

THE  
TOMBS OF ENGLISH ARTISTS.

No. 3.—JOHN FLAXMAN, R.A.

IF the world of Art be ennobled by men of high genius, whose walk through life is directed by high-mindedness, how much more is "that smaller world" which claims to be their birthplace raised among the nations when she may say, "these are my sons!" England has few greater men to boast of than John Flaxman; and among all her artists there is not one to whom other nations will more willingly accord the place of honour. It may, indeed, be doubted whether Flaxman is not more honoured and better understood abroad than at home.

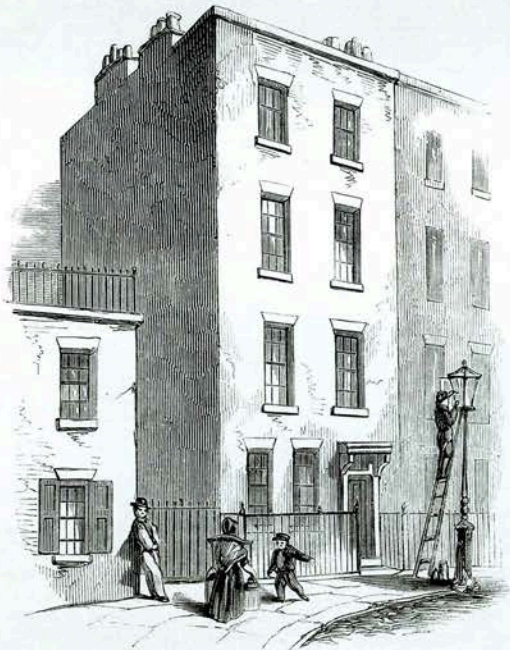
If there ever was an honest man who, by earnest application and devoted study, achieved glory—and who, by simplicity of life and purity of thought and action, left us a lesson how that glory should be borne, it was he. Fuseli, in one of his satiric moods, called him "the Reverend John Flaxman." Let us accept the term (born of a sedateness which Fuseli disliked)—he was *reverend*; if all that claims reverence can win it. For seventy-two years had he lived on earth—as a sickly boy, a poor struggling student, a young man battling against poverty, a husband with no independence but the wealth of his

own and his young wife's love. He emerges from the thralldom of early fate; he is employed and honoured; he has more than enough for his own hands' labour; he is the prosperous ruler of other and humbler Art-labourers;—is he changed? have "bettered" circumstances made him worse—the contradiction we too often see? No; he is still the same simple man, with the same plain habits; and "never too old to grow wise and good," as he once declared. His life was passed in the study of Art and "goodness;" his workmen loved him; he was to them as a father, and in sickness or sorrow his heart was ever open to counsel, and his purse to aid, them. If such a life is not *reverend*, there is no sense in using the term.

Allan Cunningham—a man of a honest and poetic mind—has written a memoir of Flaxman which does the heart good to read. It is like a grand strain of music, tinged with only enough of sadness to make it the more solemn; it rolls on over slight discords by the force of its own power; and glorious and beautiful are the closing notes of the theme. "His life was simple and blameless; he was mild and gentle; and a more perfect exemplar of the good man was to be found in his conduct than in all the theories of the learned."

Our first record of the quiet little sickly boy, who afterwards became the great academician, is very

touching. Propped on his crutches, in a chair behind the counter of his father (a moulder of figures), the child studied and read, and a sickly cough was the only announcement of his presence, when one who was destined to be an important friend—the Rev. Mr. Mathew—discovered him trying to master a Latin book. In a few years he became stronger, studied harder, and was admitted as a pupil to the Royal Academy at the age of fifteen. He still lived with his father at his house in the Strand, opposite Durham Yard, and so continued till 1782: he was then twenty-seven years of age, when he hired a small house in Wardour Street, and married Ann Deuman. The remark made by Sir Joshua Reynolds, that this last proceeding had "ruined him for an artist," really stimulated him to higher exertion and greater aspiration. He had been for many years connected with the Wedgwoods, and had furnished them with innumerable designs. They were all at low rates; yet his continuous exertion, and small requirements, made them sufficiently remunerative to content Flaxman; and the careful savings of five years enabled himself and wife to visit Rome. The writer of these notes has seen several of these bills to Wedgwood, in which many small items of ten to fifteen shillings each for modelling, go toward swelling a long bill for only a few pounds; he has also seen a list of what he re-



THE RESIDENCE OF FLAXMAN IN BUCKINGHAM STREET.



FLAXMAN'S TOMB IN THE GRAVE-YARD OF ST. GILES'S IN THE FIELDS.

quired as an outfit for Rome, and it almost rivals in simplicity the late General Napier's notion of all that was "necessary" for a field-officer. In Rome he had to work as well as study, and here he composed his noble designs to Homer, Æschylus, and Dante. For seven years he stayed in Italy, and a better apprenticeship no man served to Art in her chosen land. He returned to England experienced and famed. The statue of the Earl of Mansfield, for which he had received a commission in Rome, was the first work completed on his return.

He fixed his residence at No. 7, Buckingham Street, Fitzroy Square, and he never left it during the rest of his life. Cunningham calls it "a modest house;" it is unpretending enough, as the reader may see from our cut; it is of the monotonous cast that London builders rejoice in erecting by the thousand, until the great capital has become a tiresome heap of inanity. To it he added a small studio, and larger workshops for his assistants. Cunningham speaks of his visit, in 1825, to his little studio filled with models and sketches. "There was but one chair," he says, "and a small barrel, which held coals, with a board laid over it: on the former he seated me, and occupied the latter himself, after having removed a favourite black cat, who seemed to consider the act ungracious." The studio has been enlarged of late, and the premises behind re-

built; the front of the house has been altered also, and a gateway built beside it, on which is painted "Trinity District Schools." The pure and child-like genius of Flaxman would approve the change that converted his deserted studio to a home of instruction for the children of the poor. In this house died Mrs. Flaxman, on Feb. 7, 1820, in the sixtieth year of her age; her husband died here also, on the 7th of December, 1826: he had prepared her grave in the burial-ground belonging to the Parish of St. Giles's in the Fields, adjoining the Old Church of St. Pancras, and he was afterwards laid in the same resting-place. Let us make a pilgrimage to this once suburban spot.

Flaxman's tomb is a solid simple monument—no unfit type of the man himself; it stands in the midst of the grave-yard, but is not easy to find, inasmuch as it has no distinctive mark; it is as if the great man had desired this unpretending quietude, which enveloped him in life, to be with him in his last rest. So little is the spot known or asked after, that the grave-digger himself could not point it out, and when it was found, passed away with no other comment than "he supposed I had come to see after it a little," as the moss had grown thick in the hollows of the letters. The inscription is a long one, and first narrates the burial of his wife; then follow the words—"under the same stone is interred

her husband, John Flaxman, R.A.P.S., whose mortal life was a constant preparation for a blessed immortality; his angelic spirit returned to the Divine Giver on the 7th of December, 1826, in the seventy-second year of his age." This is followed by another to the memory of his sister, who died, 1833, in the sixty-fifth year of her age. Length of days, and honour, had fallen on all, in accordance with the great promise.

We have said that the sculptor's works are best known on the Continent, and most highly valued there. This is because the higher aspirations of Art are more familiarly studied there than among ourselves. To a large number of Englishmen Flaxman's outlines are as a sealed book: the art we chiefly value is that which presents simple transcripts of nature. It needs mental training to fully comprehend his wondrous designs, and their extraordinary embodiment of grandeur, poetry, and simplicity. The higher we educate ourselves in Art, the more we shall understand and appreciate them: and not only them, but all else in Art that is worthy of regard. Flaxman's admirers among his own countrymen are "fit, though few." His works appeal to the highest feelings of the refined Art-student; but combined therewith we also find the simplicity of true greatness.

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