

## Notes on Art.

## THE NATIONAL GALLERY.

It is strange how seldom the picturesque costume of our Nurses is seen in the National Gallery. It contains one of the best and most representative collections of pictures in the world, and a tired Nurse might often find mental rest by spending even a few minutes before one or other of the famous works upon its walls. Surely it would be difficult to find anything more restful than to be reminded that pain, though real and terrible, is passing, while the beauty of the soul which shines through the pictures of the old Italian masters, is lasting and eternal.

Let me attempt, therefore, to show how the Gallery may be helpful as a place of rest. We must return to the question, What is Art and what is its object? Browning has answered the question for us, as only he could, in his wonderful poem *Fra Lippo Lippi*. He pleads for beauty :—

“Is this sense, I ask?

A fine way to paint soul, by painting body  
So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further  
And can't fare worse!”

And, he adds—

“If you get simple beauty and nought else,  
You get about the best things God invents :  
That's somewhat : and you'll find the soul you have missed  
Within yourself when you return Him thanks.”

We are to ask ourselves—we who have seen the world, the beauty, the wonder and the power, the shapes of things, the colours, lights and shades—whether we are thankful :—

“For this fair towns face, yonder rivers line,  
The mountain round it and the sky above,  
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,  
There are the frame to.”

Then, with singular insight, Browning shows that we recognize the beauty of Nature when reflected in a painting, though it may escape us in Nature itself.

“For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love  
First when we see these painted things we have passed.  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see :  
And so they are better painted—better to us  
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that ;  
God uses us to help each other so  
Lending our minds out.”

We will, therefore, take a picture by the very painter Browning was contemplating, “The Annunciation,” by Fra Lippo Lippi. Ask a custodian to show you where it hangs, and go straight to it. How has the painter helped us by “lending his mind out”? Let us test the picture by the light of Browning's poem. First there is the background, the “frame to,” the figures of the Virgin and the Angel ; study it first. There is the delicate carpet of flowers, painted in wonderful detail ; the lily, an emblem of the Virgin in front of her ; and the long lily-stem in the hand of Gabriel. Then also, as back-ground, there is the low stone edging enclosing a group of trees. Look at the dainty painting on gold of the wings of Gabriel, and the golden drapery at the back of Mary ; there are the frame, the key to the lovely colour is the blue of the Maiden's robe against the pinkish red all Italians love.

Then there is the reverend kneeling figure of Gabriel, “Announcing” that the Virgin is to be blessed among women ; and, above all, there is Mary's modest accepting face. Look at all this, and then ask yourself whether you do not understand and love it all better “when you see it painted,” whether you do not feel through the picture that the world is no blank to you, “that it means intensely and it means good,” and that, “to find its meaning is our meat and drink.” We will consider other pictures together in the next paper.

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## The Book of the Week.

## THE SOUL OF THE BISHOP.\*

If the Soul of the Bishop had been written by an unknown author, it would probably not have succeeded in finding a publisher, but, unfortunately, as it bears on its title-page the well-known name of John Strange Winter, the two purple volumes are to be found, just now, on most people's drawing-room tables. Everyone sends for it in the hopes of being pleasantly amused, as they have often been before, by this popular author's brightly written tales ; but, alas ! this time, John Strange Winter has been bitten by the modern Tarantella spider—called “Religious Speculation”—and abandoning all her cavalry officers, dragoons, and babies, she has erected a pair of wooden puppets, which she duly labels The Bishop of Blankhampton and Miss Constable ; and through two dreary volumes these two dull and uninteresting people discuss the thirty-nine Articles, “Infantine Baptism,” and other vexatious religious questions of the day.

From cover to cover there is no vitality in the book. The heroine, Cecil Constable, from the first alienates our sympathies, and the reader wonders what the Bishop saw in her to fall so madly in love with.

The Bishop himself had blue eyes, and was called Archie—in fact, if it was not for the constant references to his shoe-buckles we should never remember that he was a Bishop at all. He goes to balls, and sees no harm in them ; he does not dance himself because he was very big, and “was never good at it,” but he improves the shining hour by sitting out several dances with the heroine, and proposes to her before he takes her in to supper. But though his behaviour at the ball reminds one of some of the author's former officer characters, Archie is a most exemplary Bishop, liberal-minded, kind-hearted, and hard-working.

At first Miss Constable is glad—

“To be taken possession of, as he, with a strong man's instinct of protecting the woman he loves, even from natural fatigue and anxiety, took possession of her.”

For he is always “drawing her nearer,” and “settling her comfortably among the silken cushions,” and she seems to like it ; but soon she begins to ask him embarrassing questions, and, in fact, makes the poor man's life such a burden that we wonder how he could endure it. One afternoon she puts “a straight question.”

“She was sitting silent, her elbow on her knee and her chin on her hand. ‘Dearest,’ said the Bishop,

\* “The Soul of the Bishop,” by John Strange Winter, in two volumes. F. White & Co., 1893.

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