

KEENER, BISHOP JOHN CHRISTIAN

My God

By Lois Matilda Buck

Thou art a God of joy:
God of the dawn on the sea,
When the white waves run to the light,
Call to the day that will be.

Thou art a God of strength:
God of the strong, silent peaks,
As they stand uplifted in white,
Hushed by Thy voice as it speaks.

Thou art a God of love:
God of the unfound flower,

That unfolding into Thy hand
Blooms as in garden bower.

Thou art a God of peace:
God of the hush on the night,
When the land lies still at Thy feet,
Trusting to Thee without sight.

Thou art a God of life
God of my own beating heart,
As it surges in yearning to Thee
Kneeling in worship apart.

—[Methodist Episcopal Mission, Meerut, India, Dec. 28, 1905.]

Bishop John Christian Keener

By Bishop E. E. Hoss

The death of this eminent minister of the gospel, which took place on the 19th inst., after a short illness at his residence in New Orleans, was not a great surprise, for he was known to be almost eighty-seven years old, having been born in the city of Baltimore February 7, 1819. Nevertheless it will be an occasion of genuine and widespread sorrow in his own church, and of no little interest in other denominations. During the past fifty years no statelier figure has appeared in Methodist circles. From every point of view he was an uncommon man, towering far above the ranks of ordinary mortals, and commanding attention by the sheer strength and vigor of his personality. My own conviction is, moreover, that, great as he seemed in the eyes of his contemporaries, he will loom larger and larger still in the eyes of his successors. History has a way of correcting current judgments, sometimes by reversing them altogether, but more frequently by toning them down or touching them up so as to bring them closer to the truth. Only those who are intrinsically worthy can stand the test of posthumous criticism. If John C. Keener does not belong in this class, then all the signs are at fault. He was the first native of Baltimore, that cradle of American Methodism, to come into the succession of Asbury and McKendree and Soule, the second being Alpheus W. Wilson, who likewise has his membership in the Southern branch of the Church, and now succeeds to the post of seniority in the College of Bishops. A good heredity is a good beginning, and Bishop Keener had that advantage. His father, Mr. Christian Keener, was a leading layman, and enjoyed the close friendship of many of the chief ministers of the Church. At the division in 1844, he naturally followed the Baltimore Conference and adhered North. He took a deep interest in all ecclesiastical movements and enterprises. It was primarily due to him, for example, that Wm. Taylor was sent as a missionary to California. His wife was also a most godly and useful woman. The couple were wholly worthy of such a son as God gave them.

When Wilbur Fisk was a young man

he spent a year or two teaching in a private family in Maryland. On his return North to become principal of Wilbraham Academy, he took young Keener, then a lad of ten or eleven years, back with him. The story of the journey, as the Bishop once related it to me, was very interesting. In Philadelphia he got lost and wandered about for some time, an overgrown boy with yellow hair and a freckled face, before finding his friends. At Wilbraham he remained three years, and then passed on to the Wesleyan University, Middletown, Conn., of which Dr. Fisk had, in the meantime, become President. Through this early period of his life he was more or less given to fads. Among other things, he became, under the influence of the old gentleman with whom he boarded, an enthusiastic vegetarian, and during one winter, to quote his own language, ate potatoes enough to bury himself under. The traditions are that he was not a particularly diligent student. Though utterly free from gross vices of any sort, he was full of fun and frolic. His old friend and college mate, Dr. E. E. Wiley, once said to me: "If any mischief went on in college, it was generally understood that Jack Keener had a hand in it." The late Dr. Frederick Merrick, whom Arthur Edwards credited with having been eighteen years old at birth, also gave me similar information, and expressed surprise that a man so lacking in seriousness should have been chosen to the Episcopacy. Seriousness has different ways of showing itself.

In a long conversation eight or ten years ago, I asked Bishop Keener the direct question: "Did they have a full curriculum at Middletown in your day?" "No," he replied, "they didn't teach much, and I didn't learn what they did teach." "What, then, were you doing all the time you were there?" "O, well, I was doing various things. Incidentally I learned to skate and to eat codfish, but chiefly I was engaged in studying New England character." In spite of such half-jocular remarks, it is certain that he got much good out of his college life. His new surroundings were provocative of thought. Among his fellow students were many who subse-

quently became famous; such as Daniel Curry, Joseph B. Cummings, Erastus Wentworth and Charles Collins. Association with such young men could not fail to be a stimulating force. But nothing counted for so much in his development as the presence and influence of Dr. Fisk, who by all accounts must have been a most charming character. None of his biographers has been able to set him fairly before the public. All alike, and in spite of their evident admiration for him, they leave the impression that he was rather thin and commonplace. But the boys who sat at his feet never ceased to sound his praises. Bishop Keener joined in the chorus most heartily. To the end of his life he could think of no words that were too eulogistic to be applied to his old teacher.

After his graduation Bishop Keener returned to Baltimore, and went into business as a wholesale druggist. Before many years, however, he abandoned this venture and removed to Alabama, being largely influenced to take this step by the fact that the young lady to whom he was engaged had gone thither before him. Soon after reaching that state he entered the itinerant ministry on trial—about 1842. From the first he was successful in his new vocation. His preaching was characterized by evangelistic fervor. Wherever he went as pastor great revivals of religion followed. Nor did he ever lose the gift of urgent appeal. Long after he had passed his three score and ten he was still perfectly at home in the midst of a religious upheaval. On the strength of the record which he made in Alabama, he was transferred to Louisiana and stationed in New Orleans, which has always been one of the hardest fields in the United States for Protestant churches. Up to that time Methodism had managed to maintain there only struggling and doubtful existence. To him more than to any other one man is due whatever successes it has achieved in later years. He possessed staying qualities. Nothing frightened him. The greater the obstacle that confronted him the more resolute his courage became. He had also the faculty of drawing around him men of the highest intelligence, and of interesting them in his work. His friendships were all a credit to him.

First and last he filled nearly all the offices in the church, was pastor of both white and colored congregations, presiding elder on large districts, agent for Centenary College, missionary to the soldiers in the Confederate army, and editor of the New Orleans Christian Advocate. In every one of these positions he showed great ability. No judge of a United States Court ever took his duties with a keener sense of their importance than he displayed in presiding over a Quarterly Conference. It was said of him that everything began to move up as soon as he set his foot inside of a pastoral charge. More than fifty years have elapsed since he wrote "Post Oak Circuit," a humorous and

Christian Advocate, Feb. 1, 1906. p. 150-151.

John Christian Keener was a Baltimorean, having been born there Feb. 7, 1819. He graduated at Wesleyan University, Connecticut, taking his A.B. in 1835 and his A.M. in 1839. He then entered the drug business in Baltimore and remained in it two or three years. In the meantime, his sweetheart, Miss Mary Anna Spencer, had moved with her parents to Alabama. Alabama then held great attraction for young Keener, and to Alabama he came. Here he married Miss Spencer, and here, too, he was licensed to preach at old Rehobeth Church, then on the Linden Circuit, but in Wilcox County. Other appointments on that circuit included Dayton, Demopolis, Linden, Spring Hill and nineteen others—twenty-four in all. Shortly after Brother Keener was licensed to preach, the pastor of the Linden Circuit missed the way, went astray, and young Keener was appointed to fill out the unexpired year's work. He was admitted on trial into the Alabama Conference in the fall of that year—1842—and was appointed to serve as junior preacher, with the distinguished Dr. Lovick Pierce as senior preacher, at Franklin Street and West Ward, Mobile. In the middle of the

year 1843 his presiding elder sent him to Demopolis. Here he held a great revival meeting. Demopolis was made over. Formerly a point on the Linden Circuit, it now became a station and has remained such until this good day. He reported 68 white members and 115 colored members. He served Demopolis through 1845; he served Tuscaloosa during 1846 and 1847. His next appointment was at Montgomery, where he served only one year, transferring at the end of that year to the Louisiana Conference. It was while serving in New Orleans that he was elected a Bishop in 1870. His son, Dr. J. O. Keener, was for many years a member of the Alabama Conference, and served with rare distinction as President of the Southern University at Greensboro.

Dr. Robert Kennon, one of the most beloved ministers of that section.

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J. H. Vincent was born at Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Feb. 23rd, 1832. His parents were northern people, his father having been born near Milto Pa., and his mother at Philadelphia. She was Mary Raser. In early life she was left an orphan, and came South to be with her brothers, one Mobile and one in Demopolis. The elder Vincent met her at the home of her brother, and they were married at Demopolis. They later moved to Tuscaloosa and were living there when, in 1832, J. H., Jr., was born. Mr. Vincent had been reared a Presbyterian and Miss Raser a Lutheran. After their marriage they joined the Methodist Church in which young J. H. Vincent was baptized. The Vincents returned to Pennsylvania in the latter part of 1837. Their son was licensed to preach in 1850. He filled various appointments in two of the Northern Conferences, and was elected a Bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1888. He was one of the founders and principal leaders of the Chautauqua Movement. He became the author of numerous books and pamphlets, and was known

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of a number of books, including one of the most dependable Histories of Methodism ever written, a monumental work that ought never to be out of print. He was a church statesman and was so recognized by all who knew him. He became the first President of Vanderbilt University originally a Methodist institution. In 1847 in Mobile he married Miss Amelia Townsend. One of their daughters became the wife of Rev. John J. Tigert, who later became a Bishop in the Church, while another mar