

The Home Mission Journal.

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Soul-Winning Stories.

REV. LOUIS ALBERT BANKS, D. D.

I.

THE CAPTURE OF THE STREET CAR MAN.

It was in the days when the horse car was in its glory, shortly before the electric trolley came on the scene and sent the horses back to the farms. It was my first pastorate in an Eastern city, and I had the care of a small church that was situated in a populous suburb. The general location was excellent, but one thing greatly annoyed my congregation: this was the existence of a great horse-car stable just across the street from us, where the cars were coming in and going out constantly to make the changes of horses and men. Whenever anything nice was said about church by one of our people to another, by any outsider to them, there was always this reservation, "If only that old street-car barn was out of the way." That old barn was like what Mordecai was to Haman when he wouldn't bow to him. It took the edge off all our joys.

This old street-car barn was annoying in many ways. In the first place, it did not smell good; in the second place, it was very noisy, and finally, and that was the most important, there was always a large group of from twenty to fifty horse-car conductors and drivers off duty, who were hanging around the doors of this barn. They were an unusually wicked class of men, and they naturally attracted other men of the same ilk, and it became notorious in the place that was noisy and stinky, where women were stared at and remarked upon. Five or six cent women took the other side of the street, and hurried past when she had to go around that corner.

After I had been pastor of the little church for a few months it was born in upon me that something must be done to change the condition at that horse-barn corner. After thinking it over and praying about it a good deal, I called my official board together one Sunday morning after the sermon, and told them that I believed that our church had a duty in relation to this horse-car barn. I said to them, "You have to get away from the place, and you have tried to get them to move away, for a long time, and nothing has ever come of it. Now, my judgment is that it is all providential. God has put me here to save that crowd. This is the duty that is at our door. Now I want you to back me up in a series of revival meetings. We will not tell people so, but the great object of all will be the saving of the conductors and drivers. We will have their headquarters at that horse-car barn."

They were greatly astounded. Most of them thought I was optimistic beyond reason, and that we would not get any of them to come to the meetings. Two or three, however, took fire at the earnestness of my own heart, and after talking it all over, they all agreed that it was worth trying, and we set to work. For six weeks, we held meetings day and night. We had preaching every evening, but I soon found that the best hour for horse-car men was about nine o'clock in the morning when the morning rush was over. More men were at leisure between

that and eleven than at any other time. So I added another meeting, especially for them, at that hour. Well, the Lord blessed our labors. We paraded them out. I hunted the church through to find out who in the church had personal acquaintance or influence with individual drivers and conductors, and I set everybody praying for their own acquaintances among these men, and urged each one to try to answer his own prayers by seeking them out, and bring them to the meetings. It was not long before it began to tell, and, one after another, they were being converted.

From the very first I found that the greatest obstacle to a successful work of grace among the men at the barn was in the person of the Car Starter. This was a man past middle age, and a man of great force of character. He was sharp and witty, and his keen tongue could always raise a laugh or bring the blood, if, as often, he chose to use it as a lash. With all this, he was a big-hearted man in many ways, and very popular among the drivers and conductors. But he hated God, he hated the church, he hated Christians, and above everything else he hated Christian ministers. There was nothing his sharp tongue could say that was bitter enough, and mean enough, if it could raise a laugh against a preacher and show his contempt for him. I very soon discovered that many of the men were holding back for fear of running the gauntlet of his tongue. When I found this out, I went straight to him and told him so, thinking I might sober him with a sense of responsibility in the matter; but he contemptuously cursed me, and told me to mind my own business. I quietly told him that I should pray God to open his eyes to his wickedness, and went away.

I told some of the people in the church about it, and we covenanted together to pray daily for the Starter's salvation. Every day now, I was about the barn, inviting the men to the meetings, encouraging some who had already started, especially working with others, and, incidentally, coming in contact with the Starter. Every day there was some bitter, vulgar sneer, or wicked oath hurled at me, and when assured that I was praying for him, he would almost grind his teeth in rage. This matter went on for some three weeks, when one night, just as I was sitting down at the table for my supper, the doorbell rang, and, on opening it, there stood the Car Starter's wife. She was greatly excited, "Oh," said she, "I wish you would come to our house right away. My husband is in a terrible condition."

"Why, what is the matter?" I inquired. I supposed there had been some accident about the barn.

"Oh!" she replied, "he is in an awful condition. I left him walking the floor, and wringing his hands in a perfect agony. He thinks he is going to be lost. He says he has committed the unpardonable sin, and there is no hope for him."

I shall never forget the thrill of joy that ran through me as the woman told me that story. Instantly I exclaimed with great fervor, "Thank God!"

She looked at me almost dazed, and inquired, "What do you mean?"

"I mean," was my reply, "that this is the beginning of better times for your husband. If he is feeling like that, I am sure I can do him good."

"Well," said she, "if you can do him good, he surely needs it, and that very soon."

I forgot all about my supper, and throwing on my hat and overcoat, hurried with her to her home. When we went in, I found she had not overstated the case as to the Starter's feelings. He was in the deepest anguish. Despair was written on every line of his face. The Holy Spirit had opened up before his gaze the awful hell that was in his heart. He seemed utterly without hope. As soon as he saw me, he cried, "There is no hope for me! How wicked I have been! And I knew better, too. But I have hated God, and I have hated you. I have said every mean thing about you that I could lay my tongue to. And I have abused the members of the church; I have picked flaws in them. I have made fun of every man that has started to be a Christian. I have done all I could to keep

them back, and I fear some of them will be lost because of what I have said to them."

As soon as I could get a word in I said to him, "Remember it is not your sin, it is not your wickedness, that is in the way of your salvation. He looked at me astonished. "What is in the way, then?" I replied, "The only thing that is in the way is your unwillingness to ask Christ to forgive you, and to accept his forgiveness."

That was a new idea to him. Then I told him the old story of the thief on the cross, and the other story of that poor, demon-possessed man at Gadara. I could see that the last one took hold of him. He seemed to feel that the man who had a whole legion of devils in him, all of whom were cast out by the power of Jesus, was a case that gave hope for him. After we had talked perhaps ten minutes we knelt down to pray. I never heard a man pray with such abandon for himself. I thought all the neighbors on the street would hear. He cried out to God. He did not mince matters in telling the Lord about his sins. Finally his heart broke. The tears came, and in that flood of tears, his faith caught sight of the Christ who died for him. His heavy burden rolled off like the load from the shoulders of Bunyan's pilgrim at the cross. He rose up from his knees, with a new look in his face, and a new joy in his heart.

He said he must go at once to his work at the barn, as he was due there in a few minutes, but I was so anxious to thoroughly entrench him in his new life, that I took him across with me to the church, where I knew a little prayer meeting was going on, and he went in with me, and there gave his first testimony for the Lord.

The Car Starter's conversion created great excitement in the community. People flocked to the meetings and the revival received a new impetus. Over two hundred were hopefully converted, and over a hundred and fifty were added to my church. But that which pleased me especially was that fifty of my new church members were made up of twenty-five street-car men and their wives.

From that day till this, now a good many years, the Car Starter had lived a Christian life. His influence everywhere has been for Christ. He has led many to the Lord, through the purity of his life, the sweetness of his spirit, and the holy boldness with which he bears his testimony to the power of Christ to forgive sins.

One of the sweetest compensations for the sacrifice which is often demanded of a Christian minister, is found in the love and devotion of the men and women who are won to Christ, through his efforts. Some years after the Car Starter's conversion, lecturing one night in a far distant State, I found him in my audience. Nothing would do but that I must go home with him for the night. I had to take a train at half past two in the morning, but he assured me that he could wake at any hour, and there would be no danger of my getting left. When he awoke me in the morning, and I went down to find a cup of hot coffee ready waiting for me, something in the Car Starter's face convinced me that he had not slept.

"Look here," said I, "you have been sitting up all night. I can see by your eyes that you have not been asleep. You are too old a man to do a thing like that."

I shall never forget the answer. His lips quivered, his eyes filled with tears, and as the great drops rolled over his cheeks, he said,

"Ah you do not know what a joy it is for me to do something for you. If I were to sit up all night, once a week, as long as I live, it would be nothing compared to what you have done for me."

I have seldom had anything touch me more deeply than those words. I thought of what Paul said to the Galatians whom he had won to Christ, in recognizing their love for him: "I bear your record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and given them to me." Many times since that night, when I have been tempted to discouragement, and wondered if the hard work was worth while, I have recalled the Car Starter's tears, and his words of gratitude and love, and thrusting aside my depression, I have thanked God and taken courage.