FRANCIS PARKMAN: A SKETCH

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Francis Parkman: A Sketch by O. B. Frothingham

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MEMOIR

OF

FRANCIS PARKMAN, LL.D.

FRANCIS PARKMAN was born in Somerset Place (now Allston Street) September 16, 1823. When he was four years old the family moved to Green Street, next to the handsome, large house on Bowdoin Square, with a green before it, shaded by chestnut-trees, and a garden behind on Chardon Street. This house was built by Samuel Parkman, the grandfather (taxed in 1822 on $150,000, the same as Gardiner Greene and P. C. Brooks). When his widow died, the house in Bowdoin Square was occupied by Rev. Dr. Parkman's family. In 1854 the mother of Francis rented it to the United States Government for a court-house, and as such it was used for three years; then it was sold and pulled down. In the mean time she and her family lived in a hired house on Walnut Street. The house in Chestnut Street was bought by the mother of Francis in 1864, and she died at Jamaica Plain in the summer of 1871. The great-grandfather, born in Boston, was a minister at Westborough, Mass. "It is worth mentioning," says Mr. Lowell (in the "Century" for November, 1892), "that a son of this clergyman, at the age of seventeen, served as private in the Massachusetts Regiment, during that 'Old French War,' as it used to be called, to which his grand-nephew has given a deeper meaning, and which he has made alive to us again in all its varied picturesqueness of hardihood and adventure. Another of his sons, returning to Boston, became a successful merchant there, a man of marked character and public spirit, whose fortune, patiently acquired in the wise fashion of those days, would have secured for his grandson a life of lettered ease, had he not made a nobler choice of spending it in strenuous

literary labor. One of this merchant's sons, a clergyman, was our author's father. . . . Energy of character and aptitude for culture were a natural inheritance from such ancestors, and both have been abundantly illustrated in the life of their descendant." This last passage may be true, but it is quite idle to pry into the secrets of heredity in the present case. Nothing but general predisposition can be discovered. Mr. Parkman's personality was so unique, his character was so exceptional, his experience so unusual, his taste so extraordinary, his talent so peculiar, that the line of inheritance seems to be all but broken. His positive traits were derived apparently from his mother, especially his moral qualities.

Her name was Caroline, daughter of Nathaniel Hall of Medford. She had by marriage six children, of whom Francis was the eldest, and two, sisters, still survive. She was a fine example of the best type of the New England woman. It must be remembered that Boston at that time was a small place; social lines were sharply drawn; there were few excitements of any kind; no great "causes" or "movements" agitated men. The question of "woman's rights" was hardly, if at all, raised; and it was entertained by a class of women who were then considered out of the pale of respectable regard. The consequence was that the life of ladies was very quiet and domestic. She was a Unitarian by inheritance, but quite uninterested in speculative or dogmatic matters. Her whole endeavor was to cultivate the Christian virtues and to exemplify the Christian graces as well as she could. With questions of doctrine, she did not concern herself, and took no part in the controversies that were raging around her, though she had a profound respect for spiritual things and an undoubting faith in the cardinal principles of religion. Her devotion to her husband and children was with her a sacred duty. Humility, charity, truthfulness, were her prime characteristics. Her conscience was firm and lofty, though never austere. She had a strong sense of right, coupled with perfect charity toward other people; inflexible in principle, she was gentle in practice. Intellectually she could hardly be called brilliant or accomplished, but she had a strong vein of common-sense and practical wisdom, great penetration into character, and a good deal of quiet humor. She loved her home and never wanted

to leave it, and put into it an amount of consecration which would have glorified a more extended sphere. She did not try to shine socially, but she had a large circle of friends, who were much attached to her. Her distinguished son resembled her in many respects, — looking like her more and more as he grew older.

The father, Rev. Dr. Parkman, was, in his way, a remarkable man, — not a great man, not a distinguished man, not a powerful or impressive man, but a cultivated and attractive one. He was graduated at Harvard College, studied theology under the Rev. William E. Channing, contributed a series of papers on moral and religious subjects to one of the Boston journals, was one of the first to visit England, heard medical lectures in Edinburgh, attended theological lectures given by Dr. Ritchie, then Professor of Theology there, read a discourse which received the approbation of the professor, preached in London, was invited to become the associate minister with Mr. Lewin in Liverpool, preached in the First Church, Boston, and in 1813 was ordained pastor of the "New North" Church. In 1829, he founded the Professorship of Pulpit Eloquence and the Pastoral Care in the Theological Department of Harvard College, and took an active part in the concerns of the Society for the Relief of Aged and Indigent Clergymen, which was formed in 1849. He was a man of various information, kindly spirit, simple and yet polished manners. Dr. Isaac Hurd wrote of him: —

"He was a diligent and successful student, moral and exemplary in his whole deportment. He discovered a strong desire for knowledge and an aptitude to avail himself of all the means which presented for general improvement. . . . Nor can I forget the uniform benevolence with which he regarded all around him. It seemed to give him pain to pass a beggar in the street without opening his hand in charity."

The Rev. F. D. Huntington (then a Unitarian minister, now Bishop of Central New York) says: —

"Every aspect of suffering touched him tenderly. There was no hard spot in his breast. His house was the centre of countless mercies to various forms of want; and there were few solicitors of alms, local or itinerant, and whether for private necessity or public benefactions, that his doors did not welcome and send away satisfied. . . . The processes of his mind were practical, however, rather than speculative.

His style was not wanting in force, but distinguished rather for clearness and ease. . . . For many years he has been widely known and esteemed for his efficient interest in some of our most conspicuous and useful institutions of philanthropy. Among these I may especially mention the Massachusetts Bible Society, the Society for Propagating the Gospel, the Orphan Asylum, the Humane Society, the Medical Dispensary, the Society for the Relief of Aged and Destitute Clergymen, and the Congregational Charitable Society. . . . Harvard University, of which he was an Overseer and frequent visitor, was very near to his heart, and its concerns touched his personal pride. Throughout he was a zealous and constant friend of the Unitarian movement, but was too Catholic in his feelings to favor an exclusive policy towards any Christian sect."

Mr. Edwin P. Whipple said of him: —

"Whether he conversed on theology or politics or manners or individual character, or recorded some sad or pleasant experience of his own, the wise and genial humorist was always observable, softening, enlivening, enriching everything he touched; his practical discernments were so sure and keen, his knowledge of the world was so extensive, and his perception of character and motives was so quick and deep that it was impossible to impose on him by any pretence or deception. . . . It was impossible to meet Dr. Parkman in the street or stop a minute to exchange words with him without carrying away with you some phrase or turn of thought so exquisite in its mingled sagacity and humor that it touched the inmost sense of the ludicrous and made the heart smile as well as the lips."

And Mr. Lowell says: —

"He still survives in traditions of an abundant and excellent humor, provoked to wilder hazards and set in stronger relief (as in Sterne) by the decorum of his cloth."

When he died (November 12, 1852) the Boston Association celebrated him as "one who loved his calling and discharged all its duties with untiring devotedness. As a preacher he was practical and evangelical; as a pastor tender and affectionate. He was a man of active and useful charities, a friend to learning, a punctual member or an energetic officer of many literary, philanthropic, and religious associations, as well as a true friend of the worthy poor. He 'loved the brethren'; he was 'given to hospitality,' 'distributing to the necessities of saints.'" Ephraim Peabody, D.D., minister of King's Chapel,

paid to him the best of tributes when he spoke of him as particularly kind to the unattractive.

The son had, from the beginning, an extremely sensitive physical system. In his fragment of autobiography, he speaks of "an inborn irritability of constitution which required gentler treatment than I gave it. . . . My childhood was neither healthful nor buoyant. . . . It was impossible that conditions of the nervous system abnormal as mine had been from infancy, should be without their effects on the mind, and some of these were of a nature highly to exasperate me. This subterranean character of the mischief, early declaring itself at the surface, doubtless increased its intensity, while it saved it from being a nuisance to those around." At eight years of age, being then delicate, he was sent to the farm of his maternal grandfather in Medford, near an extensive tract of wild and rough woodland, called the Middlesex Fells. This tract, which used to be called the "Five-Mile Woods," lies within the bounds of five municipalities, — Medford, Malden, Winchester, Stoneham, and Melrose. It encloses "Spot Pond," which covers an area of two hundred and ninety acres, the entire region containing about four thousand. The highest eminence, — "Bear Hill," — near the upper end of the pond, three hundred and twenty-five feet in elevation, has been taken for use as a park by the town of Stoneham. The whole district abounds in hills, ponds, pools, crags, and is admirably suited for park purposes. The latest history of Medford (Usher's) speaks of it as of volcanic origin, once covered with primeval forests, and later divided into farms, tilled, and, of course, inhabited. There are no remains of this now. The land looks as if it had been always neglected. In fact, it is not easy to see how anything like cultivation was ever possible, so rocky is it, so thin is the soil, so narrow are the interstices between the stones. There are no traces of human habitation, — no ruins, no cellars even. There are stone walls, but they only mark the boundary of wood lots. The forest, infested with small animals, and the deep mould of decaying vegetation, merely suggest the wilderness. The lower end of the Fells was but a few rods from Mr. Hall's land, so that an active boy could easily penetrate the woods, which, in Parkman's childhood, must have been ragged and tangled enough for a savage. Indeed, except that there were no In-

dians and no wild beasts, all the features of the waste existed. Four years spent in such a neighborhood were quite sufficient to form a taste for rude nature. Twice a day he walked about a mile to a school in Medford, Mr. John Angier's, which I recollect as an excellent school, though it was unsuited to a lad who was fond of collecting eggs, reptiles, and insects, of trapping squirrels and woodchucks, and attempting to kill birds. He lived mainly in the woods, an out-of-door life, learned all about trees and flowers, and contracted a taste for woodland scenery which only grew with his growth. He spoke of these days, in after life, as being among the pleasantest in his experience. After four years spent in the country, he was brought back to Boston; and this was the time when he practised, so disastrously, the experiments in chemistry which simply injured him. That he had any vigor left is a marvel; for chemicals are dangerous things for boys to play with. After this, being rather depressed and pale in appearance, in a low state of health, as he afterwards acknowledged, the quiet and modest boy, still and reserved, went to Chauncy Place School. When he entered, it is impossible to say, because the earliest records were destroyed in the great fire of 1872; but he was there in 1837, and had evidently come there, says his teacher, with the intention of learning and doing the best he could for himself. He was even then ambitious, and soon was able to join the class that was preparing to enter Harvard College in 1840. He was a good general scholar, especially interested in English composition and the proper use of the English language. Mr. William Russell, a Scotchman of learning and culture, was at that time teaching those branches at Chauncy Hall. Young Parkman availed himself to the utmost of his instructions, and derived great advantage from them. He used to amuse himself at this period with versifying stories of heroic achievement, which seemed to have a great fascination for him; thus he threw into rhyme the "Tournament" in Scott's "Ivanhoe," afterward using it for school declamation. Some portions of the "Eneid" of Virgil were treated in the same way. From Chauncy Hall School he went directly to Harvard College, graduating in the class of 1844. Already, in his Freshman year, according to the biography written for "McClure's Magazine" for January, 1894, "he spent a summer vacation in northern New Hampshire, making the ascent