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BOOK
REVIEWS

THE AUTHOR OF PARADISE LOST.

By Fred Myron Colby.

John Milton is perhaps the completest type of Puritanism, and his life was contemporary with its cause. Born in 1633, he may have seen Shakespeare who did not die till eight years after. All the great leaders in the Puritan uprising—Cromwell, Hampden, Pym, Elliot, Fairfax and Vane—were lads or babies when he was born; when he died the commonwealth had for fourteen years been overcome, and Charles the Second and his mistresses were carousing at Whitehall. In those years the genius had culminated that was to give to posterity the immortal poem of Paradise Lost.

Milton's father was a scrivener, or copying lawyer, and a man of culture and wealth. The boy early exhibited a decided taste for study, and his father, pleased with the activity of his precocious intellect, secured for him the best educational advantages of the time. He studied under a private tutor till he was twelve, when he was sent to the school of St. Paul's, London, which was then in high repute as a seat of learning. At the age of sixteen he entered Christ's College, Cambridge.

Scrivener though he was, the elder Milton had cultivated music, and the boy inherited his father's skill on the lute and the organ. Milton's training was broad and liberal, but the father, actuated by religious motives, destined his son for the Church. The young scholar, no less religious and an eager student of the Scriptures, had, however, a different ambition. He longed to be an author, studying unremittingly and seldom retiring to rest until after midnight. "For seven years," he says, "I studied the learning and arts wont to be taught, far from all vice and approved of all good men, even till having taken what they call the master's degree, and that with praise."

The picture which has been handed down of Milton in his youth presents us to a slight, fair, very handsome young man, with a solemn and almost austere demeanor. Severely grave and studious is that face, though beautiful with its clear grey eyes and the soft brown hair flaming it with curls. No wonder his midnight vigils made him stern and sober, for few scholars ever amassed such varied and vast learning.

Milton left the university in 1652, but his school days were not yet over. During the next five years he pursued a ceaseless round of study and reading at his father's house at Horton, in Buckinghamshire. His acquisitions of knowledge were wonderful. He mastered all the varied branches of learning. Poetry, science, theology, civil law and general literature, all lent their treasures to the adornment of his mind. He spoke seven foreign languages as readily as his mother tongue.

It was during these years of severe application that the poetical genius of the future author of "Paradise Lost" first exhibited itself. Several exquisite fanciful and delicate creations followed one after the other, so tranquil and yet so happy, so replete with pastoral imagery, sensuous descriptions and musical rhythm that had he never written anything else these alone would have proved him a great poet. Before studying

his great epic one should read these minor poems, his "Sonnet to the Nightingale," the companion pieces, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," the masques of "Arcades" and "Comus," and the elegy of "Lycidas."

Strikingly in contrast as are these productions in their themes, their fancies, and their idyllic treatment to the poems of his after years, yet even in these we catch the stern tones of the Puritan temper. There is no love and scarcely more humor in their polished elaborate rhymes. The geniality, the frolicsome delight of the Elizabethan age were exchanged for a measured seriousness and sobriety that is in marked contrast. Milton touched the key note of Puritanism in the concluding lines of his "Comus." "Love virtue," he says, "she alone is free."

After his five years' course of study Milton spent two years more in travel. He went first to Paris, then passing through Geneva he entered Italy, visiting in turn all the great cities of art and story in that fair land. At Florence, which was then the centre of Italian learning he saw among other famous men Galileo, who, old and blind, was still busy in preparing his "Dialogues on Motion." He spent several months studying the antiquities of Rome. Beautiful Naples and stately Venice passed in review under his eyes, and he returned home, his mind enlarged by intercourse with eminent continental scholars, and his literary ambition quickened and strengthened.

The approach of the civil war put an end for a time to all thought of literary triumphs. But his active and erudite brain was not idle. He wrote a series of political and polemical dissertations which circulated throughout Europe. We now see the Puritan spirit hardening in the hitherto placid scholar. He became almost as stern and uncompromising a bigot as Cromwell.

Puritanism lost its ascendancy through the fanaticism of its chiefs, and the brief despotism of Cromwell brought about the restoration of the Stuarts. But Puritanism was not dead, and Milton's glorious epic spoke of the better spirit of the fallen cause whose work had seemed so vain. The "Paradise Lost" is the very embodiment of the Puritan temper. But the Puritan conception of character, the stern idealism of the Puritan formulas are clothed and adorned with all the gorgeous fancy of one of the masters of poetry. His Adam, his Eve, his Satan are creations of Puritan character, but the splendor and music of Milton's verse, his loftiness of phrase, his gorgeous coloring are the products of his unaided genius.

The "Paradise Lost" was not considered a great poem at the time. Milton only received seventy pounds for it, which, however, had four times the value of that sum today. But it has long been classed with the five grand epics of the world. It is one of the classics, and would be more popular only that it has been used as a textbook in our schools for two or three generations of pupils.

Milton continued a devoted student to the day of his death. His house in Bunhill Fields was like a home of the muses. It was packed with books, among which the poet was always busy. Seized at last with blindness he was obliged to engage the services of a secretary. The "Paradise Lost," the "Para-

dise Regained," and the drama of "Samson Agonistes" were composed during his blindness. His conversation was delightfully entertaining, and, Puritan as he was, the wife and roysterers of the Restoration made frequent pilgrimages to his house.

He was thrice married. With his first wife he did not live happily and they separated. His second one died in the second year of their marriage. One of his most beautiful sonnets is addressed to her memory. His third wife survived him and he died in her arms, November 8, 1675. He was buried beside his father in the church of St. Giles, Cripplegate.

SPARKS FROM OTHER ANVILS.

Lutheran Observer—The young man's heart could not cheer him as he jauntily walks in the ways of his own sinful heart and in the sight of his own roving eyes, if he could look down the coming years and feel his very bones full of the sins of his youth. No man would sell his birth-right and neglect the great salvation, if he foresaw the unavailing regret of the dread future which offers no place for repentance.

United Presbyterian—The necessity to labor underlies all our civilization. Take away the necessity and every industry in our land would stop. He who feels above labor is not the kind of person who should enjoy the fruits of it. The best thing that God did for Adam, when he placed him in the garden of Eden was to set him to work. But many want to enjoy their Eden by the sweat of some other man's brow.

Christian Guardian—No man can throw his whole heart into a petition for the heathen abroad without becoming a little more of a true missionary himself. No man can pray honestly and fervently for the poor about him without becoming a little more like the Good Samaritan. When the rich man bows at the mercy-seat he gets nearer to man as well as to God, and prayer has proved itself one of the most potent solvents of all social problems.

Presbyterian Standard—Hell and heaven are both taught in the Scriptures. The proof of one is as clear as the proof of the other. If either cannot be proved neither can the other, of course. Both must be preached. Our Saviour preached both. And he did it with emphasis. He who feels it is impolite to preach hell ought to retire from the Christian ministry. No adequate adjective is at hand for the preacher who considers it impolite to do what Christ did. There are preachers of the kind. They have lapsed into Unitarianism or Universalism. The great revivals in the church and large gatherings from without that have marked the periods of the church's larger growth have followed the preaching of sin and hell as well as holiness and heaven. Let us, brethren of the ministry, keep in mind our Saviour's example, and hark back to the era of many conversions and a growing church that have always been consequent upon preaching as he preached.

Regeneration is, after all, a process rather than a particular event. Every day we are born into new relations that bring us nearer to God.