

## AN ILLUSTRATOR OF THE SIXTIES

IT is, we believe, uncontested, though a 'fact not generally known,' that English illustration attained a splendour in the sixties never equalled before or since. The fifties gave little promise of such a dazzling display, and there was already a perceptible declension in the seventies. One is sure to overlook some names if one tries to enumerate great illustrators of the sixties, but here is a sample sheaf: Millais, Tenniel, Keene, Leighton, Poynter, Du Maurier, Pettie, Pinwell, F. Sandys, A. B. Houghton, Fred Walker, J. D. Watson, Arthur Hughes. Volumes of *Good Words*, the *Cornhill*, and *Once a Week* lie dusty and forlorn in the 'Threepenny Box,' although they contain illustrations that the discerning eye could contemplate long and lovingly.

But in the decade of which we are speaking, it was common opinion in the artist-world of London that a young man had already produced such admirable work and was giving such promise of still better, that he seemed certain to make a great name for himself. So 'man proposes.' But *Deo aliter visum*. Matthew James Lawless was born in 1837. In 1864 he was lying in his grave in St. Mary's, Kensal Green. He died in Pembridge Crescent, Bayswater.

Lawless was born in Dublin, where his father, Barry Lawless, was then practising as a solicitor. Barry Lawless afterwards lived in London, where he seems to have been well known in Catholic and convivial circles, and was pronounced by his friends 'the handsomest man in London.' Matthew Lawless was educated at Prior Park. His studies were hampered by deafness and by already delicate health, though in later years he acquired the reputation of being well-

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read. He must have shown an early inclination to the artist's profession. He is said to have been encouraged by Henry O'Neil, A.R.A., an intimate friend of the family. He had lessons from Mr. Carey and from J. Mathews Leigh (father of Henry S. Leigh, the 'Cockney' Minstrel), but it seems agreed that he was to a large extent self-taught; he certainly experimented boldly, and his versatility surprised those who watched his progress. At one time he concentrated on small pictures that were worked out with a *finesse* rivalling even the minute perfection of the French school. He was also a member of the New Etching Club, and the volume issued by the club, containing contributions by Millais, Tenniel, Marks and others, included several by Lawless, one, 'The Bivouac,' very striking.

He exhibited some dozen paintings. He was a great admirer of Sir Walter Scott, and two of his pictures represented figures in *Old Mortality*. The *Art Journal* in a laudatory obituary notice, complained that one or two of the paintings (probably 'A Cavalier in his Cups' and 'A Drop too much') 'as their titles indicate, are far from being of a refined character, though the subjects are cleverly worked out.' The fastidious critic, presumably S. C. Hall, could not object to the subjects of the last two works of Lawless. 'The Widow Hogarth selling her Husband's Engravings' attracted much attention, but 'A Sick Call' was not only Lawless's masterpiece but one of the most popular pictures at the Royal Academy Exhibition; indeed, the *Illustrated London News* reproduced it as one of the 'pictures of the year.' The Dalziel Brothers thus describe it in their *Record of Work*: 'A poor woman has been to fetch a priest, who, with his acolytes, is being rowed across a river; the woman's deep grief, and the solemnity of the entire scene, gives a touch of pathos to the group.' I have only seen an engraving of the 'Sick Call,' but even that was sufficient to fix the picture on

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'the inward eye.' As a Catholic would expect, the bowed figure of the priest is the impressive feature of a design admirable in conception and treatment. It is hardly necessary to remark that one of the boys who 'sat' for acolytes became Cardinal Gasquet.

Lawless's pictures, said the *Art Journal*, 'were always well hung at the Academy, and their quality had secured him the friendship of eminent members of that body. But he was almost better known as an illustrator. His father is said to have deprecated his undertaking black and white work, urging concentration on oils. But Lawless was undoubtedly wise. He very quickly arrived at a distinctive and charming manner of his own. He was not restricted, he was clever in waterside landscape, he was effective in single-figure sketches, equally so in 'conversational pictures' and in crowded salons. An example of the last class, in *London Society*, was a diptych. In the foreground was a large group of persons in the costume of Louis Quatorze, and many more were seen descending the fine staircase. The whole was carefully done, with no scribbly pin-heads to signify the people in the background. One fancies that Lawless was observant of domestic interiors, for the only original drawing of his that these eyes have seen might have had the furniture designed by an 'art' furnisher.

*Once a Week*, that remarkable magazine in which, though George Meredith's 'Evan Harrington' appeared in it, much second-rate letterpress was redeemed by a gorgeous feast of illustration, secured the lion's share of Lawless's black and white work. I have seen every one of the series, and the late James Britten lent me his incomplete collection.

Like his contemporaries, Houghton, Pinwell and Walker, Lawless was consumptive. Whether thoughts of *ars longa, vita brevis* shadowed him as his hand grew weaker or no, there is a perceptible tender grace

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and wistful sadness in his later work. A picture of an elderly mother in *Good Words*, ministering, stricken but unflinching, beside a daughter's death-bed, had this note.

The late Gleeson White declined to pronounce Lawless a genius. He characterised as 'horrid cuts' some drawings made for a Life of St. Francis. The present writer claims no flair or faculty for estimating the 'nicely calculated less or more.' He is satisfied to be one amongst the impenitent enthusiasts who enjoy the work of Lawless. Of course if the question of his talent were the object of this paper, it would be out of place in these pages. But Catholics should feel interest in an artist who was, as art publications record, 'a singularly devout Catholic.'

The 'horrid cuts' that Gleeson White failed to appreciate are thoroughly medieval and Franciscan. We trust that no one will infer that the art of Lawless was mormid, macabre, lugubrious. He was no mope or Kill-joy. He was a musician, largely self-taught in this art also. He liked dancing, and skated elegantly. He was shy and not swift to speak, but amongst intimates a genial and interesting talker. He was no 'Bohemian' and did not affect the unconventional and bizarre in costume; he always wore black, and a well-brushed top hat.

It may be that admirers of Lawless who are stepping westward see in his work what would not appear to younger eyes. But we feel sure we are not mistaken, it is *there*. It is no mean gift to prompt sober meditations amidst a 'loud, stunning tide,' to hint that the 'maddest, merriest day' draws to its solemn evening, and to stir, even when the place of pasture is peaceful, and the waters of refreshment are sweet and cool, a wistful *heimweh* for 'the land that is very far off.'

EDMUND JACKSON.