VICTORIA, LADY WELBY.

AN ETHICAL MYSTIC.

MRS W. K. CLIFFORD.

WITH what may be called the biographical facts of her life I am not concerned; they will shortly be set forth, more fully and far better than I could do it. But it may be stated for those who only knew her in an intellectual sense that she was a Stuart-Wortley, a god-daughter of Queen Victoria, later, a Maid of Honour. In her youth she travelled much in the Near East. She married Sir William Welby of Denton Manor, Grantham (he died late in the last century), and she had two children—they are now Sir Charles Welby and Mrs Henry Cust. She died in 1912 at Harrow, and rests by the little church at Denton.

It is of the impression she made on the current thought of her time, the effect she had on those with whom she came in contact, and of her own standpoint that I want to speak. It is difficult, for though she read widely she always saw with dreaming eyes beyond the thesis in the book before her; thus she remained an idealist and above all an influence—with a teaching that was her own and had no trace of dogma in it. She brought something beautiful, if undefined, into the lives of all who knew her. But the world has changed since she died: many of those who looked to her for sustenance of heart or brain have died too, or scattered, and to the few who remain it seems sometimes as if her outlook—always a little hazy even to them—had vanished too, as a garden does when the builders come. I gather up what the years and my memory have left me.

I knew her first in 1885, but not intimately till a year later, when we went to Switzerland together. Perhaps I was a little afraid of her, for though she always avoided talking of early points of view, I knew she had been very orthodox: the scholars and philosophers of the set I had lived in might

scarcely be so described. But it was soon evident that she was in a transition stage, dreaming and evolving theories of her own, reaching out towards the thinkers—humbly seeking knowledge from them and encouragement to pursue her own tracks of thought—she counted it a great happiness when she came to know many of them well. She asked me about many who were my friends, and was very eager concerning my husband's views. She had a copy of his *Lectures and Essays* with her, the margins already covered with notes, and we discussed many points in them while we were on the Bel Alp—at the little hotel below the Tyndall hut.

She had never been to Switzerland before, and it was interesting to see that it impressed her, not so much in the manner that it usually does the first-time visitor as because it seemed to offer to her waiting hungry heart, dismayed and saddened at the vanishing of the old landmarks, some new and almost startling proof of divinity that had hardly dared before to suggest itself, or that her mind had hesitated to consider. In the late afternoon when we arrived at Mürren the July sunset was reddening the snow on the Jungfrau, and I remember how, as soon as the door was shut on the waiter who showed us to our sitting-room, she walked across to the balcony and threw herself down on her knees while she looked up thankfully at the great Alps. She had breathed with intense relief when, from the Terrace at Berne, she saw the famous view of the Oberland, so that her attitude at Mürren was not surprising, though she had given no hint, beyond her eager search among men and books, of the conflict that must have been going on inwardly. It struck me during the whole time we were away that, though she struggled after side-issues, she was perhaps unconsciously more of a Pantheist than anything else. There was no trace of the usual orthodoxy or tenacity to the dogma of earlier years in her talk, but always a sense of the divinity of Heaven and earth *together*, she never seemed able to separate them; there might be long stretches of weary or difficult road to tread, many rough bits to smooth and much to understand, but there were no impassable barriers between them. Were not the mountains that reached upwards and the clouds that met them a material sign, if one were needed, not only of the surpassing beauty of both worlds but that they were one? To what seemed to her the blemishes (mostly accidental she counted them), the almost pathetic blemishes of the earth, or the weaknesses of humanity, she was either blind, or she obstinately and mercifully

ignored them. She had an absolute faith in the fulfilment of all best promises, in the development of all best things, a firm belief that she saw pathways that led to a goal—and the joy of thinking that she could lead others towards it —a goal that meant the healing of all sorrow, and a high and pure attainment; it gave her an underlying strength through all pain, and courage to go on. Her attitude never changed. She seemed absolutely certain of a way to human and more than human happiness, and to feel that she was inspired to point it out. It was a tragedy to her that so many were blind or careless and failed to understand marvellous signs that she saw clearly, a tragedy qualified by the conviction that she could in the future, by written or spoken words, be the means of their seeing and feeling as she did. She imagined, in her later years, that with an increasing number it was so already; that she had helped to endow the lives of those about her with the sunshine shed into her own beautiful soul. It gave her a strange uplifted feeling that was evident in her voice, in everything she did: not for a moment that she thought herself different or held herself aloof from those about her; she entered keenly into their everyday joys and sorrows, their ambitions and amusements; she was just as human, as much alive as they, but she seemed a little wiser, as if she had a secret knowledge that was not yet theirs, but would be when they were ready. There was something of the seer about her, but of a seer, held and softly bound, who failed to find means to convey all that she longed to make clear to others. "What we do want is a really plastic language," she complained. She tried many forms and variations of expression—scientific and philosophic terms difficult to the outsider, which only tangled and lumbered the natural simplicity of her English; allegory and metaphor, that were beautiful occasionally, but unconvincing. She tried to grapple with the inadequacy of words, and for a long time gave herself up to an overmastering sense of their failure to express the exact nature of argument and thought. She held them, as commonly used, to be a false, or at least a weak and misleading set of symbols, and tried to make others recognise this and the reasons of it; hence her long and patient toiling, her perplexities, her various excursions in the direction of what is known as Significs;[1] but seeing that we have nothing but words to expose the insufficiency of words, and must use these current symbols in the task of trying to discredit them, she often failed to make her contentions under-

[1] She wrote the article on "Significs" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

stood, and seemed to be moving in a maze.[1] She took refuge in declarations of her own sense of security, her certainty that all she felt was veritable; but owing to the confusion of terms—a confusion not hers only—and her experiments with words, what she actually meant was sometimes difficult to understand, and an air of patient disappointment showed that she knew it, though she refused to acknowledge it. A little note of pain, that smote the heart of her listener, would now and then come to her voice till suddenly her face would light up while she told of what she took to be agreement with her of those who were great in their generation, or of letters that had cheered and helped her to go on; though some who gathered round her were of an order that, while they recognised the beauty of her aspirations and longings, gave only a feigned acquiescence that perhaps justified itself since it was given for love of her. Did not a great thinker tell us that it was sympathy, not agreement, that he wanted most? It was so with her; it is so with all pioneers, and she was essentially a pioneer along the track she made her own—the track that is waiting. Will it wait long? There are those who would go on, but who stand baffled and disheartened, perhaps lacking the courage that she had to sort out the true from the untrue, and to turn resolutely from the false.

She worked on to the end, like a beautiful form with a veiled face, a face one longed to see and yet could not, groping along a sunlit path that she was certain led—whither? She could never clearly see. *The secret was in her heart*, but something held her back, she could never tell it. It seemed as if a mist rose between her and the words she was seeking, as a mist rises, or as clouds hide from the pioneers the hidden city that is beyond the road they are making for others to tread. She could only declare—in that wonderful voice of hers, and with the tender smile, as of one who knew—that there was a balm for all ills, a definite understanding of all causes and effects, a key that would open a door and then the whole earth would be flooded

[1] In 1903 she published (Macmillan & Co.) *What is Meaning? Studies in the Development of Significence.* A remarkable book that, probably owing to its obscurities and her lack of concentration on its subject, received far too little attention. She had previously published *Links and Clues* (which reached a second edition) and *Grains of Sense.* Both are interesting as showing the anxious trend of her thought, which, in isolated passages, became more daring and speculative in the much later work.

It is significant that her daughter (Mrs Henry Cust) translated Michel Bréal's *Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meaning*, in 1900.

not with new beauty but with beauty that was already its own, waiting for our knowledge of how to use it.

Lest it be imagined that she was merely a visionary, it should be said of those in the thought-world who were her friends that if belief in the value of what she failed to make clear was not wholly given, it was at least intermittent; and more—there were those who waited patiently, almost reverently, and were stimulated and rewarded by flashes of light that helped them, occasionally even flashes of genius. To my mind, genius—uncertain and difficult to control, as it always is, with its bewilderments, its intuitions, its upliftedness, and dread of tragedy—is the word that best describes her. Underlying everything, her long years of work and thought and patient searchings, one felt that, unknown to herself, there was the longing to find—solved with the beauty and wonder with which her heart endowed it—the secret that all the centuries have kept, and that each one of us will solve in a single moment of which none may give account.

But there is more than this to the right understanding of her, and again she was unconscious of it. The goal toward which she worked and longed for, with all her heart and soul, was the betterment of the world. Many long for it, or imagine they do, and at times work for it with good or ill results; but she believed in the betterment being actually there—before us now—in its having some unseen lodgment beyond any obstructions that had gathered, just as she believed in the dawn being beyond the darkest night. Surely all who were of any good would struggle towards it, she thought, once they realised it was waiting and felt its right to exact the best that was in them, and the blessedness of giving it. There was a difference in the chances and capacities dealt out, but it need not concern them over-much. Some had a whole empire, its power and chances, with means to help it; some a bit of work to try and do as best it could be done; some just an ordinary home to make a haven of content or a back garden to cultivate, a storm-ridden life to smooth, a child in danger of some sort to rescue or make happier or better—all were contributions to the whole. She felt it more keenly than words can express. She showed it in her actions, she wove it into her theories, her beliefs, her longings; and this, saturated as she was by a sense of all that the world could be to humanity, and of all that humanity could do for the world, and her anxiety to see it done, gave her an air as of one who had more knowledge—perhaps a secret knowledge—of divinity than is usually vouchsafed to ordinary

people; it put her on a different level and made those about her a little better, or a little rueful—for ashamed is too strong a word.

She knew everyone who counted in the world. In her later years at Harrow especially, where she was nearer the heart of things than in her Lincolnshire home, men of letters and all degrees of thinkers gathered round her. . . . I can see her plainly, in those last years, in her chair near the window—in a study rather than a drawing-room, with books everywhere on shelves and tables, and papers scattered about, and all the signs of work and thought with which she loved to surround herself. In front of her a little table with more papers, beside her, a couch in the recess of the bay window; the bay window was wide and long, fringed by a creeper that reached a little lower every summer and straggled down the woodwork that divided the glass. Outside was a terrace, with roses falling over the wall and dipping to the lawn; beyond the lawn a long garden of little slopes and high trees and trailing flowers that were free from all the atrocities of restraint. The garden became a part of the landscape that stretched into a misty distance: it was always misty when I saw it and always beautiful. . . . The tall figure with the soft dark folds falling about it, the face, thin and sensitive, on which pain had set its mark, lighted up with happy greeting as one entered, and she had the magic of giving out happiness to her friends. She had sympathy and eager listening for all attitudes of thought; and she sought with almost passionate expression to urge the significance of her own convictions and (for lack of a better description) her mystical ethics. To some who listened she was an inspiration, helping as a hand held out unexpectedly may help even the strongest over ways that are difficult. Tired men and women especially loved her. She gave them rest and comfort, and seemed to draw them into the peace and vision that were her own. Perhaps there are some who find it rest and comfort still, when sorrow comes or the mysteries of life and death take hold of them, to see her face and hear her voice again in their hearts; or to ponder over her work and all it means: difficult to grasp, but with wisdom and beauty for its freight. This was the effect of her on those who thought and felt and cared. The road she began is unfinished. Will any carry it further, now that she, veiled and silent, has passed on?

LUCY CLIFFORD.

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