

PORTRAITS IN MINIATURE

AND OTHER ESSAYS

By

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*Est brevitatis opus, ut curat sententia, ne se
Impediat verbis lassas onerantibus aures.*

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NEVER did the human mind attain such a magnificent height of self-assertiveness as in England about the year 1650. Then it was that the disintegration of religious authority which had begun with Luther reached its culminating point. The Bible, containing the absolute truth as to the nature and the workings of the Universe, lay open to all ; it was only necessary to interpret its assertions ; and to do so all that was wanted was the decision of the individual conscience. In those days the individual conscience decided with extraordinary facility. Prophets and prophetesses ranged in crowds through the streets of London, proclaiming, with complete certainty, the explanation of everything. The explanations were extremely varied : so much the better — one could pick and choose. One could become a Behmenist, a Bidellian, a Coppinist, a Salmonist, a Dipper, a Traskite, a Tryonist, a

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Philadelphian, a Christadelphian, or a Seventh Day Baptist, just as one pleased. Samuel Butler might flear and flout at

petulant, capricious sects,
The maggots of corrupted texts ;

but he, too, was deciding according to the light of his individual conscience. By what rule could men determine whether a text was corrupted, or what it meant ? The rule of the Catholic Church was gone, and henceforward Eternal Truth might with perfect reason be expected to speak through the mouth of any fish-wife in Billingsgate.

Of these prophets the most famous was George Fox ; the most remarkable was Lodowick Muggleton. He was born in 1609, and was brought up to earn his living as a tailor. Becoming religious, he threw over a charming girl, with whom he was in love and whom he was engaged to marry, on the ground that her mother kept a pawnbroker's shop and that usury was sinful. He was persuaded to this by his puritan friends, among whom was his cousin, John Reeve, a man of ardent temperament, fierce conviction, and unflinching holi-

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ness. Some years later, in 1650, two peculiar persons, John Tawny and John Robins, appeared in London. Tawny declared that he was the Lord's high priest, that it was his mission to lead the Jews back to Jerusalem, and that, incidentally, he was the King of France. Robins proclaimed that he was something greater : he was Adam, he was Melchizedek, he was the Lord himself. He had raised Jeremiah, Benjamin, and many others from the dead, and did they not stand there beside him, admitting that all he said was true ? Serpents and dragons appeared at his command ; he rode upon the wings of the wind ; he was about to lead 144,000 men and women to the Mount of Olives through the Red Sea, on a diet of dry bread and raw vegetables. These two men, " greater than prophets," made a profound impression upon Muggleton and his cousin Reeve. A strange melancholy fell upon them, and then a more strange exaltation. They heard mysterious voices ; they were holy ; why should not they too be inspired ? Greater than prophets...? Suddenly Reeve rushed into Muggleton's room and declared that they were the chosen witnesses of the Lord, whose

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appearance had been prophesied in the Book of Revelation, xi. 3. Muggleton agreed that it was so. As for Tawny and Robins, they were devilish impostors, who must be immediately denounced. Sentence of eternal damnation should be passed upon them. The cousins hurried off on their mission, and discovered Robins in gaol, where he had been lodged for blasphemy. The furious embodiment of Adam, Melchizedek, and the Lord glared out at them from a window, clutching the bars with both hands. But Reeve was unabashed. " That body of thine," he shouted, pointing at his victim, " which was thy heaven, must be thy hell ; and that proud spirit of thine, which said it was God, must be thy Devil. The one shall be as fire, and the other as brimstone, burning together to all eternity. This is the message of the Lord." The effect was instantaneous : Robins, letting go the bars, fell back, shattered. " It is finished," he groaned ; " the Lord's will be done." He wrote a letter to Cromwell, recanting ; was released from prison, and retired into private life, in the depths of the country. Tawny's fate was equally impressive. Reeve wrote on a piece of paper, " We

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pass sentence upon you of eternal damnation," and left it in his room. The wretched man fled to Holland, in a small boat, *en route* for Jerusalem, and was never heard of again.

After this the success of the new religion was assured. But Reeve did not live long to enjoy his glory. In a few months his fiery spirit had worn itself away, and Muggleton was left alone to carry on the work. He was cast in a very different mould. Tall, thick-set, vigorous, with a great head, whose low brow, high cheekbones, and projecting jowl almost suggested some simian creature, he had never known a day's illness, and lived to be eighty-eight. Tough and solid, he continued, year after year, to earn his living as a tailor, while the words flowed from him which were the final revelation of God. For he preached and he wrote with an inexhaustible volubility. He never ceased, in sermons, in letters, in books, in pamphlets, to declare to the world the divine and absolute truth. His revelations might be incomprehensible, his objurgations frenzied, his argumentations incoherent—no matter ; disciples gathered round him in ever-thickening crowds, learning, to their amazement and delight, that there is

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no Devil but the unclean Reason of men, that Angels are the only beings of Pure Reason, that God is of the stature of a man and made of flesh and bone, that Heaven is situated beyond the stars and six miles above the earth. Schismatics might arise, but they were crushed, cast forth, and sentenced to eternal damnation. Inquiring magistrates were browbeaten with multitudinous texts. George Fox, the miserable wretch, was overwhelmed—or would have been had he not obtained the assistance of the Devil — by thick volumes of intermingled abuse and Pure Reason. The truth was plain—it had been delivered to Muggleton by God ; and henceforward, until the Day of Judgment, the Deity would hold no further communication with his creatures. Prayer, therefore, was not only futile, it was blasphemous ; and no form of worship was admissible, save the singing of a few hymns of thanksgiving and praise. All that was required of the true believer was that he should ponder upon the Old and the New Testaments, and upon " The Third and Last Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ," by Muggleton.

The English passion for compromise is well

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illustrated by the attitude of Charles the Second's Government towards religious heterodoxy. There are two logical alternatives for the treatment of heretics—to let them alone, or to torture them to death ; but English public opinion recoiled—it still recoils—from either course. A compromise was the obvious, the comfortable solution ; and so it was decided that heretics should be tortured—not to death, oh no !—but . . . to some extent. Accordingly, poor Muggleton became a victim, for years, to the small persecutions of authority. He was badgered by angry justices, he was hunted from place to place, his books were burnt, he was worried by small fines and short imprisonments. At last, at the age of sixty-eight, he was arrested and tried for blasphemy. In the course of the proceedings, it appeared that the prosecution had made a serious blunder : since the publication of the book on which the charge was based an Act of Indemnity had been passed. Thereupon the Judge instructed the jury that, as there was no reason to suppose that the date on the book was not a false imprint, the Act of Indemnity did not apply ; and Muggleton was condemned to the pillory. He was badly mauled, for it so hap-

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pened that the crowd was hostile and pelted the old man with stones. After that, he was set free ; his tribulations were at last over. The Prophet spent his closing years writing his autobiography, in the style of the Gospels ; and he died in peace.

His doctrines did not die with him. Two hundred and fifty Muggletonians followed him to the grave, and their faith has been handed down, unimpaired through the generations, from that day to this. Still, in the very spot where their founder was born, the chosen few meet together to celebrate the two festivals of their religion—the Great Holiday, on the anniversary of the delivery of the Word to Reeve, and the Little Holiday, on the day of Muggleton's final release from prison.

I do believe in God alone,
Likewise in Reeve and Muggleton.

So they have sung for more than two hundred years.

This is the Muggletonians' faith, This
is the God which we believe ; None
salvation-knowledge hath, But those
of Muggleton and Reeve. Christ is the
Muggletonians' king, With whom
eternally they'll sing.

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It is an exclusive faith, certainly ; and yet, somehow or other, it disarms criticism. Even though one may not be of the elect oneself, one cannot but wish it well ; one would be sorry if the time ever came when there were no more Muggletonians. Besides, one is happy to learn that with the passage of years they have grown more gentle. Their terrible offensive weapon—which, in early days, they wielded so frequently—has fallen into desuetude : no longer do they pass sentence of eternal damnation. The dreaded doom was pronounced for the last time on a Swedenborgian, with great effect, in the middle of the nineteenth century.