

CHAPTER VI THREE BUILDERS OF METHODIST FAME

THE year 1827 was an eventful one in Methodist history. In the nation at large a revolutionary spirit prevailed. There was a tendency to defy law, and to set at nought authority.

A revolutionary spirit is contagious. Its influence cannot be restricted. All institutions, more or less, are affected. It creeps into Church as well as into State. It demands ecclesiastical as well as political change. It was so in connection with the Methodist Church in the year 1827. A lawless spirit – a spirit that resented authority – had crept into the Connexion. The erection of an organ in one of the large chapels of Leeds, sanctioned by the Conference, was made the pretext for a rebellion. The characters of noted Methodist ministers were traduced. A secession took place. The malcontents boasted that they had taken away, from the Leeds societies alone, “twenty-eight local preachers, seven exhorters, fifty-six leaders, and nine hundred members.”

It was fortunate that the Conference of 1827 had a strong man in the chair – one who stood at least on a par with any of his illustrious predecessors. John Stephens had been elected President. “A noble person; fine temper; superior mind; an excellent preacher”; such was his character as given by a contemporary. John Stephens was born in Cornwall. He had great natural ability. From a youthful miner he became a distinguished preacher, had charge of some of the most important Circuits, and, in 1827, was elected President of the Conference.

This was the man who had to deal with the Leeds secession. He did so in a very effective manner. In an address, delivered at Leeds, speaking of the leading spirits in the unhappy division, he said: “Would to God that I could have introduced these persons to the deathbed of an old friend of mine, who got to heaven by the skin of his teeth. He had been an active agent in a division in a certain tow; and, soon after the separation, he found that he could not have everything his own way because they all wanted to be masters. His head was sick, and his heart faint; and he begged permission to return to the old Connexion. He was received; but he never lifted up his head again among his brethren with confidence. God had forgiven him, but he never could forgive himself. ‘Oh, sir!’ said he, ‘I was instrumental in taking away two or three hundred souls, but I could not keep them together; they were therefore turned adrift, and many of them got into the world. When I think of these souls my heart is almost fit to break.’ This man came to his deathbed. It fell to my lot, as it accorded with my inclination, to visit him. The blood of souls was in his skirts, and he sank deeper and deeper into despair.... I talked with him, and prayed with him; but the heavens were as brass.... It seemed as if God had shut up His bowels of tender mercy against him. He continued so till near midnight, when one glimmering ray of light darted into his mind.... The little ray brightened into a flood of light, and the next day he died happy in God.”¹

In view of the story that we have to tell, these eloquent words have increased pathos.

Three sons of this “remarkable man” (as Dr. Smith terms him) in the early days came to South Australia. Their names were Samuel, John, and Edward. In different ways they helped to lay the foundations of the Colony. Samuel represented the pastoral and agricultural interests; John, the press; and Edward, commerce.

SAMUEL STEPHENS

Samuel Stephens was the first adult colonist to put his foot on South Australian soil. He came, as we have seen, by the *Duke of York* in 1836, and landed at Kangaroo Island. On the voyage out, service was conducted by him each Sunday, and on

¹ Smith's *History of Methodism*.

Wednesday evenings. He was sent out by the South Australian Company as its first manager, and was the leading spirit at the Kangaroo Island settlement.

Samuel Stephens married Miss Charlotte Hudson Beare, a fellow-passenger. In this way he became related to Mr. William L. Beare, who, as a lad, came out in the same vessel, and who "continues to this day."

Every detail in relation to the pioneers and their mode of life is of value, and will become increasingly so as the years roll by.

From the letters of early emigrants we get glimpses of the son of the Rev. John Stephens and his new surroundings. Under the guidance of these we see several tents and rude huts not far from the beach at Nepean Bay, Kangaroo Island. A number of people are moving about the beach, some dressed in smock-frocks and gaiters. A boat is being rowed from an emigrant vessel to the shore. Presently depth of water fails. The passengers are either carried by the sailors or wade through the water to the beach. They are met by Samuel Stephens, and conducted to his tent. Lunch is prepared. He takes them to see the site on which his cottage is to be built. It is on a gentle slope. In the foreground there are native shrubs almost down to the water's edge, and a fine view of the ocean. There are several Cashmere goats, imported by the South Australian Company, browsing the herbage. Some poultry are busy examining the nature of the new country. Cattle there is none. Mr. Stephens and his party go for a short walk in the bush. They come to a piece of land that has been cleared. It is a burial-ground. Already there are two graves in it. How very suggestive! What a lesson it reads in human mortality! How soon the most recent and smallest community needs a cemetery! As soon as we provide homes for the living, a place must be prepared for the dead. The party walk back to the beach gathering shells and sponges. Farewell words are spoken. The visitors take their seats in the boat. Samuel Stephens goes back to his tent; while the sailors pull for the emigrant vessel, whose destination is Holdfast Bay.

After Colonel Light had pronounced against Kangaroo Island as a place of settlement, Samuel Stephens and other settlers removed to the mainland. He imported the first horse into the new Colony. One of the pioneers (Jacob Abbott), who will occupy a prominent position in these pages, describes his first meeting with the horse and its owner. Samuel Stephens was walking down the North Terrace of the embryo city, leading his newly-imported horse. A short distance away was a group of blackfellows. Directly they caught sight of the animal "their expressions of astonishment and horror were indescribable." The men shouted! The lubras screamed! The children sought refuge behind their parents. Gradually they became calmer, muttering, "Big kangaroo! Oh, big kangaroo!"

Alas! the noble-spirited Samuel Stephens soon came to an untimely end. About 1840 (four years after his arrival in the Colony), riding down one of the hills between Mount Barker and Adelaide, his horse fell. The rider was thrown; picked up in an unconscious state; and died a few hours later. He was esteemed by all, and general regret was felt among the emigrants. He has been described to the writer as "a perfect gentleman and model husband." His remains lie (far from the burial-place of his honoured father) in the West Terrace Cemetery, Adelaide.

It was Samuel Stephens who granted the use of the South Australian Company's store for the first Methodist service conducted on Kangaroo Island. Shortly afterwards his name appears as contributing two guineas towards the erection of the first Methodist chapel in Hindley Street, Adelaide. These are the only references that we can find to him in connection with Methodism in this Colony.

JOSEPH RAYNER STEPHENS

Before dealing with John Stephens, passing reference must be made to his brother, Joseph Rayner. Though he did not come to this Colony, yet indirectly he had

some connection with it. Strange that a father, who apparently was conservative in his instincts, should have at least two sons who became ultra-radical. The President, who had to deal with the unhappy strife at Leeds, had the mortification, a few years later, of seeing two of his sons in a position of antagonism to the Connexion.

Like his father, Joseph Rayner Stephens was a man of great ability – energetic and eloquent. He was received on trial in 1825. In 1832 he was appointed to Ashton-under-Lyne. Here a society was formed to agitate for the disestablishment of the Church of England. The young Methodist preacher was asked to give the movement his sympathy and support. To this he consented. At the inaugural meeting a very able address was delivered by him in favour of Disestablishment. He went further, taking an official position in connection with the society, and giving the weight of his energy and ability to secure the end for which it had been formed.

To say the least, his action was unwise and unfortunate. It had a tendency to stir up strife and division. The Methodist Church, as a body, was not unfriendly to the Establishment. There was a tacit understanding that Methodist preachers would not ally themselves to the movement for separation. Complaints were made to the Chairman of the District (Robert Newton). The case was tried at the District Meeting. Joseph Rayner Stephens was requested to resign his position as secretary of the Church Separation Society, and to cease working in its interests. The verdict of the District Meeting was supported by the Conference. Not willing to give the pledge, Mr. Stephens retired from the Connexion.

JOHN STEPHENS

The preceding sketch brings John Stephens, who took a prominent part in the founding of South Australia, on the scene.

In Chapter III reference was made to the *Christian Advocate* and its editor. That editor was John Stephens, so named after his illustrious father.

Originally the *Christian Advocate* claimed to be a Methodist paper, though not officially connected with the conference. Some of the leading preachers wrote for it. The editor became enamoured of the radical spirit of the times. Multitudes read the paper. Dr Smith (no mean authority) says: “The paper was conducted with ability. Its articles were exceedingly plausible; and, in the absence of any counteracting agency, few were able to detect its fallacies.” It sat in severe editorial judgment upon Dr. Bunting. It is only fair to say that it dealt out to other religious bodies that incurred its displeasure much the same treatment that was meted to Methodism. The paper was condemned by the Conference of 1833, and the discussion that took place has been put on record: “Theophilus Lessey spoke with great ability against the course pursued by the *Christian Advocate*. William Atherton, in very strong terms, condemned the conduct of those preachers who wrote for it. George Marsden reminded preachers who contributed to its columns that their writings were infrequently read in pot-houses by drunkards and scoffers. James Dixon spoke of Dr. Bunting as being too great to be injured by things so little; yet his happiness might be affected by it, and the Conference ought to express some censure upon the paper. Richard Reece expressed the hope that all the preachers who had in any way given their names to the support of the paper would withdraw them.”² These critics were some of the most eminent men in the Conference. Such sweeping condemnation would neither curb the impetuous spirit of the editor, nor make the tone of his articles less acrid.

The judgment of the Conference on the “Joseph Rayner Stephens Case” added fuel to editorial fire. Under the impression that his brother Joseph had a grievance, John Stephens took up the cudgels on his behalf. He was a hard hitter, and, Methodist history says, sometimes very unfair. We state the case in the most charitable way. Dr.

² Dr. Smith's *History of Methodism*.

Smith says: "*The Christian Advocate*, impelled alike by the principles that it had adopted, and the interest that the editor felt in his brother, exerted its utmost influence to rouse the members of the Methodist Society to rebellion." He further says that the members and congregations who were influenced by the paper were "beyond calculation."

The paper took a prominent part in the "Warrenite Agitation," after which both it and editor pass away from view.

It is in connection with the founding of South Australia that John Stephens somewhat abruptly rises again. That he was known to George Fife Angas, one of the founders of this Colony, is evident from a passage in Mr. Angas' published life. He says: "I went over to Blackfriars to see John Stephens."

The next we meet with him is in connection with the publication of a book. The title is *The Land of Promise*. It was written in the interests of the new Colony of South Australia, and published in 1838. A second edition was soon called for, and published under the title of *The Rise and Progress of South Australia*. A copy of this edition the writer has been privileged to see. It consists of more than two hundred pages, and reveals considerable literary instinct.

In 1843 John Stephens is in Adelaide. He established the Adelaide *Observer*. Later on, the *Register* came into his hands. The same characteristics that were so marked in England were manifested here. He was an Ishmaelite indeed. By the courtesy of the present proprietors of the *Register*, the writer has been able to glean the following respecting his colonial career: - He "had great difficulties with his literary business, as he wielded a trenchant pen, and enemies rose up all round him, some of whom sought redress for their imagined wrongs at the hands of the law. At the time of his death his name had appeared nine times in the Cause List of the Supreme Court as defendant in libel actions." Many advertisements were withdrawn from his paper. He is represented as having "decision of character, indomitable pluck, and untiring energy in an eminent degree." He was a staunch teetotaler. In the various actions that were brought against him, it was his conviction that he suffered for righteousness' sake. One who knew him well in South Australia has left on record the following: - "He was the unflinching and unvarying advocate of civil and religious liberty; the truthful and uncompromising exposé of every proved corruption and abuse." It is probable that this free Colony to-day owes much to the powerful pen of John Stephens. He died in 1850. A contemporary says: "The victim of the severity of his own discipline and labour, but not until he had established, on a permanent basis, the reputation and success of the *Register*." Business worries, and the death of a beloved son, helped to break him down.

His portrait, in oils, hangs in the library of the *Register* office. The face is a striking one, animated and intellectual. It gives the impression of a man surcharged with nervous energy.

What a remarkable career! All that is mortal of John Stephens, - once editor of the *Christian Advocate* - the man who moved multitudes - who sat in bitter editorial judgment upon Jabez Bunting, Robert Newton, and other eminent ministers of the Methodist Connexion - the brother of Josieph Rayner Stephens, and son of one of the ablest men who sat in the chair of the British Conference, - all that is mortal of this remarkable man lies, with the remains of his brother Samuel, in the West Terrace Cemetery, Adelaide, South Australia.

The stone that marks his resting-place is wasting away. Some of the letters are obliterated. The curator of the cemetery went to considerable trouble to decipher the inscription. The following is copy: -

IN MEMORY OF
JOHN STEPHENS,

WHO DIED
NOVEMBER 28TH, 1850,
AGED 44 YEARS.

The memory of his worth shall never cease,
Upright in all his ways: his end was peace;
But though sincere, affectionate, and just,
His Saviour's merits were his only trust.

EDWARD STEPHENS

Of his early history in England we are not in a position to speak. We believe that he came to this Colony from Hull.

Joseph and John Stephens forsook the Church of their fathers. Edward carried his Methodism over the sea, and, as the next chapter will show, was a powerful factor in laying the foundations of a great and influential Church. He was an early emigrant. Samuel came by the first vessel, in 1836. Edward and his wife arrived by the *Coromandel* about five months later. He came to the Colony as cashier and accountant of the South Australian Company's Band, bringing with him a portable banking-house and iron chests. When he arrived the site for the city had not been fixed, consequently he had to take up his abode in a bent, not far from the beach, at Holdfast Bay. From a private letter, written by a niece of Mrs. Edward Stephens, and published in the *Methodist Recorder* (20th January 1898), we take the following: -

I remember Aunt Stephens telling me that she and her husband went out in the second ship of emigrants:³ he in charge of the first gold for the currency of the new Colony. They took out a house with them; that is to say, the material for a house ready prepared. But it was so difficult to fix a site for the town (afterwards Adelaide), that the material lay on the shore until at last it became unsuitable.... Meanwhile a camp of tents was formed, and, as theirs was the largest tent, service was held in it every Sunday. Aunt used to describe the pretty sight, - the settlers wending their way, at the sound of the bell, from the long line of tents, and under the green trees, to morning service.

Also, I remember her speaking of those most anxious days when her husband was away prospecting for a suitable site for the new town, and rumours were brought to the camp from time to time of the dark deeds of the natives, and how often she sank upon the chests containing the gold in fear and trembling, lest a raid upon the treasure in her husband's absence should be made.

We may remark, in passing, that Mrs. Stephens' fears respecting the natives were not groundless. About three years after the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Stephens, tidings were conveyed to Adelaide that a number of white people, who had escaped from a wreck, had been murdered by the blacks. The wreck had occurred on the coast, near Lacedpede Bay. The country at this time was little known. However, under instructions from the Government, a search-party was organised, amongst whom were three blacks of Encounter Bay. The country was scoured, and a ghastly discovery made. Partially covered with sand, the party found legs, arms, and other portions of human bodies. Gathering the fragments together, by the aid of a doctor, they made them out to be those of two men, three women, and a female child of ten; two male children, and a female infant. The bodies were dreadfully bruised, and stripped of every rag. In some of the native wurlies male and female garments were found, drenched with blood; also letters, newspapers, the leaves of a Bible, and part of the wrecked ship's log. Other bodies of the murdered people were discovered. The body of one woman was found in a wombat hole with a Bible, in which was a list of births, deaths, and marriages. The number killed was about twenty-six. It appears that the

³ Here there is a slight error. The *Coromandel*, in which Mr. and Mrs. Stephens sailed, was not the second ship.

shipwrecked people were guided by the natives into the interior. They were induced to separate into two companies, and they killed. As the search-party followed up the tracks, they noticed that occasionally the marks of the children's feet disappeared. It was evident that the little ones became tired with their long journey, and were carried by their friends. The native women who had been captured said the white people had been divided into two parties, then some of the natives rushed upon them and held them, while others beat them upon the heads with waddies until they were dead. It was an awful outrage. This much may be said in extenuation: the blacks suffered much from lecherous whites. Like other savage tribes, they did not distinguish between the innocent and guilty, but took revenge on any who came in their way.

The search-party rounded up as many of the natives as they could, got evidence against the leaders, and hung them in the she-oak trees, over the graves of their victims. The bodies were left hanging in the trees, and the natives warned not to touch them. They remained in suspension until dissolution set in.

The ill-fated vessel that carried these unfortunate passengers was the brigantine *Maria*, bound for Van Diemen's Land.

Some of the natives were treacherous, ferocious, and revengeful, especially the great Murray tribe. No wonder that Mrs. Stephens, who had been delicately brought up in the Old Land, was sometimes afraid as she sat in her tent amongst the trees at Holdfast Bay.

In public matters connected with the young Colony, Edward Stephens took a prominent part. He became manager of the Bank of South Australia. In addition to his work as a banker he edited a weekly journal, *The Adelaide Miscellany*; but it did not pay, - he lost £400 by this literary venture. He was also a Member of Parliament, and, judging from a specimen of his oratory that the author has seen, must have been a very effective public speaker. The influence that he exerted amongst the early emigrants was evidently great. There was a saying amongst them to the effect that he had "more power than the Governor." So far as the writer has been able to ascertain, he resigned his position as manager of the Bank of South Australia in 1854, returned to England, and died a few years after. Like his brother John, his nervous system broke down. "Able and clever" is the description that an old colonist gives of him.

Edward Stephens was brother-in-law to the gifted Methodist preacher, Richard Treffry, jun., who died in Penzance in 1838. No doubt he owed much to his excellent wife, of whom the editor of the *Methodist Recorder* (20th January 1898) says: "She was the daughter of the late Mr. Baron, of Hull, whose tablet may be seen on the walls of Waltham Street Chapel. Mrs. Edward Stephens, in later life, was often seen in London Methodist circles. She and her sisters, Mrs. Richard Treffry... and Mrs. Edward Corderoy, were a trio of sweet saintliness, walking ever more in light and love."