

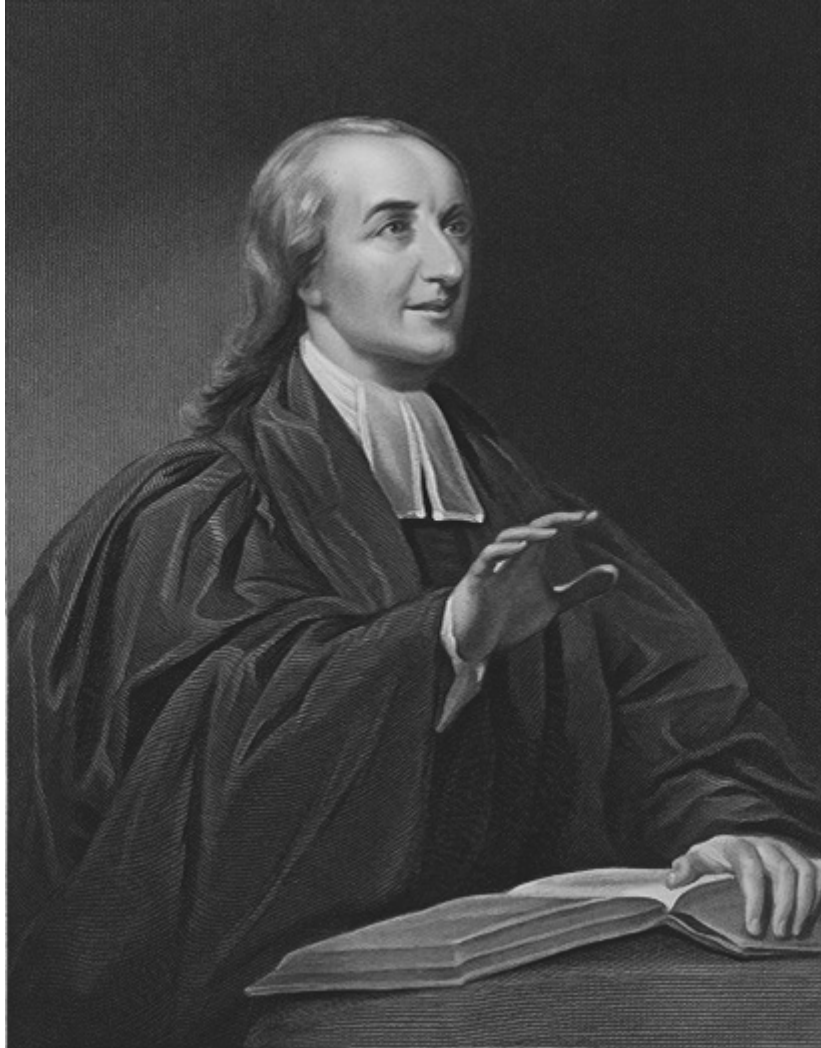
THE
CHRISTIAN LEADERS
OF
The Last Century;
OR,
ENGLAND A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

By the
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"Enquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of
their fathers."—JOB viii. 8.

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REV. JOHN FLETCHER, Vicar of Madeley,
1729–1785AD.

XIII.

Fletcher of Madeley and his Ministry.

CHAPTER I.

Born in Switzerland, 1729—Educated at Geneva and Leutzburg—Wishes to be a Soldier—
Becomes a Tutor in England, 1750—Private Tutor in Mr. Hill's Family, 1752—Becomes
Acquainted with Methodists—Inward Conflict—Ordained 1757—Vicar of Madeley,
1760—Correspondence with Charles Wesley and Lady Huntingdon.

I BELIEVE that no one ever reads his Bible with attention without being struck with the deep beauty of the fourteenth chapter of St. John's gospel. I suspect that few readers of that marvellous chapter fail to notice the wondrous saying of our Lord, "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you." Cold and dull must be the heart that is not roused and stirred by these words.

This beautiful saying, of late years, has been painfully wrested from its true meaning. Men of whom better things might have been expected, have misapplied it sadly, and imposed a false sense on it. They have dared to say that men of all faiths and creeds will find a place in heaven at last; and that "every man shall be saved by the law or sect which he professeth, so that he be diligent to frame his mind according to that law and the light of nature." They would fain have us believe that the inhabitants of heaven will be a mixed body, including heathen idolaters and Mohammedans as well as Christians, and comprising members of every religious denomination in the world, however opposite and antagonistic their respective opinions may be. Miserable indeed is such theology! Wretched is the prospect which it holds out to us of eternity! Small could be the harmony in such a heterogeneous assembly! At this rate, heaven would be no heaven at all.

But we must not allow human misinterpretations to make us overlook great truths. It is true, in a most comfortable sense, that "in our Father's house there are many mansions," and that all who are washed in Christ's blood, and renewed by Christ's Spirit, will find a place in heaven, though they may not see eye to eye upon earth. There is room in our Father's house for all who hold the Head, however much they may differ on points of minor importance. There is room for Calvinists, and room for Arminians, room for Episcopalians and room for Presbyterians, room for Thomas Cranmer and room for John Knox, room for John Bunyan and room for George Herbert, room for Henry Martyn and room for Dr. Judson, room for Edward Bickersteth and

room for Robert M'Cheyne, room for Chalmers of Edinburgh, and room for Daniel Wilson of Calcutta. Yes! thank God, our Father's house is a very wide one. There is room in it for all who are true-hearted believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thoughts such as these come crowding over my mind as I take up my pen to write an account of the eleventh spiritual hero of the eighteenth century, whom I want to introduce to my readers. The man whom I mean is the well-known Fletcher, vicar of Madeley. I cannot forget that there was a doctrinal gulf between him and my last hero, Toplady, and that while one was a Calvinist of Calvinists, the other was an Arminian of Arminians. But I will never shut my eyes to the fact that Fletcher was a Christian as well as an Arminian. Mistaken, as I think he was, on some points, he was certainly thoroughly right on others. He was a man of rare grace, and a minister of rare usefulness. In short, I think that no account of English religion a hundred years ago could be considered just, fair, and complete, which did not supply some information about Fletcher of Madeley.

John William Fletcher was a native of Switzerland, and was born at Nyon, in that country, on the 12th of September 1729. His real name was De La Flechiere, and he is probably known by that name among his own countrymen to this day. In England, however, he was always called Fletcher, and, for convenience's sake, I shall only speak of him by that name. His father was first an officer in the French army, and afterwards a colonel in the militia of his own country. The family is said to have been one of the most respectable in the canton of Berne, and a branch of an earldom of Savoy.

Fletcher appears to have been remarkable for cleverness even when a boy. At the first school which he went to at Geneva, he carried away all the prizes, and was complimented by the teachers and managers in a very flattering manner. During his residence at Geneva, his biographer records that "he allowed himself but little time either for recreation, refreshment, or rest. After studying hard all day, he would often consume the greater part of the night in writing down whatever had occurred in the course of his reading which seemed worthy of observation. Here he acquired that true classical taste which was so frequently and justly admired by his friends, and which all his studied plainness could never entirely conceal. Here, also, he laid the foundation of that extensive and accurate knowledge for which he was afterwards distinguished, both in philosophy and theology."

From Geneva his father sent him to a small Swiss town called Leutzburg, where he not only acquired the German language, but also diligently prosecuted his former studies. On leaving Leutzburg, he continued some time at home, studying the Hebrew language, and perfecting his acquaintance with mathematics. Such was Fletcher's early training and education. I ask the

reader's special attention to it. It supplies one among many proofs that those who call the leaders of the English revival of religion in the last century "poor, ignorant, illiterate fanatics," are only exposing their own ignorance. They know neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm. In the mere matter of learning, Wesley, Romaine, Berridge, Hervey, Toplady, and Fletcher, were second to few men in their day.

Young Fletcher's education being completed, his parents hoped that he would at once turn his attention to the ministry, a profession for which they considered him to be eminently well fitted. In this expectation, however, they were at first curiously disappointed. Partly from a sense of unfitness, partly from scruples about the doctrine of predestination, young Fletcher announced that he had given up all idea of being ordained, and wished to go into the army. His theological studies were laid aside for the military works of Vauban and Cohorn, and, in spite of all the remonstrances of his friends, he seemed determined to become a soldier.

This strange determination, however, was frustrated by a singular train of providences. The same overruling hand which would not allow Jonah to go to Tarshish, and sent him to Nineveh in spite of himself, was able to prevent the young Swiss student carrying out his military intentions. At first, it seems, on his parents flatly refusing their consent to his entering the army, young Fletcher went away to Lisbon, and, like many of his countrymen, offered his services to a foreign flag. At Lisbon, on his offer being accepted, he soon gathered a company of Swiss recruits, and engaged a passage on board a Portuguese man-of-war which was about to sail for Brazil. He then wrote to his parents, asking them to send him money, but met with a decided refusal. Unmoved by this, he determined to go without the money, as soon as the ship sailed. But, on the morning that he ought to have put to sea, the servant at breakfast let the kettle fall and scalded his leg so severely that he had to keep his bed for a considerable time. In the meanwhile the ship sailed for Brazil, and, curiously enough, was never heard of any more!

Fletcher returned to Switzerland, in no wise shaken or deterred by his Lisbon disappointment. Being informed that his uncle, then a colonel in the Dutch service, had procured a commission for him, he joyfully set out for Flanders. But just at that time a peace was concluded, and the continental armies were reduced; and his uncle dying shortly after, his expectations were completely blasted, and he gave up all thought of being a soldier.

Being now disengaged from business, and all military prospects seeming completely at an end, young Fletcher thought it would not be amiss to spend a little time in England. He arrived in this country, almost totally ignorant of our language, sometime in the year 1750, and began at once to inquire for some one who could instruct him in the English tongue. For this purpose he

was recommended to a boarding-school, kept by a Mr. Burchell, at South Mimms, and afterwards at Hatfield, in Hertfordshire. With this gentleman he remained eighteen months, and not only acquired a complete mastery of English, but also became exceedingly popular as a clever, amiable, and agreeable man, both in his tutor's family and throughout the neighbourhood in which he resided. While staying at Mr. Burchell's, Mr. Dechamps, a French minister to whom he had been recommended, procured him the situation of private tutor in the family of Mr. Hill of Tern Hall, in Shropshire. His acceptance of this post in the year 1752, in the twenty-second year of his age, was the turning-point in his life, and affected his whole course, both spiritually and temporally, to the very end of his days.

Up to this time, there is not the slightest evidence that Fletcher knew anything of spiritual and experimental religion. As a well-educated man, he was of course acquainted with the facts and evidences of Christianity. But he appears to have been profoundly ignorant of the inward work of the Holy Ghost, and of the distinctive doctrines of the gospel of Christ. Happily for him, he seems to have been carefully and morally brought up, and to have had a good deal of religion of a certain sort when he was a boy. From an early period of life, he was familiar with the letter of Scripture, and to this circumstance he traced his preservation from infidelity, and from many vices into which young men too often fall. Beside this, a succession of providential escapes from death, which his biographers have carefully recorded, undoubtedly had a restraining effect upon him. Nevertheless, there is no reason to think that he really experienced a work of grace in his heart until he had been some time an inmate of Mr. Hill's house. Up to this time he had, after a fashion, believed in God and feared God; but he had never felt his love in Christ Jesus shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost. He had never really seen his own sinfulness, nor the preciousness of Christ's atoning blood.

The first thing which awakened Fletcher to a right conviction of his fallen state, was the simple remark of a servant in Mr. Hill's household. This man, coming up into his room one Sunday evening, in order to make up the fire, found him writing some music, and, looking at him with concern, said, "Sir, I am sorry to see you so employed on the Lord's day." At first his pride was aroused and his resentment moved, to hear a reproof given by a servant. But, upon reflection, he felt the reproof was just, put away his music, and from that very hour became a strict observer of the Lord's day. How true is that word of Solomon, "Reproofs of instruction are the way of life!" (Prov. vi. 23.)

The next step in his spiritual history was his becoming acquainted with the people called Methodists. The way in which this was brought about he afterwards related to John Wesley, in the following words:—"When Mr. Hill

went to London to attend Parliament, he took his family and me with him. On one occasion, while they stopped at St. Alban's, I walked out into the town, and did not return till they were set out for London. A horse being left for me, I rode after them and overtook them in the evening. Mr. Hill asked me why I stayed behind. I said, 'As I was walking I met with a poor old woman, who talked so sweetly of Jesus Christ, that I knew not how the time passed away.' Said Mrs. Hill, 'I shall wonder if our tutor does not turn Methodist by-and-by.' 'Methodist, madam,' said I; 'pray what is that?' She replied, 'Why, the Methodists are a people that do nothing but pray; they are praying all day and all night.' 'Are they?' said I; 'then, by the help of God, I will find them out, if they be above ground.' I did find them out not long after, and was admitted into the society."

The third important step in Fletcher's spiritual history was hearing those clergymen who were called Methodists preach about *faith*. Under the influence of newly awakened feelings, he had begun to strive diligently to make himself acceptable to God by his doings. But hearing a sermon one day preached by a clergyman named Green, he became convinced that he did not understand the nature of saving faith. This conviction was only attained through much humiliation of soul. "Is it possible," he thought, "that I, who have always been accounted so religious, who have made divinity my study, and received the premium of *piety* (so-called) from a Swiss university for my writings on divine subjects—is it possible that I should yet be so ignorant as not to know what faith is? But the more he examined himself and considered the subject, the more he was convinced of the momentous truth. The more he saw his sinfulness, and the entire corruption and depravity of his whole nature, the more his hope of being able to reconcile himself to God by his own works began to die away. He still sought, by the most rigorous austerities, to conquer this evil nature, and to bring into his soul a heaven-born peace. But alas! the more he strove the more he saw and felt that all his soul was sinful. In short, like Bunyan's Christian, before he saw the way to the wicket-gate, he felt his imminent danger, and yet knew not which way to flee.

How long this inward struggle continued in Fletcher's mind is not quite clear. It seems probable that it was at least two years before his soul found peace and was set at liberty, and his burden rolled away. Evangelists were rare in these days, and there were few to help an anxious conscience into the light. His diary shows that he went through an immense amount of inward conflict. At one time we find him saying, "I almost gave up all hope, and resolved to sin on and go to hell." At another time he says, "If I go to hell, I will serve God even there; and since I cannot be an instance of his mercy in heaven, I will be a monument of his justice in hell; and if I show forth his

glory one way or the other, I am content.” At another time he says, I have recovered my ground. I thought Christ died for all, and therefore he died for me. He died to pluck such sinners as I am as brands out of the burning. And as I sincerely desire to be his, he will surely take me.” At another time he records, “I heard a sermon on justification by faith, but my heart was not moved in the least. I was only still more convinced that I was an unbeliever, that I am not justified by faith, and that till I am, I shall never have peace with God.” At another time he says, “I have found relief in Mr. Wesley’s journal, when I heard that we should not build on what we feel, but go to Christ with all our sins and all our hardness of heart.”

Mental struggles like these are no strange things to many of God’s people. They are deep waters through which some of the best and holiest saints have had to pass, in the beginning of their journey towards heaven. John Bunyan’s little book called “Grace Abounding,” is a striking account of the inward agony which the author of “Pilgrim’s Progress” had to endure before he found peace. There are many points of resemblance between his experience and that of Fletcher. It is a pleasant thought, however, that sooner or later these painful struggles end in solid peace. The greater the conflict at first, the greater sometimes is the peace at the last. The men that God intends to use most as instruments to do his work, are often tempered for his service by being frequently put into the fire. The truths that we have got hold of by tremendous exertion are precisely the truths which we afterwards grasp most firmly, and proclaim most positively and powerfully. The man who has embraced the doctrine of justification by faith alone, through a hand-to-hand fight with Satan, and a contest even unto death, is precisely the man to preach the doctrine to his fellow-men with unction, with demonstration of the Spirit, and with crushing power. This was the experience of that mighty evangelist, George Whitefield. This was the experience of Fletcher of Madeley.

Once set free from the burden of sin unforgiven, and feeling the blessedness of peace with God, we need not wonder that Fletcher longed to tell others of the way to life. Long before he was ordained a minister, he began to speak to others about their souls, according as he had opportunity. Both in London, when he accompanied Mr. Hill, and even during the sitting of Parliament, and in the neighbourhood of Tern Hall, he seized every occasion of trying to do spiritual good. And even at this early period his labours were not in vain. His biographer says: “Though he was at present by no means perfect in the English tongue, particularly in the pronunciation of it, yet the earnestness with which he spoke, then seldom to be found in English preaching, and the unspeakably tender affection to poor, undone sinners, which breathed in every word and question, drew multitudes of people to hear him, and few went empty away.”

We can easily understand that Fletcher's views about taking orders now went through a complete change. Little by little his doubts, and fears, and scruples as to his fitness for the ministerial office melted away. Correspondence with John Wesley encouraged him to go forward with the idea of being ordained. Difficulties which seemed likely at one time to put an insuperable barrier in his way, were unexpectedly removed. A gentleman whom he hardly knew offered him a living which was likely to be soon vacant. A clergyman whom he had never even spoken to, of his own accord offered him a title to orders; and at length, in the year 1757, he was ordained deacon on Sunday the 6th of March, and priest on the following Sunday, by the Bishop of Bangor, in the Chapel Royal at St. James's. How Fletcher got over the difficulty of being a foreigner, and of not having taken an University degree, I am unable to explain. I can only suppose that the influence of the family of the Hills, in which he was still tutor, made a bishop of those days ready to ordain him as a "literate person." On what title he was ordained, I am also unable to say. But, putting things together, I conjecture that he was nominated curate of Madeley, the parish of which he afterwards became vicar. The whole matter of his ordination seems to have been attended with strange irregularities, judged by the standard of the present day. But things were strangely managed in the Church of England a hundred years ago.

With characteristic energy, Fletcher lost no time in beginning the work of the ministry. The very day that he was ordained priest, he came straight from the Chapel Royal to West Street Chapel, and assisted John Wesley in the administration of the Lord's Supper. Throughout the next two months, until Mr. Hill's family left London for Shropshire, he preached in many London pulpits both in the English and French language, according as he had opportunity. Labouring in this way, he soon became well known as a fellow-labourer of the leading evangelists of the day, and rapidly attained a very high reputation.

In the month of May 1757 he went down into Shropshire with Mr. Hill's family, and found comparatively few openings for the exercise of his ministry. In fact, a friend says that he did not preach more than six times in six months; partly, no doubt, from his time being occupied with the education of his young pupils, and partly, in all probability, because the Shropshire clergy were afraid of him, and would not admit him into their pulpits. The only churches in which he preached were Atcham, Wroxeter, Madeley, and St. Alkmunds, and the Abbey Church, Shrewsbury.

Whatever the cause may have been, I cannot discover that Fletcher had any regular stated ministerial work for the first three years after his ordination. From March 1757 to the latter part of 1760, he seems to have retained his position as tutor in Mr. Hill's family, and in that capacity to have gone

regularly to London for one part of the year, and to have been generally in Shropshire for the other. Wherever he was, he appears to have found time for itinerating and preaching a good deal, and it is only natural to suppose that he was not required to devote himself entirely to the superintendence of Mr. Hill's sons.

I must confess my inability to trace out Fletcher's history very accurately during the first three years of his ministry. The memoirs of men of that day are so often written with a reckless neglect of dates, that at this distance of time it is impossible to follow their movements. Sometimes I read of his being at Bristol, preaching for John Wesley at Kingswood; sometimes I find him in London, preaching in Lady Huntingdon's drawing-room; sometimes he is at Brighton, occupying the pulpit of Lady Huntingdon's Chapel; sometimes he is at Tunbridge, preaching to French prisoners; sometimes he is itinerating about the country, and appearing in all sorts of strange and unexpected places. But the order and reasons of his movements during these three years are matters which I cannot pretend to explain. One thing only is very clear. He became his doubts, and fears, and scruples as to his fitness for the ministerial office melted away. Correspondence with John Wesley encouraged him to go forward with the idea of being ordained. Difficulties which seemed likely at one time to put an insuperable barrier in his way, were unexpectedly removed. A gentleman whom he hardly knew offered him a living which was likely to be soon vacant. A clergyman whom he had never even spoken to, of his own accord offered him a title to orders; and at length, in the year 1757, he was ordained deacon on Sunday the 6th of March, and priest on the following Sunday, by the Bishop of Bangor, in the Chapel Royal at St. James's. How Fletcher got over the difficulty of being a foreigner, and of not having taken an University degree, I am unable to explain. I can only suppose that the influence of the family of the Hills, in which he was still tutor, made a bishop of those days ready to ordain him as a "literate person." On what title he was ordained, I am also unable to say. But, putting things together, I conjecture that he was nominated curate of Madeley, the parish of which he afterwards became vicar. The whole matter of his ordination seems to have been attended with strange irregularities, judged by the standard of the present day. But things were strangely managed in the Church of England a hundred years ago.

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It was about this period of his life that Fletcher became acquainted with the famous Berridge of Everton. This took place under such singular circumstances that I shall give them at length in the words of Lady Huntingdon's biographer. It appears that he went to Everton vicarage uninvited and unexpectedly, and "introduced himself as a raw convert who had taken the liberty to wait on Berridge for the benefit of his instruction and advice. From his

accent and manner the shrewd vicar of Everton perceived at once that he was a foreigner, and inquired from what country he came. 'I am a Swiss, from the canton of Berne,' was the reply. 'From Berne!' said Berridge; 'then probably you can give me some account of a young fellow-countryman of yours, one John Fletcher, who has lately preached a few times for Mr. Wesley, and of whose talents, learning, and piety, he speaks in high terms. Do you know him?' 'Yes, sir,' said Fletcher; 'I know him intimately; and did the Messrs. Wesley know him as well as I do, they would not speak of him in such terms, for which he is more obliged to their partial friendship than to his own merits.' 'You surprise me,' said Berridge, 'by speaking so coldly of a countryman in whose praise they are so warm.' 'I have the best reason,' he rejoined, 'for speaking as I do, for I am myself John Fletcher.' 'If you are John Fletcher,' said his host, 'you must do me the favour to take my pulpit tomorrow, and when we are better acquainted, without implicitly receiving either your statement or that of your friends, I shall be able to judge for myself.' Thus commenced an intimacy between Fletcher and Berridge, which no subsequent controversy could ever entirely interrupt."

The turning-point in Fletcher's ministerial history was his appointment to the vicarage of Madeley, in October 1760. Madeley is a large and unattractive parish near Wellington, in Shropshire, containing at this time between eight and nine thousand inhabitants, employed almost entirely in collieries and ironworks. There is no reason to suppose that it was very different a hundred years ago from what it is now, though the population has probably increased. The circumstances under which he obtained the living were very remarkable, and are well described in his own letters.

The first link in the chain of providence which took him to Madeley, was the offer of the living of Dunham in Cheshire by his friend Mr. Hill. He told Fletcher that the parish was small, the duty light, and the income good—£400 a-year—and that it was situated in a fine sporting country. After thanking Mr. Hill most cordially for his kindness, Fletcher replied, "Alas, sir! Dunham will not suit me. There is too much money, and too little work." "Few clergymen make such objections," said Mr. Hill; "it is a pity to resign such a living, as I do not know that I can find you another. What shall we do? Would you like Madeley?" "That, sir, would be the very place for me." "My object, Mr. Fletcher, is to make you comfortable in your own way. If you prefer Madeley, I shall find no difficulty in persuading Chambers, the present vicar, to exchange it for Dunham, which is worth twice as much, and in getting Madeley for you." In this way, curious as it now appears, John Fletcher, in the month of October 1760, found himself in the strange position of an English incumbent, and vicar of a large parish in Shropshire.

He did not go to Madeley without many doubts and misgivings. Not a few

of his best friends thought it a move of very questionable wisdom. Even now, one cannot help fancying that his valuable life would have been longer, and his extra-parochial usefulness greatly increased, if he had been content with the lighter work and smaller population of Dunham. But we must not forget that the “steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord.” It is place that often draws out grace. For anything we know, Fletcher might have sunk into comparative indolence and obscurity, if he had not been planted at Madeley. His letters, however, at this period, show plainly that the move was not made without great anxiety and exercise of soul.

To Charles Wesley he writes: “My heart revolts at the idea of being at Madeley alone—opposed by my superiors, hated by my neighbours, and despised by all the world; without piety, without talents, without resolution, how shall I repel the assaults and surmount the obstacles which I foresee if I discharge my duty at Madeley with fidelity? On the other hand, to reject this presentation, burn the certificate, and leave in the desert these sheep whom the Lord has evidently brought me into the world to feed, appears to me nothing but obstinacy and refined self-love. I will hold a middle course between these extremes. I will be wholly passive in the steps I must take, and yet active in praying the Lord to deliver me from the evil one, and to conduct me in the way that he would have me go. If you can see anything better, inform me of it speedily; and at the same time remember me in all your prayers, that if this matter be not of the Lord, the enmity of the Bishop of Lichfield—who must countersign my testimonials, the threats of the Bishop of Hereford’s chaplain who was a witness to my preaching at West Street Chapel, the objections drawn from my not being naturalized, or some other obstacle, may prevent the kind intention of Mr. Hill.”

It is written that “when a man’s ways please the Lord, he maketh his enemies to be at peace with him.” This text was eminently illustrated in the matter of Fletcher’s appointment to Madeley. Obstacles which at one time seemed insuperable, melted away in a most extraordinary manner, and, almost in spite of himself, he was instituted into possession of the living. In a letter to Lady Huntingdon, on the 3rd of October, he says, “I seem to be the prisoner of God’s providence, who is going, in all probability, to cast my lot for life among the colliers and forgemen of Madeley. The two thousand souls of that parish, for whom I was called into the ministry, are many sheep in the wilderness, which, after all, I cannot sacrifice to my own private choice. When I was once suffered to attend them for a few days, some began to return to the Shepherd of their souls, and I found it in my heart to spend and be spent for them. When I was afterwards sent away from them, that zeal, it is true, cooled to such a degree that I have wished a thousand times they might never be committed to my charge. But the impression of the tears of those

who, when I left them, ran after me crying, ‘Who shall now show us the way to heaven?’ never quite wore off from the bottom of my heart; and, upon second thoughts, I always concluded that if the Lord made my way plain to this church, I could not run away from it without disobeying the order of providence. That time is come, the church is vacated, the presentation to it brought unasked into my hands; the difficulty of getting proper testimonials, which I looked upon as insurmountable, vanishes at once; the three clergymen who had opposed me with most bitterness signed them;—the Bishop of Lichfield countersigns them without the least objection; the lord of the manor, my great opponent, leaves the parish; and the very man, the vicar, who told me I should never preach in that church, now recommends me to it, and tells me he will induct me himself. Are not these intimations of the will of God?”

On the 28th of October 1760, he writes to Lady Huntingdon as follows:—
”Since I had the honour to write last, all the little circumstances of my institution and induction have taken such an easy turn that I question whether any clergyman noted for good fellowship ever got over them with less trouble. I preached last Sunday, for the first time, in my church, and shall continue to do so, though I propose staying with Mr. Hill till he leaves the country, partly to comply with him to the last, and partly to avoid falling out with my predecessor, who is still at Madeley, but who will remove about the same time. If I know anything of myself, I shall be much more ready to resign my benefice, when I have had a fair trial of my unprofitableness to the people committed to my care, than I was to accept it. Mr. John Wesley bids me do it without a trial. He will have me see in this appointment to Madeley ‘the snare of the devil, and fly from it at the peril of my soul.’ I answer, I cannot see it in that light. He says, ‘Others may do well in a living; you cannot, for it is not your calling.’ I tell him I readily own I am not fit either to plant or water any part of the Lord’s vineyard, but that if I am called at all, I am called to preach at Madeley, where I was first sent into the ministry, and where a chain of providences I could not break has again fastened me. I tell him, that though I should be as unsuccessful as Noah before the flood, yet I am determined to try to be to them a preacher of Christ’s righteousness; and that, notwithstanding my universal inability, I am not quite without hope that he who reproveth a prophet’s madness by the mouth of an ass, may reprove a collier’s profaneness even by my mouth.”

The doubts and misgivings with which Fletcher accepted the living of Madeley, appear to have clung to him for several months after he entered on the duties of his parish. Great allowance must, of course, be made for the natural ignorance of a young Swiss about the habits and customs of a neglected mining population in England. But, judging from the three following

letters, he seems for some time to have gone through great exercise of mind after commencing his residence at Madeley. I make no excuse for inserting these letters at length.

On the 19th of November 1760, he writes to Lady Huntingdon as follows:—"I have hitherto written my sermons, but I am carried so far beyond my notes when in the pulpit, that I propose preaching with only my sermon-cover in my hand next Friday, when I shall venture on an evening lecture for the first time. I question whether I shall have half-a-dozen hearers, as the god of a busy world is doubly the god of this part of the world; but I am resolved to try. The weather and the roads are so bad, that the way to church is almost impracticable; nevertheless, all the seats were full last Sunday. Some begin to come from the adjacent parishes, and some more, as they say, *threaten* to come when the season permits. I cannot yet discern any deep work, or, indeed, anything but what will always attend the crying down man's righteousness and exalting Christ's—I mean a general liking among the poor, and offence and ridicule and opposition among the respectable and rich people. Should the Lord vouchsafe to plant the gospel in this country, my parish seems to be the best centre of a work, as it lies just among the most populous, profane, and ignorant parts. But it is well if, after all, there is any work in my parish. I despair of this when I look at myself, and fall in with Mr. John Wesley's opinion about me. Yet sometimes, too, I hope the Lord has not sent me here for nothing; and I beg for strength to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. Nevertheless, I am still fully determined to resign my living after a while, if the Lord does not think me worthy to be his instrument. If your Ladyship could at any time spare me a minute, I should be glad to know whether you do not think I should then be at full liberty to do it before God. I abhor the title of a living for a living's sake. It is death to me.

"There are three meetings in my parish—a Papist, Quaker, and Baptist; and they begin to call the fourth the Methodist one—I mean the church. But the bulk of the inhabitants are stupid heathens, who seem past all curiosity, as well as all sense of godliness. I am ready to run after them into their pits and forges, and I only wait for God's providence to show me the way. I am often reduced to great perplexity, but the end of it is sweet. I am driven to the Lord, and he comforts, encourages, and teaches me. I sometimes feel that zeal which forced Paul to wish to be accursed for his brethren's sakes, but I want to feel it without interruption. The devil, my friends, and my heart, have pushed hard at me to make me fall into worldly cares, and creature snares—first by the thought of marrying, then by the offer of several boarders, one of whom offered me sixty pounds a-year; but I have been enabled to cry, 'Nothing but Jesus, and the service of his people;' and I trust the Lord will keep me in the same mind."

On the 6th of January 1761, he writes to Lady Huntingdon again, even in a lower key and a more depressed frame of mind. He says,—“I had a secret expectation to be the instrument of a work in this part of our Church, and I did not despair of soon becoming a little Berridge! Thus warmed with sparks of my own kindling, I looked out to see the rocks broken in pieces and the water flowing out; but, to the great disappointment of my hopes, I am now forced to look within, and to see the need I have of being broken, and of repenting myself. If my being stationed in this howling wilderness is to answer no public end as to the gospel of Christ, I will not give up the hope that it may answer a private end as to myself, in humbling me under a sense of universal unprofitableness. If I preach the gospel ten years here, and see no fruit of my labours, in either case I promise to bless God, if I can only say from my heart, ‘I am nothing, I have nothing, I can do nothing.’”

“As to my parish, all that I see hitherto in it is nothing but what one may expect from speaking plainly, and with some degree of earnestness. Many cry out, ‘He is a Methodist, a downright Methodist;’ while some of the poorer sort say, ‘Nay, but he speaketh the truth.’ Some of the best farmers and most respectable tradesmen talk often among themselves, I hear, about turning me out of my living as a Methodist or a Baptist, and spread about such stories as your Ladyship may guess at without my writing them. My Friday lecture took better than I expected, and I propose to continue it till the congregation desert me. The number of hearers then is larger than that which my predecessor had on Sunday. The number of communicants is increased from thirty to above a hundred, and a few seem to seek grace in the means. May they do it in sincerity!”

The last letter which I shall quote in this memoir was addressed to Lady Huntingdon on the 27th of April 1761. He says:—“I learn by slow experience, that in me dwelleth no good thing. This I find cannot be learned of man, nor by man. It is a lesson that grace alone teaches effectually in the furnace of affliction. I am still at the first line; but I think I read it and understand it in a manner quite different from what I did before. Surely the Saviour speaks as no man ever spake; and he teaches with authority, not as the scribes. His words are recorded in the heart, while those of men only graze the surface of the understanding. I have met with several trials since Providence cast me, I shall not say into this part of the Lord’s vineyard, but into this part of our spiritual Sodom. Nevertheless, they did not work upon me as they ought to have done. I stood out against them in a kind of self-resolution, supported by human fortitude rather than divine humility; and so they did not bring down the pride of nature, but rather increased it. The old man, if he cannot have his own food, will live quietly and comfortably on spiritual food; yea, he is often pampered by what the natural mind supposes will poison him.

“Of late I have met with a trial that, by God’s infinite mercy, has found its way to my heart. Oh, may the wound be deep enough to let in the mind of Jesus! A young woman, daughter of one of my most substantial parishioners, giving place to Satan by pride and impatience, is driven in her convictions into a kind of madness. I could not bear patiently enough, before this, the reports that went about that I drove people mad; but the fear of having this laid to my charge, backed with so glaring an instance, has thrown me into some agonies of soul.

“Why God permits these offences to arise, has not a little staggered me. Once I was for taking to my heels, and hireling-like, flying at the first approach of the wolf. But, thanks to divine grace, I now try to commit to the Lord the keeping of his own work, and pray for a blind faith in him who calls light out of darkness. Had not this trial staggered me, I should have great hopes that a few living stones may be gathered here for the temple of the Lord. There is a considerable stir about religion in the neighbourhood; and though most people rise up against it, yet some begin to inquire in earnest what they must do to be saved; and some get a sight of the way. My church is full, notwithstanding the oaths that some of my parishioners have sworn never to hear me preach again. I am insensibly led into exhorting sometimes in my house and elsewhere. I preach on Sunday morning and Friday evening; and on Sunday evening, after catechising or preaching to the children, I read one of the Homilies, or a sermon of Archbishop Usher, insisting on all that confirms what I advanced in the morning, which greatly stops the mouth of the gainsayers, till God shall turn their hearts.”

Such were the beginnings of Fletcher’s ministry of Madeley. His subsequent history would occupy far more room than can be assigned to it in this chapter. How he persevered in his evangelistic work at Madeley for twenty-five years—how he became the principal of Lady Huntingdon’s College at Trevecca—how his health broke down under the abundance of his labours—how he lived on through evil report and good report—how he married—how he died—how he preached and how he wrote,—all these are matters which I think it best to reserve for another distinct chapter.

CHAPTER II.

Ministerial Labours at Madeley—Superintendent of Trevecca College, 1768—Resigns Trevecca, 1771—Laid aside by ill health, 1776—Goes to Clifton, Newington, and Switzerland—Returns to Madeley, 1781—Marries—Dies, 1785—His Preaching—Writing—Private Character—Testimony of Wesley and Venn.

THE position of a parish clergyman in the Church of England who does his duty, is one of peculiar difficulties and discouragements. He has not to deal with a voluntary congregation, whose members have no connection with him beyond that of free choice and inclination. He has the nominal charge of all who reside within certain territorial boundaries, and, whether they like him or not, in the eye of the law he is bound to do what he can for their souls.

The larger the population of an English parish, the greater are the English clergyman's difficulties. Many a clergyman finds himself placed in the midst of dense masses of people whose spiritual necessities he is utterly unable to overtake. He sees around him hundreds of immortal souls continually passing out of time into eternity—ignorant, immoral, without God, without Christ, and without hope—and yet has neither time nor strength to get at half of them! A position like this is dreadfully trying and crushing to the spirit of a conscientious man. Yet this is the position in which Fletcher found himself at Madeley. Who can wonder that at first he felt sorely cast down, and half inclined to think, with Wesley, that he had mistaken his calling?

These first feelings of discouragement, however, gradually passed away. Little by little he became fitted to his post, and saw clearly that he was where God would have him be. Once settled down in his work at Madeley, he never gave it up, and for twenty-five years did the work of an evangelist among his semi-heathen parishioners in a way that few have ever equalled, and none probably have surpassed. No other cure ever tempted him away. Where he began his ministry, there he ended it. Madeley was his first charge, and Madeley was his last.

The machinery which Fletcher used in doing his work at Madeley was very simple and apostolic. He was instant in season and out of season, always "preaching the Word." Publicly in church, privately from house to house, by the roadside, in the fields, at the coal-pit mouth, he was continually lifting up his voice, and "teaching and preaching Jesus Christ." He counted the day lost in which he was not actually employed in doing his Master's business. A warfare of holy aggression on sin and Satan's kingdom was constantly kept up throughout the district, and no one was let alone. So great indeed was his zeal, that people who were determined to have their sins agreed to lock their doors, and refuse him admission. Like Ahab, they hated him because he did not speak good of their condition, but evil. Even John Wesley, who thought

him wrong in going to Madeley, bore this testimony to his work: "From the beginning of his settling there, he was a laborious workman in the Lord's vineyard, endeavouring to spread the truth of the gospel and to suppress vice in every possible way. Those sinners who tried to hide themselves from him he pursued to every corner of his parish, by all sorts of means, public and private, early and late, in season and out of season, entreating and warning them to flee from the wrath to come. Some made it an excuse for not attending the church service on a Sunday morning, that they could not awake early enough to get their families ready. He provided for this also. Taking a bell in his hand, he set out every Sunday for some months at five in the morning, and went round the most distant parts of the parish inviting all the inhabitants to the house of God."

He found abundance of organized wickedness in his neglected, overgrown parish. It was a common thing for young men and women to meet in large bodies on stated evenings for what they called "recreation." This recreation usually consisted in dancing, drinking, revelling, and immorality, and continued all night. Against these licentious assemblies Fletcher resolutely set his face, and used every exertion to put them down. He would often burst suddenly into the room where the disorderly company were assembled, rebuke the thoughtless revellers with a holy indignation, and beard Satan in his high places. Nor was his labour altogether in vain in this unpromising field. After standing the first outbursts of rudeness and brutality, he generally found his exhortations received with silent submission; and in some cases he had the comfort of seeing a reformation in the behaviour of the revellers.

Cases of sickness in a mining district like Madeley were necessarily very frequent, and coal-pit accidents, we need not doubt, were very many and often fatal. In attending such cases Fletcher was peculiarly zealous and indefatigable. "It was a work," says Wesley, "for which he was always ready. If he heard a knock at his door in the coldest winter night, his window was thrown open in a moment. And when he understood that someone was hurt in a pit, or that a neighbour was likely to die, no consideration was ever had of the darkness of the night or the severity of the weather. One answer was always given: 'I will attend you immediately.'"

"In all labour there is profit." It will not surprise any Christian to hear that Fletcher's labours at Madeley produced an immense effect on many souls. At first, indeed, he seemed to labour in vain, and to spend his strength for nothing. People were not converted in masses, and all at once. But gradually a large number of hearers were led by the Spirit to Christ, and became witnesses for God in the midst of the sin and darkness around them. With success, no doubt, came opposition and persecution of no common kind. This,

however, will not surprise any Bible-reading Christian. Satan will never allow his kingdom to be pulled down without a mighty struggle, and never is his wrath so great as when he sees he has but a short time." Let a great and effectual door be opened to the gospel, and there will never fail to be "many adversaries." It is an invariable mark of a real work of God, that it is carried on "through much persecution."

One Sunday, for instance, after doing his usual duty at Madeley, Fletcher was on the point of going to a place called Madeley Wood, to preach and catechise. But, just as he was setting out, he received a sudden notice that a child was to be buried, and had to wait for the funeral. This waiting till the child was brought prevented his going to the Wood till some time after the appointed hour. Herein the providence of God appeared in a very remarkable manner. At the hour originally appointed for his preaching, some colliers, who neither feared God nor man, were baiting a bull just by the place where he was expected. Having had plenty to drink, they had all agreed, as soon as he came, to "bait the parson." Part of them were then appointed to pull him off his horse, and the rest to set the dogs upon him. But in the meantime the bull broke loose, and threw down the booth in which the ringleaders were drinking, and the people were dispersed. The result was that the godly people who had come together to hear him preach were enabled to hold their meeting in quietness and safety.

To enter into all the details of Fletcher's history during the twenty-five years of his ministry at Madeley, would be clearly impossible in the narrow limits of a brief and condensed memoir. In fact, to attempt it would be only telling the same story over and over again. Throughout this whole period, with little intermission, he was always doing one and the same thing—always preaching, always teaching, always trying to awaken sinners, always trying to build up saints; but always one and the same man, giving himself up wholly to his Master's business. Sometimes he found time to take a few Sundays at Lady Huntingdon's chapel at Bath. Sometimes he exchanged duties for a little season with friends, such as Mr. Sellon, at Bredon, in Leicestershire. Sometimes he wrote long controversial treatises, in defence of what he believed was Christ's truth, against what he called Calvinism and Antinomianism. Sometimes he was entirely laid aside from work by ill health. But wherever he was, and in whatever condition, John Fletcher was unmistakably the "man of God," always the minister of Christ, always delighting in work, always insatiably desirous to do good to souls. I find no man of the last century, whatever his defects may have been in doctrine, to whom the scriptural motto might be so justly applied, "One thing I do."

About the year 1768 Fletcher was invited by Lady Huntingdon to become superintendent of her Training College for young ministers at Trevecca, in

Wales. He accepted this important post with the distinct understanding that he was not to be generally resident there. He felt strongly that his duty to his flock at Madeley would not admit of this. But it was settled that he should attend as often as he could, should give advice about the appointment of masters and the admission or exclusion of students, should oversee their studies and conduct, and should judge of their fitness for the work of the ministry.

Whether a native of Switzerland, who had never seen England or spoken the English language till he was twenty-one, was exactly the man to be head of a training college, may admit of some doubt. In all probability, however, Fletcher was the best man among the evangelists of the day whom Lady Huntingdon could find. His reputation as tutor to Mr. Hill's son was probably a strong recommendation. His learning and scholarship were undeniable. His character as a holy, decided man stood very high. In short, if he were not the fittest person in the world to be principal of a college, it would not be very easy to say who, in that day, was more fit.

Fletcher, at any rate, appears to have done what he could to give the new Institution success. A letter to Lady Huntingdon, dated January 1768, gives a very favourable idea of his sound judgment. He evidently sees the materials he had to work upon, and wisely resolves not to pitch the standard of attainments required too high. He proposes to instruct all the students in grammar, logic, rhetoric, ecclesiastical history, geography, a little natural philosophy, and a great deal of practical divinity. The books he specially wishes to have in the library are,—Henry's and Gill's Commentaries on the Bible, Baxter's Works, Keach on Metaphors, Taylor on Types, Gurnall's Christian Armoury, Edwards on Preaching, Wesley's Christian Library, Usher's Body of Divinity, Scapula's Greek Lexicon, Lyttleton's Latin Dictionary, and Johnson's English Dictionary. Short and scanty as this list may appear for the beginning of a college library, it cannot be denied that it was well selected, considering the times. The mention of Gill's Commentary is also an interesting fact. It is enough to show that Fletcher's Arminianism did not prevent him valuing the works of a thoroughly Calvinistic writer.

The best account of Fletcher's proceedings as Principal of Trevecca is to be found in the writings of one of the under-masters; and it is so interesting, that I shall make no apology for giving it entire. He says:—"I went to reside at Trevecca in 1770. The young men whom I found there were serious, and made considerable progress in learning, and many of them seemed to have talents for the ministry. Mr. Fletcher visited us frequently, and was received as an angel of God. It is not possible for me to describe the veneration in which we all held him. Like Elijah in the school of the prophets, he was revered, he was loved, he was almost adored; and that not only by every student, but by every member of the family. And indeed he was worthy.

Prayer, praise, love, and zeal, all-ardent, elevated above what we would think attainable in this state of frailty, was the element in which he continually lived. And as to others, his one employment was to call, entreat, and urge them to ascend with him to the glorious source of being and blessedness. He had leisure, comparatively, for nothing else. Languages, art, sciences, grammar, electricity, logic, even divinity itself, so-called, were all laid aside when he appeared in the school-room among the students. His full heart would not suffer him to be silent; he must speak. The students were readier to hearken to this servant and minister of Christ than to attend to Sallust, Virgil, Cicero, or any Latin or Greek historian, poet, or philosopher they had been engaged in reading. And they seldom hearkened long before they were all in tears, and every heart caught fire from the flame which burned in his soul. Such seasons generally terminated in this. Being convinced that to be filled with the Holy Ghost was a better qualification for the ministry of the gospel than any classical learning, after speaking awhile in the school-room he used often to say, 'As many of you as are athirst for the fulness of the Spirit, follow me into my room.' On this many of us have instantly followed him, and there continued for two or three hours, wrestling, like Jacob, for the blessing; and praying one after another, till we could not bear to kneel any longer." I make no comment on this curious account. I dare not say that I think it would be well to be incessantly converting college-lectures into prayer-meetings. But I will not shrink from saying, that a few more head-masters of schools and principals of colleges as spiritual-minded and prayerful as the Vicar of Mad-eley, would be an immense blessing to the Church of Christ. Head-masters and principals too often go into the very opposite extreme from that into which Fletcher went. Too often they are cold, dry, hard, and unsympathizing, and seem to forget entirely that young men have hearts, and consciences, and souls.

Fletcher's connection with Trevecca College only lasted three years. It came to an end in 1771, in consequence of his steady adherence to Arminian principles, and his firm determination to stand by John Wesley in matters of doctrine. He parted from the Institution on good terms with Lady Huntingdon, and without any bitterness or asperity on either side. Whether, in point of fact, there was so very much difference in doctrinal views between him and Lady Huntingdon's party, as he supposed, is a matter on which I feel considerable doubt. At any rate, I suspect it was greatly exaggerated. There is no getting over the remarkable fact that for three years he took a leading part in the great anniversary gatherings at the college, and preached side by side with men like Whitefield, Rowlands, Berridge, and Venn. That simple fact speaks volumes. In days of controversy, bystanders are fond of exaggerating differences, and blowing up the fire of division. When men can preach

and pray together with freedom, we may rest assured that in heart they do not greatly differ. Let us try to believe that all was ordered for good. It is pretty certain that Fletcher could not long have retained his double position as Principal of Trevecca and Vicar of Madeley. The double responsibility would have killed him. It is far from improbable that he saw this himself, and was not sorry to have a door opened for retiring.

About the year 1776, Fletcher's health failed so much that he was completely laid aside from public work, and obliged to leave Madeley entirely for the long space of five years. He had never been very strong at any time, and for some years before 1776 he had many premonitory symptoms of consumption. Like many unmarried ministers, he had lived alone and taken no care of himself, and at the age of forty-seven he seemed to be breaking down entirely under the abundance of his labours. He felt himself that he had often been imprudent, and taxed his constitution too much. But it is just one of those lessons which ministers generally find out too late, when the mischief is done. Over-laziness is so much more a besetting sin than over-zeal, that a conscientious man may well be excused if he turns a deaf ear to the suggestion, "Spare thyself," and suspects it to be a temptation of the devil. Such, I have little doubt, was the case with Fletcher.

The first two years of Fletcher's forced retirement from work was spent in England,—partly at Brislington, near Bristol; partly at Newington, near London; and partly at other places,—but always at the house of loving friends. His one employment was that most wearing and depressing one, the search for health; and many, strange, and various were the remedies he seems to have tried in order to obtain it. At no time of his life, perhaps, did his graces shine more than they did at this. He gave full proof that he could bear God's will as well as do it, suffer patiently as well as work actively, sit still and do nothing as well as run about and do a great deal. Let me here express my own firm conviction, that this is the highest point of excellence in a Christian. Self-conceit, and the love of the praise of men, will often help us to preach, and speak, and write, and make a great noise in the world. Nothing but great grace will enable us to be content to do nothing, and to sit still and wait. No wonder that one who came to visit him at Newington, when he was thought to be dying, said afterwards, "I went to see a man that had one foot in the grave, but I found a man that had one foot in heaven."

The last three years of Fletcher's period of ill health were spent on the Continent,—partly in the south of France, and partly in Switzerland. This Continental tour was a wisely-devised plan, and answered perfectly. The return to his native air, the entire change of scene and occupation, the freedom from a thousand causes of care and anxiety in England, the society of his valued and kind travelling companion, Mr. Ireland of Brislington,—all these

things acted with mighty power on Fletcher's shattered constitution. Little by little he began to rally. Little by little he lost the many unfavourable symptoms with which he had left England. At last, to his own great delight, he was able to preach without difficulty; and at length, in the month of June 1781, like one miraculously raised from the dead, he found himself once more in his vicarage at Madeley.

In the latter end of 1781, the same year that he returned to Madeley, Fletcher was married. He was now in the decline of life, a man of broken health, in the fifty-second year of his age, and the step probably took his friends by surprise. But it seems to have been a wise and well-ordered step, and one that added much to the comfort of his latter days. The lady of his choice, a Miss Bosanquet, was one whom he had known well as a decided Christian for at least twenty years, and she appears in every respect, both in age and character, to have been eminently calculated to be a help-meet for him. The account of the wedding, which is given at great length by Fletcher's biographer, Mr. Benson, is very curious indeed, and deserves an attentive perusal. Seldom, perhaps, was a marriage ever celebrated in a fashion so utterly unlike the fashion of this world. But Fletcher was no common man, and his wedding was no common wedding.

The Vicar of Madeley's letter to a friend, written shortly after his marriage, is interesting; and the more so as it throws some light on his motives for changing his state. He says: "I am married in my old age, and have a new opportunity of considering a great mystery, in the most perfect type of our Lord's mystical union with his Church. I have now a new call to pray for a fulness of Christ's holy, gentle, meek, loving spirit, that I may love my wife as he loved his spouse the Church. But the emblem is greatly deficient. The Lamb is worthy of his spouse, and more than worthy: whereas I must acknowledge myself unworthy of the yoke-fellow whom Heaven has reserved for me. She is a person after my own heart; and I make no doubt we shall increase the number of the happy marriages in the Church militant. Indeed, they are not so many but it may be worth a Christian's while to add one more to the number. God declared that it was 'not good for man,' a social being, 'to live alone; 'and therefore he gave him a help-meet for him. For the same reason our Lord sent forth his disciples two and two. Had I searched the three kingdoms, I could not have found one brother willing to share, gratis, my weal, woe, and labour, and complaisant enough to unite his fortune to mine. But God has found me a partner, 'a sister, a wife,' to use St. Paul's language, who is not afraid to face with me the colliers and bargemen of my parish, until death part us. Buried together in our country village, we shall help one another to trim our lamps, and to wait, as I trust you do continually, for the coming of the heavenly Bridegroom."

In another letter, written in the beginning of 1782, he says: “Strangely restored to health and strength, considering my years, by the good nursing of my dear partner. I ventured to preach of late as often as I did formerly: and, after having read prayers, I preached twice on Christmas-day. I did last Sunday what I had never done: I continued doing duty from ten till past four in the afternoon, owing to christenings, churchings, and the sacrament, which I administered to a churchful of people; so that I was obliged to go from the communion-table to begin the evening service, and then to visit some sick. This has brought back upon me one of my old dangerous symptoms, so that I had flattered myself in vain to do the whole duty of my parish. But my dear wife nurses me with the tenderest care, gives me up to God with the greatest resignation, and helps me to rejoice that life and death, health and sickness, work all for our good, and are all sure, as blessed instruments, to forward us in our journey to heaven.”

Fletcher’s most useful ministry did not last long after his return to Madeley. He died on Saturday the 14th of August 1785, after a short illness of only ten days’ duration—apparently a typhus fever—in the fifty-sixth year of his age. His constitution was probably broken down by his long-continued labours in Christ’s cause, and a constant tendency to consumption; and when the last enemy came, he had no strength or stamina to enable him to resist disease. Even to the last he was the same man that he had been for twenty-five years, and his obstinate determination to work on to the uttermost in all probability made his attack of fever terminate fatally. Though taken ill on Thursday the 4th of August, he persisted in taking the full morning duty on the following Sunday in his church. He read prayers, preached, and administered the Lord’s Supper, though he nearly fainted several times in the service. From the church he was supported into his bedroom, where he lay for some time in a swoon, and from that time he never left his house alive. Never, perhaps, was there a more striking instance of the “ruling passion being strong in death.” Like Whitefield, he almost died in harness.

All through the early part of the week he lay very ill, able to speak little, but full of joy and peace, and delighting greatly in hearing his wife read hymns and treatises on faith and love. On Thursday and Friday he spoke very little, but seemed to take peculiar pleasure in the text, “God is love,” and in the verse of a hymn containing these words,—

“The blood of Christ through earth and skies,
Mercy—free, boundless mercy cries;
Mercy’s full power I soon shall prove—
Loved with an everlasting love.”

On Saturday afternoon the fever seemed to leave him for a little time, and he became so much more like himself that a friend said, “Do you think the

Lord will raise you up?” He strove to answer, but could only just pronounce the words, “Raise me up in the resurrection.” To another who asked the same question, he said, “I leave it all to God.”

On Saturday evening the fever returned again, and with greater violence than ever. It became evident that he was dying very fast. His wife then said, “My dear creature, I ask not for myself—I know thy soul but I ask for the sake of others:—If Jesus be very present with thee, lift up thy right hand.” Immediately he did so. “If the prospect of glory sweetly open before thee, repeat the sign.” He instantly raised his hand again, and in half a minute raised it a second time. He then threw it up, as if he would reach the top of the bed. After this he moved and spoke no more, excepting when Mrs. Fletcher said, “Art thou in pain?” then he answered, “No.” From that time he lay in a kind of sleep, though with his eyes open and fixed, sitting upright in his bed, with his head leaning on pillows. Eighteen hours he continued in this position, breathing quietly like a person in common sleep, and with a countenance so calm and composed that not a trace of death could be seen on it. During this period many of his mourning parishioners, who had assembled for Sunday service, were permitted to walk through the house, and past the open door of his bedroom, and to see his much-loved face once more. At length, at half-past ten on Sunday night, August 14th, he fell asleep in Christ, without a struggle or groan, and entered into the joy of his Lord. On the 17th, he was buried in Madeley churchyard, amidst the tears and lamentations of thousands, of whom many never knew the true value of their vicar until they had lost him.

I have now followed Fletcher from his cradle to his grave. It only remains for me to offer some estimate of his real worth as a preacher, a writer, and a man.

As a *preacher*, I am disposed to assign Fletcher a very high rank. Even in the last century, when there were “giants of pulpit power on the earth,” I suspect there were not half-a-dozen men superior to the Vicar of Madeley. He was naturally an eloquent man. He had a mind well trained and stored with scriptural matter. He was eminently direct, bold, and conscience-stirring, in his way of putting things. Not least, he had a very fine voice, and a singularly fervent and attractive manner. It is recorded that many English people used to go to hear him preach in French to the French congregations in London, though they could not understand a word that he said. “We go,” they used to say, “to look at him, for heaven seems to beam from his countenance.” A minister possessing such qualifications as these must have been a man of no common power in the pulpit. John Wesley, who was no mean judge, used to say, that if Fletcher had had more physical strength, he would have been the first preacher in England. This is probably saying too much.

Nothing, I suspect, would ever have made Fletcher equal Whitefield or Rowlands. But we need not hesitate to place him in the first class among the Christian orators of England a hundred years ago.

The following passage will probably convey a pretty correct idea of what Fletcher was as a preacher. I have taken it from his "Address to a serious reader who inquires what must he do to be saved." The address was certainly not published in the form of a sermon; but if it had not been preached, I am greatly mistaken. Ministers who spend their whole life in preaching, as Fletcher did, have seldom time to think and compose in more than one style. To that rule Henry Venn was perhaps the only exception among the great men of the last century. But that Fletcher had preached the following passage in Madeley pulpit before he committed it to the press, I feel thoroughly persuaded in my own mind. After quoting a long list of encouraging promises and invitations in Scripture, he goes on,—

"Are these, O sinner, the gracious sayings of God to thee? the compassionate expostulations of God, become incarnate for thee? Did God so love thee as to set forth his only-begotten Son, as a propitiation through faith in his blood, thus to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past? May the Almighty now be just, and yet the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus? Is there no difference, no respect of persons, with him? And is the same Lord over all rich unto all that call upon him? Then shout, ye heavens! triumph, thou earth! and thou, happy sinner, know the day of thy visitation; be wise, ponder these things, and thou shalt understand the loving-kindness of the Lord.

"Be no longer afraid that it will be presumption in thee to believe, and that God will be offended with thee if thou makest so free with Jesus as to wash instantly in the fountain of his atoning blood. He not only gives thee leave to believe, but he invites thee to do it freely. Nay, he commands thee to believe; for 'this is his commandment, that we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ.' He even enforces the precept by a double promise, that if thou believest thou 'shalt not perish, but have everlasting life.' And that nothing may be wanting to stir thee up to this important business, he is gracious enough to threaten the neglect of it with the most dreadful punishment; for 'he that believeth not shall not enter into his rest,' and 'shall be damned;' and he that to the end remains 'fearful and unbelieving' 'shall be cast into the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.' How canst thou doubt, then, whether thou art welcome to receive the Son by believing on his name?

"Come to him just as thou art, and he will make thee what thou shouldst be. When he counsels thee to buy of him the gold of faith, and the garment of salvation, take him at his gospel-word. Come without regarding thy

stuff—the poorer thou art the better—the oil of his grace flows most abundantly into empty vessels—his charity is most glorified in the relief of the most miserable objects—his royal bounty scorns the vile compensation of thy wretched merits—he sells like a king, like the King of kings, ‘without money and without price.’

“‘Ask and have,’ and ‘take freely,’ are the encouraging mottoes written upon all the unsearchable treasures of his grace.

“Be of good comfort, then; rise, he calleth thee—stretch out thy withered hand, and he will restore it—open thy mouth wide, and he will fill it—bring an empty vessel, a poor hungry heart, and he will give into thy bosom good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over.

“And now, what meanest thou, sleeper? Why tarriest thou? Arise, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord. Lose not time in conferring with flesh and blood; much less in parleying with Satan, or consulting thy unbelieving heart. These delays lead to ruin; the Philistines are upon thee, instantly shake thyself; if thou art not altogether blinded by the god of this world, and led captive by him at his will, this moment, in the powerful name of Jesus, burst the bonds of spiritual sloth—break, like a desperate soul, out of the prison of unbelief—escape for thy life—look not behind thee—stay not in all the plain. This one thing do; leaving the things that are behind—Sodom and her ways—press forwards towards Zoar, and escape to the mount of God, lest thou be consumed. By the new and living way consecrated for us, in full assurance of faith, fly to the Father of mercies, pass through the crowd of Laodicean professors, press through the opening door of hope, take the kingdom of heaven by violence.

“With halting, yet wrestling Jacob, say to the Friend of sinners, ‘I will not let thee go unless thou bless me.’ If he makes as if he would go farther, with the two mournful disciples, ‘constrain him to stay;’ or rather, with the distressed women of Canaan, ‘follow him whithersoever he goeth,’ take no denial. Through the veil, that is to say, his flesh, torn from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet—through this mysterious veil, rent from the top to the bottom, rush into the blood-besprinkled sanctuary; embrace the horns of the golden altar; lay all thy guilt on the head of the sin-atonement victim; read thy name on the breast of thy merciful high-priest. Claim the safety, demand the blessings, receive the consolations bestowed on all that fly to him for refuge, and begin a new, delightful life, under the healing and peaceful shadow of his wings.”

As a *writer*, Fletcher’s reputation will never perhaps stand so high as it deserves. Unfortunately, a very large portion of his literary remains consists of controversial treatises against Calvinism, and in defence of Arminianism. In these treatises I must plainly say the worthy Vicar of Madeley says many

things with which I cannot agree, because I cannot reconcile them with the statements of Scripture. Yet, even when I do not agree with him, I feel bound as an honest man to admit that Fletcher is a very able adversary, and makes the best that can be made of a bad cause, and writes with courtesy. Indeed, I never can help suspecting that he was not nearly so much an Arminian in his heart as he thought he was, and that he was pushed into saying things, in the heat of controversy, which he afterwards regretted.

The following passage, from Fletcher's "Checks to Antinomianism," will convey a very fair idea of his power as a writer, and will show how thoroughly his mind was saturated and imbued with Scripture. It is almost needless to remark that, like many controversialists, he was constantly fighting shadows of his own creation, and that his Calvinistic antagonists hated Antinomianism and unholy living quite as much as he did. But the passage is a good specimen of his style of writing. He is giving a long catalogue of the melancholy inconsistencies of professors of religion, and says:—

"Who can number the 'adulterers and adulteresses' who know not that the friendship of the world is enmity against God?—the concealed idolaters, who have their 'chambers of imagery' within, and 'set up their idols in their hearts?'—the envious Cains, who carry 'murder in their breast?'—the profane Esaus, who give up their birthright for a sensual gratification; and covetous Judases, who 'sell the truth' which they should 'buy,' and part with Christ for 'filthy lucre's sake?'—'the sons of God, who look at the fair daughters of men, and take to themselves wives of all which they choose?'—the gay Dinahs, who 'visit the daughters of the land,' and come home polluted in body or in soul?—the prophets of Bethel, 'who deceive the prophets of Judah,' entice them out of the way of self-denial, and bring the roaring lion and death upon them?—the fickle Marcuses, who depart when they should 'go to the work?'—the self-made prophets, who 'run before they are sent,' and scatter instead of 'profiting the people?'—the spiritual Absaloms, who rise against their fathers in the gospel, and, in order to 'reign without them,' raise a rebellion against them?—the furious Zedekiahs, who 'make themselves horns of iron to push' the true servants of the Lord, because they will not 'prophesy smooth things and deceit' as they do? Who can count the fretful Jonahs, who are 'angry to death' when the 'worm' of disappointment 'smites the gourd' of their creature-happiness?—the weak Aarons, who dare not resist a multitude, and are carried by the stream into the greatest absurdities?—the jealous Miriams, who rise against the ministers that God honours?—the crafty Zibas, who calumniate and supplant their brethren?—the treacherous Joabs, who 'kiss' them to get an opportunity of 'stabbing them under the fifth rib?'—the busy sons of Zeruiah, who perpetually stir up resentment and wrath?—the mischievous Doegs, who carry about poisonous

scandal, and blow up the fire of discord?—the hypocritical Gehazis, who look like saints before their masters and ministers, and yet can impudently lie and impiously cheat?—the Gibeonites, always busy in hewing wood and drawing water, in going through the drudgery of outward services, without ever aspiring at the adoption of sons?—the halting Naamans, who serve the Lord and bow to Rimmon?—the backsliding Solomons, who once ‘chose wisdom,’ but now pursue folly in her most extravagant and impious forms?—the apostatizing Alexanders, who ‘tread under foot the Son of God, and count the blood of the covenant, wherewith they are sanctified, an unholy thing?’—and, to include multitudes in one class, the Samaritans, who, by a common mixture of truth and error, of heavenly and earthly mindedness, ‘worship the Lord and serve their gods;’ are one day for God, and the next for mammon?—or the thousands in Israel who ‘halt between two opinions,’ crying out, when Elijah prevails, ‘The Lord he is the God!’ and when Jezebel triumphs, returning to the old song, ‘O Baal, save us!’ O trinity of the world, money, pleasure, and honour, make us happy!”

But it really is not fair to judge Fletcher, as a writer, by his controversial treatises alone. Out of the eight volumes of his works, at least four contain many admirable things, which are far less known than they ought to be. His admirable “Letter to Mr. Prothero in Defence of Experimental Religion;” his “Critical Vindication of the Catholic Faith, in reply to Priestley;” his “Portrait of St. Paul;” his “Pastoral Epistles” to his flock at Madeley, are, generally speaking, all worthy of high praise. Last, but not least, his letters to friends, like most of the letters of the spiritual heroes of last century, are often most excellent. If a volume of letters by Whitefield, Venn, and their contemporaries, could be compiled and published—and I have long regretted that the thing has not been done—I am bold to say that Fletcher’s letters would occupy a very prominent place among them.

As *a man*, Fletcher’s character stands above all praise. I can find very few men of a hundred years ago about whom there is so striking an agreement on all sides that he was pre-eminently and peculiarly a most holy man, a saint indeed, a living epistle of Christ. His deep humility, his extraordinary self-denial, his unwearied diligence, his courage in Christ’s cause, his constant spirituality of tone, his fervent love to God and man, his singleness of eye, are features in his character so strongly marked and developed, that even his adversaries never pretended to deny them. Wrong as he was in some of his views of doctrine, his worst foes never ventured to doubt his singular holiness of life. In this respect, at any rate, the Vicar of Madeley ranked high among his contemporaries. Like every earthen vessel, he had his cracks and flaws, no doubt, and no one knew it better than himself; but they were cracks and flaws which were far less visible than, unhappily, they are in many of

God's saints.

Let us hear what John Wesley thought of Fletcher. No doubt he was an Arminian, like Fletcher, and likely to think well of him. But Wesley was a calm, cool-blooded man, and not one to speak strongly in any one's praise without good reason. This is his testimony:—"I was intimately acquainted with Mr. Fletcher for thirty years. I conversed with him morning, noon, and night, without the least reserve, during a journey of many hundred miles; and in all that time I never heard him speak an improper word, or do an improper action. To conclude, within fourscore years I have known many excellent men, holy in heart and life; but one equal to him I have not known, one so uniformly devoted to God. So unblamable a man, in every respect, I have not found, either in Europe or America, nor do I expect to find another such on this side eternity."

Let us hear, finally, what Henry Venn thought of Fletcher. His testimony, at any rate, is unexceptionable. Though not an extreme Calvinist, he certainly was not in the least an Arminian. He had little or no direct connection with the Vicar of Madeley, and did not move in the same path. Above all, he was a man of rare good sense as well as grace, and one whose gift of sound judgment was great and extraordinary.

His testimony was as follows:—"Mr. Fletcher was a luminary. A luminary, did I say? He was a sun. I have known all the great men for these fifty years, but I have known none like him. I was intimately acquainted with him, and was under the same roof with him once for six weeks, during which I never heard him say a single word which was not proper to be spoken, and which had not a tendency to minister grace to the hearers. One time meeting him when he was very ill with a hectic fever, which he had brought on himself by excessive labour, I said, 'I am sorry to find you so ill.' Mr. Fletcher answered with great sweetness and energy, 'Sorry, sir! Why are you sorry? It is the chastisement of my heavenly Father, and I rejoice in it. I love the rod of my God, and rejoice therein, as an expression of his love and affection towards me.'"

With John Fletcher I now close my biographical accounts of the ministers who were prime movers in the revival of English religion a hundred years ago. I have shown, I think, that in the best sense "there were giants in those days." The Vicar of Madeley, my readers will probably agree with me, was not the least of them.