

# BUDS AND BLOSSOMS,

AND

Friendly Greetings.

"Israel shall blossom and bud and fill the world with fruit."

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## Paul's Psalm of Love.

BY LYMAN ABBOTT.

**T**HE thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is a psalm interjected in the midst of a treatise. Paul has been arguing with his fiery earnestness against the spirit of strife which had broken out in the Corinthian Church; he has rebuked the emulation between men distinguished by the exercise of different gifts; he fears lest his rebuke shall stifle ambition, check progress, deaden life. "Covet earnestly the best gifts," he cries, and then he pauses: heaven opens before him; a vision is let down like Peter's; he passes under one of those sudden transitions of feeling characteristic of all poetic and spiritual natures: "and yet," he says, "I show you a more excellent way." And then follows his apotheosis of love. To comment upon it is like weaving a spider's web over the clear glass through which the light of heaven shines into an otherwise darkened room. I shall only attempt to repeat his teaching in words less felicitous, but in a modern rendering and with modern applications.

Our most common tests of religious character are false and unscriptural, or imperfect and mere fragments of Scripture, or superfluous and extra-Scriptural. Is he active in church? Does he take part in the prayer-meeting? teach in the Sunday-school? speak and pray? Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels and have not love, I am become as sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. Is he sound in the faith? Does he subscribe to the creed? Has he a clear apprehension of Divine truth? Does he read with a prophet's eye and receive it with a spiritual apprehension? Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have not love, I have nothing. Has he a mystic's faith? Has he a prophet's exaltations? Sees he visions? Dreams he dreams? And does he show his faith in works of religion greater than those of his fellows? Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. Is he generous in his gifts? Can his pastor depend upon him to head the subscription paper? Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and have not love, I am nothing. Is he self-sacrificing? Is he willing to suffer for his church and his conscience? The martyr spirit is rare in our age; has he any of it? Though I give my body to be burned, and not have love, it profiteth me nothing. Religion is not in speech, or doctrine, or vision, or gifts, or martyr sacrifices: it is love. Love is the only test. He who loves and is silent, loves and is doubtful, loves

and is prosaic, loves and gives not, loves and suffers not, is better than he who speaks, believes, has a mystic's faith, gives, and suffers, and yet loves not.

What is this love which constitutes the heart of religion? Paul does not analyse it; it cannot be analysed. He does not define it; it cannot be defined. He describes it.

Love suffereth long and is kind: it is no effervescent emotion; no dew shining like diamonds in the grass to be drunk up and disappear in the first hot sun. It suffers long, and still is kind: loving on, not for reward, but because it must to satisfy the necessities of its own inherent nature; serving as faithfully in thankless service as in service understood and honored. Love envieth not: it has no mean, miserable desire to pull down another to its own level; will not climb to preferment on the shoulders of others; cannot intrigue. Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up; the loving soul never rolls its own reputation over and over like a sweet morsel; never plumes itself before its own imagination; never looks at itself in the pleasure of pride, or put itself where others may look and admire. Love doth not behave itself unseemly; it is not careless and inconsiderate; love is the only true etiquette. Love seeketh not her own: is not ambitious, pushing self-assertive, self-seeking. Love is not easily provoked. It may be angry. There is no wrath like the wrath of love. But it is not irritable, cross snappish. It punishes, but it is not vexed; it is angry, but it is not impatient; it rebukes, but never scolds. Love thinketh no evil; never searches for evil motives for good deeds—rather for good motives for evil deeds: and so it never gossips; knows nothing of that carrion-feeding which is the commonest occupation of small society. Love rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth: it will not listen to scandal; it does not read the noisome revelations of modern society made every now and then in our daily newspapers; it does not buy the penny-dreadful to gloat over the last divorce suit or the latest bank defalcation. It never rubs its hands and chuckles and says, Aha! Aha! another church member fallen. Love beareth all things; and this is the threefold secret of its bearing: it trusteth all things; would rather be a thousand times deceived than cherish a suspicious and distrustful spirit; when it can trust no longer, it hopeth all things, still looking for some turn that shall bring good out of evil; and when it can neither trust nor hope, it endureth all things. O sacred love! thou art indeed more eloquent than speech, wiser than knowledge, more wonderful than the mystic's faith, a greater gift than all giving, and the only true martyr spirit.

Love never faileth. It is immortal. Prophecies, tongues, knowledge, are all transitory. Our best