THE STATER IN THE FISH'S MOUTH.

MATT. xvii. 24—27.

A GOOD deal of wit, not more irreverent than clumsy and stupid, has been directed against this incident. It has been spoken of as a "miracle for a dollar," or half-a-crown, and even serious and intelligent men have found great difficulty in understanding how a fish could be hooked, and still hold a shekel in its mouth. Such difficulties I think we may leave to the practical angler.

But the ordinary devout Bible reader commonly misses the point and bearing of the miracle, because it is not sufficiently obvious in our translation that it was the Temple-tax which was being collected. In the Revised Version the proper rendering is given: "When they were come to Capernaum, they that received the half-shekel came to Peter, and said, Doth not your master pay the half-shekel?" Every Jew knew that the half-shekel was the tax appointed by Moses as the ransom of souls, and now collected annually for the upholding of the Temple. This tax was levied on every Israelite of twenty years of age and upwards, even the poorest. The pauper who had no money must beg it, or sell his under-garment. In whatever part of the world the Jew resided, he was obliged, and he was proud, to send up his half-shekel to Jerusalem. It was chiefly from this tribute that the Temple was enriched with those piles of silver which again and again tempted the avarice of the Romans. In the province of Galilee the tax

Nile Valley during the fifth century. They used to amuse themselves with the ancient pagan and pre-Christian Demotic novels, of which the French and German periodicals, like the *Revue Egyptologique*, have been giving most interesting specimens. As the ancient tongues died out, the monks set to work and composed Christian novels, wherein the various Christian sects and parties furnished the bad and good characters. Even Egyptian asceticism could not shut out the human craving after romance.

was levied by officials sent for the purpose between the 15th and 25th of the month Adar; and no force, no distraint was used by them, but if any did not then pay he was compelled to pay when he went up to Jerusalem to the feasts.

It was an official question therefore which was now put to Peter, and it was put courteously by officials who knew the extent of their powers, who knew that quite possibly there might be exemptions from the tax, and that they were mere collectors and not judges of appeals. It was not an entangling question, such as was afterwards put by the scribes, who asked if it was lawful to pay tribute to Cæsar. There was no question, nor could be any question, of the lawfulness and propriety of this tax; and all that the collectors wished to know was a mere matter of business for the arrangement of their accounts, whether Jesus wished to pay the tax in Capernaum, or at Jerusalem, or whether He Himself paid it or some one else for Him, or whether perhaps He had not some special claim for exemption. Especially, these collectors seem to have supposed Jesus might claim exemption as a teacher; for they do not name Him, but designate Him as "your teacher," showing that He was quite recognised in the district as exercising a spiritual function, and as one who might possibly on this ground think Himself worthy of being classed with the priests and Levites, who claimed exemption from the tax.

Peter, as usual, does not stop to think, but fancies he knows all about the matter, and promptly assures the collectors that his Master certainly considered Himself taxable. The conversation may have taken place at the door, the tax-gatherers having called for the purpose of making the inquiry, so that Jesus might both see the men and hear what their business was, and especially the loud voice of the fisherman uttering his emphatic "Yea." At

all events, no sooner does Peter come in than Jesus, without further introduction, says, "What thinkest thou, Simon? the kings *of the earth*, from whom do *they* receive toll or tribute? From their sons or from strangers?" Peter promptly answers, "From strangers." "Therefore," says our Lord, "the sons are free." The parable was so obvious that Peter at once understood what was meant, and our Lord added no explanation. It was obvious that if earthly kings did not tax the princes of their house, but only their subjects, the Heavenly King could require no tax from Him whom Peter had only a day or two ago acknowledged to be in a special sense the Son of God. For the Son to pay tax to the Father was an absurdity. The very name by which the Romans designated "children" was the word for "free." It was everywhere recognised that the father and the children of the house were one. If then Jesus was God's Son in a sense in which other Jews were not, Peter had been hasty in committing Him to the payment of this tax.

Had Peter been left to himself he would probably have sought to rectify his mistake by shouting after the tax-gatherers, who were still in sight, and telling them that his Master would not pay the tax. But Jesus at once shows him a better way out of the difficulty. He had no intention of standing upon His right and claiming exemption. His whole life was a foregoing of His rights as God's Son, and He who had not thought equality with the Father a thing to be grasped and tenaciously held, was not going to make a great fuss about paying 15*d*. He who had laid aside all the outward pomp of Divinity, and had come among men as one of themselves, born of a woman and made under the law, was not going to assert His superiority to this particular enactment of the law. It was quite true that He was God's Son, and that it was an incongruity in Him to be paying tax to Himself, for that

was what it amounted to; but men were not to be convinced of His Divinity by His standing upon His rights and compelling them to submit to Him, but by the unrivalled depth of His humiliation, by His Divine lowliness and meekness and power of submission. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. He came appealing to far higher principles in us than our capacity for being struck with wonders and for admiring what is physically mighty. He appealed to our capacity for recognising spiritual greatness, and therefore it was His love He revealed in one prolonged humiliation. He submitted therefore to this tax, just as He submitted to baptism, to the law which required all Jews to appear at the feasts, and so on. Having submitted to become man, He need not stagger at any act which that involved.

But that Peter at least might clearly understand that this payment and every act of His human life was a voluntary humiliation, that he might in one mental view see both the dignity of his Master and the meekness with which He veiled that dignity, Jesus bid him go and find the money in the fish's mouth. While submitting to pay the tax as the least influential Jew might have done, He provides it in a manner which is meant to exhibit Him as the Lord of nature. That the miracle was necessary in order to furnish 2*s.* 6*d.* is scarcely credible. Peter seems to have had a comfortable house, and even making the extremely unlikely supposition that he had not a single shekel, he could very easily have borrowed it, or he could by half-an-hour's fishing have made it. But had the money been procured by such means the lesson would have been lost. When, however, Peter took his tackle, and went down to the lake and hooked a fish and found the coin, all as his Master had said, he cannot but have thought with himself, Certainly our Master is as humble as He bids us be; He has all nature at command, and yet makes no

sign to these tax-gatherers, but submits to be dunned for payment as if He were an obscure peasant. He bids us avoid giving offence, He bids us beware of doing what might be wrongly interpreted, He bids us accommodate ourselves to the ignorance and prejudice of those about us, and He Himself stoops to the smallest child and keeps step with the tottering and faltering feet. He sets a little child before us as the type of the humble disciple; but there is nothing which is fit to represent the humility of the Master, who, having all rights, asserts none, and, divesting Himself of His native authority, appears among us with nothing to awe but an unequalled goodness and lowliness.

This miracle then was meant to instruct. And that which it was meant especially to illustrate was the humility of Jesus. It was intended to follow up the teaching of the Transfiguration and of Peter's confession, and, on the other hand, to put in a concrete and visible form the teaching regarding humility which our Lord at this time gave to the disciples. The answer which Peter gave to the tax-gatherers showed that he had not thought out the consequences of his own confession. He had explicitly and emphatically acknowledged his Master to be the Son of God, and yet he admits that He was liable to be taxed. He did not observe the inconsistency. There was so much in the life of Jesus that *seemed* inconsistent with His being the Son of God that Peter had no clear perception of what was really consistent and what inconsistent. The Divinity of his Master lay for the most part so concealed from the superficial observer that, even in the mind of one who, like Peter, had once seen and owned His Divinity, it was apt to be taken very little account of. And yet it was of the utmost importance that Peter and all the Apostles and all of us should see deeper than the surface, even down to that point at which it becomes apparent that these acts of

humility are not only consistent with His Divinity, but are the fittest expressions of it. Peter was to be helped to see that the most Divine thing about our Lord was His becoming man and submitting day by day to all that was involved in that. And in this miracle he had his first easy lesson; for in it he was himself the instrument at once of our Lord's Divinity and of His submission.

In the quiet, easy, and almost playful little parable by which our Lord exhibited to Peter what was involved in paying the tax, nothing is more obvious than that He claims to be the Son of God in a sense distinct from that in which all other Jews were God's children. For them He argues it was quite right to pay this tax: from Himself it cannot legally be required. To ask from Him the half-shekel which went to uphold God's house was to tax the Prince for the upkeep of the royal palace. In other words, He claimed to be more akin to God than to men; He claimed to be of the family of God in a sense in which ordinary men were not.

But though our Lord had so valid a claim to be exempt, He was unwilling to push this claim. Indeed, had the tax-collectors come to Himself instead of to Peter, they would in all probability have received the same answer. Why then does our Lord make any remark on Peter's reply? Plainly because from the prompt and easy manner in which Peter gave it, it was obvious that he had no idea of the ground on which Jesus paid the tax, but considered that being a pious Jew, He, like all other pious Jews, was glad to contribute to the Temple funds. But this superficial reason hid the true and radical reason, which was that the payment of this tax was merely one particular of that prolonged *voluntary* humiliation to which Christ was subjecting Himself.

Our Lord Himself assigns a reason for the payment: "Lest," He says, "we should offend," or become a cause

of stumbling. People would put a wrong construction on His conduct if He declined to pay. They would think He either despised the Temple or was in some form a heretic. The evilly-disposed might plead His example, and also refuse payment. His refusal would only make it more difficult for ordinary people to understand Him. It would do nobody any good, and might do a great deal of harm. No doubt this was not His fault; He had in various ways given men quite sufficient proof that He was Divine; it was their slowness and blindness which were to blame. Still, though it was their own fault—though it was discreditable ignorance in the authorities to allow Him to be taxed, He would not act as if they ought to have been prepared to acknowledge His supremacy, but would be conciliatory, oblivious of the wrong done to Him.

To all followers of Christ, then, as well as to these first disciples, this action of our Lord says, Forego your rights rather than cause any ignorant person to stumble at your conduct. An *offence* or stumbling-block is anything laid before a person, and which makes it more difficult for them to do right. "Woe to that man," says our Lord, "by whom the offence cometh—by whom the stumbling-block is laid in another's path." We are very apt to justify ourselves when our conduct has been misconstrued by ignorant people, and has done them harm, either by encouraging them to do what is wrong in them though right in us, or by provoking them to speak evil of us: we are very apt to justify ourselves by maintaining that it was not we who were in fault, but the person who stumbled—that he ought to have known better—that had he not been so ignorant, so narrow-minded, so evilly-disposed, he could not have stumbled at our conduct; and if he was so weak as to find occasion for falling in so slight a matter, it makes very little difference that I happened to be the cause of his stumbling,

for he would have stumbled at something else if not at that. "Yes," says our Lord, "it is quite true; it must needs be that offences come: but woe to that man by whom they come." All men die, but murder is not on that account a venial sin. All men meet stumbling-blocks in their path through life, but to be the occasion of a man's stumbling is no slight offence.

We are frequently in circumstances in which this principle should guide us. We may feel that we have perfect liberty to do such and such things; but if the doing of them be not necessary or binding on our conscience, then before we use our liberty we must consider further what impression our conduct is likely to make on others. Of course there are also occasions, as every one knows, when we are called upon to assert our opinions and principles, regardless of consequences; but, as our Lord insists, there are times —and these very frequent—when we must be guided by the opinions of others, even though we know these to be erroneous. We may, *e.g.*, be quite sure it does us no harm to study science on Sunday, or to read very secular literature; we may feel sure we are the better and not the worse for going to the theatre, and we may be thoroughly convinced that it is a limitation of our Christian liberty if we are prevented from going. That may be true, but that does not exhaust the question; we must further ask whether our using what we feel to be our liberty will not encourage some one who sees things less clearly than we do to take the same liberties, and so dull his moral sensibility by accepting our guidance rather than the guidance of his own conscience. "It is his fault," you say; "he ought to know better." No doubt it is his fault, but it is you who bring upon him the consequences of his ignorance. Instead of enlightening, you embolden and harden him, and so do him what may be irreparable injury. For the man who has over-ridden his own conscience has put out or seriously

injured the eye of his spirit, by which alone he can walk safely.

And how much do we all need the general lesson of humility taught us by our Lord. In presence of His quiet and meek disposition, that does not strive and cry, how ashamed may we be of our pretentiousness and insistence on our rights! How sensitive are we to every neglect; how indignant if our rightful place is not given us—if we are not recognised—if our work is not appreciated—if our opinion is not listened to! Here is the Son of God passing through life unrecognised, unworshipped, contradicted, despised, mocked by ignorant persons, and He says nothing of His dignity, when reviled, reviles not again; while we feel deeply injured if on one occasion we do not get all our due, and are continually craving recognition, and cannot bear to be considered less useful, or less liberal, or less clever, or less full of information, or less alive to great questions than we are. How we quarrel and sulk and stand upon our dignity if we are not treated with deference! What a pitiful spectacle does humanity often afford!

In closing, it is, I think, worth while to observe what was implied in this law of the half shekel, although this is not strictly in the line of our subject. The law ran, "The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when they give an offering unto the Lord to make an atonement for your souls," a law which evidently was intended to impress upon the people a sense of their equality before God. All Jews had an equal right of access to God; and all had an equal interest in the Temple; the king contributed, at least through the regular tax, no more than the poorest of his subjects. There can be no question that this went far to produce a feeling of religious equality among the people. If a man's poverty laid him under serious disabilities and disadvantages in society, it laid him under no religious disabilities. He

enjoyed precisely the same right as the rich to enter the Temple and engage in its worship. He felt that in God's sight wealth made no distinction. The poor man's prayer was as likely to be heard; the poor man's offering as sure to be accepted. God looked upon all His people, irrespective of social position, and simply as men.

And this is a feeling which should, by one means or other, be continually propagated. The least among us has his responsibilities; there is no one so weak, so uninfluential, so absolutely impoverished, that he is expected to contribute nothing to the common stock of duty done—it will not do to rob God under the guise of modesty or humility, and profess to be unable to do any good. Your half-shekels must be forthcoming. And there is no one so remote from the great centre, no one so far removed by disposition or by habit from the mass of Christian worshippers, no one so forgotten by men and disregarded, that he is not known by God and cared for by Him. The distinctions that separate us in society fall from us as we enter God's presence, and we feel that God is as likely to listen to the supplications of the poor and the helpless, as of the rich and mighty.

Perhaps there is also significance in the circumstance that our Lord miraculously paid Peter's tax as well as His own. He did not include Peter in the law which applied to Himself, nor did He claim exemption from the tax for Peter; and yet the furnishing him with the half-shekel must have seemed to Peter to mean more than if He had given him it out of the common purse. He might not see all it meant, but when he heard our Lord a few days afterwards saying to the Jews, "If the Son make you free, then are ye free indeed," his mind must surely have reverted to this incident. For Christ did make him, to a certain extent, a sharer in His own Sonship. He supplied him out of His Father's treasury, giving him an inkling of the truth,

afterwards to be set in the clearest light, that in Christ we are all the children of God, and that in Him we *get from* God far more than ever we can give to Him.

There is a freedom which certainly the Jews had not attained, and which, it is to be feared few Christians attain. Even in intelligent and pious people there is always a notion that what God wants is the fifteen pence. There remains in us a servile, tax-paying spirit, which throws doubt upon our sonship. Now Christ distinctly declares that such a relation between God and us as moves us to offer Him payments, large or small, is to be abolished. That is not the relation God wishes us to hold towards Him. He means us to be free. He means us to enter into the freedom of His own Son; to learn from Him a free spirit and bearing, and as His friends to look up to God as our Father. He desires no service that is done by constraint, no offering that is a mere paying of taxes. He wishes us to count ourselves His children, and to live on what He supplies, fearlessly, cheerfully, hopefully.

Every other liberty is against nature and must end in more hateful bondage. Had Peter refused to pay his tax, and out of mere selfwill and independence and greed evaded the collectors, he would have been arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned till he paid. So short-lived is the flash of apparent liberty a man secures to himself by disregard of God and His love, and contempt of everything but his own pleasure. It is folly and madness to seek liberty so. The world were a hateful world if men could find true freedom in selfishness, and apart from love and God and holiness. The freedom we are destined to is of no such pitiful kind —but an absolute and eternal freedom, grounded in our harmony with God and our consciousness of His perfect love for us. The man who is conscious of this, who knows that God is with him and he in God—the man who knows that God has made all things for His children rather than

for Himself, and that all things are ours because they are God's—this is the man who has true freedom. Conscious that he loves God above all, he is not haunted by the fear of offending Him, nor is tormented with scruples, but lets his love rule his life.

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