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William Vidler

WILLIAM Vidler, born May 19th, 1758, was tenth and last child of John and Elizabeth¹ Vidler of King Street,² in Battle, Sussex. The males of the family were stone-masons and the females domestic helps (one a lady's maid), all being communicants at St. Mary's, the parish church, and very proud to be visited by the Rev. Thomas Nairne, B.A., and Dean of Battle.

Those visits became more frequent as the college graduate found a kindred spirit in the unschooled son of the stone-mason, whose weakness of body kept him confined to a couch but whose mind was "as healthy and as avid" (to quote the Dean) "as any I've had the pleasure of contacting."

In one of his published sermons the ex-invalid recalls those days when he :

"was not ill-considered but yet ignored by the stalwarts of my family, to whom strength was as fetich as skill . . . The town numbered me with its incompetents, those unable to work therefore without the ordinary right to live . . . I owned nothing save desire to read and to remember what I read; the couch I rested on was loan from friend, my books were the Dean's, even my window view of trees and birds was veiled each evening bereaving me of everything save my thoughts."

When he was about eighteen he suddenly essayed to join his family at their stone-craft, with the result that "his life hung on a thread" for many long months afterward. And during those months the "patient understanding" of a neighbour's daughter saved him from despair. And more. For Charity Sweetenham introduced him to George Gilbert, and presently married him.

George Gilbert, independent Calvinist of Heathfield, known as "The Apostle of Sussex," visited Battle "with the Word of God" in 1776,³ preaching under Great Oak or Watch Oak at the entrance to the town, "not without opposition," and in the cottages. In one such meeting William "dedicated his life to his Lord," and in many such meetings afterwards he "led those assembled by reading some sound discourse."

¹ Elizabeth Bowling.

² Now High Street.

³ The Presbyterians had long before preceded him, a Mr. Burnard, of Lewes, forming a branch here in 1696 that lingered hesitatingly under visiting ministers until the middle of the next century, when their building was taken over by Vidler.

Dean Nairne, although "troubled by the new spirit of non-conformity," remained his friend, and in the autumn of 1777 sent him to the Isle of Wight to his brother the Vicar of Godshill. Here the youth learned "theology and the art to declaim it," the Biblical languages (his host being as zealous a student as his brother the Dean), and "the logical arts." Here also he clarified his thoughts anent Charity,⁴ deciding to marry her as soon as his means allowed.

Here also the cause of his bodily weakness was lost, and his stature and strength grew amazingly. Not long afterwards when the Bully of Battle tried to break up one of his meetings he bound the man's hands and, after the service concluded, "pushed him home in shackled humiliation."

The newly-formed band of disciples gathered by Gilbert⁵ recalled William from the Garden Isle to be their leader at £17 per year, and amongst those who attended his first meeting as Pastor were representatives from Sedlescombe of "the pious Lady Huntingdon" Connexion, some Quakers from Lewes, George Gilbert of Heathfield, and Thomas Purdy, for fifty or more years Baptist Pastor at Rye. Purdy had baptized William, as he had the eight first members of the Battle Church (1780), and he and Gilbert were witnesses at the wedding of William and Charity on the 7th of September, 1780, Thomas Nairne officiating.

That union can best be described by a quotation from a letter written twenty years after by Charity to a friend :

"As a man, a husband, a father, a friend, none ranks higher. He has a warm generous heart that feels for all. He is ever ready to do good beyond the extent of his means, even beyond the bounds of prudence. His humour is playful and innocent, his anecdotes and conversation highly interesting. All who know him allow he is so instructive and cheerful a companion as to be the delight of all."

William augmented his stipend by "peddling books when there was no stone to cut or when no stone was allowed to me to cut." One entry of his diary of this time reads : "When I was indebted £15, Thou, Lord, knewest my need and didst send just £15 to pay it with, though I had told no mortal." Thus were met

⁴ William Sweetenham, her father, came from Brighthelmstone (Brighton) to make bricks, joining the Heathfield brethren each Sunday (a twenty mile walk) until Gilbert's fellowship was formed.

⁵ George Gilbert, 1741-1827, born Rotherfield, enlisted 1759 in horse regiment of General Elliot, fought through Seven Year's War under Prince Ferdinand and the Marquis of Granby, distinguished himself in the capture of a French standard, converted 1776 at Nottingham, appointed superintendent of General Elliot's estate workmen the next year and became minister of Heathfield Independent Church, that he founded, introducing the message of His Mercy into more than forty different parishes, forming some churches that remain to this day.

again and again the expenses that increased so rapidly, five children coming in seven years and Charity's mother and his own mother presently being added to the household. Soon he made the front room of his house, 22 High Street, into the first bookshop possessed by Battle, and the only one in all the district between Rye and Lewes.⁶ Amongst his customers was Thomas Paine, then living in Lewes, who had just published his *Rights of Man*.

By 1790 his fellowship had grown to 150 baptized believers, his stipend to £50, and his services to six weekly, some in cottages more than ten miles away. A new Meeting House was opened, costing £700, of which £160 was raised locally and the rest by William in several tours of the country. During those journeys he met a youth at Northampton who was to be known as Dr. Ryland of Bristol, a venerable father at Arnsby whose son became Robert Hall of Leicester, and Andrew Fuller of Kettering. With the last William corresponded for some years, on Socinianism, the letters afterwards becoming public.

His diary during those years suggests he was not fully at ease regarding the theology he had been taught. In 1784 he writes: "I have lately had some serious thoughts of the God Head of Christ and the eternity of hell torments." And in 1787 there is the entry: "Much stirred by reading Mr. Winchester⁷ on the final restoration of all things." There is also that paragraph in the *Life* he wrote of his friend:

"I preached Calvinism for sixteen years, during which time my heart, with its feelings of love, and my head, with its cold unfeeling creed, were at perpetual variance. I have reason to bless the day which, by a full discovery of Divine Truth, set me at liberty; my heart and my head now both agree, and I both know and feel that God is Love."⁸

Being the man he was the fellowship had to be informed of his change of creed, and in December, 1792, after Winchester and he had changed pulpits, a series of meetings culminated in 153 members out of 168 voting he should remain Pastor. Other churches, however, opposed his staying; future engagements at both Baptist and Independent chapels were cancelled, and Rye and other Particular fellowships publicly disowned him.

He had been chosen, for the second time, to preach the Association Sermon⁹ at Chatham, and went there ready to do so, and

⁶ The Dobell family continued the business to recent times, one of whose sons was Bertram Dobell the Charing Cross book-seller and author.

⁷ Elhanan Winchester, 1751-1797, came from New Jersey to succeed Universalist James Rely, once a ministerial helper of George Whitefield, at the Philadelphian Chapel, Windmill Street, Finsbury Square.

⁸ *Life of Elhanan Winchester* by Vidler.

⁹ Kent and Sussex; of which he had been Moderator.

was met not only by oral abuse but also by threat of physical harm. June 4th and 5th, 1793, were days of drama in the stiff, square Chatham building with its narrow windows and the three-decker "that could with ease accommodate more than a dozen leaders." The agenda contained the items: "Separation of Mr. Vidler's society at Battle from the Association,"¹⁰ and "Acceptance of 15 late members of Vidler as the Particular Baptist Church,"¹¹ and "Excommunication of William Vidler; self-confessed heretic."

The substitute preacher was Middleton of Lewes, who decided to "improve the occasion" by taking as his text "God be merciful to me a sinner." But eloquence was impossible in so demonstrative an audience. Middleton stood in the great pulpit and Vidler stood in the deacon's pew, and whenever the preacher said something Vidler thought not altogether fair he raised his hand asking leave to answer (that was never granted), and at anything complimentary Vidler elaborately bowed, as he did when Middleton said: "Some of my hearers might conclude that those who maintained such doctrine must be *bad* men, yet heretics are sometimes the holiest and best of men; but they are the more dangerous on that account."

The excitement continued in the tavern around the dining table, where the delegates talked as rapidly as they ate, some, who had wished to exclude Vidler from the meal, turning their venom on the preacher, asserting he was tinged with the heresy he had pretended to condemn. Middleton, it is said, appealed to his living text, who rose and cleared his friend of the charge before leaving tavern and Assembly for ever.

Two years later Vidler was chosen to succeed Winchester¹² at Parliament Court, where his ministry was to last more than twenty years. In 1796 he moved home and family to Bethnal Green, soon after joining John Teulon as Bookseller and Publisher. On the retirement of Teulon he shared the business with Nathaniel Scarlett¹³ in the Strand and (1804) Holborn, dissolving the partnership when Scarlett published his *British Theatre*, but retaining the friendship.

In January, 1797, he began his occasional periodical, calling it *The Universalist's Miscellany* (with sub-title, "The Philanthropist's Museum": Intended Chiefly as an Antidote against the Anti-Christian Doctrine of Endless Misery), in 1802 *The Universal Theological Magazine*, and in 1804 added *The Impartial*

¹⁰ It became Battle Unitarian Church.

¹¹ The 15 who afterwards built Zion in Mount Street, Battle.

¹² Who wished to return home to America.

¹³ Converted by Winchester after being baptised by Vidler.

Review: New Series. The year after it was bought by Robert Aspland,¹⁴ a contributor to its pages.

The thirteen numbers published in the nine years by Vidler had fair sales, especially the earlier issues, bought largely because they contained the controversy between Andrew Fuller and Vidler on Socinianism.¹⁵

He had now become the recognised head of the British Universalists. Crowds filled Parliament Court and London discussed, not quietly, his sermons. He was a much sought after preacher, touring some part of the country each year, making many friends and converts.

During the final months of the century he received a call to Boston of the United States to lead a congregation that included some of the best-known poets and writers of the land, at last refusing it. The reason he gave was that he was pledged to his friends Nathaniel Scarlett and James Creighton, an Anglican clergyman, and James Cue, a Sandemanian, in a *Translation of the New Testament from the Original Greek: with Notes.*

Parliament Court was to experience a similar upheaval to that witnessed long before at Battle when their Pastor formally declared his Socinian belief. Three-quarters of his people left. His stipend dropped from £250 to £30. His friends went out of their way to avoid him in the street. But he refused to lose heart, and within a short time his pews were filled again and overflowing, his income once again became secure, and London returned to the discussion in coffee-house and tavern of his fiery and provocative sermons. He was also filling Leather Lane Chapel, Holborn, with his lectures for the Unitarian Evangelical Society he had founded, and travelling far and wide for the Unitarian Fund, of which he was a founder and trustee.

It was when he was touring the Eastern Counties and staying in Wisbech that he heard that Charity, his wife, was seriously ill. They were then living in "the little village called West Ham; a health resort," Mrs. Vidler never having quite recovered from the shock of her eldest son's death in 1796. At fourteen he had promised to be as brilliant as his father.¹⁶ He was one of the many victims of an epidemic that devastated East Sussex that winter.

¹⁴ Robert Aspland, 1782-1845, baptised 1797 Devonshire Square, won Ward Scholarship at Bristol Baptist Academy, 40 years minister Gravel Street Unitarian Chapel, Hackney.

¹⁵ This became a Battle of Books, including *Memoirs of Andrew Fuller* by Morris, *Letters to Mr. Vidler on the Doctrine of Universal Salvation* by Fuller, and *Letters to a Universalist* by Jerram, an evangelical clergyman.

¹⁶ A grandson, William (D. 1861), a son of Ebenezer the Sailor, was for 24 years Domestic Chaplain (Missionary) at Chapel Street, Milton Street, Cripplegate.

Ten years afterwards the second daughter, "another mother in the house," unexpectedly died when nearing her nineteenth year.¹⁷ "Therefore the home partner of William Vidler's sorrows and joys, tribulations and triumphs, was quite ready to answer her Father's call." She died December 22nd, 1808, in her 56th year.

To help forgetfulness the bereaved husband plunged into ever fresh work, writing a *History of the Particular Baptist Church at Battle*, and a *Life of Elhamon Winchester*, editing Paul Siegvolk's *Everlasting Gospel* and *Winchester's Dialogues*, and publishing sermons, his own and those of his friends, whilst establishing Unitarian Churches here and there, the best known of them being at Reading. As his strength allowed he continued his tours, several through Sussex, where he was guest of noble hosts at Battle Abbey and Ashburnham House, and of friends at Beach Farm¹⁸ and like homesteads, and preaching under some of the many Sussex oaks¹⁹ that sheltered the open-air gatherings of the time.

In his hurried journey to be with his dying wife he had had an accident, from an overturned post-chaise, that severely bruised his more than outsize body,²⁰ and went for nursing to his daughter and her husband, William Smith, the organist at Parliament Court, at Spencer Street, Northampton Square, and there, "resting of the Divine Goodness and the Paternal Character of God," he died on August 23rd, 1816, in his 59th year.

"At our last interview," said Robert Aspland, "he said, firmly and affectionately—and I am sure had he taken leave of every one of his congregation and friends it would have been in the same words—'Before the face of the Master, the Friend, the Brother, Jesus Christ, I expect to meet you again.'"

Before the burial in the Old Gravel Pit graveyard, Aspland delivered the funeral oration in Parliament Court, and spoke of the periodical his friend had founded, that now under William Johnson Fox²¹ had amongst its contributors John Stuart Mill, Crabbe Robinson, Harriet Martineau, Eliza Flower, Ebenezer Elliott, and Robert Browning,²² and then of his friend. William Vidler was, he said :

¹⁷ She was buried in Bunhill Fields.

¹⁸ That housed a regiment of sons who left one by one to farm in New Zealand. There was a "Hammer Pond" there, the last of those of the once famous iron-fields, the long heavy tree-stem handle of the hammer being uncovered in almost perfect condition in the early years of this century.

¹⁹ Watch Oak of Battle and Elizabeth's Oak at Northiam amongst them.

²⁰ He is said to have claimed two chairs at meetings and booked two seats for his coach journeys.

²¹ His successor at Parliament Court.

²² In 1836 it passed into the possession of R. H. Horne ("Orion") and the next year into that of Leigh Hunt, who had the assistance of W. S. Landor and G. H. Lewes.

"One of the true old English characters, quiet, simple, human, his bodily make tall and upright, his step angular and firm, his countenance open and varying, indicating great courage, his voice clear and strong, his person dignified. As a student he had himself said he moved slowly and comprehended slowly, not being of quick parts, but whatever he attained it remained with him and became his own. As a preacher he excelled in strength of reasoning, simplicity and perspicuity of style, and an open manly elocution."

On the tablet put on the wall of Parliament Court, Bishopsgate Street,²³ by his son-in-law, is cut this terse biography :

"In early life he became a Protestant Dissenter : his popular talents soon qualified him for the Ministry : his youth was spent without education, but rising superior to every obstacle he attained distinguished eminence as an extempore preacher : his mind, formed for great and noble purposes, was directed by benevolence of design, unshaken integrity, and profound love of truth : the various trials he endured for conscience sake dignified his character : his life and death illustrated the grand doctrines he taught : after a life of active usefulness, in the firm belief of the Divine Unity and the Universality of God's Love, without ecstasy but full of immortal hopes, revered, regretted, beloved, he fell asleep in Jesus, awaiting the Resurrection of the Just."

F. W. BUTT-THOMPSON.

²³ Where Vidler had been Minister 22 years.

First Epistle to the Corinthians. A Commentary by F. W. Grosheide. (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 25s.).

This work is part of the New London Commentary on the New Testament. Its author is Professor of New Testament Studies in the Free University of Amsterdam.

The commentary is on the English text. References to Greek words are always reserved for foot-notes. The text used is the American Standard of 1901. The exposition is always helpful, if at times rather over-elaborated. Amid the apparently unrelated variety of subjects treated in the epistle, Dr. Grosheide sees a main thread—the principle of Christian love—in the light of which the character of Christian freedom is to be interpreted. It was a false conception of freedom which gave rise to the particular problems with which the Apostle was faced. On some points, e.g. Deliverance to Satan, and the question of the Virgins in chap. VII, the argument is not convincing. Further one would have welcomed some discussion of the more significant terms in the Pauline literature, such as "sanctification," "redemption," etc. But the volume will be of help and inspiration. One must add that it is a pity that in a work of good appearance, so many minor errors should have passed. We have noted at least thirty errors of reference and the like.

W. S. DAVIES