

Methodists, and hinted that the Wesleys were ambitious to become Bishops and were preparing themselves a place in the overseas dominions. Thus was the purest of projects misunderstood. But Methodism was fulfilling its God-given mission and could wait for recognition. Two years later the British Conference sent another pair of missionaries, one of whom was destined to be a bishop, both in name and in deed. Meanwhile a noble band of lay evangelists were spreading Methodist doctrine throughout New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland.

Boardman, on his arrival, drew up some regulations regarding the work of the preachers and their remuneration. This was the beginning of what was afterward the Book of Discipline. Two years of successful labor followed; but the societies, scattered over four states, were so many disconnected units. Boardman had neither initiative nor executive powers equal to the task of organizing them into a Church. The man who was destined for this task was still in England in the ranks of Wesley's itinerants.

At the Conference of 1771 five more men offered to go as missionaries to America. Two of these were accepted, Richard Wright and Francis Asbury. Of Wright little is known. He never attained any prominence. But it was an epoch-making event when Francis Asbury was sent to America. One historian of Methodism has said that Francis Asbury was certainly the noblest gift England ever bestowed on her children beyond the Atlantic. To him, more than to any other of its preachers, American Methodism owes its form, its spirit and its vast achievement.

Francis Asbury came of an intelligent peasant family in the parish of Handsworth, in Staffordshire. He was born August 20th, 1745. He was carefully nurtured in the religion of the Established Church. At an early age he was apprenticed to a button maker, whom he served for six and a half years. At the age of thirteen he was converted while listening to one of Wesley's preachers. At seventeen we find him preaching in his father's house. Later he became a Methodist preacher, and worked under John Wesley for five years. That great man was distinguished for his power to perceive the innate qualities of men. He saw that Asbury was not an ordinary man, and when the young itinerant offered himself for America, Wesley gladly accepted him.

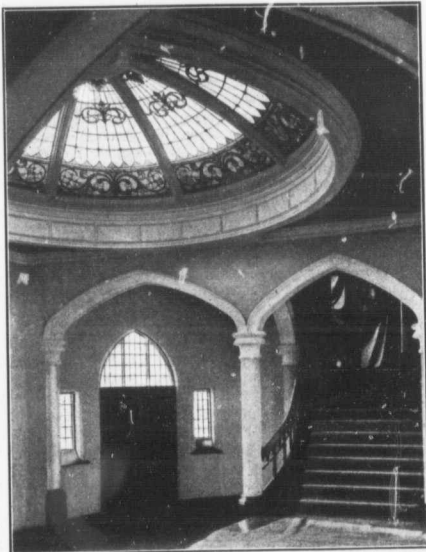
Asbury was warmly received on his arrival in Philadelphia, in Oct., 1771. He found, all told, 316 members in the Methodist societies, but these were widely scattered over what are now four states. Leadership was lacking. Already the missionary spirit had been lost by many of the preachers. They wanted to settle down in churches already established instead of pushing into the newer settlements where the most crying need existed. The newly-arrived missionary resolved to combat this spirit. He wrote in his journal: "I am fixed to the Methodist plan. I have not the thing I seek—a circulation of the preachers to avoid partiality and popularity." New life was at once infused into the movement. Within a year the membership was doubled. Asbury was an example to all. In spite of the bitter, winter weather, to which he was wholly unused, he pushed his work vigorously from the first. Rapidly new settlements were visited and societies organized. Under the inspiration of his example the other Methodist preachers doubled their diligence.

Rigid enforcement of the rules in the societies was a point upon which Asbury laid special stress. This he had learned from John Wesley. He writes in his journal: "While I stay the rules must be attended to. I cannot suffer myself to be guided by half-hearted Methodists." Small though they were in numbers, he did not hesitate to purge these early societies of unworthy members. In New York they cried out against his discipline, saying he would preach the people away and destroy the work; but their fears seem to have been groundless.

In October, 1772, one year after Asbury's arrival, John Wesley wrote, formally appointing him head of the American Societies. Asbury was now twenty-seven years of age and was the youngest of the preachers, but he was the natural leader of them. Boardman amicably acquiesced in the appointment. The newly-appointed "assistant," as Wesley called him, now made a tour of all the territory thus far

occupied, noting the good work and correcting irregularities. One thing that he had to cope with proved almost too much for him. The Maryland Methodists clamored for the sacraments at the hands of their own preachers. Strawbridge had yielded to their wishes. Asbury opposed this irregularity. Like John Wesley, he had no other thought than that the Methodists were a society within the Church of England, and that as lay evangelists, the Methodist preachers had no authority to administer the sacraments.

In 1773 two more men were sent to America by the British Conference, one of whom, Thomas Rankin, was put in Asbury's place. Perhaps Wesley had heard of the irregu-



PART OF THE BEAUTIFUL NEW ENTRANCE TO THE BELLEVILLE METHODIST TABERNACLE, RECENTLY ERECTED.

larity of Strawbridge and wanted discipline more rigidly enforced. Asbury continued, nevertheless, to be the ruling genius of the movement. The first Conference of American preachers was called by Rankin soon after his arrival. It met in Philadelphia in 1773. Ten men composed that Conference. Not one of them was an ordained minister. "They were simply lay evangelists, poor in purse, unlearned as the early apostles, but they burned with apostolic zeal to spread the power of godliness in a land of spiritual death." At this Conference 1,160 members were reported. The question of the right of the Methodist preachers to administer the sacrament came up, and at each succeeding Conference it was discussed, but it was not finally settled until, in 1784, the American societies were constituted a Church.

Meanwhile the Revolutionary war broke out. It was a trying time for the Methodist preachers. Being of English birth and members of the Anglican Church, they were suspected of having Tory sympathies and of being British spies. Unable to pursue their work without molestation, all the English preachers but Asbury returned to England. He felt it was his duty to remain at his post, and it was well for Methodism that he did. But for his heroism and his tact these infant societies would have been broken up. It was not only a trying time for him, it was also a time of danger. In spite of his expression of sympathy with the colonists he was suspected of British leanings. He was often threatened. Once he was arrested, and on more than one occasion attempts were made to kill him. But he continued his itinerant work, taking up again the task of superintending the