

A

MEMOIR

OF THE

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TO THE REV. ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER, D. D.

*Staunton, Oct. 19th, 1811.*

MY DEAR SIR,

Your letter bearing date 26th ult. has been received. By the preceding mail a letter was received from Dr. Miller, in answer to one I had written him on the same subject on which I addressed you. Dr. Miller's letter was still more unfavourable than yours. After weighing all circumstances, I have determined to defer my journey to the North until next spring. In the mean time the building of the Richmond church will go on, and probably it will be completed very early in the spring. There is no probability of my going to Richmond before that period, and I am afraid that the few pious people of that place will not be able to support me without a school. I shall continue in Charlotte at least until the spring.

The sessions of Synod are just over. Nothing of much importance was done, except in relation to the proposed amendments of the Constitution. As soon as that matter was called up, I moved that the subject should be postponed indefinitely. Mr. Baxter spoke against the motion, and Mr. Speece in favour of it, when the question was taken and carried by a sweeping majority of twenty-three, I think, to three. So that this matter is laid to rest for the present. So far, you will say, so good.

I hope that the meeting of Synod at this place has not been a vain thing. Mr. Calhoun thinks that he never saw such agitation here before. Several members have been added to the church; I do not know how many, but I believe not fewer than seven or eight. I think that the congregation, to-day, was one of the most solemn that I have lately seen.

Our Presbytery sat last week. Mr. Logan was ordained, and installed pastor of the Byrd congregation. The appear-

ances at that place were very favourable. We had more good preaching than I have heard lately from so many preachers. Upon the whole, I think that the state of religion is more favourable now than it has been for several years. May these things not be like the morning cloud, or like the early dew !

Whilst things were in this train, and he was still hesitating what to do, an event happened which had, no doubt, great weight in deciding his course, as well as in preparing the field for his future labours. This was the memorable burning of the theatre in Richmond, on the night of the 26th of December, 1811, which involved the loss of many valuable lives, and spread mourning and lamentation throughout the city, and throughout the whole state. It was indeed no false play that evening ; but, really and truly, one of the deepest tragedies that had ever been exhibited on the stage of human life, and admirably calculated to “purge the passions” of all who either saw or heard of it, by the “pity and terror” which it could not fail to excite in every breast. The theatre, it seems, which was unfortunately built entirely of wood, and otherwise badly constructed, stood upon the brow of Shockhoe hill, where it begins to fall into the great ravine below, and upon the very spot which is now the site of what is called the Monumental Church. At this time, it was being used by the Charleston company of players, under the management of Messrs. Placide, Green, and Twaits, who were performing in it with great success. On this night, particularly, a new play and pantomime had been got up for the benefit of Mr. Placide, who was a favourite of the town ; and a large and brilliant crowd of gentlemen and ladies, of the very flower of the population, embracing Mr. Smith, the newly elected Governor of the Commonwealth, Mr. Abraham Venable, formerly a senator of the United States, and now President of the Bank of Virginia, Mr. Botts, an eminent lawyer, and many others, members of the General Assem-

bly, and citizens of wealth and fashion, were assembled at an early hour to enjoy the entertainments of the evening. It was truly a brilliant display; and, for some time, all went on gaily and happily enough. The play was over—the first act of the pantomime had passed by—the second and last was now begun—and all eyes were intently fixed upon the actor, who had come forward on the stage towards the lights, and was moving to the music of the orchestra—when suddenly a bustling noise was heard from behind the scenes, towards the rear of the building. This, it seems, was occasioned by the fact that a servant who had been ordered to hoist up a chandelier, in doing so had got the rope hitched, and jerking to clear it, had swung the thing against one of the painted scenes, which instantly caught fire, and sent up a sheet of flame to the roof. This unfortunately was not plastered, but consisted only of rafters covered with light pine boards, and shingles, very dry, so that it kindled at once; and the actors, with their assistants, were trying to tear down the scenes, to put out the fire. This movement, however, was not immediately seen by the spectators, being hid from their view by the interposing scene; and they were still watching the progress of the piece, when they saw a shower of sparks and burning matter fall upon the actor before them. At this some were startled, while others apparently thought that it might be only a part of the show. A moment afterwards, some one exclaimed, “There is no danger,” and only forced the sense of it more strongly upon their fears; when Mr. Hopkins Robinson, one of the performers, rushed forward to the front of the stage, and cried, “the house is on fire,”—pointing at the same time to the ceiling, where the fire was now seen running like lightning along the roof. Instantly, all was horror and dismay. The cry of “fire,” “fire,” rang through the building, mingled with the shrieks of women and children, in frantic consternation. Husbands looked for their wives—mothers for their children—while

some, almost frenzied by the sense of danger, thought only of themselves.

There was, of course, a general rush of all at once to escape out of the house as fast as possible, by the nearest way. Those in the pit easily got to the outer door, which was not far off. Those in the galleries also, or most of them, flying down the stairs, soon emerged into the street. But the spectators in the boxes were not so fortunate. Some few of them, indeed, had leaped into the pit, and got out with the rest from that part, and a few others had been helped on to the stage, and hurried off the back way; while a small number still bravely kept their seats, only to meet the fate which they hoped to avoid; but the great mass of them, crowding tumultuously into the narrow lobbies, in the wildest disorder, stopped each others progress towards the door, while the suffocating smoke which soon filled the house, extinguished the lights, and stifled its victims; and the flames which now flashed in lurid sheets, as they ran along the light wooden work of the boxes, caught the clothes of the fugitives in the rear, and wrapped them at once in palls of fire and death. Happy now were those who had reached the windows, where a stream of fresh air from without revived their failing senses, and enabled them to hurry on for their lives, or to escape perhaps to the ground. For by this time, many of those who had got out from the pit and galleries, were seen gathered in crowds below, stretching out their arms, and calling on those within to leap into them for safety. Some did so from the first, and some even from the second story; and a number escaped in this way, while a few were either killed, or shockingly mangled by the fall. Those, in the meantime, who had succeeded so far as to clear the lobbies, found themselves again stopped, and straitened in the narrow angular stairs that ran from the landing of the boxes into the common entry, or pent up in the small passage at the

bottom, where the only door which opened inwards had been shut to by the rushing crowd, and could not be forced back for some time, even by the help of hands from without. Here, then, some were crushed to death by others, who, even less happy, emerged at last over their dead bodies, through the door now opened, but horribly scorched or burnt, and only to die in the arms of their shuddering friends.

By this time, (although only six or seven minutes had passed,) the whole house was in a light blaze, that brightened the windows of the houses far and near with its dismal light; the bells were tolling with most appalling sound; and hundreds of citizens, roused from their beds, and alarmed for the safety of their relatives and friends, were rushing to the scene, but too late to save, or find them. The rest may be imagined, but cannot, and perhaps ought not to be described. There was no sleep in Richmond that night; but candles were burning in all the houses, and the voice of weeping was heard from many dwellings.

The day after this awful occurrence, the Common Council of the city convened, and passed a resolution prohibiting all public amusements within the limits, for four months ensuing; and a meeting of citizens was held in the capitol, at which it was resolved, that the remains of the dead should be collected and buried together on the spot where they had expired; and that a monument should be raised over them to record the remembrance of their fate. And it was also determined, that a day should be set apart for fasting, humiliation, and prayer, in commemoration of an event, in which all who had any sense of piety could not but see and acknowledge, that the hand of God had been most strikingly and affectingly displayed.

In the mean time, the news of this dreadful disaster was flying rapidly all over the state, and soon reached the ears of Mr. Rice, who could not help feeling, very naturally, a sort of personal interest in the event. The following letter,

which he wrote immediately afterwards, will show the effect which it produced upon his mind.

TO MRS. JUDITH RANDOLPH.

*Charlotte, Jan'y 1st, 1812.*

MY DEAR FRIEND,

“ You have no doubt heard more of the particulars of the late dispensation of Providence in Richmond than I have. How awful! For so many, by one dreadful stroke, to be hurried from the midst of amusements and gaiety, to the bar of God and to eternity, is shocking to the mind even of the most unfeeling. Did you ever know an event so calculated to impress upon our minds the words of the wise man, “Vanity of vanities: all is vanity?” “Surely man in his best estate is altogether vanity.” I heard of the melancholy event last Sabbath, just as I was going into the court house to preach. It made such an impression on my mind, that I could not resist the impulse to lay aside the text on which I had intended to preach, and to deliver an extempore discourse from the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, and perhaps the sixth verse. “And the voice said, cry. And he said what shall I cry? All flesh is as grass, &c.” Happy would it be for us could we constantly realize this, and live as if every year and every day were to be our last.—I have been, as far as I could find time, endeavouring to recollect my thoughts and ways during the last year. I find much to reprehend in myself; much for which to be ashamed and humbled. I have been endeavouring to form good resolutions about my future life. But I fear they will be like resolutions made before—a salve to the conscience for the present. I am sure that without the all-sufficiency of a Saviour I shall never do any thing. Unless God work in me both to *will* and to *do*, I shall never work out my salvation. May God give us all needed grace, and finally crown “that grace with glory.”