On Liberty

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By John Stuart Mill.

With an Introduction by W. L. Courtney, LL.D.

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To the beloved and deplored memory of her who was the inspirer, and in part the author, of all that is best in my writings--the friend and wife whose exalted sense of truth and right was my strongest incitement, and whose approbation was my chief reward--I dedicate this volume. Like all that I have written for many years, it belongs as much to her as to me; but the work as it stands has had, in a very insufficient degree, the inestimable advantage of her revision; some of the most important portions having been reserved for a more careful re-examination, which they are now never destined to receive. Were I but capable of interpreting to the world one-half the great thoughts and noble feelings which are buried in her grave, I should be the medium of a greater benefit to it than is ever likely to arise from anything that I can write, unprompted and unassisted by her all but unrivalled wisdom.

INTRODUCTION.

I.

John Stuart Mill was born on 20th May 1806. He was a delicate child, and the extraordinary education designed by his father was not calculated to develop and improve his physical powers. "I never was

a boy," he says; "never played cricket." His exercise was taken in the form of walks with his father, during which the elder Mill lectured his son and examined him on his work. It is idle to speculate on the possible results of a different treatment. Mill remained delicate throughout his life, but was endowed with that intense mental energy which is so often combined with physical weakness. His youth was sacrificed to an idea; he was designed by his father to carry on his work; the individuality of the boy was unimportant. A visit to the south of France at the age of fourteen, in company with the family of General Sir Samuel Bentham, was not without its influence. It was a glimpse of another atmosphere, though the studious habits of his home life were maintained. Moreover, he derived from it his interest in foreign politics, which remained one of his characteristics to the end of his life. In 1823 he was appointed junior clerk in the Examiners' Office at the India House.

Mill's first essays were written in the _Traveller_ about a year before he entered the India House. From that time forward his literary work was uninterrupted save by attacks of illness. His industry was stupendous. He wrote articles on an infinite variety of subjects, political, metaphysical, philosophic, religious, poetical. He discovered Tennyson for his generation, he influenced the writing of Carlyle's _French Revolution_ as well as its success. And all the while he was engaged in studying and preparing for his more ambitious works, while he rose step by step at the India Office. His _Essays on Unsettled Questions in Political Economy_ were written in 1831, although they did not appear until thirteen years later. His _System of Logic_, the design of which was even then fashioning itself in his brain, took thirteen years to complete, and was actually

published before the _Political Economy_. In 1844 appeared the article on Michelet, which its author anticipated would cause some discussion, but which did not create the sensation he expected. Next year there were the "Claims of Labour" and "Guizot," and in 1847 his articles on Irish affairs in the _Morning Chronicle_. These years were very much influenced by his friendship and correspondence with Comte, a curious comradeship between men of such different temperament. In 1848 Mill published his _Political Economy_, to which he had given his serious study since the completion of his _Logic_. His articles and reviews, though they involved a good deal of work--as, for instance, the re-perusal of the _Iliad_ and the _Odyssey_ in the original before reviewing Grote's _Greece_--were recreation to the student. The year 1856 saw him head of the Examiners' Office in the India House, and another two years brought the end of his official work, owing to the transfer of India to the Crown. In the same year his wife died. _Liberty_ was published shortly after, as well as the _Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform_, and no year passed without Mill making important contributions on the political, philosophical, and ethical questions of the day.

Seven years after the death of his wife, Mill was invited to contest Westminster. His feeling on the conduct of elections made him refuse to take any personal action in the matter, and he gave the frankest expression to his political views, but nevertheless he was elected by a large majority. He was not a conventional success in the House; as a speaker he lacked magnetism. But his influence was widely felt. "For the sake of the House of Commons at large," said Mr. Gladstone, "I rejoiced in his advent and deplored his disappearance. He did us all good." After only three years in Parliament, he was defeated at the

next General Election by Mr. W. H. Smith. He retired to Avignon, to the pleasant little house where the happiest years of his life had been spent in the companionship of his wife, and continued his disinterested labours. He completed his edition of his father's _Analysis of the Mind_, and also produced, in addition to less important work, _The Subjection of Women_, in which he had the active co-operation of his step-daughter. A book on Socialism was under consideration, but, like an earlier study of Sociology, it never was written. He died in 1873, his last years being spent peacefully in the pleasant society of his step-daughter, from whose tender care and earnest intellectual sympathy he caught maybe a far-off reflection of the light which had irradiated his spiritual life.

II.

The circumstances under which John Stuart Mill wrote his _Liberty_ are largely connected with the influence which Mrs. Taylor wielded over his career. The dedication is well known. It contains the most extraordinary panegyric on a woman that any philosopher has ever penned. "Were I but capable of interpreting to the world one-half the great thoughts and noble feelings which are buried in her grave, I should be the medium of a greater benefit to it than is ever likely to arise from anything that I can write, unprompted and unassisted by her all but unrivalled wisdom." It is easy for the ordinary worldly cynicism to curl a sceptical lip over sentences like these. There may be exaggeration of sentiment, the necessary and inevitable reaction of a man who was trained according to the "dry light" of so unimpressionable a man as James Mill, the father; but the passage quoted is not the only one in which John Stuart Mill proclaims his unhesitating belief in the intellectual influence of his wife. The

treatise on _Liberty_ was written especially under her authority and encouragement, but there are many earlier references to the power which she exercised over his mind. Mill was introduced to her as early as 1831, at a dinner-party at Mr. Taylor's house, where were present, amongst others, Roebuck, W. J. Fox, and Miss Harriet Martineau. The acquaintance rapidly ripened into intimacy and the intimacy into friendship, and Mill was never weary of expatiating on all the advantages of so singular a relationship. In some of the presentation copies of his work on _Political Economy_, he wrote the following dedication:--"To Mrs. John Taylor, who, of all persons known to the author, is the most highly qualified either to originate or to appreciate speculation on social advancement, this work is with the highest respect and esteem dedicated." An article on the enfranchisement of women was made the occasion for another encomium. We shall hardly be wrong in attributing a much later book, _The Subjection of Women_, published in 1869, to the influence wielded by Mrs. Taylor. Finally, the pages of the _Autobiography_ ring with the dithyrambic praise of his "almost infallible counsellor."

The facts of this remarkable intimacy can easily be stated. The deductions are more difficult. There is no question that Mill's infatuation was the cause of considerable trouble to his acquaintances and friends. His father openly taxed him with being in love with another man's wife. Roebuck, Mrs. Grote, Mrs. Austin, Miss Harriet Martineau were amongst those who suffered because they made some allusion to a forbidden subject. Mrs. Taylor lived with her daughter in a lodging in the country; but in 1851 her husband died, and then Mill made her his wife. Opinions were widely divergent as to her merits;

but every one agreed that up to the time of her death, in 1858, Mill was wholly lost to his friends. George Mill, one of Mill's younger brothers, gave it as his opinion that she was a clever and remarkable woman, but "nothing like what John took her to be." Carlyle, in his reminiscences, described her with ambiguous epithets. She was "vivid," "iridescent," "pale and passionate and sad-looking, a living-romance heroine of the royalist volition and questionable destiny." It is not possible to make much of a judgment like this, but we get on more certain ground when we discover that Mrs. Carlyle said on one occasion that "she is thought to be dangerous," and that Carlyle added that she was worse than dangerous, she was patronising. The occasion when Mill and his wife were brought into close contact with the Carlyles is well known. The manuscript of the first volume of the _French Revolution_ had been lent to Mill, and was accidentally burnt by Mrs. Mill's servant. Mill and his wife drove up to Carlyle's door, the wife speechless, the husband so full of conversation that he detained Carlyle with desperate attempts at loquacity for two hours. But Dr. Garnett tells us, in his _Life of Carlyle_, that Mill made a substantial reparation for the calamity for which he was responsible by inducing the aggrieved author to accept half of the £200 which he offered. Mrs. Mill, as I have said, died in 1858, after seven years of happy companionship with her husband, and was buried at Avignon. The inscription which Mill wrote for her grave is too characteristic to be omitted:--"Her great and loving heart, her noble soul, her clear, powerful, original, and comprehensive intellect, made her the guide and support, the instructor in wisdom and the example in goodness, as she was the sole earthly delight of those who had the happiness to belong to her. As earnest for all

public good as she was generous and devoted to all who surrounded her, her influence has been felt in many of the greatest improvements of the age, and will be in those still to come. Were there even a few hearts and intellects like hers, this earth would already become the hoped-for Heaven." These lines prove the intensity of Mill's feeling, which is not afraid of abundant verbiage; but they also prove that he could not imagine what the effect would be on others, and, as Grote said, only Mill's reputation could survive these and similar displays.

Every one will judge for himself of this romantic episode in Mill's career, according to such experience as he may possess of the philosophic mind and of the value of these curious but not infrequent relationships. It may have been a piece of infatuation, or, if we prefer to say so, it may have been the most gracious and the most human page in Mill's career. Mrs. Mill may have flattered her husband's vanity by echoing his opinions, or she may have indeed been an Egeria, full of inspiration and intellectual helpfulness. What usually happens in these cases,--although the philosopher himself, through his belief in the equality of the sexes, was debarred from thinking so,--is the extremely valuable action and reaction of two different classes and orders of mind. To any one whose thoughts have been occupied with the sphere of abstract speculation, the lively and vivid presentment of concrete fact comes as a delightful and agreeable shock. The instinct of the woman often enables her not only to apprehend but to illustrate a truth for which she would be totally unable to give the adequate philosophic reasoning. On the other hand, the man, with the more careful logical methods and the slow processes of formal reasoning, is apt to suppose that the happy intuition which leaps to the conclusion is really based on the

intellectual processes of which he is conscious in his own case. Thus both parties to the happy contract are equally pleased. The abstract truth gets the concrete illustration; the concrete illustration finds its proper foundation in a series of abstract inquiries. Perhaps Carlyle's epithets of "iridescent" and "vivid" refer incidentally to Mrs. Mill's quick perceptiveness, and thus throw a useful light on the mutual advantages of the common work of husband and wife. But it savours almost of impertinence even to attempt to lift the veil on a mystery like this. It is enough to say, perhaps, that however much we may deplore the exaggeration of Mill's references to his wife, we recognise that, for whatever reason, the pair lived an ideally happy life.

It still, however, remains to estimate the extent to which Mrs. Taylor, both before and after her marriage with Mill, made actual contributions to his thoughts and his public work. Here I may be perhaps permitted to avail myself of what I have already written in a previous work.[1] Mill gives us abundant help in this matter in the _Autobiography_. When first he knew her, his thoughts were turning to the subject of Logic. But his published work on the subject owed nothing to her, he tells us, in its doctrines. It was Mill's custom to write the whole of a book so as to get his general scheme complete, and then laboriously to re-write it in order to perfect the phrases and the composition. Doubtless Mrs. Taylor was of considerable help to him as a critic of style. But to be a critic of doctrine she was hardly qualified. Mill has made some clear admissions on this point. "The only actual revolution which has ever taken place in my modes of thinking was already complete,"[2] he says, before her influence became paramount. There is a curiously humble estimate of his own powers (to which Dr. Bain has called attention), which reads at first

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