AN ARTIST'S RECOLLECTIONS.[1]

Mr. Frith is neither a great artist nor a writer of literary distinction. Yet, exactly as he has succeeded so remarkably in pleasing multitudes of people by his great canvases—such as his "Derby Day," "Scene at a Railroad Station," and "Marriage of the Prince of Wales"—pictures crowded with figures or with portraits of celebrities, and abounding in incident—so in his briskly and agreeably written volume of reminiscences he entertains and interests by the number of men famous in art and literature recalled, the profusion of amusing anecdote, and the popular style of treatment. It must also be said that, unlike many similar books of recent years, it contains little that is ill humored or likely to offend the susceptibilities of those talked about, if living, or of the friends of those who are dead. It is, in short, a good-natured, gossipy, chatty book, of no great importance in literary or art estimation, but agreeable reading for odd half-hours. For such a work a casual glance at some of the pleasant passages is more satisfactory than an elaborate criticism. We have accordingly marked a few paragraphs as specimens of the whole.

Among the many authors of high fame with whom Mr. Frith was intimate the most esteemed by him was Dickens, of whom he painted an excellent portrait. Frith talks of the great novelist with the warmest affection. How much Dickens esteemed him in return is shown by an incident. While Dickens was giving public readings Frith was strongly impressed with the idea "that the author had totally misconceived the true character of one of his own creations," that of Sam Weller himself, in reading whose jaunty utterances Dickens "lowered his voice to the tone of one who was rather ashamed of what he was saying, and afraid of being reproved for the freedom of his utterances." Frith says:

"When I determined to tell the great author that he had mistaken his own work I knew I should be treading on dangerous ground. But on the occasion of a sitting, when my victim was more than ever good-tempered, I unburdened my mind, giving reasons for my objections. Dickens listened, smiled faintly, and said not a word. A few days after this my friend Elmore asked my opinion of the readings, telling me he was going to hear them, and I frankly warned him that he would be disappointed with the character of Sam Weller. A few days more brought a call from Elmore, who roundly abused me for giving him an utterly false account of the Weller episode.

"'Why,' he said, 'the sayings come from Dickens like pistol shots; there was no "sneaking" way of talking, as you describe it.'

"'Can it be possible,' thought I, 'that this man, who, as it is told of the great Duke of Wellington, never took anybody's opinion but his own, has adopted from my suggestion a rendering of one of the children of his brain diametrically opposed to his own conception of it?'

"At the next sitting all was explained, for, on my telling Dickens what Elmore had said, with a twinkle in his eye which those who knew him must so well remember, he replied:

"'I altered it a little—made it smarter.'

"'You can't think how proud I feel,' said I, 'and surprised, too; for, from my knowledge of you, and from what I have heard from other people, you are about the last man to take advice about anything, least of all about the way of reading your own books.'

"'On the contrary,' was the reply, 'whenever I am wrong I am obliged to any one who will tell me of it; but up to the present I have never been wrong!'"

Of Thackeray Frith formed an unpleasant impression, having been unmercifully and, it must be said, uncivilly chaffed by the humorist at an after-dinner meeting, a rough playfulness that was never forgiven. Rogers he saw leaning on Dickens's arm, "so old," as Maclise said, "that Death seemed to have forgotten him." Disraeli sat to a friend of Frith, and the latter relates that after the first sitting Mrs. Disraeli, after seeing her husband to the carriage, returned to the studio, laid upon the painter the solemn mandate, "Remember, his pallor is his beauty," and without another word rejoined her husband. There are several anecdotes of Douglas Jerrold, but the famous wit's repartees lose by retelling. Mark Lemon, the editor of "Punch," was another of Frith's literary acquaintances. At a dinner given by Dickens, Lemon met Hans Christian Andersen, and was so amusing that the gentle Dane exclaimed, "Ah, Mr. Lemon, I like you, you are so full of comic." The eccentricities of the gifted but erratic Cruikshank appear to have amounted, in Frith's belief, to something very like insane delusion. He says:

"Cruikshank labored under a strange delusion regarding the works of Dickens and Ainsworth. I heard him announce to a large company assembled at dinner at Glasgow that he was the writer of 'Oliver Twist.' Dickens, he said, just gave parts of it a little 'literary touching up,' but he, Cruikshank, supplied all the incidents as well as the illustrations. 'Mind, sir,' he said to me, 'I had nothing to do with the ugly name Dickens would insist on giving the boy. I wanted him called Frank Steadfast.' He also wrote the 'Tower of London,' erroneously credited to Ainsworth, as well as other works commonly understood to have been written by that author. My intimacy with Cruikshank enables me to declare that I do not believe he would be guilty of the least deviation from truth, and to this day I can see no way of accounting for what was a most absurd delusion. Dickens was very fond of Cruikshank, but he found him occasionally troublesome: he would see, or fancy he saw, a resemblance to an old lady friend of his in one of the characters in 'Chuzzlewit' or 'Nickleby,' or some other of the serials then in course of publication, when he would say to Dickens, 'I say, look here; Mrs. So-and-so has been to me about'—Mrs. Nickleby, perhaps—'and she says you are taking her off. I wish you would just alter it a little; the poor old girl is quite distressed, you know,' etc., etc. This Dickens told me, and added: 'Just imagine what my life would be if George was making the drawings for "Dombey" instead of Brown, who does what I wish and never sees resemblances that don't exist!"

Cruikshank's fellow-caricaturist, Leech, was quite another sort of man, modest as he was clever. On being told that he was "the backbone of 'Punch,'" he smiled and said, "Don't talk such rubbish. Why, bless your heart, there isn't a fellow at work on the paper that doesn't think *that* of himself, and with as much right and reason as I should; but I think no such nonsense."

The author has many new and curious anecdotes of Turner. At a certain dinner-table, a salad being offered him, he remarked, "Nice cool green, that lettuce, isn't it? and the beetroot pretty red—not quite strong enough; and the mixture, delicate tint of yellow, that. Add some mustard, and then you will have one of my pictures." Frith states that Turner once declared his intentions of being buried wrapped in two of his finest pictures, now in the National Gallery. A friend hearing this morbid idea said, "Well, if that bright idea is carried out, we will dig you up and unroll you, as they do the mummies." Here is a speech of Turner's at the annual dinner of the Royal Association. It was, says Frith, not unlike the most incomprehensible of his later pictures, mixed up with the "fallacies of hope." He looked earnestly at the guests before he began, and then spoke as follows:

"Gentlemen, I see some"—(pause, and another look around) "new faces at this—table—Well—do you—do any of you—I mean—Roman history"—(a pause). "There is no doubt, at least I hope not, that you are acquainted—no, unacquainted—that is to say—of course, why not?—you must know something of the—old—ancient—Romans." (Loud applause.) "Well, sirs, those old people, the Romans I allude to—were a warlike set of people—yes, *they were*—because they came over here, you know, and had to do a good deal of fighting before they arrived, and after too. Ah! they did; and they always fought in a phalanx—know what that is?" ("Hear, hear," said some one.) "Do you know, sir? Well, if you don't, I will tell you. They stood shoulder to shoulder, and won everything." (Great cheering.) "Now, then, I have done with the Romans, and I come to the old man and the bundle of sticks—Æsop, ain't it?—fables, you know—all right—yes, to be sure. Well, when the old man was dying he called his sons—I forget how many there were of 'em—a good lot, seven or eight, perhaps—and he sent one of them out for a bundle of sticks. 'Now,' says the old man, 'tie up those sticks tight,' and it was done so. Then he says, says he, 'Look here, young fellows, you stick to one another like those sticks; work all together,' he says, 'then you are formidable. But if you separate, and one go one way, and one another, you may just get broke one after another. Now mind what I say,' he says"—(a very long pause, filled by intermittent cheering). "Now," resumed the speaker, "you are wondering what I am driving at" (indeed we were). "I will tell you. Some of you young fellows will one day take our places, and become members of this Academy. Well, you are a lot of sticks" (loud laughter). "What on earth are you all laughing at? Don't like to be called sticks? wait a bit. Well, then, what do you say to being called ancient Romans? What I want you to understand is just this—never mind what anybody calls you. When you become members of this institution you must fight in a phalanx—no splits—no quarreling—one mind—one object—the good of the arts and the Royal Academy."

The Princess of Wales was one of Mr. Frith's royal sitters—he had not a few—and he has this little story to tell of the amiable lady:

"The first sitting can I ever forget? I did not dare to complain till after two or three more fruitless attempts. With downright failure staring me in the face, I opened my heart to the Prince of Wales. 'You should scold her,' said the Prince.

"Just at this time the Princess was sitting for her bust to the celebrated sculptor Gibson, R.A., in a room at Marlborough House. I was sent for by the Prince, and, before I was admitted to an interview, I was shown into the sculptor's studio, and found him waiting for a sitting from the Princess. The bust was already in an advanced stage. I did not think it was very like, and, in reply to Gibson, said so. 'Well, you see,' said Gibson, 'the Princess is a delightful lady, but she can't sit a bit.'

"Just at this moment I was summoned to the Prince, whom I found with the Princess; and I saw, or thought I saw, a sort of pretty, smiling pout, eloquent of reproof, and of half-anger with me. The Prince had something to show me—photographs, I think—and he led the way to Gibson; the Princess and I following.

[1] *My Autobiography and Reminiscences.* By W. P. Frith, R.A. (New York: Harper & Brothers. $1.50.)

"No sooner did we find ourselves in the sculptor's presence than—after some remarks upon the bust—the Prince said: 'How do you find the Princess sit, Mr. Gibson?' 'Now,' thought I, 'If ever man was in an awkward fix, you are, Mr. Gibson; for after what you said to me a few minutes ago, you cannot, in my presence, compliment the beautiful model on her sitting.'

"The Prince looked at Gibson, and Gibson looked in dead silence at the Prince, and then at the Princess; he then looked again at the Prince, smiled, and shook his head.

"'There, you see, you neither sit properly to Mr. Gibson nor to Mr. Frith.'

"'I do—I do,' said the lady. 'You are two bad men.'

"And then we all smiled; and Gibson went on with his work, the Princess sitting admirably for the short time that I remained."

Frith was unmercifully treated by many, perhaps most, art critics, and, not unnaturally, had but a poor opinion of art criticism in general.

"One criticism on the 'Vicar of Wakefield' picture in a leading paper began thus: 'Mr. Frith is a rising artist, and he has already risen to the height of affectation,' etc., etc. This is all I can remember, but much more of similar severity followed.

"I would here advise all artists, young and old, never to read art criticism. Nothing is to be learned from it. Let me ask any painter if, when he wants advice upon any difficulty in the conduct of his work, he would seek it from an art critic. No, I reply for him; he would apply to an artist friend. But though, as I believe, no advantage accrues in any case to an artist from public criticism, much undeserved pain is often inflicted, and even injury caused, by the virulent attacks that sometimes disgrace the press. For very many years—indeed, ever since I became convinced of the profound ignorance of the writers—I have never read a word of art criticism. 'That accounts for your not painting better,' I hear the critic say. I think not; but I have no doubt saved myself from a good deal of annoyance."