

IMPRESSIONS OF GENERAL BOOTH

It has occurred to the writer that a few words descriptive of William Booth, the creator and first General of the Salvation Army, set down by a contemporary who has enjoyed a good many opportunities of observing him during the past ten years, may possibly have a future if not a present value.

Of the greatness of this man, to my mind, there can be no doubt. When the point of time whereon we stand and play our separate parts has receded, and those who follow us look back into the grey mist which veils the past; when that mist has hidden the glitter of the decorations and deadened the echoes of the high-sounding titles of to-day; when our political tumults, our town-bred excitements, and many of the very names that are household words to us, are forgotten, or discoverable only in the pages of history; when, perhaps, the Salvation Army itself has fulfilled its mission and gone its road, I am certain that the figure of William Booth will abide clearly visible in those shadows, and that the influences of his work will remain, if not still felt, at least remembered and honoured. He will be one of the few, of the very few enduring figures of our day; and even if our civilization should be destined to undergo eclipse for a period, as seems possible, when the light returns, by it he will still be seen.

For truly this work of his is fine, and one that appeals to the imagination, although we are so near to it that few of us appreciate its real proportions. Also, in fact, it is the work that should be admired rather than the man, who, after all, is nothing but the instrument appointed to shape it from the clay of circumstance. The clay lay ready to be shaped, then appeared the moulder animated with will and purpose, and working for the work's sake to an end which he could not foresee.

I have no information on the point, but I should be surprised to learn that General Booth, when Providence moved him to begin his labours among the poor, had even an inkling of their future growth within the short period of his own life. He sowed a seed in faith and hope, and, in spite of opposition and poverty, in spite of ridicule and of slander, he has lived to see that seed ripen into a marvellous harvest. Directly, or indirectly, hundreds of thousands of men and women throughout the world have benefited by his efforts. He has been a tool of destiny, like Mahomet or Napoleon, only in this case one fated to help and not to harm mankind. Such, at least, is my estimate of him.

A little less of the spirit of self-sacrifice, a different sense of responsibility, and the same strength of imagination and power of purpose devoted to purely material objects, might have raised up another multi-millionaire, or a mob-leader, or a self-seeking despot. But, as it happened, some grace was given to him, and the river has

run another way.

Opportunity, too, has played into his hands. He saw that the recognized and established Creeds scarcely touched the great, sordid, lustful, drink-sodden, poverty-steeped masses of the city populations of the world: that they were waiting for a teacher who could speak to them in a tongue they understood. He spoke, and some of them have listened: only a fraction it is true, but still some. More, as it chanced, he married a wife who entered into his thoughts, and was able to help to fulfil his aspirations, and from that union were born descendants who, for the most part, are fitted to carry on his labours.

Further, like Loyola, and others, he has the power of rule, being a born leader of men, so that thousands obey his word without question in every corner of the earth, although some of these have never seen his face. Lastly, Nature endowed him with a striking presence that appeals to the popular mind, with a considerable gift of speech, with great physical strength and abounding energy, qualities which have enabled him to toil without ceasing and to travel far and wide. Thus it comes about that as truly as any man of our generation, when his hour is ended, he, too, I believe, should be able to say with a clear conscience, 'I have finished the work that Thou gavest me to do': although his heart may add, 'I have not finished it as well as I could wish.'

Now let me try to convey my personal impressions of this man. I see him in various conversations with myself, when he has thought that he could make use of me to serve his ever-present and impersonal ends, trying to add me up, wondering how far I was sincere, and to what extent I might be influenced by private objects; then, at last, concluding that I was honest in my own fashion, opening his heart little by little, and finally appealing to me to aid him in his labours.

'I like that man; he understands me!' I once heard him say, mentioning my name, and believing that he was thinking, not speaking.

I tell this story merely to illustrate his habit of reflecting aloud, for as he spoke these words I was standing beside him. When I repeated it to his Officers, one of them remarked horrified:--

'Good gracious! it might just as well have been something much less complimentary. One never knows what he will say.'

He is an autocrat, whose word is law to thousands. Had he not been an autocrat indeed, the Salvation Army would not exist to-day, for it sprang from his brain like Minerva from the head of Jove, and has been driven to success by his single, forceful will.

Yet this quality of masterfulness is tempered and illuminated by an unflinching sense of humour, which he is quite ready to exercise at his

own expense. Thus, a few years ago he and I dined with the late Mr. Herring, and, as a matter of fact, although I had certain things to say on the matters under discussion, his flow of most interesting conversation did not allow me over much opportunity of saying them. It is hard to compete in words with one who has preached continually for fifty years!

When General Booth departed to catch a midnight train, for the Continent I think, Mr. Herring went to see him to the door. Returning presently, much amused, he repeated their parting words, which were as follows:--

GENERAL BOOTH: 'A very good fellow Haggard; but a talker, you know, Herring, a talker!'

MR. HERRING (looking at him): 'Indeed!'

GENERAL BOOTH (laughing): 'Ah! Herring, you mean that it was I who did the talking, not Haggard. Well, perhaps I did.'

Some people think that General Booth is conceited.

'It is a pity that the old gentleman is so vain,' a highly-placed person once said to me.

I answered that if he or I had done all that General Booth has done,

we might be pardoned a little vanity.

In truth, however, the charge is mistaken, for at bottom I believe him to be a very humble-minded man, and one who does not in the least overrate himself. This may be gathered, indeed, from the tenor of his remarks on the subject of his personal value to the Army, that I have recorded at the beginning of this book.

What people of slower mind and narrower views may mistake for pride, in his case, I am sure, is but the impatient and unconscious assertiveness of superior power, based upon vision and accumulated knowledge. Also, as a general proposition, I believe vanity to be almost impossible to such a man. So far as my experience of life goes, that scarce creature, the innately, as distinguished from the accidentally eminent man, he who is fashioned from Nature's gold, not merely gilded by circumstance, is never vain.

Such a man knows but too well how poor is the fruit of his supremest effort, how marred by secret weakness is what the world calls his strength, and when his gifts are in the balance, how hard it would be for any seeing judge to distinguish his success from common failure. It is the little pinchbeck man, whom wealth, accident, or cheap cleverness has thrust forward, who grows vain over triumphs that are not worth having, not the great doer of deeds, or the seer whose imagination is wide enough to enable him to understand his own utter insignificance in the scale of things.

But to return to General Booth. Again I hear him explaining to me vast schemes, as yet unrealized, that lurk at the back of his vivid, practical, organizing brain. Schemes for settling tens of thousands of the city poor upon unoccupied lands in sundry portions of the earth. Schemes for great universities or training colleges, in which men and women might be educated to deal with the social problems of our age on a scientific basis. Schemes for obtaining Government assistance to enable the Army to raise up the countless mass of criminals in many lands, taking charge of them as they leave the jail, and by regenerating their fallen natures, saving them soul and body.

In the last interview I had with him, I read to him a note I had made of a conversation which had taken place a few days before between Mr. Roosevelt and myself on the subject of the Salvation Army. Here is the note, or part of it.

MR. ROOSEVELT: 'Why not make use of all this charitable energy, now often misdirected, for national ends?'

MYSELF: 'What I have called "the waste forces of Benevolence." It is odd, Mr. Roosevelt, that we should both have come to that conclusion.'

MR. ROOSEVELT: 'Yes, that's the term. You see the reason is that we are both sensible men who understand.'

'That is very important,' said General Booth, when he had heard this extract. "'Make use of all this charitable energy, now often misdirected for national ends!" Why not, indeed? Heaven knows it is often misdirected. The Salvation Army has made mistakes enough. If only that could be done it would be a great thing. But first we have got to make other people "understand" besides Roosevelt and yourself.'

That, at least, was the sense of his words.

Once more I see him addressing a crowded meeting of City men in London, on a murky winter afternoon. In five minutes he has gripped his audience with his tale of things that are new to most of them, quite outside of their experience. He lifts a curtain as it were, and shows them the awful misery that lies often at their very office doors, and the duty which is theirs to aid the fallen and the suffering. It is a long address, very long, but none of the hearers are wearied.

At the end of it I had cause to meet him in his office about a certain matter. He had stripped off his coat, and stood in the red jersey of his uniform, the perspiration still streaming from him after the exertion of his prolonged effort in that packed hall. As he spoke he ate his simple meal of vegetables (mushrooms they were, I remember), and tea, for, like most of his family, he never touches meat. Either he must see me while he ate or not at all; and when there is work to be done, General Booth does not think of convenience or of rest;

moreover, as usual, there was a train to catch. One of his peculiarities is that he seems always to be starting for somewhere, often at the other side of the world.

Lastly, I see him on one of his tours. He is due to speak in a small country town. His Officers have arrived to make arrangements, and are waiting with the audience. It pours with rain, and he is late. At length the motors dash up through the mud and wet, and out of the first of them he appears, a tall, cloaked figure. Already that day he has addressed two such meetings besides several roadside gatherings, and at night he must speak to a great audience in a city fourteen miles away; also stop at this place and at that before he gets there, for a like purpose. He is to appear in the big city at eight, and already it is half-past three.

Five minutes later he has been assisted on to the platform (for this was before his operation and he was almost blind), and for nearly an hour pours out a ceaseless flood of eloquence, telling the history of his Organization, telling of his life's work and of his heart's aims, asking for their prayers and help. He looks a very old man now, much older than when first I knew him, and with his handsome, somewhat Jewish face and long, white beard, a very type of some prophet of Israel. So Abraham must have looked, one thinks, or Jeremiah, or Elijah. But there is no weariness in his voice or his gestures; and, as he exhorts and prays, his darkening eyes seem to flash.

It is over. He bids farewell to the audience that he has never seen before, and will never see again, invokes a fervent blessing on them, and presently the motors are rushing away into the wet night, bearing with them this burning fire of a man.

Such are some of my impressions of William Booth, General of the Salvation Army.