

Chapter 9

This chapter is a bundle of fents. If I mistake not, "fent" is a Lancashire term for remnant. So before taking the reader on to the next stage of my life's journey, I present him with a few biographical fragments which cluster round that period of which I am now writing.

It was my exceeding precious privilege in the first period of my spiritual life to be brought into contact with some of the simplest and holiest souls I have ever met. With them it was no question of—

"I go to prove my soul!
I see my way as birds their trackless way.
I shall arrive I what time, what circuit first,
I ask not; but unless God send His hail
Or blinding fireballs, sleet or stilling snow,
In some good time, His good time, I shall arrive:
He guides me and the bird."

The very earth they trod upon was not more sure than their belief. Questionings of the faith never entered the mind. With apostolic simplicity they accepted the whole revelation of God. This was charming society for a young convert whose soul was full of zeal. There is a barrenness and a simplicity of life and worship which are the very antitheses of the Christian genius. Tertullian revels in a false satisfaction on what he supposes is the entire suppression and exclusion of things beautiful and great from the Kingdom of God. And writers who in the extreme sense are ever eager to tell us, that when Art reached her climax in the history of old Florence the devil was supreme. But Christianity has no quarrel with the beautiful. The jewelled sky, the flower besprinkled earth, all cloud-land glory, declare this ever to us. The Bible, even is poetry in its highest form. And the simplicity which crowned the hearts of those pure lives I knew in the early days was not the spurious simplicity of ignorance, but the simplicity of Christ, a simplicity born of the Spirit of God, which knew the commandments of life and obeyed them. Rich soil, indeed, was this in which my soul could grow. My spiritual comrades were men of the horny hand, but the spotless life. Enthusiastic in service, mighty in prayer, victorious in faith.

"Ere the evening lamps are lighted,
And, like phantoms grim and tall,
Shadows from the fitful firelight
Dance upon the parlour wall,—

Then the forms of the departed
Enter at the open door!
The beloved, the true-hearted
Come to visit me once more.

'They,' the young and strong, who cherished
Noble longings for the strife,
By the road-side fell and perished,
Weary with the march of life.

Oh, though oft depressed and lonely,
All my fears are laid aside,
If I but remember only,
Such as these have lived and died?

If my reader could search the archives of the Church I do not suppose he would find a single mention of many of those dear friends of my early youth. But many of them were full of faith and of the Holy Ghost. It was one of these men who taught me more truly than any other the deep things of God. Though only a miner, he was a saint. Of grave and reverent demeanour, he had an experience the richest I have ever known. His prayers were like Luther's words - "half battles." In intercession he could pluck the prey from the hand of the mighty. When the heavens were as brass, he could melt them into a rain of fire. Whenever he went to the throne of grace he mightily prevailed. He bore about in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus. His life was a perpetual witness to the truth. What Dr. Ruen Thomas said of Dr. Dale in his last days could most truly be said of this good man:—
"His face had become wreathed in tenderness. A new pathos had come into his voice, carrying the impression that he was helped, by some power not his own."

Some years ago I was visiting the old scenes of my youth. Among those I conversed with was the minister of the church of which my friend was a member. Soon as I mentioned his name the minister's face lighted up, and he said: "That man's prayers make my ministry a power. I have often said that his prevailing intercessions keep the life of the whole society both sweet and clean. To listen to his pleadings melts the soul."

What a testimony! Oh, that God the Holy Ghost would bestow this gift on the whole Church. It was such men as this that in my Christian pupillage formed the educational factors of my moral nature.

It was about this time that several of us formed a kind of "Holy Club." We met for secret prayer, spiritual conversation, instruction in righteousness, and aggressive evangelism. Our palace of meeting was the room of a cottage. One result of these meetings was a burning passion for souls. We saw the great majority of the people around us living in open sin, and our hearts were inflamed with love to reach and bless them. Personal appeal was largely resorted to. Mission work was engaged in. Good Friday each year was our great day for outdoor evangelism. I distinctly remember our first Good Friday experiences. We met in the early morning for prayer. Then, with large supplies of religious literature we started off on our whole day's tramp. Like the apostles, we commenced at "Jerusalem." Planting ourselves in the "home" streets we proclaimed temperance, righteousness, and judgment to come. After spending an hour or two in the town we walked to the districts beyond. One of our chief means of advertising was a brass bell, which that first day in our zeal we had the pleasure of breaking. After four or five hours of singing, preaching, and praying, we were painfully reminded by clamorous appeals from within that we were still of the earth. If our company had not been so serious one might have suggested Wesley's hymn:

"Come on, my partners in distress,
My comrades in the wilderness,
Who still your bodies feel."

Instead of that, the leader called a halt, and asked what we were to do for food. No one could tell. One of our company remarked that a public tea was being held that very day in a Primitive

Methodist Chapel in a village some miles ahead, and which we hoped to reach about five o'clock. The price was ninepence each. But where was the money to pay for the tea to come from? The leader held out his hat, and invited every one to put what money they had into it. The command was at once obeyed, and when the whole was we found that we were one shilling short of paying each man's share. This meant two of our company going without food. Had the Saviour been there in bodily presence He might have suggested the hooking of a fish and the opening of its mouth to find the coin. But He was not, so His Spirit suggested, "Pray." And we did. Forming into a large ring, with the leader in the centre, we knelt on the high road and prayed for God to send us a shilling with all the earnestness of soul which usually characterised our efforts. It was a curious scene. To see some twenty men on their knees pleading with heaven, not for rivers to be dried up, or lepers to be cleansed, or the dead to be raised, but for God to step in and either by miracle or the operation of natural law, help us to the extent of - twelve pence. Let those consider this trifling who may; "trifles make perfection." The sublimest intercessions often grow out of the most insignificant requests. The prayer of the Son of God for the recovery of a lost human sense grew into an intercession for the human race. The prayer of George Müller for the rent of a house expanded into a petition that commanded the resources of the nation. Mrs. Casse says that she was so used to consulting her Lord in everything, that if she mislaid her sewing-needle and could not find it, she would ask His help, and she believed He would direct her to where the needle was. Let those smile who can at these things, they are thought of seriously in heaven.

How long we prayed I cannot tell. But we prayed until our faith appropriated the answer. Rising from our knees we unitedly believed the shilling would come; but how, or when, or where, and by whom, we had not the faintest conception. Pursuing our way, saluting all we met in the name of the Lord Jesus, we came to a large public-house called the "Seven Oaks." The house was situate near some large ironworks, erected there, no doubt, to catch the thirsty toilers as they came and went to and from their labour. The house was crowded, and thinking that an attempt to influence men for good who were inflamed with drink would be really like "casting pearls before swine," several of our party had gone on ahead. But one, whose soul quickly burned itself out in sorrow for men and zeal for God, lingered behind on the road. Gazing with eyes full of tears at the men crowded into the public-house, "Brothers," he cried, "these men have souls. Christ died even for them. Have we no word for them?" No sooner said than a ring was formed, and our voices rang out—

"Jesus, keep me near Thy cross;
There a precious fountain,
Free for all, a cleansing stream,
Flows from Calvary's mountain."

Windows were thrown up, passages filled, and nearly the whole of the company crowded out into the open air. One man, reeling from the effects of liquor, leaned himself against the side of the house, and in a comical way endeavoured to gain an intelligible idea of his surroundings. At last, appearing to grasp the situation, he staggered forward to where we stood singing. Coming close up to the ring, he pulled up the leathern strap of his trousers, and darting his hand into the pocket, drew something out. Seizing the hand of the one of our company who stood nearest to him, he placed within it a silver shilling, saying as he did so, "Here, my lads, it's all I can afford. I hope you'll all soon get into work."

The poor fellow concluded we were on strike, and that we were singing for relief. But God knew we were hungry and needed that shilling for food. Soon as we knew our prayers were answered, and the shilling had come, we broke out into praise, and, as John Bunyan would have said, "We joyfully went on our way." Arriving at the chapel we took tea. Poor society, I pity their profits after we had done. The Rev. C.H. Boden was the superintendent of that station at that time. I have often thought he must have wondered why the monetary results of that anniversary tea were not larger. I could have enlightened him. We had been without food for about nine hours, and we certainly occupied considerably more room in space when we finished than when we started. Refreshed, we continued our journey, and closed our day's work for Christ on the dark street at ten p.m. in a little country town some three or four miles from home. The last, hymn was sung, the last benediction pronounced. Crowds of people stood around. Weary, so weary we could scarcely walk, we joined arms and started for our last tramp home. Just then a boy pushed through the crowd with a handful of bread, saying as he did so, "Please, my father's sent this for you to eat." Thanking the lad, who at once vanished in the crowd, we ate the bread and trudged along, thoroughly tired, but happy as kings.

Sixteen years afterwards I preached in one of the Free Churches of that same place. A gentleman at the close escorted me to his carriage. When seated by my side, as we drove along, he said: "Mr. Flanagan, do you remember standing one night with a company of others in the main street of this place preaching and singing the Gospel?"

"Yes," I said, "I do quite well. It was one Good Friday which a few earnest souls had given up to missioning."

"And do you remember a boy pushing his way up to you with some bread sent by his father?"

"Yes, quite well; and I remember also how thankful I was to get a mouthful. But how do you know of this?" I asked.

"I know," he answered, "because my father was the man who sent it, and I was the boy who brought it. My father lived in the fear of God, and died triumphant, and I, to His praise, am trying to serve Him."

In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand, for thou knowest not which shall prosper, this or that.

It was on one of these pioneer, rough and ready mission excursions that I first met my friend and brother, the Rev. S.S. Henshaw. I am afraid some of my methods of soul-saving work in those days were enough to shock the ministerial dignity of any man. The incident may have faded from his mind, but it lives in mine. On the morning of the day referred to, having; the day to myself, and eager to use it for Jesus Christ to the best advantage, I had gone to the house of a man who had been a noted character, but who now, happily for himself and society, was converted, and asked if he would join me in a day's missioning. "Yes, he was quite ready." Just then a man of kindred spirit coming in, and hearing my request, said he would like to join us. He suggested that as he had a horse and cart, we might take that, as the cart would be handy for a pulpit at every place we halted. An hour afterwards saw us all jogging along in our friend's clumsy conveyance to our first stopping-place. Wishing to make our meetings as effective as possible, I went to the vicar of the parish and borrowed the large bell with which he summoned his people to church, or the children to school. Taking our stand in the first village, my friend, the converted pugilist, rang the bell. Everybody

turned out and gathered round the cart, thinking, no doubt, that we were either a company of "cheap Jacks," or dealers in pills. When the bell-ringing ceased, prayer was offered, and then I exhorted the people. At the close, with a prayer, we dismissed the people and were preparing to go to the next stage, when a rough, dissipated-looking fellow, known all round as a lazy, godless soul, came up to the Cart and said to me:

"I say, guv'ner, which way are you going?"

"To Keyworth," I answered.

"Will you gi'e me a ride as far as t' four lane ends? "

"Have you any money?" I asked.

"No," he answered.

Turning to the other two, I said in a whisper, " Give him a ride, and in the name of the Lord Jesus we will make him remember it."

"Get in!" I said.

The man entered the cart and fixed himself between me and my pugilistic brother. Some miles ahead we came to a very lonely place close to four cross roads, about three hundred yards from Widmerpool railway station.

"Pull up," said the man, "I must get out here, guv'ner. You go round to the right, but I go straight on."

Seizing him by the collar, I said, "You must pay for your ride before we let you go."

The man stared in astonishment.

"Why, I tow'd you I had no money when I got in," he blurted out.

"Very well, there's only one of two things for it, you will either have to pay or pray."

Leaping out of the cart, I commanded him to alight. Holding him by one side of his coat collar, I told my friend the pugilist to hold the other. In this fashion we led him to the side of the road and commanded him to kneel, which he did trembling in every limb. Then I commanded him to pray. He answered that he never had prayed. "Then," I said, "it is time you did." And pray he had to. Whether it was the Spirit of God or fear, I know not, but he commenced to shout for mercy in such loud tones that the brother who was driving had to hold the horse for fear it would take fright, and the station-master and porters at the railway station some distance away came on to the high road to see what was the matter. The man professed to find forgiveness of sins. We parted with glad hearts and mutual vows to meet in heaven. "Strange method," my reader may murmur, "to lead a man to God." Yes, good friend, strange indeed, but rough means are sometimes needed to teach the brutish mind. Even Christ must glove His hand with steel before He can bend or mould some lives. The Almighty has to hammer some people into goodness. I remember when Joshua Poole, (commonly known as "Fiddler Joss,") visited our town many years ago, that among one of his converts was the chief prize-fighter of the district. A night or two after the event Mr. Poole placed the converted prize-fighter in ghe front rank of a large procession of singers he was leading through the streets to the Town Hall. Three of the man's old companions had arranged to have some fun. Two were to stand some distance off and enjoy the game, while the other created it. Soon as the procession swept round the last corner into the market-place, the man who was to make the fun went up to the saved pugilist, and giving him a poke in the side with his thumb, said: "I suppose thou'st gotten converted, Jack, eh? How does it feel when you're converted, eh? Ls it nice?"

Each of these expressions were accompanied by a severe dig in the ribs. Finding that the man only grinned and bore it, the joker renewed his attentions with added force. Giving an extra poke, he said:

“Jack, I suppose now thou’st converted, thou has to do what the Lord! tells thae?”

The man turned to him, and forming his right hand into a hard fist, he drew it back to his shoulder and said:

“Yes, Bill, I ha’e to do as t’ Lord tells me now. *An’ if He tells me to hit thee, I shall.*”

At once the man’s countenance dropped, and half-frightened he slipped away to his laughing friends.

“Why didn’t thee go on? I niver enjoyed aught like it ’e all my life,” said one of them.

“Go on!” said Bill, “thou mun go on thysen’ if thee wants ony more.”

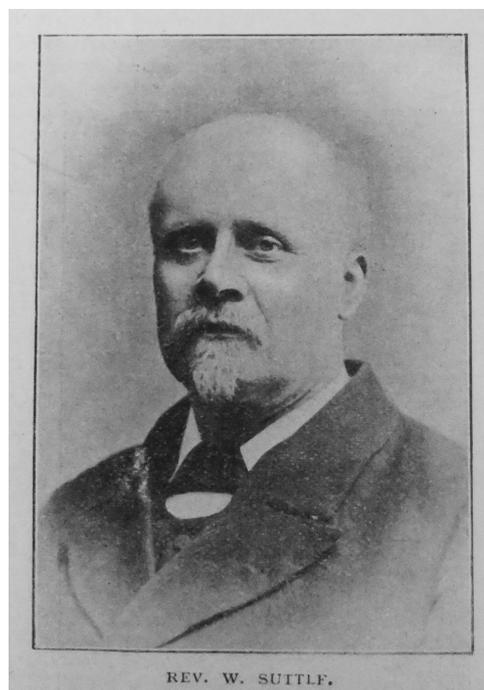
“Why?” chimed both together.

“Why, I axed him if he had na’ to do as t’ Lord tow’d him now he wor converted’, an’ he said, ‘Yea, an’ if t’ Lord tow’d him to hit me he should, an’ you kno’, *I wor’ afeerd t’ Lord would.*”

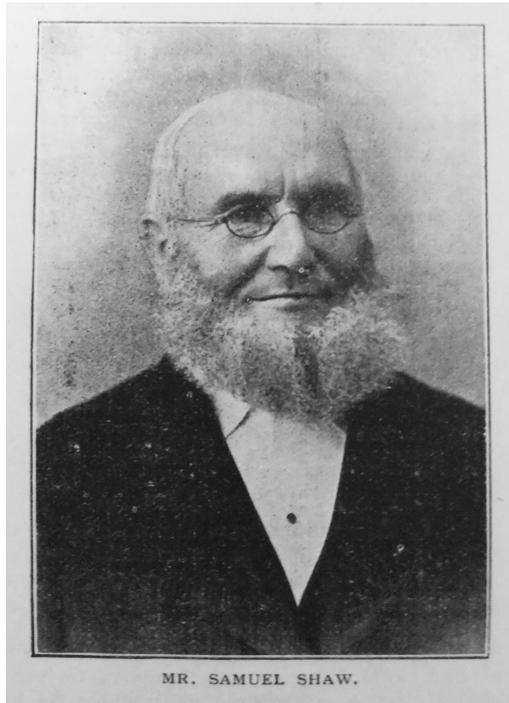
Yes, and I believe so too.

It was my eagerness to reach and bless men, I think, which first led the officials of the Church to call me to the work and office of lay preaching. I believe that the Rev. W. Suttle was the first who suggested that I and several others should be examined with a view to coming on the plan. For once in my life Mr. Suttle made me shake in my shoes. A friendship lasting over twenty-five years has allayed the ghost of fear and established a profound regard for him as a man of God and a minister of Jesus Christ.

My first teacher in the art of public address was Mr. Samuel Shaw, an honoured local preacher on the Ilkeston station. I must confess that he did not spare me in his kindly criticisms, both of my matter and style. I do not know that he ever complained very much of what I said, but I am afraid I often severely tried both him and the congregation by the way I said it. If my aged brother’s eye happens to fall on this page, let him know that his fatherly counsel has not been forgotten, some of it being treasured to this hour. I can never forget one lesson he gave me, which at the time made me feel very angry and as though I wanted to fight somebody. But after many years’ experience of public speakers and public speaking, I feel more than ever grateful for his rebuke. The incident occurred during some revival services in the circuit chapel. It was a week-night meeting, and I was appointed to lead. A large company had gathered. In his usual pew sat Mr. Shaw. By some means I arrived five minutes late, and after the manner of certain speakers, began to apologise for my lateness. In the midst of my apology Mr. Shaw quietly rose, and walking to the front of the communion, and before the whole congregation, said, “My



brother, we have come here to get some good, and not to listen to thy apologies; and if thou hast nothing better to do than tell us that ,thou hadst better sit down, for we don't wish to hear it.



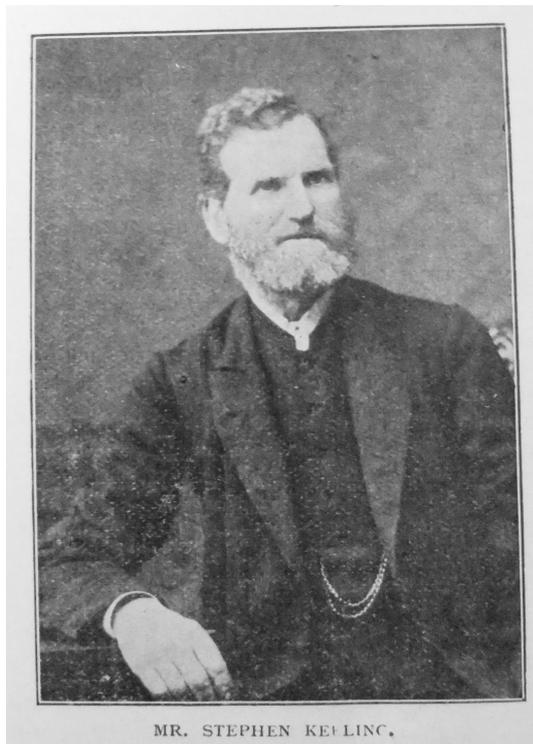
Having delivered his soul he returned to his seat. For some minutes I felt rather queer in the head and hot in the cheek. But this quickly passed away, and many a time since then I have thanked God for the reprimand – a reprimand which would do good to some other public speakers I could name. The public address of many a man is marred by the bad practice of introductory apologies. Some men practise this so often that those who listen and know their tricks of oratory conclude that they are utterly insincere. To be announced to address an audience and then commence with an apology of personal depreciation, followed by an oration which has been delivered hundreds of times, in order to lead the popular mind to a fictitious conception of our intellectual and rhetorical greatness, comes perilously near a breach of morality. If I had to counsel preachers, I

would say, “Go and deliver your message in the fear of God, with humility of spirit and the confidence begotten of the truth; *but do not apologise.*”

God has many ways, not only of educating the soul, but of perfecting the gifts with which soul is endowed. His gift of utterance to me in the early days brought with it a snare. Ignorant of Satan's devices I fell into it, but God, who is merciful, redeemed me from his power. Pride is a hateful thing. Pride has many forms, its worst is that which assumes the guise of religion. Old William Hickenbottom, of Belper, fathered the devil on to pride. For, having a shave one day, the barber, in a joke, asked “Billy” who was the devil's father. “PRIDE,” answered the old man quickly.

Pride tripped *me* up, but grace corrected me. The experience was as follows: I had not been a lay-preacher long before I became conscious of a supposed superior gift. A measure of conceit was born. One day I was planned as a chapel squire in the heart of a district where many of my work-mates lived. I knew a host of them would be present. Here was a chance for display. The day came. The chapel was crowded. All went as merry as a marriage bell for the first few minutes of my address. Then suddenly my mind became a blank. Speech and thought fled away, I was left standing in the pulpit silent and – ashamed. I will not describe the horror of that moment. I closed the service and hurried away. I concluded never to try public speaking again. Pride fled, conceit died. A day or two after, smarting under my humiliation, I told a brother my experience and also my resolve to give up preaching. Laying his hand on my shoulder, he said, “See, my brother, you must make the best of it. God has called you to preach and preach you must. So look to God for strength and try again.” I said nothing, but those few words spoken to me over twenty years ago in the corridor of Ilkeston Old Sunday School by Mr. Thomas Croot, put fresh resolve into my heart, and by the grace of Christ I have continued to declare His blessed Word unto this day.

The deep, burning passion to save men grew upon me; more than food and sleep, and ease, and honour, yea, even life itself, was the desire to bring men to God. My heart's desire and prayer to God for the people were that they might be saved. Some ten or twelve young men, converted about the same time as myself, were possessed of the same spirit. We met secretly and statedly for prayer and conversation, first at one place, then at another. Three of us made a solemn covenant with God and each other that we would meet at certain times to pray specially for a revival of religion. We persuaded the good woman who kept the chapel to allow us to go into the schoolroom and intercede with God for the Church and the town. There, in the dark, alone, night after night, and week after week, we met for prevailing intercession. At last a deep spirit of earnestness fell upon the society. Services were better attended. One of us, with trembling, told the minister of our secret meetings. He was deeply moved, and requested permission to announce them as open to all. He did so. The school became crowded. Power fell upon the people. Special services were commenced. Glory and salvation swept over the whole town. The sights and scenes of time will never be forgotten by those who were present. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! my heart leaps for joy as I think and write of them.

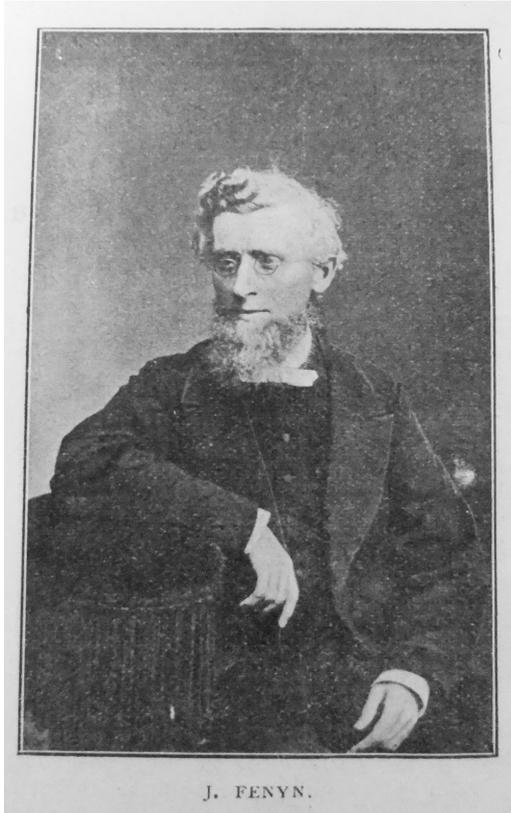


My own inward yearning for men I tried to hide from others. Yet, try as I might, the feeling of sorrow over the perishing would have way. Still I was conscious that anyone outside my own intimate circle knew my secret yearning. To be used of God in larger spheres of Christian service was my supreme desire. The first to discover my secret, and express his sympathy with me, and to offer the influence of his official position for my engagement as an evangelist, was Mr. Stephen Keeling, then, I believe, the circuit steward of the Ilkeston Station. It was one day when going to Stanley Common, he hailed me for a ride, and seized the opportunity for a talk about my future.

I am now coming, dear reader, to that crisis in my life when I received my call to the wider sphere of evangelism. How the call came, and some of the things it led to, shall be related in Chapter X.

The next chapter will deal with an incident taken from the "romance of Evangelism," and which happened in the early days of rough mission work.

(To be continued.)



References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1901/687

Note: A correction at the foot of the next chapter says that the above photograph was incorrectly identified as J. Fenyn. It is in fact Rev. J. Barfoot