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Milton for the Young

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MILTON FOR THE YOUNG
By Dr. Thomas P. Haviland

Our young people have been relieved of many burdens in the several revampings which the system of primary and secondary education has undergone in the past hundred years. And if Paradise Lost has been included among these one may at least see so much the less justification for Burton Rascoe's violent accusation that "the error of overestimating Milton is perpetuated in England and America by the deficiencies of the educational systems."

There was a time when the great epic played a vital part in the upbringing of the youth of England, both Old and New. Cowper embarked upon its delights at the tender age of fourteen—the beginning of a life-long infatuation. Others, in deference to their more tender years, began with prose abridgments such as the glamorous Mrs. Siddons (who, while still little Sarah Kemble, included passages from Milton in her recitations of Shakespeare and Rowe to her fellow servants) prepared for her children. Out of nineteenth-century New England, where the transcribing into a copy book of many a noble passage from the blind poet's epic, or, better, committing its lines to memory, seems to have been a common procedure, came The Story of Paradise Lost for Children, by Eliza W. Bradburn, "First American from the London Edition," Portland, 1830. The copy in our library has come to us through the "American Sunday School Union," perhaps grown somewhat too sophisticate.

Its author was the daughter of that staunch Methodist preacher and associate of Wesley, Samuel Bradburn. In the course of ten conversations on as many different days, she retells the story in tolerably simple prose interspersed with bits of the original poem. Beginning with Raphael's account of the revolt in Heaven, from Book Five, she follows the chronological order of events, now freely, now paraphrasing almost exactly, stopping frequently to solve the theological dilemmas

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1 The only copy in the British Museum is, strangely, the American edition, but the English Catalogue lists an English edition of 1828.
which arise in the minds of three youngsters whose daily regimen is to read in the Bible night and morning and submit to a daily catechism.

The children, in their sweet ingenuousness, contribute no little joy to this small duodecimo. Eliza, the eldest, is eleven, Emily nine, and Willie, a pure delight, just turning seven. It is Willie who, in his enthusiasm at parts overheard, wishes to read the poem aloud. On being told that it is not a book for children, he begs Mamma to "explain it in your own pleasant way," adding, with a wisdom beyond his years, "I know if you come to any part not fit for us to hear, you will pass over it, as you always do." He assures the company that he receives the same pleasure from passages which Mamma recites (with distressing frequency the least poetic) as he does from music. Indeed, his imagination is so fired that he sees devils in the grate, and wishes to play with his sisters at being Satan, Sin, and Death; he greatly regrets that Adam and Eve paid no heed to Raphael's counsel, since "We should have had nothing to vex or pain us and we should never be naughty." Emily rejoices that *she* was not the first woman, to be obsessed ever after with the thought of having brought suffering to all the race yet to be born; and Eliza is resolved to be more thankful when she gets to heaven "than if I had always led a holy life in Eden, since Jesus Christ would not then have suffered and died for me, and of course I could not have loved Him as my Redeemer".

An interesting point is that Mamma has to warn of the poet's misinterpretation of the Bible, ably fortified, herself, with Dr. Clarke's Commentary. She quotes from *Acts* xx, 28, to prove that Christ, contrary to Milton, was the Son of God and that he created the angels. She feels that the poet is most reprehensible in painting Hell as so pleasant a spot, with song and sport and angelic counsel, and conjures the children to lip the Biblical passages she has taught them: "the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone" where the evil ones "are reserved in everlasting chains under darkness" and mortal sinners languish—"Their worm dieth not and the fire is not
quenched." For these misrepresentations Mamma holds Milton not entirely to blame, but rather, the bad taste of his age! William assures her that, for his part (he must later have migrated to Tennessee): "However entertaining books may be, I am determined never to believe anything in them which is contrary to the Bible."

How startled the great seventeenth-century poet who "cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue" would have been to hear this nineteenth-century mother assure her little brood how fortunate they are to have parents who will keep them from seeing and hearing what is sinful. The tragic fate of The Boy in Kipling's *Thrown Away* has always seemed the best commentary on this enlightened system of education.

An eleventh chapter is devoted to some account of Milton's life, quotes the letter to Philaras anent his blindness, includes several sonnets, part of the *Nativity Ode*, and brands *Paradise Regained* "quite unworthy its author." Chapter Twelve, addressed to the elder girl, defines poetry and gives long selections considered both beautiful and suited to Eliza's more mature mind. Quotation is also made from the prose. Fired, as Wordsworth was, by the sonnets, Eliza resolves to learn all these passages and, when she is given a promised Sunday School class, at the age of fourteen, to "write in a plain hand, my favorite passages, that the older girls may commit them to memory".

Miss Bradburn was apparently quite sanguine that this would be the result!