

CHAPTER XV.

1850–51.

CANTON.

WE have already remarked that Mr. Burns' labours on Chinese soil had been hitherto mainly preparatory and tentative. The question of a permanent centre of operations for the infant mission had not even yet been determined. The balance of opinion, however, in the home committee had been for some time back turning more and more decidedly towards Amoy, and in this judgment Dr. Young very strongly concurred. Mr. Burns himself so far acquiesced in it as to have actually taken his passage for that port on September 5th, 1849, when his course was arrested by an attack of fever, brought on as he thought by the anxieties of the decision and exposure to the sun during the numerous "salutations" of a hurried leave-taking. The decision, however, had clearly not been taken without some misgiving. On his recovery from illness the suspended purpose was for the present silently dropped, and was never afterwards resumed, until he had fully proved by prayer and earnest effort whether another and still wider door nearer at hand were not open to him. It is probable that from the first, and whilst wandering amongst the villages opposite Hong-Kong, his eye had been turned towards Canton, the great centre of life in Southern China, towards which at each successive movement westward he approached nearer and nearer. Cowloon, the point at which he first landed, is distant from that city only about ninety miles, and the whole district lying between, and which he had been since traversing, might be regarded as in its immediate vicinity, and as the natural pathway of advance towards it. It was the great centre, too, of that dialect which for the last two years he had been so laboriously studying, and which was the only form of the Chinese spoken language which as yet he knew. Anyone, therefore, that knew him might almost have predicted that he would *not* pass it by without making some effort to bring to the ears of its heathen myriads the message of life. It might indeed be that the will of the Master as well as the growing conviction of the Church was calling him elsewhere, and that He had no work for him to do, no people for him to gather "in that city;" but he was unwilling too hastily and rashly to adopt so important a conclusion. He will at least knock at its gates earnestly and patiently, and see whether there were an entrance there for his message and his Master or not.

The prospect at the outset was not very encouraging, nor did it on further trial greatly brighten. The door of entrance even to a settled residence in the city was never fully opened to him. He succeeded, indeed, at last, after many harassing disappointments, in securing the expiring lease of a lodging

from a brother missionary about to return to Scotland; but that was only for a period of eight months, and at its close his position would be as unfixed and as uncertain as ever. In other respects, too, the aspect of the field was scarcely more promising. Whilst he enjoyed abundant opportunities of sowing the precious seed, and was seldom without a goodly group of apparently attentive hearers, yet it seemed to him that his words did not tell upon them. There was attention more or less fixed, but no impression. They listened to the truth, and possibly carried away some glimpses of it, but it did not take hold and keep hold of them. Few of his casual hearers ever came back of their own accord to hear him again, or sought the preacher out to inquire further of his message and his doctrine. He was even tempted sometimes to doubt if the Chinese were in their present state even susceptible of those deep spiritual impressions which he had seen in former days and longed to see again; whether a lengthened period of preparation, and the long and patient sowing of many labourers, might not be necessary ere anyone might hope to “return *rejoicing* bringing his sheaves with him.” Yet he went on patiently and hopefully, and speaks of himself as happy here and in the midst of his self-denying and apparently unproductive work as “he could be anywhere in all the world.”

There is nothing in his life, as it seems to me, more admirable, and in the whole circumstances of the case more remarkable, than this patient and steadfast continuance in well-doing in the midst of the most prosaic and uninteresting labours, and amid the dead calm of a more than heathen apathy, equally as when borne along by the exhilarating breath of sympathetic enthusiasm and almost uninterrupted success. “The two works,” says Mr. Moody Stuart, “were singularly diverse in their character, and were such as have rarely, if ever before, been allotted to one man to accomplish. Those who knew William Burns only as the enthusiastic preacher from town to town throughout the land would have looked upon him as the last man in the Church who, after eight years of what seemed the highest religious excitement, with thousands crowding to hear him, would set himself to what was then reckoned the almost hopeless task of thoroughly mastering the Chinese language; would seclude himself from his own countrymen, and live among a people so different, teaching their children that he might learn their language, and then adopt their dress, and their ways, till in strange places the authorities were sometimes slow to believe him when he claimed to be an Englishman.” Such mainly had been his work for many months at Hong-Kong, and such too, at least not more exciting or spirit-stirring, was his life at Canton. Meanwhile Dr. Young had gone on before him to Amoy, and wrote from month to month most hopefully of the prospects of the work there, and urged him earnestly to join him. He still hesitated. There was not much indeed in the way of positive encouragement to detain him at Canton;

no “great and effectual door” visibly opened to him and loudly calling upon him to enter; but yet there was not, on the other hand, any clear and decisive indication that God had no work for him to do there. It even seemed to him sometimes as the months passed on as though a prospect of ultimate success were beginning to dawn upon him, and as he saw the stolid countenances of his hearers now and then lightening up with something like intelligent and earnest interest, his heart yearned over them with a wistful hopefulness, and he felt as if he could not leave them so long as the faintest hope of a day of power and blessing among them remained:—“If you do not hear,” said he, “so interesting accounts from Canton” (as those recently received from Amoy), “you must ascribe it in part to the defects of your correspondent, but still more, it may be, to the difficulties of this very important station—a station so difficult and important, that I believe no agent who is in any degree suited for it, and who has a heart to love and labour for its proud and suspicious people, should be encouraged to leave it. Last Tuesday evening, when looking on an assembly of from fifty to sixty engaged listeners, while a native was addressing them before I did so, my heart said, How can I leave these dear and precious souls for whom there are so few to care? I can now tell them of the way of life with some measure of clearness and acceptance, and so long as God gives me standing ground to gather and address them, I must go on to do so, leaving the issues in His own hand, with whom it is to bless and save! Help us to maintain the combat in this great heathen city, until its gates are opened to the King of glory! Brethren, pray for us that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified!”

But those distinct intimations of the Master’s will, for which he had so long waited, came at last. The door he had sought and hoped to enter was finally closed; the standing-ground which alone he desiderated as a warrant to remain was taken from him. Shortly after the expiry of the lease, he had received notice to remove from the premises he had hitherto occupied, and all efforts to obtain another suitable station had failed. This, taken in connection with the open door and brightening prospects at Amoy, seemed to him decisive of the path of duty. Difficulties in the ordinary sense of the word had little influence with him: rather only did they rouse him to a more determined resolution to “go forward” in the course of service set before him, in the strength of Him before whom the mountains flow down, and whose word is “not bound;” but the slightest indication of His will, the faintest whisper of His voice, was to him imperative. Such an intimation had now, he believed, been distinctly given to him; and he prepared himself without delay to obey it. He sailed from Canton, after a residence of sixteen months, in June, 1851, and reached Amoy on the 5th day of next month.