

Robert Betts
Champion of East Anglia

Transcription of 'Sketch' In the Christian Messenger by W.A. Hammond

WHAT a contrast from Thomas Lowe to Robert Betts! As wide as the poles asunder, as diverse in their gifts and talents as men could possibly be, and yet each in his own sphere a "workman that needed not to be ashamed." Robert Betts was the plain, unadorned evangelist. Of the arts of popular oratory or the tricks of the mere rhetorician he knew nothing. But he had a message to deliver, a fire burned within him, and he could not refrain. Nor did he need. For of him it might be reverently said, "The common people heard him gladly."

He was an East Anglian by birth and breeding. No one could mistake him. He never lost the brogue or the mannerism of the countryside. Nor did he wish. He came of the people, he belonged to the people. He knew their life, their habits, their mode of thought, their trials and difficulties, their prejudices and limitations, and because he knew he could speak to them, and they gladly listened to his words.

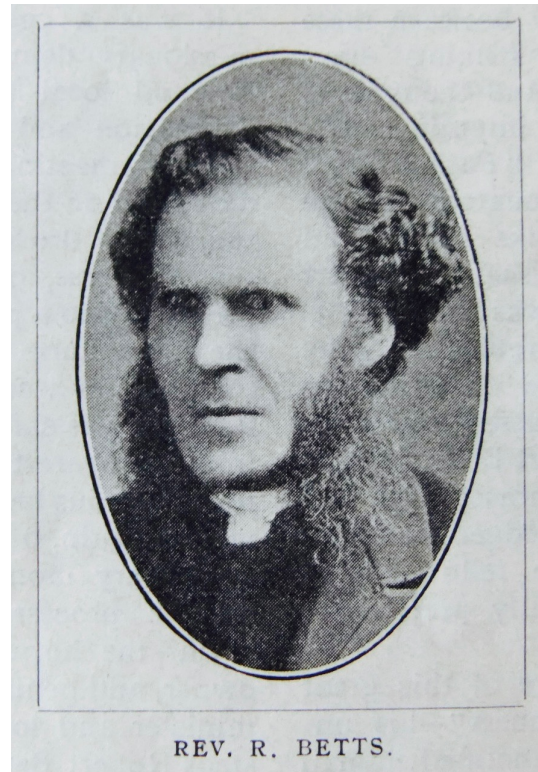
He was richly endowed with great natural gifts, and if in his early life he could have been mentally disciplined and trained, what a mighty preacher he would have been! Mighty he was without the training, but if the training had been possible he would have been mightier still. But schools were few and far between in East Anglia in his early days, and such as were available for him only left an imperishable bitterness in his mind. The outstanding feature of rural education was that poor lads must be "respectful to their betters." They were taught to say:

"God bless the squire and his relations,
And keep us in our proper stations."

Robert Betts never forgot it. It entered his soul as a scorching iron, and made him scornful and intolerant of many of the surroundings of rural toilers. He was no "snowy-banded, dilettante, delicately-handed priest," but a mighty giant, with strength of limb and brain and lung that made him a valiant warrior for Jesus Christ.

See him as he stands before you, especially when his blood is up, and the crowd in the open air stand before him! What a leonine face he has—frank, open, fearless, strong, with a voice like thunder so far as its carrying power is concerned, and yet flexible as the well-managed organ. His vocabulary is fairly extensive, and speech is easy to him. His words are purely Saxon, his sentences short and effective. He has all the magnetism of the orator. His message is always the same; not by any means the sameness of careless reiteration or neglected preparation, but the sameness of concentrated interest and idea. He was like his great ideal, a man of one idea. Earnestly he would say, "This one thing I do."

Of bricks and mortar he had a genuine abhorrence. Of purely business affairs he was as innocent as a child. Of ecclesiastical statesmanship he knew nothing and cared less. One thing he knew and one



thing he did. He knew how to arrest men on the way to ruin and turn them into the narrow way of life and peace. He knew how to proclaim the Gospel of the Grace of God so that men left the ways of sin and yielded themselves to Christ. If oratory be the art of persuading men, he was a splendid orator. If the greatness of preaching lies in its power to win men to Christ, then Robert Betts was a great preacher. What multitudes he led to the Saviour, and what men they were! If he had done nothing else than lead that really great preacher, John Hammond, with his wonderful intellectual power and marvellous gifts, to Christ, it would have been well worth living for. Intellectually, John Hammond was far beyond the plain, earnest preacher of the Gospel. His was a massive mind in a massive frame. But his child-like affection and reverence for the man who had won him to Christ was strangely beautiful. Like a child he would sit at his feet. Like a faithful follower he would go far to hear his "father in the Gospel" preach. Well-trained himself, he would utterly fail to notice the untrained style of his friend's deliverance. With rapt attention and overflowing joy he would sit entranced whilst his friend swept the audience with his boisterous oratory, every emotion of his nature stirred by the appeals of the preacher. But he was only one of hundreds who, by the grace of God, were brought into the kingdom by the evangelistic fervour of this rugged soul.

Robert Betts was a great soul, and great souls gathered to him. Probably his closest companion was Robert Key. Between these two giants there was a striking similarity—a similarity of mind and thought, of purpose and idea, of aim and intention. Mr. Betts would talk tenderly of "Father Key," and Key would speak affectionately of "my son Warbert." They were like David and Jonathan, like Elijah and Elisha. If Robert Betts had any human ideal it was Robert Key. He caught his spirit and largely his style. And when the great apostle of Primitive Methodism in East Anglia passed away, his mantle largely fell upon Robert Betts, so that in style and manner and phraseology and power he became the acknowledged successor of his beloved master. The fellowship of kindred minds was delightfully precious to both.

But the outstanding feature of this great soul was his simple "humanness"—his unalloyed, unadulterated, yet sanctified human nature. He stood on no isolated pedestal aloof from the ordinary toil and struggle of men. He had no priestly airs and no sacerdotal ideas. He wore his white tie it is true; none of your Roman collars or stiffly-starched cravats, but the plain, big wrapper tied twice round the neck as the old preacher usually did, and which was the recognized badge of the circuit minister. But whilst he wore the badge, he was far removed from the mere official minister. What scorn he would pour on those who occupied such a position! If you wanted to hear him at his best on the platform you needed to catch him in one of his scornful, sarcastic moods. The iron of intolerant clericalism had entered his soul. He had no soft words for an Established Church or its clergy. "If Peggy be a duck, let her swing," was his derisive way of referring to the tied condition of a State-supported church. "Loose her, and let her go," he would scornfully cry. For all social oppression and intolerance he had nothing but scorn, and sometimes more sensitive souls would chafe under the withering scorn of his words.

But he was delightfully human. At times he was as playful as a great boy. His laughter was splendid to hear. No one could be sad in his presence. He knew the burdens of life. He had passed through the shadows as well as the sunshine. But how he could laugh! None of your simpering, whimpering smiles, but a great, broad laugh that lighted up the whole of the face and made his well-knit frame shake with the heartiness thereof.

It was a cold, wintry night. He was missionary deputation on a country round. A good local preacher had conveyed the deputation and circuit minister to the missionary meeting. The night was densely dark, and on the way home after the meeting the driver drove his cart up the bank and turned

horse, cart, deputation and circuit preacher into a pond on the other side, whilst the missionary money lay scattered on the road. They were the days before compulsory lighting was enforced. A light was obtained from the nearest house, the horse rescued from its dangerous bath, the cart turned on to its wheels again, but with broken shaft, and the missionary money carefully collected. And then a procession walked into the circuit town—the horse and broken cart led by its owner, and behind the deputation, the circuit minister and local preacher. But every few steps Robert Betts would stop and make the welkin ring with his merry laughter, and when all had retired to bed early in the morning, his host was awakened again and again by the loud laughter of the deputation in the adjoining bedroom and the merry enquiry, “Are you all right, bor?” It was quite characteristic. He was a great “human” soul. He died as he lived, in the full sunshine of the Father’s love, simply saying, “God is good! God is love!” But in the Homeland the crown of his rejoicing will be full of stars luminous and bright, for he turned many to righteousness.

References

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