



1

Born and born again

Thou straggler into loving arms,
Young climber-up of knees.
(Mary Lamb)

When I awoke on the morning of the 12th January 1987 I had elephants with hobnailed boots doing a fandango in my stomach! What had I let myself in for? Why had I said 'Yes' when I had been invited to speak to the Parliamentary Wives' Fellowship in Westminster in London? Who was I to speak to these women about prayer? I lifted my heart in a silent prayer ... HELP!!!

Another chapter in my adventure with God was about to begin, one that started on 28th April 1933 when I was born to William and Jessie Robertson. I was only another statistic in the books of Glasgow's Rottenrow Hospital, but was in the book written by the Master Creator, 'all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be' (Ps. 139:16). My adventure in life had begun, a journey that was to take me down many valleys where dark lessons had to be learned and up many high peaks of opportunity and privilege. But it all started off with a little girl in Glasgow.



'He's coming! He's coming!' I could hear Dad's footsteps on the tenement stair. Any minute now he would appear at the close mouth (the entrance to the communal tenement stairway) to be admired by all our wee friends. 'Dad!' my young sister, Wilma, and I shouted, swelling with pride. There he was, dressed in the full Highland regalia that was the uniform of the St Rollox Pipe Band. His embarrassment was probably equalled only by our pride! How handsome he looked! We had good cause to be proud of Dad's piping. When I was a little girl he was chosen to play the piping solo for Scottish dancers performing in the Royal Albert Hall in London. I didn't know much about the Royal Albert Hall and I had certainly never been to London, but I was proud of Dad and loved him very much. And he loved me and I knew it.

Not only did Dad play the pipes, he also built locomotives. Glasgow's Springburn was, in those days, a solid working class area. The Calais, Cowlaers and Hyde Park Works meant nearly full employment for the menfolk. Dad worked in Hyde Park, a huge factory which produced locomotives to be shipped to the far corners of the world. It was always a thrill when one was completed. The men who built her watched proudly as she left the sheds. My pals and I looked on excitedly. 'My Dad built that!' I boasted, as we followed the beautiful, shining, brand new locomotive, chrome and paint sparkling as it made its way along the first part of its cobblestoned journey to the Clyde. Some went to India, others to China. I was allowed to go as far as Petershill Road before turning for home. How I longed for Dad to come in for his tea to tell him I had seen



his locomotive. I wonder if it ever crossed my childlike mind that anyone else at all was involved in its building.

Our home, 290 Springburn Road, was a room and kitchen in a red sandstone tenement, made up of three landings with three homes on each landing. Our house was above the Co-operative Stores, which was, in turn, made up of the grocery store, the dairy, the butcher and the drapery.

My mother did all her shopping there. Everything was bought on credit and the co-operative system meant that she even earned a dividend. I smile when I see advertisements nowadays for the Co-op Dividend Card! The Bible says, 'There is nothing new under the sun' (Eccles. 1:9). How true that is.

Songs often accompanied games. 'One, two, three, a leerie,' I sang, bouncing my ball three times off a wall before throwing it up from under my right leg. 'Four, five, six, a leerie,' completed the pattern with the other leg. 'Seven, eight, nine, a leerie, hands behind your back,' I concluded with a flourish of hands clapped behind my back before either catching the ball or chasing it as it rolled away.

We skipped throughout the summer. Old bits of broken washing line served as skipping ropes. We skipped on our own, up and down the street, avoiding the cracks on the pavement of course. You did not land on a crack. If a number of us gathered, we skipped together, taking it in turns to ca' (turn) the rope. And if only a couple of us wanted to play there was always a lamp post or drain pipe to which we could tie one end of the rope. True, it was a bit sluggish, but the girl at the other end made up for it by ca'ing just a bit harder.

The pavement served for many a game. Having drawn out a numbered grid on the slabs with a bit of



broken crockery, we hopped from one to eight and back, pushing a peever in front of us. If the peever landed on a line we were out and had to wait until everyone else had their turns before we could try again. Peevers varied. A flattish stone would do. But the best peevers of all were empty polish tins. Little shoe polish tins were much sought after. Big furniture polish tins were hard work for wee legs.

If the rain came on we ran for the close, there to play houses or schools. Glasgow closes denoted status. If you lived, as we did, in a tenement with a tiled, or wally, close you were a toff. We were toffs. But how I envied my cousins. I thought they were real toffs because they lived in a council house with a garden. While I thought it must be wonderful to have a garden, I knew it had its disadvantages. I still remember my grandmother sending me out with my cousin Arthur to collect horse droppings from the streets to serve as manure in her garden!

Just as surely as boys played with conkers in the autumn when the chestnuts fell off the trees, so girls' games followed a seasonal pattern too. Scraps, little coloured pictures kept treasured between the pages of a book, were exchanged. Intricate patterns were woven by quick fingers with a yard of string tied into a loop. Why that was called Cat's Cradle I can't imagine. Daisies were dismembered to discover whether 'he loved us or he loved us not'. And there was, of course, no better indication of whether or not a friend liked butter than to hold a buttercup under her chin to see if it reflected yellow on her skin!

Our pleasures were simple as were our expectations. How Wilma and I looked forward to Christmas. Our

anticipation was not because we expected big, gaily wrapped parcels to yield surprises. We knew what we would get for Christmas, it was the same every year. What we delighted in was almost that: the familiarity, the predictability of it all. Our Christmas tree was about twelve inches high and artificial. After our mother cleaned the house until it shone, and Wilma and I decorated the little tree, it was given pride of place on the sideboard. And when New Year was over, its tiny baubles were wrapped carefully and packed away to be produced again the following year. The disposable society in which we live today was far away in the future. And what did we get? I can close my eyes and picture our gifts: new pyjamas, an Oor Willie or Broons book – they were standard reading for children in the central belt of Scotland and beyond – and a game.

Our stockings, that early Christmas morning delight, held a half crown, an orange, and, if we were fortunate, some sweets. We did not expect too much and we were not disappointed, quite different from the children today who look for designer sneakers, computers, Wiis and so much more. How times have changed!

While my memory of Christmas is of baubles and the Broons, I knew from my earliest days that it celebrated the birth of the Baby Jesus. My mother and father had both professed faith in Jesus Christ when they were young and from my earliest years I knew about him. I cannot remember a time when I did not have an awareness of God or when Sunday worship was not part of the pattern of my life.

Dad's lovely tenor voice led the worship every Sunday at The Glasgow Foundry Boys Religious Society, which

met in Garngad in Glasgow. Both my parents were members there. Mum did not often attend. She stayed at home to make the dinner. But sun, rain, hail or snow, I walked hand in hand with Dad or danced beside him, from our home in Springburn Road, down Castle Street and along Garngad Road to worship God. I suppose it was on one of our walks that I learned from Dad how our church came to have such a long name. In the 1860s, there were young men who could find no employment and who were liable to engage in petty dishonesty which sometimes led to lives of crime. The Foundry Boys Religious Society gave itself the task of finding ways in which these uneducated, undisciplined and often poor youths could become God-fearing, self-respecting citizens. They set up their work in four departments: Religious, Social Reform, Educational and Provident.

It seems to me that the church of those days fulfilled the calling of Jesus as he proclaimed it in the Sermon on the Mount. Christians fed the hungry, clothed the poor and set captives free. In the Old Testament, God showed Isaiah that what he wanted from his people was practical love rather than a system of fasting which 'ends in quarrelling and strife'. 'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter – when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?' (Isa. 58:4, 6-7).

When the Foundry Boys began, the church really related to people. God was seen in practical ways as Christians addressed the many social needs of the day.

Later, the Welfare State took over and the bridges between church and society were quietly drawn up. The church retreated into its Castle of Respectability. I wonder if the decline which has been evident in the church for decades is at least in part the result of its taking refuge in religious activities rather than seeing that practical Christianity involves believers being out in the real world and getting their hands dirty. By the time I attended Foundry Boys, the Social Reform and Educational and Provident Departments were things of the past. Only the Religious Department remained, and it was our church.

My mother's best friend, whom we called Aunt Margaret, ran a children's choir in the Foundry Boys. I attended the choir before I ever attended Hydepark Primary School. God gave me both a natural singing voice and a love of song, and by the age of five I was a regular soloist at Sunday School socials which were held for three nights in a row. The church was packed to capacity as parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles came to see their children sing. It was a wonderful way of relating the Gospel.

I look at photographs of myself at that time and both smile and wince. I smile at the fresh-faced little girl, at her pretty, full-skirted taffeta dress with its belt tied in a bow at its back and at the bleached white cotton ankle socks atop highly polished buckled shoes. I wince when I look at my hair. Its curl was not natural and it was achieved by nothing less than a form of torture!

Saturday evenings were dedicated to hair. A sheet of newspaper was laid on the floor and after my hair was washed I was sat upon a chair placed in the centre of the paper. How I hated the eternity that followed as my



mother bone-combed my hair, strand by strand or so it felt, in a search for any unwanted wildlife, which if found landed on the newspaper and was hastily dispatched. That done, my ordeal had not yet ended. My hair, divided into fine bunches, was held there with metal grips.

Then a length of warm, damp cloth was wound round each bunch and tied at its bottom end. Hair dryers had not been invented. I dried my hair by toasting myself in front of the fire in the living room, turning from side to side when I could bear the heat and the position no longer. The cloths were left in overnight and unwound in the morning. Then came the brushing out ... a tugging, irritating start to a Sunday morning. And all this was for the sake of a curl in my hair that was tied, as fashion demanded at the time, with a bow on one side.

There was nothing of boring duty in my childhood attendance at Foundry Boys. It was fantastic! In those days the hall was packed full for the morning service, which was rather like a Sunday School for children and young people although it was attended by parents and others too. There was lots of singing, enthusiastically led by my father. The choir and junior choir contributed to the praise as did solo singers, my tiny self among them. We always had a speaker who brought God's Word alive in such a way that even a child could begin to understand it. I look back with gratitude on those days and thank God for such a lively start to my Christian upbringing.

Foundry Boys was a focus in our family life, but it was a focus which excluded my mother. She was not happy within that fellowship and when Wilma, who is five years my junior, was old enough to join Dad and





me on Sunday mornings, she attended the local Church of Scotland. My sister and I went to the Girls' Brigade Company and the Brownie Pack that met in the Church of Scotland hall, but our church was the Foundry Boys.

Some Saturdays were special. The four of us went away for the day. Our destination was normally one of the Clyde coast towns; Helensburgh being a favourite. Our sense of adventure was all the more because we travelled by train. After walking along the seashore and window-shopping in the town, we took ourselves to a tea room for tea and cakes. What a treat! I wonder if a can of coke in a cafe can ever bring the same feeling of delight as a visit to a tea room in the days just preceding the outbreak of the Second World War.

And there were holidays too. Our mother was a prudent woman, saving her Co-operative dividend all year in order to take a house for a month each summer in Saltcoats. As Dad only had two weeks holiday, we spent the first two weeks of our break without him. The simple pleasures of the seaside were ours. We built sandcastles, topping them with gulls' feathers, and then watched as the incoming tide eroded their foundations and then washed them away. We paddled and played in the sea, dressed in rucked swimsuits that drank in the sea water and slipped down our bodies as they grew heavier and ever heavier. They took ages to dry, sometimes not even completing the process overnight, so that when we put them on the next day the chill made us shudder. But that was nothing to the shudder when we went into the sea.

The Gulf Stream may heat up the sea off the west coast of Scotland, but it doesn't feel like it when






you first go into the water! We counted the days till Dad would join us. And when the great day came we counted the hours, then the minutes, till we met him off his train. Dad was the love of our young lives and the joy of our holiday was complete when he arrived.

As girls, Wilma and I had our treats but we were children of our time. The Depression was happening all around us and money was scarce. For two years during the Depression Dad had no work. Every penny had to earn a pennyworth. Dad's health made matters more difficult. He suffered from emphysema, a dreadful lung condition which caused shortness of breath. Modern bronchodilators had not been invented and Dad's chest became more and more barrel shaped with the damage to his lungs and the sheer effort of breathing. Every winter he was off work as colds became chest infections and his emphysema played up. Dad was not a complaining man, and he lived with his health problems in a way that was an example to Wilma and me.


Mum's nature was very different from Dad's. He was an extrovert, she an introvert. He loved us and told us so; if not in so many words then in the way he obviously enjoyed our company. Mum loved us too, but she showed it in ways that were difficult for me as a child to recognise as love. Her love was expressed in dusting and cleaning, ironing and mending, in being a capable housewife and in making ends meet. She was not the kind of woman who was comfortable with her children on her knee. Mum's was an efficient love rather than a warm one. I yearned for the warmth and comfort of cuddles. But they never came.



Because of Mum's inability to express her love she seemed to find an outlet in frustration. And unfortunately, as a little girl, I was often the brunt of it. It made her quick tempered and impulsive, especially with regard to discipline. The expression 'punish first, question later' might have been coined for Mum. Only she often forgot to question, even afterwards. It is a hard conclusion to draw, but I think my childhood relationship with Mum was perhaps one of distant respect on good days, and fear on bad ones.



11th July 1944 is a day I will always remember because it was the day I gave my life to Jesus and asked him to be my Saviour. But I remember it for another reason too. That day, when I was eleven years old, I made my mother happy. We were in Saltcoats and Dad had just joined us. The Scottish Evangelistic Council held a summer mission each year in the town and I loved to go to its children's meetings. Some friends, also from Springburn and holidaying in Saltcoats, went with me. That year, Rev. Austin Stirling of Dunfermline Baptist Church was the leader. On the day of my conversion Christie Gunn preached on, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life' (John 3:16, AV). While I already knew the verse off by heart, the concept of God loving the world meant nothing to me. But when Christie asked us to put our own names in place of 'the world' and 'whosoever' it made all the difference. The impact was tremendous. 'For God so loved Jessie Robertson, that if Jessie Robertson believes in him, Jessie Robertson will not perish, but have everlasting life!' God so loved



ME! When an invitation was made for any who wanted to give their lives to Jesus to move to the front of the meeting, I went, along with my three friends.

We laughed and giggled our way to the front. I'm sure Christie Gunn thought we were just frivolous kids. But God had begun a work in my life which he is still completing today. I don't know if my friends' experiences were real, but I know it was real for me.

I went straight back to the place we were staying and told Dad and Mum. They were so pleased. I think Mum felt relief that I was on the right road. Perhaps she also felt a little easing of the weight of responsibility she carried so dutifully on my behalf. Although I was not at ease with my mother, I was aware of her Christian concern for my sister and myself. I knew she prayed for us and that day, in the grace of God, she saw her prayers answered in my life.

These beach missions dealt with the great issues of eternal life and death. But they were also good fun. Most of the team members were young men at university. I remember them still: Ernest Watson, Tom Houston, John Moore and others. We called them 'uncles'. Sandcastle competitions, games and races were the order of the day. There was more serious stuff too. I won a Bible for quoting a verse of scripture for every letter of the alphabet, and a book for reciting the whole of Isaiah 53.

I read my Bible as a child, but not in an organised way. These games made me more diligent in my reading. My mother encouraged me too. Although she was not walking closely with the Lord, she knew the path in which she wanted us to walk.