

in accord with the real sense of Holy Writ, whereas the tenets of sects are too often based upon the private interpretations of individuals.

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ART. VII.—WILLIAM BLAKE : SEER AND MYSTIC.

“ **A** MAN perfect in his way, and beautifully unfit for walking in the way of any other man.” So Mr. Swinburne sums up his fellow-poet, and the phrase is more illuminative than many of the volumes, biographical and critical, which centre round the name of William Blake. For unlike other men as he undoubtedly was, unaccountable as his friends thought him, and unfit for the ordinary duties of life as his wife must often have found him, he was, after all, “ beautifully unfit,” and in that qualifying word lies the whole point of the description.

The son of a London hosier, born and brought up in Golden Square, it might have seemed that his prosaic surroundings must inevitably weigh down the soaring pinions of his soul; but the boy's mind was fixed, not on the outward circumstances of his life, but on things unseen, and from his earliest years his visions were more real to him than any natural objects. Coming home one day from a walk to Dulwich, he told his father that he had seen “ a tree filled with angels, bright wings bespangling every bough like stars ”; and when in 1771 he was apprenticed to James Basire, the engraver to the Society of Antiquities, the boy of fourteen, being sent to make a drawing in Westminster Abbey, “ suddenly saw the aisles and galleries filled with a great procession of monks and priests, choristers and censer-bearers, and his entranced ear heard the chant of plain-song and chorale, while the vaulted roof trembled to the sound of organ music.”

Such fancies have been shared by many precocious children, but Blake's artistic career was characterized by one peculiarity which is probably unique. “ I assert for myself,” he says, “ that I do not behold the outward creation, and that to me it is a hindrance.” Natural objects stood, as it were, between him and their spiritual essences, which alone he desired to express. “ What ? ” he says, “ it will be questioned, when the sun rises do you not see a round disc of fire, somewhat like a guinea ? Oh no, no ! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host, crying Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty ! I question not my corporeal eye, any more than

I would question a window concerning a sight, and I look through it and not with it."

These visions make up, in fact, the whole of Blake's life. His skill as an engraver gave him a means of livelihood by which he could support himself, but his spirit roamed at will among the clouds, and his earthly experiences no more affected his work than the flittings of a butterfly affect the exquisite colours upon its wings.

What Blake would have been without his wife we can only conjecture. To most women he would have been the most exasperating, even if the most lovable, of men, but to Catherine Boucher, the daughter of a market-gardener at Battersea, whom he married when he was twenty-five, he was, if unfit, yet "beautifully unfit" for walking in the ways of other men. Never once through all the long years of their married life do we read of her love failing or falling short of his requirements, although these requirements were certainly somewhat exacting! Fierce inspirations sometimes seized on him at night, "which seemed as though they would tear him asunder," and in these paroxysms of sketching or writing his wife would rise and sit beside him that he might feel the support of her presence, neither moving nor speaking for hours at a time. His younger brother, Robert, who lived with them, was one day offended by a speech of Catherine's, and made a complaint to him. "Kneel down," said Blake, "and beg Robert's pardon, or you shall never see my face again." She knelt down obediently, saying, "I was in the wrong," to which Robert, with tardy remorse, replied curtly: "Young woman, you lie!"

The poet's experiences at Felpham must have been a hard trial to his wife. A wealthy man, by name Mr. Hayley, invited Blake to come to this lovely seaside village in Sussex, promising to give him employment. At first the place seemed to him a paradise, and he wrote to a friend: "The sweet air and the voices of winds, trees, and birds, and the odours of the happy ground, make it a dwelling for immortals—work will go on here with God-speed." "Felpham," he writes again, "will be my first temple and altar; my wife is like a flame of many colours of precious jewels whenever she hears it named."

But poor Catherine's pleasure was soon alloyed by misunderstanding and friction between her husband and Mr. Hayley.

"He approves of my poems as little as he does of my designs," writes Blake. "I have been forced to insist on his leaving me, in both, to my own self-will, for I am determined to be no longer pestered with his genteel ignorance and polite disapprobation. His imbecile attempts to depress me only deserve laughter."

When things had come to this pass the position was clearly untenable, but we hear of no lamentations on Catherine's part when Felpham was left behind and they were installed in the restricted space of a small London lodging.

"What do we do, Kate, when the visions forsake us?" was his question, when Richmond, the young artist, came to consult him about the temporary lapses of inspiration to which every artistic temperament is subject. "We kneel down and pray," was her simple answer, though no one knew better than herself that these visions would never be to them a course of worldly gain. When their purse was exhausted, she would quietly place an empty dish before him at dinner-time, and at this eloquent hint he would take up his graving tools again; but as soon as the need was supplied, she allowed him to go back to his dreams without remonstrance.

Her housewifely skill was the admiration of all his friends; although the same room served them for bedroom, kitchen, and parlour, it was always exquisitely neat and clean, and their visitors would find Blake at the table with his pen or pencil, and Catherine at the window with her sewing, as calm and self-possessed as though they were receiving their guests in a palace. To reproach him for keeping her in such poverty seems never to have entered her thoughts; only one complaint did she ever make of him—that though they were never separated, yet he was little with her, for he was "incessantly away in paradise." The parting of death was thus to her no real parting. She herself related that on his deathbed he told her that he would always be near her to take care of her; and when her own time for departure came four years later, she lay calling to him as though he were only in the next room, to say that she was coming to him and "would not be long now."

And yet, though it is evident that Catherine Blake did not find her philosopher "gey ill to live with," there must surely have been moments when her practical spirit found it hard to discern between the fine frenzy of genius and the aberrations of madness. "Milton, the other day, was saying to me," he once remarked to a friend, and after detailing the course of the argument, he added: "I tried to convince him that I was wrong, but I could not succeed."

"Draw me Moses," or "draw me Julius Cæsar," his friend Varley would say to him, and Blake would look up as though a real sitter was before him and begin to portray the features that no one else could see. "I see him now; there, there! How noble he looks!" he cried one day, on being asked to draw William Wallace; but after a while he suddenly stopped, saying: "I cannot finish him; Edward I. has stepped in

between him and me." "That's lucky, for I want the portrait of Edward, too," replied his friend; and having made a sketch of Edward, and, as it were, got rid of him, Blake was able to finish the portrait of Wallace.

His drawing of the Ghost of a Flea is one of the most extraordinary productions on which human eyes ever rested. He told his friends that he had some difficulty in finishing the portrait, as the sitter "would not close his mouth"; but he was much interested in the conversation that took place between them, the ghost telling him that fleas were the spirits of blood-thirsty men, and that it was providential they were not larger, "else were I the size of a horse I would depopulate a great part of the country."

"Did you ever see a fairy's funeral, madam?" was the startling question once put by him to a lady. "Never, sir!" "I have," he replied, "but not before last night. I was walking alone in my garden; there was great stillness among the branches and flowers, and more than common sweetness in the air; I heard a low and pleasant sound, and I knew not whence it came. At last I saw the broad leaf of a flower move, and underneath I saw a procession of creatures, of the size and colour of green and gray grasshoppers, bearing a body laid out on a rose-leaf, which they buried with songs and then disappeared. It was a fairy funeral."

The voice of the wild visionary speaks even in his private letters. "You, O dear Flaxman," he writes to the artist, "are a sublime archangel, my friend and companion from eternity. In the Divine bosom is our dwelling-place; I look back into the regions of reminiscence and behold our ancient days before this earth appeared in its vegetated mortality to my mortal, vegetated eyes. I see our houses of eternity, which can never be separated, though our mortal vehicles should stand at the remotest corners of heaven."

And again, writing to Mr. Hayley, who had lately lost his son, he says: "I know that our deceased friends are more really with us than when they were apparent to our mortal part. Thirteen years ago I lost a brother, and with his spirit I converse daily and hourly in the spirit, and see him in my remembrance, in the region of my imagination. I hear his advice, and even now write from his dictation."

It was this brother, Robert, whose spirit Blake declared that he saw rise from his dead body and ascend through the ceiling, "clapping its hands for joy," and it was from him and from St. Joseph that he believed that he obtained directions for his work. But though all this savours of madness, Blake was no madman. Being asked by a lady where he saw these visions of which he spoke, he touched his forehead and

replied : " Here, ma'am." A madman confuses the conceptive and perceptive faculties, but Blake never failed to distinguish between them, even though his conceptions were as real to him as tangible objects to ordinary men. To a young painter he said : " You have only to work up imagination to the state of vision, and the thing is done;" but though he possessed the power of actually seeing his thoughts and ideas, he was conscious all the while that this visualizing faculty was but a supreme effort of imagination.

Mr. Swinburne eloquently describes those qualities of soul which gave Blake the name of the Interpreter among his younger friends :

" To him the veil of outer things seemed always to tremble with some breath behind it, seemed at times to be rent in sunder by clamour and sudden lightning. All the void of earth and air seemed to quiver with the passage of sentient wings and palpitate under the pressure of conscious feet. Flowers and weeds, stars and stones, spoke with articulate lips and gazed with living eyes. Hands were stretched out towards him from beyond the darkness of material nature, to tempt or to support, to guide or to restrain. His hardest facts were the vaguest allegories of other men ; to him all symbolic things were literal, all literal things symbolic. About his path an infinite play of spiritual life seethed and swarmed : spirits imprisoned in the husk and shell of earth consoled or menaced him ; every leaf bore a growth of angels, the pulse of every minute sounded as the falling foot of God."

On such a man as this the restrictions of outward circumstance could have no effect. In his MS. notebook appear the following striking lines :

" The angel who presided at my birth  
Said, ' Little creature formed of joy and mirth,  
Go, love without the help of anything on earth.' "

Worldly possessions seemed to him, in fact, mere obstacles to spiritual and mental advancement :

" This life's dim windows of the soul  
Distorts the Heaven from pole to pole,  
And leads you to believe a lie  
When you see with, not through, the eye !"

But here the question confronts us : Was Blake only a seer, dreaming dreams and beholding visions, or was he also a prophet, charged with a message for his fellow-men ?

That he believed that he had such a message is clearly proved by his own words :

" Trembling I sit day and night ; my friends are astonisht at me ;  
Yet they forgive my wanderings. I rest not from my great task,  
To open the eternal worlds ! To open the immortal eyes  
Of man inwards, into the worlds of thought and eternity,

Ever expanding in the bosom of God the human imagination,  
 O Saviour, press upon me Thy spirit of meekness and love,  
 Annihilate selfhood in me! Be Thou all my life!  
 Guide Thou my hand which trembles exceedingly upon the Rock of  
 Ages."

The "Book of Thel," one of the most mystical of his writings, conveys a distinct lesson. Thel, the youngest daughter of the Seraphim, laments over the transitoriness of life, and is rebuked in turn by the Lily, the Cloud, and the Worm, who speak of the fostering care of God, who doeth all things well. But here, as in all his other works, the ideas are so overlaid with imagery, so unusual in themselves and so confused in their expression, that it is a hard task to discover them, not to speak of understanding them! A description of his drawings by one of his biographers is equally applicable to his writings, and it shows how well-nigh impossible it would be for any "wayfaring man" to try and find a rule of life in his pages.

"Flowers sprung of earth and lit from heaven, with chalices of floral fire, and with flame-like forms growing up out of their centre; sudden starry strands and reaches of breathless heaven, washed by drifts of rapid wind or cloud; serrated array of iron rocks and glorious growths of weedy lands or flowering fields; reflected light of bows bent and arrows drawn in heaven, dividing cloud from starlit cloud; stately shapes of infinite sorrow or exuberant joy; all beautiful things and all things terrible, all changes of shadow and of light, all mysteries of the darkness and the day, find place and likeness here."

Yet through these strange wild shapes of whirling cloud and shifting lights Blake's message is clearly discernible—a message that may be briefly described as "the building of Jerusalem," or, in ordinary phraseology, "the establishment of a kingdom of truth and righteousness in his own land."

Thus, at the end of the poem called "Milton" he writes:

"I will not cease from mental fight,  
 Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,  
 Till we have built Jerusalem  
 In England's green and pleasant land."

The doctrine is further brought out in the poem called "Jerusalem":

"The fields from Islington to Marybone,  
 To Primrose Hill and St. John's Wood,  
 Were builded over with pillars of gold,  
 And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

"Her little ones ran on the fields,  
 The Lamb of God among them seen,  
 And fair Jerusalem, His bride,  
 Among the little meadows green.

- “Pancras and Kentish Town repose  
Among her golden pillars high,  
Among her golden arches, which  
Shine upon the starry sky.
- “What are these golden builders doing  
Near mournful, ever-weeping Paddington,  
Standing above that mighty ruin  
Where Satan the first victory won ?
- “Jerusalem fell from Lambeth vale  
Down through Poplar and old Bow,  
Through Malden and across the sea  
In ever-howling death and woe.
- “England, awake, awake, awake !  
Jerusalem thy sister calls ;  
Why wilt thou sleep the sleep of death,  
And close her from thy ancient walls ?
- “Thy hills and valleys felt her feet  
Gently upon their bosoms move,  
Thy gates beheld sweet Zion’s ways,  
Then was a time of joy and love !
- “And now the time returns again,  
Our souls exult, and London’s towers  
Receive the Lamb of God to dwell  
In England’s green and pleasant bowers !”

Blake’s mystical writings, embellished with his still more mystical illustrations, brought him neither money nor reputation. “Take them away !” was George III.’s sole comment when some of the drawings were shown to him, and there are many in the present day who would probably echo the remark. Even to those to whom he is more than a name, it is chiefly by his Songs of Innocence and Experience that he is known. “Little lamb, who made thee ?” or “Tiger, tiger, burning bright,” have a haunting music in their very simplicity ; while his verses on “The Sweep” and “The Charity Children at St. Paul’s” are familiar to all :

“’Twas on a Holy Thursday, their innocent faces clean,  
Came children walking two and two, in red and blue and green ;  
Gray-headed beadies walked before with wands as white as snow,  
Till into the high dome of Paul’s they like Thames’ waters flow.”

But though Blake himself is only to be discovered in his mystical works, their very mysticism makes them sealed books to the general reader. If a complete edition, with the fullest annotations, were published to-morrow, it could never make him a popular author. And yet, with all this obscurity of expression, his spirit was as clear as the day. “God make this world to you, my child, as beautiful as it has been to me !” were his words on one occasion as he laid his hand on the head of a little girl. The child, beautifully dressed and surrounded by every luxury, looked up in amazement at this

wild and shabby old man, thinking his words were folly, "but afterwards," she says, "I understood them."

There were many, no doubt, who looked upon his perfect contentment as folly. The poorest of the poor, as far as this world's wealth goes, he could yet say :

"I have mental joys and mental health,  
Mental friends and mental wealth ;  
I've a wife that I love and that loves me,  
I've all but riches bodily.  
Then if for riches I must not pray,  
God knows its little prayers I need say ;  
I am in God's presence night and day,  
He never turns His face away."

This was the secret of his contentment, and this also was the inspiration of all his work, artistic and poetic. Earth was to him the house of God, and life but an emanation of the Divine.

"He died in a most glorious manner," wrote a friend of his after he had passed away. "He said he was going to that country he had all his life wished to see, and expressed himself happy, hoping for salvation through Jesus Christ. Just before he died his countenance became fair, his eyes brightened, and he burst out into singing of the things he saw in heaven."

"I have been at the deathbed," said the nurse who assisted his wife in his last hours, "not of a man, but of a blessed angel!"

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#### ART. VIII.—THE MONTH.

THE past month has been marked by an interesting incident in the proposal by a committee of clergymen, at the instance and under the presidency of Mr. Russell Wakefield, the Rector of St. Mary's, Bryanston Square, of a declaration of opinion, of which the professed object was "to maintain the Faith, promote the peace of the Church, strengthen the hands of the Bishops in securing obedience to the Church's laws, and to reassure the minds of those of the faithful laity who may be disquieted by present difficulties." The propositions put forward with these laudable objects seem, however, to be singularly ill-adapted for the purpose. In the first place, the signatories "affirm their sense of the sacred obligation imposed by the Declaration made by the clergy under Canon XXXVI. not to alter the services in the Prayer-Book by unsanctioned omissions, or by any additions which hinder the service or which suggest its insufficiency ; nor to introduce other services or prayers without