



The
William Booth
Collection

THE GENERAL'S LETTERS

PRUDENCE.

From the "War Cry," April 4th, 1885.

MY DEAR COMRADES,

Some of my friends who sincerely wish well to the Army have been reading my last letter, urging you to increased speed, and have been inquiring whether, after all, there is not such a thing as prudence, and whether, it is not a Christian duty to practise it. To these and all concerned I want to say that most certainly I think so, and that with equal confidence I think The Army is attending to the duty. We want to go along – we want to go faster than we have done hitherto, but we want to go prudently.

Prudence, that is a word often recommended to my notice; I am considered to be sadly lacking in this, I believe. Let us look at it for a moment and consider whether I come so far short of it as I am considered to do.

Well, what is prudence? Johnson explains it as "wisdom applied to practice;" that is, "going on," "working," "progressing," but doing so wisely. In other words – practical wisdom. Good, very good. I accept the principle, as so explained, and beg to say that I have endeavoured to act upon it for the last forty years, and expect to do so all through my future course.

But you will perceive, my comrades that this definition consists of two divisions. There is, first, practice – the doing something; and, secondly, there is the doing of that – whatever it is – in the wisest way.

Now, first, I want to say that there are no considerations of prudence that will relieve a man of this responsibility from doing the duty he owes to God and man; and that we Salvationists have found out what our duty is, and have given ourselves up to the doing of it, at all costs and consequences. We have to serve God and save the world – or, as large a portion of it as we possibly can. That is settled. It has been revealed to us; written down for us to read in the Bible, and written in our hearts by the Holy Ghost.



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It is settled, also, that this duty means to us – as it did to our Master – persecution, and hatred, and sorrow, and grief, and shame; in short, the cross. There is no escape, there is no deliverance and we don't ask for any. We must fight – whatever the odds – if all the world is against us, with its sneers, and sarcasms, and objections; nay, though it bring out its fire and sword, and make our pathway straight to the prison, the scaffold, or the stake, we must go on.

No prudential considerations can affect us in this direction. Granted that there is a right way and a wrong way of doing things, that we may go too fast or too slow, that we may be reckless and foolish in our actions and ridiculously extravagant in our expectations. Better all these things together than not join in the battle. Better, in short, that we fight imprudently than not fight at all.

But perhaps some one may say, "It is not that you serve God, and save souls, and confess your Master, and do good that we object to. It is the way you go about it that seems so imprudent."

Indeed! but let me ask those who thus object whether they are sure that they are in such a state of mind and in such circumstances as enable them to judge. The Antediluvians must have thought Noah's conduct most shamefully imprudent. How foolish it appeared to them for the old man to spend his fortune, sell his farms, and use the money that he ought to have left his children at his death, in building a ship where there was no water to float her! I should think they laughed at him, and that the ark went by the name of "Noah's folly" all along that countryside. But the people changed their minds about the prudence of his conduct when the flood came and swept them all away.

I should think that the multitudes who, in the plain of Dura, saw Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fly in the face of the proudest monarch of the world, must have thought them imprudent to run the risk of being burnt alive, because they had a silly religious scruple against just bowing their heads at the king's command. How they exclaimed "that religion was all very well in its place, but there was reason in all things." Their conscientiousness was admired, "but what a pity it was not combined with prudence." But there was a wonderful change of opinion



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on the subject when they saw these young men walk out of the fiery furnace, and more still when they heard the decree exalting them to be princes and governors in the land.

"But is no recklessness possible in doing good?"

Certainly there is; and we are always writing cautions, and offering prayers, and giving advice to keep everybody from practising it. We say, "Do not begin to build your Barracks, and do not go out to fight your enemy, unless you have calculated carefully that you are likely to finish and win. And by all means choose that course which promises to gain the end in view in the surest and readiest manner and with the least expenditure of time and strength and money." Nay, we go further and say, "Do your work in that way which causes the least unpleasantness to other people." Unfortunately there is the difficulty of not being able to fight people after any fashion that will be pleasant to all parties.

But, after all, is not *prudence* with many people only another word for *cowardice*?

To be out-and-out for God and overhead in the War – to be a Hallelujah Garibaldi, going forth with a handful of men to attack a nation – means risk. Men see danger in it. It does not appear prudent to procession in streets, or wear uniform, to go either to home or foreign lands without guarantees of salary and assurances of safety. They may get hurt, and therefore they are prudent, and do none of these things, and those are imprudent who do them.

Why are people down upon us because we are ever scheming and borrowing and begging and running risks in order to drive the devil and sin and drink and misery out of the world and win it for the Saviour? Why are not these same people down upon Governments that engage in killing wars, and borrow, and tax, and send their subjects forth to be slaughtered in carrying them out?

The whole nation would ridicule just now any men who were offering for the war in Egypt, willing to take the pay and march to the music, and even go to the battle, but who were at the



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same time so prudent as to require as a condition of their going a guarantee that they should not be shot.

"Still, you may go too fast." My comrades, we can go too slow. Let us only apply the principle of this "*practical wisdom*" to our going, and then it strikes me that we shall go much faster. When the sun shines on the farmer, and the favourable wind blows on the sailor, the one applies this principle if he makes his hay, and the other if he hoists his sails. All the world is saying, "Why did not the British Government go to Khartoum a little sooner, and then Gordon might have been saved? How imprudent it was to wait and let the chances go by! And now no amount of "going" or blood-spilling can bring poor Gordon back again!"

Oh, my comrades, the Sun of Heaven is shining on us. Let us haste to gather in the harvest! The winds of Salvation are blowing; let us crowd on more sail; let us go on! By all means let us go wisely; but, by all means, let us go! For us not to go when thus favoured would be the maddest imprudence possible.

But, after all, is there not more serious ground to bring this charge of imprudence against our blessed Lord than against His poor and unworthy followers in The Salvation Army?

A great hue and cry has been raised about some few persons of a little position and education leaving their circles and enrolling themselves in our ranks. Some have said, "How imprudent it is of them to give up not only what they possess, but their prospects, to go down to lives of comparative poverty for the rest of their days! Could they not have served God and their generation as well – or nearly so – where they were?"

Well, they thought not. They acted on their convictions, and I heartily approve of what they did. But as to the imprudence of their step can anything be conceived more imprudent than was the action of Jesus Christ in leaving Heaven? What a sacrifice of position and wealth and power that was when He – the Lord of Life and Glory – came down and made Himself one of the common people in income and education and circle, all simply to originate and ally Himself with a band of despised fanatics formed to help on the Salvation of the world! Measured



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according to the standard by which our critics measure us, my comrades, what a gigantic piece of imprudence was here!

But it is replied, "He was sure of getting back to Heaven, and more than recouping Himself!" Thank God there is no one still, who has ever left a heaven of any kind in houses and lands and fathers and mothers and friends for Christ's sake, who shall not be abundantly recompensed; and in any case, whatever comes to any such one in this life, he will receive a thousand fold more in the life everlasting.

People say how imprudent it is of us to go out in the streets and slums where we know the devil is, and where we can reckon with a dead certainty that we shall raise him. They say, "Can anything be conceived more imprudent than to go with their bands and music and colours where they know there will be opposition, and consequently a row? How imprudent it is!"

My comrades, how imprudent it was for the Lord Jesus to allow Himself to be led into the Wilderness to have that hand-to-hand fight with the Evil One! He knew he was there, and that His business was to vanquish him; not because of any love for the task, but because he could not get at souls without fighting him. And he went and did it.

This is our justification also.

And lastly, my comrades, judged by the standard by which men measure us, what a piece of reckless imprudence it was for the Saviour to go up to Jerusalem when He knew they would put Him to death there! He knew the value of His life. He knew how His enemies hated him. He knew their plot. He knew, also, His duty, and, like a brave warrior, He died at His post. The explanation of all, and of all that had gone before it, was assumed up in one of the sarcasms levelled at Him as He hung in His death agony: "He saved others; Himself He cannot save."

My comrades, when it is asked why we rush into danger, why we suffer the howlings of the mobs, the cruelties of the Skeletons, the injustices of the authorities – in short, bear the cross that is laid upon us, our answer is, "We want to save others; and at present neither from the



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Bible nor from our experience, nor from any other source, can we discover any other plan to save them by – in some measure at least – making the sacrifice of ourselves." My letter is already too long. It has had to be written in a great hurry, so I must bid you goodbye this week with the entreaty – at all costs – to push on the fight.

Yours affectionately,

WILLIAM BOOTH.

March 27th, 1885.