

## INTRODUCTION [\*1]

*Trasumanar significa per verba*

*non si poria; pero, l'emplo basti*

*a cui esperienza grazia serba.*



There are few figures in history more strange and beautiful than that of Jacob Boehme. With a few exceptions the outward events of his life were unremarkable. He was born in 1575 at the village Alt Seidenberg, two miles from Goerlitz in Germany and close to the Bohemian border. His parents were poor, and in childhood he was put to mind their cattle. It was in the solitude of the fields that he first beheld a vision, and assuredly his contemplative spirit must have been well nourished by the continual companionship of nature.

Physically he was not robust (though he never had a sickness), and shoemaker. Of his apprenticeship nothing is recorded, I think, except a story about a mysterious man who came once to the shop when the master was away, and taking Jacob by both hands foretold to him the great work that he should accomplish.

In 1599, when he was four-and-twenty, he became a master shoemaker, and in the same year he married the daughter of a butcher. The girl developed into a capable considerate woman, and they lived together happily until Boehme died. They had four sons and probably two daughters, but his children do not figure prominently in the story of his life. Already he had been visited by a sudden illumination of mind, and in 1600 he experienced the second of those marvellous ecstasies that gave splendour to the whole of his after-life. This, also, was followed by a third and still more brilliant illumination that made clear and complete much that in his previous visions had been obscure and unrelated.

The more dramatic portion of his life begins, however, with the publication of his first book (about 1612). At first he called it Morning-Glow, but at the suggestion of a friend he altered the title to that under which it has become world-famous--Aurora.

Now although Lutheranism had severely shaken the old

orthodoxy, it had itself become, in Boehme's time, an orthodoxy just as rigid. Quite naturally the book was read by the pastor of Goerlitz, one Gregorius Richter. He was a man intolerant, conceited, violent of temper, and obtuse of intellect. He despised and feared the shoemaker. The book ruffled him into a self-righteous passion, and hurrying to the City Council he demanded that Boehme should be banished. The Council was afraid to refuse, and Boehme (like nearly all the truth-bringers) was exiled from his native town.

On the morrow, however, the Council convened again. Its members were stirred by a fine shame when it was put to them that they had banished a citizen of stainless reputation, and one, indeed, who regularly attended church. They recalled him at once, but on condition that he should write no books.

In the following year he changed his occupation. Literary work had caused his business to decline, and having sold the shop he journeyed to the larger cities of the neighbourhood (such, for example, as Prague and Dresden) selling woollen gloves; but after a while it was no longer possible for him to disobey the inner command that he should give to men his revelations, and in these last ten years he composed the unique and shining books of which we have a selection in this volume.

Gregorius Richter, as we should expect, by no means left him at peace. He was denounced from the pulpit and in his own hearing. Scurrilous treatises were flung at him, treatises full of personal abuse and ignoble sneers at his profession. "His writing," observed those who represented the Son of the carpenter, "smells overmuch of cobbler's pitch;" and again we read, "Will ye have the words of Jesus Christ or the words of a shoemaker?" The shoemaker answered them gently and with dignity, as when he declared, "Not I, the I that I am, knows these things, but God knows them in me."

In 1624 his friend Abraham von Frankenburg republished a selection of his writings under the title of The Way to Christ. Its radiant beauty impelled the respect of many who belonged to the orthodox church, and this very fact inflamed the Tertullians of his native town. Again they banished him on the charge of impiety, and even refused that he should say farewell to his wife and sons. He went to Dresden. There already he had found a friend in Dr. Hinkelmann. It is pleasant to record that while he was at Dresden the emperor convened a meeting of eminent divines, that Boehme was invited, and that the depth and spirituality of his thought, together with the charm and modesty with which he expressed it, were received with admiration by many and with enthusiasm by the learned doctors Gerhard and Meissner.

But at the end of the year (November 20, 1624) he died, happily and in the presence of a loving and beloved son. He had foretold the very hour of his death. So relentless were his opponents in Goerlitz that, until the intervention of the powerful Count Hannibal von Drohna, they refused a burial service, and the very priest who had attended him in death, being forced by the Council to make an oration, began by declaring that he would rather walk twenty miles than praise the gentle Boehme. The elaborate cross, too, which was put upon his tomb was torn down in anger.

We are told by Frankenburg, his friend, that he was short in stature, "worn and very plain," with "grey eyes, that lightened into a celestial blue, a low forehead, a thin beard, and an aquiline nose."

Now in the study of mysticism we soon find the essential experience of all mystics to have been identical, and that among them is no figure more representative than Jacob Boehme: so that when we read this book we are like men who from the vantage-point of one of its highest hills can see below and around them the whole expanse of a beautiful and unearthly island. If it allures us we shall then delight in exploring its verdant valleys or spirit-peopled woods or quiet starlit gardens, and all the mysterious birds and blossoms that fly or flutter within them; but if it does not seem attractive we can push off and sail for another country. By no true philalethe can mysticism be honourably ignored. It is either the noblest folly or the grandest achievement of man's mind. Alexander and Napoleon were ambitious, but their ambition dwindles to insignificance when it is compared with that of the mystic. The purpose of the mystic is the mightiest and most solemn that can ever be, for the central aim of all mysticism is to soar out of separate personality up to the very Consciousness of God.

So well, indeed, had Roman Catholicism taught those who were religious the insignificance of the human soul that few among the European mystics of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance were so brilliantly conscious that they could cry out boldly with Meister Eckhardt, "I truly have need of God, but God has need of me." Often they shrank from the ultimate experience, wholly worshipping God indeed, but retaining ever a sense of separateness. Their very humility was the final veil of egotism which they dared not rend.

Jacob Boehme, the last of the great European mystics, having imagined the Spirit which pervades the universe, knew well how little was the stature of his human personality; but he had realised that God was verily within him, and he spoke with the uprightness of a divine being. Unflaggingly he counsels men (as in *The Supersensual Life*) to turn away from the worthless and separated self which hungers for honour or for

bodily comfort, in order that they should rediscover within themselves "what was before nature and creature." And he means by this phrase "that light which lighteth every man who cometh into the world." It is here, he says, now and always: we have but to extricate our consciousness from all that is the effect of our time and place. We have but to quiet our own thoughts and desires, and we shall hear at once the harmonies of heaven.

The danger of such a doctrine is apparent. The true mystic may safely follow his Inward Light, but the enchanted apples are guarded by dragons and are only to be captured by the strong. Many a self-styled mystic has wasted his life in "waiting for the spark that never came:" wasted, we say, though surely not worse wasted than the thousands of lives that, for all their activity, bring nothing to the soul. It is something at least to have striven for the noblest of all ends. We must choose either safety or romance, and mysticism is the romance of religion; the mystic an explorer in the spiritual world. He does not use the instruments of intellect. He experiments. Perhaps, like the Persian Sufi poets, he thinks of God as the Great Beloved, and then, directing all his power of love to the most glorious idea that he is able to conceive, he finds that his emotion like a river has carried him into a state of soul in which he is vividly conscious of the Divine Presence. In that state he beholds the visible world as it were from within. He perceives the spiritual cause of all these material effects. He understands the essential nature of trees and flowers and mountains and the live creatures of the world. No longer does he see men by those dim lights that penetrate the dense and cloudy world of matter. He sees them as angelic toilers bowed by the burden of their own mundane selves. And he knows the insignificance of much that we deem important, the deep value of much that we count accessory, for having cleansed his vision of all personal impediment he apprehends the true proportion of all the elements that compose the universe. The vast realisations that shine within him then are by their nature not easy to express in common terms. Who that has loved could explain his experience to one that had never loved? Only those who are near can understand, and that is why so often the words of mystics are obscure.

Sometimes the seer will attempt to explain his illumined state, like St. John or Jalalu-d-din Rumi, by the use of brilliant symbols adapted from the material world; sometimes, like Plotinus or Boehme, by the use of the most abstract words in order that the mind may be led away from worldly associations: but all alike have looked upon one splendour. By many ways they have travelled homeward to that ideal state in which alone the unshackled soul has perfect freedom, and in this book, assuredly, we are communing with one who, if any among men has ever done so, broke free from the bonds of personality and could look upon the universe with the eyes of God.

alloquy, the inspiration of the Almighty, the breath of God, the holy unction, which sanctifies the soul to be the temple of the Holy Ghost, which instructs it aright in all things, and searches to bathe thy Theoy, [\*1] the depths of God.

This is the precious pearl, whose beauty is more glorious, and whose virtue more sovereign than the sun: It is a never-failing comfort in all afflictions, a balsam for all sores, a panacea for all diseases, a sure antidote against all poison, and death itself; it is that joyful and assured companion and guide, which never forsakes a man, but convoys him through this valley of misery and death into the blessed paradise of perfect bliss.

If you ask, What is the way to attain to this wisdom? Behold! Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, tells you plainly in these words; "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me;" [\*2] or as he says elsewhere, "Unless you be born again, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven:" or as St. Paul says, "If any man seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise." [\*1]

Herein lies that simple childlike way to the highest wisdom, which no sharp reason or worldly learning can reach unto; nay, it is foolishness to reason, and therefore so few go the way to find it: The proud sophisters and wiselings of this world have always trampled it under foot with scorn and contempt, and have called it enthusiasm, madness, melancholy, whimsy, fancy, etc., but wisdom is justified of her children.

Indeed, every one is not fit for or capable of the knowledge of the eternal and temporal nature in its mysterious operation, neither is the proud covetous world worthy to receive a clear manifestation of it; and therefore the only wise God (who giveth wisdom to every one that asketh it aright of him) has locked up the jewel in his blessed treasury, which none can open but those that have the key; which is this, viz., "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: "The Father will give the Spirit to them that ask him for it.

This is the true theosophic school wherein this author learned the first rudiments and principles of wisdom, and to which we must go if we would understand his deep writings: For we must know that the sons of Hermes, who have commenced in the high school of true magic and theosophy, have always spoken their hidden wisdom in a mystery; and have so couched it under shadows and figures, parables and similies, that none can understand their obscure, yet clear writings, but those who have had admittance into the same school, and have tasted of the Feast of Pentecost.

CLIFFORD BAX

#### Footnotes

<sup>^v:1</sup> The biographic substance of this introduction is principally drawn from Dr. Hartmann's rare volume, and from Professor Deussen's Preface to the magnificent edition of Boehme's works.