

**Billy Nicholson - The Irish Whitefield****Leonard Ravenhill:**

In the year 1900 a "massed band" of four people marched out-of-step down the main street of Bangor in Northern Ireland. The two members with uniforms were Salvation Army lassies; the other two were young men. One of these men had a mind keen as a razor's edge; the other (according to the first) "hadn't enough brains to give him a nucleus for a headache."

The young man who headed this little parade was beating a tuneless tambourine. He had recently vowed that for Christ's sake he would go anywhere and do anything at any cost. Then this silly thing in the streets of his home town had turned up. He had been walking down the street when this Salvation Army lassie asked him to stand with the other three at the street corner to witness for Christ.

It hadn't the faintest smell of the heroic about it. Theories he formulated in the armchair looked heroic. But in the heat of the battle, a swivel-chair theologian's theories perish. For this young man it was tough to get things in line when he actually faced his Goliath.

"Daft Jimmy," the nitwit who stood with the Sally lassies, wore a red jersey. On the back of it in white letters was written the startling non-scriptural text, "Saved from Public Opinion." Maybe the nitwit hadn't enough wit to be scared of anybody, but the young leader was scared. Moreover, wide-eyed cynics showered the band with unsubdued catcalls. What a baptism! His public enemy number one was public opinion. His meeting with God had been a mountaintop experience. Now he was in the valley of humiliation.

To make bad worse (as the Irish say it), it seemed by some pre-arranged signal that every friend, every relative, and every enemy of his passed the corner as he stood there bashfully. Notice that I said "passed"-- thus marking the meeting's total ineffectiveness.

Seeing the dilemma, one of the Army lassies suggested that the four kneel down and ask the Lord to "take over." Poor Billy! As they knelt there, a brother offered a "telegram" prayer which Billy wished had been as long as the 119th Psalm. Then something happened. When Billy arose from his knees, he was through forever with any sensitiveness to public opinion. His reputation died and had a public funeral in that street meeting. (To die and be buried publicly doesn't take long!)

To the jeering spectators, this street meeting may have looked like comedy. But to this young man it was sweeter than the "Triumphal March" in Verdi's Aida. It was a glory march to celebrate a greater victory to him than that of Nelson at Trafalgar or King William III at the Battle of the Boyne. Billy was triumphant. He had just lost what he never wanted to find again and had just found what he never wanted to lose. He lost his reputation and fear of man and found the joy and peace Of the overflowing fullness of the Spirit. Hallelujah!

That meeting was his inauspicious comic introduction into a world of evangelism. Who was this young man? None other than W. P. Nicholson (better known to millions as just W.P.). He was as Irish as the turf and rugged as the hills of Donegal.

W.P.'s middle initial might well have been C for courage. At fifteen he sailed away from home as an apprentice seaman. His was a harsh training. He had been at sea in old sailing vessels as long as five months at a time without seeing land. He had weathered Cape Horn in a hurricane. He had fought overweight men bare-fisted. His fighting was "all in and no holds barred."

W.P. was saved in 1899 and he knew it. Months later (and only a few hours before his famed street meeting episode in Bangor) he had had an old-fashioned liberation from sin. Presbyterian though he was full-blooded, pedigreed, and bluestockinged -- after the Spirit liberated him, he began to weep and sing and rejoice like any old-fashioned Free Methodist.

Because of his meetings, many men are in the ministry today, battering the strongholds of Satan and snatching souls from the burning. One of these is my friend Andy Mays, the old drunk who was saved in Billy's meeting.

The first night Andy Mays attended the meeting, he itched on his chair. "Nicholson won't get me in there again," he vowed as he left the service. But the next night Andy was there. As he left, he repeated his vow. The third night Andy sat up on the "top deck." But the higher you are, the further you fall. That night Andy fell right into the hands of a merciful God.

Andy now occupies the pulpit in "Beach House," outside a town called Lisburn, nine miles from Belfast. Andy has walked long and well. But the evangelist who showed him "yonder shining light" (as Bunyan said) was Billy Nicholson.

W.P. became a fearless and flaming winner of souls. He was enthusiastic and effective. The Bible became his textbook and his greatest delight was witnessing for his Saviour and winning souls.

Wilbur Chapman and Charles Alexander asked him to accompany them to Australia. As in Ireland, so in Australia; there were mighty moves of the Spirit. Later on Peter Connolly teamed with him. Tens of thousands came to Christ as Saviour, and uncounted more numbers knew for themselves the Spirit-filled life.

There were also great times when Finney, Billy Sunday, Dr. Torrey, and W.P. used the Sunday afternoons in meetings for men only. One minute the men were sore with laughing; minutes later they were shaking with conviction. W.P. could play on the human emotions, fears, and mind as Mendelssohn played the organ.

Very few Christians have known the craft of evangelism better than Nicholson. He prayed, he studied, he wept, he warned, he pleaded, he urged, he coaxed, he threatened. He would be "all things to all men that he might by all means save some." When he entered a pulpit, he did so with "soul-sweat." It would be no exaggeration to say "the gates of hell could not prevail against him."

One instance of his preaching can be seen the time he gave a great message on John 3:16. At the invitation to accept God's love, there was not a move. W.P.'s guns were loaded the next night with a fearful message on hell. No jokes that night! No "by your leave's"! No sprinkling theological rose water! No short cuts! I have heard Christian men say they would go 100 miles to hear W.P. deliver his soul on the solemn subject of hell.

Billy was all steamed up because men dared slight God's love. He preached and sweat; the crowd listened and sweat. W.P. cried in the name of the Lord; the crowd cried in the fear of the Lord. After the message, W.P. raised his foot and with a solemn warning "kicked" the whole crowd into hell. "You would not take God's forgiveness last night? Then take His judgment tonight!" There was no benediction, and the solemn, stunned souls sat. Billy was half way down the street before they were aware that he had gone.

For his disgusting pulpit procedure, my friend P.C. stormed at Billy and warned, "The folk will not come to hear you any more."

"If hell is half as bad as I painted it tonight, then by Sunday night they will be glad to get out of it," replied Billy.

How right he was! At the altar Sunday night there was a shoal of souls. Conviction had so tormented them for two days that they were ready to surrender.

In spiritual and Biblical matters, Nicholson bowed to none. He was very conscious of his sonship to God. Yet he was equally conscious that he was a servant of God, and so he helped all who called for it. This was the great thing about W.P.

Many copied W.P.; he copied none. He traveled far and wide and made ten circuits of the world, preaching great sermons and preaching with the great. Yet he did not assimilate their style or use their methods. His own individual method "caught fish," and so he fished that way. As a man of God, he kept that strange originality that the Lord had given him.

Prayer might be called his habitat, for he loved to pray. His campaigns had nights and half nights of prayer. Praying in the Spirit kept him in the spirit of prayer. From the prayer closet he mounted the pulpit-endued.

With William Bums, Nicholson could cry, "The thud of Christless feet on the road to hell is breaking my heart." Of his fiery preaching it could be said, "His words were a flame and the hearts of men as dried up grass."

Two years ago devout men carried W. P. Nicholson to his resting place. Heaven knew when this preacher-prophet of Northern Ireland arrived!

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