

The Unjust Steward.

I.

It is conceivable that the fifty measures of oil and the eighty measures of wheat to which the steward reduced the amounts due from the two debtors were all that they really owed his master, the other fifty and twenty measures being simply overcharges with which the steward himself had cruelly and fraudulently burdened them. In that case the expedient to which he resorted in the emergency which came upon him was not an act of trickery and dishonesty, but one of at least outward repentance and justice, and it is no wonder that he was commended for the shrewdness of his conduct. By hitherto robbing his master's debtors he had impoverished them, and so had indirectly

injured his master also by rendering them less able to discharge their real obligations to him. A gentleman who was once a missionary in India tells me that the parable viewed thus is constantly being illustrated by similar conduct in the East to-day.

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II.

IN the interpretation of this parable, do we bear its setting sufficiently in mind? The Pharisees murmur at our Lord's receiving sinners. The Parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Piece of Silver, and the Prodigal Son show God's attitude to sinners. Is not the Parable of the Unjust Steward meant to teach us the wisdom of man's forgiving?

F. G. DUTTON.

Bibury, Fairford.

Ecclesiastes.

AN APPRECIATION.

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KOHELETH is a preacher, a 'master of assemblies,' one who can draw men together and hold them by the living human interest of his topics, and by the 'acceptable words' in which he clothes his utterances. He is one whose speech is sharp and penetrative as goads, and fastens itself 'as nails in a sure place' in the hearts and consciences of his hearers. Yet with Ezekiel he may well say, 'Ah, Lord God, they say of me, Doth he not speak parables?'

The preacher's sermon is an estimate of two worlds, the sensuous and the supersensuous, the fleeting and the abiding, the economy of the soul's temporary tabernacle and the economy of its native region. Of the world of sense and time he has unique experience. No man we know of has investigated it so thoroughly, and yet kept the wisdom which would enable him to appraise it justly. Of the supersensuous and abiding world he has not, he could not have, the knowledge of the New Testament Apocalypse, the Apocalypse of Paul, of John, and of Christ; but with dim views of the forms and modes of the eternal, he has yet a distinct apprehension of its essential character. He knows clearly that the cognate clime and proportioned home of the soul are found in God; in the remembrance and the fear of Him who formed

us. He knows that the spirit of man, *passing upwards*, returns to God 'from whom it comes'; and that '*it shall be well* with them that fear Him.' The New Testament Apocalypse itself is but a more perfect unveiling of the same things. We catch in Koheleth's 'acceptable words' muffled peals of those clear bells that in the New Testament ring out the high praises of charity, as greatest of the only 'abiding things'; for 'faith, hope, and charity' are but the sublimated form of the remembrance and fear of God.

The ever-recurrent burden of our preacher's utterance is the word which he has made proverbial, 'Vanity of vanities: all is vanity.' This iteration is easily misleading, especially to those who hear a word, form a conclusion, and pass on. The most frequently recurring tone is easily taken for the master tone of the composition. The most constantly reiterated estimate of the world is accepted as the only and absolute estimate. Just as the Psalmist's 'threescore years and ten,' his simple statement of an observed fact, has become proverbial as 'the scriptural limit of human life,' so 'vanity of vanities' has become the proverbial estimate, by the wisest man, of all mundane things.

But 'vanity of vanities' is but *one* burden of his

discourse; the fear of God is another. 'Vanity of vanities' is *one* appraisalment of the world; 'beauty and joy is another.' Poor Koheleth! Little did he foresee how the word which he knew called for most frequent utterance, the nail which needed most blows to drive it home, would gain for him the miscellany of epithets incontinently attached to him, as 'sceptic,' 'satiated worldling,' 'worn-out voluptuary,' and 'pessimist.' But this has been the common lot of all real seers. Koholeth knows that the true view of the world cannot be gained from one standpoint, nor set forth in one simple proposition. He knows that 'God hath set one thing over against another,' and that both 'things' must be regarded in forming an estimate of either. He knows that both good and evil inhere in every finite thing, as it is used in this way or that; that as Horace, who echoes so many of the lower notes of this book, says, 'Nothing was ever happy on all sides,' and that to know anything truly we must see it in varied lights. Our preacher is 'one among a thousand,' who has had the opportunity, the astuteness, the courage, the firmness, and the well-balanced judgment to apply the efficient test. No sceptic, no epicurean, no pessimist,—nay, no optimist either, no 'ist' of any kind,—none but a clear-brained, large-souled man, who knows how to get the equation of all the 'categories,' could possibly have thus tested life, and have given, as he has done, the 'conclusion of the whole matter.'

To those to whom 'vanity of vanities' is the preacher's sole and total valuation of the world, one might say, 'Have you ever noticed *this* shining line in the gloomy picture, He hath made everything beautiful in its time?' And have you observed, further, that 'everything' here means literally everything, as you may see by the pre-pendent catalogues of things to which God has given 'a time'? That list is representative of the whole phenomena of nature, and of the whole round of terrestrial life, from being born to dying. It becomes at points almost grotesque in its enumeration of things beautiful in their time. It would be wholesomely educational to most epicures and æsthetic connoisseurs. Not only summer noons and autumn sunsets, rainbows, and roses, gleaming stars, and children's faces, but such prosaic and inglorious things are included as sewing and rending, casting away stones and gathering stones together. Even in that sordid 'getting and spending' in which a modern poet of

the beautiful in common things says 'we lay waste our powers,' and even in weeping and dying, this seer sees beauty. Could the most cheery of optimists see it? Does he not gain and keep his optimism by ignoring the mean and the mournful; or, at the most, by saying, 'The world is very beautiful, *nevertheless*'? Our preacher says it is all beautiful. Has any other assessor of human life dared to say as much? Perhaps it may be found that this universal beauty is visible only to the man who has discerned the universal vanity,—the man who has seen that nothing is beautiful except in its time. Has Koheleth seen that to find the fulness of the world we must live above it, and that to 'rejoice evermore' in our earthly home we must 'have our conversation in heaven'? We know that He who saw glory in the grass that was doomed to wither, love touching into loveliness the sparrow's death, and wealth of beauty, passing that of the stones of the temple, in the poor widow's two mites, was He who spurned 'all the kingdoms of this world, and the glory of them,' and taught us that to find our life we must lose it. However we may regard the seeming paradox, it remains that the preacher who cries, 'Vanity of vanities,' sings also 'beauty of beauties' over the same life in the same world. But truth has many such seeming paradoxes.

To recur to this proverbial keynote and refrain, What is its real import? It is not a word of abuse or contumely. It carries no sarcasm, satire, or reviling. The preacher does not call the world a pest-house or a howling wilderness, as does the visionary who imagines that the worse he speaks of this world the better he is fitted for the next. His verdict is a simply negative one, like the Psalmist's on Gentile idols, 'The gods of the heathen are vanity,' which St. Paul paraphrases thus, 'We know that an idol is nothing in the world.' He does not add a vindictive rider, as a modern Epicurean has done—

This world is all a fleeting show,

For man's illusion given.

He says what a thirsty traveller may say of an ornate Sèvres vase, 'Exquisite but waterless'; or what a hungry, friendless orphan might say, wandering in the throne-room of the Uffizi galleries, 'Emptiness of emptinesses: all is emptiness.' Has no sober, clear-eyed, calm and dispassionate soul ever echoed that as truth and verity? Can we ever find the true beauty and

worth of the world, or the true blossom and fruition of human life, until we echo it too?

How has our preacher come to this finding? Many conjectural answers have been given by others. Let him give his own answer. He tells us that it was by that surest of all methods for a wise man, but worst for a fool, that of personal experiment. Given equal wisdom, the man who has himself been a millionaire can best tell us what it is to be a millionaire. Koheleth tells us that he has 'given himself' to each purpose, pursuit, and pleasure in its turn, and has given himself to it with all his heart, with such zest that he asks who can hasten thereunto more than he, and what the man can do who comes after him? He has not tested the pleasures of life by mere dipping and sampling, nor by indulging in them while his heart is possessed with higher delights. Such a testing is all that most men can safely dare, and is amply sufficient, and more even than is needful, for ordinary men and for ordinary purposes; but not for this man and his unique purpose, which is to know to the full, and to declare once for all, the real worth to man of all terrestrial pleasures and pursuits. So he tells us that 'whatsoever his eyes desired he kept not from them,' that he 'withheld not his heart from any joy,' and that 'his heart rejoiced in all his labour.' He took each form of earthly good at its best; his fruits from well-stocked and well-watered gardens and orchards, his music from male and female choirs and from orchestras of all kinds of instruments. To these and the like satisfactions he threw open all the avenues of his nature, that all his senses and all his soul might be flooded without let or hindrance, with all the delectation these things could give. He even gave himself to wine and to folly, that he might discover what really lay in the strange paths of the drunkard and the fool. Yet in all this, he tells us, his wisdom remained with him. While he gave himself to each course with real abandon, he did not really abandon himself to any. This is his unique distinction, and his superiority to all other exponents of the world's worth. The ordinary moralist keeps what wisdom he has, but fails to test the world completely. He investigates with reserve. The voluptuary abandons himself to his enjoyment, letting his wisdom go. He explores in the dark. Our preacher has tested pleasure as one might voluntarily test the sensations of drowning, or the effects of a powerful opiate, in the certainty

of resuscitation and recovery. This testing of pleasure is neither psychically nor morally impossible to certain strong natures, as many examples on a smaller scale have shown; and Koheleth has a strong heart and a strong brain.

What now are his several findings?

1. That nothing under the sun can give full and final satisfaction to the spirit of man. 'He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver'; and so with every subsolary thing. This has many reasons. The heart has illimitable desires. 'God has set the world,' the whole cosmos, the whole eternity, in it; it possesses the boundlessness of space and duration, while all these things have but a limited power and period of satisfaction for it. There is no end to the soul's pursuit of these things; but that pursuit is but the treading of a round in which the best is soon reached, and what lies beyond is just the repetition of what is past.

Day treads upon the heels of day;

New moons wane on to perish.

As the sun in the sky, as the wind in its changes, as the waters in their circling, man seeking good in temporal things ever ends where he began, beginning again where he finishes, and finds 'nothing new under the sun.' Though a man live 'a thousand years twice told,' such labour is but vexation of spirit. He is but toiling to fill a mouth that craves it of him with an ever-increasing insatiable craving, and upon whose taste all viands quickly pall. 'An untimely birth were better than he.' For a beast, whose spirit goeth downward to the earth, the satisfactions of earth may suffice; but for man, whose spirit goeth upward, they are emptiness of emptiness.

2. That there is one thing that can suffice man's whole nature—the fear of God. With the preacher this fear evidently stands for all that we mean by 'religion'; that thought of God which induces reverence and trust, obedience and love, giving the assured conviction that whatever phases this earthly life may assume, it shall *be well* with them that fear Him. Or, to give it the form given by another old-world seer, who had discovered by his own experience the blindness and brutishness of a heart set on mundane things, taking God to be 'the strength of the heart, and the portion for ever.' In this 'fear of God' man shall not only have a full and abiding good, but shall have power to 'take his portion,' and to 'rejoice in his labour,' so that he 'shall not much remember the days of

his life,' so blissfully shall they pass; because 'God answereth him in the joy of his heart.'

3. That the world is neither absolute good nor absolute evil to men; but is either one or other, according to the fashion of their own spirit Godwards, and the way in which it is regarded and used by them. Everything is good in its season, and in its season only. Gardens, orchards, music, meats, and drinks; loving, hating, laughing, weeping,—each is beautiful in its time and measure, but only in its time and measure. Laughter is good, but not at a funeral. Weeping is good, but not at a feast. Wealth is good, but it is 'vanity' in the war with death, and in the great assize. To gather stones together is good when a field needs clearing, or a wall needs building; but to gather stones at all times, and to no fitting end, is to vex the spirit with empty toil. To the fool, 'who walketh in darkness,' the world is first a fool's paradise, and then a fool's prison, where he pines in misery. To the wise man, whose 'eyes are in his head' (a happy definition of a wise man), it is neither paradise nor prison, but a well-stocked estate for his temporary use, from which he can draw according to his need and his reasonable desire; a sphere of mingled pleasure and pain, each beneficial in its time to the man who remembers his Maker; so that 'in the day of prosperity he can be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider' how 'God has set one thing over against another,' and can be quiet and confident in all—

Through love and fear of Him,
Before whose sight the changes of this world
Are vain as billows on a tossing sea.

4. That in his use of the world a man should be neither 'over-much wise' nor over-much foolish, neither 'over-much righteous' nor 'over-much wicked.' He should neither be lax and reckless in his use of the world, and 'die before his time'; nor over-knowing and over-strict, and 'destroy himself' by the refusal of its good. (If anyone imagines that by his cautions here our preacher commits such an egregious solecism as to commend some moderate measure of transgression, while he urges the fear of God and the thought of coming judgment, we can only say that the interpretation places the interpreter beyond all reach of reasonable argument.) Our preacher is neither voluptuary nor ascetic. The youth is to remember his Creator while his youth is still in him in all its unchecked

buoyancy and energy; while the sun is still bright, and the stars are still glistening; while the daughters of music sing for him all the day, and the pitcher at the fountain is unbroken and brimming. He is to 'let his heart cheer him in the days of his youth,' to let it 'lead him, and his eyes guide him'; only in all this he is to have with him the anticipation of judgment, and not to follow heart and eyes as one who may live as he lists, who has no account to give, and whose destiny will not be affected by his doings. He is to be joyously wise, as the traveller who exults in the morning glow, the perfume-laden air, the enchanting landscape, the hedgerow glories and the wood-bird's song, letting in the living joy of them at every pore, while he is intent at every step on the place where he should come when the night falls, and on coming safely and surely there. Again Koheleth anticipates St. Paul, who, because 'the time is short, and the fashion of this world passeth away,' bids 'those that have wives be as though they had none, those that weep as though they wept not, those that rejoice as though they rejoiced not, those that buy as though they possessed not,'—in a word, 'those that use the world as not abusing it.' Both preachers prescribe that 'golden mean' in which men neither discard life's pleasures and possessions, nor are enamoured of them; in which they prove that the world and life are theirs, while they are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

5. That it is when we come to regard the world as 'emptiness of emptinesses,' while 'remembering' its Creator and ours, that we discover its real fulness, and find it to yield its true good. 'To a man that is good in his sight God giveth wisdom and knowledge and joy'; while 'to the sinner He giveth' only 'to gather and to heap up.' The devotee of mammon is not the world's possessor; the voluptuary is not the world's honey-bee; the glutton does not 'eat his meat with gladness'; and the drunkard does not know the taste of 'wine that maketh glad the heart of man.' The 'many inventions' which men have 'sought out,' by which to make the world yield them its satisfactions, to relieve life of its monotony and staleness, and to put a little sufficiency into its 'emptiness of emptinesses,' are themselves vanity. The epicure and the sensualist never find 'the harvest of a quiet eye'; they never 'taste and see that the Lord is good'; they never know

The glory that the world puts on
For him who with a quiet heart goes forth
Under the bright and glorious sky, and looks
On duties well performed, and days well spent.

With him who fears God it is ever 'well.' The recollection of his Maker gives him luminous knowledge of himself and of the world; the fear of the Lord begins and perfects his wisdom; the thought of the judgment gives him a sense of his responsibility, checks him at the point where wholesome liberty becomes injurious licence, and 'curbs desire within the bounds of The Enough.' He knows and feels his own kingship over all things terrestrial. His spirit is attuned as a well-strung harp, and lies open to every real joy as the celandine to the sunlight—

His thoughts now flowing clear,
From a clear fountain flowing, he looks round
And seeks for good, and finds the good he seeks,
Until abhorrence and contempt are things
He only knows by name.

He is God's child, and dwells in his Father's garden. His 'ways are ways of pleasantness, and his paths are peace.' He is 'in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field are at peace with him.' 'The lines fall to him in pleasant places; and he has a goodly heritage.'

For him the winds, aye, and the yellow leaves,
Shall have a voice, and give him eloquent teachings.
He shall so hear the solemn hymn that Death
Has lifted up for all, that he shall go
To his long resting-place without a tear.

Our preacher has discharged well his function among the specialists of Holy Writ. Moses has opened for us the vista of our past; St. John the vista of our future. Job has sounded for us the depths of our sorrows; the Psalmists have soared to the sublimest heights of our joys. Koheleth has tested and appraised for us the worth of our earthly heritage and environment, and of the various forms our present life may take. He has accomplished his appointed task with thoroughness and decisiveness. We thank him for a service which only 'one in a thousand' could render.

His sermon is of living, present-day interest. Men still conceive that the only way to enjoy the world is to give the rein to appetite and lust, forgetting God and judgment. They still imagine that the fear of God and the thought of death are naturally kill-joys.

'A cried out, "God, God, God!" three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God:

I hoped there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet.'

On the other hand, men still conceive that the only way to master the world is to cease to use it, taking as their watchword that 'doctrine and commandment of men' which St. Paul condemns so roundly, 'Touch not, taste not, handle not.' They still cannot see that John Baptist is not worthy to unloose the sandals of the Son of man. Our preacher will neither, with Lot, *choose* the fat land, though it lead him to Sodom, nor, with Dan, be forced to dwell in the inhospitable mountains, because the Amorites will not allow him to set his foot on the plain. With Asher, he will 'dip his foot in oil,' because 'his bars shall be iron and brass, and as his day his strength shall be'; and, with Joseph, will know how to combine the two possessions, 'the precious things of the earth and the fulness thereof, with the goodwill of Him that dwelt in the bush.' But this requires a manhood which is the rarest of human attainments, and which both luxury and asceticism tend to *make* rare, the manhood of the sound mind in the sound body; the manhood of him who 'kept himself' in the prison and in the palace; as Potiphar's slave and as Pharaoh's viceroy, 'the arms of his hands being made strong by the mighty God of Jacob.' While this is the true ideal, it must still remain for multitudes a 'counsel of perfection.' The gospel of the Son of man, who 'came both eating and drinking,' who could sit down to a feast and accept a costly anointing, who could yet be content to have 'not where to lay His head,' and could spurn 'all the kingdoms of this world and the glory of them' if their acceptance involved a single genuflection to Satan,—that gospel can alone make the ideal of Koheleth a reality on earth, and give us our second Paradise.

Come then, our heavenly Adam, come;
Thy healing influence give;
Hallow our food, reverse our doom,
And bid us eat and live!
Earth then a scale to heaven shall be;
Sense shall point out the road;
The creatures all shall lead to thee,
And all we taste be God.

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