

a community called ...

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A CAREER
WITHOUT A PARALLEL.

BY

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A CAREER WITHOUT A PARALLEL.

SAMUEL HALSTED was born in Rye, N. Y., January 21, 1804, of parents who were zealous Christians and among the founders of the Methodist Episcopal Church at that place. He came to this city when he was about fourteen years old and obtained a place in a store. He was soon followed by his brother Schureman, and in 1822 these two young men joined the Forsyth Street Church. In 1826 they established the firm of S. & S. Halsted, cloth merchants, a house that had an honorable and very successful career until 1850, when the senior members withdrew. Between these brothers there was an extraor-

dinary personal friendship. They were the youngest of a large family of children. In religious work they co-operated as few men have ever done, and, in particular, in what is known as revival work. From the first their business greatly prospered. They were rich men when Methodism had not many such; but neither worldliness nor extravagance had any charms for them. They found their chief delight in prayer and praise, in urging men to come to Christ. They were mighty in prayer and wonderful in exhortation. The two differed in personal qualities in a way well expressed by the fact that Mr. Samuel Halsted was always known as "Uncle Sammy." Peculiar mellowness, warmth, affability, simplicity of manner, characterized him. For the last fifty years Mr. Samuel Halsted belonged to the Allen Street Church. He would accept no official position except that of class-leader, which he faithfully filled until his eightieth year.

At this point the reader unfamiliar with the facts may ask, What is there in this

without a parallel? At this late date is it to be told in Methodism that a man who prospers in business and remains warm-hearted, loving prayer and class-meetings, and attending them and seeking to save souls is an anomaly—that such a character is without a parallel? By no means.

This is not all. Retiring from business with ample means, he devoted the last thirty-five years or more of his life to voluntary unpaid church work, and went from place to place at his own expense, engaging in evangelical services with the churches who desired him. He was not a minister, an evangelist, nor even a local preacher, but a plain business man, with an experience that he was ever ready to tell. For this service he would not receive any compensation, nor even allow his traveling expenses to be paid. He did it for the love of the work, and it is to be doubted whether there is a minister of the Gospel in the Methodist Episcopal Church, whatever his age, who, in the whole course of his life, has ever seen so many persons rise

for prayers, go forward to the altar, manifest a disposition to serve God, as Samuel Halsted saw in the meetings which he attended, and in which he was the principal figure.

For a considerable time there was a band called a Praying Band. To this himself and his brother Schureman belonged, and were the leaders therein. They had a regular organization, and went from place to place. The following record of the minutes of a meeting held in the Lexington Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church, in this city, in Mr. Halsted's own handwriting, will serve to show how the band worked :

“Meeting held in the Lexington Avenue Church, Sunday, December 15, 1872. Morning meeting very good. A large number came forward, representing unconverted relatives and friends, and God was present to bless his people. The afternoon meeting was a most glorious season ; about 20 came forward seeking religion, and 15 professed con-

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version. Bless God! A large and very attentive congregation assembled in the evening, and God was eminently present to bless. About 22 were seeking, and 20 were reported converted. Blessed be God! During the day and evening about 40 came forward seeking religion, and 35, we hope, were converted. At the closing up of the evening was witnessed a glorious sight: 25 persons, male and female, rose for prayer, and seemed in earnest to save their souls. May they all soon be converted! At the 10 o'clock meeting we agreed to go to Old John Street on Sunday, the 29th of this month. Present: Hamilton, Merritt, Parton, Sherwood, Langstroth, Foster, Turner, Little, Halsted. God seemed to be with the brethren all day in power, and blessed their labors in a wonderful degree. Brother Nicholson from Philadelphia was with us, and rendered good and profitable service, and also our beloved Brother Parish. Adjourned by singing the doxology, and benediction by the Rev. F. S. De Hass.

“S. HALSTED, Sec’y *pro tem.*”

After many years of service the band, by the deaths of its members and from other causes, disintegrated. Mr. Halsted was not one of that class of men who think that every thing they do is successful, for from the minutes of a similar meeting, held at Jane Street, December 8, 1872, we take the following :

“In the afternoon meeting there seemed to be a lack of fire that generally attends our afternoon meetings. Nevertheless, there were three seekers and two conversions.”

There was about the proceedings of the band a certain stereotyped method into which it had naturally grown, so that while its effect upon those unaccustomed to it was very powerful those who had seen its operations frequently were inclined to regard it with less favor. It was supposed that its fervor was simulated, worked up, and that no corresponding depth of feeling existed. As the band generally took charge where it worked, and the members of the church there were

comparatively silent, some objected to it on the ground that the band would go and secure 25, 30, or 100 inquirers, some of whom would profess conversion, then go away and leave them to the instructions and sympathy of an unprepared church. But such was the character of Mr. Samuel Halsted that none ever suspected him of simulated fervor in his exhortations or of mere shrewdness of strategy. He had an intuitive perception of the right thing to say, and a responsiveness to every changing phase which looked like astuteness. But it was as different from that as the involuntary ebullitions of genius are from the prepared outbursts of the rhetorician of the schools.

The writer did not consider the introduction of a band into a regular service of a large church as wise. Therefore, while having a delightful personal acquaintance with "Uncle Sammy," and the highest admiration for his disinterestedness, he never gave any encouragement to a few of his parishioners who desired that the band be invited. But there

came a time when at Stamford, Conn., the venerable gentleman was visiting some relatives. There was a marked religious interest; numbers had been brought into a state of conviction by the preaching of the truth, and the prayers and appeals of the people; and several had committed themselves to Christ. But the results were not correspondent to the desires of the pastor, or the hopes of the people. At that time the writer called upon "Uncle Sammy" and addressed him somewhat as follows:

"You are visiting here?"

"Yes."

"Would you be willing to come down to the church and be introduced to the people as a New York merchant who, after retiring from business, has devoted himself to leading his fellow-men to Christ?"

"Well," said he, "the less said about me the better. But if I can serve you in any way I will come down; and if the Lord blesses us may be I can stay a few days."

This expression, "the less said about me the better," was in harmony with his general views; for his friends had often urged him to keep a journal, or, at least, some memoranda, of his peculiar evangelical work. He told a friend that he did so for a short time, but in reviewing it he was so impressed with its seeming egotism that he entirely destroyed it.

He came down. Notice was given in the morning that he would be present. In that place he was a comparative stranger, and a brief introductory account was given of his business career, his honorable retirement, and his devoted work. He rose and said :

"I suppose it is my experience you want. I have not got theology, nor great learning. I am not a reformed drunkard. I never killed any body; but blessed be God, I have had an experience, and I am ready to tell it on earth, and I never expect to be tired of telling it in heaven. It is the old, old story. But it was new to me, and it is my private property, but I sha'n't lose it by telling it to you. It will be all the better, and it will

shine and gleam ; and it is like a piece of gold, the more you rub it the more it shines. Blessed be God ! ”

The light in his countenance, the benignity of his glance, and the warmth of his smile reflected so much good nature as well as holy joy that the audience was transformed into a collection of children listening to the kind words of a beloved grandparent, and to the eight who had come forward to the place set apart for inquirers, under the ordinary invitations of the pastor, were added in a few minutes more than thirty of those in whom the church felt the deepest interest.

On the third evening a thrilling scene occurred. The pastor, in preaching about those who found no place for repentance though they sought it, referred for the purpose of illustration to the case of Aaron Burr, who in his early youth was deeply moved, and for some days debated the question whether he would become a Christian, but decided in the negative, and afterward went on in a career of worldly prosperity and dissipation,

becoming infamous as the slayer of Alexander Hamilton and as one suspected of treason, and died without hope. When Mr. Halsted rose to exhort, he said: "I knew Aaron Burr. Hearing that he was sick on Staten Island, I selt it my duty to visit him; and knowing that he was the grandson of the famous Jonathan Edwards, a man of God, I hoped to be able to touch his heart and lead him to Christ. So not long before his death two pious friends and myself went to see him at the hotel on Staten Island where he was staying. When ushered into his presence we introduced each other to him, as at that time we were entire strangers. He looked as if wondering what object we had in visiting him. We inquired about his health, and remarked our pleasure in finding him able to sit up. His keen eyes seemed to pierce us through and through, and almost terrified us. He was very pleasant, and seemed to enjoy our call until one of us ventured to say something about the future state. He gave us to undersand that upon that subject he had no wish to converse.

Poor old man! We pitied him from our hearts, and lifted up a silent prayer that the good Lord would incline him to repentance, and save him through the merits of the Saviour at last."

The manner in which he described the scene, the appearance of perhaps the most mysterious of the early public men in America, and the vividness with which he recalled an interview that had taken place forty years before, cannot be described in words, but its effect was thrilling, and a striking confirmation of the doctrine taught. It must not be supposed that there was either levity or austerity in his character. He had an exuberant cheerfulness which is occasionally a product of nature, but when refined by grace invests religion with an almost irresistible charm. Visiting the sick-bed of a Christian with him, we encountered one of the most notorious unbelievers in the whole region, who bore a name once famous in that part of the country among Methodists. This man, in a somewhat crusty way, in response to a question whether

he enjoyed religion, said "No," and then made an attack upon Christianity and religion. Uncle Sammy burst into laughter. "What!" said he, "are you destitute of religion and trying to make me believe that there is nothing in what I have enjoyed for fifty years?" And he fairly laughed him to silence, and closed by telling him that he could learn more by five minutes' heart-felt prayer than all the books and all the people in the world could teach him, and, with laughter still ringing in the air, he turned to kneel by the bed-side of the sick man, and, with tears of joy streaming from his eyes, said, "Thank God, *we* do not have to begin that way," and invoked the blessing of the Lord in a way which melted every body in the room. Both that sick man and his widow, and the unbeliever and the patriarchal Christian of whom we write, have now passed into the great unknown.

What would not be done if prosperous laymen had the spirit of this man? If they would talk about religion as about their busi-

ness, not forcing it upon the unwilling, but so speaking of it and looking it and living it that those with whom they mingle could not but fall in love with it.

Mr. Halsted was endowed with a remarkable constitution. At the time we had the pleasure to entertain him he was more than seventy-two years of age, but had never worn any underclothing in his life, and lived principally upon rice and milk, seldom touching meat. It was exceedingly hard, therefore, for such a man to realize that he was breaking down. In his eightieth year he held a series of meetings for four weeks at the Kensington Methodist Episcopal Church of Philadelphia. This was the last of his labors. He was obliged to confess himself superannuated. His means enabled him to live in entire comfort, but many a time between his eightieth year and the close of his life he was heard to say, "I would willingly dispense with my luxuries for the privilege of conducting a meeting such as the last, when the people flocked to the altar in response to my invitations." It

was a common thing during his last days, wherever he went, for strangers to approach him and say, "It was through you I was brought to Christ."

It is our belief that not among the early or late records of Methodism can a career be found to parallel this. It has taken place in this generation, and we record it in the hope that laymen whom God has blessed will find in it an incentive to give themselves more fully to the work of saving men.

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