EUGENE HIGGINS: AN AMERICAN ARTIST WHOSE WORK UPON CANVAS DEPICTS THE DERELICTS OF CIVILIZATION AS DO THE TALES OF MAXIM GORKY IN LITERATURE:

BY JOHN SPARGO

It was the Sunday evening before Christmas when the trail ended and my eyes rested upon the gloomy soul-haunting pictures of the social abyss, and upon their artist-creator, Eugene Higgins. The pictures were not new to me, for some vision of them had haunted me for months in a strange, uncanny sort of way. One night last winter as I sat in a New York café with a group of friends, one of them pulled from his pocket some worn and tattered pages of a French magazine, L’Assiette de Beurre, containing several poor reproductions of some powerful pictures of outcast, broken and desolate human beings, which exercised a wonderful fascination over our little group. All that we could learn about them was that the pages we saw were part of an entire issue of the magazine devoted to the work of the artist, an unknown, mysterious painter named Higgins—Eugene Higgins. The pictures took irresistible hold of my thoughts and fancy; their greatness manifested itself despite the poor paper and engraving, dominating everything.

After that everywhere I went among artists and students of art I made vain attempts to learn something about the pictures and the man who painted them. Eugene Higgins became a Man of Mystery and his work something belonging to the world of legend and romance.

Then I heard of my mysterious unknown in various places and strange ways. A poet-painter friend at the shrine of whose genius I have sought and found inspiration for the life-struggle, spoke of the painter of the weirdly great “Les Miserables” as “a Charles Haag in paint,” and confirmed my own judgment thereby, for I had already associated the two names in my thoughts. So he was in New York! But, alas! New York is a great wilderness of humanity and no one has blazed the trails. There is no place in our great
metropolis where the dreamers, doers and thinkers meet in common social union—where, sooner or later, one is certain to meet everybody. Then, on the Twentieth Century Limited, journeying from Chicago, I heard of Higgins again from one who had known his work in the Quartier Latin of Paris. He was an artist and spoke with an artist’s enthusiasm: “Higgins paints wonderful things—figures of the driven and damned—in the spirit of Victor Hugo,” he said.

Again and again I heard of the man and his work, but not until I appealed to one whose glory is that he personifies the Genius of Friendship, whose ways seem to lead him into association with everybody worth knowing, did I come into welcome touch with both. “I am Eugene Higgins,” I heard a deep, powerful voice say over the telephone, and, a few hours later, in the teeth of a furious gale which mocked with screeching bitterness the Christmas song floating from some unseen place of mirth, I turned into familiar old Washington Square, the haunt of artist-ghosts corporeal and ethereal, and stood in the presence of the man—at the end of the trail.

Somehow, I expected to be disappointed by the pictures I had longed so earnestly to see, but I was not. Even in the poor lamp-light of the studio, the power of these portrayals of the pathetic, the helpless, the ruined, the despised and rejected of humanity, was incontestable. Since then I have grown to know the artist and his work more familiarly, and I know that this painter of Rembrandt-esque pictures of the victims of the human struggle is a genius of the first order, worthy to be ranked with Millet. As Edwin Markham wrote me lately, “Mr. Higgins stands in America as the one powerful painter of the tragic licks and losses, of the doomed and the dispossessed—the painter who gives us the pathos of street and hovel and morgue, as Millet gave us the pathos of the fields.”

WHAT Gorky has done in literature for the underworld, Eugene Higgins has done upon canvas; he is a Gorky in paint. I remember saying to the Russian writer something to the effect that he had portrayed in fiction the outcast, not of Russia alone but of the whole world, and his replying with a smile of unutterable sadness, “Ah, I am the Outcast of the World!” When Higgins was living in the Quartier Latin, he was known by his fellow artists as the “poor beggar in a garret who paints beggars and miserable because he is one of them”—and he frankly admits nowadays that he took some secret delight in his “martyrdom,” being young. At
From a Painting by Eugene Higgins.

“A PAINTER WHO GIVES US THE PATHOS OF STREET AND HOVEL AND MORGUE.”
From a Painting by Eugene Higgins.

"THIS OLD MAN BY THE WALL, SURROUNDED BY
SHADOWS—BECAUSE HE WAS PICTURESQUE, I PAINTED
HIM, BUT I HAD FIRST TO KNOW HIS KIND."
the same time, he chafed under, and resented with all the passion of an ardently independent spirit, the sympathy which offered cast-off clothes and invitations to dinner. Once, when the papers were filled with long accounts of Maxim Gorky, some friends of the painter, in St. Louis, were earnestly advising him to give up painting the types of failure and misery and turn to "more cheerful and pleasing" subjects. Wrathfully he snatched away the canvas he was showing and exclaimed, "I am not painting for you! You do not understand. I am painting for men like Gorky, men who can feel and know!" It is a matter for deep regret that the painter and the writer did not meet during the latter's stay in America last year.

There is nothing of the lachrymose about Higgins's art; no sickly sentimentality. Perhaps that is why the effect of his pictures is much less depressing than might be supposed on account of their subjects. Countless painters have depicted forlorn beggars and waifs and strays with a dominating note of appeal compelling tears to flow like rain. We have wept—and quickly forgotten. But these pictures produce an impression not to be obliterated by easily shed tears. They move to a pity too deep for tears, and force us to think. The difference in result is the difference between cleverness and genius.

The question has been raised whether such subjects as Mr. Higgins chooses are suited to the medium of canvas and paint, or whether they do not belong rather to literature. It is an old and interesting question, one that has confronted every artist who has chosen unusual themes or treated old themes in an unusual way. Michael Angelo answered it in his own way, in our own time have Millet and Meunier answered it each in his own way. So Higgins answers the question for himself: "They who say that these gloomy pictures of mine do not please the eye, but hurt by their realistic representations of misery and woe, and are not beautiful, missing thereby the two chief functions of art," said the artist, "are correct enough from one point of view. They would limit the sphere of art to the things which minister to selfish desires and to things which are pretty merely, having no real concept of the beautiful. Take this old man by the wall, surrounded by shadows; because he was picturesque I painted him, but I had to first know and understand his kind. Many a man whose cleverness I highly respect would have painted him as a man in rags, moving along by a wall—that and nothing more. And the colored result, an exercise in technique, would be put forth as the picture of an outcast without a hint of the very definite form
and movements of the real outcast. To me, it is a simple matter to see that the fault of most modern painting and sculpture is that it shows a lack of thinking and feeling; that the artists themselves are merely clever workmen—in spite of all the nonsense one hears and reads about their artistic abilities, written by critics as superficial as themselves.

"When you look at one of Rembrandt’s great pictures, you not only feel that you are looking at a masterpiece of technique; that you feel, of course, but you feel even more strongly that you are looking at the work of a painter who was also a great thinker. Or take Sargent: I confess I never cared for his work until I saw his portrait of an English nobleman in hunting costume, exhibited in the Salon some three or four years ago. Sargent impressed me then for the first time as a great painter, because he painted the whole man, not merely his external appearance, but, so to speak, his blood and his soul. Long generations of aristocracy were sticking out all over him. I don’t know whether I like aristocrats or not, but certainly I like the portrait of an aristocrat to show unmistakably that he is an aristocrat. This, Sargent accomplished and the picture stood out above all others in the Salon. It crowned Sargent in the minds of the best critics of France as a master. That illustrates my own attitude perhaps as well as anything I can think of. If I prefer to paint outcasts rather than dandies in drawing-rooms, simply because they interest me greatly while the dandies interest me not at all, that is of no concern to anyone but myself so long as I do not throw mud at the outcasts as so many have done. It is of no more concern than Sargent’s painting aristocratic types. It is, however, a matter which concerns everybody, who chooses to make it matter for concern, whether I succeed in painting real outcasts or sham ones; whether the figures obviously are the figures of outcasts, or made to appear like outcasts by the skillful use of accessories and tricks of technique."

I have thought it best to reproduce the substance of a long conversation with the artist, as nearly in his own words as possible, to accompany these reproductions of some of his pictures, in the hope that I may thus be able to place the pictures in a setting where they can speak for themselves. Of course, the pictures lose something of their power when reproduced in black and white, the coloring of the originals being no small element of their strength. Doubtless the tragic nature of most of them, the intensity with which they
From a Painting by Eugene Higgins.

“GLOOMY, SOUL-HAUNTING PICTURES OF THE SOCIAL ABYSS.”
From a Painting by Eugene Higgins.

"I prefer to paint outcasts rather than bandies, because they interest me greatly, and the bandies, not at all."
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reveal those awful social facts which lacerate the soul, make them undesirable for the constant associations of home decoration in the minds of many who will readily admit their greatness. They are, many of them, better fitted for public exhibitions and galleries, and the pity of it is that in this country as yet there is little or no evidence of an inclination on the part of the custodians of our public art to seek out struggling genius and to encourage it. There are some few of the artist’s pictures, however, which do not suffer from this limitation—scenes of lowly domestic life full of sympathy and appealing tenderness.

Mr. Higgins is an Irish-American and was born in Kansas City thirty-three years ago. When he was four years old his mother died, and thenceforth he lived with his father, who was a stonecutter by trade, in cheap boarding houses, coming often in these early years into close contact with types of dissolute and luckless humanity such as he now loves to paint. When he was a lad of twelve or thereabouts an article on Millet, illustrated by sketches which the great artist used to draw for his children with a burnt match, gave him his first impulse to be a painter. The influence of Millet upon his work has been profound and far-reaching—indeed, Millet and Victor Hugo have largely moulded his entire life. So great was the influence of “Les Miserables” upon him that for years he was accustomed to regard himself as the actual personification of Jean Valjean.

At sixteen years of age he entered the Art School in St. Louis, remaining only one season. He says that he could learn nothing there, but in the light of his experience in Paris later on it may be conjectured that he was too impatient to submit to the long and hard drudgery of learning the elements of drawing. Be that as it may, he left the school and started to paint on his own account, his first painting being, characteristically, a picture called “The Tramp.” Big canvases he painted—and still bigger themes. He tells with a good deal of gusto of an immense canvas devoted to the theme of “Human Evolution”—a foreground of low marshland with stones fantastically shaped into a gradual likeness of strange animals and these in their turn grotesquely shaped to suggest the evolution of human beings, into the perfected type of whom a wonderfully weird Divinity breathed the breath of life. Struggling alone, outside the pale of art influences, with no training or guidance, he grew to regard himself as a great genius working for posterity—a conceit to be indulgently regarded under the circumstances.
POVERTY AS AN ART INSPIRATION

At twenty-three years of age he entered the École Julien, and studied under Jean Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant. At his very first lesson he discovered to his dismay that he could not draw and his fancied greatness melted away in an outburst of mortification. "My attempt to draw from a living model resulted in a thing which looked like a keg of nails," he says. The teacher at once set the crestfallen student to the humbler exercise of copying a metal bowl. When Constant saw him struggling, he said, "You are awfully serious but hard as iron; you will make a good draughtsman some time, but you haven't got it yet" — and the student fulfilled the prediction. He was "hard as iron," he struggled hard and in a few months was taking the honors of the school for his fine academic drawing. As one looks at his pictures nowadays, it is not easy at first to realise that at this school under Laurens and Constant, and later, at the Beaux Arts under Gerome, his fine academic work was his chief distinction.

That he endured the usual hardships of struggling genius while in Paris we have already seen. He had more than the usual amount of reward, however, his work attracting the attention of a group of influential artists and critics. He regularly exhibited at the exhibitions of the American Art Association in Paris and half a dozen of his pictures were well hung in the New Salon. In 1904 he returned to this country to begin the struggle anew. Some of his canvases have been exhibited in Philadelphia and at the St. Louis Exposition, but he remains practically unknown, a prophet without honor in his own country, still compelled to struggle. But he is young and has abundant courage and faith in himself. By the sale of tiny etchings which he makes for a living he keeps the hunger-wolf from the door and the fire of inspiration burning within himself.

SPRINGTIME

A purple mist on the distant hills,
A swift wind-driven shower of rain,
A burst of sunshine, warm and glad,
All tell that the spring is here again.

—Jean Montgomery Martin.