

Rev. Samuel Antliff, D.D. - 'Third Article'

Transcription on an article by Rev. S.A. Barron

The Doctor's gifts of wit and a humour were widely famous; and contributed in no small degree to his popularity as a speaker, and his effectiveness in debate. It is said that in his younger days, the satire was sometimes merciless, and that his caustic tongue made him more feared than beloved. As we knew him, in his mellow age, the humour was altogether kindly, and no ungenerous sting remained in the wit. The Doctor could be scathing in dealing with unworthiness, but there was no ungentle handling of the feelings of good men. With what inimitable drollery he used to draw the contrast between bachelors and spinsters, illustrating the point by the story of the man who having sold as "warranted without a fault" a blind horse, when taxed with his dishonesty said, "The poor thing's blindness is not its fault; it is its *misfortune*"



Very characteristic also was the way in which he turned the tables on certain officials who had joined in demanding, under the ancient rule, that the travelling preachers should present their journals to the Quarterly Meeting. The insistent ones were present in strength to hear how their behests were obeyed. The preacher read of an appointment at one of the places. "In the course of family visitation was much pained to hear that brother So-and-so (who was present) had bought a pig from Brother So-and-So more than twelve months previously and had not yet paid for it." The brother hastily retired, followed by some other apprehensive ones, and the preachers' journals were demanded no more.

Speaking of the difference between the earnest workers in churches, and their less active and useful members, he said that he was reminded of a passage in the book of Job: "The oxen were ploughing in the field," and "*the asses were feeding beside them.*"

A good story is told. of an encounter he once had with a couple of young curates of Ritualistic proclivities. He was on a railway journey when these young divines entered the compartment, and, mistaking him for a senior clergyman, began to speak of church questions.

"Have you begun to intone your services yet?" said one.

"No," said the Doctor, "I haven't begun yet."

"It sounds very beautiful," said the other, "on the note G."

"Is that a favourite note with the Almighty?" asked the Doctor.

A little nonplussed at this unexpected question, they attempted no answer.

"But," said the other curate: "I think it sounds better on the note A."

"Now," said the Doctor, "can you tell me which of these notes the Almighty prefers? If you can tell me the Almighty's favourite note, I will take care to intone all my services on that note."

But by this time, the young clerics had discovered that they had caught a tartar; and at the next stopping-place they left the compartment.

But Doctor Antliff was much more than a mere humorist. There was a very spiritual and a very tender side to his character. No one could be brought into any intimacy of relation with him without seeing that he was a deeply religious man. You felt that he was a man of God; and the feeling stimulated all that was best in your own life.

Many years ago, a venerable layman of the Nottingham District said to us, obviously with absolute sincerity of conviction, "He is one of the best men in the world." The Doctor himself would have been the last to accept so exalted an estimate, but it may at least be said that it is a good thing when, upon his fellow-labourers, the Christian character of a minister of religion makes such impressions. Speaking for ourselves, we bear record that a talk with the Doctor was a means of grace; that again and again it has sent us to our knees; and that the memory of those gracious communings in life's holy places makes us think of our old superintendent with affectionate veneration. "Grace," says Thomas A'Kempis, "is the mother of tears," and we have often seen his eyes fill and his lips tremble as he has spoken of these deepest things.

It was in the light of what we saw and felt of his genuine spirituality that we were led to regard what some thought a weakness. There were some who said of the Doctor that he was an egotist. And no doubt he did often speak of himself. But everything depends on the point of view. On ourselves, the impression was never made of mere boastfulness, pose, or desire for admiration; but rather that here was a man who had seen much, done much, learned much, and experienced much of blessing, and who felt that he had much to tell which might be useful to others. It was not Samuel Antliff he aimed to glorify, but Samuel Antliff's Lord, and behind and beneath all the tone was, "Not I, but the grace of God that was with me"; grace which, he never failed to urge, might be sought and obtained by all. We are very glad that no apprehension of what censorious tongues might say kept him from telling things it was profitable for us of the later time to hear. With all his ability and shrewdness there was in his character a certain simplicity that made him sometimes unaware how different an impression might be made from that which he intended to convey. He knew that he meant right, and he assumed that this would be felt. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, things do not always work out so. But "evil be to him who evil thinks." At any rate, Samuel Antliff had done something worthy of being told, which is more than some can say.

Throughout his career, he practically recognised the claims of Christian citizenship. From the beginning he was an earnest temperance reformer; and, in days when temperance principles were less practised than they now are, he not infrequently visited neighbourhoods, and faced unfriendly assemblages in the character of a temperance pioneer. His gifts of persuasiveness, argument, satire, biting wit, and humorous narrative, made him a most redoubtable antagonist of the "drink shop," (a term he often used); and half a century ago, he was a widely celebrated temperance speaker. Naturally, his pungent dealing with what was then a prevalent and cherished indulgence awakened opposition: and in circumstances dating many years back may be found the explanation of the prejudice against him displayed in some quarters in his latest years. He was amongst those who have "suffered for righteousness sake." Supporters of the Anti-Cigarette League will be interested also in hearing that he had no sympathy with what he called "sucking smoke,"

When, upon retiring from Connexional office, he returned to circuit work in the town of Derby, he was placed upon the Derby School Board, on which he continued to the end of his life, doing splendid work. When County Councils came into existence, he consented to stand in the Liberal

interest for the Derbyshire County Council, and was elected. The story of the election is too good to be omitted.

Through an oversight of the authorities, causing a shortage of voting papers at one of the polling stations, the poll had to be taken a second time. In the first instance, there were three candidates, the Doctor heading the poll. In the second contest, the Independent candidate dropped out, and the Doctor was left to face his stronger opponent, a Tory squire, of considerable local and social influence, who had stood not far below him in the previous fight. The balance was, of course, in the hands of those who had voted for the retired candidate. So confident were the squire's supporters that they would now carry the day that they provided themselves with a quantity of fireworks with which to celebrate the victory, and also with ropes, in order that their candidate's horses might be taken out of the shafts, and his carriage, as the Doctor put it, "*pulled by other animals.*" However the fireworks and the ropes were not required, for after a neck and neck race in the counting room, the Primitive Methodist minister proved again the victor by a majority of nine votes, and a County Councillor he became and remained until his death.

Our subject was fortunate in his home life and domestic relationships. We did not know Mrs. Antliff, but she must have been a lady of rare sweetness and strength of character. We have often heard the Doctor speak of his departed wife in tender terms; and we gathered the impression of a combination in her of spirituality, sagacity, self-forgetfulness, steadfastness of purpose and faithful affection. There was earnest piety conjoined with strong common sense; and moral firmness along with the play of tender humour. Altogether, we should imagine, a character of singular beauty and charm. The late Rev. T.H. Richards, who knew her well, described her as "one of the finest ministers' wives that ever a preacher or a circuit could be blessed with." Their* sons, with their families, are usefully connected with the church at Draycott, in the Derby First Circuit, where the Doctor spent his last years. Both of their daughters became the wives of distinguished ministers. The elder, who, like her mother, was greatly esteemed on her husband's circuits, is the widow of the late beloved and lamented Governor of Elmfield College, the Rev. W. E. Crombie. Their younger daughter, for so many years her father's devoted and capable secretary, and, after the death of her mother, his housekeeper, became the wife of Professor A. L. Humphries, M.A. Mrs. Humphries was scholarly and widely read. Always a diligent church worker, she found a wider sphere when, some years ago, she commenced to give public addresses. Bringing to this work a well stored and original mind and a ready and cultured utterance, she became one of the foremost lady speakers in the denomination. Her death in 1907 was a great loss, not only to her husband and family, but to the church in which she was becoming increasingly useful.

Samuel Antliff had a fine physique, and, for many years, enjoyed vigorous health. He possessed the valuable capacity of sleeping and waking at will. He was thus able, in the midst of taxing and protracted exertion, to snatch rest.

He had an amusing story of how he once did at a Nottinghamshire village, where he was planned to preach School Sermons. Arriving, after a hot and long walk, he found a long programme of recitations, with a brief address put down for the middle of the service. "No," he said, "we'll have all the recitations first." While these were going on, he covered his face with his hand, and took a nap. Refreshed by this, he preached with freedom and power, and all went off so well that at night the school superintendent desired the arrangement to be repeated. "No," said he, "I will preach first to-

night.” He did so, and had the collection taken. Then, while the recitations proceeded, he slipped out, and was some miles on his long walk home by the time the service would close.

We fear that the energy and intensity of our old friend may have led him, in his earlier days, to presume on his strength, and to take too much out of himself, preparing the way for the dyspeptic troubles that harassed him in the later years. His travels as a deputation to the Colonial churches in the seventies, while they enabled him to render valuable service, and brought him his divinity degree, must have been exhausting to himself. There was much night journeying and loss of rest. His period, first as General Missionary Secretary and then as Deputy Treasurer was most responsible and anxious. Sufficient to break down many men, it left its mark on him. From the strain and application of these years dated the affection of the iris, which, necessitating more than one operation, left him nearly blind. In a previous article, we spoke of the heroic way in which, in spite of this disability, he kept up to his work.

Strong man as he was, and built apparently for length of days, he yet did not see three score and ten. Born in July, 1823, he was not sixty-nine when, in February, 1892, he passed away. He celebrated his ministerial jubilee in the summer of 1891, and was deeply touched by the many expressions of love and gratitude he received at that time. In the following September he went to America, to attend as a representative the Methodist Ecumenical Conference at Washington. Some of us wondered as to what, at his time of life, the effect of the journey and the change might be. We thought it would affect him considerably; we hoped, favourably. A friend said, “The Doctor may, after this voyage, be better than he has been for years.” A little before his departure we had a letter from him, with the same old ring: “Sow beside all waters; some at least will grow,” our old superintendent’s last charge.

On the voyage a large carbuncle developed on his neck, causing great suffering and exhaustion, and incapacitating him from attending the Conference. Nursed with loving care in the home of his nephew, Dr. J. Cooper Antliff, he recovered sufficiently to return -home. Venturing then, to Elmfield College, on urgent business, the winter cold, acting on a weakened frame, brought on a fatal chill, and after some weeks of suffering, on February 2nd, 1892, he passed to his. eternal reward.

His name and fame and works belong to our denominational history. He was amongst the mightiest of those workers into whose “labours” we are “entering” to-day. We who knew these great leaders whom God gave to our church, and on whose life their personality left an ineffaceable mark, owe it to the future not to let their memory die. Young ministers, who have heard us speak of our old superintendent, have asked us to publish some of our reminiscences; and in this tribute to the memory of a great man and a great Christian minister their desire and a long contemplated labour of love have been fulfilled.

* We regret to say that, since these lines were penned, Mr. William Antliff has passed away.

References

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