WILLIAM DENTON, THE GEOLOGIST AND RADICAL: A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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THE

GEOLOGIST AND RADICAL.

"Who reigns within himself, and rules
Passions, desires, and fears, is more than king."—MILTON.

CHARACTER is the growth of time. Solid as rock, beautiful as love, is integrity grounded upon the virtues.

We cannot fail to appreciate high-toned character — that is, if we are not utterly devoid of appreciative powers in the direction of morals.

This old world of ours is a hard battle-field. We all, more or less, go through drill and are *forced* into fights. Woe betide us if we lack courage or honor.

"Some men defeat makes great, victory less." Others rise to Alpine peaks of success, unchanged in valor and truthfulness, through a hundred battles. These are the true heroes, conquerors over self, whom neither adversity nor fortune can demean.

It is well that character is a soul-inheritance, worth more than princely palaces, and mines of material treasure; that men have lived along the line of the centuries, whose characters were dearer to them than their lives. Well that such men live to-day. Their lives are lessons, illustrated with heroic pictures, noble actions, achievements inspiring to humanity. To such, progress owes more than words can compute.

"To-day abhorred, to-morrow adored," the best men and women of the world fight their way through sloughs of Despond and murky morasses of dilletantes, conscious of the divine dignity of integrity.

It is pleasant to recall the lessons of biography, especially those that belong to the Reformer. From Jesus to John Brown, what a mighty array of heroes on the progressive track are marshalled before us. I fancy I hear their courageous voices in concert, chanting the World's Marseillaise of Freedom.

In the treasured hope of sketching a portrait that will be loved by multitudes, and offering illustrations of sturdy, uncompromising perseverence, as well as proofs of acquired success, which appeal pleadingly to laggards on the base of the hill of knowledge, I propose to myself the task before me. It is customary, I am aware, to write more of a man who makes his mark in any department deemed worthy, after he has dropped into the grave of his fathers, than during his life-time on earth.

I do not care to follow custom, without a due regard for reason. I think I see in William Denton, a man who has won his way to a place in the hearts of all liberalists; not that all liberalists agree with his conclusions in all things, but because he has fought a good fight against authority, in favor of enlightened individualism, and thus, to his fullest power, rendered service to liberalism.

Besides, I regard the difficulties of his life-path, which, with much fasting and unflagging will, he surmounted, a theme which points a moral, useful to those who sicken at failure and give up the task of toil in despair. Further, I feel that his work in the field of Reform is a valiant and eminently useful work, and am desirous of

throwing what light I possess on his career, that his friends may see the struggles through which the hero grew with the man.

Satisfying his friends, what of his enemies? Enemies! Can Denton have enemies? Echo, he is heterodox — orthodoxy is never charitable, always implacable. Perhaps after reading this sketch, even he of the fold of Christ, who christened the geologist, "the special child of the Devil," may relent and recant, finding that this Devil's child owns a character for sturdy uprightness, graced by sincerity, not too frequent even in the churches, which claim special goodness through Christ. I propose to give even "the devil his due," so proceed.

The world's chief-thinkers and actors have, mostly, like the Nazarene, had a manger, or something akin to it, for a birth-place. Poverty would seem indigenous to genius, were it not for the few representatives nurtured in the heart of luxury.

William Denton was born, like many another whom the world shall love to honor, in comparatively humble circumstances. He came into being with neither a silver spoon in his mouth, nor a geologist's hammer in his hand. Yet he had the germ-principle, which has enabled him to secure both; the one to sup milk with, the other to strike the rocky mountains and loosen the teeth of the orthodox devil.

On Jan. 8th, 1823, at Darlington, Durham Co., England, William became a denizen of the world.

It is a common event in the history of the poor, the birth of a child. Common and maybe saddening was the event of the dawn of another infant at the Dentons. They were poor. What right had poverty to children? How could they fly in the face of Malthus

and Adam Smith; add to an already increased population and their own heavy burdens? Political Economy was supplanted by Methodism. Ignorance and its offspring, fanaticism, must have blinded the eyes of the parents. Four children, including William, were enough surely to tax to the full the energies of the father, whose utmost earnings at wool-combing brought the family a weekly stipend of ten shillings. The poor do not profit by Malthusian or Smithsonian deductions. That is a marked fact. They will persist in increasing the population, and rejecting the plainest politico-economic axioms.

William's father was a sturdy, true man, who had the disadvantage — ignorance of scholarship, to add to his poverty.

It was a bright day for him when he married, for he not only took unto himself an exemplary wife, but a woman who had spent years in teaching school. By his marriage he secured a tutor, and was taught by her to write and cast up accounts.

As child after child claimed food, clothing and education, the mother was necessitated to employ every available hour in binding shoes. The whole family occupied one large square room at a cheap rent, finding life not all a bed of roses.

Amongst the friends of Mrs. Denton, was a kindly old woman, Nelly Sedgwick. She maintained herself by keeping a small school.

The boy William was only three years of age when it was arranged for Nelly to initiate him into the mysteries of education.

His first lessons were acquired readily, the more so on account of the good nature of Nelly. She was incapable of hurting a hair of any child under her care.

Yet she had a stick long enough to reach every pupil, and used it to gently tap the heads of youthful delinquents without rising from her seat.

The boy's progress was rapid, owing in a great measure to the help of his father, who spent every spare minute in instructing the boy. At four years he could read the Bible, a pleasing fact for his parents. He was transferred from old Nelly's school to the British Penny School in Darlington.

He soon began to manifest a relish for books. Naturally his taste was governed by the views of his parents. The Methodist Library, at that time, was to the young student a world of marvelous and exhaustless riches. Baxter's "Saint's Rest," "Pilgrim's Progress," and volumes of "The Methodist Magazine" were, speaking figuratively, swallowed by him with avidity. He attended the Sunday School, and soon grew familiar with its ritualism.

When he reached eight years he was called upon to recite from memory a chapter of the Bible. It was a red-letter day with the school. The pupils all assembled in the church. The parents, visitors, and the minister were listeners. William was with others in the gallery. He was expected to bow his head to the congregation before speaking his piece; it was his first appearance before an audience in the character of speaker. All was breathless silence in the church. The boy knew his task; down went his head on the desk, the sound rung through the sacred edifice. Why did he bow so low and awkwardly? A general titter which was irrepressible, brought the minister to his feet, who solemnly reprimanded them for daring to laugh aloud in the house of God.

During this time, William's mind exulted in an atmosphere outside of science. He had not the faintest conception that other themes than those which had occupied his attention, like new orbs in the heavens, would yet unfold unimagined beauties to his rapt gaze.

"A change came o'er the spirit of his dream." A new teacher, William Shotton, came to the day school. He was a *rara avis*.

William marvelled at his erudition, and delighted to listen to his practical lessons in Phrenology and Electricity. Shotton was a Baptist. William often heard from his lips conclusions on religious subjects, anti-methodistic. The tutor had a galvanic battery of his own make with which he experimented, to the delectation of the pupils.

New fields of thought dawned upon the boy. He was not himself conscious at the time of the silent revolution working in his soul.

There was a library in connection with the school in which William Shotton was teacher. Religious bobks, mostly tinctured with Methodism, had strongly impressed the student's mind, necessarily influencing his life. Glorious! "The Penny Magazine," "The Saturday Magazine," and Chambers' Works fell into his hands.

The world had no material riches that could purchase the privilege he owned. Happiness like his was not to be found in animal pursuits. True, his home was humble, his parents poor; coarse food was to him a luxury. He lived in a heaven not specially apportioned to the saints, yet he did not find rest.

At this stage of his career, William commenced his studies in Geology, reading closely on the subject and preparing, hammer in hand, for future researches.

Eleven years old, he must earn something for the "glorious privilege of being independent."

He was hired by a currier of Darlington for a year, and paid a half-crown — about 60 cents, a week.

He worked valiantly, with a growing distaste for the business. Being young, he was considered of little account, except for the work he accomplished. The foreman, with the spirit but not the genius of Dean Swift, used to fling the weekly wages at the boy, as the dean is said to have flung his benefactions at the poor who sought his patronage.

During his stay in the currier's shop, the boy had an opportunity of exhibiting for the first time, his powers in debate. A split in the old Methodist society excited the religious world. The spirit of reform wore the disguise of the devil and stirred up immense commotion. Multitudes grew tired of the rule of authority in Methodism. It was to them Popery, and nothing better. They desired to have a voice in the regulation of the church. Hence the split.

William's father, a firm Methodist of good standing, took sides with the progressives. William himself stood on his father's platform. An old man working with William asserted himself true blue to the old society, and looked upon the dissentients as infidels. The wordy conflict between the man and boy was hot, but it had the effect on William of a strong mental stimulant. Doubtless there was much surprise manifested by those who heard the debate, at the ability of the youthful disputant.

Another change. He left the currier's shop, and for three months was employed by a Methodist minister in his grocery store in Darlington. This arrangement was brought about by the boy's father, who supposed