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JOHN MILTON

A SHORT STUDY OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS

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JOHN MILTON

A SHORT STUDY OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS

BY

WILLIAM P. TRENT

AUTHOR OF "WILLIAM GILMORE SIMMS," "SOUTHERN
STATESMEN OF THE OLD RÉGIME,"
"ROBERT E. LEE," ETC.

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TO
RICHARD GARNETT, LL.D.

Of the British Museum

WHO TO HIS WELL-DESERVED FAME AS POET, SCHOLAR
AND CRITIC

AND TO HIS POWER AND CHARM AS A FULL MAN
ADDS THE DISTINCTION OF BEING
A LOVER AND JUDICIOUS BIOGRAPHER OF MILTON

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PREFACE

THIS book is a result of a conviction forced upon me by an experience of many years as a teacher of literature, that we Anglo-Saxons do not honor Milton as we should do, that we too frequently misunderstand him and neglect him. He is rapidly passing—if, indeed, he has not already passed—into the class of authors whom we talk about oftener than we read. In view of this fact I have here ventured to tell over again the story of his life and achievements in the hope that I may win him more lovers and readers.

It may, of course, be deemed a presumptuous undertaking, for there is nothing new to say after Professor Masson's herculean labors, of which I have taken full advantage, and Mark Pattison and Dr. Garnett have covered the field admirably in their smaller volumes. But I have thought that the new book always has an ad-

vantage as a literary missioner, if I may use the phrase, through the very fact of its novelty, and I have also hoped that a somewhat unusual grouping and proportioning of the most important biographical and critical materials might arrest the attention of at least a few of the many souls to whom Milton has become a name and nothing more. But perhaps I have trusted rather to the naturally contagious effects of an enthusiastic treatment of a poet who has inspired me with reverence since my earliest years. If this hope fail me, I shall at least not repent of having paid a vain tribute to his memory, for popular neglect can never really dim the lustre of Milton's fame, nor can an injudicious panegyric hurt it, and it is always a spiritual advantage to a man to give utterance to a love and enthusiasm for a sublime character that have grown with his growth and strengthened with his strength.

W. P. TRENT.

SEWANEE, TENN.,
January 9, 1899.

Hearty thanks are hereby given to Messrs. Longmans, Green, and Company for their kind

permission to use in Chapters III., IV., and V. of Part II. considerable matter first employed in my edition of "L'Allegro" and other poems in their "English Classics," edited by my friend, Professor George R. Carpenter, whose consent has also been granted. Much of the matter in Chapters VIII. and IX. of Part II. will be found in the *Protestant Episcopal Review* for April and May, 1899; while the first part is expanded from an article published in the *Sewanee Review* for January, 1897.

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JOHN MILTON

A Short Study of his Life and Works

PART I.—LIFE

CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS (1608-1639)

THE fact that Milton was born in London on December 9, 1608, counts for not a little in his career. He was born early enough to catch much of the power and inspiration of the age of Elizabeth, but not early enough to catch its spirit of universal open-mindedness and free-heartedness. Thus it happens that some of the finest qualities of Shakspeare, who epitomized the Elizabethans, are found in Milton in a state of arrested development, — for example, genial humor and, in a less degree, human sympathy. Had Milton been born twenty years earlier, it is possible that he might have surpassed Shakspeare in totality of accomplishment, just

more
by far than

as the latter surpassed Marlowe; for in point of grandeur, both of work and of character, the advantage seems to lie with Milton. Had his connections been even more entirely with the country instead of with the capital, the centre of political and religious activity, he might have lived his life under the spell of the Elizabethans, and left behind him poetical works more serenely, less strenuously artistic, than those we now possess, but also of wider range in point of underlying qualities. Yet these are might-have-beens, and some of us would not have Milton other than he is, — the greatest artist, man of letters, and ideal patriot, as we think, that the world has ever known. There are, however, certain points about his early career which are not at all hypothetical, and deserve careful though not, in this connection, minutely detailed attention.

He was the third child and namesake of a prosperous scrivener, of respectable family, whose puritanical leanings did not prevent him from conforming to the Established Church, from cultivating, with some success, the art of music, and from giving his children a broad

education and a pleasant, happy home. From this father Milton probably inherited much of his genius, — a genius fostered by the wisdom and liberality of the parent to an extent that can scarcely be paralleled in our literary annals, save in the cases of Robert Browning and John Stuart Mill. That the youth was grateful is evidenced by his fine Latin verses, “Ad Patrem,” especially by the lines:—

“Hoc utcumque tibi gratum, pater optime, carmen
Exiguum meditatur opus; nec novimus ipsi
Aptius a nobis quæ possint munera donis
Respondere tuis, quamvis nec maxima possint
Respondere tuis, nedum ut par gratia donis
Esse queat vacuis quæ redditur arida verbis.”¹

To his mother also, whose maiden name, Sarah Jeffrey, has been only recently ascertained, he owed not a little as every good man does, as well as to his early tutors with whom

¹ Thus rendered by Cowper:—

“For thee, my Father! howsoe'er it please,
She frames this slender work, nor know I aught
That may thy gifts more suitably requite;
Though to requite them suitably would ask
Returns much nobler, and surpassing far
The meagre stores of verbal gratitude.”

he seems to have been on especially affectionate terms. One of these, Thomas Young, is still remembered by scholars as a Presbyterian controversialist of note, but his surest title to fame is found in these four lines of his pupil's:—

“Primus ego Aonios illo præeunte recessus
Lustrabam, et bifidi sacra vireta jugi,
Pieriosque hausî latices, Clioque favente
Castalio sparsi læta ter ora mero.”¹

Thus we see that the boy was grateful to his father and his teachers, and we have his subsequent testimony that he was so much in love with learning that from the early age of twelve he scarcely ever quit his lessons before midnight.² Yet there is nothing to show that then or afterward he was anything of a prig, and it is clear that he must have enjoyed and profited from his intercourse with the noted musi-

¹ Thus rendered by Cowper:—

“First led by him through sweet Aonian shade,
Each sacred haunt of Pindus I survey'd;
And favored by the muse, whom I implored,
Thrice on my lip the hallow'd stream I pour'd.”

² See the long and fine autobiographical passage in the “Second Defence”—the source of much of our best information about Milton.

cians that frequented his father's house. The phrase so loosely used by us, a liberal education, applies in full force to Milton — his was the education given by good training, by contact with ripe minds and with sound learning, and by practice in the liberalizing art of music. Nor was that finer element of a well-spent youth, friendship with a companion of the same age and sex, lacking to him. His intimacy with Charles Diodati, the son of an Italian physician settled in London for religious reasons, left its mark, we cannot doubt, on Milton's character as well as upon his Latin verses. Diodati's devotion has been repaid by the "Epitaphium Damonis," but Milton's has not been sufficiently remembered by those who insist that he was practically devoid of the intimate human sympathies. No man destitute of such sympathies could have written such poetry as Milton's, but it is fair to say that the direct influence of his fellows counted for less with him than with any other great world poet. Yet he is also the sublimest, though not the most universal of the poets, and perhaps in his case and always, sublime eleva-

tion is obtained only through isolation. Be this as it may, the indirect influence of men through their books counted for more with Milton than can be estimated in words. From his earliest youth he was not merely an earnest student but an unsatiated reader, and to this day he stands as our most learned poet and cultured artist, Ben Jonson not excepted.

About 1620 Milton entered St. Paul's School as a day-scholar and remained there until 1625, when he commenced residence, during the Easter term, at Christ's College, Cambridge. At school he profited from the acquirements, both in the classics and in the vernacular, of the head-master Dr. Alexander Gill, and somewhat from the friendship of the latter's able but rather graceless son, namesake, and assistant. Here, too, he formed his friendship with Diodati and began his apprenticeship as a poet by paraphrases of Psalms cxiv. and cxxxvi. — exercises which, if reminiscential of the work of other poets, nevertheless deserve the praise of Dr. Garnett as being in general tone both "masculine and emphatic."

Why his father should have selected Cam-

bridge for him is uncertain, but it is quite clear that although Milton continued his university studies for seven years, taking his B.A. in 1629 and his M.A. in 1632, he did not enter into the spirit of the place. He tells us in one of his controversial tracts that he "never greatly admired" it in his youth, and one of his Latin academical exercises lets us see that he probably indulged in strictures on the methods of instruction. From the elaborate account of the Cambridge of the time put together by Professor Masson one is inclined to infer that the studious and well-trained undergraduate had reason for his criticisms. There were able men among the instructors, but none capable of arousing the enthusiasm of a self-contained youth like Milton; and although the poet John Cleveland, and Henry More, the Platonist, were members of his college, they were his juniors in age and standing. Yet we have Milton's word for it that the fellows of Christ's treated him with "more than ordinary respect," and we know that he was several times accorded the honor of selection as a public speaker. As for the story that he was actually whipped by his un-

sympathetic tutor, William Chappell, a tool of Laud's, we may dismiss it as an idle tale, or else as a distorted version of a personal encounter between pupil and instructor. Nevertheless the fact remains clear that Milton heads the list of great English men of letters who have been out of sympathy with their universities—a list that includes Dryden and Gibbon and Shelley and Byron.

Yet during these college years he was laying the broad foundations of his character and his culture. The personal purity preserved through all temptation and ridicule (his fellow-students dubbed him "Lady" as much on this account, we cannot doubt, as because of his conspicuous beauty of face and figure), enabled him to expound as no other poet has ever done

"the sage

And serious doctrine of Virginity ;"

the self-absorption in the pursuit of high ideals, the proud aloofness from common things and common men that characterized him, may have lessened his human sympathies, but assuredly made possible that su-

premely ideal love of religion and his native land that prompted and accomplished as noble a deed of patriotic self-sacrifice as has yet been recorded to the credit of the race; and finally it is hard to believe that he would ever have become master of so profound and exact an erudition and so serene and balanced a culture, had he not profited by that systematic training and discipline of the faculties which is imparted in full measure by a historic university alone. It should be remembered furthermore that during his university career he found time and inspiration to write much of his Latin verse, as well as such great English poems as the ode "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," the epitaph "On Shakspeare," and the sonnet "On his being arrived at the age of twenty-three." This was no slight achievement in verse, especially if we add two serious and good elegies, two humorous ones, two fragments, and perhaps the exquisite "Song on May Morning"; but more important was the formation of the resolution to which he ever afterward adhered—to order his life

"As ever in *his* great Task-Master's eye."

When he left Cambridge he betook himself to his father's halfway suburban residence at Horton, in Buckinghamshire. Although he had criticised the administration of the university, he seems to have been pressed to take a fellowship, but that would have meant practically taking orders; and while such had once been his intention, he felt now that he could not conscientiously pursue the latter course. The church service could not have been very irksome to him, for he had borne it daily for seven years; nor could theological difficulties have beset him greatly, for he subscribed the Articles on taking his degree, and his Arian proclivities were a matter of later years. It was at the ecclesiastical organization then controlled by Laud, who was fostering to the best of his abilities and in a peculiarly exasperating way the high-church reaction, that the Puritan idealist looked askance. He would not "subscribe slave" even though he were conscious that with his scholarly tastes he would find it hard to discover a better profession. He preferred to be "church-outed by the prelates" and was nobly serious if also somewhat stiff-

necked about it. Had he continued at Cambridge he would assuredly have been the centre of many an academic dispute; it is impossible to say what would have happened had he entered the Church in any active way and been brought into personal contact with Laud. He would have gone down temporarily before bigotry in power; but the genius even of a Boswell would have failed to do justice to an encounter that would have required a Shakspeare.

If Milton read his own character as we now do, and restrained his ardent nature that he might allow his powers to ripen through solitude and study, he more than deserves the epithets he bestowed upon his favorite Spenser — "sage and serious." If he did not fully understand himself, but simply felt conscious of high powers and a mission to fulfil, he deserves all the praise that belongs so amply to those "who only stand and wait." But much praise is due to the father also who, now that his active life was over and his chief interests were necessarily centred in the success of his children, was content to do his

share of waiting till the genius of his son should, in the fulness of time, become manifest to the world. That genius was slowly developing itself through study, contemplation, intercourse with nature, and occasional wooing of the muse. He mastered the ancient classics and the chief writers of more recent times until he may be said to have lived with them. He contemplated life with all its possibilities, and became more firmly fixed in his determination to devote himself to the service of humanity, to lead a life that should be a true poem, and to leave behind him some child of his imagination that posterity would not willingly let die. He watched, too, with poignant anguish the headlong course of Charles and Laud, toward destruction, and saw that they would involve in ruin not merely themselves and the Church, but the nation for which he already felt the burning passion of the man who not loving easily, loves the more deeply. But he contemplated also the serene beauty of the peaceful landscape around him, and the spirit of nature took hold upon him — not as it had done on Shakspeare and

was to do on Wordsworth and Byron — but in a true, noble, and powerful way. Finally he wrote verse to relieve his pent-up feelings or to oblige friends, yet never without keeping his eyes fixed on the masters of his craft and registering a solemn vow not to allow himself to be tempted by easy praise to abandon the arduous upward path on which his feet were set. It is to the five years (1632–1637) spent at Horton that we are said to owe “L’Allegro,” “Il Penseroso,” “Arcades,” “Comus,” and “Lycidas” — poems so perfect that many critics laying aside their judgment, which must always consider quantity as well as quality of work, have actually regarded them as the most adequate expression of Milton’s poetical genius. This they are not if the sublime in art be accorded its true supremacy, yet they are at once so strong and so exquisite that the fact that they were composed at Horton should make the little Buckinghamshire village second only to Stratford in interest to all lovers of English poetry.¹

24 6 29

¹ Milton tells us that he paid occasional visits to London to purchase books or to learn something new in *mathematics* or music. (“Second Defence.”)

true In the spring of 1638 Milton undertook to put the finishing touch upon his education by setting out for Italy. The spell that that fair but fatally dowered land exercises on every liberal soul, had already been communicated to him through the medium of her great poets, but it was not to be sealed permanently upon his spirit as it has been since upon Byron, Shelley, Landor, and Browning. He was fitter than these to penetrate into Italy's secret, being the most artistic spirit England has ever borne, and it is interesting to speculate what a longer residence under the sky that smiles upon Naples and Florence and Venice would have meant for him; but that was not to be. Yet we may be sure that no nobler stranger has ever since apostolic times set foot upon that sacred soil so often trod by alien feet—not Chaucer or Goethe, not Luther or Bayard. Shakspeare probably never saw the land that his genius so often adorned, and Dante was its native—and it is with Shakspeare and Dante alone of all moderns that we may fittingly compare Milton.

The details of his journey are scant, but even

the few facts we know must be given rapidly here. Stopping for a brief space at Paris, he met Grotius, and then proceeded by Nice, Genoa, Leghorn, and Pisa, to Florence. Here he was introduced to the most cultured representatives of that day of Italy's decline, and frequented their academies, and paid as good Latin compliments as he received. He impressed all who met him by his beauty, his grace, his mental and spiritual attainments, and if the tributes paid him were extravagant, they nevertheless retain even to this day a note of sincerity. We do not know whether the sightless Galileo thought him an angel or an Angle, but it is easy to agree with Dr. Garnett that — "the meeting between the two great blind men of their century is one of the most picturesque in history; it would have been more pathetic still if Galileo could have known that his name would be written in 'Paradise Lost,' or Milton could have foreseen that within thirteen years he too would see only with the inner eye, but that the calamity which disabled the astronomer would restore inspiration to the poet."

From Florence Milton went, via Siena, to Rome, where he remained two months, and was treated with consideration in spite of his imprudent habit of discussing religious matters in public. He was fascinated by the singing of Leonora Baroni, on whom he wrote three Latin epigrams, but he is silent, so critics have observed, about the effects of antiquity and of modern plastic art upon his spirit.¹ His natural aptitude was for music, and perhaps when later, his Puritan controversies put by, he took up poetry once more, his loss of sight inclined him to leave unsung the glories of arts he could no longer appreciate. It was different with nature, whose effects he could still feel and whose beauty he was bound by the scheme of his work to describe.

Naples was the next stage of his journey, and there tidings reached him of the distracted political state of his native land. He gave up at once his intention of proceeding to Sicily and Greece, but was leisurely enough in his return. He again spent two months at Rome

¹ He tells us expressly that he viewed the antiquities of Rome, and the company of Lucas Holstein, the Vatican librarian, and other scholars would indicate that he did not waste his time.

and an equal period at Florence, barring a visit to Lucca, and proceeded to Venice by way of Bologna, where an Italian lady is said to have fascinated him. The sonnets written in her native language lend some color to this statement, which would at least furnish additional proof of Milton's lack of essential English narrowness; but the whole affair is shadowy, and the sonnets may have been mere exercises in a strange tongue. It is better perhaps to lay stress on the actual friendship formed at Naples with the venerable Marquis Manso, the protector of Tasso and Marini, and upon the noble Latin verses in which Milton repaid the generosity of his host and announced his own hope of some day acquiring perennial fame through an epic upon King Arthur and his Table Round. It would be too painful to lay stress upon the anguish of his spirit when he reached Geneva from Venice, via Verona and Milan, and there probably heard for the first time of the death of the friend of his boyhood and of his riper years, the man who had first brought him in touch with the beautiful land he was just leaving, — Charles Diodati.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN OF AFFAIRS (1640-1660)

30 1/2 MILTON once more set foot on English soil toward the end of July, 1639. His first act of any moment was one of piety. He wrote his greatest and practically his last Latin poem, the "Epitaphium Damonis," in honor of Diodati—a tribute the exquisite sincerity of which its foreign medium of expression cannot impair, but unfortunately obscures to those of his race whose classical education has been neglected. It was also, with the exception of a pair of sonnets, to be the last of his elegiac poems, for his father's death eight years later, just as his mother's, two years previously, called forth no poetical expression of grief. For Diodati, the returned traveller could not but mourn in the language in which they had exchanged their innermost feelings, and which linked them both with the land from which

one sprang and to which the other was still turning regretful eyes.

His elegy finished, he set himself to a less congenial but in every way honorable task — he began to teach his two nephews, Edward and John Phillips, sons of his elder sister Anne, now a Mrs. Agar. He lived at first in lodgings, his younger brother Christopher continuing to reside with their father at Horton; but in a short time he found it convenient to take a house in the somewhat suburban Aldersgate Street. Here he taught his pupils and watched the course of public events.

Milton as a schoolmaster may suggest to some the veriest profanation of genius, to others that irony of fate at which we smile or jest; but no one who has read the tractate entitled "Of Education," or rightly gauged the poet's character, or comprehended the true dignity of the teacher's office, will ever regret the quiet months devoted to pedagogical pursuits and the "intermitted studies." So, too, no one not a hopeless partisan of the Stuarts, or biassed like Mark Pattison in favor of the scholarly life, will regret that Milton took in-

terest enough in public affairs to smile at Charles's failure to subdue Scotland and to wait eagerly for the Long Parliament to throw open the doors concealing "that two-handed engine."

But neither teaching nor politics, we may be sure, seemed to him at that time worthy of being made his permanent vocation. His note-books prove, as we shall see later, that he was meditating deeply upon the great poem he felt called upon to write. He was preparing to be a *vates*, when circumstances determined that he should become, not a dictator, but a dictator's spokesman and champion. For twenty years he wrote no verse save a comparatively small number of sonnets, and his silence during a period when most poets do their best work might easily have resulted in England's having only one supreme poet instead of two. But Providence willed otherwise, and our shudder at the risk our literature ran should not make us forget the fact that to Milton's participation in politics we owe not only the most magnificently sonorous prose ever written by an Englishman, but

also much of the force and nobility of "Paradise Lost" itself.¹

It was the resolute spirit shown by the Long Parliament in its early days, especially with regard to ecclesiastical grievances, that plunged Milton into politics with the resolve "to transfer into this struggle all *his* genius and all the strength of *his* industry." The humbling of Charles, the arrest and imprisonment of Laud, and the execution of Strafford had shown the religious and political reformers their power, and had brought into prominence not merely men of action, but also a crowd of zealous and advanced theorists, and of visionary schemers for the ordering of Church and State. It is always so with revolutions. The French had their Abbé Siéyès, and we Americans had scores of theorists from Jefferson down. But no such ideal reformer as Milton has ever since lifted his voice above the din of faction, and if we convict him of partisanship, we must nevertheless figure him to ourselves as a seraphic partisan. To fail to do

¹ See Dr. Garnett's admirable remarks on this subject, "Life of Milton," pp. 68, 69.

this is to fail to comprehend one of the most inspiring characters in all history, yet thousands have so failed because they could not forgive certain coarse expressions characteristic of the times and circumstances or because they were not capable of acknowledging greatness in a political or religious opponent. Milton's fame has suffered from their alienation, yet surely their loss has been the greater, for not to know and love the sublimest of all human idealists is an inestimable misfortune. That such is Milton's transcendent position cannot, of course, be proved, but it is perhaps admissible for an admirer to believe that no man ever got to the heart of the master's writings without being convinced of the truth of the statement.

Milton's first utterances were naturally on the subject of episcopacy, the abolition of which had been proposed in the Commons, and as naturally they took the form of rather cumbrous pamphlets. To some critics it is now difficult not merely to see any force in his arguments, but even to comprehend at all the point of view maintained by him in

the five tractates of 1641-42. Minute study of them will convince us, however, of Milton's grasp of the situation, of his logical power, and of his essential purity of mind and heart. It was not to him a question of expediency that he was considering; it was a question whether God or the Devil should rule in England, if not in the world. The sublime confidence with which he promulgated his ideas of Church polity moves our wonder; the impassioned language in which he clothed those ideas moves not only our admiration but a sense of our infinite inferiority. Such swelling periods of prophecy and denunciation, of high purpose and holy hope, have been possible to one man alone — to the future author of "Paradise Lost." Whether or not we love Laud less and Milton more, whether or not we seek the arena of religious controversy, we cannot but conclude that the crisis which called forth the dithyrambic close of the tract entitled "Of Reformation in England" was not lacking in momentous results to England's literature and to the character and work of her noblest son.

34 The outbreak of war in the autumn of 1642 forced upon Milton the question whether he should take up arms in defence of the principles he advocated. We know his exact course of reasoning, and thus need not infer it. He could serve his country and his God better with his pen than with his sword, so instead of fighting, he wrote his sonnet "When the Assault was Intended to the City" — that superb plea for the inviolability of the "Muse's bower." To blame Milton for not becoming a soldier is like blaming Washington for not writing an epic on the Revolutionary War after he had sheathed his sword. The man whose imagination was already revolving the war in heaven, was not wanted on the fields of Naseby and Dunbar: the prophet of the glories of a renovated and redeemed England had faith enough to believe that God would, in due season, show forth the man who should render those glories possible. He could not foresee that the representatives of the people for whom he sang and Cromwell fought would one day refuse the meed of a statue to their greatest ruler and soldier; but could he rise

from the dead he would set the seal of his approval upon the fiery protest against a nation's ingratitude recently wrung from a poet into whom he has breathed not a little of his own impassioned eloquence and love of liberty :—

“The enthroned Republic from her kinglier throne
Spake, and her speech was Cromwell's. Earth has known
No lordlier presence. How should Cromwell stand
By kinglets and by queenlings hewn in stone ?”¹

35 But while Oxford was protesting her loyalty and Cornwall was rising in arms and the king's cause seemed by no means hopeless, Milton, for the first time in his life apparently,² was falling seriously in love. Exactly how this came about is not known. He seems to have gone to Oxfordshire in the spring of 1643 to collect a debt from a Cavalier squire, Richard Powell by name, and to have returned to London in a month with this gentleman's daughter, Mary, as his bride. A party of her

¹ A. C. Swinburne in *The Nineteenth Century* for July, 1895. The Conservative government has since accepted as a *gift* the bust by Bernini.

² Unless we believe in the Bolognese love affair.

relatives soon after visited the pair, and the young wife appears to have enjoyed their dancing more than she did her husband's philosophizing, for she shortly after left him under promise of return and took up her abode with her father, from whose protection she could not be induced to withdraw, in spite of Milton's protestations, until about two years had elapsed.

As a matter of course this marriage venture of Milton's — the most mysterious, perhaps, in history save that of Sam Houston, the hero of San Jacinto — has been much discussed, and Mary Powell has found stanch advocates in inveterate maligners of her husband. An additional element of disturbance was unwittingly contributed to the controversy by Professor Masson when he discovered that in all likelihood the first edition of Milton's pamphlet on "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," was issued on August 1, 1643, *i.e.* a little after or just about the time of his wife's departure for her father's house. It had been previously believed that Edward Phillips's statement that the tract was written after Mary Milton's posi-

tive refusal to return to her husband was correct, but now this seems to apply only to the second and enlarged edition of the following February. Yet what sort of man was this who could argue in cold blood during his honeymoon about the justice of allowing divorce for incompatibility of temperament!

Milton's foes would have his friends on the hip if he had actually argued in cold blood; but that was very far from Milton's way of arguing anything. As Dr. Garnett has deftly shown, the first edition of the "Doctrine and Discipline" was not only highly idealistic but profoundly emotional, and was just the sort of protest against his fate that might have been wrung from an intense, proud-spirited man like Milton in the days that followed his wife's departure. The second edition was his reasoned plea, though it too was full of emotion; the first was the almost lyrical outburst of his deeply tried soul struggling for escape. If any one will read the noble preface, "To the Parliament of England, with the Assembly," he will be forced to confess that, whatever were Milton's domestic reasons for writ-

ing, he nevertheless wrote in all honesty, and speedily passed from a consideration of his own case to an impassioned plea for reform in the interests of the common weal. His resolutions were "firmly seated in a square and constant mind, not conscious to itself of any deserved blame, and regardless of ungrounded suspicions." He could proudly and sincerely say, "I have already my greatest gain, assurance, and inward satisfaction to have done in this nothing unworthy of an honest life and studies well employed." He could actually compare his new light on the subject of divorce with the gospel preached upon the continent by Willibrod and Winifrid, and conclude with that noblest of sentiments — "Let not England forget her precedence of teaching nations how to live."

Milton's tract was therefore sincere and characteristic of him, but this is not a proof that it was a worthy thing to write and publish. Yet perhaps if we will read his utterances carefully and remember that he wrote at a time when every liberal mind was narrowly examining the structure of society and pro-

jecting discoveries and applications of new moral and political truths, we shall come to the conclusion that he acted not only consistently, but worthily, with regard to this whole divorce matter. If we condemn him merely because our views on the question of divorce are stricter than his, — our ideal of a true marriage could not be higher, — we have just as much right to condemn him for his ultra-puritanism or his ultra-republicanism — that is, we have no right to condemn him at all, for we are obviously called upon to judge him now only as a man and a great creative writer, not as a theorist in religion and politics.

But can Milton be absolved of blame as a man for his treatment of his first wife? One may answer, "Yes, so far as the evidence goes." His demands upon the girl were probably excessive, but then he was an idealist who had somehow made a bad match. If she suffered, so did he; and the chances are a thousand to one against the grave, dignified man's having wantonly offended his young wife, while they are not nearly so great against

the shallow Royalist girl's having uttered light and flippant gibes about her Puritan husband's noblest and dearest ideals. As to Milton's alleged attentions to the "very handsome and witty" daughter of Dr. Davis, one can only say that, in view of Milton's sincerity and courage of character, they are an additional proof of his determination to announce his principles and act upon them. The young lady and her parents were probably able to look out for themselves and must have shared Milton's ideals, or, in view of the danger attending the woman from the state of the law, he would have been asked to cease his visits. To blame him for being "light of love" is simply to forget that strong natures bent in one direction rebound far when released. Perhaps Mistress Davis's qualities were complementary to those of Mary Powell, or perhaps gossips mistook a Platonic friendship for a love affair. Be this as it may, we know that in July or August, 1645, the wife surprised the husband at a friend's house, and that a reconciliation was effected. Perhaps, as has been urged, she was brought to terms by the visits

to Mistress Davis; but on the face of things her voluntary return is a circumstance in Milton's favor.

This is not the place to discuss in detail the divorce pamphlets which proved too strong a diet even for Milton's coreligionists and had to be published without license—a fact to which we owe the greatest and best known of his prose writings, the noble “Areopagitica, a Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing.” But before the thread of his married life is taken up once more, it will be well to say a few words about his relations with women in general. He has been much criticised for them, not always with entire justice. If he did not enjoy much happiness with his first wife, he could nevertheless write his noble sonnet to his second, Katherine Woodcock,¹ a sufficient tribute to any woman, though perhaps borrowed in substance from a similar sonnet by the Italian poet, Bernadino Rota; while with his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull,

48
¹ The second marriage lasted from November, 1656, to February, 1658. The marriage for convenience with the “gentle” Mistress Minshull took place in 1663.

who survived him, he seems to have lived as congenially as could be expected when all the circumstances are taken into account. His daughters by his first wife have won a sympathy which they scarcely deserve. Reading aloud in languages one does not understand is not an enjoyable task; but what are we to say of the characters and dispositions of women who could lack reverence for such a father? Admiration and sympathy are two of the noblest attributes of womanhood, and who has ever been fitter to elicit them than Milton in his blindness? Perhaps the best excuse for these daughters is the fact that they were trained in part by their mother. We may dismiss this unpleasant topic with the remark that it is well to note that in the scanty tale of Milton's English sonnets there are four addressed to women in which there is not a line to make us believe that he had a low estimate of the sex, and much to convince us, in spite of the often-quoted lines of "Paradise Lost" which represent the normal view of the period, that he was at times capable of extending to them that intelligent admiration which the mass of mankind

are only just beginning to recognize as their due. This conviction is rendered almost a certainty when we study the relations of the poet with the famous Lady Ranelagh, the learned and virtuous Katherine Boyle, mother of "the noble youth, Richard Jones," whom Milton taught and to whom he indited some epistles. It will probably be impossible to root from the public mind the notion that Milton was a sour woman-hater and a vindictive partisan, but we may be sure that the records do not warrant any such conception of his character, and we should protest emphatically against such an egregious assumption as that of Professor Dowden to the effect that there is an unlovely Milton from whom we are all anxious to avert our gaze.

38

Early in 1646, at the solicitation of Humphrey Moseley, the publisher, who seems to have known what a favor he was doing mankind, Milton, who, except in the cases of his *magnum opus* and "Samson Agonistes," generally waited for an external stimulus to literary undertakings, brought out the first edition of his poems in two parts, English and Latin.

He prefixed a quotation from Virgil which showed that he regarded the publication as premature. In view of the great praise now given to the minor poems, this attitude of Milton's might seem to furnish fresh evidence of the irony attaching to the judgments of authors about their own works; but if we can appreciate duly the transcendent merits of "Paradise Lost" and will remember that the scheme of that noble work was even then occupying Milton's thoughts, his unwillingness to rush into print will smack neither of the irony of self-judgment nor of false modesty. Be this as it may, it was an unpropitious time for the muses that he or his publisher chose; but it was not many years before he was plagiarized from in a shocking manner by one Robert Barron, and if imitation be the sincerest flattery, he ought to have been pleased, but probably was not. Meanwhile his school had increased, and he had moved into larger quarters, whither his wife's relatives, who had been dispossessed by the Parliamentarians, presently flocked in a way to make one suspect that they had had a reason for helping to bring husband and wife

together once more. Milton seems to have done his duty by them in an exemplary manner, and he obviously deserves far more sympathy than he has ever got. They inspired little poetry, we may be sure, but he worked away at his studies, gathered materials for his "History of England," and perhaps began his treatise "De Doctrina Christiana," which through a train of curious circumstances did not see the light until 1823. In 1647 his father, who had been living with him since the lapsing of Christopher Milton to royalism and Roman Catholicism, died, and the consequent addition to his income led him to give up all his pupils, save his nephews. He also moved to a smaller house and got rid of the daily presence of the Powells. So he lived on and looked out at the swift succession of events that seemed about to change entirely the course of English history. He was still conscious of great powers and still yearning for an opportunity to do something for his people, but he preferred a scholarly seclusion, as he tells us, to a station "at the doors of the court with a petitioner's face."

With the king's death, however, a change

40 took place in Milton's affairs. Charles was beheaded on January 30, 1649; in exactly two weeks Milton had published his pamphlet "The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates," in which he maintained the right of "any who have the Power, to call to account a Tyrant, or wicked King, and after due Conviction, to depose, and put him to Death, if the ordinary Magistrate have neglected, or denied to do it." This was a bold and certainly expeditious defence of the actions of his party—how bold may be somewhat realized when we remember how the news of the execution of Louis XVI., nearly a century and a half later, resounded through Europe. Even the philosophic mind of Burke was unhinged by the latter catastrophe; the former and more astounding event simply woke Milton up. Merely as a private citizen with convictions of his own and as an enthusiast whose dash for the breach showed him to be uninfluenced by political or other calculations, he dared to defend a deed which had filled a whole people with horror and consternation; to the seductions of sympathy stimulated by the timely

appearance of the "Eikon Basilike," he opposed the warning voice of reason and the high, clear strains of duty. If he took an untenable position in some particulars, he nevertheless put the half-hearted to shame and enrolled his own name high among the sons of liberty. The popular leaders could overlook him no longer, and he was offered the post of Latin Secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The salary was ample,—about \$5250 in our present money,—and the position such as even a Milton could accept, for he was not merely to carry on diplomatic correspondence in the language of scholars, but also to be the recognized spokesman of his party. In his own eyes it was the spokesman of liberty and his native land that he aspired to be, and the proffered office gave him an opportunity of realizing his aspiration. There could be little or no thought of a refusal, and he thus became, as Dr. Garnett happily puts it, "the Orpheus among the Argonauts of the Commonwealth."

His first work as Secretary that need be noticed here was his "Eikonoklastes," written in

answer to the "Eikon Basilike" of Bishop Gauden, then generally believed to be the work of the "Royal Martyr" himself. Milton seems to have shirked the task, knowing that to accomplish it effectively would necessitate depreciation of the dead king and much chaffering over straws. In spite of this known reluctance on his part and of the obvious fact that much of his matter and manner was determined by the nature and arrangement of the treatise he was answering, critics have not ceased to search his book minutely for data on which to rest charges against his personal integrity, his consistency, even his taste in literature. But he was soon to undertake a greater task, and one that was to bring him more fame, since he did little with "Eikonoklastes" to stem the tide in favor of the pseudo-religious martyr. The learned Frenchman, Claude de Saumaise, better known as Salmasius, the discoverer of the Palatine Ms. of the Greek Anthology, had been employed to unmask the batteries of his ponderous erudition, so valued at the time, in defence of Charles I. His "Defensio Regia"

appeared in the latter part of 1649, and Milton was directed by the Council to answer it. He did at the cost of his sight. For some years his eyes had been failing, and one was already gone. He was advised that any further strain would speedily induce total blindness, yet he never wavered in the performance of his duty. He calmly faced the loss of a sense that every true scholar must value more than life itself; he put from him all anticipation of the noble pleasure he had looked forward to deriving from the first sight of his great poem in print; he may even have despaired of ever composing the poem at all; he looked forward to the miseries of a cheerless old age, and without repining accepted a commission that could not under any circumstances have been specially grateful to him—all because he deemed it right that his country and party should make a proper reply to the charges that had been laid against them in the forum of European opinion. If a sublimer act of patriotic self-sacrifice has ever been performed, it has surely never been recorded. And yet readers have been found who could calmly

dissect the "Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio contra Salmasium" and argue from it that its author had not merely a bad cause, but a bad temper and a worse taste. There have been critics who have imagined that it is proper to judge a seventeenth century controversialist by standards more talked about than acted upon in the nineteenth. There have even been friends of Milton who, forgetting that the man is and ought to be greater than the poet, have wished that he had never performed this act of self-sacrifice that makes him the true Milton of song and history.

43

And now by the spring of 1652 the Milton who had won the plaudits of cultivated Italians for his beauty and his grace, the Milton who had looked on nature's face and found her fair, the Milton who had at last been brought to mingle with the affairs of men at a critical juncture in his country's history, was totally blind, an object of pity, a man who was apparently without a future. It was due to the fact that he was Milton and no one else that he did not succumb but became the poet of "Paradise Lost." And as if to complete his

misfortunes, the death of his wife left him the blind father of three little girls. Under such circumstances he can have thought little of his sudden leap into European fame through the complete victory he had gained over Salmasius. That victory, like all partisan victories, was dearly bought, for the price paid was nothing less than the consciousness that he was execrated by hundreds of thousands of his fellow-countrymen.

The literary duel which cost Milton his sight and Salmasius his life, according to the doubtless exaggerated story, was followed by a sorry squabble which would be regrettable but for the fact that it led Milton to make certain autobiographical confessions of great value. A scurrilous tract was written against him by a broken-down parson, Peter du Moulin by name, who managed to keep his identity well concealed. Milton was led by plausible reasons to believe that his reviler was one Alexander Morus, a Scoto-Frenchman, pastor and professor of Sacred History at Amsterdam, and a resident in Salmasius's household, in which he did not conduct him-

self with perfect chastity. Morus, hearing that Milton was contemplating a reply to the anonymous pamphlet, and fearing the weight of his hand, hastened to assert his innocence in the affair. Milton would listen to nothing, however, and published his reply in 1654. Then Morus was literally flogged into taking up whatever literary weapons he could find, but Milton crushed him with another tract the following year. We shall refer to these productions again, but we must confess here that nothing connected with Milton's life is less edifying. It should be remembered, however, that no man, not even a Milton, can be expected to be far in advance of his times in his methods of personal controversy, and that controversy was a prime constituent of the intellectual atmosphere of the seventeenth century.



Milton's State Papers are less disquieting reading than his controversial fulminations. It seems quite clear that while he was but carrying out the wishes and plans of his superiors in office he threw into his letters to foreign potentates not a little of his own noble

spirit. Whether he was able, even before he lost his sight, to affect the policy of Cromwell, which he certainly ventured to criticise, is very doubtful; but he was none the less the spokesman of his party while living, and he has ever since been its articulate voice. Perhaps it is just as well that in revolving in imagination those eventful years of English history we should not confuse the two dominant conceptions that come to us—that we should always be able to distinguish Cromwell's vigor and Milton's godlike utterance.

The blind man's utterance was in some respects more potent than the Protector's vigor, for the latter could not be transmitted to Richard Cromwell or to any other survivor, while Milton could and did continue to inculcate his lofty conceptions of the true nature of Church and State. His blindness and his enforced confinement to his home and the companionship of a few choice friends like Andrew Marvell, his assistant secretary, and the Cyriack Skinner and Henry Lawrence of the sonnets, doubtless proved to him a blessing in disguise, for he could not see how the

fabric of popular government was rushing to its fall. He heard enough to disquiet him, and he doubtless brooded over what he heard, but his practical withdrawal from the world must have deadened the shock of the Restoration and rendered less vivid his solicitude as to his own fate. To those, however, who have studied the shameful history of England for the year 1659, the isolation of the blind poet but adds to the pathos of the picture he presents — a Republican Samson, captive in the midst of his contemptible foes. Yet even the pathos of this picture should not make us wish with Mark Pattison that Milton had never sunk the poet in the man of affairs. It seems as idle to argue that "Paradise Lost" would have been the poem it is without the poetic interregnum of 1640–1660, as it is to argue that Milton would have been as great a man without it. Those critics may indeed be right who maintain that Milton's nature was subdued to what it worked in, "like the dyer's hand," that the Puritan controversialist sometimes got the better of the poet long after occasion for controversy had passed away (as

if Milton could ever have thought this!)—
but such criticism means merely that Milton
had not the universality of genius, the abso-
lute perfection of artistic balance that char-
acterize Homer, and perhaps Shakspeare, alone
of the world's poets. No one has ever
claimed such universality, such perfect bal-
ance for him; his sublime elevation of con-
summate nobility being sufficient basis for
his eternal fame.



CHAPTER III

THE SUPREME POET (1661-1674)

57 It is easy enough to infer that Milton did not fully understand the signs of the times from the fact that he published two of his idealistic political and theological tracts in 1659, and one, the "Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth," not two months before Charles II. reëntered his kingdom. If he had understood the times thoroughly, and perceived of what gross clay his fellow-countrymen were made, he would hardly have had the spirit to pen his eloquent periods. Yet he knew more or less what was coming, and he displayed his matchless courage in protesting the justice of Charles I.'s execution on the eve of the triumphal advent of Charles II. He was not foolhardy, however, for early in May he left his house and went into hiding in Bartholomew Close, Smithfield.

If either king or Parliament had been bloody-minded, Milton would almost certainly have been brought to the scaffold. His writings were burned by the hangman on August 27, but influential friends made it possible for his name to be omitted from the list of twenty persons who were proscribed in addition to the authentic regicides. He actually escaped arrest for a long while, and when this came, suffered only from the exaction of heavy fees. Finally he found a refuge in Holborn, his nerves shaken, and his property greatly reduced, partly in consequence of his political affiliations. There is nothing more pathetic in history than this return of Milton to the outer world. Blind, reviled, despised by his own children, his ideals shattered, his health impaired, he had but one comfort, — his undefiled conscience; and but one hope, — the completion of the great poem he had already begun.

But by degrees his condition began to mend. His third marriage restored order to his home and prevented his daughters from selling his books. His friends visited him faithfully, and his organ was a source of unfailing pleasure.

55 Readers and amanuenses were provided, and the labor of composition went on, interrupted only by his own singular inaptitude for work at certain seasons. By 1663, five years after its inception, the first draft of the immortal epic was probably completed; in two years more it was in all likelihood fit for the printer; but the fatal Plague and Fire doubtless impeded business negotiations, and certainly sent the poet down to Chalfont St. Giles, where the interesting Quaker, Thomas Ellwood, visited him and asked the famous question which probably led to the composition of "Paradise Regained." Before, however, the latter poem was published along with "Samson Agonistes" in 1671, the greatest epic since "The Divine Comedy" had passed so as by fire through the sapient hands of the licenser, the Reverend Thomas Tomkyns, and had been printed by Samuel Simmons (in 1667) on terms that have been made the subject of many critical homilies.

Mr. Simmons may have driven a hard bargain, though there is much room to doubt it; but he did better by Milton and his epic than a good many modern critics have done who are

not supposed to hold chairs in the School of Cobbett. We are told now that people do not read "Paradise Lost," and that its subject is antiquated and a little absurd, especially since the theory of evolution has thrown grave doubts upon the lion's ever having pawed to extricate his hinder parts. If this be true of the public, and if our critics are to judge poets from the point of view of Cobbett's so-called common sense or of Huxley's epoch-making science, it may well be doubted whether printer Simmons was not more a child of the muses than one is likely to jostle to-day on the streets of any of our great cities. But Simmons's niggardly pounds have either been quite worn out or have forgotten that they ever took part in a prudent or a shabby transaction, and a similar fate awaits the Cobbett critics and the public that pays attention to them. "Paradise Lost" has set a seal upon Milton's glory that can be effaced or unloosed by angelic power alone — by the might of the angel who shall in the fullness of time blow the last trump.

With regard to the pendant epic and the noble drama in classical style whose date of

composition is uncertain, little need be said here save that those persons who refrain from reading them stand greatly in their own light. Neither can claim the preëminence in our poetry that belongs of right to "Paradise Lost," but none the less both poems are worthy of Milton, and therefore of our admiration and love. They may give evidence of the declining powers of his mighty genius, or they may, more probably, represent that genius moving in regions less elevated and pure; but they are worthy to shine through their own lustre, and to live through their own vitality. Their comparative unpopularity is proof of nothing save of the proverbial isolation of the noble; but their existence is proof of the fact that in a blind old age Milton would be content with nothing less than a strenuous and lofty use of his divinely bestowed powers. He could not, like his Nazarene hero, pull down the pillars of an ungodly state upon the heads of its citizens, although he would not have shirked the self-destruction involved; but he could still sing in exultant tones of the triumphs of virtue and of the justice and majesty and mercy of God.

That mercy was shown him in his last years in fuller measure than he perhaps expected, or than his political and ecclesiastical foes would have admitted to be his due. He was passed by in ignorance or contempt by the great world; but here and there a judicious celebrity like Dryden would pay his court to him, and the old friends remained faithful. The gout afflicted him, but not enough to keep him from singing. He had the pleasure of utilizing manuscripts prepared in better days, and of thus discharging his debt toward posterity with the utmost punctiliousness. The
61 small Latin grammar (1669), the "History of
62 Britain" (1670), the "Art of Logic" (1672), 64
the tract on "True Religion, Heresy, Schism,
65 Toleration" (1673), the revised and enlarged
65 edition of the "Minor Poems" (1673), the
66 "Familiar Epistles" (in Latin, 1674), is a
catalogue of undertakings of no transcendent
moment, but amply sufficient to prove that
Milton did not pass many completely idle
days. His political and diplomatic corre-
spondence and his treatise on "Christian Doc-
trine" could not of course see the light then,

but the latter at least must have occupied him more than it does most mortals now.

Yet revising and publishing old works, and listening to the Bible and the classics, as read to him by his friends, and playing and hearing music were not, we may be sure, the chief delight of the aged Milton. Nor was this to be found in recollections of the tremendous and perilous times through which he had passed, in reminiscences of Cromwell and other great men, or even in pardonable pride of the *quorum pars magna* kind. His chief delight, in spite of his blindness, was in his visions — his visions of empyrean glory, denied to all other men save his three compeers, Homer, Shakspeare, and Dante. With such visions he lived until the end came, on November 8, 1674, having tasted the blessings of immortality while yet a mortal.

66 But what, in conclusion, are the main ideas about Milton the man that we should carry away, whether from reading a mere sketch like the above, or from studying Professor Masson's monumental biography, probably the most elaborate tribute ever paid to a man of

letters? This question is not easy to answer, because it is never easy to speak adequately about a supreme genius; but we must attempt some sort of answer.

In the first place, we ought to remember that Milton is the great idealist of our Anglo-Saxon race. In him there was no shadow of turning from the lines of thought and action marked out for him by his presiding genius. His lines may not be our lines; but if we cannot admire to the full his ideal steadfastness of purpose and his masterful accomplishment, it is because our own capacity for the comprehension and pursuit of the ideal is in so far weak and vacillating. And it is this pure idealism of his that makes him by far the most important figure, from a moral point of view, among all Anglo-Saxons; for the genius of the race is practical, not ideal, — compromise is everywhere regarded with favor as a working principle, — and the main lesson we have all to learn is how to stand out unflinchingly for the true, the beautiful, and the good, regardless of merely present and practical considerations. We have glorified the compromis-

ing man of action at the expense of the ideal theorist until we have deluded ourselves into believing that men, who are, above all, reasoning creatures, have succeeded best when they have acted illogically, and we have thus held back reforms by contenting ourselves with halfway improvements. A due admiration for Milton's unflinching idealism, both of thought and action, will at least make it impossible for us to tolerate the charlatanism of compromise.

In the second place, we should admire Milton's consummate power of artistic accomplishment. He is the master workman of our men of letters, and this genius for perfection manifested itself in all that he undertook. In him there was no haste or waste. Whether as a youthful student at school or college, or as a scholarly recluse among his books at Horton, or as a traveller seeking culture, or as a schoolmaster, or as a political and theological controversialist, or as diplomatic secretary, or finally as a great epic poet, Milton is always found, not merely doing successfully and admirably, but doing his marvellous best. There are as few ups and downs in his work

of whatever kind as are to be found in the works of any other man save perhaps Homer. He is always girded. Slowness and somewhat of sluggishness may perhaps be charged against him, but in view of his lofty conception of the need of adequate preparation, such a charge must be very tentative. He is *par excellence* the perfect conscious artist among Anglo-Saxons — as unerring as Raphael, as sublime as Michelangelo.

But he is more than idealist or artist — he was a superlatively noble, brave, truly conscientious man, who could never have intentionally done a mean thing; who was pure and clean in thought, speech, and action; who was patriotic to the point of sublime self-sacrifice; who loved his neighbor to the point of risking his life for republican principles of liberty; who, finally, spent his every moment as in the sight of the God he both worshipped and loved. Possessed of sublime powers, his thought was to make the best use of them to the glory of God and the good of his fellow-man. We may not think that he always succeeded; but who among the men of our race save Wash-

ington is such an exemplar of high and holy and effective purpose? Beside his white and splendid flame nearly all the other great spirits of earth burn yellow, if not low. Truly, as Wordsworth said, his soul was like a star; and, if it dwelt apart, should we therefore love it the less? It is more difficult to love the sublime than to love the approximately human, but the necessity for such love is the essence of the first and greatest commandment.

In conclusion, we may remember that whatever may be thought of the claims just set forth, which will not be admitted in their entirety by any one who has not made Milton an object of lifelong devotion, there are two facts that render a study of his life and works essential to all persons who would fain have the slightest claim to be considered cultured men.

The first is that Milton has unquestionably influenced his country's literature more than any other English man of letters, unless it be Shakspeare. Although he did not live to reap the reward of the fame that "Paradise Lost" began to attract, even before the close of the seventeenth century, he must have felt sure

that he had built himself an enduring monument. His conviction was true. Certainly, from the appearance of Addison's criticism of the great epic to the present day, no English poet of any note has failed at one time or another to pass under his spell. Even Pope borrowed from him; and Thomson, Dyer, Collins, and Gray were his open disciples. What Cowper and Wordsworth would have been without him is hard to imagine. The youthful Keats imitated him, Byron tried to rival him, and Shelley sang that "his clear sprite yet reigns o'er earth the third among the sons of light." As for Landor, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, and Swinburne, their direct or indirect debt to him is plain to every student. With regard to his prose, which has never been sufficiently studied, the case has been somewhat different. It is the old story of the bow of Ulysses. But it cannot be doubted that if on the formal side our modern writers look back to Cowley and Dryden, and that if Burke is the only specific author in whom a critic like Lowell can discover definite traces of the influence of Milton, there has never

been a master of sonorous and eloquent prose who did not owe more than he was perhaps aware of to the author of "Areopagitica."

The second fact is equally patent, but less often insisted upon. It is that in the triumphant progress of the Anglo-Saxon race, whether in the mother island, in America, or in Australia, whatever has been won for the cause of civic or religious or mental liberty has been won along lines that Milton would have approved in the main had he been living; has been won by men more or less inspired by him; and will be kept only by men who are capable of appreciating rightly the height and breadth and depth of his splendid and ineffable personality.

PART II.—WORKS

CHAPTER I

EARLIEST POEMS IN ENGLISH

IN discussing Milton's minor poems, exclusive of the sonnets, it is well to adopt some convenient lines of division. There is so little that is juvenile about his work that the usual twofold classification will hardly suffice; there is such variety that his own separation into Latin and English is not fully satisfactory. Perhaps we shall do well to adopt a new division of our own—to treat first the English poems written before the retirement at Horton, excluding the elegies; next the Latin poems, except the "Epitaphium Damonis," and kindred verses; then the companion poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," with a few pendant pieces; then "Arcades" and "Comus," both being masques; and finally "Lycidas,"

together with the other elegies of which it is the crown. This division has the advantage of being sufficiently chronological, while at the same time it groups the poems according to their kinds.

We have already seen that as a boy of fifteen Milton attempted paraphrases of Psalms cxiv. and cxxxvi. It was just such a beginning as might have been expected of him, and as the pieces probably represent all that we have of his ante-Cambridge compositions, they possess considerable interest. Minute critics have inferred from them his acquaintance with Spenser and Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas, but it would be fairer to lay stress on the original vigor displayed.

“And caused the golden-tressèd sun
All the day long his course to run,”

and

“The ruddy waves he cleft in twain
Of the Erythræan main,”

are couplets premonitory of the splendid rhythm of the later works, whether or not they contain borrowed epithets.

The English poems composed at Cambridge

number exactly eleven, if the little "Song on May Morning" be assigned to that period. Five of these, the elegies on the "Fair Infant" and the Marchioness of Winchester, the two humorous pieces on Hobson, the carrier, and the lines on Shakspeare, can be best discussed in detail along with "Lycidas." Two of the others are sonnets, and will be appropriately treated with their fellow-poems in this form. We are thus left to take account of only four pieces, a complete and a fragmentary ode, a song, and an academical exercise — an amount of verse that would be unworthy of separate treatment but for the fact that it contains Milton's single ode, one of the supreme specimens of its class in our literature. Before discussing it, however, we must remember that while these eleven Cambridge poems do not represent great fecundity, they do represent both scope and mastery of genius. The two serious elegies are excellent, the lines on Shakspeare are noble and indicative of a fine culture, and the sonnets are marked by pure, if serious, charm. In short, it is a body of verse full of promise, as well as evidencing much achieve-

ment — an achievement sufficient, had he never written another line, to have preserved Milton's name along with those of Barnfield and other minor Elizabethans, though in a somewhat higher category.

The elegy on a "Fair Infant" seems to date from Milton's second year at Cambridge, 1625-26; next in chronological order comes the fragmentary "At a Vacation Exercise," which dates from 1628, the year before he took his Bachelor's degree. He had been appointed to deliver a Latin speech at certain sportive exercises held by the undergraduates. His thesis was the familiar one that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, but he presented it under a much more decorous title. He was assisted by other students who represented fictitious characters — on this special occasion the "Predicaments" of Aristotle. Milton, in spite of his serious nature, managed to play well his part of "Father" to the unruly assemblage, hence his speech contains jocularities and now unintelligible personal allusions. Suddenly he introduced an innovation; he passed from Latin into English,

apostrophizing nobly his native tongue, and declaiming solemnly fifty sonorous couplets. Much of the poem is dead to us now ; but the style cannot die, because it is prophetic of the future master. Even the undergraduates bent on fun must have stood dumb with pride for their brilliant colleague who could thus sing, —

“Of kings and queens and heroes old,
Such as the wise Demodocus once told
In solemn songs at King Alcinous’ feast.”

But Milton would not try their patience, for he soon called up his “Predicaments,” and ended with some lines about the chief English rivers that long puzzled the critics until it was discovered not many years ago that the dignified poet was probably punning on the names of two young freshmen, sons of a Sir John Rivers.

21 His next poetic performance, dating from Christmas, 1629, must have still more astonished his fellow-students, if any of them were permitted to hear it. The famous stanzas entitled “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” which Hallam has declared to be an ode,

“perhaps the finest in the English language,” represent a marked growth of poetic power and an exceptional accomplishment for a poet just turned twenty-one. He thought enough of it to give an excellent description of it to his friend Diodati in his sixth Latin elegy; indeed the original hardly anywhere rises above two splendid lines of the paraphrase:—

“Stelliparumque polum, modulantesque æthere turmas
Et subito elisos ad sua fana deos.”¹

As we shall see from the fragment on the “Passion,” Milton was meditating upon the great events of the Christian Year and endeavoring to give them poetic expression of an adequate kind. He succeeded so well at his first attempt that he may almost be said to have imposed the thought of his ode and himself upon most reading people whenever the glad festival comes round. Reverence of spirit and noble charm of style had never be-

¹ Loosely rendered by Cowper: —

“The hymning angels and the herald-star
That led the Wise, who sought him from afar,
And idols on their own unhallow'd shore
Dash'd, at his birth to be revered no more.”

fore been so harmonized in an English religious poem, nor have they, perhaps, been so harmonized since. The poet was rapt away on the wings of his imagination, but not carried so far out of sight as in much of his later work; hence his ode is one of the most comprehensible of his poems for the normal reader.

Whether, indeed, it deserves Hallam's high praise is another matter. It has action, but not the dramatic intensity of Dryden's "Alexander's Feast"; it has nobility of thought and feeling, but not the nobility of the best stanzas of Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality." Besides, being a regular ode in set stanzas, it did not allow Milton to attain the full harmonic effects of the more or less irregular ode, in which sound is married to sense in a manner unparalleled in any other form of lyric. Yet, if it be not the greatest English ode, it surely deserves more attention than Mark Pattison gave it, not to mention the purblind Johnson. There are crudities to be discovered in it beyond doubt; there are indications of a slight bending toward the

Fantastic School of Donne; but these are trifles compared with the charm and power that result from the blending of Greek and Hebrew elements — with the almost magical effects of the skilfully chosen proper names — with the pervading dignity of style and the individual mastery of rhythm.

With regard to the last point it will be well to go somewhat into particulars. Not only is the rhythm of such a stanza as that beginning

“Such music (as ’tis said) ”

masterly and original, but the stanzaic form itself is the invention of a metrical artist. Its elements are not new, being merely a “tail-stave” and a couplet; but the proportions observed by the various lines with respect to the number of contained syllables are strikingly unique. The short lines of five or six syllables are balanced against lines of ten, and when one expects a uniform couplet, one is confronted with a line of eight syllables rhyming with an Alexandrine of twelve. Hence the resulting stanza gives swiftness of

movement through its short lines, abundance of melody through its frequent rhymes, and a stately dignity through its protracted and sonorous close. What finer combination of melody and harmony could one desire than this : —

“The lonely mountains o’er,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard and loud lament;
From haunted spring, and dale,
Edged with poplar pale,
The parting Genius is with sighing sent;
With flower-inwoven tresses torn
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets
mourn.”

The alliteration discoverable here and elsewhere has induced some critics to find the ode too artificial, just as the twenty-sixth stanza about “the sun in bed,” introducing a figure more suitable to Donne, or, with a slight change, to Butler, has induced them to discover a hankering in the young poet after the diseased beauties of Marinism; but these are trifles when compared with the splendid rhythmical and metrical triumph of the

"Hymn" proper, or with the marvellous diction exhibited in such verses as

"And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the weltering waves their oozy channel keep."

With regard to the four admirable preliminary stanzas, Milton can claim no such metrical originality as he can for the stanzas of his "Hymn." They are precisely the stanzas used in the elegy on the "Fair Infant," and are a mere modification of the rhyme-royal of Chaucer, the seventh verse containing twelve syllables instead of ten, *i.e.* being an Alexandrine. This modification had been consciously or unconsciously made by Sir Thomas More, in his "Lamentation" for Queen Elizabeth, wife of Henry VII., but Phineas Fletcher was more probably the source that influenced Milton. He might easily have developed it for himself, however, since modifications of stanzas by the addition of an Alexandrine in imitation of Spenser were frequent at the time. But such noble use of any sort of stanza as that made by Milton was not common then, and never has been or will be.

The Easter season of 1630 evidently found Milton preparing to emulate his success of the preceding Christmas. He began with eight introductory stanzas of the same modified rhyme-royal form; but at the end of the eighth, before he reached the "Hymn" proper, he broke off, appending to the fragment years later the following note:—

"This subject the author, finding to be above the years he had when he wrote it, and nothing satisfied with what was begun, left it unfinished."

With this judgment it is easy to agree. The stanzas, while not lacking in beauty, are not worthy of the transcendent subject. They show more markedly than his preceding poems the influence of his favorite Spenser, and they do not show to the full the splendid original powers of which Milton had already given such evidence. They mark also the limit of his yielding to the fantastic absurdities of Marinism, for there is little in the poetry of Quarles or Sylvester that is more extravagant than the monumental "conceit," in the seventh stanza, of "that sad sepulchral rock," upon

whose "softened quarry" the poet "would score" his "plaining verse as lively as before."

If the little "Song on May Morning" dates from 1630, it more than atones by its beauty for the failure of the poem on the "Passion." But, as we shall see later, there is a tendency among critics to assign the undated early poems to the period of retirement at Horton; hence the ten beautiful lines may not represent the emotions of the college student at all. They are full of an exquisite feeling for spring, especially for its pulsing energy, which is well symbolized by the sudden change at the fifth verse from long iambic lines to shorter trochaic ones. Why a student like Milton, who had celebrated the return of spring in Latin elegiacs, might not have written this song after a walk in the beautiful gardens of Trinity is hard to see; but the critics seem to write as if Milton's love of nature was brought out at Horton alone. Of this we shall speak hereafter; it is sufficient now to emphasize the beauty of the lines, which is more elaborate, however, than befits a genuine song.

CHAPTER II

THE LATIN POEMS

As we have seen, the Latin poems formed a separate portion of the volume of 1645-46. They filled eighty-eight pages, divided by their author into two books, one of elegies ("Elegiarum Liber"), and one of miscellanies ("Sylvarum Liber"). In the poem last written, the "Epitaphium Damonis," Milton announced his intention of writing thenceforward in English, a promise which was practically kept, since nothing but the "Ode to Rous" and a few epigrams were subsequently added to the collection. Of the seven elegies, eight epigrams, and nine miscellaneous pieces (excluding the three Greek poems) printed in 1645, twelve were written at Cambridge, one apparently at Horton, and the rest during or shortly after the Italian journey. The whole is therefore the work of a young man, and a considerable

portion that of a mere youth. Judged from this point of view, it is a wonderful achievement.

With regard to the intrinsic merits of the verses, there is almost complete unanimity among the most qualified critics. With the exception of Landor, who wrote more as a Roman, to whom Latin seemed, in the words of Dr. Garnett, to come "like the language of some prior state of existence, rather remembered than learned," Milton is the greatest English writer of Latin verse. This may seem to be a dubious compliment in an age when even the veritable classics are often disparaged; but it would not have been such to Milton and his contemporaries, and it must mean something in any careful estimate of his work. He is the greater man and poet for having succeeded so well in his Latin verses, even if we believe with Dr. Garnett that he won his success by the sweat of his brow — a point that does not seem to be irrevocably settled.

Authorities are agreed that Milton always attained scholarly elegance, and that he did

not lose his own individuality as is so often the case with writers who attempt to use a language not native to them. That he succeeded in writing great poems is hardly asserted, save with regard to the "Epitaphium Damonis," of the nobility and beauty of which there has been no serious doubt. Difference of opinion has revealed itself as to what author Milton followed most closely, Warton, a good judge, believing that he imitated Ovid with consistency, Hallam maintaining that his hexameters at least are more Virgilian. It is safer, perhaps, to side with Warton. It is safe, too, to agree with Dr. Johnson and with Dr. Garnett that, in the words of the former, neither "power of invention" nor "vigor of sentiment" are so conspicuous as "the purity of the diction and the harmony of the numbers"; but on this point something needs to be said by way of explanation.

Milton's diction is pure on the whole, but it is easy to establish the fact that he uses quite a number of ante- and post-classical words; more, seemingly, of the former than of the latter. His excessive and sometimes inaccu-

rate use of "que" is also to be noticed!¹ Harmonious his verses certainly are when he is using the elegiac couplet; but it may be questioned whether vigor is not rather the chief characteristic of his hexameters. Again, it is a mistake to suppose that there are no remarkably poetic passages to be found outside the "Epitaphium Damonis" and the two elegies (i., vi.) to Diodati, as might be inferred from the prominence given these poems. Such are to be found even outside the lines "Ad Patrem" and the tribute to Manso, which some modern critics praise. The close of the fourth elegy to Thomas Young, Milton's tutor, is full of sonorous energy; there is a fine lift in the early verses on the "Return of Spring"; and there is probably more sheer dramatic power in the

¹ In an interesting letter my friend Professor Charles W. Bain of South Carolina College informs me that Ovid seems to have had a preponderant influence on Milton's diction, also that the latter uses an excess of purely poetic words as well as quite a number rendered classical only by a single use on the part of Ovid or Virgil. Mr. Bain thinks Milton's versification remarkably good, but his trained ear supports my untrained one in finding not a few verses rendered unpleasant by a superfluity of elided syllables.

strong hexameters on Guy Fawkes's Day ("In Quintum Novembris"), written when Milton was not quite eighteen, than is to be found in the rest of his Latin verse, or indeed in the poetry of any other poet of equal age. There is strong work, too, in both the academical exercises included in the "Sylvarum Liber." In short, while the Milton of the Latin poems is plainly more graceful than sublime, he is just as plainly a Milton destined to grow greater with the years.

There is little need in a study like the present to dwell at length on special poems. The elegies on the Bishops of Ely and Winchester, on the Cambridge beadle and vice-chancellor, and on Diodati will occupy us in a later chapter. None of the epigrams can be called great, or even fine, although some are good; and the irregular ode to John Rous, the librarian at Oxford, who had lost his copy of the edition of the "Minor Poems" of 1645 and desired another, is interesting chiefly as a metrical experiment. The two Greek epigrams and the paraphrase of Psalm cxiv. are not remarkable, and the scazons to the ailing Roman, Giovanni

Salzilli, who had praised Milton so extravagantly, are little more than graceful. But the elegies to Diodati—really friendly letters in verse—are excellent of their kind, the later written being notable for its fine expression of that cardinal doctrine of Milton's faith, afterward so nobly presented in "Comus" and in a memorable prose passage,—that he who would write a true poem must live a pure life. The elegy or letter to Young is full of reverent affection, and the lines on the advent of spring have a distinct charm. The seventh elegy is interesting from its somewhat conventional but graphic description of the effect upon the young poet of a pretty face flashing upon him in a London street, but immediately disappearing in the crowd. Later, Milton appended some lines of apology for his youthful enthusiasm, but they were not needed; the occurrence described was evidently a rare one.

The "Sylvarum Liber" adds more to Milton's fame than the technical elegies do. The "In Quintum Novembris" is, as we have seen, a memorable poem, even if it ends flatly. The description of Satan arousing the Pope to send

his emissaries to England is very vivid, and ought to be read in Professor Masson's hexameters, since the gentle Cowper was too squeamish to translate it, and the high-church Johnson to praise it. The academical exercises, especially that on Aristotle's view of Plato's philosophy, show how Milton could clothe with life even the dry bones of metaphysics, just as he afterward clothed those of theology. The lines to his father are not only a fine filial tribute, but are a splendid autobiographical defence of the right of genius to careful culture and to exemption from all sordid incentives to self-exertion. It is as noble a document as can be found in the annals of human intercourse, and should be studied by all who know Latin. Almost as much can be said of the "Mansus," the admirable tribute to that Marquis Manso who has the unique distinction, denied even to Mæcenas, of being the friend of two great epic poets of different tongues, Tasso and Milton. The aged Neapolitan has his name enshrined in Tasso's verses, but he has as sure a title to fame in Milton's tribute. The English reader may indeed bear away from the