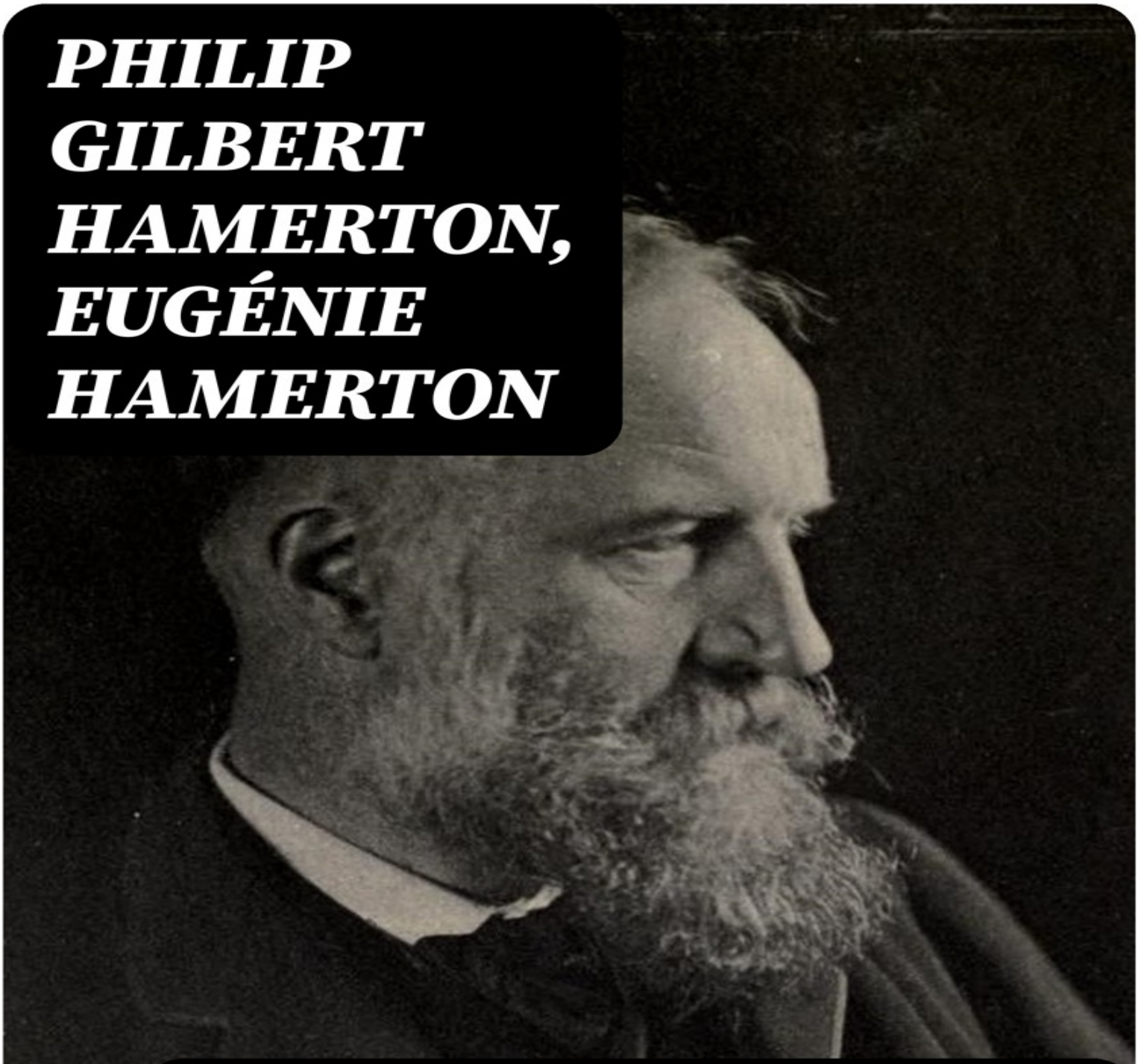
PHILIP GILBERT HAMERTON, EUGÉNIE HAMERTON



PHILIP GILBERT HAMERTON

Philip Gilbert Hamerton, Eugénie Hamerton

Philip Gilbert Hamerton

An Autobiography, 1834-1858, and a Memoir by His Wife, 1858-1894

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PREFACE.

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About twelve years ago my husband told me that he had begun to write an Autobiography intended for publication, but not during his lifetime. He worked upon it at intervals, as his literary engagements permitted, but I found after his sudden death that he had only been able to carry it as far as his twenty-fourth year. Such a fragment seemed too brief for separate publication, and I earnestly desired to supplement it by a Memoir, and thus to give to those who knew and loved his books a more complete understanding of his character and career. But though I longed for this satisfaction and solace, the task seemed beyond my power, especially as it involved the difficulty of writing in a foreign language. Considering, however, that the Autobiography was carried, as it happened, up to the date of our marriage, and that I could therefore relate all the subsequent life from intimate knowledge, as no one else could, I was encouraged by many of Mr. Hamerton's admirers to make the attempt, and with the great and untiring help of his best friend, Mr. Seeley, I have been enabled to complete the Memoir—such as it is.

I offer my sincere thanks to Mr. Sidney Colvin and to his co-executor
for having allowed the insertion of Mr. R. L. Stevenson's

letters; to
Mr. Barrett Browning for those of his father; to Sir George and Lady
Reid, Mr. Watts, Mr. Peter Graham, and Mr. Burlingame for their own.

I also beg Mr. A. H. Palmer to accept the expression of my gratitude for his kind permission to use as a frontispiece to this book the fine photograph taken by him.

E. HAMERTON.

September, 1896.

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OF

PHILIP GILBERT HAMERTON

1834—1858

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My reasons for writing an autobiography.—That a man knows the history of his own life better than a biographer can know it.—Frankness and reserve.—The contemplation of death.

My principal reasons for writing an autobiography are because I am the only person in the world who knows enough about my history to give a truthful account of it, and because I dread the possibility of falling into the hands of some writer who might attempt a biography with inadequate materials. I have already been selected as a subject by two or three biographers with very friendly intentions, but their friendliness did not always ensure accuracy. When the materials are not supplied in abundance, a writer will eke them out with conjectural expressions which he only intends as an amplification, yet which may contain germs of error to be in their turn amplified by some other writer, and made more extensively erroneous.

It has frequently been said that an autobiography must of necessity be an untrue representation of its subject, as no man can judge himself correctly. If it is intended to imply that somebody else, having a much slighter acquaintance with the man whose life is to be narrated, would produce a

more truthful book, one may be permitted to doubt the validity of the inference. Thousands of facts are known to a man himself with reference to his career, and a multitude of determinant motives, which are not known even to his most intimate friends, still less to the stranger who so often undertakes the biography. The reader of an autobiography has this additional advantage, that the writer must be unconsciously revealing himself all along, merely by his way of telling things.

With regard to the great question of frankness and reserve, I hold that the reader has a fair claim to hear the truth, as a biography is not avowedly a romance, but at the same time that it is right to maintain a certain reserve. My rule shall be to say nothing that can hurt the living, and the memory of the dead shall be dealt with as tenderly as may be compatible with a truthful account of the influences that have impelled me in one direction or another.

I have all the more kindly feelings towards the dead, that when these pages appear I shall be one of themselves, and therefore unable to defend my own memory as they are unable to defend theirs.

The notion of being a dead man is not entirely displeasing to me. If the dead are defenceless, they have this compensating advantage, that nobody can inflict upon them any sensible injury; and in beginning a book which is not to see the light until I am lying comfortably in my grave, with six feet of earth above me to deaden the noises of the upper world, I feel quite a new kind of security, and write with a more complete freedom from anxiety about the

quality of the work than has been usual at the beginning of other manuscripts.

Nevertheless, the clear and steady contemplation of death (I have been looking the grim king in the face for the last hour) may produce a paralyzing effect upon a man by making his life's work seem very small to him. For, whatever we believe about a future state, it is evident that the catastrophe of death must throw each of us instantaneously into the past, from the point of view of the living, and they will see what we have done in a very foreshortened aspect, so that except in a few very rare cases it must look small to them, and ever smaller as time rolls on, and they will probably not think much of it, or remember us long on account of it. And in thinking of ourselves as dead we instinctively adopt the survivor's point of view. Besides which, it is reasonable to suppose that whatever fate may be in store for us, a greater or less degree of posthumous reputation in two or three nations on this planet can have little effect on our future satisfaction; for if we go to heaven, the beatitude of the life there will be so incomparably superior to the pleasures of earthly fame that we shall never think of such vanity again; and if we go to the place of eternal tortures they will leave us no time to console ourselves with pleasant memories of any kind; and if death is simply the ending of all sensation, all thought, memory, and consciousness, it will matter nothing to a handful of dust what estimate of the name it once bore may happen to be current amongst the living—

"Les grands Dieux savent seuls si l'âme est immortelle,
Mais le juste travaille à leur oeuvre éternelle."

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I was born at Laneside near Shaw, which is now a manufacturing town of some importance about two miles from Oldham in Lancashire, and about four miles from Rochdale in the same county.

Laneside is a small estate with some houses and a little cotton-mill upon it, which belonged to my maternal grandfather. The house is of stone, with a roof of stone slate such as is usual in those parts, and it faces the road, from which it is separated by a little enclosure, that may be called a garden if you will. When I was a child, there were two or three poplar trees in that enclosure before the house; but trees do not prosper there, and now there is probably not one on the whole estate. One end of the house (which is rather long for its height and depth) abuts against the hill, and close behind it is the cotton-mill which my grandfather worked, with no great profit to himself or advantage to his descendants. I have mentioned a road that passes the house; it is steep, narrow, and inconvenient. It leads up to

an elevated tract of the most dreary country that can be imagined, but there are one or two fields on the Laneside estate, above the stone-quarry, from which there is a good view in the direction of Rochdale.

I never knew my grandfather Cocker, but have heard that he was a lively and vigorous man, who enjoyed life very heartily in his way. He married a Miss Crompton, who had a little property and was descended from the De Cromptons of Crompton Hall. I am not aware that she had any family pride, but, like most people in that neighborhood, she had a great appreciation of the value of money, and when she was left alone with her daughter, in consequence of Philip Cocker's premature death, she was more inclined to favor wealthy than impecunious suitors. My father had come to Shaw as a young attorney some time before he asked for Anne Cocker in marriage. He had very little to recommend him except a fine person, great physical strength, and fifteen quarterings. He had a reputation for rather dissolute habits, was a good horseman, an excellent shot, looked very well in a ball-room, and these, I believe, were all his advantages, save an unhappy faculty for shining in such masculine company as he could find in a Lancashire village in the days of George IV. Money he had none, except what he earned in his profession, at one time rather a good income.

Miss Anne Cocker was a young lady with a will of her own, associated, I have been told (the two characteristics are by no means incompatible), with a very sweet and amiable disposition. At a time when my grandmother still vigorously opposed the match with my father, there

happened to be a public charity ball in Shaw, and Miss Cocker showed her intentions in a very decided manner, by declining to dance with several gentlemen until the young lawyer presented himself, when she rose immediately with a very gracious smile, which was observed by all near enough to witness it. This was rather unkind perhaps to the other aspirants, and is, in fact, scarcely defensible, but it was Miss Cocker's way of declaring her intentions publicly. When my father made his offer, he was refused by my grandmother's orders, but received encouragement from her daughter (a tone of voice, or a look, yet more a tear, would be enough for a lover's hope), and counted upon the effects of perseverance. At length, when he and Miss Cocker thought they had waited long enough, they determined to marry without Mrs. Cocker's consent, and the determination was notified to my grandmother in the following very decided terms:—

"DR. Madam,—You are no doubt well aware of the warm attachment which has long existed betwixt your dear daughter and myself. Upwards of twelve months ago our affections were immovably fixed upon each other, and I now consider it my duty to inform you that we are fully engaged, and have finally concluded to be married within a fortnight of the present time.

"I sincerely trust that all your hostile feelings towards me are entirely worn out, and that you will receive me as the affectionate husband of your beloved daughter, and I with great confidence hope we shall be a happy family and live together with peace and harmony.