

THE LAST OF THE ARTISTS

TIMOTHY Raeburn was the last of the Artists. He lived in a garret in London, the very last of the garrets. Both he and the garret seemed to exist only by some oversight, in the present almost perfect state of things. A lingering echo of those now distant times when artists had been content to starve to death in such places, just for the mere glory of the thing.

Here he lived entirely alone and unfriended. He was a mystery. Nobody knew how he lived, or what secret force sustained him in his isolation from the world—not even Timothy himself: or by what mysterious power he alone had managed to survive into the new and happier era. How did he maintain this detachment, where one by one the others failed?

Gradually the little band of Timothy's fellow-artists had dwindled into nothing. The last survivors of the Post neo-Primitives, who had struggled so valiantly with the banner of reaction, had all capitulated in one way or another. For instance, during the past five years no fewer than one hundred and seventy-four cases of suicide had been announced among them. Only a month ago the *Trumpet Blast* had wasted three lines of a column on the death of Mr. J. A. Yeeke, the leader of the group and believed to be the last of the free-lances, who had last been seen reading a copy of this same *Trumpet Blast*, and had immediately done away with himself in a fit of sheer boredom. It should prove a salutary lesson, said they who read of it, to those perverse spirits who refused to compromise with the great forces that were sweeping mankind on to the fulfilment of his highest destiny on earth. Let the artist abandon his devotion to this false and undefined deity, which could do nothing but make an outcast, a madman, and finally a

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suicide of him. Surely this was a fitting and inevitable end to such folly. Who could feel sorry? Let him co-operate with his fellow-men. Let him, too, come into line with the modern spirit which was animating all mankind to pursue in common the only practical and sane ideal. Science, commerce, business efficiency, the Higher Thought, statesmanship, the Arts all linked in harness together, hastening on to the great consummation, the world's desire, which the Spirit of Man had groaned to achieve through the ages of superstition, ignorance and barbarity.

The Art-schools had already been re-established firmly and irrevocably as the hand-maidens of Commerce and World-wide Progress. With the exception of Timothy, all those artists who had refused suicide as the solution to the problem, and had compromised in favour of that broader and certainly very much easier path, were already at work in hundreds in the Art-factories, for which the Art-schools had become a most efficient training ground. The editor of the *Trumpet Blast* had himself contributed a glowing article dealing with a personal visit to one of these Temples of noble human activity. Seated in long rows in fine light and airy apartments with walls of glazed tiles, without smoking or speaking, the artists answered to the thousand different demands which Progress made upon their talents. Here they breathed that atmosphere of economic security in which alone man can put forth his highest endeavour. Under the correction of the manager (generally Jewish, but none the worse for it, surely), who would peer over their shoulders to direct their efforts, they catered for those thousand different human appetites, which their Master fostered so tenderly, so solicitously, in the great cause of Humanity. Anything from a blacking-tin label to an 'Underground' poster

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could be turned out with amazing efficiency. All those commodities whose virtues made them so vital to the public interest, could be proclaimed by this means in the newspapers and on the hoardings at their true worth.

Thus daily the artists earned their almost living-wage. Certainly adequate remuneration for labour, which necessary as it was, the world had come to admit was of a secondary order. Also some privileged few were still commissioned to execute portraits of the great ones and their wives, and by a careful avoidance of any trace of coarseness in the sitter, and a dexterous manipulation of paint, they could earn titles and a respectable income.

And still Timothy would have none of it. In the garret, where the little beacon-flame of his perverse soul perpetually flared up and sank almost to extinction, he considered the horrid death of Mr. Yeeke. He did not feel touched in any way, any more than he felt touched by the scrambling of the mice around the last of his store of crusts in the very soap-box on which he sat. ('It's such a simple thing to buy a mouse-trap,' his aunt had remonstrated with him, on the occasion of her first and last visit.) He felt no added sense of desolation or loneliness. He had long maintained an aloofness from all men, even from those who might have helped him. Supposing someone offered him a solution to his life which he couldn't decently refuse, and yet which he didn't want. It would make things so awkward. How could he possibly explain his position when he didn't understand it himself? It was these efforts at explanation, to himself and others, that tormented him so. As his aunt had so justly remarked, 'After all, you know, even an artist must live!' And the ghastly truth, that all such statements are finally unanswerable, had bitten into him like hot iron. So with his mind far

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removed from things and people, he lived on furtively, as if he were continually afraid of someone addressing him, to whom he would have no retort ready.

But how did he live? How did he support this quite impossible existence?

No one knew. Not even Timothy . . .

The sun had sunk behind the great city, and called a temporary halt to the march of Progress, when Timothy returned up the creaking stairs from the saloon-bar at the corner. He seldom went further abroad than that, except perhaps to read a book without buying it, in the Charing Cross Road. It was the last of the saloon-bars, and Timothy had come to feel a sort of sympathy with all last things. It was another oversight, by which the souls of common men were still left shamefully exposed to one of the jollier temptations. He entered the tiny room, and taking in the dark a sharp blow on the head as usual from the cramped and sloping ceiling, he recovered himself and, picking up a piece of old sacking from the floor, hung it across the window. Then he lit the little bit of candle, stuck correctly enough in the neck of a bottle. The wind whistling through the broken window harried its feeble flame, yet allowed sufficient light for him to survey the room. Then the little beacon-flame within him soared up and burst into sparkles behind his calm grey eyes. For his gaze had come to rest upon the wall where his five little drawings hung, so arranged as to hide some of the gaping holes in the plaster. That little jumble of scratches represented his last four years' work. But they were his creations, his own beloved offsprings! Was not that some compensation for all his trials, his isolation, his sufferings? Look at that drawing on the left. Just look at the man's arms in it. Those lines were a man's arms, weren't they? He couldn't

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be sure. He had forgotten what the drawing was about by this time. But no matter. Regarded as mere abstract marks on the surface of the paper, what a superb creative turn of the wrist had put those lines in! How happy and satisfying they were as part of the whole design!

But then, nobody wanted these things, nobody looked at them. Or if they could look at them, nobody would understand them, or have an inkling of the pangs that they had cost, even though they were the work of genius, as Timothy himself suspected. He gave it up . . .

His eyes roamed on absently till they lit upon the corner of the room where he could discern his unwashed plate and broken cup. Near by was a great smear on the floor where he had trodden on the margarine, and forgotten to clean it up. 'I ought to clear that mess up,' he mused resolutely. 'Not now, though. What about that fellow Yeeke. I must think about that unfortunate affair for a moment . . .'

The wind continued puffing through the broken pane, and the flame from the guttering candle-end, finding its life too difficult a thing, suddenly sighed itself into oblivion. The room was plunged in blank and hopeless darkness. Timothy abandoned himself deliberately to the burden of his thoughts, and sank down at full length on to the scanty bedding on the floor. 'The truth is, my position is perilous and uncertain in the extreme. The time has come for a drastic revision of my relationship to this curious society amidst which I dwell . . .'

A shudder ran through his feeble frame as his mind dwelt again on the way out of the dilemma that Mr. Yeeke had found, and the still more impossible way out of the men in the Art-factory. 'What is it that keeps me standing so long at this fork in the road? Why can I find no incentive to go down either of these paths? Or

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rather, what force holds me back from both of them? Why do I linger on here at all? Not surely to grow fat.' He surveyed the room in imagination, while counting his ribs ruefully. 'So far, Timothy, the answer to the riddle of your existence would appear to be emphatically in the negative. Yet perhaps after all, there is some third way out. Perhaps after all there is some final and absolute value to be placed on the Artist's efforts rightly directed.' Then he thought of that lowest of all values which alone survived in the era of Progress and Art-factories. 'Perhaps after all, I am a man of faith. Yet faith in what? I must answer that before night comes again. Perhaps the little flame that has burnt in me so long and yet so fitfully is about to go out . . .' In his pocket his fingers were trembling on the little phial he had carried about so long, that contained Mr. Yeeke's drastic solution to all things.

At last he fell into a troubled sleep, which continued for the greater part of next day, as was his wont. When he awoke, a street organ was grinding out its familiar tune under the garret window. The last of the organs. One that had tortured him many times during his exile. Yet sometimes he had wondered whether he would not miss it, when it succumbed finally to the march of progress, forcing its owner into inevitable co-operation with Things as they must be. An arc-lamp in the street below burst into life, and flicked a patch of orange light on to the ceiling of the garret. Timothy sprang from the floor like a madman, and hurled the phial through the window down on to the organ, where it burst into a score of fragments, silencing the wretched thing instantly. Something had happened. For one wild, mad moment he had seen the Truth, and knew that he would live on. The Powers that he had pitied him and smiled on him. Down through the heavens and the earth and

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the waters under the earth, across the gloom of those dreadful times and into the little garret reverberated the thunder of that celestial guffaw. The seed of something important had again been sown on earth, and strong laughter entered the wasted frame of Timothy, a menace to the Devil, but life to him.

He lived on, and only after sixty-five years more of life did he die a perfectly natural death with a good priest to hand.

DENIS TEGETMEIER.