

# THE BOYHOOD OF MARTIN LUTHER

by Canon Sheehan

This is an unfinished story by Canon Sheehan that, as far as I know, has never been published as part of Sheehan's work. It is a charming 'factional' account of Martin Luther's childhood and obviously intended for children. We don't know the context in which it was written or what plans Sheehan had for it but it is clearly a first draft of part of a larger work.

Its theme is typical of Sheehan's broad humanitarianism and in keeping with his efforts through *The All-for-Ireland-League* to build a religiously inclusive nationality. It is not fanciful to assume that he may have meant this work of his to be a children's introduction to Martin Luther and it is quite extraordinary that it has taken so long for it to see the light of day.

It is from a manuscript in what is now the Cork City and County Archives.

Jack Lane

## Foreword

Our hero does not need an introduction. He is long known to you, and to many hundreds who have gone before you. History speaks of him well and ill. Divines have preached of him as saint and sinner. He has been written about, talked about, praised and abused, blessed and cursed, damned and canonized for the past 400 years, and his name is Martin Luther. Quaint old Mart! We still bless him, some of us, we still curse him, more of us, for we are all good Christians. We don't know what the Mahomedans think of him, but that does not trouble him now.

He was born in Germany. His forefathers were born there, so he naturally followed first and he made his entry at Eisleben on the 10th November 1483.

## His Arrival.

There was great excitement in the little town of Eisleben. All the bells were ringing. The boys were shouting and cheering and all the dogs were barking and the women old and young were waving all kinds of garments out of the windows. The Dean of the Cathedral school hurried after the boys down the street with his long coat streaming behind, and then came the Organist who ran after the Dean and gave him a sound slap on the back shouting "*Hullo Dean, what is all this row about?*" "*Have you not heard*" said the Dean "*Old Hans Luther's wife presented him with a son this morning*" - "*Hurrah*" cried the Organist "*We will go down and cheer him up, and after a few bumpers of good old lager beer he may recover from the shock*".

So they soon arrived at the house and found old Hans alone in his sitting room gazing very sadly at the fire. "*Good luck to you Hans old fellow, how is the Frau and the baby? We came to drink their health and a welcome to the new arrival, and to cheer you up.*" They

talked a lot and drank a lot, and had quite a jolly time. Then the two old friends went home arm in arm and Hans went to his bed in pretty good humour with all the world.

The days passed on quickly and the youngster was thriving, so Hans thought it time to have him christened. He had forgotten to enter the birth in the family Bible, and the child was over 3 weeks old before his parents thought of marking time for him. He was baptised on St. Martin's Day and therefore got the name of Martin. That evening there was a very jolly party in the house in honour of the event. Songs were sung and many toasts drunk over and over even the health of the family cat and her new brood of kittens were not forgotten.

When the liquor was consumed the visitors departed, the house was quiet again only for the usual howling of the youngster which did not trouble the deep sleep of his father. The lisping days of childhood quickly passed away and Martin got stronger and very troublesome.

He got tired of cradle life and one day he suddenly crossed the Rubicon by indignantly smashing on the floor the new feeding bottle that was pressed on him and kicked his doll round the room. He soon got into pantaloons and then into knickers and grew up rapidly so when 7 years old he was quite a lively active boy and swaggered round the house full of fun and mischief and proud of his new knickers.

He was not easy to manage and one day he found his father's knife and learned to whittle and he was caught trying it on the furniture to his sorrow as the old man lost his temper and broke a nice new cane on his hindquarters.

When 10 years old he was sent to school. He enjoyed the school and the games at playtime with the other boys who all liked him. They were taught singing the old ballad songs in chorus and Mart learned to whistle them better than most of the boys as he had a fine ear for music. The school was beside the Dean's house and the garden. The Dean taught the most of the classes and Mart learned his Latin and arithmetic and the practice of medicine with healing herbs. In return for his teaching Old Hans agreed to mend the Dean's ironware and to shoe his mare free of charge.

The Dean's garden was large, full of fruit trees of all kinds and the boys were not allowed to go there, but Mart one day after his lessons ventured in and strolled around. He saw some fine peaches on a tree up against the wall and went straight to inspect them. Now these peaches were the Dean's special favorites. He had with constant care brought them to perfection and he loved them and watched over their growing with delight.

Mart stood gazing at them for a while and he felt a warm tingling in his stomach. So carelessly whistling one of Hans Sach's ballad songs he went to the tree and quickly transferred half a dozen to his pockets. The Dean's terrier dog was basking in the sun nearby must have especially hated this tune, or perhaps he loved to guard his master's property, jumped up for Mart who quickly dashed for the wall and climbed over leaving in the frenzied dog's teeth a large piece from his pantaloons. This remnant the trusty animal brought home to his master and Mart got his mother to insert a patch in the gap of some other material.

The Dean of course missed his fine peaches and cursed the rising generation. Next day in the classroom Mart was at the blackboard with his chalk making a fool of Euclid and a diagram on the

back of his pants caught the eye of the Dean who guessed that he had the piece to match. Being a man of alacrity and speedy conclusions he had the astonished Mart across his knees in a moment and though his strap was heavy he hit that patch every time. Poor Mart was very sore after this interview and though he was not sorry that he ate the peaches, as they were delicious, he was very sorry that he whistled and vowed he would never do so again.

I have not seen this anecdote in any of the biographies of this celebrated man, so perhaps I have the honour of first giving it to a greedy world of admirers.

Old Mr. Luther was a man of excellent parts and his veneration for religion and sacred history was extreme. His friend the Kapellmeister who lived over the way under the wing of the fine old Church would often drop in on an evening bringing a sheaf of manuscripts of the Old Testament in Latin and together with pipes and the gently stimulating lager beer they would read and talk to a late hour over these marvellous olden stories.

Mart was always an eager listener to the old folks as all the boys knew Latin in those days and he was greatly taken with the curious incidents and anecdotes narrated in the Bible.

One evening the subject of their discourse was Joseph and his cruel brethren. The story touched our Mart deeply and he slept on it. The next day he presented himself to his father with his mother's best patchwork quilt folded toga fashion around him and he requested to be dropped down the well at the bottom of the garden. His father was just then busy doctoring a favorite corn and disliked interruption but on Mart repeating his request with the hope of being taken into captivity by some wandering gypsies the old man got cross and called his wife. When the good dame saw her fancy quilt in such company her spirits rose and she would be Joseph felt so sore after the interview that he forgot to eat his supper that night.

However, being a lad of elastic temperament he was up early the next morning, had a very pleasant all round day and in the evening again listened intently to the Choirmaster slowly and reverently reading the story of Abraham's sacrifice and the saving of his son Isaac. He had to repeat it all over again for Mart.

It is extraordinary what an effect it had on him. He did not go to sleep for a long time that night and then his dreams were wonderful. He dreamed that his father took him up on the hill covered with shrubs and trees and there they found the rosy faced Choirmaster sitting with his back to a tree with supplies of cold meat and bottles of beer ready for them.

So they had a jolly good lunch and Hans drank so much of the strong beer that he got excited he took the big carving knife in his hand and ran for Mart vowing that now he would chop him into mincemeat. He chased poor Mart and called him to stop, but at this moment a big black ram rushed out from the bushes and gave Hans a tremendous pucker from behind driving him right against the poor Choirmaster into whose fat paunch he plunged the knife.

So Mart escaped and mounted the ram and rode away happy for home. Next morning he told his parents at breakfast the very funny dream he had. They enjoyed the way Mart told it and Hans said he must tell it to the Choirmaster in the evening at supper.

Mart was pleased with himself and all that day he was very busy and at noon with the help of two servants he got his father's prize ram, a wicked beast, into the yard. They tied him to the gate and Mart made up a heap of sticks and straw. He then set it on fire and when it was blazing to his fancy he went to the workshop and told his father that he was ready. "Ready for what?" asked Mr Luther. "*I am ready for the sacrifice like Isaac*" proudly replied Mart. "*So now father come on with your knife for the fire is alight.*" The old man took off his spectacles and eyed his son sharply but seeing him take off his clothes he seized his stick and went for Mart. The ram in his struggles at the gate had got loose and half blinded by the smoke was savage. He rushed for old Hans in a couple of bounds, hit him with full force a tergo, pitching him right across the blazing straw but he escaped the burning.

When the old man was released, singed a little, he went into the house and tackled Mrs Luther - "*That boy is going to the Devil.*" "Poor boy" said she "*it is these Bible stories that are so exciting him,*" "By Jehoshaphat" said Mr Luther "*I'll give him Bible exercise enough to worry him.*"

So later on he called Mart. "*Mart, my son*" said he "*thou art a hopeful youth and the early budding of a love for Scripture lore betokens a great future for thee so you will stay indoors all day and study hard as I want you to find out for me what relation was Lot's wife to Abraham and when the days of Higher Criticism arrive thy name shall be held in honour.*"

Whether Mart ever traced this odd line of genealogy to the satisfaction of his parent is not recorded. He complains however, of the harsh treatment he received from his parents at his early age. The one flogged him, the other whipped him impartially so the honours were divided so that Mart grew up humble minded and dutiful. Yet often in his later years does he speak in very touching words of the sweet intercourse with his father and mother in their happy home.

He was now sent to a regular school and learned for the first time the true meaning of education. He did not like school. He honestly confesses as much. He says that the schoolmasters were tyrants and the schools were worse than jails. They flogged declensions and configurations into him and every evening they flogged him again lest he might forget the flogging he got in the morning. His back was scored like a chessboard and all the masters had a turn at him. He says he never learned much from them and he was anxious to get away from this type of society.

So at the age of 15 he left home without the consent of his parents and went to Eisenach to start life on his own account. He began as a charity scholar going from house to house teaching all he knew and getting food and lodging in return and having, as we are told, a good sweet voice he succeeded in charming some old ladies who were very kind to him.

They got him into a good seminary where he had very different masters from those with whom he was previously acquainted. They were learned and good men who did not even speak harshly to him but coaxed knowledge into him accompanied with apple tart and fine rich puddings. Mart evidently thought that he had pleasant quarters here and as he was always

hungry he was glad to get good food though not enough of it and he also had a good bed to sleep on - rather a hard one indeed but things were better for him all round.

The worst of it was that besides lessons and long lectures he had to get up very early, to get to bed before sunset, to work at very many jobs all round the house and he was dead tired before he got to bed. The worst of it was that he was under the eye of the Sacristan all the time and he was a very sharp taskmaster. This Sacristan, named Albertus, was a long thin specimen of a monk with a keen nose and seemed to take pleasure in making poor Mart do every kind of job in scrubbing and washing and digging so that Mart was all pains and aches by bedtime and he often cursed the early bell to rise after a few hours sleep.

He began to hate the Sacristan but he liked the old Abbot who often patted his head and called him a good boy and told him that in a short time he would be free of hard work and commence studies in a room for himself. So Mart worked on and one day the Abbot called him to his room, examined him and was surprised by his intelligence. So Mart was given a small room upstairs which had a view of the large garden and field and contained a small collection of books all in Latin. Mart was happy in the new room but he had too many visits from the monks who dropped in to chat with him and especially his enemy the Sacristan who always found fault with him.

His dress he said was dirty, his table was soiled with ink, the room was not cleaned and his singing was a nuisance as bad as the cats. One day Mart caught a little mouse in his room and kept him in his desk. The Sacristan came in as usual and was looking around poking his long nose into every corner. He came over near Mart and while he was looking over the books on the high shelf Mart opened his desk, caught the mouse, and quietly slipped him into the pocket of the big coat which Albertus wore.

When he left the room Mart silently opened the door and listened. The Bell rang for prayers, all the monks went into the Chapel and Mart went also. They were not long there when the Sacristan put his hand into his pocket for his Hymnbook then let out a yell, jumped up and ran out to the corridor. Some of the monks went out after him to see what happened and found him stripping off his long cloak, then shaking it and using very bad words. They asked him what was up and before he had time to answer out jumped the mouse and ran off behind the wainscot.

(MSS ends)