

Chapter 1.

Early Years

Rees Howells was born on October 10, 1879, the sixth of a family of eleven. The little white-washed cottage still stands on the Llandilo Road, in the mining village of Brynamman, South Wales, where Thomas and Margaret Howells brought up three girls and eight boys. It is a wonder that the little home could contain them!

It was a hard struggle in the early years. Rees' father had employment in the iron works, and afterwards in a coal mine. His wages, the sole source of income for the family, was the handsome sum of 2s. 3d. or 2s. 6d. a day, and sometimes, when a strike was on, there would be nothing at all, and no Unemployment Benefit. In later years he opened a little shop in the village for the sale and repair of shoes, and things became easier as the older children left school and went to work.

But they were a happy family, for godliness and love were preeminent in the home. His mother's love was one of the deepest impressions on Rees' young life, especially as he watched her ceaselessly nursing one of the three little members of their circle who were later taken from them. As for the proud father, a visitor one day puzzled young Rees by looking round on all the children and exclaiming to his father, "How rich you are!" "How could he say you are rich?" Rees asked him later. "Well, how much would I sell you for?" answered his father. "For £1,000? Or would I sell John, David or Dick for £1,000 each? That's how rich I am!"

Most of the children started work in the local tin mill, at the bottom of the valley below the village. The only education they had was in the one village school. They were not supposed to be employed before they were thirteen years old, but when Rees was only twelve and was taking food down to his brothers in the mill, the manager asked him one day if he would like to do a little work. His name would not be on the payroll, but he would give him a wage and put it down in the name of his brother Moses.

So Rees' schooling ended at twelve, and the next ten years were spent in the tin mill, where he was considered a good worker. His job claimed him for twelve hours a day, rising at 6 a.m. and not returning home till nearly 6 p.m.

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Both Rees and his brothers felt their need for further education and attended night classes weekly in the village school. In those days there was no such thing as a library in the village; the only reading centre was a little newspaper shop, where for a penny a month they could go and read the newspaper or borrow a book. By these means two of his brothers passed several examinations, John, the eldest, joining the Railway Company, and Dick becoming a colliery manager.

Rees himself did not take up any specific line of study, but he did show signs of organising capacity. When his mother would give the boys odd jobs to do, the others would each do their own, but Rees would usually manage to get about half a dozen of his friends to help him—and then ask his mother to give them all dinner! She must have wondered if it was worth asking Rees to do a job!

The generosity which was such a marked characteristic of his later life was also to be seen in his boyhood days. He would give all he had away. One of his brothers tells how a customer came into the shop to buy some shoes while his father was absent. The customer tried to persuade this brother to reduce the price from 3s. 9d. to 2s. 6d., but he refused. A few days later she came in and told the story to his father, giving a description of "the salesman," which could fit either Rees or the brother. It didn't take the father a second to choose, for he knew Rees couldn't have refused her!

Rees developed a fine physique, and was interested in physical training. He brought home dumbbells, boxing gloves, and so on, and took his brothers on in friendly fights. A healthy appetite accompanied a healthy body. Dick and Rees arrived back late some nights from their various occupations. If Dick came in first, so the story goes, his mother who had gone upstairs would call down, "Is that you, Dick? Help yourself to a piece of tart." But if Rees preceded Dick, his mother would call down, "Is that you, Rees? There's a tart on the table. Leave a piece for Dick!"

But outstanding from Rees' earliest days was his consciousness of God. It seemed as if an invisible Presence overshadowed him from birth, the One who, as with Paul, separated him from his mother's womb and called him by His grace. In this respect Rees' grandparents were the most powerful influence on his early years. Their home was another little white-

washed cottage, called Pentwyn, up on the Black Mountain, and to cross their threshold, Rees said in later years, was to pass from earth to heaven. They had been converted in the 1859 Revival, and Rees always believed that their blessing came down to him. Something drew him in that little home: "God was its atmosphere," he would say. He loved the walk from his own home down in the Amman Valley, up through the fields, leaving the houses behind one by one, until an iron gate clanged behind him, and he was out in the silent spaces of the mountain slopes, which in future years were so often to be his trysting place with God. Here the only sounds that disturbed the stillness were the song of the lark, the occasional bleating of sheep, and the music of tumbling mountain stream.

Over the crest young Rees would go, down the other side, with the eight miles of green Welsh valley spread out before him, till he reached his beloved Pentwyn, perched on the steep slopes where the moorland gave place again to hedges and fields. As he crossed the threshold, he would usually hear the sound of his grandmother's voice reading the Bible to his invalid Uncle Dick. It reminds us of another young lad who probably spent many an hour on another Black Mountain, Kara-Dagh, with Lystra at its foothills, where young Timothy was brought up under the godly influence of his "grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice."

Indeed, the young men of Bible times, like Joseph and David, who feared and served God from their boyhood days, had a great influence on Rees. His wise father had brought the children up on the Bible stories; Rees' earliest memories were of those evening readings and their effect on him. The story of the Saviour, His birth and life and death, stood out above all others, and kept him from ever taking His name in vain or daring to sin against Him.

Even the normal pleasures of the world had no attraction for him. He would walk miles to hear someone preach and bring him "under the influence of God," but he "wouldn't cross the road to hear a concert." Only once did he even attend a football match. As the crowd were "shouting and bawling" around him, he felt it was not the place for him, and vowed that, when he got his feet out of it, he would never go to such a place again. He never did.

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The Apostle Paul makes that striking statement about serving God, as did his forefathers, with pure conscience, and Rees seemed another example of it. "I didn't run into sin," he said years later. "There was always a restraint on me. It seems that some people are much more sensitive than others, even before conversion. I marred my conscience once, when my

father sent me to deliver some shoes to a customer, and I asked him for ls. 10d. when the correct price was ls. 9d. I spent the penny on apples. Although I confessed my sin to my father, I never got it out of my mind—especially when I saw apples! I had marred my conscience. Of course, because it had that effect on me, it kept me from anything bigger.” But it also had another effect, from which he had to be disillusioned later, for he added, “I thought in those days that probably I had been born with a good nature!”

He became a member of the chapel at thirteen, resolving, according to the light he then had, that he must now “live up to the teaching of the Saviour.” He got this idea from reading Sheldon’s book *In His Steps*, only to find out later, of course, that he couldn’t do it.

Contact with the other young fellows in the tin mill did not alter his tastes. Swansea was only about twenty miles away, but “city life, a superficial life, never appealed to me,” he said. “It was no test to me not to go to a theatre; I didn’t like such places. I was at home in the chapels and prayer meetings. Nature—the hills and valleys and running streams—appealed to me. Sunday mornings were wonderful times to me: such a hush and peace over everything. I felt I could face God every night, because I lived such a clean, pure life, and there were hundreds in Wales who lived like that.”

Quiet, good living, hard working; there was not much to attract attention to this young Welsh lad or to inspire prophecies for the future, except perhaps an unusual piety, which might be strange to English eyes though maybe not to Welsh. But is it not God who turns the ordinary into extraordinary when He is given a chance?