

Reminiscences of the Rev. John Aldis of Maze Pond.

By his only surviving Son.

THE full title of these reminiscences should be "of Manchester, Maze Pond, Reading, and Plymouth." But it was at Maze Pond that my father's genius perfected itself, and found its fullest scope. The other places gave him work which was a preparation for, or a supplement to, his real life-history.

He would indeed always have been "of Maze Pond" had not the ceaseless growth of London slowly transformed his surroundings there, and removed the chief members of his congregation to almost inaccessible distances. The chapel itself has become a place of business. It has been rebuilt under its old name several miles away in the Old Kent Road. It used to stand at a few minutes' distance from the southern end of London Bridge. Maze Pond was so called because in ancient days a public garden was there, containing a lake or "pond" for boating and bathing; the distinctive place of amusement being a "maze," such as is still to be found in the gardens at Hampton Court.

My father had a theory about the origin of his name, which he based upon a supposed historical fact known to him as a local tradition.

For years before 1685 a wealthy family had resided in a large house, standing in its own grounds, near the sea-coast south of Norwich. But the owner was dissatisfied with it, and so built himself a new house at some distance away. The former residence was kept in repair, but was untenanted. The villagers always called it the "Auld Hoose," to distinguish it from the Squire's new mansion.

After the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) a colony of Huguenot weavers escaped to England and settled in this neighbourhood. The Squire handed over to them the "Auld Hoose" in perpetuity, to be their place of residence, and their factory. Here they flourished, and begat sons and daughters. They were excellent workers and successful in business. Naturally the members of this colony were called by the

villagers "Jack of the Auld Hoose," "Tom of the Auld Hoose," etc. Gradually the descriptive phrase became a surname, "Aldous." A few who migrated inland corrupted their name into "Aldis." It is a confirmation of this theory that while the name "Aldis" is comparatively rare, the original form "Aldous" is freely scattered all over the coast from Norwich to Colchester. We as a family firmly held this theory as undoubted historical fact, and prided ourselves upon our Huguenot ancestry more than we should have done had our forbears come over with the Conqueror.

Two things confirmed this theory in my father's case; his remarkable facility for acquiring French and German; and his noticeably dark complexion. These two peculiarities in combination often led to his being mistaken for a foreigner.

I have heard him describe how on one occasion before he became known at Maze Pond, he was one of the less important speakers at a public meeting where the advertised attraction was an address by "a gentleman of colour (a negro)." He came into the chapel at the head of the procession from the vestry, the rear being brought up by the chief speakers. As the procession wound round the platform he overheard a little girl in the front row of the audience loudly whisper to her sister, as she pointed to him, "That's the gentleman of colour."

Of his remarkable faculty for Continental languages I may give two illustrations. He used to describe how he sometimes amused himself when he was in parts of England where he was personally unknown by pretending to be a Frenchman who could only speak broken English with a French accent, interspersed with rapid digressions into his own (supposed) native tongue. He always found this successful. But he could not have attempted such a device had he not acquired a most perfect mastery of French. On one occasion, when travelling as an amateur guide and interpreter with some of his wealthy Maze Pond friends, he overheard the landlord and landlady of the hotel, where his party had put up, discussing the nationality of that day's arrivals. When his own name was read out the landlord suggested that he was Swiss. The landlady scoffed at the idea. "Nein, nein, ein Preussischer!" ("No, no, a Prussian.") This was due to his correct pronunciation of the guttural *ch*, which in that part of Switzerland and in Rhenish Bavaria is pronounced *sh*.

Of his early days I do not remember hearing my father say much beyond the fact of his having been a rowdy, troublesome boy, addicted to all sorts of mischievous tricks, and recognised by his companions as a born leader in forbidden escapades. But at an early age he attached himself to the

Congregationalists of Colchester, to which denomination his parents belonged. He distinguished himself in their chapel debating society. On one occasion he was chosen to reply to a young Baptist whom they had invited to one of their meetings. My father carefully prepared himself by reading all the arguments on both sides of the subject, and was considered by his fellow-members to have successfully answered their visitor. But for days and weeks afterwards he was haunted by the arguments he had disproved, and gradually he became convinced that the Baptists were right and the Congregationalists wrong. So he consulted the local Baptist minister, and after full investigation of the whole subject, he was publicly immersed on his own declaration of faith and repentance. He thus became for the rest of his life a convinced and fearless Baptist. On one detail alone of that creed did he afterwards modify his opinions. These friends were Strict Communion Baptists, and my father naturally fell in with their way of thinking on that point. Later on his parents must have followed their son's example, or at least his father did so; as I discovered, in a curious interview I had with the old gentleman after I had become an undergraduate at Cambridge in the early sixties. My father used to spend a week or so every year at his birthplace, Colchester. Usually he went alone; but on one occasion he took my elder brother William and myself with him for a day's visit. As we were walking along the streets, we came in sight of the old man (who was now quite blind) led by a boy on one side and tapping vigorously with his stick on the pavement on the other side. We let them go home, and then followed them, and introduced ourselves. I was put into a chair just opposite our blind host. He took me by the hand, and very soon began to unburden himself of what was obviously a weight on his mind. He knew that, like my brother, I had gone to Cambridge; he knew that in some respects Dissenters were under a religious ban, and being now too old to understand the question clearly, he had come to the conclusion that I must have renounced my denominational principles. "Well, James," he began, firmly holding me by the hand. "I hear that you have changed the ordinances." I asked him which ordinance. "The ordinance of believers' baptism," he at once replied, and launched forth into a full and exact statement of what he and all other Baptists held on that point. I assured him that I had not "changed it"; that I was quite as good a Baptist as he was himself; but he seemed only half convinced, and kept occasionally muttering something about "changing the ordinances," till my father managed to quieten him, and turned the conversation in another direction.

My father soon showed such marked ability for teaching

and speaking, first at Colchester, then at Goswell Street, London, that it was decided to send him as a student for the ministry, to Horton College, near Bradford, which had been founded by its Principal, Dr. Steadman. Providence directed his steps, when he became a student there, in an unusual way. On arrival he was looking out for the students' entrance, when a mischievous collegian sent him round to the kitchen door. He knocked, and was admitted by Dr. Steadman's youngest daughter, Letitia, who was at work there, helping the cook. This informal introduction soon put them pleasantly at ease together, and in the end led to their marriage when my father was appointed to his first pastorate in Manchester.

At Horton College my father made some life-long friendships; the most important of these was with James Webb, who after a brief ministry at Arnsby, settled for life as the minister of the Strict Communion Baptist church at Ipswich. My father had entered Horton College as a Strict Communionist, and Mr. Webb as an Open Communionist. The two soon became intimate friends, and when they discovered the discrepancy of their views on the Communion question they argued with each other week after week, and month after month, until in the end Mr. Webb converted my father, and my father converted Mr. Webb; each held his changed belief for the rest of his life. This was a very happy experience for my father, since it gave him a far wider field for his special talents than he could otherwise have found, while the narrower ecclesiastical surroundings quite harmonised with Mr. Webb's temperament.

Of my father's work at Manchester I have never heard him tell us anything, except one curious anecdote. As he was walking towards his chapel on a Sunday morning, he saw a half-drunken woman lying in the gutter by the roadside. A woman friend, bending over her, was trying to rouse her up to a more respectable posture; and as a clinching argument, reminded her that the folk would soon be coming along on their way to church; "And then," said the friend, "they must all see you here, like this. Think of your character!" The woman half raised herself up, as she loudly exclaimed—"Ch'racter—thank God, I ain't got no ch'racter. Ch'racters take a deal of upholding," and with these words resumed her interrupted repose.

But it was after his settlement at Maze Pond (1838) where he remained for seventeen years, that I had the chance of knowing anything personally about his work, as I was thirteen years old when he left Maze Pond for Reading in 1855. During my childhood, naturally, I could not appreciate him. I can only

remember counting the buttons on my frock in weary anticipation of the end of the sermon. But towards the end of his Maze Pond ministry I began to appreciate religious teaching, and took a keen interest in such books as Angell James' *Anxious Enquirer*. When he left us to make his final arrangements with the church at Reading, I wrote to him, told him of my experiences, and asked to be taken as a candidate for baptism. Soon after we had settled in our new home, I was baptised at a week-evening service along with my elder brother William. Of course our names had been given in previously at a church meeting, and I had to undergo the customary questioning from the two "messengers" of the church who had to report on my fitness as a candidate for church-membership. My father had a theory of his own about the two lions who guarded the gates of the Palace Beautiful in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. They represented these "messengers," and, no doubt, did sometimes deter people who otherwise would have come forward for baptism. However, I found my "lions" quite tame and friendly, and got through the ordeal satisfactorily.

What I chiefly remember about Maze Pond was the excellence of the congregational singing, and the comparatively high intellectual and social character of the people. In either respect our only rival church was Devonshire Square, where John Howard Hinton was pastor. Many members of our congregation sang bass, tenor or alto from the score of Novello's *Psalmist*, which was considered too difficult a book by most other congregations; later on it was pretty universally superseded by the *Bristol Tune Book*. We had no choir, and would have scorned the use of a harmonium or organ. This is an interesting reminiscence of the earliest history of the church. When Benjamin Keach was introducing the singing of hymns, many who objected to the novelty withdrew, and in 1691 formed this new church. But when in 1736 the church called Abraham West, he stipulated that they should sing; and they agreed. Our chief deacon was Mr. Beddome, a near relative of the hymn-writer so named. He often visited us at our home, and used to recite to us passages from George Herbert's poems, especially the lovely lines "*Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright, etc.*" George Herbert became the favourite poet of our family; my sister, the eldest of us, often read him aloud to us on Saturday evenings.

One pew at Maze Pond was filled by the family of Mr. Whympers, a celebrated wood-engraver. One of his sons became even better known as an Alpine climber, he was one of the few survivors of the Matterhorn accident, which mountain, he, with his party, was the first to ascend.

My chief remembrance of the Maze Pond ministry was of

its connection with our residences at Shirley, a village some four miles from Norwood Junction, and five or six from Croydon. Long before my time my mother had been more or less an invalid. One summer she spent at a cottage in Shirley, and improved so much from the change that my father rented three white cottages close to the Common. We gave up our house in London and lived in these cottages, which practically constituted one house with a large garden in front and at the back. From this garden there stretched a row of some six or seven heathery hills that sloped down to an oak plantation bordering the road from Shirley to the Croydon cross-road. On the other side these hills rose upwards to a level heath-land bounded by a long fir-plantation, extending from the Archbishop's private grounds above Addington for about a mile towards Crohamhurst and Selsdon. The whole place is now jealously preserved as a beauty-spot by the Croydon Town Council. These three cottages, built end on end, are still in good order, but are inhabited by three separate families.

We lived here for some three years and then went back to London; but, after a short residence there, returned to Shirley till we left it in 1851, and took up our final abode in Surrey Place, Old Kent Road, not far from the Bricklayers' Arms terminus of what was then the South Eastern passenger railway.

While we lived at Shirley my father had to content himself with a "prophet's chamber" in the caretaker's house, which formed one corner of Maze Pond chapel. There he resided from Saturday evening till Wednesday evening, when he came back for the rest of the week; having taken the Sunday services, the Monday evening prayer-meeting, and the Wednesday evening lecture at Maze Pond, besides visiting his people on the intervening days.

On the Wednesday evening some of the elder children always went to meet him as he walked home from Norwood station, then quite an inconsiderable place. I was too young to share in that privilege. Once a month he went on to the next station, Croydon; whence he came back to us with the monthly issue of one of Dickens' novels, which he read aloud to his family. From that privilege also I was similarly debarred. But I can remember seeing the book occasionally lying about; more especially one with a picture of a ragged little boy looking piteously up to a tall lady who had just put her watering-pot down beside the flower-bed, and was staring at the urchin with evident astonishment. That, of course, was Betsy Trotwood with David Copperfield. My father on this one point disagreed entirely with Charles Spurgeon. I remember hearing Spurgeon

denounce novel-reading in the course of a Sunday evening sermon. "I know that worldly people will read novels; I don't blame them. I don't grudge pigs their swill. But how any converted man can waste his time over a novel I cannot imagine."

Both at Shirley and afterwards in London my father used, whenever he had time for it, to take us out for long walks, especially on Christmas Day and similar festivals. One of these impressed my memory, though I was too young to share in it. On a day which turned out very wet and stormy, though fine to begin with, the elder ones went with him on a long expedition to Selsdon, beyond Crohamhurst. I do not know what it was, but there seemed to be some magic spell in that remote place, which lured them on to it, in spite of wind and storm, and the slippery mud they often had to wade through. They consoled themselves, and urged on their way, by making up and singing a parody of Bunyan's "*Who would true valour see,*" which was one of our favourite fireside hymns. Every verse ended with "To go to Silsdon." That was how we always pronounced and spelled the name, though the maps and the signposts now give it an "e" instead of an "i."

We made ourselves quite at home at Shirley. As there was no evening service at the village church we used to have one in one of our cottages, to which any of the villagers who chose to come were welcomed. Our minister was a local baker and grocer, a Wesleyan, who was almost entirely blind. My sister read the Bible for him. She generally chose the chapter; but sometimes asked him what part she should read. His reply was invariable "Heave it open anywhere, miss, it's all good alike." I never met a man with a more marked gift both for extempore prayer and for expounding ('spounding, as he called it) the Scriptures. Had my sister "heaved" the Bible open at a mere list of names from Numbers or Chronicles, he would have deduced some pertinent and useful exhortation from it.

On Christmas Day we gave a present to every villager who chose to come for it; a large slice of Christmas cake, an orange and a few pence. Naturally we had many applicants. The Vicar of Shirley, an old-fashioned Evangelical, was on very friendly terms with us. A drinking-fountain erected in his memory now stands where the road to Crohamhurst and Croydon branches off from the main road from Norwood to Shirley. While we were living there my youngest brother, Charlie, died. The Vicar called to condole with us on our loss. My father, to prevent any misapprehension, explained that the child was unbaptised; "I am sorry you have told me," said Mr. Farrar; "I should have asked no questions myself, and have offered to bury the child here; but, as you *have* told me, you will see that

I cannot legally do so now; which I very much regret." Charlie was buried in the ground belonging to some dissenting chapel in Croydon.

When we gave up Shirley in 1851 and settled in the Old Kent Road, we children all felt very keenly the change from the country to the town. I did especially, and was always dreaming of some plan for revisiting our beloved hills and moorland. Once I inveigled my younger brother into walking with me thither, hoping that our cottager friends would take us in. We started directly after breakfast and walked on bravely till at last we were forced to feel that the project was beyond us; and so, in great misery, turned back. I had twopence in my pocket, with which we bought some biscuits and ate them sitting on a doorstep. We reached home soon after two o'clock, just as our parents were sending out to the police-station to have search made for us. My brother was laid on the sofa, and fed up with every kind of delicacy; while I was banished in disgrace.

There were two consolations for us in our enforced residence in town. One was that we were not far from fairly good country walks, in such places as Peckham Rye: these my father found out for us, and took us with him in his explorations; sometimes helping us by a lift in an omnibus or a short ride in a train. Our hearts would have been broken had our surroundings then been what they are now; an unrelieved wilderness of brick and mortar. We were as far out in the country as was consistent with the imperative condition, that we must be within walking distance from Maze Pond chapel. We walked there and back twice every Sunday, through a queer maze of slummy back streets as soon as our route left the Old Kent Road at the S.E. Railway terminus. Another imperative condition was that we should be able on weekdays to walk to the City of London School; then standing in a quiet enclosure, Honeylane Market, cut off from the noise of Cheapside, just opposite Bow Church.

Another consolation was a fair-sized garden at the back of our house; and more especially a gigantic acacia tree that grew there. The central trunk rose up straight; and, when once you had reached the lowest branches, was as easy to climb as a staircase. It had two specially convenient resting-places on the way up; and at the top the branches formed a comfortable chair; seated on which our eyes were almost on a level with the topmost ridge of the roofs of Surrey Place, which bounded our horizon. On the other side we could look for some distance over a wide expanse of houses and trees.

The great lower boughs of this acacia led to nothing in particular, and they were very troublesome to clamber along.

Once I tried to distinguish myself by going further than any of my brothers had done: in that particular I succeeded; but when I had gone so far that I could not go forward, I found to my dismay, that I could not get back; somehow I could not find a safe foothold. There I stuck, vainly trying to extricate myself, until at last I had to call out for help. So they went in, and brought my father to the rescue. He climbed up the tree and along the branch, until he could reach my feet; these he took hold of and guided in the right way, so that I could scramble down backwards and thus reached the main trunk in safety.

In this garden we were allowed to play pretty much as we liked; and each of us had a small strip along the side-walls for his very own. In these we did what we liked, planting flowers or even making miniature hills and mill-dams. There were several currant-bushes in the garden; mostly black currants, these we were allowed to eat freely, as they were not very tempting so that there was little risk of our taking too many.

One room was my father's study, the walls of which were more or less lined with bookcases that reached from floor to ceiling. The contents of these were chiefly theological; later on I came to know them well and delight in them. But there were many books for the general reader: the *London Encyclopædia*, the *Penny Cyclopædia*, besides books on travel or science. This room was of course sacrosanct, and only to be approached with special permission. We had a small library of our own upstairs on the top landing.

Before we went to the City School we were taught at home chiefly by my sister and mother. My father taught us Latin. There was one subject, however, which he taught us somewhat indirectly. One memorable day when we lived at Shirley he brought home a box, about one foot each way, which opened out and disclosed rows of tiny shelves filled with little pill-boxes containing chemicals of every kind, and little stoppered bottles filled with acids or reagents of different sorts. These surrounded a space packed full with a crucible, pestle and mortar, and other appliances. With this box my father taught the elder ones chemistry for the best part of a year, afterwards he handed it over to them, with its book of instructions to teach themselves and the younger ones. This box seemed endowed with immortality, it held out for such a length of time, and it gave to us all, especially myself, a deep-rooted love for scientific experiments.

On Sundays we had to learn by heart an assigned number of verses from the Psalms or Isaiah; and among our "Sunday books" there were several interesting ones, such as *The Life of*

William Knibb, the Missionary, which we read of our own free will. On weekday evenings we often had a book read aloud to us by one of the elders. In this way we became familiar with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I remember my brother William struggling manfully with his feelings while reading a pathetic death-bed scene, till at last he had to give way, and broke down in a flood of tears.

It was in these intimate relations of home life that my father influenced us most. We were not of an age to appreciate his work as a minister until after he had settled in Reading, where we were separated from him for the greater part of our time by residence in London, when at school, and afterwards in Cambridge, when at the University. In this way we came chiefly under outside influences when at the most impressionable periods of life.

During his ministry in London my father was one of the first to welcome Spurgeon, when the latter settled there in 1853. The older ministers of the denomination looked rather askance at Spurgeon's peculiarities. My father introduced him to membership in a Union of London Baptist ministers; and at the first meeting that Spurgeon attended, the chairman, a venerable fossil, thus summed up the young man's merits in his closing prayer—"O Lord, have mercy upon thy young servant now before Thee, who has so much to learn and so much to unlearn."

In one respect my father's ministry was the exact opposite of Spurgeon's. However interesting and instructive his sermons might be, he never in the pulpit showed the least vestige of humour. No one ever smiled during his discourses. This was the more remarkable because, in himself, he was full of fun, and when speaking on the platform he could make, and did make, his hearers laugh as much as any other speaker. Possibly he had an exaggerated sense of the sanctity of the ministerial office; I never heard him say anything that would have explained this peculiarity in his pulpit utterances. Most probably he had, when a young man, met with some striking instances of preachers who had spoiled their life-work by giving way to an excessive love of the facetious; and knowing his own instinctive tendency to be in that direction he had once for all laid down for himself a rule absolute against any such liberties; and, by thus constantly schooling himself, habit had at last become a second nature with him.

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