

Memoirs of Mighty Men.

ROBERT MOFFAT

THE GARDENER BOY
WHO BECAME THE GREAT
SOUTH AFRICAN PIONEER

BY

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LIFE STORY OF ROBERT MOFFAT.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCOTCH LADDIE WHO KEPT HIS PROMISE : A
TRUANT, AND WHAT BECAME OF HIM.

" Childhood is the bow where slumbered
Birds and blossoms many numbered."

" Man ! thou art a result ! The growth of many yesterdays,
That stamp thy secret soul with marks of weal and woe."

" **H**OW fair the Firth of Forth shines in the morning
sun ; like a sheet of pure silver, shot with purple
and gold ! Yonder, too, is Queensferry. Rest
your blue bundle upon my parcels ; we have still time
for a crack, mother dear."

The speaker was a tall, slender youth, with dark hair, and eyes of the same hue, singularly handsome in their liquid pathos. A broad high forehead, slightly shaded by scanty black hair gave promise of considerable intellectual power ; a large full nose above a mouth whose lips, uncovered by moustache or beard, were tremulous with

kindly humour and suppressed feeling. Altogether a face sweetly winning by its suggestions of sleeping smiles and ready sympathy. Evidently a youth to be trusted and loved.

“Ay, laddie, ‘Kindness creeps where it daurna gang,’ says the proverb. ‘Tis but little I can do now; but, oh, it goes sore to my heart that ye must go south. England is a bonny place, but it is like rending the flesh from my bones to see ye depart. ‘Tis the Lord’s will, and must be accepted.”

The mother of Robert Moffat was tall like her son, but more perfectly proportioned. From her evidently he had derived his handsome face and dark eyes; her own eyes also shaded with a deeper shade of melancholy than usual as she looked upon her son, going to a situation in Cheshire. As her glance met his look, the regular rigid features softened into a smile—alike, but sweeter than her son’s; a smile which made the marble sternness of her face radiant with an indescribable charm and grace.

“Ye are eighteen now, my Robert,” she continued, ‘but it seems not long since the 21st December, 1795, when ye were born. We lived then in Ormiston, near Dalkeith, as my family, the Gardiners, had done a long time. They were poor as we were, but not a whisper was ever heard against them at the ancient cross.

“Ye were but a two years’ old laddie when we left the little charming village. Your father was appointed to the Custom-house at Portsoy, near Banff, and we all removed thither. Well I mind the dreary voyage. The ship was not over clean, and we were sore disturbed by fear of the



FISH OF BORN.

French privateers, who had but just before taken a sloop from near Leith, so bold were they.

“Behind the low line of hills, through which the burnie went into the sea, was the little fishing village, with its many herring boats. Far away were the Caithness mountains, beyond the Moray Firth; inland, we had pleasant meadows and valleys under the plough. But ye loved to watch the broad fleet of fishing boats that went out to sea, stretching across the water in the setting sun. We stayed not there many years, but came to Carronshore, on the other side of that Firth of Forth that will soon separate us (perhaps for ever). We then moved to Falkirk.

“There in the long evenings, when our red-tiled cottage echoed with the clock tick, I would teach ye knitting and sewing, while I read to ye about the missionaries that lived upon tallow, to preach Christ to the Greenlanders. Ay, but they were holy men; would God all my boys might be like them!

“Old Willy Mitchell, the parish schoolmaster, was not a man ‘to ride the water wi’,’ as the saying is; but ye might have learnt more from him. When ye ran away to sea, it went to my heart thinking when the wind blew about my sailor boy rocking upon the deep; but the captain loved ye so that he persuaded us to let ye make several voyages, for, thought we, ‘a burnt bairn dreads the fire;’ and so it proved. Ye were fain to come back to our lowly cottage, where, with your three brothers and two sisters, ye were as happy as might be in a world like this. Ye were but eleven when I sent ye to Mr. Paton’s school at Falkirk with your eldest brother Alexander, who has gone to be a soldier. Mind ye the time, Robert?”

"Yea, mother; Mr. Paton taught me writing and book-keeping. But as after school hours he taught my brother Alexander and others astronomy and geography, I used to peep under their elbows to spy what they were doing in the circle, and by listening I gathered much I shall not forget, though I was but six months there."

"Let me see, it was in 1809, when ye were but fourteen, that ye were apprenticed to John Robertson of Parkhill, Polmont, to learn the gardening."

"True, mother; and well I remember him. He would not wrong any one of a penny, or mean to be unjust to us, but he *did* make us work. When we used to turn out at four o'clock on a winter's morning so cold that we had to knock our fingers upon the spade handles to try to get some feeling into them, I sometimes felt my lot was hard. And then we were not starved, it is true, but we had no more food than we could well eat, I suppose for fear we should become dainty or lazy."

"That will never be your failing, Robert," replied his mother. "Twas then ye began Latin, and learned to do blacksmith's work."

"In 1811 we moved across the Forth into Fifeshire, and were still at Inverkeithing when ye left Parkhill and went to serve the Earl of Moray at Donibristle near Aberdour. Never shall I forget the fright we had when we heard that ye had fallen from a boat into the water, and were like to die."

"But I can swim now, mother, with the best of them. John Thomson, that is to marry my sister Mary, knows that. He was sinking for the third time when I was able to bring him to shore."

