

THE INTERCOLLECIAN

Organ of the Student Department of the International Committee of Young Men's Christian Associations and of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions

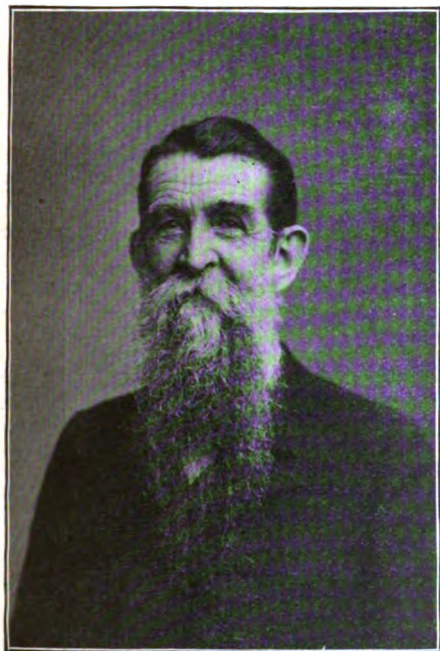
Fourth Series

DECEMBER, 1904

Vol. XXVII. No. 3

Lessons From the Life of Dr. Henry Clay Trumbull

By Robert E. Speer



HENRY CLAY TRUMBULL

HENRY CLAY TRUMBULL taught us three great lessons, the greatest lessons that man can teach to men. He showed us the supremacy of truth. Where everything he wrote and said was so evidently only the unveiling of himself, a sort of fragrant moral exhalation, it would not be true to single out any one of his books and say, "This was the distinctive expression of his teaching and of himself"; yet I think that one of the three or four of which this might most truthfully be said is his little book in defense of the absolute inviolability of

truth. With truth compromised he felt that the foundations were gone. Life might be sacrificed. He had risked his battle without fear, and he has written with noble love of his dearest friend, who, choosing the post of danger, died in battle a hero's death. Christ Himself had said: "No man taketh my life from me. I lay it down of myself. I have the right to lay it down." And God, he held, was taking life daily, even as His Son had laid down His own. What God could do He could authorize man to do; but God could not lie, and what was impossible to the nature of God was intolerable in the character and ways of men. The truth was to him a holy thing, and he abhorred with all his stern soldier soul all falsehood and every lie. We learned this from him. May God grant that we shall not forget!

He taught us the glory of love. He thought himself, when he had finished it, that "Friendship the Master Passion," as he called it, was his great book, and he believed that he had demonstrated that there is no power in the world like unselfish love. He told me once that when he had finished his book and given it to his friend, Charles Dudley Warner, Mr. Warner said to him, referring to the theme of the book, "Trumbull, you can't prove that proposition." But when he had read it through he said, "Well, Trumbull, you have made your case." It was he who taught us what friendship is—a love that asks for nothing again, that many waters cannot quench, serene, eternal. No teacher of our generation saw as he saw the nature of that love which St. John tells us is God. Beside

this conception all other ideals and all books on friendship seem tawdry and of a lower world. We who were in his school know how to love. He taught us, and we see now that, next to truth, the most wondrous thing in life is love, unselfish, unchangeable.

He taught us what life is. This was what he was dealing with in his covenant books—on the covenants of blood, of the threshold, and of salt. Institutions, he held, were the symbols of life. The covenant of blood, the atonement, was an atonement of life. He taught the reality of such a mingling. The mysticisms of the Gospel lay like the veil and the unveiling of immortality across our mortal life. He made real and clear to us, he set forth in the language of our own day, the living truth of the Savior's words: "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourselves. He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life." He held to the truth of a divine intercourse. This was what life was to be, a fellowship with the divine life, a union of our souls with the great life of our Father, who is God.

And what he taught he was. No discord severed the message from the man. What we heard from his lips we saw in his life. We came near to him, and we knew him, and we knew him to embody in himself the doctrine which he taught to the world. He loved the truth. No shadow of insincerity tinged him. The light of a great honor was in him, and the air where he was was pure, and it purified. He was one of the men of whom the Psalmist says, "They looked unto him, and were radiant." He exemplified in himself his ideals of friendship. He would go anywhere for his friends, and no service could be a sacrifice for one he loved. I have known him to make long journeys simply to make some truth, which he thought it was important for a friend to have, clear to that friend's mind. He stopped the press on his paper and held up an entire issue to cut out of a review of a friend's book a single phrase which he had just discovered, which might be misunderstood and grieve his friend. We all have friends, but we shall never have a greater friend than he

was and is; and all our friendships have now, and will have forever, a divine glory, an infinite security, since he taught us by his words and by his life how to love with a friendship love. We love others more, and more truly, because he loved us. And how athrill with life he was! No one could come near him and not feel the tingle and deliverance of it. Stagnation fell off the soul at the touch of the exhilaration of life in him. The lines about his eyes spoke with an irresistible eloquence of delight. The nervous, alert form trembled in response to the quick movings of the mind and heart. He was all alive in his body. And the mind was even more quick and vital. It shrank from anything commonplace and mediocre. It leaped at the living aspects of truth. It sprang past the inadequacy of systems to the infinite life that cannot be codified. And the spirit that was back of all, that came from God and has now returned whence it came—shall we feel upon our lives another spirit like it on the earth again? The life of God was in it. It lived in God. This we shall see often. This we may experience ourselves. But the buoyancy, the intensity, the unassailable certainty of that life equally hid and exposed with Christ in God, the naturalness in the supernaturalness, the assurance, the humility, the living, eager joy of it all—what irrefutable, what positively convincing, what tenderly persuasive, evidence this bore to the reality of his doctrine, that it was all so incarnate in his own dear life.

He showed us what it is to be free. This blessing also he brought to us all—I mean to us young men who loved him. Often we went to him for counsel. "What shall we do?" He would not answer that. "Shall I go here, or there?" He would not say. He would show us the principles which he believed to be involved, and then he would say no more. "You must decide for yourself," was his word. He loved to tell of an old Connecticut farmer whose son was about to seek his fortune in the city. The evening before he was to go, the father took him for a last walk and talk over the place where the boy had spent his life. They went over the familiar paths in silence, all the memories of his past education in

righteousness and purity of soul sweeping in wave after wave over the boy as he walked beside his father, until at last they returned to the garden gate again. Then the old man turned to his son, laid his hand on his shoulder, and said: "John, I have only one thing to say to you: Always do as you have a mind to." The boy needed no more. His only peril lay in doing as others had a mind for him. If he acted according to the integrity and honor of his own mind, schooled under the godly manliness of that old father, he was safe and free. It was so that he dealt with us. He strove to give us the mind of Christ, and then he bade us do as we had a mind to. He was free in Christ, and he would have us free. He held to the law, to be sure, but he saw even in the Ten Commandments a covenant of love. Love, he believed with the Apostle, was the fulfilling of the law, and that he was the freeman whom love and truth made free in Christ to render a full and joyous obedience.

He was full of large expectations of good. His faith was in God, and therefore his heart was stayed in hope. He was impatient with the easy talk of the day about the retrogression of religion and the diminished study of the Bible. He knew that there was no peril of any retrogression except in the heart of the man who thinks it is in the world because it is within himself. And he was sure, and rightly so, that there never has been as much belief in the Bible, or study of it, or love for it, as at this day. God could not lose him. How could He lose the world? The faith of the Resurrection past and the hope of the Advent yet to come bound for him the horizon of a world of the goodness and greatness of God, full of the assurance of the triumph of the Savior.

He was a true prophet of God to our souls. He spoke forth the Infinite in the terms of our world and the Eternal in the forms of our human life. God was near him, almost visible. His faith in

prayer was one noble expression of his realization of the present power of his Father. I met a gentleman a few days ago on a ferry-boat, and I told him that when I last saw Dr. Trumbull he had spoken of him. "Oh, yes!" said my friend, "he was a great Christian, so real, so intense. He was at my home years ago, and we were talking about prayer. 'Why, Trumbull,' I said, 'you don't mean to say that if you lost a lead-pencil you would pray about it and ask God to help you find it.' 'Of course I would; of course I would!' was his instant and excited reply." How easy it is to reproduce the very sound of the voice, to see the flash of the eye and the trembling gesture of the hand. Of course he would. Was not his faith a real thing? Like the Savior, he put his doctrine strongly by taking an extreme illustration to embody his principle, but the principle was fundamental. He would trust God in everything. He did trust Him. And the Father honored the trust of His child. And he always walked with God in Christ. Very near, very real, very precious was the Lord Jesus to him, and into that loving intimacy he bore all the needs and names of his dear ones, speaking of us and of our children to his Father and our Father, his God and our God.

One of his favorite thoughts, embodied long years ago in a historical address and more than once in his writings and sermons, was expressed in the phrase which his son recalled in announcing his death in the paper with which his name has been so long associated as to make dissociation impossible, "Our duty to make the past a success." "Unless sons are better than their fathers," he used to say, "both fathers and sons are a failure." And he would quote the line, "He mourns the dead who lives as they desired." This would be his word to us if his lips could speak to-day. We are to repeat, to expand what we have seen and known in him.