

*The Lay Figure***T**HE LAY FIGURE: ON THE PENALISING OF ART.

“Another injustice to art!” cried the Man with the Red Tie. “Are we never to be given a chance? Are we always to be the target for the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune?”

“What is the particular trouble now?” asked the Young Artist. “We have had so many injustices to put up with lately that I am beginning to lose count of them.”

“Well, I was thinking about this new entertainments tax,” said the Man with the Red Tie. “It seems to me an unfair imposition upon art shows, and I feel that it will press very hardly upon all classes of art workers.”

“If you want my view of it, I consider it is imposed in an entire misconception of both the functions of art and the mission of the artist,” declared the Young Artist. “I cannot follow the reasoning which would justify the application of such a tax to art exhibitions and I cannot possibly see how they can be made to come under the head of entertainments.”

“That is because you do not understand the popular view of art,” broke in the Art Critic. “You take art seriously, but to the ordinary man it appears only as an amusement, a frivolity which must be approached in a light and careless spirit. The practical person regards it as a useless and not particularly reputable luxury, and, as such, a legitimate subject for taxation.”

“Then am I ranked with the other clowns as a mere provider of unnecessary amusement?” exclaimed the Young Artist. “Is that the position I occupy in the world?”

“I fear that a very large section of the public takes that view of you,” agreed the Critic. “Clearly, it is the opinion of the Government—which presumably represents the feeling of the majority—that you are only an entertainer, and that if you are taxed out of existence no one will be much the worse for your disappearance.”

“There you have it!” sneered the Man with the Red Tie. “Art is only a sort of grinning through a horse-collar, and if you will grin in these solemn times you must pay the penalty for being so unseasonably amusing.”

“But I neither want to grin myself nor to make other people grin,” protested the Young Artist. “I want to teach them something and to give them something to think about. I do take myself and my work quite seriously and I claim that I am an educator, not a mountebank.”

“So you say,” laughed the Man with the Red Tie; “but your fellow-men do not agree with you. There is no escape from the position which the world thrusts upon you: the more serious you are the more people chuckle.”

“That is the pity of it,” commented the Critic. “When an artist talks about the educational value of his work or the importance of his mission the public either marvel at his conceit or abuse him for the impudence of his pretensions. None of those practical, business persons, who boast so persistently that they form the backbone of the country, will ever allow him a hearing. They are quite confident that they can do perfectly well without him.”

“But can they do without him?” demanded the Young Artist. “Is he not a necessary part of the social and industrial machine?”

“Certainly other countries seem to think that he is,” returned the Critic; “it is only here that he is laughed at and taxed as a mere purveyor of comic interludes. Abroad, pains are taken even in war time to protect him and to encourage his activity. I know that in one at least of the enemy countries the State has taken art under its particular care, has subsidised artists, has provided funds to enable them to tide over their difficulties, and has spent money freely to develop new forms of artistic effort. I do not know of any country, except this, in which art has been systematically penalised on the score of economy or unjustly hampered by taxation on the ground that it is a luxury or an amusement.”

“We are nothing if not original,” jeered the Man with the Red Tie. “Anyhow, we seem to be quite incapable of understanding what are the needs of art, and we always, in dealing with it, choose the wrong road and the wrong method, if we possibly can.”

“And what is the price that we shall have to pay in the future for our unique attitude?” asked the Young Artist.

“Time alone will show,” replied the Critic; “but I fear it will be a heavy one. I fear that nations wiser in their appreciation of the value of art and with a juster sense of its importance will profit by our stupidity and take from us what by right should be ours. They are striving to keep it alive; we with our boasted commonsense and our wonderful idea of shrewd business devices are doing all we can to kill it. I have few hopes for the future; the outlook is depressing.”

“Well, we shall deserve all we get,” said the Man with the Red Tie.

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