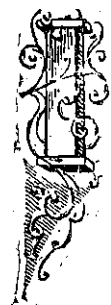


Herrick and His Contemporaries.

By RACHEL DEE BROWNLOWE.



It is not in the least surprising that the period covered by Herrick's very long life was one which contributed great poetic treasures to the literature of England. For it was a period during which a wayward and overbearing monarchy was put upon its trial, not by an hysterical mob, but by a deliberately flouted people; a people who could forgive, and had already endured much; but who, rising at last, measured the seriousness of their vengeance by the frivolousness of the offender. Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to say that Charles I. was beheaded because he insisted upon it; and yet, to a nation which so strongly condemns his conduct, his kingly fortitude at the catastrophe will forever appeal most strongly; and it is easy for us to realize that the men of his own party could cling to him, through defeat and imprisonment, enduring loss of property and even life itself in his cause. Stirring indeed were the times in which the Royalist Herrick lived, and loved, and sang; times of intense religious feeling, of civil war, and at the Restoration of gay excess: such times produce poetry of widely different quality.

The puritan religious element of that period found lofty utterance in the work of that Titan, John Milton, who remains for ever the beginning and end of his own artistic conception. Like Moses, steeped in the learning of ancient Egypt,

yet called and set apart for the service of a great people; like Paul, familiar from his youth with the Hebrew Scripture, yet able to quote their own poets to the Athenians, John Milton stands out, that rare combination, of finished classical scholarship and intense religious earnestness and conviction. Even in his lighter poetry, which is still a part of himself, one feels the palpable puritan spirit emanating fresh the page, like winds blowing fresh from unbreathed space. He is among those rare singers, of which even English literature cannot boast very many, who have ascended a poetic altitude where praise cannot follow; an altitude upon which even the most comprehending spirit can gaze only in silence or tears of intensest joy.

But, though it is scarcely possible to treat of any branch of the poetry of that time without touching, in passing, that one supreme presence, it is not of Milton that we purpose in these papers to speak: he was not Herrick's contemporary, Herrick was rather his.

Among the lyrical poets whom we may class with Herrick there is by no means an absence of religious writers; but their feeling is as different in a way from the superhuman religious fervour of the great puritan, as Herrick's devotion to his Julia is different from the Miltonic Adam's regard for Eve. On the whole we find the work of George Herbert more stimulating to spiritual fervour than that great work in which Milton strives to

"Justify the ways of God to men,"