

Lewis, H Elvet - After the Year of Blessing. Stories of the Welsh Revival

AFTER THE YEAR OF BLESSING. STORIES OF THE WELSH REVIVAL. By the Rev. H. Elvet Lewis.

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While it is too early to audit the results of the Revival in Wales, it may not be amiss to give a few selected cases of remarkable conversions and experiences in different parts; and to furnish some evidence of how the converts stand at the end of twelve or fifteen months of the new life. It is not wise to parade names, lest too public prominence should in any way lead to spiritual disaster. It will be sufficient to say that the writer has come again into personal contact with most of them within a weeks - in some instances a few days - of writing, or else has direct testimony from those who know them best.

I. In the Valley of Achor.

He had been a soldier; he had served in India; he had been through the Transvaal War. He was not devoid of either religious knowledge or religious inclinations; he had strayed into "the far country," and dwelt there. One evening, sitting in the public-house, he heard the others discuss the one topic of interest in every locality in Wales during the winter of 1904-5 – the Revival. As he listened, although he was already under the influence of drink, he was increasingly disturbed, and at last could stay there no longer. On his way he met a prominent member of one of the churches, and told him he wished join the church. "But you must mend your ways before you can do that," said the other, as he saw in what state he was. He went home, and spent a sleepless night of misery, until, as the dawn drew nigh, a glimmering sense of pardon touched the gray depths of his soul. He found his way to Christ and His church, and his life became one unbroken prayer for help to overcome; he prayed in words whenever he had the chance, alone or in company, and the prayer without words filled in the spaces between. He had gone on for months, successfully baffling the tempter, when one night he dreamt that he had fallen back again into the pit of drunkenness; and he heard a voice saying, "You have gone away from God - for ever - for ever - for ever!" It was all so actual to him that he sobbed and shook in his sleep, so frightening his wife that she woke him. The first moment of full awakening, and of finding that it was but a dream, he leapt out of bed, and on his knees thanked God, in broken, rapturous phrases, that he was still in the kingdom of grace. But all the terror of the dream returned to him when next day an old comrade unexpectedly called to see him, and asked him to accompany him. The hour of temptation had come with this sudden upthrow from the old life. What could he do? For a moment he felt utter despair. But he recovered himself, told his comrade he would be ready in a moment, and then retired - to pray for strength. Who but those who know the sting of old sins can realize his anguish? He returned, but with a new light in his soul. While on his knees, he remembered that there was a way of reaching the place where his friend wished to go, a path through the woods - without passing a public-house. So they started; but they had not gone far before his friend began to explain that many things had changed since they used to soldier it together. And, little by little, with shyness at first, he told his story, and said at last, "And do you know that I have found Christ, and that makes all the difference?" There was an indescribable moment in that wood, when the haunting sense of fear and peril gave way to the common rapture of two saved souls. "And I will give . . . the valley of Achor for a door of hope."

II. Adding to Virtue, Knowledge.

It was a weekday evening service - the last of three that day - in the early weeks of the Revival, towards the close of 1904. The whole three services were intense, but not marked with much outward excitement. The address given that night was ethical rather than evangelical - or, more properly, the substance was ethical and the spirit of it evangelical. When it was over, spontaneous prayer flowered as a meadow in a warm spring shower. When the meeting came to be tested, a man was seen to rise, and then move forward through the crowded aisle. Who but knew him? When had there been an election fight, or a Saturday night row, and he not foremost in it? What has he, the reckless pugilist, to do with these children of prayer, in these dewy airs from celestial hills? He sobs forth his confession, tells them in what precincts of hell he has spent the last two hours; how it seemed as if his head must literally burst but for the gracious relief of tears. "None of you will ever know what I have gone through here tonight." And as his confession dies away into a sob, half of anguish, half of redemptive joy, the congregation carries him upward and onward on a swelling tide of thanksgiving. Next morning there is no name oftener than his in everybody's mouth - in the coal mine, in the shop, on the street, among the school-children even. And the day of his new birth was the first of his missionary days. He literally prayed one after another of his old gang to Christ. How can I forget, one night in an English city a month or so later, when a young man from the neighborhood came forward at the close of a service and said, with such a rejoicing accent, "You remember the night at ---, when --- came in? The last of the gang was last week brought in!"

And now, after twelve months, the minister of the church which he joined, writing to me, refers to a devotional paper just read by this same man, and remarks, "You would be surprised at the spiritual keenness and thoughtfulness of many of his observations."

III. In White Raiment

Last Christmas twelvemonths there was many a happy home for the first time, almost, since the wedding day. The shadow of poverty still hung over them; but it was the outer fringe of the shadow. Into one of these homes a miner came a few days before Christmas, and astonished his wife by saying that he must have a white linen shirt - an article unknown in that drink-stricken wardrobe. He had been asked to assist at the chapel tea-meeting, and "flannel was not good enough to cut cake for Jesus Christ in." It was the faint dawning of reverence in a redeemed soul. A few weeks ago he was asked to lay one of the foundation stones of new English chapel in connection the church he had joined, and the gift laid on the stone proved that "walking in white" makes in every way the better life.

IV. Whosoever Cometh.

Expectancy grew with the growth of the Revival. There were certain men and women in every congregation that might be expected with the first rise of the tide. But very soon this quiet expectancy was startled by God's surprises, until at last there was no case to be despaired of. Still, when it was suggested that C---, notorious prize-fighter, leader of riotous living, known and feared near and far - that C--- might find his way to the prayer meeting, it was too much even for disciplined faith. But he gave his promise to come one night; and he came - too drunk, almost, to walk down the aisle. He took his seat where the deacons usually sit in Welsh churches, just in front of the pulpit. For a moment the meeting was too disturbed with astonishment to proceed, but the astonishment soon melted into fervent hymn and intercession. The minister went and sat beside him, and spoke a gentle word to help to quiet him. He replied that he meant to

“stick” - that is, to try his best; and kept repeating the word in drunken fashion. Later, he went on his knees and made some kind of a prayer. Before leaving he promised to come again - a promise that caused almost as much anxiety as joy. For what if he made a habit of coming in the same disconcerting state? Happily, it was a growing atmosphere for faith, and ministers and deacons went home to pray and trust. The following evening came, and with it the prayer meeting; and, true to his promise, he came too, as sober as anyone there. He took his place again where he had sat the night before - the senior deacon's seat! And in that prayer meeting he gave himself to Christ - the long-lost prodigal son of a praying mother. He prayed his first prayer for many a long year; and from that night no one has worked harder than he in the cause of the revival. Nearly a year had passed between that first prayer and a prayer on a week-day morning, simple and childlike, which I heard him pray, and which returns this moment as the memory of some grand sunset, with a sense of something beyond the circling of day and night.

V. A Little Child shall Lead Them.

He came in, trembling and afraid. He knew how sharp the struggle would be; he concealed neither from others nor from himself the force of the temptation to drink. And the public-house which he had mostly frequented lay between his home and the chapel. When he yielded to the Savior's call, he prayed for strength, and begged for a share in the prayer of others. And light came - surely from Him "Who sheweth Himself through the lattice" of prayer! He took his little girl to accompany him each night - past the door of temptation. She, probably, little knew the worth of her hand. For the months have gone, and he still remains true. Within a brief while of writing this I held his hand in mine; I was sorry not to have the privilege of holding the other, smaller hand, as well!

VI. Nearing Home, and Still Singing.

The last incident will be of a different kind. At the close of a preaching service in the first week of 1905, a lifelong Christian - now several years past eighty - rose to give out a hymn. He prefaced it by an outburst of thanksgiving; he had seen the revival of 1839, of 1849, of 1859; and he had been permitted to see this before going home. Then he came to his verse - well-known in many a mission service for a century or more - of which the following is a free translation:

"Hark! what trumpet now resoundeth?

'Tis the King of Shiloh's call:

Who are to the feast invited?

Mortal sinners, one and all!

Turn, ye wanderers, from your folly,

Leave the husks, and turn ye home;

Still the King is calling, calling -

From His love no longer roam!”

In giving it out he commented on each line. After the first line, he recalled the use of the trumpet in Bible phrases. But there was present in the congregation a true mother in Israel, of about his age. She was too impatient, in the fervency of her spirit, to let the question hang. So, while he was commenting, she repeated aloud the second line - which, through slight deafness, he did not hear. He repeated the third line, and again expounded; and once more she anticipated him with "Mortal sinners, one and all!” Then, somehow, the two joined, in thrilling duet, to repeat the rest of the verse. It was all so unexpected, so spontaneous, that the audience, in smiles and tears, were wholly carried away with the scene of these two far-faring pilgrims, almost on the threshold, turning round, as it were, to call God's wandering children home.

Almost on the threshold - yes! For one of the two has already passed through the sunlit door. Her death-bed last summer was a festival of holy song. Her voice rang clear and fresh, as though her youth were restored; and in the stillness of the hills some of the triumphant strains could be heard from afar. For it is not only that the prodigals have returned, but the children of the home have learnt a new song. "And no man could learn that song but" those "which were redeemed from the earth,"