

THE BLADE OF GRASS.

“He will pass away like the blade of grass; for the sun arose with a scorching wind, and withered up the grass, and the flower thereof fell off, and the grace of its form perished. So also shall the rich man be blighted in his ways.”—
JAMES i. 10, 11.

ST. JAMES plays the fabulist, or historian, in these verses, and narrates the sad end of a certain blade of grass. He warns the rich man that he will fade and perish like this blade of grass; and in the Greek, throughout the warning, he uses the historical tense, the *past* tense. His words should be rendered “the sun *arose* and *scorched* up the grass,” not “the sun *rises* and *scorches* up the grass”; “the flower thereof *fell* off,” not *falls* off”; and “the grace of its form *perished*,” not “*perishes*.” Obviously he is narrating a past event; he is telling the story of a certain famous blade of grass, which grew, flourished, and withered away, long before he wrote.

In whose field then did this grass grow? All the commentators reply, “In that of the prophet Isaiah.” St. James is here falling back on Old Testament words which would be familiar to the Jews for whom he wrote, words which his story would be sure to recall to their minds, though they may not immediately recall them to ours. So that before we can fully enter into the apostle’s meaning we must consider the words of the prophet. In short, our subject naturally divides itself into (1) the Story of the Blade of Grass, and (2) the Moral of that Story.

1. *The Story of the Blade of Grass.* In Isaiah xl. 6-8, we find these words: “All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof as the flower of the field. Grass withers, flowers fade, when the breath of the Lord bloweth on them. Surely the people are grass. Grass withers, flowers fade; but the word of our God will stand for ever.”

Now we can hardly listen to these words without be-

coming conscious of a certain tender beauty in them. It is not simply that their leading thought, the transitoriness of human life, is in itself a most pathetic thought; but the words seem to set themselves to a plaintive music, and the refrain, "Grass withers, flowers fade," goes singing through our brain in mournful numbers, quickening pathetic memories of beauty blighted, wounded affection, "the tender grace of days that are dead," the bright but broken promise of defeated hopes, the clear, happy dawn of lives soon clouded in disastrous eclipse or quenched in the darkness of death. As we listen to the prophet, imagination stirs and works; we *see* the broad, pleasant field bathed in sunlight, fanned with sweet airs, thick with verdant grass, gay with the purely tinted, fragrant wild flowers which clothe the grass as with the robes of a king; and then we feel the fierce, hot blast sweep across the field, under whose breath the grass withers, the bright flowers fade, and all that teeming life, all that exquisite and varied beauty, is swallowed up of death. Who does not feel at times that *that* is a true picture of human life? Who does not feel that the very moment we detach ourselves from the throng and lift our thoughts to the height from which alone it can be truly seen, how brief our life is, how frail, how transitory; that the generations of men rise, and fall, and pass away, just as the grass springs and withers, just as the flowers bloom and fade? And remembering how, in *this* field, every separate blade of grass and every fragile flower has its own little world of hopes and fears, joys and pains, who can fail to be saddened as he beholds them withered by a breath, their early promise unfulfilled, their goodness not ripening to its maturity?

Touching and beautiful in themselves, as an exquisite expression of a most pathetic fact, these words take new force so soon as we connect them with the circumstances in and for which they were spoken. The prophet Isaiah.

whose main duty hitherto had been to denounce the judgments of God on the sins of Israel, to foretell that bitter captivity in Babylon which seemed to strike a fatal blow at all the Hebrew hopes, now receives a new series of visions, a new and happier duty. The eternal Spirit carries him on to that distant point of time at which the Jews shall have reached the term of their captivity, and will start on their return across the sands and the rocky defiles of the intervening "desert" to their native land. He is to "speak comfortably" to them, to assure them that their iniquity is pardoned, their sin put away, that the years of their bondage are told and gone. As the prophet broods over the vision with a joy too deep for words, the silence is abruptly broken as by the voice of a trumpet—"Hark! a herald!" In the herald he recognises the servant and ambassador of the great King. Another message of comfort has come to him from heaven. And the message, delivered in the curt, imperative tones of the herald, is: "Prepare ye a way for Jehovah in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be raised, and every mountain be levelled; and let the rough places be made smooth, and the rockledges a plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh see it." This divine proclamation teaches the prophet to look for the return of the exiled Jews under the form of a royal progress. The great King, followed by His hosts, is about to cross the wilderness which lies between Babylon and Jerusalem. To prepare the way before Him and them, the valleys must be filled up, the rough, difficult gorges must be made smooth, rocks and hills be levelled with the plain. When the royal highway is ready, the King will come, His subjects in His train, and there shall be so wonderful a display of the divine Majesty and Grace that "*all flesh* shall see it," even to the ends of the earth. In other words, whatever hindered, or threatened to hinder,

the emancipation and return of the Jews from Babylon should be taken out of the way, and all the perils of their passage through the desert be happily overcome.

The herald having delivered his message, there is once more silence in the prophet's soul. But again the silence is broken, and he cries with deepening wonder, "Hark! a Voice!" and now it is the voice of the great King Himself. It arrests the feet of the departing herald with the command "Cry"; *i.e.* proclaim. But the herald has discharged his commission: he has nothing more to proclaim. In his embarrassment he turns and asks, "*What shall I cry?*" And the divine Voice replies: "*All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof as the flower of the field. Grass withers, flowers fade, when the breath of the Lord bloweth on them. Surely the people are grass. Grass withers, flowers fade; but the word of our God will stand for ever.*"

The first proclamation had closed with the promise that the glory of the Lord should be so signally displayed that "*all flesh*" should see it; that is, all the great heathen world. The second proclamation commences with "*all flesh is grass*"; the great heathen world, stable and imposing as it looked, was transient; all its bravery would wither beneath the breath of the Lord, like the field of grass before the hot blast of the desert.

These surely were very "comfortable" words for the Jews. To them it could not fail to be good tidings of great joy to hear that the vast heathen empires, by which they had been so cruelly tortured and oppressed, were but as grass; to hear that God so cared for *them*, a few poor thousand captives, that He would "blow upon" the massive and enormous kingdoms of the East, and cause them to wither away in His anger. In such a message as this they would exult and rejoice. But they must not forget that they too are men, that they too are frail and transient in themselves, that they can only endure as they fashion them-

selves on the word of God, which endureth for ever. And therefore the herald was to repeat and vary his message. "All flesh is grass"—all the great heathen races; but also "this people is grass," a grass which withers like the rest. Like their neighbours, the Jews were in a constant flux, vexed by constant change. One generation came, and another went. Their life, vexed with perpetual changes while it lasted, never continuing in *one* stay, was soon over and gone. Their only hope lay in obedience to the divine word, in appropriating that word, in steeping their life in it till it became enduring as the word itself.

This then is the noble passage which St. James had in his mind when he told his story of a certain famous blade of grass that had been scorched by the heat of the sun, till the flower thereof fell off, and the grace of its form perished, He was thinking of the field which Isaiah had depicted centuries ago, of the grass which grew in it and had long since withered away; of the mighty Babylonian empire which their fathers held to be as solid and enduring as the mountains, but which had now sunk into a mere heap of ruins; of the generation which had returned to Jerusalem, with joy upon their heads, to recommence a national life which was now fast drawing to a close. All these had passed and gone; they had withered like grass, faded like the flowers that clothe the grass; the place that had known them would know them no more for ever. And thus, by recalling the history of the past to his readers, the holy apostle gave new force to his warning on the frailty of human life, the instability of worldly fortune.

2. Here then we come on *the Moral of this Story*. St. James is not content with a lesson so large and general as had contented Isaiah. He has a special and more definite purpose in view in telling the story which called up memories, prophetic and historic, from the past. As he had taken a single blade of grass out of Isaiah's broad field,

so he selects one man, or one class of men, for special warning. The blade of grass reminds us that human life soon withers, that human fortune often withers even before the man dies. Yes; but it also reminds us that some men wither even while they retain the full vigour of their life, and their good fortune abides. *The rich man "withers in his ways,"* in his goings to and fro along the lines of his traffic, before his health is touched, before his wealth is touched. And therefore, argues St. James, the rich man should rejoice when his riches use their wings and fly away. The alternative the apostle places before him is this: Let the wealth wither that the man may live, or let the man wither amid the abundance of his wealth.

'Tis a hard saying! but, before we reject it as too hard for practical use, let us clearly understand what it means. James had just said, "Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is lifted up, but the rich in that he is brought low." And, as we have seen, we are bound by every sound canon of interpretation, and by the whole scope of the apostle's argument, to take these terms in their plain, literal sense. The poor man is to be glad when he is tried by riches, and the rich man is to be glad when he is tried by poverty. St. James is arguing that trial, and trial of the most searching kind, is good for every good man, that it helps to make him perfect, that it prepares him to receive the crown of life. And because great reverses of fortune are among the severest tests of character, he would have the poor good man welcome wealth, and the rich good man welcome poverty.

Now, however much we may dislike the injunction, or part of it, can we deny that it is based on a true, on a Christian, view of human life? Are not sudden and large reverses of condition severe and searching tests of character? Does it not take a very good poor man to ride straight to God when he is set on horseback, and a very good rich man

not to "break down" when he is "brought low"? We may not fear riches for ourselves, but do we not fear them for our neighbour? If a poor brother suddenly becomes rich, are we not afraid that he may grow worldly and self-indulgent and "stuck up"? If he bear *this* test well, if he retain his humility, his soberness, his spirituality of mind, do we not account him capable of meeting almost any test by which character can be tried? On the other hand, do we not fear poverty for ourselves and for our friends? If a rich brother, reduced from affluence to penury, is no more ashamed of his penury than he was proud of his affluence; if he is patient, content, cheerful, as, with failing strength, he addresses himself to new, difficult, ill-remunerated toils, and can greet with a smile the swallow-flight of friends who valued him only for what he was "worth" to them, do we not pronounce him a well nigh perfect man?

So far as this then we must admit St. James to be right. Great reverses of fortune *are* very searching and conclusive tests of character. And can we expect a Christian teacher to bid us grieve over any reverse by which our character is tested, matured, perfected? In the Christian view of life *character* is of supreme importance; circumstances, easy or uneasy, are of value only as they serve to form, purge, elevate, and strengthen it; for on the character we form our welfare, here and hereafter, depends. No doubt wealth is very pleasant if we can use it wisely, and poverty very unpleasant if we have not learned to bear it well and to get from it the good which God intended it to yield. But what is infinitely better than either is that true manliness which makes us equal to either fate, that true godliness which enables us to welcome any condition, any change that will strengthen us in virtue, in goodness, in charity. The wealth and the poverty will soon pass, but the character will remain, and will determine our destiny.

Therefore it is that the wise man says, "Whatsoever is brought on thee take cheerfully, and be patient when thou art brought to low estate; for gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity." And therefore the inspired apostle says in precisely the same spirit, "Let the brother of low degree rejoice when he is lifted up, but the rich when he is brought low."

Does any one object, "It may be easy enough for a poor man to be glad when he gets rich; but how is a rich man to rejoice when he becomes poor? You ask too much of us, more than it is in man to give." I reply: "You are not speaking, and you know that you are not speaking, from the Christian point of view, in the spirit of Him who, when He was rich, for our sakes became poor. You are putting circumstances before character, transitory gains and pleasures before abiding and eternal realities. Nay, you are not speaking from your own best selves, and your own highest point of view; for the very men whom you most admire are not the men who put money first, or any kind of gain or pleasure, but the men who put God first, and duty, and truth; and the moments in their lives which you most admire are precisely those in which they sacrificed their personal interests to the common good, or preferred the cause of truth and righteousness to all the joys and gifts of the world. And what do you admire them for save that you may imitate them?"

But if any one should plead, "It is surely *very hard* to be honestly and sincerely glad, to count it all joy, when loss and pain come upon us": what can any man, with a heart in his breast, reply but, "Yes, surely it *is* very hard, so hard that we shall never do it except as we possess ourselves more and more fully of the Spirit of Christ and of God, and receive grace on grace. Heaven is very high: how are we to reach it save by climbing? It *is* most difficult to raise these frail, sinful natures of ours into the

noble characters of immortality: but does a difficult task grow easier because we shut our eyes on it, or if we either neglect or postpone it?"

St. James himself felt that the latter half of his injunction was hard to flesh and blood; in demanding that the rich man should rejoice whenever he is brought low, he felt that he was imposing a very severe test on character, a very heavy strain on virtue. And that, I suppose, is why he told his story of the blade of grass, to which at last we come back. What he meant was I think to this effect: "You remember the prophet Isaiah's field of grass, and how it withered beneath the scorching heat, so that the flower thereof fell off, and the grace of its form perished. The rich man is often like a blade of that grass. The sun of prosperity shines on him more hotly than he can bear; all the promise and beauty of his nature fade beneath the scorching heat; he withers in his ways, in the multitude and perplexity of his schemes and pursuits: his fortune grows, but *the man* decays, dies before his time, dies even long before he ceases to breathe and traffic."

Is not that a true picture, and a sad one? All flesh is as grass; we must all needs die; and this fact is sad enough in some of its aspects; but it is sadder still that many of us should be as grass which *will* expose itself to the heat it might escape, which will tolerate no cloud, welcome no cooling wind, and fades and dies while the rest of the field is still green and fragrant. Yet do we not all know men who give themselves to the mere task of accumulating wealth with a devotion so excessive that in very deed *the man* does die out of them long before they die: men who neglect the duties and charities of home, put aside all that makes life fair and graceful and noble, repress their spiritual energies and affections, and hardly give a thought to heaven, or to the kingdom of heaven, till they have utterly unfitted themselves to enter it? As you watch them year by year,

do you not see them growing more and more sordid and unspiritual in their aims, with a fiercer greed for gain, with fewer scruples as to *how* they get it, their tasks and schemes so multiplying on their hands, so incessantly occupying and taxing their powers, that they have no leisure, no taste, for reading, for thought, for prayer, for aspiration, for any but a purely doctrinal or a purely formal religion, if any profession of religion be maintained? Are *these* spiritual creatures in training for an immortal life? Nay; they are rich men *withering away in their ways*, merging and losing themselves in their affairs.

Douglas Jerrold, one of our keenest wits and satirists, has depicted "a man *made of money*." He had only to put his hand into his breast to find it full of banknotes; but as he draws away note after note, he drains away his vitality; he dwindles and pines amid his vast schemes and luxuries month by month, till he wastes into a mere shadow, till the very shadow disappears. The picture is hardly a satire, it is so mere a commonplace. Every day we live we may see men *dying of wealth*, all that is manly, all that is fine and pure and noble in character, perishing as their fortunes grow. On every side, in every field, we may see St. James's blade of grass withering beneath the heat of the sun, its flower falling, its grace perishing.

The warning comes home to us in this age as in few previous eras of the world; for our whole life is so rapid and intense, our business is such a strenuous and exhausting competition, we are solicited by so many schemes for our own advancement, or for the good of the town in which we dwell, or for the benefit of the commonwealth of which we form part, that it is almost impossible to make leisure for thought, for a quiet enjoyment of what we have gained, or for those religious meditations and exercises on which our spiritual health in large measure depends. We are literally *withering away in our ways*, so many are the

paths we have to tread, so rapid the pace we have to maintain, so scorching and tainted the atmosphere we breathe. And hence, whether we are rich, or seeking riches, or are labouring with anxious and fretting care for a bare competence, we all need to take heed to the warning which speaks to us as to *men*; i.e. as to spiritual and immortal creatures, children of God and heirs of eternity. If we would not suffer this world, which holds us by ties so many, so strong, and so exacting, to crush all high spiritual manhood out of us, we must set ourselves to be in this world as Christ was in the world. He neglected no duty, refused no innocent delight, loved, when He could, to sit at feasts, with friendly faces round Him and good fare on the board, insomuch that His enemies denounced Him as a glutton and a wine-bibber; and yet, in all things, He made it His meat and His drink to do His Father's will. He was content and cheerful even when He had not where to lay His head. He could refuse all the kingdoms of the world that He might worship God and serve Him alone. He could rejoice even in His unparalleled sorrows for the joy set before Him, the joy of being perfect as His Father in heaven was perfect. Let the mind that was in Christ be in us also; let us cultivate His preference of duty to pleasure, of service to gain, of doing good to getting good; and instead of withering away in our ways, we shall find every path in which we walk a path of life, a path that leads us home.

Grass withers;

Flowers fade:

But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

S. Cox.