

Sidelights on the History and Personality of the Venerable William Clowes

Chapter VIII

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

DEFEATING THE POWERS OF DARKNESS.

BEFORE describing Clowes' expedient for overcoming the evil influence of the "wakes," it may be well to say a word or two on the festival itself. What were the "wakes," and why should such an institution colour our thinking of the great Evangelist? There was no festival at that day which had such an attraction for the "man in the street." Like many of our old institutions the "wake" is of ecclesiastical origin, and bears the mark of Rome upon its brow. When the old parish churches were consecrated, each church was dedicated to some particular saint, St. John, St. Michael, etc., and the feast of dedication was kept by watching all night, colloquially called the "Wake."

The anniversary of the dedication was kept as the "parish wake," and in many parishes there was a second "wake" on the supposed birthday of the saint. Crowds flocked to these festivals from the neighbouring parishes, and tents were erected in the churchyards and on the open spaces, to supply the visitors with refreshments. Gradually all devotion and reverence diminished, and the "wake" became a market or fair, largely characterised by merry-making and coarse revelry; ultimately becoming a gathering for bull-baiting, pugilistic encounters, and all kinds of rough sports and animal indulgences. Shakespeare speaks of one of his characters haunting "the wakes, fairs, and bear-baitings," and Milton writes of the "merry wakes and pastimes."

Unless we have been wonderfully misinformed by some of the elderly people connected with our churches in the Pottery district, in the time of Clowes, the "wakes" were generally regarded as the great festivals of the year. Men and women, whose everyday surroundings on the pot-banks were of such a degrading character that they transcend the limits of expression, felt that for a few days they were free from their "daily grind," and gave loose reins to their passions and entered heart and soul into the rough sports afforded by the "wakes." For a long time there had been no wake at Tunstall in which Clowes had not been an outstanding figure. His merry song had filled the taproom with laughter, and he had figured prominently as a referee or competitor in their boxing contests and various athletic sports. What will he now do? This question became the subject of speculation and debate, and wagers were laid that he would not retain "his religion during the wakes." This became known to him, and he resolved to put his soul to the uplift and conquer the foe.

His testing time had come – the time when the sin that had so easily beset him had once more to be faced - and he laid aside every weight and entered the conflict unhampered. What he writes in his Journal is very largely confirmed by stories of that time. It has been frequently stated that he spent the whole of each day in fasting and prayer, seeking strength by divine fellowship. He did not try to conquer by thinking of the evil, but by developing the corresponding virtue.

Sir Oliver Lodge has recently been reproaching us for thinking so much about the morbid instead of attacking it through the healthy, and there is a great truth underlying Dr. Lodge's representation. We

can only master our weaknesses by thinking of our almightiness in Christ. Our medical faculty are coming to recognise the antiseptics of nature, and they now seek to place their patients in the "open air," where they can have the ozone of the sea, and the balm of the atmosphere.

It was thus that Clowes sheltered his soul "in the love of God" during the wakes. All are agreed that he assiduously watched and prayed, and gave his evenings to social prayer in the cottage meetings. Some have told us that this decision was reached after an interview with good James Steele, his old Class Leader. On this incident we have made full notes of interviews with two or three old people who knew Clowes, and while they slightly differ from what has been given, they all agree in this, that Clowes believingly committed himself to God, conscious that He would put His shield around him, and protect him in this hour of peril. Perhaps it will be acceptable if we transcribe a report of a rather lengthy interview with Mrs. Thelwell, for it gives glimpses of Clowes as he appeared to James Nixon.



JAMES NIXON.

"Did your father tell you much about this incident in Clowes' life?"

"Not much. Father was not a man of many words. But I have often heard him say that Clowes came from this praying carrying with him such a power that the people knew that he had been with God. It is not easy for me to make you understand what a wonderful change had come over Clowes, and how rapidly he grew in spiritual power."

"Do you remember whether the peril which the wakes brought was a subject of conversation at the meetings of the church?"

"I cannot remember details as I used to do. I could have told you much years ago, but I find it hard work to recall some things now. But it was common knowledge that bets were made and wagers laid that he would not go through the wakes, and some of those dare-devils would not stop at anything to win their money. Of course this would be talked about in the church."

"Were there any who specially helped him at this time?"

"Yes; father told me very often that James Steele was a wonderful help. Of course, you know that he was in Steele's class, and Steele would be anxious about his member. This leader was a good, godly man, and he it was who told Clowes to shut himself up and keep to his own room. Clowes asked his wife not to let anyone see him."

"It is said that he kept to his room two or three days?"

"I cannot say how long it was; but he was not there all the time. For he sometimes went out into the street, and openly rebuked the people. When he met his work-mates he reproved them so severely that they walked away without saying a word."

"Of course your father knew Clowes very intimately?"

"Indeed he did, and he has often said that the salvation of Clowes at the wakes was the result of his shutting himself in his room and entering into fellowship with the Unseen."

This wise man took note of his own weakness, and with something of the instinct which sends the swallow on its voyage through the air, he chose the most effectual method of escaping from his peril. His fighting instinct, and his staying power were roused and engaged in the task of seeing this

thing through and achieving the victory. He describes his arrangements in the following graphic words taken from his Journal: "Matters being in this posture, I resolved to look resolutely to God, claim His promise, and serve Him truly, knowing that if I served Him continually He would deliver me. As these wakes had been to me, in my carnal state, times of feasting and banqueting, I determined that by the grace of God, they should forthwith be seasons of fasting and prayer. Accordingly, when the time arrived, I told my wife that I should shut myself up in my room the whole of the day, for the purpose of fasting and prayer; and that she was to permit no one, on any account, to disturb me. After thus spending the day in self-examination and devotion, I went in the evening to the prayer-meeting. The day following I spent in a similar manner."

Let the thoughtful man turn this extract over in his mind, and it will give him a glimpse of the true William Clowes. Here we see the man rearing an impassable wall which barred off his life from the assaults of his foes. "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people." It is not a prison which he builds, but rather an insulator, which shuts him off from something to preserve something to him. He isolates himself from man that he may have uninterrupted communion with the infinite. He closes his ears to the sounds of the world that he may more distinctly catch the music of heaven; he isolates himself from man that he may feel an impact which is not from man. He hears a speech, he feels a rapture. The man is all aflame; listen to his words: "I can truly say, the pleasure and enjoyment I experienced far surpassed anything I had ever felt during those periods of carnal festivity. My soul feasted on the hidden manna, and drank the wine of the kingdom. My soul rose in spiritual greatness, and I felt withal such a burning sympathy for souls, and saw their lost and perishing condition with such vividness, that I went into the streets among the licentious and profane, and addressed them in the name of the Lord. The rebels against God were struck with surprise and astonishment whilst I bore witness against them, and cleared my soul of their blood. Indeed the fire of God's love became so hot in my soul as frequently to constrain me to shout and praise aloud as I went along the road."

We said the man was all aflame, but he is also rising to his richer manhood: "my soul rose in spiritual greatness," and this soon revealed itself. He was not a little man, and he could not fashion his religious conduct according to small models. He was not made to be one of a crowd of mechanical Christians who worship to order, or adopt a "ready-made" system of religion. He has his own way, will speak his own word, and evolve, according to his deepest instincts, his own soul life. To him Christ was supreme, and in his own rugged fashion his service shall be rendered. And this is his record: "After the toil of the day I attended a meeting every evening, and usually laboured till my strength failed. My Sabbath labours were also unremitting. In the first place there was the prayer-meeting at six o'clock in the morning; another followed at nine; preaching at eleven; band-meeting at one; preaching at two; visiting the sick at four; preaching again at six; afterwards a prayer-meeting at my own house - besides reading the Scriptures, family and private prayer, and other occasional duties. In the midst of all this *ponderous* labour I felt strong, active, and unspeakably happy in God. My peace flowed like a river." This is no common man, but one who dwells on the holy mount, and has entered into the secret of spiritual endurance. The foundation of his strength was divine fellowship; William Clowes "walked with God," and this is the explanation of his wide influence and rapid growth in the spiritual life.

There is a strange story told, in which W. Clowes was a prominent actor at this time. Jenny Hall, of Harriseahead, was a member of Daniel Shubotham's class, but for some reason she became a backslider, and in this condition manifested violent paroxysms, and her rage was so intense that she became a positive danger to the members of her household. For their safety it became necessary to restrain her by force, and for a time she was bound to her bed with chains. Shubotham invited Clowes to meet several friends at her house and pray for her recovery. The neighbours brought the woman to the house the previous night, that she might be present during the praying service, but by some means she escaped, and the next morning they found her wandering in the fields. I now give the story in the words of Davison, which agrees in the main with what we have heard: "when she saw the praying people, she cried out to Daniel Shubotham: 'It's no use, Dan, the devil will fetch me away before morning.' Daniel replied, 'The devil is a liar, Jenny! you told me that before, and you are here still. We have come to pray for you, and We will have you delivered from the powers of darkness in the name of the Lord.' The valiant band entered into the conflict - the struggle was dreadful, but their united faith took hold on God, and the power descended in a mighty stream; the woman, as they proceeded in wrestling, agonising prayer, became agitated - her body was singularly convulsed, as if some internal force was rending her to pieces; her face was nearly black; her throat rattled; she foamed at the mouth, and appeared as if she would be suffocated. The praying souls, however, continued pleading with the Almighty until some of them were nearly exhausted. To obtain a little relief Mr. Clowes threw off his coat, bound up his head with a handkerchief, and with his companions continued to maintain the conflict. Faith began to increase mightily; they felt as if the heavens were rending and God had come down into the midst. Then one of the praying men began in a loud voice to abjure the devil in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, to come out of the woman. Immediately there was a sudden alteration; deliverance came, and she exclaimed 'Glory!' The praying victors shouted, 'Glory' along with her, with such united power, that the noise was heard afar off. In a short period after this manifestation of the power of faith, Mr. Clowes went up to Harriseahead to know how Jenny Hall was going on. Daniel Shubotham told him she stood her ground well, and that although the powers of darkness had made repeated assaults upon her, she was generally happy in God. Mr. Clowes observes on this brand so mercifully plucked from the fire: 'Whenever I happened to meet Jenny Hall, if even in the market place, she would seize me by the hand, heave it up as high as she could, and bring it down again and cry aloud with strong symptoms of excitement, 'O Billy, how you prayed for me; I shall never forget it! glory, glory!' About eighteen years after her remarkable deliverance, Mr. Clowes saw, her for the last time, and she told him she had never since lost her confidence, and still enjoyed the light of God's countenance." (Pp. 25-7.)

It was not likely that such a man, or such a band of men as he typified, could be bound or strapped down by any ecclesiastical arrangements which did not allow full scope for their emotions. They were rugged children of nature, who had been transformed by the divine Spirit, but their natural forces remained. There is given in Clowes' biography, and told by Mr. Kendall, and rehearsed by some of the old people an amusing description of an attempt to crib their religious exercises, and make them pray in fetters. The scene of the experiment was Mr. Smith's kitchen, and the actors in the proposal were Nixon, Clowes and Co. A locomotive pulpit - a chest of drawers fixed on castors and fitted up with reading board and swing brass candlesticks - was provided, and into this pulpit each person who desired to pray was required to enter, and conform to specified regulations. Probably it is this same movable pulpit which may still be seen in the Jubilee Schools at Tunstall. At the time fixed for the meeting the new pulpit was brought forward and its proprietor invited J. Nixon



FIRST PRIMITIVE METHODIST PULPIT.

to ascend and conform, but James was unwilling and refused to promise obedience. Clowes standing by - his spirit stirred within him - interjected a remark, which led Mr. Smith to invite him to officiate. Instead of conforming he instantly struck up a hymn, and then prayed. He says, "The first expression I got hold of was 'Lord, bind the devil.' The praying souls thundered forth their loud 'Amens.' I repeated the words about twenty times, and we all rose in faith. A grand shout of 'Glory' followed, and the victory was declared for the faithful."

(To be continued.)

References

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