

Young Mr Judson

Having hammered in the very last nail, the carpenter climbed down the ladder to admire his handiwork. The sign was absolutely straight. It looked good. Picking up his ladder and toolbag, he turned and left. A young man standing nearby looked up at the newly erected sign and smiled.

‘Plymouth Independent Academy,’ Adoniram Judson read to the puppy at his side. ‘Who’d have thought I’d be opening a school for the intelligent young of the great state of Massachusetts! I wonder if I’m the youngest headmaster in the area. There can’t be many nineteen-year-olds with schools of their own!’

The puppy, recognising his master’s happy voice, wagged his tail in agreement. Adoniram knelt on the grass. ‘Let’s shake hands on the school’s success,’ he said. ‘Give me a paw.’

Obediently the puppy sat down and raised a paw. He tried to combine this with wagging his tail in delight at the attention he was receiving, and just about managed.

Adoniram laughed. ‘If my pupils all learn as quickly as you do the school will be a great success.’

‘You must be very proud of your boy,’ a friend told Mr and Mrs Judson. ‘He’s a real credit to you

both. I hear he's writing books as well as running his school.'

Adoniram's father, Rev Adoniram Judson, smiled, but had no time to answer before his wife spoke proudly of their eldest child. 'That's right! He's already written *Elements of English Grammar* and he's almost finished *The Young Lady's Arithmetic*.'

Their visitor nodded to the Judsons but smiled to himself. 'That's a young man who ought to get a life,' he thought.

And that's just what Adoniram was thinking too.

'I'm giving up the school,' he told his parents quite soon afterwards.

Mrs Judson, had been aware that her son had become restless in his work. 'You've just had a bad week,' she assured him. 'Things always look at their worst on Friday evenings. You wait and see, you'll feel differently on Monday.'

Mr Judson watched the contortions on Adoniram's face. 'And what would you do if you were to give up the school?' he asked.

The young man, who had expected a tirade about irresponsibility and security and other such things as didn't interest him, suddenly realised to his horror that his father expected him to say that he wanted to close the school in order to train to be a minister! His mind went into a spin. His stomach heaved with apprehension, and he thought he was going to have to leave the room. Then his words all came out in a rush.

‘I can’t bear the thought of teaching for the rest of my life, and...’ he looked at his father.

The older man’s eyes lit up, hope gleaming out of them, ‘You’ll train to be a minister?’

Adoniram felt sick. But he knew there was no going back. ‘No I can’t,’ he said, his voice quavering. ‘I respect what you believe and in a way I admire what you do, but it’s not for me. I can’t preach the Bible because I don’t believe it’s God’s Word. It’s no different from any other book. It’s just another book written by men for men. And,’ he gulped at the prospect of the reaction he expected when he made his final statement, ‘and I don’t believe that Jesus was the son of God either. He was certainly a good man, but that’s all he was, a man.’

Mr Judson’s face fell. He sank to his seat, and Adoniram heard the whispered words, ‘Part of me has just died, part of me has just died.’

Adoniram’s mother couldn’t bear it. ‘I’m sure you could make a living writing books,’ she said hopefully, but with absolutely no conviction. However, Adoniram grasped at the straw his mother had unwittingly held out.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘That’s what I want to do. I want to be a writer ...’ and now that he had started talking he couldn’t stop himself. ‘I want to write interesting things, not school books. I want to write stories and plays for the theatre. I want to travel, I’ll join a touring theatre company and I’ll write new plays for it to perform.’

For the six days that followed Mr Judson heaved heavy sighs. Adoniram avoided going past his study door

because each time he did he heard his father pleading in prayer for his soul. But his mother was even worse - always behind him, weeping, praying, begging, until her son could take no more. Still a little short of twenty years old, Adoniram packed his few things together and rode off to Albany where he boarded a boat for New York. That trip contributed just a little chip to history, for he travelled on the first successful steamboat. It was called the *Clermont*.

The weeks that followed were all that Adoniram hoped they would be. He did join a group of travelling actors and he did write short plays for them. There was a real thrill in seeing his words come to life on the stage, but less excitement in seeing the empty seats where the audience should have been. And for a young man brought up strictly there was even a kick to be had in living like a vagabond, and in finding lodgings wherever he could, only to get up before the landlord in the morning and leave without paying. But it was not long until Adoniram realised that writing for the stage wasn't what he thought it would be, that the loud laughter he and his friends shared was often hollow, and that the life of a strolling player wasn't for him. Buttoning himself up against the 'I told you so' he thought would meet him at the door of his home, he headed in that direction.

'Young Mr Judson!' the maid said, as she opened the door. 'How you've grown!'

‘Is my uncle at home?’ Adoniram asked. ‘I’m on my way back home from New York and I wondered if I might stay overnight.’

Opening the door wide, the woman explained that his uncle was away but that he was very welcome to a bed. ‘There’s a young preacher here while your uncle is travelling. I’m sure you’ll enjoy each other’s company.’

Judson swallowed hard. A keen young preacher getting at him was just what he didn’t need. But if he wanted a free bed he had no choice but risk it.

‘Tell me about yourself,’ the preacher invited, as they sat beside the fire after their evening meal.

And, much to Adoniram’s surprise, he found himself telling this comfortable stranger about his disappointments and doubts, his hopes and his fears. Far from preaching, the minister just spoke about himself as Adoniram had spoken, and it was somehow more powerful than any sermon young Judson had ever heard. The young preacher spoke of Jesus as one of his friends in a way that set Adoniram thinking. Though he would have enjoyed the preacher’s company for longer, Adoniram left the following day for the next leg of his journey home.

‘Yes, I’ve a room you can have,’ an innkeeper said that evening when Adoniram knocked at his door. ‘But I’m afraid you might be disturbed. There’s a young man in the next room to it who is very ill. Dying, I should think. Sometimes he moans in his sleep. But take it or leave it, that’s the only room I’ve got left.’

‘I’ll take it. Maybe he’ll have a decent night and we’ll both get some sleep.’

But the ill young man had a terrible night. He cried out and wept. It was awful to hear it. And Adoniram had hardly any sleep at all. In order to blank out what was happening in the next room he lay on his side, pulled a pillow over his head, hauled the blanket on top, and thought over his life to date. He had a vivid imagination, and before long the distressing sounds from next door were masked by memories. And so long as he concentrated on his memories he could forget the poor young man.

‘What’s my very earliest memory?’ he asked himself. ‘I know! I remember when my sister Abigail was born. I wasn’t quite three then. And I remember worrying that the baby would be given my striped blanket, and I knew I couldn’t sleep without it. Even when I was six and my little brother was born, I still used that blanket as a comforter.’ His mind wandered. ‘I wonder what would comfort that poor soul?’ he asked himself, hearing the groans through the wall. Then he concentrated on his memories again. ‘How I loved being in father’s study,’ he said aloud but quietly. That helped to drown out the distressing noises. ‘I was fascinated by his quill pen and glass ink-pot. And I loved watching him scatter fine sand on his writing to help it dry.’

Quite out of the blue a scene flashed into Adoniram’s mind. It was 1791. He was three years old, and his father was on a preaching trip.

‘Would you like to give Papa a surprise when he comes home?’ his mother asked.

Greatly excited at the thought of the surprise, the boy followed his mother into the sitting-room where, with splendid patience, she taught her tiny son to read a chapter of the Bible. Judson felt his heart aching as he remembered his father’s return home and his disbelief turning to pride when the chapter was read to him by his three-year-old son.

‘I wonder if the Bible would help that poor man,’ Adoniram thought. He shook his head. ‘It’s none of my business. Now where was I?’

Memory followed memory - of the pigs and hens in the back garden, of the maid who taught him to make all the animal noises, of games played and puzzles done. ‘Puzzles,’ he said aloud, and grinned.

‘I was eight or nine,’ he remembered, ‘when I did the Enigma puzzle in the newspaper and sent it off to the editor without a stamp. However, the postman recognised my writing and gave it back to Papa. I suppose that was fair enough though, after all, the newspaper would have had to pay the postage if it had arrived. I remember Father’s face when he opened the letter and saw how well I’d done the puzzle, and that I’d got the right answer too! I could hardly believe it when he was so impressed that he promised to buy me a puzzle book of my own. And I can still recall the disappointment when it was a book of arithmetic problems he bought! Poor Papa, he never could get things quite right.’

The noise from the neighbouring room was reaching a crescendo. Adoniram spoke out his memories louder to try to drown it out. 'I suppose he did get it right sometimes,' he admitted, 'like when he took me to the harbour to see the ships coming and going. When we lived at Salem the boats carried exciting cargoes: silks and spices, sometimes even live monkeys. It was a pity Papa moved to churches in Braintree, then Plymouth. Cod fishing boats was all Plymouth rose to, and the smell of them put me off going to the harbour at all!'

His memory settled on his primary school days. 'I never saw mathematics as work,' he recalled. 'I just enjoyed it. But I liked most things really. I must have seemed a terrible swot to the other boys. I loved languages - they are just like puzzles. It's fun seeing what English words came from Latin and Greek words. Papa laughed so much when I tried to play the piano and pretended I was a great musician called Cakos Phonos, the Greek for loud noise! Languages fascinate me. Maybe I could find a career based on languages. I'll have to think about that.'

'Papa uses words well,' Adoniram said, still struggling to block out the terrible scene he could picture in the adjoining room. 'He told us wonderful stories when we were children. Why was it then that he was so dull when he was preaching? What do I remember about his sermons?' He thought back, but it was the church building that came into his mind, not what his father had said. Despite the noise next door, Judson found himself

smiling. ‘Those old box pews were splendid when I was small. If I wanted to see Papa I climbed up on a stool to look over. But if I didn’t want to see him, or I didn’t want him to see me, all I had to do was get off the stool and I was out of sight. What games my imagination conjured up using the foot-warmers in the pew! They were boats going to faraway places, or snow shoes for tramping high up in the mountains, or they were four-poster beds for me to snuggle down in. I even remember taking little wooden model horses into church once and pretending that the foot-warmer was their stable. Mama wasn’t best pleased when she saw them!’

‘I was about fourteen when I had my serious phase,’ Judson remembered aloud. ‘A year sick and off school saw to that. No wonder I wanted to be a minister then, I was so bored!’ Then Adoniram realised that hadn’t been true at all. Yes, he had wanted to be a famous minister of a huge church, but he hadn’t been bored, the books in his father’s study had seen to that. ‘I soon caught up at school,’ he recalled, ‘and headed off to Rhode Island College at Providence when I was sixteen years and six days old. It was there I met Jacob Eames, and he opened my eyes.’ There was silence from the room next door, and Adoniram relaxed into thought of college life. ‘What laughs we had! What discussions! Jacob was the first serious thinker I knew who didn’t believe in God and who built his life on a whole different set of ideas. I’d just accepted what I’d been taught till then, but Jacob helped me to challenge all that Christian thinking and to

come out the other end knowing I could face life head on without needing the help of any god. And it works,' he concluded. 'I know it works because I've proved it for myself. Good old Jacob!' Judson's mind rambled over his college years.

He pictured his teachers and his friends. 'What a funny thing life is,' he concluded. 'When we were at college our friendships seemed as though they would last for ever and now I don't know where most of my friends are, not even Jacob. I don't know where he is, but I do know where he's not,' Judson smiled at the thought. 'He's not in church on Sundays!'

The night hours passed slowly. Having been disturbed by the noises in the next room, Adoniram now found himself needing to hear them to assure himself that his neighbour was still in the land of the living. But nothing came, and the silence oppressed the young man as much as the noise had unnerved him. He tried not to think about death, but he couldn't help it. 'What would happen to me if I died?' he asked himself. But he had no answer. Was there a heavenly home for those who trusted in Jesus? Would there really be a day of judgement, and if there was, how would he be judged? Did hell exist? And was that where he was heading? All these questions rattled around in his mind, tormenting him in the uneasy silent darkness. He could hear his father's voice telling him that everything he had been taught from the Bible was true. He could hear Jacob Eames' dismissal of the very idea. And the hours wore on. 'Was ever a night as

long as this one?’ he demanded of the early dawn, ‘or as disturbing?’ It was nearly time to get up when Judson eventually fell asleep. And all was quiet in the room next door.

‘How’s the fellow who was ill?’ Adoniram asked, as he paid his account before leaving.

The man looked up. ‘He’s dead.’

Young Judson could imagine the moment of death. There had been moaning and groaning, cries and tears, louder ... and louder. Then silence. That terrible silence. Despite himself, Adoniram wondered if the dead man had met his Maker, if he had met his judge. Shaking himself free of the thought, he took his change from the innkeeper.

‘What was his name?’ Judson asked, more to escape his thoughts than out of any real interest.

‘His name was Jacob Eames,’ the landlord said. ‘A young man like yourself. Jacob Eames would have been just about your age.’