

JAMES EDGAR SNOWDEN¹

BY TRUMAN O. DOUGLASS

In the year of our Lord, 1914, Brother Snowden is fully qualified to speak for himself. In a communication of recent date, he writes in substance as follows:

To write one's own history is a difficult and delicate task. To avoid egotism and yet tell the truth is not an easy matter.

Fortunately there is a place to begin—the place and date of one's birth. Of this I have nothing to say, only to report what my parents told me and what they wrote down in the Holy Bible. According to this testimony I was born August 4, 1834, in the village of South Charleston, Clark County, Ohio, in a log cabin. I make note of this because it places me in the company of the great men of earth who were born in a little village, or in a log cabin. The log cabin always seems to say:

"Lives of great men all remind us,
We can make our lives sublime,"

and,

"Honor and shame from no condition rise.
Act well your part; there's where the glory lies."

One of the earliest recollections of my home life was the public confession by my father and mother of their Christian faith; not that they were not Christians long before this, but this was their first good opportunity to unite with the church.

I came of a religious stock, like Timothy of old. My faith, also, was first in my grandmother. Often as a boy I was hushed into silence as she in the morning would retire to another room and close the door; then I would hear her voice in song, and when the song ceased I knew she was talking with God, and I was very still. Christianity's grandest opportunity for the conquest of the world is in the home, dedicated to God in the training of children in the ways of holiness, Bible reading, prayer and church attendance. I cannot remember the time when in our home family worship was not a part of each day's program. The Bible was read and prayer offered early in the morning every day. As I recall the prayer, there was something of a sameness in it, but it was out of a sincere heart and it had its effect upon my life. One petition always came at the close of the prayer: "And when done with us on earth, receive us to thyself in Heaven." Nearly a half century after I had gone from the old home, one morning God called my father to him-

¹The manuscript copy of this article was recently found in "some abandoned rubbish" in San Diego, California, by E. E. Griswold, a former Iowan, but now of that city. We do not know that it has been previously published. Mr. Snowden died in Cedar Falls, Iowa, April 9, 1918.—Editor.

self, and his prayer was answered. Later mother and two sisters were called, and again my father's prayer was answered. I am the only member of the family left; some day soon, father's prayer will be answered again.

My educational advantages were limited. For a time I attended an academy in Springfield, Ohio, where I took some advanced studies. I had some private lessons in Greek, but circumstances were such that I was sent out into the ministry without such preparation as is necessary.

When I was thirteen years of age I passed through what was to me a wonderful experience. Old things passed away, and all things became new. How much was merely emotional I do not know, but I know that God was there and spoke to my soul. This new life needed training, but



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the church did not know how to give me the guidance I needed. In a measure I lost the fervor of the new life, but I still continued to pray.

At the age of twenty-one I was baptized and received into the church. About this time a friend invited me to a cottage prayer meeting. I promised him I would go on condition that he would not call upon me to take any part. But another led the meeting, and I was called upon to pray. It was the beginning of an active Christian life.

I do not remember the time when I did not feel that I ought to preach. I used to preach to my sister when we were children. I think this was partly the outworking of parental influences. Before my birth mother prayed that it might be a man child, and if a man, that he should be a minister. I had the honor and pleasure of being my parents' pastor for twelve years.

I was licensed to preach in 1859, and July 4 of that year I preached my first sermon. In 1860 I was ordained to the ministry by the Protestant Methodist Church, and in this communion I labored for ten years.

My first parish was a home missionary field of large dimensions, embracing a number of counties in northern Ohio. I certainly had a "peculiar people" to deal with. It was a hard field, but it was good for me. I learned things there that schools do not teach. There is nothing better for a young preacher than to have hard problems, and meet the difficulties of life in such a field. A home missionary field is the place where a young man gets a diploma worth having.

In 1867 I married Miss Kate Davis of Lebanon, Ohio, and a helpmate she was to me indeed. Previous to our marriage, I had accepted a call to a church in Fairmont, West Virginia, where I preached for nearly four years. In December, 1870, I came to Oskaloosa, Iowa, to marry my sister. The pastor of the Congregational Church, Rev. G. D. A. Hebard, was sick, and I was invited to supply the pulpit. During the week following, December 14, 1870, he died, and I was invited to supply the next Sabbath. At once a meeting was called and I was invited to take the pastorate of the church. I accepted and within two weeks I had returned to Fairmont, resigned my pastorate there, and was back in Oskaloosa. On the second Sunday in January of 1871 I began a pastorate in Oskaloosa which ran on for fifteen years.

In 1886 I accepted a call to the Congregational Church in Storm Lake where I remained for only one year. I was then called to Le Mars and was there until 1894, at which time I removed to Fayette, and was there for three years. The Methodist College at Fayette gave me an opportunity to give my younger children better educational privileges than I felt able to give them by sending them away from home.

The first day of August, 1897, I began my pastorate in Cedar Falls. For twelve years I labored among this people, resigning in 1909, at this time completing fifty years of active ministry—fifty years of continuous service without a break excepting one or two short intervals from physical disability.

In 1898, occurred the first break in the family of eight. In this year my good wife passed on to her reward. Two years later I married Mrs. Kate Shaw, who has been a faithful wife, and shares life with me today. When I resigned at Cedar Falls the church made me pastor emeritus, and provided me a good house in which to live, and to be mine as long as I need an earthly dwelling place.

In all my ministerial life I have fared better than I deserved. I do not mean to say that the path has always been strewn with flowers, but I can say with Paul, "The things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the Gospel," in that I was drawn nearer to Christ and made a better man. There are things which a preacher must know, but never can be known only through experience. It is a great matter to be educated in the schools, but it is a greater matter to be educated in the school of Christ, and to be able to meet a soul in its deep needs, and lead it to the fountains of life and peace.

One of the sweet recollections of these years in Iowa is the fellowship of the brethren of the state. I think often of the men who were here

when I came. There was Father Turner, a parishioner of mine until death removed him—a man of broad vision and a great heart. I remember so well his funeral. The simplicity of the service made a deep impression on my mind. At the grave we all gathered around, and each in turn repeated a passage of Scripture; prayer and benediction followed, and we all went away in the faith of Christ's own words, "I am the resurrection and the life."

Daniel Lane was also a parishioner of mine for several years. From these two men I heard the story of the "patriarchs" and of the Iowa Band. It is not often that a pastor will find among retired ministers such helpers as were these two men.

Other members of the Band I counted as my friends—Dr. Salter, for more than sixty years at Burlington; A. B. Robbins, for fifty years at Muscatine, a man of pronounced opinions and fearless in giving expression to them; and Ephraim Adams, a saintly and lovable brother, true and faithful. He never boasted of any attainments in the divine life, or anything he had done, but the people with whom he lived felt the force of his life, and recognized the goodness and the greatness of the man. Douglass was then a young man, full of zeal, and he is still with us, a good and faithful servant, loved by us all. Frisbie came to Des Moines in October of 1871, nine months *after* I came to Oskaloosa. I never let him lose sight of the fact that I came to Iowa before he did. Dear old comrade! God has commended him to silence, but his life still speaks.

Hill was in Atlantic when I came to Oskaloosa. He never had any other parish in Iowa. Harvey Adams was then at Fairfax, W. L. Coleman at Mitchell, Father John Todd at Tabor, Pickett was superintendent of home missions in Southern Iowa, Archibald and Sturtevant and J. O. Stephenson and Vittum came later. This fellowship gives a value to life not to be estimated by any standard of value save that of the heart in the hunger for friendship, with the deep affection which only believers in Jesus can experience.

I am writing this at the age of eighty, occupying my time in reading and study, making sermons and preaching them as opportunity offers. I look backward and see many things to regret, and more in which to take delight. I look forward to the things which are to come, and I press on toward the prize of my high calling in Christ Jesus.

Nothing beyond this personal portrait is needed to give the full measure and correct features of the man. Physically he is tall, but neither slim nor stout, but with the exact proportions of a perfect man. His eye is keen, his face that of a Nazarite never profaned by the coming of a razor upon it, his head covered, even in old age, by a great shock of hair, now almost as white as the "driven snow."

It need not be said that he is a man of superior natural mental endowments. He tells of his lack of training in the schools.

That has been in evidence through all his life, limiting his vocabulary, narrowing somewhat his range of vision, closing many doors against him in the realms of science and philosophy; but the gifts of nature, mother wit, practical sense, mental insight, coupled with the spiritual qualities of sympathy and love for his fellow man, and a knowledge of the Bible, have compensated him for his lack of education, and have made him every whit the equal of the average man of the college and the seminary.

As a preacher Rev. Snowden is unique. His sermons are perfectly innocent of logic, they have only the slightest acquaintance with rhetoric, they do not abound in illustrations, they are largely devoid of literary and historical citations or allusions, they never attempt the oratorical or the dramatic, but somehow they take hold. People listen, they are interested. His power as a preacher has its deepest seat in his knowledge of the Bible. His sermons are saturated with Bible ideas and imagery, and abound in scriptural quotations. Moreover, there is a quaintness and quiet humor about the man which find their way into his sermons to light them up, and hold the expectant attention of the hearers; and the crown of all is the preacher's downright sincerity and earnestness, causing his discourses to glow and sometimes blaze with subdued but evident passion.

Rev. Snowden was a fine preacher; therefore, he could stay fifteen years at Oskaloosa, and twelve years at Cedar Falls, and therefore he was welcomed heartily to the pulpits of Iowa. His pastorates were each a grand success. Of this I speak in my "Pilgrims of Iowa," page 213, as follows:

James E. Snowden came from Ohio and from Methodist Protestant parentage and training, but soon developed into a good Congregationalist, of a unique type—all his own, however. In his sixteen years' pastorate at Oskaloosa, that church reached high water mark, though it still has all the future to improve upon that record. After one year at Storm Lake and eight good years at Le Mars, a stately church edifice being one of his monuments there, he took hold of that little missionary church at Fayette. In the three years of his pastorate there he rebuilt the house of worship, added about a hundred to the membership and brought the church to self-support. Twelve fruitful years at Cedar Falls brings this grand old patriarch down to date, pastor emeritus there, busy still supplying the many churches which call for his services. Of this unique, forceful, facetious, brotherly man, a booklet could be written. May he go very late to the better world!

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