

NEW READINGS OF OLD PARABLES.

BY THE REV. CHARLES ANDERSON, M.A.

THE MARRIAGE FEAST.

This "kingdom of heaven," which is here "likened unto a marriage feast," what is it? the after-life, or this life? Most assuredly and most evidently not the after-life, but the kingdom of righteousness in this life. There is nothing more remarkable than the way in which the religious world delights to put God and heaven as far off as possible; and this, in spite of the words of Christ, which say, "the kingdom of God is *within* you."

The loving father, being a loving father, does not keep back his good things from his children as long as possible, but he hastens to give and to give yet more abundantly. What is there of heaven which is not now within the reach of every one of us, if we will but put forth the hand and grasp it? In heaven we look to see God; do we not see him here? In heaven we hope to be near God; but, now, he is very nigh unto every one of us; "in him we live and move and have our being;" "God dwelleth in us;" he cannot be much nearer than that. In heaven we seek the rest, joy, and spiritual strength which come of God; but do we not seek and find all here? Is it not just because of this foretaste, that we have the desire, the hope of its fruition? Every single act of virtue brings heaven all about us; and yet men say, heaven is put off to the other world. So, of old, the disciples said, "Show us the father and it sufficeth us;" but Jesus answered, I am in the father, and ye in me, and I in you."

But if heaven is here, hell is here too. We want no flames coming out of the earth to convince us of that. Sin, the devil, and hell are too often both seen and felt and kept company with, to leave any doubt about the fact, in respect of this life. As to the after-life, we have no wish to raise the veil, or to dogmatise about a future, with those who would seem to be sceptics even as to the present.

To continue our story. The king who "made a marriage for his son, sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding, and they would not come. Again he sent forth other servants," with a yet more urgent entreaty; "but they made light of it and went their ways."

So it was with the religious world then, and so it is now. The bidden will not come; they make light of it and go their ways. That is to say, they stand by their ritualisms, their shibboleths, their theologies, and will not go one step further. Pushing and shoving at the door in a very ill-bred manner, swearing at one another with, of course, the most pious oaths, they neither enter in themselves to the marriage feast of righteousness, nor suffer those that would to enter in.

So it is with the religious world. And, as to others, they go "one to his farm and another to his merchandise." The bodily and material interests absorb the mental and spiritual. Men cannot *make haste* at two things at once. If they make haste to get rich at their bankers, they have no time to make haste to get rich in the gains of righteousness. Unhappily not only England but the whole "*civilized*" world is, as yet, little better than a Nation of Shopkeepers.

"And the remnant took his servants and entreated them spitefully and slew them."

The teacher here is the prophet of his own future—a shameful death on the cross—and of the future of all his followers. Still, men show spite by the old cry, *Beelzebub*! against our preachers of righteousness—our men of science, political economists, sanatory and educational reformers; against all who think for themselves as free men and not slaves. Still, men slay, and with that most cruel of weapons, the tongue.

"But when the king heard thereof he was wroth, and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city."

Now, who is meant by this king? Plainly God. Then God is wroth and revengeful. And yet he is a loving father. How do we explain this? Very readily. The mind of man cannot reach God, but only reach after him; seek if haply it may find him. But no man by searching can find out God. The thoughts of men and the words of men are far too feeble to reach the Eternal. Hence men speak—when they speak their best—but blunderingly. They say, God is wroth, God repents, God loves, hates, is capable of changing his purposes if we only do penance enough and cry loud and often enough. In fact, they say God is a *person*; and by this word, person, they connote a *human person*; for we know not neither can we conceive any other.

But after all, there is a great truth wrapped up here. For those who violate the law of righteousness suffer, as those who violate the law of gravity suffer—only they suffer more. Those who come into collision with the spiritual world get a blow, like those who come into collision with the material world—only a sharper blow. And just as the child, through its ignorance of the material world, in striking its head against a table, cries out, "naughty table," seeing in it a *person*, so the spiritually unenlightened, when they sin against purity, truth, justice, exclaim, God is a God of wrath—revengeful, cruel. And, again, as the law of gravity on the whole works well, although multitudes suffer from its violation, so the law of righteousness on the whole works well. To say this, is, indeed, after all, no more than to say that life is the outcome of this twofold law, and that life *is*—i.e. exists.

As a last reflection on this head. Science—that is *knowledge*—strips off from matter, layer after layer, its materialistic envelopes; and in like manner, it strips off from spirit, bit by bit its anthropomorphic encumbrances. Each thus becomes laid bare. And both are found in the end to be, what? Neither "matter" nor "spirit," so-called, but the Eternal One—creator, sustainer, *alpha, omega*.

"Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good, and the wedding was furnished with guests."

Both *bad* and good are gathered into the kingdom of heaven. So says Jesus; as against the pharisees, pietists, bigots, spiritually selfish, of his own day and of all days.

The story of this marriage feast ends tragically enough. One guest is discovered by the king "not having on a wedding garment"—not clothed in righteousness. For him there is the inevitable fate: bondage—"bound hand and foot;" exclusion—"take him away;" darkness—"outer darkness;" sorrow—"weeping and gnashing of teeth."

And all this is acting itself out now, to-day, everywhere around us. Are we so blind that we cannot see? are we so deaf that we cannot hear? do we not indeed feel that it is so?—The life of righteousness, joyous as a marriage feast; the life of unrighteousness, a hell's curse.

A LIFE'S OPPORTUNITY.

BY FELTON LEA.

(Concluded.)

When Lord Somerset realized what had been going on in their little circle, he saw that in his blind infatuation he had been unmindful of what might have befallen the friend of his life, and stood convicted of his disloyalty towards him. Not to himself had he put the question what was to result from the course he was pursuing. Basking like a very moth, he heeded not the morrow, the present was all he grasped. Now his sin stood before him, with a shuddering horror of the heart's deceitfulness. What a baptism of repentance he went through that night, but having let the enemy in as a flood, he was not going to lose his victim without another struggle for possession.

"Why, Fitzroy, how pale you are," exclaimed Brandon who was standing in the hall drawing on his gloves. "What is the matter? Are you going to take a turn at sickness?"

"I hope not, but my head is not very easy," he answered, the crimson suffusing his cheek and brow as Violet came down the stairs ready dressed to drive to the station. At the sight of her all his painful humiliation came back upon him, as with an inward groan he wondered how he could have been so mad.

"Get your hat and come with us," said Brandon, "the air will do your head good. I was just wishing you were about, for company back with Violet."

"If Violet will for once excuse—"

"All nonsense," interrupted Brandon, "I know what you are going to say. But you shall go; it will do you good, you won't get a chance for another refusal. Next time I drop in, it will be to bring Aunt Barbara and take my wife back."

So it came to pass Lord Somerset had to find, however he might struggle and resolve that his lesson would not be perfect until he had learnt to fly from himself wholly, and depend entirely on the never-failing strength for victory.

"Do not keep the horses standing, Fitzroy," said Brandon "the train will be up in a few minutes, and Violet grumbled at leaving the boy, so I know she wants me off, to get back."

"Mistaken again," she laughed, "and I am going to see your back before I turn mine."

"Not this time. Say good bye, for I see one of our bank directors and want to ask him a question. Take care of her, Fitzroy," and with a twirl of his hat for a last salute he disappeared.

If we could foresee events, how differently we should act. Brandon never would have hurried off his wife, had he known the peril that act placed her in.

"Fitzroy," said Violet in a troubled voice after reading sometime in a silence very unusual, "what is grieving you? It makes my heart ache to see such pain in your face, are—"

"Steady, there!" cried Lord Somerset to the coachman. "Parsons keep a tight hold on them."

Just as Violet got so far in her inquiry, the horses made a sudden plunge, as the sound of train was heard coming,—as it drew nearer with its snorting engine and whirled past with its crashing din, with one bound they tore along as if in a mad race to overtake it. Losing all control of herself, Violet grasped at the low door to meet almost certain death by the jump she meditated. It took but a moment for Fitzroy to drag her back, clasping her with a determined hold, he said quietly but firmly "Sit still, Violet, press your feet tightly against the opposite seat. Parsons, turn the horses if possible from the turn-pike road."

"Can't be done, my lord" cried the man making ineffectual efforts to restrain the frightened animals.

The victory over self the night before gave place to the tempter; all was forgotten in that brief moment as Violet lay in his arms with her white face buried against his breast. With a passionate "Mine at last" he bent his face on hers.

"My lord, the gate is open."

Like a thunder-clap of destruction those words smote on the ears of the now humbled conscience-stricken man. He looked with a heart-breaking sorrow into the piteous eyes bent on his. "My poor little laddie!" came from her trembling lips, for Violet understood only too well what the gate being open meant; beyond it all the road was open from pipes being laid, and she knew what was before them. It was not the sense of danger that wrung such a groan from his master, that made even the man turn from his own peril to gaze