John Gordon

~Other Speakers S-Z: Alexander Whyte:

Put off a sin or a piece of a sin every day.'Â—Rutherford.

If that gaunt old tower of Cardoness Castle could speak, and would tell us all that went on within its walls, what a treasure to us that story would be! Even the sighs and the moanings that visit us from among its mouldering stones tell us things that we shall not soon forget. They tell us how hard a task old John Gordon found salvation to be in that old house; and they tell us still, to deep sobs, how hard it was to him to see the sins and faults of his own youth back upon him again in the sins and faults of his son and heir.

Old John Gordon's once so wild heart was now somewhat tamed by the trials of life, by the wisdom and the goodness of his saintly wife, and not least by his close acquaintance with Samuel Rutherford; but the comfort of all that was dashed from his lips by the life his eldest son was now living. Cardoness had always liked a good proverb, and there was a proverb in the Bible he often repeated to himself in those days as he went about his grounds: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' The miserable old man was up to the

neck in debt to the Edinburgh lawyers; but he fast discovering that there are other and worse things that a bad man entails on his eldest son than a burdened estate. There was no American wheat or Australian wool to reduce the rents of Cardoness in that day; but he had learnt, as he rode in to Edinburgh again and again to raise yet another loan for pocket-money to his eldest son, that there are far more fatal things to a small estate than the fluctuations and depressions of the corn and cattle markets. Gordon's own so expensive youth was now past, as he had hoped: but no, there it was, back upon him again in a most unlooked-for and bitter shape. 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes' was all he used to say as he rose to let in his drunken son at midnight; he scarcely blamed him; he could only blame himself, as his beloved boy reeled in and cursed his father, not knowing what he did.

The shrinking income of the small estate could ill afford to support two idle and expensive families, but when young Cardoness broke it to his mother that he wished to marry, she and her husband were only too glad to hear it. To meet the outlay connected with the marriage, and to provide an income for the new family, there was nothing for it but to raise the rents of the farms and cottages that stood on the estate.

Anxious as Rutherford was to see young Cardoness settled in life, he could not stand by in silence and see honest and hard-working people saddled with the debts and expenses of the Castle; and he took repeated opportunities of telling the Castle people his mind; till old Cardoness in a passion chased him out of the house, and rode next Sabbath-day over to Kirkdale and worshipped in the parish church of William Dalgleish. The insolent young laird continued, at least during the time of his courtship, to go to church with his mother, but Rutherford could not shut his eyes to the fact that he studied all the time how he could best and most openly insult his minister. He used to come to church late on the Sabbath morning; and he never remained till the service was over, but would rise and stride out in his spurs in the noisiest way and at the most unseemly times.

Rutherford's nest at Anwoth was not without its thorns. And that such a crop of thorns should spring up to him and to his people from Lady Cardoness's house, was one of Rutherford's sorest trials. The marriage-day, from which so much was expected, came and passed away; but what it did for young Cardoness may be judged from such expressions in Rutherford's Aberdeen letters as these: 'Be not rough with your wife. God hath given you a wife, love her; drink out of your own fountain, and sit at your own fireside. Make conscience of cherishing your wife.' His marriage did not sanctify young Cardoness; it did not even civilise him; for, long years after, when he was an officer in the Covenanters' army, he writes from Newcastle, apologising to his ill-used wife for the way he left her when he went to join his regiment: 'We are still ruffians and churls at home long after we are counted saints abroad.'

One day when Rutherford was in the Spirit in his silent prison, whether in the body or out of the body, he was caught up into Paradise to see the beauty of his Lord, and to hear his little daughter singing Glory. And among the thousands of children that sang around the throne he told young Cardoness that he saw and heard little Barbara Gordon, whose death had broken every heart in Cardoness Castle. 'I give you my word for it,' wrote Rutherford to her broken-hearted father, 'I saw two Anwoth children there, and one of them was your child and one of them was mine.' And when another little voice was silenced in the Castle to sing Glory in heaven, Rutherford could then write to young Cardoness all that was in his heart; he could not write too plainly now or too often. Not that you are to suppose that they were all saints now at Cardoness Castle, or that all their old and

inherited vices of heart and character were rooted out: no number of deaths will do that to the best of us till our own death comes; but it was no little gain towards godliness when Rutherford could write to young Gordon, now old with sorrow, saying, 'Honoured and dear brother, I am refreshed with your letter, and I exhort you by the love of Christ to set to work upon your own soul. Read this to your wife, and tell her that I am witness for Barbara's glory in heaven.'

We would gladly shut the book here, and bring the Cardoness correspondence to a close, but that would not be true to the whole Cardoness history, nor profitable for ourselves. We have buried children, like John Gordon; and, like him, we have said that it was good for us to be sore afflicted; but not even the assurance that we have children in heaven has, all at once, set our affections there, or made us meet for entrance there. We feel it like a heavy blow on the heart, it makes us reel as if we had been struck in the face, to come upon a passage like this in a not-long-after letter to little Barbara Gordon's father: 'Ask yourself when next setting out to a night's drinking: What if my doom came to-night? What if I were given over to God's sergeants to-night, to the devil and to the second death?' And with the same post Rutherford wrote to William Dalgleish telling him that if young Cardoness came to see him he was to do his very best to direct and guide him in his new religious life. But Rutherford could not roll the care of young Cardoness over upon any other minister's shoulders; and thus it is that we have the long practical and powerful letter from which the text is taken: 'Put off a sin or a piece of a sin every day.'

Old Cardoness had been a passionate man all his days; he was an old man before he began to curb his passionate heart; and long after he was really a man of God, the devil easily carried him captive with his besetting sin. He bit his tongue till it bled as often as he recollected the shameful day when he swore at his minister in the rack-renting dispute. And he never rode past Kirkdale Church without sinning again as he plunged the rowels into his mare's unoffending sides. Cardoness did not read Dante, else he would have said to himself that his anger often filled his heart with hell's dunnest gloom. The old Castle was never well lighted; but, with a father and a son in it like Cardoness and his heir, it was sometimes like the Stygian pool itself. Rutherford had need to write to her ladyship to have a soft answer always ready between such a father and such a son.

If you have the Inferno at hand, and will read what it says about the Fifth Circle, you will see what went on sometimes in that debt-drained and exasperated house. Rutherford was far away from Cardoness Castle, but he had memory enough and imagination enough to see what went on there as often as fresh provocation arose; and therefore he writes to young Gordon to put off a piece of his fiery anger every day. 'Let no complaining tenants, let no insulting letter, let no stupid or disobedient servant, let no sudden outburst of your father, let no peevish complaint of your wife make you angry. Remember every day that sudden and savage anger is one of your besetting sins: and watch against it, and put a piece of it off every day. Determine not to speak back to your father even if he is wrong and is doing a wrong to you and to your mother; your anger will not make matters better: hold your peace, till you can with decency leave the house, and go out to your horses and dogs till your heart is again quiet.'

Rutherford was not writing religious commonplaces when he wrote to Cardoness Castle; if he had, we would not have been reading his letters here tonight. He wrote with his eye and his heart set on his correspondents. And thus it is that 'night-drinking' occurs again and again in his letters to young Gordon. The Cardoness bill to Dumfries for drink was a heavy one; but it seems never to have occurred, even to the otherwise good people of those days, that strong drink was such a costly as well as such a dangerous luxury. It distresses and shocks us to read about 'midnight drinking' in Cardoness Castle, and in the houses round about, after all they had come through, but there it is, and we must not eviscerate Rutherford's outspoken letters. The time is not so far past yet with ourselves when we still went on drinking, though we were in debt for the necessaries of life, and though our sons reeled home from company we had made them early acquainted with. If you will not even yet pass the wine altogether, take a little less every day, and the good conscience it will give you will make up for the forbidden bouquet; till, as Rutherford said to Gordon, 'You will more easily master the remainder of your corruptions.'

Let us all try Samuel Rutherford's piecemeal way of reformation with our own anger; let us put a bridle on our mouths part of every day. Let us do this if we can as yet go no further; let us bridle our mouths on certain subjects, and about certain people, and in certain companies. If you have some one you dislike, some one who has injured or offended you, some rival or some enemy, whom to meet, to see, to read or to hear the name of, always brings hell's dunnest gloom into your heart-well, put off this piece of your sin concerning him; do not speak about him. I do not say you can put the poison wholly out of your heart; you cannot: but you can and you must hold your peace about him. And if that beats youÂ—if, instead of all that making you more easily master of your corruption, it helps you somewhat to discover how deep and how deadly it isÂ—then Samuel

John Gordon

Rutherford will not have written this old letter in vain for you.