

WILLIAM BLAKE, ENGRAVER.*

The best artists have been workmen. They have had, that is, at some time of their lives experience of the needs, the stubbornness, the qualities of material. Of course many of the arts are themselves obviously dependent on a material which has evident powers of resistance and refusal. In spite of the most extravagant exuberances of Baroque and Rococo, there are some things which stone and marble will not do, however the artist forces them. There are some things which they cannot even be made to seem to do. There are arts, however, where material has not this evident quality of resistance—the arts of music and of literature. Words, used, misused, fingered, ill-treated, misunderstood, lose their sharp outline, their clearness of composition, their colour and their gravity. They are the medium of slovenly speech as well as of the supremest art, and it is only too easy for a beginner in the art of literature to start out with but little sense of his material. The same thing is true, though not so true, of the pictorial arts, especially of drawing and water-colour painting. The material here is more present to the mind of the worker, but often suggests easiness rather than difficulty, in the rendering of effects. Now, if a painter, a poet or prose-writer has had some other work, it will, if he can use his experience, be of great value to him: for he will be less tempted to ignore the qualities of his material when he is writing or drawing. He will never forget that all great art, all true beauty grows out of a marriage between the artist and his material, is the result of a man's knowledge of and respect for the stuff in which he is working.

Of the value of a workman's training and of keeping a sense of material, the engravings of William Blake are an excellent example. It is too often forgotten, but Blake was first and last a workman. So much emphasis has been laid on his mysticism, his lyric genius, his astounding imaginative power, his keenness of spiritual vision, that we are in danger of forgetting that he had a hard, close training as an engraver under Basire; that he engraved much work of his own, and a great many designs for others, or that the series which remain his greatest achievement—the illustrations to the "Book of Job"—are a most splendid triumph of the engraver's art, may indeed be rated with the most beautiful plates of Albert Dürer. It is true of course that Blake would almost certainly have accomplished more supreme work even than he did had he been born in an age with a better standard of the art. Never was any man so out of his time as Blake; and the more I look at his work, represented magnificently in this handsome volume, and find in it, as everyone must, traces of the influence of his time upon him, the more I am convinced that had he lived in the days of the Renaissance, or even a hundred years later than he did, he would be recognised the world over as the greatest of all English artists in his particular arts. Even as it is, some of us would claim that no other English engraver, no other English painter has come nearer to the true business of art, to interpret the visible world in the terms of the invisible, and to place the things of time in the light of eternity. The technical defects of his faultier work are obvious enough; but they seem irrelevant beside the power of his imagination, the sheer force of his vision, or the exquisite tenderness of the lovelier passages in the "Songs of Innocence," the "Book of Thel," the designs for "Virgil," and some of the illustrations for the "Divine Commedia."

Mr. Binyon contributes to this book a complete catalogue of all Blake's engraved designs. He does not include the engravings done after other artists' work—four hundred and seventy-six in number. The purpose of his book differs from that of Mr. A. G. B. Renesch's excellent monograph as Mr. Binyon includes the designs which appeared in the "Prophets' Books." He has given a simple and extremely useful introduction, in which he only too rarely allows himself to indulge in æsthetic criticism. One passage of such criticism I must quote, as it puts the truth about Blake with the dignity we should expect from a poet.

* "The Engraved Designs of William Blake." By Laurence Binyon. £6 6s. (Benn.)

"'Jerusalem' is, with the 'Job,' the grandest of Blake's engraved work. His peculiar imagination is here at its most impressive. For what he had to say, the language of form, the language of light and dark, was more expressive than any words could be. And whatever the faults of the verse, the theme is grand and inspiring. We may not know what some of these images mean: even when they have been interpreted in the light of mystic ideas, they remain much more eloquent than the interpretation. They are sometimes, no doubt, images that appeared to Blake in waking vision, and were transcribed in perfect confidence that significance was in them, even if he could not himself explain it: for as he wrote on the title page of 'The Daughters of Albion,' 'The Eye sees more than the Heart knows.' And they wake in us emotions such as music, mysterious in its origin or effluence, awakes, because of the power with which the images are thrown upon the page. Never before had Blake made his forms so plastic. Except in certain figures the 'lay-figure' anatomy, the stereotyped attitudes, are forgotten; and the finer expressiveness is helped by the technique, though the designing in white on black seems to contradict Blake's passionately proclaimed precept of the 'ivory outline.'"

I cannot agree with Mr. Binyon when he finds a parallel to Blake in music. Blake's designs have at once a more imaginative emotion and a less intellectual appeal than has music. Great music has in it something cold, something far-off: it puts the high and difficult things away in a region where man can only be a visitor. Art such as Blake's on the other hand convinces those who love and apprehend it that man's true home is among these visions, that he is a citizen of that Jerusalem where Blake lived. How admirable however is the phrase "were transcribed in perfect confidence"! It is his "perfect confidence" which distinguishes Blake, whether as painter, poet, or engraver, from all other artists of his time, and puts him with the greatest artists of all time. I do not know that one could express more accurately the precise differentia of really great art than by that quality "perfect confidence." It is that which makes us instinctively align a song of Shakespeare's, a lyric of Heine's, the Sistine ceiling, the St. George of Donatello, an etching of Rembrandt's, an engraving of Dürer's, a drawing of Holbein's, a lyric or an engraving of Blake's. They belong to a world of certainty—not of conceit or pride—but to a world where a man is completely sure of what he sees, and is sure that what he sees is true.

R. ELLIS ROBERTS.

INDIANS AND WITCHES.*

Lives there a man with soul so dead that, were he asked who were the companions of his golden age, would not reply "Indians and Witches"? But is he so courageous that he can with a calmer gaze view these wonderful creatures in their exile and their exposure by kindly or eccentric interpreters? We have here an example of both. Let the Indians come first.

I

It is a matter of wonder that no adequate recognition has ever been made to the place of the Redskin in the imaginative background of our life and literature. Times have changed, and a new generation must find its own glamour to face its tribulations, but inseparably interwoven into the nineteenth century of England and America will abide the heroic and immutable Indian. He provided for us our ideals of stoicism, silence and tension. While we could play at Indians the real life of cities and cash was mercifully hidden from our knowledge. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Red Indian—from the fierce Iroquois to the last stand of the Sioux—fought the white man's medicine with a courage, persistence and craft which has so immortalised his race that already in America they are turning to him as the romantic background upon which nations build their poetry and their prestige.

* "Indians of the Enchanted Desert." By Leo Crane. 21s. (Leonard Parsons.)—"The History of Witchcraft and Demonology." By Montague Summers. 12s. 6d. (Kegan Paul).

It is not common knowledge how sustained was the part the Indian played in the history of America. The Redskin not only formed a frontier for two hundred years, but actually influenced the trend of European history. During the Colonial period he allied himself with English and French in turn, and scalped both with splendid impartiality. During the final struggle he put up a last stand which, under Red Cloud, actually expelled the United States troops for several years, and under Gall, American Horse and Sitting Bull destroyed Custer and a regiment of American cavalry in the seventies. Great days. But the buffalo were annihilated, the land-grabbers pushed on, the Indians were starving, and in the Reservations the last chapter was opened. After that came, and is still coming, civilisation, and with it the Redskin is passing into the common mould.

In our romantic gallery of boyhood we have been familiar with pioneers, scouts, Texas Rangers, hostiles and cow-boys, but the Indian Agent we were taught to regard with suspicion and even contempt. He meant the end of the Wild West and that was against everything we treasured. The agent was henceforward to hand out store trousers and rations of beef to the inscrutable Sioux, the fierce Apache and the defiant Cherokee. No one can distribute Government pants and expect a poem in a quarterly. He may be a splendid and trustworthy fellow, but he is an official, and who of us with heart so dead as not to regard any official with indignation and hauteur.

One is wrong. As a matter of fact one is usually wrong. And yet in matters of romance the colour fades and vanishes under the glare of verity. As Mr. Leo Crane says in his delightful book, "Indians of the Enchanted Desert":

"Indian Agents! a much-maligned class of officials, although recognised as part of the National Government since 1796, clouded somewhat in their efforts by the memory—fact and fiction—of the 'ration' days. They might have spoken proudly of the traditions of their Service, a Service that has had little recognition and possesses no chronicle other than a dryas dust Annual Report compiled by unknowing clerks. The reason for these officials' existence has produced much sound and fury. The very title seems to have infuriated the ablest writers of the past, and still causes some of the present to see red. When sentimentalists—and God knows the ignorance of them is astounding—take pen in hand to picture the fabled glories and the believed miseries of the savage, they usually begin by attacking those very men I met and have in mind. They forget, if indeed they have ever known, that they are privileged to view the savage because of these men; that the miserable actualities of the 'glorious past' would long since have engulfed the idealised protégé but for them. Indian Agents may not vie with painters and poets; but tubes of colour, Strathmore board, dreams, and rhyming dictionaries produce small knowledge of tuberculosis, trachoma, smallpox, measles, syphilis—scourges of the Indian people, whose long train of evils reach grimly down through the generations of an ignorant and devitalised race. No one feels this so keenly as the official who daily faces the unromantic task, charged with the duty of alleviating the miseries of the present. Unlike the Spanish explorers, these men have no historian, and but for prejudice and libel would probably be unknown.

"Yet this one had succeeded to the task Custer left unfinished among the unrelenting Sioux; had checked a second rebellion; had faced and quelled and buried Sitting Bull, the last of the great savage charlatans. That one

had built a city in the pines to shelter the children of the murderer Geronimo; a third had tracked and mapped a region few civilised men had known. Now came one who had chained a river without an appropriation; now came another who had fought pestilence in winter, among a superstitious people, crippled by distances and lack of transport, without sufficient health officers, to learn in the end that his mortality records were lower than those of enlightened civilisation. Occasionally a fancied uprising brought one to unpleasant notice; occasionally, too, one was killed.

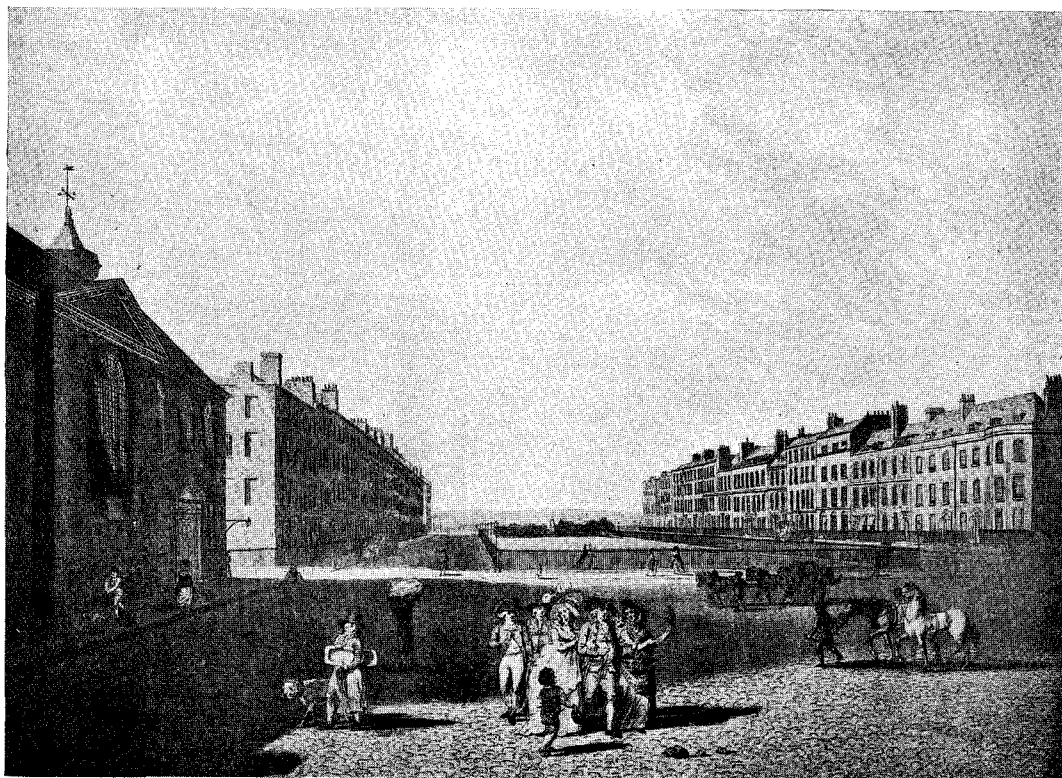
"These unromantic facts, having no camouflage of feathers and war paint, nothing in them of the beating of tomtoms or the chanting of legends, do not invite a sentimental record; and, it is true, few such things occur in the 'dude season,' when sentimentality, accompanied by its handmaiden ignorance, takes its neurasthenic outing in the wild."

Mr. Crane belongs to the type of official who in America, as in our own Colonies, makes history in lonely places. As an experienced colonel remarked to him when he left him amongst none too quiescent Indians: "Young man, you have an empire to control. Either rule it or pack your trunk." I gather Mr. Crane did not pack his trunk. This most charming, restrained and modest study of the Navajo and Hopi Indian proves that instead he won the trust and affection of the people under his charge. But he in his turn was won by the Painted Desert in which they lived. As a thoughtful and moving etcher of the characteristics of the Indian and the attitude of the Indian, Mr. Crane is remarkable, and his record of permanent value.

II

In these credulous days the witch is returning to her kingdom, broomstick and all. Only the old-fashioned can gather together and speak of the good old times when she was the backbone of the Christmas pantomime. In a few years she may descend upon us once again as she descended upon the Middle Ages, and the will to believe will once more have its most astonishing recrudescence.

To the hardened reviewer the subject of spiritualism must always cause embarrassment. One does not desire to ridicule. At the same time one has a right to inquire, and one's inquiries are so apt to strike the faithful as what our present author, Mr. Summers, would I am sure call "impertinent." But if I may speak with candour, this vast subject of witchcraft has not received proper justice, because it has been carefully avoided by the writer with the adequate historic qualifications, and the capacity to



Queen Square from the South, 1787.

From "Queen Square, its Neighbourhood and its Institutions," by Godfrey H. Hamilton (Leonard Parsons).