

JACOB BOEHME.

BY BELLE P. DRURY.

JACOB BOEHME was born in or near Görlitz in upper Lusatia in 1575. He was a grave and thoughtful child with the gift of immediate vision regarding the wonders of fairy tradition, as, later, he had of the mysteries of religion. After having learned to read at school he was apprenticed to a shoemaker. Alone at his work in the shop one day a stranger appeared and said: "Jacob, thou art little but shalt be great and become another man such an one as at whom the world will wonder. Therefore be pious, fear God and reverence his word. Read diligently the Holy Scripture wherein thou hast comfort and instruction; For thou must endure much misery and poverty and suffer persecution, but be courageous and persevere, for God loves and is gracious to thee."

This incident made a deep impression on his mind and he made such rapid progress in his Christian life that he became a reproach to his master who set him at liberty, telling him to seek his living as he liked best. For a time he became a traveling apprentice, wandering about with little in hand, and possessed of a tender conscience and melancholy soul. He was distressed that the very principle of Protestantism was being forsaken when ecclesiastics began to prove their positions not by Scriptures but by articles of faith.

Boehme married young and settled in Görlitz, working hard at his homely trade. When Stilling visited this town he said Görlitz was interesting to him because Jacob Boehme was a master shoemaker and citizen of the place, and that it was extremely affecting to him to find his memory still so much cherished and its influence so beneficial although it was now two hundred years since he lived and was so undeservedly and basely treated by the clergy. Boehme inculcated nothing in his doctrines or writings which was contrary to the Augsburg confession. He went constantly to church and frequently received the sacrament. In his manner of life he was

blameless, a faithful subject, an exemplary father, a kind neighbor, yet the priesthood treated him as a heretic, and would not suffer his body to be buried in the churchyard. But the case was referred to the Court at Dresden which ordered that Boehme's corpse should be interred with all the honors due a good Christian and the whole of the clergy should attend his funeral!

Boehme is styled the "Teutonic Philosopher" because he wrote of God, nature and man in the Teutonic or common German tongue. His language is often obscure and inadequate, his ideas transcendent and even fantastic. He also uses strange hieroglyphical figures, and gives to everything an air of mystery, yet Cousin in his history of speculative philosophy pronounces Boehme the most profound and unaffected of the mystics of the sixteenth century.

Coleridge regarded him with veneration and acknowledged his personal obligations to the "illuminated cobbler."

His abstractions are pictured in actual forms. He is as grotesque as Dante, as pithy and picturesque in speech as John Bunyan.

Boehme was illiterate and claimed no wisdom of his own, no ability to think, speak or write of himself. His works claim to be an opening of the spirit of God working in him and out of the common path of man's reasoning wisdom. They show the first rise of nature and creature, how all things come from a working will of the Holy Triune Incomprehensible God manifesting himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit through an outward perceptible working Triune Power of Fire, Light and Spirit—both in the eternal heaven and in this temporal transitory state of material nature; how man is the real offspring of God, born partaker of the divine nature, He shows, at length, how some angels and man are fallen from God, what they are in their fallen state and the difference between the fall of angels and that of men. He labors to show what is meant by the curse, how and why sin, misery, wrath and death shall reign but for a time till the Love, Wisdom and Power of God shall in a supernatural way triumph over sin, misery and death, make fallen man rise to the glory of angels and this material system shake off its curse and enter into everlasting union with heaven from whence it came."

To study the writings of Boehme is to attain to something of the wisdom of the East which Solomon had, it is to attain the mysteries of nature and also Divine Wisdom and Theosophy or the wisdom of faith, for this is the wisdom by which Moses wrought his wonders which were above nature and all the prophets from the

first to Christ. It is that which Jesus himself taught his disciples and which the Comforter continually teaches the holy servants of God. But Boehme's biographer adds: "They who come to mankind with a plain uncouth message for them to strive with earnestness or else their expected heaven will turn to hell are odious messengers especially to those who in their several forms of religion have been promised eternal happiness at a far cheaper rate!"

Boehme's originality is thought to consist in the way he applies the principles of the theosophists to the interpretation of Scripture. He claims, indeed, divine illumination but admits that the light was communicated to him by degrees, at intervals, and not without obscurity. He does not, like Swedenborg, profess to hold intercourse with spirits in other states of being but aided by divine grace he lived along the whole line of his nature with a completeness attained by few. He says he did nothing of himself, only sought earnestly the Holy Spirit and thus seeking, the Gate was opened so he saw more in one quarter of an hour than if he had been many years at a university. He saw and knew the Being of all Beings, he knew and saw in himself all the three worlds, the divine, the paradisaical, the dark world. He saw things as in chaos which it took him years to bring forth into external writings.

He was persecuted and exiled, although the doctors of divinity who examined him admired his meekness of spirit, depth of knowledge and fulness of matter with which he answered all inquiries. One Doctor who examined him at Wittenberg said: "Who knows but God has designed him for some extraordinary work, and how can we with justice pass judgment against that which we understand not? For surely he seems to be a man of wonderful high gifts of the spirit though we can not at present from any ground of certainty approve or disapprove of many things he holds."

The superstitious of the time thought Boehme possessed of magical powers, and one man went so far as to try to conjure the familiar spirit away from him!

After the publication of "Aurora or the Morning Light" chemists and other learned men sought out the author. From them he learned some Latin and Greek words he afterward used in expressing his ideas or rather his illustrations. His writings began to be quite generally read in many countries, even in Rome. Infidels catching at the bait of his mysterious philosophy were drawn to the true faith, and he influenced ministers to be less controversial.

He wrote the following in a friend's album:

“To whom time and eternity
 Harmoniously as one agree;
 His soul is safe, his life's amended,
 His battle's o'er, his strife is ended.”

Boehme's mysticism is not sentimental or effeminate. A few points in his theory are as follows:

As regards the Trinity he supposes that in the abyss of the Divine Nature there exists Desire—a going forth which is called the “Father.” The object and realization of such tendency is the “Son.” The bond and result of this reciprocal Love is the “Holy Spirit.”

As there is an Eternal Spirit so also there is an Eternal Nature. God is not mere Being, He is also “Will”—the Will manifests itself in external nature. Eternal Nature has in it seven forms of life,—Active Principles or Fountain Spirits typified in the seven golden candlesticks of Revelation. These forms or qualities reciprocally generate and are generated by each other and their center is the Son of God.

The simultaneous action of these qualities becomes concrete in the visible universe, on our planet their operation has been corrupted by moral evil. The names of the seven Fountain Spirits are: The Astringent Quality, the Sweet Quality, the Bitter, the Quality of Fire, of Love, of Sound, of Corporeity or Essential Substance. The Father is the dark fiery principle, the Son the principle of Light and Grace, the Holy Ghost the creative preserving principle. The Light or Son had not been but for the Darkness—the Father—and from the two arises the Holy Spirit, the archetypal form of the universe. Evil is necessary to manifest good. What were virtue without temptation? In life's warfare lies its greatness. Our author believed in the doctrine of a future state determined by the deeds done in this. He does not believe that God is a mere vital force, nor yet does he relegate Deity beyond the skies. God is the life of all creatures, He dwelleth in me, I am in his heaven if I love him wherever I go. The universe is born of him and lives in him.

God created three kingdoms of spirits to correspond with the three persons in the Trinity. To each a monarch and seven princes were assigned, corresponding to the Fountain Spirits. One of these sovereigns, Lucifer, fell through pride. The seventh quality of Lucifer's realm collided in space with our world, and the earth, once a heavenly world, was broken up in chaos. Before man was created nature had fallen and out of this chaos God made earth.

Adam was made to be the restoring angel of this world, but

when he began to love the external world it was thought better for him to lose the feminine in his own nature, so Eve was made, but this did not serve to arrest his downfall: he ate of the tree and his angelic life ceased. No divine wrath was visited on him: disease and death ensued solely because he chose an animal instead of an angelic life.

God inflicts no punishment on lost souls, their own sins and passions are their flames and chains. Redemption is our deliverance from the restless isolation of self or "ownhood," and our return to union with God.

He sometimes breaks away from the authority of Scriptural text and says, "It is evident that the dear man Moses did not write this as it is contrary to—etc.

Boehme's style is often very difficult to master, but again it is simple and clear as in such passages as this:

"Therefore, O noble man, there is nothing nearer to you than heaven is; all the principles with eternity are in you and the holy paradise is again generated in you, wherein God dwells. When will you seek for God? Seek Him in your soul only that is proceeded out of the eternal nature wherein the divine birth stands.