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CONCERNING THE VIRTUES AND VICES OF ARTISTS

Do They Belong to the Oppressed or to the Criminal Classes?

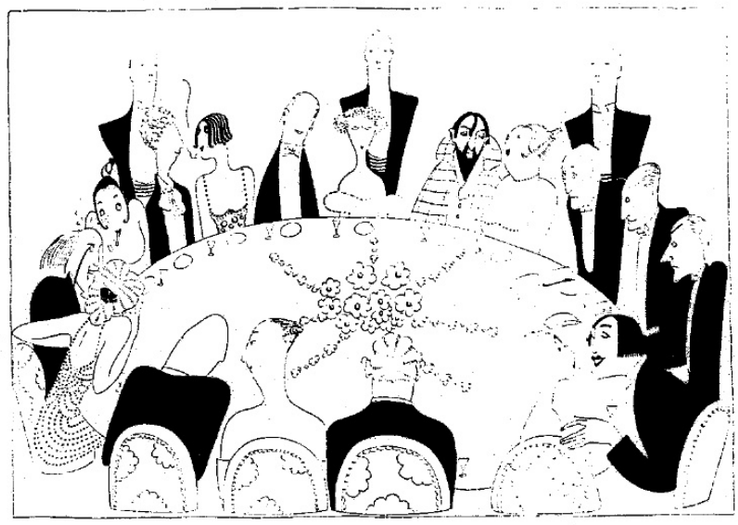
BY P. BROOKE-HAVEN

NOTHING is more interesting to the thoughtful mind than the manner in which Nature supplies even the humblest of her creatures with the ingenuity to achieve self-preservation against its enemies. We see this in the case of the opossum which, when pursued by local sportsmen, instantly publishes obituary notices of itself, hangs its door with crape, and instructs its nearest relatives to stand around saying nice things about it, thus deceiving the hunter into believing that his quarry is no more. One could cite numerous other instances (if one could only think of them), but none more remarkable and instructive than that of the modern artist.

THE invention of photography and the growing popularity of the stage hit artists hard. It began to look as if there would be no more need for them in the scheme of things. In the olden days they had had an established place in the community. They alone could perpetuate for us the features of our loved ones and preserve the scenes on which we desired to gaze. They had a monopoly. If you wanted to refresh yourself with a daily look at your rich uncle or the home of your childhood, you had to hire an artist. Then photography came along, and a shrewd public began to see that with its aid they could get the same thing much better done for a fraction of the cost. Instead of an expensive portrait in oils of our rich uncle, we could have a cabinet photograph of him holding a scroll and gazing imperiously into space for about a dollar a throw. Naturally people began to stop commissioning artists and to send them away when they called at the back door for orders. And with photography came the popularity of the stage, which hit artists in another place. No sensible person was going to buy "Child and Kitten," "Woodland Memories," "Distant Prospect of Old Poughkeepsie" and the like, when for a mere nothing he could get photographs of Billie Burke, Pearl White, Anita Stewart, and a thousand others. It looked as if the artist were through and would have to go back to work.

And then Nature came to the rescue. With amazing resourcefulness, the resourcefulness of creatures in dire straits, the artists spread it about that photographs might look like the right thing to the untutored eye but were really all wrong, and that a picture ought to look not only unlike its subject but like nothing on earth. They said to us in effect: "Cover your walls with photographs of your rich uncle, if you like, but don't imagine that you are seeing him as he really was. If you want him as he really looked you must come to us, and we will demonstrate that he was cubic in shape, with no head and no arms or legs, and that his most striking feature was a single eye that looked out of the center of his chest." There was nothing to be said. The camera could not turn out stuff like that, so we had to go on paying our good money as before to the artists, thereby enabling them to maintain expensive studios in Washington Square, to wear long hair or—if female—to bob it, to enjoy riotous meals at the Dutch Oven, and to spend their lives, when not eating or painting, in having those hectic adventures with deliriously beautiful women which are the main support of the "vitalized fiction" magazines which your wife tells you to be sure not to leave about.

ARTISTS have their troubles, of course, even now. A furtive but exhaustive perusal of the type of magazine alluded to has shown us that, whenever an artist wants to begin his masterpiece—a bold striking thing in the nude—he is always in despair because he cannot find the right model. One would think he would have got used to it by this time. But no; every time it happens he writhes on a tiger-skin covered couch feeling that his career is at an end. Nothing cheers the man up, not even the priceless tapestries on the walls of his studio and the sort of furniture which only artists can afford these days. He is just going to commit suicide with a jewelled revolver when the heroine, a prominent society girl, comes in and volunteers to sit for him. It is a proof of the innate childish capacity for wonder so characteristic of the artist soul that he is just as surprised every time it happens as he was the first time. It all comes right in the end, of course, but he has a bad time while it lasts.



TYPICAL DINNER OF MODERNIST AND IMPRESSIONISTIC ARTISTS

Drawing by Fish

THEN again, to anyone with an artist's sensitiveness, it must be depressing to know that there are all sorts of total strangers sitting round like buzzards, waiting impatiently for him to die and send the value of his pictures up a bit. It is a grewsome experience to chat with a man who understands pictures and their values. It is like going round the fowl-run with a farmer. He leads you from picture to picture. You pause before a representation of a storm at sea. You like it. You say so. "Yes," replies your host, "that ought to go up a lot when the chap dies. I've got a couple more in the attic, waiting to be released. The trouble is that although he drinks like a fish and has only the southeastern corner of one lung left, he still hangs on, confound him!

The knowledge that this sort of thing is going on all around him all the time must be trying to a highly-strung artist. He must suspect the *bona fides* of everyone who enquires after his health. "How are you, Percivale?" asks some friend of his boyhood, carelessly, as he whizzes by. The day is spoilt for the artist. He looks after the other suspiciously. "I believe that chap meant something," he says to himself. "I believe he must have picked up my 'Jocund Spring' at some auction. I'll be dashed careful to see that he doesn't put something in my spaghetti next time he asks me to lunch." Of course this is morbid. The friend has no intention of poisoning the artist's spaghetti. Besides, what's the use of poisoning spaghetti? You can't make it any deadlier.

There is another side to this matter of killing artists. It has never actually been settled in law whether there is anything wrong in killing an artist who, for instance, had illustrated one of your stories in a magazine. It would be interesting if some public-spirited author with the good of the community at heart were to make a test-case of it. The trouble with the artist, as illustrator, is that, in his devotion to his own studies, he has never learned to read. It is useless for the author to write, "Hildebrand faced the girl, wild and dishevelled. There was a gash on his forehead where the puma had bitten him, and his clothes were in rags. She, too, owing to the explosion of the bomb recorded in the last chapter was in little better case." When the story is published he finds that the artist has depicted Hildebrand in faultless evening dress with a wooden expression on his face, talking down the back of the heroine's neck at the country club; she being dressed in the latest model and a diamond necklace. Murder cannot be a crime in these circumstances.

MUCH has been written about the morality of artists. Many hold that they are a maligned class, more that they ought to be ashamed of themselves. Fortunately it is possible nowadays to apply an acid test. The movies have settled definitely the moral status of every existing section of the public. Thus, soldiers are good. The movie villain is never a soldier. Captains of Industry are bad. Sailors are good. So are bank clerks, doctors and railroad engineers. But the artist is practically always a shocking bad lot. Directly he comes on to the screen and starts posing in front of that canvas which is always thoughtfully turned away from the view of the audience, the ten-cent seats sit up tensely and get ready for the entrance of the heroine and the commencement of those devilish wiles by means of which her girlish heart is to be ensnared.

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