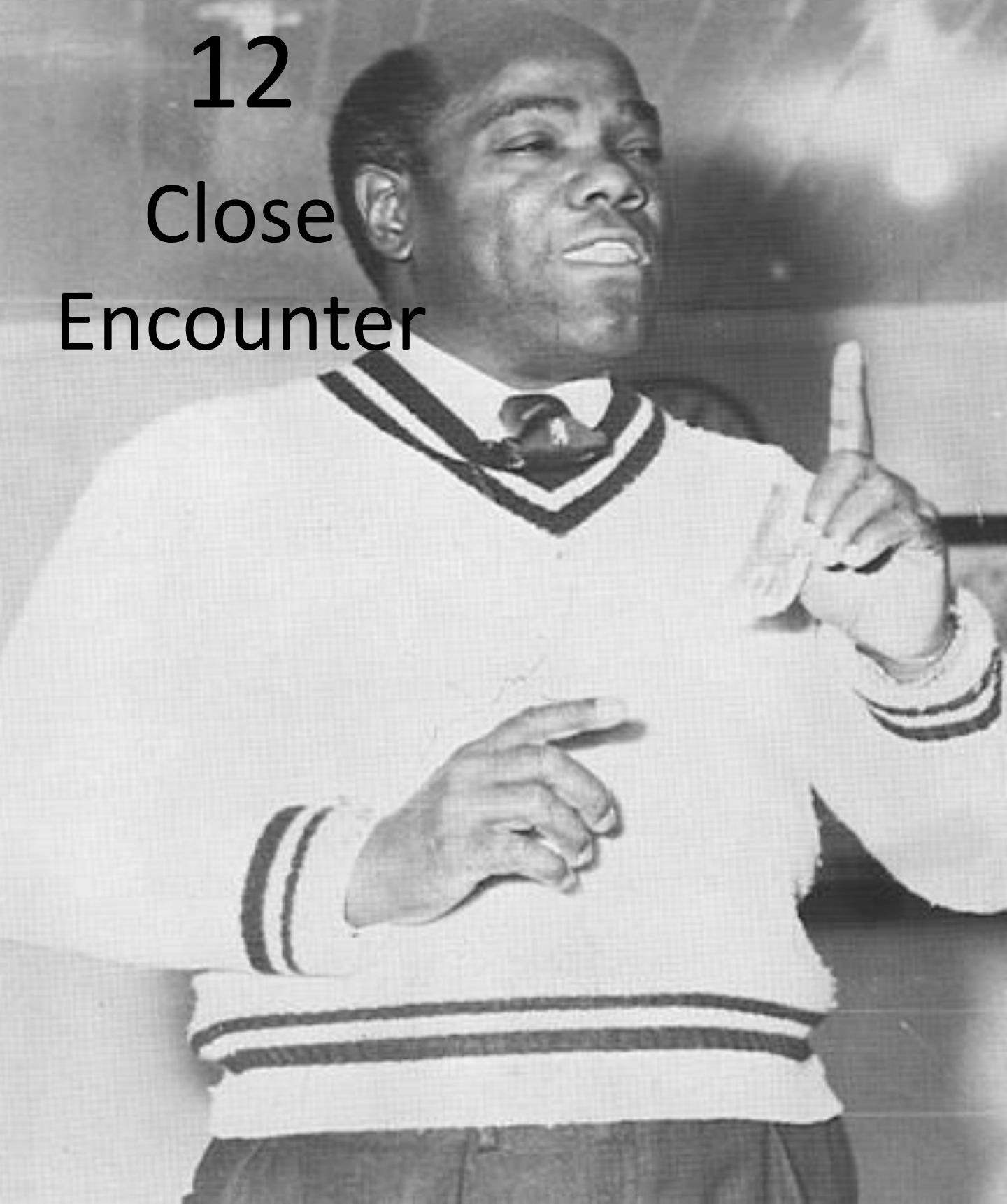


Chapter

12

Close

Encounter



CHAPTER XII

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

Clarence A. Bain was already fifty-two when he was first elected to the House of Assembly. Brother Bain represented Andros continuously for twelve years. Although the business of The Improved Benevolent, Protective Order of Elks of the World often took this man of destiny out of the island, it could not take the island out of the man. Next to life itself, he loved his Andros.

It was easy to spot Clarence Bain in a crowd. He was always in the centre of action, spinning tall tales about the days when sponge was king; the days when one saw such things as electric lights, roads, schools, and running water only in picture books.

On this November morning in 1962, Clarence was addressing a crowd in Fresh Creek. One marveled when one observed this tall, black, robust figure of a man gesticulating with every part of his body as he addressed his people. C.B., as he was called, knew how to hold an audience without a rope.

“Man,” he said, “I remember when the first motor car came to Andros Island. It was a Saturday and all the people dressed in their Sunday best came to town to witness this Model T move. And among those who came to watch were my Ma and my Pa.

“Now Ma believed that this car could move cause the white man say so. And in them days, the white man didn’t lie too much. But Pa, he was Doubting Thomas. ‘Dees ’Merikans always talkin’ fool,’ he said. ‘Who would ever hear of a piece of scrap iron moving unless a horse would pull it?’”

At this point C.B. became excited. He threw out his chest and strutted up and down as he held the audience’s undivided attention. He seemed to taste the relish of his own story.

“At ten o’clock sharp,” he continued, “the ’Merikan man sat down at the driver’s wheel. He put his key in the ignition socket and turned it a couple-a-time; but, man, not’n happen. He then pullout the choke wire and turned the key again while the people held their breath in expectation of seeing the car take off. But still nothing happen.

“Pa then looked at Ma and smiled, ‘Ah, see? What I tell ya? Dis ting ain’t gwine ever move.’”

“The ’Merikan man then got out of the car. He lifted the hood. He shook a few spark plugs and tightened the connecting wires on the battery. With the hood still lifted, he cranked the car from the front. There were three explosions that made the spectators jump. The spark plugs now ignited the mixture of fuel and air and this mixture in turn forced the pistons up and down the cylinders. The smell of gasoline was like perfume and the sound of the motor was like music. At last the engine was running.

“The ’Merikan man then ran around the car and jumped into the chauffeur’s seat. He placed his right foot on the accelerator button and, at the same time, slowly raised the left clutch. The engine backfired another explosion as the car suddenly jerked forward and raced along the rocky terrace amid loud applause.

“It moved, ladies and gentlemen. Indeed it moved.

“Ma then looked at Pa and asked, ‘Well Pa, what yo’ got to say now?’

“Pa replied, ‘Well, Ma, it’s just like a tell ya. Dis ting ain’t gwine ever stop.’”

When we started the progressive movement about ten years ago, there were those who told us that we would never get it off the ground. We radicals were regarded as lunatics from another planet as we talked about the new Bahamas that was to be, the new Bahamas with a black Bahamian as governor and a wife who could identify with Bahamian womanhood; the new Bahamas with a black prime minister and black Bahamian men and women as ministers of state. Back in those days, in the early 1950’s, it was only a dream but now we were beginning to make that dream a reality.

Current surveys revealed that the natives had made significant strides in the fields of politics, business and education since the advent of the P. L. P. and B. F. of L.

Shortly after the 1956 march on the banks by Milo Butler and I, Mizpah Wallace, a graduate of Government High, became the first black Bahamian teller at the Royal Bank of Canada. Today many others of our own kind occupy the majority of responsible positions in the banks and trust companies.

By 1962 there was a new high in the number of people who believed that a black government was possible within the foreseeable future. Thousands of natives from all areas of The Bahama Islands participated in The B. F. of L.’s first official Labour Day holiday parade. We thought we should dramatize our determination to gain equal rights to all the opportunities then enjoyed only by white folks.

Again, by 1962, one noticed a sharp decline in the number of land title deeds

that contained covenants restricting ownership of residences in choice neighbourhoods, such as The Grove in the Western District which was “for whites only”. And, at last, black children were being accepted as students at Queen’s College, the institution formerly reserved for the training of white leaders. The walls of Jericho had indeed started to crumble.

By the time Constitution Day, January 7, 1964, arrived I had left the ranks of the P.L.P. and reverted to my former role as the lone Labour parliamentarian. This posture was a ruse that made me less vulnerable to the criminal charge of calling political strikes. It also paved the way for genuine employer-employee dialogue. Of course, the relations between the B.F.of L. and the P.L.P. after 1964 remained reasonably cordial. All things considered, each branch of the progressive movement needed the other like fish needed water.

The 1964 Constitution was ushered in by the white minority government amid great pomp and circumstance. The budding nation took a two-day holiday to mark the historic event. My wife and I did not attend the official ceremonies at Clifford Park on January seventh. Our invitations were posted two days too late.

But this pique by the U.B.P. minority government did not hurt too much; I sought consolation in my Bible study courses from many sources. I had become convinced that the theme of the Bible was nation building. So during the weeks and months before and after Constitution Day, I raced through the pages of this good Book in search of a plan as to how one man with God can overthrow the status quo and replace it with a truly representative government.

Soon I came to respect the Bible not merely as a book but as a library of sixty-six books with a single unifying theme written by a variety of human beings who themselves were inspired by a single author: the Holy Spirit. This was one of my greatest discoveries ever.

And so I re-read the historical books (Genesis to Deuteronomy) and heard anew the call of Moses to lead the children of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt. In the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, I watched the varied fortunes of the new nation, Israel, through the seven centuries of its life until it was reborn under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Then I marveled at the beauty of Hebrew poetry and drank from the fountain of wisdom contained in Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Songs of Solomon. By the time I met the major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), my vision of life broadened and I took a giant step forward.

But it was not until I started my journey through the New Testament that I met the most unforgettable character of them all—The Man from Galilee. I had studied the four Gospels in school under many teachers. None of them, however,

had ever told me that within its pages was a plan for successful living. In those days I memorized large portions of the Sermon on the Mount but with so many things happening to me, I began to drink more deeply from those eternal springs.

The words from Matthew 5:41, “And whosoever shall compel you to go a mile, go with him two”, meant nothing to me when I was a boy except giving more and getting less in return. Now, however, I realize that if I had doubled the school load assigned to me by my teacher, then I might have finished my education in half the time.

Once Booker T. Washington, a former slave, sought admission into Hampton Institute (Virginia) to prepare himself for the future leadership of his people. On presenting himself to the principal of the school, Miss Mary Mackie, she gave him a broom and ordered him to sweep a large auditorium. To the ordinary youngster this would have been an insult, but to Booker T. Washington it was a challenge. He took the broom and swept the room twice and dusted it thrice. He went the second mile.

When the teacher returned she was so pleased with his performance, she gave him a place in her class. Booker T. Washington went on to become one of America’s leading educators of all times. Today, Tuskegee Institute stands as a lasting monument to his perseverance and insight. A similar story can be told of the late great Mary McLeod Bethune, another Negro slave and graduate of Moody Bible Institute. She became the founder of Bethune-Cookman College, Daytona Beach, Florida. She and other great persons were prepared to go “*the second mile*”.

But the big question is why couldn’t I understand this before now? Well, I’ll put it this way: I had to suffer before growing wise. Suffering purified my motives and by this suffering, I came ultimately to wisdom. This was not only the whole theme of the Greek tragic drama but also the story of all the great Biblical heroes.

While my spirit yet soared as if borne aloft by these new insights into eternal truths, my eyes fell on Matthew 17:20, “For verily I say unto you, if ye have the faith as a grain of mustard seed ye shall say unto this mountain, ‘Remove thyself hence to yonder place,’ and it shall remove, and nothing shall be impossible to you.”

But what does the word “mountain” symbolize?

What does “mountain” mean in this context?

I reached for Unger’s Bible Dictionary. On page 765 I discovered that mountain was used not only as a symbol of strength and stability but also as a metaphor for “kingdom” or “government”. Thus in Psalm 30:7 when David says, “Lord, by Thy

favour Thou has made my mountain strong”, he meant to express the stability of his kingdom. In the same way in Isaiah 2:2 as well as in Daniel 2:35, the kingdom or government of the Messiah is figuratively referred to as a mountain (big kingdom) which shall be exalted above all the hills (little kingdoms). Then again in Jeremiah 51:25 and in Zachariah 4:7, the Chaldean monarchy is likened to a mountain which shall soon be reduced to a plain (dust). Furthermore, mountains are described in Psalm 72:3 as persons in authority.

While walking down Market Street to my offices in the House of Labour on Thursday morning, September 11, 1963, I pondered the full implication of Matthew 17:20. Its message was clear and unmistakable. “If I had the faith as a grain of mustard seed, I could overthrow the government.” Man! what a mind-blowing revelation. The Holy Spirit is a source of power and strength! He went on to assure me that “nothing shall be impossible to me”. This was the kind of conviction I had been looking for all my life.

On reaching the House of Labour, I met a contingent of employees from The Princess Margaret Hospital waiting for me. Among them were Thomas Williams, alias Big Ben, Isaac Baillou, alias Half Pint, and Dudley Lunn, alias Caruso. They spoke on behalf of the street sweepers, garbage collectors, chauffeurs, laundry women, maids and cooks. They demanded from government the following:

- (i) an increase in salary from two shillings to three shillings per hour;
- (ii) uniforms for all employees;
- (iii) raincoats and a set of gloves for garbage collectors; and
- (iv) soap and water to wash themselves after work.

The Bahamas Federation of Labour had always contended that Government’s attitude towards street sweepers, garbage collectors and chauffeurs of dump trucks was antediluvian. Government designated them as “scavengers”—organisms that fed on dead and rotten flesh and refuse—and treated them accordingly. But the union called them public health employees and asserted that as such they were equal in dignity and rights to any other essential workers.

In those days Government needed a systematic approach to the problem of ensuring that employees were paid in a logical and equitable manner for the work they performed. If the problem of wage fixing is not addressed equitably and fairly, it would eventually undermine the morale of the staff.

In spite of these repeated warnings, Government still lacked a salaries policy or plan. Salaries paid in various departments were done in a haphazard manner. They bore little or no relationship to competitive rates for different jobs and had disjointed internal relationships based on age, sex, social status and favouritism rather than on merit or training. The union wanted to know why a street sweeper,

garbage collector or driver of a large dump truck made only one-half of the salary of a junior secretary? This was wrong and we sought to correct it. We threatened a strike.

Government clenched its fists. Employers called me names—profane and indecent. They said I was ambitious. This was true; I was ambitious for the emancipation of the poor.

The B.F. of L. gave Government an ultimatum. The countdown had scarcely started when both newspapers (the *Nassau Guardian* and the *Nassau Daily Tribune*) asked, “Who does Randol Fawkes think he is? How and by what authority does he dare give the Government of The Bahamas an ultimatum?”

On September 12, 1962, Sir Etienne Dupuch advised Government, “Let’s fight Fawkes now!”

“When will this strike be called?” the establishment inquired.

“That, my friends, is a military secret,” said I.

The latter reply vexed them all the more. The thought of one man holding The Bahamas up for ransom was revolting to them. On Tuesday, September 17, 1963, the official *Nassau Guardian (1844) Limited* editorialized as follows:

“LUST FOR POWER”

“The colony has enjoyed excellent management-labour relations for a considerable period. The last major strike in 1958 taught many workers a bitter lesson and brought no material benefits to anyone.

“But last week members of the Transport, Agricultural Distributive and Allied Workers Union of Mr. R. Fawkes’ Bahamas Federation of Labour voted to strike against the Health Department. Although the Acting Chief Industrial Officer has submitted a report to the Governor in which he is believed to have questioned the validity of the strike vote, it appears likely that the workers concerned will come out whenever Mr. Fawkes beckons.

“The most sympathetic consideration to the union’s requests has been given by the Health Board. Indeed, so far as it lies within their power to do so, the Board has acceded to the workers’ demands.

“On the question of wage increases, the Board is powerless to act beyond passing

on its recommendations to the Governor-in-Council. Mr. Fawkes, a lawyer and a member of the House of Assembly, is fully aware that the Board itself cannot grant increases in pay; this is a matter which can only be dealt with finally by the Legislature.

“Since this fact is well known to Mr. Fawkes, the conclusion is inevitable that he has either deliberately misled union members into believing that the Board could grant the wage increases if it wanted to, or he is merely determined to bring about a strike as a means of satisfying his unlimited appetite for personal power.

“There are no other alternatives. There have been of course some pious talks which seek to convey the impression that Mr. Fawkes is concerned with the health of the public. But under the circumstances, that is just so much poppycock, for no one who is genuinely concerned with the public’s health would contemplate calling garbage collectors, street sweepers, and laundry workers, et. etc. out on strike over an issue which cannot possibly be settled until the Legislature is reconvened at the end of the next month.

“The proper course for Mr. Fawkes to follow—and he knows it—would be to assure himself that the union’s demand for higher pay had been passed on by the Board to the Governor-in-Council and then to await the Council’s decision when the House re-opens. If that decision does not seem to him to be forthcoming within a reasonable time, there is other action open to him in Parliament as a member of the Assembly.

“While we seriously doubt that the Governor-in-Council will regard a demand for almost double pay as a reasonable proposal, the point is that the request has not yet been rejected. What legitimate basis, therefore, can there possibly be for bringing on a strike? Whether or not the workers have a reasonable grievance against their present pay is not the immediate question; the fact that they must understand (and may not have been told) is that the authority which must deal with their request initially has not yet been given an opportunity to take action on it one way or another.

“We are obliged to conclude that all Mr. Fawkes seeks to achieve is a demonstration of his personal power and the pay demands are simply being used to create an opportunity for him to try out his wings again. Members of the union who have voted to strike at his order might do well to talk first to some of the hotel workers who heeded Mr. Fawkes’ strike call in 1958.

“It seems to us that the projected strike is shaping up as a power struggle between Randol Fawkes and the Government of the colony. Perhaps it is time that the test was made, for if it happens that Mr. Fawkes emerges an individual who is more powerful than The Bahamas then this would no longer be a decent place in

which to work and live and we might as well find that out now.”

On September 18, Sir Etienne Dupuch shrieked: “Fawkes is a menace to the working people of this colony. Strike him down now!”

On September 29, he was at it again: “Fawkes is demanding twenty pounds (approximately \$57) per week for common labour! Where is the money coming from?”

On September 30: “Let’s fight now. Any compromise with Mr. Fawkes at this time means that he will be back in three months time for something else. Let’s fight this dangerous bully now!”

Since Government refused to take our demands seriously, The B.F. of L.’s Transport and General Workers Union called a meeting of all public health employees and took a strike vote. Government therefore dispatched Mr. J. V. Brown of the Ministry of Labour to supervise the taking of a second strike vote. This time the vote was unanimous. As the axe was supposed to fall on October 1, the following morning, we gave last minute instructions to the officers, shop stewards and members for the conduct of the strike.



The Labour leader speaks to his brothers and sisters.

This done, the union went into a prayer session. Our gentleman chaplain, the Reverend Henry Wright, nearing seventy, said a short prayer. He seemed to be weighed down by the thought of the poor having to fight yet another round against the high and mighty of the minority government.

Next on the prayer list was Sister Florie Smith. Whereas Brother Henry Wright was tall, weak and weary, Sister Smith, aged thirty-five, was a short, fat, sturdy, buxom domestic servant whose booming voice had been heard far and wide during the General Strike and the sedition case. In those days she extemporaneously composed her own hymns to garner more souls for the mighty army of Labour.

That night, after Mr. J. V. Brown, the labour officer, had left the meeting, Sister Florie took the microphone and started singing:

*O God our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come;
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.*

Then Sister Smith took off on the theme of Israel's exodus from the land of Egypt, drawing vivid parallels between us and the Hebrew children of yesteryear. When Sister Smith started to pray for the union and for me personally, the whole House of Labour caught fire. There were moans and groans in response to her every sentence as she established contact and led us close to the Pearly Gates: "May the power of God pilot this union. May the wisdom of God instruct this union. May the eye of God watch over us and the right hand of God defend us. And as for Brother Fawkes, O Lord, You go with him into the battle tomorrow morning. Christ, be with him. Christ, be in front of him. Christ, be in the back of him. Christ, be all around him. And Lord, O, Lord when you give him the victory we will give you the thanks and glorify Your Name."

Now I was beginning to understand what mountain moving prayer was all about. It took another five to ten minutes for emotions to calm and return to earth. When we opened our eyes, however, Sister Edith Miller was standing over me. "Brother Fawkes," she said with a heart full of love, "there are two policemen downstairs. They say they have come to see you."

"Tell the policemen, if they want me, they must come upstairs and get me," were my instructions to her. In a minute the two officers were present. They handed me a letter. Goose pimples formed all over me as I opened the envelope and commenced reading. The union members waited with bated breath. After I had completed my reading my heart became full. I struggled against myself to stay calm, cool and collected. Then with a heart full of emotion, I announced, "My Brothers and Sisters, the mountain has bowed to your commands. Government has granted

everything we asked for: the increase in wages, the uniforms, the raincoats and an adequate supply of soap and water.”

The meeting became ecstatic with joy. We sang and danced all night long. Our brothers jumped like rams and our sisters skipped like lambs.

*GLORY, GLORY HALLELUJAH,
GLORY GLORY HALLELUJAH,
GLORY, GLORY HALLELUJAH.
HIS TRUTH IS MARCHING ON!*

Gentle Reader, you too can bend the mountain to your will if only you will keep the faith and work at it.

