

Chapter 6

I would now ask the reader's attention to the action of God in my own life. And, first, it will be in order for me to begin with my conversion. Though my religious instincts were rudely violated by the social atmosphere in which I lived, it must not be thought that I passed through the years of boyhood and young manhood without often feeling the powers of the world to come. I felt the pangs of a mind diseased. The memory of a rooted sorrow, based on life's enigma and life's shame, often wrote its trouble on my brain. My disease and pain needed more

"The divine than the physician."

My sin struck heaven in the face, no wonder I was "cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in with saucy doubts and fears." I often felt it would be better with the dead than on the torture of the mind to lie in restless misery. But, thank God, despair had not quite seized my spirit. Hope, though with broken wing, still had residence in my heart. For I knew with Lady Macbeth, that—

"Things without all remedy should be without regret."

At twenty-one years of age by the clock, it should for me have been day. But wrong-doing had extinguished my travelling lamp, and left me in the dark. So far as my physical powers were concerned, I was a complete wreck. Alas! that evil should seem more natural to us than good. Evil is so near, and oft so attractive. The devil hides the cloven foot. Sanctity has a blood-stain, but sin is robed with flowers. We grasp the immediate and find it the evanescent. We pass by the distant and discover when the day is declining that we have missed the true. While clearly conscious that I was rebelling against the truth, and convinced of the fact that I was warring against my best interests, I, like many others, fooled by wrong, continued yet to sin. I revered the life of my mother, but followed the example of my father. I knew no higher associations than the stage, the music hall, and the public-house. My temperament was such that anything which excited the feelings, moved the imagination, or appealed to the senses, commanded my obedience. Alcoholic habits had completely unhinged my nervous system. The most trivial shapes or things would fill me with horror. Infernal imaginations haunted my brain. Thoughts of which I could not write filled the mind. Evil is cruel at all times, but specially so when nature is weak. It was when Christ was hungry that the devil mocked Him. The consciousness of what a man feels when held by the drink demon often sobers my thought, and fills me with pain. I know with Luniel, that—

"When God we spurn we suffer: suffer and inflict
On Him our suffering."

Yea, and on ourselves, and on God because of on ourselves. For hell is part of nature, as pain is part of love. Human retribution stands divine in ordination. The Christian who laughs at sin in any form, even in the antics of a drunken man, laughs at God. He is finding amusement at the expense of his Master's tears. Did those who joke at a drunkard's folly ever pass through the same experience they would never play the fool again. The experiences of my early manhood seem like an ugly nightmare. At the age mentioned I appeared to be beyond all hope. Like a helpless wreck before the storm, I drifted on to a hopeless grave. How awful to be ever feeling one's self drawing nearer and nearer to the vortex of despair; to know that to die would mean damnation. To be ever conscious that my life was a curse to those I loved. To possess a diseased imagination which constantly filled me with gloomy apprehensions, was sad indeed. Often did I vow to be better, but the vow was not supported by the moral forces of the cross. The first temptation would scatter my resolution to the winds.

Physically, I had reached the lowest level. A few more steps and the tragedy would have ended. What a hell would have been mine if, at last, the Almighty had shown me in the eternal world what grace would have led me to achieve! Let me say that I never sinned because I loved to sin. From the dawn of memory I had a leaning to better things. But I chiefly sinned because, though knowing higher things, I knew not how to possess them. Had the love of God and the way to make that love my own been revealed to me, the years of sinning might have been years of consecrated service. Those truths which to some children are in the very air they breathe, were to my understanding unknown. The strong hand of my father shaped my life, and, alas, I only too readily followed his steps. The memory of those years haunts me, and ever will. There are moments when I think it must all be a dream. But I am reminded by natural laws which no man can break with impunity, that both the suffering and the sin were real. Like Jacob's wrestle with the angel, they have left marks upon me which time alone can never entirely obliterate.

And here may I say, that I am glad the physiological aspects of Temperance are being so closely studied in the present. It is a practical impossibility for some men to become drunkards. The man whose nature is cold and phlegmatic, who seldom laughs or cries, to whom emotion is an offence, and enthusiasm almost blasphemy; such a man will never fall through the drink. He is constitutionally moderate. Such men do useful work, they never go to extremes. If the heavens were falling they would finish their sausage. Gough says: "They are like a lot of tunes boxed up in a barrel-organ. Turn the handle and you get the tunes without variation, save, perhaps, a few cracks in the notes." Such men must have a joke explained before they can appreciate it. They make good arithmeticians, but bad poets. They walk the earth, they never soar away to the sun. Then there is the close-fisted calculating man who if not restrained by grace or public opinion would easily become a miser or a Judas. If ever a man like that gets drunk he does so at some one else's expense. He sometimes carries the accent of wisdom with the intelligence of a fool. He lives in a narrow world, rigid, mechanical, cold. Such a man is too mean ever to become a sot. But take a man all afire with enthusiasm, of nervous temperament, of generous heart, a man whom every one loves without effort, the soul of the party, the mother's darling, the father's joy, highly-strung, finely-formed – such a one as would be selected for a forlorn hope. When a man like this is seized by the drink-crave his passage is swift and deadly. During the years of my moral descent I had many a "kick against the pricks." Much abused my conscience was ever warning me that —

THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH.

"Present pay we now receive" is true for the sinner as well as the saint. How cruel is the penalty of a diseased imagination. Men who sin deeply experience hells unspeakable. How awful to live, to see, to hear, to touch, and taste, yet be a corpse. To have high ambitions, pure desires, and yet be mocked and enslaved by some thing of sense. To hear the name of a man, yet be slave of passion. To see the noble and the good around you and know that your nature and genius are equal to the best, yet be the sport of appetite. Still, some do not feel so acutely such circumstances as others. Nature has her compensations. She usually weds the thick skull to the thick skin. I blame her not, for who has not found the "iron collar" linked to the "celestial idea"? I sometimes wish I could erase part of my past. But this is impossible. The past must ever be what it is - irrevocable, unchangeable. There is one consolation, however, God can forgive the sin, yea, and His grace can transform the past into testimony of the highest value; testimony which magnifies the love that redeems, which warns the unwary and kindles hope in many a despairing soul. Blessed be God for those who have never

thought or lived a lie. For a lie is at the base of all evil. Hell is but a lie in full fruition. The white radiance: of some lives, like Sister Simplice, illumines both lips and eyes. "Her lips were white, her smile was white. There was not a spider's-web, nor a speck of dust upon the glass of her conscience." These are those—

"For whom unerring
The souls white lilies keep their virgin hue,
Those who when thoughts to danger sweet are stirring,
Take the stern strength that nature gives to few.
Alas! too human was my weak heart's feeling—
An evil passion virtue did undo."

The first time I ever distinctly remember the Spirit of God calling me to a better life was when about twelve years of age. My father was working in the town of Birstal. My mother, true to her heart's desire, sought out a Sunday School. She found one in connection with a small chapel at the foot of the hill on which we resided, and strange to say, it was a Primitive Methodist School. The Bible Class into which the good superintendent placed me was held, as a mark of distinction, in the old singing pew, just under the quaint old pulpit. One Sunday afternoon while the lesson was proceeding, the teacher, possibly feeling at the moment an intense interest in the spiritual condition of the lads before him, burst into tears. Those tears moved me much. They touched the well-spring of my own, and I wished for the school to close that I might find a quiet spot in which to weep. When the school session was over, I hurried away, and finding a lonely place in an obscure lane, I wept to my heart's content. I have often thought and said, that had some Christian friend found me there in those moments of sorrowful desire I might have been led to Jesus. For I wished to serve the God who loved me, but about whom I knew so little. How much I should have missed had I found Christ then! What years of sinning would have been transformed into years of service. When the tear-flow had ceased, I arranged both my countenance and my dress so that those at home should not perceive my emotion. Nearly thirty years after, when taking part in the Shipley Convention, I took train on a cold, stormy day to Birstal, to look on the same scenes again. I found the old chapel, now vacated for a larger and more handsome building. The chapel-house was tenanted by a rather rough-looking man of the working-class. I asked him if he would allow me to look inside the chapel. "Ah!" he said, "but there's nowt to see."

Thanking him I entered the building. There was the old gallery and the singing pew where first the Spirit consciously impressed my heart. I told the man who stood by my story, and then rehearsed God's goodness in saving me, and requested permission to pray. Returning thanks to God, I left the chapel and found the lane where, as a boy, I wept in my sorrow. There was the very spot where I stood, and the old stonewall against which I leaned. I could not help but again bare my head and pour out my soul in thanksgiving to the Lord. Leaving there, I sought the workshop where I laboured for my daily bread. Finding my old master was still alive, I sought him out. I told him about my conversion, and the old man wept. Learning from him that some whom I knew in bygone days were still living, I invited him to take me to them. He did, and for some time led me about from door to door, while I confessed with joy what the Lord had done for my soul.

The next time I distinctly remember the Holy Spirit convicting my mind was under most remarkable circumstances. I was about nineteen years of age, and was residing at the time in the city of

Nottingham. I had a passion for the stage, (I wonder what young Hotspur has not), and having a good voice was in popular repute among the profession. God since those days has enabled me to turn even this talent to good account. My stage experiences brought me into touch with some personalities who in their day made a great sensation. Some of the best actors and singers of a past generation I knew. To me, even now, it is no mean privilege to have heard Lorraine interpret "Jean Valjean." I can never forget the "Hamlet" of poor Charles Dillon. And how much more realistic and true to me is "The Merchant of Venice" when I recollect how Charles Kean portrayed Shylock. I can hear even now the pitiable old Jew asking for his "pound of flesh." To see and hear Charles Kean interpret by gesture, and tone, and feature, the words:

"I'll have my bond; I will
Not hear thee speak: I'll have
My bond, and therefore speak no more,
I'll not be made a soft and dull-eyed fool,
To shake the head, relent and sigh and yield
To Christian intercessors. Follow not;
I'll have no speaking; I will have my bond" —

was for ever to make Shakespeare of living interest to the thoughtful student. Many of Shakespeare's characters are more real to me because they are associated with actual impersonation, which for me transmuted them from the sphere of literature into the realm of flesh and blood. Yet, let me say, the actor's life is a fictitious one. It is much easier to imitate greatness than to be great. To play the king one day and the fool another, is not very edifying. I knew one who could never move his audience to tears unless he was half-drunk. And I have heard of another who at times charms London audiences, that needs the tonic of a powerful drug to steady his brain for his part when overindulgence has made him reel. No wonder Birrell writes, "It is remarkable that no man of lofty genius or character has ever condescended to remain an actor."

And how true are Garrick's words:-

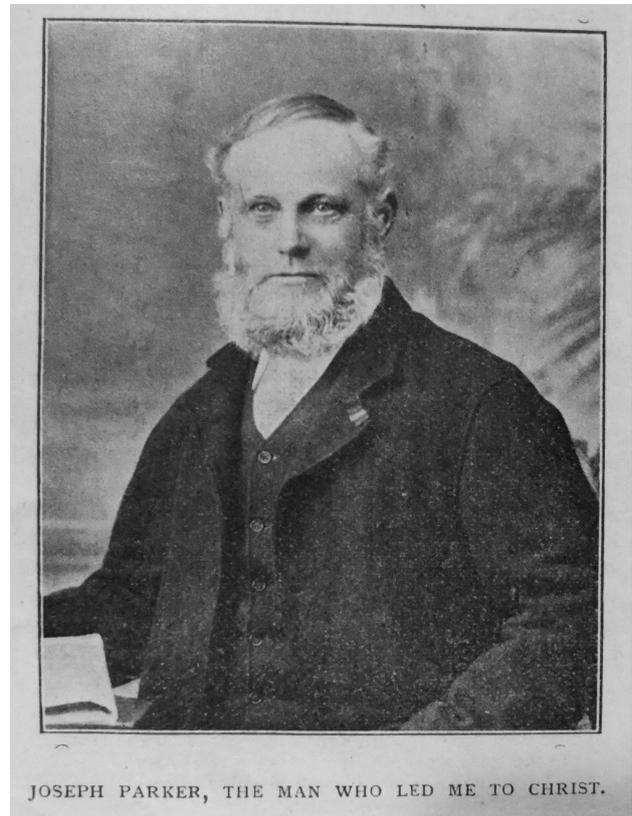
"The painter's dead yet still he charms the eye;
While England lives his fame shall never die:
But he who struts his hour upon the stage,
Can scarce protract his fame through half an age;
Nor pen, nor pencil, can the actor save,
Both art and artist have one common grave."

The actor is an imitationist, an apist. He is a dispenser of other men's thoughts. He is a human marionette wound up for the occasion. Even Shakespeare himself hated the stage. Let those who doubt read Sonnets 110 and 111. The stage may have its use, though its teaching in the higher spheres is very questionable. The stage creates no conscience for good or against evil, because everybody knows, however deep the tragedy, *that it is only acting*. Yet, strange to say, it was on a stage in Nottingham that I received one of rudest shocks to my moral sense. I was before the footlights in a large public hall, which since then has been closed. A large audience crammed the building. The part I had to take was that of a captive soldier meeting his father, from whom he had been separated long. At first I had the stage to myself. There was a moment's pause to allow the applause to subside. In that moment I seemed to hear a voice, distinct, clear, awful; the voice seemed to say: "Flanagan, if you were to die as you are just here, where would you go?" In a hushed but frightened whisper, hardly knowing what I did, I answered, "To hell!" The shock was so great I

trembled in every limb. The audience saw me falter, and thinking it was nervousness, applauded again. I managed through my part, and when behind the scenes, a few glasses of liquor banished for a time the unpleasant sensation from my mind.

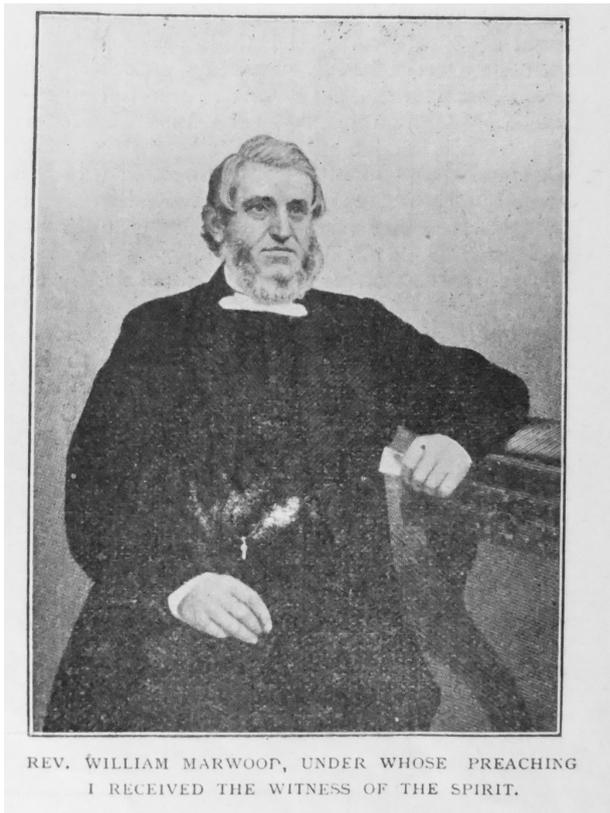
It was about this time that my father commenced business for himself at Ilkeston. The new sphere plunged me into new public associations. I was brought more and more into contact with the drink. My unrenewed heart found here a fruitful sphere. Lower and lower I went. About this time I married her whom I now call my wife. For this event I thank God. It was my wife who first started into action those ministries which by the blessing of God ultimately led me to Christ. A member of the Church of England, prayerful, consistent in life, she watched for my change to goodness as those who watch for the morning. How true it is that the only link which holds many a man from perdition is the woman at his side. Had it not been for the one who bears my name I shudder to think what I might have become. Long before I was converted I was deeply impressed by the example she set before me. She was the only stumbling-block in my path to ruin. With my wife before me I found it difficult to be damned. The last touch which brought me to God was as follows:—

Near where I lived there resided a young man who was lame. He was intelligent, devoted, prayerful. His happy demeanour in spite of his misfortune made him to me at times a subject of interest. He was a teacher in the Primitive Methodist Sunday School, Bath Street, Ilkeston. His name was Joseph Parker. I was often impressed by his happy and, at times, enraptured look, but refrained from asking the cause. Unknown to me my wife had spoken to Joseph Parker, and knowing him to be a true Christian, she requested him, under a promise of secrecy, to call and see me. One day he knocked at my door, and I bade him enter. Close to the door was a chair, on which he sat, and carefully laying his crutch on the floor, he crossed his hands, and with all the sweetness imaginable, he commenced to feel among the broken heart-chords for the one that was still remaining. And, blessed be God, he found it. Joseph Parker believed with Wordsworth that:-



“Small service is best service while it lasts,
Of humblest friends, bright creature, scorn not one;
The daisy by the shadow which it casts,
Protects the lingering dew-drop from the sun;
The primal duties shine aloft like stars,
The charities which soothe and heal and bless,
Are scattered at the feet of man like flowers.”

His first appeal was for me to sign the pledge. Total abstinence to me in those days seemed a veritable Devil's Island. How a man could live and be happy without the drink I could not understand. My only objection to the drink was that I took too much. Things have changed since then. The pure simplicity of this man, together with his sweet but earnest words, deeply moved me. I thought, Here is a man whose desire is to do me real good. I do not believe in his principle, but I honour his spirit. He pressed upon me by all the arguments he could think of, the benefits of freedom from the cursed drink. At last I yielded. I was a convert, not to his principle, but to his kindness. A few days afterwards, in company with my friend, Joseph Parker, in the Good Templar lodge room, No. 1799, Ilkeston Excelsior, I took the solemn obligation of a life-long abstinence from strong drink. It was while taking that pledge that a few gleams of a better life entered my soul. But the pledge was not enough. Joseph Parker knew as a Christian that life to be safe in the continuance and fulfilment of any principle must be fortified by the grace of God. For if the natural man develops a virtue in one direction, he will, unless renewed in the spirit of his mind, develop a vice in another.



So by long persuading, he led me an unwilling captive to the House of God. Unwilling, I say, for I had my own ideas about both church and chapel. To me God had favourites, others were reprobates. Some He cursed, others He blessed. I always associated God's favour in those days with good social standing and a strictly righteous life. The mercy that sends the rain and the sunshine alike upon the just and the unjust I knew not. The love that could die for the loveless was not to me even a dream.

I distinctly remember the first service at which I was present in Bath Street Chapel. It was Sunday morning, and the preacher was my sainted friend, the Rev. William Marwood. I entered the door of the chapel feeling like a man going to be executed. Joseph Parker invited me forward to his seat. But no. My feet seemed to stain the very floor. That was the

place of the holy and I was a prodigal. My surroundings were uncongenial. I was not good enough for such a place. I crept suspiciously into a corner and sat on a rude, backless form under the gallery.

(To be continued.)

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1901/444