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MILTON, THE TYPICAL PURITAN.

BY DR. JOHN CLIFFORD, M.A.

Puritanism is one, and only one, phase of the many-sided and richly-gifted life of John Milton; but it is the phase which brings him before us, "in his habit as he lived," and brings the inner spirit of him more comprehensively and actually to view than any other.

He is chiefly known as a poet, whose verse

"Majestically moulded—

Steaming irresistible;

Moves like armed and bannered hosts,"

and it is confessed that, if he does not rank highest in the world of song, he is certainly one of the first four whose fame the world "will not willingly let die;" Homer, Dante and Shakespeare being the other three.

He is a prose writer, matchless in the majesty and overwhelming force of his style, and cogent and invincible in his thought.

He is a statesman of keenest insight, dauntless courage, breathing a patriotic fervour that is transfigured by divine humanitarianism,

Nor can it be forgotten that he was a skilled musician, a perfect master of the harmonies of sound; a seer of rapt vision, extraordinary vividness of conception and far-reaching wisdom; and a saint of stainless purity and sublime spiritual elevation; but he is in all, and over all, and throughout all, a Puritan, and in fact, to adopt the language of the historian Green he is "not only the highest, but the completest type of Puritanism."

In saying this, I am not forgetting Cromwell and Owen, Vane and Baxter, Milton's contemporaries. They, too, were Puritans, filled with the deepest awe for the authority of God, fired with glowing moral ardour, profoundly reverent to the truth, resolutely set on securing the indestructible rights of the indi-

vidual soul, and eager to build their fatherland into greatness and strength. But Milton transcends them all. In him we see the indomitable courage of the victory of Marston Moor, wedded to the wonder-working imagination of

“Sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy’s child,
Warbling his native wood-notes wild.”

To the austere gravity of Richard Baxter and the dominating sense of the seriousness of life of John Owen, Milton adds a generous welcome to all that increases the charm and multiplies the delights of life, writing his “Comus,” and going

“To the well-trod stage anon
If Jonson’s learned sock be on.”

Like Sir Harry Vane, he is an apostle of liberty, but his teaching that “man is his own dungeon,” and that the kingdom of the earth like the kingdom of heaven is within, lifts his doctrine of liberty to the highest plane, and shows the Puritan idea of freedom, in its most perfect setting. Other Puritans were great, for it was, and is the mark of Puritanism to make virile men; but the full-orbed revelation of the ideas and spirit, aims and issues of that wonderful world-movement is given in London’s most distinguished citizen.

But is it fair to treat John Milton in this way? Is not Professor Green’s claim that Milton was “the completest type of Puritanism” altogether invalid? Why not take Praise-God Barebones, or Hezekiah Mucklethwaite as your pattern Puritan?

Simply because that would be flagrantly unhistoric and unscientific. This is the age of evolution; and we have reached that stage in its exposition, where we no longer go down to the depths of savagery for the typical man, but rather follow man in his fullest development, and ascend to the summits of civilization, in order to know him and his achievements and possibilities; therefore, we have in the seer Isaiah the complete type of Prophetism; in Paul, the pattern of Christianity; and in Milton the embodiment of the qualities and characteristics of Puritanism.

Amongst those “qualities and characteristics,” let me place first its *radiant joyousness*. It is customary to figure the Puritan as sour and morose, ascetic and acrid, of vinegar aspect,

frowning on innocent pleasure, incapable of mirth and jollity, and averse to human delights. But Milton was as genial as his muse was sublime. The felicities of his poetry are an imperishable treasure, and not three hundred years will exhaust their charm. The incomparable music, extraordinary vivid pictures and lilting verse of *L'Allegro* will link his name with the joys of nature and life as long as the English language is spoken, and if it were to cease from the speech of men, students would, perforce, learn the dead tongue, so that they might quaff the joys of his song. Why, even his Melancholy is a blithe goddess, free from scepticism and without a touch of despair, and chiefly given to healthy reflection on the experience of life. No doubt he was, like his Samson,

"A person separate to God,

Designed for great exploits,"

and had the Puritan inability to look at the world, except from a moral point of view. To him, as to Emerson, "all things were moral, and therefore he was the foe of the debasing pleasures of a "lubricious and adulterous age," and rigidly held himself from everything that corrupts as it pleases, and degrades as it charms; but every reader of his poems knows that he saw the world through "magic casements," as the gardens of Hesperus where

"Eternal summer dwells

And west winds with busky wing

About the cedarn alleys fling

Nard and cassia's balmy smells."

Never forget, when you hear men sneer at Puritanism, that John Milton was a man of gaiety of heart; no foe to wit or humor or of any pure human enjoyment. He delighted in—

Quips, and cranks, and wanton wiles,

Nods, and becks, and wreathed smiles,

Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,

And love to live in dimple sleek;

Sport that wrinkled Care derides,

And Laughter holding both his sides."

Life is, in his thought, made for joy, as the sparks fly upward; but joy is the fruit of virtue and reason, of the wise use

of the will in obedience to the highest and best. Milton is ever a man of the dawn, one of God's singing men, clad in the garments of praise, delighting in the works of the Lord and the just ways of men.

Akin to this, and springing from the same causes, came his conquering optimism. Milton was a prophet. He saw. He saw God and life: God in all, and over all, and through all; and, seeing God, he saw into the heart of life, its sovereign purpose, its subjection to law; its certain course, its final issues. God fills his universe and makes the world his sanctuary, and life itself, a God-given opportunity of service in which, whether by patient waiting or strenuous fighting, the result is, and must of necessity be, blessed for him who serves. Therefore, he sang and taught and fought and endured, as one who saw the invisible. In his early days he wrought at his self-training as one who felt that he was destined to immortality, and quite early in life he purposed to leave behind him that which subsequent generations would appreciate. His dreams were of the future. His faith in God gave reality to them, and placed the stamp of eternity upon his activities.

Life had its severe tasks, its dark days, and its accumulated defeats; but he was sure that

"Virtue could see to do what virtue would
By her own radiant light, though sun and moon
Were in the flat sea sunk."

He rejoiced in the struggle for purity and freedom and goodness, and set apart as a precious pearl a sentence he found in a Latin homily, in which his invincible faith in the final victory is revealed. "A good man seems in a certain sense even to surpass the angels, in so far as, enwrapped in a weak and mortal body, he is engaged in a perpetual strife with the lusts of the flesh, yet aspires to lead a life resembling that of the celestials."

And though he fought on unflinchingly, and was doomed to see his political ideals recede further into the dim distance, still he did not surrender them.

He was defeated, but he did not go over to the enemy. His prophetic spirit seized the vision of the kingdom that cannot be moved; the kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy in the

Holy Ghost, which God is surely establishing through all the mutations of time; and he faltered not. He wrought as one who knew that his work would last—and even when sight was gone, and the glories of the commonwealth were turned to dust, yet in the soul of him, he was still the warrior drilled and disciplined, with loins girt and lamp burning, ready for the battle on behalf of truth and righteousness, and against fraud and avarice, foul living and effeminacy. And so we turn with affection as well as reverence to the conquering saint as he chants his triumphant strains seated by the side of his daughter, and whilst we rejoice in his undying faith, and unflinching fortitude, we welcome the tender, trustful love that sings:

“I argue not

Against heaven’s hand or will, nor bate a jot
Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer
Right onward.”

Further, in Milton we see the Puritan as the rightful heir of the Reformation and of the Renaissance more vividly than anywhere else. The two great forces that make modern Europe and the world meet in him. He has the heroism of the man who burns the Pope’s Bull, and the love of learning of the student who gave to Europe its New Testament in Greek. In the genealogy of souls the Puritan Milton is descended from Martin Luther and Erasmus. They both join in him, and are at home with each other, as they never were anywhere else. There is the quickening vision of God with its resultant awe and peace, joined with the restless and passionate pursuit of knowledge for the sake of truth, and of truth for the sake of character-building. Puritanism is the new name for the two broad and deep streams of the Revival of Learning in Reuchlin, von Hutten and Erasmus on the one hand, and of the Revival of the Gospel of Paul in Luther and Melancthon on the other.

Milton was a paragon of learning. As a boy he sought it with eagerness and even to the injury of his eyes. Throughout his life, he rejoiced in it more than in his necessary food. The influence of classical antiquity had a clear and welcome course through his nature. The lore of the prophets and psalmists and apostles was as familiar to him as his own features. Greece

and Rome, Italy and Palestine spread their vast literary treasures at his feet, and he could use them as a banker his gold. Human culture—"all-round culture," has no finer specimen. He has the exploring mind that goes in quest of knowledge and truth until he finds it. He is resolutely accurate, and insists on intellectual honesty with the energy of Huxley; "Let truth and error grapple," is his word. Make a ring for them. Let them fight it out. Open the doors and windows of the soul to all the new knowledge. Away with falsehood and fraud in the name of religion, and in the vain attempt to save the Church.

Hence he always handles life in a large way. His outlook is broad and impartial. The sweep of his mind is regal and divine. He has the universality which marks the highest order of intellect and soul, and the width and profundity of his learning is only matched by its accuracy. He was the most accomplished citizen, not only of London but of the world in his day, and it would be difficult in the centuries since to discover a more complete type of culture than this Puritan.

And yet the man was directed and sustained in putting all this intellectual energy and wealth to the highest uses by his "Reformation" faith. He believed in God; just and ruling; living and actual; revealed in the Son as the Redeemer and Renewer of men, visiting men in their sins, and recovering for them more than their lost Paradise. He held that "there is but one sacrifice and it is over; one Priest and He is invisible;" that religion is spiritual, and the soul must be free from the tyranny of priests and prelates and churches, so that it may realize itself according to the plan and purpose of Him who made it.

Next, I remind you that this Puritan saint and scholar stood for freedom, and that in the words of George Meredith—

"Nor has fair Liberty a champion armed
To meet on heights or plains, the Sophister
Throughout the ages, equal to this man."

It is a fact. It is his outstanding merit, that he is at once the foremost interpreter and leading apostle of freedom. He spoke and wrote for liberty of conscience, for liberty to know and to

think, to publish and to live. It was the duty of every man to secure for his fellow this fundamental right to freedom. The "Areopagitica" is Milton's free soul in majestic and mighty speech. He fought against the prelacy, because it bred tyranny; against subscription, because it fettered and corrupted the soul; against priests because they usurped the work the independent spirit of man should undertake for itself; against the State whenever it sought to rule in realms to which it was alien, and out of which it ought always to be kept, the realms of conscience and of the Christian society.

Nor could Milton be in anything a mere theorist. Knowledge supplied material for conduct. Ideas had to be incarnated in action. He was a worker for freedom as well as its advocate. Hence the rapidity with which he returned to England from Italy in 1639. He was in search of perfect equipment for his work; but the news reached him that the struggle between Charles and the priests on the one side, and the people on the other, was becoming desperate, and he said: "I considered it dishonorable to be enjoying myself at my ease in foreign lands while my countrymen were striking a blow for freedom."

He, too, must strike his blow for freedom, and therefore, he doffs his singing robes at a moment's notice, and takes his place amongst the warriors for English liberty. Do you ask, was it altogether wise for him to descend from the lofty heights of divine poesy and "embark on the troubled sea of noises and hoarse disputes," his answer is ready. "Were it," he says, "the meanest under service, if God by His Secretary Conscience enjoin it, it were sad for me if I should draw back." He could not be disobedient to the heavenly vision. He must speak and act for freedom or die.

But it is in his conception of the meaning, and conditions and ends of human freedom, that he shows his mighty intellect, his fine judgment. He saw that it was, and must be, personal; that it has to be won inwardly by each individual in order to secure and maintain the freedoms that are without. "Liberty dwells twinned with right reason and from her hath no dividual," or separate "being." "Love virtue," he says in *Comus*, "She alone is free." Liberty is for the sake of virtue—that is, that man

may obey his God and be perfectly loyal to the laws of the divine order; free to follow the dictates of his conscience, free from the tyranny of kings and priests, so that he may strive to reach the loftiest ideal of life for himself, his home and his commonwealth.

But the outer freedom hinges on the inner. Abraham Lincoln does well to set free four millions of slaves in the States; it is both necessary and right. It is a first duty to deliver them from political despotism, but Booker T. Washington must complete Lincoln's work by helping the slave to emancipate himself from his ignorance and appetites and passions, by education, right reason and virtue. For

"Sometimes nations will decline so low
From virtue, which is reason, that no wrong,
But justice and some fatal curse annexed
Deprives them of their *outward* liberty,
Their *inward* lost."

Milton's Puritanism was a fount of exhaustless *philanthropy*. He was a patriot, but he was more. He loved freedom, and loved it for all his race. His chief delights were in literature, but as soon as the call of public duty sounds, he puts aside his harp, and strains his eyes to the verge of blindness in the service, not only of the State, but, through the State, to the oppressed everywhere.

True, "his soul was like a star and dwelt apart," as Wordsworth says: but as Moses ascended the heights to commune with God, and then came down with the divine imperatives for Israel, and as Christ descended from the Mount of Transfiguration to the valley, and then cast out the evil spirits; so Milton dwelt apart with God in habitual fellowship, but came forth to win an ordered and free State, a perfected Commonwealth in England; and through "God's Englishmen" a free world. Milton, such was his conception of the dignity and greatness of man, that he saw in every man a possible theologian, a possible priest of God, a possible king; for he said, "he who reigns within himself, and rules passions, desires and fears, is more than a king."

For lover as he was of England, his love was always pure and

unselfish, and more akin to the broad humanitarianism of the Gospel than to the narrow jingoism that mistakes greed for patriotism, and mere bigness for power. His hatred of Rome was due to his love of freedom for all men, and his resolute efforts to deliver the persecuted Vaudois, whose extermination the Jesuits were seeking, were inspired by an ardent devotion to liberty and humanity.

Such are some of the qualities of Milton's Puritanism. In the eager and thirsting time of youth he had the courage to accept and adopt a high and exacting ideal of life, to seek communion with, and obedience to, the Eternal Will, and throughout his long course, in stress and storm, through defeats and victories, he held on his way, never taking his hand from his work, but working "as ever in the great Task-master's eye," so that he might enjoy and promote truth and freedom, righteousness and joy.

And still our England needs that Puritanism, and needs it sorely. Meredith truly says:

"We need him now,
This latest Age in repetition cries:
For Belial, the adroit, is in our midst;
Mammon, more swoln to squeeze the slavish sweat
From hopeless toil: and overshadowingly
(Aggrandized, monstrous in his grinning mask
Of hypocritical Peace), inveterate Moloch
Remains the great example."

It is so. Let us therefore celebrate his genius and gifts, first by praising the God who gave him to our nation and the world, and next by imitating his example, proclaiming his principles and perfecting his work.