

**THE REAL SIR
RICHARD
BURTON; PP. 21-238**

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The Real Sir Richard Burton; pp. 21-238 by Walter Phelps Dodge

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II

HIS DESULTORY BOYHOOD



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AS to the date and place of his birth, Burton himself says: "I was born at 9.30 p.m. March 19th (Feast of St. Joseph in the Calendar), 1821, at Barham House, Herts, and suppose I was baptized in due course at the village church."*

He was christened Richard Francis.

Thomas Wright, however, in his "Life," states that Burton was born at Torquay on March 19, 1821.

Burton's niece, Miss Stisted, in her

* "Life of Capt. Sir Richard F. Burton," by his Wife, Isabel Burton. London: Chapman and Hall, 1893, vol. i. chap. ii. p. 15.



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“True Life,” says he was born at Barham House.

His father was Lieut.-Col. Joseph Netterville Burton ; while his mother was Martha Baker. There were two other children in the family—Maria, who afterwards became Lady Stisted, and Edward, who died unmarried.

Colonel Burton was a great sufferer from asthma, and, in the vain hope of securing relief from his annoying complaint, roamed incessantly from place to place on the Continent, dragging his family about with him.

Under the influence of these constant changes it is not to be wondered at that the eldest son should have developed a habit of wandering about the world.

Tours was the first foreign objective point of the family. For this there were several reasons : the English colony was reputed select and exclusive ; the educational facilities were famous and the air was dry.

The Château de Beauséjour, the first home of the Burtons, soon became noted for its entertainments, and was known for famous wine-cellars. Colonel Burton spent nearly all his time at boar-hunting in the leafy recesses of the wood of Amboise, while Mrs. Burton was by nature, as well as by name, a Martha of old. From all accounts, the Burtons must have been charming people. "Nice to be able to feel proud of one's parents," Richard Burton used to say in after-life. His father appears to have been a handsome man; his mother, on the other hand, was rather plain.

Burton says himself he was like his mother, but Lady Burton indignantly negatives the statement in her "Life" (vol. i. p. 3 note): "This I deny. Richard was the handsomest and most attractive man I have ever seen."

A difference had been made to the financial position of the Burtons by the fact that




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Colonel Burton had been obliged to go on half pay by the Duke of Wellington for refusing to testify against Queen Caroline. He had been in control at Genoa when the Queen lived there, and her kindness to the officers and men had so impressed the elder Burton that he refused to appear against her. Richard Burton thoroughly approved of his father's course in this matter, although it compelled him to begin life as an East Indian cadet, while his cousins were in the Guards.

Richard Burton says of himself that he began Latin at three and Greek at four, but there is not recorded for him in these subjects the brilliant success that distinguishes the common or garden infant phenomenon.

At the age of six he was sent to a day school kept by a lame Irish schoolmaster with a vile temper. From his care Burton was transferred to that of a Scotch dominie, who caned his pupils regularly on the



principle of an ounce of prevention. After this experience of the Celtic fringe, Burton showed a special aptitude for French, and a strong tendency towards the art of swordsmanship, an art on which he was later to become a recognised authority.

Burton says of himself at this school: "We boys became perfect devilets, and played every kind of trick, despite the rattan." It is to be doubted whether he then learned much, as his time seems to have been chiefly occupied in fighting his fellow-pupils, who were a *mélange* of all nations. In after-life he expressed himself strongly on the absurdity of bringing up English boys on the Continent.

About the time of the Revolution that placed the treacherous Louis Philippe upon the throne of his more deserving but unhappy cousin, Colonel Burton resolved to take his boys to England, realising that the experiment at Tours had hardly proved a success. The knowledge of French gained



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by the children during those early years was the only gain.

The heavy travelling carriage was brought out; and after an auction sale of household goods, Colonel and Mrs. Burton took their hopeful family back to London. It appears that Colonel Burton had intended to send his boys to Eton, but he abandoned this intention, to settle down in a roomy house at Richmond in Maids-of-Honour Row, where the boys were sent to a private school kept by one Delafosse (chaplain to the Duke of Cumberland), a sort of early English Squeers, whose teaching failed to supply the needed antidote to the Irish and Scotch "education" imbibed at Tours.

Here again Richard Burton distinguished himself by conflicts with the other boys. He was described by his sister at this time as "a thin, dark little boy, with small features and large black eyes." From a description of the food at this school one begins to believe in the doctrine of the