

DOVER DAYS—MEMORIES FROM THE LIFE OF
EDWIN MILLER WHEELOCK*

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THE CHILDHOOD and young manhood of a talented and forceful individual is always a matter of absorbing interest. It is a pleasant and often a profitable task to run the threads of character back to their first outcropping and in the youth search out the traits which, with time and experience, shall ripen into the qualities of the prime. With those destined to heroic work, in whatever path, whether illustrious or obscure, the child is commonly father to the man and in the early arenas of endeavor reflects the image of his after-life. Few phases of biography, indeed, yield a richer return to the assiduous student.

A distinguished American poet has referred to Edwin Miller Wheelock as one of the remarkable men of his time, and such indeed he was in spite of the restricted though eminently useful sphere in which he wrought. A precise parallel for his character and career might be hard to find in the lives on our shelves. Beyond many of those better known to fame he possessed the elements of greatness. In form and figure, in feeling and faculty, in superb courage where his convictions were concerned, and in the eloquence that made words dynamic on his lips, he was fashioned for a shining place, but to a degree rarely found in the history of such men he held in contempt the motives which lead to achievement for ambition's sake. A dreamer and a mystic, disdainful of renown and wealth, he turned his back deliberately upon the avenues to distinction, preferring to disregard the urge of private interest for the exalted call of great humane movements.

It is precisely of such a man, however, that the antecedents carry the loftiest challenge. The self-seeking man, the organizer of personal success, the manipulator of social and business forces in his

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own interest, is a familiar type, and we need no recourse to the lessons of biography for an analysis of his character. It is about such types chiefly that latter-day history has turned. The altruistic man, engrossed, through some inner pressure, with the human problem, hunting the secret of a nobler race and society with all the self-forgetfulness of a scientist in his laboratory, is by the conventional standards an eccentric, undeserving the attention of sober historians. That such individuals are really anticipations of a type of humanity to which the future belongs is a truth too refined as yet for popular acceptance. Changing standards, however, call from age to age for a revaluation of life and history, and a generation to come will resurrect from the limbo of forgotten things the stories of such men and give them a commanding place in the chronicles of mankind.

We saw in the preceding instalment of this biography that, when our young minister entered upon his pastorate at Dover, the church whose creed he had espoused was torn with dissension, the younger and more radical clergy storming at the citadels of tradition with their transcendentalism and their agitation against slavery, while the older and more conservative and influential fought to preserve the strongholds of ancient belief and sweep back the rising tide of heresy. The fact of young Wheelock leaving the faith of his fathers for the somewhat more liberal creed of the Unitarians is abundant proof of his independence of feeling and action, and the influence of Emerson and Parker must have tended powerfully to draw him into the more radical movement; but he had come out of one of the old churches, the pressure of the traditional belief was strong upon him, and the hold upon his mental being of a long heredity of orthodox teaching was something not to be easily released.

We get an insight into his spiritual struggle in an expression we find in the manuscript of an old sermon which speaks of the distrust and misery and horror of the unknown which for many years weighted down his own spirit. Moreover, the early writings of Thomas Lake Harris had told strongly in favor of the old ideas, investing them with a mystical meaning which might win acceptance from a youthful and visionary intellect when in their literal nakedness they would find instant rejection. So it is, therefore, that the earliest sermons breathe a spirit of orthodox piety which comports ill with the virile, questioning tone of the later discourses. In

one of the earliest of his deliverances we see something of Puritanical asceticism in the intimation that nothing should be spent on art or works of mere beauty so long as suffering existed in the world. A sermon upon Baptism, too, attached a value to the rite which jars harshly with his later and kindlier view. A discourse, again, upon the subject of "Home" spoke with a feeling one might expect in the most orthodox of pulpits of the old-fashioned religious observances in the domestic circle. Here was plainly a soul in struggle with itself, held in the grip of religious instincts inherited from a hundred generations, while the growing intellect was straining at its bars, reaching out for the freedom of thought which could not long be denied it.

The steady growth of his mind in the direction of rational belief was inevitable. On June 22, 1857—a scant half year after his ordination—he delivered at Dover a discourse in which he declared:

When a man lowers the flag of his personal independence before an unhealthy and unchristian sentiment and trembles before the vulgar tribunal that he should despise, that man is at once a traitor to his manhood and an infidel to his heart. We find few indeed, who have the courage and heart to be *true* at any cost. We follow the leadings of the Divine with "ifs" and "buts" and reservations and so it comes that we follow it not at all.

A spirit such as this could not fear the leadings of reason, whithersoever they might tend, or, once found, shrink from declaring the truth.

We are not without abundant evidence, moreover, of a growing liberality. In a sermon which could not have been delivered later than 1858, he says:

No form of faith professed by the older nations of the world, by Turk, Arabian, Hindu, Chinese, Persian, and the like, is wholly superstitious; and no form of so-called Christian faith, whether Greek, Catholic, Protestant or any of their subdivisions, is *wholly* spiritual. Indeed, the lower and more selfish forms of nominal Christianity contrast very unfavorably with the purer forms of paganism as we in our bigotry term those modes of belief which have for centuries furnished bread of spiritual satisfaction to the vast majority of our race. And we ourselves, who almost alone of all the sects profess a benign and hopeful faith, resting on the pure reason of man, while we have shaken off many of the grosser and more sensual terrors of the old superstition still bear the token of

its unwholesome contact and morbid influence. The marks of the old fetters are still visible on our limbs and the prison smell yet lingers on our garments. Far, very far, are we yet from a purely spiritual faith. It has often been my duty to point out these defects and such as these, and to speak of the noxious elements of superstition, worldliness and unbelief mingling with the purer current of our faith. It will be no less my duty in the future to hold them up to view until we cast them off as belonging to the time of our ignorance and our spiritual childhood and press forward to higher truths.

It is in a lecture, however, delivered on June 20th, 1859, from his pulpit at Dover that convincing evidence is found of his growing independence and incisiveness of statement and his deepening inclination to do fiery battle for the saner and more rational views of religious truth. The address is entitled "Literal Interpretation"—and described as "A Lecture in the Unitarian Church, Dover, New Hampshire, June 20, 1858, being a reply to the recent attack upon liberal Christianity by Rev. T. J. Greenwood, with a review of the dogma of verbal infallibility and a statement of rational Scriptural belief." The lecture is found printed in a pamphlet of twenty-four pages by Crosby, Nichols, & Company, Boston, 1858, and is to be seen in the Congressional Library at Washington among the Waterman pamphlets bound together with other tracts ranging in date back to 1758.

The purport of the lecture makes clear that Rev. Mr. Greenwood had taken deep umbrage at the presence of the young religious rebel in the community and had referred to him in a public address as an "infidel" and a "blasphemer" and "corrupter of youth" because of a series of discourses the young Unitarian had delivered during the winter upon "Liberal Christianity." It is evident that our minister had not scrupled to declare his beliefs wholly as they had matured in his mind and that even upon the supreme question of slavery, then agitating the entire country which, more than any other, timid souls sought to avoid, his words had rung out clear and unmistakable.

For myself personally I can only say that any charge of infidelity emanating from one who during a ministry in this town of seven or eight years has consented to be muzzled on the most momentous and sacred question that ever came before the pulpits of a nation—the question of the chief sin of America, an organized national crowning sin; the buying and selling and holding as merchandise of four millions of human

beings, many of them Christian church members; any charge of infidelity, I say, emanating from such a source, I accept as a compliment.

The lecture attacks the dogma of the literal infallibility of the Scriptures with every weapon wielded before or since by those who espouse a rational interpretation, and it is plain enough that this dogma, at least, had no remnant of hold upon the mind of the fearless young polemic. The language of the discourse, compared with that of the earlier sermons, betrays a steady growth in the direction of a firm, clear, balanced diction. A vein of biting sarcasm appears which in the earlier sermons had not been noticeable and an occasional pungency of phrase—foreshadowings of that splendid command of the resources of language which his maturer writings were to manifest.

The sermons of this period were not without many beautiful touches, indicative of the fine sentiment which was a part of the man and the poetic atmosphere with which his thought surrounded the subject of his deliverances. Thus, upon the subject of "Childhood"—a favorite theme, often treated in his sermons and one which his domestic felicity and growing family circle invested, doubtless, with a personal interest, he says:

The young soul, all sensation, stands upon the confine of a new and boundless world, filled with an exhaustless variety of interesting objects to excite and gratify the senses and to solicit by every varying delight the manifold activities of the soul. Experience has not yet taught caution and disappointment has thrown no dark shadows over the heart. Life is a May morning with no recollections of the past and no fears of the coming winter. All life is in the present. The only rest is action; the only peace is the all-absorbing interest of delightful sensation. All sorrow is a passing cloud; all darkness a quickly vanishing vapor. There are no mournful memories, no sharp regrets, no paralyzing fears. A perfect singleness of purpose is the secret of the loveliness of childhood. The child does one thing at a time and that one thing fills his whole mind. No cautious reserve, no circumspection, no fear of criticism tones down the color of his eagerness to the cold propriety of the adult. Is it strange that we should call this the happiest season of life?

So, in another discourse:

I know not if anywhere in the whole world God's voice and presence seems more plainly heard and felt than in our

children. They are perfumed with the very air of Heaven. How absorbed is a child in the present!—a living embodiment of the command “take no thought for the morrow.” How spotless its innocence! Truly children are among God’s highest gifts.

Again, upon the subject of “Marriage and Spiritual Laws,” we find a beautiful passage in an old sermon of this period, and its tone reflects the happiness of his own home and the joy he took in the noble companionship of a loving and loyal helpmate. He had been married September 22, 1855, at Charleston, Massachusetts, to Ellen, the daughter of Thomas C. Brackett, then in her twenty-fifth year—a young woman of distinguished colonial descent, and of fine qualities of mind and spirit, who, in the following year, became the mother of their eldest child, Charles. For nearly forty years that companionship was to be vouchsafed by the fates and was to make his life redolent of a sacred and enduring influence, but it is pleasant to read the words which that first flush of his happiness inspired and bridge in thought the chasm of time between that early, youthful, ardent day and the day, well nigh two score years later, when beside her form, stilled in death, he penned, and two weeks later delivered, the most beautiful and touching of all his discourses.

Innumerable phenomena, both of matter and mind, are solved by reference to sex and marriage as universal laws. They offer the grandest proof that man is nature concentrated and nature man diffused. They constitute a bond of divinity which certifies every part of the creation to be of common origin and of a common plan—the manifest expression of one primary idea. Each of the spiritual elements of our nature is lonely and celibate until conjoined to the other and instinctively impels its possessor towards its vital complement. Along with this marrying of the spiritual effigies come all the sweet blessings of the family circle—birthdays, the musical prattle of children and their silvery laughter—the noble friendship of brothers and sisters—the tender and changeless affection of fathers and mothers—thanksgiving gatherings around the bright hearths that reflect the warmer and more glowing welcome of those around. And these phenomena are to a great extent repeated in the vegetable world, furnishing one of the most striking parallels in nature. Nothing is more beautiful than the sight of a hazel tree on a fine day in early Spring, covered with its thousand pendent stamen-blossoms—blossoms from which with the slightest motion descends a shower of golden-colored particles kissing the

crimson lips of the unpretending little pistil-blossoms; it stands living and awake while everything else is still steeped in its heavy winter slumber. Thus, sex, like life, is uniform in its history, whatever kind of body it may actuate.

Once more, upon the subject of the duty of man. In a sermon of June 1861, he says:

The Almighty reigns in every atom, in all states, in all things visible, in all things invisible. Demons are subject to Him; angels are obedient to Him; the elements run swiftly to obey him; what we call nature is His servant and His slave. Friends, this is the word of the spirit to us, be strong! Take up your crosses whatever they are. Do not pray for deliverance but pray to God continually for more strength to bear more burdens. The heaviest burden can never sink you lower than your knees and at last your fetters will become wings and you will rise with Christ above worldliness and all selfishness.

Upon the fundamental subjects of religion, those departments of thought where speculation is most difficult, the utterances of the early sermons are striking, since they give token of keen and balanced thinking and show a tendency to reason closely in the direction of basic principles. Upon these subjects indeed his views underwent no change in the passing of the years, and the quotations which follow might have served as well for the last years of his ministry.

Of the nature of Deity, he says in a sermon delivered at Dover, Salem, Marblehead, Jersey City, and Easton:

If the Almighty is to fill our dead hearts with new life he must appear to us not merely as the all-diffusive energy mixed up with everything in the creation—the Infinite All; but as one having personal attributes, sympathy, heart, reciprocal feeling. God in nature seems too distant, too diffusive, too vast, too impersonal to meet the needs of our hearts.

So, on the nature of matter, he says:

The universe with all the things in it is an actual emanation of God and rests as closely to him now as in the beginning. God in the infinite past threw out from himself portions of his own substance which, becoming more and more dense in their recession from Him, gradually formed the world and their apparel. Now everything that is created must first have existed in the spiritual world before it can exist as matter. It is impossible for anything to be and not yet

first exist as a thought before it can have material shape. Man, trees, flowers, animals, the birds, the sea, the mountains, the stars, everything that enters into the composition of the visible universe, every line of duty, every touch of harmony, must have distinctly pre-existed in the realm of spirit before taking form in the realm of matter. God *thought* them all and sent them forth first as spiritual things and lastly expressed in a material clothing. We know this to be true for like Paul we reason from the known to the unknown. When we look upon a beautiful landscape, we see trees, hills, rivers, real and substantial, indeed, yet only the temporary images of forms existing in a world we do not see. That world is spiritual—the same old beautiful world of God in fact with which we are familiar only on a higher plane of creation. As the soul is to the human body so is that grand spiritual realm to the human world.

So, again, upon the subject of immortality:

As the scientist learns the intrinsic quality of a fixed substance in his laboratory by testing it with appropriate acids and alkalis till he finds that with which its different parts combine and thus learns the nature of its elements, so the spirit of man after death is tried and judged by its interior attractions and affinities. The real center of a man's life, both in this world and the next, is his ruling motive, that which he most desires and loves. After death all qualities extraneous to that drop away—nothing goes out but that which is within till the whole man, within and without, is the type of his ruling love. Whatever of errors and vain imaginings we may embrace let us never fancy that we can live all our lives in the exercise of worldly and selfish affection, that we can stimulate into gigantic growth the passions, desires, appetites, ambitions and other forms of self-love and of the love of the world, and that when we die all this mighty organism, all this solid framework of character which has become knit into the moral tissue by constant exercise during a whole life, will vanish away like a morning vapor before the sun, and those spiritual and Christ-like affections which we have never called into action and life during the period assigned to their germination and growth leap at once full-grown into vigorous life.

Already, it is apparent the young minister had become a finished preacher. His thought had grown deeper and broader in the few scant years of responsibility, and practice with the pen had greatly enriched his native gift of expression. The clinging of old beliefs had been early sloughed off and he was ready now to take his place with the advanced thinkers of the day.

It is not difficult to conjure up before the mind's eye a faithful picture of the days and works at Dover. There was the small but cultivated congregation. There was the Sunday school and its activities. There was the simple and unpretentious service before the discourse each Sunday morning. Above all, however, there was the young minister with his rich voice and fine figure—a voice and figure which even in the last years defied the infirmities of age—and the large, full, prophetic eyes, turned upon his hearers or lifted, as was his wont, in whispered prayer.

That finely disinterested, splendidly heroic nature must have impressed greatly the little assemblage which greeted him on the Sabbath morning. So rare a personality could not but have won deeply upon their affection and devotion. It was a remarkable type of man, indeed, who had come among them—a type alien to the crass commercial world and even to the smug and self-sufficient religiousness of the time. A hero of the old day who set out for savage lands resolved to barter life and ease for the spiritual welfare of the rude inhabitants—such a one might have found something congenial in his spirit. Souls of lesser mold were drawn powerfully to him by the nobility of his motives, the tenderness of his feeling and the beauty of his thought and speech, but they knew him afar only, and his true spiritual proportions they could not discern.