The Venerable John Paterson Smyth

A Memoir by
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Old in years but young as ever in heart and mind, John Paterson Smyth has at last set out on the great Adventure to which he always looked forward, as he said, "With eager, intense, glad curiosity." Just as the Church bells had summoned the people to Evensong on Sunday, February 14th, he slipped quietly through the veil into the Unseen. He has begun to explore a world that, by voice and pen, he made so real and vivid for many. A short while ago he wrote to a friend who was in sore grief over a mother's death in these words: "I have no troubles, no anxieties, nothing in front of me now but the change of death which I feel sure will bring the real romance of life. None of life's crises, I think, can be as beautiful and hopeful as that when we pass 'through the little gate into the City.' I have great plans for that Hereafter . . .. I am looking forward to a very lovely time on the Other Side. Shake off this foolish fear of death, which has spoiled so much

Paterson Smyth's long ministry divides into two almost equal parts, twenty-seven years in Ireland, twenty-five in Canada. It was towards the end of May 1907, that he stood for the first time in the pulpit of St. George's, Montreal. A few weeks before, the traffic had been blocked in Dawson St., Dublin, by the immense crowd struggling to gain admission to St. Ann's to hear the farewell sermon of the man who, in five years, had drawn all Dublin to his feet by his fearless preaching of the everlasting love of God. Not since the days of the great Evangelicals, in the previous generation, had Irish congregations thronged to a preacher as they did to Paterson Smyth. This Dublin ministry is the high watermark of his pulpit power. His sermons were seldom shorter than forty-five minutes and, at times, exceeded the hour. But he cast such a spell upon his hearers that they were unconscious of the flight of time. In those days, he used an abundance of gesture that he abandoned in later years. Who of those who have heard him only within the last few years would recognize him in this pen-picture made by a Belfast journalist in 1906? "He is a wonderful preacher. With a wealth of suitable gesture, he seemed almost unable to restrain himself to the limited confines of the pulpit. He would emphasize his remarks by patting the palm of his left hand with the first two fingers of his right. One moment he crouches down in the enclosure in such a position as to suggest that he longed for a shillelagh and wanted to add 'Hurroo' to some truism. Then he would lean heavily on either side of the rostrum until his head sank down into his broad shoulders." This was a life-like portrait at the time. Paterson Smyth was at his best in expository preaching. The sermons that drew the crowds were not only his impassioned assaults on medieval ideas of Hell, which in those days were still "de fide" with the strictly Orthodox. No; they were sermons of the Patriarchs, Moses and the Exodus, the Prophets and Kings of Israel. His vivid imagination and incisive descriptive powers made these old worthies live; they were men like ourselves, moved by the same motives, feeling the same loves and hates, faced with many like problems. To hear Paterson Smyth deal with Joseph and David was to realize the sense in which it is true that human nature is the same in all ages. He never descended to the meretricious art of "topical preaching," he scorned all "stunts" to draw the public. Topics of the day, questions of the moment came in naturally in his expositions of Scripture. He

had an uncanny power of reading the thoughts of the man in the pew, with the instinct of a true prophet he could feel the public pulse.

He took infinite pains in the preparation of his sermons. The voluminous manuscript that he laid on the pulpit desk was not read, it served as notes and was a guarantee to the discerning listener that thought and words had been submitted to the stern discipline of pen and paper. It was his habit to go into the empty church on Saturday night, stand in the pulpit and, with his wonderful imaginative power people the empty pews with the faces of those to whom on the morrow, he must speak the words of Life.

If his power as a preacher waned somewhat in the course of his Canadian ministry, his fame and influence as a writer extended to reach an ever-widening public. His career as an author began in his curate days. The year of his Ordination, 1880, witnessed the first appearance of the Revised Version of the New Testament, followed four years later by the Revised Old Testament. There are those who can remember the bewilderment, the heart-burnings and suspicions with which this "new" Bible was received. To devout souls, nurtured on the theory that the English Authorized Version was in some way the infallible and verbally inspired Word of God, it seemed that the Stevisers had incurred the dread doom pronounced in the closing words of the Bible on those who would add to or take from the things which are written in this book. The young curate, fresh from his brilliant college course, determined to explain to his congregation the real nature of the revision. When he had told the involved but fascinating story of "How we got our Bible," a publisher in the audience, Mr. Eason, undertook to produce the lectures in book form. This was the book of which Gladstone said: "Rarely have I seen the faculty of lucid exposition more conspicuously displayed." This was the beginning of a literary career that was to bring him fame and substantial financial returns. A total of twenty-three books lave come from his pen. Three of these: 'How we got our Bible," "The Gospel of the Hereafter," and "A People's Life of Christ" have reached a circulation of over half a million and are still among the best [idlers in their class.

With the exception of Bishop Gore, whose writings hardly come into the comparison, probably no contemporary writer of popular religious books has achieved such a circulation. And have the works even of Gore been published in eleven languages and Braille type? "The Gospel of the Hereafter" and the "Life of Christ" have been translated into Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Dutch, Italian, South American Spanish, Hindustani. Urdu, Arabic, Formosan, Russian. The "Life of Christ" has just appeared in Braille.

But these achievements are only a background against which those who knew him intimately will ever see a most loveable and loving man. Paterson Smyth could not help loving. He proclaimed it to be the supreme duty of a clergyman’s life to think the best and believe the best of all men. He lived by that rule to the full. Never did beggars appeal to him in vain. People said that he was easily imposed upon, but that was not really so. A keen judge of character, he detected the frauds and professional beggars as swiftly as any of our social experts. The difference was that his pitying eye saw in every one of them a brother man and a son of God. His vast sympathy was like that of Father Stanton, who whimsically left a bequest for "the undeserving poor."

Love was his only weapon against those who adopted a hostile attitude to him. Such big men as he are bound to provoke jealousies and make enemies among the smaller-minded. His doctrinal position was misunderstood by many and cruelly misrepresented by a few. Paterson Smyth, though sensitive as a woman, never spoke a bitter word of such persons. Sometimes his keen sense of humour shielded him from the barbed shaft. An effort was made by Lord Monteagle to secure his election as Bishop of Limerick, and so to hold him for his native land. But silly slanders had done their work. When one synodsman told a canvasser that he

intended to vote for Paterson Smyth, he was solemnly informed: "Then your are casting your vote against Jesus Christ." Paterson Smyth saw, or pretended to see, only the comical side of that cruel remark. Even a brief memoir must include some reference to his humour. How he loved to hear and tell funny stories! A bishop, who served with him ' on the committees for the revision of the Prayer Book, declared that Paterson Smyth often saved a situation. When nerves were frayed and tempers getting short, he was sure to clear the air with some droll remark or flash of wit that provoked a healthy gust of laughter. Thus, a committee was divided on the manner in which the article of the Creed, "He descended into Hell" should be treated. Someone proposed that an explanatory note should be added and the article marked with an asterisk. The mellow brogue rolled out: "I think you'd be an ass to risk it." The footnote we have but we are spared the asterisk. Another story is better known. In General Synod it is the custom for messages to be sent from the House of Bishops to the Lower House designated by the letters of the alphabet. The Lower House may concur, non-concur, non-concur, or add a rider in amendment and return the message for the approval of the bishops. If the messages are so numerous as to exhaust the alphabet, the letters are doubled; the twenty-seventh is called "Message AA." In one such session the Prolocutor announced: "From the Upper House. Message G.G." Quick as a flash Paterson Smyth was on his feet. "Mr. Prolocutor I move that we send back the bishops' gee-gee with a rider."

When he was appointed Archdeacon, he took great pride in wearing, on formal occasions, the garb distinctive of Anglican dignitaries but the gaiters were a source of constant amusement to him. He told the Bishop that they threatened to interfere seriously with his spiritual life; some mornings, he had to decide whether to say his prayers or button his gaiters. Among some good Limericks in which he delighted is this:

"There was an Archdeacon who said
May I take off my gaiters in bed?
But his Bishop said, No,
Wherever you go
You must wear them until you are dead."

Let no one think that his humour was forced. With him, it was so spontaneous that he could say things even in the pulpit that on other lips would shock.

Four great themes exercised his thoughts and enlisted his enthusiasm in the course of his ministry. They were: (1)The Bible; (2)Social Service; (3)Reunion; (4)The Hereafter. These governed all his preaching and teaching. While he occupied the Chair of Pastoral Theology in T. C. D., he imparted his infectious enthusiasm to his students and impressed the stamp of his own earnestness upon them. He brought a new atmosphere of devotion into a Divinity School that, in those days, was perhaps laying excessive stress upon the intellectual training of ordinands. One can but mention with reverence his adoration of his wife. None can estimate to what extent the man was made by this great love nor what he owed to her devoted care in his hours of prolonged physical suffering.

Ever a boy at heart, he has gone to join another boy in the Unseen, the boy to whom he dedicated the "People's Life of Christ."

"God, accept him. Christ receive him."