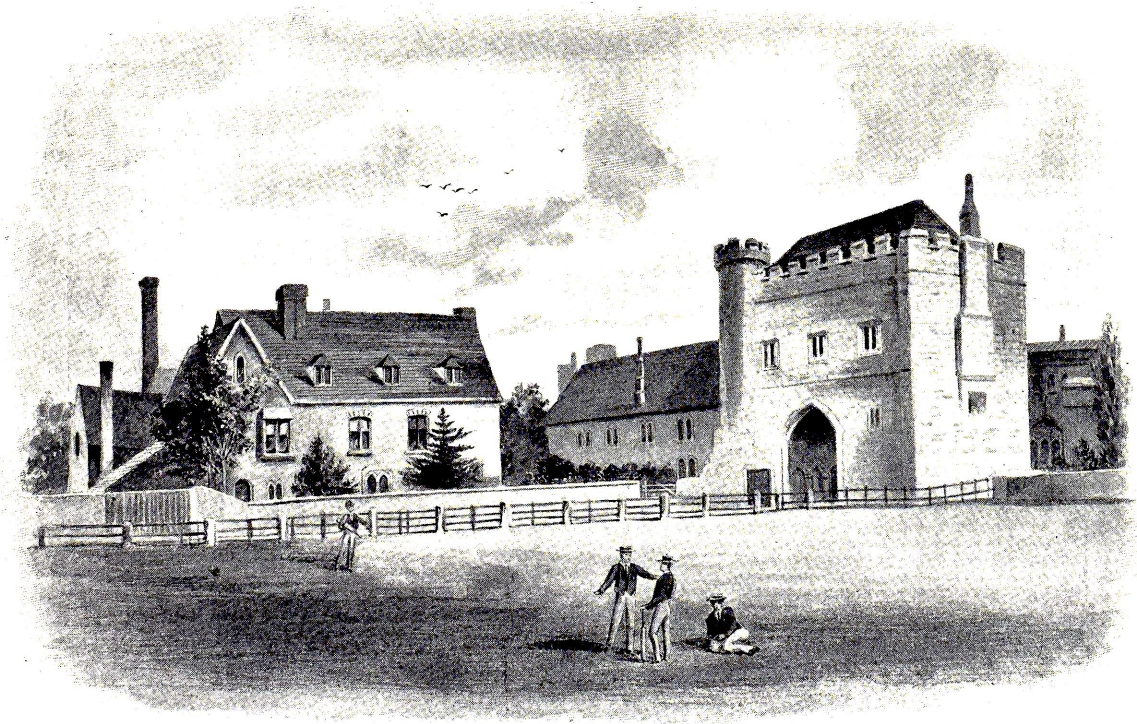


CHAPTER VII.

Memories of Maidstone and Newmarket.



ST. AUGUSTINE'S COLLEGE, MAIDSTONE (WHERE C. H. SPURGEON WENT TO SCHOOL, 1848-9).



RECOLLECT that, when I first came to London as a boy, to go to school at Maidstone, while I was sitting in the coach, ready to start, a man came along selling knives with a great number of blades. He put one in at the window, and stuck it right before my face. Why did he want to intrude on me like that? He had no business to poke a knife into my eye; but he had never studied that kind of modesty which some of us have. If he had kept that many-bladed knife in his pocket, and quietly said, "If there should be a person in the coach who would like to look at a knife with ever so many blades, I have one in my pocket," he would not have sold

one in a century ; but he picked me out as a likely customer, and opened the blades as if he knew that such a knife would be wonderfully fascinating to a boy going to school. That man's energy taught me a lesson which I have often turned to good account when I have been trying to induce people to "buy the truth."

* * * *

I was about the age of fourteen when I was sent to a Church of England school,—now called St. Augustine's College, Maidstone. We had three clergymen who came by turns to teach us their doctrines ; but, somehow or other, the pupils did not seem to get on much, for when one of them was asked by a clergyman how many sacraments there were, he said, "Seven," and when that was denied, he said, "Oh, sir, there is one that they take at the altar!" upon which I could not help saying, "That's hanging, I should think," which suggestion made even the reverend gentleman smile, although, of course, I was bidden not to be so rude as to interrupt again. I am sure many of the sons of the gentry in that establishment were more ignorant of Scripture than the boys in some of our Ragged Schools.

One of the clergy was, I believe, a good man ; and it is to him I owe that ray of light which sufficed to show me believers' baptism. I was usually at the head of the class, and on one occasion, when the Church of England Catechism was to be repeated, something like the following conversation took place :—

Clergyman.—What is your name ?

Spurgeon.—Spurgeon, sir.

C.—No, no ; what is your name ?

S.—Charles Spurgeon, sir.

C.—No, you should not behave so, for you know I only want your Christian name.

S.—If you please, sir, I am afraid I haven't got one.

C.—Why, how is that ?

S.—Because I do not think I am a Christian.

C.—What are you, then,—a heathen ?

S.—No, sir ; but we may not be heathens, and yet be without the grace of God, and so not be truly Christians.

C.—Well, well, never mind ; what is your first name ?

S.—Charles.

C.—Who gave you that name ?

S.—I am sure I don't know, sir ; I know no godfathers ever did anything for me, for I never had any. Likely enough, my mother and father did.

C.—Now, you should not set these boys a-laughing. Of course, I do not wish you to say the usual answer.

He seemed always to have a respect for me, and gave me *The Christian Year*, in calf, as a reward for my great proficiency in religious knowledge. Proceeding with the Catechism, he suddenly turned to me, and said,—

Spurgeon, you were never properly baptized.

S.—Oh, yes, sir, I was ; my grandfather baptized me in the little parlour, and he is a minister, so I know he did it right !

C.—Ah, but you had neither faith nor repentance, and therefore ought not to have received baptism !

S.—Why, sir, that has nothing to do with it ! All infants ought to be baptized.

C.—How do you know that ? Does not the Prayer Book say that faith and repentance are necessary before baptism ? And this is so Scriptural a doctrine, that no one ought to deny it. (Here he went on to show that all the persons spoken of in the Bible as being baptized were believers ; which, of course, was an easy task, and then said to me,—) Now, Charles, I shall give you till next week to find out whether the Bible does not declare faith and repentance to be necessary qualifications before baptism.

I felt sure enough of victory ; for I thought that a ceremony my grandfather and father both practised in their ministry must be right ; but I could not find it,—I was beaten,—and made up my mind as to the course I would take.

C.—Well, Charles, what do you think now ?

S.—Why, sir, I think you are right ; but then it applies to you as well as to me !

C.—I wanted to show you this ; for this is the reason why we appoint sponsors. It is that, without faith, I had no more right than you to holy baptism ; but the promise of my sponsors was accepted by the Church as an equivalent. You have no doubt seen your father, when he has no money, give a note-of-hand for it ; and this is regarded as an earnest of payment, because, as an honest man, we have reason to expect he will honour the note he has given. Now, sponsors are generally good people, and in charity we accept their promise on behalf of the child. As the child cannot at the time have faith, we accept the bond that he will ; which promise he fulfils at confirmation, when he takes the bond into his own hands.

S.—Well, sir, I think it is a very bad note-of-hand.

C.—I have no time to argue that, but I believe it to be good. I will only ask you this,—Which seems to have the greater regard to Scripture,—I, as a Churchman, or your grandfather as a Dissenter ? He baptizes in the very teeth of Scripture ; and I do not, in my opinion, do so, for I require a promise, which I look upon as an equivalent of repentance and faith, to be rendered in future years.

S.—Really, sir, I think you are more like right ; but since it seems to be the

truth that only believers should be baptized, I think you are both wrong, though you seem to treat the Bible with the greater politeness.

C.—Well, then, you confess that you were not properly baptized ; and you would think it your duty, if in your power, to join with us, and have sponsors to promise on your behalf ?

S.—Oh, no ! I have been baptized once, before I ought ; I will wait next time till I am fit for it.

C.—(Smiling.) Ah, you are wrong ; but I like to see you keep to the Word of God ! Seek from Him a new heart and Divine direction, and you will see one truth after another, and very probably there will be a great change in those opinions which now seem so deeply rooted in you.

I resolved, from that moment, that if ever Divine grace should work a change in me, I would be baptized, since, as I afterwards told my friend the clergyman, “ I never ought to be blamed for improper baptism, as I had nothing to do with it ; the error, if any, rested with my parents and grandparents.”

* * * *

When at Mentone, on one occasion, I was greatly pleased to receive the following note from a lady I met there, as it enabled me to identify the esteemed clergyman who had shown himself so interested in my welfare while at Maidstone :—

“ Mrs. S—— wrote me, the other day, that she had been dining out, and sat next to Canon Jeffreys, of Hawkhurst. The conversation turned upon Mr. Spurgeon and his valuable Commentary on the Psalms. The Canon said that he once examined at some Grammar School where the boy Spurgeon was, and that he was the only boy out of, I forget how many, who could answer most of the questions. Some boys could not do *any*, while young Spurgeon did all excepting those on the Church Catechism.”

* * * *

It was while I was at Maidstone that I had the opportunity of attending the services of the Established Church, and therefore was able, long afterwards, to say to the students of the Pastors' College :—“ There is an ecclesiastical twang which is much admired in the Establishment, a sort of steeple-in-the-throat grandeur, an aristocratic, theologic, parsonic, supernatural, infra-human mouthing of language and rolling over of words. It may be illustrated by the following specimen,—‘ He that hath yaws to yaw, let him yaw,’ which is a remarkable, if not impressive, rendering of a Scripture text. Who does not know the hallowed way of pronouncing—‘ Dearly-beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in divers places ’ ? It rolls in my ears now like Big Ben, coupled with boyish memories of monotonous peals of ‘ The Prince Albert, Albert Prince of Wales, and all the Royal Family. . . . Amen.’

Now, if a man who talks so unnaturally does *not* get bronchitis, or some other disease, I can only say that throat diseases must be very sovereignly dispensed. At the Nonconformist hobbies of utterance I have already struck a blow, and I believe it is by them that larynx and lungs become delicate, and good men succumb to silence and the grave."

I had a variety of experiences while at that Church school. One piece of mischief I remember to this day. There was a large jar of ammonia in a certain cupboard, and I used to lead the new boys to it, and tell them to take a good sniff, the usual result being that they would be quite overpowered. Once, when a boy fell down in a dead faint, I was really frightened, and I did not want to play the same trick on anyone else. Perhaps I took the more liberty as the master (Mr. David Walker) was my uncle ; at any rate, I was a great favourite with my aunt, and that fact helped me out of many a difficulty.

Mr. Walker's usual plan of punishing his pupils was to make the sentence bear as much resemblance as possible to the offence they had committed. For instance, the boys had gone one night, and borrowed a boat from the river ; so, the next night, they were roused from their slumbers, and made to go at once to return it to its proper place. They would probably be all the more careful not to repeat their wrong-doing when they found how much discomfort it brought to themselves.

It often happened that, when corporal punishment was to be administered, my uncle would send me out to find a cane for him. It was not a very pleasant task, and I noticed that I never once succeeded in selecting a stick which was liked by the boy who had to feel it. Either it was too thin, or too thick ; and, in consequence, I was threatened by the sufferers with condign punishment if I did not do better next time. I learned from that experience never to expect God's children to like the particular rod with which they are chastened.

I greatly offended my uncle, on one occasion, by pointing out an error in an arithmetical problem he was working on the blackboard. He said that it was derogatory to his dignity to be corrected before his pupils, but I maintained that it was not right for me to let the mistake pass without mentioning it after I had detected the blunder. I think, after that incident, he judged that I could employ my time to the greatest advantage by taking my books, and studying by myself beneath an old oak-tree by the river Medway ; at all events, he showed his appreciation of my mathematical progress by allowing me to make the calculations which are, I believe, still used by a certain Life Insurance Society in London.

* * * *

(In the month of July, 1889, Mr. Spurgeon paid a short visit to the town of

Maidstone. On the Sabbath evening after his drive into Kent, he preached at the Metropolitan Tabernacle a sermon upon Psalm lxxi. 17, in which he said :—)

I went down, last week, to Maidstone, in Kent. It is as near as possible to the day, forty years ago, when I left the school called a "College" there. I thought that I must go down and look at the spot, and specially at a tree which stands by the river Medway. Under that tree I spent many hours, and many days, and even many weeks, reading all day long. "In school-time?" say you. Yes, my master thought that I should do better under that tree than in the class; and he was a wise man. He gave me my book, and left me to myself; and as I stood last week under that tree, with the smoothly-flowing river at my feet, I could thank God for His mercy to me for all these forty years, and I could say, "O God, Thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared Thy wondrous works." There may be some young people here to-night, just come back from school, boys and girls who are just finishing their school days. I would to God that they would spend some time in holy, quiet thought about their future, about whom they will serve, who shall be their Teacher, for whom they will become teachers, and how the life which has now become more public than before shall be spent.

As I stood there, last week, I could not help praising God that, not long after I left that school, He led me to faith in Christ, and to rest in Him, and find eternal life; and I could not but thank God that I went to that school for twelve months. It was a Church of England school. I had never seen anything of Church of Englandism till that time; but there was a turning in my life, through being there, to which I owe my being here. The Church of England Catechism has in it, as some of you may remember, this question, "What is required of persons to be baptized?" and the answer I was taught to give, and did give, was, "Repentance, whereby they forsake sin; and faith, whereby they steadfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that sacrament." I looked that answer up in the Bible, and I found it to be strictly correct as far as repentance and faith are concerned; and of course, when I afterwards became a Christian, I also became a Baptist; and here I am, and it is due to the Church of England Catechism that I am a Baptist. Having been brought up amongst Congregationalists, I had never looked at the matter in my life. I had thought myself to have been baptized as an infant; and so, when I was confronted with the question, "What is required of persons to be baptized?" and I found that repentance and faith were required, I said to myself, "Then I have not been baptized; that infant sprinkling of mine was a mistake; and please God that I ever have repentance and faith, I will be properly baptized." I did not know that there was one other person in the world who held the same opinion; for so little

do Baptists make any show, or so little did they do so then, that I did not know of their existence. So I feel grateful to the Church school, and grateful to the Church Catechism, for what I learnt at Maidstone. I do not know that I have any vivid gratitude for any other question in the Catechism ; but I am very thankful for that particular one, for it led me where it was never intended to lead me by those who wrote it. It led me, however, as I believe, to follow the Scriptural teaching that repentance and faith are required before there can be any true baptism.

* * * *

THE YOUNG USHER'S TEACHER IN THEOLOGY.

The first lessons I ever had in theology were from an old cook in the school at Newmarket where I was an usher. She was a good old soul, and used to read *The Gospel Standard*. She liked something very sweet indeed, good strong Calvinistic doctrine ; but she lived strongly as well as fed strongly. Many a time we have gone over the covenant of grace together, and talked of the personal election of the saints, their union to Christ, their final perseverance, and what vital godliness meant ; and I do believe that I learnt more from her than I should have learned from any six doctors of divinity of the sort we have nowadays. There are some Christian people who taste, and see, and enjoy religion in their own souls, and who get at a deeper knowledge of it than books can ever give them, though they should search all their days. The cook at Newmarket was a godly experienced woman, from whom I learned far more than I did from the minister of the chapel we attended. I asked her once, "Why do you go to such a place?" She replied, "Well, there is no other place of worship to which I can go." I said, "But it must be better to stay at home than to hear such stuff." "Perhaps so," she answered ; "but I like to go out to worship even if I get nothing by going. You see a hen sometimes scratching all over a heap of rubbish to try to find some corn ; she does not get any, but it shows that she is looking for it, and using the means to get it, and then, too, the exercise warms her." So the old lady said that scratching over the poor sermons she heard was a blessing to her because it exercised her spiritual faculties and warmed her spirit. On another occasion I told her that I had not found a crumb in the whole sermon, and asked how she had fared. "Oh !" she answered, "I got on better to-night, for to all the preacher said, I just put in a *not*, and that turned his talk into real gospel."

* * * *

(After Mr. Spurgeon was "called home," Professor J. D. Everett, F.R.S., of Queen's College, Belfast, wrote to *The Christian World*:—"In the summer of 1849, when I was not quite eighteen, I went to Newmarket to assist in a school kept by a

Mr. Swindell,* who had been an old friend of my father's, and who had my brothers, Percy and John, as pupils. There were two other assistants, but not long after my arrival they went off, and I was left for a week or so as the sole assistant. I was then relieved of part of my duty by a lad of fifteen, who came as an articled pupil. This was Charles H. Spurgeon, and for the next three months we shared the work between us. We boarded in the house, occupied the same bedroom, took our walks together, discussed our common grievances, and were the best of friends. He was a keen observer of men and manners, and very shrewd in his judgments. He enjoyed a joke, but was earnest, hard-working, and strictly conscientious. He had a wonderful memory for passages of oratory which he admired, and used to pour forth to me with great gusto, in our walks, long screeds from open-air addresses of a very rousing description, which he had heard delivered at Colchester Fair, by the Congregational minister, Mr. Davids. His imagination had evidently been greatly impressed by these services, at which, by-the-by, his father was selected to give out the hymns on account of the loudness of his voice,—a quality which would appear to have run in the family, but which had not at that time shown itself in my young friend. I have also heard him recite long passages from Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. He was a delightful companion, cheerful and sympathetic; a good listener as well as a good talker. And he was not cast in a common conventional mould, but had a strong character of his own.

"As to the early history of his theological views, I can add something to what has been already published. In Mr. Swindell's household there was a faithful old servant,—a big, sturdy woman, who was well known to me and all the inmates as 'cook.' She was a woman of strong religious feelings, and a devout Calvinist. Spurgeon, when under deep religious conviction, had conversed with her, and been deeply impressed with her views of Divine truth. He explained this to me, and told me, in his own terse fashion, that it was 'cook' who had taught him his theology. I hope I am not violating his confidence in mentioning this fact. It is no discredit to the memory of a great man that he was willing to learn from the humblest sources.")

(When the above article appeared in print, Mr. Robert Mattingly, of Great Cornard, Sudbury, wrote to the same paper:—

"About twenty-five years ago, I became acquainted with the person referred to, Mary King by name. She was then living in cottage lodgings, facing St. Margaret's

(Copy of memorial card.)

* JOHN SWINDELL,
Died at Jeffries Road, Clapham,
18th September, 1882,
Aged 81 years.

This is the person with whom I lived as usher at Newmarket.

C. H. SPURGEON.

Church, Ipswich, and was a member of the Bethesda Strict Baptist Church, close by. She was a staunch Calvinist, logical, clear-headed, and had a wonderful knowledge of the Bible. I have often heard from her lips the account of her intercourse with the youthful Spurgeon, of which she was naturally not a little proud, as he had then attained the height of his marvellous popularity. Professor Everett says she was known as 'cook.' She always spoke of herself as 'housekeeper', and as the intercourse between Mr. Spurgeon and herself seemed to be quite within the order of the household, she probably occupied something more than a menial position. During my acquaintance with her, I learned that she had outlived all, or nearly all, of a small income (I do not remember from what source). I wrote to Mr. Spurgeon, acquainting him with the facts, and received from him a prompt reply, thanking me for my letter, sending a hearty greeting to his old friend, and with characteristic generosity he enclosed a cheque for £5, with a request that I would minister to her immediate necessities, pay her 5s. a week, and generally use my discretion in dispensing the amount in his behalf. This I did, and reported to Mr. Spurgeon from time to time, always receiving a fresh cheque when the fund in hand became exhausted, and this was continued until her death about three years later.")

* * * *

(Professor Everett has kindly transcribed from his journal all the entries relating to Mr. Spurgeon while at Newmarket. Most of the matters mentioned are not of general public interest, but the two following items are worthy of preservation in this volume :—

"*Monday, Sept. 10 (1849).*—In the afternoon, the missionary meeting began. Mr. Spurgeon was made chairman. [This was a meeting of the boys, in the school-room. I believe it was the first time Mr. Spurgeon ever made a speech. He spoke fluently.]

"*Tuesday, October 9.*—After dinner, I took Percy and four other boys to see the races. We saw the Cesarewitch, the most celebrated race at Newmarket; thirty-one horses ran. We also saw four other races. I saw quite enough to gratify my curiosity, and did not wish to stop to see any more races. Mr. Spurgeon did not go, as he thought he should be doing wrong if he went.")