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The Sensational Preacher

Dr. Geo W. Ryan's Informal by Dr. Geo W. Ryan

The American press in the fruition of its evolutionary growth has many sins to answer for. However, with all its faults there are none who doubt its power for good or ill, and it is only simple justice to say that its influence has generally been lent to that which is the better side of our poor human nature. But as in individuals so it is with the press – its faults are always more conspicuous than its virtues. With its overwhelming power it has made, in the minds of the people, statesmen out of second rate politicians Great captains out of men in whose minds war meant only a question of numbers and that the force of attrition was greater than strategy; Great orators out of phrase-makers and word-jugglers and sorriest of all, of after dinner jokers. Surely all of this is bad enough but it pales before its last production – the sensational preacher. No child ever had a more indulgent parent and the sweet milk of notoriety never pampered a more vigorous youth than he. Naturally under such treatment we would suspect such common things as rebellion, sulkiness or poutings, which characterize the spoiled child. Not so with our sensational preacher. He is a wise child indeed and he has a keen eye for the main chance with a lively sense of that gratitude which has been defined as the expectation of the favors which are to come.

We, in Cincinnati, are not wholly unfamiliar with his kind. A few years ago an individual projected himself into the community as the pastor of a rather obscure church on the West Side. He was a man of striking appearance and of considerable education, although his manners and bearing might lead one to doubt it. He had a very good voice and one could not fail to admire the intense and unrelenting energy he exercised in keeping it in practice. It was whispered about that he had been known to arise in the middle of the night and indulge in an half hour monologue. Such a temperament as he had could not be satisfied with a small audience on one day of the week, and like other ambitious citizens he readily saw that the shortest way to notoriety in our conservative city was to enter politics and forthwith threw his whole energy into its murky waters. It is charitable to believe that he made a mental reservation regarding his soul. The old parties did not present an inviting field – and the adjective is knowingly used for an invitation from the “boys” was probably not tendered. So our facile friend found himself posing as an orator of the great cause of labor. His was the most prominent figure at the convention. He was heard on street corners declaiming the wrongs of the poor artists and – from the pulpit of his church the beautiful platform of the party was a theme that never wearied him, though it was doubtful if as much could be said of his auditors.

He made his appearance before the congregation in evening and a showy diamond glistened on his shirt. This sincere and beautiful apostle was heard no more in the great cause of labor after the ticket was defeated. But he had distinctly achieved his object. He was talked about, and he evidently had an abiding belief in the truth of the old cynical saying that it is good to have people speak well of you if they will, but if they will not then encourage them to abuse you.

His name was frequently in the newspapers. His sermons were often printed and he posed as an intellectual preacher with liberal tendencies. He learned that a man named Darwin had written a book on the "Origin of Species" and it is reported that he read it with considerable interest if not curiosity. Huxley and Tyndall had also contributed an occasional sketch to the same subject and they were perused with the acumen of a discriminating mind. And then the theory of Evolution was taken hold of by our friend with characteristic audacity and the public soon learned through the press that he was belaboring his Orthodox children with a club. The poor mistaken souls had secured, as they believed, some one, who was to teach them something of the sublime sayings of the Prince of Peace, but they found a warrior who was determined to make scientists out of everyone of them. It was not long before Spiritualism was a subject for another series. Hypnotism came in its good turn and was explained so clearly and beautifully that the metaphysicians who are still puzzling their weak intellects about it would have embraced him in rapture – if they could have been led to believe in the exposition.

But with all of our friends eccentricities his love of sound and fury he has not attempted, or if he has he was wise enough not to exploit it, the role in which Dr. Parkhurst has so recently played his Star engagement. No one can find fault with the New York divine for his public crusade against the corruption which is the cancer of municipal government in the United States. It deserves and should receive the hearty encouragement of the press and of all – and it is not easy to say that he is without his province when he attempts. His "slumming" tour must have given sorrow to all men who respect and revere the cloth. The performance in the house of Hattie Adams where he spent an hour or two and the subsequent testimony of himself and his Sunday school Assistant and particularly as to the conduct of the latter with the inmates is not a pleasant picture to dwell upon.

He went it is said by himself in order to see the immorality prevalent in New York under the protection of the police and we may hope that he saw enough to last him a lifetime. As if perchance our good friend never believes that such things had not existed since the days of Noah.

Surely it is time to call a halt to sensationalism in the pulpit when a man of high culture – a preacher in a sect distinguished for the high intelligence of its ministry

– stoops to such methods in order to gain a notoriety which will avail nothing in the making mankind better and which must result only in the destruction of the moral force of the pulpit. And may we not in all reverence wish such men may gain something of that grace for which they appeal so often and apparently receive so little.

George W Ryan

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