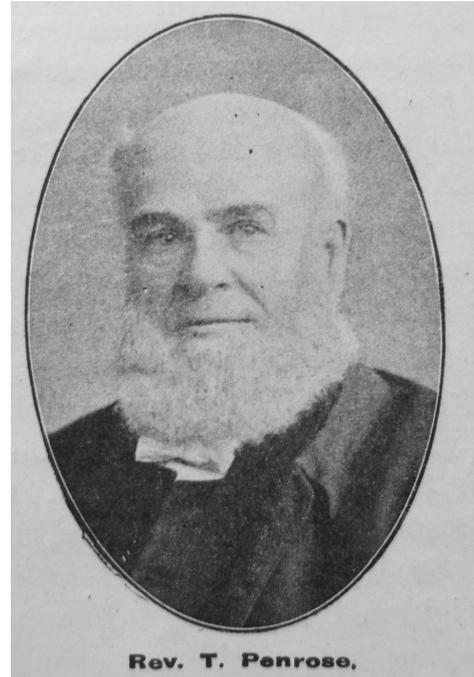


Thomas Penrose the Valorous
“A mighty man of valour.” – Judges

Transcription of Sketch in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by Grapho

CHARLOTTE BRONTE has put into the lips of one of her characters these significant words:- “Relinquish! What! my vocation? My great work? My foundation laid on earth for a mansion in heaven? My hope of being numbered in the band who have merged all ambitions in the glorious one of bettering their race - of carrying knowledge into the realms of ignorance - religion for superstition - the hope of heaven for the fear of hell? Must I relinquish that? It is dearer than the blood in my veins. It is what I have to look forward to, and to live for.”



This is what we mean when we speak of the inspiration of great purposes, and the constraints of a conscious destiny. It is the successive conviction, sometimes sublime utterance of all destined souls, coloured, perhaps, by the varied vicissitudes of times and toils, but always the self-same intensity of the conscious calling of fiery hearts, seething and simmering like molten metal in the great furnace of their feelings and thoughts. A spark from the central sun, Who avowed “for this end was I born, and for this came I into the World.”

None who knew Thomas Penrose will deem these prefatory words, introducing the picture of him, out of place. He lived and laboured as a destined man, as one who moved under some mighty prompting, and some unresisted propulsion.

“Such earnest natures are the fiery pith,
The compact nucleus round which systems grow
Mass after mass becomes inspired therewith,
And worlds impregnate with the central glow.”

He was born May 31st, 1815, at Knaresborough, in Yorkshire. His family, both on his father’s and mother’s side, was most respectable, and some members of it even opulent. He was educated in an Endowed Church of England school, and, as a scholar, was esteemed by his master for his thirst for knowledge, uniform industry, and his general pains-taking in his studies. As a youth he was much attached to the services of the Anglican Church, and appears to have been more than ordinarily thoughtful and devout, so much so that some marked him out as likely to become a clergyman.

However, in the year 1831, he was invited to a service in one of our Primitive Methodist chapels. Here he came under new influences and light. He saw religion in its less formal and more spiritual relations; and it was discovered to him in its sublime inwardness rather than the outwardness of its routine. It came to him as a revelation, and responded to his ardent and thoughtful soul. From that hour he became new. He had found the solution to many of his heart’s questionings, and the satisfaction of his deep hungers.

“He saw the mysteries which circle under
The outward shell and skin of daily life.”

He was but sixteen when this took place, but it was all so real that he read the wondrous promise of the future in the wondrous meaning of his newly-found experience and associations. From that moment he was consciously God’s, and Primitive Methodism was the home of his religious life and the sphere of his consecrated services. In the class meetings, prayer meetings and love-feasts he found scope for the exercise of his gifts, till at length the Rev. John Wilson requested him to accompany one of the local preachers to his appointments. This was followed by his speedily becoming an exhorter and local preacher. During this period his fervour and manifest abilities and success were not only enough to gain the admiration of the circuit officials, but were warrant sufficient to recommend him for the ministry.

It was before he was nineteen years of age that he was invited by the York Circuit to supply the place of a Female Minister, Mary Burks, April 18th, 1834. The following June Quarterly Meeting decided to ask the Conference to station him on the York Circuit, and by the unanimous consent of the officials of the Circuit he was pledged the following year. He laboured subsequently on the following stations:- Malton, Leeds, Halifax, Settle, Hull, Norwich, Glasgow, Bury, Preston, Chester, Burnley, Barnsley, London Second, London Third, London First, Leighton-Buzzard, and Reading.

This is no place to comment upon the wide areas over which the ministry of our fathers stretched usually; nor the time to ask the reasons why so many changes of locality marked the years of their labours; perhaps the explanation was in the needs of the denomination, and in the kind of men themselves in these earlier years! But what matters it now, what were the reasons; they were days, and men, we are justly proud of; and we only mention this to point out the vast dimensions, and immense stretch over which their pioneering feet passed. The spirit of the denomination seemed to possess the men. In those days the watchword was, *extension*. We passed into another era in our Church’s history when the watchword, openly, or secretly became, *consolidation*.

That there was the need for concentration cannot be for a moment disputed; however, some of our perils have leaned this way for years, and we need to learn better the aggressive spirit of some of these honoured sires, who were less parochial, let us hope, not more denominational than we.

These eighteen circuits were divided between the thirty-nine years of Mr. Penrose’s active ministry; and what these spheres required by way of journeyings, and cares and toils, and what these years meant of honest endeavours, and prodigal expenditure of time, and strength, and of chapel building, soul-saving and comforting, and of money raisings, and of general circuit prosperities, we cannot attempt to describe. Human arithmetic is unequal to the reckoning, and even fancy is not able to paint such strenuous lives, as they deserve. Such men as Thomas Penrose cannot toil anywhere, even for a brief year without:-

“Leaving it richer for the growth of truth;
For Good, once put in action, or in thought,
Like a strong oak, doth from its boughs shed down
The ripe germs of a forest.”

As I write the man comes up to my memory as I saw him for the first time. It was at the Conference in London, 1873. Evidently his strength was Waning. But one could see the giant he had been. The massive build was there, the bold features, the piercing eyes, the firm lips, the stern, almost forbidding aspect, until you caught the behind glow of benignity. He was the warrior of a thousand battles, and the marks of the conflicts were upon him. He was the sort of man, as you looked at him, who set you wondering what he dared not attempt when he had once heard duty's call? Or what sudden and surprising kindness might break through those firm fixed lips? For within the massive build of the man, you were impressed, were woven some kindly qualities; and behind the appearances of the stalwart warrior and commanding leader was the fountain of tears. All these impressions were verified when we became intimate with him. He was a man of deep sensitiveness, and of intense sympathies, even of magnetic tenderness, and influence. He was remarkably social, and found easy admission into the hearts and homes of the people. He quickly responded to the calls of others for counsel and comfort; and people as readily answered to his touch of sympathy. He moved among the people as one beloved, and found hospitality in their homes and generosity in their purses, from which others were excluded or found scant welcome.

“His was no lonely mountain-peak of mind,
Thrusting to thin air o'er our cloudy bars,
A sea-mark now, now lost in vapours blind:
Broad prairie rather, genial, level lined,
Fruitful and friendly for all human kind.”

As a preacher he appeared to be, at first, made to be a fighter, thunderer, one who smote with a broad sword. But he was more a Barnabas than a Boanerges. Nature had done much; but grace had wrought more in him. In him extremes blended. Massive strength rounded with leafy gracefulness. A huge frame with a woman's heart within. A giant's form with a child's love and docility.

He lived too busy a life, amid the varied and manifold requirements of circuit and connexional work, to be a successful student; or a great sermonizer. But his discourses were always wealthy in scriptural knowledge, and rich with his own heart's deepest and warmest experience. It is difficult, even perplexing, to learn what some preachers are aiming at. But with Thomas Penrose his intention was transparent. It was always one of two things - the two sublime ends (we had almost said, risking being ungrammatical, the two *superlatives* of all preaching), conviction of unbelievers and the edification of believers - the conversion and comfort of the hearers. In the latter, Thomas Penrose excelled. Given a promise for a text, or some passage of experimental truth, possessed or prospective, it stirred the deep springs of his soul, and he spoke, as a man inspired, not with the uncertain flame of genius, but with the fire kindled within him by God.

A favourite theme of his was Barnabas going to Antioch. This did him splendid service, and so it did thousands. The subject was congenial. The whole scene was made to re-live: as he described what Barnabas saw - what he felt - what he said. The grace witnessed - the gladness expressed - the exhortation to a full-purposed steadfastness, were themes in which his soul revelled, and thoughts and words flowed like streams from a Horeb-rock smitten.

It was a treat to see him leading a procession in the street, or conducting a meeting on the camp-ground, or leading a love-feast in the chapel, at a District Meeting or Conference gathering. The man

was ablaze. He wielded the mass as he willed. His portly form and massive voice - his abandon and yet sagacity never failed to inspire confidence and enthusiasm on such occasions.

He lived a laborious life, and his was a toilsome ministry. He was supremely a man of action - varied and abundant. Nothing measured and stinted - nothing reserved and restricted - nothing half-hearted and half-done about Thomas Penrose, he served his God and his Church with all his strength.

The first twenty-nine years of his ministry he erected as many chapels. He knew what keen opposition and bitter persecutions, tedious journeyings and fastings and privations mean. He used to recall the time he spent in the West Riding of Yorkshire, at Settle, Bentham Black, Burton Ingleton, when under the shadows of the majestic Ingleborough, he often knew not where to get a lodging, and had as often to go to the hedges for his dinner. In all the stations he toiled abundantly and successfully. Little is to hand as concerns the details of his provincial work. It was in London that we knew him, and where he has left his greatest monuments of service and influence. London challenged the man, as no other place had, and he answered the challenge with a sympathy, energy, and resourcefulness, if equalled, not exceeded by any. In the three London stations in which he laboured he has left monuments of his diligent ministry. He came to London from the Leeds District in 1859, in response to a special desire, as the man most likely to cope with the difficulties of the London Second Circuit. During the two years he was in this station he secured the old Wesleyan Chapel at Camden Town; a society was formed at Kentish Town, and a society started at Market Street, which was the beginning of our vigorous Caledonian Road Church. In 1861 he removed to London Third Circuit, where, in three years, five new chapels were erected by him. In 1864 he was stationed to London First Circuit, where he remained three years. During this period the debt on Coopers' Gardens was materially reduced, as also the heavy liabilities on Hoxton and Hackney were considerably relieved, and the freehold of Stoke Newington was purchased at a cost of £750, of which sum £350 was raised. What these new chapel erections and debt reductions meant of anxiety and toil in those days of our London work, when our generous helpers were so few, it can be hardly fancied.

But Mr. Penrose's influence abides in forms other than those in which we have indicated. He projected the bold scheme of holding a large and central missionary meeting, the first of which was held in Bloomsbury Chapel, in 1860, and was presided over by Sir F. Crossley, M.P. The success of this meeting induced Mr. Penrose and his friends, the following year, 1861, to ask for the Metropolitan Tabernacle, which was granted - Mr. Spurgeon himself taking part in the enthusiastic gathering. To Mr. Penrose we must give the credit of inaugurating what has grown to be our Connexional Annual Missionary meeting. And it was no small pleasure to hear him read the report at this gathering year by year.

To him also must be awarded the principal share of the honour of the formation of the Metropolitan Chapel Fund, of which he was the first secretary, and remained so for many years. Not many have felt the needs of London pressing upon them as he did. When pleading for London we have seen his eyes stream with tears, and heard his voice subdued with emotions. And he evidenced his deep and practical affection for it by long years of toil in the interests of this Fund, which has assisted, if not adequately to the demands required, most certainly very materially to many of our London chapels.

Through him very largely we as a Connexion secured Old Surrey Chapel, which was the commencement of our commanding position in Blackfriars Road. Such terrible toiling eventually told upon his strong constitution - added to this the insidious working of a disease which was growing

serious. Besides toil and suffering, he had domestic troubles, and it can be hardly wondered at that in the year 1873 he became superannuated. It was an affecting sight in the London Conference of this year to see the man weeping, as he made known to the assembly the decision of two experts, that he must retire from active service. The whole Conference was moved to tears, to see so valorous a warrior unbuckling his armour, and leaving the battle ground. His heart had not lost one whit of its chivalry; but his arm had lost its strength, and his hand its grip of the sword. Almost immediately after Conference he visited America, and the change, and use of mineral waters obtained there, had the happy results of prolonging his life for fifteen years. But these years were not spent in ease. Work for God and men had been his life's passion, and as strength permitted he was ever ready to serve, sometimes at considerable risk. And when on one occasion he was remonstrated with, and warned as to the perils he not unfrequently exposed himself to, he said, "Well, I would as soon die on the high road as in my bed, for the one is as near heaven as the other." There the spirit of the heroic worker was evinced; even when the weakness which suffering and age bring with them was upon him. He felt he must work as long as even the twilight lasted, for he lived in the inspiration of an imperative "must."

For years he bravely endured the suffering occasioned by the malady which afflicted him with a resignation and even cheerfulness which were exemplary. However, towards the end of October, 1888, it was obvious the night was coming, and the day's work was done, and the sufferer and toiler was going to his rest and reward. On Sunday morning, October 28th, 1888, he fell asleep. His last illness was but brief; he was confined to his bed but a few days. A few hours before the brave spirit dropped its well-worn garment of flesh his son, the Rev. J.T. Penrose, whispered in his ear - "Jesus is precious," and though too feeble to speak he made an effort, and waved his hand in conscious confidence and triumph. His mortal remains were interred in the Reading Cemetery on November 1st, amid a crowd of those who had loved him during his life, and from whom death could not wholly separate him, for he remained with them in tenderest affections and memories.

So passed away from our sight, but not from our holiest memory, a spirit disciplined in the strife of battle, and refined in the furnace of pain. Brave and glorious was his young career - gallant and conquering his manhood's strides - undaunted and cheerful, as pain relaxed his strength - valiant and exultant as he fell, as one assured of triumph. And fitly may we who still prolong the fight, and wield truth's weapons, think of him gratefully as "one who kept the whiteness of his soul," and imitate him as one who was:-

Not lured by any cheat of birth,
But by his clear grained human worth,
And brave old wisdom of sincerity!
Deeply knew that outward grace is dust;
He could not choose but trust
In that sure-footed mind's unfaltering skill,
And supple-tempered will
That bent like perfect steel to spring again and thrust.

References

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