

THE REVIVAL OF FRESCO-PAINTING IN ENGLAND

THE STORY OF GARETH AND LYNETTE AT OAKHAM SCHOOL



GARETH'S DEPARTURE FOR THE COURT OF KING ARTHUR



GARETH IN THE HALL OF THE OLD KNIGHTS
The Hall is identical with the Hall of Oakham.



GARETH HALES THE RED KNIGHT BEFORE LADY LIONESSE

It is always a wonder to those who have been to Italy, and have seen how wonderful a thing a painting on a wall can be, that there are so few frescoes in England. A painting on canvas is a thing by itself; it can be torn from an altar and yet retain its majesty or its holiness. But a fresco is indigenous; it looks as inappropriate when removed from its surroundings as do the bas-reliefs of Luca della Robbia at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The natural compensation to this attribute is that a fresco has often, when in its place, a more abiding charm, and a more retentive hold on the memory, than any picture. Witness, for example, the tender beauty of the frescoes which Fra Angelico painted for the cells of his brother-monks at San Marco, in Florence; or the splendour of Benozzo Gozzoli's procession on the walls of a Florentine palace; or, to take very different examples, the absorbing piety of the pictures which Giotto painted on the walls of the upper church at Assisi. These are but three examples out of hundreds in which piety and history and legend are recorded in work of ineffaceable beauty on the walls of Italian churches and palaces and cloisters.

We use the word ineffaceable with some intention. That the fresco has not been adapted more widely in England is due to a suspicion of its durability. There is an idea that a cold and damp climate would quickly damage it, though there is little reason based on actual experience for this apprehension. The few ancient frescoes in England were simply colour-washes on a thin

layer of some coarse plaster laid directly on the stone or brick. In English frescoes of a more recent date the imitation of the later coarse and Italian methods produced work which would have been ruined in any climate. Fresco-painting is not merely an art; it is a craft, to be learnt like any other. The first and best step to its introduction in England would be the teaching of the technique of the method. That requisite, in its broader aspect, is one which may be commended to the attention of all British art schools, where it would be more profitable to teach students the crafts of the painter, the



GARETH BLOWS THE HORN BEFORE THE CASTLE OF LADY LIONESSE

engraver, the lithographer, the etcher, the decorator, than to allow them to plunge into the painting of pictures irrespective of a natural bent or genius. Such instruction would be especially useful in the case of fresco-painting, for which, to use the language of commerce, there is a distinct "opening" in England at the present time. The multiplication of public buildings, and, we believe, the increasing interest of the public in the decoration of them, are a call to the fresco-painter. Unhappily, if many are called there are few that are chosen. The artistic standing of most fresco-paintings that have been unveiled in England of recent years is not high. Similar work in the United States has been better rewarded, and more deserving of reward.

There is, however, one painter of frescoes in England whose work has a distinction, a strength and structural beauty, which are remarkable even in the working drawings or cartoons which have been exhibited during the last few weeks at the Grafton Gallery.

This is Mrs. Sargent-Florence, a painter whose work in fresco first attracted attention last year at the Arts and Crafts Exhibition, but who has been engaged for some seven years in decorating the fine Elizabethan Hall of Oakham School, in Rutlandshire. The school was founded by Archdeacon Johnson in 1584; the appearance of its hall is reproduced in that one of the frescoes which represents Gareth and Lynette, as in the Arthurian legend, sitting in the Banqueting Hall of the old knight who was King Arthur's friend. There are eight panels in the hall; and in them Mrs. Florence has painted eight scenes from the story to be found in Malory's "Morte d'Arthur." Besides those which are reproduced on this page are others of the meeting of Gareth with Merlin; of Gareth's first appearance at the Court in audience with the King; of his apprenticeship among the scullions; and of Lynette's petition at the Court of Arthur. It is not easy to gather from these small photographs an adequate idea of the finely spaced and nobly balanced proportions of Mrs. Florence's frescoes. It is still less easy to realise the charm which the painter's fine sense of harmonious and brilliant colour imparts to these severe and simple designs. Many have paid Oakham a pilgrimage for the sake of seeing this fine and truly artistic achievement; and it may be hoped that at no distant date the artist will be given the opportunity of decorating one of the many public buildings which stand in need of a testimony of the new artistic movement in this country. E. S. G.



LYNETTE AND GARETH (DETAIL)



GARETH'S COMPANIONS (DETAIL)