

In his commentary on the situation, Bramwell Booth [William's eldest son, and successor as General] said: 'In periods of calmness The General has evidently fully realised the serious nature of his illness. He has spoken several times of his work as finished. He has referred with joy to the prospect of soon meeting again both the dear Army Mother [General Booth's wife, Catherine] and my sister Emma, the Consul.'

'During yesterday, although he had considerable difficulty in speaking, he referred with great emphasis to the promises of God, saying more than once, with much energy, "They are sure – they are sure – if – you will only – believe." It is a great comfort to him, indeed to us all, that my sister, Mrs Booth-Hellberg, is able to be with him at this time, and we know how gladly Commissioner Eva would have shared our vigil with us had that been possible.'

On Tuesday 20 August, Bramwell wrote to Eva [the Founder's daughter, Evangeline – serving in the USA], who was thinking about whether to travel to England: 'The General has again changed very much for the worse, and it looks as though we could not expect him to last many days – sometimes we feel like saying many hours. He had a short period of consciousness on Sunday morning and it may prove to have been the last. He could not say much as his speech has been very much affected since Saturday, but he spoke of himself and then referred to the promises of God saying in a very distinct and definite way, although in broken words, as I have described in "The War Cry" which I enclose...

'The doctors say that he is now quite unconscious like a man in a heavy sleep, who is neither dreaming nor suffering in any way. This is a great mercy and almost compensates, at any rate for the time being, for the fact that he does not know us. Katie [General Booth's daughter] has been down and seen him but, of course, could not say anything to him. She cried very much but she did not say anything of the kind that you and I could have hoped for.

'Up to the time of dictating this I have not heard anything from either Herbert or Ballington [the General's other sons]. Now as to your coming over, the main fact which influences me is your own health. The enormous fatigue and expenditure of

To mark the 100th anniversary of the promotion to Glory of General William Booth, Founder of The Salvation Army, Gordon Taylor has written a new biography of the General. During many years' service at the International Heritage Centre in London, UK, Gordon has become one of the foremost experts on Salvation Army history. His new book includes reference material such as journals and private letters that have not previously been published.

This exclusive excerpt gives an insight into the lives of General Booth's family – and the grief felt by the wider Salvation Army – as the great man prepares to 'lay down his sword'.

'The General' took his last breath'

strength and nervous energy which would be involved and from which, as you say in your telegram, nothing would be gained if The General remains unconscious – as seems almost certain...

'I have had a dark time the last two or three days. One is so tempted to think that we ought not to have allowed The General to go through that operation [to remove a cataract]. But for that blow I really believe he would have been spared to us for a year or two. On the other hand there is no doubt the fact that the decline in power had begun and even with restored sight it might have gone on and possibly led to difficulties of another kind that might have been worse still.

'All three doctors have put this point to me. Even Campbell, who has been the most sanguine of all and who seemed to understand The General best, said to me at his last visit, "Well, you must believe that you have acted for the best. There were evidently changes going on before the operation which none of us fully realised."

'But what a life! What a record! Talk about a man leaving "foot-prints in the sands of time" – what an example we have

here. I wonder the world does not see it – perhaps some day it will...

'You will realise what all this means to me having regard to future arrangements etc, etc.

'Eternal unchanging love. We – you and I will have a hard pull without The General. But God is for us and his promises will not fail.'

On Monday and Tuesday, Bramwell Booth had arranged for small groups of officers to see the General for a few minutes in his room, and many of the officers were deeply moved. One of the officers who valued this privilege was Brigadier Richard Slater, head of the Army's music department, who afterwards wrote in his diary: 'My emotions overcame me and I could not refrain from weeping and I could have sobbed aloud.'

On Tuesday, when Colonel Theodore Kitching, who had been to Bristol for the weekend, tried to start a conversation, there was no indication that William Booth was aware of his presence. In the afternoon, when the General's condition seemed to have deteriorated, Dr Milne was called to his bedside, but he improved again slightly and there seemed to be every prospect that he might last through the night, or even for two or three more days. Several members of the Booth family, including Lucy, Bramwell and Florence, and their daughter Catherine, were present for much of the day, while some of the other grandchildren, including Mary, Olive and Wycliffe, came for shorter visits. Catherine Booth-Clibborn, who had visited her father on the day before, came again in the afternoon.

During the afternoon there was a dramatic thunderstorm, reminiscent of when Catherine Booth died at Clacton-on-Sea in 1890, but at other times the room was quiet. There was a growing sense that the end of William Booth's life might be drawing nearer, and a few officers from

International Headquarters and the General's staff joined the close family around the bedside.

Dr Milne came again around nine o'clock in the evening, and was not expecting to stay long but, when William Booth's heartbeat and pulse became weaker, and his breathing more irregular, the doctor stayed to support the family at the moment of death.

Bramwell bent over to kiss his father, and, prompted by Lucy, kissed him again in response to a telegram from Eva which said: 'Kiss him for me.' Finally, just before 10.15pm, with Bramwell Booth holding one hand and Dr Milne holding the other, the General took his last breath.

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What a record! Talk
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