

William Vidler, Baptist and Universalist.

WILLIAM VIDLER was born at Battle, Sussex on May 4th, 1758. He was the tenth and youngest child of John and Elizabeth Vidler of that historic town. The father and several of the elder brothers worked as stonemasons and bricklayers in the district. Being good workmen the home was better than most of those belonging to people in like circumstances, and the family took in the society of the place a better position than other cottagers. Mr. and Mrs. Vidler were communicants at St. Mary's, and its minister, the Very Rev. Thomas Nairne, B.A., Dean of Battle, frequently found his way to their house. His visits often marked the arrival of books from his library to satisfy the reading hunger of William, the "little bookworm."

Because of chronic ill-health the boy lived most of his life upon the couch. From the first his Bible was as interesting a book to him as any of the many he read, and he was looked upon as "religious." His quiet studiousness did not help him to make many friendships, and to a number of people in the town he was an object of scorn as one unfit for work, and therefore an incumbrance. Some of his own brothers shared this feeling, and maybe, helped it to live and grow. To his stalwart father he was a great disappointment. Save for this weakling his was a family of strength. And physical ability was the only thing that counted with this workman, whose muscle won him more respect than even his skill gained. The majority of the inhabitants saw so little of William that they quite forgot his existence until circumstances thrust him before their eyes.

At the age of fifteen William decided to attempt his father's trade. The endeavour was ill-advised, for within a little time the unusual exertion reduced him to such weakness that he was glad to be left in undisturbed possession of his window-seat again. There for several more years he lived out his life, daily steeping himself in whatever literature came to his hand.

In the year 1776 Battle was "visited with the word of God by the means of Mr. George Gilbert, an independent Calvinist, from Heathfield; who appears to have been a man of real zeal for God, and had the happiness to be much owned by God in his public labours."

"The occasion of Mr. Gilbert's coming was thus. There was a poor man, one William Sweetingham, that came from Brighton to Battle to make bricks; this person loved the Gospel, but he could go nowhere to hear it nearer than Heathfield, which is ten miles from Battle; he therefore gave Mr. Gilbert an invitation to come to his house to preach: he accepted the invitation, and in January, 1776, he came and preached to about forty people in the evening; the word seemed to be well received."

For more than seventy years there had been a Presbyterian Church in the town. It had been founded by the Lewes minister in the last decade of the 17th century, and had a succession of four resident ministers. The last one (David Jenkins) had come to a flourishing cause in 1747-8. He was "evangelical and able," but as the time passed he found it increasingly difficult to cope with the Arian (or Unitarian) blight that devastated the fair harvest of his own and his predecessors' devotion and faith. By the time Mr. Gilbert visited the place, Mr. Jenkins had died after a twenty-five year ministry, and the edifice in which he had conducted services had been closed for some few years. The January visit of the Mountfield minister was followed by others in the succeeding months. In March, the landlord of Sweetingham's house forbade the preaching, on penalty of having to seek another residence. The little band thereupon accomplished what they had in mind by asking Mr. Gilbert to come for "conversations." But as "several people seemed in earnest about their salvation; the appearance of which set the whole town in confusion," they had to conduct their meetings in the open air.

Sweetingham's daughter was numbered amongst the few who called William Vidler friend, and she had persuaded him to come to the services. The eighteen-year old student and the twenty-four year old maiden took their stand together under "the oak, at the entrance to the town" (now known as 'The Watch Oak'). This was in the month of May, and for more than six months they remained faithful to those difficult and often dangerous meetings. For the result of their boldness was "noise, insults and blasphemy." But "twelve persons acknowledged their need of a new life." At the end of the year another house was provided.

It was at the meetings held in this house that William Vidler interpreted certain desires that were gradually strengthening into a call from God to take active part in His service. Mr. Gilbert presided at their monthly communion on the Lord's Day, and generally preached "every Thursday beside." During 1777 "several ministers who were in connection with the pious and Honourable Lady Huntingdon visited them." When "they had no minister to preach to them," some "sound discourse was read by one or the other" of those present.

"This was useful," says Mr. Vidler, in describing his entrance into his ministerial career, "in bringing forward a gift among the people." And he proceeds, "A youth, whose name was William Vidler, who was often their reader when they were destitute of preaching, about nineteen years of age, at the desire of the people in general was induced, in April 1777, to speak among them by way of exhortation. Being encouraged to continue this practice by the good acceptance it met with, he went on in it, though in much weakness and fear, until October (of that year), when, through persecution, he left Battle for the Isle of Wight."

That exile in the garden-island helped him to understand his relationship with Miss Sweetingham, with whom he began a correspondence. And the change of air and scene did for him physically what all the Battle doctoring and nursing had failed to accomplish, so that when he returned ("somewhat reluctantly" as he says), in July 1778, he was qualified to advertise mens sana in corpore sano. He now went regularly to work as a stonemason, finding opportunity about the district, and made such rapid strides in his profession that he soon had more tasks than he could do single-handed, and was able to put many a chance in the way of his relatives. His studies were only pursued by the greatest determination, but he found out that his meal times could be profitably spent with his books, and he therefore hired a man to take these volumes to and from the place of his employment.

His preaching work caused increasing persecution to centre about him, the hardest to bear being that from his own home. Even his mother leagued herself with them, and it was from her lips he heard that if he did not give up preaching he must give up his home. It was many years before he was free from the petty spite of his enemies, but he persevered in what he conceived to be God's plan for his life. The folk who formed the flock of "Methodists" (as they were nicknamed) encouraged him to stand fast, and "his amiable and affectionate behaviour," gradually "softened prejudice and conciliated esteem." "He was richly rewarded for his consistent and exemplary conduct by the conversion of his mother to his opinions and feelings."

About this time he became friendly with Thomas Purdy, who was for close on fifty years the Baptist minister at Rye. The result of the fellowship was that he was baptised in January 1780, with two others, by Mr. Purdy, and joined the Church in that town. From the calf-bound minute book recording in such neat writing the doings of over 150 years of Church meetings the following extracts are taken:

"At a general fast held in our Meeting Place, Feb: 4th, 1780, the Church having stopped. It was agreed by the Church to call out into the ministry our Brother William Vidler by holding a day of Fasting and Prayer the Wendsnesday senight after."

"Feb: 18th, 1780. Being a day set apart for Fasting and Prayer for the calling out into the ministry Brother William Vidler who was accordingly by the whole consent of the Church set apart for the Ministry of the Word and had the right hand of fellowship given him by Brother Thomas Purdy, Pastor of the Church."

"At the same time seven persons Viz—Joseph Fuller, Thomas Hazelden, William Askley, Abraham Bodle, Elizabeth Hazelden, Mary Weller, Ann Selms, gave in their experiences to the Church with declaration of their faith in Christ and conviction of baptism, and were baptised the same evening. Mr. Daniel Wood gave in his experience the same time but being poorly in body put off his being baptised. These persons came from Battle and were among the first baptised to form and plant a Baptist Church at Battle."

"Thursday, 19th Feb: 1780. Samuel Gestsel came before the Church and gave in a very satisfactory account of the work of grace on his soul, and of his faith in Christ, and was baptised the Lord's Day following. He also was one that proposed to form a Church at Battle."

The cause at Battle had steadily progressed until Mr. Gilbert regularly presided over more than fifty communicants. This gentleman was, however, only willing to help them as long as they remained "Independent" in faith and practice. The growing number of adult baptisms caused him great uneasiness, and in the early part of 1780 he felt it his duty to withdraw from the pastorate or oversight that had gradually been granted him.

The people turned to William Vidler for help, and on March 28th, 1780, Thomas Purdy of Rye, and William Copping of Sandhurst, came to Battle and presided at the formation of a Particular Baptist Church, with William Vidler as its pastor, and a membership of fifteen. Mr. Vidler was then twenty-two years of age.

He celebrated his new position by wedding Charity Sweetenham, and by so doing began a home life that was marked by an increasing beauty of fellowship to the end. There were times in their partnership when only the grace of God was sufficient to keep their faces toward the dawn, sad times of debt and distress and death, but for twenty-eight years the lives that God had joined were a continual refreshment to family and friends and flock alike.

The Church bestowed the sum of £17 yearly upon him as salary, and making this his book fund he worked at his trade for the daily bread. His expenses increased very rapidly. By 1787 he had a family of five, and William Sweetingham dying he took his wife's mother into his home, where she resided for more than twenty years. The following extract from his diary is eloquent of this period:

"When I was indebted to my butcher and baker Fifteen pounds,

thou Lord that knewest what I had need of, didst send me just Fifteen pounds to pay it with, though I told no mortal of my case. Now I am sure that thy hand was in this, for it was just the sum I needed, and came just in the time that I needed it, and the person who was chief instrument in doing it knew very little about me."

His fame was by no means confined to his birthplace, and many journeys he took for the supplying of better known pulpits than his own, and the preaching of special sermons. Several "calls" came to him from larger Churches, and this possibility of losing him may have brought to his people's remembrance the necessity of augmenting his stipend. By annual increase it was raised to £50.

The town persecution had by no means stayed, and one of the newer methods of annoyance was the accusation made that he was oppressing his people and making a gain of godliness. Considering that he preached six times each week and walked thirty miles so to do—plus his journeys to and from his work—the charge must have been very difficult to sustain. But many were found to continue this canard, and when it was worn threadbare others were invented to take its place. He was accused of lending money at an extortionate rate of interest, and in answer says: "I have never yet been able to keep myself quite level with the world, which at times has been a great trouble to me, as I earnestly wish to owe no man anything but love." Again it was rumoured that "he charged everyone he baptised half-a-guinea or a guinea," and defended himself thus: "Of all those whom I have ever baptised, I never did receive the value of one penny . . . though I have several times refused presents which have been offered me on these occasions."

The opposition to him and his work culminated in a solemn league that was formed by the tradesmen and others of the town "laying themselves under the obligation not to buy or sell anything of or to those who formed Vidler's band of religionists." The very absurdity of this was its executioner, and a certain person in high position in Battle dying just then, the boycott gradually ceased. Little petty spitefulnesses had, however, to be encountered now and then. A typical incident is as follows: A shoemaker in the High Street divided his days between hatred of Mr. Vidler and admiration of a notice conspicuous in his window. The latter declared that his shoes and his only would "infallibly fit." On the day of the Annual Fair he observed the young minister coming down the crowded street, and stopping him with a low bow, with solemn voice said, "Good morning to you, Parson Brickdust. I hope your Reverence is well this morning, Most Reverend Sir." Mr. Vidler perceiving how highly the people relished the joke, uncovered his head with great gravity, returned a still lower obeisance than he had received, and with great stateliness of manner replied,

" Good morning to you, Mr. H—, Infallible Boot and Shoe maker; I hope I have the pleasure of seeing your Excellency well this morning, Most Infallible Sir." This unexpected retort, in which the fool was answered according to his folly, disconcerted the scoffer, raised the laugh against him, and fixed on him the name of " Mr. Infallible," to the day of his death.

The influence of Mr. Vidler's character and talent won its way at last. His enemies became afraid of encountering his keen raillery. And with the joining of most of his relations to the Church he served, came a time of peace to him and his.

Somewhen before 1790 he gave up his manual labour and opened a shop for the sale of books and stationery and drugs. Although he kept this establishment until he finally left Battle, it did not do much towards keeping him. He was not cut out for a salesman. His books seemed better to read than to sell. The few customers complained of his inattention, but what could be expected of a shopman who had to prepare several sermons and addresses between the ringing of the shop bell, and who read himself into other worlds from whence it was a long journey back to the sale of a packet of wafers. Owing to his growing popularity in the denomination he served, he was frequently away from home, and during these absences closed his shop, needless to say this did not tend to enhance his trade profits.¹

One of the masters in whose yards he had worked as a stonemason was Mr. Samuel Luff, of Northiam. This gentleman asked him to hold services in the village, and for many years Mr. Vidler visited the place every other week, walking the nine miles in all weathers, the meetings being held on fine evenings under the oak called Elizabeth's and when wet, in a building in Mr. Luff's yard. Hence arose a branch Church in this village.

On October 11, 1780, his father died. A courageous, hard-working, skilled citizen; a good father; a man of worthy character; but without any signs of having been converted along the lines of the Calvinistic scheme. For years there had been constant attendance at the Established Church, but no qualifications that would make the dissenters of that town rejoice because the brand was plucked from the burning. William Vidler was asked to preach the funeral sermon. He did, and in it he said that " good men are finally saved even though they might not clearly apprehend what the reputed orthodox termed ' saving faith.' " From this time the doubts that were in his mind as to the infallibility of the Calvinistic system of doctrine grew ever stronger. The following is from his diary some four years later:

¹ After his removal to London he continued to sell and publish books in the Strand and in Holborn. Mr. John Fenton and Mr. N. Scarlett were partners at different times.

"I have lately had some serious thoughts on two important points in divinity—the Godhead of Christ, and the eternity of hell torments. At present I do not doubt the truth of these doctrines, as commonly received amongst the orthodox; but I do intend to consider them both more minutely; and as I desire to have nothing but truth, I entreat God to direct me and keep me from error."

By 1790 the Church over which he ministered had grown to the total of 150 baptised believers. For eight years they had worshipped in the Old Meeting House that they had bought from the representatives of the Presbyterian authorities. Now they rose and built. The new chapel was opened on April 11th, 1790, and soon thronged with hearers. Although the pastor was hammering out his doubts into useful helps for future days, the people neither heard the ring of the anvil nor the roar of the furnace. What they were sure of was that their minister was the most successful in that part of the country, and even of that part of England. A contemporary pen-portrait tells us that "there was everything about him to attract the attention and admiration of his audience. His figure in the pulpit was commanding, his voice was melodious and of fine compass, and his attitude inclining to be graceful. His ministry excited considerable attention; the Church and congregation rapidly increased; and abroad as well as at home his preaching secured him a large share of public approbation and esteem."

The new meeting house cost £700, a large sum for even a successful Church to raise. Local subscriptions came to £160 and there stayed. The members were not rich folk. And the neighbourhood was being rapidly denuded of its moneyed classes. The ironworks that had spelt fortune to the owners and comfort to the workers had been closed down. Even that great hammer down in the Beech Mill Valley—whose clang had been heard for twenty miles—was silent, and the only forge at work was "My Lord Ashburnham's," some miles away. The prosperity of Battle was over. For now it would have but the shadow of trade and employment, although it would for many generations refuse to believe that it was but a shadow. The town of Hastings, leaping yearly into greater size and notableness, was steadily taking the trade from the shops of Battle. Therefore Mr. Vidler had to seek the rest of the money away from the district, and in May, 1791, he commenced his travels so to do.

Unfortunately for the Church the tour did not result in a large increase to the money. But fortunately for the pastor it resulted in the making of many friends, and in his becoming known amongst the Churches of the Midlands and the East of England. He met Mr. Ryland at Northampton (afterwards Dr. Ryland, of Bristol), the venerable Mr. Hall, of Arnsby (father of Robert Hall, of Leicester), and Mr. Andrew Fuller, of Kettering. The last-named pledged himself to a literary corres-

pondence with Mr. Vidler, and the letters have since become famous by reason of their being the manifestos of two opposing champions in one of the theological controversies that divided the then Christian world. From the first these letters were written mainly upon the subject of the consequences of Socinianism.

This journey did a great deal in strengthening the doubts in Mr. Vidler's mind as to Calvinism. His diary afterwards shows great restlessness and indecision. On August 22, Lord's Day, he writes:

"It is long since I wrote anything of the state of my soul. I have lately been much stirred up again by reading Mr. Winchester on the final restoration of all things, which doctrine (upon a consideration of several years, and much fear and prayer for direction) I am constrained to say I believe. I preached this morning from the parable of the pounds, Luke 19, and found myself much confined in speaking as I have always found myself when treating on such passages. I suspect I have something wrong in my sentiments which I ought to get rid of. O Lord, I desire to have no sentiment but what I receive from Thy word."

Elhanan Winchester was an American, who through John Murray had adopted the tenet of Universal Restoration, revived in 1750 by James Rely, a fellow-worker of the great Whitfield. Winchester had come to England to spread this doctrine, and in 1787 had drawn together a large and influential congregation at Parliament Court, Artillery Lane, Bishopsgate. Vidler now not only read his works, but was converted to his view. He invited Winchester to preach at Battle on the last Sunday in 1792, when the Church held its annual meeting. In a speech that lasted over three hours the pastor declared and explained his doctrine. Then the matter was put to the vote. Should they keep their minister and so advertise their acceptance of the Universalist's creed? Or should they stand to the old belief and its consequence? For Mr. Vidler and Universalism there voted 153 out of the 168 members present. The "old guard" of fifteen withdrew, and in a room lent for the purpose, formed themselves into a Church of the Particular Baptist faith and practice.

Letters of expostulation and reproach, and even of abuse, poured in from all parts of England. His apostasy was the theme of general discourse. The town of Battle became very well known to those who thought in theological phrases. Of but one of his numerous mentors need anything be said here. Mr. Andrew Fuller was genuinely sorry at the change of Mr. Vidler's doctrinal standpoint, and a letter written in February, 1793, to express that sorrow was preserved and printed by both parties. Mr. Fuller intended it at first to be private, as well as "affectionate and faithful," but no reply being received, he inserted it in the Evangelical Magazine some two years afterwards. Although

most people knew to whom it was written, Mr. Vidler's name was omitted, and it was signed "Gaius." J. W. Morris, in his Memoirs of Mr. Andrew Fuller, sums up this letter in three questions, and they are sufficiently interesting to record here:

1. Whether Mr. V.'s change of sentiment did not arise from an idea that endless punishment was in itself unjust.

2. Whether the genius of the sentiment in question be not opposite to that of every other sentiment in the Bible.

3. Whether Mr. V.'s ministrations, on this principle, will not savour of His who taught our first parents, "ye shall not surely die."

The Church in Battle was affiliated with the Particular Baptist Association of Kent and Sussex, and Mr. Vidler had held high office amongst the associated Churches. Several times he was chosen preacher to the Annual Assembly, and in 1791 the Moderatorship, the highest honour at their disposal, was conferred upon him. In 1793 he had again been chosen the Association preacher. The meetings were held at Chatham. To prevent him fulfilling the task they had invited him to, the ministers and delegates met on the preceding day to the one advertised and expelled him from the connection. His old friend, Middleton, of Lewes, was chosen to preach a sermon the next day that should be a pronouncement, official and final, of the excommunication. The Battle minister arrived at the proper day and speedily learned how matters stood. He stayed, however, and accompanied the others to listen to the address. When he recognised the theme he rose up and continued standing during its delivery. In the course of it, after insisting on the pernicious nature and tendency of the heresy, the preacher seemed apprehensive lest some of his hearers might conclude that those who maintained such doctrine must be bad men, so cautioned them against this, and said: "So far from it, heretics are sometimes the holiest and best of men; but they are the more dangerous on that account." On his saying this Mr. Vidler bowed, as he did at whatever was personal in the sermon. After its delivery they all went to dinner together at the tavern. The brethren discussed the discourse in the approved way, and after the meal the feeling gained ground that the preacher was himself tinged with Vidler's heresy because of some things that he had said. Mr. Middleton thereupon appealed to his living text, who rose and cleared his friend of the charge.

Thus cut off from his former friends, he naturally tightened the bonds with his new. Several times he preached for Winchester, and on February 9th, 1794, he was chosen his assistant. Before the year was out Winchester wished to return to America, and on his advice, by the suffrage of the people, William Vidler became his successor, and entered on a ministry that lasted more than twenty years.

The congregation at Parliament Court wanted Mr. Vidler so much

that they accepted the somewhat peculiar conditions that he imposed upon them. He was to spend several holidays of two or three Sundays at a time with his Battle friends, and his new people were to pay off the debt that still stood on the Meeting House he had erected in Battle. Up to November, 1796, these conditions held, but in that month he severed his connection with the country town by moving his residence to Bethnal Green.

He had now become the recognised head of the Universalists. He "so infinitely outdid all the doings of his predecessor, as to cause the name of Winchester soon to be forgotten." Crowds flocked to his chapel, and all London talked of his sermons.

In January, 1797, he began to edit and publish a periodical entitled, "The Universalist's Miscellany; or, The Philanthropist's Museum." It was "Intended Chiefly as an Antidote against the Anti-Christian Doctrine of Endless Misery." In the sixth volume the title was changed to, "The Universal Theological Magazine (for the year 1802). Intended for the Free Discussion of all Religious Subjects, to which Persons of every Denomination are invited. Being a continuation of the Universalist's Miscellany." In 1804 the title was again changed, and read, "The Universal Theological Magazine and Impartial Review: New Series," and the year after it passed into the hands of Mr. Robert Aspland, who had been a contributor to its pages for some time. In all, Mr. Vidler published thirteen volumes in the nine years.

Perhaps the only value of this publication is in the fact that it became an index of the editor's mind. The numbers mark the progress towards his final position. In the first and second numbers Mr. Vidler issued his reply to the letter of Andrew Fuller written four years before, and published two years before.

The controversy is not of importance to-day. For the curious there is a very full account of it written by a strong Calvinist, in Mr. Morris's "Memoirs of Andrew Fuller." It was mostly about the meaning of certain words, such as "ever: everlasting: eternal:" which in Mr. Vidler's creed stood for "age: age-lasting: ages." It reached great length, the answers taking up most of the Miscellany, and in 1802 Mr. Fuller published his share of it in a 108 page book of 8vo. size, entitled "Letters to Mr. Vidler, on the doctrine of Universal Salvation." If it had been left at that, the dispute would at all events have been dignified, but just afterwards a Mr. Jerram, an evangelical clergyman, a friend of Mr. Fuller's, who had been a "strict observer of everything that passed, and had watched the direction of every blow," and had been "provoked at the groundless pretensions of Mr. V.," and had been "hurt by his ignorant, irreverent freedoms with the holy scriptures; resolved to expose him to the religious world." He therefore published, "Letters to a Universalist; containing a Review of the Controversy between Mr.

Vidler and Mr. Fuller, on the Doctrine of Universal Salvation." In this Mr. Vidler is exhorted to "hide his face in confusion," and his letters are referred to as "trash." Yet, says the author, "I have no enmity whatever against the man; it is simply against the writer that all my animadversions are aimed." It is, perhaps, just as well that the "aim" was sufficiently bad not to "hit."

About the year 1799 Mr. Vidler took up the study of the personality of Satan, and "after the examination of the passages one by one," came to the conclusion "that the popular view was erroneous." In March, 1815, his committee asked him to publish a volume of lectures, and include "the three lectures on the existence of the Devil," but his last illness prevented this being done.

During the final months of this century he collaborated with Mr. Scarlett,² and others in a translation of the New Testament, with notes. The "Notes" were evangelical, but accommodated to the Universal hypothesis. The basis of the translation was some M.S. notes by James Creighton, an Anglican clergyman. Once a week Creighton, Scarlett, John Cue (a Sandemanian), and Vidler, met at Mr. Scarlett's house to revise the progressing work. When published its title page read: "A Translation of the New Testament from the Original Greek, 1798."

A tour in the Fen country and Lincolnshire during 1801 revealed another stage in his development. At Wisbeach was a General Baptist Church, dating from 1654, which had been touched by the Socinianism on the 18th century. One section had come again into evangelical circles through the New Connection; but the other, under Richard Wright, was now distinctly Unitarian. Wright (1764—1836) became a great friend of Vidler, and the contact led the latter to adopt the Unitarian position. This was the year 1801. Many of the old General Baptist Churches in these parts were wavering, and even the influence of Dan Taylor had not sufficed to regain them to the old lines. The appearance of Vidler now gave them a strong impetus in the other direction. Round about Cambridge, and then North—through fen and marsh—he preached. Buildings overflowed with the crowds that desired to hear him. The journey became a triumph for the man as an orator and advocate. In many parts of Lincolnshire he planted his Unitarian banner, and left companies of followers, who instituted Churches of that faith and practice. Not only did the old General Baptists afford a fine field for his efforts (he was by 1802 in full connection with them) but the Particular Baptists also yielded him fruit. For instance at Soham, where Andrew Fuller had been pastor 1775—1782, the death of Francis Bland, in 1802, and the coming of John Gisborne marks the turning point,

² Nathaniel Scarlett, 1753-1802, became Universalist under Winchester and was baptized by Vidler. When he published the "British Theatre," Vidler marked his objection by closing the friendship.

and by 1811 the Unitarian section had joined the ancient assembly. And his old church at Battle and Brighthelmstone, with its branch at Northiam, despite its Calvinistic origin, followed him into the General Assembly in 1804.

Upon his return he formally declared to his people his Socinian belief. The result was that the largest portion of the congregation left. The change from a full auditorium to an almost empty one meant many things hard to bear. Especially was this so in a monetary sense. For this not only stood for personal sacrifice, but for family distress. When he went to Parliament Court he was offered £140 per annum. Of this he had a part only, for the congregation promised more than they could give. After he came to live in London and put in all his time as their minister, things improved so much that the whole of the amount was regularly paid, and each year presents were made to him of surplus balances. At the time of his avowal of altered belief he was receiving the sum of £250 yearly. Because of that avowal it dropped to £30, and there remained for a few years. The Church revenue was from the sale of seat tickets, the taking of quarterly collections, and donations. The £30 marked its zero, and in the years that followed, right along to the time when he was too ill to preach, it steadily mounted towards a respectable figure. In 1808 it was £133 10s. 6d., and at the conclusion of his pastoral days the building was again regularly filled, and the income restored to its former amount.

In 1804, Mr. Vidler started "The Unitarian Evangelical Society," and lectured on its behalf each Thursday, at the chapel in Leather Lane, Holborn. Two years after he was appointed the Travelling Advocate for the Unitarian Fund, of which he was one of the founders and a trustee.

Very frequently did he have to leave London for tours in the Provinces, and it was whilst on one of these that the news came to him at Wisbeach that his wife was seriously ill. They were then living at "the little village called West Ham." Mrs. Vidler had never quite recovered from the shock caused by her eldest son's death on January 26th, 1796. He was but fourteen. And he manifested signs of being even more brilliant than his father. An epidemic of fever had raged through Battle, and her boy had been one of those who passed in its fury. Another grief hastened the home-going of Mrs. Vidler, for two years before her death the second daughter of the family was taken at the age of eighteen. Therefore the home-partner of Mr. Vidler's sorrows and joys, tribulations and triumphs, was quite ready to answer the call of the Father's voice. She died December 22, 1808, at the age of 56.

The last years of Mr. Vidler's life were very busy ones with preaching and publishing. He edited an edition of Paul Siegvolk's "Everlasting Gospel." He published a sermon on "The Designs of the Death of Christ," that he had preached in 1795; and also sermons on, "God's

Love to His creatures Asserted and Vindicated;" and "A Testimony of Respect to the Memory of Elhanan Winchester." He took pains to present Mr. Winchester's views to the reading public, and issued editions of "Winchester's Dialogues: with Notes," and the same writer's "Trial of Witnesses." A little while before the end he completed and published his "Life of Elhanan Winchester and Review of His Writings." During the flood of "The Temple of Reason;" "The Religion of Reason;" "The Goddess of Reason;" and "The Age of Reason," Mr. Vidler has made some notes that he intended to publish as a reply, but they were put away and not used until he wrote a preface for the edition of "Revelation Defended," that he issued. The most notable of his letters, included, beside those to Andrew Fuller, a "Letter to Mr. S. Bradburn and All Methodist Ministers in England."

The journey that he so hastily made to be with his wife during her last earthly hours was responsible for hastening his own death. During it the postchaise was overturned down a steep bank, and though Mr. Vidler received no breaking of limb, the bruising and shock were sufficient to weaken him considerably, for he was a more than usually heavy man.³ He lived about eight years after that accident, but never quite threw off its effects. His last years were very happy and prosperous. A crowded meeting-house, an increasingly loving people, an established fame; such was his portion. In 1815 he was kept from active service by illness, and only preached twice. Next year he removed to the home of his son-in-law, William Smith, where he fell asleep on August 23rd, 1816, at the age of fifty-eight years and three months. Five days later he was buried in the grave-yard of the Unitarian congregation, at Old Gravel Pit, Hackney, the funeral being "attended by a multitude the most respectable and solemn that can well be conceived."

The congregation to which he had ministered called William Johnson Fox to the pastorate, and in 1824 moved to South Place, Finsbury. It lost its Baptist tinge, dropped its connection with the General Assembly of General Baptists, and by degrees evolved into an Ethical Society without any distinct Christian bias.

It is not easy in a sentence or so to state what was the secret of his power. His was a manifold personality. The extreme weakness of the early years accounted for the irascible temperament that he found so hard to subdue. At the age of thirty, a note in his diary states:

"Surprised into fit of violent and unreasonable anger in midst of my people at a Church meeting. I have good reason to be ashamed. O Lord, give me meekness and patience."

Although the first part of the prayer could not be said to have been

³ His excessive corpulence was the source of many odd adventures, and of many stories about them. It is still locally told that he always claimed two chairs at public meetings, and booked two seats for his coach journeys.

altogether successful, the patience was given. Especially was this demonstrated in the beautiful home life that centred about his wife and himself.

He was all his life interested in public and philanthropic affairs, and advocated by voice and pen, reforms that were far in advance of his day. The following extract from his Review, for 1801, upon "the neglected subject of cruelty to animals," was written nearly fifty years before the first of the three Acts of Parliament to stay this abuse. It is given at length because it is a fair specimen of his style as a journalist:

"There are several species of barbarity in this Christian country which reflect dishonour on our national character. Throwing at cocks, we believe, is pretty generally disused since our moral mentor, Addison, so compassionately pleaded their cause in one of the papers of the Spectator; but cock-fighting and bull-baiting yet continue, and we fear that the practice of pruning the cockchafer, among children, is yet frequent. Parents and tutors of youth ought to discourage everything of this kind; from cruelty to animals the transition is very natural to cruelty to our own species."

He was also amongst the first to include the pleasures of the chase under the head of "cruelties."

As a preacher he was an Apollos among his brethren. The fact of his being chosen three consecutive years as the orator of the Association to which he first belonged stands for something. For that Association was Baptist! "A high rank must be allotted to him," says one of his biographers, "amongst popular divines, for there have been few preachers who have been able to make upon the minds of an auditory, so deep an impression, not of feeling merely, but of knowledge and truth."

He gained extensive knowledge as a student. The loss of a classical foundation could never be recovered, and although early in life he taught himself Latin and Greek, yet he never could become the sure and accurate scholar he desired to be. On the other hand the opponent who called him "half-taught . . . just learned to distinguish alpha from beta," sacrificed his own standing by stating what was not true. Mr. Vidler's clearness of conception, retentiveness of memory, quickness of perception, patience in enquiry, and coolness in judgment, gave him great advantages, which he used with, perhaps, greater ability than any other man who has occupied a like position.

In spirit he was one who never knew what fear meant, and by his courage he made the causes he championed prosper exceedingly. As a Baptist he was beloved and honoured. As a Universalist he became the greatest leader England has known. As a Unitarian he was one of the foremost champions and noblest advocates.

And he continued to the close of his life a decided Baptist.

F. W. BUTT-THOMPSON, Battle.