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THE ARTIST GOES TO FRANCE

Fairy Story That Came True

Written for "The Listener"
by HOWARD WADMAN

ONCE upon a time (for this is a fairy story, although it happens to be true) there was a young New Zealand painter who had no money and no influence, and wanted nothing but to paint. He painted night and day, making up his own oil paint and laying it on so thick and in such fierce conjunctions of colour that people tapped their heads or laughed when his pictures were shown.

Then one day this painter met a friendly genie who had spent many years in France and therefore knew something about art. And this genie said to the New Zealand painter: "If you wish hard, I will waft you to Paris, where you shall study under one of the best teachers." "Thank you," said the painter, who had a wife and three little girls, "but who will pay my expenses?" "That," said the genie, "can probably be jacked up." So the painter did wish hard, and he is leaving for Paris next month.

THE painter is Sam Cairncross and the genie is M. Armand Gazel, French Minister to New Zealand. It is four years since Sam, at the age of 30, suddenly started to paint, and one year since M. Gazel first saw his work at a show in the Wellington Central Library. The Minister bought some of Sam's paintings, and when a couple of bursaries became available for New Zealanders to study in Paris, he offered one to Cairncross. (The other is for a student of the French language and has gone to a teacher at Berhampore School).

Sam Cairncross is a "working man" and proud of it. He was a porter at Wellington Hospital, and then to get more money for canvas and pigment he took to street photography, but found it left him too tired to paint. So he went back to the hospital as a night male nurse. He found that after a few hours' sleep in the morning he could get back to his beloved painting.

But Sam knew in his heart that there was no job that would run in double harness with the passion of his life, and the problem was—how to keep up the honest discharge of the duties necessary for a minimum income, and still have time and energy to cover canvas with colour. Well, for a year at any rate, his problem is solved. The bursary will pay his tuition fees at the famous school of André l'Hôte and his keep in Paris, and it will pay his fare home. He has to find the passage money to France, and he has to support his family in New Zealand. This he is doing by selling his paintings as hard as he can go.

AND what are they like? Some members of the public (brought up on

the respectable offerings of the New Zealand Academy) who recently saw a strong concentration of Sam's paintings at a farewell exhibition, appeared slightly dazed and sat down to gather their vital forces. He favours the brightest shades of red, yellow, and blue, applied with an abandon reminiscent of Van Gogh. He will put pink flowers on a red table, or set down orange next to crimson and leave them to fight it out.

Sam Cairncross paints without discretion, but (and what a magnificent "but" it is) he paints with his whole being. Comparing his work with that of some of our more discreet and educated painters, I could not help thinking of Roy Campbell's lines on the writers of his native South Africa:

You praise the firm restraint with which they write—
I'm with you there, of course:
They use the snaffle and the curb all right,
But where's the bloody horse?

Sam, at any rate, never misses the horse. Naturally the question arises as to whether he will lose his present intense vitality when the schools have had a go at him. I think not. In the first place, he has had some years in the Life Class at the Wellington "Tech," and they have given him a good grounding of draughtsmanship without spoiling the vigour of his portraits, which are among his best work. Second, he is going to l'Hôte who is an advanced painter himself, and certainly did not drain any of the life out of John Weeks, who studied under him 25 years ago.

In addition to his own solid talent, Sam Cairncross has a number of people to thank for his opportunity. There is first of all his wife. She has no doubt but that Sam must fulfil himself and follow his star; her loyalty is good to



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A PORTRAIT by Sam Cairncross

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