

## **Sidelights on the History and Personality of the Venerable William Clowes**

### **Chapter V**

#### **Transcription of Article in the Primitive Methodist Magazine by J.T. Horne**

When we come to the study of this period of the life of Clowes we find the phenomena resolve themselves into two things first the sum of their original qualities, and second the currents of external influences to which these qualities have been subjected. William Clowes was originally like his fathers before him, hard working and hard drinking, whose idea of enjoyment lay largely in horse-play and coarse brutalities. But upon his character had been poured, unthought of and unsought by himself, a magnetic stream of spiritual influence which had combined with his own original qualities and had produced the human result we described in our last paper. We see the struggling Clowes suffering from the consciousness of evil, which seems to him a wrongness in his essential nature. His distress is so deep that he bursts into a flood of weeping in his own house, to the astonishment of his wife, from whom he concealed the cause. His spiritual loneliness is awful, a wide gap through which he is wearily trudging in search of his lost self. The world offers no more pathetic, no more widely suggestive spectacle, than a soul in search of itself. The man who has gazed into the depths of such an experience will never scoff at the doctrine of a Redemption and a Redeemer.

A pathetic picture has been shown to us of this great soul yearning for companionship and finding none. In company with his wife he walked along the bank of the canal which skirts Tunstall, and wept bitter tears as he told his companion of his deep inner conflicts, and his strong desire to reform. He sought her spiritual companionship, and suggested that they should join the people called Methodists. But Mrs. Clowes received such a proposal with perfect coolness, and told him it was an indication of mental aberration. Why should he become a Methodist? It was childish to go about crying, and talking of going to chapels. What he needed was to become industrious like his neighbours; and as for religion, certainly she would not entertain such a question. It has been truly said, "there are thoughts which have no confidant, sorrows which are not shared. We dream alone, suffer alone, die alone."

This domestic repulse seemed to throw Clowes upon his moral death bed, and for a time he gave way to despair. His mental and spiritual anguish returned, and his vivid imagination pictured his condition so graphically that once, for the space of two hours, he expected every moment to be struck down. It was precisely this isolation from his fellows that drove him, upon the Infinite. Like Cromwell on the shady banks of the sleepy Ouse, smiting his breast and crying, "O, my sins, my sins, where can I find relief?" Clowes was the victim of internal misery almost insupportable. The man himself knew his interior, and this is the picture he has sketched.

"Sometimes I used to walk in solitary and unfrequented places, wishing that I was a bird or a beast, or anything else that was not accountable to the tribunal of heaven. Sometimes in sleep in the night I have been agitated with terrible dreams, and starting up, I have been afraid of looking out of my bed, supposing the room to be full of devils, and damned spirits, Occasionally I have broken out in strong perspiration, and wished for the light of day in order that I might drown my distressing convictions with strong drink."

This period in this life reminds us of similar experiences in the spiritual biographies of many eminent Christian workers. Mir. Kendall has likened it to Bunyan's dark hours, and certainly there are many striking points of resemblance; but recent works on the psychology of character have much to say on such a subject. Mr. Hind, in the "Quarterly Review" for April says, "it may be questioned whether William Clowes, greatly as he has been revered, has, up to the present time, commanded all the admiration he has merited." In that suggestion we heartily agree. There is much in his experience at this time worthy of deeper study than it has yet received, and which would repay careful treatment along the lines of Professor James' "Varieties of Religious Experience." Clowes is on the "pain threshold" and his existence is little more than a series of zig-zags, as now one tendency, and now another gets the upper hand. He had drunk so deeply of the cup of bitterness that he could not forget its taste. The whole face of nature was changed and the world looked remote, strange, sinister, uncanny. It lost its colour, and everything around in his own luminous words "glared on him with the eyes of evil spirits."

It is rather difficult to trace the successive steps by which he came to a consciousness of release from the bondage of his sin's, because the printed accounts are somewhat in conflict with the verbal statements. We may however, take it that he attended a Methodist preaching service at Burslem, and by a "pious fraud" obtained admission to a lovefeast which was held as an after-meeting. The passport to this meeting was a Class ticket surreptitiously secured. At the critical moment when the ticket was presented to the vigilant door-keeper, who was examining them by the candle-light, a gust of wind extinguished the light. Another candle was quickly obtained, and as the official was in the act of scrutinising the pass, a second puff of wind blew out the light. Thrown off his guard, and somewhat confused, the officer returned the document, bidding Clowes "move on," and he quickly entered the meeting. Having taken his place in the congregation he joined reverently in the service, and if we may judge from his description of what took place a mighty power operated upon him during the evening. The testimonies to personal deliverances so enlightened his understanding, that he gradually came to see the way by which he could obtain peace. Mrs. Thelwell considered that "this lovefeast was the service at which the darkness of his soul was relieved by gleams of heavenly light." Not the time of his conversion, but the meeting when he first came to see the path along which deliverance would come. This opinion is confirmed by his own words; "some rays from the Eternal Sun of Righteousness had already fallen upon me, for on my return from the lovefeast, I told my wife where I had been, and what I purposed to do in the future."

Now what could this man do? Instead of clumsily and vaguely seeking deliverance from his drinking habits by refraining from taking drink to excess, and flying hither and thither for deliverance, he had learned at this Methodist lovefeast that there was a large Power which makes for righteousness, and that this Power had been welling up in his own being, and he must let that Power do the work in its own way by unreservedly yielding - by giving himself over to the new life, and making that life the centre of a new personality. He had come to learn the need of absolute surrender of self; and the whole development of the five years' struggle had consisted in little more than emphasising this crucial fact. Accordingly the next morning, January 20th, 1805, he made the all decisive surrender. We have vainly tried to locate the place where this epoch-making change occurred, for both the day and the place mark a distinct advance in our spiritual annals. It was the beginning of a new era in the life of William Clowes, but it also gave a mighty impulse to the Evangelism of England. Let that day stand out distinctly in the history of our Church as the day on which a divine purpose was born in a

brave man's soul, for its results are already amazing. Judged by natural standards this great volition is a miracle. No known law of physics will measure it. We have accurate instruments for measuring world forces, but where is there an instrument that will express the impact on the world of the "I will" of Clowes on that winter's morn? In the moment when he said to himself, in the realm of his own consciousness, "He has saved me," there was evolved a force the range and results of which have grown with the revolving years. This new departure in his life is given by him in such graphic language that we may be pardoned quoting his words: "I felt my bonds breaking, and when this change was taking place, I thought - 'What is this?' 'This,' I said, 'is what the Methodists mean by being converted: yes, this is it; God is converting my soul.'" In an agony of prayer I believed God would save me - then I believed He was saving me - then I believed He had saved me; and it was so. I did not praise God aloud at the moment of my deliverance, but I was fully persuaded that God had wrought the glorious work - that I was justified by faith, and had peace with God through Jesus Christ. Accordingly, when the meeting was concluded, someone asked me how I was going on; I instantly replied - 'God has pardoned all my sins.' All the people then fell upon their knees, and returned thanks to God for my deliverance. . . I had lived according to the course of the world during the period of twenty-four years, nine months, and eight days."

The outward calmness of Clowes during the transformation gave rise to a doubt of the genuineness of the work, in the minds of some who were present. One of our old members told me that he had heard a person who was present at the meeting, say that several doubted its reality. They expected that the conversion of such a person as Clowes would be attended by some dramatic manifestation of the Spirit's working, and in its absence they erroneously concluded no change had taken place. But his was an uncommon type of religious experience. He had been nailed on the cross of natural despair and agony, and when released he could not comprehend the greatness of the change, or adopt the usual mode of manifestation. That came later at Harriseahead. He realised that a complete division had taken place between the old life and the new, and in giving the exact duration of the old tenders "acknowledgments of praise and glory for ever and ever," for working such a mighty glorious, glorious change.

Such a well-known character could not become a Methodist without exciting public comment, and the pot-banks and factories were favourite places for discussing the subject. Mrs. Thelwell told me that a few days after his conversion wagers were made at the Swan Bank Pottery that he would not continue a Methodist a week. And in quoting from notes taken at the time, she added "My father told me that on the day of Clowes' conversion he realised the change so vividly that as he was going to his work he felt that a ton's weight had been lifted from his heart; and a conscious supreme bliss caused him to repeat 'Glory to God' for a long time. The Holy Ghost seemed to be surveying his soul, and he knew that he was cleansed from sin." The consciousness of his change and the "expulsive power of his new affection" freed him from the dominance of his old amusements. At that time the volunteer movement was very popular in Staffordshire, and Clowes had enrolled himself as a private in the corps of which his master was an officer. He now felt that his continuance as a volunteer would be inconsistent with, and dangerous to, his spiritual freedom; and he therefore resolved to withdraw from the movement. Such a decision gave very serious offence to his employer, who sent for his workman and personally interviewed him on his resignation. On his appearing in the office the master at once introduced the business by saying: "I am told you have turned a d— — — Methodist?"

“Yes, sir.”

“How long is this going to last? ”

“To the end, sir.”

“Indeed, how do you know that?”

“No man ever put his trust in the Lord, and was put to shame.”

“No? ”

To his interrogation Clowes gave an emphatic “No, sir.”

The master fixed his eyes upon him, but Clowes met them unflinchingly, and for a short time neither spoke. Then the silence was broken by a strong outburst of passion from the master, who threatened that unless he withdrew his resignation, and remained in the corps he should at once leave his employ. The gauntlet was thrown down and the struggle commenced. Rapture had filled his soul, for he had found his long-sought spiritual freedom and ratified his vow of allegiance, and now the bread was to be taken from his lips unless he would forego his religious liberty, and violate his conscience. But his spirit quailed not in the solitary struggle, and he plainly told his master that he did not intend to recall the resignation, and withdrew from his presence. The sacred fire which burned unseen drove him to seek the counsel of his class leader, the intelligent and judicious James Steele. We do not know all that passed between them but we have been told that he gave him “suitable instruction, advised him to remain firm, and assured him of divine help.” His own words are luminous: “I went and laid the whole matter before the Lord in prayer, and I felt blessed with a holy assurance that God would stand by me; and if banished from my employment, I believed God would open for me another door; so I proceeded tranquilly to my work, having committed myself to the direction of God.” The master never mentioned the subject to him afterwards. This victory thus gained helped him in his future conflicts with this irate employer. I have heard a story of an incident which happened in these works which shows Clowes in another light. Whilst working at the turner’s bench one day, he was expressing his gladness of heart by singing a revival song, which he had learned at the meetings. My informants differ as to the actual words of the song, one giving it,

“My soul is now united,” etc.

But Garner gives it as

“My soul’s full of glory which inspires my tongue,  
Could I meet with an angel I’d sing him a song.”

In the midst of his song the master accompanied by the foreman of the department came to him, and with a volley of oaths ordered him to cease his Methodist rant, as he disturbed the clerks in the office. This coarse language was too much for Clowes who instantly admonished his master for his profanity. Such an unexpected attitude quickly silenced the master, who, it is said, retired without any attempted justification for his insulting language. Some days afterwards the foreman expressed to Clowes his regret that such words had been used, acknowledging that he was right, and advised him to continue his connection with the Methodists.

(To be continued.)

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## References

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1906/398