

Memoir of Mrs. Harmstead

Rev. Joseph Castle

This memoir was published in the February 14, 1850 Christian Advocate, and was written by Rev. Joseph Castle (1801-1881), pastor of St George's, 1849-1851. A native of England, Castle began his ministry with the Genesee Conference in 1823. In 1841 he joined the Philadelphia Conference, where he spent the remainder of his career, and within which he was appointed a presiding elder four times.

“Father and Mother Harmstead,” two most venerable and devoted members of St. George’s ME Church, Philadelphia, have left us, to join the church of the first-born in heaven. Through a long life, they walked together in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, and were separated by death but for a little season, and now their remains rest together in the Laurel Hill Cemetery until the redemption of the body. Mr. Martin Harmstead, after serving his generation by the will of God for about sixty years, fell asleep in the Lord on the 24th day of September, 1849, in the 86th year of his age, and on the 17th day of December his most excellent consort followed him, in her 87th year.

Mrs. Mary Harmstead was one of the most devoted, consistent Christians, I suppose, of these or any other times. She was indeed a bright and shining light. Every one had confidence in her; and I have heard men of strong sense say, they felt in her presence as they did not in the presence of any other person. There was so much purity, humility, dignity and fervor of devotion beaming from her, and like an atmosphere surrounding her, that her piety was both felt and seen.

With the weight of eighty-six years upon her venerable frame, the house of God on the Sabbath, the prayer-meeting, and the class-room ever found her among the most constant and seasonable of God’s worshippers. She was never absent, and never late, unless prevented by sickness; and in the house of God she was an example to all Christian people. Business or company never kept her at home at the hour of prayer, and her great age never kept her in her seat when God’s people arose for praise, or knelt for prayer. She was among the first on her feet to praise God, and on her knees to humble herself before God.

She was emphatically a woman of one book. The Bible was her companion, her study, and her delight; and large parts of it were read upon her knees. Her thoughts and her feelings flowed in the channels of divine truth, and came from her lips in the class-room, love-feast, and

social meeting like sweet waters from a full fountain. Her piety was eminently intelligent, uniform and consistent; and I know not that there was one unlovely trait in her character – there was nothing unsocial, censorious, or unkind, but everything in her appearance, language and manners bespoke a pure heart at peace with God and man. Her ways truly were ways of pleasantness, and all her paths were peace. She moved among us revered and beloved as a mother in Israel, and yet she was as humble and teachable as a little child.

In early years she was a member of St. Paul's Protestant Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, under the ministry of the venerable Dr. Pilmore. For fifteen years she feared the Lord, but had no evidence that her sins were forgiven; and I have often heard her say, the irregularities of professing Christians were a stumbling block to her during that whole time. She was at length brought into the liberty of God's children in a rather remarkable manner. Returning from class-meeting with a female friend, who, on reaching home, was blessed above measure, an ungodly relative said, "Do not make fools of yourselves." Mrs. Harmstead immediately said: "Let us be fools for Christ's sake;" and then and there she received the spirit of adoption; and for about fifty years she never lost the witness that she was born of God, but steadily grew in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, until she appeared to live almost on the suburbs of heaven..

Her sickness was short and very distressing. She had little rest, or opportunity for religious conversation between the paroxysms of her pain; and yet many were the gracious words that fell from her venerable lips. To her children she gave the most satisfactory assurance of her readiness to depart and be with Christ, and said, "I have but little to add to what I have already in my life said." To her minister she remarked: "If I had not sought religion before this, I should die without it, for I am in too much pain to seek it now." Speaking of the Sabbath before she was taken sick, when she was carried in spirit almost to the third heaven, she said: "I hope you will have as good a day next Sabbath – God sometimes gives us samples of what heaven is; yes, and pretty large samples, too." At another time she said, "Pray while you have breath."

"I'll praise Him while he lends me breath," etc.

Thus passed away Mother Harmstead, in life cheerfully doing the will of God, and in death patiently suffering his will. Her like I have never seen; her like, I fear, I shall rarely see again.