

its level. He cordially accepts their decision, and forgives him whom they forgive.

Incidentally we remark that it is hardly possible to avoid the conclusion that Titus carried to Corinth Paul's letter (1 *Cor.*)¹ and was to bring back an answer and to report on the case. Then, when Paul had to leave Ephesus suddenly, he must have sent a message to Titus bidding him come round by the coasting voyage to Troas. Finally, when his arrival was delayed, Paul went on and met him in Macedonia, perhaps at Neapolis, the harbour of Philippi.

W. M. RAMSAY.

JOSEPH: AN ETHICAL AND BIBLICAL STUDY.

PART III.

“THE BLANK IN THE TENT.”

(GEN. XXXVII. 29-35.)

THE most absolutely interesting track in all this world to follow is that of a good man's life. The Bible leads us often along such tracks, and no book does this so enticingly; but at no point does its spiritual genius beguile us to a finer interest than when it leads us into the life of Joseph. It gives us here a delicate and genial narrative and makes a soft appeal to our heart. It inclines us to love Joseph with an immediate impulse, so chaste and goodly he is!—a streak of true light shining in a little world of wildness and license, where the darkness not only does not comprehend but hates; and it pleasantly entangles us with concern as to the working out of the purpose which was to make him a man. For from the first some higher harmony seems to find and touch the strings of his life and to set them vibrating. He comes before us with a spiritual rhythm in his life, and he is at once intensely interesting.

¹ *St. Paul the Trav.*, p. 234.

He has a great belief which corresponds, and attaches him, to unseen realities; he is mobile and swift, but in all his movements he recognises those things that will neither swerve nor shake. He has a subdued enthusiasm for God. He cannot help doing significant things. An inspiration from on high is upon him. His years on earth become one of God's "sundry times," and his life becomes one of God's "divers portions," for by him God spells out to the fathers one or two syllables of His great Word to man.

While this was God's purpose in the actual life of Joseph, the historian biographer in God's Book has inspiration for his work of interpreting and setting it forth. He uses the finest human art; he selects, assorts, and accentuates; his skill is supreme to weave out of the facts an allegory and lesson of human life, and so essential and vital are the ethics of this one life that what is written grows in moral import and truth with the ages. The author writes with the distinctest spiritual consciousness and intention, yet he never halts to preach—to justify or to blame; he unfolds ideas and actions in their relations, showing us these in their power to order or to confuse what is within our own nature, and to keep us in, or to throw us out of, harmony with the Infinite, and in this way he teaches us that peace and punishment are issues to conduct rather than rewards. The sequence and coherence of the moral elements in the tale are so close and compact that it suggests a transcript from God's own recording Book which is sealed until the time of the end; whilst the lustre and shading of its incident and circumstance make it a story of human life on the earth as vivid as we may anywhere read, domestic tenderness and human pathos being as much a part of it as the terrible irony of the situation at times and the tragedy of transgression.

In these verses a new element and influence come into this story to aid in unfolding the life and character of

Joseph before our eyes. In addition to the fixed and unshaken conditions amidst which a human life must find its way in our world, there are also changeful and uncertain elements upon which it bears and by which it is modified. The serious game of life is much affected by the lives around it; other balls on the table are set a-rolling by the impact of the ball we drive, and our own gets a bias and curve from contact with them. On life's lower planes success consists in calculating, adjusting and deciding among chances and hindrances; and, on higher planes, virtue must impinge on villainy: the coward must swerve from the hero, and the true must displace the false. Even planets in their high course feel the power of others, and answer one another as they pass; and there is nutation and occultation amongst them.

All are needed by each one;
Nothing is good or fair alone.

The sun in God's heavens has his light accentuated by shadows on the earth; and God's men have the light of their lives brought out by contrast—the evil showing up the good.

So it is conspicuously here. God's lesson in these verses is read out directly from Joseph's life; but He calls us to realize and remember its links and relationships, that we may therein learn the interaction of human lives and be taught the reaction of evil as well as the force of good. We are not to be allowed to forget the brethren who have permitted unkind feelings to grow up into fierce passions in their breast; and we are not to lose sight of them when they slouch away home and pretend to wash their hands clean of Joseph's blood before their father. The Bible diverts our interest from Joseph and presses it back to these ten men of falsehood and wrong. It takes us home with them; it makes us stand and hear what they say; it

bids us look on as they break bad news to an old man. We shall try to read the verses, which tell of all this, in their right tone, setting the facts in their true light and shade and giving each its proportion, as we gather and group them under the heading, "The Blank in the Tent."

The grief of Reuben (verse 29) was unmistakably genuine. It broke upon him in a moment. He was an impulsive creature; easily agitated, easily swayed; no steadiness in him, no grip. His father spoke contemptuously of him, and called him "unstable as water"—first one thing and then another! a shallow nature! all surface and no depth! no stamina in him! Still he saw the sadness of the circumstances and was distressed; and there was remorse in his sorrow, for he had known his duty and had not done it. It would not last long, but it was severe while it lasted. He reproached himself, and said, "The child is not," with a sense of awe that for the moment was like a glimpse of the Furies advancing on his soul. Whether then are we to blame Reuben or to pity him? We blame him with all our heart. Reuben is just a particularly dangerous kind of man. In one aspect he is the faultiest of all the ten. He had a tenderer heart than all the rest and a more wakeful conscience, and he had the voice of the eldest brother, and he felt quite clearly that the whole treatment of the child was wrong. The only chance for such a man is to act at once on his best impulse; his only strength is in yielding at once to his finer feelings. But he played fast and loose with his convictions; he tampered with his opportunity; he seemed to treat Joseph better than the rest did; but, trifling with his sense of duty, he treated God worse. God in Reuben's innermost soul called him to be his brother's keeper, and he had instead, by his delay to be obedient, been his destroyer. No wonder that his conscience stung him and

that the goad was sore in his soul! He might well ask, "I, whither shall I go?"

There are not in this chapter two more instructive verses than these two about Reuben. He had no ill-will to Joseph; he had fine impulses; he had a conscience that did its duty; yet, withal, he was a cipher in the moral universe. He was like a mariner with rocks ahead laid down clear on his chart, with the wind rising round him, who yet never went near the wheel. Reuben dallied with the Divine orders in his breast, trifled with time and missed his chance; his whole inner nature called out "Duty," and he never laid his hand on his will or said to himself, "Thou shalt." He acted the moral coward, and became a moral weakling; he knocked at the door at his own time, as if God was going to wait his convenience, and the door was shut; he "returned unto the pit, and, behold, Joseph was not in the pit." It is perhaps safe to say that none of us fail in good impulses; we all have them by the dozen daily. None fail in visions of glorious opportunity; the man must have blind bats' eyes who does not see them every day in a world where a horizon of immortality bounds all the paths of life; but we fail in courage and action. In morals and duty second thoughts are never best—are ever bad; a man's only chance is in immediate, decisive, fearless action. A fine impulse is very flattering to one's self, it spreads a pleasant aroma over one's inner life; but God smells no sweet savour in it. A grand opportunity to do duty is a chance and a call to make one's self morally a man, but a grand opportunity neglected is only disgrace in the ranks of God's heroes. We think we are right (each may answer for himself if we are or not) when we say that most of our failures in duty have arisen in vacillation, in neglect of golden moments, in trifling with time. Like Reuben, we hung fire, we hesitated, and we let the chance go by, thinking we would have it afterwards. Or we

ventured upon a forbidden path—perhaps upon a round-about right path instead of the straight and direct one—meaning at the end to do the right thing in good time. But God gives us only a moment at a time to waste or work with; we have no hours in hand, no morrows to count on; we have no credit in the future to warrant us to speculate with what is so precious as the present. All that lies behind us of time is but a long succession of dead moments that drew but one breath, throbbed but one pulse, smiled but one smile, or were offended into but one frown, and which wait to live and rise and meet us again in the restitution of all things. Young men especially, remember Reuben! learn to pass at once from good impulse to good action! translate in a moment “Thou oughtest to do” into “Thou shalt do”! The connection should be automatic betwixt conscience and will; the moments in morals save us or ruin us. Stand, hammer in hand, ready to hit whenever God lays a glowing opportunity before you: God’s opportunities quickly cool. To delay doing duty is simply not to do it at all.

Miss not the occasion; by the forelock take
That subtle Power, the never-halting Time,
Lest a mere moment’s putting off should make,
Mischance almost as heavy as a crime.

In the two verses 29, 30 we saw that there was a light parting between Reuben and the rest, Reuben being a little separate from the others in motive and aim. But here (verse 31) the ranks are closed again; and, shoulder to shoulder, the ten sons stand before their father as liars, and Reuben is their captain. What a failure the fellow is making of his life! and yet all he wanted was the courage of his convictions. They took Joseph’s coat and dipped it in the blood of a goat. They had never liked that coat—their father’s love-token to Rachel’s boy; they hated their brother out of it, they hated him the

more in it; they had a malicious pleasure in stripping it off him, and now they are mad against it. We have heard that when men have done a deed of murder and left their victim dead, they will turn round, wild with an afterblast of fury, and strike again and again at the silent face—so terrible is a passion when let fairly loose. There is, in these brothers letting out their hatred on the gift of their father's love, something that appals one in much the same way; there is an infuriated irony in it, a wanton extravagance in their cruelty. To save themselves a very little responsibility—the responsibility of a mere word—they stood back and allowed the old man to search for the fair colours through the cold, silent stains; they hand him, with refined and exquisite torture, the coat, and say, "Know now if this be thy son's coat or no." We think that they need not have strained out the gnat, when they had swallowed a camel. We think they might have written out the lie in plain black and white, instead of mixing up the deceiving red with those fair colours. This is the mean side of sin; for the whole nature of a man sinks when he sins. To be an undutiful brother is to begin to be an unkind son. There is no end to sin when it once gets into a man's heart, it advances at such a ratio—an unkind feeling, then an unkind word, a furious passion, death blows and lies, and cruelty for the mere pleasure of it! This is what it meant as they took Joseph's coat and killed a kid of the goats and dipped the coat in the blood and brought it to their father. Sin has banished the divine out of these men; it has done more, it has eaten their manhood out of them. Surely sin is a cruel canker! Surely this disease needs a Great Physician and Healer!

We might wish that we had a pleasanter subject to meditate on; but here we have come to it in God's lesson-book, and we may not without much blame pass

it by. We must ask ourselves what, in this world of ours, and in our own lives, a lie means. For we cannot but feel that the lie of these brethren was even a more serious fact for them than their having sold their brother into Egypt. When we work our moral nature, we work a self-recording machine; when we do wrong, we set an indelible mark on the forehead of our better selves. But when a man lies to hide what he has done, he is locking up his nature and throwing away the key which might open things up that they might be put right; he is as nearly as possible making recall impossible, he is leaving sin's mark to burn itself in.

Now there are two ways of lying—a bold daring way, like writing with a plain round hand in black ink; and a meaner way, like mixing fair colours with red and writing in a disguised hand. There is the plain lie of black and white; and there is the finely-shaded lie—the Turneresque lie of subtle chiaroscuro and vague and subtle effects—the lie that is mixed up with truth. Both ways of lying are sin before God; neither way is permitted anywhere in all His universe. Yet to us there is a difference: the plain, blunt lie is the one that society is shocked at and rises up to avenge, but it is the subtle lie that eats the man out of us, and ruins the life of an age. You had better put lights out and leave a ship to the black night than kindle a false beacon and with light lure her to wreck. If you will lie, lie right out rather than shuffle the truth and insinuate the lie. See and learn what lying is in its most foolish and meanest forms as you are shown these sons of Jacob here. It was all to come out yet: these cowardly men would not be saved a moment's misery by all the falsehood with which they covered their crime; they would shudder at their own shadow every day till the truth was disclosed. They had done Joseph not a whit of harm when they

stained his harmless coat in blood; they were doing old Jacob really no harm, for the difference to him was infinitesimal whether his son was lost to him one way or another, if lost he was; but they were doing irreparable injury to themselves. They were kindling a fire that would burn their hearts unbearably hot, that would make them draw quick breath at night and take restless steps by day till flame broke out all around their false life, and the world was told that they had lied. The moral sage of our century, its prophet of roughest clothing, the Hebrew interpreter of the French Revolution—which was the suicide of France's lying century—lived and spoke to purpose if he had said nothing else than this: "In that whirlwind of the universe . . . there was to men a voice audible . . . voice from the heart of things once more to say "Lying is not permitted in this universe. The wages of lying, you behold, are death. Lying means damnation in this universe; and Beelzebub, never so elaborately decked in crowns and mitres, is not God." Every day we live we are making our life either a truth or a lie; but we may learn here out of God's own word that both Time and Eternity proclaim for Truth! and at the last we all one by one shall be judged by that man who said, "I am the Truth."

How slowly (verse 33) the old father drags out the inevitable and painful inference, as he handles the blood-stained evidence and turns the sad facts over in his mind! How full of the cadence of pain the simple words are—"It is my son's coat; an evil beast hath devoured him"! and how pathetically he accepts the reluctant conclusion, "Joseph, my Joseph, the lad, Rachel's child—Joseph is without doubt rent in pieces"—all the reminiscences of the innocent little life breaking round like waves in a great sea of sorrow. "And Jacob rent his clothes and put sackcloth upon his loins and mourned for his son

many days." These are words which need not to be explained; their meaning is too plain to need to be told; for "Never morning wore to evening but some heart did break." The big world all round has been trenched into graves: the sea has its dead and the frozen snows have theirs; our old earth driving through blue space is freighted with the dead—a larger charge than all the living! This old sorrow of Jacob's is a fresh sorrow to some one every day; there are hundreds to-day bending over their broken hearts, their whole life having become as if one great blank. There is not one who reads this page but has known some vanished face, the memory of which still commands their tears; and

That loss is common does not make
My own less bitter.

The grief of Jacob had elements of peculiar sorrow in it. It was the morning of the old for the young—a grief with a quality all its own; for this is the unrelieved, unmitigated complaint of the most disinterested love. Then, added to that, were all the torturing elements of uncertainty—imagination heightening the unseen into a large pain. When we can count the hours as we watch the slow going away of a friend on a death bed, when, after it is all over, we can hold the dead hand and can venture even to speak to them their dead name, when we can do all the last offices and lay them in a grave, the pain may be very sharp, but then we know it all to the very end. But we may know, or we can think, what it means when a son leaves the father's doors and never comes back—the sea taking the life and giving the grave in one and the same moment, or some far distance wrapping the absent one in perpetual separation and silence. For such a death gives a bitterer sorrow than any death at home. It was this sorrow which made Jacob mourn so much. His son was lost—at least he thought so—

yes! it must be so; and yet there was a mystery about it, an awful uncertainty hung over it all, and sometimes all his mind was clouded with a doubt. The agonizing thing would be that some hope would linger in his heart—not enough to give any comfort, but just enough to keep the pain from healing!

This is the grief that is sorest by far. On other mourners sorrow falls like a frost, and leaves are withered and fall, and dead, cold winter takes awhile entire possession; but this gnawing uncertainty eats at the root and slowly silences the life with a perpetual blight. It is a sorrow which the old can never get over, when they do not know exactly what has happened. Long after the sun is set the grey will lighten and fade, and fade and lighten again, till they hardly know whether their grief is a darkening night or a brightening morning. Again and again, and yet again, old Israel would be at the tent door looking for Joseph to come back, and returning, though late, to look again before it was dark, waiting after all the hills were silent lest even then he might return. We know that that is the way with the old when the loved are lost, some unseen distance having taken them away and kept them. They wake at night and hear the watch-dog bay far up the hills, and think of those who arrived late when they were not looked for; remember, or think they remember, having heard of some who returned after hope was gone. They wander along familiar walks by day and listen along them by night; they stand by the pier when the ships sail home, and they watch for the wave of a hand—all in vain, they know; but hope will neither be bidden nor forbidden, when they have gone from us who have never come back. Israel knew what he was saying, "I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning"—so irremediable was the loss, so great "the Blank in the Tent"; so impossible was it that such a sorrow should either be comforted or by an old man

be got over; and Jacob's only solace and desire were now to think that by-and-by he and his son would sleep in a common bed—a grave with many sleepers between—or haunt together some silent halls of Hades. So, “though all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort, he refused to be comforted; for he said, I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning.” All his sons rising to comfort him! Would one not like to have given a look and a word to those sons, intruding on their father's sorrow, and doing the hypocrite as they pretended to console him? Could more hollow-hearted mockery be imagined? Could falseness have gone farther? But I have little doubt that they had done themselves such moral injury that they had mortified consciences as well as petrified feelings ere now. They had told, and had lived in, their falsehood so often and so long that they—to use Shakespeare's words of terrific moral analysis—

By telling of it
Made such a sinner of their memory
To credit their own lie!

Indeed, to exaggerate is simply impossible in speaking of the utter havoc which untruth can and does make in a human heart and life.

We may dwell for one moment upon that wondrous love wherewith Jacob loved Joseph, and on the utter anguish to which this love was changed by loss. Think how that tender young life had grown up out of sorrow for Rachel, till it was all enclosed round with the clinging tendrils of the old man's heart, and then realize how the heart was torn when Joseph was lost. A young heart may live to love again, but the old heart can only live to sorrow. And yet life is made up of such experiences; the old have the last lingering blossom plucked, and their life left wintry bare and wintry desolate; and the young, who had fixed on a bud to be plucked on a morrow when its delight would

be greater, its petals fuller and its fragrance sweeter, have often to hear all through the night the wind and pitiless rain, and to find in the morning what promised so much only a broken and soiled disappointment. As far as this world goes, all the love is changed or lost; all the lights of life go out; all the rooms of our houses are left unto us desolate—it always comes to “the Blank in the Tent.”

But is this what it really means? Is this all? Is this most? No, it is not all! It is not most! It is really not this at all! Is the great house of life made up of only these few poor rooms down here which you and I have entered, and peopled with our friends, and sweetened with our love? Even these silent chambers, which we call those of death, are rooms in this great house—resting-rooms, where the wearied sleep—chambers whose name is Peace, opening towards the sunrise, and love is the atmosphere and law of the whole wide house. Love has the right to wander into every desert, and to call to every sea, and to knock at every grave, and to demand its own back again; and God, who is Love, will not, cannot, dare not refuse, for love is His own law; and when love does all that, it is only accepting His own pledge and making His own plea. Never let us try to comfort ourselves for the lost by lessening our love for them, or by withdrawing it and giving it away to others; when we do that, we are giving up the best, we are surrendering everything. Rather let us trim our love for the dead when it wanes, and steady it if it flickers; we should never let it burn out or burn low; it is one of God's lights—one of His lesser, lower lights—for guiding His children home. A dark horizon, as of night and cloud, now divided Joseph and Jacob; and above it there hung, unextinguished, unimpaired and only tearful like a star in a troubled sky, their love for one another. Jacob had lost Joseph, but his love for him shone out in the darkness and desolation years and years afterwards and led

him across the desert and the distance till they met and clasped and kissed with tears. That star is God's: He made it; He calls it by name; He calls it by His own name, and its name is "Love"; and by it He promises to each of us that He Himself

In the long way that I must tread alone,
Will lead my steps aright.

We may also think of Joseph and look at this loss and separation from his point of view. He was hidden to sight among the shadows of the far away; but, if we may so put it, though Jacob cannot see into the darkness, Joseph can see out from under it. He can see and remember his old home, and can respond to his father's love there, the old scenes and the companionship of their old love were dearer now "than when he walked therein." So it may be, we reverently presume, with those who have gone further away to be absent longer—those whom we never hope, and, by-and-by, never *wish* to see on earth again. It is pleasant, and spiritually permissible, to think of this world of ours being still in their eyes—hanging far beneath them like a dusky star, but within sight of heaven and within their sight; and, without fault, we may believe that, in some far city there "clear as crystal," those faces we knew are sometimes to be found around its wall, "great and high," looking towards earth and remembering that we are there. Weep we may! weep sometimes we must! but we will not go down to our graves after them mourning; we shall rather ascend in desire into their life, or, if go down into the grave we must, we shall go down hoping, trusting, loving. Thus only can we as Christians, as the followers of Him who was dead and is alive again, and who is the Resurrection and the Life, allow ourselves to weep for

Those friends of mine who live in God.

ARMSTRONG BLACK.