

THE YOUTH OF THE POET AND THE PAINTER.

LETTER I.

EDWARD ASHFORD TO JAMES HOPE.

DEAR HOPE,

Lovedale.

I have been a week in this beautiful place. I am glad to fly the round of forms for the breath of the green fields. This sweet spot was carved, by the Spirit of beauty, for a fairer race than mortals; and if I am not happy, it is that I wander alone, with the faithless figures of hope to light the path. I believe in solitude with one friend. Do you remember our week at Hillsborough, and those homelike evenings, after our tramps up the mountains, and our strolls in the meadows? What a peculiar sympathy is that which can tolerate society at such seasons; and I believe I shall never meet another, with whom I shall be so willing to wander, as with you. Have you sailed much on the inland rivers? When we wandered, we did not use the stream, so smoothly gliding at the foot of purple mountains, but I spend much time in my boat now. I love its motion, and pass among the trees, free from being entangled in the branches, and rustle the long grass of the morass in dry shoes. The leafy walls on each side produce new combinations of shade, picturesque and artistical, and their reflections double the forest, with the clouds brought so low, that I fear the actual woods may lose part of their pleasure, when I again tread their recesses. This spot combines the attraction of two rivers. The larger, in contrast with the less, seems almost a sea, from its high banks. The sunset, streaming across the water, reminds me of the ocean. There is a wildness, in the larger river, that would better suit you, than my little boating-ground; the woods, on the lofty shores, are bold and massive, and the hills soar into the sky. When the wind blows fresh, there are waves, and the sail-boats dash through the foam, as if the mimicry of the sea acted on their keels, and excited them with its life.

My little skiff dares not tempt the flow of the large river, and winds its way on the tranquil bosom of the Willow,—

for this is the name given to the little stream, from many groups of this graceful tree, floating on the margin. I am sheltered from storms in a cove, circled with trees, where the banks nod with white and red flowers; my caverns are roofed with leaves and brown branches, and, instead of sea-gulls, I have robins and thrushes sweeping over the crags of verdure, and the blue king-fisher glances between the two skies, and calls shrilly to me. If I feel the wind, it is in the mimic rain pattering in the leaves, or see the tiny waves frolic below me, where the forest opens. I never hear better music than listening to these songs on the river. I wish I had your talent, and could bring these scenes home in a sketch-book, or was poet enough to express my acquaintance with this delightful river, in verse. He, who can do this, need not ask men to give; nature has enriched him, I suppose his poetry is more valuable to the poet, than to his auditors, and I wonder at his sensitiveness, and delicacy, as to his productions. It is enough for him to embalm the world in human affection, for himself.

At some distance from the mill where I live, up the Willow, is a sand-bank, covering some acres, on which not a tree grows, nor a blade of grass. I came to it, fresh from reading some African travels, and felt I had discovered a little Sahara, in these green plains. Though it was noon, I wandered over it, in a festive mood, and if the soles of my shoes did not burn, I felt the solid heat. I have no doubt, you will dub me African traveller, and claim me for a second Ledyard, whom you used greatly to admire, and say there had been no other modern man of a similar character. I am sitting on this sand-bank, and writing my letter, just on its edge, under the shade of an oak, whose glossy leaves shine in the sun. The broad fields of sand are everywhere covered with warmth, yet nothing grows; if you dig down only two inches, how damp and clammy is the soil. I have found some Indian arrow-heads upon it, and I see various shining insects hopping about.

Have you been much in a mill? It is a domestic place. There is an honest tone in the spinning stones, the impersonation of a loaf of bread; it is a speech of power besides, rolling and whirling. The beams, coated with dust, glow like dead alabaster, and every spider's web is made from white yarn. Even at noon, the

rooms are lit badly, and at twilight they gloom. I am startled when the miller treads the creaking stairs; and the trap-doors and odd passages seem like an old castle. When grinding stops, silence hangs over the chambers, tenanted by squab figures, in white clothes, while down stairs the water trickles under the wheel, and the rats play hide-and-go-seek. Sometimes I am miller, and once I nearly set the building on fire by letting the grist run out of the hopper.

I am more than ever convinced, since I came here, you have made a mistake in not attending more to coloring, to the neglect, if you please, of so much outline-drawing. As I float down the river, I am detained by the color. These rich reflections, black in their depths, shining on their surfaces, with a delicate coating of silver, and glossing the trees, in masses, with an uncertain body-tint, could never be used in outline. You must pile on color, glaze and re-glaze. What would be the value of that starry group of willow-foliage, in your neutral pencil-drawing, deprived of its light, glimmering green, or this emerald bank, bearing a wreath of vermilion cardinals? I long to put these preparatory years of yours into one, and give it to a study so vexatious as this of outline, and then set you free into gorgeous colors that press forward and lie at your feet. Come from your neat chamber to my river, and we will float in splendid sunsets and royal moonlights, till you forget all but your picture, and create this smiling world over again. They will furnish a room in the mill, where you hear the hum of the lazy water-wheel, and the owl's screech, out of the forest on the opposite bank. We have good sweet meal, an orchard of scraggly apple-trees, and a deep kitchen hearth for cool evenings. Come, I entreat.

EDWARD.

LETTER II.

MRS. ASHFORD TO EDWARD ASHFORD.

MY DEAR SON,

I was surprised to learn you had suddenly deserted college, and made your way to some place in the country, without either consulting me or the president. As your

mother, and nearest living relative, your feelings should have led you to inform me of this very serious change in your course of life. You left Doughnut, apparently contented to reside at college, and President Littlego's first letter was perfectly satisfactory. In his second I was mortified to learn you did not attend prayers, so often as was required, though regular at recitations; and in his third, with feelings I cannot describe, I learned you had left your room, and the greater portion of your clothes, and taken up your residence at some obscure farmhouse, in a country village.

It was from a letter to your friend Hope, I discovered to what point you had gone, and I write immediately on hearing, to beseech you to return to Doughnut, even if you do not instantly go back to Triflecut. At least, write on the receipt of this, and inform me by what reasons you sustain your present extraordinary course of conduct. You must feel this is due to me, as well as to your other friends, and to President Littlego.

After so long a course of studies, in this city, under the best preceptor I could obtain, I naturally felt that you would enter college with superior advantages, and obtain a high rank in your class. I know, my dear son, that as a young man,—a very young man,—just entering into life, your responsibilities do not seem so important as they will. I regard a good position at college extremely desirable on one account, as the means of securing a good social position. You entered with the most respectable youth of this city, as associates in your class, and in other classes you have acquaintances, your friend Hope, and others of the same standing. I trust it will be your purpose to rank with these excellent young men. Again, the discipline gained from the study of foreign languages, and mathematics, will afford you a good basis on which you can erect your future labors.

You know, my dear Edward, my pecuniary circumstances, and that it is by limiting myself and your sister, I have been able to send you to Triflecut, without infringing too far upon the course of life we pursue in Doughnut. Yet I shall cheerfully make a greater sacrifice, if it will conduce to your greater happiness. If your room was unsuitable, or not furnished according to your wish, or if your ward-

robe did not content you, I beg you will lay the cause before your mother's eye, and she will gladly devote any portion of her store to supply what you require.

Hope informs me, you pass part of your time in a boat or some old mill. I beg of you not to be out in the evening air; remember your health, and how dear you are to me. Old mills are badly ventilated, and you have a tendency to cough. I have procured from Mrs. Puffy your flannel waistcoats, which I forward, together with another bottle of Smith's Lotion for sore throat. In case you should be unwell, send at once for a physician. I feel you will come home at once. God bless you my dear son.

Your affectionate mother,

REBECCA ASHFORD.

LETTER III.

RICHARD ASHFORD TO EDWARD ASHFORD.

Doughnut.

What has got into your brains now, Ned, goes beyond the powers of your Uncle Dick! I happened to come to Doughnut the day they expected you from Triflecut. I arrived at 11 o'clock, in the stage, and found mother and sister Fanny working at your winter stockings, in the little back parlor. At 12 the bell rung, and the Triflecut coach stopped. Fanny flew to the window, your mother ran to the door, and in came a dapper-looking college man, in a black coat, and handed us a letter, which contained the astounding intelligence, that you had fled the soft embraces of President Littlego, and now smacked your lips over johnny-cakes and apple-dumplings, in a distant although romantic grist-mill. I was introduced to Mr. Hope, and asked him what could induce a quiet young gentleman, like you, to cut such a trick; at which he smiled, drew up his eye-brows, twirled his hat, and said, "I wish I was there with him." "The devil you do," said I. I have not laughed so much since I burnt off deacon Bugbear's queue at a revival lecture.

Your mother popped a series of maternal questions at Mr. Hope, to discover what motives led her darling boy to such a display of independence. Mr. Hope, who is a quiz

plainly, informed her your sudden disappearance was as much matter of surprise to him, as to herself, and went, leaving us as wise as when he came. He supposed the classic shades of Triflecut, as your mother calls scrub commons and twopenny tutors, might have wearied your imaginative head, and that the beautiful village of Lovedale was more adapted to it. I have lived a long time, my dear Ned, and have seen a good deal of life. I did not run away, when a youth, but was put up and labelled — sailor, and despatched in a dirty ship, to plough my way through the furrows of the ocean. I thought I should have a good time, rocking on the billows, far from the torments of six brothers, the plague of school, and the dull routine of a little seaport. My first voyage "cleansed my bosom of this perilous stuff." I came home, "a sadder and a wiser" lad, — but I had to equip for another voyage, and sailed the sea twenty-six long years. At the end I came back to the little seaport, "an ancient mariner," with no property but the clothes on my back, some yarns about my travels, gray hair, and a rheumatism, to burden my family and look after my nephews.

Do what you like, only be careful to go to sea with a rudder. I rarely give advice, but I can recommend you never to do anything without seeing where your path goes, and, if you can, keep the old road. You will find the beaten track pleasanter, on the whole, and, if the scenery is tame, the accommodation is good at the taverns.

Your friend Hope made me laugh, as I say, by his cool indifference to your mother's tenderness. He has an old head on young shoulders. He told me, Triflecut was thrown into an agreeable excitement by your disappearance. Mrs. Puffy was in consternation, to lose so quiet a boarder with such a small appetite, and the good soul really feared that the hard fare of the University must have driven you desperate. A few of the young ladies have manifested some sympathy, and set you down as a rejected suitor. Pray appease your mother's distressed heart, by writing her.

We are in a quandary here. I have had a notion I would get a lawyer's advice, — perhaps we could take you with a *habeas corpus*, but it is a good way to send a sheriff's officer, and it would be a blank business to have a *non est inventus* returned. Your mother begs me to engage

a vehicle and drive down myself; your sister Fanny suggests we bribe you to come back by the offer of a study and pens, a library, and permission to pass a week in seclusion. What we shall resolve, I cannot say; in the mean time I puff my pipe, at my leisure, in the garret, and read some old French plays I bought at a book stall.

Your Uncle,

DICK.

LETTER IV.

JAMES HOPE TO EDWARD ASHFORD.

Trifecut.

I acknowledge what you say of outline is partly true, my dear Ashford, but I think you have drawn too hasty a conclusion. We must, in art, make a beginning, — to leap from the outset to the end, cannot produce any work above that of a *petit-maitre*. It is the fault of our time to escape deliberation, to mar by haste, and to suggest, rather than perfect. I am chagrined to hear you remark, you wish the Poet's power belonged to you, for I have always thought you were born to write verse.

I console myself by reflecting that every true poet has felt this deficiency at the outset, and my chagrin was the result of the same want of maturity I find everywhere; for how could I require you, just beginning to write, to produce anything sublime? I want courage to assert my right to the pencil, as much as you do to the pen. I believe our age is not only that of immaturity, but of disbelief; we are neither willing to graduate nor confide; we finish in haste, and read our failure of necessity. When I consider how the masters, who have stamped eternal foot-prints in the sands of time, spent years in writing characters which were instantly washed out, I resolve to sit in love and admiration, and value my ill-formed outsets as some tendency towards real beauty, as the alphabet to the bible of art. My outlines, in this light, are worth preserving, and I grieve that I was not possessed of this patience years ago, for it would have led me to keep my first sketches, and I might now see such a change for the better as to make golden my

loftiest aspirations. So much do we learn in youth, and so unfortunate it seems to grow old early, and abridge this holiday-floor, where, in games, we harvest deep experience. I have been long laboring at outlines, yet feel I have accomplished little, compared with what I might, other pursuits have so abridged my time. I have not yielded to your earnest request, to dwell only in art, to abandon these college studies; in short, to identify my whole external existence with the beautiful. I prize the unselfish enthusiasm that leads you to desire for your friend only the happiest results. For your sake I should love to yield myself entirely to the radiant sunlight of picture, and dispense with the cold economy of the world.

What will you think if I confess I have not that confidence which enables me to say entirely, that I can produce anything to warrant me in following an artist's life? An irresistible impulse draws me to landscape. I take my pencil, but the scenes do not flow warm and living. In a measure I satisfy myself, yet not to that extent I desire. You will send the lesson I have just read, on haste, and the necessity of taking degrees in art, step by step. Alas! I find I can read lessons to everybody better than practise them.

It would not avail to be an amateur; I must be all or nothing; and in fully feeling this, I found my right to become a painter. He, who truly aspires to the loftiest, has the consolation of knowing he can make no failure; yet to pass life in stepping from one stone to another, would not be sufficient excuse for deserting what other avenues I may have to knowledge. I am an unresting man; all I hear, all I see, all I do, is but the faint uncertain dawn of what I am equal to; and it would be a sensation profoundly satisfactory, did I seize what jewels are strewn by the way; but I seem to be carried forward with such rapidity that I cannot stoop to seize even these. I am possessed with the idea, that I cannot neglect any of the common avenues to knowledge, and find myself faithfully performing every college duty, no matter how dry, with the instinct that something may be in it. The ancients yield me more fruit than the moderns, and Homer, Æschylus, Lucan, and Virgil, I would not exchange for any four of the moderns. I would not aim at acquiring a critical knowledge of the

dead languages; but these four years, we spend at college, are a convenient period for mastering them sufficiently. These are youth's leisure days, in our age, to read the past. The Greeks I never tire of. I have lately made a prize in a bust of the Apollo, which was sent from Italy as a specimen cast, and now have it in a corner of my chamber. I have captured, this week, Flaxman's Homer, and spent some pleasant hours over it, in which I wished you with me. What manly fellows these Greeks were! So bold, so finished, so splendidly wrought up to a pure, stern ideal, yet without that sentiment which spoils our ideality.

What a strange point of history is this, when we stand in an age not capable of producing any work of sublime excellence, yet having a back ground filled with monuments cut in eternal beauty. That there should have been preserved, through the dark ages, these sayings of former civilization, which we now comprehend, yet cannot reproduce, makes our time a youth of speechless beauty, whose eyes penetrate the shroud before his birth; and how individual we are, for we only survey the future with promise. I know of nothing so singular, as that our age should be the age of reform. I doubt, indeed, that it is. Our people of reform love to cover their imperfections with this vanity, while their eyes swim with tears, when they look into the bright face of the past. Give me, if not the power of present creation, the capacity to appreciate those matchless ancients who sat supreme among forms, and bend their successors into an unsuccessful imitation. If I can make nothing new, if this is a winter's day, when the field-flowers do not bloom, let me twine my brows with the ever-green laurels of the summer past. I can, at least, live with the divinities, if I cannot match them in performance. I can worship in silence, and believe, though speechless.

There has been a revival, of late years, all over Europe, of the Greek spirit, surprising to behold, and finally the discovery that if Shakspeare is the first of moderns, it is only that he inherited, the largest share of the ancient. Yet, I do not look upon Shakspeare as such an immortal as Homer, and fancy I can discover traces that he shakes on his seat. But you know that I am not such a Shakspeareman as you; if he should suffer, I think it will be a partial obscuration, caused by the extreme meanness of his

late critics, who have overloaded the public mind with their leaden lumber.

Even in America, the puritan side of modern cultivation, I see this Greek spirit marching forward to conquer custom. This new development of sculptors, is a warning, while late poets tend to a smoothness, a finish, and neatness, which gives us the workmanship of Pope's time, while we possess besides a liberal idea. I rejoice in this, and cling to my old books the closer, when I see they are beginning to warm the mass. I will not quarrel with your devotion to what is only new, and shall always be delighted with your mill, and your sails on the river.

I have fallen in with a new person this last week, whom I met on Grecian hill, where we used to walk. He was loitering, apparently, like myself, a cloud-gazer. I found more tenderness in his eyes than in his speech, and that he did not do credit to his heart. We conversed about books and pictures. He was not so fond of the ancients as I. He professed not to be a favorite in general society, yet I saw, by the manner in which he spoke of several of our mutual acquaintances, that he had approached in a way agreeable to them, as he was full master of their faults. I detected he was impatient of defects, yet would not tolerate a stately beauty, with great external polish, because he believed nature knew best how to win affection, and that the apex of cultivation, if lofty, was covered with snow. In this, he differed from me, as I believe that true polish can do no more than proportion nature. I found he dwelt more on defects than beauties, and that it was owing to his love of the ridiculous which set out the imperfection, if never so small, in a humorous light, leaving the equal graces to shine unobserved. He had detected this tendency, as in speaking of some of the old humorists, he said, "They are like me; they love the comic, yet see what lies below without mentioning it." Still, I thought, from his conversation, which lacked any one distinguishing peculiarity, that his humor was not natural, but the product of sorrow united with an original mirthfulness, whose proper outlet would have been fair smiles. He had no wit, but labored with his power to express himself; and though what he said sounded fresh and honest, from an occasional alteration, or a repetition of the same thought, I concluded he found it

difficult to fit expression precisely to thought. He must have been a writer, rather than a painter; but yet as he showed a keen sense of beauty in the landscape, which you remember, is one of those that do nothing but suggest, I concluded he had studied pictures. We spoke of love, and he mused moodily, and showed he had been disappointed in some passion. I believed, from the fair oval of his brow and the undrooped eyelids, that his character was trusting, and that a long life of affection lay before him, to be tinged with occasional shade from the recollection of his past affections. As we strolled on, I was charmed with the quick eyes he had for every object. Nothing escaped, neither cloud, flower, tree, bird, nor insect, and I was glad to find he valued masses, and where the landscape opened he traced a good foreground, a wide distance, and a sidelight which struck a group of trees in the middle, brought out a winding brook, a small golden valley, and an elm tree with a cottage under it, and connected these domestic emblems with a group of gray clouds. He looked at me, as if this picture did not satisfy him, but had formed a better in his mind, which he did not show. When I spoke to him of books, I found he had read a number; yet on his quoting some poetry, discovered he did not give it correctly, though he added words which made it better, and seemed musing whether he had read the right line. He selected some half dozen books out of all he had read, as the sum and substance of books, and placed them on his shelves, as silent reserves, specimens of what had been done, which held in them no obligation for him to read. I spoke of the old masters, and the Greek sculpture, and found he loved painting best, but did not prefer any special artist. I spoke with him, also, of philosophers, and found he had read them rather in his imagination than in fact, and formed figures of the past men, as well as epochs, without having really taken much notice of their works. In the midst of very serious criticisms, he called me off to point to some tree waving by the wall's side, or plant at our feet, and I saw he was firmly fixed in nature rather than art.

Pray send me another letter from your mill, before long, and if you write any verses, some copies, and if I find a chance, I will send some of my late outlines.

Ever yours,

HOPE.