

GENERAL BOOTH: THE MAN WHO HUNGERED FOR HELL

"I hungered for hell. I pushed into the midst of it—London's East Side. For days I stood in those seething streets, muddy with men and women, drinking it all in and loving it all. Yes, I loved it because of the souls I saw. I knew I had found my work. One night I went home and said to my wife: "Darling, I have given myself, I have given you and our children, to the service of those sick souls." She smiled and took my hand, and we knelt together. That was the first meeting of the Salvation Army."

His tired eyes, their cunning half-curtained by great drooping lids, blazed with blue flame as he spoke. His voice, a remnant of departing thunder, rumbled like a distant storm in summer. But all is winter now with this old soldier of salvation—all save the spirit. The tousled hair and streaming beard which frame his huge Semitic face—they are the hoar-frost of nine and seventy years. That enormous hooked nose is the beak of an eagle, a man-eagle long since sated with the sublimities of the upper strata and swooping down to snatch broken bodies and scorched souls from the ash-heaps of humanity. Tall, spare, unsteady, his is the body of Dore's Don Quixote with the head of Ezekiel set upon its stooped shoulders. Did he claim reincarnation, he might call himself Ezekiel. There is much likeness. He is somewhat the fierce benefactor. His cry is Ezekiel's—Work and Hope! He knows all filth, all grief, all horrors, yet he sees the sunrise. Surrounded by dust of defeat and degradation, smoke of sin, fog of falseness, and clouds of crime, he has shown men a patch of Christ's clear morning sky on the horizon of hopelessness, as he marched on through the wide world, dragging them out of darkness and death into light and life. Had he chosen the flowing robe and mystery of speech, he might have duplicated the magic of Mahomet. He is as sure of his providential mission. Who knows but this possibility confronted him in his Methodist pulpit fifty years ago! He was only fifteen when he heard an echo of that voice which smote Paul on the road to Damascus.

Even then he preached as if possessed. William Booth was possessed. He hungered for hell.

HE THIRSTED FOR THE DREGS.

A little while he waited. He had enough of routine religion to breed the hope that these would come to satisfy his longing. Waiting, he worked and thought. One day it came to him that Christ "sought" men when here. He, too, would seek them, but not in the highways. He would track them into the swamps and sink-holes, the dump-heaps. For this he led his little family to London in 1861. For this he haunted the nearest approach to hell on earth—that East End. For that he knelt with his wife, a woman of blest memory everywhere. He always lifts his eyes when he calls her name, as if speaking to her.

In a disused buryground on Mile End Road he pitched an old tent. The sentimental will see in this a sign of resurrection from the dead. He chose the place because he could get no other. The tent was his tabernacle. He called it the "Christian Mission." A crowd of poor Whitechappellers drifted into the place the first night he preached, led by curiosity. The East End had never seen such a "congregation," nor London, nor the world, for that. It was just a mass of wreckage cast up by the waves of what we must call Life because of breath and heartbeats. He talked to them as such. He told them the old, old story stripped to the quick of its layers of theology. He worded his message to fit their meagre knowledge. Some slept through it all; some sneered and

snickered; others listened. A harlot or two and a drunkard cried for shame at their sinning and then for joy at their saving, and thus ended the second meeting of what was yet to sweep over seas as the Salvation Army. William Booth went home tired but happier than he had ever been. He had won from the Devil at the first throw.

"In the last few years we have saved fifty thousand fallen women," said this General to me. He sat up straight in the car seat, the light on his face was something more than the reflection of the gold-leaved trees past which the train was rushing. "They say such women cannot be saved; that they have fallen too far. Women fall farther than men only because they slip from greater heights. I wish I could show them these fifty thousand as they were and as they are!"

He doesn't care for the honors and compliments heaped upon him by kings and emperors. To dine with Roosevelt doesn't ruffle him in the least. I warrant you he let Oxford "doctor" him last year more for the sake of not displeasing the old university than pleasing himself. But if he could only marshal his fifty regiments of reclaimed womankind before you or me!—that would fill him with satisfaction. The way he spoke showed it.

And if he could only find some way to work while he sleeps!—that would make him smile. He seldom smiles, yet he is witty and knows fun when he sees it.

"Twenty years ago an English physician told me I was worn out. He said I ought to retire to some small parish and spend much time fishing and shooting. God has already given me one of his small parishes—this world—and I have found excellent fishing everywhere, only I have caught mostly crocodiles. As for shooting, I'm still firing at the Devil, and if I've not yet hit him in the head, I've wounded him several times in the tail."

HIS THEOLOGY.

He believes in a personal Devil, indeed he does. He snarled when I asked him, and, taking for granted I differed in the matter, growled at "your microbe Devil." He believes in a sure-enough hell, too, but he balks at the brimstone. He avoids particulars as he avoids disputes about religion.

"I've no time to argue theology," he says. "Whether Christianity is right or wrong, you must admit it is the most wonderful force that has ever come along." He will go one step farther, and after that you might as well try to whistle against a hurricane. "There are three things we must have: Forgiveness of the past, strength to be good in the future, and a spirit of love for others. If there is any way to get these except through regeneration by the Holy Ghost, I have yet to find it. Now we have talked enough religion."

Criticised as he was at first by those of every creed, you cannot draw from him a word of counter criticism for any creed.

"Men need many roads to salvation, and it takes all my time and thought and energy to keep the one I opened in repair."

From that crude beginning in the deserted burying-ground the Salvation Army has branched in all directions, blossoming in the blue poke-bonnet and the visored cap in nearly every country under the sun. From the one officer who braved the scorn of many it has increased to more than twenty-one thousand officers, who command the respect of all and the admiration of the majority. Its many-sided work is directed from eight thousand posts, each garrisoned by a corps whose one purpose is the saving of sick souls through the most direct means.