

# CHURCH MILITANT PASTOR

By FREDERICK E. NORTON.

In the cemetery in the town of Branford, Connecticut, one may still find a monument bearing this inscription: "Beneath this monument are deposited the remains of the Reverend Philemon Robbins, A.M., Pastor of the First Church of Christ in Branford, and his pious Consort, Mrs. Hannah Robbins. They fell asleep in Christ after a life of eminent usefulness in their stations. The former on August 13, 1781, in the 72nd year of his life and the 49th of his Ministry. The latter on June 17, 1776, in the 63rd year of her age."

Philemon Robbins, whose useful career is thus commemorated, was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and educated at Harvard college. Late in 1732 he visited Yale college and while there he received an invitation to preach the following Sunday for the church at Branford. The pious people of Branford were so well pleased with the young candidate that they gave him a call, offering him a salary of one hundred and thirty pounds. This call was accepted, Mr. Robbins writing that he had thought deliberately and impartially thereon, and the date of ordination fixed for February seventh, 1733.

The people soon became much attached to their young shepherd, who in 1736 married Hannah Foote, daughter of one of the first families of the town.

A year or two of quiet life and then came that spiritual whirlwind, the "Great Awakening." This enveloped the Reverend Philemon Robbins and for nearly ten years he saw much strife. His moral fiber was tried to the uttermost, the daily bread due himself and his family came near being taken from him, and the manner of it was in this wise:

The great revival was a strange thing to the New England clergy, something hard to be understood. Living too early to dispose of the matter by calling it a mental disorder, they were, after the custom of their time, suspicious that the awakening might in some way be invested by Satan to his advantage. Most of all did they object to the traveling preacher who went abroad reaping where he had not sown, and in Mr. Davenport's case, at least, more blessed in lungs than brains. To counteract this evil the General Assembly in 1742 passed an act providing that any regularly ordained minister who preached in the parish of any clergyman without the latter's consent should forfeit the legal right to collect his salary, while the unlicensed and unordained man who should venture to teach, preach or exhort was liable to be summarily sent out of the colony as a vagrant. This drastic measure originated directly or indirectly with the clergy of New Haven county, and had been approved by a council in Guilford in 1741.

Brother Whittlesey, of Wallingford, did not approve of the new movement, and when a little band of Baptists in his parish desired that he should preach a sermon to them, he met them with a curt refusal. After some consultation the little band sent the following quaint letter to Mr. Robbins at Branford:

"Sir: After suitable respects to yourself, this note is to inform you that Mr. Bellamy has been with us at Wallingford and preached in our Baptist society to our very good satisfaction and success, on several persons both of our own people and also those of your denomination, with whom we desire to join heartily in the internals of religion,

though we can't in form; so that it seems to be the desire of both denominations here, that yourself would oblige us with a sermon or two as soon as you can after next week. And please send me when. This is also my desire for the good of souls and the glory of God.

"Sir: Yours in good affection,  
JOHN MERRIMAN, ELDER.

"Wallingford, Dec. 23, 1741."

After Mr. Robbins had given the matter due consideration, he accepted the invitation and agreed to preach in Wallingford on January sixth, 1742. On January fifth he was given two letters requesting him not to preach to the Baptists; one signed by two or more members of the Congregational church at Wallingford, and the other by the Rev. Messrs. Styles and Hemingway. He evidently saw no reason why he should change his decision, and accordingly preached twice to the Baptists, meeting large congregations. This was enough and more than enough for the Congregational brethren, and on February ninth a formal complaint was presented to the Consociation at New Haven, charging Mr. Robbins with preaching in a disorderly manner in the First Society of Wallingford, without the consent of the Rev. Mr. Whittlesey, and contrary to the act of the Guilford Council contrary to the act of the Consociation and contrary to the desire of two neighboring ministers and to a great number of church members of Wallingford.

This theological fire alarm, signed by Theophilus Yale, was answered by Mr. Robbins, who pleaded that he knew nothing of the resolutions of the Guilford Council; that they had not been adopted by the Consociation; that he has not entered into Mr. Whittlesey's parish, but had preached to a congregation already recognized as a separate body by the government of Connecticut; and lastly, that he "knew of no rule in the word of God or the Saybrook platform" which obliged him to comply with their desires in his preaching; nor could he see any reason in such desire.

The Consociation was not of Mr. Robbins' mind in the matter, and resolved that his conduct had been disorderly and that "he should not sit as a member of this Council for his disorderly preaching."

After his reading of this resolution, the Rev. Philemon returned to Branford, supposing the matter at an end; but in May, 1743, further complaints were brought against him to the association, signed by six disaffected brethren of the Congregational church in Branford. The charges were unimportant in character, and were never directly communicated to Mr. Robbins, though the association appointed a committee to go to Branford and investigate the matter. Upon learning of this action, Mr. Robbins met his complaining townsmen, Messrs. Hoadley, Plan, Frisby, Rogers and Baldwin, with the result that they informed the association that their grievance had been remedied and that they were in good agreement and union. Hoadley, *et al*, found it one thing to enter a complaint and another to withdraw it, as the committee of clergymen met and drew up articles of advice to Mr. Robbins. The latter then endeavored to attend the next meeting of the association at North Haven, only to find himself confronted with a document in which he was asked to acknowledge that his preaching at

Wallingford was a disorderly act, and to promise to give no further cause of offense.

To this he would not subscribe and offered one of his own which was rejected in its turn, ending the matter for that year. In 1744 he came before the Consociation with three distinct acknowledgments, but in these he failed to admit that he had committed any fault in ministering to the Baptists. His overtures were once more rejected and in 1745 another complaint was given the Consociation from the disaffected minority in the Branford church, with the result that one more council was held in that long-suffering town, which came to nothing as usual. In September of that year Mr. Robbins went to Waterbury and presented one more confession, in which he stated that "he could not after more than three years' study, meditation, and prayer for light in the matter, be convinced that my so preaching was contrary to the holy scriptures or the mind of God." He was perfectly willing to admit that his action was against the wishes of Mr. Whittlesey and the desire and advice of two ministers and a considerable number of church members in Wallingford, closing his confession with an appeal for forgiveness not so much for his own sake as for the flock in Branford. This was not at all to the Consociation's mind, and the confession was never given a second reading.

The result of this action had its effect on the flock at Branford and they resolved among other things on October twenty-first, 1745, "That what our pastor has offered in relation to his preaching to the Baptists at Wallingford is sufficient. That this society desire the Rev. Mr. Robbins to continue in the ministry among us," and "that a particular people have a right to choose their own minister and that no authority has a right to censure, suspend or depose a minister regularly ordained without the vote or consent of his people." This action was distasteful to the minority and they made more appeals to the Consociation and, in 1746, that body once more summoned Mr. Robbins to appear before a council. Had that gentleman imagined that he had committed the crime of the century he would have been excusable, for he now stood accused under no less than twenty different charges, of which he was once more found guilty in an *ex parte* hearing and deposed.

This action, like the Lord Cardinal's curse in Barham's poem, "Gave rise to no little surprise, as nobody seemed one penny the worse."

Mr. Robbins officiated the following Sunday as usual, preaching from the text "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel," and once more the society upheld him, advancing his salary.

The novelist and historian alike have done honor to the pastor for his stand in behalf of Christian brotherhood; it is time a word was said for the men and women of his congregation who made his action possible. That a pastor might be found who was in advance of his age, was not so remarkable as that a congregation was found willing to suffer many things in sustaining him. The action of the Consociation meant a great deal to them, and that they clung to Philemon Robbins through good report and evil report should be enough to entitle them to respect and praise. There remained

for Mr. Robbins' opponents the appeal unto Caesar. This was taken in May, 1748, asking the General Assembly to come to the relief of the Branford minority. A legislative committee was appointed to investigate the matter, with the result that another council was advised. This never met and now, six years after the delivery of the Wallingford sermons, peace was in sight. Mr. Robbins faithfully attended to his work in Branford, and in 1755 the Consociation so far receded from its former attitude as to invite him to be present at the ordination of a minister at East Haven. This invitation was accepted and from henceforth he regularly attended the meetings of his brethren.

The fierce heat of the seven years' controversy had welded together pastor and people, the last sermon delivered by Mr. Robbins being to his flock in Branford on August twelfth, 1781. After dinner the next day he sat at his open door smoking his pipe; his wife going to him a little later found him dead. It was said of Mr. Robbins not many years ago by one of his successors, who has since joined him, that the controversy injured his circumstances, as it deprived him of a part of his income and subjected him to great expense and anxiety. The anxiety and expense were undoubtedly real, yet he was fairly well provided with this world's goods.

It was the writer's good fortune to discover not long ago the will and distribution of the estate of Mr. Robbins, from which document one may find proof that he was at least as well-to-do as most people of his day. The will, a holographic document over date of May fifth, 1778, divides the property between two sons, Chandler and Ammi Ruhamah Robbins, and four daughters, Hannah, Sarah, Rebecca and Irene, each being married. To his daughter Sarah he leaves his "silver tankard," to his daughter Hannah his "silver cup," and "to my daughter Rebecca H. Gould my silver pepper box, in testimony of my love to them and agreeable to yr late Mother's Desire." According to the division, Mr. Robbins' household goods were valued at fifty-six pounds, while there is also a comfortable mention of notes and bills due the estate. He owned "a wharf, a portion of meadow below Peter's bridge," and three separate portions of real estate near the center of the town of Branford. Two sons had been educated at Yale and a third died there an undergraduate, and his first wife having died he had married a second. His sons were both clergymen, Ammi settling in Norfolk, Connecticut, where his descendants now do honor to their ancestry and keep green the grave of their forefather Philemon, whose bones lie, as is meet, in the town where he suffered and triumphed and where he was indeed a light of the world in his day and generation.

Westport, Connecticut, is having its annual art exhibition, to which a goodly number of New York artists have contributed. The show is for the benefit of the Westport library, and is held within the walls of that institution. Among the men who have contributed to the exhibition are Karl Anderson, Robert L. Dodge, E. M. Ash, Hugo Ballin, Henry Raleigh, Ossip Linde, Arthur Dow, J. Mortimer Lichtenauer and Silas Dustin.