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Life of John Milton

Richard Garnett

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Richard Garnett

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-8235-7

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LIFE
OF
JOHN MILTON
BY
RICHARD GARNETT

NOTE.

The number of miniature "Lives" of Milton is great; great also is the merit of some of them. With one exception, nevertheless, they are all dismissed to the shelf by the publication of Professor Masson's monumental and authoritative biography, without perpetual reference to which no satisfactory memoir can henceforth be composed. One recent biography has enjoyed this advantage. Its author, the late Mark Pattison, wanted neither this nor any other qualification except a keener sense of the importance of the religious and political controversies of Milton's time. His indifference to matters so momentous in Milton's own estimation has, in our opinion, vitiated his conception of his hero, who is represented as persistently yielding to party what was meant for mankind. We think, on the contrary, that such a mere man of letters as Pattison wishes that Milton had been, could never have produced a "Paradise Lost." If this view is well-founded, there is not only room but need for yet another miniature "Life of Milton," notwithstanding the intellectual subtlety and scholarly refinement which render Pattison's memorable. It should be noted that the recent German biography by Stern, if adding little to Professor Masson's facts, contributes much valuable literary illustration; and that Keighley's analysis of Milton's opinions occupies a position of its own, of which no subsequent biographical discoveries can deprive it. The present writer has further to express his deep obligations to Professor Masson for his great kindness in reading and remarking upon the proofs—not thereby rendering himself responsible for anything in these pages; and also to the helpful friend who has provided him with an index.

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LIFE OF MILTON.

CHAPTER I.

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608, when Shakespeare had lately produced "Antony and Cleopatra," when Bacon was writing his "Wisdom of the Ancients" and Raleigh his "History of the World," when the English Bible was hastening into print; when, nevertheless, in the opinion of most foreigners and many natives, England was intellectually unpolished, and her literature almost barbarous.

The preposterousness of this judgment as a whole must not blind us to the fragment of truth which it included. England's literature was, in many respects, very imperfect and chaotic. Her "singing masons" had already built her "roofs of gold"; Hooker and one or two other great prose-writers stood like towers: but the less exalted portions of the edifice were still half hewn. Some literatures, like the Latin and the French, rise gradually to the crest of their perfection; others, like the Greek and the English, place themselves almost from the first on their loftiest pinnacle, leaving vast gaps to be subsequently filled in. Homer was not less the supreme poet because history was for him literally an old song, because he would have lacked understanding for Plato and relish for Aristophanes. Nor were Shakespeare and the translators of the Bible less at the head of European literature because they must have failed as conspicuously as Homer would have failed in all things save those to which they had a call, which chanced to be the greatest. Literature, however, cannot remain isolated at such altitudes, it must expand or perish. As Homer's epic passed through Pindar and the lyrical poets into drama history and philosophy, continually fitting itself more and more to become an instrument in the ordinary affairs of life, so it was needful that English lettered discourse should become popular and pliant, a power in the State as well as in the study. The magnitude of the change, from the time when the palm of popularity decorated Sidney's "Arcadia" to that when it adorned Defoe and Bunyan, would impress us even more powerfully if the interval were not engrossed by a colossal figure, the last of the old school in the erudite magnificence of his style in prose and verse; the first of the new, inasmuch as English poetry, hitherto romantic, became in his

hands classical. This "splendid bridge from the old world to the new," as Gibbon has been called in a different connection, was John Milton: whose character and life-work, carefully analyzed, resolve themselves into pairs of equally vivid contrasts. A stern Puritan, he is none the less a freethinker in the highest and best sense of the term. The recipient of direct poetical inspiration in a measure vouchsafed to few, he notwithstanding studies to make himself a poet; writes little until no other occupation than writing remains to him; and, in general, while exhibiting even more than the usual confidence, shows less than the usual exultation and affluence of conscious genius. Professing to recognize his life's work in poetry, he nevertheless suffers himself to be diverted for many a long year into political and theological controversy, to the scandal and compassion of one of his most competent and attached biographers. Whether this biographer is right or wrong, is a most interesting subject for discussion. We deem him wrong, and shall not cease to reiterate that Milton would not have been Milton if he could have forgotten the citizen in the man of letters. Happy, at all events, it is that this and similar problems occupy in Milton's life the space which too frequently has to be spent upon the removal of misconception, or the refutation of calumny. Little of a sordid sort disturbs the sentiment of solemn reverence with which, more even than Shakespeare's, his life is approached by his countrymen; a feeling doubtless mainly due to the sacred nature of his principal theme, but equally merited by the religious consecration of his whole existence. It is the easier for the biographer to maintain this reverential attitude, inasmuch as the prayer of Agur has been fulfilled in him, he has been given neither poverty nor riches. He is not called upon to deal with an enormous mass of material, too extensive to arrange, yet too important to neglect. Nor is he, like Shakespeare's biographer, reduced to choose between the starvation of nescience and the windy diet of conjecture. If a humbling thought intrudes, it is how largely he is indebted to a devoted diligence he never could have emulated; how painfully Professor Masson's successors must resemble the Turk who builds his cabin out of Grecian or Roman ruins.

Milton's genealogy has taxed the zeal and acumen of many investigators. He himself merely claims a respectable ancestry (*ex genere*

honesto). His nephew Phillips professed to have come upon the root of the family tree at Great Milton, in Oxfordshire, where tombs attested the residence of the clan, and tradition its proscription and impoverishment in the Wars of the Roses. Monuments, station, and confiscation have vanished before the scrutiny of the Rev. Joseph Hunter; it can only be safely concluded that Milton's ancestors dwelt in or near the village of Holton, by Shotover Forest, in Oxfordshire, and that their rank in life was probably that of yeomen. Notwithstanding Aubrey's statement that Milton's grandfather's name was John, Mr. Hyde Clarke's researches in the registers of the Scriveners' Company have proved that Mr. Hunter and Professor Masson were right in identifying him with Richard Milton, of Stanton St. John, near Holton; and Professor Masson has traced the family a generation further back to Henry Milton, whose will, dated November 21, 1558, attests a condition of plain comfort, nearer poverty than riches. Henry Milton's goods at his death were inventoried at £6 19s.; when his widow's will is proved, two years afterwards, the estimate is £7 4s. 4d. Richard, his son, is stated, but not proved, to have been an under-ranger of Shotover Forest. He appears to have married a widow named Jeffrey, whose maiden name had been Haughton, and who had some connection with a Cheshire family of station. He would also seem to have improved his circumstances by the match, which may account for the superior education of his son John, whose birth is fixed by an affidavit to 1562 or 1563. Aubrey, indeed, next to Phillips and Milton himself, the chief contemporary authority, says that he was for a time at Christ Church, Oxford—a statement in itself improbable, but slightly confirmed by his apparent acquaintance with Latin, and the family tradition that his course of life was diverted by a quarrel with his father. Queen Mary's stakes and faggots had not affected Richard Milton as they affected most Englishmen. Though churchwarden in 1582, he must have continued to adhere to the ancient faith, for he was twice fined for recusancy in 1601, which lends credit to the statement that his son was cast off by him for Protestantism. "Found him reading the Bible in his chamber," says Aubrey, who adds that the younger Milton never was a scrivener's apprentice; but this is shown to be an error by Mr. Hyde Clarke's discovery of his admission to the Scriveners' Company in 1599, where he is stated to have been apprentice to James Colborn. Colborn himself had been only four

years in business, instead of the seven which would usually be required for an apprentice to serve out his indenture— which suggests that some formalities may have been dispensed with on account of John Milton's age. A scrivener was a kind of cross between an attorney and a law stationer, whose principal business was the preparation of deeds, "to be well and truly done after my learning, skill, and science," 16 and with due regard to the interests of more exalted personages. "Neither for haste nor covetousness I shall take upon me to make any deed whereof I have not cunning, without good advice and information of counsel." Such a calling offered excellent opportunities for investments; and John Milton, a man of strict integrity and frugality, came to possess a "plentiful estate." Among his possessions was the house in Bread Street destroyed in the Great Fire. The tenement where the poet was born, being a shop, required a sign, for which he chose The Spread Eagle, either from the crest of such among the Miltons as had a right to bear arms, among whom he may have reckoned himself; or as the device of the Scriveners' Company. He had been married about 1600 to a lady whose name has been but lately ascertained to have been Sarah Jeffrey. John Milton the younger was the third of six children, only three of whom survived infancy. He grew up between a sister, Anne, several years older, and a brother, Christopher, seven years younger than himself.

Milton's birth and nurture were thus in the centre of London; but the London of that day had not half the population of the Liverpool of ours. Even now the fragrance of the hay in far-off meadows may be inhaled in Bread Street on a balmy summer's night; then the meadows were near the doors, and the undefiled sky was reflected by an unpolluted stream. There seems no reason to conclude that Milton, in his early boyhood, enjoyed any further opportunities of resort to rural scenery than the vicinity of London could afford; but if the city is his native element, natural beauty never 17appeals to him in vain. Yet the influences which moulded his childhood must have been rather moral and intellectual than merely natural:—

"The starlight smile of children, the sweet looks
Of women, the fair breast from which I fed,"

played a greater part in the education of this poet than

"The murmur of the unreposing brooks,
And the green light which, shifting overhead,
Some tangled bower of vines around me shed,
The shells on the sea-sand, and the wild flowers."

Paramount to all other influences must have been the character of his father, a "mute" but by no means an "inglorious" Milton, the preface and foreshadowing of the son. His great step in life had set the son the example from which the latter never swerved, and from him the younger Milton derived not only the independence of thought which was to lead him into moral and social heresy, and the fidelity to principle which was to make him the Abdiel of the Commonwealth, but no mean share of his poetical faculty also. His mastery of verbal harmony was but a new phase of his father's mastery of music, which he himself recognizes as the complement of his own poetical gift:—

"Ipse volens Phœbus se dispertire duobus,
Altera dona mihi, dedit altera dona parenti."

As a composer, the circumspect, and, as many no doubt thought prosaic scrivener, took rank among the 18 best of his day. One of his compositions, now lost, was rewarded with a gold medal by a Polish prince (Aubrey says the Landgrave of Hesse), and he appears among the contributors to *The Triumphs of Oriana*, a set of twenty-five madrigals composed in honour of Queen Elizabeth. "The Teares and Lamentations of a Sorrowful Soule"—dolorous sacred songs, Professor Masson calls them—were, according to their editor, the production of "famous artists," among whom Byrd, Bull, Dowland, Orlando Gibbons, certainly figure, and three of them were composed by the elder Milton. He also harmonized the Norwich and York psalm tunes, which were adapted to six of the Psalms in Ravenscroft's Collection. Such performance bespeaks not only musical accomplishment, but a refined nature; and we may well believe that

Milton's love of learning, as well as his love of music, was hereditary in its origin, and fostered by his contact with his father. Aubrey distinctly affirms that Milton's skill on the organ was directly imparted to him by his father, and there would be nothing surprising if the first rudiments of knowledge were also instilled by him. Poetry he may have taught by precept, but the one extant specimen of his Muse is enough to prove that he could never have taught it by example.

We have therefore to picture Milton growing up in a narrow street amid a strict Puritan household, but not secluded from the influences of nature or uncheered by melodious recreations; and tenderly watched over by exemplary parents—a mother noted, he tells us, for her charities among her neighbours, and a father who had discerned his promise from the very first. Given this perception in the head of a religious household, it almost followed in that age that the future poet should receive the education of a divine. Happily, the sacerdotal caste had ceased to exist, and the education of a clergyman meant not that of a priest, but that of a scholar. Milton was instructed daily, he says, both at grammar schools and under private masters, "as my age would suffer," he adds, in acknowledgment of his father's considerateness. Like Disraeli two centuries afterwards (perhaps the single point of resemblance), he went for schooling to a Nonconformist in Essex, "who," says Aubrey, "cut his hair short." His own hair? or his pupil's? queries Biography. We boldly reply, Both. Undoubtedly Milton's hair is short in the miniature painted of him at the age of ten by, as is believed, Cornelius Jansen. A thoughtful little face, that of a well-nurtured, towardly boy; lacking the poetry and spirituality of the portrait of eleven years later, where the long hair flows down upon the ruff.

After leaving his Essex pedagogue, Milton came under the private tuition of Thomas Young, a Scotchman from St. Andrews, who afterwards rose to be master of Jesus College, Cambridge. It would appear from the elegies subsequently addressed to him by his pupil that he first taught Milton to write Latin verse. This instruction was no doubt intended to be preliminary to the youth's entrance at St. Paul's School, where he must have been admitted by 1620 at the latest.