

ALEXANDER THE CHOIR-SMITH

Some Personal Reminiscences

By WILLIAM WOODFORD ROCK

Eighteen years ago in the city of Melbourne, Australia, preparations were on foot for an evangelistic campaign on a scale hitherto unknown in the land of the Southern Cross. A great choir of 2,000 voices had been organized, and had already begun to meet for practice. The two American evangelists who were to conduct the campaign had not yet arrived. But there had landed from the American boat a young man who said in a slow, quiet voice that he had come "to help a little with the singing."

This young man dropped into a meeting of the executive committee, where he had to introduce himself. Some members of the committee were a little suspicious that this unknown singer from America might introduce innovations that would jar the religious susceptibilities of the Australian public, and the chairman hinted as delicately as he could, that they did not wish any sensational methods in the campaign. To the young man's reply, the young man leaned across the table, flashed his winsome smile, and gripped the speaker's hand. In that moment the two men understood each other, and before rising came to terms with the executive committee. One of the four secretaries present said to a friend: "There's something about that fellow I like." In the months that followed, Australia and later English-speaking world, were captivated by that "something," which baffles accurate definition, but which made the possessor—the incomparable Alexander.

When Charles M. Alexander stepped on the platform before his first Australian audience of 10,000 people, he was a stranger to most of them; when that meeting was over the 10,000 were his friends. Australia is a land of sunshine, and it asks for a religion of sunshine—a religion that can sing, and set others singing. Alexander brought just that kind of a religion.

A few days after his arrival, in response to a newspaper man's request for a photograph, he produced a long cut. The editor, unused to a highly illustrated press, was a little dismayed at the size of it. He did not know when that cut was to be the forerunner of a hundred others, or that the original of the cut was to be one of the attracting forces of three great campaigns throughout the commonwealth. Wrapped around the cut were a few hymn sheets, one of which bore the title, "The Glory Song." The young singer put his finger on it, "There," he said, "is a Gospel song that this country will be singing from end to end, before the campaign is over. His prophecy was not ambitious enough."

Alexander and "The Glory Song" leapt into fame simultaneously in Melbourne. In a day or two the whole city was singing the song. In a few weeks it swept from one end of the country to the other. The entire English speaking world has been singing it since.

Charles M. Alexander represented a singing religion. No one who has seen that great figure standing on a platform, with radiant face and uplifted arms, kindling a great audience into song, will ever forget the picture. He had that indefinable touch of genius that could draw the suppressed soul from the heart of his hearer. His tall figure, alight with energy, his radiant face, his mellow voice rich in the broad-vowelled softness of the south, his bubbling humor linked to a passionate earnestness, formed for his audience an irresistible combination.

It may be said that Alexander rediscovered for the church the function of music in religion. Certainly he resurrected the joyous note in religious music, and the singing of the churches all over the world will gain, as a result of his influence, a happier tone, a more uplifting beat, a more spiritual measure. He mastered for himself, and taught to others, the art of making song the channel and servant of religious forces.

No other Gospel singer within a century possessed to such an extent the power to make people sing, or to sway a crowd so completely. He drew an audience of anything from the 5,000 to 10,000 men and women, to gather, as it were, their disconnected strands of thought, and weld them into a single wire for the dispatch of the message. Gifted with a rare, spontaneous humor, Alexander understood the psychology of a crowd, although he himself never used the term. To an unusual degree he possessed the ability to let people out of themselves, and to make them forget their troubles.

The apex of his evangelistic career was reached in London in 1903, where, with Dr. R. A. Torrey, he conducted one of the most remarkable meetings that Great Britain has ever seen. Alexander took the great metropolis by storm. For two months the Royal Albert hall, London's greatest auditorium was packed twice daily with audiences of 15,000 people, and it was the song leader who was the attracting force. London had heard many great preachers, but never before had it seen a man who radiated such a joyous religion, and who made the city sing whether it wanted to or not.

A London First Night
The opening night of that campaign is memorable. It was a typical first-night English audience, somewhat critical and a good deal inclined to be critical. In the boxes were titled people, and men prominent in public affairs. When Alexander mounted the high rostrum on the platform and looked out with his disarming smile on the great mosaic of human faces, there were some who wondered if he could subdue that vast crowd to his will, as he had done so many others. Behind him sat a choir of 4,000 voices, the largest evangelistic choir ever organized in England, waiting his word of command.

The song leader had only half an hour in which to break down a wall of indifference and inborn prejudice. Much of the future success of the London work depended upon that opening night, and Alexander knew it. But he did not hesitate. The choir surpassed itself in its instant response to the magic of the conductor's hands and voice. Calling into play every faculty and all his persuasive power, the song leader coaxed, exhorted, threatened, cajoled and laughed the vast audience into singing, and soon there rose a wave of exultant song that proclaimed his victory.

"Alexander the Great" was greater than ever that night. It was an undoubted triumph. The daily newspapers sang his praises in superlative terms, and thus at the very outset of the campaign, largely as a result of Alexander's work, received an impetus that did much to carry it to success. Almost over night his Gospel songs leapt into a popularity that was amazing in the phlegmatic city of London. The "Glory Song" became a better known than the latest music hall jingle, and men and women realized as they had never done before the power and uplift of Gospel music.

But what shall he said of the man

himself, the "life and soul" of his evangelistic party, as he was of any company, group or coterie with whom he foregathered? An Australian editor once likened him to "a bit of embers and sunshine." Living in close contact with him for a number of years, the present writer has tried to discover and define just exactly what is that sunny quality, which lifted him a little above the trouble was thickest and the clouds over the horizon, until nothing remained but blue sky and a wind that laughed. That day crept into the heart of Charles Alexander, and stayed there. That sunny quality did not diminish with the passing of the years. There were courage and a steadfastness of purpose behind it. It was this courage that shone out in difficult places, it was this steadfastness that kept Alexander in the forefront where the trouble was thickest and the fight hardest, and there was enough of both to inspire other people not so richly endowed. There were times when he was misrepresented, misunderstood and criticized, there were times when he suffered from the thoughtless injustice of people who did not understand him, but no one ever heard an unkind word pass from his lips. Always, he was "the captain of his soul."

To know Charles M. Alexander in private life, and under the roof of his own hospitable home in Birmingham, England, was a privilege indeed. And yet he was exactly the same man on a platform before 5,000 people, as by his own fireside with a single friend. With him, religion was woven into the texture of body, brain and heart. It was as natural for him to talk about religion or to sing about it, as it was to breathe. His religion was not only a part of him, it was an atmosphere in which he lived.

The door of his home, which he called "Tennessee" in honor of his native state, was always open to visitors from all parts of the world, Americans, Canadians, Australians, missionaries from far-off corners of the earth, have sojourned there, and have gone away with a new light in their eyes and a new hope in their hearts. When Alexander was present, his infectious laugh rang through the house; when he was away, the home, no matter how full of people, seemed strangely empty. An English writer describing his visit to "Tennessee," says: "When people criticized Mr. Alexander, I always wished I could take them to his home."

Friend-Making Genius

Alexander possessed a genius for making friends, and, what is of greater worth, he had an uncommon genius for helping them. He was equally at home in every strata of society. The porter in a hotel held just as strong a claim upon his interest as the man who drove up to the front entrance in a high-powered automobile. Alexander was in each a possible son of God.

I used to think of Charles M. Alexander solely as a choir leader; but I was wrong. Before everything else, he was a winner of souls. Until the last, he still handled large choirs with that rare touch that was peculiarly his own. Until the last, he still swayed great audiences with those strong, compelling hands of his. But the office of choir-leader was always secondary, an accessory only to the main purpose of his life. I think the text, "He that winneth souls is wise," must have danced continually before his eyes. That thought, that ambition, that purpose was never absent from him. First, last, and all the time, Alexander was a soul-winner, and he died at work.

Two impressions of my friend—a first and final imprint—are stamped indelibly upon my mind. The first is of a man in bed under doctor's orders, a man overflowing with good humor, who smiled up through a heavy cold, and asked a few direct questions concerning the relation of a soul to God. His concern was genuine, his questions were pure, his wonderful tenderness, his earnestness was irresistible. As an ultimate result of that personal work the writer became a Christian.

The last impression came two months ago, when we drove in a taxi from a New York hotel to the wharf to say good bye to the singer as he sailed for a visit to his English home. Alexander was in high spirits that morning, and his humor flowed like a mountain stream. There were four of us in the cab, and we laughed hilariously. It was a characteristic farewell. On such occasions Alexander refused to allow anyone to become mournful. Two blocks from the wharf he paused. His face became serious, and he requested his old friend and colleague, George T. E. Davis, to offer a prayer for the cause of Jesus Christ around the world before we separated. Alexander was a man with a Cause, and that Cause was dearer to him than life itself.

People have frequently asked, what is the secret of this man's unusual power? To me there was never any secret about it. His life was consecrated to God. In an unusual degree the Lord Jesus Christ was mirrored in that shining life. It was not surprising, therefore, that in his company you were constantly reminded of the Master. Alexander's greatest contribution to the world was not his gift of song, not his collection of Gospel hymns, but this: He showed us how to live a radiant Christianity.

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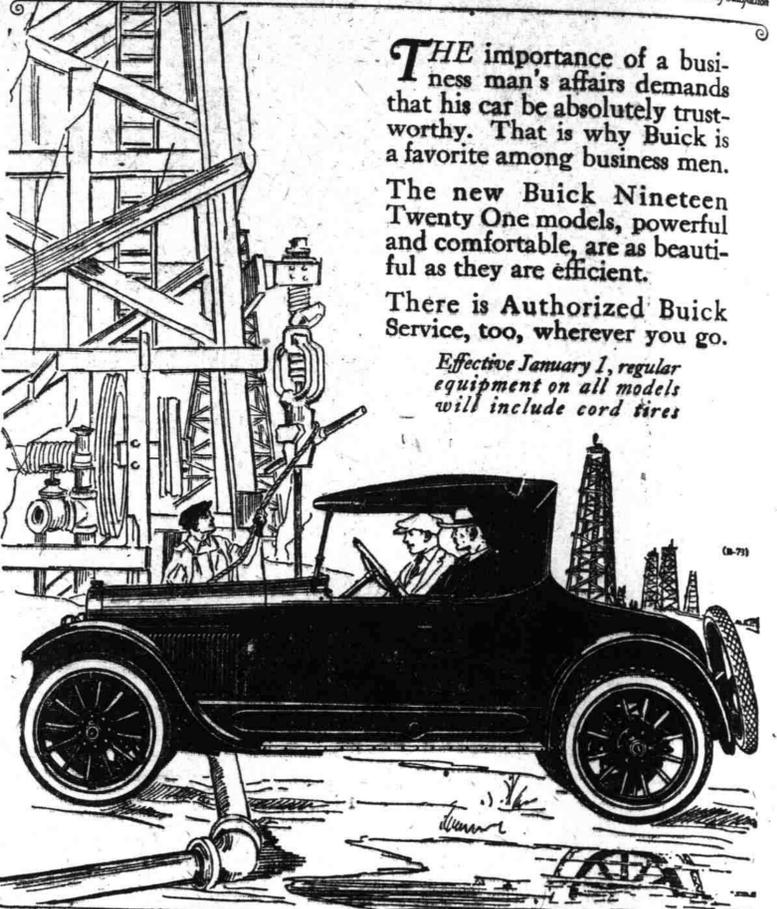
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