

MEMORIALS OF EDWARD BURNE-JONES

CHAPTER I

1833—1844

My mother groaned, my father wept,
Into the dangerous world I leapt.

THE mother who bore her little son on the 28th of August, 1833, did not live long enough to know anything about him, for within a week she died. He was the second child of his parents; but the first, a girl, had not survived her infancy, so that his birth was expected in a special way to bring with it comfort and fresh hope. Before it happened, they removed into a new house, built for themselves, and life was to begin again.

The marriage of Edward Richard Jones and Elizabeth Coley was one of great affection, and when, in his thirty-second year, the young husband found himself suddenly a widower, with a baby of six days old left to him in exchange for the wife of his heart, he could feel no joy in the innocent cause of such sorrow. Of this the child himself was never conscious, but the father spoke of it long afterwards with regret and self-reproach, saying that until his boy was four years old he could scarcely bear to take him into his arms. Not even a portrait of the mother exists; the only one known to have been made was an ivory miniature, which, in an unlucky moment, was given into the hands of her child when he was so young that he

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himself destroyed it. Thus there remained only the name of mother to a man who, more than most, would seem to have needed one.

Nobody was able at first to come and take permanent care of the infant, who, after passing through the hands of one incompetent nurse after another, fell before long into such poor case that a friend of the dead mother bestirred herself actively to find some one more fitting for the charge of both house and baby. This person was a Miss Sampson, who had never known the mother, and to whom the melancholy, unworldly young father who could not rejoice in his own son was incomprehensible; but the child she fostered tenderly.

The street in which they lived, Bennett's Hill, Birmingham, was a new one, in the heart of the town,—a short, wide street connecting two busier thoroughfares, not much used by vehicles, because of its steepness, but with a good deal of bustle afoot when it was completed. The houses in it were then chiefly banks and offices, as indeed they are to this day. No. 11 was an exception, however, for it was built with a "show-room" in front, a quiet room, carpeted with a red floor-cloth and filled with mirrors, picture-frames, and sometimes a few paintings. A side-entrance admitted to the house, and at the back was a yard, with a workshop in it where Mr. Jones himself worked. What caused him to be a carver and gilder we never knew, for he was not brought up as one, but it was understood that Mr. Benjamin Coley, his wife's father, who did not much like the marriage because he thought his daughter "might have done better," made a condition, of his consent to it, that her husband should have some settled business; and possibly this one was to be had.

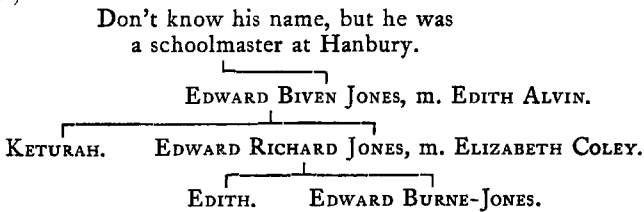
Before meeting Miss Coley Mr. Jones had always lived in London with his widowed mother; but she had lately died, and he was alone in the world when he first saw his wife. This was at Stourbridge, where they both happened to be staying at the same time; and, as nothing tied the young man now to one place more than another, he obeyed

the impulse to follow her when she returned to her native town of Birmingham. His marriage to her in 1830 decided where he was to spend the rest of his life.

They had about three years together, of what he called perfect happiness, before her death; and then everything changed. His simple heart, however, followed the straight path, and turned its baffled feeling into laborious work for his child's sake, little as he cared himself for the world out of which his "Betsy" had been taken.

Whatever his business may have been at first, it certainly was never very flourishing, and as the child grew older, the father worked harder. He has told me that for years he often rose at four in the morning and did not get to rest until midnight. When he did go, however, he found his young son hours deep in sleep on a little bed in a corner of the room.

So far as is known, there was no foreshadowing of the gifts of this child in the family of either parent. On the mother's side we have not any record beyond the grandparents, and on the father's, of only one generation more, whilst the Christian name of the great-grandfather is forgotten! In Edward's own handwriting is this brief genealogy;



Biven was the maiden name of the great-grandmother at Hanbury, but all we know of her family is that a brother of hers, named Edward Biven, who was a wine merchant in Lambeth, adopted her son—his nephew and namesake—and brought him up to London. This Edward Biven Jones married a Mary Edith Alvin (called "Edith" only in Edward's note) and died early, a few months after the birth of his second child, who was Edward Richard,

the father of Edward Burne-Jones. The other child was a girl, Keturah, whom her great-uncle, Edward Biven, adopted in succession to her father, and who married a Mr. Thomas Burne. She and her husband were god-parents by proxy to Edward when he was baptized at St. Philip's Church, Birmingham, on the 1st of January, 1834. The names then given to the child, Edward Coley Burne, explain themselves as being those of his father, mother, and aunt.

Next door to No. 11, Bennett's Hill, at the time of Edward's birth, was already living a family to whose friendship he owed much of the pleasure of his first years. The household was a Jewish one, and almost patriarchal in character; for the two partners of a firm of merchants established in Birmingham, Messrs. Neustadt and Barnett, had married two sisters, and both families, including children, a widowed mother, and a maiden aunt, lived together under the same roof. These children were coming into the world about the same time that Edward was born, and one of his earliest memories was that of the happy life on the other side of the wall, and the kind welcome always given to him there. A member of the family now living says that he took his place among them "as a cousin," and in that house the word "cousin" meant much. They shared all their pleasures and amusements with him, nor was he excluded even from their holy days and festivals. At the Feast of Purim he dressed up with the other children, and was so eager for the merry-making that when the day came round he was always the first guest to arrive.

Miss Sampson was passionately devoted to Edward, and it is pathetic to think how slight a clue she ever had to his nature. He loved her in the way that children often love parents from whom they greatly differ, seeming never to criticize her and never to confide in her. She was uneducated, with strong feelings and instincts, and she must have suffered much in seeing him, as he grew up, for ever slipping away from her, gently though he treated her, and tightly as she clutched him to her heart. The little body,

however, which his soul inhabited lay peacefully and happily at first within her arms.

It always seemed as if nature had intended him for a strong man, for his chest was broad and his limbs straight: but perhaps those early motherless months left their mark upon him, preventing fulfilment of the promise. Miss Sampson was never weary of telling how frail she found her nurseling when first he was given into her charge; often repeating, with the fond insistence of mother and nurse in one, how, when the great day arrived for him to be put into "short sleeves," they had to cut off the sleeves of his little dresses an inch at a time, lest a sudden chill might undo all her care.

From the first Mr. Jones realized that so delicate a child must have as much country life as possible, and in the summer-time he used regularly to send his little boy with Miss Sampson to lodge a few miles away, for the sake of purer air. These yearly visits to villages and farms were a happy thing for Edward, and often mentioned in later days. He remembered going when very young to a place, then on the outskirts of Birmingham and now swallowed up in it, the name of which was "Nineveh," and heaven only knows the background of imagination that this one word made for the child, who thought that of course it was "Nineveh in the Bible." Miss Sampson could throw no light on the fact of its being within three or four miles of their own front door. She had strange friends, he said, to whom she used to take him,—for her fidelity would not allow her to leave the child when she went out; and long before she dreamed of it, his watchful soul was awake and listening. One of the errands on which he remembered they went together was to an old gentleman who kept a cloth-shop; "Miss Sampson used to go there and buy cloth, to be made up into clothes for my father and me, in the funny, old-fashioned, careful way we used to live. He wore gaiters, and a little old, low-crowned hat, and spectacles, of course, and after a time he gave up his shop,—I forget why,—and grew older and older and littler,

but still had some cloth left to sell where he lived, and Miss Sampson and I used to go there and buy it.”

With all these friends she talked ceaselessly. He never forgot how one of them blamed him for profanity when he was building a small city of stones that he called “Jerusalem.” “You mustn’t say ‘Jerusalem,’ Edward,” sank deeply into his mind. As he grew older, Miss Sampson used to be puzzled sometimes by his silence, and would ask suddenly, “What are you thinking of, Edward?” To this demand he told us that he early invented an answer, in one word; “Camels.”

Two friends of his father, a Mr. and Mrs. Caswell, contributed much to the happiness of his childhood, for they loved him and thought him gifted. They were childless, and used to invite him to their house for days at a time. Mrs. Caswell, a silvery little old lady when I first saw her, told me how, when he was staying with them, they would delight to watch him in his bath, as real parents might have done, and of a game, equally enjoyed by all three, when he would escape from the tub and from her hands, and spin round and round the room with laughter, and sing “Jim Crow” as he danced, while she and her husband joined in the fun and admired all he did. It was

Motherless baby and babyless mother,
Bring them together to love one another.

Later on, Mr. Caswell was the first person who seriously noticed Edward’s drawing, and tried to direct it, by giving him engravings to copy. One of these copies, done when he was seven years old, still exists; the subject is a group of deer, and Mr. Caswell’s remarks are written literally *upon* it. The child never forgot this, and as long as he lived spoke of the irritation he had felt on seeing words written across the sky. Mr. Caswell himself, after he had retired from business, took great delight in buying old pictures of a moderate size at sales, and touching them up according to his fancy, and Edward was very happy watching him squeeze the paint he used, out of little bladders.

Then there was the bliss of the garden with Mrs. Caswell, (they lived a short distance out of Birmingham); going with her to smell the flowers and pick currants and gooseberries, and the delicious pies that came of it. Only a few years ago he took up a wall-flower from the centre of the dinner-table one evening, and smelling it, said, "I'm four years old again, in Mr. Caswell's garden. How kind they were to me, Mr. and Mrs. Caswell, and I never thought about it!" Another of his memories was of being on a visit to them when a friend came in bringing the news of the massacre in the Khyber Pass. He says, "I was a very little chap, and was terrified at the idea of all the men shut in by the rocks, and being shot down and killed from above without being able to do anything."

When he was between four and five years old, one of his mother's younger sisters—Amelia—became the third wife of a Mr. Choyce, a farmer then living in the depths of the country, at Wootton in Warwickshire, where her kind heart made her soon invite her pale little town nephew to come and see them. This was the first of many visits. Here he found some cousins-in-law, the children of Mr. Choyce's former marriages, but was so soon adopted by them as a real relation that they will henceforth be spoken of as such without qualification. The change of going from a street in town, and a house where he was the only child, into the midst of family life, the freedom of the fields and the delightful bustle of a working farm, must have been a true shock of pleasure, and he often spoke of the life at Wootton as if he recalled it day by day. The eldest of the young people there was a clever girl, Maria, who is still living, and her sister Kitty was a pretty and charming creature both then and all the days of her life. These two made a great impression on Edward, and as, when a boy, he generally preferred the company of his elders to that of his juniors, he finally chose them for his especial friends. One of them says, "When he first came to Wootton, before he was six years old, I remember his attempts at drawing, which we thought so clever for a small boy." He used to

draw them all, with their distinguishing peculiarities, if they had any. The curls which the young ladies wore were unmistakable, but he was baffled by what he called the “big heads” of the maid-servants, namely their caps. About this early habit of drawing we have his own words, recorded by a friend, an artist, who, talking to him of David Copperfield and his neglected childhood, remarked in passing that he himself never remembered feeling unhappy when he was left alone. “Ah,” said Edward, “that was because you could draw. It was the same with me. I was always drawing. Unmothered, with a sad papa, without sister or brother, always alone, I was never unhappy, because I was always drawing. And when I think of what made the essence of a picture to me in those days, it’s wonderful how little I have stirred. I couldn’t draw people, of course, but I never failed to draw mountains at the back of everything, just as I do now, though I’d never seen one.”

Miss Maria Choyce, who was some ten years older than himself, was as kind to him as a sister, and to her, a few years later, he revealed much of his inner life.

Before this, however, came the building up of his physical health, and his careful father, not content with pure inland air, sent him also to the sea. Blackpool, on the Lancashire coast, was the place chosen, probably because the children next door, the little Neustadts and Barnetts, were going to it, and the whole joyous troop lodged together in one house during their stay. Edward used to declare that when they were all together Miss Sampson, out of complaisance to their friends, made him keep the Jewish Sabbath as well as the Christian one, and that he felt the ordinance to be extremely tedious; but no doubt in their own way the children softened the dispensation. He also complained with much comical exaggeration that she was in the habit of adopting for his benefit, on the spur of the moment, various rules for the education of children which she might hear of or notice in practice among her acquaintance. For instance, her admiration, he said, was

aroused by the method of a lady, who, when fruit was on the table, thought it good to say to her children, “Now, you may take your choice, my dears, but you may only have one. You see, there are apples and pears and nuts and currants, so you may choose any one of these.” But if under this new law Edward ever chose a currant, I am sure Miss Sampson gave him “one” several times over.

His memory went back very far, both consecutively and in the way of detached pictures of scenes. Writing in 1873 to a friend, he says that he recollected quite well the Queen’s Coronation, which took place when he was four years old, and being carried to the Town Hall, “to see where the poor folk were going to be feasted, and a general sound of happiness in the air, and the ringing of bells.” Also, “being allowed to wave a banner in the air in front of the house, and that gave me more happiness, I think, than anything that has happened to me ever since.”

To his daughter, when she was travelling in the Midland counties in 1884, he wrote, “Give my love to Warwick, where I once lived a while, and saw a lady paint bronze colour on a butterfly for an album. I was about four,—it looked very beautiful. I don’t remember why I was at Warwick. In all those regions I went about as a ‘little,’—to school when I was five, at Henley-in-Arden, so give it my love.”

The “living” at Warwick is probably a mistake, as there is no record of his having been in that neighbourhood except when at Wootton, from which place, however, he might easily have been taken over for a visit to Warwick. But a child reckons not by days nor years in the world he makes for himself, and the joy of seeing the lady paint the butterfly would wipe out time.

The school at Henley-in-Arden that he mentions was one to which, when staying with his Aunt Choyce, he sometimes accompanied an elder cousin, and it was on the Henley Road, not at Henley itself, which was too far from Wootton for the boys to walk.

The Chartist riots in 1839, during which his father was

sworn in as a special constable, made a great impression upon him, and he suffered many things in imagination because a maid-servant, while putting him to bed, used to fan his terrors by grisly stories of what was happening, or might happen, in the streets. In his childhood he had many restless nights with bad dreams, and would often wake up with a cry, when he said he always found his father or Miss Sampson standing by his bed, looking at him with "large, anxious faces," that terrified him afresh; and he warned us not to stand looking closely at children in their sleep, lest they should awake suddenly and be startled. All through his life he was a dreamer of dreams, by night as well as by day.

As soon as he was old enough to walk out alone with his father, they used to go together on the day of his mother's death and visit her grave. He said that his father used to grip his hand very tightly, and to cry, which frightened him. Sixty years after it happened, he writes, "Sunday was Sep. 3rd. I always keep it, with what piety I can. That was the day my mammy died,—the sixth day after my birth." Some one who personally knew this mother is reported to have said that a distinguishing quality in her was good sense, "good, practical, common sense more than ordinary," and a sister of hers writes that "she was very much beloved, recited poetry well, and was pretty." Fair in complexion she must have been, for Edward's father and all his family were dark, but her child was extremely fair in hair and skin, with eyes of a light colour. There is a bad portrait of him as a child of seven, which when he grew older he would gladly have cut into ribbons, but forbore because it would have grieved his father. In it he is represented with curling hair, which he never had. The reason of this, he told me, was that Miss Sampson, jealous of that charm in his little friends next door, and determined he should not be outdone by them, curled it herself for that occasion, if never again. The only thing of interest in the picture is that he is represented holding a slate, upon which a church is drawn, so that drawing was evidently