

TOMBS OF ENGLISH ARTISTS.

No. 7.—WILLIAM BLAKE.

Few persons could look upon the portrait prefixed to Blake's illustrations of Blair's "Grave," without wishing to know something of the artist there pictured; that solid, well-formed face, that expansive forehead, that firm mouth, dreamy eye, and thoughtful eyebrow, could belong to no common man. The knowledge will reward the inquirer, for probably the world of Art can scarcely yield a parallel to William Blake. Life with him was a long struggle with spiritualism, which at last completely mastered him, and the records of his last years are entirely composed of his supposed supernatural experiences.

Blake's father was a hosier—an unpoetic trade for a son who, at the earliest age, began to draw, and to compose verses, so he was apprenticed to Basire the engraver. He worked hard as if at a trade, but all his spare hours were devoted to allowing his imagination full scope in making drawings, and elucidating them by verse, to be hung in his mother's room, for she it was who first fostered his love of Art. He soon afterwards made acquaintance with Flaxman and Stothard, both men of gentle and poetic minds, and they introduced him to many useful friends. It was at the expense of Flaxman and his early friend, the Rev. Mr. Mathew, that Blake's first work, "The Songs of Innocence," was published. But such works are "caviare to the million," and Blake toiled on with his graver for bread, employed daily in uncongenial drudgery, but enjoying all his extra hours in noting down his thoughts in sketches or verse. He had married at the age of twenty-six, and a happier match was never made, for his wife seemed specially created for him; she idolised his genius, she was uncomplaining over the poverty of their lot, she believed in his spiritualisms, and her thoughts and actions were all devoted to his happiness. Few, indeed, are the instances of such conjugal affection as Blake enjoyed; that, and his day-dreaming, made up a life of great happiness to him, and it was all that either cared for. As an engraver he was but little employed, but a guinea a week was considered ample by him for subsistence, and he preferred that some leisure should be taken for his own ideal pictures. In all these works there is great originality of conception, and much poetic design, but it is mixed with bad drawing and ineffective engraving. They are productions of undoubted genius, but it is genius unregulated by the rules of Art.

Blake's happiest days were passed in the employ of Hayley the poet; while living near him in a cottage at Felpham, in Sussex, he engraved the plates for his edition of Cowper, as well as his



SPIRIT OF A FLEA.

original designs for Hayley's "Ballads founded on anecdotes relating to Animals." In a copy of the latter work, which once belonged to T. Park, the bibliographer (now in the possession of the writer), he has written this note:—"These ballads were written to show off the erratic genius of Blake, who tries to out-Fuselize Fuseli. Mr. Hayley is an enthusiastic patron of Blake." The plates to this book are the best examples of Blake's ability, as they possess good general effect and careful engraving. It was Flaxman who had introduced him to Hayley, finding he had been paid so miserably by Edwards, the bookseller, for his marginal

illustrations to Young's "Night Thoughts." In the note of his arrival, written to Flaxman, he says,— "Felpham is a sweet place for study, because it is more spiritual than London. Heaven opens here on all sides her golden gates: her windows are not obstructed by vapours; voices of celestial inhabitants are more distinctly heard, and their forms more distinctly seen." This mysticism assumes a more decided tone, as he continues,— "I am more famed in heaven for my works than I could well conceive;" and then adds,— "In my brain are studies and chambers filled with books and pictures of old, which I wrote and painted in ages of



BLAKE'S HOUSE, FOUNTAIN COURT.

eternity, before my mortal life; and those works are the delight and study of archangels. Why, then, should I be anxious about the riches or fame of mortality?" He believed that the spirits of the great departed held converse with him, and he actually sketched their forms as they appeared before him. It was the spirit of his beloved brother Robert that directed him, so he said, to engrave the plates to his poems in their original method of execution and colour. But one of his most *bizarre* visions was the ghost or spiritualization of a flea, which he depicted in a scaly armour of green and gold, with a cup to hold blood in one hand, a dry, eager eye, and a formidable mouth, thirstily open-



SCENE FROM DANTE.

of old;" the rocks are composed of petrified humanity, and the lurid sky sweeps like a pall over Lethe: you feel the drear nature of the poet's scene more fully as you study Blake's pictured realization.

These seven plates were never published, only a few proofs were taken off for Blake's own use. All of them are in an unfinished state; in some instances the figures are slightly scratched on the copper with a dry point, and the burr remains on the lines. With much that is grand and poetic,

ing, and displaying a sharp tongue quivering in anxiety for its sanguinary meal. This extraordinary fancy, after he had sketched it, passed into the hands of the late John Varley, a fellow-artist and friend, and our cut is copied from the head of this portentous monster.

After residing three years at Felpham, he returned to London, and lodged at 17, South Molton Street, where he soon afterwards published his "Jerusalem," the maddest of all his inventions. The designs are one hundred in number, and for them, when tinted, he charged 25 guineas. The public cared not for such dreams, and he would have been unable to have completed another series of twenty-one plates, to illustrate the book of Job, but for the kind aid of his brother-artist, Linnell. In 1809 he opened an exhibition of his works, of which he printed a catalogue as wild in its words as they were in ideas. The public were naturally mystified over such pictures as "the Spiritual form of Pitt guiding Behemoth;" particularly when they were told "the artist had been taken in a vision to the ancient republics of Asia, and had seen those wonderful originals called in sacred Scriptures the cherubim," and that he "endeavoured to emulate the grandeur of those seen in his vision, and to apply it to modern times on a smaller scale."

Blake's last residence, when an old man, was at No. 3, Fountain Court, Strand; he expired in the back room of the first floor, on August 12, 1827, at the advanced age of sixty-nine. On his death-bed he persevered in his art, and, propped up by pillows, continued his designs to Dante, affectionately tended by his wife; one time he suddenly ceased sketching his favourite angels to delineate her features, "for you have ever been an angel to me," said the dying man. It was his last work; he lay dreaming on, and the moment of his death was not perceived. He was buried in Bunhill-fields Cemetery, about 25 feet from the north wall, numbered 80. No stone marks the spot: a visionary life of labour and privation has been ended in an obscure grave.

For the illustrations to Dante he had completed nearly one hundred drawings, and had engraved seven plates. His enthusiasm for the author was so great that, at the age of sixty-three, he learned the Italian language to more fully enjoy his works. How he could interpret the great poet's vision our cut must show. It illustrates the thirty-second canto of the "Inferno," descriptive of the "frozen circle," where the spirits of the condemned are—

"Blue pinch'd and shrined in ice."

The earthly visitant is told to take—

"Good heed thy soles do tread not on the heads
Of thy poor brethren."

The icy sea freezes into oblivion many of "the great

there is mixed in these designs many horrible imaginings, and some faults of drawing. They are unfinished, and must therefore be judged for their conception only; all are marked by that strong originality which characterised their author, and made him unlike any other artist. His works are now exceedingly rare, the illustrated books of poetry particularly so; but there is so much beauty, fancy, and simplicity in them, that they deserve to be known.

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