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GILBERT MUNGER.

FOR many generations America has been indebted to Europe for all that has given her the highest pleasure in the arts, literature, music, and the drama. A native artist was not accepted unless he had studied at Rome. A book by a home-bred author was not successful until European reviewers had said it was worth reading, and good native singers were as rare as good native song-birds. For centuries the admitted inferiority of American productions of this character prevented the full development of the talents possessed by many of the people. It was not altogether from want of appreciation for European books were printed with the utmost cheerfulness, and as no amount of ingenuity could furnish them with a replica of a *prima donna*, New York was willing to pay a heavier price for her services than even London or St. Petersburg. Gradually, however, they groped their way out of the Slough of Despond in which they had been all but embedded, and once on firm ground their progress in these pursuits has been as rapid as their material development. At first it seemed to be thought impossible that anything artistically good could be executed in America, but having, to their astonishment, found that they were not so hopelessly helpless as they had imagined, they set to work with characteristic energy to show that they could not only do something, but something that would rival the productions of the Old World. In literature the predominating nation of the New World made its first strides. A skirmisher here and there had been thrown out in other directions; but it was in book-lore that the earliest national "school" was founded, and at the present time the United States can boast of poets, authors, and men of science whose names would be an honour to any country. Occasionally the works of a sculptor or an artist would stand out in bold relief against the dark back ground of mediocrity, but they were meteors and did not belong to any recognized constellations. In return for carrying off some of our best singers, America has now sent us some of her children with voices as sweetly attuned as the music of her own pine forests, and actors who would have

been worthy rivals to Garrick or Kean. While there is a distinct nationality in literature and the drama, art in the United States is even now only feeling its way; the influence of Europe is still too strong for the formation of a distinctive body. Mr. Gough, in one of his "orations," violently attacks the prejudice which is attached by the *bourgeois* to everything "Yewropean," and ridicules with unrivalled force a prevalent idea in his adopted country that a visit to "Yewrope" is the one thing needful to distinction in this life and salvation hereafter. However, it is with American art, or rather with the career of an American artist, that we have to deal, and although the deference paid in the past, and in a less degree at the present time, to European judgment and work, is very flattering to us, it is to be hoped for the sake of the inhabitants themselves, that deference will not degenerate into servility, but will induce imitation and ultimate rivalry.

The career of Mr. Gilbert Munger shows the energy with which our "kin beyond the sea" struggle to attain success in everything they undertake, even though their aim be an education. When a child he firmly believed he should become an artist, and told his parents so, but they thought he was acting on a childish freak, and discouraged the notion. At that period he had never seen a picture of any merit; except in New York there were no art schools or academies, and he had never been in New York. Fortunately for all lovers of art he had as tutor an English gentleman of culture, an enthusiast in art, and when his pupil was only eleven years old he happened to see some of his productions. He saw in them such promise of future distinction that he earnestly advised the parents to allow their son to follow his own inclination and become an artist. Unfortunately at that time the prosaic and practical inhabitants of New England did not consider the profession "quite respectable." However much we may be amused now at such an opinion, we must not forget that within this century an artist even in England was not considered "quite respectable" unless success and consequent wealth happened to be unusually great. He was offered any other profession, but he did not want any other. At last his tutor conquered, and at the age of thirteen he became the pupil of a natural history and landscape engraver at Washington. His school-days soon enough came to an end and at the early age of fourteen he was a full-fledged natural history engraver, receiving a salary from the United States Government. During

the following five years he was principally employed in engraving large plates of plants, birds, fish, fossils, reptiles, portraits, and landscapes, published by the Government, in connection with the exploring expedition of Commodore Wilkes, and for Professor Agassiz's works, and the works for the Smithsonian Institution.

Although his time was thus busily occupied, Mr. Munger never renounced his intention of becoming a landscape painter, and only adopted engraving as a means to that end. He borrowed from a friend Ruskin's works, and read them, and purchased a copy of J. D. Harding's drawing-book. Rising in the summer months at four o'clock, he hastened, sketch-book in hand, to the woods, and drew careful studies of trees until eight o'clock – then back to his home, and from nine till five earned his daily bread at his engraving-desk. After that, three more hours in the woods with his pencil and paper. Could any other profession have been successful to such an enthusiast? The most ardent worshipper of the arts could not have been more devoted to the shrine of his goddess. During this period he went on one occasion to the *atelier* of a sculptor (from Rome,) who was then executing some Government commissions, and for the first time saw an artist at work upon a statue. After carefully watching the operations of the sculptor he left, taking home with him some modelling clay. Turning for a time with enthusiasm to this new pursuit, he gave up his evening to its study, and modelled portions of the human figure. They were received at the exhibition of the Metropolitan Institute of Science and Art, and were awarded the first medal, much to the astonishment, no doubt, of the young exhibitor. In spite of his elation at his early success, he did not swerve from his original design, but purchased a box colours and some brushes, and for the first time seriously attempted to copy the tints as well as the forms of the Colombian woods. Except the little technical knowledge he may have gleaned from seeing amateur artists at work from time to time, Nature has been his only instructor, and he has never attempted to study under any other tutor. In this he has but followed the example of some of our greatest artists, although in his boyhood he was probably unconscious of the fact.

At nineteen years of age came one of those changes in life of which America has furnished so many examples. The great conflict broke out between the slave-holding and the free States, and all appropriations for natural history publications was dis-

continued. With a liberality and foresight unknown in this country, America has long directed large sums of money from the national purse for the furtherance of objects having a great ultimate aim, but the immediate benefits of which were likely to be little felt. Her elaborate annual reports on agriculture have lately awakened an interest in England, where the compilation of statistics on the subject has been left to individuals or newspapers, and the results have necessarily been imperfect and erratic. The observations of the Meteorological Bureau of the United States have proved of great benefit to us, although separated by three thousand miles of salt water, and at last we are in possession of a daily record of the weather in all parts of the kingdom, and daily foreshadowings of that is to come. But in the year 1860 the war-cloud had lowered over the United States, the arts and sciences, the luxuries of a nation, had to be abandoned, the national life was endangered, and money was essential to its existence. Deprived of his means of livelihood – for no private firms would publish such work as Mr. Munger produced – he was offered and accepted a position as engineer in the Federal army. The new calling was not congenial, the imaginative artist temperament being “cribbed, cabined, and confined,” when all his duties were comprised in the more mechanical labours of the military engineer. However, he studied hard to fit himself for the new calling which fortune had conferred upon him and with such success that he became a constructing engineer, with the rank of Major. During the four years' war he was engaged upon the field fortifications around Washington, and so, while employed for the defence of his country, happily escaped the horrors of the battle-field.

When peace was concluded, and the army were disbanded to return to their homes, many of them only to find the wrecks of their farms and homesteads, Mr. Munger also laid down his arms and resigned his commission, although much against the advise of his friends. He was now at last to follow in earnest the career his boyish fancy had chosen. Taking a studio in New York he painted two pictures during the winter, both of which were exhibited in the National Academy of Design, favourably noticed by the Press, and sold. A large work, “Minnehaha,” the “laughing maiden” of Longfellow’s “Hiawatha,” was next painted, and was then exhibited in the different cities, a specially paid ticket exhibition. This picture attracted great attention, and brought him a commission from a

wealthy gentleman from France, the subject being Niagara Falls. After filling this commission, for which he received £1,000, he went west, and spent the next three years in the wildest scenery of the Rocky Mountains, California, and British America. In the vast mountain region which divides the Continent, he found some of the grandest scenery the mind of man could conceive. On every side was a new subject for his brush, the fitful, changing shadows on the peak before him, with its hues of gold, ruby, indigo, or grey, the mountain stream, as it rushed through the valley, swollen with the melting snow, the vast chain of mountains, rising peak after peak and foothill after foothill, and stretching from the tropics to the North Pole. Here, away from civilization – with no neighbour but the bear, the fox, and the eagle, no sound to break the stillness of the day but the sharp crack of the far-off hunter's rifle, nothing to arouse the ear at night but the howl of the coyotes as the pack take up the cry of their leader, and the sound dies away with a single bark far in the distance – well supplied with food, with health youth and strength, and, above all, with a reverence for, and delight in, the beauty of nature, the artist is in an earthly paradise. In all seasons the mountains are beautiful – in winter, when clad from base to summit with the virgin snow, with jutting rocks showing grey and dark, with park-like valleys dotted with deep-hued pinon trees, and narrow canons impassable for the foot of man; in spring or summer, when the dry, rarefied, mountain air softens the burning heat of the sun, when a hundred miles of country are open to view, and nothing can be seen but lofty peaks, with a rosy gleam upon the unmelted snow, when sleep under a blanket in a sheltered nook is more delicious than all the refinements of civilization; but above all in late autumn when the quivering haze of the Indian summer softens the hard outlines of the rugged hills, and throws a glamour upon everything. With a mountaineer and pack animals Mr. Munger spent months during his wanderings far from any habitation, meeting now a band of friendly Utes, with their little ponies, now a roaming Sioux, who had ventured within the territory of hereditary enemies, sometimes coming unexpectedly upon one or other of the wild animals which still prowl about the more unfrequented regions. Satiated with mountain scenery, there were plains, stretching eastward for hundreds of miles covered in the autumn and spring with vast herds of buffalo migrating to their winter or summer feeding places, with shy

delicate antelopes grazing curiously at the distant intruder, and with skulking wolves eager in their chase for carrion. Far as the eye can reach extends a limitless expanse of uninhabited land, buffalo grass, sage-brush, cactus, and soap-weed the only vegetation – not a tree or hill to break the monotony, or to hide the solitude. Patches of white alkali dot the earth; here and there are salt-licks hollowed out by the tongues of countless thousands of animals, while over the whole desolate waste are the bleached bones of buffalo which have perished by the hunter or old age.

Turning his back on the mountain and the plain, Mr. Munger travelled westward to the famous Yo-Semite valley, the scene of wonders equally gigantic. Four thousand feet high the solitary rock El Capitan rears its head, and this is but one of, the enormous works which nature has lavished on that strange land. St. Paul's Cathedral in London is about 365 feet from foundation to cross, and if we can imagine another St. Paul's placed above it, and then another and another, until eleven cathedrals are reared in one huge whole, we can obtain an imperfect idea of the height of that great rock. One season was passed amid the extinct volcanoes of Oregon, California, and Washington Territory. He chose them as the subject for series of paintings, and he also received a commission from the United States Government to paint series of pictures illustrating scenery of that wild description. The attractions of the Yo-Semite were sufficiently powerful to draw him to the sport during two seasons. Here he met Lord Skelmersdale, who with many other English gentlemen, gave him commissions for works illustrating the scenery of the neighbourhood. They also earnestly advised him to set out at once for England with his collection of studies. After due deliberation he decided to accept their counsel, returned to New York to arrange his affairs, and then set out for England.

Arriving in London in 1877, Mr. Munger soon received commissions for paintings of American scenery. Fresh from the unpopulated mountain ranges and valleys of the far West, he soon made his escape from the stifling wilderness of houses, and in the autumn of the same year spent some weeks at Dunkeld, in company with Mr. J. E. Millais. The second season was passed at Skye, Stornoway, Loch Maree, and Dunkeld. He did not exhibit during the first year he passed in England, but in 1879 send no less than eight pictures to various exhibitions – to the Royal Academy, “Loch Coruisk,” “Loch Maree,” and “Great Salt Lake, Utah;” to Manchester, “A Glimpse of the

Pacific" and "Loch Coruisk;" to Newcastle-on-Tyne, "Woodland Streams" and "Herring Fleet;" and to Liverpool, "Great Salt Lake." Seven of these pictures were sold. To this year's exhibition of the Royal Academy he has sent his large picture of "King Arthur's Castle, Cornwall," a fine work, which is fortunately on the line, and well placed. The Fine Art Society, New Bond Street, are successfully publishing his etchings. His work would have been better known had he commenced to exhibit on his arrival, but until last year he preferred to send the picture direct to the owner. He intends to adhere to the rule of painting direct from nature, and exhibiting the original pictures so painted, the result being necessarily safer. Mr. Munger's visit to England is not that of a bird of passage; he has made this country his home, and is willing to trust his fortune to his own ability and the unprejudiced opinion of Englishmen. Although when travelling in foreign countries our insular ideas are somewhat too stubbornly maintained, yet Englishmen are always willing to give a hearty welcome to the traveller who visits their shores, and none are welcomed with more unselfishness than those who come to vie with the natives themselves. Mr. Munger's bark has now been fairly launched on British waters, and he need not fear that any storm of envy or calumny will be raised to drive it out of its course.