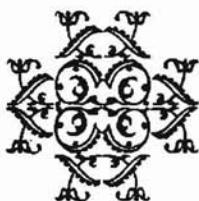


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## ACHSA W. SPRAGUE (1827-1862)

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*With this sketch of Miss Sprague's life by Mr. Twynham, we complete the review of a Vermont personality which should not be forgotten and which deserves further study. Selections from Miss Sprague's diary and journal were printed in our September, 1941, issue. In that issue in our editorial note we stated that Miss Sprague was "probably born in 1828." Our information came from a standard reference work, but the date is evidently incorrect. Professor Fred K. Jackson of Burlington, Vermont, tells us that Miss Sprague was born November 17, 1827, according to Miss Sprague's diary, and Mr. Twynham agrees that the correction should stand. Editor.*

SEVERAL old Vermonters in Plymouth, Bridgewater, and Ludlow have told me how, long before the Coolidge excitement, the remote community at Plymouth was a center of activity. That was the time when Achsa Sprague was a popular spiritualistic medium. She first aroused curiosity by her unusual devotion to dogs and by telling everyone that all the neighborhood pets would go to heaven. She created a local sensation at the time of her father's death by compelling all the school children to file over to the funeral, at which she stood up and said, "These are the remains—this is only a shell—he is with God." Old folks in that neighborhood still recall how the only famous woman in town, so beautiful in her youth, gradually became ugly, because an abscess behind her left eye pushed it outward. They stressed to me the fact that she was not a superstitious sort of person, because after one of her demonstrations, when several individuals were frightened at strange lights along the village streets, she insisted that they were fooled by the tricks that the moon was playing through the tree tops. Such were casual recollections of Achsa Sprague by villagers with whom I talked.

She was born on a farm at Plymouth Notch, Vermont, Nov. 17, 1827. In the cemetery, a few steps from the Coolidge plot, is a tablet inscribed with two favorite phrases of this eminent spiritualist,—"Went Home" and "I Still Live." Her father, Charles, died in

1858, and her mother, Betsey, in 1869. Plymouth was put on the map by tourists before motor pilgrimages to the Coolidge home started. Miss Sprague was the first citizen of the town to enjoy widespread fame. People travelled from far to pay respects to her, to ask for her prayers and revelations as a medium, and later, to visit the places associated with her life, and to leave flowers at her grave. Crowds attended the gatherings of spiritualists held as a result of her influence. Achsa's first appearance in public as a speaker was in the Union Church at South Reading. Old persons in the region still recall her earliest religious speech; and even now in memory of her influence the church there is turned over once a year for an assembly of spiritualists. Her education up to this point had been very limited, except under the tutelage of her parents. She attended the village school. She read and reread *Jane Eyre*, *Windsor Castle*, and *Lalla Rookh*. She lived for a time in a house below the cemetery on the road toward The Notch, and also in the home across from the present schoolhouse, only fifty yards from the Coolidge homestead.

Her father was the educated man of the township. Her cousin was William Sprague, Governor of Rhode Island. She was herself precocious. As a local prodigy, she started teaching the rural school at twelve.

The malady which cut short her promising career, a scrofulous disease of the joints, overtook her when she was about twenty years of age. The ailment, which plainly would be known nowadays as arthritis, caused her intense misery for seven continuous years, during which time she was sullen and resentful, and railed against the justice of God. An old resident of Plymouth thought she was merely ill-tempered and spoiled, and claimed that she should have been spanked. The family doctor finally considered her a love-sick problem child and pulled her forcibly out of bed. It was reported that after that treatment she was entirely normal in her mental outlook for several years. In a partially crippled condition she continued her duties for over a year, apparently rid of her abnormal states of mind, but a degree of physical invalidism persisted for about six years. It should be noted in connection with her recurrent symptoms that her tendency to ill health had a family history—in fact, she had two sisters and one brother who were morons and simpletons.

By 1854 she was apparently normal through the agency of "angelic powers," and began her practice as a trance medium and lecturer. She addressed large audiences from Canada to Maryland,

from Maine to Missouri. Traditions and pictures represent her as a distinguished personality of rare charm. Provoked to public debate by a minister's condemnation of Spiritualism, she discovered her latent ability, and soon began extensive trips, which took her repeatedly through the New England States, and southward and westward through Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, and Missouri. Severities of winter were detrimental to her health.

Though equipped with only an elementary education, her private papers reveal that she studied the works of Browning, Emerson, the Brontë sisters, Milton, Blackmore, and others. Among lesser writers, she was especially influenced by the poetry of Nathaniel P. Willis, Felicia Hemans, and Lydia Sigourney. On her journeys she came in touch with Samuel Sartain, Wendell Phillips, Rowland Robinson, and Henry W. Longfellow. She was a female pioneer of spiritual and social truth. In numerous cities she visited prisons and urged reforms. She felt that criminals are not depraved, but are "the victims of a bad social scheme." She laid the primary blame for crime on the use of liquor, yet she felt that remedial measures would improve prisoners. She advocated humane treatment of inmates, and in this theory she antedated Dorothea Dix, who as a girl in the printing shop in Barnard, Vermont, somehow learned these advanced ideas. She opposed slavery. When women were coming into prominence as educators, lawyers, and doctors, she was known as "The Preaching Woman." When she officiated at funerals the public was startled. She wrote and talked to condemn what she said was the contemporary idea—"woman must be either a slave or a butterfly." She was the promoter of large regional conventions of religion. She abandoned the *materia medica* of the day and experimented with magnetizing processes, with galvanic bands, with sensational seances, and seems to have come finally to a sane faith in mental healing, the basic doctrine of Mrs. Eddy, Dr. Worcester, and Professor Murray. This truth—with no strange physical manifestations—came to her as "the voice of God," and raised her almost instantly from her sick bed. "Speaking with tongues" meant much to her and many of her compositions were "automatic writings." She was able to paint when blindfolded. In a kind of trance she paced the room, in her days of health, and dictated to a secretary. When on her back she wrote voluminously,—one composition of 4600 lines in 72 hours. She always thought herself under the control of divine and mystic energies.

Most of the poetry of Miss Sprague was written during her pe-

riods of illness, and especially during the last few years of her life. The diaries give the dates of composition. Many of her verses are spontaneous expressions of spiritual anguish and despair and were not revised with careful craftsmanship. In standard lyrical form the heroic soul, thwarted by the miseries to which her flesh was heir, clamoured for opportunity, and rebelled against providence and destiny. In numerous verses there is an exultant affirmation of faith and hope; in many also an appeal for economic justice and social equality.

Her long "I Still Live, a Poem for the Times," is a cry for freedom, a treatment of the contemporary scene, dedicated to hearts "offering their lives at the shrine of liberty." It is a moving didactic piece in pentameter couplets. It extols the names of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Webster; it refers to civil war, to "a house divided against itself," to the Union; it is an intense exhortation in behalf of emancipation in America, a vigorous denunciation of slavery and oppression.

Her versatility in subject matter and technique is shown in her collected poems, "The Poet and Other Poems." The chief themes are nature, patriotism, and religion. Among the outstanding compositions, certain of a permanent place in our poetic literature, are "The Soldier's Shroud," "The American Eagle," "Wendell Phillips," "Mountains," "Emancipation in the District of Columbia," "The Stoic Soul's Defiance," and "Shame on the Coward Souls." Among her unpublished manuscripts is much superior work.

Her accomplishments in literature are notable, but not so significant as her lectures or her personality. It was left to others to publish her primary works. Magazines printed articles by her during her life time. The published books and articles include only a fraction of her writings. I have a vast quantity of manuscript material, verses and essays, which await publication. The diary and journal are primary sources of information. Among her unpublished manuscripts is an autobiographical poem of 162 pages, which she composed in six days, when in such a nervous state that the spinning wheel, latches, and roosters were all muffled for her peace of mind; and also a poetic play of 75 pages dealing with the Biblical story from Eden to Calvary. In her thirty-fourth year the pen dropped forever from her hand. Her death came on July 6, 1862. The close friend, who was with her during her final hours, and who spoke the last words,

"The great change has come," was Mrs. M. S. Newton of Bridgewater, also a medium. She gave the sermon at the burial rites.

Miss Sprague's fame as a reformer, feminist, and lecturer was spreading rapidly at the time of her death. Spiritualism suffered a lull when the clouds of war enshadowed the land and forced people to more practical issues. As a writer Achsa Sprague must be put in the same class with Mrs. Lydia Sigourney; as a leader among women she must be ranked with the Willards, with Dorothea Dix and Susan B. Anthony.

The local record from the lips of the village sages like Norris Wilder, Allen Brown, and Addie Sprague, indicates that a faithful suitor, whom she rejected because of her own personal convictions of futility and frustration, a man never identified by the Vermont natives, came once every year to her grave, knelt in prayer for a lengthy period, and left behind a bright tribute of flowers. There he read on the headstone, "I Still Live," and found it hard to believe.

Shortly before her death she had written in Plymouth lines of verse quite meaningful to all Vermonters, an appeal to Salt Ash Mountain, which symbolized to her enduring strength.

*Teach me, sublime old mount,  
To stand like thee, defying clouds and storms,  
And wrap the snow-white mantle of a calm  
And holy resignation round my soul,  
When sorrow's dreary winter-time shall come!  
And when 'tis past, like thee reclathe myself  
To be re clothed in Higher Worlds, in robes  
That young immortals wear, to lose their light  
No more forever.*

#### PRESS NOTICES—FAVORABLE AND UNFAVORABLE

*It is not surprising that audiences reacted differently to Miss Sprague's lectures and to her own personality and appearance. She herself, coming from a small Vermont mountain community, presents a number of challenges to our own understanding. Her experience with healing through her "Guardian Angels," her espousal of mental healing, and her wide influence in her day cannot be resolved easily into a formula. One phase of the answer is in these clippings. Editor.*

"This excellent woman and gifted medium delighted a large and respectable audience in Concert Hall on Sunday afternoon and evening, with religious and philosophical teachings of the highest order, poured forth in a perfect

torrent of eloquent speech. The opposition of the Christian Church to Spiritualism, to say the least, is very inconsistent, in view of the important fact that all Spiritualistic teachers preach the morality which Jesus taught, and profess to demonstrate as a positive fact, what hitherto has been received on faith as a dogma of the church—the conscious life of the individual human soul in the great hereafter.”—*L. G. B., Burlington, Vt., June 14th.*

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Miss Sprague’s labors, in this city, closed for the present on Sunday evening last. The interest in the discourses given through her instrumentality was unabated to the end.

The style of Miss Sprague’s discourse is usually argumentative, but simple, and adapted to the ready comprehension of the ordinary mind. Nothing can be more evident to the hearer than that the design of the intelligence addressing him is to reach and arouse to action the nobler and higher impulses of the soul, and thus to secure his practical spiritual good. No one, after listening to a discourse, can doubt either the earnestness or the purity and benevolent intention of the speaker.

Personally, Miss S. is extremely modest and retiring, possessed of those attractive and amiable qualities of head and heart which at once secure the confidence, respect, and affection of all who come in contact with her. The idea of deception or pretense on her part could be tolerated by no one who enjoys her acquaintance.—*A Boston paper.*

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Large audiences greet, on every occasion, the eloquent and powerful discourses of Miss Sprague who, in “thoughts that breathe and words that burn,” teaches the truths of Spiritualism. It is surprising how a lady, with less than the educational advantages of the clergyman or the lawyer, can pour forth, for an hour and a half or more, such beautiful sentences with such eloquent and impressive elocution, as no clergyman or lawyer, of our acquaintance, can equal. Miss Sprague’s exordial singing, last night, was melodious, appropriate and beautiful.

She lectures again to-night, and those who would enjoy what is great in sentiment, and enchanting in language and mode of speech, should attend.—*Terre Haute Daily Evening Journal, Indiana, Jan. 25th.*

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Spiritual—Miss Sprague, a young lady of Vermont, delivered a lecture on Spiritualism last evening in Republican Hall, which was packed to suffocation with hearers. She spoke under mesmeric influence, and her lecture was a curiosity throughout. The spirit—for it *was* a spirit, they say, that spoke for an hour and a quarter—dealt with two difficult topics,—the interior and exterior conditions of our being. Spiritualism was defined to be the sublimated essence of all good—the cream, the ultimatum, the essence boiled down, skimmed and refined still more; then you had the real, simon pure, the bona fide thing itself. And the people were edified. Death was only a change, a removal, a transition to a different state, at whose approach we should have no

fears. The spirit held forth eloquently—and woke up in due time, when it was announced by brother Somebody that she would speak in Howard Hall next Sunday afternoon and evening, and *all people must buy their tickets at the office*—so that spirits, as well as the poor worms of earth, like to handle a little hard cash.—*Providence, R. I.*

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Spiritualism—Mechanics' Hall was crowded last Tuesday evening by an intelligent and discriminating audience, who listened with the closest attention to the lecture, which purported to be delivered by spirits, through Miss A. W. Sprague. The sentiments advanced were certainly not unworthy the source from which they claim to emanate, enjoying as they did the highest kind of morality. In the evening, we noticed clergymen and church members listening with as much apparent interest to the eloquent speaker, as the most devout spiritualist.

It was announced . . . also that a lecture would be given sometime during next week, the proceeds of which would be given to the Provident Association.

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Miss Sprague, the celebrated trance speaking Medium, spoke in the Universalist Meeting-House . . . to overflowing houses. The evening discourse was a most eloquent, philosophical, interesting and unexceptionable effort.

Her text or proposition, was, "Who shall be able to stand?" She said truth should be the only object of investigation. He that was not true to his own convictions formed after all the light he could receive was a traitor to himself and his God. He was cowardly and base. Spiritualism, as properly understood, demanded to be heard; it challenged to combat and was not to be put down by any ridicule or airs of indifference. But we do not attempt to follow her. We only give her leading proposition.

She commenced with a beautiful song and concluded with a long poem possessing much poetical merit and eloquence. It was eloquently delivered. We learn that they were both impromptu and original, spoken in a trance state. . . . She certainly possesses wonderful powers as a speaker and their source deserves investigation.

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. . . Why it is that all the world should run nightly mad to hear her (Achs W. Sprague) improvise a "hymn" from a subject selected at random, a hymn that nobody else ever wrote or sung, for the very good reason that it was not worth the while, or why everybody should crowd to hear a woman who is chiefly afflicted with a flow of words, discuss the weightiest questions of social science, religion and metaphysics, is more than I am able to tell . . . whether our intelligent citizens consider a loose, extempore effusion more likely to be thoughtful and truthful than a well considered, carefully prepared lecture or essay, or whether they believe a pretended "trance" to be a genuine indication of inspiration, is difficult to tell. May be they are pleased to see a woman on the platform.

But whatever the motive was, the public were certainly out *en masse*, and

judging from the liberal encomiums that went round, and the delighted smile of intelligent comprehension that went from seat to seat as by chance the speaker ventured to express, instead of merely talking about, "the idea," they all went home delighted.

As a woman, Miss Sprague is a pleasant, genial, kind-hearted and intelligent person, of little scholastic education but a good deal of reading. As a speaker, she has a good voice which she will soon spoil, a slightly swaggering gesture, a fair flow of ideas connected with her special themes, a tremendous flow of words, and a tolerable acquaintanceship with the cant phrases of spiritualistic literature.

As a reasoner, she, like all other verbose orators, is muddy . . . she does not believe there is rightfully any such thing as punishment. . . . She thinks freedom is a myth. Man is born under, and lives under, inexorable natural laws. He is forever hampered by his surroundings, the sport of circumstances. So he has no merit in doing well, no demerit in doing ill. . . . Criminals instead of being confined in gloomy dungeons . . . should be surrounded with all the heart could wish. . . . It is a comfortable theory and needs only to be named to catch the general attention of legislators. . . . It is not every itinerant lecturer, whether speaking in a "trance" or in the "natural man," who will make the world wiser.—Letter to the Editor of the *Oswego Times*, Dec. 14, 1858.

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We listened . . . to a declamation by Miss Sprague at Good Templars Hall. There was a very large attendance, and the extra seats were all occupied. . . . She is not by any means a prepossessing young lady. Her "human face divine" promised us no superior intellectual treat. We thought she was haggard, as though the "trance state" in which she spent part of her existence, was not congenial with the corporal system; and we were disappointed at the outset, for we knew that the magic of a woman's tongue is scarcely effective with a mixed audience, unless there is the important adjunct of personal beauty. Miss Sprague seated herself upon the platform and commenced what Tom Hood has called—

*The washing of hands with invisible soap  
In imperceptible water.*

After wringing her palms, and passing them slowly over her face for a few moments, she rose with her eyes closed, and commenced her lecture. It was spoken in a clear, distinct, but not by any means pleasant voice. Her articulation was perfect, and not a word was uttered but might be understood in any part of the room. But the subject was the same pointless collection of beautiful abstractions which it has ever been our misfortune to listen to when Trance Speaking was announced. . . . To the honest listener, who went with the desire of learning something, it was profound twaddle from beginning to end. . . . The clever arrangement of words descriptive of beautiful things—the speaker's acquired knowledge, or clairvoyant perception of musical beauty, and the fervid flow of stolen poetry, produced a pleasing

sensation for the time being—much after the manner of one of our own rivulets.—*Milwaukee, Wis.*

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