

## END OF AN ERA

ON OCTOBER 31, 1916, Pastor Russell died.

Suddenly.

The news sent a shock wave through the Bible Students' community around the world. Somehow no one had ever visualised the possibility of the movement without its leader. That he should have been removed suddenly and without warning was unthinkable. And he was only sixty-four! The Harvest witness was in full swing and he had been universally looked upon as the inspiring force and leader of that witness. Now he had gone! The question uppermost in every mind was "What now?"

Of course re-organisation started. The Pastor's instructions were clear and unequivocal. In the event of his demise the affairs of the Society were to be managed by a Board of Directors the members of which he named, and since the Society was in fact solely a printing and publishing organisation having no powers of control over the individual Bible Student churches it should be that church life would not be affected apart from the loss of the inspiring example of the leader. There was therefore little or no expectation in the UK at this moment that the unlooked-for event would appreciably affect the conduct of affairs on this side of the Atlantic apart from the emotional effect of the loss. Unexpected though it was, some among them will have remembered that when in this country in 1913, three years earlier, the Pastor suffered a serious heart attack, and while under the care of two London specialists his heart stopped beating for five seconds. They did not expect him to survive. Their verdict at the time was that his was a most remarkable case, a physical frame almost worn out but a mind as fresh and virile as ever.

It is possible that he had some premonition of his approaching end. He had not been in good health for several years. Nearly forty years of incessant travel in every part of the world with continuous preaching, the editing of a fortnightly magazine, the management of a large and continuously growing evangelical organisation, had taken its toll. And there was another factor.

Pastor Russell was well versed in the history, the triumphs and the failures, of past Christian organisations and movements. He knew, only too well, what so often happened when the reformer who started and built up a movement passed on. All too often other men, lesser men, sometimes, alas, ambitious men, battled to gain control and bend the organisation to their ends or shape it in conformity with their own ideas. The principal characteristics of the movement get lost in the process. Some of his co-workers who knew him intimately claimed after his death that he had begun to feel that he was losing control of that which he had built up during his forty years' ministry. While he lived, personal loyalty to him ensured that these elements would remain below the surface, but after that . . . .?

There is not much doubt that the Pastor knew what was coming, and sought to warn the brethren against it, if perchance they might take heed, and avoid it. He could not have known, when editing the November 1st 1916, issue of the "Watch Tower", that his own words therein contained were prophetic of a situation soon to be created among the brethren. Entitled "The Hour of Temptation", it was a long message of pastoral counsel, of which just a few extracts are here given, to show how clearly he perceived the tendency of which, perhaps, he was about the only one to be fully conscious at the time.

"The selection of improper leaders is a reflection against the Church which has the improper leaders. How could such get into positions to represent the Lord's people, except by the latter's votes? When will the Lord's people learn that ability to talk in public is only one of the qualifications of an Elder? Time and again have we noted how the Lord's Cause has been hindered, and spirituality among the brethren has been stifled, by attempts to imitate the established churches in putting

forward persons glib of tongue, lacking in spirituality.

"In such a case, is it not pride on the part of the Church, a desire to make a fair show in the flesh before the world? If not, why do they elect such persons? . . . . . When Elders seek to bring the Church under their control and succeed, does it not show that the Church lacks the very quality the Lord desires to see, - courage, overcoming? And does the Church not injure such a would-be ruler, as well as itself, by permitting him to succeed in his unscriptural methods? . . . . .

"We have already alluded to the ambitious and selfish spirit in the world, leading on to anarchy; and we have just pointed out how the same selfish, ambitious spirit is leading on to anarchy in the Church. The world cannot purge itself, for the leaders and the led have the worldly spirit. But not so is the Church of Christ. Ours is the spirit of the Master, the spirit of loyalty to Truth, the spirit of the Golden Rule, the spirit of brotherly love, the spirit of liberty and helpfulness, the spirit of fidelity to what we believe to be the Truth. It is inexcusable for the Church, possessed of this spirit, to continue under the domination of ambitious men. If they have not been conducting their Church affairs along proper lines, should they not begin at once? We believe that this is the time in which to set the House of the Lord in order . . . . .

"But, someone will say, 'we would have a great disturbance if we attempted to do anything contrary to the wishes of those who have fastened themselves upon us as our leaders and rulers. To make a move at all would endanger a division of the Church, and how could we think of anything which would result in that catastrophe?'"

"But, we enquire, which would be the better, to have a smaller Church operating along the lines which the Lord has indicated, or a larger Church upholding principles contrary to the Lord's provision, injuring themselves, hindering their influence, and encouraging as a leader one who is either a 'wolf' or else a 'sheep' which has been mistakenly misled into the wolf spirit? We encourage all the dear brethren who are in such trouble to be very heroic, to see that they do nothing from strife or vain glory, but everything in the spirit of meekness and love, that they may get back again to the liberty wherewith Christ

makes free, and do not get entangled again in any human bondage.”

Little did those who read those words in that month of November 1916 dream that within a few more months they would be involved in a controversy that was to be precipitated by men who, whether sincere in their motives or not, were to challenge the whole basis of self-government on which the Bible Students' movement was founded, and measurably to succeed. The new President of the Society, Joseph Rutherford, elected in the belief that he would faithfully continue in the path of Pastor Russell, almost immediately embarked upon a policy of dictatorial rule the very antithesis of that of the Pastor, and at once evoked strong protest by the brethren of the USA who were naturally the first to become involved. When by 1918 the confusion in the United States had begun to subside, there was a clear line of demarcation between the one body which maintained the principles promulgated by Pastor Russell and intended to continue the work for which he was celebrated, and the other body which willingly accepted the oversight of Rutherford and followed him into the conversion of the Society from the literature service organisation that it had been into a rather dogmatic religious sect in which all members were expected to be obedient to the mandates of its leader, a system which eventually possessed little or nothing in common with either the theology, the spirit or the outlook of thought from which it sprang.

Inevitably the British brethren were caught up in this maelstrom of conflicting claims, but fully to understand the position so far as the United Kingdom was concerned it is necessary to go back a little in history, to a point in time prior to Brother Russell's death.

The London Tabernacle had been acquired by Brother Russell in 1911 as a centre for his British work, particularly to represent his message before the British public. The building was at the first owned by the Society and a lease had been taken on the adjacent mansion, 34 Craven Terrace, for the Society's office and stockrooms. The eight existing London churches which had combined to constitute the congregation of this Tabernacle enabled the project to make an impressive start – or

so they thought at the time, forgetting for the moment that when Christians attempt to present an impressive appearance before the world there is usually trouble ahead. The three co-managers of the Society's work at 34 Craven Terrace, Jesse Hemery, Henry Shearn, and William Crawford, were all elders of the congregation and Hemery was by common consent and election Assistant Pastor and Chairman of the Board of Elders. All this caused the Tabernacle to be looked upon by the rest of the country as peculiarly representative of the Society even although in theory and fact it was an independent and self-governing Church of Bible Students as were all the others. The fact that London was the national capital and this fusion of eight London churches had produced the largest church numerically in the United Kingdom – a few years later it was the largest in the world – accentuated the situation, and this respect for the London Church on the part of the country generally had an effect upon the events of 1916 onward.

The key to those events is the fact that between 1913 and 1916 there was a growing tendency among a certain element on the Board of Elders to limit the freedom of congregational control of church affairs. To an increasing degree the preaching services were being monopolised by Jesse Hemery to the exclusion of other elders, under the claim that since the building was the property of the Society and that Pastor Russell was the unanimously elected Pastor of the congregation, his appointed representative, Jesse Hemery, also unanimously elected Assistant Pastor, should at least be the principal one to represent him in the pulpit. At first the position was tacitly accepted. There was, and is to those who knew him and still survive, no doubt that he was a superb orator and could hold an audience spell-bound for as long as he wished – easily the foremost Bible Student preacher in the country. The Pastor himself when establishing the Tabernacle had stipulated that only really qualified preachers should occupy the pulpit; this stemmed from his desire that the message should be ably and well presented in this, the central church of the British Bible Students, and this fact was a powerful argument in favour of this growing tendency. Unfortunately Jesse Hemery himself was fully aware that he was the best speaker in the country and

this was not so good. He could have been, and probably was, perfectly sincere in concluding that it was in the best interests of the Truth that he exert as much personal control as he could, in his role as UK representative of Brother Russell, rather than risk the congregation and its elders falling short of the high standard which had been set. Unfortunately, consciousness of one's own ability, the plaudits of men, outward success and prominence, is likely to add ambition to sincerity, and when ambition comes in at the door, sincerity is liable to fly out at the window. Traditionally, the elders of the Bible Students, true to New Testament teaching, set themselves to serve the flock, not to lord it over them. Jesse Hemery as a younger man at the turn of the century was an indefatigable missionary, never slow to go anywhere in the country to talk to one or two people who were feeling after the Truth. Now he began to see himself as the minister of a large London church, like so many churches around him, and that was a very different thing.

For the first three or four years all went well. The great days of 1910 were only just in the past. The succeeding evangelical work of the Photo-Drama of Creation occupied the minds and hands of the brethren throughout 1914 and 1915 and its aftermath lasted into 1917. Public lectures continued to be well attended and the number of brethren in fellowship together continued to increase. Brother Russell visited England and preached at the Tabernacle as at other places each year from 1911 to 1914 and it was fully expected that after the war was over he would be here again. But as the years drew on there was this nagging feeling that all was not quite as it should be. Why, if the other churches throughout Great Britain, including the other large London Church at Forest Gate almost next door, were completely under the control of their congregations through their elders; why, since Pastor Russell's own recommendations in his chapter on Church order in the Sixth Volume of the Scripture Studies outlined this as the proper scriptural course; why then was a system growing up in the London Tabernacle tending towards a different basis? Why were so many of the elders, elected to serve them in spiritual things, excluded from the performance of the duties for which they had been elected. Some among them recalled the days before the

fusion in 1911 when as much smaller individual churches they had received and learned by the ministry of these same elders; now they were all one large and impressive church things were different and some wanted to know why. They began to find that big is not always beautiful.

The upshot of this rising feeling was that in 1915 the Elders initiated a discussion between themselves aimed at probing the depth of this feeling and what should be done about it. A correspondence with the Pastor resulted; it is a little uncertain from such records as still exist whether the London church or the Pastor made the first move. A remark made by him in a discourse at a USA convention in 1915 shows that his astute mind was already foreseeing some kind of an imminent crisis – a “fiery tribulation to separate Elijah and Elisha” he said; he did not know whether it would first come in “Canada, or the States, or where”. The first record that survives is that of a letter dated June 20, 1915, from the Pastor to the London church, in which he suggested that the London church should now assume responsibility for the running expenses of the Tabernacle, that “the congregational and the Society’s work should be kept separate and apart”, “leaving the Society the care of the Bethel” (34 Craven Terrace) “and its expenses”. Two months later at a church meeting the congregation accepted the suggestion and the Pastor was advised accordingly. In the meantime he had written the three co-managers suggesting that Jesse Hemery occupy the pulpit on alternate Sundays and the other two, with others of the Elders, on the remaining occasions. This was what the congregation had in mind and it seems probable that more correspondence ensued, for in a letter to the Church dated October 22 the Pastor said “In respect to Tabernacle arrangements being turned over to London, we reply that if they are ready to take up all the obligations of the Society connected with the Tabernacle, including interest payments, we will be very happy indeed to turn over the entire management of the Tabernacle to the congregation.” A week later at an Elders meeting a feeling was expressed that since the congregation was now bearing the financial responsibility, the affairs of the Church should be definitely seen to be in the hands of the Elders and Deacons of the Church, as was the position everywhere else.

It is here that a certain amount of "stalling" on the part of Jesse Hemery would seem to become apparent. He stated that an entire change of policy would be involved and the proposition would be better considered by the new Board of Elders due to take office the following February. Since the Board of Elders had survived relatively unchanged apart from four additional ones since the fusion of 1911 there would seem to have been no reason to expect any change of heart by such new Board. Moreover there was not in fact any change in policy - the Church was only asking for the restoration of rights of control which had been whittled away during the preceding few years, and which for the past four months the Pastor had verified should be theirs with his full approval. There is also the unexplained phenomenon that whereas the Church was under the impression that it was now paying all the Church expenses the Pastor was still writing letters asking when the Church was ready to commence the arrangement. One might be justified in enquiring whether there was not what is nowadays called a "failure of communication" at this point.

The Church itself, however, was getting restive. At a Church meeting held on November 28 1915, the question of the speakers at Sunday services was raised. A motion was put from the body of the Church "in view of the congregation now paying the Tabernacle expenses the Church suggests that the services of the Elders be extended to the filling of Sunday Tabernacle appointments". Jesse Hemery, as chairman, must perforce put the motion, but before doing so staged a bit of a rearguard action by telling the assembly "to a limited extent this is already in operation, and Brother Russell had recently suggested that Brothers Shearn and Crawford should serve more frequently in this way". If this was a reference to the Pastor's letter of August 12 it was at best a bare outline. There was considerable dissent but the calm and admittedly winning demeanour of Jesse gained the failure of the motion, although only by a slender majority. But with half of the congregation now getting definitely apprehensive of the ingress of ecclesiasticism into their Church and the loss of the standards of Church government characteristic of the Bible Student movement since its inception, it was obvious that matters were not going to remain there. There



was clearly the beginning of a feeling that the fusion of the eight independent London Churches into one large impressive one, with all the opportunities it offered for the exercise of personal ambition, had been a mistake, and perhaps they would have been better off as they were. Most Christian denominations have been through the same phase of experience in their history; perhaps the Bible Students were not automatically immune. Some of them must have reflected that they had borne the heat and burden of the day in the early times between 1882 and 1911 when their little assemblies had been founded; Jesse Hemery was a comparative newcomer to London and all the real work had been done before he arrived – he came into a ready-made Tabernacle and a ready-made congregation. Christians are human; these earnest souls must have compared the sincere simplicity of their earlier faith in their little communes, each bound to its neighbours in the bonds of fraternal fellowship, with this tendency to political moves they now saw rising in their midst, and they did not like what they saw.

In the year 1915 the London Tabernacle Board of Elders comprised nineteen men, all of long standing and mature in the Truth. The history of the period between 1911 and 1915 is barren of church records; most of what is known comes from personal recollections and information imparted by some who experienced those days but are now long since gone to be with the Lord. So far as can be gleaned, fifteen of the nineteen were Elders of the various constituent Churches before the 1911 fusion. Of these, four were in favour of the status quo with Hemery; eleven supported the move for reform. Four Elders joining the Board in 1911 or later, from outside London, were with the eleven. Thus the proposals in 1915 had fifteen in favour and four against. Supported as they were by something like 50% of the Church the result could have been a foregone conclusion had it not been for the universal conviction that the avoidance of a disruption was the paramount consideration, and this theme was certainly played to excess by Jesse Hemery, probably from the best of motives. At this stage he was almost certainly convinced that the best interests of the Truth in this country required his personal control over the central Church in London. Perhaps he failed to consider the Old Testament story

of Uzza and the Ark of the Covenant. So he sought by every conceivable right and proper expedient to hinder the majority Elders and the Church behind them from taking any positive action.

They took it, though. The discussions, moves, and counter-moves dragged on through 1915 without any decisive result until by December some of the congregation had had enough. Some of those who had been members of two of the original North London ecclesias, Crouch End and Stoke Newington, re-constituted those ecclesias and in January of 1916 commenced regular meetings. There was no thought at that time of secession. These brethren chose to exercise their constitutional right to organise and control their own meetings in parallel with the Tabernacle Church, and still remain in fellowship with them. But it showed which way the wind was blowing. What North London was doing to-day West and South London might be doing to-morrow. In fact Surbiton in South-west London did follow their example only a few months later. A series of Elders' meetings during the next few months strove in vain to persuade Hemery and those with him to withdraw their objection to normal democratic control of Church affairs. One might wonder why, with such a majority of Elders in favour, - at that time fifteen against four - the matter could not be settled there and then. The answer was determined by two factors - one, the desire of all without exception that nothing be done to disrupt the prestige of the Tabernacle as the principal Church of the Bible Students, and two, the personal esteem in which most of the congregation, who would necessarily have the last word, held Jesse Hemery, leading to a reluctance to endorse anything that was not endorsed by him. Nevertheless it was agreed that something would have to be done to resolve the dilemma. The correspondence of the previous year with Brother Russell was brought back into the limelight, and the consequence was that at an Elders meeting on September 1st 1916 Hubert Thackway moved a resolution that in view of the fact that feeling in the Church for control of its own affairs had increased so much during the twelve months just past, the Elders should go fully and finally into the matter. Unanimous consent being obtained, a further meeting on September 16 agreed, also unanimously,

that a full statement of what was proposed should be sent to Brother Russell, signed on the one side by the assenting Elders, and on the other by those dissenting.

This seemed like progress. The Elders dispersed with agreement to meet four days later to prepare the agreed statement. The hope and expectation was that whatever Brother Russell advised would be accepted by all parties.

On September 17 Jesse Hemery wrote to Brother Russell charging his two co-managers in the Society office, Henry Shearn and William Crawford, with "disloyalty to the Pastor" in that they were engineering a movement to put the control of the Tabernacle in the hands of a "Church Board". If by this he meant the Board of Elders he spoke truth but since this proposal was precisely in line with Brother Russell's own recommendations in Volume Six it might be difficult to say wherein lay the disloyalty. Despite this action, Jesse joined in the preparation of the statement and after four successive revisions it was finally approved and signed by all parties, including Jesse, on October 21.

By this time one of the Elders, Walter Eddington, wearied of the whole affair, had resigned his office and attached himself to Stoke Newington. Of the remaining eighteen, two who were in favour of the proposal, Harold Hooper and Cedric Davey, were apparently not present at the last, and so their signatures did not appear. Hubert Thackway had, rather unexpectedly, changed sides, so that in the outcome there were eleven in favour and five against. (For the record, the "in favour" elders were Cotton, Cormack, Crawford, Cruikshank, Doe, Edgell, Fraser, Gentle, Hart, Radwell, Shearn; those "against" were Cronk, Hemery, Seeck, Swain, Thackway.) The resolution stated that the "in favour" Elders "considered it to be in the best interests of the Church meeting in the London Tabernacle that the arrangements governing its affairs be organised along the lines laid down in Volume Six, which they recognised as the Scriptural method". It went on to endorse the continuation of Brother Russell as Pastor of the Tabernacle - which of course implied the Assistant Pastorship of Jesse Hemery - and the relation of the Tabernacle to the Society, and that the Elders should select the speakers at the preaching services subject to Brother

Russell's endorsement, as Pastor, of individual names. There was probably a feeling of quiet satisfaction that at last agreement had been reached. It was inconceivable that anyone would disagree with the Pastor's verdict.

Theodore Seeck, Elder and Church Secretary, posted the letter on October 23. There was no air mail in those days. Letters went by steamer. It could not have arrived in Brooklyn before November 1st.

Pastor Russell had died on October 31.

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On or about November 13 there set sail from New York, bound for Liverpool, one Paul Johnson, erstwhile right-hand man of Pastor Russell, now coming to England as an emissary of Joseph Rutherford, who at the moment had his hands full in the States endeavouring to effect his own succession to the Presidency of the Society. In the light of subsequent events it is tolerably clear that Rutherford's object in sending him was to "sound out" the attitude of the British brethren as to his succession; he was engaged in a difficult task in the States and he was probably not too sure that he would not meet with the same opposition - perhaps more so - in Britain. In such case, events proved him to have been right.

Johnson landed at Liverpool on November 19 and proceeded to London, where he confronted the three London co-managers with the assertion that he had come as "minister plenipotentiary", whatever that may have meant - nobody ever did find out - to enquire into the state of the churches and put right anything that was wrong. As a means of settling the differences of thought on policy which had pre-occupied the London Church for twelve months past this sounded good, and the brethren prepared themselves to talk and listen. They speedily found out, however, that they were expected to listen but not talk. Johnson claimed that as the Society's representative with sweeping powers he would give the orders and the brethren would obey. His own words, a month later, were "no discussion is permitted. It is for the UK brethren to carry out the suggestions of the Society's representative who has full charge of its affairs in this country". It is not surprising that the

euphoria generated by his coming evaporated rather quickly - except in the case of Jesse Hemery. And when it was revealed that Johnson had come fully armed with full knowledge of the proposal which the London Church had sent to the Pastor for his endorsement, and intended to suppress it completely, light began to dawn.

It turned out later - from Johnson's own writings - but was not known at the time, that he had come to England having in his possession not only a copy of the proposal signed by the Elders, but also a copy of the 1916 Elders schedule marked by Jesse Hemery to show which of the Elders were sponsoring the move towards control of its own affairs by the Church. And Johnson came with the intention of eliminating those Elders. He says that Jesse had sent two copies of this list to America before he left for Britain. Now if this is true, it does raise a query. The news of the Pastor's death could not have reached the London office before November 2 - the Pastor died in California while on a preaching tour and the news had first to be received at Brooklyn and be cabled from there to London. If Jesse Hemery sent the schedules to Rutherford immediately upon hearing of the Pastor's death, they could not have reached Brooklyn before November 9, and Johnson left New York not later than November 13. It looks that there was some urgent discussion at the American end before Johnson left, and now here he was, having by his own admission already prejudged the issue.

His first exercise of his claimed authority was to dismiss Henry Shearn and William Crawford from their positions of co-managers of the Society in Britain, and order them to remove their furniture and effects from the premises forthwith. His next was to declare that the resolution intended for Brother Russell's approval was now invalid and refused - the Tabernacle arrangements were to remain under the control of Jesse Hemery. This, unwelcome as it was to the majority Elders and the Church, was welcome news indeed to Jesse, who now had a powerful and indeed all sufficient ally.

He next announced that he was off on a tour of the country and it is probable that the London brethren saw him go with a feeling of relief. They had never before had a brother from the

States quite of this nature and most were not quite sure what it was all about and what they ought to do about it. The general feeling that whatever came to them from Brooklyn must be good precluded most from making any hasty judgement. Anyway he was off to Manchester and that was that for the time being.

Manchester, however, thought differently. The national Convention at Manchester was due over the period December 30 to January 1 and the arrangements had long since been made and the programmes printed and circulated, featuring eighteen British speakers from the whole country, Scotland to the South. Johnson demanded that the programme be torn up and he himself given a major share of the speaking appointments. Under strong protest the organisers gave way, probably on the same basis as London.

By January he was back in London in time for the annual election of Church elders and deacons. Normally Jesse Hemery, as Chairman of the congregation, presided over this function. Johnson insisted that he, as the Society's representative, preside, quite illegally since this was an individual Church matter and nothing to do with the Society. Weakly, Hemery gave way. It is surprising that the congregation as such did not protest - but the fact is that Johnson was an eloquent and quick-witted man with a certain winning manner which served to mask in some degree his brusque authoritarianism. And the congregation, completely unused to this kind of behaviour on the part of one coming from America as a pastor and counsellor, were still in considerable doubt in what way they should react.

Now he returned to the attack on Shearn and Crawford, demanding from the pulpit that they be dismissed from their position as Elders, or at least not elected as such at this election. "Brother Crawford is no longer a child of God" he declaimed "but I believe that Brother Shearn is". In the stunned silence that followed, one teen-aged observer wondered inwardly why some of the Elders did not rise and protest at this unwarranted slur on their fellow-elders, but no one did. As the silence continued, William Crawford rose quietly from his seat, carefully gathered his books together from the pew shelf in front

of him, spoke decisively and clearly "That's enough for me", made his way along the pew to the side aisle, walked down the aisle and out of the building. For the first time it became evident that something was seriously wrong.

That something was more plainly demonstrated when Johnson announced that he was called of God to perform a work in London which, he said, was typified by the work of Nehemiah and the enemies of the Jews at the Restoration, that in a symbolic sense he was to judge and slay these enemies who, said he, were those in London who supported the resolution proposing freedom of action for the congregation. Outlining this thesis one day to a group of London brethren he was approached by Duncan Cronk, one of the Elders, who could always be relied on to relieve the tenseness of a difficult situation with a little light humour. "So you are Nehemiah, Brother Johnson?" "That is so." "And Brother Shearn is Tobiah and Brother Crawford is Sanballat and you are going to hang them in the Tabernacle?" "That is so." "Then who am I?" "The Lord has not shown me yet, Brother Cronk, but He will." "And Nehemiah is said to have plucked out the hair of his enemies." "That is so." "Then pluck mine out" and so saying he bent his head forward revealing a pate so neatly trimmed that even Nehemiah would have found difficulty in performing his recorded action. For perhaps the first time since his arrival the other was for a moment at a loss for words.

It is fairly evident that Jesse Hemery was banking upon Shearn and Crawford, the principal advocates of the freedom proposal, being eliminated by Johnson so that upon the latter's return to the States Jesse would be left in supreme control. By late February, however, Johnson announced that he, and not Rutherford, was the true successor to Pastor Russell, and that he himself was to fulfil the role of the "Steward" in the Parable of the Penny. To the unbiased mind at the time the root of the trouble was obvious. Here were three men, Rutherford, Johnson and Hemery, each convinced that he, and he alone, was the best man to rule and direct the brethren, ambitious enough to attempt achievement of the coveted position, and blind to the harm they were causing. There is an old proverb, the origin of which the writer has long since forgotten, which runs "When

Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug-of-war". In this case there were three Greeks, and the tug-of-war was a triangular one. There could only be one winner, and in the upshot that winner had to be the man with the strongest pull.

In the meantime Johnson was travelling the country visiting the larger churches assuring them that he was the rightful head of the Society and they would do well to heed and obey him. In most places he got short shrift; a few did take some notice and when in later years he formed a body called the Laymens Home Missionary Movement these did associate themselves with it as a "British branch". At the time, however, the overwhelming majority wanted nothing more than to see the back of him. From Liverpool he wrote to Jesse Hemery a long letter in which he predicted the coming of an imminent famine, fulfilling an episode in the life of Elisha, (although what connection there was between an eighth century BC Hebrew prophet and a possible English famine in the Twentieth century AD did not immediately appear) and instructing that supplies of food be purchased and stored, especially including "wheat and monkey nuts"! It was now that the truth began to be glimpsed; the man was undergoing a severe mental breakdown. "Am not at all well," he said "my brain is quite weary . . . . I am sure that the Lord has given me Sister A" (a Bethel sister accompanying him for secretarial purposes) "to give me much needed relief. If this relief had not been forthcoming I am satisfied I would have had a repetition of my 1910 breakdown, but the Lord will sustain me to finish the work that He has given me to do." He had suffered a mental breakdown in 1910 but it had been thought then that this would be non-recurring. This, and the many eccentricities which he manifested at this time, and which lingered a long time in the memories of brethren who witnessed them, and his dictatorial manner and extravagant claims so uncharacteristic of brethren in the Truth, led to the British brethren chiefly concerned, and Rutherford in America, reaching the same conclusion simultaneously, and in consequence Paul Johnson received a summons from Brooklyn to return at once. Johnson refused to go and declared again that the election of Rutherford as Society President was invalid and that he himself was Pastor Russell's true successor. At the same time he "dismissed" Jesse



Hemery as manager for the Society; Jesse took no notice of that but realising, rather late it must be admitted, the seriousness of the situation, called in Shearn and Crawford, whom he had quite happily seen disfellowshipped and sent into the wilderness only a few weeks previously, to come back and help him get rid of Johnson – which, with perhaps a commendable disregard for old differences, they did. Looking back from the vantage point of many years later, there could be a grim humour in this rather tardy appeal of Hemery – the denunciations of Shearn and Crawford by Johnson were as nothing to that of Hemery when he found that the latter had turned against him. Writing of this many years later, Johnson said that his “experiences with J. Hemery revealed him as one of the most cunning hypocrites with whom he ever dealt”. (In these memoirs he always referred to himself in the third person.) “So completely successful was he as a hypocrite that PSL did not suspect this of him until after Rutherford threw PSL down . . . .” This kind of language was, of course, totally unacceptable to all right-thinking British brethren, however exasperating the circumstances.

Perhaps, after all, he was the instrument of the Lord’s salvation as far as the UK brethren were concerned, for it was chiefly in consequence of the issues he stirred up during his short sojourn in this country that the attitude of at least half of them hardened into a resolve that they would neither accept from America nor set up for themselves any leader wielding dictatorial authority; from henceforth the British Bible Students would stand by the principles laid down by their deceased Pastor and remain a decentralised body having no cohesive bond between the churches save that of voluntary association together in the practice and promulgation of a common faith and a common hope.

But despite the tragedy of the occurrence, and the succession of incidents, saddening at one time and humorous at another, a dispassionate view of the happening against the background of the position in England prior to and at the time of his arrival might enable a more realistic appraisal of his actions to be made. In the first place Paul Johnson could very reasonably have expected to succeed Pastor Russell as leader of the world movement. It is likely that many of the USA brethren

did so expect, and he would certainly have been a more popular choice than the austere and dictatorial Rutherford. He came to England knowing that Rutherford, largely by means of legal rather than moral considerations was going to win the race, and knowing Rutherford, as he undoubtedly did, as well as anyone in the States, he knew what would assuredly happen to the movement to which he had given his life. And he could not bear the knowledge. Did he think, knowing the sturdy and independent spirit of the British brethren, that if he could get them on his side he could challenge Rutherford from this side of the Atlantic, and perhaps win? The line between waiting for the Lord to put things right and trying to put them right for the Lord can on occasion be a very thin one and many a sincere disciple in past history has overstepped that line. Then upon arrival in England, instead of meeting a solid body of brethren eager to do battle for the right under his leadership, as he might perhaps have hoped, he found a community asserting a right to independence which would brook no leaders of the kind he envisaged. Hence he got rid of Shearn and Crawford, the spearheads of the independence movement, only to find that Hemery had ambitions like to his own, so that he now had an opponent in England as well as in America. Is it a possibility that, faced with this mounting opposition, and feeling quite sincerely that, if he failed, the whole Bible Student movement would pass into alien hands and fall into ruin, his mind became temporarily disordered and this could account for the strange and unexpected things he said and did. He was normal enough after his return to the States. He went on to break with Rutherford and eventually organise his own movement which still survives and conducts a vigorous evangelical work not only in English-speaking countries but also in the third world. The few in Britain who espoused his cause at the time are represented to this day as a branch of the American movement still holding to the theological outlook of Pastor Russell and counting themselves as lineal descendants of his work, but looking to Johnson and his successors as their spiritual leaders and accepting their oversight and control. A closer study of his recorded acts and dealings in this country by anyone who was there at the time suggests the picture of a man convinced that the fate of an entire

world community rested on his shoulders, frustrated at opposition to what he sincerely believed to be the only way in which it could be saved, and finally broken in despair at his failure to achieve his aim. Perhaps his real mistake was the very common one of feeling that the well-being of the Lord's work rested on him and him alone. When tempted to adopt that attitude – and many from the best of motives have been thus tempted – it is well to remember the words of good King Jehoshaphat: "Ye shall not need to fight in this battle, for the battle is not yours, but God's. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord".

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A week before the end of March Paul Johnson left 34 Craven Terrace, early in the morning, quietly, before anyone else was up. The rather undignified – and unnecessary – mode of his departure, often recounted in after years and invariably evoking some hilarity, need not be recounted here. He went, and there was relief at his going. No one knew where he was until news was received from Liverpool that he had sailed for the United States on March 31. He had been in this country for nineteen weeks and in that short time created an unprecedented scene of confusion and misunderstanding amongst the brethren which was by no means allayed by his departure. A number of churches, mostly from the larger cities, such as Glasgow and Manchester, wrote to Brooklyn requesting that he be not allowed to come to Britain again.



HENRY J. SHEARN  
1865-1946