

Henry Robinson King's review of Louis Napoleon Parker's autobiography, *Several of My Lives* (London, 1928), printed in *The Shirburnian*, November 1928.

This priceless book by a man beloved equally in School and Town has been given to me to review. The author has dealt with four of his lives – his early life, Musical life, Theatrical life and Pageant life. The book has been very favourably reviewed already in *The Times Literary Supplement* and the *Morning Post*, and probably in other newspapers. But I am limited to a certain space and, writing as I do for *The Shirburnian*, I propose to deal with lives Two and Four only. Let the readers of this short review get hold of the whole book and I promise them they will be amply repaid.

I humbly say to my old friend “among thy mightier offerings here are mine” and I applaud that reviewer who said “This is a brave and jolly book.” Quite so. The book is an honour to human nature.

For the author, dealing with hard times, disappointments, his very livelihood as a family man endangered by the horrid Sherborne schism which lasted from 1888-1892 never allowed his humour, his courage, his genius for friendship, his fairness to both the contending parties to fail. When the School Lists in 1891 contained but 120 names, Mr Parker finding his pupils growing scanty left us and went to London. After a brave struggle with fortune he won great success as a very clever and original playwright. Then in 1905, being already known, he began his fourth or Pageant life by becoming Inventor, Master, Inspirer, what you will, of the Sherborne Pageant. This new move made the name of Parker a household word all over the country. The real suggester of the Sherborne Pageant was Mr Field [Arthur Field (1872-1960)], who wrote to Mr Parker an epoch-making letter on Sherborne antiquity in 1904.



Louis Napoleon Parker (1852-1944)

Anyhow the present reviewer will just say something of Mr Parker's 19 years as Musical Director of the School, and afterwards as Pageant Master in 1905, leaving his other great successes as Pageant Master at Warwick, Bury St. Edmunds, Dover, Colchester and York; and his innumerable successes as a Playwright, altogether alone. In the book under review the reader will of course find the history of the Four Lives given fully and delightfully.

With the year 1873 begin Mr Parker's earliest dealings with Sherborne. They begin a little unhappily, for his printer thinks *Fons Limpidus* is Latin for Sherborne and his own first sentence is “I have never heard of Sherborne.” Oh, *Fons Limpidus*! Did you deserve such obscurity? But except for some small disciplinary difficulties and his threatened deafness he began his useful and happy life here well. For him after one false start the course of true love did run smoothly and he carried on in music James Sterndale Bennett's aims and methods and bettered his instruction.

Mr Parker's first love affair must be read in his book. Any other hand would ruin the story. His second attempt was successful, and Mrs Georgiana Parker [Georgiana Bessie Calder (1853-1919)] lived happily with her husband 42 years, loved by all who knew her. Listen to Mr Parker's attack on all you young bachelors whose days of entanglement is yet to come: “This time (says he) I was taking no risk. Successively I carried the mother by storm, the father by diplomacy, the maiden aunt by an appeal to her emotions, and the great-aunt by base flattery.”

But in 1877 Dr H.D. Harper left Sherborne. The present writer can say of him *Vidi tantum*. He was a noble Berserker of a man and was succeeded by an ultra-refined Etonian scholar, Mr E.M. Young, who fitted in not too well with Sherborne traditions. Now Dr Harper was beloved as Headmaster, but he was a difficult

man to follow. Into these “old unhappy far-off things, and battles long ago” the present reviewer does not propose to enter, although he is the sole survivor of the whole turmoil, which nearly wrecked the School. Mr Parker deals most admirably with those disastrous years 1888-1892. Eventually Canon Young bowed to fate and resigned. He had fought hard; he had given thousands to the School, but these things could not help him. Meanwhile Mr Parker’s pupil list was ever dwindling, but he, an anxious paterfamilias, never seemed to us worried or wretched. He still did splendid work with the Musical Society and in 1889 we had a grand performance of Sullivan’s “Golden Legend” – the culminating point of Mr Parker’s Sherborne career as Choirmaster.

So then in 1892 Mr Parker left Sherborne to try his fortune in London, and was not seen again here till 1905, the year of the ever memorable Pageant. The great successes which he achieved cannot be recorded here. They made his name famous as a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy, but they did not spoil his simplicity. This remained even when Sir Philip Burne-Jones painted his portrait, which was hung in the Academy and afterwards presented by the painter to Mr Parker, not a little to his astonishment. He gives us in one place his diary to read; it is wholly unlike that of Pepys and other famous diarists; you are to picture a distinguished company cycling on a bad road towards Southampton. Thus Mr Parker’s diary records what happened:

Monday, April 11th –
Left Lyndhurst
Bicycled to Southampton
Tree fell off
Mrs Tree fell off
Nearly killed a dog
I fell off
Viola fell off
Evelyn Beerbohm fell off
Nearly killed a boy
Gave him a shilling
Train crowded
My bag lost.

How eloquent is this record!

Mr Field’s letter of June 1904, previously named, was to remind Mr Parker that the following year, 1905, would be the twelfth centenary of the founding of Sherborne Abbey, School and Town by St Ealdhelm, and this reminder caused him to answer (so he says) “hot-foot.” The then Headmaster [Canon F.B. Westcott] promised the aid of the School and acted himself as St. Ealdhelm. All objections were waved aside: all prejudices forgotten. A sturdy Nonconformist appeared in the gorgeous vestments of an Abbot, and eventually there were 900 players, seven crowded performances and an enthusiasm which was indescribable.

So the era of Pageants came in. All Mr Parker’s pageants, six in number, were immensely successful, financially and otherwise, except Dover, and to commemorate the part played by our town and school the Pageant Master appeared once more in 1925, made a capital speech and unveiled in the Pageant Gardens a memorial Slab to the “Mother of all Pageants” for the enlightenment of our children’s children.