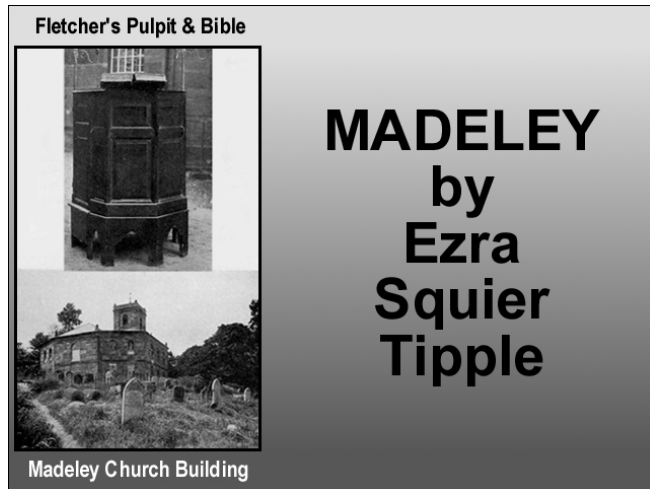


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**MADELEY**  
By Ezra Squier Tipple

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**MADELEY**

Among the treasures of my library -- and I have among others a number of "association books" which lure me to a favorite shelf now and again -- is a copy of Southey's "Life of Wesley," which once belonged to Edward Fitzgerald, the poet, bearing his autograph together with many annotations and references. Among the

latter are several to "Fletcher of Madeley," which, with various notes and characteristic markings of the account of the life and death of Fletcher, show Fitzgerald's interest in this eminent eighteenth-century Saint. He indicates his approval of Southey's well-known estimate: "Jean Guillaume de la Flechere was a man of rare talents and rarer virtue. No age or country has ever produced a man of more fervent piety or more perfect charity; no church has ever possessed a more apostolic minister. He was a man of whom Methodism may well be proud, as the most able of its defenders; and whom the Church of England may hold in remembrance as one of the most pious and excellent of her sons" -- a remarkable tribute, but not more remarkable than Robert Hall's: "Fletcher is a seraph who burns with the ardor of divine love. Spurning the fetters of mortality, he almost habitually seems to have anticipated the rapture of the beatific vision"; or than John Wesley's encomium in the sermon which he preached on the death of his friend and coworker in 1785: "Many exemplary men have I known, holy in heart and life, within fourscore years; but one equal to him I have not known -- one so inwardly and outwardly devoted to God. So unblamable a character in every respect I have not found either in Europe or America; and I scarce expect to find another such on this side eternity." Now all this sounds like extravagant praise, but modern writers are no less profuse. "If John Wesley was the great leader and organizer," writes a Church of England historian, "Charles Wesley the great poet, and George Whitefield the great preacher of Methodism, the highest type of saintliness which it produced was unquestionably John Fletcher. Never, perhaps, since the rise of Christianity has the mind which was in Christ Jesus been more faithfully copied than it was in the Vicar of Madeley. To say that he was a good Christian is saying too little. He was more than Christian; he was Christ-like!"

This remarkable man, although an English parish priest, was not an Englishman. He was born in Nyon, Switzerland, some fifteen miles from John Calvin's city, Geneva, the cradle of the Reformation. Fletcher never talked much of his ancestry, nor of the fine old baronial hall above Lake Lemman, in which his father, at one time an officer in the French army, lived. Shortly after Fletcher's marriage his wife found in his desk a seal. "Is this yours?" she asked, not knowing that the simple country preacher was a descendant of one of the Savoy earldoms. "Yes," replied the good man, "but I have not used it for many years." "Why?" "Because it bears a coronet, nearly such as is the insignia of your English dukes. Were I to use that seal, it might lead to frivolous inquiries about my family, and subject me to the censure of valuing myself on such distinctions." More was it to him that he was a child of God than that the blood of earls flowed in his veins. A rich experience of grace in Christ Jesus, how certainly it will give one a just sense of values!

Fletcher's boyhood was spent in a beautiful home, superbly situated. "The house where I was born," he wrote, "has one of the finest prospects in the world. We have a shady wood, near the lake, where I can ride in the cool all day, and enjoy the singing of a multitude of birds." Who that has seen that wonderful view of Lake Lemman with the Jura Mountains in the distance will ever forget it? At one's feet are vine-covered terraces reaching down to the blue lake

**"with its crystal face,  
The mirror where the stars and mountains view  
The stillness of their aspect in each trace";**

**there is a boat on the quiet waters, whose "sail is as a noiseless wing"; to the right is the stem city of Geneva, to the left are Lausanne, Clarens, "sweet Clarens, the birthplace of deep Love," and the much-sung Castle of Chillon, and beyond and above are the mountains, and over all an Italian sky! Upon such a scene as this Fletcher looked during his boyhood.**

**Some, like Samuel, are called early to God's altars. John Fletcher was, but his instinctive timidity turned him from "so great a burden," and he entered the army, or made the attempt, rather. The story of the thwarting of his purpose is classic. Portugal was sending troops to Brazil to defend its interests there, and Fletcher went to Lisbon, where he gathered a company of his own countrymen, accepted a captain's commission, and was waiting for the ship to sail, when one day the maid who was attending him at breakfast let fall a kettle of water, which so severely scalded the young soldier that before he recovered, the vessel had sailed for Brazil, aid, as Wesley observed, "the ship was heard of no more." God seemingly had other plans for him.**

**Oliver Goldsmith went to Holland once to teach the Dutch English, without himself knowing a word of Dutch. Fletcher, speaking only French, came to England in 1752 for the sole purpose of learning the language, and in an incredibly brief period he had acquired such skill in its use that he obtained a position in a family of influence, living at Tern Hall in Shropshire, the head of which was later to place this Swiss tutor in the parish which was to be the scene of his life work. It was all very strange. God does move in a mysterious way!**

**The England into which Fletcher came to learn English was itself learning something else, being at that time in the very midst of that remarkable evangelical revival which was destined in the providence of God to kindle fresh altar fires all over the land. For nearly twenty years now George Whitefield, as eloquent a preacher as England heard in the eighteenth century, had been going about the country, gathering immense crowds, and moving men to repentance; John Wesley had long since entered upon that unparalleled itinerant career which was to take him to every town and hamlet in England; and such other "evangelicals" as Grimshaw, and Romaine, and Rowland, and Hervey were producing really extraordinary effects by their open-air preaching.**

**There is a story that Fletcher's earliest acquaintance with the Methodists came about in this wise. Indeed, he himself related it to Wesley in the following words: "When Mr. Hill went to London to attend the Parliament he took his family and me with him. On one occasion, while they stopped at Saint Albans, I walked out into the town, and did not return until 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 doesn't turn Methodist by and by.' 'Methodist?' 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." Tyerman thinks that the date was surely not later than 1756, and probably a year or two earlier. Be that as it may, Fletcher had at last yielded to his early call to preach, and shortly after received the divine anointing for the work of the ministry. His own account of the solemn event reveals in large measure the secret of his passion for and success in the salvation of souls. "About the time of my entering into the ministry," he says, "I one evening wandered into a wood, musing on the importance of the office I was going to undertake. I then began to pour out my soul in prayer, when such a feeling sense of the justice of God fell upon me, and such a discovery of his displeasure at sin, as absorbed all my powers, and filled my soul with an agony of prayer for poor, lost sinners. I continued there till the dawn of day, and I considered this as designed of God to impress upon me more deeply the manner of those solemn words, 'Therefore knowing the terrors of the Lord, we persuade men.' "He was ordained in 1757, receiving deacon's orders from the Bishop of Hereford, and priest's orders on the following Sunday from the Bishop of Bangor, in the Chapel Royal at Saint James, London. On the day that he was ordained priest he went to Snowfield to assist Wesley in a sacramental service. It was a far cry from that royal chapel to Snowfield! But henceforth Fletcher was to have close relations both with the Church of England and with the Methodist movement, as so many clergymen did in that wonderful spiritual awakening. Fletcher speedily became a great favorite with the Wesleys, and between him and Charles Wesley there grew up a beautiful friendship, which continued until Fletcher's untimely death.

Fletcher's choice of Madeley rather than a much more desirable living was characteristic of the man. The story has been told many times, but it will bear repeating to every generation. He remained with the Hills at Tern Hall, until the two sons of the family had become undergraduates at Cambridge. Meanwhile he had preached as occasion offered, now at Atcham, some five miles from Tern Hall, where the text was so direct, and his sermon so plain, that the rebuked congregation did not soon care to hear him again, and now in a village chapel in another direction. Now he preaches in French, and now in English. His patron knew his burning desire to preach and one day offered him the living of Dunham. It had never occurred to him that it would not prove an acceptable gift.

"The parish," said he, "is small, the duty light, and the income good -- four hundred pounds per annum, and it is situated in a fine, healthy, sporting country." But Fletcher was not looking for this kind of an opening.

**"Alas!" he replied, "alas, sir, Dunham will not suit me. There is too much money and too little labor."**

**"But," said his benefactor, "few clergymen make such objections. Is it not a pity to decline such a living, especially as I know not where I can find you another? Would you like Madeley?"**

**"That, sir," said the zealous young preacher, "would be the very place for me."**

**And so the matter was arranged, and Fletcher had no occasion to be dissatisfied either with the amount of the work, or with the size of the income, the former being abundant, and the latter amounting to barely twenty-five pounds per year. Thus, October 17, 1760, John Fletcher became vicar of Madeley, a relationship which was to continue until his death, twenty-five years later, August 14, 1785.**

**Madeley is in Shropshire, in the west of England, near Wales, a journey of nearly three days by coach from London. To one who proposed to visit him, Fletcher sent these directions, much as Thackeray might have written to a friend: "If you choose to venture into Shropshire, you may take the Shrewsbury coach at the Swan, in Lad Lane, somewhere in the city, and in two days and a half you will be at Shiffnal, eighteen miles short of Shrewsbury, and three from Madeley. If you send me word when you are to set out, I will send my mare to meet you at the Red Lion, in Shiffnal, the day that the coach passes through the town." And whoever made the journey found a town beautifully situated in a winding glen through which flows the Severn River. The church was not an attractive one -- it was long ago demolished and the one now standing built. The parish included Coalbrookdale and Madeley Wood, noted for their coal mines and their iron works. Aside from these, Madeley seems to have been remarkable in Fletcher's day for little else than the ignorance and profaneness of its inhabitants. It was surely a benighted place to which he came, though the situation there was no worse than elsewhere in England. Appalling indeed were the conditions of rural and urban life in England in the eighteenth century! In Madeley as everywhere the external forms of religion had long been held up to ridicule. The people almost never went to church. The ordinary congregation was discouragingly small, and, what was worse, nobody seemed to care. No modern pastor has been confronted by a more difficult task, or has found more "problems" clamoring for solution. The most of the people were "stupid heathens," many of them were wantonly immoral, even. It was a common thing in that parish, he soon discovered, for young persons of both sexes to meet together for what was called "recreation," which recreation generally continued from evening to morning, and consisted chiefly of dancing, reveling, drunkenness, and obscenity. Immediately, like John the Baptist, he laid the ax at the root of the tree. Time and again he burst in upon them, his eyes aflame, and his indignation breaking all bounds. He made constant war on the saloon and other foes of goodness. Yet he was the gentlest of men, and from the very start of his ministry at Madeley he sought to be a good shepherd. He was not content merely to discharge**

the stated duties of the Sabbath as others before him had been. In return for the "living of Madeley" he gave a life to the people. He sought them out. He went "into their pits and forges." He put on the dress of a miner, and was lowered into the mines where he worked with the men and exhorted them with tears. He visited from house to house six, eight, ten hours a day. Those alarmed sinners who tried to hide from him he pursued to every corner of his parish. When some gave as an excuse for not attending church that they could not awake early enough to get their families ready, taking a bell in hand, he went through the streets and lanes and even to the outlying parts of the parish, starting as early as five in the morning, to summon all the people to the house of God. His pastoral labors were incessant. Early and late, without regard to weather, now on horseback, and now on foot, he went his daily rounds. He ate little, seldom taking any regular meal except when he had company, and when reproved for not allowing himself a sufficiency of necessary food, he replied, "Not allow myself food? Why, our food seldom costs my housekeeper and me less than two shillings a week!" The emphasis which the "evangelicals" put upon pastoral oversight has been overlooked. It is commonly thought that Methodism was merely a revival, and an awakening it surely was, but the leaders gave unusual attention to the care of converts. The first work of the Holy Club was pastoral in its nature. The members visited the poor, the sick, the prisoner.

Fletcher's appreciation of the value of time was such as any man will have who feels the urgency of the King's business. To some schoolgirls who came on his invitation to the vicarage in the early morning of the day following a visit by him to the school, he gave an impressive lesson. When they were seated in the kitchen he took a basin of milk and some bread and seating himself on an old bench, said as he laid his watch near him, "Girls, yesterday morning I waited on you a full hour, while you were at breakfast. Look at my watch!" He then began to eat, continuing in conversation with them. When he had finished, he asked them how long he had been. "Just a minute and a half, sir," one of them answered. "Now, girls," he replied, "we have fifty-eight minutes of the hour left." And then he began to sing,

"Our life is a dream!  
Our time as a stream Glides swiftly away,  
And the fugitive moment refuses to stay."

After which he talked with them on the value of time, and the worth of the soul, and prayed with and for them, and gave them his blessing.

Naturally opposition arose, and it was of a sort to test his faith and his patience. His preaching was too direct; his pastoral labors were too personal; the questions which he asked were too troublesome; the course which he marked out was too straight. Soon the parish was in a turmoil. A clergyman living in Madeley, a very proper young man, openly declared war upon him by pasting on his church door a paper in which he charged him with rebellion, schism, and with being a disturber of the public peace. The owners of the public houses raged against him. Some of the leading farmers and most of the respectable tradesmen wanted to turn

him out of his living. Others called him a Jesuit, and still others used more obnoxious terms. The opposition grew so violent that Fletcher was sorely tempted to give up his living. He wrote his friend Charles Wesley that he had lost what little reputation he had had. Nevertheless he continued his labors and added to them. To his Friday night lecture, which was an innovation--and what parish will not resist innovations or changes to the death? -- he added the catechizing of children on Sunday afternoon, another startling departure. He opened services at Madeley Wood and Coalbrookdale -- more irregularities. Yet soon his preaching and his work began to attract much attention. Not only was his church filled, but scores who could not find room in the church stood in the churchyard, and listened to his impassioned appeals.

There are numerous incidents of Fletcher's early ministry at Madeley which are historic, among them a remarkable occurrence which belongs to the year 1753, barely three years after his coming to Madeley. It attracted unusual attention at the time and has since. Among other modern writers, Stanley in his "Lectures on the Jewish Church" refers to it. On September 29, of that year, the Feast of Saint Michael, to whom the church at Madeley was dedicated, Fletcher preached a sermon which had an amazing outcome. The story of it was afterward published in a small tract entitled "The Furious Butcher Humbled," the substance of which shall be given in the words of the preacher himself. "One Sunday when I had done reading prayers at Madeley," he relates, "I went up into the pulpit, intending to preach a sermon, which I had prepared for that purpose; but my mind was so confused, that I could not recollect either my text or any part of my sermon. I was afraid I should be obliged to come down without saying anything. But, having recollected myself a little, I thought I would say something on the First Lesson, which was the third chapter of the book of Daniel, containing the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, being cast into the fiery furnace. I found in doing this such extraordinary assistance from God, and such a peculiar enlargement of heart, that I supposed there must be some peculiar cause for it. I therefore desired, if any of the congregation found anything particular, they would acquaint me with it in the ensuing week. In consequence of this the Wednesday after a woman came and gave me the following account: 'I have been for some time much concerned about my soul. I have attended the church at all opportunities, and have spent much time in private prayer. At this, my husband (who is a butcher) has been exceedingly enraged, and has threatened me severely as to what he would do to me if I did not leave off going to John Fletcher's church, yea, if I dared to go again to any religious meetings whatever. When I told him that I could not in conscience refrain from going, at least to the parish church, he became outrageous, and swore dreadfully, and said if I went again, he would cut my throat as soon as I came back. This made me cry to God that he would support me; and, though I did not feel any great degree of comfort, yet, having a sure confidence in God, I determined to do my duty, and leave the event to him. Last Sunday, after many struggles with the devil and my own heart, I came downstairs ready for church. My husband said he should not cut my throat as he had intended, but he would heat the oven and throw me into it the moment I came home. Notwithstanding this threat,

which he enforced with many bitter oaths, I went to church, praying all the way that God would strengthen me to suffer whatever might befall me. While you were speaking of the three children whom Nebuchadnezzar cast into the burning fiery furnace, I found all you said belonged to me. God applied every word to my heart; and, when the sermon was ended, I thought if I had a thousand lives, I could lay them all down for him. I felt so filled with his love that I hastened home, fully determined to give myself to whatsoever God pleased, nothing doubting that he either would take me to heaven if he suffered me to be burnt to death; or that he would in some way deliver me, as he did his three servants that trusted in him. When I got to my own door I saw flames issuing from the oven, and I expected to be thrown into it immediately. I felt my heart rejoice, that if it were so the will of the Lord would be done. I opened the door, and to my utter astonishment saw my husband upon his knees praying for the forgiveness of his sins. He caught me in his arms, earnestly begged my pardon, and has continued diligently seeking God ever since."

The Lady, when I read this strange tale to her, remarked quietly and convincingly that with such preaching today she imagined there would be more men, and women, too, for that matter, attending church. I suspect she is right -- as usual.

Fletcher's relations to the "evangelicals" of the eighteenth century were very intimate. As I have said, the Wesleys were devoted to him. No man in England better understood John Wesley, not even his brother Charles, or more thoroughly sympathized with his mission than John Fletcher; and in the society of no man of his age did Wesley have greater delight than with this best beloved of his preachers, the Saint John of Methodism, and of no other did Wesley entertain a higher opinion as to his gifts and graces. "Such a burning and shining light," he said, "instead of being confined to a country village ought to shine in every other corner of the land," and Wesley used all his arts of persuasion to draw him far afield, but it may well be doubted, as we shall see in a moment, whether Fletcher, if he had become an itinerant evangelist, as Wesley desired, could have rendered the invaluable service to Methodism which he did render a little later. Wesley visited Madeley, which he designates "an exceeding pleasant village, encompassed with trees and hills," and urged him to accompany him on a preaching tour, which Fletcher did now and again, but he would soon find his way back to his country parish. So great was Wesley's regard for him that he selected him for his successor, and in January, 1773, wrote to him a memorable letter in which he makes known his choice of the man upon whom his mantle shall fall. In this letter he speaks of the amazing work which God had wrought in Great Britain in less than forty years, and how it was spreading in America. He states, though, that people are saying that "when Mr. Wesley dies, all this will come to naught," which he says "may happen unless a competent successor is found." He then describes the kind of a man his successor ought to be. "He must be a man of faith and love, and one that has a single eye to the advancement of the kingdom of God. He must have a clear understanding, a knowledge of men and things, particularly of the Methodist

doctrine and discipline, a ready utterance, diligence and activity, with a tolerable share of health. There must be added favor with the people, with the Methodists in general. For, unless God turn their eyes and their hearts toward him, he will be quite incapable of the work. He must likewise have some degree of learning, because there are many adversaries, learned as well as unlearned, whose mouths must be stopped. But this cannot be done unless he be able to meet them on their own ground. But has God provided one so qualified? Who is he? Thou art the man!" He then goes on to tell Fletcher that he has the gifts, the knowledge of Methodism, as well as of men and things, experience, and piety for the task, meets any objections which he may urge, and concludes, "without conferring, therefore, with flesh or blood, come and strengthen the hands, comfort the heart, share the labor of your affectionate friend and brother, John Wesley." This letter is in every respect a remarkable one, and indicates as nothing else could Wesley's judgment of the Vicar of Madeley. To have been chosen from among all of Wesley's preachers as the one preeminently qualified to carry forward the stupendous work of that ecclesiastical genius of the eighteenth century was no small distinction. But in the providence of God, Wesley lived to preach his "designated successor's" funeral sermon.

Fletcher early made the acquaintance of the more conspicuous leaders of the Methodist movement, and Madeley became a sort of Mecca to which many of them made religious pilgrimages. Hither, accompanied by Lady Anne Erskine, came the Countess of Huntingdon in 1767, for a memorable visit. Wesley had introduced him to this gracious woman in 1758, which was the beginning of a rare friendship, clouded for a season, it is true, by the unfortunate controversies concerning doctrines, which divided the evangelical house against itself, but beautiful even in the midst of storm.

Shortly after meeting Fletcher, the Countess of Huntingdon -- "an humble and pious countess, a modern prodigy," as Fletcher styled her in a letter to Charles Wesley -- requested him to become one of her domestic chaplains, and thereafter Fletcher preached frequently in her ladyship's drawing room. In his audiences there he had many distinguished hearers, such as Lady Anne Frankland, daughter of the Earl of Scarborough, one of the firstfruits of Whitefield's ministry among the London nobility, and her sisters, Lady Barbara Leigh and Lady Henrietta Lumley; Lord Dartmouth, the founder of Dartmouth College; the Countess Delitz, Lord Bolingbroke, who "sat like an archbishop," one of the cleverest skeptics of the day; Lord Chesterfield, of whom Dr. Johnson once remarked that he was "a wit among lords, and a lord among wits"; the Duchess of Queensbury, daughter of the Earl of Clarendon, whose beauty and vivacity were celebrated by Prior, Pope, and Swift; Lady Fanny Shirley, an aunt of the Countess Selina of Huntingdon, the friend of Pope and the rival of Lady Mary Wortley Montague, whose conversion Horace Walpole recounts in his gossiping letters, and many others. With all these he was a decided favorite, though unfortunately not all of them gave heed to his admonitions.

When Lady Huntingdon opened her famous college at Trevecca, Wales, for the education of young men resolved to devote themselves to God's service, she

sought the active coöperation of her friend and chaplain, John Fletcher, whom she induced to undertake the superintendency. Without fee or reward Fletcher filled this important position, continuing meanwhile his work at Madeley, until the controversial tempest broke, and it seemed best to resign. One of the early students of Trevecca College, if not the very first student, was a young parishioner of Fletcher, a collier and iron-worker from Madeley Wood, who proved to be a preacher of decided ability. This was not Fletcher's only "son in the Gospel." Samuel Bradburn, a soldier's son, born at Gibraltar, brought to England when he was twelve, apprenticed to a shoemaker, converted, called to preach, set off for Madeley to see the renowned Fletcher, who with characteristic hospitality urged him to become his guest. To the end of his life Bradburn, who became a mighty preacher, unquestionably the greatest pulpit orator Wesley had in his company of preachers, thankfully acknowledged that he greatly owed his subsequent eminence to his Madeley visit. Adam Clarke, who knew him well, thought that he had never heard his equal, and long after Fletcher's death the eloquent voice of Bradburn was echoing through England, and in him as in others John Fletcher being dead, continued to speak.

"Alike are life and death,  
When life in death survives;  
And the uninterrupted breath  
Inspires a thousand lives."

One of the large services which the country minister contributes to the advance of the kingdom of God is the turning of the steps of worthy young men in the direction of the schools and the pulpits of the Christian Church.

To return to the Madeley visitors, hither came in 1784 Charles Simeon, then twenty-five years of age, full of zeal and of faith, and who when he came into the vicarage was greeted with fatherly affection by the fast-failing preacher. When Fletcher had secured the young man's assent to his request that he preach, he again went through the village as of old, bell in hand, calling the people to the sanctuary to hear "a young clergyman from Cambridge."

Among the friends of the Madeley vicar -- a circle as distinguished in its way as the group which revolved around Samuel Johnson -- was Henry Venn, who saw Fletcher often, and who remarked with solemn emphasis to a brother clergyman after his friend's death: "Sir, 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 time 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."

Fletcher made the personal acquaintance of Berridge early in his career. He had heard much of him, and desiring to see him made a journey to Everton in 1760.

The account of this visit is well known. On arriving he introduced himself to Berridge "as a new convert, who had taken the liberty to wait upon him for the benefit of his instruction and advice." Berridge, perceiving he was a foreigner, asked what countryman he was.

"A Swiss from the canton of Berne," was the reply.

"From Berne! Then probably you can give me some account of a young countryman of yours, John Fletcher, who has lately preached a few times for the Messrs. Wesley, and of whose talents, learning, and piety they both speak in terms of highest eulogy. Do you know him?"

"Yes, sir, I know him intimately; and did those gentlemen know him as well they would not speak so highly of him. He is more obliged to their partial friendship than to his own merits."

"You surprise me," said Berridge.

"I have the best reason for speaking of John Fletcher as I did. I am John Fletcher."

"If you be John Fletcher," replied Berridge, "you must take my pulpit tomorrow." And it is more than likely that he did, for Berridge was not one to be denied. Later there was an estrangement occasioned by the controversy which alienated Lady Huntingdon and others from him, but which could not last long when between two such spiritually minded men.

Perhaps this is as good a place as any other to say what must be said concerning that period of Fletcher's life at Madeley in which he was engaged in a spirited defense of Arminian teachings. The statement shall be as brief as possible, but no account of Madeley or its famous preacher would be complete without some account of that "unhappy controversy," in which the doughty champion of the doctrine of free will and the like played such a conspicuous part. At the Methodist Conference of 1770 it was felt that there had been "leaning too much toward Calvinism," and the fact was so stated. This fear was ever before them. They had said the same thing as far back as 1744. Now the conflict became general and painfully bitter. Few of those who were engaged in it came out of the fray creditably. Lady Huntingdon intimated that if there were instructors or students in her college at Trevecca, Wales, who sided with Wesley, there was no room for them. Benson was dismissed, and Fletcher resigned. There was a world of trouble. Meanwhile in the quiet country parish in Salop, Fletcher was writing his famous "Checks to Antinomianism." He vanquished Shirley and Sir Richard Hill. Then Rowland Hill came into the field, and Fletcher took his measure. Southey, in the "Book of Authors," says of this war of words, that the most conspicuous writers on the part of the Calvinists were Richard and Rowland Hill and Augustus Montague Toplady, and adds: "Never were any writings more thoroughly saturated with the essential

acid of Calvinism than those of the predestinarian champions. It would scarcely be credible that three persons of good birth and education, and of unquestionable goodness and piety, should have carried on controversy in so vile a manner and with so detestable a spirit, if the hatred of the theologians had not unhappily become so proverbial." But little can be said for the other side, either. It was a war of epithets. That Hill was caustic and severe, there can be no question. Hill himself admits that his language was sharp, but excuses his severity by quoting some of the epithets applied by the Wesleys and others to the Calvinists, such as, for example, "devil factors," "advocates for sin," "Satan's synagogue," "witnessing for the father of lies," "blasphemers," "Satan-sent preachers," "liars," "fiends." They certainly did not mince matters. Black was black, and no mistake. But at the distance of a hundred years and more, all this seems rather mild and commonplace, yet when the conflict of words was being waged it was wormwood and gall. This, however, must be said concerning Fletcher's part in it, he does not seem to have shown the same bitterness of spirit as some of the other writers. Of all the controversialists he came out with the least injury to his reputation. "If ever true Christian charity was manifested in polemical writing," if I may quote Southey once more, "it was by Fletcher of Madeley." And Overton says, "Fletcher wrote like a scholar and like a gentleman, and what is better than either, like a Christian." Fletcher did not like the controversy. It was to him an unspeakable sorrow. "I long to be out of controversy," he wrote. He was not in any sense a party man. He desired merely to do his duty, and he did it well, for whatever may be thought of the famous theological war, this country minister did for Methodist theology what no one else at that time could have done. He had a remarkable knowledge of Scripture, and a gift of expression which enabled him to state Methodist doctrines as no other writer. It is agreed by all historians that John Wesley traveled, preached, formed societies, and governed them; that Charles Wesley wrote hymns for the converts to sing; and that Fletcher explained, elaborated, and defended the doctrines they believed. Wesley, in his itinerant travels, could not command the time to give to such a task; but Fletcher almost literally for six years shut himself up in Madeley that he might have time to write. Everything had to give way to this great purpose. Everything? Yes, everything -- except his pastoral duties, and with these nothing was ever allowed to interfere. How like Chaucer's parish priest, who

"This noble ensample to his sheep he gave  
That first he wrought and afterward he taught."

Fletcher's devotion to the people of Madeley was complete. He lived for them and for their children. Their concern was his concern. Their spiritual development was always uppermost in his mind. He was among the first to see the value of the Sunday school, which had been started by Robert Raikes in 1780 at Gloucester. He undoubtedly knew of Raikes's new enterprise, and he was even more familiar with the work of Hannah More, "one of the most brilliant female ornaments of Christian literature," who had turned from her literary friends, Johnson, Burke, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and a host of others, in London, after the death of Garrick in 1779, to live a life of quietness and goodness in a small village near Bristol, and who, moved by

the shocking condition of the villagers, gave herself "to the poor and to those that have no helper," opening first one school, and then another. Fletcher almost immediately opened six schools in his parish, and the results were surprisingly good, not alone among the children, but also among adults.

His love of children was always great. There is no more beautiful passage in the hundreds of letters which he wrote than is to be found in a letter written from Nyon, while on a visit there in 1778, in which he tells of meeting "some children in ray wood gathering strawberries." "I spoke to them about our common Father. We felt a touch of brotherly affection. They said they would sing to their Father, as well as the birds; and followed me, attempting to make such melody as you know is commonly made in these parts. I outrode them, but some of them had the patience to follow me home; and said they would speak with me. The people of the house stopped them, saying I would not be troubled with children. They cried, and said they were sure I would not say so, for I was their good brother. The next day, when I heard this, I inquired after them, and invited them to come and see me; which they have done every day since. I make them little hymns which they sing." Could anything be more exquisitely beautiful than this!

This visit to Nyon was not the first which he had made since his departure for England. It was in 1770 that he first returned. He went to Marseilles, then made a visit to the Protestants in the Cevennes Mountains, and finally set out for Italy. When in Rome he drove out to the Appian Way. As they approached it, Fletcher left the carriage, for, as he remarked, "I cannot ride over ground where the Apostle Paul once walked, chained to a soldier." As soon as he set his foot upon the old Roman road, he took off his hat, and, walking on with his eyes lifted up to heaven, he gave God thanks for the glorious truths which Paul preached. Arriving in Switzerland he was at once urged by the clergymen at Nyon to occupy their pulpits. There were not a few converts as the result. When the time had come for him to return to England, a good minister, of more than threescore years and ten, begged him with much earnestness, to remain a little longer, even if only for a single week; and when this was found to be impossible, the disappointed man burst into tears with the exclamation, "How unfortunate for my country! During my lifetime, it has produced but one angel of a man, and now it is our lot to lose him!"

Country preachers are not of necessity provincial. A man of the broadest culture and sympathies, Fletcher was interested in the affairs of the nation as well as the daily round of parish duties. In an unpublished letter, dated Newcastle, May 21, 1776, Joseph Benson, speaking of the perilous times in England, says, "You see what a famous politician our friend Fletcher is become." I doubt, though, if it may be said that Fletcher turned politician. But like Wesley, Fletcher, although foreign born, was desirous of showing himself a loyal British subject, and wrote two pamphlets that year of the signing of the Declaration of American Independence, defending the government's course and contention with regard to the American colonies. These publications, which showed both literary skill and an unusual knowledge of English politics, consisted of letters addressed to writers who argued in favor of the

colonists. It is generally felt that this lending of his pen for political discussion was an error of judgment, one of the few mistakes which the good man made. His motives were pure, but even pure motives will not always atone for mistakes. He should have let George III and his ministers fight their own battles. Fletcher was a man of peace, not of war. Nevertheless, the king, to whom one of the pamphlets was shown by the Lord Chancellor, was so well pleased with Fletcher's statement of the case, that he sent a messenger to him to inquire if ecclesiastical preferment would be acceptable to him, or if there was any other way he could serve him. But Fletcher had written from a stem sense of duty and not with the view of advancing his personal interests. "I want nothing but more grace," was his reply.

I have in my library another rare book, which is more like Fletcher than either his "Vindication of John Wesley's Calm Address," or his "Tract on American Patriotism." It is a copy of his "An Essay upon the Peace of 1783," translated from the French by the Rev. J. Gilpin, a presentation copy from the translator, with numerous rewritings of the translation in the translator's handwriting. The dedication is to the "honored Mrs. Mary De la Flechere, of Madeley in Shropshire." This was among the last of the writings of Fletcher, not published until after his death. It seems very fitting that one whose life had been given to the proclamation of the gospel of peace, should have written an apotheosis of peace at the very end of his life, the closing words of which are:

"Messiah reigns! by every Tongue confessed,  
Triumphant Lord of all, for ever blessed!  
Let Heaven's bright Host, in one grand Chorus joined,  
With all the mingling Tribes of Humankind,  
Peace upon Earth, in endless Transports sing,  
And Glory to our Everlasting King."

Unlike Beecher, who once replied to an inquiry as to his health that he had more of it than he knew what to do with, Fletcher for years had great "bodily weakness," and at times his condition was such as to awaken the gravest fears. Never rugged, of a delicate constitution, living ascetically, taking no exercise, toiling unceasingly, he developed pulmonary consumption, and as it seemed improbable that he could live much longer in England, he went to the south of France in 1777, and later to his native place, where he sought medical advice, and was tenderly cared for by loving friends and relatives. It is noteworthy that one of his first acts there, sick and weak as he was, was to write a letter "to the Societies in and about Madeley," addressing the people of that beautiful region as "my dear, very dear brethren." Letter followed letter, all breathing his concern for them and exhorting them to "continue steadfast in faith, patience, and love." Whenever he was away from Madeley, if only for a short time, he dispatched a letter to his flock, and his numerous pastoral letters are among the best of his many letters. For some time after his arrival in Switzerland he lived in the fine old house in which he was born, with its commanding view of Lake Lemman, with Geneva in the distance, and towering over all, some fifty miles away, Mont Blanc, monarch of mountains.

Gradually his strength returned, and he preached occasionally, and then he grew impatient to be in England once more. He reached Madeley in May, 1781, after an absence from his people of four and a half years, during which he had only partially regained his health, but had done some of his most important literary work, such as his poem in French, published in Geneva with the title "La Louange," an extended paraphrase of Psalm 148, and his "The Portrait of Saint Paul, or, The True Model for Christians and Pastors," which was not published, however, until after his death, and now is little read, but which every modern minister might peruse with profit. He took up his parish work with the old zeal, resumed the old crusade against the public houses with greater success, opened Sunday schools in various neighborhoods, preached with increased power -- and decided to marry! He was now fifty-two years of age, and the woman to whom he made the offer of marriage was ten years his junior, having been born in 1739. Mary Bosanquet had been led into the light, like Catherine Livingstone, who married Freeborn Garrettson, one of American Methodism's conspicuous preachers, by a servant. Later coming into possession of "a small fortune," she dedicated it and herself to good works, and for many years was known as one of the elect women of the evangelical movement. Lady Huntingdon knew her and esteemed her highly. John Wesley said that she was the only person in all England worthy of Mr. Fletcher, but then poor Wesley wasn't much of an authority on women, certainly not a judge of wives. They had long admired each other, but when they first became acquainted Fletcher regarded Miss Bosanquet's fortune as an insuperable barrier to their union; and Miss Bosanquet was too much occupied with her philanthropic schemes to think of being married. Their marriage proved a singularly happy one. On January 6, 1782, they spent their first Sunday at Madeley. Seventeen years afterward, Mrs. Fletcher wrote: "The first Sabbath after I came to Madeley my dear husband took me into the kitchen, where his people were assembled to partake of refreshment between the times of worship. He introduced me to them saying, 'I have not married this wife for myself only, but for your sakes also.'" And then the happy throng sang the hymn, that epithalamium of the redeemed soul, beginning

"Blow ye the trumpet, blow,  
The gladly solemn sound!  
Let all the nations know,  
To earth's remotest bound,  
The year of jubilee is come!  
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home."

And thereafter they worked together for the well-being of the Madeley flock until Fletcher's death, August 14, 1785, after which she continued to reside in the vicarage, and there for thirty-one years she kept the anniversary of their wedding-day, and every day of every year was a blessing to the country parish in which her husband had lived and labored.

Never more beautifully was this good man's devotion to his people shown than the last Sunday he spent with them. I am going to let his devoted companion

tell the story of that holy day and scene. "I begged him not to go to the church in the morning; but to let a pious brother, who was with us, preach in the yard; but he told me, it was the will of the Lord that he should go. When I met a little company of our pious women, on Sunday morning, I begged they would pray that he might be strengthened. In reading the prayers, he almost fainted. I got through the crowd, with a friend, and entreated him to come out of the desk, as did some of the others; but in his sweet manner he let us know that we were not to interrupt the order of God. I then retired to my pew. All around were in tears. When he was a little refreshed by the windows being opened and a nosegay thrown into the desk by a friend, he proceeded with the service. Going into the pulpit, he preached with a strength and recollection which surprised us all. In his first prayer he said, 'Lord, thou wilt manifest thy strength in weakness. We confer not with flesh and blood, but put our trust under the shadow of thy wings.' His text was, 'O Lord, thou preservest man and beast. How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.' After sermon, he went up the aisle to the communion table, with these words, 'I am going to throw myself under the wings of the cherubim before the mercy-seat.' The congregation was large, and the service lasted till nearly two o'clock. Sometimes he could scarcely stand, and was often obliged to stop for want of power to speak. The people were deeply affected. Weeping was on every side. Notwithstanding his extreme weakness, he gave out several verses of hymns, and uttered various lively sentences of exhortation. As soon as the service was over, we hurried him away to bed, where he immediately fainted." When he recovered from this swoon he said to Mrs. Fletcher with a smile, "Now, my dear, thou seest I am no worse for doing the Lord's work. He never fails me when I trust him." He lingered on through the week, often expressing himself in words of rapture and triumph. When another Sunday dawned it was seen that the end was not far distant. "From this time," concludes his wife's narrative, "he lay in a kind of sleep. And so remarkably composed -- yea, triumphant -- was his countenance, that the least trace of death was scarce discernible in it. About thirty-five minutes past ten on Sunday night, August 14, his precious soul entered into the joy of his Lord, without one struggle or groan, in the fifty-sixth year of his age. And here I break off my mournful story; but on my bleeding heart the fair picture of his heavenly excellencies will be for ever drawn." Life's short day was over, and John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley, had been faithful to its end.

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THE END