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**J. S. BASSETT**

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NORTH CAROLINA CONFERENCE,

Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

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J. S. BASSETT..... Editor.

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1901.

## THE LIFE AND CHARACTER OF WILLIAM HENRY BRANSON.\*

BY REV. T. N. IVEY, D. D.

The most thrilling chapter in the book of events covering the last fifteen decades is that which relates to the origin, growth, and triumph of Methodism. The central figure in this chapter is the itinerant preacher. Intensely human, largely endowed with the aggressive martial spirit, and surcharged with the spirit of Him whose love reached as deep into the depths of depravity as the area of sinstricken humanity was large, the Methodist itinerant preacher has made himself one of a distinct type of heroes.

Every vision of Methodist triumph inspheres a Methodist preacher. But it is a significant fact, and one which unfortunately is largely ignored, that no vision of Methodist triumph is complete without the presence of one who belongs to another distinctive type of heroes, and that one is the Methodist layman. Modest, faithful and active, he works both before, behind, and in the scene, and manipulates the machinery of that panorama, which, for over one hundred years, has been unrolling so grandly before the eyes of the world.

It is very appropriate that the subject of an annual address before the North Carolina Historical Society should be a Methodist layman. Especially is this true in the light of the fact, that since the organization of this Society, the Methodist preacher has been the subject of the annual address. We esteem it a great privilege to present to this audience the life and character of William Henry Branson.

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\*A Paper read before the N. C. Conference Historical Society at New Bern, N. C., December 4, 1900.

We all know him. For years he was one of the most prominent figures at our annual gatherings. A stalwart body, columnar, broad-chested, and large-limbed, with the red currents of health running unimpeded and exultant. A head whose front of broad brow, large honest blue eyes, virile sensitive mouth, and strong square chin was as striking as the facade of some Corinthian temple. A mind practical and incisive, quick to grasp the strategic points, and exercising mastery over the various problems of human action. A soul, warm with the divine breath, and speaking through sunny smiles, hearty hand-clasp, and sympathetic voice. This outlines the personality of William Henry Branson, a model layman of the people called Methodists in the goodly State of North Carolina. Cut off in the full flush of young manhood he forms a large part of our common heritage.

In the last year of the last century, there was born in Randolph county a man whose ancestors in the beginning of the 18th century came from Old England to assist in the heroic work of carving this republic out of wilderness and forest. This man was Thomas Branson. His character was a benediction to the section in which he lived. He had those qualities of mind and heart which can never be appraised in terms of dollars and cents. One who knew him said, "Never was there a more upright man than Thomas Branson." He married twice. His first wife was Mary Lewellyn, who proved a true helpmeet. His second wife was Miss Buck—a woman whose gentle heart and active mind well qualified her for mating with one of the worthiest of the untitled noblemen of the New World. From this union sprang William H. Branson. So it can be seen that he was born well. Heredity gave him a rich largess. In studying a man's life, it is necessary to study at least two other lives whose blending time is always when heart runs out to heart.

The arena in which William Branson the boy moved would not be considered ideal in this busy rapid time. The community was sparsely settled. Schools were few and of short term. This disadvantage, I am sorry to say, still exists in the God-blessed land of Carolina. The chances for communication with the outside world were few. The scream of the locomotive had not sent its echoes among the old hills of Southern Randolph. The heavy loaded wagon lumbered slowly on its way to Fayetteville or Salisbury. A trip to either place marked an epoch in the life of the average boy. The visit of the Methodist circuit rider was a rare event. To attend "meeting" at the old country church, to ride or walk miles to a party at a neighbor's house, to trudge gun in hand on Saturday afternoon through the mighty forests or sweep with eager dogs over the snow-covered hills, to eat frugal unadulterated fare, to bathe the face in the cool crisp mornings at the back door, to sleep right under the roof where rain at night makes sweetest music—this was the life of the country boy. William Branson's school days were few. These closed for him in his eleventh year. His father died when he was a very small boy. His after life showed to what advantage he utilized his school advantages. There is pathos in the fact that the little country school house was his academy and college and that he was forced to graduate at such a tender age. Yet there is inspiration in the thought of what he made of his few advantages. Within the periphery of that short simple school life he crammed a force sufficient to project him as a mighty force into that larger life which awaited him. The story of his boyhood days is full of instruction to those of limited opportunities.

When he was about twelve years old he left the old roof nest and went out into that larger world which, doubtless, had often beckoned to him. Near the site of



the battle of Guilford Court House had sprung up a busy town by the name of Greensboro, named for the hero of the famous battle. In this town was a merchant by the name of Odell. He grew up with the town. Upright, energetic, and far-seeing, J. A. Odell's life has become one of the foundations of the material prosperity not only of Greensboro but of his native State. He has ever been a tower of strength to Methodism in his Conference. From the home of Thomas Branson, he brought a thrifty, accomplished woman, a half-sister of the subject of this paper, to install her as high priestess at his home altar. The fires of love burned upon this altar. God was in this home and is to this day. At the age of twelve, William Branson entered this home. Fortunate boy! Had he entered a home of different character, Methodism would have been deprived of a model layman, and the theme of the speaker on this occasion would be different. Happy is the boy, who, on leaving his home, is permitted to enter another home where Christ dwells. William entered at once the store of J. A. Odell, and began to lay the foundations of his wonderful business success. He was not ashamed to work for his mere board. This he did for four years. In his labors, there was no thought of undertime and overtime. "Do the work, and do it well" was his motto. Everybody fell in love with the polite, winsome boy, who was obliging at home, in the store, on the street. He evinced a material affection for his step-sister, whom he implicitly obeyed. Mr. Odell and his wife remarked, with pardonable pride, that "William, in all his life, never gave them any trouble."

It is not surprising that William Branson gave his heart to God when he was only seventeen years old. If there is any surprise, it is that this step was not taken sooner. He was converted in old West Market Street church, of which the sainted Shockley D. Adams was pas-

tor at the time. He at once connected himself with the church. The relations between God and the converted boy must have been beautiful. The divine hand was upon him, and Christ was regnant in the heart. Because his heart was pure, his thoughts, words and life were pure. No one can say that he ever heard a profane or vulgar word to come from William's lips. The "sanctuary" idea of the church is a fatally favorite one with new and old converts. They look upon church membership as the door which opens into a delightful place of refuge where all that is to be done is to wander idly along purling streams and through green pastures. Hence the church is cumbered with a huge mass of unutilized material. The majority of the operatives in God's great factory are idlers. The business which would allow the waste which characterizes the church of God could not last through one year. William Branson looked upon the church as an army in which he was a soldier to fight the battle of our Lord; a school, in which he was to be both teacher and pupil, teaching and ever learning the mighty truths of God; a factory, in which he was an operative, working for the product of a pure heart; a hospital, in which he was a trained nurse to minister to those wounded by sin; a harvest field, in which he was to reap the golden grain for heavenly garnerers. He at once became a worker for the Lord. He was almost immediately made steward, an office which he filled with fidelity and success. He was a "prayer-meeting and Sunday school" layman. May the tribe increase in these border! His religion made him glad. The joy of the Lord was his strength. Very few ever saw him downcast or doubtful. There was sunshine in his glance, a picture in his smile, a loving message in his words, a tonic in his life. He loved to work in revival meetings. Though somewhat timid, he never hesitated to approach a sinner and invite him to

the cross of Christ. The beauty of it is that he never waited for a revival to throw the arms of his love around a sinner and ask him to come to Jesus. He was truly "instant in season and out of season."

There are two places where a layman of the truest type must receive his equipment—the mercy seat and his own home. In old West Market Street church, William Branson first bowed at the former place. He approached for the first time the latter place, where, in 1885, he led to the marriage altar Miss Clara Sergeant, of Greensboro. Then he laid the foundations of a home which became to him and others a "fountain of living waters." Let one, President Kilgo, who knew much of this home, speak: "William Branson and Clara Sergeant were *married*. She was to him an ideal woman. Genial, sympathetic, loving, and faithful, she was to him a poem, the passion of whose movement was a divine impulse keeping alive the diviner sides of his nature. With him, she could never degenerate into a soft social show; with her, he could never become a hardened man of the market. Society is at its best or at its worst in the home. In this house it was at its best. Mr. Branson had his business day, but when that was ended, he gave himself to his family. The City of Durham will not forget the evening rides with his family. The sight was a sermon on 'How to love, and be loved.'"

The model Methodist layman must be a good business man. The Methodist Episcopal Church is the most highly and finely organized body in the world, either secular or ecclesiastical. It touches the world at many points. It both gives to, and takes away from, secular life in many ways. It deals not only in souls, but in men and money. The Parliament of Twelve in Jerusalem ages ago decreed that "it is not reason that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." This is peculiarly true in the Methodist church. The preacher must have his lay helpers, or fall under the