

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

A paper at the Chuzzlewit club

Ralph Wilson belonged to a class of ambitious young draftsman who are ever unhappy because limited means prevented them from leaving home to seek a professional education abroad. Once however he was hopeful. During one of his early student years an enthusiastic friend of the family, a connoisseur who had taken intense interest in him, had insisted that the only proper course for him to pursue was to go to the architectural school at Vienna. This friend had a brother who was the head of the famous school at that time and he insisted upon writing to him upon the subject. Ralph was in ecstasy at the prospect, although he wondered who was to pay the expenses. The German professor thought differently of the matter and wrote a good fatherly letter displaying an amount of common sense which it was difficult to ignore. It was as follows:

“Dear Sir:

Your intention of coming to Vienna at this time with the purpose of acquiring a higher architectural education does not meet with my approbation. You have done well to engage yourself in the services of a busy architect, and this is the best thing for you for the present. After you will have worked for him for five or six years, and will have become thoroughly familiarized with all the branches of architecture, the technical tactical as well as artistic; and this you could not possibly have accomplished as yet; when you will have learned the close relation which of various structural peculiarities bear to manners and customs; in short, when you will have recognized the art of building as a product of your country (and this requires a comprehensive knowledge of all branches pertaining to it) then, if you still have the desire and the opportunity, you may go abroad to study our classical architecture; you will then appreciate its value and will waste no time but will see at a glance what you have to learn.

The value of practical activity during the years from 18 to 24 cannot be overestimated. In these years you easily acquire mastery over technical difficulties, and a good understanding of conditions, of the land and the people that are to influence your career. If you spend these years abroad among people of foreign customs and institutions it will be doubly difficult for you to regain your foothold at home. However, if you wish to make a study of architecture purely as a fine art in the strictest sense of the term, then the sooner you come to our schools the better. But of what value this training would be to you in America, that is a different question. In any case, however, you should sooner or later visit our arts centers; you will doubtless see much that is not to be had in your country.

Assuring you of my readiness at all times to give you further information, I am

Yours most respectfully,

Hans Becker.”

Poor Ralph was overcome with disappointment, for he had still fresh in mind the immortal Schiller's appeal to Providence, imploring her to tear from the mother's breast the infant genius and nurse it tenderly 'mid the classic surroundings of the Aegean shores that it may develop unsullied with the degenerating influence of this prosaic age. But he could not help recognizing the truth contained in such an impartial letter and therefore submitted as gracefully as possible, writing back an answer full of thanks and regrets. However he could not forget the disappointment altogether and allowed himself, not infrequently, to grumble and protest against being excluded from the ideal life which his strong imaginative powers had pictured. He braced himself for the struggle and was industrious, spending much of his leisure time in the library, where he pursued a course of study which, in his ambitious way, he had laid down for himself. As is usual in such cases he had planned more than he could accomplish, finding it difficult to tear himself away from the great volumes that dwelt upon the beauties of ancient architecture. Today he was particularly eager in his search through the stacks of books which lay piled about him on the table.

His neighbors wondered what it was all about, this restless rummaging, turning over volume after volume; absorbed but a minute or two in one place; always greedily devouring and never seeming to know what he wanted. But what mattered it to others; there was to be a paper at the Chuzzlewit club the following evening upon Architectural Styles under the Influence of Modern Civilization. True, he did not feel that he would be called upon to take part in the discussion that usually followed the reading of the paper, but the fear of appearing but half informed on the subject, and that his statements would lack weight, made him brush up for the occasion; it was his pride that he should feel strong enough to dispute the opinions of his fellow auditors. This morning he went to his office to take up his work upon a prosaic tobacco warehouse. Poor fellow, his head was too full of Grecian refinements and while his hand moved mechanically over the paper over which he was apparently absorbed deeply in the solution of some of the mysteries of warehouse construction, his mind was really on the shores of the Mediterranean and from there back to the Lecture Room, and so back and forth, entirely oblivious to the frown of the foreman, who had not the heart to bring the dreamer back to his irksome tasks. Ralph wondered what the speaker might say and was beginning to feel indignant at what appeared to him would be an attempt to proclaim Art a slave to necessity. But the great crowds and noise upon the street would not permit him to meditate upon this subject on his way to supper.

He hurriedly ate what was set before him, and after reluctantly discussing the questions of the day with his fellow borders, excused himself and was off for the Club. He chose a quiet street so that he could undisturbedly think over the subject announced; but he was not to be so fortunate. He soon was walking with an elderly gentleman whom he recognized as Mr. Jas Miller a business acquaintance and a would-be connoisseur. The this gentleman was one of the particular kind that takes special delight in flattering their young professional friends, being apt to indulge in awkward compliments by affecting much interest in subjects of which they understand little, or nothing. He was a merchant jeweler, professedly in easy circumstances, and certainly wonderfully gifted in that great art so invaluable to business men, namely, the art of blowing their own horn. Yet he

seemed to move his establishment as often during the year as there are seasons, probably to keep up with them.

Ralph hadn't the greatest respect for his opinions, he having on one occasion most ostensibly proclaimed a certain stone residence of only fair artistic merit to be by far the finest piece of architecture in the country, immediately there on mentioning another which he thought was even finer. Being a goldsmith by trade, he probably considered himself by virtue thereof, to be a qualified art critic; and why not? Since the great masters of the Renaissance were in many cases apprenticed goldsmiths, including even one of the architects of the great Duomo in Florence.

After the usual introductory remarks upon the weather, business, and other interesting topics, Mr. Miller continued in the manner peculiar to people of his class, "By the Way, Ralph, aren't you the architect of the new Masonic Temple?" Ralph conscious that the building in question was well thought of among the profession, explained with modest pride that it had been designed by the firm whose employee was at the time, but much of it have been done by himself; "Oh indeed; well it's a fine building. But it's a pity that you did not buy the lots next to it." Ralph explained that they had not been for sale; and Mr. Miller continued: "That tower is a mistake; Don't you think it ought to be on the corner? I think it would look much better, don't you?" It is doubtful whether the most angelic temperament would not wince under adverse criticism. Possibly when administered by higher authority it may be taken with the show of graceful submission, but it is probably rarely the case that the expressions of delight or thankfulness which are sometimes encountered are ever uttered, even in the most favorable instances from the fullness of the heart.

Ralph felt that his prestige as an artist would not tolerate in his acquiescence in his friend's uncalled for criticisms, so with much disgust but with a supreme effort of self-control, he answered as politely as he could under the circumstances, saying that he preferred not to pass upon work that was largely his own, although he confessed feeling great pride in the result. He tried to change the subject, but Mr. Miller kept right on elaborating quite a wonderful criticism upon Art in general, always insisting however that he was really no judge, but was merely expressing his opinion, and firmly believed that he had an undisputed right to this. He thought that taste was entirely a matter of opinion, and that the public should not be backward in proclaiming its views, for the public certainly controlled the fate of all things that concerned the general welfare. This view he did not wish to confine merely to politics but would have it extended to all matters pertaining to art. Mr. Miller was wound up, giving Ralph no opportunity to reply, and only ceased when they had reached the entrance to the Club room, where the paper was to be read. Though the parting was a great relief to Ralph, he could not avoid a slight nervousness following him as he climbed the stairs, wondering why people will insist on displaying so much stupidity. There are individuals, who, though perhaps of quiet deportment, on entering a room full of people inevitably cause a stir; a their manner of dignity or importance commands lesser gods ever ready to flock about them and 'mid flattering smiles and strained efforts of wit, endeavor to endear themselves in the graces of their idol. Wilson belonged neither to the one class nor to the other. He was usually too occupied with thoughts of his life study to indulge to any great extent in an exhaustive

analysis of human nature. However he was not a little gifted with the power of grasping many of its mysteries, and on such occasions as this would quietly circulate from one knot of talkers to another or withdraw into some window nook to indulge a little in idle speculations upon the sincerity or other failings of mankind.

His natural cleverness as a designer had won him some distinction in the profession, and his entrance into the room was consequently far from being unnoticed. He was greeted kindly by a number of gray heads, one of whom remarked that he looked as though a vacation would do him much good. Ralph smiled his thanks and passed on to a group of young men of his own age. A cordial "good evening" was immediately followed by an appeal to his opinion on the question that was eagerly being discussed. "See here Wilson," said the one who had just been gesticulating most violently, "when you vote the Lawyer's Judicial Ticket will it the right to put your sawbuck at the head of the main ticket, for safety's sake, as they say?" Ralph sighed and wondered what "architecture" was coming to; but he was moved by compassion for the questioner and replied decisively, "Yes, be sure to mark the head of your ticket and then scratch all you please." With this he moved away to find more congenial company, but in his sauntering stopped absentmindedly before a large and superb photograph of the Parthenon.

For the moment he was not thinking of the picture; but stopped merely to avoid encountering the venerable president of the Club, hardly feeling the privilege of claiming recognition after but a slight introduction to a man so far his superior. But becoming absorbed in the picture, he felt more at ease and reflections on the progress that had been made in Architecture since the time of this wonderful creation. A friendly clasp on the shoulder and a "Hello Wilson, what are you thinking of?" roused him rudely but with the effect of at once crystallizing his ideas. Instantly recovering from the shock he extended the speaker an hardy "good evening" and with enthusiasm grasped the proffered opportunity to vent the pent-up ideas on his hobby. "Why, I was just studying over this photo," and slipping his arm through that of his friend and drawing him up more closely to the picture, began in a time of confidential seriousness; "Jerry," said he, "did it ever occur to you what a mess is being made of Architecture nowadays?" "Why what do you mean" said the surprised Howard? "Simply this; here's a building that is over 2000 years old and its ruins (poor thing) guarded with the tenderness and care of a mother, and worshiped by us as the most marvelous of artistic creations that the world has ever seen; in fact it is perfection." "Yes, that's true" remarked Jerry, getting interested, "But what has that got to do with your wholesale condemnation of our modern efforts?" "A great deal, efforts to be sure but what else are they?" "Now" replied Jerry, "you certainly didn't expect us to attain the ideal which was protected so long ago? There was no originality in; all they knew was to design all their buildings after one and the same model, and it took them hundreds of years to get away from the two or three styles which were in vogue. That sort of thing would never be tolerated at the present day.

I would like to see a man repeat himself only once; what a howl there would be. It is bad enough when a house owner insists upon building a series of houses from the same set of plans." "Yes, I know" said Ralph, "that is the way people think but your last point is not exactly what I referred to. It is this thing of originality that is working so much havoc with us, we must not forget that the old classics form the basis of all design

regardless of style. It is the principle which we must look after, and we can find it only there and nowhere else; and how can you ever expect to develop principles yourself when you are hardly allowed time enough to properly develop even one scheme?

When Ictinus undertook to design the Parthenon it never for a moment entered his head to make it look like anything else that was ever designed. It was the one problem before him to carry to as great a degree of perfection as possible what had been handed down to him from generations past. To succeed in this was his only ambition and he succeeded only because he was unhampered by crazy notions and artistic fads, which are the bane of the present civilization. In fact the Parthenon is a beautiful expression of the character of the age, which being upon such a high intellectual plane naturally could produce nothing but a perfect work of art.”

His friend Jerry listened patiently but was beginning to feel some pity for the hopeless position in which Ralph was placing himself. He was one of those thoroughly practical fellows who take the world as they find it and who do not believe in torturing themselves with notions of perfection so long as they interfere with the accumulation of dollars and cents. Ralph was getting too serious for him. And he replied: “My dear fellow, I don't want to interfere with your building Parthenons to your heart's content; it is a very simple trick in spite of all your fine principles, you will find it all measured up carefully, nicely engraved and bound ready for use, the only thing I fear is that you will not only have trouble in getting an order for one but also in finding some use to which to put it.” “No, no,” retorted Ralph, somewhat annoyed, “I don't mean anything of the sort but I certainly do protest against so-called architecture which is being inflicted upon the public, in Chicago for instance and elsewhere.

For instance here's a sample of which I read a description in this morning's paper. It is a great Temple with which the Odd Fellows intended to paralyze the foreign visitors to the World's Fair. It is to be the biggest and most hideous office building in the world. They call it a Temple, (but not a Parthenon by any means) but the form of tobacco warehouse with a sugar refinery at the base with three states prisons on the top, the whole surmounted by an insane asylum and with a factory chimney with Windows in it and a church steeple on top. The entire delirium just 34 stories high and the peak of the steeple to be 556 feet above the ground, just 1 foot higher you will notice than the Washington Monument. If it were a foot lower the Chicago Odd Fellows would feel that they had lived in vain.

When foreigners witness this triumph of American taste they will stop asking why we put a duty on works of art.” Jerry smiled good-naturedly and thought it was about time to stop the argument if they were going to bring in such testimony as that, and Ralph who felt that whilst he had not convinced his friend, he had still accomplished what he considered a successful defense of his favored theme. The two friends moved on to look for a seat, inasmuch as there seem to be

preparations going on to open the meeting. In passing a picture of St. Peters at Rome which hung close by, Jerry taunted him with, "I suppose you consider this about as bad as your unfortunate Chicago building?" But Ralph was quiet, thinking it a good subject to write up some time in the shape of a paper to present and a future meeting of the Club. By this time the meeting had been called to order, a little business transacted and the paper announced. The speaker was a clergyman who had traveled much, preached little and got himself quoted on art matters, but I fear that his opinions in most cases were not the result of original investigations or technical training.

He probably considered this unnecessary, thinking that his calling assured him against violent outbursts in case of dissension. With some this is a dangerous condition, it makes them bold to assert things that should otherwise admit of dispute. I will not dwell upon his introductory remarks, for they were unsatisfactory, he assumed at the outset that his audience was a class of beginners that were in need of having the different styles of architecture explained to them. He succeeded better in boring his listeners than in most anything else that he tried, for he not only played the instructor but inflicted a number of photographs of commonplace subjects that one could see illustrated in every child's picture book. Yet he did happen to express a few opinions upon questions of the day but it is very much to be doubted that he was responsible for them. The gist of the paper seemed to be that he thought we owed much to photography and rapid transit, that it was these things which were the great factors aiding so largely in more universally educating the masses than heretofore, ambitious individuals were enabled now to see with their own eyes the wonders of past civilizations, bringing home with them influences which were destined quickly to tell upon the art of the present day.

Through the medium of photography the illustrations of old and current work in all countries were being forced upon the attention of the public. It was no longer a question of a style developing naturally from the native conditions of the people, but since everything was distorted, customs as well as notions, it naturally followed that our modern cities assumed the aspect of an architectural medley and the interior of the house that of bric-a-brac shops on a large scale. Whether the requirements of the times are entirely responsible for this condition of affairs and whether these are to be blamed for the monstrosities that are perpetrated is a question, the decision of which our friend left to the judgment of his auditors. Although privately holding the former beliefs "let us take for example" he said, "the problem of building an office building which shall rise in the air to the extent of 30 or 40 stories. This is not improbable, because they are already considering such projects in Chicago and in New York. Now" he continued, "you will all agree with me that the only solution of such a problem is to design the building in the form of a tower, and that is exactly what they did in New York.

In this case the architect made short work of the difficulty by almost bodily reproducing the beautiful Campanile of St. Marks with modern variations." "I am glad" he continued, "that he had sense enough to copy a good thing if copy he must, and I do not see how he could have ever hoped to dispense with such recourse although in Chicago, it must be confessed, they aimed at greater originality but with the dire result of plain box like structure with simple perforations for windows and great projecting ledges for cornices." He continued in this strain, mentioning the recent Romanesque revival in New York, probably due to the impetus given by the late lamented Richardson, and while admitting that a great many of the buildings designed in this fascinating style might be very beautiful, yet it was only a fad which would not hold its own longer than a few years, or at most until some other style would assert itself; this he stated was being rapidly accomplished by the younger generation of architects, who have seemed to discover greater possibilities in the renaissance and are fast establishing a prestige of this style. Only a few years ago it was thought the romaneseque was best adapted to the American conditions and when the World's Fair was talked of there seem to be a chance for great development of this style which was to over-shadow all efforts of past ages.

Architects the century over where one the qui vive for the announcement of the great competition, notwithstanding the general impression that romaneseque would triumph, things did not turn out that way; the management developed into one man power and instead of a great competition taking place there was a Board of Architects appointed, consisting of a limited number, and if one is to judge from the results, there must have been definite instructions given that the renaissance style shall govern. The speaker thought that it was very fortunate that there should be a decided expression given this gigantic display and that it would undoubtedly astonish the world see such an unparalleled group of monstrous buildings, all in the style of the classics, and that this would go far to redeem our reputation in the glorious field of art. There was to be none of the gingerbread ornamentation which seems to be the sum and substance of most exhibition buildings it was to be all seriousness and refinement that would secure the respect and applause of our cultured visitors from across the sea.

Undoubtedly the influence of this revival would be wide felt and there would be some hopes of soon hearing the last of such terms as Queen Anne and the like. The balance of the paper was rather dull and at conclusion it failed to elicit very much comment or discussion from the hearers, so Ralph found little occasion to apply his fresh knowledge of recent brushing up. He was somewhat worried and did not feel disposed to remain longer at the Club. He felt fortunate in finding a congenial companion who would walk most of the way home with him and so took the opportunity to depart.

This friend was a Mr. Stroble one of the foremost architects of the town. This was

particularly gratifying to Ralph, for he meant to confide to him his secret opinions about art. Of late he had often been considering the question of establishing himself in independent practice. He had worked as a draftsman a number of years, sufficient in his opinion to justify such a step. He was able to undertake works of ordinary magnitude, such as residences and the like and felt no alarm at the probable outcome of his venture. In the course of his conversation with Mr. Stroble he mentioned that he felt a desire to be his own master so that he could carry out his ideas without being interfered with by anyone in the role of a superior. Mr. Stroble smilingly nodded his approval and wished to congratulate his young friend with all his heart. He knew Ralph well enough to feel that a little advice confidentially given would be appreciated and so ventured to call his attention to some of the dangers that he would find in his path.

“You must not forget,” he said, laughingly, “that the very first principle of professional practice is first to get your client, and that move over you will probably have to wait until your client comes to you; then if you are fortunate enough to make him a convert to your ideas you will have plain sailing, but unless your client regards you as second Daniel come to judgment there are strong probabilities that he will gracefully insist upon having many of his “pet schemes” as he calls them, introduced into the building and will probably bring you a lot of cuts of buildings in all conceivable and unconceivable styles and tell you that he would like something on that order. Your indignation may not help you for as a prophet, you know you will not be appreciated at home.” This was too much for Ralph; he protested that he would never do such a thing and that his clients will have nothing to say about the design of the exterior; he will cheerfully endeavor to gratify all their whims upon the arrangement of the interior but when it comes to the exterior he alone is to be master.

“Well,” replied Mr. Strobel, “that's right, but it is not very profitable particularly if in such a case of your client leaves instructions not to do anything upon the work until you hear from him again and then never returns. You see my dear friend, people are not so lavish in the expenditure of money over which you are to dispose as you might wish them to be, and you will discover therefore that it is very largely money which determines the style of architecture. Given an unlimited purse and indifference as to the returns on the investment you could very easily design a building that would be the talk of the world and live for all ages, but reverse the conditions so that you would be compelled to calculate every pound of iron, the cost of every molded course, and make comparative estimates as to the cost of wood and stone, discovering that wood is a great deal cheaper, and a final requirement of nothing less than a hundred per cent more or less of returns, you will probably have to lay aside your editions of deluxe and apply yourself with independent energy to the invention of a style of architecture which will give your building a fairly presentable appearance without being a happy possessor of the name of the recognized styles. You will discover also while your artistic instinct guides you in everything that you do that you are still

primarily a builder; that you will be worried to death with all manner of forms of building contracts, remarkable only for their laxity, and that you will be forced into unpleasant contact with provoking lien laws that are framed only for the benefit of the material man and the Contractor.

But my dear boy I could go on and talk to you by the hour upon the subject, but this is no time or place to elaborate and seeing that you have arrived at your home, I will defer it to some other time. I am very much interested in your welfare and I want you to feel at perfect liberty at all times to profit by my experience, which you can have in the shape of advice whenever you desire it." Ralph was "too full for utterance" so to speak, and with the sense that his eyes had been opened and he had been awakened from somewhat of a dream, he thanked his friend warmly and bid him "good night." The next morning when he took up his tobacco warehouse again, he said to himself, Well, if I am in the wrong in this matter of styles, I fail to see it. Someday I will show these people their own errors.

A.O. Elzner

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