

ROUSSEAU (1712–1788).

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As the environments and associations of our early days have very often an immense influence on our character in after life, a short account of Rousseau's childhood and youth may perhaps enable us better to understand the character of the man.

Born in Geneva, to which city of refuge his family had fled from Paris at the time of the religious wars, Rousseau was always more of a Genevese than a Frenchman, and being brought up "a free citizen in a free city" he seems to have imbibed early that love of liberty for which he became so famous in after years. His mother, a simple, cheerful woman, the daughter of a Genevan minister, died at his birth, and we cannot but feel that if only she had been spared to help in the formation of her child's character and to counteract his father's too great imaginativeness, Rousseau's views of life might have been saner and healthier. "I cost my mother her life," he says sadly, "and my birth was the first of my woes," and certainly the education of the sickly motherless boy was of the strangest kind, formal instruction and corrective discipline being totally absent. He was practically an only child, his brother having run away to Germany and never being heard of again, and like many other only children he grew up with an unduly large opinion of himself and of his own importance. His father treated him as a companion and an equal, and we read with dismay that before he had reached his seventh year, he and his father would spend whole nights reading romances, becoming so absorbed in the fictitious characters and situations that the "early song of the birds" alone would recall to them the fact that the night was over and the morning at hand.

What a training for a naturally highly sensitive and imagina-
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tive child! Is it to be wondered at that passion and sensuousness should have played so large a part in his after life? "I had no idea of real things," he says of this time, "though all the sentiments were already familiar to me, ... these confused emotions ... gave me bizarre and romantic ideas of human life, of which neither reflection nor experience has ever been able wholly to cure me."

At the age of ten, when he seems to have been practically deserted by his father and left to the care of his mother's sisters, he went to a school at Bossy; after two not very profitable years he was taken away from there and apprenticed first to a notary and afterwards to an engraver, but with no success in either case; and, at last, at the age of sixteen he ran away, and without a penny in his pockets and with no trade to help him, fearlessly faced the unknown world.

Finding his way into Savoy, the priest at Confignon had compassion on the hungry lad and gave him a good dinner; afterwards with proselytising ardour pointing out to him the errors of the Genevan doctrine and the authority of the holy Roman Church, and as Rousseau's religion, if he had any at this time, was of a very undefined character, he was easily induced to change its outward form. The priest then sent him to the care of Mdme. de Warens, herself a convert, a beautiful and fascinating woman, with whom, romantic and sentimental as he was, Rousseau immediately fell in love, and who exercised a great influence over him in after years. For the time, however, she sent him to a monastery at Turin, where his conversion being

completed with great ease and rapidity, he was once more sent forth into the world, and passed through many strange experiences before he returned again to Annecy and his beloved "Maman," as he called Mdme. de Warens.

Here his youth must be considered as ended; but the effects of this time when he was lackey, tramp, vagabond and fugitive, "everything by turns and nothing for long," remained with him all his life and may account for many of his restless wanderings, as well as for his sympathetic understanding of the needs of the poor.

With Mdme. de Warens he eventually settled down for some time at Chambéry, afterwards moving to the farmhouse "Les Charmettes," where he spent with her the happiest hours of his unhappy life. It must indeed have seemed a time of rest and repose after his homeless wanderings, a short interval of quiet and peace that must have done much to strengthen him both in mind and body for those strenuous times that were before him. But this idyll came to an end, as might have been expected, by the
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infidelity of the lady to whom Rousseau had no scruples in being himself unfaithful, and once more he became a wanderer.

It was not until Rousseau's return to Paris, when he was in his thirty-third year, that he seems to have come seriously before the notice of the public. The Academy of Dijon having offered a prize for the best "Discourse on the question whether the restoration of science and arts has contributed to purify manners," Rousseau eagerly took up the subject, and startled the world with an essay that won not only the prize but also the wonder and admiration of all who read it. Rousseau gave a direct negative to the question asked, and asserted that the sincerity, confidence, and rude simplicity of the natural man had been changed into deceit, suspicion and hollow uniformity of conduct, by social institutions, and declared that a return to nature was the only true remedy for all the ills of the race. Paradoxical though this all was, the people were so amazed at the originality of the idea that they attached more importance to it than they might otherwise have done, and it was the publication of this essay that first made Rousseau famous.

His "Lettre sur la Musique Française" caused an almost equal disturbance in the musical world—here again "simplification" being the key-note of his discourse, a plea for the return to simplicity and nature in music, with a vigorous protest against "the unmeaning devices of false art"—a revolutionary system in a time of "fugues, counter-fugues, and all other such difficult fooleries," which with the assertion that France had no national music set all Paris in an uproar.

Except for his "Lettre d'Alenbert" which was an attack on Voltaire which Voltaire never forgave, his next serious literary effort was "Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse," a novel which Morley has dissected somewhat mercilessly, but which McCarthy calls an "exquisite romance." For though, no doubt, to us, the characters would seem stiff and unnatural, we must remember the artificial manners of the time in which it was written; and if, as is argued, the character of Julie is immoral on account of her lax notions on the subject of marriage, we must also remember that "autre temps autre mœurs" and that she would appear almost as a saint to the readers of the "Pucelle" and other such abominations.

"Émile," which is more of a treatise on the education of children than a novel, is chiefly remembered for the confessions of a Savoyard Vicar contained in it, which some have thought to be the expressions of Rousseau's own religious opinions.

But it was the publication of Rousseau's "Confessions" (written after he had attained manhood) that probably has

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done more harm to his character as a man in the eyes of posterity than any other of his works or even of his doings. Though, perhaps, hardly enough consideration is ever given to the fact that he was a highly neurotic and emotional boy, given to much morbid introspection, which a healthier body and a better-trained mind would have enabled him to shake off: also that he wrote these "confessions" as a duty, with the idea of "leaving nothing to tell to God," and that possibly some of our own confessions written with that idea honestly and faithfully carried out, with our innermost thoughts and feelings put down in uncompromising print, might not make always very pleasant or very edifying reading. It is by his "Contrat Social," however, that he will be longest remembered; a work which will still live when its author may be forgotten. We are told that when published "it came upon the world like a thunder-clap and took that world by storm;" and though it is difficult for us to whom so much of it seems "an old story," to realise the immense effect it produced, yet we can partly understand the amazement caused by the bold assertion of such revolutionary ideas as the sovereignty of the people and the equality of man, coming as they did at a time when the government was becoming even more arbitrary than despotic, and the distinction between the classes becoming more marked day by day. In the midst of a thoroughly artificial life, both political and social, Rousseau's voice was heard like a clarion-trumpet, proclaiming with passion that all men should be equal, that there should be no masters and no slaves, and that where there was guilty luxury on the one side and hopeless misery on the other, there ought to be "equality, love, brotherhood and happiness." Creating in his own mind a being of absolute honesty, truthfulness, courage and purity, which he called the "natural man," he declared that its degeneration was entirely the work of social laws and mis-government: he dwelt much upon the "General Will" and asserted that society was originally based on a "contract" by which every citizen in return for protection of life and property bound himself to obey this General Will, that the laws were the expression of the General Will, and that the kings were therefore the servants of the people and the real sovereignty was in the people's hands. No wonder that the people of that time, groaning under the tyranny of "an extravagant Court, a bigoted priesthood and a luxurious nobility," did not stop to think that these theories might be full of flaws and could never be worked out to their logical conclusions; but clutching at the hope that was held out to them, they yearned passionately for that Arcadian existence as depicted in Rousseau's glowing language, where all natural

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wants would be supplied and where the poor and down-trodden should come into their rightful and natural inheritance.

"Pull down the artificial barriers," cried Rousseau; and the people ignoring those parts of the "Contract" which they did not understand or did not like, seized upon this as their war-cry, and giving it a practical meaning that was never intended by its author, they did indeed sweep away not only the barriers that divided them from the nobles, but also the hated nobles themselves.

Rousseau was undoubtedly the Evangelist of the Revolution, and as such he will live in the memory of the future ages when his character with its many weaknesses and inconsistencies will, we hope, be lost in kindly oblivion.

For it is with a feeling almost of regret that we turn from Rousseau's writings to his life,—from the lofty thoughts and imaginings of a noble mind, from a voice ever uplifted in the cause of humanity, to the morbid, querulous man of infirm and sickly habits, who after a life of much sorrow, and, it must be added, of much sin, ended by quarrelling with his best friends and dying in a state bordering on insanity. Many have criticised severely his connection with Thérèse Le Vasseur, but, at least, he was faithful to her (as far as lay in his nature to be faithful to anyone) long after she had tired of him; and even after the disenchantment of later years, he ever remained loyal to the memory of Mdme. de Warens, and would refer with affection to the "sweet perfume of many-scented nights in the silent garden at Charmettes." Other women, too, clever women of the world, such as Mdme. d'Epinay and Mdme. d'Houtetot, were greatly devoted to him, and many men were glad to call him friend, until his ill-humours (probably often caused by ill-health) drove them away from him. So that we feel there must have been something strongly attractive about this strange man, who combined the waywardness and petulance of a child with the enthusiasm and the charm of a strong personality. A lady describing him to a friend wrote thus: "He pays compliments, yet he is not polite, or, at least, he is without the air of politeness. He seems to be ignorant of the usages of society, but it is easily seen that he is infinitely intelligent. He has a brown complexion, while eyes that overflow with fire give animation to his expression. ... They say that he has bad health, and endures agony, which from some motive of vanity he carefully conceals—it is this, I fancy, which gives him from time to time an air of sullenness."

Rarely, if ever, free from suffering and often racked with pain, with his passions always strung up to their highest pitch,
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with an intense self-consciousness and a morbid vanity that always suspected his friends of either making "a show" of him or else of neglecting him, Rousseau's last years were indeed unhappy ones; though the remembrance of his unsatisfied yearnings and unrealised ideals should turn our condemnation into pity. For faulty though, and very human, no doubt being, like that other great spirit, Carlyle, "ill to live with," yet within, there was that "divine spark" of genius which lifts him far above mere ordinary criticism. As John Stuart Mill says: "Persons of genius are more individual than any other people, less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which Society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character. ... If they (persons of genius) are of strong character, and break their fetters, they become a mark for the Society which has not succeeded in reducing them to commonplace, to point out with solemn warning as "wild," "erratic," and the like, much as if one should complain of the Niagara not flowing smoothly between its banks like a Dutch canal." And, I think we should keep these words in our minds when attempting to study the character of Rousseau. For his was indeed a fiery spirit imprisoned in a weak body, and though the accounts of his last days, over which a cloud of misery seems to hang like a pall, fill us with grief that so noble a mind should have so sad and unheroic an ending, yet it should not be forgotten that he never failed to proclaim the divine message which he was given to deliver, and so by his words and works he was the instrument by which help was given to the helpless and hope to the despairing. And if we should still sigh to think that the messenger was so unworthy of his high task, let us also remember that though "the vessels on which we read sacred emblems may turn out to be

common pottery; yet the sense of the pictures is sacred, and you may still read them transferred to the walls of the world."