

William Willis, K.C.

AMONG Baptists William Willis is remembered as an outstanding lay preacher and as the president of the Baptist Union in the year of the first Baptist World Congress. It is my privilege to remember him in another connection also, as I met him on several occasions in a professional capacity.

Although I had heard him on the political platform and, perhaps, also at Rye Lane Chapel, my first intimate knowledge of him was at the Central Criminal Court, where he and I were each waiting for cases in which we were concerned to be called on. He sat with other Counsel at the Barristers' Table, by which I stood. He showed what a simple-hearted, sincere Christian he was, as he told some of the great experiences of his life to those about him, never seeming to realise that his stories were only subjects of mirthful mocking to some of his comrades at the Bar.

I came into closer touch with him when he was a County Court Judge, and being transferred from a Norfolk Circuit, came to the Southwark County Court, where I was constantly conducting cases before him. He cannot be described as an ideal Judge, his interruptions were far too frequent and made it extremely difficult for any advocate to present his client's case as, with a more intimate knowledge of it than the Judge could have, he considered best. On one occasion, his interruptions were so frequent that, at last, I said, "It is impossible to conduct a case if your Honour so persistently interrupts." I think that, for a time, the rebuke was effective. He never bore malice. On one of the occasions when we were having a chat in his private room, he said to me, "Why do you get so cross with me? I always decide in your favour if I can." Once when he had decided in favour of my client, the other side appealed and he had to state a case for the High Court. In his room he discussed the case with me, but the appeal was successful.

He had a wonderful memory, trained in more than one direction. You could name any date and, quick as thought, he seemed able to tell you the day of the week on which it came. His memory of poets, particularly of Milton, was extraordinary.

He was always ready to talk with any one. A story, which must have originated with himself, used to be told how, on one occasion, returning by omnibus to his home at Lewisham, he

had been talking very continuously until he was interrupted by the call of the conductor of the name of a certain public house, where he got off for home. He said, "I get out here." A woman passenger suggested to him, "You had better not, my man, you've had enough already."

Returning from Sunday preaching engagements on Monday morning, I sometimes met him at London Bridge, he having come by train. After general conversation, his talk would turn to Milton and, taking my arm, he would walk down the Borough, reciting some part of "Paradise Lost" to me, and if he had not finished his quotation by the time I reached my office, he would keep me at the door until he concluded.

I knew that he had some good lectures on the poets, and one day asked him to come to Rye Lane and give us one of them. He told me that it was impossible, he was too busy. The matter passed from my mind, but months later, just as I had turned from the Borough into Trinity Street to my office, I heard a shout, "Philcox, Philcox." I took no notice. The cry was repeated. I thought, "What rude man is that?" When it was again repeated, I looked round and saw the Judge. His greeting was, "I'll come and give that lecture for you." He did so and we much appreciated his visit.

He was a good lawyer, but his success as an advocate was largely spoiled by the fact that he always seemed so sure that his client ought to succeed and failed to see the strength of the other side, and so threw himself sometimes with too much vehemence into his case and damaged it with Judge and Jury.

He told some of us how, on one occasion, I think at Lewes Assizes, he was conducting a case for a widow and children in respect of the death of her husband when Mr. Justice Hawkins summed up so strongly against his clients that he could not remain in Court. When the Jury returned a verdict in his client's favour, and the news was brought out to him, he rushed to the widow, shook her by both hands and, he said, "I am not sure that I didn't embrace her."

His acts of private generosity were many, and if he allowed sympathy, both in Courts and in private, to lead him sometimes to err, well, "e'en his failings leaned to virtue's side." Certainly he was a humble, earnest Christian to whose memory I gladly pay this tribute.

HENRY N. PHILCOX.