

LUKE HEYWOOD

The soldier of Fort George

During the 18th century the parish of Resolis was blessed in the person of Hector M'Phail, with one of the most eminently useful and laborious ministers that the Church of Christ has ever seen. The district in which his labours were best known may be stated generally as lying along the shores of the Beaully and Cromarty Firths in Northern Scotland.

This remarkable man is said to have been awakened to spiritual concern after he had entered on the work of the ministry, and to have continued under deep distress for a period of no less than seven years, during three of which his mental sufferings were so great that he never knew what it was to have a night's complete rest. While in this state of protracted anxiety under a "law-work," he made a solemn vow that should the Lord be pleased to grant him a sense of pardoning mercy and clear views of his personal interest in Christ, he would never pass a sinner, with whom an opportunity of conversing should occur, without directing his attention to the great concerns of eternity, and the mercy of that Saviour whom he had himself found. So scrupulously did Mr. M'Phail observe this vow that his little white pony, the unfailing companion of his almost endless journeys, learned to halt of its own accord when it overtook a traveller. Not infrequently, amid the bewildering darkness of the night, as the icy blasts swept down from the hills over the wild solitudes of Meol-bhui, did the sagacity of his four-footed bearer remind the faithful servant of Christ that a fellow-sinner was at hand to whom he had to deliver the message of a Saviour's love. With him the salvation of souls was a real passion, calling forth a self-denial and a devotedness of an almost apostolic type.

It is said that on one occasion, when riding in the company of a brother minister, the travellers were overtaken near Inverness by the equipage of one of the Lords of Judiciary, who was to preside in the circuit court about to be held that day. Mr. M'Phail suggested to his brother minister that this might be an excellent opportunity of doing some spiritual good to an influential man of the world, and urged him to assist in improving the precious and unlooked-for moment. His companion, however, anxious not to be carried away by his zeal beyond the bounds of propriety, politely declined the invitation. Mr. M'Phail, however, had long learned "be instant," not only "in season" but also "out of season;" so the willing propensities of the white pony were again put in requisition.

Riding forward to the carriage, Mr. M'Phail respectfully addressed his lordship, and, after a prefatory remark or two, reminded him that the proceedings in which the court was to engage were emblematic of another Judgment Seat, at which his lordship must appear, not as a judge upon the bench, but as a party at the bar; entreating him, at the same time, with respectful but affectionate earnestness, to weigh well the nature of his case, and to commit it in time into the hands of the great Advocate with the Father, who can never be an unsuccessful pleader, since He Himself is the propitiation for sin. His lordship appeared to be impressed with the address he had heard, thanked Mr. M'Phail most warmly for his ministerial faithfulness, and invited him to be his guest at the close of the court.

Many such anecdotes are told of this amiable and laborious man, and numerous were the instances in which these "out of season" efforts in his Master's cause were savingly blessed to the souls which "by any means" he sought to win. Among the rest, the following perhaps is one of the most remarkable.

In order to reach the parish of Resolis from the coast of Nairn, it was necessary in Mr. M'Phail's day to cross the ferry of Fort George and traverse the peninsula of the Black Isle. After a journey of some eight or nine miles over an immense wilderness the most dreary moorland lying along the entire back of the peninsula, the Church and manse of Resolis were reached.

At the period of our story, Fort George was garrisoned by an English regiment, which partook of the usual profligate character of the British Army at that time. As the neighbouring town of Campbelltown is some distance from the Fort, wooden shambles had been erected close to the water's edge, immediately below the garrison, to serve as a meat market for the convenience of the military. Having occasion one day to travel homewards by the route just described, Mr. M'Phail was detained for some time the Fort by the delay of the ferry-boat, which had to be summoned over from the opposite side.

While he was standing at the edge, with his inseparable companion the pony, a soldier came into the shambles to purchase some meat, and asked the price of a quarter of mutton. The butcher named the sum. With a frightful oath, in which he pledged the everlasting salvation of his soul, the soldier refused to give the price, but ultimately, after a good deal of wrangling, agreed to the butcher's terms and took up the meat to go away. All this while Mr. M'Phail, who was standing outside the shambles, overheard the conversation within, and, shocked at the awful jeopardy in which the soldier had placed his soul, was watching for an opportunity of addressing him upon the imminent danger of his condition. No sooner, therefore, had the man left the market than Mr. M'Phail contrived to throw himself in his way and to engage him in conversation.

"A fine day, soldier."

"A fine day, sir," replied the man, touching his cap.

"Do you belong to the Fort?"

"Yes, sir, and a dull enough place it is; nothing but drill and the blues."

"You are an Englishman, I see. What is your name?"

"Luke Heywood, your honour."

"That seems a fine piece of mutton you have got."

"So it is, sir; and cheap, too."

"What did you give for it, may I ask?" The soldier named the price.

"Oh, my friend," replied Mr. M'Phail, "you have given more than that!"

Luke Heywood looked astonished.

"No, sir, I gave no more. There's the man I bought it from and he can tell you what it cost."

"Pardon me, friend, you have given your immortal soul for it! You prayed that God might damn your soul if you gave the very price you have just named. *And now what is to become of you?*"

The ferry-boat was announced as ready, and Mr. M'Phail stepped on board, while Luke Heywood walked off with his purchase, and entered the Fort. Throwing off his cap, he sat down upon a form in the barracks, and in a short time his reflections turned upon his conversation with the stranger at the ferry. The gentleman's parting words were still fresh in his memory, "You have given your immortal soul for it, and now what is to become of you?"

"Really," thought he, "the stranger is quite right. I have a soul, though I had almost forgotten it; I have pawned it for a piece of mutton, too. Well, I didn't mean that, but I have done it; and now what is to become of me?"

The thought, even to a profligate, was anything but an agreeable one, so he tried to banish the occurrence from his memory. But it would not go; conscience was at work, and refused to still its voice. The words of the stranger were pealing in his ears like the death-knell of his soul. "You have given your immortal soul for it, and now what is to become of you?" In a perfect agony of terror he started from his seat, rushed bare-headed from the Fort, and arrived all breathless at the ferry in quest of Mr. M'Phail.

"Where is the gentleman?" cried Luke to the butcher.

"What gentleman?" enquired the other.

"The gentleman in black clothes, and with a white pony, who told me my soul was lost."

"Oh, you mean Mr. M'Phail. He is the minister at Resolis, and *you* will have to go far enough before you catch him, for he has crossed more than an hour ago."

The ferry-boat being about to make a passage across the water, Luke Heywood entered it, with the design of following the stranger with whose words he had been so painfully impressed. Enquiring of the ferryman the route he must follow, Luke leaped from the boat as it touched the shore at the point of Fortrose and started afresh on his ardent pursuit. We know not the feelings of the agitated traveller as he rushed bare-headed through the town of Rosemarkie, or toiled all flushed and heated across the weary wilds of Maol-bhui. We have not been informed regarding the astonishment of the shepherd or the cottar as the excited soldier hastily enquired whether he had seen anything of a clergyman upon a white pony, what was all the description he could give. He arrived, however, towards evening at the manse of Resolis, and on demanding eagerly to see Mr. M'Phail, was immediately admitted.

We know not how to reconcile the occurrence with the military discipline, but so it was that Luke remained at Resolis all that night and the two following days, during the greater which time he was closely closeted with the minister. Mr. M'Phail's study was not a confessional, albeit many a poor soul had gone thither to ask counsel of the man of God; and if the walls of that little room had but retained a transcript of the experiences to which the minister had been called to listen, how interesting the record they would have presented of the spiritual difficulties which M'Phail had to meet - how useful to those who are entrusted with the same momentous office, and have the like responsibilities to fulfil!

Numerous, however, and varied as were the spiritual cases on which this singularly godly man had been consulted, it may be questioned whether he had ever been called to deal with an experience like Luke Heywood's. His was no doubt a rare case, for into those two short days was condensed, as to its leading features, the history which, with Mr. M'Phail, had stretched over a period of more than seven years.

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither so is everyone that is born of the Spirit (John 3:8). How strikingly was this passage illustrated within the study at Resolis as the minister and soldier knelt down together on the evening of the second day! Both were extreme specimens of the two great modes of conversion - the gradual and the sudden. He whose voice you now hear in holy thanksgiving laboured for seven long and weary years under a "horror of great darkness," unable to appropriate as his own the Saviour of sinners; while he who kneels beside him, and weeps with joy unspeakable over a new-found peace with God, only two days ago was foremost in the ranks of profligacy, his curse the deepest and loudest, and his revelry the wildest and most unbridled, even amid the sottish jollity of the canteen. Yet of him it can be said, just as certainly as of the other, that he is "born of the Spirit."

Doubtless the gradual method of conversion is the Spirit's more usual way; it is, if we may use the expression, more consistent with the structure of the human mind by degrees to the exercise of a

mature faith, and to lead it through a course of careful, anxious, and all-absorbing enquiry to a realisation of a saving interest in the work of Christ, so that the progress from "grace in the blade" to "grace in the ear" may be very gradual and very slow. This, we repeat, is the Spirit's usual way; and for our own part, we are far more disposed to trust the genuineness of the ordinary than of the extraordinary manifestations of a work of grace, insofar, at least, as this is to be judged by its symptoms. But still it cannot be doubted, without doing great violence both to the Scriptures and observation, that there have been, and still are, cases in which the omnipotent Spirit has dispensed with the employment of ordinary means, and, like the wind which "bloweth where it listeth," does not always breath in soft and balmy zephyrs, but anon, though seldom, bursts forth with the fierceness of the tornado to annihilate, with almost lightening suddenness, every obstacle that would arrest its tempestuous path. Even such is the unfettered agency of that free and sovereign Spirit who will not only have mercy on whom He will, but will also *manifest* His saving grace in whatever way He pleases.

Both the minister and the soldier were, as we have said, types of the two opposite methods of conversion; and as they knelt down to offer up their parting prayer, might not each have felt how true were the words of one who had himself been changed like Luke Heywood rather than like Mr. M'Phail: "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit ... And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (I Corinthians 12:4,6).

But we must leave Mr. M'Phail in the study of Resolis and accompany Luke back to the garrison of Fort George. Happy if we can join him in the "new song" with which he wakes the echoes of the moorland wilds on his way back through the Maol-bhui:

He took me from the fearful pit,
And from the miry clay,
And on a rock He set my feet,
Establishing my way.

Like the woman of Samaria, Luke Heywood now began to feel a love for the souls of others, and with David was ready to say to his comrades, "Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul" (Psalm 66:16). The Word was "as fire within his bones," and he "could not but speak the things which he had seen and heard." He accordingly began to hold small prayer meetings in the barracks, and to expound the Scriptures to his fellow-soldiers. By degrees, however, the godliness and zeal of the former profligate became known throughout the district. The people of God were amazed when they heard that he who had scoffed at them in times past now, like Paul, "preached the faith which one he destroyed; and they glorified God in him."

His prayer meetings attracted others besides the military, and the people began to flock from neighbouring parishes to hear the expositions of this wonderful man. An old relation of the writer used to come down amongst the crowd from the parish of Ardealach, a distance of about sixteen miles from Fort George; and his informant was personally acquainted with a godly old schoolmaster who had been a fellow-soldier of Luke's (and a very wild and thoughtless young man he was), but who, along with *many others*, owed his conversion to these prayer meetings among the garrison.

But matters could not long continue thus without exciting the enmity and opposition of the ungodly. The captain of Luke's company was particularly active in his opposition to these prayer meetings, and often threatened the godly soldier with the lash. Sending for him on one occasion, he told him he was going from the Fort that day, and added, with a *tremendous* oath, that if, on his return, he should hear that Luke had been holding any more of these conventicles, he would order so many lashes.

On hearing this intimation, Luke was silent for a few minutes. Then, looking at his officer, he

replied, "Sir, if you ever return alive, God never spoke by me" - an answer almost identical with that of the prophet Micaiah to Ahab (2 Chronicles 18:27). The issue proved that the Spirit was even then speaking by the lips of Luke. The captain and a brother officer went to shoot in the neighbourhood of Culloden, and as the former was crouched behind a hedge in the act of watching the approach of some deer, his comrade (a brother of his own, as we have been informed) mistaking him for large game, took a hasty aim at the moving object, and shot him dead on the spot.

The regiment was soon after ordered to England, and it was reported that Luke purchased a discharge from the army, and became an eminently useful minister. He ceased to be a soldier of King George that he might become a soldier of the Lord Jesus Christ. Can we not hear the echo of the words, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I ignorantly in unbelief"? (1 Timothy 1:12,13).