

ELIHU BURRITT—FRIEND OF MANKIND

BY ROBERT K. SHAW

THE genuine pioneer, whether in the field of exploration, scholarship or philanthropy, justly holds the respect of all mankind. Since the world is always happy to applaud the keen individualist, who casts traditions to the wind and follows the bent of his own genius, to accomplish some unselfish plan, we should now be ready, nearly fifty years after the death of Elihu Burritt, to pay a fresh tribute to the memory of this staunch apostle of the brotherhood of the world.

As any paper presented to this Society quite naturally bears upon either its history or work, it may be well to state, thus early, that the subject of this essay, during his several years residence in Worcester, beginning in 1837, considered himself under the greatest obligation to our Society and its library for putting at his disposal such a wealth of philological material as he had never expected to be collected in one spot.

Before studying our subject as a peace-advocate, however, let us consider him for a moment in that rather more picturesque guise of a self-taught polyglot.

Although Mr. Burritt's early linguistic studies, fostered by the generous help rendered by our Society, were mainly of an academic nature, they sometimes had a very practical bearing. For instance, it happened that while he lived in Worcester, a certain will, written obscurely and ungrammatically in the Danish language, was brought to this country from the West Indies, for execution. After several college professors had declined the task of translation, Mr. Burritt essayed it, and completed the work to the entire satis-

faction of the probate court. The only compensation which "The Learned Blacksmith" would accept for this unique service was the equivalent of what he would have earned by manual labor at the forge.

Another, still more remarkable, example of his linguistic ability and untiring patience was shown in his success at deciphering a document written in a dialect of the South Sea Islands, not a mere test of academicism, but necessary for the settlement of a considerable amount of marine insurance. This paper also fell a victim to "The Learned Blacksmith's" indomitable determination, only after being given up by the best expert knowledge that Boston and Cambridge could supply.

Again, it will be noted with interest that among the treasures of the library of this Society are a dictionary and a grammar in the Celto-Iberian dialect of ancient Brittany. Assisted only by these two volumes, Mr. Burritt forged out a letter in this forgotten tongue, to the Royal Antiquarian Society of France, returning the thanks of an American student for the opportunity of learning that unfamiliar dialect. In due time a formal acknowledgment of his effort was delivered to him at the forge.

The subject of this paper being, however, "Elihu Burritt, friend of mankind," it will be profitable for us to turn now to what we might call his "conversion" and to see how the language-loving blacksmith became a world-famed philanthropist.

Born at New Britain in 1810, the youngest son among ten children, he apprenticed himself to a local blacksmith after his father's death, in 1828, and early manifested that keen desire for mental self-improvement, which dominated his whole career. Encouraged by his older brother Elijah, in the study of mathematics, Elihu would propound for himself, at the forge, such an exercise in mental arithmetic as: How many barleycorns, at three to an inch, will it take to encircle the earth at the equator? This prodigious feat of

mental gymnastics he would perform with no written aid whatsoever, giving the result orally to his brother at night. Elijah would take down the result on a slate; verify the processes and find the answer correct.

Turning from mathematical to linguistic studies (while working regularly from ten to fourteen hours daily at the forge) Mr. Burrirt decided to secure more congenial surroundings for private study, and started on foot for Boston, where he arrived, walking all the way from his native New Britain, after the financial panic of 1837 had ruined his grocery business. Disappointed in the hope of finding a steamship ready to sail on a voyage which would enable him to collect foreign language texts in the trade-centers of Europe, he turned his steps (literally) to Worcester, owing to reports of the value, to serious students, of this Society's library (exactly twenty-five years after its foundation). Boundless must have been the delight of this ardent young plodder both to obtain steady employment in Worcester at the anvil, and to find the doors of our Society's library flung wide open in response to his humble knock.

While in Worcester two events occurred which should be classed as most significant milestones in his career. Overnight he sprang into fame from a letter which he wrote to his friend William Lincoln, requesting an opportunity to secure some work as a translator, and presenting in some detail an account of his early struggles to acquire knowledge. Mr. Lincoln was so deeply impressed by this live spark from the anvil that he transmitted the letter to Governor Everett, who both read it, with full rhetorical effect, at a state teachers' meeting, and caused it to be printed, in full, in a Boston newspaper. From this episode dated his title "The Learned Blacksmith" and likewise much embarrassment to this over-modest knowledge-seeker.

The second event alluded to above was wholly spiritual, but most practical, as shaping Mr. Burrirt's

future career, and may be called his "conversion." When about thirty-three years old and preparing a lecture on "The Anatomy of the Earth" as a result of the publicity which Governor Everett had given him, he was drawing a comparison between earth-features, as shown in mountains, soils, rivers, and seas; and man-features, in bones, flesh, veins and blood. Like a flash it occurred to the lecturer that the great diversity of soils and climate, particularly in the same latitudes, shows plainly that all civilized nations need the products of many other nations, and that a state of world-peace is essential for the proper distribution of world-products in general. At once, therefore, this quasi-scientific lecture, as it was supposed to be, was rewritten and became an ardent plea for world peace and universal brotherhood. From this time forward the advance of international peace was Mr. Burritt's most zealous ambition and desire.

Of St. Paul's famous preachment to the Athenians, he said: " 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on the face of the earth' is not a Greek apothegm, though uttered in the midst of Athens. It is neither a maxim of human wisdom, nor a new-coined motto of human democracy. It is a great, everlasting and capital verity of divine revelation, which shall outlive the existence and memory of all unfriendly nationalities."

As a vehicle for his peace propaganda, to which cause he persistently devoted, from now on, as much time as could be spared from earning a very modest living, Mr. Burritt now founded, in Worcester, a weekly newspaper called "The Christian Citizen", devoted to the causes of Anti-slavery, peace, temperance, self-culture, etc. Though never acquiring a large circulation, it lived from 1844-1851 and won many friends in the northern states and in England, serving also to bring the editor's name before the principal peace advocates of two hemispheres. Its editor claimed it to be the first American newspaper to devote a

considerable amount of space to an advocacy of the cause of peace.

From his editorial work on "The Christian Citizen" he developed the original and unique "Olive Leaf Mission." In this he would write a short and pithy article of a few hundred words on some peace question; make ten or fifteen printed copies, and send them to as many papers, for simultaneous insertion. The unique name was derived from the dove with an olive spray in its beak, surmounting the article. Success crowned the idea from the first, though later, whenever possible, the editor preferred paid insertions.

It was, however, through the Oregon dispute of 1846 that Mr. Burritt's internationalism first shone forth with real effulgence. As public sentiment in England and America became much inflamed, from week to week, some good citizens of Manchester, England, led by that staunch Quaker, Joseph Crosfield, determined that the politicians and newspapers should not have things all their own way. "Friendly International Addresses" were the result; by means of these, messages of peace and good will, urging arbitration of the Oregon boundary dispute, were drawn up and signed by leading citizens of a certain city or town, to be delivered to a designated place on the opposite side of the water. Those from England were all transmitted to "The Learned Blacksmith," for delivery in their respective cities or towns. Two of them he took in person to Philadelphia and Washington, the latter, from Edinburgh, bearing the distinguished names, among many others, of Dr. Chalmers and Professor Wilson. Mr. Burritt showed the address to Senator John C. Calhoun, who was much impressed by the fervor and unselfishness of the message, and promised to further its spirit in any way possible. Whatever influence Joseph Crosfield and his associates may have had in molding public opinion, the controversy was settled shortly, without recourse to arms.

The movement just described marked another mile-

stone in Mr. Burritt's spiritual progress, as he was now induced by his overseas friends to visit England, which he did on the ship bringing the news of the settlement of the Oregon controversy. Prominent among the motives leading to this radical change of scene and labor, was his desire to make a careful study of the conditions surrounding English agriculture, and to undertake, incidentally, an extensive journey on foot. So many, however, were the opportunities for public service opening up to him on his arrival in England that it was almost twenty years before his two long walks to John O'Groat's and to Land's End, respectively, were actually accomplished.

On reaching Manchester and Birmingham his first great enterprise was the organization of the "League of Universal Brotherhood" designed not only to assist in the abolition of war, but to help friendly world relations in general. The pledge which all members were called upon to sign was such as only a very extreme pacifist of today would be willing to support.

Following now chronologically the career of our apostle of brotherhood, we find him engaged during the year 1847 on two separate lines of altruism, each of the highest importance, yet neither related directly to the great cause of world-peace. The first was his visit to famished Ireland during the winter of the terrible potato famine. Taking up his quarters in the stricken area, he made a systematic canvass of the district, after which he sat down, on the spot, and wrote an effective little pamphlet called "Four Months in Skibbereen," which was freely circulated in England and America. His "Christian Citizen" which he had left in Worcester in good editorial keeping, was also very influential in providing Americans with ample and trustworthy information regarding this appalling calamity.

The fight for Ocean Penny Postage, however, being of almost universal interest, and drawn out, by inertia and active opposition, during a full quarter century,

assumes a much greater interest than the foregoing. Although the name of Sir Rowland Hill is always (and justly) associated in the public mind with this great reform, there can be no doubt that "The Learned Blacksmith's" heavy and well directed blows on the anvil of public opinion, proved efficient factors in the eventual success of this splendid enterprise. Ocean postage from eighteen to twenty-five cents, in addition to land postage at each end, made letter-writing in the 40's from America or the colonies an almost impossible luxury for the poor. In the course of two winters Mr. Burritt says himself that he addressed 150 meetings on this subject from Penzance to Aberdeen and from Cork to Belfast. The year 1872, which witnessed both the complete triumph of Ocean Penny Postage and also the mammoth Peace Jubilee in Boston, must have been well nigh the happiest in all his life.

Returning now to a study of his activities as an apostle of peace, we find him crossing the Channel in the spring of 1848 (that year of ill omen for crown and sceptre) in the hope of erecting a great peace congress on the platform "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" which the French people had just established on the ruins of Louis Philippe. After a few weeks spent in Paris, in conference with peace-lovers at the French capital, he returned to England to sow more seed there and to water some of the tender shoots timidly springing up in the British field of prejudice and conservatism. Several men of prominence had agreed to attend the Paris conference, and plans in general were progressing favorably, when the terrible "Three Days of June" intervened at Paris, with deeds of violence and bloodshed, making hopeless the immediate realization of any representative Peace Congress on French soil.

To Brussels, therefore, were activities at once directed, and so briskly did Mr. Burritt and his associates proceed with their correspondence and interviews that the three day conference was all planned,

executed and an accomplished event of recorded history before the close of September of this same 1848. The Belgian government did even more than could be reasonably expected in giving sanction, publicity and active assistance to the cause. Ten of the leading citizens, including the Secretary of the Interior Department, were chosen as an Entertainment Committee, to welcome and make comfortable the visitors from many lands. One of the finest halls in the city was offered free as a meeting-place. About 150 delegates crossed from Great Britain, and others from France, Germany and Holland. The general enthusiasm and interest were much greater than the promoters had ventured to expect.

Encouraged by the triumphs won at the Brussels Congress, the English Peace Society joined hands with the new League of Universal Brotherhood and proceeded to lay siege to Parliament in the interests of what they called "Stipulated Arbitration." By this term was meant a series of treaties to be negotiated between all the principal nations of Christendom, agreeing to settle by arbitration rather than by appeal to arms, any and all disputes which might pass the limits of every-day diplomacy. Their leader and spokesman in Parliament was no less a person than the famous economist and statesman, Richard Cobden, whose persuasive and eloquent tongue rallied some seventy votes in support of the measure. Through its introduction into Parliament, as well as by the persistent itinerancy of Mr. Burritt and Henry Richard, secretary of the London Peace Society, the name and platform of "Stipulated Arbitration" became familiar to all intelligent Victorians.

By the spring of 1849 things were pretty well quieted down in France, so that it seemed proper to hold the second World-Peace Congress in Paris. The French government outdid the Belgian attempt to show honor to the visitors, admitting all English and American delegates without custom-house formalities; throwing

open for free inspection all museums, libraries and other public buildings; and, as a crowning mark of favor, directing the fountains of Versailles and St. Cloud to be played for their entertainment—an honor paid hitherto only to foreign sovereigns on visit. As an index of the attendance on this conference, the British delegation numbered about 700, and were conveyed across the Channel on two chartered steamers. Regarding the personnel of the Congress, Mr. Cobden remarked to M. de Tocqueville that if those two precious vessels were to sink in the Channel, all philanthropic enterprise in the United Kingdom would be brought to a standstill at once. Delegates from the United States included Hon. Amasa Walker, and the Presidents of Bowdoin and Oberlin Colleges. Victor Hugo, chosen President of the Congress, spoke very eloquently both at the beginning and end of the sessions.

In preparing the details of this conference, Mr. Burritt wrote in his journal: "We are treading upon delicate ground in attempting to associate men of different countries, religions, politics, language and habits in a work which should be distinguished by a spirit of harmony." As a mark of Mr. Burritt's personal popularity it should be noted that when, as Vice-president and delegate for the United States, he stepped upon the platform to present the greetings from this republic, during nearly two minutes he was unable to begin his speech, owing to loud and continuous applause. Further evidence of affection from his hosts of English friends came, somewhat later, as he was about to sail for America, in the form of an elaborately engrossed and framed testimonial to the value of his services as apostle of peace; a substantial purse of \$500. and a tactful exchange of his third-class steamer ticket for one of the best on the boat.

Occupied for the most part, during his short stay at home, following the Paris conference, in touring the country to stir interest in the next European Peace

congress, "The Learned Blacksmith" found himself, for once, a prophet of supreme honor in his own country. He says himself that he was welcomed by his fellow townsmen of New Britain with a testimonial of respect and esteem which he prized above all other public expressions of regard that he ever received. A monster mass meeting filled the new Town Hall to overflowing, many distinguished visitors from Hartford and elsewhere being also present.

Having secured a number of delegates pledged to attend the Peace Congress of 1850, Mr. Burritt sailed back for England in May that year, and at once embarked with his friend and colleague Henry Richard to prepare for this next specially delicate undertaking. Determined to strike their hardest blow at militarism, the friends of peace decided to invade war-ridden, crown-ruled Germany, and to preach the new gospel from the house-tops where it might have the very widest hearing. In spite of being obliged to contend with indifference and almost opposition on the part of the government, the Frankfort conference accomplished even more than its most sanguine friends had hoped, its delegates representing more European countries than at the previous gathering. The English visitors required two large vessels to carry them up the Rhine, and all the German states sent representatives, beside some from Italy and many from France and America.

A striking feature of this Congress was the fact that it almost effected a piece of practical arbitration. A war having broken out between Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein, the Peace Congress was earnestly invited to pass on the merits of the question. With obvious good sense this request was denied, as the platform of all these Congresses naturally forbade participation in any existing controversy. After the close of the Congress, however, Mr. Burritt, accompanied by two other delegates, proceeded to Berlin, in individual capacity, to make an attempt at arbitra-

tion; considerable progress, in fact, had been made when, without warning, some Austrian troops invaded Schleswig-Holstein, and renewed the conditions of war. While in Hamburg Mr. Burritt succeeded in starting another "Olive Leaf Mission," to promote the cause of peace, similar to the one he invented in Worcester several years before.

As the printed word is known to penetrate vastly beyond the spoken, so did our Apostle of Peace come to value more and more highly the service of his "Olive Leaves." Believing also in the superiority of paid newspaper insertions, but having little money available for publicity purposes, he speedily conceived the idea of enlisting the sympathetic and loyal aid of women. This he effected by arranging an afternoon meeting, where he was to speak in the evening on Ocean Penny Postage, in order to secure the women's co-operation in the work of the "Olive Leaf Mission." So successful was he that, within two years, over one hundred of these Olive Leaf Societies had been formed, which presently became so effective as to finance practically the whole Olive Leaf plan, at a cost of some \$2000 annually. The literary material was translated into seven languages, and published monthly in more than forty different journals, from Copenhagen to Vienna, and from Madrid to Stockholm. "Thus," he says picturesquely, "several millions of minds, in all these countries, were kept continuously under the dropping of ideas, facts and doctrines, which fell upon them as quietly as the dew of Heaven."

The Peace Congress of 1851, assembled in Exeter Hall, London, during the progress of the great International Exhibition, was the largest and most influential gathering of its kind ever held. Not yet under the shadow of the Crimean war, the 2000 delegates, assembled from many lands, discoursed so earnestly of peace and brotherhood that many must have believed the millennium to be almost in sight. The president's chair was occupied by the venerable and distinguished

Sir David Brewster, while Richard Cobden took an important part in the proceedings, and Rev. George C. Beckwith, Secretary of the American Peace Society, shared with "The Learned Blacksmith" the honor of representing America. Said the latter: "A beautiful spirit of fraternal unanimity pervaded the proceedings of the Congress, and no one who took part in them will be likely to forget the occasion as long as he lives."

But the sway of the Goddess Pax seems destined to be brief, on this pugnacious planet, and the Victorian peace-workers were not allowed to wait even for the Crimean war, only three years distant, before receiving a violent jolt from across the Channel. For Louis Napoleon, despite the serious mien which he assumed before the peace delegates of 1849, was doubtless preparing, all the while, for his famous coup d'état, which he executed before the close of 1851. As existing political conditions made it practically impossible to conduct a peace conference on the continent of Europe, the Congresses of 1852 and 1853 were held at Manchester and Edinburgh respectively, and, although much good work was done, these two meetings hardly assumed, in point of attendance, an international phase.

Although no permanent results may, perhaps, be demonstrable from these six conferences, it is hoped that enough has been said, and on sufficient authority, to warrant the belief that these gatherings, which Mr. Burritt fostered with such warm affection and interest, were not mere soap-box meetings, gathering the rough-scuff from the streets and making no deep general impression. Like most reformers, Mr. Burritt may have had many of the instincts of a visionary, but he was an excellent organizer, and the fact that he secured the active participation from France of Victor Hugo and de Tocqueville, and in England of Cobden, Bright, Brewster, Henry Richard and Joseph Sturge (all of whose names may be found in the Dictionary of National Biography) shows plainly that he made a distinct impress, for his principles, on the very best thinkers of his time.

And now before the scene shifts back to America, for good, we may find Mr. Burrirt remaining for many years still in England, serving most acceptably as United States Consul at Birmingham, through a wholly unsolicited appointment by President Lincoln. He likewise undertook the two promised agricultural surveys on long walks, first to the northernmost tip of Scotland, and then, westward to Land's End and back. These truly formidable feats of pedestrianism are each described, entertainingly and in much detail, in books published at the completion of the respective journeys.

Although the aim of this paper is to present to your attention "The Learned Blacksmith's" career as a peace advocate, there is a certain other unselfish activity to which he gave much time and thought while at home during the decade of the 50's: the most momentous question of that crucial period—the issue of human slavery in these United States. Mr. Burrirt was an ardent social reformer and, as already stated, probably harbored elements of the visionary and possibly of the fanatic in his makeup, but his plan for "Compensated Emancipation" smacks of the soberest common sense. Though he undoubtedly loathed the institution of human slavery as intensely as John Brown or Wendell Phillips, he would not, like the former, unsheath his sword and seek to strike away the slave's fetters at a single blow. Burrirt had an enormous respect for the law, and realized not only that the Constitution recognized the existence of slavery, but that the North, for several generations, had battered on the slave-trade, and should be made to share with the South the responsibility for its existence and growth. When he proposed, therefore, that the slaves should be freed gradually, and that their former owners should be "compensated" through the sale of western public lands, owned by the Federal Government, he won some very substantial and intelligent support. Just how carefully he entered into the details of the project, is not my purpose to determine;

certainly he was no mean statistician, as his natural bent toward mathematics, and the successive volumes of his "Year-books of the Nations" issued just at this time, will amply testify. In August, 1856, the National Compensated Emancipation Society held its first convention in Cleveland. The presiding officer was President Mark Hopkins of Williams College, with Elihu Burritt as permanent secretary. Dr. Eliphalet Nott, president of Union College, and Governor Fairchild of Vermont were also intimately associated with this movement; even President Lincoln gave the project his support. As paid secretary of this society, with headquarters in New York, our peace advocate's daily regimen was often reduced to a six-cent loaf of bread for breakfast, a ten-cent cut of meat for supper; luncheon from the cold water faucet, and a mattress on the office floor.

In fact, wherever we look, we shall always see some sign of the picturesque in Elihu Burritt. We may visualize the eager young blacksmith's apprentice, construing his *τύπτω, τύπτεις, τύπτει*, from his Greek grammar, to the rhythmic anvil beat; or the ardent young Worcester editor timorously putting forth his first "Olive Leaf Mission," broadcast before an un-receptive world; or the sturdy English pilgrim, dusty and travel-stained, nearing his toilsome journey's end, at nether-most John O'Groat's; or the zealous emancipator, in the hay-loft of his New Britain farm, with sleeves rolled up and perched upon a nail-keg, before the lime-cask which served him for a table, pouring out hot missives on a Fourth of July to wake the South to the sin of slavery!

Dead, gone and all but forgotten in this hurly-burly age of ours, "The Learned Blacksmith" may appear today, but like old John Brown of Ossawatomie, who so sadly dashed the hopes for "compensated emancipation"—his soul too, let us believe, goes bravely marching on!

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