

THE MIRACLES OF CHRIST.

III.

PERHAPS the most sublime passage in all literature is that march of God in Habakkuk, beside which the rush of Achilles, with his helmet blazing like a baleful star, shines very dimly. And the most awful phrase in that tremendous poem tells us that "Before Him went the pestilence." It is a lurid expression of one side of what we think of God, the Avenger, the jealous God. Egypt mourning for her firstborn learned to know Jehovah preceded by that grim forerunner.

How comes it, now, that such a conception of the Lord has fallen quite into the back-ground, so that our hymns and litanies never say, "Before Him went the pestilence," but love to proclaim that "Mercy and truth go before His face"? We owe the victory of the milder conception most of all to the life, to the words and works of Jesus. We owe the harmony and fulness of our belief that God is love to the harmony, fulness, and consistent vividness of His character, in Whom Christendom adores her manifested and incarnate God. And this is the supreme greatness of our creed. Sir Edwin Arnold himself does not pretend that even the Buddha of his daring romance taught this lesson.

"Thy Jesus filled
The leaf of wisdom in, and wrote for men
The name Lord Buddha would not say nor spell,
. Denying not,
Affirming not, but finding no word fit
Saving the Wordless, the Immeasurable,
But thou, reporting . . . dost inscribe
This mighty name of Love."

—*The Light of the World.*

But it is absolutely certain that this supreme issue of the teaching of Jesus, by which He draws all men unto Him, is not the result of abstract moralizing, but of the clear, har-

monious, and vital presentment of His own life, that life in which His church sees God.

“The Word had flesh, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds,
In loveliness of perfect deeds.”

This is the charm of the religion of Jesus, and the spell would have been broken by the slightest admixture of miry clay with the pure gold of this unparalleled and marvellous conception. Students may prefer to dwell upon the lofty precepts of the Sermon on the Mount; but they are dull students who fail to observe that the public, the church, the masses, are much more powerfully affected by such words as “Jesus wept.” Now these words occur in the story of a miracle. And all the miracles of Jesus deepen our sense of perfect love and absolute condescension. Any inquirer (and there are many such) who hesitates to accept the miraculous, while conscious of a divine power and reality in the gospel story, of a life which throbs there, can easily do more to help himself than many subtle arguments can do for him. He can score out of the four Gospels all the miraculous narratives, and then carefully read over and weigh the residue. The first thing which will probably arrest his mind is the remarkable identity of character in what remains and what is cancelled. The next is that somehow this character is no longer so well accounted for. The key to its idiosyncrasies is lost. Still, for example, He teaches with authority; but His “Verily I say” does not appear so reasonable, so decisive, as when He also with authority commanded even the unclean spirits. A certain lack of argument, syllogism, logical demonstration is felt, for the first time, in the absence of demonstrations of another kind. He will find moreover that the picture has faded woefully, which is strange, considering that what has been expunged is no part of it, so that the tints should have brightened, and the figures should stand out better from the canvas.

On the contrary, much of the love and condescension, the forbearance and thoughtfulness for others, is now comparatively dim and indistinct. The meekness of Jesus is certainly not so adorable, so inspiring an example, as when we felt that He could have summoned legions of angels to His side, while in fact He only healed His persecutor's wound.

The investigator may now ask himself whether, like a skilful restorer, he has removed only dust and smoke, the accretions of a later day, or has unhappily cleaned away much of the inimitable, the divine picture itself. The miracles answered their highest purpose, said Neander, in vividly exhibiting the nature of Christ.

Think how unbelievers explain the presence of the miracles. First of all, there were the portents of the Old Testament, inflaming the public imagination, and forcing similar prodigies into the Messianic legend. "It was known in detail," said Strauss, "what sort of miracles Jesus, being the Messiah, must have performed." He tells us that nameless lepers were cleansed, because the heroes of the Old Testament healed Miriam for whom a nation mourned, and Naaman for whom a sovereign interceded. Six pots of water were turned into wine, to rival the plague which converted the mighty Nile into blood, of which wine is a type. A meal had to be given, lest the Messiah should be outstripped by him who fed a whole nation during forty years, and it had to be repeated because the former miracle was mentioned twice. As there were quails, with the manna, knee-deep all around the camp, therefore Jesus added fish (for which Israel had murmured vainly) to the barley-bread which made so fine a substitute for angel's food. Because the nation marched through the Red Sea, and Pharaoh was engulfed, therefore Jesus walked upon a lake, and Peter narrowly escaped with his life. Because God spoke to Moses in thunder from Mount Sinai before a whole nation which trembled, therefore two human beings appeared to Jesus on

Hermon, before three spectators who just kept awake. Such is the issue of an imperative instinct, which commanded that the Messiah should not "be outstripped." Never surely was the mythical impulse at once so busy and so modest. These absurdities are heightened by assertions that the Messiah had "to excel the prophet" Elijah, and "to do at least as much," whereas it is frankly recorded that Jesus was challenged to show a sign from heaven (as Elijah did on Carmel), and refused; and again that He rebuked His disciples for wishing, like him, to call down fire upon His enemies. Yet even Keim, in his perplexed and hesitating discussion of the first cure of leprosy, when his reluctance to admit the supernatural is well-nigh balanced by his sense of the verisimilitude of the story, appeals to the repeated mention of leprosy in the story of Moses, and to the healing of Naaman.

We shall presently have to ask the meaning of what is so plain in the above examples, the total absence of any desire to outstrip, or even to rival, the stupendous and shattering miracles which are connected with the Exodus. In the meantime, these parallel cases, in all of which the advantage of bulk and brilliance must be conceded to the earlier story, are an admirable commentary upon Schenkel's reckless phrase, "As Moses had drawn water from the rock to refresh the thirsty and had fed the hungry with manna, as Elijah and Elisha had healed the sick, how natural was it to ascribe greater and more glorious deeds to one who was unquestionably greater than Moses and more glorious than Elijah, . . . seeking by such hyperboles to give expression . . . to the sacred glow of their admiration, love, and reverence" (*Sketch* 21, 22). In candour we should have been reminded that, except the raising of Lazarus alone, every one of these remarkable hyperboles, devised by the "religiously inspired imagination" of "followers touched to the uttermost," as a rival prodigy falls absurdly short of

what it is asserted to compete with. No such explanation would explain anything, if only the average reader would compare the facts with the theories which profess to account for them.¹

In the meantime, these passages are an invaluable proof, from hostile sources, that the gospel miracles are not the natural outcome of such tendencies, and, what is more important, that the Messianic expectations, the popular demands, the requirements of the Time-Spirit, when Jesus came, would have scorned to accept any such limp and bloodless achievements as the charm of an exalted personality might work upon the nerves of the hysterical.

The explanation of the miracles by nervous excitement is, from quite another point of view, forbidden by the facts. Of all great teachers, Jesus was the most reasonable, sober, and unexciting. Every one has noticed the small part given to penalty and spiritual terrors in His treatment of all but the most stubborn and insolent sin. He imposes silence upon every approach to demonstrative and revivalistic testimony. He does not strive nor cry. In form, His teaching is often paradoxical: it pierces deep and demands everything; but it is reasonable in the purest and highest sense. The Christian war, the Christian building must not be

¹ But so deficient are most readers in this faculty of simple observation, this vigilance of the mind, that many readers were befooled by J. S. Mill's wickedly reckless assertion, "Christ is never said to have declared any evidence of His mission (unless His own interpretation of the prophecies be so considered) except internal conviction" (*Essays on Religion*, p. 240). The sting of this passage is not in any opinion which Mill may entertain, going behind the documents, about what Jesus taught. This we can take for what it is worth. What imposes on people is the assertion, by a man of intellectual rank, that more than this is never claimed for Him, "is never said." This means that He is never recorded to have said, "That ye may know that the Son of Man hath power to forgive sins, take up thy bed and walk"; nor again, "If I by the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come unto you"; nor, "If I had not done among them the works that none other man did, they had not had sin"; nor, "Believe Me for the very work's sake." The assertion is an impressive warning to the credulous, not all of whom are Christians, since it appears that Mill believed this.

undertaken without first sitting down to count the cost. If one impulsively offers to follow Jesus anywhere, he is reminded that the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head. Instead of heated nocturnal assemblies, we find ourselves in the daylight and the fresh air. Renan's eye for the picturesque has seen correctly that "Jesus lived with His disciples almost altogether in the open air. Sometimes He entered a boat, and taught them congregated on the beach. Sometimes He sat upon the mountains which fringed the lake, where the atmosphere is so pure and the horizon so lucid" (*V. de J.*, 172). But how does all this agree with the notion that overstimulated nervous excitement is the true explanation of the success of the Carpenter and His fishermen, that it worked His miracles for Him by hysterical expectation, and after His death beheld Him by consentient hallucinations, and of all times and places did this on a breezy mountain, and when they went a-fishing?

Look again at the style of Jesus. Never was teacher so full of vivid illustrations, but His allusions are not to thunder, earthquake, and volcano; they are to dawn and sunset, birds and grasses, seeds growing silently, leaven leavening the lump. Even the same image which in the Old Testament was thrown into sublime and lofty forms, becomes homely, vivid indeed and picturesque, but unstrained, when Jesus uses it. The lion out of the forest that rends them becomes a wolf that scattereth the flock. The eagle that fluttered over her young is now the hen that would have sheltered her chickens. We miss the oak, the palm, the cedar, and the terebinth; but we find instead a tiny seed that actually becomes a tree, tall enough for birds to shelter in. Read any page of Thomas Carlyle, and then any chapter of the discourses of Jesus, and it will become very plain that no teaching is less calculated to produce hallucination, extravagance, or hysterical delusions.

Precisely the same character, calm, absolutely balanced,

utterly unfit for the stimulating of false excitement, is actually to be recognised in the process of working the very miracles which are explained by popular excitement. And this fact has a double value. It not only refutes this theory, but also identifies the character of Jesus in this part of the story and in the rest, and so establishes their common origin. Thus when the belief of any sufferer is so weak as to require special confirmation, the emotions are not inflamed, but repressed and calmed; not a stimulant, but exercise is administered to faith. Some He sends to a distance, to wash at an appointed fountain, or to show themselves to the priests. Others He takes aside, withdrawing them from the excited crowd. Matter-of-fact questions are put to the excited demoniacs or their friends: What is thy name? How long is it since this came upon him? Everything is calm, and fitted to calm the patient; it is a method accurately the reverse of what the sceptical theory demands.

The same temperament reappears when the miracle is wrought. Sometimes He conveys Himself away so unobtrusively that the sufferer only discovers afterwards to whom he is indebted. Very often He charges them not to make Him known. In a moment when amazement has paralysed the practical energies of all others, Jesus is keenly observant. He provides for her healthy appetite when the daughter of Jairus has recovered; He delivers to the widow of Nain the son from whom, as from an unearthly and spell-bound being, she still held aloof; and He is careful that Lazarus should be disentangled from his graveclothes.¹ Thus He is divinely at home among His wonders, and quite as ready to remove trouble by a familiar word afterwards as by the summons which recalls the dead. In His greatest

¹ No mythical impulse could have infused into three events in various documents these curiously diverse yet harmonious touches, of which the consistent individuality is left unnoticed by Farrar, Geikie, and Edersheim. All these writers indeed have passed one or more of the charming incidents in question without mention.

miracles He is much more truly the good Physician than the dazzling Thaumaturgist.

We find, then, in the modest scale of the Christian miracles, compared with those of Jewish history, a convincing refutation of the sceptical argument, and also clear marks of identity with the admitted character of Jesus. But this is not all. His aims, and therefore the effect which His miracles should produce, were entirely different from those of Moses and of Elijah. One of these had to execute judgment on all the gods of Egypt, the other had to wring from apostate Israel the confession that only Jehovah was Elohim. The praise of Jethro (as commonly understood) is exactly what was desired by both: "Now know I that Jehovah is greater than all gods, yea, in the thing wherein they dwelt proudly." And this avowal was extorted by an overwhelming display of those physical powers for the sake of which false gods were adored, as may be clearly seen by the competition of the magicians in Egypt, and by Elijah's appeal, in rivalry with Baal, to the test of an answer by fire. What had to be made good was a supremacy in power. Therefore Egypt was visited with every form of loathsome and dreadful plague, ending in the wholesale destruction of the very flower of the nation. Therefore all nature was made to own its Master; the river rolled down blood; the sun was darkened; the sea was rent asunder by an obedient tempest; and presently the whole mountain of Sinai burned with fire up to heaven. Therefore, again, the flame of God consumed the sacrifice on Carmel, and drought and famine, and afterwards rain, were obedient to the prayers of a mortal.

Very different was the task of Jesus among a people who had no doubt whatever about the worship of Jehovah and the vanity of idols. And no more delicate problem could be devised than this one; by what degree and kind of miracle should a Messiah best authenticate his claim, who

did not profess to establish the pretensions of a new Deity, or to overwhelm a rival god, but on the contrary to establish a true character of that God who was already worshipped, and even to exhibit it, being Himself God manifest in the flesh. This problem, like many others apparently insoluble, Jesus solved without hesitation and without an effort. For it is evident that the mind of God is most clearly shown, not by what is exceptional but by His usual course, which therefore ought not to be disturbed by such an envoy, even when He overstepped its range. The convulsions of nature and the diseases of men are disorders, penal interruptions, His "strange work," and they shall cease when His full purpose is worked out. Therefore these could have no place in the works of One, in whom God was reconciling the world unto Himself, and whom He sent not to judge the world.

Now the whole work of Jesus was a restoration of harmony to convulsed nature, and of health to afflicted men. When this is observed, the alleged rivalry between Christian miracles and those of Moses and Elijah is converted into a most instructive contrast. At the bidding of Moses all the water of Egypt was polluted; Jesus only supplied wine when it had failed. Elijah smote the land with famine; Jesus only gave bread to the hungry. Moses stretched out his rod, and the sea overwhelmed Pharaoh; Jesus only rebuked the wind and the waves, and there was a great calm. All this could never have been astutely devised by the criticism of the early church, because the Apocryphal Gospels are in quite another style, and because the sceptics even of our own time are unaware of this change of tone. Thus Renan tells us that "the coming of Messiah with His glories and terrors, the nations trampling on each other, *the convulsion of heaven and earth*, were the familiar food of His imagination" (*Vie de J.*, p. 40). But Jesus actually convulses nothing. Strauss appeals to "*the production and*

cure of leprosy" in the Old Testament, and to the fact that Miriam was first visited with leprosy for having "had the audacity to rebel against her brother," and afterwards relieved, and he also mentions the punishment of Gehazi; but he omits to explain the fact that no person is thus afflicted for disrespect to Jesus. "Leprosy, and the healing of leprosy," says Keim, "appear in connection with Moses from the time when he was first called, as well as in connection with the miracle-working prophets of the ninth pre-Christian century, especially Elisha" (*Jesus of Nazara*, iii. 210, 11). But he, too, remains quite unconscious of the problem why it is that not "leprosy" but only "the healing of leprosy" has been taken over into the New Testament, by the mythical impulse, so jealous of those exploits.

In truth, Neander is right when he insists that the miracles are a part of Christ's humiliation. They are so because, intentionally and in the face of taunt and challenge, He abstains from all glittering and conspicuous works, neither casting Himself from the temple summits, nor exhibiting "a sign from heaven," nor granting to "this generation," to official inquisition or to the public in bulk, and as a whole, any sign whatever, not so much as thunder in barley harvest or the return of a shadow on a dial. They are so because, in every one of them, Jesus is among us as He that serveth, breaking the bread for the hungry, rudely awakened by the terrified, touching the defilement of the leper, the bleeding wound of Malchus, the cold and defiling hand of the dead. They are so, again, because, unlike any wonderworker of the Old Testament, He was disobeyed and slandered with absolute impunity. He charged the restored not to make Him known, but they blazed it the more abroad, yet retained their health: He asked, Where are the nine? yet their cleansing held good: the impotent man betrayed Him to a hostile quest, but we read not that any worse thing came upon him.

And yet, in the midst of this lowly gentleness, there is one respect, and that all-important, in which His works are entirely without a parallel. They are wrought by no invocation of any greater name. Instead of soliciting, He bestows. And it is a strong evidence of the consistent truth of the story, that very early indeed this peculiarity was observed by every one, so that the bystanders said, With authority He commandeth even the unclean spirits; and the centurion compared His action to that of an officer saying, Go, and Come; and the Pharisees demanded, By what authority doest Thou these things?

It is a strange irony that the only apparent exception is found in that Gospel which is loudly charged with suppressing all the lowlier and more human manifestations of His nature. It is in the words, Father, I thank Thee that Thou hast heard Me.

In the miracles of Jesus He is meek, unobtrusive, willing that His followers should perform greater works than these. But they are the manifestations of a God who is not above but within Him, and they are quiet, beautiful and benignant as the ordinary ways of God; even as He said, Many fair (*καλά*) works have I shown you from My Father.

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