

THE KING'S SON;

OR,

A MEMOIR OF BILLY BRAY.

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST-FRUITS OF HARVEST.

“Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of first-fruits of His creatures.”—JAMES i. 18.

BILLY BRAY'S own account of his conversion bears the impress of truth and reality. The sceptic who tried to reason him out of his convictions, or to rob him of his perfect peace, his living joy, his immortal hope, utterly failed. I have witnessed some such attempts; but, as Billy said, they had no more effect than “a drop of water upon a duck's back.” If nothing is so divine as experience, and if the deeper it is the diviner, Billy had good reason to be satisfied with his. His was no ordinary struggle, but it ended in perfect liberty of soul. He could say—

“No condemnation now I dread.”

The conflict was terrible, but the victory was all the more glorious. The trial of his faith was sharp, but the reward was sweeter ever afterwards. He knew more certainly how inconceivably great and glorious was the salvation which is by faith in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. He was filled with a holy rapture of soul, which nothing could restrain. His words, his tones, his looks, had a magnetic power. He was, so to speak, charged with a divine electricity, and the effects thereof were sudden and marvellous. He could no more help speaking of Christ and His salvation than the sun can help shining, or the trees in spring can help budding and blossoming into beauty and life. The light that was kindled flashed with unusual splendour, but it increased in brightness even unto the end. His wife was the first to yield to his holy entreaties, and about a week afterwards in Hicks' Mill Chapel (which had been, happily, the birthplace of hundreds of souls) she regained the blessing she had lost. He had spent much of his time in his unconverted state in telling lies to “make fun,” as his companions called it; “but now I could tell them a new tale about heavenly truths, and what the Lord had done for me.” This was not so pleasing to many; but “it was not

long before some of them were as mad as I was.” The open confession of Christ is a solemn duty of His followers; it is an inestimable privilege also. How much this duty is neglected, how much this privilege is despised, multitudes know to their sorrow. Billy’s words thrill us with joy, and yet produce much self-reproach and self-condemnation as we transcribe them.

“There were men who professed to be converted before I was, but did not love the Lord enough to own Him, and us enough to pray with us and tell us we were going to hell. But when I was converted, praise the Lord, He gave me strength to tell all I met with that I was happy, and that what the Lord had done for me He would do for anybody else that would seek His face. There was nobody that prayed in the mine where I worked; but when the Lord converted my soul He gave me power to pray with the men before we went to our different places to work. Sometimes I felt it a heavy cross, but the cross is the way to the crown. Sometimes I have had as many as from six to ten men down with me, and I have said, ‘Now, if you will hearken to me, I will pray for you before we go to work, for if I did not pray with you, and any of us should be killed, I should think it was my fault.’ Some of them would say, ‘You pray and we will hear you.’ Then I should pray in what people call simple language, but as I hope the Lord would have me. When praying I used to say, ‘Lord, if any of us must be killed, or die today, let it be *me*; let not one of these men die, for they are not happy; but I am, and if I die today I shall go to heaven.’ When I rose from my knees, I should see the tears running down their faces; and soon after some of them became praying men too.”

The individual cases of conversion are too numerous for us to relate here; but one or two may be given as specimens of the rest.

“An old man, called William S——, with his son, used to work near me, and as they were not converted I used to tell them what the Lord was willing to do for them, and then I would kneel down and pray for them until the tears came into the old man’s eyes. But such power has the devil over poor sinners, that soon after I should hear him swearing at his son. And I was tempted not to pray with him again, but, thank the Lord, I did not yield to the temptation. I continued to pray with him, and before the poor old man died he was made very happy in Jesus.”

O Christian reader! “of some have compassion, making a difference: and others save with fear, *pulling them out of the fire!*” If every convert only felt that he was a *voice of Christ*, how many would hear the gospel that go down into the grave in silence; if every one only felt that he was a *hand for Christ*, how many would be snatched from death and destruction who now become an easy prey to the Evil One. Take another case:

“There was Justin T——, who was with me in Devonshire; we were companions in drunkenness, and came home to Cornwall at the same time.

I was converted before he was; and when I told my comrades what danger the wicked were in, and where they would go if they died in sin, they would persecute me, and call me a fool. But J. T. used to say, 'You shall leave that man alone, and say nothing to him, for I knew him when he was a drunkard, and now he is a good man; I wish I was like him.' *Then my heart went out after J. T.* One day when at work in the field, I knelt down to pray for him. *The Lord spoke to my mind, 'I will save him soon.'* When I next saw him I told him I had good news for him, for while I was out in the field praying for him the Lord told me he should be converted soon. *And so he was.* Shortly after his conversion he was taken ill. I saw him many times in his illness, and he told me he was happy in Jesus, and going to heaven to praise God forever."

Some parts of this narrative may appear to be strange and inexplicable even to some of the Lord's children. They never heard the Lord speak to them in the way just described. Would that they had! For when God impresses persons to pray for any particular blessing, it is a sure sign that He is about to bestow that blessing upon them. Definiteness of aim in prayer, combined with a holy persistency, will surely hit the mark. We quote just one more case, as it illustrates Billy's quickness of thought, and the happy way in which he could turn a phrase, for which he was so remarkable.

"I worked with a man before I was converted called *William Bray*, and he was, like myself, a very wicked man. Both of us were promoted at the same time, for he was made captain of the mine, and I was adopted into the royal family of Heaven, and made a child of God. I had not seen him for a long time, *when one Monday evening it was impressed on my mind that if I went to see him he would be saved.* And I went, nothing doubting, and found him at home. I prayed with him; told him what the Lord would do for him; and soon he found the Saviour, and was made happy in His love. I saw him many times in his last sickness, and he was very happy and full of faith. Just before he died he sent for me, as he wanted to tell me that *Christ was his.* Then he had a good shout, and said, 'Christ is mine, and I am His.' These were the last words he spoke to me, and soon after he was taken to paradise. Since then, four of his children have gone to meet him, and his wife will no doubt soon, for she too is on the road to heaven."

Mr. Ashworth truly says that Billy was one of those "happy, unselfish men who love everybody, and with simple earnestness he spoke to all—rich or poor—about the love of Jesus. He gloried in religious revivals, and shouted for joy when he heard of souls being saved anywhere."

Mr. A. illustrates this trait of his character by relating an extraordinary incident, full details of which the Rev. W. Haslam, of Little Missenden, Bucks, has, at my request, kindly supplied. He says:

"I have often heard of Billy Bray at Baldhu, from his brother James, and

wished very much to see him. One morning, three months after my conversion,¹ I heard someone walking about in the hall of my house, praising the Lord.' I rose from the breakfast table, and opened the door to see who my

¹ The reader will be interested in the following account of the conversion of this good clergyman, from his own pen. "In the hey-day of my prosperity, and in the success of my sacramental ministrations, while I thought the church was the Ark—and no salvation could be had out of the church, except by some uncovenanted mercy—one of my most promising disciples, a regular communicant and zealous churchman, was taken seriously ill, and was pronounced to be in hopeless 'galloping consumption.' The man was my own servant, a gardener, and one to whom I was much attached; not exactly my spiritual child in the gospel, but my ecclesiastical child in churchmanship, and a strong adherent who, with many others, upheld me and encouraged me in a place abounding with 'gospel men,' against Dissenters of various kinds. This man's heart failed him in the prospect of death; his views and religious practices did not comfort him in the hour of need, or give him assurance. He heard of others who could say their sins were pardoned, and read their title clear to mansions in the skies, whereas, with his, as he thought, superior teaching, he was yet afraid to die. He ventured to send for some Dissenter to talk to him and pray with him, who went to work in a way just the reverse of the priest. Instead of building up and comforting, the man plainly showed him he was a lost sinner, and needed to come to Jesus, just as he was, for salvation and pardon. The man was confident, 'Pray for yourself,' said he; and he set before him the finished work of Christ, as the sinner's substitute. The gardener was brought under deep conviction, and eventually found pardon and peace through the blood of Jesus. This was a great disappointment. Instead of rejoicing with Christ over a lost sheep which he had found, I was angry with the sheep for being found, and deeply mourned over what I considered a fall into schism! Grieved as I was, however, I loved my disciple, and went to see him, though not till after several urgent invitations to go, I endeavoured to reclaim him, but the man was too firmly persuaded to be shaken from the truth as it is in Jesus.' Instead of lying on a bed of suffering, he was walking about the room, praising God in a most joyful state. 'Ah, John, you are excited, you have been taking wine!' 'No, master,' said the man, I have not touched a drop of it—no, dear no, that is not it, dear master. I know you love me and I love you—you don't know this joy and peace, I am sure you don't, or you would have told me of it. O master! pray the Lord to give it to you—I will never rest praying for you—don't be angry with me—the Lord bless you and convert your soul! You have been a kind good friend to me, I cannot forget or leave you. I will pray for you while I live, for the Lord to save your soul.' I could not stand this pleading, and fled from the house in a tumult of disappointment and confusion." His heart was now "broken for work." A visit to a brother clergyman deepened his convictions; for he plainly told him that "if he had been converted he would have rejoiced in that man's salvation and praised God with him, and that he would never do any good in his parish till he was converted himself." So deep became his distress, that, when the bell tolled for service on the following Sunday morning, he trembled and feared to preach; but while preaching on the words—*What think ye of Christ?* the Lord showed him so clearly that Christ was the true and only foundation, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world, that his soul was filled with joy, "as full of joy as it had been of misery!" The fervour and earnestness with which he now proclaimed "a present salvation caused a general cry for mercy, and many of his parishioners were saved." It was no wonder that Billy wished to see him, *to give his eyes a treat*, and to witness some of the blessed results of his prayer of faith years before.

happy, unceremonious visitor could be;— and then for the first time beheld this queer-looking man. I asked him who he was. He replied, with a face beaming with joy:

“‘I am Billy Bray—be you the “passon?””

“‘Yes,’ I answered.

“‘Converted, are ye?’

“‘Yes, thank God.’

“‘Be the missus converted?’

“‘Yes’

“‘Thank the dear Lord,’ said he, coming into the room to make his bow to the said missus. Then he inquired of her if she had any maids in the house.

“‘Yes, there are three.’

“‘Are they converted?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Where be they?’

“‘In the kitchen’ So he proceeded thither, and soon we heard them all praising the Lord in Cornish style with a loud voice.

“After a time Billy joined us again, in the dining-room, to take, by invitation, some breakfast, but before he sat down he approached me and suddenly put his arm round me, and took me up, and carried me round the table, and then, setting me down at my chair, rolled on the floor for joy, and said he was as happy as he could live.’² We persuaded him to sit down and get some breakfast, as he had been riding in a slow-going donkey cart since midnight through the cold night air of January. He said he had heard of our conversion, and had been begging Father to give him leave to visit us. He received permission to do so just as he was getting into bed at half-past eleven. So he put up his clothes again, and hitched in the donkey,’ and came along singing all the way.

“Then he proceeded to tell us why he was so anxious to see us. He said, some years before that time he was walking over the place where the house

² Many persons have been treated by Billy in much the same way as the good clergyman. The first time Mr. Maynard saw him was at Deliverance Chapel in 1884, under these circumstances: When he was in the pulpit a little man came in, turning up the white of his eyes, and praising the Lord. He thought at once, as the eyes of all the people were instantly upon the new-comer, and as a smile, as if a magic wand had been used, passed over their faces, “This, then, is the famous Billy Bray, about whom I have heard so much.” After the service, Billy did not exactly carry the preacher, but he dragged him round the pulpit pew, to the amusement of the people, shouting and jumping with all his might the whole time. When he let the preacher go, he asked him whether he could stand that or not. “Yes, much more than that,” was the answer. “All right, friend Maynard, praise the Lord.” On my first interview with him he carried me round the room many times, continually asking me, “Is not this pretty’ riding, dear?” But I was too much disconcerted, half-amused, half-frightened, to be able to answer.

stands, and the Lord said to him, I will give thee all that dwell on this mountain.' So he knelt down immediately and prayed for all who lived there, and then proceeded to the various cottages which were situated on that hill, and continued to visit the people in those cottages till they were all brought to the Lord. Then he knelt down and complained that there were 'only three houses' there; and received a promise that there should be some more. He never forgot this, but continually mentioned it in his prayers to the Lord till, to his joy, one day he received a letter from his brother James to say they were planting the hill and going to build a church there, and then his brother wrote to say they were building a house (the vicarage)—then again another house (the school). Dear Billy redoubled his efforts of prayer and faith, and when the church was opened he came to see and hear for himself, and was disgusted and disappointed to find a 'Pusey there preaching.' He went away unhappy, and it came to his mind that he had no business to come to see till Father had bidden. So he departed to the neighbourhood of Bodmin where he then lived and remained there. After a few years news reached him of the clergyman's conversion, and also that there was a great revival in the place. He then praised God and begged permission to go and see this parson and his misses, and continued to beg till he obtained permission.

"After breakfast he went off to the school-house, and found the schoolmaster and his wife both converted, then to another house where the people were all converted. His joy was unbounded; he jumped and danced, and clapped his hands, he shouted and he sang! The happy man was beside himself, and beyond himself!"

He began to publicly exhort men to repent, and turn to God, about a year after his conversion. Towards the end of 1824 his name was put on the Local Preachers' Plan, and his labours were much blessed in the conversion of souls. He did not commonly select a text, as is the general habit of preachers, but he usually began his addresses by reciting a verse of a hymn, a little of his own experience, or some telling anecdote. But he had the happy art of pleasing and profiting the people, so that persons of all ages, the young as much as the old; of all classes, the rich as much as the poor; and of all characters, the worldly as much as the pious, flocked to hear him, and he retained his popularity until the last. As the Rev. M., G. Pearse says: "From one end of Cornwall to another no name is more familiar than that of Billy Bray.

"On Sundays, when one met crowds of strangers making for the little white-washed chapel that was perched up amongst the granite boulders; or when one found the 'quiet church town' thronged by the well-dressed people, the usual explanation was that Billy Bray was going to preach.

"If you had overtaken Billy on the way you could not have been long in

doubt as to who he was. A little, spare, wiry man, whose dress of orthodox black, and the white tie, indicated the preacher. The sharp, quick, discerning eye that looked out from under the brows, the mouth almost hard in its decision, all the face softened by the light that played constantly upon it, and by the happy wrinkles round the eyes, and the smile that had perpetuated itself,—these belonged to no ordinary man. And with the first suspicion that this was Billy Bray there would quickly come enough to confirm it. If you gave him half a chance there would certainly be a straightforward question about your soul, in wise, pithy words. And if the answer was what it should be, the lanes would ring with his happy thanksgiving.”

I remember once hearing him speak with great effect to a large congregation, principally miners. In that neighbourhood there were two mines, one very prosperous, and the other quite the reverse, for the work was hard, and the wages low. He represented himself as working at *that* mine, but on the “pay-day” going to the prosperous one for his wages. But had he not been at work at the other mine? the manager inquired. He had, but he liked the wages at the good mine the best. He pleaded very earnestly, but in vain. He was dismissed at last with the remark, from which there was no appeal, that he must come there to work if he came there for his wages. And then he turned upon the congregation, and the effect was almost irresistible, that they must serve Christ here if they would share His glory hereafter, but if they would serve the devil now, to him they must go for their wages by-and-by.

If he quoted the wonderful saying of our Lord, “I am the bread of life,” he would proceed in some such strain as this: “Precious loaf this! The patriarchs and prophets eat of this loaf, and never found a bit of crust about it. The apostles and martyrs eat of this loaf, too, for many long years, and never found a bit of ‘vinny’ in it. And bless the Lord! poor old Billy Bray can eat it without teeth, and get fat on it.”

Mr. Tabbs says that at the opening of Trecrogo Chapel, in the Launceston Circuit, the crowd that came to hear Billy was so great they were obliged to have the service in a field. The subject of his address was “happiness,” and as his custom was, he interspersed his discourse with some pointed remarks on Teetotalism. Thinking that some of his hearers would probably think he was pressing the duty of self-denial and self-sacrifice too closely, he burst out “*You* may think *we* have nothing to drink, but we have. My father keeps a wineshop.” An apt reference to Isa. xxv. 6 followed. And his imagination once fired, the most fastidious could listen to him with pleasure, and even the wise and learned to edification. At such times he would generally express his determination to live up to his glorious privileges, and enjoy the varied *abundance* of his Father’s house. Some could only eat out of the *silent* dish, but he could eat out of that, and out of

the *shouting* dish, and *jumping* dish, and every other.

His *preaching* was effectual because he prayed much. By prayer he opened God's hand when it was filled with blessings, and by prayer, too, he kept the devil under restraint, who was to Billy Bray, as we shall clearly see further on, just as he was to Martin Luther, and John Bunyan, and George Fox, a very real person. This is strikingly characteristic of him. Mr. Maynard says: "Many a time, when he and I have been leaving my home together, he has said to me, 'Now, friend Maynard, let us pray a minute before we go, or else the devil will be scratching me on the way. If I leave without praying, this is the way he serves me; but when I get on my knees a minute or two before leaving I cut his ould (old) claws, and then he can't harm me; so I always like to cut his claws before I go.'"

There was great excitement, and much apparent confusion, in some of his meetings, more than sufficient to shock the prejudices of highly-sensitive and refined, or over-fastidious persons. Billy could not tolerate "deadness," as he expressively called it, either in a professing Christian or in meeting. He had a deeper sympathy with persons singing, or shouting, or leaping for joy than he had with

"The speechless awe that dares not move,
And all the silent heaven of love;"

but his services, with all their simplicity and warmth, were distasteful only to a few, and many were so far convinced that his method was right, or were so far influenced and attracted, as heartily to join with him. He speaks of one who worked with him in Devonshire, and returned at the same time to Cornwall. They were also converted together, but while Billy joined the Bible Christians, his companion cast in his lot with the Wesleyan Methodists. Their names were put on the plan at the same time, and when Billy was appointed at a chapel near where his friend lived he came to hear him, but would leave immediately after the preacher had done speaking, as he could not enjoy the subsequent proceedings—some singing, some praying, some shouting, some dancing, scenes to be frequently witnessed when the Cornish people get what they call the "victory" through the blood of the Lamb. But one Saturday night John had a dream which brought him to the conclusion that he was wrong in opposing shouting when the Lord made His people happy. The next night, and ever afterwards, he remained until the end, and "shouted" as loudly and "leaped" as joyfully as Billy himself. He lived a good life, and died a happy death; Billy dismissing him with the characteristic remark: "So he has done with the doubters, and is got up with the shouters!"