

By Virgil's Tomb.

By MARY BRADFORD WHITING.

EACH step of the way from Naples to Posillipo is instinct with beauty, but those who climb the steep stairs that lead up the side of the hill to the tomb of Virgil, never fail to maintain that this spot is the most beautiful of all. Far below lies the Bay, blue as the sky that it reflects. To the left Vesuvius throws up its dark column of smoke; to the right lies Posillipo, a vision of flower-clad loveliness. But while some who visit the place are so entranced by the distant scene that they pay little attention to the tomb itself, there are others who are fretted with the fear that perhaps, after all, this small and gloomy temple may not be the actual burying-place of the poet.

“Mantua me genuit, Calabri rapuere, tenet nunc
Parthenope; cecini pascua, rura, duces.”

So runs the inscription on the wall of the tomb; but, though it is not denied that Parthenope holds the ashes of the singer of flocks, fields, and heroes, it has sometimes been asserted that not this, but some other spot near by, is the true site of the sepulchre.

And yet, however this may be, nothing can really detract from the interest of the place. On this hill, undoubtedly, must the poet have often stood when he left his neighbouring villa to refresh his brow with the sea-wind and to delight his eyes with the beauty of the landscape; and along the road which stretches from the foot of the slope to the seaport town of Pozzuoli came—so runs the legend—a prisoner, the perils of shipwreck behind him, the perils of Roman captivity confronting him, who yet besought his guards that before taking him on his journey they would let him visit the tomb of the poet whom he regarded as a Christian in all but the name.

On St. Paul's Day, in Virgil's native city of Mantua, a Latin hymn was at one time sung which embodies this traditional belief in the Apostle's pilgrimage of love:

“ Ad Maronis mausoleum
 Ductus, fudit super eum
 Piæ rorem lacrymæ ;
 Quem te, inquit, reddidissem,
 Si te vivum invenissem,
 Poetarum maxime !”

“ When to Maro's tomb they brought him,
 Tender grief and pity wrought him,
 To bedew the stone with tears ;
 What a saint I might have crowned thee,
 Had I only living found thee,
 Poet first and without peers !”¹

Many passages might be quoted from Virgil's works to show that he, like other so-called “heathen” writers, inculcated religious doctrines. Such are the stanzas in the sixth book of the “Æneid,” which proclaim the immortality of the soul, or the striking passage which reads like an amplification of St. Paul's statement that God, who made the world and all things therein, “giveth to all life and breath and all things” :

“ One life through all th' immense creation runs,
 One spirit is the moon's, the sea's, the sun's—
 All form in the air that fly, on the earth that creep,
 And th' unknown, nameless monsters of the deep—
 Each breathing thing obeys one Mind's control,
 And in all substance is a single Soul. . . .
 Then since from God these lesser lives began,
 And the swift Spirit entered into man,
 To God again th' enfranchised soul must tend ;
 He is her home, her author is her end.
 No death is her's when earthly eyes grow dim ;
 Star-like she soars, and, God-like, melts in Him.”²

But Virgil stands in a different category from other writers, in that he was widely credited, not only with a belief in the existence of one God, Father of all things, but with an actual faith in a Messiah—the Christ whose coming should regenerate the world. This opinion was based upon the remarkable points of resemblance between his “Pollio,” or Fourth Eclogue, and certain passages in Isaiah. Pope, who confessedly framed his

¹ Translated by Mr. J. A. Symonds.

² Translated by Professor Myers.

poem "The Messiah" on the Fourth Eclogue, appears to think that he was the first to discover these resemblances, for he says in his Preface :

"In reading several passages of the Prophet Isaiah, which foretell the coming of Christ and the felicities attending it, I could not but observe a remarkable parity between many of the thoughts and those in the "Pollio" of Virgil. This will not seem surprising when we reflect that the Eclogue was taken from a Sibylline prophecy on the same subject."

The lines of Pope's poem are studded with notes, bringing out the various points of resemblance—*e.g.* :

"Rapt into future times, the bard begun :
A Virgin shall conceive, a Virgin bear a Son !"

"Jam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna,
Jam nova progenies cœlo demittitur alto."

(Eclogue iv. 6.)

"Now the Virgin returns ; now the kingdom of Saturn returns ;
now a new progeny is sent down from high heaven."

"Behold, a Virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son" (Isa. vii. 14).

This wondrous child, foretold by Virgil, is supposed by some to have been the child of Pollio, the great consul who was instrumental in negotiating the Peace of Brundisium ; by others, the expected child of the Emperor Octavianus ; by others, again, the young Marcellus, adopted son of the Emperor Augustus, whose death the poet afterwards lamented in touching strains in the sixth book of the "Æneid." However this may have been, no one can fail to see the likeness between the prophecies in the eleventh chapter of Isaiah and the passage in the poem in which Virgil describes the blessings that shall follow the coming birth :

"The Child shall purge
Our guilt stains out and free the land from dread ;
He with the gods, and heroes like the gods,
Shall hold familiar converse, and shall rule
With his great Father's spirit, the peaceful world.
For Thee, O Child, the earth, untilled, shall pour
Her early gifts—the winding ivy's wreath,
Smiling acanthus and all flow'rs that blow.
She-goats, undriven, shall bring full udders home,

The herds no longer fear the lion's spring ;
 The ground beneath shall cradle thee in flow'rs ;
 The venom'd snake shall die, the poisonous herb
 Perish from out thy path and leave the almond there.
 Come, claim Thine honours, for the time draws nigh,
 Babe of immortal race, the wondrous seed of Jove !
 Lo, at thy coming how the starry spheres
 Are moved to trembling, and the earth below
 And widespread seas, and the blue vault of heaven—
 How all things joy to greet the rising Age !”

This is the spirit, and almost the very words of Isaiah's prophecy :

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid ; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together ; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed ; their young ones shall lie down together ; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain.”

Pope, as we have seen, makes no allusion to any former mention of the resemblance between the utterances of the Prophet and the poet, but, as a matter of fact, it was first pointed out in very early times, and became almost an article of faith in the Christian Church. The Emperor Constantine, for example, in his oration to the Assembly of the Saints, delivered in the early part of the fourth century, examines Virgil's Fourth Eclogue at length, finding prophecies of Christ and revelations of Christian doctrine in every line, and thus concludes :

“Well said, wisest of bards ! Thou hast carried the licence of a poet precisely to the proper point. For it was not thy purpose to assume the functions of a prophet, to which thou hadst no claim. I suppose also he was restrained by a sense of the danger which threatened one who should assail the credit of ancient religious practice. Cautiously, therefore, and securely as far as possible, he presents the truth to those who have faculties to understand it.”¹

¹ Translated from Eusebius' "Life of Constantine," by Dr. E. C. Richardson.

Constantine precedes his exposition of the Eclogue with the statement that Virgil derived his inspiration from the Cumæan Sibyl, who dwelt by the shores of Lake Avernus, and this idea was shared by St. Augustine, who says, in his "City of God," that the Sibyl of Erythrea or of Cumæ "wrote some apparent prophecies of Christ, which we have read in rough Latin verses."

In an edition of the "City of God," in the Bodleian Library, these Latin verses are thus translated by John Healey, who lived in the early part of the seventeenth century, the initial letters forming an acrostic :

"I n signe of Doomsday the whole earth shall sweate ;
 E ver to reigne, a King in heavenly seate,
 S hall come to judge all flesh, the faithfull and
 U nfaithfull too, before this God shall stand,
 S eeing Him high with saints, in Time's last end.
 C orporeall shall He sit, and thence, extend
 H is doome on soules. The earth shall quite lye waste,
 R uined, o'ergrowne with thornes, and men shall cast
 I dols away and treasures. Scorching fire
 S hall burne the ground, and thence it shall inquire,
 T hrough seas and skie and breake hel's blackest gates ;
 S o shall free light salute the blessed states
 O f Saints ; the guilty, lasting flame shall burne.
 N o act so hid, but then to light shall turne ;
 N or brest so close but God shall open wide.
 E achwhere shall cries be heard and noyze beside
 O f gnashing teeth. The sunne shall from the skie
 F lye forth, and stormes no more moue orderly.
 G reat heauen shall bee dissolved, the moon deprived
 O f all her light ; places at height arriued
 D eprest, and ualleys raised to their seate ;
 T here shall bee nought to mortals, high or great.
 H ills shall lie leuell with the plaines, the Sea
 E ndure no burden ; and the Earth, as they
 S hall perish cleft with lightning ; euery Spring
 A nd Riuer burne. The fatall Trumpe shall ring
 U nto the world, from heauen, a dismall blast
 I ncluding plagues to come for ill deeds past,
 O ld Chaos thro' the cleft mass shall bee seene,
 U nto this Barre shall all earth's Kings conuene,
 R uiners of fire and brimstone flowing from heauen."

To these verses St. Augustine adds the comment :

"Now this Sibylla Erythrea, or (as some rather thinke)

Cumana, hath not a word in all her verses (whereof these are a parcell), tending to idolatry, but all against the false gods and their worshippers, so that she seems to me to have been a citizen of the city of God."

In this same edition, the Latin notes of Ludovicus Vives on the "City of God" are appended in an English translation, and he thus discusses the question of the Sibyl's identity :

"Some said it was Sibylla Cumana, as Virgil doth, calling her Deiphobe, daughter to Glaucus, who was a prophet and taught Apollo the art. Her chapell was to bee seene at Cumæ ; but Varro thinketh it unlikely that the Sibyl that Æneas talked with should live unto the fifth King of Rome's time, and therefore hee thinketh it was Erythræa that sung the Romans' destinies."

Vives' notes on the verses themselves are delightfully quaint, and though they have nothing to do with Virgil, it is impossible to refrain from quoting a specimen. Of the prophecy that in the coming kingdom all men shall be equal, he says :

"There is no greater plague than to be under him that is blowne bigge with false conceit of greatness. He groweth rich and consequently proud : he thinks he may domineere : his father was, ay, marry, was he ! his pedigree is always in his mouth, and (very likely) a Theefe, a butcher, or a swine-herd in the front of this his noble descent. Another Tarre-lubber bragges that he is a Souldier, an aid unto the State in affairs military, therefore will he reare and teare down whole cities before him (if any leave their owne seates and come into his way, or to take the wall of him, not else!)."

Though Vives thus expounds the verses attributed to the Sibyl, he does not explain their origin, nor tell us who first ascribed them to her, but that the belief in her inspiration was received by the early Church we have a proof in the well-known line from the "Dies Iræ" :

"Teste David cum Sibylla."

In an old Latin mystery play of the eleventh century, among the witnesses who are summoned to give evidence of the Nativity, appear Virgil and the Sibyl, who join in a *Benedicamus Domino* ;

but Dryden, in his note to the Fourth Eclogue, acquits Virgil of any Messianic prophecy, while he fastens it upon the Sibyl :

“The poet celebrates the birthday of Saloninus, the son of Pollio, born in the consulship of his father, after the taking of Salonæ, a city in Dalmatia. Many of the verses are translated from one of the Sibyls, who prophesied of our Saviour’s birth.”

The Sibylline Oracles, quoted by St. Clement and other of the Fathers, are believed by scholars to be forgeries collected between the dates A.D. 130, and A.D. 160. If Virgil really quoted from them, some, at least, must have been written 40 B.C., but there is no real evidence of this. Our concern, however, is with Virgil himself, and not with the legendary Sibyl, and that the belief in his unconscious Christianity lasted well into the Middle Ages we have proof in the “*Divina Commedia*,” for though Dante places Virgil among the virtuous pagans who are excluded from Paradise by their lack of Christian faith, he yet attributes to his writings the conversion of the Roman poet Statius, who died at Naples about A.D. 96. In the Twenty-second Canto of the “*Purgatorio*,” Statius thus addresses Virgil :

“Thou didst, as one
Who, journeying through the darkness, bears a light
Behind, that profits not himself, but makes
His followers wise, when thou exclaimed’st, ‘Lo,
A renovated world, justice returned,
Times of primeval innocence restored,
And a new race descended from above.’
Poet and Christian both to thee I owed.”¹

The whole subject of the unconscious Messianic prophecies of heathendom is fully dealt with by Archbishop Trench in his *Hulsean Lectures for 1846*. He points out that all those who looked forward to a New Age of peace and happiness connected their hopes with the coming of a person :

“In His time, and because of His presence, these good things should accrue. He should Himself be the middle point of blessing from which all should flow out. For there was a just sense and instinct in men which hindered them from ever

¹ Translated by the Rev. F. H. Cary.

looking for, or conceiving of, any blessings apart from a person, with whom they were linked, and from whom they were diffused. Even in the "Pollio" of Virgil, however little interpreters are at one concerning the wondrous Child, the kindlier of such glorious expectations, however unsatisfying the common explanations of His words must be confessed to be, yet this much is certain, that the poet could not conceive or dream of a merely natural Golden Age. It must centre in a living person and unfold itself from Him; it must stand in a real relation to His appearing, being the outcoming and reflection of His righteousness. The world's history, as men justly felt, can have no sentimental and idyllic, it must needs have an epic and heroic, close."

The existence of any Messianic idea has been disclaimed on Virgil's behalf with much vehemence by modern scholars. Lord Bowen, writing of the Fourth Eclogue, says:

"The fancy of the theologians in days gone by was fond of discovering in the language of the poem compared with that of Scripture, in references to the Virgin, the Boy, the snake, etc., an unconscious anticipation of the Messiah."

Mr. J. A. Symonds, in his work on the Italian Renaissance, shows how this "fancy" was combated by scholars in the days of the Revival of Learning:

"Poems like Virgil's Fourth Eclogue were prized for what the poet had not meant when he was writing them; while his real interests were utterly neglected. Against this mental misconception, this original obliquity of vision, this radical lie in the intellect, the restorers of learning had to fight at least as energetically as against brute ignorance and dulness. It was not enough to multiply books and to discover codices; they had to teach men how to read them, to explain their inspiration, to defend them against prejudice, to protect them from false methods of interpretation. To purge the mind of fancy and fable, to prove that poetry apart from its prophetic meaning was delightful for its own sake, and that the history of the antique nations, in spite of paganism, could be used for profit and instruction, was the first step taken by these pioneers of

modern culture. They had, in short, to create a new mental sensibility by establishing the truth that pure literature directly contributes to the dignity and happiness of human beings. The achievement of this revolution in thought was the great performance of the Italians in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries."

And yet, putting all "fancy" and all forced interpretations aside, it is out of the question to think of Virgil merely as a poet, or *Sayer*; he was also, without doubt, one of the world's prophets, or *Seers*, who looked forward, consciously or unconsciously, to the establishment of the kingdom of God upon earth. As Tennyson says, he was not only the "landscape-lover," the singer of "wheat and woodland"; he was also—

"Chanter of the Pollio, glorying in the blissful years again to be,
Summers of the snakeless meadow, unlaborious earth and oarless sea.
"Thou that seest Universal Nature moved by Universal Mind;
Thou, majestic in thy sadness at the doubtful doom of human kind.
"Light among the vanished ages; star that gildest yet this phantom shore,
Golden branch amid the shadows, kings and realms that pass to rise no
more."

Whether Virgil possessed, or did not possess, a knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, is a question for scholars; but it is not possible to wander through the scenes that he has immortalized—to visit the Sibyl's cave, or to gaze upon the dark depths of Avernus, over which, its sulphurous fumes long since evaporated, the birds now safely wing their way—and not to feel that one who so vividly portrayed the blissful seat of happy souls cannot himself be excluded from the faithful band who, having not seen, yet believed.

"Now at the last they come to the realms where Joy hath her throne;
Sweet green glades in the Fortunate Forests, abodes of the blest,
Fields in an ampler ether, a light more glorious dressed,
Lit evermore with their own bright stars and a sun of their own."¹

There, surely, we may believe, with the noble warriors, the pure priests, and the faithful prophets of whom he sings, the poet, too, as one—

"Whose services earned the remembrance deep of the race,
Round his shadowy forehead, 'the snow-white garland entwines.'"

¹ Translated by Lord Bowen.