PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

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PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

I.

At the request of some friends, and in response to an inward prompting, I propose to write some personal reminiscences of a life which, although perhaps not of great importance to the world, has been to me full of interest, with a remarkable variety of experiences. As I am quietly drifting down toward the close of my eightieth year, beyond which will come the beginning of second childhood or the loosening of the silver cord, I wish to put on record some of the lessons I have drawn from life and which have shaped the course of my ministry.

My first chapter will relate entirely to events in the first eight years, 1836–44. I was born in Southbury, Conn., where my father was ordained and served for five years as the minister of a Baptist church. After I was born we lived successively in Agawam, Mass., Stratford and Wallingford, Conn. I now put on record several events which have shaped the course of my whole life from that time to the present. As I look down the years to the little boy of whom I am writing, I see all the beginnings of the man that I now am. The lessons that I have drawn from my own experience in these early years have affected my treatment of children and the conduct of classes of boys and girls in my three pastorates. I trust that these lessons may be of use to others.

On the way from Agawam to Stratford we spent a night, and my mother and brother left me in bed while they went to hear a sermon by Elder Knapp, the great revivalist. At the breakfast-table I heard them tell what happened at the meeting. That morning Elder Knapp had been in court on a charge of inciting a riot at his

tumultuous revival meetings. In his sermon that evening he described the scene in court that morning, where he said, "It looked as if all hell had boiled over and this was the scum of it." While he was speaking, some one in the gallery fired an air-gun, which broke a pulpit lamp on one side of the speaker. The gun was found where it had been thrown from a gallery window, but the culprit was never discovered.

At Stratford a neighbor took me away to spend the day. When he carried me home at night I recited my lesson: "I am an Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren Democrat." To show that childish impressions are deep and abiding, let me say that from this time, although I was a red-hot abolitionist, I always called myself a Democrat until I was old enough to vote for John C. Fremont.

The event which made me an abolitionist and brought me afterward more than once into helpful relation with fugitive slaves occurred in my father's study. Standing by his chair I saw, and can see now, a negro who said that as a slave he had been cruelly whipped and then ran away. My father wished some proof of his story, and the man took off his coat, pulled his shirt over his head, and showed his back gridironed with unhealed stripes. Needless to say, I was hot with indignation.

In Wallingford several things happened which were the beginning of my religious and theological education. I was sent to the Baptist Sunday-school. The first lesson given me by my youthful teacher was a hymn which has remained in my memory ever since. The first stanza was,—

"Oh, how happy are they
Who their Saviour obey
And have laid up their treasures above;
Tongue can never express
The sweet comfort and peace
Of a soul in its earliest love."

I have to thank the girl who taught me for giving me at the age of five years the impression that religion was a joyous experience. In her teaching there was never a hint of the awful background which lay behind the teaching of evangelical churches in those days.

At home we had Scripture reading and prayers morning and night, and grace before meat three times a day. The impression made upon my mind was that devotion was not always spontaneous, and sometimes was evidently forced. I became shy of talking about religion, and I was much embarrassed when one morning my father laid his hand on my head and said, "I want you to love Jesus." The effect of too many prayers in my childhood was to make me in manhood over-sensitive in regard to personal revelations of religious experience. One incident may show that little pitchers have large ears. When I was seven years old my father read in the morning that he who calls his brother a fool is in danger of hell fire. In the course of the day I called my sister, two years younger, a fool, whereupon she pointed to me an accusing finger and said with glee, "Oh, you are in danger of hell fire." She thought she had a good retort.

In 1842 came the great Washingtonian temperance revival, started by Hawkins and two other drunkards in Baltimore. It spread like wildfire throughout the country, and efforts were made everywhere to interest the children in a crusade against "RUM." A pledge was printed, to be framed, which I will quote because it marked an important epoch in the temperance movement. The first four lines were:—

"We cold-water girls and boys
Freely renounce the treacherous joys
Of brandy, whiskey, rum, and gin,
The serpent's lure to death and sin."

Up to this time, as I have recently learned, the pledge of total abstinence did not include distilled liquors. Now an additional pledge was added, as follows:—

"Wine, beer, and cider we detest,
And thus we'll make our parents blest,
So here we pledge perpetual hate
To all that can intoxicate."

On the Fourth of July, 1842, there was a grand procession of boys and girls gathered from all the churches in town. At the head of it a boy carried a large banner, while another boy and myself assisted him to keep the

balance, with two silken cords. It was a hot day. As we passed my father's house I looked across the street where my mother's forefinger summoned me to come home. I obeyed with reluctance, for was I not a leader in a great movement?

In 1843 came the great excitement concerning the second advent of Christ, which spread through churches of all denominations and affected many ministers of religion who years after the time had passed disclaimed sympathy with the popular movement. This has been much misunderstood and maligned. There were many excitements and extravagances connected with it, but there were no ascension robes. William Miller was the leader of a crusade against the popular churches, and many who were stigmatized as "Come-outers" and "Millerites" left the churches. The appeal made by them was similar to that made by the early Quakers in Massachusetts. All men were exhorted to make ready for the coming advent of Christ, which William Miller predicted would come in 1843. My father accepted the belief in the speedy second coming, but did not leave the Baptist church. My mother was never moved by the excitement, which was great, and I shared her mood of quiet disbelief. When the time came I dreamed one night that the heavens opened and white-winged angels drifted down like snowflakes. In the orchard near the house were some rails leaning against the lower branches of an apple-tree. Some angels alighted on these rails, which tipped under their weight, when they drifted away as light as butterflies. It was a beautiful dream and shows that there was no thought of terror in my youthful mind concerning the coming of the awful day of judgment. From that day on my father's interpretations of Scripture were accepted by me only in so far as they were in agreement with such common sense as I had.

A curious thing happened, which affected all my later thought concerning my mother's creed and the use of sacraments. As a child I was allowed to sit beside her in the communion service. When the bread was passed, my mother took a piece; but when I put out my hand to take one, I found that this service was not for me. It

had a mysterious character, which was deepened after we went home. For some reason now forgotten I opened the velvet bag in which she carried her handkerchief and a sprig of fennel. In her handkerchief I found the piece of bread which she had taken and had not eaten. With a sense of awe, as in the presence of some inscrutable mystery, I closed the bag and never told her, then nor afterward, what I had found; but from that time on I knew that for my Baptist mother it was the spirit and not the form which engaged her attention. About this time I received a pleasant impression concerning preaching from a friend who had filled my father's pulpit in the afternoon. After the service he and I were in a room together. As he was leaning back in a chair with his eyes closed I made some remark which led him to say of himself, "Perfect rest and peace." Such from that time on I thought should be the mood in which preaching should leave a minister of the glad tidings.

My final reminiscence for this period will, I know, excite scepticism. It will be said that I am putting into the beginning of my eighth year something that happened later, but I am positive that my memory in this matter serves me well. For sixty years I have not looked at the book entitled "Vestiges of Creation," which was published anonymously by Robert Chambers. I have just looked up the date of its publication and find that it was 1840. It was a surprising book and was a precursor and preparation for Darwin's great work on "The Origin of Species." I probably did not read it until a later time, but I know that it came into our house and was discussed in my hearing by my father, who, in common with all other evangelical Christians, regarded it as a blow at the authenticity of the account of creation in six days in the book of Genesis. The impression made upon my youthful mind, that this was a book to be reckoned with, remained with me and made it perfectly natural for me to accept Darwin's interpretation. I can hear my father arguing with some one against the statements made in "Vestiges of Creation." He said, for instance, that the finding of marine shells on the tops of mountains was to be accounted for by the story of the flood in the time of

Noah. I listened with both ears and said nothing, but I did not accept the defence of orthodoxy against science.

My father was in the habit of taking me in his carriage wherever he went. While he made calls I was often left to amuse myself. One day while exploring the buildings on the premises of a parishioner I opened the door of a room in the back of the house, where I saw a well-dressed man evidently in the last stages of disease. I asked no questions and nobody told me his story, but in that mysterious way in which children gain knowledge from the looks of people, from what they say and what they don't say, I became aware that I had been looking upon the awful penalty of sin. The impression made was deep and was never effaced.

One day a converted Jew of prepossessing mien and address came to our house and was hospitably entertained at night. After breakfast he recited with great dignity and impressiveness some psalms in Hebrew. Soon after, he announced his intention to spend some days with us. Upon being told that our domestic arrangements were such that it would be quite impossible to entertain him he became very angry and broke out into an avalanche of curses that sounded like the imprecatory psalms. He went away in wrath, and from that time on I took no interest in any society organized for the conversion of the Jews. It is a good sign that efforts to proselyte among them have almost ceased.

These reminiscences seem to me important because they show how the deepest impressions are made upon the plastic mind of childhood, impressions which may be blurred under careless handling and may be forgotten, but which remain in what, without knowing much about it, we call the subconscious mind.

II.

1844–58. My father moved to the beautiful little town in the southwest corner of Vermont. Williams College was five miles away, and Prof. Albert Hopkins became a friend of my father's and sometimes preached