ARTICLE IX.

NEWELL DWIGHT HILLIS: A CHARACTER SKETCH.

BY Z. SWIFT HOLBROOK.

THE late Professor David Swing had finished that sentence, "We must all hope much from the gradual progress of brotherly love," when he laid down his pen. He never returned to his desk to complete his task, for in a few days he passed into the great beyond. The work at Central Church was at a stand-still because its moving spirit, its master-mind, was gone. Many thought that no one could be found to follow in the footsteps of such a man, for he was a genius, a rare combination of poet and artist. To ask another to complete that unfinished sermon was to ask some writer of fiction to finish "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" where Dickens left it, or like seeking an artist to restore the missing arms to the Venus of Milo.

David Swing was the most beautiful destructionist that Chicago had ever listened to. His poetical instincts and religious faith were all that saved him from being a cynic. His natural tendency was to destroy, but his artistic sense, his intellectual love of the true, the good, and the beautiful bade him sheathe his sword like Hamlet, and, like Hamlet, he obeyed with a tenderness born of affection. He was not only poet and artist, but philosopher and sage. He was the deadly enemy of the ugly, the deformed, the cruel, whether in theology, in art, or in literature. Like Tennyson and Wordsworth, he was the poet's poet, not in verse but in prose. For twenty years the most cultivated people in Chicago had listened to such an one who combined in the rarest degree a broad philosophy with poetical insight and artistic skill, for Swing could touch the deepest emotions of the heart in the minor key, or, with ease and simplicity, could change to the major and arouse one's hopes and faith. He left his audience not hopeless and desolate, as does Chopin in his funeral march; but, like Mendelssohn or Beethoven, he left a ray of sunlight to brighten and to cheer. He was influenced and molded intellectually by Greek thought; for, though he never went abroad but once, and then only to Scotland, he sauntered in the streets of Athens, he was on terms of familiarity with the great minds that made that city the home of culture, of refinement, and of intellectual brilliancy. Sappho and Dante he knew by heart, and he conversed with Plato and Socrates every day in the market-place. He sauntered about the Acropolis; he loitered at the gateways of Knowledge to hear the voices of those who had learned

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some new truth; he loved his New Testament, not so much that it was revelation as that it was the truth, beautiful and written in Greek.

He loved Christianity not less as the way and the life, but more as the truth. His friendship for Marcus Aurelius, and his admiration of the constancy of Penelope were among the charges of heresy brought by Professor Patton. Swing was willing to admit that such virtues might have saving merit apart from a knowledge of a historical Christ. When Swing was a young man, it is told of him that he once, on a hot summer day, was driving a yoke of oxen, and stopped by a running brook in the shade to cool and rest and dream. The oxen were in as much of a hurry as young Swing, so he waited, and drank of the cool running water. Being overheated, he injured his health for life by so doing, bringing on the trouble that finally caused his death. The incident was a prophecy; for if Swing's theology were ever foundered it was because he let the running brook and the voices of nature sing to him of love and beauty, cooling off the overheated doctrines of eternal punishment, predestination, election, or saving grace. His whole nature revolted when logic demanded the damnation of infants, and he found no time or patience to discover the flaw in the argument.

Cultivated by listening to such high ideals and lofty ethical standards as only David Swing could present in his artistic way, with his matchless graces and gift of language, the board of trustees of Central Church, composed of such men as Lyman J. Gage, felt that the hope of finding a successor was a forlorn one. It was like searching for such a master as Turner to complete a half-finished canvas, or for a companion piece to the "Angelus," or for a poem to compare with Gray's "Elegy," with Drake's "Culprit Fay," or Bourdillon's eight matchless lines.

Theological seminaries do not send out such men in droves; they are born not made; they never come in duplicates, for they are not the product of any school or college. They are the product of many generations; they are born of heroic and gentle blood, and are thus of a noble ancestry that asks for no insignia of rank beyond that stamped upon the soul. Such men come as well from the homes of the humblest and from the walks of the lowly as from the palaces of the rich or from the ranks of nobility. The trustees of Central Church looked not far and wide, to Ireland or Scotland, but they looked wisely and well.

The choice of a successor to David Swing fell upon Newell Dwight Hillis, a young man only thirty and six years of age. Few people realize what a momentous task was set before this young thinker and speaker then comparatively unknown. He was a stranger, but, as time has proved, not in a strange land; for, after several years of public service, no one familiar with the facts for a moment doubts the wisdom of the choice. Audiences as large as ever greeted Professor Swing fill Central Music Hall each Sunday morning, while through published writings and books his audience has widened far beyond the bounds of his church or city.

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What then is the secret of Dr. Hillis' power and popularity, whence comes it, why do the educated and refined no less than the common people hear him gladly when so many pulpits are vacant, so many churches in Chicago half-deserted. Why do his books go so quickly to the fifth and seventh editions when printing is cheap, and standard writers are clamoring for a hearing?

Dr. Hillis, like David Swing, was born of a German mother who gave him the power and love of abstract reasoning. She was of high origin, born of one who married against her father's wishes and for this was disinherited. His father was a descendant of the Hylles of England driven out from Kenilworth, during the days of Charles II., to the north of Ireland. His grandfather, a Puritan Quaker, went from Philadelphia to Kentucky in the days of Henry Clay, and became prominent in politics, while his father was such a stern and unbending opponent of slavery that he refused to vote because of his then radical views. He moved to the Western Reserve, and then to Iowa, where, at Magnolia, Dr. Hillis was born, September 2, 1858. He was the youngest of the family, and brought up in the society of three older sisters, all graduates of Grinnell College. One of them was missionary for the American Board in India for fifteen years, and died in 1887—a woman of sweet spirit and of remarkable gifts, who acquired a knowledge of the Aryan language no less than the Indian. At the age of seventeen, with thirteen dollars in his pocket, the boy left home, and became from that time dependent on his own resources. Of the boyish struggles, the hardships, the privations, no one knows, but there were battles that made the hero and the man; that touched the deepest chords of the heart, that strained the will to its severest test, and awakened the most rugged thought. The greatest battles in history are oftentimes fought in childhood in the human heart, away from the sight of men; but God keeps a record of all such struggles, and rewards in character.

Young Hillis graduated at Lake Forest, Illinois, in 1884; at McCormick Seminary, Chicago, in 1887; became pastor of churches at Peoria and Evanston; received the degree of D.D. from Northwestern (Meth.) in 1894. While yet in Evanston he organized the Workingmen's Club, and, having called the labor leaders together, offered to resign his wealthy church and become a leader and pastor to the poor; but he was told that the exigencies of modern labor-agitations demanded measures that he never could endorse or sanction, and his unselfish offer was declined.

When, therefore, Dr. Hillis took up the task laid down by David Swing, he was at the threshold of a success or a failure so conspicuous that to him it meant public life or death. It led up the Capitoline hill to the palace of the Cæsars, or turned aside to the tullianum in the Colosseum.

It goes without saying that Dr. Hillis is in no sense an imitator of Swing. That would require a low order of talent, but no genius. Genius

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cannot copy or imitate, it creates. The kaleidoscope never produces the same combination twice, nor do the forces of nature come together twice in the same proportions for even one generation, much less for two; and if they did, environment and education can shape and mold heredity. No two men can be alike. Dr. Hillis has so much original merit of his own, he has never found need of copying any one. A man must be himself or time will discover the fatal flaw, and such a flaw, like that of Achilles', belongs to the undipped heel no less than the head. A host of evangelists imitate Moody's manner of speech, but they have failed to find the source of his power; the theological students in the days of Beecher wore their hair long in imitation of him, but they forgot to lengthen their views or broaden their vision in keeping with his great heart and mind. For every genius a thousand men of talent follow on behind, imitating and copying.

Dr. Hillis is as unique in his own way as Swing was in his. Like Swing, he has a refined and keen sense of the humorous. Wit and humor are founded on the incongruous and the illogical. Surprise is an element that is enjoyable. A mind that is orderly, logical, and founded on deep verities easily discovers the incongruous, the absurd, the amusing. This mental characteristic lent a charm to Beecher's speeches and sermons; it was ever present in a dignified way in Swing, and it characterizes Dr. Hillis' writings. With him it is humor rather than wit, for it is kindly and sweet tempered. It is impersonal, never destructive except of principles. It never wounds, because it is a keen perception of the absurd guided by good-will. It is the sense of the ludicrous clothed with dignity, never boisterous or noisy, but, like Charles Dudley Warner's, piquant and racy but always quiet. The fine perception that dreads a point too broad, but conceals itself behind the form of words, leaving one to read between the lines,—this marks the intellectual artist. Thus a man's style is himself,—it bears his character, and is itself like him, refined and gentle, high-toned and constructive, or it may be coarse and shallow, boisterous or aggressive. No quality reveals the ethical and intellectual standard of a writer or speaker more readily than his notion of what is humorous. Only a genius can find the lost chord; and the mind that is supersensual will ask that wit and humor remain only as the servants of truth in the corridors of the sanctuary. Such genius is intuitive rather than intellectual, its culture is innate. It is like Tennyson's poet's mind, that must not be vexed with vulgar wit. The instinct to say the right thing in the right place and to clothe it in garments of simplicity and beauty is a virtue of first rank with Dr. Hillis. Such an instinct has about as much use for the rules of homiletics in its forms of expression as the singing meadow brook has for yardstick or tapeline. As well might one ask the robin to warble by the tick of the metronome, or that Patti's voice shall be regulated by the one who, in old New England days, was accustomed to line off the verses. Tennyson

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rose superior to metric rules and measure; the new poet-laureate of England is enslaved by them.

And just here we approach Dr. Hillis' theology, for the poet and the logician must ever see religious truth from different points of view. To place a low value on the study of theology or to minimize its importance for the thoroughly trained preacher would be as idle as for the young physician to despise the study of anatomy and physiology. The intellect that is scientific must delve into ultimate principles and truths. Theology is the result of applying the intellect to the truths of religion. Religion is soul life, theology is intellectual life with religion for its subject. The value of Christian evidences to the scholarly preacher can never be denied, but these need not be brought constantly into the pulpit. Just as the farmer brings to market not his plow and his cultivator, but only the product, so the preacher can have faith that the people believe the essentials of Christianity. Dr. Samuel Harris of Yale, one of the ablest theologians of the century, has well said that the religious life must not be measured by the exactness of theological belief, that the heart is often wiser than the head. To follow the inexorable laws of logic when only one pole of truth is under the lens is to go far astray. When the New England divines were dwelling on the sovereignty of God, they arrived at conclusions that overlooked the other pole of the truth,—the fatherhood of God, his mercy and his goodness. As the Westminster divines forgot in their catechism the love of God, when some one suggested that it be put in a footnote, so the purely logical mind is often farther from the truth than the poet who sees through instinct what the reason can never reveal. The doctrines of immortality and of the existence of God are revealed more clearly through the instincts than through the reason; otherwise only great intellects could be the children of God, and heaven would be open only to those possessed of some valuable information. The poetic instinct is as valuable a telescope for scanning the heavens as is the logical faculty; just as Dr. Poole said that fiction was as near to truth as most history that had been written. Hence Swing revolted from the faith once established by Calvin and Patton. It was necessary that the system be saved, even if it damned a few millions of infants. A nature like Dr. Hillis' loves not Cæsar less but Rome more. It knows the use of logic, but it also knows that love defies the processes of the reason as easily as birds fly in seeming defiance of the law of gravitation. Hence it is true of Dr. Hillis' theology that, while he is familiar with the anatomy of a theological system, he is not always presenting before a popular audience the ribs and backbone, even if they be fundamentals. His instincts and his love of the beautiful lead him to clothe his manikin with flesh and blood, to breathe into it the breath of life, to let the soul light up the eye and the glow of health to paint the cheeks. This is life, it is love, it is religion, not merely a cold system of abstract truth.

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Dr. Hillis assumes, and rightly, that Christianity is now established, that the character of Christ is the greatest miracle of the New Testament, for it has defied the worm and the rust of time. It needs no apologies or explanations, but simply exemplification and amplification. This is a deeper and a broader faith than the dogmatist or the apologetic scholar can boast, for it finds in Christ sufficient merit as the ideal unit of society to need only interpreting. This is precisely what Phillips Brooks did at Harvard College. As Taine said of Shakespeare, "He asks for no eulogy of words, he only asks to be understood." A study of Dr. Hillis' theological conservatory reveals not simply his love of botany, but a supreme love of floriculture. The fragrance and the beauty of his flowers easily escape the spirit of criticism, and the botanical analysis is quite forgotten. Theology is like the love of botany; religion is floriculture, it is the aroma of flowers. The majority of people are repelled by the former but attracted by the latter. Theology is essential, it is fundamental, but religion is also vital, for it gives shape and color to the soul, and hence it makes the creed its servant, its intellectual formula.

The people may admire a Browning, but they love a Burns; they may applaud a Wagner, but all through the day they will hum "Home, sweet home," or "The last rose of summer." The popular preacher is never the didactician, the cold theologian. Dorothea imagined she could be happy all her days with a cold and abstract mind like Casaubon's, but she soon hungered for friendship and sympathy. He was icily regular and splendidly null; but, after all, he was a freak, for the doors of his imagination had long before rusted upon their hinges, the juices of mind and heart had long before dried up, leaving him as unlovely and unsympathetic as he was logical, abstract, and unpractical.

The theologian now speaks to one per cent of the people, and the ninety and nine turn away. Dr. Hillis could speak to empty chairs within a month, if he should follow the advice of some of his theological friends. As great as were Dwight and Edwards, Hopkins and Emmons, they could not to-day draw an audience, and their pulpits are quite forgotten, but their work shall endure through generations. Kant and Hegel could never be popular. The popular preacher must learn to scan Euclid; he must set his thoughts to music; he must put his prose into blank verse if he would speak to the multitude. This marks not the dawn of a decaying civilization that worships beauty instead of righteousness; but it is the bud in bloom, the flowering of a noble and true culture. Although not an evangelist, Dr. Hillis has a system of truth that is evangelical, for the center of his planetary system is the same as that of the New Testament. His ideal is the Christ.

The distinguishing difference between Dr. Hillis and Professor Swing, as it impresses one who knew them both, is this: Professor Swing's sermon was more of an end in itself, while Dr. Hillis' subordinates it to a spiritual end. Swing aroused the intellect, touched the imagination,

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warmed the sensibilities, but seldom stirred the conscience or fired the will. Dr. Hillis aims to please, to amuse even, but this is quickly forgotten in the evident purpose to encourage, to stimulate, to help onward and upward. One feels uplifted and takes on new hope and faith who listens to him, for, like Swing, he says "Come," never "Go"; but, more than Swing, he provokes the will to higher purposes by stimulating the conscience and awakening the spiritual life. He loses none of the admiration that Swing called forth for his splendid ability, but he draws out a personal affection that Swing was singularly lacking in power to awaken. Swing dreaded personal contact with men; Hillis feeds upon friendships, and is generous and loyal to his friends. One knew David Swing best when he was on the platform, for there he spoke the deepest sentiments of his heart, but away from that he was diffident, shy, even cold and uninteresting. Hillis, on the contrary, is warm, affectionate, and helpful in his friendships. This peculiarity of Swing's offended many, and easily passed for insincerity, for it dreaded the personal contact. One lost the focus on Swing the moment he stepped from the platform, while Hillis is seen in a clearer light in his personal and domestic relations.

A public speaker's first duty is in his study, and here Dr. Hillis is a power, an omnivorous reader, an indefatigable worker. He is always busy. When he comes to illustrate a point in literature, the books of his library fairly tumble down from the shelves upon him, for his memory is logical and works by association. Valedictorians are usually made of men with rote memories, and our colleges have too often reserved their highest rewards for mental powers that make excellent tutors and teachers, but oftentimes poor lawyers, judges, and clergymen. Many a man has awakened to find himself gifted with powers that in college he little knew himself the possessor of, but, on the contrary, supposed himself to be stupid. The college curriculum seldom discovers or rewards a logical memory, it never fails to find a rote memory and upon it to bestow all the honors and rewards within its gift. Many classes in colleges have learned after twenty-five years, that their most brilliant men were at the foot of the class, while many of their high-rank men are now seen to be of inferiority or even mediocrity.

The artistic element in Dr. Hillis is seen nowhere more conspicuously than in his dramatic power. It shrinks from the coarse and vulgar as instinctively as it would refuse to turn a somersault in the pulpit, or resort to the spectacular or sensational to win applause. Yet there is a hungering and thirsting in the human heart which the drama, in one form or another alone satisfies, and it is the duty and the province of the pulpit to recognize this need and satisfy it. Swing did it not by any trick such as Edward Everett is said to have practised when he rushed to the front of the stage by a preconcerted plan, and snatched a flag, waving it aloft. Nor did Swing resort to the antics of a pulpit acrobat, who struts the

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stage, or strikes attitudes, or calls into practice intellectual jugglery, or rhetorical flights of fancy, where sound is substituted for sense. But Dr. Hillis, no less than Swing, has the same art of putting things like the landscape gardener who permits the sea or the broad expanse to come gradually into view. The dramatic effect is not in elocution alone, nor in rhetoric, but in the *tout ensemble*. It is the highest and only legitimate use of the dramatic instinct in pulpit oratory. Ruskin said that beauty is the flowering of truth. Who knew this and practised it more simply than he who said,

> "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow;
> They toil not, neither do they spin;
> And yet I say unto you,
> That even Solomon in all his glory
> Was not arrayed like one of these."

Simplicity is the soul of culture, whether in form or in principle, whether in dress or language, and nature abhors nothing more than the unorderly, the illogical, the complicated. The direct mind, the simple style, the Anglo-Saxon words, the self-evident truth,—these always have attracted men in political science or in theology, whether in pulpit or in rostrum. Webster and Beecher were both simple, as was Lincoln, and Phillips Brooks pronounced these the three greatest Americans. There is not a sentence in all of Hillis' writings that is involved, ambiguous, or muddy. A high line of thought clothed in simple language is his marked characteristic. Small ideas may need lung power or gesture to float them, but large thoughts and lofty ideals can stand of their own weight, they ask not for scaffold or support. A clear style, the natural voice, the Anglo-Saxon words, with an ear bent close to earth to hear the footsteps of God walking in the garden as he speaks through the voices of nature no less than through Revelation,—these always have attracted men whether in oratory, art, or music.

But if the manner be of great importance, much more is matter, or we have sound without sense. Without a healthy mind, vigorous thought, hardy common sense,

> "The best-laid schemes o' mice and men
> Gang aft a-gley."

In these days, nowhere is this discerned more quickly than in the sphere of social questions. The walks of literature have come to be frequented by dreamers, emotionalists, sentimentalists, impracticables in the sphere of social reforms.

Chicago is the storm center of social questions. It is the economic workshop of the country. This is due in part to its large percentage of foreigners with paternal views of government; exaggerated notions of the duties and the functions of the state; limited ideas of the rights of the individual; natural hatred of all authority; false conceptions of liberty and equality; visionary dreams of an ideal social condition, when the state shall be the master, not the servant, of all. When writers like Bel-

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lamy sell their books by the millions, and men like Howells, called our first writer in fiction, have as crude ideas of economics or political science as is revealed in his writings on these subjects, we need not marvel that, to a city like Chicago, labor troubles arise, and social questions have come for solution. To have spoken in such a city for so many years on these great questions and maintain the right poise of mind is the highest tribute that could be paid to Dr. Hillis. But his type and temper of mind, both by inheritance and environment, is individualistic and yet sociocratic. He has intuitions of the bi-polarity of truth that lead him always aright on the great social questions of the day. There has been no writer or frequenter of the walks of literature since Emerson who can compare with Dr. Hillis as the advocate and apostle of subjectivism. "A Man's Value to Society" reveals the triumph of individualistic conceptions. The man is the unit with powers, and faculties, and with natural rights that rise by the side of the duties and functions of the state as one mountain by the side of another stands independent and solitary. This is that conception of the autonomy and independence of the individual that sent the Mayflower across the ocean and drove Dr. Hillis' ancestors to the north of Ireland. It runs in his veins bequeathed to him as the richest legacy of a distinguished ancestry. It does not necessarily adopt and sanction the entire individualistic conception of competition in the sphere of economics, for it gives free play to the philosophy of coöperation; it does not approve of the *laissez-faire* doctrine as it is seen in operation in a selfish world; but, on the contrary, it does not deny the fundamental doctrines of ethics, nor attempt to change the well-established conceptions of the rights of property, because the desire to acquire so readily passes over into avarice. Dr. Hillis is not a socialist, nor is his mind closed to the evils of the competitive warfare. He certainly does not advocate a return to the democracy of Aristotle, when the state was the unit, and the individual a zero, and this is precisely what many clergymen are virtually advocating. Men with socialistic views are no more the product of New England thought than thistles are the fruitage of fig-trees. They are misled by their sympathies for the poor in the fierce struggle for existence, and in this spirit of good-will and kindness all Christian thinkers must join. But because competition works some evils, it need not give way to a *régime* that is infinitely worse, that stifles liberty, and binds the individual in chains, delivering him over to a bondage that Luther broke away from, and that sent the Mayflower across the sea.

As the friend and advocate of individualism, and at the same time the foe of its evils, an educated mind sees an imperfect crystallization of the forces of society. Dr. Hillis maintains that judicial poise that is absolutely necessary in these days of social deforms and reforms. New England individualism sacrificed the lower value to the higher, it left the ninety and nine to find the one, only because proper conceptions of the

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rights of the individual were necessary to the perfection of the whole. It realized what Herbert Spencer said, that the character of society is determined by the character of its units, for one cannot make a perfect whole out of imperfect units. In Dr. Hillis' second book "The Investment of Influence," the other pole of the truth is developed, and here we find the line of truth so essential that the rights of the individual are subordinate to the good of society. David Swing told the writer that he had no taste for social questions, and that he had little knowledge of them. This cannot be said of Dr. Hillis. In this particular he has been a much broader reader and thinker than Swing, and his sympathies are far more democratic. Swing was naturally aristocratic, and his associations were largely with the prosperous and well-to-do. Dr. Hillis finds friends everywhere, among rich and poor alike. In a word, then, Dr. Hillis has the poetic temperament, the artistic sense, the fine perception of truth, the refined sentiments and noble ideals in all shapes and colors, the qualities that so characterized Swing. The application of those qualities to religious themes with a vigorous common sense and a deep love of the truth must find appreciation wherever there are minds that think or hearts that love. But Dr. Hillis has some qualities in a superior degree, the element of conscience no less than of intellect, the vigor of will no less than refinement of sensibility. Hence he is more heroic than Swing. He is more of a Spartan and none the less an Athenian.

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