

THE PALIMPSEST

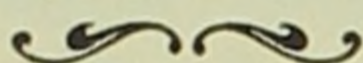
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The Education of a Clergyman

It was June 8, 1807. In the pleasant village of Dummerston, Vermont, an old, yet always new, event was taking place. When William French was presented with his new-born son, he called the baby Ozro. There had been Johns and Williams, Rebeccas and Mehitabels, and Jonathans and Abigails in the nine generations of the French family in America, but this child was the first to be named Ozro. And a good name it was. The infant who bore it was to make it known and respected, not only in the land of steady habits, but also in far-off India and ultimately on the Iowa frontier.

As Ozro French grew to boyhood, he learned something of the history of the French family. The surname was said to be derived from an ash tree or perhaps an ashen spear. Traditionally, the line extended back through the centuries to the days of Rollo, Duke of Normandy. There were Frenches in England in 1599. Lieutenant

William French, his wife Elizabeth, and their four children brought the family name to Boston on October 3, 1635, in the good ship *Defense*. From this contingent sprang the nine generations of ancestors to which Ozro could look back. He could even trace with his finger the names of God-fearing ancestors cut firmly into New England granite gravestones.

Ozro showed himself to be a boy of promise during the days of his early village education. His natural intelligence together with his pietism led to a desire for further schooling. Plans were made for him to attend one of the better institutions.

Brattleboro Academy, when the twenty-one-year-old lad entered in the spring of 1829, stood high in the educational life of New England. Its classical curriculum was sound, and its faculty were men of learning. There French first set foot upon the path which was to lead him to India and eventually to the Iowa agricultural frontier.

Ozro quickly adjusted himself to the academy environment. He spent many hours of "hard vexatious study" over Cicero and complained to his diary that the passing and repassing of stages frequently interrupted his work. He became a member of a small debating circle and attended a singing school conducted by a Mr. Baker. "Be-

fore they began to sing," he wrote, "my heart was wounded within me to behold some vain and wicked playing lively dancing tunes upon their musical instruments."

He was equally upset when, early in May, a traveling troupe exhibited a few cages of wild animals in the village. "Many people," commented the young scholar, "old and young, rich and poor, male and female went from the town. Some would give more to see wild animals than to send the gospel of peace and grace to the heathen".

Student life was not easy for French. He learned hard. In addition, he was poor. But he was determined in his ways and possessed the sterling qualities which so frequently New England imparted, as a precious gift, to her favored sons. He received some slight compensation for rising early each morning and ringing the academy bell. And even though he received his board free and his tuition gratis, he had to saw wood in order to meet his few incidental expenses. Two handkerchiefs, for example, cost him fifty-eight cents, and a new palm-leaf hat was fifty-four cents more. A Greek grammar and reader came to \$2.62 $\frac{1}{2}$.

By the end of June, discouraged but determined, Ozro French left the academy to teach at Newfane, a small village only a few miles from

Dummerston. Before leaving Brattleboro, he essayed expression of his morbidity in verse.

Swifter than the flying arrow
Pass my days and months away;
Each reminds me of the narrow
House appointed for this clay.

In Newfane, he found a "very noisesome, roguish set of scholars" who tried his patience and flouted his authority. For teaching the full term of school, he received \$40.50, enough to enable him to register again in the academy in March, 1830. On September 6th, he completed his course satisfactorily and made ready to enter Williams College.

He went to Williams in the autumn of 1830 and was graduated four years later. His entrance examination, obligatory of every freshman, was conducted by Professor Ebenezer Kellogg, and he spent his first night at Kellogg's Tavern. The next morning he obtained a room at No. 12 Williams College, and found board with a Captain Taft. During the afternoon, French made himself a table from rough boards and began to build a desk.

Classes began on September 30th. "Recited the first lesson today to Tudor [Mason] Noble. He is very young, pleasant and affable in appear-

ance. The religious exercises of the chapel are interesting and devotional. Thus far I am highly pleased with my situation. I find amongst the students some devoted Christians, intercourse with whom I shall esteem and hope to be benefited from their example, and influence."

French's career at Williams was one of alternate satisfactions and disappointments. He relished the activities of the Sabbath School Society whose function was to establish Sabbath Schools in the "valley of the Mississippi", and he took an active part in the local temperance societies. He was also a member of the Anti-Tobacco Society. The Philotechian Literary Society, founded in 1795, invited him to become a member. On June 9, 1834, the group debated whether or not persons of color should be admitted to New England colleges.

Certain college activities, however, were anathema to him. Chip Day, when the students cleaned the college premises of debris accumulated during the winter months, and Gravel Day, when undergraduates carefully spread gravel upon the muddy college walks, were unpleasant occasions. He made no objection to the work involved for he was used to labor, but he heartily disliked the spirit of fun with which students clothed their tasks.

"Satan has triumphed," he wrote after Chip Day of 1832, "and led almost all College captive at his will. . . . Professors of religion joined with the ungodly in all the mean, sinful transactions of the day, which has disgraced the college and injured the character of many individuals."

It is interesting to compare French's picture of this typical New England college celebration with that painted of the same occasion by one of his classmates. "At length it came," wrote the more secular student, "and a beautiful one it was. The laughing sun shone brightly and not a cloud darkened the azure concave . . . 'Hurrah! Hurrah!' echoed through the halls. 'We have the day, hurrah, hurrah!' The big, disfiguring piles of rubbish were quickly removed. A procession followed in which the late chipmen became a martial troop, brooms and brushes served as flagstuffs, and sheets and handkerchiefs as floating pennants. Our quiet, beautiful town of the vale has not seen so imposing a sight this many a day."

On November 4, 1830, an agent of the American Tract Society arrived at the college to stress the wants of "the west" and of "foreign lands". With thoughts already turning to the ministry, French was deeply impressed by the claims of these two great areas of spiritual destitution.

During college vacations, the erstwhile student

frequently taught school. During the winter of 1830-31, he instructed twenty-six pupils at Canaan, New York. He taught at Adams for two months in the following year. His total salary at Adams was twenty-four dollars. During the heavy winter months of 1833-34, he conducted a family school where "seven precious souls" were under his care, and in April, 1834, he taught at the Burr Seminary in Manchester, Vermont. Years later, after his return from India, the missionary met two of the boys whom he had instructed when at Manchester. Both were in the ministry, and each testified that his inspiration came from French.

Fourteen days after his arrival at Burr Seminary, the young professor set down a list of the sins of which he was especially guilty.

1. Neglect to study the Bible, and bring the truth home to my heart.
2. Formality in prayer. (Very guilty)
3. Vanity in thought, word, and action.
4. Positive transgression of God's word.
5. Unfaithfulness to Christians.
6. Unfaithfulness to sinners.
7. Abuse of Sabbath and other means of grace.
8. General neglect of opportunities for doing good.
9. Special abuse of stations of influence.
10. Inclination to justify my disobedience. (A very great and aggravated offense.)
11. Misuse of seasons devoted to humiliation and fasting.

Such self-reproach seems feebly rooted in fact. It was customary for pietistic young folks to dwell more upon their shortcomings than upon their virtues. The true analysis of French's personality and character lies in the more than seventy small, paper-covered diaries which he kept for almost thirty years. Here is revealed a character devoted to honesty, truth, uprightness, and Christian living.

On July 10, 1834, French completed his duties at Burr Seminary and set out, on foot, for Williamstown. Within six days he completed his senior examinations and was ready for graduation. "This is the last Sabbath of my college life," he wrote on August 17th, after hearing Dr. Edward D. Griffin deliver the baccalaureate sermon from Zachariah 14:20, 21. Commencement exercises for the twenty-nine seniors were held three days later. In the evening the Handel Society gave an oratorio, but "the intended address on the occasion failed, and some of the instrumental music deserted us."

French was firmly determined to enter the ministry, although he was yet undecided whether to elect the foreign or home missionary field. After some discussion, he planned to enroll at Andover Theological Seminary and while there choose his field of activity. He arrived at Andover on Sep-

tember 9, 1834. Classes began in late October, yet there were some amusements. On November 1st, French wrote, "Saw the 'menagery' this afternoon. This is the first time that I ever saw a wild animal of any kind except a monkey." He was then twenty-seven years old.

The curriculum at Andover, of course, was centered around such subjects as Christian theology, sacred literature, sacred rhetoric, ecclesiastical history, and pastoral theology. The Reverend Justin Edwards was president of the seminary, and Lowell Mason, well-known in the annals of American song, was instructor of sacred music.

As the young man worked in his plain room at No. 29 Bartlet Hall, read in the seminary library, or walked in the hills, his thoughts frequently turned to his life work. Where should he preach? For a time he toyed with the idea of going to the trans-Mississippi frontier where the need for missionaries was great. But, more and more, his mind was attracted by the foreign field. Perhaps the lure of far places played fascinating tricks with the imagination of this sturdy New Englander so accustomed to the commonplace. Of one thing he was certain — he was going to be a missionary. He would elect no easy city pastorate.

On November 11, 1834, French met informally, after dusk, with a few classmates who felt a

personal interest in missions. "There are several of our number whose hearts are set on the ends of the world." And on New Year's Day of 1835, the second step was taken when he "met for the first time with the committee on Foreign Missions, to whom I have joined myself." The final decision came on April 9th. "Why should not I be a missionary," he entered in his diary. "Is my constitution and health sufficient? Yes. Do friends and earthly connections afford a barrier? No. Is there then anything in the way? Nothing which I can plead as an excuse before God. Shall I not, then, must I not go? . . . Lord, I am thine, to thee I consecrate my powers and devote my life. If thou wilt, send me to the heathen".

The years at Andover saw a mental and spiritual growth in the young man. Having mastered the technique of learning and having committed himself to theology, he prospered both in his studies and his professional obligations. Much time and energy was given to his Sabbath School class, to visiting the sick and sitting with the dead, and with seeking to convert domestic servants and laborers. He held meetings at the "poor house" near Andover, identified himself with temperance and anti-slavery interests, and became chairman of the Andover Foreign Mission Committee. During the fall vacation of 1836 he taught school

in West Chester, New Hampshire. That year also he journeyed on the Erie Canal to Buffalo. On April 11, 1836, in Dalton, he met Miss Jane Hotchkiss, his future wife. Sometime in May he proposed to her.

His senior year at Andover was little different from preceding semesters. His class of about twenty young theologians was graduated in 1837 and scattered from Andover's red brick buildings and enclosing fence to all parts of the world. French began to prepare for his ordination examinations.

He was ordained at Brattleboro on November 7, 1838. The services began at eleven o'clock amid surroundings which the candidate knew so well. From Isaiah 55: 12, 13, came the words of a well-known text beginning, "I have made the earth, and created man upon it." The young minister, dedicated to the church, read aloud the words of the closing hymn, "Yes, my native land, I love thee." At the end of that day, French wrote that he felt "entirely composed and at home" during the exercises. "The deed is done. I am now publicly consecrated to the sacred ministry."

PHILIP D. JORDAN

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