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William Knight

Excerpt

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MEMOIR OF HENRY VENN, B.D.

CHAPTER I.

EARLY YEARS AND LIFE AT CAMBRIDGE.

1796—1827.

HENRY VENN, the subject of the following pages, was born at Clapham, of which parish his father was rector, on February 10, 1796. The genealogy of his family on the male side was a matter in which he always felt much interest, as had been the case with his father before him, and about which they both made many and careful inquiries whenever they could find time and opportunity for the purpose. This interest he retained indeed to the close of his life, though pressure of other work prevented him, after a comparatively early period, from devoting more than an occasional fragment of time to such investigations.

A tradition had long prevailed in the family that his ancestors had been clergymen of the Church of England in an uninterrupted line since the time of the Reformation. This has been several times stated in print. Of the first link in this chain, however, no documentary proof could be obtained, in spite of researches (repeated

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occasionally at various intervals, both by Henry Venn and his father before him) in Doctors Commons, the Matriculation and Admission Books at Oxford, the Registry of Wills at Exeter, and elsewhere, and many parish registers in various Devonshire villages. What is definitely known, however, shows a clerical line, which is almost certainly unique in its way, and a brief account which, therefore, can hardly be unacceptable to those who have any interest in the fortunes and characteristics of the Church of England. No one of the line ever obtained, as far as is known, any kind of ecclesiastical dignity beyond an honorary prebend, yet with scarcely an exception none of them failed by devotion, integrity, and inflexibility of purpose to leave some permanent memorial on record, to the present time, of his life's work.

It need hardly be said that men of this stamp would be often, if not mostly, on the unpopular side, or at least be found to advocate their opinions in an unpopular way.

The first of the line of whom anything certain is known is William Venn, vicar of Otterton. He was born in Devonshire in 1568,* and educated at Exeter College, Oxford. He was ordained at Exeter, and

* Presumably at or near Payhembury, then and ever since the centre of a family of yeomen of that name. He was admitted at Exeter College as 'filius pauperis.' This proves but little as to his parentage. It would be a fitting enough designation at any rate for the son of a country parson of that day, and in fact his own son was subsequently so admitted at the same college. By this designation certain admission fees were avoided. As a striking instance of the uncertainty in the spelling of surnames, and the consequent difficulty sometimes of verifying genealogical statements, it may be remarked that he is matriculated as 'Fenne,' is admitted in the bursar's books as 'Fen,' was ordained as 'Fenne,' instituted at Otterton as 'Venne,' but is styled in the parish register 'Venn.'

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resided apparently in Devonshire all his life. He is referred to in a memorial tablet still extant at Thelbridge Church, erected in memory of his son Robert, who was vicar there. His eldest son, Richard, influenced doubtless by the county attractions of those days, was also educated at Exeter College, and succeeded his father as vicar of Otterton. He underwent considerable suffering and persecution during the Commonwealth, of which a full account is given by Walker in his 'Sufferings of the Clergy.' He was examined by Fairfax at Tiverton, and by the commissioners at Exeter; treated with much roughness, carried about prisoner with the army for a time, and ejected from his living. For some years he and his large family wandered about in great poverty and distress. For nearly a year during this time he was in prison at Exeter. It is almost needless to say that the only charges against him were his loyalty to the King, and his 'saying of mass' or using the Book of Common Prayer. Full particulars of all that is known of his life are given in Walker's narrative, just mentioned, who obtained them from Mr. Venn's daughter-in-law. He lived to re-enter his living after the Restoration. His son, Dennis Venn, again, in turn, went to Exeter College, where he graduated in 1669. He held the living of Holbeton, in Devonshire, where he died at a comparatively early age. Scarcely anything is known of him personally. His widow was left, herself young, to carry on the education of their three young children, which she seems to have done with extraordinary firmness and success. It is related of her (a somewhat similar story is recorded by Plutarch in the case of a Roman matron) that being asked when she meant to send her son to college, she replied, 'When he can say

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No boldly.' This son Richard was educated, during the latter part of his boyhood, at Tiverton, at Blundell's school, then one of the principal schools of the county. He went to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where there were scholarships and fellowships confined to students from Blundell's school. He gained credit there for his diligence and learning, but still more by some remarkable instances of firmness under peculiar temptation. After taking his degree in 1712 he went to London, where he spent the rest of his life. He held the living of St. Antholin's, Watling Street. He was a man of singular determination and courage, both physical and mental. He was also remarkable for great liberality towards the poor, and especially towards distressed clergymen. His strong High-Church principles were strengthened on their political side by his marriage with a Miss Ashton. Her father, Richard Ashton, Esq., had been Paymaster of the Pensions to King Charles II., and Privy Purse to James II. He is principally known by his resolute and successful opposition to the election of Dr. Rundle, who was an intimate friend of the Lord Chancellor, to the bishopric of Gloucester. He announced his intention of appearing publicly at Bow Church and opposing him on the ground of the Socinian opinions which he had heard him utter in his company. As Dr. Gibson, the Bishop of London, heartily agreed with him in his opposition, they were finally successful.* After Mr. Venn had been both bribed and threatened to induce him to be silent, and after the bishopric had been kept vacant for a year, Dr. Rundle was finally appointed

* A full account of the matter is given by Lord Hervey in his 'Memoirs of the Times of George II.' It is written with a strong bias in favour of Dr. Rundle.

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to Derry instead. This naturally 'brought him into considerable obloquy, the effect of which was increased by the high station and influence of Dr. Rundle's principal friends.

The domestic manners of the family were of a somewhat patriarchal style. They are thus described by John Venn, Rector of Clapham.

In the education of his children my grandfather combined the natural firmness and decisiveness of his temper with much affection. He was indeed absolute in his power, and no child durst presume to manifest the least opposition to his will. The system of Solomon he preferred to that of Rousseau. He always required an absolute and instant obedience. Upon any heinous offence the delinquent was secluded from the family, and the rest of the children and the servants forbidden in the strictest manner to hold any communication with him. In the evening it was the custom, according to the venerable and patriarchal mode prevalent in that day, for all the children to kneel before the father and ask his blessing before they retired to rest. The delinquent was allowed to join the rest and enter the parlour, but if his punishment was not thought to have been carried to a sufficient extent he was immediately on his entrance ordered back to his confinement with a peremptory 'Begone!' and he knew that at least another day must elapse before he could be admitted into favour. Yet with all this strictness his children loved him with as fervent an affection as they honoured him with a profound reverence. I can myself bear testimony to the ardour with which they were wont to speak of his memory. He made it a rule never to permit his children to encourage a spirit of self-conceit or arrogance. He would check it when it appeared even in such instances as their saying, 'Our house,' 'Our servants.' They were to say, 'My father's house, servants,' etc. He was, perhaps, scarcely

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sufficiently sensible of the original difference of character in children, and therefore expected all his children to be as intrepid and as firm as himself. Finding that his daughter was afraid of spirits, after endeavouring to convince her how groundless her fears were, he obliged her to go by the light of the moon into the church which stood at a little distance from his house, and bring him a book from the reading-desk, on the evening of a day on which a corpse had been interred in the aisle, through which she would have to pass.

His second son, Henry Venn, well-known as one of the early leaders of the Evangelical movement in the Church of England, having had his biography published,* a very few facts only need here be recorded. He was born in 1729. He was educated at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he became a scholar, and afterwards a fellow of Queen's. He inherited at first the High-Church principles of his father, and distinguished himself by similar zeal and devotion.

The great change in his convictions, which brought him over to become one of the leaders of the obscure and despised set of the so-called Methodists or Evangelicals, is fully described in his life. After holding the curacy of Clapham for five years, where the hereditary connection of his family with that of the Thorntons' first commenced, he was appointed to the living of Huddersfield, in Yorkshire, in 1759. This was the principal scene of his labours.

After twelve years of exhausting labour there, failing health forced him to resign the charge of this populous parish. He soon afterwards moved to Yelling, near Cambridge, of which place he remained rector till his

* 'The Life and Correspondence of Henry Venn.'

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death in 1797. The last twenty years of his life were marked by no peculiar or striking events. His intercourse with the young men at Cambridge is to be regarded as his chief sphere of usefulness during this period. Several of the most eminent and laborious ministers of the generation which succeeded him might be mentioned as having been visitors at Yelling during their residence at Cambridge. One of the earliest amongst the number was the late Rev. T. Robinson, Vicar of St. Mary's, Leicester; who, as his biographer informs us, took Mr. Venn for his 'prototype' in the discharge of his ministerial duties. A still more prominent name is that of Simeon, who, in a letter to the author of the 'Life,' says: 'I most gladly bear my testimony that not the half, nor the hundredth part of what might have been justly said of that blessed man of God, is here spoken. If any person now living, his surviving children alone excepted, is qualified to bear this testimony, it is I; who, from my first entrance into orders to his dying hour, had most intimate access to him, and enjoyed most of his company and conversation. How great a blessing his conversation and example have been to me will never be known till the Day of Judgment.'

Shortly before his death he removed to Clapham to be near his son, who was then rector of that parish. Here he was able to renew his intimacy with the Thornton family, and others of the well-known residents. [His surviving grandson, formerly Prebendary of Hereford, has recorded that his mind in these closing years of his life was much occupied with the thought of the spread of Christ's kingdom in the world. He used to look with keen eagerness for the reports of the few societies then engaged in Foreign Missions, scanty and

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meagre as they were. His little namesake was but an infant then, but he used to take him in his arms or hold him on his knees, looking fondly at him and blessing him, and 'it may well be believed that the unceasing and earnest prayers, which for years together were offered up for the conversion of the heathen, were in one way, at least, answered and rewarded when his son became one of the founders of the Church Missionary Society; and when that little child grew up to love the society, even when a youth, and to devote to the service of that society, for more than thirty years of his life, such gifts and graces as have rarely been found combined in any one man, and with a success which continually called forth the gratitude and praise of all its friends.'] As an author, he is best known by his 'Complete Duty of Man,' which has gone through a number of editions. He died in 1797. A medical friend, the late John Pearson, Esq., who frequently visited him at this time, observed that the near prospect of dissolution so elated his mind with joy that it proved a stimulus to life. Upon one occasion Mr. Venn himself remarked some fatal appearances, exclaiming, 'Surely these are good symptoms!' Mr. Pearson replied, 'Sir, in this state of joyous excitement you cannot die.'

Of his son, John Venn, the Rector of Clapham, something has already been said at the commencement of this chapter. He was born in 1758, and educated at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where he graduated in mathematical honours in 1781. After holding for a time a small living (Little Dunham, in Norfolk), he was appointed to the Rectory of Clapham, in 1793, which he held till his death in 1813. It is here, in connection with the so-called Clapham Sect, that he is best known.

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His most enduring work was the formation of the Church Missionary Society, to which further reference is made in a later chapter of his memoir. He presided at the first meeting held for the purpose of establishing it, prepared many of the earlier documents, and took part in all the deliberations of the committee so long as his health permitted.

About the early years of the future Missionary-secretary there is not much to say, beyond the fact that, owing to various circumstances, he was much thrown into the society of those older than himself, and thus acquired a degree of maturity and manliness of character which seems to have struck all who became acquainted with him. He lost his mother in his early childhood; and, being the eldest son, soon became to an unusual extent the guardian and adviser of his brothers and sisters.

The following brief autobiographical account was drawn up by himself for his children. It was begun at Torquay, during the first days of bereavement following the death of his wife, and when he had himself been for a time laid aside from all parochial work by a dangerous illness. It was never continued, for, on recovering health, the parish and his secretaryship soon absorbed all the time which would have been thus employed.

In the year 1805 Samuel Thornton, a year younger than myself, came to be my father's pupil and to be educated with me. Then I suppose plans of instruction were adopted, such as my father's wisdom was well calculated to devise; but he was overwhelmed with the business of his important ministerial charge, and could only hear us our lessons in a morning from eight to nine o'clock. . . . The rest of the time we learnt our lessons alone in a schoolroom which opened out on a play-

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ground, and two windows looked into the street. I have a more lively recollection of transactions at the door and window than at the table. . . . I cannot but in some measure deplore the idle and desultory habits of reading which I thus acquired. That habit of strenuous application and exact attention which boys get at a good school, and under the excitement of emulation, I never had, and when I went to College I grievously felt the want of it, and was forcibly discouraged by that feeling, far beyond the reality of the case. . . . Samuel Thornton remained with us till he went to sea in 1812. My other dear and constant companion was Charles Shore (the first Lord Teignmouth's eldest son), and George Stainforth during his holidays. My recollections of these years are all of unmixed happiness. My father was always pleased with me and most tender to me ; but his constant occupations and ill-health removed him in some degree from that familiar companionship which would otherwise, I am persuaded, have been his delight. Hence, perhaps, with the most romantic love for him, I had always a degree of awe in his presence. When Samuel Thornton went for the holidays to his father's beautiful seat, Albury Park, I generally went with him, and was treated like a son in every respect. . . . I met with universal kindness and attention from all my father's friends, and thus I was brought much more forward in life, as it is called, than boys usually are, and prepared, by premature experience of the kindness and confidence of friends, for that difficult situation to which I was called at my father's death, at the age of seventeen, to settle his affairs and make various family arrangements. . . . In 1812 the two sons of Sir Thomas Baring, Thomas and John, came to be my father's pupils ; they were much younger than myself, and I was in some measure to instruct them. . . . My father gave me the wisest instructions about my studies, set me a high standard of accuracy, excited a desire to excel in composition and style of writing, and to enter into the spirit of an author ; he encouraged me, also, to seek the acquisition of *all* kinds of knowledge—