

# THE LATE EDWARD BENT WALKER

By ROBERT BLATCHFORD

EDWARD BENT WALKER, another true man and true friend, has joined the greater Fellowship. A strong, upstanding, hearty man, to outward seeming, Walker was struck down very suddenly and, though he tried with characteristic courage to rally, he was mortally hit, and failed to make good against the inscrutable and deadly malady.

When I last saw Walker in London he was looking older, for he had felt keenly the loss of a beloved child and besides had been, like many artists, hard pressed by the war. Yet he seemed physically fit and good to endure many years of the hard work and hard luck which had been his lot, his whole life through. And yesterday, I read the report of his death in the newspaper, and I find it difficult, to realise the fact.

I first met Walker some five and twenty years ago. He came over from; Stockport to ask permission to paint my portrait. As I was then a notorious "agitator" he hoped to get the picture exhibited. But ill luck, as usual, played him a jade's trick. When the picture went before, the exhibition committee it was rejected. Walker learnt afterwards that the committee had not refused the picture for artistic reasons, but because it was the portrait of a Socialist. "But", Walker protested to the official who gave him the facts, "confound it man, there's a portrait of John Burns, the Socialist, on show in the same exhibition." So there was, but the official had an answer ready. "Yes," he said, "there is. But the portrait of John Burns was painted by the Hon. John Collier."

I tell this story here because it is an illustration of our poor friend's absolutely weird luck. That kind of crooked elfish mischance only happened to Bent Walker. Some years later Walker lent his studio to a friend. It was burnt down, and nearly all his pictures with it.

Walker was a Wigan man. From what he told me of his home and his youth I would think it was a kind of ironical stroke of the Fates which put an artistic soul into surroundings so uncongenial. Walker fought the adverse environment stubbornly, and became a painter by dint of sheer grit and resolution; but his heredity was too strong for him. I mean his own nature was and remained an obstacle to his success. The artist, was handicapped by the man.

Only those who knew Bent Walker intimately understood him. He was one of that odd mixture of virility and boyishness. Sturdy, independent, outspoken, with a sound clear head and a blessed gift of humour, he was as pitiful as a woman, as generous as a boy, as affectionate as a baby and as shy as a girl. His shyness and his modesty, weirdly entangle in the threads of a delicate

pride, were parts, and perhaps the parts most fatal, of his bad luck. A man of strong physical courage, who could stand his corner, and defend his beliefs, yet he was incapable of any kind of "push and go," and neither could nor would advertise.

I said that his shyness and his pride were blended. When I tried to instil commercial ideas (!) into my friend: conjured him to hustle a bit, to swank a bit, to blow an occasional tantarn on his trumpet, he would answer "No, no, no. My business is to paint pictures, not to sell them. If people don't want to buy. . .!"

What could I say to such a man? He only laughed at me. He knew that I was about as clever a salesman as he was himself; only that my luck had streaks in it: his was horribly consistent.

Walker was not cursed with an "artistic temperament." His luck did not treat him quite so scurvily as that.

He had no vices, no luxurious tastes or habits. He was a domestic animal, happy in his home, devoted to his wife and children. A man who lived sparsely and worked hard. Give him a plain meal, a pipe, and the tools of his trade, and he was content. He would paint all day, year in and year out. I never heard him complain of his bad luck – not even when his studio was burned; but I have heard him utter some scathing criticisms of certain kinds of art which he regarded as meretricious. Sincere in all things, he was a sincere socialist. He maintained that painters, poets, and novelists ought to be left to make good each his own faulty, and ought not to be asked to hawk their work in the marts of publishers and dealers. He ought to have been a monk, like Fra Lippo Lippi, given free meals and lodging and free leave to paint for the church and the monastery. He cared little for praise or pudding, but he resented the necessity of having to sell his work to live.

As to Bent Walker's merits as an artist, I am not qualified to judge. That he was a great colorist I do know, for it is impossible to see his pictures without recognising that fact. Some of his canvasses fairly seem to glow with colour. I do not know any other artist who could produce such perfect effects of blue. And he seemed to attain those unearthly glories of his favourite colour by means both frank and simple. He was a master of colour in any vehicle, pastel, water colour, or oils. And he loved blue so much that I wished a hundred times I could take him from the Azores to Madeira, and from the Mexican Gulf to Hayti, so that he could delight his eyes with the indescribable beauty of the Gulf Stream. If any man could have painted the Gulf Stream Bent Walker was the man – and he never saw it.

This is the second time in three months that I have had to deplore the loss of an old and true friend. Pa Chilvers, the gardener, Edward Bent Walker, the painter, were both artists and lovers of Nature; they were both home-keeping, affectionate men; they were both simple-minded and sincere; diligent in their vocation, loyal to their friends; they were both too much engrossed with the labour of their choice to spare an hour willingly for the pursuit of commercial success; but there was this difference, that whereas Walker faced the idea of sale and barter with a kind of Mordant scorn, Pa Chilvers smilingly ignored it.

I have lost both these good friends, and the happiest man has not many such friends to lose. If I could "grasp the sorry scheme of things entire," and "mould it nearer to the heart's desire," I would arrange it that men like Walker

and Chilvers, lovers of beauty and creators of beauty, men whose happiness it is to make others happy, should stay to leaven the general life for at least a couple of hundred years. Horace speaks as "beating with equal foot at poor men's doors, and "kicking at the gates of emperors." He is very welcome to the emperors, but when it comes to poor *marchands des bonheur* one could wish he were more patient.

Walker was more to me than just a personal friend. He was a friend of my wife and my daughters, a friend of the Clarion, a family friend who was wont to sit and amuse us by the hour with quaint recitals of his sketching adventures with humorous descriptions of queer folk he met as he went about the country. He would drop in for an hour's chat at our house in London, and he always missed the last train to Croydon, and had to walk home. I say again, it is difficult to realise that he is gone, and that we shall never see his friendly nor hear his friendly voice again. And the fellowship has lost a real and a very modest comrade. *Vale!*

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The Clarion, a socialist weekly, was established by Robert Peel Glanville Blatchford, a Manchester journalist, in 1890. During a long life (1851-1943) Blatchford moved slowly from a leftist radical in the 1880's to a supporter of Baldwin in the mid 1920's. The Clarion first appeared in Manchester in 1891. Blatchford said the paper would follow a "policy of humanity; a policy not of party, sect or creed; but of justice, of reason and mercy." The first edition sold 40,000 and settled to about 30,000 a week.

In 1893 the Clarion began serializing Blatchford's book *Merrie England*, an anthology of essays on socialism. When eventually published as a book it sold 750,000 copies.

The Clarion was involved in many activities including missionary vans, cycling clubs, choirs, handicraft guilds and holiday camps and "Cinderella Clubs" which entertained children from the slums. Blatchford boasted that he would "convert England to Socialism in seven years" – but it was soon clear that

he had overestimated the power of the Clarion. Asked about this a few years later, he replied that "the British working classes are not fit for Socialism yet". Blatchford upset a lot of the Clarion readers with his enthusiastic support for the Boer War and opposition to organisations such as the NUWSS and the WSPU that were demanding the vote for women. Sales fell but revived after the 1906 General Election, when 29 Labour Party MPs were elected. Blatchford increased paper's size and began to employ talented

socialist writers such as George Bernard Shaw. By 1907 sales of the Clarion had reached 74,000.

After the First World War Blatchford abandoned the Labour Party and, in the 1924 General Election, supported the Conservatives, declaring that Stanley Baldwin was Britain's finest politician. In later years he became a passionate supporter of the Empire.

The Clarion ceased publication in 1931.

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From a copy supplied by Lynne Brushett