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Breakfast With a Wesley

Charles Wesley's face lit up when he heard a timid knock on his door, though he had no idea who might be calling.

Wesley was the junior tutor of Christ Church in the University of Oxford and sat at his customary relaxation of writing verse, this October afternoon in 1733. His rooms overlooked spacious Tom Quad and revealed much about his personality: they were decorous; the furniture was good but not expensive; calf-bound books lined one wall entirely and in a prominent place stood his harpsichord. In a corner Charles Wesley had placed a prayer-desk, not pressed back but inviting any casual visitor to take note of its existence, a most unusual piece of furniture for an Oxford room of 1733.

He called, 'Come in!' An old woman entered. Her clothes were shabby and her bones creaked as she bobbed a curtsy. She smelt strongly of apples. Wesley smiled pleasantly and asked how he could serve her.

She replied in a broad Oxfordshire accent that she worked in Pembroke College and that a servitor had sent her to tell Mr Wesley of a woman in the workhouse who had tried to cut her throat; Mr Wesley would wish to go and pray with her. A servitor held the lowest rank of undergraduate, the bottom of the scale topped by noblemen, whose gowns were as lordly as a servitor's gown was coarse. Charles asked the servitor's name.

The apple-woman turned coy and said she had been forbidden to tell. Charles charmed it out of her in no time: Mr George Whitefield.

Wesley gave her a coin. He knew Whitefield by sight and while her footsteps receded down the oak staircase a line of verse formed in his head: 'A modest, pensive youth who mused alone.' Wesley ran to the door and called down the stairs: 'Bid Mr Whitefield breakfast with me tomorrow!'

Next morning the knock sounded almost as timid. Then entered a neat, rather pallid young man, little more than a boy. He had a marked squint in one of his dark blue eyes and a twinkle in both, which was suppressed at once as George Whitefield looked at the floor in the modesty appropriate to a servitor who was not yet nineteen, before a Master of Arts aged twenty-six. But that first glance had won Charles Wesley: 'I saw, I loved, and clasped him to my heart.'

Charles poured chocolate from a silver pot – coffee was too expensive for a tutor – and plied his guest with cold tongue, pasties and toast. The guest had a hearty appetite and did not prove tongue-tied either: evidently Mr Whitefield's proper abashment on entering the room was uncharacteristic. In a striking melodious voice he told how he had come up to Pembroke College from Gloucester the year before as a poor student allowed to earn his keep, 'and many of the servitors being sick at my first coming-up, by my diligent and ready attendance I ingratiated myself into the gentlemen's favour so far, that many chose me to be their servitor'.

George spoke of his fellow servitors, rather primly: 'I was quickly solicited to join in their excess of riot with several who lay in the same room. God gave me grace to withstand them.' He refused to go roistering round the inns and brothels although the dormitory was almost too cold for study. However, said George with a laugh, 'They left me alone as a singular odd fellow.'

Encouraged by Charles Wesley's smiles and toast Whitefield told his life story.

The years flashed back. George saw himself again a foppish youth stepping daintily over the gutter outside the Bell, the inn which his mother kept and the most important hostelry in

Gloucester. Yet a standing reminder that the Whitefields had come down in the world. His grandfather had made money as a Bristol merchant and had then 'lived retired upon his estate' in Gloucestershire; this landed gentleman, who could talk on equal terms with squires of ancient lineage, was the son, grandson, nephew and brother of clergymen: Oxford was in the Whitefield blood. His son Thomas, however, had not gone into the Church but into trade as an apprentice wine merchant and then had bought the Bell Inn. He married Elizabeth Edwards of sound trading stock and bred a large family and died, aged only thirty-five, two years after the birth of his youngest son, named George in a burst of loyalty to the new king who had come from Hanover shortly before.

The widow's second marriage to an ironmonger brought nothing but misery. And if her children by Whitefield were respected as citizens they could not break away from the social inferiority imposed by the keeping of an inn; George must touch his cap to squires who had dined with his late grandfather and George longed to be a gentleman like him. The best way back to gentility lay in becoming a clergyman. He left off therefore serving in the tap room and with his mother's encouragement returned to school.

His passion, however, was for the stage. He had the strongest and most beautiful voice in Gloucester which Mr Bond, the schoolmaster, was training with loving care. No self-respecting mother in early Hanoverian Gloucester would let her son be an actor, so George had to content himself with watching the strolling players who hired the great room at the Bell for their performances, and with acting plays at school.

Though rather girlish to look at, George was full-blooded.

Once – not that he told Charles Wesley or anyone else – the boys had been reading a Restoration comedy, making the room resound with guffaws as they emphasised every sensuous inflection and double meaning. Then they had walked merrily out to the banks of the Severn, to a wood where they knew girls would be waiting for them after school. They paired off. George took his girl. They romped and kissed. It was a warm day and as they fondled one another she was hot to go the whole way.

George suddenly recalled that to father a bastard, except on a sailor's moll, would be branded a disgrace in a provincial city like Gloucester. Then he remembered raptures of a different sort six months earlier, in a church in Bristol (where he had gone to stay with his elder brother, a wine merchant) where George, all of a sudden, had longed desperately to be holy; he forgot the urge when he had returned to Gloucester, and now went to church only 'to make sport and walk about', but at this moment beside the panting girl in the wood, the memory of the Bristol church was decisive and disruptive. He left her where she lay, skirts up, hair tousled, and walked straight back to the city and betrayed his friends to Mr Bond, the schoolmaster.

Whenever George felt holy he turned prig.

In the last years at Gloucester before his mother wormed an Oxford servitorship out of an influential friend, George was erratic. Sometimes he repressed his natural gaiety and sense of fun and felt very devout. Sometimes he tired of devotion and then he could not suppress his passions, though he managed to avoid being saddled with a paternity. The wheel turned again; and remorse made him miserable with shame.

He was erratic; he was vain. One evening he went on an errand for his mother and while returning through darkened streets where he knew every cobble and puddle and had no need of lantern, an extraordinary sensation, a 'very strong impression was made upon my heart *that I should preach*'; he could see their faces as they hung on his words while the golden voice reached forth to the farthest corners of a church. Instead of keeping this to himself he quickened pace, burst into the inn and began to tell his mother. She stopped him roughly. He remembered her exact words: 'What does the boy mean? Prithee hold thy tongue!'

He caught the look of pride on her face as she turned away.

The time drew near for the journey to Oxford. Shortly before he left Gloucester, a friend and neighbour who kept the city's best bookshop, Gabriel Harris, son of Gloucester's Mayor, showed him a brand-new book, the second edition of William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life.*

George could tell this part of the story freely. Charles Wesley listened with even closer attention than he had shown to George's half-shamed account of his youth, for Wesley knew A *Serious Call* like the back of his hand. William Law had refused the Oath of Allegiance to King George and could hold no office, ecclesiastical or academic, but his gentle wit and wise advice had come like a shaft of warmth in the coldness of the Church under the Hanoverians. Charles Wesley and many other educated men and women followed earnestly Law's recipe for salvation.

Bookseller Harris, said George, had allowed him to handle Law's *Serious Call* for a few minutes only, lest his grubby fingers spoil the calf, but he had read enough to fire him: '... He therefore', wrote Law, 'is the devout man who lives no longer to his own *will*, or the *way* and *spirit* of the world, but to the sole will of God; who considers God everything, who serves God in every thing, who makes all the parts of his *common* life, parts of piety, by doing every thing in the name of God, and under such rules as are comfortable to his glory.'

George did nothing by halves. He began to say his prayers and sing psalms thrice daily; visited the poor, fasted on Fridays, received the Sacrament as much as once a month; and actually went to services at Gloucester Cathedral on weekdays, although no choir sang and the precentor was sometimes drunk at evensong.

Neither his mother nor bookseller Harris knew what to make of all this. One of his brothers laughed: 'It will not hold long, George. You will forget all when you get to Oxford!'

He did not forget all at Oxford. Indeed, he had already been to a church service on a weekday, most eccentric behaviour in a freshman, and Charles Wesley and the little knot of pious friends round him, now led by his elder brother John Wesley, a Fellow of Lincoln, had wondered at the unknown youth in his coarse servitor's gown.

Whitefield confessed to Charles that he longed to join their group but had been too shy to approach. Men might deride them as a 'Holy Club', dub them 'Methodists' because of their methodical life, and hate them because one of their number had died as a result, it was said, of excessive rigours of devotion.

George knew that they had no other desire than to save their souls by being good and doing good. He wanted their help in the arduous climb to heaven. He had not dared flaunt public opinion by attending the University Church for Holy Communion at the start of term as they did. He had stood afar off and admired their courage when they passed through a hostile jeering crowd.

Charles Wesley did not rebuke George for cowardice. He invited him to the next meeting of the Holy Club. He gave him wise advice and warm encouragement.

George Whitefield walked back round Tom Quad with a loan of Wesley's books under his arm, happier than he had been since coming to Oxford.