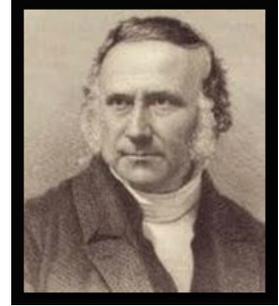


The Universalist's Daughter



There was something, as I thought, not a little peculiar in the religious aspect of a young married woman in my congregation, whom I sometimes visited, and strove to influence on the subject of religion. She was not a pious woman, but greatly respected religion, and was a constant attendant at church. It was her seriousness which first made me particularly acquainted with her; though before that time, I had sometimes urged her to attend to the concerns of a future life. At her solicitation, as I understood, her husband, with herself, had left my congregation about six months before, and they had attended another church, until they were induced to come back to our church, one evening, by the expectation of hearing a clergyman from a distance. As she found I was to preach (for the stranger clergyman was not there), she whispered to her husband, proposing to leave the place and go home; but he refused to go, for he said it did "not look well." They constantly attended our church after that evening; and when they became seriously disposed to seek the Lord, I became more intimately acquainted with them. She had become deeply serious, but appeared strange to me. I could not discover precisely what it was that was peculiar about her, but there was something. She was uniformly solemn, appeared to me to be frank and candid, was an intelligent woman, had become prayerful, and at times deeply anxious about her future welfare. And yet, as weeks passed on, she appeared to make no progress, but remained in much the same state of mind, unsettled and without peace.

She had no resting-spot. 'Whenever her thoughts were directed to the subject of religion, a pensiveness would spread over her soul, like the

shadow of a cloud over the summer landscape. I pitied her. She was an interesting woman. Her naturally fine mind had not been neglected. She had received the accomplishments of a careful education. She was young, she was beautiful, she was tasteful; and the ease of her manners threw an additional gracefulness over her tall and graceful person. But a cloud was on her brow. It was out of its place—it had no right there. Such a brow ought to be bathed in the sun-light. A heart like hers ought not to be the victim of some secret and mysterious sorrow, and such a soul as hers ought to find in the kindness of Christ the balm for its sorrows.

She had been married about a year, and her husband, like herself, had become interested in the subject of religion. But they were very unlike in their religious successes. He seemed to get onwards; she remained stationary and sad. They were about the same age (twenty-seven, perhaps), and in other respects much resembled each other; but they were unlike in religion.

She was born and had been educated in a distant part of the country, and among people of somewhat different manners; and I thought that she might perhaps have some feelings of melancholy and loneliness, as she had come to reside among strangers. But I found she had no feelings of that kind. On the contrary, she was delighted with her new home; was easy and familiar, and friendly in her social intercourse with her new acquaintances. Several times I called upon her, and aimed to discover what made her so downcast in mind, and especially what hindered her from attaining peace with God, through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. But I could gain no light on the subject. After all my conversation with her, the peculiarity which hung around her was as mysterious to me as ever.

At one time I suspected that her seriousness might arise more from mere fear than from any just sense of her sin; and therefore I aimed, by explanation of the law of God, and by application of it to her own heart, to render her conviction more deep and clear. But, to my surprise, I found that her sense of sin and unworthiness, and of the wickedness of her heart, appeared to be more than usually deep and solemn.

At another time I feared that she might have a very imperfect idea of the freeness of divine grace; and therefore I aimed to show her how '*the kindness and love of God our Saviour*' offers to every sinner pardon and eternal life as a free gift, by us unmerited and unbought. And again to my surprise, I found that her ideas on this point also appeared as clear and as strong as any that I could express.

So it was with her, as it seemed to me, on every part of evangelical truth. I could discover in her mind no error or deficiency: and could not even conjecture what kept her from flying to Christ in faith. Evidently the Holy Spirit was with her, but she yet lingered; and her state appeared to me the more wonderful, because her husband had become, as we believed, a follower of Christ, and was cheerful and happy in hope.

As I was conversing with her one day about her state of mind, she somewhat surprised me by suddenly asking,—

“Will you lend me the Presbyterian Confession of Faith?”

“Certainly, Madam,” said I, “if you want it; but I advise you to let it alone.”

“I want to know,” said she, “what the Presbyterians believe.”

“They believe just what you do, I suppose,” said I; “they believe the Bible,—they believe just what you hear me preach every Sabbath.”

“Other denominations,” said she, “who disagree with you, profess to believe the Bible too.”

“Yes, that is all true; but I do not wish you to agree with either; but to agree with the Bible. I have no desire to make a Presbyterian of you. I only wish you to be a Christian, and I am fully content to have you judge for yourself what the gospel teaches, without being influenced by the Presbyterian Confession of Faith or any other human composition. The Bible is the rule. If we agree with it, we are right; if not, we are wrong. You will understand it well enough to be saved, if you will study it prayerfully, and exercise your own good sense. You have to give an account of yourself unto God, and it matters little to you what other people believe.”

“Why are you unwilling,” says she, “to have me read your Confession of Faith?”

“I am *not* unwilling, Madam,—not at all, if you wish to read it, I will bring it to you, with pleasure, at any time you desire it. But I am only expressing my opinion, that it will do you no good at present. I think the Bible is far better for you to read just now. At another time, the Confession of Faith may be of service to you, but not now.”

“I was not brought up in the Presbyterian church, Sir. My father is a Universalist, and my mind is not settled about the doctrines of religion.”

“Are you a Universalist too?”

“No, sir, I don’t think I am; but I don’t know what to believe,” said she most mournfully.

“Do you believe the Bible is God’s word?”

“Oh, yes, I believe that.”

“Well, the Confession of Faith is not God’s word (though in my opinion it substantially agrees with it); and I advise you to take the Bible and lay its truth upon your own heart, with all candor and with sincere prayer. If you get into the Confession of Faith, I am afraid you will not understand it so well as you can understand the Bible; and I am afraid your understanding alone will be employed, and not your heart; or at least, that you will have more of the spirit of speculation than of heart religion, and will leave your sins, your Saviour, and salvation too much out of sight.”

“Oh, sir, I don’t mean to do that.”

“I think, Madam, that you know perfectly well, that the Bible demands of you a repentance, and a faith, and a love of God, which you do not exercise; and your first business should be, not to examine the Confession of Faith about a great many other doctrines, but to get your *heart* right,—and what that means, the Bible teaches you, and you painfully feel its truth.”

“But, sir, I ought to know what a church believes, before I unite with it.”

“Most certainly you ought. But you are not prepared at present to unite with any church. You do not think yourself to be a true Christian at heart—a true penitent—a true believer—a sinner born again, and at peace with God through Jesus Christ. Come to these things first. Get a heart religion; and after that you will be better prepared to examine the Confession of Faith. But don’t allow your mind to be led away into a wilderness of doctrines, to the neglect of your present, plain duty. You are an unhappy woman, a sinner without pardon. You have no peace of mind. And first of all, yes now on the spot, you ought to give up your heart to Christ, penitent for sin and trusting to the divine mercy. Here lies our present duty. Don’t you think so yourself?”

“Yes, sir, indeed I do,” said she, sadly; “*I wish I was a Christian.*”

“I will send you the Confession of Faith if you desire it, but in my—”

“No, don’t send it,” said she, interrupting me, “I will not read it yet.”

“You said your father was a Universalist, but you did not think you yourself were one. I have no desire to say anything to you about that doctrine. It is unnecessary. If you will read the Bible with candor and common sense, and with humble prayer for the direction of your heavenly Father, you certainly can know as well as anyone, what the Bible teaches about that. I leave that to your own judgment. If you find any difficulty on that or any other subject, I shall be happy to tell you hereafter just what I think. But I am sure you cannot mistake the meaning of God’s word about the everlasting punishment of sinners.”

“Do come to see me again,” said she, with a sad earnestness. “I am not satisfied to rest where I am. I will try to follow your advice.”

After a short prayer, I left her. In subsequent conversation with her, I discovered nothing to make her peculiarity or hindrance to repentance any more intelligible. I did not suppose that the religious opinions of her father were exerting any influence upon her mind, for it seemed to me, and to herself, too, that she had entirely abandoned them.

Just at this time, her father paid her a visit, and remained with her for more than a week. He probably noticed that she was unhappy, and

probably knew the cause; but he said nothing to her on the subject of religion. He was one of the prominent men and liberal supporters of a Universalist church in the place of his residence; and as she afterwards told me, she longed, day after day, while he remained with her, to talk with him about religion, and about her own feelings; but he seemed to avoid all conversation which would lead to the subject, and she “could not muster courage enough,” as she expressed it, “to speak to him and tell him how she felt.” Every day she thought she certainly would do it, but every day she neglected it, and every night she wept bitterly over her neglect. Says she to me, “he is a very affectionate father, he has always treated me most kindly; but I could not tell him how I felt—my heart failed me when I tried.”

The morning at last came when he was to leave her. He prepared for his departure, and she had not yet told him of the burden that lay on her heart. He bade her good-bye very affectionately, gave her the parting kiss, passed out at the door, and closed it after him. Suddenly, her whole soul was aroused within her. She “could not let him depart so.” She hastily opened the door and ran after him through the little yard before the house, to the front gate. She flung her arms around him, “Father, oh, my father I” says she, the tears streaming from her eyes, “I want to ask you one question; I can’t let you go till you tell me. I have wanted to ask you ever since you came here, but I couldn’t. I am very unhappy. I have been thinking a great deal about religion lately, and I want to ask you one thing. Tell me, father, what you truly think—you must tell me—do you really believe that all people will be saved hereafter, and be happy in another world? Don’t deceive me, father, tell me what you really believe.”

“Elizabeth,” said he, with evident emotion, which he struggled to conceal, “I think it is very likely that some will be lost forever!” and lifting his hand to his brow, he instantly turned away and left her. He could not tell his daughter, as she hung upon him in such distress, that dangerous falsehood which he professed to believe. His tearful daughter returned into her house, the last prop knocked away, the last refuge gone! “Now,” as she said to me afterwards, “she could look to nothing but Christ, and

have hope only in sovereign mercy. My last deception was gone.” And it was not long before she became as happy in hope, as she had been sad in her perplexities and fears. She was a firm and joyful Christian.

She united with the church, and for more than twenty years has lived as a happy believer. Her children have grown up around her; and some of them, the delight of her heart, are the followers of their mother’s Saviour and their own.

But her father returned to his home and his former place of worship, professing still before the world to believe in universal salvation, a falsehood which he could not tell his daughter, when she wept upon his bosom.

After her hopeful conversion she wrote to her father, giving him a simple and affectionate account of her religious experience, thanking him for his kindness in telling her his real opinion, and entreating him to forsake a congregation where he himself knew he did not hear the truth—beseeching him to turn to Christ, that he might be saved from everlasting punishment. His reply to her letter was kind, but evasive. He made no response at all to the real burden of her letter. She then wrote to him again. In the most kind and touching manner she recapitulated her experience, told him of her sweet peace of mind, her joy and hope, and asked him whether he was willing; that she should unite with the Presbyterian church, as she proposed to do, or would rather that she should be a Universalist. In his reply, he adverted to what he had said to her on the morning when he parted with her, and very plainly assured her that he would rather have her join the Presbyterian church than His own. But still he avoided saying anything about himself. Again she wrote to him, and appealing to the declaration of that morning, and to his letter, she affectionately entreated him to obey the truth as it is in Christ .Jesus, and not go down to death with a lie in his right hand—a thing the more dreadful because he knew it was a lie!

But all this did no good. He remained in the Universalist church. Though for a time he appeared to waver, and occasionally for some weeks together would attend the Sabbath ministrations of another congregation,

and sometimes wrote to his daughter in a manner which encouraged her to hope he would become a Christian; yet all this passed away, and the last time she mentioned her father to me, she told me with bitter tears, "He has gone back to the Universalists, and I am afraid he will be lost forever!" "Oh!" says she, "he knows better—they all know better—they try to believe their doctrine, but they don't believe it." I shrewdly suspect there is no little truth in her declaration.

The course of this man at first appeared to me very astonishing. I marveled at it beyond measure. I could not doubt that he told his daughter the truth, when he said he "thought it very likely that some would be lost forever." But while entertaining such an opinion, and while unwilling that the daughter whom he fondly loved should be a Universalist, that he should himself still continue to be a supporter of that system of falsehood, appeared to me most surprising. But I have ceased to wonder at it. He only followed the inclination (as I suppose) of his wicked heart. He did not obey his conscience. He only strove to pacify it with a delightful deception. He did not love the truth. And with some dark and indefinite notion about the salvation of all, he strove to hide himself from the power of the truth, which he both feared and hated—hated, because he feared. Any man who will be wicked and hardened enough thus to trifle with truth, and thus to run counter to conscience, and thus aim to "believe a lie," may be left to do the same thing. Human depravity, fostered and indulged, has immense power, and will lead in strange ways to the eternal ruin of the soul.

Sinners are sometimes kept from repentance by a hindrance which they do not suspect. This woman was. She afterwards recollected, that idea would come floating over her mind, and lingering around it, "Perhaps all will be saved." And this it was that half stilled her fears, and half pacified her conscience, and threw a sort of dimness and doubt over the whole field of religion. On this account she lingered in her sins, and away from her Saviour. She knew not her own heart till it sunk within her, as her delusion fled. But she soon came to Christ after her delusion was dissipated by the words wrung from the conscience of her father on

that memorable morning, “Elizabeth, I think it is very likely that some will be lost for ever!”