

*JACOB'S WRESTLE : A MAN AND HIS FATE.*

A NARRATIVE such as that of the wrestle of Jacob by the brook Jabbok requires to be not expounded but translated. Its meaning is clear whenever it is written in language intelligible to the modern mind. The incident is told in the Book of Genesis in, as it were, a dead language—one foreign to our modes of thought and expression—and so we find it hard to understand. And most people treat it as a man unfamiliar with the classics would treat a passage in Greek or Latin which he finds in a book he is reading. They glance at it, fail to make much of it, and pass on. But this unfamiliarity and obscurity are only in the manner of the telling of the story. The language is foreign; the story itself is no far old-world prodigy or strange Semitic legend, but a real “human document,” a page from the catholic experience of man. The wrestle of Jacob—what was it really but simply the struggle of a man with his fate, with the “Divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will”? For that Power men have various names—fate, chance, providence, the force of circumstances, but, under whatever name, every one who knows life knows its reality. We are not alone and supreme in the guidance of our life. A *force majeure* meets us here and there. It met Jacob at the summit of his fortunes. He struggled against it and struggled in vain. But he learned much. That is the meaning of the story. And to-day the experience of man has the same story to tell, though we should not tell it in the same language as did the picturesque old Hebrew chronicler.

The way most clearly to see that this is the meaning of the story is to glance back over the earlier period of Jacob's life.

Jacob was a clever man and an ambitious man; moreover he had a mother who was also clever and ambitious

on his behalf. Her suggestions, no less than his own inclinations, made him resolve to make the most of his life. He formed his definite conception of what he would be and set about to realize it, aided constantly and stimulated by Rebekah. A man's cleverness and ambition are often lazy, a woman's are restless and practical; the two together produce intense keenness about life. So Jacob's plans grew and grew to practical ends. There was always in them a certain religious element. He was not a "profane person" like his brother. There was in his natural temperament a strain of piety, or at least of religious appreciativeness, to which Esau was an entire stranger, and so his plans of life included and indeed centered round what was characteristic of the faith of his fathers. None the less, however, were they *his* plans of life, his personal ambitions.

All this comes out plainly in the two chief recorded incidents of Jacob's earlier days—the buying of Esau's birthright and the gaining of Isaac's blessing. In both of these transactions were ambition—an ambition with a religious colour—and cleverness. In strong contrast to the thoughtless, impulsive, blundering natural-animalism of the one brother is the reflective, deliberate, adroit intellectualism of the other. Esau had no plan of life beyond what is contained in saying: "A fine day—let us hunt something." To Jacob life was a study, a fine art, a game of skill. The securing of the eldest son's birthright and of the father's blessing were two important points or positions which he had gained.

But the game of life is not finally won by two even supremely successful strokes. Soon after this Jacob was forced to flee from home, and he found himself a lonely wanderer at Bethel. His prayer there has been made into a Christian hymn, but it is really the prayer of the same Jacob of pious temperament and personal ambition. "If," premises the latter, "God will prosper me, then," adds the

former, "shall the Lord be my God." This is a different school of prayer from that of Gethsemane—"not my will but Thine be done." However, when the traveller reached the house of Laban, it seemed as if his prayer were being answered. All went well with him. Jacob began to get the lead in the game of life again. The two great factors in the making of a man—love and work—came to his hand, and he made the most of them. He laboured hard, and his labour was done to music for her sake for whom it was done. Year by year his purse grew heavier and his heart lighter. Jacob felt he was winning in life. The risks and obstacles of his earlier days were past. He had neither feared his fortunes nor proved unequal to them—a situation that suggests pleasantly interesting and complacent reflections. Now there seemed before him only ease and happiness. He "increased exceedingly, and had much cattle and maidservants and menservants and camels and asses." He married and became the head of a house. Jacob's life was a success. True, he had in part succeeded by means that could not always bear the strictest moral investigation; but we very easily let success, even more than charity, cover a multitude of sins. The one thing still left for him to accomplish was to make his way again homewards and settle in the old country. That had always been the crowning feature of his plans, as his prayer at Bethel shows; and, moreover, Laban's sons were getting jealous of his prosperity and becoming unfriendly. So again Jacob set out to retrace the old road.

It was the same road, but a very different man. How often on that return journey did Jacob turn back over the pages of the earlier volumes of his life and read their story as a novel! How interesting had his life been! It had had the glamour of adventure and the spice of danger; it had not missed the thrill of love nor even the charm of romance; nor had it lacked the solid elements of work and

of duty ; and, moreover, there were the " much cattle and maidservants and menservants and camels and asses." It was altogether a pleasant situation. The atmosphere of the East lends itself to comfortable reflections. On many an evening as Jacob went out, as his father had been fond of doing, to meditate in the fields, and the Syrian sun lowered and the shadows lengthened, and the peaceful bleat of the sheep and lowing of the kine fell on his ears, and his eyes rested gratefully after the glare of the day on the quiet tones of the landscape, he felt his life a sweet, a satisfying and a safe thing. This was the Jacob who was returning to the home from which years before—it seemed ages before, so much had happened since—his brother's angry threats had driven him. No wonder it seemed to him that the very " angels of God met him."

Meanwhile what of that brother? The question could not but suggest itself to Jacob's mind as he approached again the hills and plains over which he had fled from Esau for his life. It was an old story now, and the Jacob of to-day was in a very different position from the fugitive of that day. Still, as a measure of precaution—for we often accept prudential suggestions from the region of the conscience, while dead to its moral strictures—or possibly as a mere civil intimation of his coming home, he sent forward messengers to Esau to bespeak his friendliness. The message said nothing of the past, and practically assumed that bygones were bygones. The answer was sent back : " Esau cometh to meet thee with four hundred men." We know from the subsequent narrative that these four hundred were coming only in friendship, but to Jacob—his long half-forgotten treacheries to his brother recalled to his mind by the sight again of the scene of them—the news seemed black with another meaning. If it was from his conscience that the suggestion of his own message came, from his conscience came now the interpretation of his

brother's response. The four hundred meant revenge. And what did that mean? It meant the cup dashed from Jacob's very lips. It meant shipwreck at the very harbour bar. It meant that all for which he had waited so long and so laboriously worked was to be wrested from him, and his whole life spoiled and shattered just at its climax. In the hour of confident success here was ruin; here was disaster at the moment of entering on the joys of victory. Jacob was face to face with despair. It was only with the energy of despair that he divided his camp into two companies—obviously a last resort. He sent out in advance a long procession of cattle and camels, laden with gifts that might appease his brother. He prayed, and his prayer had no "ifs" in it now. He did what he could to avert his fate. But after all, what did anything he could do amount to in the face of this horde of wild warriors, headed by his rough and revengeful brother, that every hour brought nearer? He sent his wives and household over the brook, and "Jacob was left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day."

I said at the outset that this story needs only to be translated. Do we not now understand what this wrestle was? Jacob was realizing that a man—even a clever man—cannot play providence to his own life. He had now met that in life which was other and stronger than himself. He was in the hands of an unseen Power. He had played the game of life skilfully, patiently, successfully; but here was something he had not calculated upon, and which he could neither circumvent nor overcome. It was not just Esau's four hundred. That was only its instrument. It was a great *force majeure* declaring itself in his life. That it was connected with his own deeds only moralized it and made it more impressive, but did not reduce it to a mere human consequent. Jacob had all but completely achieved his life, when here was a hand laid on

it, and a voice said: "*This is not yours, but mine.*" And Jacob wrestled with the claim. It was not the mere loss of goods he fought against: it was this authority. His pride wrestled; his will wrestled; his ambition wrestled. All through the night, the calm, shining, Syrian stars looked down on that proud, wilful, ambitious man as he fought against his fate, rebelled against its lordship in his life, and—even if he was helpless before it—refused to accept it or bow his spirit before it.

Thus translated, this story is, in the profoundest sense, true to life. It is no old-world legend or marvel. For indeed, as sooner or later we all learn, there is about us a power not ourselves. The man of faith and piety finds he is led by it through life; the man of daring and independent nature, who would ignore it or deny it, finds himself at times lying in its hand. Even a Napoleon has his St. Helena. This element in life—call it with the thoughtless chance, or with the faithless fate, or with the devout providence, or what you will—is one of the great phenomena of history, of literature, and of experience. It is the key-note at once of ancient Greek tragedy and of modern fiction. It is one great aspect of your life and mine. We plan and we often achieve, we dare and do, we labour and wait; but we are not sole masters of our destiny. There is an Another in the plot. An eminent writer—I think it was the late Mr. Huxley—likened life to a game of chess in which we play against Nature, an opponent perfectly fair, but that never overlooks our mistakes. If life is to be compared to any game, it is most aptly described as like some game that combines known and unknown elements—such, for example, as whist, in which a great deal depends on our own skill in using what we have, but in which we simply cannot win if our opponent plays certain cards from his unknown hand. And how often the unseen player in life does this! How often—if

one may continue a metaphor which to some may appear inappropriate, but is really most apposite—does fate trump a man's best cards in life! Sometimes it is by such obvious means as the loss of health or fortune, or some outward calamity. And of course its final stroke is death. At other times we are checked by means that are less apparent and nameable, but are none the less on that account real. The destiny of a man's life may be diverted from chosen ends, and its dearest hopes destroyed, by inward and subtle forces.

“A God, a God their severance ruled!”

Few men surely can look back over life, even a life lived boldly and strongly, without feeling that there has been another Power besides their own in the determination of their destinies. To quote Arnold again:—

“Even so we leave behind  
As, chartered by some Unknown Power,  
We stem across the sea of life by night,  
The joys that were not for our use designed;—  
The friends to whom we had no natural right,  
The homes that were not destined to be ours.”

And when this Power asserts itself, as it did to Jacob, in the day of success and of triumph, how our wills wrestle with it! Then a man knows—especially if he has been keen about life, and has really lived it—what that scene by the tumbling Jabbok meant. Could we indeed describe it better than by saying, “He was left alone, and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day”? The solitariness, the struggle, the darkness: how they are all true! Over how many early graves, over how many baffled ambitions and blighted hopes, has the human spirit in all ages wrestled with this “man”!

The object of this paper is not homiletical, but it is impossible to leave the scriptural narrative of Jacob's wrestle without at least indicating the lessons as well as the pic-

ture of life it contains. Here one must not try to force moral significance into details. The narrative is literature, not dogma. I shall mention briefly three things.

One is that this "man," while he overcame Jacob and even wounded him, blessed him. After all Jacob's fate proved to be his friend. And one of the things we too may find in life is this—that there is nothing which can happen to us from which we may not gain. Circumstances often come upon a man like a crowd of robbers and take from him his dearest treasures; and yet he can always extort something from them. They can take from him his health, his wealth, his friends, his pleasures, his ambitions, his prospects; but he can gain from the very loss of these a humbler spirit, a tenderer heart, a gentler mind, more insight, more sympathy, more helpfulness. Whether or not this be so, depends upon himself—upon his own will. If a man say to his hardest fate: "I will not let thee go except thou bless me," he will turn that fate into, not perhaps happiness but, blessedness. How many a man, looking back on his life, dates his real inward good from some outward evil. The human spirit, taught of the Spirit of God, can make its foes its footstool. Our flesh wins merely its victories; our spirit is victorious even in defeats.

This inward good is in character. A second noteworthy point in the narrative is that Jacob received a new name, and that means a new character. That struggle was the laming of him, but it was also the moral making of him. Hitherto, as we have seen, Jacob had been a somewhat mixed character; hereafter, he was a strong and a noble man. And so that night, in which his character was made and his fortune apparently all about to be lost, taught Jacob the great lesson that life is made for character. Hitherto he had pictured and planned his life as made for money or love or ambition; after that night he had a truer conception of it and the meaning of it. For the only

meaning you can justly find in this strange, mortal career of ours is that of character. For all other purposes—the making of money, the enjoyment of pleasure, the securing of worldly good—this life is most obviously not primarily adapted. The flux of things, the uncertainties of fate, the varied, unforeseen combinations of circumstances adverse to fortune and happiness and satisfaction—all these prevent us from expressing the meaning of life in things the attempt to gain which is so easily and often thwarted, and which, even if gained, are held on so uncertain a tenure. But, observe, that these very conditions—this flux, this risk, this uncertainty—are just the conditions that make character. It is precisely in the elements by which life declares itself to be unfitted primarily for other ends that it declares itself fitted for this end. Jacob learned this all-important lesson about life that night he spent by the Jabbok. It is one of the greatest lessons a man can learn.

A third and last point in this suggestive narrative I mention in a word or two in closing. This “man,” who blessed Jacob and gave him a new name, did not reveal his own name nor even let himself be clearly discerned, for with the breaking dawn he departed; however, Jacob called the place Peniel, that is, “the face of God.” How true this is: how soberly and sanely true! Some persons are glib in consolation for themselves and others, and have the most pious and beautiful names for the heaviest disciplines of life. But most men are rather silent about these things; they are not unbelieving, but they do not say much. They do not attempt to name or describe the “man” that has taken from their hearts their dearest. And yet one thing can be said about it all. That “man” has brought us face to face with God. He takes us past the false and foolish and fleeting to that which is eternal. We see there the things that are, the real things, the best things, the

only things. That is to see the face of God. We cannot perhaps with appropriate piety name nor with theological assurance describe death or disaster or disappointment—at least, we cannot always or immediately do so ; but we can, with Jacob, say we were really face to face with God there. And what would God with us ? Shall we not let Christ assure us about that ? If, after such times, we believe in God, let us believe also in Him whom God hath sent to teach us what His thoughts and purposes about us really are. The Christian name for fate is God's love.

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