

A RETROSPECT

BY

J. HUDSON TAYLOR, M.R.C.S., F.R.G.S.

“Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee.”

THIRD EDITION

TORONTO

CHINA INLAND MISSION

CHAPTER III

PREPARATION FOR SERVICE

HAVING now the twofold object in view of accustoming myself to endure hardness, and of economising in order to be able more largely to assist those amongst whom I spent a good deal of time labouring in the Gospel, I soon found that I could live upon very much less than I had previously thought possible. Butter, milk, and other such luxuries I soon ceased to use; and I found that by living mainly on oatmeal and rice, with occasional variations, a very small sum was sufficient for my needs. In this way I had more than two-thirds of my income available for other purposes; and my experience was that the less I spent on myself and the more I gave away, the fuller of happiness and blessing did my soul become. Unspeakable joy all the day long, and every day, was my happy experience. GOD, even my GOD, was a living, bright Reality; and all I had to do was joyful service.

It was to me a very grave matter, however, to contemplate going out to China, far away from all human aid, there to depend upon the living God alone for protection, supplies, and help of every kind. I felt that one's spiritual muscles required strengthening for such an undertaking. There was no doubt that if faith did not fail, GOD would not fail; but, then, what if one's faith should prove insufficient? I had not at that time learned that even "if we believe not, He abideth faithful, He cannot deny Himself"; and it was consequently a very serious question to my mind, not whether *He* was faithful, but whether I had strong enough faith to warrant my embarking in the enterprise set before me.

I thought to myself, "When I get out to China, I shall have no claim on any one for anything; my only claim will be on GOD. How important, therefore, to learn before leaving England to move man, through GOD, by prayer alone."

At Hull my kind employer, always busily occupied, wished me to remind him whenever my salary became due. This I determined not to do directly, but to ask that GOD would bring the fact to his recollection, and thus encourage me by answering prayer. At one time, as the day drew near for the payment of a quarter's salary, I was as usual much in prayer about it. The time arrived, but my kind friend made no allusion to the matter. I continued praying, and days passed on, but he did not remember, until at length, on settling up my weekly accounts one Saturday night, I found myself possessed of only a single coin—one half-crown piece. Still I had hitherto had no lack, and I continued in prayer.

That Sunday was a very happy one. As usual my heart was full and brimming over with blessing. After attending Divine service in the morning, my afternoons and evenings were filled with Gospel work in the various lodging-houses I was accustomed to visit in the lowest part of the town. At such times it almost seemed to me as if heaven were begun below, and that all that could be looked for was an enlargement of one's capacity for joy, not a truer filling than I possessed. After concluding my last service about ten o'clock that night, a poor man asked me to go and pray with his wife, saying that she was dying. I readily agreed, and on the way to his house asked him why he had not sent for the priest, as his accent told me he was an Irishman. He had done so, he said, but the priest refused to come without a payment of eighteen pence, which the man did not possess, as the family was starving. Immediately it occurred to my mind that all the money I had in the world was the solitary half-crown, and that it was in one coin; moreover, that while the basin of water gruel I usually took for supper was awaiting me, and there was sufficient in the house for breakfast in the morning, I certainly had nothing for dinner on the coming day.

Somehow or other there was at once a stoppage in the flow of joy in my heart; but instead of reproving myself I began to reprove the poor man, telling him that it was very wrong to have allowed matters to get into such a state as he described, and that he ought to have applied to the relieving officer. His answer was that he had done so, and was told to come at eleven o'clock the next morning, but that he feared that his wife might not live through the night. "Ah," thought I, "if only I had two shillings and a sixpence instead of this half-crown, how gladly would I give these poor people one shilling of it!" But to part with the half-crown was far from my thoughts. I little dreamed that the real truth of the matter simply was that I could trust in GOD plus one-and-sixpence, but was not yet prepared to trust Him only, without any money at all in my pocket.

My conductor led me into a court, down which I followed him with some degree of nervousness. I had found myself there before, and at my last visit had been very roughly handled, while my tracts were torn to pieces, and I received such a warning not to come again that I felt more than a little concerned. Still, it was the path of duty, and I followed on. Up a miserable flight of stairs, into a wretched room, he led me; and oh what a sight there presented itself to our eyes! Four or five poor children stood about, their sunken cheeks and temples all telling unmistakably the story of slow starvation; and lying on a wretched pallet was a poor exhausted mother, with a tiny infant thirty-six hours old, moaning rather than crying at her side, for it too seemed spent and failing. "Ah!" thought I, "if I had two shillings and a sixpence instead of half-a-crown, how gladly should they have one-and-

sixpence of it!” But still a wretched unbelief prevented me from obeying the impulse to relieve their distress at the cost of all I possessed.

It will scarcely seem strange that I was unable to say much to comfort these poor people. I needed comfort myself. I began to tell them, however, that they must not be cast down, that though their circumstances were very distressing, there was a kind and loving FATHER in heaven; but something within me said, “You hypocrite! telling these unconverted people about a kind and loving FATHER in heaven, and not prepared yourself to trust Him without half-a-crown!” I was nearly choked. How gladly would I have compromised with conscience if I had had a florin and a sixpence! I would have given the florin thankfully and kept the rest; but I was not yet prepared to trust in God alone, without the sixpence.

To talk was impossible under these circumstances; yet, strange to say, I thought I should have no difficulty in praying. Prayer was a delightful occupation to me in those days; time thus spent never seemed wearisome, and I knew nothing of lack of words. I seemed to think that all I should have to do would be to kneel down and engage in prayer, and that relief would come to them and to myself together. “You asked me to come and pray with your wife,” I said to the man, “let us pray.” And I knelt down. But scarcely had I opened my lips with “Our FATHER who art in heaven” than conscience said within, “Dare you mock GOD? Dare you kneel down and call Him FATHER with that half-crown in your pocket?” Such a time of conflict came upon me then as I have never experienced before or since. How I got through that form of prayer I know not, and whether the words uttered were connected or disconnected I cannot tell; but I arose from my knees in great distress of mind.

The poor father turned to me and said, “You see what a terrible state we are in, sir; if you can help us, for GOD’S sake do!” Just then the word flashed into my mind, “Give to him that asketh of thee,” and in the word of a KING there is power. I put my hand into my pocket, and slowly drawing forth the half-crown, gave it to the man, telling him that it might seem a small matter for me to relieve them, seeing that I was comparatively well off, but that in parting with that coin I was giving him my all; what I had been trying to tell him was indeed true—GOD really was a FATHER, and might be trusted. The joy all came back in full flood-tide to my heart; I could say anything and feel it then, and the hindrance to blessing was gone—gone, I trust, for ever.

Not only was the poor woman’s life saved, but I realised that my life was saved too! It might have been a wreck—would have been a wreck probably, as a Christian life—had not grace at that time conquered, and the striving of GOD’S SPIRIT been obeyed. I well remember how that night, as I went home to my lodgings, my heart was as light as my pocket. The lonely, deserted

streets resounded with a hymn of praise which I could not restrain. When I took my basin of gruel before retiring, I would not have exchanged it for a prince's feast. I reminded the LORD as I knelt at my bedside of His own Word, that he who giveth to the poor lendeth to the Lord: I asked Him not to let my loan be a long one, or I should have no dinner next day; and with peace within and peace without, I spent a happy, restful night.

Next morning for breakfast my plate of porridge remained, and before it was consumed the postman's knock was heard at the door. I was not in the habit of receiving letters on Monday, as my parents and most of my friends refrained from posting on Saturday; so that I was somewhat surprised when the landlady came in holding a letter or packet in her wet hand covered by her apron. I looked at the letter, but could not make out the hand-writing. It was either a strange hand or a feigned one, and the postmark was blurred. Where it came from I could not tell. On opening the envelope I found nothing written within; but inside a sheet of blank paper was folded a pair of kid gloves, from which, as I opened them in astonishment, half-a-sovereign fell to the ground. "Praise the Lord!" I exclaimed; "400 per cent for twelve hours' investment; that is good interest. How glad the merchants of Hull would be if they could lend their money at such a rate!" I then and there determined that a bank which could not break should have my savings or earnings as the case might be—a determination I have not yet learned to regret.

I cannot tell you how often my mind has recurred to this incident, or all the help it has been to me in circumstances of difficulty in after-life. If we are faithful to God in little things, we shall gain experience and strength that will be helpful to us in the more serious trials of life.