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Albert Augustus Isaacs

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I.

Few offices are so difficult to fulfil as that of the Biographer. The materials, out of which he is required to construct his work, are necessarily imperfect and perplexing. The faithful and complete delineation of a life, is entirely beyond his grasp. The springs of thought and action,—the processes by which a life has assumed its form and proportions, are to him almost unknown. He can trace events, weigh circumstances, and draw conclusions. But these are more or less uncertain, and, it may be, would have been repudiated by the very person whose motives and objects he desires faithfully to represent. Even when he may have the assistance of a diary, or a record of the experience and feelings of the deceased, it does not necessarily happen that a true light is thrown upon his picture. Such a diary is invaluable as a record of passing events; but when it attempts to delineate the secret workings of the heart, there is generally a morbidity and unnaturalness about the narrative, which discourages sympathy, and neutralizes conviction.

Nor is this all. The readers of a Biography look upon it from different points of view. If they have never seen, nor known the person, whose history is brought before them—if no public and well-known occurrences have either excited their admiration, or provoked their censure, a neutral tint tones down the record. But there are others, who have known with a greater or lesser intimacy the departed one, and who regard the Biography in the light of their own experience. Some may have known him under certain special and unfavourable conditions. This colours and distorts their opinions, as to what such a Biography should have been. Others,

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knew him in all the intimate and loving relations of daily life, or in the varied labours which raised him above the ordinary rank of mankind. To these, there should be nothing to mar the symmetry of the figure, or to cast a shadow over the bewitching landscape. Between one and the other, therefore, the Biographer has to steer his way. All upon which he looks, he knows to be more or less distorted and defiled by the influence and power of sin. He describes an imperfect character: he relates the events of an imperfect life; and he seeks to embalm the memory of one, of whom the utmost which can be said is this; "She (he) hath done what she (he) could."

Are we, therefore, to infer that Biographies are either valueless or undesirable? This is far from being the case. God Himself has graciously encouraged us in the preservation of such memorials, by the introduction of many into the narratives of His Holy Word. We are conscious that He who seeth all things, He who knoweth the thoughts and intents of the heart, alone could set forth "what was in man." But He has given us models and examples of the manner in which uninspired minds, and weak and faltering hands should chronicle the history of their fellow men. How varied is the sacred delineation! With some it is pure history, without any reference to character; with some, there is nobility of soul, and earnestness of purpose, to stimulate; with others, a corrupt life, and an untoward end, to warn and to alarm. One spotless, perfect and magnificent life, alone, rises above, and among those of the works of God's hands—it is that of "The Son of Man."

It is only at a remote distance, and with feeble steps that we can attempt to follow the divine guidance. But it is well that the attempt should be made, especially when the theme of our history is that of one, who occupied a foremost place in the annals of Missionary enterprise. HENRY AARON STERN was no ordinary man. My own knowledge and observation had for many years led me to conclude, as I have often so expressed myself, that he was "the greatest Missionary of modern times." Nor was it unadvisedly, that in the funeral Sermon, which it was my privilege to preach after his death, that I represented him to have been "a king

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among men." I shall not be so ungracious as to define any features in his character, which may have been open to unfavourable criticism,—but as a keen observer of men,—possessing, it may be, rather exceptional opportunities for studying human nature under varied conditions of life, I may with confidence say, that I have rarely met with his equal in all that gives dignity and greatness to humanity. The admiration, and friendly intercourse of the great, had no special attractions for him, and had no influence on his demeanour. He never sought great things for himself. His character was one of absolute simplicity. That simplicity extended itself to all his habits and pursuits, and was one of the great instruments through which his life was preserved under conditions most detrimental to health. At the same time, he possessed a very powerful frame, admirably fitted to meet the hardships, and to encounter the fatigue, which were inseparable from some of his missionary journeys. His mental gifts and powers were of no ordinary kind. As a writer and a speaker there was peculiar brilliancy in his mode of expressing himself, and a striking adaptation of his language to the theme which he discussed. He possessed invincible firmness of character—deterred by no obstacles—a firmness, which never allowed possible difficulties to embarrass. He was always influenced by a considerate regard for the interests and well being of others. None of his fellow-labourers were ever humiliated by any assertion of his superiority, although they lived and laboured in concert with him, under a consciousness that they were sustained by a master-mind. Some of the events which are hereafter to be related, will show, how subordinated to his great work were all his earthly interests, and how he never allowed any advantages presented for his acceptance, for one moment to be entertained, which might even by inference bring reproach upon his calling. Above all, he had but one desire—a desire which shed its radiance over every event of his Christian life; and that was, "to win Christ, and to be found in Him," and in this spirit to make known to his fellow sinners, and especially to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, "the unsearchable riches of Christ." For this he lived, and in this he died. He now rests from labours of which he might with justice have said, with the great Apostle of the Gentiles:

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“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they the ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. In journeyings often, in perils of water, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren. In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Besides those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.”

CHAPTER II.

EARLY LIFE.

Germany has been the nursery, in which has been trained and nurtured, a multitude of faithful men of God, who have devoted themselves to Missionary work. It would almost appear, that the gracious and overruling providence of God, has seen fit to balance, or counteract the unbelief and indifference which have so painfully distinguished that part of the Continent of Europe, by fostering within its confines an unusual number of gifted and eminent believers, and an army of Missionaries for the promulgation of the Gospel. The sacred duty of going into all the world, for the purpose of preaching the Gospel to every creature—a duty which had been hidden under the superstitions of the middle ages—first exhibited returning life and activity among the Teutonic race. The annals of Missionary effort in the heathen world bear witness to this, and the records of Missions to the Jews attest the same fact. Although it was in England that the flame of love to Israel was first rekindled, Germany has chiefly supplied the agents by which this love has been practically exhibited. From the ranks of the early converts from Judaism to Christianity, a large proportion of the most able and successful Missionaries were obtained. Their attainments and training eminently fitted them for the work; nor have they generally been less distinguished by that zeal and enterprise, which were essential to the effectual discharge of their duties. It has often been questioned whether Jewish converts are the best agents through whom the Gospel message should be conveyed to their unbelieving brethren. But this question receives a satisfactory solution, in the abundant, and it may almost be said, the exceptional blessing, which has generally accompanied their ministry. The subject of this Memoir was himself destined to illustrate this fact. It may be said that his Jewish origin never raised up a barrier between himself and

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his own people, but rather assured them of the sympathy and fellowship of one, who had had personal experience of their wants and difficulties. Yet it would have been difficult for anyone, who may have had the opportunity of knowing the conditions under which the early life of young Stern was passed, to have conceived the possibility of his eventually becoming one of the most undaunted and honoured warriors of the Cross. The careful observance of Jewish usage, and the strict conformity to all the requirements of the Synagogue ritual, which distinguished his parents, might reasonably have been expected to have left a fixed and lasting effect upon the mind and principles of the son. Yet it would appear, that in his early life, he was impressed with the hollowness of this burdensome ritual, which even the devotion and consistency of his parents could not dispel. The light and liberty of the Gospel of Christ, was eventually to throw into darker relief the shadows of Jewish observance, through which so many of his people were vainly endeavouring to grope their way.

HENRY AARON STERN was born in the village of Unterreichenbach, near Gelnhausen, in the Duchy of Hesse Cassel, on the 11th of April, 1820. He was the youngest of the family, and his parents, whose names were Aaron and Hannah, regarded him with that peculiar solicitude and affection which generally falls to the lot of the last and youngest of several children. His early life was one of gentle but firm discipline. The resources, as it would appear, of his father, and his conviction concerning the best manner in which the child should be trained, did not admit of indulgence in the luxuries and superfluities of life. His mid-day meal at school (to which he had two miles to walk) consisted of dry bread and apples, or such other fruit as might be in season. A hard-boiled egg was an unusual luxury, or a cup of coffee as an accompaniment to his frugal supper. It was rarely, except on the Jewish Sabbath, that he was allowed to eat animal food. To some, it might appear, that such fare was inadequate to the preservation of health. But Henry Stern grew in physical strength as well as in mental vigour. In the years, then future, of trial and of want, when the most simple food alone were attainable, it would be found how invaluable and providential were the training and abstinence of his youth. Even in a matter

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dences was here forged, which were eventually to lead to results, then unknown and unsought.

At that time, one of the most devoted and successful Missionaries of "the London Society for promoting Christianity amongst the Jews" was located at Hamburg. Amongst the expedients which Mr. Moritz adopted for attracting the attention of the Jews, was the exhibition of a number of books, in Hebrew and German, in a glass case, in the immediate neighbourhood of his house. The open pages attracted the curiosity of the youth, and again and again he would pause on his way in order to read their contents. He ascertained, on enquiry, that the owner of the glass case was a "prediger" who sought the conversion of the Jews to the Christian faith. This he regarded as preposterous. He had not at that time arrived at man's estate, and like most Jewish youths, was devoid of all genuine religious principle; yet the Christian books, which from time to time he had the opportunity of reading, convinced him, that the creed of the Christians was far more rational than the burdensome ritual imposed by the Rabbis.

It was in the year 1839 that Henry Stern received an offer of a good appointment in London. With eager expectation he accepted the offer, and sailed for the great centre of commercial life and progress. But his sanguine expectations were about to be rudely crushed. On his arrival in London, he found that the firm by which he expected to have been employed, had failed; and that no other opening presented itself by which he might pursue the object of his journey. Day by day his efforts to obtain employment were unsuccessful, and his slender resources were becoming exhausted. His pride forbade his return either to Hamburg or Frankfort. He was unwilling to own to his friends that his hopeful undertaking had been worse than fruitless. His energetic and self-reliant spirit began to quail, before a prospect so dark and unpromising.

One Sunday afternoon, a young fellow-lodger invited him to accompany him to Palestine Place Chapel. This had for many years been the centre of the operations of "the London Society for promoting Christianity among the Jews." Young Stern's companion led him to think, that it would be an opportunity for seeing what was going on among those whom they called "apostates." Having

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no other engagement, he agreed to go. The service that afternoon was performed by the late revered Dr. McCaul. The young man was greatly impressed with all that he saw and heard. Under the influence of those impressions, he repaired again to Palestine Place the next day, and having the opportunity of a long conversation with the late Rev. J. C. Reichardt, whose affectionate and pious demeanour greatly struck him, the favourable impressions of the preceding day were confirmed. These visits were frequently renewed; the Messiah of the Old Testament was always the subject of conversation, and it appeared to the young Israelite as a singular coincidence, that in London, as in Hamburg, he had been brought into contact with Christianity and Christians, without any design of his own. He now resolved to read the New Testament, with the assurance that if it did him no good, it could do him no harm. As he expressed himself; "To my surprise, the lessons it inculcated, the moral precepts it enjoined, and the characters it pourtrayed, appeared to me wonderful and extraordinary. No such perfect person, as these publicans and fishermen described, had ever appeared on earth. Whence did they procure their model? Whence their inspiration? The volume I had began to read with indifference, I now read with attention. If there be a Saviour, I mentally exclaimed, it must be Jesus. No one ever exhibited such love, put forth such supernatural energy, nor uttered such words of wisdom. I longed to be His disciple, but dreaded the grief the intelligence would inflict on my parents."

None but those who have passed through the deep waters of conviction and conversion, can understand the mental and moral suffering, to which an enquiring and enlightened son of Abraham is almost invariably exposed. His perplexities arise, not merely from the *prima facie* difficulty of accepting doctrines and principles to which he has been hitherto a stranger. The impression forces itself upon his mind, that he is about to sever every tie which bind him to those whom he most tenderly loves. The national sentiment, which has kept his people separate from all the other nations of the world, is about to receive a rude shock; and by all those whom he has been taught to revere and love, he knows that he will be regarded in future as an apostate and an outcast. The declarations from his

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own inspired Scriptures, concerning the curse which must inevitably descend upon all those who serve and worship other gods, force themselves upon his memory; and the fear of controverting one of the most positive commands, and acting in direct disobedience to the will and desires of his parents, wounds the most tender susceptibilities of his heart. Those who had an acquaintance with the character of Henry Stern, will easily understand, that the conflict which agitated his mind must have been most agonizing. The deepest convictions, and the most positive evidence could alone support and carry him onward, in the path on which he had entered. He himself records, that he was again and again on the brink of despair. His slender means also were gradually diminishing, and he was driven to the necessity of pawning his watch and books, in order to supply his daily wants. However sorely pressed by the necessities of each day, he felt that he could not conscientiously write to his father, or other relatives, for assistance. The change which his belief and convictions had undergone, led him to shrink from a course, which might savour of hypocrisy.

In his intercourse with Mr. Reichardt, these difficulties were mentioned by the young enquirer. Mr. Reichardt was at that time the Superintendent of "the Operative Jewish Converts' Institution," which had been established for the purpose of giving employment to converts and enquirers. The trades of printing and bookbinding were there taught. A fair test was in this way given of the sincerity of those who professed a desire to become Christians, and a useful trade acquired, by which they might be enabled to earn their own bread. "In all labour there is profit." As far as we may judge, the occupation of a lowly carpenter was sanctified by the personal service of our blessed Lord. But it must have been no light trial to Henry Stern, that the humble trade of a printer was to take the place of a vocation, which, he had ardently believed, would ensure to him an honourable, and probably a prominent position in society. But he had now determined to cast in his lot with the people of God, and to endure reproach for Christ's sake. The proposal was accepted; and after a short interval, he was admitted into the Institution, through the portals of which many have passed, who have attained distinguished positions in the vineyard of the Lord.