

*THE RAINBOW.*

## REVELATION vi. 3.

THE rainbow appears, and vanishes, and reappears in the Biblical very much as it does in the natural world. It spans the sky of the very first book in the Bible, where it is raised to the power of a covenant—made the symbol of the most generous and unconditional of covenants, a covenant in which God pledges Himself, but exacts no pledge from man. It reappears in the writings of the prophets; their allusions to the covenant with Noah being frequent and pathetic. And, finally, in the very last book of the Bible, it is raised to a still higher power, and shines round the throne of God in heaven.

A phenomenon so lovely, so delicate and spiritual, as the rainbow has naturally excited the imagination, not of the poets alone, but even of the commentators, who, not very justly I think, are commonly regarded as the dullest and least imaginative of men. They have found in it a symbol of whatever unites in itself the earthly and the heavenly, the human and the divine; and some of the earlier of them ventured to call Christ Himself "the Rainbow," because in his person the human and the Divine natures are reconciled and commingled. But so to generalize the spiritual meaning and intention of the rainbow is to cast away that which is special and peculiar to it; for there are many other natural phenomena which blend earthly and heavenly elements. Here, as almost everywhere else, the simplest and most obvious interpretation of the symbol is at once the most

definite and the best. And by any unsophisticated mind the dark raincloud across which the bow is bent is taken as a symbol of the sins by which men obscure their inner heaven, or of the judgments which dog their sins ; while the sunshine which casts the bow on the cloud is taken as a symbol of the Divine Love that absolves men from their sins, of that Mercy which is the final intention of judgment. So often as this fair and delicate apparition appears in the sky, hallowing and etherealizing the tear-besprinkled earth, we are reminded of the cleansing power of penitence, of the Compassion which seeks to make our lives the brighter and the sweeter for our very sins, of the lavish and inalienable Goodness which, by a divine alchemy, draws new promise and new hope even from our darkest transgressions. It is impossible—if at least we give our natural piety fair play—to look thoughtfully at the bow shining in a sky in which light is at the point to triumph over darkness, bending over an earth sweetened and enriched by the very rains which have fallen on it, and transfiguring it into a pure and mystic beauty, without receiving from it, as our first and deepest impression, an assurance that “God’s love is more than all our sins,” that somehow good is to be the final goal of ill, that the whole creation is moving on to some far-off divine event which will solve all the problems and redress all the wrongs of time. The sun does not shine on every shower, nor glorify every cloud ; but when it does shine on and through the streaming rain, it throws a light of promise over the world. And therefore the rainbow is an incarnate promise ; it is the very embodiment of

hope. It speaks, or should speak, to us of a time when evil shall be overcome by good. It assures us that there *is* an answer to all the problems by which we are perplexed, though perhaps we cannot reach it yet; and that we *shall* reach and rejoice in it some day. It assures us that there is a remedy for all the ills under which we groan, and that this remedy will be applied, if not within, yet beyond the borders and coasts of time.

And perhaps the fact that both the prophet Ezekiel and the seer in the isle of Patmos saw a rainbow *round the throne of heaven* may involve a hint that, so long as we are compassed about with the infirmities and limitations of the flesh, we must not expect to solve the problems, or to escape the trials, which afflict us now and here; it may imply that only when that which is spiritual has come, only when we ourselves have become "pure heavenly," only when we stand before the throne, will the long, sad, mysterious story of Time unfold its true meaning, and all the way in which God has led us be explained and justified by the end to which it has conducted us.

To us, as to Noah and his family, the rainbow is a sign, a proof, a prediction that mercy is to rejoice over judgment: to them it brought the assurance that, let men sin as they would, God would never again sweep them away with a flood; and to us it brings the assurance that, let men sin as they may, and whatever the miseries they may breed by their sins for a time, all the darknesses and sorrows of human life are to be penetrated and suffused by the transfiguring light of the Divine Love. It suggests

that the end is to vindicate and crown the work of God.

No promise is more welcome to us than this ; and therefore it has a fitting symbol in the rainbow, than which no natural phenomenon is more delicately beautiful or more suggestive of hope. But no promise is more incredible to us ; for we see neither that it is being, nor how it is to be, accomplished : and therefore it is, I suppose, that as the rainbow gleams along the whole Bible from end to end, so this promise of the final victory of good is wrought into the very substance of Scripture from its commencement to its close. In the very first book of the Bible we hear of a salvation committed, for a time, to a single race, in order that, through them, all the families of the earth may be blessed. And from that time onward the promise grows even more full and distinct. Thus Isaiah never wearies of depicting the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness shall dwell. Joel breaks into an extasy as he sees the Spirit of God poured out *on all flesh*—young men and maidens, old men and children, freemen and slaves. Zephaniah can rejoice in the very judgments of Jehovah, because he sees that by these God will turn *to the nations* a pure lip and cause them to serve Him with one shoulder, until *all the isles of the heathen*, every one from its place, shall worship Him. In like manner Habakkuk looks through all the clouds and terrors of time, and sees *the whole earth* filled with the knowledge of God as the water covers the deep. Malachi affirms that men are passed through the furnace which burns up all unrighteousness, only that *from the rising of the sun*

*to the going down thereof* God's name may be great among the nations, and that *in every place* incense may be burned to his name, and a pure worship be offered on the altar of the universal heart. The Gospels reveal a Sacrifice which taketh away the sin *of the world*, a Cross which is to draw *all men* to Christ and change them into his image, and a kingdom which is to rule over all. St. Paul affirms that God has shut up all under sin, that He may have mercy on *all*. St. Peter speaks of a salvation which extends even to Hades, throws open the prison-doors of the disobedient dead, and rescues even the guilty race which was swept away by the Flood. And in the last book of the Bible St. John rifles the whole universe of its splendours in order to set forth the glory of that city and kingdom in which *the nations* of the saved walk in white. True, there is another side to this bright and glowing picture. The very prophets, who labour to depict the wide all-embracing sweep of the Divine Compassion and Love, speak also of searching and terrible judgments to be executed on the ungodly both in this world and in that which is to come. But what we have to mark is that they speak of these very judgments as designed to cleanse and purify either men or the world in which they are to dwell; and that beyond these dark clouds of judgment they invariably see a land of righteousness and peace and joy, a whole world of renewed men walking in a new earth and beneath a new heaven.

*We* need not faintly trust the larger hope, therefore. We may be sure that our largest hopes for men will be transcended. And we need the assurance, and to be constantly reminded of it. For we

are too apt to walk with eyes fixed on the ground, or lifted only to take in the narrow range of facts and events immediately around us. And *here*, we can often detect no sign of progress, no prophecy of hope. *We* are so weak and so wicked, and the world close around us is, for the most part, not only weak, but so unconscious of its weakness—not only wicked, but so indifferent to its wickedness—that we often lose hope both for ourselves and for the world at large. We need, therefore, to look out on human life through the eyes of the prophets, and to see the vast prophetic hope which, for them at least, stretches across the whole horizon and sheds down its clear spiritual light on the whole family of man. The clouds just above and around us may be dark and threatening; a cold and bitter rain may be falling on us: but, see, the sun is breaking through the clouds, and shining on them; faint and broken gleams of colour tremble through the air, melt into each other, and take definite form; the bow spans the sky, and, under its magical hues, the whole earth is transformed; the birds break forth into singing, the flowers kindle their censers and fill the air with fragrance. We all know what lovely and delicate transformations take place as the bow gleams forth on the clouds; how it seems at once to hallow and to brighten the earth, so that, standing beneath its vast mystic arch, we feel as though we had entered some great temple and were taking part in an act of solemn and elevating worship. And the change thus wrought on the face of nature, or on the eyes with which we regard it, is not more pure and gladdening than the change wrought upon our hearts when once we grasp

the truth it symbolizes and rest upon it. To believe that, because God is love, He is for ever educing good from ill, and that, through all its sins and miseries, the world is passing on to righteousness, charity, peace—this is, as it were, to have a rainbow for ever shining in our beclouded hearts; it is to gain a clear sustaining hope which hallows and spiritualizes our whole conception of human life. With this great hope for the world's future, we cease to mind earthly things; for our hearts are set on seeing men grow, not in power, or wealth, or ease, but in righteousness and love. And from this hope, moreover, we draw strength and courage for all our endeavours to raise men and better them. We cannot despair of a world which God is saving, which He has declared that He will save at all costs. We cannot forbode failure for any enterprise which is honestly intended to instruct or elevate it; for we know that, in taking part in them, we are working towards the very end which God Himself has in view.

And while we gain this large hope for the world, we may also gain a better hope, and therefore a more stedfast design and a firmer endeavour, for our individual lives. There is a latent rainbow in every single drop of dew, as well as in the streaming shower. And there must be hope for every man, or how could there be hope for all men? *We*, we may be sure, are included, in common with our fellows, in the vast design which embraces the renewal of the human race, the salvation of the world.

And if any of us are called to pass through many and searching sorrows, we shall do well to remember

that those who live in the high lands, and are most exposed to shower and storm, see most of the rainbow too. To be much exposed to trial is to be brought very near to that Love, touched by which all clouds grow bright with hope.

Nor do I think it fanciful to derive from the Scripture use of the rainbow a hint on that great mystery, the purpose and function of evil. We soon grow weary of staring colours and blazing suns ; but who ever grew weary of the subdued and tender hues of the rainbow ? And, perchance, the irradiation of our sin-obscured lives by the stedfast love of God may yield a more tender and pathetic beauty, a beauty more various and mystical, than the clear outshining of his goodwill in cloudless skies. Man *may* rise by his very fall, and become the more like God by a knowledge of good and evil.<sup>1</sup>

But as yet I have only touched on the rainbow and its spiritual suggestions, its incentives to hope ; I have said nothing about the rainbow *round the throne* of heaven, or nothing beyond this : that, probably, the rainbow is carried on and up into heaven in order to intimate that its prediction of a happy solution to all the problems of time will be fulfilled only when we enter heaven and put on immortality. But do we thus exhaust the meaning of the position given to the bow of hope in the passage before us ? We do not even touch what I take to be its chief meaning. If St. John transfers earthly symbols to the heavenly world, it is only reasonable to assume that he uses them in their familiar sense, in order that he may thus convey to

<sup>1</sup> Genesis iii. 22.

us some faint conception of mysteries which we do not comprehend. If he uses them in a wholly new sense, what can they teach us of the new world into which he lifts our thoughts? No, we may be sure that he uses them in their old sense, and wishes us to transfer the conceptions they suggest into that strange heavenly world. But in that case heaven can hardly be either the place, or the state, which many of us have assumed it to be. For, as we have seen, the rainbow is the symbol of a heavenly light shining on earthly clouds; it is the symbol of a Divine Love penetrating, suffusing, transfiguring, the wrongs and sins and miseries of time: it is a prophecy of the final triumph of good over evil. And if there is a rainbow in the sky of heaven, must there not be problems there which we shall not be able to solve, and perhaps sufferings the full meaning of which we shall not be able to see, even though we are being made perfect by them? Must not the rainbow round the throne be intended to remind us that, even in heaven, God, and God's ways, must remain inscrutable to us, and to promise us that, as we advance in the heavenly life and get nearer to "the throne," we shall nevertheless more and more fully apprehend Him and his ways? It may be that when we reach the heavenly shore, we shall be able to look back and see our earthly life in a new light which shall explain and justify it to us; but in that new and vaster life on which we shall then enter must there not be much which we cannot grasp at once, and perhaps even a discipline in wisdom and holiness which will be so far in advance

of that whereunto we have attained as that, at times, it may pain and perplex us ?

Opposed as such a conception of heaven may be to the assumptions current in the Church, it is in full accord with the teachings both of reason and of Holy Writ. St. John, for example, tells us in the immediate context,<sup>1</sup> that he saw a door opened in heaven, that he went through the door, and beheld the worship of the heavenly temple. In a pause of the worship a strong angel brings a sacred roll, a scripture—or rather seven scriptures in one roll, each of which has its own seal—and demands who will break the seal and read the writings. Here, then, was a mystery in heaven ; here was a sealed scripture, containing a sevenfold disclosure of the Divine Will ; and of all the inhabitants of heaven not one was “ found worthy,” or “ able to open the book, or even to look thereon.” Only the Lamb could do that. And whatever else and more all this may mean, can it mean less than this—that, at least at the date at which St. John wrote, there were mysteries of the Divine Will utterly unfathomable to the denizens of heaven until Christ interpreted those mysteries to them ?

So, again, in Chapter vi. verse 9, we are told that St. John saw the souls of the martyrs gathered under the altar on which they had been slain, and heard them cry out with a loud voice, “ How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth ? ” Here, once more, was a mystery in heaven, a painful and perplexing mystery—justice postponed, if not denied,

<sup>1</sup> Revelation iv. and v.

and the souls of the faithful martyrs held back, in some ineffable way, from the reward for which they yearned.

Now surely, if St. John's picture of the heavenly world has any truth or force for us, that world must include in it many problems not solved, or solvable, by the intellect of the redeemed, and some which even press painfully on their hearts.

And can any modest and reasonable man suppose that, the very moment he enters heaven, *he* will comprehend the mysteries which St. John could make nothing of till an interpreting angel was sent to explain them to him? that he will at once, or ever, master *all* the wonders and secrets of the spiritual world? Can any modest and reasonable man imagine that he will find out the Almighty to perfection the very instant he is admitted to his presence? Must not the Infinite ever remain a mystery to the finite? Must not God ever be, and do, that which it will task, and perplex, and baffle our feeble intellects to explain and vindicate?

Nor let any man say that *this* is but a poor heaven as compared with that which he has been wont to anticipate. If it seem poorer to any man, that is only because it is so much greater and richer. For what can be a more noble and attractive prospect to any reflective and devout mind than this: to be always advancing in wisdom and holiness, yet ever to see stretching before us new fields of wisdom to be traversed, new attainments to be won; to be ever drawing nearer to God, yet ever to find in Him new wonders, new depths, new claims on our confidence and love and praise? If there be *a cloud*

of impenetrable mystery around his throne, a *rainbow* gleams upon the cloud, assuring us that the cloud is big with mercy, fraught with benediction, and that, while we shall come to apprehend its wonders as we press onward, we shall nevertheless find in them ever new wonders to awe and attract and delight our souls. It is the wonder of *this* world—the secrets to be discovered in it, the anomalies which are for ever being reduced to law, the apparent discords and contradictions which are for ever being resolved into harmony, which render it so attractive, so instructive, so dear to us. And shall the heavenly world be poorer and less wonderful than this? We may be sure that it is not. We may be sure that, when we rise into it, we shall enter into a vast realm of wonders, transcending not our present powers of conception alone, but all finite powers, a world ever new, ever various, ever beckoning us on to new endeavours and new attainments. To the thoughtful and devout no prospect can be more alluring; to them, therefore, the very throne of God grows the more beautiful, and the more precious, for the rainbow round about the throne. CARPUS.

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