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Some Thoughts on the Seven Epistles.

II.

ABOUT eighteen years ago, in the early spring, I passed through Smyrna on the way to Ephesus, or rather to what was Ephesus of old. From the tourist-yacht which carried a hundred and more English and Scottish visitors round the Ægean coasts of Greece and Asia Minor, on the way to Palestine, I landed on the quay of Smyrna, a scene of life and active traffic, and, after a brief lingering there, took train (strange was the paradox) and went inland to the Ephesian plain. It was an experience of moving interest thus to touch in one day two, the first two, of the Seven Churches. The contrast of the two scenes was striking and suggestive. At Ephesus, if the name may still be used, I sate on one of the stone seats of that great Theatre, still existing in large fragments, which once echoed so long to the name and fame of Artemis the Great, and looked towards the westering sun over a vast field of scattered ruins. In its midst was a hollow, thick with brambles and heaped with stones; it was the site of the once glorious Temple of the Goddess. The landscape was eloquent of utter abolition and depopulation. It was impossible not to connect it, at least in emotion, with the Lord's tender but awful warning to the Angel who did not keep his first love: "I will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent."

Smyrna on the other hand shewed every sign of present life, pulsating in an immemorial scene of habitation. The city has its Christian Churches, and I believe, (it certainly had, in the last century,) its Evangelical Missions. This too it was difficult not to connect, in sentiment and suggestion at least, with the tone of the Epistle now before us. For to Smyrna and to Philadelphia, alone out of the Seven, the Lord has only good and comfortable words to say, and Gibbon himself cannot help remarking, in a tone not altogether cynical, though an accent of irony lingers in the sentences, that precisely those

two towns of the Apocalyptic group still, after all the intervening ages, remain alive.

However, to the Smyrnæan angel is addressed this message of unalloyed love and praise. It follows the normal plan of the Epistles. The Sender first denotes Himself: "the First and the Last, who became dead, and lived again." Then He reports to the Angel, to this His "ministering spirit," human, and in the body, "sent forth to minister" at Smyrna "to the heirs of salvation," what He knows of His servant's "works." "Tribulation and poverty" surround and afflict him, "but he is rich," in faith, hope, and a first love that is not lost. He is assailed by the "blasphemy," the railing, against him and his Lord, of "those who say they are Jews, and are not, but a synagogue of Satan"; Jews by race, but utterly alien from Abraham's and David's faith and hope, rejecters of Messiah, persecutors of the Israel of God. From them, or at least from powers instigated by them, a fiery trial, a storm of violence, was about to strike the Angel and his flock. The Enemy, mysterious energizer of sinning man's hostility to truth and light, was soon to put out his permitted personal force against them, as against their Lord before them. They, "some of them," were to taste the terrors of a pagan dungeon; to feel the stern tests of the cruelty of man, to be "tribulated," beaten down as on the threshing floor, for a season. But it was for a season only. "Ye shall have tribulation ten days." Perhaps that limit was to be literal. More probably it was symbolical; the number stated, so much, no more, was to signify the watchful control of the supreme Love over the awful yet subject Powers of hell. Not one "day" beyond their King's permission, beyond the limitation of His gracious wisdom, should the saints suffer.

As for the Angel himself, it is intimated that he is to be the sufferer in chief. The ordeal of death awaits him; even as, long before, the same sovereign Master, "in the days of His flesh," (then also in the hearing of John,) had warned Peter that by death he should glorify God. "Be thou faithful unto death, and

I will give to thee the victor-wreath (τὸν σιέφανον) of life." Then follows the final utterance of "the Spirit," the message which, taking occasion from Smyrna and its Angel, passes out from them to "the Churches" and all their members, even to us here and now. It speaks as ever to "the overcomer." It accosts the Christian who finds himself face to face with the central Power of evil in his seeming triumph, and with the sting of death. And it bids him be serenely sure that he, overcoming in the Overcomer, hidden in the Christ who is stronger than the strong man, and over whom death, alike the first and second, can have dominion no more, shall "never die." "Over such the second death hath no power" (Rev. xx. 6), no "authority" (ἐξουσίαν), no warrant to arrest and bind. He shall not "see" it, he shall not "taste" it. His Lord shall lift him immeasurably over it into the deathless bliss.

So we have traced this short, pregnant missive along its lines of sympathy, forewarning, and immortal promise. As we noted above, they are all radiant with approving love. This Angel has already his Lord's "Well done, good and faithful servant" spoken to him, this side the grave. Who more absolutely and firmly than he would say that all his fidelity, all his persistent loyalty under restraints, and burthens, and hostilities, was "of grace"; that all the power he felt, and his people felt, to meet the dark invisible Persecutor in victorious peace, and to persist in obedient holiness through the martyr's death, was "not his own but *given*"? For surely it is so always, by a beautiful law, with the disciples of the Crucified. The more conscious the man is of a faculty of spiritual victory, the more he feels in his hands a gift of strength which lays perils and temptations under his feet, the more he knows, in a deep intuition, that this is *grace*. That wonderful word, so easily and so lightly usable in conventional or in controversial connections, can spring, under the experiences which really test the soul, into a splendour of meaning new and blissful. The believer, surprised over himself, sees in it the expression at once of his own entire inability to stand and to endure, by his

own resources, and also of the illimitable supply which the supreme Kindness keeps always alive within him. He knows more than ever that he *cannot*, in the very act of realizing how greatly, how victoriously, in him, his Lord *can*.

But none the less that Lord loves the result of His own goodness as it takes shape in His servant's receptive personality. He rejoices over His own overcomer; He loves the human heart which loves to use His grace; He "crowns" with the wreath of Immortal joy and power the sufferer who, not only after His example but in His enabling life, has won his way through one anguish or another to the face of God.

Some particular treasures of truth and love call for notice in the Smyrnæan letter. Let us take them up, briefly but reverently.

I. "*The First and the Last, who was dead, and lived again.*" We think here with humble gladness of the Lord's undying memory of His death, as He thus claims in one breath eternity and the experience of the grave. Let the disciple called in any way or degree to suffer remember always with deepening gratitude that he belongs to a Master who, to save him, *and to have him*, consented to be the supreme Expert in pain, in mortal pain. He consented for us to feel the tortures of an outraged body and the deeper woe of an unfathomed solitude, as of a forsaken soul. In common life there is no sympathy like that of one who, coming to handle our broken hearts, perfectly remembers the breaking of his own greater and nobler heart in its time, and tells us that he remembers it, and so, and only so, can *really* enter into ours, and *reverence* our tribulation, knowing what pain is.

So it is here with the suffering Christ. The same tone breathes in the words of sacred cheer that follow; in the recognition of the "tribulation," and the "poverty," and the cruel "railings" and contradictions, and again of the dire assaults of the enemy, and the horrible "prison," and the martyr's last ordeal. The tone is not that of mere pitying kindness. It is the voice of a sacred fellow-feeling. He who speaks *knows all*

about it in His own person. He was, (and therefore He is, in the sense of that grand saying, "Suffering passes; to have suffered lasts for ever,") the supreme Expert in distress, the Prince of sufferers. And He overcame, we remember, not by any forth-putting of His latent Deity, but as the perfect Human Believer, taking His Father at His word of promise. "For the joy set before Him He endured the Cross, despising the shame."

2. "*The devil shall cast some of you into prison.*" We must not forget this recognition of the personal action of the unseen "Ruler of the darkness of this world." Externally, of course, human beings would seize and immure the bodies of the persecuted. But another Person would stand behind them and act through them. Trench remarks on these words that on many scenes of the history of persecution they cast a lurid yet useful light. They explain the more than normal, the super-human, wrath and malice of the assailants, as in the strange and moving story of the sufferers of Lyons and Vienne; the Evil One had "entered into" the unhappy evil ones. And the thought is not merely gloomy. Rather, it prompts a certain pitying extenuation of the human criminals. It helps sufferer, and student too, not to think their sin less dreadful, but to think of them more patiently, without *hatred*, and to look up to the Throne the more directly for judgment upon the *ultimately* guilty will.

It is impossible, at least to myself, not to apply the thought to some black phenomena of the War under which, as I write, the world is groaning. The unutterable outrages recorded, and with ample proof, in Belgium, and not in Belgium alone, are they not indeed, in a sense by no means conventional, *Satanic*—as in spirit, so in origination? The contempt of plighted faith, the profound and calculated dissimulation, and then the almost demented hatred which has possessed a great nation on a sudden, does not all this look the same way, to causes hidden in the outer darkness? And to me the thought brings help, as it brings the suggestion to pray for triumphant retribution not

merely, or mostly, upon a guilty State but upon "the Enemy that hath done this."

3. "*And I will give to thee the crown of life.*" I make no long comment on this radiant promise. I do little more than point to it, and bid my reader and myself let that word of immortality sink in till it meets the soul which is made for endless and blessed life. The Speaker has right to His utterance. For He is He who "was dead, and lived again" for ever. He stands close by us as He speaks, yet beyond the grave. Look at Him, till His dying and deathless glory, in its self-evidencing power, possesses mind and soul. And then already, by faith in Him, armed with His word here given you, overcome death before you die.

As we close, it is interesting to recall what is at least a possibility—I think that it is more—the identification of this same Angel of the Church of Smyrna with a noble name in Christian history. If, as I for one incline to think, the Revelation dates itself in the reign of Domitian (81-96), not in that of Nero, it is possible to identify the chief-pastor of this Epistle with Polycarp, the disciple of St. John, bishop of Smyrna, beloved and revered of all men, who at last, in 155, in very advanced old age, certainly older than eighty-six, was burned to ashes in the Smyrnæan stadium. I do not attempt to develop the case for identification, which is well stated by Trench in his book on these Epistles. I accept it here only as an interesting possibility, and as most certainly a grand and moving *illustration* of the Epistle. In this view I close this paper with a chapter (§ 9) of *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (one of the most beautiful among the scanty relics of the earliest post-apostolic literature)—the passage which describes one great incident of the final scene. I use my master Lightfoot's version of the Greek :

"As Polycarp entered into the stadium, a voice came to him from heaven : 'Be strong, Polycarp, and play the man.' And no one saw the speaker, but those of our people who were present heard the voice. . . . When he was brought before him, the proconsul enquired whether he were the man. And on

his confessing that he was, he tried to persuade him to a denial, saying, 'Have respect to thine age,' and other things in accordance therewith, as it is their wont to say: 'Swear by the genius of Cæsar; repent, and say, *Away with the atheists.*' Then Polycarp with solemn countenance looked upon the whole multitude of lawless heathen that were in the stadium, and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven he said, 'Away with the atheists.' But when the magistrate pressed him hard, and said, 'Swear the oath, and I will release thee; revile the Christ,' Polycarp said, 'Fourscore and six years have I been His servant, and He hath done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?' "

“ Face yet awhile the transitory strife,
And I will give to thee the crown of life.”

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