

Mike

‘Mother! Mother!’ shouted Robert Faraday as he burst through the front door of his home just north of Oxford Street in London.

‘Calm down, son! Calm down!’ said Margaret Faraday. ‘Just tell me, slowly.’

‘But Mother, you just won’t believe what the teacher wanted me to do today. It was just awful!’

‘What did she want you to do, son?’ asked his mother now suddenly growing anxious as she saw the pained look on Robert’s face.

‘She offered me a half penny to buy a cane to thrash Mike!’

‘Why, what has he done?’ asked Margaret in surprise.

‘He keeps calling me Wobert!’

‘But that’s because he has a speech defect,’ said Mrs. Faraday. ‘He can’t help it if he is unable to pronounce words with a sounding ‘r’ in them.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Robert. ‘But the horrible thing is that she wanted me to thrash it out of him.’

‘What did you do?’ asked Margaret Faraday in despair.

‘I refused to do what she asked,’ answered Robert. ‘I threw the half penny over the wall and came home to tell you.’

‘Well, you and Mike won’t be going back to that school again,’ said Mrs. Faraday. And they didn’t.

The Faradays lived on the edge of poverty above a blacksmith’s shop in the back premises of 16, Jacob’s Mews. It was a bright and broad alley just north of Oxford Street in London that ran behind the Spanish Chapel of the Spanish Embassy. Mr. James Faraday, Michael and Robert’s father was a blacksmith and he worked in the smithy below his rented rooms. He’d been a sick man for years and sometimes he was unable to complete a day’s work. This meant that his family was not financially secure. At one stage in 1801 when England was at war with France and the price of corn was very high the young ten-year-old Michael was given a single loaf of bread that had to last him for a week.

James Faraday came from Clapham in North Yorkshire. He had married Margaret Hastwell, the sixth child of Michael and Betty Hastwell of Black Scar Farm at Kaber in Westmoreland at Kirby Stephen Parish Church in 1786. James took over a smithy opposite the King’s Head Inn at Outhgill, five miles south of Kirby Stephen. Soon huge problems arose for James, Margaret and their two children Elisabeth and Robert. There was a drought in 1788 in the Mallerstang Valley of the River Eden where they lived.

‘Let’s pray for rain, Margaret,’ James said to his wife one day as the drought increased. They both believed that God was interested in all the details and

problems of their lives. They were convinced that he heard and answered prayer.

‘We desperately need rain, James,’ answered Margaret. ‘The sheep and cattle are dying.’

‘There isn’t enough hay for the horses either,’ said James. ‘That means fewer coaches are coming up the valley and I am getting less work to do in shoeing horses.’

Soon the autumn with its frosts gave way to a very severe winter. For a period in December no coaches came up the valley at all and James had no work at the smithy. With summer came dramatic news from France.

‘I hear a mob has stormed the Bastille prison in Paris, Margaret,’ said James one summer day in 1789.

‘What happened?’ asked Margaret.

‘The Bastille fortress surrendered,’ answered James. ‘And the mob freed the prisoners. The people danced and sang in the streets.’

‘Will there be a wide-spread revolution in France?’ asked Margaret anxiously.

‘Looks like it’ answered James. ‘Poverty has driven the people to it. France hasn’t got a proper Parliament like ours you know, and King Louis XVI is out-of-touch with the true conditions of his people.’

‘Poverty drives a lot of people to do a lot of things, James,’ said Margaret who was now experiencing what poverty meant for her little family. ‘Do you think that England will go to war with France?’

‘There is talk of it, Margaret, and I’ve seen soldiers on the move up and down the valley going to Carlisle, Leeds and London.’

‘Maybe it’s time for us to move, Margaret,’ said James, after a period of thoughtful silence. ‘We need to go to a city if I am to get work. I know you work hard as a maidservant at Deep Gill Farm but we need more money to care for Elisabeth and Robert. What do you think?’

‘Let’s go and talk to the elders of our Chapel and pray with them,’ said Margaret.

God guides people through all kinds of circumstances. He over-rules even in the most difficult times. Just as the Bible shows that poverty drove Jacob to Egypt and drove the poverty-stricken Ruth to Israel, so God still over-rules events in peoples lives. James and Margaret decided to move as a family to the great metropolis of London. By the time they were ready to leave Outhgill, Margaret was heavily pregnant with a little baby. It was not an easy day for the Faradays when they left their home and all their friends in Westmoreland for an uncertain future in one of the largest cities on earth.

On September 22nd 1791 Margaret and James Faraday’s little baby was born in rented rooms near the Elephant and Castle a short distance off the Old Kent Road in London. They called him Michael. He was to become a great, if not the greatest experimental scientist in history. If anyone was to prove the truth of the Bible verse that ‘God has chosen the weak things

of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty,' Michael Faraday was to be that person.

Not a lot is known of Michael's childhood but he did say later, 'My education was of the most ordinary description, consisting of little more than the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic at a common day-school.'

Times were very difficult and even the most basic education cost money. Michael's father would not have earned more than 20 shillings a week even at the best of times. Michael was actually very fortunate to even have received the education he did. When not at school Michael spent his time at home or playing in the streets. He was fond of playing marbles in nearby Spanish Place. He often looked after his little sister playing in Manchester Square.

'There's something about that boy,' his mother would say of him, 'he understands things immediately without having to reason it out.' She was right, for he had rare intelligence. 'My Michael!' she would say with deep affection when talking to others about him.

'I think it is time Michael went to work,' his father suggested to his wife when Michael was thirteen years of age. In the early 19th century family members were expected to contribute to family finances as soon as they were able.

'Well, he'll certainly make a good worker, James, for anyone fortunate enough to hire him,' said Margaret Faraday. She could not have been more right.

George Riebau ran a bookbinding and bookseller's shop just around the corner from Jacob's Mews at No 2. Blandford Street. He decided to hire Michael as an errand boy. It was busy work. His first task, early every morning, was to take newspapers round to all of Mr. Riebau's clients and then to visit them later in the day, collect the newspapers again and take them on to other clients. All the newspapers had to be returned after being read for which each client paid a small sum. These were days long before modern printing presses, telephones, television and satellites which, of course, Michael the errand boy was going to influence. Errand boys carrying newspapers around London were the main source of circulating news in the city.

News in 1801 was exciting. Lord Nelson with all his brilliance as a navy Commander led the British fleet to force the French fleet to surrender at the Battle of the Nile. He also led the action against the Danish fleet in the Battle of Copenhagen. Michael Faraday carried news of such battles as he rushed around London throughout the day.

'Faraday?' said Mr. Riebau one morning after Michael had worked for him for a year. 'I think you're going to be too bored running my errands for the rest of your youth. I think you would make an excellent bookbinder.'

'Really, sir?' answered a surprised Michael.

'Of course you would! I would like to offer you an apprenticeship to learn the trade of a bookbinder

and stationer. It will be seven years of hard work and training but I am sure you would enjoy it and I would just love to have you here.'

'Can I talk to my parents about it,' said the excited fourteen-year-old boy.

'Of course,' answered Riebau.

On October 7th, 1805 Michael Faraday enthusiastically signed up as an apprentice bookbinder and stationer. On October 21st the most decisive sea battle of the Napoleonic wars was fought off Cape Trafalgar on the Spanish Coast between the combined fleets of Spain and France and the Royal Navy. Before the sun had set on that famous day Lord Nelson had been killed but his decisive command had brought victory and not one of the twenty-seven ships of the British Fleet had been sunk or captured. Napoleon's master plan to control the world through the command of the seas was shattered forever. It was not until several days after the battle that newspapers in England were able to inform their readers of its outcome. Michael Faraday, though, no longer carried the news. He was on his way to making it.