

## **My Testimony.**

**By the Rev. Arthur Hird.**

Among the many definitions of genius, that which forcibly impresses itself on me at the moment, is given by Sir James Barrie: "the power to be a boy again at will." Nature compels us to put away childish things and to become a man, but only the grace of God can enable us to put away the things of manhood and enter again the kingdom of our childhood. Anyone can go back as an adult into that kingdom, but it is difficult beyond words to return a child therein, to see incidents and recall moods in their pristine freshness, to "recapture the first fine careless raptures" of a child's first joys, to taste again the bitterness and feel again the unmitigated desolation of a child's first griefs, or to plunge at the bidding of our will into the fearsome, haunted gloom of a child's loneliness of spirit.

In telling the story of how I came to Christ I find it difficult to decide on the limits of the period under review. I publicly confessed my faith in Christ on Sunday evening, January 29th, 1899, but only in a very clumsily approximate sense can I use this crisp date as the time when I came to Christ; for now, nearly twenty years after, I am seeking to apprehend that for which I was apprehended that night and am only now beginning to know Him in the fellowship of His sufferings and the power of His resurrection. But let that date stand as the time when I knew He had found me. Likewise the date of my birth, December 18th. 1883, is inaccurate as the beginning of my spiritual pilgrimage, for ere God laid me in my mother's arms He had so fashioned me that restless I must ever be until I had found my rest in Him. I seem to have begun my march Godwards before I was given to my mother. My spiritual pilgrimage was determined, in that the hunger of my soul for God was ordained, before my bones were formed and for this hungry soul was also being prepared a veritable Procrustean bed of circumstances which should more than keep my soul awake!

Among the pitifully few things I have saved from the wreck of my childhood is a portrait of my mother. I count it supreme good fortune that the work was well done, for it is not even fading yet. Should it fade now it is no matter for that face is indelibly printed on my heart. It is all I have ever known of my mother. As I look again into her quiet, steady eyes I gain a new insight into those words: "Whom having not seen, ye love." In a sense we dwell apart, but not altogether, for though I never knew her in the flesh, she knew me—and one day we shall meet and forget the intervening years. Even now that I am become a man and other love has been given to me, a lonely child lives on in me poignantly crying for a mother's love. In that Day, there is no marriage nor giving in marriage, but there is no forbidding word to hold a child from its mother. My quest awaits me and my joy is sure: I am content, for when I awake I shall be —satisfied! Others have written of a mother's hand leading them to their Saviour and I have weakly envied them the tender caress and the incarnate love. But that which we lack is often more determinative than that which we possess, so I no longer crave their good, My loss is from the Hand which gave them fulness, and I, too, had and have a mother; not *here* to place my hand in His, but *there*, to guide His hand to mine lest I suffer the greatest loss. God sometimes uses a mother on earth, at other times takes her to heaven—for the one saving purpose.

No light is thrown on my inner development from the pranks and follies of my early boyhood. In these things I was just the eternal "boy": breaking windows, breaking rules and commands, breaking my own bones and on occasions the bones of other boys. For minds curious in these things I would record that I was sent to a Wesleyan day school at the age of three and for the next two years elevated truancy into a fine art, with the added joy that every Monday I had twopence school-money which never found its way into the official coffers. Up to five years of age I am proud to think that I did not put in a fortnight's attendance at school — so I was wise before all that were—! I won more fights than prizes at school and for those early years still think I chose the better part. But, lest youthful readers should be stirred to an unwise because one-sided emulation, I equally scorned to allow a boy I could beat in the playground to gain an undue advantage in the classroom, and when at eleven years of age I had to go as a half-timer into the factory my master wrote asking my people to allow me to remain at school, and sit for a scholarship with a view to becoming a teacher. But three shillings a week was an item in the family exchequer and in addition I wanted to go to work and come home proud in my dirt. Now that the years have passed, and though I know I shall halt on my thigh all the days of my life

because of my scant training at that period of my life, I still think the verdict was just on the facts as they stood then. (When I had been a few years in the ministry I spent a tantalizing hour trying to convince that said master that I really was a real minister. It is one of my joys to recall his puzzled face as he struggled to believe me.)

But as I look back on my early years I think not of this or of that incident. The outward details of my life were normal but I would fain believe otherwise of my inner history. There were two black years in my later boyhood when my food was measured; that eaten, then for me the meal was ended. I was hungry for the greater part of that time— nor am I sorry now, for I know things it is good for a minister to know yet difficult for most to come by, and can enter into some sacred experiences whilst the expensively educated and always well-fed must abide without. But up to eleven or twelve years of age I had a sufficiency of plain food and adequate clothing. Only once did I protest on the question of clothing for I had a boy's healthy indifference to these things. One day, however, I had to go to the factory in a pair of corduroy trousers washed white, a black cloth waistcoat decorated with vivid red spots like the back of a certain flat fish, and a cotton velveteen jacket the worse for rain and wear. Before 8 a.m., I had two fights about that waistcoat—and came home to breakfast without it, and burn now with anger when I think of the callous cruelty of unthinking adults who subject sensitive children to the ridicule of other children by insisting on some feature of dress or other equipment which renders them conspicuous. That waistcoat was a castoff "which they thought would just fit me"—and I know yet who cast it off!

But to resume: my body was well-attended to, but my soul was starved, chiefly through neglect, which in turn produced estrangement and a plentiful crop of evils. I utter no reproaches for none abide in my heart. All my life I have received more than I have given, but I sometimes think I should have had more to give if not more but other had been given to me. I was born with two hungers, a hunger of the mind to know, and a hunger of the heart to love and be loved. I was often thrashed and quite frankly can admit, more often deserved it—whose fault is hard to say. But I never had a woman's arm around my neck until the night I was converted, never a woman's hand to touch me with kindly intent, and never to my knowledge had I ever had a caress. I would a thousand times prefer to be hungry than unloved, now, as then, then, as now. The worst cruelty, especially to children, does not show scars on the body. No humane society can redress the wrongs done to a child's spirit.

My early years are a horror of blackness to recall and I would not have them over again for a diadem of double stars. I was robbed of my childhood and the tragedy of it is and was that nobody knew, and even I cannot say who was to blame. I only know that in bulk it was a period of such utter loneliness that only a child, with its lack of experience and contact with life, with its lack of compensating interests and foils for grief, can feel. I have since felt keen pain and grief of spirit but no loneliness so devastating, no tears so blinding as were my portion when my spirit ought to have yet been "streaming with the waters of baptism." Sensitive, with strong passions and a fierce independence of spirit quick to resent heedless word or tactless touch, something of an Ishmael and very much a child as I see myself, alternately affectionate and rebellious, tender and wild, obstinate yet again tractable to the right tone of voice or glance of eye, altogether a very difficult and seldom loveable child—yet, with the makings of a better man in me than ever now can be because of the evil heedlessly wrought in those impressionable years— thus do I see myself. At this distance of years my soul cries out that someone ought to have known, someone ought to have understood that baffled, tempestuous soul groping with blind hands and crying with twisted mouth for a good beyond his feeble words and stumbling thoughts. I see no heroic nor tragic figure in those dead years—just a child yearning to love and be loved, timid as a squirrel, capable of paroxysms of temper and yet would be disarmed by a kind word, kicked fiercely by grown men without a whimper and yet would hide like a wounded animal in some quiet place to cry out his grief—such a welter of contradictions, such a wayward, Protean soul calling in a tongue that none could understand or would heed, crying, with no language but a cry.

In later years I found Psalm cxlii. 4, and preached the sermon born of these stark years; the Psalmist had passed this way before me: "I looked on my right hand, and beheld, but there was no man that would know me: refuge failed me; no man cared for my soul"; and by the time I came to preach the sermon I too could say: "Thou, O Lord, art my refuge and my portion in the land of the living. When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, then Thou knewest my path."

Soon after I became eleven years of age my grandmother died, her last words being a prophecy that I should end my days on the gallows. Not such a wild prophecy either, but for that other gallows, the Cross of Christ. I have said that I was not an easy child to love but there had been the makings of one in me. As it was, however, I was heading even at that early age for evil courses and a wild career, all the more dangerous that I could place at the service of an evil and warped will an active mind and a strong body and a driving power of soul with the kick of a horse in it. I never had much use for grass under my feet. I was at war with myself and with others. I could not establish my contact with life. Nobody wanted me, and I had the sense even then to see that often I was not very desirable. Later I was to know the awkwardness that comes to the growing boy, when his arms are in the way and his legs strangely uncontrollable, especially when furniture is about or people are watching him. I think my soul had its ugly duckling stage before my body and I were wrestling to become at home in the world, not content to abide my time, and with no one to guide me or to take me out of myself.

A little while after the death of my grandmother, I was living alone in the house with my remaining guardian, and we did the house-work between us—and did it well, too. During the day he went to his work and I went to mine, and the evenings were full with our appointed house-work. This was one of the worst periods of all. The week-ends were a horror to anticipate and fearful to experience. I had always been nervous and afraid of being in a house alone. I had the key of the house, but from Saturday noon onwards to late Sunday evening I preferred to use the key of the street. In the late evening the other boys would be called in; then for a time I amused or rather occupied myself by wandering up the lighted main street, and by standing under the lamp at the top of our street and watching the Saturday shoppers straggle homewards with their loads, accompanied often by their children. Soon lights would appear in the bed-rooms, and one by one be extinguished until the street was dark and the factory at the bottom of the street menacing in its sinister blackness. The streets were deserted and often it was past midnight when the steps for which I listened could be heard and often my trouble was but then beginning. Sometimes a neighbour would forget to house his dog for the night; then it was not so bad, for a dog was a godsend and a friend whom I knew by name and could fondle. But God forgive those who leave a child to fondle a dog in the dead o' night and on the streets! Over the years I hear the cry for my mother that went up on my bad nights.

And now the other hunger of which I spoke was awaking and becoming insistent. I wanted to know—to know anything and everything. By the time I was full-time at the mill, that is, thirteen years of age. I was a haunter of the reading-room and beginning to scan the local papers, and remember my early struggles with local politics; a reader of any printed scrap that came my way on any subject under the sun. To and from work, and in the short intervals during work, I read. After tea, when my work in the house was done, I read. I read until I was ordered out of the house after tea, for by this time another power reigned, and I was forbidden on pain of drastic punishment to go into a reading-room. So I walked the streets until nine o' clock, then dutifully went to bed—and waited until the others had come to bed, and promptly lit my stump of candle and read on, often to beyond midnight, though I should be called again at five o'clock. I enrolled as a student at the night school for shorthand and arithmetic— and became shorthand-mad. When I could not write with pen or pencil I read the rules; when I could do neither I traced outlines of long words with my finger, which possibly accounts for my polysyllables to this day. I gave half my pocket-money to a boy to read to me in our back-yard while I toiled painfully after him. My mind was awakening and demanding food, and I have ever since been glad that I cut my teeth on Pitman's short-hand.

The local librarian took an interest in me, after he had nearly frightened the soul out of me with his off-hand ways and terrifying look if your hands were not spotless—and I worked among oil in the factory at that time. He introduced me to Tolstoy before I was much more than fourteen, and I think it was through him that I first came across *Sartor Resartus*. I know I had read it through three times before I was fifteen and a half and was hoping some time to be able to understand it, but that strong soul spoke to my soul long years before his intellect had much to say to me. Ruskin and Emerson followed, but no novels and no poetry, for in my callow intensity of spirit I scorned such easy joy and weak dalliance.

For one thing shall I ever be indebted to my early home, they insisted and saw to it that I attended Sunday school morning and afternoon, and never was the rule relaxed for any reason. On the

whole I liked it and the prizes for unbroken attendance were the first books I possessed. Later when I left home (just after I was fifteen years of age) all my worldly possessions went into a cube sugar box, and half of the space was occupied with books won at the school, or given.

As my fifteenth birthday drew near matters seemed to be reaching a climax at home and in other ways. My inner life had been forced back on itself and I was old for my years, unhealthily so. I had no companions and lived in my day's work and that other world of books. I worked fiercely and silently in the mill and when out of it spent my time with my thoughts. I trod mechanically the treadmill of the recurring duties of the day and pined for I knew not what. Sometimes a flash of animal spirits or a sharp contest of wits with one or the other of my fellow-workers broke the evil monotony of the soddened hours, only to be succeeded by a more or less lengthy period of brooding and eating of my own vitals. The waters of my soul, denied natural outlet, were turned brackish and sour.

My whole soul cried out for congenial comradeship, but by a strange perversity I had a knack of chilling the few friendly overtures that were made. But in general the thoughts of those I knew about my own age were not my thoughts, and decidedly my ways did not commend themselves to others. I had nothing I cared to talk about and no one to talk to, and having no use for words save now and then at my work, I grew ever more silent. Now and then, though very seldom, I wept for very misery; and scorned myself for my weakness. I liked my work well enough in a way, but my soul turned from the life that seemed to lie ahead of me with deep loathing. I had changed to another department in the same factory and for a time the change of work brought new interests into my life. But a settled gloom was with me for no reason that I could put into words and there were short periods of utter desolation of spirit when suicide was my constant thought. Later than the time of which I write the firm sent me away for a holiday into the country as I was threatened with a vicious form of melancholia. I now see that over-work, brooding, and being flung too much in my own company, together with too much reading after ten to twelve hours every day in the factory was enough to sap the strongest constitution, and still I feel that in addition to this there was an element of spiritual ferment not thus to be explained, much less to be thus explained away.

All this time I was regular in my attendance at Sunday school and was a continual thorn in the flesh of the teachers. We had a goodly and good succession for no teacher could or would stand us for long. Sometimes I warmed to the teacher and my hunger to know what was beyond, and to test and taste of that love of which they so confidently spoke, made me listen tensely at times. Never for long, however, for this love was so unreal. I had never seen it in action, frankly doubted its existence, and more frankly its use. It was up there! But one day, yet another teacher came to try her hand with us. Because of the uproar she was standing in the middle of the class-room before I noticed her, and her face alight with a real smile, not a bland wrinkling of the muscles of the face, she asked to start the lesson with prayer and was praying ere we knew it. And it was a *real* prayer with a ringing trust in God and an honest interest in "these boys." I was quiet that day. I liked her. Her face bore the marks of past sorrow; there was that something about the eyes as though full often washed with tears, yet left capable of honest laughter. As she talked she handled real money all the time; also she had boys of her own and knew their ways and the way into their hearts. Especially was she a genius in knowing what *not* to say, and how *not* to say a thing. She scored a bigger success that day than she knew I think, and I often told her so afterwards.

I began to attend the evening service in the church about this time and generally practised my shorthand on the sermons of the Rev. J.T. Barkby, much appreciating his measured and ordered delivery and his clean enunciation of every word. His was a great help, withal not unduly spiritual up to that point. After my conversion he made a most valuable contribution to my spiritual development, and I owe him a deep debt of gratitude.

Then there descended on me one of the blackest periods of depression I had ever known, It was not that I lost hope, for I had never had any hope to lose that I knew of. Just blackness, heavy, malignant, stupifying darkness lay like a fog on my spirit. I felt I was a doomed soul neither knowing my doom nor my sin. A blank hopelessness and deadness of soul lay on me which deprived me of the power either to think or speak. For a fortnight I do not think I spoke ten words a day, other than were necessary for the progress of my work. My soul was frozen within me, I had no thoughts good or bad beyond my work, no problems, no special sense of sin, no want

that could be expressed in words. My heart was crying out for the living God—nothing less or other would suffice my need, but I did not know it was God I wanted. I should have denied it with cursings, real and deep, if one had told me. My state was noticed by those who worked with or near me, and certain women tried to rouse me and to rally my spirits (for they knew I could be gay enough when so inclined) by retailing sundry lewd stories which remained with me for years, God forgive such women, and pity them! One of them had a child almost as old as myself!

The climax came on the evening of the Sunday mentioned. A lay-preacher was in the pulpit but I heeded not his sermon. I wrestled with my own misery of soul. I only knew I wanted to be good, I wanted God to love me, for nobody else did. I wanted a friend, I wanted, wanted—! I felt that something was going to happen. I had got to the end of my resources. I stayed to the prayer-meeting for the first time in my life, having persuaded another scholar of the same class in the school to stay with me. I remember the names and even yet can see the faces of the men and women who prayed. My teacher flashed her blue eyes joyfully as I stole into the body of the church, and I remember feeling a momentary fierce indifference whether she were glad or not, and wondering whether I should go out again after all. But I stayed, not knowing why I had come or why I had stayed. I only know that as they prayed and I sat watching them with hard eyes, my spirit thawed, the pent-up forces had their will with me, I flung myself from the pew, and nervous and distraught, threw myself down at the communion rail and cried as though my heart would break. And then, a woman's arm stole round my neck and the tear-stained cheek of my teacher was warm against my own, her tears mingling with mine—and I knew and was known of Him whom I did not know I sought, I loved and was loved by Him who had brought me by His own way to Himself.

That was the beginning of a revival that swept in the whole of our class and others, but that is another story. I had found my Saviour, or rather had been found of Him. I had wrestled not with sin, but with the needs of my own soul, and in Him I found the rest I sought. In the Church I have found both father and mother. In Him I found my resting-place, and He gave me into the keeping of some who made the Word flesh again.

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#### References

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1918/622