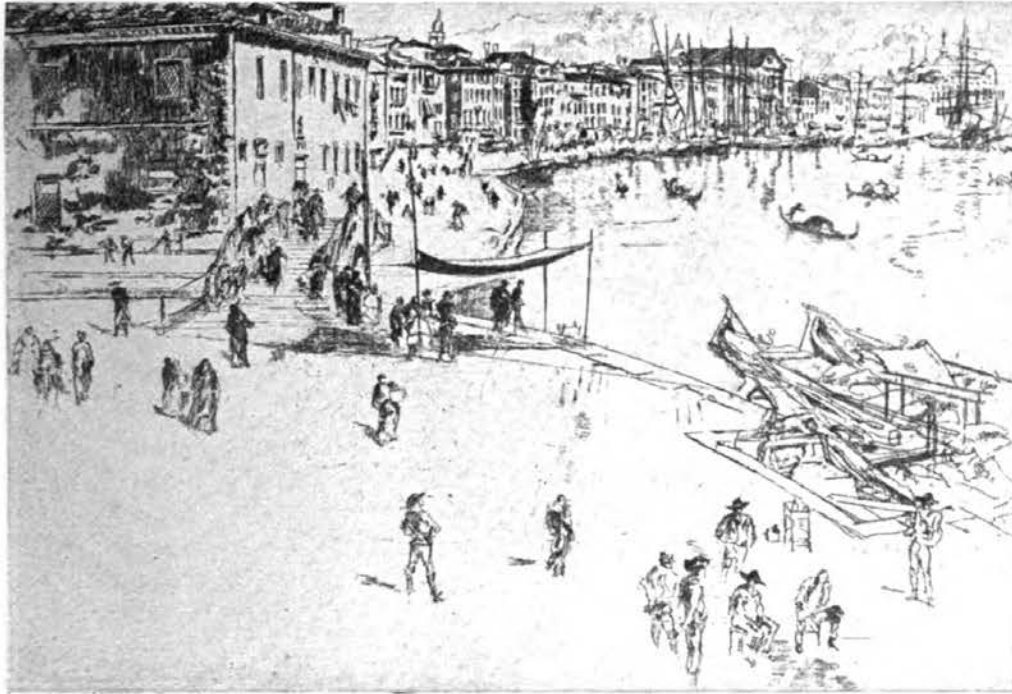


# MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

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Number I



"THE RIVA"—ONE OF THE VENETIAN SERIES, KNOWN TO COLLECTORS AS "RIVA NUMBER TWO"  
*By courtesy of M. Knoedler & Company from the etching by Whistler*

## WHISTLER FROM WITHIN

BY CHRISTIAN BRINTON

AN INQUIRY INTO THE INNER SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ART OF THE GREATEST AMERICAN PAINTER AND ETCHER OF HIS DAY—THE CONSISTENCY OF HIS DEVELOPMENT FROM JOYOUS REALISM TO THE SHADOWY NUANCES OF A SPIRITISTIC POINT OF VIEW—FIRST AND LAST, A MAN OF HIGH PRINCIPLE

LET us for the moment put aside all previous ideas of Whistler. Let us forget all the vapid stories, grotesque theories, and clumsy misconceptions with which he has so long been surrounded. It is time for his work to speak for

itself in its own incomparably subtle and persuasive language. It is enough if he stand there in the dim studio prompting now and again, or pointing the way as he might once have done with his un-failing clarity and enthusiasm.

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"LA FRUITIÈRE DE LA RUE DE GRENELLE" — A VIEW OF A PARISIAN FRUIT-STORE

*By courtesy of M. Knoedler & Company from the lithograph by Whistler*

Why has this man who took such deliberate pains to explain himself remained a puzzle, an enigma? How is it possible that he should have eluded not only a

lies in the fact that Whistler has invariably been approached from without instead of from within. Nothing could be more dissimilar than the Whistler of tra-



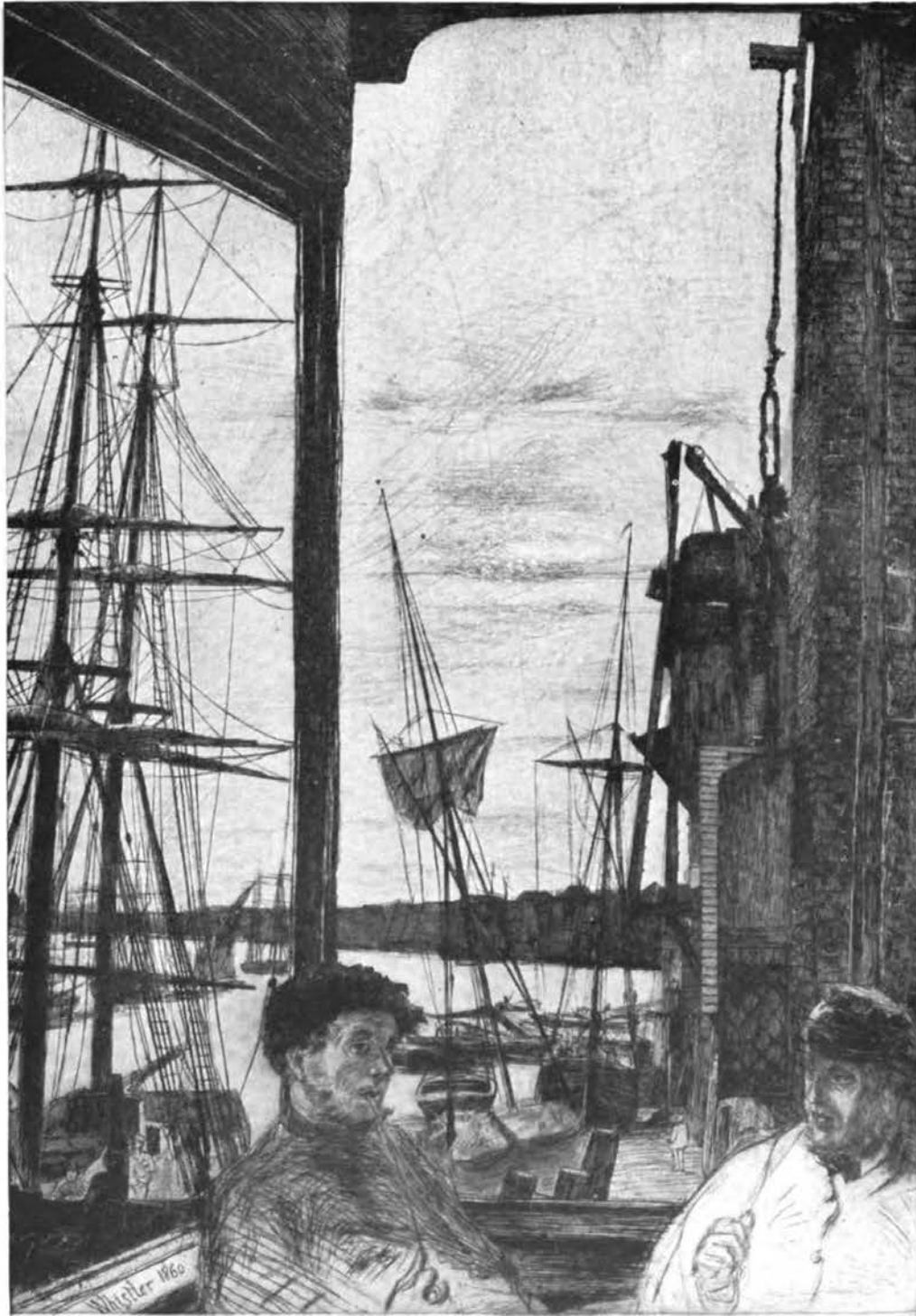
JAMES McNEILL WHISTLER

*By courtesy of Frederick Keppel & Company from the soft-ground etching by Paul Adolphe Rayon*

vast inquisitive public, but his friends and followers as well? Why does he always retreat nimbly as you advance, gliding farther and farther into the distance just as his portraits seem to dissolve into their vague backgrounds, their matchless envelope of mystery?

The answer is simplicity itself. It

dition and the Whistler of truth. Stripped of all that has been foisted upon them of specious and foreign, of malicious or frivolous, the man and his message shine forth full of spontaneous unity. Instead of being a clever mountebank, he was in reality a mystic and a martyr. Instead of being careless and



"ROTHERHITHE"—ONE OF THE THAMES SERIES. IN THE LATER ETCHINGS FIGURES ARE NOT SEEN AT CLOSE RANGE LIKE THESE TWO FISHERMEN

*By courtesy of Frederick Kettel & Company from the etching by Whistler*

inconsequent, he was one of the most scrupulous emblems of the esthetic conscience ever known. It is marvelous how this slender, tenuous creature survived those weary years of opposition and obloquy, and that subsequent period

of adulation and over-praise. He succeeded in doing so only because his was the life of the spirit, because he possessed the calm austerity of an Emerson, the lofty self-detachment of a Swedenborg.

You will perhaps think that all this

From the outset his practise was to eliminate, to simplify. He began with rich, almost robust qualities; he loved form, color, and contour, yet one by one he renounced what are usually deemed the essentials of pictorial representation. Little



"MY MOTHER"

*From the portrait, by Whistler, in the Luxembourg Gallery, Paris*

sounds ecstatic; you may doubtless find it difficult to associate such ideas with the Whistler of convention, the nonchalant Whistler whose existence seemed to his contemporaries so aimless, and who left behind so much that appears transitory or experimental. In the interest of verity let us, however, judge this eager, zealous being according to his own standards; let us measure him by his own restrained and aristocratic accomplishment.

No man in the history of graphic expression presents a more intense and exalted example of artistic purification.

by little his art became fastidious and evanescent, the merest phantom suggestion of fact. It passed through a continual process of etherealization.

#### THE PUREST ALCHEMY OF ART

Do those later portraits, lingering so far back in their black or dull gold frames, depict actual men and women, or are they eloquent, disembodied souls? Are these luminous nocturnes bits of Venice and the Thames, or are they but the magic record of vagrant impressions? Is this fleeting glow the radiance of nature or the powdered dust blown from

countless fairy butterfly wings? You cannot form a valid reply without bearing in mind that Whistler began a realist and ended a spiritist, that what he achieved was the purest alchemy of art.

Let us, then, follow him from those

cedents and youthful associations. From the beginning he displayed a haughty contempt for externals. It was the idea which attracted him, seldom the fact. When, after a whimsical militant experience, he arrived in Paris, it was the



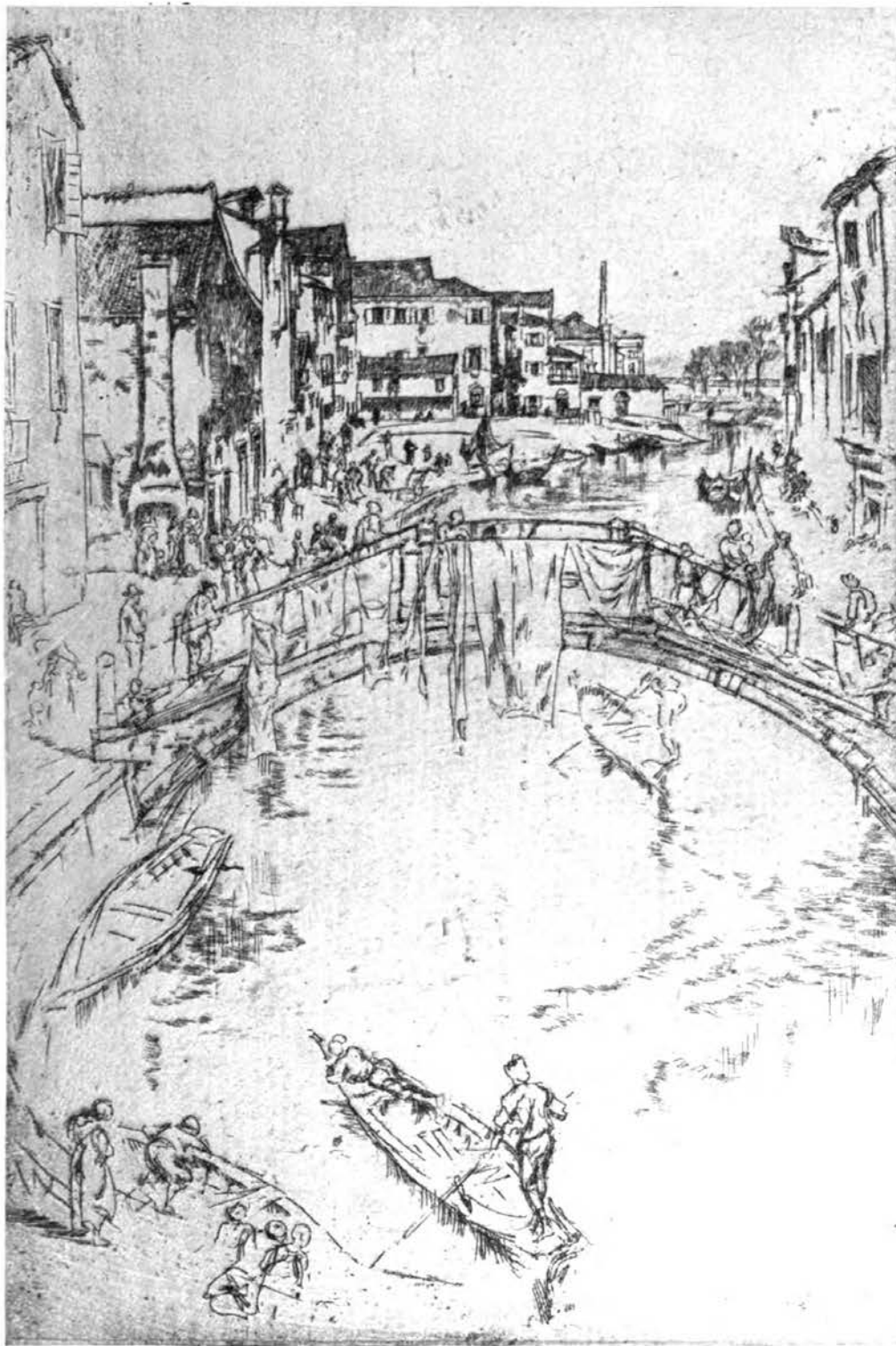
"THE TIRESMITH—CHELSEA"

*By courtesy of M. Knoedler & Company from the lithograph by Whistler*

early Paris days, when he saw so vividly and so joyously, to the deepening twilight of that last quiescent hour in Chelsea when all he had seen and dreamed melted into the great, encircling infinity.

With an instinctive knowledge that details in themselves signify little, Whistler adroitly rebuffed the prying nobodies who industriously delved into his ante-

theory of realism in which he became absorbed, not its practise. It is true that under the direct influence of Rembrandt he painted certain vigorous portraits, notably the one of himself with the hat, which clearly recall the great Dutchman's plastic energy and heavy, oily palette. It is equally obvious that the rugged Courbet is reflected in his "Coast



"THE BRIDGE" — ONE OF THE VENETIAN SERIES, SHOWING THE GRADUAL ETHEREALIZATION OF WHISTLER'S STYLE

*By courtesy of Frederick Keppel & Company from the etching by Whistler*



"THE LIME-BURNER" — ONE OF THE THAMES SERIES

*By courtesy of Frederick Keppel & Company from the etching by Whistler*



of Brittany" and the clairvoyant Manet in his "Thames in Ice"; yet this phase was transient, and bears little relation to his subsequent work.

#### WHISTLER'S FRIENDSHIP WITH FANTIN

His favorite counselor and companion was Fantin, the gentle visionary who gazed at simple interiors, at young girls reading or embroidering, at the whole subdued intimacy of daily life, through the tenderest, most pervasive soul-mist that art has thus far known. They first met in the Louvre, and then and there began the friendship which proved so stimulating to both, especially to the student from oversea. There was always a deep mental as well as artistic affinity between the two men. Though Whistler shortly crossed the Channel, the inspiration of Fantin persisted, subtly helping him to paint his "At the Piano," so full of rich and quiet tonality, so infused with the permeating limpidity of atmosphere, the beauty of sentiment, and the suggestion of softly played melody. From Fantin, too, perhaps, came also the idea of those later and still more insinuating harmonies and symphonies; for Fantin was already dreaming of transposing to black and white the throbbing utterances of Wagner, Schumann, Brahms, and Berlioz. The whole influence of Fantin was in the direction of a rhythmic, appealing eloquence, a psychic radiation through which were to emerge the beseeching shapes of an ever-present spirit-world.

Yet it need not be assumed that the



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"THE LITTLE ROSE OF LYME REGIS"

*From the Copley print of the portrait, by Whistler, in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts*

Whistler of this formative period was in any degree lacking in a proper sense of actuality or definition. Utterly without academic leanings or reverence for the schools, he declined to pass his time copying old masters in the Louvre, but went inquisitively about the bright streets and squares of Paris, or strolled along the Thames water-front, selecting here and there whatever impressed him as being picturesque and refreshing. The etching needle was used with transcendent-



"AT THE PIANO" — A PORTRAIT OF WHISTLER'S SISTER, LADY HADEN, WIFE OF THE FAMOUS ENGLISH ETCHER, SIR FRANCIS SEYMOUR HADEN, AND HER DAUGHTER, MISS ANNIE HADEN

*From the painting, by Whistler, in the possession of Mr. Edmund Davis*

ent fluency and charm, whether in catching the quaint, thoughtful profile of "Bibi Lalouette" or a 'longshoreman seated in his slowly drifting scow. It is the etched portraits, such as those of "Becquet," "Drouet," and his own youthful countenance crowned with masses of wavy hair, which particularly enriched this early French series; for when he moved to London humanity was subordinated to those incomparable views of wharves and warehouses, swaying masts and tall chimneys standing sharp against the sky, which characterize the Thames set. Just as he rarely, for color or movement, duplicated the vividness and sweeping vigor of "The Blue Wave" breaking on the shore of Biarritz, so he never again attempted the accurate, net-like tracery of "Billingsgate" or "Black Lion Wharf." They are unique, these plates, in the field of etching. One after another they reveal the clearest vision and the surest hand that ever chose the needle and copper surface as a means of expressing nature's baffling intricacy.

Years later, in Venice, when he turns

to etching once again, Whistler is a different man. He has ceased to care for the same effects. You cannot put your finger on the walls or crumbling cornices of these palaces along the Grand Canal. They appear before you phantom-like and ephemeral, or stretch in slender lines across the distant, iridescent horizon. You never see the figure at close range, like the two rivermen comfortably puffing their clay pipes in "Rotherhithe." Infinitesimal specks of personality flit by the Riva; gondolas glide to and fro in the twilight; here rises a campanile, there looms the swelling dome of I.a Salute; all is magical in its delicacy, its feather lightness of touch. Now and then you pause before an entrance or glance into a garden or courtyard, merely, it seems, the better to realize the contrasting vagueness and remote, illusory splendor of this city by the sea.

#### THE KEENNESS OF HIS OBSERVATION

Do not imagine, because Whistler transcribed less and less at each stage of his development, that he saw less, that

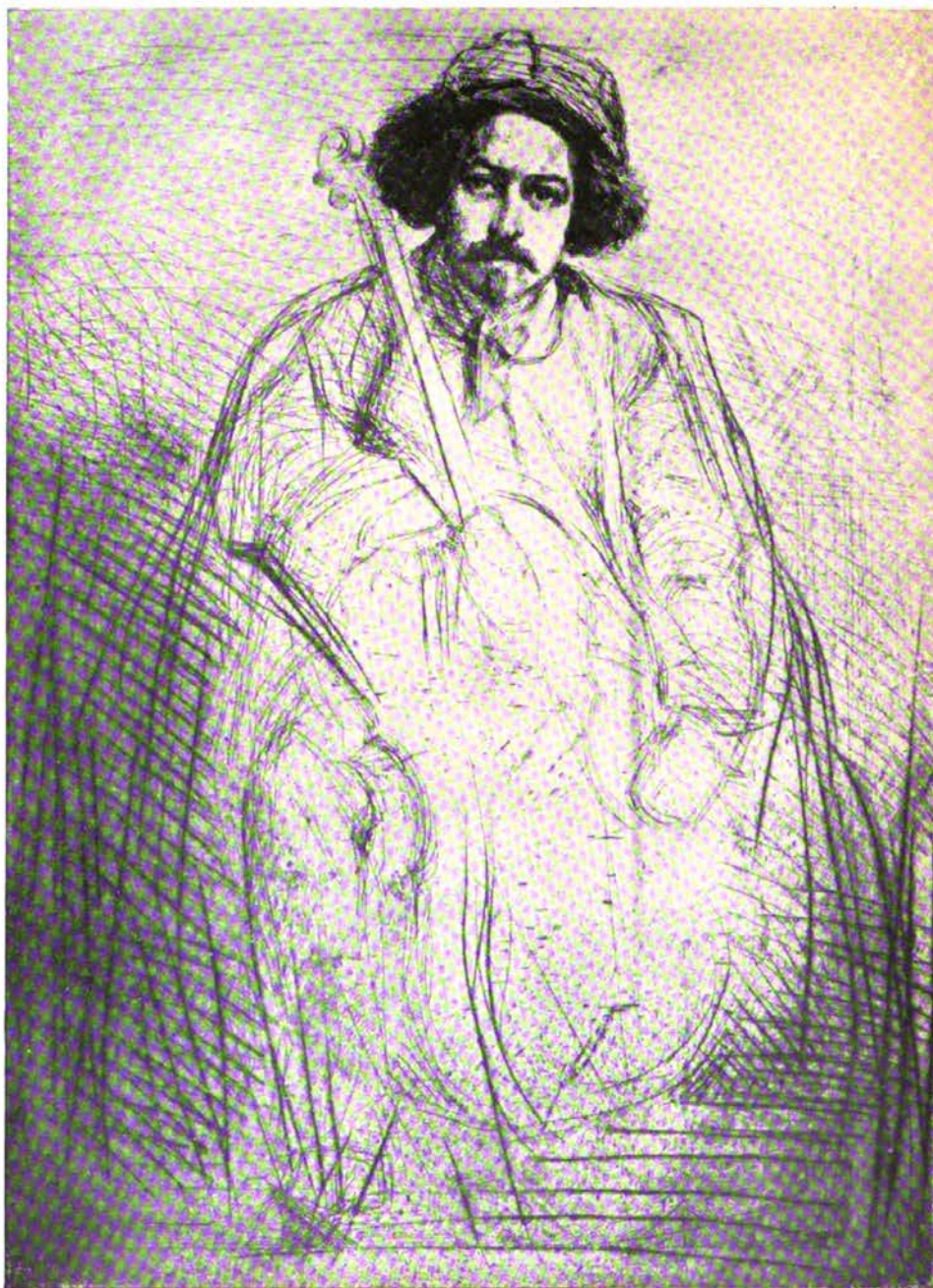


"MISS ALEXANDER"

*From the painting, by Whistler, in the possession of Mr. W. C. Alexander*

his power of observation in any degree diminished. The truth is that he kept discerning more and more; he discovered nuances which were indescribably diffi-

He was accomplishing, indeed, with his etcher's needle just what certain simpler folk near by were doing. He was attaining the dexterity of those lace-



"BECQUET" — A PORTRAIT OF WHISTLER'S FRIEND, BECQUET, THE SCULPTOR

*By courtesy of Frederick Kettel & Company from the etching by Whistler*

cult to perceive, and these he recorded with matchless freedom and vivacity. With each step forward he acquired increased facility and precision of pattern.

makers he must often have seen bending over their work in some sunlit doorway or seated at a quiet window.

The Whistler of the etchings, litho-



"THOMAS CARLYLE" — ONE OF THE PAINTINGS THAT MARK THE CLIMAX OF THE ARTIST'S AUSTERITY OF STATEMENT

*From the portrait, by Whistler, in the Glasgow Art Galleries*

graphs, and pastels will always remain the Whistler for those of minute, attenuated artistic perceptions. It is the author of the "Mother," "Carlyle," and "Miss Alexander" who attracts broader, more explicit minds. In painting he passed through the same process of renunciation as in the strictly graphic arts. Yet during the period when he was feeling his way with tragic eagerness, he was not above accepting assistance from the outside. Behind the tremulous aspiration of "At the Piano," Fantin, as

we know, nods in grateful recognition and approval. Beside the "White Girl" and the "Princesse du Pays de la Porcelaine" lingers the luxuriantly sensuous Rossetti, while over those two maidens in a "Symphony in White, No. 3," Albert Moore cast a spell of that same classic immobility and mellowness which was wafted from the shores of Sicily and the gleaming isles of the Egean. From print or shop front Whistler caught bewitching glimpses of Japan, and in the Louvre stood transfixed



"BLACK LION WHARF"—ONE OF THE THAMES SERIES, SHOWING THE CHARACTERISTIC FIGURES IN THE FOREGROUND

*By courtesy of Frederick Keppel & Company from the etching by Whistler*

before the sweeping line and silver gray vibrancy of Velasquez. Each separate factor contributed to his esthetic maturity. He selected this, he assimilated that, blending all into his own innately personal and exclusive vision.

#### HIS SUPREME ARTISTIC RESTRAINT

Nothing is more illuminating than to note how through an almost frenzied self-chastisement he rose to spiritual height and the supreme artistic restraint of the "Mother" and the "Carlyle." Before long he shrank in disgust from the stolid truculence of Courbet; he even left behind without a pang of regret the full-keyed brilliance of "The Music Room" with its exquisite, instantaneous figures, simple reading-lamp, flowered chintz curtains, and porcelain vase reflected in the clear mirror.

It was doubtless with somewhat easier conscience that he forsook such elaborate Japanese arrangements as "The Golden Screen," "Lange Leizen of the Six Marks," and "On the Balcony," which had never meant more to him than studies in decorative distribution. The balcony on which these fragile creatures were grouped was, in point of fact, the bal-

cony of his own house. He did not even add an imaginary profile of Fuji towering in the distance, but let us see the winding river with its dimly outlined warehouses and scattered shipping. And after all it mattered little, for he soon cleansed himself of an effete, exotic orientalism. He soon began to look within, to express things in their briefest terms, to paint, as it were, with the penetrant intensity of thought alone.

#### A MAN OF LOFTY PRINCIPLES

It was not through gifts wholly esthetic that Whistler was able to conceive the "Mother" and the "Carlyle," but also by grace of qualities distinctly intellectual and moral. In all matters he was essentially a purist. His numerous quarrels were questions of principle, not merely the splenetic vagaries of a tantalizing egotist. Art was his religion, and for his artistic creed he was ready to make any sacrifice. You cannot gaze at these two canvases without feeling that they represent the sovereign force of pure mentality as well as finely attuned sensibilities. The abstract reasoning of his engineer-mathematician father and the exalted piety of his mother were curi-

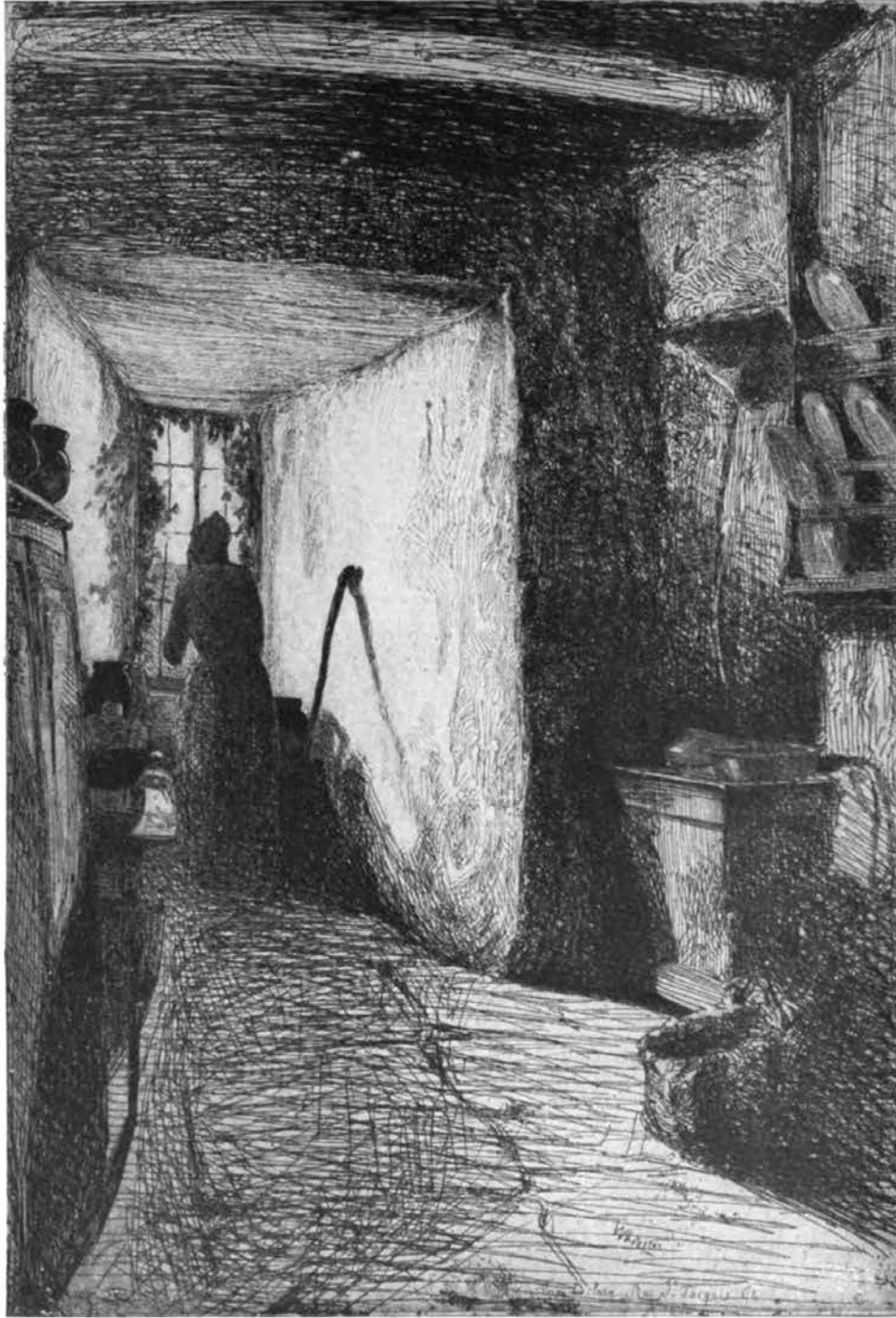


"BIBI LALOUETTE" — THE CHILD OF WHISTLER'S LANDLORD IN PARIS

*By courtesy of Frederick Keppel & Company from the etching by Whistler*

ously blended in Whistler's making. The "Mother," seated in that subdued room, her hands peacefully folded, her eyes

fixed intently upon the world invisible, seems the incarnation of Puritanism. It is easy to imagine her having written in



"THE KITCHEN" — ONE OF THE FRENCH SERIES

*By courtesy of Frederick Kettel & Company from the etching by Whistler*

her diary, during those diverting St. Petersburg days, after her sons had been up late the night before watching the illuminations:

My boys did not take their breakfast till

noon Friday; this is surely not keeping the straight and narrow way.

Although strangely puzzled at times in later years, she must have felt that her "darling Jimmie" was, after all, keep-



ing with infinite precision the straight and narrow way.

You will as readily agree that no one who was not himself something of a Covenanter could have painted the "Carlyle" as you will that no one whose sympathies were not of the most exquisite fiber could have revealed to us little "Miss Alexander" waiting there in delicate white and gray, a black bow in her hat, a black ribbon in her hair, a pair of butterflies flitting above her blond head, and a cluster of daisies peeping out of the corner. Nothing that Whistler has ever done quite approaches this gracious, hesitant apparition. The greatest galleries of the world can show nothing more lovely, more appealing, or more sensitive. All that Whistler had been striving for was there at last. All that he had written to Fantin in despair of ever achieving had been achieved. With a line as sure as that of Velasquez, and a surface as smooth as the finest lacquer, he imprisoned at the moment and for all time this modern *infanta*, this slender slip of latter-day culture and civilization. Though the "Mother" and the "Carlyle" mark the climax of Whistler's austerity of statement, his complete surrender to the spiritual, rather than the material, little "Miss Alexander" seems to pause wistfully on the threshold of this kingdom where actuality was almost to attain the vanishing-point. She suggests, indeed, both prophecy and regret. Perhaps she is even pleading with the painter not to step farther into shadowland.

#### THE CHILDREN OF BRAIN AND NERVE

However that may be, he was not to heed her warning. Never again do we see such pearl-like luminosity of tone and such caressing certainty of outline. Black, the universal harmonizer, herewith begins to breathe its somber, aristocratic allure over figure and background. Henceforth we move silently into a realm of half lights, of suggested color, and undefined form. Mutely resigned, "Rosa Corder" stands tall and impassive, her plumed hat hanging at her side, her body turned more than half around—black, in an atmosphere almost as black. Slipping on her glove ready to depart, "Lady Archibald Campbell" smiles im-

perceptibly as she blends into the enfolding gloom. Amid poetic nothingness, "Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac" recites verses quite as impalpable, while from the near-by music-room float the strains of "Sarasate's" violin.

They are children of the brain and creatures of the nerves, these beautiful, hesitant beings. Resemblance counts for little, and yet each is definitely individualized, each vibrates with life and truth, a truth not so much of the world physical as of the world psychic. As you look intently from one to another the body appears to recede, the soul to glide forward, inviting confidence and understanding.

#### THE FINAL PHASE OF WHISTLER'S ART

On approaching the final phase of Whistler's art it is necessary to renounce all conventional conceptions of painting. Subject, direct representation of nature, and what is called incident, rapidly disappear. A chance mood, a momentary impression, an evasive allusion, these are all that remain. Along the river bank in "Pink and Gray Chelsea" pass and re-pass vague, detached silhouettes. A few scattered, spectral figures flit about the "Cremorne Gardens," listening to the music and watching the flicker of countless lights; but soon you are alone with naught save the mystery and the magic of night. And yet this turquoise blue immensity is never quite without its note of contrast, its touch of emotional relief. You can literally hear long waves breaking on the shore, see the distant gleam from ships riding softly at anchor, or watch for an instant the suspended incandescence of a bursting rocket.

#### A CONSUMMATE PAINTER OF NIGHT

Here, too, no one has attempted effects so subtle, so illusive. As a painter of night, Whistler never had a kinsman save perhaps Hiroshige, in far Japan. It is only when you consider the infinite penetration of vision and deftness of stroke which these little panels exact that you begin to understand how really consummate an artist Whistler was. Nothing seemed to baffle him, nothing escaped his incredible refinement of perception and supreme power of suggestion.

Reviewing in turn this succession of nocturnes, harmonies, symphonies, and arrangements, so full of suppressed color and almost audible melody, so intangible, so subliminal, it is difficult not to feel that Whistler enlisted qualities hitherto unknown to painting. Instinctively you recall his enthusiasm for the stories of Poe. Spontaneously the mind travels back to those early London days, and to the tiny cottage in Walham Green where he used to busy himself with table-turning and spirit-rapping, or to sit up all night discussing with Rossetti things which lie just across the border-line of consciousness.

#### INDIFFERENCE TO THE MATERIAL WORLD

His habits were singularly abstemious, his nature was deeply ascetic, and as he drifted through the increasing years he resolutely put aside all that appeals directly to the lust of the eye and the

pride of life. He grew indifferent to the world of pleading reality which lay always about him; he even forgot the red-gold hair, green eyes, and infectious laugh of "Joe." He came to see everything through the gray fogs of London and the veiled mists of the brain. As he pressed lightly and eagerly onward, peering forward into the unknown, he simply jotted down what he found in this uncharted land.

It is easy to maintain that the arabesques which he so delicately traced are impersonal, that this art is immaterial, isolated, and lacking in human application. It is impossible, however, to hold that it is ever wanting in sheer beauty or persuasive evocation. And above all it is impossible not to realize that before he passed away that lingering summer afternoon he had with his sensitive, nervous fingers unlocked a new and secret chamber of the soul.

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EDITOR'S NOTE—This article is one of a series suggested by the death, within a remarkably brief space of time, of a number of the most famous artists of their generation—among them Bouguereau, Bréton, Gérôme, and Henner, in France; Lenbach and Menzel, in Germany; the English Watts and the American Whistler. A paper to be published next month will deal with the life and work of Henner; those already printed were on Gérôme, in the June number of this magazine, and on Lenbach, in the September issue.

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#### THE LOST WINGS

"Know you where it was I lost my wings?"

"Oh, poet, at the Mart of Sordid Things,  
Where the merchants strive and barter all day long,  
Where the clamor of the huckster drowned your song—  
Oh, poet, at the Mart of Sordid Things!"

"Know you where it was I lost my wings?"

"Oh, poet, at the House of Pleasing Things—  
At the place of noisy laughter, where the mirth  
Of wine and feasting dragged your song to earth—  
Oh, poet, at the House of Pleasing Things!"

"Know you where it was I lost my wings?"

"Oh, poet, at the Place of Trifling Things;  
The little scorn, the spite, the lesser love—  
These maimed your song and killed the sweets thereof;  
Oh, poet, at the Place of Trifling Things!"

"Where, then, shall I find my wings again?"

"Oh, poet, in the Prison House of Pain—  
From the silence, from the anguish, from the night,  
Shall the sudden song of singing thrill to flight;  
Oh, poet, in the Prison House of Pain!"

*Theodosia Garrison*