

ONE DAY AT A TIME

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and Other Talks on Life and Religion

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A DAY AT A TIME

AND OTHER TALKS
ON LIFE AND RELIGION

BY THE REV.
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"The Glory in the Grey"

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THIS BOOK
WRITTEN IN WAR-TIME
TO MINISTER COMFORT
AND IF IT MAY BE TO REINFORCE HOPE
AND FAITH
IS DEDICATED
BY PERMISSION
TO
SIR JOHN R. JELlicOE
G.C.B., K.C.V.O.
ADMIRAL OF THE GRAND FLEET

"There are nettles everywhere,
But smooth green grasses are more common still;
The blue of heaven is larger than the cloud."
E. B. BROWNING

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"As thy days, so shall thy strength be."
 (DEUTERONOMY xxxiii. 25.)

I

A DAY AT A TIME

If any one of us knows a word of hope or has picked up a message of comfort anywhere, it is his plain duty to share it, these days. We owe it to each other to cherish as exceeding precious, and to pass on to others, every brave and helpful word or thought we come across.

Well, here is a splendid one for us all, and especially for those who have most at stake in this great conflict, and are looking anxiously ahead and fearing what the weeks may have in store,—*"As thy days, so shall thy strength be."* It is a great and glorious promise. And just a couple of verses further on, it is caught up and included in one greater still,—*"The eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms."* Fathers and mothers, with a boy, or more than one, perhaps, away on active service for King and country, this promise is for you, to take to your heart and hide there, like some precious secret between you and God,—*As thy days, so shall thy strength be.*

Notice carefully, however, how the promise runs. Not, mark you, as your life is, not as your years are, not even as your weeks are, but as your days, so shall your strength be. For each day as it comes, God's promise is that strength will be given you, but just for a day at a time. The way to live under any circumstances, but especially in these hard weeks, is just a day at a time. Leave to-morrow with God, my brother, until it comes. That is what the Word of God lays upon you as a duty. Live this day at your best and bravest, trusting that God's help will not fail you. And for the duties and trials of to-morrow, however hard and heavy, believe that strength for that day also will be given you, when it comes.

You cannot have failed to observe what an important place this way of living had in the teaching of Jesus Christ. He was always trying to get men to trust the coming days to God, and to live fully worthily and nobly to-day. He was dead against the practice of adding to the burdens of to-day fears and forebodings for to-morrow. It is in love to us, in His desire to save us unnecessary pain, that He bids us remember that *"sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."*

In one of R. D. Blackmore's fine open-air stories, there is a character who talks at length about horses. After comparing good ones and bad ones in their

behaviour the first time they breast a hill with a load behind them, he sums the matter up thus: "Howsoever good a horse be, he longeth to see over the top of the hill before he be half-way up it." The man who is listening to him confesses that he has often felt that way himself! And I do not know that there are many of us who can claim to be guiltless in this respect. Yet it is perfectly plain that the men and women who are living the bravest and most successful lives around us, and are proving towers of strength to others, are those who have learned the art of living just a day at a time, and of depending upon God for strength for that day in the simplest and most trustful fashion.

Why, my brothers, if God our Father had meant us to carry on our backs the fears and anxieties of the coming days, He would surely have told us more about them! If we were meant to bear to-day what next week holds, surely we should have been permitted to see into next week. But we cannot. We cannot see a single second ahead. God gives us Now, and To-Morrow He keeps to Himself. Is there anything wiser or better we can do with our to-morrows than just to leave them quietly and trustfully with Him?

The habit of living ahead, as so many of us do, prevents us from getting the full taste and flavour of the happiness and blessing that are ours to-day. I defy any man to be adequately grateful for this day's sunshine if he is worrying all the time about the chance of a bad day to-morrow. Mark Rutherford, merciless self-critic as he was, takes himself severely to task for this habit in his "Autobiography." "I learned, alas! when it was almost too late," he says, "to live in each moment as it passed over my head, believing that the sun as it is now rising, is as good as it ever will be." Yes, in great things as well as in little things, that is true. If we are to live our lives at the full, and anywhere on the Christian level, the only way is to live one day at a time.

Our forefathers in the pulpit were fond of reminding their hearers to live each day as if it were their last. And in solemn truth, without being in the least morbid, that is the way to live. If a man knew that after to-day, he would not smell the sea again, how fully and gratefully would he fill his lungs with its ozone to-day! If he knew he were not to enter God's House again, how earnestly and sincerely and reverently he would join in its worship to-day! Yes, but the point is, why should his hope, that he has other days to come, prevent him taking out of this day all that he possibly can? Why should this day be any less prized, because others in all probability will follow it?

But the great value of this word is the comfort of it to those who are anxious and fear the coming days. And which of us is not in that category? I do not suppose there is one of my readers upon whom, somehow or other, the war has not levied its tax. Nearly every one has somebody belonging to him or her who is in this gigantic struggle, and whose welfare is a matter of real concern. And,

closer still, there are fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, whose very dearest are "in it" or are getting ready to do their share. They have joined, and we are proud that they have joined, for this is a cause that ennobles every mother's son who fights for it. But who shall say what the mother's thoughts are, these days? How proud, and justly proud, the father is that his boy has played the man, and offered himself to his King and for his country! But only God, who made the father—and the mother—heart, knows what the surrender costs. And only God knows how eagerly and anxiously they look ahead to try to see what the future may hold.

And, knowing that, He sends His comfort to you, fathers and mothers. The comfort of His promise,—As thy days, so shall thy strength be. Just a day at a time, my friend! Do not take fears for next month on your shoulders now. You will get strength given you for to-day, certain and sure, and when next month comes, the strength and comfort for that day will come too, as certain and as sure. Be not over-anxious about the morrow. Leave your to-morrow, and your soldier-son, in God's hands. You can do nothing more at the best, and this is the best. But it is such a mistake to do anything less. Leave all your to-morrows with God—it is what He wants you to do—and humbly and gratefully take from His hands His gift of To-day, and the strength that comes with it. If that be not enough—and it is not enough for God has said more—when that is not enough, still your heart a moment, and listen! And you will hear, beneath that promise for to-day, like the grand deep tones of an organ, the magnificent diapason of the Father's constant love and mindfulness,—"The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." And surely that is enough!

"So for To-morrow and its needs
I do not pray,
But keep me, guide me, help me, Lord,
Just for To-Day."

PRAYER

O Lord our God, who dost appoint the way for each of us, give us the grace to trust that as Thou hast helped us hitherto, so, in Thy great mercy, Thou wilt bless us still. We do not ask to see the distant scene. Keep us, and our beloved, this day; and in quietness and confidence teach us to leave to-morrow with Thee, our

Father. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"The Spirit of life was in the wheels."
(EZEKIEL i. 21.)

II

GOD IN THE WHEELS

The prophet Ezekiel once had an extraordinary vision of God. He tries to tell us about it, but his description seems to be a meaningless jumble of cherubim, and wheels,—wheels within wheels, complex, wonderful, unresting. Behind all, he saw the Glory of God. And again and again he tells us that "the Spirit of Life was in the wheels."

Now that at least is intelligible, and it is a good thing for us to think about. The Spirit of God is in the wheels.

I want to suggest to you that He is in the wheels of industry. We have no hesitation in saying that God gives the farmer his harvest, and we actually thank Him for it in His temple. A shepherd with a lamb in his arms is for a pastoral people like the Jews the very image of the Saviour God. But men who dwell in towns, and work in mills and factories and yards and railways, or who control or manage such places, have little to do with either corn or sheep. Is it not worth while to remind them that God is also in the wheels? Do you remember how Kipling's old chief engineer Macandrew believed that his twin monsters, driving the liner onward on her way, sang their hourly hymn of praise to God? And why not? From all the wheels of industry and man's inventiveness, goes there not up to Him a praise as real as the song of His little birds?

Where two or three gather together on Lord's days, God is truly and graciously present. But I want you to remember that out in the noisy moving world of industry and business, God is present also, guiding, controlling and bringing His long, long plans to pass. It is by His decree that all the countless wheels

of traffic and production turn and spin, for He needs them all, and has brought them into being by the hands of men, and they are His, as the Church is His. I would not have you, as Christian men, look upon your week-day world with its mechanism and its traffic, that world of yours that goes so literally upon wheels, as a province of life very far remote from the presence of God. I would remind you rather that God's spirit is in those wheels, that they move at His bidding, and that they are working out His purposes upon the earth.

I would suggest, further, that God is in those wheels whose turning brings us Change. If you will allow the figure, I would say that God is in the wheels of Change and time.

As we grow older, we resent more and more the constant alteration of the surroundings of life. It saddens us that there should be such a continual moving on. But perhaps it is in the realm of doctrine and practice that changes hurt and perplex us most. Godly old customs die out. The face of truth seems to alter. Old notes in religion disappear and new ones take their place, and we are sorely tempted to ask if it be possible that the children can know God better or serve His Christ more truly than their fathers. Ah yes, from forty years and upwards, men are very apt to have a quarrel with change. They resent it, and would spike Time's wheels if they could.

Forgetting that the Spirit of God is in those very wheels. Change is God's method and His blessing. The Bible does not envy the man who has no changes. It is afraid for him, afraid that for want of them, he may settle on his lees, and forget the fear of God.

Of course, no one will defend every new fashion, or assert that everything recent is an improvement on what went before. But I, for one, do believe that generation after generation men are moving up, being shepherded up, the long slope of history nearer to God. I believe that God's promise is that He will do better for us than at the beginnings, and I believe He is keeping His promise. I must believe that the history of this world which man rough hews, is—spite of all the wars—being shaped by God Himself, or else there is no God at all. And so I would say to those who distrust the continual changes of life, and would fain stop the wheels that turn on and on and never halt, "Fear not! Be of good courage! For aback of all change is God our Father, and it is His Spirit that is working in the wheels."

Again, I would suggest to you that God is in the wheels that shape your own lot and mine. The wheels of Chance, they are sometimes called, the mere whirligig of destiny, as if the world were some blind irresponsible machine grinding on in the dark, and heeding not which or how many lives were broken in its teeth.

And I grant you that there be times when that idea seems feasible. For life

is full of mysterious happenings, and chance sometimes seems the most probable explanation. The tragedy of Job is always being played somewhere. There are men who up to a certain point in life have known nothing but good fortune, and after that, nothing but disappointment and disaster. Out of a blue sky the bolt may fall on any one; while from clouds lowering and heavy, it is waited for, expected and dreaded—and never comes! The merest knife-edge of circumstance sometimes affects results out of all proportion to its importance. "A grain of sand in a man's flesh" as Pascal remarks, "has changed the course of Empires." Yes, I grant you, there be times when the blind chance theory does suggest itself.

But by an overwhelming majority the instinct of man is against it. And best of all, Jesus Christ, our supreme authority, has pledged Himself in His life and death, that the Ruler and Disposer of all events is Eternal Love. We have learned from Jesus to say and to trust "Our Father who art in Heaven." We know and believe that whatever is to come falls not by chance, but is sent and permitted by the Love of God, who makes no mistakes. Taught and inspired by Jesus, many thousands of men and women have committed themselves and all their interests—home, health, happiness, reputation, loved ones—to the keeping of God the Father, and known by the peace that came to them, that it was a real transaction.

Soulless wheels of destiny! say some. The blind mechanism of law! Ah, no, Jesus is the refutation of that. Law there is, and mechanism there must be. But neither blind nor soulless. For, above all, is the Father Love of God, and it is His spirit that is guiding and governing the wheels.

Wheels of Industry, Wheels of Change, Wheels of Destiny. And God's Spirit in them all!

PRAYER

O Lord our God, to whom not only the Church but our whole work-a-day world belongs, give us the purged sight that can see Thy tokens there. Deliver us from all foolish fear of changes since the goad moving all things onward is in our Father's hand. And help us to be sure that whatsoever befalleth us and ours has been permitted and appointed by a Love that passeth knowledge. Amen.

"The just shall live by faith."

(ROMANS i. 17.)

III

A TRIPLE BEST

Some time ago I came across the life-motto of George Stephenson, the "father of the locomotive," as he has been called, the man whose brains and sagacity made possible the network of railways which spreads now over the earth. The crystallised experience of such a life is worth studying. Here, then, was Stephenson's working formula:—"Make the best of everything; think the best of everybody; hope the best for yourself."

First, MAKE THE BEST OF EVERYTHING. In every set of circumstances possible or conceivable, there are always, at any rate, two ways of acting. You can look for the helpful, bright, and hopeful things, and "freeze on" to these meantime. Or, you can select all the doleful, sombre aspects, and sit down in the dust with them. Now, if it did not matter which a man did, there would be no good saying any more. But it has long since become abundantly clear that the man who makes the best of his circumstances, however hard they be, comes most happily out of them in the end. In other words, it pays to make the best of things. It is the cheery people who recover quickest when they are sick. There are men who, if their house should fall in ruins about them, will contrive some sort of shelter meantime with the broken beams! That is the type that wins out in the end somehow; these are the men to whom the miracles happen—who never know when they are beaten, who will face the most tremendous odds with "the half of a broken hope" for a shield, who are never done until they are dead. What makes for success or failure in a man is nothing external to him at all. It is something within him. It is the temper of his spirit. It is the way he captains his own soul.

The other day I saw a photograph of a backyard. It was a little bit of a place, of the most forlorn appearance, littered with tin cans, overgrown with weeds, and hemmed round with blank walls of brick. But it came into the hands of a man who believed in making the best of things. Another photograph showed that same backyard after a year had passed. It was still as small as ever, still overlooked by high walls and surrounded by chimneys. But it was now a perfect little oasis of beauty amid a wilderness of bricks and slates. Will anybody deny that that spirit pays?

Right up the scale, from little things to the highest things, the man who

looks for the shining possibilities and follows them, is the man on whom, in our short-sighted way, we say that Fortune smiles. Rather, he smiles in such a determined way to Fortune, that she has at length to smile back!

Nobody pretends that it is easy, when we have failed, to gather our powers together and try again. But nearly all the big men have had to do that very thing. It certainly is not easy, when you have a heavy burden of your own, to spare a cheery word or a hand of sympathy for somebody who is really much better off, but there are plenty of people doing it at this moment. Nero's palace is the last place in this world where you would expect to find a company of loyal Christian folk. Yet there were such people there, "the saints of Cæsar's household." And the grace of God that made that possible can achieve all these lesser wonders too.

Second, THINK THE BEST OF EVERYBODY. There is a winsome legend that Jesus once revealed Himself in this way:—A knot of idlers had gathered in the street round a dead dog. One remarked how mangy and unkempt its hide was. Another said, "What ugly ears!" But a stranger, who had come forward, said, "Pearls are not whiter than its teeth!" And men said to one another, "This must be Jesus of Nazareth, for nobody but He would find something good even in a dead dog." Certainly it is the mark of the most Christlike men and women that they delight rather in emphasising the merest speck of goodness than in denouncing the too visible evil. We can, all too easily, see the fault in another. What we cannot see is the heart of the defaulter, the weight of temptation he struggled under, and his bitter inner penitence. "Granted," as Carlyle says, "the ship comes into harbour with shrouds and tackle damaged; the pilot is blameworthy. He has not been all-wise and all-powerful. But, to know how blameworthy, tell us first whether his voyage has been round the globe, or only to Ramsgate and the Isle of Dogs."

The way to get the best out of people is to think the best about them. Let a man see that you have good hopes of him, and recognise what is best in him, and, in ways of which science can give no explanation, you add to his chances of reaching better things. In any case, who would not wish to stand on Christ's side rather than on Judas's. "This ointment might have been sold for three hundred pence and given to the poor." That is Judas. "Let her alone. Why trouble ye her? She hath wrought a good work in me. She hath done what she could." That is Jesus Christ.

Third,—Don't leave yourself out of the picture. HOPE THE BEST FOR YOURSELF. George Eliot, in her "Scenes of Clerical Life," gives, in one chapter, an account of how the Rev. Amos Barton is criticised and discussed in his parish. In the next chapter we see the Rev. Amos himself going on his way blissfully unconscious of the poor opinion in which he is held, believing quite honestly in himself, and not a little proud of his abilities. "We are poor plants," says this keen

student of character, "buoyed up by the air vessels of our own conceit." And a blessed thing, too, when you think of it! If we only knew all the disparaging remarks people make about us, we should never face up to our duties at all. What helps us along is our innocent belief in our powers, in the esteem in which we are held—our little conceits, if you like. Since they send us to our tasks with more spirit, and keep us at them with more determination, aren't they good things in their way? They are indeed just a lower form of that hope that we are speaking of—Hope's poor relations.

If these are of such value, how much more pure quiet steady Hope itself, purged of all pride and undue self-esteem? Hope the best for yourself, and you are already a good way on the road to it. Suggestion is a tremendously powerful instrument, even when you make it yourself. By self suggestion, the psychologists tell us, you can influence your actions, your character, and your general outlook in a wonderful fashion, either to your advantage or your hurt. Therefore, they say, be careful never to suggest evil to yourself. Never say to yourself, "I'm going to make a mess of this," or "I am not fit for that." Suggest success, happiness, health, and you beckon them to you. Hope the best for yourself, and you pave the way for its coming.

On higher planes, the same holds true. Hope on, and, though you fall you will rise again. Believe that you will be enabled to face your trouble or temptation, and you will be brought through it somehow. Even when the end of life is near, hope still, for beyond this best there is a better, and God's road winds uphill all the way.

But, you say, this is just faith. I know it is. Run your hopes for yourself up as high as you can reach, and they will touch God and become faith. That is why you are to hope the best for yourself. Because—God. Because God the Father loves you, and desires the best for you too. I believe in the optimism which Stephenson's motto embodies, because I believe in the Fatherhood of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. That is why I counsel you to go on hoping that the best is yet to be. Not that we can earn it at all, or that we deserve it at all. But—because God, our Father. And, for the daring and faith of that saying, this sufficient ground.—Because—Jesus Christ.

PRAYER

Help us all, Heavenly Father, to meet the discipline of life with stouter hearts. May we all try harder to cultivate the Christ-like mark of charity. And spite of our many sins and shortcomings, and our poor love of Thee, grant us the courage to believe that all things, in Thy great Love for us, are working together for our

good. We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

*"He that observeth the wind
shall not sow, and he that
regardeth the clouds shall not
reap."*

(ECCLESIASTES ii. 4.)

IV

FINICAL FARMING

When a man like the writer of Ecclesiastes gives his views on life, it is worth everybody's while to listen. A tabloid of experience is worth a ton of theory. And it is from his own knowledge of men and experience of life that he has discovered that "he that observeth the wind shall not sow, and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap."

Was ever a temper of mind, that we all know something about, more neatly hit off than that? You can see the very picture which this wise preacher had before his eyes. Agricola was a farmer in his parish who would not sow his fields unless the wind was blowing soft and gentle from a certain direction, and the clouds were just as he wished to see them. He held there was no hope of a harvest unless wind and clouds were right. And I observed, says the wise man, that Agricola, my farmer friend, waiting for the exactly suitable conditions, never got his seed in at all.

He was speaking chiefly about benevolence and charity when he used this figure. And that is one reason why we need to give heed to it. For ours is an age of charity. We give more to the poor and needy to-day than ever any nation gave before. It is said, indeed, that a good deal of our giving is not very wise. Our charities overlap. The truly necessitous are forgotten, and the improvident, the lazy, and the wasteful reap the largest share. Certainly that is one of the perils

of charity-giving. But I question very much if, in our efforts to avoid it, we are not running the risk of falling into a graver mistake still, namely, of observing the wind overmuch before we sow. If I refuse to give my mite for Christ's sake till I have made perfectly certain that it will not be misused, if we withhold our subscription from a charity till we are assured that it is managed in the very most economical fashion, it will end in us giving nothing at all. There is, of course, a reasonable amount of inquiry that is not only legitimate but necessary. Just as there is a regarding of the clouds before reaping which is simply wise. But, to wait till every scruple is satisfied, till every risk has been eliminated and there is not a cloud in the sky, is to wait for a state of matters that may be long enough in coming. Meantime the needy person may die; or the corn blacken in the fields.

Charity, however, is but a small part of Christian benevolence. The law of Christ says "neighbour" whether he be poor or not. He is in trouble, and I feel inclined to visit him. Must I wait till I am sure he will not misunderstand my motive? I have it in my heart to forgive him. Shall I defer the reconciliation till I am convinced he will not offend again? Or I have hurt and offended him, and wish to apologise. Had I not better wait till I know that he will not reject my advances? The wise man's answer to all these questions is an emphatic No. If you wait for all that, he says, you will wait too long, and the chance will go past. Wait till the wind and the clouds are just as you would wish them, and you will neither sow nor reap at all.

What to do, then? The wise man answers: "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good." Just because you can never fully calculate what the result of your labours may be, give up trying. Don't trouble about it, but do what comes to your hand at the time. If it is sowing time, don't wait for the perfect day. If the weather will do at all, sow thy seed in the morning, and in the evening do not stop. In other words, Take life more royally. Do not be deterred by its ordinary risks. Seize your chance like a brave man. You do not know, of course, whether that seed you sow will prosper or not. But sow it, all the same. Don't let the fact that you don't know cause you to hold your hand. It is just because you do not know but that the kindness which you offer your neighbour may be ill-requited, that there is a royal free-handed self-forgetfulness in offering it. That a man should live his life and do his good deeds with a certain dash and carelessness of consequence—that, the Preacher thought the ideal of noble living. And when we measure it by the standard of Him who said, Do good and lend, hoping for nothing again, it does not seem to come so very far short.

For, of course, there are the continual surprises that life holds for faith. If only the corn reaped when the clouds were just right was safely gathered in, then

indeed we might feel that we could not be too careful. But what do we find again and again? Why, we find that men who have had the faith to sow when the day was by no means perfect have been blessed beyond their expectations. We find our barns full and running over, though we reaped on a cloudy day. We have seen men cast their bread upon the waters, where you would say it was certain to be lost, and find it again, after many days. It's perfectly true that you don't know whether shall prosper this or that. Yet how often have you been surprised to find that where you thought you knew, you were proved mistaken, and where you dealt in faith, it stood justified beyond your dreams.

And so, the end of the matter for the Preacher is, once more, Live your life royally, with a certain loving wastefulness, and an easy disregard of calculations. Do all the good you can, and do it with a free hand, not asking to see your harvest before you sow, but taking your risk of it, and leaving the outcome with God. "Cast your bread on the waters, and you will find it after many days."

But what of the bread one has cast on the waters, only to see it carried away, apparently of no use to anybody? What of the faith that has not been justified? What of the good done to the ill-deserving, of the kindly-meant act repaid with indignity and scorn? It is a hard question, not easy to answer, not fully to be answered at all. "After many days," said the Preacher. And there is no sign yet, we say. Patience, brothers, patience! God's day is not yet done. When the days have run out to the end, it will be time enough to say if we miss the bread returning. We shall be better able to count the gains and the losses, if there are any then,—when the "days" are done.

PRAYER

Teach us, O Lord and Master, the high and difficult lesson that only those who lose their lives shall truly find them. Show us that the manna hoarded in miserly fashion is always touched by Thy curse. In small things as in great, may this be a token that we are Thy disciples, that virtue also goeth out of us. Amen.

*"But when Jesus heard
that, he said unto them, they
that be whole need not a physician,*

but they that are sick."

(MATTHEW ix. 12.)

V

THE DOCTOR

Jesus is Himself the best witness as to what He was, and what He wished to do for men. It is a fact, moreover, for which we cannot be too thankful that, in explaining Himself, Jesus used not the language of doctrine, but living figures and symbols which the humblest and youngest could not fail to understand.

When, for example, He compared Himself to a shepherd leaving the ninety and nine in the fold and braving the darkness and the steep places that he might bring back the one that had wandered, He opens a window into His own love for men which is worth pages of description. For those who are familiar with the daily life and work of a shepherd, it means a great deal that Jesus waits to be the Shepherd of men.

But, in these very different days of ours, there are multitudes in streets and tenements who have never seen a shepherd, and know not what manner of life is his. So that one is glad that Jesus gave Himself other names as well. When Matthew Arnold met the pale-faced preacher in the slums of Bethnal Green, and asked him how he did—

"Bravely," he said, "for I of late have been
Much cheered with thoughts of Christ, the Living Bread."

If that name for Christ brought him comfort, another preacher may be allowed to confess that he has often been cheered and helped by the thought of Jesus as the Good Physician. I am glad that in effect, at least, if not in actual words, He called Himself by that name.

This is His apology for consorting with publicans and sinners, for being so accessible to those who had lost caste and character. He says it is the sick who need a Physician, not those who are well. And His defence implies that Jesus regarded Himself as being in a true sense a Physician, not for outward ills merely, but for the whole man, body, mind, and spirit.

The days were, as you know, when priest and physician were one calling;

and it is doubtless to the advantage of both vocations that their spheres are now distinct. But it may be, and I think it is, unfortunate that Jesus should be regarded by many as so entirely identified with the priestly side of life and the priestly calling. It is beyond question that a faithful priest is, in his degree, a mirror of Christ, and helps men to see Him more clearly. But it is also true—and a truth worth underlining in these days—that the Doctor, too, is a symbol of what Christ means to be to men—nay, more, that there are respects in which the figure of a beloved physician of to-day comes nearer to the reality of the living human Christ than any other calling in the world.

It is a sure and unique place which the Doctor holds in the esteem and confidence of the community. He is the most accessible of all professional men, the most implicitly trusted, and, I think, the best beloved. At all hours of the day and night he is ready to give his services to those who need him. His mere presence in the sick room inspires confidence. In the poor districts of town and city especially, he is more really the friend and confidant and helper of everybody than any other person whatever. As no other man does, the Doctor goes about continually doing good. His life is a constant self-sacrifice for his fellow-men. He wears himself out in the interests of the needy. He runs risks daily from which other men flee. He asks not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and often and literally he gives his life a ransom for many.

And I do not know what we have been thinking of that we have not oftener made use of this as Christ's claim for Himself, that we have not told the ignorant and the very poor especially, who know far more about the Doctor than they do about the Church, who are, in fact, shy of all that is priestly, but who do understand and appreciate the Doctor, I say, I do not know why we have not oftener told them to forget that Jesus is the King and Head of the Church and remember only that He is the best of all Physicians. That Christ is compassionate, sympathetic, and approachable, like the Doctor, would be veritable good news to many a poor ignorant soul who is mightily afraid of His priests.

The word which comes to our lips when we seek to characterise the life and work of the true Doctor is Christlike. And big as the title is, it is deserved. In sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, in his care most for those who most need him, in the way he identifies himself with his patient, bearing with, because understanding, his weakness and petulance and fears, and seeking all the while only to heal and help and save him, there is no more Christlike character or calling in the modern world than the Doctor.

I am the happy possessor of an engraving—a gift from one whose calling is to teach doctors—of Luke Fildes' famous picture. Most of you doubtless are familiar with it. It represents the interior of a humble home where a little child lies critically ill. The father and mother, distracted with grief, have yielded their

place beside the couch to the Doctor, who sits watching and waiting, all-absorbed in the little one's trouble. It is a noble face, strong, compassionate, resourceful, gentle; and if the Eternal Christ of God is to be represented to us in His strength and gentleness by any human analogy or likeness whatever, as He wished to be, and indeed must be, no finer figure could be found, I think, than that, none more certain to draw out the reverence and gratitude and trust of men.

Men of all grades and classes appeal to and trust the Doctor. But how many of them realise that Jesus desires that men should come to Him and trust His willingness to help and save them, just as they would do to some good physician? How many men who have found comfort by taking their fears and forebodings to the Doctor and hearing his authoritative "Go in peace!" know or realise that just so would Jesus have us bring Him our unworthiness and shame and sin? Jesus never preached at those whom His compassion drew to Him. He never lectured them, He just helped them, and that at once. He lifted them to their feet and gave them a new hope. He, straightway, in God's name, assured them of forgiveness.

Ah, if men only understood that Jesus is to be found to-day down among the world's burdened and weary souls, not as a Priest begirt with ceremony and aloof from daily life, but as a Physician, approachable, helpful, human, who sees and pities their weakness, and longs to save them and help them to their best. If men only understood that!

PRAYER

We come to Thee, Thou Good Physician, with all our ills and fears. We would whisper in Thine ear the troubles that frighten and shame us. Surely Thou wilt hear. Draw near us in Thy strength and Pity, and in Thy Mercy heal us all. Amen.

*"Whatsoever thy hand findeth
to do, do it with thy might,
for there is no work nor device
nor knowledge nor wisdom in
the grave whither thou goest."*

(ECCLESIASTES ix. 10.)

VI

WELL AND NOW

In popular and condensed form, the golden rule according to Ecclesiastes is, "Do it well and do it now." His own words are, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in the grave whither thou goest." We want to let that precept soak into our minds for a little.

DO IT WELL. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." Among the lesser joys of life there are few that thrill one with a more pleasurable sense of satisfaction than that which goes with the bit of work finished, rounded-off and done as well as one can do it. No matter what the job may be, if it is worth doing at all, or if it is one's business to do it, it is not difficult to recognise in the curious inward glow over its honourable completion, a token of God's good pleasure, some far-off echo of His "Well done!"

It is a truism which never loses its point that it is enthusiasm that commands success. In her weird book called "Dreams," Olive Schreiner tells the parable of an artist who painted a beautiful picture. On it there was a wonderful glow which drew the admiration of all his compeers, but which none could imitate. The other painters said, Where did he get his colours? But though they sought rich and rare pigments in far-off Eastern lands they could not catch the secret of it. One day the artist was found dead beside his picture, and when they stripped him for his shroud they found a wound beneath his heart. Then it dawned upon them where he had got his colour. He had painted his picture with his own heart's blood! It is the only way to paint it, if the picture is to be worth while at all. If we would have the work that we do live and count, our heart's blood must go into it. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.

What magnificent heart-stirring examples are coming to us every day just now, from sea and battle-field, of the good old British virtue of sticking in gamely to the end and "seeing the thing through!" If the stories of the old English Admirals are calculated, as Stevenson says, to "send bank clerks back with more heart and spirit to their book-keeping by double entry," shall not the story that unfolds day by day of what our own kith and kin are doing, nerve and inspire us all to "do OUR bit," to face up to OUR duty, humdrum and ordinary though it be, with the same grit and energy, with the same determination to see it through, and make as good a job of it as we can?

The Preacher has his reason for this advice. Because, he says, some day you will have to stop and lay down your tools, and that will be the end. No more touching botched work after that. No going back to lift dropped stitches then. Such as it is, your record will have to stand as you leave it, when Death raps at your door. Even for us in this Christian age, this ancient Preacher's reason still stands valid and solemn. Do what you are at now as well as ever you can, for you shall pass that way no more again for ever.

The Apostle Paul, who expresses practically the same sentiment, gives a different reason. "Whatever ye do," he writes to the Colossians, "do it heartily as to the Lord." And that is the point for you and me. Not merely because we have a limited time to work, but because our work is Christ's service, we must do it heartily, with all our might. It is to the Lord. To us all in our different labours, in the things we work at day by day, and the worthy interests we endeavour to support, there comes this call that transforms the very commonest duty into an honourable obligation to a personal living Master—Whatever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord.

Yes, and DO IT NOW. For the amount of misery and suffering and remorse that is directly due to putting off the God-given impulse or generous purpose to some other season, is simply incalculable. If all the kind letters had been written when the thought of writing was fresh and insistent—ah me, how many burdened souls would have been the braver and the stronger. If only the friendly visit had been paid when we thought about it—and why wasn't it? "Never suppose," says Bagshot, "that you can make up to a neglected friend by going to visit him in a hospital. Repent on your own death-bed, if you like, but not on another's."

An old writer on agriculture says that there are seasons when if the husbandman misses a day he falls a whole year behind. But in life the result is often more serious still. When you miss the day, you miss it for ever. Wherefore, let us hear the words of the Preacher. If we have a kind purpose in our heart towards any living soul, let us do it now. If we think of beginning a better way of living, let us begin now. If we propose to end our days sworn and surrendered servants and soldiers of the Lord Jesus Christ, let us volunteer now, for this is the day of salvation.

It is said that a great English moralist had engraved on his watch the words, "The night cometh," so that whenever he looked at the time he might be reminded of the preciousness of the passing moment. The night cometh. How far away it may be, or how near to any one of us, no one of us knows. But near or far it cometh with unhalting step. Wherefore, whatsoever the thing be that is in your heart to do, great or little, for yourself or for others, for man or for God—DO IT NOW!

PRAYER

O Lord our God, by whose command it is that man goeth forth to his work and his labour until the evening, grant us all a more earnest regard for the sacredness of each passing moment, and help us to do with our whole heart whatsoever our hand findeth to do. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

*"And he washed his face,
and went out, and refrained
himself, and said, Set on bread."*

(GENESIS xliii. 31.)

VII

THE "WASHEN FACE" IN WAR TIME

That is what Joseph did when his feelings nearly overmastered him at the sight of his brother Benjamin standing before him, all unconscious of who he was. He "sought where to weep," says the record with quaint matter-of-factness, for of course he did not want his brothers to see him weeping just yet. So "he entered into his chamber and wept there." But Joseph's secret affections being thus recognised and allowed their expression, he had a duty to perform. He put a curb upon his feelings. He took a firm grip of himself. He "washed his face and went out, and refrained himself, and said, Set on bread." One cannot help admiring that. It was a fine thing to do.

And there are two classes of people in our own time in whom one sees this same attitude, and never without a strange stirring of heart.

The first and most honourable are those who have already tasted of the sorrows of war and lost some dear one in the service of King and country. We speak of the courage and sacrifice of our men, and we cannot speak too highly or too gratefully about that. But there is something else that runs it very close,

if it does not exceed it, and that is the quiet heroism and endurance of many of those who have been bereaved. Time and again one sees them facing up to all life's calls upon them with a marvellous spirit of self-restraint. God only knows how sad and sore their loss is. And upon what takes place when they enter into their chamber and shut the door and face their sorrow alone with God, it does not beseem us to intrude. Such sorrow is a sacred thing, but at least we know, and are glad to know, that God Himself is there as He is nowhere else. It is never wrong and never weak to let the tears come before Him. As a father understands, so does He know all about it. As a mother comforteth, so does the touch of His Hand quieten and console.

But what fills one with reverent admiration is that so many of those whose hearts we know have been so cruelly wounded have set up a new and noble precedent in the matter of courage and self-control. They are not shirking any of the duties of life. They are claiming no exemptions on the ground of their sorrow, and they excuse themselves from no duty merely because it would hurt. They wear their hurt gently like a flower in the breast. They carry their sorrow like a coronet. Out from their secret chambers they come, with washen face and brave lips to do their duty and refrain themselves. How beautiful it is! What a fine thing to see! The sorrowing mother of a noble young fellow I am proud to have known, said to a friend recently who was marvelling at her fortitude, "My boy was very brave and I must try to be brave, too, for his sake." Dear, gentle mother! One cannot speak worthily about a spirit so sweet and gracious as that. One can only bow the head and breathe the inward prayer, "God send thee peace, brave heart!" But, surely, to accept sorrow in that fashion is to entertain unawares an angel of God! The feeling which underlies this new etiquette of sorrow with the washen face is not very easily put into words. But it rests, I think, upon the dim sense that the death which ends those young lives on this noble field of battle is something different from the ordinary bleak fact of mortality. If death is ever glorious, it is when it comes to the soldier fighting for a pure and worthy cause. There is something more than sorrow, there is even a quiet and reverent pride in the remembrance that the beloved life was given as "a ransom for many." When one thinks what we are fighting for, one can hardly deny to the fallen the supreme honour of the words "for Christ's sake." And it is not death to fall so. Rather is it the finding of life larger and more glorious still. It is that that marks the war-mourners of to-day as a caste royal and apart. It is that that moves so many of them by an inward instinct to wear their sorrow royally. Hidden in the heart of their grief is a tender and wistful pride. Lowell has put this feeling into very fine words:

"I, with uncovered head,

Salute the sacred dead,
 Who went and who return not—
 Say not so.
 'Tis not the grapes of Canaan that repay,
 But the high faith that fails not by the way.
 Virtue treads paths that end not in the grave;
 No bar of endless night exiles the brave,
 And, to the saner mind,
 We rather seem the dead that stayed behind."

The other class who are teaching us a new and better way to bear burdens are the friends at home of those who are on active service. Men, with sons in the trenches, are going about our streets these days almost as if nothing were happening, making it a point of honour not to let the lurking fear in their hearts have any outward expression. Wives and mothers and sisters are filling their hands and their hearts full of duties, and putting such a brave face on life that you would never suspect they have a chamber that could tell a different tale. It is absolutely splendid. There is no other word for it. I walked a street-length with a young wife recently whose man has been ill and out of the fight for a while. She hoped that he might have been sent home, and who can blame her? but he has gone back to the trenches instead. And how bravely and quietly she spoke of it! Pride, a true and noble pride in her beloved soldier, a resolute endeavour to do her difficult bit as uncomplainingly and willingly as he—it seemed to me that I saw all that in her brave smile. And I said to myself, "Here is the cult of the washen face! And a noble cult too! Britain surely deserves to win when her women carry their crosses so!"

It is easy, of course, to read the thought in their minds. Our men, they say, are splendid, why should we be doleful and despondent? They have made a new virtue of cheerfulness; let us try to learn it too. They have offered everything in a cause which it is an honour to help in any degree; let us lay beside theirs the worthy sacrifice of the washen face and a brave restraint. Such, I imagine, is the unconscious kind of reasoning which results in the resolute and cheerful bearing you may see on all sides of you every day.

And wherever it is seen, it carries its blessing with it. Others with their own private burdens and anxieties are encouraged to hold on to that hope and cheerfulness which are just the homely side of our faith in God and in the righteousness of our cause.

The cult of the washen face is contagious. It spreads like a beneficent stain. And since it is entirely praiseworthy, we can but wish it to spread more and more. Those who come out from the chambers where they have kept company

with sorrow or anxiety, to face life and duty with shining face and mastered feelings, are not only proving their faith in the Divine Strength, they are making a precious contribution to the moral steadfastness of the nation.

"And he washed his face and went out and refrained himself." Good man!

PRAYER

We bless Thee, O God, for the assurance that Thine ear is ever open to our cry, that it is never wrong to take our sorrows and our cares to Thee. But help us also, endowed with Thy strength in our secret chambers, to bear our burdens bravely in the sight of men. For Thy Name's sake. Amen.

*"But few things are needful,
or one."* R. V. (margin).
(LUKE X. 42.)

VIII

THE REAL MARTHA

When Jesus said, upon one occasion, that He had not where to lay His head, He was speaking the bitter and literal truth. He had really no home of His own, but was everywhere a wanderer, dependent on others for shelter and food; and though the New Testament draws a veil over all the hardships which that entailed even in the hospitable East, imagination can picture something at least of what the homelessness of Jesus must have meant.

But He had close and warm friends who made it up to Him as far as friends could, and of these were the two sisters, Martha and Mary, who with their brother, Lazarus, had a house in Bethany. This place was His haven and shelter, for "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." The sisters were unlike in disposition. Mary, we can imagine, was dreamy, meditative, perhaps a little

delicate and fragile, and gifted with a quick and loving sympathy. Martha was robust, practical, energetic. Her way of showing the Master that she considered it an honour to have Him for a guest was to give Him the very best that her housewifely skill could suggest. No trouble was too much for her. And it is very possible that one of the charms which this home had for Jesus—one of the qualities which made it a real place of rest—was its well-ordered arrangements, the quiet, efficient, capable way in which things were done. And whose was the credit for that? Martha's.

What would that household have been like without Martha? And what would any home that is fortunate enough to have a Martha in it, be like without her? The truth is our debt to the Marthas is one which we have never fully acknowledged. You would imagine, hearing the way in which her name is sometimes used, that it has an apologetic character, as if the making of a home comfortable and homelike were a gift to be lightly esteemed in comparison, for example, with the ability to write verse! It is foolish to play Mary off against her sister in this way. Martha did what she could do best, and showed her love for Christ in that fashion, and you may be quite sure that He understood. Mary served Him in her way, by giving Him what He needed more at times than food—a heart to listen to His message, and a sympathy which made the telling of it meat and drink to Him. Each sister was the complement of the other.

But we wrong Martha, of course, in thinking of her as always in the kitchen. Certainly when there was a meal to be prepared you would find her there, and well that was for the household and the servants. But nobody is always eating or thinking about eating; and often of an evening, doubtless, when the labours of the day were over, Martha would join her sister at the feet of the Master whom she loved as much as Mary did.

The incident which has given rise to the popular misconception of Martha's character occurred during a visit which Jesus paid in the days before Lazarus fell sick. Something went wrong in Martha's department that day. Perhaps it was a mistake of a servant that irritated the usually self-controlled Martha, or maybe some oversight of her own. At anyrate, it set up a condition of worry which straightway began to add to itself, as its habit is, seven other devils. And as Martha went out and in the dining chamber getting things ready, the sight of Mary sitting there at the Master's feet doing nothing, struck her, perhaps for the first time, as rather out of place. Things began to go further wrong. Just when Martha wanted to do special honour to Jesus, the ordinarily smooth-running wheels of that home began to creak and grind. Each time she entered the room where Christ and Mary were, Martha's steps grew brisker and more emphatic; and then the last straw was laid on, and the outburst came! Martha asked Jesus if He really did not care that Mary was leaving her to do everything. Bid her come

and help me, she said.

Of course, Jesus knew that it was for His sake that Martha was giving herself all this trouble. He saw, as even we can see, that this kind-hearted, worried woman was speaking crossly, as the very best will do at times, because she was tired and a bit overdriven. And with a perfect and gentle chivalry and tact He made His reply. As the Authorised Version puts it, it jars on one, somehow. But King James' translators have misread their text. What Jesus said was: "Martha, Martha, you are unduly anxious and troubled. Only a few things are necessary, or even one. Mary has chosen a good part, and I cannot allow you to take it from her."

Martha, remember, was making a feast worthy of the Master, and Jesus, looking upon the various dishes being got ready, said, in effect, I do not really need so many as that. One would do quite well. And I must not let you think that Mary is doing nothing. She, too, is ministering to me by her sympathy and her willing ear, and you must not take away the good part she has chosen.

Jesus was not speaking about the personal salvation of either Mary or her sister. He was only dealing gently with a good and true friend of His who had not served Him as she had wished to do. When He spoke of what was needful, He meant needful for Himself, the Guest whom both the sisters were seeking to honour.

He made no comparison between Martha's service and Mary's. He did not say, as we have read it so often, that Mary had chosen the better part. He said, in her defence, that Mary's was also a good part. He is not blaming Martha, but only expostulating with her in the gentlest fashion, and defending Mary from the charge which Martha in her heat had made against her, the charge of being useless, and doing nothing to help to entertain the Master. Jesus said, She is helping to entertain Me in her own way, and, He added, it is a good way.

When Jesus having said that only a few things were necessary, dropped His voice, as we may imagine, and added "or indeed one," He may have meant more than He seemed to say. For there was one thing that was more than meat to our Lord, and that was to find a soul with heart and sympathy open to His message. And it may be that He felt, as He said the words, that Mary's ministry met a need of His deeper than that for which Martha was catering. At anyrate, the oldest and best versions of this Gospel give Christ's words as we have rendered them, and they stand here, not to be used as a peg on which to hang doctrines, but rather as a proof of the gentle courtesy of our Lord, of His insight into character and motive, and of His gracious recognition of the worth of any and every kind of service that has love at its heart.

Martha went back to her kitchen, and Mary remained where she was. Mary was not asked to go and help. Martha would have protested if she had come.

Martha was not called upon to go and sit beside Mary. Each continued the service for which she was best fitted. But each, I think, had learned something that day. And you and I must not leave this page of our New Testament till we have learned it too—that we serve best when we do gladly that for which we are best qualified; that it belongs to our Christian service to recognise in all loyalty that, though others find different ways of expressing it, theirs is a good part; and that we must never either belittle it or seek to take it from them.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, Who by many diverse ways dost bring us near to Thee, and in differing modes and stations dost appoint our service, help us gladly and gratefully to do the things we can do, neither envying those whose opportunities are greater, nor forbidding those who follow not us. For Thy Name's sake. Amen.

*"He giveth (to) His beloved
(in their) sleep."*

(PSALM cxxvii. 2.)

IX

OUR UNEARNED INCREMENT

"It is vain for you," says the writer of the 127th Psalm, "to rise early and sit up late and eat the bread of sorrow, for so He giveth to His beloved (in their) sleep." That is the true reading, and I want you to think about it. "God giveth to His beloved while they sleep." Over and above what you have yourself achieved, you GET something you have never worked for. And you get that, as it were, in your sleep. This is a beautiful thought, and there are three people to whom I want to offer it as God's comfort.

The first is the worried man. It is indeed directly against worry that this

psalmist sets forth his reminder. It is not that he minimises the need for hard work and watchful care. But he tells the man who is feverishly burning his candle at both ends, and consuming himself in a frenzy of tense anxiety, to leave something for God to do. It is as if he said, "Why so hot, little man, why so fiercely clutching all the ropes? Remember that God is working too as well as you, working in your interest and in love for you. When you have done your best therefore, go to your bed and sleep with a quiet mind, for God giveth to His beloved even so."

One can imagine how a word like that would relax the tension and lead some persuadable Hebrew who heard it to say, "Ah, well, I worry far too much. After all, I am not Providence. I am always getting a great many things I have not wrought for. I shall worry less about securing the good things I desire for me and mine, and trust more to God to give them as He sees fit." If all of us who needed this reminder just had the sense to come to the same conclusion!

I have seen a man compass his family with so many careful regulations and observances that the criticism of a candid friend seemed entirely just. "You would think," he said, "to see so-and-so shepherding his family, that there was no other providence than his own." You can't be with your best beloved all the while. And you ought to know that God too is watching even while you sleep.

If there be some plan on which you have set your heart, and you are over-anxious about it, quote this text to yourself. Do your best, of course, but, having done so, leave the outcome with God. About a great many of the things over which we worry ourselves needlessly, I believe God's word to us is:-Leave these things to Me. You can't work for them. And anxiety won't bring them. But you will get them, as you need them, just as if they came to you in your sleep.

Said one hermit to another in the Egyptian desert, as he looked at a flourishing olive tree near his cave, "How came that goodly tree there, brother? For I too planted an olive, and when I thought it wanted water, I asked God to give it rain and the rain came, and when I thought it wanted sun I asked God and the sun shone, and when I deemed it needed strengthening, I prayed and the frost came-God gave me all I demanded for my tree, as I saw fit, and yet it died." "And I, brother," replied the other hermit, "I left my tree in God's hands, for He knew what it wanted better than I, and behold what a goodly tree it has become."

The second man to whom I would offer the comfort of this word of God is the man who is disappointed. Things have gone wrong with him. The plan on which he spent so much of his time and energy has miscarried, and a very different result has emerged from what he counted on. His way, as he saw it, is blocked, and he has had to turn aside.

Now, there are not many things one can say usefully to a disappointed man. And it is cruel kindness to try to heal his hurt lightly. Nevertheless, to him also the psalmist's message applies, and what he needs to remember, that he may pick

up heart and go on again, is that God giveth to His beloved while they sleep.

We have all had disappointments, sore enough at the time, which after-experience proved to have been blessings in disguise. Many a man can point to a signal failure as the beginning of a true success or usefulness or happiness. We did not feel as if we were being enriched when our plan fell through, and we were bitter and rebellious enough at the time, it may be, but it is quite clear to us now that God was at that very time giving to us with both His hands.

No one, of course, can see that about any more than a few of his disappointments. It would be false to experience to speak as if we could. But what is manifestly true about one or two may conceivably hold with regard to them all, if we knew more, or could see better. And the Christian Gospel calls us to believe and trust that that is so. There is another Hand than ours shaping our life, a wiser Hand. Better things are being done for us than we can see in the meantime. And the man whose hopes and plans have turned out amiss, but whose trust is still in God, is invited by our psalmist to reason with himself thus:—"I am like a man asleep, and I do not rightly understand at present, but I will trust that it is not for nothing that misfortune has come, and when I wake I shall hope to see that God has been giving to me in love and mercy when I was not aware of it at all."

The third man whom this text will help and comfort is the worker, the man or woman who is trying to do something for Christ's sake. The Christian worker needs to be told that what he is trying to do is not nearly all that he is doing. What he is, is speaking as loudly as what he does or says. There is an aroma and fragrance about the life of the consecrated Christ-like man or woman which sweetens and sanctifies other lives beyond what he or she can ever know. Some of the best sermons in the world have been preached by people who least suspected what they were doing. The invalid in the home does not know how real religion becomes to all who watch her patience and unselfishness. And among the busy and vigorous we often catch hints and reflections, that they never suspect, of what Christ-likeness means. The man who has surrendered his life to God, indeed, is a channel of blessing to others beyond all he ever dreams of. He must not be disheartened when he realises how little he is doing, for the truth is he is doing far, far more than he knows. Wherefore, my brother, be of good cheer, and render your service to Christ with a quiet heart. Lay your course, and work your ship, and hoist your sail and trust. And the gifts of God will enrich you, and the winds of heaven will bring you on your way, even while you sleep.

PRAYER

We give Thee thanks, O God, for all Thy bounties, undeserved and unearned; for the increase Thou dost send us while the stars are shining; for Thy gracious

thirty-fold and sixty-fold beyond what we have sown. Every morning Thou leavest gifts upon our doorstep and dost depart unthanked. But this day we remember, and we bow our heads to render unto Thee our humble and our hearty thanks for all that Thou hast given us while we slept. Amen.

"The smoking flax he shall not quench."

(ISAIAH xlii. 3.)

X

SMOKING WICKS

We read the 42nd chapter of Isaiah now as if it were a part of the Christian Evangel. And that is right. For whoever the Servant may have been, of whom Isaiah was thinking, it is Christ and only Christ who completely fulfils this prophecy. This is a true description of His spirit and His method. "The dimly-burning wick he shall not quench."

The figure is easily understood. Here is a piece of flax floating in oil, and burning so faintly that it seems a mere charred end from which the smoke coils thinly upwards. Some one comes and snuffs it out, because it smells. That is the way of the world's reformers, as Isaiah saw it, and we can see it still. By and by they will trim the wick and light it with fire of their own, but first they will quench the spark. But there is One to come, said Isaiah, shooting his arrow of prophecy in the air, who will go otherwise about it. He will not despise the spark because it is so feeble. He will tend it and foster it, and make the evil-smelling bundle of flax into a clear, shining light. And the saying has found its mark in Jesus Christ.

When a woman that was a sinner made her way into the house where He sat at meat, and wept at His feet, He amazed all those present by the extraordinary gentleness of His dealing with her. He did not refer to the evil in her life. He did not, as other good men would have done, first cast her down, that He might

afterwards lift her up. He simply took the beautiful impulse after good which she brought Him out of a life besmirched and tawdry, held it in His hands—a mere spark of virtue—and breathing on it, blessed it, and behold it was a flame, burning up the evil in her life, a lamp lighting her path along a new and hopeful way. That was Christ. He does not, He will not quench the dimly-burning wick.

Now—and this is our point—if those who profess and call themselves Christians are to have the spirit in them that was also in Christ Jesus, must not this be their mark too? Does not this prescribe their attitude to life, that many-coloured, strangely-mixed compound of good and evil? Good in any form, however feeble, however mixed, as in this world it inevitably is, with what is evil, should find in those who call themselves by Christ's name, its truest supporters, sympathisers, friends.

To the eye and heart in sympathy with it, beauty often peeps out in strange places.

"The poem hangs on the berry bush,
When comes the poet's eye,
And the whole street is a masquerade
When Shakespeare passes by."

So the mark of the Christ-like heart is just that it discerns, and, discerning, loves the feeblest tokens of some inward grace that redeems a life from evil. Do not be afraid that by welcoming the scant good, you may be held to approve of the greater evil. That is a risk that God Himself rejoices to take. Did not Christ risk that, when He accepted that poor woman's worship? Did He not risk it when He held out His hands to a man like Zaccheus? Does He not risk it always when He declares, "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out?" And shall we refuse because the risk is too great?

Life presents us with many anomalies that refuse to square with our theories. You find men exhibiting qualities of character, which any Christian might be proud to emulate, outside of the Church altogether. And you cannot simply label these—"glittering vices," and pass on. God is not two but One, and goodness is His token wherever it be found. "The World," says John Owen, "cannot yet afford to do without the good acts even of its bad men." And the truth for us to learn is that the grace of God is not bound by our standards or limits. Make the circle as wide as you like, you will still discover fruits of the Spirit outside, where by all our canons they were never to be expected.

"And every virtue we possess,
And every victory won,

And every thought of holiness
Are His alone.”

It is for something more than tolerance I am pleading. For that may be a weak and a wrong thing, if it spring not from belief in the good. What our calling demands is something more, the rejoicing, hopeful recognition of the good deed or purpose anywhere, and the offer of a sympathy and a faith in which it can grow. That gift of yours may actually be the decisive factor in a life balancing perilously betwixt good and evil. Three times, the other evening, I tried to light my study fire, and each time it went out. The paper burned, but the sticks apparently would not light. At last in despair I flung in a burning match and went away—and when I returned I found a cheerful blaze: the brief glimmer of that last match had been the determining factor. You will smile perhaps at the illustration, but you will remember, all the better, that where the flax is even smouldering, there the angels are still fighting for a soul. And you will, maybe, remember also that even your warm sympathy may turn the scale, and fan the flicker to a flame.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray that the mind that was in Him may more and more be found in us. Help us to offer to what is good anywhere a sympathy in which it may grow and increase. Grant us a helpful faith in the struggling good in every man, even as Thou, our Father, dost call us sons while as yet we are but prodigals, afar off. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

*“Let not then your good be
evil spoken of.”*

(ROMANS xiv. 16.)

XI

CULPABLE GOODNESS

In his letter to the Christians at Rome, the Apostle Paul counsels them not to let their "good be evil spoken of." And at first we ask ourselves if this is a possible thing. Can you have good that is evil spoken of? Since this is a matter that ought to concern us all, I want to suggest one or two ways in which this very result may be brought about, that those of us who are trying to follow an ideal of goodness may be on our guard.

First, we can very readily have what is good in us evil spoken of because of our CENSORIOUSNESS. When men come upon some fruit that grows upon a goodly-looking tree, or one at least that has a trustworthy label attached to it, and find it sour or bitter to the taste, they are apt to be particularly resentful. And it is with precisely such indignation that they observe men and women who profess themselves followers of Christ exhibiting a censorious and critical spirit. Where ought you to find the broadest charity, the kindest judgment, the most Christ-like forbearance and restraint? Among Christians, of course. And yet—alas! alas!

Just keep your ears open with this end in view for a week, and you will be surprised at the appallingly hard judgments that come tripping daintily from the lips of some of those you know best. And if that line of investigation be not very handy, just watch yourself for the same time, and you will learn what a rare thing Christian charity is.

We talk a lot about it, but in real life we "forbid" men very readily "because they follow not us," we belittle things which we do not understand, we speak rashly about people whom we do not know, and we are ready, without the least consideration, with our label for the movement or the man, who happens to be brought to our notice.

Ah, if we could only see how far astray we often are, what a libel our label is, and how unChrist-like many of our speeches appear! We don't know enough of the inner life of any man to entitle us to pass judgment upon him. A critical spirit never commends its possessor to the affection or the good-will of men. Besides, it blinds him to much that is really beautiful, and cuts him off from many sources of happiness. You will see evil in almost anything if you look for it, but that is not a gift that makes either for helpfulness or popular esteem. "I do not call that by the name of religion," says Robert Louis Stevenson, "which fills a man with bile," and, on the whole, the ordinary man is of the same mind with him.

"Judge not; the workings of his brain
 And of his heart thou canst not see.
 What looks, to thy dim eyes, a stain,
 In God's pure light may only be
 A scar brought from some well-won field,

Where thou wouldst only faint and yield.”

Sometimes one must, in the interests of true religion, pass judgment, but these times are not so frequent as we suppose. And if there are occasions more than others when the disciple needs an overflowing measure of Christ’s spirit, it is when it is his clear duty to diagnose, disapprove, and condemn.

Secondly, we may have our good evil spoken of by our EXTREMENESS. I should be very chary of saying that there is such a thing as being righteous overmuch, but for two reasons. The first is that there is an injunction in Scripture against it. And the second is that I have met people, of whom, in all charity, it was true! The modern name for being righteous overmuch is being a ”crank.” Now, nobody loves a crank. The extremist always does his own cause harm. Carefulness about one’s food is a good thing, but to take an analytical chemist’s outfit to table with us is simply to ask for the contempt of all sensible people.

Paul’s advice to the Philippians was, ”Let your moderation be known to all men.” And Paul was himself a splendid example of the true moderation as distinguished from that which is merely indolent and uninterested. Earnest, enthusiastic, loyal, there was yet about him a big and healthy sanity, a sweet reasonableness, and—what the extremist always lacks—an engaging tact. In other words, Paul was a Christian gentleman, and if you want to know what that means, read his letter to Philemon about Onesimus the runaway slave. There are blunt words with which a man can be felled as effectually as with the ”grievous crab-tree cudgel” of which Bunyan speaks. Paul did not consider it any special virtue to employ such words. His Christian zeal did not lead him to make a statement in a way that would irritate and rasp a man’s soul. There is a certain extreme candour affected by some Christian people, who pride themselves on always calling a spade a spade. But if it hurts my friend to hear me say ”spade” I know of no law of God that compels me to name the implement at all!

And then, lastly, we can have our goodness ”evil spoken of” because it is so COLD. It sometimes seems as if, in our day, warmth of manner had gone out of fashion. Ian Maclaren once said of our generation that it will ”smile feebly when wished a happy New Year as if apologising for a lapse into barbarism.” But I don’t think any sensible person, not blinded by an absurd convention, cares for that type of rarified demeanour. No one likes to get a hand to shake which feels like a dead fish!

In one of his books, Dr Dale of Birmingham criticised that line in Keble’s hymn which speaks about the trivial round and the common task giving us ”room to deny ourselves.” ”No doubt,” he says, ”but I should be very sorry for the people I live with to discharge their home duties in the spirit of martyrs. God preserve

us all from wives, husbands, children, brothers, and sisters who go about the house with an air of celestial resignation." Ah, no, that's not the goodness, either at home or on the street, which wins men. It is not beautiful because it is too cold. The religion of Jesus is something much more than duty-doing. Thou shalt love the Lord thy GOD WITH ALL THY HEART. Whosoever compels thee to go a mile, GO WITH HIM TWAIN. Whatsoever ye do, do it HEARTILY AS UNTO THE LORD.

PRAYER

From all unkind thoughts and uncharitable judgments; from all intemperate speech and behaviour; from coldness of heart and a frigid service, Good Lord, deliver us. For Thy Name's sake. Amen.

"God loveth a cheerful giver."

(2 CORINTHIANS ix. 7.)

XII

A KHAKI VIRTUE

We are proud to believe that, in the article of courage, our men are second to none in the world. They have glorious traditions to live up to, and they are adding to these pages—nay, a whole volume, as splendid as any in our annals. Yet it is not of our soldiers' courage I wish to speak.

For we are told on all hands that there is another quality shining brighter still these days in the trenches in France and Belgium, in ambulance waggons and field hospitals, and in the camps at home, namely, cheerfulness. Again and again the same tale is repeated from one quarter or another—"our men are simply wonderful," "they treat discomfort as a joke." They label the very instruments that deal death among them with names that raise a smile. Nurses, doctors, and

correspondents tell us that the light-hearted way in which our soldiers face pain and suffering and force twisted lips to smile has created a new record for the British Army. When the story of this war is written, and the world gets a nearer glimpse into those awful trenches, I venture to prophesy that the quality in our countrymen which will most capture the imagination and fill us with the greatest pride will be the gay, undaunted cheerfulness with which they faced it all.

Surely we who stay at home may learn something of that virtue too. For it is worth learning. Ordinary people who only know what they like, without knowing why they like it, have a very warm side towards the person who, when things are grey and gloomy, can keep cheerful. They would much rather see him come in on a dull day than a wiser man whose wisdom was a burden to him, or even than a pious person whose piety ran to solemnity and gloom. It is high time, indeed, that the tradition was broken for good and all which associates moral excellence with a funereal heaviness of manner and denies the favour of the Lord to one who, as Goldsmith has it, "carols as he goes."

For the blessing of God is written visibly upon the results of cheerfulness wherever you find it. God rewards the gallant souls who keep their colours flying through every battle, even though they have to nail them up over a sorely damaged ship. If you want a proof that the hopeful and cheery way of facing the rebuffs of life and tholing its aches and disappointments is more in the line of what God expects from His children than the doleful whining temper, you have it shown unmistakably in the fact that the gallant unconquerable soul solves problems, overcomes difficulties, endures pains, and wins successes where the solemn and easily depressed would simply have given in and lain down. You can safely prophesy that the man whom you hear singing as he goes through the valley, like the pilgrim that Bunyan's Christian heard, is going to get out of it safely and honourably in the end. The Lord Himself will deliver him, as He delights to deliver all those who face life smiling and unafraid, and meet His Fatherly discipline with a stout heart.

Cheerfulness, in other words, pays for oneself. But it is also a great blessing to others. One very safe and sure way to help our fellows up their hills is to breast our own as bravely and gaily as we can. And the cheerfulness which heals and blesses like the breath of morning is that which shows up against a background of cloud and trouble. Let us all in this year of war and clean courage, register a vow that we shall take a leaf out of our soldiers' book, and think less about our own troubles, teach our lips to smile when things are wrong, and keep our eyes wider open for trouble's danger signals among our friends. It's a simple way of doing good, but a very effective one. For cheerfulness, like mercy, is twice blessed. It blesseth him that has, and him that sees!

”It was only a glad Good Morning
 As she passed along the way,
 But it spread the morning’s glory
 Over the livelong day.”

But cheerfulness needs its explanation. It implies something. A man is not cheerful without some underlying philosophy of life to sustain him, some pillar of faith or hope at his back. When a man faces life dauntless and smiling, he does so because some inward and, it may even be, unconscious faith or hope thus finds its expression. What that faith is, different men will describe in different ways.

But however much the descriptions vary, it all comes back to this in the end, that the man who is living bravely and cheerfully is expressing by his conduct at any rate his faith in the Fatherhood and good Providence of God. He knows that ”God’s in His Heaven”; at any rate he believes so. He believes that things do not just fall out by chance, but that a Father Hand controls all, and a Father Heart cares even for the sparrow’s unheeded fall. The God who rules all makes no mistakes.

And is not that a cardinal part of the faith which Jesus brings near to all who are learning of Him? There are various adjectives used to qualify the title Christian. One hears, for example, of ”earnest Christians,” and earnestness is a very necessary quality, even though one does occasionally happen upon ”earnest Christians” who are rather unlovable and irritating people. But there’s another adjective, not nearly so common—and yet it denotes a quality just as essential in those who have taken Christ’s gospel of God’s Love and Fatherhood to their hearts—namely, cheerful. A ”cheerful Christian.” Let us all try to be that kind of Christian at least.

PRAYER

”The day returns and brings us the petty round of irritating concerns and duties. Help us to play the man, help us to perform them with laughter and kind faces, let cheerfulness abound with industry. Give us to go blithely on our business all this day, bring us to our resting beds weary and content and undishonoured, and grant us in the end the gift of sleep. Amen.”

R. L. STEVENSON.

"(Jeremiah dwelt among the people that were left in the land."

(JEREMIAH xl. 6.)

XIII

THE OVERCOMING OF PANIC

Once upon a time Jeremiah the prophet had asked for only one thing, that he might get away from that strange cityful of perverse men to whom it was his hard lot to be the mouthpiece of a God they were forgetting. He was tired of them. "O that I had in the wilderness a lodging place of wayfaring men that I might leave my people and go from them."

Well, time passed on. The people got no wiser, and Jeremiah's burden certainly got no lighter. But the very chance he prayed for came. He had a clear and honourable opportunity to go to the lodge in the wilderness, or anywhere else he liked, away from the men who had disowned his teaching. His work was done apparently, and he had failed. Yet with the door standing invitingly open, see what Jeremiah did! He "went and dwelt among the people that were left in the land." He had his chance and he did not take it!

We all know something of this desire to get rid of a present hard duty, or a difficult environment, or a perplexing problem. And yet I wonder, if the way were similarly opened up for us, how many would seize the opportunity? I believe that the feature of such a situation would just be the large number of us who, when it came to the pinch, would choose as Jeremiah did, to remain where we are! Something would hold us back.

Yet the desire itself is natural enough, and a man need neither be a coward nor a weakling who confesses to it. The hours when the daily round seems altogether flat and unprofitable, and when one would gladly change places with almost anybody, are real hours in life, and it is no shame to have known them. But between that knowledge and the actual escape, the actual fleeing from one's post, there is a great gulf fixed that, for very many with any high ideal of duty, is impassable. For, though a man has known the state of mind that looks for some

back door out of a depressing situation, he has had the other experience also, the joy of self-mastery, the keen sense of pleasure that comes to him when he discovers that his surroundings do not count for so much as he himself does. That experience, though it be only in memory, will stand between a man and retreat. He has conquered before, and the thrill of victory over material discouragements may be his again. And so, though the way of escape be open, he will choose to remain and fight it out.

Sometimes the mere weight of his responsibility may tempt a man to wish that he might escape. There is a fairly well-known symptom of nervous disease whose name signifies the fear of being shut in, when the patient dreads the experience of being in any closed place. Sometimes a moral panic of that kind comes to a man when he realises that he is shut in with some duty which must be gone through with. With something of the instinct of the trapped animal he may look round for a way of escape.

Yet does that mean that he would take the chance deliberately, with eyes full open to the consequences, if it were offered? I think not.

You can apply the test to yourself. Have you ever accepted some responsibility, and then, when the occasion came nearer, backed out of it for no other reason than that you were afraid? If you have, you will perhaps remember whether you felt proud of yourself, whether, beneath the undoubted relief, there was not a good deal of quiet shame and self-scorn. If the same thing were to happen again, you might feel the impulse to desert, but if you remembered your former experience, you would hardly yield to it, I imagine.

The plain truth is that no proper man really likes a soft job. "In the long run," says J. A. Symonds, "we really love the sternest things in life best." And he speaks truth. There is a certain exhilaration in the endurance of hardness. Responsibility braces most men like a shock of cold water. What is arduous calls them as with a trumpet. And in the general sense of quiet contempt for the person who in a panic flings up his responsibility, we may recognise one of God's elementary checks upon cowardice.

There are those who are reading these words who are enduring hardness and making sacrifices from which they might easily escape. They do at times desire relief. But the point is that they don't take it, when it is possible. And I say there must be some reason for this. What is it that holds men back from the easy way when it stands open before them?

For one thing, I think, the sense of the place that hardness and effort and endurance play in every true life. For centuries men have climbed up to strength of character, if at all, by ways uniformly arduous and steep; and distrust of the primrose path, however alluring, has passed as an instinct into our blood. In the small unheroic affairs of life we have learned that a difficulty faced and overcome,

or a duty doggedly fulfilled, add a precious something to experience that there is no other way of securing. The schoolboy on a hot summer day may look up from his task, away out wistfully to the cool shade of the trees across the playground, and wish that he were there, rather than where he is. Yet even he knows, what we all come to learn, that that is not the road to anything in life worth the gaining.

Another deterring impulse is the sense of a divine vocation. Our calling and circumstances are ordained for us by God, and we must not quit the field till the day is done. It is He who has chosen our lot in life and summoned us to the sphere we fill.

We may succeed or fail as seems to Him best. Sometimes he places men, for reasons of His own, in corners where success, as commonly measured, is not possible. But one thing—success or failure—we must not do. We must not shirk. We must not run away. God means us to stand fast and do our best. For failure even, if it be honourable, He may have His good word at the last. But to the man who has shirked life's hard duties, not even God can say, "Well done!"

PRAYER

Lord of our life, and God of our salvation, make us strong to endure hardness as good soldiers of Jesus Christ. Thou sendest no man a warfare upon his own charges. In dependence on Thy help, grant us grace to do each duty, as the hour and Thy will may bring it. And, with Thy fear in our hearts, grant us deliverance from all other fears whatever. For Thy Name's sake. Amen.

*"Whatsoever ye do, do all
to the glory of God."*

(1 CORINTHIANS x. 31.)

XIV

THE DAY'S DARG

It is never hard to connect the presence of our Lord and Master Jesus Christ with our Sabbaths and our hours of worship. If ever Christ comes near us in spirit at all, we say, it is when in the quiet of the sanctuary we reach out hands of prayer and desire to Him. The link between our worship and our Lord is strong and obvious. But, when the din of business shuts out all else, when the hard, toilsome duty of the ordinary day is to be done, when we are at work amid surroundings that have no suggestion of sacredness or of God about them—what of the link with Christ then? It is much harder then, is it not? to imagine any thinkable and workable connection that our Lord has with that sphere of life, broad and extensive as it is. There are many indeed who forget that there is any, and live as if there were none. And yet the solemn truth is that if that link is not strong and real, we don't know what religion means. We have hardly the right to call ourselves Christian men and women unless we can relate our week-day labours to the fact of Christ.

So let us try to strengthen that link. Let us look at our daily work in the light of religion.

First, let me remind you that our work is by divine commandment. It is not something that God allows us to do when we are not worshipping. It is His ordinance that we should all work at something. The business of life is labour of some sort. I do not know if we all realise how the Fourth Commandment begins—"Six days shalt thou labour and do all thy work." And the man who is inexcusably idle, or who belittles his work, even in the interest, as he thinks, of religion, is breaking this commandment as truly as he who neglects the other half of it and dishonours the Sabbath day.

No one will accuse the Apostle Paul of any indifference or lukewarmness where true religion was concerned. Yet it was this Apostle who ordered the Thessalonians to go on with their daily occupations even though they believed, as so many did at that time, that the Return of the Lord to earth was just at hand. By our daily work we serve the Lord as truly as when we gather to His worship. Let us get out of our heads, then, the false and foolish idea that all the working part of our week is the part at which God looks askance. Man's chief end is to glorify God, and one of the ways of doing that is by being loyal to the duties of each hour whatever they may be.

Secondly, I would ask you to think of those quiet, unrecorded years of our Lord's life on earth before His public ministry. The Gospels give no details, but the fact is perfectly certain that up till His thirtieth year Jesus of Nazareth worked at His trade as a carpenter. If only we would let that fact soak into us, it would alter our whole idea of the relation of our daily work to religion. Jesus worked Himself.

And we have, as has been pointed out, interesting indirect proof as to what manner of life He lived on those workaday levels that we all know so much about.

For, to this Carpenter of Nazareth there came a day when, in Nazareth itself, He stood forth as representative of a morality and religion higher than ever was proclaimed before. He spoke to men about the true way to live like one having authority. And there were many who so resented what they deemed His presumption that anything that reflected on His claims or belittled His authority would gladly have been seized upon and made the most of. Had there been in Nazareth a bit of botched work of His doing, "a door of unseasoned wood or a badly made chest," don't you think it would have been produced to discredit His mission? If any one could have been found with whom the Carpenter had not dealt honourably and justly, if, as He walked the streets of His native town and lived His humble daily life in the sight of all men, there had been anything that weakened His claim to guide and teach His brethren, don't you think they would have found it out and taxed Him with it?

There was nothing of that. Jesus faced His fellows with His daily duty behind Him, and it reinforced every word He said. His message to men was backed up by His daily life. He spoke of religion as no other son of man ever did, but He lived it long before He ever opened His mouth. He brought religion down to the workshop and the street, and showed men what it meant there. And unless He had done that, it is difficult to conceive that His public ministry of itself would have satisfied men that He was indeed One sent from God.

Do you see, then, from this point of view, what a great and vital part of religion our day's work is, and the way we do it, our life at home, our ordinary contact with our fellow-men? It is that that gives weight to any profession we may make. If in our daily life we are not exhibiting our religion, nothing that we can profess or say on Sunday will make up for that defect. It is what we are on Monday and Tuesday that underlines and emphasises the claims we make at church on the Sunday. Behind all our prayer and profession lies the everyday life.

Third, our daily work is sanctified by the fact that our Lord and Master is with us, to help and strengthen us there, as truly as when we pray. Jesus Christ is not far away, as we so pitifully misconceive it, amid the dust of business, when we must keep our temper and follow conscience along the hard way and deal honourably with all men. He is near us there also, ready and willing to help us to be true to God and man on that road which once He trod Himself.

There is a famous unwritten saying of Christ which puts memorably what the Gospels likewise testify. "Raise the stone and thou shalt find Me. Cleave the wood and there am I." Christ is as near us in our daily work as that! When Peter and his friends went a-fishing, you remember, with heavy hearts because the Master had gone away from them, He met them by the lake as they plied their ordinary calling. So does He wait, my brother, to meet you and me wherever the

duty of the hour may take us. For our working life is not outside of His interest nor out with His care and guidance. With reverent imagination Van Dyke has seemed to hear the Christ speak thus—and the words may perhaps further weld the link for some of us between our everyday duty and the Christ whom we worship and seek to serve:

”They who tread the path of labour follow where My feet have trod;
 They who work without complaining do the holy will of God.
 Where the many toil together, there am I among my own;
 Where the tired workman sleepeth, there am I with Him alone.
 I, the peace that passeth knowledge, dwell amid the daily strife,
 I, the bread of heaven, am broken in the sacrament of life.
 Every task, however simple, sets the soul that does it free,
 Every deed of love and mercy done to man is done to Me.
 Nevermore thou needest seek Me; I am with thee everywhere—
 Raise the stone and thou shalt find Me, cleave the wood and I am
 there.”

PRAYER

Our Lord and Master, whose command it is that we do with our whole heart whatsoever our hand findeth to do, grant that we may so yield and surrender ourselves, body, mind and spirit, unto Thee, that even in the common business of each ordinary day we may serve Thee and glorify Thy great Name. Amen.

”*Gashmu saith it.*”

(NEHEMIAH vi. 6.)

GASHMU THE GOSSIP

Gashmu is a mere name in Scripture. He is mentioned only three times—twice as acting with Sanballat against Nehemiah, and once as the authority for a false piece of news. It is reported, wrote Sanballat in a cruel letter to Nehemiah, that you are plotting against the king, and "Gashmu saith it." That is what Gashmu stands for in Scripture, a tale-bearer, a slanderer, a gossip. What an unenviable immortality to be remembered only as the pedlar of a tale he knew to be untrue!

As long as we live together in society, there will be a kind of gossip that is inevitable, the kindly or merely casual relation of small and insignificant matters of fact, as that the painters are in next door, or that Mrs So-and-So has got a new bonnet. It is not of that I want to speak.

For there is another sort as deadly as the plague, and in civilised countries the cruellest and most devilish instrument that one man or woman can use against another. And that is the inventing of an untrue report about a man's doings or character, or the unthinking repetition of the same. That is the pestilence that walketh in darkness; that is the destruction that wasteth at noonday. And I wish I had the pen to write of it as it deserves.

It is very, very common. We are all too ready to repeat what we have heard, with a "Gashmu saith it," as if that certified the tale correct. And the harm done is simply incalculable. If my house is burned or I lose my money, I can still get along by the kindness of my friends for a little, till I find my feet again. But whoever by some lying story takes away my character, deals me a blow from which there is no recovering, which my loyalest friends can do nothing to avert. I have no redress, no compensation, and no help. Any one may be a victim, and you and I, by thoughtlessly passing on the deadly thing, may all unconsciously be driving another nail into a man's coffin.

Did you ever lie awake at night and think that even now the cancer may have begun on YOUR good name, that whispers may be going about among your friends concerning you? Those who know you will hear it, and will say, It's a lie! But that won't stop it. And you will never know till some day you waken up and find that your reputation is in danger. And not one word or vestige of truth may be in it. It may be a lie pure and simple, or a colourable counterfeit of some quite innocent truth. That won't make any difference. It is enough merely to start it, and, like a stone thrown down an Alpine slope, it gathers others in its train, till an avalanche swoops down on some unsuspecting head.

When King Arthur enrolled his Knights of the Round Table, he made them take the oath to "speak no slander." And there is a knightly chivalry of speech which ought to be the mark of all those who have promised fealty to Jesus Christ. Our discipleship of Jesus demands of us the high endeavour to love our neighbour

as ourselves, and that presupposes, as one of its consequences, that we guard his name against false witness as carefully as we protect our own. If we hear a good story about some one, a report that is to his credit and honour, let us blazon that abroad. We are all far too slow at that, and somehow the tale that is a little damaging has a far easier and more rapid circulation. Might we not make more of our brother's successes? Might we not oftener repeat about him what he is too modest ever to say about himself? It were a true and kindly Christian act. But never, as we call ourselves servants of Christ, never do our brother such a grievous irreparable wrong as to start about him a tale which may not be true. God can and will forgive you your sins of speech. But even He cannot make clean the character which a foolish word has sullied.

King Arthur went further, however, than demanding that his knights should speak no slander. Their vow included the words, "no, nor listen to it." And that is a high and difficult course to keep. It is not easy, when you are being told of something that is striking or sensational of a merely gossipy character, to stop the conversation and lead it into other channels. It requires great courage and as great tact. But how many of us ever try it?

If, however, the refusal to listen be regarded as a counsel of perfection, there remains yet the further injunction—never REPEAT the gossip you have heard. That at least is homely and possible.

We used to read in our book of Fables of the lamb that noticed this significant thing about the track that led to the lion's den—that all the footprints pointed inwards, but there were none returning. "Vestigia nulla retrorsum." No footprints backwards. It would be a good motto for us all. Let the stories, the ill-humoured, unkind, uncharitable sayings that float and wander about everywhere, let them come to us as they will, but let the traces end there. Be such a person that men may trace a story from its source down the chain TO you, but never PAST you.

We can do that much at least for our friends. All about us is the constant, unquiet drift of gossip and distorted half-truth, as restless as the sand in the desert, dancing and whirling with every puff of wind. We can do something to arrest that drift. We can be for our friends in some measure what Isaiah said that God's Servant, when He came, should be, the shadow of a great Rock in a weary land, stopping the drift of the sand, and sheltering our friends by our loyalty and our silence.

Don't even repeat the gossip that comes to you, not only for the strong reason already given, but also for this little one, that you won't likely repeat it correctly. With all the will in the world, it is one of the hardest things to retail a story just exactly as you heard it. Sir Walter Scott, speaking about anecdotes that he had heard, said he always liked to cock up their bonnets a bit and put a staff in their hands that they might walk on a little brisker and sprightlier than

when they came to him! But we all do that, without meaning to do it at all. We add a little bit. We exaggerate just the tiniest fraction, and our hearer when he repeats the story does the same, and so the matter grows till it is big enough to do much mischief.

”A Whisper broke the air,
 A soft light tone and low,
 Yet barbed with shame and woe.
 Now, might it only perish there,
 Nor further go!

Ah me! A quick and eager ear
 Caught up the little meaning sound;
 Another voice has breathed it clear,
 And so it wandered round,
 From ear to lip, from lip to ear,
 Until it reached a gentle heart,
 And that—it broke.”

There is a legend that once a king avoided death in a poisoned cup that had been handed to him by making over it the sign of the Cross—when it broke in pieces at his feet. Let us, when we are tempted to retail the vivid, poisonous piece of scandal, stop and invoke the Spirit of Christ. Is this that I am going to say about my brother the kind of thing I should say if Christ were standing by? Am I justified in turning over that bit of gossip which may be true, but which ought not to be true? Our duty, who profess and call ourselves Christians, is clear. We are to speak no slander no, nor listen to it. We are to retail evil about no man. We are to love one another.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, whose command it is that we love our neighbour as ourselves, help us to cherish and protect his good name as carefully as we guard our own. Make us more willing to repeat the good about him, but slower to retail or exaggerate the evil. Grant us all a deeper sense of the deadly wrong a foolish tongue can work, and keep Thou the door of our lips. For Thy Name’s sake. Amen.

*"Thou preventest him with
the blessings of goodness."*

(PSALM xxi. 3.)

XVI

GOD IN FRONT

You know how, in a happy home, the near approach of a birthday is signalised, how parcels are mysteriously smuggled in and hidden in secret places, and, though everything seems to be going on as usual, yet the plans are being laid in train that will surprise and delight the fortunate owner of the birthday when the festal day dawns. That is our feeble, human way of trying to surprise one another with the blessings of goodness. That is how we "prevent" our beloved with tokens of our remembrance. So, says the Psalmist, does God deal with us. Not only have we—what we so much need—His forgiveness of our past, and His help and presence for the day which now is; He is working for us in the future too, sowing the days to come with blessings for us to pick up when the passage of time brings us to the places where He has hidden them.

The idea that God has been beforehand in our history, getting ready, as it were, for our coming, though not a very usual one, is very helpful, and it finds abundant illustration and proof in all directions. When a child arrives on this earth, he enters into the enjoyment of bounties and blessings prepared, not merely weeks, but literally ages before his coming. Warmth he needs, and aeons ago the coal beds were formed in the bowels of the earth. Food he needs, and God "laboured for ages," as Sir Oliver Lodge puts it, to bring corn into existence. For corn needs soil, and, to make that, the Creator had to set the glaciers grinding over the granite, and to loosen the forces of rain and frost and running water over great stretches of time.

Every child born into the world becomes the heir of all the ages past. What blessings have been prepared for most of us, in advance, in the homes into which we were born, and the gracious influences under which we have grown up! "I have to thank the gods," says Marcus Aurelius the pagan Emperor, "that my grandfathers, parents, sisters, preceptors, relations, friends and domestics were

almost all of them persons of probity." "I have to thank the gods." Who else is there to thank but God who prevents us in this way with the blessings of goodness? God is working beforehand in our interest in all these things. So, when we awaken to a sense of Him, there is His Church, established of old, awaiting to take us by the hand and help us on our way. When we learn our need of a Saviour, behold Christ stands at the door and knocks. When, in penitence of heart, we ask God's mercy, we learn that, long since, it was laid up in store for us. Before we thought of loving God, He first loved us, and gave Himself for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Is it not gloriously true all the way along that God has been beforehand with His goodness?

And that, of course, is the explanation of all the glad surprises of life. The Lord has prepared them for us beforehand. He has sown the future with good things and watched our surprise as we picked them up. When Mary Mardon and her father, in Mark Rutherford's "Autobiography," went to the seaside to look for lodgings they saw a dismal row of very plain-looking houses. Mary objected instinctively to the dull street, but her father said he could not afford to pay for a sea view, so they went in to inquire. To their delight they found that what they thought were the fronts of the houses were really the backs, for the real fronts faced the bay, had pretty gardens before the doors, and a glorious sunny prospect over the ocean. Isn't that what we often find to be the case? Our most treasured friends are not always those whom we fall in love with at first sight. The thing we greatly fear dissolves like mist. An envied, but despaired-of, blessing is flung into our lap. A door of splendid hope opens in a dead wall. Life is full of the unexpected as if wonder were one of the things God wanted very much to keep alive in us. When, as you think, everything has been exhausted, God surprises you with a fresh gladness. And, aback of all, there is the unending surprise of God's patience with us, and of that daily mercy of His, which we so ill requite, and so often forget.

Of course, no one dreams of suggesting that all our surprises are of a happy sort. It is not so. But the point is that if it is God who has hidden the blessings for us to come upon, it is He also who has hidden the other things. God's hand does not slip so that we get the wrong parcel by accident. He prevents us also with the blessings that we do not call by that name at all. In his Lay Sermons, Huxley, describing the tadpole in its slimy cradle, says: "After watching the process hour after hour, one is almost possessed by the notion that some more subtle aid to vision than an achromatic object-glass would show the hidden artist with his plan before him, striving with skilful manipulation to perfect his work." If, in that wonderful fashion, God is working beforehand according to a plan of His own, in the life of a tadpole, is it not much more likely that He is so working in your life and mine, not in its joys only, but also in its dark hours and its sorrows?

That, indeed, is the very message and comfort of the Lord Jesus Christ, that not even a sparrow falleth to the ground—calamity indeed for the sparrow—without our Father.

If it be true that God our Father is working in advance of us all the time, then surely it is wrong to speak of the monotony of life? For we are on a road which God Himself has sown with surprises for us, and the hour of our deadliest weariness may be the immediate precursor of our richest and most joyous find. Who could have supposed, at the end of the eighteenth century, when poetry in England seemed dead, that a great galaxy of stars—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats—was on the very eve of rising? The unexpected can always happen. You may come upon another of God's hidden blessings to-morrow. Let us not talk of monotony, therefore, in an age which has seen so many wonderful things happen. Rather let us hold to the faith that all the while God is going before us with the blessings of goodness.

This faith puts another complexion on all our fears and forebodings. Before we live it, the web of our life passes through God's hands. And the shaded parts, as well as the bright parts, are in His wise and loving design. Nobody can promise us freedom from sorrow, but the Bible promises that God is beforehand to make the sorrow bearable. He has adjusted our temptations to our strength, and never a one has He hidden, where we come upon it, that it is impossible for us by His help to withstand. Before the mother puts her little child into his hot bath at night, she tests the water first with her fingers. And the Psalmist means us to believe that life comes to us from God, who has measured and adapted it for us, beforehand, in a like fashion.

Viewed in the light of this faith, Death itself takes on a different aspect. Oliver Wendell Holmes has suggested that the story of this life and the next can be fully written in two strokes of the pen, an interrogation-point, and, above it, a mark of exclamation—fear and question here below, and, above, adoration, wonder, surprise. "I go to prepare a place for you," said Christ to His disciples. If the preparation for us here is so wonderful, is it likely to fail yonder? If Love made ready for us here, shall it not be beforehand there too? Yea, verily. Our experience of how God prevents us here with His loving kindness ought to strengthen in us all the "faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the saint's trust in every age, that when we pass hence it will be to meet the grandest, the most blessed, and the most surprising provision of all."

PRAYER

Our Father in Heaven, we shall not be afraid of what life may hold for us when we have learned that our little web has first passed through Thy merciful and

loving hands. We have often prayed that Thou wouldest go with us; but Thou hast answered us beyond our asking, for Thou goest before us all. In the faith of that leading, make us to journey bravely and to sleep secure. Amen.

"Fight the good fight of faith."

(1 TIMOTHY vi. 12.)

XVII

"UNBELIEF KEPT QUIET"

We are often told that this is not an age of faith, that the day of the beautiful, old, simple acquiescence is past, whether it ever comes again or not. Some one has wittily suggested that the coat of arms of the present age is "an interrogation-point rampant, above three bishops dormant, and the motto 'Query.'" But, like a great many more witty things, that saying leaves one questioning whether, after all, it be really true. I venture, for my part, to assert that a great many more people are really interested in this matter of faith than most of us imagine. There is something that haunts men as with a sense of hidden treasure about this wonderful thing in life called Faith, that always seems to be going to disappear, and yet somehow does not. With a strange, wistful persistence men linger about this pool, though there are many to tell them that the "desired angel bathes no more."

I wish to speak a word of encouragement to-day to all who are finding faith hard. "Fight the good fight of faith," says Paul to his young friend, Timothy. Fight. I want to remind you that faith often implies effort, that there is nothing in the idea of faith which is incompatible with struggle, that the very form of Paul's advice implies an antagonism.

It is true that many think of the "faith of the saints" as a quiet, contented habit of gentle acquiescence, a sweet and beautiful state of mind very far removed from the restless, questioning, analytic temper of the man of to-day. Now, I do

not say that faith is never seen now in that placid form, but I do say that that was not the type Paul had in mind when he wrote Timothy, it is not the figure which best described his own faith, and it is certainly not the aspect he would require to deal with, were he writing to the men of to-day.

For they are only too conscious of much inward suspense of judgment and uncertainty concerning many things in Heaven and earth. And that inward conflict seems to many of them a sign that faith is waning, if not dead. They have forgotten that it is that very sense of inward conflict which proves that faith is not dead. Dead things do not offer any resistance. We ought by this time to have learned that a thing "may be for us an intellectual puzzle, and yet a sheer spiritual necessity," and that the Christian faith is, for every soul who has once caught it. There are a great many earnest and honest men to whom it is the best of news that Christian faith is not incompatible with very grave perplexities. The real opposite of faith is not doubt, as so many suppose, but deliberate and satisfied denial. Faith can live in the same life along with very many doubts—as a matter of fact, in the case of not a few of the most Christ-like men of our time, it is living beside them constantly. Paul assures us that outside of him he found fightings and within him he found fears. Yet he kept the faith for all that. They start up on all sides, these spectres of the mind and reason, and they ask questions which a man cannot answer. Yet Faith may be dwelling in his life in very deed and truth, because faith is something more than the sum of all his beliefs. It is the whole conscious and deliberate set and desire of his being.

It is a well-known fact that a man may be truly courageous, acting, speaking, thinking bravely at the very moment when panic fears are gripping his heart. I like that fine old story of the soldier advancing into the fire zone with steady step, and taunted by a comrade for his pale face. "You're afraid," said the other. "I know I am afraid," said he, "and if you felt half as much afraid as I do, you would turn and flee." It is the very finest courage that dominates and controls a sensitive organisation, and holds the shrinking other-half to its purpose with firm grip. Just so is it with faith. A man keeps his course, lifts up his eyes to the hills, lives for God and His Christ, prays on, struggles on, and hopes for the home beyond the edge of life, while often enough his mind is full of questioning and the puzzle of God's deep mysteries. For faith is not what the intellect says merely. It is what the whole man is struggling and trying to say.

"With me, faith means perpetual unbelief
Kept quiet, like the snake 'neath Michael's foot,
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe."

Don't do yourself the wrong of thinking that faith has vanished because the

snake is felt to be writhing. "Perpetual unbelief kept quiet." Yes, but what keeps the clamouring doubts and fears under foot? Just yourself, just your highest self, the bit of you made for God, and unable to do without Him! Faith is the vote of the whole man, of the best of the man, in the face of a protesting minority. In other words, fight is a splendid word to use in speaking about faith.

Let a man ask himself—Does he really wish that the best he has dreamed or heard about God and His love for men, His passion to deliver them from evil, and His pity and nearness to us all in Jesus Christ His Son—does he wish all that to be true? No man is without faith who does wish that, and is living in the direction of his desire. In that man's life who, despite all the clamour and philosophy of Babylon, is keeping his window open towards where he believes Jerusalem to be, there is that vital element of faith that is linking his life to God even now, and will bring him where he would be at last.

I do not think that the prodigal was at all sure of the welcome that awaited him. Probably his mind, as he limped along in his rags, was full of misgivings and fears. But the father hailed him as his son whenever he saw afar off that the lad's face was set for home. I do not imagine our Father will concern Himself very much about the gaps in our creed if only our faces are turned homewards and towards Him. Let the man I have tried to speak to be of good courage, and fight on with a stout heart. Faith is not sight. It may not even be assurance, may be only hope and longing, and a reaching towards the Highest. But I firmly believe that no man, even though he may fall on the way home, and before he knows of his welcome, I believe that no man shall be cast out at the last, whose arms, as he fell, were outstretched in desire to God.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, Author and Finisher of our faith, help us with all our strength to fight the good fight. When our defence is being broken, do Thou garrison our souls, O God, that we may be able to stand in the evil day, and, having done all, to stand. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

"The joy of the Lord is your strength."

(NEHEMIAH viii. 10.)

XVIII

THE EQUIPMENT OF JOY

Let us talk about joy, and especially that kind of it of which Nehemiah was thinking when he said, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." It is strange that while practically everybody would agree as to the wholesomeness and the duty of joy in the ordinary sense of the term, to add the words "of the Lord" to it, seems, to some, completely to alter its character and in fact to spoil it, to turn it into an unreal sort of joy which is not true joy at all.

I wish emphatically to protest against such a conception of religious joy as an injustice to the Father Love of God. The joy of the Lord, as I understand it, is not different in quality from wholesome human gladness, it is, in fact, just that gladness deepened and sanctified by the sense of God, and the knowledge of Him brought to us by Jesus Christ our Lord. There is not a single innocent and pure source of gladness open to men and women on this earth but is made to taste sweeter when they have opened their hearts to the love of God. It is the very crown of happy living that is reached when a man can say, "My Lord and my God." Once I have dared to accept the wonderful truth that even for me the Eternal Father has His place and His plan and His care, every simplest happiness, every common joy of living, every delight in the beauty of the world and the pleasures of home and work and friendship—every one of these takes on a keener edge. It is a pestilent heresy to declare that a Christian ought to walk through life like a man with a hidden sickness. On the contrary, there is no one who has a better right to be joyous and happy-hearted. Do you think it is for nothing that the "joy of our salvation" is a Bible phrase? And shall we believe that that salvation is ours and not be mighty glad about it all the time? What is the good of translating "Gospel" as "good news" and at the same time living as if religion were a bondage and a burden grievous to be borne? Of all the strange twists of human convention, it is surely the strangest to allow ordinary human joy to be happy and cheerful, and to insist that those whose joy is in the Lord should pull a long face, and forswear laughter, and crawl along dolefully as if to the sound of some dirge! The "morning face and the morning heart" belong of right to the truly religious, and no one ought to be gladder, come what may, than the man who has made the highest and best disposal of his little life that any one can make, namely, surrendered it in faith and obedience to his Lord.

A gloomy, ponderous, stiff religion which looks askance at innocent mer-

riment and is afraid to pull a long breath of enjoyment has the mark of "damaged goods" on it somehow, and no one will take it off your hands. It is not catching, and certainly your children will never catch it. It is said to be a good test of a religion that it can be preached at a street corner. But I know a better test than that. Preach it to a child. Set him in the midst of those who profess it. If their religion frightens him, freezes the smiles on his lips, and destroys his happiness, depend upon it, whatever sort of religion it be, it lacks the essential winsomeness of the religion of Jesus Christ.

I need not say, of course, that I am not pleading for a more hilarious religious life. And, equally of course, empty frivolity, and the cult of the continual grin are insufferable things to endure either in the name of religion or anything else. Not by a single word would I lessen the condemnation which such aberrations deserve. But I do say, and with all my heart I believe that a deep, abiding well-spring of happiness—which our author calls the "joy of the Lord"—is of the very essence of true religion, and is indeed, what he asserts it, actually our strength. Actually our strength. Let us be quite clear about that.

The man in whose heart there dwells this best of all joys is a strength to other people. We don't need any one to prove that to us, I imagine. We have all been helped and revived many a time merely by contact with some hearty cheerful soul. Who, for example, that had his choice, would elect for his family physician a man with a doleful air? Have we not all found that a doctor's cheery manner was as potent a medicine as any drug that he called by a Latin name? Ay, and even when we are in trouble, and our hearts are sad and sore, I think we would all rather see the friend whose faith in God showed in a brave and buoyant outlook than one whose religion was of the dowie and despondent sort.

I have heard it said of an employee who had the gift of the joyous heart that the twinkle of his eyes was worth £100 a year to his firm. I could easily believe it, though the money value might well have been set at any figure, seeing that the thing itself is really priceless. Did not the most famous modern apostle of the duty of happiness—himself a signal proof that joy is something more than the mere easy overflow of health and animal spirits—did not Stevenson declare that "by being happy we sow anonymous benefits," and that "the entrance of such a person into a room is as if another candle had been lighted?" I take it the proof is ample that a joyous heart is a strength to others.

But more, it is a strength to oneself. That may not be so obvious, and yet the result here is even more certain. Ordinary experience tells us that joy is good for us, that depression and gloom work us bodily harm. But from one province of scientific study especially there has come a wonderful array of evidence that makes it as certain as any fact can be that the happy states of mind do literally add to our strength in quite measurable directions. There is, in strict fact, no

tonic in all the world like gladness.

That being so, joy, and especially the best kind of it of which Nehemiah speaks, is not a luxury, not a condition you may legitimately cherish if you are fortunate enough to possess it. It is a sheer necessity. You can't do without it. Even to meet your sorrows, even to gird you for service, even to run your race without fainting, you need the joy of the Lord, which is strength. And since the Father has stored up such an abundant supply of it in this world of His, since it is knocking at our doors every day, and only our distrust and suspicion keep it outside, we know what to do to secure this good gift of God. We have only to open our doors to let it in, and give it room.

"So take Joy home
 And make a place in thy great heart for her,
 And give her time to grow, and cherish her,
 Then will she come and oft will sing to thee
 When thou art working in the furrows-ay,
 Or weeding in the sacred hour of dawn.
 It is a comely fashion to be glad-
 Joy is the grace we say to God."

PRAYER

Help us, O God, beyond our poor and forgetful thanksgiving, to show forth the praise of Thy loving kindness by our joy and gladness. For Thy great grace and mercy toward us, and for all the gifts of Thy sleepless Providence, we offer Thee the joy of our hearts. Accept our offering, we beseech Thee; forgive its scant measure, and teach us to be glad in Thee. For Thy Name's sake. Amen.

"The God of Jacob is our refuge."
 (PSALM xlvi. 11.)

XIX

THE GOD OF THE UNLOVABLE MAN

There is a phrase which echoes through the Old Testament like the refrain of some solemn music—the "God of Jacob." "The God of Jacob," says the 46th Psalmist, "is our refuge." Yet when you think of it, it is a strange title. The "God of Abraham" you can understand, for Abraham was a great and faithful soul. And the "God of Isaac," also, for Isaac was a saint. But the "God of Jacob" is a combination of ideas of a very different sort. For though, by God's grace, Jacob became a saint in the end, it took much discipline and trouble to mould him into a true godliness. And, for the greater part of his life, and many of his appearances on the stage of Scripture, his actions and ideals are not such as to make us admire him very passionately. We like Esau for all his faults, but we do not like Jacob for all his virtues. There is something cold and calculating about Jacob that repels affection. For all his religion, the Jacob of the earlier chapters is a mean soul, successful but unscrupulous, pious but not straight, spiritually-minded but not lovable. And yet the Almighty condescends to be known as the God of Jacob, and the Bible loves that name for God!

What does that say to you? To me it says this—and I think we all need to learn it—that God is the God even of unlovable people! That even unlovable people have a God! That the Lord is very gracious to sinners, we all rejoice to believe, for that is the Evangel of Jesus, and He Himself was found practising it even among the waifs and outcasts of society. But that unlovable people have a God, too, is actually harder for us to realise, for the plain fact is that unlovable, disagreeable people irritate and annoy us more even than the sinners. If you question that, just analyse your attitude to the Prodigal in our Lord's wonderful story, compared with that toward his respectable, cold-hearted and priggish elder brother. The brother irritates us. We call him, with some heat, as Henry Drummond did, a baby, and we want to shake him. But we never want to shake the prodigal.

Now, we all have, on our list of acquaintances, people whom we have labelled disagreeable, who continually rub us the wrong way, as we put it. There is the man who is always talking about himself, and is filled with conceit like a bladder with air. "There is the man," says Hazlitt in one of his Essays, "who asks you fifty questions as to the commonest things you advance, and, you would sooner pardon a fellow who held a pistol at your breast and demanded your money." There is the ill-tempered, sulky person, and the grumbling, whining, dolorous soul never without an ache or a grievance. So we can all draw up our own pri-

vate "Index Expurgatorius" of the people we bar or dislike. We say these people are unlovable.

And, since the corruption of the best is the worst, we are agreed that the most unlovable of all types is the religious undesirable, the smug, unctuous, oily person, for example, whose sincerity is continually in question, the narrow, intolerant, little soul who cannot see any sort of truth or righteousness except his own, or the prim and pious man who is cocksure of his interest in the life to come, but is not straight in the affairs of the life which now is. There are others, but enumeration is not a very profitable or a pleasant task. Take them all together, gather them in a crowd in your memory, and then set yourself this exercise for your sanctification and growth in grace. Realise that the Lord your God is the God also of these unlovable people. Get that idea thoroughly into your heart, and say it to yourself, if need be, many times a day. These people look up to Him in worship just as you do. They have their sacred hours in His presence just as you have. There is nothing you look for to God, that they do not seek, too, from Him. They are not of a different order from you, but the same order. And though you do not love them, God does. Though they are outside of your circle, they are not outside of His. The God of Jacob is their God. And therein lies for them, as it did for Jacob, the hope and promise of better things to come.

If we remembered that, should we not be more patient and forbearing with them than we are, keener to look for the best in them, and to make the best of them than we are? Just to think of what is meant by the "God of Jacob" is to set our sharp and bitter judgments of others over against the infinitely tender compassion and patience and longsuffering of God. All the wonder of the divine grace is hidden in the phrase. And this is the wonder—that God never grows tired even of disagreeable people. He does not give up caring even for the unlovable. But oh! what poor sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty *we* are, with our quick, rash final judgments and our hard, unbrotherly hearts!

Did you ever ask yourself what some of these unlovable people are doing, the while you and I are telling each other how impossible and unlovable they are? George Eliot suggests it somewhere thus:—"While we are coldly discussing a man's career, sneering at his mistakes, and labelling his opinions 'Evangelical and narrow' or 'Latitudinarian and pantheistic,' or 'Anglican and supercilious,' that man in his solitude is perhaps shedding hot tears because his sacrifice is a hard one, because strength and patience are failing him to speak the difficult word and do the difficult deed." Ah, yes, it's a mercy that there is a God even for unlovable people!

But there is a question that has been waiting all this time, and we must ask it before we close. *What about ourselves, you and me?* Are we such lovable people that we can afford to judge others? Do we never rub our friends the wrong way,

and, without meaning it, annoy and disappoint and repel them? Are *our* religious profession and our daily practice so very much in keeping that we may talk about prigs and self-righteous people as if they belonged to an entirely different world? May I speak for you all and say humbly "No"? No, God knows they are not! The fact is that if we know ourselves at all well, we must be aware that we have it in us to be quite as disagreeable and selfish and self-righteous as anybody. It is only our best beloved who do not get tired of us, and sometimes even they must be hard put to it.

But there is a blessed Gospel for those who have made that discovery about themselves. There is a God of Jacob. Abraham is too high for us, and Isaac is too saintly, but Jacob, faulty, disappointing, unlovable, yet by God's grace redeemed and perfected at last, Jacob is the man for us! The hope and comfort of all who have learned what they really are is that "the God of Jacob is our refuge."

PRAYER

Bring us, we pray Thee, O God, into a truer knowledge of ourselves. Make us to learn how frail we are, how poor and blind and naked; to the end we may regard with due charity the shortcomings of others, and may worthily praise Thy great Mercy, who yet hast not turned away Thy face from us. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

*"Elijah went a day's journey
into the wilderness, and came
and sat under a juniper tree, and
requested for himself that he
might die."*

(1 KINGS xix. 4.)

XX

UNDER THE JUNIPER TREE

A well-known writer relates that, when passing through Edinburgh once, he saw a procession of Friendly Societies, and observed on one of the banners the name emblazoned, The Order of the Juniper Tree. His comment is:—"Many of us belong to that order." So we do. And, because of that, we can diagnose Elijah's trouble quite accurately. He is suffering, as we have all suffered at some time or other, from the pains and penalties of reaction. Just because he had climbed to a height almost superhuman, the reaction when it came was very black and terrible. The Bible is too wise and too true to human nature to conceal the fact that for his hour of splendid daring, Elijah had his price to pay.

It's a commonplace, of course, but just one of those commonplaces which in the bulk spell wisdom, that there was a physical reason for this condition. To put it plainly, Elijah was tired out. He had been using up his physical and nervous energy at such a ruinous rate during the past few hours, that he had overdrawn his account. It strikes one as a very significant fact that when God's angel took the prophet in hand, the first thing he did was to provide him with a meal. Elijah was actually on his way back to his normal condition when he had had something to eat.

That is not a mere incident in the story. It is exceedingly important, because, sometimes the religious depression with which we are acquainted arises in a similar way. It is a very useful fact to remember that a man's whole religious outlook is coloured by the condition of his health. We may be slow to admit such a low and material cause for effects so apparently spiritual. But it is a fact all the same. And it is only wise to recognise it.

But Elijah's reaction was not entirely or even mainly physical in its origin. He had been in a very exalted spiritual condition during the contest on Carmel. Think what the man had done! He had stood alone in the path of a whole nation rioting down to idolatry and shamelessness, and with voice and presence and fire from Heaven had stopped and turned them, driven the huddled, frightened sheep back again to the ways and the worship of God. Was it to be wondered at that his very soul within him was faint under the strain?

Though the vision and the privileges of the hill-top are what the best men covet most, it is but little of it at a time that any one can stand. Do you remember that Jesus would not let Peter and James and John remain long on the Mount of the Transfiguration, even though they wanted to build tabernacles and dwell there? There have been few greater spiritual experts than John Bunyan, and when he has described how his pilgrim fared in the Palace Beautiful, how he slept in a chamber called Peace, how he saw afar off the Delectable Land, whither he was journeying, where does he take him next? Straight down into the Valley of Humiliation, where he has to fight for his life against the darts of the Evil One flying as thick as hail!

There is no cure for reaction, of course, but there are one or two rules which experience has proved to be helpful.

For example, it is never a wise thing, when you are depressed, to attempt to form any judgment about yourself, your service, or your standing in the sight of God. By some Satanic impulse, that is the very time, of course, when you will be tempted to do it. It may appear a very wholesome spiritual exercise when you have gone a day's journey into the wilderness and are faint, to reckon up what manner of man and disciple of Christ you are. But don't do it then. Nobody sees truly either himself or God, under a juniper tree.

And then, if possible, do not speak about your despondency. Don't express your mood outwardly at all, if you can help it. Bottle it up if you can, and you will starve it all the sooner. His biographer relates of the late Ian Maclaren that, like many people who have Celtic blood in their veins, he was subject to curious fits of depression and gloom which did not seem to be in any way connected with bodily health. "But," he goes on to say, "he never inflicted his melancholy moods on his family, was only very quiet and absorbed, and kept more closely to his study. In a day or two he would emerge again, like a man coming out into the sunshine."

And lastly. Once a man has sworn himself a disciple and soldier of Jesus Christ, neither doubt nor depression, neither darkness nor reaction absolves him from the obligation to follow and to serve when he is called. It must be confessed that it is an undue sense of the importance of our own feelings that makes the juniper-tree-mood the peril and hindrance that it is. We need to remember that the call of Christ overrides personal feelings. In His army too, there is discipline to be thought of, and "it is not soldierly to skulk." When the bugle calls to action, nobody but a coward would make the fact that he is not feeling quite up to the mark, an excuse for sitting still. Reaction is a natural thing, but cowardice is always shameful.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, we bless Thee for the comfort of Thy perfect knowledge of us. We are glad to think that Thou knowest our frame and rememberest that we are dust. Make us more wise to bring the burden of our moods of darkness and reaction to the footstool of Thy perfect understanding; but save us, we beseech Thee, from all yielding in the long fight against them. Seeing that Thy grace is sufficient for us and Thy strength made perfect in our weakness, grant us a godly

fear of all unmanly surrender. For Thy Name's sake. Amen.

*"If any man will do his will
he shall know of the doctrine."*

(JOHN vii. 17.)

XXI

INSTRUCTING THE CABIN BOY

When John Wesley was on his way home from Georgia, he wrote this record of the voyage in his Journal:—"Being sorrowful and very heavy (though I could give no particular reason for it) and utterly unwilling to speak close to any of my little flock (about twenty persons), I was in doubt whether my own neglect of them was not one cause of my heaviness. In the evening, therefore, I began instructing the cabin boy, after which I was much easier."

This is a significant passage for various reasons. For one thing, it lets us see that even a spiritual genius like Wesley sometimes fell into the mood of doubt. And, for another, it shows how, almost by accident, as it seems, he found a cure for his trouble. It is plain that religion just then had lost its savour for the great evangelist. The joy had gone out of his service and the power from his prayers, and he was not sure of anything at all. This is practical doubt, the only serious kind there is. "Being sorrowful and very heavy and very unwilling."

There are not a few men and women whose trouble this is. They are in straits to know what is really God's truth. They greatly desire to lay hold of it surely for themselves. The tremendous earnestness of those who have found the old dogmas unsatisfying, and are adrift again in a twentieth century search for God, is one of the most significant features of the situation. Can a man really come in touch with God? they ask. Is there a living Christ whose presence redeems men from evil and can lift them up to what they long to be? Is there a life with God which even Death cannot end? And those who are in such deep earnest

to know God vitally for themselves, are sorrowful and heavy indeed to find that all their thinking and reading and inquiry do so little for them. They pray for light, and examine all the evidence with a wistful eagerness, but the clouds still lie around them, and they are still wandering, now in this direction, now in that, like men lost in a mist.

Is there no way out of this tangle? Yes, there is. To all who are sorrowful and heavy because they know so little they can call their own about God and spiritual living, I want to say, There is a way forward, a safe, sure way. It is the way that Wesley stumbled upon. "I began instructing the cabin boy." That is the way for you and me to a fuller experience of God.

That is the simple solution which so many thousands of us have overlooked, and it was the discovery of Jesus Christ. When asked how He knew about God, He answered that it was because He was doing God's will, and He added, If any man, no matter who, no matter what his doubts be, if any man be willing to do God's will, where, and as, it is clear to him, he too shall know. God will not leave him in ignorance of what is really essential.

Nowhere, except in the Bible, do you find such a method of learning recommended. From nobody but Christ could such a precept come, for it is clean contrary to all that we know about learning in other spheres. Study and you will know, think, investigate, ask questions—that, we can understand. That is how knowledge comes to us in the realms with which we are acquainted. But when men asked Christ how they could learn God's truth for themselves, He said, First of all you must obey it. Do, and you will know.

You remember the lepers whom Christ touched, of whom it is written that "as they went, they were healed?" That is how the only sort of doubt that really matters is healed. As you go, not as you sit still and puzzle, but as you shoulder the nearest duty and obey what light and knowledge you have.

"I don't know," Wesley would say to himself, "whether I am in my right place here or not, whether I am really Christ's servant or not. I am in the dark, and don't seem to be sure of anything. But there is that cabin boy. I can at least do him some good. That is right anyhow, whatever be uncertain." "After which," he says, "I was much easier." It is marvellous to read, but it is a law as certain and safe as gravitation. Do God's will as you know it, and you will get more light. "Doubt of any sort," said Thomas Carlyle, "cannot be removed except by action."

It is hardly necessary to say, of course, that the knowledge which Christ promises to those who will obey God's will is not of dogma in its restricted theological sense. It was life Christ talked about, it was life He was concerned with, and, for Him, life meant not head-knowledge, but heart-experience and heart-hold of God. It is that He promises in His great saying. So do not make the mistake of thinking that when you seek to do the Will of God, all your mental

difficulties, about miracles or inspiration or what not else, will come to an end. These are problems, not of life, but of mind, and you have them because God has given you a mind, and you will probably have them as long as your mind is growing. What Christ does promise is of vastly more importance, namely, the light of God's truth in your heart, the assurance of God in your inmost soul, that you shall know for yourself that God is, and that He is near to you, and that your true life is in Him; and when a man has got that length, there are many doctrinal and other mental puzzles for the solution of which he is content to wait with an easy trust and patience.

I like that saying of Viscount Kenmure's, away back in the sixteenth century, "I will lie at Christ's door like a beggar, and, if I may not knock, I will scrape." I like it, for this reason, that I am quite sure there is no essential door of God in earth or heaven which is shut against the man who casts himself so utterly on Him as that. And I take Kenmure's word to illustrate what Jesus meant by If any man will do God's will. It is when a man says, I cannot see, I do not know, my mind is filled with spectres and doubts and questions, but, so help me God, I will do the thing that is right for me, I will walk by what little light I have—it is then, it is to that man that there come infallibly the knowledge which no criticism can shake, and the peace which the world can neither give nor take away.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, we thank Thee for this one straight road out of our doubts, and the difficulties we so often make for ourselves. We bless Thee for the stedfast certainty that no man, who will rise and follow what light he has, shall finally be left in darkness. By doing shall we come to know. As we go upon our clear duty, other truths become more clear. It is our Lord's own doctrine, and in His Name we pray that Thou would'st help us to learn it. Amen.

"The valley of Achor for a door of hope."

(HOSEA xxv. 15.)

XXII

GOD'S DOOR OF HOPE

The world has a scheme of redemption of its own, and men can themselves do something for the brother who has fallen. But the plan involves, invariably, a change of surroundings. Worldly wisdom says, of the youth who is making a mess of his life, "Ship him off to the colonies, try him with a new start on another soil." But the grace of God promises a far more wonderful salvation. It makes possible a new start on the very spot of the old failure. It leads a man back to the scene of his old disloyalty, and promises him a new memory that shall blot out and redeem the old. God does not take the depressed and discouraged out of their surroundings. He adds an inward something that enables them to conquer where they stand. It is not some new untried sphere that God gilds with promise. It is the old place where one has already failed and fallen. It is the valley of Achor, the scene of Israel's defeat, and Achan's shame and sin, that God gives to His people as a door of hope.

In Italian history, during the Middle Ages, the republics of Pisa and Genoa were often at war, and at one time the Genoese were badly beaten in a sea-fight near the little island of Meloria. Some years after, a Genoese admiral took his fleet to that same spot and said, "Here is the rock which a Genoese defeat has made famous. A victory would make it immortal." And sure enough, the fight that followed ended in a great victory for Genoa. It is that sort of hope that God holds out to all defeated souls who put their trust in Him. He points us back to our valley of Achor, the place with a memory we do not like to think of, and He says, There is your door of Hope, Go back and try again. And those who go back in His strength are enabled to write a new memory upon the old shame.

Our Lord and Master is very gracious to forgive us when we come to Him in penitence to tell Him of the position we have lost by our faithlessness or our cowardice, but He does not consent to the ultimate defeat of the very feeblest of His soldiers. "Go back and try again," is His order. There are many, as Dr Matheson says, who offer us a golden to-morrow, but it is only Christ who enables us to retrieve our yesterday. For His grace is more than forgiveness. It is the promise to reverse the memory of Achor, to turn defeat into victory even yet.

Achor, further, literally means Trouble, and it is a great thing for us when we have learned that even there God has for us a door of hope.

The valley of Trouble is perhaps the last place in the world where the un instructed would look for any fruit of harvest, and yet again and again men have brought the fairest flowers of character and holiness out of it. How many a de-

vout and useful servant of Christ owes the beginning of his allegiance to a serious illness, to some crippling disappointment, to an overwhelming sorrow? In all humility there are many who can say, It is good for me that I have been afflicted, and there are many, many more about whom their friends often quote that text.

"I walked a mile with Pleasure;
She chattered all the way,
But left me none the wiser
For all she had to say.

"I walked a mile with Sorrow,
And ne'er a word said she,
But oh, the things I learned from her,
When Sorrow walked with me!"

There is a door of Hope even in the valley of Trouble, and those who tread it in God's company shall not fail to find it.

There is one other class who need to know that even in Achor there is a door of hope, the depressed and discouraged. Phillips Brooks once declared, "I came near doing a dreadful thing the other day. I was in East Boston and I suddenly felt as if I must get away from everything for a while. I went to the Cunard dock and asked if the steamer had sailed. She had been gone about an hour. I believe if she had still been there, I should have absconded." I wonder if there is any one who has not known that feeling? When duty is dull, and circumstances discouraging, when we seem to be merely ploughing the sands, "Oh," we say, "for the wings of a dove!" Comfort and happiness and salvation seem to lie solely in escape. And it may be that they do. But more often the trouble is in ourselves, and would travel with us to the new post.

If there be any depressed or discouraged reading these lines, I should like to remind them of God's promise to give the valley of Achor—that is the depressing scene of your labours, my brother—for a door of hope. You are looking for your hope somewhere else, anywhere else provided it be out of your present rut and drudgery. In reality your door of hope lies in the rut, in the valley itself. It is not escape you need. It is just a braver faith that God is in your valley with you, and that He needs you there.

Take a firmer grip of that, and go back to where you serve, and you will find, please God, that even in your valley He has opened for you a door of Hope and Gladness.

May all those who are living and working these days in the valley of Achor find in it somewhere God's Door of Hope.

PRAYER

Grant us, O God, the faith that in Thy strength we can yet succeed even in the place where we have failed. Teach us that it is Thy whisper we hear, when we have fallen into Despond, bidding us rise and try again. And grant us the courage to be sure, since Thou hast a tryst to meet and help us there, that even our Achor shall open to us its door of hope. Amen.

*"There be many servants
now-a-days that break away
every man from his master."*

(1 SAMUEL xxv. 10.)

XXIII

NOW-A-DAYS

Nabal, says the Bible, was a churl. When David sent his men to request some provender, in return for services rendered, this ill-mannered sheep-farmer broke out, "Who is David? There be many servants now-a-days that break away every man from his master." It was a singularly rude and ungracious reply, all things considered. But it is not about Nabal's truculence I wish to speak. I want you to think about that phrase he used, and the tone in which it was said. "Now-a-days." The implication, of course, is that servants did not break away from their masters in *his* young days. Things were different in the times *he* could remember.

You will recognise this peculiar intonation of "Now-a-days" as something fairly familiar. You hear it yet, quite often. Now-a-days the Church has lost caste. Now-a-days the Bible is a neglected book. Now-a-days faith is on the wane, and most people don't believe anything at all. There are many such sentences, beginning with the word Now-a-days and sounding like a chant on a minor key.

This pessimistic philosophy is difficult to fight, for it is unsubstantial, and

dissolves like mist whenever you come to close quarters. But there are three queries I have noted in my Bible opposite that "Now-a-days" of Nabal.

And the first is—What about the man himself? Judge his philosophy by his actions. Nabal apparently believed that servants were getting entirely out of hand, and he speaks as if he remembered something very different in his own early days. Very good. What was he doing to maintain the old standards? Nothing, less than nothing. His personal manners and behaviour were such that servants would be very ready to break away on that farm, I should think. Now, what business has Nabal to go whining, in general terms, mark you, about servants now-a-days, when he behaves like a boor to his own? For any declension which he may see about him, he is himself largely responsible.

I think that it is a perfectly fair line of argument, and it disposes of quite a number of pious "inexactitudes." When I hear a man talking about the lost influence of the Church now-a-days, I am always tempted to inquire what his own relation to it is, whether he is loyally supporting it and working in its interests, for experience has taught me that a very great deal of exaltation of the Church's past records, at the expense of its position to-day, comes from men who are themselves doing absolutely nothing to help it on its way. There are exceptions, of course, but, as a rule, it is not the active workers in any worthy cause who are lamenting its failure. The men who think the country is going to the dogs are themselves to be found, for the most part, lolling in the clubs. It is not the pledged and active member of Christ's kingdom who thinks it is disappearing from the earth. And to those who are fond of the Now-a-days type of complaint, I would suggest the inquiry—What about yourself? Are you helping to keep up the old standards as you say you remember them? Or is your influence also tending to set this ball of the earth rolling in the very direction you deplore, namely, down the hill?

The second query on Nabal's "Now-a-days" is—Can his memory be relied upon? It is an instinct with us all to idealise the past, and gild it in memory with all sorts of romance. We quietly drop all the shadows from the picture as time goes on. Were ever summer days since so long and fine and sunny as they were when we were boys? Never! We are all agreed about that. Yet when we were boys, men who were then grey were using exactly the same words about summer days years before! We are all apt to praise the past just because it is the past, and because it has a way of turning rosy as it recedes. The wise man recognises that, and allows for it. The foolish man begins many sentences with "Now-a-days," and ends with a shake of the head and a sigh.

But there is something that does not forget nor gild the past with false romance, and that is history. Turn back its pages a hundred years or more; read such a book as H. G. Graham's "Social Life in Scotland in the Eighteenth Cen-

ture”; and you will soon discover what a fine word Now-a-days really is.

As far as humanity and civilisation, brotherly charity, and true religion are concerned, the man who in pessimistic mood contrasts now-a-days with the good old times a hundred years ago, simply does not know what he is talking about. Changes there have been, many and radical, but change is not necessarily a sign either of declension or decay.

I can partly understand a man without faith in God giving his vote for a general falling off in human progress, but I cannot understand a man who believes in God, and in the presence in the world of a living spirit of Christ, being a pessimist. No one affirms, of course, that we are progressing everywhere, and all the time. Set-backs here and there, there are in human history just as in a successful campaign. But that, on the whole, the world grows better, the Kingdom comes, and earth draws nearer to Heaven, seems to me to be simply a corollary from the fact that God reigns, and has blessed us with knowledge of Himself.

I grant you that the war is a disappointing revelation of how far mankind still has to travel. But, as far as we are concerned, I am not disposed to counsel undue humiliation and self-condemnation on account of it. A people that for the sake of unseen eternal realities like honour and righteousness will make the sacrifices which we are making, can hardly be said to be degenerating, especially when we remember some of the causes for which we have drawn the sword in years and generations gone by. But even though the clock of progress be set back awhile—and that does not seem so likely now as when the war began—it is simply not possible that, in this world of God’s, evil should ultimately vanquish good, that the Spirit of Christ should finally be crushed by the forces that oppose it. That can never be. As soon might the germs of disease which the sun destroys turn round upon it and quench its blessed light.

The third query opposite Nabal’s ”Now-a-days” is—Does he truly discern the present time? Does he know ”now-a-days” even as well as he knows the past? As a matter of fact, David was not just a servant who had broken away from his master, and if Nabal had only lived a little longer he would have seen how completely he had misread the signs of the times.

That is worth remembering when you are tempted to say, Now-a-days things are out of joint. Maybe you don’t clearly see these very days you are disparaging. When Jesus preached in Nazareth, the village where He had been brought up, the people said, Is not this the Carpenter? and in their anger at His presumption, as they thought it, they wanted to make away with Him. If they had only known!

It is not enough to recognise that we cannot see the future. We cannot even see the present. Think what it would be like if we could see the great men, the prophets, poets, reformers, leaders, who are at this present moment in our

nurseries and schools, or if we were able to recognise in the—at present—small shoot of a cause, the great tree into which in God's providence it is destined to grow!

Now-a-days; now-a-days! What a delusion it is for anybody to think he knows "now-a-days" well enough to call it names! It is not with observation that the Kingdom comes. God rings no bell when He has a new and gracious purpose afoot in the world. And the thing for you and me to do is to rest confidently in the faith that, in His own good way and time, God is redeeming the world to Himself, and to do all that we can to help Him, and to make our little corner of it a brighter and a better place. But do not let us imagine that we can see all that is going on about us. There is far, far more of God and of goodness in the world than we suspect. The woods and hedges look very bleak and bare to-day.[1] It is a dead and barren aspect that Nature wears now-a-days. Yet *even now* the sap is mounting quickly in every living stem, and Spring is getting ready while we sleep.

[1] Written in February.

So, let us have the courage to believe—so is it with every worthy cause of God and man.

PRAYER

Almighty God, Ruler and Disposer of all events, we would remember that this world of ours is, first of all, Thine. We believe that, though Thy Kingdom comes not with observation yet it does come more and more. We believe that, with Thee, the best is yet to be. And we pray that, with that faith in our hearts, we may leave the large campaign with quietness and confidence to Thee, and seek rather to discharge the duties of that post Thou hast assigned to us, with loyalty and good hope. Amen.

"And a certain man drew a bow at a venture."

(2 CHRONICLES xviii. 33)

XXIV

ROUNDAABOUT ROADS

It sounds improbable that though a whole army was trying to kill Ahab, it should be an arrow which a man shot at a venture, or as the Hebrew has it, quaintly, "in his simplicity"—when twanging his bow carelessly, or trying a new string perhaps—that should find the king's heart.

And yet it is the thing that does happen occasionally in real life. We sometimes do get the target when we are aiming for something else. The name which we have been worrying to recall strolls casually into our memory when we have given up trying and are not thinking of it at all. There are certain stars, astronomers tell us, which they see best when they look askance. And I have come to think that there are certain precious goods of His which God allows us to possess on the same conditions. You see them by looking past them. You get them by aiming at something else. "Look at your goal and go for it straight," says worldly wisdom, wisely and truly enough in many instances. All the same there are good things in life to which that is emphatically NOT the road. The real way to secure these is to aim for something else.

This is true, for example, of Happiness. Everyone of us wants to be happy. And there is such a bountiful provision of the means of happiness all about us that it is difficult to resist the conclusion that God means us all to be happy. Yet when those for whom happiness is meant and prepared seek it directly and for itself, it is as certain as anything can be that they won't find it. You ask, perhaps you pray for this boon, and God shows you only some bare duty that is clearly yours. Out to it you go, like a brave man, not thinking there can be any blessings on that road, when, lo! as you journey, happiness comes to you, quietly, filling your heart with peace.

One does not find that the New Testament, as a matter of fact, has much to say about being happy at all. There is so little reference to it that it looks as if God had forgotten our need. I find that the Book which I had thought might tell me how to find happiness tells me instead of "bearing one another's burdens," doing it "unto one of the least of these"; tells me about my brother's need of me when he is sick or naked or hungry; tells me even about such a thing as a cup of cold water to a thirsty disciple. Ah! but when, in however poor a fashion, I forget my own quest and gird myself in Christ's name and try to DO some of these things, I find that God has not forgotten after all, that, all the time He has been showing

me THE way to happiness, and I did not recognise it because it is not a straight road. It's not a question of seeking, but of forgetting to seek. Happiness comes to you oftenest when you are intent on bringing it to your brother.

The same principle holds true also with regard to Influence. It is natural that a man should desire that his shadow when it falls on others should heal and not hurt. But the healing, helpful shadow is not got by wishing for it. As soon as you begin to think about it and aim for it, you will go astray. Here is a little poem which tells how the strange magnetic quality of influence for good comes to a man:—

”He kept his lamp still lighted,
 Though round about him came
 Men who, by commerce blighted,
 Laughed at his little flame.

He kept his sacred altar
 Lit with the torch divine,
 Nor let his purpose falter,
 Like yours, O World, and mine.

And they whose cold derision
 Had mocked him, came one day
 To beg of him the vision
 To help them on their way.

And, barefoot or in sandal,
 When forth they fared to die,
 They took from his poor candle
 One spark to guide them by.”

That is the secret—a roundabout way, as you see. If Influence is to be ours, that is how it will come, not by our trying to be influential, but by our striving to be upright, loyal, and true.

In the third place, this is true of Life in Christ's sense of the term. Life was one of His favourite words. It was Life, in the highest sense, that He claimed to bring to men. And the greatest calamity in His eyes that could fall on any man is that that inward soul-life should die.

Yet when those in whom He has awakened it, aim directly for its growth and culture, they make mistakes. To the question—Shall I regard the development and deepening of that soul-life of mine as the one end and object of my living?

the answer of Jesus, as I understand it, is No. Life, said He, at its highest and fullest and most perfect, is reached by giving it away. He that loseth his life shall save it.

What a long way from this ideal are those good people who are for ever laying their fingers on their spiritual pulse and plucking their soul-life up by the roots to see how it is growing! There is a nobler use of life than to save it in that fearful fashion. There is a truer way to grow in grace than by hoarding up virtue so, namely, by letting it go generously out from us. When St Nicholas got to Heaven with his white robes of sainthood stained with mud through stopping on his way to help a carter pull his waggon out of a rut—a task which his fellow St Cassianus, for the sake of his robes, avoided and declined—it was the muddy saint whom the Master welcomed with the sweetest smile and the most gracious words. Whoso loseth his life, the same shall save it.

Happiness, Influence, Life, these three, and the road to each of them is indirect. May God bless it to us that we have stood for a little to mark the flight of an arrow shot "in simplicity!"

PRAYER

O Lord our God, may we have grace to discover the blessings that lie on Thy roundabout roads. May we never make the mistake of thinking that the path to true happiness is the one that runs straight towards it. Keep us true to Christ, and we shall not then be false to any man. And give us to know that we are likest Him, not when we hoard and cherish life and virtue, but when we spend them without stint or measure in any worthy cause of God or man, for His sake. Amen.

*"Why was not this ointment
sold for three hundred pence,
and given to the poor?"*

(JOHN xii. 5.)

THE EXTRAVAGANCE OF LOVE

"Wherever this Gospel is preached, this that she had done shall be told as a memorial of her." What a gracious memorial, and how worthy of it was Mary's beautiful outburst of generosity! But what a pity that the speech of Judas should be recorded also, as a memorial of him! And yet, on mature consideration, we would not have the Judas criticism forgotten. Because it called forth what we might not otherwise have had, the vindication of Jesus Himself. And because, as a matter of fact, we are constantly hearing the protest of Judas repeated in our own day, and are often ill-held to know how to meet it.

"This he said," records our evangelist bluntly, "not because he loved the poor, but because he was a thief and kept the bag." Yet he might have been an honest man and said the same thing. For very many honest and earnest men and women are repeating this criticism still. It is repeated whenever it is taken for granted that practical utility is the only standard by which to judge actions and offerings, that God and man can be served in no other way than by "iron bars and perspiration."

How often do we meet the type of mind that admits the service of a ploughman and denies that of poet or artist, for whom a waterfall, as somebody has said, exists merely as so much power for driving turbines, and whose sole test of usefulness is that of making two blades grow—and corn blades at that!—where but one grew before. We are commonly browbeaten by this type of person, and yet we feel that somehow, if we could only say it, he is wrong—that the poet's is as divine a vocation as the farmer's, that God meant a silver band of falling water in a green glade to suggest other things besides dynamos, and that he who even paints some blades of grass, and paints them pleasingly, has his place somewhere in the great guild of servants of God and man.

One has heard the same attitude taken up in other directions too. Why spend so much money on a Church, you will be asked, when there are so many poor people in the land? What need for stone pillars and a fine organ, when a plain building and a harmonium would do as well? Why try to secure what is called a beautiful Church service, dignified, stately, musical, when the very baldest worship is acceptable in God's sight, if only it be sincere? We have heard all that, and other remarks like that, often, and we have seldom been able to give reasons against them. A mere instinctive sentiment seems a feeble thing to oppose to such cold and hard facts. Yet somehow we feel that it is all wrong if only we knew how to convict it.

Did it ever occur to you that Jesus Himself has answered that objection and others like it when He vindicated Mary's action that night? There is no doubt that her ointment cost a deal of money, money that could have fed many hungry people. It was an extravagant offering, without any practical outcome, save that Jesus was refreshed. There is no doubt also about our Lord's sympathy with the poor and needy. And yet He upheld Mary's action, and would not have it called wasteful! All that could be said in its favour was that it was beautiful, that it touched Jesus keenly, and influenced all who saw it done. And that, as I read the story, was one reason at least why Jesus defended it. He allows the Beautiful. He would have the Beautiful honoured for its own sake even in a world so full of sorrow and trouble as this.

For my part, I am very grateful that this word of Christ's has been recorded. For it affords sufficient warrant for declaring the poet, the artist, the architect, and all those who are trying to make the world more beautiful, God's servants too, offering Him a gift He does not disdain to recognise, as truly as the physician, the philanthropist, and the preacher whose object is to make it better.

Beauty of form and structure has been lavished profusely by the Creator on creatures too small to be seen. There are more things grow out of God's earth than corn for food or timber for building houses. There's the heather and the wild flowers, the daisies and the violets. Hard-headed common-sense asks—What's the use of them? What good do they do? The answer is that they are beautiful, and that seems in God's sight to be justification enough for having made them.

So when we see Love breaking her alabaster box, and pouring forth her offering without stint, as she is doing every day—a mother lavishing care upon an ungrateful son, a husband surrounding a peevish wife with a tireless devotion, or a sister keeping her own love-dream at arm's length that she may guard and guide some graceless brother—let us lay our hands upon our lips when we are tempted to criticise. These actions may be foolish, extravagant, quixotic, and may outrage every canon of common-sense. But there is a fragrance about them without which the world would be much poorer. They are morally beautiful, and for that reason, our Lord Himself would teach us, they are not to be rudely handled nor judged by any hard standard.

Yes, but He said more than that. He found a more complete extenuation of Mary's extravagance. It was because she loved much. Her gift was an offering of love to Himself. "She hath done it for my burial." And that is the end of the whole matter, my brothers. Love is always extravagant when measured by the tape-line of bare duty. It always overflows. It breaks its box and gives everything it has. Yet, like the widow's cruse of old, its casket is never empty, for even when it has given its all, the next needy case will find succour at that door. Take your charity subscription sheet to the man who loudly asserts that too much money

is being given to the Kirk this dull season, and what will you get? Take it also to the man who has signed a bigger cheque than he can well afford that the House of his God may be made beautiful, and it will be strange if you are sent empty away. Ah no, it is not Mary, whose devotion has found outlet in some sudden generosity, it is not she who neglects the poor.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, whose we are and Whom we seek to serve, enlighten us, we pray Thee, in the knowledge and practice of that supreme service which is love. May we learn that the greatest thing in our little lives is the love they hold for God and man. Teach us to appraise love's extra everywhere as those who have also felt and understand. And when our own gift and offering must needs be poor and small, may we be encouraged by the remembrance that even a widow's mite that love has offered is precious in Thy sight. Amen.

*"I know both how to be
abased, and I know how to
abound."*

(PHILIPPIANS iv. 12.)

XXVI

THE ART OF "DOING WITHOUT"

In one of his letters, Paul declares that he knows both how to be abased and how to abound. Most people, who did not stop to think, would be inclined to assert that the second of these lessons did not require much learning. It's an easy enough thing to be content, they would say, when you have plenty. Far harder is it to learn how to do without. I am not at all sure that that is right. I rather think that, of the two, abundance is a more searching test of a man's true quality than

scarcity ever is. Carlyle has declared that for one man who will stand prosperity there are a hundred that will stand adversity.

But whether that be so or not, there is no question that it is a great thing to have the secret of doing without. And the merest glance abroad convinces us that it is of the utmost importance. In literature, for example, the quality which confers most distinction upon style is the art of omission. Did not Stevenson, himself a master, say that one who knew what to omit could make an Iliad of the daily newspaper? And the commonest blunders in the great business of living spring from ignorance of this secret. Why do some people make themselves disagreeable in a community by their touchiness and sulkiness? Simply because they have not learned how to be abased, how to live without getting their own way always, or without getting the praise or recognition to which they feel themselves entitled. It's an art, you see, which is well worth studying.

It has to be added that opportunities for practising it are never long wanting from anybody. We don't need to choose what things we shall do without, as a rule. The things are simply taken from us, or we never get them. It may be our own fault, or it may not. The result is the same. We have to do without. And we give away our inmost self by the fashion in which we do it.

There is, for example, the question of material goods. It's easy to talk unreal nonsense here, and we all must confess to wishing to have more of this sort of property than we do possess. But I honestly believe that the Apostle Paul did not greatly concern himself whether he was, materially speaking, well-off or ill-off. There are other men that one knows who have attained to the same point of view. There's no question either that for those whose religion is a vital thing it is the right point of view. The real man is independent of either riches or poverty, because the real man is the man inside. Riches is not you. Poverty is not you. You are what you are in your inner spirit. The riches there are invisible, but they are eternal—love, faith, hope, peace. And the man who has these, as Paul had them, can honestly say that it is of relatively small moment whether he is in a material sense, rich or poor.

Or take the question of friendship. Who can tell in adequate words what it means to have one true, loyal friend? But it has happened sometimes that the very closest friendships are broken and a man has to stand alone, not by his own choice, but in the grim ordering of things. There is a higher obligation than that you keep faith with your friends. First and foremost you must keep faith with yourself, with your own conscience, with the voice within. And it may be that obedience to that involves seeming disloyalty to your friends, either for a while or permanently.

Such a time came to Paul. He had for conscience' sake to stand alone; and he did it. He was able to do it because his life did not rest for its ultimate pillar

on his friendships any more than on his riches. Paul's real life was within. That inner life of his was enriched and made radiant and constant by one supreme fact—he believed that Jesus Christ his Lord deigned to share it with him in spirit. It is not irreverent to say that in his inner soul Paul lived with Christ.

Maybe his words are too big for us to use, but each of us who, at some hard bit of our journey, has appealed beyond friends to the Christ within, saying, "I have done, O Lord, what seemed to me right. And my friends are hurt and angry. But Thou knowest"—that man has learned, even in a slight degree, that there is a nearer and truer blessing possible for sinful men than even human friendship.

Then there is another thing that has sometimes to be done without. There are privileges that belong to every Christian man and woman, and are in a sense their birthright—the sense of God, confidence, quietness of heart, hope. There is no doubt that every real Christian should be walking and working in the light and gladness of God's presence.

But it is just as clear that not all are so blessed. It may be their own fault. Doubtless in many cases it is. Or it may be temperament or outward circumstances that determine it. Anyhow, many have to walk, not in the light but in uncertainty, perplexity, and misgiving, and sometimes even in darkness.

But "a bird is a bird even though it cannot sing." And a Christian is a Christian still even though his soul is dark within him, and he goes on in fear, never daring to look up and hope at all.

That is spiritual abasement. It ought not to be. It is never to be lightly acquiesced in. But it happens sometimes to earnest men and women, and it seems to be the settled condition of a few. Is it possible to do without these things? Can a man manage to exist and even move forward who has for a while lost his hold on his faith and on God? There are good and godly men who have done it. Brother Lawrence did it. Robertson of Brighton did it. Horace Bushnell did it. And many, many more. When all that they held most precious in faith had been eclipsed for the time, they steered still by the little light they knew. Though there should be no heaven, they resolved that they were called to be pure, truthful, patient, kind, since these things could never be wrong. Though there were no Christ, they would still follow where He had once seemed to invite them. And so doing and so following they came again to know. The darkness passed, and faith and gladness returned. They had lost hold of God for a little, but He had never lost hold of them. And, brethren, whatever the doubt or darkness be, that's always true. That is what makes it possible at all. That is what may make it even blessed. For

"It's better to walk in the dark with God
Than to walk alone in the light;

Better to walk with God by faith
Than to walk alone by sight.”

PRAYER

Our Gracious God and Father in Heaven, whether Thou dost appoint for us poverty or riches, save us from thinking that a man’s life consisteth in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. Beyond all our friendships, be Thou our Friend and Helper, and grant us to seek first the blessing of our God. Make us very sure, for their comforting and our own, that when men in their darkness sorely seek Thy face, the very ache of their quest is token that Thou hast already found them. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

*”And Moses said, I will now
turn aside and see this great sight.”*

(EXODUS iii. 3.)

XXVII

WONDER

Moses, adds one commentator significantly, was then eighty years of age. By the ordinary standards, he was an old man, yet he had not lost his youthful sense of wonder. It is a good sign, the best of signs, when a man has lived so long and yet finds wonder in his heart. It is a bad sign when a man at any age, or when a generation of men, find nothing in all God’s world to wonder at.

Yet in many quarters it is regarded as the correct attitude to refrain from expressing surprise at anything, no matter how striking. The utmost concession to be made to what is really wonderful is a languid and patronising “Really?” That is always a pitiful thing. For where there is no wonder there can be no religion worthy of the name.

The instinct of worship and the instinct of wonder are very intimately related. And where the one has died, the other cannot be in a very healthy state. "I had rather," said Ruskin once, "live in a cottage and wonder at everything, than live in Warwick Castle and wonder at nothing." And his preference is to be commended. For he who has never wondered has never thought about God in any way to be called thinking.

It was our Lord Himself who said that the ideal of religion was the child-like heart. Everyone knows that these little people are always being brought to a halt to wonder at something. And Heaven is in very truth nearer to them than, and they are more truly filled with its spirit, than either you or I are when the glory and bloom of this world unfold before our eyes, or the thought of the Infinite and Eternal God comes to us and we have not felt impelled to bow our heads in silence and worship, spell-bound, and in a godly fear.

It is not hard to lay one's finger on some of the causes that have brought about this state of things. A silly fashion, for one cause, has decreed that wonder is vulgar. Why that should be so, no one can tell. But if there be higher intelligences than ours in God's Universe, and they see the sons of men, as they have plenty of chances to do, casting an indifferent glance at the full pomp and majesty of the setting sun, or reading such a Psalm as the 103rd with an untouched heart, how they must marvel indeed!

And then, of course, familiarity tends to blunt the sense of wonder in a certain and common type of mind. The best men have always resisted that tendency and recognised that it works harm to life and character. They have remembered to look for God in the common and familiar, and that is a search that goes far to make a man a saint, just because it is a continual prayer, a continual holding open of the heart to God. His answer is to fill the wondering heart, bit by bit, with Himself.

Ignorance, too, is often a cause, the kind of ignorance that calls itself knowledge. It is an innocent delusion on the part of the youthful tyro in Science that after he has made a little experiment with a prism and a beam of sunlight, there is nothing wonderful in the rainbow. Pure, profound Science on the other hand, speaks very humbly—and wonders all the while.

Nature is dumb and silent concerning the Infinite behind it to him who goes but to catalogue and dissect. Take a heart that can wonder with you on your country-walk, open your eyes and look, open your heart like a child and listen, and you will find, as Moses found, that even in a bush there may be the Voice of God. Hold the door of your heart ajar in simple wonder, and some thing of God will enter to cleanse and freshen it, as the hot and dusty street is washed by the rain from Heaven.

Just as he who goes to Nature with a heart that cannot wonder, will find no

message there for him, so he who looks out upon the sanctities of home, of human life and love, in that dull mood of mere acceptance, must often find himself hard pressed for material when he makes his thanksgiving to God. George Eliot has spoken somewhere of the agony of the thought that we can never atone to the dead for the stinted affection we gave them, for the "little reverence we showed to that sacred human soul that lived so close to us, and was the divinest thing God has given us to know." The divinest thing God has given us to know!

Have we realised that that gift of God to us lives now in the same home with us? Do you know what it is? It is a wife's devotion, a mother's care, a brother's comradeship, a sister's love. It is the trust and affection of little children, and the patience of those who love us. And yet there have been men—judge ye if this be not true—who have lived close to gifts of God like these, and taken them all unquestioned and never wondered at the undeserved bounty of them or their continuance from day to day.

How easy it is to discover the gifts and charm of a stranger, how easy to wonder at that! But to wonder at the sacrifice and the patience of the love that dwells under the same roof with us, and stoops, in Mrs Browning's happy phrase, "to the level of each day's most quiet need," how few of us do that! And yet, without daily wonder, how can we be sure that we do not slight it, or requite it ill, how can we truly give our thanks to God whose gift it is?

Most important of all, he who brings no wonder in his heart can never be touched with the sense of God. The lack of the great deep and awful wonder of our fathers in all their thought and speech about God, has brought it about that our religious speech to-day is too often either superficial, flippant and easy, or syllogistic, mechanical, and hard. It is the absence of wonder that tempts men to imagine that God can be enclosed in any formula whatever, or brought to the hearts of men in so many rigid propositions. If men would but give their wonder expression when they frame their creeds, there would be less chafing where the edges are too sharp.

I am bound to confess that my sympathies are altogether with a working man who once listened to a fervid evangelist at a street corner unfolding a scheme of salvation as clean-cut and mechanical as a problem of Euclid, and buttonholed him afterwards to inquire if he had ever read any astronomy. No, he said, he had not. "That's a pity," said the artisan, "for, eh, man, but ye have an awfu' wee God." In all reverence, my brothers, that is what the absence of wonder brings us to, a small God, a small salvation, and a merely mechanical Christ.

Men have sometimes asked what that childhood of the Kingdom is on which Jesus laid so much stress, and some have taken it to mean renunciation of intellect and reason in favour of a Church's dogma. But it means, says John Kelman, something far more human and more beautiful—"it means wonder and

humility and responsiveness, the straight gaze of childhood past conventionalities, the simplicity of a mind open to any truth, and a heart with love alive in it.” That is surely right. That is what becoming a little child in Christ’s sense does mean. First of all, wonder.

PRAYER

Almighty and eternal God, Creator and Ruler of the Universe, dwelling in light that is inaccessible and full of glory, whom no man hath seen or can see, what is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou visitest him? Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God! Such knowledge is too wonderful for us; it is high, we cannot attain unto it. O come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. Amen.

*”If ye then, being evil, know
... how much more ... your
heavenly Father.”*

(LUKE xi. 13.)

XXVIII

THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD

If it were a conceivable thing that we had to part with all the words of Scripture save one, and if we were allowed to choose that one, there are some of us who would elect to retain that great declaration of Jesus—*”If ye being evil know ... how much more ... your heavenly Father.”* For, having that, we should still be rich in knowledge of the Love and Fatherhood of God. We should still know Christ’s dominating conception of God, and have His last and highest word regarding Him. We should still be able to rise, as Jesus not only warrants but invites us to

do, from the little broken arc of true fatherhood on earth to the perfect round in Heaven.

At the warm reassuring touch of that "How much more your heavenly Father" whole systems of brainy divinity vanish away! The truth of the Fatherhood of God, vouched for and lived on by Jesus, kills men's hard and unworthy and hurtful thoughts about God as sunshine kills the creatures that breed and prevail in darkness and ignorance. They can no more live alongside of a realisation that Christ's name for God is His true name, and really describes His attitude to all the sons of men, than the dark, creepy things that live under the stone can remain there when you turn it over and let in the air and the light.

But, say some, you must not carry the truth of God's Fatherhood too far. What is too far? I ask. I want to carry it, and I believe Christ means us to carry it, as far as ever it will stretch, and that is "as far as the East is from the West." Think of a father's GOOD-WILL. It is conceivable that other men may do you a deliberate wrong. But you are entitled to believe that your father won't. You may not understand what he proposes, but you can be quite sure that he means only your good. Henry Drummond tells how his early days were made miserable by the conception he had of God as of some great staring Eye in the heavens watching all he did. But that is a policeman's eye, not a father's.

There are many tokens that, even yet, we have not realised what these blessed words of Jesus mean and imply. A mother vainly trying to answer the old, old question why her little one was taken from her, will say, "Perhaps I was too fond of him." Or, should sudden sorrow come, the explanation suggested by the troubled one himself is, "I was too happy." There are plenty of people who are afraid to declare that they feel very well or are very happy, in case the upper Powers should hear and send trouble, apparently out of sheer malice! "Bethankit, what a bonny creed!" Oh! what a dreadful caricature of God! How it must pain the Father to hear His children talking so!

There is another mark of fatherhood, as we know it on earth—COMPASSION, pity, the willingness to forgive. There is no forgiveness on earth like a father's or a mother's, none so willing, none that will wait so long and yet give itself without stint at last. Pity, as the world of business and of ordinary relationship knows it, is at best a transient emotion. It murmurs a few easy words and then forgets. But parent love suffereth long and is kind, hopes against hope, and waits and is still hopeful when every one else has written the offender down irreclaimable. It is such compassion and pity for us sinners, how great soever our sins be, that Jesus would have us come for to God in Heaven.

But will not men abuse such patience and long-suffering? it is asked. Is it not a risky thing to tell them that God is our Father? It is. But it is the risk that Love takes cheerfully, and that only Love can take. And when men talk

lightly and complacently about the great mercy of God, there is something, I think, which they have forgotten, namely, that at the heart of the divine Fatherly forgiveness there lies the shadow of the Cross. I do not say that in any conventional sense. I say it because I have seen for myself that at the heart of all true earthly forgiveness of a fatherly sort there lies this same mysterious shadow. Shall not the father forgive his returning prodigal? Yea, verily, and with all his heart. But, ah, before that, think how the father has suffered with his son, and for his son. The prodigal's shame is the father's shame too, and lies heavy on his heart. And it is out of a chamber where he and that pain have long been companions that the earthly father issues to welcome and receive at last the lad who has sought his face penitent and in his right mind. The welcome is real. The forgiveness is full and free. And yet behind it there is sacrifice. The price of it is suffering. Aback of it lies—the Cross! That is what silences cheap thinking and glib speech about the forgiveness of God. If God's long-suffering be like a father's here, it is, first, long suffering.

The danger, however, is not that we abuse God's grace knowingly and in callous complacency. Far more is it, I think, that we never actually accept and realise and build our lives upon the gracious compassion of the Heavenly Father and His willingness to forgive.

Every parent ought to know Coventry Patmore's beautiful lyric, "The Toys." In it a father tells how, when his little son had been disobedient again and again, he struck him, and sent him with hard words and unkissed to bed—"his mother, who was patient, being dead." And when, later, he went upstairs to see him, he found him asleep, his lashes still wet with tears, and—what touched him most—on a table beside his bed all his little treasures heaped together to comfort his sad heart—a box of counters, and a red-veined stone, a piece of glass abraded by the beach, and six or seven shells, a bottle with blue bells, and two French copper coins—all his little store of precious things.

So when that night I prayed
 To God, I wept and said—
 "Ah, when at last we lie with tranced breath,
 Not vexing Thee in death,
 And Thou rememberest of what toys
 We made our joys,
 How weakly understood
 Thy great commanded good,
 Then, fatherly not less
 Than I, whom Thou hast moulded from the clay,
 Thou'lt leave Thy wrath and say:

'I will be sorry for their childishness.'

One word more about our Father's SILENCE. Our fathers here on earth had their silences when we were children. We asked him for something that we wanted very much. And he gave no reply. We went on asking. We expected to get what we had set our hearts on. He heard us hoping and believing that this good thing would come to us, and he held his peace. But we knew that silence, and we trusted it. We were quite sure that he would have told us if we were deceiving ourselves, that his gift, when it came, would, at least, not be a mere mockery of our hopes.

And I often think of these words of Christ's, "If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?" when I stand by a graveside, and speak the words of radiant hope with which we lay our beloved to rest. Our Father hears us speak that hope. He has heard hearts in an agony through all the generations wish that it might be true—that this bleak fact of Death is not the end, but only the beginning of a better thing. But He keeps silence. We have no sure proof, only the blessed hope of the Christian evangel.

He keeps silence. But, my brethren, can we not trust that silence since it is our Father's? We have asked this bread in our pain and through our tears. We have asked it because it seems to us we need it so. And whatever gift His silence hides, this at least is certain, it is not, it cannot be, only a stone.

PRAYER

Almighty God, who through Jesus Christ has taught us to call Thee our Father, we thank Thee that Thou hast chosen a name so dear to us to reveal Thy care and Love. When our way is dark and our burden is heavy and our hearts are perplexed, grant us the grace to know that Thou who art directing every step of our journey art a God of Love, and Thy true and perfect Name is Our Father in Heaven. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*"Whosoever will lose his
life for my sake shall find it."*

(MATTHEW xvi. 25.)

XXIX

THE UNRETURNING BRAVE

(EASTER DAY, 1915)

NOTE.—I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to Sir Wm. Robertson Nicoll's "When the Wounded Go Home," a tender and courageous message.

Christmas in war time was like an evil dream. Easter is like a breath from Heaven itself, a wind from the pure and blessed heights of God blowing the clouds of battle-smoke apart for a brief space so that we all may see again that beyond the smoke and beyond grim death itself there is the Life Enduring, a Divine Love compared to which ours at the best is untender and hard, a Fatherly welcome beside which welcomes here are faint and cold. This is the strangest Easter Day the world has ever known, yet never have the thousands and thousands of stricken homes and sore hearts needed more the living hope that is begotten anew in the Christian Church this day by our Lord's rising again from the dead. It is assuredly of God's mercy that Easter should fall in these days, when so many fathers and mothers, wives and sisters and lovers need its hope and comfort so.

We cannot but think to-day of the many, many homes in our own and other lands from which strong and brave men marched away weeks or months ago, because they had heard the call, and were willing to make the supreme sacrifice for righteousness' sake, who will never come back again, who have died a soldier's death and sleep in a soldier's grave—fathers, husbands, sons, lovers, gallant men, dear lads, cheerful, willing, dauntless. You find their names by the hundred and the thousand in the casualty lists, but the loss you cannot measure unless you could see all the shadowed homes. How many such homes there are in our own land alone, How many such in our own little circle!

Try to realise that, and then ask if a more gracious message could fall upon all these hearts to-day than the Easter message of the Christian Church,—that there is no death and that its seeming victory is not a victory. The old, old question, If a man die shall he live again? is answered to-day by the triumphant Yes! of Christendom. Yes, he never ceases to live. From the inferno of the battlefield the mortally stricken do but pass across the bridge and stream of death to God's Other Side. When they fall in battle, they fall into His everlasting Arms. They do

not die. They are not dead. It is only their poor mortal bodies that the shrieking shells can maim or destroy. They themselves, the real self and spirit of them, no material force can hurt, for that belongs to a higher kingdom than the visible, and its true goal and home are not here at all.

To all who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death in these days, to all who have watched their beloved go out where every true man would wish to go, and know only too surely that they shall never return,—to these to-day Jesus Christ has His Word to speak,—and would that all might hear it and give it room in their hearts to do its blessed work! It is to Him we owe it, and He is our authority for believing that beyond the darkness and separation of death there is the morning of a new and fairer day. The valley of the Shadow, yea, the valley of battle itself opens out again at its far end to the sun's rising and the untrammelled life in the light and liberty of God. The happy warrior is borne by gentle hands to God's own land of peace, where the fret and fury of battle slip from him like a discarded garment, and beside the still waters of that better country he finds healing for his hurt. It is that quiet and blessed hope that is being reborn in our hearts this day as the Church keeps her festival of a Risen and a Living Christ. It is that lively hope the Church offers for comfort to all stricken homes and to every sorrowing heart.

They offered themselves, these gallant lads, not for anything they hoped to gain, but for the sake of honour and liberty, of justice and righteousness. And when a man casts himself on God in that fashion, offering not the words of his lips, nor the homage of his worship, but himself, all that he has, his life and all that life holds for him, think you that upon that poor soul, with his priceless offering borne humbly in his hands, the God and Father of us all is going to turn His back? "He that loseth his life," said Jesus, "for my sake shall find it."

There are times when the most gracious doctrine is not gracious enough to represent and embody the Spirit of Christ to us. We want something more, and we often seek it and sometimes find it in poetry, in art, or, best of all, in the silence of our own hearts when God-given instinct whispers what no words or doctrine can ever express. Such a time is now. Such a need is ours to-day.

I make no defence of it theologically, and I ask no man to accept it who does not feel it clamouring at his heart for entrance, but I confess that for me a couple of lines of John Hay's in his "Pike County Ballads" strike a note which all that I know in my heart of the Spirit of Christ leaps up to welcome and approve. It is when he has told the story of Jim Bludso's sacrifice. Jim was engineer on the "Prairie Belle," a river-steamboat, and he was rather a rough, careless man. But when the steamer took fire, it was Jim who held her against the bank till everybody got safely off except himself. With eyes wide open to what he did, he sacrificed his life to save the other souls on board. Hay sums up in these lines:—

”And Christ ain’t going to be too hard
On a man that died for men.”

I leave it there. I trust I am a loyal son of the Church, but I must have a place in my creed somewhere for the hope which these lines express that Christ ain’t going to be too hard on a man that died for men.

But there is something more to be said. Every chaplain at the front tells us that the most careless and irreligious youths and men take up a wonderfully different attitude out there. Men pray in the trenches who have never prayed before. I heard some stories recently that brought tears to my eyes, of brave and simple confessions made at little gatherings for prayer in strange places, by some of those very lads whom we reckoned indifferent and heedless before they left home. And some of them, turning their faces simply and earnestly, and by an old, old instinct of the heart, towards God and His Christ before the battle broke upon them, some of them have fallen on the field!

Many, many more there must be who turned them Godwards even at the eleventh hour in one brief upward glance to ask forgiveness and strength to play the man, about whom no chaplain can report, for no one knows or saw or heard save Christ Himself. But there’s a glorious page in the Gospel to assure us beyond all doubt or question that no one who makes that appeal, though it be the dying thief himself, ever makes it in vain.

And there we leave the issue—with God, who is kinder than our kindest, and whose mercy is from everlasting. It is He who has brought us this blessed hope, through His Son, this Easter Day, and we honour His gift best by taking it in all its breadth and comfort to our hearts. To the broken-hearted wife or mother, to whom the bald War Office report has come, let us take this comfort,—”Your beloved is not dead. God has him in His gracious care and keeping till the day break and the shadows flee away.” For that is the Easter message, God be thanked. And this is Easter Day.

PRAYER

To Thy merciful care and keeping we commend all the sons and daughters of affliction, and especially those who in this great contest have lost some loved one. Grant that even through their tears they may discern the glory that belongs to those who have given their lives a ransom for many. Be Thou their help and their strength, and may the sympathy of all who know them be for them an earnest and token of Thy great Love and Compassion. Through Jesus Christ our

Lord. Amen.

*"The heavens declare the
glory of God."*

(PSALM xix. 1.)

XXX

THE SACRAMENT OF SUNSET

"The sky," says Ruskin, "is the part of Nature in which God has done more for the sake of pleasing man, more from the sole and evident purpose of touching him, than in any other of His works." It looks like the truth. For there is no scene of earth so fair or majestic that man cannot spoil it. Where the "cataract exults among the hills, and wears its crown of rainbows all alone," he will build him a power-house to supply current to some distant town. But he cannot touch the heavens. In the heart of some fairy glen he will placard the virtues of somebody's pills, and plaster the gate-posts in a sweet country lane with the specious claims of some quack doctor, but above it all, it is God, and God alone, who spreadeth out the heavens like a curtain and in them has set a tabernacle for the sun. Even in places where the face of earth wears no suggestion of natural beauty the face of the sky redeems it from evil. For, above the squalor of the city's meanest slum, burn the great fires of the setting sun, and overhead the fleecy white clouds sail silently all night long.

But, of it all, the glory of the sunset is chief. The dawn has its cold splendours too, but not many of us are there to see it when it is at its best. It is at eventide, when the work of the day is done, and the spell of its restfulness lays the senses open, it is then chiefly that God unfolds these splendid harmonies of colour in the western heavens. And, by consent, on this Ayrshire coast, on which I look out as I write, these glories can be seen to great advantage. It is into no flat expanse of water that the dying sun sinks here. The peaks and crags of Arran

invest its passage with an indescribable pomp and majesty, standing out against it like the massive pillars of some giant gateway of the West. It is never twice the same. Sometimes lurid and blazing, with masses of thunder-cloud piled high, all their outer edges rimmed with fire; and, next night, peaceful and level, a study in straight lines, as if the great Artist, with even brush, had washed the sky with bands of grey and blue and gold. Each evening God has His own picture for us, His own handiwork, unspoiled by man. How many of us ever pause to recognise its beauty? What does it mean that such a prodigality of harmonious colours should be the most ordinary feature of our evening hour? Is it that God Himself takes delight in the beauty of it all, for its own sake, rejoicing, like all good workmen, in the work of His hands? Or has He some purpose with regard to His children of mankind? Is it, as Ruskin says, for the sake of pleasing man? How unthankful and unmindful we are, if that be so!

The sunset teaches us to put together these two ideas—beauty, beyond the wit of man to portray, and God. There is plenty of ugliness and sin in the world, and the life of men. Man himself recognises how much of the beauty that might have been has been marred and disfigured by him. Yet in his heart he worships it, and feels after it afar off. And in the evening sky it is written that Beauty belongeth supremely unto God.

Whatever that far-off divine event be, to which the whole creation moves, one of its features shall be, must be, a beauty which shall fully satisfy. For beauty and God cannot be divorced. And when, of an evening, God for His own good pleasure, working with those material elements which have no power to disobey His behests, unfolds His will in such dazzling visions of splendour, is He not declaring that the end and goal of life itself, when His purpose therewith is completed, and Man, too, has fallen into harmony with His will, shall be fair, and satisfying, and beautiful?

Let us not be afraid to say and believe that God speaks to us in the sunset. If I pick up the receiver of a telephone and hear my friend announce some good news that fills my heart with gladness, it does not disturb me to remember that the wire itself has no power to speak. For I feel that somewhere at the end of the wire is a mind and a heart like my own who is using the dead, soulless wire as a medium of speech with me. When the glories of the sun's setting fall upon your heart like a benediction, stirring you to devout and grateful thought, breathing peace upon you, cleansing your desires of all that is mean and sordid, do not be afraid to believe that, behind and beyond all that is material and visible, there is the Mind and Heart in whose image yours was made, whose gift peace is, whose whisper, though it come along dead ether-waves to reach you, is His whisper nevertheless.

It is perhaps natural that the prevailing quality of the thoughts that arise

within us when we watch the setting sun should be pensive, tender, and, not seldom, a little sad. For it speaks of the end of the day and the coming night. Its charm and spell are like that of autumn, the remembrance of what has gone, the tender grace of a day that is dead. For all the beauty and wonder of this world, there is a tear at the heart of things. Beneath all our laughter and happiness there lies that deeper note. The night cometh. There is an end to it all—friendship, love, happiness, work, life itself.

”For be the long day never so long,
At last it ringeth to evensong.”

And yet, and yet, my brothers, the end is beautiful, more beautiful even than the beginning. God has made the day’s death to be exceeding fair. The sun passes gloriously to its rest. Hopefully too, for, passing thus, it promises a new and fairer morning. So do God’s children die.

PRAYER

O Lord our God, who hast written Thy Word of hope and promise in the evening sky, be near us when our day is done, and the wind has fallen silent, and the night is waiting. Put us to sleep in a chamber of peace whose windows open toward the sun rising, and, when we awake, may we be still with Thee. For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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