Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1952.

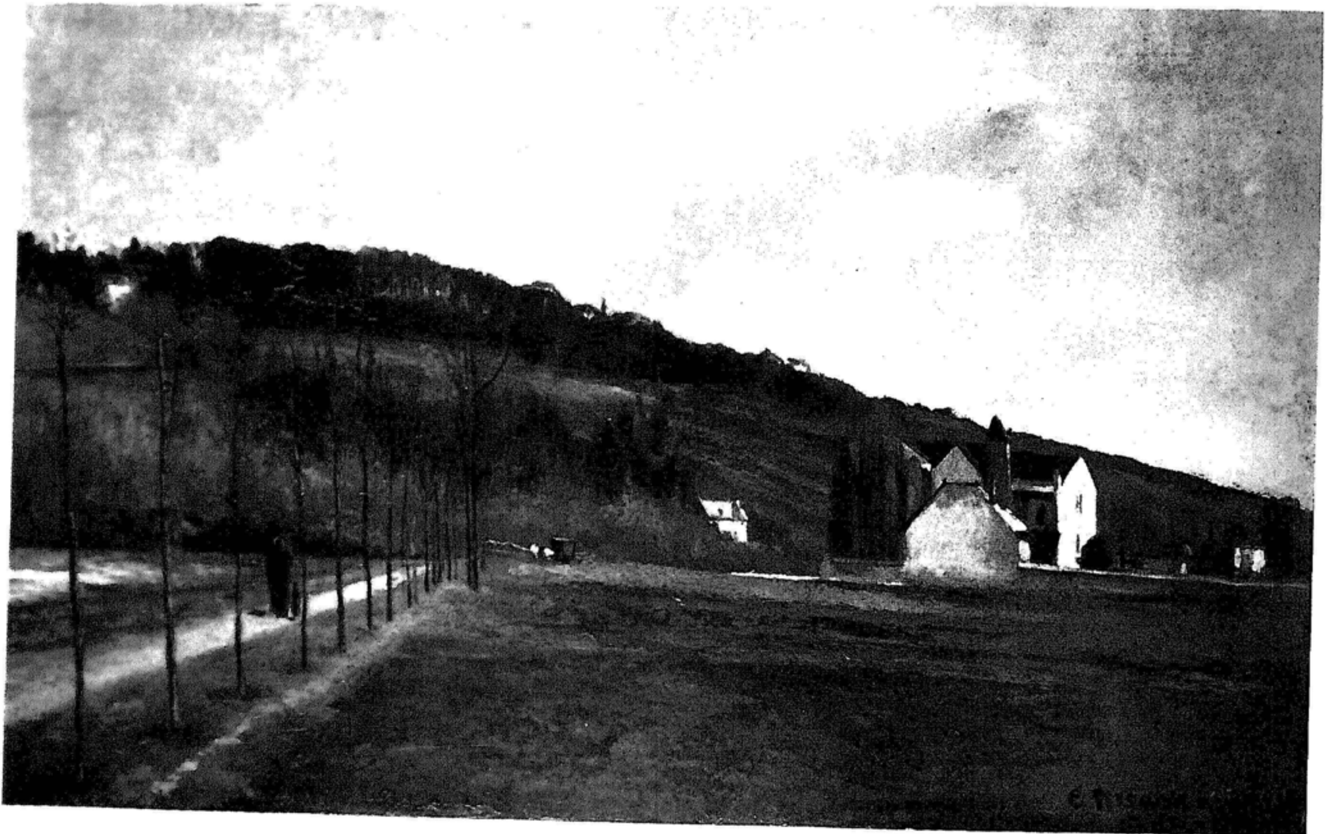

Fig. I. Bords de la Marne en Hiver by Pissarro. *The Lefevre Gallery.*

FRENCH PAINTERS
V—PISSARRO AND SISLEY

BY H. E. BATES

A FEW years ago a certain novelist wrote of a character who, under extreme physical duress in the heat of a tropical desert, temporarily lost his sense of colour without, apparently, losing his sense of light. His surprise was later extreme when he learned, from a doctor engaged in vision research, that this incident, described intuitively, without the slightest ophthalmic knowledge, out of pure imagination, was, in fact, a rare though possible phenomenon, occurring under extreme pathological conditions. The novelist had, in fact, by sheer pressure of imagination, accurately described a highly unusual condition of sight the very existence of which was unknown to him. The doctor, engaged in trying to separate the senses of colour and light, could not believe that such an incident was fictitious and was greatly surprised in turn when told that it was so.

This is not the place to embark on a treatise dealing with the complex problems that obviously lie behind the mere notion that the senses of colour and light are separate or can be separated, even if I had the knowledge to do so. But the incident, remarkable enough in itself, seems to me to show two interesting things: first, that an artist, by sheer power of intuition, is capable of arriving accurately at a conclusion which another man reaches only by reasoning, knowledge and training in a particular subject. And secondly, that if the sight of ordinary persons can be so violently upset by emotional or pathological conditions, how very much more possible it is that artists of rarer sensibility should be even more profoundly affected. In other words, an artist of imagination, under extreme pressure of emotion, is capable of seeing in a way that the rest of us simply cannot do. This at once recalls the famous retort of Turner's when confronted by a lady who declared she had never seen in nature such colours as he put on the canvas: "Don't you wish you could, madam?" and a much more recent opinion of Sir Kenneth Clark's in a penetrating broadcast talk on Leonardo da Vinci—namely, that Leonardo was not only capable of seeing differently and more accurately than most people, but of actually seeing more.

Somewhere behind all this, I feel sure, lies the clue to the fantastic contemporary outburst of hostility that greeted the work of the first Impressionists, of whom Pissarro and Sisley, born before Victoria came to the throne, now seem to us by far the quietest, most inoffensive representatives. Now, when we look at those tender early canvases of the Seine, of back gardens at Pontoise, of snow and summer, of Upper Norwood and Marly and Louveciennes, of peasants and hayfields and cornfields and woods and meadows, all of them so simple and so close to earth and yet so radiantly fresh and truthful and in perfect taste, it seems quite incredible that critics spoke of them as paintings that "would make a cab-horse rear," greeting them with a combination of virtuous indignation, insolence and derision. It seems impossible, for example, that the delicious "L'Entrée du Village" of Pissarro, as eternally truthful of France and nature as anything could be, or the lovely Corot-like Sisley "Vue de Montmartre," with the young saplings seeming to walk like delicate stilts across grass of exquisite greenness, should have excited, at the time of their painting, the sort of outraged popular wrath that the English reserve for books

Fig. II. Femme au puits à Montfoucault, by Pissarro. *Arthur Tooth & Sons.*

like *Jude the Obscure* and *The Rainbow*. It does not come to us as a surprise that the vehemence of Van Gogh or the sheer subject-matter of Toulouse-Lautrec had, as in fact they still have, the power to shock and bewilder. It is quite acceptable that the Fauvism of Vlaminck or the fevered anguish of Soutine should prove difficult and unpalatable, out of the sheer physical complication and violence of their method, to eyes that require at least a recognisable hint of photographic substance in painting. These painters are all still capable of exciting degrees of dislike and bewilderment, even to a generation schooled through successive phases of Impressionism, neo-Impressionism, Pointillism, Fauvism, Cubism and all the rest of the tiresome jargon with which art and art-criticism is continually strangled. When painting seeks to stun the onlooker it is not surprising that there should be a considerable number of onlookers who, for one reason or another, do not wish to be stunned.

It would be hard to find two artists whose work contained less evidence of a desire to stun the onlooker than these two painters—one born of English parents, the other far from France in the Danish Antilles—whom we think of as being always so typically, profoundly French. Yet the violence of the reaction their early work evoked was exactly as if they had set out deliberately to do so. Not only was the critical reaction so extreme and obtuse as to make suspect the whole popular notion that the French have somehow more perception about art than anybody else ; the work of the two men was so unpopular as not to be saleable at all. When Pissarro was compelled to leave his studio at Louveciennes in 1870 because it was being shelled by German guns from the fort of Mont Valérien he had never sold a picture ; nor, I believe, had Sisley. Pissarro, departing for England, left behind him in fact practically his accumulated life-work up to that date—never, as Sickert has pointed out, to see that part of it again. And for all that French opinion, French taste, French critical esteem cared, it might never have existed.

It is not easy to explain all this, and it may well be that, as in scores of instances before and since, it is simply another case of popular resentment at poetic vision. It is clear that both Sisley and Pissarro were poets who were capable of seeing things in a way not given, for example, to cab-drivers or to the academicians whose studios the two painters decided to leave when they were still young men. Nothing baffles the commonplace mind more, I think, than the results of the poetic eye bringing its freshness of vision to commonplace things. The remark of a critic that the farmers in D. H. Lawrence's *The White Peacock* were quite unlike any farmers he himself had ever seen is simply a parallel example, in literature, of the case of Sisley and Pissarro. Lawrence was not only capable, as they were, of an acuter than average perception ; it is possible that, under the pressure of extreme emotional and pathological conditions, his vision

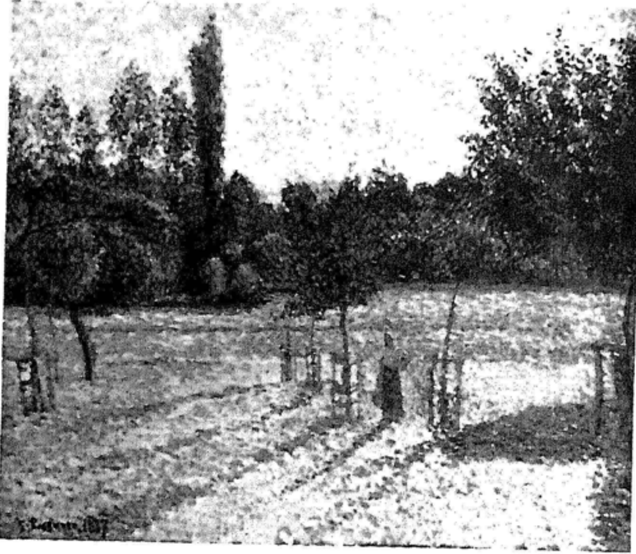

Fig. III. La Prairie, Soleil Couchant, Août, Eragny, by Pissarro.
The Matthiesen Gallery.

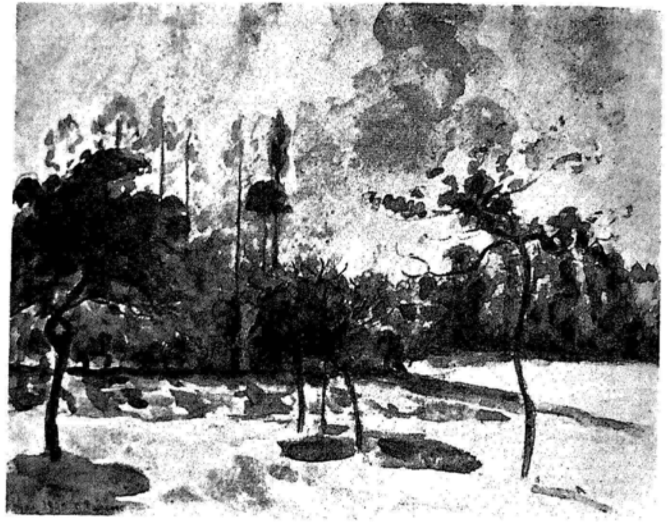

Fig. IV. A water colour by Pissarro.
Gimpel Fils.

was capable of a special kind of magnification which entails the revelation of things that, to the rest of us, are not there. Vision ceases to become merely a means of registering the obvious; it achieves, through pressure of the senses, a sort of X-ray power of illumination.

There are still people who seek to show that Impressionism is ephemeral: partly because it does not address itself to the imagination, partly because the things of most permanent endurance in painting are apparently things with lines round them; and that Impressionism abolished line. It seems to me that this attitude is wrong, and that it is wrong because it fails to account for the part the onlooker in painting—or the reader, similarly, in literature—has to play. So much has been written of Impressionism as a gospel of light that other aspects of it have been obscured; and one of those aspects is the participation of the onlooker, the necessity of his helping to complete the picture, of helping to supplement out of his own sensibility, his own emotions, his own perceptions and his own delight those impressions to which the painter has decided to limit himself. The same is true of some modern writing, in particular of certain short stories stemming from Tchekhov. Life in them is merely sketched in, projected by impressionistic touches, without plot or line. It is for the reader to supply this line, to confer on the sequence of what sometimes seems to be merely casual detail the final solidity that achieves the full and finished picture the writer has in mind. Stories achieved by this method do not immediately appear to have the material substances of stories in which the line of conventional plot is drawn with unmistakable direction; and they are not as popular. But to say that such stories do not address themselves to the imagination, or that they are not enduring because they abolish line, is wholly wrong. It seems to me the opposite is true. It is exactly because they rely for their full effect on the fusion of the sensibilities of writer and reader that they appeal to imagination on an altogether higher plane. And what is true of the writer is true of Sisley and Pissarro.

Quite clearly people in 1860 or so were unprepared for this collaboration, just as they were unprepared for it in Russia thirty years later, when the same critical offensiveness that had labelled the first Impressionist pictures as things to make "a cab-horse rear" struck at Tchekhov with the highly intelligent prophecy that "he would die in a ditch." (His body was in fact taken home to Russia from Baden-Baden in a railway truck labelled "Fish": a touch of irony that would have delighted him immensely.) Even as late as 1886 Pissarro had this depressing picture to send to his son Lucien in London:

"I went to Paulin's this morning in frightful weather, in pouring rain, the streets are like lakes. It is two o'clock and it is still raining. I am streaming wet, my feet are soaked. I went out in vain, Paulin was not in. I will try him again at six o'clock, after going to Durand's to see if anything has turned up.—Yesterday evening he had nothing to give me, not even twenty francs, it's very embarrassing. Things must be very bad. Everything is at a standstill. I know that Monet, Sisley and Renoir get no more than I do. Monet particularly must be up against it, for Petit, too, is in dire straits, much worse off even than Durand, from what I hear from people who understand business matters: he is reduced to his last devices."

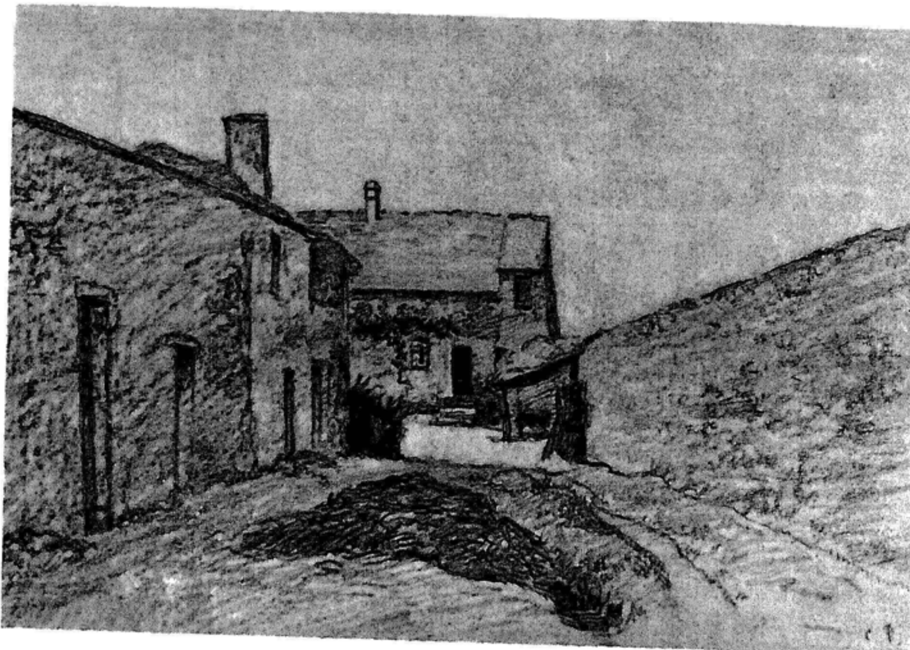

Fig. V. La Ferme, by Pissarro.
Jacques O'Hana, Ltd.

Fig. VI. Automne à Louveciennes, by Sisley. *The Lefevre Gallery.*

Fig. VII. The Seine at Suresnes, by Sisley. *Wildenstein & Co.*

It is extraordinary that in these circumstances, aggravated by domestic troubles and marital misunderstanding and with his health impaired by an infirmity of the lachrymal duct, which finally made outdoor painting impossible, Pissarro should have consistently painted works distinguished always by the gravest calm and beauty. His best work is the essence of a profound tranquillity; it is the painting of still waters. The shadow of uneasiness or bitterness or misanthropy is never on it; it contains no sort of hint of disruption. One could have excused Pissarro, perhaps above all painters, for bitterness—the whole of his best work plundered by war, himself exiled, his art continually evoking no sort of response at all except from his equally impoverished fellow artists—yet the emotion apparently never aroused by this everlasting situation of poverty ("That's all I earn, bills!") and neglect ("I see that even my last *gouaches* are not going to be understood, it's enough to make me quit") seems to have been bitterness. In the whole of his letters to his son Lucien there is no hint of it or of self-pity. On the contrary, there is a continual tremor throughout them of the gentlest philosophical gaiety touched also by a characteristic humility. He finds it hard to believe, for example, that his work can, as one friend believes, surpass that of Monet—"I feel so puny and mean next to that robust artist"—yet in 1894 he bears not the slightest ill-will that Monet is asking 15,000 francs, a fairly good price, for his "Cathedrals," while he himself languishes at Fraguy and has nothing better to tell Lucien in London than "I haven't brilliant news for you—black poverty and not a ray of hope on the horizon."

We are indebted to Sickert for a firm and lucid note on Pissarro in which the dominant feeling—not exactly a common one with Sickert—is also humility. It is worth noting too that both Cézanne, on whom Sickert delivered the shattering judgment "ninety per cent of whose work consists of monstrous and tragic failures," and Gauguin were not too proud to bring to him the same emotion and homage. "Perhaps we all come from Pissarro," Cézanne said. "He was one of my masters," said Gauguin, "and I do not deny him."

The most characteristic period of his life was at Pontoise: the world of small orchards, back gardens, "the wood of old palings, the modest houses, built of soft stone called *moellon*, diapered with black smoke and with white by the droppings of pigeons, tinged with green by lichen, the linen hung out to dry by homely women in faded blue cotton gowns. . . . It is the material of Millet, seen with a gayer and more objective eye." The series of gouaches, pastels, drawings, distemper and oils that he did here prompted Sickert to say: "Pissarro's importance has not yet been properly understood. Writers on art have insisted so exclusively on that side of Impressionism which dealt in series of studies of different effects on one subject under different illuminations, that the whole gospel of Impressionism was supposed to be limited thereto. To study the work of Pissarro is to see that the best traditions were being quietly carried on by a man essentially a painter and a poet."

That, it seems to me, goes to the essentials in Pissarro. He was perhaps a very simple man; even, it is conceivably possible, naïve. When he rushed forward to support with fresh ardour the new divisionist theories of Seurat one feels behind the gesture something of the naïve eagerness of an older man who did not want to be thought stuffy or dim or old-fashioned. He never seems to me happy with divisionism;

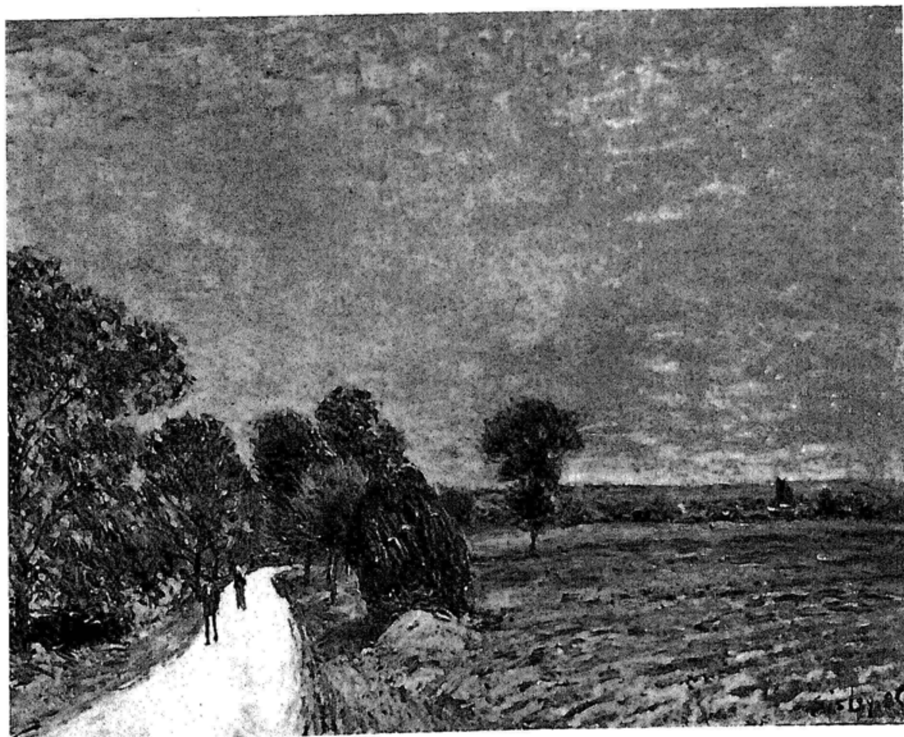

Fig. VIII. La Campagne de Moret, by Sisley. *Arthur Tooth & Sons.*

Fig. IX. Un Matin de Mai à Moret, by Sisley. *The Matthiesen Gallery.*

yet the resolution to support it, undertaken at a time when it could have endangered the support of the few clients he had, was one of great courage, a quality he later showed admirably again when he modified the whole divisionist technique and then, with customary frankness, admitted that his support of it was wrong. That too shows the essence of the man behind the painter.

"Like Sisley," he said, "I remain at the rear of the Impressionist line," and Sisley is indeed his fellow poet in penury and distress. The well-known story of Sisley, in desperation, trying to interest a collector, through the influence of a friend, in the idea of allowing him 500 francs a month for six months for thirty canvases is only another monstrous indictment of the plush-minded indifference of the 70's towards a painter who, like Pissarro, had work of the subtlest and most tender luminosity to offer. Like Pissarro, he was oppressed by domestic crises ; like him, he became desperately afflicted physically, in his case with cancer of the throat. Unlike Pissarro he was not blessed with a temperament of resolution and buoyancy ; he flagged into moody, nagging desperation. In 1898 he wrote : "I can do no more, I am at the end of my strength . . . I can't move my head any more because of the swelling of my neck, my oesophagus, my throat, and close to my ear. . . . However, if you have a doctor in whom you feel confidence and who wouldn't charge more than 100 or 200 francs, I'll see him."

He could hardly have been cheered in that desperate situation, worse even than Pissarro's, by the recollection that a year before a small Daubigny had fetched, alongside his own pictures at auction, the fantastic sum of 72,000 francs, or that that timid and wooden painter Lebourg had commanded prices as high as and even higher than his own. He must have wondered, as writers and artists have often wondered before and since, how good a poet has to be before the fact of it penetrates the skulls of philistines. He is almost a feminine painter ; his lyricism is full of the most luminous vibrations ; it bears always a bloom, except in the later canvases, of exquisite refinements. "I always start a painting with the sky," he said: a habit that perhaps gives his work its incomparable quality of being uplifted, its pure and radiant illusion of floating in air.

LIST OF PAINTINGS BY PISSARRO AND SISLEY

illustrated in this article

Bords de la Marne en Hiver (by Pissarro)

Fig. I. 36 × 59 in. 1866.
The Lefevre Gallery, 30, Bruton Street, W.1.

Femme au puits à Montfoucault (by Pissarro)

Fig. II. 21 × 26 in. 1874.
Arthur Tooth & Sons, 31, Bruton Street, W.1.

La Prairie, Soleil Couchant, Août, Eragny (by Pissarro)

Fig. III. 21½ × 25¾ in. 1887.
Matthiesen Gallery, 142, New Bond Street, W.1.

Water Colour (by Pissarro)

Fig. IV. 9¼ × 11½ in. 1890.
Gimpel Fils, 50, South Molton Street, W.1.

La Ferme (by Pissarro)

Fig. V. 14 × 20 in.
Jacques O'Hana, Ltd., 9, South Bolton Gardens, S.W.5.

Automne à Louveciennes (by Sisley)

Fig. VI. 14¾ × 22 in. 1870.
The Lefevre Gallery, 30, Bruton Street, W.1.

The Seine at Suresnes (by Sisley)

Fig. VII. 18⅛ × 25⅝ in. 1880.
Wildenstein & Co., 147, New Bond Street, W.1.

La Campagne de Moret (by Sisley)

Fig. VIII. 21¼ × 28½ in. 1885.
Arthur Tooth & Sons, 31, Bruton Street, W.1.

Un Matin de Mai à Moret (by Sisley)

Fig. IX. 21¼ × 28¾ in. 1886.
The Matthiesen Gallery, 142, New Bond St., W.1.