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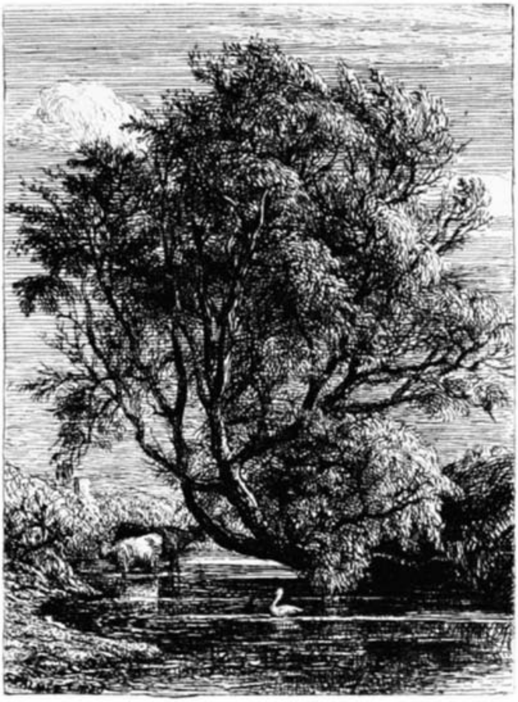

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CHAPTER I

1805 TO 1826

EIGHTY-SIX years ago Surrey Square, in the parish of St. Mary's Newington, was not severed by interminable streets from every country association. From the upper windows might be caught pleasant glimpses of sylvan Dulwich, and the southerly wind came fresh from many a neighbouring copse and meadow, long since forgotten.

At that time a young bookseller lived in the Square. His father (a prosperous City tradesman) was the son of Samuel Palmer, a pluralist divine of Sussex, and the grandson of Samuel Palmer, a Wiltshire Rector.[1]

Although the bookseller could trace his descent still further back, and no doubt was proud to be able to claim kindred with Richard Hooker (not to mention a certain Sir Stephen Fox), Fate had denied him the ancestral orthodoxy. He was, I believe, a Baptist of the strict old school; and ultimately obeyed a "call" to exhort the members of a Baptist congregation in Walworth.

His wife, to whom the slightest expression of his decided will was an unalterable law, had figured as "Lavinia" in a frontispiece designed by Stothard for some work of her father. This literary gentleman had also achieved a book on "Domestic Happiness"; but, as I have always understood, he was a domestic martinet of the first water. He had written books, and the books had been printed, so he was the pride of his family, who meekly obeyed his orders, and worshipped him (at a very respectful distance) under the title of "The Author."

On the 27th of January 1805 (the bookseller being then thirty years old) there was born to him his first child. This was my father who,

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[1] An inscription and a coat of arms upon an old brass within the altar rails of Wylye Church, still testify that the Rector's bones lie beneath. He was presented to the living by Archbishop Wake (whose niece he had married), in 1708, three years before his death.

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in due course, was registered at Dr. Williams' library, under his forefathers' Christian name. Like many first-born children he was supposed to be delicate, and was the source of needless anxiety, but he always asserted that he owed his life to the very original gastronomic notions of his young nurse. She found him pining on pap and other baby diet, and boldly substituted more substantial and unusual nutriment. However this may be, he certainly owed to Mary Ward something more than a precocious appetite for salmon. She was one of those faithful and affectionate servants of a race which seems to exist no longer, and although for the most part unlettered she was not only "deeply read" in her Bible, and in *Paradise Lost*, but was acquainted with other poetry. For instance, when the child was between three and four years old, Mary and he stood watching at a window while the full moon, rising behind the branches of a great elm, cast a maze of shadows on the opposite wall. As the shadows changed, the girl repeated this couplet :—

"Fond man ! the vision of a moment made !
Dream of a dream, and shadow of a shade !"

My father never forgot those shadows and often tried to reproduce them with his pencil. There are not many nurse-maids who are capable of intelligently quoting poetry to such purpose as to fix an incident like this permanently in the memory of a baby, and I think it is evident that both must have possessed a rare faculty.

My paternal grandfather was a methodical, punctilious, and very simple-minded man, whose words were generally wiser than his actions, the wisdom being otherwise than worldly. He was not without originality, and though his natural bent was evidently towards the exact sciences, he had considerable literary taste. So far from becoming indifferent to the books with which his trade made him familiar, or regarding them as so much merchandize troublesome to dust, he seems to have felt for them a deep regard, unlike that of the mere bibliomaniac, and to have delighted in their constant presence. Inside the last of his little home made pocket-books that exists I find these words (written by my father when he gave it me), "He loved knowledge for its own sake." His letters certainly bear this out. They are feats of legibility, are sensible, and are sometimes seasoned with a little dry humour, but they are not the letters of a man who is likely to be successful in much besides the neat storage of innumerable facts, gathered indiscriminately.

Considering his boy rather weakly and the fragility a good reason for deferring his schooling, he determined to lay the foundations of his education himself, in his own way. Thus at an exceptionally early age, the child was encouraged to fall to upon his Greek and Latin, and was

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allowed at the same time "free pasture through a wide range of English literature"—literature of such variety, that bigotry does not seem to have been one of his father's failings. Every day a portion of the Scriptures was learnt by heart, and every day were repeated with the other lessons, these words:—"*Custom is the plague of wise men, and the idol of fools.*" This was a rather subversive maxim for the nursery, but one for the learning of which (as I have often heard him say) my father had cause to be thankful all the days of his life. When a son of his own was beginning his career he gave him this very similar advice, "If we once "lose sight of goodness as the principal thing we are adrift without an "anchor. *If we merely ask ourselves 'What will people say of us?' we are* "*rotten at the core.*" It will be presently seen how thoroughly these precepts were put into practice, even to the verge of fanaticism.

The exceptional eagerness my father showed in following his early studies caused the months to pass away very pleasantly; and from time to time, by way of holiday, he paid visits with his mother to relations at Greenwich and Margate; this last journey being made, I believe, in one of the old "Hoys" owned by a distant kinsman. It was in Margate, perhaps, that his delight in the supernatural had its origin; weird stories of murder and of unquiet spirits which roamed in some of the ancient houses being common.

My father never spoke of his childhood as having been unhappy or dull, but although some young cousins tempted him into a few boyish pranks, it seems to have lacked the boisterous frolic so essential to the well-being of children. It was for the most part a sedentary and precociously grave childhood, which proved deleterious to the body, and, for a time, to the development of a healthy mental condition. It was all very well to nestle in a corner with his cat "Watch" and a glass of home made wine, there to pore over the pages of a favourite author, but it was such habits as these that led to his becoming physically unlike the average English boy—small of limb, soft handed, and lacking in activity. They also helped to produce a sensitiveness which he would have been better without, and a strange liking for shedding "delicious tears" at performances on the organ.

After the birth of a second son, who afterwards received the smatterings of an artistic education, my father was sent to Merchant Taylors' School —a life for which he had been carefully unfitted. Before he had begun to find his level, and to profit by the inestimable advantages of that well-known process, it was discovered that he had "a taste for art." He tells us that his parents misinterpreted "an instinct of another kind—a passion-"ate love (the expression is not too strong), for the traditions and monu-"ments of the Church; its cloistered abbeys, cathedrals, and minsters, which

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"I was always imagining and trying to draw; spoiling much paper with pen-"cils, crayons, and water-colours." This might have been an unfortunate instinct for the elder son of a very earnest Baptist to possess, and it is not surprising that it was at first "misinterpreted." We have my father's authority for the fact that he was what he calls "a free-thinker" at fourteen, and we know that he afterwards became and remained a staunch churchman. What part, however, my grandfather's arguments and influence may have played in the growth of his son's religious opinions—whether he opposed them, or simply left them to grow unchecked, I do not know.

No one has realized more thoroughly than my father afterwards did the priceless value of a liberal education, and the serious responsibility resting on those who take away the opportunity of acquiring it except for the gravest reasons. "It is too commonly the case," he wrote, "that when my young master prefers scribbling over paper to his Latin and Greek, he is supposed at once to have a 'taste for painting.'" In my father's instance, the result did not seem to justify the step of removing him from school. He began his artistic studies heartily, but for want of proper teaching they were altogether misdirected. Instead of being made to attack the all-important rudiments of draughtsmanship and anatomy (a discipline of which he afterwards well knew the value) he was allowed to copy laboriously, prints of the Campo Santo frescoes, engravings of "botanical minutiæ," and even architectural drawings.

When he was nearly thirteen years old these ill-advised attempts were interrupted by his first great trouble. He was paying a visit to his grandfather "The Author" early in the year when he was told that his mother was dead. He had dearly loved her, for he says "she was the counterpart of her who has charmed us all in Cowper's verse," and the news "pierced him like a sharp sword." It is doubtful whether he recovered the shock for many years, and to this cause may be partly attributed a morbid and melancholy tendency of mind which grew upon him to no small extent, although its attacks were fortunately intermittent. His capability of suffering in this and other calamities cannot be gauged by his age, or by the usual standard of susceptibility, but only by his own abnormally sensitive temperament; and it will be seen, by and bye, how terrible a scourge that temperament became.

Father and son were now thrown more together, and they turned for their recreation to the diligent study of English literature. The bookseller, in spite of his avowed contempt for custom was, as I have said, a punctilious man, and he loved to do everything with the orderly deliberation that sometimes degenerates into an iron routine. He made himself little vellum-covered memorandum-books just the size of his waistcoat pocket, and filled

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them with elaborately written notes, ranging from the solution of an algebraical problem, to a quotation from some favourite poet or divine. If the daily walk with his son proved wearisome or unattractive, out came the little book to shorten the homeward journey.

The artistic studies were still continued to small purpose, but as it had been definitely decided that the boy should become a painter he received some lessons from a Mr. Wate; an obscure artist, but a man whose sterling and unostentatious character, together with his methodical habits, impressed his pupil not a little.

Good news greeted the student not as he says himself on his fourteenth birthday, but just after it, and this was the letter he received. "Mr. Young presents compliments to Mr. Palmer informing [him] that "Mr. Wilkinson of No. 4 Beaumont Street, Marylebone has purchased his "picture No. 169 marked at 7 guineas, and Mr. Wilkinson wishes to see Mr. "Palmer, being disposed from the specimen he has seen of his abilities, to "give him further encouragement. British Gallery, Pall Mall. February 2, "1819."[1] In the same year he was represented at the Royal Academy by three subjects.[2] It is less remarkable that so young a tyro should have tried to grapple with the difficulties of painting from nature and the difficulties of design, than that he should have ventured to send his first attempts to the leading exhibitions of the day, with encouraging results. Perhaps we may conclude that crude as these works were, they were not without sterling qualities which the kindly Academical veterans detected. But the standard of those days was, of course, quite a different thing from that of the present time.

The Academy exhibition of 1819 was the first my father had seen, and he was at once deeply impressed by Turner's *Orange Merchantman.* This was the origin of his admiration for the great painter; and he says that afterwards, when "Mr. George Cooke the engraver would sometimes drop "in of an evening for a talk about art, the engravings of the brothers from "Turner formed part of the pabulum of my admiration—lunacy I may "almost say, before the popular expositors of that wonderful man were "born . . ." The frame of mind which forced the lad of fourteen to stop before the *Orange Merchantman* and to carry away with him such a vivid impression of that one picture was probably due partly to the kind of literature in which he had enjoyed "free pasture," and partly to the same predisposition which fixed the moon-cast shadows in his memory. Faculties which at that age are generally rudimentary appear to have been already fairly developed.

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[1] This picture was either *Bridge scene, composition*, or *Landscape, composition.*

[2] 257. *Landscape with ruins;* 259. *Cottage scene. Banks of the Thames, Battersea.* 414. A study.

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In 1820 he was again successful in getting a picture accepted at the Academy, and we find from the index of the catalogue that the family had migrated to No. 10, Broad Street, Bloomsbury.

The boy began now to flounder into the deep waters of his profession; but he was not altogether without encouragement. It was long before the days of the westward tide which left the stone stairs and lofty rooms of Newman Street high and dry on the shores of unfashionable life, and in that street dwelt Stothard, who must have known something of the family as he had drawn my grandmother. From Stothard plenty of good advice was forthcoming, together with occasional tickets of admission to the lectures at the Royal Academy, where Flaxman then discoursed on sculpture. But my father was without the healthy emulation of the schools, where he might have profited by seeing the workmanship of those more experienced than himself. So, at a time when he should have contented himself with the alphabet of art, he was full of theories and speculations more suitable to the most learned professors; and full also of boyish certainty about things of which he knew very little. As far as art was concerned he continued to misuse his days, but at the same time, be it remembered, to exercise very diligently his mental faculties, till he became acquainted with Mr. John Linnell, who was his senior by twelve years, and in full career as a well-known artist. The healthy influence of this remarkable man came just at the right moment, and I shall presently have to allude to it more particularly. According to Mr. Richmond the acquaintance arose through Mr. Linnell admiring some of my father's small sepia landscapes, and it soon grew into intimacy. The new friend introduced the student to John Varley and Mulready; and just as Turner's work had appealed to one peculiarity of that student's mind Mulready's thoroughness and love of conscientiousness appealed to a second. As my father wrote afterwards, Mulready "was one of the few who realized Lavater's advice to devote ourselves to each new undertaking as if it were our test—our first work and our last." Mulready's maxims were much to the mind of a youth who, in spite of his admiration for Turner, was now struggling to imitate the very texture of the marble statues at the British Museum; and we shall find that, in after years, my father handed them on in his own way by harping on the importance of Patience, Elements, and Accuracy.

He was now about to enter upon the first of the five eras into which his career naturally divides, by falling under a peculiar influence which seemed to him almost supernatural.

My uncle Mr. John Linnell Junr., writing to me touching an erroneous date in Gilchrist's *Life of Blake*, says that his father "first became ac-"quainted with William Blake when he (J. L., Senr.) was living in Rathbone "Place (1818) to whom he paid a visit with the younger Mr. Cumberland.

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"Blake lived then in South Molton Street, Oxford Street (2nd floor), and "J. L. employed him to help him with the engraving of his portrait of Mr. "Upton, a Baptist preacher. This is stated thus in his autobiography by "J. L., and the first entry referring to Blake in J. L.'s Journal is dated "*June* 24, 1818, when he took Blake the picture of Mr. Upton and the "copper plate to begin the engraving upon." This was the beginning of an intimate friendship between Blake and Mr. Linnell Senr., and it was through the latter that, six years later, my father became himself intimate with Blake, though he had doubtless known his works for some time. That these works were inspired by the spirit of the purest and noblest art and were worthy to be ranked with the greatest works of the greatest masters he soon became convinced, and neither he nor Mr. Linnell appeared to see in them any other peculiarity.

The first records of my father's acquaintance with Blake occur in 1824, and that the two friends visited the Academy exhibition of that year together seems probable from a passage in Gilchrist's *Life:* "Mr. Palmer "well remembers a visit to the Academy in Blake's company, during which "the latter pointed to a picture near the ceiling by Wainwright, and spoke of "it as 'very fine.' . . . 'While so many moments worthy to remain are "fled,' writes Mr. Palmer to me, 'the caprice of memory presents me with "the image of Blake looking up at Wainwright's picture; Blake in his plain "black suit and *rather* broad-brimmed, but not Quakerish hat, standing so "quietly among all the dressed-up, rustling, swelling people, and myself "thinking "How little you know *who* is among you.'" According to Gilchrist, this picture was a scene from Walton's *Angler*, and upon referring to the Academy catalogue we find it entered thus. "No. 268 *The Milkmaid's Song*, T. G. Wainwright, *H.* 'Come live with me and be my love.' From *The Compleat Angler.* Isaac Walton and Venator listening.'"

Now my father more than once described a certain interview with Blake at Fountain Court as a first interview; but no doubt through his having mislaid and forgotten the memoranda he made at the time his descriptions differ. I have been fortunate in finding among his papers the very book in which the notes (together with some others relating to Blake) were entered, and, assuming that the incident of the picture is correctly related, we are confronted with a difficulty on account of the date assigned to the first interview. These notes, however, being evidently written very near the time of the occurrences with which they deal are more likely to be accurate than my father's recollections many years afterwards. They open as follows:—

"On Saturday, 9th October, 1824, Mr. Linnell called and went with me "to Mr. Blake. We found him lame in bed, of a scalded foot (or leg). "There, not inactive, though sixty-seven years old, but hard-working on a bed "covered with books sat he up like one of the Antique patriarchs, or a

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"dying Michael Angelo. Thus and there was he making in the leaves of a "great book (folio) the sublimest designs from his (not superior) Dante. "He said he began them with fear and trembling. I said 'O! I have "enough of fear and trembling.' 'Then,' said he, 'you'll do.' He designed them (100 I think) during a fortnight's illness in bed! And "there, first, with fearfulness (which had been the more, but that his designs "from Dante had wound me up to forget myself), did I show him some of "my first essays in design; and the sweet encouragement he gave me (for "Christ blessed little children) did not tend basely to presumption and "idleness, but made me work harder and better that afternoon and night. "And, after visiting him, the scene recurs to me afterwards in a kind of "vision; and in this most false, corrupt, and genteelly stupid town my "spirit sees his dwelling (the chariot of the sun), as it were an island in the "midst of the sea—such a place is it for primitive grandeur, whether in the "persons of Mr. and Mrs. Blake, or in the things hanging on the "walls. . . ."

The authority of the Academy catalogue for 1824 on the one hand, and that of my father's notes on the other leave no way of reconciling the conflicting dates, except by assuming that either he or Gilchrist was in error as to the title of Wainwright's picture, and that it was one of those exhibited by that notorious and accomplished criminal in 1825. This is the more probable because we find that it was not till October 9, 1824, that my father showed Blake some of his "first essays in design," whereas there were two works of his [1] hanging in the very exhibition Gilchrist refers to—works which he would not be likely to refrain from bringing under his companion's notice.

I must return to the time preceding these notable events in my father's life, reminding the reader once more that (as he himself freely acknowledged) his early professional career, as far as technical training went, was very ill-advised. It seems that his artistic feeling and taste were at first strong and acute, then decadent, and then, temporarily, almost extinguished; a state of things probably caused chiefly by this misdirected practice. But all this time there was a steady intellectual advance—the steady influence of the best literature upon a mind naturally susceptible to all good influences, whether moral or poetic. The first crop may have failed, but the soil was mellowing.

Just at the time when a dangerous propensity might have arisen to wander off on bye roads leading to idleness or pleasant dilettantism there came upon the scene the decided, uncompromising character of John Linnell—a courageous artist who had fought many a tough battle, and

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[1] 504. *Landscape Twilight*; and 706. *Study of a Head.*