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Milton and Puritanism

As hardly any of Milton's poems are more direct expression of his character and opinions than the sonnets, it is essential that in studying them we should have some knowledge of the 'faith and morals' which he held. Milton was a puritan and any account of him that fails to take due note of his Puritanism is of necessity bound to be incomplete. For Puritanism permeates his character and poetry and its influence is discernible in much of his peculiar strength and weakness as a man and a poet. It gives an exaltation to his character and lends, as in the sonnets 'on his blindness' and 'the massacre of the vandois', a note of glory to his poetry, it accounts also for much of its harshness and narrowness. To understand Milton, therefore, it is necessary to understand Puritanism. Puritanism is the

name given to the movement for greater strictness of life and simplicity of worship which grew up in the Church of England in the 16th and 17th centuries among those who thought that there had not been sufficient divergence from the Roman Church. Its ideals and inspirations were largely drawn from the teachings of the famous French reformer, John Calvin, the dominant thought of whose theology is the infinite and transcendent sovereignty of God to know whom is the supreme end of human endeavour. God, he held, is made known to man who is a sinner by birth, specially by the scriptures, and nothing is accepted by him save righteousness, purity and innocence. With such a conception of life and its object at its basis, Puritanism was at once a source of strength and weakness in the character of its fall.

works. The student will get a fairly good idea of the two distinct sides of Puritan character from the following admirable summary by Hudson:

Puritanism meant the evolution of a noble but stern and hard type of character pre-occupation with the most narrowly religious aspects of man's conduct, aims and destiny and in consequence, the general repudiation of the claims of art, science, humane culture, and whatever helps to beautify, uplift and give value to our secular life. Thus amid much that was excellent in the way of strength, uprightness and integrity, the growth of puritanism was inevitably accompanied by a wide spread tendency towards fanaticism, moroseness and gloom. God-fearing, high-principled, courageous and earnest the Puritan was, but he was austere exacting and uncharitable.

We admire his great qualities, but we are still painfully aware that these were too often cultivated at the expense of the flexibility, catholicity and many-sidedness of interest which are needed to make human nature not only engaging but complete. His one absorbing concern was the salvation of his soul and this was a matter of infinite ~~difficulty~~ difficulty, it called for all his thought and all his effort, for constant watchings, incessant prayers, daily and nightly wrestlings with God. To one whose mind was thus fixed upon eternal realities all earthly things were vain and fleeting shadows or rather they were the snares and traps of the Evil one, intent upon his spiritual ruin. Puritanism was thus fatal to art and all but fatal to literature and even the literature that it did inspire bore the unmistakable im-

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press of its limitations no
less than of its strength.

The end.

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