

FORGOTTEN TRAGEDIES

DROWNING OF BISHOP SAWYER.

(By N. C. Hewitt.)

Of all the sad drowning fatalities that the mother colony of New South Wales suffered in the early days of settlement, when the North Coast was young and battling for its very existence, to none is attached the pathetic interest surrounding the lamentable loss by drowning of Dr. William Collinson Sawyer, the first Bishop of Grafton, who, with his son and members of his household, was drowned in the Clarence River there whilst returning home from Even-song on Sunday night, March 15, 1868. Though sixty long years have rolled by since that event was enacted, the tragedy is frequently discussed as there are old residents still living who remember the sad happening.

Early in the "sixties" an agitation, led by Mr. Clark Irving, then owner of Tomki station (between Lismore and Casino), was set on foot for the separation from Newcastle of a coastal Anglican diocese, with Grafton as the See. It received solid support from the squatters, including Major Chauvel (Tabulam), Mr. E. D. S. Ogilvie (Wiangarie), and Mr. John Tindal (Ramornie), Mr. Irving setting a fine example by giving £2000 towards the founding of an endowment fund. The matter was settled at a meeting held in Sydney on January 21, 1862. After disappointments extending upwards of four years, in 1866 the Rev. S. R. Waddelow was chosen as the first Bishop, but he withdrew because of ill-health, and shortly afterwards died. The next choice fell upon the Rev. W. C. Sawyer, D.D., who was in receipt of an income of £1200 a year. He was a man admirably qualified for the work for which he had been selected and was universally respected and loved, and only 36 years of age. He accepted the Bishopric which carried a salary of only £600 per annum. He was consecrated at Canterbury on February 2, 1867, and with his party arrived in the colony in December of the same year. His family remained with Bishop Tyndal.

His family remained with Bishop Tyrell, of Newcastle, for eight weeks while he made his first visit to his large diocese which included Armidale, and the western plains. He then joined them and took them by steamer to Grafton. On Friday, March 13, they got into the nice home that had been secured for them on the left bank of the Clarence about a mile and a half below Grafton on the same side of the river. The house, a big one, with massive cedar staircase and window shutters, resembling an English villa, is still well preserved and is now the home of Miss Cameron. The locality is just past the cemeteries, and was the scene of Carter and Selman's factories.

On that Sunday evening the Bishop drove to the service, leaving at home his wife and several of his children, also his brother, who was a doctor. As the road lay through the heavy cedar brush and was dark and rough, the Bishop gave orders that his boat should take him home. Not being a swimmer he had a life belt to put in his boat in case of accident, but on this occasion it was left at the house. The rest of the sad story has been graphically told by various old residents, the heart of Mr. James Creighton, the only survivor of the party (now an estate agent in Grafton, still hale and hearty despite the weight of four score years) being always too heavy to tell it in full. It was a memorable service attended by the writer's parents. The church was very full, the Bishop's sermon, which was on the subject of "The unjust steward," from 16th chapter of St. Luke's Gospel, was remarkably earnest and searching. He spoke of the necessity for being prepared to meet our Creator. Mr. Creighton, who heard it, states: "The Bishop said these prophetic words: 'Only imagine in one short hour falling at your Saviour's feet,' 'and as those words fell from his lips there was a heavenly expression in his face I shall never forget.'" After the blessing his private prayer was unusually prolonged, so that the congregation, moved by the exceeding solemnity and beauty of the sermon, began to wonder when it would end.

began to wonder when it would end. Who shall tell what were the supplications poured out by the young Bishop for his flock and himself at that, his last service on earth?

Service over, and farewells taken of friends, the party of six set out to return by the river. A gusty darkness lay upon the noble river as they embarked. In conversation with the writer, Mr. Creighton said recently:—
“We left the church a little after 9 p.m. I rowed the boat to nearly opposite Dobie street, when the good Bishop, ever thoughtful for others, ordered the sails to be put up. He was steering the boat himself, his nephew holding the sheet of the sail. When near the point of Elizabeth Island, 1½ mile from Grafton, a storm suddenly came up. I advised the Bishop to steer for the light of his house. He did so at first, but he was so pleased talking about the large congregation in the church that night that he must have crossed the steering yokes; anyway, he pulled the wrong line, causing the boat to jib. She went up into the wind, a sudden gust took her abaek, and she capsized. All of us were thrown into the water. The persons in the boat were the Bishop, his second son, Hewley, and his nephew, Harrington Brown, two servant girls, Mary Hogan and Sarah Southgate, and myself. My first thought was to save the poor little boy Hewley, but he had sunk. He had been lying asleep, and thus passed into a deeper sleep. I got Mary Hogan to the boat and swam around looking for the Bishop. I saw

his silk hat floating, and found him later when he came to the surface. I took hold of him and told him not to clasp me—that I would save him. He was quiet until I neared the boat. The girl, Sarah Southgate, who had a good hold on the stern of the boat, called upon me to save her. I was close to the boat, and she let go her hold and clasped me. Up to that time the Bishop had not struggled at all, but directly the girl took hold of me he did the same. We all

hold of me he did the same. We all went to the bottom in 18 feet of water. I did not see the Bishop again when I came to the surface. After that I called as loudly as I could: 'A boat,' 'help.' Mr. D. D. Selman, Mr. William Gibson, and one other came to the rescue.

The sad event plunged Grafton into gloom. The bodies were not recovered for two days, and there was universal mourning—closed houses, with cessation of every sign of business in the town until the bodies had been laid to rest. Henry Kendall, who was living on the Clarence, then wrote:—

"O, beautiful Clarence, so dreamily flowing,
He went on thy bosom to go to his home;
But the Father, All-Glorious, directed his going
To that home in the skies whence no sorrow can come."

By his loving and devoted character, his energy, self-denial, ability, and friendly demeanour, the sacrifices he made in England to undertake missionary work, he had won all hearts and attached friends unconnected with his church. As showing how public sympathy was awakened throughout the land, no less than £1700 was contributed in one day in the churches throughout the Newcastle diocese in aid of the widow and orphans. A further liberal offering of £240 came from Melbourne church people.

To Bishop Tyrell, of Newcastle, fell the melancholy duty of providing for the return to England of Bishop Sawyer's wife and surviving children. Mrs. Sawyer married again long years afterwards, but has since entered into her rest, as has also another son. A daughter of this son lives in Melbourne. Two sons of the Bishop survive and are still in the active ministry of the Church of England. One is the Rev. H. V. Sawyer, of the School House, Shrewsbury, whilst the other is in a neighbouring parish. Both sent donations to the writer two years ago when a sum of £40 was collected for the restoration of the tomb, which is surmounted by a handsome freestone cross bearing Christ's words: "When thou passest through the waters I will be with thee." His name and position are also

passess through the waters I will be with thee." His name and position are also perpetuated by a memorial brass on the south choir wall of the Grafton Cathedral.

Bishop Sawyer's death was a severe blow to the Anglican Church, and especially to the young diocese. During his episcopate of 23 years his successor, Dr. J. F. Turner, preferred to reside in Armidale, and thus was intensified the loss of the cathedral city of Grafton.