The Short Day Dying

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Extract

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Another Sabbath is gone into eternity borne from us swiftly as though the angels gathered it in their arms flung wide to harvest the days. Our time is stolen from us and we are blind to its loss neither will we see it again mine hours have been wasted. The days flicker with light and are quickly past.

In the short hours today I made my labours though they left me tired and I have work tomorrow. I have been to school and to class I have given my tithe. I am gone down to Tideford to change the tracts and then the time were spent it feels as though I have not seen the reward that our land is bare of promised fruit. It seems a long while since I saw anything but desolation in this place. We have failing mines and failing communities too there are wide spaces opening up among the congregations.

I have been to the empty houses of the Lord I have seen *his* home made barren and held to ridicule the jewels that man may find in there gone to gather dust and the Book unopened though it contain such wisdom. I have known the Word of the Lord speak through me though it echoes in the emptiness with none to hear it none to listen.

Time is pressing. Twenty-seven years are gone from me at least twenty I must surely be able to remember what has passed around me. It has been so short. Yet half my life is lost and my youth is already distant I forget what it were to be a child and the forgetting is as painful as grief. What have the days amounted to? I know I have not improved the past as I ought. The sick have gone unvisited and my duties undone souls have been left unsaved and abandoned in the cold far from their Father's home. It seems as though the time were

never mine to govern. Have I ever been free? These years have been taken in work in earning my keep and I have no security in earthly matters nothing for myself and little enough to give to others.

I am not an uneducated man. I have received schooling and been much informed by those preachers I have had the grace to hear and by reading too. I have experienced many changes none so great as that within my own heart. I have seen some small part of this land heard men talk about many things and listened that among all the foolishness I might understand something new. But learning is passing. Seems to amount to nothing. Well what good does it serve if it will not endure what worth is it if it does not come to my aid in my work or in *his*? I confess I am worn from work I have had no good rest nor do I feel I have enough love for my duties. It seems I must always pause before fulfilling them as though to decide whether the weight were worth bearing at all.

Lately I am come to thinking on all the various agencies through which some good might be done. The tract distributor. The visitor of the sick. The Sunday School teacher. The preacher of the Gospel. All go their rounds yet we see no trophy because the poor souls they will not awaken to a sense of their danger may it please my Master to prove me wrong.

Even the Sabbath comes and they go about their work or take their rest as they please. As I walked in town today I saw a man gathering water at the well with the chapel not a hundred yards away. Oh I am certain his body thirsted enough but he ignored the deeper thirsting of his soul and the well we are offering here is more abundant than his and more refreshing too. It is a wretched state. They abuse the freedoms they have been accorded this life they have been given and they do not turn to their Lord though *he* aches for them I have felt it. They would search out their rest after hard labours yet they have no desire for the purity of peace *he* offers and content themselves with the vanity of their own mean comforts. They will lose the Sabbath and be ignorant of what they have

had. Then their imaginations will fail them and they will cease to remember what it once were to have faith. They imagine they have awoken to some new world that has an easy life in store for them a place where they can rest on the Sabbath and forsake their God. But there is no new world no easy time for them and they have merely died to the old one.

I know there were better times in this country when Heaven were situated closer to earth. It were not so long ago. Even in my father's time the Church were a powerful force in this place it turned the drunk to sobriety made the profligate moral and set families right in the sight of God. I long to see *his* house renewed and made strong again.

Many times this week the fire has descended on me even in my working hours I have known the pain of the Lord as people curse and bemoan their misfortunes but come the evening they do not repair to *him* they work against themselves they do not awaken. It is said that the way of fools seems right to them. Why do they not give their hearts to God?

For our time is short. The end comes with quickening breaths. This week already has taken many with it and they go prepared or unprepared. I have seen some in this village have passed away so that children have been called to weep for parents and wives for husbands and the saying of the wise man has been renewed *Man goeth to his long home and the mourners go about the streets*. Well death is always near I do not need to be reminded of it. I feel it has been a close companion to me. I know how short life is that though in Heaven we may be granted Eternal Life on this earth our flesh is passing.

I am gone to visit the sick and saw Mr Blackmore he is weak and says he feels his Salvation is near. He is just waiting for the call. And I visited a young woman who is lain in bed these years but who keeps close to Christ and it were a joy to see that faith in someone it seems she cannot praise God enough. I think it is profitable sometimes for us to go to sickness it teaches us a lesson so that we might hear the voice of

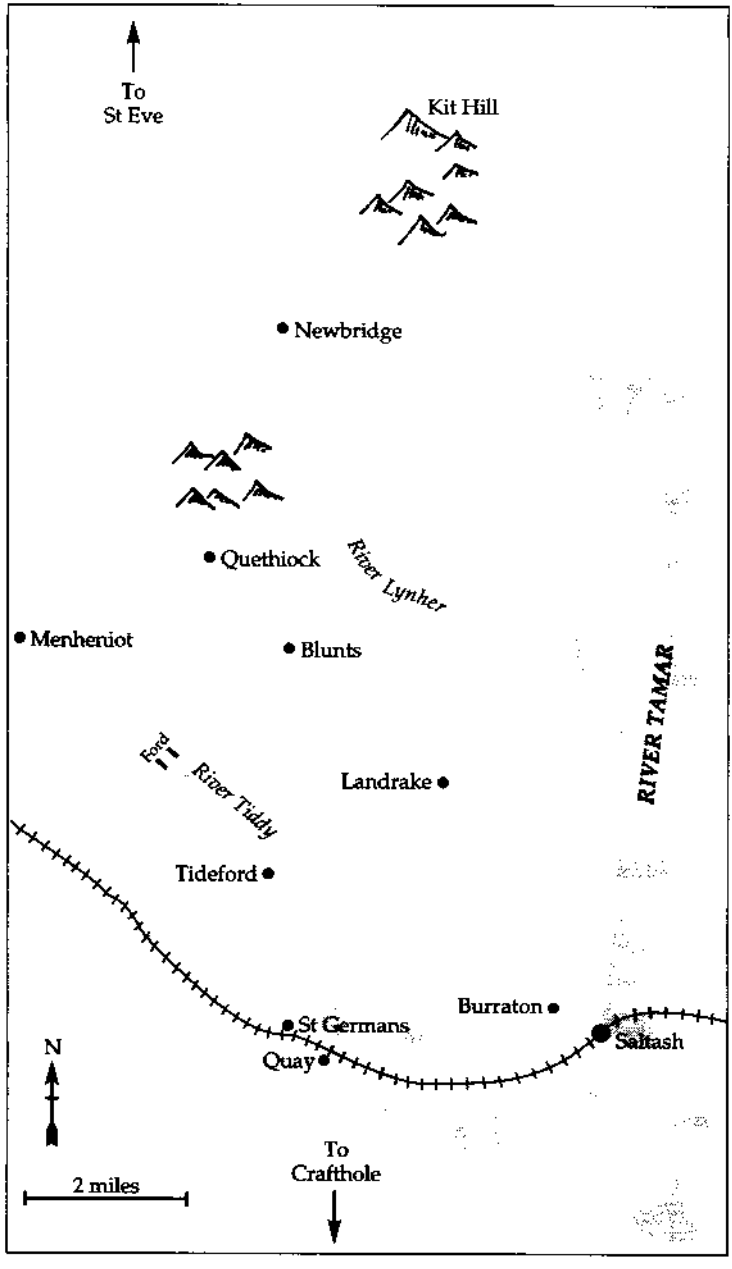
our Master calling us to be ready for *his* coming. PREPARE THYSELF *he* says I hear *his* voice it causes my soul to shake.

Yet I know I am unprepared. For my time has been wasted I have not put it to good use it has been let run through my fingers and I have been left sharp conscious of my lack of worth. Should I number my sins I have hardly the time. I do not feel within me the hope I know I should own and my labours do not bring me relief. Like the most complacent child have I tarried.

Still it is not all dark. I remain in *his* favour it seems and grateful that I am neither consumed by sickness nor bought to bow down to idols. Even as the hours of my Salvation are slipping away I am shown the mercy of *his* Grace for *he* has led me to this place and given me a knowledge of *him* in my heart and a taste of that heavenly bliss which awaits us.

So I must strive to better efforts and seize the hours left to me. I will watch my remaining days and mark them that I might see how *his* work is done. I will stake back the time make a sharp edge to catch on it as it falls and tear it out for me. I will remember those gone before I will record their names and pray for them I will keep to my stern duty. And then perhaps I shall have satisfaction and can go forth to my labours refreshed with so much cheerfulness and no aching no hard grieving no remorse of conscience no wishing that I had stayed at home.

JANUARY 1870


To
St Eve
Kit Hill
Newbridge
Quethiock
River Lynher
Menheniot
Blunts
RIVER TAMAR
Ford
River Tiddy
Landrake
Tideford
Burraton
St Germans
Quay
Saltash
N
2 miles
To
Crafthole

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Well if happiness were found in a round of duties I should have had my portion today for I have not had much leisure. I am gone down early to St Germans to change the tracts they have not been done since the turn of the year. I found the workers already labouring at the quay loading the barges as the tide rose. The railway viaduct stands immense over the scene it is a remarkable construction one which seems to diminish us in comparison yet still leaves us to wonder at what men can do.

One or two of the men nodded to me as I passed by there are some here who know me. All of us wrapped thickly against the early cold I were glad I had taken an extra layer. The hawsers holding the boats were stiff with ice I have known days so cold that they have snapped robbed by the season of their taut strength the barges sliding from their position at the quay and bringing sudden shouts from the men to hold them there to fasten a new line before they drift out of reach. But the river continues to pour along regardless it has too much mud and salt for it to freeze I think or the tide is too strong and the flow too swift. Just the mill ponds at Newbridge then with a thin layer on them now though one too thin for walking or skating.

Though I have not seen it this year there is a pond on my mother's farm which often freezes. In the harder winters when I were a child my brothers and I were sent to break into it so the cattle could drink the icy water there. We took long sticks and smashed the clotted surface then carried and threw huge tiles of ice until our fingers grew numb. I remember the hard ache as they warmed so deep and persistent it seemed it would never leave.

Well this winter too has been severe there were days when I could not shake the cold no matter how hard I worked and I have felt for those who are not as strong as I am neither do they have a fire to work beside. I have not always loved the forge it is difficult labour there but the least that can be said of it is that my hands have been kept warm against the frosts. Only the tinners will have been granted similar luxury burrowed deep in the ground warmed by the heat and pressure of rock but I know how things are for them there and I do not envy them.

Still we are just a few weeks into the year and I am a little hopeful that the season is already turning. The easterlies which blew without rest all winter have lost their sharpness and kinder southern winds have swung around to us bearing with them the warmth and weight of the ocean. There is a new feel to the air a touch of cold to it still but no longer one of ice. I have thought too that the first birds are returning though it is early and perhaps my hopes run ahead of the truth of the matter. A broken flock peppered the sky today like seed thrown upwards and scattered by the winds.

I left the quayside to its industry and climbed back up the path towards St Germans. The village proper sits over the lip of the valley tucked beyond the woods a half mile from the river. It is a familiar way and pleasant to walk I have come this road many times and my thoughts tend to drift from the scenery and my particular occupation here. These steps are worn so deep into the patterned memory of my legs that I think if I were to go blind they would find their way with equal ease.

I stopped at the wayside board to post a new tract. The wooden frame supported above the verge by an upright stained with moisture. Some few patchy residues of pitch still visible but no longer enough to keep it from wear. A faint bitter smell of damp from the week's snow to the wood today though the beams drying in the day's clear air. On the wooden divider to the glass front of the board there is a tiny keyhole

though there were no key that I ever knew of and the doors pull open easily enough to the touch of my fingertips. Inside just the old tract tacked there where I left it at the close of last year.

I kicked from the board the icicles which hung in a bearded row. Took a cloth to the clouded glass. Smoothed a fresh sermon sheet from the packet and fixed it there straightening the paper so that it could be clearly read then I closed the doors the swollen wood squeaking together and holding firm.

In folding the old tract down to take away with me I came to wondering how many had taken the time to stop there and profit by it. I have seen dock workers come home past it and not turn their heads. Perhaps it goes unread. That it is a sight too familiar to them so much so they no longer register it with their eyes the way we overlook much that is close to us. I have thought to mention it at the next distributors' meeting I wonder what we might do about it. Perhaps if we moved the posts made just a simple change which might encourage people to see them as though for the first time as if they were new and the Word fresh. For I have to ask myself that if it is not the means of saving souls then what good is it? May it please the Lord our God to awaken the poor souls to a sense of their danger for it is late.

I have worked during the day and in the evening I have spent my time visiting the sick it has been a rewarding duty. I have seen two widows at the almshouses Mrs Webber and Mrs Truscott but I found I had disturbed them they had been sleeping through the cold and were not keen to sit with me so I have let them be. Then Mr Blackmore briefly for he were tired his old lungs wheezing still full of dust from the ash pits and lastly Harriet French. She too were very weak her mother told me she had some pain in her chest and sides but she lay quite peaceful during my visit and did not complain of it. She is a kind girl who bears her suffering well though it has already taken her sight and I do not know how much longer she is for the world. She appears very thin with little

decent meat on her but then she has survived the passing of another year full of hazards so perhaps we have reason to be hopeful.

She has a cough which scrapes like pain it stretches her face horribly when it comes and the sound of it is bitter reaching out like an infection to take hold of us. Of course we know it is a symptom of that deeper illness that has taken many away from this place and led them to desperation first. In the face of such suffering it is miracle Harr still has her faith a remarkable sight to witness but then faith is a hard stone I think quite a small thing but powerful and not easily crushed.

Some snow came as we sat and talked but it turned to rain within an hour a soft patter against the window sometimes quite hushed then renewing itself with a squall. Reminded me that there is a leak in the roof there which I have promised to help patch though it is not something I am too sure of I must find someone to ask about it.

But it were a pleasurable hour. The time glided subtly away and I felt I were called home too soon. So though I have been kept busy with no time for myself and though I do not know how to measure its gain I feel it has been a good day for my soul.

And now that today is already yesterday. I scarcely noticed how it went buried beneath the next day each erasing the last and pushing it further from our memories into oblivion. The Sabbath too has come around and were swiftly lost to us. The poor weather persisted and worsened overnight well I do not mind the rain at all but it made for a miserable walk to preach and there were a disappointing end to my walk attending. I were expecting a congregation but there were just one other there. It is a sad thought if all it takes to keep them away is a little cold and rain.