

APOCALYPTIC SKETCHES.

IX.

THE MARRIAGE SUPPER OF THE LAMB.

REV. XIX.

WE are here confronted with another of those impressive contrasts with which the Apocalypse abounds. The wail over fallen Babylon of the princes and merchants and sailors has scarcely died away from earth when from heaven above there are heard triumphant shouts of victory. The "alas!" of the world is replaced by the "Alleluia" of heaven, in chorus after chorus of praise to Him who has overthrown selfishness and sin, and given the victory to purity and love.

We are now to witness a triple triumph over a triple foe. Recall the great foes of Christ and His people which have in the course of these visions been described in full. There was first the great red dragon of chapter xii., symbol, as we are distinctly told, of the Prince of Darkness, called in chapter xx. "that old serpent the devil." Next, in chapter xiii., a full description was given of the "beast coming up out of the sea," followed by "another beast coming up out of the land." As the first great enemy was the devil, this second enemy is the world, in its ferocious cruelty as represented by the one beast, in its deceitfulness, as represented by the other which had horns like a lamb but spake like a dragon. After the dragon of chapter xii., and the beasts of chapter xiii., we have the woman of chapter xvii., whose description we had so fully before us in the last article that we need not recall it. The first enemy being the devil, the second the world, we may without hesitation, leaving out the specific applications with which we dealt last month, think of this third one in the abstract as the flesh.

Such is the trinity of evil with which Christ and His people have to contend. And these three are one. In the last chapter the woman was riding on the beast, and the two were treated as one and named as one, "Babylon the great"; and in chapter xiii. we are told that the dragon gave his power and authority to the beast. From this it follows that in the last chapter we really had all the three in the one symbol, for though the dragon could not be separately distinguished, it was under his inspiration and control that the woman plied her seductive arts, and the beast put forth his destructive energy; and, indeed, we may consider that even this appeared in the symbol as represented by the scarlet colour; for the dragon, it will be remembered, was red. The beast, on his first appearance, was probably black; but in chapter xvii. it has become a scarlet-coloured beast, and the woman, too, is clothed in scarlet. They are both "clothed upon," as it were, with the great red dragon, in striking antithesis to the woman clothed with the sun. Thus we may regard Babylon the Great as a combination of the three great enemies of God and His people, and the fall of Babylon as the overthrow of the entire trinity of evil.

When the scene is shifted to heaven, we see the same triumph, but over each separately; first over the woman, followed by the coming forth of the pure bride to enter on the holy joy of her heavenly marriage (xix. 1-10); next over the beast and the false prophet (as the second beast is here called, to bring out specially the quality of deceitfulness which in the symbol had been indicated by the horns like a lamb), the rider on the white horse, whom we recognise at the opening of the first seal as the "Son of God gone forth to war" returning from the fight a Conqueror, crowned with many diadems (xix. 11-21); and, finally, there is the crowning triumph over the dragon, the last and mightiest enemy of all, followed by the renewal

of the face of nature, the end of sin and death and tears, and the coming down from heaven of the glorious city of God (xx.-xxii.).

The order, observe, is the reverse of the order of their introduction: the first is last, and the last first. The reason of this is not far to seek. In the trinity of evil Satan comes first as the original tempter, and the wily foe behind the scenes in all temptation. But as he is spirit, and therefore invisible and intangible, in order to get power over men, he must act through flesh and blood and things material. He must make use of the world as the engine alike of his cruelty and his cunning. And as the female form is the highest expression in nature of beauty and attractiveness, we have a woman as the appropriate symbol of Satan's masterpiece. By capturing the female figure he transforms himself into "an angel of light." He himself is of hell, the world is of earth, the woman is of heaven; and as the corruption of the best is the very worst, it comes about that the most refined and loveliest work of God becomes, when possessed with Satan, his most seductive and destructive minister. Thus, in the attack the woman is conspicuous, the great attraction, but she has the world at her back, for she is riding on the beast, and Satan is unseen, betrayed only by the scarlet colour; and accordingly, in the celebration of the victory in heaven, we are summoned to witness in three successive scenes the overthrow first of the woman, then of the beast, and last of the dragon. Hence the order in the heavenly triumph on the consideration of which we enter now.

The triumph song over the defeat of the woman is a magnificent hallelujah chorus. There is first the shout of the vast multitude of the hosts of heaven as the noise of many waters, yet with articulation so distinct that every word is heard: "Salvation and glory and power belong

unto our God." This dies down; and a second time the great hallelujah is sent rolling through the vault of heaven. Then the theme is taken up by the inner choir of the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures. Out of the silence which follows this strain comes a single voice, like the voice of the Son of God Himself, for it comes forth from the throne, calling upon all, small and great, to join the song; and then there is the final outburst from the great multitude in that short strong anthem which the genius of Handel has made to echo and re-echo through the corridors of time: "Alleluia; for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

We can now readily see how appropriate it is that the overthrow of the impure woman should be followed by the coming forth of the pure bride of God to be united for ever to Him in whom she finds all her nature craves of love and life and joy. The worshipping throng, even as they sing their anthem of praise, begin to make high preparation for a heavenly bridal. The adoration of heaven passes, by the most natural transition, into the joy of a wedding feast, a joy so truly human that the heaven of the Apocalypse loses all that distance and strangeness, not to say awfulness, which its transcendent glories, and the terrible thunders and lightnings and voices which have proceeded from it, have impressed upon our imagination. Every cloud has now cleared away, the last thunder is hushed into silence, and instead of forked lightning we have only pure and heavenly light, while in the full sunshine of the Divine presence the happy throng continue their glad chorus of thanksgiving and praise: "Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, let us give the glory unto Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife has made herself ready."

This is no new figure of speech. It is found in the Old Testament prophets. In the New, John the Baptist takes

it up, and Christ Himself makes it emphatically His own. It is plain, then, that this vision of a wedding feast in heaven is no dream of a lonely mystic, but a distinct and prominent part of the revelation of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Without authority the conception would have been too daring for even a poet's imagination, so we have a little episode to assure us that it is no mere vision, that we can fully rely upon the representation as giving, so far as human thought can, a true idea of the joy of heaven. First there is a special summons to write it (verse 9). He had a general commission to write all that he saw and heard; but when special attention is to be called to some cheering announcement, there is a special summons to write, as it were to underscore or capitalize it. There are three occasions on which this is done. One we have had already when the voice from heaven said, "Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord." Another is coming when the great announcement is made, "Behold, I make all things new. And He said unto me, Write; for these words are true and faithful." So here we have the special summons: "Write, Blessed are they that are bidden unto the marriage supper of the Lamb."

Not only have we this special summons to put on record the great prospect, but a special assurance following it: "And he said unto me, These are the true words of God." When we think how transporting to the Apostle of Love must have been the thought of the heavenly marriage, the thought on the one hand of God over all, blessed for ever, ready to take His people into such close and endearing relations to Himself; and on the other hand of the people so purified from all iniquity, so utterly without spot or stain, that such a relation was even conceivable—when we allow ourselves to dwell on the transcendent thoughts which must have filled his soul before this great unveiling of the secrets of the future life, we can understand the feeling

which prompted him to fall down and worship Him who gave him the assurance that all was veritably true, and how it needed the protest of the angel, and the explanation that he was only an Apostle of good tidings like himself to turn his thoughts from the messenger to the message, and above all to Him concerning whom the message is given: "Worship God; for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

In the latter part of the chapter we have the coming forth of the bridegroom as a conqueror returning from the war, having overthrown the great army that had been arrayed against him and had thirsted for the blood of his bride. Moreover, as the former scene culminated in a marriage feast, this reaches its climax in a banquet which is as gruesome in its horror as the other was rapturous in its joy.

As this would be too painful a subject to close with, it may be well to take it now. And first it is important to remember that in such representations as these we are confronted not with individual persons, but with abstractions clothed for the purpose of dramatic impressiveness with the attributes of personality. Moreover, the ideas embodied in the persons of the Apocalypse are often, from the necessity of the case, the extremes of contrast. To make this clear, let us go back to the two women who have figured so largely in the last six chapters. The woman clothed with the sun is the ideal Church, and the Scarlet Woman is her extreme antithesis. In actual life there are none so heavenly as the sun-clad woman, and scarcely any so utterly diabolical as the Scarlet Woman. Yet the representation, as a representation in the ideal, is no exaggeration; for those who make the purity of heaven and of God their high ideal are ever tending in that direction, and will one day be clothed as with the light of heaven; while those who turn away and yield to the seductions of the flesh, and

the world, and the devil, tend towards the character of the Scarlet Woman, and will in the end fall in her ruin. These two contrasted symbols, therefore, are the two poles of the moral universe: the marriage feast of heaven, the carrion banquet of hell. It is therefore not only contrary to all right principles of interpretation to apply the awful imagery of the close of this chapter to anything in history, but it introduces an element of difficulty which quite needlessly calls forth a protest from the thoughtful reader. Who could have borne Dante's *Inferno* if it had been taken as plain history? Its horrors would have been intolerable. But when it is taken as a poetic representation of the awful results of sin, the effect is entirely different. So here, when you have an angel of light standing in the sun and calling on the eagles and the vultures, and all the flesh-devouring birds of heaven, to gather together for a great banquet, and then down below are shown an immense plain strewn with corpses of kings, and captains, and mighty men, and all kinds of men, free and bond, small and great,—a great supper for the carrion birds,—it would be too horrible to allow the mind to turn to, even for a moment, were it not that it is evidently intended to set before the readers of this book, in the most forceful and memorable way possible, the awful results of yielding to the beast in us. As things are presented to us in every-day life, there is such a blending and intermingling of good and bad, of light and darkness, of angel and devil, that we are in terrible danger of being lured to our destruction by not seeing where we are going. There is a young man drinking his champagne with a light heart. Surely champagne is a good gift of God; and there is nothing wrong in festivity—is not heaven itself to be festivity? All very well, so long as the latent beast is not aroused. But let it be aroused, let the man yield to the temptations which beset him, and in a few years what is he? Carrion. "He that soweth to the flesh shall of the

flesh reap corruption." Put that awful certainty into the language of the imagination, and you have that frightful carrion supper of the vultures which makes the flesh creep, as one reads this terrible delineation of the sinner's doom. It is indeed a part of the shout of victory, for the beast and the false prophet by whom his victims were lured to their destruction are cast into the lake of fire, to be utterly destroyed for ever ; but with the satisfaction of victory there is necessarily associated the sad and awful thought that those who identify themselves with the beast, and are marked indelibly as his, must share his awful fate.

Observe further the indications that the war is no mere war of carnage, but a holy war, fought not with carnal but with spiritual weapons ; for, as we shall see later on, the only weapon is the Word ; the sword proceeds out of the *mouth* of the Lord, and His followers are unarmed, their only accoutrements being fine linen white and pure. What carnage there may be in the contest, then, is not His doing or theirs, but the result of the evil passions which are let loose among the followers of the beast. He is no more responsible for the horrors of the vultures' banquet than were the heralds of freedom in the great American War of Slave Emancipation for the horrors with which it was necessary that that great act of righteousness should be carried out ; and in this connection it is interesting to notice that the passage before us (see especially *v.* 15) seems to be the inspiration of that splendid ode which is known as "the battle hymn of the Republic" :—

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord :
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of earth are
stored ;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword.
His truth is marching on.

We have dwelt long enough on the gloomy background of the picture. Let us now look at the high lights of the fore-

ground. The whole scene is set forth with a Rembrandt-like antithesis of light and shade; and the shadows are there not for themselves alone, but for the sake of the central figures, which must now engage our attention.

“And I saw the heaven opened; and, behold, a white horse, and He that sat thereon called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He doth judge and make war” (v. 11). We have seen the rider on the white horse before—only once, however, at the very opening of this long series of seals, trumpets, thunders, vials. At the opening of the first seal (vi. 2), when the first of the four living creatures called, “Come,” “behold, a white horse, and He that sat thereon had a bow; and there was given unto Him a crown, and He came forth conquering and to conquer,”—*conquering*, for already the victory was gained in His own person; it is the risen Christ, already Victor over death and hell, who rides forth conquering, a crown upon His head. But it is only the beginning of a long war; for as yet He is alone, and the victory gained in His lonely duel with the Prince of Evil must be gained anew in all His followers till He can bring them with Him, a victorious army, all kings and priests to God. Accordingly it is written there that He comes forth “conquering *and to conquer.*” So the war goes on; and the rider on the white horse retires from view; for through all the holy war the Captain of our salvation is unseen. He is never absent, but He remains invisible, till the great day of His appearing, when behold again we see the Rider on the white horse, no longer alone, but attended with a mighty host: “The armies which are in heaven followed Him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen white and pure” (v. 14).

It will have been observed that when the Lord appears in any of the visions His name is never mentioned; but the descriptions given are such as plainly to mark Him out. This is quite in harmony with the apocalyptic nature of the

book, the revelation being addressed mainly to the eye. Even in the great unveiling of the first chapter, when the Lord appeared in glory to His servant John, the name is not mentioned: "In the midst of the seven golden candlesticks I saw one like unto a Son of Man"; and then follows the marvellous description with which we are familiar. In the same way John here simply tells what he saw and what he heard, and yet makes it perfectly plain Who it is, some of the features being precisely the same as arrested his attention when first the heaven was opened and the Lord appeared. He is no longer indeed vested as a priest. He is now robed as a King; but the features are the same: the eyes are a flame of fire, and out of the mouth proceeds a sharp sword, as in the first appearance.

And notice here in passing that His weapon is the sword of His mouth; and that His followers are all unarmed, clad in fine linen white and pure, from which we see that this is no ordinary war, that it is a spiritual contest with spiritual weapons, so that we must interpret the dreadful imagery which follows in no offensive literal sense, but in the strong spiritual sense which we have already attempted to set forth.

It would seem that as He rides forth among the heavenly host He is greeted with shouts of "Faithful and True." Remember He had been out of sight of His people all through these cruel wars; and again and again it had seemed as if His word had been broken and His promises had failed. Again and again had the lamentable cry gone up to heaven, "How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" It had been an age-long trial of faith and patience; but the faith was not misplaced, and the patience could not be disappointed; and accordingly, when He rides forth in triumph with His redeemed behind Him, there rises from all around the shout, "Faithful and True."

There was, as we have seen, quite enough of the old features to make it certain who He was; but there are some new things in the picture which we must now look at. One of them is the garment sprinkled with blood. There is no blood on His followers' robes: they are all clothed in fine linen white and pure.

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?

Nay. Yet in one sense He did bear the cross alone, in that He was wounded for our transgressions. There is where the bloodstains came from. And the fact that there are none on His followers' robes proves that the reference cannot be to the blood of the enemies, but to His own. As the Lamb in the midst of the throne is a "Lamb as it had been slain," so the Rider on the white horse is arrayed in "a garment sprinkled with blood"—His own blood, by the shedding of which He gained the victory over sin and death.

"And upon His head are many diadems." When in the opening of the first seal He issued forth alone, there was a crown upon His head. Now there are many; for the crowns of all His people are His; they cast them at His feet, and sing, "Crown Him, crown *Him* Lord of all." In another sense indeed it is equally true that on His head are many diadems; for He is King of Righteousness, King of Peace, King of Love; but all that really was included in the single crown which was already on His head at the opening of the first seal. That triple crown was His as soon as He had vanquished sin and death and hell in the conflict with Satan upon the cross; but the many diadems seem now to refer to the crowns He has won for all His people; for are they not all now "kings and priests to God"? And in harmony with this we see the great name

written on His vesture and on His thigh: "King of kings and Lord of lords."

But there is more than this to be said about the names in this great passage. We have seen already that the personal name of Christ is not used here any more than in any other vision of the Apocalypse. When He comes forth, He is greeted with shouts of "Faithful and True"; but we can scarcely call that a name. Farther down, however, there are three references to His name, first to one which remains unknown (*v.* 12), then to the name by which He is called by those who know Him (*v.* 13), and finally to the great name written on His vesture and on His thigh (*v.* 16). The unknown name reminds us that "No man knoweth the Son save the Father." It points in fact to His essential Deity. "Who can by searching find out God"? In His inmost being and nature He "dwelleth in light that is inaccessible." It is quite probable that here too we have the counterpart of the name of His great enemy. Recall it. The first word was "Mystery" (*xvii.* 5); and verily there is a mystery of iniquity which no pure mind can fathom. So, too, the first name of our Lord and Saviour is "Wonderful" (*Isa.* ix. 6). We cannot comprehend Him. We can only look, and wonder, and adore. "He hath a name written, which no one knoweth but He Himself." Yet we know Him. How? As the utterance of God to our souls. "His name is called the Word of God." That is what He is to us now; but when the Kingdom shall come, what shall be His name? Look up into the open heaven; look at the Rider on the white horse; see the name upon His vesture and His thigh—on the vesture stained with blood, symbol of His love, and on the thigh, symbol of His power, "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

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