



Biography: Confessions of a Young Man (Annotated)

George Moore

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CHAPTER I

My soul, so far as I understand it, has very kindly taken colour and form from the many various modes of life that self-will and an impetuous temperament have forced me to indulge in. Therefore I may say that I am free from original qualities, defects, tastes, etc. What I have I acquire, or, to speak more exactly, chance bestowed, and still bestows, upon me. I came into the world apparently with a nature like a smooth sheet of wax, bearing no impress, but capable of receiving any; of being moulded into all shapes. Nor am I exaggerating when I say I think that I might equally have been a Pharaoh, an ostler, a pimp, an archbishop, and that in the fulfilment of the duties of each a certain measure of success would have been mine. I have felt the goad of many impulses, I have hunted many a trail; when one scent failed another was taken up, and pursued with the pertinacity of an instinct, rather than the fervour of a reasoned conviction. Sometimes, it is true, there came moments of weariness, of despondency, but they were not enduring: a word spoken, a book read, or yielding to the attraction of environment, I was soon off in another direction, forgetful of past failures. Intricate, indeed, was the labyrinth of my desires; all lights were followed with the same ardour, all cries were eagerly responded to: they came from the right, they came from the left, from every side. But one cry was more persistent, and as the years passed I learned to follow it with increasing vigour, and my strayings grew fewer and the way wider.

I was eleven years old when I first heard and obeyed this cry, or, shall I say, echo-augury?

Scene: A great family coach, drawn by two powerful country horses, lumbers along a narrow Irish road. The ever recurrent signs--long ranges of blue mountains, the streak of bog, the rotting cabin, the flock of plover rising from the desolate water. Inside the coach there are two children. They are smart, with new jackets and neckties; their faces are pale with sleep, and the rolling of the coach makes them feel a little sick. It is seven o'clock in the morning. Opposite the children are their parents, and they are talking of a novel the world is reading. Did Lady Audley murder her husband? Lady Audley! What a beautiful name; and she, who is a slender, pale, fairy-like woman, killed her husband. Such thoughts flash through the boy's mind; his imagination is stirred and quickened, and he begs for an explanation. The coach lumbers along, it arrives at its destination, and Lady Audley is forgotten in the delight of tearing down fruit trees and killing a cat. But when we returned home I took the first opportunity of stealing the novel in question. I read it eagerly, passionately, vehemently. I read its successor and its successor. I read until I came to a book called "The Doctor's Wife"--a lady who loved Shelley and Byron. There was magic, there was revelation in the name, and Shelley became my soul's divinity. Why did I love Shelley? Why was I not attracted to Byron? I cannot say. Shelley! Oh, that crystal name, and his poetry also crystalline. I must see it, I must know him. Escaping from the schoolroom, I ransacked the library, and at last my ardour was rewarded. The book--a small pocket edition in red boards, no doubt long out of print--opened at the "Sensitive Plant." Was I disappointed? I think I had expected to understand better; but I had no difficulty in assuming that I was satisfied and delighted. And henceforth the little volume never left my pocket, and I read the dazzling stanzas by the shores of a pale green Irish lake, comprehending little, and loving a great deal. Byron, too, was often with me, and these poets were the ripening influence of years otherwise merely nervous and boisterous. And my poets were taken to school, because it pleased me to read "Queen Mab" and "Cain," amid the priests and ignorance of a hateful Roman Catholic college. And there my poets saved me from intellectual savagery; for

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