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John Donne (1573 - 1631)

The briefest outline of Donne's life shows its intense human interest. He was born in London the son of a rich iron merchant, at the time when the merchants of England were creating a new and higher kind of prince. On his father's side he came from an old Welsh family, and on his mother's side from the Huguenots and Sir Thomas More's family. Both families were Catholic and in his early life persecution was brought near, for his brother died in prison for harboring a proscribed priest, and his own education could not be continued in Oxford and Cambridge because of his religion. Such an experience generally sets a man's religious standards for life, but presently Donne, as he studied law at Lincoln's Inn, was investigating the philosophic grounds of all faith.

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Gradually he left the Church in which he was born, renounced all denominations and called himself simply Christian. Meanwhile he wrote poetry and shared his wealth with needy Catholic relatives. He joined the expedition of Essex for Cadiz in 1596 and for the Azores in 1597 and on sea and in camp found time to write poetry. Two of his best poems, "The Storm" and "The Calm" belong to this period. Next he travelled in Europe for three years but occupied himself with study and poetry. Returning home he became secretary to Lord Egerton, fell in love with the latter's young niece, Anne More, and married her, for which cause Donne was cast into prison. Strangely enough his poetical work at this time is not a song of youthful romance, but "The Progress of the Soul" a study

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of transmigration. years of wandering and poverty followed until Sir George More forgave the young lovers and made an allowance to his daughter. Instead of enjoying his new comforts, Donne grew more ascetic and intellectual in his tastes. He refused also the flattering offer of entering the Church of England and of receiving a comfortable "living". By his "Pseudo martyr" he attracted the favor of James I, who persuaded him to be ordained, yet left him without any place or employment. When his wife died her allowance ceased and Donne was left with seven children in extreme poverty. Then he became a preacher, rose rapidly by sheer intellectual force and genius and in four years was the greatest of English preachers and Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. There he "carried some

to heaven in holy raptures and led others to amend their lives," and as he leans over the pulpit with intense earnestness is likened by G. K. Walton to "an angel leaning from a cloud."

There is variety enough to epitomize his age, and yet in all his life, stronger than any impression of outward weal or woe is the sense of mystery that surrounds Donne. In all his work one finds a mystery, a hiding of some deep thing which the world would gladly know and share and which is suggested in his haunting little poem, "The Undertaking":

"I have done one braver thing
Than all the worthies did;
And yet a braver thence
doth spring,
Which is, to keep that hid."

The end. ✓

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