

Description of Boydton College Work

By Dr. Charles Cullis

I do not intend to preach a sermon tonight, but I always like to take the word of the Lord as a basis for utterance. So I give you the 15th chapter of Joshua, 19th verse: "Give me a blessing, for thou hast given me a south land." Some ten or more years ago, when all the country was interested in relation to the work among the freedmen at the South, I, too, began to stretch my thoughts away from the North to the South, and to pray that the Lord would give us something to do among the colored people; that we might have a branch of work there, and that I might be able to send workers to do some good among that people. I do not remember how long I prayed about it; but at one of our Tuesday consecration meetings, (and I wish I could tell of the wondrous blessing that has attended this meeting every Tuesday), Dr. Howard Malcolm from Newport, Rhode Island, was present. At the close, he came to me and said, "Doctor, did you see the account of the college property down in Virginia, to be sold?" I said, "No, I have the paper, but I didn't see anything about it." "Well," he said, "I will send you the paper." He knew nothing of my prayer about the work at the South. He knew nothing of my desire to send workers down there. Nobody knew anything about it. Will you say that it was accident that that man should speak to me about this place in an out-of-the-way region of Virginia? There was no connection whatever with the thought he brought to me, and the meeting itself.

He sent me the paper. I read in it the letter of a Baptist preacher in Boydton, saying that the large property known as the "Randolph and Macon College, a Methodist college, had been abandoned, and was now for sale. He gave a description of the college building, now standing, that cost \$30,000 to build; also of a smaller brick building that had been used as a dining hall, and the number of acres of land. I at once commenced a correspondence with the writer of the letter, although I had not a dollar toward the purchase. He was urging the Baptists to go down there, and establish in that building a work for the education of the colored people, and build up a Baptist institution. I could not possibly leave home to see the property; but I had a friend, a business man, who was going as far as Norfolk, Va., and I said to him: "If you will go and look that property over for me, I will pay expenses, and pay you for your time." He went, and looked it all over. The sudden appearance of a stranger, and his strange movements, gave the colored people there an inkling that somebody at the North was about to buy the property, and do something for their education. On the morning he left, they came out of their cabins, and stood by the side of the road, hoping, looking, and anxiously waiting, to know if it were really true. But he could not tell them.

My friend returned with his report. This occurred while I was at Old Orchard, holding a summer Convention. I did mention it to one or two friends of mine who were interested in the work and one of them said, "Doctor, if you would like to buy that property, I will give you \$10,000." It did not take very long to decide. I bought the whole place, including 425 acres of land—about 300 of it being woodland, and about 125 forming the campus around the college—for \$6,200. The building had been used as a barrack for the soldiers, after the surrender of Lee, by the Union troops. It was badly out of repair, windows were

broken, mantelpieces cut down for firewood, etc., so that it cost \$4,000 to put it in order.

That was nearly ten years ago. I then began to pray for some one to take charge of the institution, for I could not do it. I learned of a dear man of God, who is now in glory, Rev. Mr. Sharpe. His health being somewhat impaired, he had at one time accepted an appointment in a government school at the South. This experience was a preparation for him, after a period of rest, to resume work among the colored people at Boydton, to which place he removed, with his wife and family. But he was then in consumption, and after a little more than a year of labor, he came home, and died. His wife, being a woman of experience and capability, took tip his labors, and with able helpers has continued the work. Last year, Rev. Mr. McAllister, a Methodist preacher, assumed the post of principal, in place of Rev. Mr. James, who occupied the position before him.

During all this time I had not seen the work. With the desire, had often been given the promise to go; and I had promised so many times, that I really think the people thought there were no such persons as Dr. and Mrs. Cullis ; that they were only imaginary people who might have lived, some time, at the North, but where they lived now nobody knew. But our time had come, and three weeks ago we started. We left Boston on Monday morning, spent the night in New York, and left the next day for Washington. Here we spent a night, and took one day's vacation for sight-seeing. Accompanied by a dear friend, a resident, we saw as much in one day as many people would in two or three weeks, going about alone. The following clay saw us en route for Richmond. There we spent a night, as there is only one train a day out of Richmond, and that at noon, which goes in the direction of Boydton.

Having time for a short stroll, we had a view of the Capitol, and saw the statue of Stonewall Jackson, erected by Englishmen. The church was pointed out to us in which Jefferson Davis sat, when the messenger walked down the aisle and told him Lee had surrendered. We saw Libby Prison, though not to go into it, and also had a good view of the city. Our train for Five Forks left at 1:20, I think. This was the end of our destination by rail, which is one hundred miles below Richmond. The road has been opened to that point since our college work has been established at Boydton. Previous to the last two years, it was a thirteen mile ride by stage from Chase City to Boydton. We reached Five Forks on a mixed train at six o'clock, so that we did not travel very rapidly. There we met what was called a "hack," that ran from the depot at Five Forks to Boydton. (we should call it a "carryall" here) Some of you have seen Virginia roads. I have! They make a road down there by just saying, "This will be a road," and it is a road from that time on. You wonder what it is as you go over it. I asked the driver of this hack where the springs were, if they were on top. I had no consciousness of their being underneath. We had six miles of that road, this way, and that way, and all sorts of ways. In the middle of the road we struck a mud puddle, a large pond, with the water to the hubs of the wheels, and I suggested that we stop a while to fish. I tried to get a little comfort out of the road as best I could. This driver, I found, was a good Christian man. He was very much amused at all my wise or unwise sayings. When he reached the village of Boydton, after leaving us at the college, the people were questioning "Did the Doctor come ?" "Yes." "What kind of a man is he ?" He began to retail the sayings, and that broke the ice; for what they imagined I could be, I don't know.

I must go back a little here, to say that everywhere at the South in Virginia, as far as I saw, the churches all have spittoons; there is a large spittoon in every seat in a railway car, and usually two in every pulpit, for every man uses tobacco. The noon that we left Richmond, I noticed by the morning paper that Miss Willard was to speak in the evening in the Methodist Church, and that Mrs. Smith,—Hannah Whittall Smith,—was to give a Bible reading at noon. We had just ten or fifteen minutes to meet the ladies at the church, before taking the train. Mrs. Smith was anxious that I should say a few words. I went into the pulpit, and as there was only one spittoon I pushed it over to her, and said I had no use for it, if she wished it. I was very sorry to see all this. But they raise tobacco down there, and kill their soil in so doing.

We reached Boydton about seven o'clock, and everybody was glad to see us. A meeting had been appointed for that evening, in the college; not a prayer meeting, but a debating or literary class, under the charge of Miss McAllister. Assembling there after tea, we sat down to take a look at the students and our surroundings. The college is a large, four-story, brick building, as nice in outward appearance as any college building need be. The rooms are all large, and every room has an open fireplace. We have 105 students, all colored young men and young women. The exercises were held in the chapel, so called, because it was one of the large schoolrooms. This was filled by the young men and young women students, who were to read essays, some original, and some otherwise. The "debating" was omitted, as the students were all anxious to take us by the hand.

We enjoyed the evening; and we looked into the faces of as bright young men and women as you will find in any college in the land, some as black as anybody in this room, and a good deal blacker; many of them just as white as anybody in this room; fine young men and women; if they sat here tonight, you would never dream they had the first drop of colored blood in their veins. They were well dressed, gentlemanly and lady-like in appearance. After the exercises I made a short address, and Mrs. Cullis followed, after which several in the audience were called upon to make remarks. One man, who has been fourteen years Representative to the Legislature from Mecklenburg County, a mulatto, who lives close by there, and whose daughter has been a student at the Boydton College, stood up, and expressed his delight at seeing us there. His face was shining all over with thankfulness, and his heart was in his eyes. And he was not alone, because every face bore the expression of joy and thanksgiving.

At nine o'clock every morning, a half hour's study of the Bible precedes the other studies. Of course I was called to take the lead the first morning, and after my half hour, the remainder of the time was given up to praising God, those on the platform taking their turn; and then the testimonies of these students, and of the other colored people who came in were given. There was one old colored woman as black as black could be. She must be somewhere between seventy and eighty; I don't think anybody knew, or ever has known for the last hundred years, how old she was. Nobody could tell me. She had been a slave, and was as original a character as the best. She got up, and thanked the Lord we were there, and went on to say, "Bless the Lord, I'm free, I'm free. The bottom log is at the top, and the top log at the bottom, now, and I'm free. When ole massa was 'live news came one day, 'Lee has surrendered, Richmond had fell;' and I asked them where it had fell. I knew, all the time. They were all

crying because Richmond had fell, but I knew all about it."

After these morning exercises, we went over the building. The students had decorated their rooms with evergreens, fires were burning brightly, for as I have said every room has a large open fireplace, and wood is very plentiful, all cut on the place. Warm was our welcome from each and all. After dinner we enjoyed several calls from the white people of the neighborhood. Nearly every man was a "Colonel," or a "General." I only found one man who was anything less than a Colonel, and he was introduced to me as a Captain. "Captain?" I said. "Yes." "Aren't you anything but Captain?" "No!" he replied. "Well," I said, "you are the first Captain I have met. I congratulate you ;" and he laughed pleasantly over it. I find that all the Southern people date everything now in their history to "the surrender ;"when Lee surrendered," or "before the war," or "since the surrender." This is the date upon which their country had started anew. I must say, to the praise and glory of God, that I never was treated more kindly. I never received more thoughtful attention. I never expect to receive better treatment, or more kindly expressions, than I received from the people of the South.

Before I started I had a little feeling of dread. I thought, these Southern people know I am carrying on a work for the education of the children of their old slaves. I do not know but what they will have a little feeling against me. But I must say I was touched to the heart by expressions like the following: "Doctor, I have come to pay my respects to you." or "Doctor, I have come to thank you for what you have done here in Virginia, this work that you have established has been a great blessing to the whole country. The schools are taught by the graduates of your college" (the public day schools among the colored people). The pulpits of the colored people in all the region round about are filled by the graduates of the college. All this hearty good will I shall never forget. One gentleman gave me a \$500 bill, but it was a Confederate bill! I thanked him all the same. It was not any use to him, and it was quite a curiosity to me. Dr. Finch, the owner of those famous "hacks," sent us his best one every day, if we had to go to the village or elsewhere.

I was invited to go to the village (for the college is just a mile from the village), to preach there. All the churches united, and the Methodist Church, being the largest, was enlisted for the services. I heard not the first criticism upon the North. Oh, let us thank God that the gulf is closed! Not merely bridged over, but that upon solid earth we may walk from one length of the land to the other and clasp hands as brother with brother. Thank God that we are one people, and that there is no slavery in our land. They said that we were a blessing down there. It is the answer to our text, "Give me a blessing, for thou hast given me a south land."

One day, when talking to the students upon the certainty of God's care of His people, and that He does direct our steps in the smallest particular, I told them that "This building was erected for you. Every brick put into this building was put here for you. You didn't know it. I didn't know it. But as truly as we stand here, this building was intended for your service and for God's glory. I can assure you the amens followed heartily, and many an eye moistened with a renewed sense of God's tender care.

It is interesting to visit the log cabins of the colored people, built of logs filled in with mud; the chimneys upon the outside, built in the same way, look as though a few sparks carelessly lodged, might make quick the work of

destruction. They live some six or eight in a room, perhaps there is a small loft overhead, but we saw nothing but cleanliness of appearance, and cheeriness in spite of poverty.

What Mrs. Sharpe calls "Charity Saturday" is now an institution there. We were privilege to be present on one of these interesting occasions. Always with an eye to doing good, Mrs. Sharpe saw, soon after settling at the college, that the poverty among the colored people was very great and that many had hardly seen a really new or whole garment since the war. The Southern people, paralyzed in business, were powerless to lend more than temporary aid. She saw great suffering consequent upon the want of the bare necessities. She gave what she could, and friends of the Work were stirred to send barrels of cast off clothing and money, many of these were even sent from our own Work here at Grove Hall. Well, they came, some twenty, some thirty miles, ragged children, crippled men, and almost helpless women, with no strength and less courage, where all had seemed so hopeless. Could our friends see the light coming into those faces, as their eager hands were stretched out to receive, one a dress, another a coat, hat, or shoes, they would hasten to search their closets and attics again to see if possibly some seemingly worthless garment had not been overlooked, and quickly another barrel would be packed and shipped. With some such feeling, I immediately wrote to Grove Hall, saying, "Pack up all the old things you can get hold of and ship at once." Eight barrels were the result, and last "Charity Saturday" loving hands were busy again at Boydton, whose hearts rejoiced quite as much in the giving, as did those of their dusky recipients.

I must tell you that this charity is not dispensed until all have been seated, and some of the earnest Christians among the students or outsiders have told the story of the cross, and some have been awakened to penitence and love toward Jesus, the Giver of all good gifts, Himself the Gift of gifts. Mrs. Sharpe thought we had better wait until the meeting had progressed, when the peculiar features of these negro gatherings would be prominent, but the singing grew louder and louder. I could not be restrained, and so crept in. Several under conviction had taken the front seats, and two or three old women, seemingly leaders among them, were doing their best to lead them into the kingdom. Words fail me to describe the earnestness, the pathos, the abandonment, as they would sway backward and forward, singing and grasping hands, then would be given the word of exhortation. To us, it was very real and heartfelt, while the supervision of Mrs. Sharpe and the assistance of the students who have been so well taught, left nothing for us to coldly criticize or condemn.

The saddest sight to us was the appearance among these of a white man and his wife, with their two children, one a babe. Such pitiful degradation we never witnessed. Their clothing was rags and patches, the faces of the man and woman were almost expressionless. Only the little ones smiled, as innocent children can, under the most abject conditions. It seemed heart-rending to send them away with only clothing for the body, while their souls were starving. But oh, do send the old clothes! Anything that a human being can wear will prove a blessing there.

The poor people, having learned that I bore the title of Doctor, thought I could cure everything: One old man came hobbling towards me. I asked him what the matter was. He said he had a "refliction" in his leg. Everybody had a

"misery" and had it everywhere, although it was almost always in their sides; and the way they described their aches and pains would puzzle anybody but a Southern doctor, I think. I prayed and I dealt out medicines. I did everything I could to make them comfortable, and had a nice, happy time myself, praising God that He had given me such a privilege.

We came to the last morning. We were to leave at nine o'clock to take the "hack" over that road, and it was not very pleasant to think of. They promised, though, in a year to have the railroad through to Boydton, and I shall be very thankful. From our room we heard singing, and as we came down stairs we found both sides of the hall and stairs lined with the students. They were singing a plantation hymn, one we had fallen in love with, and it so overcame me that I had to go around the corner and take out my handkerchief and get my face straight before I could face them. The carriage was at the door, and people were coming in all directions across the campus to say, "Good-bye" and "God bless you." We shook hands with one after another. Finally we were at the carriage door, the driver looking at us and at his watch, but it was hard to leave, or for each and all to finish up the kind words of parting, one saying, "I bless God that I have lived to see you," another, "Bless God for this college," another, "I hope I may live to see you again." At last, seated in the carriage, I said, "We must go!" I lifted my hat and prayed, prayed for God's blessing upon the people, both white and black, that all the region round about might know the fullness of the blessing of the Lord.

Still the students were not satisfied. They ran across the campus. By the side of the carriage entrance were steps that they mounted, and seating themselves there, as many as could, they continued to sing and wave their handkerchiefs until we were out of sight. Not content with that, they ran across the grounds to another gate where there was a bend in the road we did not know of. Our coming in sight again was the signal for another demonstration. We were obliged to use our handkerchiefs freely, for it was truly a separation from those who for years had been in our hearts, and who now had secured a deeper place there by their unaffected love and gratitude.

Oh, the work at Boydton is truly wonderful! From there have already gone forth young men and young women to preach the gospel. Many are teaching in the public schools. I visited one of the latter taught by one of our students. The scholars would bear favorable comparison with many of those in the schools of Boston, and I think they were quite as far advanced in their studies. Whatever the condition of unbelief or ignorance of the truths of God when a student enters, the power of the ever-present Spirit soon convicts and saves, and these are made a blessing throughout our land. Some of the old students were quite disappointed, on going to visit us, to find we had taken our departure before they arrived. Those of the students who were entirely without means pay nothing. Some pay one dollar a week, just to cover the cost of food, simply that they may feel that they are not living upon charity.

We would here express our gratitude to all those friends in the North who by their free-will offerings have been one with us in this blessed work. I wish I could put you all there tomorrow morning, and let you see the bright faces under that bright sky, and hear the songs of praise and thanksgiving that go up from glad hearts to a living God for what people at the North are doing for them. The trees were budding when we were there two weeks ago, the birds were singing, and the grass was growing green. In wandering over the grounds, I

found the little cemetery where some of the professors of the former college, and some members of their families, had been buried. It was sad to see these old graves uncared for and dilapidated. I left orders for the old broken fences and other debris to be removed, that the sacredness of the spot might be kept, in memory of the godly men and women who had lived and died here years ago.

We saw many ways and needs and chances for improvement, and we encouraged our hearts and those of the faithful workers there, by asking God to increase the gifts, and enlarge our borders. A barn is much needed, and a horse. The one pair of oxen are employed almost continually hauling wood. A chapel is also much needed. God will reward the prayers and faith of these colored people. The way of faith we teach finds good soil to flourish in, in the hearts of these people, who in their darkest days believed God would look upon their afflictions and send deliverance, and we were able richly to rejoice with them, as they sang "Deliverance has come."

As Mrs. Sharpe is not here, and many of you know her, I can speak a word in her behalf, and say how truly the Lord has been with her, and how eminently He has fitted her for her responsible position. Brother McAllister is holding up her hands most faithfully; he was born to be a teacher. Music and other branches of study are taught by a daughter of Prof. McAllister, and Mrs. McAllister lends a helping hand in the household. Miss Scales from Portland and Miss Waddell from Nova Scotia have been several years in the work, and now, added to their duties as teachers, they have charge of the Orphanage. They are sweetly at one with us in all the work. For a few months past a young man from New York has lent efficient aid in teaching, and we must not forget Miss Belle Hatch, who left her attractive home in New York, and spent the early winter months until Christmas in whole-hearted service, a strength and joy to all with whom she came in contact.

Miss Dougall, a young physician from Montreal, also gave her valuable services a portion of the season. The sick poor gave her incessant occupation. She has returned to New York for further study, and is waiting to know God's will for her and for Boynton.

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow!"

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