

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

### **Chapter X**

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

##### **CLOSING WORDS.**

THE sacrifices made by these working potters to pay William Clowes ten shillings a week, puts them in a high rank amongst the world's benefactors. They had brooded over the spiritual destitution of their fellows until their hearts rose to the heroic decision to give themselves for their salvation. It was a holy resolution to build the structure of their character according to the pattern shown them at the Cross. In acting thus they were not conscious that they were doing a brave thing, and it is that element of unconsciousness which proclaims its greatness. We have heard of many such instances of sacrifice connected with our origin. The fact is, only a portion - a very small portion - of the history of those days, has been written, and the unwritten part has often been the best or most interesting portion. A few things we know - just a little of what came to the surface - but the interior is beyond our ken. The crust of the earth shows the fruits, flowers and landscapes, but it conceals the volcanic fires beneath; so the words and works which we know are something like the outer features of the earth, but what do we know of the interior, of the volcanic fires beneath the surface - which dominated and directed these outer manifestations? They are known only to the workers and their God.

To make this payment to Clowes the family of Nixon several times went without food. It had been mutually arranged that he and Woodnorth should make the payment on alternate Saturdays, but occasionally work was short at the pottery, and at such times the whole weekly wage did not much exceed ten shillings. His daughter told us that once after paying the stipulated amount Nixon was left with sixpence for the family's food for the week. The next day her father was planned to preach at a place some distance from Tunstall; and he started in the morning without any breakfast, gathering blackberries as he walked along the road to satisfy his hunger. He conducted three services, but no one gave him food, and when he commenced his homeward journey, footsore and hungered, he almost fainted by the way. His road took him by a friend's house, where he hoped to get a piece of bread, but when he reached the place he found the door was bolted, as the family had retired for the night. Staggering to the house, in his weak condition he fell against the door, and the noise awoke the sleeping man, who quickly descended to ascertain the cause of the disturbance. Finding Nixon outside, and learning his famishing condition he placed before him a plentiful supply of food. After satisfying his needs, and resting for awhile, he resumed his journey, reaching home in the early hours of the morning.

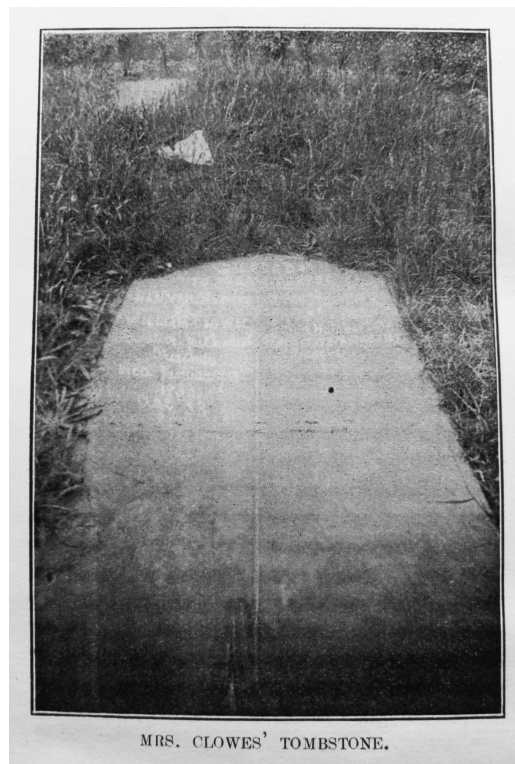
But the sufferings were not all confined to the house of Nixon, for the family of the Evangelist shared the hardships. A total income of ten shillings a week was a small amount for the supply of the household needs. Mrs. Clowes was compelled to use the coarsest food, and she and her husband very often dined off a little suet and potatoes, or a piece of bread and a drink of water. But even these privations were insufficient to keep the household expenditure within the income and *William*

*Clowes sold his feather bed* to supply his needs. Such a fact in our history is “significant of much!” What an inward drama lies behind such an act if we could only get at it! What strange thoughts must have passed through his mind when he found himself reduced to such straits! We can see his bleeding feet as he climbs the rugged steps of Calvary, with “the cross that looks not back.” Here is a highly strung, unworldly, sensitive nature, pulsating with new ideas, with a soul throbbing with intense response to the spiritual needs of the people, yet reduced to the alternative of making compromise with sin and refusing an answer to the Macedonian cry; or selling his feather bed to supply his household needs as he responds to that great impulse which drove him out, “not knowing whither he went.” This was an act of heroism as sublime as that of George Fox’s, when he made himself a leather suit that he might better prosecute this mission; and all the light upon it which comes from later inquiries only gives it greater prominence, and shows it to have been of such a quality that Clowes is worthy of a place amongst the peers in the kingdom of grace.

Passing with him into his wider sphere with its tumults and triumphs, its conflicts and conquests, we must not forget those whom he left at Tunstall. We should not be unmindful of the part which Mrs. Clowes played in the great surrender. It is probable, all things considered, that her sacrifice was greater than his. He says, “When I was called to leave her for long periods, there was an interruption of conjugal and domestic comfort, which was painful to us both, but especially to my wife. Her distress was often extreme, but the Lord came to her help.”

Let us not forget this patient woman who sublimely gave up home comforts, and surrendered the society of her husband for months together. Pathetic stories have been told us of their partings when he left her for his long missionary journeys. For a long time she was the subject of mental derangement, and she finally sank into confirmed insanity. This considerably increased the domestic difficulties, and several distressing tales are told of her conduct while in charge of her friends at Tunstall. Before the end came her mind nearly recovered its normal strength, and she died at Tunstall in January, 1833. Mrs. Wood told us that “she was buried in the same grave as Mrs. Hutchinson whose husband was a travelling preacher at Tunstall. Her grave is alongside that of my mother in Tunstall Churchyard.”

After considerable searching we found the spot, but the grave was overgrown with long grass, which concealed the slab. The face of the stone was “peeled,” and some of the letters had been obliterated. The photographer experienced difficulty in getting a picture of the stone, and now he has only shown very indistinctly the remaining letters. One half of the face was originally given to the inscription relating to Mrs. Clowes, and the remaining portion was devoted to the facts relating to Mrs. Hutchinson.



Mrs. Wood tells rather a weird story concerning her aunt. She says that her nephew, William Clowes, Junr., "was going to his work between five and six o'clock on the morning of her death, and he was alarmed at seeing, what he thought was Mrs. Clowes sitting on the steps of the Market Hall. He rushed back to his house in great excitement, and reaching the foot of the stairs, he called to his father, saying, 'Get up, father, at once, for I have seen Aunt Hannah. She is sitting on the Market steps in her night dress.' " On that day and exactly at that hour she died.

The success of Clowes on the Mission field was a subject in which his old friends and members at Tunstall took the keenest interest, and it is not possible to say how much that success was related to their prayers. They were certainly of one "accord," if they were not in "one place." The evidence points to the relationship between Clowes and Nixon, as of the strongest and strangest character. It appears to have been of such a mysterious nature that one spirit ruled the two men, and in any conflict in which one was engaged the other was a sharer. There is abundant evidence to show that however far apart they might be one had a knowledge of the doings of the other. It seemed that they possessed in common some indefinable quality by which they had the power to project their faculties through space, and not only communicate, but watch the movements and doings of each other. Science is showing to us that the outside universe contains innumerable mysterious qualities the operations of which have not yet been formulated into laws, and perhaps it will be made known to us that man has in himself elements corresponding to these unknown ones in the outside world. Or may the explanation be found in what appears to be the fact, that Clowes and Nixon had so freely and fully received God into the lowest and outermost bounds of their nature? To speak philosophically the Divine Spirit so wrought in them that they became spiritualized, and physical laws were superseded by spiritual laws.

Is this a mystery? Does it appear to verge on the romantic? Can souls become so knit together, that space is annihilated, and one person's will - or faith - influences another? Is it possible to reach that condition in which mind asserts its sovereignty, and brings matters thoroughly under its control? Let history speak. Here are two men who dwelt in the secret place of the Most High, and renewed their strength under the shadow of the Almighty, and they simply turned impossibilities into accomplished facts. The following revealing sentences are taken from our conversations with Clowes' niece.

"James Nixon and uncle had fixed hours for prayer. Sometimes when Nixon was at mother's, as the time for prayer approached he would say to her, 'I must be going for it is time for me to meet Will.' It was a very common thing for mother to ask him about uncle's health, and he could always tell her. We all seemed to take it for granted that he knew all that he was doing. I remember once while uncle was at Hull that mother said to him, 'Jim, have you heard how Clowes is?' His answer impressed me at the time as being rather strange, for he said, 'I saw him last night, and he was so weak that he could not walk round his Class, but he had to keep his seat all the evening.' "

Many such incidents have been told us, and they must not be ignored in estimating the character of Clowes. Here is another taken from our notes. During a visit which he made to Birmingham, Nixon, who was at Tunstall saw the mail coach arrive, and that Mr. Garner was there to meet him. He noticed that he spoke sharply to Mr. Garner. A few days after Clowes came on to Tunstall, and

during their interview Nixon asked him the subject of their conversation, and why he had, spoken in such a manner. His reply we will give in the words of Mrs. Thelwell.

“I had asked him not to arrange for me to attend any services, as my health would not permit me to speak, and he told me that I was expected to address two meetings. It was too bad for him to do so.”

It was common knowledge at Tunstall that Nixon knew whether Clowes had a good time at his services. Many interesting incidents relating to this subject were contained in their correspondence. For a long time these letters were preserved by the family, but they were lent to a friend by Mrs. Thelwell, and never returned, and their whereabouts cannot now be ascertained. In reply to our enquiry how her father obtained this knowledge we received this answer.

“I am afraid I cannot tell you much. He told me that sometimes when he was praying an impression was made upon his soul, and he always attached great importance to such impressions. I have seen him when he has come from his ‘knee work’ with a far away look in his eyes, and at such times he could tell us the kind of services Clowes was holding, and the number of converts at his meetings. I am quite sure he was told by God, for he used to spend hours in prayer.”

We have given but the briefest hints of what could be written concerning this feature in the life of Clowes. Some who have spoken to us on the subject have speculated very freely on the quality of this relationship. To us the pivot on which the whole question turns is that of personality - the man himself. It may be that along these lines, revelations on this subject are yet in store for humanity.

Having left his secular employment Clowes commenced a course of Home Missionary labours which finds few, if any, parallels in modern history. In this work he and his compeers were singularly in advance of the times, and at least half a century ahead of the generality of Christian workers. Out of door preaching was then considered an intolerable innovation, and bigotry and prejudice were rampant. Even members and leaders of Nonconformist churches treated the open-air Evangelist as the off-scouring of the earth. All this is changed to-day, for high dignitaries of the Establishment zealously carry their message to the working people in the highways and lanes, the streets and market places, and are applauded for their holy enthusiasm. But surely such workers should not forget their indebtedness to William Clowes and his colleagues for having set them such a brilliant and successful example of “How to reach the masses.”

After all that has been written it is highly probable that Clowes will remain a comparatively unknown man. His noblest picture cannot be drawn by the pen, nor will his richest experiences ever be told by books. He was content to leave to posterity the only authentic record of his wonderful works in what he calls his published “Journals,” one of the few live books produced by our Church, and which the Conference ought to re-publish in connection with the Centenary. If we could only have had the secret history of his prayer room, what a revelation would have been given, for surely the rarest inspiration rested upon him in that place. The late Rev. Charles Shaw, a native of Tunstall, and for many years a leading minister of the Methodist New Connexion, told us that he had heard him many times, but he never knew one who could offer such prayers.

The beauty of the imagery which he employed, the freshness and variety of his petitions, and the wonderful unction which attended his utterances, made the whole exercise remarkably impressive. The holy awe which rested on us whilst Clowes prayed is indescribable."

The results of his labours cannot be chronicled. His biographer, Mr. Davison, says: "His converts are to be found in many lands and in different grades of society. We have heard and seen them at the potters' wheels in Staffordshire; in the collieries of Northumberland and Durham; in the ships and fishing boats on the coasts; on the farms of Yorkshire; in the mills of Lancashire; among the men of business in our towns and cities; and in the depths of the Canadian forests."

From a muster of anecdotes illustrating his absorption in his work we can only find room for one. He was sojourning for a while at a farmhouse in Yorkshire. His host perceived that whoever came in his way heard from him a few words on the importance of being right with God.

In the establishment was a man-servant who was daringly wicked, and fearing that if anything serious was said to him he would insult Mr. Clowes, the host begged that when the man came in to dinner Mr. Clowes would allow him to pass in silence. Clowes smiled and made no answer. The dinner hour arrived. He said very little to the youth, and scarcely spoke at the table. Instead of standing up as his manner invariably was to return thanks, he quickly rose from his seat and said, "Let us pray a minute." There was only one door by which the youth could leave the room. Clowes stepped to it, closed it, and knelt down so close behind it that till he moved it could not be opened. Before the household had much time to think he was upon his knees pouring out his heart to God.

The danger of the young man was the burden of his soul, and his name was the principal subject of his supplication. The prayer which he offered was the prayer of faith. The subduing power of God mightily descended, and the awe-stricken youth could resist no longer. His conscience was filled with deep anguish, and falling upon his knees in the bitterness of his soul he cried for salvation, and the scene speedily and safely ended in his conversion.

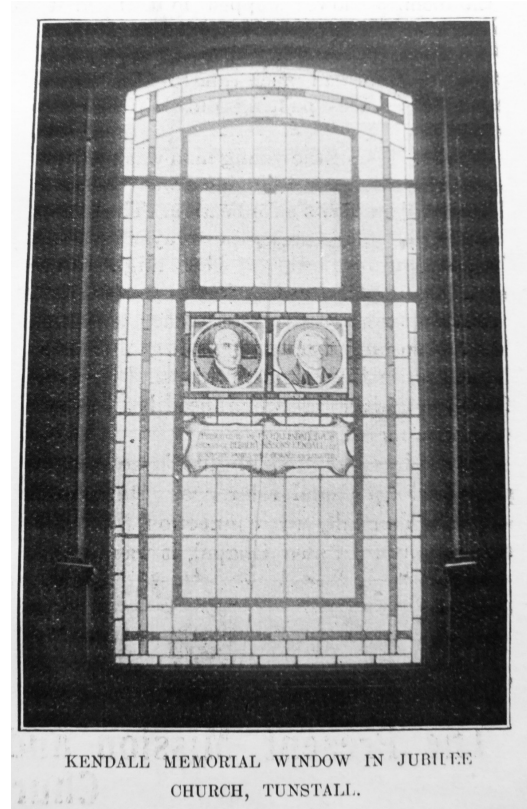
In closing our "Sidelights" we may be permitted a personal reference. During our stay at Tunstall, in connection with the renovation of Jubilee Chapel, it was to us a labour of love to introduce a Memorial Window, dedicated to our Founders. The window is placed at the south end of that historic building, and is a handsome stained glass representation of the Saviour robed in red, with a Crown of Thorns upon His brow. Underneath is inscribed the text, "The people that walk in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death upon them hath the light shined." Isaiah ix. 2.

Below is the following inscription, "This window is dedicated to the glory of God in loving memory of Hugh Bourne and William Clowes, through whose unselfish heroism and self -forgetful toil the Primitive Methodist



Church was founded. A.D. 1905." This is not the only reference to Clowes in the Church, for in the centre light in the West side downstairs, we placed a pair of panels containing pictorial representations of Bourne and Clowes, which were presented by the Rev. H.B. Kendall, B.A., in memory of his son Mr. Herbert Sissons Kendall, by whom they were designed and executed.

We have read much and heard more of the sayings and doings of William Clowes, and we are firmly persuaded that he was one of the most remarkable men of modern times. He was an apostolic man, and if his record could have been written it would have added a new chapter to the "Acts of the Apostles."



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## References

*Primitive Methodist Magazine* 1906/969