

The Home of Wesley.

The old rectory at Epworth stands a mute testimonial to the Methodist, not only of the reformer who went forth from its walls but of the singular energy and ability of the mother of the Wesleys. It was here that her wretched, obscure life was passed, yet a life so remarkable in its simplicity that few mothers have received such posthumous fame as Susannah Wesley. Here was a continual struggle with poverty. The living of the husband and father was but £130 a year, and on this absurdly small sum she had to meet the cares of a family of nineteen children. Bred in London the Rev. Samuel incurred, immediately on his installation at Epworth, the universal hatred of his parishioners, and, if we may judge from the records of his petty strifes with them, he was totally incapacitated for the work. He would go away to London to find a market for his poetry—for he manufactured rhyme—and leave the entire work of providing for the household upon the shoulders of Susannah. But amidst the ceaseless cares and menial labor which constituted her daily existence, the strength of her character is revealed, showing the true source of her prophetic religious zeal. She found time to hold kitchen services which became so popular among the humble folk that the curate wrote the Rev. Samuel in London requesting that they be discontinued, "because more people went there than went to the curate at the church." The husband away in London was amazed at the intelligence. He wrote at once to her that as the wife of a public person it behooved her to exercise discretion. Poor Mrs. Wesley replied in a letter which is still in existence, urging that great practical results were following from her work, and that she could not in conscience stop without her husband's express command. That command came at once and from that time her wise and powerful mind was devoted to her sons. Perhaps had it not been for this incident the founder of Methodism would never have been known.

And so as the pilgrims passed from the rectory they pressed their faces against the sacred walls, sanctified as much by the unhappy woman who had toiled and suffered within them as by the prophet himself who had received her counsel and teaching. They gathered pebbles from the gravels and flowers from the beautiful beds to bear away across the Atlantic, where they will be held almost priceless, as in the middle ages were the palms which were borne home in triumph by the crusaders from Lebanon and the Mount of Olives. The Lincolnshire parish has much changed since the days of Susannah's struggles there. The canon now in charge receives a salary of £2,000 a year.

From the rectory door many points intimately associated with the life of John Wesley may be seen but the most important is the old church where Samuel Wesley preached. It is still used for worship and the parishioners assemble within its walls just as did their ancestors. The church was old when Samuel Wesley preached there, as it was built in the twelfth century. Its preservation is remarkable. Although it is whitened by the frosts of time, and here and there in places the stone walls have gradually succumbed to decay, yet the main structure stands firm and intact.

The pilgrims entered the lane that leads up to the church door by the same path that was traveled by the Wesleys. The great elm trees form an over-arching roof like a solemn forest aisle. They passed into the church yard that surrounds the old house of worship. Here are buried Samuel and Susannah Wesley. The tomb stands near the entrance to the church, and is a plain marble box. Among the villagers there is a strange superstition which has gone out in regard to this tomb. It was said that the ghost of Rev. Samuel was seen there at regular intervals. People began to fear to walk near the spot after nightfall. This feeling was heightened when it was asserted that the footprints of the ghosts had been left upon the stone slab, and there were strange marks there. People came great distances to see them and those who laughed at the story of the footprints went away convinced that there were traces of something on the stone, footprints or whatever it might be. What penance the ghost was doing there no one dared to state. But after a time, when the ghost story had become a generally accepted fact, the whole matter was explained as a perfectly natural physical phenomenon. The marks in the first place appeared like the claws of a bird. It was noticed, however, that they became deeper in the course of a few years, and then it was discovered that beneath them was an irregular piece of iron imbedded in the rock, and then the natural conclusion is that the stone was softer around the metal and had

quickly disintegrated beneath the action of the rain and sun, producing the so-called footprints. But it is said that even at the present day there are many supporters of the ghost theory at Epworth.

The pilgrims surrounded the tomb and bared their heads while the crowd of villagers who had followed them from the time of their arrival thronged around them. Dr. S. F. Upham of the Boston Theological school mounted upon the tomb and spoke a few sentences in a most impressive manner. His words seemed to sink deeply upon the group around him who had journeyed many thousands of miles to feel the inspiration that arose within them at this spot.

"At this spot where I am standing," said he, "John Wesley stood. From here he preached as long as he was permitted until he was driven out. His life and its associations are before us. I am overcome by its sacredness. No words can express the emotion I feel within me as I stand here upon this tomb. Hallowed is the spot, sacred is this hour!"

And in response from every pilgrim standing there around the tomb there came a profound amen. Then all the voices were lifted in unison in singing one of Wesley's hymns. It was "Oh! for Ten Thousand Tongues to Sing My Great Redeemer's Praise." No voices ever sang the words in such an impressive way before. Every nook of the old church yard echoed with the sound. There were many moist eyes among the group of spectators.

The first object that attracted the pilgrims within the old church was the baptismal font at which John Wesley was baptized. It stands to-day exactly where it stood when that ceremony was performed by his father. It is about four feet high and octagonal in form. It is still used in the service of the church. Each of the party pressed his hand to it in reverence, as to a thing holy.

The interior of the church is antique. The old oaken pews which have served as resting places for successive generations, the stained glass windows of the day of Queen Anne, the chancel rail, where for centuries sacrament has been administered. The same altar from which Samuel Wesley preached is still used. From it John Wesley also discoursed before he was dismissed from the church. It is made of oak and of a design now rarely seen.

The design of the old church is at the rear beneath the huge chimney. Canon Overton, who is the present rector, opened the quaintly carved old door that leads into the small room where the records of the church have been preserved. The loth of time has not gnawed at the vellum volumes as at the iron chest which contains them. Their preservation is remarkable and probably in no vault in Europe have written documents been so successfully stored. Into the little room but a half dozen could crowd at a time, and in successive relays the canon pointed out the entry in the register of Samuel Wesley's death. It was written by John Wesley a century and a half ago, but it is clear and legible to-day. Silently the pilgrims were ushered into this little room and trembling each one gazed upon the legend in the register. It seemed as though the reformer had lived but yesterday as they saw before them the work of his hand, the writing of his pen. But this entry was made when he was filling temporarily the place made vacant by the death of his father. It was before he had unconsciously founded the new creed whose influence has ramified to all parts of the earth.

It was the field preaching that marked John Wesley's first step from the established church, into whose dogmas he had been educated. It was distasteful to him but he saw the work that Whitfield was doing and his enthusiasm began to arouse. The separation came on gradually, almost unawares. From the market place in Epworth he spoke to the common people, who filled the square in one sea of upturned faces. He preached on the common to colliers and marked, as he spoke, the tears making channels down their faces. The spots now are pointed out where all these scenes took place. The American pilgrims were shown where he was stoned and jeered by mobs, dragged from his horse and covered with filth. At the old market square they saw the simple stone that is erected where he preached. It is at the center of the little village where the streets cross and the red-tiled roof of nearly every hamlet may be seen. It is not difficult in standing upon this spot to imagine the stormy scenes which were enacted there. The same pebbles, perhaps, still lie about with which he was assailed. It was only his cool courage, which never failed him in the case of an emergency, which saved his life on some of these occasions. With his marvelous powers it required but a short

interval to change his pursuers and persecutors into champions and defenders.

There are many points over England which mark some such wild scenes. From the time of his first field preaching and lay preaching at Epworth his whole life was devoted to the work. It became a continued succession of preachings, journeys and awakening meetings. One day he was stoned in Sussex, a week later pelted with mud in Manchester. Wherever he could get men together to listen to his voice it was heard. He rode on horse-back day after day and in the course of his life, as he said in his journal, covered a distance of 100,000 miles. But through all his stormy career Epworth was the center from which his work radiated. It was there he would return after vicissitudes among the colliers and potters and it seems his greatest interest was centered in his old home. He demanded of everyone of his converts an assurance that his soul was saved, but at the same time a belief that it might fall back and be lost. Without this he held that no one could be a Christian, and on one of his homecomings, his old mother, Susannah, then upwards of seventy, told him of a peculiar thrill she had experienced during communion service, and he assured her that she had never before been a Christian, and afterward at her death he caused to be inscribed upon her tombstone the date of her death "After a Spiritual Night of Seventy Years." Time has worn that inscription entirely away and Susannah Wesley is held sacred to-day as the mother of the religion founded by her son. The eight rules that she formulated for the guidance of her children are still preserved as a testimonial of her strong, clear mind.

The memorial chapel, which was erected a few years ago to the memory of John Wesley, stands upon the same common where he preached. It is a simple frame structure, modern in architecture and not unlike an ordinary church in a Canadian village. On one wall is a simple tablet upon which is inscribed the words, "Sacred to the memory of John Wesley," followed by the date of his birth and death. Here the pilgrims repaired, the villagers following in respectful silence. At the door of the memorial chapel they were photographed in a group, the patriarchs in front, the young men and women in the rear. It was noticed and remarked the slow process of photographing in vogue in the village. The Americans, accustomed to the instantaneous process, grew nervous during the long exposure of the plate which was required by the village photographer. It took several trials before a satisfactory result was obtained.

"That must have been the way they photographed people in the days of Wesley," remarked one of the pilgrims after the ordeal was over.

"I believe that is the same photographer they had here then," replied another. Although none of the descendants of the Wesleys are now living, one gray haired old man was introduced to the pilgrims who is a lineal descendant of the man who rescued John Wesley from the flames when the wicked villagers had set fire to the old rectory. He seemed proud of the privilege which had fallen upon him and grasped each one by the hand. Within the chapel each of the visitors registered his name in the church records as the first party of American pilgrims to Epworth.

The hospitality of the villagers was without limit. They placed their homes at the disposal of the pilgrims as long as they would remain there, but the most of the party were limited to a single day. They separated in different directions, each one followed by fully a score who vied with each other in making them comfortable. The quaint old village never wore a more cheerful aspect than it did that evening. The neat little houses with their red tiled roofs were a mystery which the curious Americans were intent upon solving, and when they were within them their surprising comfort was a source of no small amount of wonder.

At 7 o'clock in the evening, while the slow English twilight was gathering, the pilgrims assembled once more in the memorial chapel, where the final services were held. There was a certain sense of sadness in the meeting, that the long pilgrimage which had been so full of spiritual joy to them all was about to close. The chapel was filled to the doors when Rev. Dr. Lippincott arose and offered prayer. There were frequent and hearty amens as he went on, and at the close all joined in singing one of Wesley's hymns. The old Bible and prayer book from which Wesley had read during his stormy years of field preaching were used in the service that followed. It was as though the spirit of the great preacher was conducting the exercises, and all who were present were visibly affected. There were several addresses by members of the



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pilgrimage. Dr. Upham, Rev. Mr. Bronson Dr. Docking, Rev. Mr. Burt and Rev. Mr. Thompson, followed by the present and former pastor of the Memorial chapel, all spoke feelingly of the work of John Wesley as a man and as a reformer. The holy communion was administered by Dr. Upham from the same sacrament table which was used by Wesley. No more solemn rite has ever been performed in a Methodist church.

After the benediction the pilgrims filed slowly from the memorial chapel and marched in a body to the old church yard. The evening was beautiful. A full moon shone from the clear sky and the air was blossom scented. They passed silently through the old elm shaded lane and formed again around the grave of Samuel Wesley. On every side the crumbling tombs of a ghost-like hue wrought with their shadows fantastic figures in the old church yard where succeeding generations had been laid to rest. To one unacquainted with the sacred mission of the pilgrims the sight would have seemed uncanny. But to these serious faced men and women who knelt in silent worship, it was a moment of triumph. They had surmounted every obstacle before them and stood, though even for a moment, at the source of their spiritual enlightenment. Then with one accord they joined in the hymn "Shall We Meet Again." The strong chorus sounded strangely in the shadows of the old churchyard, as with one thought the hymn changed to "We Shall Meet Beyond the River," which seemed to rise spontaneously from their hearts, while every eye was dimmed with tears. It was nearly midnight. The moon had passed behind one of the great elms and threw a checkered shadow over the bowed forms. Their work was accomplished. The pilgrimage was a thing of the past.

From Epworth the party separated. Some returned at once to London and others to their home. Many visited the city road chapel, where a statue of the great religious leader was unveiled several months ago. The pilgrims return to America with a consciousness of having accomplished the greatest hope of their lives. They were mostly from the every-day walks of life, unable to bear the expense of foreign travel, and this the first pilgrimage to the tomb of Wesley is likely to bear fruit, as it is the intention of the managers to make a permanent itinerary and each year send across the Atlantic a band of pilgrims.

WILLIAM WRIGHT.

To add to the continued miseries inflicted upon them by the continued rains, English farmers are now pestered with another infliction. In Lincolnshire, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk counties the insect known as the mustard bug is making sad ravages among certain of the crops. At Deeping a field of mustard was found to be badly infested, and as soon as the crop was cut down the bugs were to be seen crossing the road in extraordinary numbers. In their progress they devoured everything in the gardens and then made their way into the houses, from which they were swept out in thousands. From other quarters the statement is made that much damage has been done by the army worm, which owes its name to the fact that its movements are made with all the regularity which is characteristic of a military advance. Apparently the wet weather which has been experienced not only in this country, but throughout Europe, is favorable to the multiplication of these insect pests.