

THE STORY OF THE "IMITATIO CHRISTI"

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The story of the "Imitatio Christi" by Leonard A. Wheatley

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LEONARD A. WHEATLEY

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"IMITATIO CHRISTI"**

PREFACE.

IN the original scheme of the Book-Lover's Library it was proposed to devote certain volumes to the history of books of world-wide fame. After the Bible no book has been so much read or enjoyed so extended a fame, as "The Imitation of Christ" of Thomas à Kempis, and it therefore seems specially appropriate to commence this branch of the series with an account of this famous work.

The late Mr. Edward Waterton, who from his great knowledge of the subject was eminently fitted for the task, undertook to write "The Story of the Imitation."

He had collected some MSS. and numerous editions of the work, and had already written a Life of Thomas à Kempis, as well as several letters in defence of this author. He, however, died before he was able to accomplish the task. I was then asked to take up the subject, and as I had already devoted some attention to it, I gladly agreed to the suggestion. I have endeavoured to write in the same spirit as Mr. Waterton had done, and to aid in the cause he had so much at heart; to show as plainly as I can how the four treatises now known under the name of "The Imitation of Christ" had their origin in the "Rapiaria," or books of extracts recommended by Gerard Groot to his followers the Brethren of Common Life, and how the forms of expression in this work betray its origin in this*

* Articles in *Bibliographer*, May 1884, and in *Scottish Review*, July 1885.

community, and also the land of its birth; and how the majority of the MSS. of the editions and translations confirm this opinion.

I have also tried to trace the mysticism to be found in "The Invitation" from that in the German mystics who preceded Thomas à Kempis, as also the more practical ideas from the works of his friends and contemporaries.

I am largely indebted to those who have spent much labour on this subject, especially to Rev. S. Kettlewell, whose valuable works first stirred in me the love of the author, and afforded much help, especially in those chapters relating to the "Brothers of Common Life," and to "Thomas à Kempis;" to Dr. Cruise, not only for his published work, but for his kind sympathy and friendly help; as also to the works of Canon Santini and Father Becker.

I wish to express my great obligations to Rev. Provost Murray of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, for information regarding the MS. in the Library of that College; to Professor Robertson Smith, for a note on the MS. in the University Library, Cambridge; to F. Madan, Esq., Sub-Librarian of the Bodleian Library, for an account of the various MSS. in Oxford; and also to Dr. Ingram, of Dublin, for various readings in the Dublin and Cambridge MSS. of the first English translation.

There are several portraits of Thomas à Kempis, which prove that when alive his fame was widely extended. In them he is represented either in his cell or in the open air in the grounds of Mount St. Agnes. One of the former has been engraved, but it would not bear reduction to suit this volume. Of the latter there are two oil paintings in Holland, one at

Zwolle, which is unfortunately much decayed, and another at Gertruidenberg, which is in good preservation. It belongs to Pastor Allard of that town, and is evidently genuine. By the kindness of Dr. Cruise we have been enabled to secure a negative of this portrait, which forms the frontispiece of the volume.

While this work has been in progress we have had to lament the death of two of the most accomplished defenders of the rights of Thomas, Canon Spitzen and Mons. Ruelens the obliging and accomplished keeper of the Burgundian Library at Brussels. May their labours not be in vain; and may this little volume be the means of furthering the same cause, and help to settle the claims of Thomas à Kempis to be the true author of "The Imitation of Christ."

