

## A QUACK PAINTER

ALGERNON AGRIPPA DOOLEY was the Only-begotten Son of the Reverend Archibald Agrippa Dooley. The unusual capitals are intended to indicate the importance of this fact to our petty cosmos. The Reverend Archibald was a fussily feeble old soul who would have been in his place in a hunting shire; his purchase of a fat metropolitan living was a tragic joke for his parishioners. Utterly incapable of intellectual movement himself, he bitterly resented intellect in others, regarding not only its display but its reputed possession as a direct insult to himself. "A fine morning, Mr. Dooley!" was met by an action described in the family circle as "pluffing," which resembled the gathering rage of the turkey, with purpler effects. It culminated in a splutter, "You're a very impudent young fellow." And why? Because the freely expressed contempt of his son and heir had in the course of years drilled into him that very stupid people spoke of the weather. Ergo, when a reputedly clever person spoke to him of it, the implication was that it was a shaft of satire.

Individuals, unlike nations, do not always get the government they deserve. Nothing in Mr. Dooley's character called for such punishment as the wife the gods had given him. A secret drinker and a cunning adulteress, she concealed both defects and the infinite malignity of a hell-hound under the most odious and consummate hypocrisy of conduct and the most saintly and venerable exterior. She was perhaps in all this not blameworthy. Her entire family was epileptic, her sister Amelia a hopeless melancholic whom—it is a characteristic trait of the family—they imprisoned in the house rather than face the publicity of a certificate, despite of the young children who were thus brought up in earshot of her screams. Original taints weaken if the stock survive; and what in one sister was insanity, and the other vice, became in one daughter dipsomania, in another virginity, and in our hero *petit mal* and a taste for art.

Algernon gave no early sign of his eventual P.R.A.; he passed scatheless through dame's school and Harrow. It was the talk made in undergraduate circles by the decadents that caught his puberty, and thrust it in that direction. And of original genius or capacity he had none. Of all essentials he had none. But, on the other hand, of inessentials, of all superficial qualities, he had all. His mimetic faculty was fine, almost incredibly fine. Fortunately for my credit, my collection comprises not only borders and initials of which probably no expert would care to swear that they were not the work of William Morris, but pencil sketches of Rossetti girls and Burne-Jones girls done with equal excellence and Beardsleyesque drawings imitating even the miraculous fineness of that great draughtsman's execution. Some one had said to him that Beardsley's line showed no rough edge under a glass. He satisfied himself of the fact, and in a few weeks came near to rival the master.

But there was a limitation. He could copy these masters—the only masters, except Watts, of whom he had not yet heard—only by copying their work directly. He could not sketch from Nature at all, only from the reproductions that he possessed, and from imagination. Nor could he treat a Beardsley subject in a Rossetti style, or *vice versa*.

This faculty of imitation possessed his mind in every detail. He projected a press "*like* the Kelmscott Press," a periodical "*like* the Yellow Book." He could not even get near enough to originality to propose a Morris periodical!

Of course something very like this stage is common to all artists. Nothing is more pitiable and slavish than Shelley's early plagiarisms of Mrs. Aphra Behn, Keats's efforts to reproduce Moore at his worst—by "Moore at his worst" I do not here seek a euphemism for "George Moore." In fact, the sensitiveness and receptivity which is one side of genius makes this inevitable. So that one might have hoped to see the stem of Dooley spring from roots which drew sustenance from these many masters.

It was some three years before I had another opportunity of observing this youth; but no stem had yet appeared; it was the tangle still. Here was a fan painted exquisitely on silk in Conder's own technique, though (with a better artist as his model) Dooley had not made quite such a success. It was not Conder at his best; but it was not Conder plus anything or anybody. Such as it was, it was pure Conder.

On an easel was the portrait of a girl by Rembrandt-Dooley; against the wall another girl by Whistler-Dooley; the big easel held a vast Velasquez-Dooley which was not going very well.

By this time (observe!) Dooley had learnt to paint from Nature, but he could not reach the Velasquez-conception, the Whistler point-of-view; and to this extent he failed—and oh! how glaring and how ghastly was the failure!—to reproduce their style. But in all the inessentials he was there all the time. Theme, brush-work, treatment, tone, composition, all that was imitable he imitated admirably; and he had none of his own.

It was very amusing to hear him explain his failure—which he occasionally realized, for in some ways he was a fine critic, though with no real standard of balance. Painting he declared to be a lost art, in the same sense as the manufacture of gunpowder might be. He thought the old masters had “amber in their varnish.” He bought a truck-load of books on chemistry to find out what was wrong with his colours; a task joyfully undertaken and rigorously prosecuted with that degree of success which might have been prognosticated by any scientific person who happened to be cognizant of the fact that he knew absolutely no chemistry—or even any other exact science to help him a little with the terminology. However, he made endless experiments; he ground up his own colours and used all kinds of oils, and in every other way exhibited the indomitable perseverance which does indeed bring one to the top of a Sunday-school, but is unfortunately useless to the alchemist of silk-purse from sow's ear.

He tried many another plan. No draughtsman, he photographed his models with the assistance of a bald ratcatcher in a Norfolk jacket who had a perpetual snuffle and was named Mowles; pantographed the photo on to a canvas “Double Bishop,” and proceeded to paint it in! I do not think that many geniuses do this at twenty-five!

He had, too, a great deal of trouble with his Whistler, because of Whistler's “low tone.” As he had no real idea of harmony and balance, this was quite beyond him. But somebody told him that Whistler used black as a harmonizer; so he mixed everything with black. I saw him mix paint the colour of London mud for the high light on the cheek of a blonde. These pictures were scarcely discernible in the light of day, especially after—in spite of chemistry!—the paint had sunk in. In fact he told me himself a year ago that he started to paint over an old canvas, thinking it was only a background, to recognize (too late!) his favourite portrait of the Honourable Mavourneen Jones.

Any real advance that he may have made at this time was due to various friends who really could paint, or rather, who had something to paint, and couldn't paint it to their liking. (Dooley had nothing to paint; “there never was a Dooley.”) But the only visible result was a number of very creditable J. W. Morrice landscapes. And, unfortunately, there was an American among these good folk of Paris; like Gilbert, “his name I shall not mention,” but he really was a discontented sugar broker, if ever there was one. He was Pinkerton of *The Wrecker* come to life. He started with newspapers in the gutters of Chicago, and was earning £2,000 a year by his gift of suggesting an American girl to any person who had never seen one by a representation of a spider's web struck by lightning. This youth fell under the influence of Dooley, whose manner was bluster and bounce *à l'Americaine*, but more so, and thus eminently calculated to subjugate the Yank, who cannot suspect an effete European of drawing two cards to three little clubs. Dooley inspired him with a higher moral code, and in three weeks he was trying to imitate Dooley! So admirably did he succeed that nobody could tell the difference—each being always mud—and the supreme jest was that he exhibited the picture in the Salon, on the strength of his name!

His gratitude to Dooley was great, and he pointed out, just like Pinkerton, that artists must advertise, and proceeded to boom him in the Transatlantic press.

Another evil influence was a very old friend, a surgeon whose sole claim to distinction was his beautiful bedside manner, and his deference to the heads of his profession. I remember Dooley criticizing him one night in Lavenue's for this very fault. “When you see him with the big man,” he said, “it's—damn it, it's almost like this.” With his perfect art of mimicry, he gave the smile and the hand-rub of the shop-walker. In twelve months, he was doing the same thing himself!

Yet a third; a medical failure who fancied himself as a playwright, and by adapting 15-year old Palais Royal farces captured the English stage. He also had the impudence to publish novels page after page of which was stolen almost verbatim from various other books. His only other qualifications were his stutter, and his incapacity to conceive of greatness of any kind. That Dooley should have taken this creature seriously, even thought him an artist, exhibits the melancholy ruin into which his critical faculty had followed

his aspirations. I am sorry about this: Dooley had always been a gentleman of high ideals. He had honestly wished to achieve art, and toiled like a man to attain. Now he began to criticize Milton:

"Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil  
Nor in the glistering foil  
Set off to the world, nor in broad rumour lies,  
But lives and sits aloft in those pure eyes  
And perfect witness of all-judging Jove:  
As He pronounces lastly on each deed  
Of so much fame in Heaven accept thy meed."

He found that there was "no money in France"; "England is the market"; so to England he went, and sat down to paint in an atmosphere which would have turned Titian into a maker of coloured illustrations for society novels. Ultimately even he revolted, and furnished a studio in the most fashionable part of the West End at the cost of some thousand pounds or so with works of art of every nation. But still no Dooleys.

In default of these, he set seriously to work to obtain commissions, through the social influence of his family and his friends. The seats of the mighty, he learnt, were amicably stirred by the titillation of a tongue; the brush became a secondary instrument in his armoury. His very conversation forgot art; he began to prate of "gentlemen" and "his social position." He began to reproach me one day for knowing painters who could paint. "There are bad painters who are gentlemen," he said, "and there are bad painters who are not gentlemen. Now my friends are gentlemen." I had humbly to confess that I did know one bad painter who was not a gentleman!

His ideals were by now wholly commercial. He no longer asked himself "Who are the greatest painters? Let me paint like they did!" but "What is the most paying branch of Art?" and being answered on all hands "Portrait painting," continued, "Who are the best-paid portraitists to-day? Let me paint like they do!" He then proceeded to produce Sargents and Shannons, so as to deceive the very elect. His attitude to his older friends was now very beautiful. "Yes," he would say, "I'm painting rubbish. I'm painting pot-boilers, frankly. But no artist attains complete mastery of his method till he is sixty; by then I shall have made a fortune, and can afford to paint what I like!" This from the owner of No. 1, Vanderbilt Studios, Astor Place, Rockefeller Street, Park Lane!

Another typical tragedy is the Affair of Lady X. This excellent lady was of such blood that she could afford to regard the Plantagenet part of her ancestry as rather a blot on her 'scutcheon. Dooley cadged a commission, and made her look like her own housekeeper. This circumstance attracting comment, the great Dooley suddenly shifted his ground. It now appeared that he was not painting the particular, but the general. It was not Lady X.; it was "The Perfect Lady," or "Quite the Lady." Not a camel, but a whale—and oh! how like a whale!

When a man reaches this state, he is beyond hope. You cannot call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. "Why is your face so dirty?" "Do you cast stones at the poor?" "Then why do you wear a frock coat?" "I hope I am a gentleman." Dooley had discovered the secret of epithets, that you can make any one of them sound praise or dispraise as you will. He was therefore beyond criticism.

"Quel est le philosophe français qui disait, 'Je suis un dieu qui ai mal diné?'—'Cette ironie ne mordrait pas sur un esprit enlevé par le haschisch,' il répondrait tranquillement. 'Il est possible que j'ai mal dine, mais je suis un dieu.' "

Dooley's vanity could give a stroke a hole to hashish; he would reply that he had dined badly in order to mortify his flesh.

Such degradation can hardly go further; it only remains to set the seal upon it. As valour is not increased, but only recognized, by the Victoria Cross, so nothing can be done for Dooley but to make him A.R.A.

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