

## ***Evelyn Underhill Biography<sup>1</sup> Advent 2021***

Born in Wolverhampton in 1875, Evelyn Underhill was a writer and poet who was greatly influenced by the spiritual world and was perhaps best known for her works on the mysticism, particularly that which surrounds Christianity. An only child with a father who was a writer, Underhill spent most of her early days being educated at home before going to a private school in her teens.



Like her father, she developed a desire to write from a young age and combined this with her desire to explore the spiritual side of mankind. She studied history at university in London and married her childhood sweetheart Hubert Moore in 1907 who strangely didn't much share in her love of all things spiritual but did nothing to dissuade her. They had no children together and consequently Underhill was able to devote her time to traveling around Europe and writing rather than being overly preoccupied with the raising of a family.

Underhill published her first work in her mid to late twenties, a small collection of poetry under the title *The Bar-Lamb's Ballad Book* which was reviewed favourably at the time. It was for her novels that she was more popular in the early days of her writing career. She published *The Grey World* in 1904 which perhaps presaged her interest in the mystical world and was followed by *The Lost Word* in 1907.

From far horizons came a Voice that said,  
'Lo! from the hand of Death take thou thy daily bread.'  
Then I, awakening, saw  
A splendour burning in the heart of things:  
The flame of living love which lights the law  
Of mystic death that works the mystic birth.

Perhaps her greatest book and one which was widely read up until the middle of the last century was *Mysticism*<sup>2</sup>, first published in 1911 and which explored the components of spirituality and how human consciousness can be developed. Though often confused with occult practices, both then and in the present day, Underhill argued that many of the spiritual advances to come out of civilization had their basis in what people termed mysticism.

She followed up with a biography of a Flemish mystic *Ruysbroeck* that was published in 1914 and then the *Mysticism of Plotinus* in 1919 which was less favourably received. Throughout her life, Underhill was drawn towards Catholicism and was only discouraged by her husband who was strongly

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<sup>1</sup> <https://mypoeticside.com/poets/evelyn-underhill-poems>

<sup>2</sup> Find a free copy on 'Project Gutenberg'

against it. It helped that he was also a writer and was therefore supportive of her other spiritual exploration through both her prose works and her poetry.

Underhill was also friends with Arthur Machen who was well known for his fantastical stories and he influenced the fictional works that she wrote in the early part of the 20th Century. She was also guided by lesser known philosophers such as Eucken and Bergson and her later travels brought her into contact with the Indian poet and mystic [Rabindranath Tagore](#) with whom she worked on a translation of *The Songs of Kabir*.

Underhill attracted quite a lot of attention throughout her life and she was asked to give a series of lectures by Oxford University. At heart she was a pacifist and the outbreak of the Second World War proved to be a struggle for her. Though she survived the blitz of 1940, shortly after her health began to seriously disintegrate. Underhill died the following year at the age of 65.

### **Poems by Evelyn Underhill<sup>3</sup>**

#### **Immanence**

I come in the little things,  
Saith the Lord:  
Not borne on morning wings  
Of majesty, but I have set my feet  
Amidst the delicate and bladed wheat  
That springs triumphant in the furrowed sod.  
There do I dwell in weakness and in power;  
Not broken or divided, saith our God!  
Is your strait garden plot I come to flower:  
About your porch my vine  
Meek, fruitful, doth entwine;  
Waits, at the threshold, Love's appointed hour.

I come in the little things,  
Saith the Lord:  
Yes! on the glancing wings  
Of eager birds, the softly pattering feet  
Of furred and gentle beasts, I come to meet  
Your hard and wayward heart. In brown bright eyes  
That peep from out the brake, I stand confessed.  
On every nest  
Where feathery patience is content to brood  
And leaves her pleasure for the high emprise

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<sup>3</sup> <https://thevalueofsparrows.wordpress.com/2012/10/24/poetry-evelyn-underhill/>

Of motherhood—  
There doth my Godhead rest.  
I come in the little things,  
Saith the Lord:  
My starry wings  
I do forsake,  
Love's highway of humility to take:  
Meekly I fit my stature to your need.  
In beggar's part  
About your gates I shall not cease to plead—  
As man, to speak with man—  
Till by such art  
I shall achieve my immemorial plan,  
Pass the low lintel of the human heart.

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### **Introversion**

What do you seek within, O soul, my brother?  
What do you seek within?  
I seek a life that shall never die,  
Some haven to win  
From mortality.

What do you find within, O soul, my brother?  
What do you find within?  
I find great quiet where no noises come.  
Without, the world's din:  
Silence in my home.

Whom do you find within, O soul, my brother?  
Whom do you find within?  
I find a friend that in secret came:  
His scarred hands within  
He shields a faint flame.

What would you do within, O soul, my brother?  
What would you do within?  
Bar door and window that none may see:  
That alone we may be  
(Alone! face to face,  
In that flame-lit place!)  
When first we begin  
To speak one with another.

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## **Uxbridge Road**

The Western Road goes streaming out to seek the cleanly wild,  
It pours the city's dim desires towards the undefiled,  
It sweeps betwixt the huddled homes about its eddies grown  
To smear the little space between the city and the sown:  
The torments of that seething tide who is there that can see?  
There's one who walked with starry feet the western road by me!

He is the drover of the soul; he leads the flock of men  
All wistful on that weary track, and brings them back again.  
The dreaming few, the slaving crew, the motley caste of life—  
The wastrel and artificer, the harlot and the wife—  
They may not rest, forever pressed by one they cannot see:  
The one who walked with starry feet the western road by me.

He drives them east, he drives them west, between the dark and light;  
He pastures them in city pens, he leads them home at night.  
The towery trams, the threaded trains, like shuttles to and fro  
To weave the web of working days in ceaseless travel go.  
How harsh the woof, how long the weft! who shall the fabric see?  
The one who walked with starry feet the western road by me!

Throughout the living joyful year at lifeless tasks to strive,  
And scarcely at the end to save gentility alive;  
The villa plot to sow and reap, to act the villa lie,  
Beset by villa fears to live, midst villa dreams to die;  
Ah, who can know the dreary woe? and who the splendor see?  
The one who walked with starry feet the western road by me.

Behold! he lent me as we went the vision of the seer;  
Behold! I saw the life of men, the life of God shine clear.  
I saw the hidden Spirit's thrust; I saw the race fulfill  
The spiral of its steep ascent, predestined of the will.  
Yet not unled, but shepherded by one they may not see—  
The one who walked with starry feet the western road by me!

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## **Regnum Caelorum Vim Patitur**

When our five-angled spears, that pierced the world  
And drew its life-blood, faint before the wall  
Which hems its secret splendour—when we fall,  
Lance broken banner furled,  
Before that calm invincible defense  
Whereon our folly hurled  
The piteous armies of intelligence—  
Then, often-times, we know

How conquering mercy to the battle field  
Comes through the darkness, freely to bestow  
The prize for which we fought  
Not knowing what we sought,  
And salve the wounds of those who would not yield.

He loves the valiant foe; he comes not out to meet  
The craven soul made captive of its fear:  
Not these the victories that to him are sweet!  
But the impetuous soldiery of truth,  
And knighthood of the intellectual quest,  
Who ask not for his ruth  
Nor would desire his rest:  
These are to him most dear,  
And shall in their surrender yet prevail.  
Yea! at the end of unrewarded days,  
By swift and secret ways  
As on a sudden moonbeam shining clear,  
Soft through the night shall slide upon their gaze  
The thrice-defended vision of the Grail:  
And when his peace hath triumphed, these shall be  
The flower of his celestial chivalry.

And did you think, he saith  
As to and fro he goes the trenches through,  
My heart impregnable, that you must bring  
The ballisters of faith  
Their burning bolts to fling,  
And all the cunning intricate device  
Of human wit,  
One little breach to make  
That so you might attain to enter it?  
Nay, on the other side  
Love's undefended postern is set wide:  
But thus it is I woo  
My dearest sons, that ignoble ease  
Shall never please,  
Nor any smooth and open way entice.  
Armed would I have them come  
Against the mighty bastions of their home;  
Out of high failure win  
Their way within,  
And from my conquering hand their birthright take.

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## **Corpus Christi**

Come, dear Heart!  
The fields are white to harvest: come and see  
As in a glass the timeless mystery  
Of love, whereby we feed  
On God, our bread indeed.  
Torn by the sickles, see him share the smart  
of traving creation: maimed, despised,  
Yet by his lovers the more dearly prized  
Because for us he lays his beauty down—  
Last toll paid by perfection for our loss!  
Trace on these fields his everlasting cross,  
And o'er the stricken sheaves the Immortal Victim's crown.

From far horizons came a voice that said,  
"Lo! from the hand of death take thou thy daily bread."  
Then I, awakening, saw  
A splendour burning in the heart of things:  
The flame of living love which lights the law  
Of mystic death that works the mystic birth.  
I knew the patient passion of the Earth,  
Material, everlasting, whence there springs  
The bread of angels and the life of man.

Now in each blade  
I, blind no longer, see  
The glory of God's growth: know it to be  
An earnest of the immemorial plan.  
Yea, I have understood  
How all things are one great oblation made:  
He on our altars, we on the world's rood.  
Even as this corn,  
Earth-born,  
We are snatched from the sod;  
Reaped, ground to grist,  
Crushed and tormented in the mills of God,  
And offered at life's hands, a living Eucharist.