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George Herbert (1593-1633)

"O day most calm, most bright", sang George Herbert and we may safely take that single line as expressive of the whole spirit of his writings. Professor Palmer, whose scholarly edition of this poet's works is a model for critics and editors, calls Herbert the first in English poetry who spoke face to face with God. That may be true, but it is interesting to note that not a poet of the first half of the seventeenth century, not even the gayest of the cavaliers, but has written some noble verse of prayer or aspiration which expressed the underlying Puritan spirit of his age. Herbert is the greatest, the most consistent of them all. In all the others the Puritan struggled against the cavalier, or the cavalier broke loose from the restraining Puritan; but

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in Herbert the struggle is past and peace has come. That his life was not all calm, that the Puritan in him had struggled desperately before it subdued the pride and idleness of the cavalier is evident to one who reads between his lines:

"I struck the board and  
cry'd, No more!

I will abroad.

What? Shall I ever sigh  
and pine?

My lines and life are  
free, free as the road,  
loose as the wind!"

There speaks the Cavalier of the university and the court, and as one reads to the end of the little poem, which he calls by the suggestive name of "The Collar", he may know that he is reading condensed biography.

Those who seek for faults, for strained imagery and fantastic verse forms in

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Herbert's poetry, will find them in abundance, but it will better repay the reader to look for the deep thought and fine feeling that are hidden in these wonderful religious lyrics, even in those that appear most artificial. The fact that Herbert's reputation was greater, at times, than Milton's and that his poems when published after his death had a large sale and influence shows certainly that he appealed to the men of his age and his poems will probably be read and appreciated if only by the few, just so long as men are strong enough to understand the Puritan's spiritual convictions.

Life - Herbert was born at Montgomery Castle, Wales, 1533, of a noble Welsh family. His university course was brilliant and after graduation he waited long

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years in the vain hope of preferment at Court. All his life he led to battle against disease and this is undoubtedly the cause of the long delay before each new step in his course. Not till he was thirty-seven was he ordained and placed over the little church of Bemerton. How he lived here among plain people in "this happy corner of the Lord's field, hoping all things and blessing all people, asking his own way to Zion and showing others the way" should be read in Walton. It is a brief life, less than three years of work before being cut off by consumption, but remarkable for the single great purpose and the glorious spiritual strength that shine through physical weakness: Just before his death he gave some manuscripts to a friend and his message is

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Worthy of John Bunyan!

Deliver this little book to my dear brother Ferrar, and tell him he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my master in whose service I have now found perfect freedom. Desire him to read it, and then, if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public, if not, let him burn it, for I and it are less than the least of God's mercies.

The end.

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