

A PLEA FOR ART AT HOME.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRUDENCE OF COLLECTING.



FEW years ago a merchant in the west of England had in his employment a traveller who was fortunate enough to possess a taste. That such a possession may be of value I hope to show further on. This traveller's taste was for black-letter books. Wherever business took him he visited the places in which old books are to be seen and bought. Such shops are in almost every little town, and sometimes, as I have occasion to remember, they are not ostensibly book-shops; for I once bought a very scarce black-letter Bible,—a Bible of which, so far as I know, there was no example in the British Museum, or any other public collection,—and I found it among some old iron on the counter of a retired tinker at Canterbury.

But this west country bagman never neglected an opportunity of picking up a little book printed before our ordinary type was in common use. He preferred little books. Very small indeed were some of them, and he gave very small prices. He knew that the early popular literature of England was often of such a character that the owner of a book might easily conceal it. In what Mr. Green calls the "English Terror," when Henry VIII. and Thomas Cromwell had set people thinking and questioning, and then hanged or burnt them for pretending to have opinions, some printers issued little books which were never licensed by the authorities : and such books are very scarce and very valuable. And this collector endeavoured wherever he could to find such books. And one day he found a prize—four prizes in fact. They were a number of Wycliffe's writings, printed in London, evidently for popular reading, but very small and curious. He bought them, as I have heard, for a shilling each ; that is, for four shillings altogether. He could find no account of them in any of the works on bibliography, and began to think they must be valuable. He had them very handsomely bound, which I dare say did not cost him more than 2*l.* so that his whole investment amounted to about 2*l.* 4*s.*

There are copies of the four little books and also of a fifth which belongs to the set, in that wonderful treasure house, the Lambeth Library : but our commercial gentleman did not know this, nor did any one else, so far as I am aware, until an event occurred, which gives me my excuse for telling this anecdote.

Our commercial traveller bethought him once, when

times were bad, as they were for so many people in 1866 and the following years, that he would sell some of the little books he had collected. So he sent a selection up to a well-known auction-room in London, and included in the parcel his four little Wycliffes.

They were duly put up and knocked down, and the four little Wycliffes fetched four hundred pounds, that is, one hundred pounds a piece.

It is easy to calculate the interest our travelling collector made on his original outlay. He spent 2*l.* 4*s.*, and kept the books two years, during which time he was out of the interest, say, at 10 per cent., or thereabouts, 5*s.* So that when his books were put up they had cost him 2*l.* 9*s.* Then the auctioneers' expenses amounted to 12½ per cent. or 50*l.* : and his whole profit was 348*l.* 2*s.* 11*d.*, or about two thousand per cent., per annum, for each of the two years.

This was, of course, an extreme example of the prudence of collecting : black-letter books are not art ; and it may be objected, that I have no right to take up time with stories not to the point. I hope to return to this question, namely, what is art, and what is not, but first I will tell another collector's story which may be a little more to the purpose.

The late Canon R. was a man of taste. When he began life he was poor, and was, I believe, chaplain to a nobleman of his own persuasion, in the country. He lived in a small house near the high road, and one day a tinker came to him with his bag of old iron, and said he had heard that Mr. R. was a collector of curiosities. Presently after much fumbling among the old iron, he brought out a bronze processional cross of

the utmost beauty, made probably in the fourteenth century, and altogether such a magnificent example of the art, that poor Mr. R.'s heart beat with excitement merely at the sight of it. His practised eye showed him, as he examined it, that the bronze surface had formerly been heavily plated with silver, and in places even with gold, and the cross must have been borne before some great abbot, possibly before an archbishop.

With a trembling voice, for he had very little money, he asked the tinker how much he wanted for the cross.

"Sixpence, sir," said the man; "and indeed I think it's quite worth it, sir—it is, I'm sure."

Canon R. thought he was dreaming.

"Sixpence," he repeated.

"Well, sir, I gave nearly that for it," said the man; "and there's more than the weight of copper in it."

Canon R., as he told me the story, said, the mere reference to the weight of copper, and the allusion to the possibility of melting it, made him feel quite sick. He could hardly summon up strength to take out the sixpence. As soon as the tinker had it in his hand, he picked up his bag, and walked away quickly.

Canon R. looked at the cross, and could hardly believe his good fortune. Then he looked at the retreating figure of the tinker. It seemed like robbery to give him only sixpence for such a treasure. He called him back. The man came back very slowly and doubtfully.

"Look here," said Dr. R., "I think this cross is worth more than sixpence. I'll give you a shilling."

The tinker took the shilling with hesitation. He looked twice at it and twice at the priest's face. "There's summat rummy in it," was no doubt the reflection which passed through his mind. Then he took it, and again departed.

Canon R. looked at the cross, and turned to go into the house with his treasure. He told me as he took it in he felt sure it would melt away into thin air and disappear like a dream. But when he had laid it on the table, his mind was reassured, and again his conscience smote him. It was worth more than 1s. 6d. He would give the man half-a-crown,—fortunately he had half-a-crown in his pocket.

The tinker had nearly reached the gate. Canon R. called him. He stopped. "Look here, I think I have given you too little for that cross."

The man came no nearer. The Canon advanced towards him. He retreated. "I'll give you half-a-crown. Here it is," said the Canon, putting his hand into his pocket.

The tinker looked at him for a moment. Then with a look of deep suspicion, and the use of a word which sounded very like "Walker," he turned and took to his heels.

The cross has been engraved more than once, and if I do not mistake, the reader will find a very faithful representation of it as a frontispiece to Paley's *Gothic Architecture*. If this cut does not represent the same cross, it is one almost exactly like it; and the reader can judge for himself whether it is worth half-a-crown.

Now in both these cases, that of the commercial traveller, and that of Canon R., the quality required was knowledge.

Mr. D. knew the value and scarcity of black-letter books in duodecimo. Canon R. knew the style of art practised in the fourteenth century, and could judge in a moment of the genuineness of the bronze cross.

But another and very needful quality is forethought. Some years ago, I think about forty, a young gentleman who was in a public office in London saw a pair of jars at a dealer's shop. This young gentleman had a small but sufficient allowance from his father, a country squire. The price of the jars was fifty guineas. They were of English make, I forget of what particular pottery, but I think it was Chelsea. Now fifty guineas would be very nearly a quarter's allowance, but the young man observed two things about the jars; first, that they were very beautifully painted, and secondly that the manufactory whose mark they bore had long been closed, and no more ware would issue from it. Such porcelain can never become more common, he reflected, and this is the best work that particular pottery ever produced. So he offered the dealer thirty guineas.

"No, sir, they're worth the fifty."

But fifty was more than he had to give. He went away, but came back again the next day. He offered the dealer 40*l.* and carried away his jars.

I need hardly say that his father,—when the end of the quarter came, and the son petitioned for a little advance of his allowance, at the same time telling truly what he had done—his father was shocked.

"Forty pounds for a couple of jars! Such an extravagant son was never known." He would not have been in the very least surprised if his son had lost forty or even a hundred guineas on a horse-race, but that he should give 20*l.* a piece for a pair of jars, seemed to him simply madness.

But thirty years later that same pair of jars were sold at Christie's at a price which paid interest on the original outlay of 20 per cent. per annum for all the thirty years, and left a good margin over, besides, as profit.

Thus the young gentleman in the public office had put by in his youth a sum of money quite as profitably as if he had invested in shares, and he had, moreover, during thirty years of his life, enjoyed the pleasure of looking at what he considered a pair of very beautiful objects. I did not admire them when I saw them. They were ugly in shape, as I thought, and dingy in colour. But my taste in ceramics is warped, no doubt, by a strong admiration for the porcelain of China and Japan.

But the collector has another incentive. By forming a collection he does good work for the knowledge of art, and he increases the value of each individual specimen in his collection. I have spoken hitherto only of cases in which a man has bought some one object or set of objects. But collecting involves more than this. It implies what phrenologists call "comparativeness."

The collector must endeavour to ascertain the comparative excellence and rarity of the objects he collects. This is especially the case with prints.

Books, that is printed books, are much like prints in this respect. A unique book is as rare as a unique print. But every painting and every manuscript is unique; and the collector who can afford to buy pictures and illuminations will perhaps do better than the book collector or the print collector.

On the other hand, pictures, especially good ones, are much more expensive than books. The question is which will afford the collector the greatest measure of enjoyment. Some men like one thing and some another; but unquestionably the man who wishes to make his house look nice, and who wants his family and his friends to partake of his enjoyment, will prefer pictures or prints, which can be hung on his walls, to anything else.

But the cheapest collection that can be made is one of books. The experienced buyer lays out very little money. If he has gathered a library judiciously he can sell it at a large profit: for example:—

A man of moderate means made a study of a certain class of religious books. They were rare, and often they were beautifully illustrated with cuts and engravings. When he had collected a hundred or more, one by one, and at very low prices, he began to find he knew more about them than anybody else; he could, therefore, confidently bid for a book, knowing perhaps that it was perfect, perhaps that it was unique, and could exercise a little discrimination. Every now and then he picked up a treasure, and his knowledge grew rapidly. For instance, one day he saw a large volume, which he knew to be rare, put up at a sale. It fetched what seemed a

good price, 4*l.*, I think. He went home, not having bought it; but his interest being aroused by finding he knew very little of that particular edition, he tried to discover more. After some research he found it was extremely scarce. No other copy had ever occurred for sale. It had been rigidly suppressed. So, full of excitement, he rushed to the saleroom to discover the name of the buyer, determining to offer him a profit on his purchase.

The clerk informed him of the name, but added that the book was found to have a worm-hole and had been returned—in other words, the buyer, a bookseller, thought his bargain too dear. Our young collector asked when it would be re-sold.

“In about a month,” was the reply; “you shall have notice.”

A month elapsed, and then another, but at last the precious volume came up again for sale.

Unfortunately for our friend, he was not his own master. Duty called him away on the long expected day. He found it would be impossible for him to go to the sale.

He went in his despair to a man on whom he could depend, and said to him, “Buy me that book at a moderate price. It may fetch four or five guineas, perhaps more,—but I would go to 10*l.* and even a few shillings more, if there is any chance of getting it.”

All day he thought of the book. Had he offered enough? Had he offered too much? Could he have made any mistake about it? Would his man be punctual? In short he was full of contradictory questions, and almost trembling with excitement.

The next morning came. He went to the saleroom, almost afraid to ask about the book. He had not been able to see his agent, and came to ask the clerk.

"What was the number of the lot, sir?"

"It was No. so-and-so."

The clerk looked it out slowly. My friend felt as if it took hours to find the entry.

"I find, sir," said the clerk, at length, "that the lot's entered to your name at four-and-sixpence."

When he had gathered about two hundred volumes he made an elaborate catalogue. It was much noticed and reviewed. The subject was of some interest to the general public; and my friend's book, a mere list, was bought by many people who did not care for bibliography. Its publication, however, cut off his sources of supply. Every bookseller could now judge as well as himself, of the value and rarity of books of this class. He determined to sell his collection.

So he had a list printed, and sent it to people who were likely to buy, and meanwhile he prepared to sell by auction, if necessary. But in a few weeks he had an offer from a great public library, which he accepted. It was that he should send them all the books in his list, and that the trustees of the library, on condition of his taking a certain sum, would keep the collection together and put them in a bookcase inscribed with his name.

He could not afford to present them, though he would willingly have done so, but this offer seemed to him so pleasing that he accepted it, and sent the books.

As I happened to hear both the sum laid out and the sum received, and as this chapter is not so much on the art or ethics, as on the prudence, of collecting, I may as well give them as nearly as I can remember. He had laid out altogether on buying and on binding 78*l.* This outlay had been spread over some three or four years. He received 225*l.*, of which the odd 25*l.* was absorbed by various expenses connected with the printing and packing. His profit was thus 122*l.*

I say nothing of the pleasure he had taken in the pursuit, nor yet of the advantages of the knowledge he acquired, and the many incidental benefits which accrued to him.

The point on which I am anxious to insist is merely that it is often profitable to collect judiciously. I think this point may be taken as proved. I have purposely avoided, for the present, any mention of the great collections of which one so constantly hears. I only speak of what may be done in a very small way by a man engaged in some other business and only collecting in his leisure hours, and with what may be called his leisure money.

People who live in great cities are often shocked to find how much is spent without any return. Pocket money makes away with itself and leaves no mark behind. You have bought nothing yet your money is gone. We cannot all bring ourselves to the state of mind of a late nobleman, who having several hundreds of thousands a year used to go out without any money in his purse for fear he should be induced by pity or a passing fancy to spend even sixpence. Without going this length, we might yet find it possible to

economise considerably in this one particular. The man is singular who does not enjoy buying, just as the sportsman enjoys killing, for its own sake. We must buy, and there are few pleasures more to be enjoyed, and few also which need cost us so little, and which may be more innocent. For though it may seem a little paradoxical to say that spending money, even judiciously, is a cheap pleasure, I will endeavour to prove the truth of the proposition.

There are two pleasures in buying. One is in the act of buying itself, the other in the subsequent possession of the object bought. But if the object be one which soon loses its value this second pleasure is gone with it. A young man likes to go to an arcade and spend his money in gorgeous jewellery, satin neck-cloths, and other things which may safely be summed up in the single word "toys." The pleasure of buying these things, that is of choosing them, must be considerable, for many young men of wealth seem to do nothing else, and it would be hard to believe that they do it from any sense of duty, and not rather from self-gratification. But that the choice is not of a kind to give the æsthetic faculties much play is also evident. Though the buyer lavishes both time and money on diamonds and cigars, his taste is often not sufficient to enable him to give any reason for his preferences. The fancy shops are furnished to reach him, and they succeed, for as he has no taste, in the true sense of the word,—one which implies something of reflection—he is guided wholly by his fancy. Novelty, therefore, is the first thing he seeks. It requires no mental effort to know that you never saw a thing before, or

do not recollect it, which comes to the same thing. As your experience increases you begin to find that real novelty is very rare, and that for the most part you have been imposed on. But by this time you have also found that few of the things for which you paid such long prices are worth anything now, and you are disgusted to see that though your money is gone you have nothing to show for it.

This kind of expenditure, then, is not remunerative. And there is another kind, which is also, as a rule, a loss of money.

You may buy with taste but without knowledge. Thus a few years ago a young man who had considerable command of money, and also considerable taste for art, took the advice of a well-known print-seller, who is still alive, and whom therefore I refrain from mentioning by name. This man advised him to buy the large engravings from Landseer's pictures, and offered him proofs at very high prices, telling him that in a very few years they would be worth twice as much. After a time our young friend married.

"Now," he said, "I will realize all that money I put into engravings; they should be worth a great sum by this time." He went accordingly to the dealer. What was his surprise to hear they were only worth twice as many shillings as he had given pounds!

At first he said he would bring an action against the printseller. But after a time he grew more composed, as he saw that the fault was his own, and was this:—He had bought without knowledge. He was

content with, say, the last proof; and everyone knows that the first ordinary print is almost as good as the last proof, and frequently even better. My friend had thought any proof was equal to any other proof from the same plate, and he had made the further mistake of allowing the dealer to choose for him, without any mental exercise on his own part.

But I have only shown that buying novelties and buying good things without knowledge are not cheap pleasures. I have still to show how it may be cheap to buy.

The late Mr. Gillott, of Birmingham, began as soon as he had the money to buy a picture or two every year from some rising artist. I am told that he trusted his own judgment. This implies that he had judgment to trust. He enjoyed the possession of the pictures very much. They were a constant source of intense pleasure to him. He was an illiterate man, having raised himself from the lowest condition. I do not know whether he could read. He certainly could not read so as to be fond of reading, and his great resource was in his picture gallery. When he died I went to Birmingham to see it before it should be dispersed; and I afterwards attended the famous sale at Christie's. I may have more to say about it presently. My present purpose is only to show that Mr. Gillott's gallery was a cheap pleasure. The fact is it cost nothing. When it was dispersed there were not wanting people to assert that the increase in the value of the pictures since they were painted was such as to bring in to Mr. Gillott's heirs a sum equal to the aggregate produce at 20 per cent.

per annum of all the money spent. And it is curious further to observe, that the pictures which Mr. Gillott had bought at the highest prices fetched less at his sale than those he had given the least money for. The Ettys, the Maclises, the Wilsons, which formed, as he probably thought, the great features of his gallery, fetched nothing in comparison with the Turner water-colours, and the Müllers, for which comparatively he had given very little.

But let us take a less prominent case, as more illustrative of the position, that collecting may be a cheap pleasure. A man with a taste for early printed books, and with a knowledge of the history of the art, goes into an auction room or a bookseller's every now and then as he passes by on his daily road to business. Sometimes he sees a rare book going for a low price, and he buys it. More often he has to be content while others buy who are wealthier, but he learns something regarding the comparative value and rarity of particular books. He derives a vast amount of enjoyment from his pursuit. He meets intellectual men on common ground. He has a little wholesome excitement now and then at a sale. And he has the quiet pleasure of collating his treasures of an evening, of mending them, of binding them, perhaps of making one perfect whole from several fragments. He learns a great deal, and that too of a useful kind, and though he often has to walk or go in the omnibus rather than take a cab, he does not mind it. The taste, the consciousness that he has something behind the daily routine of business life, is worth much to him, and meanwhile he is steadily gathering a collection. All

those cab drives he does not take, all those newspapers and magazines he does not buy, all those cigars he does not smoke, all those club luncheons he does not eat, all those coats, hats, hosen, and other garments he does as well without, have gone to increase the collection. Had he bought all these things he would have none of them to leave; but the mere chips and parings of ordinary life have given him enough to form a good, if a small, collection, and at his death, or before it, they are sold for such a sum as will materially add to the resources of his family.

This is the kind of case on which I would rather dwell; and indeed the object of my present book is to show that a very small expenditure on worthy objects of art is both good and pleasant in itself, and also a prudent piece of economy.

I will take one more example. The facts of it are true, but one or two particulars, of no importance to the matter in hand, are varied, as many of the actors in the story are still alive.

About forty years ago, let us say, but it may have been fifty, and it may have been ten, a country baronet of moderate wealth married for the second time. His only son did not get on with his stepmother. He was wild, and would not be restrained. She had a large family in the course of time; and the stepson, having gone on from bad to worse, died in miserable circumstances, into which we need not pry further than to say that, immediately after his death, the old baronet had a letter acquainting him with the fact that his son had married just before his death, and that the widow hoped shortly to present him with a grandchild.

Knowing, as he too well did, the kind of female company into which his prodigal son habitually entered, the old man was terribly shocked at the news. His second wife's eldest boy was a good lad, and was likely to be a comfort to himself and a credit to his family. But if this woman should have a son then all would go into her control, and the result probably would be the utter ruin of his ancient family.

So much did these apprehensions distress him that he died a very few months after his eldest son. Almost at the same time the widow wrote to say she was the mother of a boy.

The consternation in the family may be imagined. The young mother had taken care to provide for all possible contingencies. There were witnesses to the marriage and to everything. And though the witnesses chiefly belonged to the same class as the lady herself, their testimony was not thereby invalidated.

At first the young uncle and his mother endeavoured to do what they could to draw the heir and his mother to them, and, promising to forget all past errors, offered to receive her into the family, and to make no opposition to the child's succession. But before very long curious rumours reached them. They made inquiries, which were attended with great expense, and led to nothing. By degrees, however, one little circumstance after another accumulated till they were able to take a decisive step. They boldly challenged the paternity of the child, and refused to acknowledge it or its mother.

Legal proof was still difficult to obtain. It was
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obtained at last, however, and by a mere accident. The child was proved to be the offspring of a washerwoman at Stepney; and though the marriage was never called in question, it is said that the witnesses to it were no more to be believed than those who testified to the birth of the false heir.

A more romantic story has seldom been told in our law-courts. The general public were greatly entertained. But the bill had to be paid, and of that the public knew nothing. A great deal of money had been spent or was owed, and the new baronet's success seemed to have been purchased at a cost which would keep him poor all his life.

But it so happened that shortly after these events a man of taste, who was well acquainted with certain branches of art and archæology, was staying in the house. And one day the unfortunate young heir showed him a great boxful of old curiosities—coins, let us say; they were not coins, but coins will do for my purpose. "They were gathered by my great-grandfather, and are of all ages and kinds. Do you think they would be worth selling? They did not cost much, for my ancestor never had much money to spend."

The connoisseur looked over them for a few minutes. There were a great number, most of them worthless. But presently he jumped up with an exclamation: "This must be a forgery," he cried. "The only known example is in the Museum; they gave a thousand pounds for it, and it should be worth more now."

He had two or three more surprises, and finally determined to take the whole boxful to town, and show them to an expert.

When the box of coins had been thoroughly ransacked, about four hundred were found to be of great value. Of these two hundred were at once bought for a great public collection at an immense price, as it seemed to their owner; and the rest were sent to a saleroom. There they brought such a sum as, added to that obtained from the museum, paid off all the costs of the lawsuit, and enabled the young baronet to start in life out of debt from that cause at least.

From which may be drawn the safe moral that, if you collect what may seem common enough now, a few years hence your grandchildren may have cause to bless you. How far it is to be considered worth while to make a collection in order to deserve the thanks of posterity I cannot say, but I can promise you a great deal of pleasure for yourself from the pursuit, and I think I may venture to claim that I have made out some part of my original proposition—that spending money in this way is a cheap enjoyment.

It may of course be objected that collecting is not in itself the practice of art. But, except for people who are actually artists, much that goes to make home beautiful must of necessity be obtained by judicious collecting. It might easily be proved that articles which are really beautiful owe their chief attraction to the sense of suitability and permanent value which is required to make them satisfactory.

But, further than this, it may fairly be argued, and, indeed, has several times been pointed out already, that it is the duty of every one who is so fortunate as to possess a home and to be the head of a family, to endeavour, so far as he can, to make his family happy by making his home beautiful.



CHAPTER II.

FURNISHING AND OLD FURNITURE.

GIVEN economical collecting is open to a certain suspicion. Too many men collect only for their own private gratification; and it may be as well before we go further to draw a sharp line between the man who gathers objects in which he alone is interested, and the man who desires to beautify his house with what he buys. My concern here is with the latter only. The old Adam in me may perhaps make me lenient to the faults of the other class, but Art at Home is art calculated to give pleasure to as many as possible in the home, and to make its rooms as pretty and attractive as possible. The bibliomaniac too often forgets others in his comparatively solitary pursuit, and the collector of autographs can have but little regard for the pleasures of his family. If things are only bought to be stowed away in portfolios and cupboards, they are merely money laid by to accumulate.

But this is not the ideal of collecting which I wish