

Number 1 in the series

A Great Legacy

*the influence of the Scriptures on a young
Irish girl and her family*

by Rev. R. J. Coates, MA

Number 2 in the series

Blind But Seeing

*an old Dublin Lady recalls
The Hundred Texts*

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IRISH CHURCH MISSIONS
28 Bachelor's Walk, Dublin 1
11 Buckingham Street, London WC2N 6DF

A Winner of Souls
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The Witness of Walter Byrne
Counsellor for God in Dublin

by Rev. R. J. Coates, M.A.

An Irish Church Missions
Publication Number 3

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A WINNER OF SOULS

DURING THE LAST five years, since my return to Ireland, I have met many people whose spiritual awakening can be traced to the influence of a man who died over twenty years ago. He was still then quite young, in his late thirties, he never preached much, and in fact when he did, his attempts were very poor. He worked as an insurance agent, and as he often said, he mixed Eternal Life insurance in with his ordinary endeavours to get people to make provision for the future. He was a cheerful, lovable character. I remember well the comment of another friend of his, when, discussing the prospects of the conversion of a young man, he said, 'Don't worry about him. Walter Byrne is praying for him, and he is a dead shot'. As I am perhaps the one person who can say much about the early years of this truly devoted servant of Christ, I want to give some record of him in this booklet.

About the year 1912 a worker of the Irish Church Missions, who was looking up absentees from Rath Row School called by mistake at the room occupied by the Byrne family in a Dublin tenement. There she found a man with two small boys, respectable in appearance, but obviously in great need. When she asked why the boys were not attending school, the father replied that they were too badly off for clothes, and that they were hungry as well. The ICM worker told him of the Rath Row Schools. He replied, 'I am a Roman Catholic myself, but my wife is a Protestant. She is out working. Indeed it is the only way we have of paying the rent, and getting a bit to eat'. He continued, 'I am reading the New Testament, and I am looking into things for

myself'. The two boys commenced attendance at the School, and the workers of the Mission constantly visited the family.

The year (1913) was the period of the great strike in Dublin, led by the champion of the working-classes, James Larkin. It was a time of unemployment and much hardship. In God's mercy Matthew Byrne had a gentle Christian wife, and had begun to read the Scriptures. He was a most intelligent man, and read not only from the Scriptures, but quite widely in controversial literature. Like many Roman Catholic men of his class he had passed through a period of scepticism about the Christian Faith. He had some experience of the rigid intolerance of the Church of Rome at that time in its endeavours to prevent people reading the Scriptures. It was after a stormy interview with a Roman Catholic priest who denounced him for reading the Bible and other books, and the visits of the Irish Church Mission-workers, that he decided to attend a class for instruction. He was received into the Church of Ireland, at his own request, by the Rev. J. R. Goff, in 1913.

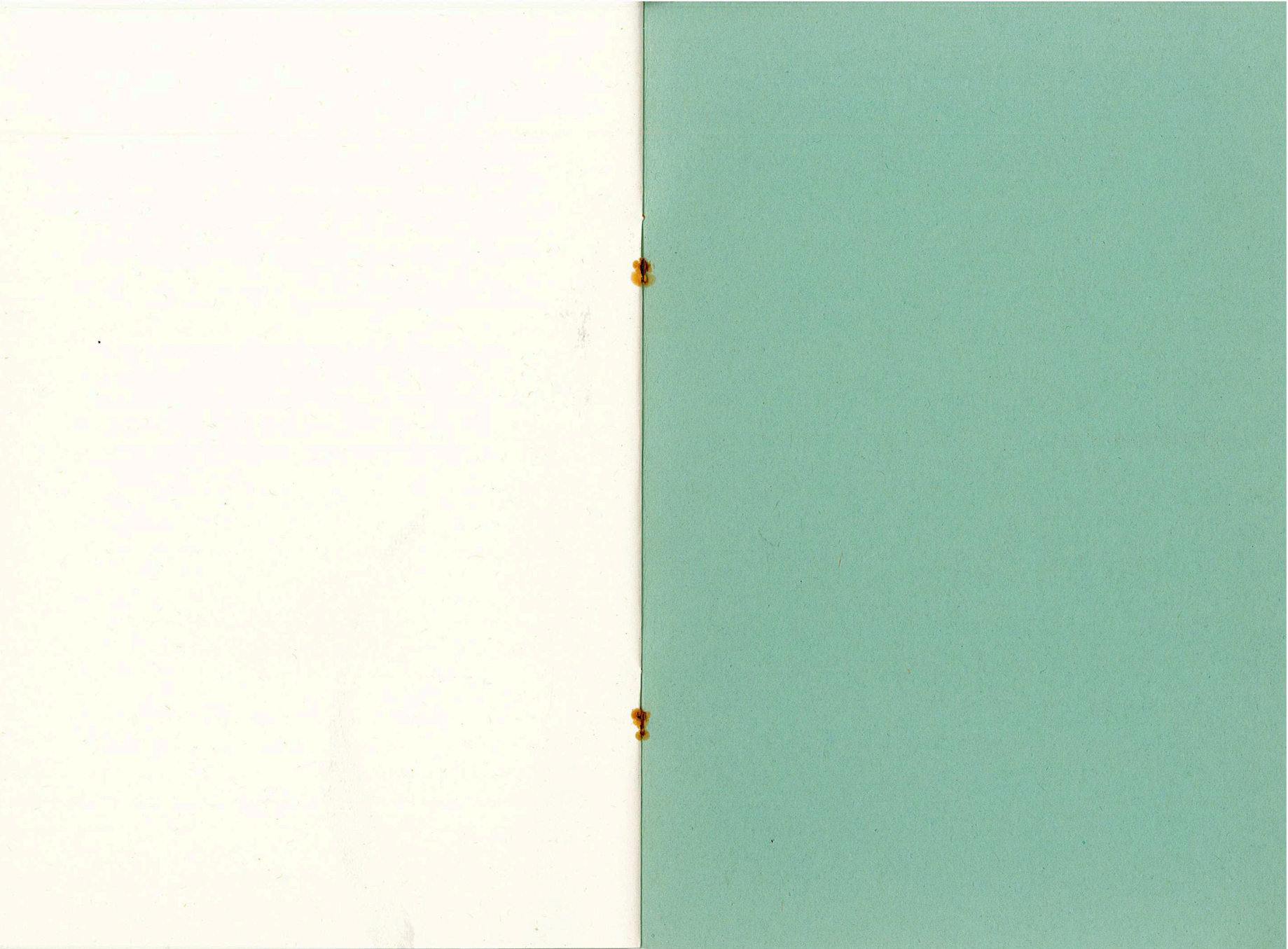
Tragedy overtook the family when, about a year after, his wife died in hospital. She was a woman of prayer, and died in the Faith of the Gospel. Although Walter, who was the third boy in the family, had hardly known her, he always spoke of her influence as something very real in his life. There can be no doubt that the realisation that his mother was a very good Christian played a part in his conversion as a young man about the age of twenty. Soon after his mother's death the father went to England to obtain work. Before he left he had a premonition that he might never return, and he made a Will expressing his desire that his children should be brought up in the Protestant Faith. His premonition about his death was unfortunately fulfilled, and after but a short time in England his three boys were left as orphans. The two older were placed in the Smyly Homes, and

the youngest, Walter, went to live with his maternal aunt. His aunt was a woman of great character, and a strict disciplinarian. Walter was always well groomed, and even as a boy was fearful lest his clothing or appearance should become untidy. Although very small of stature, he had a most manly bearing. He was always bright and cheerful, and full of energy.

His conversion was one of many which took place during the year 1929 in the city Parish where he lived. Although there had been no great evangelistic preaching either in the Church or elsewhere to which this movement could be attributed, many young men and women, as well as older people, were awakened to a sense of their need of salvation. Walter Byrne was one of the first to make a stand, and from the day of his conversion he was busy in seeking to bring others to Christ. The spotless flat in which he lived with his aunt was the place where many young men were encouraged, at the supper table, to kneel and seek the Lord. There was always somebody to whom he had been speaking, for whom he was praying, and when his aunt was away their little flat was the place used to help enquirers, and on many occasions to register the great turning point in someone's life. Just recently, in thinking about Walter Byrne, I sought to get in touch with one whom I knew he had influenced. He had been engaged as an evangelist for over twenty years. In speaking to his wife on the 'phone, and telling her I was seeking information about his conversion, she told me how, on many occasions in the past, as they passed the corner of a certain well-known street, he had said to her, pointing to the spot, 'That is holy ground for me. That is where Walter Byrne led me to give my heart to the Lord'. He has recently given me the Bible which was used in the Club rooms over the garage of a private house where a group of young men, after that time of awakening, used to meet to study the Word of God and pray. In the Bible, an old family Bible, the family regis-

ter pages in the middle have the names of twenty-six young men, and the dates of their conversion, inscribed. Many of them were influenced by his Christian witness. These, however, are but a small number compared with the many who through the years that followed, until his early death in 1946, were influenced by this devoted servant of God. As my friend the evangelist said, 'He was the greatest winner of souls I have ever known'. His method, if he had one, was very simple. He was interested in people. He sought them out, and visited them, and usually took them to somebody else in the end whom he thought more fitted than himself to seal their allegiance to Christ. He was not only, however, a diligent soul winner; he was a very practical Christian man. To the aunt who had brought him up, he gave the service of his life. In her declining years, when she suffered very much ill-health, he tended her at all times like a slave. In doing so he neglected his own health, and followed her within a few weeks to the grave.

There are a few obvious, and yet encouraging lessons to be learnt from the story of Walter Byrne. First, there is the ceaseless providence of God over-ruling the work of his servants. How little could that woman visitor who called at the wrong room in the tenement away back in 1912 appreciate how much good would come from her apparent mistake. Second, there is the short, but great influence of the godly wife and mother upon her husband and her whole family in very trying circumstances of poverty and ill-health. Third, there is the lesson to be learnt from Walter Byrne's life — that the one who may not be able to take a prominent public part in preaching the Gospel may yet have greater gifts in winning souls. And lastly, there is the warning that it is unwise to attempt to measure the influence of Christian work and witness within the limits even of one life.



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