

St. Peter's Despair.

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'Lord, Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee.'—John xxi. 17.

PETER is distressed at this third repetition of his Lord's question. It seems to show that there is still in His mind a deep-rooted suspicion of his perfect sincerity. And the point that rankles in Peter's soul is that Jesus has sufficient cause to distrust him. Not many days have elapsed since, in sudden panic and in craven terror for his life, he had with oaths and imprecations denied that he had ever known his Lord and Master. And now the scene is changed from the Judgment Hall of Caiaphas and all the imposing symbols of worldly power and splendour that had overawed his too feeble will, and he is once more sitting by the slope of Galilee's lake beside his Lord, and is under the magic spell of His personality.

'Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me,' is the question he hears from those dear lips, whose words always send such a strange thrill through every chord of his spiritual nature. What answer can he, dare he, make? There is no room now for loud and boisterous protestations of faith and loyalty such as he was wont to indulge in. These would be strangely out of place after all that is past and gone. All he can do is to appeal to that mystic understanding that subsists between souls who love each other, and with downcast eyes and modest voice reply, 'Yea, Lord, Thou knowest that I love Thee.'

And yet again, to Peter's great distress is the question put, 'Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me?' Ah! Peter thinks, how can I convince Him that my heart is all His own? Surely He *must* know it, for the language of love is independent of words, and can sound high and clear even through all misunderstandings and injuries and apparent neglect. 'Yea, Lord,' he replies, 'surely Thou knowest that I love Thee.'

And still is Peter invited to greater heart-searching, for the question comes again, 'Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou Me? Is it with thy whole heart that thou lovest Me?' Ah! what more is there he can say? With what words can he convince his Master of the devotion there is in his soul? He has appealed to that subtle spiritual understanding that exists between loving hearts which makes the one so sure of the other without a word being said. He knows that this bond can remain unimpaired even in spite of long estrangements, profound misapprehensions, deep and bitter quarrels. But there are some injuries that pierce this mystic bond of union to the very quick. Love between kindred spirits can survive much. Bitterness and strife may separate loving hearts, and yet, at any

moment, the one can appeal to the other with the perfect certainty of being entirely understood, 'Thou knowest, spite of all, that I love Thee.'

But the living link of love may be broken. The wound from which love lies bleeding may be in its very heart. Deeds may be done and words said that show a cleavage so utter and profound that mutual sympathy and understanding are henceforth impossible. And to Peter, at this moment, the awful thought came, 'Is it so between my Lord and me? Can He never trust me again? Is the bond of love for ever broken, the mutual sympathy for ever chilled? Can I never again get near His heart? Can no word, no deed of mine ever wipe out the shame of that terrible moment that cleft our souls asunder? What word can I say, what deed can I do, that can possibly convince my Lord that the erst abject traitor is now a friend who can be trusted to the uttermost? Alas! the link between us is severed, the seed of distrust has been sown, the language of the soul can no longer be deemed reliable. Unless my Lord could read my soul like an open book, and see for Himself what is inscribed therein, confidence between us can never more be established. Words, deeds, all those subtle emanations that convey from one soul to another tender feelings and intense emotions have in my case been falsified, and never more can Jesus take me to His heart of hearts if He cannot, with Omniscient eye, penetrate through every interposing medium and see for Himself the contrition and rapture of my soul.'

So Peter is thinking, and as he thinks, the great truth flashes upon him, as once before at Cæsarea Philippi, that this is just what Jesus *can* do. And so at the third repetition of the question he is no longer content to appeal simply to that mystic comprehension that exists between loving souls among men, for his sin has been so great as to make that appeal of no avail. Not to His Lord's human insight but to His Divine omniscience he appeals. Looking with penitent, tearful eyes, into those mild orbs that pierce him through and through, his spiritual vision takes a higher, wider sweep, and with crushed and broken heart and trembling voice, he exclaims, 'Lord, Thou knowest *all things*, Thou knowest that I love Thee.'

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