

Disfigured Faces

by "SUNDOWNER"

THOREAU or Emerson, I forget which, deplored his own weakness in contributing to causes in which he did not believe. It is a weakness of which everyone is guilty now and again, nearly always for a bad reason. It was not patriotism that made me contribute this week to the

MARCH 27 Navy League, or the love of Christ that made me help the Salvation Army, or zeal for education that made me listen to an appeal by the School Committee. It was muddled thinking and moral cowardice. It was easier to conform than to stand alone, pleasanter to be thought generous than mean. And these were easy tests. Though I have neither patience nor sympathy with the typical Navy League propagandist, I acknowledge my debt to the Navy itself; though I can't swallow even the crumbs of Salvation Army doctrine, I believe that money entrusted to Salvation Army officers is put to honest and unselfish uses; though I am 30 years too old to feel much responsibility for primary schools, or even to know what goes on behind their glass fronts, I can think of no other institutions of comparable importance. But I contribute to causes of no importance to man or beast, buy tickets for functions that I think vulgar and stupid, throw my mite into boxes that I would gladly see stolen or burnt. I think we all do; and as often as we do we disfigure our own faces. What should be a straight line becomes a crooked line; what should be a clear sound becomes a muffled sound; what should be a sharp edge becomes a blunted, blurred, and dented edge separating nothing from nothing. I try to tell myself that these little conformities are harmless. I know, in fact, that every one is a lie, and that what I call nods of generous

acquiescence are the wobbles a top makes before it ceases to spin.

I WAS pushed hard today by a visitor who asked for answers to questions beyond my range of interest and understanding. We were talking about modern art, of which I know as much as the sheep on Burnett's station know about Mt. Cook. I have seen scores of reproductions, and the great collection of originals in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. But

MARCH 28 I have looked at them with eyes as artless as Elsie's. Except here and there by a combination of colours they arouse no emotion in me, and I have usually to resist the impulse to think them an impudent pretence.

But even if I could have said that the Picasso originals moved me, my visitor would not have let me off. Was emotion enough, he asked. If there was nothing but emotion in a poem or a picture, could we call it great? Must it not mean something as well as make us feel something?

It is the oldest question in art, the most frequently asked, the most angrily debated. If I knew the answer I would be wiser than Tolstoy, bigger than Whistler, deeper than Ruskin; and I am not sure that I would like to occupy any of those pinnacles. But it is a question without an answer. We might as well ask what Beethoven means as look for a meaning in Rima or the Mona Lisa; unless, of course, we accept an emotional interpretation. If the meaning of art is what it does to us, its effect on us, and the artist's method of conveying that effect, I know what to say when questions about it are put to me. But I don't know what to say if I have to answer from a platform on which I am not able to stand.

THOUGH my rams are what is technically called flushed, they are still not interested in my ewes, which this

year have come from Otago and are only a week or two separated from their lambs. How long, on the average, a ewe takes to transfer her interest from lambs to rams, I have never observed.

Breed has something to do with it, feed a great deal, but the

MARCH 29 chief factor in my case this year is no doubt geography. My rams were born (probably in August) in Canterbury, and have always been flushed in February. My ewes were born (probably in October) in Otago and have run with their lambs till the first or second week in March. Their cycles are thus from six weeks to two months out of adjustment, and there is the further difference that the rams are Southdown and ewes Romney. But I will be surprised, all the same, if the gap is not reduced by half. I am sure that propinquity counts as well as breed, feed, and past history, and that belief, as well as my bad fences, was my reason for putting the rams with them as soon as the ewes arrived ten days ago. My grandchildren, if any of them run sheep, will probably adjust such matters harmoniously; but I am prehistoric enough to leave a little to God.

I WAS surprised, a little bewildered, and more than a little embarrassed yesterday when I hurt a man's feelings by confessing that I had served in the Boer War. He brought it on himself by asking if I had served in the 1914-1918 War, and it somehow hurt his

MARCH 30 pride to discover that I had raced him into the world by one year and into battle by more than twelve years. Instead of reflecting cheerfully that I would probably race him out of the world, too, he became morose, and then almost offensive, ending the discussion with the sneering remark that "there were, of course, no hardships in South Africa."

It is being as foolish as he was to think any more about him, but when I got home I re-read H. W. Nevinson's account of the Siege of Ladysmith, in which, of course, I had no hand, and since every Boer War survivor is now 70 or older, and can probably do with a tonic, I commend this story and this author to old soldiers who know neither. But I can't resist the temptation to quote at once Nevinson's account of the attempt by the relieved garrison to cut off the retreating enemy:

Mustering every man and horse that could crawl. White marched us out in column along the Newcastle road, in the hope of cutting off the Boers' retreat at their railroad by Modder Spruit. I have seen many miserable and pathetic marches, but none so heart-rending as that. The men looked like parodies of death. They were so weak they could not straighten their knees, but crept with legs doubled under them. Along the whole route one saw them falling out and falling down by the roadside. Even the gunner horses were so thin they could hardly stir the guns. Their riders were so thin they could hardly sit the horses for pain. Yet, like a line of resurrected skeletons, the column crawled and stumbled on.

(To be continued)

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