

## John Wesley the Methodist

### Chapter XII - Wesley Faces Mobs

The Wednesbury Riots.--Before the Magistrate.--A Noble Champion.--"Always Look a Mob in the Face."--Stoned at the Market Cross.--Causes of the Disturbance.--Quieter Times.

THE Wesleys had been censured by bishops, cursed by High Church clergy, and slandered by a host of pamphleteers. But this stormy course of violent words was only the prelude to the ferocious attacks of the mobs which came, like wild beasts, howling on their track in the moral wilderness of England.

The "Black Country," in the northern part of Staffordshire, was the scene of one of the earliest and most violent persecutions. The towns of Wednesbury, Walsall, and Darlaston had won for themselves an unenviable notoriety for lawlessness. The brutal sports of these towns reflected the moral condition of the people. Bull baiting and cockfighting provided scenes of riotous delight.

Charles Wesley was the first Methodist who preached at Wednesbury, in November, 1742. John soon followed, and a society of one hundred members, increased to more than three hundred by the following May, was speedily formed. The storm soon broke. Charles preached in May at Walsall from the steps of the market house the mob roaring, shouting, and throwing stones incessantly, many of which struck him, but none hurt him.

Soon after this the rioters of the three towns turned out in force and smashed windows, furniture, and houses. People were promiscuously struck and bruised. The magistrates, on being appealed to by the Methodists for protection, told them they were themselves to blame for the outrages, and refused all assistance

Wesley, in London, received a full account of this terrible six-days' riot, and thus writes: "I was not surprised at all; neither should I have wondered if, after the advices they had so often received from the pulpit as well as from the episcopal chair, the zealous High Churchmen had risen and cut all that were Methodists in pieces!"

Wesley proceeded at once to the scene to render what assistance he could. But no redress could be obtained. In October he went again to this den of wild beasts. While he was writing at Francis Ward's the mob beset the house and cried, "Bring out the minister; we will have the minister!" Wesley asked some one to take their captain by the hand and lead him in. After a few words the lion became a lamb. Wesley now asked him to bring two of the bitterest opponents inside. He soon returned with a couple who "were ready to swallow the ground with rage; but in two minutes they were as calm as he." Then, mounting a chair in the midst of the mob, he demanded, "What do any of you want with me?"

Some said, amid the clamor, "We want you to go with us to the justice."

"That I will," said Wesley, "with all my heart."

The few words he added had such an effect that the mob shouted, "The gentleman is an honest gentleman, and we will spill our blood in his defense."

Some dispersed to their homes, but Wesley and the rest, some two or three hundred, set out for the magistrate's house. Darkness and heavy rain came on in about half an hour, or by the time they had walked a mile, but they pushed forward another mile, to the justice's house at Bentley Hall. Some of the advance guard told that officer, Mr. Lane, that they were bringing Wesley.

"What have I to do with Mr. Wesley" quoth the magistrate. "Take him back again."

When the crowd came up and knocked for admission the magistrate declined to see them, sending word that he was in bed. His son came out and asked their business. A spokesman answered, "To be plain, sir, if I must speak the truth, all the fault I find with him is that he preaches better than our parsons."

Another said: "Sir, it is a downright shame; he makes people rise at five in the morning to sing psalms. What advice would your worship give us?"

"To go home," said young Lane, "and be quiet."

Not getting much satisfaction there, they now hurried Wesley to Walsall, to Justice Persehouse. Although it was only about seven o'clock, he also sent word that he had gone to bed, and refused to see them. Yet these very magistrates had recently issued an order

calling on all officers of justice to search for and bring before them any Methodist preacher found in the district.

At last they all thought it wise to make their way home, and some fifty of the crowd undertook to convey Wesley back to Wednesbury. But they had not gone a hundred yards when the mob of Walsall burst upon them. They showed fight but, being wearied and greatly outnumbered, were soon overpowered, and Wesley was left in the hands of his new enemies

Some tried to seize him by the collar and pull him down. A big, lusty fellow just behind him struck at him several times with an oaken club. If one of these blows had taken effect, as Wesley says, "it would have saved all further trouble. But every time the blow was turned aside, I know not how, for I could not move to the right hand or left. Another, rushing through the crowd, lifted his arm to strike, but on a sudden let it drop and only stroked Wesley's head, saying, "What soft hair he has!" One man struck him on the breast, and another on the mouth with such force that the blood gushed out; but he felt no more pain, he affirms, from either than if they had touched him with a straw; not, certainly, because he was over excited or alarmed, for he assures us that from the beginning to the end he was enabled to maintain as much presence of mind as if he had been sitting in his study, but his thoughts were entirely absorbed in watching the movements of the rioters.

When he had been pulled to the west end of the town, seeing a door half open--which proved, strangely enough, to be the mayor's, though he did not know it--he made toward it to go in; but the owner, who was inside, would not suffer it, saying the mob would pull the house down to the ground. However, Wesley stood at the door, and raising his voice to the maddened throng, asked, "Are you willing to hear me speak?" Many cried out, "No! No! Knock his brains out! Down with him! Kill him at once!" Others said, "Nay, but we will hear him first!" Then he spoke a while, until his voice suddenly failed. Now the cry was: "Bring him away! Bring him away!" Recovering his strength, he began to pray aloud. Then the ruffian who had headed the rabble, a prize fighter at the bear garden, struck with awe, turned and said: "Sir, I will spend my life for you! Follow me, and not one soul here shall touch a hair of your head!" Others of his companions joined with him in this new departure. An honest butcher also interposed and thrust away four or five of the most violent assailants. The people fell back to the right and left, and in the charge of his new-found protectors Wesley was borne through the infuriated crowd and escorted to his lodgings at Wednesbury, having lost only one flap of his waistcoat and a little skin from one of his hands. He says concerning it: "I took no thought for one moment before another; only once it came into my mind that, if they should throw me into the river, it would spoil the papers that were in my pocket. For myself, I did not doubt but I should swim across, having but a thin coat and a light pair of boots." "I never saw such a chain of providences before; so many convincing proofs that the hand of God is on every person and thing, overruling all as it seemeth him good."

In the midst of all these perils four brave Methodists--William Sitch, Edward Slater, John Griffith, and Joan Parks--clung fast to Wesley's side, resolved to live or die with him. None received a blow save William, who was knocked down, but soon got up again. When Wesley asked William Sitch what he expected when the mob seized them he answered with a martyr's spirit, "To die for him who died for us." And when Joan Parks was asked if she was not afraid she said: "No, no more than I am now. I could trust God for you as well as for myself."

When Wesley reached Wednesbury the friends were praying for him in the house from which he had started. His sufferings awoke general sympathy. Next morning, as he rode through the town, he says, "Everyone I met expressed such a cordial affection that I could scarce believe what I saw and heard." Charles Wesley met him at Nottingham. He says his brother "looked like a soldier of Christ. His clothes were torn to tatters." Charles went straight from Nottingham to the scenes of the rioting, boldly bearding the lions in their den. He was constitutionally a timid man, as he often confesses, but there was nothing he feared so much as to offend his own conscience.

He arrived at Wednesbury five days after the miraculous escape of his brother, and found the Methodists "standing fast in one mind and spirit, in nothing terrified by their adversaries." He writes: "We assembled before day to sing hymns to Christ as God. As soon as it was light I walked down the town and preached .... It was a most glorious time." The clergyman at Darlaston was so struck with the meek behavior of the Methodists in the midst of suffering that he offered to join the Wesleys in punishing the rioters. As for "honest Munchin," the nickname for George Clifton, the captain of the rabble, who had rescued Wesley, he was so impressed with Wesley's spirit that he immediately forsook his godless, profligate gang, and was received on trial into the Methodist society by Charles. The latter asked him, "What think you of my brother?" "Think of him" was the answer, "That he is a man of God; and God was on his side, when so many of us could not kill one man." Clifton lived a good life after this, and died in Birmingham, aged eighty-five, in 1789, two years before Wesley. He was never weary of telling the story of that night when he might have taken life, had not God stayed his hand.

It was John Wesley's rule, confirmed, he says, by experience, "always to look a mob in the face." An indescribable dignity in his bearing, a light in his eyes, and a spiritual influence pervading his whole personality often overawed and captured the very leaders of the riots.

At St. Ives, in Cornwall, when the mob attempted to break up his meeting, he says: "I went into the midst, and brought the head of the mob up with me to the desk. I received but one blow on the side of the head, after which we reasoned the case, till he grew milder and milder, and at length undertook to quiet his companions." A similar incident is recorded a few years later when a lieutenant at Plymouth-dock, with his retinue of soldiers and drummers, headed a raging crowd. "After waiting about a quarter of an hour," says Wesley,

"perceiving the violence of the rabble still increasing, I walked down into the thickest of them and took the captain of the mob by the hand. He immediately said: ' Sir, I will see you safe home. Sir, no man shall touch you. Gentlemen, stand off! give back! I will knock down the first man that touches him! ' We walked on in great peace, my conductor, a very tall man, stretching out his neck and looking round to see if any behaved rudely, till we came to Mr. Hide's door. We then parted in much love. I stayed in the street, after he was gone, talking with the people who had now forgot their anger and went away in high good humor."

Sometimes the rioters themselves were the chief sufferers from the missiles and clubs so freely used. Wesley gives a striking instance of this at Bolton, Lancashire, when he preached at the Cross. One man was bawling just at Wesley's ear, "when a stone struck him on the cheek, and he was still." A second was forcing his way to assault Wesley, when another stone hit him on the forehead, "the blood ran down, and he came no farther." A third stretched out his hand, and in the instant a sharp stone came upon the joints of his fingers, and he was "very quiet" during the rest of the discourse, which was finished in peace. A year later, in the same town, Wesley was followed "full cry" to the house where he stayed. A raging crowd filled the street and took possession of every room in the house. One friend who ventured out was thrown down, rolled in the mire, and thrust back in such a state that "one could scarce tell who he was." Wesley called for a chair and quietly stood upon it. "The winds were hushed, and all was calm and still. My heart was filled with love, my eyes with tears, and my mouth with arguments." In a few hours the entire scene was changed, and none opened their mouths unless to bless or thank the Methodists!

When Wesley was preaching at Gwennap two men raging like maniacs rode furiously into the midst of the congregation and began to lay hold upon the people. Wesley commenced singing, and one man cried to his attendants, "Seize him, seize him, I say; seize the preacher for his majesty's service." Cursing the servants for their slowness, he leaped from his horse, caught Wesley by the cassock, crying, "I take you to serve his majesty." Wesley walked with him three quarters of a mile, when the courage of the bravo failed, and, finding he was dealing with a gentleman, he offered to take him to his house, but Wesley declined the invitation. The man called for horses and took Wesley back to the preaching place.

The next day at Falmouth more serious perils awaited him. The rioters attacked the house where he was staying, and the noise was like "the taking of a city by storm." The outer door was forced; only a wainscot partition was between them and the object of their rage. Wesley calmly took down a large looking-glass which hung against the partition. The daughter, Kitty, cries out, "O, sir, what must we do"

"We must pray," he replied.

"But, sir, is it not better for you to hide yourself "

"No," said Wesley. "It is best for me to stand just where I am."

The crews of some privateers, to hurry matters, set their shoulders to the inner door, and cried, "Avast, lads, avast!" and the door gave way. Wesley stepped forward at once and said: "Here I am. Which of you has anything to say to me To which of you have I done any wrong Toyou Or you Or you" He walked on as he talked until he came to the middle of the street, when, raising his voice, he cried with great dignity:

"Neighbors, countrymen! Do you desire to hear me speak "

"Yes, yes," they answered; "he shall speak."

The captains of the mob, admiring his courage, commanded silence while he spoke, and afterward conducted him in safety to another house.

The reasons assigned by the rioters themselves for their opposition to Methodism were very various and curious, but they often echoed the pulpit cries of the day, or were the outcome of passing popular and unreasoning excitement ready to seize on any excuse for violence. When Wesley visited St. Ives the second time, in 1744, he found the mob had pulled down the preaching house "for joy that Admiral Matthews had beat the Spaniards such is the Cornish method of thanks giving. I suppose, if Admiral Lestock had fought too, they would have knocked all the Methodists on the head." The violence of the clergy was not any more intelligent. The bigoted rector of Penzance had several Methodists committed to prison, among them Edward Greenfield, a tanner, who had a wife and seven children. Wesley asked what objection there was to this peaceable man, and the answer came: "The man is well enough in other things; but his impudence the gentlemen cannot bear. Why, sir, he says he knows his sins are forgiven!"

The main responsibility of these riots lay with the clergymen and "gentlemen" who stirred up the excitable people, and cannot be attributed to any illegal or rash actions of the Wesleys.

Miss Wedgwood, who is far from being a Methodist, says, concerning John Wesley: "Nothing that could form the flimsiest pretext for the treatment received by his followers can be brought home to him. He does not appear to have separated families; he never went where

he had not a perfect right to be; he addressed those whom he regarded as beyond his pale in courteous and modern language; he never thrust his exhortations on anybody. The attacks of enemies, and even the accounts of alienated disciples, may be read without extracting a single anecdote that we should think discreditable to him; indeed, it is from this source that we derive much valuable, because unconscious, testimony to the good influence of his code on secular life. We cannot, then, admit that Wesley's errors of judgment or limitations of sympathy had even the slightest share in producing the popular fury of which instances have just been given."

It is noteworthy that, while Wesley's persecutors passed quickly away, nearly all who took patiently the spoiling of their goods lived long and peaceful lives. Wesley notes the sad end of many persecutors. Egginton, the Vicar of Wednesbury, who delivered a sermon against the Methodists which Wesley pronounced the most wicked he ever heard, and who was responsible for the violence of the mob, died in a few months. At Bristol, in 1743, a clergyman preached terrible sermons in several city churches against the upstart Methodists, and was about to do so in the Church of St. Nicholas, when, after announcing his text, he was seized with a rattling in the throat, fell backward in the pulpit, and expired the following Sunday. In some instances those who planned the death of the preachers were themselves wounded, and even killed, by their companions. The Methodists were not driven out; they more and more became masters of the situation, and after 1757 peace reigned almost everywhere. It was due largely to Wesley's good generalship, his perfect command of his forces, and the noble example which he himself set. Isaac Taylor's verdict is, "When encountering the ruffianism of mobs and of magistrates, he showed a firmness as well as a guileless skill, which, if the martyr's praise might admit of such an adjunct, was graced with the dignity and courtesy of the gentleman." Wesley was always the gentleman and the scholar. As Rigg says: "It was contrary alike to his temper and his tactics, to his courtesy and to his common sense, to say or do anything which might justly offend the taste of those with Whom he had to do .... Wesley's perfect, placid intrepidity, his loving calmness and serenity of spirit, amid whatever rage of violence and under whatever provocations and assaults, must always remain a wonder to the historian. His heroism was perfect; his self-possession never failed him for a moment; the serenity of his temper was never ruffled. Such bravery and self-command and goodness, in circumstances so terrible and threatening, were too much for his persecutors everywhere. He always triumphed in the end."