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978-1-108-06421-7 - Memoirs of the Life of Sir Samuel Romilly: Volume 1

Edited by His Sons

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS  
OF  
SIR SAMUEL ROMILLY.

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NARRATIVE OF HIS EARLY LIFE, WRITTEN BY  
HIMSELF IN 1796.

1757—1778.

August 16. 1796.

I sit down to write my life; the life of one who never achieved any thing memorable, who will probably leave no posterity, and the memory of whom is therefore likely to survive him only till the last of a few remaining and affectionate friends shall have followed him to the grave. A subject so uninteresting will hardly awaken the curiosity of any one into whose hands this writing may chance to fall, and I may almost be assured of having no reader but myself. In truth, it is for myself that I write, for myself alone; for my own instruction, and my own amusement. In old age, if I should live to be old, I may find a pleasure, congenial to that season of life, in retracing the actions and sentiments of my youth and of my manhood, less imperfectly than by the aid of an impaired and decaying memory, and as it were in living again with relations and with friends long deceased.

VOL. I.

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If I had the inclination, I have not the means of speaking of many of my ancestors. The first of them that I have ever heard of is my great-grandfather; and of him I know little more than that he had a pretty good landed estate at Montpellier, in the south of France, where he resided. He was a Protestant, but living under the religious tyranny of Louis XIV., and in a part of France where persecution raged with the greatest fury, he found it prudent to dissemble his faith, and it was only in the privacy of his own family that he ventured to worship God in the way which he judged would find favour in His sight. His only son, my grandfather, he educated in his own religious principles, and so deeply did the young man imbibe them that, when he was about seventeen years of age\*, he made a journey to Geneva for the sole purpose of there receiving the sacrament. It was a journey which had most important consequences to his posterity, and to which I owe that I was not born under the despotism of the French monarchy, and that I have not fallen a victim to the more cruel despotism which succeeded it. At Geneva my grandfather met with the celebrated Saurin, who happened to be on a visit there. The reputation of that extraordinary man was then at the highest. He was revered as an apostle; and his eloquence and his authority could not fail to make a forcible impression on a young mind deeply tinctured with that religious fervour, which persecution generally inspires. The result of a few conversations was a fixed determination in my grandfather to abandon

\* In 1701: he was born in 1684.

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1757–78. HIS EARLY LIFE, PART I.

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for ever his native country, his connexions, his friends, his affectionate parents, and the inheritance which awaited him; and to trust to his own industry for a subsistence amidst strangers and in a foreign land, but in the enjoyment of civil and religious liberty. Instead of returning to Montpellier, he set out for London; and it was not till he had landed in England, that he apprized his father of the irrevocable resolution which he had formed. He, at first, met with much more prosperity in the country, which he had thus adopted, than he could have had reason to expect. His father endeavoured to alleviate the hardships of his exile by remitting him money; and, after he had been a few years in England, he set up with a tolerable capital at Hoxton, in the neighbourhood of London, in the business of a wax-bleacher. He soon afterwards married Judith de Monsallier\*, the daughter of another French refugee, and he became the father of a very numerous family. His generosity, his piety, his affection for his wife, his tenderness towards his children, and their reciprocal fondness and veneration for him, are topics on which I have often heard my father and my aunts enlarge with the most lively emotion. His generosity, indeed, was such, that it led him into expences, which the profits of his business alone would have ill enabled him to support; but he had a better resource in the remit-

\* She was one of four children of Francis de Monsallier: the other three were also daughters; Lucy, married to Solomon Pages; Anne Marie Picart, married to a person of the name of De Laferty; and Elizabeth, married to \*\*\* Fludyer. See the will of Francis de Monsallier, dated 5th May, 1725. When he died does not appear, but there is a codicil to his will dated, 13th Oct. 1726.

tances, which he was seldom long without receiving from his father.

This resource, however, at last failed, and a sad reverse of fortune ensued. His father died: a distant relation (but the next heir who was a Catholic) took possession of the estate, and my grandfather was reduced to a very scanty income for the subsistence of his large family; difficulties were soon multiplied upon him, and bankruptcy and poverty were the consequences. His gentle spirit sunk under these calamities, and he died at the age of forty-nine of a broken heart, leaving behind him a widow, four sons, and four daughters, and most of them wholly unprovided for.\* To them, though they were all of an age to discern the full extent of the melancholy prospect before them, all misfortunes appeared light in comparison with the loss of such a parent; and the youngest of them, whose name was Joseph, abandoning himself to grief and despair, was within a few months buried in the grave, which had recently closed upon his father.

Of the three remaining sons, Stephen, Isaac, and Peter, my father was the youngest. He was born in the year 1712, and had been bound by my grandfather an apprentice to a jeweller, of the name of Lafosse, who lived in Broad Street, in the City.

During his apprenticeship, he contracted a great intimacy with one of his fellow-apprentices of the name of Garnault, who was, like himself, the son of

\* He died in 1733. His four daughters were, Ann, afterwards married to \*\*\*\* Gibbons; Catharine, who married \*\*\*\* Hunter, and Martha and Margaret who were never married.

a Protestant refugee. This lad had a sister to whom my father was introduced, and his acquaintance with her soon grew up into a mutual passion. The brother long encouraged it; but afterwards, either from a change in his own prospects in life, founded on a hope which he conceived that a rich uncle would leave him his estate, or from mere caprice, he began to look on my father with coolness, disapproved the visits to his sister, and at last desired that they might be discontinued. She had no money, indeed, but she had rich relations, and they too were averse to her marrying a young man without fortune, and with no other expectations than what industry, honesty, youth, and good health could enable him to form. The passion, however, which, under the sanction of her nearest relations, she had indulged, had taken too strong possession of her mind to be dismissed just as they should dictate; but what she could do she did, she submitted to their authority, resigned all hopes of marrying my father, and gave herself up to a despair which destroyed her health, and endangered her life.

My father soon afterwards quitted the kingdom, and went to reside at Paris. There he continued for a considerable time, working as a journeyman in his business; and having saved out of his little earnings a small sum of money, he employed it in making an excursion into the south of France. Montpellier was amongst the places which he visited; and he did not fail to take a view of the family estate, now in the possession of strangers and irrecoverably lost, since it could be redeemed only by falsehood and apostacy.

\* \* \* \* \*

His children were his greatest delight ; and yet of the six eldest of those children, five died in-in-fancy. The sixth, a girl, lived indeed a few years longer, but she lived only till she had taken stronger hold of his affections, and then was torn from him like the rest. The death of this favourite child was considered by my father as the greatest calamity of his life. Her extraordinary perfections, my father's doting love of her, his habit of waking her in the morning by playing on a flute at the side of her bed, his anxious solicitude during her illness, and the violence of his grief at the loss of her, have been often described to me. I was not born \* myself till several years after her death.

Naturally, my father was of the most cheerful and happy disposition, always in good humour, always kind and indulgent, always, even in the worst circumstances, disposed to expect the best, enjoying all the good he met with in life, and consoling himself under adversity with the hope that it would not be of long duration. Of extreme sensibility, and quick in expressing what he felt, he was subject to violent transports of anger ; but they were always short and transient, and left not the least trace of resentment behind, not even where a real

<sup>1</sup> In this part of the MS. there is a considerable erasure. The writer had no doubt proceeded to give an account of his father's marriage, and of the circumstances connected with that event; but dissatisfied, as it would seem, with what he had written, he expunged several pages. This chasm in the narrative he never afterwards filled up; and, the papers he has left do not afford any materials from which to supply the deficiency, beyond the fact that Miss Garnault's family at length consented to her union with Mr. Romilly's father, which accordingly took place.—ED.

\* The date of his birth is the 1st of March, 1757, that of his death 2nd of November, 1818.—ED.

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injury had been done him : warm and persevering in his friendship, he can hardly be said to have ever entertained an enmity. He was very religious, but his religion was without austerity : and, though he did not fail to read prayers in the midst of his family every Sunday, he attached much less importance to the forms of religion than to the substance of it; and the substance he thought consisted in doing good to our fellow-creatures. His charity far exceeded the means of his fortune, and he sometimes indulged it to a degree which cold discretion might tax with imprudence. At a time when he had but a slender income, and a numerous family, it happened that he frequently observed in a street in his neighbourhood a woman lying at a door in rags and dirt, half naked, and apparently in extreme distress, yet generally intoxicated : she had a female infant by her side, who was crying for bread, but to whose cries she seemed insensible. My father's imagination was forcibly struck by this spectacle of wretchedness and depravity. He pictured to himself, in strong colours, the fate to which the wretched child seemed devoted, and he determined if possible to save her. He applied to the woman, who, without difficulty, parted with the child, of which she did not pretend to be the mother. He clothed her, maintained her for several years, had her taught to read and work, and when she had grown up to a proper age, provided for her the place of a servant, and had the satisfaction to see her in that situation living for many years with reputation and comfort.

There was one occurrence, and that a very im-

portant one, in his life, in which he acted with such unexampled disinterestedness, and made so extraordinary a sacrifice of his happiness to what he conceived to be his duty, that it is with great reluctance that I deny myself the satisfaction of relating it ; but it is unfortunately connected with transactions, the memory of which might give great pain to persons now living, and who perhaps may survive me. My father, therefore, I am sure, would be sorry that it should be remembered, and I suppress what would add so largely to his praise from a pious respect for his benevolence.

He used often to talk to his children of the pleasure of doing good, and of the rewards which virtue found in itself ; and from his lips that doctrine came to us, not as a dry and illusive precept, but as a heart-felt truth, and as the fruit of the happiest experience.

All my father's favourite amusements were such as his home only could afford him. He was fond of reading, and he had formed for himself a small, but a tolerably well chosen, library. He was an admirer of the fine arts, but pictures being too costly for his purchase, he limited himself to prints ; and in the latter part of his life, as he grew richer, indulging himself in this innocent luxury to a degree perhaps of extravagance, he had at last a very large and valuable collection. He took pleasure in gardening, and he hired a small garden, in which he passed in the summer most of the few leisure hours which his business afforded him. But I am anticipating a subsequent period.

The loss of so many children filled my father



with consternation. He began to ascribe it to the unwholesomeness of a constant town residence, and he determined to take a small lodging in the country, where his family might, during the summer months, breathe a purer air than that of London. He accordingly hired some rooms at Marylebone, which was then a small village about a mile distant from town, though it has now, for many years, by the increase of new buildings, been united to, and become a part of the metropolis. My father had reason to congratulate himself upon the success of this experiment, for all the children which he afterwards had lived to years of maturity. They were only three; my brother Thomas, my sister Catherine, and myself.

We were brought up principally by a very kind and pious female relation of my mother's, a Mrs. Margaret Facquier, who had lived in our family ever since my mother's marriage. She taught us to read, and to read with intelligence; though the books in which we were taught were ill suited to our age. The Bible, the Spectator, and an English translation of Telemachus, are those which I recollect our having in most frequent use. But this kind relation had too bad a state of health to attend to us constantly. During the last forty years of her life, it seldom happened that many weeks passed without her being confined to her bed, or at least to her room. The care of us, upon these occasions, devolved on a female servant of the name of Mary Evans, who was ill qualified to give us instruction or to cultivate our understandings; but whose tender and affectionate nature, whose sensibility at the suf-

ferings of others, and earnest desire to relieve them to the utmost extent of her little means, could hardly fail to improve the hearts of those who were under her care.

Perhaps there hardly ever existed three persons more affectionate, more kind, more compassionate, and whose sentiments and whose example were better calculated to inspire every soft and generous affection, than these two excellent women and our most excellent father. It was under the influence of these examples that we passed our earliest years; as for my mother, she was incapable, from the bad state of her health, of taking any part in our education.

The servant whom I have mentioned was to me in the place of a mother. I loved her to adoration. I remember when quite a child, kissing, unperceived by her, the clothes which she wore; and when she once entertained a design of quitting our family and going to live with her own relations, receiving the news as that of the greatest misfortune that could befall me, and going up into my room in an agony of affliction, and imploring God upon my knees to avert so terrible a calamity.

It is commonly said to be the happy privilege of youth to feel no misfortunes but the present, to be careless of the future, and forgetful of the past. That happy privilege I cannot recollect having ever enjoyed. In my earliest infancy, my imagination was alarmed and my fears awakened by stories of devils, witches, and apparitions; and they had a much greater effect upon me than is even usual with children; at least I judge so, from their