CONTENTS

Formation and Family

Susie's Birth and Victorian London

The weather was a frosty thirty-four degrees, but the sun was shining brightly outside the Thompson home on January 15, 1832 when Susie was born. However, the warmth of welcoming a newborn to the family more than countered the winter temperatures for Robert Bennett (R. B.) and his wife of only nine months, Susannah Knott Thompson.[1]

The Thompson home on Old Kent Road, London, was not far from where a number of religious dissenters in the sixteenth century were accused of treason and hanged. The Thames River flowed just to the north of Susie's first address, but at various times over the course of her lifetime, she resided on both sides of the famous waterway.

William IV was the reigning king of England, and Victoria, his young niece, was heir to the crown when Susie was born. After an extended illness, William died in 1837, and Victoria, eighteen years old, ascended the throne where she served until her death in 1901. Susie was five when Victoria was crowned, and she died two years after Victoria's death—all of Susie's life was characterized by Victorian culture. Victoria's reign was

mostly ceremonial, but she had an important influence in England, especially as an agent of morality and family life. Victoria, her husband, Albert, and their nine children were the subject of admiration, curiosity, and criticism in the nineteenth century. Her long reign directly touched two centuries, and numerous prime ministers served under her, including Melbourne, Disraeli, and Gladstone. Though it is unlikely that she ever met the queen, Susie shared a lifetime with her.

Not only was Susie a Victorian chronologically, she was also one culturally. In the course of her seventy-one years, she was familiar with the literature of the day, including the works of Charles Dickens, and the beloved English author's prose even made its way into Susie's later writings.[2] Like many upper middle class young ladies, Susie was well read and expertly versed in literature, music, art, and language.

Susie witnessed many changes in Victorian London—changes that included some advances for women, such as the women's suffrage movement, gained traction in the later years of the 1800s. However, for much of the Victorian era, women were mostly valued in the domestic realm. Upon marriage, the husband legally controlled most spheres of his wife's life. That said, during Susie's lifetime, progress toward increasing women's rights was realized.

Susie thrived both socially and educationally, and once she was married, she was contented as the wife of Charles Haddon Spurgeon. She was blessed with a husband who valued her, not only as his wife but also as his friend, equal, and partner in gospel enterprises, despite their living and ministering in a male-dominated society.

Susie's generation experienced massive technological developments that brought gaslights to city streets, rapid transit via railways, and later introduced electric lights and the telephone by the end of the nineteenth century. London was a city of change.

When Susie was born, travel was limited to walking or traveling by horse, carriage, or boat; but the 1840s cut many miles of train tracks across Europe, and by 1850, trains raced across the landscapes of both England

and France. Susie enjoyed long walks, and when given the option of riding in a carriage through scenic passageways or walking, Susie chose to go on foot. She crossed most of the Alpine passes, and whenever possible, she left carriage or mule to walk, for she loved to stand and view the towering mountains above and the deep gorges below.

Driven by the Industrial Revolution, England moved from primarily a rural population to having a majority of citizens residing in urban settings. From the early days of the nineteenth century until the mid-1850s, nearly insurmountable challenges confounded the city's leaders and plagued its citizens. London's streets, lined with new residents looking for opportunities, brought burdens to the Royal City, burdens that she was ill prepared to bear.

Sanitary conditions deteriorated. Water from the Thames was contaminated. From an infected well and a filthy river, death was pumped into the homes of the city.[3] The weeping in London was heard in almost every neighborhood due to the resulting cholera outbreak. It is likely that Susie Thompson and her family felt some measure of fear as a result of the widespread death in the city during several such cholera epidemics that afflicted London.

While riches increased for some, with manufacturing advances and the expansion of trade, poverty afflicted many in the overpopulated and often unsanitary neighborhoods of London from early to midcentury. Prostitution and other forms of vice stood in sharp contrast to the age of Victorian morality, which comprised strict sexual ethics, law and order, and a romanticized view of women as the "angel of the house." Religious values permeated Victorian culture and an enterprising work ethic fueled industry.

Susie remained in the city through—as Dickens wrote—the "best of times and the worst of times."[4] Yet she escaped disease, death, and hard labor in the factories, and she experienced many benefits that were inaccessible to lesser-privileged London girls. Even with its problems, Victorianism entered its Golden Age with an expanding economy and,

with the exception of the Crimean War, the continent enjoyed a season of relative peace.

Victorian London was Susie's primary context all of her life. On those occasions when she ventured outside London during her youth, it was to pursue cultural experiences and educational opportunities in France. For those journeys, Susie, accompanied by a chaperone, traveled down to Dover via carriage, crossed the English Channel by boat, and proceeded on to the brilliance of Paris with its art galleries, cathedrals, and monuments to military victories. There she learned to speak French and, as she gazed at the towers of Notre Dame or walked along the Seine River and near the Louvre, her English sensitivities were further refined. Perhaps it was as much the "City of Lights" as Victorian London that shaped the poetic quality of Susie's speech and later her writing. Certainly, her cultural proclivities and educational development were nurtured by the two cities.

Susie Shines in the "City of Lights"

Like most London girls, Susie was educated in music (she was a pianist), art, manners, etiquette, and homemaking. But as a young woman, she also spent significant time pursuing an education in Paris.

The following advertisement from a London newspaper provides a clue as to why Susie went to Paris and how she eventually connected with Rev. Jean-Joël Audebez, a leader of the French church reform movement, and his family.

> Ladies and Young Ladies desirous of spending a few months in Paris, are informed that they would find a happy and comfortable home in the family of the Rev. J. J. Audebez, French Minister. They would enjoy all the advantages of social and religious intercourse. His three daughters would give them, every day, instruction in the French language.[5]

If the advertisement is an accurate indicator of when Susie began her Paris studies, then she was probably about eighteen years old. However, it is likely that she had visited Paris earlier and, because prior opportunities for study in Paris were available, she may have been as young as sixteen on her first visit.

Regardless, the advertisement placed by Audebez turned out to be a perfect opportunity for Susie to expand her education and to engage in social and theological exchanges. Paris became her schoolroom and her second home as she often traveled there until she was twenty-two years old.

France's capital city fascinated Susie, and she was attracted to its beautiful cathedrals and art galleries. The colors, windows, and spires of the ancient buildings looked heavenly to her. She possessed a keen knowledge of French history, and in her later writing, she nostalgically recalled the glory days of Paris prior to what she described as the "Communistic fires" that had "scorched and blackened her streets" and the "turbulent mobs" that had "despoiled her temples and palaces."[6] Her numerous trips to Paris included excursions to tour its famous attractions, as well as to learn the French language. It was during those Paris adventures that she spent months living in the Christian household of Pastor Audebez.[7]

Susie first came to Audebez's home after the death of his first wife in 1840 and during his second marriage to his wife's sister in 1842. Almost certainly, his daughter Clary Pauline and stepdaughter Maria became friends with Susie, as they were near her in age. They also served as Susie's tutors in French. Audebez was a writer, preacher, and missions leader, as well as pastor of several independent congregations in Paris.[8]

Minister John Yeardly, in his *Memoir and Diary,* writes warmly of Pastor Audebez:

> We felt much inclined to hear him for ourselves, and attended in the Rue St. Maur on First-day evening; and we have this testimony to bear,—that we heard the *gospel* preached to the *poor*. He first read the 25th Psalm, and then part of the Epistle

> to the Romans, which formed the basis of his exhortation. It reminded me of [what I have read of] the preaching of the early Christians. My very heart went with his impressive exhortation to believe in the Lord Jesus as the only means of salvation, and of the necessity of bringing forth fruits unto holiness.[9]

Audebez was also one of the originators of the Evangelical Society of France. In the 1840s, he visited London on several occasions to report on the moving of God's Spirit in France and to raise funds to assist in the evangelistic efforts there. It's possible that during his London trips, Audebez made the acquaintance of R. B. Thompson, who became comfortable entrusting Susie to the pastor's school. Living in the godly home of the Audebez family provided a solid Christian influence for Susie as she enlarged her education, deepened her understanding of the gospel, and attended church with his family.

Susie's numerous ventures to Paris provided opportunities that served her well throughout her life. Some years later, she was in frequent contact with missionaries and pastors from around the world, and her multicultural experiences in France no doubt enhanced her international communication with gospel workers. Paris also proved to be even more memorable to Susie, as she and Charles would spend their honeymoon there.

Susie's early cultural and educational experiences stand in contrast to those of the man she would marry. Charles Spurgeon was a man of books and learning, yet his early years were steeped in rural culture with its green pastures, dirt roads, and small villages. Though he had visited London, he was more at home on his grandfather's land in the farming community of Stambourne, his parents' home in small-town Colchester, and the Puritan world of Cambridge with its outlying villages where he lived as a teenager. Even after he moved to London and was married, he sought homes outside the city that would afford him fresh air, clearer skies, and higher ground. The country life characterized Spurgeon's early experiences in ways that were evident in his speech, writing, and preaching until his death at age fifty-seven.

Susie, though a city girl, nevertheless had a deep appreciation for nature as well. In later years, when she was wracked with physical pain and often confined to Westwood, their home at Beulah Hill, she wrote of wishing that she were an artist so she "could with pencil or brush perpetuate some of the lovely pictures," which she had discovered when wandering with Charles across the grounds of that estate. Such happy memories stirred her to refer to that place as Dulce Domum, sweet home.[10]

Susie's childhood and youth were materially prosperous and socially astute. Charles, on the other hand, was a man of more modest means who, especially because of his impressive mind cultivated by voracious reading habits, could converse with people in either village or metropolis, with farmer or architect. He arrived in London, initially in the garb of a country preacher, to pastor the New Park Street Chapel (NPSC). He had come from a small village church, with even smaller wages, but what resources the members of the Waterbeach Chapel were blessed with, they gladly had shared with their bivocational pastor. Spurgeon recollected to his friend H. I. Wayland:

> I paid twelve shillings a week for my room at Cambridge, and had left seven shillings for all other expenses; but the people, whenever they came to town, would bring potatoes, turnips, cabbages, apples, and sometimes a bit of meat; and so I managed to live.[11]

In contrast, Susie's family enjoyed more prosperous circumstances, which were sometimes improved through her father's business enterprises and, likely, through the generosity of her extended family.

Susie's Parents and Family

[To avoid confusion, it may help to note that this section refers to three different people named Susannah: Susannah (Susie) Thompson (later Spurgeon); her mother, Susannah Knott Thompson; and her cousin Susannah Kilvington Olney.]

Susie Thompson left behind only a few slender passages about her childhood and teenage years. Fragments from her family background can be pieced together through census reports and legal records. Susie's address on Old Kent Road was near her grandparents, Sampson and Mary Knott. The Knotts' home, with its small garden, would later play a role in Susie's romance with Charles.

In a rare glimpse into her childhood, Susie once recalled:

> When I was a little child, and had been troublesome to my mother, reproof or punishment would always be followed by the trembling question, "Mother, don't you love me?" And the mother's reply invariably was, "Yes, I love you: but I do not love your *naughty* ways." Poor mother! Doubtless I tried her very much, and this was the best that grieved parental love could say; but the Heavenly Father has sweeter, choicer words than these for His erring children. His love is Divine, so He says, "I have seen his ways *and will heal him*." O sweet pitifulness of our God! O tenderness inexplicable! O love surpassing all earth's loveliest affection! Do not our hard hearts yield under the power of such compassion as this? God knows all our wickedness. He has seen all our waywardness; yet His purpose towards us is one of healing and pardon, and not of anger and putting away.[12]

As an only child, it is likely Susie, along with her mother, lived a relatively solitary home life due to her father's job, which required him to travel.

R. B. was employed in the warehousing industry as a foreman and as a traveling sales representative at various times during his career, eventually as an employee for Messers. Cook and Son, a large warehousing and distribution company of silk, linen, woolen, and cotton goods, located at St. Paul's Courtyard in the city of London.[13] For much of Susie's early life, her father, as a traveling sales rep, dealt in fabric, clothing, and accessories.

He rode the expanding rail lines across the country, visiting retailers with a sampling of his company's products.[14]

Susie began the 1840s as an eight-year-old girl and was seventeen as the decade ended. For her and her family, and also for many people in London, those years were times of highs and lows. They included the wedding of Victoria and Albert, but they were also marked by a significant economic downturn resulting in rising unemployment and the highest crime rate of the century.[15] The financial reversal that gripped the nation was felt all the way to the Thompsons' door.

Early in the decade, R. B. was a partner with two other wholesale warehousemen. That partnership dissolved on August 24, 1840. By May of 1842, R. B. was unable to meet the demands of his creditors. *The Morning Advertiser* from October 1842 under the heading "Law Notices This Day. Bankruptcy Court" listed "Robert Bennett Thompson, of Wood-street, warehouseman, audit and dividend at twelve."[16] Undoubtedly, this disrupted the Thompson household. Bankruptcy, debt, and unemployment, though widespread and feared, were viewed unfavorably in nineteenth-century England. Though Thompson avoided the poorhouse, one of the worst-case scenarios connected with such a financial downturn, his temporary inability to meet his obligations must have been a difficult burden for him to bear.

Susie was only ten years old at that time; old enough to feel the emotional blow to her family but young enough to be protected by parents and extended family members from the full impact of her father's financial troubles. Susie never mentioned her father's economic problems in her later writings, nor do any extant letters reveal her feelings during those trying times. It is unusual, given Susie's prolific writing later in life, that she rarely refers to her parents or childhood. Perhaps her reticence came from her sense of Victorian propriety or from sadness or awkwardness she felt in reflecting on such trying times.

The 1850s brought better days for London as rapid train transit created a "national culture," allowing London's daily papers to be read at the

breakfast tables throughout the hamlets and cities of England. With the increased speed of steamships crossing the Atlantic, a more international culture developed in England.[17] Perhaps the most visible monument to "British Supremacy" was the Great Exhibition that opened in London's Hyde Park in May of 1851 and ran through October of that same year.[18]

R. B., his wife, Susannah, and daughter, Susie, would almost certainly have attended the Exhibition, along with six million others. Charles Spurgeon lived north of London in June of 1851 and traveled by train from Cambridge to visit the Great Exhibition.[19] For six months, the latest inventions and technological advances from around the world were on display. After the exhibit closed, its central structure, the Crystal Palace, was dismantled, reconstructed, and in 1854 reopened in south London.[20] Built of metal and glass, it was a unique architectural marvel, and the fulfillment of Prince Albert's dream. The massive structure, holding over 100,000 exhibits and three times longer than St. Paul's Cathedral, was "a triumph of engineering and design."[21] In 1854, the Crystal Palace played a key role in the budding relationship between Susie and Charles.

Susie's family lived primarily in the central London area of Falcon Square for much of the decade of the 1850s. With improving financial conditions, R. B. was able to hire a domestic servant for their home. Except when she was away in Paris, Susie resided with her parents until she was married in 1856. However, for two and a half years, the Thompson family again lived on the south bank of the Thames at 7 St. Ann's Terrace on Brixton Road, in the home of Susie's aunt, Mary, and her husband, Henry Kilvington.[22]

The Thompsons joined the Kilvington family, most likely, to provide assistance to them due to the deteriorating health and eventual death of Mary. The Kilvingtons still had children at home, and Susie and her mother, no doubt, would have been a help to them.

Henry and Mary's second eldest daughter, also named Susannah, was Susie's cousin and dear friend. By the time the Thompsons resided with the Kilvingtons, cousin Susannah was married. Her marriage to William

Olney, son of Thomas and Unity Olney, stalwart members of the New Park Street Chapel, would later provide the key connection between Susie and the Olney family and—ultimately—Charles Spurgeon.

Susie was especially close to Susannah and William. At one point during a spiritual struggle, she looked to William for counsel. She writes of that occasion referring to him as "Father Olney's second son" and her cousin by marriage. She described him as "an active worker in the Sunday-school at New Park Street, and a true Mr. Greatheart, and a comforter of young pilgrims."[23]

Susie's close relationship with her cousin Susannah often brought her into the societal circles of the Thomas Olney family, and she was regularly welcomed into their home, as a "greatly-privileged favourite with Mr. and Mrs. Olney."[24] The Olneys' love for the New Park Street Chapel (NPSC), and for the Thompson family, led to Susie and her parents' occasional church attendance at NPSC. Though Susie was not yet a Christian, she was surrounded by Christian influences.

Pastor James Smith served NPSC for nine years (1841–1850). He was the latest in a line of distinguished Baptist pastors stretching back to the 1600s that included Benjamin Keach and John Gill.[25] Smith gained the respect of the Thompsons, including Susie, who described him as "a quaint and rugged preacher, but one well-versed in the blessed art of bringing souls to Christ." Yet, at that point in her life, Susie was unconverted and uncertain. She would observe Smith baptize new believers "wondering with a tearful longing whether [she] should ever be able thus to confess [her] faith in the Lord Jesus."[26]

Thomas and Unity, along with their children, were important to the spiritual development of young Susie. Despite the scarcity of information about Susie prior to her marriage to Charles, a picture emerges of a girl and young lady influenced by godly people.

In his 1903 biography, *The Life of Susannah Spurgeon*, Charles Ray asserts, "The young girl's visits to New Park Street Chapel were no doubt more frequent than they would have been, from the fact that old Mr. and

Mrs. Olney were very fond of her and often invited her to visit them."[27]

However, until she was twenty-one years old, Susie had not yet professed her faith in Christ. In her writings, she often indicated conviction over her sins. Perhaps her sense of guilt clouded her eyes to the grace of Christ, hindering her confession. Many years later, *after* her conversion, Susie still grieved over her "misgivings" and "weaknesses." In her later years, she still considered herself "so forgetful, so unworthy, so inexcusable," yet by that time she understood God's kindness and sought Him for help to overcome her sins.[28]

The depth of Susie's parents' religious commitment remains uncertain; the fact that R. B. was baptized as an infant at an independent chapel and that his wife, Susannah Knott, was likewise baptized in the Church of England offers no resolution. The Thompsons' attendance at NPSC, primarily during the tenure of Pastor Smith, suggests that if they had ever been connected to Anglicanism, they were no longer.

Scripture reading was likely a regular activity in the Thompson family, as it was in many English homes of the day. Though the depth of England's love for Scripture at that time is a matter for debate, the Bible was nevertheless, as Victorian Era scholar Timothy Larsen argues, "a dominant presence in Victorian thought and culture."[29] Victorian literature and its art were saturated with references to Scripture,[30] and Victorian families often participated in both "morning and evening, private and household devotions." Larsen asserts that the Bible "was the lens through which people saw their own experiences."[31] However, the dominance of the Bible within the Victorian world was primarily a cultural veneer.

Regardless, the ubiquity of the Bible for the Victorians is inarguable, which helps to frame an understanding of the childhood and first twenty years of Susie Thompson's life.

When Susie died in 1903, her son Thomas stated at the memorial service that "R. B. Thompson, Esq. and his wife were occasional attendants at New Park Street Chapel,"[32] which indicates they were not members of the church, nor were they overly active participants. This may imply

that after Smith left New Park Street, the Thompsons lost interest, or it may be a hint to Mrs. Thompson's developing illness that hindered her participation.

Robert, Susannah, and Susie moved from the Kilvington home to Falcon Square in late spring of 1855.[33] Falcon Square was a busy area of shops and inns where people lived and business was transacted. R. B.'s work headquarters was nearby, and Susie often walked past her father's business and window-shopped the latest wares at the shops. The great dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, a towering monument reflecting back to the days of Sir Christopher Wren's architectural prowess, was likely visible from Susie's home. As she enjoyed walks through the city, she passed by the old cattle and horse trough near her home, and she often strolled down nearby Aldersgate Street where the great Methodist preacher John Wesley was converted in 1738.

The Death of Susie's Parents

Susie married in 1856, and her parents remained at Falcon Square. R. B. continued his work as a warehouseman. Sadly, Susie's mother Susannah entered into an extended period of sickness and suffering by 1862. Mrs. Thompson's affliction was severe, and she died April 14. The death certificate records her cause of death as, "Abdominal tumor of uncertain date. Hemorrhage from the stomach." Her obituary in *The Observer* simply read, "14th, Susannah, the wife of Mr. R. B. Thompson, Falcon-square City, aged 57."[34] Charles Spurgeon, in a letter to his parents in April, mentions Mrs. Thompson's long period of suffering:

> April 21/62
>
> My dear Father and Mother,
>
> In the hurry and singular excitement of the past week I failed to do what I should have done, viz to inform you of our loss.
>
> Poor Mrs. Thompson ceased to breathe last Monday

evening and I buried her this morning. She had suffered so long that her departure is subject of unfeigned joy. The bitterness of death is past. It was far better that she should depart than lie there to become a mass of living corruption and agony. Susie and our poor Mr. Thompson are both resigned as one could wish, indeed they feel as I do that it is well.

She enjoyed much peace, and seemed full of simple childlike faith. She enters glory as we must do solely through the merit of our only Savior.

The poor sinful soul is washed in precious blood and the body waits for the trump of the archangel.

Receive our warmest love. The time when we hope to see you draws near. Let us know your arrangements and consider us always.

Your loving Children,

Charles for both.[35]

Susie felt both relief that her mother's suffering had ended and grief over the loss. In addition to the letter providing Susannah's date of death and the fact that Charles led her funeral service, it also reveals that Mrs. Thompson's illness caused her longtime suffering. That, along with the early death of her sister and, later, Susie's long illness, suggests the possibility of a hereditary disease. Most importantly, Charles's correspondence indicates that Mrs. Thompson had a "simple childlike faith."

The death of Mrs. Thompson appeared to change the dynamic of Susie's relationship with her father. In the late 1860s, R. B. moved from Falcon Square to Bell Street where he was employed as a wine merchant. On October 18, 1870, he married Mary Ann Kirkwood, a widow, at Christ Church, Newgate Street. R. B. and Mary Ann resided at Middleton Street, Hornsey, just outside of London. Surprisingly, neither Charles nor Susie, nor any members of Thompson's extended family, are mentioned as participating in the wedding or being involved with R. B. after he re-

married. Instead, R. B.'s accountant, Joseph Ramsdale, served as the legal witness to the marriage ceremony, and later as the executor of Thompson's will. The final known reference about any family interaction with R. B. is from a letter that Charles wrote to Susie in 1869 mentioning that her father had stopped by their home at Nightingale Lane for a visit while Susie was recovering from surgery in Brighton.[36]

With the loss of her mother and the uncertainties in her father's circumstances, Susie contented herself with her own home and pursuits. After she married Charles, she embraced his parents as her own, and she referred to them as mother and father. She even signed her correspondence to Charles's parents with the affectionate descriptor, "daughter."

The 1871 census records R. B. and Mary Ann as still living in Hornsey and Robert as an unemployed wine merchant.[37] For reasons unknown, in 1873, R. B. traveled to South Terrace, Penzance, almost three hundred miles from his home, where he died, at sixty-five, on October 5, from a probable heart attack ("spasm of the stomach and heart)."[38] The *West Briton and Cornwall Advertiser* records that he was the "father-in-law of the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon." It is curious that Thompson was buried in Penzance and not London, the city where he had spent all of his life. If the issue was finances, Susie and Charles could have easily provided the necessary resources.

At R. B.'s death, his resources had diminished since his earlier, more successful days as a businessman, and he died in debt to the Mercantile Credit Association.[39] R. B.'s finances seemed to fluctuate throughout his life, though he did enjoy occasions of relative prosperity. In England, wealth was not the sole determiner of one's class in society. Business, property ownership, and job title were often just as important, in regards to determining social status, as one's financial portfolio. Therefore, descriptors of Robert as Esquire and gentleman may be more indicative of his circumstances related to property, work, and position.

R. B.'s story ends with some sense of sadness. Miles away from home and from his only daughter, he died and was buried, although it is likely

that his wife was with him. When he died, Susie was ill and mostly confined to her home. Yet, her godly character leads one to believe that she loved her father and prayed for him.

Despite the lack of information about Susie's first twenty years, her declaration that she went to church in her mother's womb and that from childhood she professed a love for Jesus[40] indicates she was raised in a home where Christ and His church were honored. And, though she didn't make a confession of faith until she was twenty-one, gospel seeds had been planted in her heart by her mother, friends, extended family, and pastor that eventually sprang up into true faith in Christ that continued to grow.