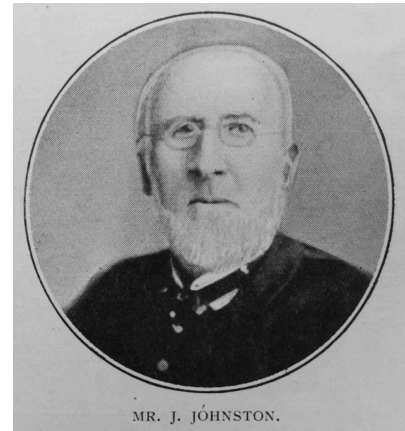


James Johnstone of Willington

Transcription of article in the series “Some of our Stalwarts” by “Izaak”

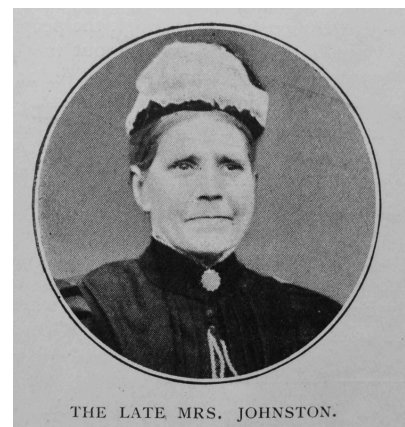
“HOW amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts!” The aged man kneels over flower-beds — fragrant and beautiful they are in this morning hour, holding their dewdrops to the light—and in an attitude of worship, he makes, so it seemed to me, a profile of “The Angelus” upon the garden path. He busies himself with uprooting of weeds and gentle lightening of the soil about the stems of the plants he loves. And, the while he works away the psalms well up within his heart, like a fountain of waters, wedding the scriptures and the blossoming soil together, so that one who stands musing by may, perhaps, remember Francis Thompson’s lines:



“All things by immortal power,
Near or far,
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star.”

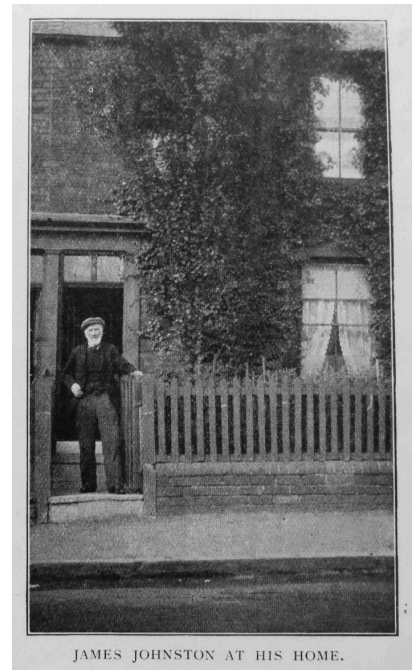
Of a truth there is a ladder set from the dust upon the earth to the blue sky above and mystic energies ascend and descend whether we wake or sleep. The vision Jacob saw is at once the most ancient and the most recent happening in the world, and if you will dispute with me I will quote a saying of Theophrastus Paracelsus to this effect: “He who tastes a crust of bread tastes all the stars and all the heavens.” Among the stones of Bethel the patriarch found the splendour of God shining as upon an altar, and this aged gardener will tell you, too, that no less does the beauty from above breathe and blossom about that bit of masonry where the roses are wreathed. But I must away from the parable and the philosophy to the plain tale I want to tell of which the text is the psalmist’s. word I have already quoted: “How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts!”

For that is the song on the lips of the gardener, and just as we are said to attune our whole behaviour to the rhythm of remembered poetry, so whether you see him at work with spade or sickle he keeps in unison with the harp which sounded in Israel centuries ago. Rejoicing in the amiableness of the tabernacles of the Lord of Hosts he is seeking to render them pleasurable also with the grace of spring flower and the glory of summer foliage and fertility; and, stern Methodist as he is, I somehow feel he is in kinship with them who raised up cathedrals, strong and stately and abiding, leaving us, as Ruskin says, memorials of their adoration. In a word, James Johnstone, of Willington, county Durham, now on the eve of ninety years of age, ever since the “Primitive chapel” was built in the High Street, has sought to make the courts of the Most High beautiful.



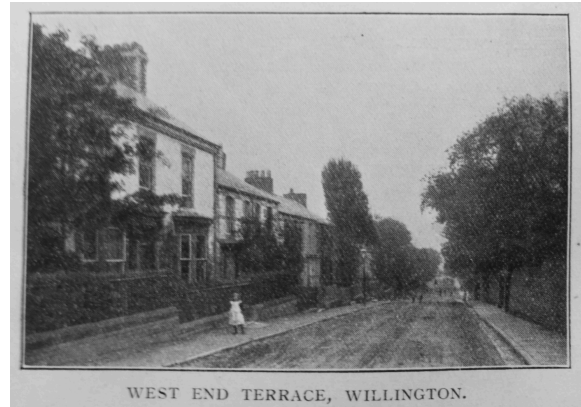
The lawn and the long flower beds which lead up to the entrance doorway of the church are of his sowing, his nourishing, These are his cloisters, if I may so put it, through which we pass to the place of prayer. It must be over thirty years now that he has filled the office of gardener to the King, keeping the chapel front winsome and fragrant in a place which is black and unlovely with the winning of coal. As a boy I remember him in his pit-clothes proudly at work in this sacred garden, sparing no industry for the chapel's sake, and when our Ramsay Guthrie came to exalt the miner into literature I felt sure that the saintly face of "Jimmy Johnston"—as the folks knew him—would soon be sketched in that portrait gallery.

Is the chapel front worth all the toil and care? The question has in it the sound of the murmuring which arose when the alabaster box of precious ointment was broken in the leper's house in Bethany. And we may as well confess without more ado that we Methodists are sometimes careless of the things that pertain unto the anointing, In the place where I now write the environs of the little chapel have been allowed to run waste, and until recently the notice-boards seemed in their dismal weather-beaten state to be the fragments of some lonely shipwreck, the records of death rather than the messengers of life. "From their unkempt condition," said a critic to me one day, "one might imagine a lot of your chapels to be forgotten graves. They look to be an assembling place for the weather; and the dust and rain leave deeper memorials upon them than the care and love of human hands." The impeachment is true, and I wish we could have a baptism of the spirit of James Johnston, not only that we might share the quiet passion of his prayer and the unbroken strength of his devotion, but also the zeal for the outward beauty of the home of supplication and of song. Nor is it a matter of finance; all that is needed is a thought and a deed will follow, or rather a spade, and the marring stains of neglect will be purged away by the breath of summer flowers. For over thirty years James Johnston has kept the "chapel front" in beautiful array, an oasis in the stragglng desert of street, and the service is greater than we dream.



But now that I see him kneeling there, I seem to feel that this literal gardening of his is a parable of what he has done by the grace of God for Willington in the coalfield of Durham. The half indeed can never be told, for inasmuch as the trees he plants grow-up without noise, so he has done good by stealth, silently sowing the seed of the kingdom which maketh the solitary place to rejoice even with singing. Into the dark, dank underground of "the pits" in which he worked for half a century, and into the hard, harsh hearts of miners rougher than we know them now, James Johnston—the King's gardener shall we call him?—has carried the holy seed, and if travellers tell us that flowers are found within the Arctic circle, it is not more wonderful than the harvest won from these stony depths by the quiet courage and consecration of this one man. Faith which removes mountains is also potent unto the cleansing of mines. Homes in Willington there were which were swept by waves and whirlwinds of sorrow and left black and desolate, and into these—I know it for myself—the gardener would come with succour for the ravaged soil and healing for broken and bruised tendrils. The chapel front was not the only place he kept fair and fragrant in that little town.

I like best to hear James Johnston tell of those grand triumphant early days of Methodism when the flood-tide came surging in, and when, to use Matthew Arnold's words, every man caught the scents and murmurs of the infinite sea. When in that large room above the green-grocer's shop, a Pentecostal wind shook the people and George Maddison sprang out to the penitent form and began to pray over and over again the only prayer he knew— "Our Father which art in heaven" — and then leaping up cried out to those still

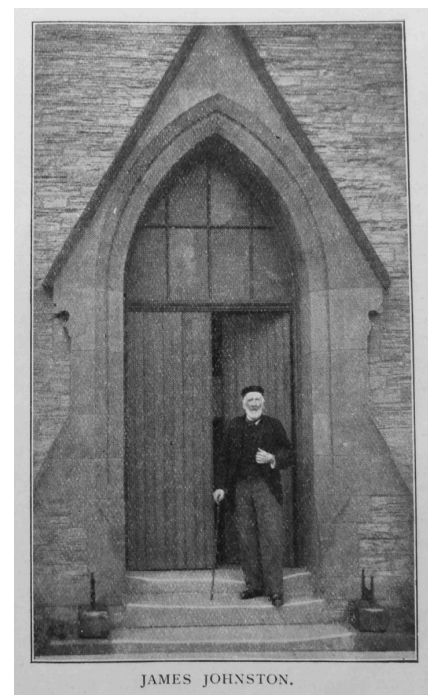


hesitating, "If ye want putting right, come up here," is it not the history over again of the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple in Jerusalem? And is it not a picture of the vigour and ecstasy of those first Methodist days whose memories are our heritage? George Maddison went home blessed. In the garret where his sister slept was a basket full of cakes suspended by a string to a spar on the roof to keep it from the mice. But the mice nibbled at the string during the night and down came the basket and contents to the floor with an unearthly crash. Mary came running down the stairs in her night-dress and George roused up his wife: "It's the Devil! Let us pray. "Our Father which art in heaven."

And again, old Jane Stones, upwards of seventy years, had a son Harry who was very much out of the way. He had brought her to poverty. One day she said to James Johnston, "We are going into the long pantry to pray for Harry, and are not coming out until the Lord says He'll convert him." Spending most of the livelong day in a struggle and wrestling of prayer, the answer seemed to come, and she put on bonnet and shawl and went forth to seek her son. He was on the spree as usual. From one tavern to another she went in her search and found him at length in "The Green Tree," where he was standing in a state of great emotion, his whole frame trembling and the tears bathing his face. "Mother," he said, "something stood up before me and shook me all to bits." Home they went and old Jane soon summoned the chapel folk — they were processioning the streets that night — and Harry passed from darkness and disgrace into the gladness of conversion.

James Johnston's heart is stored with the memory of these spiritual miracles, and he will glow and make the hearer glow in turn, when he draws upon the rich past. And if you have seasons of religious doubt, there is no medicine so quickening as a talk with this saint who has seen with his own eyes the transforming light and power of God abroad upon the earth.

It was in the parlour of his home in Willington yonder that the first officials of the Bishop Auckland Circuit were chosen, and some eight years ago Willington became a separate circuit with Mr. Johnston as the first steward. A Sunday-school teacher sixty-three years and superintendent of the School forty-three years out of that, a class-leader fifty-five years! It is a splendid



record when every day has been made sweet with acts of Christian grace and charity, and I for one shall never forget the still, strong depth of his prayers whether on his own hearthstone before leaving for "the pit" or in the Sunday evening prayer meetings. Sometimes, indeed, I have heard our Willington church spoken of as "Jimmy Johnston's chapel," so intimately has he been associated with all its exploits, and so splendid a fruit is he of the religion for which it stands. That surely is the glory of Methodism, namely, that out of it is born to bless mankind a great praying company of what I will call daily saints who, whether in their "pit clothes" or in their Sabbath dress, shine with the majesty of God, a majesty not always expressed in a blaze of burning light, but in soft summer radiance which the hearts of men drink in even as the flowers weave the sunshine into themselves and yield it back in fragrance.

There we will take leave of the aged gardener, the morning sun making a halo about his brow, remembering that of him and his brethren who serve in like spirit it is written that "the wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." He has planted seeds whose fruit is the happier lives of men—a golden harvest of joy upon the earth. The end of these things is not yet. Not "till the day is done and men bring out the gauge" will his influence be known.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1914/802