

Biography of Madame Curie

Madame Curie

By Eve Curie. Translated by Vincent Sheean. Pp. xii + 411 + 31 plates. (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1938.) 18s. net.

INTERESTED as we are in the sources of scientific creation, we must welcome the appearance of a book which is a touching example of filial piety and at the same time an excellent biography of one of the most eminent scientific workers of our epoch. It has considerable artistic and documentary value. I think it gives a fairly complete answer to the question how it could happen that a young girl from a foreign country was called to acquire a fame which made her name a symbol, and to become a leading scientific personality not only in her native and adopted country, but also throughout the world. In fact the book tells us of national, social and hereditary factors which contributed to the formation and development of the exceptional gifts of Mme. Curie's mind and character.

Very few of those who admire this great woman realize that in the second half of the past century women played a great part in Poland. Strange to say, this fact was due to the loss of independence and severe conditions imposed by the Russian domination. Political thought and national feeling were for the most part compressed into family life, with the result that women were often equal to men in assuming full civic responsibility. Another consequence was a great movement towards 'emancipation' and university education for women. Young girls often went abroad to study at a university. This tendency would certainly not be opposed in the highly cultivated Skłodowski's family where all told young Manya of the value of intellectual effort. The moral atmosphere was that of strenuous work, of sense of duty, of patriotism. Strength of will was her inborn quality—the photographs show it clearly on her "stubborn face"—but the experiences of her childhood and youth, the early necessity of earning her living as a governess, hammered this good material and made her a rare example of endurance and tenacity. The following fact illustrates the spirit of self-sacrifice which reigned in this family. When Bronya, the older sister, went to Paris to study medicine, the younger one helped her with money saved from her meagre salary and patiently awaited her own turn. When it came at last, she studied with passion, living confined in the "icy garret", ignoring world and pleasure. What moved her was the desire to be useful to

her family, the faith in her abilities and something specifically Polish: ambition fed by the love for her country.

There is scarcely any other scientist's life which shows in such a striking way how great achievements in science are due to the association of moral and intellectual qualities. Of course it was remarkable scientific insight to conceive the idea of radioactivity as an atomic property, but the actual discovery of radium—and what was perhaps more difficult, its purification from two tons of ore—conducted in the famous shed in the worst conditions one can imagine, were only possible owing to the incredible tenacity of this delicate woman; and we still see this strength of will throughout Mme. Curie's later life. Her resolution to face the gravest responsibilities immediately after Pierre Curie's death, that terrible tragedy which might have broken even a strong man's nature, attained to heroism. No less heroic were her activities during the Great War, when moved perhaps by some ancestral influences, she organized, careless of danger, the then neglected X-ray examination of wounded soldiers both behind and practically in the lines of the French armies. Who could fail to admire her continual struggle against illness, the firm decision to work up to the last moment? One might say that she was taken almost directly from the laboratory to her death-bed.

All these facts belong perhaps more to the *vie romancée* than to a scientist's biography. But in Mme. Curie's life romance was mixed with science. When we read Mlle. Eve Curie's book, the beautiful account of the great days spent by the Curies at work, of their holidays, of misery and glory, we do not know what comes first: a story of love or of one of the greatest scientific discoveries of our times. Of the later scientific activity of Mme. Curie, the book tells us not as much as we might desire. This is not a reproach: Mlle. Curie is an extremely intelligent person and a brilliant writer, but she is not directly interested in science. A scientist is, after all, a human being and we want to know how race, milieu, physical and spiritual constitution show themselves in his life and activity.

I have watched Mme. Curie's work for years, but never understood it as well as after reading Eve Curie's book. May I express to her my personal thanks, which will also be shared, as I hope, by scientific workers throughout the world.

L. WERTENSTEIN.