

The Blight Family.

GENEALOGY is curiously elusive, and comparatively few outside the ranks of the ancient nobility can trace their lineage earlier than the third George. Far smaller is the circle of those who can point to a family tree with its roots deep in the Elizabethan era; but a recently published volume of considerable interest (*Francis J. Blight, F.R.S.E., Publisher*, by George Hawker, with a Foreword by J. W. Ewing, M.A., D.D., Elliot Stock, 10s. 6d. net) reveals the honoured treasurer of our Historical Society occupying a worthy place in that select circle.

Elizabeth had been on the throne but ten years, and the adventure with the Spanish Armada was still ten years distant, when, in 1578, John Blight (i) was born at Exeter. His is the first of the ten names on the Birth Script; and he is not unworthy of the renown which has come to his descendants, for we learn from Izacke's *Antiquities of the City of Exeter* that, in 1608, he was appointed Bailiff or Steward of Exeter and Justice of the Peace, positions which called for dignity and a degree of stateliness. Unfortunately his religious associations are veiled in the mists of time. Fancy plays with the idea that he may have been one of the earliest Devon Baptists; that he may have counted among his friends some of the Pilgrim Fathers who two years after his death sailed in the *Mayflower*; and that, had he survived a few years, he might have joined in the correspondence with the Mennonite Church in Amsterdam. But the idea remains a fancy as information is lacking. Not until one hundred and fifty years from the birth of John Blight can the Baptist association of the family be established with certainty. In the meantime Gilbert Blight (i), who "lived six and fifty years and begat sons and daughters," in adult life found his place amongst the Puritans; and John Blight (ii), just before the close of the seventeenth century, settled the family at Topsham on the Exe, less than five miles from Exeter, where, according to *Thompson's MSS.* in Doctor Williams' Library, was a small Baptist Church, an off-shoot from Exeter. It is possible that at this little cause the Blights received their first lessons in Baptist life and doctrine, but we are still in the region of surmise. Safer ground is reached when we conjecture that the prosperous block-maker, John Blight (iii) "who, amongst other activities, was a humble follower of Ctesibius of Alexandria, who is said to have invented pumps 140 B.C.," almost certainly discussed theological questions

with fervour, for Exeter in 1718 was the cock-pit of an Arian controversy which set the whole West Country ablaze and ultimately reached London. Beginning with local Presbyterians it spread to the Baptists, and some members of the South Street Church "falling into that error, were cut off for the same." For several months scarcely any question was debated in Exeter and the surrounding country but that of the Trinity. It was discussed in families; preached about from the pulpit with such fervour that one minister was led to charge some of his fellow dissenters with "damnable heresies, denying the Lord that bought them"; reported in local journals; and written about in quite a library of pamphlets. The controversy waxed so hot that a Judge at the Exeter Assizes, in the course of his Grand Jury charge, thought it necessary to deliver a homily on the awful sin of Arianism. In the midst of these exciting conditions no prominent citizen could remain neutral, and there is little doubt that John Blight (iii), when attending to the parish pumps, found ample opportunities to argue for the faith that was in him.

Solid ground is gained at latest in 1742, for an old minute book of South Street discloses in that year, and in 1749, several members of the family in association with that historic church. As the direct descendants in our treasurer's line have been Baptists, the record thus emerges of almost two hundred years continuous association with Baptist churches. It is doubtful if there are more than three or four families, which could, by documentary evidence, prove a similar uninterrupted connection. Of those in fellowship with the Exeter Church, Richard, who was born in 1729, attracts attention, for writing of him his great-grandson says: "This Richard Blight is noteworthy, and his name is expressive of his nature—Richard, strong; Blight, merry and gay. In our line he stands—like Hebe in mythology—the personification of Spring-time. There is a sprightliness about him, a delightful freshness as invigorating as the morning dew. His portrait in oils, painted in his maturity, explains and supports the esteem and honour in which his memory is cherished." Richard Blight served the Exeter Church as a deacon probably more than ten years, and then, early in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, said farewell to the County of "Drake, Raleigh, Gilbert and Blight," and moved the family to London. A neighbouring Devonian, John Rippon of Tiverton, had settled at Carter Lane three or four years previously; and, therefore, to the south of the Thames, within easy reach of Carter Lane, Richard Blight naturally gravitated. Two or three years passed, and then, "before a silver thread appeared among his dark curly locks," writes his great-grandson, "with unquenchable cheerfulness the 'Spring-time' canoe glided from

the valley by the river until 'joy unspeakable' became glory on October 21st, 1780, and Richard Blight was buried at St. Olave's Burying Ground, Southwark."

His son, Gilbert Blight (ii), who lived from 1767 to 1847, was an outstanding figure in the public and religious life of the Metropolis. A prosperous Stationer with premises at the Royal Exchange, whose business had a wider range than the title suggests, he was admitted a Freeman of the City of London in 1809, sure evidence of the esteem and respect in which he was held in City circles. But the chief interests of his life were religious. Baptised at Carter Lane in his twentieth year, his membership of that historic church continued sixty years. Deacon, minute secretary, presiding deacon during the minister's absence, senior deacon—all offices were filled with dignity and devotion. To the Christian movements of his day he gave himself unsparingly, supporting them by speech, by pen and by purse. Hardly a denominational society existed, and few inter-denominational, but his name was found among those serving on the Committee. His son, Gilbert Blight (iii), maintained the family tradition of sterling business integrity and active religious service, and, following in his father's footsteps, he also was admitted a Freeman of the City of London. In youth and early manhood he enjoyed the great privilege of association with Mare Street, when F. A. Cox was at the height of his glory as a preacher, a writer, and a political leader of Nonconformity. Subsequently he moved to the newly formed church in Camden Road, of which for a number of years he was a deacon and church secretary.

From the foregoing it will be realised that Francis J. Blight entered into a rich heritage, to which it can with truth be said he has contributed greatly added lustre. His career is a romance, and of particular interest and inspiration to young men for whom he has long had a warm regard. Born within sound of Bow Bells, and living throughout his career in London and its environs, he is every inch a Londoner, but "the call of the West has been to him a call of the blood; and the beauty of the West Country, so rich, so varied, so soft, so bold, has called forth his instinctive affection from childhood." Those who have known him at all intimately have appreciated something of his versatility. On odd occasions unexpected windows have been opened and new interests disclosed. It is not surprising, therefore, to read that many varied experiences went to the fitting of Francis Blight for the eminent position ultimately attained by him in the world of technical publishing, a position which led a high authority to say "Mr. Blight did for *technical* literature what Cassell in his time did for *popular* literature." Honours in drawing in the

Senior Cambridge Examination almost inevitably suggested draughtsmanship as a calling, and in the office of a northern engineering firm he found congenial duties. Increased architectural knowledge was gained in four years service in the private office of the architect to the Great Northern Railway; and then followed a Civil Service clerkship in the office which had charge of title maps and apportionments, under the Survey Department of the Land Office. In 1886, our treasurer started an eight years association with J. & A. Churchill, publishers; and at the close of this period became assistant manager to Charles Griffin & Co., Ltd., the firm of which five years later he was elected chairman and managing director. To these offices he was continuously re-elected for twenty-eight years. In his appreciative foreword Dr. Ewing writes of this period—"This long and intimate association with the world of letters gave opportunity for creative work of a high order which he readily availed himself of, and rose quickly to eminence, giving the world numerous volumes of technical importance. His work in this direction won him many honours, notably the Fellowship of the Royal Society of Edinburgh" . . . while in Griffin's richly ornamented Centenary Volume, Prof. T. Hudson Beare's testimony was "The present head of the firm, Mr. Francis Blight, F.R.S.E., has had the great advantage of being engaged in his earlier days on engineering work, and thus it has been always an easy task to persuade him as to the need of a book on some new development of engineering science, while his intimate knowledge of modern scientific advances in all fields has made him a qualified critic when any new manuscript is offered for publication by an author who has yet to win his spurs."

Mr. Blight rapidly gained fame as the pioneer in the publication of text books of applied science, books which proved one of the safeguards of the country during the stress of war, and which secured for his name a prominent place in articles on "Publishing" in modern national encyclopedias. Not only as already indicated did Mr. Blight become a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, but he was also admitted a Freeman of the City of London, thus following in honourable succession his father and grandfather. As Renter Warden in 1925 he had the unique distinction of entering the illustrious names of Lord Balfour, Sir James Barrie and Rudyard Kipling in the Renter Warden's Roll Book.

All the members of our Historical Society will rejoice heartily in the noteworthy position in Publishing attained by their treasurer, and in the rare distinctions in Civic life which have been conferred on him. But they will equally rejoice that, amid all business and scientific successes, he remained an ardent,

devoted Baptist, rendering consistent and whole-hearted service. Over fifty-five years have passed since, beginning with baptism at Camden Road, he entered on that Christian career which has made his name one of the best known and respected in the Baptist churches of the metropolis. During this period there have been few denominational movements in which he has not been a hard worker, but probably he feels his best and most lasting service has been done in connection with young men. Himself in his younger days a cross-country runner and cricketer of no mean distinction, he knew the virile manly note which effectively appealed to youth, and so, wherever circumstances guided him—Camden Road—Highgate Road—Camden Road again—Heath Street—Wealdstone—Alperton—inevitably he found his way to the leadership of the Young Men's Bible Class.

Writing of one of such classes, Mr. Hawker says "Mr. Blight spared no pains in ploughing and sowing, and God gave him increase. He was the friend as well as the teacher of the members of his class. A young man himself, he understood their perils and their conflicts. He received their confidences, gave them sympathy, accompanied with them in wholesome recreations, and by all means sought to win them for Christ." Members of one or other of the classes became ministers, missionaries, colporteurs, religious secretaries, while others passed on to positions in churches and Sunday Schools, and several to distinguished posts in professional life. When serving as secretary of the Western Group of the London Baptist Association, an office which he held for thirteen years, Mr. Blight was ever on the look-out for younger men who could render service in the wider life of the denomination, and the writer of this article is one of many who are indebted to him for the generous word of encouragement spoken at the right moment.

It is always the busy man who is asked to do more, and somehow he usually finds the necessary time to fit in the "extra." It was therefore almost a matter of course that, as the years passed, claims for Mr. Blight's service increased in number and intensity. His own churches elected him Sunday School secretary and superintendent, deacon, church secretary, mission leader, &c. Examples of outside service are many; a few only can be indicated: Presidency of Western Group (twice) and of London Baptist Missionary Union; committee of Regent's Park College and the Bible Society; treasurer of Dr. John Ward's Trust and of our Historical Society.

The crushing sorrow of Mr. Blight's life came in 1918, when his son, Horace Vincent Blight, M.C., A.C.A., the ninth of his line and the fifth in the succession of those known to be Baptists,

was killed in action in France, whilst leading his men in a successful attack on the enemy machine-guns. Horace was a most lovable personality of fine attainments, who, after a brilliant school career at Merchant Taylors' entered the service of Charles Griffin & Co., Ltd., as secretary and was speedily made a director. He continued the family tradition of Christian service, and as joint secretary with his father of the Western Group and joint auditor of the London Baptist Property Board, Ltd., he revealed gifts and a culture which suggested he might attain the highest position in the denomination.

The biography which has inspired this article suggests an interesting question which has already been hinted, viz., Which family can trace the longest uninterrupted association with the Baptists? The Blights can do so for nearly two hundred years, and possibly further research in Devonshire would reveal a still longer period. The Northampton Grays and the Bowers go back with certainty to the second half of the eighteenth century, and there are two or three other families which might feel justified in claiming the distinction. It would certainly be worthy of note if any family could prove association from the days of persecution to the present.

As we should expect of a book about one who was himself a publisher of *quality* books, the volume is excellently produced on paper that is a delight to handle and in print that is pleasing to the eye. Moreover, the author, whose ability for clear and melodious writing is well known, has brought to the work that personal affection which speaks the truth lovingly. The illustrative thirty-two half tone plates have a charm and interest of their own. They comprise not only family portraits and churches, but also reproductions of Mr. Blight's microscopical and pen and ink drawings. The book was prepared in the first place for private printing: we are grateful to the many whose requests led to publication.

SEYMOUR J. PRICE.