

ANGELS UNAWARES.

“Forget not to show love unto strangers : for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”—*Heb.* xiii. 2.

THE history of the Hebrews is a long series of migrations and dispersions. Since their first pilgrim father crossed the Euphrates and became a stranger in a strange land, Abraham's children have endured exodus and exile so often that the figure of the Wandering Jew seems like a type of their scattered race.

Yet no people ever proved so cohesive in dispersion. In New Testament times the Hebrews abroad outnumbered those in Palestine; but they were Hebrews still. In every city along the shores of the Midland Sea they formed a little Puritan colony, aloof from the heathen, but ready with welcome for the travelling merchant and hearing for the travelling teacher of their own faith and blood.

The early Church inherited this primitive bond of kinship and its tradition of hospitality. More than one Apostle enforces the duty of entertaining wayfarers who belong to the household of Christ. Moreover a Christian Jew was counted a renegade by his own countrymen; the fact of his Christianity shut in his face those Ghetto doors which sheltered any orthodox Jewish pilgrim. So that the Hebrew disciples would appreciate the stress here laid upon showing love to brethren on a journey, who might specially need succour; they would appreciate, too, the allusion to Abraham and Lot and Gideon and Manoah and Tobit, who had all entertained angels unawares. “Play the host generously,” says the writer, “and you may, perchance, harbour heavenly guests like theirs.”

Now such a precept certainly does not require the modern Christian to turn his home into a casual ward. Yet there remains a real sense in which we are still bound to show love to strangers, and in which we too may thereby welcome angels whom we least expect.

Our modern Protestant ideas about angels are curiously mixed. We borrow them mainly from Milton; and they came down to him multifariously, through Rabbinic legends, and Gnostic fancies, and Neoplatonic speculations, and scholastic disputes. The result belongs less to religion than to the mythology of poetry and art;

yet we habitually read that mythology into the Bible. It is true indeed that our Lord Himself distinctly acknowledges the reality of these spiritual beings; but the functions of angels in Scripture almost overshadow their personality. The name stands for that which embodies to us either a manifestation or a message of the Most High; its two senses are not always distinguished, but together they cover the chief uses of the word in the Bible. An angel is some special form in which God speaks, or works, or shows Himself; it is an agent or an instrument that brings Him into touch with men. And this text teaches that any passing guest may prove an angel to us—may become a living medium of God's message, a personal channel of God's grace to our souls.

There were ancient nations who had only one word to mean both stranger and enemy: each new comer was treated as a foe until he proved himself a friend. And we are still often tempted to think evil of people before we have had time to test their goodness. Perhaps some plausible stranger has taken you in, and made you suspect all his tribe. Nothing sours the heart like being duped by those to whom your faith had imputed its own righteousness. After a few such trials you persuade yourself that the world at large is not fit to be trusted, and that every man must be considered a rogue until he has proved himself honest.

And yet no temper is less Christian than this spirit of general suspicion. Better trust ten times and be deceived, than suspect one soul unjustly. The love which Christ requires us to show to strangers is the love which thinketh no evil, which believeth all things and hopeth all things, which is sometimes betrayed but never in despair.

Yet modern Christians neglect this precept not so much because they are too suspicious as because they are too busy. In simpler times, when strangers came like single spies, it was not so difficult to seek them out and make them welcome. But in our congested civilization we jostle among battalions of unknown folk each day, and we put on, perforce, the armour of reserve. We have enough acquaintances already, so many that their mere number goes to dilute the quality of friendship. What man has more than a certain available maximum of spare thought and interest? Which of us has time to show any real love to the units in this bewildering crowd?

The social world finds its analogue in the physical. We are told that all material substance consists of the interaction of innumerable separate tiny atoms, which are always in swiftest motion, always clashing against each other, and making millions of impacts every second. And yet not one of these molecules is forgotten before God; and ye are of more value than many molecules. The Father of Spirits must surely guide and restrain the contacts and encounters of each human soul that He has made. It is no vague chance or blind destiny which brings strangers to our tent door. And therefore *we must cherish a certain reverence for the unexpected*: we must keep an open heart towards these unknown pilgrims whom God's election has sent across our path or settled in our camp. Every year, at any rate, some fresh strangers detach themselves from the dim mass, and definitely enter our service or our circle; and we count them as "new people" not yet properly known. Yet each one of them is a brother immortal, who inherits an equal share with us in God's solicitude. For each one of them Christ died. In each one of them the Holy Ghost is dwelling, and working, and striving. And each dullest stranger has his own heart-secrets of joy and bitterness, his inward shames and sacrifices which we cannot estimate, a hidden romance which we never guess, a coming destiny of which we never even dream. We simply do not know how much may be in him, how much he may become to us or may do for us, in the future.

There are measureless possibilities in a stranger. When Haroun Alraschid was Caliph, any strayed reveller in the streets of Baghdad might prove to be the Commander of the Faithful himself. We ought to discern under the face of each stranger the countenance of Christ Himself. Inasmuch as we show love to one of the least of them, we are showing love to Him. There is an apocryphal saying recorded of our Lord, "Never be joyful except when ye shall look upon your brother in love." And it holds true, even when the brother is a stranger. The happy spirit which can so regard him, brings you straightway into touch with him; it opens an avenue into his heart.

That stranger may need you more even than you need him; he may come as a claim on your pity, a call for your devotion, an opportunity for your service. God has sent this needy angel to rouse you out of sloth and ease and indulgence, to build again the broken altar for a sacrifice of yourself. "Are they not all minister-

ing spirits?" Nay, not all. God's angel is sometimes sent, not to minister to us, but to be ministered unto: so that we may win thereby the grace of those who give rather than receive.

We do it all unawares. We often grow half impatient of these strangers who require so much, and seem to bestow so little. The hospitable heart goes on to the end, unconscious how its most exacting guests were only the disguises of One who shall say at last, "I was a stranger, and ye took Me in."

Nothing on this earth is so pathetic as the way in which we miss the meaning of life; and when our blessings meet us, we pass by ignorantly on the other side. We *refuse them*, as we entertain them, *unawares*. Alas! for the grace we have lost without knowing it. We take our daily bread, unwittingly and unworthily, not discerning the Lord's body. We look for God in earthquake or in fire, not listening for the still small voice. It is written of certain angels, that "their countenances were like lightning": but it is not said that their voices were like thunder. Dante describes Beatrice's speech as being, like Cordelia's, *soft and low* "*con angelica voce.*" And often our messages most direct from heaven fall softly from children's lips, or are murmured in low tones of sorrow and sickness. God's messenger does not sound a trumpet or lift up his voice in the streets. Whoso hath ears to hear, let him keep silence for what the angels say.

"We are come unto an innumerable company of angels": this is the experience of the Christian. To him all the common order of life and its natural changes seem instinct with spiritual presences and powers. To him the glory and loveliness of the outward world are, as Newman says, "the waving of their garments, whose faces see God." The storms and calms of nature become vocal. "Some said, it thundered; others said, an angel spake to Him."

It is written again, "Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him." These wayside angels of circumstance still meet us, day by day, in homely garb and guise. But as we show them love, and welcome each daily event that happens as being a token to us of the will of God, we find that each carries its own secret and peculiar blessing. Concerning such trivial things, it may be said, "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones." The hands which it holds out to us are laden with perfect love.

As we are hospitable to God's daily messages and mercies, we

find ministers of grace compassing our path and our lying down. Verily He has given His angels charge concerning us : perchance, the angel of pain, to purify ; or the angel of disappointment, to humble ; or the angel of loss, to enrich. But all His angels work together for good to them that love Him.

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“THE JOY SET BEFORE HIM.”

“For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross, despising the shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”—*Heb.* xii. 2.

WE read a great man’s biography mainly to understand what kind of man he was. We try to get behind his titles and trappings, and to touch the man himself. We pass over the mere details and accidents in his career ; we want to discover the ideas which inspired him, and the ambitions which controlled, to see into the passions and sorrows which struggled in his breast, and so to realize what it was that moved him along the path he trod.

And we read the New Testament amiss unless it teaches us something about the motives of Jesus Christ, unless it opens His inward life to our gaze, and makes us understand not only His words and deeds, but also, by help of these, what manner of man He Himself was. The sacred biography will profit us little, except as it admits us into the heart of the Son of Man, so that we sympathise with His feelings, and grasp His purpose, and rejoice with Him as He rejoices, and weep with Him as He weeps.

Now we are hindered from this sympathy with Christ’s human experience, in part by our theological prejudices, and still more by our moral defects. For spiritual secrets are spiritually discerned ; and we are not good enough to understand His goodness. We are not simple enough nor pure enough, to realize how simply pure and how purely simple His mind and His motives were. We cannot imagine a man so perfect that He could always obey His natural impulse, because His impulse was always right. Jesus Christ always did exactly what it was natural for Him to do. And half our explanations of His words and deeds miss the mark because they are so clumsy and far-fetched and elaborate and artificial. The truth about Him is generally so simple that we