

PAGEANT

JANUARY, 1947: p. 96

Runner-up to the

BIBLE

In His Steps, the second most popular book in history, has sold 25,000,000 copies and is still going strong

By Evangeline Semon

MORE THAN 50 YEARS ago a young minister in Topeka, Kansas, tried an experiment which he hoped would fill the empty pews which faced him Sunday evenings. Instead of preaching a sermon, he decided to write a novel and read it, chapter by chapter, each week. Little did he realize that out of this idea would come the most widely read book of all time next to the Bible.

The very idea of a minister's writing a novel was revolutionary for those days. When the young man, Charles M. Sheldon, told his mother of the plan she replied: "But you can't do that. The deacons will not allow it."

The story was called *His Brother's Keeper*. At the end of the first chapter the hero was at the bottom of a flooded mine with water coming up over his knees.



Charles M. Sheldon
(1857 ~ 1946)

In His Steps

“I had not the least idea how he was going to get out,” Sheldon admitted later. “But the audience didn’t either, so it came back the following Sunday to hear the next chapter.”

The minister eventually found a forgotten tunnel through which his hero escaped. And, while filling his mine with water, he also filled his church with people. Most of them were young people and when the story was finished they insisted on another. The deacons were won over and the novel-writing minister turned out a book each year.

Then, in 1896, he conceived the idea for the story which was to shake the world. It was called *In His Steps* and concerned the efforts of a group of modern Americans to walk in the steps of Jesus, to ask themselves, before each action, “What would Jesus do?”

The idea had germinated in the young minister’s mind some years before. He was graduated from an Eastern theological seminary after a boyhood on a North Dakota farm; the contrast between the simple Christianity of the Middle West and the formalism of the East was painfully evident. The shortcomings of his religion became even more apparent when, as a social-service worker in London, he witnessed the poverty and misery of the slums.

Sheldon believed that the churches were not doing enough to change these conditions. With the encouragement of his wife, a Topeka girl, he began to ask the challenging question: What if people really walked in His steps, doing as He would do on earth?

The characters in Sheldon’s book tried this experiment. A business executive resigned his position rather than condone dishonest practices of his superiors. A young lady of wealth devoted her money to rehabilitating the slums. A bishop left his comfortable cathedral to work in a settlement house among the poor. Problems of personal gain, business ethics, poverty and unemployment all were examined in the light of “What would Jesus do?” Although in most cases the characters had to sacrifice material

In His Steps



Charles M. Sheldon

The 1899 Edition

comforts, they were richly rewarded in the spiritual things of life.

While the chapters were being read each Sunday evening, a church paper in Chicago, the *Advance*, printed them serially, paying Dr. Sheldon \$75. When the young people of the church urged him to publish it in book form, the minister took it to Chicago and made the rounds of the publishing houses. The public, he was told, would not be interested in a religious story.

Discouraged, Dr. Sheldon was about to return home when the editor of the *Advance* offered to print a ten-cent paper-covered edition of a few hundred copies. The minister signed over his rights to the book and went back to Topeka. Then a remarkable thing happened: not only was this edition sold immediately, but subsequent printings totaling 10,000 copies were bought within a few weeks.

Dr. Sheldon received the news excitedly. He planned to use the royalties for long-planned church projects. But he was to be disappointed. The editor of the *Advance*, through an oversight, had filed only one copy of the book with the Copyright Office, instead of the required two copies. The book was in the public domain. Within

In His Steps

a year, 16 different publishers were putting out *In His Steps* in editions ranging from 25 cents to a dollar.

Hundreds of thousands of copies were sold. Church publishing companies promoted the book through their catalogs. News vendors hawked it on the streets; candy butchers peddled it on trains. Bookstores could not get copies fast enough. The F. W. Woolworth Company stocked a ten-cent edition and the demand became so great that their printing plant at Kingsport, Tennessee—which employed 1,000 men—devoted practically its entire time to it.

Although the book's popularity was attributed to its message of putting Christian ethics before "business as usual," none of the publishers, including many church companies, saw fit to pay its author royalties. Legally, they were not obligated to pay. Apparently the book influenced everyone except those who stood to profit by its sale. Some years later, Dr. Sheldon actually had to pay money out of his own pocket on its account. He had signed over the movie rights to a motion-picture company; then receivers for the *Advance*, asserting that he had sold the paper all rights, including those for the movie, threatened to bring suit. Even though the motion picture had not been invented when the story was serialized, Sheldon was forced to pay \$500 to the same paper which originally bought the book for \$75.

Meanwhile *In His Steps* was spreading its influence all over the world. No less than 15 English publishers issued it, in editions selling for a penny to de luxe copies costing several dollars. In London, Dr. Sheldon was walking along the Strand one day when he heard a newsboy shouting the title of his book. He bought a copy and read across the top of the first page: "This is number 918,000." Altogether over two million copies of the penny edition were sold on the streets of London.

Editions also appeared in Scotland, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and the book was translated into 16 languages. Even in non-Christian countries it was a

In His Steps

best-seller. The Japanese edition sold more than a million copies. An Arabic translation was read all over the Mohammedan world. In the Soviet Union, where the book was banned, a Russian woman translated it secretly; afraid to put her name on the title page, she wrote: "Translated by NOBODY." Altogether 12,000,000 copies were sold in England and Europe.

The influence of *In His Steps* has been surpassed only by that of the Bible. The idea that men might apply Christ's teachings literally in modern society burst upon the world with the force of a Second Coming. Out of the group of young people who first heard it read in the Topeka church, 25 became missionaries and teachers in foreign lands. For 50 years—until his death last February, at the age of 89—Dr. Sheldon received letters from people all over the world who had been converted by reading it.

Wherever he went, Dr. Sheldon found people reading his novel. In Haifa, Palestine, a Jewish missionary presented him with a copy as he stepped off the boat. In Glasgow, Scotland, a draper published a special edition as an advertisement, printing the name of his store on every page.

In Argentina, the publishers changed the name of the hero from Henry Maxwell to Henry Ford. When Dr. Sheldon protested, the translator wrote back, "I am very sorry, but the fact is that Henry Ford is better known down here than Henry Maxwell." That ended it; although it was estimated that the Ford Motor Company enjoyed many thousands of dollars' worth of free advertising, the author received nothing.

In His Steps was dramatized as a play, made into an album of records and finally produced as a movie. The movie, however, was so greatly changed from the original story that Sheldon was horrified. At his plea, the Government forced exhibitors to stop showing the film.

Sheldon was a tall man—six feet three inches—and his dynamic personality and utter sincerity profoundly impressed all who met him.

In His Steps

He made himself a living example of his book's message. Like many of his generation, he believed that the saloon was a plague spot. He aligned himself with the prohibitionists and campaigned so successfully that he was invited to England in 1908, and New Zealand in 1914, to help rally anti-liquor forces in those countries. Everywhere his fame guaranteed him large audiences. And although he was probably the best-known preacher in the United States, he preferred to remain with his Topeka church to the last.

The most remarkable example of his ability to put Christian ethics to a practical test occurred when the publisher of the Topeka *Daily Capital* invited him to take over the editorship and run the paper "as he believed Jesus would have run it on earth." One of the most important incidents in his book had been the attempt of an editor to do just this and all Topeka held its breath to see if the minister could follow his own advice.

Sheldon eliminated all patent-medicine and liquor advertisements and refused to publish illustrations for "hose and garter" ads. Crime and scandal stories were cut out. Even sports news was played down. Contrary to all expectations, the results of Sheldon's editorship were so successful that mats of the paper were rushed to Kansas City, New York and London, and special editions were printed in these cities. At the end of the experiment, the paper's circulation of 30,000 had jumped to 370,000.

When the minister retired from his church in 1920, at 63, he had almost no money and had only a meager church pension to live on. Then, as though God were determined to look after his own, an unexpected thing occurred: a New York publisher, who had just bought the plates of *In His Steps* and read it, was so influenced by its message that he decided to pay the author a royalty. He was a Scotsman, Alexander T. Grosset, president of Grosset and Dunlap. During the next 26 years Grosset not only paid Sheldon the regular royalty but shamed a few other publishers into doing likewise. Al-

In His Steps

together, the Grosset edition went into more than 75 printings. Even today, the minimum print order for new editions is 25,000 copies. The world-wide sale for the last 50 years is estimated to total 23,000,000 copies. Only the Bible has been read by more persons.

Had the author received only a cent for each copy sold, his earnings would have amounted to \$230,000. The fact that he actually got much less never embittered him. For he knew that his book had encouraged millions to walk, as he did, in His steps.

PAGEANT

In His Steps

publishers into doing likewise. Altogether, the Grosset edition went into more than 75 printings. Even today, the minimum print order for new editions is 25,000 copies. The world-wide sale for the last 50 years is estimated to total 23,000,000 copies. Only the Bible has been read by more persons.

Had the author received only a cent for each copy sold, his earnings would have amounted to \$230,000. The fact that he actually got much less never embittered him. For he knew that his book had encouraged millions to walk, as he did, in His steps.

PAGEANT