

FRANCIS THOMPSON : THE LOVER

HILDA RIDLEY

A DREAMY faced lad, wandering alone in a Manchester art gallery, used to pause evening after evening before the statue of an unknown woman and contemplate the beauty of a head which, in his own words, thrilled his youth with a passion such as feminine mortality was skillless to instigate. Even then he was conscious, in his worship, of the "baffling mysteries of her meaning", that the eyes surveyed him not, but looked always beyond him—"waiting for something, not for me". Words prophetic of his peculiar destiny—the love for that which always eluded him, teaching him through pain the secret of renunciation! Words prophetic of that Unknown She for whom every night in Manchester he used to pray—she who was to be the directing influence of his life, and to hold in very truth, through her understanding, the key—

Of the treasure of his years,
And the fountain of his tears!

But before the coming of that friend into his life, this boy was to pass through the dark valley of suffering, and to emerge from it, not again into the garish light of common day, but into a twilight of communion with the souls to whom he was knit with a bond far closer than the ties which united him to his own family.

When, indeed, one thinks of the relatives of Francis Thompson, one is confronted with a difficulty that the eugenists have not solved—how out of an ultra-respectable, ordinary, middle-class English family, with no literary traditions, a genius and a poet can emerge. His father was a reputable doctor who proposed that Francis should follow his own profession; but the boy, instead of attending medical lectures, read poetry in the public library. He also haunted the museums and art galleries of Manchester, and listened to music in the homes of musicians. We have a picture of him "leaving his father's reputable doorstep with untied laces, dragging their length on the pavement past the windows of the curious and critical neighbours."

The fatal lure of opium at this time helped to complete his repudiation of filial obligations. Initiated into its uses by the

reading of De Quincey's *Confessions*, he found a refuge in the drug from the harsh realities of the dissecting room, and other discordant experiences. With his loss of any sense of responsibility to his family went his utter failure in his medical examinations, and the building up of a *karma* that he was to work out through the pain and ecstasy of renunciation. One day, leaving a note for his sister on her dressing-table, he drifted away to London.

Without friends or *savoir faire*, the streets yawned for him. One can see this dreamy, slipshod youth, who carried no wealth with him but an Aeschylus in one pocket and a Blake in the other, losing his position as collector of books and various odd jobs that intervened between long sojourns in the Guildhall Library. Then followed the experience of the common lodging house where he would lie "watching the beetles crawling on the ceiling"—a prelude to the interval when even this shelter failed him and "the nights were an agony of prevented sleep, and the days long blank of half-warmth and half-ease", and he knew—

the places infamous to tell
Where God wipes not the tears from any eyes.

But in those streets he found a friend. It was she who "out of her scant and piteous opulence, consisting of a room, warmth and food", gave to him and cherished him with an affection "maidenly and motherly". In a room in Chelsea the two outcasts would sit—

Your lamp, my Jenny, kept alight,
Like a wise virgin's all one night!
And in the alcove coolly spread
Glimmers with dawn your empty bed.

It was this child of the streets who, upon the discovery of his genius by the outer world, made for his sake the sacrifice of his friendship, and fled from him, "a swift and trackless fugitive". "They will not understand our friendship," she said, and added simply: "I always knew you were a genius." In vain he sought for her through "the mighty labyrinths of London."

The discovery of Francis Thompson came about through his sending of an article and a poem to the editors of *Merry England*. With the badly soiled manuscripts he enclosed a letter concluding with, "Kindly address your rejection to the Charing Cross Post Office". It was six months before the over-taxed editors, Wilfrid and Alice Meynell, examined the manuscripts which they had in the interval pigeon-holed. They at once recognized the literary gifts of the author, and hastened to communicate with him. By that time, however, Charing Cross Post Office knew him no more.

Mr. Meynell then resolved to publish the poem, hoping in this way to get into communication with the poet. A few days after the publication of the poem he received a long letter from Thompson, with the request that he inform him at once of the fate of the articles that he had submitted. He gave as his address a chemist's shop, to which Mr. Meynell at once despatched a messenger bearing a letter of explanation and an invitation to Francis to arrange for regular work. As no answer was received, Mr. Meynell himself went to search for Thompson. At the shop he was told by the chemist that the poet sometimes called, but it was not until many days after that Mr. Meynell, while in the shop, was informed that Mr. Thompson wished to see him. "Show him up," he said, and was left alone.

"Then the door opened, and a strange hand was thrust in," relates Mr. Everard Meynell. "The door closed, but Thompson had not entered. Again it opened, again it shut. At the third attempt a waif of a man came in. No such figure had been looked for; more ragged and unkempt than the average beggar, with no shirt beneath his coat, and bare feet in broken shoes...."

Little was effected at this meeting save the extraction of a promise from the poet to call again. The chemist's shop became for a time a meeting place for the outcast and the man who had discovered his genius, and was resolved not to let him go. Then, at last, Thompson was prevailed upon to visit the Meynells at their home in Kensington. And there it was that he met the lady of "deathless beauty," who all through the remainder of his days was to give him the "sweet direction" of her counsel and her sympathy. He has described the mingled pain, awe, and rapture of that initiation into the inner circle of the family with which he was to be so closely associated in the lines:

At fate's dread portal then
Even so stood I, I ken,
Even so stood I, between a joy and fear,
And said to mine own heart, "Now if the end be here!"

What a delicacy of rare love the Meynells must have shown to this poet, this shy moth of a man, who had fluttered into their presence! It was warmth and love that they gave him, and a subdued light that never once merged into the flame that might have singed his delicate, gossamer wings. For a time they could not make him believe that he might be rescued from the streets and take up regular literary work. Mr. Meynell persuaded him to see a doctor, who pronounced, "He will not live," but Francis

was just at the beginning of a new life, a rebirth of the spirit that was to carry him through the years in which he won an immortal name. With a change of air and scene he made a quick recovery to something like health. Then came his relinquishment of opium and the release of his powers, which soon began to manifest their splendour in the production of poem after poem. Soon he had produced enough poems to be garnered up into a sheaf. Upon the advice of his friends he began to prepare a volume for the press. In the preparation of these poems for publication he was helped especially by Mrs. Meynell.

"My dear Francis," she wrote in 1893, "I am very glad that Mr. Lane asked me to send you the first pages of the book—your poems, to which Wilfrid and I have so long looked forward. It is a great happiness to me to do so. . . . I cannot express to you how beautiful your poems are. Always, my dear child, your affectionate Alice Meynell."

Again in August she writes: "Here are your wonderful poems—most wonderful and beautiful. It is a great event to me to send you these proofs. . . ."

The poems met with an immediate appreciation by the critics of discernment—by all those whose opinion counted in literary London. Coventry Patmore speaks of the seven poems called *Love in Dian's Lap* as "poems of which Laura might have been proud and Lucretia not ashamed." These poems of "Fair Love" were addressed to Alice Meynell—the friend who was mother and sister to him, who called him "her child." In them one recognizes again that incorporeal love, that purely spiritual affection which, as a boy, made him in love with a statue:

How should I gauge what beauty is her dole,
 Who cannot see her countenance for her soul,
 As birds see not the casement for the sky?
 And, as 'tis check they prove its presence by,
 I know not of her body till I find
 My flight debarred the heaven of her mind.

And now we enter upon the Holy of Holies in the relation of Francis to the woman who, with her husband, had redeemed his life from futility.

"I know how it must tax you," he wrote to Mrs. Meynell, "to endure me; for you are a friend, a mother; while I, over and above these, am a lover—spiritual as light, and unearthly as the love of one's angelic dreams, if you will—but yet a lover; and even a seraph enamored must be a trying guardian angel to have to do with."

Here we have the exact relationship—but it was not without pain and renunciation that Francis transmuted an earthly affection into one “as spiritual as light.”

“The Lady Pain figures, in one sense, in ‘Love in Dian’s Lap’,” writes Mr. Everard Meynell. “His one real love was itself a thing most strictly circumscribed; it existed only to be checked.”

And in a passage of self-revelation Francis Thompson says:

I yielded to the insistent demands of my conscience and uprooted my heart—as I supposed. Later, the renewed presence of the beloved lady renewed the love I thought deracinated. For a while I swung vacillant. I thought I owed it to her whom I loved more than my love of her finally to uproot that love, to pluck away the last fibres of it, that I might be beyond treachery to my resolved duty. And at this second effort I finished what the first had left incomplete. The initial agony had really been decisive, and to complete the process needed only resolution. But it left that lady still the first, the one veritable, full-orbed and apocalyptic love of my life. Through her was shown me the uttermost of what love could be—the possible divinities and celestial prophecies of it. None other could have taught them quite thus, for none other had in her the like unconscious latencies of utter spirituality. Surely she will one day realize them, as by her sweet, humble, and stainless life she has deserved to do.

And Alice Meynell gave him the solace of an understanding and sympathy that only a poet, as delicately poised as himself, could bestow.

What of her silence, that outsweetens speech?

What of her thoughts, high marks for mine own thoughts to reach?

In a practical way she wrote in his behalf in various reviews, and when need was (as not infrequently happened) she rushed to his defence with glowing words of truth that put the calumniator to shame. It is to her that we owe an authentic picture of the real Thompson. “He has been unwarily named with Blake as one of the unhappy poets,” she says. “I will not say he was ever so happy as Blake—but few indeed, poets or others, have had a life so happy as Blake’s, or a death so joyous; but I affirm of Francis Thompson that he had natural good spirits, and was more mirthful than many a man of cheerful, social, or even of humorous reputation. It is pleasant to remember his laugh, a laugh readier than a girl’s, and it is impossible to remember him with any real recall, and not hear it in mind again.”

Yet this poet, who had absolutely no acquisitive spirit, who owned nothing, made no demands upon life, was often strangely happy.

"In memory I see him one miserable November afternoon communing with the young-eyed Cherubim in Chancery Lane," says a friend. "The roads were ankle-deep in slush; a thin, icy rain was falling; the yellow fog enwrapped the pedestrians squelching down the lane; and going through them in a narrow path, I saw Francis Thompson, wet and mud-spattered. But he was not unhappy. What is a day of unpleasant weather to one who lives in eternity? His lips were moving, his head was raised, his eyes were humid with emotion, for above the roof of the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Company, in the murk of fog, he saw beautiful visions. They were his reality, not the visible world."

With "his dewy laughter, his sweetness and sanity, and his fluttering gratitude," how much there was that was lovable in the "strange figure that fluttered through the London streets, gentle in looks, half-wild in externals."

She who knew him best wrote of him: "During many years of friendship, and almost daily companionship, it was evident to solicitous eyes that he was one of the most innocent of men."

There was no resentment, no peevishness or irritability in the heart of Francis Thompson against the fate that had been apportioned to him. He knew, in his own words, that in Supreme Love there is "Supreme Pain", but he also knew that "Pain may be made the instrument of joy." And in the latter days, before he went to sleep in the quiet cemetery of Kensal Green, he could write in relation to the one love that had been the guiding principle of his life—

Know that at end
Pain was well paid, sweet Friend,
Pain was well paid which brought me to your sight.