

Chapter IV

THE EASTMAN MINISTRY

Although Mr. Beecher was a man of unusual strength and endurance the time came when he needed an assistant. In the early nineties a handsome young man just out of Harvard came to undertake such work as Mr. Beecher might wish him to do. It is said that this young man, the Rev. Frank Buffington Vrooman, caused much fluttering of feminine hearts and won a bride while here, but for some reason was not quite the man for the place. A little later Mr. Beecher chose the Reverend Samuel E. Eastman and the Rev. Annis Ford Eastman to be his assistants.

At the time the Eastmans came to Elmira, Mr. Eastman was not in robust health and the arrangement was that Mrs. Eastman should carry the major part of their responsibilities with Mr. Eastman taking on more of the work as his health improved.

Mr. Eastman's ill health dated from his service in the Civil War with the Army of the Potomac. After the war he attended Oberlin College, where he met Annis Ford who became his wife. In 1912 Oberlin conferred upon him the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree and Alfred University in 1915 the Doctor of Literature degree. He also attended Andover Theological Seminary, and before coming to Elmira had pastorates in Massachusetts, Ohio, Kentucky and New York. Those periods of ministerial work were broken by times when he could work only out of doors, and sometimes not at all. It was during these times that Mrs. Eastman began to preach, first as a supply for him and then as one hired on her own merits. It is no reflection upon her interest in her professional life to say that her entry into it was an economic necessity that she might help support her semi-invalid husband and her four children, -- Morgan who died before the family came to Elmira; Max who became a well-known author, critic and teacher; Crystal, a beautiful, brilliant girl who became a writer on economic questions and an advocate of women's rights; Anstice Ford who for many years was a distinguished physician.

Mrs. Eastman began her first pastorate at Brookton, N.Y, while the family was living at Canandaigua. She went to Brookton for Saturdays and Sundays only and was paid \$12. For the two days. While still in that ministry she was ordained by a ministerial council headed by the Rev. Thomas K. Beecher. Soon after her ordination she was called to West Bloomfield, N.Y. where she was paid \$800. per year, and a parsonage provided. From West Bloomfield she came to Elmira.

Mr. Eastman's health improved in Elmira so that at the death of Mr. Beecher, the Eastmans became the joint pastors of The Park Church. This was in 1900.

The Eastmans were excellent preachers. Their sermons were simple and direct in style, but full of substance. Mrs. Eastman had a remarkable gift for speaking directly to the hearts of her hearers. Mr. Eastman was the more profound scholar, especially in the fields of history and philosophy. He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

They were both endowed with unusual physical beauty. Those who remember them speak especially of Mrs. Eastman's smile and her beautiful voice.

Mr. Eastman was tall, spare and graceful with strong, finely chiseled features. "He looked like a saint" is a tribute one hears from many, and from another, "When he wore his academic gown in recognition of his Oberlin degree, he looked like a medieval scholar, one of the real humanists."

Mr. Eastman was a lover of nature and his tendency to go to nature for illustrations of spiritual matters is shown by the titles of some of his sermons - "Message of a Spring Dawn," "The Month of Flowers," "Midsummer Parables." These were gentle sermons, but when occasion demanded, he could strike out with a vigor that suggested a vein of iron beneath his gentle exterior.

He was especially stirred by civic corruption of any kind and by irresponsibility in high places. "The Ethics of Democracy" and "The Cure of Corporate Crime" are titles of sermons preached in this sterner mood. They read like good sermons still.

His courage is interestingly shown by a sermon called "The Home and Its Defenses." After a clear statement of his belief in the home as the bulwark of society, he said,

And now I come finally to our Domestic Relations Law as it is named in the code, and the question of divorce. May these be improved in any way to insure a better defense of the home?

I have said that I believe we shall some day have a law on our statute books making it possible for a man and a woman, whose life together is a perpetual quarrel, to separate on other grounds than the one plea of adultery, and without the ordeal and expense of a long and disgusting lawsuit. That is my opinion, and it has been for years. It is the opinion of a growing number of thinking men and women in this city, and elsewhere, who are at work as pastors and philanthropists in the human uplift on the under side of society, and among the tattered shreds of human life.

Now, listen, and if you quote the above, quote the following also.

1. The wife of a laboring man who is a brute in his treatment of her should have it made as easy for her to gain her freedom as her rich sister, and the laboring man on from nine to twenty dollars per week should have it made as easy for him to gain separation from an impossible wife as it is for the rich man. 'The destruction of the poor is their poverty,' and the most processes in the court continue the truth of the proverb. Our Domestic Relations Law is no exception. I would equalize the opportunity.

It was nearly fifty years after this that the law was finally changed.

On January 19, 1908, the church adopted the plan of yearly pledges of support from each member of the church, the money to be paid Sunday by Sunday. This was to supplement pew rentals and followed a sermon by Mrs. Eastman in which she advocated such a plan.

The most discussed event of the Eastman ministry was the "changing of the creed." The "confession of faith" adopted by the early church which we briefly described in our first chapter had gradually come to be called "the creed." Mr. Beecher had been supremely indifferent to all written statements of belief. A present member of The Park Church gives this eye witness account of Mr. Beecher in relation to "the creed." There had been some talk about revision. Mr. Beecher opened a drawer of his desk, pointed to some papers in his desk and said "There is the creed." Then pushing in the drawer with considerable vigor he said "And there it shall remain." He could not be bothered by, nor give time to, anything that seemed to him so unimportant.

But the time came when the Eastmans did not take the matter so lightly. We can well believe that this was, to a degree at least, more than a difference in temperament between Mr. Beecher and the Eastmans. The Eastmans' concern about the creed grew up in a period when a considerable struggle was on throughout Protestantism between conservatives and liberals. The so-called struggle between religion and science was not yet resolved. We believe it was not only a desire to line up The Park Church with the liberal camp that motivated the Eastmans, but also a desire to keep The Park Church a place where people of different private opinions could work together. The Eastmans believed that a simpler, more liberal statement of belief could, in their day, better implement the purposes of the founding fathers.

There were three shades of opinion in the church. There were those whom we call Beecherites. They were inclined to think that the whole struggle, for struggle it was, was rather in the nature of much ado about nothing. At least one present member of the church remembers his father speaking in that tone about it.

There were those that felt the change would be a mistake, and there were those who supported the Eastmans. Finally on February 13, 1907, the shorter creed was adopted, but not unanimously.

There has been a tradition to the effect that many people left the church at this time. Attendance may have dropped off, but the record of letters of dismissal issued within the following months does not uphold the story of large numbers leaving the church.

The simpler "creed" reads as follows:

I

We believe in God, who is revealed in nature in human experience, in the life of the spirit and in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

II

We believe that God is to be revered, loved and obeyed, and that in Him we have eternal life.

III

We believe in Jesus Christ as the Supreme Embodiment of the Spirit of God in the soul of man, and our Divine Teacher and Guide.

IV

We desire to follow Him in our lives by obedience to God and service to men.

V

We believe in the unity of the Christian Church, the observation of the Christian Sabbath, and the ordinances of baptism, and the Lord's Supper as aids to Christian living.

The Eastmans had a summer home at Glenora-on-Seneca which Mr. Eastman named "Cherith" after the brook beside which the ravens fed Elijah. Miss Ida Langdon has given us this description:

The house stood at some distance above the lake and a rapid, little stream ran close along one end of the wide porch. It was not so much because of the brook as it was because of the restoration of body and spirit he found in this place that Mr. Eastman named it "Cherith." He could rest there, putting off the minister and taking on the farmer or philosopher as he chose. He liked to make things grow. To his own delight, and that of the robins, his cherry orchard flourished; and the seedling pines he planted grew, during his life time, into a dark, cool grove.

Mr. and Mrs. Eastman's presence attracted an unusual group of people to Glenora for the summer months, and "Cherith" was the center of their pleasure. On Sunday mornings quiet, religious gatherings were held in the large living-room where often an open fire burned. On other days people came together there for music, outloud reading, and frequently a free and very lively interchange of ideas. The atmosphere thus developed around the Eastmans was warm and happy and unfailingly interesting. Often Mrs. Eastman's contribution was humorous and provocative. But essentially this atmosphere was intellectual and spiritual. It was always, now for one reason, now for another, stimulating to both heart and mind. Those who shared it hold its memories as beyond price.

Mrs. Eastman died in 1910 and within two years Dr. Eastman chose the Rev. Albert G. Cornwell to be his assistant. Mr. Cornwell began his work in Elmira, January 1, 1912, and in a report made January 1, 1913, Dr. Eastman said, "The year has been one of growth and improvement in many directions. The coming of Mr. Cornwell has added youth, vigor and enthusiasm to the pastorate. Under his management the Sunday School has pursued a course of completely graded lessons with profit to all interested."

Dr. Eastman retired five years after Mr. Cornwell's coming and for the remainder of his life was Pastor Emeritus.

Two events of a special nature testify to the affection of The Park Church people for Dr. Eastman during the later years of his life. Without any personal solicitation, but simply through an announcement in the church calendar, enough money "came in with enthusiasm," as the record says, to make him a gift of a trip to Europe. His 75th birthday was celebrated by a luncheon in the church lecture room at which leaders in community life, as well as his own parishioners, paid affectionate tribute to him.

The Rev. Albert G. Cornwell succeeded Dr. Eastman as pastor of The Park Church.