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ART. I.—RABSHAKEH.

"Is not that He whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away?"—2 Kings xviii. 22.

EVERY now and then we come upon passages in ancient records which show us quaintly how like men were to what they are. The bargaining of the patriarchal times, for example, as recorded so graphically in the early Scriptures, is almost literally reproduced in the East every day. The description of it is so transparently natural, according to our ideas of Oriental bargaining, as almost to provoke a smile.

The very striking scene enacted before the walls of Jerusalem about 2,600 years ago, when the words of my text were spoken, is an unusually good instance of this element in the Old Testament records. It shows you your enemy, advising you for your good, pointing out with engaging frankness in what direction your best interests lie. You find, curiously enough, that what is to be best for you happens also to be best for him. But that is an incident. His purpose is to counsel you for your good, to show the advantage to yourself and to your cause of taking the steps he suggests for putting yourself into his hands. Many of the fables called of Æsop go far back into antiquity. There probably always has been one from very early times that has set forth this persuasive friendliness of the devourer, and its consequences to those who are persuaded.

Again, you see your enemy armed, but in peaceful guise. He has his forces with him, but not for use at present. He is not going to fight now; that will come later, if you really will have it.

And he knows so much about your affairs, and what you have done, and what you have meant by what you have done.

And in setting this before you in a candid spirit he blunders with such easy confidence.

He has his own statistics, too, and he tells you how weak you are, and how strong he; and he promises to help you in this respect, when you have come to terms. The terms shall be generous.

He shows you, further, that you are mistaken in your central hope and assurance; that the right is with him, not with you; that the force on which you rely is on his side, not on yours—has gone over to him, though once no doubt it was with you. The mandate has gone forth, in modern phrase, and it is against you. He is going to execute it considerately, if you will give him no trouble.

You find him making use of you as a passive medium. He does not quite expect to take you in; but he speaks past you, and the audience he really addresses are folk of a commoner sort. When it is merely a question of counting heads, a weak head counts as well as a strong one.

These and other rather pointed lessons, on the method of conquest by confident talk, we find strewn thick on these pages —the pages which tell of the discourse held by the wily Rabshakeh in the ears of the men that sat upon the wall. Let us see how the lessons come in.

Hezekiah had been moved to imperative action by the abuses which he had found in religious observance and religious belief. He had risen up in wrath against these abuses, and had put them down with a high hand. The whole area of the kingdom had bristled with abuses and the means for abuses. There were high places all over to be pulled down, images to be broken, groves to be felled: the objects, the incentives, the shelters, of horrible wickedness called worship. Even that venerable relic of the past, the brazen serpent—now, if the original, between seven and eight hundred years old—even that had been corrupted into an object of idolatrous worship, and the stern iconoclast brake it in pieces.

And this was no mere local cleansing of one portion of the land. Up into the northern kingdom, just left desolate by the final captivity of Israel, and across into the territories of Ephraim and Manasseh, the king's arm reached, and everywhere the altars were destroyed.

All this the Assyrians knew, for they were watching; but they did not understand. Each country, as they believed, had a tutelar god, who helped the country in its wars, and whose power had to be taken into account by an enemy, perhaps as much as the visible forces of the country, perhaps more. The God of the country of the sons of Israel, as the Assyrians believed, was the God whose high places and whose altars

Hezekiah had destroyed. Hezekiah had thus alienated his invisible ally. The soldiers alone of Hezekiah, not the soldiers and the God of Hezekiah, were now arrayed against the Assyrians. This was probably their honest belief.

Armed with this telling argument, telling to those who did not know, and ready with other arguments of a practical character, and with one clenching argument claiming the God of Hezekiah as on their side, as having given a positive mandate to Sennacherib, they came up to Jerusalem. The king would not come himself as yet. He sent three principal officers to negotiate, and an army to give moral force to their negotiations.

The spokesman of the Assyrians was skilfully chosen. Named last of the three, and thus, we may presume, not the chief military man, he had evident fitnesses for this special task of persuasive talk. He could marshal his facts and arguments well; he could speak to the Jews in their own tongue; and he could make himself heard in the open air. This lies on the surface. If we look a little deeper we shall see that his probable knowledge of the internal affairs of the government, of the divisions between the religious and the secular rulers, of the prophecies of evil to come, of the mistakes made in the past, and the present dissensions arising out of them, we shall see that the convergence of several indications suggests that he was not improbably a renegade Jew, who knew Jerusalem well, and therefore was entrusted with the conduct of this business. In any case he was probably in communication with a more or less powerful party of Assyrianisers within the walls.

This one, then, of the principal officers of Sennacherib, chief cup-bearer, or whatever else the title Rabshakeh may have meant, presented himself at the gates of the city; and three of Hezekiah's chief men were sent to hear his message.

He began by assuming, as a self-evident fact, that they were of themselves helplessly weak, and of themselves could not attempt to resist his will. He took it for granted that only a political alliance could have given them confidence. And what that alliance was he felt no doubt. They looked to Egypt. That policy was in the ascendant, he had reason to believe. Perhaps it was. It was the policy of Shebna, one of the three who listened, himself probably not a Jew. It was not the policy of Isaiah. Any confidence in Egypt was misplaced, the speaker assured them. Egypt would prove a broken reed; in its breaking, dangerous. And they had no other ally. Thus, help of man they had none; or, if they counted Egypt, worse than none. He knew much better than they did about such high matters of alliance and policy.

And as for that invisible help in which all nations then believed, a help which the history of the past showed to have been mighty indeed with the nation against whom Sennacherib had sent an army, that help, the help of the God of the nation, depended of course upon the favour of the God. That favour they had forfeited, the speaker told them. Hezekiah had torn down the high places, cut down the groves, of the national God. He had forbidden them to offer the accustomed sacrifice to their God in any part of the land, except in Jerusalem alone. What help could they expect from a God whom they had thus outraged? Here, again, he knew better than they. He took a larger survey. He saw how the king's action had offended the God of Israel. He saw it because he took an impartial view, looking at it all from the outside. They, probably, misled by Hezekiah, did not know the effect of what had been done. He did.

Weak in themselves, cut off from visible sources of help, cut off from spiritual help, they were indeed isolated, they were indeed alone. They had better make terms, while yet the great king was willing to treat with them. They should in their own interests abandon their attitude of defence, yield up their untenable position. He would at once supply them with a large number of horses, if Hezekiah could find men enough to mount them. He openly doubted whether Hezekiah could find so many. But, any way, that would be better than trusting for such things to that broken reed away to the south-west.

But he had yet a final argument, a powerful argument, the most dangerous he had to use; so dangerous that they at once endeavoured to hush the matter up, to prevent this fatal argument reaching the ears of the people. "Am I come up without the Lord against this place? The Lord said unto me, Go up against this land, and destroy it."

Was it true? Had God really said to the Assyrians, "Go up and destroy"? In what way, by what means, could any such communication have been made?

The ordinary belief is that the Rabshakeh was playing the part of a braggart, a romancer. But, curiously enough, it was substantially true. And the representatives of Hezekiah probably knew that it was substantially true, though it may well be that the people did not know. The denunciations of Isaiah, in the time of Hezekiah's father, had in fact declared that God would send the Assyrian to destroy the land. "Behold the Lord bringeth up upon them the king of Assyria and all his glory; and the stretching out of his wings shall fill the breadth of thy land, O Immanuel."—"O Assyrian, the rod of Mine anger, and the staff in their hand is Mine indignation;

I will send him against the people of My wrath, to tread them down like the mire of the streets." It was at most five-and-twenty years since these threats were uttered, this commission to the Assyrian to come and punish was announced. Isaiah was still prophesying. A large part of his prophecy was written in this very year and the next year. His earlier prophecies were not forgotten. The Rabshakeh may have been a Jew when they were spoken, a Jew of the high-place-and-altar type, who left the country thus threatened, and cast in his fortunes with the other country, whose dominance was declared. Or at least the opposition party in Jerusalem had kept him informed. And so he used this statement to clench the considerations he had urged.

The king's commissioners were moved to request that the communications might proceed in the Syrian language, which they understood—especially, we may suppose, Shebna. They wished the proceedings to be private, not public, to the people who watched and listened from the wall.

That was exactly what the enemy did not wish. He specially desired that the people should hear him, and he turned to them and addressed them. If they did what Hezekiah bade them do they would certainly be ruined. If they followed the advice which he, the speaker, gave them for their good, they should have immediate peace, comfort, and plenty; and before long he would come back to them, and would take them to a delightful land, where they should live in abundance to the end of their days. Such were the liberal, the generous terms, which the great king offered.

What the people thought, we do not know; for Hezekiah's commandment to them was, "answer him not a word." But the three commissioners came to the king in great distress, with their clothes ceremonially rent, and reported the words to which they had been compelled to listen.

We know what the end was. The vast forces of the Assyrian enemy melted away. Sennacherib returned with the small remnant to his own land. In the temple of the god in whom he trusted, in whose name he had defied the power of the Lord God of Israel, his own sons slew him. Hezekiah had stood firm at the critical moment, strengthened by prayer to God, strengthened by God's message through Isaiah. The arrogancy and insolence of the forces arrayed against him had come to a head, just when those forces were about to fall in pieces. If he had given way, he would have saved his enemy from total discomfiture. The ruin would have fallen upon him that was ready to fall upon them. How many a pathetic lesson there is in history, how many a pointed warning, material and moral, of fatal surrender, just when one more

effort would have seen the threatening storm dissipated and gone!

Firmness, then, is the lesson which lies on the surface of this graphic story. Firmness founded in knowledge and conscience; firmness due to your convictions, not to your circumstances. The firmness which comes of favourable circumstances is valuable, but it is apt to degenerate. The firmness that is really strong, that wears well, is the firmness that is founded in knowledge and conscience.

But when you say "founded in knowledge and conscience," you evidently mean to assume a very grave responsibility. You mean that whatever the subject of strife may be, you have really endeavoured to get at the rights of the case. You have examined for yourself. You have made up your mind; not drifted into a mental attitude, not merely followed someone. And when you speak of examining for yourself, you mean—or ought to mean—that you have enquired into facts, with the clearly-defined intention of being guided by them to a conclusion, even though the conclusion to which they point be different from that to which you had initially expected to be brought. Nothing short of that is worthy of the name of enquiry. To find in facts arguments in favour of your position, when your position has been carefully taken, that is not unworthy. But to prejudge a question, and then to look to facts for arguments to support your prejudgment, that is not a free enquiry; it is not the enquiry of a free mind, it is not the enquiry of a free man.

In these days of controversy, acute in manner and grave in matter, with very far-reaching issues at stake, and with great heat in the course of the controversies, it is more than ever necessary that we should take all pains to inform ourselves, and that our conscience should thoroughly support us in our attitude. Otherwise there cannot be real firmness, such firmness as is worthy of beings with intellectual and moral powers; certainly not firmness which is likely to prevail, which deserves to prevail. More and more, it seems to me, the world is finding that a principle, well thought out, firmly grasped, is the one true, the one successful foundation of policy, of controversy, of action. Mere cleverness, mere skill in fence, mere hardihood of assertion, mere electioneering—these, no doubt, often succeed, and have even great success. But no one really thinks that on such foundations the saving of social order can be built up, the remedying of wretchedness achieved.

And the careful—nay, anxious—endeavour to found yourself upon knowledge and conscience in your attitude towards controversy, will certainly bring home some useful lessons. In the first place, you will learn that those from whom you

differ are many of them as seriously in earnest, as well founded —in their own belief—as you are. It is a highly educational and educating process, to talk quite freely and frankly to someone—not of the baser sort—who holds strongly views opposed to your own, on some point which you regard as vital, —say in politics, say in religion, say in some more abstract sphere of thought. The result is sometimes so unexpected, that it is difficult to avoid a suspicion that your opponent is concealing the worst part of his motives, and is dealing rather persuasively than fully with you. But if you can rid yourself of that suspicion, which you may fairly understand is not confined to your side of the discussion, the result is decidedly to reduce the bitterness of your difference. Not the least to reduce your difference in principle, often quite the reverse of that; but, if you are both fair, to assuage bitterness. For, when you come to look into the matter, much of the bitterness in controversy is due to a belief that your opponent is actuated by a desire to do harm. And that portion of the bitterness tends to disappear, nay, is sometimes replaced by a feeling of personal regard and respect, when you realise that great as may be the harm which you believe your opponent will do, if his view prevails, he honestly and conscientiously believes that his aim is to do good. You and he can respect each other—will respect each other, when each has learned the difficult lesson that the difference is to both of you one of principle; not one of principle on one side and want of principle on the other.

And, of course, another useful lesson is that the difference of principle covers a smaller area than the controversy covers. It is now the settled aim of many men to narrow controversies by recognising large areas of the field as neutral territory, common ground, zones of agreement,—call it what you will. It is a very happy thing when you find that there is much —very much—in common between yourself and someone from whom you have supposed that you differed by the whole sky. Those who make it their aim to discover these patches of common ground, even of agreement, are doing their own heart and mind a great deal of good, and are doing what they can for the good of others. They take the moral mischief out of controversy. In such attempts lies one of the hopes of the future. The more general such attempts become, the more will the mere leveller, the mere agitator, the mere professional controversialist, be discredited. And in such discrediting lies another of the hopes of the future.

But, of course, the more you neutralise by care parts of the area over which controversy has raged careless, the more you isolate those parts in which there is a real and clear difference

of principle; the more you make that real difference of principle stand prominently out, the more you dissipate Utopian dreams of agreement—a dangerous kind of dream. From a general state of blurred vagueness, you bring the vital points into focus, and cut off the hazy fringe. And in that there is a real, a great gain. The more clear the difference of principle is, the less the chance of the two sides misunderstanding one another; and it is in such misunderstandings, far more than in the fact of real differences, that the evils of controversy lie. When the difference in principle has been clearly set out, the benefits of controversy begin; and the benefits of a worthy controversy—a controversy on a great question—are important. We owe to controversy, and that sometimes of an internecine character, such clearness as we have on the fundamental facts of religion, the fundamental principles of good government. Impatience with questioning—even questioning of all that we hold most vital in the state, most holy in religion—impatience with questioning is not the attitude of one who reads, or reads aright, the pages of history, sacred or secular.

There is, or some of us try to believe that there is, a rightness of feeling growing up with regard to methods of controversy. There are, no doubt, and there always will be, the Rabshakehs, who bluster and bully and shout; and when feelings run very high they are a terrible power—a power which less violent men are not unwilling, are not ashamed, to profit by, even to employ. But no one looks to them as the saviours of society. Society will be saved by gentler means. They intensify, it may be, the impulse, which men of other—higher—soul use for good. The efforts of all thoughtful men should be addressed to a mitigation of the evils of this coarse, distasteful method of progress by brutality. When once a question is fairly raised, a principle clearly at issue, more can be obtained by good temper than by violence. It is one of the most interesting and hopeful lessons of the great controversy which is now occupying the Commons House of Parliament, to read how a brief appeal, made in a courteous manner, in a reasonable and not unkindly spirit, is of more avail than an hour of destructive criticism; nay, succeeds where the other fails. And no one who, in a more private manner, is accustomed to handle important affairs, where the decision turns upon the vote of those with whom he acts, can have failed to notice time after time the curiously effective power which good temper has.

When we cast an anxious eye to the future—a very anxious eye—as even the most hopeful, the most confident, the best satisfied, cannot fail to do, we are met by a threatening state-

ment. An actual majority can in the end do what it likes; that is to say, a real, clearly ascertained, undoubted majority. We shall never get over that fact, however much we may try to safeguard the future. It is of no use to repine; it is of less than no use. The true wisdom is to address ourselves, not to the first part of the statement, "a majority can do," but to the second half, "what it likes." There is much that a majority can do, which yet it does not like to do; and in the expansion of that "much" lies the real work, the real hope, of moderate men. So to conduct controversy, that neither side looks upon success when it comes as an opportunity for punishment, for revenge; that either side shall not like to do one unnecessary thing which the other side keenly dislikes; that is not only a worthy aim, but a very hopeful one—perhaps the most hopeful of all. A majority which founds itself upon knowledge and conscience, when controversy is narrowed to principles, and no leaders of men are so blind as not to see the principle which underlies the opposition to them, what such a majority likes to do will not be very tyrannical, not very bad.

But, after all that is moderate is said and done to mitigate the natural tyrannies of controversy, of men, there remains the great invisible force which is stronger than all—the force in which Hezekiah trusted, the force which the Rabshakeh claimed as on his side—the mighty hand of God. That God will decide the issue, or will allow the issue to be decided, as He pleases, we believe; and in that belief is our surest hope. But that is a very different thing from saying that God is on our side and is against our enemies. It jars terribly on the feelings of sensitive men to hear the confident tones of a controversialist, claiming that God is with him and that he has the monopoly of that Almighty presence. He always reminds us of the Rabshakeh—never of Hezekiah, whose cause, after all, did prevail. To have in your heart the blessed sense that in your inmost belief you are walking in the way God would have you in, that is sufficient, that is all. Without that sense you have no business to be where you are. With it, you are in the highest sense independent of the result. This same Isaiah, whose advice led Hezekiah right, has this message for us: "Thus saith the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, in quietness and confidence shall be your strength." Follow that advice; seek, feel, be sure of that strength. Leave it to others to earn, if they will, the rebuke of the words: "Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth."

G. F. Browne.