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Pascal

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PASCAL

by
PRINCIPAL TULLOCH
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p. iPREFATORY NOTE.

The translations in this volume are chiefly my own; but I have also taken expressions and sentences freely from others—and especially from Dr M'Crie, in his translation of the 'Provincial Letters'—when they seemed to convey well the sense of the original. It would be impossible to distinguish in all cases between what is my own and what I have borrowed. The 'Provincial Letters' have been translated at least four times into English. The translation of Dr M'Crie, published in 1846, is the most spirited. The 'Pensies' were translated by the Rev. Edward Craig, A.M. Oxon., in 1825, following the French edition of 1819, which again followed that of Bossut in 1779. A new translation, both of the 'Letters' and 'Pensies,' by George Pearce, Esq.—the latter after the restored text of M. Faughre—appeared in 1849 and 1850.

J. T.

p. 1INTRODUCTION.

There are few names which have become more classical in modern literature than that of Blaise Pascal. There is hardly any name more famous at once in literature, science, and religion. Cut off at the early age of thirty-nine—the fatal age of genius—he had long before attained pre-eminent distinction as a geometer and discoverer in physical science; while the rumour of his genius as the author of the ‘Provincial Letters,’ and as one of the chiefs of a notable school of religious thought, had spread far and wide. His writings continue to be studied for the perfection of their style and the vitality of their substance. As a writer, he belongs to no school, and is admired simply for his greatness by Encyclopedist and Romanticist, by Catholic and Protestant alike,—by men like Voltaire and Condorcet and Sainte-Beuve, no less than by men like Bossuet, Vinet, and Neander. His ‘Pensies’ have been carefully restored, and re-edited with minute and loving faithfulness in our time by editors of such opposite tastes and tendencies as M. Prosper Faughre, M. Havet, and M. Victor Rochet. p. 2Cousin considered it one of the glories of his long intellectual career that he had first led the way to the remarkable restoration of Pascal’s remains. Of all the illustrious names which group themselves around Port Royal, it is Pascal alone, and Racine—who was more its pupil, but less its representative—whose genius can be said to survive, and to invest it with an undying lustre.

Pascal’s early death, the reserve of his friends under the assaults which the ‘Provincial Letters’ provoked, and his very fame, as a writer, have served in some degree to obscure his personality. To many a modern reader he is little else than a great name. The man is hidden away behind the author of the ‘Pensies,’ or the defender of Port Royal. Some might even say that his writings are now more admired than studied. They have been so long the subject of eulogy that their classical character is taken for granted, and the reader of the present day is content to look at them from a respectful distance rather than spontaneously study them for himself. There may be some truth in this view. Pascal is certainly, like many other great writers, far more widely known than he is understood or appreciated. The old, which are still the common, editions of the ‘Pensies,’

have also given a certain commonplace to his reputation. It were certainly a worthy task to set him more clearly before our age both as a man and as a writer.

It is no easy task, however, to do this; and to tell the full story of Pascal's life is no longer possible. Its records, numerous as they are, are incomplete; all fail more or less at an interesting point of his career. They leave much unexplained; and the most familiar confidences of his sisters and niece, who have preserved p. 3 many interesting details regarding him, have not entirely removed the veil from certain aspects of his character. The well-known life by Madame Pirier, his elder sister, is of course the chief authentic source of his biography. It was written shortly after his death, although not published for some time later; and nothing can be more lively, graphic, and yet dignified, than its portraiture of his youthful precocity, and, again, of the devotions and austerities of his later years. But it leaves many gaps unsupplied. Like other memoirs of the kind, it is written from a somewhat conventional point of view. No one, as M. Havet says, was nearer to him in all senses of the expression, or could have given a more true and complete account of all the incidents in his life; but she was not only his sister, but his enthusiastic friend and admirer, in whose eyes he was at once a genius and a saint—a man of God, called to a great mission. It was from a consciousness of this mission, and the full glory of his religious fame, that she looked back upon all his life; and the lines in which she draws it are coloured, in consequence, too gravely and monotonously. Certain particulars she drops out of sight altogether. These are to be found scattered here and there, sometimes in his own letters, more frequently in the letters of his younger sister, Jacqueline, and in a supplementary memoir, written by his niece, Marguerite Pirier, all of which have been carefully published in our time, and made accessible to any reader. [3] The researches of M. Cousin, M. Faughre, and M. Havet, the p. 4 curious and interesting monograph of M. Lilut, [4a] have thrown light on various points; while the copious portraiture of Sainte-Beuve [4b] has given to the whole an animation and a desultory charm which no English pen need strive to imitate.

My only hope, as my aim, will be in this little volume to set before the English reader perhaps a more full and connected account of the

life and writings of Pascal than has yet appeared in our language, freely availing myself of all the sources I have indicated. And if long and loving familiarity with a subject—an intimacy often renewed both with the 'Provincial Letters' and the 'Pensies'—form any qualification for such a task, I may be allowed to possess it. It is now nearly thirty years since the study of Neander first drew me to the study of Pascal; and I ventured, with the confidence of youth, to draw from the 'Pensies,' which had then recently appeared in the new and admirable edition of M. Faughre, the outlines of a Christian Philosophy. [4c] I shall venture on no such ambition within the bounds of this volume; but I trust I may be able to bring together the story of Pascal's life, controversy, and thought in such a manner as to lead others to the study of a writer truly great in the imperishable grandeur and elevation of his ideas, no less than in the exquisite finish and graces of his style.

p. 5 CHAPTER I. PASCAL'S FAMILY AND YOUTH.

Blaise Pascal was born at Clermont-Ferrand on the 19th June 1623. He belonged to an old Auvergne family, Louis XI. having ennobled one of its members for administrative services as early as 1478, although no use was made of the title, at least in the seventeenth century. The family cherished with more pride its ancient connection with the legal or 'Parliamentary' institutions of their country. [5] Pascal's grandfather, Martin Pascal, was treasurer of France; and his father, Itienne, after completing his legal studies in Paris, acquired the position of Second President of the Court of Aides at Clermont. In the year 1618 he married Antoinette Begon, who became the mother of four children, of whom three survived and p. 6 became distinguished. Madame Pascal died in 1626 or 1628; [6a] and two years afterwards (in 1630) Itienne Pascal abandoned his professional duties, and came to Paris, in order that he might devote himself to the education of his children.

Soon after the Pascal family settled in Paris, their character and endowments seem to have attracted a widespread interest. If not superior to the Arnaulds, they were no less remarkable. They did not escape the penetrating eye of Richelieu, who, as he looked upon the father with his son, then fifteen years of age, and his two daughters, was so struck by their beauty that he exclaimed, without waiting for their formal introduction to him, that he *would like to make something great of them*. [6b] Itienne Pascal was a man not only of official capacity, but of keen intellectual instincts and aspirations. He shared eagerly in the scientific enthusiasm of his time. A letter by him addressed to the Jesuit Noki shows that the vein of satire, half pleasant, half severe, which reached such perfection in the famous 'Letters' of his son, was not unknown to the father. The careful and systematic education which he gave to his son would alone have stamped him as a man of remarkable intelligence.

Gilberte, Pascal's elder sister and biographer, exerted an influence upon his character only second to that of his father. She married her cousin, M. Pirier, also of a Parliamentary family, and Counsellor of the Court of Aides at Clermont. She was alike beautiful and p.

7accomplished, a student of mathematics, philosophy, and history. [7] For a time she shared in the enjoyments of the world, like other persons of her age and condition; but the same impulses of religious enthusiasm which animated the rest of her family led to her practical abandonment of the world while still young. The memoirs which she composed, both of her brother and sister, and her letters, all indicate a high intelligence and a mingled dignity, sweetness, and restraint of character, which made her their best counsellor and friend.

The younger sister, Jacqueline, has been made a special study by M. Cousin amongst the 'Illustrious Women of the Seventeenth Century.' She was beautiful as her sister, and a child of genius like her brother. She began to compose verses at the age of eight, and in her eleventh year assisted in the composition and the acting of a comedy in five acts, which was a subject of universal talk in Paris. Her powers, both as an actor and a verse-maker, made a wonderful reputation at the time, which, as we shall see, was highly serviceable to her after. Her verses, it must be confessed, are somewhat artificial and hollow; but her letters, and, more remarkable than either her verses or her letters, her 'Thoughts' on the 'Mystery of the Death of Christ,' are in some respects very fine, and might even claim a place beside some of those of her brother. They are equally elevated in tone, and pervaded by the same subtle, penetrating, radiant mysticism, the same rapture of self-sacrificing aspiration, p. 8though lacking the glow of inward fire and exquisite charm of style which marked the author of the 'Pensies.' Noble-minded and full of genius, she was yet without his depth and power of feeling, or his skill and finish as an author. In 1646 she came, along with her brother, and greatly through his influence, strongly under the power of religion; and in 1652, after her father's death, she renounced the world, and became one of the Sisters of Port Royal. She died amidst the persecution of the Sisters in 1661, a year before her brother.

In Paris the elder Pascal became a centre of men of congenial intellectual tastes with himself, and his house a sort of rendezvous for the mathematicians and the physicists of the time. Among them were Descartes, Gassendi, Mersenne, Roberval, Carcavi, and Le Pailleur; and from the frequent reunion of these men is said to have

sprung the Academy of Sciences founded in 1666. It is interesting to notice that it was into this same society that Hobbes was introduced on his first and second visits to France, when he accompanied the future Duke of Devonshire there as tutor. With Father Mersenne and Gassendi especially he formed a warm friendship, which sheds an interest over his life. Possibly in some of these reunions the author of the 'Leviathan' may have encountered the young Pascal, and joined in the half admiration and half incredulity which his wonderful powers had begun to excite.

There never certainly was a more singular story of youthful precocity than that which Madame Pirier has given of her brother, accustomed as we have become to such stories in the lives of eminent men. Detecting the remarkable powers of the boy, his father had formed p. 9very definite resolutions as to his education. His chief maxim, Madame Pirier says, was always "to keep the boy above his work." And for this reason he did not wish him to learn Latin till he was twelve years of age, when he might easily acquire it. In the meantime, he sought to give him a general idea of grammar—of its rules, and the exceptions to which these rules are liable—and so to fit him to take up the study of any language with intelligence and facility. He endeavoured further to direct his son's attention to the more marked phenomena of nature, and such explanations as he could give of them. But here the son's perception outstripped the father's power of explanation. He wished "to know the reason of everything;" and when his father's statements did not appear to him to give the reason, he was far from satisfied.

"For he had always an admirable perspicacity in discerning what was false; and it may be said that in everything and always truth was the sole object of his mind. From his childhood he could only yield to what seemed to him evidently true; and when others spoke of good reasons, he tried to find them for himself. He never quitted a subject until he had found some explanation which satisfied him."

Once, among other occasions, he was so interested in the fact that the sound emitted by a plate lying on a table when struck, suddenly

ceased on the plate being touched by the hand, that he made an inquiry into sound in general, and drew so many conclusions that he embodied them in a "well-reasoned" treatise. At this time he was only twelve years of age.

At the same age he gave still more astonishing evidence of his precocious scientific capacities. His father, p. 10 perceiving his strong scientific bent, and desirous that he should first of all acquaint himself with languages before the absorption of the severer, but more engrossing, study seized him, had withdrawn from his sight all mathematical books, and carefully avoided the subject in the presence of his son when his friends were present. This, as might be expected, only quickened the curiosity of the boy, who frequently begged his father to teach him mathematics, and the father promised to do so as a reward when he knew Latin and Greek, which he was then learning. Piqued by this resistance, the boy asked one day, "What mathematical science was, and of what it treated?" He was told that its aim was to make figures correctly, and to find their right relations or proportions to one another. He began, says his sister, to meditate during his play-hours on the information thus communicated to him.

"And being alone in a room where he was accustomed to amuse himself, he took a piece of charcoal and drew figures upon the boards, trying, for example, to make a circle perfectly round, a triangle of which the sides and angles were equal, and similar figures. He succeeded in his task, and then endeavoured to determine the proportion of the figures, although so careful had his father been in hiding from him all knowledge of the kind, that he did not even know the names of the figures. He made names for himself, then definitions, then axioms, and finally demonstrations; and in this way had pushed his researches as far as the thirty-second proposition of the first book of Euclid." [10]

At this point a 'surprise' visit of his father arrested him in his task, although so absorbed was he in it, that p. 11 he did not at first recognise his father's presence. The older Pascal, having satisfied

himself of the astonishing achievement which the youthful mathematician had worked out for himself in solitude, ran with tears of joy to communicate the fact to his friend M. le Pailleur. It was agreed betwixt them that such an aptitude for science should no longer be balked, and the lad was furnished with the means of pursuing his mathematical studies. Before he had completed his sixteenth year he had written the famous treatise on Conic Sections which excited the "mingled incredulity and astonishment" of Descartes. [11]

The happiness of Pascal's home was suddenly interrupted by an unforeseen calamity. On coming to Paris, his father had invested his savings in bonds upon the Hotel de Ville. The Government, impoverished by wars and extravagance, reduced the value of these revenues, with the result of creating discontent and calling forth expostulation from the disappointed annuitants. Some of them met together, and, among others, Itienne Pascal, and gave such vent to their feelings as to alarm the Government. Richelieu took summary means of asserting his authority and silencing the disturbers. The meeting was denounced as seditious, and a warrant issued to arrest the offenders and throw them into the Bastille. Itienne Pascal, having become apprised of the hostile designs of the Cardinal, contrived to conceal himself at first in Paris, and afterwards took refuge in the solitude of his native district. His children were left without his care, and plunged in the greatest sorrow. At intervals, indeed, he contrived to see them in secret, p. 12 and is said even to have nursed Jacqueline through a severe attack of the smallpox, which impaired her hitherto remarkable beauty. But all the pleasant companionship which he had enjoyed as their instructor, and the centre of a group of intellectual friends, was at an end. He could only visit his home by stealth.

At this crisis (February 1639) Richelieu took a fancy to have Scudiry's *tragi-comedy of "L'Amour Tyrannique"* acted before him by young girls. The Court lady who undertook the management of the piece appealed to Jacqueline Pascal, whose accomplishments as a girl-actor were well known, to assist in its performance. She was then thirteen years of age. The elder sister, who, in the enforced absence of the father, was acting as the head of the family, replied, with feeling, that "they did not owe any favour to M. le Cardinal,

who had not acted kindly towards them." The request, however, was pressed, in the hope that some good might come out of the affair to the family, and Jacqueline was allowed to appear. The result was all that could be anticipated. The Cardinal, charmed by the grace and accomplishment of her acting, received her cordially when she ventured to approach him with a petition on behalf of her father, thrown into a form of verses similar to many which she had already composed. The verses have been preserved with her other pieces, and have been thus rendered: — [12]

p. 13"O marvel not, Armand, the great, the wise,
If I have failed to please thine ear, thine eyes;
My sorrowing spirit, torn by countless fears,
Each sound forbiddeth save the voice of tears.
With power to please thee wouldst thou me inspire? —
Recall from exile now my hapless sire."

She has herself described, in an interesting letter to her father, [13] the whole incident, and the result of her intercession. Having told how the Cardinal had been previously well prepared, and had the true state of the case explained in reference to her father, who appears to have been in no degree to blame in the agitation which called forth the displeasure of the Government, she says that—

"M. le Cardinal appeared to take great pleasure in the representation, especially when I spoke. He laughed very much, as did the whole company. When the comedy was finished, I descended from the theatre with the design of speaking to Madame d'Aiguillon [the same lady who had already interested herself in the business]. But as the Cardinal seemed about to leave, I approached him directly, and recited to him the verses I send you. He received them with extraordinary affection and caresses more than you can imagine; for at first, when I approached, he cried, 'Voil' la petite Pascal!' Then he embraced me and kissed me, and while I said my verses he continued to hold me in his arms, and kissed me each moment with great

satisfaction. And then when I was done he said, 'Yes; I grant to you all that you ask; write to your father that he may return with safety.' Thereupon Madame d'Aiguillon approached, and addressed the Cardinal. 'It is truly well, sir, that you do something for this man. I have heard him spoken of as a thoroughly honest and learned man, and it is a pity he should remain unemployed. Then he has a son who is very learned in p. 14mathematics, although as yet only fifteen years of age.' The Cardinal assured me once more that I might tell you to return in all safety; and as he seemed in such good humour, I asked him further that you might be allowed yourself to pay your thanks and respects to his Eminence. He said you would be welcome; and then, with other discourse, repeated, 'Tell your father, when he returns, to come and see me.' This he said three or four times. After this, as Madame d'Aiguillon was going away, my sister went forward to salute her. She received her with many caresses, and inquired for our brother, whom she said she wished to see. It was this that led to his introduction to the Duchess, who paid him many compliments on his scientific attainments. We were then conducted to a room, where we had a magnificent collation of dried sweetmeats, fruits, lemonade, and such things. Here the Duchess renewed her caresses in a manner you will hardly believe. In short, I cannot tell how much honour I received, for I am obliged to write as succinctly as possible. I am greatly obliged to M. de Moudroy for all the trouble he has taken, and I beg you will be so good as write to him by the first post to thank him, for he well deserves it. As for me, I esteem myself extremely happy to have in any way assisted in a result which must give you satisfaction."

This letter was written from Paris on the 4th April 1639, when Jacqueline Pascal was therefore only fourteen years of age. It is in all respects a remarkable and interesting production, both for the glimpse it gives of the great Cardinal in his hours of ease, and its revelation of Jacqueline's own character,—her dramatic cleverness, her firmness and wisdom in assailing the Cardinal with her prepared verses at the right moment, her self-conscious importance as the chief actor of such a scene, and all the same, her girlish enjoyment of the sweetmeats provided for her. It is a pleasant enough picture; and it deserves especially to be noticed how prominently the p. 15 scientific reputation of her brother, only two years older than herself, is already recognised.

The sequel was all that could have been desired. The father hastened, at the summons of his daughter, to pay his respects to Richelieu, who gave him a welcome reception. "I know all your merit," he said. "I restore you to your children, and commend them to you. I desire to do something considerable for you." Within two years Itienne Pascal was, in consequence, appointed Intendant of Rouen, where he settled with his family in 1641. Disturbances had arisen in Normandy at this time in connection with the payment of taxes, and the Government, believing that the Parliament at Rouen had not acted with sufficient vigour, took the matter into their own hands, and sent their officers to collect the revenues of the province. [15] Itienne Pascal's character and previous labours in this capacity, no less than his restoration to the Cardinal's favour, pointed him out as a man specially fitted for this work, which in the circumstances was not unattended with danger. The work in itself was also harassing and troublesome; and the youthful Pascal, anxious to assist his father, had busied himself in the invention of a machine for performing arithmetical calculations, which made a great sensation at the time. Ingenious as the machine was, it came to little, as we shall see in the next chapter, which will be devoted to a brief account of Pascal's scientific discoveries. In the meantime it will be better to confine ourselves to the thread of his personal history up to the important epoch which is known as his first conversion.

p. 16 Settled at Rouen, he pursued his studies with unremitting devotion, and with only too little regard for his health. His elder sister, who might have won him occasionally to lighter pursuits,

was married to her cousin M. Pirier in 1641, and two years afterwards went with him to Clermont, where her husband was appointed a Counsellor in the Court of Aides. Jacqueline was absorbed in her own poetical studies, which received a special impetus from the friendship of Corneille, who had returned at this time to his native town. The illustrious dramatist speedily sought out the Pascal family, and became one of their most intimate associates. A prize being given every year for the best copy of verses on the "Conception of the Virgin," it was awarded to certain verses of Jacqueline's for the year 1640. When the announcement of the result was made she was absent, but a friend of the family rose and returned thanks in verse in the name of the youthful poetess—*Pour une jeune muse absente*. The friend was Corneille, whose impromptu lines on the occasion, along with those of Jacqueline, are still preserved. [16] Neither have much poetic merit, but they recall an interesting incident.

A bright atmosphere of intellectual emulation and cheerful prospects surrounds the family at this time. But all the while it is evident, from Madame Pirier's account, that her brother was injuring his health greatly in his undue assiduity in his scientific pursuits. The attempts to perfect the construction of his arithmetical machine seem especially to have worn out his delicate frame, and to have laid the foundation of the nervous prostration from which he more or less suffered all his life afterwards. "From the age of eighteen," she says in a significant passage that her brother "hardly ever passed a day without pain. In the intermissions of his sufferings, however, his spirit was such that he was constantly bent on some new discovery." [17]

In the beginning of 1646 an accident happened which had important consequences both to Pascal and his sisters. Itienne Pascal fell upon the ice and severely sprained his foot. During his confinement he was attended by two brothers who had acquired repute in the treatment of such injuries. They were gentlemen of family in the neighbourhood, who had devoted themselves to medicine and anatomy from benevolent instincts and the love of these studies. Both were disciples of a clergyman at Rouville, who was an enthusiastic pietist and friend of St Cyran. Crowds flocked to hear Pastor Guillebert whenever he preached, and many were stirred by his

eloquence to devote themselves to pious and philanthropical labours. One of the brothers under this inspiring guidance built a hospital at the end of his park, and gave his children to the service of the Church in various capacities. The other brother, who had no children, provided beds in the hospital and attended the sick poor.

p. 18The character and conversation of these men made a deep impression upon the Pascal family. Hitherto esteemed pious, they had not yet made religion an anxious concern in their lives. Madame Pirier says expressly of her brother that he had been “preserved by the special protection of God from all youthful vices, and, what was still more remarkable in the case of a mind of such strength and pride, he had never yielded to any libertinism of thought, but had always limited his curiosity to natural inquiries.” He attributed, according to her statement, this religious sobriety of mind to the instructions and example of his father, who had a great respect for religion, and who had impressed upon him from his infancy the maxim, “that whatever is the object of faith cannot be the object of reason, and still less the subject of it.” He had seen, in his father, the combination of scientific attainment with a strong reasoning power, and the maxim therefore fell with weight from his lips. And so, when he listened to the discourses of free-thinkers, young as he was—

“He remained unmoved by them, and simply looked upon them as men who had adopted the false principle that the human reason is above everything, and who know nothing of the real nature of faith; so that this spirit, so great and inquisitive, which searched so carefully for the reason of everything, was at the same time submissive as a child to all the truths of religion, and this submissive simplicity predominated in him through his whole life.” [18]

This is a significant extract in more ways than one. In the meantime we quote it as indicating the religious atmosphere of Pascal’s home, and the pious temper p. 19which marked him from the first. But as yet religion had not taken hold of him with an absorbing enthusiasm. It had its place in his thoughts, and this a deeply re-