



JOHN MILTON.

CHAPTER V.

MILTON.

I.

“A TEACHER,” says Goethe, “who can arouse a feeling for one single good action, for one single good poem, accomplishes more than he who fills the memory with rows on rows of natural objects.”

To me, for years, not only have the poems of Milton been a delight, but his character has been an example, and his thoughts a strong consolation and support. “Character,” as Emerson said, “is higher than intellect;” and Milton was not only one of the world’s mightiest poets, but also a supremely noble man.

I will endeavor, then, to bring before my readers in this paper a great mind and

a great character. Milton, like Dante, is one of those whose books cannot be separated from his personality. His character is itself a great book. Whenever I can, I shall let Milton speak for himself, especially in the lordly and impassioned eloquence of his prose writings; and as Mr. Gladstone said that hardly before manhood was he aware that Milton had written any prose works at all, and as those works contain some of the most splendid passages in English literature, I may hope that those quotations may turn the attention of my readers to the books themselves.

My estimate of Milton is not loftier than that which has been formed of him by some of the greatest and most sober minds. It has, for instance, been said that Wordsworth was "like Milton in dignity of aim, gravity of life, early and deliberate dedication to poetry, high self-appreciation, haughty self-reliance, and majesty

of sentiment." And Wordsworth called Milton —

"Soul awful, if this world has ever held
An awful soul."

He says, —

"We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spoke; the faith and morals hold
That Milton held."

And he sums up his high appreciation in this noble sonnet, —

"Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour
England hath need of thee. She is a fen
Of stagnant waters! altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men.
O raise us up! Return to us again!
And give us manners, freedom, virtue, power.
Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart.
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free:
So didst thou travel on life's common way
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest burdens on herself did lay."

Walter Savage Landor went so far as to say,

"It may be doubted whether the Creator ever created one altogether so great as Milton, taking into our view at once his manly virtues, his superhuman genius, his zeal for truth, for true piety, true freedom, his contempt for personal power, his glory and exaltation in his country's." And again,

"He indulges in no pranks and vagaries to captivate the vulgar mind; he leads by the light of his countenance, never stooping to grasp a coarse hand to obtain its suffrages. His gravity is unsuitable to the age we live in. The cedars and palms of his Paradise have disappeared; we see the earth before us in an altered form; we see dense and dwarf plants upon it everywhere; we see it scratched by a succession of squatters, who rear a thin crop, and leave the place dry and barren. Constancy and perseverance are among Milton's characteristics, with contempt of everything mean and sordid. Indifference

to celebrity, disdain for popularity, unobtrusive wisdom, sedate grandeur, energy kept in its high and spacious armory until the signal of action sounded, until the enemy was to be driven from his intrenchment,—these are above the comprehension, above the gaze, of noisy drummers, in their caps and tassels. Milton stood conspicuous over the mines of fuel he accumulated for that vast lighthouse, founded on a solitary rock, which threw forth its radiance to Europe from amid the darkness and storminess of the British sea."

And, to quote but one more eulogium, Tennyson apostrophizes Milton as—

"O mighty mouthed inventor of harmonies,
O skilled to sing of Time or Eternity,
God-gifted organ-voice of England,
Milton, a name to resound for ages."

We have three authentic and deeply interesting portraits of Milton. The first is a portrait of him when he was a child

of ten years old, by the Dutch painter Cornelius Jansen, painted in 1618. It shows us a little Roundhead, grave, serious, and beautiful; but to give it life, you must, to borrow his own phrase, "envermeil" the round cheek with a healthy rose, and give a gleam of gold to the auburn hair, which his Puritan tutors had cut short. His eyes were hazel; the eyebrows finely pencilled; the mouth a perfect Cupid's bow. Thus, as Aubrey says, "his harmonicall and ingeniose soul did lodge, in a beautiful and well-proportioned body. . . . His complexion was exceeding faire — he had a delicate, tuneable voice." As he stood before his friends, with his thoughtful face, frilled lace collar, and braided dress, he was indeed "a child whom every eye that looked on loved," and one in whom the opening dawn of life seemed to promise a golden day. The father, the good Bread-street scrivener, must have been proud of his little son, or he would

not have paid "five broad pieces" for his likeness. When the picture was engraved, in 1760 by Cipriani, he placed beneath it the very appropriate lines, —

"When I was yet a child no childish play
To me was pleasing; all my mind was set
Serious to learn, to know, and thence to do,
What might be public good; myself I thought
Born to that end, born to promote all truth
And righteous things."

We may at once seize on the distinguishing characteristic of Milton's childhood. It was Innocence. His days were

"Bound each to each by natural piety."

Qualis ab incepto might be written broad over his life, as its description. There was no discontinuity in Milton's career. "We cannot make life's reckoning twice over; you cannot mend a wrong subtraction by doing your addition right." How many, alas, do make youth one long subtraction, of which the deficit can never

be restored! But Milton's character was as unique and stately as his immortal verse. It is to us a rich legacy of ideal and of fulfilment; and with the "unique and superb egoism" which in him is natural, he said, "If God has ever instilled into any human soul an intense love of moral beauty, he has done so into mine."

We pass next to Milton's boyhood, and we may at once seize two of its characteristics.

One was earnest diligence. Here is his own account of his boyhood.

"My father destined me from a child for the pursuits of literature, and my appetite for knowledge was so voracious that from twelve years of age I hardly ever left my study before midnight. This primarily led to my loss of sight. My eyes were naturally weak, and I was subject to frequent headaches, which, however, could not check the advance or retard the progress of my improvement."¹

¹ "The Second Defence of the People of England."

Another characteristic was indomitable perseverance.

"When I take up a thing," he says, "I never pause or break it off, nor am drawn away from it by any other interest, till I arrive at the goal I had proposed for myself."

The results of this diligence and perseverance were wonderful. When in church we sing the fine lyric,—

"Let us with a gladsome mind
Praise the Lord for he is kind;"

or,

"How lonely are thy dwellings fair,
O Lord of Hosts, how dear
The pleasant tabernacles are,
Where Thou dost dwell so near,"

we are singing the paraphrases of the Psalms, of which some were written by Milton when he was only a boy of fifteen. I doubt whether there has ever been any boy who could match him in attainments. By the time he was sixteen he had a good

knowledge of Greek, and he was a finished Latin scholar. He wrote Latin prose, that is not a mere echo of Ciceronian phrases, but proves a perfect mastery and individuality; and he composed Latin poems so beautiful and masculine that they still survive. To this he added a good knowledge of the best literature that England had then produced; a considerable acquaintance with French, Italian, and Hebrew; and some practical skill in, and theoretical knowledge of, mathematics and music. I have had some share in the training of several generations of English boys, of whom many have won high honors at Oxford and Cambridge, and not a few have attained to eminence in Church and State; but I never yet saw a boy whose attainments at the age of sixteen distantly approached those of Milton. He must have been a glorious pupil, and one of those — so rarely found — who need the curb more than the spur. When we see “our young barbarians all

at play” at Harrow or Eton, there are, I imagine, but few in these days of whom that can be said. Yet he was no milk-sop or bookworm; he was fond of healthy recreation and manly exercise.

“I was never deficient,” he says, “in courage and in strength; and I was wont constantly to exercise myself in the use of the broadsword. Armed with this weapon, as I usually was, I should have thought myself quite a match for any one, though much stronger than myself.”¹

At school he made one delightful friend, Charles Diodati, whom he lost too early. There were no wild oats sown in Milton's boyhood to spring up afterwards in their poisonous crop; but he was like one of those mountain ash-trees covered in spring with “creamy and odorous blossoms,” which are the promise of the brilliant clusters that make it glow in autumn one blaze of scarlet from its lowest twig to its top-

¹ “The Second Defence.”

most bough. He shows "the inevitable congruity between seed and fruit;" his boyhood was not silly, wasted, ignoble, but rich in attainments, and richer still in hopes.

And now we come to Milton's youth. We have a second portrait of him, taken at the age of twenty-one. It shows the same noble, engaging face,—virginal, strong, self-confident; and now he wears the long bright locks which in his childhood his Puritan teachers had cut so short. It was thus he looked when at sixteen he went to Christ College, Cambridge. And this portrait, with its fair, flowing curls, illustrates the nature of Milton's Puritanism. It was no sour and narrow fanaticism; no coarse and dull Philistinism. The ordinary Puritan hated the cathedrals, and loved "to break down the carved work thereof with axes and hammers;" Milton, on the contrary, says,—

"But let my due feet never fail
To walk the studious cloister's pale,

And love the high embow'd roof,
With antique pillars, massy-proof,
And storied windows richly dight,
Casting a dim religious light.
There let the pealing organ blow
To the full-voiced choir below
In service high and anthems clear
As may with sweetness, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all Heaven before mine eyes."

The ordinary Puritan affected severe precision in dress; Milton liked what was comely. The ordinary Puritan anathematized stage plays; Milton wrote "Masques" to be acted, and liked to refresh himself at the theatre. He sings in his "L'Allegro,"—

"Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If Jonson's learned sock be on;
Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild."

He delighted, too, in the glories of nature, the green fields, the flush of spring, the shadows of the elms, the song of birds. With "his beautiful and well-proportioned

body, bright face, ingenious and harmonical soul," with his "erect and manly gait, bespeaking courage and undauntedness," his ingenuous modesty and moral austerity, — he must have been one of the most perfect youths whom England has ever seen. "I seem to see him here," says Wordsworth, writing at Cambridge,

"Bounding before me, in his scholar's dress,
A boy, no better, with his rosy cheeks,
Angelical, keen eye, courageous look,
And conscious step of purity and pride."

His aspect reflected the soul of one who loved whatsoever things are true and pure and lovely and of good report; and who had already given to the world poems as rich and immortal as the "Ode on the Death of a Fair Infant," and "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," and "At a Solemn Music." He says of himself in an Italian sonnet, "My heart is faithful; fearless; secure in its own adamant though worlds flamed;

free from the malice and fears of the vulgar; loyal to all things manly." "You ask me, Charles, of what I am thinking," he wrote to his friend Diodati; "I think, so help me Heaven, of immortality."

His college days lasted from 1625 to 1632, between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two; — and we might well have supposed that manly beauty of the highest type, singular purity, a temperament perfectly ready to unbend, a capacity for friendship, supreme ability, and unusual attainments, would have secured unbounded popularity for the fair and noble youth. Yet it is clear that he was not popular either with his tutors or with his fellow undergraduates.

We can see the reason for this. He was too independent and too original for the commonplace and stereotyped officers of his college. He was a very hard student in the University, and performed all his exercises with very good applause; yet

Aubrey, or some one who has interpolated his remarks into Aubrey's manuscript, says that he was "publicly whipped" by his tutor Chappell. This assertion is certainly a piece of mean and false University scandal; but Milton seems for a short time to have been "sent down." This cannot have been a punishment for anything discreditable, since he openly speaks of it without the smallest touch of regret or apology.

He disliked and disdained the curriculum of the University, of which Roger Bacon had said, four centuries earlier, "*languet et asininat circum male intellecta.*" He could not bear to be dragged from important studies to employ himself in composing some frivolous and conventional declamation. Cambridge, with "its barren and shadeless fields," he tells us that he had never greatly admired "even in the time of her better health, in his own younger judgment." In this he resembles Gibbon, Shelley, Gray, Landor, and Wordsworth. But

if the Fellows were unjust to him, and wholly failed at first to appreciate and understand him, they afterwards found out their mistake; and he says "signified in many ways how much better it would content them that I should stay: as by many letters, full of kindness and loving respect, both before this time and long after, I was assured of their singular good affection toward me."

If he was not popular with the undergraduates, that, too, may be because he was made of nobler elements. Something in his fresh complexion and bright hair had earned him the nickname of *Domina*, "the lady of Christ's College;" and, as in the case of the younger Pitt, the corrupt, vulgar natures around him may have sneered at his ingenuous modesty and high chastity. He had a reserved nicety and "honest haughtiness of nature" which would not be "Hail fellow well-met" with every Tom, Dick, and Harry who chose to slap him on the back.

"I had rather," he writes, "since the life of man is likened to a scene, that all my exits and entrances should mix with such persons only whose worth erects them and their actions to a grave and tragic deportment, and not to have to do with clowns and vices."

Then, again, he had not much sense of humor, but "a mind made and set only on the accomplishment of the greatest things." Add to this he was a severe critic of his companions and their performances.

The authorities at Christ's College did not elect him to a Fellowship, though they elected many younger men who had not a tenth of his genius. But that his seven years at college were honorably and blamelessly spent is proved by the fact that ultimately, when they grew better able to appreciate his gifts, "most of the Fellows of his college," he says, "showed him no common marks of friendship and esteem," and even endeavored to induce him to stay

at Cambridge, and to give up his purpose of retiring to his father's house.

We now pass from Milton's youth to his years of early manhood, between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-seven. They were years of preparation, supported by the touching faith of his father, who never doubted of the grandeur of his purposes, or of his ultimate success. The good father must doubtless have been disappointed by his declining to take Holy Orders, for which he had been intended. Both in prose and verse Milton has given his reasons for this decision. In "Lycidas" he makes St. Peter say of the death of his young friend, Edward King, —

"How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,
Enow of such, as for their bellies' sake
Creep, and intrude, and climb into the fold!
Of other care they little reckoning make,
Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast,
And shove away the worthy bidden guest;
Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how
to hold

A sheep-hook, or have learn't aught else the least
That to the faithful herdman's art belongs!
What reck's it them? What need they? They are
sped!

And when they list, their lean and flashy songs
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw;
The hungry sheep look up and are not fed,
But, swoln with wind and the rank mist they
draw,

Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread:
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing said."

And in prose he speaks of "The difficult labours of the Church, to whose service, by the intentions of my parents and friends, I was destined of a child, and in mine own resolutions, till, coming to some maturity of years, and perceiving what tyranny had invaded the Church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slave, I thought it better to preserve a blameless silence, before the sacred office of speaking, bought and preserved with servility and forwearing."¹

¹ "The Reason of Church Government."

Yet Milton, referring to these years of seeming inactivity, says, "I was something suspicious of myself, and do take notice of a certain belatedness in me." In his sonnet written "On his being arrived at the age of twenty-three," he says, —

"How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
Stolen on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!
My hasting days fly on with full career,
But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,
That I to manhood am arrived so near;
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
Than some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.
Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure even
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Toward which Time leads me, and the Will of
Heaven;
All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great Task-Master's eye."

And surely Milton had no real need for self-reproach. We see from his journal that during those quiet years in the country retirement of Horton he had read and anno-

tated no less than eighty solid books, and he must have spent many a studious hour in the library which still exists in the tower of Langley Church. He still ever cherished his inward conviction "that by labour, and intense study, which I take to be my portion in this life, joined to the prompting of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written as men should not willingly let die."

In this lofty self-confidence "which let Malice call Pride" he resembled Dante and Bacon, and Shakespeare. He was anxious "not to press forward, but to keep off with a sacred reverence and religious advisement, how *best* to undergo — not taking thought of being late, so it gave advantage to the more fit: for those who were late lost nothing."

And indeed he must have been a stern critic of himself if he thought the years "belated" in which, having thus "pledged himself to God and his own conscience,"

he was but pluming his own wings and meditating flight. During this quiet time he gave to the world such precious and immortal poems as "L'Allegro," "Il Penseroso," "Arcades," "Lycidas," and "Comus;" while during the whole period he was "gazing on the bright countenance of truth in the quiet and still air of delightful studies."

We have fixed on innocence as the characteristic of Milton's childhood; on earnest diligence and perseverance as the notes of his boyhood; nor were the specific marks of his youth less noble. They were steadfastness of purpose, resolute purity of life, and lofty self-respect.

Milton's steadfastness of purpose was exceptionally strong. No part of his life was lived at haphazard. He never was one of those who yielded to the "weight of chance desires," nor would he suffer his earthly existence to be mere "flotsam and jetsam" on the sea of time. There are many who drift through life, many who