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THOMAS S. MCPHEETERS

IN MEMORY OF

Thomas S. McPheeters

1852-1909

To record the virtues of a fine character while they are still fresh in the minds of men; to tell others who were unacquainted with them of these virtues, in the hope that a high example may spur to emulation; to set down in enduring form the services of one who has been useful to many people, in order that men may not seem indifferent to the obligations of gratitude; these are the motives which have induced the preparation of the following memorial.

1909

THOMAS S. MCPHEETERS was born in St. Louis on the 5th day of May, 1852. His father was a Presbyterian clergyman of Scotch-Irish descent. Much good might be said of his ancestors. They were strong, God-fearing folk, devoted to duty, competent to all work, self-contained, self-respecting and mindful of the rights and needs of others. The narrow income of the clergyman provided few luxuries, and the boy was brought up in the stern simplicity of a well-ordered and economical household. His religious instruction, begun in his early childhood, developed in his mind convictions which nothing in his subsequent experience disturbed, and he became and remained throughout his life an ardent and stern Calvinist.

His schooling was such as fell to the lot of children of his time. Narrow, perhaps, from a more recent point of view, it was thorough and useful, and as well calculated to fashion and confirm the mind and character as the more artful instruction of to-day. He entered Washington and Lee University, but left college before obtaining his degree. He was never a student in any proper sense of the word. His mind was active and eager, but too desultory for persistent application; and his temperament resented the constraint of any set task. What he learned he learned quickly, and rather from men than from books. He derived from college a little learning, such discipline as boys give each other, and friends for whom his affection never diminished. That he was a merry companion, a wild scamp given to practical jokes and all manner of roguish pleasantries, we know from his contemporaries and from himself. He was also a sincere, hearty Christian even at this early period, and to every temptation opposed the sturdy resistance of a quick conscience, fortified by fear of the wrath of God. In his

case, as in all others, the child was father to the man, and the character which slowly unfolded during his youth shaped and determined his after life.

After leaving college he returned to St. Louis in order to earn his livelihood. His business career, never very eventful, does not concern us. After several disappointments, he established a business which prospered and provided for his family a moderate livelihood. He made friends quickly, he became known to everybody, everybody liked him; but his heart, his soul, his personality, were devoted to other things than the making of money.

Immediately after his return to St. Louis he joined the church of which his father had been pastor, and became active in its affairs. Henceforth religion and the things that pertain to religion, became his ruling passion. He taught Sunday School, then a Bible class, and at the same time conducted services in the Young Men's Christian Association. For many years he preached every Sunday afternoon to the prisoners in the St. Louis jail. Throughout a long period of time he was the superintendent of a Sunday School for negro children. He was constant in attendance upon the services of his church, never omitting what he regarded as a duty, upon any pretext. Having become interested in the work of the local Y. M. C. A., he was profoundly impressed by the good it accomplished, and entered upon the work of establishing and building up such institutions with the whole ardor of his nature, begging and importuning his friends for financial aid, exhorting his associates to greater zeal, instructing the members, rousing communities to the moral value of Christian influences upon young men, urging young men to righteousness and old men to helpfulness.

The faculties which he brought to the discharge of these various responsibilities were of the highest order, and he used them without stint. His reputation became national. Everywhere he was successful. His eloquence was as efficacious in Boston and Atlanta as in St. Louis and Kansas City. He traveled continually, and continually did good. Old men and young men, from one end of the country to the other, were impressed by him. To the former he offered opportunity to do good, to the latter safe refuge from temptation, a place to meet one's fellows, a religious atmosphere, a helpful, restful and inspiring influence. In time he became a ruling elder in his church, and later the President of the Board of Trustees of Westminster College.

It is hard to exaggerate his religious influence. He is remembered by poor and rich, by black and white, young and old, good and bad, with gratitude and affection. To each he gave hope, some he saved from despair, many were converted to better lives, all felt the inspiration of his eloquence and the charm of his personality. His influence was not confined to the churches and the institutions they founded. On the street, in the warehouse, at the club, everywhere he uttered the sentiments and convictions of a Christian. If the occasion offered, he preached as boldly in the market place as in the sanctuary. Pressing no man with obtrusive impertinence, he yet found a way to let his faith be known. He believed in sin and damnation and the atonement, and was as eager to save souls on a high day as on a holiday. Such was the charm of his character, the gentleness and friendliness of his address, the evident sincerity of his concern, that no one was offended. If men rejected his instruction, they still felt grateful for his solicitude, and none loved him better than those whom he

failed to persuade. So simple was his faith in the goodness of God, that disappointment left no scar upon him. Where he failed, he still loved, and was content to hope.

It must not be assumed, because of these things, that he was a saint. No good man was ever less saintly. He was not humble either in his behavior or in character. He had moments of profound depression, but his ordinary mood was one of buoyant and abounding self-confidence. What he believed he believed manfully; what he did not understand, he scorned. Certain opinions he hated. Believing in the literal inspiration of the scriptures and that God had wit enough to say His meaning, he scorned the refinements of critical interpretation and insisted that the written Word contained only obvious lessons and obvious meanings; believing in the damnation of unrepentant sinners, he had the liveliest contempt for any evasion which seemed to him to mitigate the plain doctrine of the Bible. His faith was too simple, too steadfast, to admit of the least doubt or hesitation; and if men of less intensity or greater intellectual refinement found trouble where he found none, he felt an inextinguishable contempt for their dubitations. He could tolerate a Roman Catholic or an infidel; the former as being submissive to authority, the latter as being without light; yet he scorned those who, professing faith, reserved to themselves liberty of choice and discrimination, and was ever ready to denounce the liberal tendencies of his time. In many respects he was a narrow man, hating innovations and vexed by the notion that improvement was possible where all was perfect. He was also outspoken, and denounced what he condemned in plain, harsh, forceful terms. Never doubting his own opinions, and believing with his whole soul that truth—God's truth—

was of such evident and excellent virtue as to be plain to every honest mind, he attributed to evil influences convictions which he did not share. His religion was high and intolerant and militant. No man was ever less the saint—he lacked even pretense.

He was neither humble nor austere—far from it. If he entered the door, gloom fled through the window. When he wished to be most severe, to act his part with appropriate dignity, to be impressive and convincing, cheerfulness continually broke in. His sense of humor was exquisite, and his eager mind, caught by the suggestions of the moment, was never restrained by considerations of propriety. Even on solemn occasions he was impatient of restrained and formal deliberation, and was apt to put a little “ginger into the meeting by talking common sense.” Perhaps those who had the best right to complain were most grateful to him. He was always a welcome and influential member of church conferences. If he did not inspire reverence, he never failed to provoke the liveliest personal affection.

It ought to be added that he did not lose sight of his own duty in his eagerness to instruct others. His conduct was ever that of a Christian gentleman. He assumed duties and performed them. He gave away a tithe of all his substance; he helped continually; he was good to the poor and the sick, and the unfortunate. Trouble never deterred him. He prayed continually in his closet for grace, and notwithstanding his eccentricities and extravagances, and the exuberance of his natural propensities, became a good man. Never heavy with piety, he was always full of the milk of human kindness, and God’s more precious gifts were showered upon him with lavish hand.

His daily life outside of churches and Christian institutions was full of bustling activity. He took a hand in politics, played a part in business associations and business enterprises, and was prominent and influential in the Civic League and Business Men's League. Of the latter organization he was chairman of the legislative committee. His business brought him into contact with railroad and transportation problems, and none understood better than he the industrial needs of a great city. In every character and in every situation he was of use to his fellowmen.

Perhaps nowhere else was his character so evident as in politics. He was a good fighter, a capital stump speaker, an enthusiastic partisan. He caballed, confederated, intrigued, combined, entered every clique, ring or conspiracy, always provided the object was good in his sight and the means honorable. In his own phrase, "He didn't care how many rogues fought on his side if it was the right side and they fought fair."

Happily, he was always quite sure that his side was the right side; his side being that which, for the moment, he embraced; whether inside or outside of his party was of no importance. He was more often outside than inside. His nature was impetuous and insurgent, and his self-confidence never wavered. He joined every movement for reform. He was captivated by every opportunity to be righteously indignant. He rode on every storm. Without understanding the intricacies of the subject, he was an ardent hard money man and fought against free silver with all his might. He sometimes moved first and deliberated afterwards. He enlisted in the posse comitatus, and was ever ready to fight for peace.

He fought also for good government, and was an enthusiastic advocate for civic betterment. It is not too much to say that no movement originating in the city during a quarter of a century and having for its object the betterment of politics or men or institutions, lacked his co-operation. In many respects he was the best "mixer" in town. No one had a more open, transparent candor, no one was freer from personal animosities. He greeted the "gang" and the "boys" with easy familiarity, and was on as good terms with the "boss" as with his intimates. One could never tell from his manner whether he was talking to a politician or a preacher, for he was easily at home with both; and if he treated the one with too much respect, he treated the other with too little reverence. His stories, his jokes, his "grinds" have become notorious. Men, many men, have heard them over and over again. They were always apposite and always new, as he told them.

He was indifferent to calumny and would never do or say anything in order that men might think well of him. Once when accused of shocking immorality, he read the charge to his friends, laughing heartily, and refused to make any reply, saying, "If the fool doesn't know any better, people who know me do, and that's all I care about." Believing in temperance rather than prohibition, he refused to join what he regarded as a fanatical and injurious movement and openly expressed his convictions, notwithstanding the expostulations of Christians whom he loved. In this instance also he practiced what he preached, for no one loved a glass better or made a better and saner use of its mellowing influence. Criticism of his political affiliations may have disturbed his serenity but they did

not influence his conduct. Conscious of his own rectitude he was unmoved by obloquy, yet he was a sensitive man. Sometimes his anger blazed out at an unjust accusation, and he hit back with all the force of his nature, repelling and retaliating with equal vehemence. After the battle was over, he forgot. It was hard to be on bad terms with him.

Much more might be written of his public character and services. His hold upon the public confidence increased day by day, and his reputation for probity, courage and disinterested zeal had at the time of his death established for him an honorable distinction among his fellow-citizens. It is just to say of him that he was never nominated for office, because he would have been an indiscreet candidate and no man could have used him for selfish purposes.

Of his private character and social influence, of those qualities which have enshrined him in the affectionate remembrance of a great circle of friends and acquaintances, it is impossible to convey an adequate impression. To delineate his personality and set down the many qualities which made up the man, is beyond the capacity of even loving assiduity.

He was the drollest, merriest, most exuberant, enthusiastic and delightful of companions; a good fellow as well as a good Christian. Where he entered, care fled and all constraint. He burst upon his company like a west wind, scattering gloom. He was always young. Enthusiasm, eagerness, capacity for happiness, never seemed to stale in him. In his youth and in his maturity he delighted every company and was master of every occasion. When he appeared, conversation ceased and men and women listened.

He had many tricks, and many pastimes, but chiefly he delighted by the eager flow of his general talk, by the levity and charm of his badinage, by the hearty, loving good humor which he invariably displayed.

In his youth he played a trick with a black string and a cane, pretending to mesmerize the cane and make it perform curious gyrations, to the infinite confusion of "smart alecs" and the immense delight of his giggling audience. He was in the habit of preaching pretended sermons with all the pompous and affected mannerisms of the divine of the old school. He lampooned in charming parody the affectations of public speakers. He assumed many characters and was as versatile in his delineations as a comedian.

Many years ago he founded a club. It was composed in the first instance of several of his intimate friends who met habitually at lunch. The number was subsequently increased to ten. He elected himself chairman, and presided over its meetings with arbitrary and oppressive sovereignty. As chairman, he made all of its rules. Its first rule was that one should talk at a time, and its unwritten law allowed him to be that one at his caprice. The club convened daily for a period of twenty-two years or more. He was its life and its inspiration, its charm and its value, its sole reason for existence. Dr. Johnson's famous club was not more completely dominated by one personality. Customs grew up within it, traditions clustered about it. It entertained from time to time almost every distinguished man that came to St. Louis, and had as its guests senators, judges, statesmen, orators, actors, divines, presidents of colleges, adventurers, explorers, writers and men of science.

He was as charming to the stranger as to his intimate friends. As soon as he appeared, the conversation became eager, and in a little while boisterous, and hilarious. No guest ever departed from the room where the club assembled without feeling his heart lightened. He ruled the members with an iron hand, enforcing with jocular sternness preposterous rules made upon the spur of the moment. Among the institutions of the club was what he called a "half-cock book." While the utmost freedom of discussion and criticism was allowed, every opinion was uttered at the peril of the speaker. If a mistake was made, or an exaggeration indulged, the culprit was required to hold up his right hand and say solemnly, "I have busted," and was expected to crawl into an imaginary hole. After this ceremony, the half-cock book was invariably produced and an imaginary entry made, recording the indiscretion. At times the chairman himself was guilty of some absurdity, and upon a vote of the club he was himself required to hold up his hand and repeat his formula and make the entry in his book. The frequency with which this ceremony was performed by him gave to the half-cock book in time the character of an autobiography. He laughed as heartily at his own humiliations as at those of anyone else. His stories, always old and always new, were told time and time again. In the telling of them he exhibited a marvelous fluency of speech, which he lacked upon ordinary occasions. His language was almost eloquent, frequently elevated, sometimes in all respects admirable, and never otherwise than appropriate to his subject.

To this club he owed much of the happiness of his life, as its members owed to him much of their happiness. It is to be regretted that no record of its proceedings has

been preserved. All of the good things, all of the witty things, all of the fine things said by him in his youth and in his maturity, were uttered to these boon companions. He told to them the substance of all his addresses and lectures, he read to them from time to time extracts from his sermons, from his letters, from his retorts. He preached to them habitually his doctrine and his theories of life. He expounded to them his notions of theology. The charming self-complacency with which he related one of his own good things will never be forgot. He was as naïve as a child, and delighted his friends as much by unconscious revelations of himself as by his elaborate characterizations of others.

His death quieted the most animated, eager, joyous spirit in the city. The sum of its happiness is distinctly diminished. Those who knew him best loved him best and miss him most. He who caused many people to love him, was of great use in the world. He is enshrined in many hearts, and thousands will mourn his untimely loss.

Of his home life it is impossible to speak without reserve. That he was hospitable to those he loved, was the least among his virtues. His door was open to people in need, and he was lavish of his benefits. The charm of his hospitality cannot be described. All of the graces of his character, the resources of his wit and experience, his fund of humor and stock of tales were spread before his guests. To say that he was a loving husband and father, expresses but a small part of his domestic charm and influence. He was the light of the house, its joy and consolation as well as its strength. None will mourn him so bitterly as those who lived by his side in loving intimacy.

We who have prepared this memorial have been prompted by emotions of gratitude and profound affection. We owe him too much to be content to seem indifferent to his memory. We wish others to know the qualities which endeared him to us. We have set down his characteristics, as we saw them, without favor, nought extenuating,—so far as we could under the potent influence of a recent grief. We have intended to show him as he was, and if we have failed, it is because loving friendship is incompetent to do justice to so elusive a personality. We loved him dearly, and because we loved him and knew him well have attempted to write of him as we think he would have us write—truthfully and sincerely.

