

The Prayer Factory

David Wheldon

Engine against th'Almightie, sinner's towre
George Herbert 1593 - 1633

The Prayer Factory, as it is called by those who work within it, is a high, narrow, single-storey stone structure with a shallow hipped roof of slate with plain ridging-tiles and wide eaves which, for some reason, puts you in mind of a railway building: its interior is invested with the smooth impression of orderly arrival and departure. The title *The Prayer Clearing-House* might have been more appropriate, but its original name stood. It is much loved by those who come to work in it, seeking employment there, all single women.

Cass, a new candidate, a tall, fair girl of about eighteen, was drawn to knock at the door early one fine Tuesday morning in mid-May.

'May I — ?' she began, her voice not quite interrogative: she spoke rather as one making a statement, or even an affirmation. It was hardly light and the dawn chorus sounded around her.

The scene that met her eye was simple. There were two long benches, apparently of teak — and now much worn — at which were seated some eighteen women examining and choosing from small coloured cards the size of railway tickets.

'Come in,' said the woman who had opened the door. 'Introduce yourself.'

Well, that was a Tuesday morning now long gone. Cass was welcomed to the Prayer Factory, as was any young single woman who knocked at the door, for the building had no sign, its door no number, and one was forced to believe that any young woman who found herself knocking at its panels must have had some intuitive knowledge of its existence and purpose, even though she, like Cass, might not have been able to put the idea into words.

And, of course, Cass, being an intelligent and resourceful young woman, quickly found her way by experience, and, within a month, was a practised assembler of prayers. She could hold a fan of some eighteen differently coloured prayer-components in her left hand, choosing the correct colours with the thumb and forefinger of her right, while listening to the client's words through headphones. Then she would stack up the prayer-components on a little wooden rack and the task would be almost done.

It was rumoured that the Prayer Factory moved from site to site, though to date no-one has ever claimed to see it move. It was said to glide gracefully across the landscape some height above the ground, at some speed, casting a deep shadow on the fields below. Being not altogether substantial no other buildings obstructed it: it was said that it could pass through material objects with ease. The workers in the Prayer Factory were well aware of these rumours, but never actually saw the Factory move: the work was too demanding — one moment's lack of concentration and the prayer could be ruined, and fail the final inspection before it left the premises. The assembling of each prayer took diligence, as though it were invisible garment repair or numinous embroidery. And, of course, a worker from time to time wished to utter a prayer herself, and so, quietly in a break, a close friend would carefully construct it for her.

Prayers are difficult to construct. Have you ever tried to pray yourself? I have. Endlessly. None of my efforts succeeded. Perhaps you need the Prayer Factory to help you. I recommend the Prayer Factory. How can you invent prayers without instruction? Your voice is hoarse. It seems unreal. It just echoes in the mind. It never reaches the mark. My prayers are illiterate. I doubt: and I even doubt the authenticity of my doubt. And the workers in the Prayer Factory are so human, their neat, womanly fingers so precise, like those of accomplished string-players. As it happened, my prayers through the Prayer Factory were never directly answered. Indirectly, possibly: perhaps the answer to your prayers

is woven indirectly into the fabric of everyday life. Perhaps prayers are answered elliptically. I hope so.

[This is a preview. The full text has 3500 words.]

For Sarah Longlands MA
Artist and violin restorer

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