

Spurgeon and Simpson

THE article on Spurgeon and Gladstone¹ has prompted a further note on what is probably a little-known relationship between the "Prince of Preachers" and another eminent figure of the Victorian era.

Sir James Young Simpson, Bart. (1811-70), the first Scottish Medical baronet, was Professor of Midwifery at the University of Edinburgh and noted as an archaeologist. Although he is popularly remembered as the discoverer of the anaesthetic effect of chloroform, this was not his real service to the science and art of anaesthesia. More accurately, he owes his position as one of the seven foundation stones of anaesthesia² to his work and energy as a propagandist and apologist and as an expositor of the principle that it is right and proper deliberately and scientifically to allay the pain of surgical operations and the discomfort and distress of women in childbirth. Not only did he enter the lists against the majority of his medical colleagues, but he was quite happy to do battle with the theologians on their own ground and to investigate Hebrew grammar to prove his points from the Book of Genesis!³ What is not so well known is the other aspect of this doughty and intrepid Scot: Simpson was a staunch Evangelical Churchman. He had written on the physical causes of the Death of Christ and was quoted by Dale⁴ and Farrar.⁵

As a child he was deeply impressed and influenced by a good and God-fearing mother and this influence never deserted him. His daughter⁶ tells us that he joined the Free Church movement in Scotland in 1843 and that whenever he could get to church sat under the ministry of Dr. Thomas Guthrie the Scots divine. His biographer Dr. Duns⁷ states that by 1860 he had come, in spite of his good and philanthropic works, to an intellectual perception of the true character of works not done as unto God. He enquired much into Scripture and was profoundly influenced by the illness of a close friend. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." "Lord, I believe," was the response that Simpson made. Eighteen hundred and sixty-one was "my first happy Christmas, my only happy one," for all his speculative doubts had gone and he became the possessor of a new life. Simpson was, of course, absolutely sincere when he said that his greatest discovery was not the anaesthetic value of chloroform but that he had a Saviour. In 1862 his third son, Jamie, a half-blind, delicate lad, died. "We must all

speak for Jesus," the dying boy had said. Simpson, obeying this injunction, began to speak from religious platforms, and commanded attention, but he quickly came to see that his Christian vocation lay in a rededication of himself to his medical work and to his patients.

Mr. Spurgeon and Sir James Young Simpson bore no little resemblance to each other physically and mentally and it is not surprising that, given the opportunity, an affectionate friendship should spring up between them. They first met in 1864 at the house of a mutual Scottish friend, Mr. William Dickson, and here they continued to meet whenever Spurgeon visited Edinburgh. Quite soon Spurgeon was to become acquainted with the medical and surgical skill of Sir James and to know the warmth and sympathy of their friendship.

In 1867 Simpson learnt of the painful illness of Mrs. Spurgeon and offered immediately, through Mr. Dickson, his professional services to Spurgeon in London. "But remember, if I go, it is as a friend and not as a doctor."⁸ Needless to say this offer was gratefully accepted. On the 27th September Spurgeon writes to Mr. Dickson: "I am no small trouble to you, but what can I do? My dear wife grows worse. I wrote to Sir James about a week ago . . . You will do me a service incalculable and never to be forgotten if you can see our kind friend and get him to appoint a time." This was done, for on the 7th October he writes: "My dear friend, let me live the age of Methuselah, I shall not forget your goodness. The Lord reward you, I cannot. This is to bear one another's burdens and to fulfil the law of Christ." After Simpson had visited Mrs. Spurgeon he writes from Nightingale Lane, Clapham, at 1.0 a.m.: "My very Dear friend, I am writing far into the night to tell friends how my dear wife has sped. That dear angel of mercy, Sir James Simpson, has been very successful, as usual, and the operation is well over; patient, very patient, and in good spirits, If you know ten thousand eloquent men in Scotland I would give them work for the next hundred years, viz. to praise the Lord for sending to us such a man, so skilful and so noble a Doctor."⁹ His reply when Spurgeon raised the matter of fees is typical of his large-heartedness and generosity: "Well, I suppose it should be a thousand guineas; and when you are Archbishop of Canterbury, I shall expect you to pay it. Till then, let us consider it settled by love."¹⁰ The relief and laughter in Spurgeon's face at this answer can be imagined!

In his graduation address to the Edinburgh students in 1868 Simpson spoke as if he knew that death was near. "At that solemn hour, as we cross the river of Death, may He by whom 'all things were made' lead and protect and sustain you by the might of His hand—that hand which hung up the sun in the firmament—which spun the planets and stars in their courses—which created this bright and beautiful physical world—and which, in human form,

was nailed up to the Cross of Calvary to ransom back the Dark and Desolate moral world, and atone for man's transgressions. May the infinitude of the Saviour's love guard and claim you then, and now, and always." By now he was starting to feel the effects of the disease (angina pectoris and coronary thrombosis) to which he was soon to fall a victim¹¹ and March, 1870, finds him bedridden and awaiting his end. It was a wonderful sick room. "I could not have believed it possible that any man could have attained to such familiarity with the thought of Death and eternity," says Dr. Duns.¹² The hymn, "Just as I am without one plea" expressed his thoughts perfectly at this time. Ann Ross Cousin's hymn, "Immanuel's land" became one of his favourites and was read to him many times. (She was later to write a poem on his death.)¹³ And now it was Spurgeon's turn to help his friend. Simpson was an enthusiastic reader of Spurgeon's sermons. Let Duns take up the story again.¹⁴ "I mentioned the subject of Spurgeon's sermon, 'When they had looked round about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only, with themselves.'¹⁵ As part of it was read to him Simpson was suffering a great deal, but his face could light up with animation as he said, 'That's nice, read it again.' It seems fitting that the written words of the great preacher should help and comfort him at such a time. Spurgeon had more than repaid the debt to his friend. On May 6th, 1870, Simpson died—unconscious—at his house at 52, Queen Street, Edinburgh."¹⁶

Afterwards Spurgeon wrote: "My friend Sir James has gone over to the majority. IT CANNOT BE WRONG." What did Spurgeon mean by these last emphatic words? There may be evidence, as yet undiscovered, which would give us some clues. Superficially they would appear, possibly, to express some slight doubt: but this is most unlikely in view of all that we know of the man. Perhaps this problem will never be solved. Spurgeon appears to have made no mention of Simpson's death in his utterances of the time. The Victorians were reticent about their illnesses and he may have felt, too, that this friendship was too intimate for it to be disclosed to the general public. Nevertheless, it seems surprising to the writer that he remained so silent.

NOTES

I am grateful to Miss Betty Micklewright for arranging the loan of the very rare Duns *Memoir of Sir James Y. Simpson, Bart.*

¹ D. P. Kingdon, "Spurgeon and Gladstone," *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XX, p. 62, 1963.

² W. Stanley Sykes, *Essays on the First Hundred Years of Anaesthesia*, Vol. I, Edinburgh and London, 1960.

³ J. Y. Simpson, "Answers to the Religious Objections to Chloroform." (Reprinted in the *British Journal of Anaesthesia*, January, 1959).

⁴ Quoted by R. W. Dale, *The Atonement*, 22nd Edition. Note "D" (Congregational Union of Great Britain and Wales, 1902).

⁵ F. W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ*, Vol. ii, 23rd Edition, London, Paris and New York.

⁶ Eve Blantyre Simpson, *Sir James Y. Simpson*, Edinburgh and London, 1896.

⁷ James Duns, D.D., *Memoir of Sir James Y. Simpson, Bart.*, 1873.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ C. H. Spurgeon's *Autobiography*, Vol. III, London, 1899.

¹¹ Douglas Guthrie, "Centenary of Chloroform Anaesthesia," *British Medical Journal*, 1 November, 1947.

¹² James Duns, D.D., *op. cit.*

¹³ "No rest for him in heart or hand or brain:
No pause the o'er wearied frame, work to attune;
No truce in the stern war with human pain,
Till sudden sleep closed life's bright afternoon."

Ann Ross Cousin (1824-1906).

¹⁴ James Duns, D.D., *op. cit.*

¹⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, Sermon on *Mark* 9. 8, "Jesus only," No. 2634 in the published sermons.

¹⁶ 52, Queen Street, Edinburgh,—Simpson House—became in 1947 a Youth Leadership Training Centre and now fittingly provides classes and conferences for Leaders in all the Church of Scotland's work among young people, and has become an accepted centre for all who are interested in the task of passing on the faith from one generation to another.

From a pamphlet, *His Home—our Youth Centre*, issued at Simpson House, Edinburgh—1963.

C. D. T. JAMES

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Under the title *Old Ascot*, one of our members, Mr. B. L. Pearce, has published the diaries of two of his 19th century forebears, George and G. A. Longhurst. A country baker and his son, they were Baptist lay-preachers and that tradition has continued in succeeding generations. The diary entries are terse and without any pretension to literary style but are of much interest whether viewed as documents of social history or as providing a glimpse into the interests and activities of two Christian laymen. Mr. Pearce has issued a limited edition of 25 copies, price 5/6d. each, and they can be obtained from him at 237, Staines Road, Twickenham, Middlesex.