

John Nelson Darby as I knew him

W. Kelly.

A friend of Mr. Darby's, who was for many years on intimate terms with him, has kindly forwarded the following interesting account of a most interesting career.

As you wish for some personal reminiscences of the late J.N.D., I go back to my first intercourse with him in the summer of 1845 at Plymouth. For though I had been for years in communion before this, it had not been my lot to see him for whom above all others I had conceived, because of his love and testimony to Christ, profound respect and warm affection. I was then living in the Channel Islands, in one of which I began to break bread with three sisters in Christ, before ever looking a "brother" in the face. It was in J. B. Rowe's shop, Whimble Street, that we met; and very cordial and frank was his greeting. Painful disclosures had already been made of an effort to undermine from within, and to set up, under His name Who had taught us liberty of ministry and the unity of the Spirit, a state of things contrary to His word.

Mr. Darby was then bringing out in numbers the perhaps most valuable critique he ever wrote, in exposure of Mr. B. W. Newton's *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*; wherein the main object was to oppose, slyly but with set purpose, every truth which was distinctive of the movement, and all-important in our convictions of God's truth and glory in Christ. Nor was the revolutionary effort confined to the retrograde party in Plymouth. Mr. Chas. Hargrove, an Irish ex-rector, Mr. J. Parnell (was he yet Lord Congleton?), with others, had committed themselves on various grounds to the reaction. Mr. Darby had replied to them all, with an earnest trenchant ability which earned the dislike and resentment of such as love compromise, rather than truth. Though grieved to the heart at schism, which must if unjudged lead to what the apostle calls "heresy" or sect, it was clear to me which cared for Christ, and which did not rise above self or their friends.

To established and non-established, it was just what many leaders of Christendom were desiring; for like the chief priests of old, they doubted whereunto this would grow. As no mean one among them wrote, they began to breathe freely when the Newtonian rent came. But a little matter of a private kind will interest you and your readers, as it gave me (some twenty years or so his junior), a practical lesson. When dining with Mr. Darby, he by the way said, "I should like to tell you how I live. Today I have more than usual on your account. But it is my habit to have a small hot joint on Saturday, cold on Lord's day, cold on Monday, on Tuesday, on Wednesday, and on Thursday. On Friday I am not sorry to have a bit of chop or steak; then the round begins again." I too, like Mr. Darby, had been ascetic as a young Christian, and had been reduced, by general indifference to outward life, so low that the physician prescribed as essential what had been discarded in self-denial. How uncommon to find a mind endowed with the rarest power of generalisation, able to come down like the apostle, and impress on a young disciple, eating, drinking, or whatever is done, to do all unto God's glory! At that time Mr. Darby had not a whit of asceticism, but liberty and his heart bent on pleasing the Lord as to necessary food. To me, however small it might seem to some, it was a hint of daily value, and through me to others; for many a saint, when "cleansed from leprosy", forgets or neglects, in Levitical phrase, to shave off all his hair, and to wash his clothes, though he may duly bathe. So natural is it, as one of that class said, to retain and give to the Lord his "gentlemanship" — a gift abhorrent in His eyes; for it is worldly to the core.

Mr. Harris, Mr. Newton, Mr. H. Soltau, and many more I of course saw, and found full of

kindness, even then when party spirit was doing its deadly work. For in brighter days did not Edward Irving call it a "swamp of love", when his own mind was carried away by pretensions to miraculous power, and to a ritual beyond the Ritualists?

But such is the power of spirituality and devotedness, that Mr. Darby was the only one there to whom I felt free to tell confidentially the sad tale of an ex-clergyman's sin, and to join with me in prayer respecting it. As the evil had come to my knowledge unsought and far away, it devolved on me in faith and love to seek him out, and lay what none perhaps suspected upon his soul before God. As he had already withdrawn from communion, one could leave all else with Him. No doubt he is long departed, and as no one is alive to guess the one meant, I venture thus to speak.

It was at a much earlier date (1831, I think) that F. W. Newman invited Mr. Darby to Oxford: a season memorable in a public way for his refutation of Dr. E. Burton's denial of the doctrines of grace, beyond doubt held by the Reformers, and asserted not only by Bucer, P. Martyr, and Bishop Jewell, but in Articles IX — XVIII of the Church of England. With a smile he said to me, "That is the only pamphlet by which I ever made money." The same visit of his acted more privately (not on Mr. W. E. Gladstone, who saw and heard him then) but on G. V. Wigram, Sir L. C. L. Brenton, B. W. Newton, and W. Jarrett, as well as others too halting in faith to make a decided stand and endure the consequences. It was characteristic of those young men that, when once at a *conversazione* someone remarked, "May the Lord give me a living in a beautiful country," (and *he* had more than his desire in a Scotch Bishopric), Mr. Wigram immediately exclaimed, "May He give me to follow and serve Him at all cost!" He too had his heart's desire. Sir Chas. Brenton hardly quite appreciated J.N.D., if one may judge by his rather severe saying, "I never knew a man in whom the two Adams were so strong." Sir Charles was rather legal, and suffered from it; so much so that J.N.D. called a few, not long before the former died, for special prayer on his behalf, and not in vain.

It was, if I err not, before 1830 that, filled with the sense of the Christian's union with Christ, J.N.D. visited London, and laid it before one regarded as among the most mature of the Evangelical clergy. But his own indifference to worldly appearances seemed to render that precious but little understood truth a dead letter to this divine, who confounded it with the new birth, as ill-taught saints commonly do. His tone was pompous and self-complacent. He evidently regarded his visitor as a poor curate airing as a wonder what all knew. But the well-appointed carriage from Westminster, with coachman and footman, came to take Mr. Darby to his father's house, and happened to catch the clergyman's eye, when his manner changed to servility. This disgusted my friend, who could make allowance for ignorance, but was pained by a worldly spirit in a Christian, especially in a Christian minister. He well enough knew that the clergyman was of humble extraction; but this was nothing in his eyes if there had been spiritual feeling. Nor did the clergyman grow in grace any more than truth, when he became a bishop, and a metropolitan one. There was a worm at the root of his theology; for he betrayed unsoundness as to divine inspiration, both before his elevation to the episcopal throne, and after it. Such men cannot be expected to have ears to hear.

I was unable to attend the Conference at Liverpool in the forties, but was present at that which was held in London in 1845. Only on the afternoon of the third day did J.N.D. rise to speak, and this, after a well-known friend had alluded to his silence in singular terms. Mr. Darby explained that he had not spoken because so many brothers had a great deal to say. It was a most impressive discourse; for after many, and not leaders only, had spoken with considerable power and unction, he gave a terse summary, which set their main points in the best position, and then brought in a flood of fresh light from Scripture on the whole theme. During the same Conference a noble personage, who resented Darby's exposure of a foolish and injurious tract by himself, gave way to vehement spleen. But J.N.D.

answered not a word. Another, who was no less unreasonably offended, came into the hall while Mr. R. M. Beverley was telling us what had helped him to what he regarded as the chief truth he had long wanted. The old brother (very deaf) entered, and went as near the speaker as he could, and heard him read a page of his own book, affirming the very doctrine of the Spirit's presence and working, which he himself was abandoning, and for which Mr. Darby had censured him. This incident made no small impression on me of a living God's ways.

Considerate and kind as J.N.D. was to F. W. Newman, before Newman's active mind rebelled against "the doctrine of Christ", he had no real sympathy with the character either of him or of his brother the Cardinal. Men, and not God, governed them both, though in a different way. The younger of the two had been much the most distinguished throughout his academic career. The elder became a master of style in English writing, but a mere slave of tradition. Mr. Darby cared supremely for Christ and the truth to the glory of God the Father. Both brothers began as Evangelicals; but they diverged, as time went on, and were quite estranged, till the one became a Papist, and the other an infidel; then they "renewed happy intercourse." Anything like this was sorrow and shame to Mr. Darby, who could not respect, even as a man, him who wrote and justified No. 90 of the Oxford Tracts; for from beginning to end it is a barefaced and jesuitical plea, to construe in a Romanist sense the Protestant Thirty-nine Articles. More shocking still that Pusey and Keble etc., should endorse its deceit. Also what could J.N.D. feel but grief and indignation at the blasphemer, who at length could compare J. Fletcher's as a life more perfect than that of Jesus the Son of God? It is my judgment, that if Professor H. Rogers, in his *Eclipse of Faith*, crushed *Phases of Faith* on its own ground, much more did Mr. Darby, on a Christian basis, in his *Irrationalism of Infidelity*; just as he also laid bare the dishonesty of J. H. Newman's *Apologia pro sua Vita*. Even their logic was anything but immaculate.

Mr. Darby was deliberate and prayerful in weighing a Scripture; but he wrote rapidly, as thoughts arose in his spirit, and often with scarcely a word changed. He delighted in a concatenated sentence, sometimes with parenthesis within parenthesis, to express the truth fully, and with guards against misconception. An early riser and indefatigable worker, he yet had not time to express his mind as briefly and clearly as he could wish. "You write to be read and understood," he once said playfully to me; "I only think on paper." This made his writings, to the uninitiated, anything but pleasant reading, and to a hasty glance almost unintelligible; so that many, even among highly educated believers, turned away, because of their inability to penetrate sentences so involved. No one could be more indifferent to literary fame; he judged it beneath Christ and therefore the Christian. He was but a miner, as he said; he left it to others to melt the ore, and circulate the coin, which many did in unsuspected quarters, sometimes men who had no good to say of him, if one may not think to conceal the source of what they borrowed. To himself Christ was the centre of all, and the continual object before him, even in controversy; nor is anything more striking, even in his hottest polemics, than his assertion of positive truth to edification. He was never content to expose an adversary, where not only his unfaltering logic, but instant and powerful grasp of the moral side, and above all of the bearing of Christ on the question, made him the most redoubtable of doctors. Yet the same man ever delighted in preaching the glad tidings to the poor, and only paid too much honour to those whom he considered evangelists more distinctively than himself. Indeed I remember one, who could scarcely be said to be more so than he was, happening (to his own discomposure) to preach in his presence at one of the Conferences in the past (Portsmouth); and for months after, this dear simple-minded servant of the Lord, kept telling brethren in private, and not there only, "Ah, I wish that I could appeal to the people as So-and-so does!"

That he exercised large and deep influence could not but be; but he sought it not, and was plainspoken to his nearest friends. To one whom he valued as a devoted man, he said, "Come, -, not so

much of the gentleman." Another, dear to him from an early day and an admirable pastor, a good teacher and preacher, had got married to a worldly-minded lady (his second wife), though an Evangelical of the Evangelicals. This brother (an ex-clergyman) grieved him by running down the simple few gathered to the Lord's name in the village where he lived. The complainant was no longer the labourer he had once been among the poor, but was as a half-squire and half-parson drawing back to a long abandoned social intercourse with country folk. "Ah! -," said Mr. Darby, "it is not the brethren but the wife." That this was true made it the less palatable; and the wife did not fail to make it a rupture never healed. Nor was it only such cases that gave him pain. A lady I knew, when he paid a visit to Guernsey, invited a company to meet him in private, but exclusively of those who were in a good position. Had it been an Anglican Christian, or one with Denominations, he would have made allowance and expected nothing else; but he was vexed that one in fellowship should be so far from the word and will of the Lord as to fail in giving an opportunity to lowly saints, rich in faith, who would have enjoyed it exceedingly. When asked to give thanks, he begged me to do so, meaning it as a quiet sign that he was displeased.

It was my privilege, being actively engaged, to hear him very seldom, and this at great meetings in which he ordinarily took a large part; but I remember once hearing him preach (on Romans 5: 20, 21) to a small company of the very poor; and to a more powerful and earnest discourse I never listened, though in the plainest terms, exactly suited to his audience. The singing was execrable; and he did his best to lead them, for his voice was sweet, and his ear good; but the barbarous noise of others prevailed, with which he bore in a patience truly edifying, going on with his message quite unmoved.

Yet was he anything but self-confident. Being asked once to preach in the open air, he begged the younger man to take it; for said he, "I shrink from that line of work, being afraid of sticking in the midst, from not knowing what to say." He ungrudgingly delighted in the bold preacher with a heart full of the love of souls. He overlooked many faults, where he credited anyone with devotedness (sometimes at their own valuation). An intense admirer of his used to say that in this respect and others too, "he was the most gullible man in England." This of course was extreme exaggeration; nevertheless it occurred often enough to embarrass his fellow-labourers. I remember once in Bath remonstrating with him, because of his apparently unbroken confidence in a brother who was behaving very ill to his own mother and sister, whom he drove out of the meeting as a veritable "Diotrephes," to gratify his mad and unbelieving father. Mr. Darby soliloquised as we walked along, "Strange thing, that my pets should turn out scamps." I fear that so it evidently was with this person; for not long after he furnished the most defamatory scandal ever written, printed and circulated, against his blindly generous benefactor.

The upshot of this case is instructive. The railer, who of course vanished, not only from fellowship but to another land, had great kindness shown him by a Christian man there, an Irish gentleman. Having occasion afterwards to visit Ireland, he enquired if any of his friends knew of one, Mr. Darby. Oh, yes to be sure! Everyone knows of Mr. Darby. "Well," said he, "I received — and his large family for a long time; during which he was habitually abusing Darby. But I found *him* out to be worthless; so I came to the conclusion that the object of his abuse must be a very good man." It smacks rather Hibernian; but it was a sound instinct, and true in fact.

The same readiness to believe the best, even of untoward souls, showed itself not seldom when persons drew on his purse, or, what was of more moment, sought fellowship through his mediation. Not a few even now will recollect an excessively turbulent man, who espoused the cause of one who had to be put out of fellowship; and being himself no less guilty, he fell under the like sentence. This man never appeared till Mr. Darby returned to London from his long journeyings, but repaired to him

forthwith on his arrival. Then followed the renewed appeal: "How is it that — is still outside?" Thereon a dead silence ensued, easily understood; for everyone would have gratified Mr. Darby, had it been possible. At last a brother (now deceased), noted for his downrightness, said, "Mr. Darby, we know -; but you do not." Yet were some weak enough to call him a Pope who would have his way, and bore no contradiction.

A similar case, only more disreputable, of one ex-communicated for outrageous profanity, etc., occurred much later. Mr. Darby's heart somehow was touched, because he came to the meetings, and indeed forced himself to the front, and tried, while unrestored, to appropriate the Lord's Supper. Yet our beloved friend looked leniently on what was very painful to most. He was as far as possible from the ogre which so many fancied, but inflexible against those who assailed Christ. So he himself used to say, "I ought never to touch matters of discipline; for I believe the first person, brother or sister, that tells me about things. It is quite out of my line." So much was this felt, that I used to pray the Lord that only a true account might first reach his ear. But every considerate Christian must be aware that the faithful were as slow to spread evil tidings to gain a point, as the light and party-spirited were quick to plead for those they favour, and especially with one so influential as J.N.D. Also, when one of his position and character took up a cause in this one-sided way, as might and did happen, all can conceive how difficult it was for others to convince, or for himself to revise. Do any blame me for giving these amiable drawbacks? I humbly think that even in a brief sketch it is hardly truthful to omit what has been here touched with a loving hand, and what he himself would have frankly owned. It is not for me to say one word of what is best left in the grave of Christ, where my own failures lie buried.

No man more disliked cant, pretension, and every form of unreality. Thos. Carlyle loudly and bitterly talked his detestation of "shams," J.N.D. quietly lived it in doing the truth. He often took the liberty of an older Christian to speak frankly, among others to a brother whose love, as he thought, might bear it. But sometimes the wound however faithful only closed to break out another day. "What were you about, -, hiding among your family connections, and not once seeing the brethren around?" On the other hand reliable testimony is not wanting of his ready love in so lowly a way as to carry him where few would follow, especially where known. In early days, among the few at Plymouth a barber brother fell sick; and as no one else thought of his need, J.N.D. is said to have gone in his absence and served as well as he could in the little shop.

Thoughtful for others he was indifferent as to comforts for himself, though he did not mind buying costly books, if he believed them of value for his work. Then he was habitually a hard worker, from early morn devoted to his own reading the word and prayer; but even when most busily engaged, he as the rule reserved the afternoons for visiting the poor and the sick, his evenings for public prayer, fellowship, or ministry. Indeed whole days were frequently devoted to Scripture readings wherever he moved, at home or abroad. But his clothes were plain, and he wore them to shabbiness, though punctiliously clean in his person, which dressy people are not always. In Limerick once, kind friends took advantage of his sleep to replace the old with new, which he put on without a word, as the story went.

In middle life he trudged frequently on foot through a large part of France and Switzerland, sometimes refreshing himself on the way with acorns, at other times thankful to have an egg for his dinner, because, as he said, no unpleasant visitors for certain could get in there! In his own house, or lodging, all was simplicity and self-denial; yet if invited to dine or sup, he freely and thankfully partook of what was set before him. Still he had a vigilant eye for the Lord, particularly with younger fellow-labourers; and I remember that when with me on first setting up house, he deliberately looked at a table-spoon or fork before him. Happily I passed muster; and nothing was said: they were only plated!

So he lived himself. Even in such things he hated for Christians the pride of life, and justly felt that one little licence opens the way for many greater.

His largeness of heart, for one of strong convictions and of practical consistency, showed itself in many ways. After he left the Anglican Establishment he preached occasionally at the call of godly clergymen who urged it; but he only appeared for the discourse and was not present at the previous service. So in France afterwards he preached for pious ministers of the Reformed Church; nor did he refuse the black gown as an academic dress; but when they brought the bands, "Oh! no," said he: "I put on no more." Again, he did not spare but warmly rebuked the zealots among half-fledged brothers, who were so ignorantly bitter as to apply what the apostle said of heathen tables to those of the various Denominations. It was only fundamental error which roused his deepest grief and indignation. Then, as one of these (a heterodox teacher) said to me, J.N.D. writes with a pen in one hand and a thunderbolt in the other.

As a more public instance, take his letter from Barbados to Archdeacon Stopford, when cast down by Mr. Gladstone's disestablishment and spoliation of the Irish Protestant church, to assure him of his sympathy. "If the Protestants trust God, this will remain their position. Let them, because of the word of God, and in honouring it and what is called Protestantism, as owning it cordially, coalesce with the Presbyterians, as you have noticed they did in the best times under Bramhall . . . Only be yourselves, and trust God. Have done with the State, reject it, making no terms for a little money and much subjection; if you do, you are lost." But none the less, when the pious and learned Dr. O'Brien, Bishop of Ossory, who had married his niece, wrote a defence of Baptismal Regeneration, which he had long rejected, Mr. Darby wrote a vigorous reply, and proved that the argument on the formularies as well as Scripture was simply and grossly a begging of the question.

Even in his own circle his forbearance towards prejudice was as great as his decision in momentous things. He often worked with another, when he did not shrink from preaching in the open air so much as later. Once his companion was a man of singular eloquence, but slow to learn fuller truth and addicted to form. So the naval ex-commander read a petition from the Common Prayer selection, and the ex-clergyman made the gospel appeal. Perhaps one such experiment sufficed. Incongruities happened in those days. At a later date he became more chary of preaching in so-called churches or "temples" (as they call them abroad), when superstition crept in and rationalism. The recent indifferentism that prevails also curtailed in practice the readiness with which outside Christians were received, though the principle abode as ever; but its application could not but be abridged, when some wished to break bread who were insensible to notorious and grievous error taught where they usually attended.

It will interest many to hear that his paper on the *Progress of Democratic Power, and its effect on the Moral state of England*, immensely struck the late Sir T. D. Acland, who was Mr. Gladstone's intimate friend from Oxford days till death. In acknowledging the gift of *Miscellaneous I.*, which contains the sketch, he wrote to me that it was (though written many years before) the most wonderful forecast and just appraisal he ever read of what is come and coming.

This then is my conviction, that a saint more true to Christ's name and word I never knew or heard of. He used to say that three classes, from their antecedents, are apt to make bad brothers; clergymen, lawyers, and officers. He himself was a brilliant exception, though a lawyer first and a clergyman afterward.

A great man naturally, and as diligent a student as if he were not highly original, he was a really good man, which is much better. So, for good reason, I believed before I saw him; so taking all in all I

found him, in peace and in war; and so, in the face of passing circumstances, I am assured he was to the end. Do I go too far if I add, may we be his imitators, even as he also was of Christ?

W. K.