Sir Philip Sidney
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Outline.

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY.

Brief Introduction (general).

I. Sketch of Court Life from 1554 - 1586.

II. Sidney as a Type of English Chivalry.

III. Sketch of Literary Influences at work in Elizabethan England.

IV. Sidney as a Man of Letters.

AUTHORITIES.

Fox Bourne's Life of Sir Philip Sidney.

Mr. Pollard's Introduction to Astrophel and Stella Sonnets.

Pamphlets.
Taking up the life and character of Sir Philip Sidney, it naturally divides itself into two distinct parts, his life as a courtier, and his life as a man of letters. In order to estimate his character and the value of his influence in either of these two spheres, a brief survey of the forces at work, shaping the life and thought of the time, is necessary. A description of the court life of Queen Elizabeth naturally finds a place as introductory to the sketch of Sidney, as the ideal 16th Century Knight.

I. The years between Sidney's birth and death (1554 - 1586) were in many respects years of transition. The influences which were coming from Italy, the Lorne of the renaissance, and from the New World across the water were breaking down mediaeval traditions. Nowhere was this transition more plainly mirrored than in the court life of the time. The inrush of new ideas was fast sweeping away the old Knight of chivalry. But in the court life of Elizabeth there are many signs that the chivalrous ideal still held sway in the minds of the young nobility.

Years before, Cervantes had laughed Knight-errantry out of Europe. No youth dared start out in shining mail to seek for great adventures; or go in search of a distressed damsel to redress her
wrongs. Yet many customs lingered which are directly traceable to the old chivalrous ideal. Prominent among these are the jousts and tournaments in which the Tudors delighted. The splendor of Elizabeth's tourneys was unexcelled in the feudal days. The habit of petty duelling may, in a sense, be regarded as a remnant of Knight-errantry. The slightest offense was to be wiped out in blood by the laws of the duello. Even the noble Sidney challenged the Earl of Oxford for a few hasty words spoken in a petty quarrel on a tennis court.

The blind adoration of woman, of which the literature is so full, was still another remnant of chivalry. The devotion of the Sixteenth Century Knight is as servile and abject in its expression at any rate, as that of the Knight of the Thirteenth or Fourteenth Century. The sonnets and love letters of amorous youths well illustrate the adulation which was showered upon her.

This attitude toward woman had much to do with the position of the Queen toward her courtiers. They gave her their loving service and complete devotion. The young nobleman felt that he was obeying the law of chivalry in dedicating his life to his virgin Queen. Everyone made his private interest secondary to the service due to Elizabeth. With rare judgment she used these men whom she drew around her. She knew each one in his power and his limitations. At her council she gathered the men whose statesmanship and honesty she
could trust. To foreign posts she sent men whose diplomacy was unerring and whose fidelity to England and Elizabeth was unquestioned.

For her gayer hours no sovereign in Europe had a more brilliant court. Lords and ladies move in splendid pageant through the halls of Windsor Castle. Elizabeth's progresses through the country from castle to castle were an unending series of gay masques and pageants.

Strong in policy, brilliant in external appearance as was this court life of Elizabeth, there is another darker side to the picture. She was at best a capricious sovereign. She was full of moods and whims and to keep in favor meant an infinite capacity for suiting the word and action to the variable mood of the Queen. This condition hardened men's consciences to the habit of lying and deceit. Intercourse between man and man was on a false basis. Everyone supposed his neighbor to be lying until the contrary was proved. Constant rivalry for position and favor did not tend to make these relations better. Moreover, there was great uncertainty after a position was once attained. Men climbed to high places only to be hurled down to lower depths than those from which they rose. Gay, brilliant, picturesque, as in the 16th Century court life, we cannot be truthful and omit the darker side of deceit and selfishness that made the court the worst school in which to train a youth to a true and honorable life.

This brief and somewhat general survey of the court life of the
time gives us roughly the conditions in the midst of which Sidney was trained as one of Elizabeth's loyal Knights. A further word is necessary concerning the reformation in England in order to understand Sidney's relations to the Netherlands and the last great act in the drama of his life. It has been said that the reformation entered England by the back door. It is enough that it did get in and once there thrived, in spite of persecution. Elizabeth accepted Protestantism as a matter of policy, to gain for herself the Protestant alliance in Germany. Having taken this position, still to keep the peace with the Catholic powers was a task by no means easy. But England accomplished this, although it often involved the Queen in an uncertain, vacillating policy such as she was guilty of in her relations with the Netherlands. The ardent Protestants felt that England should take a more decided stand for the Protestant cause against Catholic Spain. No question of policy was more hotly argued on both sides than this. Religion was the vital question of the hour and around the discussion of England's relation to Holland centered all the great issues, political as well as religious.

II. Sidney, The Type of English Chivalry.

As we look back upon this brilliant court of Queen Elizabeth and think of the group of men that gathered about her at the council board, at joust and tournament, the name of one young man comes to
the mind as the type of the ideal gentleman and Knight. No name in all history more completely represents everything that was ideal in chivalry than that of Sir Philip Sidney. His is a name known not to students only, but to the least educated among us, and familiar in the mouths of children.

Moreover, his was not a life whose "voice comes deepest from the sepulchre," his great name had not its "root in the dead body." Youth though he was, among the princes and wise men of his time he won not affection only, but confidence and respect. At home, Burghley, Leicester and Sir Francis Walsingham listened to the young man of twenty-one, as he told his experiences and observations in foreign countries. Abroad, he won respectful hearing from the haughty Don Jon of Austria and an appreciative testimonial from the cautious William of Orange. He held the court of the dogmatic Rudolph of Germany silent with surprise and admiration as he dared to tell them the simple truth of the hidden deceit and treachery of Catholicism. In the brilliant circle of students, among whom Hubert Lanquet was not the least prominent, Sidney made friends who held him in dear remembrance. In short, in his own day, there was not a man in Europe more loved, respected and honored. By a brief review of his life I shall try to show why this man whose life covers but the brief span of thirty-two years should have held then and should still retain a place as the ideal Knight, without fear and without reproach.
Sidney came of a race of courtiers and statesmen. He counted as his chiefest honor that he was a Dudley, a family always held in high favor at court. He might more worthily have gloried in the inheritance of sturdy manhood which he had from his father. His father's letter, written to him when he was but fourteen years old, shows so the character of Sir Henry, that it is worth quoting. Moreover, it seems like a prophecy addressed to the young Philip, who afterwards so well fulfilled the father's hopes.

Son Philip:- x x x x

Be courteous of gesture, affable unto all men. Be modest in each assembly and rather be rebuked of the light for maiden-like shamefastness, than of your sad friends for pert boldness. Tell no untruth, no not in small things, there cannot be greater reproach to a gentleman than to be accounted a liar. Remember, my son, the noble blood you are descended of by your mother's side, and think only by a virtuous life and good actions, you may be an ornament to that illustrious family. x x x

Your loving father so long as you remain in the fear of God.

Henry Sidney."

(In France, 1572.)

Until he was eighteen Sidney remained at Oxford, where he studied the classics with all the youthful enthusiasm of the age, but his taste for sciences and modern languages was equally marked. His po-
sition on leaving college, as heir apparent of his Uncle Leicester was a brilliant one. Anxious to gain a wider experience and acquire those accomplishments befitting his rank and station he decided, in 1572, to go abroad with the Earl of Lincoln's embassy. The three following years, spent in foreign lands, are an important period in the life of young Philip.

The boy, fresh from college, with his ideas of life based largely upon what he read in books, and the ideals which his imagination had fashioned, must have suffered a strange shock from the scenes to which he was first introduced in France. He saw the rejoicing of the Huguenots over the supposed peaceful adjustment of the religious difficulties, followed by the horrors of St. Bartholomew's Eve. To the thoughtful young man, this experience must have marked the end of boyhood and the beginning of serious manhood. We may infer that his ardent Protestantism may have been the result of the horrors he witnessed here.

Sidney's travels were full of varied and interesting experiences. He made friends everywhere, fascinating old and young alike. The most notable friendship made at this time was with Hubert Lanquet, the staunch old Huguenot. The older man felt a fatherly interest in the youth, which made him exercise an almost fussy care and oversight of him. He not only loved him, but he had great hopes of what young Sidney might do for the Protestant cause so dear to Lanquet. This
friendship was one of a lifetime and influenced Sidney's opinions, his studies, and his character, to a notable degree.

(Recalled to England in 1575.)

Passing much that is interesting in Sidney's travels abroad, touching his friendships, studies and experiences, we must hasten back to England whither he was very soon called. Leicester was in high favor at court at this time, and as Leicester's nephew and heir Sidney was cordially received in court circles. Moreover he was a valuable recruit to the Leicester party. He had left England a raw youth and he returned the experienced courtier. His uncle's party consisted of a group of young men more or less brilliant in ability, and all ambitious for advancement, attached to the unscrupulous Earl, not for love and duty, but seeming so for their own advantage. The Earl of Oxford was Leicester's most prominent opponent and around him gathered a rival group.

(At court, 1575-1577.)

For the next two years, Sidney's life was spent among these rival factions. Although attaching himself distinctly to the Leicester party, he seems to have had the faculty of moving through these scenes of selfish party strife and maintaining the respect of all factions. The secret of this may lie in the fact that he never sacrificed his self-respect for the sake of advancement. With the Queen he was on terms of easy, graceful familiarity. She called him. "My Philip,"
and he returned her patronage with expensive New Year's gifts, such as ruffs trimmed with spangles weighing four ounces. He maintained his relations with his capricious sovereign, just at the point of intimacy where he could sustain it without danger. The power of keeping the golden mean in his relations with his contemporaries which argues rare judgment, may in a measure explain his unequalled popularity.

(In Germany. 1577.)

We must pass hastily over the remaining events of Sidney's life, many of them full of dramatic interest. I refrain purposely from mentioning his relation to Penelope Devereux, as that episode falls naturally under the consideration of the Astrophel and Stella sonnets. I may say in passing that the story of the sonnets serves to illustrate one phase of Sidney's devotion to the ideals of Knighthood. Sidney's love was of the old chivalrous type. His other literary work, some of which falls into the years we are now considering, I shall take up in its proper place.

(1577.)

Sidney's first public office was his mission to the emperor Rudolph of Germany. He discharged his commission with honor to himself and to the satisfaction of his Queen. He returned to England in a few months and became again a prominent figure about the court, spending most of his time at Penhurst and Wilton with his sister the
Countess of Pembroke. (1578. Defending his father. Office at court). His serious attention at this time was taken up with his father's affairs. Sir Henry Sidney's position as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland was full of difficulties and yielded him little honor at court. Sidney entered zealously into his father's cause and gained for him temporary favor.

(1580. Opposes Queen's marriage. In March is retired from court in disgrace.)

Sidney's bold letter to the Queen, stating the grounds of his opposition to her proposed marriage with the Duke of Anjou, well illustrates his temper. It was straightforward and full of sound logic, at the same time showing the impetuous nature of the author. The letter contained many daring statements and it is probable that it had much influence with the Queen. Following close upon the writing of this letter is Sidney's retirement from court in disgrace. The cause, however, may more likely be found in the quarrel between him and the Earl of Oxford.

(Fall of 1580 in court. 1581 in Parliament. 1583 marries.)

From the date of his marriage he became more actively interested in politics. He warmly espoused the Protestant cause and felt that England should enter more decidedly into the cause of the Netherlands against the tyranny of Spain. Sidney's relation to the details of the situation is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say
that to this cause he dedicated the ripest years of his manhood. He felt that in it he found the real work that he was born to do, and in fighting for this cause he lost his life. He was great in that last hour, as he had been great throughout his life. The last immortal scene, of his giving the cup of water to his dying comrade, is a fit epitome of his career.

He was the last of the chevalier Bayards. With him the best of chivalry breathed its last. We have seen that the remnants of chivalry in 16th Century England were not the highest and purest elements of the system. But Sidney rose above the decadent chivalry of his time, and tried to bring back the ideal chivalry of an earlier day. He shows this in his fidelity to truth, when men found lying easy, in his unselfish devotion to a cause he believed a righteous one, at a time when selfishness was the ruling power among the men about him. He never rose to as high a position as the more self-seeking, but his frankness, honesty, his courtesy and singleness of purpose gave him an unlimited influence. At his death every court in Europe mourned the great Sir Philip and he is yet dear to us after three hundred years, as the Knight without fear and without reproach.

III. Sketch of Literary Influences.

Many as the influences were which shaped the literary activities of the Elizabethan reign, they may be roughly grouped under
three heads: the renaissance, the reformation, and the romantic movement or imaginative awakening of the Nation. The renaissance divides itself into two parts, the influence of pagan Italy and the classical revival. In most of the men who were writing we find touches of all these influences. The pagan and the puritan often met in an odd conflict for predominance. Many of the most ardent classicists were, like good old Roger Ascham, staunch puritans at bottom.

The term renaissance has been very loosely used and by many definitions has been made to include the reformation spirit. For my purpose I take the term to refer to various influences which contact with Italy brought into England, and also to the revival of interest in the Greek and Latin authors.

Italy was the terra incognita of the time, a country to the mind of sturdy John Bull, where anything in the way of crime might happen. It was the place where the young courtier went to give the finishing touch to his manners and education. He came back with his ideas of morals very much perverted, with his ideal of life to dream and seek pleasure at any cost. So true was this that it passed into a proverb that the "Italianated Englishman was the devil incarnate." The effect of the Italian upon the English literature was very similar. Art for art's sake was the Italian watchword. Their literature was full of crime, of licentiousness and debauchery. All the young writers of
England read the Italian novels of Boudells, or Painter's translation (which was worse) and the effect of this reading was very marked both for good and evil. The writers under the Italian spell wrote very much about pretty mistresses and dancing girls and very little about martyrs, very much about goddesses glad and gay, sunshine, leafy gardens and playing fountains, and very little about dusty cloisters. Thus arose the writers of love poems, considered so abandoned by the good puritans. Such writers as Wyatt and Surrey took Petrarch and Boccaccio as their models. They tried to gain in English the effects which they admired in the Italian. The result was rather stiff and conventional but it was a step toward better art. The influence of Italy was most plainly mirrored in the theater of the time, but a discussion of its effect there would necessitate a digression which the scope of this paper does not allow.

All the men interested in literature at this time, whether of courtier or of the merchant class, studied the Greek and Roman models. The literature of this epoch teems with classical allusions. The study was new and all followed it with youthful enthusiasm. The effects of this study were various. To the young romanticists, the Bohemian rascals of the theaters, the classics were used simply for decorative purposes. They embellished their work with classical allusion, and ignored the stiff rules of form laid down by the Greek and Roman master. Men like Sidney, Spencer, Harvey, Ascham took the
study more seriously and felt that the future of English literature depended upon the adherence to classical standards. The rules of Horace and Aristotle must be followed to make perfect art. Epics must be like Homer's, a drama that violated the unities they condemned.

Standing side by side with the pagan and the classics was the puritan who said all literature must be moral. If a work of art does not tend to more righteous living, it is to be condemned as worthless. This moral tome as Taine points out pervades all English literature. In the most pagan of writers it crops out most unexpectedly. It is impossible for the old dramatist to paint a villain of the real Italian conscienceless kind, he must needs repent before the end of the play, often with the pangs of death upon him. The reformation strengthened this natural tendency toward moralizing and many books, like Gosson's School of Abuse, reflect the popular feeling against the pagan spirit of the time.

I have now come to the third and last characteristic influence, of which I shall speak but briefly, as it has very little effect upon Sidney's work as a man of letters. The imagination of the people was awakened to an activity to us almost incomprehensible. The boundaries of the known world had been suddenly extended by the discovery of America. Returned sea-captains told fabulous tales to interested listeners in taverns and grogshops. The credulous people pictured the new land as one flowing with milk and honey, a land where no one need
work and life should be one long delight. The people at large were fairly intoxicated by the imaginative visions conjured up by the wonderful new discoveries of which they were constantly hearing. In the taverns, in the theaters, and about the St. Paul's shops gathered the figures who were most profoundly stirred by this enthusiastic, romantic spirit. A man like Sidney, spending his life at court and mingling with the lords and ladies would not feel the influence of this movement. Very much of the best literature of this reign is, however, of the romantic, imaginative type.

IV. Sidney as a Man of Letters.

Although Sidney himself made valuable contributions to the body of English literature, it was perhaps as a liberal patron that he did his most permanent service. His Uncle Leicester drew players and playwrights about him, and did much to nourish the dramatic genius of the time. Sidney allied himself with the students, the university spirits of the period, Harvey, Brooke and Spenser.

Sidney was all his life a student. He knew his own literature thoroughly. He did not live to see the greatest triumphs of the Elizabethan period, but he had read Wyatt and Surrey, Sackville and Norton, Ascham, the early works of Marlowe and Shakespeare. He was also conversant with the literature of other lands, Italian, French and German, and most of all he was an ardent student of the
Because a man like Sidney was devoting himself to the pursuit of knowledge, and the cultivation of literature as an art, would help to make it fashionable. Many young courtiers were dabbling in literature for pleasure, and many with earnestness of purpose. A body of these young experimenters combined themselves into a club called the Areopagus. With Sidney as chief patron and president, with Harvey as chief critic and Spenser as chief poet, the man who could apply all the theories proposed, the influence of this club was enormous. All the questions of interest in the literary world of the day were discussed here. Questions of rhyme, of meter, of stanza, of the unities in the drama, of the rules of Aristotle were thoroughly weighed and estimated. In this club and its discussions we find the beginnings of conscious criticism.

I have said that it was as patron that Sidney's chief work was done. The second great service that he did for our literature was in writing the first book of literary criticism, properly so called. The Defense of Poesy gave clear and logical statement to all the arguments for classical rules and classical models which the Areopagus discussed and approved.

The book, besides phrasing the prevailing ideas of the classicists of the time, is interesting as a revelation of Sidney's character as a man. It was written in answer to Stephen Gosson's "School of classics."
Abuse." This latter book was an example of the worst that could be done in the way of Puritan villification. Gosson called names and threw mud. Sidney's book throughout is moderate, gentlemanly and convincing. He acknowledges, at the start, the force of his opponent's arguments, but leads the reader ingeniously to an opposite opinion. His refutation is as subtly managed as Erstino's. There is a winsomeness, a grace and ease about the work that hold the reader's attention and the sound logic and admirable clearness leave you convinced, for the moment at least.

Sidney's position is distinctly that of an idealist. Oscar Wilde might easily use the same phrases which Sidney does, in regard to the end and aim of art. But curiously enough mixed with this idealism is a touch of the puritan moralist. Sidney's postulate is that the end of art is didactic, and he proves that poetry is the best and most effective way to inculcate morality. It is better than history because it is not bound to what is, but tells of things as they ought to be. It is better than philosophy, because philosophy tells us only what is best, but has no way to affect the will to make us do the right. Thus we see Sidney is neither puritan simply, nor pagan simply. He has a touch of both, he loves literature for its own sake and he loves it for the moral that it teaches.

Sidney's other contributions to literature, the Arcadia and the Astrophel and Stella Sonnets suggest many interesting questions, but
I can say but a word concerning them. The first has little value as literature, although it contains many beautiful passages. It was written hastily and for the author's sister only to read. The plot is complicated beyond the power of the human mind to untangle. The style is euphuistic and exceedingly involved. Bits of descriptions here and there of a sunrise or a bit of landscape, relieve the monotony, but on the whole the romance does not repay careful perusal.

Of the sonnets, much has been written and there is so much to say that I am tempted to leave them untouched. As in the case of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Wyatt, Surrey, Spenser and Shakespeare, we shall never know whether we have here the history of a sincere tragedy or a rhetorical exercise. Strong probability supports the theory that the Stella of the Sonnets was Penelope Devereux and they seem to be written in a spirit of sincere feeling. The words have a ring of sincerity and I for one like to think that the man followed his own immortal doctrine, "Lock in your heart and write." If we accept Mr. Pollard's evidence Sonnet 14 which opens:

"Leave me oh love that cometh but to dust,"

was written just before his death. The whole Sonnet expresses complete self-conquest; he had suffered, sinned, but at last rose conqueror and with this splendid strain of victory on his lips, he went to meet his death on the field of Zutphen.