

A CHARACTER STUDY

by

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The nineteenth century has given us two truly great women,-- one the great authoress who calls herself George Eliot is perhaps chiefly known as a novelist, but she is certainly more than a novelist in the sense in which the work applies to writers of great genius. The other is our beloved Francis E. Willard who is possibly the most conspicuous woman of her time. The importance of individuals depends much more upon whether they are on the right line, of progress than upon their intrinsic value.

Their environment has no doubt influenced them, as the hammer of the smith influences the iron which glowing from the forge, is laid on the anvil. The most important school for the training of character is the home, and each of these great women had a wise and noble mother.

Mary Ann Evans, as was George Eliot's maiden name, was born at South Farm, a mile from Griff, in the parish of Calton in Warwickshire, in November 1819, when the baby girl was only four months old, the Evans family removed to Griff, a charming red-brick ivy-covered house on the Arbury estate,-- and there George Eliot spent the first twenty-one years of her life. Her father who was of Welsh origin, started life as a carpenter, but soon became a land agent in Warwickshire. This position implied great responsibilities, and demanded thorough business capacities as well as firmness and trustworthiness of character. Her mother was a woman of unusual amount of natural force; a shrewd, practical person with an affectionate, warm-hearted nature.

Miss Willard, also was born in a humble home, was a farmer's daughter without rank or money, and spent practically the first two decades of her life at Forest Home in Wisconsin. Here Francis lived

with no neighbors within a mile, but with nature all around. Her parents were enthusiastic lovers of nature, Her mother early introduced her children to the poems of Coleridge, Cowper, Thompson, and Wordsworth, while the father was a kind of prairie Thoreau.

The great charm about this country life was the close fellowship which it established between the children and the world of nature.

In this home education, books naturally played a very considerable part. Among George Eliot's active employments she found time to lead the life of an industrious student. Though frequently interrupted by ill health, she was capable of sustained and severe attention to difficult subjects. She had a thorough knowledge of French, German, and Spanish, and could talk in each language correctly, though "with difficulty". She was fond of reading aloud especially Milton and the Bible; and a fine voice, perfectly under command, gave peculiar power to her rendering of solemn and majestic passages. Hebrew was a favorite study. But she read little of the lighter literature of the day. Besides her main studies she had dipped into scientific writings, had at one time taken to geometry, and thought that she had some aptitude for mathematics. If Miss Willard were to contribute to "Books that have influenced Me", she would doubtless trace most of her characteristic tendencies to the books she read in her early days.

First and foremost there was of course the Bible, which was read through every year at the regular rate of three chapters a day and five on Sunday. Then there was the "children's Pilgrim's Progress," "the sweetest book of my childhood," The best English poetry, the biographies of great men, the classics of history and

of religion formed the library which the eager spirit constantly devoured.

The true and independent development of George Eliot's mind began when after the death of her mother she took charge of Griff House for her father. But for all her knowledge of books, she attended to her ordinary feminine duties. She was proud of her good housekeeping, and her early training and love of order had given her a thorough knowledge of how such matters should be done.

After nineteen years spent in this happy, natural rural life on the prairie and among the trees and animals, Francis Willard began to pine after an independent existence. From the age of twelve she had gone to school at a neighbor's house. Later a little school house was built, and when she was seventeen she went to Milwaukee Female College, and then graduated at the Northwestern Female College Evanston. She broke down from overstudy before she graduated, but her indomitable will carried her through. In order to make an independent living she went out to be a school teacher when in her twentyfirst year. From 1858 to 1874 she had thirteen separate seasons of teaching in eleven separate institutions and six different towns, her pupils in all numbering about two thousand.

During all of George Eliot's early years, as, indeed, during all the years which followed them, religious and moral ponderings made the basis of her life. To her, as to most of the more serious spirits of her generation, religion came first after the Evangelical---for a time even after the Calvinistic--pattern. The figure of Dinah Morris is partially taken from her aunt Elizabeth Evans, whose simple goodness had much attraction for the earnest

self-questioning girl, and in other well known characters she has shown her deep realization of those forms of faith and piety which rest, not on outward ceremonies, but on the direct communion of the heart of God. The earnest almost lugubrious conception of life which she formed in these times, and which subsequent years and experience only intensified, no doubt gave the keynote to her whole temperament and genius. It produced in her that supreme development of the idea of duty and compassion for human suffering which elevates the tone of her writings with a lofty conception of life, enabled her to penetrate into the feelings and aspirations of all classes, and while it widened the range of her sympathy, never did so at the cost of genuineness or intensity of feeling.

It is natural to consider Miss Willard first as a reformer and to dwell upon the influence of her character and life upon the great moral questions of temperance and purity. But it should not be forgotten that had she done nothing in these her mightiest fields of work, her influence on the character of the young was sufficient to have made her existence rounded and rich, not because she gathered round her an association of women more fully organized and probably much stronger than any other woman's society in the world; but rather because she was a woman who saw ahead of her times, who realized that the evils that were around her must be grappled with by an entirely new conception of woman's responsibility to the world. It should be the pride of America that no other country could have produced her, and no other age understood her, but this will probably be for the future generations to realize what her life has meant to humanity.

It is rare to find an intellect so skilled in the analysis of the deepest psychological problems, so completely at home in

the conception and delineation of real character as was George Eliot. What is remarkable in her is the striking combination of her very deep speculative power with a very great and realistic imagination. George Eliot had observed the phases of a more natural and straightforward class of life, and she draws her external world as much as possible from observation--though some of her Florentine pictures must have been suggested more of literary study than of personal experience. That George Eliot shows the masculine breadth and strength of her genius adds less to the charm of her tales--- that is the shrewdness and miscellaneous range of her observations on life. The influence of Thackeray seems to have had a distinctly bad effect on her genius at first, but in "Silas Marner" that influence began to wane, and quite disappeared in "Romola".

While George Eliot was a great authoress, it may also be said Francis Willard was a great Orator. She had the gift of eloquence. She was a subtle, thoughtful, thrilling speaker. Her words were clear and pellucid as crystal. They bore internal evidence of complex sincerity. If her presence was not imposing it was at the beginning always tranquillizing and afterward full of sweet surprises.. Her voice was clear and melodious and strong, with a peculiar quality of blended defiance and deference, of tenderness and intrepidity that gave it an indescribable charm. "She had discovered that legislative results were not worth the paper upon which they were written unless the same moral forces that had succeeded in obtaining them had also a voice in choosing the executive that was to carry them into effect. She knew that the religious feelings of a country was of little use unless it permeated its whole executive life, and that the divorce that had existed so

long between the church, in the widest truest sense of the word, the government of the nations and the framing of the laws were wholly disastrous to the best intellect of any people. In order to endeavor to educate the coming race she did not set about a system of reform that meant a sweeping down of all existing barriers, a destruction of all that is, in order to make room for that which was to be; but she realized that, to effect great reforms, it is the home circle that must be first touched with a deep sense of responsibility for that wider circle beyond, which we call the nation.

Both of these great nineteenth century women possessed in an eminent degree that power which has led to success in so many directions---that of keeping the mind unceasingly at the stretch without conscious fatigue. Ceasing to read or to ponder when other duties called, but never, as it seemed, because they themselves felt tired.

The story of George Eliot's life is a simple and perhaps an unsuggestive one to some. It is the record of the steady development of a strong and serious mind. In the intervals between her successive compositions her mind was always fusing and combining its fresh stores, and had her life been prolonged, it is probable that she would have produced work at least equal in merit to anything which she had already achieved. Her natural candor of self-judgment had perhaps been fostered by the tardiness of her success, which had worked in her the best effect which long obscurity can produce on strong and humble natures. It had accustomed her to conceive of herself as of one who must still strive, who sees his work before him, whose ideal is not yet attained. It is said that in any casual allusion to her own faulty tendencies she seemed to

have, felt less need to guard against those which go with failure than against those which go with success.

Miss Willard's life was different in many respects from that of George Eliot's. It was indeed a prismatic many sided life, and whether we think of her as the prairie child, as daughter, sister, student, teacher, orator, leader, reformer, it was on every side a white life, facing the sun and absorbing and reflecting the light. She had the genius of leadership in that no detail was too small for her attention. Her infinitely fine perception knew each chord that should vibrate in the great white ribbon chorus, as the master of the great orchestra detects instantly the absence of the smallest instrument, or the slightest mote of discord, so her sensitive soul felt the inharmony,--fertile brain and loving heart seeking at once to bring perfect accord. Most rarely did she fail. It is unnecessary to dwell upon the breadth of the work that she has accomplished. She has done far more than build a vast temperance organization the world over. It is quite true that her conception has bound the women of all lands in one great society; that her enthusiasm, has fired missionaries to start out round the world carrying with them their gospel of a pure life and a protected home; that armies of children are enlisted in the great league for reform who will grow up to be the home guard of America's best interests: but she did more than all this---She taught the world that woman loses none of her best attributes, her gentlest influence, her strongest hold upon the affections of home and children, neglects none of the sweet home ways, because she realizes that life holds for her responsibilities to humanity which she dare not ignore.

An acute thinker, a keen if somewhat ponderous critic, a review-writer of power and promise--such was George Eliot at

thirtyseven. At this age the caustic reviewer was suddenly changed into the ardent romancist. Everything in her aspect and presence was in keeping with her soul. The deeply lined face, the too marked and massive features, were united with an air of delicate refinement which in one way was the more impressive because it seemed to proceed so entirely from within. Nay, the inward beauty would sometimes quite transform the external harshness; it was said, and that there were times when the thin hands that entwined themselves in their eagerness, the earnest figure would bend forward to speak and hear, the deep gaze would move from one face to another with a grave appeal,-- all these seemed the transparent symbols that showed the presence of a wise, benignant soul. Her real interests remained throughout her life what they were when she first began to write-- strictly intellectual. Nothing, indeed, was more remarkable in this last period of her life than her intense mental vitality, which failing health did not seem in the least to impair.

But one thing may be safely said--that whatever revelations may be in store for the world, they will serve only to reveal her character, and increase the general reverence for her genius. She was great alike in mind and nature, and her place in literature is among the small band of creative artists whose names are immortal, and whose supremacy is disputed only by the rivalries of egoism, challenged only by the vanity of envy.

Most people do not change after forty years, experience is only a deepening of ruts and not an added power for progress. Not so with Miss Willard, for she was always developing, growing, particularly on social lines. Two of her most beautiful traits were her clearness of vision and her sincerity.

It may be said that her success was due to three things--

first, she learned that life was given us for work, and secondly that everyone has his own specific work to do, and lastly she knew of the importance of carrying through to the end whatever undertaking assigned to her.

Francis Willard's fiftyeight years were rich in experience and thought, in sorrow and aspiration, in disappointment and achievement; they were more than centuries of common life. The shock of her death reveals the weight of her influence, "She is no longer a voice and a corporeal enchantment weaving about us the spell of a luminous conscience and a pure heart. She has taken her place in the "Choir invisible," but audible forever in heaven and on earth," All that the words of an admiring world could offer to any woman's memory the world has done for her, and yet she least of all women needed eulogy. For souls like hers justice is a higher tribute than praise, and to follow where she led a better offering than speech.

Thus we find in the study of these two great lives, that the foundation of character is laid in the training and testing which it receives; and the nature of the resulting life will depend on the nature of the elements entering into it. And again we see the importance of the home. Here the mind of the child yields readily to home influences grows and develops either a strong, healthful character, or one utterly useless, according as the surrounding have been for good or for evil. It requires the practice and discipline of real life, of temptations and even hardships, to form a character that can stand firm before the world, bearing the wear and tear of actual existence, bearing anything and doing everything to brighten and widen the sphere of human existence.

In this study one can clearly see the influence of labor on

character. It has a strengthening and invigorating effect, it allows contact with the world and a taking part in its affairs which is of great practical benefit. Every person who would accomplish anything in the world must necessarily meet with actions and opinions which do not agree with his own. To rise above that which he believes to be injurious and to help forward that which is deserving of aid, involves such collisions and oppositions as, if born out would rouse the energies into such activity as to make a character eager and watchful for all the issues of life.

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