

THE SENSE OF SIN IN GREAT LITERATURE.

V.

HERE AND THERE.

THE objection may be taken to these studies, that we are dealing with rare and unusual personalities ; that therefore the inferences which we deduce from their behaviour *in extremis* are good only for them and are not authoritative for average human beings. Well : there are many things to be said by way of answer or qualification to such a criticism. For example : it is surely a presumption in favour of the universality which is claimed for these tragic moods and protests, that they awaken a response in the souls of those who either choose to come within hearing of them ; or, is it when men are reduced by life to some constraint or fear, the language of great literature becomes their own natural speech. It is not claimed that all men dwell habitually among those deep things. It is not claimed even that all men have had experience of those deep things. What is claimed is that those deep things are there ; that the soul of man is capable of and liable to the vision of those depths ; and that whenever the soul has been thrown back upon itself, and shut in with itself, there are certain persistent fears which present themselves, and a certain course which offers itself as the only possible way of peace.

The deeper literature of the soul, with an unanimity which makes it authoritative for many of us and ought to make it worthy of consideration by all responsible people (the deeper literature of the soul) has given a name and body to those intangible things.

To say that there are many who have never had such feelings is simply to say that their great day,—that day on earth wherein the soul rehearses what its behaviour shall

be before the Great White Throne,—their great day has not yet come. Or it may only mean that they have so far succeeded in escaping from a season of loneliness long enough and acute enough to bring out those lurking shapes.

Certainly it is no news to those of us who are acquainted with that great body of the literature of the soul, the Bible, to be told that all men have not these tremors and disquietudes. "All men have not faith," said St. Paul, meaning, when he wrote the words, this very thing, that all men have not this moral tenderness which keeps us soft towards God. Plato also discriminates between "royal" natures, as he calls them, natures, that is to say, which are liable to waves of contrition, and natures of another kind which, so far as we see,—but then in these matters we do not see very far and can only see for ourselves,—live on without ever coming to a day of reckoning with themselves.

In our own day, William James of Harvard divided all souls into two classes,—souls which, with a measure of predestination, are tough, and souls which, by an equal necessity, are tender.

It is another aspect of the greatness of Jesus that in His view the human soul in its final instincts and necessities is *one*, however certain features may have been heightened or depressed. He believed that the true and final nature of the soul is to seek, and having found, to dwell in communion with, Him whom He called "the Father." He believed that if the Father were brought to the heart of man, as He by His own unstinted life of love was bringing Him, the heart of man in every instance would respond. Not easily indeed. With great difficulty and labour rather, as happens at every new birth.

But this He did believe, and in this faith He gave Himself without reserve, that there was and is in every human being the capacity for seeing something higher than its own

reach at any moment, and that, when the human spirit becomes aware of that Presence of God knocking and waiting at its own very door, there and then begins a controversy between impulses which, whatever be the issue, makes the man morally self-conscious and a party to his own fate.

Whether or not all men are ultimately liable to the miseries which follow wrong-doing, or to the shame and sorrow which afflict souls of a certain kind when they see themselves in the light of some holier way, is a matter so serious that it is wiser not to dogmatise upon it. It must be left to ourselves one by one to say whether we have such feelings, or do not have them. It may be that once upon a time we did have them. But they do not trouble us now. In that case, we ought to ask ourselves whether we dealt honourably by them when they visited us, or whether we tampered with the delicate mechanism of our spiritual life and trampled down the secret barriers of God.

Once again, it may be said that all this agonising over one's ways has lost its reason and foundation by the work in various fields of the scientific method. If moral grief appears to-day in literature or in life, it is a reminiscence from pre-scientific times. In short, to recall the phrase with which these studies began—"no one to-day is worrying about his sins." Well now, let me say one or two things just there.

It is probably quite true that in our day the sense of sin is much fainter than it has been; for the sense of God may not be so strong as it has been. The sense of sin is the shadow of the sense of God; and a dim light casts no shadow. It is the bright shining of a light which discovers us to ourselves. It is inevitable that in a society which is without moral seriousness, the individual, if he does not summon himself each day before a higher court, will come more and more into equilibrium with his surroundings. But this

is not to say that he has lost the power to feel the misery of his own way, if the higher way should be revealed to him. And besides, populous and confusing as is the general life in these days, one's soul is always distinct to itself and keeps urging its own business upon each one's attention. It is true that there are many ways by which we may for a time escape from ourselves. We may even train our mind to an extraordinary pitch of ingenuity for escaping seriousness. And yet all the time we know that we are merely evading something, we know that we are living by our wits. It is not without significance that the best-known poem of Francis Thompson should be "The Hound of Heaven." It but shows that there the poet had revealed the thoughts of many hearts.

So long as a man believes himself, he will believe in the unhappiness of wrong-doing and he will know precisely wherein for him wrong-doing consists. It is when we cease to believe ourselves, and begin to believe other people; it is when we take our eyes off our own case and let them wander carelessly upon the general life; it is when we say—"Why should I trouble myself, in this busy city where the crowds are passing to and fro, and where other people are not troubling themselves?"—it is then and thus that we escape the very issue which bears witness to our moral worth in the world. Now the fact is that those crowds who help us to get over our own scruples are made up of individuals like ourselves, who, so far as we know, are doing precisely what we are doing, avoiding the challenge of some personal question by looking out upon what seems the fashion or custom. So long as we keep our eyes upon ourselves we feel we must decide something. Whereas when we look away from ourselves and begin to speak about the spirit of the time, about progress, about enlightenment and so forth, we begin to feel that everything has already been

decided, and decided in a way that falls in very happily with our own inclination.

But once again it is simply not true, if one may judge from the best writing of our own time, that man has found a formula for the silencing of those ancient voices of the soul. Book after book has appeared in our day, where one might even say the author has tried to prove a case against the established moral habit and prejudice. He has launched a human being out upon life on some principle which is against the social tradition. And yet I know of no single case where the end is not bitterness. I know of no case in any piece of serious literature where a person, or persons, who flout the accepted morality in fundamental things, gain happiness: I mean, of course, such a happiness as they themselves can bear to think about and to look back upon. You may say, indeed, that the reason for this is, that society itself is so constituted, so hide-bound by conventionality, so timid, so insincere and hypocritical, that souls who will be free must suffer. But that is not my point. That men suffer at the hands of society is, of course, no proof that they are wrong. It may be proof that society is wrong. It is true likewise that it will only be by the faithful endurance of suffering at the hand of society that society itself will be renewed. It would be no disparagement of a life's principles that they nailed a man to a cross. But it is a disparagement of a life's principles that they lead on to private misery, that they provoke an invincible reaction towards shame and bitterness. And that is what I find in every sincere piece of writing in which the dice are not loaded, in which, I mean to say, the writer obeys with fidelity the logic of his own imagination. The thing in the long run does not work. Not only does it not work, and will it not work, on the large scale as a social habit; it does not work in the kingdom of a man's own spirit. If you still

protest that this liability to remorse, this tendency of self-seeking to leave the taste of ashes in the mouth, is simply the reminiscence in our blood of barbarous and hideous social retributions before these days of enlightenment, once again you leave the real issue untouched. For human nature is just that thing which has come down through history bearing within itself those profound and terrible susceptibilities.

But it is not enough to say that this misery which free spirits cannot escape is the reminiscence of the social penalties of earlier times, or that it is the effect of the attitude of society to-day towards one who violates its conventions. Society has not the power to cause moral misery. Society has the power to inflict penalty ; society has not the power to make one ashamed of himself. There is a quality of misery which I alone can bring upon myself and it arises when at length I have come within sight of a way of living which makes the way I have come seem unworthy, or cruel, or sensual, in any case intolerable.

So long as my own heart does not reproach me, so long as, in the fine speech of the Bible, I can lift up my face to God without spot, I may suffer, I may be forsaken, but, deeper than everything, I ought to be at peace, my heart should be free of even one drop of bitterness. I ought, indeed, to be contemptuous of a society or of a generation which is so blind as not to see the glory of the way which I have chosen. Suffering, indeed, is no proof that a man's life-principles are at fault ; the society which inflicts the suffering, or stands by while it is being endured, may be at fault. In such a case, the man's life-principles, though they are opposed to the principles of his day, may all the time be in harmony with the principles of a day that is coming. But misery, the taste of ashes in the mouth, personal shame, the sense of world-weariness, these, when they follow upon

some way of life, and when they arise in the human heart out of some way of life, do demonstrate that that way of life is contrary to the man's own true nature and spirit. For a way of life which destroys the very principles of human nature cannot be according to the nature of things.

"And so," I said, "Good-bye to London!" We said no more, but watched the South-side streets below—bright gleams of light and movement, and the dark, dim, monstrous shapes of houses and factories. We ran through Waterloo Station, London Bridge, New Cross, St. John's. We never said a word. It seemed to me that for a time we had exhausted our emotions. We had escaped, we had cut our knot, we had accepted the penalty. That was all settled. That harvest of feelings we had reaped. I thought now only of London, of London as the symbol of all we were leaving and all we had lost in the world. I felt nothing now but an enormous and overwhelming regret. . . . Then suddenly, stabbing me to the heart, came a vision of Margaret's tears and the sound of her voice . . . I came out of a cloud of thoughts to discover the narrow compartment with its feeble lamp overhead, and our rugs and hand-baggage swaying on the rack, and Isabel, very still in front of me, gripping some wilting red roses tightly in her bare and ringless hand.

For a moment I could not understand her attitude, and then I perceived she was sitting bent together with her head averted from the light to hide the tears that were streaming down her face. She had not got her handkerchief out for fear I should see this, but I saw her tears, dark drops of tears upon her sleeve.

For a time I stared at her and was motionless in a sort of still and weary amazement. Why had we done this injury to one another? Why? Then something stirred within me.

"Isabel," I whispered.

She made no sign.

"Isabel!" I repeated, and then crossed over to her, crept closely to her, put my arm about her, and drew her wet cheek to mine."

So ends a great modern story. But surely this sad way is the wrong way. It is not that they are suffering which proves that they are wrong. Their chief suffering is that they know that they are wrong.

"Sail in there," cried an old admiral, when the fight had gone against him, "sail in there; for I have taken the

soundings, and when they sink my ship, the flag at the mast-head will still be flying." That is the language of a man whose heart is with him in the deep waters. But "wet cheeks, silence, wilting red roses"—these are signs that their own heart has gone out of the business.

The last thing about us is that we are not alone. When we look long and deeply into ourselves, we perceive that we stand for ever in a relation to Another, to an Absolute and close-fitting Personality. We can no more think of ourselves as quite alone and independent than we can think of space except as being surrounded by space, and of time except as surrounded by time. Whatever may be the truth in regard to other races, it is true with regard to us, that the only God with whom we have to do is the God of our fathers. We can free ourselves from the bondage of one aspect of His nature only by appealing to another aspect, which we claim as belonging still more properly to Him, more central and abiding.

I do not know how better to describe the private misery which, on the witness of all great literature, has been let loose in men's hearts by certain ways than to say, that it is the experience by us of an intolerable loneliness. We can all of us endure loneliness in one region of our life, so long as we are sustained by friendliness and belief in us, in another region deeper and more intimate. We can bear to be misunderstood by those who do not know us, so long as we are supported by the love, or, if need be, by the patience of those who know us to some depth. And even when friends forsake us, when the one or two on whom we leaned fall away, if we can still without conscious self-deception send our soul more deeply into itself and there find comfort and no embarrassment; if, to use language concerning matters about which language fails, we can look across the frontier of our own personality and truly believe that we are not

outcasts or outlaws from the Kingdom of God,—we may suffer, we will suffer, but we have not failed, and we are not unhappy. The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit that we are sons of God. But, if it is otherwise with us, if when we descend into ourselves for solace, we find none ; if, when we would lean upon our last Resource and make our protest from the judgment of the world to Him who knows everything ; if there and then we are alone ; if the Face we plead with seems to be turned away from us, —we have come, I think, upon that final silence and disapproval from which there is no appeal.

This was an idea which more than once our Lord dwelt upon. In some of His gravest words He warned men that the penalty for certain courses was not the pain which they entailed. The true penalty was—the consequence, and that consequence was that one day they should be left out of something. It might be the society of men. It might be the friendship of those who had been dear to them. It might even be the Fellowship of God.

And the great cries of the soul in literature and in life are the cries of those who are afraid of that loneliness, or who already are tasting the bitterness of it.

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NOTES ON THE FOURTH GOSPEL.

XVIII. THE RESURRECTION (John xx.).

(1) It is not necessary here to discuss the general problem of the evidence for the Resurrection ; we are now concerned only with the narrative in this chapter and the light it throws on the question of the authorship, character, and credibility of this Gospel. In the first division of the chapter (*vv.* 1–10) the visit of Peter and the other disciple to the tomb to verify Mary Magdalene's report that it