

BIOGRAPHY.

THE LIFE OF THE REV. JOHN NEWTON.*

During the year 1743, his habits became more and more depraved, until he received another remarkable check by a dream, which made a strong but not very abiding impression on his mind. The anxiety he endured in his waking hours seemed to give a colouring to his night-visions. He felt himself in great perplexity and horror. While musing on the wretchedness of his condition, there appeared suddenly a figure who presented him with a ring, which, if preserved with care, would prove his safeguard, and extricate him from all trouble. He was overjoyed at the reception of it. Shortly after another personage made his appearance; and, making many artful insinuations prevailed on him to part with the ring. Upon this terrific flames burst forth from a range of mountains which appeared behind the city of Venice; and he was taunted, and threatened with instant destruction. At this moment of horror, his former friend again appeared, and with a frown of mingled love and reproof, upbraided him for listening to the voice of the tempter. He descended into the water, and returned, bearing the ring, and thus addressed him,—‘As thou art unable to retain this treasure, I will preserve it continually for you.’ Even an outline of this beautiful vision will exhibit to us the spiritual instruction with which it is replete. If left for one moment to our own strength how soon do we all abandon ‘the ring,’ even at the first suggestion of the tempter! Then the soul is affrighted, but Jesus, our guardian, is able and willing to restore ‘the ring,’ and last we should lose it he, in condescension to our infirmities, deigns to keep it. ‘I will never leave thee nor forsake thee,’ is ever his language.

Soon after his return to England, Mr. N. was impressed, and sent on board the Harwich man-of-war; here he met with companions, who completed the ruin of his principles, by imbuing him with infidel notions, and he renounced the hopes and comforts of Christianity at the very time when every other comfort seemed about to fail him. He deserted the service; but, being captured, was sent back, and reduced to great misery; so much so, that his attachment at home alone kept him on several occasions from attempting his own life. Having at last received permission to exchange, he landed in Guinea, and there remained several years, in close connexion with the slave-trade; his habits of dissipation and vice being confirmed by the brutalising employment.

In 1747, he again came to England; and it was during the voyage home, by way of America, that the thoughts which led to the lasting change in his character, were first whispered to his soul by the Spirit of God. Amid a series of great hardships from severe weather, he was led to Jesus as a mighty deliverer, whom he felt he needed; and he received strength to effect a thorough reformation of his conduct: from an infidel he became a sincere believer; and from a most inveterate swearer, a man whose words were modest and subdued. He made another voyage to the African coast; and was then married, in February 1750

After this union with the object of his early choice, he still continued in the slave-trade, at that time carried on with no idea of its heinous criminality, making no less than three voyages to the African coast as commander of a fine ship. During the first of these voyages, he thus describes his manner of passing his time:

‘I had now the command and care of many persons; I endeavoured to treat them with humanity, and to set them a good example. I likewise established public worship, according to the Liturgy, twice every Lord’s day, officiating myself. Having now much leisure, I prosecuted the study of Latin with good success. I had heard Livy highly commended, and was resolved to understand him. I began with the first page; and laid down a rule, which I seldom departed from, not to proceed to a second period till I understood the first, and so on. I was often at a stand but seldom discouraged; here and there I found a few lines quite obstinate, and was forced to break in upon my rule, and give them up, especially as my edition had only the text, without any notes to assist me. But there were not many such; for, before the close

of that voyage, I could (with a few exceptions) read Livy from end to end almost as readily as an English author.’

During these voyages his growth in spiritual things was steady and decided, in despite of the disgusting nature of his occupation. He was very regular in the management of his time, allotting about eight hours to sleep and meals, eight to exercise and devotions, and the remaining eight to his books. He describes himself never to have known sweeter or more frequent hours of divine communion than in his two last voyages to Guinea, when he was either almost secluded from society on shipboard, or when on shore with none but natives; reflecting continually on the singular goodness of the Lord to him in a place where, perhaps, there was not a person who knew him for thousands of miles around.

In the year 1755, Mr. N.’s compunctious visitings of conscience having increased upon him, relinquished the slave-trade, and settled at Liverpool, having obtained the situation of tide-waiter. Here, being possessed of considerable leisure, he prosecuted his studies, commencing Greek and Hebrew, for the sake of the Holy Scriptures, with a distant hope of being able to enter the ministry. Upon this point he remarks:—‘My first desire arose years ago, from reflecting on Gal. i 23, 24. I could not but wish for such an opportunity to testify the riches of divine grace. I thought I was, above most living, a fit person to proclaim that faithful saying, ‘Jesus Christ came into the world to save even the chief of sinners;’ and as my life had been full of remarkable turns, and I seemed selected to show what the Lord could do, I was in hopes that perhaps, sooner or later, he might call me into his service. My first thought was to join the Dissenters, from a presumption that I could not honestly make the required subscriptions to the canons. &c.; but my scruples being moderated, and preferring the Established Church in other respects, I accepted a title for orders in 1758, but met with a refusal from the Archbishop of York.’

From that period to the year 1764, he employed his time in expounding wherever a door was opened to him. He preached occasionally among the Dissenters, and published a volume of sermons; but on the 29th of April in the last-named year, he became a clergyman, being ordained by the Bishop of Lincoln to the curacy of Olney, Bucks. He entered immediately upon those duties, which, for fifteen years, he unremittingly discharged: he was a blessing not only to the parish, but to the whole neighbourhood for miles around. While here, he became acquainted with, and was made largely useful to, the pious, amiable, but afflicted poet, Cowper; and, jointly with him, composed the delightful collection of poetry, called the ‘Olney Hymns.’ He also published his ‘Narrative,’ some volumes of letters, and some other works. It was also during his residence at Olney, in 1774, that his friendship was formed with the excellent Scott the commentator, at that time in a state of mind somewhat resembling that of St. Paul before his journey to Damascus, but who, being brought to the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus, in a great measure by Mr. Newton’s instrumentality, was afterwards so ‘mighty in the Scriptures’ to the conviction of others.

In the year 1779, the rectory of St. Mary, Woolnoth, in London, was presented to him, which, after considerable hesitation, he accepted, and came to the resolution of leaving Olney; and now (observes Mr. Cecil) ‘a new and very distinct sphere of action and usefulness was set before him. Placed in the centre of London, in an opulent neighbourhood, with connexions daily increasing, he had now a course of service to pursue in several respects different from his former at Olney. Being, however, well acquainted with the word of God, and the heart of man, he proposed to himself no new weapons of warfare for putting down the strongholds of sin and Satan around him. He perceived, indeed, most of his parishioners too intent upon their wealth and merchandise to pay much regard to their new minister; but since they would not come to him, he was determined to go, as far as he could, to them; and therefore soon after his institution, he sent a printed address to his parishioners on the usual prejudices that are taken up against the Gospel.’ Mr. Newton often spoke with great feeling on the circumstances of the important

station in which we now view him. ‘That one of the most ignorant, the most miserable, and the abandoned of slaves, should be plucked from the long state of exile on the coast of Africa, and length be appointed minister of the parish, and first magistrate of the first city in the world, he should there not only testify of such grand stand up as a singular instance and monument that he should be enabled to record it in his preaching, and writings, to the world at large, a fact (he said) he could contemplate with admiration but never sufficiently estimate. — To be continued

EXTRACTS FROM THE LIFE OF WILLIAM WILBERFORCE BY HIS SONS.

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MINISTERING TO THE POOR NOT UNWORTHY OF THE HIGHEST INTELLECT.

There was no part of Mrs. H. More’s character which he regarded with greater admiration than her active usefulness in the retirement of the country. ‘I was once,’ he said, ‘applied to by a Yorkshire gentleman, who desired me to assist him in obtaining a dispensation for a non-residence upon his cure had been used, he said, to live in London with the first literary circles, and now he was banished to the country far from all intellectual society. I told him that I really could not in conscience use my influence I possessed to help him; and then I mentioned to him the case of Mrs. H. More, who in her manner had lived with Johnson, Garrick, Burke, Reynolds, &c., and was so courted by them all, and had a great taste for such society; and yet had been taken away from its attractions, and shut herself up in the country to devote her talents to the instruction of a set of wretched people sunk in heathen darkness, amongst whom she was spending her time and fortune in schools and institutions for their benefit, going in all weathers a considerable distance to visit over them, until at last she had many villages, some thousands of children under her care. Truly magnificent, the really sublime in character, delight to think of it, and of the estimation in which the sacrifice she made will be held in another world. ‘There is no class of persons,’ he would say, ‘whose condition has been more improved with the recollection than that of unmarried women. Fully they there seemed to be nothing useful in which they could be naturally busy, but now they may find an object in attending to the poor.’

UNPROFITABLENESS OF LARGE RELIGIOUS PARTIES. ‘Dined at T.’s with Robinson of Leicester, and others; yet nothing truly serious: a crowd crowd be it of whatever sort.’

PUBLICATION OF HIS WORK ON PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY. Upon the 12th of April his work was published. ‘My book out to-day.’ Many were these who anxiously watched the issue. Dr. Milner had been dissuaded his attempt. ‘A person who so high for talent,’ wrote David Scott, ‘must rise in point of fame at least, by publishing upon a subject on which there have been the greatest exertions of the greatest genius. His publisher was not of apprehensions as to the safety of his own circulation. There was then little demand for religious publications, and he evidently regarded me as a zealous enthusiast.’ ‘You mean to put your work? Then I think we may venture upon a few copies,’ was Mr. Cadell’s conclusion. Within a few days it was out of print, and within half a year editions (7500 copies) had been called for. ‘My friends were delighted with the execution of it, as well as with its reception. ‘I heartily thank you for your book,’ wrote Lord Muncaster. ‘As I thank you for it, as a man I doubly thank you, but as a member of the Christian world, I receive all gratitude and acknowledgment. I do not know you well, but I know you better now, and you are an excellent Wilber.’ ‘I see no reason,’ said friend James Gordon, ‘why you should withdraw given it another year’s consideration; it would only have been so much the worse for you.’ ‘I send you herewith,’ Mr. Henry writes to Mr. Macaulay, ‘the book on lately published by Mr. Wilberforce; it excites more attention than you would have supposed all the graver and better disposed people. The