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978-1-108-00828-0 - Memoir of the Rev. Henry Martyn, B. D: Late Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, and Chaplain to the Honourable East India Company

John Sargent

Excerpt

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MEMOIR.

PART I.

IT has been well observed, by one* who took a profound view of human nature, that there are three very different orbits in which great men move and shine, and that each sphere of greatness has its respective admirers. There are those who, as heroes, fill the world with their exploits; they are greeted by the acclamations of the multitude; they are ennobled whilst living, and their names descend with lustre to posterity. Others there are who, by the brilliancy of their imagination, or the vigour of their intellect, attain to honour of a purer and a higher kind; the fame of these is

* Pascal.

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confined to a more select number; all have not a discriminating sense of their merit. A third description there is, distinct from both the former, and far more exalted than either; whose excellence consists in a renunciation of themselves, and a compassionate love for mankind. In this order the Saviour of the world was pleased to appear, and those persons obtain the highest rank in it, who, by his grace, are enabled most closely to imitate his example.

HENRY MARTYN, the subject of this Memoir, was born at Truro, in the county of Cornwall, on the 18th of February, 1781, and appears, with his family in general, to have inherited a weak constitution; as of many children, four only, two sons and two daughters, survived their father Mr. John Martyn, and all of them, within a short period, followed him to the grave. Of these Henry was the third. His father was originally in a very humble situation of life, having been a labourer in the mines near Gwennap, the place of his nativity. With no education but such as a country reading school afforded, he was compelled, for his daily support, to engage in an employment, which, dreary and unhealthy as it was, offered some advantages, of which he most meritoriously availed himself. The miners, it seems, are in the habit of working and resting alternately every four hours; and the periods of relaxation from

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manual labour, they frequently devote to mental improvement. In these intervals of cessation from toil, John Martyn acquired a complete knowledge of arithmetic, and some acquaintance also with mathematics; and no sooner had he gathered these valuable and substantial fruits of persevering diligence, in a soil most unfriendly to their growth, than he was raised from a state of poverty and depression, to one of comparative ease and comfort: admitted into the office of Mr. Daniel, a merchant at Truro, he lived there as chief clerk, piously and respectably enjoying considerably more than a competency. At the grammar school in this town, the master of which was the Rev. Cornelius Cardew, D. D. a gentleman of learning and talents, Henry was placed by his father in Midsummer 1788, being then between seven and eight years of age. Of his childhood previous to this period, little or nothing can be ascertained; but those who knew him, considered him a boy of promising abilities.

Upon his first entering the school, Dr. Cardew observes " he did not fail to answer the expectations that had been formed of him; his proficiency in the classics exceeded that of most of his school-fellows; yet there were boys who made a more rapid progress, not perhaps that their abilities were superior, but their application greater, for he was of a lively cheerful temper, and as I have been told by those

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who sat near him, appeared to be the idlest amongst them, and was frequently known to go up to his lesson with little or no preparation, as if he had learned it merely by intuition.”

In all schools there are boys, it is well known, who, from natural softness of spirit, inferiority in point of bodily strength, or an unusual thirst for literary acquirements, become much secluded from the rest, and such boys are generally exposed to the ridicule and oppression of their associates. Henry Martyn, though not at that time eminently studious, was one of this class; he seldom joined the other boys in their pastimes, in which he was not an adept, and he often suffered from the tyranny of those older or stronger than himself.

“Little Harry Martyn,” for by that name he usually went, says one of his earliest friends and companions, “was in a manner proverbial among his school-fellows for a peculiar tenderness and inoffensiveness of spirit, which exposed him to the ill offices of many overbearing boys; and as there was at times some peevishness in his manner when attacked, he was often unkindly treated. That he might receive assistance in his lessons he was placed near one of the upper boys, with whom he contracted a friendship which lasted through life, and whose imagination readily recalls the position in which he used to sit, the thankful expression of his affectionate countenance, when

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he happened to be helped out of some difficulty, and a thousand little incidents of his boyish days.” —Besides assisting him in his exercises, his friend, it is added, “had often the happiness of rescuing him from the grasp of oppressors, and has never seen more feeling gratitude than was shewn by him on those occasions.”

At this school, under the same excellent tuition, Henry remained till he was between fourteen and fifteen years of age; at which period he was induced to offer himself as a candidate for a vacant scholarship at Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Young as he was, he went there alone, without any interest in the University, and with only a single letter to one of the tutors: and, there, he acquitted himself so well, though strongly and ably opposed, that in the opinion of some of the examiners, he ought to have been elected. How often is the hand of God seen in frustrating our fondest designs! Had success attended him, the whole circumstances of his after-life would have been varied; and however his temporal interests might have been promoted, his spiritual interests would probably have sustained a proportionate loss.

It was with sensations of this kind that he himself many years afterwards reverted to this disappointment. “In the autumn of 1795,” he says, in an account prefixed to his private journal

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of the year 1803, “ my father, at the persuasion of many of his friends, sent me to Oxford, to be a candidate for the vacant scholarship at Corpus Christi ; I entered at no college, but had rooms at Exeter College, by the interest of Mr. Cole, the Sub-Rector. I passed the examination, I believe, tolerably well ; but was unsuccessful, having every reason to think the decision was impartial. Had I remained, and become a member of the University at that time, as I should have done in case of success, the profligate acquaintance I had there, would have introduced me to a scene of debauchery, in which I must in all probability, from my extreme youth, have sunk for ever.”

After this repulse, Henry returned home, and continued to attend Dr. Cardew's school till June 1797. That he had made no inconsiderable progress there, was evident from the very creditable examination he passed at Oxford ; and, in the two years subsequent to this, he must have greatly augmented his fund of classical knowledge : but it seems not to have been till after he had commenced his academical career, that his superiority of talent was fully discovered. The signal success of that friend who had been his guide and protector at school, led him in the spring of this year to direct his views towards the University of Cambridge, which he probably preferred to that of Oxford, because he there hoped to profit by the

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advice and assistance to which he was already so much indebted. Whatever might be the cause of this preference, it certainly did not arise from any predilection for Mathematics: for in the autumn before he went to Cambridge, instead of the study of Euclid and Algebra, he confesses that one part of the day was dedicated to his favorite employment of shooting, and the other to reading, for the most part, Travels, and Lord Chesterfield's Letters,—“attributing to a want of taste for Mathematics, what ought to have been ascribed to idleness, and having his mind in a roving, dissatisfied, restless condition, seeking his chief pleasure in reading, and human praise.”

His residence at St. John's college, where his name had been previously entered in the summer, commenced in the month of October 1797; and, it may tend to shew how little can be determined from first attempts, to relate that Henry Martyn began his mathematical pursuits by attempting to commit the propositions of Euclid to memory. The endeavour may be considered as a proof of the confidence he himself entertained of the retentive powers of his mind; but it did not supply an auspicious omen of future excellence.

On his introduction to the University, happily for him, the friend of his “boyish days” became the counsellor of his riper years: nor was this most important act of friendship either lost upon

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him at the time, or obliterated from his memory in after-life. "During the first term," he has recorded in his Journal, "I was kept a good deal in idleness by some of my new acquaintances, but the kind attention of * * * was a principal means of my preservation from excess." That his time was far from being wholly misemployed, between October and Christmas, is evident, from the place he obtained in the first class, at the public examination of his college in December; a circumstance which, joined to the extreme desire he had to gratify his Father, encouraged and excited him to study with increased alacrity; and as the fruit of this application, at the next public examination in the summer he reached the second station in the first class; a point of elevation, which "flattered his pride not a little."

The tenor of Henry Martyn's life during this and the succeeding year he passed at college, was to the eye of the world in the highest degree amiable and commendable. He was outwardly moral, with little exception was unwearied in application, and exhibited marks of no ordinary talent. But whatever may have been his external conduct, and whatever his capacity in literary pursuits, he seems to have been totally ignorant of spiritual things, and to have lived "without God in the world." The consideration, that God chiefly

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regards the *motives* of our actions,—a consideration so momentous, and so essential to the character of a real christian, appears as yet never to have entered his mind: and even when it did, as was the case at this time, it rested there as a theoretic notion never to be reduced to practice. His own account of himself is very striking. Speaking of June 1799, he says, * * * (the friend alluded to before) attempted to persuade me that I ought to attend to reading, not for the praise of men, but for the glory of God. This seemed *strange* to me, but *reasonable*. I resolved, therefore, to *maintain this* opinion thenceforth; but never designed, that I remember, that it should *affect my conduct*." What a decisive mark this of an unrenewed mind!—What an affecting proof that 'light may break in on the understanding, whilst there is not so much as the dawn of it on the heart!

Providentially for Henry Martyn, he had not only the great blessing of possessing a religious friend at college, but the singular felicity likewise of having a sister in Cornwall, who was a christian of a meek, heavenly, and affectionate spirit; to whom, as well as to the rest of his relations there, he paid a visit in the summer of the year 1799, carrying with him no small degree of academical honour, though not all that he had fondly and ambitiously expected—for he had lost the

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prize for themes in his college, and was only second again in the first class at the public examination, when he had hoped to have been first ;— a “ double disappointment,” which, to use his own words, “ nettled him to the quick.” It may be well supposed, that to a sister, such as his, her brother’s spiritual welfare would be a most serious and anxious concern : and that she often conversed with him on the subject of religion, we have his own declaration. “ I went home this summer, and was frequently addressed by my dear sister on the subject of religion ; but the sound of the Gospel, conveyed in the admonition of a sister, was grating to my ears.” The first result of her tender exhortations and earnest endeavours was very discouraging : a violent conflict took place in her brother’s mind, between his convictions of the truth of what she urged and his love of the world ; and, for the present, the latter prevailed : yet sisters, similarly circumstanced, may learn from this case not merely their duty, but from the *final* result, the success they may anticipate from the faithful discharge of it.—“ I think,” he observes, when afterwards reviewing this period with a spirit truly broken and contrite, “ I do not remember a time, in which the wickedness of my heart rose to a greater height, than during my stay at home. The consummate selfishness and exquisite irritability of my mind were displayed