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RAVI VARMA.

HERE are some people who come to glory in spite of external circumstances, whose personal history and intellectual achievement have fought one long battle with each other. Adverse circumstances and unsympathetic surroundings by curious reaction challenge into existence some unsuspected psychological possibilities. The early poverty and material miseries of some of the great artists are in strong contrast to what their genius deserved. The squalor of literary men is one of the most tragic jokes in literature. But even amongst men of genius there is a more fortunate race—whose worldly affluence and easy fortunes are of a piece with their life-work. You cannot think of their life without their work nor of their work without their life. Browning and Gibbon occur to one as instances. Ravi Varma belonged to the latter category. His work was part of his life.

He was born in 1848 in Kilimanore, a village a score of miles north of Trivandrum, the capital of the Native State of Travancore. The family in which he was born was a historically important one and was in the days of its greatest affluence the reigning power in the country round about. In the great process of the political consolidation of Travancore in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the chieftainship was extinguished and the House swore fealty as vassals to the victorious Dynasty. The conquered ever afterwards remained faithful and loyal to the now mighty Prince of Travancore. A special sort of local importance still attaches to them and the House of Travancore is connected by marriage with the House of Kilimanore. The aristocracy of Travancore has always been noted for its learning and culture and Kilimanore has held a foremost place in this respect. It has produced scholars of considerable merit from time to time. That, however, was commonplace enough. But there was one thing which it always regarded as a source of peculiar and very natural pride. There was all along a rich vein of artistic capacity in the family, the ultimate worth of which was fated to be embodied in Ravi Varma.

Ravi Varma's own mother was a lady of great learning and discriminating culture and a minor poet as well. It will thus be seen that the future artist was born into an atmosphere of wealth, influence and a fine tradition. It meant for the child a home life which helped and encouraged in a pre-eminent degree his artistic leanings. His uncle, Raja Raja Varma was himself an amateur artist of considerable taste and refinement and the youthful Ravi Varma used to watch his work eagerly. The boy began to study Sanskrit in his early youth as English education had not sufficiently popularised itself, and Sanskrit was the only vehicle for a generous education. But like other boys who were destined to become great artists in their day, Ravi Varma did not take kindly to book learning and was often discovered sketching on walls in school-boy fashion the heroines of Hindu mythology. It would be foolish to draw any serious conclusions from a school-boy tendency of this sort, but it is worth noting that his efforts were in the purely imaginative line. There is also another tradition clustering round this period—it may be a legend but it is a legend that is widely believed and is worth recording. Raja Raja Varma, the uncle, was at

one time painting a picture in which there was a tree. He had finished the morning's work and gone out when Ravi Varma entered the studio and drew a parrot on the tree. I believe the parrot quite spoiled the picture, but Raja Raja Varma was unwilling to damp the enthusiasm of his aspiring collaborator and he finished the picture as it was. The picture is forgotten but the story is still with us—charged with a quiet, fragrant human touch.

The year 1862, was an eventful one for the boy. He had just turned fourteen when he accompanied his uncle on one of his periodical visits to the then Ruler of Travancore. The admiring uncle introduced his nephew and pupil to the Maharajah as a promising artist. His Highness became interested in the boy and presented him with a box of water colours—a right Royal gift in the Travancore of 1862. I am afraid this box has never had its due. I myself think that this box—a gaudy and paltry one no doubt tested by the standard of these days—was more precious to him than anything else which happened to him in the fifty-eight years of a very busy and active life. I do not know that Ravi Varma himself ever counted it as such—though I should not be a bit

near some fine day that he did. But, Ravi Varma may still have been a most probably one of that sort which peaks of :—

Full many a gem of purest ray serene

The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.

That box rescued Ravi Varma from being an amateur artist like his uncle and a good many others in his House in their time. The box opened his eyes to the possibility of a greater and richer variety of colours and a more scientific method of mixing and manipulating them than he had been used to before that. The adoption of a method and the ambition of getting the best out of the method were just a step from one another. The box of water colours was vitally significant to Ravi Varma for a good many reasons. The artistic traditions in the Travancore of that period are not easy of determination now with any degree of accuracy. But some of the pictures that have come within the experience of the present writer seem to indicate that the fashion of the period afforded a blending of the extreme objective accuracy of European Art and the no less extreme, idealistic conventionalism of purely Indian Art. A fine sense of line

there is in them but the queer liveliness of Japanese or classic motifs altogether absent. The criticism of had come but its constructive genius was a mystery to most. The artistic psychology of that time must have been a curious study. It was a critical time—the old experiences were slipping away and the new experiences had not been understood. Little things were tremendously important. The box of water colours meant the little great thing of Ravi Varma's life. He made up his mind to adopt and observe the canons of European Art for the purpose of interpreting to the world the rich and exquisite mythology of the Hindus. We shall have a good deal to say by and by how far this ambition was justified by success.

For seven years Ravi Varma dabbled in water colours. It does not appear that any example of his work during that period of experiments has been preserved—at any rate not one of them is open for public inspection. He had no regular training of any kind and whatever he did do in the realm of Art, he had only himself to praise or blame for. In 1865, at the age of seventeen, he was married to a lady in the Travancore Royal family.

He was rich with results for the time. He began to reside in the Royal palace and came in touch with the art and learning inseparable from a civilized Indian Court. In 1868, another and really decisive incident occurred.

The then Maharajah of Travancore wanted to have the portraits of the members of his family executed in European fashion and at his invitation a certain Théodore Jansen * came down from Europe for the purpose. Of course, he did his work in oils—which was a novel thing in Travancore. Ravi Varma's attention was thus drawn to the new medium and he was not slow to appreciate its effectiveness and beauty in artistic work. Water colours were good in their own way, but once a really good artist happens on oil colours, it goes hard without his adopting that medium. But Ravi Varma was labouring under a great disadvantage—a disadvantage which as we shall see was destined to handicap him all through life—he had no one to give him lessons in working with oil colours. He applied to Jansen for guidance, but

* I have seen the name spelt in two different ways—Johnson and Jansen. The difference is immaterial enough.

unfortunately through pique or jealousy practically refused the aspiring student. The young artist was chagrined and took the slight in as graceful a manner as could. All the same he was allowed to work at Jansen at his work; and this constituted practically the only artistic instruction that Ravi Varma ever had had.* He also attempted some foolish and futile things—he tried to learn the art by mechanical rules and admeasurements. This was unfortunate no doubt but this fact should never be ignored either in our praise of Ravi Varma or in our quarrels with him. During the next six or seven years, we do not hear anything about Ravi Varma except that he was still at his arduous and dangerous task of self-education. He worked in oil and water colours strenuously enough, but there was no one to encourage him. The Royal Family were well pleased to have an artist of considerable merit amongst them but they looked upon the work as his amusement. He was tremendously and genuinely in earnest but his earnestness was mis-

* As an instance of what good work an Indian Artist can do according to European canons of art I may mention Rahamim Samuel see *The Studio* Vol. 52 p. 30 et seq.

undervalued because of the amateurism of his family. His uncle's encouragement was still often given but those valuable moments rarely and far between on the ordinary occasions of his visit to the capital. The year 1873 saw a great event in his life. Chisholm the Superintendent of the Technical School in Madras paid a visit to Trivandrum and Ravi Varma became his discovery. He was surprised and delighted to see the admirable work of a young artist of considerable talent if not real genius who had taught himself all that he knew. Ravi Varma had been working till then in a more or less purposeless fashion—doing studies and working out imaginative pictures and Mr. Chisholm had the insight to see that the work was likely to be lost in dilettanteism if it was allowed to remain unknown to the outside world. He therefore suggested that the young artist should undertake some serious subject, treat it as well as he could and exhibit it at the next Annual Art Exhibition in Madras. His Highness the Maharajah also was agreeably surprised at the enthusiasm of such a competent judge as Mr. Chisholm and generously gave a grant of money to meet the expenses of the experiment. Ravi

Varma worked the rest of the year on coming work. It was exhibited in 1874. The picture was a portrait of 'Nair Lady adorning her hair with a gar. Jasmine'. The choice of the subject was particularly happy—it was an exquisite harmony of imaginative idealisation and strict portraiture. The type of Nair beauty was also a revelation to Philistine untravelled Madras. The picture created quite a sensation and there was a rush to see it. It was essentially popular and decided the style of Ravi Varma's work throughout life. The picture secured the suffrages of the Judges who unanimously gave it the 'Governor's medal'. Lord Hobart who saw the picture, was delighted with the work and gave the gratified young man a personal interview. We may be sure a lot of platitudes were then spoken about perseverance and steady work and a good many things of that kind.

Ravi Varma survived the flattery and the counsel and came back to Trivandrum. The Maharajah was greatly pleased and almost regarded the picture as an achievement of his own. This work was followed the next year by one of a similar type 'A Tamil Lady playing on a stringed

it'. This was hardly an improvement on the predecessor either in conception or execution, but it was good enough to secure the 'gold medal' a second time. The Prince of Wales (H. M. the late King-Emperor) visited Madras in 1875, and the Maharajah of Travancore who had come to Madras to see His Royal Highness, presented him with some pictures of Ravi Varma—one of these was 'The Tamil Lady'. The Prince of Wales expressed his admiration of the work done especially in view of the fact that the artist had never had the benefit of European education.

In 1876, Ravi Varma again exhibited in Madras—the picture being the first of his series of studies of 'Sakuntala writing to Dushyantam.' The story is well-known and the picture at once appealed to the popular imagination. This was the first attempt to deal with Hindu dramatic fiction and the artistic appeal was almost thrilling. As a picture it is richly susceptible to criticism—it is too crowded with irrelevant details, the perspective is almost helpless, Sakuntala is false and rigid—but all these things were ignored or forgotten in what it was taken to stand for in the public mind. Hindu mythology and the stories of India had once more come into their own for

serious artistic treatment. This picture was purchased by the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos who had in the meanwhile succeeded Lord Hobart as Governor of Madras.

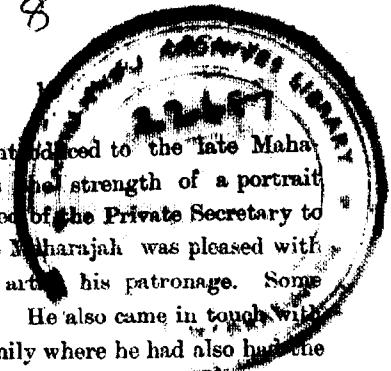
Before another two years had elapsed Ravi Varma tried the first of his great portraits. He painted the portraits of the Governor and some of the members of his family. The first of these is still in the Government House. It is not in any sense a very great picture but it is singularly straightforward and honest. The artist did not attempt any subtle or profound effects and it is interesting enough from another point of view. The old Indian portraiture was too psychological as a general rule and to that extent Ravi Varma's work represents a healthy reaction against the earlier psychologism which was often morbid and obscure.

From 1878-81 Ravi Varma led a quiet but intensely busy life. His fame had gone forth and in the rush for new portraiture, the public of South India kept his hands full. Most of the paintings of this period were portraits and they are scattered all over South India in the possession of their respective owners. I have come across some of them and they have often made me wish that he had stuck

a little more religiously. He does not seem to have done much of purely mythological or imaginative work at this period. But there was at least one of them which had a curious history. It was a study of 'Sita's Ordeal'. It is rather a complex group and the contrast of emotions trying. The story itself is familiar, else the meaning is none too clear from the picture. The treatment of the central figures Sita, Rama and the Earth goddess is singularly successful. Sita's patience in her trial and silent grief at parting from her lord is exquisitely expressed. While there is a quiet scorn and triumph on the face of the Goddess, Rama is too much surprised to take in the full meaning of what has happened. But the background and the grouping of the subsidiary figures is weak and unsatisfactory. It is ghostly and artificial. As a matter of fact, as we shall see subsequently, Ravi Varma was never successful with dark effects—he was too much the child of sunniness and naive joy. Lakshmana is absolutely incomprehensible. But the general effect is admirable and Ravi Varma's work was emphatically bold—and it would be foolish to be very fastidious and critical about the work of a young man of thirty-three. Sir T. Madava Row's

attention was subsequently drawn to
struck by it. He bought the picture
a present of it to H. H. the Gaekwar
Baroda.

This secured the introduction of the
the Gaekwar who invited him to Baroda for
forthcoming Coronation ceremony. He remained
in Baroda for some time and painted the
portraits of the members of the Royal family.
The enlightened Prince was so pleased with the
artist that he ever afterwards extended to him
his liberal patronage. Soon after his return
home his uncle and master in the art died.
Ravi Varma's career from 1885 to his death in
1906 can be more summarily dismissed. He had
established a name for himself and the period
meant incessant work and travelling for the purposes
of his work. The pictures of this time are
the most popular and best known and they were
produced almost one on the heels of the other and
it is conceived that his pictures may be studied in
detail without injustice even though the chronological
reference is not always kept in view. But
the few remaining interesting incidents of his life
may be referred to before I come to discuss some
of his representative pictures.

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 he was introduced to the late Maharaja
Mysore on the strength of a portrait
he had painted of the Private Secretary to
His Highness. The Maharajah was pleased with
it and granted the artist his patronage. Some
portraits were done. He also came in touch with
the Pudukottai Family where he had also had the
privilege of knowing that interesting statesman,
diplomat and author, Sir M. E. Grant Duff who
was then the Governor of Madras. In 1888 he
got from the Gaekwar of Baroda the commission
for the most considerable work he was ever des-
tined to do and which was also destined to make
him the genuinely popular artist that he became
in later years. It included all his mythological
and historical studies of the grand age of Hindu
civilization and culture. They were originally
meant to be a series of studies from the Rama-
yana and the Mahabharata--but the possibilities of
classical studies were revealed to him as the work
progressed and by the time he died there was
hardly a well-known incident in Hindu my-
thology and legends of chivalry and heroism that
he had not painted. Royal patronage and
general popularity also made him a fashionable
artist which, of course, meant a deal of labour

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and a small fortune to him in
 Soon after his Paroda experience,
 perhaps the only artistic blunder of his
 established an oleographic press for issu-
 own pictures. His pictures attained an al-
 unique popularity but the oleographs were exe-
 cuted by unperfected mechanism and soulless
 mechanics. The colours too were laid with the
 worst possible taste and I myself think steel
 engravings would have been much better than
 these daubs of oleographs. No discriminating
 critic really denies now that the press was artistic-
 ally as much a mistake as it was financially a
 success. But it is possible to be of two minds in
 the matter.

Towards the end of his career, Ravi Varma
 was undoubtedly the leading artist in India and
 he gathered round him a large number of pupils.
 The school, if this heterogenous assembly of young
 artists may be called a school, had no new doctrin-
 es or canons of art to preach—but they were all one
 in their admiration of their master and in their
 well-meant efforts to emulate him. With advanc-
 ing years, his health began to fail and in some
 instances of his work at any rate, he degenerated
 a good deal. But I always look back to a small

ady, suffused with the darks and lights
 calling tropical evening entitled 'The Russo
 the War' as the best example of the mellow
 gained wisdom of the master in his old age.
 It was the only instance in his art where whim-
 sical blends of darkness and light yielded their
 treasures to him. This was in 1904 and it will
 always be matter of speculation with me what
 new fields he might not have trod but for the
 sweeping death-rate of the tropics. He had dealt
 in sunshine and glory all his life and just before
 the curtain was finally run down he seemed to
 capture the riches and suggestions of the deep
 puzzling darkness. He may have had a second
 chapter of his life which he was never allowed
 even fairly to begin. But this is sad speculation.
 One of the most pleasing things which happened
 towards the close was the appreciation and admir-
 ation of some of the pictures by Lord Curzon
 when he visited Travancore in 1900. Ravi
 Varma's health began definitely to fail in 1905
 and he died on October 2nd, 1906.

II

Art criticism in India is a tremendously diffi-
 cult matter. There is the essential complexity of
 criticism as such. It means such a lot in present

experience—it means a good deal of pre-suppositions, culture, education, imagination. But in other countries are rarely at fault. You can either find yourself or be put in the way of finding then. Deductively there is the great critical tradition, inductively there are the works which are essentially and undeniably great. Within limitations the critic's task is simplified. But in India there is this peculiarity, you have no canons—or the canons themselves are in a fair way of being undermined. The hunt for unchallengeable standing ground is as baffling as it is in metaphysics. Mr. Havell has discovered the glory of ancient Indian art but he has also discovered and expounded the essential wickedness and weakness of Ravi Varma's art in half-a-dozen sentences on the lines of Dr. Coomaraswamy. Critics may quarrel as much as they please about Ravi Varma, but he means far too much in modern life to be dismissed in half-a-dozen, even a dozen sentences. Mr. Havell's guidance in this matter must therefore be regretfully but firmly dispensed with. In his iconoclastic criticism of present Art tendencies in India, Dr. Coomaraswamy has lost his moorings and in his criticism of Ravi Varma, he

be for once helpless and unedifying. The ancient Art are useless. Judged by the standards of the highest European Art, Ravi Varma is artistically nowhere. What then are we to do? Critics may fret and fume but the popular mind and imagination have been appealed to in an unmistakable fashion and criticism itself is on its trial. The canons have to be educated—it is our duty to do it. Therefore this is what I propose to do. First, I shall indicate some of his types, women, and children; then I shall help to a criticism of a few of his best known and most representative pictures. One preliminary caution, and the work of discussing some of Ravi Varma's best known and most representative pictures may proceed. The warning is merely this—the popular preference should never be ignored.

To begin with, one general observation may be made. Ravi Varma was essentially a child of the sun. The blaze of colour and gorgeous effects which are present everywhere in his pictures will be impossible without the hard beating down of a tropical sun. There is an unquestioned delight, an uncritical acceptance of the joys of life perceptible in every one of his pictures. He is sweet, rich, luscious, a very Tennyson amongst artists.

Psychologically and as an artist, he is capable of working in the dark—there is one glad rhythm and symphony of color, joy and delight. It was not even a crisis of optimism. Optimism of that kind is sure to have catches of tragedy, anguish and baffling paradox. Take for instance his study of 'Nala abandoning Damayanti' on the dark stormy night. There is unrelieved gloom and horror all round and the flash of lightning which illuminates the scene *should* be lurid and fate-charged—but in the picture we have nothing but a faint and unmasterful light showing off an effort of false, crude realism. The moral tragedy of it does not strike you straight in the face as it should and you wonder how unmoved you watch the picture. It is not as if the Indian Artist is as such, incapable of achieving these effects—in fact, one may almost go the length of saying that the austere strength and ideal asceticism of the old tradition was most effective in just these results. But it will be noticed that the 'Russo Japanese War' which I have already mentioned is an exception, a unique exception, as I believe, in the whole range of Ravi Varma's art. It was probably an experiment but not a bad experiment in this style.

At least characteristic creations of the artist are his women, but here again there is the tendency to delight in luscious sweetness. There is not the slightest trace of voluptuousness about one of them—nor is there, as a general rule, any suggestion of the tragedy and self-sacrifice of womanhood. Even his Sitas with one exception, that of the 'Sita's Ordeal,' have not realised the depths of self-abnegation and wifely sacrifice so closely associated with the character in legend and imagination. It may be that he deals for the most part with the Sita of her happy girlhood and early wifhood when as yet the world's calumny had not seared her soul; but the art is poor which has not a divine gift of prophecy and anticipation. You must have a whole lifetime in a look or it is worth but little. But he is happier with his Radha—there is a more tremulous depth attained in those studies. There is first of all, the study of Radha where she is wearying for her lord and her maid is speaking to her words of consolation. It is easy to quarrel with the picture—the back ground is incomprehensible, the foreground hardly less so; but Radha herself is exquisite. The graceful folds of the white sari, the iridescent gold of the lace and the jewels, the

black hair and the flowers, the grand
the two figures all form a magnificent
The eyes of Radha with their liquid dep.
looking not at this thing or that, but into
infinite of weariness and longing and desolati
It is all so peaceful and quiet and haunting—no
with the quality of tears but with placid suggest-
iveness. Now observe the next 'Radha'. Here
Krishna is coming from behind and has surprised
her. She has thrown her arms up in the ecstasy
of fulfilled longing and she is too happy to look
round. The mere sense of her lord's presence is
sufficient to charge her with untold, intense deli-
cious joy. The arms are eloquent in a manner
which is not achieved elsewhere by Ravi Varma.
The expression on the face may almost be dispensed
with as far as the artist's meaning is concerned—
but who can forget the face? Krishna is quite a
contrast. There is just the little hint of tease
and fun somewhere about him—it is not in the
eyes, for the lids are drooping, it is not in the
face, for that is too happy, it is not in the body—
but I think it is just in the poise of the head.
It is a very bold and subtle effect, but the mean-
ing is unmistakable.

But on the whole I think it is in the third

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manhood that Ravi Varma is happiest—
ini. As I said before he is far too
us a man and too refined an artist to
the appeal of the Mohini coarse and of the
earth, earthy. You have her as Menaka, as the
Mohini in Rukmangad, and as the Mohini in the
Swing. The pictures are different but the
Mohini's face is the same as also her philosophy.
There is the 'Mohini in the Swing' for instance—
she is the embodiment of love and joy and a
langorous acceptance of the things of life. She is
not a butterfly, the butterfly is too dynamic a
figure—the warmth of the tropics has entered her
blood and made her just a bit indolent. But the
Menaka is somewhat different and higher. The high
gods had set for her a mighty task indeed—no less
than to break the austere penance of the sage
Visvamitra. It is foolish to conceive of her as a
coquette—she has reached too high an altitude of
feminine fascination for that. All the freshness
of the green rain-bathed woods gleaming in the
sunshine is in her eyes and face—there is a hint
of the battle of the wills but there is more in it
of the irresistible assumption of woman's conquest.
You may not like the sage's rotund outlines but
you can see the soul working in his face.

Rukmangada's Mohini is conceived in a mould. She is to the king not merely a negation of the complex of kingship, fatherhood, Dharma. She is not a schemer, a petty seeker to defeat a rival by getting her son. She is loftier than all that. The image in the background reminds you that you are in the presence of a vital issue.

I shall mention only three of his children, (Sakuntala in the arms of Menaka is too much of a baby to need specific discussion.) I mean the boy in 'Rukmangad and the Mohini,' Sarwadaman, the son of Sakuntala and Dushyanta, and Krishna in the Visvadasan. There is a subtle greatness about Rukmangad's son. I use the words deliberately. The picture itself is the greatest of Ravi Varma's paintings and the little lad in the centre realises and embodies the heroism of the whole. He is every inch a king's son. Straight as an arrow, beautiful as a Greek god, he stands there a young Kshatriya asking his father to keep his vow even though it should mean his own death. The lines are perfect and there is just a divine touch in the fair face and the firm step. There is some

, but who grudges the little fellow his

anna represents a different spirit. The boy himself has a universal significance and Yashoda seems to have a glimpse of it, but Krishna himself is comical. He is just the little mischief-making imp suspected of a juvenile prank and trying to escape the rod by a practical demonstration of his innocence. He has been suspected of stealing the sweetmeats offered to Ganapati and he holds his mouth wide open to show that there is nothing in it. But he is still not very sure of his own innocence and there is just the suggestion of a little apprehension on that account. But the whole thing is comical—with the tragi-comedy of childhood at which grown-ups laugh.

Sarwadaman is however the best of them all. The delicacy of childhood with the courage of a hero,—that is what the picture is. I believe the study of the child is beyond praise. For the like of it elsewhere you have to go to some of the best European studies of the child Christ. It would be fatuous to compare the two classes of pictures because the inspiration and the meaning are so widely different but for unerring execution.

the fine perception of childhood's innocent and sheer beautifulness, this study deserves a high place in the world's art.

I shall close by a short consideration of the pictures 'Damayanti and the Swan', 'Rukmangad and the Mohini', 'Draupadi at the Court of Virata', 'Draupadi on an unpleasant Errand'. I may say at once that the choice is my own but I think they represent Ravi Varma at his highest. It may be difficult to persuade other people that it is so, but a certain element of arbitrariness is perhaps unavoidable in a matter like this.

Damayanti is listening to the Swan who has come with a message from her lover, King Nala. The picture is just one blaze of colour but it is aided on with true artistic instinct. The receding perspective of the King's garden behind is barely suggested but it is sufficient to indicate the subdued richness of the scene. This is one of the few instances where Ravi Varma has dealt successfully with open air perspective. The marble column—curiously tonic with a Hindu base, sets off the glowing colours of Damayanti's sari. But what I consider the supreme virtue of the picture is the precise mastery with which

sound is made to 'help' to set off the character in the picture. I shall not do injustice to the Swan—he is far too generous a fellow for that, but he does not in any way distract attention or over-emphasise the subtle shades of restrained womanly feeling on Damayanti's face. The art is the art of concealment but with just enough to suggest the inward meaning of it all. 'Draupadi on an unpleasant Errand' is an extremely simple picture. The story is that of Kichaka's guilty love for her and Sudhama's sending her to Kichaka with refreshments. Neither Kichaka nor Sudhama is in the picture and we have only the silent angry helpless grief of the insulted woman. She is coming down the steps with the tray of refreshments and the thrill of her disgust and horror is in every line of the figure. Draupadi is no doubt great, but the guard at the gate is a masterpiece. It is the most restrained study in Ravi Varma of the conflict between disciplined duty and the chivalrous human emotion to help. He is no doubt only a rough soldier but the sheer wanton insult offered to a defenceless woman has brought the indignant soul into his eyes. There is the convulsive firm grip on the lance which speaks of deeply stored

emotions. Then the final perception is no less inevitable. The plain dull Draupadi's sari is no less effective a contrast to the barbaric splendour of the guard's costume than that between the psychology of the two. It is a study in contrasts no doubt but it has an unforgettable synthesis in it.

'Draupadi at the Court of Virata' is a characteristic study in gorgeous groupings and complex human emotions. The setting is common enough—it is the case of an aggrieved and insulted woman seeking protection from the lord of the country and praying for redress against a powerful adversary. The king is sitting under the symbolic canopy listless and indifferent; he is surrounded by his wives or concubines and listens to the tale bored. There are the attendants who are no less bored than their royal master. This is the setting and there is also the gorgeousness and pomp inseparable from an Indian Court. But one sweep of the counsellor's arm has sufficed to charge the whole atmosphere with electricity and an impending sense of the doom of moral reprobates. The characters do not perceive it—they are too dull of heart and perception to realize the significance of it, but the whole picture

is ruined. Knock the central figure out (it may mean Draupadi) and you will once more find yourself landed in the ordinary and the commonplace. In a sense it is an one figure-piece but the subtlety and delicacy of the art will be obvious if we remember how the whole picture remains rational with the counsellor on or off. But there is a difference—there is the distinction between the sense of approaching doom and the quiescence of browsing contentment.

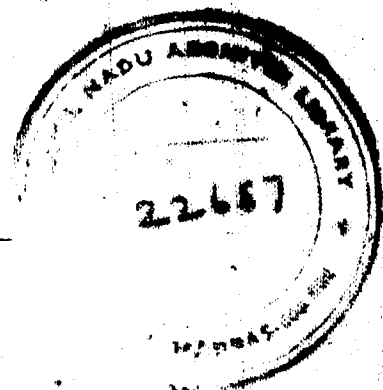
'Rukmangad and the Mohini' is however the greatest of Ravi Varma's pictures. The problem is very much deeper. The king had promised to the Mohini anything she desired. On the sacred Ekadasi day—the day of fasting, the Mohini presents the king with food and asks him to partake of it. He protests because it is against his Dharma and she therefore offers him an alternative—let him cut off the head of his only son. The promise has to be kept to give the Mohini anything she desired. The problem is really the ancient one of the conflict between love and duty, the love of the son is pitted against the duty of keeping the fast. What is he to do? The Mohini is pointing to the food—the son has come forward offering his neck. The king's wife has

fainted away and you have a miscellane of men and women before you. 'Love' has been painted dozens of times over, but I venture to think with the same poignant interest or soul-stirring tenderness.* You must take each individual of the whole group and there is not one of them with a false note. The weeping women on the one side, the perturbed men on the other, the decorated God in the background and the three central figures of the Mohini, the king and the lad, the matchless grouping of colours and the whole air vibrating with the eternal issues of life and death—it is all glorious. And the balance and the rythm, the careful, meticulous care of details—you do not find them to the same perfection elsewhere in Ravi Varma. As I said before, the problem here is that of the conflict between love and duty and it is well that its treatment should be so original and essentially Indian.

One closing word about the portraits. There are a large number of them in existence but most of them were done with no special view to subtle effects. They have not in them the peculiar Ravi

* Cf *The Huguenot* of Millais,

couch—the touch of sunniness and gladness. Of this, the pictures are the most characteristic memorial and India is the richer for her heritage.



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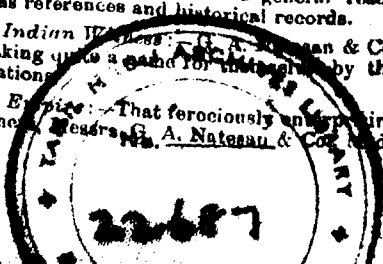
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