

NEW READINGS OF OLD PARABLES.

BY THE REV. CHARLES ANDERSON, M.A.

THE FATHER AND HIS TWO SONS—THE YOUNGER AND ELDER.

The popular, indeed, universally received title of this story, is sufficient evidence in itself of the one-sided manner in which the religious world studies its bible. This parable is called that of the "Prodigal Son;" whereas it is a history of "two sons," and the teaching lies in the contrast which is drawn between the life and character of the younger and the elder.

Here, as in so much of the teaching of Jesus, it is the unpopular side which is espoused. The, at first, seemingly, utterly worthless son becomes the hero; and he who would at one time appear to be the model of all virtues finds himself condemned.

THE STORY OF THE YOUNGER SON.

The younger son would seem to have been of an active, restless temperament, and possessed with a passion for adventure. The farming life in which he and his brother were engaged, though congenial to the plodding habits of the one, was insupportable to the other. So the younger "said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living." From the promptness with which the request is granted, it would appear that the father had, at this time, full confidence in his son.

And now we read, "Not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living."

What then was the nature of this "riotous living?" That there was sin in it there can be no doubt, and also folly and indiscretion. We have here the case of an impulsive, inexperienced young man, abundantly supplied with money, alone amidst the temptations of large cities. It would have been a miracle if he had not fallen. Yet there is nothing to show but that folly, indiscretion, and a false generosity, might have been the occasions of his wasted substance, rather than deliberate, unblushing vice.

Be this how it may, he did not stop in his downward course till he got to the bottom; for we read, "And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him."

And now his misfortunes having reached their lowest depths, we meet with a strange expression: "And when he came to himself, he said." Then all this while he was not *himself*; and "himself" was a better, more worthy, or, at least, less worthless self. We were then right in our conjecture that this young man was not in heart, in his heart of hearts, utterly bad. He had been carried away from "himself" by circumstance; and now, trouble and loneliness and time for reflection, had brought him back to "himself" as, by the grace of God, they have very many another.

It is very difficult to say how far a man carries about with him, at all times, *two selves*; a better and worse, or a good and bad self. And to determine which of these two is his *true self* is yet more difficult. This problem seems to have exercised Paul a good deal. He says, "That I would, I do not; and that I would not, I do." "Now then it is no more I." Again he says, "I find a law in my members; and I find *another law*." Which then was the true I; which the governing law?

Now let us look at our own experience. Have we not, when standing erect, in the conscious exercise of virtue, looked back at the fallen self of yesterday, wallowing in the mire of some swinish passion, with a conviction of the whole reasoning mind, irresistible in its force and clearness, that that one of yesterday, so sin-bound, be he who he may, was not, never could have been, *I myself*? Have we not even gone one step further, and striven to relieve ourselves from the burden of past guilt by the reflection that after all it was not *I*, but, in very truth, some other one that did it?

But, to proceed with our story. What did he say "when he came to himself?"—"How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger. I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants."

This was, doubtless, an admirable resolution; but was there nothing to damp it, to hinder its being carried out, to make it, indeed, altogether impracticable? There would on consideration, appear to be much. The journey was a long one—"he went into a *far country*"—without food, clothing, or friend to help. And should all these difficulties be mastered, so that he once more arrived at his father's house—no longer his own home—might he not be driven from the very door, and even spurned by the servants? All this doubtless, passed through the mind of the young man; and, had he been weak and wavering, his resolve, which was little short of heroic, would have ended as it began—a mere passing thought of the mind.

But our hero is not unworthy of the part he has to play. We read, "He arose, and came to his father." And this is told in the very next line, as though all had been accomplished without difficulty, on the instant.

And here the story becomes exquisitely tender: "But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

But this touching embrace of the father does not weaken the stern resolve of the son. The refrain of the first confession is repeated word for word: "And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." Such repetition is the wont in Eastern story-telling; and this simple severity of construction does much to heighten the poetic character of the parable.

And now we have arrived at the climax of the First Part of this sacred drama—the crowning of the reconciliation with a merry feast: "But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry."

But before we pass on to the Second Part, one reflection presses upon us. So the doctrines of the schools are false. The heavenly father does not demand penance, atonement, bitter humiliation. He asks nothing of the sort; only a return of the heart and steps homeward, a coming back to one's self, not a negation of self; he checks the self-humiliation; and when the son is "yet a great way off," his father "has compassion, falls upon his neck, and kisses him;" that is *God does this*. Such is the gospel of Jesus. But the priests of the churches, Protestant as well as Catholic, close the door against this loving doctrine. "There must be a bloody sacrifice," they say, "a victim, and years of penance." Then, they will open the door—for *God*—just a little way.

THE STORY OF THE ELDER SON.

"Now his elder son was in the field." He had, seemingly, been leading a blameless life, engaged in the dull routine of his calling, ever since that first day that we heard of him. He was, plainly, one of those young men who are not led away by strong passions or violent enthusiasms, but such as are wont to be set before their fellows, as very models of sober-mindedness and of all virtue.

"And as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound."

Now, how is the elder son affected by this news? Is he filled with irrepressible joy like the father?—for this was his only brother. By no means. We read, "He was angry, and would not go in."

Here, certain words from other parts of holy scripture come to us, unbidden, as is their wont when Jesus is the teacher; such as these: "without *natural affection*;" or, "he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"

"Therefore," to continue the story, "came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf."

Here we discover that this model young man is by no means without his faults, when occasion calls them forth; for instance, jealousy and uncharitableness. Jealousy as shown in this: "thou never gavest me, &c., but this *thy son*!" And uncharitableness; for what just right had he to interpret his brother's life at the worst?—"which hath devoured thy living with harlots." And yet, curiously, men have ever been ready to accept this statement, although coming from so biased a source, as "gospel truth" itself.

"And his father said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry and be glad, for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again, and was lost, and is found."

Here, again, the former words, so full of power, simplicity, and beauty, repeat themselves as a refrain, thus intensifying, if possible, their original dramatic force, and ending this exquisite Eastern fable in a manner not unworthy of it.

What then do we see to be the teaching of this parable? That Jesus, in his tender, human heart, feels the keenest sympathy with, and pity for, the erring younger son; but that he is, on the other hand, repelled by the hardness and coldness and selfishness of the elder son, in spite of his severely correct life and entire freedom from all taint of what Catholics call "mortal sin."

It is to be especially noted, that the story ends without any hint at a reconciliation between the father and elder son. This young man is, by his own act and deed, left out in the cold.

To conclude. Heaven, if anything, is a place of *love*; no cold heart, no unbrotherliness can, by possibility, enter in there. It is, also, a place of *joy*—"joy over the sinner that repenteth;" the joyless can never set foot on its threshold.

CARMEN: A SPANISH STORY.

(Translated from the French of PROSPER MÉRIMÉE, of the French Academy.)

CHAPTER I.

DON JOSÉ-MARIA NOVARRO.

I had always suspected geographers of not knowing what they say when they place the field of battle of Munda in the country of the Bastuli-Pæni, near the modern Monda, some two leagues north of Marbella. According to my own conjectures on the text of the anonymous author of the *Bellum Hispaniense*, and some information gathered in the excellent library of the Duke d'Ossuna, I thought that in the envious of Montilla must be sought the memorable spot on which, for the last time, Cæsar played double or quits against the enemies of the republic. Finding myself in Andalusia in the beginning of the autumn of 1830, I made quite a long excursion for the purpose of dispelling the doubts that I yet retained on this subject. A little memorandum that I shall soon publish will, I hope, no longer leave any uncertainty in the minds of honest archæologists. Meanwhile, until my dissertation shall at last solve the problem that holds all learned Europe in suspense, I wish to relate to you a story that in no degree can bias the interesting question of the site of Munda.

At Cordova I hired a guide and two horses and started on my campaign, "Cæsar's Commentaries" and a few shirts comprising my luggage. On a certain day, wandering over the elevated portion of the plain of Cachena, worn out with fatigue, dying of thirst, scorched by an oppressive sun, I heartily sent Cæsar and the son of Pompey to the deuce, when I perceived at some distance from the path I followed a nook of greensward strewn with reed grass and rushes, which announced the neighbourhood of a spring, and in fact I discovered on drawing near that the delusive sward was a marsh in which disappeared a rivulet issuing from a narrow gorge between two hills of the lesser chain of the Cabra Sierra. I concluded that in going higher up I should find fresher water, fewer leeches and frogs, and perhaps a little shade among the rocks. At the entrance of the gorge my horse neighed, and was immediately