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978-1-108-06592-4 - Memoirs of the Life and Works of George Romney: Including Various Letters, and Testimonies to His Genius, &amp;c., Also, Some Particulars of the Life of Peter Romney, His Brother

John Romney

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE, &c.

OF

**GEORGE ROMNEY.**

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PART THE FIRST.

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**B**EFORE I enter upon the Memoirs of Mr. Romney's life, it will, I presume, be expected that I should give some account of his immediate ancestors, partly to gratify simple curiosity and partly in order to ascertain how far the bias of his genius was influenced by family circumstances. Had it not been for this latter consideration, the particulars respecting his family might as well, perhaps, have been consigned to oblivion. The pride of pedigree is one of the most silly and vain of all pretensions, and such as can only influence men of little minds, who having nothing to boast of in themselves, seek to buoy up their consequence by a real, or pretended claim to a little antiquity. But even if ancestral merit did exist, it reflects no honor on the descendant unless he himself be also meritorious. Mr. Romney had little to boast of on the score of pedigree; but surely it is much more honorable for a man to raise his family by his genius and talents, than to count a few generations of men, born to eat and sleep—

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*fruges consumere nati*,—whose first ancestor that emerged from obscurity was, perhaps, some miser, or oppressor, or one who had amassed wealth by some other disreputable means. Although Mr. Romney's progenitors were of humble rank, they were nevertheless respectable in society, and distinguished for virtuous habits and moral worth; and, if what Juvenal says be true,—*Nobilitas sola est atque unica virtus*,—he might justly have been proud of distinctions in his family, more valuable and meritorious than riches or titles.

His grandfather, George, was born at the village of Colby, near Appleby, where his father had some property; but on account of the civil disturbances which prevailed in Appleby and its neighbourhood during the protectorate of Cromwell, he was induced at early age to leave his native place and migrate to Lancaster. Urged, probably, by the same motive, he soon quitted that town, retired across the sands, and established himself in Furness. He did not marry till he was sixty years of age, but, being a man of temperate habits, and blessed with a good constitution, he lived to see his children's children, and died at the very advanced age of ninety six. A younger brother of this George, being of a more enterprising disposition, accompanied King William to Ireland, and fought at the battle of the Boyne. He afterwards settled in Ireland, in the neighbourhood of Cork, and became steward to Lord Inchiquin; and some of his descendants continued in the same situation many years after. There were some other branches of the family who remained in Westmorland. Mr. Romney's father, John, was by trade a carpenter, joiner, and cabinet-maker, and of very extensive business. He was a man of mild and placid manners, retired and contemplative in his habits, correctly moral in his conduct, and unaffectedly pious. His

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notions of religion were just, being equally remote from cold philosophy and blind enthusiasm. I well remember his saying, though then a mere boy, that it was our interest to make up our minds to the faith of the christian religion ; because, if it should not prove true, we were still benefited by it ; but if it should, of which there was no good reason to doubt, how great then would be our recompense ! The veneration in which I held this just man, will appear from the following circumstance, which I hope the candid reader will not be offended at my introducing here. I dreamt when at school, that a relation had come to inform me of his death ; saying that there was inscribed on his coffin this motto, *sic perit flos rosæ fragrantis* ; meaning, that, as the rose after it was withered still retained its fragrance, so the sweet odour of his inoffensive and pious life would survive his mortal remains. I have seen something like the sentiment since ; but at the time, the idea and manner of expressing it were quite new to me. I place no faith in dreams, but, having heard of his illness, I attribute it entirely to the influence of my own reflections when awake\* ; it seemed, however, to have come upon me like a supernatural *afflatus*. The impression upon my mind was so strong, that the next day I told a schoolfellow, that, in consequence of a dream, I expected to hear of my grandfather's death ;—which information came by the next post.—Ever, indeed, shall I feel grateful for the moral and religious impressions which I received in early youth from the precepts and example of this amiable progenitor ; who by his strict probity, disinterestedness, and singleness of heart, had obtained among his acquaintance the characteristic epithet, *honest* ; a title which had also been conferred upon his father before him.

\* *Maxime reliquæ earum rerum moventur in animis et agitantur, de quibus vigilantes aut cogitavimus, aut egimus.—Cic. de Divin.*

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Notwithstanding the disadvantages of his station and circumstances, he had nevertheless enriched his mind with much science and general knowledge. The books which he read, were above the capacity of common readers, and such as could only engage the attention of superior minds. In the line of his business he was remarkable for ingenious contrivance and practical skill. He had a taste for drawing, was an architect, an engineer, and an agriculturist. Every thing within the grasp of the human intellect, was an object of interest to his inquisitive mind. He was employed in constructing all the engines which were in use at that time for raising water from the neighbouring iron mines; and was well versed in that kind of mechanics. Like a second Triptolemus, he introduced many improvements in agriculture into his own neighbourhood, being a great experimentalist. His estate being on the sea coast, he was the first that began to manure his land with mussels; for, being a stiff clay, it was fertilized as well by the shells, as by the fish. In those days, when the science of agriculture was so little understood, he contrived an apparatus for chopping whins (furze;) which he used to give intermixed with straw, as fodder, to his cattle in winter. In his excursions to Liverpool, or other distant places, whither his business sometimes called him, his attentive eye lost nothing that could benefit the district in which he lived. Instead of clog-wheels, which till then were in general use in Furness, he introduced the spoke-wheels; which being lighter in their construction, and in every respect better fitted for use, were soon afterwards universally adopted. He made, also, some important improvements in the structure of the plough, and it was to his ingenuity that agriculturists are indebted for the *iron* mould-board, which was cast according to his model, and first introduced into practice by himself; and which, from its form, was so well adapted to the purpose of turning the furrow-slice, that, I

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believe, it has remained unaltered to the present time.—He even carried his experiments so far as to attempt to construct a plough to go by wind. The first mahogany brought from the West Indies into Furness, if not into Lancashire, came in the form of a sailor's chest; and out of this he made a chest of Drawers, which was the first mahogany furniture introduced into that country. Prior to that, walnut or cherry-tree were in general use. His genius was as expert in making a fiddle, as in constructing, or embellishing a gentleman's mansion. Every structure in wood, however great, or however small, was within the compass of his abilities. From the extent of his business, notwithstanding his numerous family, (for he had ten sons and one daughter,) he might easily have grown rich, had he not had his infirmities; for genius and infirmity too frequently go hand in hand. He wanted exertion to collect his debts, and even to record them; no man ever felt less anxious about wealth, if he was but employed, he cared not who had the profit. His guileless simplicity, and confidence in other people's honesty frequently, also, exposed him to losses. Had he, however, been wealthy, he would probably have wasted his riches in expensive projects; as his genius led him strongly to that kind of speculation. Notwithstanding, however, this negligence in the management of his affairs, he was enabled to give a decent education to his children; and, at his death, to bequeath to George, his oldest surviving son, a small estate in Furness, and to his other children, proportionate legacies. His wife's name was Ann Simpson, she was born at a place called Sladebank in Millom, Cumberland, which estate belonged to her father. She was a clever woman, and well qualified to assist her husband in the management of his pecuniary affairs; but the important duties of a mother claimed her undivided attention. Her mother's name was Bridget Park, she was born at *Millwood*, near Dalton, and was the granddaughter

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of that Thomas Park, who has distinguished himself by writing a narrative of the intestine broils and commotions that afflicted Furness in the civil war between the king and parliament; he being during that unhappy period high constable of Furness, (from 1642 to 1647;) and who from the nature of his office, might justly have said in the words of Æneas;

—————quæque ipse miserima vidi,

Et quorum pars magna fui—————

[See West's Antiquities of Furness.]

All his sons died before the meridian of life, except George and James; the latter was a Lieut. Colonel in the Honorable East India Company's service, and much respected both in his professional, and private character. He was a man of gentlemanly demeanour, had a taste for literature, could write complimentary verses to the ladies, and trifle agreeably on the violin. I have an account by him of the siege of Darwar, in the East Indies, at which he was present when a Lieutenant; and several manuscript comedies, written in so slovenly a hand, that I have not hitherto had leisure to decipher them.

There was another son, besides George, gifted with such fine talents, that he ought not to be passed over in silence; though the page which records his genius, must also expose his infirmities. Much has been said *de infortunio literatorum*; but that misfortune, which seems so often to be the fate of men of genius, may, perhaps, be accounted for from this principle, which is applicable to mechanism in general—the finer the organization, the more liable it is to injury. A high susceptibility of feeling, and a powerful imagination, are generally the concomitants, if not the constituents of genius; these, I apprehend, result from a superior organization of the nerves



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which communicate between the senses and the brain—the seat of mind or of the reasoning faculty : when, therefore, the nerves become affected by any exciting cause, the feelings and imagination immediately participate ; and if the cause be powerful, the delicate structure of the nerves becomes overstrained and forced ; hence reason becomes implicated in the disorder and loses its control—then follows error, afterwards, misfortune. Besides, where there is genius there is generally a certain elevation of soul, which makes the possessor despise those low and mean practices by which vulgar minds prosper. Peter (for so he was called after a brother of his grandfather) was endued by nature with all those qualities of mind which constitute genius ; his disposition, also, was amiable and virtuous ; and had he been so fortunate as to have been subject to the controlling influence of some benevolent mentor when he entered extremely young and ignorant of mankind into the world ; he might have been a splendid ornament to his profession. Beside painting, he had a turn for poetry and music ; but having embraced the first, he had little leisure for the cultivation of the other sister arts.—See the appendix.

GEORGE ROMNEY was a native of Lancashire, and born at *Beckside*, adjoining to the town of Dalton, in Furness, on the 15th of December, O. S. 1734 ; which place his father afterward sold, and purchased in the year 1742, (as appears by the Title deeds,) a small estate, called *Upper Cocken*, in the same parish, about a mile west of Furness Abbey. I am the more particular in mentioning this circumstance, because some have asserted that he was born at the latter place. Here, however, he undoubtedly did reside from his eleventh to his twenty first year. He had an older brother, named William, who was intended for the university, and was instructed in classics, along with Dr. Postlethwaite, the late master of Trinity

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College, Cambridge, also of the same age, and born in the same town. Though William made great progress in scholarship, and might have had the advantage of being sent to Trinity College under the same circumstances, and with the same recommendation as Mr. Postlethwaite; yet he, either from the report of fortunes acquired in the West Indies, or from its being the *rage* at that time for the youth in the neighbourhood to go thither; preferred being apprenticed to one of the wealthy merchants of Lancaster, and placed in his stores in the West India Islands—a situation attended with more expense to his father, than that, of being sent a sizar to Trinity College. But George not making much progress in school learning, and being, moreover, of a sedate and steady disposition, was taken from school in his eleventh year, to be employed at home, where his services were wanted.

During the ten years that he continued with his father, while his genius was struggling in obscurity, and labouring under every disadvantage; not much is known of its operations, or of the manner by which it began to unfold itself: but it is probable that it might have received the first impulse from having observed his ingenious father make drawings of ornaments and architecture. Of his skill and ingenuity in carving, the violin which he made for himself, and which is now in my possession, is a curious specimen and a sufficient proof.

In his leisure hours he devoted himself to higher objects. There was at that time living at Dalton, a very ingenious man, of the name of Williamson, a watch-maker by trade, who had great influence in directing his pursuits. This person, being a masterly performer on the violin, taught him to play upon that delightful



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instrument; and I have heard him say, that he once accompanied Williamson to Whitehaven, where he had the good fortune to hear Giardini perform; with which he was so much transported, that it was sometime a struggle in his mind, whether he should devote himself to painting or music. Gainsborough, also, was equally enraptured when he heard the same performer at Bath; but with this remarkable difference of feeling—that he wished for the instrument, and Mr. Romney, the art.—It was, however, one of the peculiarities of Gainsborough's eccentric mind, to become enamoured of almost every kind of instrument, on which he happened to hear any able musician perform. This strange propensity must have arisen from the ardour and impetuosity of his genius, which, overlooking all intermediate steps, bounded at once upon that which he thought would lead directly to excellence.

Williamson was a philosopher, and explained to his youthful pupil the phenomena of the *Camera Obscura*; and it would be no extravagant idea, to suppose that the latter might have received his first impressions of picturesque representation by contemplating objects thus exhibited; it is quite as plausible as the story of the Corinthian maid; for Mr. Romney being then a pupil of nature, knew no more of art than the daughter of Dibutades. Williamson was likewise an enthusiast in the science of alchymy, and devoted much of his time to that unprofitable pursuit; and Mr. Romney, by associating with him, did not escape the allurements of that delusive study; but his friend's bad success, co-operating with his own improving judgement, soon put to flight the airy dreams of wealth, which had beguiled his youthful imagination. The circumstances, however, which had attended some of Williamson's unsuccessful experiments, had made so deep an impression upon Mr. Romney's memory, that in his declining

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age he used sometimes to amuse himself with the idea of constructing a Melodrame upon them. It was his intention to have made a series of drawings, representing the progress of an alchymist in quest of the philosopher's stone. The sanguine expectations of the philosopher were to have been heightened in every scene, but as he approached the crisis of the discovery, and was about to reap the golden recompense of all his toils; an ill-timed and prying curiosity in his wife, ignorant of his sublime pursuits, made frustrate, by one single interdicted act, the consecutive experiments of years: a tremendous explosion then took place, the devil himself appeared;—but, instead of gold, there remained nothing but broken crucibles; and all those glittering visions, which had so long figured in his imagination, vanished at once in smoke,

—————come fumo leve

Al vento.—————

The catastrophe was suggested by a similar accident that befel Williamson in his chymical processes; who, it should seem, had a wife ill able to withstand the temptations of curiosity: whatever, however, were the infirmities of this woman, he certainly had not the character of being a good husband, though a clever fellow. When he came to live at Dalton he had left her, and co-habited with another woman, by whom he had afterwards four children, and whom he ultimately married on the death of his wife.

Mr. Cumberland, in his brief Memoir of Mr. Romney, has asserted, that he conceived his first idea of becoming a painter from copying the cuts in a magazine, borrowed from a workman of his father's; and has dwelt with unbecoming levity upon circumstances, not only false in themselves, but made ridiculous; more with a view to display his own wit, than to elicit the truth of facts. Mr. Romney's father