

XXXIX.

BOYHOOD AND RISE OF SIR THOMAS MORE.

Among the eminent men of one of the most remarkable periods of English history is Sir Thomas More, the records of whose early life throw some light upon the education of the time. More was born in Milk-street, Cheapside, in 1480, five years before the accession of Henry VII. to the throne. He was taught the first rudiments of education at St. Anthony's Free Grammar-school, in Threadneedle-street, one of the four grammar-schools founded by Henry VI., and at that period the most famous in London. Here More soon outstripped all his young companions, and made great proficiency in Latin, to which his studies were confined, Greek not being taught in schools:

It was the good custom of the age that the sons of the gentry, even of persons of rank, should spend part of their early years in the houses of the nobility, where they might profit by listening to the wisdom of their elders, and become accustomed, by the performance of humble and even menial offices, to stern discipline and implicit obedience. The internal economy of a great man's family, resembling on a smaller scale that of the monarch, was thought to be the proper school for acquiring the manners most conducive to success at court. Persons of good condition were, consequently, eager to place their sons in the families of the great, as the surest road to fortune. In this station it was not accounted degrading to submit even to menial service; while the greatest barons of the realm were proud to officiate as stewards, cup-bearers, and carvers to the monarch, a youth of good family could wait at table, or carry the train of a man of high condition, without any loss of dignity. To profit by such discipline, More, when about fourteen years of age, was removed from school to the palace of Cardinal Morton, archbishop of Canterbury and lord high chancellor. Here he attracted notice among the Cardinal's retinue, and was pointed out by him to the nobility who frequented his house, as a boy of extraordinary promise. "This child waiting at table," he would say, "whosoever shall live to see it, will prove a marvellous man." Listening daily to the conversation, and observing the conduct of such a personage, More naturally acquired more extensive views of men and things than any other course of education could, in that backward age, have supplied. Dean Colet, a visitor at the Cardinal's, used to say, "there is but one wit in England, and that is young Thomas More."

At the age of seventeen, More was sent by his patron to Oxford, where he studied Greek, which was then publicly taught in the University, though not without opposition. While at Oxford, More composed the greater number of his English poems, which Ben Jonson speaks of as some of the best in the English language. More retained his love of learning throughout life; and when he had risen to the highest offices, he frequently complained to his friend Erasmus, of being obliged to leave his friends and his books to discharge what were to him disagreeable commissions.

XL.

THE SCHOOL OF MORE.

We here follow More into his domestic retirement at Chelsea.

More hath built near London, (says Erasmus,) upon the Thames, such a commodious house, and is neither mean, nor subject to envy, yet magnificent enough. There he converseth affably with his family, his wife, his son and daughter, his three daughters and their husbands; with eleven grand-children. . . . You would say that there were in that place Plato's academy; but I do the house injure in comparing it to Plato's academy, wherein were only disputations of numbers and geometrical figures, and sometimes of moral virtues. I would rather call his house a school or university of Christian religion; for there is none therein but readeth or studieth the liberal sciences; their special care is piety and virtue; there is no quarrelling or intemperate words heard; none seem idle; which household discipline that worthy gentleman doth not govern by proud and lofty words, but with all kind and courteous benevolence. Every body performeth his duty, yet is there always alacrity, neither is sober mirth anything wanting.

In the intervals of business, the education of his children formed More's greatest pleasure. His opinions respecting female education differed very widely from what the comparative rudeness of the age might have led us to expect. By nothing he justly thought is female virtue so much endangered as by idleness, and the fancied necessity of amusement; and against these is there any safeguard so effectual as an attachment to literature? Some security is indeed afforded by a diligent application to various sorts of female employments; yet these, while they employ the hands,

give only partial occupation to the mind. But well-chosen books at once engage the thoughts, refine the taste, strengthen the understanding, and confirm the morals. Female virtue, informed by the knowledge which they impart, is placed on the most secure foundations, while all the milder affections of the heart, partaking in the improvement of the taste and fancy, are refined and matured. More was no convert to the notion, that the possession of knowledge renders women less pliant; nothing, in his opinion, was so untractable as ignorance. Although to manage with skill the feeding and clothing of a family is an essential portion in the duties of a wife and a mother, yet to secure the affections of a husband, he judged it no less indispensable to possess the qualities of an intelligent and agreeable companion. Nor ought a husband, if he regards his own happiness, neglect to endeavour to remove the casual defects of female education. Never can he hope to be so truly beloved, esteemed, and respected, as when the wife confides in him as her friend, and looks up to him as her instructor. Such were the opinions, with regard to female education, which More maintained in discourse, and supported by practice. His daughters, rendered proficient in music, and other elegant accomplishments proper for their sex, were also instructed in Latin, in which language they read, wrote, and conversed with the facility and correctness of their father. The results of this assiduous attention soon became conspicuous, and the *School of More*, as it was termed, attracted general admiration. In the meantime, the step-mother of the daughters, a notable economist, by distributing tasks, of which she required a punctual performance, took care that they should not remain unacquainted with female works, and with the management of a family. For all these employments, which together appear so far beyond the ordinary industry of women, their time was found sufficient, because no part of it was wasted in idleness or trifling amusements. If any of More's servants discovered a taste for reading, or an ear for music, he allowed them to cultivate their favourite pursuit. To preclude all improper conversation before children and servants at table, a domestic was accustomed to read aloud certain passages, so selected as to amuse, for the time, and to afford matter for much entertaining conversation.

Margaret Roper, the first-born of More's children, was as celebrated for her learning as beloved for her tender affection to her father in his hour of suffering. Erasmus called her *the ornament of Britain, and the flower of the learned matrons of England*, at a time when education consisted only of the revived study of ancient learning. She composed a touching account of the last hours of her father.

With a few words upon Sir Thomas More's views on Public Education we conclude. That he conceived the education of all classes to be most conducive to happiness, is evident from the following passages in his *Utopia*, professedly written to describe "the best state of a public weal," or in more familiar words, a sort of model nation. More says: "though there be not many in every city which be exempt and discharged of all other labours, and appointed only to learning—that is to say, such in whom, even from their very childhood, they have perceived a singular towardness, a fine wit, and a mind apt to good learning—yet all in their childhood be instructed in learning. And the better part of the people, both men and women, throughout all their whole life do bestow in learning those spare hours which we say they have vacant from their bodily labours." This was written nearly three centuries and a half since; the people of England have not yet reached this condition, although they are tending towards it by efforts at affording elementary instruction for all children, and inducing the habit of self-culture in all adults.

XLI.

WOLSEY, LATIMER, AND CRANMER.

The boyhood of three great men of this period shows the means of education then obtainable by the middle classes. Wolsey, who was the son of "an honest poor man," not a butcher's son, as commonly supposed, was sent when a boy to the Free Grammar-school at Ipswich; thence he was removed to Magdalene College, Oxford, and was subsequently appointed master of a grammar-school dependent on that college. Part of his ill-acquired wealth, Wolsey, late in life, expended in the advancement of learning. At Oxford, he founded the college of Christchurch; but before his magnificent design was completed, Wolsey had lost the favour of his sovereign, and the King having, immediately on the Cardinal's fall, taken possession of the revenues intended for the support of the college, the design had well nigh fallen to the ground; when Wolsey, in the midst of all his troubles, among his last petitions to the King,