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Milton's Life

John Milton was born in Bread Street, Cheapside, London, on 9th December, 1608, or some four years before Shakespeare's retirement to Stratford. His father, though strongly Puritan in his sympathies, was none the less a lover of literature and art, and the child enjoyed all the advantages of a cultivated home. He was educated at St. Paul's School, and at Christ's College, Cambridge, where he remained seven years, taking his B.A. degree in 1629 and his M.A. in 1632. His systematic studies did not, however close with the close of his College course. Realising that he could not conscientiously enter the Church for which he had been intended and feeling no call to any other profession, he decided to give himself up entirely to self-culture and poetry. Fortunately his father was in a financial position to

further his wishes, and on leaving Cambridge he accordingly took up his abode in the country house of the family at Horton, Buckinghamshire, some seventeen miles from London. While a boy at school, as he himself tells us, his books had kept him out of bed till midnight at the university he had shown the same untiring devotion to learning and now during six years of almost uninterrupted seclusion he was able to pursue his studious way undisturbed. Building steadily upon the firm foundations, he had already laid, Milton thus became a very great scholar. This point must be carefully marked, not only because in the breadth and accuracy of his erudition he stands head and shoulders above all our other poets, but also because his learning everywhere nourished and interpenetrates his poetic work. Having now reached his thir-

tieth year, he resolved to complete his studies by travel. He therefore left London in May, 1638 and went by way of Paris to Italy, whence, however, he was prematurely recalled by news of the critical state of things at home. While he was preparing to pass over into Sicily and Greece, he writes, 'the melancholy intelligence which I received of the civil commotions in England made me alter my purpose, for I thought it base to be travelling for my amusement abroad while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home'. He was back in London in August, 1639 after an absence of fifteen months and from 1640 onward was increasingly active as a supporter of the Puritan cause against the Royalists. As a pamphleteer he became indeed one of the great pillars of that cause and on

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the establishment of the Commonwealth was appointed Latin Secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs. In 1643 a terrible calamity overtook him, his sight, which had long been failing was now ruined entirely by over-stress of work and he became totally blind. Three years later he married again but his wife, Catherine Woodcock died within fifteen months. On the restoration of the monarchy, Milton was arrested and two of his books were publicly burnt by the hangman, but he was soon released and permitted to drop into political obscurity. He was now poor and lonely as well as blind, he felt bitterly the failure of the cause for which he had toiled so hard and sacrificed so much and though his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, brought comfort to his declining years, he was greatly

distressed by the unfilial conduct of his daughters by his first marriage. It was in darkness and sorrow, therefore that he now turned back upon the ambitious poetical designs which he had cherished many years before and had long set aside at the call of practical duty. His 'Paradise Lost' was published in 1667, 'Paradise Regained' and 'Samson Agonistes' together in 1671. Three years later - on 8th November, 1674 Milton died.

The end.

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