

THE TWENTY-THIRD PSALM.

THE twenty-third Psalm seems to break in two at the end of the fourth verse. The first four verses clearly reflect a pastoral scene; the fifth appears to carry us off, without warning or connection, to associations of an utterly different kind. This, however, is only in appearance. The last two verses are as pastoral as the first four. If these show us the shepherd with his sheep upon the pasture, those follow him, shepherd still, to where in his tent he dispenses the desert's rites of hospitality to some poor fugitive from blood. The psalm is thus, so far, a unity, even of metaphor. We shall see afterwards that it is also a spiritual unity; but at present let us summon up the landscape on which both of these features—the shepherd on his pasture and the shepherd in his tent—lie side by side, equal sacraments of the providence of God.

A Syrian, or an Arabian, pasture is very different from the narrow meadows and fenced hill-sides with which we are familiar. It is vast, and often virtually boundless. It has to be so, for by far the greater part of it is desert—that is, land not absolutely barren, but refreshed by rain for only a few months, and through the rest of the year abandoned to the pitiless sun that sucks all life out of the soil. It is thus, by no carelessness of speech, but on the regular tide of the seasons that the Hebrew word for *pasture* has drifted off into the meaning of *wilderness*, or *desert*.¹ The landscape is nearly all glare, monotonous levels or low ranges of hillocks, with as little character upon them as the waves of the sea, shimmering with mirage under a cloudless heaven. The bewildering monotony is broken by only two excep-

¹ מִדְּבָר from דָּבַר, to *range* or *drive forth* the flocks, becomes *wildland*, defined by Jer. ii. 2, as אֶרֶץ לֹא זָרְעָה, *land not sown*. Cities are said to be reduced to מִדְּבָר, Jer. xxii. 6 and the name is used especially for the Arabian desert and the wilderness of Judæa.

tions. Here and there the ground will be cleft by a deep ravine, which gapes in black contrast to the glare, and by its sudden darkness blinds the men and sheep that enter it to the beasts of prey which have their lairs in its recesses. But there are also hollows as gentle and lovely as the ravines are terrible, where water bubbles up and runs quietly between grassy banks under the open shade of trees.

On such a wilderness of mirage, illusive paths, lurking terrors, and infrequent spots of herbage, it is evident that the person and character of the shepherd must mean a great deal more to the sheep than they can possibly mean with us. With us, sheep left to themselves may be seen any day—in a field or on a hill-side with a far-travelling wire-fence to keep them from straying. But I do not remember ever to have seen in the East a flock of sheep without a shepherd. On such a landscape as I have described he is obviously indispensable. When you meet him there—“alone of all his reasoning kind,” armed, weather-beaten, vigilant, leaning on his staff, and looking out with eyes of care upon his scattered flock, their sole provision and defence, your heart leaps up to ask : Is there anywhere in all the world so dear a sacrament of life and peace as he?”

There is, and very near himself. As prominent a feature in the wilderness as the shepherd is the shepherd's tent. To our western eyes, a cluster of desert tents looks ugly enough—brown-black lumps often cast down anyhow, with a few loutish men lolling on the trampled sand in front of the doorways, that a man has to stoop uncomfortably to enter. But conceive there coming to these a man who is fugitive—fugitive across such a wilderness. Conceive a man fleeing for his life as Sisera fled when he sought the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber, the Kenite. To him, that space of trampled sand, with the ragged black mouths above it, mean not only food and rest, but dear life itself. There,

by the golden law of the desert's hospitality, he knows that he may eat in peace, that though his enemies come up to the very door, and his table be spread as it were in their presence, he need not flinch nor stint his heart of her security.

That was the landscape the Psalmist saw, and it seemed to him to reflect the mingled wildness and beauty of his own life.¹ To him human life was just this wilderness of terrible contrasts, where the light is so bright, but the shadows the darker and more treacherous; where the pasture is rich, but scattered in the wrinkles of vast deserts; where the paths are illusive, yet man's passion flies swift and straight to its revenge; where all is separation and disorder, yet law sweeps inexorable, and a man is hunted down to death by his bloodguiltiness. But not in any of those things is life more like the wilderness than in this, that it is the presence and character of One, which make all the difference to us who are its silly sheep; that it is His grace and hospitality which alone avail us when we awaken to the fact that our lives cannot be fully figured by those of sheep, for we are fugitives and in need of more than food—we are fugitives with the conscience and the habit of sin relentless on our track. These are both elements of the religious experience of man, just as the two figures which the Psalmist has used as their symbols, are both elements of the shepherd's life. The Psalm is a spiritual as well as a pictorial unity. And it is a poor exegesis and unworthy of its calling that is satisfied with the letter and the figures of the art it interprets, but makes no attempt to sound beneath them those tides of living experience, whose motion gives them all their array and sequence.

¹ It is unnecessary and even absurd to ask the question whether the Psalmist spoke of his individual experience, or in the name of the pious in Israel. It was both.

The Lord is my Shepherd: or—as the Greek, vibrating to the force of the original—*The Lord is shepherding me*;¹ *I shall not want*. This is the theme of the first four verses. Before we enter into the details in which it is elaborated, a preliminary consideration is raised by its general character.

Every one feels that the psalm was written by a shepherd,² and the first thing that is obvious, of course, is that he has made his God after his own image. Now there are many in our day who sneer at that kind of theology—pretty, indeed, as the pearl or the tear, but like tear or pearl a natural and also a morbid deposit—a purely human process which, according to them, pretty well explains all religion; the result of man's instincts to see himself reflected on the cloud that bounds his view, man's honest but deluded effort to put himself in charge of the best part of himself, to fill the throne of an imaginary heaven with an impossible exaggeration of his own virtues.

But it is far better to hold with Jesus Christ than with such reasoners. Jesus Christ tells us that a man cannot be wrong if he argues towards God from what he finds best in himself. *If ye then being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask it. What man of you having an hundred sheep doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost until he find it? Either, what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a candle and sweep the house and seek diligently till she find it. . . . Likewise, say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.*

¹ ποιμαίνει με. The original is not a noun, but the present participle of the verb, יָרַע.

² Or, which comes to the same thing, has risen out of the heart of a shepherd people.

That is a true witness, and strikes its Amen out of every chord of our hearts. The Power so evident in nature that He needs no proof, the Being so far beyond us in wisdom and in might, must also be our great superior in every quality which is more excellent than might. With thoughts more sleepless than our thoughts, as the sun is more constant than our lamps; with a heart that steadfastly cares for us, as we fitfully care for one another; more kingly than our noblest king, more fatherly than our fondest fatherhood, of deeper, truer compassion than ever mother poured upon us, whom, when a man feels that the highest thing in life is to be a shepherd, he calls his Shepherd, and knows that as the shepherd, *whose the sheep are*, shrinks not to seek one of his lost at risk of limb or life, so his God cannot be less in readiness of love or in utterness of self-sacrifice. That is the faith of strong and unselfish men all down the ages. And its strength is this, that it is no mere conclusion of logic, but the inevitable and increasing result of duty done and love kept pure—of fatherhood and motherhood and friendship faithfully fulfilled. One remembers how Browning has put it in the mouth of David when he has done all he can do for “Saul,” and is helpless:

Do I find love so full in my nature, God's ultimate gift,
That I doubt His own love can compete with it? . . .
Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man;
And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet alone can?

Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to enrich,
To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would—knowing which
I know that my service is perfect. Oh, speak through me now!
Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst thou—so wilt thou!

Thus have felt and known the unselfish of all ages. It is not only from their depths, but still more from their topmost heights—heaven still how far!—that men cry out and say, *There is a rock higher than I!* God is stronger than

their strength, more loving than their uttermost love, and in so far as they have loved and sacrificed themselves for others, they have obtained the infallible proof that God too lives, and loves, and gives Himself away. Nothing can shake that faith, for it rests on the best instincts of our nature, and is the crown of all duty faithfully done. He was no hireling herdsman who wrote those verses, but one whose heart was in his work, who did justly by it, magnifying his office, and who never scamped it, else had he not dared to call his God a shepherd. And so in every relation of life. While insincerity and unfaithfulness to duty mean nothing less than loss of the clearness and sureness of our faith in God, duty nobly done, love to the uttermost, are witnesses to the love and ceaseless care of God, witnesses which grow more convincing every day.

The second, third, and fourth verses give us the details. Each of them is taken exactly from the shepherd's custom, and applied without interpretation to the care of man's soul by God. *He maketh me lie down*—the verb is to bring the flocks to fold or couch—in pastures of green grass—the young fresh grass of springtime.¹ *By waters of rest He refresheth me.*²

This last verb is difficult to render in English; its original meaning was evidently to guide the flock to drink, from which it came to have the more general force of sustaining or nourishing, *My soul He restoreth*—bringeth back again from death. *He leadeth me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake*, not necessarily straight paths, but paths that fulfil the function of paths and lead to somewhere, unlike most desert tracts which spring up, tempt your feet for a little, and then disappear. *Yea, though I walk in a valley*

¹ נֶשֶׁךְ as distinguished both from dried grass cut for fodder, and from the larger herbs and cereals. Deth, the equivalent of נֶשֶׁךְ in the southern Arabic dialects, means springtime.

² LXX. ἐπὶ ὕδατος ἀναπαύσεως ἐξέθρεψε με.

of deep darkness, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff are not synonymous, for even the shepherd of to-day, though often armed with a gun, carries two instruments of wood, his great oak club, thick enough to brain a wild beast, and his staff to lean upon or to touch his sheep with, while the ancient shepherd without firearms would surely still more require both. They will comfort me—a very beautiful verb, the literal meaning of which is to help another, choked with grief or fear, to breathe freely, and give his heart air.

These simple figures applied thus lyrically to the conduct of the soul by God require no interpretation. Who cannot read into them, from his own experience, more than any other can direct him to find? Only, perhaps, on two points is a word required. *Righteousness* has no theological meaning. The psalmist, as the above exposition has stated, is thinking of such desert paths as have an end and goal, to which they faultlessly lead the traveller: and the analogy of these in God's care of man is not the experience of justification and forgiveness,¹ but the wider assurance that he who follows the will of God walks not in vain, that in the end he arrives, that all God's paths lead onward and lead home. And this thought is clinched with an expression which would not have the same force if righteousness were taken in a theological sense: *for His name's sake*. No being has the right to the name of guide or shepherd unless the paths, by which he takes the flock, do bring them forward to their pasture and their rest. The other ambiguous point is the *vale of deep darkness*. As is well known, the letters of the word may be made to spell *shadow of death*; but the other way of taking them is the more probable. This, however, need not lead us away from the associations with which the old translation has invested them. It is not only darkness that the poet is describing, but the dark-

¹ So commentators from Jerome downwards.

ness where death lurks for the poor sheep,—the gorges, in whose deep shadows are the lairs of wild beasts, and the shepherd and his club are needed. It is thus every dismal and deadly passage through which the soul can pass, and, most of all, it is the valley of the shadow of death itself. There God is with a man no less than by the waters of repose, or along the successful paths of active life. Was He able to recover the soul from life's wayside weariness and hunger?—He will equally defend and keep it in life's deadliest dangers.

Up to this point the simple figures of the sheep with their shepherd have satisfied the poet in his song of human life under God's guidance. But now other thoughts of life, other needs of man, appear to have visited him. It might have seemed as if the soul's experience of God had reached its climax in the fourth verse. What higher glory is there than to feel God's presence in the hour of life's most awful dangers, and of death the awfullest of them all? Yet man is no mere sheep that is turned easily with the staff, that has no need but of rest and food, that has no fear but of pain and death! How can a sheep figure human life? Man's life is no mere wandering and search for grass; it is a being searched. It is not all a following; most of it is a flight. Not the future do we chiefly shrink from, even though death lurk in the shadows. What we most fear, if we are awake and honest, is the past. The past is on our track and hunts us down. We need more than guidance, we need grace.

I cannot but feel that if we are to read this psalm, not of the national fortunes of Israel, but of the religious experience of the pious in Israel, we must suppose that it was by some such thought the psalmist was visited when he did not close the Psalm with the fourth verse. He added the other two because he knew that weariness and death are never the last enemies of men, nor the future the true

man's only fear. He remembered the inexorableness of the past; he remembered that bloodguiltiness, which sheep never feel, is worse to men than death. As perchance one day he lifted his eyes from his sheep and saw a fugitive from the avenger of blood crossing the plain, while his sheep scattered right and left before this wild intruder into their quiet world; so he felt his fair and gentle thoughts within him scattered by the visitation of his past; so he felt how rudely law breaks through our pious fancies, and must be dealt with before their peace can be secure; so he felt, as every true man has felt with him, that the religion, however bright and brave, which takes no account of sin, is the religion which has not a last nor a highest word for life.

Consider this system of blood-revenge. It was the one element of law in the lawless life of the desert. Everything else in the wilderness was fitful and uncertain, everything else might swerve and wander. This alone persisted and was infallible. It crossed the world; it lasted through generations. The fear of it never died down in the heart of the hunted man, nor the duty of it in the heart of the hunter. The holiest sanctions confirmed it, the safety of society, the honour of the family, love for the dead. And yet, from this endless process, that hunted a man like conscience, a shelter was found in the custom of Eastern hospitality, the "golden piety of the wilderness" as it has been called, by which every wanderer, whatever his character or his past might be, was received as the "guest of God"—such is the beautiful name they give him to this day—and kept inviolate, and furnished with rest and food, his host becoming responsible for his safety.

Now that the psalmist had this custom in his view, when composing the last two verses of the Psalm, is plain from the phrase with which these open: *thou spreadest before me a table in the very face of mine enemies*, and

perhaps also from the unusual metaphor in verse six : *surely goodness and mercy shall follow, or pursue me, all the days of my life.*

And even though those were right (which I do not admit) who interpret the enemies and pursuers as the human foes and persecutors of the pious, it is plain that to us using the psalm this interpretation will not suffice. How can we speak of this custom of blood-revenge, and think only of our material foes? If we know ourselves, and if our conscience be quick, if we be faithfully reading our past, then of all our experiences there is surely but one which suits this figure of blood-revenge, when and wheresoever in the Old Testament it is applied to man's spiritual life. So only do the conscience and the habit of sin pursue a man. Our real enemies are not of our opponents, our adversities, our cares and pains—these our enemies! Better comrades, better guides, better masters no man ever had. Our enemies are our evil deeds and their memories, our pride, our selfishness, our malice, our passions, which by conscience and by habit pursue us with a relentlessness and a cruelty past the power of figure to express. We know how they persist from youth unto the grave; *the sting of death is sin.* We know what they want: nothing less than ourselves, our whole character and will. *Simon, Simon,* said Christ to a soul on the edge of a great temptation, *Satan hath asked you back again for himself.*

Yet it is the abounding message of the whole Bible, of which our twenty-third Psalm is but a small fragment, that for this conscience and this habit of sin God hath made provision, even as sure as those thoughts of His guidance, which refresh us in the heat of life and comfort us amidst the shadows. In Nature? Yes; for there too the goodness of God leadeth to repentance. There is nothing which the fifth verse so readily brings to mind as the grace of the Divine hospitality in nature. *Thou preparest a table for me*

in the presence of mine enemies. How these words contrast the fever and uncertain battle of our life with the calmness and surety of the Divine order ! Through the cross currents of human strife, fretted and sullied, the tides of nature keep their steady course, and rise to their invariable margins. The seasons come up undisturbed by crime and war. Spring creeps even into the beleaguered city ; through the tents of the besiegers, across trench and scarp, among the wheels of the cannon, and over the graves of the dead, grass and wild flowers speed, spreading God's table. He sendeth His rain upon the just and the unjust. And even here the display is not merely natural nor spread only in the sight of our physical enemies ; but God's goodness leadeth to repentance, and even for deliverance from sin is Nature bestowed. Who has come out upon a great landscape, who has looked across the sea lying under the sun, who has lifted his eyes to the hills and felt the winds of God blowing off their snows, who has heard earth's countless voices of praise rising heavenwards, but has spoken to himself, saying : " What a wide place this world is for repentance ! " Man does find in Nature deliverance from himself, oblivion of his past, peace and purity ! And yet the provision, though real, is little more than temporary. The herdsmen of the desert are not obliged to furnish to their fugitive guest shelter for more than two nights with the day between. Little more than two nights with the day between is the respite from conscience and habit which Nature provides for the sinful heart. She is the millionfold opportunity of repentance ; she is not the final or everlasting grace of God. And, therefore, whatever may have been the original intention of our Psalmist, the spiritual feeling of the Church ever since has understood his words as in the last two verses of that mercy and forgiveness of our God which was spoken articulately to men by the mouth of the prophets, but reached the fulness of its proclamation and

proof in Jesus Christ. He who took the throbbing heart, which beats in the first four verses, and laid it on His bosom, saying, "Thou art right, I am the Good Shepherd," so that since He walked on earth the name is no more a mere metaphor of God, but the clearest, strongest reality that has ever visited this world of shadows—He also has been proved by men as the Host and Defender of all who seek His aid from the memory and the pursuit of sin. So He received them in the days of His flesh, as they drifted upon Him across the wilderness of life, pressed by every evil that it is possible for sin to bring upon us. To Him they were all "guests of God," welcomed for His sake, irrespective of what their past might have been. And so, being lifted up, He still draws them to Himself, and still proves Himself able to come between them and their past. Whatever they may flee from He keeps it away, so that, although to the last for penitence they may be reminded of their sins, and their enemies come up again and again to the open door of memory,—in Him they are secure. He is their defence, and their peace is impregnable.

GEORGE ADAM SMITH.

GOD'S CALL TO SELF-POSSESSION.

NAPOLÉON the Third is said to have shown traces of a peculiar power, which may perhaps be described as the exact converse of that personal magnetism by which some leaders inspire and exalt their allies. His presence seemed to lower for the time being the vitality and intelligence of those who came into contact with him, and so acted as to destroy their self-possession. By some occult spell thrown over them, he could disturb their recollectedness, and so empty them of