

A Right Appreciation of Riches.

BY IAN MACLAREN.

Much has been written in Holy Scripture and said by teachers of morality regarding the subtle snare and evil effects of riches, and no one can have seen anything of life or have any insight into character without indorsing such charges. Riches, more than any other influence, have blinded the possessor's mind to the exquisite beauty of Jesus' life, to the radiant splendor of God's kingdom, to the severe dignity of character, to the visions of imagination. When one falls under their baneful tyranny he loses all sense of proportion in life, he is deceived by false standards of rank, he becomes arrogant in manner, he is coarsened in thought. On account of the greed of money families have been rent in twain, lovers' hearts have been broken, high ideals have been flung aside, conscience itself has been besmirched and horrible deeds of cruelty have been done. The secret sin of many a saint has been the love of money. As the gold was concealed in the hair of the young girl of Browning's poem, the public stain on many a great man's reputation has been the taking of bribes. For thirty pieces of silver Judas Iscariot sold his Lord, and with money Simon Magus desired to buy the Holy Ghost.

If God has bestowed upon any one more of this world's goods than is necessary for the support of himself and his family—which superfluity may be called riches—then it is evident that this is a perilous gift, and it is intended to be a discipline for the soul. One must not be self-confident and take for granted that because he was in earlier years generous and unselfish he may not grow hard and mercenary in later years. Nothing is more common, nothing is more painful, than the decay of character with the years, so that the spring of fine impulses dries up within the man and his capacity for liberal deeds withers before our eyes. Cases there are, no doubt, where one has passed into liberty as he grew in riches—marvelous deliverance of divine grace—but for one such there are ten where increase of wealth has ended in meanness of soul. And surely there can hardly be a sadder irony than a man building larger barns for his goods, while an ever decreasing space will hold his illiberal and churlish soul.

It were, however, an extreme and unreasonable view to regard riches as a necessary and unmitigated curse. Were this the truth, then the path of duty and religion for one and all of us would be monastic poverty, and he only had done the will of God who had left all to follow Christ as did St. Peter and St. Matthew. This, however, were to change the whole organization of society and hardly for the better, since the day of this general surrender would be the beginning of general degradation. One has only to think twice on this matter to discover that the ethical good to be obtained in connection with riches will not as a rule be their refusal, but their management, and that the man who does his duty best for the race is not he who, through indolence or stupidity, acquires nothing, or having acquired something flings it away, but rather he who, having labored and received, uses his just reward for the highest good of his family and his fellowmen. This is the appreciation of riches.

From this standpoint riches afford three benefits to their possessors, and the first is achievement; and one means that in the effort, by fair means, to obtain riches certain solid qualities are created and fostered. One is thinking, of course, not of the people into whose hands riches have flowed, but of the people who have wrought hard to gain them. There are those who have inherited their possessions, who are often envied, but ought rather to be pitied. Others there are who seem to have obtained their wealth by some accident or turn of life, but who, it is more likely, have simply seized an opportunity for which they had prepared. Some may have amassed unholy gains by oppression and dishonesty, but their prosperity will be short lived. All these classes are to be left out of account in any ethical judgment, for it is evident that in their case the acquisition of riches cannot have gone to the formation of character. Take rather the man—representative of so large and honorable a class in a modern commercial city—who was the son of poor parents and began life in humble

circumstances, who has prospered with the years and is now like unto Joseph of Arimathea. It has been the fashion of literature to put this man in the pillory and to make play with him, and to leave the impression that any scribbler who could string together a few verses, although neither he nor his verses had any claim to character, stood higher by the truest standards of worth and was of more value to the community. This man is also apt to give himself away by too often insisting on his own history, and speaking as if with his own sword and bow, and not by the good favor of the Almighty, he had achieved his success. But it is common speech which does him most injustice, and quite confuses the situation, for it is asked, "How much is he worth?" and then the answer is given in figures. If this were indeed his exact value, surely his life had been a sad fiasco and he himself was of no account. What he is worth is another thing from what he possesses, and if you go into the matter his fortune becomes a mere symbol to be translated from figures into qualities. Just as half a dozen books stamped with university arms show that a young scholar has made a fair beginning in culture, or a simple bronze cross on a soldier's breast proves that he has played the man on the field of battle, so does honorable success in business bear witness to character. It means that a fellowman called to do his work in his calling has not been idle and careless, flinging away his opportunities and denying his duties. It means that he has not yielded to the lower impulses of his nature and done foolishly, to the weakening of his mind and body. It means that he has resisted temptations to trickery, deceit and unprincipled work of all kinds. This ten or hundred thousand pounds are in themselves only dust and vanity. But consider them as x , and work the equation out, and they read industry, perseverance, thrift, intelligence, self-denial, integrity. This gold is but another word for brain and conscience.

The second benefit of riches is opportunity, and this must be patent to every mind. Has not every one of us at times envied a rich man, not for his money, but for the good he could do; not for the pleasant garden in which Joseph walked on an evening, but for its use when he consecrated it to the Lord? Did ever the high office of wealth receive a more convincing illustration than when a millionaire of Jerusalem rescued the body of Jesus from outrage and laid it to rest, with honor, in his rock hewn tomb? In order of beneficence the prophet must stand first, for he declares God, and with him, as being of the same kin, must be classed the poet, the painter, the master of music. None have done so much for us as these messengers of God who have preached to our souls the kingdom of God and magnified its treasures. But after them for solid service give place for Joseph of Arimathea when God has touched his heart. Gold may be only yellow dust, but what is there its possessor cannot accomplish with it? He can enter a home when the head has been stricken with dangerous sickness and send him where the air is dry and the sun is shining, and so restore the husband to the wife and the father to his family. He can find some poor lad whom God intends for a scholar and open to him the gates of knowledge, and so fulfil one of the purest passions of the human heart. He can pull down a nest of evil houses and replace their hideousness with green grass and flowers, so that where disease and crime once reigned little children will play in their innocence. He can secure noble works of art and house them in a fitting building, so that the humblest of the people may possess those things in their souls eye hath not seen nor ear heard. He can raise, in the midst of the care and labor of the city, some house of God wherein the weary shall have a place to pray and the evangel of Jesus shall be preached.

And so riches also must be a joy for the great reward their Christian use brings to their steward. No man must give to God in order that he may get from God, for this were a base spirit that can bring no blessing; yet God is not unfaithful to forget any labor of love. No one can purchase heaven by his riches, yet one may so invest his means as to bring heaven within his heart. The recompense of liberality is automatic and spiritual. What victory is greater than his who, having the world at his disposal, makes it not the minister of his pleasures