

The Lay Figure Amused

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“It is easy to grumble against South Kensington,” said the journalist, “but after all any system must press hardly on individuals. You cannot make one set of rules, any more than one suit of clothes, fit everybody.”

“I wonder who these would fit,” said the Lay Figure, taking up the *Art Examination Paper*, “Principles of Ornament,” set for the 8th of May, 1896. “Listen to its last regulation: ‘If any of you break any of these rules, *you* will be expelled, and your paper cancelled.’ It seems hard on the innocent, but probably it does not mean what it certainly says.”

“Let me look at it,” said the man with a clay pipe, and as he studied it, he burst into a laugh. “The value of each question is set after it in brackets,” he read out. “One thought it was the answer that gained the marks. Oh, I say!” he went on, “this is too bad: ‘A full and correct answer to an easy question will in all cases secure a larger number of marks than an incomplete or inexact answer to a more difficult one.’”

“Still, these are only administrative regulations,” said the Lay Figure; “go on and interpret the lucid questions to us, but do not disturb their elegant English.”

The journalist read out Question 5: “‘Draw any smooth water-jug you recollect to stand on a table or sideboard, with a thick lip, a thin neck, and a moulded base, and with the handle rising high above the lip, the neck and body painted with bands and enrichments, and explain the principles of the ornament and why the bands are put at the particular places.’ No, I am not joking; the punctuation is just as I read it to you.”

“This is still better,” he continued: “‘Draw two hemi-spherical perfuming pans you recollect of the same diameter, each on three legs, only one on short and the other on long legs, and ornament the pans and legs, and say if the two examples are equally good, or, if not, why not, and give reasons.’”

“You are joking,” said the journalist, taking the paper from his hands and scanning it. Then he, too, read: “‘I. Sketch the side of some book cover you recollect, about 6½ inches high by 4 inches wide, bound in black morocco, with an ornamental border and centre, with a small coat of arms in the middle, the divisions and ornaments on the side to be widish and made by tooling down the spaces between with a ribbed tool. Explain the

principles of the ornament in both centre and margin, and explain why it was made widish——” he broke off and gazed into vacancy. “And yet we sometimes blame the art students,” he said, in a conscience-stricken voice, “as though any but a Mrs. Nickleby could follow the maze of this preposterous question.”

During this time the youth with a Liberty tie, by way of protest, had been quietly reading lest any one should infer that South Kensington, where he was once a student, interested him at all. “Isn’t it queer,” he said, “to find a novelist with perfectly sane views upon art *versus* photography. Listen to this: ‘Photography, when it is perfected, will give us simply, in their exact colours and perspective, the rocks, and clouds, and streams, and trees, we already have in Nature, and castles and monuments we already have in our cities. It will add nothing to humanity’s present possessions, and thus it will be superfluous.’”

“Didn’t Shakespeare say,” the man with a clay pipe broke in, unconsciously quoting *Lady Lohengrin*, the novel in question, “that Art was a mirror held up to Nature?”

“He said that of the stage only,” replied the Liberty man, “that alone should answer your objection; but it is also answered here,” and he went on reading: “‘Art should be more than a mirror, it should be a diviner’s crystal. What does a mirror show you more than you can see for yourself by suddenly turning your back upon it? All that photography does is to make the image in the mirror permanent. It merely gives us Nature over again on pieces of paper, and therefore it is not Art.’”

“Really, these two documents that have by chance tumbled against each other are very depressing,” said the Lay Figure. “To find South Kensington confusing Art in most muddled English, and an unknown writer of fiction—J. E. Woodmeald—whoever he may be, putting down a perfectly logical argument with curiously felicitous expression and clear insight, seems to argue that outsiders see more of the game than professionals.”

“That is flat heresy,” the man with a clay pipe said in a serious voice. “I suppose that the South Kensington inquisition must needs preserve the semblance of mystery, and hide its meaning in uncouth jargon; but ‘a widish border,’ and ‘a centre with a coat of arms in the middle:’” and at the memory of these choice phrases he broke into laughter long and inextinguishable.

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