

HARD SAYINGS OF CHRIST.

I.

'This is an hard saying; who can hear it?'—John vi., 66.

Such was the complimentary comment made by some of the shallower disciples of Jesus, in the synagogue of Capernaum, after they had heard his discourse on the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, in order to obtain eternal life. It may serve as a suggestive introduction to a few short studies on some of the more pregnant and less obvious sayings attributed to Christ in the Gospels.

When the Jews, however, spoke of that word as a 'hard saying,' it was not because they thought there was any difficulty in understanding it. They took him up without further question in a purely literal sense, and they were offended at him because it seemed so absurd. And though it certainly showed some perversity on their part, it was perhaps not altogether unnatural that they should put such a construction upon his language. They were looking mainly for physical blessings with the coming of the Messiah. He himself had only the day before fed the multitude with loaves and fishes. He had compared himself to the manna from heaven which their forefathers had literally gathered and eaten in the wilderness, and he had insisted on the startling statement that if they should really eat his flesh and drink his blood they would live for ever. Now, assuredly they would have welcomed any ordinary meat and drink, and thought it nothing strange that these should have come as their share in the kingdom. But this struck them like a proposal of the grossest and most offensive cannibalism, in which He offered Himself as the victim. They especially recoiled from the thought of drinking

blood of any kind as distinctly forbidden by the Mosaic law. They did not stop to inquire, as they might have done, whether these strange conditions of life might not be intended by him in some other than a purely literal sense, would not even listen when he hinted at another, but set him down as a fanatical madman, and left him in disgust. Any one of us would probably have done the same with a similar apprehension of his meaning. The twelve were prevented from following the rest only by an instinctive feeling that something more reasonable must be intended though they hardly understood at the time what it was.

Of course, no one finds this a 'hard saying' in that sense now. No writer of any school, Christian or otherwise, thinks of interpreting it as wholly literal. But when we come to explain what it does mean, we find considerable difference of opinion. To begin with, the passage is a sort of battleground of theology because of its supposed bearing on the sacramentarian question. From the fourth century down to the present, there has been an almost continuous line of commentators who explain this saying as referring by anticipation directly and exclusively to the Lord's Supper, which was instituted a few months later. These commentators are not confined to any one church. Lutherans, Anglicans and even rationalists maintain it, as well as Greek and Latin expositors. The interpretation is undoubtedly a plausible one to those who find it possible to discover transubstantiation or any kindred view of the sacrament in the New Testament anywhere, and it is not to be denied that the words of Christ here readily lend themselves to a superficial ad cap-