

## THE HOME-COMING OF MICHAEL FIELD

Consider them Thy poets, how they grow,  
Thy lilies of the field!

Where are they in Thy Providence?  
They do not spin  
And yet such fabulous beauty win—  
Surely, King, Thou dost delight in these  
Thy field-lilies?

THE close of the Victorian age was marked by a deep and significant unrest amongst those painters and writers who, escaping from the prevailing smugness and weak hypocrisy of that time, had clung firmly to what they looked upon as the true and vital principles of their art. Heralded by the Pre-Raphaelites, and by Ruskin, a period of revolt was approaching which was to pass from one hideous negative extreme to another extreme, so assertive as to lose all semblance of order, that necessary attribute of beauty. To-day, this lack of restraint, this utter impatience of rules still finds ardent support amongst such poets as Stephen Spender and W. H. Auden. By taking the work of so entirely individualistic a poet as Gerard Manley Hopkins as their model, they are condemned at once, on their own showing. They are as rash as the painter who might seek to model himself upon Parmigiano or upon Blake. It is true that the value and deep intrinsic meaning of the work of the artist had been almost entirely discounted by the Victorians. Nowadays, it would be readily admitted by all that any true art is essentially the product of the life of its time, reflecting the thoughts and whole tendency of that particular age. But in the last century in England, when art had lost its meaning, and become for the most part vitiated, no longer with a definite purpose to serve, it was looked upon as a luxury to be enjoyed only by the wealthy, whose ugly drawing-rooms it made more ugly. But there was throughout these years a small body of men and women who, looking with scorn upon an emasculated art, sought to recapture in their own work the true note of vitality. Of such was Michael

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Field. The sudden and exotic flowering of the 'nineties had been foreshadowed by earlier tendencies and these years were the culmination of the so-called Aesthetic Movement. Of course there was exaggeration. The mistaken slogan of "Art for art's sake," and a meticulous quest for the *mot juste* led sooner or later to a preciosity which is so definitely the mark of the literature of that epoch: moreover, many thought that the vitality so badly needed by literature and painting could best be found in the brothels, and in the city streets after nightfall, or in the cafés of the quay. *Les Fleurs du Mal* drew many across the Channel to that country which has given birth to most modern movements in art. But the reconsideration of the principles of art brought many face to face with the consequent problem which arose inevitably. The return of the Pre-Raphaelites to the legend and old romance of other days for their inspiration, was destined to failure from the start. Much of their work is as flaccid as the *Idylls of the King*. The whole movement was without a living principle. They were looking at life through a highly artificial mirror, and one day the mirror would break, and the web float out of the window. It was when he realized this that William Morris became a socialist. A man, as has been admitted, without a spark of religion, he was only logical in his action. But it was elsewhere that so many people sought and found the reconciliation of art and life that they desired—in the peace of the Catholic Church. It is fashionable nowadays to scoff at them as "escapists"; but it is hardly true to say that they escaped. Rather did they enter into that Life which is the only truth, the Life of the Mystical Body of Christ. But not with ease nor without great renunciation did they submit themselves to the discipline of the Catholic Church. There were people amongst them whom it can scarcely be exaggeration to call saints.

In 1864, Katherine Bradley and her widowed mother had moved to Kenilworth to look after Katherine's sister, Mrs. Cooper, who had been left an invalid by the birth of her second child. Her first child had been Edith, and thus it was that in these early years there began for Katherine

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Bradley and Edith Cooper an association which was to end only in death. For Katherine, an early and tragic love left a wound which even time was powerless to heal. Neither Katherine nor Edith was to know "The mystic raptures of the bride." Perhaps it is the echo of some fleeting regret for this that finds expression in *Tiresias*:

When man's strong nature draweth nigh  
'Tis as the lightning to the sky,  
The blast to idle sail, the thrill  
Of springtide when the saplings fill.  
Though fragrant breath the sun receives  
From the young roses softening leaves,  
Her plaited petals once undone  
The rose herself receives the sun.

At Bristol, whither the family removed a few years later, aunt and niece found full play for the exercise of their remarkable gift in the intellectual life of that city. The wonders of literature and art were unfolding before them. Indeed, their deep understanding and appreciation of painting was destined later to be a source of delight to the artists whom they met. There is an appreciation in their diaries of Giorgione's *Venus*, as "that ideal sympathy between woman and the land, which nations have divined when they made their countries feminine." And of the same painter's *Madonna and Child*, with SS. Francis and Liberale, they wrote: "That mother with her babe sleeping on her arm, and one hand laid on the stone end of her throne for coolness or support, is part of every summer we have ever loved. The open-eyed dream of life we have when everything sleeps in the sun, sweet as it is universal, that is what Giorgione gives to his *Madonna* as her Grace. She is Our Lady of June—full of the imagination of siesta when it is quiet wakefulness." Conversion was to lead them from the appreciation of mere outward loveliness to a deep and intimate knowledge of that Beauty which lies at the heart of all earthly creation.

The years 1875 and 1881 saw the publication of their earliest work, the second volume of which came from their joint pen. Thus began that long literary association in which

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during the years to come they wrote and published their work as though from the pen of one writer—Michael Field. They were always quick with nicknames for themselves or for others; Katherine was Michael, and Edith, Field, or Henry—often changed to Henny. When in 1833 Michael Field published his first book of poetry (the two previous volumes had been published under the names of Arran and Isla Leigh) he was enthusiastically acclaimed by poets and critics alike. It is indeed difficult for us in these days to understand the attitude to women writers which led to a distinct cooling-off of this enthusiasm when the identity of Michael Field was discovered. The bitterness which they felt at this unjustifiable coldness was never quite dispelled. In more recent years, something of the same bitterness came to Mary Webb when her work was almost entirely ignored, and led her to shun the literary society of London, and return with a poignant home-sickness to her beloved Shropshire. The hurt to their very keen sensitiveness led them to retire more closely into themselves. In addition, the death of Edith's mother and father, and her own ill-health, led them to seek a peace and seclusion where they might rest secure from the world, happy in their friendship. They found the desired haven in Richmond in an eighteenth-century house which looked on to a lovely stretch of the Thames, a fit setting for the flowering of their genius.

One morning, making beds at Kenilworth, they had sworn to devote themselves to poetry.

It was deep April, and the morn Shakespeare was born;  
The world was on us, pressing sore;  
My Love and I took hands and swore,  
Against the world, to be  
Poets and lovers ever more.

They had in those early days but little notion of the Calvary which they should ascend together, in the fulfilling of that promise. Their love, indeed as all true love must be, was to be made perfect on the Cross. But at this time, the glitter of all earth's loveliness was in their eyes, the happiness of a rare friendship gave peace to their hearts. It was enough that they should be able to sing in such sweet uni-

son, and look out upon the world from the windows of a house belonging to an age when literary grace was still the most desired of all the arts. With the discrimination of the connoisseur they would emerge at times to cultivate a few outside friendships. Their lives showed forth clearly the teaching of Pater in *Marius*, when he wrote: "Supposing our days are indeed but a shadow, even so we may well adorn and beautify, in scrupulous self-respect, our souls, and whatever our souls touch upon—these wonderful bodies, these material dwelling places, through which the shadows pass together for a while, the very raiment we wear, our very pastimes, and the intercourse of society." The deep self-consciousness of these days never entirely left them, and was responsible for a certain lack of humour, which is at times noticeable in their work.

As they grow older, the barrenness of Pater's attitude to life became apparent. In youth, "to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame to maintain this ecstasy," may well have seemed to be success in life. But tragedy came; there were friendships that proved false and failed; even George Meredith was found wanting. More and more they turned to one another, confident that each could look into the eyes of the other, and say, "She at least will not fail me."

Gradually, through the shadows of death, and the failure to gain something which even the most perfect friendship could not give, they were drawing nearer to the Catholic Church.

It is significant that their early inspiration took its rise from a Greek source. In the volume of poetry entitled *Long Ago*, the fragments of Sappho were each expanded into a poem, with the precise and graceful beauty which is characteristic of their best work. Their work, like the prose of Pater, is deeply coloured with the vision of a Greece wherein the Perfect Beauty was sought and worshipped with almost superhuman discernment. With the great Greek thinkers, they had gone to the confines of the mortal world and gazed into the blinding beauty of a sunset sky. But further they could not go. They were earthbound, silent before the door to which they had not yet found the key. "O Love,"

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they sang, "O bitter mortal journeying, By ways that are not told!"

That they should have come to Catholicism through its realization of the desires and hopes of Greek thought is not strange. They took the way which St. Thomas adapted for those who would see Christian revelation in all its overwhelming mystery and beauty. To-day, when Epstein seeks to portray the suffering Christ in an essentially Egyptian art, he fails utterly. Power and rock-like strength he can depict, but not that Love and Sacrifice which in suffering is the strongest of all. For the majority of intellectual men and women the way to Calvary leads through the Garden of the Hesperides.

The answer to the riddle of death is sought constantly in the early poetry of Michael Field: dread of that last dark mystery hangs everywhere.

My darling! Nay, our very breath  
Nor light nor darkness shall divide;  
Queen Dawn shall find us on one bed,  
Nor must thou flutter from my side  
An instant, lest I feel the dread,  
Atthis, the immanence of death.

Even the death of a favourite dog played its part in their entry into the Church.

But there is another perhaps unconscious trait in their poetry, which shows the direction which their lives eventually should take. "The neo-paganism which, without their knowing it, they cherished not mainly for its culture but for its cult of sacrifice," wrote Fr. McNabb, O.P., after their death, "had turned their dramatic souls towards the Sacrifice of Calvary. Once the vision of the Cross had been vouchsafed to them they knew that it was 'the Mass that mattered.' The step forward from neo-paganism to the Church of the Mass was but the inevitable Envoi to all they had thought and lived and sung."

One of their early sonnets is significant.

I found Love by a fountain and alone,  
And had no fear and crept up to his face;  
"And Love," I said, "art thou indeed alone?  
. . . . .

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But tell me, while I sit down at thy side,  
Rather of those first days when thou wert mated  
With many a stubborn force, and fierce the strife,  
How light was of thy loving power created:  
And all thy labour not for death, but life."  
Oh, then I heard how the sweet stars were born,  
And very softly put away my scorn.

That love and sacrifice were intrinsically bound together  
they well knew.

How gladly I would give  
My life to her who would not care to live  
If I should die!

They had climbed the hill of earthly beauty, and there they had rested for awhile. But, as Fr. D'Arcy has written, "Beauty shares the fate of all mortal children, and we who would build our tabernacle to watch it for eternity, have to descend the hillside, heavy with a sense of loss." But at the foot of the mount of lost beauty they found that, which in the undreamt-of fulfilment of half-cherished hopes was to open their eyes to a world which hitherto they had only regarded dimly, at a distinct remove from life.

In 1905, they published anonymously a play entitled *Borgia*. It is something of the nature of a paradox that the reading and study entailed by this play on Alexander VI should have led directly to their conversion. Since the marriage of Edith's sister, Amy, to a Catholic doctor in 1900, they had been in close contact with a Catholic circle, thus being given a good opportunity of observing the practical side of Catholicism as well as its theoretical side. Edith was the first to enter the Church. Charles Ricketts records Katherine's exclamation when she was told: "But this is terrible! I too shall have to become a Catholic!" But it must be clear that the idea had for a long time been in their minds.

Writing of the death of their pet dog, Whym Chow, in 1906, Edith says: "I have always disowned the Church of my childhood, because it was destitute of the real centre of all true religion—an altar with its present Deity—and because the Dead had no portion in its services and there was no universality in its rites." It is amazing to see from their

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diary how quickly their whole outlook became Catholic. Their conversion had, as it were, renewed their youth; it had swept away that faint tinge of bitterness which had threatened to cling about them in later years because of the coldness which had met their work. Long ago it had been possible to write of their friendship:

I love you with my life—'tis so I love you;  
I give you as a ring  
The cycle of my days till death:  
I worship with the breath  
That keeps me in the world with you and spring;  
And God may dwell behind, but not above you.

But now, in the awakening, Michael could write:

Beloved, now I love God first  
There is for thee such summer burst  
Where it was stirring spring before,  
Lo, for thy feet a blossom-floor!

They looked back with sorrow and regret on the years that had been spent away from the fold. Though they did not then know it, the full tale was soon to be told, and told tragically. But meanwhile they would amass an offering fit to lay at the feet of the Crucified, red with their hearts' blood, and enriched with human agony and suffering. Formerly their chief desire had been perfection and fulfilment in their song. But now they wished to go to Death, when the time should come, having on the nuptial garments of purity of life, as brides to the Bridegroom, leaving resolutely all the joys and comforts of earth.

Let me come to Thee young,  
When thou dost challenge *Come!*  
With all my marvelling dreams unsung,  
Their promise by first passion stung,  
Though chary, dumb . . .  
Thou callest *Come!*  
Let me rush to thee when I pass,  
Keen as a child across the grass.

Death came again, this time to Edith's sister, Amy—Little One, converted in 1907. But death was no longer the hopelessness it had hitherto been. The note of triumph was sounded too. "That clasp of the crucifix—what a joy! The supernatural gripped by the corruptible."

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Their whole thought, now, centred round the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

How can we give Thee love  
Surpassing Sacrament?  
Thou art above  
All gifts of ours together blent;  
As the noon-Sun  
Puts congregated torches out each one  
And nothing bright can shine  
Beneath mid-magnanimity divine.

Body of God, indeed  
Thou dost outshine our praise:  
Yet have we need  
To love Thee and our feeble torches raise  
For thee to doubt,  
No matter if their gratitude ebb out  
In Thy meridian beam  
That makes our glorying a hollow dream!

In the Host was summed up all that they had sought unavailingly through the weary ways of life.

There is upon God's shrine a wheaten disc,  
Full of the infinite gold  
Of mine and stream and sun,  
Of the undulating stars a-run,  
Of money whethewith things are bought and sold,  
A Universe. And God doth risk  
His Majesty—that we who thus behold  
Should fall upon our knees and worship bold  
The Universe with that wheaten disc.

Again and again their song returns to the Eucharist; they were lost in the contemplation of that ineffable Mystery, which is the very centre and heart of Christian doctrine. For their work of these years, which, alas, appears to be so little known, they might well be called the poets of the Blessed Eucharist.

In 1911, Edith learned that she was suffering from cancer. There followed a visit to a specialist. Tightly clutching a little crucifix, she sat alone whilst the doctor took Katherine aside. "Thy will be done," she wrote, "Fiat voluntas tua."

In these last sad years a deep friendship with Fr. Vincent McNabb came to lighten their sorrow. They were ever more and more conscious of the parting which each day brought

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nearer, and they submitted themselves to the Will of God, that It might be perfected in them. The cancer was gradually gaining a greater hold on Edith, but when the pain was greatest she remembered Christ's rejection of the myrrh, and refused the drugs which would have deadened the pain.

Winter again, how quick  
Comes! and my loved is sick:  
"Proserpine"  
Shuddering she pleads "I do not want  
The ponegranate"—  
Desire in tears  
Claims an eternity of love and years,

wrote Michael. As the mists grow thicker about them, they were able at last to look back without bitterness on the rejections of the world. They saw it now as part of the vast plan of Divine love, which was to lead them to Christ. But Michael would hoard up the golden moments, swift though they were and poignant with anguish. On October 27th, 1913, Michael's birthday, Edith wrote: "It is early morning of my own Love's birthday. How dear she is to me—how the sweetness and clench of love grow pain and joy as I look at her, and receive her little wreath of kisses in my withered hair. We have the bond of our art, precious, precious. We have had the bond of race, with the delicious adventure of the stranger nature, introduced by the beloved father; we have had the bond of life, deep set in the years; and now we have the bond of the Faith and the bond—different from any other bond—of threatened death."

The following is the last entry in her diary: "Again we pray we may love God with all our heart and mind. Sometimes we have to give the mind wholly to Him—as we give Him the heart to do what He likes with. We must remember we don't give to dictate but to delight. The dry Sacrament of Thanksgiving precedes in His precious death the blood-drenched weaknesses and merely mortal atmosphere of dereliction that God Himself endured when dying." She died on December 13th, 1913.

Now at last Michael opened the secret which Love had bidden her hide. She too was stricken with cancer. She would go the way which Henry had gone before her, accept

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every pain, knowing that the union which had been so close in life would not be lost in this communion in pain. She too would be touched with the Cross, that she might come to the love of Him who had hung upon it. The parting would not be too long; there would scarcely be time for that dimming of the memory of a beloved face which the years bring even to those who have loved most deeply. Michael's last poem is dated May, 1914.

What shall I do for Thee to-day?  
What service, pray?  
I will carry a basket all the way  
And strew and strew  
Flowers of forgiving  
On each mortal living.  
And I will sing as I hold the flowers  
Of the hours and hours  
Of Thy loving me  
On Calvary.  
I will extol Thy Powers  
Then scatter the herbs and the heartsease free.

She died on September 26th of that same year.

There is a passage in Pater which these two noble women must often have read. There has come into the mind of Marius the memory of the old legend of the encounter of Christ and St. Peter outside Rome. "The legend told of an encounter at this very spot, of two wayfarers on the Appian Way, as also upon some very dimly discerned mental journey, altogether different from himself and his late companions—an encounter between Love 'travelling in the greatness of his strength,' Love itself, suddenly appearing to sustain that other. A strange contrast to anything actively presented in that morning's conversation, it seemed nevertheless to echo its very words—'Do they never come down again,' he heard once more the well-modulated voice, 'Do they never come down again from the heights to help those whom they left here below?'—'And we too desire not a fair one, but the fairest of all. Unless we find him we shall think we have failed.' "

But Michael Field had not failed. They had found Him—the Loveliest, the Fairest of all.

GERARD FAY.