



Some three thousand five hundred persons visited Weston Park, and availed themselves of the opportunity afforded of walking through the Mappin Art Gallery on Sunday afternoon. I was one of the number. "You might have spent the time better" will probably be the rejoinder of many as they read these lines. Perhaps so, but before you condemn my conduct at least learn why I went and what I witnessed. Truth to tell, it was not the thought of gazing upon a choice collection of paintings hung upon the walls of one of the prettiest galleries in the provinces, nor was it because I had nothing else to do and wished to while away a few hours between the midday and afternoon meal. Some days previously the privilege of studying some grand specimens of the British School of Painters had been offered and embraced by me – let me own to my great gratification – and on Sunday afternoon for many reasons, chief of which the sultry weather, I would have preferred to quietly in my own room and read. But of late there has been no little feeling expressed as to whether or not it is wise to open the newly-acquired art gallery on Sunday afternoons. When the matter was before the council some weeks back exception was taken to the rule for Sunday opening, and one or two gentlemen went so far in their "conscientious objections" to the rule, that I firmly had the matter rested with them alone, they would seriously have considered whether they should not, as Christian men, decline the generous gift rather than accept it with this proviso. Other gentlemen sheltered themselves behind the screen that it was not a matter with which the Council could deal – it was a condition by the Mappin Trustees, and therefore the less said about it the better. On the other hand, the Mayor and one or two of his colleagues boldly stated that they were distinctly in favour of Sunday opening, under certain restrictions. And Sir Harry Stephenson did not hesitate to tell the Council that he had taken pleasure in inspecting some of these paintings on Sundays during the lifetime of Mr John Newton Mappin, and that he should consider himself guilty of hypocrisy if he took any steps to prevent the working men of Sheffield from seeing the pictures during reasonable hours on Sunday. These several standpoints taken up by a small body of men, I think, fairly represent the varied opinions held by the Sheffield people as a whole, and therefore it was that I determined to visit the gallery and spend an hour or so, not in gazing upon the pictures, but upon the spectators, and try as far as my mental faculties would allow me to judge from what class they came, why they came, and what impression the visit made upon them.

It was about three o'clock when I reached Weston Park, and entering by the bottom gate in Winter Street the first impression derived was that considering the glorious afternoon, the attendance was below the average. But on reaching the broad flight of steps which lead to the

principal entrance I became aware of the true state of the case – the attractions of the park itself had been insufficient to draw attention from the art gallery. There were at least a hundred persons upon the steps and in proximity to the stately Corinthian pillars - waiting for admission, passing the turnstile in single file is slow work, but although a few youths kept up a rather lively conversation, there was no crushing and pushing, and in a very few minutes I was inside the building. Turning to the right and entering the gallery No. III., let me confess to a momentary feeling of sympathy with the objectors to Sunday opening. It seemed, glancing round, as if the majority of the spectators was composed of youths and girls between the ages of 14 and 18, and that their appreciation of the artists labours was not of the type in which John Ruskin would have found delight. Of course my friends who talk glibly of the evils of strict Sabbatarianism will reply that it was better for them to be here than in other and worse places they name – for my own part I should not deem this a satisfactory reply but I am to tell what I saw, not what was expected or desired, and therefore let me hasten to explain that my first impressions were materially modified by the afternoon's experience. Passing round the room I soon discovered two things. First, that there were many persons of an entirely different character to that just described; and, second that the gallery seemed in a very few minutes to subdue the excessive buoyancy of spirits manifested by the elder boys, who, mixing with other spectators, speedily appeared interested in a greater or less degree, according to their capabilities, and the subject of the paintings upon which they gazed. Of course, some did not enjoy the pictures – and this remark is by no means confined to the youthful visitors. Tennyson, in his poem of "The Wreck", gives us a portrait of a rich and handsome man who was

"Repelled by the magnet of Art,"

and it did not take me long to find out that pictures which cost England's best artists years of careful and loving work, and which brought them laurels from eminent critics, could be passed by with the remark, "Don't think much to that." But this I am told is the everyday experience of those who move in art circles. I remember, by the way, a story on this point which is worth repeating: - When one of the earlier of Sir Noel Paton's sublime pictures was going the tour of the country it visited a large northern centre, and some huge posters attracted the patronage of a country youth and his lady friend who happened to be sightseeing that day. They paid their shilling each entered the room, and took seats facing the picture. Quietly they sat for about ten minutes, and then the young man left his chair and going up to the doorkeeper said, "Say Mister, when's the show a going to begin" – he mistook the painting for a drop scene. I don't think we can match that in Sheffield – at least not in the Mappin Gallery on Sunday. In front of that grand painting by Edwin Long, "Pharaoh's Daughter", I found several genuine admirers who appeared to thoroughly appreciate the work. ... I noticed with some curiosity the crowds as they neared Mr Poynter's painting of "Diadamene," but many fought rather shy of the work; perhaps it will be more appreciated when the gallery is not so crowded. ... Turning into the gallery containing the pictures given by Sir Frederick Mappin, I found crowds of appreciative spectators belonging to almost every class and of all ages. Many parents had brought their elder children, and together they studied the catalogue and the paintings with an intelligent interest and a quiet air, which would have done much to silence the objections of the strongest opponent of Sunday opening. ... The large French picture, representing the toil after fortune and the disappointment meted out by the fickle goddess, was admired by many; but one sturdy Sheffielder, more expressive than polite, confided to another, "It looks mucky, as if it had been painted a long time." ...