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The Heart Speaks

"When life and its pre-occupations are at last over, we let the heart speak—or rather, it speaks of itself, and asks no leave."

—EDWARD THOMPSON.

IN the last year of last century an advertisement appeared in a London newspaper—"A gentlemanly youth required in the office of a Religious Institution." In response to his application for the post, the writer was summoned to Furnival Street. He arrived at "No. 19" to find it a solidly built house, with a pleasing façade, but as the Headquarters of a Denomination it seemed unworthily situated. An area of mean streets surrounded the house, with lawyers' offices and printers' factories. Small taverns, and "tea-rooms" abounded, and there were many old-fashioned shops where you could buy penny bottles of ink, halfpenny pens, packets of writing paper, balls of twine, sealing-wax, as well as the cheap sensational periodicals, loved by boys at that time. Took's Court, closely associated with Charles Dickens, ran at the rear of the Mission House, and within a stone's throw, were the leafy Inns of Court.

Within the House were many spacious rooms and passages, and the first impression one might gain was of unhurried life. Now and then a smiling figure would issue from a room, cross the sunny hall, and disappear. The youth was presently interviewed, and appointed to a clerkship in the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. In this manner my connection with the official side of our Denomination commenced, and it lasted until September, 1945, a period of forty-six years.

The Mission House was indeed a place of quiet, rarely disturbed by the hurry-skurry of hasty footfalls. Nor were there typewriters to hurt the serenity. Long letters were copied in an old-fashioned letter press, but inevitably the first typewriter came soon after. Speaking-tubes were used before the telephone invaded the rooms. It seems not too extravagant a claim to say that the atmosphere generally was one of Sabbath-like calm. But, with its air of repose, this House had within its precincts the promise of mighty things.

The Baptist Union occupied two or three rooms above the offices of the Baptist Missionary Society, where Alfred Henry Baynes, the Magnificent, occupied the secretarial chair with considerable pomp and power. One room was *The Baptist Times and Freeman* sanctum, to the door of which came one day an irate person whose heated desire it was to whip the Editor of the journal for some imagined affront made by a contributor in the current issue! Happily the Editor was absent.

One of the supreme figures of our Denominational story, John Howard Shakespeare, fresh from his pastorate at Norwich, and a man of force, now devoted his energy to transmute his visions into things of power. Like sparks struck from the glowing anvil of a master-mind, one after another, a succession of brilliant achievements marked the early years of his great charge. First came the Twentieth Century Fund—£250,000 from half a million Baptists! I see now, in wealthy fancy, the ceaseless daily inflow of cheques, bank notes and gold, as this momentous fund ran its swift course. One of its early commitments was the building of the new Church House, and many, I do not doubt, can still recall—although its principal actors have departed—that afternoon in April 1903 when John Roskruge Wood, of Upper Holloway fame, presented a gold key to the President of the Baptist Union, with which he formally unlocked the fine doors and entered the new House in company with the Secretary.

Came the Ministerial Recognition Fund, The Education, Home Missions and other funds. The Baptist Fire Insurance Company came into being, rising vigorously from a small office agency. I remember inscribing the first Share Certificate in the name of the first son of an honoured Baptist still happily with us.

The *Baptist Times and Freeman* appeared for a penny a week, with a sermon by a Leader of the Denomination, and a "serial" by Silvester Horne. Gange gave sketches of village life, and the anonymous "Nicholas Notewell" his weekly impressions. Wheeler Robinson contributed his useful article, "The Minister in his study." The *Baptist Handbook,* of six hundred closely-packed pages, cost only two shillings! The *Juvenile Missionary Herald,* forerunner of the magazine, *Wonderlands,* appeared for a halfpenny, and the writer clearly recalls receiving this tiny magazine, with its quaint "wood-cut" pictures, at his Sunday School attached to the Walworth Road Chapel. The *Missionary Herald,* for a penny, told of the growing importance of the Society's work abroad.

Its famous tenant having departed, the B.M.S. was able to enlarge its tents, and swiftly developed its auxiliaries, Summer Schools, and Laymen's Conferences. The two growing organisations united in Assemblies twice a year in Spring and Autumn, important achievements which have been well described by other pens.

An historic event, in 1905, was the First World Congress in Regent's Park College. From all parts of the globe came men of many nations to the stately College and grounds. For several days this scene was the historic cradle of a great enterprise. I recall on one sunny day being despatched to the Army Barracks near Regent's Park to complete arrangements for a military band

to play daily in the College gardens. How lovely this London seemed to that youth:

> London, the flower of cities all,
> As old Dunbar once did you call,
> Rose Royal and Original.

There were very few motor-cars. Open-topped, horse-drawn buses, bright-coloured, ambled along the Strand; here and there were hansom cabs or an open barouche, drawn by two horses. There were conjurors and sword-swallowers at street corners. Sometimes I saw a little Italian playing a hurdy-gurdy, a lively monkey on his shoulder. I lingered sometimes to listen to a German band, or to a comic singer, with his banjo, outside an inn.

In those days before the magical birth of the radio, our entertainment was found at the "Mohawk Minstrels," the Saturday Night Popular Orchestral Concerts at St. James' Hall in Piccadilly, and at Mr. Henry Wood's concerts, that made his name revered throughout the world of music. A little way off Maskelyne and Devant thrilled boys and girls and their mamas and papas with amazing feats of legerdemain. I shall never forget seeing a poor lady cut into two halves, literally cut in two —or so it seemed to my trusting mind. The Aquarium at Westminster, with tight-rope walkers, and human bullets propelled from a cannon, never failed to thrill all who saw these wonders.

The observant would often see in the famous thoroughfares, not so crowded then, many notable personalities: titanic "G.K.C." in his landau; Dean Inge with his odd jerky right shoulder, umbrella tightly rolled, and the correct hat; time has happily refuted the easy description of him by many journalists —the "Gloomy Dean." Rider Haggard walked frequently in Fleet Street, the Mind of the World; Israel Zangwill I saw sometimes on the side-walk; and R. J. Campbell at the height of certain notoriety. John Clifford, kindly and patriarchal in appearance, was to be seen now and then. These came and passed by. One young heart, at least, watched them in silent admiration. In the new Church House almost every day many famous Baptists graced the scene, including Judges and Cabinet Ministers.

There was gold in the Banks as well as in the streets on any of those far-off summer days. The cashier, elegantly polite, would scrutinise your cheque, and then ask you, "How will you have it; half and half?" Thereupon, if you so desired, he would weigh the required amount of sovereigns and half sovereigns, and propel them towards you from a copper shovel! I loved also to loiter, dreaming dreams, in the shades of "Booksellers' Row" in the Strand, or in the Clare Market near by, an area soon to be

cleared that Aldwych and Kingsway might add new dignity to the old city. Not able to buy a coveted expensive book, I would read it through page by page, one or two a day, until its joys were mine. On recalling this practice, I crave your pardon, Mr. Ancient Bookseller, if in my uncontrollable desire for fine reading I broke any law.

If you, in religious witness, delighted to hear London's great men preach, there was Hugh Price Hughes in Piccadilly, Mark Guy Pearse, the Master of the Temple, J. R. Wood, George Hawker, and a galaxy of others, "whose names flit still living on the lips of men." There were to be heard also voices of eminent clergymen in Cathedral and Abbey, and fashionable preachers in West End Churches pleased their famous parishioners, although about this time Dean Inge tells us, the Golden Age of West End incumbents was coming to an end.

Truly London was a venerable city! Fine were its citizens, and mayors, its shows and pomps, pageantry and solemnity; its stately squares of many mansions, each with armies of men servants, its twisting streets with romantic names: Old Jewry, Little Britain, the Barbican, Little Paul's Yard, and Bleeding Heart Yard; and, "curiouser and curiouser," Sea-Coal Lane, and Great St. Thomas Apostle, where, in a great leafy tree, a thousand sparrows held their Parliament; its Bookshops in Churchyards, some actually leaning against the very walls of a church; its

> Cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And . . . leave not a rack behind.

Truly it might have been so, but the valour and vicarious sacrifice of the Finest Few saved for us and the Future the ancient glories of this proud city.

The youthful century, happy and prosperous, advancing grandly in science, medicine, arts and letters, was early to know the pain of disillusion and suffering. Only just in her 'teens, the century suffered the unspeakable horror of the First World War. We spoke of it hopefully, as the war to end all war. A high purpose, but it failed. We won a semblance of Peace, a thing of shreds and patches, but in the weaving of it there was no victory, unless it rested with the vanquished; for in the passing of a score of years, in which suspicion and distrust among Nations grew, a greater tragedy plunged the anxious world once more into years of catastrophic horror, and it seemed true that "a great stream of human tears must fall always through the shadows of the world."

Dr. Johnson argued: "If Mr. X has experienced the

unutterable, Mr. X should not try to utter it." But it is not possible for a writer to set down his experiences of the first half of this century, however brief his impressions, without consideration of the Second World War, and our reaction to it as members of the Christian Church. Lord Acton said, "the first of human concerns is religion." With Browning, we reached into the dark, feeling what we could not see, and still our faith stood.

With the end of the "phoney" war, air raids on Britain gravely threatened our religious life. Churches everywhere were reduced to rubble. Many lovely London Wren churches exist only as names, with often but a garden to mark where they stood. Our own Baptist church buildings suffered seriously. We worshipped, sometimes a mere handful of us, in a wrecked church parlour, when sudden death missed us by not more than a few yards. Sabbath evenings were often haunted by the horrors of air bombardment, and still our faith in God stood, immovable, and our witness marched forward.

The *Daily Telegraph* was able to say recently, "It is undisputed that five years of war have seen a strong resurgence of religious feeling." This is true. The *Sunday Times* prints a sermonette week by week, and other Sunday papers, speaking to millions of non-Churchgoers, give in every issue a "Five Minute" talk on affairs of the heart. Leading articles in many other weeklies and dailies are headed with a fitting text from God's Word. With all its varied mixture of fun and fantasy, its light moods, and its learning, the B.B.C. daily calls millions of listeners into the presence of God; the Sunday evening services from all over the British Isles, and from every Denomination, bring to the fireside, or into the summer garden, the peace and uplift born of religious worship, bringing listeners into that Presence which, as Philip Sidney claimed, "doth give to dark hearts a living light."

The service in a church I know well has developed dignity and sincerity, though its background is ugly with the scars of years of bombing. A happy democratic spirit is evident. At their Sunday School Anniversary, I heard the lessons beautifully read by a girl, prayers taken by a lad. All the offices indeed were carried through by the young people with evident joy. It was their service, something belonging to them. I shall not easily forget the two boys and the two girls, the offering taken, bearing it slowly between the chairs to the Minister's Table. The light upon their faces touched the hearts of their elders as, seated in discomfort on hard chairs, in a cold, draughty room, they bowed their heads in the presence of this lovely act of youthful service. "So will Beauty find a way to clothe Tragedy till the heart is uplifted and comforted."

I have lived long enough to perceive in this saying much precious and eternal truth. During the passage of these six years I have experienced happenings that to the sane mind years ago, would have seemed more wildly fantastic than anything Verne, Poe or Wells in maddest mood conceived. Yet inevitably came the incontestable loveliness of six English Springtimes and Nature smiled still, while the heart wept. And in each Springtime is the consummation of all beauty and truth. So I found consolation and courage in hours of peril.

There exist to-day many elderly men who have lived through times like those I have attempted, all too briefly, to sketch, a mingled yarn of good and ill together. Such memories might have served them well in their eventide. But they inveigh the present, and like Dr. Faustus, cry, "Give me back my youth," for the days of youth were the only ones they deem worth while. For such minds life has proved a lost endeavour. As I see it, the present, and the years to come, are bright with enlightenment, and the high promise of God's Peace, a tapestry woven fine of glowing colour and abounding life, against which the Victorian-Edwardian days of my youth are but a pallid monochrome. Because our Faith endured in six years of agony, mankind now struggles for a world made perfect at last. A Peace we have never known, lies within our grasp.

The human race stands at the most solemn period of its history. Two paths open upward out of the dark valley of Night: the Path of Peace, and the Path of oblivion. The heart of man, not the atom, shall direct the course.

J. Roland Evans.