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CHAPTER VII

BEGINNINGS IN SERVICE

The happiest religious influences surrounded my childhood, nevertheless the constant repetition of religious exercises, and the fact that I knew that my parents' hopes centred on my consecration to the Service of God, aroused in me a distaste for the whole business. It was a happy surprise to me myself that all this vanished when I was converted. I discovered I loved prayer, which I had before often considered rather a bother. The meetings which I had not always attended willingly became a delight. This change gave me a delightful sense of surprise.

In my thirteenth year I first began, in the presence of adults, to bear witness to the fact of my salvation. This was at a small meeting in the house of our friend, Henry Reed, near Tunbridge Wells. There, while on holiday, I met two lads, both older than myself, who were unconverted. They were present at a private meeting in Mr. Reed's library, and I felt that I ought to testify in their presence of God's goodness to me, and did so.

While staying there I kept a journal, a fragmentary affair, but it serves to bring to mind some of the hopes and desires of those early days. I take these entries from the faded pages:

"Friday, July 16th, 1869.

"Good meeting — a great blessing. Very happy. Mrs. Sharpe wept very much — worked on by the Holy Ghost. May the Lord deepen the work. Fred kind — very. Heart not at all well. . . . All very kind to me. I want to get nearer to Him — to be more like Him. . . . Mr. Reed very kind."

Saturday, July 17th.

Happy. God is with me. Wrote to Miss Short—received no letters. Talked to Fred about lying. Heart middling (sic). Miss Reed very kind—love her much. Mrs. Sharpe also. . . . I want to be bolder for Jesus Christ."



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"Sunday, July 18th.

"Trusting in Jesus for present moment and letting tomorrow alone. Talked to Arthur very much and he seemed affected."

"Wednesday, July 21st.

"Jesus remains with me. Bless Him."

My next effort was in connexion with some meetings for children in the underground kitchen of a hall which our Mission then used in the neighbourhood of Bethnal Green. The meetings were held on Sunday evenings, while the adult meetings were proceeding upstairs. They were of the simplest type, but they made a deep impression on my own mind. I not only gave a short address, but I organized all the gatherings. There was a gracious, moving influence on the children who attended. A number of them knelt at the mercy-seat and asked for the forgiveness of sins. I spoke to many, and there opened up to me a world of human need and tragedy. Some of the revelations made to me by those children of the conditions under which they lived and the insuperable difficulties they met in trying to be good have never been forgotten. These meetings were marked by a circumstance which, though trifling, I must nevertheless regard as the beginning of that fight against adverse conditions which I have so often faced in public work. The room was infested by rats, and while I was speaking the rats would appear, necessitating frantic efforts on my part to drive them away without letting the children know what was happening. Had the youngsters seen the rats, there would have been an end to the meeting. Boys and girls would have scattered, the boys for one reason, and the girls for another!

Then there came to the Mission a man named Rapson, who had a great gift for influencing children. He encouraged me in my efforts, with the result that the meetings assumed larger proportions. Presently we had a larger meeting-place, and perhaps two hundred or even three hundred children attended. We had a few leaders appointed to assist us, but in the main the affair was left to us. Here we got our baptism of fire. Rough lads and girls occasionally broke up the gatherings.



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We had a penitent form for children willing to yield themselves to Christ. I arranged that those who came forward were welcomed. A girl was stationed at one end of the form and a boy at the other — both were converted — and the duty of the boy was to grip the hand of every youth who came forward, and that of the girl similarly to greet every young sister. I continue something of this kind in my meetings to this day. When the call is made for decision a woman in uniform takes her place at one end of the penitent form, a man at the other, and the people who come forward are conscious, not only of a vacant place where they may kneel, but of a sympathetic face and a welcoming hand. After I had gone a little further into public work there came the interruption of my illness. I had rheumatic fever, which stopped all work, and left me a legacy of heart trouble. For two years I lived the life of a vegetable. I studied my Bible and read seriously, which no doubt helped me afterwards, but I am afraid it was not very vigorous study, and as for recreation, I could not for a long time play even a game of croquet. My chief diversion was chess.

After a partial recovery I went back to the Mission, whose business affairs occupied me in the main. At that time I began my work as a local officer. I held various posts, fighting many a hard battle in the streets as well as in the indoor meetings.

Later I began to speak in the open air. I had not the advantage of a powerful voice, and in other respects I was a very faltering and nervous beginner. But I persevered. Our instructions were not to argue with or answer interrupters. But I found that I succeeded in getting and holding a much larger crowd by running a kind of conversation.

About this time a hall was set apart entirely for children's work. I was anxious to organize the converted children for further instruction. In this hall in Whitechapel I held meetings, and among other enterprises I took what we called a class for converted children. It was very similar to a Methodist class meeting. These were to me most delightful gatherings. They were fruitful, too. Most of the children in later years became officers in the Salvation Army. The class became a hothouse of spiritual life. No doubt I had exceptional opportunities, but I was earnestly concerned for my "members," followed them up to their homes, prayed with them, and on occasion with their parents, and helped them in various ways.



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For some time I was what we now call a Ward Sergeant, and from this work I entered into a more responsible position as an employed official of the Mission. It was in 1874, when I was eighteen years of age, that I came thus definitely into the Mission service. I did not consider that my entrance into that service pledged me to a life of public ministry. I took service for any work that I could do, but I was in the midst of a great controversy with myself, which continued for at any rate three years, as to whether I could be what is called a public man. I was very conscious of my limitations, and suffered much from the desultoriness consequent on semi-invalidism. Further, I was immensely burdened by the importance of the work of public teaching. Instead of rising to the opportunity of speaking to the unsaved, I was, oftener than not, bowed down by it. My concern in this matter was perhaps accentuated by untoward events, such as the sudden death of some of those whose souls I had just begun to seek. I shrank from the burden of the Lord!

I take from a journal kept during 1875 and 1876 a few typical entries which indicate something of my difficulties and my doings:

"Saturday, April 15th, 1876.

"Spoke at Soho in a Hallelujah meeting. They (our people) were pelted in the open air with cabbages and turnip-tops, etc., and one woman came and smashed one of the brethren full on the face. He bore it. I had a good time. The Holy Spirit was at work."

"Sunday, April 16th (Easter Sunday).

"A blessed day with Katie (my eldest sister) at Hammersmith. Felt much of God's presence. Preached myself in the afternoon from 'A peculiar people,' and although no freedom, I was helped to speak very plainly about conforming to the world. Some wept, and I believe were blessed.

"At night I was much exercised in opening the service. God was mightily there...."

"Monday, April 17th.

"Open-air on Mile-End Waste. Led procession and then went to Poplar."



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"Sunday, April 23rd.

"I have just come home from preaching from Neh. iv, 20. A very poor do. I have been resolving, first, that I cannot preach, second, that I won't preach the sort of thing I have been doing this afternoon.... I am all in the dark as to what I am going to do."

A year later:

"Monday, May 14th, 1877.

"Very busy, very down, and very poorly all the week. Much agitated in mind as to the future. I seem to lack the force, ability, and application which I see are positively necessary to do the work I am attempting. . . . A secular employment would certainly be much easier than this."

"Sunday, May 20th.

"Last Sabbath I preached to thirty folks at Canning Town in the morning. . . . In the afternoon passed on to Plaistow. Open-air meeting. In the evening returned to Canning Town. Preached with some freedom. ... One backslider restored. Walked home, which made a day's work of some twelve miles' walk and four services. And I am supposed to have a diseased heart!"

"Tuesday, December 11th, 1877.

"Four months since a line was written in this book. . . . I have passed through more conflict than I could have thought possible on the matter of preaching and public work generally, but I feel more settled lately. . . . I rejoice in God my Saviour, my salvation, my all. More and more He is laying on my heart the need and importance of holding up constantly the Holiness Flag.... O Lord, help me to show forth Thy praise."

Looking back on those inward controversies now, I can see how the Devil used much that might have helped me only to discourage and silence. I was retarded also by my ill-health. Until I was nearly forty I never fully got over the weakness which followed my early prostration. In spite of all this I came thoroughly to enjoy every opportunity of speaking in the open air.



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I began to travel for the Mission, visiting the provincial stations, and after 1877 I was very frequently away from London.

I was much helped by the encouragement of my mother, who always felt that my vocation would be that of public witnessing for God. I have quoted from letters from her to me on the subject elsewhere in this volume.

It was also a great stimulus to me to be permitted to see results of one kind or another in most of my meetings. I was helped, as I still am, by the correspondence which, even in my earliest days, reached me—not only the correspondence which is grateful or sincerely inquiring, but that which is hostile or critical. If my appeals have been powerful enough to stir either approval or disapproval there is a presumption that I have been travelling along the right lines.

When one's life and one's work are so bound up together that the one can never be considered detached from the other, it is difficult to single out for reflection the causes which contribute to one's development. I think I should be inclined to place first the fact that, like most of our officers, I have had the joy of seeing much of the fruit of my own work. Not to everyone who ploughs and sows is it permitted also to reap, though it is a vital part of our Salvation Army teaching that in due season we shall reap if we faint not." Certainly, the sight of results has been vouchsafed to me, and has been a perpetual encouragement. It has made me desire them more and more, has led me to toil for them and expect them, and has extended my faith in God Who gives the increase.

Then it has been a great advantage to me to have to fight all the time. The opposition which The Army has encountered, much of it from unexpected quarters, has often harassed and perplexed me, but it has had its cheering and heartening aspect too. My reading of history is that the principle of opposition to God's work, and of hatred towards His witnesses, never dies down. It fluctuates according to the circumstances of the time, but we, living nineteen centuries after the Apostles, cannot claim an exemption from the toil and tribulation which were theirs. The world is always hostile. If the fire of opposition is not always at the blaze, it never goes out! We have



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been confirmed in our views of the essential rightness of The Army's principles by the character of the forces which have come forth against them. We have learned that such opposition, while it may check and embarrass the work at this point or that, or may even cause the line to give way here and there, really does, in the long run, if we survey the field as a whole, help rather than hinder. Obviously it brings about a rapid development of personal godliness in the men and women who have to bear the brunt of it, and thereby the whole host gains reinforcement, and the timid and hesitant who step to the fight are made strong and bold. Natural force commonly takes the line of least resistance. In The Army it is the line of most resistance we believe in taking. Where the road is roughest, where the entanglements are most intricate, where the very way lends itself to the strategy of the Devil, there is the way for us. It is the way of life and conquest. I do not mean to say that I have not myself often shrunk from the difficult path and wished that there were an easier way if only God could be equally honoured upon it. But I see now that the thing above all others that enabled me to press forward was the deep, settled conviction that God's of progress is a way of conflict.

Looking back I also perceive that from the first days of my officership I saw religion to be essentially practical, not a matter of theory and theology only, but of life and conduct. Theory, there is and must be, since man is a reasoning being, but theory is not religion. The three years of severe bodily weakness of which I have already written compelled me to live in places where no meetings of The Army had up to then been organized, and in consequence I saw something of the inner life of other religious communities. Although I was not of mature age, I observed how easy it was for a participation in the forms of religious worship and the hearing of sermons to be accepted in place of vital godliness of heart and life. I saw, too, how possible it was to exercise a kind of charity towards one's fellow-men, and yet to have no religion which would express itself in downright concern for their souls. This clear perception was of great value to me when, at a later period in Army history, we were pressed into philanthropic and social work. We were determined that entrance upon these activities should not mean the loss of one dear note in The Army's original and continuing message to the world. In explicit terms, what has shaped itself in my own mind with regard to practical religion, and what I have tried to urge on others, is that what God requires of men is not merely the doing of righteousness, but the loving of it,



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not the outward keeping of His laws, but the burning longing to keep them, and that this new love and eagerness can only flow from a changed heart.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the influence of my development from the fact that from first to last I have had to work hard. Hard work was, in the first place, an immense help to me from the point of view of my health. Even through the years of physical weakness when I was in my later teens I kept a tenacious hold of work of some kind. At fourteen I was not expecting to live to be seventeen; at seventeen, though I was stronger, the doctors gave me little hope that I should reach twenty-one. But although I had other helps to recover, such as hydropathic treatment and a strictly vegetarian diet, I owe more than I can say to hard work. Constant toil kept me interested, which is tantamount to being kept alive. It dispersed my rheumatism. It enabled my heart to set up compensations which gradually counteracted the original deficiency. It brought me back to health. But for work I should have settled down to an invalid's existence.

This was not the only advantage of hard work. It opened out such latent capacities as I possessed. It helped me to discipline my own nature. It hardened me against those depressions and fluctuations of feeling to which a delicate youth is liable. It took from me the opportunity to indulge in those pleasant but time-dissipating pursuits and interests which do occupy so large a space in the average existence. I do not claim to be specially industrious by nature. But the fact that all through my life I have steadfastly occupied myself has resulted in such a development of my powers and capacities as now enables me to do some things far more quickly than I was able to do them years ago. The right use of time should result in the ability to get more out of every hour every year we live.

Another thing which has been of incalculable help to me has been my association with the common people. I confess that in the early days of our movement I often felt an unworthy humiliation when I had to walk the streets with coarse-mannered, dirty, badly-clothed EastEnders. I could not help the reflection that in education, upbringing, and manners I was certainly very different from them. Not much harm, perhaps, in the reflection, but certainly harm in taking pride in the fact, as I did. But contact with the people saved the situation. It showed me



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the grandeur of their spiritual life, the intimacy of their knowledge of God. It swept away at one stroke my foolish Pharisaism. I began to see in the navvy, the washerwoman, the factory girl, a spirit of priceless value. I realized, not only, as Lincoln said, that God must love the common people because He had made so many of them, but also that they had a capacity for knowing God and for obeying and enjoying Him, and a courage in suffering for His sake, which often did not belong in the same measure to people of wealth and refinement, whose possessions and graces might easily hinder instead of help in seeking to qualify as disciples of Christ. I urge all my officers to keep close to the common people, to associate with them, to avail themselves of invitations into their homes, to listen while they pour out their troubles, and to try and understand their feelings and their point of view.

The discipline of the Army has helped me. I have learned through a study of the operation of Army principles better to understand the work of God with the human spirit. Especially in the early days, but all through the years of my officership, I have myself been subject to the most rigid discipline. Those who read between the lines of earlier chapters will understand that in a large measure the beloved Founder of The Army lost sight of the father in the General, and of the son in the Lieutenant. He was a hard master, to himself first and most of all, but to others also, and he did not spare his own flesh and blood. I incurred the sledge-hammer of his wrath when I failed, and his whip of small cords when I lacked in courage and determination. But it taught me obedience. If my life proves that I have any ability to command, it is because in a somewhat hard school I have learned to obey.

And so I come to perhaps the most obvious factor of all, that of being intimately concerned with an organization which I, at least, have regarded not as a machine, but as a living thing, expressing itself in a diversity of works controlled by one aim. I think of the poor little group of East End mechanics, costermongers, mill-workers, who first gathered round our flag. They were the first small ripple from the casting of the stone into the still waters more than half a century ago, and the ripples have gone on in widening circles until their circumference is now almost that of the world itself. What praying and striving and self-denial goes on day by day in our ranks! What organizing and inventing power is at work! What music and song, what enthusiasm and go, what pleading, alike with the crowd and the individual, what faithful dealing, what instruction in the



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highest things, what testimony rich with personal experience, make up its unwritten record every day!

What continual extensions of the vanguard into fresh territory! What continual consolidation of the territory already won! And who has called it forth? What is it but, first and last, the result of faith in God working by love, the faith of a people who believed that things could be while yet they were non-existent? By faith they subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Yea, by faith they attempted to do the impossible — and did it!