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MRS. ELIZABETH PHILLIPS SOULE.

BORN AUGUST 15, 1794.

DIED MAY 9, 1883.



Fruit in Old Age.

A MEMORIAL SKETCH

OF

MRS. ELIZABETH PHILLIPS SOULE.

BY HER PASTOR,

REV. GEORGE E. STREET,

IN THE

SECOND PARISH CHURCH, EXETER, N. H.,

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“THEY SHALL STILL BRING FORTH FRUIT IN OLD AGE.”—*Psalms* xcii. 14.

THE dread of growing old, so natural to every one, so keenly felt and expressed by those starting on the downward side of life's journey, springs largely from the desire to be still active and useful.

Coming years are not so much feared in themselves as the possibility of living in them without participation in the work of the world. Old age is an unwelcome visitor because it comes in, as many feel, with a warning that foreclosure upon one's possessions and powers is begun. And so, to most people of active temperament and habits, the prospect is the dreary one of not living in any real sense; of laying aside all interest in what they have done, or what others are doing; of resting, or rather rusting out, like an unused machine; of watching the melancholy process of self-decay go on, and waiting the hour when, the forces of life having been wholly spent, the end comes. It was in this sense of it that Hood sang:—

“When he is forsaken,
Withered, and shaken,
What can an old man do, but die?”

But in spite of this dread of slow decay and dependence, which leads so many to hope very earnestly that they may never live to grow old, we hear the Bible, that true friend of human happiness, everywhere speaking of long life as a blessing. It is held up to men as a prize to be coveted. It is the promised reward of a virtuous course. “That thy days may

be long" was the powerful incentive set before men to lead worthy lives in an age when life had far fewer attractions than now; and if we ask why this different estimate upon old age from what we are apt to cherish, the answer is that it was an old age conditional on and following a life of virtue and obedience to God that alone stands at a high premium. Such an old age could not be a period merely of regret and of gloomy decay. It would have too much vitality and worth left to be shut out from the world as past use and valueless. True, the physical sense might be dulled, the day of movement, enterprise, or growth, even, might be past; but it would be the season, nevertheless, when the best fruits of the whole previous life might be matured and garnered up for the good of mankind; when character, which is the true man, might reach its ripest stage of earthly progress and exert its most elevating and purifying power upon others; and above all, when the conscious nearness of another and better life might fill the soul with the energy of hope and of glad expectation.

Even the tendency to look backward, so characteristic of those who are facing the westering sun, might be met by one of faith and high Christian feeling by the more powerful drawings of eternal hope. So that old age, with its bright, calm outlook toward the heavenly home, might be a better thing in the Christian life than youth or even manhood.

This is the central thought in the passage containing the text. Taking those oft-used emblems of the "righteous," the waving palm and the stately cedar of Lebanon, the psalmist conceives of them as planted in the courts of the Lord's house, striking deep their roots and growing up there; and how, even in their age, not only their shade and fragrance, but their fruit as well, should be seen and enjoyed by the multitude resorting thither. The very age of such trees in that place would give them peculiar veneration and value.

It is, however, a comforting thought that we do not need to refer to the times or the teachings of Holy Writ for assurance

that old age may still be the crowning period of life, but that here among us it has been so clearly demonstrated that "age is opportunity, no less than youth itself."

One has just finished her course in this community, having transcended the natural limit of human life by nearly a score of years. Coming of a stock noted not only for its intellectual robustness, but also for physical endurance and longevity, she naturally expected, if she lived to be old, she might go on to extreme old age; and to her came the shrinking, so natural to us all, from falling into a dotage, which should be a burden to herself and to others. So with strong will, — shall I not rather say with the impulse and purpose born of high Christian responsibility, — she seems to have resolved not to surrender herself to the whims and caprices, the pettishness and peevish selfishness, which sometimes disfigure old age and make the period of second childhood a very unlovely childhood. If her Heavenly Father wished her to stay in the world beyond the time when most men leave it, outliving the friends of her youth and riper years, she would try to glorify Him in that lengthened lease of life as conscientiously as she had ever done. She would still accept life as a glorious trust and opportunity. She would not be out of conceit with the younger generation about her. She would try to fit into society in some efficient way as a factor for good. And so she kept her mind alert by constant communication with the thought of the present through the press, with the movements transpiring in the political world, with the changes of sentiment in the church, with the social and moral drift among the people at large or in the community about her. Her sympathies she kept active with all the benevolent work in which she had ever been interested, or which was being developed by other hands to meet some fresh emergency.

When the days came in which her increasing infirmities prevented her attending church, her benefactions to missionary and other charitable causes kept on. By some instinct she

seemed to know when the time of such charitable offerings came, and would send in her unasked donation. She begged to be kept informed of whatever other busy hands were doing for the destitute, both of our own and of other lands, saying, with happy earnestness, "You know I want to be still counted in as one of the workers."

Certain charitable objects which had long been her especial care kept their place in her thoughts after she had become too feeble to personally attend to them, and her planning brain and heart took pains that they should not suffer. The friendly ties she had formed in so many directions, here and elsewhere, were not allowed to be weakened, but, by correspondence, made difficult by her failing sight, and by many lovingly devised tokens of her affection, she kept warm and flowing the stream of intercourse of other days. And so as before, —

"Deeds of week-day holiness
Fell from her noiseless as the snow;
Nor did she ever chance to know
That aught were easier than to bless."

As a matter of course, one by one of her active duties in the household had to be relinquished to other hands; but her interest in those duties did not flag. In no regretful and suspicious way did she follow those who took up her laid-down work. Rather did she cheer them on by the intelligent, grateful sympathy she expressed with all they were doing, making it, by her appreciative words, a real pleasure, if not honor, to do what, if she had been able, she would so gladly have done.

Her appreciation of what was done for her, however slight, gave her companionship a charm to those beyond the family circle. It was not true, as the great poet said, that "men shut their doors against this setting sun." The young loved, as did those older, her society, for they found themselves with one who felt still "the gulf stream of her youth flowing into

the arctic region of her life" and showed in her face and cheery welcome her gratitude for their coming, — who could enter at once most fully, joyously, into all that occupied them, as if bound to prove that "days, though shortened, still can shine." The inquiry after her own health was usually dismissed, after a brief answer, with a brightening look and the enumeration of her manifold blessings. Her humility always showed itself in her wonder that her Heavenly Father should give her so little pain and discomfort, — so many mercies. Not the least of these was the strong filial affection she was conscious of every day and the friendship of so many congenial minds. Her self-forgetfulness made her think that she only was the benefited one, while they thought of her as benefactor; for, speaking from an experience of many visits to her sick-room, there was rarely an occasion when she did not confer more good than was brought to her. *Not* to speak of the spectacle of such absolute trust in God, of such cheerful bearing up under infirmity, ~~there~~ were her practised mind and ripened experience in the Christian life, which ever brought forth their stores for my own and others' enrichment, ~~for~~ with her, *conversation* was regarded as a talent not to be despised and hidden, but put to use as much as gold itself. In the commerce of minds through this channel she early in life discovered an immense source of mental and spiritual wealth, and had assiduously cultivated it. While she had not despised games and amusements in the gatherings of friends, they were not held by her in high favor, since they tended so effectually to cramp the exercise of this noble gift. She well understood the natural hunger of the mind for ideas well expressed, and how the magnetism of the person speaking, the light of the eye, the expression of the face, would make the image of some thought flash upon the mind like a sudden picture; and so in that earlier life of our century when, though books and periodicals were scarcer than now, yet knowledge and reflection were

perhaps better balanced, she had sought to develop in herself and in others this now almost "lost art" of entertaining, effective, useful speech, and with a success and influence for good beyond her knowledge on earth; for, during the many years in which she aided her husband in his high position at the head of this academy, it was an obligation she turned into a delightful privilege to speak judicious and well-chosen words to the many young men who formed a part of her own household or who came within her reach, which became as seed-thoughts of manly Christian purposes and actions afterwards.

To the exercise of this talent she brought an essential factor to conversational success, — an accurate and well-stored memory. The knowledge of her subjects was therefore ready at hand. She carried around with her the materials, carefully assorted, for pleasant and profitable discourses, — pointed passages of Scripture, hymns by favorite authors, poems, either entire or in fragments, with choice selections from other literature, and a vivid and varied reminiscence of men and scenes she had herself been familiar with, — animating all with a glow of hearty, personal interest.

When, therefore, she came upon those days when retirement and seclusion were her appointed lot, and month followed month of waiting for her Heavenly Father's summons, she brought to the trial many resources in herself. Most mercifully her mind was allowed to retain its integrity and poise. Her mental force was unabated, and out of her treasures, new and old, she was able to draw forth those literary, Scriptural, and biographical stores of her former years, which continually refreshed her own and other hearts. Now it would be a poem of Cowper's, and now a hymn of Wesley's, Montgomery's, or Doddridge's, and now a striking passage from some favorite preacher or author. In my last visit to her but one she was speaking of our human need of prayer, and asked if I remembered Tennyson's fine passage on the sub-

ject. Failing to quote it accurately, she turned with her own dim sight to the place in "Morte d'Arthur":—

"More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of; therefore, let thy voice
Rise like a fountain for me night and day;
For what are men better than sheep or goats,
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If, knowing God, they lift not hands in prayer,
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God."

Long will that image of her live in my mind as she used to sit propped up in her chair, dressed with the severe simplicity which suited her taste and character so well, a picture of health, though losing strength by almost imperceptible degrees, dignified, without stiffness or coldness, rallying herself to every fresh encounter with friends, responsive to all innocent mirth, yet, without abrupt change of tone or feeling, leading the conversation before it ended into serious and higher channels, and joyfully uniting with her pastor in prayer.

It has been said that one of the dangers to strong minds in growing old is the *loss* of their *early convictions*. Painful instances of this will recur to many of us. The principles of faith and of conduct for which they contended earnestly when young or in their maturity, and by which they themselves were established, seem, if not to lose their importance, to be less definite and deserving of emphasis as they come upon later years. This relaxing of the grasp of conviction may be thought the result of a broadening mind, but as it affects all opinion, it is more likely to indicate a loss of moral fibre and of spiritual perception; to be evidence of really a weakened manhood. But no such yielding of once cherished convictions was seen in her whose later life we are to-day glancing at. It is true, I have heard her express dissatisfaction at the large space she had given, in the days of it, to purely theological controversy; but to the essential facts of Biblical theology as she saw them

in the light of our Saviour's teaching, she unflinchingly adhered. And these facts she felt underlie Christian faith and hope everywhere.

Mere creed statements and forms of religious worship interested her but little. The cardinal facts which the heart witnesses to, of great moral and spiritual need, and of God's provision for it in His word and dear Son Jesus Christ, of the comfort and power of prayer, of the possibility and privilege of walking with God here,—these grew into her convictions rather than out of them, as the years went on, and on these grounds of her heart convictions she easily touched hands with Christians of every name, and upon all she felt like breathing the apostolic benediction of Paul: "Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity."

Her religion was more than a sentiment, it was a faith which worked by love and purified the heart. It was nothing in her view, except as it was realized in all her walk of life and her relations with others. So her *conscientiousness* became her striking trait of Christian character. It went, as those who knew her best have testified, into everything,—into simple and sincere speech as into act. Her calm, well-balanced judgment kept her from carrying it into unworthy and needless issues, but into all matters where principle, moral and Christian principle, was at all concerned, there she let conscience alone speak,—while she prepared herself to obey its voice at whatever cost, acting always under this mentor, her convictions of duty seemed to carry a certain majesty with them which impressed others, and even conquered their approval, while it gave to her own spirit a certain calm and cheerful tone, which nothing could ruffle. And so, instead of becoming what Wordsworth calls,

"The sport of every random gust,
Of being to herself a guide,"

she had learned to spurn "such unchartered freedom," and, in

sweet captivity to conscience and to Christ, to hail with the poet the voice and form of Duty —

“Stern Law-giver! Yet thou dost wear
The Godhead’s most benignant grace,
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face.”

And yet, in my recollections of my subject, towering above this ever-present and all-dominating conscientiousness, will be her *religious aspiration*, which I cannot better define in her case than as an eager relish for spiritual things, and hence for those means God so kindly gives us for lifting our minds upward to the spiritual world, — for divine truth, for prayer, for those sacred songs which seemed to her like the wings her spirit needed to soar with toward heaven.

If I had doubted the fitness of revealed religion to man, or whether there were such a revelation, her presence surely was not the place for such a doubt to find encouragement. If I had ever thought of the possibility of a person’s fulfilling life’s great end without faith, such a thought could not have been cherished there, for more and more prayer was her “vital breath,” religion her life.

With all her interest in things about her, — which was undiminished to the last, — with all her contentment with her surroundings, there was an eager outgoing of her whole nature for something more and higher, — a longing for something which, though unseen, seemed almost within her grasp, the certainty of which she no more doubted than of the presence of her earthly friends. What was it? It was what David felt when he cried, “I am athirst for God, — for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?” It was what Augustine felt when he said, “Lord, I am made for Thee, and my soul is ever disquieted till it find rest in Thee.” It was her immortal spirit reaching out after its native element, — the mighty instinct of a child of God craving its own place and portion in its Father’s house.

Ah, who could not see that the inner man was increasing though the outward were perishing, — that the husk was withering because of the ripening, swelling life of the kernel within! Vain, as cruel, the suggestion to such a one that of the future to which she was aspiring nothing could be certainly known. The whole forward movement and energy of her soul would have disproved it. She felt, she knew, that One whose divine provision had met her on entering this life would make no less generous and suitable provision for her on leaving it; that He who had taken her into His divine love and counsels on earth, and permitted her to walk with Him in a fellowship of increasing delight, would not disappoint her hope as she left the boundaries of earth and time. Rather did she hear Him whisper to her inner ear, "Because I live ye shall live also."

And so, though keenly interested in the affairs of this world, and loving dearly her many earthly friends, and sincerely attached to this church, of which she was the oldest member, she yet looked eagerly forward to that brighter world whither her Saviour had gone and the friends of nearly three generations had preceded her, and could say with one who had herself loved "the life that now is" and had her full share of its blessings: —

*
 "Life, we've been long together,
 Through pleasant and through stormy weather.
 'T is hard to part where friends are dear;
 Perhaps 't will cost a sigh, a tear.
 Then steal away, give little warning;
 Choose thine own time.
 Say not Good-night, but in some brighter clime
 Bid me Good-morning."



