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THE BALANCE OF CHARACTER.

(Revelation xxi. 16.)

The secret of all physical beauty is proportion. It is not enough that the feature of a face be perfect in itself; it must be in harmony with the expression. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in "Transformation," is not afraid to give his type of beauty a nose not absolutely straight; he says that otherwise it would detract from the playfulness of the countenance. A city irregularly built is not necessarily a city whose individual buildings are bad. There are some towns where you see a small cottage side by side with a four-storeyed house. The cottage may be perfect in architecture; the house may be perfect in architecture; but the conjunction of the two is unsymmetrical. The eye receives its impression of pleasure in the same way as the ear receives its impression of pleasure—from the harmony of the parts, from the balance of the different elements.

In describing the city of God the seer of Patmos fastens on the attribute of *proportion* as the essence of all its beauty, "the length and the breadth and the height of it are equal." Yet in this he is not mainly guided by an artistic impulse. He is writing an allegory of the human soul. He longs to see in the mind of man a balance of character; he regards a balance of character as the goal of all development. He puts into the city what he would like to see in the heart; he makes his city his *symbol* of the heart. It is in passing from the one to the other that St. John's picture begins to suffer. It contradicts the common view. The world's ideal of beauty may be that of a well-proportioned street or a well-proportioned town, but it is not that of a well-proportioned character. The type of heroism we select for admiration and imitation is commonly a one-sided type—a character in which one part of the nature has

absorbed the other parts. We are all familiar with the expression, "He leads an irregular life." We generally apply it to a course of evil, and in this sense it expresses our condemnation. But there are irregularities in the course of goodness as well as of evil. The spiritual city of God, as at present constituted, is a series of irregular buildings; and the most unhealthy symptom of all is that by reason of their irregularity they please the common eye.

What I understand by irregularity in the city of God is the holding of one quality in isolation from other qualities. We cannot do better than take the three qualities given in this verse,—height, length, and breadth; an allegorical passage should be allegorically interpreted. We begin with height. There is a class in the Christian Church who are called mystics. They keep their eye on the mountain, and they are in danger of forgetting the plain. Sometimes they look so high that the length and the breadth are ignored. There is no finer example than the early life of St. John himself. He was always a mystical soul. He was thinking of where he would sit on the right hand when his work on earth was scarce begun. Yet, this man who was so intent on the upper city of God and the means of beautifying it, had no sympathy with the imperfections of a village in Samaria. Do we not see the same thing in actual life? Many a woman sheds tears over a romance and is cold to a case of real distress. Many a girl has the vision of being a sick nurse—of seeing an ideal hospital in the air, who yet after trial leaves the real hospital in a fortnight. The reason is plain. The ideal city and the ideal hospital are alike one-sided. They indeed call man to sympathise with sorrow, but it is only with romantic sorrow—sorrow such as knight-errants may feel. The city has no gutters, the hospital no unseemly wounds. It is the vision of isolated height—height without length or breadth.

There is a second class in the religious world who may be

said to represent isolated *length*. These are they who walk for ever over the long, narrow plank of duty, never looking up to the stars, never looking round to the highway, but simply pressing on through the daily task, and making life a monotonous routine. The nearest New Testament type of this is perhaps St. James. He is distinctively the apostle of law. He rarely lifts his head from the practical. John may have his apocalypse, Paul may be taken up to the third heaven, but James treads perpetually the plank of duty. Tradition says he found it rather arduous work. No wonder. Nothing helps the practical like the vision. We never do common things so well as when we have seen something out of the common. We walk best on the plank after we have raised our eyes. Faith helps to justify a man even in the sense of making him just. Work can no more exist comfortably without mysticism than mysticism can exist profitably without work. The length without the height is as great an irregularity in the spiritual building as is the height without the length. Both must grow together if there is to be a harvest.

There is a third class within the city of God—the men of isolated *breadth*—breadth contemplated to the exclusion of either height or length. I would take as their representative that young man in the parable who said he would not go, but went. He was not a bad man, but he wanted the reputation of independence. He wished to emphasise the fact that he had leapt over the fences set up by the men of old time. He desired to air the negative elements in his nature, to show that he was beyond leading-strings, to make it plain that, if he followed the course of others, it was not a homage to law, but an act of grace. He was, in short, a man proud beyond all things of his Christian liberty. Now, wherein lies the sting of such a position? In this, that liberty, as such, is not a thing to be proud of at all. It depends entirely on the quality of the thing in

which you are free. Is it good to leap a prohibitory fence in order to find a short cut? It may or it may not be. The question is, Why do you wish a short cut? Is it to get a doctor sooner in a case of sickness? Then you are justified in leaping the fence, in braving the prohibition. But to leap the fence merely as a proof that you are not restrained is an ignoble thing. Freedom for its own sake is not beautiful; it is nearer to animal. To make it human, it must be the freedom to do good. It must be the liberty of something which is noble—the liberty to proclaim glad tidings, the liberty to unclasp the Bible, the liberty to extend the communion of love. Breadth cannot be a quality standing alone. We want to know *what* is broad. Is it broad charity? Is it broad sympathy? Is it broad cloth? Is it broad humour? Tell us the thing to be extended, and we shall tell you how far the extension is desirable. You speak of a broad platform; how *high* is that platform? Breadth without height is an idle thing.

Now, St. John says that the aim of the Divine architecture is to remove these irregularities in the city of God, to equalise the three elements held in isolation. That this is the aim will be manifest if we reflect that human life is so constituted as to give successive play to each of them. Each has its day, and each finds at the end of its day that it is by itself inadequate, unable to give effect to its ideal. The history of every rounded life exhibits the steps of a process by which we pass in succession from the one to the other. Let us try to trace the order of the spiritual kingdom.

We all begin in the heights. The first world that opens upon us is an ideal world. The city on which the eye of childhood rests is not a city of stone and lime; it is a series of houses not made with hands. In the religious life, as in the secular life, man receives the kingdom as a little child—with his eye on to-morrow. To the individual soul, as to

the collective church, the first thing seen is the last advent. When the eye first catches the light of Christ, it sees without perspective and without shadow. The second coming is already at the door. We stand upon the hill-top and look down upon the world below; and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers. The earth dwindles as we gaze. Its pleasures, its pursuits, its ambitions, sink into insignificance before the sight of the ideal splendour. All the old mountains become valleys. Everything that we strove for in the past seems a waste of time. There is only one reality—the other world and the preparation for it. We sympathise neither with length nor with breadth. We call the plank of duty mere morality, as distinct from evangelical religion. We call the exercise of freedom a spirit of worldly conformity, a want of seriousness about Divine things. The light of the future has put out the light of common day.

By-and-by there comes a check to this soaring; the bird gets into collision with something which breaks its wing. We go wrong in some way; we experience a fall. Then we turn aside from the sky to the earth, from the height to the length, of the city. We begin to travel over that narrow plank of duty which we have so long neglected. And the plank generally becomes to us narrow indeed. We make up our minds that the thing in which we have fallen is the one hindrance to the Christian life, that to conquer *this* temptation is the essence of the whole Gospel. Perhaps it was the passion of drink to which we yielded; then teetotalism becomes the whole duty of man. Perhaps it was the pride of wounded affection which lowered our nature; then pride becomes to us the unpardonable sin. The days in which we tread the plank are not commonly days of charity.

At last there comes to us a cry from Macedonia or some other quarter, "Come over and help us." When we look across, we make a discovery. We find that these

people are also moving on a plank, but that *their* plank is different from ours. One voice cries to us: "*Your* case is the opposite of mine. *You* had too much natural passion; *I* had too little; *I* was too cold to be easily influenced by good." Another says: "*You* had an overplus of pride; *I* had always too much humility; *I* was never sanguine enough to be a believer." There breaks upon us the knowledge that in the length, as well as the height, of the journey we have been one-sided. We find that we need something more than either the sight of the sky or the vision of our own narrow plank—the recognition that others have *also* their plank, in other words, the breadth of human sympathy. It is here, and here alone that the building reaches proportion, for it is here, and here alone, that the isolation of a quality becomes impossible. Christian breadth is not a negative, it is the most positive of all things. It is distinguished, not by what it rejects, but by what it accepts. It finds a place in the structure for every plank that has ever borne the weight of a human foot, for every thought that has ever sustained a human spirit, for every interest that has ever inspired a human heart. Christian breadth is the close of negation; it is the reconciliation of all things.

The distinctive feature of Christianity from an artistic standpoint is, as Paul says, just this power of gathering together, of presenting in a connected view those parts of the building which, in other faiths, are exhibited in isolation. Christianity, in truth, is the only religion which professes to save without eliminating a part of human nature. No one would deny that other forms of belief have contributed something to the moulding of man's character. But in all of them man has had to pay a price for it—the price of mutilation. They have exalted one phase of our nature at the expense of another; nay, by the *sacrifice* of another. Even in this natural sense, the re-

ligion of Christ may boast that it has made its offer, "without money and without price."

The Brahman has done something for man; he has taught him to look beyond the seen and temporal. This, indeed, is his distinctive message. But it is professedly an exclusive message. Brahmanism is the worship of height —height without length or breadth. Everything that relates to length or breadth is crucified. There is no room in the building for plain materials; it is all towers. There is no place for the common world—the world where men strive and toil. It is a religion of wings, not of hands and feet. Life as it exists is ignored. Man occupies the world in order to get out of it. Every other phase of human nature is annihilated for the sake of one—its moments of rapt contemplation. It is a heavy price to pay for being set free.

The Jew has done something for man; he has taught him to walk over the long and narrow plank of duty. This is *his* distinctive message—the keeping of the law. But here again, it is an exclusive message; it is length without height and without breadth. There is no justification by faith, no sense that a man may give promise by his mere aspirations, even while his actions lag far behind. Everything is measured by the yard, by the line. The standard of excellence is the amount of work done, rather than the conviction of the amount of work to *be* done. Man's duty is to sweep the streets of the city of God; and so intent is he on cleansing the pathway, that he forgets the actual purity of the sunbeams overhead.

The Greek has done something for man. He has taught him that there is a beauty in the absence of fetters, a sense in which it is good to say, "I don't care." The characteristic of the Greek is breadth—the freedom from restraint. But here too the emancipation is bought with a price. It is breadth, but it is breadth without height. There are

two ways in which a man may say "I don't care." He may cast his cares upon God, and feel that in His hands they are all right, or he may cast them into the waste-basket—become reckless of their existence. The Greek is the latter. He preaches breadth for the *sake* of breadth. He teaches man to leap the fences, simply because they *are* fences. He rids him of his old toil-worn garment; but he takes away along with it the rich treasure which is wrapt in its folds. The death of care becomes the death of earnestness.

Now, in Christ, these three are one—the height, the breadth, and the length. I believe that in Christ this is their order. All are comprehended in one word—love. Love begins in the height. If it had not a height to spring from, it could not descend. Its sacrifice demands an original sense of glory. Then it empties itself of its glory, takes a servant's form. It narrows itself—not immediately to its *own* plank of duty, but to *mine*. With a more than *Greek* abandonment, it passes beyond itself, leaps the fences of its own personality; it takes up my cares, my burdens, my sorrows. Finally, as a result of that, it is able to tread with speed the length of its *own* plank; its personal yoke becomes easy, its individual burden light. If you begin with the thought of self—even of self-improvement, it is very difficult to pass into the life of another. But, if with Christ you begin by passing into the life of *another*, if with Him you put yourself in sympathy on the narrow plank which *others* have to tread, you will find that your own way is made smooth and gentle. Judaism shall be best fulfilled *after* Christianity, for there is no power like love that can help us to keep the law, and there is nothing which makes us strong like the absolute surrender of ourselves.

GEORGE MATHESON.