

THE  
KING'S SON;

OR,

A Memoir of Billy Bray.

*COMPILED CHIEFLY FROM HIS OWN MEMORANDA.*

BY

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### CHAPTER I.

#### HIS CONVERSION.

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”—2 COR. v. 17.

**T**HIS chapter, which is mainly devoted to Billy's own account of his conversion, is a striking illustration of this Scripture. Persons who only knew him after this great change had been wrought in his heart by the Truth and Spirit of God, would never have imagined that he had “run” to that “excess of riot” which he so feelingly describes. But the same grace which transformed a persecuting Saul of Tarsus into the renowned Apostle of the Gentiles, and a blaspheming tinker of Bedford into one of “England's most famous preachers and confessors,” changed also Billy Bray, formerly a drunken and lascivious miner, into a loving and consistent disciple of the Son of God, a living embodiment of the things which are “true,” and “honest,” and “just,” and “pure,” and “lovely,” and of “good report.” The greatness and thoroughness of the change he mercifully experienced fully agree with those representations of it with which all New Testament readers are so well acquainted. It was a change from darkness to light, from hatred to love, from despair to hope, from misery to joy, from death to life. If the darkness was dense, the light into which his soul was ushered was “marvellous,” revealing a new world of spiritual glories and realities; if the hatred was bitter, the subsequent love was self-sacrificing and complete; if the despair was tormenting and terrible, the hope was correspondingly peaceful and bright; if the misery was profound, it was succeeded by “joy that was unspeakable, and full of glory;” and if the death was like the shadow and the actual precursor of the “second death,” the life was spiritual and divine, God's own immortal and glorious life in the human soul.

But of the great and gracious change, the reality of which his whole life afterwards testified, Billy Bray shall presently speak himself. It is only necessary for us to state that he was born at Twelveheads, a village in the parish of Kea, near Truro, Cornwall, on the 1st of June, 1794. The village then consisted of only a few thatched cottages, inhabited by “tanners,” but which

had its humble Methodist chapel, where his paternal grandfather worshipped, and which he had helped to build. He was one of the old Methodists, for he joined the then persecuted and despised people when Mr. Wesley first visited Cornwall. Billy's father was also pious, but he died when his children were very young, who then went to live with their grandfather; and with him Billy remained until he was seventeen years old, when he went to Devonshire, where, far removed from pious example and instruction, he "lived a bad life." He says:

"I became the companion of drunkards, and during that time I was very near hell. I remember once getting drunk in Tavistock; when going home we met a large horse in the way; it was late at night, and two of us got on the horse's back; we had not gone far before the horse stumbled against a stone, and turning right over, both of us were nearly killed. At another time I got drunk, and while fighting with a man my hat fell into the fire, and was burnt. I stole another to wear home, and narrowly escaped being sent to jail for it."

His drunken frolics were many, which he could not recall without deep shame and sorrow; but his soul was stained with viler sins than any that have been mentioned. His gratitude was lively ever afterwards because the Lord had saved him "from the lowest hell." "The Lord was good to me," he often said, "when I was the servant of the devil, or I should have been down in hell now;" and he felt he must praise the Lord for His goodness. His hairbreadth escapes from danger, though he was such a wicked wretch, made an impression on his heart at the time, and a deeper impression afterwards. He was emphatic in his wish that all the evil should be faithfully recorded, that the great mercy of God might be more fully known.

"Once," he tells us, "I was working underground, and I heard a 'scat' (rent) overhead; I ran out, and, I think, forty tons fell down where I had been working but a minute before."

But he had not yet reached the lowest depths of evil and misery. Turned away from the mine at which he worked for being insolent to the "captain," he removed to another part of Devonshire, and as if to make his damnation sure, went to live at a beer-shop. We may follow the course of his narrative again:

"There, with other drunkards, I drank all night long. But I had a sore head and a sick stomach, and worse than all, horrors of mind that no tongue can tell. I used to dread to go to sleep for fear of waking up in hell; and though I made many promises to the Lord to do better, I was soon as bad or worse than ever. After being absent from my native county seven years, I returned a *drunkard*."

A whole world of misery that one word expresses and reveals. Domestic happiness can find no place in the home of a drunkard. His infatuation is as

complete as it is terrible. The wife of a drunkard, the child of a drunkard, how much they stand in need of help and pity is only known to God. Billy well knew that the wife of a drunkard has reason to praise God when her husband is saved from intemperance if nobody else has. His wife, he tells us, had to fetch him home night after night from the beer-shop.

“At one time, I remember, I went to get some coal; there was a beer-shop in the way” [alas! that there are so many beer-shops, for every one of them is *in the way* of some poor drunkard], “and coming home I went in, and stayed till I got drunk. My poor wife was forced to come for me, and wheel home the coal herself. A drunkard would rather spend his money in drink than give it to his wife and children. At one time I had good wages for two months successively, and £5 of the money went in drink. I sinned against light and knowledge; and never got drunk without being condemned for it;” his conscience tormented him day by day, and dreams terrified him by night.

But the crisis of his life was now at hand. He was about to be recovered to truth and holiness, and Bunyan’s “Visions of Heaven and Hell” was the appointed means of his recovery. The book came into his hands, and he began to read it, the “Visions of Heaven” first, and then the “Visions of Hell.” Bunyan saw, he says, two lost souls in hell cursing each other for being the author of each other’s misery, and that they who love one another on earth will hate one another in hell. One of Billy’s companions, to whom he was much attached, was also much attached to him. They worked together, and went to the alehouse and got drunk together. The arrow that pierced his soul was the thought, “Shall S. Coad and I, who like each other so much, *torment* each other in hell?” From that time, November, 1823, he had a strong desire to be a better man. He had married some time before; his wife had been converted when young, but had gone back from the right way before marriage. The remembrance of what she had enjoyed was very sweet, and yet very bitter. She told her husband that “no tongue could tell what they enjoy who serve the Lord.” “Why don’t you begin again?” was his pertinent inquiry; adding, “for then I may begin too.” He was ashamed to fall on his knees before his wife, “for the devil had such a hold of him;” but he knew it was his duty to pray for mercy. He went to bed without bending his knees in prayer; but about three o’clock he awoke, and thinking that if he waited until his wife was converted that he might never be saved (“though he had begged she would get converted first, and then show him how to be saved, for he thought she was so much less a sinner than himself that she would soon be forgiven”), he jumped out of bed and *got on his knees for the first time*, and forty years afterwards he could joyfully boast that he had never once since been ashamed to pray. His decision, once formed, was unalterable, “and I found,” he said, “that the more I prayed the more I felt to pray.”

The whole forenoon was spent in supplication. If he had been less resolute and in earnest, the day of grace might have passed unimproved, the blessed opportunity have fled for ever. Forty years ago, on pay-days and setting-days,<sup>1</sup> miners in Cornwall were in the habit of going to the alehouse to eat, drink and get drunk. This day, so auspiciously begun, was one of those days, and Billy joined his companions as usual. "I was the worst of the lot," is his own expression. "He was the wildest, most daring and reckless of all the reckless, daring men; and on one occasion so fearful was his blasphemy that his wicked comrades declared *that his oaths must come from hell, for they smelt of sulphur.*" His liveliness of disposition, his power of repartee, his mother-wit, marked him out from others, and the same remarkable natural powers were used to produce merriment and laughter, and to turn sacred subjects into ridicule and fun, that subsequently made him so popular and useful as a follower of the Saviour and a preacher of His gospel. The change in him was noticed by his companions, and one of them swore. This elicited the reproof, "You must give an account of that, some day," when the other mockingly answered, "Shall we all go to the 'Bryanites'<sup>2</sup> meeting?" to which Billy replied, it was better to go there than to hell. Reproached by another "for making such a noise, he replied, 'You would roar out too, if you felt my load, and roar I will until I get it off.'"

On the first pay-day that he came home sober for many years, his wife, he says, "was greatly surprised, and asked, 'How is it you are come home so early to-night?' and she had for answer, 'You will never see me drunk again, by the help of the Lord.' And she never has since. Praise the Lord He can cure drunkards!

"That same night I went up-stairs, and prayed till we went to bed. The next day I did not go to work; I took the Bible and Wesley's Hymn-Book, went up-stairs, and read and prayed all day. Sometimes I read the Bible, sometimes the Hymn-Book, and then I cried to the Lord for mercy. I was glad that I had begun to seek the Lord, for it is said, 'Let the heart of him rejoice that seeketh the Lord.' When Sunday morning came it was very wet; the 'Bible Christians' had a class-meeting a mile from our house; I went to the place, but because it was wet none came."

This had an unfavourable effect on his mind, and his first thought was, "If a little rain will keep the people away from the house of God, I shall not join here." This hasty decision was soon reversed, for Billy was a consistent member with the Bible Christians for more than forty years, and died in communion with the people of his early choice. But how much harm lukewarm and careless professors do to inquirers after salvation and young con-

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<sup>1</sup> Days appointed for making contracts for work.

<sup>2</sup> So the Bible Christians were then generally called.

verts it is impossible to determine. The class-meeting has perhaps been a greater benefit to Methodism than any of her institutions besides. To multitudes it has been a safeguard in danger, a comfort in trouble. But in these, in some respects, degenerate days, attendance at the class-meeting is by many deemed unnecessary, and in some quarters it has become quite unfashionable. The results are such as might have been predicted with certainty. The example of the older members is most disastrous in its effects on the habits of the younger ones, and a feeble, stunted piety is, unhappily, characteristic of too many of her churches.

But Billy returned home, and alone with God, with the Bible and the Hymn-Book as his companions, he spent all that day in reading and praying. He was assailed fiercely by the temptation “that he would never find mercy;” but with the promise, “Seek, and ye shall find,” he quenched this fiery dart of the wicked one, and in due time he learnt, by blessed experience, that the promise was *true*. Monday forenoon was spent in the same manner. In the afternoon he had to go to the mine, “but all the while I was working I was crying to the Lord for mercy.” His sad state moved his fellow-workmen to pity; he “was not like Billy Bray,” they said. Why? Because he formerly told lies to make them laugh, and now he was determined to serve the Lord. No relief came, and he went home, “asking for mercy all the way.” It was then eleven o’clock at night, but the first thing he did was to go upstairs and fall upon his knees, and entreat God to have mercy on him. Everything else was forgotten in the intensity of his desire that the Lord would speak peace to his soul. After awhile he went to bed, but not to sleep. All the forenoon of the next day he spent in crying for mercy, food being almost untasted, and conversation with his “partner” at the mine in the afternoon nearly ceased. That day passed away, and nearly the whole night he spent upon his knees. The enemy “thrust at him sore,” but “I was glad,” he says, “that I had begun to seek the Lord, for I felt *I would rather be crying for mercy than living in sin.*” On the next day he had “almost laid hold of the blessing,” but the time came for him to go to the mine (two o’clock in the afternoon). The devil strongly tempted him while at his work that he would never find mercy; “but I said to him, ‘Thou art a liar, devil,’ and as soon as I said so, I felt the weight gone from my mind; and I could praise the Lord, but not with that liberty I could afterwards. So I called to my comrades, am not so happy as some, but sooner than I would go back to sin again, I would be put in that plat<sup>3</sup> there, and burned to death.” When he got home on former nights he had not cared anything about supper, his anguish of soul being so great, nor did he this night, because a hope had sprung up in his heart, and with it a determination to press right into the kingdom of heaven. To his chamber he

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<sup>3</sup> An open space near the shaft of a mine.

again repaired. Beautifully simple and touching are his own words. "I said to the Lord, 'Thou hast said, *They that ask shall receive, they that seek shall find, and to them that knock the door shall be opened,* and I have faith to believe it.' In an instant the Lord made me so happy that I cannot express what I felt. I shouted for joy. I praised God with my whole heart for what He had done for a poor sinner like me; for I could say, the Lord hath pardoned all my sins. I think this was in November, 1823, but what day of the month I do not know. I remember this, that everything looked new to me, the people, the fields, the cattle, the trees. I was like a man in a new world. I spent the greater part of my time in praising the Lord. I could say with Isaiah, 'O Lord, I will praise Thee, for though Thou wast angry with me, Thine anger is turned away, and Thou comfortedst me;' or like David, 'The Lord hath brought me up out of a horrible pit of mire and clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings, *and hath put a new song* in my mouth, even praise unto my God.' I was a new man altogether. I told all I met what the Lord had done for my soul. I have heard some say that they have had hard work to get away from their companions, but I sought mine out, and had hard work to find them soon enough to tell them what the Lord had done for me. Some said I was mad; and others that they should get me back again next pay-day. But, praise the Lord, it is now more than forty years ago, and they have not got me yet. They said I was a madman, but they meant I was a *glad*-man, and, glory be to God! I have been glad ever since!"