

The Late Mr. Albert Stanley, M.P.

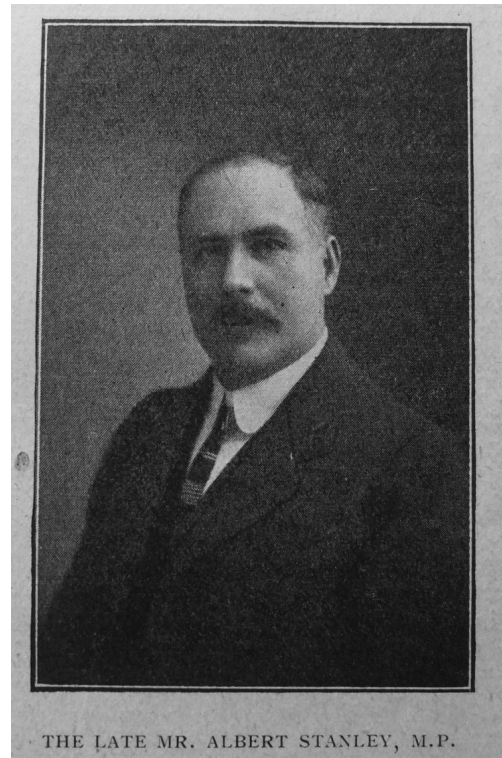
Transcription of article published Primitive Methodist Magazine by F.W. Henshall

WHEN Albert Stanley died *The Times* said "He was of the best type of Labour Members," and the *Daily Dispatch* said "He won his way to a high position by sterling merit." Among the many leaders of the Labour Movement which our Church has provided, none was ever more proud of his Church. It was in his grandmother's kitchen that the first Primitive Methodist service in his native district was held, and in that kitchen Hugh Bourne once preached. His grandparents made a bequest to the Church of the site on which the first Primitive Methodist chapel in the neighbourhood was erected. A thing of which he spoke always with pride was the possession of a small piece of paper, yellow with age, which said that as a boy of thirteen he was a member of the Primitive Methodist Church.

Some men so crowd the days that they seem to have lived twice the number of their years. Albert Stanley died at fifty-three, but those who have known of him only from afar must have thought him a

much older man. In the Labour world he had a front place; among his own people he was loved. His untiring efforts, his sterling character, and his charming personality won admiration, even where they did not win support; and when he passed away he was mourned in every part of the land. His life-story is one of unrelenting labour and perseverance, from which the influence of Christianity was never absent.

Born at Dark Lane, in Shropshire, his father a miner, a year at an old dame's school and a year at a National school was all the day-school training he received. His desire for self-improvement was due to the teaching given in the Sunday school. It was there he learned to put letters together; and he never remembered a time when he was unable to read and did not delight in reading. His father was a Primitive Methodist of the old type, his mother's sphere of influence was the home, and the religious atmosphere of that home was the inspiration of the future leader's noble life. Albert went to work in the coal-mine at eleven. There was no eight-hour day then, and there were weeks in winter when he only saw the daylight on the Sunday. With his first pocket-money he trudged from the village to Oakengates, and at a second-hand bookshop purchased a grammar, a Shakespeare, and Paley's "Natural Theology." From that day he was a book-lover; he used to say that his one extravagance was books. Those three books were the nucleus of one of the finest working-men's libraries in the land. It numbered more than two thousand volumes, and included complete editions of Thackeray, Dickens, George, Eliot, and Scott; many volumes of poetry (Tennyson being his favourite poet); the library edition of John Ruskin's works; the Encyclopaedia Britannica; standard theological works and biographies; a first edition of "Oliver Twist"; and a first issue of Richardson's "Pamela."



At the age of fourteen he was put on full plan, and at once became popular as a boy-preacher. Frequently he had to stand on a stool in order to be seen by the congregation. His companion at this time was Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, the well-known American divine, who often accompanied him to his appointments. Possessed of a beautiful voice, a mind well-stored, and a real love for preaching, his services were much sought after, and his popularity grew with the years. In his native county and in Staffordshire there are few Nonconformist pulpits in which he has not ministered; and he even preached in Hednesford Parish Church. The Rev. Thomas Richards urged him to enter the ministry, but lack of funds made that impossible. He responded to so many calls to preach that he had only ten free Sundays in twenty-five years. "If I could not preach I could not live," he often remarked.

When the Cannock Chase coalfield was being developed, in the seventies, numbers of miners with their families removed thence from Shropshire, and among them were the Stanleys. Into the work of the Church at Littleworth young Albert threw himself with zeal. A great revival took place, in which he was the leading spirit. It spread to the collieries; prayer-meetings were held in the pits; at one colliery the management provided New Testaments for all the employees. In the midst of that revival the leader met with a serious accident at his work, and had to be removed to Stafford Infirmary. For many days he lay in a critical condition. When the crisis was at its height a special prayer-meeting was held at the little chapel, and let it be explained as it may, from that evening improvement began. Though he carried the marks of that illness to the end, and was permanently lame, he lived to do the best part of his life-work. He was unfitted to work again in the mine, but was given lighter work at the weighing machine. While thus engaged the miners would take their complaints to him, in the absence of any agent, and he got into the habit of acting as intermediary with the officials of the colliery. When the Cannock Chase Miners' Association was formed he was appointed agent—at the age of twenty-three—a position he occupied as long as he lived.

No body of men could have been served more devotedly than those Cannock Chase miners. Many tempting positions were offered him, but he would not accept any position which would sever his connection with them, or would prevent him from continuing his work as a preacher. His work as miners' agent was so thorough and earnest, and his manner so persuasive, that he won the confidence both of masters and men. In his meetings his religion was never in the background. "I will not sully my Christianity" he would say, and as with homely eloquence he talked upon mining topics men were moved to the depths.

During the strike for a minimum wage in 1893 he toiled day and night; churches and platforms were opened to him throughout Staffordshire, and support was won for his cause. He risked everything in that struggle—even his much-loved books were pledged to obtain bread for the women and children. When at the end of sixteen weeks it was settled at the historic Rosebery Conference, and he returned to report the result, ten thousand miners waited for hours in the open air on a wintry day, snow falling heavily. His first act was to ask them to sing "Praise ye the Lord, 'tis good to raise our hearts and voices in His praise." The men reverently bared their heads, and sang with real heart-praise the verses as he lined them out. It was a spectacle so impressive that no one who took part could ever forget it. Owing to his powers of conciliation, Cannock Chase has been freer from strikes than most mining districts. The employers knew his character and trusted his honesty; and he knew that there were always two sides to a case. Thus a way was found out of most difficulties, and he became known as a negotiator throughout the Midland Counties. On rare occasions his men seemed refractory, but he could always win them to his side. At the end of the minimum wage strike in 1912

the majority. were dissatisfied, and resentment was keen. To their leader it was a great trial; he with others had done his best, and the actual gains were not small, though not all the men had demanded. When he faced them, for a few moments they interrupted and complained; after a dozen sentences they listened ; at the end of his speech a vote of approval was unanimously passed. It was a veritable triumph !

When County Councils were formed he was elected for Hednesford, and never again had he to fight for his seat. He served on all the important committees, and won respect from Tory, squires and local earls. He was secretary of the Midland Miners' Federation, working along with Mr. Enoch Edwards, M.P., another loyal Primitive Methodist; and was also assistant secretary to the National Miners' Federation. In the larger field of trades unionism he was honoured for his straight dealing and Christian integrity. When he moved a resolution on the Eight Hours' Bill at the Trades Union Congress his opponent was Mr. Straker, of Northumberland, who very reluctantly took the position. "You have nothing to fear," said a colleague, "Stanley is moving the resolution, and he never says anything discourteous." For many years he was the special British correspondent of the *Musée Social*, and by this means became acquainted with leading social, religious, and political workers on the Continent. Through one of these friends Count Tolstoi heard of him, and was so interested to learn of his work as a local preacher, and so impressed by what, to the Count was the novelty of a man not merely preaching for nothing, but paying his own expenses, that in 1896 he sent Mr. Stanley Christmas greetings in the shape of a signed photogravure of himself, to show his appreciation of Mr. Stanley's devotion to his Church. That photogravure, naturally enough, was highly prized.

To recount the many other activities of Mr. Stanley's life would require more space than is at our disposal. Though he enjoyed his work, it was always tinged with regret that it left him. so little time for home-life and its duties. His home was his heaven; with his wife and his children he was at his best. "If I had only one smile, I would bring it home," he used to say. This love of home kept him from accepting invitations to stand for Parliament, though urged to do so again and again. In 1907, however, on the death of Sir Alfred Billson, only one man was thought of as a candidate for North-West Staffordshire. He yielded to the pressure, and threw himself heartily into the fray. His charming personality, his sterling merit, and his deep religion impressed the whole constituency. His meetings had the atmosphere of warm-hearted prayer-meetings, and if they did not commence with hymn and prayer, they often ended with the Doxology and the Benediction. The election was strenuous, but it was clean, and his majority was two thousand three hundred and forty-nine. Thus, in the year of our Centenary, a Primitive Methodist became Member for Mow Cop. As the result was announced his opponent, speaking to the crowd, said, as he clasped the victor's hand, "I have lost the election, but I have gained a friend." At each of the two subsequent elections his majority increased.

An incident, recorded by a journalist who himself saw it, will explain much of Albert Stanley's power. One evening, in the thick of his election campaign, he was told a miner's wife was dying, and had expressed a wish to see him. To know of such a wish was to comply with it. He left his car in the street, though a meeting awaited his arrival, and proceeded along a few back streets to the house in which the sick woman lay. There he remained for about an hour, speaking words of comfort and hope to the sick collier's wife. If he could help a soul in departing, that was of more importance than even his election meeting.

His work in Parliament, and the interests of his union, with the many other claims upon his energies, became too great a strain. An assistant was appointed, but it was evident the pressure could not be maintained. A nervous breakdown ensued, and though he rallied at times, his work was done. His last public service was when he preached in our church at Stoke-on-Trent. In comparative retirement he lived for two years, and in December last he passed away.

When he was buried men came from all parts of the country to do him honour. Employers and employed, members of all churches, were at the service in the Primitive Methodist Church at Hednesford. All classes and all parties bore testimony to the power of his life and influence. The procession to the churchyard was a quarter of a mile in length. A minister of his own Church paid a tribute of love to one who had been an inspiration in his youth, and a clergyman wrote and attached to a wreath of holly leaves: "In the life, atoning death, and perfect example of a sinless Saviour, Albert Stanley, Primitive Methodist preacher, and Richard Weston, Vicar of Burntwood, found the centre of their faith and inspiration and their duty, and this was sufficient to make them both one in Christ Jesus."

During his illness it was suggested that if only he could begin life again he would not live so strenuously, and certainly he would not preach every Sunday. The remark was not welcome. "No," said he, "I have nothing to regret. I would do just as I have done. I would live life as I have lived it." It is easy for those who knew him to understand the words of a northern miner's leader, in his monthly circular: "When the time comes for me to leave this house of clay I will ask no greater joy in the next world than to be privileged to meet again and enjoy the society of such men as Albert Stanley."

References

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