

[Harter, Jacob H.]

AUBURN'S ECCENTRIC MAN  
The Pastor of the Church of Divine Fragments Laid to Rest  
Auburn Special.

A line of carriages followed to the picturesque Fort Hill cemetery in this city on Thursday afternoon the remains of the Rev. Jacob H. Harter, who had for the past fifteen years been the most picturesque personality in this city. Every man, woman and child in this city knew him, and an item about Harter never went into the waste basket. He was a favorite around newspaper offices, and every reporter and editor in Auburn was his friend and he was theirs. He knew what constituted a good story, and on more than one occasion he has furnished points for a sensational article.

Mr. Harter started in life as a Universalist minister, drifted from the pulpit into the newspaper publishing business, then into the photographer's art, and for the last dozen years of his life he announced himself as "the pastor of Church of Divine Fragments, located wherever a fragment of humanity was found." He seemed to take especial pride in this title, and never lost an opportunity to talk about his fragments, as he called the members of his congregation, which was one of great proportions. Every outcast from society was a fragment, and was properly a member of the "Church of Divine Fragments." Ask Harter about his theology, and he would say:

"Other ministers preach to keep people out of hell; I preach to keep hell out of the people."

Harter was no more of a success in business than he was in the pulpit as the regular pastor of a church. His venture in photography nearly ruined him. In all his financial vicissitudes he was strictly honest, and when the crash came he mortgaged his household furniture and books to pay his debts. He was never cast down, and appeared as cheerful as though he had at his command unlimited wealth. He was a firm believer in the doctrine of spiritualism, and gathered around him a number of believers in this city. Frequent séances were held, at which Harter was a prominent figure. The latter years of his life were a struggle against poverty.

Mr. Harter stood in disfavor among the orthodox clergy of the city on account of his religious views, and also of his readiness to marry young couples. He had acquired the title of "the matrimonial blacksmith of Central New York," and used to tell about his queer experiences in marrying people. The city clergymen and a goodly number of church people were of the opinion that Harter was altogether too liberal in dispensing the matrimonial blessing in marrying couples altogether too young to think of so serious a step. In his defence Harter used to say that he never married a young couple about which there was any doubt, unless he found upon investigation that it was better that they were married. There is no doubt that he

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officiated a great many clandestine marriages which turned out unfortunately.

The one great desire of Harter's late years was to secure a home in this city, and to accomplish this object his eccentric mind furnished him with a novel scheme. He went about among the business men in this city and solicited funds for the purpose of "removing a house from his wife's brain and placing it in a lot." He said his wife had conceived a house in her mind, to remove which required money and labor. He argued this matter in such a kindly, witty and original manner that he was successful, and about a year ago Harter was settled in a neat frame house at 6 Evans street in this city. It was partly paid for by the money subscribed. He christened his new house "The Bower of Rest," and there he died last Tuesday. To secure part of the purchase money Harter gave a mortgage on his new home. He used to speak of this mortgage as the Diahka, or evil spirit, a spiritualistic term. The well which he had dug in his lot he designated as St. Jacob's well.

Harter knew every spiritualist in New York, Pennsylvania and the New England states. He was frequently summoned by telegraph to travel hundreds of miles to conduct a funeral service over some believer in Spiritualism. About the last thing he did was to make a trip to the eastern part of the state to bury one of his fragments. For these services he received very little. Sometimes he got a few dollars, but oftener he paid his own traveling expenses and received nothing.

A reporter asked him once if he always got his pay for performing the marriage ceremony.

"Well," he said, "I have had some curious experiences in that line. I have married couples who never paid for it, but twenty years later I have married their children and received a liberal fee."

In speaking of his curious relation to society, one day he said:

"I am like a school boy who stops to look out of the window and loses his place in his book. I have been looking into the spirit of life, and gazing at its beauties and wonders so long that I have lost my place in the world."

The majority of people believed that he had lost his place in the world.

Last Thanksgiving day some of his newspaper friends sent him a turkey for his Thanksgiving dinner. The old man, as soon as he had eaten his breakfast on Thanksgiving morning, went to the other end of the city and brought one of his fragments, an old woman, home to share the turkey with him. The old woman thought Harter had not lost his place in the world.

His familiarity with the Bible was remarkable, and he could make an apt question to strengthen almost any proposition.

Joe Petmeky, the murderer, who was hung in this city a few years ago, was one of Harter's fragments. Harter wanted to be hanged in place of Petmeky, and caused the sheriff no end of annoyance by his importunities to

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be allowed to expiate the murderer's crime with his own life. Mary Druse, the daughter of Mrs. Druse, who was hanged last March for the murder of her husband, was another of his fragments. He used to visit her frequently in the Onondaga county penitentiary, where she is [sic] confined. He was a queer character, but a kindly, simple, honest man. His life and his thoughts were as open as a book.

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Transcribed on 24 May 2013 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY