

T. C. Steele, Artist And Gentleman

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A LONG time ago, measured by the memory of the present generation of students, and maybe by the water that has run under bridges, there was born over in Owen county what almost anyone then might have thought would be another farmboy, but who by some twist of fate and temperament became the artist, T. C. Steele. No one knows just the forces that make a man turn out to be what he becomes until after history and biography have settled the matter, and T. C. Steele's biography has not yet been written. All we know is that he wanted to paint portraits and that he did. Perhaps that is the main fact in the case.

If you could get him to thinking out loud about his boyhood you would learn that he liked to read in an old book that told about artists, and he might add that Riley as a boy read the same book. Then that he had a teacher of drawing in the Academy at Waveland who made him feel that drawing is something a boy may do without being thought queer. You might hear of one brief spell of trying to think of being a doctor. But always there was the dream of painting something. That desire stuck. Looking backward one sees that one of the remarkable traits of T. C. Steele has been the unwavering conviction that art is life and that it is a man's work: that art is his master and that he has been about his master's business.

Now it seems to me that T. C. Steele could never have held steadily by those things an artist does if he had not loved the things of art more than he loved the things the rest of us go in for. Lack of encouragement has never made him doubt the reality and worth of art. Success, recognition, profits, and he has had them all, have always been the lesser things because he has had a world full of beauty and the engrossment with brush and palette to give him satisfaction. After all, what is genius but to know pretty clearly what you want and to get it?

But all this abstracting is not T. C. Steele; for no explanation ever accounts for a man. And moreover every explanation can be met with a counter explanation. But the man as he lives among us is a positive fact. You need not explain him into being and

you can't explain him away. The presence of the man is the solid real thing. Let me turn then to this reality and see if I can bring him to judgment in your mind.

You have all seen him as he goes about the campus paths, a tallish man capable of gripping the earth under his feet and of going some place by his own energy. That in itself is somewhat in a man's favor that he can stand up and walk. His hands do not attract you as you see him walking, but rather his legs and his head. He has achieved to a personal manner of wearing a hat, which is more than most of the campus population has done. His face does not fix your attention, but rather the head—the whole bearing of it. It is a head giving evidence of something going on inside of it, for it has a statuesque poise and pose as if the world just at hand were not of so great importance. And that independence is something, too. For most of us go about as if we were afraid something might get past us, and as if the important things were outside of us. His individualism makes him a figure that fits into the landscape like a natural phenomenon. Most of us, if we fit into anything, fit into a room, or into a mass of our fellows.

If you have ever come upon Mr. Steele at work you may have been struck with the total absorption with which he does things. He has evidently dismissed a large part of the world, including us, because he has seen something fugitively beautiful and is concerned only in holding fast by that and by the record of it he is busied in making. Now the feet and legs, having no problem of transportation, have become unnoticeable and the hands have become the living members. And the head is now busy with the things without. If you could watch his eye you would see it fix upon some detail and stay as only the seeing eye can till it has determined just what is the quality of that detail. Then the eye turns the task over to the mind and the hand. And after a little pause in which the whole secret of the art of painting lies concealed from us, the hand busies itself with the colors on the palette, and then unhesitatingly but deliberately produces a something on the canvas that is the counter part of that detail in nature. It is comforting to note that art is produced so noiselessly. There is no ripping and clanking, no tearing and forcing. It is not so much made as revealed. It is thought become creative rather than productive. It is no wonder, with his temperament, that Mr. Steele has stuck by art.

Then if you have ever seen Mr. Steele after he has put by his paints and brushes, and has come into the world we understand and live in, you know why in the title I have called him Gentleman.

There is nothing extreme in him, nothing partisan. He is in everything gentle, kindly, and charitable. He is not afflicted with the artistic temperament. He does not look for the differences between himself and others. Be assured, however, that he has opinions and standards and judgments. After awhile, when you talk to him enough you see a whole world of things in him that might cause him justly to differ with you. Many opinions he evidently has the wisdom to take as weather—to be accepted, knowing they are clouds of selfishness blown about by winds of doctrine.

To the young fellow who has a ready-made brand of talk, and has just acquired the art of jimmying into the conversation, Mr. Steele would seem more than reserved. For he has cultivated the gentle art of listening long before he ventures into the conversation. And this gentleness is not a pose or a modesty. It is the way he thinks. He sits quietly in his chair as if it were a part of his state of mind. There is a repose in every line of his figure. He likes to burn a little good tobacco while he sits, and he knows how to do it with that gentle ease that justifies it even to a W. C. T. U. worker. Now as he sits in repose it is his face that contains him mostly. He turns his head at an angle best suited to meditatively considering what is being said. But under the calm there is evidence of thought. His face understands in every line of it. It is not a face easily moved like water under a breeze. Only rarely does it ripple into the multitudinous lines that it is capable of. The smile is more commonly inward, yet visible. It is the poise of the head, the slant of the beard, the calm of the nose, and the insight of the eye that tell you he has heard you. Sometimes he gives audible consent, and sometimes he draws out of his experience a wisdom inclusive, but not final as is the case so often with positive men who consent to what you say but thereby finish the conversation. Mr. Steele is not a Samuel Johnson. He has a sense of humor.

If there is any single feature of his face that is superior it is his eye. I do not recall the color of it—one does not look into it as if it were a flower or a bird's nest—but I know it is a seeing eye and that when it lights up there has something significant passed behind it where we agree thought originates. It is an eye long trained to see reality under the spell of beauty. If one could only imagine what has passed into that eye through the years, one would understand most of what has happened in modern art. It is an eye that has seen much of the loveliness of the earth, and tures what beauty and joy there is in the world, we will go out and look for that beauty, and in so doing find joy and peace.

knows the magic something to add to the reality we all can see and turn it into art.

There are many things I might tell you about Mr. Steele—interesting facts and stories of the places he has been and of the pictures he has painted, but I have not time for it here. If I sweep all that aside and try to get at the most significant quality of him as an artist, I would say it is sincerity. He has painted hundreds of pictures, each one more or less of an experiment, but he has never been a faddist, nor has he ever done anything less than the best he could do. That attitude is one of the noblest man can hold by. As I see it his sincerity has led him to do two things. First, to be faithful to the substance of things as they are, and second, to see in all things a gleam or hint of the beauty that makes truth lovely. He has never forgotten his training as a portrait painter, and the need to paint first a likeness and then an interpretation. His central doctrine in landscape painting is to interpret a real place, and to eliminate the non-essential and to strengthen the essential till some effect of truth and beauty comes out on the canvas. Though he is largely self taught, it is easy to see that he has held to the best traditions of his art and has known the best that has been thought and done in his field. He has never painted a picture that had to be named before it had a meaning. Almost the greatest praise that one can give an artist is to say that his art does not offend by its eccentricity, and that in what is offered there is nothing to forgive.

Everyone has a philosophy of life and Mr. Steele has his. I venture to say he has arrived at it from his constant interpretation of nature. He evidently believes the world is friendly, and that to live is pleasant. You cannot find in his pictures any hint of the tragic or of the cruel in nature. There is quiet, peace, dignity, nobility, grace, and inviting loveliness, but no violence, no storm, no sternness, no furtiveness, no ugliness. He has not painted *The Man With the Hoe*, but has suggested the fact that Providence sends rain and sunshine with a blessing. It is not an accident that he paints as he does. He paints as he sees, and he sees as he is. His philosophy goes into his paint and comes out to us as beauty.