

COLLECTED WORKS OF SØREN KIERKEGAARD Illustrated

Translated by L. M. Hollander

The benefits of education and of useful knowledge, generally diffused through a community, are essential to the preservation of a free government.

Sam Houston

Cultivated mind is the guardian genius of democracy.... It is the only dictator that freemen acknowledge and the only security that free-men desire.

Mirabeau B. Lamar

*To my Father-in-Law
The Reverend George Fisher,
A Christian*

INTRODUCTION I



Creditable as have been the contributions of Scandinavia to the cultural life of the race in well-nigh all fields of human endeavor, it has produced but one

thinker of the first magnitude, the Dane, Sören Å. Kierkegaard.¹ The fact that he is virtually unknown to us is ascribable, on the one hand to the inaccessibility of his works, both as to language and form; on the other, to the regrettable insularity of English thought.

It is the purpose of this book to remedy the defect in a measure, and by a selection from his most representative works to provide a stimulus for a more detailed study of his writings; for the present times, ruled by material considerations, wholly led by socializing, and misled by national ideals are precisely the most opportune to introduce the bitter but wholesome antidote of individual responsibility, which is his message. In particular, students of Northern literature cannot afford to know no more than the name of one who exerted a potent and energizing influence on an important epoch of Scandinavian thought. To mention only one instance, the greatest ethical poem of our age, "Brand"-notwithstanding Ibsen's curt statement that he "had read little of Kierkegaard and understood less"-undeniably owes its fundamental thought to him, whether directly or indirectly.

Of very few authors can it be said with the same literalness as, of Kierkegaard that their life is their works: as if to furnish living proof of his untiring

¹ Pronounced Kerkegor.

insistence on inwardness, his life, like that of so many other spiritual educators of the race, is notably poor in incidents; but his life of inward experiences is all the richer-witness the "literature within a literature" that came to be within a few years and that gave to Danish letters a score of immortal works.

Kierkegaard's physical heredity must be pronounced unfortunate. Being the child of old parents-his father was fifty-seven, his mother forty-five years at his birth (May 5, 1813), he had a weak physique and a feeble constitution. Still worse, he inherited from his father a burden of melancholy which he took a sad pride in masking under a show of sprightliness. His father, Michael Pedersen Kierkegaard, had begun life as a poor cotter's boy in West Jutland, where he was set to tend the sheep on the wild moorlands. One day, we are told, oppressed by loneliness and cold, he ascended a hill and in a passionate rage cursed God who had given him this miserable existence-the memory of which "sin against the Holy Ghost" he was not able to shake off to the end of his long life.² When seventeen years old, the gifted lad was sent to his uncle in Copenhagen, who was a well-to-do dealer in woolens and groceries.

² An interesting parallel is the story of Peter Williams, as told by George Borrow, *Lavengro*, chap. 75 ff.

Kierkegaard quickly established himself in the trade and amassed a considerable fortune. This enabled him to withdraw from active life when only forty, and to devote himself to philosophic studies, the leisure for which life had till then denied him. More especially he seems to have studied the works of the rationalistic philosopher Wolff. After the early death of his first wife who left him no issue, he married a former servant in his household, also of Jutish stock, who bore him seven children. Of these only two survived him, the oldest son-later bishop-Peder Christian, and the youngest son, Sören Åbye.

Nowhere does Kierkegaard speak of his mother, a woman of simple mind and cheerful disposition; but he speaks all the more often of his father, for whom he ever expressed the greatest love and admiration and who, no doubt, devoted himself largely to the education of his sons, particularly to that of his latest born. Him he was to mould in his own image. A pietistic, gloomy spirit of religiosity pervaded the household in which the severe father was undisputed master, and absolute obedience the watchword. Little Sören, as he himself tells us, heard more of the Crucified and the martyrs than of the Christ-child and good angels. Like John Stuart Mill, whose early education bears a remarkable resemblance to his, he "never had the joy to be a child." Although less systematically held down to his studies, in which religion was the be-all and end-all (instead of

being banished, as was the case with Mill), he was granted but a minimum of out-door play and exercise. And, instead of strengthening the feeble body, his father threw the whole weight of his melancholy on the boy.

Nor was his home training, formidably abstract, counterbalanced by a normal, healthy school-life. Naturally introspective and shy, both on account of a slight deformity of his body and on account of the old-fashioned clothes his father made him wear, he had no boy friends; and when cuffed by his more robust contemporaries, he could defend himself only with his biting sarcasm. Notwithstanding his early maturity he does not seem to have impressed either his schoolmates or his teachers by any gifts much above the ordinary. The school he attended was one of those semi-public schools which by strict discipline and consistent methods laid a solid foundation of humanities and mathematics for those who were to enter upon a professional career. The natural sciences played noddle whatever.

Obedient to the wishes of his father, Sören chose the study of theology, as had his eldest brother; but, once relieved from the grind of school at the age of seventeen, he rejoiced in the full liberty of university life, indulging himself to his heart's content in all the refined intellectual and æsthetic enjoyments the gay capital of Copenhagen offered. He declares himself in

later years to be "one who is penitent" for having in his youth plunged into all kinds of excesses; but we feel reasonably sure that he committed no excesses worse than "high living." He was frequently seen at the opera and the theatre, spent money freely in restaurants and confectionary shops, bought many and expensive books, dressed well, and indulged in such extravagances as driving in a carriage and pair, alone, for days through the fields and forests of the lovely island of Zealand. In fact, he contracted considerable debts, so that his disappointed father decided to put him on an allowance of 500 rixdollars yearly-rather a handsome sum, a hundred years ago.

Naturally, little direct progress was made in his studies. But while to all appearances aimlessly dissipating his energies, he showed a pronounced love for philosophy and kindred disciplines. He lost no opportunity then offered at the University of Copenhagen to train his mind along these lines. He heard the sturdily independent Sibbern's lectures on æsthetics and enjoyed a "privatissimum" on the main issues of Schleiermacher's Dogmatics with his later enemy, the theologian Martensen, author of the celebrated "Christian Dogmatics."

But there was no steadiness in him. Periods of indifference to these studies alternated with feverish activity, and doubts of the truth of Christianity, with bursts of devotion. However, the Hebraically stern cast

of mind of the externally gay student soon wearied of this rudderless existence. He sighs for an "Archimedean" point of support for his conduct of life. We find the following entry in his diary, which prophetically foreshadows some of the fundamental ideas of his later career: "...what I really need is to arrive at a clear comprehension of what I am to do, not of what I am to grasp with my understanding, except insofar as this understanding is necessary for every action. The point is, to comprehend what I am called to do, to see what the Godhead really means that I shall do, to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and to die..."

This Archimedean point was soon to be furnished him. There came a succession of blows, culminating in the death of his father, whose silent disapprobation had long been weighing heavily on the conscience of the wayward son. Even more awful, perhaps, was a revelation made by the dying father to his sons, very likely touching that very "sin against the Holy Ghost" which he had committed in his boyhood and the consequence of which he now was to lay on them as a curse, instead of his blessing. Kierkegaard calls it "the great earthquake, the terrible upheaval, which suddenly forced on me a new and infallible interpretation of all phenomena." He began to suspect that he had been chosen by Providence for an extraordinary purpose; and with his abiding filial piety he interprets his father's

death; as the last of many sacrifices he made for him; "for he died, not away from me, but for me, so that there might yet, perchance, become something of me." Crushed by this thought, and through the "new interpretation" despairing of happiness in this life, he clings to the thought of his unusual intellectual powers as his only consolation and a means by which his salvation might be accomplished. He quickly absolved his examination for ordination (ten years after matriculation) and determined on his magisterial dissertation.³

Already some years before he had made a not very successful debut in the world of letters with a pamphlet whose queer title "From the MSS. of One Still Living" reveals Kierkegaard's inborn love of mystification and innuendo. Like a Puck of philosophy, with somewhat awkward bounds and a callow manner, he had there teased the worthies of his times; and, in particular, taken a good fall out of Hans Christian Andersen, the poet of the Fairy Tales, who had aroused his indignation by describing in somewhat lachrymose fashion the struggles of genius to come into its own. Kierkegaard himself was soon to show the truth of his own dictum that "genius does not whine but like a thunderstorm goes straight counter to the wind."

³ Corresponding, approximately, to our doctoral thesis.

While casting about for a subject worthy of a more sustained effort-he marks out for study the legends of Faust, of the Wandering Jew, of Don Juan, as representatives of certain basic views of life; the Conception of Satire among the Ancients, etc., etc.,-he at last becomes aware of his affinity with Socrates, in whom he found that rare harmony between theory and the conduct of life which he hoped to attain himself.

Though not by Kierkegaard himself counted among the works bearing on the "Indirect Communication"-presently to be explained-his magisterial dissertation, entitled "The Conception of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates," a book of 300 pages, is of crucial importance. It shows that, helped by the sage who would not directly help any one, he had found the master key: his own interpretation of life. Indeed, all the following literary output may be regarded as the consistent development of the simple directing thoughts of his firstling work. And we must devote what may seem a disproportionate amount of space to the explanation of these thoughts if we would enter into the world of his mind.

Not only did Kierkegaard feel kinship with Socrates. It did not escape him that there was an ominous similarity between Socrates' times and his own-between the period of flourishing Attica, eminent in the arts and in philosophy, when a little familiarity with the shallow phrases of the Sophists enabled one to