



METHODIST REVIVAL MEETING

Remembering a Boyhood Experience in 1865

by Henry A. Miller

IN THE EARLY SPRING of 1865 a religious "revival" was held at the Methodist Church in Unionville, Iowa. Such revivals in those days were usually rather frenzied affairs and this was one of that kind. I attended it, and was caught by the spirit, and "got religion" myself. I had a bad case. It has always been my nature to do everything I do with all my might. I have always played ball or marbles, or gone swimming, or fought, or cussed, enthusiastically. Even in my illnesses (when I had any) I had them bad. When I had the measles in '62 I was sick a month longer than any other member of the family. When I had the mumps, in the wet and muddy spring of '63, I had them on both sides at once and had them bad. I fell down on a slippery plank into the mud while I had the mumps and I thought there could be nothing more painful than to fall down on a slippery plank into the mud when you have the mumps on both sides.

So when the big revival began in the Methodist Church I fell into grace, and I fell hard. Under the earnest exhortations of Reverend Orr (who was really a fine man) I became "convicted" of my sins and felt sure that I was on the straight road to Hell. I remembered that I had done about everything bad that a small boy should not do. If I did not repent and turn over a new leaf I was surely a "goner." Merely repenting and turning over a new leaf was not all that was necessary, either. I would have to make a public confession and join the church. As I listened to the preacher, I realized the imminence of my impending doom. What if I should die before reaching home that night? And the preacher said I stood a good chance of doing that very thing; for it happened that way to many sinners. What would become of me in

such a case? I shuddered to think of it.

My past life confronted me in memory, ominously. Those watermelons I had stolen! Those chickens we boys had "confiscated" and fried in the woods while we were "soldiering"! And my cussing! And those window panes Bill Bailey and I had broken out of the Baptist Church! I tried to think that Bill had probably suggested that enterprise, but I could not get much comfort out of that thought; for my belief in the doctrines of free moral agency and "every fellow for himself" convinced me that it would do no good to lay that job onto Bill. Had not every broken pane of glass opened another avenue to perdition? And perdition was not described by the preacher as simply a mental condition after death. If it had been, I think I would have been willing to take a chance for a while longer. *Bodily* resurrection was preached, and the unregenerate would be literally roasted in Hell over a hot fire — hotter than any fire I had ever seen. And that fire would never go out either, or even die down a little. I wouldn't have a chance to get out of it even for a little while and put a wet rag on the burned places (as I had done when I burned my hand so bad trying to mold some hot lead into a ferrule around the handle of a dirk-knife that had been made for me out of a file at the blacksmith shop). No, I would just keep on burning, forever and ever. And forever was a long time. I had never realized before what a long time forever would be. The brimstone would be furnished by the Devil, and he had unlimited supplies. Brimstone was supposed to make a hotter fire than any other fuel. Gasoline hadn't been heard of then, nor acetylene gas, nor the electric torch. The Standard Oil Company had not been invented then, or I

suppose the Devil would have made arrangements for a rebate on the price of gasoline in large quantities.

As I listened to the preacher, I became almost frantic about the risk I had been taking in leading my ungodly life and resolved to make a change at once. People were shouting, singing and exhorting all around me. Every little while some good brother or sister, fully satisfied that he or she was on the right track, would jump up and exhort those who were about to be lost to come forward at once. Time was precious: "Come right now, for it may be everlastingly too late in another minute." Strike while the iron is hot, was their motto; and I became satisfied that they had the right viewpoint.

AROUND the platform on which the pulpit stood was a black walnut bench, about ten inches wide and eighteen inches high. It was called the "mercy seat," and it was the place where sinners could go and kneel down and get freed from the clutch of the Devil. I didn't know whether there were any other mercy seats in the world. Probably not, for the Baptist Church didn't have any. But that didn't signify much, for the Baptists were mostly Democrats and would go to Hell anyhow. But from the way folks were crowding around the mercy seat in front of me, taking turns for it like men waiting for a shave in a barber shop, I thought it likely that there were no other mercy seats in the world outside of that one in Unionville, Iowa. After the sinners had remained on the mercy seat awhile, they would be led back to a bench reserved for them exclusively and another lot would go forward, accompanied by the singing and shouting of the congregation. The preacher had said that salvation was free, and I could see that the reserved seat was free. I was very glad of that; for if there had been any charge I certainly would have been lost, for I was broke.

Being so little, I didn't have much show with the bigger and stouter sinners, but I watched my chance and edged in and put my head between my hands on the black walnut bench and confessed all my sins — that is, all that I

could think of on such short notice, for I may have left out a few small sins in my hurry. Occasionally, a good old sister would come along and put her soft, motherly hand on my head and ask me if I had "seen the light" yet?

"No, it's all dark here," I would murmur.

"You haven't given everything up then, my dear. You must just let everything go and give it all to the Lord. If you do you will see a great light and you will know that you are saved."

I couldn't understand what she meant by "letting everything go," for I didn't have anything to let go that I thought the Lord could possibly want. And it wasn't the Lord anyhow that I was interested in. It was the Devil that I was trying to get away from, and that bake-oven he was operating. The Lord, I had understood, was kind-hearted and would listen to reason. But the Devil was not to be put off with any sort of argument. Why crowding around that mercy seat would get me shut of the Devil I could not make out, but the preacher had said it would work and I was willing to try anything once. But no great light would come to me, however much I tried to "let everything go."

I finally concluded that no one could be expected to see a great light with his head between his hands on a black walnut bench, and maybe the light of the big coal-oil lamps at the pulpit would do. They certainly gave a great deal better light than the tallow dips we had at home. So I raised my head from between my hands and went back to the reserved seat and took my place among the other brands plucked from the burning, while the stentorian voice of the self-appointed leader of the singers struck up, as another relay of penitents went forward:

*"O, won't you go 'long,
we're purty nigh there,
We're gatherin' heavenly man-na."*

NOW, I DON'T MEAN to speak irreverently of religion. Indeed, I am not doing that. I am just relating an incident that took place during a meeting that seemed more an attack of religious hysteria than a revival of deep religious feeling. Religion so acquired may be a good thing for some people, and no doubt there

are a few who are improved by it. But my observation has been that most of the converts secured under the stress of such excitement do not stick very long and soon backslide. Those who do stick and remain consistently faithful to the teachings of their religion were probably good enough for all practical purposes anyhow.

As for me, I expect that almost any change would have been a good thing, for there was room for improvement. I understood that from that time on I was to go to Sunday School regularly and also to preaching once in a while; and that it would not be right any longer to steal watermelons or chickens, or to break window lights out of a church, or fight or cuss, or play marbles for keeps, for that would be gambling. I must not play hooky and go swimming while I was supposed to be in school, nor "ring" switches for school-marms so they couldn't administer corporal punishment to needy pupils.

I believe my "conversion" did improve my general conduct for some months, and it helped the other boys who got religion too — some of them. A lot of them joined the church, before the revival closed like a fire burns out for want of fuel. Bill Bailey became fairly docile and Sam Crow did not play marbles for keeps for some time. For that change in Sam I felt truly thankful, for Sam was a much better

player than I. In fact Sam was usually the owner of nearly all the marbles in the neighborhood. Sam was bigger than I was and I believe he had been tougher. But I had not tried to compete with him, for I realized that I could never aspire to the heights of toughness that Sam Crow attained. I am sorry to be obliged to relate, however, that Sam did not hold out faithful very long; for in the following summer he was caught red-handed by one of the older church members while he was skinning us boys playing for stakes; and, being called to account for his fall from grace, he excused himself by explaining that his church dues would soon have to be met and business in other lines was dull just then.

When one joined the Methodist Church in those days he was taken in on probation. That is, he was put on his good behavior for six months before being admitted to full membership. After that he could do pretty much as he pleased. Like being vaccinated for smallpox, he should be able to stand a good deal of exposure to sin without catching the disease. Even if he did catch it, it would be only a slight case and not dangerous. I managed to behave fairly well for my period of probation and became a full-fledged member of the church in the fall. But I took it easy after that and felt reasonably natural again. □

IN 1935 Henry A. Miller, the author of this piece, wrote, "If this somewhat crude and incomplete account can convey . . . something of a picture of the simple, rugged life of those days, I will be satisfied and will feel repaid for my effort."

Miller was born in 1854 in Wisconsin and the family moved when he was four to Unionville, Iowa. His eight boyhood years in a southern Iowa border county were punctuated by the Civil War, Fourth of July celebrations, revival meetings, and frontier farm work.

In 1866, after his father had left his mother, Miller was bound out to a printer in Lan-

caster, Missouri, where as a 12-year-old he went alone to make his way in the world. Later he courted and married Ella Mary Potter, and they lived in Lancaster for two decades. There Miller copublished the *Lancaster Excelsior* and held county office. He was an avid reader, musician, and gardener. New technology fascinated him. In his forties he studied law at home; in his sixties, Latin. His son recalled his father's "abounding, whimsical sense of humor." Miller himself admitted that he "never seemed to meet a stranger."

In 1921, Miller "wrote out a sort of history" of his boyhood years. "Some members of my

family had asked me to do this several years earlier," he wrote, "but I hesitated to do so as I felt that the small events of my life were of no especial interest to anyone outside my own dear ones." He expanded the manuscript twice more before he died in 1937. These memoirs, "Recollections of an Octogenarian," were later found in an attic, and both son Franklin Miller and grandson Franklin Miller, Jr. have worked to preserve and distribute them to relatives.

The account of a revival meeting is reprinted here with the permission of Franklin Miller, Jr., of Gambier, Ohio.

—The Editor