

CHAPTER XXXIII

A NOTE ON ROBERT BUCHANAN

AMONG the minor poets of the Victorian period, Robert Buchanan cannot be passed over unnoticed. A contemporary of all the great singers, he seems to have been always a little isolated; I mean that he formed no strong literary friendships within the great circle. Most great poets must live to a certain extent in solitude; the man who can at once mix freely in society and find time for the production of masterpieces is a rare phenomenon. George Meredith is said to be such a person. But Tennyson, Rossetti, Swinburne, Browning, Fitzgerald, were all very reserved and retired men, though they had little circles of their own, and a certain common sympathy. The case of Buchanan is different. His aloofness from the rest has been, not the result of any literary desire for quiet, but the result, on the contrary, of a strong spirit of opposition. Not only did he have no real sympathy with the great poets, but he represented in himself the very prejudices against which they had to contend. Hard-headed Scotchman as he was, he manifested in his attitude to his brother poets a good deal of the peculiar, harsh conservatism of which Scotchmen seemed to be particularly capable. And he did himself immense injury in his younger days by an anonymous attack upon the morals, or rather upon the moral tone, of such poets as Rossetti and Swinburne. Swinburne's reply to this attack was terrible and withering. That of Rossetti was very mild and gentle, but so effective that English literary circles almost unanimously condemned Buchanan, and attributed his attack to mere jealousy. I think the attack was less due to jealousy than to character, to prejudice, to the

harshness of a mind insensible to particular forms of beauty. And for more than twenty years Buchanan has suffered extremely from the results of his own action. Thousands of people have ignored him and his books simply because it was remembered that he gave wanton pain to Rossetti, a poet much too sensitive to endure unjust criticism. I suppose that for many years to come Buchanan will still be remembered in this light, notwithstanding that he tried at a later day to make honourable amends to the memory of Rossetti, by dedicating to him, with a beautiful sonnet of apology, the definitive edition of his own works.

But the time has now passed when Buchanan can be treated as an indifferent figure in English literature. In spite of all disadvantages he has been a successful poet, a successful novelist, and a very considerable influence in the literature of criticism. Besides, he has written at least one poem that will probably live as long as the English language, and he has an originality quite apart and quite extraordinary, though weaker than the originality of the greater singers of his time. As to his personal history, little need to be said. He was educated at Glasgow University, and his literary efforts have always been somewhat coloured by Scotch sentiment, in spite of his long life in literary London.

Three volumes represent his poetical production. In these are contained a remarkable variety of poems—narrative, mystical, fantastic, classical, romantic, ranging from the simplest form of ballad to the complex form of the sonnet and the ode. The narrative poems would, I think, interest you least; they are gloomy studies of human suffering, physical and moral, among the poor, and are not so good as the work of Crabbe in the same direction. The mystical poems, on the contrary, are of a very curious kind; for Buchanan actually made a religious philosophy of his own, and put it into the form of verse. It is a Christian mysticism, an extremely liberal Unitarianism forming the basis of it; but the author's notions about the perpetual

order of things are all his own. He has, moreover, put these queer fancies into a form of verse imitating the ancient Celtic poetry. We shall afterward briefly consider the mystical poetry. But the great production of Buchanan is a simple ballad, which you find very properly placed at the beginning of his collected poems. This is a beautiful and extraordinary thing, quite in accordance with the poet's peculiar views of Christianity. It is called "The Ballad of Judas Iscariot." If you know only this composition, you will know all that it is absolutely necessary to know of Robert Buchanan. It is by this poem that his place is marked in nineteenth century literature.

Before we turn to the poem itself, I must explain to you something of the legend of Judas Iscariot. You know, of course, that Judas was the disciple of Christ who betrayed his master. He betrayed him for thirty pieces of silver, according to the tradition; and he betrayed him with a kiss, for he said to the soldiers whom he was guiding, "The man whom I shall kiss is the man you want." So Judas went up to Christ, and kissed his face; and then the soldiers seized Christ. From this has come the proverbial phrase common to so many Western languages, a "Judas-kiss." Afterwards Judas, being seized with remorse, is said to have hanged himself; and there the Scriptural story ends. But in Church legends the fate of Judas continues to be discussed in the Middle Ages. As he was the betrayer of a person whom the Church considered to be God, it was deemed that he was necessarily the greatest of all traitors; and as he had indirectly helped to bring about the death of God, he was condemned as the greatest of all murderers. It was said that in hell the very lowest place was given to Judas, and that his tortures exceeded all other tortures. But once every year, it was said, Judas could leave hell, and go out to cool himself upon the ice of the Northern seas. That is the legend of the Middle Ages.

Now Robert Buchanan perceived that the Church legends of the punishment of Judas might be strongly questioned

from a moral point of view. Revenge is indeed in the spirit of the Old Testament; but revenge is not exactly in the spirit of the teaching of Christ. The true question as to the fate of Judas ought to be answered by supposing what Christ himself would have wished in the matter. Would Christ have wished to see his betrayer burning for ever in the fires of hell? Or would he have shown to him some of that spirit manifested in his teachings, "Do good unto them that hate you; forgive your enemies"? As a result of thinking about the matter, Buchanan produced his ballad. All that could be said against it from a religious point of view is that the spirit of it is even more Christian than Christianity itself. From the poetical point of view we must acknowledge it to be one of the grandest ballads produced in the whole period of Victorian literature. You will not find so exquisite a finish here as in some of the ballads of Rossetti; but you will find a weirdness and a beauty and an emotional power that make up for slenderness in workmanship.

In order to understand the beginning of the ballad clearly, you should know the particulars about another superstition concerning Judas. It is said that all the elements refused to suffer the body to be committed to them; fire would not burn it; water would not let it sink to rest; every time it was buried, the earth would spew it out again. Man could not bury that body, so the ghosts endeavoured to get rid of it. The Field of Blood referred to in the ballad is the Aceldama of Scriptural legend, the place where Judas hanged himself.

'Twas the body of Judas Iscariot
Lay in the Field of Blood;
'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Beside the body stood.

Black was the earth by night,
And black was the sky;
Black, black were the broken clouds,
Tho' the red Moon went by.

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Then the soul of Judas Iscariot
 Did make a gentle moan—
 ‘I will bury underneath the ground
 My flesh and blood and bone.

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‘The stones of the field are sharp as steel,
 And hard and cold, God wot;
 And I must bear my body hence
 Until I find a spot!’

’Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot,
 So grim, and gaunt, and gray,
 Raised the body of Judas Iscariot,
 And carried it away.

And as he bare it from the field
 Its touch was cold as ice,
 And the ivory teeth within the jaw
 Rattled aloud, like dice.

The use of the word “ivory” here has a double function; dice are usually made of ivory; and the suggestion of whiteness heightens the weird effect.

As the soul of Judas Iscariot
 Carried its load with pain,
 The Eye of Heaven, like a lanthorn’s eye,
 Open’d and shut again.

Half he walk’d, and half he seemed
 Lifted on the cold wind;
 He did not turn, for chilly hands
 Were pushing from behind.

The first place that he came unto
 It was the open wold,
 And underneath were prickly whins,
 And a wind that blew so cold.

The next place that he came unto
 It was a stagnant pool,

And when he threw the body in
It floated light as wool.

He drew the body on his back,
And it was dripping chill,
And the next place he came unto
Was a Cross upon a hill.

A Cross upon the windy hill,
And a cross on either side,
Three skeletons that swing thereon,
Who had been crucified.

And on the middle cross-bar sat
A white Dove slumbering;
Dim it sat in the dim light,
With its head beneath its wing.

And underneath the middle Cross
A grave yawn'd wide and vast,
But the soul of Judas Iscariot
Shiver'd, and glided past.

We are not told what this hill was, but every reader knows that Calvary is meant, and the skeletons upon the crosses are those of Christ and the two thieves crucified with him. The ghostly hand had pushed Judas to the place of all places where he would have wished not to go. We need not mind the traditional discrepancy suggested by the three skeletons; as a matter of fact, the bodies of malefactors were not commonly left upon the crosses long enough to become skeletons, and of course the legend is that Christ's body was on the cross only for a short time. But we may suppose that the whole description is of a phantasm, purposely shaped to stir the remorse of Judas. The white dove sleeping upon the middle cross suggests the soul of Christ, and the great grave made below might have been prepared out of mercy for the body of Judas. If the dove had awoke and spoken to him, would it not have said,

“You can put your body here, in my grave; nobody will torment you”? But the soul of Judas cannot even think of daring to approach the place of the crucification.

The fourth place that he came unto
It was the Brig of Dread,
And the great torrents rushing down
Were deep, and swift, and red.

He dared not fling the body in
For fear of faces dim,
And arms were waved in the wild water
To thrust it back to him.

There is here a poetical effect borrowed from sources having nothing to do with the Judas tradition. In old Northern folklore there is the legend of the River of Blood, in which all the blood ever shed in this world continues to flow; and there is a reference to this river in the old Scotch ballad of “Thomas the Rhymer.”

It was mirk, mirk night, and there was nae starlight,
They waded through red blude up to the knee;
For a' the blude that's shed on earth
Rins through the springs o' that countrie.

Judas leaves the dreadful bridge and continues his wanderings over the mountain, through woods and through great desolate plains:

For months and years, in grief and tears,
He walked the silent night;
Then the soul of Judas Iscariot
Perceived a far-off light.

A far-off light across the waste,
As dim as dim might be,
That came and went like the lighthouse gleam
On a black night at sea.

'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
 Crawl'd to the distant gleam;
 And the rain came down, and the rain was blown
 Against him with a scream.

'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot,
 Strange, and sad, and tall,
 Stood all alone at dead of night
 Before a lighted hall.

And the wold was white with snow,
 And his foot-marks black and damp,
 And the ghost of the silver Moon arose,
 Holding her yellow lamp.

And the icicles were on the eaves,
 And the walls were deep with white,
 And the shadows of the guests within
 Pass'd on the window light.

The shadows of the wedding guests
 Did strangely come and go,
 And the body of Judas Iscariot
 Lay stretch'd along the snow.

But only the body. The soul which has carried it does not lie down, but runs round and round the lighted hall, where the wedding guests are assembled. What wedding? What guests? This is the mystical banquet told of in the parable of the New Testament; the bridegroom is Christ himself; the guests are the twelve disciples, or rather, the eleven, Judas himself having been once the twelfth. And the guests see the soul of Judas looking in at the window.

'Twas the Bridegroom sat at the table-head,
 And the lights burnt bright and clear—
 'Oh, who is that,' the Bridegroom said,
 'Whose weary feet I hear?'

'Twas one look'd from the lighted hall,
 And answered soft and slow,

'It is a wolf runs up and down
With a black track in the snow.'

The Bridegroom in his robe of white
Sat at the table-head—
'Oh, who is that who moans without?'
The blessed Bridegroom said.

'Twas one looked from the lighted hall,
And answered fierce and low,
'Tis the soul of Judas Iscariot
Gliding to and fro.'

'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Did hush itself and stand,
And saw the Bridegroom at the door
With a light in his hand.

The Bridegroom stood in the open door,
And he was clad in white,
And far within the Lord's Supper
Was spread so broad and bright.

The Bridegroom shaded his eyes and look'd,
And his face was bright to see—
'What dost thou here at the Lord's Supper
With thy body's sins?' said he.

'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Stood black, and sad, and bare—
'I have wandered many nights and days;
There is no light elsewhere.'

'Twas the wedding guests cried out within,
And their eyes were fierce and bright—
'Scourge the soul of Judas Iscariot
Away into the night!'

The Bridegroom stood in the open door,
And he waved hands still and slow,
And the third time that he waved his hands
The air was thick with snow.

And of every flake of falling snow,
Before it touched the ground,
There came a dove, and a thousand doves
Made sweet sound.

'Twas the body of Judas Iscariot
Floated away full fleet,
And the wings of the doves that bare it off
Were like its winding-sheet.

'Twas the Bridegroom stood at the open door,
And beckon'd, smiling sweet;
'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Stole in, and fell at his feet.

'The Holy Supper is spread within,
And the many candles shine,
And I have waited long for thee
Before I poured the wine!'

It would have been better, I think, to finish the ballad at this stanza; there is one more, but it does not add at all to the effect of what goes before. When the doves, emblems of divine love, have carried away the sinful body, and the Master comes to the soul, smiling and saying: "I have been waiting for you a long time, waiting for your coming before I poured the wine"—there is nothing more to be said. We do not want to hear any more; we know that the Eleven had again become Twelve; we do not require to be told that the wine is poured out, or that Judas repents his fault. The startling and beautiful thing is the loving call and the welcome to the Divine Supper. You will find the whole of this poem in the "Victorian Anthology," but I should advise any person who might think of making a Japanese translation to drop the final stanza and to leave out a few of the others, if his judgment agrees with mine.

Read this again to yourselves, and see how beautiful it is. The beauty is chiefly in the central idea of forgiveness; but the workmanship of this composition has also a very re-

markable beauty, a Celtic beauty of weirdness, such as we seldom find in a modern composition touching religious tradition. It were interesting to know how the poet was able to imagine such a piece of work. I think I can tell a little of the secret. Only a man with a great knowledge and love of old ballads could have written it. Having once decided upon the skeleton of the story, he must have gone to his old Celtic literature and to old Northern ballads for further inspiration. I have already suggested that the ballad of "Thomas the Rhymer" was one source of his inspiration, with its strange story of the River of Blood. Thomas was sitting under a tree, the legend goes, when he saw a woman approaching so beautiful that he thought she was an angel or the Virgin Mary, and he addressed her on his knees. But she sat down beside him, and said, "I am no angel nor saint; I am only a fairy. But if you think that I am so beautiful, take care that you do not kiss me, for if you do, then I shall have power over you." Thomas immediately did much more than kiss her, and he therefore became her slave. She took him at once to fairyland, and on their way they passed through strange wild countries, much like those described in Robert Buchanan's ballad; they passed the River of Blood; they passed dark trees laden with magical food; and they saw the road that reaches Heaven and the road that reaches Hell. But Buchanan could take only a few ideas from this poem. Other ideas, I think were inspired by a ballad of Goethe's, or at least by Sir Walter Scott's version of it, "Frederick and Alice." Frederick is a handsome young soldier who seduces a girl called Alice under promise of marriage, and then leaves her. He rides to join the army in France. The girl becomes insane with grief and shame; and the second day later she dies at four o'clock in the morning. Meantime Frederick unexpectedly loses his way; the rest I may best tell in the original weird form. The horse has been frightened by the sound of a church bell striking the hour of four.

Heard ye not the boding sound,
 As the tongue of yonder tower,
 Slowly, to the hills around,
 Told the fourth, the fated hour?

Starts the steed, and snuffs the air,
 Yet no cause of dread appears;
 Bristles high the rider's hair,
 Struck with strange mysterious fears.

Desperate, as his terrors rise,
 In the steed the spur he hides;
 From himself in vain he flies;
 Anxious, restless, on he rides.

Seven long days, and seven long nights,
 Wild he wander'd, woe the while!
 Ceaseless care and causeless fright
 Urge his footsteps many a mile.

Dark the seventh sad night descends;
 Rivers swell, and rain-streams pour;
 While the deafening thunder lends
 All the terrors of its roar.

At the worst part of his dreary wandering over an unknown and gloomy country, Frederick suddenly sees a light far away. This seems to him, as it seemed in Buchanan's ballad to the soul of Judas, a light of hope. He goes to the light, and finds himself in front of a vast and ruinous-looking church. Inside there is a light; he leaps down from his horse, descends some steps, and enters the building. Suddenly all is darkness again; he has to feel his way.

Long drear vaults before him lie!
 Glimmering lights are seen to glide!—
 'Blessèd Mary, hear my cry!
 Deign a sinner's steps to guide!'—

Often lost their quivering beam,
 Still the lights move slow before,
 Till they rest their ghastly gleam
 Right against an iron door.

He is really in the underground burial place of a church, in the vaults of the dead, but he does not know it. He hears voices.

Thundering voices from within,
Mixed with peals of laughter, rose ;
As they fell, a solemn strain
Lent its wild and wondrous close!

'Midst the din, he seem'd to hear
Voice of friends, by death removed;—
Well he knew that solemn air,
'Twas the lay that Alice loved.

Suddenly a great bell booms four times, and the iron door opens. He sees within a strange banquet; the seats are coffins, the tables are draped with black, and the dead are the guests.

Alice, in her grave-clothes bound,
Ghastly smiling, points a seat;
All arose, with thundering sound;
All the expected stranger greet.

High their meagre arms they wave,
Wild their notes of welcome swell;
'Welcome, traitor, to the grave!
Perjured, bid the light farewell!'

I have given the greater part of this strange ballad because of its intrinsic value and the celebrity of its German author. But the part that may have inspired Buchanan is only the part concerning the wandering over the black moor, the light seen in the distance, the ghostly banquet of the dead, and the ruined vaults. A great poet would have easily found in these details the suggestion which Buchanan found for the wandering of Judas to the light and the unexpected vision of the dead assembling to a banquet with him—but only this. The complete transformation of the fancy, the transmutation of the purely horrible into a

ghostly beauty and tenderness, is the wonderful thing. After all, this is the chief duty of the poet in this world, to discover beauty even in the ugly, suggestions of beauty even in the cruel and terrible. This Buchanan did once so very well that his work will never be forgotten, but he received thereafter no equal inspiration, and "The Ballad of Judas" remains, alone of its kind, his only real claim to high distinction.

The poetry of Robert Buchanan is not great enough as poetry to justify many quotations, but as thinking it demands some attention. His third volume is especially of interest in this respect, because it contains a curious exposition of his religious idealism. Buchanan is a mystic; there is no doubt that he has been very much influenced by the mysticism of Blake. The whole of the poems collectively entitled "The Devil's Mystics," must have been suggested by Blake's nomenclature. This collection belongs to "the Book of Orm," which might have been well called "The Book of Robert Buchanan." Orm ought to be a familiar name to students of English literature, one of the old English books also being called "The Ormulum," because it was written by a man named Orm. Buchanan's Orm is represented to be an ancient Celt, who has visions and dreams about the mystery of the universe, and who puts these visions and dreams, which are Buchanan's, into old-fashioned verse.

The great Ernest Renan said in his "Dialogues et Fragments Philosophiques" that if everybody in the world who had thought much about the mystery of things were to write down his ideas regarding the Infinite, some great truth might be discovered or deduced from the result. Buchanan has tried to follow this suggestion; for he has very boldly put down all his thoughts about the world and man and God. As to results, however, I can find nothing particularly original except two or three queer fancies, none of which relates to the deeper riddles of being. In a preface in verse, the author further tells us that when he speaks of God he does

not mean the Christian God or the God of India nor any particular God, but only the all-including Spirit of Life. Be that as it may, we find his imagery to be certainly borrowed from old Hebrew and old Christian thinkers; here he has not fulfilled expectations. But the imagery is used to express some ideas which I think you will find rather new—not exactly philosophical ideas, but moral parables.

One of these is a parable about the possible consequences of seeing or knowing the divine power which is behind the shadows of things. Suppose that there were an omnipotent God whom we could see; what would be the consequences of seeing him? Orm discovered that the blue of the sky was a blue veil drawn across Immensity to hide the face of God. One day, in answer to prayer, God drew aside the blue veil. Then all mankind were terrified because they saw, by day and by night, an awful face looking down upon them out of the sky, the sleepless eyes of the face seeming to watch each person constantly wherever he was. Did this make men happy? Not at all. They became tired of life, finding themselves perpetually watched; they covered their cities with roofs, and lived by lamp light only, in order to avoid being looked at in the face by God. This queer parable, recounted in the form of a dream, has a meaning worth thinking about. The ultimate suggestion, of course, is that we do not know and see many things because it would make us very unhappy to know them.

An equally curious parable, also related in the form of a dream, treats of the consolations of death. What would become of mankind if there were no death? I think you will remember that I told you how the young poet William Watson took up the same subject a few years ago, in his remarkable poem "The Dream of Man." Watson's supposition is that men became so wise, so scientific, that they were able to make themselves immortal and to conquer death. But at last they became frightfully unhappy, unutterably tired of life, and were obliged to beg God to give them back death again. And God said to them, "You are hap-

pier than I am. You can die; I cannot. The only happiness of existence is effort. Now you can have your friend death back again." Buchanan's idea was quite different from this. His poem is called "The Dream of the World without Death." Men prayed to God that there might be no more death or decay of the body; and the prayer was granted. People continued to disappear from the world, but they did not die. They simply vanished, when their time came, as ghosts. A child goes out to play in the field, for example, and never comes back again; the mother finds only the empty clothes of her darling. Or a peasant goes to the fields to work, and his body is never seen again. People found that this was a much worse condition of things than had been before. For the consolation of knowledge, of certainty, was not given them. The dead body is a certificate of death; nature uses corruption as a seal, an official exhibit and proof of the certainty of death. But when there is no body, no corpse, no possible sign, how horrible is the disappearance of the persons we love. The mystery of it is a much worse pain than the certain knowledge of death. Doubt is the worst form of torture. Well, when mankind had this experience, they began to think that, after all, death was a beautiful and good thing, and they prayed most fervently that they might again have the privilege of dying in the old way, of putting the bodies of their dead into beautiful tombs, of being able to visit the graves of their beloved from time to time. So God took pity on them and gave them back death, and the poet sings his gratitude thus:

And I cried, 'O unseen Sender of Corruption,
I bless Thee for the wonder of Thy mercy,
Which softeneth the mystery and the parting.

'I bless thee for the change and for the comfort,
The bloomless face, shut eyes, and waxen fingers, —
For Sleeping, and for Silence, and Corruption.'

This idea is worth something, if only as a vivid teaching

of the necessity of things as they are. The two fantasies thus commented upon are the most original things in the range of this mystical book. I could not recommend any further reading or study of the poet, except perhaps of his "Vision of the Man Accurst." But even this has not the true stamp of originality; and only "The Ballad of Judas Iscariot" is certain not to be soon forgotten.