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**WILLIAM
BLAKE**

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The Lamb (1789)

I.

WILLIAM BLAKE would have been the first to understand that the biography of anybody ought really to begin with the words, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." If we were telling the story of Mr. Jones of Kentish Town, we should need all the centuries to explain it. We cannot comprehend even the name "Jones," until we have realised that its commonness is not the commonness of vulgar but of divine things; for its very commonness is an echo of the adoration of St John the Divine. The adjective "Kentish" is rather a mystery in that geographical connection; but the word Kentish is not so mysterious as the awful and impenetrable word "town." We shall have rent up the roots of prehistoric mankind and seen the last revolutions of modern society before we really know the meaning of the word "town." So every word we use comes to us coloured from all its adventures in history, every phase of which has made at least a faint alteration. The only right way of telling a story is to begin at the beginning

—at the beginning of the world. Therefore all books have to be begun in the wrong way, for the sake of brevity. If Blake wrote the life of Blake it would not begin with any business about his birth or parentage.

Blake was born in 1757, in Carnaby Market—but Blake's life of Blake would not have begun like that. It would have begun with a great deal about the giant Albion, about the many disagreements between the spirit and the spectre of that gentleman, about the golden pillars that covered the earth at its beginning and the lions that walked in their golden innocence before God. It would have been full of symbolic wild beasts and naked women, of monstrous clouds and colossal temples; and it would all have been highly incomprehensible, but none of it would have been irrelevant. All the biggest events of Blake's life would have happened before he was born. But, on consideration, I think it will be better to tell the tale of Blake's life first and go back to his century afterwards. It is not, indeed, easy to resist temptation here, for there was much to be said about Blake before he existed. But I will resist the temptation and begin with the facts.

WILLIAM BLAKE was born on the 28th of November 1757 in Broad Street, Carnaby Market. Like so many other great English artists and poets, he was born in London. Like so many other starry philosophers and naming mystics, he came out of a shop. His father was James Blake, a fairly prosperous hosier; and it is certainly remarkable to note how many imaginative men in our island have arisen in such an environment. Napoleon said that we English were a nation of shopkeepers; if he had pursued the problem a little further he might have discovered why we are a nation of poets. Our recent slackness in poetry and in everything else is due to the fact that we are no longer a nation of shopkeepers, but merely a nation of shop-owners. In any case there seems to be no doubt that William Blake was brought up in the ordinary atmosphere of the smaller

English bourgeoisie. His manners and morals were trained in the old obvious way; nobody ever thought of training his imagination, which perhaps was all the better for the neglect. There are few tales of his actual infancy. Once he lingered too long in the fields and came back to tell his mother that he had seen the prophet Ezekiel sitting under a tree. His mother smacked him. Thus ended the first adventure of William Blake in that wonderland of which he was a citizen.

His father, James Blake, was almost certainly an Irishman; his mother was probably English. Some have found in his Irish origin an explanation of his imaginative energy; the idea may be admitted, but under strong reservations. It is probably true that Ireland, if she were free from oppression, would produce more pure mystics than England. And for the same reason she would still produce fewer poets. A poet may be vague, and a mystic hates vagueness. A poet is a man who mixes up heaven and earth unconsciously. A mystic is a man who separates heaven and earth even if he enjoys them both. Broadly the English type is he who sees the elves entangled in the forests of Arcady, like Shakespeare and Keats: the Irish type is he who sees the fairies quite distinct from the forest, like Blake and Mr. W. B. Yeats. If Blake inherited anything from his Irish blood it was his strong Irish logic. The Irish are as logical as the English are illogical. The Irish excel at the trades for which mere logic is wanted, such as law or military strategy. This element of elaborate and severe reason there certainly was in Blake. There was nothing in the least formless or drifting about him. He had a most comprehensive scheme of the universe, only that no one could comprehend it.

If Blake, then, inherited anything from Ireland it was his logic. There was perhaps in his lucid tracing of a tangled scheme of mysticism something of that faculty which enables Mr. Tim Healy to understand the rules of the House

of Commons. There was perhaps in the prompt pugnacity with which he kicked the impudent dragoon out of his front garden something of the success of the Irish soldier. But all such speculations are futile. For we do not know what James Blake really was, whether an Irishman by accident or by true tradition. We do not know what heredity is; the most recent investigators incline to the view that it is nothing at all. And we do not know what Ireland is; and we shall never know until Ireland is free, like any other Christian nation, to create her own institutions.

Let us pass to more positive and certain things. William Blake grew up slight and small, but with a big and very broad head, and with shoulders more broad than were natural to his stature. There exists a fine portrait of him which gives the impression of a certain squareness in the mere plan of his face and figure. He has something in common, so to speak, with the typically square men of the eighteenth century; he seems a little like Dan ton, without the height; like Napoleon, without the mask of Roman beauty; or like Mirabeau, without the dissipation and the disease. He had abnormally big dark eyes; but to judge by this plainly sincere portrait, the great eyes were rather bright than dark. If he suddenly entered the room (and he was likely to have entered it suddenly) I think we should have felt first a broad Bonaparte head and broad Bonaparte shoulders, and then afterwards realised that the figure under them was frail and slight.

His spiritual structure was somewhat similar, as it slowly built itself up. His character was queer but quite solid. You might call him a solid maniac or a solid liar; but you could not possibly call him a wavering hysteric or a weak dabbler in doubtful things. With his big owlish head and small fantastic figure he must have seemed more like an actual elf than any human traveller in Elfland; he was a sober native of that unnatural plain. There was nothing of the obviously fervid and futile about Blake's supernaturalism. It

was not his frenzy but his coolness that was startling. From his first meeting with Ezekiel under the tree he always talked of such spirits in an everyday intonation. There was plenty of pompous supernaturalism in the eighteenth century; but Blake's was the only natural supernaturalism. Many reputable persons reported miracles; he only mentioned them. He spoke of having met Isaiah or Queen Elizabeth, not so much even as if the fact were indisputable, but rather as if so simple a thing were not worth disputing. Kings and prophets came from heaven or hell to sit to him, and he complained of them quite casually, as if they were rather troublesome professional models. He was angry because King Edward I. would blunder in between him and Sir William Wallace. There have been other witnesses to the supernatural even more convincing, but I think there was never any other quite so calm. His private life, as he laid its foundations in his youth, had the same indescribable element; it was a sort of abrupt innocence. Everything that he was destined to do, especially in these early years, had a placid and prosaic oddity. He went through the ordinary fights and flirtations of boyhood; and one day he happened to be talking about the unreasonable ways of some girl to another girl. The other girl (her name was Katherine Boucher) listened with apparent patience until Blake used some phrase or mentioned some incident which (she said) she really thought was pathetic or, popularly speaking, "hard on him." "Do you?" said William Blake with great suddenness. "Then I love you." After a long pause the girl said in a leisurely manner, "I love you too." In this brief and extraordinary manner was decided a marriage of which the unbroken tenderness was tried by a long life of wild experiments and wilder opinions, and which was never truly darkened until the day when Blake, dying in an astonishing ecstasy, named her only after God.

To the same primary period of his life, boyish, romantic, and untouched, belongs the publication of his first and most famous books, "Songs of Innocence and Experience." These poems are the most natural and juvenile things Blake ever wrote. Yet they are startlingly old and unnatural poems for so young and natural a man. They have the quality already described—a matured and massive supernaturalism. If there is anything in the book extraordinary to the reader it is clearly quite ordinary to the writer. It is characteristic of him that he could write quite perfect poetry, a lyric entirely classic. No Elizabethan or Augustan could have moved with a lighter precision than

"O sunflower, weary of time,
That countest the steps of the sun."

But it is also characteristic of him that he could and would put into an otherwise good poem lines like—

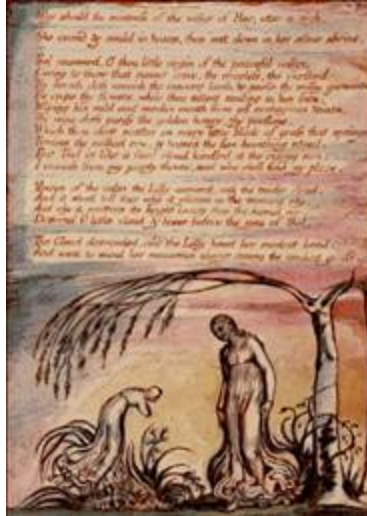
"And modest Dame Lurch, who is always at church,
Would not have handy children, nor fasting nor birch;"

Lines that have no sense at all and no connection with the poem whatever. There is a stronger and simpler case of contrast. There is the quiet and beautiful stanza in which Blake first described the emotions of the nurse, the spiritual mother of many children.

"When the voices of children are heard in the vale,
And laughter is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still."

And here is the equally quiet verse which William Blake afterwards wrote down, equally calmly—

"When the laughter of children is heard on the hill,
And whisperings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale."



The Lilly (1789)

That last monstrous line is typical. He would mention with as easy an emphasis that a woman's face turned green as that the fields were green when she looked at them. That is the quality of Blake which is most personal and interesting in the fixed psychology of his youth. He came out into the world a mystic in this very practical sense, that he came out to teach rather than to learn. Even as a boy he was bursting with occult information. And all through his life he had the deficiencies of one who is always giving out and has no time to take in. He was deaf with his own cataract of speech. Hence it followed that he was devoid of patience while he was by no means devoid of charity: but impatience produced every evil effect that could practically have come from uncharitableness: impatience tripped him up and sent him sprawling twenty times in his life. The result was the unlucky paradox, that he who was always preaching perfect forgiveness seemed not to forgive even imperfectly the feeblest slights. He himself wrote in a strong epigram—

"To forgive enemies Hayley does pretend,
Who never in his life forgave a friend."