THE ARTIST’S WONDER-STONE: HOW BARON DE MEYER SEES MODERN SPAIN

Here was once a man who ceaselessly wandered through the quiet lanes and busy highways of the world hunting for the fabled stone that endows the finder with power to look through the mask of externals, through all sophistries of the mind and allurements of the flesh, straight into the transparent heart of things. Eyes touched with this wonder-stone see the fadeless beauty that hides within the transient form; ears hear the intent of speech and not the words; lips lose their power of deceit before it and speak but truth. The man stumbled upon many strange pebbles hidden among wayside flowers or buried in the dust of highways, and bought many a glittering gem from fantastically garbed wizards of the market-place. But the magic stone was not among them. One day, as he sat talking with an age-bent peasant as they rested together by the road, he saw the fine brave spirit of a true knight-errant shining through the tired old eyes, heard a voice of kingly dignity behind the uncouth dialect, felt the soft touch of understanding sympathy in the clasp of the toil-hardened hands. Looking about him he was surprised to find that he could see a divine beauty in all common things, the fine essence of rough exteriors. Yet he had no wonder-stone in his hand! By constantly peering into every eye, listening with unbiased mind to every voice, putting the pebbles of earth to test with anxious hope, he had gradually created within his own mind the invisible stone or clear perception that gives vision. Where else would the key to understanding be lodging except in the experienced, weighing and testing, penetrating human mind!

The talisman of true insight sometimes becomes the possession of artists when they steadily strive to portray the real man or woman behind the social mask of a beautiful or ugly face; of writers who continually seek the significant motive behind apparently insignificant deeds; of travelers who with the “open sesame” of a friendly heart become able to penetrate the castes and customs of all nations to the mysterious thread that binds the many into one.

Photographers have, for the most part, been absorbed in reproducing the beauty of external forms and the charm that lies in nicely related lights and shades. They have looked for the graceful composition of a landscape rather than for the atmosphere that makes it sentient; for striking attitudes of figures and intimate details of physical life rather than for the emotion that prompts each expression. They have focussed the lens of their cameras sharply upon the texture of a rose leaf, the velvet quality of tree shadow upon a white wall, the glint of sunshine on still waters, the swift fluttering of a humming
A TYPICAL BEAUTY OF GRANADA: FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON RUDOLF DE MEYER.
"THE SPANISH DANCER OF TODAY," FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON RUDOLF DE MEYER.
"A MODERN CABALLERO OF GRANADA." FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON RUDOLF DE MEYER.
"DREAMING OF VICTORY," FROM A SPANISH PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON RUDOLF DE MEYER.
SPAIN THROUGH THE ARTIST’S CAMERA

bird’s wing as it hovers above a nectar-filled flower cup. They have
made telescopes of their cameras and photographed the mountains
of the moon; turned their lenses with microscopic force upon tiny
insects of the grass, and revealed them as ferocious monsters of a
trackless jungle; they have shown us with X-ray wizardry the beating
of our hearts, the coursing of our blood, the flight of a cannon ball,
the nervous system of an angle worm. Wonderful things indeed they
have done in revealing the secrets, the inner workings, the external
beauties of objects of physical life. But few of them try to photo-
graph the soul of things—the Dweller beyond the Threshold.

It is the exceptional photographer who uses his camera with the
insight of an artist, who strives to reveal not only the outward beauties
of his subject but that inner significance of which the external is but
the lovely shell. And such an artist is Baron de Meyer, some of whose
studies inspired this article. He deliberately focuses his camera not
upon the sparkle of an eye but upon the light that illumines the eye.
He has somehow become possessed of the immaterial wonder-stone,
the talisman of insight, and uses it as a lens! When he photographs
a man the face is shadowy but the soul is clear; when he photographs
a tree, its storm-resisting spirit shines through the bark of the twisted,
staunchly fighting branches. He makes portraits of flowers—(not
just pictures of them) a humanly modest or flaunting individuality
showing in poise of stem, lift or droop of petal. A field of his photo-
graphing shows its hope or pride of harvest; a lane, its prim or saunter-
ing air of haste or leisure, its aristocratic or plebeian way of marching
proudly up a hill or shrinking shyly through a pasture lot or grove.

Readers of The Craftsman are already familiar with the work
of this photographer who penetrates the shell of things to the essential
kernel, for they have seen, from time to time in this magazine, his
inspired interpretations of humanity, his portraits of trees and
flowers, his spiritual treatment of the usually lifeless, still life subjects.

Pictures of Nature are great or indifferent according to the treat-
ment given them by the artist. He is the translator, as it were, who
destroys or justly interprets their story of life. “Not all the mechan-
ical or gaseous forces of the world or all the laws of the universe will
enable you either to see a color or draw a line without that singular
force anciently called the soul,” says Ruskin. Baron de Meyer pos-
sesses that force “anciently called the soul,” that essential quality
of vision without which a picture is lifeless, inert, valueless as art.
Unless a man has understanding, vision, insight, he sees but darkly.
“Having eyes they see not.”

His interpretations of Spanish life that we are publishing this
month might easily be mistaken for reproductions of paintings instead
of photographs. The camera does not usually pierce to the essential fact of a subject and leave the rest to its deserved second place. In its zeal for detail it generally leaves nothing to the imagination—and without imagination there is no art. When it is turned toward the face of a friend it has a diabolical way of recording any blemish of the flesh, of exaggerating every weakness of character. Some say that “the camera never lies.” The truth is that it generally bears false witness; it reports but half the truth, a most malicious, evil trick indeed. Only in the hands of the artist does the camera give things their true value.

How wonderfully it has portrayed the questioning, balancing, half-laughing, quizzical, inviting yet defying look of the Spanish woman. She is just as we would remember having once seen her. The loose, dark hair, sensuous eyes, smiling lips, soft full throat and graceful upraised hand would remain in our memory, while the folds of the dress be forgotten—if observed at all. This is true art, not commercial photography—to retain the things that should be retained and to lose the things that are of no account. And the thoughtfully peering face of the man with the soft-lipped profile! His is the face of a dreamer, looking within his own soul for solution of that which his eyes see. How sensitively the camera, under the command of de Meyer, has portrayed the still, intent gaze. That look of the seer as the significant detail, the kerchiefed head, cap, coat and chin as unimportant details have been justly balanced and truly reported.

The treatment of light in the full-length study of the dancer lifts the picture beyond the field of the usual. It is handled masterfully, also in the other two photographs reproduced. In the one of the dashing young caballero, the artist depends upon a mass of shadows and concentrated spot of light for his interest. In the other he has dared the full blaze of the sun, the penetrating light that permits no shadow, that softens lines and blurs all detail. The strong light that produces strong shadows is difficult to handle in photography, for the negative is apt to show but a blank flare of light beside a blurred mass of darkness. Diaphragming for detail of shadow, the lights become deadened. In the photograph of the woman sitting at the table in the direct light of a window, he has managed with consummate skill to get softness of contours and detail of fold, even the glow of light upon the face glancing from the white cloth on the table. The outline of the hand on the bottle is nicely lost—as it naturally would be against the transparent bottle. Focusing the camera with an artist’s insight, he has gained a remarkable balance of those powerful contrasts—sunlight and shadow—the intangible elements from which the infinite subtleties of beauty spring.