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Title: A Day with John Milton

Author: May Byron

Contributor: John Milton

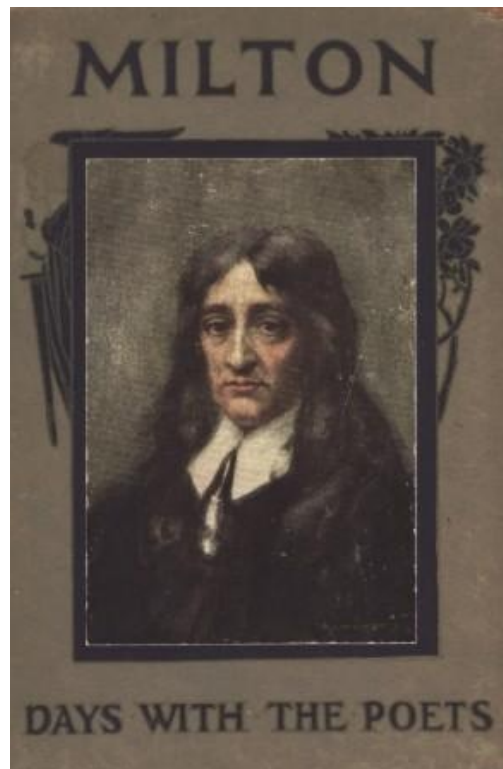
Illustrator: Sidney Meteyard

Release date: July 3, 2012 [EBook #40130]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Juliet Sutherland, Steven Brown and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DAY WITH JOHN MILTON ***





PARADISE LOST. BK. XII. *Painting by S. Meteyard.*

"They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way."
(Paradise Lost. Bk. XII.)

A DAY WITH JOHN MILTON

BY MAY BYRON



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A DAY WITH JOHN MILTON

About four o'clock on a September morning of 1665,—when the sun was not yet shining upon his windows facing the Artillery Fields, and the autumnal dew lay wet upon his garden leaves,—John Milton awoke with his customary punctuality, and, true to his austere and abstemious mode of life, wasted no time over comfortable indolence. He rose and proceeded to dress, with the help of his manservant Greene. For, although he was but fifty-four years in age, his hands were partly crippled with gout and chalkstones, and his eyes, clear, bright and blue as they had always been to outward seeming, were both stone-blind.

Milton still retained much of that personal comeliness which had won him, at Cambridge, the nickname of "Lady of Christ's College." His original red and white had now become a uniform pallor; his thick, light brown hair, parted at the top, and curling richly on his shoulders—(no close-cropt Roundhead this!)—was beginning to fade towards grey. But his features were noble and symmetrical; he was well-built and well-proportioned; and he was justified in priding himself upon a personal appearance which he had never neglected or despised. In his own words, he was "neither large nor small: at no time had he been considered ugly; and in youth, with a sword by his side, he had never feared the bravest."

Such was the man who now, neatly dressed in black, was led into his study, upon the same floor as his bedroom,—a small chamber hung with rusty green,—and there, seated in a large old elbow-chair, received the morning salutations of his three daughters.

One after another they entered the room, and each bestowed a characteristic greeting upon her father.

Anne, the eldest, a handsome girl of twenty, was lame, and had a slight impediment in her speech. She bade him good-morning with a stammering carelessness, enquired casually as to his night's rest, and stared out of window, palpably bored at the commencement of another monotonous, irksome day. Mary, the second,—dark, impetuous, and impatient,—was in a state of smouldering rebellion. She addressed him in a tone of almost insolent mock-civility, —he must needs have been deaf as well as blind not to detect the unfilial dislike beneath her words. Ten-year-old Deborah, the most affectionate of the three, ventured to kiss her father, even to stroke his long, beautiful hair, and to re-tie the tassels of his collar.

"Mary will read to me this morning," said Milton, gravely inclining his head in acknowledgment of Deborah's attentions. The dark girl, with a mutinous shrug of her shoulders, sat down and began to read aloud, in a hard, uninterested voice, out of the great leather-bound Hebrew Old Testament which lay upon the table. And not one single sentence did she understand—not one word of what she was reading.

John Milton's theories of education, which he had expounded at length in pamphlets, were a curious blend of the practical and the ideal. Vastly in advance of his time in his demand for a practical training, he had evolved that "fine definition which has never been improved upon,"—"I call a complete and generous education that which fits a man to perform, justly, skilfully and magnanimously, all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war." But he made no allowances for slowness or stupidity: all his schemes were based upon the existence of scholars equally gifted with himself. And he entirely left out of all calculations, much as a Mahomedan might, that complex organism the female mind. He wished it, one must conjecture, to remain a blank. So his daughters had received no systematic schooling, only some sort of home-instruction from a governess. And he had himself trained them to read aloud in five or six languages,—French, Italian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and even Syriac,—in total ignorance of the meaning. "One tongue," observed Milton brusquely, almost brutally, "is enough for any woman."

Mary read on, steadily, stolidly, sullenly, for a full hour. The others had left the room and were busy upon household tasks. At the conclusion of two chapters, "Leave me," commanded Milton, "I would be alone now for contemplation,"—and Mary willingly escaped to breakfast.

The great poet reclined in his chair,—wrapt in such solemn and melancholy meditation as might have served as the model for his own *Penseroso*. A severe composure suffused his fine features, a serious sadness looked out of his unclouded eyes; his entire expression was "that of English intrepidity mixed with unutterable sorrow." For Milton was a bitterly disappointed man.

It was not merely his comparative poverty,—because the Restoration, besides depriving him of his post as Latin or Foreign Secretary to the Commonwealth Council of State, had reduced his means from various sources almost to vanishing point.

Nor was his melancholy mainly the result of his affliction; that he had deliberately incurred, and was as deliberately enduring. Constant headaches, late study, and perpetual recourse to one nostrum after another, had eventuated in the certainty of total blindness if he persisted in his mode of work.

"The choice lay before me between dereliction of a supreme duty and loss of eyesight; ... and I therefore concluded to employ the little remaining eyesight I was to enjoy in doing this, the greatest service to the common weal it was in my power to render."

No: it was not a personal matter which could sadden John Milton to the very roots of his stern, ambitious, courageous soul. It was the contravention of all that he held most dear in life,—the frustration, as he conceived it, of that liberty which was his very heart's blood by the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy. He had resolved, in his own words, to transfer into the struggle for liberty "all my genius and all the strength of my industry." It appeared that he had flung away both in vain. The Stuart monarchy, to him, lay monstrously black, overshadowing all the land, like his own conception of Satan.

The Restoration was not merely the political defeat of his party, it was the total defeat of the principles, of the religious and social ideals, with which Milton's life was bound up. He had always stood aloof from the other salient men of the time. Of Cromwell he had practically no personal knowledge: with the bulk of the Presbyterians he was openly at enmity. "Shut away behind a barrier of his own ideas," he did not care to associate with men of less lofty intellectual standing. But now he was even more isolated. Since the downfall of the Puritan régime, he of necessity "stood alone, and became the party himself." And he presented, in his *Samson Agonistes*, "the intensest utterance of the most intense of English poets—the agonised cry of the beaten party," condensed into the expression of one unflinching and heroic soul.

Upon the mysterious and inscrutable decrees of Providence, which had laid in the dust what seemed to him the very cause of God, Milton sat and pondered, in a despondency so profound, a disappointment so poignant, that his own great lines had sought in vain to voice it:

"... I feel my genial spirits droop,
My hopes all flat: Nature within me seems
In all her functions weary of herself;
My race of glory run, and race of shame,
And I shall shortly be with them that rest."

(*Samson Agonistes*).

Yet his indomitable spirit was by no means quenched in despair: and an outlet was now open to him at last, which for eighteen years he had foregone,—the outlet of poetic expression. He was conscious of his capacity

to travel and to traverse the regions which none had dared explore save Dante. And with that tremendous chief of pioneers he was measuring himself, man to man.

He was able, above the turmoil of faction and the tumult of conflicting troubles, to weigh

"... his spread wings, at leisure to behold
Far off the empyreal Heaven, extended wide
In circuit, undetermined square or round,
With opal towers and battlements adorned
Of living sapphire, once his native seat."

(*Paradise Lost*).

That Milton had been silent for so long a period was due, firstly to his preoccupation with political and polemical questions, into which he had thrown the whole weight of his mind; and, secondly, to the effect of his own firm resolve that the great epic, which, he had always secretly intended, should be the outcome of matured and ripened powers: the apotheosis of all that was worthiest in him: the full fruit of his strenuous life. He had long since arrived at that conclusion, never surpassed in its terseness and truth, that true poetry must be "simple, sensuous, impassioned,"—words which might serve as the text and touchstone of art. "And long it was not after" when he

"was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem."

For poetry, to John Milton, was no sounding brass or tinkling cymbal; in his hand "the thing became a trumpet," apt to seraphic usages and the rallying of celestial cohorts.

Therefore, when he ceased to touch the "tender stops of various quills" that trembled into silence in *Lycidas*, it was not as one discomfited of his attainment. Rather it was as one convinced of a mighty purpose, and patiently awaiting the just time of its fulfilment. The "woodnotes wild" of *Comus*, the exquisitely stippled *genre* painting of *Allegro* and *Penseroso*, were mere childish attempts compared with that monumental work to which Milton firmly proposed to devote the fruition of his genius. And now, having become a man through mental and physical experience even more than through the passage of years, he had put away childish things. He had resolved at last upon, and had at last undertaken, the one subject most congenial to his taste, and most suitable to his style and diction. *Paradise Lost* was the triumphant offspring of his brain. It had sprung, like light, from chaos. Out of the darkness of poverty, blindness and defeat arose the poem which was to set him on the pinnacles of Parnassus.

"You make many enquiries as to what I am about" he wrote in bygone years to his old schoolfellow, Charles Diodati. "What am I thinking of? Why with God's help, of immortality! Forgive the word, I only whisper it in your ear. Yes, I am pluming my wings for a flight." Nor was this the idle boasting of an egotist, the empty imagination of a dreamer.

Consumed by "the desire of honour and repute and universal fame, seated," as he put it, "in the breast of every true scholar," Milton sedulously and assiduously had prepared himself for the achievement of his aims. That he should "strictly meditate the thankless Muse" required a certain self-control. "To scorn delights and live laborious days" is not the customary delight of a handsome young scholar, expert in swordsmanship as in languages. To equip himself for his self-chosen task, still a misty, undefined prospect in the remotest future, required strenuous and disciplined study; and necessitated his forgoing too frequently the scenes of rustic happiness which he had pictured so charmingly in *L'Allegro*,—absenting himself from "The groves and ruins, and the beloved village elms ... where I too, among rural scenes and remote forests, seemed as if I could have grown and vegetated through a hidden eternity."

And this, though Milton had neither the eye nor the ear of a born nature-lover, was in itself a sufficient deprivation and sacrifice. For beauty appealed to him with a most earnest insistence,—and the purer, the more abstract form it took, the more urgent was that appeal. "God has instilled into me, at all events," he declared, "a vehement love of the beautiful. Not with so much labour is Ceres said to have sought Proserpine, as I am wont, day and night, to search for the idea of the beautiful through all forms and faces of things, and to follow it leading me on with certain assured traces."

Yet not alone among "forms and faces" was he predestined to discover that Absolute Beauty. The passionate love of music, so frequently characteristic of a great linguist, which led him into sound-worlds as well as sight-worlds, was fated to remain with him, an incalculable consolation, when "forms and faces" could be no more seen. And into the vocabulary of *Paradise Lost*, that incomparably rich vocabulary, with its infallible ear for rhythm, for phrase, for magnificent consonantal effects and the magic of great names that reverberate through open vowels,—into this he poured forth his whole sense of beautiful sound,

"as the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid,
Tunes her nocturnal note."

Paradise Lost remains, as has been observed, "The elaborated outcome of all the best words of all antecedent poetry—the language of one who lives in the companionship of the great and the wise of all past time, equally magnificent in verbiage, whether describing man, or God, or the Arch-Enemy visiting" this pendent world, when

Thither, full fraught with mischievous revenge,
Accursed, and in a cursed hour, he lives.

At seven o'clock the body-servant Greene re-entered, followed by Mrs. Milton, the poet's third wife, and by Mary Fisher, their maid-servant, bringing in his breakfast, a light, slight repast. Mrs. Milton, *née* Elizabeth Minshull, of Nantwich, was a comely, active, capable woman, "of a peaceful and agreeable humour," so far at least as her husband was concerned: for she shared the traditional destiny of a stepmother in not "hitting it off" with the first wife's daughters. Her golden hair and calm commonsense were in striking contrast, alike with the dark beauty and petulant spirit of Mary Powell, and with the fragile sweetness of Catherine Woodcock, Milton's former spouses. If she did not in her heart confirm her husband's celebrated theory of the relative position of man and wife,—*"He for God only, she for God in him,"*—(which, it has been said, "condenses every fallacy about woman's true relation to her husband and to her Maker"), she managed very adroitly to convey an impression of entire acquiescence in the will of her lord. And at least she was entirely adequate as a housewife.

Had Milton ever encountered that "not impossible She" whom he portrayed in his ideal Eve? or was this latter a mere visionary abstract of great qualities, "to show us how divine a thing a woman may be made"? Neither of his three wives, nor yet that "very handsome and witty gentlewoman," Miss Davis, to whom he had at one time paid his addresses, conformed to this description: one cannot even conjecture that it was a *pasticcio* of their respective fine attributes.

Mrs. Milton, third of that name, as she bustled and busied herself about the study, was by no means a new Eve. She regarded her husband's ambitions and achievements with that good natured tolerance so characteristic of the materially-minded. Only genius can appreciate genius; and the man who shut himself away from his *confrères* in scholarship and literature was not likely to unbosom himself to his housewifely, provincial wife.



COMUS. *Painting by S. Meteyard.*

Sabrina rises attended by water nymphs,
"By the rushy-fringed bank,
Where grows the willow and the osier dank,"

(*Comus*).

The manservant Greene, breakfast being concluded, read aloud, or wrote to his master's dictation for some hours. This had formerly been the girls' daily office, but they were revolting more and more,—the whole position was becoming untenable, for they resented the presence of their stepmother as much as they disliked the duties which fettered them to their father's side, and forced them to parrot-like, futile drudgery in unknown tongues. To-day, however, Greene was relieved of the task, for which he was manifestly but ill-fitted, by the entrance of Milton's two favourite visitors.

No celebrity ever had fewer friends. From all who might have called themselves such, he was separated by

hostility of party, rancour of sect or by that almost repellent isolation of character to which reference has already been made. When at the highest of his political fame, he had almost boasted himself of this "splendid isolation,"—"I have very little acquaintance with those in power, inasmuch as I keep very much to my own house, and prefer to do so." At heart a Republican beyond the conception of any Roundhead,—cherishing a form of religion so recondite that it could be classed under no heading, since he ignored both public worship and family prayer,—having given offence to all and sundry by his outspoken theories upon divorce and divine right,—Milton presented to most men a dangerous personality. And most of all now, when the wits of the Restoration roués could be sharpened upon him, and when the heathen, as he considered them, roistered and ruffled it through the city that had "returned to her wallowing in the mire."

Yet those who had sat at his feet as pupils, retained a singular affection for their former master. For all such young folk as adopted the disciple's attitude, the stern self-contained man had a very soft spot in his heart. With such, he was not only instructive, but genial, almost cheerful; and they alone could move him to the only utterances which were neither "solemn, serious or sad." Chief among his former pupils were those who now made entrance—Henry Lawrence and Cyriac Skinner.

It may be guessed, therefore, with what pleasure the blind poet received these loyal and affectionate men. His pensive face became transformed with interest and animation, as with gentle courtesy and unfeigned delight he turned his sightless eyes from one speaker to another. Upon every subject he had a ready flow of easy, colloquial conversation, seasoned with shrewd satire: his deep and musical voice ran up and down the whole gamut of worthy topics. Sometimes he fell into the stately, almost stilted diction of his great prose pamphlets,—sometimes he spoke in racy English vernacular,—sometimes, warming to his subject, he assumed an almost fiery eloquence. But when, at twelve o'clock, he was escorted downstairs to dinner in the parlour, the metamorphosis was complete. This was no longer the brooding introspective man of the early morning, but one "extreme pleasant in his conversation," almost merry in society so congenial,—the life of the party: abstinent, but not ascetic, having a healthy, human enjoyment of the dishes set before him.

"These are the victuals most to my liking," he observed as he ate, "being seasonable and withal of no great cost. For that which is of great rarity or richness, and must be procured with care or toil, hath no temptation for me."

"I do always my best, Mr. Milton," replied his wife, "that you shall be well satisfied: and methinks to-day I have hit your taste right fairly."

"God ha' mercy, Betty," said Milton, regarding her with an air of kindly tolerance, "I see thou wilt perform according to thy promise in providing me such dishes as I think fit while I live; and when I die, thou knowest I have left thee all." Here Anne, Mary and Deborah sat up very straight, and directed looks of fury and astonishment towards their stepmother.

"Talk not o' dying, in God's name, man," responded the embarrassed Betty, "we have enough to do to make shift to live, nowadays," and she hastily pressed her good but simple fare, homely Cheshire dishes well-prepared, upon the two guests. "Such a many learned foreign folk have visited our poor house these latter days,—time hath failed me for my cheese-cakes,—and of the havercakes I made two days ago, why, not a crumb is left. But eat, my masters, eat and drink. Though these be but country victuals, none of your Court kickshaws, I warrant you they are fresh and savoury. I would commend you, now, to this rabbit pie—"

"Peace, Betty, peace. The woman prates o' pies like a pie (maggie) herself. What saith the Apostle? *I suffer not a woman to speak* in presence of the man's authority. Ha' done, good Betty, with thy harping on kitchen matters,—let thy savoury messes be companioned with a sauce of silence."

Temporary eclipse of Mrs. Milton: obvious and malevolent satisfaction of Anne and Mary: desperately suppressed inclination to giggle on the part of little Deborah: and a desire to cover up the situation with talk, as regards kindly Lawrence and courtly Skinner.

The "foreign folk" were no new thing. Milton's fame, indeed, was European: as a prose-writer and pamphleteer, be it understood, not as a poet. Had he not refuted and put to shame the most erudite scholars of the day? Foreign *savants* of note, therefore, who might be visiting London, were desirous to acquaint themselves with so powerful a personality: and the little house in the Artillery Walk was the rendezvous for many distinguished persons. They found their host no such recluse as town-talk might have led them to imagine, but one ready and willing to converse with them,—an English gentleman to the backbone, a scholar and artist to the finger-tips. His Continental tours and Italian sojourns had made him less insular than most of his compatriots, and his vast range of reading had imparted a certain cosmopolitanism to his exceedingly individual lines of thought. The visitors found him, moreover, employed upon a work so important, and of a theme so lofty, as might well give them pause, considering the circumstances under which it was being accomplished: and whatever their particular religious tenets might be, they could not fail to admire the magnitude of his aim in composing *Paradise Lost*,—"To justify the ways of God to men."



PARADISE LOST. BK. II *Painting by S. Meteyard.*

"Satan with less toil, and now with ease, ...
Weighs his spread wings, at leisure to behold ...
This pendent world in bigness as a star
Of smallest magnitude."

(*Paradise Lost. Bk. II.*)

Dinner despatched, the master of the house, led by his devoted friends, went out into the garden. A garden was the desideratum of his existence, and he had never been without one; for in seventeenth-century London every house was fitly furnished in this respect. Here Milton was in the habit of taking that steady exercise which was a *sine qua non* to a sedentary and gouty man. He made a point of walking up and down out of doors, in cold weather, for three or four hours at a time,—sometimes composing his majestic lines, sometimes merely meditating. When weary with walking, he would come in and either dictate what he had conceived, or would take further exercise in a swing. In really warm weather, he received his visitors sitting outside his house door, wrapped in a coarse grey overcoat—gazing out upon the fields of the Artillery ground with those "unblemished eyes" that belied their own clear beauty—"the only point," as he said, "in which I am against my will a hypocrite." To-day, being cool and cloudy, allowed but intermittent periods in the open air. Milton, Lawrence and Skinner paced slowly to and fro, deep in entralling intercourse, until three o'clock: when the rain and Thomas Elwood arrived simultaneously, and the other two men departed to their respective avocations.

Thomas Elwood was a young Quaker of twenty-three, who was acting in some degree as honorary secretary to Milton. Himself of a defective education, and having been expelled from his father's house on account of his religious opinions, he was only too glad to take a lodging in the neighbourhood, and, by reading aloud to Milton every afternoon, acquire an amount of information and a variety of learning, which by no other means could he have obtained. And there was also a tacit sympathy between them, inasmuch as Milton was, more and more, as life went on, inclining towards the Quaker tenets,—in those days, *bien entendu*, viewed with horror and detestation by the majority of men.

Having re-entered the house, "We will not read as yet, Tom," Milton said, "I desire greatly to comfort myself with sweet sounds. Bring me into the withdrawing-room, and place me at the organ. A little bellows-blowing will not hurt thee, Tom. And let my wife attend me, that we may have song withal. She hath a good voice, though a poor ear."

Seated at his beloved instrument, the blind man steeped himself in the principal pleasure that was left him. Milton's father, stout Puritan though he might be, was an accomplished musician, and had taught his son to play in early youth. The austerities of a narrow dogma had not been able to crush out the inveterate artistry of either father or son: and now the devotee of "divinest Melancholy" was able to solace himself with such lovely concords, such "anthems clear,"

"As may with sweetness, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all heaven before mine eyes."

Sometimes he sang as he played; sometimes Mrs. Milton, with her clear unemotional notes, sang to his accompaniment. Presently, that Elwood should not be wearied in his blowing, he quitted the organ for the bass-viol, on which he was no mean performer. At the conclusion of his playing he sat with a rapt, transfigured face, such as might well have called forth the Italian's encomium, thirty years before,—“If thy piety were equal to thy understanding, figure, eloquence, beauty and manners, verily thou wouldest not be an Angle but an Angel!”

And, now, good Tom," quoth Milton to the young man, "let us to work: the day moves on apace." They went upstairs to the study. "Before we read, I have some forty lines to set down," continued the poet, "all day they have been knocking for admission, and with that last music they made entrance. Needs must I house them now in ink and paper."

"I am instant at thy bidding, friend," and Elwood seated himself with dutiful alacrity at the table. Milton, placing himself obliquely athwart his elbow-chair, with one leg thrown across the arm, dictated forty lines, almost in a breath,—they burst from him, as it would seem, in a stream no longer to be restrained.

"Gently, gently, good sir!" exclaimed Elwood, "slow-witted and slow fingered I may be,—but I cannot keep pace with thee!"

A grim smile hovered over Milton's full lips, "Out of practice, Tom," he replied indulgently, "it is a long while since I required this service at thy hands. From the autumnal to the vernal equinox, as I have told thee, my muse lies dumb,

and silent as the moon
When she deserts the night,
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.

But now the winter is overpast, the singing of birds is heard in our land, and she too awakes and sings. With the vernal equinox my thoughts flow free as Helicon." Then, with slow and deliberate diction, he repeated the lines once more: and, having had them read aloud to him, he compressed, condensed, concentrated every thought and phrase, and reduced them to twenty.

"There is more to come?" queried Elwood, his quill poised ready to write.

"No more. Not one word more at present," replied Milton, sighing as though somewhat exhausted.

His inspiration was entirely intermittent: and sometimes he would lie awake all night, trying, but without success, to complete one single line to his liking. "They please me not wholly, these lines," he continued, "much remains to be done before I set them down to be changed no more."

"Not every man would say so," replied Elwood, "the learning and erudition whereof these few lines alone give witness, would supply many with just cause for boasting throughout a lifetime."

Milton shook his head. "Pomp and ostentation of reading," he remarked, "is admired among the vulgar: but in matters of religion, he is learnedest who is plainest."



"And may at last my weary age
Find out the peaceful hermitage,
The hairy gown and mossy cell,
Where I may sit and rightly spell
Of every star that heaven doth show."

(*IL Penseroso.*)

"Yet, Mr. Milton, thee hast the reputation of such scope and range of wisdom, as the greatest scholar in Europe might fitly envy. To me, I confess, in my poor unlettered ignorance, it is not conceivable in what manner thee acquired so great and witty powers."

"I gathered them not of mine own strength," said Milton, "but they were mine for the asking and endeavour, and any man may obtain them in like fashion. I ceased not, nor will cease, in devout prayer to the Holy Spirit, that can enrich with all utterance and knowledge, and send out his Seraphim with the hallowed fire of His altar, to touch and purify the lips of whom He pleases. To this must be added select reading, and steady observation, and insight into all seemly and generous acts and affairs.... And now, good Tom, to reading."

Elwood took up the Latin author which he was at present engaged upon, and proceeded with it. Whenever the preternaturally acute ear of Milton detected, by Elwood's intonation, that he did not quite understand a sentence, he would stop him, examine him, and elucidate the difficult passage. By and by, "You will find a saying very similar to that," he observed, "in Virgil his Fourth Eclogue. Fetch down the book, and let us hear what the Mantuan hath written therein."

Elwood searched along the bookshelves, but to no avail. "Friend," said he, "thy Virgil is no longer here. Yesterday I handled it myself,—to-day it is vanished. So is the Lucretius." A frown contracted Milton's splendid brow. "These women-kind," he muttered like rumbling thunder, "they are verily the root of all evil. Bid me hither my wife and daughters, and Mary Fisher the maid moreover." The first and the last, being summoned, arrived in all haste, and disavowed any knowledge of the missing books. Anne and Mary Milton, it appeared, were gone out marketing: but little Deborah, being strictly cross-examined, confessed that she had seen sister Anne carrying books away from the study last night when their father had retired: the wherewithal for "marketing" was easily obtained in this way.

Milton groaned in his ineptitude. "How have I deserved this treacherous dealing at their hands? Lord, how long shall I be

dark in light exposed
To daily fraud, contempt, abuse, and wrong,
Within doors and without, still as a fool
In power of others, never in my own?

(*Samson Agonistes.*)

Here, by a happy coincidence, there was a sturdy hammering heard at the front door, and Andrew Marvell was ushered in, "I am out of my due time," said he, "for it is not yet gone six,"—(six to eight P.M. being Milton's best time for receiving visitors). "Yet to so old an offender as myself, John, I know thou wilt make an exception." Marvell was the one friend of his own type and standing, the one constant and inalienable comrade, upon whose fidelity the blind man could rely. He had formerly been Milton's colleague under the Cromwellian Government: and was his kindred spirit, so far as anyone could claim such relationship with the frozen heights of the poet's intellect.

With him, during the next two hours—the learned physician Paget joining them, and Elwood listening in respectful silence to the converse of these mighty men—Milton forgot the vexations of his ill-assorted household. He assured his friends that he was truly far happier now, in poverty, infirmity and neglect, occupied solely upon his long-projected masterpiece, than during the eighteen years of his manly prime, when his mind and pen were solely employed upon the controversies which he now professed to hate. "Never again," he declared, "shall earthly ambitions interrupt and thwart me: never now shall I endure to leave a calm and pleasing solitariness, fed with cheerful and confident thoughts, to embark in a tumbled sea of noises and hoarse disputes. Cast out of my fool's Paradise of fame not worth the finding, shall, not I and the hope whereunto I am wedded explore some fair and fragrant tract of outer Eden? Even as I have set forth the banishment of our first parents:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide.
They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

(*Paradise Lost.*)

I and my espoused hope indeed do tread through Eden."

The four men now, at eight o'clock, went down to supper: a very spare and frugal meal, so far as Milton was concerned: for all he consumed was a little light wine, a piece of bread and a few olives. His flow of speech was still unwearied, his spirits as near vivacity as they could approach it, when his friends rose to take leave. "The night is yet young," said Paget, "but I know that nowadays you seek rest early." "That is so," Milton assented, "since I am no longer able to study o' nights, and since the best of secretaries,"—he smiled towards Elwood—"must needs grow weary of a blind man's whims, I were as well in bed as out of it. Moreover, I can compose my lines to better advantage lying down."

"One thing, at least, you are spared," Marvell told him, "darkness cannot discommode your doings, nor doth the eye-weariness of the midnight student afflict you with grievous brow-aches in the morning as of old."

Milton answered, "My darkness hitherto, by the singular kindness of God, amid rest and studies, and the voices and greetings of friends, has been much easier to bear than that deathly one. What should prevent me from resting in the belief that eyesight lies not in eyes alone, but enough for all purposes in God's leading and providence? And to you now I bid farewell, with a mind not less brave and steadfast than if I were Lynceus himself for keenness of sight."

In a short space of time he was at rest in his darkened room; not as yet drowsy, but revolving great phrases, and deriving a greater joy from these lonely silences of the night-watches than could ever accrue to him by day. Gradually the aisles and bowers of the Paradise which his mental eyes enjoyed took upon them more and more the lovely similitude of rural England. The greennesses and sweetnesses of his childhood's home, the Buckinghamshire village, were fused into the "eternal spring" of the primeval garden. And from the "glassy, cool, translucent wave" of the river that ran through Eden,

"by the rushy-fringed bank
Where grows the willow and the osier dank,"

arose "Sabrina, attended by water-nymphs" as once he saw her rise in *Comus*, and sang the sightless bard to sleep with the plashing of water-music.



*Printed by Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., Ltd.
Bradford and London.*

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Transcriber's Notes:

Some illustration's captions have been moved out of the paragraph and below.
Spelling has been made consistent throughout.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DAY WITH JOHN MILTON ***

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