

JOHN MASON: POET AND ENTHUSIAST.

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No apology should be needed for the appearance in these RECORDS of a purely biographical essay; but when it is pointed out that no such contribution has been made to them since 1879,¹ it may not be superfluous to suggest that surely the delineation from contemporary evidence, however fragmentary, of the forgotten personality of one who was in his own day noteworthy, and who exercised some influence for good on his contemporaries and on those who followed him, may be as strictly a "Record of Buckinghamshire" as the reconstruction, on paper, of a mutilated building, or the disentanglement of a complicated pedigree.

In the present instance, while the problems suggested are so permanently interesting, the facts themselves are preserved in such detail that it has seemed worth while to link together, into as continuous a narrative as may be, what has hitherto been scattered in half-a-dozen rare pamphlets and as many scanty memoirs, prefixed to uncritical editions of poems, letters, and 'select remains.'

John Mason was born in the period of stress and excitement which immediately preceded the outbreak of the Civil War. The precise year is unknown, and can only be computed approximately from the dates of his university career. The family to which he belonged lived in the neighbourhood of Kettering and Wellingborough, and was divided into several branches, some of which held land early in the seventeenth century in the parish of Irchester. A Nicholas Mason was Vicar of Irchester from 1622 (when the extant Registers begin) to 1646,² when he moved to Tilbrook, in Beds, and afterwards

¹ Mr. Gibbs' paper on the Bucks Regicides, vol. v. 2.

² The register, however, at Irchester is in the same hand till 1649.

to Skelton and Bletsoe in the same county,³ dying in 1671. He was twice married, and had a son John, who was born in 1647, at Skelton, a son Nathaniel (b. 1650), and a daughter Barnardiston (b. 1652). There is a tradition that our John Mason was the son of a minister, and this Nicholas may have been his father.

But the two brothers who survived him, and were "curators" to his children were named Thomas and Nicholas.⁴ Now, a Thomas and a Nicholas, sons of Thomas and Margaret Mason, were baptized at Irchester, Aug. 3, 1643, and Feb. 2, 1644, respectively, and in March, 1646, *something* happened to *a son* of the same couple; but the register is defective, and though it is almost certainly a *baptism*, it would be mere conjecture to assert that the name is *John*. John Mason himself had a son Thomas, which is some faint confirmation of this view. But against it must be set the consideration that Thomas Shepherd, the part author of "Penitential Cries" (page 20), who was born in 1665, was also the son of a Vicar of Tilbrook, and that his friendship with Mason *may* have begun in boyhood.

From whatever home, little John was sent to a grammar school kept by the Vicar of Strixton, not far from Irchester; where, again, a Robert Mason had been Vicar from 1622 to 1628. The registers at Strixton, down to 1729, have unfortunately been burnt, and no papers seem to be extant which relate to the school; so for this period, too, we are in darkness. The boy's health appears to have been delicate, but his strong character made itself felt already, and his master is reported to have said of him that "if he lived he was like to be a violent zealot."⁵

From Strixton young Mason went on to Cambridge, and was admitted a sizar of Clare Hall, on May 16, 1661.⁶ We still have no direct evidence about him; but so much that is characteristic of him seems to be referable to the Cambridge thought of the time, that we can see very plainly what were the ideas which chiefly influenced him.

³ "Notes and Queries," March 5, 1892, p. 186.

⁴ Act of Administration, Somerset House. Arch. Bucks Act Book, fol. 165, June, 1694.

⁵ I. A. 25.

⁶ Clare College Admission Register.

Since the Earl of Manchester's visitation in 1644, when nine royalist fellows had been ejected from Clare Hall alone, the strictest Calvinistic doctrines had been established in high places, and had become extremely popular; yet they did not seriously disturb the very moderate and liberal school which was led by Cudworth and Henry More. Meanwhile, the Nonconformist criticisms of the Liturgy, on which Mason never satisfied himself, were being met by the successors of Jeremy Taylor; and the "singularly benevolent and gentle" Joseph Mede, of Christ's, though he himself died in 1638, had initiated in the University a line of millenarian speculation, which will be of the first importance later on in our story.⁷

One of Mason's college friends, Gray by name, who was afterwards a minister in Northamptonshire, wrote, after his death, that he was 'careless in some part of his life' at Cambridge; and he himself excused his lucubrations at Isham on the ground 'that he had lost his time at the University, and must regain it;'⁸ and would repeat in his sermons 'here stands one that has been as great a sinner as any of you, till it pleased God to open his eyes.'⁹ There was a rowdy set in Cambridge, even in the heart of the Puritan time, when the undergraduates 'raged like Diana's craftsmen' against George Fox, in 1655,¹⁰ and the restoration of the Merry Monarch did not tend to improve matters.

With Mason, however, this phase did not last long; for, after taking his B.A. degree in 1664, he entered the ministry, and was appointed curate to Rev. Mr. Sawyer, Rector of Isham, Northamptonshire.¹¹ Here, 'with a most cheerful spirit, freed from moroseness or enthusiasm,' he went about his work earnestly and faithfully, while he endeavoured to make up for lost time by regular study far into the night.¹² This excessive application at the beginning of his ministerial life must be held responsible, in great measure, for the broken health and loss of mental balance of his later years.

⁷ Cf. Mullinger: 'Cambridge Thought in the Seventeenth Century.'

⁸ Imp. Acc. 26.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Journal, i. 290.

¹¹ I. A. 26.

¹² *Ibid.*

He returned to Cambridge for his M.A. degree in 1668;¹³ and on the 21st of October in the same year was presented to the Vicarage of Stantonbury, near Stony Stratford, where he remained more than six years.

Stantonbury (or Stanton Barry, as it was formerly called) lies on the south bank of the Ouse, three miles east of Wolverton. In the middle of the seventeenth century, the manor and advowson belonged to the family of Temple; but Mason was presented to the Vicarage by Sir John Wittewronge, of Rothampstead, in Hertfordshire, who had bought the manor shortly before.¹⁴ The new patron still lived, and in 1693 was buried, at Rothampstead; but he built a large house at Stantonbury for his son, the ground-plan of which can still be traced in the field north of the church, between the river on the west and an artificial mound on the east, which bounded the garden, and has half-a-dozen old hawthorns upon it still.

Even then, except for the large house and the outlying farms, Stantonbury seems to have been almost deserted.¹⁵ There is no trace of a vicarage, and it is not improbable that the Vicar lived at the Hall as Mr. Wittewronge's private chaplain. Now the place is quite deserted, and the old Church is only used for an occasional funeral. It is a very small building, consisting of chancel, nave, and north porch, all poor and mean; but the chancel arch is a magnificent specimen of the best Norman work; and the pulpit dates from the time of the Wittewronges, and is no doubt that which Mason himself used. The square pew on the north side opposite to it represents the seat of the Lord of the Manor, whose proper corner, however, with statue-niche and piscina, on the south side, is occupied by the pulpit and a later reading-pew.

It is clear enough, then, that at Stantonbury Mason had most of his time to himself; and he seems to have used it well. He still pursued his theological studies, and very probably began, in this leisure time, the "Critical Latin Commentary," which he only carried as far as the

¹³ *Graduati Cantabrigienses*.

¹⁴ Lipscomb, 'History of Buckinghamshire,' viii. 347-9.

¹⁵ Local tradition says that there were houses in the large field north of the Church.



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Second Book of Samuel ; and a "Short Paraphrase and Comment on Revelation," which must be ascribed to the earliest period of his ministry, because it is so entirely contrary to his later opinions on the subject."¹⁶

Here, too, he made the acquaintance of Rev. Henry Maurice, Curate, and afterwards Rector of Tyringham, which lies between Newport Pagnell and Olney, and is some six miles as the crow flies from Stantonbury.¹⁷ The Blackwells, who succeeded the Tyringhams at Tyringham about this time, were connected by marriage with the Wittewronges ; and the two ministers whose tastes had much in common, were consequently thrown together a good deal.

Maurice was a man of learning, and of broad and moderate views ; he had a very high opinion of Mason's ability and piety—an estimate which was fully in accord with his reputation in the parish and neighbourhood.¹⁸ His account of Mason, and his opinions at this time, is worth quoting at length :—

"He was a person of as great devotion as ever I met with, and his main aim was to make all he conversed with to be religious." I. A. 28. "In his principles he was a rigid Calvinist, and not a little inclining to Antinomianism. 'Tis almost twenty years since¹⁹ that we discussed eagerly about St. Peter and Judas ; and he would acknowledge no other difference betwixt them, but what *decrees* and *irresistible* grace had made. At another time we were no less earnest upon imputation, etc., and for a conclusion to our discourse upon that subject, he deliberately asserted, and repeated it, that it was all one, whether he had kept the Commandments or broken them all, since Christ had observed them. He did never (that I could hear of) speak directly against the prayers of the Church ; but as he made use of some of them in public, so (when his head would not suffer him to pray in his family) if he could not persuade any with him to *extemporize*, he would then desire them to read some Collects of the Common Prayer, which he said were very good." I. A. 27. Mason's own phrase was—"No form was apt to make men vain-glorious, but a form was apt to make them careless." *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Preface, by his grandson, to "Select Remains" (1812), p. ix.

¹⁷ Though Maurice does not begin to sign the registers, even as Curate, till 1686, his own language (I. A. 7) about his acquaintance with Mason certainly implies that he lived there in some official capacity, while Mason held the living of Stantonbury. I. A. 27. Mason, however, frequently stayed at Stantonbury after he had resigned the living. I. A. 28.

¹⁸ I. A. 28.

¹⁹ This was written in 1654.

This testimony is confirmed by others who knew him well. Rev. John Hammet, a graduate of St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford,²⁰ who succeeded him at Stantonbury, wrote of him thus :—

“My acquaintance with Mr. Mason I have esteemed one of the greatest mercies I ever received. His learning and piety were great, and his humility deep. Divers souls, in the neighbourhood wherein he lived, were seals of his ministry. His affections were so fervent and his zeal so great, that, as they were the comfort, so they were the admiration of those that feared God, and lived near Him. He was in his judgment and practice a conforming minister. The Liturgy he read with affection, and said he enjoyed much communion with God while reading it. But he was far from a bitter spirit against Dissenters. So great was his love to Christ, that he had a value for any one who spoke a savoury word of Him ; and as he had a great charity for others, so he was most highly esteemed by the most sober Churchmen and Dissenters. Mr. Baxter said he was the glory of the Church of England.²¹ Other judicious ministers I have heard say that they never conversed with a minister, conforming or non-conforming, that equalled him. The frame of his spirit was so heavenly ; his deportment so humble and obliging ; his discourse of spiritual things (and little else could we hear from him) so weighty, with such apt words and delightful air, that it charmed all that had any spiritual relish, and was not so burdensome to others, as discourses of that nature have been from other ministers.”²²

The friendship begun at Stantonbury was lifelong. Maurice was one of the few divines who were allowed to speak with him during the last few weeks of his life ; and did what he could to defend his memory, and put the best construction upon his eccentricities. The “Impartial Account,” which he published in the year of Mason's death, remains by far the most valuable discussion of the Water Stratford ‘enthusiasm.’

Another connection, however, which Mason formed while at Stantonbury, was destined to a very different result. Hardly a mile across the river from the church

²⁰ “Catalogue of all Graduates.” Oxford, 1851.

²¹ I am sorry I have not been able to verify this from Baxter's published works ; but it may have been *obiter dictum*.

²² Preface to “Select Remains,” 1812, pages vi. and vii. Mr. Hammet had access to Mason's papers, and prepared to write a life of him immediately after his death (I. A. 24) ; but I can find no trace of it. He may have been working in collaboration with Mr. Mayo, James Wrexham's successor at Kimble (page 25).

of Stantonbury and the Wittewronge mansion, lies the village of Haversham, commanded by its fine church on the high ground beyond. Mason used very frequently to minister to the people beyond the water meadows in default of parishioners of his own. Haversham was his "beloved place," and his affection was returned by those whom we only know as the "Haversham Christians" later on.²³ Of the Rector, Daniel Rogers, however, we know as little as we do of the faithless 'shepherd' of Little Linford, whose duties Mason was undertaking in 1674.²⁴ It is with one of his successors that we shall be concerned hereafter.

The six years at Stantonbury, then, were not ill spent: and besides these occupations he carried on a considerable correspondence on devotional topics, "tending to increase the power of godliness both in persons and families;" the extant remains of which (Letters xiii., xiv., xv., and perhaps x. and xi.), like the earlier letters from Water Stratford, show his intense spiritual earnestness, undisfigured by the extreme Predestinarian expressions of his last years. The following passages are characteristic alike of his theology, and his literary style:—

"All our hope might have been in this life, all our comfort in this world, all our confidence in creatures, and all our heaven upon earth. Has the Lord caused us to know better things? O let us admire his free grace now and for ever. Live not so much upon the comforts of God as upon the God of comforts." (Letter x.)

"Every soul will be uncased ere it be long; and then it will appear whether they ever applied themselves seriously to Christ. There is *no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus*. Nothing but *condemnation* to them that are out of Christ Jesus. Faith makes Christ ours. This consists in *Self-denial* and *Self-resignation*. We must see our sins so far as to abhor ourselves, abhor ourselves so far as to deny ourselves, deny ourselves so far as to resign ourselves up into the saving arms of our only Saviour. They that do this are pardoned, sanctified, saved for ever." (Letter xi.)

"Be of *good comfort*, sister, it is but yet a very little while, and *He that shall come, will come, and will not tarry*. We shall be welcome at home, however it fares with us on *our journey*." (Letter xv.) The italics follow the earliest extant text.

²³ I. A. 24.

²⁴ Letter xiii. The numbering of the Letters is that of the 1812 edition of the "Select Remains."

The last two passages are especially noticeable, as containing, in germ, the thoughts which occupied his mind, and at last broke down his reason: though it is clear that the terms used are still merely metaphorical.

On the 12th of October, 1669, "Clare Wittewronge, the wife of John Wittewronge, Esq., departed this life . . . and was interred Oct. 22nd" at Stantonbury.²⁵ Her epitaph, on a slab in the chancel floor, contains some lines which have something of the bold imagery of Mason's verse; though the cadence is not so smooth as that of his acknowledged poems. The funeral sermon which he preached on this occasion was printed two years afterwards, under the title, "The Waters of Marah Sweetened" (London: 1671), and forms a pamphlet of thirty-nine pages.²⁶ The text is Heb. ix. 27, 28, and the subject, the sufficiency of Christ's mediation.

This sermon is earlier in time than any of his dated letters, and therefore probably exhibits his beliefs in their least developed stage. "It is not enough for us to meditate on the Death of Christ; but we must apply it to ourselves by a lively faith, that it may have an influence upon our death."²⁷ "Lastly," and this is the keynote of Mason's preaching from beginning to end, "would you hold up your heads in the Day of Judgment, then look for the coming of Christ. Woe be to those souls, to whom Christ shall come unlocked for."²⁸

In the latter part of his incumbency at Stantonbury, Mason married a wife, and a daughter was born to him there in the autumn of 1674. The child was baptized Martha, after the second wife of his patron, Mr. Wittewronge, who, we may conclude, stood godmother.²⁹

The living of Stantonbury was not a rich one, and if, as is probable, there was no regular parsonage house, Mason cannot have been sorry to accept the very sub-

²⁵ Entry in Stantonbury Register: the Epitaph is given in Lipscomb viii. 350.

²⁶ The only copy I know of is in Dr. Williams' library in Gordon Square, to which Miss Porter has had access; and my acquaintance with it is entirely through her notes. (See page 40.)

²⁷ Page 34.

²⁸ Page 36.

²⁹ Stantonbury Register: date almost illegible; apparently October 11.

stantial promotion which was offered him in the same year. Sir Peter Temple, the regicide, had owned Stantonbury, and "Dame Elianor Temple," his widow, was buried in the chancel of the church in 1671. His daughter, Anne, had become acquainted with Mason at Stantonbury, and now presented him to the vacant Rectory of Water Stratford, near Buckingham. He was instituted on the 28th of January following (1674-5),³⁰ and held the living till his death, twenty years later.

The village of Water Stratford, or West Stratford, lies about four miles west of Buckingham, on the north bank of the Ouse, at the point where the Roman way from Alchester to Towcester crosses that stream by a ford which is still traceable, and which gives its name to the parish. The population of the village is now about 140; in 1712 it was 105;³¹ and may be estimated to have been about the same at the time when Mason came there. The church lies on the east side of the village street, which follows the line of the Roman road, at its south end, almost overlooking the ford from a projecting spur of the higher ground on which the village stands. It is a very small Norman building, consisting of chancel, nave, and diminutive tower, with windows and other details inserted in later periods. The Norman doors remain; the priest's door on the north side has the *Agnus Dei* rudely carved in the tympanum; and the large south door, a very fine representation, in relief, of the Deity, in an attitude of benediction, holding a book in one hand, and enthroned in an aureole, which is supported by two kneeling angels. The church had been allowed to fall into disrepair in the earlier part of the century,³² but was very thoroughly restored in 1652; the exact date being given by a tablet inserted in the south wall, over the door.

The Rectory stands on the north side of the churchyard, and communicates with the priest's door by a gate and path. It was built, or at least much enlarged, by a

³⁰ Browne Willis, "History of the Hundred of Buckingham," page 348.

³¹ Browne Willis, *l. c.*, page 343.

³² RECORDS OF BUCKS, vi. iii., page 253.

former Rector, Samuel Marshall, before 1639,³³ but the present south wing of the house, built in 1819,³⁴ obscures the form of the Rectory as John Mason knew it.

The greater part of Mason's life at Water Stratford was little more than a continuation of that of Stantonbury. His parish duties by no means filled up his time; though once in a letter he complains, as parsons do, " 'Tis Saturday, and my work is upon me, which makes me take leave of you sooner than else I should do : " ³⁵ so he travelled frequently to and from Haversham,³⁶ keeping up his connection with the Christian community there, and visited friends at Mursley³⁷ and elsewhere.

The remains of his correspondence are more continuous for these years, and present a beautiful picture of almost paternal relations between himself and his friends and parishioners.

" Whatever he uttered," says his grandson, who inherited much of his spiritual power, " seemed to come from the very bottom of his soul ; and the impression it made upon his hearers was owing, in a great measure, to that which they observed it first made upon him.

" The same is observable in his writings. We are touched not only with the force and beauty of a fine thought, but with the easy and unaffected manner in which it is delivered ; which shows that it came directly from the author's heart, and it moves us, because we cannot but see it moved him.

" His style is strong, concise, and plain, which of all others is certainly the fittest to convey the warmest sentiments from and to the heart ; but the success of his ministerial labours was not so much owing to his natural oratory in the pulpit as to the strict and exemplary piety of his conduct out of it. If ever a man made religion his greatest business and pleasure, he did." ³⁸

So utterly absorbed was he in this spiritual work, and so broad-minded still, in spite of his own extreme opinions, that the condition of the Church and the nation affected him very little : a fact which in that age must be considered very remarkable. While his friend, Thomas Shepherd, was obliged by his convictions to resign his

³³ Terrier of 1639, in Browne Willis, *l. c.*, page 346.

³⁴ Terrier of 1826, at Water Stratford.

³⁵ Letter xxii. March 17, 1676.

³⁶ I. A. 35. S. P. 23. (A letter not included in the 1812 edition.)

³⁷ Letters xxxii., xxxiii., xxxiv.

³⁸ Preface to "Select Remains," pages 4 and 5.

living in Buckinghamshire, he was a steady conformist; and there is no evidence that his views brought him into serious collision with any of his clerical neighbours.

Though he had no private means, and only maintained himself and his family by close economy, and by 'teaching school sometimes,' he was liberal even to a fault, always keeping a little store of money by him for the relief of the poor,³⁹ 'and most commonly gave them soul instruction also.'⁴⁰

Besides the daughter Martha, born at Stantonbury, Mason had five other children, all of whom were baptized at Water Stratford, as follows:—

- 1677. Sept. 19. John, the son of John Mason and Mary, his wife, was baptized.
- 1679. Aug. 21. Mary, the daughter of John Mason and Mary, his wife, was baptized.
- 1681. Aug. 8. Thomas, the son of John Mason and Mary, his wife, was baptized.
- 1682. Oct. 27. William, the son of John Mason and Mary, his wife, was baptized.
- 1684. Oct. 8. Peter, the son of John Mason and Mary, his wife, was baptized.

William took orders, and was Vicar of a parish in Derbyshire, and of Mentmore, Bucks, from 1706–1744, dying there at the age of sixty-one. John, the genius of the family, became a congregational minister at Daventry (Northants), Dunmow (Essex), and Spaldwick (Lincoln), successively, and died in 172 $\frac{3}{4}$; leaving a son, John, born at Dunmow, 170 $\frac{1}{2}$, who became a minister at Cheshunt, and is best known as the author of the "Treatise on Self-knowledge," which was first published in 1745.⁴¹

In 1683, Mason published a little volume of Verse, entitled 'SPIRITUAL SONGS; OR, SONGS OF PRAISE TO ALMIGHTY GOD, ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS. TOGETHER WITH THE SONG OF SONGS, WHICH IS SOLOMON'S, FIRST TURNED, THEN PARAPHRASED, IN ENGLISH VERSE.'

It was reprinted in 1685, 'with the addition of a Sacred

³⁹ I. A. 33.

⁴⁰ I. A. 23.

⁴¹ Memoir by John Mason Good, prefixed to the "Treatise on Self-knowledge," in the London edition of 1818. Dr. Stoughton (Religion in England, iv. 423–5) wrongly says that John of Cheshunt was son of John of Stratford.

Poem on Dives and Lazarus,' in which his Predestinarian views find more explicit utterance: and again, in his life time, in 1692; this time with a second series of poems added, the "Penitential Cries," sketched and begun by himself, but completed by his friend and former neighbour, Rev. Thomas Shepherd. These poems, which have been often reprinted, are the real ground of Mason's claim to be remembered.

He was one of the first who composed original hymns for congregational use, instead of versifying the Psalms as heretofore. Quarles, Wither, and Herbert had written devotional lyrics, which have hardly been surpassed for dignity of style, depth of feeling, and quaintness of imagery; but they were not intended, and do not seem to have been adopted, for use in divine service.⁴² The number of versions of the Psalter which had appeared attested the demand for a more elastic canon, which even copious centos of psalm verses could not supply.⁴³ The 'Poetical Fragments,' which Richard Baxter published after the death of his wife, in 1681, and supplemented by another collection in 1683, are much freer in the choice of their subject-matter, without losing the form of the congregational chant;⁴⁴ and many of them were certainly intended to be sung. Like Thomas Shepherd's part of the "Penitential Cries," they are favourable examples of a class of verse which was freely written at this time, and which lies at the bottom of every modern compilation; but they do not equal Mason's 'Songs' in smoothness of rhythm, intensity of feeling, or originality of thought.

Mason has been called 'an imitator of George Herbert';⁴⁵ but, though he owes more to him than to

⁴² George Herbert used to sing his own lyrics; and a number of those in the 'Temple' were 'turned into the common metre' in the next generation. (Advertisement in Parkhurst's Tenth Edition of 'Spiritual Songs,' 1708.) I do not know if this quaint book is extant.

⁴³ Like those in Baxter's 'Poor Man's Family Book,' and 'Spiritual Songs,' xxxi., xxxii., and xxxiii.

⁴⁴ Some of them even have a word enclosed in brackets in the second and fourth lines, so that they may be sung *either* to C.M. *or* to L.M. tunes. The collection includes some psalm-versions.

⁴⁵ Moorsom, 'History of Composition of Hymns Ancient and Modern,' p. 212.

Wither or to Quarles, the debt is over-estimated; and to call him 'a middle tint between the raw colouring' of Quarles and the 'daylight tint' of Watts is almost as vague.⁴⁶ His closest affinity is certainly with Baxter. His verses, however, become less congregational as their characteristic rhythm and expression are more pronounced; and consequently a selection from the paraphrase of the 'Song of Songs' would stand higher, as poetry, than many of the 'Songs of Praise'; though the former is far more unequal in quality, because, as the poems themselves and the character of the writer indicate, the best work was produced in fits of devotional inspiration, while in the longer pieces something was left to be wrought out, later, against the grain. It is just this which distinguishes Mason's verse from the cooler and more scholarly poems of Herbert and of Watts, and which gives it a swing which carries the reader over the lapses, and makes the rough places plain. So lively, indeed, is the rhythm, that it sometimes calls up the most incongruous echoes, of Cowper, and even of Hood.

'Dives and Lazarus,' a more ambitious piece, mainly in heroic couplets, is much less effective; full of antithesis and epigram, but formal and lifeless altogether.

Few of Mason's verses will be found in modern hymn books, though many popular hymns have been suggested by them or constructed out of them, according to the peculiar canons which regulate plagiarism in this department of literature. Pope is said to have admired, and even to have borrowed from him. But the permanent result of Mason's talent was the influence which he had over Isaac Watts and the two Wesleys. The former especially borrowed largely and confessedly, both in thought and form; but everything is so made his own by the keen censure of his fine taste, that a clear instance of his obligation is hard to find.⁴⁷

But it was as a prophet, not as a poet, that he was notorious among his contemporaries. All the early

⁴⁶ Montgomery, 'Christian Poet,' p. 338 (1838).

⁴⁷ My limits forbid quotation. The 'Spiritual Songs' are most accessible in the reprint of 1859; 'Dives,' and the Canticle, only in older editions.

accounts of him deal primarily with the 'enthusiasm' which drew crowds to Water Stratford, in the last year of his life, to hear his preaching, and to await the promised 'Kingdom.' Ephemeral as this excitement was, groundless as it proved to be, and painful and even disgusting as its incidents appear in retrospect, it is so typical of the mystical doctrine and Millenarian superstition which seethe up from time to time in the current of religious thought, that it is worth examining in detail as a compendium—in very small compass—of these phenomena.

Mysticism in England in the seventeenth century is represented, firstly, by the followers of Jacob Boehme, of Görlitz (1575–1624), whose works were largely reprinted and translated in England between 1647 and 1660, and whose principal exponent, later, was William Law; secondly, by the native popular movement of which Quakerism was the most effectual and permanent outcome; and, thirdly, by the half-Christian, half-Platonic philosophy of Cudworth and Henry More. Mason, indeed, has no direct connection with any of these; but much of his writing is thoroughly mystical in tone, and must be estimated, so far as is possible, by a contemporary standard; and it is worth noting that the "Spiritual Guide" of the Spanish Quietist Molinos was translated from the Venetian edition of 1685, and published in English in the year of the Revolution; and that Henry Maurice mentions it without ceremony, and compares its obscurities to those of Mason's 'witnesses.'⁴⁸

Millenarianism has no necessary connection with Mysticism, but has commonly made its appearance in history at times when Mystical tendencies have been prevalent. Like Mysticism, Millenarianism is always a protest against the secularisation of the Church; and strives to cut the elect loose from the world, because the signs of the times show that the end is near. The signs of the times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were conspicuous enough. The Peasant War in South Germany,⁴⁹ the Revolt of the Netherlands, the

⁴⁸ I. A. 17.

⁴⁹ In which connection we must recall the predictions of the Zwickau prophets in 1521, and the Anabaptist phrenzy at Münster in 1532–5; John of Leyden being quoted by Henry Maurice (I. A. 55) in illustration of "John of Stratford."

Thirty Years' War, and our own Civil War, each seemed a stage in a final struggle over the ruins of what had been, and each was the occasion of a *Schwärmerei* of enthusiastic predictions; astronomers like Tycho Brahe, chemists like Paracelsus and Sendivogius, found their own results converging on an imminent catastrophe; even philosophers dreamed, if they did not expect, that a new time was coming. Boehme, it is true, protested, like Baxter afterwards, against the literal and material interpretation of apocalyptic texts, which "made ancient Jewish prophecy the fortune-teller of the present day,"⁵⁰ but his followers in Germany and in England seem to have gone with the stream.

Of the names which suggest themselves as typical of the movement,⁵¹ only one need concern us here. John Henry Alsted, Professor of Theology (including things in general) at Herborn, published, among other works of a similar character, a "*Diatribē de mille Annis Apocalypticis; non illis Chiliastarum et Phantastarum, sed BB. Danielis et Johannis*" (Frankfurt, 1627), which is a mine of references and arguments on Millenarian topics. The following passage, besides being typical of his method, contains the very argument which was to turn the brains of Mason and his friends.

"LXX septimanae⁵² terminantur excitio urbis, id est anno Christi 69. Hic incipit epocha dierum: id est annorum 1290: ita pervenimus ad annum Christi 1335. Ita ergo deducemur ad annum Christi 2694, quo desinent mille anni Apocalyptici: et iis expletis incipit bellum Gogicum (page 205). . . Daniel, cap. 12, finem suae prophetiae praedicit, dum exprimit annos elapsuros inde a fine LXX septimanarum, id est, ab anno Christi 69. Itaque si addantur isti anni, conficitur summa annorum 2694. . . Quare si ab annis 2694 subducantur anni 1000 pervenimus ad annum Christi 1694. Itaque vel isto anno vel citius incipient mille nostri anni" (page 222). Compare 'Beloved City,' page xviii., at the end of the book, and the passages from the 'Chronology' (pp. 146-8, 434), cited in I. A. 42.

Parts of Alsted's treatises were translated and pub-

⁵⁰ Vaughan, "Hours with the Mystics," ii. 74.

⁵¹ Alfonsus Conradus, Stephanus Pannonius, Osiander, Dobrius, Heurnius, and a host of others.

⁵² Dan. ix. 26-27.

lished in London in 1642, under the titles, "The World's Preceding Woes and Succeeding Joyes" (1642), and "The Beloved City; or, the Saints' Reign on Earth a Thousand Years . . . Faithfully Englished, with some occasional notes," by Wm. Burton, and "printed in the year of the last expectation of the Saints," 1643. Both of these pamphlets contain a good deal which is not Alsted's; and the latter adds confirmatory quotations from Hake-will, Twiss, the anonymous "Nunc Jus Propheticus," and the "Commentationes Apocalypticae" of Joseph Mede; which show the progress which the theory had made in England before the outbreak of the Civil War.⁵³

The world, however, survived the Commonwealth, and the next crop of pamphlets comes after 1680, when the reaction under James II. seemed to be a judgment on the reformed Churches for their lukewarmness since the Restoration. One computation, current about the same time, fixed the beginning of the thousand years in 1697. Its most voluminous exponent was Thomas Beverley, Rector of Lilley in Hertfordshire. His earliest work, published in 1687, is an "Exposition of the divinely prophetick Song of Songs which is Solomon's, composed into verse," which interprets the Canticle, verse by verse, into a continuous history of religious thought, from the reign of David to that of James II. The logic is what might be expected; the versification is villainous; and the book is only worth mentioning, because Mason had himself paraphrased the "Song of Songs," and may have been induced to read it, and take it seriously. Beverley continued to write until the year in which the kingdom should have come. He even published, early in 1698, "A Review of what God hath been pleased to do this year according to prophecy," to prove that the world *had* come to an end unawares; and continued to

⁵³ Mention is also made of one "Doomsday Sedgwick," as having influenced Mason's beliefs; but I cannot discover whether, or no, he is the notorious Obadiah Sedgwick, who was chaplain of Col. Hollis's regiment before Edgehill ("Reliquiae Baxterianae," London, 1696, p. 42), and the associate of Perkins, Saltmarsh, and the extreme Predestinarian Calvinists, who must be held largely responsible for the Millenarian craze of that time.

devote himself to similar calculations at least until 1701. John Mason was not so fortunate.

Alsted's computation, which hit off the date required so nearly, of course became popular again, and is of special importance here, because it was this chronology which became a fixed idea in Mason's mind.

The "Haversham Christians" have been already mentioned; and it is clear that Mason kept up the connection long after leaving Stantonbury, for even Water Stratford was within a day's ride.⁵⁴ On Mr. Rogers's death, in the summer of 1680, the vacancy does not seem to have been filled up directly; but the extant register gives no adequate information. This entry is on the fly-leaf, in the handwriting of the Curate:—

"James Wrexham minister of ye Gospel cam to dwell at Haversham and to officiat as Assistant to ye Curat, Jan. 3, 1681.

and was buried October 2, 1684.

1. Tim. 3. 7. Moreover he must have a good report of them that are without, lest he fall into reproach and ye Snare of ye Divill."

That he was a regularly ordained minister, which is ambiguous here, is made clear by the entry of his burial in the register; where the birth of a daughter, Philadelphia, is also recorded. He had formerly officiated at Great Kimble and Woburn (at which latter place Mason may have made his acquaintance already), and came to Haversham with a reputation for great piety, for abstruse and deep, if not wide, learning, and for views more extreme even than Mason's own.

"A melancholy divine indeed he was, and very often disturbed. He had bestowed much time and pains in compiling a more exact and complete Scripture chronology (as he thought) than was yet extant. When he had perfected the work, he offered it to the then Bishop of Lincoln to be perus'd, and as he hop'd, approv'd. But it fell out otherwise, and the reproof he there met with, for wasting so much time and pains in a fruitless study, was so much laid to heart as to hasten his distraction, which happen'd not long after. This Mr. Wrexham (who was sometimes with Mr. Mason for a quarter of a year together) was, as he himself own'd, the very man that put him first upon *Revelation Thoughts*." I. A. 30, 31.

⁵⁴ I. A. 35.

This is Henry Maurice's estimate, and we may take it as a fair one; for not only had he ample opportunities of seeing Wrexham during his lifetime, but he came into possession, later, of his copy of Alsted's Chronology, with marginal notes in the enthusiast's handwriting. Such was the man whose influence marks a new period in Mason's life. The "Snare of the Divill," which entrapped the assistant minister of Haversham, closed about the good Rector of Water Stratford. Quite apart from the actual modification of his own views by his joint study and conversation with Wrexham, he may have felt himself bound to bring to an issue what his friend had failed to accomplish. At any rate, "Revelation Thoughts" are henceforth the motive of all that he said and did.

It has been suggested already that he was not naturally robust, and his infirmities grew upon him in middle life. It is clear that the disorder was nervous :

"He was seldom free from violent pains in his head, and troubled with vapours in an excessive manner. His head was often so much out of order, that he could not bear the least noise, and when he heard his sons read, it was by way of whisper. He was forced sometimes to quit his own house, and to live in an unfrequented part of a large house, near by, where he scarce ventured to walk for fear of the noise of his own tread, nor could he pray in the Family (though it was his chief delight) at those times, lest he should disturb his brain with the sound of his own words." "His legs and feet were often so very cold, that two or three hours' rubbing could scarce procure any sensible heat : though he lay in his stockings and wore boots, yet he was almost constantly benumbed in those parts." I. A. 30.

It is not surprising to learn that, with such a constitution, he was a great smoker :

"I seldom visited him," writes his biographer, "but he was enveloped in clouds of smoke, and this, amongst other things, overheated his brain, and kindled that zeal which wrought itself into new light and Prophecy. . . . This he thought an innocent entertainment, and therefore he indulg'd it. But 'tis natural for frail Man to delight himself too much in that which nourishes his Disease. . . . I the rather mention this, because his chiefest friend did ascertain me of the truth of it. For upon my enquiry, Whether he was at all times alike full of Rapture ? It was presently answer'd, That generally, while he smok'd, he was in a kind of ecstasy, and all his People flock'd about him to receive his Communications. It made me think of blind Homer, and his gaping Poets." I. A. 52.

It has been mentioned that he was frequently unable to conduct his services, or even family prayers; but when he was able to pray,

"His Prayers were always vehement; and an awful silence betwixt every Petition doubled their length, with a sort of divine breathings. He affected a laborious way of address, or else 'tis impossible to imagine but that the frequent habit . . . must have given him a greater facility to express himself." I. A. 28.

The same peculiarity, however, is by no means uncommon among those who practise extempore prayer. His preaching, too, followed the well-known type:

"So earnest, as not to leave a dry thread about him . . . and so long, as to be always ready to faint before he gave over." I. A. 28.

In fact, he was one of those men of quick sensibilities and high-strung temperament, whose nervous organisation is stimulated to intense activity by incidents which ordinary people barely notice; who are liable to occasional accesses of enthusiastic elation, alternating with equally abnormal periods of depression and morbid self-consciousness; and who tend to develop extreme theoretical views, and to carry their conclusions out into practice with a terrible consistency, which is called genius or insanity, according to its issue.

The critical point, however, which divides the best part of his career from the saddest, is marked by the death of his devoted wife, which happened in 1688. Here is the plain entry in the Water Stratford register:

"Feb. 9. Mary Mason was buried."

It is in the Rector's own hand. We hear almost nothing of her, but "the best woman is she who is the least talked of among men." Twice she was ill;⁵⁵ once she is excusing 'Mr. Mason's melancholy fancies' to a startled visitor;⁵⁶ often she 'sends her love' and other kindly messages in his letters; once in his poems,⁵⁷

"Mine Olive-branches and my Vine
Thrive by my Table's side,
While others wither and decline,
Who in Death's Shade abide."

⁵⁵ Letter xvi., and that omitted in 1812 edition, but numbered xxii. in S. P., page 41.

⁵⁶ I. A. 35.

⁵⁷ "Songs of Praise," viii.

But here it was the Vine which, while clinging, braced the walls of the house together; and the ruin was great when once the thin stems parted.

Mason 'never rightly enjoyed himself' after his wife's death. Mrs. Margaret Holms, his sister-in-law,⁵⁸ came to keep house for him, and to look after the children: an honest, not very intellectual woman, with a thorough belief in 'brother Mason' in his lifetime, and a jealous regard for his good name afterwards;⁵⁹ but without the fine sympathy and tactful control which that 'dear saint now in heaven'⁶⁰ had exercised over her gifted but erratic husband.

The first direct evidence of the break-up of his constitution is the last, in time, of his extant letters,⁶¹ written from Stratford, July 29, 1691. Read in view of what followed, it is a terrible letter. After an incoherent flow of ecstatic ejaculations, he thus describes his state:

"I bless the Lord I am neither in Sickness nor in Pain, but under that defect of spirit which incapacitates me for the publick worship and service of the Lord, and also what engages my affection afflicts me, I am told it is a call to Rest. I thank you for the Bottle of Liquid Stuff, I hope, through mercy, it comforts me. I give my Body to Rest; I drink *Asop* waters, I give myself to rest from labour; I Cherish myself; I have rested at home these two Sabbaths past. I hope I am somewhat amended through Mercy, but dare not adventure upon business."

Then he relapses into predictions like those with which he had begun: "The Lord is coming. Watch and Pray."

Some time in this year Mason preached a sermon on the Parable of the Ten Virgins, then, as always, a favourite text with Millenarian Mystics; and delivered it again in the neighbourhood more than once. Soon after, the discourse was published anonymously as a small quarto pamphlet of about thirty pages, preceded by a preface, signed R. M., which explains the circumstances of its appearance:

"Many have run to and fro (*i.e.*, by comparing Scripture with Scripture; for which the following discourse is so highly valuable),

⁵⁸ S. P. 3.

⁵⁹ I. A. 19, 41.

⁶⁰ Letter iii.

⁶¹ Not in "Select Remains" (1812), but numbered xii. in S. P., p. 28.

and knowledge in these things is much increased. But though knowledge is increased, carelessness and ungodliness are increased of late also : We stand in need of the notes of some Boanerges, some such awakening Discourse as is here presented to you." ⁶²

And this is the key-note of his cry :

"We pray with the Church, That the kingdom of thy dear Son may come quickly ; and that all his Enemies being made his Footstool, He who is the Lord of lords and King of kings, may reign to all the Ends of the Earth."

Though the editor was "engaged by promise to say nothing of the author," he did not feel himself bound to consult him, in preparing the sermon for the press :

"This Sermon was preached in a Country Church (I am persuaded) without the least design of being made publick, and the Copy was written out and sent to the Press (though not without the leave, yet) in the Absence of the Author : so that the judicious will easily believe with what Advantage it would have come forth, if it had been on purpose prepared for publick view, and the Copy had been corrected by the Author's own hands."

In spite, however, of this clandestine publication, the sermon itself hardly needs an apology. In an age of laborious and involved periods, the style is crisp and emphatic ; the argument, though the articulation of its parts is emphasized to a degree which would now be thought pedantic, is clearly worked out and kept well in hand, and is an admirably concise example of the method of exposition which is employed.

The subject is opened at once. 'What is the Coming of the Son of Man ?' It is threefold : (1) to the Individual Soul ; 'The Body's dying-day is the Soul's doomsday.' (2) To the whole world, as we learn in the Creed ; but (3) 'the proper and immediate sense is seen in the context ;' a literal and actual Coming is to be expected ; and, to determine the character, the moment, and the presages of it, 'you must compare Text with Text, and Place with Place :' not omitting to check your interpretations by the facts of history as you proceed.

The Great City of Rev. xvi. 18, 19, which is the Roman Empire (not Babylon, which is Papal Rome), is divided into three parts, 'The German, French, and Italian or Papal Factions.' ⁶³ The 'cities of the nations fall ; Spire, Worms, Openheim. So the 'Earthquake is begun ; that issues in the Ruin of Babylon (Rome) ; and on the ashes of Babylon is Christ's Kingdom erected.' ⁶⁴

⁶² Midnight Cry, page 5.

⁶³ Page 11.

⁶⁴ Page 12.

'The tribes of the Earth shall mourn (Zech. xii. 10)' ⁶⁵ when 'the Jews are converted'; and 'tribulation' will come upon the Protestant Churches, and upon the Turks. ⁶⁶ When the sun is darkened, 'this is the overthrow of an Empire, which is the 'fourth great Empire (the Papal Empire, the Popes having the 'fag-end of the Roman Empire).' ⁶⁷

This is illustrated by the testimony about eclipses elicited by Hugh Broughton from a Jewish Rabbi.

Then the Parable itself is interpreted. The Wedding is the reconciliation of the Jewish Church with Christ: and the Virgins ⁶⁸ are, among Gentiles, the Christians; and, among Christians, the hundred and forty and four thousand Protestants who were 'redeemed' from Popery; 'for they are virgins' (Rev. xiv. 3; xvii. 5). They 'went forth' to meet the Bridegroom, at the Reformation; some with the lamp of Profession, others with the oil of Grace as well: Thyatira, the unregenerate Church, becoming Sardis, the reformed Church of England; and Philadelphia ⁶⁹ representing the converted Jews, and the reunion of the whole body of the faithful.

But though the time is short, the Virgins are asleep. 'How did our Fathers weep over the Palatinate, when it was but a 'light stroke? But we have had Thundrings and Lightnings, and 'we are slumbering. What a noise there is in Flanders, and in 'Ireland, and we in England between them are asleep.' ⁷⁰ 'Such a 'blow given the Turks,' ⁷¹ such an earthquake and division of the 'papal world,' ⁷² are further confirmations of the prediction that 'the midnight cry doth signify a terrible judgment on the Protestant; a great Tribulation which will be by the Papists.' ⁷³ . . . 'We had a midnight cry a year and a half ago,' ⁷⁴ but People are 'asleep again. When the real cry comes, all will be of one mind, 'the Bridegroom is coming.' Then they will trim, that is scour, their lamps.

The awakening is vividly described. 'It is some outward 'performance of duty that they all agree in. Gentlemen leave 'their Hawks and Hounds, Countrymen their grounds, and Tradesmen their shops, and run to their Prayer books and Practice-of-Piety, and all the Nation is in a wonderful Religious Posture.' 'They all have an high esteem for Oyl: All the world for a little 'Oyl A thousand worlds for Oyl; Union with Christ, Com-

⁶⁵ Page 14. ⁶⁶ Page 15. ⁶⁷ Isa. xiii. 10. ⁶⁸ Page 16.

⁶⁹ P. 20, the namesake of poor Wrexham's daughter (compare Rev. ii. 18; iii. 1). This interpretation of the seven Churches as seven ages of the Church is a Millenarian commonplace, and a special device of Thomas Beverley. Cf. "Angel's Oath," pp. 11, 17 ff, 27, 36 ff.

⁷⁰ Page 21.

⁷¹ Rev. xi. 14, *e.g.*, the capture of Buda, and Morosini's operations in the Morea.

⁷² Rev. xvi. 18.

⁷³ Page 27. Rev. ii. 2.

⁷⁴ It would be difficult to find in the literature of that time a more curt and off-hand allusion to the events of 1688.

'munion with Christ ; Oh ! for Christ and Grace.' ⁷⁵ But a lamp is no good without oil. 'Before, they thought a lamp was enough. "We are for the Church ; we'll live and die in the Church." This is but a lamp.'

Then the 'carnal graceless Protestants' find their mistake. 'They that were in Presumption, are now in Desperation . . . Now they would hang upon the skirts of the Saints. Give us some of your Oyl. Now send for Moses and Aaron in haste.' ⁷⁶ 'All the creatures cannot help them ; the Wise have little enough for themselves. They cry, but it is too late. Esau's tears ! The door, in conclusion, is shut, and they are howling with dogs without.' ⁷⁷

Then follows the application, very shortly and impressively : 'Blessed be God, you have grace, the Spirit of Grace ; but I fear it is Oyl in the glass, not in the Lamp : Methinks I see when the cry comes, what a pouring of Oyl there will be out of the vessel into the Lamp : What a lively frame Christians will be in : Oyl in the Vessel is Grace in the Habit, Oyl in the Lamp is Grace in exercise. Therefore see that you have Oyl in the Lamp.' ⁷⁸

In the nineteenth century, no doubt, much of this seems vain and fantastic enough, though even now the spirit of prophecy is not quite extinct ; but at the end of the seventeenth, such an argument as that of the "Midnight Cry" gained ready credence, and might call for serious refutation.

The sermon was more than once reprinted in the same year ; and the Bodleian copy of the second edition has 'two Hymns for the Coming of Christ, by the same author,' bound in at the end, on different paper and with fresh paging. The first is of twelve verses, with a chorus ; the second of fourteen. Both are painfully ecstatic ; the sense is incoherent, the metre falters ; but it is only too clear that they are from Mason's pen. Whatever we may think of the action of "R. M." in publishing the 'Midnight Cry,' we cannot but regret that these worthless lines should have survived to qualify our estimate of their author.

This pamphlet was quickly followed by another, "Two Witnesses to the Midnight Cry, by Two Laymen," with John ix. 39 as their motto. Only their initials, T. W. and V. E., appear on the title-page ; but Valentine

⁷⁵ Pages 28-29.

⁷⁷ *Id.* ; Rev. xxii. 15.

⁷⁶ Page 30 ; Ex. xii. 31.

⁷⁸ Page 31.

Evans threw off his disguise later, and T. W. is known to have been Thomas Ward, a copy of whose "Monomachia, or a duel between Dr. Thomas Tenison and a Roman Catholic Souldier," is in the Bodleian Library. They do not add much directly to the force of the "Midnight Cry"; while they complicate the issue not a little. Ward leads off with a very vigorous defence of the mystical position,⁷⁹ and, in fact, only comes to Mason's sermon on p. 15. Evans follows, with a more pertinent exhortation to prepare for the coming Day. 'I beseech you all,' he says, 'not to speak against the truth, especially against the Book called the Midnight Cry,' to whose author he refers as 'my dear brother in the Lord.' Indeed, he appears to have known Mason well, to have stayed with him in these years, and to have been one of his 'witnesses' and interpreters during the great 'enthusiasm.'

This tract was answered anonymously, in a pamphlet entitled, "The Trial and Condemnation of the Two False Witnesses,"⁸⁰ but not until the enthusiasm was at its height. That part of it, however, which deals with the Two Witnesses was written two years before it was printed, and was 'presented to his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, and to some other of the Reverend Bishops and Clergy.'⁸¹ The writer, who remains unknown, meets the pretensions of the "Two Witnesses" by propounding five considerations; of which i. is not merited by any extant Masonite fulmination; ii. is purely personal; iii. begs the question; iv. appeals to what is really a subjective criterion, and proves nothing; and v. cites matters of fact, to which Mason himself appeals in the contrary sense. The "Trial and Condemnation," indeed, is chiefly of interest as evidence that Mason's theory was worth refuting, under patronage so distinguished as that cited in the introduction.

But though the publication of his sermon caused some ferment at the time, there is no evidence that Mason himself was much sought after. Nor was there need, for the calculations on which he relied gave three clear years

⁷⁹ Pages 2-19.

⁸⁰ It is "licensed May 14th, 1694," on the title-page.

⁸¹ Page 3.

more before the catastrophe was to be expected. For his own part, so far as his health permitted, he went about his work in the parish as usual. All that was noticed was that his teaching, formerly so liberal, began to incline more and more to the narrower and severer type of Calvinism; and that the 'kingdom' was so much in his thoughts, that 'though he would sometimes write down the sermons for the following Lord's Day (as he had formerly done) upon some other theme, yet he had no sooner ended his Prayer, but he would tell his People that the Spirit mov'd him to discourse of the *mystery of the kingdom*, and of nothing else.'⁸² And, like others of that school of thought, he refused the Sacraments to all but those whom he believed to be 'elect,' and therefore fit to communicate.

In the autumn of the same year, however, people already began to congregate at Water Stratford, and, before Christmas, Mason stood committed to the leadership of a miscellaneous crowd of expectant enthusiasts, roused by his former exhortations, hanging now on his words, and already clamouring for a sign.

It was a practical application of his argument which he can hardly have foreseen; but the logic of the case was irrefutable, and he accepted the situation. Indeed, to have gone back now would have been to him, and much more to those who were about him, the wilful neglect of a monition of the Spirit. Henceforward, however, there is an increasing difficulty in unravelling, in the accounts which remain, what Mason said from what his followers said he said, and from what they said themselves. How far he recoiled from the excesses into which he was being hurried; how far to him, as to Bodenstein, in Luther's age, *vox populi vox Dei fuit*; or how far, in the mental prostration which grew upon him, he was content, or compelled, to let things go their own way, it is impossible to decide. The last, however, is the most charitable supposition, and is supported by his recorded reluctance, and frequent inability, to dispute with the many ministers and divines who came to ques-

⁸² I. A. 31.

tion him.⁸³ It was quite in the spirit of Mysticism, however, to object that 'men of sense' and understanding were incapacitated, just because they were such, from apprehending the things which the enlightened soul perceived intuitively; and it is as clear that Mason's inaccessibility was partly contrived by Valentine Evans and kindred spirits,⁸⁴ as that it was also due to the 'doctor's orders' of Mrs. Holms. What puzzled his visitors was, that when he did talk to reasonable people, 'he would waive all his discourses of an elevated nature, and talk like other men.'⁸⁵

Still the numbers of the elect increased, whole 'families removing to Stratford to live, carrying thither all that they had.' 'They sold houses and land for what they could get,'⁸⁶ 'as if they had utterly done with all affairs of this world.'⁸⁷ Before the end of Lent, quite four hundred had taken up permanent abode in the village, besides many more coming and going from day to day.⁸⁸ Such an increase in the population of a village, which has never been a large one, taxed its resources to the utmost. The Rectory was very soon full to overflowing.⁸⁹ Of the rest, 'some lay in the Town, and others made themselves open Partitions in the Barn'⁹⁰ near the House, 'fearing no ill, because they designed none':⁹¹ though there was unfortunately more than a rumour, that those excesses took place which are almost inevitable in such assemblages.⁹²

The crisis came on the first Sunday after Easter.⁹³ As his custom was,⁹⁴ Mason had fasted all through the long services and discourses of the festival, and had retired, before nightfall, for the rest which he so much needed.

⁸³ *E.g.*, the Thomas Harris, and Elizabeth Glover, who "testify" in the "Angel's Oath." ⁸⁴ I. A. 51. ⁸⁵ I. A. 34, 51.

⁸⁶ L. ix., page 4.

⁸⁷ B. S.

⁸⁸ The numbers given in the pamphlets vary; especially, as is natural, in their estimates of the crowd of onlookers; but the "Impartial Account" is the only one which professes to give more than the impressions of a mere day's visit, and is accordingly allowed more weight in the reckoning here.

⁸⁹ Several in a room, S. P. 4.

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ I. A. 45.

⁹² Browne Willis; *cf.* S. P. 8.

⁹³ April 15: so that the vision took place in the small hours of the 16th. I. A. 5, 43.

⁹⁴ I. A. 44.

We may imagine how, at this season, he would use the sculptured figure of the Glorified Deity over his church door, as illustration in his discourse; and how he would be musing on his exposition of the appointed passages of Scripture, which came so 'pat to his long surmising.' He had not slept at all till after midnight;⁹⁵ when, as he

"Turned himself in his bed from his left side to his right, a little before one,⁹⁶ not having any Imagination or Previous Thought, how if Christ should appear, on a sudden he had an Appearance of Jesus Christ to him in a deep scarlet robe down to his Feet, far surpassing anything in Nature; immediately his Eyes were carried from his Garments to his Countenance, which was most comely and Majestick; Majesty enough to strike Terror into Ten Thousand Blasphemers, and yet Pleasant to behold; he says he was without fear or Raptures of Joy at this appearance, and it did end without Prayer or praises. No sooner was the Appearance over but his Imagination sunk, and he could no more that night recall to mind what he had seen; next day all came into his mind, which broke him all in pieces.⁹⁷" He recalled distinctly that he 'first saw the back parts, and then the face,' of the 'Beloved':⁹⁸ that 'the crimson or purple robe 'seemed to be dipped in the blood of His enemies'⁹⁹; that he 'saw Christ sitting in a Chair, and a candle lighted in a candlestick standing on a Stool'¹⁰⁰; that he 'saw Him for a considerable time, that He said many things, but spoke no word.'¹⁰¹ 'What need, indeed, was there of saying anything, when He has actually begun His reign.'¹⁰² 'For His majestick looks said, that He came to judge and condemn the greatest part of the world; and His smiling countenance said, He would save Sion, and the Holy Ground; that is, said they, *Water-Stratford* and its borders'¹⁰³; and that 'he himself was neither in a Dream, nor mad, nor drunken, neither was he affrighted.'¹⁰⁴

Before the following Sunday the news of the vision had spread far and wide, and crowds assembled to hear the truth from the Prophet's own mouth.

⁹⁵ I. A. 47.⁹⁶ L. G. 5.⁹⁷ S. P. 2.⁹⁸ I. A. 15.⁹⁹ L. G. 5.¹⁰⁰ *Id.*¹⁰¹ I. A. 10.¹⁰² *Id.* 15.¹⁰³ *Id.* 10.

¹⁰⁴ L. G. 5. It should be noted that he had experienced clairvoyant apparitions of the kind, before. One of them, admirably recounted in the "Impartial Account" (page 53) and dated about 1682, is worth the notice of the Society for Psychical Research. Compare the story of the angels who stopped the backslider from Great Horwood.—I. A. 9.

"Being a great multitude of people gathered together round the Country, more than the Church could contain, they stood in the Minister's yard, and he out of his chamber window, declared unto the multitude what he had seen."¹⁰⁵

Otherwise he was very reticent about the vision, especially before his clerical brethren, who came in great numbers to question him, referring them to Mrs. Holms, and to Valentine Evans, who were in constant attendance.¹⁰⁶ To the company, however, he preached twice a day, as long as he had strength,¹⁰⁷ and prayed, or rather praised, so far as his convictions allowed him. But, as Browne Willis says, he overtalked himself¹⁰⁸: "α γλωσσαλγία, or a Ranula under his tongue,"¹⁰⁹ made speech very painful, and developed into a severe "Squinancy."¹¹⁰ "Dr. Paxton, a very eminent Physician, was sent for from Buckingham,"¹¹¹ but gave no hope; and Mason himself seems to have despaired of recovery. In his severe illness in the preceding summer, he had been confident that his life would be prolonged, "because he had not fulfilled his ministry, nor finished the work of the Lord":¹¹² several prophecies yet remaining unfulfilled, and notably Isa. xxxiii. 17. Now he felt that he had "finished his Gospel"; and Mrs. Holms "verily believed that he had foresight of his death":¹¹³ even a few weeks before

"he told his most particular friend that our Saviour would daily converse with him," and that, till he went to the New Jerusalem, which made him ask him, whether he thought he should live always (or words to that effect), and he presently answered, 'There is here that shall never taste of Death.'¹¹⁴

The majority of his followers, however, refused to believe that he was sinking, and even claimed to share his reputed immortality:

"Valentine Evans," for example, "being asked whether he thought he should not dye, made Answer, striking his hand upon his breast, '*by grace I am assured, I shall never dye.*'"¹¹⁵

A pitiful change, too, had passed upon his own views;

¹⁰⁵ L. ix. 5.

¹⁰⁶ S. P. 3.

¹⁰⁷ S. P. 4.

¹⁰⁸ P. l. c. 344.

¹⁰⁹ I. A. 9.

¹¹⁰ Quinsy.

¹¹¹ Browne Willis, l. c. 345.

¹¹² I. A. 17.

¹¹³ I. A. 18.

¹¹⁴ S. P. 8.

¹¹⁵ S. P. 5.

he who had been "the fiercest man in the World against Sin, but the pityfullest man to the sinner,"¹¹⁶ was now caught in the logic of his own Calvinism:

"And from that time he contracted (as he thought) such a Friendship with God, as might warrant him to despise men. For, from that very time, his good nature left him; he became froward in his converse, reserv'd in Discourse, and impatient of a Contradiction; yea, and seem'd to damn all mankind but a few in his own way; and thus he continu'd to his last minutes.¹¹⁷ 'The books were sealed' he said, 'and there was no place for repentance.'"¹¹⁸

His followers even twisted the text of his Wittewronge sermon, rationally enough explained by him then, into an assertion of impeccability: 'Mr. Mason shall have no sense of his sins'; and contended that 'this John was the true Elias, or Harbinger of the Second Coming.'¹¹⁹ The Kingdom being already come, he gave up the administration of the Sacraments altogether, and the use of prayer, 'because he thought nothing remained to be prayed for,' and, at last, even of exhortation, 'because they should all be enlightened from above.'¹²⁰

But his followers were by this time quite beyond control, even had he been able to exercise it. Those who love such horrors may read for themselves in the pamphlets the sufficiently copious details of the orgies which went on in the big kitchen of the Rectory; of the ceaseless dancing and skipping, night and day, by relays of screaming and hand-clapping maniacs; of the singing of doggerel hymns to ballad tunes, accompanied by vagrant fiddlers, pipers, and singing-boys¹²¹; of ecstatic screaming¹²² and crying of "Fire,"¹²³ explained as denoting the suddenness of the destruction that was coming, in a 'mystical way' like the black stories of "Sacrifice" which got about—"the Sacrifice of Thanksgiving."¹²⁴

Soon after the Vision, Mrs. Holms wrote to a relative in Northampton, describing what had occurred.¹²⁵ 'Cousin Ives' came later to Water Stratford,

¹¹⁶ I. A. 23.¹¹⁷ I. A. 38.¹¹⁸ I. A. 38.¹¹⁹ S. P. 2; cf. I. A. 36.¹²⁰ I. A. 14.¹²¹ S. P. 5; I. A. 15.¹²² L. G. 6.¹²³ I. A. 16.¹²⁴ I. A. 17.¹²⁵ I. A. 5, ff.

and taking a common-sense view of the business, advised bleeding, to get rid of the "Vapours," 'not so much out of hopes of working a cure (for he found he was too far gone for that) as to prevent his growing worse.'¹²⁶ It was an happier idea to forward Mrs. Holms' note to Henry Maurice, who came over from Tyringham on the 28th,¹²⁷ and obtained leave, with some difficulty, for a brief and serious conversation with Mason himself, who was lying in the 'darkish garret' where the Vision had occurred; and with Mrs. Holms, Valentine Evans, and a deputy of the second 'witness' (who was indisposed), at greater length downstairs. They claimed that the elect would be gathered together from all the world to the 'Holy Ground,' or 'Hill of Zion,' at Water Stratford, which they identified with the close at the back of the Rectory. But he writes,—

"They could not, or would not, tell me, how far the Borders would extend, but they told me that few, that very few of this Land should be Sav'd.

"This I thought very hard, and therefore I ask'd them, What would become of some truly pious Persons that might never hear of Water Stratford? To which they answered, That some of the elect would be *halld* thither, without their consent, by Angels.¹²⁸ Will our Saviour (said I) be visible to all when He comes amongst you? They reply'd, to very few: And, as they seem'd to explain themselves, only to the Prophet and his Witnesses; but with the Prophet he would daily converse, and be very Familiar; and his chief residence would be in the clouds. They expect Him, they assur'd me, every Minute, and therefore Day and Night they are upon the watch. When our Saviour has done here, He would (they said) carry the Believers in this new Prophet to the New Jerusalem, and gather the elect in other places to them."¹²⁹ I. A. 11.

"They pretend not to any Miracles, or discerning of Spirits; nor need they, for they require nothing but this Faith, that Christ has this second time appeared in order to salvation." I. A. 13.

In answer to a suggestion that the Rector was deceived, Mrs. Holms objected that 'the holiness of his life made it impossible';¹³⁰ and the Witnesses quoted Dr. Owen to the effect that

"Though he that has not the Spirit may think he has it, and be deceived, yet they that have it know they have, and cannot be deceived." I. A. 13.

¹²⁶ I. A. 40.

¹²⁷ I. A. 7 ff.

¹²⁸ Cf. I. A. 9.

¹²⁹ Compare B. S.

¹³⁰ I. A. 12.

which seems to have quite upset Maurice's temper: strong language followed on both sides, and he went back sadly to Tyringham.

Though the Coming was foretold for so near a date as Whitsunday,¹³¹ the Prophet was not destined to see it. After a few weeks of increasing weakness and suffering, he died, still testifying in his last moments 'that he had seen the Lord, and that it was time for this nation to tremble, and for Christians to trim their lamps.'¹³² But at the end there was peace. 'Two days after he sickened, he began to tell us how God had poured in his lovingkindness into his Soul, in an extraordinary manner; and so it continued all his sickness, and the last words he spake to us were that he was full of the loving kindness of the Lord.'¹³³ He was buried on May 22nd, in the churchyard of his Water Stratford; but grave has no memorial.

Of course, the assembly did not disperse at once. Many had returned to their proper business, even before the death of their leader¹³⁴; but even after Whitsunday came, the majority of the community kept together, saying, 'they saw their call clear to come, and till God shows it them so to go from hence, they think not to do it'¹³⁵; and went on 'with Repetition, Prayer, and Singing.' The 'Angel's Oath' pamphlet appeared in the autumn, and is the most outspoken statement of the enthusiasts' beliefs which is extant.

The relatives of the late Rector had a claim upon the living until the 25th of the following November, and till that time they made the most of their opportunities, laying in a new store of provisions, still occupying the Rectory and the big barn, and meeting as before in the "Holy Ground."¹³⁶

Of private property Mason left little or none. The Act of Administration, already referred to,¹³⁷ constitutes his brothers 'curators' of his children, of whom the

¹³¹ Mason did not give any date within the year, in the "Midnight Cry," but, after the vision, this expectation seems to have been general.

¹³² I. A. 21.

¹³⁴ L. G. 7.

¹³⁶ S. P. 10.

¹³³ Mrs. Holms' letter, I. A. 21.

¹³⁵ S. P. 8.

¹³⁷ Page 10, note 4.

eldest was only in her twentieth year. All that is known of their after life has been already related.¹³⁸

A rumour had got about that Mason had said that he would rise again, and so inveterate was this belief that the new Rector, the Rev. Isaac Rushworth, felt it his duty to have the grave re-opened, and to demonstrate that at least the material parts of the prophet were in no danger of resurrection.¹³⁹ But even this grim proof did not convince the enthusiasts. They were evicted, of course, from the Rectory, and at length even from the 'Holy Ground;' but they continued their communistic life and ecstatic worship in full order for some twelve or sixteen years,¹⁴⁰ and some traces of them were still to be found in 1740. Even now the 'Holy Ground' can be identified, and a story is current in the village that the ghost of a former Rector had to be 'laid' at a bend in the river, called the 'Parson's Hole.'

For the best part of the above, I am indebted to many friends : to the clergy of the parishes mentioned, for information and register-search ; especially to Rev. L. E. Goddard, Rector of Water Stratford, for help in investigations on the spot ; and most of all to Miss Bertha Porter, who most generously allowed me to make use of her copious notes from books and pamphlets which were inaccessible to me, who has most kindly gone through the proofs, and whose account of Mason in the "Dictionary of National Biography" contains many literary references which are omitted here, and remains the best summary of his life and influence.

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¹³⁸ Page 19.

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