

MARTIN LUTHER

Churchman 009/2 1883

W. Morris Colles

NEARLY four hundred years have elapsed since the birth of Martin Luther, and their history is his noblest monument. Through all these centuries the influence of the Wittenberg Professor can readily be discerned for all time. It is, however, not a little remarkable that the world should have so long been content to know so little of the private life of this marvelous man. Yet it would be difficult to point to a single biography which gives us a faithful portrait of him. In our own language there is certainly none in which his personality is not completely obscured by adventitious matters, and it has hitherto justly been the reproach of German literature that it had so little to tell us of the man who made German a language and Germany a nation. It has been suggested that most ordinary readers would have no difficulty in writing down what they know of Luther upon a sheet of note-paper, and this is probably not a greatly exaggerated estimate of the popular ignorance. Sundry of his acts and words, it is true, are familiar to all of us. Many fables and calumnies respecting him can, too readily, be recollected. But of the man's life from boyhood to old age most of us must confess that we know very little. Nor is this wholly inexplicable. The magnitude of the events in which he was the principal actor have dwarfed his individuality. Probably no single figure of his own or any other era ever made so much noise in the world as Luther:

Who so stood out against the Holy Church,
The great metropolis and see of Rome.

The consequences were inevitable. He has become little more than a creature of criticism. The industrious student may well be bewildered by the mass of contradictory testimony. On the one hand, a crowd of critics have addressed themselves to the task of lowering the prestige of the great German Reformer with such goodwill, that were we to follow these blind guides, we could arrive at the conclusion that he was an ignorant and depraved monk, while the Reformation itself was merely a revolution against authority of a political as much as of a religious character. Others, again, actuated doubtless by a fancied necessity for explaining things, treat the Reformation as the mature outcome of the downfall of mediaevalism, and tell us that there would have been no lack of Luthers if Luther had never been born. But all his motives, words, and deeds have been interpreted in an infinite variety of ways. It is, too, such a wholly superfluous task to speculate what the Reformation would have been without Martin Luther, and his indispensable coadjutor, Philip Melancthon. History, at any rate, would have had a very different reading.

It was from a very humble origin that Luther was called to such great and exceptional honour. He was the son of a peasant. The date of his birth is unknown, or at any rate doubtful, thanks to the Roman Catholic writers who could find no star evil enough to have been that of his destiny; while, curiously enough, according to Melancthon, Martin's mother remembered the day and the month but not the year of his birth. By the common consent of his biographers, however, it has come to be fixed as the 10th of November, 1483.

Of his parents, John and Margaret Luther, we know very little. John, however, seems to have been in some ways a remarkable man. Upright, straightforward, and hardworking, he was at

the same time austere, and obstinate to a fault. He was, too, a man of some education, and read such books as he could obtain, although we can well believe that at the latter end of the fifteenth century these would be few indeed, notwithstanding that the revival of letters had then already set in in Germany. Margaret was a pattern wife. "Other honest wives," says Melancthon, "looked to her as a model of virtue." Martin was indebted to his parents for his early lessons in a piety which was strongly tinged with terrorism. They seem, indeed, to have erred on the side of strictness, for, as Martin himself tells us, they used the rod with such frequency that he became timid. His mother, for instance, whipped him until the blood came one day for stealing a hazelnut; and his father was so fervent a believer in the same method of correction that the child was in the habit of hiding in the chimney-corner to avoid his anger. There seems, however, to be little doubt that Martin was naturally headstrong and willful; and although he himself blames his parents for their severity, the spirit of independence which chiefly enabled him to achieve his life-work was probably due in no small measure to his early training. At the school at Eisenach the same rough and ready code of discipline was practiced. Once, he tells us, he was beaten fifteen times in a single morning. Nor could this have been for stupidity, for when six years old little Martin could read and write with ease. It is impossible to dwell with pleasure upon a childhood which was little more than a succession of ordeals. Of his little playmates we know nothing. He was one of a family of some six or seven, but not even the names of his brothers and sisters have been preserved.¹

In 1497 Martin and a comrade, Hans Reinicke, went to a school of the Franciscans at Magdeburg. Here they scraped together a very precarious livelihood from alms and such sums as they could earn as choristers. Martin's father could do little for him as this time, so that when he had been in Magdeburg for a year he again returned to Eisenach. Too much has been made of Martin's singing in the streets of Eisenach for alms. Such was the rule rather than the exception in Germany, and not the least touching of the customs of the country was that of bestowing bread or pence upon the scholars of the schools who sang from door to door asking "*Panem propter Deum.*" Of course their livelihood was precarious, but the practice was then almost universal, and survived down to very recent times. One name at any rate will ever be remembered in this connection. Ursula von Cotta, the wife or widow of a rich citizen of Eisenach, has earned an immortal memorial for her charity to the boy Martin, and it must have been in no small measure due to her kindness to him that he afterwards, "looking back through years that gilded the distance and wiped out the hungry hours," spoke of "Eisenach, my own dear Eisenach." Here he studied grammar, rhetoric, poetry, and Latin, under Trebonius, Rector of the Convent of the barefooted Carmelites, and a man of some learning, and, more than that, rare sympathy. Martin was indebted to him for his first lessons in self-respect, and was one of his pupils, thanks to his patroness, for four years.

When he was eighteen Luther entered at the University of Erfurt, then the capital of Thuringia, and a famous seat of learning, with the intention of embracing the legal profession, in compliance with his father's wishes. The name of "Martinus Ludher ex Mansfeld" is recorded on the register of the University in the year 1501, the entry having been made by the rector Jodocus Truttvetter, who was one of his tutors in philosophy, and was afterwards to be one of his great opponents, and whose death Martin accuses himself of having hastened by his rebellion against the theology of the schools. Martin could already write and converse in Latin fluently. He was, too, remarkable for quickness of apprehension, and his rare natural eloquence made him a leading figure in the disputations which were then an important feature of German university life. His studies were now chiefly in law, logic, and dialectic philosophy. The writings of Occam, Scotus, Bonaventura, and Thomas Aquinas were at this time his chief mental *pabulum*. Although he attained to a remarkable pitch of

proficiency in both mediaeval and ancient philosophy, such studies had little charm for him, and he gladly embraced the opportunity of studying classics afforded by the invaluable collection in the University library. Amongst his companions were some destined to be remembered. Of these, George Spalatin, afterwards the confidant of Frederick III., Elector of Saxony, and one of Luther's staunchest friends, is the best known. Lucas Cranach, too, was ten years his senior, and was afterwards court painter to three Electoral princes, was one of his associates, and is perhaps best known to fame as the painter of Luther's portrait. Crocius Rubianus, again, the friend of Ulrich von Hütten, was one of the leaders of the Humanists, of whom there was already a little coterie at Erfurt, and who were destined to play no unimportant part in the coming Reformation. With these Luther was on terms of intimate friendship.

In 1502 he was admitted to the degree of Bachelor of Philosophy, the entry on the University roll being "Martinus Luder, Baccalaureus Philosophiæ." (Luther himself spelt his name in four ways, viz. : Ludher, Lutter, Lothar, and Luther.) His chief relaxation was music. All through his life the song and the lute never failed to charm him. "Music," said he, "is a gift of God, and near akin to Divinity. I would not for a great matter be destitute of the small skill in music which I have." He played both the guitar and flute, and he taught the art to all his children. He had, too, great taste for mechanics, and could use a lathe skilfully, a fact which was afterwards of some importance to him. We have no trustworthy record of his personal appearance at this time, but the vigorous vitality of his middle age was unknown to his youth. Luther's life at Erfurt was full of anxieties, and he suffered both mentally and bodily from the constant strain he placed upon his intellectual powers. He was a voracious student. Fired with the fever of knowledge, the peasant's son might well be bewildered in the midst of so many almost priceless volumes, now for the first time within his reach. He studied at once logic and law, philosophy and theology, poetry and *belles lettres*. He read everything. It was when he was twenty years old and in the University library that Luther first saw the Vulgate. Hitherto he had only met with the fragments of Scripture which had been appointed to be read in the churches. There can be no question that this was the turning-point of his life. There is nothing to show that up to this period he had been peculiarly influenced by religious feeling. He was a scrupulous Catholic, but nothing more than that. From this period, however, a great change is noticeable in his career. He passed through an agony of doubt, and although not even his bitterest enemies accuse him of having led a wicked life, he became at once conscious of his shortcomings. Yet he could only read the Latin Bible in the college library at odd moments, and when his studies permitted. He was still a law student, but by degrees his inclinations towards making theology the business of his life steadily grew. Other influences, too, were at work tending to this end. In 1505 Alexis, one of his boon comrades, was killed in a duel, then even a more common event in the German universities than now, and about the same time, when walking to Mansfeldt in order to visit his parents, a thunderbolt struck the ground in front of him. In his terror he vowed himself to a monastic life. The promise was kept. In spite of his father's prayers and his mother's tears he took the cowl, and at midnight on the 7th of July, 1505, he entered the cloister as a novice, taking with him a Plautus and a Virgil as the sole memorials of his past life.

He was fortunate in his choice of a brotherhood. John Staupitz, the Vicar-General of the monastery of St. Augustine at Erfurt, was then far in advance of the time, and was a man of vast learning and wide sympathy. He speedily discerned Luther's promise. Luther himself has partly lifted the veil which would otherwise have shrouded his monastic life. It was during his novitiate that he first studied the Bible systematically. "When I entered into the cloister," he says, "I called for a Bible, and the brethren gave me one. It was bound in red

morocco. I made myself so familiar with it, that I knew on what page and in what place every passage stood." His studious habits, however, provoked the jealousy of some of the monks, so that he was set to perform menial duties, and had again to beg in the streets with a bread-bag on his shoulders. In his monk's cell he fought a hard fight. But for Staupitz, who cheered him, while he could not wholly satisfy his cravings after a higher life, he might not have survived the combined results of his mortifications and doubts.

The University of Wittenberg was now in its infancy, and in 1508 Luther, through the kindly instrumentality of Staupitz, exchanged his cell at Erfurt for the chair of philosophy and theology at the favourite foundation of Frederick the Wise, where there was a branch of the Augustinian monastery. Here Luther lived, lecturing and alternately preaching in the monastery chapel and college church. There were at the time some four hundred students, but in a few years, thanks chiefly to the fame of the new Professor, the number increased to two thousand. It was owing to the fact that the University which was destined to be the birth-place of the Reformation was not like those of Louvain, Cologne, and Leipzig, protected by Pope and Bishop, but by the Elector, that the Reformation was possible; and it was, too, because Luther was there that the craving after freedom, which was already making itself felt throughout the Fatherland, took that definite form and shape which prepared the nation by steady gradations for the time when it should possess an "open Bible and a preached Gospel." In March, 1509, Luther applied for and obtained the degree of Bachelor in Divinity, and in return for this distinction he had every day to lecture on the Bible, and we may well believe that it was a congenial theme. The fame of his lectures soon spread far and wide. The eloquence and the vehemence with which he expounded a new theology to that of the schoolmen attracted students from all parts of the country. Frederick the Wise came to Wittenberg to hear his young Professor.

It was at this juncture that Luther was destined to visit Rome. He was selected as one of two emissaries of his order, who were charged with the duty of procuring the Papal decision upon certain disputed questions. This journey was most pregnant in its results. Never did pilgrim since the earliest days of the Christian era more reverently drag his weary feet to the Holy Sepulchre than did Luther to the city still in his eyes the holiest on earth, since there God's vicegerent sat enthroned. As he neared the land of promise, however, doubts gradually grew. The splendour of the Italian convents, their gorgeousness, their ostentatious luxury, came upon the foot-worn Augustine friar as a terrible surprise. The German monk who had begged for food from door to door could not but contrast the poverty and rigid austerity of his own brotherhood with the magnificence of the Benedictines, who knew little of mortification and less of prayers. At Bologna he had a dangerous illness; but recovered; and at length, six weeks after he had left Wittenberg, he entered Rome.

Julius II. was now on the Papal throne. Occupied in the intervals of intemperance and debauchery with schemes of political aggrandisement which should make him "lord and master of the game of this world,"² he had neither leisure nor inclination to make even a pretence to the Christian life. Ecclesiastical duties, too, had small weight in the Pontifical councils; and Luther, full of zeal and reverence for authority, received from authority but scanty favour. Julius could not trouble himself about the quarrels of a few German monks. But although Rome knew it not, a prophet was in their midst. Luther paid visits to the churches. On all sides were irreverence and venality, but nowhere could the shadow of spiritual religion be found. Of the grand truth "*The just shall live by faith,*" not an echo was heard. Luther was even chided by the Roman priests for not reading mass more speedily. The honest monk was astounded at what he saw and heard. He, however, was not idle, and from

Elias Levita, a celebrated rabbi, he learned the rudiments of Hebrew, which was necessary to fit him for the work he had to do. Probably never in the world's history was conviction fraught with such momentous results brought home to a man's mind more speedily. Luther only stayed a fortnight in Rome. He entered it a Papist: he left it a Protestant for all time.

Luther re-entered Wittenberg a sadder man than he left it. His doubts were now overwhelming, and speedily made themselves apparent in his teaching, both in the lecture-room and the pulpit. Meanwhile, the fame of him spread far and wide. Scarcely a city of the then civilized world but had already heard of the philosophy of the Wittenberg Professor.

Now, for the first time, he began to publicly question the wisdom and the piety of the Papacy. His words furnished his hearers with plenty of food for thought. For a time, too, he took upon him the duties of Vicar-General of his Order. Staupitz was glad of a respite from the constant complaints and dissensions of his flock; and, perhaps discerning the signs of the times, he wished Luther to take a prominent part in the coming renaissance of religion. "It is now necessary, my friend," said he to Luther, "that you become a Doctor of the Holy Scriptures." Luther was overwhelmed at the prospect of such an honour being conferred upon him; but all his scruples were overcome, and the Elector took all the attendant expenses upon himself.³ He now applied himself diligently to the study of Greek and Hebrew, thus fitting himself for the work that was to be given him to do. He was already a notable scholar. In an age when philosophy was one of the sciences most abstrusely studied, he was distinguished for his profound erudition. In common with his Order he followed the principles of the Nominalists. He was a diligent student of the Fathers, especially of St. Augustine. Of the schoolmen, Occam and Gerson still attracted him; while his indebtedness to Reuchlin and John Tauler, the mystic, can hardly be exaggerated. He was, too, certainly better read than any other divine of the Romish Church in the Bible. He had now, to some extent, overcome the constitutional weakness of his youth. Of medium height, sturdy square build, with a small head, and features typical of a sensitively vigorous mind, and eyes like a "falcon"—his was the type of a perfect manhood.

Near Wittenberg lived a monk, John Tetzel, a man of notoriously immoral and evil life. In spite of this, however, he was employed by Albert, Archbishop of Mentz—and, although only a young man of about twenty-four years of age, already a Cardinal and Prince of the Empire—as the German agent for the sale of indulgences. It would be superfluous to specify here the nature of this traffic; but if it was bad in itself, it was made a thousand times worse by the infamous manner in which Tetzel practiced it. He selected the annual fairs for its prosecution; and with all the pomp and circumstance of an accredited Papal agent he cried his wares, inventing a catalogue of most heinous crimes, merely as a proof of the efficacy of the indulgences which he offered for sale. History relates not how Luther was first brought in contact with Tetzel; but the story runs, that some of those who had purchased these bits of parchment confessed themselves to be guilty of very gross sins to Luther, who thereupon imposed severe penances, whereupon they triumphantly produced Tetzel's indulgence and demanded absolution. Luther's indignation got the better of his prudence. In ignorance that Albert was pecuniarily interested in the traffic in indulgences, he wrote a letter to him remonstrating against it. To this he received no reply. Turning to Staupitz, he said: "I will declaim against this gross and profane error—write against it—do all my power to destroy it." "What!" said Staupitz, "would you write against the Pope? They will not permit you to do it; your head will go for it! I pray you desist!" "Suppose they must needs permit it!" replied Luther. He was as good as his word. On the eve of All Saints' Day, 1517, Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg, and thereby struck the key-note of

the Reformation.

In the act itself there was nothing remarkable. In these days the martial spirit had made its way into the schools; and challenges on points of doctrine or scholarship were as usual among the learned as duels among the warlike. Nor in themselves did the theses go any great length in protesting against Papal authority. It was indulgences and their abuse that were attacked. He did not wholly discard all use of indulgences, but only maintained “that they were merely a release by the Pope from the canonical penances for sin established by ecclesiastical law, and did not extend to punishments which God inflicts; that forgiveness of sins was to be had only from God, through real repentance and sorrow, and that God requires no penance or satisfaction therefor.”⁴

Luther’s theses raised a whirlwind throughout Germany. They gave a shape to the popular feeling. Tetzl, put on his defence, pleaded the infallibility of the Pope, and issued a set of counter-theses which were not logically worth the paper on which they were written. John Mair of Eck—better known as John Eck—whom Luther had counted upon for support, assailed him with great fury; and so, too, did Sylvester Prierius of Rome, and James Hochstraten of Cologne, two learned Dominicans. Luther was bewildered by the storm of abuse, but stood his ground with combined modesty and firmness. A general convention of the Augustinians met at Heidelberg early in the following year, and here Luther maintained his opinions so earnestly as to convince many of his brethren. While still at Heidelberg he addressed firm but respectful letters to the Pope and the Archbishop of Mentz and Magdeburg. Although Leo X. is said to have made light of this controversy,⁵ he must have speedily changed his mind for on the 7th of August Luther received a citation to appear at Rome within sixty days and take his trial. The Elector Frederick, however, demanded that Luther should be tried in Germany, according to the ecclesiastical laws of that country; and ultimately in October Luther left Wittenberg, amid the shouts of the students, to meet the Papal Legate, Cardinal Thomas Cajetan (Thomas de Vio, of Gaeta), a Dominican (and hence obviously unfitted to sit as judge in a controversy between a Dominican and an Augustinian monk) learned in the theology of the schools, but profoundly ignorant of Scripture. Such an interview could only have one result. Luther was not so constituted that he would obey an imperious mandate to say “Revoco,” unless convinced by argument; and the Legate could not argue from the Scriptures for lack of knowledge. Luther, who had been furnished with a safe-conduct from Maximilian, and provided with legal advisers, terminated the discussion by appealing *a Pontifice male informato ad melius informandum*—a familiar legal artifice, which while it recognised the jurisdiction of the Pope, superseded that of Cajetan. To this Leo X. imprudently replied by publishing a special edict requiring all his subjects to believe that he had the power to forgive sins. Thereupon Luther appealed from the Pontiff to a general council of the whole Church. The efforts of Charles von Miltitz, the Pope’s private Chancellor, in the following year to bring about Luther’s submission were more craftily conducted, and but for the firmness of Frederick would probably have succeeded in luring Luther to Rome. Many events, however, combined to keep the breach open. The death of the Emperor Maximilian had complicated matters, and the Elector Frederick was appointed Regent of the Empire. The Pope was too fully occupied in intriguing to secure the succession to the imperial throne of a candidate favourable to the Papacy to attend to the case of a single monk.

The famous disputation of Eck with Luther at the Castle of Pleissenburg, at Leipzig, respecting the Papal supremacy and authority, also certainly had the result of confirming Luther in his convictions. He was now in his thirty-sixth year. The anxieties and intense

labour and study of the past few years had told terribly upon his constitution. His physical prostration was such that his bones showed through the skin. He had not, however, lost his old vigour and fire in debate. Possessing a naturally strong moving eloquence and melodious voice, his earnestness carried with it the conviction that this was a man who was asserting the truth, and at once gave him an immeasurable superiority over merely scholastic disputants. He was, however, not free from fault. He answered his opponents with too great acrimony, and indulged too frequently in personalities. We must not, however, forget that much of his passion was fully justified, and that in the age in which he lived it was far from being singular. Controversialists were then accustomed to abuse one another. Those who prefer to dwell upon the mild and peaceful disposition of Melancthon as standing out in pleasing contrast to the rugged obstinacy of Luther may well ask themselves whether without Luther the Reformation would ever have been achieved. The time for compromise had not yet come. Among the results of the debate at Leipzig were proofs that the authorities were on the side of authority. The faculties of Louvain and Cologne condemned Luther's propositions. At this time, too, Luther did not know how far he could rely upon support outside his own University. Upon his return to Wittenberg, however, he assumed the offensive. The die was now cast, and all the world felt assured that the contest in which all the power of Rome was arrayed against that of the Professor of a mushroom University could have but one issue. Eck, burning with rage, had hastened to Rome to ensure Luther's destruction. There Luther was burnt in effigy and his writings in reality. It was high time. They had already spread all over Europe. The press at Bâle was busily engaged. Luther now published, amongst other things, his "De Captivitate Babylonia Ecclesiæ," "wherein he maintained that the Church was captive, that Jesus Christ, constantly profaned in the idolatry of the mass, set aside in the dogma of transubstantiation, was the Pope's prisoner." It is scarcely to be wondered at that works of this kind were in demand. In France, Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands, as well as throughout the whole of Germany and Switzerland, they were already eagerly read. At the time that the Pope thought it desirable to suppress the spread of schism in Germany, it had already begun to make way in nearly all the other countries of Europe. On the 15th June, 1520, Leo X. finally closed the door to reconciliation by issuing the Bull against Luther, in which forty-one of his propositions were denounced as heretical, scandalous, and damnable, and everyone was prohibited, under pain of excommunication, from in any way propagating or sanctioning them. It further condemned all Luther's writings to the flames, while Luther and his followers were commanded to confess their faults within sixty days or be cast out of the Church. Luther responded by renewing his appeal from the Pontiff to the supreme tribunal of a future council, and by reasserting all the condemned propositions. Having now decided upon secession, he further emphasized this act by committing to the Bull, together with a copy of the Pontifical Canon Law, to the flames on the 10th of December, 1520, in the presence of a vast number of spectators, just outside the walls of Wittenberg. The act was an earnest of the dawn of that "Christian liberty" which he had already preached. The second Bull, in which Luther was expelled from the bosom of the Romish Church, followed promptly upon this act of defiance. But all Germany rallied round the young Professor. The climax was at hand.

Charles V. had succeeded to the Imperial throne when yet only twenty years of age. An Imperial Reichstag was summoned to meet at Worms to inaugurate his accession, and the Emperor was charged by the Pontiff with the duty of punishing the recalcitrant monk. Fortunately Charles was willing to be guided by the Elector, who advised him not to proceed summarily and condemn Luther without a hearing, as he was disposed to do. The case was such as, according to the ancient Canon Law, could properly be heard before the Provincial Council of the German nation, in which the Archbishops and Bishops and some of the

Abbots had seats among the Princes. Already, too, had Luther gained a following which was strong enough to render it desirable that the matter should be conducted with seeming fairness. That the worst results were anticipated when Luther was summoned to Worms may well be believed. There were those who shook their heads even though Luther held the Imperial safe-conduct. His journey from Wittenberg to Worms was one perpetual ovation such as Germany had never accorded to any one man, and can never accord to any other. Money was provided sufficient for his needs, and the Doctor was furnished by the Council of Wittenberg with the unwonted luxury of an open wagon, the state of his health wholly preventing him from journeying as usual on foot. At Erfurt he received an enthusiastic reception, and there he preached on Easter Sunday. During his sermon, as the record runs, part of the church fell in, probably owing to the unusual crowd, and the audience fled in terror. Luther, however, continued preaching, and such was his magnetism that, even in that superstitious age, he induced them to return to the dilapidated building. At Leipzig the magistrates gave him the cup of honour, the customary reception accorded to distinguished visitors. At Weimar, John, Duke of Saxony, replenished his scantily filled purse. At Eisenach he paid a visit as a pious pilgrim to the house of Ursula von Cotta, and was nearly detained by a fresh attack of pain; but wishing to avoid the appearance of reluctance to obey the Imperial mandate, he pushed on. He was cheered shortly before he reached Frankfort on the Main by a priest who sent him a portrait of Savonarola, bidding him “persevere for the glory of God.”

It is a pity that there is no proof that he composed that famous hymn—“Ein’ feste Burg ist unser Gott”—which is not only the national psalm of Germany, but has sunk so deeply into the national heart, upon his way to Worms; but the better opinion seems certainly to point to its having been written later. However this may be, the spirit of that psalm must certainly have been running in the Reformer’s mind at this time. He entered the city, henceforth destined to be famous. He was escorted to his lodgings by an immense crowd, and already even at Worms the populace were with him. Among the Princes, however, few had as yet declared for him. Of these, Philip, the young Landgrave of Hesse, Duke William of Brunswick, and the Elector Frederick, countenanced him most openly.

Luther’s prayer, when summoned before the Reichstag, which has been preserved, is pregnant with proofs that the Reformer feared the worst, and had already faced the bitterness of death. Haggard but resolute, Luther entered the assembly. It was a terrible ordeal. The Emperor, six Electors, an Archduke, twenty-seven Dukes, two Landgraves, five Margraves, and numerous Counts, Archbishops, and Bishops, formed a tribunal before which the bravest might tremble. The galleries, too, were crowded with nobles. Luther had few friends here. Outside the populace cried “Bundschuh! Bundschuh!” the old rallying-cry of the insurgent peasantry, but within there was little to reassure the Reformer. He acknowledged that he was the author of his books when their titles had been read over to him, and asked for and obtained time to consider his defence. It is unnecessary to recapitulate minutely the events of this, perhaps the most memorable scene of history. They have been reiterated over and over again, and there is no more familiar figure than that of Luther at Worms. Every device that sophistry could suggest was adopted to induce him to retract. Cajolery and flattery were exhausted. Cochläus, for instance, tempted him to increase his fame as an orator by offering to dispute with him if he would forfeit his safe-conduct, or in other words, sacrifice his life. But all were of no avail. Luther refused to renounce his opinions unless first convinced of error by proofs from Scripture or from sound reason. His intrepid attitude roused the manhood of the German Princes. In the face of the feeling evolved among nobles and people, it would have needed greater influence than even Charles possessed to have then safely

sacrificed Luther to the Papal vengeance. Even the sentence condemning his books to destruction was carried out with difficulty. The people passed summary judgment upon those daring enough to attempt to destroy them publicly. The edict which placed Luther under the ban of the Empire was, too, cunningly ante-dated, so that although it was when nearly all the Electoral Princes had departed, it purports to be the sentence of the whole Reichstag. Although of doubtful legality, it was none the less efficacious. Luther left Worms on the 26th of April, and for twenty-one days was protected by the Imperial safe-conduct; but after that period no man might harbour him on pain of treason, but whosoever might find him was charged to deliver him up to the Emperor.

Fortunately, however, Frederick discerned how real was the danger, and that Rome clamoured for Luther's blood. He was equal to the emergency. The Reformer had reached Eisenach in safety, and after visiting his parents set out for Waltershausen, through the solitudes of the Thüringerwald. Here he was set upon by armed horsemen, and his companions having been allowed to escape, was taken prisoner to a neighbouring castle—the Wartburg. He was now dubbed “Junker Georg,” and passed as a captive knight.

This holiday, for such it must be called, was of the greatest importance to him. Rural amusements and better fare than that to which he was accustomed were doubtless of great service in restoring some of his lost vigour. He filled up his tedious hours by commencing the most glorious labour of his life—the translation of the New Testament into High German, a work which first assumed definite shape while he was in the Wartburg. In the meantime both friends and foes were aghast at his disappearance. For some months he had vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up. Soon, however, he began to write letters and tracts, graphically dated “From midst the birds which sing sweetly on the branches of the tall trees, and praise God night and day with all their might;” or, again, “From the mountain; from the Isle of Patmos.” It is impossible that the Emperor could have really been very anxious to apprehend him, for he might doubtless have discovered his retreat. His friends certainly frequently visited him, and more than once he visited Gotha, Erfurt, and other towns and villages in disguise, and he went to Wittenberg openly towards the end of the year. Sorely against the will of the Elector, he finally left the Wartburg in March, 1522. He was constrained to take this rash step by the progress which the Reformation had made. A fanatical spirit was making headway. Carlstadt, who had been excommunicated in conjunction with Luther's followers, had begun to break the images in the churches, and gathering round him the common people, had established a sect which threatened to destroy the firstfruits of the Reformation. The young church at Wittenberg stood sorely in need of a strong hand to guide it; and heedless of the risk he ran, and almost discourteous in his replies to the remonstrances of the Elector, Luther once more took the lead.

This was the busiest time of his life. Henceforth he knew no leisure. Volumes poured from his pen; the translation of the Bible was continued in the midst of great difficulties, and the New Testament was completed and published. Henry VIII,⁶ through his chaplain Edward Lee, had entered the lists against him as defender of the Seven Sacraments, and great as was his provocation, it is impossible wholly to justify the unbounded license which Luther allowed himself in his reply.⁷ Such questions, too, as the mass, the *elevation of the Host*, confession and monastic vows, demanded speedy settlement. The emancipation of the Reformers themselves could not but be gradual, and was the work of years.

The death of Leo X., and the accession of Adrian VI. of Utrecht to the Papal throne, were perhaps instrumental in securing for Luther a period of comparative peace. It is true that

Adrian, at the Diet of Nuremberg in 1522, demanded that the decree against Luther should be executed; but the German Princes calling for a council, the Pope, who was conscious of the abuses existing in the Romish Church, was loth to bring the matter to the test of the sword, and consented to a truce. A terrible civil war was now threatening Germany. Goetz von Berlichingen, with thousands of the peasants, was preparing to fall upon the nobles. Thomas Münzer, who was now the leader of the Zwickau fanatics, whom Luther, in a letter to Spalatin, describes as “instruments of Satan, full of a proud and vehement spirit, and deaf to the voice of reason,” had exchanged the *rôle* of an advocate of visionary spiritualism and a pretender to supernatural gifts for the leadership of the insurgents in Thuringia. Luther was charged by the nobles with being the author of this outbreak, but he was certainly greatly instrumental in suppressing it. He was indefatigable in his efforts to put a stop to these terrible scenes. He tramped all over the country preaching and exhorting the people to peace. All through the years 1523, 1524, and 1525 he did his utmost to stem the tide of rebellion. He was called upon to protect the Romish monks from the fury of the religious fanatics, and in turns the nobles from the peasantry and the peasantry from the nobles. All through this terrible time the man’s integrity was inflexible. “Those who take the sword,” said he, “shall perish by the sword;” and he, a peasant’s son, showed no false sympathy with the peasants who overstepped the bounds of reason, nor servility to the nobles, who were by no means blameless.

Great changes had now occurred. During the insurrection the Elector Frederick had died, but John, who succeeded him, was even more friendly to the Reformation. Adrian VI., who only lived long enough to reign a little more than two years, had been succeeded by Clement VII. The first Diet of Spire had secured religious liberty to the German Princes, and the war between Charles V. and the Pope had further fostered the Reformation. On the other hand, Erasmus and Luther, who had long been on friendly terms, had become bitter antagonists, and a war of words was waging. The Swiss reformers too were coming to the front. As yet, the principles of the faith which Luther inculcated had not assumed a definite shape. Much had been accomplished, but much still remained to be done. It was at this juncture that Luther, at the wish of his father, married. It was a very bold step. His bride, Catherine von Bora, was one of those nuns who owed their emancipation to the Reformation, and had taken refuge at Wittenberg. She was only twenty-four years of age, and was of noble birth; but, despite the disparity in age and station, she made Luther an excellent helpmate at a time when he sorely needed womanly solace and sympathy. Those contemporary portraits of her which are still extant are little better than caricatures, but the better opinion seems that she possessed considerable personal attractions. Luther certainly never repented his marriage, but to the end of his life frequently gave expression to his love for her. “I would not,” says he, in a letter to Stiefel, “exchange my poverty with her for all the riches of Cræsus without her.” So great was his poverty, indeed, that after his marriage he endeavoured to fill his leisure by occupations which would serve to eke out his narrow income. Doubting his ability to teach music, he became a turner. He also applied himself to gardening and building. He seems to have received little or nothing for his books, and his annual salary never exceeded “two hundred Misnian florins.” He was, too, generous to a fault, so that it is not surprising that he was burdened with debt. Fortunately he had five or six rooms in the old Augustinian convent for a home. His early married life was full of light and shade. The terrible plague which swept over Germany in 1527 spared him and his family, although his favourite son John sickened. The following year he deeply felt the loss of his little daughter Elizabeth “I could never have dreamed,” said he, “that a man’s soul could be filled with such tenderness even towards his child.” He was, too, himself in wretched health.

But another ordeal awaited him. The Turks had been defeated, and Germany was saved, but Lutheranism was again in danger. The hostility between Catholic and Protestant Princes fostered by Clement VII. was reaching a head in the absence of a common foe. The Pope and the Emperor were again friends. In 1529, at the second Diet of Spire, a decree was passed revoking that of the first Diet of Spire, and again bringing Germany under the yoke of the Church as a system of spiritual slavery. The Lutheran Princes, however, protested against the decree, and in token thereof assumed the name of "Protestants." With a view to greater strength, attempts were now made to reconcile the different sects of the Reformation in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Luther and Melancthon maintained an argument with Ecolampadius and Zwingli; but it came to nothing. In 1530 the Protestant Princes were summoned to meet the Emperor at Augsburg. Melancthon and Luther in council drew up the Articles of the Protestant Faith, founded on those previously agreed to in a convention at Schwabach, and known as the Articles of Torgau. This, henceforth to be known as "the Augsburg Confession," signed by five Electors, thirty-five ecclesiastical Princes, twenty-three secular Princes, twenty-two Abbots, thirty-two Counts and Barons, and thirty-nine free imperial cities, was presented and publicly read before the Emperor and the members of the Diet at Augsburg on the 20th June, 1530. It was the charter of Evangelical Christianity. The Papal advisers of the Emperor, however, soon afterwards presented their Refutation of this Confession; and on the 19th of November a decree was passed requiring the Princes and the cities which had become alienated from the Pontiff "to return to their duty or to incur the vengeance of the Emperor." The result of this was the formation of the Protestant Princes into a defensive league at Schmalkald, a proceeding which Luther viewed with only qualified approval, since it seemed to inevitably bring matters to the arbitrament of the sword. There can, however, be no question that the bold front assumed by the offending Princes had the greatest effect upon the mind of the Emperor; of this the truce made at Nuremberg in the following year was the natural expression.

In the meanwhile the translation of the Old Testament had been progressing. Already various portions of it had been published. In 1534 the whole Bible appeared in German, and Luther's noblest work was accomplished. His translation was a masterpiece. "Idiomatic, vital in every part, clothed in the racy language of common life; it created, apart from its religious influence, an epoch in the literary development of the German nation." Luther's life-work was now nearly finished; but he was not yet destined to enjoy much peace. The terrible scandal to religion occasioned by the Anabaptists of Münster, and the constant prospect of the assembling of the Council, occupied his attention. In this respect Paul III. seemed to be more tractable than any of his predecessors; but the Protestant Princes, finding that Italy was fixed upon as the meeting-place, declined to consent, and reunited themselves in the Schmalkalden League; and in 1537, at a time of terrible suffering, Luther drew up the memorable Articles of Schmalkald to serve as a declaration of the Protestant faith, and they spoke in trumpet tones. Luther came near to dying at this time, but recovering in spite of the doctors, was taken home by easy stages, there to spend perhaps the most peaceful period of his life. During the absence of Bugenhagen in Denmark he officiated as pastor of the Stadt Kirche at Wittenberg, but he never held any pastoral charge. He, however, fulfilled his University duties almost to the last. In May, 1539, one of his wishes was realized. Duke George, of Saxony, had been succeeded by his brother Henry, a Protestant, whose first act was to invite Luther to inaugurate the establishment of Protestantism in his dominions. He preached on Whitsunday in St. Nicholas Church to an immense congregation, thus fulfilling his own prophecy: "I shall one day preach God's Word in Leipzig." In 1542 death again visited his family, and Magdalene, his favourite daughter, died at the age of fourteen. There can be no question that this loss overshadowed the rest of his life.⁸ But it is touching to know

that the heart-broken father, in the next year, published his “Geistliche Lieder,” containing many of those sweet hymns which have now passed into household words in Germany.

But Luther was now weary of life. His health was thoroughly broken down, and he was threatened with blindness, and subject to frequent attacks of vertigo. His University would not, however, hear of his retirement. He had for the past few years been in better circumstances. The new Elector Frederick had given him substantial presents, and he had received gifts from others. He had purchased a farm, and had looked forward to retiring to it for the evening of his life. His home at Wittenberg was still in the old convent (now “The Luther Hall”). Here he held a little court. From all parts of Europe people made pilgrimages to see him. Round him, too, were gathered a little circle of adherents. Melancthon and his family were, of course, constant visitors; so, too, were Cruciger, Justus Jonas, Eberus, Bugenhagen, Dietrich, John Forster, and others: and these recorded many of his sayings, which were published in 1566 as his “Tischreden.” The volume contains much that is curious and interesting. It cannot, however, be regarded as an unimpeachable authority, since it bears evident signs of emendation. Still it reveals to us much of that lighter side of Luther’s character, of which we should otherwise have no record. That Luther could be humorous at times we can well believe; and there is a rare example of his pathos in the way in which he tells us: “I, who am aged, and have title of *Emeritus*, should prefer now to enjoy the pleasures of an old man in the garden, contemplating the wonders of God’s creation in the trees, the flowers, the grass, and the birds.” But it was not to be. He felt that his end was near. Still he was constrained to visit Eisleben in the beginning of 1546. Disputes had arisen between the Counts of Mansfeldt as to the ecclesiastical regulations of their territory. These Luther examined and settled. He also preached repeatedly. But on the 14th of February he entered the pulpit for the last time; on the 18th he was taken worse, and died in the same town in which he first drew breath.

It may be contended that Luther came in the fullness of time; but none the less did he stamp the hallmark of his individual genius upon the grand framework of Christian liberty, of which he lived to see complete. In Germany and the world, as he found them and as he left them, there is a contrast so great that it cannot be claimed as the work of one man; but without Luther the emancipation of Germany and Christendom from Rome must have taken generations. To those who prefer to dwell on his faults we commend the words of Robert Montgomery:

“If Soul majestic and a dauntless mien;
If Faith colossal o’er all fiends and frowns
Erect; if Energy that never slack’d,
With all that galaxy of graces bright
Which stud the firmament of Christian mind;
If these be noble—with a zeal conjoin’d
That made his life one liturgy of love—
Then may the Saxon from his death-couch send
A dreadless answer, that refutes all foes
Who dwarf his merit, or his creed revile
With falsehood!”

W. MORRIS COLLES.

Endnotes

- 1) Luther tells us that two of them died of the plague which swept over Europe in the beginning of the sixteenth century, and one of his sisters married Ruhel de Mansfeldt, a scribe whose name is mentioned in Luther's letters.
- 2) Ranke's "History of the Popes," vol. i., p. 50, 1846.
- 3) It was on October the 19th, 1512, that he was invested with the insignia of Doctor of Divinity, by Andrew Bodenstein of Carlstadt, Dean of the Faculty of Theology at Wittenberg, and Canon and Archdeacon of the Church of All Saints in that town.
- 4) Mosheim's "Eccles. History," vol. iii. p.101. London, 1841.
- 5) Luther tells us in his "Tischreden" that the Papal comment on reading them was: "A drunken Dutchman wrote them; when he hath slept out his sleep and is sober again, he will then be of another mind."
- 6) See "Assertio septem Sacramentorum," Pynson: London, 1521. This was the work for which Pope Leo X. conferred upon Henry VIII. the title "Defender of the Faith."
- 7) "Contra Henricum regem Angliæ," Wittenbergæ, 1522.
- 8) Luther wrote the following touching epitaph for her tombstone:
"Dormio cum sanctis hic Magdalena Lutheri,
Filia et hoc strato tecta quiesco meo.
Filia mortis eram peccati femine nata,
Sanguine sed vivo Christe redemta tuo."
VOL. IX.—NO. L.