

Sidelights on the History and Personality of the Venerable William Clowes

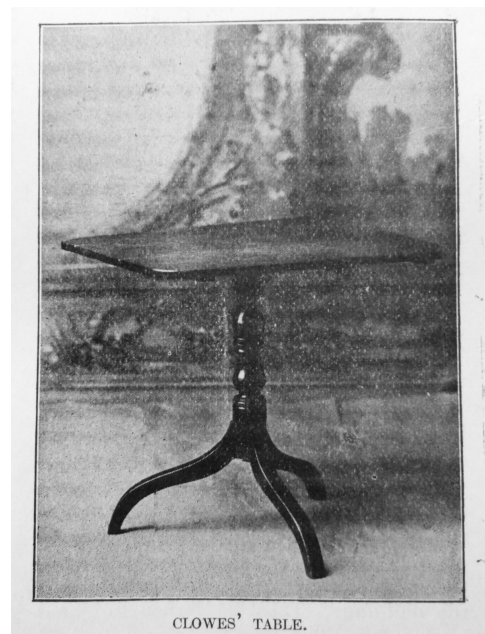
Chapter VI

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

We get successive glimpses of Clowes after his conversion which are distinctly revealing. The consciousness which he possessed in the first moments of forgiveness - the assurance of his new relationship with the Great Father, continued to grow. Mighty revelations came to him, stupendous experiences of trial and suffering wrought upon him; his horizons continually widened, and this process was a part of the great work, with which nothing is comparable in interest and value, the growing of his soul. We wish to emphasise the fact that the soul of William Clowes really grew. The lower desires of his nature were annihilated, and his sense of the spiritual world made him grandly indifferent to the conditions of his earthly lot; his power of influence was such that through ordinary words and common acts he could thrill mysterious forces and shake and inspire the hearts of men; his power of enjoyments which were drawn from sources that the world could not control, reached at times an intensity that transcends the limits of expression. We have not space to particularise all the steps by which these results were obtained, and it must therefore suffice to simply note the fact that he became enriched with such a victorious life. But it came by way of Gethsemane and Calvary.

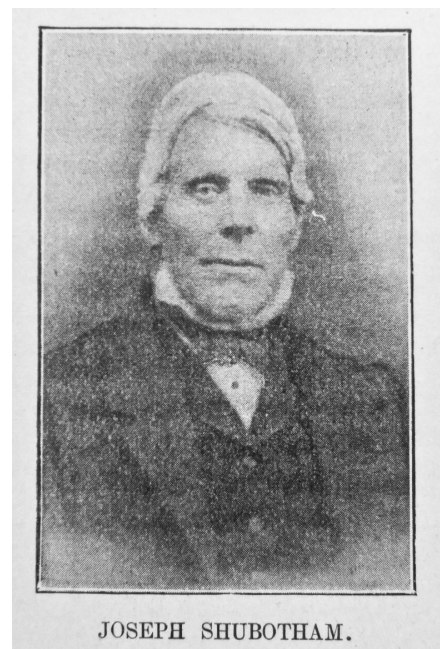
Personality is always the one thing that interests us in all regions of thought. To create a living picture the colours must be mixed with human blood. To make truth powerful it must be incarnated. Applying this test to Clowes we see that great consequences followed the change in his personality, and as he proceeded along the way to spiritual enrichment he reached a time of fierce conflict. He tried to pray but felt that he had no heart to engage in the exercise, and at times he was subject to the temptation that the Spirit of God had left him. For a while he staggered under the idea, and he writes, "There struck like a thunderbolt into my soul the awful thought; 'it is now all over; thou hast sinned against the Holy Ghost, and in lying to the Holy Ghost, by telling the people thou art pardoned, whereas thou art not.' "

It is notorious that such a feeling has often come to those who have passed to the extremes of spiritual experience. For five years Clowes had been putting all the force of his being into the wild pleasures of life, and had reached such a condition of deadness and such a pitch of unhappiness, that his very blunders and misdeeds and lost opportunities had all spelled his failure in life, and created a poignant humiliation of soul. Now he has gone to the other extreme and the transformation accompanying his conversion was necessarily attended with alternate colouring experiences. Everything was strange, and troops of questions arose. "How should I live? Can this be right? Will that be Wrong? " and with such enquiries he had seasons of excitement and interest alternated with discomfort and suffering. Although he had broken with his old life, invisible forces impelled him



hither and thither creating indescribable sufferings which he thus describes: "Under these powerful temptations my heart, almost died within me. My strength departed; and I was told that I looked like a corpse." This depression, this sense of incompleteness, was the result of his entire consciousness being so choked by evil, caused by his dissipation, that the sense of good had to struggle to assert itself. He received great help in the difficulty from the testimonies given at a lovefeast held at Harriseahead. A company of Methodists from Tunstall arranged to attend this meeting, including James Steele, Thomas Woodnorth, and the two brothers, James and Joseph Nixon, and they invited Clowes to join them. The journey took them through Pitts Hill and Brindley Ford to the old Methodist Chapel which Hugh Bourne had built in 1801, in which the lovefeast was held. This appears to have been a remarkable meeting in many respects. Mr. Kendall, on page 45 in the New History, regards it as marking a distinct advance in our Connexional evolution, but our concern with it at this point relates to its influence on Clowes.

There are two outstanding features connected with this visit to which we wish to call attention. First: it was at this lovefeast that Clowes first met Daniel Shubotham, the author of the famous saying, "You shall have a meeting upon Mow some Sunday, and have a whole day's praying, and then you'll be satisfied." A few words relating to this distinguished character may be of interest. There are descendants of this Daniel still living at Tunstall, and from one of them we have learned the following: Daniel was a cousin of Hugh Bourne, and was an offspring of a family of great wealth. At one time he owned many farms but lost them in consequence of his drinking habits. He is buried in Newchapel Churchyard, not far from the grave of the famous James Brindley, the great Canal Engineer. He had two sons, Joseph and Trubshaw. The elder, Joseph, was born at Harriseahead, on July 25th, 1807, and died at the same place March 15th, 1889. In features and general build Joseph was always very much like his father. Copying from my notes of the interview, my informant describes Daniel as "a big, raw-boned man standing over six feet high, who walked with a stoop. His son Joseph changed the family name from Shubotham to Shufflebotham, and for many years was underground bailiff in the Trubshaw coal-pit."



JOSEPH SHUBOTHAM.

"Did you know much of Clowes?"

"No. I have seen him a few times, but I knew Hugh Bourne very well. I remember father saying that grandfather used to accompany Hugh when he returned to Bemersley, as far as the Black Bull public house, and then Hugh would come back with him almost to Harriseahead, and they would thus walk together backwards and forwards for hours, eagerly interested in their conversation."

"I suppose you can remember many incidents connected with Bourne?"

"O yes. I once met him as I was crossing a field. I was then about eleven years of age. He stopped me, and looking in my face asked, 'What is your name?' When I told him he said, 'Do you love Jesus?' and he then put his hand upon my head, and told me to be a good boy. I can feel that touch now. Many years have passed since then, but that touch lives with me to-day."

“Let me tell you of another time when I saw him. My mother was the keeper of the old chapel which he built at Harriseahead. I was once present when he visited the chapel, as he was getting an old man. My grandmother, Daniel’s wife went with us into the place. When Hugh entered he looked up at the gallery, and then swept his eye round the building. Then he turned to grandmother, with big tears running down his cheeks, and said, ‘Hannah, we have had many happy times here; there are sweet remembrances of this old place.’ ”

The second outstanding feature of the lovefeast relates to Clowes’ personal experience which he gives in these words: “In that meeting the clouds of darkness and temptation which had settled on my soul were dispersed, and the flame of God’s love expanded throughout all my powers; both body and soul rose in strength and majesty. I shouted ‘Glory to God’ in the meeting with all my might, telling the people what God had done for my soul. The place was filled with the glory of God. Believers greatly rejoiced, and tears of joy rolled down the cheeks of numbers of people.” It is perfectly clear from what has been said that when Clowes went to this lovefeast he was in a peculiar spiritual and emotional condition, and was thoroughly prepared for this luminous vision of God’s presence in his soul, and its coming caused a sense of indescribable happiness. His personality was changed - the man was *twice born* - and he touched his own upper limits. He was lifted to the highest centre of energy - the new level of spiritual vitality, a relatively heroic level - in which impossible became possible, and new energies and new endeavours were shown. *Renan* says, “As soon as sacrifice becomes a duty and a necessity to a man I see no limit to the horizon which opens before him.” Mrs. Thelwell always spoke of Clowes as having been “sanctified” at the Harriseahead lovefeast, and we are quite prepared to accept this theological term for the richer experience into which he entered. It seems to us that it cannot be defined psychologically in terms of *how it happened*, but it can be stated in terms of *what was attained*, and we see the new Clowes with his soul regal, graceful and pleasant, and we thank God that Divine Grace so Worked upon his personality that it produced such a striking result.

This experience in the life of Clowes has been illuminated by the later writings of mental scientists, and a “sidelight” from this source may be helpful to a better understanding of the subject. Looked at from the psychological point there are two things in the mind of every candidate for conversion. First, a present deep sense of sin from which he is eager to escape, and the Second may be expressed as the positive ideal which the soul longs to compass. With most persons, and certainly with Clowes, the sense of present wrongness, is a far more distinct piece of consciousness than the imagination of any positive ideal to which the soul can hope to attain. In the majority of cases the deep sense of sin almost exclusively engrosses the attention, and conversion consists in a process of struggling away from sin, rather than of striving after or towards righteousness. Dr. Starbuck seems to put his finger on the root of the matter when he says that, “to exercise the personal will is still to live in the region where the imperfect self is the thing most emphasised. Where on the contrary, the subconscious forces take the lead, it is the more probably the better self *in posse* which directs the operation. Instead of being clumsily and vaguely aimed at from without, it is then itself the organizing centre.” What then must the person do?” “He must relax,” says Dr. Starbuck, “that is, he must fall back on the larger power that makes for righteousness, which has been welling up in his own being, and let it finish in its own way the work it has begun. . . . The act of yielding, in this point of view, is giving one’s self over to the new life, making it the centre of a new personality, and living from within the truth of which had before been viewed objectively.

This rather lengthy extract from the teaching of the new psychology, by one of its ablest exponents, is beautifully illustrated by the experience through which Clowes passed at this period of his life. He made an absolute surrender of self at this Harriseahead lovefeast, and henceforth sought to shape his conduct in complete obedience to what he conceived to be the Divine Will. We have heard from living lips of his rules for domestic government, and although a close observance of some of these regulations seemed to savour of mediaeval austerity, yet, considering his temperament, it was possibly for the best that he should adhere to such a system. His niece told us that one day he had been for a long walk, and returning home was overtaken by a heavy shower, drenching him to the skin. Now his custom was to retire to private prayer as soon as he entered the house, according to his fourth regulation. But under these conditions he reasoned that he ought first to change his clothes, lest he should receive a chill by keeping on his wet garments. But to William Clowes such a thought was a temptation from the evil one, and he forthwith proceeded to his chamber and followed his custom. Whilst thus employed he received such an inflow of joy that he could do nothing but shout "Glory" continuously for upwards of two hours. The effect of such vociferations we can easily surmise. Mrs. Clowes and her mother were alarmed, and the neighbours crowded around the door concluding that he had suddenly become mentally deranged; and the more prudent entered the cottage to seek his explanation for such an outcry. This was only adding fuel to the fire. No sooner did they cross the threshold and commence their enquiries than he sprang to his feet and closing the door, fell upon his knees again beseeching God to lay His hand upon them. The result I had better give in the words of his niece: "They became so affrighted that they rushed out of the room as though they had been electrified."

Clowes was not a man who could serve God quietly. His wickedness had been known everywhere, but now that he had abandoned sin and left the dominion of Satan he resolved to wrestle and plead with men on Christ's behalf. One outcome of the revival which had then come to the churches, was the practice of holding cottage meetings, and many remarkable incidents are still told as the result of such gatherings. Would-be suicides, attracted by the singing, were drawn into the meetings and rescued from their destruction; drunkards were led to the cottages by their workfellows and brought into the light. Following his conversion, and that of his wife, which took place a few days after the Harriseahead lovefeast, he offered his cottage for a prayer meeting, and Mrs. Kaye, his niece, tells of wonderful times at these services. They instituted two public prayer meetings, two class meetings, and a band meeting per week. The prayer meetings were soon crowded to overflowing; every part of the house was filled, and every room, the pantry not excepted; and the numerous conversions which occurred increased their popularity to such a degree that it became impossible to accommodate all who wished to attend. Things reached such a crisis that Clowes had either to give notice that he could not accommodate the crowded meetings, or make some provision to meet the emergency. The former was contrary to his evangelistic spirit, and the latter meant extra toil and expense; but with a truly liberal soul he removed to a more suitable house with ampler accommodation.

(To be continued.)

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1906/520