

James Jackson
Champion of East Anglia

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

JAMES JACKSON (No. 1) was the sweet singer of the early Primitive Methodist movement in the Eastern Counties. With a fine presence and a rich and melodious voice, he stood out prominently as the minister of song in those early days. All who then undertook evangelistic work were expected to lead in song. Necessity was laid upon them. There were no organs or harmoniums in those days; not even flute or cornet to lead the service in cottage, open air, or rough mission-room. Every missionary must strike his own tune or trust to the quavering voice of some nervous soul who hardly knew C.M. from L.M., and sometimes they got awfully mixed. But James Jackson needed no choirmaster for his service. With unfaltering skill he would strike up one of the popular songs of his day, and as his rich tenor voice rang out through market square or village green, the people would flock round to hear what this songster had to say. And certainly he was as skilled in prose as he was in poetry, in preaching as in song.



He had started forth from a good home in the fens of Norfolk. Primitive Methodism had early swept across those bleak lands and gathered some of the thrifty farmers into its ranks. Very little provision had been made for their religious needs until Primitive Methodism saw and responded to it. Upwell Circuit, now Downham Market, had the reputation of being the wealthiest circuit in the Eastern Counties. But that is not saying much, for those who belonged to our Church were far from being millionaires, but they were just above the labourer who earned his eight or nine shillings per week. It was from one of these sturdy, thrifty, independent homes in Hilgay Fen that James Jackson set forth with another like-minded fellow-labourer who did good work for awhile, and then, breaking down in health, returned to Ten Mile Bank to render good service to the old circuit for many years as local preacher. Bensley Redhead may well be remembered for his own sake, but just now we remember him as the friend and fellow-labourer of James Jackson.

Nearly eighty years ago the Circuit Quarterly Meeting separated these two young men for the work of the ministry. They were appointed to missionary work, but the sphere of their labours was left to their own choice. Learning that N. Essex was sadly lacking in religious provision, these two pioneers started forth. At the end of their first day's pilgrimage, after walking forty miles, they found themselves at Saffron Walden, a market town in the centre of a wide, agricultural district. Here they pitched their tent, and began their mission in the open air in Castle Street. Sunday found them in the Market Place proclaiming the Divine Evangel to a large congregation. From Saffron Walden they struck out into the surrounding country and established societies in the villages around. They were the creative days of Primitive Methodism. Those who went forth builded on no other man's

foundation, but they builded better than any knew, and within two years a somewhat extensive mission had been formed. But the cost! How startling! That mission effort cost the circuit sixty-five pounds in two years—eight pounds per quarter for two missionaries on purely virgin soil! But those were days of economy; they were also days of success, for within five years Saffron Walden had eight preaching places, eight local preachers, and eighty-two members. The work abides till to-day.

Bensley Redhead returned to his farm, but James Jackson plodded on, calling men to repentance and singing them into the Kingdom. His was essentially a ministry of consolation. He could be stern, searching, strong, but he could be gentle as a lamb. Of one of his colleagues it used to be said he knocked men down, but Jackson picked them up. The one was a veritable Boanerges, the other the Son of Consolation. He was every inch a gentleman, neat in appearance, fastidious in dress, very correct in his deportment, and gentle in speech. He commanded respect wherever he went: but no one would think of taking the slightest advantage of him.

It was the Watch Night Service in the Artillery Street Schoolroom. Colchester. The meeting was led by James Jackson. Just before the midnight hour two young fellows strolled in from the street not quite sober. We all kneeled down for silent prayer, and then the great stillness was broken by the husky voices of those young fellows scornfully saying, "Amen!" "Praise the Lord!" The leader stood it as long as he could, and then, with all the majesty of a military officer, and with the calmness of a great soul, he steadily marched down the centre of the room, and, laying a hand on the head of each kneeling interrupter, he clapped them together, saying, as he did so, "Say 'Amen!' again; say 'Amen!' again!" Not a dog wagged its tail, not another sound was heard, and the Watch Night Service proceeded to its finish, though some who were there found it hard to keep a straight face and a devotional spirit.

It was but illustrative of the man. He was so gentle and winsome that the children would creep up to his knees and pleadingly say, "Tell us a story, Mr. Jackson," and he always had one ready for them; but, if need be, he could sternly rebuke the offender or fearlessly advocate the cause he represented. He knew no fear, but his gentleness really made him great.

From one station to another he pursued the even tenor of his way, leaving behind a fragrance sweet as that of new-mown hay. Probably he spent more time in Essex than most men. Robert Key found Essex "hard soil." The quiet Essex people did not respond to his fervour like the more emotional Norfolk folk, but James Jackson's winsome ministry appealed to these quieter people and won them to Christ. His ministry on the Colchester station, stretching, as it then did, from Lexden to Clacton-on-Sea, was very effective. He knew how to persuade men.

Yet possibly the most effective service that he rendered our Church was somewhat late in his ministry, when he moved from Stowmarket to Yarmouth and built the present splendid temple. Our church at Priory Plain had worshipped in the "Hayloft," and then it had built for itself a spacious but barn-like building—"The Tabernacle." But when James Jackson entered upon his ministry there the time was ripe, and the men were ready, for something more pretentious than the plain structure which had been dear to so many because of splendid ministries which had been exercised there. James Jackson was just the man for the work. Sane, reliable, optimistic, with a strong faith in the future of the Church to which he belonged, he became the leader of a noble band of valiant men,

and led them on to the successful erection of the splendid buildings which adorn the site of the old "Hayloft" to-day. More timid men would have faltered, less pliable men would have blocked the way, less optimistic men would have discouraged the enterprise; but James Jackson saw the opportunity, took occasion by the hand, and laid that strong circuit under abiding obligation by giving to the church a home in every way worthy of its strength.

James Jackson died as he lived, singing all the time. On the morning of his death he was unusually happy, and spent most of the day in song. He went out to tea with a friend, and when he returned home the singing pilgrim suddenly joined

"The choir invisible

Of the immortal dead, who live again

In minds made better by their presence."

Yes, hundreds of lives have been made better by the ministry of this pilgrim of song, and the Church has been greatly enriched thereby.

References

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