

ADVENTURES, NATIONAL CUSTOMS,
AND CURIOUS FACTS.

MILTON.

THE father of John Milton was the son of a substantial English Catholic farmer, who disinherited him because he turned Protestant. Coming to London in quest of fortune, he set up in the business of notary and conveyancer, in which he gained a considerable fortune. The very spot in Broad Street, City, where his house stood, in which he lived and worked, and in which the poet was born, existed until a few months since. Houses were not numbered then, but distinguished by signs. Over the door of a bookseller there would be a gilt Bible; perhaps; over a baker's shop a sheaf of wheat; and some men would mark their houses by a sign having no reference to their occupation. Milton, the scrivener, distinguished his office and abode by putting up over the entrance a black spread eagle, the arms of his family.

This thriving notary, besides being a man of reading and culture, was a composer of music; and some of his compositions, which were published in his lifetime, have been found in musical works of that day. John Milton owed the bent and nurture of his mind to his father. His father was his first instructor, and when the boy was ten years old, he proved for him a tutor of eminent qualifications. This good parent early discovered the prodigious genius of his son, and he made the culture of that genius the chief object of his existence. The poet was enabled, by his father's liberality, to pass the first thirty-one years of his life in gaining knowledge and cultivating his faculties. Until he was thirty-one, John Milton was a student, and nothing but a student; first, at home, at his father's side, next at a great London grammar-school, then at Cambridge University, afterwards at his father's house in the country, and finally in foreign countries. During all this long period of preparation, he was a most diligent, earnest, and intense student.

It was during his residence in Italy that his literary ambition was born. From an early period of his youth he had been accustomed to write Latin poems, some of which he carried with him to Italy and showed to his learned friends there. They were struck with wonder that a man from distant England should have attained such mastery of the Latin language, and they were not less astonished that a Briton should be so excellent a poet. It was their hearty praise, he says in one of his letters, that first suggested to him the idea of devoting his life to literature. Then and there it was, he tells us, that he began to think that "by labour and intent study" he might, perhaps, produce something so written that posterity would not willingly let it die. A great Christian Poem was the object to which he aspired. He desired to do for England what Homer had done for Greece, Virgil for Rome, Dante for Italy, and Camoens for Portugal.

While he was indulging these pleasing dreams under the deep blue of the Italian sky, the news came to him that civil war was about to break out in England. So the poet and scholar turned his steps homeward when he heard that hostilities were imminent between his countrymen and their king. Farewell, Poetry, for twenty years!

When Milton returned to his native land, after two years' absence, it was not at his father's house that he found a home. He preferred to reside in London, where he took a few pupils to prepare for the University. These were his employments for many years, until Oliver Cromwell appointed him his Latin secretary.

He was extremely unfortunate in his relations with women. Until he was thirty-five he lived a bachelor; and it had been better for him, perhaps, if he had remained such all his life. In his thirty-fifth year, just as the civil war was actually beginning, he went into the country, telling no one the object of the journey. A month after he returned home a married man, bringing his wife with him. She was a good enough country girl, the daughter of an old friend of Milton's father, but as unsuitable a wife for John Milton as any woman in England. She was rather stupid, very ignorant, fond of pleasure, accustomed to go to country balls and dance with gay young officers. Milton was a grave, austere student, absorbed in the weightiest public topics, and living only in his books and in his thoughts. The poor girl found his house so intolerably dull, that, after a short trial of it, she asked leave to go home for a short visit; and, being at home, she positively refused to go back. But during the troubles of the civil war, his wife's family being driven from their home, he took them all into his house, with his own aged father, and so they again lived together. They had three daughters, who resembled their mother more than their

father, and who loved him little more than she did. She died when the youngest of these children was an infant in arms. Three years after, he was married again, and in less than a year he was left again a widower. Six years later he married his third wife, who was twenty-eight years younger than himself, and who survived him for the long period of fifty-five years. This last marriage was embittered by ceaseless contentions between his daughters and his wife, of which Milton lays the blame upon his daughters. He says his wife was good and kind to him in his blind old age, but that his daughters were unadulterated and inhuman—not only neglecting him, and leaving him alone, but plotting with his maid-servant to cheat him in the marketing.

During all this time of domestic trouble, his labours were incessant. Besides his political writings, he wrote for the use of his pupils a short Latin grammar, part of a History of England, and other school-books. At that day, a great part of all diplomatic and other state papers were written in Latin, and it was Milton's duty to write such. It was a somewhat lucrative employment: the salary was 290*l.* per annum. Most zealously did John Milton serve the government of the Protector. So arduous were his labours, that his eyes, which began to fail him at thirty-five, gave way entirely ten years after. Before Milton had completed his forty-sixth year, he was totally and incurably blind. An assistant was granted him, and he retained his post until Cromwell died, though at a reduced salary. This reduced salary, however, he would have enjoyed for life if the government had remained unchanged. He was fifty-five years of age, blind and prematurely old, when the restoration of the monarchy, under Charles II, consigned him to private life, and gave him back to poetry.

Now it was that he realized the dream of his early manhood, and wrote his great poem—the work of just five years. For this poem, the product of a life of thought and five years of toil, Milton received eighteen pounds, and it sold to the extent of about 3,000 copies in seven years. This was a large sale for that day, and adds one more to our list of proofs that a great man is appreciated during his own lifetime. Milton certainly was. We have evidence enough that even in the reign of Charles II, all that was high and noble in England bent in veneration before the majestic genius of this blind old man.

Milton lived seven years after the publication of *Paradise Lost*. He died in 1674, aged sixty-six years. His property, which amounted to fifteen hundred pounds sterling, became the subject of a lawsuit between the widow and the daughters of the poet. They had quarrelled over the dying bed, and they quarrelled over his freshly-made grave.

Milton was a man of small stature, slender make, delicate features, and pale complexion. But for the manliness and vigour of his bearing, his appearance would have been feminine. He rose early, and loved a walk in the fields, delighting in the birds, the flowers, and the sweet morning air. He was simple in his diet, and was cheerful over his food. Great numbers of the learned and noble, both native and foreign, visited him in his modest abode. During the last years of his life, there was only one name in Great Britain more honoured than his, and that was the august name of the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell.

We read the other day a letter of Voltaire, which states that when he was an exile in London in 1727, fifty-three years after Milton's death, word was brought to the circle of wits and lords who frequented the house of Alexander Pope, that a daughter of Milton's was living close by, with her children, in a condition approaching want. In two hours, says the French poet, a sum of money was raised for her sufficient to make her comfortable for the rest of her life.

ADVENTURE WITH A RHINOCEROS.

ONE fine moonlight night, when snugly ensconced in my "skarm," and contemplating the strange, but picturesque scene before me, my reverie was interrupted by the inharmonious grunting of a black rhinoceros. He was evidently in bad humour, for, as he emerged from amongst the trees into more open ground, I observed him madly charging anything and everything that he encountered, such as bushes, stones, &c. Even the whitened skulls and skeletons of his own species, lying scattered about on the ground, were attacked with inconceivable fury. I was much amused at his eccentric pastime; but, owing to the openness of the ground, and the quantity of the limestone thereabouts, which made objects more distinct, he was not easy of approach. However, after divesting myself of my shoes, and all the more conspicuous parts of my dress, I managed to crawl—pushing my gun before me—to within a short distance of the snorting beast. As he was advancing in a direct line towards

me, I did not like to fire, because one has little chance of killing the rhinoceros when in that position. Having approached to within a few feet of me, his attention was attracted, and suddenly uttering one of those strange "blowing" noises, so peculiar to the beast when alarmed or enraged, he prepared to treat me in a similar manner to the stones and skulls he had just so unceremoniously tossed about. Not a moment was to be lost, and, in self-defence, I fired at his head. I shall never forget the confusion of the animal on receiving the contents of my gun. Springing nearly perpendicularly into the air, and to the height of many feet, he came down again with a thump that seemed to make the earth tremble—then plunging violently forward (in doing which he all but trampled on me), he ran round and round the spot for fully five minutes, enveloping every object in a cloud of dust. At last he dashed into the wood and was hidden from view. Not finding blood on his tracks, I had no reason to suppose he was much hurt. My notion is, the bullet struck his horn, partially stunning him with its jarring violence. Had my gun missed fire when he charged, it is more than probable I should have been impaled.—Anderson's "Africa."

NOTES ON FRUITS.

THE apple is at once the most brisk and refreshing of any of the common hardy orchard fruits. It remains the longest in season, is used in the greatest number of ways, and, therefore, is the most generally cultivated. The varieties in the apple at present known are considerably more than a thousand. Many of the better sorts of English apples were at first introduced into this country from the Continent, and the greater part of our names of apples are French, either pure or corrupted. The fine cyder orchards of Herefordshire began to be planted in the reign of Charles I. The adaptation of these apples to the soil was quickly discovered, and they spread over the whole face of the country. The cyder counties of England lie something in the form of a horse-shoe round the Bristol Channel: the best are Worcester and Hereford on the north of the Channel, and Somerset and Devon on the south.

The pear is among the trees which Homer describes as forming the orchard of Laertes, the father of Ulysses. Pliny mentions several sorts of pears which were grown in Italy, and particularly mentions that a fermented liquor was formed of their expressed juice. It is probable that the Romans brought the cultivated pear to England, and the monks paid great attention to its varieties. The Chinese, who carry the cultivation of fruit to very great perfection, have pears, white in the inside, melting, and with a fragrant smell, of the enormous weight of ten pounds each.

The cherry is a native of most temperate countries of the northern hemisphere. It is generally said that the first of the present cultivated sorts was introduced about the time of Henry VIII, and was originally planted in Kent. The cherry orchards of Kent are still celebrated. It seems, however, that they were known much earlier, or at any rate cherries were hawked about London before the middle of the sixteenth century, in the very same manner as at present. Our popular song of "Cherry ripe" is very slightly altered from Herrick, a poet of the time of Charles I. There are about 250 varieties of cherries cultivated in England.

The currant was formerly erroneously held to be the Corinthian grape degenerated. It is now considered as a native of this country, the red being found growing naturally in many places both of England and Scotland, and the white being merely a variety of the red. The black currant is supposed also to be a native of Britain, or at all events the period of its introduction is unknown.

The gooseberry, if not a native of Britain, is yet a fruit much better adapted to cold than to warm climates. It was cultivated in the time of Henry VIII. In the south of Europe the gooseberry is small, tasteless, and neglected; and though it grows to a large size in the warmer parts of England, its flavour there is very inferior to that which it has in Scotland. Even in that country the flavour seems to increase with the cold; for if there be warmth enough for bringing gooseberries to maturity and ripening them, the farther north they are grown the better. In England, the Lancashire gooseberries are the finest in appearance. They are very large; but still their flavour is far inferior to that of the Scotch. Perhaps the inferiority of the English berries may be in great part owing to the large sorts that are cultivated, the finest, even in Scotland, being those that are of a middle size. Gooseberries are of various colours, white, yellow, green, and red; and of each colour there are many sorts. The yellow gooseberries have, in general, a more rich and vinous flavour than the white; they are, on that account, the best for the dessert, and also for being fermented into wine. When the sort is choice, and