

## THEODORE PARKER—A STUDY FROM THE LIFE OF EDWIN MILLER WHEELOCK

BY CHARLES KASSEL

THE author of *Proteus*, and of the two papers in the style of *Proteus*, which appeared in the September issue, 1920, and the July issue, 1922, of the present magazine, was essentially a poet, though his medium of expression was prose. Even the casual observer, viewing the remarkable portrait which accompanied the excerpts from *Proteus* in the July issue, 1908, of *The Open Court*, and which served later to illustrate the superb edition of the book put forth by the Open Court Publishing Company, could scarcely mistake the type. It is, indeed, as the product of a poetic mind, and with some measure of allowance for poetic license, that *Proteus* and its companion pieces must be read, though they rest upon the sciences and find there the source and spring of their inspiration.

That such a man should have possessed also in marked degree the character of the crusader is just matter for marvel. Crusader, however, he was, as the biographical sketch in the September issue, 1920, sufficiently attests, and what that sketch lacks in detail is amply supplied by the papers in the February issue, 1922, and the March and August issues, 1923, relating the story of his labors as an abolitionist in the turbulent days of the movement before the Civil War. It was by no mere accident, as the earlier papers have shown, that his sermon upon the execution of John Brown—the culminating discourse of a series upon slavery ranging through the years of his ministry at Dover—should have given to his name an enduring place in the literature of the anti-slavery agitation.

It was not the subject of emancipation alone, however, which afforded the outlet for our minister's ardor in the cause of freedom. He was the champion as well of intellectual liberty. Stirred deeply by his contact with Theodore Parker, he entered upon his first min-

istry as pastor of the Unitarian Society at Dover, New Hampshire, in 1857, at the age of twenty-eight, pledged by instinct and training to unceasing war against human thralldom, whether of mind or body, and his sermons during the five years at Dover, still preserved in manuscript, are impressive testimonies to the zeal and eloquence with which he waged the struggle.

It was in 1859, during the pastorate at Dover, that the death of Theodore Parker occurred. The passing of the great reformer was a signal for tributes from hundreds of pulpits. Among the words, however, which were spoken in honor of that remarkable man the discourse of the Dover minister was one of the noblest and most powerful, and the sermon is an impressive evidence of the broadening influence of the three years of active ministry, and an evidence likewise of the added power and persuasiveness of statement which the weekly preparation of his sermons had imparted. So striking is this discourse, coming as it did from a young man in his thirtieth year, that we shall hazard an over-fullness of quotation in order to preserve in these pages some few of its striking passages.

Theodore Parker, let us preface, was born in 1810, and after studying at Harvard University was settled in 1837 as a Unitarian minister at West Roxbury. He soon became famous over New England as a preacher and lecturer. In January, 1841, Parker delivered a sermon at the ordination of a young minister which has become known as the South Boston Sermon from the circumstance of its delivery at the South Boston Unitarian Church. The sermon smacked of a disposition to discount the accepted principles and traditions of the church, and was ill-pleasing to the conservatives. As yet, however, Parker was very far from the extreme of radicalism in religion which he later attained. Some short time after, a book appeared from his pen which wrote larger the principles of this sermon and the murmur of disapproval grew correspondingly louder. Even Dr. Convers Francis, who had presided at his ordination—the same Doctor Francis who performed that office at the ordination of the subject of this biography—grew timorous and for a time excused himself from exchanging pulpits with Parker. In 1845 the distinguished James Freeman Clarke invited Parker to occupy his pulpit, disavowing, however, in advance, all sympathy with the latter's heresies of opinion, but even with this disavowal to relieve the tension of the situation many of the influential members of Clarke's church withdrew by way of protest.

Notwithstanding all this, Parker's power was growing and soon Boston began to know him as a resident and a preacher to its heretics. Here, the feeling against him from the conservative Unitarian clergy grew more intense—so far, indeed, that his fellowship with the remainder of the Unitarian ministers of Boston became impossible. Parker thundered from his pulpit that the words of Christ are to be accepted because they are *true*, and not because of any supernatural authority which attend them, while the conservative Unitarian thundered back that they were to be accepted because they were spoken by *him*, and not merely because they were true—a distinction which presented an ever-widening chasm. They did not deny that Parker's character was of an exalted type, that his power as a preacher was extraordinary, that his notions of God and immortality were exceedingly beautiful; but he cast off wholly the supernatural element in religion and this was too much for the Unitarians of Boston of that period, tight-laced as they were by inherited dogma.

Time was to be when the principles for which Parker stood should triumph completely in the Unitarian organization and his sermons should be re-echoed throughout the land from Unitarian pulpits, but that time was not yet. His congregation in Boston boasted few of the rulers of opinion in finance or society, but among those who heard him were such men as William Lloyd Garrison, Samuel G. Howe and Frank B. Sanborn, and such women as Julia Ward Howe and Louisa May Alcott. Herndon, Lincoln's law-partner at Springfield, knew Parker well and had much correspondence with him, and it was from him doubtless that Lincoln was given access to Parker's sermons and addresses.

Parker's discourses against slavery, which form the crowning work of his ministry, were as yet in the future, and had only been dimly foreshadowed in 1845. The series of sermons at the Music Hall in Boston with which his name is chiefly associated did not begin, indeed, until 1852, when the removal of the congregation to the Music Hall took place, with its seating and standing capacity of more than three thousand.

Parker had a sympathy for all movements looking to the alleviation of the human lot and many a page in his writings is given to the reforms of his day. The movement, however, which particularly engaged his interest was the anti-slavery agitation. The annexation of Texas in 1845 had been the subject of a sermon in which the war with Mexico was denounced as the legitimate fruit of slavery, and

two years later, in a speech at Faneuil Hall, he grew more emphatic upon the subject of the Mexican War and its relation to chattel slavery, giving token of an ever-deepening feeling upon the subject, which was to break at last into blasts of moving eloquence prophetic of the larger and blacker storm to come.

In 1856, the year of the graduation of the subject of our biography from the Divinity School at Harvard, Parker took charge of an independent religious society at Watertown. This was the same congregation addressed later on frequent occasions by young Wheelock, as were the churches at New Bedford and other places organized by Parker, or to which he had preached. At Watertown, perhaps, as at the Music Hall in Boston during his student days at Harvard, young Wheelock was privileged to hear the great Unitarian and listen to the powerful deliverances upon his favorite doctrine of the Divine Immanence of God in matter and man, as likewise to his critical treatment of the Bible and his emphasis upon the human side of the great Galilean, and it was quite to be expected that a difficulty would arise in deciding between the preaching of Parker and that of the conservative ministers whose prestige was supreme at Harvard and who were wholly without sympathy for the eloquent heretic and his doctrines.

The financial panic of 1857—the year of the beginning of the pastorate at Dover—and the depression which followed, gave an opportunity to revivalists of the old churches to reach the religious sensibilities of those who had been touched by misfortune and who were open therefore as never before to the traditional religious consolations. Parker strove to meet the psychological effect of this condition, but his health was almost gone and in 1859 he left for Europe, whence he never returned.

It is singular that even at the time of his death, Parker's influence, while great enough to create for him a ringing fame throughout the American continent, was not sufficient to dissolve the prejudices of the staid and conservative authorities at Harvard. The younger Unitarian ministers and Divinity students, it is true, were coming over to his side, and in 1857 the class of that year—the class, be it remembered, succeeding that from which Edwin Miller Wheelock graduated—elected him as their class preacher; but their choice was vetoed by the faculty to the indignation of the students who voiced their protest at once against this infringement of their intellectual liberty.

Parker's death in May, 1850, was followed on June 17th by a Memorial Service which filled the Music Hall with sorrowing lovers of the great preacher, and at this service addresses were heard from Emerson, Wendell Phillips, George William Curtis, Doctor Furness and others.

This was the man, then, whose memory the sermon of the subject of this chapter commemorated. It was delivered at Dover on the morning of the Sunday upon which, at the Music Hall in Boston, the Memorial Service was proceeding, and its utterances gain a greater dignity as the spontaneous outpouring of the preacher's heart with all opportunity denied to know what Emerson and Phillips and Curtis and others were saying at Boston.

Our minister took for his text, upon that occasion, the famous verses from the ninth chapter of Luke, "And John said, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name; and we forbade him, because he followeth not with us." And Jesus said, "Forbid him not; for he that is not against us is for us." He then began:

"Some forty years ago, a noble company of New England men broke away from the old ecclesiasticism and planted themselves on the right of unlimited freedom of inquiry, private judgment and a free Christianity. They believed that through all the rubbish of the old dogmas—through all the human inventions and additions of the creeds—new life was to flame forth, revealing fresh potencies and splendors of the Christian truth. They never claimed to understand the whole of this new truth or to have discovered its entire. They had no distinct and precise and stereotyped system to substitute for the dogmas they denied, but they claimed that the dead past should shackle no longer the living present and that to all earnest criticism the Bible should be open and free. Turning from the partial and tyrannical sect-religions, they demanded as the only evidence of a true religious experience a true religious life.

"This was the liberal movement led by such minds as Channing, Buckminster and Ware. A nobler summons was never sounded to the soul. For the original household stood fairly on the high tableland of a liberated Christianity, where each found space and verge to develop his whole thought. In the strong force of a tolerant spirit and in the consciousness of a stable and rational faith, they confronted the superstitions of this age as Luther did those of the sixteenth century, solemnly protesting against proscription for opinion's sake and demanding the freest discussion of the various questions of theological science.

"The success of this movement, for a long time, was signal. It really seemed to hold in its hand the Protestantism of today and the better church of the future. The younger age, weary of a theology based upon mere assumption, hostile to imagination, at variance with science, and scornful of human instincts and human reasoning, felt its heart throbbing in unison with these noble ideas.

"Had the successors of these men been true to their original affirmation, in another generation the republic would have been theirs. But a test of character was presented. The denomination was brought before the judgment seat and was found wanting. Their sentiments faded into sentimentalities and their strong early faith oozed out of their souls. They ate their grand words about human reason and the imminence of God in the soul and returned to the outward authority of the Book and the church.

"Since then, say the Doctors, the denomination is affected with a 'suspense of faith.' For on societies as on persons wait the retributive laws of God. Each act of recreancy meets its due recompense or reward. If great principles are seen, *but not obeyed*, then from those unfaithful souls even the *vision* of Truth is taken away.

"The church that on the pathless sea of American sectarianism refuses to go where God points, furling the sails of free inquiry and rational methods, must drift into the dead calm of a 'suspense of faith,' while the Heretic they scorn lays his course straight across the boisterous sea to safe anchorage and firm footing on the farther shore.

"When our Unitarian body brought Theodore Parker, for his 'terrible unreserve' under the ban of ecclesiastical disability, suspense and menace, they shackled their own wrists and passed the sentence of proscription on themselves. For he stood in the straight line of descent from Channing and pushed Unitarian methods to their last result. Their reiterated statement that 'the Bible is not the infallible word of God but only a record and a history of it,' remands each to his own intuition to find out the good and the true and thus legitimates him. His conclusions were logically begotten of their premises and however far he journeyed it was always in the path of their traditions.

Some one says of children, "I can forgive them everything but their injudicious frankness." Posterity will one day say, 'This was also Theodore Parker's unpardonable sin.' So vital was he, so near the gracious heart of the liberal movement, that the knife of his excision touched its main artery and its spirit began to ebb from

that selfsame hour. It was as though the Ironsides should excommunicate Cromwell.

"Was it not enough that with the might of an 'Apostle' he was casting out devils that possessed the body politic—devils that 'go not out' even *with* 'the prayer and fasting' of the church—but we must 'forbid him because he walks not with us,' in our precise theological foot-tracks? Shall we never tire of garnishing tombs of the dead prophets and stoning the living ones? Must there be in every age a John the Baptist going out into the untrodden wilderness of reform followed by the hate of those who 'sit in the seat of Moses'?

"If God *intends* variety in spiritual as in natural growth, we should slight no statement which in the light of any earnest soul seems to be good and true. Much less should we, with *canine zeal* worry those who avow it. Men can not all see truths in the same way. Every genius has a tongue of his own and every heart its own religion. It is a truth not for one generation alone but for all time that 'the stone which the builders rejected becomes the head of the corner.'

I do not know of a sorrier page in American Church History than that which tells that the most liberal church of the age—the communion in advance of all others—could find no manlier way of treating a great scholar, a profoundly religious soul, a man bent wholly on finding the truth and doing his duty, then by running at him with an ecclesiastical straight-jacket: as if *sane* heresy were no longer possible and our set of opinions were the final theology of the church.

"Theodore Parker was a teacher of positive righteousness. He was a believer in the 'two great commandments' in which Jesus summed up 'all the Law and the Prophets.' He was, in wide aspects, a providential man. No pulpit in New England ever wielded such power or spoke to so wide an audience. He led the 'forlorn hope' of Protestantism and has left no successors.

"Every humane movement felt his inspiring influence, every voice writhed under his rebuke. There was no disloyalty in him. Night and day was he straitened till his mission and baptism was accomplished. Alike in the working field of humanity and in the purer realm of thought, he was eyes to the blind, feet to the lame and a mouthpiece to the dumb. His greatness shone most towering when all shrank from him for he was never in a larger majority than then. His roots went down below the surface to the 'absolute' and 'permanent' in religion and like St. Paul the proof of his apostleship 'can

be read of all men' in the lavish hate of despot and pharisee and demagogue, in the grateful love of the poor, the scorned and the perishing. In an age like this there can be no better evidence of fidelity to God and man.

"Grant that he overlooked or denied some things which we hold exceedingly dear, that he undertook to do the work of a church without a Christology or a Pneumatology and that, in his faith, overstrained reason labored alone without the divine afflatus of imagination, yet even his unbelief was of a noble stamp and its tendencies always ran *upward*. His denials were but the recoil of a strong man from the grievous errors with which Protestantism has overlaid the gospel. While to abstractions or sentimentalities, or to the creeds scented with sulphur, he always gave a vigorous denial, none sooner than he saw the positive beauty of spiritual truths. Yea, as he prayed before his people, with still and shining face, I have thought, at times, that some of the beauty he adored in the heavens was passing into his own soul.

"He was one of a class who are *unable* to receive truth upon authority. His work was to abbreviate old mythologic dreams and enlarge life; to disintegrate and sift theology, supplying the place of each inoperative item by some practical pledge to humanity which the church had never fairly sighted before.

"The hard judaism of the existing sects may crowd and elbow him but the New Jerusalem which is descending from the great God into all good and true minds with glowing splendor, causing the lives of sects to be dim and stale and tremulous, will include Theodore Parker, as it will include every other quickened soul. For his pure prophetic life, through all its stages, was a real, deeply unconscious worship of Jesus, as, indeed, must all lives be that are *true*. 'He that is not against me is for me.' The *name* Christ he may not have seemed to hear, but the 'will of Christ' he always sought to do and the *life of Christ*—the life of tender humanity for the 'little ones,' whom the world tramples down—he uttered from his soul. He knew not, nor wished to know, the Christ of sentimentalism, whose name a hundred jealous sects are 'taking in vain' with wordy **praise**; but he knew the Living Christ—the Christ of vital piety and practical reform. He *knew his cross*, too, and for fifteen years he bore it on his shoulders—the cross of the bigot's curse, of priestly hate, and of the world's hissing scorn. No matter who may seek to dispargue or revile him now, he has served One 'who knoweth them that are His.'

"If Christ be God the Son, second person in the Trinity, I had rather stand before His bar with Theodore Parker who denies Him but follows in His steps serving humanity, than with any orthodox doctor who writes South-side books to turn our sympathy for the oppressed into approbation for the oppressor. For the Christ of the New Testament is one who cares nothing for his own personal position or honor, has no self-feeling to be wounded by any denial of his right, and can never be offended by any mistake as to his office and authority. His holy anger is only for those who offend or injure his little ones—his poor, his oppressed, his outcasts, his wretched, his forlorn."

"Believing then," he concludes, "'that men do not gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles,' we leave him to the great Hereafter of History, which keeps with costly care the few beautiful lives of earth."

The "great Hereafter of History" did abundant justice to the man and his principles, as the prophetic young thinker clearly foresaw would be the case, and "the stone which the builders rejected" did verily "become the head of the corner."

It is plain that our courageous pastor was not quite ready to go the entire way with the great crusader for liberal religious thought, and he was prepared to grant that Parker "overlooked or denied some things which we hold exceedingly dear"; but the thought of Parker was to win steadily upon him through the years, and the daring of the man, his passionate love of humanity and his fiery zeal for any cause he believed in, set off against the persecution and contumely he suffered, touched the deepest chord in the heart of the Dover preacher and brought him valiantly to the standard of the dead hero. At that time it was plainly more a faith in the man that drew forth the impassioned tribute rather than a belief in his principles, but the faith in the man was working steadily as a resolving agent, eating away inherited tendencies and predilections and neutralizing the influence of the University prejudice against Parker.

It is a far cry from the spirit and language of the ordination discourse, and the sermons upon baptism and communion of the early days at Dover, to this glowing deliverance three years after. His ordination had found him fresh from a course of years at Harvard, with the impress deep upon his mind of the bland pieties which prevailed the atmosphere of that institution. The efforts of its Doctors of Divinity to reclothe the old forms of religion so as to avoid offense, the deprecation of controversy and the iteration of smooth

abstractions which meant nothing to moral or ethical welfare and yet satisfied the superficial religious sense—all this had wrought powerfully upon his mind.

Touch close enough with Parker had been afforded him, as the present discourse amply shows, and deep stirrings of soul had occurred in consequence. Those surcharges of spirit on the Sunday mornings at the Music Hall, from the fountain of Parker's feeling and utterance, provoked, doubtless, qualms and doubts in abundance during the study hours of the week days, but the student was young and impressionable, his antecedents inclined him to the old observances and the prestige and kindly personal interest of the professors was an influence of overwhelming potency against any discipleship under the great Unitarian outcast.

For a few years still these older and more powerful factors, making for orthodoxy of sentiment and tendency, retained their hold; but his was a mind of rare strength and rectitude, and a sympathy of unwonted breadth and tenderness, and the pressure of time and thought told inevitably in favor of the outcast against the pronouncements from the established seats of authority, aided, as the process must have been, by an ever-deepening interest in the anti-slavery movement, and other humane reforms which Parker and his fellow radicals championed with unstinted zeal, and which the conservative professors at Harvard strove always to avoid with apologetic, Pilate-like movements of the hands.