

Chapter 11

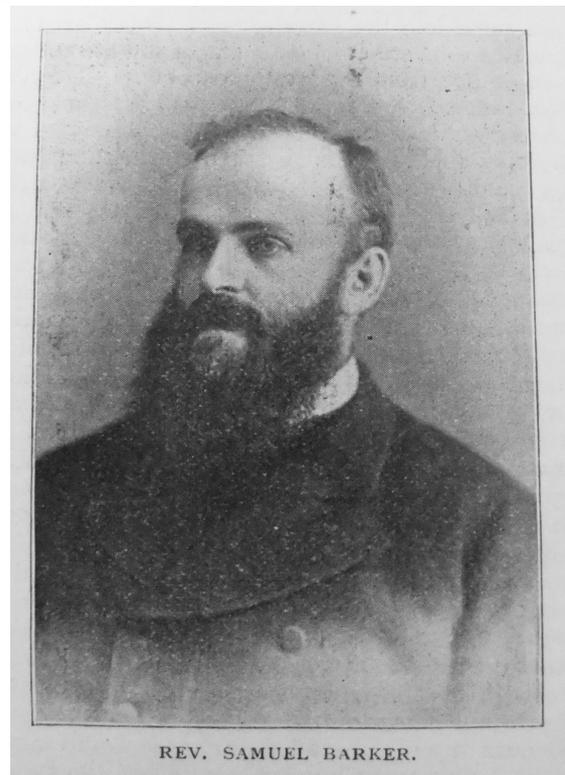
In chapter IX. I gave the reader a few typical instances of my adventures and work in my early days, and ended by speaking of the increasing burden on my heart for the souls of men; that burden increased daily, until it became almost unbearable. At home, abroad; by night and day; at work or rest, the one absorbing, overwhelming thought was the spiritual condition of those around me. I had seen Jesus crucified, and that vision had changed the whole trend of my being. O, how I yearned to communicate the good news to men who were in darkness. I saw the multitudes pressing on to ruin, and I longed to rush in and save them. They appeared to me as sheep without a shepherd. Forgetful of God, and unmindful of eternal interests, they pursued the path of ruin. Often in the street the feelings of my heart would overcome me and I would burst into tears. I could understand then, if never before, the yearning impetuosity of some of the prophets. The sorrow, and even the very cross of Christ, seemed a reasonable thing. The self-reprobaton of Paul for his own kinsmen according to the flesh appeared quite natural, and all the sufferings, persecutions, and hardships of our early preachers to bring men to God stood out before my mind as the necessary outcome of their beliefs. The agony of James Caughey when he cried out: "Lord, save souls or I die," my soul also experienced. I knew then why John Smith, of early Methodist fame, could lie prostrate for hours as he pleaded for the salvation of the people. I could understand why William Branwell could spend thirty-six hours in "a hole in the ground," interceding for power that he might more effectually preach the Word. I felt I would gladly yield up all – life's ambitions, honours, fame, - and become the off-scouring of all men, if I could but save some into the knowledge of Jesus Christ! I longed to devote every moment of my life to warn men to flee from the wrath to come. But every door seemed closed. I was poor, I was unknown, I had no friends in the ecclesiastical courts. I was the only one of my family with a Christian standing, and, greatest barrier of all, I was married. This last seemed an insuperable obstacle to the ministry. Besides, I had neither books nor money nor mental qualification. All I possessed was a consuming passion to bless and save men. But I had an insatiable desire to learn. While cultivating the devotional and the evangelistic sides of my life I tried not to forget the intellectual. I knew that having been awakened so late out of the sleep of sin, nature must work at high pressure if I was to walk in step with the good and true around me. I resolved that whatever powers I possessed should be utilised to the utmost. My first attempts at self-improvement, together with an account of the tools I worked with, have already been placed before the reader. I have lived long enough to see the wisdom of the course I pursued. The rock on which many an evangelist splits is - shallowness. He is in blissful ignorance of life's larger issues. He thrums on certain keys so often that they strike discords in souls where larger chords would awaken music. Our own Church has acted on the assumption that a cultured pastorate was necessary, but that any man could save souls who had a good pair of lungs and a strong fist. But a man must do more in these days than shout, "Come to Jesus," if he would win men to God. The average intelligence of the British people during the last twenty years has gone up considerably. As I value my soul I could not possibly address people to-day on spiritual matters as I did years ago. Their intelligence would resent it. The Church should devote her most gifted sons to this important work – saving men. Primitive Methodism is fifty years behind in this matter. Her statesmen lack vision. We have a genius for arithmetic and education, but we fail oft in seizing spiritual opportunities. My fear is that unless more wisdom is displayed in this matter the sceptre of evangelism so long our own may pas to others. The danger of many an evangelist is narrowness of view. A few thoughts and a few addresses serve him for a lifetime. He seems perfectly oblivious of the fact that life being progressive the soul's

necessities constantly enlarge. The man who cannot meet the claims of both intellect and heart in these times is limited in his range of usefulness. The boys of to-day know more of the Bible than the men of forty years ago. Evangelists have often complained to me that the missions they conducted were chiefly sustained by the ignorant and the unlearned. That the intelligent and the cultured mostly stood aloof. But why is this? Is it because life's culture makes the soul indifferent to spiritual things? No certainly not. In nine cases out of ten it is because the man who would convert the intelligent to Christ has no message to their soul. He prates, and prates, and prates, but like a sixth-rate musician banging on the keys, he repels and disgusts where he should charm and save. He repeats, like a parrot, what he has repeated a thousand times before, heedless of the fact that the effect of his message on the hearts which hear him is no more than "sounding brass or the clanging cymbal."

" Only believe, and you shall be saved;
And heaven is yours for ever," ----

represents about all the Gospel that some mission preachers know, The danger of all specialists lies just here, whether they preachers or evangelists. Higher critics of Lower critics, scientists or philosophers. Absorption of the mind in a single idea may so narrow the soul's vision that the idea, which is true when set in the right perspective, may be false if made the centre of a whole system. Because some scientists cannot see the working of absolute mind in its manipulation of atoms they reject the idea of God. The man who deals with the soul has an awful task. The heart he would touch with redeeming truth is like the keyboard of an organ. He needs the wise mind and the deft hand, for much of life's discord is the result of untrained fingers smiting the keys.

But no attempts at self-tuition eased the strain on my heart. Heavier did the burden become, until one day I felt I could bear no more. Long as memory lasts that day will live in my soul. All the hours has been filled with thoughts of God and His claims on human life. Thoughts like Christ's love made me feel that I should like to clasp the world in my arms and bear it wil all its sin and sorrow and heartache, to His blessed feet. When the evening came I retired alone, and poured out my soul for light and guidance. I pleaded that God would either open a door for me to enter a larger sphere of usefulness, or ease the pressure of pain on my soul. I was willing to stay in the humble sphere I occupied, or, if He willed, I was ready for service right up to death. But continue as I was I could not. My vigils unfitted me for my daily toil, and if not lightened would prostrate me entirely. My prayer ended, I became more calm.



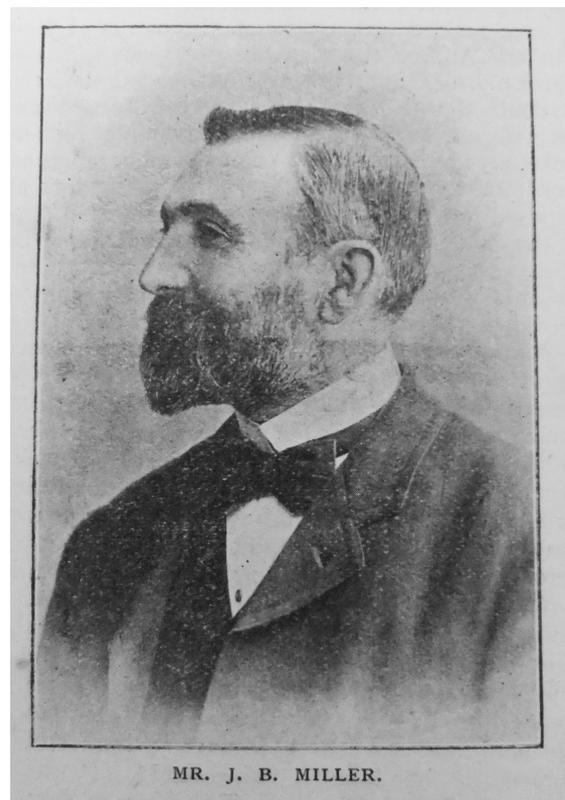
The next morning the postman brought a letter from a town which I had no knowledge of except by name – Melton Mowbray. It was written by the Rev. Samuel Barker, now of Clay Cross. It contained a request for me to go and conduct a fortnight's special services in a place called Long Clawson. The

letter contained an earnest appeal, and a hint that the acceptance of the invite might lead to something beyond. Here was a, remarkable and positive answer to my prayer of the night before. Mt. Barker had travelled at Ilkeston two years before. From Ilkeston he went to Lincoln, and from Lincoln to Melton. From the time he left Ilkeston to the day he wrote from Melton I am not aware that I ever either saw him or corresponded with him. The reason for his writing the letter which decided my future was as follows:- On the afternoon of the day when my soul had reached crisis, Mr. Barker, having to preach at Long Clawson, was wending his way to the house of Mr. J.B. Miller, the circuit steward for tea, Over the tea-cups the conversation turned on the work of God. The spiritual condition of the churches on the station, together with the numbers who were unsaved, had deeply impressed both Mr. Barker and his chief officer. Christians were cold, the societies were low, and souls were very rarely saved. The people generally lay in the arms of the wicked one. Mr. Miller expressed a strong desire for some bold attempt to reach the people. What could be done? The members were mostly poor, and any special effort would mean considerable expense. "Well," said Mr. Miller, "God has blessed me in my business, and I feel I must make some return to Him. I have money, can you find the man?"

At that moment my name was suggested to Mr. Barker, and he said, "I know the man."

That night, the night when I had prayed for God's intervention, the letter to which I have referred was written. The letter which to me meant so much, which changed my whole course of life, and has resulted in the salvation of thousands. On such trifling events do great issues rest. A few days afterwards, with bundle and stick, I was on my way to Melton.

It was Saturday afternoon when I arrived. Thinking that my destination for the mission was close to Melton, I made myself cosy after tea at Mr. Barker's, for a quiet and pleasant evening. But my comfort was disturbed by Mr. Barker informing me that I had better put myself together for a walk-of seven miles, that being the distance to my first spiritual battle-ground, Long-Clawson. It was rather a rude shaking, but I shouldered my cross in the shape of my stick and baggage, and in the company of my friend made for the road. To me, that walk was into the unknown. Neither Mr. Barker nor myself were conscious of what the future has revealed. We talked of Jesus, of the necessities of men, and of the great need for a mighty awakening of religious interest. We arrived at the parting of the ways, close by a village called Kettleby. There, with mutual prayers and blessings, we separated. "Go down this road some distance," said Mr. Barker, pointing with his finger in the direction indicated, "and you will come to a road which turns sharply to the left. Take that turn, and go on for several miles until you come to the foot of a steep hill. A few yards further on you will come to a cottage on the left side of the road; knock, and whoever comes to the door, tell them you are the preacher."



Leaving Mr. Barker I walked along thinking of my position, my hopes, my fears, and wondered what life's path would lead to in the providence of God. Kneeling on the road-side, I poured out my soul in prayer. I knew that that fortnight's mission was to be my life's test. The issue I was resolved to accept as God's sign for the future. The peculiarity of my position made such evidence necessary for the guidance of my feet. The call of some is confirmed by the Church, I required the "sign from heaven." I prayed to God He might let the mission fail on my hands rather than allow me to be deluded as to what my true work was to be. At the same time I resolved to do my best to make the services a success, and to begin my work at once. Rising to my feet I pressed along until I came to a field where two men were chopping turnips for some sheep. Between the road and the field there was a high, thick-set hedge, and so far as I could discover, there was no gate into the field from the road on which I stood. Stopping suddenly on my walk, I summoned the men to listen to me. The men halted the machine and stared at me in astonishment. I then opened my commission, and urged them, if they had not already done so, to at once seek salvation through the merits of Jesus Christ. At first the men did not seem to understand my meaning; but as I proceeded the truth gradually dawned upon them, and they turned upon me with comical fury. Finding their rage did not make any impression, they commenced to laugh and jeer. It is remarkable when some evangelists are opposed how easily they can pass from the Gospel to the law. Lorenzo Dow, I remember, one day when addressing a crowd in the open-air, made a pulpit of a huge cask. The quality of the contents he did not know. Some wags, a short time before he commenced the service, had loosened the covering at the top of the cask. Dow, during his address, became, as was his custom, much excited. Giving an enthusiastic jump, the boards gave way, and he went into the cask almost up to his neck in dirty water. His excitement was cooled. Releasing himself as best he could he finished his exhortation in a different key. He had commenced it with mercy, but he significantly ended with fire and brimstone. And I, leaving Calvary as quickly as I could, hurled at my two opponents a few terrible items out of the Revelation of John. Finding I could' make no impression, with a final malediction I passed on. Soon after I came up with a labouring man, and preached Jesus to him until I reached the first house on the road. It was the house of David Chester. Knocking, a boy answered the door, and I informed them that "I was the preacher." An escort was kindly afforded me, and soon after I was comfortably housed under the hospitable roof of good Mr. Miller. It was Saturday night. The villagers were busy preparing for the Sabbath. My mission was appointed to commence the next day. But that night I visited a few faithful souls and requested them to meet me in the chapel the next morning at seven o'clock for intercession and praise. Next morning we met, four of us, and pleaded that the might of the Spirit of God that day would be manifest. The day passed, but no distinct sign of good was seen. The congregations were fair, but a strange chill rested upon the services. At night but one or two engaged in prayer, a dumb silence was on all the rest. At the close I requested those who had prayed to stay, and when we were alone I said, "We must form a holy conspiracy to break through the spiritual coldness around us. We need a large amount of Divine wisdom and guile to catch men. When I have done preaching and we enter the prayer meeting, will you who are here pray round, and round again, and again, until the fire is kindled in some other hearts?" So they promised. But still the heavens were as brass. Four nights passed and matters became worse and worse. Not a single sinner had come to Jesus. Prayer, preaching, toil, all appeared useless. This to me was a terrible trial. I began to think that I had mistaken my calling, and that all my impressions about being called to win men were only human. On the fourth night when leaving the chapel I was dumb, I felt stunned. My failure appeared to be God's rebuke. I had asked for a sign, and the sign was unfavourable. Worn and weary I retired to my room, but not to rest. Nearly the whole of that night I spent with God. The

experiences of that night cannot be put into words. It was my night of wrestle with both the Angel and the demon. That night so impressed the existence of a personal devil on my consciousness that I have never doubted it since. Mark Rutherford says, "The idea of an actually existing devil is exploded." But Mark Rutherford has attended the wrong school. Let him pass through the one I did and he will doubt no longer. I told the fishermen of Grimsby that I knew there was a devil because I had seen him. The preceding experience was what I had in my mind. My chief temptation during this terrible night lay in the thought that I had mistaken my mission; that I was deluding myself; that my desires to devote my life to spiritual service were based on self; that I had not the necessary qualifications, and that in dealing with the destinies of men I was playing with edged-tools. Blind and ignorant, I might not only fall into the ditch myself, but drag others with me; and in proof of all this argument, there was the fact that though I had toiled almost superhumanly in the mission, there was no sign of blessing. These and many other things tore my soul. As the morning dawned a powerful impulse seized me to steal away quietly from the place and returning home, write a letter of explanation and apology, and henceforth cease all thoughts of the larger ministry of Jesus. But, no, I reasoned, I did not seek this cause, the cause sought me, and though it should cost me my life, I would stay and see the end.

The next night I felt more freedom in preaching, and at the close, to my joy of heart, God gave me my first soul. Oh, how quickly the morning dawned in my soul! Temptation was mastered. All hardness of heart melted like snow under a summers sun. The fountains of the great deep were broken up. Tears came like rain. I burst into song:

"Jesus, the Name high over all,
In hell, or earth, or sky;
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly."

In that hour of holy bliss I knew, in part, the secret of the cross. There are times when the crucifixion of the Lord seems more natural to the heart than supernatural. That was such a time to me. I knew now why for the joy set before Jesus He endured the cross and despised the shame. I knew also, in part, the reason for my keen temptation - it was my wilderness experience. It was Satan's last attempt to turn me from my life's mission. Thank God, he failed.

The results of that first series of meetings live to-day. From the resultant harvest the Saviour has gathered some fruit for the heavenly home. The churches were stirred. Many were led to seek a higher life. Strange sights were witnessed. Some, I believe, whose names I could give, received their last call. It appeared as though eternal themes were the one absorbing topic. Those who passed through the meetings and whose eyes are following these pages will feel the tender thrill as they recall the spiritual glory which night after night rested on the people. Great grace rested on us all. This autobiography is but a fragment. Scenes and incidents crowd upon me as I write, full of beautiful and living interest. In after years, if God afford the leisure, they shall be given to the world. Every house in the place was visited by myself personally. Some remarkable conversions took place in this way. Not only the poor, but the rich were moved to seek salvation. I felt that I was responsible to God for every soul in the place, even to the vicar. For the first time I met him I solemnly asked if her was converted. He stopped, stared, looked at me from the crown to sole, and then, without a word, thinking no doubt, I was a very impudent fellow, he passed on. If the people would not let me

go inside their houses to pray, kneeling before the door I prayed outside. This soon got reported until some of the worldly when they knew it was my knock, would say, "For goodness' sake, let him come in or he will arouse the whole district."

The little church is set in the centre of the village, like a divine sentinel guarding the inhabitants from evil. The churchyard to me is classic ground - God's acre, indeed, both to memory and feeling. No spot is so rich and pregnant with hallowed memories as this. One grave after another remind me of those I won to truth. The young and the old lie there whom, I pointed to the redeeming cross. The last time I was going through, a lady was carefully cleansing the dust from the letters on a stone. Her countenance revealed her tender grief for the one beloved. I watched her for some time in silence. "Was the one whose form lies there related to you?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, my sister," she answered.

"I also knew her," I replied. "I remember years ago, when almost a stranger, knocking at her house-door, and entering her home. I knelt on the hearthstone and prayed her into the arms of Jesus. I believe that that visit was to your sister the beginning of days."

Yes, the memory and power of those first services abide. Grace and glory rested upon the people. The closing scenes of that first mission were remarkable. The House of God was the place of weeping. Strong men bowed at the mercy-seat. The chief result of the mission upon my own heart was the confirmation of the conviction that God had marked me for His service. I returned home with overflowing joy and to await the larger call. The joy of a spiritual warrior returning from the strife is beyond compare. His victories are spiritual. He blights no homes; he spills no blood. Like the triumphs of Jesus, the slain of the Spirit were sharers of my bliss. Hearts were filled with purity, and homes with song. I personally know of seven saved in those meetings who have gained their crowns. I thank God for these, and for those who for many years in the Vale of Belvoir and in many parts of the world are preaching to others the truth that saved their souls. To God be all the glory!

A short time afterwards the Quarterly Meeting met, and Melton passed the following resolution:-
"That the Rev. S. Barker correspond with Mr. Flanagan with a view of securing his services for six months, at the rate of one pound, seven shillings, per week, with the understanding that in the event of a second engagement a further sum of money shall be given if money matters warrant it."

When the call came I did not hesitate a moment. God lived and he was leading; that was quite enough for me. The day before I said "good-bye" to the old scenes was a very busy one. The morning came when the huge farmer's waggon, which Mr. Miller kindly sent, drew up at my front door. The goods were loaded and we were ready to start on our life-long pilgrimage. I remember the day well. It was Wednesday, and the Rev. W. Durrance, who was then superintendent minister of the Ilkeston Station, came to ask if I would give a farewell address in the chapel. I thanked him, but declined. "My last words," I said, "shall be spoken in this street to the people among whom for ten years I have lived. They knew me when I was a servant of sin, and they have known me since I became a follower of Jesus Christ. They are the people to judge if I am worthy to go and commend the grace of God to others."

Asking the loan of a chair, our own all being packed up, a woman with whom I had often pleaded for God, handed me one of hers. Shouldering the chair I started up the centre of the street singing:

“Hark! the gospel news is sounding;
Christ hath suffered on the tree;
Streams of mercy are abounding;
Grace for all is rich and free;
Now, poor sinner,
Look to Him who died for thee.”

Reaching the top of the street where I lived, I planted the chair in the centre, and mounting it, plunged into the third verse of the hymn:

"Grace is flowing like a river;
Millions there have been supplied;
Still it flows as fresh as ever,
From the Saviour's wounded side:
None need perish,
All may live, for Christ hath died.”

A short prayer followed, and I then commenced my address. The rumour had got abroad that I was leaving to become an evangelist, and all in the street turned out to listen to my words of farewell. It was to me a sadly interesting moment. A man cannot tear up the associations of years without a pang. The faces of all around were familiar to me. And though for many years I have moved amid other scenes, I have still a fondness for the old haunts. Here in my motley congregation, were comrades of my toil. They had known me in the days of wandering, and had marked the grace of God in me. I longed that each of them should know the salvation of Christ. My heart was very tender when I spoke to them as follows: "My dear comrades and fellow-neighbours, I thank you all for coming round in such large numbers to hear the last few words I shall, perhaps, ever speak to you. All of you know me. My manner of life for the last ten years has been lived under your eyes. For five years you knew me as a prodigal. My life was godless. Many of you were my companions in sin. You know how well I served the evil one. You remember how I made haste in the path of ruin. But five years ago there was a change, a change that surprised both myself and you. I was apprehended by Jesus Christ. The grace of God made me a new man. New hopes, new ambitions, new joys became mine. All these because God had given me a new heart. From that time old ways were cast off. Life became to me a different thing. I saw many of my townsmen in the same darkness which had blinded me. And you know how earnestly and faithfully I have sought your salvation. I have now been called to devote my life to God's service. Many of us will never meet again till we stand at the Bar of God. I desire in that day to be found faithful, and I ask that if I have failed to warn any of you to flee to Jesus Christ, or if I have not tried to live before you as I ought, that you will charge me now that I may deliver my soul and seek forgiveness."

No one spoke. Many were in tears. Exhorting them all to turn to God, I went away.

(To be continued.)

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1901/845