

THE LEAVEN OF HEROD.

ST. MARK VIII. 15.

THE greatest work which any man accomplishes during his life on earth is the shaping and fixing of his own character. His outward life is as much subsidiary to this supreme result as scaffolding is to the structure which rises within it. The scaffolding is but for a time and seems to conceal its own purpose ; and it is only when it falls away that the building which it veiled stands forth to be seen and to remain. "As the ways of the mason are, so is existence"; for, when a man's life-work is done and all his activity and effort have ceased, his character will stand disclosed. Then shall be seen what he was making himself all the time that he went about his daily work and took his daily pleasure, and what he is to be for ever. The only lasting product of this whirling, hammering, noisy world, is *men*. What each one of us is toiling at, and will turn out at the last and get wages for, is—*himself*.

Life, therefore, is a momentous experiment for every one of us ; we are on our trial every day ; and "the way of life" must in essence be "living the right way." Man's most important book must be his book of life—the book which throws most light on his life and gives him most help in living it. Man has such a book. God has written it for him. It is the Divine handbook to human life. It has been given to teach men how to live. We call it our Bible, because, in motive and power and for help in life, there is none beside it.

The Bible is largely a book of biography. Much of it is a record and report of men, in varying ages and circumstances and of varying temperament, trying to find out the true way to live or wilfully and sadly neglecting it. We are in Scripture thrown, so to speak, into the company of the

evil and the good. We seem to know them awhile, as we know the people we meet and walk about with. And, at the end, our acquaintance with them is made impressive and solemn when they are called from our side, and when after hearing a great voice we see them, as they pass into shadow out of sight, go to right and left as when a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats.

This method of teaching life by the lives of others is always an admirable one. The great principles which affect men's lives for evil or good are in this way shown in operation and process; and this way of teaching is both fascinating and sure. We are taught without knowing that we are being taught; we are so taught that we cannot forget. But in Scripture this method has a power all its own. For, first of all, the central thing in Scripture is a life, a human life, *the* Life which the best voices of these latest ages call divine, and which men have agreed on as the standard of human perfection; and the turning of a few pages can thus at once set every life there written in the most searching light and in the most trying contrast. And, still further and more, there is a power like that of life itself in the biography of the Bible. There is no doubt about this; the Bible is in this respect quite different from all other books. It is quick. It is vital. It goes straight to those centres in us where life originates and takes direction and shape. This most real power in our Bible has in it a mystery; on ordinary terms it is inexplicable. We may not say less about it, and we cannot say more, than that the Spirit of God gives it this power. Without this "Spirit which quickeneth" the Bible would in all the larger reference and need of human life, be only dead and deathful letter. That Spirit "giveth life" in a very special degree to the record of the life of Jesus Christ, so that saints when they read the Gospels seem to know Him as if they had heard His voice, and touched His hand, and seen His face,

and had entered into a new relation and friendship in life. But the same Spirit in measure also "giveth life" to the Bible record of other lives. Jacob, Joseph, Balaam, Saul, David; St. John and St. Peter; Herod, Pilate, Judas—they all have died and are gone. But when we open the Bible we come into a place where they all are as when they actually lived—some of them there pacing to and fro with dark countenance, and some serene and content in the peace of God. The Bible thus in its biography becomes, by the side of our pilgrim life, an Interpreter's House to us. We go in and we see, and we wonder and we ask our questions; and the Holy Spirit is our Interpreter. He bears witness with our spirit. He reads the lives of others into our own.

The Bible, when showing us how men determine their own character, is faithful in recording the circumstances which influenced them. It is often both graphic and detailed in its record of a man's environment, keeping us while we read as much in remembrance of the events which befell him as of the motives which swayed him. Indeed the Bible was the first book to make any recognition of the law of heredity about which we hear so much nowadays. It recognises that men are born with a bias to good or to evil, for which they are not responsible—a bias which we cannot calculate but which God must estimate when He visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and when He shows mercy unto thousands. At the same time this Book, above all books, lays each man's responsibility upon himself. Each man in its pages bears his own burden. He goes on in the midst of his complex circumstances, shaping and determining his own character; and then, when his time of probation is done, death comes and fixes it, that over it one last great word may be spoken—the word of "The Amen, the faithful and true witness." In this way the Bible in its portraiture would have us to read and learn of life.

The Herod who is mentioned in our text has his life written in the Bible's most characteristic way. The features of the life are made very distinct; and the surroundings and setting of the picture are minute and faithful. Wonderfully little is said about him, and yet wonderfully much! He came of a pedigree which had strong in it all the essentials of the Jew—prejudice, pride and power of passion. He was the son of a father who had had genius, which secured for him the title of Herod the Great. His father had lived in the thick of great events, and been a hero in courage and patriotism; and the son was sworn from his birth against the Romans, like another Hannibal. But the son was a poorer man all round than the father had been. The father had known noble rage and had been fired with a splendid passion for his country and its rights; but the son's spirit was of a diluted power, and he seemed capable of little nobler than selfish resentment. The father led the multitudes; the son feared them. The father could, in carrying out a policy, both harass the Romans and massacre innocents; but the son's plans could be determined "even to the half of his kingdom" by the wish of a girl whose dancing he liked, and his only courage was of kin with that of a cruel boy who will torture what he knows can do him no harm.

Riding under the lee of his father's greater life, and accepting as in his own favour all his father's influence and fame, this Herod seems to have been a weak, ill-equipped, vacillating young ruler. He had no great projects in life, either for good or evil. A creature of weak emotion rather than of strong motive, of impulse rather than of power, and in no sense a man either of purpose or of principle! He had in his nature just enough of sympathy to be dangerous and make him flexible—that kind of sympathy which puts a man at the mercy of those whom he meets at table and which leaves him most influenced by the last word; a

spoiled, silly nature, easily inflated by wine or flattery, weak in words and great in oaths,—a man who was little and mean even in his vices! What curious types and phases human nature sometimes assumes! obliging us, when we think of them, to carry our thoughts to levels of life inferior to the human; and, thinking of Herod, one can hardly help feeling, with a not pleasing reference in one's mind, that when off his guard, and when not led by any one of nobler instinct, the habits of his soul were low and his natural gait was to slink.

At the same time there was in this man a certain pleasantness and willingness which seemed to promise well at first, and which might throw any one off his guard. But beneath this demeanour lurked a stealthiness and a suddenness which would not attack as does the lion or the wolf, but which would bite and then flee, or would take advantage and torment, or might at any moment, while it fawned, snap at the hand that stroked. Well was he named "that fox"! A man with not a noble element in his nature! A man who needed always to be watched! A man in no sense formidable, and yet much to be feared as a malicious and silent foe! A man whose opportunity was another's weakness! The only man of whom Jesus spoke with contempt!

It will be admitted, for it is plain, that the natural chances of this tetrarch of Galilee were, on the whole, against him. His inherent powers were poor; his traditions were not of the finest; his upbringing was not of the best. The bias of Herod's nature was probably away from the good and towards the evil. What wonder if he was naturally selfish! And what wonder if, with his feeble brain, his selfishness turned away from ambition and grew to sensuality! And what wonder if, discovering his own weakness, he grew cunning and cowardly and cruel! Scripture seems to indicate all this in the circumstances

and environment of Herod, and to justify, from the lips of the Highest, this terrible analysis of his heart—so faithfully does it depict human life and all the complications and chances which are involved in the making of character! Surely such an one as Herod was needs great physicians if he is to be medicined and healed! So the most important part of the Bible's record of Herod's life is that which tells of the means which were put within his reach for help and healing.

Herod had two great opportunities. His life twice came to a great moral crisis, when he had to decide before his conscience and his God as to what he would do and be. Twice over the best influences of his age powerfully affected him, and each time such help was thrown to his hand that, had he only grasped it, he would have been rescued from himself and from sin. He would have stepped forth from all the entanglement of his own nature and his environment, and would have walked the world in newness of life. Herod was almost saved—*almost!*

The first of these opportunities was when he heard John the Baptist preach. His Jewish instinct carried him with the crowd to hear that great exponent of the Law and the Prophets. John was an austere preacher, hard on himself and hard on other people. He had a fitting pulpit, and fitting echoes for his stern voice, in deserts,

Where rocks were rudely heaped, and rent
As by a spirit turbulent;
Where sights were rough and sounds were wild,
And everything unreconciled.

He thence swayed the nation, and he might well sway this facile young ruler. And sway him he did! The influence of John over Herod was noticeable, and seems to have lasted long. It looked, indeed, as if he was to be permanently influenced; for, when he heard John, "he did many things and heard him gladly." And permanently

influenced by John, he was. Even after John was in his prison Herod feared him, "knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and he kept him safe." Yes, and after he was dead and Herod had seen his lifeless head, and when he knew that his headless body was in a grave, Herod could not forget or quite get over John the Baptist. It was one of the deepest facts of his memory that he had seen and talked with John. It was part of the indelible record of his soul. It was his nearest approach to being a new and true man, when John so moved him that he all but yielded to conscience and God.

Herod's first opportunity was thus singularly adapted to his case. John seemed as if made to suit and influence the young prince of Galilee. The kingdom of God came very nigh him. He was at the very gate of the way which would have led him to life. He had to repent and turn from one sin—one sin only; and he would have received the baptism of John. But John's baptism was "of repentance unto remission of sins"; and he said of that one sin, "It is not lawful," and he was stern and unbending; and he would not let Herod be. So Herod had to make a choice; he was forced to a decision. He had to put down either his sin or his saviour; and, as he preferred his sin, he shut John up in prison. He was fool enough to hear and heed the dreadful suggestion:

Kill thy physician and the fee bestow
Upon the foul disease!

How near and yet how far away! How easy and yet how hard! This not so dangerous youth, whom the preacher seemed to lead in "a willing leash, is yet, for Herodias' sake, a great way from entering the kingdom of God. That fox, though he follows the Baptist, is not so tame as he looks. These feet, so lightly stepping, can turn; and that face, so narrow and sleek, can change;

and Herod can both hate and hurt in a moment. He resisted, and then cruelly resented and wronged, the holiest power that his earliest life knew; he silenced and crushed his best counsellor; he was, to change the figure, like a man who, when wind and wave were rising, struck down the pilot who stood at the helm to steer, and he gave himself to storm and wreck.

After Herod had first silenced and then slain the Baptist, he had one opportunity more. A place was given him for repentance. This was when he heard of Jesus. To Him the people were pressing from all the land. Gentle souls were seeking Him by night. Thoughtful hearts were longing after Him from under the contemplative shade of the fig tree at noon. Canaanites were calling for His help from across the boundaries of the country. Greeks were coming up from far away and seeking to see Him. Sorely stricken sinners were finding salvation and rest in Him; and all through the land His cry was ringing, "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden." Herod, too, heard of Him, but he was troubled. There was a nameless dread in his secret soul that John might live again; and now he let out this foolish fear in foolish words. He could not suppress it any longer, when he heard of miracles and signs; "his passion is so ripe it needs must break," and he said, "It is John whom I beheaded." His palace halls had their Banquo ghost. John was to Herod—almost the last who wore the semblance of a Jewish crown—what Samuel was to Saul—the first whom Israel crowned. If, in an hour of madness and wreck, Saul was disturbed by the shade of Samuel, an old man covered with a mantle, long after the prophet was in his grave; so Herod was disturbed by John, clothed in camel's hair and girt with a leathern girdle. He had not been buried deep enough. He came up from the grave. He haunted Herod's life. He shook his gory locks at him. Herod saw him; he

knew him; he had often had to say ere now, "It is John whom I beheaded."

The soil of this man's soul, in which he would not let the roots of true religion strike, must yield a crop; and it is now weedy and rank and tangled with superstition and fear. The worse spirits are now entering into this house, at the doors of which the good spirits received rude dismissal; and what may not the last state of this man be? Still there was a chance for Herod. The "little grain of conscience made him sour." Because there was moral pain, there was moral life. The moral symptoms were not hopeless. The regret, the remorse were there; the repentance might have come too. It was Herod's hour of visitation from the living God—his second, his greater, his last. Jesus was there before him, set for the falling or rising of this prince in Israel. One turn of his heart! One holy resolution! One word of desire! and Herod had been saved! But his good emotion was allowed to pass; his softened heart grew hard again—harder than ever and hopeless—and he was keen and cruel as before. He dared out all his convictions; he cut at all his spectre fears; and it was doubtless true, as the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Herod would fain kill Thee."

These unquiet stirrings in Herod's breast were the last symptoms of a departing spiritual life. He ceased to be troubled about himself, and then he ceased to be troubled about Jesus. He was indeed "desirous to see Him of a long season," but this was out of mere curiosity; he had the hope of seeing some miracle done by Him. This was a most melancholy stage for Herod to have reached. His fear had grown to indifference; his indifference to the interest of curiosity, and that interest came out at the last in cool and deliberate cruelty. So much was this so that he was glad, exceeding glad, when, on the day of uncertain assize at the end, Jesus was sent to him by Pilate. We

cannot but feel that the hour when the meek Saviour, unprotected and alone, stood before this insolent, unfeeling creature was almost the most pitiable of all His humiliation. It was worse than being "brought to the slaughter," yet "He opened not His mouth." "Then Herod questioned Him in many words, but He answered him nothing." It is a sad, sore sight! It is not pain; it is torture! The Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world, badgered and baited by "that fox" of Galilee!

The true character of this miserable man was fully brought out then. All that had been bad in his past life reasserted itself there, accentuated to a higher power. Rapidly it developed, terribly but truly it all came out, in the near presence and under the silent power of Jesus. Could evidence be more complete of a man being dead while he lived, and of his being "judged already"? Herod was not caring enough about the matter now even to give the Saviour a trial; he did not take the trouble to condemn Him; guilty or innocent, what cared he? Having seen the man, having had his curiosity satisfied, he minded no more. And yet in wanton malignity one step further he did go. Sin is not only cumulative but infective; and as like himself his boon companions in the banquet hall had been when John was slain, so like him are his associates now when Jesus is before him. And "Herod and his men of war set Jesus at nought and mocked Him, and, arraying Him in a gorgeous robe, sent Him back to Pilate." Words could hardly tell a more touching tale. Too indifferent to condemn Him, too callous to give their helpless and inoffensive prisoner a trial, they made themselves merry awhile with Him, and when they had had enough of it they sent Him away!

This is the Bible's picture of Herod. It is not a pleasing portrait to study and display; and yet I think that for

every distressing word I have spoken there is a distressing line in the painting. Beneath and between such atrocious facts in a human life there must have been spiritual mood and motive subtler and darker than I have even tried to say. But, take it as I have said! Do we now with any distinctness realize the kind of man Herod was—selfish and cowardly, furtive, coarse, cruel? Can we at all clearly set him in the midst of his circumstances and see how these affected his character? Can we appreciate in any measure the opportunities he had of good and the havoc which he yet made of his moral nature when he so relentlessly chose evil? And can we understand how Jesus, so innocent and silent, was at the last a swift witness to the truth of his life and unearthed the true Herod, who so long had lurked under a somewhat smooth exterior? If so, what can we say about it all to ourselves and one another? The great word about it is said for us by the Great Physician of souls, "Take heed and beware . . . of the leaven of Herod."

Leaven was a mystery to the Jews. It worked out of sight; it ate its way in the dark; it never ceased till it made a full end. A dull, unlikely something was hid in the measure of meal, and it proved itself there a secret, silent force that first impregnated and then changed the whole. We, with our glasses and curious search, now know all about it; but that was all that they, to whom Jesus spoke, thought of it. The whole of the popular notion about it was summed up in the proverb "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump": if they had any larger thought about it, it would be spiritual, not scientific.

A great physician is usually a great student and exponent of disease. In Herod Jesus detected disease of a most virulent kind. His was a typical case, so characteristic and appallingly complete in all its symptoms, that it is detailed in this book, and the malady is named to all time

from this conspicuous instance. It is called "the leaven of Herod." It never was more fell than in his life. It was at first but a spot, a speck, "the heinous freckle of the flesh"; but it grew from less to more, from little to much. From a small beginning it spread all through his nature, permeating even his soul and entirely prevailing over the good. Sin had eaten the god out of him, ay, and the man too. Even while he lived Herod was a man with a dead soul. The leaven of the Pharisees originates and begins to work in a high supercilious religiousness and strikes down until righteousness becomes self-righteousness, and morality becomes spiritual pride, and all the finer virtues of the character become hard and insensate, and spiritual life itself is strangled in a network of form and ceremony. But the leaven of Herod is the taint and fester of the lower nature spreading and prevailing, till even the higher and diviner nature in a man is involved, and his soul, invaded by the power of the flesh, becomes insensible to God and dead while he lives.

With more or less potency sin, in one or other of these forms, prevails in every age and nation of men. In the history of the world, under the forms and mummeries of religion nations and ages have lain dead and insensible to vital religion, whilst a Pharisaic zeal prevailed and would persecute to death those who would quicken and reform. Such nations and ages were full of the leaven of the Pharisees; they would have crucified the Christ. Not so in ours. Another spirit prevails now, and is amongst ourselves. It may be mild and "subtly inter-fused" with our life, but it conditions and affects us all. "The world is too much with us." Some seek the world's material wealth; some the treasures of the knowledge of it; some the passing pleasures which it affords our lower nature; some its pomp and power. Our interests are so great and our life on earth has so many comforts, that

we run the risk of being absorbed by these alone; and we have found, with the near vision of searching eyes, so much that is fascinating and rare in earth, and air, and sea, that we are forgetting, and almost losing the power, to see afar off. There is a wise measure and balance in all true life—a conserving of all the interests, a just regard to all the facts. If any interests supplant the highest interest, or any love the larger love, our diviner nature must get disordered and deadened. And, amidst so many material interests, does not a material spirit pervade our life? We must be on our guard; in contact with the ordinary life of our day, we may catch this spirit, we may get impregnated by this leaven. It may be in a finely cultivated form, but it is in essence and power an old leaven, “the leaven of Herod,” dulling, deadening our sense of God and eternity. We have almost come in some high quarters to that stage at which men would be glad to see Jesus Christ because they have heard many things of Him. They would like to see some miracle done by Him. They would like to question Him in many words. They would put His works to some scientific test. But would they ever think of doing Him reverence? Would they be earnest enough even to crucify Him? So we should be ever proving ourselves by our relation to the Truth and the true, to the good and the Best; we should be ever testing our spiritual vitality, lest subtly and insensibly the spirit of the world should be lowering the Divine life within us and laying us open to disease, in which there are the seeds of the second death—the death that comes after the first—the death that death reveals!

The point and power of this solemn word of divine warning are in the fact that in each of us there lie concealed the possibilities of becoming entirely different from what we now are—ininitely better or infinitely worse.

The spirit of Herod will make each one of us, in our own place and according to our opportunity—a Herod; and, in the light of such a life as his, we may well “take heed and beware.” We may well scrutinize our life, lest some germ-filament of flesh has, in the war against the spirit, struck root and is sending its spores into our soul—the beginning there of decadence and death. But there is a more excellent way than merely to be on our guard against an infectious and subtle evil, and that is to be zealously and powerfully affected on the side of good because animated and sustained by its spirit. To be thus fortified and secured against the insidious and deathful spirit which was like leaven in the life of Herod, we should be filled with the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit of Christ and the spirit of Herod are contrary the one to the other; they cannot dwell together in the same life; they never can be equal powers. We ourselves determine which shall be ours—the spirit which through sin worketh to death, or the Spirit which through holiness worketh to life eternal. And God giveth the *Holy* Spirit to them that ask Him.

ARMSTRONG BLACK.