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ESSAY 6: HARRIET MARTINEAU ***

CRITICAL MISCELLANIES

BY

JOHN MORLEY

VOL. III.

ESSAY 6: HARRIET MARTINEAU

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HARRIET MARTINEAU.

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HARRIET MARTINEAU.

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In 1850 Charlotte Brontë paid a visit to Harriet Martineau at Ambleside, and she wrote to her friends various emphatic accounts of her hostess. 'Without adopting her theories,' Miss Brontë said, 'I yet find a worth and greatness in herself, and a consistency, benevolence, perseverance in her practice, such as wins the sincerest esteem and affection. She is not a person to be judged by her writings alone, but rather by her own deeds and life, than which nothing can be more exemplary or noble.'

The division which Miss Brontë thus makes between opinions and character, and again between literary production and character, is at the root of any just criticism of the two volumes of autobiography which have just been given to the public. Of the third volume, *The Memorials*, by Mrs. Chapman, it is impossible to say anything serious. Mrs. Chapman fought an admirable fight in the dark times of American history for the abolition of slavery, but unhappily she is without literary gifts; and this third volume is one more illustration of the folly of entrusting the composition of biography to persons who have only the wholly irrelevant claim of intimate friendship, or kinship, or sympathy in public causes. The qualification for a biographer is not in the least that he is a virtuous person, or a second cousin, or a dear friend, or a trusty colleague; but that he knows how to write a book, has tact, style, taste, considerateness, sense of proportion, and a good eye for the beginnings and ends of things. The third volume, then, tells us little about the person to whom they relate. The two volumes of autobiography tell all that we can seek to know, and the reader who judges them in an equitable spirit will be ready to allow that, when all is said that can be said of her hardness, arbitrariness, and insularity, Harriet Martineau is still a singular and worthy figure among the conspicuous personages of a generation that has now almost vanished. Some will wonder how it was that her literary performances acquired so little of permanent value. Others will be pained by the distinct repudiation of all theology, avowed by her with a simple and courageous directness that can scarcely be counted other than honourable to her. But everybody will admit, as Charlotte Brontë did, that though her books are not of the first nor of the second rank, and though her anti-theological opinions are to many so repugnant, yet behind books and opinions was a remarkable personality, a sure eye for social realities, a moral courage that never flinched; a strong judgment within its limits; a vigorous self-reliance both in opinion and act, which yet did not prevent a habit of the most neutral self-judgment; the commonplace virtues of industry and energy devoted to aims too elevated, and too large and generous, to be commonplace; a splendid sincerity, a magnificent love of truth. And that all these fine qualities, which would mostly be described as manly, should exist not in a man but a woman, and in a woman who discharged admirably such feminine duties as fell to her, fills up the measure of our interest in such a character.

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Harriet Martineau was born at Norwich in 1802, and she died, as we all remember, in the course of the summer of 1876. Few people have lived so long as three-quarters of a century, and undergone so little substantial change of character, amid some very important changes of opinion. Her family was Unitarian, and family life was in her case marked by some of that stiffness, that severity, that chilly rigour, with which Unitarians are sometimes taxed by religionists of a more ecstatic doctrine. Her childhood was very unhappy; the household seems to have been unamiable, and she was treated with none of that tenderness and sympathy for which firm and defiant natures are apt to yearn as strongly as others that get the credit of greater sensibility. With that singular impulse to suicide which is frequent among children, though rarer with girls than boys, she went one day into the kitchen for the carving-knife, that she might cut her throat; luckily the servants were at dinner, and the child retreated. Deafness, which proved incurable, began to afflict her before she was sixteen. A severe, harsh, and mournful kind of religiosity seized her, and this 'abominable spiritual rigidity,' as she calls it, confirmed all the gloomy predispositions of her mind. She learned a good deal, mastering Latin, French, and Italian in good time; and reading much in her own tongue, including constant attention to the Bible, with all sorts of commentaries and explanations, such as those of us who were brought up in a certain spiritual atmosphere have only too good reasons never to forget. This expansion of intellectual interest, however, did not make her less silent, less low in her spirits, less full of vague and anxious presentiment. The reader is glad when these ungracious years of youth are at an end, and the demands of active life stirred Harriet Martineau's energies into vigorous work.

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In 1822 her father died, and seven years later his widow and his daughters lost at a single blow nearly all that they had in the world. Before this event, which really proved to be a blessing in the disguise of a catastrophe, Harriet Martineau had written a number of slight pieces. They had been printed, and received a certain amount of recognition. They were of a religious cast, as was natural in one with whom religious literature, and religious life and observance, had hitherto taken in the whole sphere of her continual experience. *Traditions of Palestine* and *Devotional Exercises* are titles that tell their own tale, and we may be sure that their authoress was still at the antipodean point of the positive philosophy in which she ended her speculative journey. She still clung undoubtingly to what she had been brought up to believe when she won three prizes

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for essays intended to present Unitarianism to the notice of Jews, of Catholics, and of Mahometans. Her success in these and similar efforts turned her mind more decidedly towards literature as a profession.

Miss Martineau is at some pains to assure us on several occasions that it was the need of utterance now and always that drove her to write, and that money, although welcome when it came, was never her motive. This perhaps a little savours of affectation. Nobody would dream of suspecting Miss Martineau of writing anything that she did not believe to be true or useful merely for the sake of money. But there is plenty of evidence that the prospect of payment stirred her to true and useful work, as it does many other authors by profession, and as it does the followers of all professions whatever. She puts the case fairly enough in another place (i. 422): —'Every author is in a manner an adventurer; and no one was ever more decidedly so than myself; but the difference between one kind of adventurer and another is, I believe, simply this—that the one has something to say which presses for utterance, and is uttered at length without a view to future fortunes; while the other has a sort of general inclination towards literature, without any specific need of utterance, and a very definite desire for the honours and rewards of the literary career.' Even in the latter case, however, honest journeyman's work enough is done in literature by men and women who seek nothing higher than a reputable source of income. Miss Martineau did, no doubt, seek objects far higher and more generous than income, but she lived on the income which literature brought to her; and there seems a certain failure of her usually admirable common sense in making any ado about so simple a matter. When doctors and counsel refuse their guineas, and the parson declines a stipend, it will be quite soon enough for the author to be especially anxious to show that he has a right to regard money much as the rest of the human race regard it.

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Miss Martineau underwent the harsh ordeal which awaits most literary aspirants. She had a scheme in her head for a long series of short tales to illustrate some of the propositions of political economy. She trudged about London day after day, through mud and fog, with weary limbs and anxious heart, as many an author has done before and since. The times were bad; cholera was abroad; people were full of apprehension and concern about the Reform Bill; and the publishers looked coldly on a doubtful venture. Miss Martineau talks none of the conventional nonsense about the cruelty and stupidity of publishers. What she says is this: 'I have always been anxious to extend to young or struggling authors the sort of aid which would have been so precious to me in that winter of 1829-1830, and I know that, in above twenty years, I have never succeeded but once.' One of the most distinguished editors in London, who had charge of a periodical for many years, told us what comes to the same thing, namely, that in no single case during all these years did a volunteer contributor of real quality, or with any promise of eminence, present himself or herself. So many hundreds think themselves called so few are chosen. In Miss Martineau's case, however, the trade made a mistake. When at length she found some one to go halves with her in the enterprise, on terms extremely disadvantageous to herself, the first of her tales was published (1832), and instantly had a prodigious success. The sale ran up to more than ten thousand of each monthly volume. In that singular autobiographical sketch of herself which Miss Martineau prepared for a London paper, to be printed as her obituary notice, she pronounced a judgment upon this work which more disinterested, though not more impartial, critics will confirm. Her own unalterable view, she says, of what the work could and could not effect, 'prevented her from expecting too much from it, either in regard to its social operations or its influence on her own fame. The original idea of exhibiting the great natural laws of society by a series of pictures of selected social action was a fortunate one; and her tales initiated a multitude of minds into the conception of what political economy is, and how it concerns everybody living in society. Beyond this there is no merit of a high order in the work. It popularised in a fresh form some doctrines and many truths long before made public by others.' James Mill, one of the acutest economists of the day, and one of the most vigorous and original characters of that or any other day, had foretold failure; but when the time came, he very handsomely admitted that his prophecy had been rash. In after years, when Miss Martineau had acquired from Comte a conception of the growth and movement of societies as a whole, with their economic conditions controlled and constantly modified by a multitude of other conditions of various kinds, she rated the science of her earlier days very low. Even in those days, however, she says: 'I believe I should not have been greatly surprised or displeased to have perceived, even then, that the pretended science is no science at all, strictly speaking; and that so many of its parts must undergo essential change, that it may be a question whether future generations will owe much more to it than the benefit (inestimable, to be sure) of establishing the grand truth that social affairs proceed according to general laws, no less than natural phenomena of every kind' (*Autob.* ii. 245).

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Harriet Martineau was not of the class of writers, most of them terribly unprofitable, who merely say literary things about social organisation, its institutions, and their improvement. Her feeling about society was less literary than scientific: it was not sentimental, but the business-like quality of a good administrator. She was moved less by pity or by any sense of the pathos and the hardness of the world, than by a sensible and energetic interest in good government and in the rational and convenient ordering of things. Her tales to illustrate the truths of political economy are what might be expected from a writer of this character. They are far from being wanting—many of them—in the genuine interest of good story-telling. They are rapid, definite, and without a trace of either slovenliness or fatigue. We are amazed as we think of the speed and prompt regularity with which they were produced; and the fertile ingenuity with which the pill of political economy is wrapped up in the confectionery of a tale, may stand as a marvel of true cleverness and inventive dexterity. Of course, of imagination or invention in a high sense there is not a

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trace. Such a quality was not in the gifts of the writer, nor could it in any case have worked within such limitations as those set by the matter and the object of the series.

Literary success was followed in the usual order by social temptation. Miss Martineau removed from Norwich to London, and she had good reasons for making the change. Her work dealt with matters of a political kind, and she could only secure a real knowledge of what was best worth saying by intercourse with those who had a better point of view for a survey of the social state of England than could be found in a provincial town like Norwich. So far as evening parties went, Miss Martineau soon perceived how little 'essential difference there is between the extreme case of a cathedral city and that of literary London, or any other place, where dissipation takes the turn of book-talk instead of dancing or masquerading.' She went out to dinner every night except Sundays, and saw all the most interesting people of the London of five-and-forty years ago. While she was free from presumptuousness in her judgments, she was just as free from a foolish willingness to take the reputations of her hour on trust. Her attitude was friendly and sensible, but it was at the same time critical and independent; and that is what every frank, upright, and sterling character naturally becomes in face of an unfamiliar society. Harriet Martineau was too keen-sighted, too aware of the folly and incompetent pretension of half the world, too consciously self-respecting and proud, to take society and its ways with any diffidence or ingenuous simplicity. On the importance of the small *littérateur* who unreasonably thinks himself a great one, on the airs and graces of the gushing blue-stockings who were in vogue in that day, on the detestable vulgarity of literary lionising, she had no mercy. She recounts with caustic relish the story about a certain pedantical lady, of whom Tierney had said that there was not another head in England that could encounter hers on the subject of Cause and Effect. The story was that when in a country house one fine day she took her seat in a window, saying in a business-like manner (to David Ricardo): 'Come now, let us have a little discussion about Space.' We remember a story about a certain Mademoiselle de Launay, afterwards well known to the Paris of the eighteenth century, being introduced at Versailles by a silly great lady who had an infatuation for her. 'This,' the great lady kept saying, 'is the young person whom I have told you about, who is so wonderfully intelligent, who knows so much. Come, Mademoiselle, pray talk. Now, Madame, you will see how she talks. Well, first of all, now talk a little about religion; then you can tell us about something else.'

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We cannot wonder that Miss Martineau did not go a second time to the house where Space might be the unprovoked theme of a casual chat. Pretension in every shape she hated most heartily. Her judgments in most cases were thoroughly just—at this period of her life at any rate—and sometimes even unexpectedly kindly; and the reason is that she looked at society through the medium of a strong and penetrating kind of common sense, which is more often the gift of clever women than of clever men. If she is masculine, she is, like Mrs. Colonel Poyntz, in one of Bulwer's novels, 'masculine in a womanly way.' There is a real spirit of ethical divination in some of her criticism of character. Take the distinguished man whose name we have just written. 'There was Bulwer on a sofa,' she says, 'sparkling and languishing among a set of female votaries—he and they dized out, perfumed, and presenting the nearest picture to a seraglio to be seen on British ground—only the indifference or hauteur of the lord of the harem being absent.' Yet this disagreeable sight does not prevent her from feeling a cordial interest in him, amidst any amount of vexation and pity for his weakness. 'He seems to be a woman of genius inclosed by misadventure in a man's form. He has insight, experience, sympathy, letters, power and grace of expression, and an irrepressible impulse to utterance, and industry which should have produced works of the noblest quality; and these have been intercepted by mischiefs which may be called misfortune rather than fault. His friendly temper, his generous heart, his excellent conversation (at his best), and his simple manners (when he forgot himself), have many a time 'left me mourning' that such a being should allow himself to sport with perdition.' Those who knew most about Bulwer, and who were most repelled by his terrible faults, will feel in this page of Miss Martineau's the breath of social equity in which charity is not allowed to blur judgment, nor moral disapproval to narrow, starve, and discolour vision into lost possibilities of character. And we may note in passing how even here, in the mere story of the men and women whom she met in London drawing-rooms, Harriet Martineau does not lose herself in gossip about individuals looked at merely in their individual relations. It is not merely the 'blighting of promise nor the forfeiture of a career' that she deplors in the case of a Bulwer or a Brougham; it is 'the intercepting of national blessings.' If this view of natural gifts as a source of blessing to society, and not merely of power or fame to their privileged possessor, were more common than it is, the impression which such a thought is calculated to make would be the highest available protection against those blighted promises and forfeited careers, of which Brougham and Bulwer were only two out of a too vast host of examples.

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It is the very fulness with which she is possessed by this large way of conceiving a life in its manifold relations to the service of the world, that is the secret of Harriet Martineau's firm, clear, calm, and almost neutral way of judging both her own work and character and those of others. By calm we do not mean that she was incapable of strong and direct censure. Many of her judgments, both here and in her *Biographic Sketches*, are stern; and some—like that on Macaulay, for instance—may even pass for harsh. But they are never the product of mere anger or heatedness, and it is a great blunder to suppose that reasoned severity is incompatible with perfect composure, or that calm is another name for amiable vapidty.

Thöricht ist's

In allen Stücken billig sein; es heisst
Sein eigen Selbst zerstören.

Her condemnation of the Whigs, for example, is as stringent and outspoken as condemnation can be; yet it is a deliberate and reasoned judgment, not a mere bitterness or prejudice. The Whigs were at that moment, between 1832 and 1834, at the height of their authority, political, literary, and social. After a generation of misgovernment they had been borne to power on the tide of national enthusiasm for parliamentary reform, and for all those improvements in our national life to which parliamentary reform was no more than the first step. The harshness and darkness of the past generation were the measure of the hopes of the new time. These hopes, which were at least as strong in Harriet Martineau as in anybody then living, the Whigs were soon felt to have cheated. She cannot forgive them. Speaking of John and Edward Romilly, 'they had virtuous projects,' she says, 'and had every hope of achieving service worthy of their father's fame; but their aspirations were speedily tamed down—as all high aspirations *are* lowered by Whig influences.' A certain peer is described as 'agreeable enough in society to those who are not very particular in regard to sincerity; and was, as Chancellor of the Exchequer or anything else, as good a representative as could be found of the flippancy, conceit, and official helplessness and ignorance of the Whig administration.' Charles Knight started a new periodical for the people under the patronage of the official Whigs. 'But the poverty and perverseness of their ideas, and the insolence of their feelings, were precisely what might be expected by all who really knew that remarkably vulgar class of men. They purposed to lecture the working classes, who were by far the wiser party of the two, in a jejune, coaxing, dull, religious-tract sort of tone, and criticised and deprecated everything like vigour, and a manly and genial tone of address in the new publication, while trying to push in as contributors effete and exhausted writers and friends of their own, who knew about as much of the working classes of England as of those of Turkey.' This energetic description, which belongs to the year 1848, gives us an interesting measure of the distance that has been traversed during the last thirty years. The workmen have acquired direct political power; they have organised themselves into effective groups for industrial purposes; they have produced leaders of ability and sound judgment; and the Whig who seeks their support must stoop or rise to talk a Radicalism that would have amply satisfied even Harriet Martineau herself.

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The source of this improvement in the society to which she bade farewell, over that into which she had been born, is set down by Miss Martineau to the most remarkable literary genius with whom, during her residence in London, she was brought into contact. 'What Wordsworth did for poetry,' she says, 'in bringing us out of a conventional idea and method to a true and simple one, Carlyle has done for morality. He may be himself the most curious opposition to himself—he may be the greatest mannerist of his age while denouncing conventionalism—the greatest talker while eulogising silence—the most woful complainer while glorifying fortitude—the most uncertain and stormy in mood, while holding forth serenity as the greatest good within the reach of man; but he has nevertheless infused into the mind of the English nation a sincerity, earnestness, healthfulness, and courage which can be appreciated only by those who are old enough to tell what was our morbid state when Byron was the representative of our temper, the Clapham church of our religion, and the rotten-borough system of our political morality.' We have no quarrel with this account of the greatest man of letters of our generation. But Carlyle has only been one influence among others. It is a far cry indeed from *Sartor Resartus* to the *Tracts for the Times*, yet they were both of them protests against the same thing, both of them attempted answers to the same problem, and the *Tracts* perhaps did more than *Sartor* to quicken spiritual life, to shatter 'the Clapham church,' and to substitute a mystic faith and not unlovely hope for the frigid, hard, and mechanical lines of official orthodoxy on the one hand, and the egotism and sentimental despair of Byronism on the other. There is a third school, too, and Harriet Martineau herself was no insignificant member of it, to which both the temper and the political morality of our time have owed a deep debt; the school of those utilitarian political thinkers who gave light rather than heat, and yet by the intellectual force with which they insisted on the right direction of social reform, also stirred the very impulse which made men desire social reform. The most illustrious of this body was undoubtedly John Mill; because to accurate political science he added a fervid and vibrating social sympathy, and a power of quickening it in the best minds of a scientific turn. It is odd, by the way, that Miss Martineau, while so lavish in deserved panegyric on Carlyle, should be so grudging and disparaging in the case of Mill, with whom her intellectual affinities must have been closer than with any other of her contemporaries. The translator of Comte's *Positive Philosophy* had better reasons than most people for thinking well of the services of the author of the *System of Logic*: it was certainly the latter book which did more than any other to prepare the minds of the English philosophic public for the former.

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It is creditable to Miss Martineau's breadth of sympathy that she should have left on record the tribute of her admiration for Carlyle, for nobody has written so harshly as Carlyle on the subject which interested Harriet Martineau more passionately than any other events of her time. In 1834 she had finished her series of illustrations of political economy; her domestic life was fretted by the unreasonable exigences of her mother; London society had perhaps begun to weary her, and she felt the need of a change of scene. The United States, with the old European institutions placed amid new conditions, were then as now a natural object of interest to everybody with a keen feeling for social improvement. So to the Western Republic Miss Martineau turned her face. She had not been long in the States before she began to feel that the Abolitionists, at that moment a despised and persecuted handful of men and women, were the truly moral and regenerating party in the country. Harriet Martineau no sooner felt this conviction driving out her former prejudice against them as fanatical and impracticable, than she at once bore public testimony, at serious risk of every kind to herself, in favour of the extreme Anti-Slavery agitators. And for thirty years she never slackened her sympathy nor her energetic action on English public

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opinion, in this most vital matter of her time. She was guided not merely by humanitarian disgust at the cruel and brutal abominations of slavery,—though we know no reason why this alone should not be a sufficient ground for turning Abolitionist,—but also on the more purely political ground of the cowardice, silence, corruption, and hypocrisy that were engendered in the Free States by purchased connivance at the peculiar institution of the Slave States. Nobody has yet traced out the full effect upon the national character of the Americans of all those years of conscious complicity in slavery, after the moral iniquity of slavery had become clear to the inner conscience of the very men who ignobly sanctioned the mobbing of Abolitionists.

In the summer of 1836 Miss Martineau returned to England, having added this great question to the stock of her foremost objects of interest and concern. Such additions, whether literary or social, are the best kind of refreshment that travel supplies. She published two books on America: one of them abstract and quasi-scientific, *Society in America*; the other, *A Retrospect of Western Travel*, of a lighter and more purely descriptive quality. Their success with the public was moderate, and in after years she condemned them in very plain language, the first of them especially as 'full of affectations and preachments.' Their only service, and it was not inconsiderable, was the information which they circulated as to the condition of slavery and of the country under it. We do not suppose that they are worth reading at the present day, except from a historical point of view. But they are really good specimens of a kind of literature which is not abundant, and yet which is of the utmost value—we mean the record of the sociological observation of a country by a competent traveller, who stays long enough in the country, has access to the right persons of all kinds, and will take pains enough to mature his judgments. It was a happy idea of O'Connell's to suggest that she should go over to Ireland, and write such an account of that country as she had written of the United States. And we wish at this very hour that some one as competent as Miss Martineau would do what O'Connell wished her to do. A similar request came to her from Milan: why should she not visit Lombardy, and then tell Europe the true tale of Austrian rule?

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But after her American journey Miss Martineau felt a very easily intelligible desire to change the literary field. For many years she had been writing almost entirely about fact: and the constraint of the effort to be always correct, and to bear without solicitude the questioning of her correctness, had become burdensome. She felt the danger of losing nerve and becoming morbidly fearful of criticism on the one hand, and of growing narrow and mechanical about accuracy on the other. 'I longed inexpressibly,' she says, 'for the liberty of fiction, while occasionally doubting whether I had the power to use that freedom as I could have done ten years before.' The product of this new mental phase was *Deerbrook*, which was published in the spring of 1839. *Deerbrook* is a story of an English country village, its petty feuds, its gentilities, its chances and changes of fortune. The influence of Jane Austen's stories is seen in every chapter; but Harriet Martineau had none of the easy flow, the pleasant humour, the light-handed irony of her model, any more than she had the energetic and sustained imaginative power of Charlotte or Emily Brontë. There is playfulness enough in *Deerbrook*, but it is too deliberate to remind us of the crooning involuntary playfulness of *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*. *Deerbrook* is not in the least a story with a moral; it is truly and purely a piece of art; yet we are conscious of the serious spirit of the social reformer as haunting the background, and only surrendering the scene for reasons of its own. On the other hand, there is in *Deerbrook* a gravity of moral reflection that Jane Austen, whether wisely or unwisely, seldom or never attempts. In this respect *Deerbrook* is the distant forerunner of some of George Eliot's most characteristic work. Distant, because George Eliot's moralising is constantly suffused by the broad light of a highly poetic imagination, and this was in no degree among Miss Martineau's gifts. Still there is something above the flat touch of the common didactic in such a page as that in which (chapter xix.) she describes the case of 'the unamiable—the only order of evil ones who suffer hell without seeing and knowing that it is hell: nay, they are under a heavier curse than even this, they inflict torments second only to their own, with an unconsciousness worthy of spirits of light.' However, when all is said, we may agree that this is one of the books that give a rational person pleasure once, but which we hardly look forward to reading again.

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Shortly after the publication of her first novel, Miss Martineau was seized by a serious internal malady, from which recovery seemed hopeless. According to her usual practice of taking her life deliberately in her hands, and settling its conditions for herself, instead of letting things drift as they might, she insisted on declining the hospitable shelter pressed upon her by a near relative, on the excellent ground that it is wrong for an invalid to impose restraints upon a healthy household. She proceeded to establish herself in lodgings at Tynemouth, on the coast of Northumberland. Here she lay on a couch for nearly five years, seeing as few persons as might be, and working at such literary matters as came into her head with steadfast industry and fortitude. The ordeal was hard, but the little book that came of it, *Life in a Sickroom*, remains to show the moods in which the ordeal was borne.

At length Miss Martineau was induced to try mesmerism as a possible cure for her disease, and what is certain is, that after trying mesmeric treatment, the invalid whom the doctors had declared incurable shortly recovered as perfect health as she had ever known. A virulent controversy arose upon the case, for, by some curious law, physicians are apt to import into professional disputes a heat and bitterness at least as marked as that of their old enemies, the theologians. It was said that Miss Martineau had begun to improve before she was mesmerised, and what was still more to the point, that she had been taking heavy doses of iodine. 'It is beyond all question or dispute,' as Voltaire said, 'that magic words and ceremonies are quite capable of most effectually destroying a whole flock of sheep, if the words be accompanied by a sufficient

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quantity of arsenic.'

Mesmerism was indirectly the means of bringing Miss Martineau into an intimate acquaintance with a gentleman, who soon began to exert a decisive influence upon the most important of her opinions. Mr. Atkinson is still alive, and we need not say much about him. He seems to have been a grave and sincere person, using his mind with courageous independence upon the great speculative problems which were not in 1844, as they are in 1877, the common topics of everyday intercourse among educated people. This is not the place for an examination of the philosophy in which Miss Martineau was finally landed by Mr. Atkinson's influence. That philosophy was given to the world in 1851, in a volume called *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development*. The greater part of it was written by Mr. Atkinson in reply to short letters, in which Miss Martineau stated objections and propounded questions. The book points in the direction of that explanation of the facts of the universe which is now so familiar under the name of Evolution. But it points in this way only, as the once famous *Vestiges of Creation* pointed towards the scientific hypotheses of Darwin and Wallace; or as Buckle's crude and superficial notions about the history of civilisation pointed towards a true and complete conception of sociology. That is to say, the Atkinson Letters state some of the difficulties in the way of the explanations of life and motion hitherto received as satisfactory; they insist upon approaching the facts exclusively by the positive, Baconian, or inductive method; and then they hurry to an explanation of their own, which may be as plausible as that which they intend it to replace, but which they leave equally without ordered proof and strict verification.

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The only point to which we are called upon to refer is that this way of thinking about man and the rest of nature led to repudiation by Miss Martineau of the whole structure of dogmatic theology. For one thing, she ceased to hold the conception of a God with any human attributes whatever; also of any principle or practice of Design; 'of an administration of life according to human wishes, or of the affairs of the world by the principles of human morals.' All these became to her as mere visions; beliefs necessary in their day, but not philosophically nor permanently true. Miss Martineau was not an Atheist in the philosophic sense; she never denied a First Cause, but only that this Cause is within the sphere of human attributes, or can be defined in their terms.

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Then, for another thing, she ceased to believe in the probability of there being a continuance of conscious individual life after the dissolution of the body. With this, of course, fell all expectation of a state of personal rewards and punishments. 'The real and justifiable and honourable subject of interest,' she said, 'to human beings, living and dying, is the welfare of their fellows surrounding them or surviving them.' About that she cared supremely, and about nothing else did she bring herself to care at all. It is painful to many people even to hear of a person holding such beliefs as these. Yet it would plainly be the worst kind of spiritual valetudinarianism to insist on the omission from even the shortest account of this remarkable woman, of what became the very basis and foundation of her life for those thirty years of it, which she herself always counted the happiest part of the whole.

Although it was Mr. Atkinson who finally provided her with a positive substitute for her older beliefs, yet a journey which Miss Martineau made in the East shortly after her restoration to health (1846) had done much to build up in her mind a historic conception of the origin and order of the great faiths of mankind—the Christian, the Hebrew, the Mahometan, the old Egyptian. We need not say more on this subject. The work in which she published the experiences of the journey which was always so memorable to her, deserves a word. There are few more delightful books of travel than *Eastern Life, Past and Present*. The descriptions are admirably graphic, and they have the attraction of making their effect by a few direct strokes, without any of the wordy elaboration of our modern picturesque. The writer shows a true feeling for nature, and she shows a vigorous sense, which is not merely pretty sentiment, like Chateaubriand's, for the vast historic associations of those old lands and dim cradles of the race. All is sterling and real; we are aware that the elevated reflection and the meditative stroke are not due to mere composition, but did actually pass through her mind as the suggestive wonders passed before her eyes. And hence there is no jar as we find a little homily on the advantage of being able to iron your own linen on a Nile boat, followed by a lofty page on the mighty pair of solemn figures that gaze as from eternity on time amid the sand at Thebes. The whole, one may say again, is sterling and real, both the elevation and the homeliness. The student of the history of opinion may find some interest in comparing Miss Martineau's work with the famous book, *Ruins; or, Meditations on the Revolutions of Empires*, in which Volney, between fifty and sixty years before, had drawn equally dissolvent conclusions with her own from the same panorama of the dead ages. Perhaps Miss Martineau's history is not much better than Volney's, but her brisk sense is preferable to Volney's high *à priori* declamation and artificial rhetoric.

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Before starting for the East, Miss Martineau had settled a new plan of life for herself, and built a little house where she thought she could best carry her plan out. To this little house she returned, and it became her cherished home for the long remainder of her days. London, during the years of her first success, had not been without its usual attractions to the new-comer, but she had always been alive to the essential incompleteness, the dispersion, the want of steadfast self-collection, in a life much passed in London society. And we may believe that the five austere and lonely years at Tynemouth, with their evening outlook over the busy waters of the harbour-bar into the stern far-off sea, may have slowly bred in her an unwillingness to plunge again into the bustling triviality, the gossip, the distracting lightness of the world of splendid fireflies. To have discerned the Pale Horse so near and for so long a space awakens new moods, and strangely alters the old perspectives of our life. Yet it would imply a misunderstanding of Harriet

Martineau's character to suppose that she turned her back upon London, and built her pretty hermitage at Ambleside, in anything like the temper of Jean Jacques Rousseau. She was far too positive a spirit for that, and far too full of vivid and concentrated interest in men and their doings. It would be unjust to think of Harriet Martineau as having no ear for the inner voices, yet her whole nature was objective; it turned to practice and not to reverie. She had her imaginative visions, as we know, and as all truly superior minds have them, even though their main superiority happens to be in the practical order. But her visions were limited as a landscape set in a rigid frame; they had not the wings that soar and poise in the vague unbounded empyrean. And she was much too sensible to think that these moods were strong, or constant, or absorbing enough in her case to furnish material and companionship for a life from day to day and year to year. Nor again was it for the sake of undisturbed acquisition of knowledge, nor cultivation of her finer faculties that she sought a hermitage. She was not moved by thought of the famous maxim which Goethe puts into the mouth of Leonore—

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Es bildet ein Talent sich in der Stille,
Sich ein Charakter in dem Strom der Welt.

Though an intense egotist, in the good and respectable sense of insisting on her own way of doing things, of settling for herself what it was that she was living for, and of treading the path with a firm and self-reliant step, yet Harriet Martineau was as little of an egotist as ever lived, in the poor and stifling sense of thinking of the perfecting of her own culture as in the least degree worthy of ranking among Ends-in-themselves. She settled in the Lake district, because she thought that there she would be most favourably placed for satisfying the various conditions which she had fixed as necessary to her scheme of life. 'My own idea of an innocent and happy life,' she says, 'was a house of my own among poor improvable neighbours, with young servants whom I might train and attach to myself, with pure air, a garden, leisure, solitude at command, and freedom to work in peace and quietness.'

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'It is the wisest step in her life,' Wordsworth said, when he heard that she had bought a piece of land and built a pretty house upon it; and then he added the strangely unpoetic reason—'because the value of the property will be doubled in ten years.' Her poetic neighbour gave her a characteristic piece of advice in the same prudential vein. He warned her that she would find visitors a great expense. 'When you have a visitor,' he said, 'you must do as we did; you must say: "If you like to have a cup of tea with us, you are very welcome; but if you want any meat, you must pay for your board."' Miss Martineau declined to carry thrift to this ungracious extremity. She constantly had guests in her house, and, if they were all like Charlotte Brontë, they enjoyed their visits in spite of the arbitrary ways of their energetic hostess.

Her manner of life during these years is pleasant to contemplate; cheerful, active, thoroughly wholesome. 'My habit,' she says, 'was to rise at six and to take a walk, returning to my solitary breakfast at half-past seven. My household orders were given for the day, and all affairs settled out of doors and in by a quarter or half-past eight, when I went to work, which I continued without interruption, except from the post, till three o'clock or later, when alone. While my friend was with me we dined at two, and that was of course the limit of my day's work.' De Tocqueville, if we remember, never saw his guests until after he had finished his morning's work, of which he had done six hours by eleven o'clock. Schopenhauer was still more sensitive to the jar of external interruption on that finely-tuned instrument, the brain, after a night's repose, for it was as much as his housekeeper's place was worth to allow either herself or any one else to appear to the philosopher before midday. After the early dinner at Ambleside cottage came little bits of neighbourly business, exercise, and so forth. 'It is with singular alacrity that in winter evenings I light the lamp and unroll my wool-work, and meditate or dream till the arrival of the newspaper tells me that the tea has stood long enough. After tea, if there was news from the seat of war, I called in my maids, who brought down the great atlas and studied the chances of the campaign with me. Then there was an hour or two for Montaigne, or Bacon, or Shakespeare, or Tennyson, or some dear old biography.'

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The only productions of this time worth mentioning are the *History of the Thirty Years' Peace* (1849) and the condensed version of Comte's *Positive Philosophy* (1853), both of them meritorious and useful pieces of work, and both of them undertaken, as nearly all Miss Martineau's work was, not from merely literary motives, but because she thought that they would be meritorious and useful, and because nothing more useful came into her head or under her hand at the moment. The condensation of Comte is easy and rapid, and it is said by those who have looked very closely into it to be hardly free from some too hasty renderings. It must, however, on the whole, be pronounced a singularly intelligent and able performance. The pace at which Comte was able to compose is a standing marvel to all who have pondered the great and difficult art of composition. It must be admitted that the author of the English version of him was in this respect no unworthy match for her original. Miss Martineau tells us that she despatched the last three volumes, which number over 1800 pages, in some five months. She thought the rendering of thirty pages of Comte a fair morning's work. If we consider the abstract and difficult nature of the matter, this must be pronounced something of a feat. We have not space to describe her method, but any reader who happens to be interested in the mechanism of literary productions will find the passage in vol. ii. p. 391. *The History of the Thirty Years' Peace* is no less astonishing an example of rapid industry. From the first opening of the books to study for the history to the depositing of the MS. of the first volume at press, was exactly six months. The second volume took six months to do, with an interval of some weeks of holiday and other work!

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We think all this worth mentioning, because it is an illustration of what is a highly important

maxim; namely, that it is a great mistake to expend more time and labour on a piece of composition than is enough to make it serve the purpose in hand. The immeasurable moment and far-reachingness of the very highest kinds of literature are apt to make men who play at being students forget there are many other kinds of literature which are not in the least immeasurably far-reaching, but which, for all that, are extremely useful in their own day and generation. Those highly fastidious and indolent people, who sometimes live at Oxford and Cambridge, with whom, indeed, for the most part, their high fastidiousness is only a fine name for impotence and lack of will, forget that the less immortal kinds of literature are the only kinds within their own reach. Literature is no doubt a fine art—the finest of the arts—but it is also a practical art; and it is deplorable to think how much stout, instructive work might and ought to be done by people who, in dreaming of ideals in prose or verse beyond their attainment, end, like the poor Casaubon of fiction, in a little pamphlet on a particle, or else in mediocre poetry, or else in nothing. By insisting on rearing nothing short of a great monument more durable than brass, they are cutting themselves off from building the useful little mud-hut, or some of the other modest performances by which only they are capable of serving their age. It is only one volume in a million that is not meant to perish, and to perish soon, as flowers, sunbeams, and all the other brightnesses of the earth are meant to perish. There are some forms of composition in which perfection is not only good but indispensable. But the most are designed for the purpose of a day, and if they have the degree of elaboration, accuracy, grasp, and faithfulness that suffice for the given purpose, then we may say that it is enough. There is literature proper, for which only two or three men and women in a generation have the true gift. This cannot be too good. But besides this there is a mass of honest and needful work to be done with the pen, to which literary form is only accidental, and in which consummate literary finish or depth is a sheer work of supererogation. If Miss Martineau had given twice as many years as she gave months to the condensation of Comte, the book would not have been a whit more useful in any possible respect—indeed, over-elaboration might easily have made it much less so—and the world would have lost many other excellent, if not dazzling or stupendous services.

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'Her original power,' she wrote of herself in that manly and outspoken obituary notice to which we have already referred, 'was nothing more than was due to earnestness and intellectual clearness within a certain range. With small imaginative and suggestive powers, and therefore nothing approaching to genius, she could see clearly what she did see, and give a clear expression to what she had to say. In short, she could popularise, while she could neither discover nor invent.... She could obtain and keep a firm grasp of her own views, and moreover she could make them understood. The function of her life was to do this, and in as far as it was done diligently and honestly, her life was of use.' All this is precisely true, and her life was of great use; and that makes what she says not only true, but an example worth much weighing by many of those who meddle with literature.

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Miss Martineau was never tired of trying to be useful in directing and improving opinion. She did not disdain the poor neighbours at her gates. She got them to establish a Building Society, she set them an example of thrifty and profitable management by her little farm of two acres, and she gave them interesting and cheerful courses of lectures in the winter evenings. All this time her eye was vigilant for the great affairs of the world. In 1852 she began to write leading articles for the *Daily News*, and in this department her industry and her aptitude were such that at times she wrote as many as six leading articles in a week. When she died, it was computed that she had written sixteen hundred. They are now all dead enough, as they were meant to die, but they made an impression that is still alive in its consequences upon some of the most important social, political, and economical matters of five-and-twenty important years. In what was by far the greatest of all the issues of those years, the Civil War in the United States, Harriet Martineau's influence was of the most inestimable value in keeping public opinion right against the strong tide of ignorant Southern sympathies in this country. If she may seem to some to have been less right in her views of the Crimean War, we must admit that the issues were very complex, and that complete assurance on that struggle is not easy to everybody even at this distance of time.

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To this period belong the Biographic Sketches which she contributed to a London newspaper. They have since been collected in a single volume, now in its fourth edition. They are masterpieces in the style of the vignette. Their conciseness, their clearness in fact, their definiteness in judgment, and above all, the rightly graduated impression of the writer's own personality in the background, make them perfect in their kind. There is no fretting away of the portrait in over-multiplicity of lines and strokes. Here more than anywhere else Miss Martineau shows the true quality of the writer, the true mark of literature, the sense of proportion, the modulated sentence, the compact and suggestive phrase. There is a happy precision, a pithy brevity, a condensed argumentativeness. And this literary skill is made more telling by the writer's own evident interest and sincerity about the real lives and characters of the various conspicuous people with whom she deals. It may be said that she has no subtle insight into the complexities of human nature, and that her philosophy of character is rather too little analytical, too downright, too content with averages of motive, and too external. This is so in a general way, but it does not spoil the charm of these sketches, because the personages concerned, though all of them conspicuous, were for the most part commonplace in motive, though more than commonplace in strength of faculty. Subtle analysis is wholly unreasonable in the case of Miss Martineau herself, and she would probably have been unable to use that difficult instrument in criticising characters less downright and objective than her own.

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The moment of the Crimean War marked an alarming event in her own life. The doctors warned her that she had a heart disease which would end her days suddenly and soon. Miss Martineau at

once set her affairs in order, and sat down to write her Autobiography. She had the manuscript put into type, and the sheets finally printed off, just as we now possess them. But the hour was not yet. The doctors had exaggerated the peril, and the strong woman lived for twenty years after she had been given up. She used up the stuff of her life to the very end, and left no dreary remnant nor morbid waste of days. She was like herself to the last—English, practical, positive. Yet she had thoughts and visions which were more than this. We like to think of this faithful woman and veteran worker in good causes, in the stroll which she always took on her terrace before retiring to rest for the night:—

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'On my terrace there were two worlds extended bright before me, even when the midnight darkness hid from my bodily eyes all but the outlines of the solemn mountains that surround our valley on three sides, and the clear opening to the lake on the south. In the one of those worlds I saw now the magnificent coast of Massachusetts in autumn, or the flowery swamps of Louisiana, or the forests of Georgia in spring, or the Illinois prairie in summer; or the blue Nile, or the brown Sinai, or the gorgeous Petra, or the view of Damascus from the Salahieh; or the Grand Canal under a Venetian sunset, or the Black Forest in twilight, or Malta in the glare of noon, or the broad desert stretching away under the stars, or the Red Sea tossing its superb shells on shore in the pale dawn. That is one world, all comprehended within my terrace wall, and coming up into the light at my call. The other and finer scenery is of that world, only beginning to be explored, of Science.... It is truly an exquisite pleasure to dream, after the toil of study, on the sublime abstractions of mathematics; the transcendent scenery unrolled by astronomy; the mysterious, invisible forces dimly hinted to us by physics; the new conception of the constitution of matter originated by chemistry; and then, the inestimable glimpses opened to us, in regard to the nature and destiny of man, by the researches into vegetable and animal organisation, which are at length perceived to be the right path of inquiry into the highest subjects of thought.... Wondrous beyond the comprehension of any one mind is the mass of glorious facts and the series of mighty conceptions laid open; but the shadow of the surrounding darkness rests upon it all. The unknown always engrosses the greater part of the field of vision, and the awe of infinity sanctifies both the study and the dream.'

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It would be a pity if difference of opinion upon subjects of profound difficulty, remoteness, and manifold perplexity, were to prevent any one from recognising in such words and such moods as these what was, in spite of some infirmities, a character of many large thoughts and much generous purpose. And with this feeling we may part from her.

Transcriber's Note:

The following changes have been made to the text.

Sich ein Charakter im dem Strom der Welt.

on [page 201](#) has been changed to:

Sich ein Charakter in dem Strom der Welt.

literature which are are not in the least immeasurably far-reaching, but

on [page 205](#) has been changed to:

literature which are not in the least immeasurably far-reaching, but

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