

A MISUNDERSTOOD ARTIST

The gentleman with the Jovian coiffure began to speak as the train moved. "'Tis the utmost degradation of art," he said. He had apparently fallen into conversation with his companion upon the platform.

"I don't see it," said this companion, a prosperous-looking gentleman with a gold watch-chain. "This art for art's sake--I don't believe in it, I tell you. Art should have an aim. If it don't do you good, if it ain't moral, I'd as soon not have it. What good is it? I believe in Ruskin. I tell you----"

"Bah!" said the gentleman in the corner, with almost explosive violence. He fired it like a big gun across the path of the incipient argument, and slew the prosperous-looking gentleman at once. He met our eyes, as we turned to him, with a complacent smile on his large white, clean-shaven face. He was a corpulent person, dressed in black, and with something of the quality of a second-hand bishop in his appearance. The demolished owner of the watch-chain made some beginnings of a posthumous speech.

"Bah!" said the gentleman in the corner, with even more force than before, and so finished him.

"These people will never understand," he said, after a momentary pause,

addressing the gentleman with the Jovian coiffure, and indicating the remains of the prosperous gentleman by a wave of a large white hand.

"Why do you argue? Art is ever for the few."

"I did not argue," said the gentleman with the hair. "I was interrupted."

The owner of the watch-chain, who had been sitting struggling with his breath, now began to sob out his indignation. "What do you mean, sir? Saying Bah! sir, when I am talking----"

The gentleman with the large face held up a soothing hand. "Peace, peace," he said. "I did not interrupt you. I annihilated you. Why did you presume to talk to artists about art? Go away, or I shall have to say Bah! again. Go and have a fit. Leave us--two rare souls who may not meet again--to our talking."

"Did you ever see such abominable rudeness, sir?" said the gentleman with the watch-chain, appealing to me. There were tears in his eyes. At the same time the young man with the aureole made some remark to the corpulent gentleman that I failed to catch.

"These artists," said I, "are unaccountable, irresponsible. You must----"

"Take it from whence it comes," said the insulted one, very loudly, and

bitterly glaring at his opponent. But the two artists were conversing serenely. I felt the undignified quality of our conversation. "Have you seen Punch?" said I, thrusting it into his hand.

He looked at the paper for a moment in a puzzled way; then understood, thanked me, and began to read with a thunderous scowl, every now and then shooting murderous glances at his antagonist in the opposite corner, or coughing in an aggressive manner.

"You do your best," the gentleman with the long hair was saying; "and they say, 'What is it for?' 'It is for itself,' you say. Like the stars."

"But these people," said the stout gentleman, "think the stars were made to set their clocks by. They lack the magnanimity to drop the personal reference. A friend, a confrère, saw a party of these horrible Extension people at Rome before that exquisite Venus of Titian. 'And now, Mr Something-or-other,' said one of the young ladies, addressing the pedagogue in command, 'what is this to teach us?'"

"I have had the same experience," said the young gentleman with the hair. "A man sent to me only a week ago to ask what my sonnet 'The Scarlet Thread' meant?"

The stout person shook his head as though such things passed all belief.

"Gur-r-r-r," said the gentleman with Punch, and scraped with his foot on the floor of the carriage.

"I gave him answer," said the poet, "'Twas a sonnet; not a symbol."

"Precisely," said the stout gentleman.

"'Tis the fate of all art to be misunderstood. I am always grossly misunderstood--by every one. They call me fantastic, whereas I am but inevitably new; indecent, because I am unfettered by mere trivial personal restrictions; unwholesome."

"It is what they say to me. They are always trying to pull me to earth. 'Is it wholesome?' they say; 'nutritious?' I say to them, 'I do not know. I am an artist. I do not care. It is beautiful.'"

"You rhyme?" said the poet.

"No. My work is--more plastic. I cook."

For a moment, perhaps, the poet was disconcerted. "A noble art," he said, recovering.

"The noblest," said the cook. "But sorely misunderstood; degraded to utilitarian ends; tested by impossible standards. I have been

seriously asked to render oily food palatable to a delicate patient.
Seriously!"

"He said, 'Bah! Bah! to me!" mumbled the defunct gentleman with
Punch, apparently addressing the cartoon. "A cook! Good Lord!"

"I resigned. 'Cookery,' I said, 'is an art. I am not a fattener of
human cattle. Think: Is it Art to write a book with an object, to
paint a picture for strategy?' 'Are we,' I said, 'in the sixties or
the nineties? Here, in your kitchen, I am inspired with beautiful
dinners, and I produce them. It is your place to gather together, from
this place one, and from that, one, the few precious souls who can
appreciate that rare and wonderful thing, a dinner, graceful,
harmonious, exquisite, perfect.' And he argued I must study his
guests!"

"No artist is of any worth," said the poet, "who primarily studies what
the public needs."

"As I told him. But the next man was worse--hygienic. While with this
creature I read Poe for the first time, and I was singularly fascinated
by some of his grotesques. I tried--it was an altogether new
development, I believe, in culinary art--the Bizarre. I made some
curious arrangements in pork and strawberries, with a sauce containing
beer. Quite by accident I mentioned my design to him on the evening of
the festival. All the Philistine was aroused in him. 'It will ruin my

digestion.' 'My friend,' I said, 'I am not your doctor; I have nothing to do with your digestion. Only here is a beautiful Japanese thing, a quaint, queer, almost eerie dinner, that is in my humble opinion worth many digestions. You may take it or leave it, but 'tis the last dinner I cook for you.' ... I knew I was wasted upon him.

"Then I produced some Nocturnes in imitation of Mr Whistler, with mushrooms, truffles, grilled meat, pickled walnuts, black pudding, French plums, porter--a dinner in soft velvety black, eaten in a starlight of small scattered candles. That, too, led to a resignation: Art will ever demand its martyrs."

The poet made sympathetic noises.

"Always. The awful many will never understand. Their conception of my skill is altogether on a level with their conceptions of music, of literature, of painting. For wall decorations they love autotypes; for literature, harmless volumes of twaddle that leave no vivid impressions on the mind; for dinners, harmless dishes that are forgotten as they are eaten. My dinners stick in the memory. I cannot study these people--my genius is all too imperative. If I needed a flavour of almonds and had nothing else to hand, I would use prussic acid. Do right, I say, as your art instinct commands, and take no heed of the consequences. Our function is to make the beautiful gastronomic thing, not to pander to gluttony, not to be the Jesuits of hygiene. My friend, you should see some of my compositions. At home I have books

and books in manuscript, Symphonies, Picnics, Fantasies, Etudes..."

The train was now entering Clapham Junction. The gentleman with the gold watch-chain returned my Punch. "A cook," he said in a whisper; "just a common cook!" He lifted his eyebrows and shook his head at me, and proceeded to extricate himself and his umbrella from the carriage. "Out of a situation too!" he said--a little louder--as I prepared to follow him.

"Mere dripping!" said the artist in cookery, with a regal wave of the hand.

Had I felt sure I was included, I should of course have resented the phrase.