Chapter III

COMING TO THE ALTAR

God's dealings with His people in all ages are stamped by a likeness peculiarly their own. 'He fulfils Himself in many ways,' but all His ways have a kinship, a wonderful unity readily discernible, a hall-mark which those who know it can never overlook. These simple, and often quite untutored, Soldiers of The Salvation Army, awakened by the 'call' of which I have been speaking, are only hearing again the same message which long ago on the shores of Galilee came to Simon and Andrew and James and John. In this, at any rate, they may be described without boasting as successors of the Apostles, for to them also is the word of the Master come, saying, 'Follow after Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.'

But it is one thing to receive that call, to recognize and bow before it, and it is a far other thing to obey it. Our joy is great in that we constantly see the evidences of its coming to our dear people's hearts. We do not always understand God's ways with them. Some who seem to us to be already marked as vessels of honour, gifted, qualified, and standing ready on the threshold of the temple of service, do not hear this word of separation. To others, among them many — so it appears to us — who are the most unlikely of the living stones, the least promising of the trees that the Husbandman has planted, the word of the Lord is sure. They hear His voice, 'Follow after Me,' and that is enough. Our part is, then, a humble one. It is to make straight the way of the Lord. To follow carefully after Him, if haply we may find out those whom He has chosen, and then, like Samuel, to arise and anoint them.

Rarely is one asked to become an Officer. The proposal comes to us in the form of an 'offer' for service from the Candidate, and is usually addressed to the Captain of the Corps of which the proposer is a Soldier. The making of that offer is a great step in the way of final consecration. It is almost always preceded by much heart-searching and prayer, by anxious conferences with comrades and friends, and often by inward conflicts and fiery trials, which are entirely new experiences.

For it is a deeply serious matter. There is much to be considered.

I

'What Use Am I?'

To begin with, there is the first great question: Who am I, that I should go? Those were the words that leaped to the lips of Moses as he gazed into the burning bush and listened to his call. "Behold they will not believe me nor hearken unto my voice, for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee.'" And when, in the words of the Lord to Gideon on the threshing-floor, the answer has come back: 'Go in thy might — have not I sent thee?' Hundreds, nay, thousands of Candidates for Officership in our ranks have cried out with him: 'Oh, my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.' Many a humble shopman and toiling artisan and simple village girl, to whom the message has come very much as it came to the shepherd Moses, to the farm labourer Gideon, and to the housewife Deborah, has had a hard struggle with that same problem. Who am I, and what would be the use of my going? How can I save souls? Who will believe me when I say that the Lord has sent me?' It is no less real because it is all going on around us to-day. The call is no less real, the struggle is no less real, nor is the response of faith and love less warm than of old. The following is the substance of an interesting inquiry which illustrates what I am saying: —

'Would you advise me about my future? I am an ignorant lad, the son of poor people in this village. I work in an ironmonger's. I do not feel as if God can make any use of me. I do not wish to be an Officer, but I have no rest since I read about Captain —'s death, and his last words about a young man being wanted to take his place. I stayed up three whole nights last week to pray to God to take away the feeling that I was the one; but it is still here. I am very ignorant. My wages is only 10s. a week. I do not know the world. I was only out of this place once in my life. Do you think I shall be any good to them?'

'I feel I would rather die very soon if I could bring souls to Jesus. That is what I wish to die for. I can't rest when I think of what they is losing by not being saved. It is like something burning in me when I think of it. And so, I have no rest. I do not mind what I do, or what I have to go

through, if only I am any good to get people saved. I ought to tell you that I am very short, and my father says I am a fool for thinking of such a thing. It has caused me great pain to know what to do.'

'And so now I have told you. I will pray all night tomorrow when you will get this letter for God to direct you to answer right.'

That all-night vigil brought the right answer. The lad has long since come into a position of honour amongst us, and in all his labours there is none so welcome to him as the duty of advising other lads about the future.' And once more we remember that God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty. And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.

'That no flesh should glory in His presence.'

II
Leaving All

But every Candidate for service in The Salvation Army is urged to count well the cost. For, in truth, there is demanded a real sacrifice. One of the first signs of the work of grace in the hearts of our people — and the poorer they are the more manifest it often becomes — is their beautiful zeal and love for their own. 'This is My commandment, that ye love one another.' Home, mother, father, brother, sister, lover, friend, as they are consecrated by the influence of the love of God shed abroad in their hearts, become great realities in their lives. This is, of course, more obvious with some natures than with others. The best and deepest characters are usually the most attached, and as it is generally to those natures that the claims of Christ's service most readily appeal, there is almost always a great test of sincerity to be met on the threshold of the way of obedience. Indeed, here hundreds of our young people hesitate about giving up their lives. To abandon worldly prospects, to leave home, to leave mother, especially against her wish, to go away from every friend, and that in opposition probably to the bulk of them, proves too much,

and I am afraid that there are shipwrecks of faith amongst our Soldiers which must be put down to an unwillingness among those who have heard the Voice of God to follow all the way.

But thousands, thank God, though touched to the quick, press on. To them the question now presents itself in the words of one of our songs —

How much can you suffer for Jesus?
In His service how much can you lose?
At His cross will you still kneel adoring,
And the cross which He gives you refuse?
How much will you suffer for Jesus?
There are plenty His wonders to praise!
Dare you face the legions of hatred,
And His down-trodden banner upraise?

Here is practical Christianity. Here is love on its trial. Here is following Christ, stripped of the sentimental trappings of an ease-loving generation. Here is the question of questions coming right home to the average working man and woman of today — just as it came to Paul, and came again and again until it wrung from him the imperishable answer: 'But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.'

The suffering and loss involved in leaving home is increased tenfold in the cases of hundreds of Officers by the bitter opposition of those whom they most love and revere. I have many times witnessed the agony, alike of men and women, in deciding to make that separation; and though I have seen many death-bed partings, and participated in many other bitter human experiences, I have known nothing to equal it. With many it has been an actual choice between obedience to the claims of Christ and the claims, entreaties, and love of the most precious of earth's treasures. Jesus Christ foresaw the greatness of the sacrifice, the poignancy of the grief involved in those personal forsakings and family rendings for the sake of His Gospel. He gave this special promise concerning those who pass through them, which has come as a very word of life and hope to many a struggling soul amongst us: 'Verily I say unto you, there is no man that hath left house,

or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My sake and the Gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions, and in the world to come eternal life.'

Here let me quote the testimony of one, now an Officer, whose life and labours have fully justified the sacrifice of which he tells: —

'Six months after my conversion the Spirit of God made it plain to me that I ought to apply for Officership in The Army; but at this time I was entirely responsible for the support of a widowed mother and an invalid sister; the only person besides in the house being a younger brother who was given up to drink and worldliness.'

'I tried hard to make myself believe I was mistaken, and that God would never call me from home under existing circumstances. I conferred with several Christian people outside The Army, who, I thought, would know the mind of God better than a young Convert like myself. They assured me that I was all wrong in supposing that God would ever call a young man to leave home who was responsible for his parent as I was.'

'In spite of all this, however, the conviction grew upon me, as born of God, that at all cost I must follow His call, and all my heart was set to win souls. I prayed, I think I may say, without ceasing, and eventually I made known my feelings to my mother. She said she would sooner die in the workhouse than stand in the way of my following what I believed to be a call of God, and rejoiced my heart by adding that this was the least she could do out of gratitude to God and The Army for my Salvation.'

'Still I struggled against the conviction. The more I thought of leaving her the more I realized my love for my widowed mother as days and months went by. The great trial which came very forcibly to me at times was that she would be exposed to privation and want without me. I believed that God was able and would take care of His own, and yet it seemed a great thing to go and simply leave her. But after waiting about twelve months I volunteered. I could delay no longer.'

'In due course, the Sunday came for me to say farewell at my Corps. On the Sunday night, my brother, who was directly opposed to all religion, and who was going on very badly, entered The Army Hall for the first time, with my sister, and at the close of the Meeting both volunteered for Salvation. I shall never forget my feelings when I saw them at the Mercy-seat.'

'Then and there my brother publicly confessed Christ, and, what is more, undertook the entire responsibility of my widowed mother and home, and that responsibility he has faithfully and lovingly discharged.'

'God's faithfulness has been verified in my experience over and over again in quite as marked a manner, and I believe that in making that first consecration in faith for my loved ones I learned, perhaps, the greatest lesson of my life. In many severe and dark trials and losses it has helped me to stay myself on God. It set a seal on my call to Officership, which has been more to me than anything that man could do for me.'

III

A Living Sacrifice

Of the remaining problems to be faced by the would-be Life Servant of The Army I must name one more. The Authorities of the Movement make no promises of a material kind. There is no guarantee of salary or other emolument - not for a single day — no, nor for a single penny. This fact is put always in the forefront of appeals for consecration to the work. It is one of the practical evidences of faith in God to which the whole Army gives daily witness. Among the sixteen thousand Officers already spending themselves for Christ under our Flag there is not one who can make any lawful claim for earthly pay either upon General Booth or his representatives. They may not look to him, nor to any 'fund, nor to any board, for their daily bread. Theirs must be a very real life of faith. They are indeed themselves a daily answer to the daily prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread."

Now, every Candidate knows this; and more, every Candidate knows that Officers, both in their own and other lands, often suffer privations, and in the discharge of their duty are sometimes reduced to very plain fare, and very little of it. All this is continually put before them by pen and voice. If we should neglect to name it our critics and advisers — both friends and foes — would keep the matter well to the front for us! And, indeed, the Candidates see it in many cases actually worked out before their eyes in the lives of their own Officers, and are then and there able to judge how far poverty and loss for Christ's sake can affect true happiness and peace.

What is the result? I should say, without hesitation, that it is all good. We have been very little troubled with those who are in the service of the Temple for a piece of bread! The man with the muck-rake does not often come our way! It is but seldom that a Candidate asks a single question about salary. Among all the unnumbered hosts of slanders which have been circulated about us you will rarely hear the suggestion that we are what we are for pay! I do not doubt that their poverty is one of the great sources of our dear Officers' power both with God and man. When it is fully — as it is gradually becoming — understood, whether in the palace or the prison or the slum, that their poverty is in the vast majority of cases a self-imposed sacrifice for Christ's sake, that power will be enormously increased. For we must remain poor. I agree entirely with the beautiful words of one of our old friends, Sir Walter Besant, when he wrote of our Officers —

'But they must remain poor. They must always remain poor. That is essential. They must never let the world suspect that the old passion of devotion is decaying. The last words of the dying Catherine Booth were a command. "Self-Denial," she said, "will prove your love to Christ." Therefore they must remain poor.'

But all this involves the coming to a great sacrifice by the Candidate. There is something one cannot but admire in the labourer who is worthy of his hire. To the industrious working man or woman the sureness of a regular income, even though it be small, is something not easy to forgo. To go forth from the carpenter's bench or the factory, where happy years have been spent in honest and fairly remunerated toil, and accept a life in which everything is uncertain, except hardship, in which there may be realized in grim reality the very experience of Him who said,

'The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head,' is, especially to some natures, a test of devotion the severest of all.

How beautiful then the grace that rises to embrace it. With what inward joy have I marked the progress of multitudes of my comrades up this path of self-surrender, of self-denial, of self-abnegation. And when I have sometimes hesitated about the wisdom of setting our standard of consecration so high in the first instance, I have been afterwards reproved by the testimony of those about whom I have doubted. 'It was,' one said to me a few days ago, 'the sacrifice of what cost me the most that brought me the joy, and it was the joy that made me strong to go forward, and it was going forward that won the victories of my life.'

For the first great advance in the life of true service is made when the servant is cut off from earthly supports, no matter what kind they be, and thrust back in naked faith on God, and God alone. How powerless these men and women would be if their dependence was upon The Salvation Army! How defenceless they would prove in the day of battle if they were relying merely upon General Booth! What disasters would mark their work if for the supply of their needs they were looking only to Headquarters! In short, what a ruin it would all prove unless they could be taught that they are not sent by man, nor by the will of man, but by God, and by the will of God; sent, too, to do God's work in absolute, direct, and continuing dependence upon Him. Theirs is to be a life of labour, but it is also to be a life of faith.

In this spirit they come to us. Last year over our whole Field nearly three thousand such offerings were made. We could not accept them all, but they were made. What a volume of love they represented! What a sweet-smelling savour upon the altars of our God! What tears, what prayers, what uplifting hungerings after righteousness, what solemn resolves and blessed burning of the fires of zeal for Christ and for souls they witness! Yes, even those we did not accept were blessed, for Abraham and Isaac were doubly blessed after the Lord had tried the one and given back the other.

Accepted and rejected alike could sing: —

Wherefore to Thee I all resign,
Being Thou art of love and power;
Thy only will be done, not mine.
Thee, Lord, let heaven and earth adore;
My own in all things I resign,
And know no other will but Thine.