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THE SLUGGARD'S GARDEN.

PROVERBS xxiv. 30-34.

I went by the field of a sluggard,
And the vineyard of a man void of understanding;
And lo, it was all grown over with thorns,
And nettles had covered the face thereof,
And its wall of stones was broken down.
Then I saw and considered it well;
I looked upon it, and received instruction.
“A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest;
Then cometh thy poverty apace,
And thy want like an armed man.”

KING SOLOMON, in all his glory, standing by the broken wall of the Sluggard's garden, and deliberately setting himself to “consider” that squalid scene and to draw admonition from it, can hardly fail to be an impressive spectacle. And to many minds, no doubt, this passage would lose much of its impressiveness were they told that it is the work of an unknown sage of a later period, and not that of the great king whose name has been a synonym both for wisdom and magnificence during the last three thousand years. Nevertheless, they are told so on this very page, as we shall soon see,—told plainly in the Hebrew, and only a little less plainly even in our English Version.

Indeed it is curious and instructive to observe how many books in the Bible, which were long accepted as the work of a single author, are now admitted to be compilations from the works of different authors, separated from each

other by wide intervals of time. The Book of Genesis, for example, is, and announces itself to be, such a compilation. It weaves many books into its web,—“the book of the generation of Adam,” the book of “the generations of the sons of Noah,” of Shem, of Terah, of Abraham, of Ishmael, of Isaac, of Jacob, of Esau. So, again, the Psalter comprises at least five separate collections of Psalms, each of which bears a different date, and includes hymns and spiritual odes by other poets than David. And, in like manner, the Book of Proverbs contains several collections of wise sayings, some of which certainly, many of which probably, did not fall from Solomon’s lip or pen. Chapter xxx. records, and tells us that it records, “the words of Agur the son of Jakeh”; Chapter xxxi., “the words of King Lemuel which his mother taught him.” Chapters xxv.—xxix. give us proverbs collected, three hundred years after Solomon’s birth, by “the scribes of King Hezekiah;” proverbs which tradition assigned to Solomon indeed, but which, since every “good thing” uttered by any wit or sage was long attributed to him, may have been, in part at least, the work of other men. Chapters i.—ix. were evidently collected by one hand, and Chapters x.—xxiv. by another (perhaps by more than one), since each of these collections has a separate title or superscription. It is worth our while to bear these facts in mind; for if it should prove that other Scriptures—the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, for instance—are also the work of more hands than one, we shall not be surprised and perplexed as by some strange thing: we shall say, “We have been through all that before; and just as Genesis, the Psalms, and the Proverbs are still as valuable to us as when we assumed each one of them to be the work of a single author—just as valuable, and much more instructive—so also it may be with Isaiah.”

As in the Book of Psalms, again, so also in the Book

of Proverbs there are many internal indications of even smaller divisions than those to which I have already referred. Chapters x.-xxiv. include one large section of the proverbs commonly attributed to Solomon. But in this section there are several subdivisions, some of which are so clearly marked as to be beyond dispute ; as, for instance, Chapter xxiv. Verses 23-34. If we turn to Verse 23, we find that it opens, in our Authorized Version, with the words : " These *things* also *belong* to the wise ; or, omitting the words added by our translators and printed in italics, " These also to the wise." But the preposition rendered " to " also means " by." And when we refer to the Hebrew it becomes clear that this compressed and enigmatic sentence is really a sub-title, and means, " These *sayings* also *are* by the Wise." That is to say, in Chapter xxiv. Verses 23-34, we have a small separate collection of proverbs, with its appropriate heading. They are not by Solomon, but by various unknown sages, or wise men, whose sagacity was the gift of God and was used by God for the instruction of their fellows. Like the later Jewish rabbis, they were not careful to claim each man his own work. It was their ambition to give their *wisdom* to the world rather than their *names*. And, without naming them, some pious lover of wisdom, and especially of the wisdom of his fathers, collected a few of their sayings—one of " the sons of the prophets " perhaps, familiar with the traditions of the schools—and was moved to record them for the instruction of those who should come after him. For aught we know, every proverb in these verses may have had a different author. Of no one of their authors do we know anything save that he was wise with the profitable wisdom which cometh from above ; and that he was as modest as wise, taking no pains to have his name blown about on the windy breath of men, caring only to utter some faithful saying worthy of all acceptance. Some of

these sayings are very picturesque ; as, for example, that before us, which Delitzsch calls an "ode," and of which Dean Plumptre speaks¹ as "something like an apologue, more vivid and scenic in character than most of the other proverbs." And some are very wise ; as, for instance, that of Verse 29,—"*Say not, As he hath done to me, so do I to him ; I render unto the man according to his work*" ; which surely is not far from being an anticipation of the Golden Rule, and supplies an invaluable rebuke to that haughty spirit of resentment which seeks to vindicate itself by hiding revenge under the cloak of justice.

But Verses 30-34 contain, I think, the gem of this choice collection. All *these* verses, at least, are the work of one author. They are bound together by links which cannot be broken, and form an artistic whole which must have come from a single mind, and come from it, one thinks, at a single stroke. It is composed of a little picture or parable—the picture of the Sluggard's plot, or garden, all run to waste, and of the moral which the author drew from it and utters in our hearing : "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest ; and then—O fool !—thy poverty cometh on thee apace, and thy want like a man with a shield."

I have said that to many minds this Proverb may lose much of its impressiveness when they find that they must no longer picture King Solomon, crowned with wisdom and clothed with magnificence, leaning on, looking over, the Sluggard's broken wall, and pondering on the scene of waste and ruin within it. But to my own mind the Proverb becomes, if not more impressive, at least more moving and pathetic, when I hear in it the voice of an *unknown* sage sounding through thirty centuries for my instruction ; when the dim form leaning on the crumbling wall is simply that of a man of like passions and perhaps

¹ *The Speaker's Commentary*, in loco.

of like position with myself—careless of his own fame, and content to be unknown, so that I and all men may profit by the fruit of his meditation and experience.

Even those who miss the stately figure of Solomon, and deem the picture suggested by the Proverb the poorer for his absence, may perhaps be reconciled to their loss when they learn that at least the moral is unquestionably his. Verses 33 and 34 of this chapter are but a quotation from Chapter vi. Verses 10 and 11. Where they first occur, the words are the moral which Solomon appends to his picture of the Ant and her prudent ways (as he somewhat inaccurately conceived them), who, having “no judge, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest.” They are repeated by the later sage, with only one or two slight changes in the form of the words which do not affect their main drift.¹ Probably he was moved to draw a new picture or fable for them simply by his admiration for Solomon’s moral, and that he might illustrate it from another and a still

¹ There is one difference in the later use of the words which it may be worth while to note. In Chapter vi. 11, the Hebrew puts a more definite sense into our English rendering, “So shall thy poverty come as *one that travelleth*, and thy want as an armed man,” lit. “a man with a shield.” The “man with a shield” is, of course, the soldier; and the “man that travelleth” is the rogue and vagabond who has taken to the road, *i.e.* the brigand or highwayman, both of whom use force or violence to compass their ends. In Chapter xxiv. 34, though our English Version still gives us “one that travelleth,” the Hebrew, simply by throwing the verb into another mood, undoubtedly alters the meaning slightly, though somewhat ambiguously. Dr. Otto Zöckler takes it to indicate the *stealthy* approach of poverty; while Delitzsch renders the word “apace,” seems therefore to take it as indicating the *rapidity* with which poverty overtakes the Sluggard, and explains that it comes on him “like an avenging Nemesis,” so adding the notion of *certainly* to that of *rapidity*. Out of deference to Dr. Delitzsch’s great and unsurpassed authority, I have retained his translation of the word (“apace”); but my own impression is that Zöckler is nearer to the true meaning: and that what the later poet really does is to modify Solomon’s word so as to bring out a contrast between the stealthy approach of the robber—the thief in the night perhaps—and the open and insolent rapacity of the soldier; while the Wise King was content to compare two kinds of force, that of the armed soldier and that of the highwayman who also carried arms of offence, even though he bore no shield.

more admonitory point of view. And if the two fables must be compared and weighed in the balance together, I suppose every competent judge will admit that even Solomon, in all his wisdom, was outdone by his unnamed rival, the anonymous artist of the passage before us.

The *Parable* of our Proverb need not detain us long, though it is very artistically rendered (Verses 30, 31).

I went by the field of a sluggard,
And the vineyard of a man void of understanding ;
And lo, it was all grown over with thorns,
And nettles had covered the face thereof,
And its wall of stones was broken down.

The scene is a familiar one to every traveller in Syria, where the intense heat of the sun and the frequent rains so stimulate all wild and natural growths that a few months of neglect suffice to convert even the most carefully tilled plot and the most carefully tended vineyard into a scene of desolation such as is here sketched in a few vigorous strokes. Under the pressure of an Eastern climate noxious weeds and brambles suck the soil's fertility from wholesome plants and flowers with an astonishing and alarming rapidity. In a space which seems incredibly brief to us,—

“ Things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely.”

Not that similar catastrophes are unknown even in England; but, with us, it takes longer to produce them. Most of us must have seen plots where once a fair garden grew, which, in the course of a few years' neglect, were all overrun with coltsfoot, dock, nettles, groundsel, and other foul weeds. It is not simply, as a careful observer has pointed out, that land once under the plough or the spade loses, when it is left untended, the special and wholesome growth with which it has been planted. The deterioration goes farther than that. For “the flora which follows the

plough," or the spade, "is much more varied and delicate and beautiful" than that of the unbroken land. And when tilled land is suffered to fall back into the hands of Nature, all these more delicate and beautiful wild flowers are supplanted by gorse and bramble, nettle and dock, and, above all, by the close wiry grass which usurps and covers so many of our commons.¹

Even where the plants in a neglected garden are not altogether supplanted and dispossessed, an ominous process of degeneration sets in. The flowers, once tended with so much care and grown to such perfection, revert to an earlier and inferior type; they lose form, colour, perfume; the large "voluptuous garden roses," with their infinite variety and infinite wealth of hue, sink back into the primitive dog-rose of our hedges, and the whole race of choice cultivated geraniums into the cranesbill of the copse and the wayside. And this law of degeneration from neglect runs and holds in every province of life.² Just as the neglected plant reverts to a less complex, and therefore less perfect type, so also a neglected animal reverts to an inferior strain. Actual experiment has proved that if, for example, the pigeons of our dovecotes—tumbler, pouter, carrier, and the rest—of every shade of colour and every variety of form, are collected and allowed to run wild together on an uninhabited island, they gradually lose all distinction, and soon merge into one form and are clothed in one hue, the dark slaty blue of the primitive bird from which they have been evolved.

This, then, is the Parable. Neglect a garden, be too slothful or heedless to tend and to keep it, and it soon loses all its value, all its distinction. It is either overrun with wilder and less worthy growths, or the plants which once either gave it beauty or ministered to the wants of

¹ *The Pall Mall Budget*, August 31st, 1883.

² Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, pp. 97, et seq.

man, degenerate into a baser type, and no longer yield fruit that he cares to eat or flowers that he cares to pluck.

And *the Moral* is as simple and direct as it well can be (Verses 33, 34) :

“ A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to rest ;
Then cometh thy poverty apace,
And thy want like an armed man.”

More than one of the best commentators on this Book assume that “ it is the Sluggard who speaks ” in Verse 33 (Delitzsch), or that in this verse the Sage “ ironically imitates the language of the Sluggard ” (Zöckler) : and no one who is familiar with Hebrew poetry, and knows how often it slips into the dramatic form without warning or outward mark of any kind, will have any difficulty in granting the assumption, if the sense demand it. But I am not sure that in this case the sense does demand it. “ A little,” may here well stand for “ A little *more* ; ” it may denote or imply a continuance of the process which has already produced such disastrous results. And then we should have to understand that, as the Wise Man considers the Sluggard's plot, he is moved to indignation, and cries out to its owner, in tones of warning and rebuke : “ A little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to rest, and thy poverty cometh on thee apace, and thy want¹ like an armed man.” But, however we take this verse, of the main drift of the Moral there can be no doubt. It is a warning to the man void of understanding and energy, that an utter destitution, a shameful misery, is the proper and inevitable result of his folly and sloth.

At first, perhaps, the Moral sounds a little tame, and suggests but a limited application. We deem it hardly a religious moral at all, and therefore not the kind of moral

¹ Literally “ thy wants,” thy deficits, by reason of which now one thing, and now another, and finally all things, fail thee.

we should expect to find in the Bible. We say, "There are not many men surely who are so lazy as all that: not many who will not till the field or tend the vineyard on which their subsistence depends. And, however foolish it may be, is it also impious thus to fling away the chances of life, that the few who are guilty of it are to be rebuked as by the voice of God Himself?"

But a moment's reflection will shew us that, if Religion is to be a reality, it must cover the whole of human life, and must have an appropriate word for every class, however small it may be. And another moment of reflection will suggest that, in the time for which the Wise Man spoke, the leisurely time of an antique age and an Eastern land, this sin of indolence may well have been a much more common sin than it is now. While a little more reflection may prompt us to ask whether, even in these more rapid and pushing days, this sin is so rare as we sometimes assume it to be. Different as are the conditions of the England of to-day from those of the Commonwealth of Israel three thousand years ago, there is still a large class among us of those who, relieved from the imperious necessities of toil either by the wealth of their parents or by some independent fortune of their own, live only for pleasure and amusement, and scorn the honest industry by which the world is fed and enriched, and by which even their own lazy and ignoble lives are made possible to them. They do nothing for their neighbours—worse than nothing for themselves; for while they lie lapped in indolence, or seek thirstily for amusement, neglecting even all such forms of *self-cultivation* as imply labour and self-denial, many an ugly weed of vice and ungodliness is springing up in their garden, and these weeds are perilously apt to develop fibres that sting and thorns that wound their neighbours. All their higher powers of mind and heart are deteriorating, reverting to a lower type and we might only too truly say to them as the Wise Man

said to the sluggards of Israel: "A little more, and thy poverty cometh on thee apace, and thy want like an armed foe."

We need not go far to find facts which prove the truth of this warning, and the need for it. If we go into the nearest workhouse ward, it is not too much to say that half the miserable paupers we meet there ought not to be there; they have sunk into pauperism not by sheer misfortune, not by the pressure of accidents they were unable to resist, but by a creeping indolence, by self-neglect, by vice, by the failure of speculations to which they were driven by their impatience of honest labour with its slow rewards, by a love of pleasure or self-indulgence which held them back from that whole-hearted industry and devotion to daily toil by which alone men can thrive. If we go to any dock or labour yard in which men earn a miserable pittance by unskilled and precarious labour, again we are well within the mark if we reckon that half the men we find there ought never to have been there, and would not have been there had they diligently availed themselves of the opportunities of the several positions from which they have fallen. They have cared too much for ease and self-indulgence, too little for self-culture and self-respect; regular and laborious toil was repugnant to them; they did not school and brace themselves to learn, to labour, to win the respect of their fellows: and hence they fell an easy prey to vagrant, if not vicious, desires. If we go into any family, shall we not find in it a lad who has no decided leaning to any vocation, who "doesn't much care what he does," and who in his heart of hearts would rather do nothing at all, whether for himself or for the world, if only he could live by it? If we go into any office, workshop, or warehouse, shall we not be singularly fortunate if we find no more than one youth or man who, so far from doing his work at every moment as well as he can, and so fitting himself to rise and

thrive, makes it rather his chief aim to shirk as much work as he can without losing his place, and to get away from the labour he detests at the earliest possible moment? If we go into any school or college, shall we not be still more fortunate if, for one boy or man bent on study, bent on learning and acquiring as much as he may, and so cultivating all the good growths and habits of the soul, we find no more than one who is content to scramble through his work anyhow, who will not learn a jot more than he can help, who throws away opportunity after opportunity, and is throwing away, with his opportunities, his chances of service and distinction?

No thoughtful observer of human life will for a moment admit that laziness is a defunct sin, or that the sluggard is rapidly becoming extinct. He is everywhere; and, wherever he is, the process of degeneration has set in and needs to be checked. And how shall it be checked, how shall the man "void of understanding" be recovered to a useful and diligent life, if not by the warning that, by the very course and constitution of his nature, indolence breeds its own punishment? Tell him that indolence, self-neglect and neglect of duty, is a sin, and a sin that God will punish; and if you are in earnest, and the instincts of religion have not already died out of him, you may move him for a time, but not perhaps for long; for no sin is more difficult to eradicate than a confirmed and habitual sluggardliness, while yet it is often very ingenious and fertile in self-excusing expedients. To the sluggard God may be, and is likely to be, a dim and remote, if awful, figure, and the day of reckoning very far off. He may even remind himself that God is very merciful, and not likely to be hard on a poor fellow who only wants to lead a quiet easy-going life; who is doing no great harm, if he is not doing much good; and who, if he is doing harm, is for the most part harming only himself. He may even assume a virtue if he

have it not, and rail in good set terms on the haste to be rich which takes all the dignity out of human life, and the prevailing over-devotion to labour which robs it of all its sweetness. With many such excuses and maxims as these he may defend his unapprehensive and lethargic spirit against the immediate warnings of Religion. But get him to mark one very impressive word in the Hebrew sage's moral,—“ *Thy* poverty cometh apace, and *thy* want like an armed man,”—and you may perhaps rouse him once for all. For the word implies that the destitution of the Sluggard is the natural and inevitable outcome of his indolence and neglect; no arbitrary punishment of his sin which God must bestir Himself to inflict, but the punishment wrought out by the natural order, by the very course and constitution of things. Shew him this; shew him that the law of which it is an illustration runs throughout the universe,—that *every* neglected garden hastens to ruin and decay, that every neglected plant deteriorates, that every domesticated animal, only by being left to itself, reverts to a lower type; shew him that, if a man neglects his body, he sinks, if not into disease and death, into the sordid and bestial habits of a savage, “like the dehumanised men who are sometimes discovered on desert islands;” shew him that, if he neglects his mind, he sinks towards imbecility, idiocy, madness; that, “if he neglects his conscience, it runs off into lawlessness and vice,”—and this will shake him from his lethargy, if anything will. For now you prove to him that his punishment is not future only, but present; not arbitrary, but natural; not contingent, but inevitable. It has already begun. He has set out on the path which, by the confession of all men, and by a necessity of nature, leads straight to poverty, misery, ruin, and cannot entertain the faintest hope of missing that dismal goal if he still follow the path which leads to it. He is in the grip of an inexorable law, and can only escape from it by

taking shelter under the higher law which holds out its promise of good to those who repent and amend.¹

The Moral, then, is by no means tame, or impertinent to the present conditions of men. On the contrary it is most pertinent, and needs to be constantly enforced in a world so given to an indolent and uncalculating self-indulgence as ours. But we need not confine ourselves to the Hebrew poet's point of view. As we stand by his side, and look with him over the wall of the once fair garden, now all overgrown with nettles that sting and thorns that tear, we may raise the law of which he speaks to its highest plane, and view it in its more directly spiritual aspect. "Emphatic as is the direct teaching" of this proverb, says Dr. Plumptre, "it may be taken as a parable of something yet deeper. The field and the vineyard are more than the man's earthly possessions. His neglect brings barrenness or desolation in the garden of the soul."

Nor is it in the least difficult to trace the working of this law in "the garden of the soul." Every man who has any knowledge of himself must be aware of two forces at strife within him, the one urging him upward and forward, the other downward and backward; the one inclining him to live for himself, the other disposing him to live for others and for God; the one prompting him to dwell on the lower levels of his being, to pamper and indulge his lower appetencies, and the other nerving him to rise into its higher levels and cultivate its higher impulses and affections. And many of us have long since made our choice between the two, and determined that as for us we would follow the loftier call, and make it our chief aim to live by the highest truth and be faithful to the highest good we

¹ The LXX. seem to have felt the need of some reference, in the Moral, to this higher law; for, at the close of Chap. vi. Verse 11, they append a verse not to be found in the extant copies of the Hebrew, which may be rendered thus: "*But if thou art resolute and untiring, thy harvest shall spring like a fountain, and thy want, like a poor runner, shall abandon the chase.*"

know, at any cost of loss and suffering to that lower nature in us which is for ever craving a present gain and an immediate enjoyment. This, indeed, is the teaching, the duty inculcated, not only by Him "who pleased not himself," but by all our most approved modern teachers—Carlyle and Ruskin, Tennyson and Browning, Kingsley and George Eliot; and we have responded to it, we have accepted this true "doctrine of the Cross." In the language of our Parable, we have ploughed and sown our field; we have planted our vineyard, and built a wall round it to keep it from the incursions of those ill weeds that grow apace, and from the stealthy feet and despoiling teeth of beasts of prey. To us, therefore, there must be a singular pathos in this picture of precisely such a plot as our own laid waste, despoiled, overrun, and an admonition which can hardly fail to come home to us. For we may have reckoned that, with a good start made and so much good work done, we were safe. And yet how can *we* be safe if our neighbour has been defrauded of that which he did as much to win and secure as we have done? How can we reckon on enjoying the peaceful fruits of our piety, if his wall has been broken down, if his vineyard is overgrown with weed and bramble; and if, worst of all, he has been his own despoiler, if it is *his* poverty, *his* want, that has come upon him, and that, not so much by any active vice or open fall from piety as by mere indolence and neglect?

The warning is as grave and penetrating as it is emphatic. It is not enough that we *once* believed and obeyed. It is not enough that we once waged open war against evil, and ardently pursued that which is good. If we have settled down into a quiet and easy enjoyment of our very religion; if we are not watchful and diligent, "resolute and untiring;" if we cannot work in all weathers; if we shrink from every call to *do* something for God and man, or begin to calculate how little we can do, instead of how much; if

we make no sacrifice for the sake of truth and righteousness, or mourn and complain over every sacrifice we are compelled to make; if we cease to strive vigorously, with clear and firm determination, against the evil forces and inclinations by which we are constantly beset; if we no longer care to learn any new truth that may break forth from God's holy Word or from the patient researches of men; if, instead of recognising and rejoicing in any new aspect of duty, any new form of service, we are growing lax and indifferent even in the discharge of duties we once loved,—sluggardliness is beginning to eat into our heart, our faith, our life; the good growths of the soul are beginning to deteriorate and decay, and its evil growths to wax bold and masterful.

How shall we check ourselves in this downward course before the wall is wholly broken down, and the garden of the soul be *all* grown over with thorns? How shall we secure that truth may once more become dear to us, and that we may willingly spend and be spent in the service of righteousness? How shall we rouse ourselves from our lethargy, and become resolute and untiring, that so our harvest may spring like a fountain, and our want, like a poor runner, may abandon the chase? If nothing less will rouse and arrest us, let us remember that, by the very course and constitution of nature, by a law which admits of no exception, mere indolence, mere neglect, merely being quiet and at ease, mere failure to grow and make increase to ourselves in good thoughts, good feeling, good deeds, is to sink toward the evils we most dread, from which we have been redeemed, and which ought not therefore any longer to have power over us. It is to revert to our original and inferior type; and to revert to that will only too surely be the first step toward sinking to a type still lower and more hopeless. A little more sleep, a little more slumber, a little more folding of the hands to rest when they ought to be

lifted up for the labour which is prayer, and our poverty may come on us apace, and our want—the lack and destitution natural and inevitable to our sinking and neglected condition—may spring upon us like an armed man.

S. Cox.

M. RENAN AND SCRIPTURAL INFALLIBILITY.

IN the touching and attractive Recollections of Childhood and Youth, in which M. Renan has taken the public into his confidence, one, and that perhaps the most important, passage seems to claim some notice in a Magazine intended to assist students of Scripture; I mean the passage in which he sets forth the causes which brought about his separation from the Church which he so deeply loved and to which he clung as long as his conscience permitted him to do so. M. Renan distinctly states (p. 298 of the French edition) that it was not by any of the mysterious doctrines of the Catholic creed, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, that he was driven to sever his connexion with organized Christianity: “Nothing that might be open to criticism in the policy and the spirit of the Church, whether in the past or in the present, made the least impression upon me. If I could have believed in the truth of Theology and the Bible, none of the doctrines of the Syllabus would have caused me the least trouble. My reasons were entirely philological and critical, and in no sense metaphysical, political, or moral.” He then mentions as one of the insuperable difficulties which caused him to break with all the associations and prospects of his early life, the question of the contradictions between the fourth Gospel and the Synoptics; and he gives us to understand that,