

SHAFTS FROM APOLLO'S BOW

11. Make the Punishment fit the Crime

MY morning newspaper recently flared into excited headlines—and even a photograph—concerning the trial for forgery at Amsterdam of Hans van Meegeeren who startled and considerably annoyed the art world about two years ago by admitting that he earned a comfortable livelihood by painting Vermeers and de Hoochs. 'Comfortable' is perhaps an understatement, for he is said to have sold six Vermeers and a couple of de Hoochs for £800,000, a single Vermeer for £135,000, and so on. One was sold to that prince of collectors, Hermann Goering; and, if I remember rightly, it was an investigation into this act of collaboration which brought forth the surprising defence that far from collaborating with this arch-enemy of his country he had "sold him a pup." Sensation in Court! And out of Court; for the victims (if 'victims' be the correct term) were many and various, extending from coal merchants to connoisseurs, critics and curators of National Museums.

To prove his innocence Mijnheer Meegeeren painted a fine Vermeer under the astonished eyes of the Dutch police, and added the characteristic mellowness and crackle of the varnish to show that he could give his patrons the dirt as well as the distinction of their Old—but not so Old—Masters. Some kinds of innocence are infinitely worse than guilt. Parvenues and painters, critics and custodians, collectors and coalmen made common cause against this genius who until then had given them all exactly what they wanted. Now the buyers asked for their money back; but Mijnheer Meegeeren had, like Rembrandt, Rubens or Raphael, spent the lot. They are still asking; and the present trial in a court richly hung with his faked masterpieces is an attempt to recover £500,000 from the bankrupt artist who has only his genius for deceit wherewith to earn this trifling sum. A Gilbertian situation, indeed.

For if this man paints you a genuine Vermeer
With an ease that all can see,
Then what a meagre Meegeeren and mere Vermeer
The great Vermeer must be.

That, anyway, is one way of looking at it.

The real crime he has committed is that one so marvellously understood by Ibsen: the destruction of our life illusions. That is the crime we never forgive. The experts and pontiffs who direct National Museums and advise innocent coal merchants on art are given the unenviable choice between the Scylla of confessing themselves fools and the Charybdis of earning their livings as knavishly as any painter of new Old Masters. It is even worth remembering that the monster lying under Charybdis thrice daily swallowed the whole sea and vomited it forth again; a recurring feat which might be accepted as symbolic in these circumstances, if for the wine-dark seas of Homer we read aesthetic opinions.

But these classical allusions are leading us astray. Gentlemen, consider your verdict. Shall we put this incarnation of several of the greatest Dutch masters into gaol and use his sensitive fingers to sew mailbags in a cell? Shall we make the punishment fit the crime and give him a life sentence to duplicate the whole of the treasures of the Rijks Museum, selling the duplicates to or through any pompous *arbiter elegantiarum* who doesn't know a genuine Vermeer when he sees one—as we all thought we did until Mijnheer Meegeeren destroyed our life illusion (*vide supra*)? Shall we set him up in a studio, and thus have a XXth century master who is such beyond all dispute, bidding him give the world his own masterpieces of painting that owe nothing to other men's subjects however much they owe to the methods he has discovered? Shall we make him the chief witness against his accusers, indicting them for taking private and public money (say £500,000) under false pretences of being able to judge genuine works of art from false? Shall we make him Curator of one of the great National Museums on the strength of his masterly knowledge of the processes of the Old Masters and understanding of their spirit? Shall we invite him to become an art critic less fallible than those he has deceived? Or shall we wisely forget all about it, and continue buying and selling and pontificating as though our life illusion were still intact and no Mijnheer van Meegeeren had ever introduced the serpent into our Eden?

Postscript: The verdict, given since this was written, was one year's imprisonment. Gilbertian to the last, it was decreed that the "forgery" sold to Goering be seized and hung with the National Collection!