

AUGUSTINE AND HIS MOTHER.

## CLUB ESSAYS.

---

### AUGUSTINE AND HIS MOTHER.

THE medical profession has long wished that the outer walls of some one human body at least might be made transparent, that those who attempt to cure ailments might be first permitted to see how the harp is made which they must keep in tune. Accidents have come to answer some part of this prayer, for pieces of the skull have been removed and the brain made visible, and the tearing away of the concealing veils have disclosed the throbbing heart and the expanding lungs. In the mental department of man the operations are behind heavy canopies and are largely unseen, and the wish of the medical leaders has often come to the students of spiritual modes, and mo-

---

tions and aims and ends. Burns thought much good would result if a man could see himself even as well as other people could see him; a Greek philosopher gratified a general feeling when he sighed forth the advice, "Know thyself," while Menander laughed at the imperfection of the advice, and declared it a more important attainment if one could know other people. "Murder will out," but this is not true of all the good and bad of human nature. Each soul lives and dies alone. It dwells in a dark room which no one enters. Saint Augustine comes nearest of all the great men of history to having lived and died in a transparent tenement. His soul tore down the heavy curtains and stood forth in full view. He saw himself in a manner so thorough that Burns himself must have felt that in our earth there was one man for whom his couplets were not composed.

Great as is the public aversion to an egotist,

each age is fortunate if it possesses one or two of these self-exhibitors, provided always that the man who thus loves to exhibit himself has any mental goods worthy of being spread out at an "opening." Even in so prosaic and practical a matter as a county fair, a public display of produce and stock and manufactured articles implies the superior quality of the things shown; and when the exposition is a National one held at Paris or at Novgorod, it is assumed that all the fabrics and jewels and wonders are of a very high order of merit. When an egotist comes along to set forth his own deeds and thoughts and beliefs, to put his own exploits in a magic lantern, and throw them out upon a canvass for our benefit, he in the meanwhile making the accompanying remarks and turning out the music, it is demanded simply that he has some exploits and scenes worthy of his time and our own, and of the complicated machines for ex-

hibiting. Fortunate the generation which has grown for its own use one of these glass-clear souls, having at once an experience rich and full, and an anxiety to tell the whole story. Montaigne is to-day a picture of a French half century—a picture made up of interesting details, which must have escaped the more grave historian; but more fortunate still was the fourth Christian century in the possession of such an open mind as Aurelius Augustine.

He alleges as an excuse for writing his "Confessions" his desire to do good; but it is pretty well known that such a desire generally springs up in hearts not averse to self-utterance, and that the two desires of saving souls and pleasing one's self are for the most part combined in all these personal records. But the end justified the means, for in this autobiography the nineteenth century possesses a truthful picture of the Christian landscape as it lay fourteen hundred years ago. Doctrines

and customs, smiles and tears, mothers, wives and mistresses, studies and prayers, truths and falsehoods, chimeras and absurdities and verities, are clothed with all the realism and interest which attend the drama of actual personage. Augustine possesses the double virtue of being the mirror of a whole generation, and of a generation so far removed from our own that each article displayed seems an antique or a charming novelty.

It shows the religious quality of the early Christian faith that Augustine's autobiography is addressed to God. In those days the Deity had not fallen into the hands of our Darwins and Mills and Harriet Martineaus, but He was a near friend—a companion of each soul. God was as absolute a reality as was the city of Rome or the Mediterranean sea, and the early Christians enjoyed as many conferences with God as they enjoyed with each other. To this real but invisible One cases of con-

science and of doubt were referred as to a magistrate who could not err, and, in a word, the Creator of the universe was the special friend and confidant of all who passed over from the pagan to the Christian faith. When Augustine had fallen into deep perplexity over a question of duty, he resolved to open the Bible at random and then mark what verse the Lord should first disclose to his eyes. Thus was he led from his darkness out into the supreme light, and so effective was this form of appeal that both Augustine and his bosom friend Alypius were richly blessed by a passage which contained a peculiar teaching for each one of the inseparable companions. That is, the appeal to 'random' was so full of success that the applicant had light to spare to his neighbor. Living in such a period, good Christians talked to God as they walked along the roads or as they journeyed by boat or litter, and when the subject of this sketch felt

that the human family should see his inmost heart, he simply began to write down his talks with his Maker. This evidently secures for the book great sincerity and frankness, for there is seldom a heart so depraved that it can address a series of falsehoods to the Almighty. The probability is that in these "Confessions" we have a picture of a heart in the fourth century, as it lived and loved and hated and wept. It smiled but little.

Should any modern mind possess the child-like simplicity that would tell all things to the public, we should have a grotesque collection, for thoughts are largely involuntary, and they come pell-mell, red, white and blue and black and gray. Judgment selects from this awful mixture and chaos a few things that seem worthy of utterance. Clergymen while speaking in the pulpit have their own thoughts about certain toilets and faces down in the pews, and along with their argument, that



might seem to prove the existence of heaven or hell, they cannot avoid the reflection that Mrs. Oleander has gotten a new shawl, or that Miss Columbine has returned from Europe or Long Branch ; but the rules of public address demand that from this multiplicity of ideas in the brain, a judicious selection should be made by the speaker, and that in his assumed discourse on some theological theme he must suppress his views about Mrs. Oleander and Miss Columbine. To Saint Augustine it generally seemed otherwise. He opens the the windows of his heart and lets all things escape. He mingles into one not displeasing compound, God and Æneas and Dido, and wonders that when so easily able to weep for Dido slain he should have been so slow to weep for himself or for his God. He asks the Almighty why he hated Homer and was fond of Virgil ? He informs the Lord that when a lad of fifteen he was wont to steal, and in

---

proof of the assertion he cites an instance in which he had entered a garden to divest a pear tree of its coming crop. "*Nor cared I to enjoy what I stole, but I joyed in the theft and sin itself. A pear tree there was near our vineyard laden with fruit, tempting neither for color nor taste. To shake and rob this some lewd young fellows of us went late one night (having according to our pestilent custom prolonged our sports in the streets till then), and took huge loads, not for our eating, but to fling to the very hogs, having only tasted them. And this we did only because we loved to do that which was not lawful! Behold my heart, O, God! behold my heart, upon which Thou hadst pity as it lay in the bottom of the bottomless pit.*" A statement this which places before us the boys of the Roman world as they were fifteen hundred years ago; how they made the streets noisy with their games and midnight a witness of their dusky forms as they

clambered over wall or fence; a statement which informs us that hogs ran free and hungry in the classic streets, and which recalls to mind the fact that the cooks of the period threw their kitchen-slops out of the front window saying, "*Beware*" to the passer-by.

In this wonderful *pot pourri*, there comes more of the beautiful than of the grotesque or ridiculous, and as a general rule the thoughts of the Saint flow along, much as do the meditations of a' Kempis and Richard Baxter. Almost all the leading doctrines of the Christian system, come under review, and the virtues and vices of Christians of the period are seen in the general parade. From the fact that each Christian felt that his God or his Saviour was always just at hand, the prevailing tone of religion was personal and spiritual. It was not a philosophy, but an experience. In our day Christianity among the educated is an intellectual platform of piety,

just as republicanism or democracy is a platform of politics; but in the time of Saint Augustine, it was an experience, just as love or friendship is an experience of the soul. The sins of this olden time were more the sins of ignorance than of intention, and therefore the heart which committed them was often all the while a faithful friend of the Most High. Modern Christians are few who would write down such expressions as "too late have I loved Thee, O Thou Beauty of ancient days! yet ever new! too late have I loved Thee!" "Oh Thou sweetness never failing; Thou blissful and assured sweetness." "When shall I see Thee, Oh Thou most dear, most loving, most benign, most precious, most longed for, most lovable, most beautiful, than honey sweeter, than snow or milk whiter, than nectar more delicious; more valuable than all gold or gems, than all the riches and honors of the earth dearer!" Even could such meditations find

their way into the modern mind, they would die on the lips that should attempt to give them audible utterance. Coming in the writings of this old Saint, they tell us not only what a passionate belief filled the soul of the writer but also the souls of the public, for each writer adapts his language to his age. We are thus assured that in the fourth century, the profession of faith in Christ was a declaration of love, and that for him language summoned its best adjectives, and the heart poured out its best tears. The kissing of the feet, and the wiping of them with the long hair of woman, as seen in Magdalen, is seen over again in these pages, the actions of the beautiful woman being spiritualized in the literature of a gifted man.

Explanatory of the emotion of both Mary Magdalen and Saint Augustine, it must be observed that our Anglo-Saxon civilization is, perhaps, the coldest one the world has yet

known. No Southern or Eastern land has ever equalled England and America in the ability and disposition to suppress emotion. Our greetings on the street and in social life are formal and empty, compared with even those of modern Germany and France and Italy, and when compared with the customs of the early centuries of our era, they fade as poor frost-bitten flowers. Whether the difference is not one of emotion so much as one of expression, is a question of value, but it is with outward symbols we are now dealing, and regarding these it must be declared that the forms of revealing regard are in our land comparatively cold and thin. German men who are friends or relatives, often kiss each other and weep when they separate for a long period, thus showing us that there once flowed northward a wave of demonstrativeness from the land of hot hearts, and that that wave, now dying out on the German shore, was high and full when Aug-

ustine was living his intense years. His was a time of full utterance. Language was taxed to its uttermost, and gesture and rite and tears came to supplement the resources of the Latin and Greek tongues. Be the person loved a girl, a wife, a mother, or the Savior or the Creator, the mind always ransacked the prevailing language for words that would come somewhere near conveying an idea of the heart's attachment. The demand added to the supply, and those southeastern tongues all became powerful in their terms of praise and endearment—a power which was inherited by the modern dialects of western Europe.

One of the forms of interest and utility with which these “Confessions” abound, is the conspicuous place occupied by the mother of the remarkable son. Monica is a prominent figure in this passion-play. While it is probable that she does not represent the average wife and mother of that world, yet it is desira-

ble to know what merit and maternal love and wisdom were possible and occasional in a time so far removed from our own. It is a blessed sight to behold such a wife standing forth upon the dark back-ground of classic and ancient customs, and to see a mother so loved by a great son in a day when the father was the chief personage in the house, and when the mother was only a domestic slave. Divorce was frequent and easy. The mother was liable at any time to be banished from her home and separated from her children. When mindful of these cruelties of antiquity we shall read the history of Monica as one of antiquity's brightest pages.

Monica was a Numidian girl. Her country corresponded to the modern Algiers. It was adjacent to Carthage, and hence enjoyed the influence of that illustrious city. For several centuries Carthage and Alexandria had been the successors of Greece and of intellectual



Rome. The military and political power of Rome were on the northern border of the Mediterranean; on the southern border were her literature and libraries. The new religion followed the intellectual parallels and made a grand conquest of the Alexandrian and African Romans. Tagaste, a town in Numidia, the first home of Augustine, must have sustained toward Carthage such relations as all towns are wont to sustain toward this metropolis; so that Monica, a girl in Numidia, must have enjoyed such an education and general culture as she would have received had she passed her girlhood in the larger city of greater fame. Among other teachings she drank in fully the cup of Christianity, as it was handed along in that part of our era. That she accepted of it as the true and only message from God to man may be inferred from the fact that her heart revealed an intense fear lest her promising son might not find that

path of service and safety. Her zeal followed this child with prayers and tears until she saw her dear one, at the age of thirty, pass over from paganism to the tenets of the Gospels. She made long journeys to visit Augustine and plead with him, and his record of this faithful pursuing from city to city shows that her visits were not meddlesome, and as is often the case full of mortification for proud youths who have outgrown the parental wisdom, but they were as the visits of a true love; and even when her arguments were not convincing they were all welcome to the affectionate son. It is well that in the lives of three most illustrious personages—Christ and Aurelius and Augustine—the nearest being to each one was the mother! Not always in our world does the crown of affection rest upon the right forehead.

In Monica we may see the traces of the customary bondage of the wife, which, next to the

slavery of men, has disgraced the past of humanity. What exact quality of a husband this Numidian woman found is not told us, but that he possessed the prevailing low ideas of a wife is fully evinced by the inquiry which her women-friends raised—how it happened that, having been a wife so long, she had no marks on her face and body of blows received in the ordinary experience of married life? We can paint a picture here. A half-dozen wives have met, perhaps, at a common resort on the sea, and while sitting idly together in the afternoon, their husbands being absent on a fishing or tippling or theological excursion, these wives fall into a free discourse about the scars and wounds on their bodies. One has a slightly broken nose; one has lost a couple of front teeth; one has a long scar on her cheek; one has a mark over an eye; but upon looking toward Monica to note which of these marriage certificates she may possess, they find none,

and then she explains to them that for years she has made no answer to scoldings, and has in such an adroit manner studied silence and conciliation that she has escaped blows with club or rod, and has received words only, and they leave no scar. Other of the wives then tell what it was that made their lordly husband administer the blow under contemplation. No one of these women sigh for sorrow at the remembrance of such violence, for such sighing would imply that in their hearts was slumbering some delicate ideal of domestic love. No one of them, not even Monica, could recall a time when a husband had put any flowers in her hair, or had kissed her in presence of guests, but easily can they remember that Paul has said that wives must obey their husbands, and that Xenophon has said that if a wife wants exercise let her fold and arrange all the clothes. And yet in a day when all customs tended to dwarf the wife and the mother, Monica flour-

ished and triumphed under the marriage-roof, and attached her children to her in bonds of love that would be thought very powerful, even in our age.

And yet this very wife who had managed affairs so well, did not fully realize, in the abstract, the sphere of wife or mother, for the terms are mutually explanatory. Nor had she or her husband or her son a moral sense that would compare favorably with the highest moral ideas of modern Christianity. These two defects will appear in the fact that this Christian woman rather opposed the marriage of her son, and did not battle so bravely to persuade her gifted boy to give up his unlawful mistress as to give up his paganism. Even so pious and devoted a mother could not take in the whole circle of the new morality, but splendid as she was, she had one foot back upon the borders of the dark land. She was anxious for her child to escape to Christ, not

---

dreaming that she had not herself fully come to his moral high. To all this truly noble Christian group marriage appeared as the attribute of man as an animal, and therefore between mistress and wife the difference did not seem remarkable. The long and great struggle of Augustine to find some light in this matter came largely from the power of long customs and from the low general estimate of woman. When at last thirty-three years had brought him some reason and the power to put away the temporary friend, he did not make a wife of her, who had been all things to him, faithfully for years, and was the mother of the beautiful Adeodatus, but discarding her, he begins to talk with God about matrimony, and prays for a wife that may bring him some money, and may thus add to his happiness without adding to the family expense. Thus throughout this domestic group there is visible more of piety than of intelli-

gence. As a child can have emotions, but only old age have wisdom, so the infancy of a religion may possess faith and zeal, while the delicate perception of right and wrong waits the slow coming of thought and experience.

At last by her pleadings with her family and at the throne of mercy, Monica led her son and husband and some of the nearest relatives and friends over from the old religion to the new. This transformation took place at Milan. Milan being then a rival of Rome in material and intellectual greatness, being full of the "pomp and circumstance of Kings," the wish sprang up in the hearts of these new converts to return to Africa, and for a time enjoy the meditation and spiritual luxury of solitude. Along with all these early conversions came a contempt of the world. The early Christians loved a solitude because they thought that the absence of man secured the presence of God. Having found Christ the

heart sought a hidden room or a cave in the rocks or a trackless forest, that it might see only its Savior.

In obedience to this philosophy, Augustine and his mother set forth for the coast. Loved attendants followed. They came to the well known port of Ostia, and as nobody was ever in haste in that epoch, and as all these travelers were weary from their overland trip, they determined to spend a few days or perhaps weeks at this old town by the sea. The Mediterranean tempered the winds which came from the southern region, while the mountains cooled those that came from the north. On one of these peaceful days the son and the mother were standing, and leaning out of a large window which looked out upon a blossoming garden and a serene sky. The scene and the rapture of their hearts brought these strange lovers a theme of discourse. They began to wonder what would be the nature of



that world which should come beyond the earthly flowers, and the blue sky of these days; to wonder with what kind of sweetness that life would begin, and with what rich employment proceed in its endlessness. Picture for painter, this son aged thirty-three, and this mother aged fifty-six, hand in hand like lovers looking out of a window, and with upturned faces attempting to see beyond the curtains of eternity. The vision and thoughts were too rich. They expelled from the mother's bosom the beloved Africa, and made her soul long for a holier rest than any along the shores of the sea that now murmured at her feet. "My son why should I stay longer in this world? I have seen my household all converted from darkness to light, and now why might I not wish to go to the world where my Lord dwells?" While Monica thus talked, the change of worlds was coming silently.

In a few days after this conference, which

---

will remind the reader of the similar discourses which Aurelius and his mother held in pagan words, Augustine was summoned to his mother's room. She had fainted away in a fever. In our day there are fevers which seem to touch the mind before they are perceived in the body. The door-bell is heard to ring, and persons are heard to call one's name, when no one has rung and no one has spoken; tears of memory fill the eyes; the present seem absent or the absent seem to have come home. The victim of these deceptions feels bewildered, but often laughs at the cheats. In a few days the rapid development of a fever explains the strange action of the mind. It may be that when in the far off times this beautiful mother stood by that window, which has long since decayed, and looked out over the garden whose trees are now dead, a malarial fever touched her mind with its chilling shadow, and made her heart wish to fly away

and be at rest. She heard music and voices not of earth. She seemed to see a land sweeter than the one held by the arms of the Romans or by the literature of the Greeks. In a few days the fever had made unconscious the mind which had filled years with its prayers and reasonings and love. But reason returned long enough to permit this noble woman to reveal one more color of her loveliness—a deep humility—for she requested her son not to move her body to her home, but to bury her at Ostia and to hold a service full of simplicity—beyond that he must remember her always before the altars of God.

The events which followed this dying scene, cast some light upon the services of that period. The neighbors began to pour into the house where the dead woman lay, and some one began to chant a psalm, and all the house-full began to make responses, thus showing us that the music and general service of the fourth cent-

ury was much like that of the Episcopal Church of the present. The funeral was without lamentations, not even tears being thought proper, for the soul had gone to a better land, and therefore, said Augustine, they attempted to conceal or prevent expressions of sorrow. The distinguished son himself, having invited the company into a room removed from the one where friends were preparing the body for burial, delivered an address to them "upon themes befitting the time," thus incidentally teaching us that Christianity had robbed the grave of victory, and death of its sting, and had enabled a son to contemplate peacefully a dead face, which, living, had been his inexpressible joy.

A portion of the dying request of Monica has led to some discussions among theologians. She asked to be remembered at the Lord's altar wherever the living son might be. Roman Catholic writers cite this request and the

---

obedience of Augustine, as proof that prayers for the dead have the authority of the early church. Dr. Shedd, of the Presbyterian denomination, urges that no such inference can be drawn from such an incident, but there is no space here for either side of the debate. In my opinion the dying mother asked her son to pray for her always and, in my opinion, the son was true to the request; but the force of such praying for the dead is all taken away by the fact that both Augustine and his mother did many things not worthy of imitation by any subsequent generation. If all things, the early Christians did may become a basis of church law and practice, then nothing is more useless than human habits of thought and progress. Augustine thought that singing in church had a tendency to exalt music above God. To confess the simple facts of history and then deny their value as an example, would seem more rational than to

---

resort to the method of Dr. Shedd which appears to be only a piece of theological trifling. Monica asked to be remembered in the family petitions, which should be offered up after she had passed away; Augustine went to the altar and prayed for his dead parent and his prayer is all written down. Such facts leave no room for Protestant quibble, neither do they afford any basis of the Roman doctrine and practice, for the Romanists assume that what an old Saint did, becomes church doctrine, and they further assume that by prayers for the dead, they can for money, lift a soul from purgatory. Augustine's prayer was not made for money, nor under any assumption of power, not by a third party having only official relations to the departed soul; but it was an outpouring of love, a strewing of lilies upon a tomb, a remembrance not official by a priest, but solemn and private by a lonely bereaved heart. If the Roman Catholic Church should

teach her men, young and old, who may lose a wise and affectionate mother, to repair often to her grave and there pray to Heaven to make more and more blessed her stay among the angels, and to help them obey the holy words she had taught them, prayers for the dead would be less objectionable, for they would seem to be only the efforts of human affection to carry on its loving intercourse across the valley of death. It is possible that the Protestant notion is as much too cold and iron like as the Roman doctrine is too pretentious and mercenary. It may be that in the cold North, cold by climate and cold by philosophy, death is permitted to cause too absolute a separation between husband and wife, brother and sister, mother and child. It might perhaps be permitted the weeping heart standing on the earthly shore to cast out toward the invisible realm, prayers for those who have gone away, and to cherish the hope

---

that those absent ones were also presenting in their better land, petitions for the happiness and salvation of the dear ones left in this life of temptation and suffering. For such rationalizing, for such sifting of opinion, Augustine and his mother did not wait. For thirty-three years this mother and son had given and received love; had exchanged thoughts upon all possible subjects; had held hands as though two lovers or two little children, and when death came to the parent, the friendship of the son did not cease, but its words became prayers and were flung out into the spiritual world by an impassioned soul.