

THE

BAPTIST REPORTER.

FEBRUARY, 1846.

WILLIAM KNIBB,
THE NEGRO LIBERATOR.

How painful seems the task of sitting down to number WILLIAM KNIBB among the dead! But this is now our sorrowful duty, and it must be performed.

We do not propose to furnish at present more than a very brief memoir of the departed. The sad intelligence has come so unexpectedly and suddenly upon us, that grief for our loss prevents us from sitting down as we would wish to gather up the leading incidents of his eventful life.

WILLIAM KNIBB was born at Kettering in Northamptonshire. The exact date we cannot give, but we suppose in 1802. When a boy he was a scholar in the sabbath school at the Independent chapel, Kettering,—Mr. Toller's. At the Jubilee, a friend of ours conversed with his former teacher; and telling this to Mr. Knibb, a few hours afterwards, when in that place of worship, he observed, "Oh yes! I was. Come here, and I'll shew you where I sat." And he pointed out the place. Ah! little did that teacher think then, what a fearless advocate of truth and liberty he was training for the service of God. Sabbath-school teachers, think of that and labour on!

At a suitable age he was apprenticed as a printer, with Mr. Fuller, of Bristol. His elder brother, Thomas, went out to Jamaica as a schoolmaster, in Dec., 1822, and died in May, 1824. William resolved to go out and fill up his place, and, with his wife, sailed for Jamaica, in November, 1824. The ship was near being lost in a gale off Beachy Head. But he arrived in safety, and was welcomed with joy by the negroes, who said, "Him so like him broder." In 1829, he removed to the Mission near Savanna-la-Mar. On the death of Mr. Mann, he was invited to Falmouth. "The whole church, to an individual," says Mr. Burchell, who took their vote on the occasion, "simultaneously rose up,

and held up both hands, and then burst into tears. I never saw such a scene." In 1831, this church numbered nearly 1000 members. At the close of this year the agitation respecting freedom commenced among the negroes. Knibb's position was one of great peril. Exposed on the one side to the violence of some intemperate negroes, whose insubordination he exerted himself to restrain, he was attacked on the other by the far more bitter hostility of the reckless planters. In January, 1832, he and other of his brethren were compelled to serve in the militia, and mount guard! He memorialized the Governor, but his enemies preferred charges of exciting insurrection, and his life was in danger. Through the interposition of Mr. Roby, Collector of Customs, he was admitted to bail, and took refuge in a king's ship.

In February Mr. K. was released, but in March a prosecution was entered against him, when 300 witnesses assembled to prove his innocence. The Attorney General was thus compelled to give up the prosecution. Meantime, the destruction of the chapels proceeded, and on Feb. 7, that at Falmouth was razed to the ground by the St. Ann's regiment. Mr. K., on his return, was assailed in his lodgings, and threatened with extreme personal violence.

In April, Messrs. Knibb and Burchell visited England to lay the wrongs of the Missionaries and the negroes before the British public. Hitherto restrained from touching political matters, they could be restrained no longer. At the annual meeting held in Spa Field's chapel on June 21, Knibb told all. It was in vain that he was previously cautioned—that the timid secretary pulled the tail of his coat:—"It was a solemn moment," relates Dr. Cox, "and the man was made for it. He paused,—gave a lightning glance at the awful atrocities of the past, the glorious possibilities of the future, and the grandeur of his own position, as encompassed with terrible responsibilities, standing on the brink

of immortal fame or disgrace,—then, concentrating all his energies of thought, and feeling, and voice, he exclaimed,—‘Whatever may be the consequences, I WILL SPEAK. At the risk of my connexion with the society and all I hold dear, I will avow this; and if the friends of missions will not hear me, I will turn and tell it to my God; nor will I desist till that greatest of crimes, slavery, is removed.’ The resolution was decisive. Then sounded the knell of slavery.”

Fain would we tell of the many stirring scenes and pleasing incidents which followed. Briefly, however—In 1834, Knibb returned to Jamaica. “It him! it him! it him!” exclaimed the emancipated negroes. His chapel was re-built, schools were formed, and various plans of usefulness proposed and adopted. Entire emancipation was anticipated by the people of his charge, which gave such joy to his son William, a boy of twelve—a lad worthy of his father—that he died of excess of joy!

“It was on the first of August, 1838, that all the slaves were declared by law free. Mr. Knibb congregated his people the night before, and when the clock began to strike twelve, exclaimed, as the twelfth vibrated on their ears, ‘The monster is dead! The negro is free! Three cheers for the Queen!’ The call, we need not say, was promptly obeyed; and, as morning dawned, the monster, under the appropriate emblems of whips and fetters, collected in a coffin, appropriately inscribed, was ceremoniously buried amid suitable rejoicings.”

Neither can we do more than just allude to his very benevolent exertions to promote the temporal and spiritual benefit of the new-born freemen of Jamaica, and his efforts to send the gospel of Christ to Western Africa. For these great objects he laboured with his wonted zeal and perseverance, visiting this country to obtain assistance and make the necessary arrangements. Last spring, he again visited England to complain of unjust taxa-

tion, which was made to fall heavily on the black population, grinding them down, and crippling all their efforts to do good. In parting, he said, “I wish here to leave—*perhaps, I cannot tell, perhaps for the last time.* Farewell! Farewell, ye members of the committee! farewell, ye brethren of other denominations who have assisted and sustained us! farewell, ye who have maintained the missionary work! it is joyous, it is triumphant. I retire from you with the motto, and I give it to you as a leading star: ‘Let us work for Christ on earth, till we rest with Christ in heaven.’ Farewell!”

We must reserve a description of the closing scene, as we hope, by the next West India Mail, to have further particulars. We occupy the remainder of our space with two sketches—the former from the *Nonconformist*, in which we think we trace the hand of a neighbour, and the latter from a talented new journal—the *Universe*.

“THE greatness of William Knibb consisted rather in the qualities of his heart than in the attributes of his mind. The secret of his might lay more in the moral elements which composed his character than in the colossal framework of his intellect. There was a simplicity and transparency about him which invested him with a peculiar charm, the more so, perhaps, on account of its rarity. He had nothing to conceal, no sinister ends and sidelong views. His words and his actions were the sure index to his inmost thoughts. You seemed to see the motives and springs which moved within him, through the medium of his outward demeanour. This singleness of mind, this utter absence of all duplicity, laid the basis for that fine character which he exemplified and sustained. He was totally free from that boisterousness and bluster, the offspring of an innate vulgarity and impudence, which constitute the most prominent features in some public men. In their place he possessed that spirit of dauntless and indomita-

ble courage which is usually the associate of the more retiring virtues. He had no love of publicity for its own sake, and no base thirst for popularity, but was naturally diffident and modest. Knowing how to value the esteem of the great and of the good, he nevertheless set little value on the fleeting breath of popular applause, while he shrunk from the fawning accents of the sycophantish admirer as from a noisome pestilence. With an ardour that nothing could quench, this excellent man combined the self-discipline which could control it, and the wisdom which could direct it. He was not, in the common and conventional acceptance of that term, a prudent man, and it is well for society that this did not constitute the summit of his boast and of his fame. Prudence, if indeed it deserve a place among the virtues at all, is a little feeble grace, a light and trifling ornament with which men of the loftiest excellency can afford to dispense. It is often seen allied with cunning, self-interest, and covert design. It is most eloquently eulogised by the cold, the timid, and the calculating—by men who are always thinking about the consequences, rather than the rectitude of their behaviour. Wisdom, an excellence of far statelier growth and diviner mien—the handmaid of reflection, and the companion of integrity—embraces within itself all that is worthy in Prudence, as the greater includes the less. To this higher qualification, then, William Knibb possessed pre-eminent claims; and under its guidance he placed those glorious passions which, like a sleeping lion, reposed within his breast, ever ready to obey the summons of some great animating event. A beautiful feature in his character was his genial love of truth, his warm affection for whatever was essentially right and good. Truth was to him a substantial existence, a real and glorious thing, which enchained his judgment and led captive his heart. He was enamoured with it for its own sake, and saw reflected from its face the

immutable perfections of God. He followed it, through all its fortunes, walked in its light in the day of its prosperity, and fought by its side in the hour of its adversity. His admiration of it was not that of poet, or the delighter in romance; it was not with him the mere creation of ideality or taste—for imagination entered in a very slight degree into the constitution of his mind—it was a sound and solid appreciation of its intrinsic beauty and unalterable claims; and at its shrine his reason, as well as his feelings, paid its profoundest homage. With this enlightened attachment to the interests of truth, he blended the gentlest and the kindest feelings towards the advocates of error. Though susceptible to anger, (and that man is to be avoided who is not) there was no rancour in his nature: bigotry, malice, and envy, had no home in his breast; and while he would oppose error with unflinching accents, by whomsoever maintained, and wherever wantonly and tenaciously vindicated, would visit it with the lightning of his indignant spirit, he would leave his opponent, having exorcised his error, unscathed by the consuming fire. He would wipe the tear of sorrow from the humblest and most undeserving eye, and breathe a generous emotion towards the most hostile and inveterate foe.

A creature of such a structure, then, formed an appropriate and suitable temple for the divine sentiment of religion. His uprightness, his nobility, and his benevolence, were congenial with its own nature, and formed the *media* through which its heavenly features might placidly and radiantly shine. Hence the piety of Mr. Knibb was unsophisticated and pure—no one who knew him would doubt its reality, though there were not the slightest effort to render it apparent. Though cheerful, and susceptible to a high degree of the social pleasures, and disdaining those affected airs by which some men depict the greater part of their religion in their face, he was emi-

nently devout, and emphatically the man of prayer. He appeared to those who knew him best to cultivate much communion with God, and to be richly imbued with the spirit of his divine Master. The Scriptures were his daily guide, the source of his consolation, and the foundation of his unwavering hopes; and, whether in his more private intercourse or in his public ministrations, he evinced his strong and vital attachment to those great evangelical doctrines which they so unequivocally teach. It is obvious, then, that a man so endowed in a mental, a moral, and a spiritual point of view, could not appear on the great arena of life, called forth by momentous and stirring events, without occupying a conspicuous position, and drawing towards himself the gaze and scrutiny of the world. Mr. Knibb might have been known exclusively in his character as a missionary of Christ and as a Christian teacher, but for the circumstances which were cast up, in the history of the population amidst which he laboured. Crushed beneath the ignominy of the bondage of ages, the time of their deliverance was at hand; and in the providence of God, their deliverer, like another Moses, had been unwittingly conducted to the scene. With his noble compeers, he showed himself able and ready for the task; and with an energy, a valour, and a disinterestedness, unequalled in modern times, he advanced manfully to the field. Without any pretensions to a high or finished education, he was gifted with a ready and commanding elocution; and, rising superior to art, with its advantages or inconveniences, he threw himself upon the resources of nature, and entitled himself, without aiming at any such end, to be ranked among the most popular orators of any times. Fired with a deathless love of liberty, and filled with a holy hatred of oppression, he treated with the scorn they deserved all attempts that were made to baulk him in the

advocacy of the negro's rights. In his estimation, a crisis in their history had arrived, at which some champion must stand forth in their defence; and, by the due improvement of which, the sons of Africa might be rescued from their degradation and their bonds. Throughout the cities and towns of this great empire he told the story of their wrongs, denounced, in burning accents, the guilt and infamy of their oppressors, and called upon the British people to visit colonial slavery with the thunder of their displeasure. To see him rising in large assemblies, as the writer often has, and entering on his chosen task, till, kindled into enthusiasm by the divine nature of his mission, he took possession of every breast—till the contagion of his resistless eloquence seized hold of the young and of the old—of the rude and of the refined—and till the timid and the prudent men, who would have checked him in his glorious career, were compelled to follow, as by a magnetic charm, in his train, and to admire a moral heroism, which they had not the courage to applaud, was to receive the only suitable impression of his powers, and to be assured beforehand of the inevitable triumph of his cause. But, alas! the simple-minded christian, the affectionate pastor, the impassioned orator, and the great philanthropist is no more. His days were few, but eventful; and his public course hastily, though most gloriously, run. Life with him was a brilliant flame, which glowed with an intensity of heat, prophetic of its limited duration. Still, he accomplished more during his too short sojourn among us, than men of the ordinary cast generally effect throughout the course of the longest life. All honour to his memory, whose history has furnished another illustration of the fact, that great and beneficent changes in the destinies of communities, and in the policy of nations, are oftener to be ascribed to the invincible determination and manly prowess of some master mind,

than to the councils of committees, or to the deliberations of sages. Be it ours to catch the light of his splendid example, and to tread in his firm and unyielding footsteps, and openly to protest at all times and in all places, heedless of the cry of politic and pusillanimous minds, against every infraction on the liberties of men."

"Every person is saying, Knibb was no ordinary man, was fitted for no ordinary circumstances, and was destined to pursue no ordinary career. . . . His life consisted in the grandeur of moral action, rather than in the resplendence of pre-eminent displays of intellect. But if he was second, and only second, in mental power, he was first in the might of untiring energy. His course was bright and burning; not with the desolating fires of ambition, but with the flaming ardours of christian love and zeal. The elements of his character were clear perception, intrepid boldness, and persevering devotedness to an object. A great crisis arose; he perceived it, and was equal to it. He knew when to act, what to do, and how to strike. His purpose being formed, opposition never daunted him; misrepresentation never turned him aside; insult never arrested his pursuit. He could turn a deaf ear both to the calumniator and the charmer. He could be silent, or he could thunder, as occasion required. They mistake egregiously who think

that mere stimulus was requisite to bring him into action. He was always in action—body, soul, and spirit. Love to God and love to man glowed like a vestal flame upon the altar of his heart, and it flamed out into deeds alike of generous sympathy and holy daring. His promptitude in doing private good was only surpassed, if surpassed, by his zeal in accomplishing great public services; and he was the same man in the intense pursuit of his object, and in sincerity and transparency of character, whether he stood in the pulpit, beside the bed of sickness, in the field of moral conflict, or on the platform amidst applauding thousands. At early dawn, at burning noon, at closing day, he was ever at his work, contending against principalities, and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places—the hater of iniquity, the lover of truth and goodness, the deliverer of the slave. In this latter character he was indeed pre-eminent—great among the great! Not only like Wilberforce and his faithful band, the noble enemies of the slave-trade; history will record his name as the demolisher of slavery itself; for to him must be, in an eminent degree, attributed the success of the cause of emancipation in Jamaica. He wrestled and fought with it, and threw it to the ground; and in scorn and vengeance set his indignant foot upon the monster's neck, and triumphed gloriously!"

SONNET.

WHY should we mourn when death's pale charger breaks
 The serried phalanxes of Freedom's host?
 He only raises to a higher post
 The star-crown'd heroes; glory overtakes
 The unambitious; suddenly awakes
 The mighty soul, by seraph-tongue accost,
 To immortality. Jamaica's boast,
 The lion-hearted noble KNIBB partakes
 A champion's reward. As braves the oak
 A century of storms, his steady face
 Withstood incarnate selfishness—he spoke,
 And freedom beam'd on Afric's injured race.
 ILLUSTRIOUS CHIEF! thy panoply lay down,—
 The victory is won—Go wear thy crown;

Melbourne.

W. T. P.