- 1 -

CAUGHT BY INTERCESSION'S LOVE

A young Welsh boy wanders alone in the playground of the 'Barnardo's' Home in Cardiff. After the death of his Mum, he and the others in the family had struggled so hard to stay together, to survive, and to make sure the dinner was cooked, the house cleaned up. The boy used to watch in wonder as his Dad took out a battered half-penny and spun it on the table. He would call it his "lucky half-penny" as, nestled fortuitously in his breast pocket, it had diverted a bullet from entering his young heart as he waged war in France. Destiny hangs on such slender threads ! When the Dad became ill and then died all that effort to keep the family together seemed to have been wasted as the various elder brothers and sisters went their own ways leaving the younger ones to fend for themselves in various orphanages.

At the age of just 13 the weight of the world seems to be on his shoulders as he struggles to find some meaning to it all. They had been a poor family, but at least they had been a family. He remembered how he used to look down on the 'Barnardo Boys' because he felt he was at least better off than they were. But, oh the shame and the pain to find that he was now himself a 'Barnardo's Boy'! He hated it. The five-pound note he received as his part of the inheritance seemed to add insult to injury. In the middle of one rebellious night, holding the lighted match to the sum total of what his family had left, he watched the flames consume the paper and felt his own heart burning to a dry ash.

" Oh God, I feel so alone!"

he thought, turning his eyes heavenward. And then mysteriously a strange desire to pray invades his heart.

" Oh God, when I grow up, will you give me my own family? I'd love to be a Dad, and to be the father of boys. In fact I'd like to ask you for twin boys."

The wind blows through the playground, as the bell rings to go in for lunch but somehow things are different. A sense of eternity hangs in the air, and almost despite himself, a heart has come to life again in the inspired environment of a prayer.

What a strange prayer though! Asking for twin boys is not usually the number one priority on most 13-year-old boys' prayer lists! And yet the prayer was very real and became a kind of compass setting for the years to follow.

The folks were kind enough at the orphanage but the boy could never get over the sense of being a victim of charity which he resented strongly. The resentment boiled over into lots of fighting and shouting and even to an attempted arson of the school!

" We'd better batter the rebellion out of him,"

thought the authorities. So, he found himself learning to box. Unfortunately, he was up against a rather large black man who in a few lethal punches knocked him out. The freezing cold water, which was thrown over him, may have brought him back to his senses but it also gave him pleurisy, which nearly sent him to the grave.

So the boy grew up in the school of hard knocks. As soon as he could he left Barnardo's to work in a dairy and a shredded wheat factory. One night, walking the streets, homeless, he was taken in by a family who gave him lodgings for the next few years.

Military Service came and went, as did an apprenticeship with the Eastern Electricity Board to become a cable jointer. And the romance! At a dance one evening he sees a young lady and says to his friend.

" The lady I'm going to dance with will be my wife."

He dances with her. A whole year passes before they meet again. They begin to go out together. However the man has another love in his life, not another woman, but a love, or rather a compulsion for gambling. One night at the cinema he tells her that he has put all their money on a horse.

" It's bound to win,"

he said confidently. Thankfully it didn't win, and the loss brought with it the revelation of the utter waste of gambling. The choice was made, no more gambling. His heart was set free to marry.

On the night of the honeymoon he says to his new bride,

" We are going to have twins."

How would you react? Well, three months later the wife realises that she is indeed pregnant. The doctors say,

" No, it's not twins, there is only one heart beating..."

But the man says,

" I'm sure it's twins!"

Later on the doctors discover that it is indeed twins and that the one heartbeat they heard was in fact two hearts beating together in unison. However, around the seven month period there are some complications and the woman needs to give birth prematurely. Two minute, identical twin boys enter the world weighing no more than a bag of sugar each. Even at the very dawn of their lives death seems to be trying to smother away the breath of life. One of the boys has great difficulty breathing as his lungs are not fully working whilst the other will not eat, seemingly being too weak to

even have the will to live. Both boys are put into incubators with various breathing and feeding tubes.

On hearing the news of the birth, the father rushes to the hospital. Through the corridor window he sees the two little babies under the antiseptic glass of the incubators. No knowing that they are his children his heart goes out to them.
He turns to a nurse and asks,

" Where are my boys?"

" Over there!"

she replies, pointing to the incubators.

" I'm afraid there's not much chance of them surviving."

A priest is quickly called in so that they can be christened. Another challenge for our young Welshman who now, at the very point of seeing his life's prayer come to fruition, is face to face with its utter destruction. Quietly, with determination, he goes over to the incubators, opens them up and takes the two tiny little hands in his own.

" Live, live!"

he wills in the inner recesses of his soul.

He then goes home and throws himself face down on the floor before God in the agony of prayer.

" Oh God! Give me the life of my boys. Let me love them. Let me feed and provide for them. Let me give everything for them, and then when they are old enough to look after themselves, then you can take them. Just give me time to love them now."

As he gets up from the prayer he knows he has touched God's heart. The contract has been signed and faith for the future rises in his heart.

The Welshman is my own Dad (hence all the inside details) and the proof of answered prayer for the survival of his boys are the very lines of this book being written now! Both myself and my twin brother Colin survived, thanks to the intercessory prayer of our Dad. His prayer gives flesh to the rather misty, super-spiritual idea of intercession we sometimes have. He was willing to put everything he had into the prayer. To own it, possess it personally with love and sacrifice. And once possessing it, give it back to God, surrendering his own sovereignty in submission to God's best. This is the kind of intercession Jesus' life shows us. He owned the pain of suffering humanity giving His all, His last drops of blood, to buy us back from death. He then gave it all back to God in faithful expectation of resurrection life. My Dad summed up another aspect of this prayer when he said to me.

"I went deep to the very depths. And there at the very bottom I touched a heart….The heart of God."

But the story doesn't end here. In fact it is only just beginning! The twin boys begin to grow up. Nothing is ever said about the prayer and apart from a couple of visits to Sunday School and learning the Lord's Prayer from my Mum (which I managed to say in under 10 seconds adding bless me, Mum, Dad and Colin and everyone in the world before the Amen), we were not a churchgoing, religious family.

Our first house was a little cottage in Old Welwyn with a yard, no bathroom and an outside loo. I used to love catching the mice in the mousetrap and then, holding them by the tail, ceremoniously flushing them down the loo. My brother was, at the same time, friend, enemy, constant companion and sparring partner.

Throughout childhood my constant battle was with bronchitis. I could barely run without being reduced to breathless wheezing, and my early school years were punctuated by extended absences due to the illness. Some nights I would wake up sweating, unable to breathe wondering if I was going to die. However, thanks to Mum's love and nursing, I pulled through.

After a short stay at Oxmoor Council Estate in Huntingdon, we moved to a new little house in Little Paxton, St Neots, which was to become our home for many years. I used to love going for walks with my Dad to the Gravel Pits which were not far away, and what joy it was in winter to throw stones on the frozen lakes, hearing them resonate on the ice in some ethereal chorus. Sometimes I would stay out deliberately in the rain just for the pleasure of feeling nearer to creation, nearer to God.

I had my fair share of childhood pranks. I remember one neighbour, Mrs Boswell, coming round one evening to complain,

" My Alan has lost all his eyebrows!"

Her Alan was my mate and we had found a box of matches. Unfortunately we also found an old petrol drum in the woods. What a marvellous idea, I thought, to light a bit of paper, stuff it in the petrol drum, put the cap back on and run! I think my friend must have lost his eyebrows whilst vainly trying to put the cap on as the drum exploded into flames. I'd never heard of Molotov then, but that was my first and very last petrol bomb!

Although I was not a natural sportsman because of my health, I at least had perseverance. I loved rugby and from about 12 began to play in the school team. Regular matches and training gave me greater physical resilience and I seemed to grow out of the crippling effect of bronchitis. I had the joy of captaining our comprehensive school team to many victories and trophies. The comradeship, grit and team spirit, which the game gave me, have proved valuable assets, and the sheer physical outlet was also beneficial during the years of adolescence.

When I was growing up I was known as 'fatty' at school and then when the beginnings of sport and adolescence had slimmed me down I was known as 'spotty' because of the acne which signals for so many the rite of passage into manhood. I was often involved in fights because of this name-calling. I enjoyed study, was quite good, and backed up by an environment of love and acceptance at home was able to progress on to 'O' and 'A' Levels. I got involved in drama and had the privilege of playing *'Mack The Knife'* in Brecht's *'Threepenny Opera'* and another role in Johnson's *'Bartholomew Fair'*. Getting up and acting in front of others enabled me to gain a certain confidence in public situations.

I was gifted more on the English Literature 'arty' side than the scientific, much to the chagrin of my Dad who, for some strange reason, had it in his mind that his boys should become dentists! I've nothing against dentists, but I really couldn't envisage spending the rest of my life looking into people's mouths! (At least he didn't want me to be a gynaecologist!) In the end we compromised and I ended up studying English, Maths and French. We were the first in our family to be able to go to University, my brother in London and myself in Norwich. University meant leaving home at eighteen and stepping into a whole new world.

My first roommate at University was a punk rocker from a group called *'The Right Hand Lovers'* and my second a committed, born-again Christian who later became a missionary in Chad. They both seemed to offer the extremes of choice that the freedom of University life offered.

During the summer vacations I worked as a courier on various campsites in France, a country to which I was beginning to feel more and more attracted. I was studying European Literature with a minor in the French Language which meant a year abroad in France. I taught English in two *'collèges'* in the lovely Breton town of Paimpol where I was placed as an *'assistant'*. I couldn't say that I learnt the French of 'Flaubert' as most of my language was picked up in the bars and football grounds, but I could at least communicate fairly fluently after that time.

I graduated and went to live in Finchley in North London where I thought I would spend a year doing odd jobs before launching into teacher training. I did not really have much ambition to teach but could not think of anything better at the time. I was secretly hoping that something else would appear during the year to give me some stronger direction. And something did appear, but not quite what I expected.

It all began when I received an unexpected telephone call from my Mum.

" Hello, Robert,"

she said.

" Your brother has gone all funny! He phoned up last night saying that he's become a Christian. He said he loves us all and was happy..."

I was flabbergasted. That was definitely not like my brother! I had kept up the contact with him during the University years. He had had his ups and downs but at that time was living in a squat opposite Millwall Football Ground writing poetry and thinking about life.

The next day he came to visit me. As he stood on the doorstep beaming a smile at me I couldn't help wondering if he had gone off his head and got religious mania. It was worse when he said to me,

" You know Rob, the Holy Spirit now lives in me!"

" Oh no!" I thought. " He's got into spiritualism."

I was genuinely uneasy and quite fearful of this new brother of mine who seemed to be on a different planet. I went on to the attack.

" Does that mean you don't swear anymore or go out with girls?"

I exclaimed.

" I don't know about that," he replied, " but I do know that I've met the love of Jesus. Before going on you need to get to know more of Him. Have you read the Bible?"

There he had me. In spite of my University education I'd spent more time on Marx, Freud and Nietzsche than on the founder of the Judeo Christian world. I had to confess that I had never read much of the Bible. I suddenly realised what a gaping hole in my culture it was. I was still confident though.

" Oh, I'll read some of it and come back to you."

I said, convinced by the commonly held idea that the Bible is full of contradictions and errors only to be believed by the naive or the ignorant. He left promising to pray for me. As he walked away I realised that he had something I had not, and I knew deep down that what he was saying about Jesus and redemption was true. I just was not ready to admit it to myself or willing to pay the price of following Him.

In the days that followed I read through the Gospels and the New Testament in a little Gideon's nurse's bible that had unexpectedly turned up in the house. I was genuinely surprised and overwhelmed by the person of Jesus that the Gospels described. He was a million miles away from the *'gentle Jesus meek and mild'* image I had. He had courage, wisdom and the passionate love for humanity that was strong enough to change the world. I had always felt strongly about the sufferings and injustices of the world and longed to be able to make a difference somehow. I remember how crushed down I used to feel whilst watching *'News at Ten'*. With each 'bong' of Big Ben I would get more and more depressed.

Genocide in Cambodia - Bong!

Famine in Africa - Bong!

Another bomb in N. Ireland - Bong!

I longed to be able to change things, but felt powerless. At the time I was living in Margaret Thatcher's constituency and battles were raging with the GLC under the leadership of Ken Livingstone. I was delighted when tube fare prices went down, but enraged when they went up again under the Tories. Anger and frustration was building up and the idea of communism and violent rebellion was taking root. At the time a group called *'Dexy's Midnight Runners'* had a song with the line,

" *The only way to change things is to shoot men who arrange things..."*

and unconsciously I was beginning to agree.

However, something new was challenging me as I got to know this person called Jesus through the Bible. His life of selfless integrity gave the lie to the selfish striving of so many, and His radical teaching about loving even our enemies was a level above anything else I had ever heard. And it was not just words. He modelled His own teaching, proving His love by dying alone on a cross and leaving this world with a lyric of forgiveness on His lips, *" Father, forgive"* . Chairman Mao said that power was in the barrel of a gun, but I was coming to realise that true power lay in the apparent weakness of a crucified man on the cross - the power of love. The first brings power to destroy and crush while the second defeats death and has the power of resurrection life. Truth was gradually dawning in my heart, but there was resistance.

A lot of my lifestyle at the time was in contradiction to that truth. Should I carry on in the comfort zone of living a lie, wearing the masks and trappings of a substandard life or face the challenge of allowing a true, abundant life to take its place? A real civil war began in my heart. I was so drawn to Jesus and yet a powerful fear of radical change was holding me back.

My brother continued to visit me regularly and one day invited me to come to an evening they were organising at Goldsmith's College. Circumstances allowed for me to be free that evening and I found myself on a bus heading for Goldsmith's College in New Cross, South London. As I entered the college an orchestra was rehearsing *'Belshazzar's Feast'* and little did I know that my own life was very much to be held in the balance that evening. As I walked into the meeting hall I said to my brother,

" Don't think you'll get me to be a Christian tonight. I've got too much to lose!"

I'd never been to an evangelistic meeting before so it was all new to me. Folks were friendly enough and the atmosphere relaxed. An evangelist called Andrew Page (he now works in Austria as a pastor) began to speak. The message was interspersed with two songs. The first was called, '*How much do you think you are worth boy?'* It

unveiled the incredible value that God placed on each human life. Rather than see man perish He paid for Him with the blood of His own innocent Son. I realised that even if I had been the only person alive in the world Jesus valued me enough to come and give His life personally for me. In the battle that was raging within, truth was again asserting itself. The final line of the song rang out -

" If it don't make you cry,
Laugh it off, pass it by,
But remember the day
When you threw it away,
When he showed you
How much you were worth!"

That clinched it. I couldn't pass by the truth that Jesus had died for me personally on the cross and that such knowledge held me in a strange way responsible for my destiny. I'd vaguely heard about Jesus, the cross and sins before and dismissed it all as religion, but now a deep revelation of this historic and yet supernatural truth was dawning in my heart.

" I can't deny it," I thought, " but I can hide it."

I quietly resolved to simply believe and be quiet. However, as I was feeling a bit relieved with this new solution the singer started another song. He sung from the perspective of a man in the crowd who had to choose between Barabbas and Jesus. No half-measures! No neutral vote! You are either 100% for one or 100% for the other. No hiding in the middle! I was feeling challenged. It was as if I was the only person in the room and that God was speaking to me directly. The evangelist finished by saying that he was going to pray a prayer of commitment and that all those who wanted to give their lives to Jesus should simply pray AMEN at the end. The battle raged within me. Throughout his prayer I had an inner voice within me saying,

" No! No! No! Don't say AMEN. You've too much to lose" .

The voice became more and more insistent as the prayer went on and I was pretty convinced that I was not going to step over the line of commitment. And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, another revelation eased itself sovereignly into my mind. It was like an inner vision. I had the impression of being confronted with a choice between eternal death or eternal life.

" Now is the time to choose..."

another voice said.

I had to make a decision, and the power of the revelation made it an obvious choice even if it meant losing all that I knew at the time. I said " AMEN" and passed with that simple affirmation from death to life.