

# SIR WALTER RALEGH

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## I.

THERE are certain characters apparent on the page of history which at a first glance seem to be treated with scant justice or with an extravagant kindliness. We find them dismissed with a curt note, assigned to a very little niche in the house of fame, and branded as insignificant: in which case we are left to wonder at the extraordinary and disproportioned vitality of such reputations in the popular mind. Or, again, it may happen that out of deference to fame they are treated at immoderate length, till we feel the comparative smallness of their actual achievement, when added to the lengthy narration of their lives, to be something in the nature of an anti-climax.

The endowment of popularity, whether or not it be allied with true and lasting greatness, is always a difficult, elusive quality to estimate. Some have it in the highest degree; others not at all: and in any case mere popular favour is not in itself a thing of paramount importance. Influence upon national institutions, upon the mechanism of legal and political administration, upon public life and character—these are the proper gifts with which history credits the great; and it is clear that none of these, save the last, has any necessary connexion with the kindly notoriety given by tradition and story. Hence, in the case of those

elect spirits whose gifts or fate have had something of that dazzling romantic quality which leads captive a people's heart, it must be the part of history to use especial discrimination. It is the historian's duty to explain such fame by the attributes of the man, but further to enumerate dispassionately his achievements and form some estimate of character apart from the gaudy popular portrait. And the task is a hard one, for often the honest inquirer is compelled to trample upon cherished ideals and do violence to honest sentiment, since the prevailing power of truth is not so confidently admitted as her greatness. He is happy who can use critical research only to brighten the colours and make the lines more brilliant, and at the end find his task to have been the justification and not the challenging of the people's verdict.

The case of Sir Walter Raleigh has been somewhat after this order. His fate it has been to live as a memory in English hearts, to have his name used as a synonym for high-hearted valour, and to shine resplendent in many monographs; while in serious history he has either usurped a major place by virtue of his reputation, or suffered the neglect of one who has left few tangible results. His many biographers have almost invariably fallen into the fatal trick of eulogy, and the ordinary reader is still perplexed with a gallery of contradictory portraits. The fair scholarly history of his life and deeds is yet to be written—a history which should attempt to build up from the multitudinous records of the time the vigorous, complex character of the man. This pre-eminently is the proper field for the psychologist of history, the lover of strange souls and mingled motives; for we have groaned too long under the affliction of those who would leave historical portraiture to the mere romancer or crush a manifold personality into the bounds of a narrow theory. But in these pages we set before ourselves a more modest task. It were needless to

enter into the minutiae of evidence on which the narrative is founded. The facts of his life have already been ascertained with tolerable certainty by more competent scholars, and there is little need for an amateur's vain repetition. We would seek rather to sketch his character roughly and crudely, to trace the war of motive which at all times beset him; to find, in short, in his temper and talents some explanation of the cruel circumstances of his fate.

## II.

By the end of the sixteenth century the family of Raleigh had held lands in the west of England for upwards of three hundred years, and in Devonshire had won a position of power among the gentry of the country-side. There were several families of the name, all men of good repute, allied to the Champernouns, the Carews, and the Gilberts, and other houses of renown in the place. At the manor of Hayes, near the town of Budleigh Salterton, lived Walter Raleigh of Hayes and Fardell, who married as his third wife Katherine Champernoun, the widow of Sir Otho Gilbert of Compton. Of this union two sons were born, Carew and Walter.

Of the father we hear little save that he suffered in the Catholic rising<sup>1</sup> in the west, and that he was forced by straitened circumstances to sell one of the family manors. But we can make a guess at the manner of upbringing which the young Walter would share in. He came of a fighting stock and a godly, so he would be trained in all martial exercises and bred in the strict tenets of the Protestantism of his time. But to one born in Devonshire there fell a richer boyhood than to the rest of England. The rule of Mary in its season fell less hardly there, and the accession

<sup>1</sup> Holinshed, *Chronicles of England*, continued by Hooker, anno 1549.