

BILLY BRAY

God sometimes uses weak vessels in a most marvelous way. "Billy" Bray, the famous Cornish miner, was perhaps one of the quaintest vessels ever used of God to accomplish a great work of any kind. Before his conversion to Christ he was a drunken profligate miner, but after the Spirit of the Lord took possession of him he became such a burning shining light for Christ that his name is now known all over the world. From one end of Cornwall, England, to the other scarcely any name is better known than that of Billy Bray.

Billy Bray was born in 1794, at Twelveheads, a village near Truro, in Cornwall, England. His grandfather had joined the Methodists under the preaching of John Wesley. Billy's father was also a Christian, but died when his children were all quite young. Billy lived with his grandfather until he was seventeen years of age, and then went to Devonshire, where he lived a very wicked and sinful life. He was both drunken and lascivious. One night he and a companion were going home drunk from Tavistock when they met a big horse and climbed on his back. He threw them and nearly killed them. He had many other narrow escapes from death. After his conversion to Christ he often said, "The Lord was good to me when I was the servant of the Devil or I should have been down in hell now." Once he was nearly killed in a mine. He ran out just about a minute before the mine caved in. He became so great a drunkard that his wife had to bring him away from the beer shop night after night. "I never got drunk without feeling condemned for it," he afterwards said.

Billy was led to Christ, or rather, was convicted of sin, through reading Bunyan's "Visions of Heaven and Hell." When he was seeking the Lord he went a mile one Sunday morning to attend a class-meeting of the Bible Christians. It was a wet day, and no one came. This had a discouraging effect on him. After he had been seeking salvation for a long time, the Devil strongly tempted him to believe that he never would find mercy. "But," says he, "I said to him 'Thou art a liar, Devil,' and as soon as I said so, I felt the weight gone from my mind, and I could praise the Lord, but not with that liberty that I could afterwards." The same day, in the evening after he had gone home from work, he went into his room alone and said, "Lord, Thou hast said, 'They that ask shall receive, and they that seek shall find and to them that knock the door shall be opened,' and I have faith enough to believe it." This brought joy to his soul. "In an instant," says he, "the Lord made me so happy that I cannot express what I felt. I shouted for joy." This was in 1823.

After his conversion Billy became a very happy Christian, and also a very earnest worker for the salvation of others. This was especially true after he was led into a deeper, richer, and fuller Christian experience than he had received when converted to Christ. The following account of how he was led into this deeper experience is from "The King's Son, A Memoir of Billy Bray," by F. W. Bourne: "It is more important to speak of his deep piety, his abiding sense of the Divine favour, the secret of his great usefulness, the source of his constant and perpetual joy. The 'much fruit,' which is so pleasing to God, cannot come except the roots have struck deep into the soil. Religion is not shallow in its nature. 'The water that I shall give you' said the Saviour, 'shall be in you a well of water springing up into everlasting life.' To be sanctified wholly,' to use an apostolic phrase, Billy very early in his religious history felt to be both his duty and privilege. 'I remember being,' he says, 'at Hick's Mill Chapel one Sunday morning at class-meeting when a stranger led the class. The leader asked one of our members whether he could say

that the Lord had cleansed him from all sin, and he could not. "That" I said in my mind," is sanctification; I will have that blessing by the help of the Lord" and I went on my knees at once, and cried to the Lord to sanctify me wholly, body, spirit, soul. And the Lord said to me, "Thou art clean through the word I have spoken unto thee." And I said, "Lord, I believe it". When the leader came to me I told him, "Four months ago I was a great sinner against God. Since that time I have been justified freely by His grace, and while I have been here this morning, the Lord has sanctified me wholly." When I had done telling what the Lord had done for me, the leader said, "If you can believe it, it is so." Then I said, "I can believe it." When I had told him so, what joy filled my heart I cannot find words to tell." After meeting was over, I had to go over a railroad, and all around me seemed so full of glory that it dazzled my sight. I had a "joy unspeakable and full of glory." From one expression in this narrative some may dissent. It seems injudicious, to say the least, to tell a believer that he is sanctified if he believes he is. Of tell a penitent that he is saved if he only believes he is. There is a more excellent way. But henceforth Billy lived not to himself, but to Him who died for him and rose again. He set the Lord always before him. His path was like the shining light, his own favorite figure, that shineth more and more to the perfect day. Justified, sanctified, sealed, were successive steps in Christian experience; more clear to him perhaps than to others. His faith did not become feeble, but waxed stronger and stronger; his love to the Saviour grew in intensity till it became the absorbing passion of his soul ; and his hope brightened into heavenly radiance and splendor. The freshness, the delicacy and fragrance of richest Christian experience seemed always to be his."

After the experience related above Billy often felt the love of God overflowing his soul, so much so that he frequently shouted aloud or danced for very joy. His Christian experience was so happy, so bright, so trustful, and so sunshiny that many of the great persons of the earth have been greatly interested in the story of his life. Among these were Queen Victoria, Spurgeon, and many leading ministers of Britain and America. His name is a household word throughout Cornwall where he labored so earnestly for the salvation of others.

Billy did not have the gloomy, dismal, sorrowful religion which so many professing Christians seem to have. His was the joyous, victorious Christian experience which attracts sinners to Christ as honey attracts the bees. Sinners want a religion which will give them victory over sin, and wherever this kind of religion is preached souls are won to Christ But the gloomy dismal testimony does not attract souls to Christ. In the Methodist Church at St Blazey Billy heard the people telling about their many trials and difficulties. He arose smiling, and clapping his hands said: "Well, friends I have been taking vinegar and honey, Wt, praise the Lord, I've had the vinegar with a spoon and the honey with a ladle." His testimony was always one of joy and victory. Speaking concerning the Lord, he says: "He has made me glad and no one can make me sad; He makes me shout and no one can make me doubt; He it is that makes me dance and leap, and there is no one that can keep down my feet. I sometimes feel so much of the power of God that, I believe, if they were to cut off my feet I should heave up the stumps."

Billy often literally danced for very joy. One time he got so happy on his way home from market that he danced a new frock for his little girl out of the basket in which he was carrying it. It was found later and was returned to him. Some objected to his dancing and shouting, but Billy justified himself by referring to how Miriam and David danced before the Lord, and to the example of the cripple at Lystra who, after he was healed, leaped and walked and praised God. Billy also said that it was prophesied that ' the lame man shall leap as an hart' "I can't help praising God," he once said. "As I go along the street I lift up one foot, and it seems to say ' Glory! ' and I lift up the other, and it seems to say, ' Amen ; ' and so they keep on like that all the time I am walking." Even when his wife died, Billy jumped about the room with joy, exclaiming: "Bless the Lord! My dear Joey is gone up with the bright ones! My dear Joey is gone up with

the shining angels! Glory! Glory! Glory!" He believed that afflictions were a special mark of God's favor, and that Christians ought to rejoice in them.

To those who objected to his shouting so much, Billy once said: "If they were to put me in a barrel, I would shout glory out through the bung-hole! Praise the Lord! "Someone asked him one time, when he was praising the Lord if he did not think that people sometimes got in such a habit of praising the Lord that they did not know what they were saying. He very coolly replied that he did not think that the Lord was much troubled with that class of persons. At a meeting at Hick's Mill, in 1866, a Mr. Oliver told how triumphantly a dying woman expired shouting victory. "Glory!" shouted Billy. "If a dying woman praised the Lord, I should think a living man might." When Billy heard the news of a certain preacher's death, he said, "So he has done with the doubters and has got up with the shouters".

"Some can only eat out of the silent dish" says Billy, "But I can not only eat out of that, but out of the shouting dish, and jumping dish and every other." He often spoke of his determination to enjoy the abundance of his Father's house. "My comrades used to tell me," said he, "that was no religion, dancing, shouting, and making so much 'to-do'", but I was born in the fire and could not lie in the smoke!"

When Billy met people he often urged them to say "Amen," and if they did not do so he was not satisfied with their Christian experience. The first thing he inquired on meeting any one was about their soul, and if he got an assuring answer he would shout for joy. He would shout for joy when he heard of souls being saved anywhere. He would sometimes pick people up and carry them around for very joy. He picked up several ministers and carried them about in this way, when he became very happy in the meetings. Such actions caused some people to criticise him. "They said I was a mad-man, but they meant I was a gladman," says he.

Like all great soul winners, Billy spent much time in prayer. Before going anywhere he would ask the Lord to keep the Devil from scratching him while away. He feared the Devil and so "cut his ould claws " in this way. The devil was very real to him.

When tempted by Satan at one time, Billy said: "What an old fool thee art now; I have been battling with thee for twenty-eight years, and I have always beat thee, and I always shall." One time, when his potato crop was very poor, Satan tempted him to believe that God did not love him, or He would have given him a better potato crop. Billy recognized this as a temptation from the Devil, and he said: "Why, I've got your written character home to my house; and it do say, sir, that you be ' a liar from the beginnin.'" He told the Devil that when he served him he "had only rags and no 'tatures.'" He then recounted God's blessings until the Devil " went off like as if he'd been shot."

Some of the rowdies, knowing that Billy had a very strong belief in Satan, and a very wholesome fear of him, thought they would frighten him by hiding near the road at night, and making unearthly noises. Billy paid no attention to their noises but went on his way singing. At last one of them near the road said, "But I'm the Devil up here in the hedge, Billy Bray." "Bless the Lord! bless the Lord!" exclaimed Billy, "I did not know thee wast so far away as that."

Not only did Billy pray much, but like all others who pray much he had great faith in the Lord, and his prayers were often answered in a most remarkable manner. One time his child was very sick, and his wife feared it would die and urged him to go for a doctor. Billy took all the money he had, which was eighteen pence (about 36 cents), and started after a doctor. On the way he met a poor man who had lost a cow, and who was trying to get enough money to purchase another. His story touched Billy's heart

so much that he gave him the eighteen pence. Not having any money left he could not go for a doctor. He then went behind a hedge and told his heavenly Father all about it and asked for the child's healing. It soon got well.

One day when Billy had no money, not having received his wages for some time, he took the matter to the Lord in prayer. He had bacon and potatoes but no bread in the house. He went to the captain of the mine and borrowed ten shillings (\$2.50). On the way home he found two families more destitute than himself. He gave them each five shillings and went home without any money. His wife felt blue, but Billy affirmed that the Lord would not remain in their debt very long. Soon a sovereign (\$5) was given to them by a lady.

Billy said that he was working for a big firm, "The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost", and he had great confidence in them. Once he said: "If Billy gets work, he praises the Lord; when he gets none, he sings all the same. Do'e think that he'll starve Billy? No, no, there's sure to be a bit of flour in the bottom of the barrel for Billy. I can trust in Jesus, and while I trust 'im, He'd as soon starve Michael the Archangel as He'd starve Billy."

Billy was a hard worker. He often worked twenty hours out of the twenty-four, building meeting houses with his own hands after working his regular shift in the mines. One time he went to the town of St. Ives to get money for one of his chapels. But the run of fish had been so poor that the fishermen did not have any money to give him. Billy and others prayed earnestly for fish and the fishermen caught thousands upon thousands.

Billy worked and prayed earnestly for the salvation of souls, and won many to Christ. About a year after his conversion his name was placed on the Local Preachers' roll of the Bible Christian Church, a branch of the Methodists. But he was more of an exhorter than a preacher, although he often conducted and spoke in meetings. His principal work in soul winning was probably done outside the pulpit, for he was always busy trying to win souls for Christ. He would pray for his fellow miners before they went to work in the mornings. "Lord," he would say, "if any of us must be killed, or die to-day, let it be me; let not one of these men die, for they are not happy and I am, and if I die to-day I shall go to heaven." He often visited the sick and dying. When ministering to the dying he often expressed a wish that he might "see them in heaven, dressed in robes of glorious brightness; "for," he would add in his quietest vein of humor, "if I saw them there, I must be there myself too. They say that every man has got a little of self, and so have I too."

One time when Billy was walking over a certain hill the Lord seemed to say to him: "I will give thee all that dwell on this mountain." He prayed for and visited the people in the three houses on the hill until they were all brought to the Lord. Then he complained to the Lord that there were only three houses on the hill, and the Lord showed him there would be more. Long after this an Episcopal Church and parsonage were built on the hill. Billy heard of it and visited the church. He was disgusted to find the preacher a "Puseyite," or extreme High Churchman. This made him unhappy until he reflected that he had visited the place before the Lord told him to do so. After some time the clergyman's gardener, who was also a ritualist, was converted to Christ. His pastor was displeased, but was afterwards deeply convicted of sin and was himself converted to Christ. One night, about 11:30 o'clock, as Billy was going to bed, the Lord showed him that he could now visit the hill. He hitched up the donkey-cart and started, reaching the hill the next morning. The pastor heard someone coming through the hallway praising the Lord, and guessed that it was Billy Bray. He and his wife and servants and Billy Bray had a great time of

rejoicing together. Billy then visited the other houses on the hill and found the people all converted, and he was almost beside himself with joy.

Billy used some very original illustrations in his sermons. Before his conversion he was an inveterate smoker. He would sooner have gone into the mine without his dinner than without his pipe. But the Lord so thoroughly saved him from this filthy habit that he threw away his pipe and became an opponent of the use of tobacco in every form. He frequently said that if the Lord had intended people to snuff he would have turned their noses upside down, and that if he had intended them to smoke He would have put a chimney in the back of their heads. He said that an architect who would build a house so that all the smoke had to come out at the front door was in his opinion a very poor architect, and surely the Lord could not be a worse architect than man. There is much truth in this. If meat placed in a smoke-house will smoke to the bone in a very short time, it is little wonder if, as an able physician informed the writer, the inside of the skull of an inveterate smoker is often darkened by tobacco smoke. Not only did Billy oppose the use of tobacco, but he was also a strong advocate of temperance. "Men set lime-sticks to catch birds," says he, "and Satan sets wine-bottles and ale-pots to catch fools."

Worldly dress and extravagance were also things of which Billy did not approve. "I would rather walk to heaven than ride to hell in a fine carriage", says he. Sometimes he would say to women, concerning the use of artificial flowers : "I wouldn't mind your having a waggonload of them on your heads, if that would do you any good ; but you know it wouldn't, and all persons know that flowers only grow in soft places." To men who wore long beards to be in fashion, and argued that it was natural to do so, Billy pointed out the fact that it would be folly to let fruit trees grow in their natural state without pruning. Speaking concerning fasting, Billy says: "If the members of the churches would mortify the flesh more, and not gratify it, they would be much happier than they are." When someone asked Billy how the world was getting on now, he said: "I don't know, for I haven't been there for twelve years."

Billy was a poor singer, but was often singing. He affirmed that the Lord liked to hear him sing. "Oh, yes, bless the Lord! I can sing," he would say. "My heavenly 'Father likes to hear me sing as well as those who can sing better than I can. My Father likes to hear the crow as well as the nightingale."

After a nice meeting-house was built in one place, Billy was called on with others to speak at the dedication. "I told the people," says he, "that the dear Lord had given them a pretty chapel to worship in; and now he wanted good furniture, for bad furniture looks disgraceful in a good house. I told them that the good furniture for the house of the Lord was sanctified souls. We must be pardoned, sanctified, and sealed, and then we shall not only be fit for the Lord's house on earth, but we shall be good furniture in heaven."

Billy had one illustration which always appealed very forcibly to the miners. He represented himself as working all week at a poor mine, where the pay was very poor, and then on pay-day going to a good mine, where the wages were good, to get his pay. He asked if that would not be a very foolish thing to do, and then pointed out how that many people are working for Satan and expecting God to save them at last.

When Billy lay dying, and the doctor told him that he was going to die, he said: "Glory! glory be to God I shall soon be in heaven." He then added, in his own peculiar way, "When I get up there, shall I give them your compliments, doctor, and tell them you will be coming too?" This made a deep impression on the doctor. Billy's dying word was "Glory!" Some little time before dying, he said: "What! me fear death! me lost! Why, my Saviour conquered death. If I was to go down to hell I would shout glory! glory! to my

blessed Jesus until I made the bottomless pit ring again, and the miserable old Satan would say, 'Billy, Billy, this is no place for thee : get thee back!' Then up to heaven I should go, shouting glory! glory! praise the Lord!" Billy fell asleep in Christ in 1868. The following verse is from Mr. John's poetical tribute to Billy:

His fare was sometimes scanty,
And earnest was the fight;
But his dear Lord provided,
And with him all was right.
His dress was always homely —
His dwelling somewhat poor.
But the presence of his Saviour
Made up for that and more.