CHAPTER XXI.

CONCLUSION.

 “S

O your loved and honoured William,” wrote the Rev. Charles Brown to his mother, on hearing the tidings of his death, “has obtained the fulfilment of Christ’s prayer, ‘Father, I will that they also whom thou hast given me be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory.’ I am confident that amid the sorrow of your great loss, you are enabled to give thanks and say, ‘It is the Lord:’ It is well.’ He makes no mistake as to the time, or the place, or the way of removing his servants to be with himself. Your dear William’s history has, in fact, been one so palpably stamped with the signatures of a divine leading, that it were unlawful to entertain a doubt that the Lord just saw his work *done*,and the time, for him, of the everlasting rest arrived. I con­fess that I was quite unprepared for the tidings. I had dreamed that there remained for William a time of coming home (necessitated of course by his serious illness); that you would have the happiness of embracing him once more; that we should all see again his grave benevolent countenance; and that the Church and the cause of China and her missions might be greatly benefited. But now that the Lord has given his own unerring decision, I think I can see things that go to reconcile me to it, even apart from its simple unerringness as given by *Him.* I am not sure that William would have taken kindly to going up and down this country and *talking.* China and its labours, far from the ear and eyeof man, was his sphere. He had literally *buried* himself in that vast land—a noble, living burial! No doubt, also, his system was spent. He had done his work (not a *short* one, be it remembered) in such a manner that even *his* robust constitution was undermined. And so things have just reached their natural close.”

Doubtless this is the true reading of the matter, so far as it *can* be read by us on this side the veil. If now I must speak more of the character and work of my beloved and lamented brother, it must still be in the words of others; and for this there are abundant materials in the numerous and most touching tributes to his noble life and precious labours which have spontaneously come from every side. Of these it is fitting that I should quote first the words of his esteemed colleague and friend, the Rev. W. S. Swanson, in a sermon preached at Amoy shortly after receiving the tidings of his death:—“And now that his life has closed, so far as regards earth, it re­mains as a precious legacy to us who are left. In reviewing it, what shall we say were the main characteristics of this man? He was a thorough scholar, with a well-furnished and an active mind; he possessed in no ordinary degree a sound judgment, and a large amount of common sense; he was one of the ablest and most popular preachers of his day; he was a man of great energy, indomitable per­severance, and of ardent zeal. But not these properties severally, nor all combined, seem to me to be the reason to account for the power he possessed, the success that followed his public work, or the mark he has left behind him.

“In personal intercourse with him one thing struck me above all others—his prayerfulness; and herein I believe we get some insight into his remarkable success and power. No matter what he did, or had to do, whether of importance or of a nature you might call trivial, he made it a matter of prayer. This prayerfulness of his seems to me to be the outstanding feature of his Christian life and his missionary work.

“Another very marked feature of his character was his faithfulness. You never could mistake what he was, nor whose servant he considered himself to be. He believed, as we all do, that Christ and the world could not amalga­mate; and he was faithful to his belief. And what was the result? The testimony of those who care little for Christ and the things of his kingdom is unanimous in this, that he was a faithful, earnest, and consistent Chris­tian; and this testimony they never withheld. Agree or not with him as they might, they did not fail to perceive, and were not slow to acknowledge, the faithfulness of the man to the great Master he served. This faithfulness made him sometimes seem harsh, it may be, to some, and not so regardful as they might have wished him to be of the feelings of others. But this could be thought only by those who did not know him. He was very tender, and very chary of giving offence; but not so much so as to prevent him from denouncing where denunciation was needed, or rebuking where rebuke seemed to him to be required.

“There is one other point in his character to which I must refer, and then I have done. To many he seemed eccentric, and to some morose. He was neither. There might be some shadow of seeming evidence for the former; there was none for the latter. He set a high ideal before himself as the ideal of the Christian missionary; and he did not hesitate to adopt any mode of life, or to enter upon any course of action, that seemed to him to be necessary, or even beneficial, to the proper carrying on of the work he came to do. As I have said already, the motive from which he acted was always the same; and one hardly dared to blame him in matters of no importance whatever when this was known. And now when we look back on his history, we may perhaps be led to believe that even in regard to the mode and localities of his missionary life, he acted in the way which, in his case, and with his peculiar and most marked individuality, was calculated to be of most benefit.”

The feature of his Christian life here first referred to, is so pre-eminently characteristic, that I am tempted to add the following words of another:—“Above all,” says an able writer in the *Sunday at Home,* “Mr.Burns was a man of prayer. No one could be long in his company without discovering that. All the week long ‘he filled the fountains of his spirit with prayer,’ and on Sabbath the full fountain gave forth its abundant treasures. There was a freshness, a simplicity, a scriptural force and directness in his prayers, that formed the best of all preparations for the discourse that was to follow. Out of doors, we have often felt, as we heard him preach, that the opening prayer of the service was like the ploughing up of the field, it so opened the heart, and quickened and informed the con­science; the sermon that followed was the sowing of the seed in the prepared soil; and the concluding prayer was like the after harrowing of the ground, fixing down the seed that had been sown.”

To anyone in the least degree acquainted with him, or who had come even for a day into casual contact with him, it would not have been needful to have said even this much in regard to that which was in truth so much a part of himself, as to be inseparable from his very idea. His whole life was literally a life of prayer, and his whole ministry a series of battles fought at the mercy-seat. A friend who was under the same roof with him the day before he began his labours in St. Peter’s, tells me that after walk­ing round the parish with one of the elders, whose guest he was, he shut himself up in his chamber, and was found long afterwards lying on his face in an agony of prayer—the source doubtless of the holy calm which so struck the hearers on the succeeding morning.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is an entry in his journal, during the time of his residence in Edinburgh, which is perhaps too sacred to quote, but to which I can­not withhold a reference in this connection. He seems to have possessed a private key to the church of St. Luke’s, and there we find him, at least on one occasion, “detained” a whole night in solitary prayer “before the Lord.” Such incidents as these let us far into the secret of where his great strength lay.

The Rev. Dr. Talmage, of the American Board of Missions, who, along with his admirable and lamented colleague, Mr. Doty, knew him so well during his early labours at Amoy, adds one or two characteristic traits which his friends will delight to recognize:—“He was,” he says, “very careful of his health, avoiding unnecessary exposure, abstemious in his diet, and very particular in regard to his clothing, guarding against sudden changes of temperature. Although living by himself, he made it a rule to take tea, and spend a part or the whole of the evening of every day of the week, except one, with some one of the missionary families. We all enjoyed greatly and felt profited by this social intercourse with him. . . . He also carefully watched the indications of Providence, expecting to be led in the right way. I may mention a fact to illustrate this. He had planned a visit with some of our native helpers to the island of Quemoy, situated on the north-east side of the entrance to Amoy harbour. The day appointed to go proved rainy; from this he gathered that he should go in some other direction. While meditating on this subject an inquirer from a village near Pechuia came to his room, and requested him to visit the region of his native place. This was forthwith decided on. On their way to the boat they were met by an elderly man, an inquirer, who, on learning in what direction they were going, told them that he had a son in business at the village of Pechuia, and invited them to go to his son’s shop, who, he said, would give them a hearty welcome. Such were the leadings of Providence, by which the gospel was first carried to that region. The remarkable blessings which followed that visit are well known. . . .

“His greatest power in preaching seemed to me to consist in the manner in which he quoted the Holy Scriptures. In this I do not think that I have ever heard him surpassed. Hence, in labouring among the Chinese, it was over the native Christians and inquirers that he exerted his greatest influence for good.

“On this account it seemed to some (perhaps to all) of us that his labours would have been still more efficient if he had remained longer, or had settled down permanently in some one district of country, instead of pursuing so desultory a course of labour. A man with his gifts, I should suppose, would be just adapted to a field of labour such as Amoy now is, where there are so many small churches and companies of inquirers scattered throughout the region, and where the good seed of the Word has been sown so widely. Such a field would have had more like­ness to those fields in Scotland and Canada, where his labours had been so wonderfully blessed.

“I say *it seemed,* for knowing his earnestness in seeking the divine guidance, we dare not say that he did not obtain it.

“He was a great (not perhaps in the eyes of the world) and good man; but he regarded himself as having pecu­liarities, and did not think that others should adopt his plan of labour.”

Of the style of his preaching at his best times, I cannot better speak than in the words of a writer already quoted:—“His voice was clear, full, and of a great compass and power. By nearly constant use, indoors and out, its finer tones were roughened when we heard it; but, for all the purposes of an evangelist, it was one of the finest we have ever heard. In preaching he used no notes, had but little action, and no art. His power was solely, humanly speaking, from the weight, clearness, abundance, and vigour of his matter, and from the vivid force of his own feelings and convictions of the truth of what he was uttering. He believed, and therefore spoke. God was visible to him as he preached; and so he soon became visible also to at least some of his hearers. He used but few illustrations, and when he did use them they were short and telling. His style was firm, terse, Saxon, abounding in short sentences; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. Sometimes you would have thought, in listen­ing to some of his solemn appeals, that you were hearing a new chapter of the Bible when first spoken by a living prophet. His manner was not only solemn, but pre-eminently solemnizing. Few—we might say none—that came to laugh remained long in the laughing mood. He was a man, whether in the pulpit or out of it whom you might treat many ways, but you could nowhere laugh at him. And if you tried to argue with him, you came away, if victorious in your own eyes, at least thoroughly conscious that you had grappled with no despicable, no common adversary. He was ever calm, cool, self-possessed. Preaching one day in Montreal Mr. Burns was roughly handled by a Popish crowd, some of whom threw stones, by one of which Mr. Burns was cut in the face. A party of the 93d Highlanders heard of the fracas, and rushed to the rescue, headed by one Hector M’Pherson, now labouring as a missionary at St. Martin’s, near Perth, and to whom the preaching of Mr. Burns had been blessed. To the earnest inquiry of the soldier, ‘What’s all this?’ Mr. Burns quietly wiped off the blood, and with a smile said, ‘Never mind; it’s only a little wound received in the Master’s service.’[[2]](#footnote-2) If in preaching, indoors or out, he was in any way interrupted, he was never flurried, and knew well how to turn any interruption to his own advantage. A friend has often graphically repeated to the writer an instance illustrative of this. Once on a fine summer Sabbath evening, he was preaching to a vast crowd at the approach to a railway station. A tall man, slightly intoxicated, in the outer edge of the crowd was rudely interrupting, and interjecting occasional comments, exciting the risibility of those around him. Mr. Burns paused a moment, turned his eyes on the man: ‘You are tall and strong; but you are not too tall for a coffin, nor too strong for the worms! You are tall and strong; but not too tall for the grave, nor too strong for death! You are tall and strong; but you will soon have to stand forth, one of the crowd, before the great white throne; and how will you face the Judge of the whole earth! Tall and strong as you are, you cannot be hid from God; the rocks and mountains will not cover you; his all-seeing eye is on you now!’ This was spoken with a slow deliberation that made every word tell, not only on the man, but on the crowd. ‘ It was absolutely withering and terrible,’ our informant used to say; the man was sobered in one moment. He seemed to bow himself down, as if to hide himself from that eye, and became at once the most attentive, and eager, and respectful listener the preacher had.”

In regard to the manner of his outer life, no man ever held himself more absolutely loose to the world, and to the things that are in the world. Literally he deemed not that anything that he possessed was his own, save only that he might use it in the service of Christ and human souls. Scrupulously exact and methodical in the use of his means, and rigid in his economy as regarded himself, he was conspicuously bountiful and free-handed in the dis­pensation of them to others. His whole income, from the first day on which he had any income to the last, was thus spent, with the exception only of what was necessary to supply for himself the barest necessities of life, and an annual gift of love to his one, surviving parent. He literally fulfilled his own ideal, as conveyed in words that have been often quoted:—“The happiest state of a Christian on earth seems to be this—that he should have *few wants.* If a man have Christ in his heart, and heaven before his eye, and only as much of temporal blessings as is just needful to carry him safely through life, then pain and sorrow have little to shoot at—such a man has very little to lose. To be in union with Him, who is the Shepherd of Israel, and to walk very near to Him who is a sun and shield—that comprehends all that a poor sinner requires to make him happy between this and heaven.”

How vividly do I remember the moment, a little more than a year ago, when the trunk which had come home from China containing nearly all of property that he left behind him in the world was opened, amid a group of young and wondering faces,—a few sheets of Chinese printed matter, a Chinese and an English Bible, an old writing-case, one or two small books, a Chinese lantern, a single Chinese dress, and the blue flag of the “Gospel Boat.” “Surely,” whispered one little one amid the awestruck silence, “surely he must have been *very* poor!” There was One, we felt, standing amongst us, though unseen, who for his sake had been poorer still.

Of the results of his work in the Chinese field it is diffi­cult to speak. Undoubtedly his life there was far more powerful as an influence than as an agency. It was not so much by what he said, or by what he did, as by what he was, that he made his presence felt over so wide a surface of that vast land, and that “being dead, he yet speaketh.” “I never expect to see his like again,” says an esteemed missionary of another communion, who only knew him for a very short time. “We are all, as I believe, serving God in our divine vocations, with greater gladness, and more fervid zeal, from having communed with your brother in his heavenly walk and noble aspirations.” “Know him, sir?” exclaimed another, with almost indig­nant surprise, when asked if he knew a brother missionary of the name of William Burns, “all China knows him; he is the holiest man alive.” His life, in short, was “a sign” to all who came in contact with him, and in the face of a luxurious and self-indulgent age, of an absolute consecration of heart to God, which knew no reserves, flinched from no sacrifices, and in very deed counted all things loss for Christ. In fine, to use the words of the Rev. James Johnston, once his colleague in mission work, and since for many years the esteemed secretary of the Scottish Committee:—“Reckoned by the number of conversions under his direct preaching, the results are small; measured by the effect of his personal influence, the results are great. From the nature of the work for which he was specially qualified, and to which he entirely gave himself—that of a pioneer or evangelist—he could not expect to reap the fruits himself. His work was to break up the ground and sow the seed, not to gather the harvest. No man in this age, so far as we know, has so entirely devoted himself to this self-denying work. Again and again has our departed brother laboured for years in some dark and unpromising field, and just when the first streak of dawn appeared on the horizon, he would leave another to enjoy the glorious sun-rise, while he buried himself in some other region sunk in heathen darkness. Again and again have we seen him thus in prayers and tears sowing the precious seed, and as soon as he saw the green shoots appear above the dark soil, he would leave to others the arduous yet happy task of reaping the harvest, and begin again his appointed work in breaking up the fallow-ground. The full extent of his great life-work will not be known until that day when ‘he that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.’ The faith and patience of this devoted ser­vant of God is an example to the Church, and to every labourer in the Lord’s vineyard, teaching us not to live upon the stimulus of a present success, even in the con­version of souls. No man enjoyed so great success as he did, or thirsted for the salvation of sinners with more intense longing than he, yet have we seen him labouring for seven years, according to his own testimony, ‘without seeing one soul brought to Christ;’ yet labouring on only with increased diligence and prayer, until he saw, as he shortly did, the awakening at Pechuia, which reminded him of Kilsyth. His influence in this way has been ex­tended over a larger field, and with his strongly marked individuality he left the impress of his character and piety wherever he went. Missionaries felt it, and blessed God for even a casual acquaintance with William Burns; converts felt it, and have been heard to say that they got their idea of what the Saviour was on earth from the holy calm and warm love, and earnest zeal of Mr. Burns’ ‘walk with God.’ The converts in many parts of China, and their children, will remember his high type of piety. His many trans­lations of Scripture and sacred books, like the *Pilgrim’s Progress,* and *Line upon Line,* will prove a rich legacy to the Church, and his psalms and hymns in different dialects will help the faith and fan the love of the Christian dis­ciples, and spread abroad the Saviour’s name among the heathen in the new songs sung in their hearing by the converts at their work, or by the way, and in their worship in the church and family. As a mission, we bless God for all that our departed brother was, and for all that he did. He was God’s gift to us, and while we fondly looked forward to a longer life, and further conquests in the new and vast region on which he had entered with impaired strength but undiminished zeal, we bow to our Father’s will in his removal on the 4th of April. His grave stands on the borders of the great kingdom of Manchuria, the advanced post of Christian conquests, beyond the northern limits of China. The little mound casts its shadow over many lands, for where is Burns not loved and mourned? But his life is the Church’s legacy, and loudly calls for self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause of Christ, and especially the cause of missions. His indomitable spirit beckons us to the field of conflict and of victory, while his four last converts, the conquest of his death-bed, stand like sentinels by his grave, and pray and long for the advance of the Church’s hosts.”

In stature he was about the middle height, of strong, muscular, and well-knit frame, and with a ruddy and pleasant countenance, which is but faintly recalled by the worn and aged features of his Chinese picture, but which will doubtless appear again in glorified form when He comes who maketh all things new.

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IN MEMORIAM.

As gazed the prophet on the ascending car,

Swept by its fiery steeds away and far,

So, with the burning tear and flashing eye,

I trace thy glorious pathway to the sky.

Lone like the Tishbite, as the Baptist bold,

Cast in a rare and apostolic mould;

Earnest, unselfish, consecrated, true,

With nothing but the noblest end in view;

Choosing to toil in distant fields unsown,

Contented to be poor and little known,

*Faithful to death.* O man of God, well done!

Thy fight is ended, and thy crown is won.

God shall have all the glory! Only GRACE

Made thee to differ. Let us man abase!

With deep, emphatic tone thy dying word,

Thy last, was this—”Thine is the kingdom, Lord,

The power, and glory!” Thus the *final* flame

Of the burnt-offering to Jehovah’s name

Ascended from the altar! Life thus given

To God, must have its secret springs in heaven.

O WILLIAM BURNS! we will not call thee dead,

Though lies thy body in its narrow bed

In far-off China. Though Manchuria keeps

Thy dust, which in the Lord securely sleeps,

Thy spirit *lives* with Jesus: and where He,

Thy Master, dwells, ’tis meet that thou shouldst be.

There is no death in his divine embrace!

There is no life but where they see His face!

And now, Lord, let thy servant’s mantle fall

Upon another! Since thy solemn call

To preach the truth in China has been heard,

Grant that a double portion be conferred

Of the same spirit on the gentler head

Of some Elisha, who may raise the dead,

And fill the widow’s cruse, and heal the spring,

And make the desolate of heart to sing;

And stand, though feeble, fearless, since he knows

Thy host angelic guards him from his foes;

Whose life an image fairer still might be

Of Christ of Nazareth and Galilee—

Of thine, O spotless Lamb of Calvary!

China, I breathe for thee a brother’s prayer:

Unnumbered are thy millions. Father, hear

The groans we cannot! Oh, thine arm make bare,

And reap thy harvest of salvation there.

The fulness of the Gentiles, like a sea

Immense, O God, begathered unto Thee!

Then Israel save; and with his saintly train,

Send us Immanuel over all to reign!

H. GRATTAN GUINNESS.

1. “I had the privilege of getting acquainted with him, at the com­mencement of his ministry in St. Peter’s, Dundee, while he resided at The Crescent, with Mr. P. H. Thoms; in whose family I had been resident governess for several years. The day after he came to us, Mr. Thoms took him out to show him the boundaries of the parish, and to see a few of the people in St. Peter’s district. They returned in the evening. Mr. Burns went to his room, and whilst we waited for his coming down stairs to dinner, we heard a heavy groan. Thinking he had been taken ill, Mrs. Thorns ran upstairs, and found him lying on his face on the floor groaning before the Lord! He had gotten such an overwhelming sense of his responsi­bility for the souls of that people, that he could then think of nothing else. In his absence of mind, he had left his door partially open, which Mrs. Thorns shut; and we did not see him again till late in the evening, when he came for the family worship. His prayer then was one continued strain of self-loathing, and pleading for mercy through ‘the blood of the Lamb of God.’ It happened that his room was next to mine, and *all that night* I heard him still groaning in prayer!” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This incident was mentioned before in Chapter X., but I give the extract unbroken for the sake of the additional trait here given. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)