

On some Greek Marbles

by
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The Burlington Fine Art Club has opened an Exhibition of Greek Art: brought together, and elaborately catalogued, with not less taste than learning, by Mrs. Arthur Strong; and this exhibition, in its small room in Savile Row, is the one wholly delightful resting-place, just now, in London. The second time I went there, I looked in, on my way, at the Carfax Gallery in Ryder-Street, where some Venetian and other sketches by Mr. Sargent, are on view. There, I seemed to see an athlete, going victoriously through his exercises, doing what nobody else could do so effectually, with such supple force, with such ease in strength. A little water-colour sketch of a man lying on a bed seemed to me like a fine story of Maupassant: done to the life, done surely, swiftly, with all the illusion of actual movement or relaxation. Everything that the artist had aimed at doing was done without difficulty, and how many great painters have died without learning half that dexterity! The thing itself was slight enough, but there is one of the essential parts of greatness in being able to do such a thing as that in just such a way. In the sketches of canals and of the Riva, especially in a sketch in which there are some cows in the foreground, there is the same ease and brilliance of success in doing a given thing, in giving a vivid suggestion of things as they fasten upon the eyes. The thing seen (except in the oil sketch of Duse, in which there is revelation) is the thing as almost any one might see it; no hidden beauty has been teased out of unwilling

shapes, reluctant colours; it is the world, the flesh, and the devil, unvisited by their companion and enemy the soul.

In the Greek room there is a head, No. 43, which does not seem clever at all, which seems, as one first catches sight of it, curiously simple, as if the difficulties of the art of sculpture had been evaded rather than conquered, yet which ravishes the mind into a certain quiet and fullness of delight. The modelling is nowhere obvious, every outline is smoothed and rounded, nothing leaps out upon one and seizes an unwilling admiration. You do not notice it for strength, for any ingenious mastery of any evident difficulty. Venus rose so out of the waters, when human beauty came consciously into the world, not startling anyone, but like a dream which has come true. The forehead and cheeks are no subtler than a flower; the neck, in its breadth from chin to nape, has no refinement upon an actual neck in which one has felt life rather than seen beauty. The eyes and lips settle down into no fixed expression, by which one can remember them; but some infinitely mysterious expression seems to flow through them, as through the eyes and lips of a woman's head by Leonardo.

It is indeed with the art of Leonardo that I find myself comparing the art of this unknown sculptor. In writing here about Leonardo, I said that while, in Michael Angelo, strength frequently becomes grace, in Leonardo grace itself becomes intensified into something which is beyond the utmost strength. Perfection is more than strength, for it is the perfect balance of every opposite; and grace is perfect balance.

What I mean will at once be quite clear if one

RODIN

III

Syrinx and Pan

Syrinx is caught upon the Arcadian field.

The god's grip huddles her girl breasts: his grim
And gnarled lips grin forth the soul of him.

The imprint of his bestial heart is sealed
And stamped armorial on her virgin shield,

Fame's argente heraldry despoiled: grows dim
For her the universe: supple and slim

She slides in vain: she loathes him—and doth yield.

Shame, sorrow, these be sire and dam of song.

Fatality, O Nature, is thy name.

Along the accursed river, stagnant shame,

Eddying woe, from rape and godly wrong,

Springs the immortal reed: the mortal's cry

Rises, an angry anthem, to the sky.