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THE YOUNG MAN IN THE LINEN CLOTH.

ST. MARK xiv. 51, 52.

EVERY attentive reader of the Gospel has, I suppose, often asked himself the question: *Who* was this young man? and *why* did this trivial incident, which has no organic connection with the story of our Lord's arrest, find a place in the Sacred Narrative? It must be confessed that the answer to this question is by no means easy or obvious; for, turn the incident as we may, and whatever the light in which we view it, it does not seem to be of much moment.

The Lord Jesus had been arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane by the officers of the High Priest, who are here called "young men,"—a technical name for the servants of the Synagogues. As He was being led a prisoner through the streets of Jerusalem to the palace of Caiaphas, a certain youth, awakened probably by the uproar they made, sprang from his bed, seized the first wrapper that came to hand, and, hastily folding himself in it, ran out into the moonlight, to learn what the cause of the disturbance was. As he ran after and caught up the retiring group of officers, he saw they had a prisoner in their midst, and in the prisoner he recognized Jesus of Nazareth, the Rabbi to whom no doubt he had listened with delight as He taught in the Temple and in the streets; for, we are told, he was following *Him*, not simply following the crowd. His interest was in Jesus, not in them; and how should he feel so profound an interest in Him if he had not previously met Him and listened to his words? In *Him* his interest is so great, so obvious,

that it compels him to remonstrate with the officers who had arrested Him, or to address words of comfort and hope to their Prisoner. For the officers, irritated by his too obvious sympathy with Jesus, lay hold upon him, and are about to arrest him as a follower of the Galilean Rabbi. But for *this* the Young Man is not prepared. He slips out of the linen robe, which they have grasped, and runs back, naked, to the house from which but a few moments before he had run out.

This is the whole of the story. And, as we consider it, we ask once more: *Who* was this Young Man, who comes like a shadow and so departs? and what is there in this brief incident which renders it worthy of a place in the Sacred Narrative?

I. In all probability the Young Man was St. Mark himself, the writer of this Gospel: and that for the following reasons: (1) At least one other of the Evangelists, St. John, when he has to speak of himself, does not name himself, but speaks of himself in the indefinite way in which "a certain young man" is here introduced to us. So that, if the Young Man were Mark, it might well be that he would not name himself, but give some such indefinite allusion to himself as is here employed.[1] (2) What is there in this incident to warrant, or even to account for, its insertion into the Narrative,

[1] There is some reason to believe that each of the four Evangelists has ventured to insert into his Gospel a single shy and reserved hint of his own personality: Matthew, in the Publican whom Jesus called from the receipt of custom; Mark, in the Young Man who left his Sindon in the hands of the guard; Luke, in the Unnamed Disciple who accompanied Cleopas to Emmaus; and John, in the Apostle whom Jesus loved.

unless it be a *personal* interest? It is mentioned in no one of the other Gospels. It has no direct bearing on the story of Christ's arrest and trial. St. Mark omits much else in that story which was of far greater moment, and which the other Evangelists record. Why should he insert this unimportant incident into so brief and compressed a narrative, unless it were of very grave and special importance to him? If he himself was the young man that sprang up in the dead of the night, and saw Jesus led by the officers to be tried by the High Priest, we can understand with what profound interest he would afterward recall every detail of that incident,[1] and how gladly, when he wrote his Gospel, he would connect himself, though in the most modest and unobtrusive way, with that supreme crisis in the history of his Lord and ours. Whereas, on any other hypothesis, supposing the Young Man to have been any one but himself, we can see no reason, or no sufficient reason, why he should pause to narrate so trifling an event. (3) The minute details crowded into this brief sentence look as if they could only be drawn from personal recollection. As we read it, if at least we read with an alert imagination, we can see the Young Man lying on his pallet; we can hear the brawl in the street that awakes him; we see him start up, and snatch at the first covering that comes to hand, cast it hastily about him, run out into the moonlit street, recognize Jesus, and interfere impulsively with the

[1] Just as St. John recalls every detail, down to the very hour at which it happened, of the incident which brought him into personal connection with Christ (John i. 35–39).

officers in the execution of their duty; we see him roused to a sense of his danger as they lay rough hands upon him, and run away, leaving the costly linen robe in their hands. In the Original, even the peculiar character and value of "the linen cloth" is indicated by the term used to describe it. It is called a *Sindon* in the Greek; and hence we know that it was one of those fine webs woven in India (Sind), which the ancients held in great esteem, and in which the Jews were wont, if they were rich enough, to wrap their dead when they prepared them for the tomb. I have sometimes wondered whether there was any *prophetic* symbolism in the seeming accident that the Young Man should wrap himself in a *Sindon.* The Lord Jesus was on his way to the cross and the grave, though as yet no official sentence had been pronounced against Him. Was this fine linen web, this costly Indian fabric, which came so strangely and unexpectedly into the hands of his guard, an omen of what that sentence would be? Any Jew would have set the web aside to be a winding-sheet. Is the winding-sheet brought into the Sacred Narrative to indicate that Jesus was now about to die? Be that as it may, it is obvious that the Evangelist crowds an amount of minute detail into these two verses which is in harmony with our conclusion, that he was speaking of an event which happened to himself. (4) The mother of Mark, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles (xii. 12), had a house in Jerusalem; and it has been generally held that St. Mark was a native of this city, and dwelt in it until he became a missionary of the Cross: so

that, unlike most of the disciples and friends of Jesus, he would be living in Jerusalem, and perhaps in that very street through which Jesus was led on the night of his betrayal. From the fact, moreover, that Mark's mother had a house of her own in the metropolis, and that this house was spacious enough to be the habitual resort of the primitive Church, we infer that she was a woman of some wealth and consideration; a woman, therefore, in whose house a costly Indian fabric, such as the Young Man cast about him, might well lie ready to his hand. (5) Last of all, it must be mentioned here, though to this point we shall return again, that the impulsive character of this Young Man—soon hot, soon cold, ready to dare all risks at one moment that he may follow Jesus, and ready at the next moment to abandon his sole and costly garment that he may escape the hands of the officers—accords entirely with what we know of the character of Mark as depicted by St. Luke.

On these grounds, then, we infer St. Mark himself to have been the Young Man who cast the linen robe about his body that he might follow Jesus, and who left the linen robe in the hands of the guard that he might abandon Jesus in the hour of his sorest need. The inference is at least a probable one; and henceforth we shall assume it to be true, and speak of the Young Man as Mark—John Mark, the cousin of Barnabas, the "minister" of St. Paul, and the scribe or secretary of St. Peter.

II. But all Scripture is written for *our* instruction. And, therefore, we now ask: *Why* was this incident recorded? What is there in it for us? However

deep and personal the interest Mark took in it, we may be sure that he would not have been permitted to insert it in his Gospel, either by St. Peter, from whom he is said to have derived the Gospel which bears his name, or by the Spirit who inspired St. Peter, if it had no lesson for us and for all men.

What does it teach, then? It teaches us at least this lesson,—that Christ has room in his service, and a discipline, for warm and impulsive natures; that even for these He can find some duty to discharge some function to fulfil. St. Mark was a man of this kind,—a man who was apt to begin to build without counting the cost. He was of an eager, sensitive, and impressible temperament, as the graphic touches which abound in his Gospel indicate; but, like most persons of this sensitive impulsive temperament, he was fickle and unsteadfast. Probably his imagination was very keen and active, as in such cases it often is; and painted the beauty and heroism of a certain line of conduct very brightly, but painted just as darkly the terrors of the conflict which to pursue such a line of conduct would involve. And thus he would be easily moved to undertake enterprises which he was not strong enough to carry through. For, see, he is drawn to Christ in the hour of his greatest sorrow and peril. It seems intolerable that he should hold back from the Teacher who had touched his heart when that Teacher, abandoned by his disciples, was being led away to judgment. And as he resolved to follow Him, and to interpose on his behalf, no doubt Mark would feel that he was doing a fine action, an action that would win him honour and esteem. But no sooner are the rough hands of the

Guard laid upon him than he feels, quite as keenly, to what lengths the priests are likely to go in their hatred of the Nazarene, what shame and pain he must suffer should he remain true to Him, and what his mother must endure if he, Mark, should lose his freedom, or even his warm young life, in a mere fit of enthusiasm. For we must remember that as yet Mark was not an avowed disciple of Christ. Doubtless he knew something, perhaps he knew much, of Him; but he had not joined himself to the little company of those who knew Him to be the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. His name is nowhere given in the lists of the earlier disciples. In his First Epistle[1] St. Peter calls him, "Mark, *my son;*" and, according to a frequent New Testament usage, the phrase probably implies that Mark was a convert of Peter's, that, after the death of Jesus, he was won to faith in Him by the ministry of the Apostle. So that it was not the loyalty of an avowed disciple which moved him, on the night of the betrayal, to spring from his bed and follow Jesus. It was simply the fine impulse, which constrains men of a sensitive and quickly-kindled temperament, to side at all odds with oppressed innocence, to stand up for a righteous man wrongfully entreated; and we cannot much wonder that such an impulse was not strong and steadfast enough to enable him to face danger and shame and death. It is hard for young men to see that they must often lose their life in order that they may find it; that they must often sacrifice ease, often risk all and lose much, in order that they may rise into a noble and godly life. And

[1] 1 Pet. v. 13.

it is especially hard for men of an imaginative and impulsive temperament to endure with steadfast patience the poor and sordid and painful realities which they must encounter if they would act out and carry through the fine impulses and resolves which rise within their souls.

And indeed, as has been already hinted, St. Mark, even when he had grown older and was an avowed servant of Christ, betrayed the same infirmity, the same unsteadfast poise of spirit between conflicting impulses, the same sensitive apprehension of the lions that lurk in the path of devotion to any great cause. He started with Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, just as he rose from his bed to follow Christ to the hall of judgment through the streets of Jerusalem; but just as he forsook Christ when the officers laid their rude grasp on Him, so also he abandoned Paul and Barnabas before their work was well begun.[1] His motive for abandoning them was the very motive which led him to abandon Christ—the fear of harm and loss. Matthew Henry quaintly and pithily remarks on his defection from the Apostolic mission: "Either he did not like the work, *or he wanted to go and see his mother.*" But that is not the whole truth. When he left them, Paul and Barnabas were about to plunge into the wild mountains of Asia Minor, to encounter "perils of rivers and perils of robbers" among the lawless and marauding highland clans. Mark did not like the prospect. And so, just as they were about to face their gravest perils, and to win their greatest successes, he forsook them—*deserted* them, as St. Paul

[1] Acts xiii. 13.

indignantly maintained—and returned to his mother's comfortable house in Jerusalem.

Yet even for this impulsive and inconstant man there was, not only room, but an appropriate discipline in the service of Christ. It would take too long to trace out the several processes of discipline by which he was brought to a firm and steadfast loyalty. It will be enough for our present purpose if we remember that in after years, though St. Paul long distrusted him and refused to work with him, he fully regained the confidence of the great Apostle of the Gentiles. In his later Epistles[1] St. Paul speaks of Mark as "a fellow-worker in the kingdom of God," and as "a comfort to himself;" and in his very last Letter[2] he describes him as being "profitable to him in the ministry." We may be sure, therefore, that this man, once so impulsive, so unreliable, so driven by contrary winds and tossed, became, by the teaching and grace of Christ, a brave and single-hearted servant of the Lord whose service he had more than once abandoned.

We may be sure, too, that for us also, however weak, unstable, imperfect we may have shewn ourselves to be, there is a place in the kingdom of Christ, if only we care to take it, and a discipline by which we may be fitted for that place, if only we will accept it. There is nothing, I suppose, which we lament more than our unsteadfastness to our own best resolves, nothing that we recall with deeper regret than the constant infidelities into which we are betrayed by the warring impulses that stir within us. At times we are moved, and that

[1] Col. iv. 10. [2] 2 Tim. iv. 11.

quite sincerely, to the resolve that henceforth we will set ourselves with our whole heart to the service of God and man : that our lives shall no longer be a base and timid compromise between the dictates of conscience and the opinions of men or the allurements of the senses : that we will live for the unseen and the eternal rather than for the things which are seen and temporal. Yet how soon, and before what slight temptations, do we permit these resolves to be overborne ! how easily are we distracted from them by the cares of business, or enticed from them by desires which have no root save in our sensual appetites and that do not stretch beyond the bounds of times ! As we recall the past, we cannot but see that our lives have not flowed on in a single steady current to an eternal goal ; that they have been broken into many, and even into adverse, currents, some flowing in one direction, some in another, most of them losing themselves in mere marshes and bogs, instead of carrying health and fertility along their appointed course. We are conscious that unity has been wanting to our lives, so that they will not have left one, and that a strong and good, impression on the world, but many broken and even contradictory impressions. Our influence, as we readily acknowledge, has not been wholly good ; it has not always helped to foster all the good growths springing up around us ; it has told almost as often and as much for evil as for good. Those who have dealings with us in our daily business,—what have they learned from us, what lessons of integrity, generosity, self-control, godliness ? Have we not often done as much to lower, as to raise, their

standards of thought and conduct? Nay, even to those whom we have loved best, have we not done well-nigh as much harm as good,—feeding their vanities, their irritations, their high thoughts of themselves and their hard thoughts of their neighbours, their selfish love of ease, their indisposition to serve and to make sacrifices for the kingdom of God.

As we recall the past, and see what broken and imperfect lives we have led, how we have lacked the single mind and the perfect heart, we can take little comfort from the recollection of any good deeds we may have done, any pure resolves we have framed, any high moods of devotion into which we have risen. We feel that, like St. Mark, we have again and again abandoned the Master we profess, and wish, to serve. And, at times, we lose all hope of ever reaching that constant mind, that settled and steadfast loyalty to Him, that entire devotion to his service, which yet we long to reach, without which, should we fail to reach it, we are sure that we cannot know any true happiness or peace.

At such times as these it will give us new heart to remember, that even for Mark there was reserved a place in the service of Christ, and a discipline which enabled him to fill that place. For the Master will deal with us as he dealt with him. If we have any true love for Him, any sincere desire to live to Him, He will teach us by our very errors, and train us by our very failures, and make our dissatisfaction with ourselves a spur to a more constant and cheerful obedience. S. COX.