

The Great Text Commentary.

THE GREAT TEXTS OF ACTS.

THE FACE AND THE VISION.

And all that sat in the council, fastening their eyes on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.—Acts vi. 15.

But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, and said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.—Acts vii. 55, 56.

I. A PECULIAR interest gathers about the name of Stephen. He was the proto-martyr of the Christian Church, and possessed the nobler qualities of the martyr without any of the fanaticism or vainglory which some of his successors have exemplified. Thus he furnishes a type of what the true martyr should be, and stands first and foremost in the royal line of those who have sealed their testimony with their blood.

To be the first martyr in the cause of Christ was indeed a high calling; to follow his Lord and Saviour before the Apostles was a wonderful honour. This is St. Stephen's glory. He had but lately been chosen into the lowest order of the sacred ministry; he was but a young man compared with many of longer standing in the Church; but he outstripped the rest and reached the goal first. It is ever so that the Spirit bloweth where it listeth, and we only hear the sound thereof.

2. Stephen's association with Paul is another circumstance which rivets attention, and suggests many reflexions. It is evident that Stephen's bearing and great address before the Sanhedrin made a deep impression upon the heart of Saul of Tarsus. It helped to produce the revulsion of feeling which issued in his conversion on the way to Damascus; and, when in after years he bore witness to his Lord, it was the speech of Stephen that was the model which he followed as he vindicated the cause of Christ in the face of his accusers.

I.

THE ANGEL FACE.

'Saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.'

There has been a good deal of discussion in regard to the meaning of what Luke here says. Most commentators regard the radiance of

Stephen's face as purely natural, the manifestation of the spirit of faith and zeal which kindled his soul into unwonted ardour. But some, such as Alford, Knowling, and others, are disposed to view it as a supernatural illumination like that which glorified the face of Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration.

We may be sure that this comparison is not introduced by way of ornament. St. Luke does not mean merely to tell us that St. Stephen's face was beautiful and radiant with conscious innocence, truth of purpose, and entire trust in God. All this, no doubt, but more. We may believe that strength, not of earth, but of Heaven, sat upon the young deacon's countenance—strength, like that of St. Michael, to contend before rulers and kings for the Lord's sake, which 'all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly upon him, saw,' although they failed to perceive that Immortal Source from whence it came.¹

He heeded not reviling tones
Nor sold his heart to idle moans,
Tho' scorned and mocked and bruised with stones.

But, looking upward, full of grace,
He prayed, and from a happy place,
God's glory smote him on the face.²

1. What are some of the characteristics of an angel face? None of us has ever seen an angel's face, and yet the writer of this chapter without a word of explanation, and with marvellous excess of boldness, says that all those who saw St. Stephen's face saw it as it had been the face of an angel. He takes it for granted that this bold comparison will be clearly understood by those for whom he writes, and we read the description without feeling that the comparison is at all incongruous. Yet, what is our idea of an angel's face? Suppose in an audience of people—Christian people—each one were furnished with paper and pencil and were asked to write down, without consulting one another, what each thought an angel's face was like. What a variety of notions there would doubtless be! The exercise would not be without value, for it would show what definite ideas we have about those heavenly beings with whom we one day hope to associate.

Among the characteristics suggested by the comparison the following may be mentioned.

(1) *Calmness and strength.* There was much in

¹ H. A. Coit.

² Tennyson.

Stephen's situation that might well have produced anxiety and appalled his spirit. But none of these things moved him. A furious crowd surging round him, hatred gleaming from every face, curses leaping from many throats and with hands clenched over the stones they were ready to hurl at him. But there in the face of his enemies, some of them doubtless his former friends, men of his own nationality, of his own town, with death staring him in the face, he stood calm and steadfast, his face like that of an angel.

When Lord Byron sat for his bust, which Thorwaldsen was modelling for him, he moved so uneasily in his chair and changed the expression of his features to such a degree that the artist was at length obliged to request him to keep his face still. On Byron's making answer that such was the usual expression of his countenance, Thorwaldsen merely replied, 'Indeed!' and went on with his work, producing an excellent likeness in which restlessness is visibly portrayed. But Byron was not alone in wearing a habitual look of restlessness. Stand for a few minutes at the corner of one of the crowded streets of any town, or at a railway station, and you will see what an absence there is of calm in the countenances of the throng. If there is anything that is characteristically a feature of a man's life it is this want of calm, although all desire to possess it.¹

(2) *Youthfulness and beauty.* Angels are 'ever bright and fair.' They are invested with immortal youth. In the Old Testament stories the angels that minister to men are always represented as young, and such is the case also with the monkish legends of the Middle Ages. Artists too have accepted this idea, and from the cartoons of Raphael to the paintings of Burne Jones 'have invariably painted angelic forms with the freshness and fascination of youth.' And George MacDonald, inheriting these traditions, makes Andrew Cumin say to his wife: 'But what I was lauchin' at was the thocht of anybody being auld up there. We'll a' be young there, lass.'

(3) *Christlikeness.* The angels who always behold the face of Christ reflect His loveliness and glory; and so did Stephen when he confronted his enemies in Christ's name. This is the glory that excelleth. There is no beauty like the beauty of Christ. And in their degree it has been the attainment of many of Christ's servants who have walked in daily fellowship with Him.

The time when I would have liked my father's look to have been perpetuated, was that of all others the least likely, or indeed possible;—it was when, after administering the

Sacrament to his people, and having solemnized every one, and been himself profoundly moved by that Divine, everlasting memorial, he left the elders' seat and returned to the pulpit, and after giving out the psalm, sat down wearied and satisfied, filled with devout gratitude to his Master—his face pale, and his dark eyes looking out upon us all, his whole countenance radiant and subdued. Any likeness of him in this state, more like that of the proto-martyr, when his face was as that of an angel, than anything I ever beheld, would have made one feel what it is so impossible otherwise to convey,—the mingled sweetness, dignity, and beauty of his face. When it was winter, and the church darkening, and the lights at the pulpit were lighted so as to fall upon his face and throw the rest of the vast assemblage into deeper shadow, the effect of his countenance was something never to forget.²

2. Let us consider the impression which the angel face made upon those who saw it. 'And all that sat in the council, fastening their eyes on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.' The strength, the calm, and beauty of Stephen's face struck even unsympathetic beholders. It was so lighted up with a Divine effulgence that none was insensible to it. But though it was unwillingly recognized by all, the influence of it was resisted.

The appearance did not out-dazzle or overawe them. It merely attracted, and, for the moment, arrested them. It did not turn them from their purpose, their passion was too fierce, but it brought them to a pause, imprinted itself upon them, and—may we not suppose?—came back in waking thoughts and nightly dreams, and never deserted some of them till they saw it again before the throne of God.

II.

THE HEAVENLY VISION.

Probably the Sanhedrin met in the usual chamber, not in the open air; and, if so, the character of the vision is necessarily subjective and inward. There was but a roof over the martyr's head, and other eyes looking up saw only rafters and cobwebs; but to him the illimitable heavens opened in their depths. The condition of beholding is emphatically given as 'being full of the Holy Ghost,' which seems distinctly to imply that the organ of perception was 'that inward eye' which sees the things that are, where others see only the waves breaking on the rocks of Patmos. That conception of the nature of the vision does not in the least affect its reality or its Divine source. It only affects the manner of the manifestation. No

² John Brown, *Horae Subsecivae*, i. 59 (Letter to Dr. John Cairns).

¹ W. Macintosh, *The Face of an Angel*, 16.

one else saw what Stephen saw, as is plain from the burst of horror which met his declaration. But he did see. It was no phantasm or airy fancy, the child of overstrained nervous tension and longing. If we judged by heaven's canons, we should recognize that the vision was far more 'real' than the roof.¹

1. It was a real vision of the unseen and eternal which was vouchsafed to Stephen. A vision is not granted to a dying witness of God of something that is not true. If he has a privilege above others, it is the privilege of discerning that which is true more vividly, more intensely than he had discerned it before, or than other men discern it. That such a choice gift was bestowed upon St. Stephen I truly believe; and therefore I believe that the Collect for his day is right in asking that these same gifts be bestowed upon all who, in any age, are suffering for the truth.²

Saint, did I say? with your remembered faces,
Dear men and women, whom I sought and slew!
Ah, when we mingle in the heavenly places,
How will I weep to Stephen and to you!

Oh for the strain that rang to our reviling
Still, when the bruised limbs sank upon the sod,
Oh for the eyes that looked their last in smiling,
Last on this world here, but their first on God!³

2. The vision was twofold in which Stephen saw the glory of God, and also the Son of God at God's right hand.

(1) He saw the glory of God, the unapproachable light in which God is clothed, and which in ancient times was manifested in the shechinah. Whenever the heavens are opened, the glory of God is seen. That is what fills all the heavenly region. We are told in the final picturing of it, in the Book of Revelation, that 'it has the glory of God,' and that 'the glory of God doth lighten it.' But what Stephen saw was more than the general pervading of Heaven by the brightness of the Divine glory. It was the concentration of all glory at the throne. It was the very centre sun, the very fountain head of glory, the Person of the Living One, the God of Glory. This is not to say that he beheld, before his actual entrance into heaven, the face or form of the Eternal Father. Can we say that there is ever such a visible sight

of Him? At any rate, that is a sight beyond mortal power of endurance, forbidden to fleshly eyes. 'He dwelleth in the light which is inaccessible.' No man can see God and live. But Stephen saw what Moses and the elders of Israel saw, when they climbed Mount Horeb at God's invitation, and 'saw the God of Israel: and there was under his feet as it were a paved work of a sapphire stone, and as it were the body of heaven in his clearness.'

(2) He saw Jesus standing on the right hand of God. It was an early suggestion of Chrysostom's that Jesus was standing to help His faithful servant, and this supposition is generally endorsed; but it is usual to combine with it the thought that Jesus was awaiting His servant to welcome him to his reward. The ascended Christ both succours and welcomes those who die in His name.

What men need is the spiritual vision, the illuminated eye. He, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up and saw. There is a vision which comes only with spiritual fulness. In the world of nature the sight is the door to the spirit, but in the world of grace the spirit is the door to the sight. In my natural life God enters from without and penetrates within; in my spiritual life God enters from within and makes His progress outward. The first thing in the life of nature is the last thing in the life of spirit-vision. I am often asking why it is that so little is revealed to me; it is because I myself am so little. If I had more spirituality I would have more sight. There are treasures lying at the door of my dwelling which seem to me simply like a dust-heap. Some day I shall awake and marvel at my own riches; I shall marvel at the wells of water which were lying in my desert; I shall marvel at the crowns that were cast at the foot of my cross; I shall marvel at the beauty which lay at the top of the Dolorous way. The revelation is already waiting for me; it is blazoned on the sky, it is imprinted on the air, it will be inscribed upon my heart when I have ceased to be a child. When I am full of the Holy Ghost I shall look up and see.⁴

3. The closing words of Stephen were full of energy and fire. Most remarkably he repeated the identical words which Jesus had used when, standing before the same council, He foretold His glorification. The effect was instantaneous. It reminded Stephen's opponents of what Jesus had said; it reminded them that He had escaped out of their hands; it assured them that He whom they had crucified was exalted at God's right hand, and maddened by these thoughts 'they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord.' It was by faith that Stephen endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

¹ A. Maclaren, *The Acts*, 74.

² F. D. Maurice, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 93.

³ F. W. H. Myers, *Saint Paul*.

⁴ G. Matheson, *Voices of the Spirit*, 125.

Give me a man who can look with an eye of faith beyond the narrow limits that birth, or accident, or circumstance, or his means has assigned to him—

That sees beyond the circle of his years,
Beyond the border of this narrow world;—

a man, too, who lets God possess him; who not only sets God at his right hand, but allows God really to use his right hand; who each day tries to realize that he is but an instrument for God to use to help the world; who each day realizes he is not his own, but is bought with a price; and who each day says at the call of duty, 'Here am I, send me'; if it be but to pick a child from the gutter, or help a lame dog over a stile—a man who in doubt or difficulty says (yea, even in the doubt and difficulty of hard breathing before his death), 'Father, not my will, but thine be done';—a man, in a word, filled with the Holy Ghost,—and there is no telling what capacity will be developed; for whatever use God wants the man, that man's usefulness will appear at the call.

Before the rush of the day begins, let us take time to gaze or a space into the face of the King; for one whose eyes

are open to the invisible, who sees with clear spiritual sight the angels and the angels' Lord beside him, can go on his way with high courage and perfect peace, sure that all is well.

A poor shoemaker once dreamed that the Lord Jesus would visit him on a certain day. He lived in a dark basement room, below the level of the street, and could only see the feet of those who passed by. Several times during the day he saw shabby boots moving wearily past his window, and hurried out to invite the tired wayfarers in for rest and food. All day he watched and waited for the promised Guest, and went sadly to bed at last, thinking that his dream had not come true.

But he dreamed again, and the tired strangers he had cheered and helped stood beside his bed, saying, 'Martin, dost thou not know Me?' Then he saw in each face a look of the King, and knew that his loved Master had really visited that poor little home many times during the day.

This is not a parable; it is a glorious fact, Christ, in the person of some of His brethren, will surely visit us this day. Are our eyes opened so that we may recognize Him?¹

¹Dora Farncomb, *The Vision of His Face*, 2.

The Subliminal Consciousness as an Aid to the Interpretation of Religious Experience.

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THE most desultory reader of the theological literature of the last few years cannot but have remarked the constant tendency among writers in other respects very different from one another to fall back upon the idea of a Subliminal or Subconscious self as the key to the solution of all sorts of difficulties. Almost every day one finds some new writer casting sanguine glances in that direction, if haply some problem long dark to him should find its solutions also in that half-lit region. Doctrinal entities so diverse as Immortality, the traditional Christology, the nature of the Deity, and the religious experience of the individual, have all been regarded as finding their true explanation in the Subliminal. What we propose to do here is to choose out one of these problems, the most central one, and ask whether the introduction of this new quantity really gives us any help towards its solution. Is the conception of the Subliminal self going to be of any help to us in the interpretation of the individual's religious experience? It is with this psychological question that we shall concern ourselves here.

Let us begin by examining the proposals of the two most representative writers who take a positive

attitude towards this subject,—the late Professor James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and Dr. Sanday in his recent *Christologies Ancient and Modern*. They are not the only writers who have positive views on the matter, but they have perhaps developed their views with the greatest detail, and probably we shall not lose anything that is valuable by confining our attention to them.

I.

Let us begin with Dr. Sanday; leaving out of account, of course, the Christological application of his view, and confining ourselves to the psychological side of it. The fact of religious experience which Dr. Sanday tries to explain by reference to the Subliminal is the indwelling of God in the soul, or the fact of union with God. 'The proper seat or *locus* of all divine indwelling, or divine action upon the human soul,' he says, 'is the subliminal consciousness.'¹ Or again, 'The deepest truth of mysticism, and of the states of which we have been speaking as mystical, belongs not so much to the upper region of consciousness—the region of symptoms, manifestations, effects—as to the lower

¹ *Op. cit.* p. 159.