

## A Vision of Service: The Pleiades.

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“When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that Thou visitest him?”

IN a recent number of the *CHURCHMAN* (January, 1911) there appeared an interesting and suggestive article, entitled “Restricted Horizons: A Plea for Breadth.” I desire in the following paper to extend the horizon of duty and of hope yet further, to the heights and breadths of the redeemed creation of God.

The words of the psalm which head my article seem to me to serve a double office. They first of all deny the old principles of astrology. That mysterious science swayed the world both in the East and in the West till the dawn of the eighteenth century; and this science is still in full force in China under the teaching of Taoism. I have in my possession a large collection of books full of the curious arts of this system, given to me before his baptism by a former professor of the art. Tennyson, in his drama “Harold,” puts into the mouths of a courtier and of Morcar these words:

“Lo! there once more—this is the seventh night!  
Yon grimly-glaring, treble-brandished scourge  
Of England. . . .  
It glares in heaven, it flares upon the Thames,  
The people are as thick as bees below,  
They hum like bees,—they cannot speak—for awe.”

To which Stigand replies:

“War there, my son? Is that the doom of England?”

And Harold:

“Why not the doom of all the world as well?  
For all the world sees it as well as England.  
These meteors came and went before our day,  
Not harming any. . . .”

Representing thus the faith in this superstition, and also the scepticism about it, 900 years ago.

This art continues also in the imagination of the not inconsiderable multitude who consult and believe in almanacks, such as are largely read at the present day. David will have none of it : "When I consider Thy heavens, as I keep watch over my flock by night, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, I know then that it is not the stars which remember man and control his destiny, and visit him for judgment or for mercy ; but it is Thou, Lord, who didst make the stars."

But now, in the second place, do the words suggest that there is a true astrology—namely, a family connection, and perchance a family sympathy, between the multitude of stars and yet greater multitude, perhaps, of planets and this earth, which has been called "the sorrowful star"? The learned astrologer in "Guy Mannering" is made to explain that the influence of the constellations is powerful indeed, but that the influence of Him who made the heavens is more powerful still. Bacon, while rejecting the old elaborate astrology, full of superstition, yet thought that there was something in the science, and that the stars had something to do with man. Is this possible, and if so, is it of any practical importance and interest to us?

The words of the psalm which I have quoted may, I think, be paraphrased thus : When I consider, Lord, Thy constant upholding and sustaining care over the majestic stars and planets which fill the sky, I wonder that Thou couldst spend time and thought for this small earth, far off from Thee by sin, and for mankind, deliberately wandering from the mighty Maker. Can it be that this one stray sheep from the great sheepfold on the celestial mountains can be thought of, and remembered, and sought for by Thee? Yes, and honoured afterwards by Thy very coming ; for "we see Jesus made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour, that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man." And this at once makes possible the idea of con-

nection and of sympathy—far off, indeed, but of influence more potent than we imagine—between this earth and the other members of God's great family in creation.

I saw Donati's comet in 1858, and also the great comet of 1861-62, flaming more in pity than in fury over China, distracted by the T'ai'ping rebellion. "The very stars in their courses," we read, "fought against Sisera." And was not the star in the east, the star of Bethlehem, partly a pledge sent from afar, from those depths of grace through which just before the multitudes of the hymning heavenly hosts had come, that the heavens and the earth are truly one in sympathy and in eternal destiny?

This subject has been brought to my mind by special observation of the Pleiades. Any who were awake and stirring at a very early hour in July, 1905, would have been rewarded by most entrancing sights of glory and beauty. I was during that month in the hills west of Ningpo, in the province of Chekiang. The dawn was just breaking at a quarter to four, and on the now lucid eastern sky the morning stars were blazing, a double phosphor, for both the morning star, Venus, and Saturn were rising over the still hidden sun; and by their side, only a little above them, the Pleiades were riding in extreme beauty. In three months' time that constellation had reversed its place, and, instead of rising just before the rising sun, it rose in the dull autumn evenings exactly at sunset, for some days together, and culminated at midnight.

Now, with this is connected a significant fact in the history of the world. Just this period, and marked especially by this phenomenon of the Pleiades rising at sunset, is the time observed in ancient days, and observed still, for mourning for the dead—an almost universal mourning, apparently for a universal sorrow. This period, or the days near to it on either side, is observed in the far North and in the far South, and in the East we have it in China. The mid-autumn festival is the anniversary of the release for a time of the spirits in prison, their reincarceration, and the propitiatory offerings in memory of the dead. And in

the West, sad Hallowe'en, All Souls' Day, and the more joyful and hopeful All Saints', coincide with the Pleiades rising through the gloaming. For whom is this universal mourning for the dead intended? No special names are commemorated, but a sorrow seems to come sighing up from the buried ages, which touches, or should touch, all mankind. It is remarkable that this is the exact period of the bursting of the flood which destroyed the old world; and it is not unreasonable to believe that we have here, besides the growing weight of testimony afforded by geology, a significant hint of the universality of the flood. The history of that catastrophe might indeed have been spread all over the new world by the sons of Noah; but it seems more probable that the legends of the flood which are found among all nations are the records of those signs of the universal cataclysm which the new human race found then in all lands. The Chinese highly-coloured legend of the great Yü, and his subduing of the flood, falls well within the limits of Noah's life. Call it a mere fancy, yet I dare to imagine that the great doom and sorrow of this "sorrowful star," in a rising mist of tears, was caught up by the watching, sympathizing heavens. The Pleiades have a feature almost unique, I think, in the visible heavens—that of incessantly flashing clear and then half disappearing. Tennyson's description of them refers to this—"A swarm of fireflies tangled in a silver braid"—and this silver braid, like mist, partially hides them continually. Is this the mist of ancient tears—sorrow for the sins which brought the flood, and for the obstinacy of the dead in rejecting the long-suffering of God through 120 years of warning?

Not pausing to notice here the references to the Pleiades in Homer, in Horace, and elsewhere, and also in ancient Chinese literature, it is an interesting fact to remember that in the Book of Job (which we will make bold to regard as history, and not as mere drama), the Lord Himself, subduing and ending Job's distressed assertion of self-righteousness by one glimpse of the power of His works, refers to the Pleiades and their "sweet influence," which may point to the halcyon days which often

brood over the sea at the time of their sunset rising ; or it may refer to other and more mysterious influences.

But it may be said that mere fancy is of little practical value. Is there any hint in the Bible of this almost immeasurably distant sympathy and union between the celestial order and our own ? I think there is one passage of the utmost significance and interest. I remember attending a Thursday afternoon prayer-meeting in the Church Missionary House a few years ago. The leader, instead of mentioning special items of missionary information, directed our thoughts to one great object and result of our work, far beyond the bounds of this wide, yet little earth : "To the intent that now unto the principalities and the powers in the heavenly places might be made known through the Church the manifold wisdom of God." It is noteworthy that this great result follows immediately after St. Paul's reference to this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, making all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which from all ages has been hid in God, who created all things.

I believe that one feature in the explanation of the philosophy of the plan of salvation will be that the knowledge of the fall of man and of the redemption effected only through the precious blood of the Son of God, made known to all creation, will make sin for evermore impossible. The speaker at the meeting to which I refer suggested that, amidst apparent failure in our enterprise, the certainty of this final and vaster success, affecting all creation (for are not the principalities and powers in the heavenly places most probably there in the "many mansions," our Lord's own wealth of stars and countless planets?)—the thought of this might well remove all idea of discouragement. But it is important to avoid even the suspicion of the possibility of failure in the work of the world's redemption ; for it is the news and the subtle omnipresent effect of that redemption which, made known to these principalities and powers, will thus affect for eternal good the eternal inheritance. My subject in no sense belittles the work of the redemption of this earth ; it

rather ennobles it further and enhances its value. If the Gospel triumphs, then all is well in all worlds. If it fails, then all fails. And this thought lifts us to that consideration which (if I mistake not) astronomical science is endorsing—namely, that this world is in reality the very centre of all creation. The earth is the active dominant partner, the “hub” of the solar system, and that system lies in the heart of other systems of suns and planets. Our earth is in the Milky Way, and these great solar systems are in the actual centre of that pathway of souls, that broad beam of silvery light spanning the heavens, and containing, it may be, all the hundred millions of God’s stars, by perspective arranged thus to our sight, with outriding stars on either side. Is this so? Something must account for the Psalmist’s explanation. I consider Thy heavens, full of great planets and vaster stars. Why on this little earth are Thy love and care concentrated? Is it for this reason that the earth is the beating heart and centre of all creation, and that God’s wisdom, justice, righteousness, power, and boundless love—exhibited and active here by the grace of his Divine Spirit, who “garnished the heaven,” and by the grace of His dear Son, “without whom was not anything made that was made”—affect now, and will for evermore affect, all for good, all creation, to His glory?

“Man,” say the Chinese, “is the soul of all things.” My subject is not so unpractical, and transcendental, and imaginative, after all, but of practical import. For if so, what a supremely noble and magnificent enterprise is this once despised and still much criticized mission work? Sir Francis Younghusband, in a lecture on India delivered at Cambridge, spoke in words of enthusiasm of the grandeur and sublimity of our task in India, treating the people there, not so much as subjects, or even as of the same original race, but, what is more, as *comrades* in the battle of life, our great object being to give some practical help towards the general welfare of mankind, giving them an impulse and initial guidance, starting them fairly along the path that leads to the highest pinnacle of human glory and attainment.

“If ever we leave them,” to quote his words, “may it be in the attitude of having their arms stretched out to the Divine.” Now, is not this still more true of our wider enterprise, of results to be obtained in India, in China, in Japan, and in all the world, by the power of the Holy Ghost, and with influence not bounded by time or limited by the space of this earth alone, but the sublime hope of taking part in the “restitution of all things,” the “reconciling to God of all things in heaven above and in earth beneath,” shaken and loosed from the harmony of allegiance, mysteriously alienated now—for if not, why is reconciliation spoken of?—by the breath, if not by the act, of moral evil?

The eager and almost resentful question, “How can these things be?” needs, perhaps, less and less consideration as the boundaries of possibility seem less and less restricted to our opening eyes. Yet it is perhaps worth noting, as I pass to my conclusion, that, apart from the general and dominant consideration that with God and in His works and ways all things are possible, ideas of time and space and distance may not be positive, but only relative to our present bodily earthly frames and surroundings. The distances of space are being, if not annihilated, yet almost ignored by the application of power and essences in Nature placed there long ago by the Creator, and now grasped by the hand of experiment. Space above us, the firmament, the “expanse,” the air and the strata of the ether, show symptoms of being other than we had imagined, more kindly, more yielding for transit; and travel through the depths and lengths of creation for the redeemed and evangelizing Church may be easier, simpler, swifter, than we now imagine possible.

We labour from love to God and from love to man to make known the name of Jesus Christ in all lands; and this name is conquering, and will conquer, in love; and “things in heaven and things in earth, and things under the earth, all shall bow to Him”—all shall confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.