

DESCRIPTION OF THE PAINTINGS

DISCOVERED ON THE NORTH WALL OF SWANBOURNE
CHURCH, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

BY THE REV. J. SLATTER.

These paintings do not appear to have been designedly defaced, but simply covered with a thick coat of white-wash. A large portion has been destroyed by the erection of a mural tablet, and much damage done in the course of the work now going on for the restoration of the church, before the paintings were discovered, and the whitewash peeled off to reveal them.

The principal subject which has escaped mutilation sufficiently to be deciphered is an allegorical representation of the different conditions of the Soul of Man in this world and the next.

The frame of the picture is a brick building divided into three stages or storeys, each of which is again subdivided into three scenes.

1. Beginning at the left hand upper corner, there may be faintly discerned the traces of a female figure standing before an angel. All traces of inscription above, and the upper parts of the figures, are entirely obliterated; beneath, on a scroll, is written—

*"Quia liberé solvisti tuum debitum
Do ergo tibi liberum exitum."*

This is intended to represent the case of the perfect man, who is received at once into Paradise after death. Accordingly,

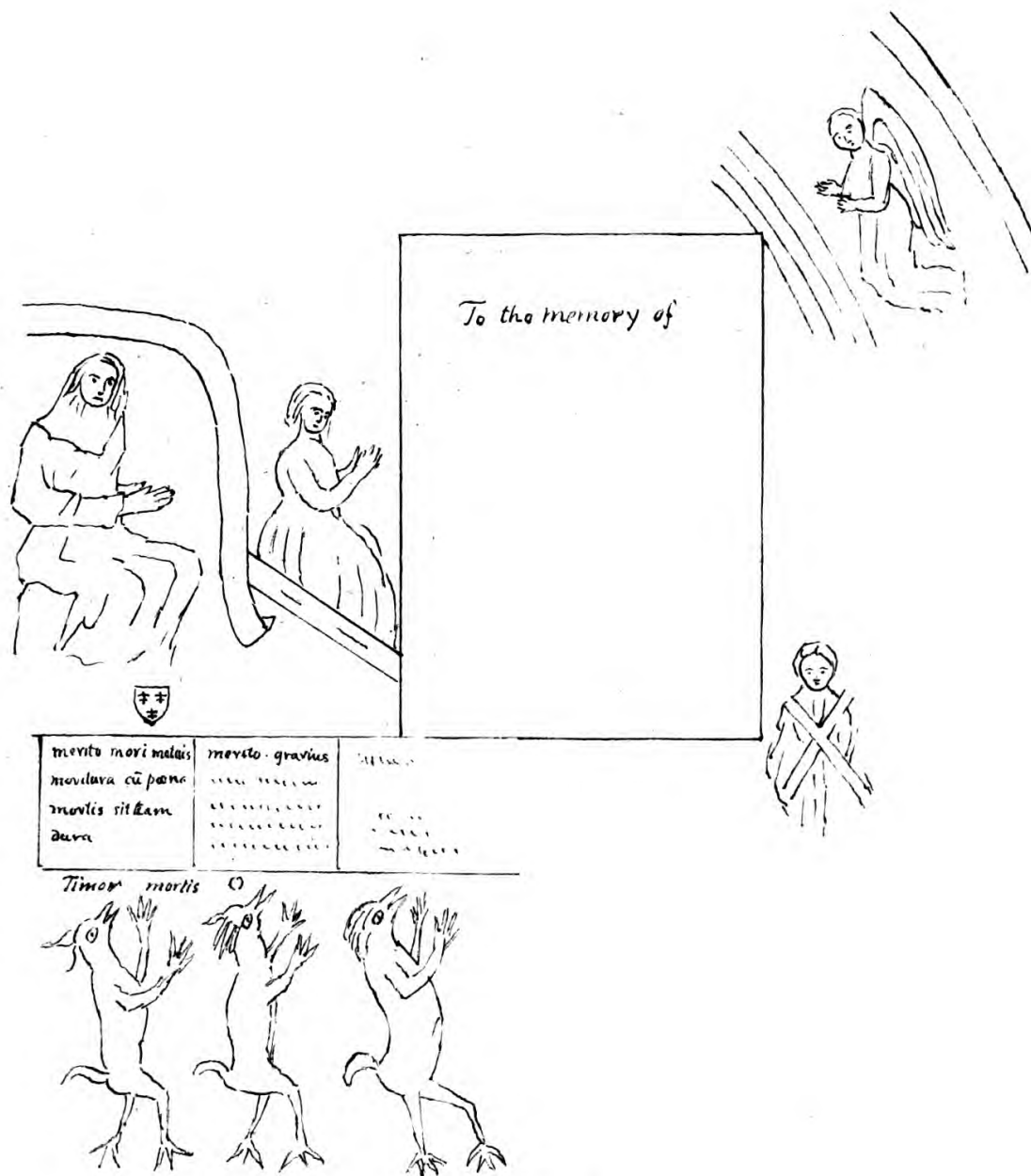
2. Represents the Soul kneeling before our Lord in an attitude of supplication, and our Lord is placing a crown (green and gold, the colour of the nimbus which surrounds his own head) upon the head of the figure before Him. Our Lord is clothed in a rich red dress; there is a scroll above, which is a good deal mutilated and difficult to decipher. Our Lord is sitting in the opening of a chamber.

3. In which, through two open arches or windows, are seen—in the first, two figures, probably angels; in the other, five similar figures, rather smaller, also with



COWELL'S ANASTATIC PRESS, IPSWICH.

Frescoes in Swanbourne Church.



Frescoes in Swanbourne Church
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wings, which either represent angels or the Souls of the Blessed. They are all in an attitude of prayer—*i.e.*, the hands held up together, and the faces denote expectation.

4. The subject of this compartment is, in logical sequence, the first of the series. It represents Death coming out of an archway in the building, which has been said is made the frame of the pictures, and presenting a priest's stole to a female figure, who is putting out her hand to take it. The figure of Death is a grim skeleton, with very white teeth, and some scattered locks of hair; the female figure, which is here and everywhere depicted with a considerable degree of unnecessary coarseness, no doubt according to the usual mode of representation in mediæval pictures, denotes the Soul of Man, and the stole his mortal body, perhaps in allusion to the text, "This body of death." There is a scroll overhead, which no doubt explains the allegory; the only word which is easily deciphered is—

"Indicatr,"

the rest is difficult from blanks and defacements; but beneath is easily read the following scroll:—

"Non poteris hic facere tuum exitum
Nisi prius mihi dederis corpus tuum."

The condition of the perfect has been described above (1); that of the impenitent comes immediately below in (7); this middle stage goes on in the next compartment to depict—

5. The condition of the imperfect penitent, which must be cleansed in purgatory, but is yet delivered from the power of the evil one. This is shown in a very vivid manner by the usual female figure in the middle, between an evil spirit and an angel. The angel holds the hands of the figure, whilst the demon is dragging at the ends of the stole which is round its neck, and the face is turned round in the same direction, very beautifully describing the double character of the imperfect Christian—with his feet set in the Christian path towards heaven, but held back by his bodily propensities, which are more or less still under the dominion of evil. Beneath are scrolls containing the speeches of the two spirits; that under the demon runs thus—

"Non (*evad*) es ? a me ita
Me (*sequebar*) is ? tu in vita."

whilst the angel says—

“Tolle manum fœda tabes
Nil in ea, vilis, habes.”

6. In the sixth compartment are seen three Souls in purgatory, with mottoes. The first—

“Misereмини mei Sancti. vos amici mei.”

The second—

“Angele nos in hoc igne.”

The third—

“Spero mox in”

7. In the lowest stage on the left hand, is seen the female coming forth from a doorway with the stole round her neck, which Death is taking off, whilst an evil spirit is standing behind Death. She is saying—

“Misera cui tam cito venisti
Anteq^m penitentem me invenisti,”

Whilst Death replies—

“N (*on solvisti*) ? debitum tuum merite
(*Dab*) is ? tamen (*corpore*) ? tuæ vitæ.”

This deciphering seems doubtful. All the Latin, though jingling, is purely expressed.

8. The evil spirit is leading off the figure reluctant, whilst overhead is written the scroll, which is imperfect.

“(Væ) ? quæ nuper fui nata condemnata (*sic.*)”

9. Which is entirely effaced, no doubt represented souls in torment ; but no trace is left.

Beneath all is a long scroll, much mutilated, of which may be read at the commencement—

“. is nobis tu merit
Munus æternæ vitæ”

The size of this composition is about nine or ten feet square. Immediately to the left of it was no doubt a representation of our Lord sitting in judgment ; a part of the nimbus surrounding the throne is visible, and two sets of angels on each side above, of which some drapery remains, and the trace of inscriptions perfectly illegible ; below, at the foot of the throne is a poor, small figure of St. Andrew, sitting with his cross ; and below all, part

really of the first composition, is an evil spirit standing at the foundation of the building, with an inscription, illegible for the most part, but containing the words

“ quia plenam ”

From whence it may be conjectured as relating to the full doom the wicked must expect.

All this portion of the painting is spoilt by the mural tablet before mentioned having been let into the wall in the middle of it.

To the left again may be seen a figure with a red cowl, possibly St. Peter, seated praying, with an inscription before him which is much mutilated, but perhaps with difficulty to be deciphered, and in front of this figure a female figure clothed praying, either seated or kneeling. Perhaps this represents the founder of the north aisle, or the donor of the painting; immediately beneath are some arms, argent, three double crosslets sable, and beneath again, three evil spirits rampant, with their names over them, two quite unreadable; the one to the right is—

“ Timor mortis,”

and over it, on a square tablet, this legend:—

“ Merito mori metuis moritura
Cum pœna mortis sit tam dura.”

Beneath all is an inscription in English, seven or eight lines deep, which unfortunately is too much mutilated to be read, all that can be readily deciphered is—

“ Man lyvyth to dye
. . . . in wynde a dream at his fete ”

The imperfect state of this portion is greatly to be regretted.

The painting is well executed, and evidently by a hand used to such representations, at least in all parts in repose, in those in action the drawing is bad.

The colour of the female figure representing the Soul seems conventional, a sort of cinereous tint, but the lips and eyes natural; the angels and our Lord natural. The evil spirits are a dull red, with green in their hair and over their bodies. It was plainly put on after the red was dry, allowing the brush to touch with green only the rough parts of the plaister; the effect is to give a sort of shot green, like the scales of a wizard or dragon.

There seems to have been a great deal of colour used in the church, especially in the north aisle; and near the south door might be traced a much mutilated picture of the Crucifixion.

