BLIND MATHILDE

GEORGE ELIOT

Mathilde Blind
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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=24173788
George Eliot:
ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/36847

Содержание

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PREFATORY NOTE

Detailed accounts of George Eliot's life have hitherto been singularly scanty. In the dearth of published materials a considerable portion of the information contained in this biographical study has, necessarily, been derived from private sources. In visiting the places connected with George Eliot's early life, I enjoyed the privilege of meeting her brother, Mr. Isaac Evans, and was also fortunate in gleaning many a characteristic fact and trait from old people in the neighbourhood, contemporaries of her father, Mr. Robert Evans. For valuable help in forming an idea of the growth of George Eliot's mind, my warm thanks are especially due to her oldest friends, Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bray, and Miss Hennell of Coventry. Miss Jenkins, the novelist's schoolfellow, and Mrs. John Cash, also generously afforded me every assistance in their power.

A great part of the correspondence in the present volume has not hitherto appeared in print, and has been kindly placed at my disposal by Mrs. Bray, Mrs. Gilchrist, Mrs. Clifford, Miss Marks, Mr. William M. Rossetti, and the late James

Thomson. I have also quoted from letters addressed to Miss Phelps which were published in *Harper's Magazine* of March 1882, and from one or two other articles that have appeared in periodical publications. For permission to make use of this correspondence my thanks are due to Mr. C. L. Lewes.

By far the most exhaustive published account of George Eliot's life and writings, and the one of which I have most freely availed myself, is Mr. Call's admirable essay in the *Westminster Review* of July 1881. Although this, as indeed every other article on the subject, states George Eliot's birthplace incorrectly, it contains many important *data* not mentioned elsewhere. To the article on George Eliot in *Blackwood's Magazine* for February 1881, I owe many interesting particulars, chiefly connected with the beginning of George Eliot's literary career. Amongst other papers consulted may be mentioned a noticeable one by Miss Simcox in the *Contemporary Review*, and an appreciative notice by Mr. Frederick Myers in *Scribner's Magazine*, as well as articles in *Harper's Magazine* of May 1881, and *The Century* of August 1882. Two quaint little pamphlets, 'Seth Bede: the Methody,' and 'George Eliot in Derbyshire,' by Guy Roslyn, although full of inaccuracies, have also furnished some curious items of information.

Mathilde Blind.

CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCTORY

Speaking of the contributions made to literature by her own sex, George Eliot, in a charming essay written in 1854, awards the palm of intellectual pre-eminence to the women of France. "They alone," says the great English author, "have had a vital influence on the development of literature. For in France alone the mind of woman has passed, like an electric current, through the language, making crisp and definite what is elsewhere heavy and blurred; in France alone, if the writings of women were swept away, a serious gap would be made in the national history."

The reason assigned by George Eliot for this literary superiority of Frenchwomen consists in their having had the courage of their sex. They thought and felt as women, and when they wrote, their books became the fullest expression of their womanhood. And by being true to themselves, by only seeking inspiration from their own life-experience, instead of servilely copying that of men, their letters and memoirs, their novels and pictures have a distinct, nay unique, value, for the student of art and literature. Englishwomen, on the other hand, have not followed the spontaneous impulses of nature. They have not allowed free play to the peculiarly feminine element, preferring to mould their intellectual products on the masculine pattern.

For that reason, says George Eliot, their writings are "usually an absurd exaggeration of the masculine style, like the swaggering gait of a bad actress in male attire."

This novel theory, concerning a specifically feminine manifestation of the intellect, is doubly curious when one compares it with Madame de Staël's famous saying, "*Le génie n'a pas de sexe.*" But an aphorism, however brilliant, usually contains only one half the truth, and there is every reason to think that women have already, and will much more largely, by-and-by, infuse into their works certain intellectual and emotional qualities which are essentially their own. Shall we, however, admit George Eliot's conclusion that Frenchwomen alone have hitherto shown any of this original bias? Several causes are mentioned by her in explanation of this exceptional merit. Among these causes there is one which would probably occur to every one who began to reflect on this subject. The influence of the "Salon" in developing and stimulating the finest feminine talents has long been recognised. In this school for women the gift of expression was carried to the utmost pitch of perfection. By their active co-operation in the discussion of the most vital subjects, thought became clear, luminous, and forcible; sentiment gained indescribable graces of refinement; and wit, with its brightest scintillations, lit up the sombre background of life.

But among other causes enumerated as accounting for that more spontaneous productivity of Frenchwomen, attributed to

them by George Eliot, there is one which would probably have occurred to no other mind than hers, and which is too characteristic of her early scientific tendencies to be omitted. For according to her, the present superiority of Frenchwomen is mainly due to certain physiological peculiarities of the Gallic race. Namely, to the "small brain and vivacious temperament which permit the fragile system of woman to sustain the superlative activity requisite for intellectual creativeness," whereas "the larger brain and slower temperament of the English and Germans are in the womanly organisation generally dreamy and passive. So that the *physique* of a woman may suffice as the substratum for a superior Gallic mind, but is too thin a soil for a superior Teutonic one."

So knotty and subtle a problem must be left to the scientist of the future to decide. Perhaps some promising young physiologist, profiting by the "George Henry Lewes Studentship" founded by George Eliot, may some day satisfactorily elucidate this question. In the meanwhile it is at least gratifying to reflect that she does not deny the future possibilities of even English and German women. She admits that conditions might arise which in their case also would be favourable to the highest creative effort; conditions which would modify the existing state of things according to which, to speak in her own scientific phraseology: "The woman of large capacity can seldom rise beyond the absorption of ideas; her physical conditions refuse to support the energy required for spontaneous activity; the voltaic pile is not

strong enough to produce crystallisations."

But was the author of 'Adam Bede' not herself destined to be a triumphant refutation of her theory? Or had those more favourable circumstances mentioned as vague possibilities already arisen in her case? Not that we believe, for that matter, in the superior claims of illustrious Frenchwomen. It is true George Eliot enumerates a formidable list of names. But on the whole we may boast of feminine celebrities that need not shrink from the comparison.

There is, of course, much truth in the great Englishwoman's generous praise of her French compeers. "Mme. de Sévigné remains," she says, "the single instance of a woman who is supreme in a class of literature which has engaged the ambition of men; Mme. Dacier still reigns the queen of blue-stockings, though women have long studied Greek without shame; Mme. de Staël's name still rises to the lips when we are asked to mention a woman of great intellectual power; Mme. Roland is still the unrivalled type of the sagacious and sternly heroic yet lovable woman; George Sand is the unapproached artist who, to Jean Jacques' eloquence and deep sense of external nature, unites the clear delineation of character and the tragic depth of passion."

Shall we be forced to admit that the representative women of England cannot justly be placed on as high a level? Is it so certain that they, too, did not speak out of the fulness of their womanly natures? That they too did not feel the genuine need to express modes of thought and feeling peculiar to themselves, which men,

if at all, had but inadequately expressed hitherto?

Was not Queen Elizabeth the best type of a female ruler, one whose keen penetration enabled her to choose her ministers with infallible judgment? Did not Fanny Burney distil the delicate aroma of girlhood in one of the most delightful of novels? Or what of Jane Austen, whose microscopic fidelity of observation has a well-nigh scientific accuracy, never equalled unless in the pages of the author we are writing of? Sir Walter Scott apparently recognised the eminently feminine inspiration of her writings, as he says: "That young lady had a talent for describing the involvements, and feelings, and characters of ordinary life, which is for me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now agoing; but the exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the descriptions and the sentiment, is denied to me." Then turning to the Brontës, does not one feel the very heartbeats of womanhood in those powerful utterances that seem to spring from some central emotional energy? Again, does not Mrs. Browning occupy a unique place among poets? Is there not a distinctively womanly strain of emotion in the throbbing tides of her high-wrought melodious song? And, to come to George Eliot herself, will any one deny that, in the combination of sheer intellectual power with an unparalleled vision for the homely details of life, she takes precedence of all writers of this or any other country? To some extent this wonderful woman conforms to her own standard. She

undoubtedly adds to the common fund of crystallised human experience, as literature might be called, something which is specifically feminine. But, on the other hand, her intellect excels precisely in those qualities habitually believed to be masculine, one of its chief characteristics consisting in the grasp of abstract philosophical ideas. This faculty, however, by no means impairs those instinctive processes of the imagination by which true artistic work is produced; George Eliot combining in an unusual degree the subtlest power of analysis with that happy gift of genius which enabled her to create such characters as Amos Barton, Hetty, Mrs. Poyser, Maggie, and Tom Tulliver, Godfrey Cass and Caleb Garth, which seem to come fresh from the mould of Nature itself. Indeed, she has hardly a rival among women in this power of objective imagination by which she throws her whole soul into natures of the most varied and opposite types, whereas George Sand only succeeds greatly when she is thoroughly in sympathy with her creations.

After George Eliot's eulogium of French women, one feels tempted to institute a comparison between these two great contemporaries, who occupied the same leading position in their respective countries. But it will probably always remain a question of idiosyncracy which of the two one is disposed to rank higher, George Eliot being the greatest realist, George Sand the greatest idealist, of her sex. The works of the French writer are, in fact, prose poems rather than novels. They are not studies of life, but life interpreted by the poet's vision. George Sand cannot

give us a description of any scene in nature, of her own feelings, of a human character, without imparting to it some magical effect as of objects seen under the transfiguring influence of moonlight or storm clouds; whereas George Eliot loves to bathe her productions in the broad pitiless midday light, which leaves no room for illusion, but reveals all nature with uncompromising directness. The one has more of that primitive imagination which seizes on the elemental side of life – on the spectacle of the starry heavens or of Alpine solitudes, on the insurrection and tumult of human passion, on the shocks of revolution convulsing the social order – while the other possesses, in a higher degree, the acute intellectual perception for the orderly sequence of life, for that unchangeable round of toil which is the lot of the mass of men, and for the earth in its homelier aspects as it tells on our daily existence. In George Sand's finest work there is a sweet spontaneity, almost as if she were an oracle of Nature uttering automatically the divine message. But, on the other hand, when the inspiration forsakes her, she drifts along on a windy current of words, the fatal facility of her pen often beguiling the writer into vague diffuseness and unsubstantial declamation.

In this respect, also, our English novelist is the opposite of George Sand, for George Eliot invariably remains the master of her genius: indeed, she thoroughly fulfils Goethe's demand that if you set up for an artist you must command art. This intellectual self-restraint never forsakes George Eliot, who always selects her means with a thorough knowledge of the ends to be attained.

The radical difference in the genius of these two writers, to both of whom applies Mrs. Browning's apt appellation of "large-brained woman and large-hearted man," extends naturally to their whole tone of thought. George Sand is impassioned, turbulent, revolutionary, the spiritual daughter of Rousseau, with an enthusiastic faith in man's future destiny. George Eliot, contemplative, observant, instinctively conservative, her imagination dearly loving to do "a little Toryism on the sly," is as yet the sole outcome of the modern positive spirit in imaginative literature – the sole novelist who has incorporated in an artistic form some of the leading ideas of Comte, of Mazzini, and of Darwin. In fact, underlying all her art there is the same rigorous teaching of the inexorable laws which govern the life of man. The teaching that not liberty but duty is the condition of existence; the teaching of the incalculable effects of hereditary transmission, with the solemn responsibilities it involves; the teaching of the inherent sadness and imperfection in human nature, which render resignation the first virtue of man.

In fact, as a moral influence, George Eliot cannot so much be compared with George Sand, or with any other novelist of her generation, as with Carlyle. She had, indeed, a far more explicit ethical code to offer than the author of 'Sartor Resartus.' For though the immense force of the latter's personality, glowing through his writings, had a tonic effect in promoting a healthy moral tone, there was little of positive moral truth to be gathered from them. But the lessons which George Eliot would fain

teach to men were most unmistakable in their bearing – the lessons of pitying love towards fellow-men; of sympathy with all human suffering; of unwavering faithfulness towards the social bond, consisting in the claims of race, of country, of family; of unflagging aspiration after that life which is most beneficent to the community, that life, in short, towards which she herself aspired in the now famous prayer to reach

> "That purest heaven, be to other souls
> The cup of strength in some great agony,
> Enkindle generous ardour, feed pure love,
> Beget the smiles that have no cruelty —
> Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,
> And in diffusion ever more intense."

CHAPTER II.
CHILDHOOD AND EARLY HOME

Mary Ann Evans, better known as "George Eliot," was born on November 22nd, 1819, at South Farm, a mile from Griff, in the parish of Colton, in Warwickshire. Both the date and place of her birth have been incorrectly stated, hitherto, in the notices of her life. The family moved to Griff House in March of the following year, when she was only six months old. Her father, Robert Evans, of Welsh origin, was a Staffordshire man from Ellaston, near Ashbourne, and began life as a carpenter. In the kitchen at Griff House may still be seen a beautifully-fashioned oaken press, a sample of his workmanship. A portrait of him, also preserved there, is known among the family as "Adam Bede." It is not as good a likeness as that of a certain carefully painted miniature, the features of which bear an unmistakable resemblance to those of the daughter destined to immortalise his name. A strongly marked, yet handsome face, massive in structure, and with brown eyes, whose shrewd, penetrating glance is particularly noticeable, betoken the man of strong practical intelligence, of rare energy and endurance. His career and character are partially depicted in Adam Bede, Caleb Garth, and Mr. Hackit – portraitures in which the different stages of his life are recorded with a mingling of fact and fiction. A

shadowing forth of the same nature is discernible in the devotion of Stradivarius to his noble craft; and even in the tender paternity of Mr. Tulliver there are indications of another phase of the same individuality.

Like Adam Bede, Mr. Evans from carpenter rose to be forester, and from forester to be land-agent. It was in the latter capacity alone that he was ever known in Warwickshire. At one time he was surveyor to five estates in the midland counties – those of Lord Aylesford, Lord Lifford, Mr. Bromley Davenport, Mrs. Gregory, and Sir Roger Newdigate. The last was his principal employer. Having early discerned the exceptional capacity of the man, Sir Roger induced him to settle in Warwickshire, and take charge of his estates. Sir Roger's seat, Arbury Hall, is the original of the charming description of Cheverel Manor in 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story.' It is said that Mr. Evans's trustworthiness had become proverbial in the county. But while faithfully serving his employers he also enjoyed great popularity among their tenants. He was gentle, but of indomitable firmness; and while stern to the idle and unthrifty, he did not press heavily on those who might be behindhand with their rent, owing to ill-luck or misfortune, on quarter days.

Mr. Evans was twice married. He had lost his first wife, by whom he had a son and a daughter, before settling in Warwickshire. Of his second wife, whose maiden name was Pearson, very little is known. She must, therefore, according to Schiller, have been a pattern of womanhood; for he says that the

best women, like the best ruled states, have no history. We have it on very good authority, however, that Mrs. Hackit, in 'Amos Barton,' is a faithful likeness of George Eliot's mother. This may seem startling at first, but, on reflection, she is the woman one might have expected, being a strongly-marked figure, with a heart as tender as her tongue is sharp. She is described as a thin woman, with a chronic liver-complaint, of indefatigable industry and epigrammatic speech; who, "in the utmost enjoyment of spoiling a friend's self-satisfaction, was never known to spoil a stocking." A notable housewife, whose clockwork regularity in all domestic affairs was such that all her farm-work was done by nine o'clock in the morning, when she would sit down to her loom. "In the same spirit, she brought out her furs on the first of November, whatever might be the temperature. She was not a woman weakly to accommodate herself to shilly-shally proceedings. If the season didn't know what it ought to do, Mrs. Hackit did. In her best days it was always sharp weather at 'Gunpowder Plot,' and she didn't like new fashions." Keenly observant and quick of temper, she was yet full of good nature, her sympathy showing itself in the active helpfulness with which she came to the assistance of poor Milly Barton, and the love she showed to her children, who, however, declined kissing her.

Is there not a strong family resemblance between this character and Mrs. Poyser, that masterpiece of George Eliot's art? Mary Ann's gift of pointed speech was therefore mother-wit, in the true sense, and her rich humour and marvellous

powers of observation were derived from the same side, while her conscientiousness, her capacity, and that faculty of taking pains, which is so large a factor in the development of genius, came more directly from the father.

Mr. Evans had three children by his second wife, Christiana, Isaac, and Mary Ann. "It is interesting, I think," writes George Eliot, in reply to some questions of an American lady, "to know whether a writer was born in a central or border district – a condition which always has a strongly determining influence. I was born in Warwickshire, but certain family traditions connected with more northerly districts made these districts a region of poetry to me in my early childhood." In the autobiographical sonnets, entitled 'Brother and Sister,' we catch a glimpse of the mother preparing her children for their accustomed ramble, by stroking down the tippet and setting the frill in order; then standing on the door-step to follow their lessening figures "with the benediction of her gaze." Mrs. Evans was aware, to a certain extent, of her daughter's unusual capacity, being anxious not only that she should have the best education attainable in the neighbourhood, but also that good moral influences should be brought to bear upon her: still, the girl's constant habit of reading, even in bed, caused the practical mother not a little annoyance.

The house, where the family lived at that time, and in which the first twenty years of Mary Ann Evans's life were spent, is situated in a rich verdant landscape, where the "grassy fields,

each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedge-rows," blend harmoniously with the red-roofed cottages scattered in a happy haphazard fashion amid orchards and elder-bushes. Sixty years ago the country was much more thickly wooded than now, and from the windows of Griff House might be seen the oaks and elms that had still survived from Shakespeare's forest of Arden. The house of the Evans family, half manor-house, half farm, was an old-fashioned building, two stories high, with red brick walls thickly covered with ivy. Like the Garths, they were probably "very fond of their old house." A lawn, interspersed with trees, stretched in front towards the gate, flanked by two stately Norway firs, while a sombre old yew almost touched some of the upper windows with its wide-spreading branches. A farm-yard was at the back, with low rambling sheds and stables; and beyond that, bounded by quiet meadows, one may still see the identical "leafy, flowery, bushy" garden, which George Eliot so often delighted in describing, at a time when her early life, with all its tenderly hoarded associations, had become to her but a haunting memory of bygone things. A garden where roses and cabbages jostle each other, where vegetables have to make room for gnarled old apple-trees, and where, amid the raspberry bushes and row of currant trees, you expect to come upon Hetty herself, "stooping to gather the low-hanging fruit."

Such was the place where the childhood of George Eliot was spent. Here she drew in those impressions of English rural and provincial life, of which one day she was to become the

greatest interpreter. Impossible to be in a better position for seeing life. Not only was her father's position always improving, so that she was early brought in contact with different grades of society, but his calling made him more or less acquainted with all ranks of his neighbours, and, says George Eliot, "I have always thought that the most fortunate Britons are those whose experience has given them a practical share in many aspects of the national lot, who have lived long among the mixed commonalty, roughing it with them under difficulties, knowing how their food tastes to them, and getting acquainted with their notions and motives, not by inference from traditional types in literature, or from philosophical theories, but from daily fellowship and observation."

And what kind of a child was it who loitered about the farm-yard and garden and fields, noticing everything with grave, watchful eyes, and storing it in a memory of extraordinary tenacity? One of her schoolfellows, who knew her at the age of thirteen, confessed to me that it was impossible to imagine George Eliot as a baby; that it seemed as if she must have come into the world fully developed, like a second Minerva. Her features were fully formed at a very early age, and she had a seriousness of expression almost startling for her years. The records of her child-life may be deciphered, amid some romantic alterations, in the early history of Tom and Maggie Tulliver. Isaac and Mary Ann Evans were playmates, like these, the latter having all the tastes of a boy; whereas her sister Chrissy, said to

be the original of Lucy Deane, had peculiarly dainty feminine ways, and shrank from out-door rambles for fear of soiling her shoes or pinafore. But Mary Ann and her brother went fishing together, or spinning tops, or digging for earth-nuts; and the twice-told incident of the little girl being left to mind the rod and losing herself in dreamy contemplation, oblivious of her task, is evidently taken from life, and may be quoted as a reminiscence of her own childhood: —

"One day my brother left me in high charge
To mind the rod, while he went seeking bait,
And bade me, when I saw a nearing barge,
Snatch out the line, lest he should come too late.

Proud of the task I watched with all my might
For one whole minute, till my eyes grew wide,
Till sky and earth took on a new strange light
And seemed a dream-world floating on some tide.

A fair pavilioned boat for me alone,
Bearing me onward through the vast unknown.
But sudden came the barge's pitch-black prow,
Nearer and angrier came my brother's cry,

And all my soul was quivering fear, when lo!
Upon the imperilled line, suspended high,
A silver perch! My guilt that won the prey
Now turned to merit, had a guerdon rich

Of hugs and praises, and made merry play
Until my triumph reached its highest pitch
When all at home were told the wondrous feat,
And how the little sister had fished well.

In secret, though my fortune tasted sweet,
I wondered why this happiness befell.
'The little lass had luck,' the gardener said;
And so I learned, luck was to glory wed."

Unlike Maggie, however, little Mary Ann was as good a hand at fishing as her brother, only differing from him in not liking to put the worms on the hooks.

Another incident taken from real life, if somewhat magnified, is the adventure with the gipsies. For the prototype of Maggie also fell among these marauding vagrants, and was detained a little time among them. Whether she also proposed to instruct the gipsies and to gain great influence over them by teaching them something about "geography" and "Columbus," does not transpire. But, indeed, most of Maggie's early experiences are autobiographic, down to such facts as her father telling her to rub her "turnip" cheeks against Sally's to get a little bloom, and to cutting off one side of her hair in a passion. At a very early age Mary Ann and her brother were sent to the village free school at Colton, in the parish of Griff, a not unusual custom in those days, when the means of tuition for little children were much more

difficult to procure than now. There are still old men living who used to sit on the same form with little Mary Ann Evans learning her A, B, C, and a certain William Jacques (the original of the delightfully comic Bob Jakins of fiction) remembers carrying her pick-a-back on the lawn in front of her father's house.

As the brother and sister grew older they saw less of each other, Mary Ann being sent to a school at Nuneaton, kept by Miss Lewis, for whom she retained an affectionate regard long years afterwards. About the same time she taught at a Sunday-school, in a little cottage adjoining her father's house. When she was twelve years old, being then, in the words of a neighbour, who occasionally called at Griff House, "a queer, three-cornered, awkward girl," who sat in corners and shyly watched her elders, she was placed as boarder with the Misses Franklin at Coventry. This school, then in high repute throughout the neighbourhood, was kept by two sisters, of whom the younger, Miss Rebecca Franklin, was a woman of unusual attainments and ladylike culture, although not without a certain taint of Johnsonian affectation. She seems to have thoroughly grounded Miss Evans in a sound English education, laying great stress in particular on the propriety of a precise and careful manner of speaking and reading. She herself always made a point of expressing herself in studied sentences, and on one occasion, when a friend had called to ask after a dying relative, she actually kept the servant waiting till she had framed an appropriately worded message. Miss Evans, in whose family a broad provincial dialect

was spoken, soon acquired Miss Rebecca's carefully elaborated speech, and, not content with that, she might be said to have created a new voice for herself. In later life every one who knew her was struck by the sweetness of her voice, and the finished construction of every sentence, as it fell from her lips; for by that time the acquired habit had become second nature, and blended harmoniously with her entire personality. But in those early days the artificial effort at perfect propriety of expression was still perceptible, and produced an impression of affectation, perhaps reflecting that of her revered instructress. It is also believed that some of the beauty of her intonation in reading English poetry was owing to the same early influence.

Mary Ann, or Marian as she came afterwards to be called, remained about three years with the Misses Franklin. She stood aloof from the other pupils, and one of her schoolfellows, Miss Bradley Jenkins, says that she was quite as remarkable in those early days as after she had acquired fame. She seems to have strangely impressed the imagination of the latter, who, figuratively speaking, looked up at her "as at a mountain." There was never anything of the schoolgirl about Miss Evans, for, even at that early age, she had the manners and appearance of a grave, staid woman; so much so, that a stranger, happening to call one day, mistook this girl of thirteen for one of the Misses Franklin, who were then middle-aged women. In this, also, there is a certain resemblance to Maggie Tulliver, who, at the age of thirteen, is described as looking already like a woman. English

composition, French and German, were some of the studies to which much time and attention were devoted. Being greatly in advance of the other pupils in the knowledge of French, Miss Evans and Miss Jenkins were taken out of the general class and set to study it together; but, though the two girls were thus associated in a closer fellowship, no real intimacy apparently followed from it. The latter watched the future "George Eliot" with intense interest, but always felt as if in the presence of a superior, though socially their positions were much on a par. This haunting sense of superiority precluded the growth of any closer friendship between the two fellow-pupils. All the more startling was it to the admiring schoolgirl, when one day, on using Marian Evans's German dictionary, she saw scribbled on its blank page some verses, evidently original, expressing rather sentimentally a yearning for love and sympathy. Under this granite-like exterior, then, there was beating a heart that passionately craved for human tenderness and companionship!

Inner solitude was no doubt the portion of George Eliot in those days. She must already have had a dim consciousness of unusual power, to a great extent isolating her from the girls of her own age, absorbed as they were in quite other feelings and ideas. Strong religious convictions pervaded her life at this period, and in the fervid faith and spiritual exaltation which characterise Maggie's girlhood, we have a very faithful picture of the future novelist's own state of mind. Passing through many stages of religious thought, she was first simple Church of England, then

Low Church, then "Anti-Supernatural." In this latter character she wore an "Anti-Supernatural" cap, in which, so says an early friend, "her plain features looked all the plainer." But her nature was a mixed one, as indeed is Maggie's too, and conflicting tendencies and inclinations pulled her, no doubt, in different directions. The self-renouncing impulses of one moment were checkmated at another by an eager desire for approbation and distinguishing pre-eminence; and a piety verging on asceticism did not exclude, on the other hand, a very clear perception of the advantages and desirability of good birth, wealth, and high social position. Like her own charming Esther in 'Felix Holt,' she had a fine sense, amid somewhat anomalous surroundings, of the highest refinements and delicacies which are supposed to be the natural attributes of people of rank and fashion. She even shared with the above-mentioned heroine certain girlish vanities and weaknesses, such as liking to have all things about her person as elegant as possible.

About the age of fifteen Marian Evans left the Misses Franklin, and soon afterwards she had the misfortune of losing her mother, who died in her forty-ninth year. Writing to a friend in after life she says, "I began at sixteen to be acquainted with the unspeakable grief of a last parting, in the death of my mother." Less sorrowful partings ensued, though in the end they proved almost as irrevocable. Her elder sister, and the brother in whose steps she had once followed "puppy-like," married and settled in homes of their own. Their different lots in life, and

the far more pronounced differences of their aims and ideas, afterwards divided the "brother and sister" completely. This kind of separation between people who have been friends in youth is often more terrible to endure than the actual loss by death itself, and doth truly "work like madness in the brain." Is there not some reference to this in that pathetic passage in 'Adam Bede:' "Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains, blends yearning and repulsion, and ties us by our heartstrings to the beings that jar us at every movement … we see eyes – ah! so like our mother's, averted from us in cold alienation."

For some years after this Miss Evans and her father remained alone together at Griff House. He offered to get a housekeeper, as not the house only, but farm matters, had to be looked after, and he was always tenderly considerate of "the little wench" as he called her. But his daughter preferred taking the whole management of the place into her own hands, and she was as conscientious and diligent in the discharge of her domestic duties as in the prosecution of the studies she carried on at the same time. One of her chief beauties was in her large, finely-shaped, feminine hands – hands which she has, indeed, described as characteristic of several of her heroines; but she once pointed out to a friend at Foleshill that one of them was broader across than the other, saying, with some pride, that it was due to the quantity of butter and cheese she had made during her housekeeping

days at Griff. It will be remembered that this is a characteristic attributed to the exemplary Nancy Lammeter, whose person gave one the idea of "perfect unvarying neatness as the body of a little bird," only her hands bearing "the traces of butter making, cheese crushing, and even still coarser work." Certainly the description of the dairy in 'Adam Bede,' and all the processes of butter making, is one which only complete knowledge could have rendered so perfect. Perhaps no scene in all her novels stands out with more life-like vividness than that dairy which one could have sickened for in hot, dusty streets: "Such coolness, such purity, such fresh fragrance of new-pressed cheese, of firm butter, of wooden vessels perpetually bathed in pure water; such soft colouring of red earthenware and creamy surfaces, brown wood and polished tin, grey limestone and rich orange-red rust on the iron weights and hooks and hinges."

This life of mixed practical activity and intellectual pursuits came to an end in 1841, when Mr. Evans relinquished Griff House, and the management of Sir Roger Newdigate's estates, to his married son, and removed with his daughter to Foleshill, near Coventry.

CHAPTER III.
YOUTHFUL STUDIES AND FRIENDSHIPS

The period from about twenty to thirty is usually the most momentous in the lives of illustrious men and women. It is true that the most abiding impressions, those which the future author will reproduce most vividly, have been absorbed by the growing brain previous to this age; but the fusion of these varied impressions of the outward world with the inner life, and the endless combinations in which imagination delights, rarely begin before. Then, as a rule, the ideas are engendered to be carried out in the maturity of life. Alfred de Vigny says truly enough:

> "Qu'est-ce qu'une grande vie?
> Une pensée de la jeunesse, exécutée par l'âge mur."

Moreover, it is a revolutionary age. Inherited opinions that had been accepted, as the rotation of the seasons, with unhesitating acquiescence, become an object of speculation and passionate questioning. Nothing is taken upon trust. The intellect, stimulated by the sense of expanding and hitherto unchecked capacity, delights in exercising its strength by critically passing in review the opinions, laws, institutions

commonly accepted as unalterable. And if the intellect is thus active the heart is still more so. This is emphatically the time of enthusiastic friendship and glowing love, if often also of cruel disenchantment and disillusion. In most biographies, therefore, this phase of life is no less fascinating than instructive. For it shows the individual while still in a stage of growth already reacting on his environment, and becoming a motive power according to the measure of his intellectual and moral endowments.

It is on this state of George Eliot's life that we are now entering. At Foleshill she acquired that vast range of knowledge and universality of culture which so eminently distinguished her.

The house she now inhabited though not nearly as picturesque or substantial as the former home of the Evanses, was yet sufficiently spacious, with a pleasant garden in front and behind it; the latter, Marian Evans was fond of making as much like the delicious garden of her childhood as was possible under the circumstances. In other respects she greatly altered her ways of life, cultivating an ultra-fastidiousness in her manners and household arrangements. Though so young she was not only entire mistress of her father's establishment but, as his business required him to be abroad the greater part of each week, she was mostly alone.

Her life now became more and more that of a student, one of her chief reasons for rejoicing at the change of residence being the freer access to books. She had, however, already amassed

quite a library of her own by this time. In addition to her private studies, she was now also able to have masters to instruct her in a variety of subjects. The Rev. T. Sheepshanks, headmaster of the Coventry Grammar-school, gave her lessons in Greek and Latin, as she particularly wished to learn the former language in order to read Æschylus. She continued her study of French, German, and Italian under the tuition of Signor Brezzi, even acquiring some knowledge of Hebrew by her own unassisted efforts. Mr. Simms, the veteran organist of St. Michael's, Coventry, instructed her in the pianoforte; and probably Rosamond Vincy's teacher in 'Middlemarch' is a faithful portraiture of him. "Her master at Mrs. Lemon's school (close to a country town with a memorable history that had its relics in church and castle) was one of those excellent musicians here and there to be found in the provinces, worthy to compare with many a noted Kapellmeister in a country which offers more plentiful conditions of musical celebrity." George Eliot's sympathetic rendering of her favourite composers, particularly Beethoven and Schubert, was always delightful to her friends, although connoisseurs considered her possessed of little or no strictly technical knowledge. Be that as it may, many an exquisite passage scattered up and down her works, bears witness to her heartfelt appreciation of music, which seems to have had a more intimate attraction for her than the fine arts. She shows little feeling for archæological beauties, in which Warwickshire is so rich: in her 'Scenes of Clerical Life' dismissing a fine monument of Lady Jane Grey, a genuine

specimen of old Gothic art at Astley Church, with a sneer about "marble warriors, and their wives without noses."

In spite of excessive study, this period of Marian's life is not without faint echoes of an early love-story of her own. In the house of one of her married half-sisters she met a young man who promised, at that time, to take a distinguished position in his profession. A kind of engagement, or semi-engagement, took place, which Mr. Evans refused to countenance, and finally his daughter broke it off in a letter, showing both her strong sense and profoundly affectionate nature. At this time she must have often had a painful consciousness of being cut off from that living fellowship with the like-minded so stimulating to the intellectual life. Men are not so subject to this form of soul hunger as women; for at their public schools and colleges they are brought into contact with their contemporaries, and cannot fail to find comrades amongst them of like thoughts and aspirations with themselves. A fresh life, however, at once vivifying to her intellect and stimulating to her heart, now began for Marian Evans in the friendship she formed with Mr. and Mrs. Charles Bray of Rosehill, Coventry. Rahel – the subtly gifted German woman, whose letters and memoirs are a treasury of delicate observation and sentiment – observes that people of marked spiritual affinities are bound to meet some time or other in their lives. If not entirely true, there is a good deal to be said for this comforting theory; as human beings of similar nature seem constantly converging as by some magnetic attraction.

The circle to which Miss Evans now happened to be introduced was in every sense congenial and inspiriting. Mr. Bray, his wife, and his sister-in-law were a trio more like some delightful characters in a first-rate novel than the sober inhabitants of a Warwickshire country town. Living in a house beautifully situated on the outskirts of Coventry, they used to spend their lives in philosophical speculations, philanthropy, and pleasant social hospitality, joining to the ease and *laisser aller* of continental manners a thoroughly English geniality and trustworthiness.

Mr. Bray was a wealthy ribbon manufacturer, but had become engrossed from an early age in religious and metaphysical speculation as well as in political and social questions. Beginning to inquire into the dogmas which formed the basis of his belief, he found, on careful investigation, that they did not stand, in his opinion, the test of reason. His arguments set his brother-in-law, Mr. Charles C. Hennell, a Unitarian, to examine afresh and go carefully over the whole ground of popular theology, the consequence of this close study being the 'Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity,' a work which attracted a good deal of attention when it appeared, and was translated into German at the instance of David Strauss. It was published in 1838, a few years after the appearance of the 'Life of Jesus.' In its critical examination of the miracles, and in the sifting of mythological from historical elements in the Gospels it bears considerable analogy to Strauss's great work, although strictly

based on independent studies, being originally nothing more than an attempt to solve the doubts of a small set of friends. Their doubts were solved, but not in the manner originally anticipated.

Mrs. Bray, of an essentially religious nature, shared the opinions of her husband and brother, and without conforming to the external rites and ceremonies of a creed, led a life of saintly purity and self-devotion. The exquisite beauty of her moral nature not only attracted Marian to this truly amiable woman, but filled her with reverence, and the friendship then commenced was only ended by death.

In Miss Sara Hennell, Marian Evans found another congenial companion who became as a sister to her. This singular being, in most respects such a contrast to her sister, high-strung, nervous, excitable, importing all the ardour of feeling into a life of austere thought, seemed in a manner mentally to totter under the weight of her own immense metaphysical speculations. A casual acquaintance of these two young ladies might perhaps have predicted that Miss Hennell was the one destined to achieve fame in the future, and she certainly must have been an extraordinary mental stimulus to her young friend Marian. These gifted sisters, two of a family, all the members of which were remarkable, by some are identified as the originals of the delightful Meyrick household in 'Daniel Deronda.' Each member of this genial group was already, or ultimately became, an author of more or less repute. A reviewer in the 'Westminster,' writing of Mr. Bray's philosophical publications, some years ago, said: "If he would

reduce his many works to one containing nothing unessential, he would doubtless obtain that high place among the philosophers of our country to which his powers of thought entitle him." His most popular book, called 'The Education of the Feelings,' intended for use in secular schools, deals with the laws of morality practically applied. Mrs. Bray's writings, on the same order of subjects, are still further simplified for the understanding of children. She is the authoress of 'Physiology for Schools,' 'The British Empire,' 'Elements of Morality,' etc. Her 'Duty to Animals' has become a class book in the schools of the midland counties, and she was one of the first among those noble-hearted men and women who have endeavoured to introduce a greater degree of humanity into our treatment of animals.

George Eliot, writing to Mrs. Bray in March 1873 on this very subject, says:

"A very good, as well as very rich, woman, Mrs. S – , has founded a model school at Naples, and has the sympathy of the best Italians in her educational efforts. Of course a chief point in trying to improve the Italians is to teach them kindness to animals, and a friend of Mrs. S – has confided to her a small sum of money – fifty pounds, I think – to be applied to the translation and publication of some good books for young people, which would be likely to rouse in them a sympathy with dumb creatures.

"Will you kindly help me in the effort to further Mrs. S – 's good work by sending me a copy of your book on animals, and also by telling me the periodical in which the parts of the book

first appeared, as well as the titles of any other works which you think would be worth mentioning for the purpose in question?

"Mrs. S – (as indeed you may probably know) is the widow of a German merchant of Manchester, as rich as many such merchants are, and as benevolent as only the choicest few. She knows all sorts of good work for the world, and is known by most of the workers. It struck me, while she was speaking of this need of a book to translate, that you had done the very thing."

A few days later the following highly interesting letter came from the same source:

"Many thanks for the helpful things you have sent me. 'The Wounded Bird' is charming. But now something very much larger of the same kind must be written, and you are the person to write it – something that will bring the emotions, sufferings, and possible consolations of the dear brutes vividly home to the imaginations of children: fitted for children of all countries, as Reineke Fuchs is comprehensible to all nations. A rough notion came to me the other day of supposing a house of refuge, not only for dogs, but for all distressed animals. The keeper of this refuge understands the language of the brutes, which includes differences of dialect not hindering communication even between birds, and dogs, by the help of some Ulysses among them who is versed in the various tongues, and puts in the needed explanations. Said keeper overhears his refugees solacing their evenings by telling the story of their experiences, and finally acts as editor of their autobiographies. I imagine my long-loved

fellow-creature, the ugly dog, telling the sorrows and the tender emotions of gratitude which have wrought him into a sensitive soul. The donkey is another cosmopolitan sufferer, and a greater martyr than Saint Lawrence. If we only knew what fine motives he has for his meek endurance, and how he loves a friend who will scratch his nose!

"All this is not worth anything except to make you feel how much better a plan you can think of.

"Only you must positively write this book which everybody wants – this book which will do justice to the share our 'worthy fellow-labourers' have had in the groaning and travailing of the world towards the birth of the right and fair.

"But you must not do it without the 'sustenance of labour' – I don't say 'pay,' since there is no pay for good work. Let Mr. … be blest with the blessing of the unscrupulous. I want to contribute something towards helping the brutes, and helping the children, especially the southern children, to be good to the creatures who are continually at their mercy. I can't write the needed book myself, but I feel sure that you can, and that you will not refuse the duty."

Mrs. Bray's answer to this humorous suggestion may be gathered from George Eliot's amiable reply:

"I see at once that you must be right about the necessity for being simple and literal. In fact I have ridiculous impulses in teaching children, and always make the horizon too wide.

"'The Wounded Bird' is perfect of its kind, and that kind

is the best for a larger work. You yourself see clearly that it is an exceptional case for any one to be able to write books for children without putting in them false morality disguised as devout religion. And you are one of the exceptional cases. I am quite sure, from what you have done, that you can do the thing which is still wanted to be done. As to imagination, 'The Wounded Bird' is full of imagination."

These extracts pleasantly illustrate both the writer and recipient of such humane letters; and, though written at a much later period, not only give an idea of the nature of Mrs. Bray's literary pursuits, but of the friendly relations subsisting to the end between her and George Eliot.

Of Miss Hennell's work it is more difficult to speak without entering more deeply into her subject-matter than is compatible with the scope of the present work. In one of her best known books, entitled 'Thoughts in Aid of Faith,' she makes the daring attempt to trace the evolution of religion, her mode of thought partaking at once of the scientific and the mystical. For the present she seems to be one of the very few women who have ventured into the arena of philosophy; and, curiously enough, her doctrine is that there should be a feminine method in metaphysics as well as a masculine, the sexes, according to this singular theory, finding their counterpart in religion and science. It may be remembered that George Eliot, in one of her essays, is of opinion that women should endeavour to make some distinctively feminine contributions to the intellectual pursuits they engage in,

saying, "Let the whole field of reality be laid open to woman as well as to man, and then that which is peculiar in her mental modification, instead of being, as it is now, a source of discord and repulsion between the sexes, will be found to be a necessary complement to the truth and beauty of life. Then we shall have that marriage of minds which alone can blend all the hues of thought and feeling in one lovely rainbow of promise for the harvest of happiness." Something of the same idea lies at the root of much in Miss Hennell's mystical disquisitions.

This circumstantial account of the circle to which Miss Evans was now introduced has been given, because it consisted of friends who, more than any others, helped in the growth and formation of her mind. No human being, indeed, can be fully understood without some knowledge of the companions that at one time or other, but especially during the period of development, have been intimately associated with his or her life. However vastly a mountain may appear to loom above us from the plain, on ascending to its summit one always finds innumerable lesser eminences which all help in making up the one imposing central effect. And similarly in the world of mind, many superior natures, in varying degrees, all contribute their share towards the maturing of that exceptional intellectual product whose topmost summit is genius.

The lady who first introduced Marian Evans to the Brays was not without an object of her own, for her young friend – whose religious fervour, tinged with evangelical sentiment, was

as conspicuous as her unusual learning and thoughtfulness – seemed to her peculiarly fitted to exercise a beneficial influence on the Rosehill household, where generally unorthodox opinions were much in vogue.

Up to the age of seventeen or eighteen Marian had been considered the most truly pious member of her family, being earnestly bent, as she says, "to shape this anomalous English Christian life of ours into some consistency with the spirit and simple verbal tenor of the New Testament." "I was brought up," she informs another correspondent, "in the Church of England, and have never joined any other religious society; but I have had close acquaintance with many dissenters of various sects, from Calvinistic Anabaptists to Unitarians." Her inner life at this time is faithfully mirrored in the spiritual experiences of Maggie Tulliver. Marian Evans was not one who could rest satisfied with outward observances and lip-worship: she needed a faith which should give unity and sanctity to the conception of life; which should awaken "that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self, which is to the moral life what the addition of a great central ganglion is to animal life." At one time Evangelicalism supplied her with the most essential conditions of a religious life: with all the vehemence of an ardent nature she flung her whole soul into a passionate acceptance of the teaching of Christianity, carrying her zeal to the pitch of asceticism.

This was the state of her mind, at the age of seventeen, when

her aunt from Wirksworth came to stay with her. Mrs. Elizabeth Evans (who came afterwards to be largely identified with Dinah Morris) was a zealous Wesleyan, having at one time been a noted preacher; but her niece, then a rigid Calvinist, hardly thought her doctrine strict enough. When this same aunt paid her a visit, some years afterwards, at Foleshill, Marian's views had already undergone a complete transformation, and their intercourse was constrained and painful; for the young evangelical enthusiast, who had been a favourite in clerical circles, was now in what she afterwards described as a "crude state of freethinking." It was a period of transition through which she gradually passed into a new religious synthesis.

Her intimacy with the Brays began about the time when these new doubts were beginning to ferment in her. Her expanding mind, nourished on the best literature, ancient and modern, began to feel cramped by dogmas that had now lost their vitality; yet a break with an inherited form of belief to which a thousand tender associations bound her, was a catastrophe she shrank from with dread. Hence a period of mental uncertainty and trouble. In consequence of these inward questionings, it happened that the young lady who had been unwittingly brought to convert her new acquaintances was converted by them. In intercourse with them she was able freely to open her mind, their enlightened views helping her in this crisis of her spiritual life; and she found it an intense relief to feel no longer bound to reconcile her moral and intellectual perceptions with a particular form of worship.

The antagonism she met with in certain quarters, the social persecution from which she had much to suffer, are perhaps responsible for some of the sharp, caustic irony with which she afterwards assailed certain theological habits of thought. It is not unlikely that in some of her essays for the *Westminster Review* she mainly expressed the thoughts which were stirred in her by the opposition she encountered at this period of her life – as, for example, in the brilliant paper entitled 'Worldliness and Otherworldliness,' which contains such a scathing passage as the following:

"For certain other elements of virtue, which are of more obvious importance to untheological minds, – a delicate sense of our neighbour's rights, an active participation in the joys and sorrows of our fellow-men, a magnanimous acceptance of privation or suffering for ourselves when it is the condition of good to others, in a word, the extension and intensification of our sympathetic nature, we think it of some importance to contend, that they have no more direct relation to the belief in a future state than the interchange of gases in the lungs has to the plurality of worlds. Nay, to us it is conceivable that to some minds the deep pathos lying in the thought of human mortality – that we are here for a little while and then vanish away, that this earthly life is all that is given to our loved ones, and to our many suffering fellow-men, lies nearer the fountains of moral emotion than the conception of extended existence… To us it is matter of unmixed rejoicing that this latter necessity of healthful life is

independent of theological ink, and that its evolution is ensured in the interaction of human souls as certainly as the evolution of science or of art, with which, indeed, it is but a twin ray, melting into them with undefinable limits."

It was, of course, inevitable that her changed tone of mind should attract the attention of the family and friends of Marian, and that the backsliding of so exemplary a member should afford matter for scandal in many a clerical circle and evangelical tea-meeting. Close to the Evanses there lived at that time a dissenting minister, whose daughter Mary was a particular favourite of Marian Evans. There had been much neighbourly intimacy between the two young ladies, and though there was only five years' difference between them, Marian always inspired her friend with a feeling of awe at her intellectual superiority. Yet her sympathy – that sympathy with all human life which was the strongest element of her character – was even then so irresistible that every little trouble of Mary's life was entrusted to her keeping. But the sudden discovery of their daughter's friend being an "infidel" came with the shock of a thunderclap on the parents. Much hot argument passed between the minister and this youthful controversialist, but the former clinched the whole question by a triumphant reference to the dispersion of the Jews throughout the world as an irrefutable proof of the divine inspiration of the Bible. In spite of this vital difference on religious questions, Miss Evans was suffered to go on giving the minister's daughter lessons in German, which were continued

for two or three years, she having generously undertaken this labour of love twice a week, because she judged from the shape of her young friend's head – phrenology being rife in those days – that she must have an excellent understanding. But, better than languages, she taught her the value of time, always cutting short mere random talk by simply ignoring it. Altogether the wonderful strength of her personality manifested itself even at this early period in the indelible impression it left on her pupil's memory, many of her sayings remaining graven on it as on stone. As, for instance, when one day twitting Mary's too great self-esteem she remarked, "We are very apt to measure ourselves by our aspiration instead of our performance." Or when on a friend's asking, "What is the meaning of Faust?" she replied, "The same as the meaning of the universe." While reading *'Wallenstein's Lager*,' with her young pupil, the latter happened to say how life-like the characters seemed: "Don't say *seemed*," exclaimed Marian; "we know that they *are* true to the life." And she immediately began repeating the talk of labourers, farriers, butchers, and others of that class, with such close imitation as to startle her friend. Is not this a fore-shadowing of the inimitable scene at the 'Rainbow?'

By far the most trying consequence of her change of views was that now, for the first time, Marian was brought into collision with her father, whose pet she had always been. He could not understand her inward perplexities, nor the need of her soul for complete inward unity of thought, a condition

impossible to her under the limiting conditions of a dogmatic evangelicalism, "where folly often mistakes itself for wisdom, ignorance gives itself airs of knowledge, and selfishness, turning its eyes upwards, calls itself religion." She, on the other hand, after a painful struggle, wanted to break away from the old forms of worship, and refused to go to church. Deeply attached though she was to her father, the need to make her acts conform with her convictions became irresistible. Under such conflicting tendencies a rupture between father and daughter became imminent, and for a short time a breaking up of the home was contemplated, Marian intending to go and live by herself in Coventry. One of the leading traits in her nature was its adhesiveness, however, and the threat of separation proved so painful to her that her friends, Mr. and Mrs. Bray, persuaded her to conform to her father's wishes as far as outward observances were implied, and for the rest he did not trouble himself to inquire into her thoughts or occupations.

From a letter written at this period it appears that the 'Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity' had made a most powerful impression on her mind. Indeed, she dated from it a new birth. But so earnest and conscientious was she in her studies, that before beginning its longed-for perusal, she and a friend determined to read the Bible through again from beginning to end.

The intimacy between the inmates of Rosehill and the girl student at Foleshill meanwhile was constantly growing closer.

They met daily, and in their midst the humorous side of her nature expanded no less than her intellect. Although striking ordinary acquaintances by an abnormal gravity, when completely at her ease she at times bubbled over with fun and gaiety, irradiated by the unexpected flashes of a wit whose full scope was probably as yet unsuspected by its possessor. Not but that Miss Evans and her friends must have been conscious, even at that early age, of extraordinary powers in her, destined some day to give her a conspicuous position in the world. For her conversation was already so full of charm, depth, and comprehensiveness, that all talk after hers seemed stale and common-place. Many were the discussions in those days between Mr. Bray and Marian Evans, and though frequently broken off in fierce dispute one evening, they always began again quite amicably the next. Mr. Bray probably exercised considerable influence on his young friend's mind at this impressible period of life; perhaps her attention to philosophy was first roused by acquaintance with him, and his varied acquirements in this department may have helped in giving a positive direction to her own thoughts.

Mr. Bray was just then working out his 'Philosophy of Necessity,' the problems discussed being the same as those which have occupied the leading thinkers of the day: Auguste Comte in his 'Positive Philosophy;' Buckle in his 'History of Civilization;' and Mr. Herbert Spencer in his 'Sociology.' The theory that, as an individual and collectively, man is as much

subject to law as any of the other entities in nature, was one of those magnificent ideas which revolutionise the world of thought. Many minds, in different countries, of different calibre, were all trying to systematise what knowledge there was on this subject in order to convert hypothesis into demonstration. To what extent Mr. Bray may have based his 'Philosophy of Necessity' on independent research, or how much was merely assimilated from contemporary sources, we cannot here inquire. Enough that the ideas embodied in it represented some of the most vital thought of the age, and contributed therefore not a little to the formation of George Eliot's mind, and to the grip which she presently displayed in the handling of philosophical topics.

In 1842 the sensation created by Dr. Strauss's *Leben Jesu* had even extended to so remote a district as Warwickshire. Some persons of advanced opinions, deeply impressed by its penetrating historical criticism, which was in fact Niebuhr's method applied to the elucidation of the Gospels, were very desirous of obtaining an English translation of this work; meeting at the house of a common friend, the late Mr. Joseph Parkes of Birmingham, they agreed, in the first blush of their enthusiasm, to raise amongst them whatever sum might be required for the purpose. Mr. Hennell, the leading spirit in this enterprise, proposed that the translation should be undertaken by Miss Brabant, the accomplished daughter of Dr. Brabant, a scholar deeply versed in theological matters, who was in friendly

correspondence with Strauss and Paulus in Germany and with Coleridge and Grote in England. The lady in question, though still in her teens, was peculiarly fitted for the task, as she had already translated some of Baur's erudite writings on theological subjects into English. But when she had done about one half of the first volume, her learned labours came to an unexpected conclusion, as she became engaged to Mr. Hennell, who to great mental attainments joined much winning buoyancy of manner. And on her marriage with this gentleman she had to relinquish her task as too laborious.

Miss Brabant's acquaintance with Marian began in 1843, and in the summer of that year the whole friendly group started on an excursion to Tenby. During their stay at this watering-place the lady who had begun, and the lady destined eventually to accomplish, the enormous labour of translating the 'Life of Jesus' gave tokens of feminine frivolity by insisting on going to a public ball, where, however, they were disappointed, as partners were very scarce. It should be remembered that Marian Evans was only twenty-three years old at this time, but, though she had not yet done anything, her friends already thought her a wonderful woman. She never seems to have had any real youthfulness, and her personal appearance greatly improved with time. It is only to the finest natures, it should be remembered, that age gives an added beauty and distinction; for the most persistent self has then worked its way to the surface, having modified the expression, and to some extent the features, to its own likeness.

There exists a coloured sketch done by Mrs. Bray about this period, which gives one a glimpse of George Eliot in her girlhood. In those Foleshill days she had a quantity of soft pale-brown hair worn in ringlets. Her head was massive, her features powerful and rugged, her mouth large but shapely, the jaw singularly square for a woman, yet having a certain delicacy of outline. A neutral tone of colouring did not help to relieve this general heaviness of structure, the complexion being pale but not fair. Nevertheless the play of expression and the wonderful mobility of the mouth, which increased with age, gave a womanly softness to the countenance in curious contrast with its framework. Her eyes, of a grey-blue, constantly varying in colour, striking some as intensely blue, others as of a pale, washed-out grey, were small and not beautiful in themselves, but when she grew animated in conversation, those eyes lit up the whole face, seeming in a manner to transfigure it. So much was this the case, that a young lady, who had once enjoyed an hour's conversation with her, came away under its spell with the impression that she was beautiful, but afterwards, on seeing George Eliot again when she was not talking, she could hardly believe her to be the same person. The charm of her nature disclosed itself in her manner and in her voice, the latter recalling that of Dorothea, in being "like the voice of a soul that has once lived in an Æolian harp." It was low and deep, vibrating with sympathy.

Mr. Bray, an enthusiastic believer in phrenology, was so much

struck with the grand proportions of her head that he took Marian Evans to London to have a cast taken. He thinks that, after that of Napoleon, her head showed the largest development from brow to ear of any person's recorded. The similarity of type between George Eliot's face and Savonarola's has been frequently pointed out. Some affinity in their natures may have led her, if unconsciously, to select that epoch of Florentine life in which he played so prominent a part.

Though not above the middle height Marian gave people the impression of being much taller than she really was, her figure, although thin and slight, being well-poised and not without a certain sturdiness of make. She was never robust in health, being delicately strung, and of a highly nervous temperament. In youth the keen excitability of her nature often made her wayward and hysterical. In fact her extraordinary intellectual vigour did not exclude the susceptibilities and weaknesses of a peculiarly feminine organisation. With all her mental activity she yet led an intensely emotional life, a life which must have held hidden trials for her, as in those days she was known by her friends "to weep bucketfuls of tears."

A woman of strong passions, like her own Maggie, deeply affectionate by nature, of a clinging tenderness of disposition, Marian Evans went through much inward struggle, through many painful experiences before she reached the moral self-government of her later years. Had she not, it is hardly likely that she could have entered with so deep a comprehension into

the most intricate windings of the human heart. That, of course, was to a great extent due to her sympathy, sympathy being the strongest quality of her moral nature. She flung herself, as it were, into other lives, making their affairs, their hopes, their sorrows, her own. And this power of identifying herself with the people she came near had the effect of a magnet in attracting her fellow-creatures. If friends went to her in their trouble they would find not only that she entered with deep feeling into their most minute concerns, but that, by gradual degrees, she lifted them beyond their personal distress, and that they would leave her presence in an ennobled and elevated frame of mind. This sympathy was closely connected with her faculty of detecting and responding to anything that showed the smallest sign of intellectual vitality. She essentially resembled Socrates in her manner of eliciting whatsoever capacity for thought might be latent in the people she came in contact with: were it only a shoemaker or day-labourer, she would never rest till she had found out in what points that particular man differed from other men of his class. She always rather educed what was in others than impressed herself on them; showing much kindliness of heart in drawing out people who were shy. Sympathy was the key-note of her nature, the source of her iridescent humour, of her subtle knowledge of character, and of her dramatic genius.

CHAPTER IV.
TRANSLATION OF STRAUSS AND FEUERBACH. – TOUR ON THE CONTINENT

Miss Brabant's marriage to Mr. Charles Hennell occurred some months after this excursion to Tenby. In the meanwhile it was settled that Miss Evans should continue her translation of Dr. Strauss's *Leben Jesu*. Thus her first introduction to literature was in a sense accidental. The result proved her admirably fitted for the task; for her version of this searching and voluminous work remains a masterpiece of clear nervous English, at the same time faithfully rendering the spirit of the original. But it was a vast and laborious undertaking, requiring a large share of patience, will, and energy, quite apart from the necessary mental qualifications. On this occasion, to fit herself more fully for her weighty task, Marian taught herself a considerable amount of Hebrew. But she groaned, at times, under the pressure of the toil which had necessarily to be endured, feeling tempted to relinquish what must often have seemed almost intolerable drudgery. The active interest and encouragement of her friends, however, tided her over these moments of discouragement, and after three years of assiduous application, the translation was finally completed,

and brought out by Dr. (then Mr.) John Chapman in 1846. It is probably safe to assume that the composition of none of her novels cost George Eliot half the effort and toil which this translation had done. Yet so badly is this kind of literary work remunerated, that twenty pounds was the sum paid for what had cost three years of hard labour!

Indeed, by this time, most of the twelve friends who had originally guaranteed the sum necessary for the translation and publication of the 'Life of Jesus,' had conveniently forgotten the matter; and had it not been for the generosity of Mr. Joseph Parkes, who volunteered to advance the necessary funds, who knows how long the MS. translation might have lain dormant in a drawer at Foleshill? It no sooner saw the light, however, than every one recognised the exceptional merits of the work. And for several years afterwards Miss Evans continued to be chiefly known as the translator of Strauss's *Leben Jesu*.

Soon after relieving Miss Brabant from the task of translation, Miss Evans went to stay for a time with her friend's father, Dr. Brabant, who sadly felt the loss of his daughter's intelligent and enlivening companionship. No doubt the society of this accomplished scholar, described by Mr. Grote as "a vigorous self-thinking intellect," was no less congenial than instructive to his young companion; while her singular mental acuteness and affectionate womanly ways were most grateful to the lonely old man. There is something very attractive in this episode of George Eliot's life. It recalls a frequently recurring situation in her novels,

particularly that touching one of the self-renouncing devotion with which the ardent Romola throws herself into her afflicted father's learned and recondite pursuits.

There exists a letter written to an intimate friend in 1846, soon after the translation of Strauss was finished, which, I should say, already shows the future novelist in embryo. In this delightfully humorous mystification of her friends, Miss Evans pretends that, to her gratification, she has actually had a visit from a real live German professor, whose musty person was encased in a still mustier coat. This learned personage has come over to England with the single purpose of getting his voluminous writings translated into English. There are at least twenty volumes, all unpublished, owing to the envious machinations of rival authors, none of them treating of anything more modern than Cheops, or the invention of the hieroglyphics. The respectable professor's object in coming to England is to secure a wife and translator in one. But though, on inquiry, he finds that the ladies engaged in translation are legion, they mostly turn out to be utterly incompetent, besides not answering to his requirements in other respects; the qualifications he looks for in a wife, besides a thorough acquaintance with English and German, being personal ugliness and a snug little capital, sufficient to supply him with a moderate allowance of tobacco and *Schwarzbier*, after defraying the expense of printing his books. To find this ph[oe]nix among women he is sent to Coventry on all hands.

In Miss Evans, so she runs on, the aspiring professor finds

his utmost wishes realised, and so proposes to her on the spot; thinking that it may be her last chance, she accepts him with equal celerity, and her father, although strongly objecting to a foreigner, is induced to give his consent for the same reason. The lady's only stipulation is that her future husband shall take her out of England, with its dreary climate and drearier inhabitants. This being settled, she invites her friends to come to her wedding, which is to take place next week.

This lively little *jeu d'esprit* is written in the wittiest manner, and one cannot help fancying that this German Dryasdust contained the germ of one of her very subtlest masterpieces in characterisation, that of the much-to-be-pitied Casaubon, the very Sysiphus of authors. In the lady, too, willing to marry her parchment-bound suitor for the sake of co-operating in his abstruse mental labours, we have a faint adumbration of the simple-minded Dorothea.

But these sudden stirrings at original invention did not prevent Miss Evans from undertaking another task, similar to her last, if not so laborious. She now set about translating Ludwig Feuerbach's *Wesen des Christenthums*. This daring philosopher, who kept aloof from professional honours, and dwelt apart in a wood, that he might be free to handle questions of theology and metaphysics with absolute fearlessness, had created a great sensation by his philosophical criticism in Germany. Unlike his countrymen, whose writings on these subjects are usually enveloped in such an impenetrable mist that their most perilous

ideas pass harmlessly over the heads of the multitude, Feuerbach, by his keen incisiveness of language and luminousness of exposition, was calculated to bring his meaning home to the average reader. Mr. Garnett's account of the 'Essence of Christianity' in the 'Encyclopædia Britannica,' admirably concise as it is, may be quoted here, as conveying in the fewest words the gist of this "famous treatise, where Feuerbach shows that every article of Christian belief corresponds to some instinct or necessity of man's nature, from which he infers that it is the creation and embodiment of some human wish, hope, or apprehension… Following up the hint of one of the oldest Greek philosophers, he demonstrates that religious ideas have their counterparts in human nature, and assumes that they must be its product."

The translation of the 'Essence of Christianity' was also published by Mr. Chapman in 1854. It appeared in his 'Quarterly Series,' destined "to consist of works by learned and profound thinkers, embracing the subjects of theology, philosophy, biblical criticism, and the history of opinion." Probably because her former translation had been so eminently successful, Miss Evans received fifty pounds for her present work. But there was no demand for it in England, and Mr. Chapman lost heavily by its publication.

About the same period Miss Evans also translated Spinoza's *De Deo* for the benefit of an inquiring friend. But her English version of the 'Ethics' was not undertaken till the year 1854,

after she had left her home at Foleshill. In applying herself to the severe labour of rendering one philosophical work after another into English, Miss Evans, no doubt, was bent on elucidating for herself some of the most vital problems which engage the mind when once it has shaken itself free from purely traditional beliefs, rather than on securing for herself any pecuniary advantages. But her admirable translations attracted the attention of the like-minded, and she became gradually known to some of the most distinguished men of the time.

Unfortunately her father's health now began to fail, causing her no little pain and anxiety. At some period during his illness she stayed with him in the Isle of Wight, for in a letter to Mrs. Bray, written many years afterwards, she says, "The 'Sir Charles Grandison' you are reading must be the series of little fat volumes you lent me to carry to the Isle of Wight, where I read it at every interval when my father did not want me, and was sorry that the long novel was not longer. It is a solace to hear of any one's reading and enjoying Richardson. We have fallen on an evil generation who would not read 'Clarissa' even in an abridged form. The French have been its most enthusiastic admirers, but I don't know whether their present admiration is more than traditional, like their set phrases about their own classics."

During the last year of her father's life his daughter was also in the habit of reading Scott's novels aloud to him for several hours of each day; she must thus have become deeply versed in his manner of telling the stories in which she continued to delight all

her life; and in speaking of the widening of our sympathies which a picture of human life by a great artist is calculated to produce, even in the most trivial and selfish, she gives as an instance Scott's description of Luckie Mucklebackit's cottage, and his story of the 'Two Drovers.'

But a heavy loss now befell Marian Evans in the death of her father, which occurred in 1849. Long afterwards nothing seemed to afford consolation to her grief. For eight years these two had kept house together, and the deepest mutual affection had always subsisted between them. Marian ever treasured her father's memory. As George Eliot she loved to recall in her works everything associated with him in her childhood; those happy times when, standing between her father's knees, she used to be driven by him to "outlying hamlets, whose groups of inhabitants were as distinctive to my imagination as if they belonged to different regions of the globe." Miss Evans, however, was not suffered to mourn uncomforted. The tender friends who cared for her as a sister, now planned a tour to the Continent in hopes that the change of scene and associations would soften her grief.

So they started on their travels, going to Switzerland and Italy by the approved route, which in those days was not so hackneyed as it now is. To so penetrating an observer as Miss Evans there must have been an infinite interest in this first sight of the Continent. But the journey did not seem to dispel her grief, and she continued in such very low spirits that Mrs. Bray almost regretted having taken her abroad so soon after her bereavement.

Her terror, too, at the giddy passes which they had to cross, with precipices yawning on either hand – so that it seemed as if a false step must send them rolling into the abyss – was so overpowering that the sublime spectacle of the snow-clad Alps seemed comparatively to produce but little impression on her. Her moral triumph over this constitutional timidity, when any special occasion arose, was all the more remarkable. One day when crossing the Col de Balme from Martigny to Chamounix, one of the side-saddles was found to be badly fitted, and would keep turning round, to the risk of the rider, if not very careful, slipping off at any moment. Marian, however, insisted on having this defective saddle in spite of the protest of Mrs. Bray, who felt quite guilty whenever they came to any perilous places.

How different is this timidity from George Sand's hardy spirit of enterprise! No one who has read that captivating book, her *Lettres d'un Voyageur*, can forget the great Frenchwoman's description of a Swiss expedition, during which, while encumbered with two young children, she seems to have borne all the perils, fatigues, and privations of a toilsome ascent with the hardihood of a mountaineer. But it should not be forgotten that, although Miss Evans was just then in a peculiarly nervous and excitable condition, and her frequent fits of weeping were a source of pain to her anxious fellow-travellers. She had, in fact, been so assiduous in attendance on her sick father, that she was physically broken down for a time. Under these circumstances an immediate return to England seemed unadvisable, and, when her

friends started on their homeward journey, it was decided that Marian should remain behind at Geneva.

Here, amid scenes so intimately associated with genius – where the "self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau," placed the home of his '*Nouvelle Héloïse*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.