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SETH
SWEETSER, D. D.**

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Sketch of Rev. Seth Sweetser, D. D. by Egbert C. Smyth

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EGBERT C. SMYTH

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OF

REV. SETH SWEETSER, D. D.

By REV. EGBERT C. SMYTH, D. D.,
PROFESSOR IN ANDOVER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

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SETH SWEETSER.

DEATH sometimes reveals the greatness of a life. On the afternoon of March 28, 1878, a remarkable audience gathered in the Central Church at Worcester. The rain was falling heavily, the season the most inclement of the year, yet the large church was full. Men were there from the halls of learning and science, from the Senate Chamber at Washington, from bench and bar, pulpit and hospital, counting-room and the bedsides of the sick, men of various faiths and callings, from many villages and cities, all assembled to do honor to one whose highest distinction, like that of his Master, had been to be the servant of all.

There is a natural and reasonable desire on the part of those impressed by such a spectacle, or by other expressions of public esteem, to know somewhat more fully respecting the early life and personal history of one thus honored at his decease. It is also a task not only grateful but inspiring to study a character and career bearing the unmistakable stamp of genuine goodness.

Seth Sweetser, the subject of this sketch, was born in Newburyport, Mass., March 15, 1807, and died at seven o'clock Sunday morning, March 24, 1878, having thus a little more than completed his seventy-first year. He was the fifth child in a family of five sisters and four brothers. All but one grew up to maturity. Five—two brothers, one an officer, and both active members in our churches, and three sisters—survive him. His father and mother were from Charlestown, for several generations the ancestral home. The mother was a daughter of Benjamin Frothingham, a captain of artillery before the war of Revolution, and a participant in that pro-

tracted conflict from its beginning to its close, rising in this service to the rank of major. At the battle of Monmouth he was struck by a ball, taken up for dead, thrown into the dead-cart and carried off the field. The sword-belt which saved his life hung in his chamber to his dying day. His wife was a woman of remarkable courage, conscientiousness, and devotion. Some British soldiers coming unexpectedly to her home, she frightened them away by causing them to suppose that she was about to pour boiling water on their heads. A fire in the roof of her house she extinguished herself, mounting for the purpose by a ladder. "My only fear for my husband," she remarked, alluding to the perils of battle and of the war,—"my only fear is that he should fail of doing his duty." On the morning of the battle of Bunker Hill, Capt. Frothingham came to his home in Charlestown, and said to his wife, "I must go to the cannon, but I have engaged a man with a cart and oxen to take you out of town." The brave woman—the cart having been loaded with what it was thought best to carry—started with her five children, the oldest only about nine years of age, walking herself by the side of the cart, and carrying in her hand some china wrapped in a cloth. As they crossed Malden River they were fired upon. They wandered on until night, asking at every house, "Can you take us in?" and receiving the invariable reply, "No, we are full." At last, about nightfall, a shelter was found in the entry of a house, and a loaf of bread, which the mother's care had provided, was drawn out from a long meal-bag, broken up, and distributed to the children.

One of these wanderers, whose life was thus early imperilled, lived to be the mother of a clergyman widely known in the Congregational churches of New England. Another became the mother of Dr. Sweetser. She inherited her mother's large conscientiousness and transmitted it to her distinguished son. She was also a woman of much decision of character, of tender and constant affection and great piety. Her early religious life developed under the ministry of Rev. Dr. Morse, in whose study were signed those articles of union which were virtually incorporated into the constitution of Andover Theological Seminary, and largely determined its character,—that Seminary

which was afterwards to educate his parishioner's son, and in turn to be served by him as president of its Board of Trustees.

The father of Dr. Sweetser belonged to a family which is said to have been represented for more than two hundred years in the First Church of Charlestown, a "Seth Switzer having joined the church in 1638, six years after its foundation." When, in 1802, his descendant, bearing the same name, moved to Newburyport, his opinions appear to have agreed with those afterwards known as Unitarian, though he was not a professor of religion. His wife urged him to institute family prayers. He said that he could not conduct them. "Then say the Lord's Prayer," was her answer. He yielded to her gentleness and firmness, went on enlarging his petitions, and grew more devout. In 1816, Leonard Withington, now in the sixty-second year of his honored ministry, came to Oldtown. Mr. Sweetser was pleased with the young preacher's ability, and to the joy of his wife, offered to attend upon Mr. Withington's ministrations, though the church was a mile away. Eventually, through the divine blessing on this preaching, and the wife's and mother's affectionate fidelity, not only her husband, but also eight of her children sat together with her at the communion. Dr. Sweetser always spoke of his father with great deference and even reverence. He was a shrewd and wise merchant, a man of fine personal appearance, of great dignity and self-control, and never spoke of himself as infirm, though he lived to be eighty years of age. His pastor once said of him that "he was about perfect in his family." Dr. Sweetser grew up in an almost typical New England home, — a large family, where the sports of Thanksgiving day and of winter evenings were shared by young and old, where the children received a goodly share of direct parental supervision and training, and where the Catechism was faithfully inculcated every Sunday night. On the same evening, also, as often as it recurred, it was the mother's habit to gather her children together for prayer. The father's words, "Your mother wants you," were a sufficient signal. While the son was in college his mother always took him to her room and prayed with him on his return. As a boy he worked in his father's store, "shovelling salt, selling rum with the rest, lighting fire on cold winter morn-

ings with the flint and tinder-box or by borrowing coals from a neighboring store." When it was decided that he should go to college he began his preparation at the Newburyport Academy, then at the height of its prosperity, under Mr. Alfred W. Pike, and numbering many pupils who have since been distinguished in various callings.¹

"As a fellow-townsmen," writes Rev. Horatio Wood, of Lowell, Mass., "my knowledge of the late Rev. Dr. Sweetser goes back to early play-days and pre-college times. I do not know that there was anything remarkable to record in his boyhood and first youth. He always maintained a proper and grave demeanor, and yet was never without a ready smile, and had a vein of humor. He was affable and companionable. He was diligent and painstaking in preparation for college. When ascending the last steps toward the entrance to the college gate, he enjoyed and profited much by the pastoral and fatherly advice, the thorough teachings, scholarly influence, and direct spurring, it may be, of the Rev. Dr. Withington, of Newburyport. As his chum in college through the four years, I bear willing testimony to his kindly fellowship, uniformly correct deportment, strict observance of study hours, and diligent improvement of them. While his general scholarship was of a high order, he took especial delight in mathematical calculations. He was distinguished in this branch.² When the most formidable difficulty of figures faced him he would wrestle vigorously, and never give up till he had the mastery. One night, sorely perplexed and wellnigh beaten, the midnight lamp going out, he threw himself despairingly into the arms of sleep, but when the morning broke, he woke, and as soon shouted at the top of his voice, 'Chum, I have got it out all right, clear as day!' Of course his college rank was highest in mathematics. On account of his scholarship, his elevated sentiments, his social qualities, and moral character sound to the core, he was respected and beloved by the class. Among his intimate friends were Felton, afterward president of the college; Stearns, afterward president of Amherst College; William M. Rogers, subsequently minister in Boston; and E. S. Dixwell, soon well known as principal of the Latin School in Boston.

"His religious life was well assured. It had been well grounded by his pastor and his pious mother, who had endeavored to fortify him against the vices of college youth. She followed up her teachings and

¹ I refer to Mr. Pike with peculiar pleasure, from gratitude as one of his pupils, though at a much later period and in another town and State. Of those who attended the academy with young Sweetser and his brothers may be mentioned Rev. Drs. Rufus W. Clark, Chandler Robbins, John Pike, and Thomas M. Clark, bishop of Rhode Island; Rev. Paul Couch, Rev. Horatio Wood, Josiah L. Hale, Richard P. Buck, George Lunt, Jacob Stone, Edward S. Moseley, Samuel W. Stickney, Allen W. Dodge, Dr. Henry C. Perkins, Judge Bonney, of New York, and Edward S. Rand, Esq., of Boston.

² He afterwards assisted the eminent Prof. Farrar in mathematics and astronomy.

exhortations to him through the college course. If there were no necessity for it, it could not be without wholesome effect on his heart, ready to receive influence in the highest direction. It may seem superfluous to mention it, but it might stand to the credit of few students and is as meritorious as rare, that he strictly followed the habit of the daily reading of the Scriptures and of prayer."

The reflective and forecasting bent of his mind appears in the subject of his Commencement part, "Prospects of Young Men in the different Learned Professions." Graduating in 1827, he took charge for two years, in company with his classmates, Cornelius C. Felton and Henry R. Cleveland, of a rising school in Livingston County, N. Y., now known as Geneseo Academy. Two years followed at Harvard, as tutor. Among the students was Charles Sumner. In 1831, Mr. Sweetser entered Andover Seminary. His eyes had broken down from overwork, particularly early morning study, and copying late at night. A brother came with him, to read to him, and also to receive instruction. At the close of the year pupil and teacher went to Cambridge. Two boys went up also from Phillips Academy. One had stood first in Greek, the other in Latin. A professor examined them in his own room, and pacing up and down did his utmost to frighten them. At the close of the day the younger Sweetser sought out his brother in Mr. Felton's room. The older brother had received an intimation that his pupil's application was not likely to succeed. "Eben," he said, "if you do not get in, take the stage this night, and don't be seen round here." It was natural for him to be sensitive to the good opinion of those whom he respected, and behind his calm exterior there was an honorable ambition for excellence. He was spared in this case any mortification. His pupil received clean papers, yet, curiously enough, the two scholars from the Academy were conditioned each in the study in which he excelled, which shows that examining professors had not then become infallible.

When Dr. Sweetser's religious life began I do not know, nor, I presume, did he. His responsibility to God and his indebtedness to a crucified Redeemer had been among his earliest lessons. Life had opened for him under the solemn shadow of eternity. His cradle had been shone upon by the

star of the Nativity. His childhood had been watched over by that pure maternal love Jesus did not forget to honor even on the Cross. In early manhood he openly recognized his supreme obligation to devote himself to the service of God. His coming to Andover Seminary was such a confession, yet it was more than a year later before he joined, on profession of faith, the church in Oldtown, of which he remained a member until his death. His seminary life was a marked period in his history, a period not only of progress in mental discipline, but of great spiritual growth. He was not, one of his classmates informs me, active as a Christian, in the sense sometimes given to these words, but he laid broad and deep foundations in the study of God's word, in the discipline of his moral and spiritual powers, and in acquisition of useful learning. During his Senior year he participated, with some of his classmates, in missionary work, at Seabrook, N. H. There appears to have been no church there, and the services were held in a school-house.

I have been impressed by the tokens which have been preserved in various ways of the thoroughness with which at this time he examined into his motives of conduct, his aims in choosing the work of the ministry, and with the amount of culture of this sort which occupied these earlier years and the opening of his public career. It is on such hidden foundations that every stable and permanent ministry of spiritual truth must be reared. Caprice in life and career has marred many a pastorate, and the secret of much restlessness and changeableness and waste of power lies too often in the superficial character of the work done at the beginning. Some interesting reminiscences of Dr. Sweetser's connection with the Seminary as a student have been communicated to me for publication, by his classmate, Rev. H. A. Tracy:—

"In the autumn of 1831 there appeared on Andover Hill a tall, spare, grave man, who it was reported had come to join the Junior class in the Theological Seminary. Upon inquiry it was learned that he had come from Harvard University, where he had officiated as tutor for two years. He took lodgings upon the hill, and kept himself somewhat aloof from the Seminary. In a few days the class learned that he could not join in the study of Hebrew. . . . A disease of the eyes, or rather a weakness contracted by overtaxing them while a tutor in the University, compelled a disuse of