

GENERAL LITERATURE.

THE BENEVOLENCE OF THE PRIMITIVE CHRISTIANS.

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(Continued from page 178.)

This voluntary surrender of property was very common in the early ages, and in the great majority of cases this step, doubtless, was dictated by a spirit of Christian sincerity and love. But many inconveniences were apt to result from these public bequests, to the families and friends of the generous donors, and hence the pastors, in their anxiety to prevent the least appearance of evil, and to countenance no proceeding, though tending to increase their treasury, but what was just, honest, and of good report, often refused to accept of estates that were offered them, or restored them again to the surviving relations of the testator, of which the following may be given as an instance:—A certain man, having no children, and no prospect of a family, destined his whole patrimony for the benefit of the poor, only reserving to himself the use of it so long as he lived. It happened that after this destination of his fortune he became the father of a numerous family, in consequence of which, the Bishop of Carthage generously restored to him the unconditional use of his estate, and gave up all right to it, in preference to the natural claims of the children.

Another story to the same effect may be subjoined, on the authority of Jerome, who had a personal knowledge of the circumstances he details. A Christian in Egypt made a public announcement that he purposed to dedicate his estate to the cause of Christian philanthropy. At his death, which happened not long after, it was discovered that he had secretly reserved a part of his fortune for his own private use; a reservation which, although he had perfect liberty to make if his intentions had been declared, became stamped with a character of moral guilt, after he had professed to dispose of the whole of his money for the support of the poor. Fame was not long in publishing this fraud to the world, and the Christians of the place, sensitively alive to the stain which such hypocrisy would cast on their name, resolved to give so strong and decided an expression of their sentiments as would prevent all imputations on the honor of Christian benevolence. A public meeting was held, at which about five thousand persons were present, to deliberate on what was best to be done in the circumstances; and while some proposed that the money so fraudulently hoarded should be remitted to the parents of the deceased, and a few suggested that it should be thrown into the treasury along with the rest he had formerly bequeathed, the voice of an immense majority prevailed, that it should be buried in the grave of the owner, and that their sentence should be recorded in these memorable words: "Thy money perish with thee." So far were the primitive Christians from proclaiming it to be a duty for the rich to part with their possessions, or from encouraging the transference of them to the treasury of the Church, that their pastors, most emulous for piety and zeal, often seized opportunities of restoring such as had been alienated, to the family and heirs of the owner;—so anxiously did they endeavour, at a time when the benevolence of some Christians was assuming a romantic character, and ambition was prompting others to signalize their names by deeds of splendid liberality, to discountenance all donations for benevolent and Christian purposes, except such as were proved to be honest and free-will offerings of faith and love.

A distinguished feature in the social man-

ners of the primitive Christians was the love feast. It was a banquet at which persons of all classes in the Christian community sat down in familiar company,—the pastor and his deacons, the aged believer and the young disciple, the opulent professor and the poorest of the flock. No seats of honour were appropriated to those that were in office,—no invidious line of distinction separated the occupiers of the head from those who were placed at the bottom of the table. It was a feast of charity; not, however, in the common sense of the term, as if it were a splendid and public entertainment which the wealthy gave to their needier brethren, and which they condescended to countenance and grace with their presence, but in the literal acceptance of the word,—a perfect community of enjoyment, in which all met together as brethren, forgetting all other distinctions but their common union in the faith and service of Christ. And though it was not properly a religious festival, yet, celebrated as it generally was, after the close of public worship,—when the minds of all were fresh from the impression of its solemn services, it was sanctified and endeared by all that is sublime and interesting to the feelings of the religion of Jesus. The way of providing and conducting this supper was as follows:—The rich brought a supply of provisions with them, and when the solemnities of worship were over, they spread a table in the Church, on which the voluntary contributions of all were laid; and, after a fervent invocation of the divine blessing on their social meeting, the viands were distributed to the guests. Every one ate and drank at discretion, but the strictest temperance was observed. And indeed this simple repast was so regulated, that it was impossible, in early times, for any excesses to be committed. During the whole continuance of the festival, they joined in edifying and Christian conversation,—the richer and better educated kindly mingling with their poorer brethren, and encouraging them to state their sentiments freely on every subject. At a convenient part of the evening, some one gave a short exhortation to unity and brotherly love; and after others had entertained the company with the singing of a psalm, or some sacred piece of his own composition, and they had joined together in prayer, they all retired to their several places of abode. It was a beautiful practice, indicating not indeed a golden age of purity, but a state of society where, to a great extent, the disciples, acting in the character of their earliest predecessors, were of one mind and one spirit, and loved to proclaim to the world that the distinguishing badge and motto of their community was, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye love one another." But this interesting custom, in the hands of Christians that did not carry to its observance the pure and exalted feelings that influenced their ancestors, soon degenerated from its primitive character, and became the occasion of many excesses; so that, from being first prohibited to be held in Churches, it was afterwards found expedient to observe it only on rare occasions, till at length it fell totally into disuse, and is now associated almost exclusively with the memory of the age that gave it birth.

FASHIONABLE WORLD.

THE fashionable world in our large cities is composed of that class of society which claims an aristocratical superiority over the less pretending classes, from affluence, family connexions, or some presumed merit, not easily ascertained or described. Wealth hath great potency in elevating an individual from a lower to a superior grade, but it is not uni-

formly successful in doing this. Literary fame may, in some instances, give the upward impulse, but neither is it always successful in raising its possessor. Pedigree has most effect, but in some instances we find the oldest and most respectable families put under the ban, and those of mushroom growth occupying a place in the higher circles. So that we are still at a loss to ascertain the precise qualities which are essential to an admittance to the distinguished rank. Very certain are we, however, that virtue or personal merit are not the *sine qua non*, for we can easily instance many, who are all the *ton*, who have small pretensions in this way. Where there exists an hereditary nobility the nature of qualification may be easily determined, and the line of demarcation is already drawn; but in our Republican country, where no such distinctions are supposed to be recognised, the matter cannot be so nicely adjusted.

That there is, however, a fashionable world, is not to be disputed, of whatever materials constituted; and it is equally certain that whatever comes not up to its level is condemned as vulgar. It settles the laws of etiquette, being the self-constituted legislature in this matter, and is the supreme umpire in all concerns, from an article of dress to the right ordering of a ball. It was but as yesterday that the whole country was on the verge of bankruptcy and disaster, and ruin threatened every family; it was a signal Providence which addressed itself to the minds of men, and demanded of them consideration; but the pressure has been removed; the symptoms of returning prosperity are discoverable, and with them the evidences of a return to even greater extravagance and dissipation. Never, perhaps, has there been such a round of parties characterized by wasteful expenditure, frivolity, and devotion to fashion.

To uninitiated readers, it may be a matter of curious intelligence, that at a fashionable party it is not expected that the guests should begin to assemble until ten o'clock, an hour of the night when honest citizens are retiring to their beds, and that after feasting and dancing, the company begin to retire at three o'clock in the morning. The roll of carriages is, until this hour, the music to which invalids are to listen, or by which the sleep of the healthful is to be disturbed. The halloo of an inebriate, at an unseasonable hour, is rewarded by a lock-up in the watch-house, but for this great nuisance there is no abatement. The fashionable are not subject to ordinary laws.

It may, however, be some comfort to those not admitted within the pale, to know that these pleasures are not cheaply purchased.—What a loss of rest, what a world of trouble, how many an aching head and jaded feeling, what an exposure of health and life, are to be encountered by the devotees to such amusements! Where, too, is the domestic happiness of these people, who turn night into day? where the family order; the proper training of children and a long line of *et ceteras*? We do not say, where is their religion, their prayers, their hopes for eternity, their cultivation of those graces which are so essential for those who are to be the heirs of heaven! Alas! they live only for the present time; and for pleasures so tiresome and vapid they sacrifice their hopes for futurity.

The fashions of the world, so engrossing to those who devote themselves to them, deaden the sympathies of the heart, despoil social life of its purest enjoyments, produce such utter heartlessness, that they may be said to bring with them a present punishment, while at the same time they fatally interfere with, and defeat man's chief end in glorifying God, and prevent his ultimate happiness in enjoying