



A Brush with Death

Twenty-year-old Hudson Taylor sat working intently in his boardinghouse room. He was sewing together some sheets of paper into a notebook for use in recording the lectures which he attended at the London Hospital where he was a medical student. Stitching his own notebook rather than purchasing one already bound from a stationer was just one way in which Hudson sought to live as frugally as possible.

Several weeks earlier, in September of 1852, he had come to London to further his medical training, believing the Lord would have him do that as part of his preparation for missionary service in China. Here he willingly continued to carry out the spartan lifestyle he had adopted two years earlier when God first called him to be a missionary. He believed that such economizing would better prepare him for the deprivations to be faced as a pioneer missionary in China.

Just that week Hudson had found himself in a position that he had experienced more than once in previous months: Despite his frugality, his personal funds were all but exhausted; he was

eagerly looking to the Lord to supply his material need soon so that he would not literally go hungry.

Hudson truly did not mind being in such a circumstance. He thought that it provided a good opportunity to develop the strong faith in God that would be needed on the mission field. The Lord had always faithfully provided for him in the past, and he was confident that this occasion would turn out no different.

The hour was getting late, and as Hudson hastened to finish stitching the notebook, he accidentally pricked his right index finger with the needle. It was such a minor wound that he promptly forgot all about it. Little did he realize that the pinprick would nearly cost him his life!

The next morning Hudson was up early. For breakfast he ate the half loaf of brown bread that he had saved from the previous night. He put a handful of apples in his coat pockets for his lunch at the hospital. On the way home that evening he would purchase another loaf of bread to eat as supper and the next day's breakfast. Brown bread and apples washed down with nothing but water—that had been his sparse diet since coming to London.

Hudson resided in the Soho district of London. He had settled there to be near his uncle Benjamin, a brother of his mother. Uncle Benjamin lived on Church Street, just around the corner from where Hudson and one of his cousins, Tom, shared a room at a boardinghouse on Dean Street. Four miles lay between Soho and the district of Whitechapel where the London Hospital was located. Hudson traversed this distance on foot each morning and evening.

“My health is good,” he wrote reassuringly to his mother in Barnsley, telling her of all the exercise he was receiving but purposely omitting the details of his meager diet. “In fact, some even say I’m getting fat!” Honesty compelled him to add,

“Although this, I believe, can only be perceived by a rather brilliant imagination.”

Upon arrival at the hospital that day, Hudson was involved in dissecting a body. The dissection was particularly disagreeable and dangerous because the person had died of a fever. All those involved with the dissection worked with special care, knowing that the slightest scratch, if it became infected with the fever, could lead to death.

By midmorning Hudson began to feel extremely tired. While making noontime rounds in the surgical wards he suddenly started feeling very sick and needed to rush out. He was faint for some time, but a drink of cold water seemed to revive him and he was able to rejoin his fellow students.

He continued to feel worse and worse, however. Before the afternoon lecture on surgery was over, he found it impossible to hold his pencil and continue taking notes. By the time a second lecture was completed, his whole arm and right side were throbbing with severe pain.

“Are you all right, Hudson?” one of his fellow students queried. “You do not look at all well.”

“I’m afraid not,” he responded. “I’m feeling very ill.”

Finding it impossible to resume work, Hudson went into the dissecting laboratory to put away his equipment. There he commented to the doctor who was overseeing the dissection, “I cannot think what has come over me.” He described the symptoms he was experiencing.

The doctor stated tersely, “Why, what has happened is clear enough: you must have cut yourself in dissecting, and you know that this is a case of malignant fever.”

“But I was most careful while dissecting this morning,” Hudson defended himself. “I’m quite certain that I do not have a cut or scratch.”

“Well, you certainly must have had one,” the doctor insisted. “Here, let me examine your hands.” He carefully scrutinized Hudson’s hands but found nothing.

Suddenly Hudson remembered the needle poke of the previous evening. Revealing this to the doctor, he asked, “Is it possible that a prick from a needle last night could have still been unclosed this morning?”

“That was probably the cause of your trouble,” the surgeon confirmed. Then he advised in a grave tone, “Now get a hansom, drive home as fast as you can, and arrange your affairs immediately. For you are a dead man!”

Hudson’s first response to this stunning declaration was a feeling of sorrow that he would not be able to go to China. But that was followed immediately by the reassuring thought, “Unless I am greatly mistaken, I have work to do in China, and shall not die.”

He was actually glad for the opportunity to speak with the doctor, whom he knew to be a confirmed skeptic, about his blended perspectives on the situation: “Sir, the prospect of perhaps soon being with my Master in heaven gives me great joy. But I do not think I shall die. For I am quite sure that I have work to do for God in China. And if so, however severe the struggle may be, I must be brought through it.”

The surgeon was unconvinced. “That is all very well,” he stated impatiently, “but you get a hansom and drive home as fast as you can. You have no time to lose, for you will soon be incapable of winding up your affairs.”

As he left the hospital, Hudson smiled slightly at the idea of riding home in a cab. He had never permitted himself that luxury, and by now his finances were so depleted that he could not afford it. He would just have to walk the long distance back to his residence.

Before long, however, his strength failed him, and he realized that it was futile to attempt walking the entire distance. He paid the fare to ride two horse-drawn omnibuses and eventually reached Soho.

By the time he entered the boardinghouse he was suffering greatly. He asked the servant girl to bring him a basin of hot water and a towel to bathe his head. When she returned with them, he pleaded with her about her own spiritual condition, realizing this might be his last opportunity.

He then lanced the finger that had sustained the needle prick, hoping to let out some of the poisoned blood. The pain was excruciating, and he fainted. When he regained consciousness he found that he had been carried upstairs to his bed.

His uncle Benjamin had been summoned and was there. "I've sent for my personal physician to come and examine you," he informed Hudson.

"But medical help will be of no service to me," Hudson protested. "I do not wish to go to the expense involved."

"You've no need to worry about the expense," his uncle reassured him. "The bill will be charged to me."

The doctor arrived, learned the particulars of Hudson's sudden illness, and checked him over carefully. Then he concluded: "Well, if you have been living moderately, you may pull through. But if you have been going in for beer and that sort of thing, there is no manner of chance for you."

"If sober living is to do anything for me," Hudson thought to himself, "few could have a better chance of survival than I do. Little but bread and water has been my diet for a good while now."

"You can be assured, doctor," he stated, "that I have been living temperately. I find it helps me in my studies."

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“But now,” said the physician, “you must keep up your strength, for it will be a hard struggle. I want you to drink a bottle of port wine every day and to eat as many chops as you can consume.”

Again Hudson smiled inwardly. Even if he desired a diet like that, he knew he did not have the means for such luxuries.

“I’ll see to it that he gets whatever he needs along those lines,” his uncle Benjamin interjected. In the days that followed he was true to his word and covered the cost of the fine food and drink himself.

Hudson was deeply concerned that his parents should not be informed of his serious condition. He felt assured that he was not going to die, and he did not want to cause them undue distress.

Furthermore, he knew that if they came to London and found him in this weakened condition, they would insist he return immediately with them to Barnsley so they could properly care for him there. “But if that were to happen,” he thought, “I would lose the opportunity of seeing how God is going to work in my behalf, now that my money has almost come to an end.”

After earnest prayer for guidance, Hudson spoke to his uncle Benjamin and cousin Tom: “Promise me that you won’t write to my parents. Leave it to me to communicate with them myself once I’ve recovered a bit.”

The two relatives looked doubtful at first, but then agreed to his request. He delayed all communication with his parents until the crisis period had passed and he was starting to recover. His family members at home knew that he had been working hard preparing for an important examination, so they were not surprised when they did not hear from him.

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His illness lingered long. It was a few weeks before he regained enough strength to leave his room. At that time he learned of two men from another hospital who had contracted fever through dissection wounds at around the same time he sustained his. Both those men had since died. Hudson knew that his life had been spared in answer to prayer to work for God in China.