

A MODERN WICLIF.

BY THEODORE STANTON.

IT is reported that on one occasion Dean Swift, after giving out as a text of a Charity Sermon: "He that hath pity on the poor lendeth to the Lord," opened, developed and concluded his exhortation with the single sentence: "If you are satisfied with the security, my brethren, down with your money." Some historians will have it that "down with your dust" was the expression employed. It may be so, for the author of *Gulliver's Travels* had a fondness for the picturesque.

After a lapse of nearly two hundred years, a successor to Dean Swift seems to have arisen in the Anglican Church, who also believes that brevity is the soul of wit, not only in talking but in preaching. And this successor has his own claim to originality besides, since he has discovered a pulpit where not even the Dean of St. Patrick's would have dreamed of seeking. He has discovered it in the "Agony Column" of the *London Times*. Here for the last half dozen years or more, perusers of the great London daily have been able to read, if so inclined, in this particular corner, almost weekly homilies, compressed into a couple of lines, and containing a consistent doctrine. The phenomenon is a sufficiently curious one to merit notice, especially as the preacher of these sermonettes, the Rev. T. G. Headly, is a man with a history, a fully ordained clergyman who entered the Anglican Church some thirty years ago and has ever since been working at the Herculean task of converting it, bishops and all, to what he conceives to be the only true conception of Christianity.

Unfortunately for the Rev. Mr. Headley, his protest comes at a time when the average-minded layman, in presence of the hundred and one creeds that each claim to be the only genuine religion, is disinclined to regard their difference otherwise than as tweedle-dums and tweedle-dees. Whether the average-minded lay-

man is right is another question. If he is not, he may at least urge as an excuse that these differences are more subtle and more difficult to be appreciated than in Wiclif's days or in Luther's, when the issues were more visible. Friars or no friars, pope or no pope, every one understood what the two alternatives meant.

In justice to Mr. Headley, it should be admitted that his contention is not one of straw-splitting. With a large measure of truth he may be likened to the early reformers, since he arraigns what orthodox Churches, up to the present day, have concurred in accepting as the basis of their faith, namely, that the sacrifice of the cross was a scheme planned and required by the Almighty for the redemption of the human race. This Mr. Headley denies, and, in his denial, bases his arguments on the language of the Bible itself, a book which, as he says in a brief summary of his life, has always been his favorite study.

"Some boys," begins our modern Wiclif, in a letter that he once wrote me, "are born with a bent, gift, mind or taste for engineering, music, painting, singing, etc. Mine was for the Scriptures. But after leaving Rugby, instead of my parents educating me for the Church as I expected, they educated me for the Law. However, I afterwards entered the University of Cambridge with the idea of taking Orders, only to be diverted from my purpose by the breaking out of the Crimean War, during which I served in the Hants Militia. Subsequently I became engaged in stock broking, and enjoyed for a time great expectations, which were ultimately disappointed. A friend, to whom I went for advice, reproached me for not having entered the Church Ministry, which he said was my true vocation. I listened to his exhortations, studied theology at King's College, London, and presented myself for ordination as an ultra-broad Churchman and archheretic, after the manner in which St. Paul was accused of heresy.

"Bishop Jackson of London accepted and ordained me, without assenting to or dissenting from my views, in which I declared it was not Christ's work to confirm a sanguinary religion as good and true, by giving himself as a sacrifice after the manner in which Abraham was tempted to offer Isaac; but it was Christ's work to spare no sacrifice to deliver and save the world from such a sanguinary worship, as being evil and false, by leaving nothing undone that love could do or suffer, to persuade the world to believe that this testimony was of God. This was the Gospel of glad tidings which I was ordained to teach. But my first Vicar, the Rev. G. H. Wilkinson, of St. Peter's, Great Windmill Street, took alarm on my

hinting at my views, and, when he understood them, he stopped me from preaching. Soon after, he forbade me even to read the lessons in church, and then altogether boycotted me. I appealed to the Bishop, but in vain, and from that date until now my life has been one long struggle to get a hearing in the pulpits of the Church to which I belong."

This struggle, prolonged for thirty years, has not been so far a very successful one; as a rule, incumbents of churches have been chary of lending Mr. Headley their pulpits. Last year, it appears that the Rev. A. W. Oxford, of St. Philip's Church, Regent Street, consented to open his pulpit in the week-day to Mr. Headley, who preached on ten consecutive Wednesdays in June and July "without the aid of choir, organ, or the presence of the Vicar," he remarked to me on one occasion. The attendance was good, and the sermons popular, so much so that a second series was arranged for the months of October and November. But this time the Bishop of London stepped in and forbade the Vicar to allow Mr. Headley the use of the church, unless the latter obtained a special preaching license. This license, of course, the Bishop refused, when application was made. "I told the Bishop," says Mr. Headley when relating this incident to me, "that he was an assassin and as guilty of crucifying me as Caiaphas was of crucifying Jesus, but he did not seem to care one straw about wrecking a brother clergyman's life."

It was this exclusion from ordinary pulpits that made Mr. Headley resolve to seek a hearing elsewhere. "In despair," he writes me, "I have put doubly-distilled, condensed essence of sermons at the top of the Agony Column in the *Times*, on Saturdays, as 'Ecclesiastical rockets' indicating that a vessel is wrecked and needs help, not money, but to be heard." Even this modest manner of proclaiming his conception of the truth—it is a fact that the sermonettes do not always use the mildest language—has procured Mr. Headley a fair share of anonymous replies, "vile, filthy, abusive cards and letters," as he characterises them. Mr. Headley acknowledges himself to be a fighter. The abuse he should accept, therefore, as a tribute to his strength.

This first series of *Times* sermonettes were in prose, and so continued for two or three years. Out of a long list before me, I select two or three as typical of Mr. Headley's style and method. The subject of each, he announces in a head line; sometimes, it is an antithesis, such as

"A False and True Church;"

followed by the exposition: "A false Church is ever fearful of discussion and forbids it! Jesus challenges discussion! Who dare follow Christ? Who? When? Where?"

Sometimes, it is a simple title, with a regular sub-division of the matter; for example:

"Christ's sacrifice! A false view of Christ's sacrifice passes current as truth, which

"*a.* mars Christ's Gospel!

"*b.* divides the Church!

"*c.* bars all progress: and makes it a stumbling-block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles."

Some of the sermonettes are decidedly bizarre in their wording: "The Echo," for instance, the development of which is: "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité, for the dead to rest everywhere! But for the living to speak in the church, bah! nowhere!" or again, "Christianity checkmated: The World's abject submission is demanded by Rome! Who dares allow a sermon to be preached on the removal of the checkmate?"

In 1895, Mr. Headley began his rhyming couplets in the *Times*. After reading a very fair sample of our modern Wiclif's second manner, I have come to the conclusion that the couplets are better than the rhymes, the verses more remarkable for force than rhythm. Take, for instance, the one on "Christ's Gospel."

"Though sinful, yet forgiv'n, uncondemned!
Sure, such love from heaven must descend."

Or the one on "Saints and Sinners."

"When a Saint is beguiled to be a deceiver:
The greater the Saint, the greater the Sinner."

I think when Mr. Headley wrote this, he must have been half-conscious of another couplet:

"When the Devil was sick, the Devil a saint would be:
When the Devil got well, the devil a saint was he."

But somehow he has missed the lilt of the latter verses. The next I select is still less perfect in form. It is the one on "Controversy":

"Divisions breed diversity, needing controversy,
Ere there can be either peace or unity."

Much the same is the one on "A Rotten Church."

"When evil's called good, and good is called evil,
That Church, though it's fair, is rot at the kernel."

I have quoted, I believe, the worst. Some are much better. The opening one on "Antichristians" is not at all bad:

"They slay the just : they add a lie,
Then boycott all who dare reply."

The next, on "Hear all sides," is about up to the same mark :

"Whilst the churches, like foes, each other deny,
Where's freedom for truth to be heard in reply?"

Perhaps the best is the one on "False Prophets."

"The coward that fears to meet the face of man
Knows nought of God or of his holy plan."

Occasionally Mr. Headley becomes slightly Hegelian. I have tried to comprehend the following, and humbly confess that it is beyond me. It is on "The Christ."

"If not miraculous! 'Tis more miraculous,
So much miraculous is not miraculous."

Now and again, too, he becomes tragic and sombre in his tone, asking, for instance, in his "Conspiracy of Silence" :

"Must a man either murder or be murdered
Ere he is either heard or considered?"

Since I am not writing as a controversialist, I prefer not to take sides in the Rev. Mr. Headley's quarrel with the Church. There is one thing, however, I should like to point out to him, and which he seems to have overlooked, namely that he would probably have met with a readier hearing, if he had left bishops and parsons alone, and opened a church for himself.

There is another remark which I cannot forbear making, to wit, that Mr. Headley is too profuse in his accusations. He does not seem to realise that the Anglican body may be quite sincere in its enunciation of the dogma of sacrifice, the Roman Catholic body quite sincere in its dogma of transubstantiation. These things may be attacked as contrary to reason and absurd, or as not being justified by the Bible, without the men who teach them being considered assassins, anarchists, anti-Christians, etc. I grant that in the good old times Mr. Headley should have risked figuring in a bon-fire for my lord the bishop of some diocese or other. But to-day these reverend gentlemen have mended their manners. They curse him in church, it is true; but I imagine they do it only in a Pickwickian sense; and little by little, under the influence of beneficent dissent, they are coming to the view that orthodoxy is "my doxy," heterodoxy, "your doxy," a consummation devoutly to be hoped for, and which our modern Wiclif may contribute to hasten by establishing a conventicle of his own, or even by his *Times* sermonettes, if the rhymes continue to improve.