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MEMORIALS OF EDWARD BURNE-JONES

CHAPTER XVI

1868-1871

Heart, thou and I are here, sad and alone.

EDWARD himself questioned the possibility of writing the biography of any but men of action. "You can tell the life of those who have fought and won and been beaten," he said, "because it is clear and definite—but what is there to say about a poet or an artist? I never want a life of any man whose work I know, for that is his day of judgment and that is his doom; the shapeless mess that other people make for one to deal with I won't have called a life. It's more like one's death—so many things are one's death more than the pale face that looks in at the door one day. My life is what I long for and love and regret and desire." Yet he realized in late years that some memorial of him would certainly be written, and even spoke to me once of the possibility of my doing it. The reason he gave for wishing this was uttered almost parenthetically—"For you *know*": and although he never returned to the subject again those words give me courage.

In a certain sense it may be true that a man's work is his best biography, but there are some whose personality is so strong as to give a fresh aspect to everything they say and do, so that when they are gone, however well known their work may be, their friends think of them first of all

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as human beings. Of such men a supplemental record in the form of some written memorial must be made, unless a great part of the fragrance of their names is to perish. Remembering, however, that to no one person can any human soul fully reveal itself, I have sought Edward's reflection in the minds of others as well as my own, and with that help have told the tale so far. Canon Dixon with the kindest sympathy stopped in his own literary work to write down the recollections of school and college life which have been already given; but suddenly his words ceased, and he himself has left us. The deep impression of Edward's earliest years which I received both from his own words and from my knowledge of his father has been confirmed, corrected, and largely added to by Mr. Price; whilst Miss Choyce's wonderful memory showed me the summers at Harris Bridge fifty and sixty years ago so clearly that I all but heard the voices of the girls and boys there, "in the field, by the fold." But now the words "He is of age, let him speak for himself" sound in my ears, for who else can say what things he "longed for and loved and regretted and desired"? Take this letter to Watts in the early years of the Grange, filled with devouring sadness. "Of myself I have had nothing to write to you or I would have done so—these three months have been so like any other three months. I suppose I have done something, but I look in vain for it, and about every fifth day I fall into despair as usual. Yesterday it culminated, and I walked about like an exposed impostor, feeling as contemptible as the worst of them could feel; and if it were not for old pictures that make one forget oneself for a time I don't know how I should ever get to work again. I miss you very much, for it has always been a real comfort to run over to Little Holland House and grumble myself out to you. At present I have evil nights and am most often awake at three, with some four hours of blank time to lie on my back and think over all my days,—many and evil they seem,—and when I think of the confidence and conceit, and blindness and ignorance, of ten years ago I don't know whether most to lament that

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I was ever like that, or that I ever woke out of such a baseless dream. All this letter shan't be about my grumps, but I am really at present at the very lowest ebb of hope. A little bit is overwork, a bit is weakness of body, but most by a thousand times is a clear certainty that I shall never do what I thought I had already done."

"This year did little work through illness" is Edward's entry for 1868 in his list of pictures. About the subject of his health, although it was so often a source of suffering and anxiety, I shall say as little as possible, for it has already been dwelt upon, and must take its place as one of the understood influences of his life. With him, as with other sensitive natures, body and mind acted and reacted on each other; so that trouble would break him as effectually as illness, whilst in times of physical weakness he could upon occasion flare up with nervous energy of an astonishing kind. The peals of laughter that came from his sick-room would have puzzled a stranger. His dread of pain was great; but the thing he talked about with fear beforehand was endured with courage when it came. "It's very nasty being ill,—it has no merits," was his own comprehensive verdict on the matter.

The pleasure and hope we had from our beautiful old garden as soon as the first winter at the Grange was over is seen in a letter to one of my sisters. "We are enjoying our garden much already, both to look at and walk in occasionally. We have found a bed of lilies of the valley about 20 feet long; our wall-fruit is in splendid blossom—may it not be nipped by unkindly frosts." This wish was granted, for peaches, plums and apricots shone on the walls in their season. There were still large elms growing in the roadway of North End, and wild roses could be gathered in a turning out of it. The space at the end of our garden was all fields, and two trees flourishing there were worth many of the houses that displaced them. One was a walnut, and the other a huge elm, through whose branches we saw the high moon shine as we paced to and fro in the summer evenings. The walnut-tree field was

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used for various purposes, including carpet-beating—the sound of which Edward explained to an Italian model as that of Englishmen beating their wives. We did not know until we had been there for some time, that one part of the Grange had once been the home of Samuel Richardson. He lived there from 1739 to 1754, and during those years Clarissa, Pamela, and Sir Charles Grandison were all published.

One Sunday afternoon in February of this year we first saw George Eliot. It was at her own house, and from that day began our friendship with her and Mr. Lewes. She was very like Burton's portrait-drawing of her, but with more keenness of expression; the eyes especially, clear and grey, were piercing: I used to think they looked as if they had been washed by many waters. Her voice was a beautiful one, sometimes full and strong and at others as tender as a dove's. Greatly as Edward admired her early work, he was astonished by her intellectual power when he came to know her personally. "There is no-one living better to talk to," he wrote the year before her death, "for she speaks carefully, so that nothing has to be taken back, or qualified in any way. Her knowledge is really deep, and her heart one of the most sympathetic to me I ever knew." The crowded Sunday afternoons at the Priory were not the happiest way of seeing her, but he went there from time to time rather as he might have gone to write his name in a visitors' book. Occasionally we dined there, or they drove over to the Grange on a weekday afternoon—they never dined out,—and the general conversation that went on at such times, I am bound to own, was chiefly very funny, with much laughter and many anecdotes.

The arrival of Professor Charles Eliot Norton from America this spring was a great gain to us. With Mr. Norton came his wife and children, his mother, and other members of his and his wife's family,—a group of three generations of people all admirable in their own way. The grandmother and the aunts were as charming as if on them depended the happiness of every visitor, yet always leaving to young

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Walker & Cockerell Ph. Sc.

The Grange.

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Mrs. Norton her due place as mistress in the house,—there was neither self-assertion nor suppression in the whole company. A sentence in a note from Edward to Mr. Norton in February, 1869, shews him as one of our intimate circle: "O! do tell,—am I to wear togs to-night? really tell me,—I should not like to be less fashionable than Topsy." To none but trusted friends did he allow himself a joke about Morris; I shall never forget his grave reproach to me for having allowed the name "Topsy" to escape before a comparative stranger. Nothing ever interrupted the intimacy with Morris; that friendship was like one of the forces of nature. "When we came to live at the Grange, and by this removal were so much further from Morris in Queen Square," Edward's notes say, "I wrote and proposed that he and Webb should come every Sunday, to bind us together, and I remember, but have lost, a letter he wrote in answer, more full of warm response to this than he often permitted himself." This was the beginning of the Sunday meetings of which mention will often be made. At first they were in the evening, but when Morris left Queen Square and came to live nearer the Grange the plan was altered, and he used to breakfast with us every Sunday and spend the morning in the studio with Edward. Before he left they always either invited me to join them for a little while or else sallied forth from the studio to pay me a call; but it was their hour and power, and I did not proffer my company. Rossetti still came to see us. I remember an evening on which he read aloud his poem of "Troy Town," and how his voice when he began, with "Heaven-born Helen, Sparta's queen," sounded like a challenge to the world. Of another time I have this record; "Gabriel came in the evening—I sang to him a long time, while Ned worked and Murray"—friend of us all by this time—"made himself happy in the background." This mention of Edward working in the evening recalls how many such scenes! It was generally upon full-size stained-glass cartoons, the strainers for which were brought downstairs and begun upon very soon after dinner.

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He made the designs without hesitation; the result of incessant study from life shewing itself in these large, free drawings, which came out upon the paper so quickly that it seemed as if they must have been already there and his hand were only removing a veil. The soft scraping sound of the charcoal in the long smooth lines comes back to me, together with his momentary exclamation of impatience when the stick snapped off short, as it so often did, and fell to the ground. He always stood at this work. If we were alone I read aloud as a matter of course—Carlyle's translation of Wilhelm Meister was one of our books during the first winter at the Grange—but if any one else was there we had music or talk, while the drawing still went on. Sometimes, after a day in the studio, he would go, for a change, to the South Kensington Museum in the evening, either to draw or to look at books in the Reference Library. "I thank the Lord in heaven that he gave me a savage passion for work," he once exclaimed.

His drawing at home in the evening never separated him from us, for he heard everything that went on, and talked also; as for laughter, that fount never ran dry. Afterwards, when the cartoons were put away, he would throw himself down on the sofa and fairly luxuriate in the rest to his tired body; and sometimes he would doze off in the middle of reading or talk, but if we stopped he would wake directly, and cry "Don't stop, I love to hear the sound of voices—I wish there was no night and no bed,—only to lie like this when one is tired, and hear friends talking around one." The "evil nights" of which he speaks to Watts became an increasingly serious trouble, and he suffered many things in dreams. In his letters are frequent allusions to this. "I dreamed of you last night," he writes to most of his friends in the course of correspondence, and to those who lived with him it was often said. But he seldom told us any details; only such things as "you were kind to me," or "you were not," or "I dreamed so and so was dead." Mrs. Morris too was a great dreamer, and they used to compare notes together.

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There was a dream of hers that impressed me deeply when we were still young. It was that she found herself quite alone in the market-place of some town she did not know, when an old-fashioned coach drove up, and stopped near her; and as its door was opened and a rickety flight of steps let down, there descended from it a little old woman with white hair, who was I,—and we exchanged doleful greetings, and she said to me, "They are all gone, Georgie,"—and we wept together. One of Edward's dreams remains in a letter about "a shadowy girl who was by a well, in that mournful twilight that is the sky of dreams. 'Now listen to the noise of my heart,' she said, and dropped a vast stone into the well,—which boomed and boomed until it grew a roar unbearable, and I awoke." A happy dream he called a cruel mockery, and an unhappy one a needless cruelty.

His daily life, however, was active, practical, and apparently cheerful. If one wanted counsel in any puzzling moment of life, his advice was of the soundest, and nobody ever went away depressed from an interview with him.

The success of sharing our house with the Heeleys for a year was complete, in spite of the birth of a small son of theirs, whose approach they had not known of when the plan was first made. But Josephine Heeley's sweetness and simplicity would have smoothed away any difficulties if it had not prevented them. The following note from Edward to Allingham will serve for a description of Wilfred at this time.

"Wilfred Heeley—very learned, (says he ain't, but is, very), best of men, simple, affectionate, full of all kinds of good things—sympathetic, thinks as we do,—you will like him very much, and all kindness done to him is done to me,—and you will find his talk varied and accurate and interesting, and all he says is truthful, and you'll like him much." A letter that Heeley, the most undemonstrative of men, wrote to Edward on leaving England, shews that on his side the time spent together in such close quarters had not lessened affection.

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"I should like to tell you," he says, "that there is nothing in all our English visit which I shall look back to with more pleasure than what I have seen of you. It was such a comfort at the first not to be disenchanted,—to find a man worth all he promised to be, and keeping up a genial life and growth; most of the men I knew have given in to the world; you and Topsy I think have alone escaped. Now I don't suppose you'll believe me, but it 's much truer than gospel, that I have always looked upon your society and your talk as my greatest pleasure; I say this as a sort of excuse for sundry acts of boredom wittingly committed by me, and especially the great boredom of remaining in the house after the kid was born. You have had the opportunity of making lots of friends; I have not; and even if I had, you would still, and I believe always, be A.1. to me, and there is nothing I am more thankful for than having seen so much of you. I am stupid in expressing myself, and always was and will be, quite a Carlylic hero of stupidity; but I must say what I think for once, and tell you how much I delight in your work, in your talk, and in yourself. God bless you, and Georgie, and the kids." We did not see Wilfred after this for seven years, and when we met again the first glance told us to our sorrow that he had only come home to die.

Heeley was right in saying that Edward and Morris had not given in to the world, though to add that they alone amongst his old friends had escaped it was but a word of the moment.

Morris never either drew near to or seemed to take the least possible pleasure in "the world,"—Edward from time to time did both. He loved many who belonged to it, and the whole spectacle interested and beguiled him amidst the stress of his own life and work. In these very days a letter of mine says; "I don't quite know what is coming to us, we go out so much more than we have ever done before, and Edward seems to like it, instead of not liking as he used to do. It is very queer to watch how one changes insensibly as time goes on,—sometimes I think I feel a kind

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of power at work changing me, but can't lay my hand on it or name it." So it was; before we had learned anything of the ways of the world, life closed in upon us, with its demands on every side.

"Circe" was finished in time for the Old Water Colour Exhibition of 1869, and there is a short note of Edward's to Rossetti about it. "I didn't like again to mention Circe, but now you have been to see it I can say how pleased is my vanity. I want a very few to think about me, and you are one, and it will be happy for me to have a word from you." Rossetti's "word", in the form of his sonnet called The Wine of Circe, was a lasting one.

A mixture of friendship and sensitiveness in business dealings was shown by Mr. Leyland, to whom the picture of "Circe" belonged, when upon its completion he sent a cheque of one hundred pounds beyond its stipulated price, accompanied by words that made its acceptance possible. Edward answered him; "You had no need to feel uncomfortable about Circe,—all the work I gave to her was needful, and if she is the better for it I am only glad a dear friend has it instead of a stranger; you really owed me nothing, dear fellow. I never for one moment thought anything about the value of the picture really, and I was glad enough when you and friends generally seemed content with it. I have been perplexed what to answer, because as I never thought about it being cheap or dear I never looked for you to do so, and your letter was a surprise to me, and at first I thought I ought not to take it. But it would be rubbish to be proud to you, and doubly ridiculous as I was of course on the extreme point of writing for tin on account of the other 'Seasons,'—so, look, my dear, I'll take without more words what you offer so gracefully."

The whole scheme of "The Seasons," together with "Day and Night," is given in letters to Mr. Leyland, for whom they were finally completed. "Here comes the Spring at last," he writes in 1868; "I've been seedy and out of town, so that I couldn't send it you when I meant. I send Autumn with it for you to see. I intend doing four more

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figures to complete the set,—a Summer nearly naked, a Winter heavily draped, and a Day and Night,—by degrees. Of course I should like them all to go together, but you needn't feel tied by that, for it is not of vast importance, but I think they would make a nice set of decorative pictures for one room." Mr. Leyland thought so too, and when they are mentioned again a place had been arranged for them in his dining-room,—"where," says Edward, "I hope you will eat and drink with friends in their company for fifty years to come."

He goes into detail also of the colour he intended to make them. "This is to be the plan of them all; first Day, naked, with a blue sky at the back of him and yellow marble to stand on,—then Spring, which you know,—then Summer, with a green curtain and a rose-garden at the back, standing on blue marble, and forget-me-nots in the water. Then Autumn, which you know,—then Winter, in light blue and brown fur, and a brown curtain and black marble and frozen water,—and last, Night, in grey, shutting a door after her, standing on blue marble, with a torch held down and her eyes closed. There is a plan throughout, of colour and expression and everything."

One result of his having so many things on hand at the same time was, of course, delay in finishing pictures, but he reckoned this a great advantage to them, and their owners were generally of the same opinion. This, however, made payments on account necessary, and it was quite late in his working-life before he was able to wait for the whole price of any picture until it was done. The system had its anxieties too, of which expression is found in a note about the "Seasons" themselves, when Mr. Leyland sent a cheque completing payment beforehand for them all.

"How kind of you, but it makes me feel horribly in debt, and nervous about finishing them. I must carry them on together though, if they are to look well as a whole. 'Day' was paid for; I keep careful notes of my affairs now. Do come up,—I can't promise to return with you, and you mustn't press me, for I cannot escape work and grow nerv-

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