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NOTE

EVERY student of our literature knows the poems of John Donne (1573–1631); early compositions, slight in bulk, but portentous and amazing as everything he wrote, from first to last, was portentous and amazing. They mark an epoch in that undying form of art, the lyric; they laid their spell over two generations of verse-makers; their music, constantly broken by passion or by equally fierce contempt of passion, still haunts and disturbs. But few consider his Sermons, in which lie embedded ingots of the most splendid prose ever fused and moulded by English brain and tongue working together. The vogue of the Sermon has passed. One might almost say that the honour of the living voice, whether in speech or in song, has passed. But there was a Golden Age of the Pulpit in England: and of that age, in that pulpit, with Lancelot Andrewes, Ussher, Hall and the later-born Jeremy Taylor for nearest rivals, the great Dean of St Paul's stands as the most tremendous figure. His learning was great even among men of that most learned age; his voice marvellous; his presence awful. He seldom or never preached for less than an hour, often much longer, but (*teste* Walton) would hold his vast audience shaken and trembling; and was always most impressive when he wrestled with the theme of Death. For his mind—ever mystical, yet imperfectly, because full of animal

heat and indignant and restlessly curious—ever played on close terms with our last enemy. He surrendered himself savagely to face its most dreadful aspects, corruption and the worm. He sat for his portrait in his shroud and slept with the picture by his bedside. More fancifully than St Paul, yet in solemn act, he died daily.

Here are two of his grandest Sermons on that theme, with their assurance of Death swallowed up in Victory.

Q.

December 1920.