

ROMANCE IN PRAYER.

"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me."—Ps. lvi. 18.

We often affront God by offering prayers which we are not *willing* to have answered. Theoretical piety is never more deceptive than in acts of devotion. We pray for blessings which we know to be accordant with God's will, and we persuade ourselves that we desire those blessings.—In the abstract, we do desire them. A sane mind must be far gone in sympathy with devils, if it can help desiring all virtue in the abstract.

The *dialect* of prayer established in Christian usage, wins our trust; we sympathize with its theoretical significance; we find no fault with its intensity of spiritual life. It commends itself to our conscience and good sense, as being what the phraseology of devout affection should be. Ancient forms of prayer are beautiful exceedingly. Their hallowed associations fascinate us like old songs. In certain imaginative moods we fall into delicious reverie over them. Yet down deep in our heart of hearts we may detect more of poetry than of piety in this fashion of joy. We are troubled, therefore, and our countenance is changed.

Many of the prime objects of prayer enchant us only in the distance. Brought near to us, and in concrete forms, and made to grow life-like in our conceptions, they very sensibly abate the pulse of our longing to possess them, because we cannot but discover that, to realize them in our lives, certain other darling objects must be sacrificed, which we are not yet willing to part with. The paradox is true to the life, that a man may even *fear* an answer to his prayers.

A very good *devotee* may be a very dishonest suppliant. When he leaves the height of meditative abstraction, and as we very significantly say in our Saxon phrase, *comes to himself*, he may find that his true character, his *real* self, is that of no petitioner at all. His devotions have been dramatic. The sublimities of the closet have been but illusions. He has been acting a pantomime. He has not really desired that God would give need to him, for any other purpose than to

give him an hour of pleasurable devotional excitement. That his objects of prayer should actually be wrought into his character, and should live in his own consciousness, is by no means the thing he has been thinking of, and is the last thing he is ready just now to wish for. If he has a Christian heart buried up anywhere beneath this heap of pietism, it is very probable that the discovery of the burlesque of prayer of which he has been guilty, will transform his fit of romance into some sort of hypochondriacal suffering. Despondency is the natural offspring of theatrical devotion.

Let us observe this paradox of Christian life in two or three illustrations.

An *envious* Christian—we must tolerate the contradiction; to be true to the facts of life we must join strange opposites—an envious Christian prays, with becoming devoutness, that God will impart to him a generous, loving spirit, and a conscience void of offence to all men. His mind is in a solemn state, his heart is not insensible to the beauty of the virtues which he seeks. His posture is lowly, his tones sincere, and self-delusion is one of those processes of weakness which are facilitated by the deception of bodily habitude. His prayer goes on glibly, till conscience grows impatient, and reminds him of certain of his equals, whose prosperity stirs up within him that "envy which is the rottenness of the bones."

What then? Very probably he quits that *subject* of prayer, and passes to another, on which his conscience is not so eagle-eyed. But after that glimpse of a hidden sin, how do the clouds of estrangement from God seem to shut him in, dark and damp and chill, and his prayer become like a dismal pattering of ruin!

An *ambitious* Christian prays that God will bestow upon him a humble spirit.—He volunteers to take a low place because of his unworthiness. He asks that he may be delivered from pride and self-seeking. He repeats the prayer of the publican, and the benediction upon the poor in spirit.—The whole group of the virtues kindred to humility seems to him as radiant as the Graces with loveliness. He is sensible of no check in the fluency of his emotions, till, *his* conscience, too, becomes angry, and