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ART. II.—THE PROTO-MARTYR OF THE REFORMATION.

"The history of Protestantism is the history of its martyrs."—FROUDE.

IN all great movements, social, political, or religious, a small cluster of famous names sheds its dazzling light across the pages of history for all time. In the contemplation of these we are apt to lose sight of the great mass of humbler constellations. Whilst the deeds and the sufferings of a few prominent leaders become household words, but a meagre and reluctant tribute is too often paid to the memory of the rank and file who fought and perished in the same cause. It is of one of these lesser stars in the firmament of English Protestantism that we would offer a slight sketch.

During the first quarter of the sixteenth century, a deep feeling of unrest pervaded men's minds in England. That Church, which had grown proud in the strength of a thousand years' more than sovereign authority, was losing her hold upon men's hearts and finding herself unable to satisfy their growing wants and yearnings. The fiery cross, which had been despatched upon its errand from the church-door of Wittenberg, had well-nigh fulfilled its mission. The indulgences, the roods, the pardons, the masses, the "gay garnishing of stocks and stones," were fast losing their power. Men were crying out for something more real, more true.

One of the earliest to utter this cry was Thomas Bilney, a poor student at Cambridge, who, like Luther, had forsaken the law for the Church. Concerning his early life but little information can be gathered. Reared almost from childhood in the classic atmosphere of the University, of small stature and insignificant *physique*, he was notable for extreme temperance of diet and great studiousness of habit. Leading a quiet and unobtrusive life, he was, up to the year 1516, an orthodox member of the Church, rendering to her entire, incessant, and unquestioning obedience. "I spent all that I had," he says of himself at this period, "upon those ignorant physicians, that is to say, unlearned hearers of confession; so that there was but small force of strength left in me (who of nature was but weak), small store of money, and little wit or understanding; for they appointed me fastings, watching, buying of pardons and masses, in all which things (as I now understand) they sought rather their own gain than the salvation of my sick and languishing soul."[1] Again, in a letter to his father

[1] Letter to Tunstall. Foxe, iv. 635.

and mother, shortly before his death, he speaks of his "negligent and reckless life, and especially in my youth, when I neither knew God nor myself."

In the year 1516 (signalized also by the appearance of the famous "Utopia") was published, together with an elegant Latin translation and notes, Erasmus's New Testament in Greek, with which, says the preface, "if we be true Christians, we cannot be too familiar." This work was received with the greatest interest, and was heartily welcomed even by those professors of the stock erudition of the Schoolmen who afterwards bitterly opposed the doctrines which it enjoined. Among the first to procure a copy of this book, "allured," as he says himself, "rather by the Latin than by the Word of God," was Bilney—a purchase destined by Providence to prove the turning-point in his career—the first step in that path which was to lead to the dungeon and the stake. Its perusal occasioned a severe mental struggle—such a struggle as was witnessed in the lonely cell at Erfurt—from which the student emerged filled with a peace such as all the prescribed fasts and penances had been powerless to give him. But let us listen a moment to the gentle Reformer while he himself describes this momentous experience:

> At the first reading (as I well remember) I chanced upon this sentence of St. Paul (Oh, most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!), in 1 Tim. i., "It is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced," etc. This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward work, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my sins, and being almost in despair, that even immediately I seemed unto myself inwardly to feel a marvellous comfort and quietness, insomuch that "my bruised bones leaped for joy." After this the Scripture began to be more pleasant unto me than the honey or the honeycomb, wherein I learned that all my travails, all my fasting, watching, all the redemption of masses and pardons, being done without trust in Christ, were nothing else but even (as St. Augustine saith) "a hasty and swift running out of the right way."[1]

From this time Bilney was the centre of a new movement. But we are not to understand that he became the conspicuous apostle of a new religious system, or posed as an obtrusive Iconoclast. Belief had not yet become crystallized into dogma, and Protestantism was as yet but a protest against a gigantic unreality of human invention. The seed of the "new learning" in the University was sown in familiar intercourse with trusted friends. Nor was there any overt rebellion against the faith hitherto professed: so small was then the number, and so slight the influence of those upon whom the new light was beginning to shine, that to have at once openly braved the

[1] Letter to Tunstall. Foxe, iv. 635.

power of a persecuting Church could have served no purpose. The foundation upon which afterwards rose the fair and stately pile of the Reformed Church was laid in many a quiet hour's chat in the rooms of Trinity Hall (of which college Bilney was a Fellow) or meditative walk by "the reedy Cam."

For a few years, in the course of which Tyndale visited Cambridge, and may have imparted to them some of his own enthusiasm, Bilney and his little company of disciples remained unmolested, a threatened visitation of the University having been expressly vetoed by Wolsey. Meanwhile the circle of inquirers after truth was gradually widening: among them was George Stafford,[1] who discarded the old system of interpretation, and expounded the Scriptures in the original language. Thistel of Pembroke Hall, Soud and Fowke of Benet College (from whom Strype says that Matthew Parker, "being a scholar of the same college, may be presumed to have first tasted of the truth"[2]), and one Dr. Barnes, an Augustin Friar. Amongst those who were wont to assemble at The White Horse (the favourite rendezvous of the Reformers, situate close to St. John's College, and sometimes contemptuously termed Germany) we also find the name of Myles Coverdale. But they were now to draw within their nets a yet nobler prize. The office of University cross-bearer was at this time filled by an ardent champion of the Church and the old learning of the Schoolmen, and one who had no sympathy with the "new-fangled kind of study of the Scriptures." This was Hugh Latimer, who afterwards, when alluding to this period, called himself "as obstinate a Papist as any in England."

In the spring of 1524, Latimer, on proceeding to the degree of Bachelor of Divinity, was required to deliver the accustomed public discourse on some theological subject. True to his instincts and his training, he selected Melancthon and "the abominable and erroneous opinions lately sprung in Germany" as the subject of a somewhat intemperate oration. Among the audience was Bilney, who, perceiving that the learned preacher was "zealous without knowledge," and guided by some inward monition, went to him and begged him to hear the confession of his own faith. "I did so," says Latimer, "and to say the truth, by his confession I learned more than before in many years." As Bilney poured out to the astonished hearer the story of his spiritual struggles and doubts, and the source of his ultimate

[1] There was a saying in the University, "When Mr. Stafford read and Latimer preached, then was Cambridge blessed."

[2] Strype's "Parker," book i., ch. i., fol. 1711. He also mentions several other names.

peace and comfort, a new light broke upon the confessor. Was this mild-mannered student the leader of the University "heretics"? Could this be the teaching of that New Testament which he had so strenuously condemned? This confession was indeed a new revelation to one who had sought and sought in vain for peace in the rites and ceremonies and ordinances of an autocratic Church. A study of the despised Scriptures wrought a conspicuous change, and Cambridge saw with astonishment the quondam enemy of the Reformers, like another Saul, throwing in his lot with those whom he had been so eager to persecute. From the time of this remarkable conversion, the future bishop and "little Bilney," as he affectionately calls him, became constant companions. Together they studied the Word, together they went on errands of mercy and charity, together they preached in the hospitals; "for he was ever visiting prisoners and sick folk," says Latimer.

During the years 1524-25, Bilney and his friends continued without active interruption quietly extending their opinions and influence in the University. The former, we are told, for more than a year ate but one meal a day, bearing the remainder of his "commons" to some poor prisoner. On few nights did he allow himself more than four hours' sleep, and he was ever on the alert to check any bad language or frivolity in those around him. So little suspicion was entertained by the authorities, that he was even granted a license to preach in the diocese of Ely. On the Sunday before Christmas Day of the latter year, however, Dr. Barnes preached in St. Edward's Church, belonging to Trinity Hall. Taking his text from the Epistle for the day (*Gaudete in Domino*), in a tone singularly out of harmony with the context, he launched out into a violent denunciation of the Bishops and clergy in general, and of Wolsey in particular. It was not to be expected that this exhibition should pass unnoticed; he was immediately accused of heresy by two Fellows of King's College, and being arrested, was carried to London, where, after examination before the Cardinal, on Shrove Tuesday, 1526, he recanted and bore a faggot before a noisy crowd at St. Paul's, the Bishop of Rochester preaching a sermon against heresy.[1] This display

[1] This same Barnes was afterwards for some time in high favour, especially from 1534 to 1536. In the latter year we find him a member of a Commission appointed for the examination of Anabaptists; and he was also employed on various foreign missions, one of which was the unfortunate project of the King's marriage with Anne of Cleves. He was an indiscreet and impetuous man, ever thrusting himself into an unwise prominence (as when he volunteered as the accuser of the martyr Lambert), and was finally burnt at the stake on Tower Hill, in 1540.

of injudicious zeal by a convert of Bilney's caused the Church authorities to cast very suspicious glances towards Cambridge. Shortly afterwards, indeed, Bilney was summoned to London to answer certain accusations of heresy before Wolsey. The Cardinal, however, was not disposed to treat him with any great severity, and after taking a solemn oath "not to preach any of Luther's opinions, but to impugn them everywhere," he was set at liberty. It seems impossible that he should have submitted to this without feeling that he was giving the lie to his convictions, and that he was undertaking an obligation which he could never discharge. But far be it from us to condemn the weakness in one who was so nobly to redeem his character. The cause of the Reformation was still but young, and the constancy which enabled its subsequent martyrs to withstand even unto the end, was not yet ripe.

Having thus escaped for the present out of Wolsey's hands, Bilney returned to Cambridge, where he rejoined his old friend Latimer. He had not been there long, however, when he started on a preaching tour, in the course of which he delivered several discourses in London, the most notable of which was one preached at the Church of St. Magnus in the City, denouncing a new rood lately erected there. "Pray ye only to God, and to no Saints," said he in this sermon, rehearsing the Litany. "As Hezekiah destroyed the brazen serpent that Moses made by the commandment of God, even so should kings and princes nowadays destroy and burn the images of Saints set up in churches;" to set up lights before these images was no Christian custom, for "Saints in Heaven need no light, and the images have no eyes to see;" for five hundred years there had been no good Pope; they had neither preached well nor lived well, but had one and all borne the keys of simony.

The Whitsun-week of 1527 found him preaching at Willesden, Newington, and Chelsea, then quiet country villages, and he also visited Ipswich and other parts of his native county Norfolk, where he was more than once forcibly pulled from the pulpit by the indignant friars. At the first-named place he would doubtless have some bitter things to say touching "Our Lady of Willesden," then one of the most famous pilgrimage images in England, second only to "Our Lady of Walsingham" and "Our Lady of Pue" at Westminster. Preaching at Christ Church, Ipswich, on the 28th of May, he again inveighed against the folly of pilgrimages, denounced the preachers of times past as Antichrists,[1] and declared the miracles alleged to

[1] In another place he says: "They" (preachers in Popish times) "have also preached evil, which either have wrested the Scriptures themselves,

be done at Walsingham,[1] Canterbury, and there in Ipswich itself, to be but machinations of the devil to blind the poor people. Again, enforcing the great fundamental doctrine of the Atonement, he argued: If He to Whom John Baptist, being more than a prophet, pointed, saying, "Ecce Agnus Dei," were the very Lamb which taketh away the sins of the world, "what an injury is it to our Saviour Christ that to be buried in St. Francis's cowl should remit four parts of penance."[2] Thus we may gather what constituted the principal themes of this outspoken preacher's discourses: the broad fundamental doctrines of Scripture, the futility of pilgrimages, masses, and images, to bring peace to the soul, and the great truth of the mediation of Christ, were the texts upon which he based those earnest appeals to his hearers, many of whom, we may imagine, were already beginning to doubt the efficacy of the prescribed ecclesiastical *nostrums*. To sum up in his own words, "With all my whole power I teach that all men should first acknowledge their sins, and condemn them, afterwards hunger and thirst after that righteousness whereof St. Paul speaketh."

These heretical proceedings coming to the ears of the authorities, he was arrested and, along with Thomas Arthur, one of his intimate friends, brought before Wolsey and several of the Bishops (West of Ely, Longland of Lincoln, Standish of St. Asaph,[3] and others, with Tunstal at their head), being one of the first to appear before this Court, recently formed by the Cardinal for the reformation of abuses in the Church. He was, of course, at once accused of having broken his previous oath; this he was obliged to confess, at the same time resorting to an unworthy and undignified prevarication to the effect that the oath, not having been administered "judicially," was not binding. Being commanded to give a plain answer,

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or have rashly gathered them out of old rotten papers, being wrested by others."

[1] Among other relics, the county of Norfolk also boasted John the Baptist's head and a part of our Saviour's crown!

[2] Deposition of John Huggen, Chief Provincial of Friars Predicants in England.

[3] Often contracted into St. Asse. Roy, in his "Satire on the Clergy" (1528), speaks of him as—

> "The holy Bishop of Saint Asse,
> * * * *
> He is a babbling Questionist,
> And a marvellous great sophist.
> * * * *
> Of stomach he is fierce and bold,
> In brawling words a very scold,
> Mingling venom with sugar," etc.

he conducted his defence with great skill and vigour. Let us glance at a few points in it. Though admitting that many of the Pope's laws might be profitable and necessary to godliness, he declined to express an opinion upon them as a whole, as he had never read them all; "And for those that I have read," said he, "I did never read to the end, and purpose to reprove them." "Can the Catholic Church err in the faith?" asked the Bishops. "By no means," was the answer, coupled, however, with the definition of the Catholic Church as *the whole congregation of the elect, and so known only unto God*,[1] for that otherwise no man should be ascertained of another man's salvation or of his own; and in support of this argument he cited a curious interpretation of Eccles. ix. 1: "No man knoweth whether he be worthy of hatred or love." With respect to images of Saints, he allowed that, being the books of the laity, they were "Christianly set up in churches," but pointed to the prototypes and not to the images themselves as the only true and legitimate object of worship.[2] From 1 Cor. xiv. he gathered that the people should have the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' Creed in English, "so that their devotion might the more be furthered by the understanding;" he would also have the Gospels and Epistles read in English, quoting St. Paul ("I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue"), Chrysostom, and the example of Bede's translation of St. John's Gospel into English. Pressed as to whether he held that *the whole* Scripture should be translated into English, he replied that, while partly doubting concerning the whole, yet he wished that the Gospel and Epistle of the day might be read in English, "that the people might be made the more apt to hear sermons;" and if it were objected that error might thereby arise, good and vigilant pastors might easily remedy that by putting the interpretations of the Fathers as marginal notes to the obscure passages. Touching the Papal indulgences, he was of opinion, considering the debased use to which they had so long been put, that they were better restrained: upon the observance of the Church's holy-days and fast-days his orthodoxy was unimpeachable. Questioned as to whether Christians might seek restitution by law (a *vexata*

[1] Compare with this Wiclif's definition one hundred and fifty years before—"*Sancta ecclesia catholica sit solum universitas prædestinatorum.*"

[2] Compare Cranmer's annotations upon Henry VIII.'s corrections of the "Institution of a Christian Man." "It is contrary to the Scripture to have any such images of the Father of Heaven, as St. Austin saith, and they be suffered only for the infirmity of the people." "Cranmer's Remains and Letters" (Parker Society), p. 101. Compare also Cranmer's article, "De Imaginibus," Ibid. p. 484.

quæstio of the Lollard controversy a century earlier), he replied that legal contention was not at variance with the doctrine of Christ and His Apostles; but he would have all true Christians give ear to St. Paul, "Why do ye not rather suffer injury?" and to Christ Himself, "He that would contend with thee in the law, and take away thy coat, give him thy cloak also." Is God the author of the fault as well as of the punishment? inquired his interrogators. "Of the punishment only, but not of the offence," was the rejoinder, supported by quotations from St. Basil and St. Augustine. The exact terms of his answer to the question whether preachers should exhort men to pilgrimages have not come down to us; but we may easily judge the tenour of it from his utterances on other occasions: "You come hither on pilgrimages to stocks and stones; you do naught," he says, to the villagers of Willesden. And again, "The people have used foolishly of late pilgrimages, when for them it would have been better to have been at home!" he exclaims from the pulpit of St. Magnus.

Notwithstanding his efforts, however, and in spite of some earnest and touching letters to Tunstal, from which we have quoted a few extracts, "What through human infirmity, what through the great importunity of the Bishop of London, who set all his friends on him," says Burnet, on the 7th of December, 1527, he was, after three refusals, compelled to abjure.

The day after saw him at St. Paul's, making his symbolic public recantation, kneeling bareheaded with the fagot on his shoulder, while a sermon was preached setting forth the heinous sin of heresy, and pointing to this further signal instance of the Church's power. This painful scene over, he was committed to prison for a year; the rigours of his confinement were, however, not without occasional gleams of brightness, for by the kindness of the gaoler he and a fellow-prisoner were sometimes allowed to take their meals together, and to "cheer one another in the Lord with such simple fare as Papists' charity would allow them."[1] Towards the close of 1528 he was released, and, after repeating his abjuration before the Cardinal, as legate, returned to Cambridge.

For long after his return the gentle Bilney suffered the greatest anguish of mind; his grief at his weakness in the hour of trial was well-nigh inconsolable; it seemed to him as though his self-inflicted wound could never be healed, and he told himself that, in recanting, he had committed the unpardonable sin. It required the constant and long-continued companionship and comforting words of his friends to bind up his broken spirit, and so great was his despondency and

[1] "Narratives of the Reformation" (Camden Society), p. 27.

remorse, that they dare not leave him alone day or night. Gradually, however, he was induced to resume his former occupations, and he might have been seen as of old breathing words of hope in the ears of the sick, or soothing the prisoner in his cell. But during this period a firm resolve was taking shape in his mind; with renewed hope and cheerfulness came a growing conviction that it was his duty to wipe out the stain of his recantation. That humiliating scene at St. Paul's was ever vividly before his eyes, and a determination took deep root that he would one day show that he was "not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ." This purpose he kept locked up in his own breast until the early part of the year 1531, when he called his friends around him and announced his intended departure. Their tears and supplications were alike unavailing; his only reply was, "I must needs go up to Jerusalem;" and, like the Apostle of old, he left them "sorrowing most of all for the words which he spake, that they should see his face no more." Considering that his first endeavours were due to his own county, he went again into Norfolk, where he preached first in households and afterwards in the fields and villages, confessing his former deplorable weakness, beseeching the people not to follow his evil example therein, and exhorting them not to put their hopes of salvation in pilgrimages and prayers to Saints or images, but rather to tarry at home, to give alms, and offer their hearts, wills, and minds to God. From Norfolk he went southwards, and it is more than probable that he visited London, for we have evidence that six weeks before his arrest he was at Greenwich. It was not long before his proceedings reached the ears of Nixe, the blind and aged Bishop of Norwich, whose officers at once arrested and imprisoned him. The case was a very simple one. Here was a relapsed heretic, pre-eminently one of those whom the Bishop delighted to call men *savouring of the frying-pan*,[1] found preaching against the priests, and disseminating copies of Tyndale's New Testament. Sir Thomas More was accordingly applied to for a writ to burn him, whereupon the learned Chancellor, to whom heresy was a crime, not content with granting the writ, must needs make the ill-timed jest that "the better course would have been to burn him first and procure a writ afterwards." The trial was short, the sentence a foregone conclusion, and the offender, being first degraded from the priesthood, was handed over to the secular power to

[1] "There is a college in Cambridge, called Gunwell Hall, of the foundation of a Bishop of Norwich: I hear of no clerk that hath come out lately of that college but *savoureth of the frying-pan*, though he speak never so holily." Nixe to Archbishop Warham (Strype's Mem. II. 696, edit. 1812).

be burned. The brief interval between the sentence and its execution was spent in cheerful resignation and constancy. The evening before his death, in the Guildhall, where he was kept, he held his finger in the flame of the candle until it was half consumed, remarking that he well knew the pain of burning. "I constantly believe," said he, "that howsoever the stubble of this my body shall be wasted by it, yet my soul and spirit shall be purged thereby; a pain for the time, whereon notwithstanding followeth joy unspeakable." On the morning of the 26th of August, 1531,[1] he was brought outside the Bishop's Gate of Norwich, to a low valley on the north of the city, called "The Lollards' Pit," this place being apparently selected as affording the best accommodation to the curious and interested populace. Accompanied by Dr. Warner, an old friend, he distributed alms liberally by the way, and on drawing near the place of execution he fervently repeated the Creed, to show that he died "as a true Christian man, in a right belief towards Almighty God." Arrived at the stake, he made his private prayer with a quiet earnestness which seemed to ignore the approaching tortures, ending with the 143rd Psalm. Dr. Warner drew near to bid him farewell, but his utterance was choked with tears. "Oh, Master Warner," said Bilney, addressing his faithful friend with a kindly smile, "*Pace gregem tuum, pasce gregem tuum, ut cum venerit Dominus, inveniat te sic facientem;* farewell, and pray for me." Then, in full view of the crowds assembled on the surrounding hills, by a death rendered doubly agonizing by its slowness (for a strong wind prevailing at the time blew the flames away from him), he put the final seal upon his faith.

There were not wanting those who studied to defame the Martyr after his death, saying that he had again recanted; "and, when once such a thing is said, they never want officious vouchers to lie and swear for it," remarks Burnet. Even the philosophic author of "Utopia" so far permitted his avowed hatred of "that kind of men" to get the better of his judgment as to assert (upon the authority of certain men of Norwich,[2] afterwards proved to be worthless), that Bilney had, when at the stake, read a bill of recantation, and that "many days before his burning he was fully converted to the Catholic faith." But the testimony of his friend Matthew Parker, afterwards Archbishop of Canterbury, who was an eye-witness of Bilney's sufferings, amply proves his constancy even in the last moments.

[1] Various dates are given, but this is on the whole the most probable.

[2] The statement, however, was only obtained from them after being *examined*, which word, be it remembered, though it *may* only mean "questioned," was at that time constantly used as a euphemism for the rack.

Such is the brief history of one whose fame has been overshadowed, if not well-nigh hidden, by those who played more conspicuous parts in the great movement of the sixteenth century. True, Bilney's views upon the Real Presence, the power of the keys, and other points, remained those of the Roman Catholic Church; but we should remember that it was only by very slow degrees that Cranmer, Latimer, and other prominent Reformers abandoned many of the doctrines in which they had been reared. Though his undemonstrative energies were for the most part confined within a narrow sphere, yet the influence of his earnest teaching and example, whilst the sun of the Reformation was barely visible above the horizon, was felt even until it attained its full mid-day splendour. Being of a quiet and unpretending disposition, his real worth and sterling qualities were perhaps best known only to his own little circle at Cambridge. The testimony of the most illustrious of these friends may fitly close this sketch of the Proto-Martyr of the English Reformation: "If a man living so mercifully, so charitably, so patiently, so continently, so studiously and virtuously, should die an evil death, there is no more to be said; but let him that standeth beware that he fall not."[1]

JOHN P. HAWORTH.

ART. III.—THE SWEATING SICKNESS.

PROFESSOR BREWER'S Prefaces to the four volumes of the "Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII.," which he edited for the Master of the Rolls some twenty years ago, have now been published by themselves in a very convenient form. To the ponderous volumes in which the Professor's digest of the State Papers was contained, ordinary readers could hardly be expected to give much attention; and the Lords of the Treasury consented to the Prefaces being republished separately, "at the urgent request of the friends of Professor Brewer, on account of their literary interest." The Prefaces, it is stated, have "no official character or authority." The two handsome volumes which we have received from Mr. Murray, admirably printed, are edited by Mr. Gairdner; they form a treasury of interesting and valuable information.[2] To this work

[1] Latimer's Letter to Sir Ed. Baynton.

[2] "The Reign of Henry VIII., from his Accession to the Death of Wolsey." Reviewed and illustrated from original documents. By the late J. S. Brewer, M.A. Edited by James Gairdner, of the Public Record Office. With portrait. John Murray, 1884.