

STUDIES IN CONVERSION.

VI. JOHN NEWTON.

It lies in the nature of the case that modern Christianity should be more fruitful in records of conversion than was either the ancient or the mediæval Church, because it has been with the human and experimental aspect of religion that it has been specially concerned. Ancient theology was objective, modern theology is subjective. Ancient Christian thinking occupied itself with the mystery of the divine nature and the constitution of the person of Christ ; modern thinking is more ethical, working out what man must do and experience in order that the great salvation, provided by the grace of God, may take effect and bear its fruits. In Great Britain there have been three separate beginnings of this characteristically modern religion ; and in each successive one of these the subjective element has been more pronounced. Thus it was more distinctly stamped on Puritanism than on the Reformation, and on the Evangelical Revival than on Puritanism. Nor was the inclination to testimony, under the impulse of deep experience and strong feeling, confined to Methodism : it manifested itself no less in the Evangelicalism which stayed inside the Established Church. As representatives of the movement within the Anglican communion Sir James Stephen, in his charming *Essays in Ecclesiastical Biography*, selects the following four—John Newton, Scott the commentator, Milner the ecclesiastical historian, and Henry Venn, author of *The Complete Duty of Man*—and from two of these the world has received accounts of their own conversion. Of the two, Newton's is by far the more significant monument of the period to which it belongs.

John Newton's name is known to all students of English literature through its association with that of the poet

Cowper. Cowper was long one of his parishioners at Olney, and his intimate personal friend. Not only did Newton write a preface to the first volume of Cowper's poetry which saw the light, but the two friends were joint-authors of *The Olney Hymns*, a volume which long enjoyed widespread popularity, and from which, to this day, all hymnbooks enrich themselves. The contributions of Cowper to this collection comprised such gems as "God moves in a mysterious way," "Oh for a closer walk with God," and "There is a fountain filled with blood." Newton's contributions were far more numerous; and, although none of them perhaps touch as high a mark as Cowper's best, it will be recognised that he was by no means, even as a poet, unworthy of the collaboration of his friend, when the following are mentioned among his contributions: "How sweet the name of Jesus sounds," "One there is above all others," "Sweeter sounds than music knows"; and it may be safely asserted that it would puzzle the literary experts to say which, among the less-known hymns, came from the one author and which from the other.

But Newton is well worthy of study on his own account, and to the collected edition of his works there is prefixed an "authentic narrative of some remarkable particulars in his life, written by himself," which deals especially with the portion of his experience of which we are at present in quest.

He was born in London towards the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, his father being master of a ship in the Mediterranean trade and, subsequently, governor of Fort York in Hudson's Bay. His mother was a woman of rare piety and refinement, and he is one of the innumerable instances of the effect of a mother's influence; for, although she was taken from him before he was seven years old, and although, when his father soon afterwards married

again, he came under influences of quite a different character, he never forgot his mother's teaching and example. Before he was twelve, he became wild in his disposition and profane in his language; yet religious impressions still haunted him. He took to the trade of a sailor, going at first in his father's ship, and he soon acquired the reckless habits for which this calling was then proverbial; yet his career was interrupted every now and then by accesses of seriousness and of an ascetic if ignorant religiosity. "I took up," he says, "and laid down a religious profession three or four different times before I was sixteen years of age." As he grew up to manhood, association with careless and profane companions began to undermine his character; yet now and then his religious convictions would come back with force, and sometimes in remarkable forms.

On one occasion, for example, he had a famous dream. He dreamt he was in the harbour of Venice, which his ship had lately visited. It was night, and he was watch on deck, when a being approached him, he knew not from whence, and offered him a ring, cautioning him to keep it carefully, because on its retention depended all his happiness. Thereupon his visitor disappeared; but soon another, of different aspect, came upon the scene and entered into conversation about the ring, undervaluing its properties and at last urging him to throw it away. At this proposal he was at first shocked, but ultimately he yielded, dropping the ring over the side of the ship. As soon as it touched the water, the whole world seemed to burst into flames. The landscape, with the aspect of which he was familiar, became clear as day, and the distant Alps, on the north, were all on fire. He felt that he was lost and about to be carried off to endless punishment, when again the being who had given him the ring appeared on deck and asked what had happened. The culprit confessed his folly, whereupon his

visitor, plunging into the water, rose with the ring in his fingers. The dreamer rushed forward to seize it with the liveliest expressions of gratitude ; but the stranger said, " No, leave it with me ; I will keep it, and, whenever you require it, you can call for me."

Another influence, which was to prove of enormous importance, was already beginning to be woven into the thread of his experience. His mother had died in the house of a dear friend in the county of Kent, who had a daughter, a little younger than Newton ; and the two mothers had frequently amused themselves by talking of a match between their children. After his mother's death and his father's second marriage, a coldness sprang up between this family and his own ; relations were entirely broken off, and he did not see any of them for years. But, on the eve of a voyage to Jamaica, where he was to be settled in business, he paid a visit to this family in passing, and, seeing the girl, then about fourteen years of age, he was inspired with a passion for her so violent that for years afterwards, he says, there was not a single hour when she was out of his memory. He believed himself that this connexion saved him at a critical period from total despair and even from suicide ; and certainly it became ultimately one of the regenerating influences of his life. After a series of extraordinary vicissitudes he obtained her hand in marriage ; and he went so far as to publish, while she was yet alive, volumes of his correspondence with her of a very ardent description, by way of showing how happy and how helpful such a connexion may be. This may be compared with the publication by Mr. Barrie of a book about his mother, intended to show how intimate and helpful may be the relation between mother and son ; although in both cases there may be people to whom the good taste of the proceeding appears questionable.

Newton is obliged to confess that this influence was not sufficient to keep him in the paths of virtue, or even of decency ; a far more powerful influence was required to curb the impulses of his wild and somewhat coarse disposition. Indeed, the violence of his passion at first seriously interfered with his duty. He was about to proceed to a situation in Jamaica ; but so averse was he to be separated from the object of his affections that he of purpose allowed the ship in which he was to proceed to his destination to sail away without him. Soon after he was seized by the pressgang and hurried on board a man-of-war, according to the violent custom of those days, when war was raging and men to supply the navy were scarce. His father, hearing of this, was able to bring influence to bear which was successful in securing for him the post of midshipman. But he lost the favour of his captain by overstaying his leave when on a visit to his friend in Kent. Not long afterwards he deserted, was caught and flogged, and the man-of-war bore him away to the East Indies, while his mind was in an agony of disappointment, humiliation and despair. About this time he imbibed infidel notions, through the reading of the "Characteristics" of Shaftesbury and the conversation of a clever unbeliever among the crew ; and this served still further to embitter his mind. He was sometimes on the point of casting himself overboard to be done with life ; and at other times he meditated a plot against the life of the captain, who, he thought, had treated him with harshness. On the African coast, falling in with a trading vessel, the captain of the man-of-war took two of her crew in exchange for two of his own men. Hearing that such a transaction was impending, Newton begged that he might be one of the two ; and his request was granted, the captain probably being glad to be rid of him. Newton considered that any position

must be better than that in which he was ; but he confesses that, as he approached the trading ship, the uppermost thought in his mind was, " Now I may be as abandoned as I please, without any control."

" From this time," he continues, " I was exceedingly vile indeed. I not only sinned with a high hand myself, but made it my study to tempt and seduce others on every occasion ; nay, I eagerly sought occasion, sometimes to my own hazard or hurt."

The captain soon found out how worthless was the bargain he had made, and it was not difficult to persuade him to part with Newton to a trader on board, who proposed to employ him on one of the islands of Sierra Leone. On this insalubrious shore Newton was accordingly landed ; but almost immediately he was stricken down with fever and rendered useless. He was consequently treated with neglect by his employer and suffered the most cruel ill-treatment at the hands of this man's coloured wife. He had scarcely clothes enough to cover his nakedness, he was fed from the leavings of the black woman's plate, and sometimes he was glad to receive scraps from the slaves in the chain. Never, in short, was there a more literal reproduction of the story of the Prodigal Son at his lowest stage, when he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat, and no man gave unto him. Newton did not yet, however, feel any of the Prodigal's desire to arise and go to his father. " I was no further changed," he says, " than a tiger tamed by hunger—remove the occasion, and he will be as wild as ever." After several months he received a transfer to another trader in the same region, in whose service he was more comfortable ; but his morals, instead of improving, grew worse and worse. He was gradually becoming assimilated to his environment ; to use an expressive phrase, which, he tells us, was current in

that neighbourhood, the white man was becoming black.

His father, meantime, had given instructions to the captain of a ship about to visit the west coast of Africa to try to find his son ; and, by a marvellous conjunction of circumstances, he was found and persuaded to return home. The ship, however, was still a year at sea before completing her business ; and during this time Newton behaved so badly that the captain often repented taking him on board, and told him that he was afraid some evil would befall them on account of his wickedness.

Once when engaging some of the crew in a midnight orgy, Newton lost his cap over the edge of the ship, and was half over the rail after it, when his companions caught him and dragged him back ; otherwise he would certainly have perished, as he could not swim. His life abounded in hairbreadth escapes ; and, in after days, he looked back with wonder on the many occasions when the divine mercy rescued him from the consequences of his folly.

As the voyage neared its close, he picked up a copy of Thomas à Kempis, which happened to be lying somewhere in the ship, and, as he read, the thought flashed upon him, "What, if, after all, these things be true ?" The same thought was burned in on his mind the next day, when the ship was struck by a tornado and one of her sides was mostly carried away. The cry arose that she was going down. Newton rushed on deck, but the captain turned him back to fetch something from below ; and the man who went up in his place was instantly swept overboard and drowned. All hands had to go to work at the pumps. In a tone of bravado Newton cried to a companion, "This will serve us yet as a theme over a glass of wine" ; but the man answered, "No, it is too late now." Involuntarily Newton let the words escape, "The Lord have mercy on us," the first prayer he had uttered for years. And then the question

started up in his mind, "What have you to do with mercy?" In the afternoon, being too exhausted to work longer at the pumps, he was sent to steer the ship; and at the wheel he had leisure to reflect. His past life rushed through his mind—his early opportunities, his profession of religion, the calls and warnings he had received, the profanity and folly of which he had been guilty. Passages of Scripture came into his memory, but chiefly those which condemned him. He prayed, and began to wonder whether there could be any mercy for him. Sceptical thoughts mingled with these reflections, but more and more conscience assured him that there must be a God. The storm passed, but not the danger. They were far from land; and four weeks elapsed before they reached it. They were in peril of perishing from lack of food and water. But, when their supplies were just on the point of giving out, they landed on the coast of Ireland. One of the first things which Newton did, on reaching *terra firma*, was to take the holy sacrament in Londonderry.

Such was John Newton's conversion. To a calm observer there would not probably have appeared to be in it much promise of permanency. Many a reckless sailor has vowed, in an hour of mortal terror, to be a new man; but, after the danger has passed, has returned like a dog to his vomit or like a sow that has been washed to her wallowing in the mire. Newton's convictions of sin were not remarkably deep, considering what his life had been; he had no transporting vision of the truth of forgiveness through the love of a dying Saviour such as has been vouchsafed to many at the crisis of their life; he confesses himself that he never knew what is called a time of first love. In his next voyage after this momentous one, there was a month of serious backsliding, from which he was rescued by a fever, which again recalled him to God. Still, his change lasted. On

returning to England he was married ; and this had a great effect in steadying his mind and confirming his principles. Years went past before he came into the full light of the Gospel. Yet he made steady progress ; and, if he had not before conversion a very profound repentance, he had it afterwards, as the Prodigal Son had a far deeper sense of his own folly when seated at home with the ring on his hand than ever he had in the far country. His resolutions grew stronger and his views of truth riper, till the way was opened up for abandoning a sailor's life and becoming a preacher of the Gospel.

John Newton's conversion did not, then, in all respects fall in with the scheme of Evangelical teaching. It did not exhibit the clearly marked stages of conviction of sin, faith in the atonement, and joy in salvation, which were considered normal in the school to which he attached himself. But in one respect it corresponded with the Evangelical model : it arrested a reckless sinner in his career of iniquity and made him a trophy of grace and a witness for Christ. The Evangelical Revival believed intensely in the possibility of such transformations. Whitefield and Wesley went down to the dregs of the population and lifted their converts up not only to respectability, but to holiness and usefulness. Was not this the boast of the Son of Man Himself, when He was on earth—that He had come to seek and to save that which was lost ? The power to effect such changes is, as the author of *Ecce Homo* has remarked, the true test of a standing or a falling Church.

Perhaps reference ought to be made, before closing, to a sneer often cast at Evangelicalism in connexion with John Newton—that, while he was being converted, he was engaged in the slave trade. The charge is true. After his marriage he became captain of a ship, and he went thrice to the coast of Africa, to purchase slaves and carry them to

America. He was holding religious services with his crew and studying the Scriptures, praying and composing religious diaries on deck, while the wretched cargo below were enduring the horrors of the middle passage. He never had a scruple about the lawfulness of what he was doing ; it was sanctioned by law, it was even looked upon as a genteel trade, and he was satisfied. It is an extraordinary instance of how religion may be dissociated from morality, and how law and custom may blind the conscience to the plainest facts. But the blindness was not John Newton's ; it was the blindness of the age. Both Church and State sanctioned the slave trade, and pronounced those engaged in it respectable. Civilisation and Christianity may well blush at the recollection of such moral insensibility ; but Evangelicalism has no special reason to blush for it, because it was by Evangelicalism that the conscience of the country was at length awakened on the subject ; the great abolitionists were leading Evangelicals ; and John Newton himself lived to denounce the horrid trade in which he had once participated.

JAMES STALKER.

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I.

PSALM cxix. 98-99 :

Thy commandments make me wiser than mine enemies ;

For they are ever with me.

I have more understanding than all my teachers ;

For Thy testimonies are my meditation.

Sometimes the so-called " teachers " of the church, the clever modern outsiders who are anxious in magazines and on platforms to put faith right, are hardly distinguish-