

THE
PULPIT COMMENTARY,

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AND BY THE
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E S T H E R.

Exposition

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THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

INTRODUCTION.

§ 1. SUBJECT OF THE BOOK.

THE Book of Esther relates an episode in Jewish history of intense interest to the entire nation at the time, since it involved the question of its continuance or destruction, but an episode which stood quite separate and distinct from the rest of Jewish history, unconnected with anything that preceded or followed, and which, but for the institution of the Feast of Purim, might as easily have been forgotten by the people as escaped perils too often are by individuals. The main scene of the narrative is Susa, the Persian capital; the *dramatis personæ* are either Persians or "Jews of the Dispersion." There is no mention, in the whole Book, of Palestine, or Jerusalem, or the temple, or the provisions of the law, nor any allusion to any facts in previous Jewish history, excepting two:—1. The captivity under Nebuchadnezzar (ch. ii. 6). 2. The subsequent dispersion of the Jews over all the various provinces of the Persian empire (ch. iii. 8). Thus the events related belong, primarily, not to the history of the Palestinian Jews, but to that of the "Jews of the Dispersion;" and it is as indicating that those Jews were, no less than their brethren in Palestine, under the Divine care, that the Book appealed to the hearts of the Jewish race generally, and claimed a place in the national collection of sacred writings. The events related may be thus briefly summarised:—At a feast held in the palace of Susa in the third year of Ahasuerus, that prince, in the wantonness of power, requires the presence of his queen, Vashti, unveiled (ch. i. 1—11); she refuses (*ibid.* ver. 12); the king is furious, and his obsequious nobles counsel her divorce, which is forthwith decreed and published to the whole kingdom (*ibid.* vers. 12—22). Efforts are then made to supply Vashti's place; virgins are collected from all quarters, and the king's choice falls upon Esther, a Jewess, who had been brought up by her cousin Mordecai, a eunuch of the court (ch. ii. 1—20). Soon after this, two of the king's chamberlains form a plot to murder him, which is discovered by

Mordecai, communicated to the king by Esther, and frustrated by their execution (*ibid.* vers. 21—23). About this time, Haman, the king's chief minister, being offended by the conduct of Mordecai, who does not pay him due respect, forms the design of exterminating the Jews, and obtains the king's consent to a decree authorising their destruction on a certain day. The day is fixed by Haman through a casting of lots, and is thereby determined to a date nearly twelve months in advance of the time at which the lots are cast (ch. iii.). Mordecai, informed of the impending massacre, requires Esther to intercede for her people; and Esther, though aware that she does so at the peril of her life, consents (ch. iv.). Her plan is to bring the king and Haman together, to denounce him as having sought her life, and so to obtain his disgrace. She invites the two to a banquet; but when her opportunity comes, shrinks from making the disclosure which she had designed, and defers it to the ensuing day, for which she appoints a second banquet (ch. v. 1—8). Haman now, intoxicated with his good fortune, as he deems it, resolves to anticipate the decree, so far as Mordecai is concerned, and to put him to death at once. He constructs a gallows, or erects a cross, in the court of his own house for this purpose (*ibid.* vers. 9—14), and proposes to hang Mordecai thereon before the second banquet. In the night, however, the king has been sleepless, and having ordered his attendants to read to him out of the Book of the Chronicles, has been reminded of Mordecai's discovery of the conspiracy against his life, and having asked what reward he had received, has been told that "nothing had been done for him" (ch. vi. 3). Upon this he has Haman summoned, and compels him to be the instrument of doing Mordecai the highest possible honour (*ibid.* vers. 4—11). The banquet follows; Esther denounces Haman; the king, angry, but in doubt, quits the apartment; Haman, eagerly imploring Esther's intercession, approaches too near her sacred person; the king returns, and taxing him with rudeness towards the queen, orders him off to instant execution. He is conducted to his own house, and hanged on the cross on which he had intended to hang Mordecai (ch. vii. 1—10). The king now puts himself in the hands of Esther and Mordecai, and allows them to take the necessary steps to frustrate Haman's designs against the Jews. As the royal decree cannot be rescinded, it is determined to send out another, allowing the Jews to defend themselves if attacked by their enemies (ch. viii.). This is done, and when the day determined by the lot arrives, a struggle takes place; the Persian authorities are on the side of the Jews, and "help" them (ch. ix. 3); the result is, that everywhere the Jews are victorious: at Susa they kill 500 of their enemies, together with the ten sons of Haman; elsewhere they kill 75,000 (or, according to the Septuagint, 15,000). The king then allows them a second day,—one of vengeance, as it would seem, at Susa,—in which they kill 300 more. The bodies of Haman's ten sons are exposed on gibbets; and the Feast of Purim is instituted and made of perpetual obligation (ch. ix. 5—32). With a brief account of

Ahasuerus' establishing a new arrangement of the tribute, and of Mordecai's greatness and favour, both with the king and with his own nation, the Book closes (ch. x.).

§ 2. DATE OF ITS COMPOSITION.

In order to determine (approximately) the date of the composition of 'Esther,' it is necessary, in the first place, to decide which of the Persian kings is intended by Ahasuerus. That no king prior to Darius Hystaspis can be meant seems to follow—1. From the limits assigned to the empire in ch. i. 1, since Darius first extended the Persian dominion over a portion of India; and, 2. From the residence of the court being Susa, which Darius first made the capital. It has been supposed, chiefly from ch. x. 1 ("And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the islands of the sea"), that Darius himself is intended. But neither the name nor the character agree; nor was Darius in his third year in a position to give a feast to all the power of Media and Persia at Susa, since he was struggling for his crown, Media was in revolt, and he was himself at Babylon ('Records of the Past,' vol. vii. pp. 95—98). Artaxerxes Longimanus has also been suggested, partly because the name is given as "Artaxerxes" in the Septuagint, and partly because such was the opinion of Josephus. But here, again, both the name and character are adverse; nor could Haman, in Artaxerxes' *twelfth* year, have any need of informing him that there was such a people as the Jews with peculiar laws (Esther iii. 8), when Artaxerxes had shown himself well acquainted with the Jews and with their law in his seventh (Ezra vii. 12—26). A later monarch than Longimanus has not been suggested, and would be incompatible with the genealogy of Mordecai (Esther ii. 5, 6); so that the mere process of eliminating impossible kings conducts us to Xerxes, the son of Darius, and father of Longimanus, as the personage really meant. And here we find, in the first place, that the names are identical, the Hebrew *Akhashverosh* corresponding letter for letter with the Persian *Khshayarsha*, which the Greeks turned into Xerxes. Secondly, the resemblance of character is most striking, and is admitted on all hands. Thirdly, the notes of time exactly accord with the chronology of Xerxes' reign. "In the third year of Xerxes' reign was held an assembly at Susa to arrange the Grecian war (Herod., vii. 7). In the third year of Ahasuerus was held a great feast and assembly at Shushan the palace (Esther i. 3). In the seventh year of his reign Xerxes returned defeated from Greece, and consoled himself by the pleasures of the harem (Herod., ix. 108). In the seventh year of his reign 'fair young virgins were sought' for Ahasuerus (Esther ii. 2—15)." * We may therefore confidently regard the Ahasuerus of Esther as the well-known invader of Greece and scourger of the Hellespont, who has come down to us in profane history as "Xerxes."

* Bp. Cotton in Dr. Smith's 'Dictionary of the Bible,' vol. i. p. 34.

With respect to the time of the composition of Esther, it is, in the first place, clear that when the author writes the reign of Ahasuerus is over. The opening passage distinctly proves this. Now Xerxes died in B.C. 465, and the question therefore is, How long after this date was the Book of Esther written? The opening passage is thought by some to imply that the reign of Ahasuerus was remote, and a recent commentator suggests B.C. 200 as the probable time of writing,* but he admits that a century earlier is quite possible. Other critics suggest as early a date as B.C. 450—440, and the arguments which they adduce are weighty. The language of the Book closely resembles that of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, which were all written about that time. The minute and particular accounts of many matters which would be known primarily only to Esther and Mordecai, and would certainly not have been written in the "book of the chronicles,"—as Mordecai's genealogy (ch. ii. 5), Esther's messages to Mordecai and Mordecai's to her through Hatach (ch. iv. 5—16), the circumstances of the two banquets given by Esther to Ahasuerus and Haman (ch. v. 6—8; vii. 2—8), &c.,—make it probable that the writer was contemporary with the events narrated, and derived his information from Mordecai or Esther, or both. Further, the individuals who have been mentioned as the writers of the Book—Mordecai himself and the high priest Joiakim—lived about this time. Altogether, it seems most probable that the work was composed about the middle of the fifth century B.C., or a little later, when Xerxes had been dead about twenty years.

§ 3. AUTHOR.

Aben-Esra, among Jewish, and Clement of Alexandria, among Christian commentators, assign the Book of Esther to Mordecai. The Rabbi Azarias says that it was written by the high priest Joiakim. Augustine and Isidore make Ezra the author. In the Talmud it is said that the work was composed by "the men of the great synagogue." These conflicting statements neutralise each other, and make it clear that the Jewish Church had no uniform, or even predominant, tradition upon the point. It is against Ezra's authorship that the style is very different from his; against Mordecai's, that the first person is never used, and that Mordecai is spoken of in terms of such high praise. Joiakim can scarcely be supposed sufficiently familiar with Persian customs and localities to have ventured upon the task, much less to have produced a work showing such perfect acquaintance with the machinery of the Persian court, its customs, etiquette, and the like. What is meant by attributing the composition to "the men of the great synagogue" it is hard to say; but certainly it would be difficult to adduce a work more distinctly stamped with the individuality of a single author than the Book of Esther. The result would seem to be that the author is really unknown. He must have been a Jew; he must have been

* Bertheau. See his 'Introduction to Esther,' § 4, in the 'Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament,' vol. iv. part ii. p. 288.

long resident in Persia; and he must have had some special facilities (besides access to the Persian archives) for obtaining exact information on the secret and delicate matters which form an essential part of his history. Probably he was a younger contemporary of Mordecai's, and an intimate acquaintance—one who had watched his career, who admired his talents and his character, and was anxious to preserve them from oblivion. His work was written primarily for the Jews of Persia; but it naturally passed from them to the other "Jews of the Dispersion," and finally reached Jerusalem, where it was adopted into the Canon.

§ 4. PECULIARITIES.

The most notable and the most noted peculiarity of the Book of Esther is the entire absence from it of the name of God. None of the titles in use among the Jews to express the Supreme Being—neither Elohim, nor Jehovah, nor Shaddai, nor Adonai, nor even any periphrasis for the name—occurs in it from first to last. The idea of God is there; but by a reticence, of which we have no other example in Scripture (for even the shortest psalm has a mention of God at least once), the Divine name is kept back, unuttered by the speakers, unwritten by the author, merged in the profoundest silence, totally absent from the whole ten chapters. It has been suggested that this absence arose from that increasing scruple against using the Divine name which characterised the period between Malachi and John the Baptist, which led to the substitution of "Adonai" for "Jehovah," in the reading of the Scriptures, and to the absolute prohibition of the pronunciation of the "Tetragrammaton" by any one but the high priest, or by him excepting in a whisper.* But the date of 'Esther' is too early for this explanation to merit acceptance. Rather we must attribute the reticence either to an "instinctive adoption of the fashion of the Persian court,"† or to a shrinking from irreverence on the part of the writer, who may have viewed it as irreverent to introduce the name of God without necessity into a history which was addressed as much to Persians as to Jews, and was not so much intended for sacred history as for secular. "*Nec Deus intersit, nisi dignus vindice nodus inciderit*" is a wholesome rule; and as the deliverance of the Jews from Haman's machinations was brought about by secondary causes without overt Divine interference, there was no necessity to bring the First Cause upon the scene at all. Whether the "Book" was to be accepted into the Canon, notwithstanding the absence of the Divine name, was a point which the Jewish Church no doubt seriously considered, and which we may believe to have been determined, under Divine guidance, by Malachi. The Book was received, and we can see that it was well that it was received. "It is expedient for us that there should be one Book which omits the name of God altogether, to prevent us from attaching to the mere name a reverence which belongs only to the reality.‡ It is well that God should have vindicated as his own a

* Stanley, 'Lectures on the Jewish Church,' Third Series, p. 179.

† *Ibid.* p. 180.

‡ *Ibid.*

mere piece of honest, plain, straightforward, secular history, written by a God-fearing person, and the chief actors in which were God-fearing persons, that so we may feel that history itself is God's, and a true record of it a godly work—a work which he will accept and approve, whether or no he be explicitly referred to in it, whether or no it be made a vehicle of direct religious instruction, whether or no the characters held up for approval have the sacred name upon their lips, if only they have it in their hearts. For, be it remarked, not merely is the name of God absent from 'Esther,' but direct religious teaching is also wholly absent from it. Even prayer is not mentioned; Mordecai and Esther fast (ch. iv. 1, 16), but it is not said that they pray. They exhibit a genuine patriotism, a lofty unselfishness, a readiness to dare all for the right; but the source of their moral strength is not made apparent. When Mordecai says to Esther, "If thou holdest thy peace, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" he approaches close to the doctrines of God's special providence in the apparent accidents of life, of the special promises of continuance made to the Jewish people, and of the visitation of sin not only upon the sinner, but upon the family of the sinner—he does not, however, enunciate any one of them. When Esther consents to risk her life, with the touching words, "If I perish, I perish" (ch. iv. 16); and again when she says, "How can I endure to see the evil that shall come upon my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" (ch. viii. 6), she speaks as only a religiously-minded person would be likely to speak; but she withholds all mention of the motives which actuate her, and leaves them to be conjectured. The absence of any mention of Palestine, or Jerusalem, or the temple, or the law,* is also a noticeable feature of the Book, though one of far less difficulty and far less practical moment than the peculiarity which we have been considering. The writer belongs to the Jews of the Dispersion—his special interest is with them; and though warmly attached to his nation, he is devoid of that affection for localities which characterised the Jews generally. He is, moreover, so far cosmopolitan as to shrink from utterances which would stamp him as a provincial, and be either unintelligible to the Persians, for whom he certainly writes almost as much as for the Jews, or even displeasing to them. The facts of his narrative do not call for any mention of peculiar Jewish institutions (excepting that of the Feast of Purim), and he is thus able to avoid obtruding on his Persian readers peculiarities with which they would have no sympathy, or practices to which they would have felt objection. There is nothing that can well be called peculiar in the style of 'Esther,' or in the form of the narrative. Both are characterised by simplicity. The narrative is very inartificial,

* Except the remark of Haman, that the Jews have "*laws* diverse from all other people" (ch. iii. 8).

following a strictly chronological order, eschewing digressions, and of a single uniform tenor. The style has been called "remarkably chaste and simple." * It is certainly simple, presenting few difficulties of construction, and scarcely any ambiguities; but its purity may be questioned, at any rate, so far as the vocabulary is concerned, since that is largely impregnated with a Persian element, and contains also terms which belong properly to the later Hebrew, or Aramaic. The tone of the narrative is generally grave and dignified; in places it is even pathetic; but for the most part it interests more than it excites us. Character is well portrayed; the descriptions are graphic, and occasionally very elaborate. Altogether, the work is one of considerable literary merit, and, as a picture of court life in Persia under the Achæmenian dynasty, is of the highest historical value, being quite without a parallel.

§ 5. HISTORICAL TRUTH OF THE NARRATIVE.

It has been said that the narrative of Esther "consists of a long string of historical difficulties and improbabilities, and contains a number of errors in regard to Persian customs." † One foreign critic calls it "a poem," and seems to regard it as based on a very slight foundation of fact. ‡ Another reserves his opinion on the subject of its authenticity, and "waits to see whether any documents are hereafter discovered which will confirm and elucidate this isolated court story, with all its various details, and, if so, to what extent." § The Jews, however, have always regarded it as a true history, uniting it with Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah; and even holding it in peculiar esteem, as "more precious than Prophets, or Proverbs, or Psalms," || and as doomed to "outlast all the Hebrew Scriptures except the Pentateuch." ¶ Nor does there seem to be any real ground for calling the historical character of the Book in question. The supposed "mistakes" with respect to Persian customs are wholly unproved; the "historical difficulties and improbabilities" disappear upon examination, or even transform themselves into historical coincidences, when the idiosyncrasy of Xerxes is taken into account. The latest critic is struck, not with "difficulties" or with "mistakes" in the narrative, but with the fact that the whole of it is "thoroughly characteristic," all the various scenes being "full of the local genius of the empire, as we know it alike through the accounts of the earliest Greek travellers and the latest English investigators." ** The accord acknowledged in this sentence is indeed most striking; the suitability of all the main facts related to the personal character of Xerxes cannot be disputed; the notes of time fit in with what we know of his reign exactly; it is quite inconceivable that a poet,

* Bp. A. Hervey in Dr. Smith's 'Dictionary of the Bible,' vol. i. p. 585.

† De Wette, 'Einleitung in d. Alt. Test.,' § 198, a.

‡ Niebuhr, 'Vorträge über alte Geschichte,' vol. i. pp. 168, 159.

§ Ewald, 'History of Israel,' vol. v. pp. 230, 231, E. Tr.

|| Stanley, 'Lectures on the Jewish Church,' Third Series, p. 179.

¶ Carpzov, 'Introductio,' c. xx. § 6.

** Stanley, pp. 173, 174.

or a romancer, writing 150 or 200 years after the events (which is the hypothesis of modern sceptical critics), should have been at once so full, so graphic, and so correct. We are, therefore, thrown back upon the opposite theory, that the writer was a contemporary, that he was familiar with the Persian court under Xerxes, and that the harmony observable between his narrative and all that we otherwise know of the time is to be referred to the unity and congruity of truth. *Τῷ ἀληθεῖ πάντα συνάδει τὰ ὑπάρχοντα, τῷ δὲ ψευδεὶ ταχὺ διαφωνεῖ τὰ ληθές.* A historical romancer necessarily involves himself in discrepancies and contradictions; the truthful narrator has nothing of this kind to fear, since with every statement that is true *all* the facts of the case must harmonise.

LITERATURE OF ESTHER.

There are extant three Targums, or Jewish comments, upon Esther, but they are neither ancient nor of much value. Carpsov, in 1721, wrote an interesting 'Introduction' to it. Fritzsche, early in the present century, devoted an entire work to the subject, which he entitled 'Zusätze zum Buche Esther;' and Baumgarten followed his example in 1839, when he published his tractate 'De fide Libri Estheræ.' Recently Bertheau has contributed a comment on Esther to the 'Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament,' published at Leipsic by S. Hirzel. Though far from faultless, it is upon the whole the best *special* work on the subject. Two important articles on 'Esther' and 'the Book of Esther' were contributed to Dr. Smith's 'Dictionary of the Bible,' in 1860, by the present Bishop of Bath and Wells.

ARRANGEMENT OF THE BOOK IN SECTIONS.

The Book of Esther is a continuous narrative, with no marked divisions, and is somewhat difficult to divide even into sections. The following arrangement, which is nearly that of Bertheau, will be followed in the present comment.

Section 1 (ch. i.). The great feast of King Ahasuerus at Susa, with the disgrace of Vashti.

Section 2 (ch. ii. 1—18). The quest for maidens, and the choice of Esther to be queen in Vashti's place.

Section 3 (ch. ii. 19—23). Mordecai's discovery of a plot against Ahasuerus' life.

Section 4 (ch. iii. 1—6). Mordecai, by want of respect, offends Haman, Ahasuerus' chief minister. Haman, in revenge, resolves to destroy the nation of the Jews.

Section 5 (ch. iii. 7). Haman casts lots to obtain a lucky day for his enterprise: the lot falls on a day in the month Adar, the last in the year.

Section 6 (ch. iii. 8—15). Haman persuades Ahasuerus to publish a decree commanding the destruction of all the Jews in his kingdom on the ensuing 13th of Adar.

Section 7 (ch. iv. 1—3). Grief of Mordecai and general mourning of the Jews on receiving the intelligence.

Section 8 (ch. iv. 4—17). Grief of Esther; her communications with Mordecai; she consents to risk making, uninvited, an appeal to the king.

Section 9 (ch. v. 1—8). Ahasuerus receiving Esther favourably, she invites him and Haman to a banquet, at which, being permitted to make a request, she contents herself with inviting them both to another banquet.

Section 10 (ch. v. 9—14). Haman, exulting at these signs of royal favour, is the more exasperated by Mordecai's contempt. At the bidding of his wife he resolves to impale Mordecai, and causes a lofty cross to be erected for the purpose.

Section 11 (ch. vi. 1—11). Ahasuerus, being wakeful during the night, has the

book of the chronicles read to him, and finds that Mordecai has received no reward. He makes Haman suggest the fitting reward for one whom the king delights to honour, and then deposes him to confer it on Mordecai.

Section 12 (ch. vi. 12—14). Despondency of Haman, his wife, and friends, at this turn in his fortunes.

Section 13 (ch. vii.). At the second banquet, Esther denounces Haman, and the king condemns him to be impaled on the cross prepared for Mordecai.

Section 14 (ch. viii. 1, 2). Haman's house given to Esther, and the royal signet made over to Mordecai.

Section 15 (ch. viii. 3—14). At Esther's request, Ahasuerus sanctions the issue of a second decree, permitting the Jews to resist all who attack them, to kill them in their own defence, and to take possession of their goods.

Section 16 (ch. viii. 15—17). Mordecai's honour and the Jews' joy.

Section 17 (ch. ix. 1—16). Result of the second edict. The Jews resist their enemies, and effect a great slaughter of them, but do not lay hand upon their goods.

Section 18 (ch. ix. 17—32). Festival held by the Jews, and institution of the Feast of Purim.

Section 19 (ch. x.). Conclusion. Greatness of Ahasuerus and of Mordecai.

THE BOOK OF ESTHER.

§ 1. THE GREAT FEAST OF KING AHASUERUS AT SUSA, AND THE DISGRACE OF VASHTI.

EXPOSITION.

CHAPTER I.

THE GREAT FEAST (ch. i. 1—9). King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in the third year of his reign, which was B.C. 484—483, entertained at a great feast in the royal palace of Susa all his princes and his servants, "the power of Persia and Media," together with all the nobles and princes of the provinces (vers. 2, 3). The hospitality was extended over a space of 180 days (ver. 4). At the end of this time there was a further entertainment for seven days, on even a more profuse scale, all the male inhabitants of Susa being feasted in the palace gardens (vers. 5—8), while the queen received the women and made them a feast in her own private apartments. The special occasion of the entertainment seems to have been the summons to Susa of all the chief men of the kingdom, and particularly of the satraps, or "princes of provinces," to advise upon the projected expedition against Greece, which Herodotus mentions in his seventh book (ch. viii.). Banquets on an enormous scale were not uncommon in Persia; and the profuseness and vainglory of Xerxes would naturally lead him to go to an extreme in this, as in other matters.

Ver. 1. — In the days of Ahasuerus. Ahasuerus, in the original *Akhashverosh*, corresponds to *Kshayarsha* (the Persian ESTHER.

name from which the Greeks formed their Xerxes) almost as closely as possible. The prosthetic *a* was a necessity of Hebrew articulation. The only unnecessary change was the substitution of *v* for *y* (*vau* for *yod*) in the penultimate syllable. But this interchange is very common in Hebrew. This is Ahasuerus which reigned, &c. The writer is evidently acquainted with more than a single Ahasuerus. Ezra had mentioned one (iv. 6), and Daniel another (ix. 1). If he knew their works, he would necessarily know of these two. Or he may have known of them independently. The Ahasuerus of his narrative being different from either, he proceeds to distinguish him (1) from the Ahasuerus of Daniel, as a "king," and (2) from the Ahasuerus of Ezra by the extent of his dominion. Cambyses (see comment on Ezra iv. 6) had not ruled over India. India is expressed by *Hoddu*, which seems formed from the Persian *Hidush* ('Nakhsh-i-Rustam Inscr.,' par. 3, l. 25), by the omission of the nominative ending, and a slight modification of the vocalisation. The Sanscrit and the Zend, like the Greek, retained the *n*, which is really an essential part of the native word. Ethiopia is expressed, as usual, by *Cush*. The two countries are well chosen as the extreme *termini* of the Persian empire. An hundred and twenty-seven provinces. The Hebrew *medinah*, "province," does not correspond to the Persian satrapy, but is applied to every tract which had its own governor. There were originally no more than twenty satrapies (Herod., iii. 89—94), but there was certainly a very much larger number of governments. Judea was a

medinah (Ezra ii. 1; Neh. xi. 3), though only a small part of the satrapy of Syria.

Ver. 2.—**The throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan.** Though the Persian court resided a part of the year at Ecbatana, and occasionally visited Persepolis and Babylon (Xen., 'Cyrup.', viii. 6, § 2; 'Anab.' iii. 6, § 15), yet Susa was decidedly the ordinary seat of government, and ranked as the capital of the empire (see Herod., iii. 49; Æschyl., 'Pers.' ll. 122, 123; Ctes., 'Exa. Pers.', *passim*, &c.). "Shushan the palace" is distinguished from Shushan the city (ch. ix. 12—15), the one occupying a lofty but artificial eminence towards the west, while the other lay at the base of this mound, stretching out a considerable distance towards the east.

Ver. 3.—**In the third year of his reign.** In B.C. 483, probably in the early spring, when the court, having spent the winter at Babylon (Xenophon), returned to Susa to enjoy the most charming season of the year. **He made a feast unto all his princes and his servants.** Persian kings, according to Ctesias and Duris, ordinarily entertained at their table 15,000 persons! This is of course an exaggeration; but there can be no doubt that their hospitality was on a scale unexampled in modern times. The vast pillared halls of the Persepolitan and Susan palaces could accommodate many hundreds, if not thousands. **The power of Persia and Media.** The empire of the Achæmenian kings was Perso-Medic rather than simply Persian. The Medes were not only the most favoured of the conquered nations, but were really placed nearly on a par with their conquerors. Many of the highest offices were conferred on them, and they formed no doubt a considerable section of the courtiers. **The nobles.** Literally, "the first men," *ha-partemim*. The word used is a Persian term Hebraised. It occurs only in this place. **And princes of the provinces.** *I. e.* satraps. The presence of such persons at the great gathering at Susa preparatory to the Grecian war is witnessed to by Herodotus (vii. 19).

Ver. 4.—**When he showed the riches.** Ostentation was a main feature in the character of Xerxes. The huge army with which he invaded Greece was more for display than for service. Vain parade is apparent at every step of his expedition (Herod., vii. 31, 40, 41, 44, 59, &c.). He now exhibits "the riches of his kingdom" to his nobles and chief officers, showing them doubtless all the splendours of the palace, the walls draped with gold (Æschyl., 'Pers.' l. 161), the marble pillars and rich hangings, the golden plane tree and the golden vine (Herod., vii. 27), and perhaps the ingots of gold wherewith Darius had filled the treasury (*ibid.* iii. 96). **An hundred and fourscore days.** We need

not suppose that the same persons were entertained during the whole of this period. All the provincial governors could not quit their provinces at the same time, nor could any of them remain away very long. There was no doubt a succession of guests during the six months that the entertainment lasted.

Ver. 5.—**A feast unto all the people that were found in Susa.** The males only are intended, as appears from ver. 9. So Cyrus on one occasion feasted "the entire Persian army," slaughtering for them all his father's flocks, sheep, goats, and oxen (Herod., i. 126). **In the court of the garden.** The "court of the garden" is probably the entire space surrounding the central hall of thirty-six pillars at Susa, including the three detached porticoes of twelve pillars each, described by Mr. Loftus in his 'Chaldæa and Susiana' (pp. 365—372). This is a space nearly 350 feet long by 250 wide, with a square of 145 feet taken out of it for the central building. The area exceeds 60,000 square feet.

Ver. 6.—**Where were white, green, and blue hangings.** There is nothing in the original corresponding to "green." The "hangings," or rather awning, was of white cotton (*karpas*) and violet. Mr. Loftus supposes that it was carried across from the central pillared hall to the detached porticoes, thus shading the guests from the intense heat of the sun ('Chaldæa and Susiana,' p. 375). **Fastened with cords of fine linen and purple.** Very strong cords would be needed to support the awning if it was carried across as above suggested, over a space of nearly sixty feet. **To rings of silver.** The exact use of the rings is doubtful. Perhaps they were inserted into the stone work in order that the cords might be made fast to them. **Pillars of marble.** The pillars at Susa are not of marble, but of a dark-blue limestone. Perhaps the Hebrew *shêsh* designated this stone rather than marble. **The beds were of gold and silver.** The couches on which the guests reclined are intended (comp. ch. vii. 8). These were either covered with gold and silver cloth, or had their actual framework of the precious metals, like those which Xerxes took with him into Greece (see Herod., ix. 82). **Upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black marble.** The four words which follow "pavement" are not adjectives denoting colours, but the names of four different materials. One is *shêsh*, the material of the pillars, which accords with the fact that such pavement slabs as have been found at Susa are, like the columns, of a blue limestone. The other materials are unknown to us, and we cannot say what the exact colours were; but no doubt the general result was a mosaic pavement of four different hues.

Ver. 7.—**They gave them drink in vessels**

of gold. Drinking-vessels of gold were found in considerable numbers in the Persian camp near Plataea (Herod., ix. 80) when the Greeks took it. They had been the property of Persian nobles. The king would naturally possess in great abundance whatever luxury was affected by the upper class of his subjects. **The vessels being diverse one from another.** This is a minute point, which must have come from an eye-witness, or from one who had received the account of the banquet from an eye-witness. It was perhaps unusual. At least, in the grand banquet represented by Sargon on the walls of his palace at Khorsabad, it is observable that all the guests hold in their hands goblets which are exactly alike (see 'Ancient Monarchies,' vol. ii. p. 214). **Royal wine.** Literally, "wine of the kingdom"—wine, *i. e.*, from the royal cellar, and therefore good wine, but not necessarily the "wine of Helbon," which was the only wine that the king himself drank (Athen., 'Deipnosoph.' iv. p. 145, A).

Ver. 8.—The drinking was according to the law. Rather, "according to *edict*"—the edict being the express order given by the king to all the officers of his household. It is implied that the usual custom was different—that the foolish practice prevailed

of compelling men to drink. That the Persians were hard drinkers, and frequently drank to excess, is stated by Herodotus (i. 133) and Xenophon ('Cyprip.' viii. 8, § 11).

Ver. 9.—Vashti, the queen. The only wife of Xerxes known to the Greeks was Amestris, the daughter of Otanes, one of the seven conspirators (Herod., vii. 61). Xerxes probably took her to wife as soon as he was of marriageable age, and before he ascended the throne had a son by her, who in his seventh year was grown up (*ibid.* ix. 108). It would seem to be certain that if Ahasuerus is Xerxes, Vashti must be Amestris. The names themselves are not very remote, since *m* will readily interchange with *v*; but Vashti might possibly represent not the real name of the queen, but a favourite epithet, such as *vahista*, "sweetest." **Made a feast for the women.** Men and women did not take their meals together in Persia unless in the privacy of domestic life (Brisson, 'De Regn. Pers.' ii. pp. 273—276). If the women, therefore, were to partake in a festivity, it was necessary that they should be entertained separately. **In the royal house.** In the gynæceum or harem, which was probably on the southern side of the great pillared hall at Susa (Fergusson).

HOMILETICS.

The Book of Esther. There is a striking contrast between the Books of RUTH and ESTHER. The earlier book is an idyll; the later a chronicle. The earlier relates to lowly persons and to rural life; the later to kings and queens, and to a great Oriental metropolis. The earlier is the story of a family, and its interest is domestic; the later is a chapter from the history of a people, and deals with the intrigues of a court and the policy of a state. The religious character and aim of this book may be presented in four observations.

I. GOD'S NAME IS ABSENT FROM THE WHOLE BOOK, BUT GOD HIMSELF IS IN EVERY CHAPTER. There is no other book except Canticles in the sacred volume in which the Divine Being is neither mentioned nor obviously referred to. Yet no disbeliever in God could have written it; and no believer in God can read it without finding his faith strengthened thereby. Refer especially to ch. iv. 14.

II. A NATIONAL FESTIVAL IS HISTORICALLY ACCOUNTED FOR. The feast of Purim was held in high honour, and observed with great regularity and solemnity and rejoicing, among the Jews. "The temple may fail, but the Purim never," was one of their proverbs. This Book of Esther was written to explain the origin of this national festival.

III. A VALUABLE MORAL LESSON PERVADES THE WHOLE NARRATIVE. Not only is the great general truth, that earthly greatness and prosperity are mutable and transitory, brought effectively before us, but we learn that God humbles the proud, and exalts the lowly who trust in him (*vide* 1 Sam. ii. 1—10).

II. THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IS STRIKINGLY AND MEMORABLY DISPLAYED. We are brought into contact with the righteousness and the rule of the Most High. A great deliverance is wrought; and whilst the means are human, the deliverance itself is Divine. God appears as "mighty to save." The book is, accordingly, one peculiarly suitable to those in distress, perplexity, and trouble.

Vers. 1, 2.—The responsibility of rule. The Ahasuerus of this book was probably the Xerxes so well known to students of ancient history. The name, the period,

the extent of dominion, the character, all correspond with this hypothesis. Observe—

I. THE EXTENT OF THE KING'S SWAY. The Persian was one of the great empires of the world. The monarch ruled from India to Ethiopia. The provinces of his dominion were in number 127. Two or three centuries ago, commentators compared this Persian empire with the dominion of "the Great Turk." It may now be best compared with the imperial dominion of the Queen of Great Britain. It is a vast responsibility to reign over such an empire.

II. THE ABSOLUTE, DESPOTIC NATURE OF THE KING'S POWER. The narrative exhibits an Oriental despot exercising unlimited, unchecked authority. "Whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive." Individuals, cities, peoples lay at the mercy of his caprice. His power for good or for evil was immense. Happily there is no parallel to this absolute sway amongst ourselves, although there are even now potentates whose empire is described as "absolute monarchy limited by fear of assassination." History proves that human nature is such that it is unwise and unsafe to intrust it with absolute power.

III. THE KING'S UNREASONABLE, CAPRICIOUS, AND CRUEL CHARACTER. What we read in this book concerning Ahasuerus agrees with what we know of Xerxes. The man who led two millions of soldiers against the Greeks, who scourged the sea, and put to death the engineers of his bridge because their work was injured by a storm, was the same man who insulted his queen for her modesty, and who was ready to massacre a people in order to gratify a favourite.

IV. EVEN SUCH POWER WAS CONTROLLED AND OVERRULED BY THE WISE PROVIDENCE OF GOD. The Lord reigneth, and the hearts of kings are in his hand. The Persian monarch was not altogether the tool of the wicked, for God turned the counsels of his enemies to nought.

V. ALL POWER IS DERIVED FROM GOD, AND ALL WHO ARE INTRUSTED WITH IT ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD. Civil authority has its origin in Divine appointment: "the powers that be are ordained of God." Nevertheless, power is not given to be used as it was used by Ahasuerus, for the gratification of sinful passions. It is given to be employed for the public good. It is well that even rulers should be accountable to their fellow-men; it cannot be otherwise than that they should be accountable to God. "Be wise, therefore, ye kings! Be instructed, ye rulers of the earth!"

Vers. 3—7.—*A royal banquet.* In this description of a sumptuous Oriental feast, notice—1. The guests. These were, in the first instance, the nobles and princes of the provinces, who were assembled for purposes of state policy; and afterwards the people of the metropolis, who were lavishly regaled from the royal table. 2. The splendour and costliness of the entertainment. The great lords were shown by Ahasuerus the riches of his kingdom, and the honour of his excellent majesty. The multitude were entertained in the palace garden, where gorgeous awnings were slung from marble pillars. The guests reclined on couches of gold and silver, placed on marble pavements. They were served with delicious viands and costly wines from the cellar of the king. 3. The protraction of the feast. The people were feasted for a week. The princes were detained for six months upon business of state. Probably preparations were then made for the expedition into Greece, which is so famous in history, and which came to so ignominious a close. Consider two great moral lessons underlying this picture of magnificence.

I. LAVISH FESTIVITIES MAY GILD THE CHAINS OF ARBITRARY POWER. The multitude often appear to care more for display than for justice on the part of their rulers. If the Roman populace under the empire were supplied with food and shows, they were content. In our own times we have seen the people of a great city kept quiet by lavish expenditure on the part of a despot.

II. REGAL HOSPITALITY MAY MASK THE DESIGNS OF WICKED AMBITION. Xerxes had a purpose in bringing his lords and satraps to Susa; he was contemplating a military expedition, in which myriads should be slain, and the complete success of which could only issue in his own aggrandisement and glory. Let the people beware of the selfish and sanguinary schemes of the great of this world. Justice and peace are preferable to despotism and bloodshed.

III. GREAT ENTERTAINMENTS MAY BE AN OCCASION FOR FORGETTING, RATHER THAN FOR REMEMBERING, GOD, THE GIVER OF ALL. When we sit at Heaven's table we should give Heaven thanks. Some of the great banquets mentioned in the Scriptures were occasions for ostentation and for carousing, and this seems to be no exception. The bounties of Divine Providence should be partaken with gratitude and devout acknowledgments. "Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, let us do all to the glory of God."

Ver. 8.—*Temperance*. At the feast of Ahasuerus the provision of luxuries was profuse. The wine was choice, costly, and rare; and was served in cups of gold of various form and pattern and ornament. But it was the king's command that no guest should be compelled to drink more than he needed or wished. A wise ordinance; and one which shames many of the customs and requirements of hospitality, both ancient and modern. Observe—

1. THE TEMPTATIONS TO INTEMPERANCE. These were manifold, and all of them may not concur in ordinary experience. For example, there was—1. *Appetite*. If there were no natural instincts of hunger and thirst there would be no gluttony and no drunkenness. It does not follow that natural appetite is bad. The evil lies in over-indulgence, in permitting bodily desire to overmaster the reasonable nature. 2. *Opportunity*. Some persons are sober simply because and when they have no means of procuring drink. There is little virtue in such sobriety, which only awaits the opportunity of abjuring itself. The Persians in the palace at Susa had wine in abundance set before them. As a nation they were proverbially luxurious (*Persicos odi, puer, apparatus*!). Those of the guests who were temperate were not so because they had no option. 3. *Example*. It could scarcely happen that in so vast an assemblage there were none intemperate. Whilst the society of the abstemious is a check and preservative, that of the self-indulgent is an incentive to sin. "Evil communications corrupt good manners." The Persians, who in the early period of their history had been a sober people, had, with the advance of luxury, lost their reputation for temperance. It is said that the king had, once a year, an obligation to be drunk, on the occasion of the annual sacrifice to the sun. We read that the heart of Ahasuerus was merry with wine; and with such an example before them, it would have been strange if the subjects universally maintained sobriety.

II. THE ABSENCE OF ONE GREAT TEMPTATION—social pressure and compulsion. 1. Remark the *wisdom of the royal ordinance*. The king, in the exercise, in this case, of an enlightened discretion, forbade the too frequent practice of urging the guests on to intoxication. Even if his example told against the regulation, the regulation in itself was good. 2. Remark the *consequent action of the officers* in charge of the banquet. The Greeks at their feasts had a *symposiarch*; the Latins an *arbiter bibendi*; the Jews a master of the feast. Much rested with these officials with regard to the proceedings on such occasions. On this occasion they exercised their functions in accordance with directions received from the throne. 3. Remark the *consequent liberty of the guests*. These were to act every man according to his pleasure. None did compel. Those who were disposed to sobriety were not urged to depart from their usual practices, to violate their convictions of what was right. The custom of constraining men to drink more than is good for them is filthy and disgraceful. Banished from decent society, it still lingers among some dissolute associations of handicraftsmen. It should be discountenanced and resisted; and, in the present state of public opinion, in a free country, it will not endure the light of day. Let it be remembered, "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging; and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise."

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Ver. 4.—*Ambition*. The context displays the miserable weakness of a mighty king. Placed in a position of immense responsibility, he might well have been overwhelmed with anxiety lest his conduct should prove detrimental to the millions under his rule. But no considerations of this nature seem to have exercised his mind; on the

contrary, he was animated only with the vainglorious wish of exhibiting to the world "the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honour of his excellent majesty." And he could think of no better way of gratifying this wish than by making an extravagant feast. Doubtless there was poverty, and wretchedness, and suffering enough in his vast dominions, and to have used his abundant resources to alleviate these evils would have reflected immortal glory upon his name; but he preferred to squander his substance in riotous revelry, a proceeding which must soon have necessitated the levying of fresh imposts, in order to replenish his impoverished exchequer. A right feeling may have a wrong development. The desire of excelling is truly laudable; but when it is alloyed with unworthy motives it becomes most despicable. Let us notice, in the first place, *wrong ambition*, of which we have an instance in the text; and, in the second place, *right ambition*, of which the former is but a perversion.

I. **WRONG AMBITION.** The most common forms of this are—1. *An immoderate love of fame.* We have instances of this in every walk of life; some of the most brilliant characters in history have been victims of it. There have been authors who prostrated their divine gifts to gain the admiration of the world. There have been orators whose chief aim was to secure the applause of the multitude. And there are men now who will face danger, endure hardship, sacrifice property, for the sake of world-wide renown—or even a paltry distinction in the narrow sphere in which they move. 2. *An immoderate love of power.* Men hasten to be rich not because of the inherent value of riches themselves, but because rather of the power which riches enable them to command; for at the word of the rich luxury, gratification, service spring up as if at the touch of a magic wand. The thirst for power is insatiable. The amount enjoyed, however great, only begets a craving for more. It has led to the most sanguinary wars that have defiled the earth in ancient and modern times. Alexander, Cæsar, Buonaparte, whom Christian enlightenment has taught us to regard with horror, are but types of all conquerors, however exalted their professed aims. 3. *An immoderate love of display.* This is the most contemptible form of all, and to this King Ahasuerus became a willing victim. Think of the sumptuousness of this feast, the number of the guests, the magnificence of the palace, the costliness of the furniture, the gorgeousness of the drapery, by which he sought to impress the world with the "honour of his excellent majesty" on this occasion. The morbid desire among the well-to-do classes of outshining each other in the grandeur of their mansions, and the splendour of their entertainments, is a standing reproach upon modern civilisation. In spite of the gigantic frauds and disastrous bankruptcies—the natural results of this spirit—which occasionally startle society, the evil seems as flagrant as ever.

II. **RIGHT AMBITION.** It does not follow that a feeling is essentially wrong because it is sometimes allowed to flow in wrong directions. Thus ambition, however uncomely in certain connections, may be in itself healthy, and conducive to our highest welfare. Ambition, then, is commendable when it is—1. *A desire to cultivate the powers with which we are endowed.* These powers are various: physical, mental, spiritual. A man cannot lay claim to the highest virtue simply because he strives to have strong nerves and well-developed muscles; still perfect manhood is not independent of these things. The struggle for intellectual distinction is certainly more dignified, and has a more ennobling influence upon those who are engaged in it. The chief glory of man, however, is his spiritual nature, his ability to hold communion with the unseen; hence spiritual pursuits are the most exalted. However strong man may be physically, or great intellectually, if his spiritual powers be dwarfed, he comes miserably short of the true ideal. 2. *A desire to make the most of our outward circumstances.* No man's circumstances have been so adverse as to make all excellence unattainable to him. The most barren and desolate life has some spots which, by cultivation, may yield glorious results. In the majority of cases unfruitfulness is due to culpable negligence rather than external difficulties. Just think of the numerous instances in which formidable disadvantages have been conquered. Poor boys have worked their way up into the presence of kings, blind men have mastered the intricacies of optics, the children of profane parents have been renowned for their saintliness. All honour to those who have wrestled with fortune and defied her

opposition! The circumstances of most men, however, are more or less favourable to their advancement, and to make the most of them is not only allowable, but a positive duty. 3. *A desire to benefit the world.* The best ambition is that which is furthest removed from self. The men who will be held in everlasting remembrance are those who have contributed their quota to the progress of their kind. When the names of the most potent warriors shall have perished, the names of philosophers like Newton, inventors like Stephenson, and reformers like Luther, shall live in the affections of a grateful world. But usefulness does not depend upon eminence; every man in his own sphere may do something for the common good.—R.

Vers. 1—4.—*A great feast.* One peculiarity of this Book of Esther is that the name of God nowhere occurs in it; yet the reader discerns the finger of God throughout. Its story is an illustration of the Divine providence. A complicated chain of events and actions is so governed as to work out the deliverance of the exiled Jews from a plot which aimed at their destruction; and this without any miracle or mention of Divine interposition. 1. A fact disclosed. That the Jews while in exile, under judgment, and without vision, were remembered and cared for by God. Outcast, they were not cast off, they were still the children of promise; God was still faithful to them. 2. From this fact an inference may be drawn. There is a Divine providence in the world; no supernatural exercises of power are needed to enable God to effect his will; all laws and things are his creatures, and therefore under his control; human dramas and tragedies take place every day in which acutest plans are foiled, and, by seemingly natural processes, truth and right vindicated. Our introduction to this king is in connection with a great FEAST. Its barbaric magnificence—prodigality and waste. All the princes and governors were invited—not together, but in companies, so that the revelry continued for the long period of six months (a hundred and fourscore days). What its motive? If we take the king to have been Xerxes, it may have preceded his expedition into Greece, as a boastful anticipation of triumph, or as a means of uniting in the monarch's resolve all the governing forces of the empire. But our story says nothing of any special purpose; that was beside the object for which it was written. The feast itself was described only because, in connection with it, a thing occurred which had a direct influence on the subsequent rescue of the Jews from a conspiracy against their life. The lines are in God's hands. He sees the end from the beginning. Every point in the narrative is necessary to the great issue, and to the general and abiding lesson. Yet enough is said to indicate that, so far as the king was concerned, the chief motive was vanity—a childish love of display, a vainglorious desire to witness the effect of the splendours of his person and palace on the magnates of his empire. During all the days of the feast "he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honour of his excellent majesty." His mind was puffed up by the conceit of his high-mightiness; he thirsted for the admiring homage of the world—not an homage attracted by mental greatness or moral worth, by elevation of character or heroism of conduct, but that low and degrading homage which fawns and flatters in presence of the vulgar ostentations of material pomp and power. This king of Persia was no Solomon, who could draw to his capital princes from all quarters by a wisdom and worth which were not overshadowed even by an unrivalled material splendour. Let us learn—

I. THAT PERSONAL VANITY IS NOT ONLY FOOLISH AND CONTEMPTIBLE IN ITSELF, BUT AN INLET ALSO OF MUCH HUMILIATION AND SIN (see Prov. xxix. 23; Matt. xxiii. 12; James iv. 6).

II. THAT HOMAGE TO RICHES AND THE LUXURIES THEY PURCHASE IS UNWORTHY OF A HUMAN SOUL. Not confined to any condition, place, or age. As readily exacted and given now as at any time. Wealth too often goes before worth. The material receives more respect than the moral or spiritual. The unspoken language is common—better be rich than good; better be surrounded with the showy emblems of worldly prosperity than have our character and homes adorned with the Christian virtues of truth, uprightness, and charity. The power to form right estimates as between the seen and the unseen, the material and the spiritual, much needed. How acquire such a power? Only by looking and listening to Jesus Christ, by having

conscience, mind, and heart enlightened at the feet of him who said, "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart." Best gifts and possessions, and truest springs of honour and happiness, in Jesus. Study his truth, his spirit, his life, and our idolatries of earthly good will shame us, and make us wonder how men with a Christ before them can sacrifice the benefits of a higher and nobler life for the material and perishing things of the present world. Our Lord himself presents the true test in Matt. xvi. 26.

III. THAT MEN ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE USE THEY MAKE OF THEIR WEALTH. Hospitality is a Christian virtue; but it is often sadly abused—a feeder of vanity and an incentive to sin. While showing a liberal and kindly spirit, it should avoid all extravagance. How much of the money that is spent on rich, showy, and self-glorifying banquets might be put to better use! A deep spirit underlies the words of our Lord in Luke xiv. 12—14.

IV. THAT MUCH POWER IN ONE HAND IS A DANGEROUS THING. Nothing tries a man more than a flood of prosperity. Ahasuerus was to be pitied, and the empire which he governed still more. Few heads or hearts can stand strong and erect under the burden of anything approaching an absolute authority. How terribly is this taught by history! It is well for the happiness of nations that improved ideas of government are now the rule. But the individual man, whatever be his rank, is to be put on his guard against the intoxications of what may seem to him good fortune, and against the temptation to abuse whatever power he possesses. Many who have acted worthily in adversity have been carried off their feet by a tide of prosperity.

V. THAT GOVERNMENTS OR EMPIRES ARE STABLE OR THE REVERSE ACCORDING TO THE PRINCIPLES AND LAWS THAT GOVERN THEM. It is hardly credible that the miserable nation whose Shah we have seen could ever have occupied a position like that described in our narrative. How great the contrast between then and now! Not alone, however; other and greater empires have gone the same way. In all edifices the foundation is the main thing. No empire, however strong, can last unless founded on Divine truth and righteousness. "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord." As with nations, so with men. A living trust in God, a true fellowship with God's Son, is the only safeguard that will give victory to a human life over all the evils that assail it, and enable it to enter at last into full possession of the life everlasting.—D.

Ver. 4.—*The sated sovereign.* It is believed that the festivities mentioned in this chapter were held prior to the invasion of Greece by Ahasuerus; that it was a time of consultation before that disastrous event.

I. SELF-COMPLACENCY AND SINFUL INDULGENCE. It is not always the difficulties we encounter which are severest tests of character; smooth prosperity is at times a fiercer crucible. Ahasuerus may hold his own against his enemies; will he be able to gain victories over himself? From all we can learn of him, from the sacred book, and from contemporary history, he appears to have manifested much pride, vanity, self-indulgence, and extravagance. "He showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days" (ch. i. 4). For the space of six months he spread before the numerous guests every delicacy his kingdom could produce. It would have seemed probable that at the end of that time the king would have been wearied both with the excesses in which he must have indulged, and the adulation he must have received. If he became weary, he evidently resolved to overcome the fatigue, and to bear with the festivities other seven days, during which not only all officials, but all the people of the capital were to be invited. Oriental ideas of festivity and of pomp are to this day very extravagant. Illustrations of this might have been seen at the Durbar held on the occasion of the proclamation of our Queen as Empress of India, or at the opening of the Suez Canal. The writer, having been present at the latter event, was staggered at the lavish expenditure in festivities, and at the number of guests, from all countries, who, like himself, were feasted at the Khedive's cost, not one day only, but as long as they cared to remain. The feast of the Persian king was most luxurious. The palace was not large enough to contain the guests. They overflowed to the court-yard, which had been fitted up for their reception. The

walls had been hung with rich stuffs, and with a canopy of white, green, and blue, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to "silver rings and pillars of marble." The couches on which they reclined were covered with cloth of gold, interwoven with "gold and silver." Crowds trod the tessellated pavement, or lounged on silken divans, quaffing wines and sherbet from the silver cups of diverse pattern and rich chasing, or inhaling the scent of the roses, so dear to the heart of a Persian. Endless was the service of viands, fruits, and wines. None, however, "did compel" in drinking. The *arbiter bibendi*, chosen by lot to preside, usually compelled the guests to drink as much as he drank; but this custom was by command of the king set aside. He provided that by temperance the feast should be prolonged, and that by refraining from taking too great a quantity at one time they might be able to continue the longer at their cups.

II. INDIFFERENCE TO THE WASTE OF WEALTH. Some defend luxury and waste on the ground that it is good for a country and for commerce. They say that it is the duty of the rich to be extravagant for the sake of the poor. The notion is widely spread, and there are numbers who "better the instruction." It is quite right that wealth should in some way be distributed, and that possessors of wealth should surround themselves with those things which cultivate their better natures, and lead to a higher appreciation of the beautiful; but it is not right to squander wealth in that which merely ministers to pomp and pride. For each one living in luxury and pride, many have to toil the harder. For all the extravagance practised greater exactions have by the poor to be endured. Think of how hard must have been the lot of the poor labourers on the plains of Persia, from whom was wrung the money which paid for those splendid festivities of the king. Possibly also the money was extorted in harsh ways, practised usually by the farmers of taxes. Think of the bitterness of the many, as contrasted with the brightness of the few. What were the mass the better, that a few tickled their palates, lolled in luxury, or flaunted in pride? The object of the whole waste was to flatter the vanity of the king. He ought to have been more thoughtful for the interests of his subjects than to permit or foster such waste. By moderating pomp, and lessening the expenses of government, he might have lessened the burdens on his poor subjects and slaves; but security of position only leads to an indifference to the waste of wealth.

III. AN ABUSE OF ABSOLUTE POWER. We see this in the ready consent given to the slaughter of thousands of defenceless, captive, and inoffensive people. He gave this consent simply to please an inhuman courtier. This is perhaps only one among many harsh decrees of which we are ignorant, but it is sufficient to indicate the abuse of absolute power. It is easy to condemn this act of Ahasuerus, but it is possible that many of us are guilty of something akin to it in spirit. There is power which comes to a man by custom, or acquisition, or accumulation, or marriage, or by law. A man may withhold wages on slight excuse, extract excessive work; if married, may make his wife miserable by his tyranny, or his children fearful by outbursts of passion or cruelty. In many a home there is more absolutism and imperiousness than was ever manifested by a modern Czar of Russia or ancient king of Persia. Few are unselfish enough to wield absolute power; and many, like Ahasuerus, forget that there is an equality of obligations on the part of the ruler and the ruled, superiors and inferiors. The life of Ahasuerus teaches us that neither possessions nor position, pomp nor power, pride nor pelf, can satisfy a human soul. God has not intended they should. He has reserved to himself the power to make us really happy. Ahasuerus, with all his magnificence, was doubtless a dissatisfied man. The determination to prolong the feast is rather an indication of satiety than of satisfaction. The past had not fully answered his expectations. He knew not him whose service is perfect freedom, and the knowledge of whose love once possessed becomes the most cherished possession. He knew not clearly of that loftiness of character which is a crown that never fades, and of that hope in the future where treasure never corrupts. He could not say, in prospect of meeting his God, "I shall be satisfied when I awake with thy likeness."—H.

Vers. 5—7.—*Vanity*. A special banquet wound up the protracted festivities. Of this banquet note—1. It was given to the inhabitants of Shushan, both great and

small, and it lasted seven days. The close of the six months' feasting with the nobles and governors, at which imperial affairs were probably discussed, was to be celebrated by a great flourish of kingly magnificence. The banquet to the capital was evidently the climax and crown of the rejoicings. 2. Special arrangements had to be made for the accommodation of so vast a crowd. These arrangements were on a most extravagant scale. We are dazzled by columns of marble, variously-coloured hangings, couches and vessels of gold, and wine usually reserved for the king's use. Everything was done "according to the state of the king." From these things we may learn—

I. THAT VANITY WHEN INDULGED GROWS QUICKLY. Nothing will satisfy it. It ever cries for more. The sight of the king's "excellent majesty" by the governors of 127 provinces was something to remember, but it was not enough; a whole city must be gathered to view and to be impressed by the royal grandeurs.

II. THAT VANITY, AS IT GROWS, GETS WONDERFULLY BLIND. It loses all perception of its own folly, and it commits its follies as if others also were equally blind. It thus virtually loses the end on which its greed fastens. There are always eyes about it keen enough to penetrate its illusions, and hearts that form, if they do not express, a true judgment.

III. THAT VANITY IS COSTLY. No expenditure was too great for the king to lavish in indulging and feeding his weakness. No thought of the sin of such waste entered his mind. No fear of possible straits in the future stayed his hand. It is likely that he possessed far more than sufficient treasure to meet the demands of the festival. But suppose it were so, that would not diminish the sin of perverting to vain uses a wealth which, if wisely applied, might have been helpful to beneficent ends. Money is a great power in the world either for good or for evil, and men are responsible to God for the use they make of it. Think of the good that may be done by it:—1. In assisting the poor. 2. In encouraging sound institutions of an educational and benevolent character. 3. In supporting Christian Churches with their attendant machineries. 4. In contributing to gospel missions among the heathen.

IV. THAT VANITY IS BURDENSOME. The physical and mental toil of the king must have been very trying during the long feast and its closing banquet. Yet what will not vanity endure to attain its object? In this it is like every other ungoverned lust—greed of gain, fleshly appetite, worldly ambition. If not under the grace of God, men will submit to greater hardships and burdens in pursuit of things that are sinful and disappointing than in the pursuit of what is necessary to true honour and happiness. 1. If the main burden of this great festival did not fall on the king, then it would fall on the king's *servants*. These would have a hard time of it. They would be held responsible for every failing or mishap. Despotism lords have little consideration for their servants, and despotic mistresses too. Vanity is another name for self-love, which always makes those who are in bondage to it indifferent to the claims of inferiors. 2. Apart from the king and his servants, a heavy burden would fall on the *empire*. Not immediately, perhaps, but soon. The attack of Greece involved the loss of myriads of lives and untold treasure. Families everywhere were plunged into mourning and desolation. The provinces were impoverished; and as the king's exchequer had to be supplied, the people were ground down by heavy imposts. Vanity, when inordinately indulged, and especially by persons in power, becomes burdensome in numerous ways to many.

V. THAT VANITY, apart from its consequences, IS A SIN AGAINST CONSCIENCE AND AGAINST GOD; or, in other words, a violation of natural and revealed law. 1. Against conscience, or the law of nature. The moral sentiment of all ages, and the common verdict of living men, condemn a vain-glorying or self-conceited spirit as opposed to a just estimate of self. Even the vain are quick to discover and condemn vanity in others. Humility is taught by the law of the natural conscience to be the proper habit of man in all circumstances. 2. Against God, or the law of God's word. The upliftings of the heart under vanity are at variance with that Divine revelation of righteousness and love by which all men are condemned as sinners, and made dependent on the mercy that is offered in Christ. All self-glorying manifests ignorance or forgetfulness of the true relation which the gospel reveals as subsisting

between man, the transgressor, and God, the Redeemer. The faith which submits all to God in Christ is an emptying of self, and a putting on of the "Holy and Just One," who was "meek and lowly in heart." God is therefore dishonoured, his truth resisted, and his mercy despised, when men who confess his name become "high-minded" or "puffed up" in self-conceit. "God forbid that I should glory," said Paul, "save in the cross of Jesus Christ." Humility before God and men is Christ-like, and the rightful clothing of the followers of the Lamb.—D.

Ver. 8.—*The law of temperance.* The entertainment of such large and promiscuous companies as those which were gathered for seven days in the court of the palace garden at Shushan was not an easy matter. To secure order, and propriety of conduct, and the general comfort, required much forethought and care. As an example of the measures adopted, a certain law of the feast is mentioned as having been laid down by the king for the occasion.

I. THE LAW. It was laid on the officers not to compel or urge any of the guests to take wine. All were to be left free to drink or not drink as they pleased.

II. THE AUTHORITY. It was at the express command of the king that the law was put in force on this occasion. We learn from this (1) that the royal command was needed, and (2) that the king, thoughtless as he was in many things, exerted a direct influence on the orderly arrangement and conduct of the banquet. The great loss of dignity by attending personally to little duties. What seems little may contain the seeds of, or have a close connection with, great issues.

III. THE MOTIVES. These are not stated. But the fact that the king issued a special command to enforce a law that was contrary to the usual practice may be taken as proof that he had special reasons for making known his will. The following are suggested:—1. Self-dignity. Any excess on the part of the citizens would have been unbecoming in his presence, and might have led to the serious humiliation of his imperial majesty. 2. Policy. It would have been an awkward thing if the close of the prolonged and so far triumphant festival had been signalled by a popular riot, whether good-humoured or the reverse. The noise of it would have spread throughout the empire, and its real character might have been lost in the misrepresentations of rumour and report. And such a result was not improbable, supposing that the servants and the mixed multitude had been left guideless as to their obligations in presence of the king and his boundless hospitality. 3. Sympathy. There would be many in such assemblies as now filled the king's tables who were unaccustomed to the use of wine, and more perhaps whose "small" condition would only enable them to use it sparingly. Young men also would be present to whom the indulgences of the older society about them would be yet strange. It would have been, therefore, a hardship and a wrong, as well as a danger, if the city guests had been allowed to act on the natural belief that at the king's table they were expected to take wine whenever it was presented. Whatever the motive or motives of the king, it goes to his credit that when the young and old, the small and great, were his guests, he enforced a law that favoured temperance. Temperance is not always studied, either on great festive occasions, or in social gatherings of a more private kind. Thus this old Persian law becomes our teacher—

1. As to the *relative duties of host and guest.* In countries where social life is highly developed, and where the men and women of different families mix much in free and lively intercourse, these duties are of great importance. (1) The host. (a) He should be kindly considerate of all whom he invites to share the hospitalities of his house—avoiding all tyrannical rules that make no allowance for differences of age, habit, and taste. (b) He should invite none whose manners are offensive to the temperate, or whose example and influence would place an undue constraint on the consciences of others. (c) He should be careful to put no temptations to excess before the weak, and to give no countenance to what may favour intemperate habits. (2) The guest. While showing a full appreciation of the good intent of his host, and a suitable amiability to his fellow-guests, he should claim and exercise the right to guide himself in the matters of eating and drinking by the dictates of the Christian conscience. Whether he abstain from wine or not, a regard for himself, for his host, and for his companions should bind him to be temperate in all things. 2. As to *the*

duty of all men to the law of moderation. Not long ago, to abstain or even to be temperate at social meetings was considered the mark of a sour and ungenerous nature. But since then a great improvement in manners has taken place. Little courage is now required to abstain altogether from wine. It is said that Queen Victoria sets a good example in this respect. To the expressed desire of a sovereign the authority of a command is attached, and to refuse wine when presented at a sovereign's table is regarded as an act of disobedience. But our queen has abolished this law at her own table, and substituted the law of Ahasuerus at his great banquet—that all guests shall be free to take or refuse wine—that none shall compel. The change for the better in social customs is a matter for thankfulness, but there is still much room for amendment. Let us remember that to indulge in excess is—(1) A sin against society. (2) A sin against one's self. (a) It injures the body. (b) It weakens the mind. (c) It enervates the will. (d) It deadens the conscience. (e) It impoverishes and embitters the life. (f) It destroys the soul. (3) A sin against God. (a) It is a transgression of his law. (b) It is a despising of his love. (c) It is opposed to the spirit and example of his Son. (d) It is a braving of his judgment. Christian men and women should live under the power of the Christian law, and strive in all things to be "living epistles" of the Master whom they serve. All such will give earnest heed to the injunction of Paul, "Let your moderation be known among all men; the Lord is at hand."—D.

Ver. 9.—*The position of women.* A noticeable feature of the king's banquet was that even the women were not excluded from participation in the festivities. In the court of the garden the king entertained only men. But inside the palace Queen Vashti made a feast for the women.

I. A PICTURE OF QUEENLY DUTY. As queen, Vashti entered into the king's mind, and gave his projects such support as she could in her own circle of duty and influence.

II. A PICTURE OF WIFELY DUTY. As wife, Vashti was mistress of the female portion of the king's household. She took charge of the women, and ruled them to the advantage and comfort of her husband.

III. A PICTURE OF ORIENTAL CUSTOM WITH RESPECT TO WOMEN. The two sexes are rigidly separated in public and social life. Women rarely travel beyond the narrow limits of the house or the apartments assigned to them. They live together in mysterious seclusion, and are carefully guarded against intercourse with the outside world.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF WOMAN. 1. On the field of governmental policies and national events. It has often been dominant, even though unseen, both in civilised and in uncivilised countries. A beautiful and clever woman may easily make a weak prince her slave, and through him affect the current of history either for good or evil. There are not a few instances of the exercise of the feminine power in the region of politics both in sacred and secular history, both in ancient and modern times. 2. On the field of domestic, social, and religious life. (1) *Mothers.* To a large extent mothers give the mould of thought and character to each generation. The early years, the formative periods, of men and women alike, are in their hands. The early home, whatever its character, is never forgotten. (2) *Wives.* The power of a trusted and loved wife over her husband cannot be estimated. It will, as a rule, work its way gradually and surely, either to his well-being or to his detriment. The effect of so close, and tender, and constant a companionship will inevitably show itself, somehow, in his character, his happiness, and his work. The spirit that rules his wife will come in some real measure to rule him; it will strengthen or weaken his character, brighten or darken his home, benefit or blast his life. Is there anything more beautiful, and strong, and good in human society than the influence of the modest, loving, virtuous, and Christian wife? (3) *Women generally.* In societies which allow free intercourse in the family and world between men and women of all ages, feminine influence touches human life at every point. When it is pure it is always purifying. When it is impure it has a terrible power to corrupt. Intercourse with a high-minded and good-hearted Christian woman is a lift heavenward. Willing intercourse with an unprincipled or unsexed woman is a plunge

hellward. In all circles, and in all directions, the influence of women powerfully tells. It is at once the best and the worst element in all grades of society.

V. THE IMPORTANCE OF A FULL RECOGNITION OF THE JUST CLAIMS OF WOMEN. The effect of secluding women, and treating them as the chattels and toys of men, has been to degrade them, and to deprive society of their proper influence. It is undoubtedly true that the position assigned to women in Eastern nations has been one of the chief causes of their decay, and is now one of the chief obstacles to all civilising or Christianising movements.

VI. THE BENIGN POWER OF CHRISTIANITY IN RELATION TO WOMEN. Wherever the gospel of Jesus is allowed to govern families or communities, the gentler sex is raised by it into its true relative position. We think of the holy women to whom Jesus gave such a mingled respect and affection, and of those who were associated with the apostles in their work, and of whom such honourable mention is made. The Christian religion ever brings with it the emancipation of women from the thralldom of man's tyrannical lust, and secures to them their rightful share of work and influence. It makes them mistress in their own sphere. It clothes them with a new responsibility and power, and, by surrounding them with high duties and ministries, draws into beneficent activity the best qualities of their nature. Nations that degrade their women are doomed; nations that cherish a Christian respect for them have a spring of life that will make them strong and enduring. The greatest trial of gospel missionaries arises from the utter ignorance of heathen women and the difficulty of reaching them with the Divine truth they teach.—D.

Vers. 1—9.—*The royal feast.* We have in the opening chapter of this Book of Esther the description of a royal feast; it may remind us of two other feasts to which we of this land and age, and they of every clime and century, are invited guests.

I. THE FEAST OF THE KING OF PERSIA. "It came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus" (ver. 1), . . . "in the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants" (ver. 3). A "great monarch" was this king, ruling "from India to Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces" (ver. 1). His palace at Susa (Shushan, ver. 2), surrounded with beautiful gardens, was a place where labour and art had furnished everything that could minister to bodily gratification. Here he entertained "the power of Persia and Media" (ver. 3) for 180 days (ver. 4), the guests probably coming and going, for all the satraps could hardly have been absent from their provinces at the same time. Then, after these days were expired (ver. 5), the king gave a banquet of a more indiscriminate kind—"a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small" (ver. 5). Every possible preparation was made for the guests, a beautiful "awning of fine white cotton and violet" (ver. 6; 'Speaker's Com.') being spread, the couches being of gold and silver, and placed on pavement of variously-coloured stones (ver. 6); wine from the king's own cellar being served in golden goblets, with liberty for the guests to drink as they pleased (vers. 7, 8). It was a feast—1. In which regal bounty was lavishly poured forth; no pains or expenses were spared, as these particulars show, to make the guests joyous. 2. In which there was more of selfish ostentation than genuine kindness. The spirit of it is seen in the fact that by so doing "he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honour of his excellent majesty" (ver. 4). 3. In which there was more of short-lived gratification than lasting joy. There was, no doubt, much exhilaration expressing itself in revelry; and revelry soon ended, as it always must, in satiety and suffering. We are reminded, partly by contrast, of—

II. THE FEAST OF THE LORD OF NATURE. God, our King, who is in deed and truth the "King of kings," and not in name only, like these Persian monarchs, spreads a regal feast for *his* subjects. It is one that (1) lasts all the year through: not for even "a hundred and eighty days," but "daily he loadeth us with benefits" (Ps. lxxviii. 19); (2) extends to all his creatures: there is "food for man and beast." In this Divine provision is (3) every needful thing for the senses: "food for all flesh" (Ps. cxxxvi. 25), beauty for the eye, odours for the smell, delicacies for the palate, melodies for the ear; (4) truth and fact for the mind: "Wisdom hath builded her house," &c. (Prov. ix.); (5) love for the heart of man: the love of kindred and of

friends, the feast of pure affection. Of this feast of the Lord of nature we may say that, like that in the text, it is one of regal bounty; it is the constant and lavish kindness of a King; that, unlike that in the text, there is more of kindness than ostentation in it—a “hiding of power” (Hab. iii. 4) rather than a display; and that it is one in which those who wisely accept the King’s invitation may find a continual and life-long enjoyment. They who eat and drink at his table, as he invites them to do, go not through an exciting intoxication followed by a remorseful misery and *ennui*, but find in the gifts of his hand a perennial spring of pure and lasting pleasure.

III. THE FEAST OF THE PRINCE OF PEACE. Jesus Christ, the “King’s Son,” has made for us a spiritual feast (Matt. xxii. 1—14): “royal wine in abundance” (ver. 7); “bread enough and to spare” at his princely table for all thirsting and hungering souls (Isa. lv. 1; John vi. 35). In this gospel feast there is (1) no ostentation, but marvellous love; the marked absence of all stately pomp and material splendour (Isa. liii.), but the presence of all generosity and self-sacrificing goodness. (2) Provision, without distinction of rank (contrast vers. 3, 4, 5) or sex (contrast ver. 9), for *all* subjects, in whatever part of his kingdom they dwell (contrast ver. 5); and (3) provision which lasts not for a number of days (contrast vers. 4, 5), but so long as the heart hungers for the bread of life, as the soul thirsts for the waters of salvation.—C.

Vers. 3, 4.—*The hospitality of vainglory.* The reign of Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, had now reached its third year. His sway was very wide, and other history lends valuable confirmation of the contents of the former of these verses. Herodotus, far enough removed in his general tone from a Scripture historian, fixes this year as the year in which Xerxes summoned the rulers of his provinces to Susa, or *Shushan*, preparatory to his expedition against Greece. Although no mention is made here of this circumstance as the occasion of the feast, or as connected with it, yet the two intimations are not inconsistent with one another, and in fact are well fitted to one another. Each historian keeps the object of his own work in view. The thing which had no significance with Herodotus would be the consideration of primary significance in our present history; and we get as the result a consent of two widely differing authorities to testify to the fact of special doings in *Shushan* this year. The passage offers us a typical instance of a *feast* such as to answer correctly to the motto, “Self first, hospitality second.” This is evidently the character of it. Yet let us take into account what may be said for it. 1. It was confessedly an Eastern feast, and as such it would have been considered essentially wanting if it had been wanting in the matter of display. 2. It was not a feast given by one of those people who had “received the oracles;” who had been long time under a course of higher instruction; who had heard, learned, pondered “the Proverbs of Solomon,” or “the words of the Preacher, son of David, king of Jerusalem.” Much less was it possible in the nature of things to have been the feast of one, who had had the opportunity of knowing the doctrine of Christ in such a matter. 3. Yet nevertheless it answered in one respect to one of the prescriptions of Jesus Christ himself; for it was a feast which could not be returned to its giver—not *in kind*, at all events. The feast of a great king, who drew on enormous wealth,—“made to” a whole multitude of princes, subordinate to him, and prolonged over months,—this could not be returned to him. 4. It was a feast of unstinted plenty—the thought of a nature that had some sort of largeness about it, and the distributing of a hand that dropt more than the uncared-for crumbs of its own table. On the other hand—

I. IT IS INCONTESTABLE THAT THIS FEAST VISITS UPON ITS GIVER THE CONDEMNATION OF VAINGLOBOUS DISPLAY AS REGARDS HIS “KINGDOM,” AND SELF-SEEKING DISPLAY AS REGARDS HIS OWN “EXCELLENT MAJESTY.” The greater the scale on which it was made, the more profuse its abundance, the longer its continuance, so much the more impressive and convincing evidence does it furnish of vanity insatiable, of selfishness deep-seated, of the presence of the hand of one who not only sought the praise of men rather than that of God, but who sought to influence even those men by the lower kinds of appeal—those of sense and the eye, rather than by any of a higher kind.

II. THERE WAS BEYOND DOUBT A DISTINCTLY AND DECIDEDLY UTILITARIAN DESIGN ABOUT THE FEAST. Though it could not be returned in kind, it could be *recompensed*. At recompense it aimed, and without the prospect of such recompense it would never have been "made." It was pre-eminently a banquet of policy, unwarmed by one simple genuine feeling of the heart, unhonoured by any noble object for its motive, fragrant with no philanthropic beneficence. It was simply a device of an inferior type, *first*, for flashing to all the extremities of the kingdom the envious tidings of the central wealth, luxury, splendour, and power, and thereby riveting the tyrannous hold and the ghastly fascination of an Eastern arbitrary despot; and, *secondly*, for ingratiating that central authority with the numerous helpless, subordinate powers who were to send contingents and contributions to a disastrous expedition into Greece. It was very different from an English banquet in celebration of some accomplished fact, or in honour of some worthy hero or distinguished benefactor of *the people*, though oftentimes it is not very much that can be justly said in commendation of even these.

III. THE GIVING ITSELF—WHAT WAS IT? It happens to be well termed "making" a feast, in the undesigned idiom of the language. Did it cost much to make? It cost lavish silver and gold very likely; but whence were these drawn? Were they not already drawn from those for whom the feast was "made"? and probably absolutely wrong by these again from the oppressed subjects of their grinding rule. Did it cost Ahasuerus himself much? Did it cost him anything at all? Was it drawn from the honourably-earned and diligently-acquired results of his own past labour? No; it speaks plenty without bounty, liberality without generosity, profuse bestowment the fruit of no kindness of soul, a lavish hand moving to the dictate of a selfish heart.

Conclusion.—1. These are just some of the hard *facts* of human nature, tried in such a position as that of this king. 2. There is a great deal to *explain and account* for such exhibitions of human nature in Ahasuerus, to be found in his time of day, in his antecedents, &c., but these things do not justify them. They do impressively help illustrate to what human nature's time of day and antecedents bring us. 3. We could plead no extenuations whatever if our own conduct or our own principles were detected sinking to the level of those before us, and all the less for the beacon of this very history.—B.

EXPOSITION.

THE DISGRACE OF VASHTI (ch. i. 10—22). On the seventh day of the feast "to all in Shushan" (ver. 5), the king having excited himself with drink, took it into his head to send a message to Vashti, requiring her to make her appearance in the banquet of the men, since he desired to exhibit her beauty to the assembled guests, as "she was fair to look on" (ver. 11). His design must have been to present her unveiled to the coarse admiration of a multitude of semi-drunken revellers, in order that they might envy him the possession of so lovely a wife. Such a proceeding was a gross breach of Persian etiquette, and a cruel outrage upon one whom he above all men was bound to protect. Vashti, therefore, declined to obey (ver. 12). Preferring the risk of death to dishonour, she braved the anger of her despotic lord, and sent him back a message by his

chamberlains that she would not come. We can well understand that to an absolute monarch such a rebuff, in the face of his whole court and of some hundreds or thousands of assembled guests, must have been exasperating in the extreme. At the moment when he had thought to glorify himself by a notable display of his omnipotence, he was foiled, defeated, made a laughing-stock to all Susa. "Therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him." It is to his credit that, being thus fiercely enraged, he did not proceed to violence, but so far restrained himself as to refer the matter to the judgment of others, and ask the "seven princes" the question, "What is to be done according to law unto queen Vashti, for not performing the commandment of the king?" (ver. 15). The advice of the princes, uttered by one of their body (vers. 16—20),

and assented to by the remainder (ver. 21), was, that Vashti should be degraded from the position of queen, and her place given to another. This sentence was supported by specious arguments based upon expediency, and ignoring entirely the outrageous character of the king's command, which was of course the real, and sole, justification of Vashti's disobedience. It was treated as a simple question of the wife's duty to obey her husband, and the husband's right to enforce submission. Ahasuerus, as might be expected, received the decision of his obsequious counsellors with great satisfaction, and forthwith sent letters into all the provinces of his vast empire, announcing what had been done, and requiring wives everywhere to submit themselves unreservedly to the absolute rule of their lord (ver. 22).

Ver. 10.—When the heart of the king was merry with wine. We are told that once a year, at the feast of Mithra, the king of Persia was bound to intoxicate himself (Duris, Fr. 13). At other times he did as he pleased, but probably generally drank till reason was somewhat obscured. *Mehuman*, &c. Persian etymologies have been given for most of these names, but they are all more or less uncertain; and as eunuchs were often foreigners, mutilated for the Persian market (Herod., iii. 93; viii. 105), who bore foreign names, like the *Hermotimus* of Herodotus (viii. 104—106), it is quite possible that Persian etymologies may here be out of place. *Bigtha*, however, if it be regarded as a shortened form of *Bighthan* (ch. ii. 21) or *Bighthana* (ch. vi.), would seem to be Persian, being equivalent to *Bagadāna* (= Theodorus), "the gift of God." *Chamberlains*. Really, as in the margin, "eunuchs." The influence of eunuchs at the Persian court was great from the time of Xerxes. Ctesias makes them of importance even from the time of Cyrus ('Exc. Pers.', §§ 5, 9).

Ver. 11.—Vashti . . . with the crown royal. We have no representation of a Persian queen among the sculptures; but Mousa, a Parthian queen, appears on a coin of her son Phrartaces ('Sixth Oriental Monarchy,' p. 220), crowned with a very elaborate tiara. It consists of a tall stiff cap, not unlike the *cidaris* of a Persian king, but is apparently set with large jewels. Vashti's "crown royal" was probably not very dissimilar. **To show the princes and the people her beauty.** More than one Oriental monarch is reported to have desired to have his own opinion of his wife's beauty

confirmed by the judgment of others. Candaules, king of Lydia, is said to have lost his crown and his life through imprudently indulging this desire (Herod., i. 8—12). So public an exposure, however, as that designed by Ahasuerus is not recorded of any other monarch, and would scarcely have been attempted by any one less extravagant in his conduct than Xerxes.

Ver. 12.—But the queen Vashti refused. Vashti's refusal was morally quite justifiable. Neither a husband's nor a king's authority extends to the wanton requirement of acts that, if done, would disgrace the doer for life. Had Vashti complied, she would have lost the respect not only of the Persian nation, but of the king himself. **Therefore was the king very wroth.** Had Ahasuerus really loved his wife, or been a man of fair and equitable disposition, he would have excused her refusal, and felt that he had deserved the rebuff. But, not really loving her, and being of a hot and ungovernable temper, he was violently enraged with her, as he always was when anything fell out contrary to his wishes (see Herod., vii. 11, 35, 39, &c.).

Ver. 13.—Then the king said to the wise men. Angry as he was, Ahasuerus had still some power of self-restraint. He was in the presence of his whole court, and of a great assembly of the people. It would not be seemly that he should vent his passion in violent words, imprecations, or threats. His dignity required that he should at any rate seem calm, and, instead of issuing any hasty order, should proceed deliberately to consider what were the next steps to be taken. Xerxes appears to have been rather fond of asking advice (Herod., vii. 8, 48, 234; viii. 101); and he now, in a sufficiently dignified way, required the opinion of his "wise men" on the practical question, What was to be done to Vashti? (see ver. 15). **Which knew the times.** *I. e.* persons who were well acquainted with past times, and knew what it was customary to do on each occasion. **For so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment.** Rather, "For so was the business of the king brought before such as knew law and judgment." Each matter which concerned the king was submitted to learned persons for their opinion before any actual step was taken (compare Herod., iii. 31, where Cambyses asks the opinion of the royal judges with respect to his proposed marriage with his sister). It is not a special practice of Ahasuerus, but a general usage of the Persian monarchy, which is noticed.

Ver. 14.—And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, &c. The chief native advisers of Xerxes in the early part of his reign appear to have been Mardonius (Pers. *Marduniya*) and Artabanus (Pers. *Arta-*

pāna), who was his uncle (Herod., vii. 5—17). It is possible that Mardonius may be here represented by *Marsena*, and Artabanus by *Admatha*; but the names could only have taken these shapes by a large amount of corruption. The other form has a general Persian air, but do not admit of even conjectural identification. The seven princes of Persia and Media. Ezra assigns to the Persian monarch seven special counsellors (ch. vii. 14), and Herodotus says that there were seven leading families in Persia whose heads were specially privileged (iii. 84). The title, however, "princes of Persia and Media," is not found anywhere but here. Which saw the king's face. Among the privileges said by Herodotus to have been reserved to the heads of the great families, one of the most valued was that of free access to the monarch at all times, unless he were in the seraglio.

Ver. 15.—What shall we do to queen Vashti according to law? Literally, "According to law, what is there to do to queen Vashti?" Law is given the prominent place, as though the king would say, Let us put aside feeling, and simply consider what the law is. If a queen disobeys the king openly in the face of his court, what, according to law, is to be done to her?

Ver. 16.—And Memucan answered. We gather from Memucan's reply that the Persian law had provided no penalty for the case in hand—had, in fact, not contemplated it. He first argues the matter on general grounds of morality (ver. 16) and expediency (vers. 17, 18), and then proposes the enactment of a new law—a *privilegium*—assigning Vashti a special punishment for her contempt of the king's order. The "decree" (ver. 20) would not have been necessary had there already existed a law on the point. Vashti, the queen, hath not done wrong to the king only. With the servility to be expected in an Oriental and a courtier, Memucan throws himself wholly on the king's side—insinuates no word of blame against his royal master, on whom in justice the whole blame rested; but sets himself to make the worst he can of Vashti's conduct, which (he says) was a wrong not to Ahasuerus only, but to the whole male population of the empire, the princes included, who must expect their wives to throw off all subjection, in imitation of the queen's example, if her conduct were allowed to go unpunished. As such a condition of things would be intolerable, the king is urged to disgrace her publicly.

Ver. 17.—They shall despise their husbands. Literally, "their lords," but the word is the one ordinarily used for "husband." When it shall be reported. Rather, "while they say," or "and shall say." (So the Vulgate—"ut contemnant et dicant.")

ESTHER.

Ver. 18.—The ladies. Rather, "the princesses." Translate the whole passage as follows:—"Likewise shall the princesses of Persia and Media, which have heard of the deed of the queen, say this day to all the king's princes." Not only will the wives of the common people get hold of the story, and quote Vashti's example as often as they wish to disobey their husbands, but our own wives too will disobey us on the same pretext, and will begin forthwith "this day." Too much contempt and wrath. Literally, "sufficient;" but the meaning is that given by our translators—"quite enough," "more than enough." Contempt on the part of the wives; wrath on the part of the husbands.

Ver. 19.—A royal commandment. Literally, "a command of the kingdom"—i. e. a public, not a domestic, order. Under ordinary circumstances such a matter as the disgrace of a favourite wife would have been settled in the secrecy of the seraglio, without calling general attention to it. In Memucan's opinion, the publicity of Vashti's disobedience had made it expedient that she should be disgraced publicly. Let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes. A sentence upon an individual was not a very suitable thing to add to a national code of laws; but we see from Daniel (vi. 8, 9) that decrees of quite a temporary character were sometimes attached to the code for the express purpose of rendering them unalterable; and so it seems to have been in this instance. Unto another. Literally, as in the margin, "unto her companion." Memucan assumes that one of the existing inmates of the seraglio will be elevated into the place vacated by Vashti. This was the ordinary course, but on the present occasion was not followed.

Ver. 20.—The king's decree. The "commandment" of the preceding verse is here given the formal name of *pitgam*, "decree," which is a Persian word, used also in Ezra (ch. iv. 17; v. 7, 11). For it is great. These words seem at first sight superfluous. Perhaps their force is this—Let a decree be made, and then, great as the empire is, the lesson will be taught to all: otherwise there will be many to whom it will never penetrate.

Ver. 21.—The king did according to the word of Memucan. This expression must not be pressed too closely. It does not imply more than that Memucan's advice was followed in a general way—Vashti disgraced, and the grounds of her disgrace published throughout the provinces. We cannot be sure that the decree was "written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes." Even if it was, it was always possible for a Persian king to give himself a dispensation from the law (see Herod., iii. 58).

Ver. 22.—*For he sent.* Rather, “*and he sent.*” Besides publishing the decree, Ahasuerus sent letters prescribing certain things, viz. :—1. That every man should bear rule in his own house; and, 2. That every man should speak his own language in his

family, and not that of his wife, if it were different. This is the plain meaning of the existing text, which cannot bear either of the senses suggested in the Authorised Version.

HOMILETICS.

Vers. 9—11.—*Queen Vashti.* It would seem that the character of Vashti has been by many writers darkened in order to bring out the brightness of Esther's virtues. But it is not fair to make one queen simply the foil to the other. Haughty, disobedient, defiant, Vashti may have been, but she was placed in no ordinary position, and treated in no ordinary manner.

I. OBSERVE THE POSITION OF VASHTI. Her name (according to some) indicates her beauty, and it is expressly said that she was fair to look upon. She was the legitimate wife of Ahasuerus. If he were Xerxes, it is possible she may have been the Amestris of the Greek historians. She fulfilled her royal duties. We read of her feasting the ladies, the princesses, in the royal palace; within doors, and apart from the men.

II. OBSERVE THE INSULT OFFERED TO VASHTI. When his heart was merry with wine, the king bade his chamberlains bring the queen, in her stately robes, and with her royal crown upon her head, before him, that he might show her beauty to the princes and to the people. Now this was—1. *A violation of national custom.* We are told indeed that, when in their cups, the Persian kings would dismiss their wives and send for their concubines and singing girls. It was certainly a command contrary to custom, however it may have been in accordance with the capricious character of Xerxes. 2. *An outrage upon her womanly modesty.* That a young and beautiful woman should appear before a vast company of boisterous and half-intoxicated nobles, and this that they might admire her loveliness, was a foul shame. 3. *A derogation from her wifely dignity.* The king should have honoured Vashti as his consort, worthy of respectful treatment; for the disgrace of the wife is the disgrace of the husband. Ahasuerus must have been despised by any sober and honourable noble who heard him give this order. 4. *It was a slur upon her royal station.* This station was acknowledged by her position at the head of the table, where the banquet was given to the chief ladies of the realm. If it was fit that she should preside as hostess, it was not fit that she should be brought forward for the general gaze and admiration, like a courtesan famous for beauty and infamous for immodesty.

III. OBSERVE THE FAULT CHARGEABLE UPON VASHTI. This was disobedience and defiance. But—1. It was a fault *with much to extenuate it.* The command was unreasonable. Compliance would have done no one concerned any good, and would have outraged her own modesty. 2. It was a fault *punished with disproportionate severity.* Certainly it was harsh and cruel to deprive Vashti of her position as queen because of her refusal to comply with the unreasonable requirement of a drunken husband. Disputes between the nearest akin are often the most keen. It was with reason that the inspired apostle penned the admonition—“Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them!”

Ver. 12.—*The king's anger.* Scripture never spares the great. Their follies and vices are exposed and castigated. The Old Testament has some striking examples of the sin of anger and wrath. Moses gave way to temptation, and sinned in his anger. Nebuchadnezzar was full of fury when the Hebrew youths would not worship the golden image he had set up. Jonah was angry when Nineveh was spared, and when the gourd was withered. In all these cases there was no sufficient cause to justify wrath. So was it with Ahasuerus.

I. THE OCCASION OF THE KING'S ANGER. His own drunken and foolish wish was thwarted, and thus his pride was wounded. “It is not for kings to drink wine, lest they drink and forget the law.” The law of Solon punished a drunken magistrate

with death. The wish of Ahasuerus was thwarted by a woman, and that woman his wife. He was not accustomed to meet with opposition or resistance to his will, and could ill brook his consort's disobedience. Circumstances heightened his anger. He had boasted of his wife's beauty and complaisance, and now, in the presence of his lords, to whom he had boasted, his vaunt was proved empty and vain.

II. THE UNREASONABLENESS AND FOLLY OF THE KING'S ANGER. A monitor might have put to him the question, "Dost thou well to be angry?" If he had not been intoxicated with pride, as well as with wine, he would have blamed himself instead of his spouse, the queen. How much indefensible, unreasonable, and ridiculous anger there is in human society! How often the wrathful would do well to transfer their indignation from others to themselves! "Be ye angry, and sin not; let not the sun go down upon your wrath!" In those occupying high and prominent and influential positions, anger is very unseemly. Here was a man bearing rule over 127 provinces, and yet unable to rule his own spirit!

III. THE RESULTS OF THE KING'S ANGER. 1. It was tempered by counsel. Ahasuerus did not act at once under the impulse of his burning indignation and resentment. This was good. But he should have taken counsel of his own heart, and not of flatterers who ministered to his passions. 2. It led him to part with his wife, and to proclaim his own folly in a public, imperial decree. The man who lashed the sea, who cruelly slew the eldest son of Pythius, who dishonoured the corpse of the brave Leonidas, was just the man to act as here described. It is true that the king's anger was overruled by Providence for good; but this is no palliation of his serious offence. We have in this narrative a warning against yielding to the impulses of capricious anger. There is a time to be angry; but we may well suspect ourselves when we are under the influence of vehement feeling of this kind. "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation!" "Consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself." Christ left us "an example, who when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not." "Blessed are the meek." "Forgive one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you!"

Ver. 13.—*Wise men.* Wisdom is the skill which some men possess of devising means to secure any end that is aimed at. It is what Aristotle termed an intellectual virtue. There is no position in life where wisdom is not useful. And in the highest positions, in Church and in State, it is a quality which is justly held in very high esteem. Counsellors of kings and ministers of state need a large measure of practical wisdom. The same may be said of pastors of Christian Churches, and of officers of Christian societies and organisations of all kinds.

I. THE FOUNDATION OF WISDOM IS NATURAL SAGACITY. It is sometimes said of men that they are "born fools," and it is certain that some are by nature more endowed than others with insight into character, and with fertility of devices and resources. A cunning man is seldom wise, for he usually overreaches himself, and awakens distrust in the minds of his acquaintances.

II. WISDOM IS NURTURED BY THE HABIT OF DELIBERATION. It is proverbial that hasty men are unwise; they will not allow themselves time to see more than one side of a subject. To weigh with calmness and impartiality the possible plans of action is conducive to a wise decision.

III. WISDOM IS STRENGTHENED BY KNOWLEDGE AND STUDY. Not every well-informed and learned man is wise; but few men are wise whose knowledge is scanty, and whose experience is contracted. Two kinds of knowledge are referred to in this passage. 1. Historical knowledge, or knowledge of the times. To study the history of nations and of the affairs of state is a good preparation for the life of a politician, a statesman (*vide* some excellent remarks in Bossuet's 'Lectures on Universal History,' addressed to the Dauphin of France). 2. Legal knowledge. The counsellors of the king of Persia are said to have known law and judgment, obviously very essential to men in their position.

IV. THE POSSESSION OF WISDOM IS A MOST RESPONSIBLE TRUST. Like other good things, it may be used, and it may be abused. There is a great danger lest the counsellors of kings should give advice fitted to please rather than to profit. It is well, therefore, that all such should remember that they are themselves accountable to the

Lord and Judge of all. If wisdom be employed to secure merely selfish ends, or to flatter the ambitious and the vain, it will prove in every way a curse.

Lessons:—1. Let the truly wise, who use their wisdom to good purpose, be regarded with general honour and esteem. 2. Let those who are consulted by others because of their repute for wisdom seek grace to give good counsel, as in the sight of the Lord. 3. Let the young seek to acquire practical wisdom, and let them remember that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding."

Vers. 13—20.—*Counsel.* The king of Persia had two bad counsellors, wine and anger. It showed some degree of common-sense on his part that, instead of acting upon impulse, he waited to ask the advice of his ministers, those privileged and trusted men who were nearest to the throne. If they had advised him well he might have avoided making an exhibition of his own folly to his people. But their plan was to fall in with the inclinations of their sovereign. This, whilst we must blame it, we cannot wonder at; for few dared to oppose the vain and imperious monarchs of Persia.

I. GOOD COUNSEL SHOULD BE SINCERE AND HONEST IN ITSELF. It sometimes happens that a person called upon for advice sees what it would be right to advise, but gives advice contrary to that which his judgment would approve. It is better to decline advising than to do this.

II. GOOD COUNSEL SHOULD BE DISINTERESTED AS REGARDS THE GIVER. If one advises so as to secure his own interest at the expense of the friend who trusts and consults him, he acts with baseness, and deserves contempt.

III. GOOD COUNSEL SHOULD BE FAITHFUL AS REGARDS THE RECEIVER. In advising the great, counsellors are too often guided by a desire to fall in with their inclinations, to flatter their pride and vanity, to minister to their lusts. Flatterers are bad counsellors, though by their flattery they may advance themselves. Their motto is, *Mihi placet quicquid regi placet* (that pleases me which pleases my lord, the king).

IV. GOOD COUNSEL SHOULD BE APPROPRIATE AND TIMELY. Advice which is not to the point, or which is given when it is too late for it to be of use, is vain. How many a misguided youth has had reason to exclaim, Why was I not warned or directed while warning and direction might have been of use?

Vers. 17, 18.—*The influence of example.* Where can be found a more striking proof of the general belief in the force of example than in this passage? The counsellors of the king of Persia were not men likely to be led away by their feelings or fancies. Yet they supposed that the conduct of one woman might influence the domestic demeanour and spirit and habits of the women of an empire throughout its 127 provinces! And they proposed to counteract the evil influence of Vashti's disobedience by a most unusual proceeding, by a stringent law affecting every household throughout the realm! The conduct of the queen made the highest personages in the land uneasy, and was thought capable of affecting the meanest and the most distant.

I. EXAMPLE IS ALWAYS INFLUENTIAL. This is owing to a principle in human nature. We are naturally social and imitative. The power of example over children is known to all. But no age is exempt from its action. Some persons live with the constant sense that their spirit and conduct will affect those of others. But if persons have no such sense, none the less is it true that their influence "tells." This is the explanation of fashion—in manner, in speech, in social usages, even in beliefs. None of us can say how much he is what he is through the influence of others' example.

II. EXAMPLE IS INFLUENTIAL BOTH FOR GOOD AND EVIL. That we should influence and be influenced by example is a Divine arrangement. It works both ways; and to the action of example the cause of virtue and religion is immensely indebted; whilst the same principle explains the prevalence of error, vice, and sin. Let every hearer call to mind the influences to which he has been exposed, and trace up to them the position he occupies, as well as the character which has been formed in him. This

exercise will make him tremble to think of the responsibility under which he lies for his own influence over his fellow-creatures.

III. THE POWER OF EXAMPLE IS ENHANCED BY HIGH STATION. Vashti was a queen, and what she did was known to multitudes, and was influential, more or less, over all who knew it. A queen sets fashions, gives social laws, even influences, to some extent, the morals of the community. A vicious court is a curse to the land. For a virtuous and benevolent sovereign, subjects cannot be too grateful. Others in high station, alike in the Church and in the world, will affect the habits of many by their good or evil example. Public persons, it has been said, are the looking-glasses before which others dress themselves. It is of highest importance that the springs should be sweetened, lest the streams be poisoned and deleterious.

Practical application:—1. Let us gratefully acknowledge God's goodness in using the principle in question for our benefit. Scripture is full of good examples. The history of the Church teems with such. The Christian society around us contains many excellent and inspiring examples for our imitation. 2. Especially let us be thankful for the example of our Divine Saviour. He was not only our Redeemer, but our Exemplar also. He "left us an example that we should follow his steps." It is the one faultless, peerless example to humanity. 3. Let us be careful what examples we study, and what influences we place ourselves under. 4. Let us be very circumspect in the education of the young, that we have brought to bear upon their hearts such influences as God may bless to their salvation. 5. Let us "watch and pray" that our influences—purposed and unconscious alike—may be for the highest good of all with whom we are associated.

Ver. 22.—*Rule in the house.* The purport of the edict here recorded was good, although there seems something almost ludicrous in the feelings and the fears which prompted its framers and promulgators. "That every man should bear rule in his own house" seems scarcely a regulation to be prescribed by political authority.

I. IT IS A PRINCIPLE FOUNDED UPON NATURAL, DIVINE AUTHORITY. It is written upon the very constitution of human nature that a wife should be directed by her husband, and children by their father. If purpose is visible anywhere, it is in this domestic law.

II. IT IS A PRINCIPLE SANCTIONED BY SCRIPTURE. From the first it was said to the woman, "Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee." The apostle thus admonishes the female sex: "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord." "The husband," we are told, "is the head of the wife."

III. THE RULE IN QUESTION SHOULD BE COMMENDED BY THOUGHTFUL WISDOM ON THE PART OF HIM WHO EXERCISES IT. If the husband is a fool, it is not easy for the wife to submit. But if he be a man of knowledge, experience, and self-control, the wife will usually, gladly and gratefully, be guided by his desires and requests.

IV. THIS SWAY SHOULD BE EXERCISED WITH GENTLENESS AND FORBEARANCE. Nothing is more hateful or contemptible than the rule of a domestic tyrant, and such a rule encourages either rebellion or deceit. Children lose all respect for an unreasonable and passionate father. The household with such a head is wretched indeed. Affection and consideration should be manifest in the demeanour and requirements of all in authority over a family.

V. SUCH A RULE SHOULD BE ACKNOWLEDGED WITH FRANK SUBMISSION. Women are very much what men make them. Let them be treated with affection and courtesy, and the response will usually be cheerful compliance.

VI. SUCH A RULE IS CONTRIBUTIVE TO ORDER AND HAPPINESS. The family is so far like the state; tyranny awakens resentment and provokes resistance, whilst a righteous and considerate rule is acknowledged with gratitude, and is productive of happiness. A home where there is anarchy is a hell upon earth; a home where a woman rules is a monstrous and loathsome spectacle. Darius and Xerxes are said, both of them, to have been too much governed by their wives. History abounds with instances in which the legitimate power of the wives of kings has been exceeded, and in which kings' mistresses have corrupted courts, and to some degree nations also.

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Ver. 10.—*A drunken device.* I. Drunkenness leads to further FOLLY. "When the wine is in the wit is out," is always true. The Persian monarch yielded to the allurements of the cup, and was betrayed into a stupid act. He desired to exhibit the beauty of his queen to a miscellaneous crowd. He had already shown nearly all he possessed. Anything and everything that could call forth admiration from his numerous guests had been laid under tribute. The festivities are closing, and the king, with muddled brain, bethinks himself of one more device for extorting more flattery and adulation. On his Sultana only the eyes of his eunuchs and himself, of mankind, had rested. He is proud of her somewhat after the same manner in which a man might at this day be proud of having on his walls the finest painting, in his cabinet the rarest jewel, or in his stables the swiftest horse.

II. Drunkenness induces a violation of MARITAL OBLIGATIONS. Had Ahasuerus loved Vashti as he ought, he would have been considerate as to her feelings. Whatever consideration he might have had when sober, he has none now. He imagines that his drunken whim is to be law. Vashti then was to him nothing more than a mere harem ornament, a slave for whom a goodly price had been paid out of his coffers. An indulgence in a like habit to that of Ahasuerus has led many to act with the same foolishness, harshness, and injustice. Known only to themselves has been the shuddering dread of many a wife lest the knowledge of a husband's secret failings should be bruited abroad. Known only to themselves the many shifts to make up for deficiencies for necessary household expenditure, deficiencies caused by a husband's folly and extravagance. Known only to themselves, the number of weary hours during which they sit watching or lie waking, waiting for the return of their dissolute lords. Known only to themselves also the many insults, the ill-usage to which they are subjected, the inflamed passions and embittered spirits they have to withstand. God have mercy on the thousands of sad women who have had to taste, like Vashti, the bitter results of a husband's drunken stupidity! God have mercy, for men have little.

III. Drunkenness often brings painful REBUFFS. Impatiently the king awaits the arrival of Vashti. Little dreams he of a rebuff. Excited as he is at the close of the festivities, and elated, both by the flattery he has received as well as the wine he has drunk, he is in no mood to brook any opposition to his will, or even delay in carrying out his drunken devices. He has sent the chamberlains for Vashti. At length they reappear. The king looks up from his cups. "What! and is not the queen coming?" He soon hears the explanation of her absence. Bowing low, and in the hesitating tones of one who has a disagreeable task to perform, the chief chamberlain tells "that the queen refuseth to come at the king's commandment."

IV. Drunkenness fosters unreasoning PASSION. How in a moment is overcast the face of the king, hitherto so complacent, the throne even of dignity still. A lowering, threatening scowl sits on his brow. More swift than any hurricane that ever swept over devoted and unsuspecting voyagers is the storm of anger that sweeps over the countenance of Ahasuerus. Shall a mere woman cross him? Shall all his glory, power, majesty be by that one woman checked? "The king was very wroth, and his anger burned in him" (ver. 12).

V. Drunkenness always covers a man with SHAME. The king was put to shame by his own act before others. Most annoying was the thought that the refusal of the queen was known to the princes and nobles. They would say, "The king cannot bear rule in his own house, and how shall he govern rightly the great dominion of Persia?" The king could better endure the obstinate conduct of his queen were it known only to himself. To have his domestic affairs known abroad, the common subject of conversation in every street, the gossip in every bazaar, and the butt of ridicule in every harem of his vast dominion, this is unbearable. The king is ashamed. Even drink does not banish that feeling from him.

VI. Drunkenness constantly creates vain REGRETS. There are regrets for folly, for expenditure, and for consequences. Ahasuerus, when he recovered from the effect of his inebriety, would begin to regret that he had acted so unwisely. He knew he

had lowered himself in the eyes of others, and he had lost the one to whom he was attached, as far as such a man under such a system could be attached. The evidence of his regret is seen in the first verse of the second chapter. Many have to regret even worse consequences. Sometimes under the effect of drink men have crippled and even killed children and wives. The very gallows have shaken with the quivering regrets of those who have had to expiate the crimes they had committed under the influence of drink. But the most overwhelming regret of all will be that which will take possession of the soul when it discovers the terrible truthfulness of the words, "No drunkard shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. vi. 10).—H.

Ver. 14.—*Privileged persons.* "Seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom." It has always been the custom of kings to surround themselves with those who should be able to help or advise, or be the media of transmitting their desires or decrees to the people. These officers of state have been called "wise men," viziers, councillors, ministers. They form the executive. In Persia there was no electoral representation, the government was absolute. Hence the seven men whose names are mentioned were appointed by the king, and his whim could remove them. So long as they were in favour they were accounted privileged persons. Two things are told of them:—I. They had a PRIVILEGED SIGHT. II. They had a PROMINENT POSITION.

I. It was the custom of the kings of Persia to seclude themselves as much as possible from their subjects. Only those who were appointed to come near might see his face. This reserve was assumed in order to foster reverence and awe of the great king among the people. When one who had been permitted to approach, and had gained the king's favour, lost it, the attendants immediately covered his face that he might not look on the king. "As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face" (ch. vii. 8). The seven wise men here mentioned were permitted to see the king's face at any time. The rulers of Persia assumed the title of "king of kings." That which was assumed by them belongs only to God. Who can see his face? He dwells in light "unapproachable." When Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord, he carried a reminder thereof in the limp or lameness, the result of the touch of that supernatural Being. When Moses desired to see the Divine glory he was hidden in a cleft rock; when he communed with God his face glistened so that he had to hide it beneath a veil. When Manoa offered a sacrifice, and the angel whose name was "secret" did wondrously, he feared he would be slain because of the visit from another world. "No man hath seen God at any time." Man could not see the unutterable glory and live. But there is One, "the only begotten Son," who not only saw his face, but rested "in the bosom" of the Divine Father, and "hath declared him." He gives to us this privileged sight also. God was in Christ. The meaning of the incarnation was this, that men looking at Christ looked on "God manifest in the flesh." Philip wanted a further view of the Father, and Christ told him, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Inter-course was possible under the old dispensation; sight was made possible under the new. Faith in Christ sees God. "The pure in heart see God" not only hereafter, but here. This is a high privilege. The Queen of Sheba said to Solomon, "Happy are thy men, and happy are these thy servants which stand continually before thee and hear thy wisdom." The happiness of the true Christian is to stand ever in the presence of God. This privilege is the gift of God's grace. None could admit to the sight of his mercy and glory unless he had graciously permitted it. The sight is not for a few, but for all who will come unto him through Christ.

II. The PROMINENT POSITION occupied by the "wise men" of Persia may suggest the advance which comes through spiritual character. "To sit first" in the kingdom is not to be the one aim, but it will be given to those for whom it is prepared—those who are prepared for it. High spiritual qualities give pre-eminence. This pre-eminence is not to be sought for itself. There must be no ambition, or we are those unfitted for it. Spiritual character must be sought as its own reward, and because it pleases God. James and John made a great mistake when they asked, through their mother, Christ for a promise of prominent position. "The last will be first, and first last." Heaven is no place of pomp, but of discrimination of character.

Mere questions of precedence, whether in court, ecclesiastical, or municipal affairs, are generally petty, because based on mere accident and opinion. In heaven character will decide precedence. Those nearest the throne will probably be those who felt themselves the most unworthy; men like Paul, who felt himself "less than the least of all saints." The great thing for us is not to seek pre-eminence, but inner spiritual power; by simple faith, humility, zeal, unselfishness, devoutness, living as in the presence of God, and having every thought and action in harmony with God's will. As the current of a river sets to the ocean, so the whole "set" of a life may be God-ward. The seven men who "sat first in the kingdom" were in their position that they might advise the king. When we are brought into God's kingdom it will be to drink in of his wisdom. These men also could be easily removed. Their position depended on the whim of the monarch, and therefore was insecure. When we are once brought into God's kingdom above we shall be safe for ever. No enemy shall dislodge, no storm trouble, no sin assail, but we shall be safe for ever. We read of Haman being "advanced," and of the king setting "his seat above all the princes that were with him" (ch. iii. 1). This must have been gall and wormwood to the rest of the princes. No such jealousy will enter the hearts of those who are permitted to behold in heaven the King's face, and to sit in his kingdom.—H.

Vers. 10—12.—*A noble womanly refusal.* We know from actual history literally nothing of Vashti, except her name, and what is written of her in the present connection. But it is evident that she could not have been *merely* one of the inferior wives of the Eastern king, although this has been suggested. She is not only emphatically called queen, but she *acts* as the queen, "making a feast for the women," while Ahasuerus makes his for the princes and the general people; and the choice and the bearing of her successor, Esther, point the same way. The name of Vashti appears to view a moment; it then utterly disappears—and in disgrace. Yet not in shame; neither in the shame of sin or folly, nor in the shame even of error of judgment and want of true wisdom. No; for "posterity approve hersaying" and her doing. Our gaze was at first invited to her as one "very fair to look upon," a meteor of beauty. So her descending track, swift as it was, is one of *real* splendour; amid thick darkness around it marks a welcome line of light, and leaves a glory on our vision! This is all the more remarkable to be said of a heathen woman. Notice here *a noble womanly refusal, and the womanly ground of it noble.* We have here the spectacle of a woman who risked, who no doubt *knew* that she *forfeited*, a high position and all splendour of earthly prospects from that time forward, because she would not prejudice the due of her own womanly nature; because she would not be party to robbing herself of her feminine birthright; because she would not be diminished in aught of her modesty's ultimate and indefeasible rights. When her affronted but determined voice and verdict were heard, as she "refused to come," *this* was heard in them—to wit, the clear *ring* of true womanly instinct and of intelligent womanly feeling.

L THIS WAS A NOBLE REFUSAL BECAUSE OF WHAT IT COST. That "cost" may be reckoned in several ways. For instance, there was present (1) the cost of effort, and effort of the most severely trying kind. There are many who stand at no cost except this. They will be liberal, and even wasteful in expenditure, *i. e.* in any other expenditure than that of effort. The prices of ease, luxury, they do not object to, but the price of effort frightens them at once. There were several *elements* also in the effort made by Vashti. There was the effort of resisting a husband's familiar authority. There was the effort of resisting an Eastern husband's peremptory command. There was the effort of breaking through the national custom of centuries ingrained in the race, and which made the wife a slave to passion and despotic rule. The severity of such effort must have been heightened by the consideration of the struggle being with a potentate of dominion unparalleled and of notorious unscrupulousness, sustained on the part of that woman single-handed. We read of those who backed up the insulting and licentious order of the king, but we do not read of one solitary voice according help and sympathy to the refusing queen. Now there are senses in which effort compels our admiration, even when the object of it fails to command our approval. Great is the *inertia* of human nature, held enmeshed in the toils of habit, of custom, of conventionality, of apprehended consequences, of jealous misconception, of envious

detraction, of artificial forebodings that magnify themselves alike so monstrously and so successfully. Correspondingly noble and impressive was this woman's effort, whose "no," though she sank because of it, crashed through all the forces that environed her, and its report resounded through a kingdom. The effort, then, the severity of it in relation to its kind, and the object of it, do in this case all command our approval and our strong admiration. Then (2) the cost of this refusal is to be judged from the consequences which ensued. As against conscience, the right, and Divine law, consequences ought to decide nothing, that is to say, they are not to be put in the balance to weigh down one side or the other. These all are to be obeyed in and of themselves. So soon as their voice is heard, understood, and *not* misconceived, that voice is to be followed, let it lead whither it will. *Their* command is sovereign, and they may be well trusted to vindicate it sooner or *later*. There is indeed a sense in which it is of the highest importance to observe consequences, and to put them into the balance, viz., when we are studying the entire structure of our moral nature. A just observing of consequences therein is then equivalent to a scrutiny of *tendencies*, and the moral argument from tendencies in this sense is most legitimate, and should be irresistible. To them, when fairly tracked from beginning to end, reverent regard is due, and, once ascertained, the greatest weight should be accorded to them. A partial and broken study of consequences is what is unreliable and proportionately dangerous. Sidelong glances at immediate, or early, or merely present life consequences are what betoken inherent weakness or ignoble timidity of principle. Yet while the consideration of consequences should count nothing against the demands of right, and the commands of conscience and the Divine law, the kind of attention paid to them *measures* for us conveniently and justly the force or weakness of principle. The temporal consequences which one foresaw or reckoned upon (even if he deceived himself) will often sufficiently explain what buoyed him up—it was a vision of earthly grandeur, wealth, success, nothing higher. And the temporal, the threatening, the immediately impending consequences which another saw, rather than foresaw, are the significant tell-tale of the high-strung principle, the determined purpose, the noble force, which without a rival reigned within him. The weight of suffering in the hand is vastly greater than that in some undefined distance of prospect. The storm of grief and of sorrow that is now ready to burst on the very head looms terrific. The deposing of a queen, the divorcing of a wife, the disgracing of a woman in the eyes of all men, and of her own sex in particular, vain or not vain—these are consequences that overwhelm! Reckon we so then the cost of *consequences* to the queen, wife, woman who "refused to come at the king's commandment." Was this not a noble womanly refusal?

II. THIS WAS A NOBLE REFUSAL BECAUSE OF THE GROUND OF IT. It can perhaps scarcely be said that there were grounds for it. There were a multitude of (what very many would have considered) reasons why Vashti should not have refused to come, and there might truly have been reasons *more* than one, had she been differently situated, why she should have done as she actually did. Had she lived, for instance, at a different time of day, had she lived in a different country, had she belonged to a different race, there might have been some variety of reasons why she should have taken up the position she did, and adhered to it. But in point of fact there was probably great singleness of reason for this her great boldness of utterance and of action. Under certain circumstances one would have been glad to suppose that other considerations *also* played their part, and had their influence in Vashti's peremptory negative decision. But we should be artificial, ungentle, and guilty of an anachronism if we supposed these now. And that we cannot bring these lesser lights to throw their fainter rays on the scene leaves it in the undivided glory of God's light. Here was *his* purity shedding its unflickering light on the thick darkness of that showy, sensual feast. The less we can justly set Vashti's refusal down to the higher conscious reflex acts of our nature, and moral effects resulting from them, the more is it attributable to the calm light of that lamp which God has hung in the retired and sacred cabinet of the bosom of woman, to decorate it, and to bless with its religious glimmering through the windows all that come near enough, but not too near! It is the lamp of sweet purity, of nature's own modesty, burning ever still with shame! That it is *nature's* modesty means that God's own hand

hung it, lighted it. That it was burning in so unlikely a place, in such unfavourable conditions, at such a time, is all comfort and joy to our faith, for it means that God's hand had been round it, and shielded it so that it was not puffed out by the untoward gusts around. And that "frail woman"—borne upon now by every present-time influence, literally thronged with inducements to sink all shame for an hour that she might reign still for years, besieged with earthly motives to succumb and yield obedience to a coarse command—did refuse to succumb, ran the gauntlet of all consequences whatsoever, and, with an aroused indignation that would sleep no more, flung back the brutal mandate in the face of him who sent it, is fitted to show us how "in weakness" certain "strength is made perfect," and how the things amazing and "impossible with man, are possible with God;" yes, even facile to his Spirit's breath.—B.

Vers. 16—22.—*The parody of legislature.* If any be tempted at first to think of the king's conferences (as here reported) with those whom we will call his statesmen as though they were scarcely serious and in earnest,—fortunate to be carried on within the protection of closed doors; the monarch, in fact, secretly smiling at his ministers, and they in turn scarcely dissembling in his presence their real convictions of his impossible folly and of their own obsequious and shallow proposals,—yet it would be found impossible to sustain this supposition. It will not bear investigation! The doors were but a short while closed doors, and the after proceedings give evidence ample that this was not *intended* to be any mere travesty of a privy council, however much to our eye it may resemble it. Assuming, therefore, what we do not doubt will be correctly assumed, that the occasion was one of widespread social bearings, and that the proceedings here narrated were of a *bonâ fide* character, we have again an impressive illustration of the fact that God's work in the constitution of human nature, *God's force in human feeling and life*, insists on bearing down all artificial barriers and sweeping away all such obstruction. It possesses such a *cumulative* character. In silence, in depth of operation, in the multiplication of an exceeding number of persistent vital ultimate facts in the constitution of the human family, a force is often stealthily generating and surely gaining headway, which at last tears down all that opposed, and that long seemed sure of its oppressing grasp. The "too much contempt and wrath" slowly "arise," and are sure to find opportunity to take their revenge, even on the part of "*a feeble folk!*" Thus a folk feeble enough, when considered one by one, will prove irresistible in combination!

I. NOTICE HOW THE HUMAN HEART, HUMAN LIFE IN ITS TENDEREST MAKE, IN ITS MOST YIELDING MOOD, RESENTS IN THE LONG RUN ARBITRARY FORCE. Even the feminine character knows despotism to be an unnatural thing, a discreditable violation of its own rights. The less obtrusive the claims of that feminine character, the more should they be studied by anticipation. Even that yielding disposition *craves* reason before force, right before might, considerateness before compulsion. The husband, the father, the social temper, the national temper, that forgets and sins against this has only to forget it and sin against it long enough to reap whirlwind and the most real of ruin. To what a pass had the treatment long meted out to women of the country and the age in question now come! What a humiliating confession from head-quarters when the king himself, "who reigned from India unto Ethiopia," and these elder "seven wise men of the east," are found thrown into a pitiable panic, a paroxysm of apprehension, lest there should happen a moral and social insurrection of their women, "great and small," throughout the vast extent of the country and its "one hundred and twenty-seven provinces," against, forsooth, "their husbands;" and in the sense, forsooth, of "despising" them and disputing their rule!

II. NOTICE TWO POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES. What must be either the degenerate social state of a nation, or its ripened state in any individual direction for some very radical alternative, when the spark that is feared is such a thing as this, anything analogous to this—the one word "*no*" of one woman! The one resisting act of a wife, who is a queen, to the rude and licentious command of her husband, who is a king! The country of which this is true, the constitution of which this is true, in any part of it, must be dry indeed for a conflagration!

III. NOTICE THE INDESCRIBABLE INANITY OF THE MERE MAKING AND PROCLAMATION

OF A DECREE ON A MORAL AND SOCIAL SUBJECT WHEN IT IS NOT BASED ON REASON, ON NATURAL RELIGION, ON EDUCATION, to say nothing of other religious sanction ; or when the just utterances of these authorities are rendered utterly indistinct, are stifled by the improper conduct of one half of the people, towards the other half, who may be aimed at by the decree. No number of decrees, no severity of sanctions attached to them, could possibly bring all the women of a vast country to honour and obey from the heart their husbands, while these should continue to act towards them in a manner contrary to the Divine voice and to the charter of creation ! The illustration which this history offers is patent and bold. The case appears a violent one ; the position one to which modern days offer no sufficient parallel. It is a call for unbounded gratitude on the part of England, if it be so. But the lesson for other lands is still wanted in its most alphabetic form ; and who can deny that all nations need the delicate guidance of the same principle in outline, though in a less visible, less common form ?

IV. LASTLY, WHEN THE LAST COMES TO THE LAST, COURTIER AND THE MOST OBSEQUIOUS OF THEM DO NOT THINK SO MUCH OF THEIR ROYAL MASTERS AS THEY DO OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR FELLOWS. Kingdoms are not made for kings, the ruled for rulers, but the reverse. And, probably without a thought of it himself, Memucan in his answer (ver. 16) shows himself keeping by no means to the view of the position which the king had set forth and enlarged upon in his question. Supposing there to have been (what there was not) advantage obtainable in the decree, the insult (so interpreted) that had been offered to the king is almost thrust on one side, while the wily counsellors seem forthwith to scent the opportunity of an advantage to themselves and the widespread people ! So the magnified affronts of the great are turned by Providence to a very different use from the vindication of their individual pride or vanity.

Conclusion.—While there is perhaps not a little in these verses which invites and almost provokes our modern satire, there is certainly one great impression resulting from the whole, and deserving of the fullest attention and most constant memory namely, that great moral, social, religious effects must not be sought primarily by mere legislative enactment. They must be sought by a diligent use of *corresponding methods*, and then even will be found only in God's blessing upon them.—B.

Vers. 10—12.—*The tyrant-slave.* Distance frequently gives us exaggerated notions of greatness, while closer intimacy would speedily dispel the illusion. To the best part of the known world the name of Ahasuerus was associated with unrestrained power, but this passage reveals his real position. Extremes meet ; an absolute tyrant may be at the same time an absolute slave. This was precisely the case with Ahasuerus. He was—

I. AN ABSOLUTE TYRANT. He occupied a position of unlimited authority, and exercised his authority in an arbitrary manner. Note—1. *That the possession of absolute power is in itself a great wrong.* It is a violation of the inalienable rights of communities that any man through the mere accident of birth—or even through his own superior abilities—should become an irresponsible ruler over them ; and history shows that this violation has always been fraught with disastrous consequences. (1) It subordinates the common weal to individual interest. The well-being of society is possible only on the supposition that the good of the greatest number should be of the first importance, and that individuals should be willing to sacrifice everything if necessary for its attainment. Despots, however, proceed on the supposition that everything exists for their private benefit—extensive territories, the wealth of nations, and even the lives of their subjects. (2) It tends to make the ruler himself capricious. To expect a man to be moderate, reasonable, and just at all times in such a position is to make too great a demand on human nature ; the temptations to which he is exposed are more than an ordinary mortal can withstand. (3) It tends to make the people servile and unprincipled. Where one will is supreme there is nothing certain : law, justice, rectitude become meaningless ; duty resolves itself into pleasing the potentate, who holds the power of life and death in his own hands. The natural outcome of this is the spread of meanness, duplicity, dishonesty among all classes, from the highest to the lowest. The apologists of despotism sometimes

refer to the position of a father in his family in justification of the institution. But a father is not absolute in the widest sense; and even if he were, the danger inseparable from the possession of so much power is neutralised by the love he bears for his own flesh and blood. 2. *The use made of absolute power in the case before us.* This is a most ignoble passage in the life of a king of such high pretensions. (1) He seemed to assume that no consideration was due to anybody but himself. The sole purpose of the prolonged festivities was to gratify his own vanity. And when he thought that the presence of the queen would add to his own pleasure, he never paused to consider whether it might not be painful to the queen herself. Selfishness makes men thoughtless, unjust, and cruel, even to those who have the strongest claims upon their tenderness. (2) He commanded what was unlawful according to the accepted notions of the time. Eastern women led a secluded life, and were not permitted to expose their countenances to the gaze of strangers. Besides, for a modest woman to display her charms in the presence of drunken revellers was a degradation from which she must have recoiled with unutterable aversion. (3) He afterwards punished as disobedience what was really obedience to a higher law of duty. The queen was deposed simply for daring to protect her honour. In this respect she takes her place among a noble band—the glorious army of martyrs, who, rather than violating their consciences at the bidding of bloodthirsty tyrants, submitted to imprisonment, torture, and death. Wrong can never really flourish. It may appear prosperous to superficial observers, but a deeper knowledge of the state of things must reveal the penalty which it entails. This king, amidst the dazzling splendours with which he surrounded himself, might have imposed upon his fellow-men, and made them gaze with longing eyes upon the elevated position which he occupied; but after all there are unmistakable indications here that the absolute tyrant was—

II. AN ABSOLUTE SLAVE. We find that—1. *He was a slave of his appetite.* “The king’s heart was merry with wine;” he had taken more drink than was good for him, and was beginning to feel the effects of it. A sorry spectacle! He who ought to have set a pattern of dignified demeanour to those beneath him, degrading himself below the level of the brute creation. Millions have done and are doing the same thing. Alexander conquered the world, but a lawless appetite conquered Alexander. 2. *He was a slave of his passions.* “The king was very wroth, and his anger burned within him.” Accustomed as he was to be implicitly obeyed, he could not endure his will to be thwarted. The demon within him was roused, and he was no longer master of himself; he must obey the promptings of unreasoning rage, however much he might regret it in calmer moments. Truly, “he that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.” 3. *He was a slave of his pride.* He was induced to depose the queen because he imagined that his dignity had been compromised. No doubt he loved her, and it must have cost him a pang to be separated from her, but pride would not allow him to revoke his decree. Like King Herod, who preferred to behead John the Baptist rather than confess that he had made a foolish oath. He may have called it courage to himself, but it was in reality the most contemptible cowardice.—R.

Vers. 16—18.—*Court influence.* We may admit the general truth of a principle, and yet deny its application to a particular case. Doubtless wrong-doing on the part of the queen might have exerted an unwholesome influence upon other women, but it by no means follows that her conduct in the present instance was open to this objection. On the contrary, might not her bravery in maintaining the honour of her sex in the face of so much danger strengthen the hands of others when placed in similar difficulties? The subject suggested by this passage is *the responsibility of greatness.* Let us inquire—

I. WHAT CONSTITUTES GREATNESS. By greatness we mean; in a general way, the position of a man who for certain well-defined reasons towers above the rest of his fellow-men. Evidently, therefore, it may be of various types. 1. *The greatness of position.* Some are born heirs to titles and kingdoms. Distinction is thrust upon them before their wishes are consulted. Their lives mingle with the web of history simply on account of their birth. 2. *The greatness of wealth.* This differs from the

preceding in that it is confined to no favoured class. A man may have a most humble origin, and yet through industry and perseverance may become a millionaire. 3. The greatness of *genius*. This is the gift of God. It resembles that of position, in that men are born into it; but it also resembles that of wealth, in that it is fully enjoyed only through labour. John Milton would have been a genius had he been "mute and inglorious;" but it was the effort he put forth in producing 'Paradise Lost' that made him immortal.

II. WHAT CONSTITUTES THIS RESPONSIBILITY. 1. The fact that the great are members of society. No member of society, however great or however humble, can be independent. His actions touch his fellows at so many points that they have a right to control his conduct to that extent. 2. The great determine their own actions. No man is a mere puppet of circumstances. A high position may involve conditions which hamper the will, but they cannot rob it altogether of its freedom. In so far then as actions are free the agent is responsible for them. 3. The great exert an influence. This is true of all, but especially of the great. And this was the point on which Memucan so emphatically insisted. (1) Influence is independent of our will. We can shape our own conduct, but we cannot regulate its effects upon others. We cannot plead that we never desired it, when we are charged with ruining others by our example, for those who copy us as a rule do not ask our permission. Does the subject of a deadly fever desire to spread infection? (2) The influence of the great is powerful in proportion to their greatness. They are the observed of all observers. They are cities set on a hill which cannot be hid. Jeroboam son of Nebat made Israel sin, and the wickedness of the people for several generations was attributed to the influence of his example. (3) It is far easier to influence for evil than for good. The effect produced upon an object is as much due to the object itself as to the power exerted. A blow that would leave iron uninjured might shatter glass to atoms. The original bias of the human heart is toward evil, so that it needs little help in that direction. No great eloquence is required to persuade the miser to hoard his money, or the spendthrift to squander his substance.

This subject has a practical application. What is true of the great with regard to influence is true of all to some extent. It is true that a taper is unspeakably less than the sun, but it produces the same effect in its own sphere as the larger luminary does in his. 1. *Ministers of religion exert an influence.* Not merely in the pulpit, but in their intercourse with the world. 2. *Parents exert an influence.* Their actions will generally produce a deeper impression than their words. 3. *Associates exert an influence.* Men are constantly brought together in the various pursuits of life. In the workshop, in the market-place, in the transactions of business, each man is unconsciously contributing his share to the making or the marring of the characters of those with whom he comes in contact.—R.

Vers. 10, 11.—*The fruit of excess.* The king's inconsistent excess betrayed him into an unworthy and foolish act. When heated with wine he summoned Queen Vashti to appear before him, crowned, that she might "show the princes and people her beauty."

I. AN OUTWARD RESPECTFULNESS OF MANNER DOES NOT MAKE AMENDS FOR ANY DISHONOURABLE INTENT. In sending to Vashti the seven chamberlains who waited on himself, the king showed some respect for her dignity. He perhaps hoped by this parade to overcome any objection she might have to obey his strange command. But the quality of evil is not affected by the garnishings with which men clothe and try to conceal it. Sin is often so disguised as to be made attractive to the unwary, but it is still sin; and the "pure in heart" who "see God" are not deceived.

II. WRONG-DOING BREEDS FEAR IN THE MOST RECKLESS MOMENTS OF SELF-CONFIDENCE. The emphatic way in which the number and names of the chamberlains are given seems to indicate that there was some fear of the queen in the king's heart. He knew her character, and was not unconscious of the insult implied in his command. Having, under the excitements of wine and vanity, conceived and expressed the desire that her beauty should be publicly exhibited, he could not draw back, but he thought to convey his will to her with such accompaniments as would either flatter or overawe her into obedience. A dishonest heart has fears that are only known to itself.

It is most timid and craven when it assumes the loudest bravery. Its bristling feathers of authority are often the signs of an inward distrust. Conscious rectitude of purpose and action is the true spring of courage. A heart that is pure in its affections and intents is bold and strong in all circumstances. It is an evil conscience that "makes cowards of us all." A good conscience will make heroes of the humblest.

III. WHEN UNJUST TO OURSELVES WE ARE IN GREAT DANGER OF BEING UNJUST TO OTHERS. If the king had been himself true to the law which he had promulgated, he would never have thought of subjecting Vashti to a humiliating exposure. When men recognise their own obligations to righteous law, and submit themselves unto God, they are careful to observe the duties they owe to their friends and neighbours. Indifference to the feelings and rights of others implies a want of self-subordination to holy and honourable rule. It is only the unregulated, whose moral and spiritual nature is not braced by habitual subjection to principle, who are willing to trample on the sensibilities of those over whom natural or social ties give them power.

IV. THE EXCITEMENTS PRODUCED BY UNGOVERNED PASSIONS OR ARTIFICIAL STIMULATION DO NOT EXCUSE THE EVILS OR CRIMES TO WHICH THEY MAY LEAD. An unbridled temper, a blinding lust, or vinous intoxication, has often been pled in mitigation of the gravest offences. But one sin cannot justify or excuse another and consequent sin. If a man allows his reason and conscience to be unseated, whether by anger, or lust, or strong drink, he is responsible for every evil result that may follow. There is no sin which does not carry within it the seeds of other sins. This is a solemn thought, and one which should put all men on their guard against the first beginnings of sin.—D.

Ver. 12.—*Justifiable disobedience.* The commission of the seven chamberlains to the queen was in vain. Vashti refused to appear before the king and his guests. Why this disobedience? Several considerations, favourable and unfavourable, may be suggested.

I. CONSIDERATIONS UNFAVOURABLE TO VASHTI. 1. She knew the absolute authority with which the king was invested. In this knowledge she had become his wife and queen. Ought she not, therefore, to have obeyed him, even at personal sacrifice, when he commanded her, with befitting circumstance, to come to him, that her beauty might be seen and admired? 2. She knew the importance of the occasion, and the disappointment and humiliation that would fall on the king, her husband, if she ventured to disobey his command. Should she not have been willing to suffer pain herself in order to save the king from the pain of a public manifestation of revolt against his declared will? Such self-denial is sometimes good, and, whenever good, is praiseworthy. 3. She may have been influenced merely by the wilfulness of pride. All reflection on the claims of duty, on the requirements of the occasion, and on the effects of her conduct on the king's dignity and peace, may have been rendered impossible by the flushings of a resentful pride. Nothing more easily drowns reflection, nothing is more unreasoning and unreasonable, than a haughty and self-exalting disposition. Pride is a bad helm for the guidance of life. 4. Whatever the queen's motive, her answer to the chamberlains may have been given in an abrupt and defiant manner. It is a good quality, and a proof either of self-discipline or of a kindly and sympathetic nature, to be able to express even strong feelings in ways that will not kindle wrath or breed discord. "A soft answer turneth away wrath." We must observe, however, that nothing is said of the manner in which the queen responded to the king's messengers. All we are told is that she refused.

II. CONSIDERATIONS FAVOURABLE TO VASHTI. 1. The king's command showed a want of sympathy with her in her faithful diligence as entertainer of the women. Inside the palace she was doing the work which the king was doing in the garden court. Why should she be called away from this real and appropriate work to pose herself as the central figure of an idle and foolish pageant? The command was inconsiderate and frivolous. Honest work, however secretly performed, is to be preferred at all times to showy ostentations which minister only to the gratification of self. A humble mind and a diligent hand are better in a woman than the most lauded beauty that courts the gaze of the world. 2. The king's command was a

violation of custom. We know the seclusion in which Eastern women then, as now, lived. It was a shame to a woman to appear unveiled before any man except her husband. Vashti would be staggered when she received the message of the chamberlains. National or social customs may be bad, but they cannot be safely or wisely departed from except under the force of enlightened and conscientious reasons. Especially are they binding when any breach of them implies a conscious self-degradation. 3. The king's command was the result of partial drunkenness. Vashti could hardly fail to perceive its cause. She would know that the king could not have issued it if he had been in possession of his sober senses. It is said of one that he appealed from Alexander drunk to Alexander sober. So may have been the thought of Vashti. Rather than subject herself to insult, she would risk the immediate displeasure of the king, in the hope that when he came to his right mind he would perceive the wisdom and propriety of her conduct. 4. The king's command was an outrage on Vashti, as queen, as wife, and as woman. (1) As sole and acknowledged queen of the empire, she could not, without utter loss of dignity, stoop to expose herself, as a royal puppet, to the excited multitude. (2) As the true and legitimate wife of the king, she could not, consistently with wifely honour, allow her beauty to be made a public plaything and gazing-stock at the whim of a wine-flushed and self-forgetting husband. (3) As a woman (apart altogether from outward position), every true instinct would make her shrink from exhibiting herself as a mere wanton to eyes that were inflamed with wine. If she had been of a soft nature she might have yielded, at the cost of much suffering. If she had been proud of her beauty, and shameless, she might have gladly obeyed. But she was neither so soft as to submit to outrage, nor so unprincipled as to welcome it. A modest spirit is the most precious jewel which nature grants to women, and when it is sanctified by the fear of God and the love of Jesus, its power as an instrument of good is wonderfully increased. 5. The king's command threatened the reputation of Vashti. It was given to the chamberlains in presence of the princes and nobles, and it was delivered to Vashti in presence of the women. Thus all were informed of it, and all understood its meaning. If Vashti had obeyed it, she would have lost caste in the estimation of her own sex, and she would have imperilled, if not sacrificed altogether, the respect and reverence of the "princes and people," and even of the king himself. The praise of men may, and often does, cost too much. It should never be allowed to enter into rivalry with the praise of God, or the approbation of a good conscience. At the same time, the esteem of the good—a high reputation for integrity of heart and life—is of exceeding price, and is usually but the reflection of the Divine favour. All who play fast and loose with their reputed character, as honourable or godly men and women, give evidence that they are loosely attached to the sacred principles of truth and virtue (see 1 Pet. ii. 2). Vashti may be taken as an example of devotion to just thought and pure feeling. At all hazards she did what her true mind and heart would only allow her to do. She risked much, and in the event she suffered much. But we do not pity her. Whatever were the motives that inspired her, our sympathies go with her in her refusal to obey the king's command. We give her honour as a woman who, in very trying circumstances, was true to herself and her position. The one act by which she is known has made her name honourable in all time. Her firmness in a critical moment may also be regarded as an illustration of the Divine providence. It produced results which she could not anticipate. It paved the way for that great deliverance of the Jews from the devices of the wicked of which this book is the record. Honest action, whatever troubles it may bring, never goes without its ultimate reward. The lines of self-denying allegiance to truth stretch far; eternity only will realise their full issue.—D.

Ver. 12.—*Anger.* Vashti's disobedience kindled in the king's mind (1) a strong resentment—he "was very wroth." (2) An abiding resentment—"his anger burned in him." Considering the man and the circumstances, this should not surprise us. 1. It was a case of rebellion. The worst crime in the view of a despot is to dispute his will. Nothing so easily inflames anger in a man who is used to power and unused to self-control as any want of submission to his authority. 2. The rebellion was in the king's own household. It was the queen, his wife, who ventured to disobey him.

Men naturally expect a special readiness of sympathy and co-operation from those who are united to them by blood or family ties. And resentment caused by opposition from such relations as wife or children often assumes a peculiar intensity. But weak and self-willed minds are apt to abuse these ties by exacting more than is just. We should be especially considerate in our demands on the obedience or service of those who have the highest claims on our respect and love. 3. The rebellion was made public. A private humiliation is much more easily borne than one suffered in presence of many. Vashti's refusal to appear was announced before the princes and the assembled citizens. This circumstance would add a sting to the affront, and supply fuel to the flame of the king's wrath. One of the penalties of wrong-doing is that it cannot be kept secret. In its effects at least it is sure to become known, and to bring confusion and shame on the evil-doer. 4. The rebellion occurred at an unfortunate time. It was just before the close of the prolonged festival that the queen failed in submission to her husband's command. So far all had gone well. All ranks had been obsequious and flattering. Not a jarring note had arisen to disturb the serenity of the vain king's heart. But now, when the triumph seemed complete, the glory of it was utterly despoiled by the disobedience of Vashti. A bitter sense of humiliation and a burning anger were the necessary results. 5. The rebellion was produced by the king's own act. He had been guilty of a folly that was full of risk. The consciousness that he had brought the dishonour on himself would be no salve to his mind. It would only aggravate the wound that had been inflicted on his pride, and the helpless rage that unmanned him. Sufferings, however severe, that come on us from without are light compared with those that are hatched by our own follies and misdeeds. It has been often observed that the hatred of ungodly men is greater to those whom they have injured than to those from whom they have received injury. According to this law of the natural heart, the anger of the king against Vashti, instead of being allayed or softened, would be increased by the knowledge that she had been driven to rebellion by his own foolish conduct. It should be remarked, however, that though the king's anger can be understood and explained, it cannot be approved. For—

I. **ANGER IS NEVER DIGNIFIED.** It shows a want of self-command. The king lost dignity when he became "very wroth" in presence of his guests. He was no longer king, but a suffering subject under the will or caprice of Vashti. Anger always makes a man look inferior to the occasion that gives birth to it.

II. **ANGER INVARIABLY ADDS TO A SUPPOSED OR REAL HUMILIATION.** If the king had received Vashti's refusal to obey him with a calm mind and a pleasant countenance, as a thing personal to himself and Vashti, and therefore above the observance of the crowd, the last hour of the banquet might have been in keeping with all the other hours that had preceded it. But his breaking into an ungovernable fury brought the festival to a miserable close. The princes and people separated in confusion and fear. The king's anger did not mend matters.

III. **ANGER IS ALWAYS UNJUST.** There can be no true judgment when the mind is perturbed by wrathful feelings. The angry man is shut up to one view of the conduct that has enraged him. He sees everything through the mist of his passion. The last man to judge or act truly is he who has given up the reins of temper, and yielded himself to the power of anger.

IV. **ANGER IS ALWAYS SELFISH.** It is violently selfish. Like the king of Persia, it has no consideration for the thoughts, influences, or circumstances which have actuated those against whom it is turned, or for the initiative or contributory wrong-doing of the heart in which it burns. While it lasts it is simply absorbed by the self that is pained, and has no regard for others. All the springs of charity are dried up when anger rules a soul.

V. **ANGER IS A PROLIFIC CAUSE OF INJUSTICE AND CRUELTY.** It led Ahasuerus, as we shall see, to be unjust and cruel to Vashti. But to what terrible and varied crimes does it give birth in ordinary life! What a place it occupies in our criminal records! How many injure others and ruin themselves by giving "place to wrath!" There is much in the every-day experience of the world to warn men against allowing themselves to yield to the power of anger.

VI. **ANGER IS A SIN AGAINST THE CHRISTIAN RULE OF LIFE.** There is an anger

which is Christlike. "Be ye angry and sin not," said Paul. But that is an anger, or holy indignation, against sin and its temptations. It has reference to things that are evil, and not to persons. Jesus himself hated sin and all its works, but he loved sinners and died for them. We cannot cherish at the same time the forgiving spirit of Christ and the feeling of anger towards any man. It was at once a recognition of our weakness, and a desire that we should strive to overcome it, that led the apostle to write, "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath."

Additional lessons:—We have here an instance of—1. A just punishment. The king's vanity, inflamed by wine, brought upon him a severe retribution. Nebuchadnezzar's madness, and David's grief under the pestilence, were heavy punishments of a vain presumption. But to such a man as Ahasuerus the rebellion of his queen, with all its attendant circumstances, was about as weighty an infliction as was possible. It was peculiarly fitting to the case. 2. A sandy foundation. No miracle was needed to bring down into humiliating collapse the edifice of vain-glory which the king had been laboriously rearing for himself throughout the festival. Many a showy fabric thus unexpectedly tumbles about the head of its builder. A little thing will destroy a false grandeur, an unprincipled reputation, or a selfish happiness. A building to stand must have a good foundation. There is only one foundation—that of God's truth and love in Jesus Christ—on which character, reputation, life-influence, happiness, and hope may safely build. Build there, and when all the storms of life have done their worst, you and your life-work will still abide. The kingdom of Christ is an everlasting kingdom. "They that trust in the Lord shall never be put to shame."—D.

Ver. 13.—*Motives of self-restraint.* If the anger which burned in the king had issued in a determination to put the disobedient Vashti to death, his will would have been obeyed, and his example would not have been singular. History affords many instances of the sacrifice of wives by despotic kings under the influence of violent passion. What withheld Ahasuerus from this last stretch of authority? Several causes are suggested.

I. AFFECTION. Vashti had both beauty of face and form, and nobility of character. That the king was fully sensible of the attractiveness of her presence is shown by his request that she should appear before his guests at the banquet. In spite of her disobedience and the anger it excited in his mind, it is very probable that a lingering affection curbed any desire he may have had to inflict on her an immediate and summary punishment. There are few greater treasures than the power to win such an esteem and love from relatives and friends as will not only be a fruitful pleasure in times of peace, but exercise a restraining influence on tempers that have become turbulent and unruly. Many qualities are needed to give a man or woman possession of it. Yet all, by a godly self-discipline, may acquire it in measure.

II. FEAR. It can hardly be doubted that Vashti's nature was a more powerful one than that of the king. The closing incident of the feast implies that the king was proud of his wife, and that the queen had some consciousness of power over her husband. From the little that is written—little, but telling—we gather that Vashti had been accustomed to a strong personal ascendancy in her intercourse with the king. And now, when anger burned in his heart against Vashti, the weak and self-indulgent king hesitated, and wavered, and sought the advice of others. He was still under the influence of a nature superior to his own. It is well to consider that there are forces in the world higher and mightier than the material. The grace and strength of character possessed by a single woman may be stronger than the wrathful will of a monarch who commands legions, and whose nod millions are ready to obey.

III. LAW. The unalterable character given to the laws of the Medes and Persians displayed, though in an unwise and awkward way, a more than usual respect for the claims of public law. King Ahasuerus inherited a sort of reverence for the fixed code of the empire, and it was "his manner," or habit, to consult legal experts in all matters of difficulty. This habitual regard for law asserted itself in his treatment of Vashti's rebellion, and assisted in preventing his wrath from wreaking itself at once in violent action. The king's recognition of the claims of law is commendable.

Notice—1. That law is the authoritative teaching of experience. It is the accumu-

lated and embodied wisdom of a nation. As civilisation advances in communities, their laws become at the same time more just and more humane, and they acquire inherent force in proportion as they reflect the principles of truth and right. Bad laws imply a low moral and social condition, and can only secure obedience through the fear excited by cruel penalties. Good laws carry with them an authority of their own which has greater power for good than the heaviest penal sanctions. 2. That law is a guide and teacher of the ignorant. There are multitudes in every country to whom it becomes the chief practical educator as to what is right between man and man. The more deeply grounded it is in truth, the higher it will be in influence. The restraints which it imposes, the awards which it metes out, lead men to reflect on the principles and ends which underlie it. If it be based on Christian ideas of justice, those ideas will emerge in the thoughts and mould the character of the people who are governed by it. Law is a great educator. 3. That law is a restraint on the evil-disposed. Even criminals who set law at defiance have their power much crippled by its just punishments. But very many who in heart rebel against it are only kept orderly and reputable in their outward conduct by fear of its rightful authority. Thus society is guarded by it against an anarchy and confusion of wickedness which would make life unsafe and intolerable. On the ground of social order we should cherish and encourage respect for law. 4. That law is a protection to the innocent, the weak, and the right-minded. It throws a benign shield over the young and tender, and it affords an open and safe field for upright living, and for the efforts of holy Christian beneficence. Without law there could be no freedom for the righteous and law-loving. A lawless liberty is the direst of oppressions. As the voice of government, law, in the words of Peter (1 Pet. ii. 14) is "for the praise of them that do well."

From these reflections on law we learn—1. The duty of all citizens. (1) To obey honestly and heartily the law under which they live. A solemn responsibility rests on them to give all honour to constituted authority. (2) To use through legitimate means what power they possess to bring the law of their country into harmony with perfect justice and freedom. Christians are not released by their religion from civil obligations. On the contrary, the faith and life of Christ only sanctifies, and makes more binding on the conscience, the claims of natural, social, and political ties. We learn—2. The immense value of the Christian revelation of righteous law. That law affects all the affairs and interests—the least as well as the greatest—of human life. Nothing lies beyond its sovereign reach. It affects—(1) Nations. The more fully and regally it is admitted into the governments, and laws, and customs of corporate societies, the higher is the level which such societies attain with respect to all the elements that constitute true prosperity and happiness. (2) Persons. Whatever be the outward conditions under which men live, their personal submission to the Christian law of life is an inestimable blessing both to themselves and to others. The Divine law which they recognise in faith and conduct makes them superior to all that is false and injurious in existing human laws; and their example of purity, humility, integrity, charity, and godly fear tells on many hearts that may be watching it in silence. We should be unfeignedly and deeply thankful for Christ's law; for his revelation of the mind of God in perfect holiness and perfect love; and we should strive earnestly to commend it to others, and to infuse it into the law and life of the nation to which we belong. "Oh, how love I thy law!" should be the life-note of individual men and women. "Great peace have they which love thy law," should express their inward comfort, and the incentive of their active labour for God and good.—D.

Vers. 13, 14.—*Counsellors*. I. RESPECT FOR COUNSEL AND COUNSELLORS. This implies—1. A proper humility. Some men are too proud to seek advice from others; they resent it as an impertinence when it is offered. Others place so much confidence in their own judgment that they fail to see the need of extraneous help. But the facts of life, as well as the verdicts of conscience and religion, condemn both pride and self-confidence as foolish and hurtful. How often are they brought low in presence of their own acts! 2. A proper sense of responsibility. We cannot estimate what may be the effect of any particular act. The well-being of others as well as ourselves

may be deeply concerned in conduct which we treat lightly, and therefore heedlessly pursue. A thoughtful consideration of our responsibility to God and our neighbour for our actions and their results would make us welcome the light of a kindly counsel, by whomsoever given. Especially should those who occupy positions of great influence seek and value the aid of good counsellors.

II. QUALIFICATIONS OF COUNSELLORS. Few possess the peculiar gifts and acquirements needed to give them the character of good and trustworthy advisers. Such a character demands a combination of high qualities. This is true in connection not only with matters of grave importance, but with the affairs of ordinary life. In our passage we have certain qualifications indicated—1. Wisdom, or knowledge. The men whom the king consulted on the case of Vashti are called "wise men who knew the times." They were learned in the wisdom of their day, and had studied the laws of the empire and the principles on which they were grounded. A special knowledge is required to grapple with, and throw light on, matters that are involved, perplexing, and attended by heavy risks. In presence of such matters ignorance is helpless or presuming, while imperfect knowledge is sure to mislead. Only a wisdom which is familiar with facts and principles can be trusted in cases where the counsellor is required. 2. Experience. A theoretical knowledge may be good and necessary, but it is not sufficient to guide in practical matters. Men may learn much from books and abstract meditation, but unless they are accustomed to apply what they have learned, or to study its applications, in the events of every-day life, their counsel in cases of difficulty will be of little value. The men whom it was "the king's manner" to consult were skilled both in "law" and in "judgment." Their knowledge was not only ideal or speculative, but practical and experimental. They had trained themselves to apply law in giving judgment. They had learned to discriminate, to weigh evidence, and to pronounce verdicts in the light of existing laws. Experience is the greatest of teachers, and those who have benefited most by its lessons are most capable of discharging the duty of counsellors. As in law, so also in all other human interests. In commerce, the best adviser will be the man who has passed through, in an honourable and successful way, all the vicissitudes of a commercial life. The same is true with respect to religious needs and anxieties. The true counsellor to the distressed soul will be the Christian who has himself experienced the struggles with sin, the renewing grace of God, and the redeeming love of Jesus Christ. 3. Reputation and standing. It is said that the king's advisers were "next" to himself; that they "saw the king's face," and that they "sat the first in the kingdom." Their wisdom had made them eminent, and the effect of their counsel would be in proportion to their eminence. They had much to gain or lose by the answer they might give to the king's proposition. Their reputation and standing were at stake. It is easy for men of small character and influence to offer flippant or heedless advice. But those whose acknowledged wisdom has raised them to a position which gives power to their judgments are usually careful as to the opinions they express. At any rate they stand out before others as possessing a special claim on the confidence of those who require the guidance of enlightened counsel. From this consideration let us learn—(1) The value of a good social reputation. It should be cherished as a treasure beyond price. (2) The influence of a good social reputation. It is incalculable. It tells on many. It works unseen. It goes far beyond the visible sphere of its action. (3) The burden of a good social reputation. It is weighty. A great responsibility attaches to it.

III. A DIVINE COUNSELLOR IS MADE KNOWN. Christ never fails those who trust and follow him. Among his recorded names are "the Wisdom," "the Word," and "the Counsellor." He is interested in all that interests man for time and eternity. His voice may be heard in connection with all duties, all positions, all events—a voice of truth, righteousness, and love. If we listen to him we shall neither live nor die in vain.—D.

Vers. 15, 16.—*Counsel.* The proverb says, "Where no counsel is, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Prov. xi. 14). The truth of this proverb is conditioned by one of two things. It assumes that the counsellors are—1. All wise and true. But this cannot be said of any human assembly, or parliament, or

senate, or cabinet. If any body of counsellors could lay just claim to it, then the safety of a perfect wisdom and truth would be the necessary result. Nothing could resist its power. This condition, however, being impossible, we must resort to the alternative assumption, viz., that the counsellors are—2. All free. In this case the conflict of opinion and aim must ultimately bring to the light what is just and good. It is the principle of free discussion that governs the proceedings of our modern parliaments. Prejudice and corrupt motive may find a place in the doings of such parliaments, but through the controversies which arise truth gradually emerges into power, and sooner or later shapes itself into irreversible laws. Circumstances, however, may elicit advice which is opposed to the better knowledge or free judgment of those who give it. A despotic king, or an infatuated people, may destroy counsel, or force it away from the lines of truth. "What to do with Vashti?" was the proposition of the king to his wise men. From the advice which was given and accepted we learn—

I. SOME OF THE MARKS OF GOOD COUNSEL. 1. It does not flatter. The words of Memucan were framed to please the king. They were very artful in their flattery. Vashti's sin against the king was expanded into a sin against all the husbands in the empire. Her punishment would confer a benefit on both "princes and people" in all the provinces. A soothing and solace to the king's wounded vanity! The desire to please and the desire to be pleased are both enemies to good counsel. 2. It is above fear. As the fear of disgrace or suffering is the greatest trial to honesty of counsel, so the conquering of such a fear, in circumstances that seemed to justify it, is its greatest triumph. Here Memucan and his companions failed. They knew the anger that burned in the king's heart, and their advice showed an anxiety to avert the effects of that anger from themselves. They valued their heads more than their virtue. Under fear, wisdom was willing to assume the guise of cunning. To get good counsel it is better to win confidence than to inspire fear. Fear is always false; love only is true. 3. It is unselfish. Whenever counsel is given, whether with or without asking, it should be entirely in the interest of those to whom it is given. Any underlying element of selfish thought is weakening, if not vitiating. It is clear that Memucan and his fellow wisdom-mongers had much regard to their own position in the advice which they gave. 4. It is just. It takes into view the interests of those whose character or position may be affected by it. Unfair or one-sided judgments are opposed to it. In Vashti's case the counsel given assumed that she had been guilty of conduct that deserved the severest punishment, without so much as noticing the circumstances which led to it and which may have justified or palliated it. It was assumed that the queen had been disobedient, had set a bad example, and had injured not only the king, but the whole empire. Nothing was said of the folly of the king's command. Nothing was allowed for the womanly feelings that were outraged by it. Injustice in counsel deprives it of the quality of goodness or true wisdom. 5. It is reasonable. Any counsel which violates common sense, or bears a ludicrous aspect, is unworthy to be given or followed. Such counsel can only be offered to men who are known to lack a reasonable mind, or come from men who are swayed rather by policy than by principle. The advice given about Vashti is so foolish in its form as to suggest that the "wise men" were befooling their king.

II. HOW DIFFICULT IT IS FOR THE GREAT TO GET GOOD COUNSEL! To secure that advice shall be founded on truth, they must—1. Be known to desire the truth. For the most part, a man possessing power will only receive counsel that is fashioned to suit his character and wishes. If he loves and seeks the truth, those who advise him will speak the truth. A wise and truthful counsel will grow up around him. But if he lives falsely and hates to be disturbed in his false living, the counsel that is given him will be after his liking. 2. Be able to discern the truth. Good instincts will not protect a weak man from the impositions of plausible cunning. A desire to learn and to do what is right may be defeated by a want of capacity to distinguish between competing counsels. This power of discernment, with respect to the quality of advice, greatly varies in men. Some possess it as a natural gift; some only acquire it after long experience; many never get hold of it; all have need to cultivate it with earnest care. It is a great power in the practical conduct of life. 3. Be resolute to learn the truth. For kings and other great people to get good counsel, it must be known that they will only listen to counsel that is good. A desire for the truth, and

a capacity to discern it, may be accompanied by an utter want of active and determined will. Then counsel will become uncertain; honest thoughts will grow timorous in expression; dishonest thoughts will grow bold. An irresolute will favours the solicitude of bad guides. As there is a Divine Counsellor, so there is a Divine counsel—the word of the living God—holy, wise, true, just, loving, and safe. All who take and follow that counsel are made “wise unto salvation,” and are “well instructed” in the things that are “unto holiness,” and that “belong to peace.”—D.

Vers. 17, 18.—*Example.* These verses speak of the force of example, and suggest some thoughts respecting it.

I. THE INFLUENCE OF EXAMPLE IS PECULIARLY SUBTLE AND DEEP. This arises from the fact that it is not an abstract, but a living thing. It is the embodiment of principles, good or bad, in an active human life. It touches and lays hold of, more or less, the actuating spirit of those who come within its circle. Fine professions go for little when personal character and conduct belie them. Nor has precept much power when not conjoined with a harmonious example. “Example is better than precept,” in the sense that it is the action of soul on soul, and will therefore tell on those who see it, when precept will only fall heedlessly on the ear.

II. THE INFLUENCE OF EXAMPLE TRAVELS FAR AND WIDE. It is seen and felt beyond the knowledge or the immediate circle of the man who gives it. Men are observed and their actions weighed when they do not suspect it. When one life is impressed by the example of another, the impression does not stop there, but is conveyed to other lives, and is thus extended indefinitely. This is true of negative as well as of positive qualities, and of ordinary conduct as well as of particular acts.

III. THE INFLUENCE OF EXAMPLE IS CONTINUOUS. Special conduct on special occasions is but a vivid expression of the spirit that animates the daily life. A man's example continues with his life, and being continuous, its influence is accumulative. Even after his death it may long continue to exert power, either through the written record, or through descendants whose character has been affected by it.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF EXAMPLE IS INCREASED BY HIGH POSITION. The higher a man stands in social rank, the more widely will he be observed, and the more readily imitated. There is an instinctive reverence for rank in the human heart which should make royal, noble, or wealthy persons very careful as to the example they set. But all positions are relative. Thus a parent is as great in the eye of a child as a monarch is in view of the subject. The Christian minister in relation to his flock; the teacher to his pupil; the master to his servant; the cultivated to the ignorant—all these also occupy a position of eminence, and their example exerts a corresponding influence.

V. THE INFLUENCE AND TRUE QUALITY OF EXAMPLE ARE NOT ALWAYS TO BE JUDGED BY PREVAILING HABITS OR POPULAR NOTIONS. It may run counter to these and be condemned by them, and yet be good. Passing fashions of thought and life afford no fixed standard of example. Vashti's disobedience was accounted bad as an example because it was a violation of the custom which laid on wives a slavish submission to their husbands. But judged by a higher law than that of custom, her example was good both to the king and to his subjects. Whatever conduct recognises the claims of truth, conscience, purity, and modest self-respect must be allowed to be good; whatever conduct tramples on or is indifferent to such things must be adjudged evil.

VI. THE INFLUENCE AND TRUE QUALITY OF EXAMPLE CANNOT BE FAIRLY JUDGED BY THOSE WHOM IT HAS AFFRONTED and filled with malice or wrath. How could the king in his burning anger, or his advisers under the flame of that anger, do justice to the conduct of Vashti? Wrath is a bad judge.

VII. THE INFLUENCE AND TRUE QUALITY OF EXAMPLE ARE OFTEN MORE JUSTLY ESTIMATED IN AFTER TIMES THAN AT THE TIME IN WHICH THE EXAMPLE WAS GIVEN. As between the king and Vashti judgment now would go against the king. Many a character and many an action, when time has scattered the mists of passion, have appeared in a new light, and received a tardy justice by the reversal of contemporary verdicts.

VIII. THE ONLY PERFECT EXAMPLE KNOWN AMONGST MEN IS THAT OF JESUS, THE

SON OF GOD. The more fully we regulate our conduct by the spirit of his life, the more influential for good will be our own life-example (see Matt. xvi. 24; John xiii. 15; 1 Pet. ii. 21).—D.

Ver. 19.—*Penalties.* In connection with the penalty imposed on Vashti the following remarks may be made:—

I. PENALTIES ARE INTENDED TO ENFORCE LAWS, or, in other words, to deter men from crime. With many law would have little power apart from the penalties attached to the transgression of it. Those who are not governed by virtue, or the love of God and truth, may be commanded by fear.

II. PENALTIES OUGHT TO BE EQUITABLE. As the servants of justice, they should have some real proportion to the trespass committed. Even supposing Vashti to have failed in temper or in wisdom, her punishment was out of all proportion to her fault—most cruel and unjust. Excessive penalties are themselves an injustice, and, as all experience testifies, rather encourage than repress crime.

III. PENALTIES, while being adequate to the offence, SHOULD CONTEMPLATE THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE OFFENDER. The king's decree against Vashti gave no room for explanation, repentance, or amendment. When penalties do nothing more than inflict pain and privation, they are likely to harden transgressors in evil, and thus to prepare new and weightier scourges for the society which they are designed to protect.

IV. PENALTIES SHOULD NEVER BE THE INSTRUMENTS OF VENGEANCE OR WRATH. They should be the award of impartial and unimpassioned justice. Of the punishment of Vashti a burning anger was the spring.

V. PENALTIES SHOULD NEVER BE INFLICTED EXCEPT WHEN GUILT HAS BEEN CLEARLY PROVED. In the action of our law courts the maxim is recognised that it is better to let the guilty escape than to allow punishment to fall on the innocent. The benefit of any doubt is given to the accused.

VI. PENALTIES FURNISH A MOTIVE FOR THE AVOIDANCE OF CRIME ONLY TO THE EVIL-DISPOSED. The good honour and love the principles on which just laws are founded, and freely live by them. If all men were governed by a pure conscience and the love of God there would be no need for penal codes.

VII. PENALTIES ARE ATTACHED TO DIVINE AS WELL AS TO HUMAN LEGISLATION. No law of God can be broken with impunity. In the cross of Jesus Christ mercy and justice meet, and through that sacrifice an infinite mercy is *justly* offered to all men. As to the future punishment of the impenitent we can say little, because little is revealed; that we must leave trustfully with him whose judgments are truth and whose ways are righteous. It should be the prayerful aim of all Christians so to enter into the love of God in Christ as to be raised above the fear of the law. "Fear hath torment;" "but perfect love casteth out fear" (1 John iv. 18).—D.

EXPOSITION. § 2.

CHAPTER II.

THE QUEST FOR MAIDENS, AND THE CHOICE OF ESTHER TO BE QUEEN IN VASHTI'S PLACE (ch. ii. 1—18). Vashti having ceased to be queen, Ahasuerus appears to have been in no haste to assign her dignity to any one else. Probably there was no one among his other (secondary) wives of whom he was specially fond, or who seemed to him pre-eminent above the rest. And he may even have begun to relent in Vashti's favour (as seems to be somewhat obscurely intimated in ver. 1), and to wish to take her back. Under

these circumstances the officers of his court would become alarmed. Vashti's disgrace had been their doing, and her return to power would be likely to be followed by their own dismissal, or even by their execution. They therefore came to Ahasuerus with a fresh piece of advice: "Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king; let officers be appointed in every province to select fitting damsels, and send them up to the court, for the king to choose a wife from among them." So sensual a monarch as Xerxes (Herod., ix. 108) would be strongly tempted by such a proposal (vers. 2, 3).

Ahasuerus embraced it at once (ver. 4), and orders were given accordingly. The quest began, and among other maidens selected by the officials as worthy of the royal consideration, there happened to be a young Jewess, named Hadassah, the cousin and adopted daughter of a Jew called Mordecai, a eunuch attached to the court, who had a house in Susa. Hadassah was beautiful both in form and face (ver. 7), and having been selected by those whose business it was to make the choice, was conducted to the palace, and placed under the care of Hegai, the eunuch who had the charge of the virgins on their arrival (ver. 8). Hadassah, who on becoming an inmate of the palace received the Persian name of Esther (= Stella), attracted at once the special regard of Hegai, who granted her various favours (ver. 9), and after she had been "purified" for a year (ver. 12), sent her in her turn to appear before the king (ver. 16). The result was such as Hegai had perhaps anticipated. Ahasuerus, preferring her to all his wives and to all the other virgins, instantly made her his queen, placed the crown royal upon her head, and celebrated the joyful occasion by a grand feast, and a general remission of taxation for a specified period (vers. 17, 18). Thus the humble Jewish maiden, the orphan dependent for her living on a cousin's charity, became the first woman in all Persia—the wife of the greatest of living monarchs—the queen of an empire which comprised more than half of the known world.

Ver. 1.—After these things. Probably not very long after. Between the great assembly held in Susa in Xerxes' third year, B.C. 483, and his departure for Greece, B.C. 481, was a period of about two years, or a little more. The application of the officers must have been made to him, and the directions to seek for virgins given, during this space. **Ahasuerus . . . remembered Vashti.** With favour probably, or at any rate with regret and relenting. His anger was appeased, and balancing what she had done in one scale, and in the other what had been decreed against her, he may have begun to question whether her punishment had not been too severe.

Ver. 2.—The king's servants that ministered unto him. *I. e.* the great officers of the court, eunuchs and others, who had been more or less concerned in the disgrace of Vashti. **Fair young virgins.** Or,

"young virgins fair to look on" (see ch. i. 11).

Ver. 3.—The house of the women. In an Oriental palace the women's apartments are always distinct from those of the men, and are usually placed in a separate building, which the Greeks called the *gynæceum*, and the Jews "the house of the women." At Susa this was a large edifice, and comprised several subdivisions (see ver. 14). **Hegai, the king's chamberlain.** Literally, "the king's eunuch," *i. e.* one of the royal eunuchs (see ch. i. 10). **Keeper of the women.** Strictly speaking, Hegai seems to have been keeper of the virgins only (see ver. 14); but he may have exercised a certain superintendence over the entire *gynæceum*. **Their things for purification.** See ver. 12. Such a divinity lodged in the Persian king that even pure maidens had to be purified before approaching him! It would have been well if the divinity had been himself less impure.

Ver. 5.—Now in Shushan . . . there was a certain Jew. Hitherto the narrative has been a mere story of the Persian court. Now at last a Jew is brought on the scene, very abruptly; and the history is to a certain extent attached to the other sacred books, and assigned its place, by the genealogy which follows. **Whose name was Mordecai.** The name Mordecai must almost certainly be connected with that of Marduk, or Merodach, the Babylonian and Assyrian god. But it may have been given to his son by a Babylonian Jew without any thought of its derivation or meaning, perhaps out of compliment to a Babylonian friend or master. Another Mordecai, also a Jew, is mentioned by Ezra (ii. 2) and Nehemiah (vii. 7).

Ver. 6.—Who had been carried away. The word "who" may have either Kish or Mordecai for its antecedent. It is simplest, however, and most grammatical (see 'Dictionary of the Bible,' vol. ii. p. 419), to refer it to Kish. Chronological considerations also lead to the same result; and indeed, if we suppose Mordecai to be intended, we must give up the identification of Ahasuerus with Xerxes. **The captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah.** There were at least three captivities of Judah—the first when Daniel was carried away, in the third year of Jehoiakim (Dan. i. 1), which was B.C. 605; the second that here referred to, when Jehoiachin, or Jeconiah, was made prisoner, eight years later, or B.C. 597; and the third when Zedekiah was taken and Jerusalem burnt, in B.C. 586. Kish belonged to the second captivity. **Whom Nebuchadnezzar . . . carried away.** See 2 Kings xxiv. 15; 2 Chron. xxxvi. 10; Jer. xxiv. 1.

Ver. 7.—He brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther. "Hadassah" has been compared

with "Atossa," and "Esther" with "Amestris;" but there is probably no more ground for the one identification than the other. Mordecai's cousin received originally the Hebrew name of "Hadassah," a derivative of *hadas*, "myrtle" (compare "Susannah" from *shushan*, "lily"); but was subsequently called by the Persians "Esther," which may either be *Ishar*, "Venus," or an equivalent of the Zend *stare*, Mod. Pers. *sitarah*, Greek *ἀστὴρ*, Engl. "star," &c. **His uncle's daughter.** Therefore his own first cousin, but probably much younger than himself. **Whom Mordecai . . . took for his own daughter.** Not perhaps by a formal adoption, but by taking her to live with him, and treating her as if she had been his own child. This fact is related to account for the terms of familiarity between the two, which form an essential part of the later narrative. It introduces Mordecai to the reader under a favourable aspect, as kindly and benevolent.

Ver. 8.—His decree. Literally, "his law"—the same word as that which occurs in the phrase "the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not" (Dan. vi. 8, 12, &c.). **Hegai.** The "Hege" of ver. 3. Slight differences in the mode of spelling names were common at this period. **Esther was brought.** Some have rendered, "was forcibly brought;" and in the second Targum on Esther there is a story that Mordecai concealed her to prevent her from becoming an inmate of the royal harem, and that the king's authority was invoked to force him to give her up; but the Hebrew word translated "was brought" does not contain any idea of violence; and the Persian Jews probably saw no disgrace, but rather honour, in one of their nation becoming even a secondary wife to the great king.

Ver. 9.—The maiden pleased him. Literally, "was good in his eyes," the same expression as that which occurs in ch. i. 21. **And she obtained kindness of him.** This is a phrase peculiar to the Book of Esther, and a favourite one with the author (see vers. 15, 17; and ch. v. 2). It is better translated "she obtained favour" (as in all the other places where it occurs) than "she obtained kindness," though the latter translation is more literal. **Her things for purification.** See ver. 12. **With such things as belonged to her.** Literally, as in the margin, "with her portions"—by which is probably meant her daily allowance of food. **And seven maidens.** Rather, "and her seven maidens." It is implied that each virgin had seven female attendants assigned to her. **Meet to be given her.** It was in this point that the "favour" or "kindness" of Hegai was shown. He selected for her use the most suitable of the attendants.

Ver. 10.—Esther had not showed her people. To have confessed that she was a Jewess would probably have roused a prejudice against her, or at any rate have prevented her from being received with special favour. Mordecai, knowing this, had instructed her to say nothing to Hegai on the subject, and no one else, it would seem, had enlightened him.

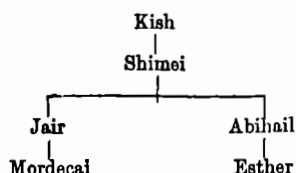
Ver. 11.—Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house. Mordecai seems to have been one of the porters at the main entrance to the palace, and his proper place was at the gateway. He contrived, however, during some part of each day to visit the court in front of the seraglio, in order to see Esther, or at any rate obtain intelligence concerning her.

Ver. 12.—After she had been twelve months, according to the manner of the women. Rather, "After she had been (in the palace), according to the law prescribed to the women, twelve months." A year's purification was considered necessary before any maiden could approach the king (see the comment on ver. 3). **Six months with oil of myrrh.** Myrrh was highly esteemed, both for its scent and for its purifying power, by the ancients. In Egypt it was employed largely in the preparation of mummies (Herod., ii. 86). The Jews were directed to make it one of the chief ingredients in their "holy anointing oil" (Exod. xxx. 23—25). Dresses and beds were scented with it (Ps. xlv. 8; Prov. vii. 17). **And six months with sweet odours.** The word translated "sweet odours" seems to mean "spices" generally (comp. Cant. iv. 16).

Ver. 13.—Then thus came every maiden, &c. Rather, "And when each maiden came thus purified to the king, whatever she asked was given her," &c. The whole verse is one sentence. The meaning is, that on quitting the house of the women for the king's apartments, each maiden was entitled to demand anything that she liked in the way of dress or ornament, and it had to be given her.

Ver. 14.—On the morrow. Literally, "in the morning." **The second house of the women.** The gynæceum comprised at least three distinct houses:—1. A residence for the queen, corresponding to that which Solomon built for the daughter of Pharaoh (1 Kings vii. 8); 2. A house for the secondary wives, or concubines; and, 3. A house for the virgins. On returning from her first visit to the king's chamber, a woman ordinarily became an inmate of the "second house." This "second house" was under the care of a eunuch called Sha'ashgaz.

Ver. 15.—Abihail, the uncle of Mordecai. Literally, "the paternal uncle," or "father's brother." The genealogy may be thus exhibited:—



Who had taken her for his daughter (see the comment on ver. 7). She required nothing, &c. Esther would not trust to the extraneous and adventitious beauty of dress or ornaments, or at any rate would give herself no trouble about such things. If she succeeded, it should be without effort. Hegai might dress her as he pleased. She left all to him. Esther obtained favour, &c. Either this is intended as a general assertion—"No one could ever see Esther without admiring her and feeling favourably disposed towards her,"—or it has special reference to the particular occasion—"No one who saw Esther on this evening but admired her and felt well disposed towards her."

Ver. 16.—**The tenth month, which is the month Tebeth.** This is the only mention of the month Tebeth in Scripture. It followed Chisleu, and corresponded to the end of December and the earlier part of January. The word seems to have come in from Egypt, where the corresponding month was called Tobi, or Tubi. In the seventh year of his

reign. Four years after the disgrace of Vashti, probably in January, B.C. 479. Xerxes had recently returned from the Grecian expedition defeated and disgraced. He was glad to dismiss warlike matters from his thoughts, and to console himself for his failure by the pleasures of the seraglio.

Ver. 17.—**Above all the women.** I.e. "above all his former secondary wives, as well as above all the virgins." The royal crown. See the comment on ch. i. 11.

Ver. 18.—**Then the king made a great feast.** As Persian kings were in the habit of doing on every joyful occasion. **Even Esther's feast.** It seems to be meant that the feast was one which continued to be spoken about, and which was commonly known under this title. **And he made a release to the provinces.** As the Pseudo-Smerdis had done when he usurped the throne (Herod., iii. 87). A "release" was an exemption from taxation, or from military service, or from both, for a specified period. **And gave gifts, according to the state of the king.** Literally, that is, "in right royal fashion" (see ch. i. 7). The practice of making presents, so common in the East at all times, was much in vogue among the Persians, and was practised especially by the monarchs (Herod., i. 136; iii. 135; vii. 26; Xen., 'Cyrop.,' viii. 2, § 7, *et seq.*; 'Anab.,' i. 9, § 22, &c.).

HOMILETICS.

Vers. 1—4.—**Evil counsel overruled.** When a king takes counsel of flatterers and favourites, it bodes no good either to himself or to his people. Such parasites think only how they may make their masters' vices the stepping-stones to their own preferment and power. And a king encompassed with adulation, and encouraged to gratify his own passions, is not likely to rule over his subjects with justice or with wisdom. The ministers of Ahasuerus, in advising him to have his provinces ransacked for beautiful girls, to be brought to him for his approval, that from among the multitude he might select a consort to succeed the disobedient Vashti, were animated by a desire to please the voluptuous monarch, and so to strengthen their own position and influence. Yet even counsel so nefarious was overruled by Divine providence for good.

I. THIS ADVICE WAS IN ITSELF BAD. Oriental despots were encouraged to lead a life of self-indulgence. Yet the counsel given to Ahasuerus passed all bounds of decency. 1. It was bad for the king, who was thereby led to think of his own sensual gratification, rather than of the cares of state which properly devolved upon him. 2. It was bad for the young women themselves, all whose thoughts were engrossed by their desire and plans to please the monarch, and who were encouraged to regard themselves in no higher light than as instruments of royal pleasure. 3. It was bad for the population generally; for the families from amongst whom the maidens were taken to supply the harem of the king, and for the young men who were deprived of wives whose beauty and amiability might assist them in living a virtuous and honourable life.

II. THIS ADVICE WAS NEVERTHELESS OVERRULED FOR GOOD. How apparent is this principle to every thorough student of history, to every careful observer of life! How confirmatory of our belief in a general and particular Providence! 1. The policy in question was directly overruled for the advancement of Esther. A virtuous,

benevolent, and deserving girl was raised from an obscure position to one of eminence and influence. 2. And this policy was indirectly overruled for the deliverance of a nation. Vashti was deposed; Esther was raised to power; Mordecai was enabled to communicate with the throne; Haman was defeated and disgraced; Israel was delivered from the enemy. Such were the links in this chain of Providence.

Lessons:—1. We have no right to give evil counsel in the hope that good may issue from it, to "do evil that good may come." 2. We must not be discouraged when tyrants and flatterers seem to have their own way. The Lord reigneth. He has a thousand ways of fulfilling his own purposes. He bringeth the counsel of men to nought. 3. We must at all times trust and hope in the Lord. He bringeth forth their righteousness as the light, and their judgment as the noon-day. Our extremity is his opportunity. They that trust in him shall never be moved. 4. For we cannot forget that the evil counsel of Caiaphas, the greed or ambition of Judas, the weakness of Pilate, the fury of the Jews, were all overruled for the salvation of mankind!

Vers. 5, 6.—*A captive Hebrew.* Among "the children of the captivity" were some remarkable instances of high character, beautiful patriotism, sincere and conspicuous piety. Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel come before the mind of the student of the later books of the Old Testament as persons who would have been an honour to any nation, any age, any condition of life. Mordecai may claim to rank with, or only just below, these noble men. His career furnishes us with several striking illustrations of the wisdom and efficiency of the plans of Divine providence.

I. We see, in Mordecai's life, HOW PROVIDENCE PREPARES BEFOREHAND FOR THE EVENTS OF AFTER YEARS. Both in his rearing and nurturing his young cousin Esther, and in his preserving the king's life by discovering the plot of the eunuchs, Mordecai was unconsciously preparing himself for the great service which was his chief claim to be held in remembrance and honour. How often do we observe the same fact—the unconscious education of his people by the Lord for the future work to which he destines them!

II. We see, in Mordecai's life, HOW PROVIDENCE CAN RAISE THE LOWLIEST TO THE LOFTIEST POSITION. He was a Jew, a captive exile, a eunuch probably, a servant in some lowly capacity in the palace. Yet he came to be acknowledged as "the man whom the king delighted to honour." He came to be in the king's favour, "was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater," and became "next unto king Ahasuerus." God, in his wisdom, often "exalteth them of low degree."

III. We see, in Mordecai's life, HOW PROVIDENCE CAN USE THE UNLIKELY INSTRUMENT TO DO GREAT SERVICE. Everything we know about this man leads us to the belief, that in selecting him for the work God chose to do by human means, Divine wisdom evinced independence of and superiority to the standards and the expectations of men. Our confidence should be shaken in the plans of men, should be strengthened in the wisdom of God. And we should beware of scorning any child of God, and of counting the lowly as unworthy of confidence and esteem. "Promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the Judge; he putteth down one, and setteth up another."

Ver. 7.—*Esther.* The Jewess after whom this sacred book is called has been always regarded by her nation with affectionate gratitude, on account of the service she rendered to Israel during the captivity. And there are some features of her character which claim our notice and admiration, and which explain the position she holds in the heart of the Hebrew people. We recognise in Esther—

I. FILIAL AFFECTION AND REVERENCE. An orphan, she was adopted by her cousin and senior, Mordecai, who "took her for his own daughter," and "brought her up." Accordingly, she treated Mordecai as her father. His will was law to her. She sought and obeyed his advice. Even when upon the throne she did not lose her reverence for the guardian of her youth.

II. A PRUDENT AND AMIABLE DEMEANOUR. When in a strange place, and in unfamiliar society, and in a difficult position, Esther commended herself to the favour

of those with whom she was brought into contact. Simple, unexact, compliant, she won all hearts.

III. **WIFELY AFFECTION AND DEVOTION.** Esther rapidly gained influence over the king, who raised her to share his throne. She evidently gained her position and influence not by haughtiness and arrogance, but by amiability and affection, by humility and grace.

IV. **SINCERE PATRIOTISM.** "How," said she to the king, "can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" Though raised to be a queen, she did not forget the people amongst whom her earliest years had been passed, and in whose religion she had been trained.

V. **WISDOM AND BOLDNESS OF POLICY.** Esther, as the queen of an arbitrary and capricious monarch, was placed in a position of immense difficulty. She conducted herself with wonderful discretion. Especially she knew when to act with a firm though modest holdness. Her whole conduct, with regard to Haman and with regard to Ahasuerus, was marked by sagacity, patience, and a wise audacity. And it resulted in a conspicuous and happy success. The poor orphan captive came to a throne, and thence wrote with all authority to confirm decrees, delivered a nation from impending peril, and instituted a festival which has lasted through centuries of human history.

Ver. 7.—**Adoption.** Esther was early left fatherless and motherless, and in her orphanage found a friend and benefactor in Mordecai, her cousin, and evidently her senior by many years. He adopted her, and treated her as his own child. Under his roof and protection she lived, until, for her beauty, she was selected for the household of the king. This is but one of many illustrations of the practice of *adoption* issuing in signal advantages to both parties.

I. Observe **THE ADVANTAGES ESTHER SECURED** through Mordecai's adoption of her as his own daughter. Her wants were supplied; a home was provided for her, a suitable education was given her, and her character was trained to habits of obedience and piety. She was protected from the temptations which might otherwise have assailed a beautiful orphan girl. And in due time her station and her work in life were pointed out by Divine providence.

II. Observe **THE BLESSINGS WHICH ACCRUED TO MORDECAI HIMSELF** through his adoption of Esther. His home was brightened by the presence of a bright and lovely daughter; his heart was gladdened by her filial affection and gratitude; his solicitude and care were rewarded by her attention to his wishes and compliance with his admonitions. And, more than all, the time came when his adopted daughter was the agent in saving his life and the life of the community and people to which they both belonged. Never could he regret having received Esther as his own child. Ever must he have looked back upon his adoption of her as one of the wisest acts of his life; as one which God manifestly smiled upon and blessed.

III. Consider **THE LIGHT WHICH ADOPTION CASTS UPON THE RELATION BETWEEN GOD, THE DIVINE FATHER, AND THE CHILDREN OF HIS SPIRITUAL FAMILY.** It is to Divine, adopting love that we owe our position of privilege, happiness, and hope. "What manner of love hath the Father bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God?" Happy we if we have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father! What obligations to gratitude and affectionate obedience are connected with the pity of God and the grace of Christ, through which we have been received into the heavenly family!

Practical lessons:—1. There may be those, people of good means, and childless especially, who may do wisely, who may exercise true benevolence, by adopting an orphan child, and receiving such a destitute one into their home. How much better this than subscribing to an orphan asylum, excellent and useful though that may be. 2. Adopted children are laid under a stringent obligation to recompense the kindness shown them by their benefactors, by their obedience, devotion, and anxiety to serve and please. Scarcely inferior to the claim parents have upon their own offspring is that they have upon the children they have adopted as their own. 3. Great is the mercy of God, who invites us, "by nature children of wrath," into his spiritual family.

There can be no question more momentous for each hearer of the gospel than this "Am I a child of God through faith in Christ Jesus?"

Ver. 10.—*Reserve and reticence.* Both when residing in the king's house, under the custody of Hegai, the keeper of the women, and afterwards, when promoted to be queen, Esther concealed her family and her nationality. This is expressly mentioned in verses 10 and 20, and stress is evidently laid upon her acting thus. A general practical lesson may be drawn from this part of Esther's conduct.

I. THERE ARE OCCASIONS FOR RESERVE AND RETICENCE WITH REGARD TO ONESELF. Such concealment is especially repugnant to our frank and open English habits. Yet there may be reasons and justification for it. 1. *Filial obedience* may require such reticence. Esther was charged to act as she did; and, even when raised to the throne, she "did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him." Her guardian's care of her entitled him to use some authority, which her just gratitude disposed her to acknowledge. 2. *Prudence* may make such reticence expedient. It was probably for Esther's advantage that her nationality should remain a secret in her own bosom. Had it been known that she was a Jewess, an exile, she might have had to endure some suffering, and disfavour, and contempt. There was no sufficient reason for disclosing her kindred and people; no one had a right to interrogate her thereupon; and she was not guilty of falsehood, or of deceit, in acting as she did.

II. THERE ARE OCCASIONS WHEN RESERVE AND RETICENCE MUST BE THROWN ASIDE. The wise man tells us, "There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak." The time came when Esther spoke out, and declared herself one of the exiled and contemned race, against which the haughty minister of state was maliciously plotting. Until then there was no obligation for her to reveal herself; after that moment silence would have been guilty. Christ himself remained silent amidst the accusations and calumnies of the false witnesses; but when adjured by the high priest, he acknowledged himself to be the Messiah, and the Son of God. There is scope for great discretion and prudence in the conduct of those who mix much with the world, and especially of those who are connected with courts and governments. The Christian will often stand in need of that guidance, which can be obtained only by consulting the oracles of God, and by seeking the teaching of the Spirit of all wisdom and grace.

Ver. 11.—*Watchful solicitude.* It is observable that Mordecai did not remit his attention and care when his adopted daughter was taken into the royal palace. He still made it his daily business to ascertain her happiness and her prospects. Remark—

I. THAT THE YOUNG AND INEXPERIENCED NEED TO BE WATCHED WITH A ZEALOUS AND AFFECTIONATE CARE. No person with any experience of human life can be ignorant of this necessity. How many young people have we known who have been ruined for want of vigilance, kindly interest, and wise counsels! It is cruelty to leave the fatherless and motherless beauty to the tender mercies of strangers—perhaps of the wicked.

II. SUCH VIGILANCE AND SOLICITUDE WILL HAVE AN EXCELLENT EFFECT UPON THOSE WHO ARE ITS OBJECTS. It is a protection to a young person to know that she is not forgotten by affectionate and anxious relatives. One who is abandoned by her kindred is very likely to be abandoned by all that is good. We are, all of us, the stronger for the sympathy and interest of those who love us.

III. WATCHFUL CARE MAY BE THE MEANS OF DEFEATING EVIL DESIGNS. It does not seem that, in Esther's case, there was any special reason of this kind for her guardian's vigilance. But in sinful society it may often happen that the protection of honourable and Christian friends may be the means of preserving the young in the paths of virtue and religion. "We are members one of another;" and none should be unconcerned at his neighbour's danger, or unwilling to put forth an effort for his neighbour's safety and welfare.

Practical lessons:—1. Are there none over whom we may watch, for their social happiness and for their spiritual good? 2. Are there not young people who are

indifferent and ungrateful for the service of friendly regard and kindly watchfulness? This is a sin, indeed, of which they cannot too soon repent. By the prayers offered for you, and the tender watchfulness of which you are the objects, I entreat you to follow the ways of wisdom, which are ways of pleasantness and peace.

Ver. 15.—*Favour with men.* We read of Esther that “the maiden pleased” the custodian, and that “she obtained kindness of him;” that she “obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her;” that she “obtained grace and favour in the sight of the king more than all the virgins.” Thus she obtained the influence which she used to so good and benevolent purpose in after years.

I. THERE ARE CERTAIN QUALITIES BY WHICH THE FAVOUR OF OUR FELLOW-BEINGS IS GAINED. Natural endowments are the easiest passport to general favour. A handsome presence, beautiful features, a winning voice, natural and graceful manners, all have great immediate influence with society generally. Genius and heroism, learning and accomplishments, birth and station, all these contribute to popularity. It seems a very easy thing for some persons to become general favourites; yet many of the qualities which secure favour are the result of painstaking and study. In the case of Esther, her extreme beauty, and the simplicity and humility of her demeanour, and the modesty and integrity of her character, all contributed to make her the favourite of the king, and the court, and the people.

II. GENERAL FAVOUR SECURES REMARKABLE INFLUENCE. Men will listen to the counsels or the requests of those who enjoy their affection and esteem. In all stations of life there are those who, being in favour, are therefore in power. Esther used the influence—which another in her position might have employed for selfish ends—for the public good. But had she not won esteem and confidence she would have been without the power to do the great service she rendered.

III. THOSE WHO ENJOY FAVOUR WITH MEN ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ITS WISE EMPLOYMENT. How often have kings’ favourites used their influence for sordid and vile purposes! And how often is popularity prostituted to base ends! Like other “talents,” the favour a Christian enjoys should be used for the promotion of the cause of righteousness and human happiness. For the employment of this, as of other sources of influence, men must give at last an account to God.

Practical lessons:—1. The young should cultivate qualities and habits which may give them favour with men. There is a foolish notion that moroseness is usually associated with independence and integrity. But we have the Scriptural admonition, Be courteous. And we read that the Lord Jesus “grew in favour with God and men.” 2. Those who enjoy favour should endeavour, with watchfulness and prayer, to use the gift for the good of their fellow-men and the glory of God.

Ver. 17.—*Esther made queen.* History records many strange vicissitudes of fortune. The beggar is raised from the dunghill to the palace; the wealthy is brought to poverty; those once flattered and caressed are forgotten or despised. In Scripture history the Arab sheik becomes the father of nations; the boy sold into bondage becomes the prime minister of the greatest of states; the deserted babe becomes the mighty leader of a people; the shepherd lad becomes the renowned king of Israel. And Esther, the poor orphan, adopted by the despised Mordecai, becomes the successor to Vashti, and the queen of Ahasuerus, king of Persia.

I. We have in Esther’s exaltation AN INSTANCE OF THE UNCERTAINTY AND MUTABILITY OF HUMAN LIFE. Here how true it is that “nothing continueth in one stay!” As the ancients figuratively expressed it, “Fortune is ever turning her wheel.” We know that the hand of a wise and overruling Providence is manifest to the eye of faith in all the changes which occur in human life. We should learn not to think too much of circumstances, but to seek in every state to be content, and to be ready to profit spiritually by all events, and to turn every position in which we are placed into an opportunity for serving and glorifying God.

II. Elevation to a high position is AN EFFECTIVE TEST OF CHARACTER. There are some weak and worthless natures which cannot endure when put thus to the proof. Such persons when raised to a lofty station forget, despise, or disown former friends. Other and nobler natures are benefited by promotion. Such persons retain kindly

recollection of former associates, carry with them into new positions the ancient sympathies, even enlarged and refined, and, above all, retain the sweet grace of humility. Esther forgot not the friend of her youth, forgot not the people from whom she had received her knowledge of the true God. And she demeaned herself with the exquisite grace of lowliness when exalted to a throne.

III. Exaltation may bring with it OPPORTUNITIES OF ENLARGED USEFULNESS. Every station in life affords scope for serving our fellow-men. But a station of eminence and authority has pre-eminent advantages of this kind. Noble natures value rank chiefly for this reason, that it imparts facilities to public services. To Esther there came one great and signal opportunity of serving her kindred and nation, an opportunity for which she was indebted to her position as consort of the king of Persia. And she did not neglect to avail herself of the opportunity thus placed within her reach.

IV. Elevation to power may LEAD TO THE ENJOYMENT OF WIDE-SPREAD GRATITUDE AND AFFECTION. Esther used her position in such a way that she has been held by the nation she rescued from ruin in lasting and grateful remembrance. Those who employ power for self-aggrandisement will, by just minds, be condemned; but all who toil "not for their own, but for their people's good," will have their record in the grateful hearts alike of contemporaries and of posterity.

Ver. 18.—*Release and gifts.* Esther's marriage was celebrated in a manner intended and fitted to impress the nation with a sense of the favour and honour with which she was regarded by the "great king." There was a great feast at Susa, that the metropolis might have an opportunity of honouring the new queen. And throughout the kingdom there took place, according to the command of Ahasuerus, such celebrations and observances as were in accordance with Oriental customs. Particularly are mentioned the releases or remissions—it may be presumed from taxation or military service; and the gifts—probably of robes, and in some cases of jewels. We may regard these tokens of kingly favour as emblematic of the blessings provided by Divine mercy in the gospel of Christ for the sinful and needy children of men.

I. The heavenly King favours us, sinners and spiritual bondsmen, with RELEASE AND REMISSION. 1. From the service of Satan. 2. From the thralldom and punishment of sin. 3. By the redemption of his Son, Jesus Christ.

II. The heavenly King bestows upon us, his subjects, NUMEROUS AND PRICELESS GIFTS. 1. As the condition and means of all other benefactions regard him who is "the unspeakable Gift." 2. The gift of the Holy Ghost. 3. The gift of eternal life. 4. Remember that all the bounties of Divine providence come to us as proofs of the Father's love, and through the mediation of Christ.

Practical lessons:—1. Spiritual liberty is provided and offered; the prison doors are opened. Go ye free. 2. Spiritual bounty is at your disposal; "all things are yours." Take and rejoice in the manifold gifts of God.

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Ver. 1.—*Memory's visitation.* The interval here indicated cannot be measured exactly. It is not important, or probably it would have been stated. But some things respecting it are worthy of note: that time is measurable by what we do in it, and by how the individual character grows in it. It is measurable in sadder ways—by all the heap and accumulation of the undone lying at our feet. And once more, among many other ways, we are reminded here how it is measurable by the duration or the cooling down of temper, of "wrath." Though the fiercest passion and the hottest wrath burn out the quickest and cool down the most rapidly, it is not to be forgotten that their effects are not similarly disposed of or reversed. Far otherwise. The fire burns out rapidly because it has finally consumed its fuel, and the hot wrath cools down quickly because it has devoured its prey. These results are irreparable, though the loss they speak, the guilt they fix, the crime they mark, men gladly turn away from—results indeed often incalculable. This passage calls attention to the

subject of *memory's visitations*. We may make a distinction between memory's visits and its visitation. The former often sweet and often welcome, even when most touched with the spirit of sadness; but the latter heralding for the most part reproof, remorse, and the retributive. Let us observe—

I. HOW MEMORY MAY BE HELD IN ABEYANCE; RATHER, UNDER CERTAIN TREATMENT, HOLDS ITSELF IN ABEYANCE. There is a sense in which it neither holds itself in abeyance, owing to any unconscious affronts we offer it, nor is held in abeyance by any distinct and defined efforts of our own. For is it not a thing worthy to be observed, as one of the evidences of a wise and merciful Creator, that memory itself does not insist on an equable exertion of all its power. Wide as its jurisdiction, it is abundantly evident that it is not all equally travelled. Its hemispherical chart shows only some strongly-marked places; multitudinous as the names engraved on its latitude and longitude,—yes, even innumerable,—they were, as regards the enormous majority of them, but very faintly graved, and they become soon enough illegible, indiscernible. The few things which we judge most important to be remembered, we charge ourselves with special pains and by special methods to remember. If memory were obliged to retain all that it had ever taken cognisance of, it is evident that it would choke up all other present exercise of our faculties, and would imperiously stop the working of the mental machinery. It would bring all to a deadlock. On the other hand, and to our present point, there are things which, instead of needing our study and effort and rational methods in order to charge memory to retain them, will need some soporific treatment if memory is to be *disarmed*. All our grand mistakes, all our vivid joys, all our vivid sorrows, all our vivid warnings, all our vivid experiences, of almost every kind—the startled moment, the hair-breadth escape, the pang of irretrievable failure, the moment of supreme success,—all these and their likes write themselves with ink that suffers no absolute effacing, even for the present life; and though it does suffer itself to be dimmed, obscured, and over-written, so as a while to be illegible, this is gained only by methods intrinsically undesirable, very unsafe, very forced. These works of memory are of nature's own quickening, and to try to stifle their due utterance is of the nature of a premeditated offence against nature. It is, with rare exceptions, at an indefensible risk that we consciously dare this, or by any species of recklessness court it. Of the devices of Satan in this sort let us not be ignorant, that we may be the rather fore-armed. Some of the methods of dimming memories that should not be dimmed are illustrated forcibly in the history of Ahasuerus' present conduct; as, for instance—1. The blinding force of the storm of "wrath," of hate, of intemperateness, of lust. 2. The stupefying force of sensuality, of bodily indulgence, and excess of luxuriousness. 3. All headstrong recklessness—the defiant disposition that "neither fears God nor regards man." 4. The enfeebled conscience, and, of necessity, much more the temporarily paralysed conscience. 5. The imperious yoke of self-seeking in all we think, and of supposed self-interest. 6. A heart already callous, hardened by habit, familiarised with sin. These and other causes frighten away the most useful messages of memory, weaken her wings, and she is not to be depended upon to alight with the needed whispers of either warning or encouragement. It is one of the worst of signs, one of the most ominous warnings of approaching spiritual disaster, when memory in certain directions abnegates her rights; offended and grieved, holds herself in the background; or, rudely repelled, seems *awhile* to *accept* the law of banishment pronounced against her.

II. HOW AT AN UNSUSPECTED MOMENT MEMORY RE-ENTERS THE SCENE, WITHOUT DEROGATION OF ITS RIGHTS, AND WITH ADDED EFFECT. It was so to a remarkable degree now. The "wrath," with some concomitant auxiliaries, which had held memory awhile at bay, was subsided, and memory with silent majesty walks in. Its figure is not dim, its utterance is not indistinct, its indictment is not vague. No; the trial must be called on, the debt must be demanded, and interest must be added to debt. With what skilful brevity, of amazing power to suggest, the position is put before us. "Ahasuerus remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her." The arbitrary, licentious man could depose the woman who resolved to maintain her own and her sex's rightful dignity and modesty, but he could not depose his own memory. *She* was a mistress still, and one who stuck

closer than an ill-treated, dishonoured wife. Affection helps memory; he sees with his inner eye the woman he had loved so well once to prefer her to all, and to make her wife and queen. Conscience perhaps in some part helped memory, as memory certainly was paving the way for the future work of conscience. The figure of Vashti was before his inner eye, but *she* herself was not. The law of Mede and Persian stood in the way, crumpled up the law of right, stifled the dictate of affection, and smothered the muffled, incoherent accents of conscience. The hall of trial is in his own disordered breast, but the essentials of the trial are present there nevertheless. He remembered Vashti, and "what she had done"—nothing worthy of divorce, of punishment. All the reflection was upon himself, fell back with a heavy thrust on himself. He remembered Vashti, "and what was decreed against her"—an iniquitous decree, a decree not merely injurious to her, but also to himself and his reputation henceforward down through all the world's time. This is what memory's visitation was now for Ahasuerus, and memory left him in the most appalling condition in which a human heart can be ever left—left him drifting into a woeful BLANK. He missed Vashti. He could not replace her. He has decreed for himself a void which cannot be filled, even though a better object be offered for the void. Memory leaves him again awhile when it has forced this conviction on the unwilling victim, that he has stricken himself sore, and that on himself his "decree" has recoiled.—B.

Ver. 4.—*The verdict of pleasure an untrustworthy basis of action.* If wisdom and goodness sometimes make all profit they can by embracing opportunity, much more often do policy and evil. For the "children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light." They most studiously adapt means to end; they most patiently bide their time; they most unerringly, in this disordered scene, this dislocated system, see and snatch the opportunity. Let us observe here the appeal made to the King Ahasuerus—

I. IN THE LIGHT OF THE OPPORTUNE TIME AT WHICH IT WAS MADE. Meaning much there was in that time. The moment makes often the difference. Now the moment and the man met. A cheerless blank before the king. An aching void within him, as though emptiness were the most veritable existence. We do not indeed read that of this inner vacancy the king said a word or uttered a complaint; he would not make so humiliating a confession. But whether he did so or not, it was no doubt *seen*, and he was seen through by the minions of his retinue and his court. His own "wrath," and, as we have reason to know, matters of state and matters of war, had helped him tide over several months; but un-ease at heart can be no longer endured, and is bound to betray him. Neither momentary diversion of heart nor months' diversion of mind destroys facts, nor turns back dissatisfaction's natural tide. The most they do is to arrest awhile, certain to aggravate after a while.

II. IN THE LIGHT OF THE SPECIAL INNER PREPARATION FOR IT WHICH THE WHOLE HERETOFORE COURSE OF HIS LIFE HAD MADE. That antecedent course of life might have been judged to be a deliberately-constituted preparation for such a moment as the present. No outward opportunity for good or evil, no outward invitation of gain or loss, is comparable for effect with that *opportuneness* which is, which is made, which grows *within*. There is no such ripeness of time as that which comes of ripeness of disposition. If the spark also is to have *its* fair chance, it must fall on touch-paper, dry wood, gunpowder. If an ill-starred suggestion, or the happiest, holiest impulse, is to have each its own due course, the one and the other must fall, though in time's briefest instant, upon the material of a character that has been consciously or unconsciously fitting and maturing a long time for each respectively. An instant's mere hint, whether of good or bad, will not mean much, except it come upon the product of months' or years' education; but if it light upon this, it may.

III. IN THE UNJUSTIFIABLY READY AND HASTY ACCEPTANCE OF IT. There was apparently no consideration of the proposal contained in it. There was certainly no careful exercise of the judgment upon it. No counsellors are called in as before. The seven "wise men which saw the king's face, and sat the first in the kingdom," are not called in to consult. Nay, not so much as an hour's time is reserved before an answer. It seems plainly that all was considered safe, and he acted on a momentary impulse, thinking only of self-gratification. "The thing *pleased* the

king; and he did so." Self-pleasure is made the basis of conduct. The thing that pleases is the right. The thing that pleases is to be *done*. Poor learner, Ahasuerus! He has already forgotten what he was remembering, regretting, only yesterday—the hasty thing “which was decreed against Vashti.” And *that* also was at the suggestion of others—ratified at his own *pleasure*.—B.

Ver. 11.—*A relative's solicitude*. “Mordecai walked every day before the court.” Esther was cousin-german to Mordecai, being the daughter of his father's brother. Her relationship was not, therefore, very close, yet we see what great interest Mordecai took in her. The text teaches us—

I. HOW GOD RAISES UP FRIENDS FOR THE APPARENTLY FRIENDLESS. Esther's parents were possibly very troubled, when passing from this world, as to what would become of their daughter. God, however, found her a protector in Mordecai. God appointed her path in life. Her parents little expected that she would become the queen of Persia, and deliverer of her people.

II. HOW ANXIOUS ARE RELATIVES AND PARENTS WHEN THEIR CHILDREN ARE ENTERING ON NEW POSITIONS. Esther's was not only new, but dangerous. She might have become vain and degraded in mind, like many with whom she had to associate. “Mordecai walked,” &c. He wished to know how Esther succeeded. How our heavenly Father walks “every day” by our side, watching what will become of us!—H.

Ver. 15.—*Simple tastes*. “She required nothing but what Hegai, the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed.” Esther's habits and tastes were simple; she cared not for the various arts supposed to lend attraction; she was content with a moderate toilet, and believed more in the charm of purity, modesty, simplicity, and piety than in artificial methods. She was right.

I. Simple tastes are LESS COSTLY.

II. Simple tastes INDICATE A PURE MIND.

III. Simple tastes ARE THE MOST ATTRACTIVE. Behold in a queen who now lives and reigns over the British Empire—an empire wider by far than that of Persia—the power of simple tastes and habits. It is this that makes the perusal of the ‘Memorial of the Prince Consort,’ and ‘Leaves from the Highland Diary,’ so delightful. It is this that has given her Majesty such a hold on the affections of her subjects, and to monarchical rule a longer lease than it promised to have. Piety and purity have power not only in the palace at Shushan and the castle at Windsor, but in the lowliest cottage of the realm.—H.

Ver. 17.—*An unexpected coronation*. “He set the royal crown on her head.” This crown was a crowning event. It was the signal event of a long and hitherto obscurely-connected series; it was *the one* effect of a series of causes and effects. Up to this point there was no one of all the foregoing to compare with it for significance. It will be well to pause awhile in the presence of this coronation scene. There have indeed been occasions of coronation which have attracted little notice or interest. There have been some supremely sad, although perhaps they have not seemed so to the eye, and at the time. But this coronation scene may be found able to yield much more for thought and profit than most. For undoubtedly it has aspects, some unhappy in their surroundings, others most happy in their substance, which strikingly difference it from very many others. 1. It was not a crown won by effort, either noble or ignoble. It was not one of those crowns which had been lifted to the brow, amid the enthusiastic plaudits of multitudes, as the result of athlete's training, poet's inspiration, or the force of genius. The statesman's anxious toil, the philanthropist's oft self-sacrificing ministry of mercy, the warrior's sword—these had not carved the way to a throne. It was not an occasion of coronation of this sort. In fact, nothing that had been specially done, and nothing that had been specially suffered, showed the way to it—no keen strain of effort, no severe tension of patience. Neither these things, nor anything falling more within feminine range, and answering to them, heralded the gift of this crown. 2. It was not a crown conferred amid surroundings of the most august kind, or associations at all elevating. 3. It was not a crown given by hands

pure, honest, or merciful. 4. It certainly was not a crown of imperishable material, of ancestral renown, or that could be reckoned upon to sit easy, or remain long on the head that now was to wear it.

But amid much to detract from it, there are some things to be remembered highly to the advantage of this crown. 1. The crown was one that was *not* sought with ambitious self-seeking. 2. It was one that did not come of mere hereditary succession. 3. It was one—very rare indeed in this respect—to the attainment of which *moral* qualities did undoubtedly largely contribute. It was the more remarkable because those moral qualities had to make their way, and assert their influence, in the most unfavourable atmosphere, and the most unlikely circumstances. Had Esther ingratiated herself? But it was not the result of wiliness. Had she ingratiated herself? But it was not among the like-minded and the pure of heart. Had she ingratiated herself? It was actually, considering her distinguishing qualities, with the worst kind of character of all for her to go near—the *official* character. Yet bribery had not done it, meretricious ways had not done it, insincerity had not done it, immorality had not done it. The force of simplicity, of contentment, of modesty, of refusal of superfluous ornament—positively *these* things had done it! It is evident that she was a pattern of goodness, after a sort not so commonly recognisable, with those who surrounded her, and with such as they, but which, streaming gently forth, *made* its radiance seen, felt, admired by some of the most unlikely. Esther's docile obedience to her guardian while she lived under his roof, her continued obedience to him after she had left it, her fidelity to the faith and hope of her people, her uncomplaining acceptance of a position decidedly humiliating to one of her race, in consideration of the captive adversity of her people, and still more of those objects which her cousin apparently, but which God really, would work for them by her—these things all bear witness to the deep heart of goodness that dwelt in her. Yet, granting all this, was it not a strange thing that she should so make her way, and “walk the queen,” that they were all ready to designate her such, and that he, with whom the choice and decision lay, at once did so? Many a desirable crown has been won by methods most undesirable. This was an undesirable crown, won by methods full of real honour and grace. 4. It was a crown which God designed for the head which it now reached. This is the best thing of all to be said about it. But for this, it would have nothing really to favour it; with this, it may claim all the rest as well. The providence of God raised the crown, after first raising the head of the humble and meek to receive it. His providence had other ends in view, great and good and kind, for his people. And by the vicarious humiliation of this maiden he wrought great miracles and wonders. For her the outer ornament of such a crown, in alliance with such circumstances, could have had small attractions indeed. But viewed in this other aspect, the crown had in the highest sense the qualities of the “unfading,” the “imperishable.” And for the patient head that now wore it, it was the earnest of another of immortal “honour and glory.”—B.

Vers. 1—4.—*Vain regrets.* We observe here—

I. AN ABIDING MEMORY. The past cannot be wholly shut out from the present. The power of memory cleaves to the soul. The king “remembered Vashti.” Time, which had appeased his wrath, had not destroyed the queen's image, or cast into oblivion the facts connected with her disgrace. The persons and things of the past continue to live in memory either to sweeten or embitter the life. We should lay up nothing in this storehouse but what will bear pleasant review.

II. AN UNAVAILING REGRET. The narrative seems to indicate that as the king's anger against Vashti died out, his love for her returned. But, with other memories, that of the irrevocable decree came into his mind. Whatever his regrets, they were in vain. It is a solemn thought that sins and wrongs once done cannot be undone. Even though bad decrees may be reversed, the evils they have wrought remain. How many through the follies of the present heap up regrets for the future!

III. A STRANGE DEVICE. Of the plan suggested by the courtiers, it may be said—1. That it was significant of the king's state of mind. It showed a perception of the feelings that troubled him. Such an appeal to his sensual nature could only be intended to drown a reviving affection and troublesome regrets. 2. That it was selfish

and cunning. The restoration of Vashti would have been dangerous to those who counselled her disgrace. The possibility of a change in the king's mind was anticipated in the decree that could not be altered. Yet such a king, under the prompting of passion, might break through any legal fiction, and therefore it was resolved to wean him from thoughts of Vashti by the prospect of an unlimited variety of sensual indulgence. 3. That it was heartlessly wicked. No thought or pity was expended on the many fair young maidens who were to be brought from their homes and sacrificed to the lust of the king. The king and his courtiers would probably regard the transaction as bestowing a special honour on its victims. "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." 4. That it was, nevertheless, not out of harmony with prevalent ideas and customs. Few would be shocked by it in all the vast empire. Whilst we hold the truth to be one in all circumstances, our judgment of conduct (like Christ's—Matt. xi. 21) should allow for differences of time and place. 5. That it marks a distinction between heathenism and Christianity. Under Christian rule such a device would be impossible. The mere idea of it excites a shuddering horror in the Christian heart. All heathenisms are hopelessly corrupt. They contain the seeds of their own decay. It is at once a blessed and a responsible thing to live in a country whose institutions, laws, and general life are governed by the Christian truth and spirit.

IV. AN INCURABLE FOLLY. "And the thing pleased the king; and he did so." The novelty of it arrested him; the pleasure which it promised charmed him; all memories and regrets were speedily swallowed up in the anticipated delights of a new self-indulgence. There is a folly which no lessons will teach wisdom, which no experiences will long influence for good. Sin hardens the heart. A yielding to carnal lusts destroys the power of the soul to follow the lights and monitions that would deliver it. Occasional fears and perplexities may arise, but "the dog returns to its vomit."

V. A SUGGESTION OF BETTER THINGS. The pleasures of sin may be fascinatingly great to the ungodly who have not tested their fruits. But however alluring, experience proves them to be short-lived, degrading to our nature, and laden with an ever-growing and corroding bitterness. They are not to be compared with the higher delights that spring from a virtuous and self-denying life, a conscious fellowship with Jesus Christ, a trustful obedience to the heavenly Father's will, a possession of the hope that is full of immortality (see Gal. v. 19—26).—D.

Vers. 5—20.—*Esther*. The strange plan adopted for the providing of a new queen in the room of Vashti resulted in a *good choice*. We need not assume that Esther was a willing candidate for royal honours. The account we have favours the belief that she passively yielded to a power which she could not resist. Among the attractive qualities she possessed, we may notice—

I. BEAUTY. She had a fair form and a good countenance. Physical beauty is not to be despised. It is one of God's gifts, and has much power in the world. Yet it exposes the soul to special danger. When not sanctified and guarded by the grace of God, it becomes a ready minister to vanity and varied sin. Moreover, it is frail and precarious. A temporary illness will destroy the brightest beauty. A few years will wrinkle the face of youth, and give a tottering gait to the most graceful form.

II. MODESTY. Esther's beauty did not make her vain and foolish. She avoided all arts to adorn it and increase its effects on others. Modesty is a lovely grace which adds a new charm to the highest physical beauty. It conciliates and wins by its own gentle force. An immodest assertion of one's self in any circumstances indicates either a want of moral sensitiveness, or a want of intellectual sight. A pure heart, a true self-knowledge, and the fear of God, are all and always modest.

III. DISCRETION. In her new and trying position Esther never failed in prudence. This was the result not of skilful planning, but of a good training, and of a modesty which quickly saw what was becoming. She made no effort to please (ver. 15). The very simplicity and artlessness of her conduct won her the favour of the king's servants, and finally drew to her the preference of the king himself. Truth and wisdom are one. There is no brighter jewel in womanly character than the discretion which reflects a simple and true heart (Prov. xi. 22).

IV. DUTIFULNESS. One of the most attractive qualities of Esther was her daughter-

like fidelity to her foster-father Mordecai, both before and after her election to the throne. She admired, loved, and trusted him, and submitted as a child to his guidance. Young people dislike restraint, and long for the freedom of independence before they are ready to bear the responsibility of it. They often fret under the wise and affectionate safeguards which their parents impose. Yet in after life most men and women are willing to confess that they were very ignorant in youth, and that it would have been well for them if they had understood better, and followed more fully, the parental admonitions which seemed so irksome.

V. INTEGRITY. Esther bore well the sudden flush of prosperity which came upon her. This is first and best seen in her unchanging regard for the man who had been the guardian of her orphaned childhood and youth. Her elevation to Vashti's place made no change in her reverent affection for Mordecai. We read that she "did the commandments of Mordecai like as when she was brought up with him" (ver. 20). A very beautiful and instructive example! Changes in condition often work sad changes in heart and conduct. Many grow false to themselves and their past, and to those who formed the chief good of their past, when some tide of prosperity raises them into a higher social circle, and creates new ties which can have no sympathy or connection with the old ones. Nothing is more despicable than that pride of worldly advancement which forgets or looks coldly on early friends whose humble fidelities of affection may have laid the foundation of future success.

The character and conduct of the Jewish maiden teach us—1. A higher beauty than the physical. In all precious qualities beauty of mind and heart far transcends the most brilliant beauty of face or form. The "beauties of holiness" are the best adornments of man or woman. "Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary" (Ps. xcvi. 6). "Zion is the perfection of beauty" (Ps. l. 2). The prayer of the Church is, "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us" (Ps. xc. 17). 2. A better possession than worldly rank. The treasure of a good understanding in the fear of the Lord is of more value than any grandeur of outward circumstance. A soul that is humble, patient, trustful, loving, holy, Christlike, has riches that all the gold of Ophir or the diamonds of Golconda could not buy, and is elevated higher than if it were to occupy the greatest earthly throne (Eccles. vii. 12; Matt. vi. 19—21; John vi. 27). 3. The importance of early training. Youth is the seed-time. Seeds are then sown which, in the after life, will surely bring forth fruit either good or evil. Well-meaning parents may be sometimes unwise, and well-trained children may sometimes go astray; but the rule is—"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Esther may be taken as an illustration of the powerlessness of worldly influences to change the feelings of the heart, or the judgments of the mind, or the government of the life, in the case of one who in early youth has been trained, under loving care, in the principles and practices of a holy religious life. 4. The truth of the saying, "Man proposes, but God disposes." In all the incidents connected with Esther's election to be queen we see the guidance of an invisible hand. The narrative is brief, simple, and artless; but on that very account it impresses us all the more with the conviction of a Divine purpose and leading.—D.

Vers. 5—20.—*Mordecai*. Mordecai possessed a lofty nature, and was destined to do great things; but our notice of him here is restricted to his relation to Esther up to the time when she was made queen. He presents to our view—

I. A FINE NATURAL DISPOSITION. When his cousin Esther lost her parents he "took her for his own daughter." His heart and home were at once opened to the little orphaned girl. The natures of men vary greatly. Some are born tender, some hard; but all may do much to cultivate the softer affections of sympathy and love. The ties of kindred and friendship afford many opportunities for their exercise.

II. A RECOGNITION OF THE DIVINE LAW. Mordecai's adoption of Esther was in accordance with the spirit of the Mosaic legislation. As a good Jew, he could scarcely have done otherwise. This, however, does not detract from the pure benevolence of his conduct. The good actions of religious people are often regarded as mechanical and constrained, as springing rather from a slavish fear of authority

than from a willing and loving heart. On this point observe—1. That natural light and strength are insufficient. All history and experience teach that when left to himself man becomes hard-hearted and cruel in his self-regard. 2. That a Divine revelation of truth with respect to relative and other duties is an unspeakable benefit. It is a clear light amidst the dark confusions of sin. 3. That good natural dispositions are purified and strengthened by a reverence for Divine truth. Mordecai, apart from religious influence, might have charged himself with the care of his orphaned relative; but, if so, his sense of obligation to Jehovah's law would deepen his compassionate interest, and give a sacredness to the adopted duties of fatherhood. The religion of God adds power and freedom to the exercise of all affections that are unselfish and good.

III. A FAITHFUL DISCHARGE OF ACCEPTED DUTY. It was no grudging place that Mordecai gave to his cousin in his family. He did not put her there, and then allow her to grow up neglected. There is much significance in the words "he brought her up." They imply, as the result shows, that he bestowed loving attentions on her; that he trained her carefully, tenderly, and religiously. It is not enough to acknowledge duty; the important thing is to discharge it. "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them" (John xiii. 17).

IV. A HELPER IN TIME OF NEED. Before Esther was removed from her adopted home, Mordecai had time to speak to her words of comfort and instruction. One piece of advice he gave her was that she should keep secret her lineage or nationality (ver. 10). It was meant to protect her from needless humiliations and troubles, and perhaps to remove a hindrance to her reaching the dignity of wifehood and queenhood. From this fact we gather that the fatherly Mordecai spent the moments that preceded the parting in administering solace and courage and wise counsel to the trembling maiden. A true love never fails, and it shines brightest in the sympathies and succours which suffering claims.

V. A CONTINUING CARE. Mordecai did not cease to watch over the charge whom God had entrusted to him when she was removed into another sphere. Separation did not diminish his love or relax his care. He had evidently an appointment which allowed him to be near her; for we read in ver. 11 that he "walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her." Some parents think that when they get their children off their hands, as it is called, they have met every obligation of duty. Mordecai thought and acted differently, and in this he was a type of Christ, who, having loved us from the first, loved us to the last; who, when we were led captive by sin, still loved and cared for us, and became himself our ransom; who, now that he is ascended above all heavens, is still ever near to guide us by his word and Spirit in the way that leads to a crown and throne immortal. "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matt. xxviii. 20).

Concluding lessons:—1. As followers of God and his Christ, we should consider the orphaned and needy (Ps. lxxviii. 5; James i. 27). 2. God blesses those who, like himself, are compassionate and merciful. Mordecai was amply rewarded for all his faithful and loving care of the orphan child, in the beautiful, modest, wise, winning, courageous, and pious woman who became the queen of Persia and the saviour of Israel (Matt. x. 42).—D.

Vers. 5—16.—*The pagan harem and the Christian home.* Every one is inclined to feel kindly toward the orphan Esther, who, at her own great risk, rendered such signal service to her race. But her introduction to us as one of the candidates for royal favour, among several other women of the harem, is far from pleasing. Under the teaching and influence of Christian truth we have formed habits and acquired instincts and sensibilities which are so far removed from those of Eastern lands, that it is difficult to read, without a strong prejudice, even this purely-written page. We have suggested to us—

I. A STRIKING CONTRAST BETWEEN A PAGAN HAREM AND A CHRISTIAN HOME. We have the virgins "requisitioned" from all the provinces (ver. 8), the fairest and finest being taken from their parents and friends; a large part of the palace specially assigned them before admission to the king's chamber (ver. 8), and another devoted

to them afterwards, when they had become his concubines (ver. 14); the extensive and protracted preparation, or "purification," including everything that could conduce to bodily comeliness and sensuous gratification, and extending over an entire year (ver. 12); the introduction to the royal presence after a choice made by the maiden herself of whatever she thought would adorn her person (vers. 13, 14). In all this we have an extravagant and evil provision for one man's satisfaction. Well had Samuel warned his countrymen (1 Sam. viii.) against the monarchy of those times and lands. It meant the elevation of a single individual to a post of such dignity and power that the people were much at his mercy and held their life, property, and honour at the caprice of one erring and passionate mortal. How excellent and how pleasing to be led away in our thought by the suggestion of contrast from the heathen harem to the Christian home. This is based on *mutual spiritual attachment*. It is *spiritual*; for the love which precedes and justifies a union of man and wife is not an ignoble passion nursed by such sensuous attractions as the king's chamberlain spent his ingenuity in perfecting; it is a beautiful combination of esteem and affection; the pure admiration which is felt for the beauty of virtue, for spiritual graces, as well as for fineness of form and sweetness of face. It is *mutual*. No union is sacred, in Christian morality, if the love of the one is not returned by the affection of the other. And, therefore, it is *lasting*; not lingering for a few weeks or months at most, but extending through the whole life, and becoming more real as the years go by. Begun in youth, it glows in prime, and shines with serene and steady light through declining years. Let us mark here a *proof of the excellency of our holy faith*. One of the very worst consequences of the reign of sin in this world is the degradation of woman. Meant to be man's helpmeet and companion as he walks the path of life, she became, under its dominion, the mere victim of his ignoble passion. But what has the Christian faith done for woman, and through her for society? It has introduced such purity and elevation of spirit, that it is painful even to read a page like this; so that it has become a "shame to us even to speak" of the things heathenism does without any shame at all. What a contrast between the Christian home, at this day, and the home of the Mahomedan and the heathen! It is the handiwork of Jesus Christ.

II. AN INSTRUCTIVE INSTANCE OF GOD'S WAY OF WORKING (vers. 16, 17). It is true that (vers. 6, 7) Mordecai was a kindly and generous man, treating his uncle's daughter, Esther, as his own child; it is true that the "fair and beautiful" Esther was modest, and cared not to deck and trim herself with ornaments, that "she required nothing but what Hegai, the king's chamberlain, . . . appointed" (ver. 15). But we should not have supposed that God would condescend to use such a heathen custom as this to place one of his people on the Persian throne, and, by such means, to provide for the rescue of the Jewish race. Yet he did. He thus brought it about, in his providence, that one who feared him and was disposed to serve his chosen people "obtained grace and favour in the sight" of the king (ver. 17), and had "the royal crown set upon her head." He who "makes the wrath of man to praise him" can make other passions of men to serve him. We must not be hasty in concluding that God is not working in some sphere, or by some instrument, because it may seem to us unlikely. God not only rules, but overrules. And when we can take no part in institutions, or are obliged to refuse to enter circles, or can have no fellowship with men, because to do so would compromise our principles, we may stand by and pray that the overruling hand of Heaven will compel even those things, or those men, to subserve his cause and the welfare of the world.

III. A HOPEFUL FACT FOR THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD. As heathenism and Mahomedanism perish—and both are "marked to fall"—such a system as that described in this chapter becomes impossible. In place of it is the purifying influence of the Christian home. What flowers and fruits of virtue, wisdom, kindness, diligence, purity, bloom and ripen there. The future of the world is in the Christian parent's hand. Let the fathers and the mothers of Christendom do their duty in (1) teaching the truth of Christ, and in (2) training their sons and daughters in all Christian virtues, and then there will go forth an influence for good which will permeate and regenerate the world.—C.

EXPOSITION. § 3.

MORDECAI'S DISCOVERY OF A PLOT AGAINST AHASUERUS' LIFE (ch. ii. 19—23). Some time after Esther had been made queen, there was a second collection of virgins at Susa (ver. 19), under circumstances which are not related, and which were probably of small importance. *At this time* (ver. 21) Mordecai, still serving in his humble office at the palace gate, from which he had not been advanced, since Esther had told no one that he was her relation (ver. 20), happened to detect a conspiracy against the king's life, which had been formed by two of the palace eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, whom Ahasuerus had somehow offended (ver. 21). Being still in the habit of holding communication with Esther, Mordecai was able to make her acquainted with the facts, of which she then informed the king, telling him how she had obtained her knowledge (ver. 22). There was nothing surprising or suspicious in a eunuch of the palace having had speech with the queen, especially when he had intelligence of such importance to impart to her. On inquiry, the king found that Mordecai's information was correct; the conspiracy was laid bare, and the conspirators put to death (ver. 23)—the facts being, as was sure to be the case, entered in the court chronicle, a daily record of the life of the court, and of the circumstances that befell the king. It was to have been expected that Mordecai would have been rewarded for his zeal; but somehow or other it happened that his services were overlooked—he was neither promoted from his humble office, nor did he receive any gift (ch. vi. 3). This was quite contrary to ordinary Persian practice; but the court generally may have disliked Mordecai because he was a Jew.

Ver. 19.—When the virgins were gathered together. Rather, "When virgins." There is no article. The fact seems to be mentioned simply as furnishing a date, and we must suppose both that there was a second gathering, and that the time when it happened was generally known to the Jews and Persians. **Then Mordecai sat, &c.** The three verses, 19, 20, 21, hang together, and form a single sentence: "When virgins were gathered together a second time, and Mordecai was

sitting in the king's gate—now Esther had not showed her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had charged her; for Esther did the command of Mordecai like as when she was brought up with him—in those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, being of the number of them which kept the threshold, were wroth," &c.

Ver. 20.—Esther had not yet showed, &c. This is inserted to account for the humble position still occupied by Mordecai. In the East a person's relations usually rise with him; and the reader would naturally expect that when Esther was once queen, Mordecai would have become rich and great. Esther's silence accounts for Mordecai's low estate; Mordecai's command (see ver. 10) accounts for Esther's silence. **For Esther did the commandment of Mordecai.** The royal dignity did not change Esther's heart. She was still the dutiful child she had been so many years. Mordecai had forbidden her to tell her kindred; he had not removed his prohibition, so she had kept silence.

Ver. 21.—In those days. Or, "at that time" — *i. e.* at the time when the second gathering of the virgins took place (see ver. 19). **Two of the king's chamberlains.** Rather, "eunuchs." Bigthan, or Bigthana (ch. vi. 2), is probably the same name as the Bigtha of ch. i. 10, and possibly the same personage. **Teresh** is not mentioned elsewhere. **Of those which kept the door.** Two of the eunuchs who guarded the entrance to the king's sleeping apartment. This was a position of the highest possible trust, and gave conspirators a terrible advantage. Xerxes actually lost his life through a conspiracy formed by Artabanus, the captain of his guard, with Aspamitras, a eunuch and chamberlain (Ctes., 'Exc. Pers.', § 29).

Ver. 22.—And the thing was known unto Mordecai. Josephus says that a certain Pharnabazus, a slave of one of the conspirators, betrayed them to Mordecai ('Ant. Jud.', xiv. 6, § 4). One of the Targums on Esther attributes his discovery of the plot to his knowledge of languages. But it is probable that these are mere guesses. **And Esther certified the king thereof.** The original is simpler, "And Esther told it to the king." **In Mordecai's name.** Mordecai's name thus came first before the king. Esther mentioned him as her informant, but did not say that he was related to her (comp. ch. viii. 1).

Ver. 23.—It was found out. The subsequent history shows that Mordecai's information was found to be correct, since he was ultimately adjudged to have deserved the

highest possible reward (ch. vi. 6—10). The two conspirators were condemned to death and hanged on a tree, i. e. crucified or impaled, as traitors and rebels commonly were in Persia (see Herod., iii. 159; iv. 43; 'Behist. Inscr.' col. ii. pars. 13, 14; col. iii. par. 8). And it was written in the book of the chronicles. Historiographers were attached to the Persian court, and attended the monarch wherever he went. We find them noting down facts for Xerxes at Doriscus (Herod., vii. 100), and again at Salamis (*ibid.* viii. 90). They kept a record

something like the *acta diurna* of the early Roman empire (Tacit., 'Ann.' xiii. 31), and specially noted whatever concerned the king. Ctesias pretended to have drawn his Persian history from these "chronicles" (*ap.* Diod. Sic., ii. 32), and Herodotus seems to have obtained access to some of them (see the writer's 'Herodotus,' Introduction, ch. ii. p. 56). Before the king. I. e. "in the king's presence." This was not always the case; but when the matter was very important the king exercised a supervision over what was written.

HOMILETICS.

Ver. 20.—*Filial obedience.* Esther was an adopted child. Her debt to Mordecai was very great, for nurture, care, training, and affection. And she was not forgetful of her obligation; she gladly repaid the solicitude of her cousin by her gratitude, reverential regard, and filial obedience. The habit of obedience continued in after life. As far as was consistent with the higher relation of married life, she maintained her grateful and affectionate subjection to her kinsman. If this was right and just, how evidently is it a duty for children carefully to display and exercise the virtue of filial obedience.

I. THE HABIT OF FILIAL OBEDIENCE SHOULD BE FORMED EARLY. It is of very little use for a parent to begin to exercise authority, to require obedience, in after life. If the child has not from its infancy been accustomed to obey, it is highly improbable that the habit will be formed in youth.

"'Tis education forms the youthful mind;
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined."

There is reason to fear that in our days more children are ruined by indulgence than by harshness; multitudes by the foolish alternation of the two opposite and equally pernicious modes of treatment. If early formed, the habit of obedience will "grow with the child's growth, and strengthen with his strength."

II. THE DEMANDS UPON FILIAL DUTY SHOULD BE REASONABLE. There was occasion for the admonition, "Fathers, provoke not your children to wrath." Capricious and arbitrary requirements are destructive of all respect, and will only secure compliance whilst there is no power to withhold it. Little children cannot always understand the reason for parental injunctions and prohibitions. But it is wise, as children grow up, to show them the justice and expediency of household regulations, &c. Tyranny on the part of the parent is likely to awaken resentment or to foster deceit on the part of the child.

III. AFFECTION AND GRATITUDE WILL MAKE OBEDIENCE EASY AND DELIGHTFUL. There may be a stage in a child's education when compulsion is necessary and proper; but, generally speaking, the appeal must be that of love to love. A parent's will is a child's law where the parent is wise and the child is grateful and affectionate.

IV. THE REVERENCE AND OBEDIENCE OF CHILDREN SHOULD, WITHIN LIMITS, BE CONTINUED IN MATURER LIFE. A wife's obligations are primarily towards her husband. Still there is force in the English proverb, "A daughter's a daughter all her life." Still she will not forget her father's house, her mother's love. God's blessing ever rests upon this beautiful virtue of filial love and obedience. This was expressed in the commandment with promise, "Honour thy father," &c.

Vers. 21—23.—*A plot in the palace.* All arbitrary governments are liable to conspiracies; all arbitrary, absolute monarchs to assassination. Especially has this been the case in all ages with Oriental despotisms. We know from history that it was so in Persia; and in fact this very Ahasuerus, if he was the Xerxes of history, fell afterwards a victim to a foul conspiracy. It was not always a political motive that

prompted such plots; the motive was oftentimes personal—it might be ambition, or covetousness, or envy, or malice, or revenge.

I. We have here the record of A CONSPIRACY HATCHED. The conspirators were chamberlains, officers of the royal household, probably under an obligation to the king for favour shown. What passion influenced them, what aim they sought, we do not know. But their plot was hateful and iniquitous, and in any case inexcusable and indefensible. Happy is the nation which is under constitutional government, and in which there is no temptation to secret plots.

II. We have here the record of A CONSPIRACY DETECTED. It was discovered by an alien, and a person in a lowly, even obscure, station. How Mordecai detected the plot we are not told; but he had the opportunity, through his adopted daughter, of communicating with the court, and thus frustrating the abominable designs of the conspirators. Thus Esther's influence would naturally be increased.

III. We have the record of A CONSPIRACY PUNISHED. The avenging was swift and stern. The punishment was probably cruel—by crucifixion or impalement. A quaint writer has said, "Traitors, like bells, are never well tuned till well hanged!" No state can tolerate secret plots against the life of those in authority. Yet such plots have often originated in the sense of wrong, in the crushing feeling of helplessness, in the frenzy of despair. "Oppression makes wise men mad."

IV. We have here A CONSPIRACY RECORDED. The narrative was inserted in the chronicles of the kingdom for subsequent reference. Thus it served as a memento to the king, as a memorial of Mordecai and his services, as a warning to conspirators, as an encouragement to loyalty.

Practical lessons:—1. Evil purposes are often defeated, and their abettors punished. "Be sure your sin will find you out!" 2. Mean agents may aid in great enterprises. How often has an obscure subject secured the safety of the sovereign or the state! 3. The providence of God may overrule men's crimes, and make them the occasions of great and signal blessings!

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Ver. 20.—*Worldly policy.* A superficial view might lead to an unqualified admiration of Esther and Mordecai, the principal characters in the scene before us. And not without reason, for they exemplify in their conduct some of the nobler qualities of human nature. With regard to Esther, note—1. *That she remembered in her prosperity the associations of the past.* This did credit both to her head and to her heart; it evinced her sound sense as well as her humble-mindedness. It is pitiable to witness sometimes the way in which those who have risen in the world forget their lowly origin; they look down with contempt upon those who are still in the position which they themselves once occupied; and nothing wounds their pride more keenly than the slightest allusion to the home of their childhood. But such a miserable display of weakness only degrades them in the estimation of all right-minded men. Esther was very different from this. Amidst the splendours of the royal palace she could not forget her former obscure lot. And this must have been an ennobling power in her soul, elevating her above the corrupt influences of a profligate court. 2. *That she showed gratitude to the man who had befriended her in adversity.* She had been left a helpless orphan; and must have been thrown upon the mercy of a heartless world, had it not been for the timely succour of her generous kinsman. But there are natures upon whom such services make no lasting impression. They are altogether absorbed in self. Affluence, luxury, ease, harden their hearts, and make them utterly insensible even to the claims of gratitude. But Mordecai's kindness to Esther embraced her entire being; it pervaded all the motives which fashioned her life. Whenever she hesitated how to act, she would put to herself the question, "What would Mordecai advise?" and upon the answer would depend her course of conduct. And this is the highest style of affection, which issues in obedience, self-renunciation, submission to another's will. With regard to Mordecai, note—3. *That he had made the greatest sacrifice for the sake of another.* He must have loved Esther deeply, tenderly,

devotedly. And no wonder. Her beautiful form, and still more beautiful soul, could not have developed themselves beneath his eye without stealing away his heart. But when the grand prospect of her being raised to the throne presented itself, he hesitated not to give her up. So far we are constrained to admire. But deeper reflection makes us pause. In this most important juncture they seem to have been too completely actuated by mere POLICY. That success crowned their efforts is no excuse for their conduct. On the same ground you might justify some of the most hideous stratagems ever devised by depraved ingenuity. Never let the dazzling glare of the prosperity sometimes attendant upon false moves make us blind to the beauty of eternal principles. Nor can they be excused on the ground that they were carrying out the designs of Providence. For in the same manner you might justify the conduct of Joseph's brethren in selling their brother, and even the conduct of the Jews in crucifying the Saviour. What is POLICY? It is the substitution of the expedient for the right. It is the spirit which constantly asks, What will best promote our own interests? Instead of asking, What will best satisfy the immutable claims of justice, truth, and honour? Observe—

I. THAT POLICY HAS A WORLDLY AIM. What is worldliness? An inordinate love of the present, the sensual, the temporal, with corresponding neglect of the future, the spiritual, the eternal. Any line of conduct that is prompted by this temper of the heart must be accounted worldly. Esther had set her mind upon the crown, and Mordecai supported her ambitious views. From a heathen standpoint it was a glorious prize, but to a Jew it was a forbidden acquisition. Probably they contrived to conceal from themselves their real aim by investing it with fictitious attributes. 1. Esther might have desired to elevate the religious tone of the court by gradually making known the God of Israel. 2. Mordecai might have hoped to serve his nation by placing at the seat of power one who would be willing to help them in time of need. But wrong can never be right. We may glorify it with fine names, forgetting that a change of name does not necessarily imply a change of nature. Let us consider how policy affects men's conduct in politics, in religion, and in private life. (1) *In politics.* Wars are sometimes undertaken, with the professed aim of extending to benighted races the blessings of civilisation and Christianity, whose real object may be to flatter national vanity, and satisfy the greed of rulers. Thus base acts acquire a dignity from the halo cast around them by high-sounding names. (2) *In religion.* Men will contend for the success of a religious party, with whose prosperity their own honour is bound up, under the mistaken notion that they are fighting the battles of religion itself. Like the idol-makers who defended the faith of their ancestors by crying out, "Great is the Diana of the Ephesians," while they thought of nothing so much as the gains of their own craft. (3) *In private life.* Think of illegitimate trades. They are engaged in simply because they happen to be lucrative. A man opens a gin palace, and finds that his coffers are rapidly filling with gold. To allay any qualms of conscience which may occasionally disturb his peace, he pictures to himself the vast power for good which an accumulated fortune may place at his command; but in his heart of hearts he really worships wealth.

II. POLICY STOOPS TO QUESTIONABLE MEANS. Granted that the crown which Esther sought to secure was a lawful object of an Israelite's desire, how did she endeavour to accomplish her purpose? 1. By contracting an alliance with a heathen monarch, which the Jews, as God's chosen people, were expressly forbidden to do. 2. By becoming that monarch's concubine before she became his wife. The loose notions in reference to this amidst which she had been educated may explain her conduct, but cannot justify it. It may also be urged that she had no option in the matter, that the monarch's will would brook no opposition, that disobedience might bring death. The only reply is that death is better than dishonour. 3. By having recourse to duplicity. She never made known her people, for fear it might interfere with her chance of promotion. In all this it is evident that Esther—and Mordecai, her adviser, too—had thought more of what was expedient than what was right. Note—(1) *That the conduct of good people, even in the most important transactions, are not always to be imitated.* Not only in small matters, but also in great matters, are they liable to err. Precedent is a poor standard to appeal to, for it may mislead us when the most momentous principles are at stake. (2) *That true heroism consists in doing right,*

irrespective of the consequences. This heroism has its type in Daniel rather than in Esther; in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego rather than in Mordecai. If you want to see the highest heroism, you need not gaze upon the battle-field, where men, through the maddening excitement of the conflict, defy death at the cannon's mouth, for there it cannot be found. Rather let your wondering eyes be directed to the martyr dying at the stake, to the pioneer of truth braving the scorn of the world, to the patient worker for the common good who toils in obscurity, and seeks no higher reward than the approval of his own conscience.—R.

Vers. 21—23.—*Conspiracy and fidelity.* I. THE INSECURITY OF ANY POSITION THAT IS NOT WELL FOUNDED. The throne of a despot is like a house built on the sand, or like a city under which smoulder volcanic fires. There is no darker page in history than that which records the doings and sufferings of despotic rulers. It is in the nature of an autocratic rule, which subjects the liberty of multitudes to the will of one man, to breed discontents and plottings. When truth and justice are outraged, time only is required to vindicate and avenge them. The first and third Napoleons may be taken as illustrations in modern times. The present Czar of Russia is a just and merciful man, but, occupying a false position, ruling a vast empire not through free institutions, but by personal will, his reign is troubled by the dark conspiracies which now create such fear and horror. The government of that country alone is secure where law and liberty go hand in hand together; where reverence for the throne is maintained by a strict regard for the rights of the people, and where the national constitution and the national life are based on principles that lie deep in the word of God.

II. THE INSECURITY OF LIFE GENERALLY. The king of Persia's life hung by a very slender thread when the two traitors were conspiring. One blow, and all his grandeur would have faded under the dark shadows of death. But all life is insecure. Death has a myriad forms. None are free from it. A cold, a slip of the foot, a breath of unseen vapour may put out the living spark, and quench every earthly hope. A thought so solemn should lead all to take earnest care that their life-building is *well founded*—built into that foundation of Christian truth and grace which cannot be moved. Christ in the heart conquers the fear of death, and turns the "last enemy" into a friend (John xi. 25, 26).

III. THE VIRTUE OF FIDELITY. We cannot tell how Mordecai discovered the design of the conspirators. He may have been asked to join them, or he may have heard or seen enough to awaken suspicion and make him watchful. In any case, he was faithful to his trust, he was loyal to the king whom he served. In all the relationships of life there are attached responsibilities and duties to which we are bound before God and man to be faithful. Fidelity is due, for example, to our sovereign, our government, our country; to our parents, our masters, our associates; to our Church, our brethren in the faith, our God and Saviour. Treachery is a vile sin against God and man, and a grievous enemy to the heart that cherishes it.

IV. FIDELITY HAS A GOOD ALLY IN WISDOM. It is a delicate and dangerous matter to interfere with the dark plottings of unscrupulous men. One needs to be sure of his ground before he charges others with unfaithfulness of any kind. But Mordecai was as prudent as he was loyal; a man of experience, of resource, and of self-reliance. He first made himself sure of the facts, and then by means of Esther secured that the plot should be quietly divulged, and that the two traitors should be seized before they had time to conceal evidence, or concoct a defence which might deceive the king, and cover with shame their bold accuser. Charges against the virtue of men should never be lightly made. A rash and impulsive fidelity may do more harm than good. A wise head works well with a true heart. It is noteworthy that Esther showed at once her confidence in Mordecai's prudence, and her desire to gain for him the credit of his fidelity, in her "certifying the king (of the plot) in Mordecai's name."

V. FIDELITY BRINGS OPENINGS FOR GOOD SERVICE IN ALL RANKS OR POSITIONS. Mordecai was a humble man, yet, being faithful to present duty, a time came when he could do, and therefore did, important service. It is wrong and foolish to despise any position, however lowly. A young man may at first occupy a post that is not

encouraging either in its duties or in its rewards, but persevering fidelity will in due time make its mark and attract attention and respect; and when that occurs the way to success lies open. So also in the field of Christian labour. The service of Christ is confined to no station. Loyalty to the Saviour's truth and name is all that is required to make any man fruitful in good works. The very lowliest may be, in his own circle of influence, as a light shining in the darkness, as a living epistle of Christ, known and read of men. There are endless ways of serving Christ. Opportunities are never wanting to the faithful. God never fails to use and honour those who live in the truth of his word.

VI. THE WANT OF FIDELITY IS A HIGHWAY TO DISGRACE AND RUIN. The plotters against the king of Persia were no doubt very secret and very clever; yet they were found out and doomed to death. Such crimes oftener fail than succeed. It is one of the striking features of historical crime that it has so generally failed, and that the projectors of it have so uniformly met with just retribution. In almost every criminal plan there is some weak point or person; some oversight, or over-confidence, or miscalculation, or unexpected contingency. Righteousness is the real law of God's universe, and when violated it always, in some time and way, exacts a just penalty. Nor are the issues of evil confined to the present life. "We must all appear before the judgment-seat of Christ."

VII. FIDELITY HAS A SURE REWARD. 1. It is always its own reward. The consciousness of having resisted and overcome evil, of having been faithful to duty at all risks, is better to the heart than any gain of gold. 2. Though not always recognised at once, it is sure in time to be duly seen and honoured. In the long run even the world seems to get light, and to do justice, with regard to noble acts which at the time of their performance were allowed to pass unheeded. Mordecai's loyalty and its result were recorded in the king's chronicle only to be forgotten. Yet a time came when the record met the king's eye, and touched his heart, and brought a power to the faithful Jew which enabled him to foil the project of the would-be destroyer of his race. 3. Man may forget, but God remembers. It was in the line of God's providence that the fidelity which saved the king's life should be brought into prominence, and receive its reward, at the proper time. Whether our faithfulness to duty be recognised or overlooked by men, it should be enough for us that God knows it, and records it in his book of remembrance—to be brought to light in his own great day.

VIII. FIDELITY TO GOD EMBRACES AND SANCTIFIES THE DUTIES OF EVERY SPHERE. To be true to God is to be true to men. Every sin against man is a sin against God. Every failure of duty to those above or about us in the world is a breach of fidelity to God's holy and gracious will. Treachery on earth is viewed as treachery in heaven. A solemn fact! The more fully we submit to God, the more heartily we love and follow Jesus, the better shall we be and do as parents and children, as masters and servants, as rulers and ruled, as friends and fellow-workers, and as members of a Christian Church. Loyalty to God means a true and holy life.—D.

Ver. 23.—*Convicted conspirators.* "And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out." Two men, Bigthan and Teresh, had a grievance. The king's favouritism may have pained them, or their own ambition galled them. Absolute systems of government, like that in Persia, generally foster conspiracies. Kings have always been "fair marks for traitors." Queens also have shared this danger. Our Queen Elizabeth said, "In trust I found treason;" and, "I marvel not so much that I am, as that I am not." Bigthan and Teresh, owing to their position as chamberlains, had every opportunity of poisoning the king when awake, or assassinating him when asleep. They had a plan, and were as careful to keep it to themselves as possible; but it became known, and "inquisition was made of the matter," &c.

I. THE MOST CAREFULLY-CONCEALED PLANS ARE LIABLE TO BE MARRED BY UNTHOUGHT-OF INSTRUMENTALITY. It is right to plan for success in our lawful undertakings. We should have no plans but such as those on which we can ask God's blessing. To plot against the welfare of others is always dangerous. Plotters are ever likely to "hoist with their own petard." Accident may mar our plottings. A word dropped, or a look passed, may betray. There is generally some Mordecai who

carries the whisper to an Esther, and an Esther who carries it to the one most interested. Sometimes God directly thwarts wicked planning. Pharaoh said, "I will pursue," &c., but God "blew with his wind." "They sank as lead in the mighty waters."

II. UNWORTHY PLANNINGS ARE OFTEN SUBJECT TO THE KEENEST SEARCHINGS. The king made thorough investigation into the matter. He did not condemn on mere hearsay or suspicion. Many, in the anxiety to protect self, are seized with prejudice which hinders just deliberation. A watch was set. Manners, companions, places of resort were marked. Inquisition was made.

III. ALL WRONG-DOING WILL SOONER OR LATER BE DISCOVERED. "The thing was found out." Bigthan and Teresh learned their folly when suffering impalement, the usual punishment of traitors in Persia. They might not have been discovered. Wickedness is sometimes successful in this world, and evades justice. That which may escape detection by men cannot pass the eye of God. Ahasuerus little knew what was in the hearts of those men, but God knew. Bigthan and Teresh would have served Ahasuerus as Ehud did Eglon, or Joab, Abner. Learn—1. That there will be inquiry into our lives, our acts and motives. 2. That none will be exempt from the searching. 3. That we should take warnings given in kindness. Suppose Ahasuerus had paid no heed to Mordecai's warning; he would have lost crown, throne, and life.—H.

Ver. 23.—*Written, but not remembered.* "It was written in the book of the chronicles before the king." The king had been delivered from danger, but he seems to have overlooked the deliverer. Ahasuerus had at least one faithful subject, Mordecai. This man had proved his loyalty by his acts, while Bigthan and Teresh paid the penalty of disloyalty by being hung. Criminals and the righteous were alike spoken of, in the chronicles of the king.

I. MAN, EVEN WHEN HE PROMISES TO REMEMBER BENEFITS, IS LIKELY TO FORGET. Ahasuerus commanded Mordecai's act to be recorded. He intended to reward him. Mordecai doubtless expected some recognition of his services, but he was for a long time disappointed. It is a "black blot" on the name of Ahasuerus that he forgot his indebtedness.

II. GOD NEVER FORGETS MAN'S GOOD ACTS OR EVEN KINDLY THOUGHTS. All are written in his book of remembrance (Mal. iii. 16). He, the King of kings, gives reward beyond our deserts. We should remember how much we owe to Christ, who is the good Mordecai who warns and saves us. We should write it in our memories that we owe everything to him for his grace and forbearance. Not until we reach the other world, and look over life's history, shall we know how much we owe to him.—H.

EXPOSITION. § 4.

CHAPTER III.

MORDECAI, BY WANT OF RESPECT, OFFENDS HAMAN, AHASUERUS' CHIEF MINISTER. HAMAN, IN REVENGE, RESOLVES TO DESTROY THE ENTIRE NATION OF THE JEWS (ch. iii. 1—6). A break, probably of some years, separates ch. ii. from ch. iii. In the interval a new and important event has occurred—a new character has made appearance upon the scene. Haman, the son of Hammedatha, an Agagite (whatever that may mean), has risen high in the favour of Ahasuerus, and been assigned by him the second place in the kingdom. It has been granted him to sit upon a throne; and his throne

has been set above those of all the other "princes" (ver. 1). He has in fact become "grand vizier," or chief minister. In the East men are so servile that a new favourite commonly receives the profoundest homage and reverence from all classes, and royal orders to bow down to such an one are superfluous. But on the occasion of Haman's elevation, for some reason that is not stated, a special command to bow down before him was issued by Ahasuerus (ver. 2). All obeyed as a matter of course, excepting one man. This was Mordecai the Jew. Whether there was anything extreme and unusual in the degree of honour required to be paid to the new favourite, or whether Mordecai regarded

the usual Oriental prostration as unlawful, we cannot say for certain; but at any rate he would not do as his fellows did, not even when they remonstrated with him and taxed him with disobedience to the royal order (ver. 3). In the course of their remonstrances—probably in order to account for his reluctance—Mordecai stated himself to be a Jew (ver. 4). It would seem to have been after this that Haman's attention was first called by the other porters to Mordecai's want of respect—these persons being desirous of knowing whether his excuse would be allowed and the obeisance in his case dispensed with. Haman was violently enraged (ver. 5); but instead of taking proceedings against the individual, he resolved to go to the root of the matter, and, if Mordecai would not bow down to him because he was a Jew, then there should be no more Jews—he would have them exterminated (ver. 6). It did not occur to him that this would be a matter of much difficulty, so confident was he of his own influence over Ahasuerus, and so certain that he would feel no insuperable repugnance to the measure. The event justified his calculations, as appears from the latter part of the chapter (vers. 10-15).

Ver. 1.—**After these things.** Probably some years after—about B.C. 476 or 475. **Haman, the son of Hammedatha.** "Haman" is perhaps *Umanish*, the Persian equivalent of the Greek Eumenes. "Hammedatha" has been explained as "given by the moon" (*Mahadata*), the initial *h* being regarded as the Hebrew article. But this mixture of languages is not probable. **The Agagite.** The Septuagint has *Bovyaioi*, "the Bugæan." Both terms are equally inexplicable, with our present knowledge; but most probably the term used was a local one, marking the place of Haman's birth or bringing up. A reference to descent from the Amalekite king Agag (Joseph., 'Ant. Jud.' xi. 6, § 5) is scarcely possible.

Ver. 2.—**All the king's servants.** Literally, "the king's slaves"—the lower officers of the court, porters and others, of about the same rank as Mordecai. **Bowed and revered Haman.** *I. e.* prostrated themselves before him in the usual Oriental fashion. **For the king had so commanded.** No reason is assigned for this order, which was certainly unusual, since the prostration of an inferior before a superior was a general rule (Herod., i. 134). Perhaps Haman had been elevated from a very low position, and the king therefore thought a special order requisite.

Mordecai bowed not. Greeks occasionally refused to prostrate themselves before the Great King himself, saying that it was not their custom to worship men (Herod., vii. 136; Plut., 'Vit. Artax.' § 22; Arrian., 'Exp. Alex.' iv. 10-12, &c.). Mordecai seems to have had the same feeling. Prostration was, he thought, an act of worship, and it was not proper to worship any one excepting God (see Rev. xxii. 9).

Vers. 3, 4.—**The king's servants, which were in the gate with Mordecai,** were the first to observe his disrespect, and at once took up the matter. Why were they to bow down, and Mordecai not? Was he any better or any grander than they? What right had he to transgress the king's commandment? When they urged him on the point day after day, Mordecai seems at last to have explained to them what his objection was, and to have said that, *as a Jew*, he was precluded from prostrating himself before a man. Having heard this, they told Haman, being curious to see whether Mordecai's matters (or, rather, "words") would stand, *i. e.* whether his excuse would be allowed, as was that of the Spartan ambassadors who declined to bow down before Artaxerxes Longimanus (Herod., i. s. c.).

Ver. 5.—**When Haman saw.** Apparently Mordecai's disrespect had not been observed by Haman until the "king's servants" called his attention to it. Then, naturally enough, he was greatly offended, and felt exceedingly angry at what seemed to him a gross impertinence. Mordecai's excuse did not pacify him—perhaps seemed to him to make the matter worse, since, if allowed, it would justify all the Jews in the empire in withholding from him the respect that he considered his due.

Ver. 6.—**He thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone.** If Haman had simply said to Ahasuerus, "There is one of your menials who persistently disobeys a royal edict, and at the same time insults me," Ahasuerus would, as a matter of course, have told him to put the menial to death. But the revengeful temper of the man was such that this seemed to him insufficient. Mordecai had insulted him *as a Jew*, and the Jews should pay the penalty. Mordecai should be punished not only in person, but in his kindred, if he had any, and in his nation. The nation itself was contumacious and troublesome (ver. 8); it would be well to get rid of it. And it would be a grand thing to wipe out an insult offered by an individual in the blood of a whole people. Haman therefore sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. Massacres on a large scale—not unknown in the West, witness St. Bartholomew's—are of frequent occurrence

in the East, where human life is not held in much regard, and the caprices of absolute monarchs determine the course of history. There had been a general massacre of the Magi upon the accession of Darius Hystaspis,

the father of Xerxes (Herod., iii. 79), and one of Scythians about a century before (*ibid.* i. 106). These were examples which might occur to Haman. A later one is the Roman massacre of Mithridates in B.C. 88.

HOMILETICS.

Ver. 1.—*The wicked exalted.* The temporary favourite of Ahasuerus was unworthy of the position to which he was raised, and the power with which he was intrusted. History has preserved the record of no meaner, baser character than Haman. He was a man servile and cruel, who used his power for disgraceful purposes. His conduct towards all with whom he was connected was alike despicable. His history and fate may be taken by the moralist as a type of the exaltation and fall of the wicked.

I. THE ARTS BY WHICH THE WICKED RISE. The basest selfishness takes the guise and garb of loyalty. Flattery is the surest road to a monarch's favour. Corruption, unscrupulousness, desertion of friends, betrayal of associates, slander of rivals, these are the means by which many have risen to share the favour of a king, to preside over the movements of a court, to control the affairs of a nation. Here observe the too common weakness of kings and those born to greatness.

II. THE TEMPORARY PROSPERITY WHICH THE WICKED ENJOY. Once in favour and in power, the world seems at their feet. They have influence with the sovereign; they are encompassed with the adulation of courtiers; they exercise power, even arbitrary and unjust, over fellow-subjects; they are lifted up with pride.

III. THE CERTAINTY OF THE FALL OF THE WICKED. From how great an elevation, and into what an abyss of misery and ruin, did Haman fall! The greater the height, the more calamitous and awful the headlong plunge. Sin rages and beats upon the shore. But above its hoarse roaring rises the voice of the All-wise and Almighty Disposer of events—"Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed!"

Practical lessons:—1. Be not envious at the prosperity of the wicked. The Psalmist seems to have been tempted to this childish and ignoble failing. He saw the wicked in great power, spreading himself like the green bay tree; but when he went into the sanctuary of God, then understood he his end. 2. Be not dismayed at the spectacle of power in wicked hands. It cannot be for long. A righteous Providence will bring the devices of the wicked to nought. The greatest man is not omnipotent. "The Lord reigneth." He bringeth down the lofty from their seat, and exalteth those of low degree!

Vers. 1—6.—*Foolish pride and wild resentment.* The lesson of this portion of the narrative is one concerning human sin. In some places Scripture seems to depict the character and the conduct of sinners in such a way as to impress the mind of the reader with what is called "the exceeding sinfulness of sin." And what more natural and appropriate than such representations of human iniquity in a book which brings to us the remedy for the disease, and the liberation from the bondage, which afflict mankind? In the temper and conduct of Haman we recognise the fruits of man's sinful nature.

I. Remark Haman's SINFUL PRIDE. It arose from his favour with the king, and from his position in the state, and was no doubt encouraged by the homage that was paid him by the courtiers and the people. His pride was hurt and mortified at the refusal of Mordecai to render him the honour he was accustomed to receive from all around. And the hurt was aggravated by the fact that the servants of the king observed the Jew's conduct, and reported to Haman his marked discourtesy and insult. What made the matter worse was the obscure position and despised nationality of the single person who did him no reverence.

II. Remark Haman's RESENTMENT. His pride was the occasion of his anger; his anger stirred up purposes of revenge; his revenge took a wild, inhuman form. Mordecai had transgressed the king's command, and his conduct had been noticed by

the king's servants. And it was this which gave a colourable pretext for the favourite's wrathful counsels and plans of destruction.

III. Remark the **UTTER DISPROPORTION BETWEEN MORDECAI'S OFFENCE AND HAMAN'S PROPOSED REVENGE.** A trivial slight was so laid to heart that it aroused a ferocious spirit, for the satisfaction of which no shedding of blood, no desolation of cities, could suffice. The great lesson to be learned from this frightful picture of human depravity is the extent to which sin will lead the victim. If so hateful a vice as pride be encouraged, if so mean a purpose as one of revenge be fostered, to what frightful crimes may the wretched sinner be led! There is one preventive and preservative: "Let that mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus!"

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Vers. 1, 2.—*Danger of quick success.* I. A **SUDDEN ADVANCEMENT.** In a short time Haman was placed above all the princes. The officials of the court were commanded to give him reverence and worship. There seemed to be nothing which the infatuated king was able to refuse him. A quick rise to power, and one that would be envied by many! In most hearts there is a strong craving for rapid success. But it is a mistake to suppose that sudden or easy success is a benefit. For observe—1. Prosperity is better borne and enjoyed when it is the result of long and steady effort. It is a sweeter and more honourable possession when it comes as the reward of conscientious toil. 2. The self-denying labour which, as a rule, is necessary to prosperity is itself an incalculable benefit. It brings into healthy exercise the physical and mental endowments. It develops many manly qualities.

II. **AN INORDINATE CRAVING FOR QUICK ADVANCEMENT HAS A BAD EFFECT ON THE HEART.** Some who never realise their desire continue to cherish it even against hope until the end. This is a cruel thirst, which dries up all the springs of happiness and kindly good in the soul. It is an idolatry which hardens, withers, embitters, and which robs life of all that would make it noble and good and happy. *Haste* not to be rich. *Haste* not after any of the world's prizes. We should strive to preserve a worthy independence of mind and heart in connection with whatever end we may be working to achieve.

III. **SUDDEN PROSPERITIES ARE OFTEN BADLY OR DOUBTFULLY GAINED.** The rise of Haman was not the result of admirable personal qualities, or of important services rendered to the state. From what is recorded of him we are entitled to infer that the arts by which he won the king's favour were degrading both to himself and to the king. An atmosphere of suspicion gathers round all sudden and abnormal successes. They are not the rule amongst men who follow legitimate courses. It is a terrible folly to stake our all on anything the world can give. No wealth, or rank, or fame can compare with the treasure of God's friendship and love (Isa. xxxiii. 6; Matt. vi. 19—21).—D.

Vers. 2—5.—*Contrasts.* Haman was not allowed to enjoy his high and ill-gotten position without trouble. Almost at the outset it brought him an annoyance which led to tragical results. In connection with this check to the triumph of his course, notice—

I. **THAT A REAL AND MARKED CONTRAST EXISTS BETWEEN THOSE WHO "FEAR GOD" AND THOSE WHO "LOVE THE PRAISE OF MEN."** The servants who "sat in the king's gate" readily obeyed the command that they should do homage to the favourite—all except one. Mordecai stood erect, with no fear or reverence in his look or attitude, when Haman passed in and out of the palace. It was a sight worth seeing, that of this man, too noble to bend to the world's idol, before which all others stooped in slavish adulation. Between Mordecai and his companions in office there was an evident gulf.

II. **THAT CONDUCT WHICH CONTRASTS WITH THEIR OWN OFTEN EXCITES AN INQUIRING CURIOSITY IN THE WORLDLY.** His fellow-servants at once noticed Mordecai's singularity. They daily questioned and expostulated with him, but "he hearkened not

unto them." In silence he listened, and still disobeyed the king's command. Sincere inquiry is to be encouraged, and kindly met; but a prying curiosity into the affairs of others is unmanly, and to be reprobated. "Busy-bodies" in the Church were duly noted by Sts. Paul and Peter (2 Thess. iii. 11; 1 Pet. iv. 15).

III. THAT CONTRASTS OF BEHAVIOUR WHICH SEEM TO REBUKE EASILY AROUSE THE SPIRIT OF MALEVOLENCE. Overcome by the importunity of his companions, or perceiving that his continued silence was regarded by them as an indication of his being afraid to speak out, Mordecai at length declared that he was a Jew, and gave that as a reason why he could not abase himself, as they did, before Haman. This announcement awakened in their minds a deeper and more evil curiosity. Their pride was wounded by the Jew's implied claim of superiority. How would it go with him if Haman were told of his obstinacy and its reason? So they told Haman. It was mean and wicked; but they were hurt, and they no doubt expected that the all-powerful favourite would soon compel the Jew to a behaviour in harmony with their own. Small minds, that bend before every breeze of authority or fashion, readily become ungenerous, and conceive malice towards those who are stronger than themselves in principle or self-respect (1 Pet. ii. 1—3).

IV. THAT IT TAKES LITTLE TO MAR THE ENJOYMENT OF A FALSE GREATNESS. The sight of Mordecai standing upright amongst the prostrate attendants of the palace filled Haman with a fierce and vindictive wrath. True greatness is magnanimous. It is above resenting little affronts, or jealously exacting the signs of outward respect. It does not rest on the humiliation of others. But Haman's glory was tarnished, and his happiness soured, by the stubbornness of one man who occupied a lowly position compared with that of the favourite. Mordecai was the fly in the ointment of his pride.

V. THAT A FALSE GREATNESS CONTAINS WITHIN ITSELF THE CAUSES OF TROUBLE AND DANGER. It is necessarily suspicious and exacting. Doubt and fear are ever springing up in its path. It imagines affronts when none are intended, and magnifies small annoyances into hostile designs. It is thus often driven into passions and crimes which endanger its existence. All evil ambitions possess in the heart of them the seeds of their own punishment. God vindicates himself in the natural working of human vanities.

Lessons:—1. Hate every false way, however alluring. Beware of its deceitful promises. 2. Cultivate a generous spirit. Show respect to rights of others. Avoid humiliating those who are dependent on you, or below you in social rank. 3. Make God your law-giver and guide, and Jesus your example and trust.—D.

Vers. 4, 5.—*A loyal disobedience.* Mordecai's conduct was indeed striking. All the circumstances added to its impressiveness. The influences that ruled him must have been powerful. Why did he refuse to give homage to Haman? Why was he willing to disobey the king's command?

I. WAS HIS DISOBEDIENCE TO THE ROYAL WILL THE RESULT OF A DISLOYAL SPIRIT? That could not be; for he had recently given a most signal proof of his loyalty in discovering the plot of the conspirators against the king's life. He was true to the king even when he disobeyed him.

II. WAS HIS DISOBEDIENCE THE RESULT OF A VIRTUOUS DISLIKE OF THE WICKED FAVOURITE? Any amount of aversion for so worthless a creature would have been justified. But such an antipathy would hardly account for his disregard of the king's command. Here duty would have stepped in and saved at once his conscience and his self-respect. It must be remembered that he braved the king as well as Haman.

III. WAS HIS DISOBEDIENCE TO THE KING A RESULT AND EXPRESSION OF HIS OBEDIENCE TO THE KING OF KINGS? We now get near to the springs of his singular conduct. Nothing but this loyalty to the God of Israel will account for his calm and persistent daring. The unworthy character and the false eminence of Haman would no doubt have their effect on his mind. But it is only by considering the religious faith and principle of Mordecai that we can reach the true motive that actuated him. And here let us learn some things from the example of the heroic Jew. 1. A wise concession. So long as we can work honourably with those who

differ from us in faith and opinion we should gladly co-operate with them. Religious differences should not interfere with civil duties or national obligations. It is laid on both Jews and Gentiles to be loyal to the throne or government under which they live. A wise conduct is especially required in the followers of God whose lot is cast in heathen lands. While true to their faith in all things, they should avoid an inconsiderate and irritating obtrusiveness. Their aim should be to win by a holy guile, *i. e.* by "the meekness of wisdom" (James iii. 13), rather than to repel by a crude and unsympathetic assumption of superior light. There are such things as casting pearls before swine, and swine turning and rending the foolish spendthrift. 2. A good confession. Whenever a time comes when silence as to our faith would be a sin, we should speak, and speak plainly. There should be no hesitation in naming God, or in witnessing for Christ, when occasion demands a clear testimony. When Mordecai saw that his silence was misinterpreted he declared his Jewish origin and faith. He was an Israelite and a worshipper of the Jehovah of Israel, and as such he could not give worship to any creature of God, even though it should be a Haman. There is a time to be silent, and there is a time to speak. 3. An enduring steadfastness. It is often easier to begin than to continue a faithful witnessing for God. Some who readily acknowledge the truth begin to waver and lose steadfastness in presence of difficulty or danger. They cannot endure. But Mordecai, having once taken his stand on religious principle, remained firm against all temptations. He reminds us of the words of Luther in presence of Charles V.: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me. Amen" (Matt. xxiv. 13; James i. 12). 4. A noble courage. It was not without sober calculation that Mordecai refused homage to Haman. He knew how much he risked. He had "the courage of his convictions." He was (1) willing to stand *alone* amongst his companions in service. He could bear their sneers and threats. A hard thing in any position! He (2) faced the probable anger of the king, to whom he had proved himself loyal. He (3) braved the malignant wrath of the favourite, from whom he could expect no mercy. He (4) put in peril the happiness and future guidance of his beloved Esther. He (5) laid his own life on the altar of righteousness. He (6) sacrificed every earthly interest to his allegiance to God. We think of Paul's heroism of faith (Phil. iii. 8). Then we think of the words of Paul's Master (Matt. xix. 29).—D.

Ver. 4. — *Profession and practice.* The favourites of fortune are generally remarkable for their pride. Especially is this the case with those whom despots delight to honour. Forgetting the worthlessness of the preference to which they owe their promotion—being sometimes nothing more than a passing whim—they rashly lay claim to universal homage. Haman is therefore the representative of a numerous class, which is not likely soon to become extinct. Mordecai in this instance resolves upon a manly course. He will not join the multitude in feeding the vanity of an inflated upstart. Neither threatening nor persuasion is able to overcome his steadfastness. What could have been Mordecai's reason for his present conduct? We may well imagine that he had more reasons than one, and that the combined force of several had influenced his decision. 1. *Haman possessed a despicable character.* Mordecai could not have bowed to him without doing violence to his own nature. He knew the man—his insolent bearing, his mean spirit, his cruel disposition—and he recoiled from him with unconquerable loathing. And he was right. There are men whom to admire is a degradation, whom to serve involves the ruin of our manhood. They may possess brilliant parts, they may occupy high positions, they may enjoy popular favour; but in a moral point of view they are the pests of society. 2. *Haman claimed Divine honours.* The court officials prostrated themselves in the dust at his feet, and he regarded such obeisance as his due. How could Mordecai, a worshipper of the Most High, unite in such an extravagant demonstration of servility, even though the object of it had been the worthiest instead of the basest of mankind? To him it was a matter of conscience, and he calmly awaited the consequences. We have here a striking exemplification of PROFESSION AND PRACTICE in perfect harmony. Mordecai declared himself to be a Jew, and conducted himself as a Jew might be expected to do. Note—

I. MORDECAI'S BOLD PROFESSION. "For he had told them that he was a Jew." This

was a brave thing to do ; for the Jews were a conquered race. But it was the right thing to do ; for to deny his people would have been the height of cowardice. What does profession involve at the present day ? Is it simply a tacit avowal that we are Christians ? Surely most people will go that length. It must, therefore, imply something more than that, if it is to serve as a distinction amongst us. It means, in fact, an open confession of our attachment to Christ, by identifying ourselves, in some way or other, with his Church. To the true Christian profession is a necessity. 1. *It is a duty which he owes to himself.* Secret discipleship may be possible under very exceptional circumstances ; but it must be most disadvantageous for the development of spiritual power. A plant may grow in the dark, but it cannot attain its full proportions, or put on its robe of beauty, without the light of day. The surest way to overcome temptation is to declare your principles. By the very act you will add to your own strength and weaken the power of the tempter. It was the attempt to disguise himself that led Peter to his fall. 2. *It is a duty which he owes to the world.* He has found peace himself, and will he hide its source from the troubled hearts among whom he lives ? The Divine light has been kindled within him, and will he place himself under a bushel ? The misery, the darkness, the sinfulness of the world constitute the world's claim upon his services, nor can he render the highest services except as a professed servant of Christ. 3. *It is a duty which he owes to God.* God requires it. No shame, or suffering, or loss should, therefore, make us hesitate in reference to this matter. Our Lord declared that whosoever was ashamed of him in his humiliation he would be ashamed to own when he came in his glory.

II. MORDECAI'S CONSISTENT CONDUCT. The king's servants endeavoured to persuade him to change his attitude, but he would not. "He hearkened not unto them." He was a witness-bearer, a martyr, and possessed a martyr's courage. Having professed himself to be a Jew, he would make good his profession by adhering to the right. Profession alone is worse than worthless. It injures the professor himself, and the cause with which he claims connection. "Faith without works is dead." 1. *To act is admittedly more difficult than to profess.* Had Mordecai merely professed himself a Jew, while he behaved like a Gentile, he would probably have experienced no difficulty. Haman would have been satisfied with his homage, and his comrades would have commended his prudence. To say, "Lord, Lord," is one thing ; but to do "the will of the Father" is another. There is no grandeur in magnificent words, except when they are backed up by noble deeds. Heroism consists not so much in declaring war as in fighting the enemy. 2. *Men learn more easily by example than by precept.* Hence the immense importance of consistent conduct, when we consider its influence upon others. If Christianity had never succeeded to produce Christians—if it had set up a high ideal which no one ever attempted to approach—it would have remained to this day a dead form ; and no amount of learning, or reasoning, or eloquence could have persuaded the world to accept it. Men may argue against creeds, but the holy lives which those creeds help to fashion are unassailable.—R.

Ver. 2.—*The perfection of steadfastness.* "But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence." This book of Esther abounds in revelation of human nature. It has been much remarked upon as not containing the name of God. Furthermore, it has nothing of strict doctrine in its technical and theological sense. Neither does it lay itself out to exhibit the great spiritual facts which arrest the attention of the Bible reader in other portions of it. It does not refer with any explicitness to the unseen, to the great future, to the "that day" of the epistles. On the other hand, it is wonderful in the various exposition it offers of human nature. To history, indeed, its matter is confined. But that history seems to pursue its object with undeviating exactitude of aim. Through impartiality of selection and fidelity of description it advances, awarding its *present* verdicts to those on the left hand, or to those on the right. We have already considered the illustration it offers of a noble refusal on the part of a woman, on an occasion when to refuse was both undoubtedly right and undoubtedly the cause of much suffering and loss. We have here an illustration of the noble refusal of a man, right against the enormous force of the current of the whole world around him. Consistently with his race, his education, his religion, it is not merely, as in the case just alluded to, in

the dictates of nature, but in the whispered monitions of religion as well, in the principle of "enduring as seeing the invisible," that the basis of the refusal in question is found and justified. Notice this refusal in some of the more prominent features it presents—

I. IT IS A REFUSAL WHICH COMES FROM THE DEEPER RECESSES OF OUR NATURE. It comes down from its higher haunts, from its more sacred retreats. To refuse at the price of suffering, loss, possibly death, because of the blush that would mantle in the cheek if you did not refuse, is to obey worthily God-given nature. All honour to Vashti that she did so! But to refuse at the imminent price of martyrdom for self, and for the all you hold dearest to the heart, and for your people scattered over a hundred lands, just because of a recovered snatch of Sinai's second commandment, is the achievement of a much higher reach. Obedience to the dictate of what we generally call nature is not to be disparaged. It reflects the intention of the Creator, and "repeats his praise." But so far as *we* are concerned, it may be considered to have something more of instinct about it. Mere physical temperament will in part account for it. But when the obedience is attributable to the new-learned lessons of the word of God, then, though it is not a nobler parentage that accounts for it, it owns to a director descent from the one Parent of all good, and this sheds fresh lustre upon it. Innocent nature in Eden, the broken snatches of Divine communication to our first parents in Eden, the patriarchal gains in similar methods of Divine revelation, then the ten commandments, the prophets, the beatitudes, the new commandment, all in developing order, challenge our lower life to regulate and improve itself by higher principles. "Thou hast magnified thy word," said the Psalmist, "above all thy name" (Ps. cxxxviii. 2). The word of God unfolds duty, opportunity, responsibility in an ever-increasing ratio, and on an ever-ascending scale. And it ascertains the law which distinguishes the praise of the obedience, amid possibly great sacrifice, of *nature*, from the obedience paid, often amid the greatest possible sacrifice, to the inner, living Word. Mordecai was a worthy successor, by some fifty years, of Daniel and his three companions with their food (Dan. i. 8—17); of those same three companions in the matter of the golden image at Dura (Dan. iii. 8—28); and again, in particular, of Daniel and his prayers (Dan. vi. 4—24). "These all obtained their good report through faith"—the faith that saw, heard, obeyed, what was a blank to mere nature, inaudible and invisible to mere sense.

II. IT WAS A REFUSAL INTENSIFIED IN EFFORT BY ANXIETY AS TO WHAT IT MIGHT ENTAIL UPON ESTHER. It risked the premature betrayal of the nationality of Esther as well as of Mordecai himself, and thereby the spoiling of what it is probable Mordecai already had in his mind, viz., that Esther might prove a great benefactor of her people generally.

III. IT WAS A REFUSAL FAITHFULLY ADHERED TO WHEN DANGERS GREW THICKER. Mordecai did not yield and cringe to Haman when the original inner reason of his refusing to do so had now become immensely added to by Haman's enormous revenge. Outer policy might have advocated yielding at that very moment. The dictate of that policy would have been felt a temptation, resisted by few indeed. Very painful thoughts might also have attacked the steadfastness of Mordecai, as to what the recriminations of his people might be—that by his one display of feeling against Haman so many were involved in a common destruction. They might have said, "Why should he endanger the welfare of his people?" All the more would they have said this if at all envious because of the relation in which he stood to the new-made queen, Esther. But "none of these things moved him." He was inflexible at the right time.

IV. IT WAS A REFUSAL WHICH OPENED A PERIOD OF DREADFUL SUSPENSE. There are many sacrifices, great in themselves, but easier to make because a moment will make the resolution, another moment will execute the resolution, and a third moment will be quite sufficient to acquaint one with the result of it. The discipline of *suspense*, however, with many natures is nothing less than *torture*. And now Mordecai's refusal inaugurated the strain of days, weeks, and months of anguished conflict of feeling, of strenuous planning, and alternative purposings, the end of which he could not foresee, but the likeliest end for himself "hanging on a tree" (ch. ii. 23); for his nation, destruction.

V. IT WAS A REFUSAL WHICH THREW DOWN ITS ROOTS DEEP INTO THE SOIL OF TRUST AND FAITH. Mordecai descried one possible way out of his own and his people's fearful peril. It was a narrow, uncertain, and dimly-lighted track. It was enough. He strove for it. He prayed for it. Faith and hope appropriated it. He will not relax an effort, nor will he permit Esther to be remiss. This was the best thing about Mordecai's refusal, that it was willing to abide by the alternatives, the worst conceivable extremities, or God's own deliverance. He had trust, and his trust was rewarded. The position then shows one man, deserted of earthly help, standing immovable in the same place, in the same posture, against a fierce current, midway in which he stood, for conscience' and honour's sake. And the issue shown was this, that to himself and to thousands upon thousands with him were brought salvation and great honour.—B.

Ver. 6.—*The intemperateness of contempt.* "And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone." The projected deed of Haman, if it had been carried to completion, would not have been entirely without precedent and parallels more or less nearly resembling it. Herodotus, in the first book of his history, tells us of a massacre of the Scythians, actually carried into execution, and which preceded by about a hundred years that now proposed by Haman. When Darius Hystaspis ascended the throne, some forty years before the present date, a cruel slaughter of the Magi was ordered, and that slaughter was for a long period commemorated once a year. Five centuries onward bring us to that most memorable date of all, when, in one of the most heartless of massacres, Herod, king of Judæa, schemed to nip in the tender bud the career of the King of all the world, and to stifle in the thought the work of the Saviour of all men! And one can scarcely fail to associate with the present purpose of Haman the transactions of Black Bartholomew day (August 24, 1572), when, through the widespread and fair provinces of France, thousands upon thousands of Protestants were slaughtered! Deterrent though the subject of analysis is, let us consider that which is offered us in this passage.

I. IT IS AN UNDISPUTED CASE OF A MAN ANGRY. But there is probably a place for almost every kind, for almost every degree, of anger. "A fool's wrath is presently known," and a good man's wrath should be presently known. Anger and sin often go together, but by no means always; the criterion this—whether the anger is *fed*, has the poisonous force of rankling thought, of gloomy brooding in it; whether the sun is permitted to go down upon *it*, or *it* bidden to go down upon the down-going of the sun. If we stop here, our analysis conducts us no way, and is not sufficient to determine anything of value for us.

II. IT IS AN UNDISPUTED CASE OF RESENTMENT. But resentment is a natural and valuable principle. Analogies come in and conspire to speak in its defence and praise. Physically it is sometimes equivalent to a vital principle. But the physical value of it is the merest shadow of the amount and value of its spiritual use. With all the fullest force of which it is capable it may advantageously come, and welcome—in order to fling off some kind of assault, some sorts of arrows, some species of temptings. It is the prime glory of resentment in matters spiritual to be as like as possible to the red-hot iron when the drop of water falls upon it.

III. IT IS AN UNDISPUTED CASE OF REVENGE. This passes us at once over the border line. We are no longer on safe ground, nor even on debateable ground. We are trespassing on the property of One who gives us here no right of ownership, but who is as liberal as he is powerful, as wise as he is wealthy, as considerate as he is just. It is he who, if he ever spoke with an impressive emphasis in his tone, has so uttered *this* one sentence: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord." Punishment, indeed, is not revenge; but how often does the most undisguised revenge dare to take the name and try to wear the look of the most impartial, temperate, judicial punishment! Perhaps Haman would scarcely feel it necessary to attempt to put this face on it, or to defend himself from an imputation to which he would attach neither guilt nor shame, provided that *danger* was not in the way. Yet it is manifest that Haman did put a very false face on what was the simple outcome of his own revengeful spirit when he was seeking the requisite powers from King Ahasuerus (ch. iv. 8).

IV. IT IS AN UNDISPUTED CASE OF THAT PARTICULAR KIND OF ANNOYANCE CALLED AFFRONT. No appreciable harm had been done to the person, or to the business, or to the place, or to the prospects of Haman. Nor had he been injured in the least degree in the person of his wife, or of his family, or of any one dear to him. But affront had been offered him, or he supposed such was intended. That is, harm, though light and fanciful as any butterfly, had alighted upon the finery of his dignity, his vanity, his pride. The abrasion of the polish of self was indeed so slight, so marvellously inconspicuous, that he himself did not at all know it till those envious mischief-makers, the "king's servants," told him (ch. iii. 4), in order, forsooth, "to see whether Mordecai's account of the reason" of this infinitesimal deduction from the incense due to Haman (to whom indeed he owed none at all) would hold him absolved. An angry man, a revengeful man, a madman, a "bear robbed of her whelps" (Prov. xvii. 12), "the lion out of the forest" (Jer. v. 6), are surely all safe company to meet compared with the vain man affronted. And this was the lot of Mordecai now.

V. IT IS AN INDISPUTABLE CASE OF THE INSATIABLENESS OF CERTAIN COMBINATIONS OF SINFUL ELEMENTS IN A CHARACTER. There is no bottom to pride, there is no height to haughtiness, there is no measure to swelling vanity, there is no temperateness to contempt, there is not "the bit or rein" that can be reckoned safe to hold in the uncertain, nettled temper of scorn and disdain. Approach any one of these with but the appearance of affront, though the *reality* may be your own principle and religion unfeigned, and there is no longer room for either explanation or even expiation. Revenge alone can meet the case. We have need to fear the first symptoms of such dispositions. They belong to the godless heart. They spread pestilence. They make the lives that own to them resemble volcanoes, which ever and anon throw up and spread all around the torrents of their destroying lava. Those who answer to this type so mournfully exhibited by Haman, miserable and uncertain themselves, are they who make misery all around. They "think scorn" to be patient; they "think scorn" to give to others the liberty they demand for themselves; they "think scorn" to ask or accept an explanation; they "think scorn" to credit any man's religion and conscience, except their own travesty of the genuine and true; they "think scorn" to show any kindness, or to make only a little misery. The heart of goodness, of justice, of mercy, nay, even the heart of reason, is cankered from within them. They must destroy all who in the slightest degree, real or apprehended, stand in their light, if only they can see their way to do it without present injury to themselves. And among all the worst foes a man can have, none can exceed this disposition, if it dwell in his heart.—B.

Ver. 6.—*Revenge*. I. THE WRATH OF THE WICKED IS REVENGEFUL. The feeling is natural that prompts to retaliation. All human history is blurred by its activity. A Haman could not be offended without seeking to do the offender hurt. In the light of Christian truth it is mean and contemptible, but it is natural, and therefore almost universal.

II. THE SPIRIT OF REVENGE IS NECESSARILY UNJUST. It does not measure the evil it contemplates by the injury that has excited it; its fierce tide flows over, and drowns every thought of balanced equity; it throws away the scales, and only wields the sword.

III. THE SPIRIT OF REVENGE IS NECESSARILY UNMERCIFUL. Every feeling of pity is quenched in its fire. Its savage aim is to cause what suffering it can. The extermination of a whole people could only satisfy the vengeful lust of Haman.

IV. THE SPIRIT OF REVENGE, WHEN ONCE KINDLED, EASILY FINDS FUEL TO FEED IT. While blind to all considerations that should moderate or slay it, it is sharp-sighted with respect to everything that is fitted to stimulate it. It was bad enough that Mordecai refused to do homage to Haman; but when the favourite learned the real ground of his refusal, then a fiercer fire entered into his soul. All the antipathies of race were stirred into flame. Henceforth "he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone;" Mordecai's people shall suffer with himself.

V. THE SPIRIT OF REVENGE IS ENCOURAGED BY THE POSSESSION OF POWER. A conscious inability to give it exercise has often a sobering effect; but the power to

gratify it only increases its resolution in evil minds. Haman's pride was inflated by the favour of the king. He could brook no slight. The might of the empire was in his hand, and that might should be exerted to its fullest extent to avenge the affront of the audacious Jew. His sense of power quickened his desire, and enlarged his project of revenge.

VI. THE SPIRIT OF REVENGE EXHIBITS ITSELF IN ALL PERIODS, AND IN ALL GRADES OF SOCIETY. Appalling as Haman's plan of vengeance was, it is not solitary. Under some of the Roman Cæsars the Christians were treated as Haman intended to treat the Jews. Later on, and under a so-called Christian authority, whole communities were sacrificed to a vengeance which could not tolerate any sign of independent belief or action, such as the Waldenses, the Albigenses, and the Protestants in France. Our criminal records in the present day also illustrate the lengths to which an uncontrolled passion for revenge is willing to go. Yet the widest field on which this spirit produces suffering and misery is not public. Many families live on, in unknown but utter wretchedness, under the stupid fury of revengeful feeling excited by real or imaginary wrongs. Even in circles where everything like passion is avoided, men and women often cherish supposed slights and fancied insults. Reputations are often very calmly destroyed. The influence of good people is often neutralised, if not turned into evil, by the quiet maliciousness of enemies in the guise of friends. The spirit of revenge works in a myriad ways, and on every existing field of human life.

VII. THE SPIRIT OF REVENGE IN MAN IS NOT GODLY, BUT DEMONICAL. Wherever seen, or however clothed, it is hateful to God, hateful to Christ, hateful to every true man. It is our part not to "return evil for evil," but to "overcome evil with good" (Rom. xii. 21). The prerogative of judging and punishing belongs not to us, but to God. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. xii. 19, 20). The Christian law is not "hate," but "love your enemies" (Matt. v. 44—48). This law was Divinely illustrated when Jesus on the cross prayed for the forgiveness of those who had in their mad fury of revenge inflicted on him such shame and pain: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke xxiii. 34).—D.

EXPOSITION. § 5.

HAMAN CASTS LOTS TO OBTAIN A LUCKY DAY FOR HIS ENTERPRISE, AND OBTAINS A DAY IN THE MONTH ADAR, THE LAST MONTH OF THE YEAR (ch. iii. 7). Having determined on a general massacre of the Jews on a given day, as the best mode of ridding the empire of them, Haman thought it of supreme importance to select for the massacre a propitious and fortunate day. Lucky and unlucky days are recognised generally throughout the East; and it is a wide-spread practice, when any affair of consequence is taken in hand, to obtain a determination of the time for commencing it, or carrying it into effect, by calling in the arbitrement of Chance. Haman had recourse to "the lot," and by means of it obtained, as the right day for his purpose, the 13th of Adar, which was more than ten months distant. The long delay was no doubt unpalatable, but he thought himself bound to submit to it, and took his further measures accordingly.

Ver. 7.—In the first month, the month Nisan. See the comment on Neh. ii. 1. This name was first given to the month by the Jews after the return from the captivity. It was the Babylonian name of the first month of the year, and superseded the old Jewish name, Abib. **The twelfth year of . . . Ahasuerus—B.C. 474, if Ahasuerus be Xerxes. They cast Pur, that is, the lot.** The superstitious use of lots has always been prevalent in the East, and continues to the present day. Lots were drawn, or thrown, in various ways: sometimes by means of dice, sometimes by slips of wood, or strips of parchment or paper, and also in other manners. Even the Jews supposed a special Providence to preside over the casting of lots (Prov. xvi. 33), and thought that matters decided in this way were decided by God. Haman appears to have cast lots, first, as to the day of the month which he should fix for the massacre, and secondly as to the month in which it should take place. Apparently the lot fell out for the thirtieth day (ver. 13), and for the twelfth month, the last month in the year. The word "Pur" is not Hebrew; it is supposed to be Old Persian, and to be

connected with Mod. Pers. *pâreh*, Lat. *pars*, Greek *μῆρος, μοῖρα*. To the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. Adar is, like Nisan, a Babylonian word, perhaps connected with *edder*, "splendour." The month so named corresponded nearly with March, when the sun begins to have great power in Western Asia.

§ 6. HAMAN PERSUADES AHASUERUS TO PUBLISH A DECREE COMMANDING THE DESTRUCTION OF ALL THE JEWS IN HIS KINGDOM ON THE ENSUING THIRTEENTH DAY OF ADAR (ch. iii. 8—15). Having formed his own resolve, it remained for Haman to bring his proposal before Ahasuerus in such a shape as should secure his acquiescence in it. For this purpose he thought it best, first, to raise a prejudice against the Jews by representing them as bad subjects, causing trouble through the peculiarity of their own laws, and still more through their unwillingness to render obedience to the Persian laws (ver. 8). In support of this last statement he would no doubt, if questioned, have adduced the conduct of Mordecai, who persisted in "transgressing the king's commandment," and gave as his only reason that he was a Jew, and therefore could not obey it (ver. 4). As, however, he doubted the effect of this reasoning on his royal master, he held in reserve an argument of another kind, an appeal to the king's cupidity, which constituted his main reliance. If the king gave his consent to the destruction of the Jewish nation, Haman undertook to pay into the royal treasuries, out of his private means, a sum which cannot be estimated at much less than two millions and a quarter of pounds sterling, and which may have amounted to a much higher figure (ver. 9). The effect of this argument upon Ahasuerus was decisive; he at once took his signet-ring from his finger, and made it over to his minister (ver. 10), thus enabling him to promulgate any decree that he pleased, and he openly declared that he gave over the Jewish nation, their lives and properties, into Haman's hands (ver. 11). Haman "struck while the iron was hot." The king's scribes were put in requisition—a decree was composed, numerous copies of it made, the royal seal affixed to each (ver. 12), and a copy despatched forthwith to each governor of a province by the royal post, ordering the

complete destruction of the Jews within his province, young and old, men, women, and children, on the thirteenth day of the month Adar, and the confiscation of their property (ver. 13). The posts started off with all speed, "being hastened by the king's commandment" (ver. 15); and the two men who had plotted a nation's extermination, as if they had done a good day's work, and deserved refreshment, "sat down to drink." But the Persians generally were less satisfied with the decree than their monarch and his minister; it surprised and startled them; "the city Shushan was perplexed."

Ver. 8.—There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed. It is not always borne in mind how large a part of the Jewish nation remained in the lands to which they had been carried away captive, after the permission had been given to return. Josephus notes that the richer and more influential of the Babylonian Jews were very little inclined to quit Babylon ('Ant. Jud.' xi. 1). There was evidently a large Jewish colony at Susa (*infra*, ch. ix. 12—15). The Book of Tobit shows that Israelites, scarcely to be distinguished from Jews, were settled in Rhages and Ecbatana. The present passage is important as showing the early wide dispersion of the Jewish people. Their laws are diverse. A true charge, but a weak argument for their destruction, more especially as the Persians allowed all the conquered nations to retain their own laws and usages. Neither keep they the king's laws. Important, if true. But it was not true in any broad and general sense. There might be an occasional royal edict which a Jew could not obey; but the laws of the Medes and Persians were in the main righteous laws, and the Jews readily observed them. They were faithful and loyal subjects of the Achæmenian monarchs from first to last—from Cyrus to Darius Codomannus. For the king's profit. Rather, as in the margin, "meet" or "fitting for the king." To suffer them. Or, "to let them alone."

Ver. 9.—If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed, and I will pay, &c. This startling proposition, to which the king might well have demurred, for even Xerxes could scarcely have regarded such a massacre as a light matter, is followed immediately, and before the king has time to reflect, by the tempting offer of such a bribe as even a king could not view with indifference. Xerxes had once, if we may trust Herodotus, declined to accept from a subject a gift of money equal to about four and a half million of pounds sterling (Herod., vii. 28); but this was early in his reign, when

his treasury was full, and he had not exhausted his resources by the Greek war. Now, in his comparative poverty, a gift of from two to three millions had attractions for him which proved irresistible. **To the hands of those that have the charge of the business.** Not the business of the slaughter, but the business of receiving money for the king, *i. e.* the royal treasurers. **To bring it.** *i. e.* "for them to bring it," or pay it, "into the royal treasuries." On the multiplicity of the royal treasuries see the comment on Ezra vii. 20.

Ver. 10.—The king took his ring from his hand. Rather, "took his *signet* from his hand." This may have been a ring, for signet-rings were known to the Persians, but is perhaps more likely to have been a cylinder, like that of Darius, his father, which is now in the British Museum ('Ancient Monarchies,' vol. iv. p. 182). **And gave it unto Haman.** Thus giving him the power of making whatsoever edicts he pleased, since nothing was requisite to give authority to an edict but the impression of the royal seal (see Herod., iii. 128). For similar acts of confidence see Gen. xli. 42; Esther viii. 2. **The Jews' enemy.** Rather, "persecutor."

Ver. 11.—The silver is given thee, the people also. Not "the silver which thou hast given me is given back to thee," for the 10,000 talents had not been given, but only offered. Rather, "the silver of the people is given thee, together with the people themselves, to do with both as it pleases thee." Confiscation always accompanies execution in the East, and the goods of those who are put to death naturally escheat to the crown, which either seizes them or makes a grant of them. Compare ch. viii. 11, where the property of those of the Jews' enemies who should suffer death is granted to those who should slay them.

Ver. 12.—Then were the king's scribes called. "Scribes" (in the plural) are spoken of as attending on Xerxes throughout the Grecian expedition (Herod., vii. 100; viii. 90). Such persons were always near at hand in the palace, ready to draw up edicts. **On the thirteenth day of the first month.** It is conjectured that Haman cast his lots on the first day of the year (Bertheau), as an auspicious time for taking anything in hand, and having obtained a *thirteenth* day for the massacre, adopted the same number as probably auspicious for the necessary appeal to the king. Having gained the king's consent, he sent at once for the scribes. **The king's lieutenants.** Literally, "the king's *satraps*." The actual Persian word is used, slightly Hebraised. **And to the governors.** The word used has been compared with *pasha* (Stanley), and again with *beg* or *bey*, but is probably distinct from either. It

designates a provincial governor of the second rank—one who would have been called by the Greeks *ὑποσάργαππος*. The number of these subordinate officials was probably much greater than that of the satraps. **And to the rulers of every people.** *I. e.* the native authorities—the head men of the conquered peoples, to whom the Persian system allowed a considerable share of power. **In the name of king Ahasuerus was it written.** All edicts were in the king's name, even when a subject had been allowed to issue them. See the story of Bagæus in Herodotus (iii. 128), where the edicts, of which he alone was the author, have the form of orders from the king. **And sealed with the king's ring.** Or "signet" (see note on ver. 10).

Ver. 13.—And the letters were sent by posts. The Persian system of posts is thus described by Xenophon, who attributes its introduction to Cyrus:—"Stables for horses are erected along the various lines of route, at such a distance one from another as a horse can accomplish in a day. All the stables are provided with a number of horses and grooms. There is a post-master to preside over each, who receives the despatches along with the tired men and horses, and sends them on by fresh horses and fresh riders. Sometimes there is no stoppage in the conveyance even at night; since a night courier takes up the work of the day courier, and continues it. It has been said that these posts outstrip the flight of birds, which is not altogether true; but beyond a doubt it is the most rapid of all methods of conveyance by land" ('Cyrop.', viii. 6, § 17). **To destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish.** The writer quotes from the edict, which appears to have had as many surplus words as a modern English law paper. **Young and old, little children and women.** "To take the father's life and spare the child's" was thought to be an act of folly in ancient times. Wives and children of criminals were, as a matter of course, put to death with them. This was anciently even the Jewish practice (Josh. vii. 24, 25; 2 Kings ix. 26; xiv. 6), and was quite an established usage in Persia (Herod., iii. 119). **The thirteenth day.** The Septuagint has "the fourteenth day" in its professed copy of the decree, but confirms the Hebrew text here by making the thirteenth the actual day of the struggle (ch. ix. 1). The fourteenth and fifteenth are the days now kept by the Jews; but it is suspected that an alteration has been made in order to assimilate the Purim to the passover feast, which began on the 14th of Nisan.

Ver. 14.—The exact import of this verse is uncertain. Some suppose it to be a mere heading to a copy of the decree, which was originally inserted in the text between verses

14 and 15. In this case the translation should be — "A copy of the writing for giving commandment to every province, published to all peoples, that they should be ready against that day."

Ver. 15. — *The posts went out, being hastened.* Though there was ample time, since the remotest part of the empire could be reached in a month, or two at the most, yet the posts were "hastened," Haman being impatient, lest the king should change his mind, and decline to publish the edict. The king may himself also have wished to have the matter settled past recall. *The king sat down with Haman to drink.* This touch seems intended to mark their hardness of heart. As Nero "fiddled while Rome

was burning," so these two, having assigned a nation to destruction, proceeded to enjoy themselves at "a banquet of wine." But the city of Susa was perplexed. The Jews had enemies in Susa (ch. ix. 12-15); but the bulk of the inhabitants being Persians, and so Zoroastrians, would be likely to sympathise with them. There might also be a widespread feeling among persons of other nationalities that the precedent now set was a dangerous one. Generally the people of the capital approved and applauded whatever the great king did. Now they mis-doubted the justice, and perhaps even the prudence, of what was resolved upon. The decree threw them into perplexity.

HOMILETICS.

Ver. 8. — *A people scattered and apart.* This very remarkable language shows us that the Jews have been one and the same people for thousands of years. This description of the Jews is from the lips of an enemy; still, except in the last clause, it is just and true. In their captivity in the East, in their dispersion, in their present condition throughout Christendom, the Jews are a people by themselves, scattered and apart.

I. THE FACT OF ISRAEL'S ISOLATION. The descendants of Jacob are like no other people, and wherever their lot is cast, they do not intermingle with the population. 1. They are distinguished by their peculiar physiognomy. 2. By their homelessness and dispersion. 3. By the national customs and observances practised among them.

II. THE TREATMENT OF WHICH THIS ISOLATION IS THE OCCASION. 1. They have been looked upon as opposed to the interests and welfare of states. How often have ministers of state and prelates of the Church aroused the hatred of princes against the Hebrew race. "It is not for the king's profit to suffer them!" 2. They have consequently met with scorn, oppression, and persecution. What a disgraceful history is that of the Jews scattered throughout Christendom! That the nation has survived such persecutions is a proof of the inherent vitality of the race, and a proof of the superintending providence of the God of all the nations of the earth.

III. THE TRUE EXPLANATION AND PURPOSE OF THIS ISOLATION. It is an evidence of a special purpose of God. It is a fulfilment of prophecy. It is a witness to the truth of Christianity. 1. We should regard the Jewish people with deep interest. 2. We should use all feasible means to bring the Jews to the Messiah. "He that scattereth will gather them."

Ver. 9. — *The price of blood.* Never was a more nefarious bargain proposed than this. That Haman not only plotted to destroy the Jews, but even offered to buy their lives, this is indeed a proof of the cruelty and baseness of his nature.

I. CRUELTY APPEALS TO AVARICE. Favourites always amass money; often by the most unscrupulous means. Tyrants always want money to spend on their pleasures and their ostentation. Haman offers to Ahasuerus a large sum to secure his assent to the destruction of the Jews.

II. A MEAN PRICE IS OFFERED FOR A NATION'S DESTRUCTION. The blood of one man were purchased cheaply at such a price; what shall we say of the purchase of a nation?

III. We are reminded of THE PRICE WHICH WAS PAID TO THE BETRAYER OF THE SON OF MAN. "The price of him that was valued" was thirty pieces of silver. Fitly was the money employed to buy "the field of blood."

IV. CONTRAST THE PRICE OF DESTRUCTION WITH THE PRICE OF SALVATION. When Christ purchased his people he paid a ransom the preciousness of which is not to be

computed in terms of earthly treasure. "Ye were redeemed not with corruptible things, as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ."

Vers 10, 11.—*Power in bad hands.* How all the links in the chain of evil counsel were fastened together! The tyrannical king was willing enough, in order to please a favourite, to decree the slaughter of a whole people scattered through his dominions. The cruel minister of state was willing enough to take the king's signet, and to issue the decree of extermination. The scribes were willing enough to write the missives of destruction. The lieutenants, governors, and rulers were willing enough to receive and to issue orders for the slaughter of the exiles. And, when the time came, the soldiers and other officers of injustice would be willing enough to "destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews" upon whom they could lay their hands.

I. THE COUNSELLOR OF STATE ABUSES HIS INFLUENCE. It is a responsible thing to be the adviser of a throne; for such counsel, as may in such circumstances be given, may mould a nation's character and determine its destinies. It is prostitution of such power to use it for selfish, far more for malicious, ends.

II. THE SOVEREIGN DELEGATES HIS POWER WITH INDIFFERENCE. It does not follow that because bad counsel is given, it must be followed. But this is likely enough to be the case when a monarch is careless, voluptuous, capricious, and arbitrary. Such was the character of Xerxes. How natural from his lips the language, "The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee." Scarcely less culpable was the king than his counsellor.

III. ALL MEN'S EVIL DESIGNS MAY BE FRUSTRATED BY THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD. If the prime minister and the despotic king of Persia could not, with all their power, destroy the Jews, who—what—could do so?

Practical lessons:—1. Rejoice in the blessings of constitutional government. In our country, happily, such a proceeding as this is impossible. 2. Sympathise with the cause of liberty, as opposed to tyranny, throughout the world. What vast populations are at the present day subject to the unjust authority, exactions, and oppressions of tyrannical governors. May the Lord deliver them from the yoke! 3. Pray for the frustration of cruel and tyrannical counsels. In many places Christians have been, and are, persecuted for righteousness' sake. Let our prayer be, God deliver them from the hands of those that hate and oppress them.

Vers 12—15.—*Heartless counsels of destruction.* History records many massacres, and the record is among the saddest and most sickening chapters of human annals. Most of these massacres have arisen from political fears and jealousies, or from religious hatred and bigotry. The proposed massacre of the Jews throughout the Persian empire took its origin from personal pique and pride—a motive even more contemptible than the others. Happily, the proposal and purpose of Haman were defeated. Still it may be well to regard the nefarious proposal of the king's favourite and counsellor as an illustration of the possible wickedness of the human heart.

I. The EXTENT of the contemplated massacre. The Jews were scattered throughout all the provinces of the empire; and to all the provinces the letters commanding to slay them were transmitted by the posts, hastened by the king's commandment.

II. The UNIVERSALITY of the contemplated massacre. "Both young and old, little children and women," were to be slain.

III. The SIMULTANEOUSNESS of the contemplated massacre. The bloody work was to be done in one day—the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

IV. The GREED accompanying the massacre. The spoil of them was to be taken for a prey. The king had given to Haman beforehand the silver for himself. Admire the wisdom and mercy of God which discomfited these evil plans, and brought their authors to confusion.

Ver. 15.—*Festivity within; perplexity without.* The contrast here is striking in itself, and all the more so from the brevity and simplicity of the language in which it is depicted.

I. REMARK THE MIRTH AND FEASTING WITHIN THE PALACE. "The king and Haman sat down to drink." This shows their indifference to human suffering. Nero fiddled, it is said, while Rome was burning. Herod feasted when he had cast the Baptist into prison. Paris and Rome were mad with mirth when the massacre of St. Bartholomew's day had rid them of the leading Protestants of France. The wicked feast, undisturbed by the cries and lamentations of their victims. Yet it is possible that the king and Haman feasted and drank to drown the voice of conscience. They both knew the deed they authorised was foul; it would not bear thinking upon. How often have sinners striven to silence the voice of the monitor, the accuser within; to overbear that voice with the shout, the laugh, the song of folly and of riot!

II. REMARK THE DISTRESS AND PERPLEXITY WHICH PREVAILED IN THE CITY SHUSHAN. The Jews themselves were naturally enough distressed at the prospect before them. Even those who believed that deliverance would come from some source knew not where to look for it. The alternative before them seemed to be flight and homelessness, or massacre. There were many citizens who sympathised with the Jews in their trouble. "Susa was now the capital of Persia, and the main residence of the Persians of high rank. These, being attached to the religion of Zoroaster, would naturally sympathise with the Jews, and be disturbed at their threatened destruction." All thoughtful, prudent subjects would be perplexed at such conduct upon the part of their ruler. The land may well mourn whose princes slay, instead of protecting and pasturing, the flock. It is better to be perplexed under the infliction of wrong than to feast and rejoice over the miseries and injustice others may endure.

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Vers. 7—15.—*Superstition and cynicism.* Haman now proceeds to carry out the terrible plan of revenge on which he had resolved. Some important steps had to be taken before he could reach his end. These seem to us strange and incongruous. We may learn from them—

I. THAT THE FREEDOM WHICH "NEITHER FEARS GOD NOR REGARDS MAN" MAY BE A SLAVE TO SUPERSTITION. Haman was a fatalist. He consulted Pur, or the lot, as to the day which would be favourable for his intended slaughter. Though it was only on the twelfth month that a propitious day was announced, yet he submitted to the long delay thus imposed. Fear of the fates curbed his impatience, even though it was spurred by an intense wrath. The first Napoleon, while willing to sacrifice millions of human lives at the shrine of a reckless ambition, was a victim, like Haman, to fatalistic ideas. Those who throw aside the restraints of virtue and religion come into other and more oppressive captivities.

II. THAT SUPERSTITIOUS FEARS MISLEAD THOSE WHO ARE GUIDED BY THEM. The ten or eleven months which Pur placed between the conceiving and executing of Haman's vengeance were the means of wrecking it. They gave time to Mordecai and Esther to counterplot, and to work the wicked favourite's downfall. But Haman was so confident in his power over the king, and in the pronounced favour of destiny, that he submitted to the delay. All false gods, all idols of man's fashioning, only get possession of the soul to deceive and destroy it.

III. THAT A WICKED PURPOSE IS NOT SCRUPULOUS AS TO THE MEANS IT ADOPTS. In illustration of this observe—1. Haman's lying report to the king concerning the Jews (ver. 8). There was some plausibility in the report, yet it was essentially a lie. It was so framed as to make the weak king falsely believe that it was not to his profit that the Jews should exist in his empire. It was true that the Israelites had their own law, and honoured it; but their loyalty to Moses, and the God of Moses, did not prevent them from being good citizens in the countries in which their scattered tribes had found a home. It is easy to clothe falsehood in the garb of truth. 2. Haman's offer of a bribe to the king. It was an immense sum, over two millions sterling of our money. Whence was it to be drawn? Not from Haman's own treasures, but from the devoted Jews. They were rich, and after being killed all their wealth was granted to Haman to be his own. In connection with this

proposal there was evidently no consciousness of offering insult on the one side, or of receiving insult on the other. Bribery was as common in the East then as it is now. Would that we could describe it as a sin confined to the East. It enters so largely into the commercial and political life even of such a country as our own, that many touch and are tainted by it without suspecting the wrong they have received and done. The sensitiveness created by a living fellowship with Christ is required to deliver us wholly from its multiform and insidious temptations (see Isa. xxxiii. 15, 16).

IV. THAT THE THOUGHTLESS AND SELF-INDULGENT BECOME AN EASY PREY TO THE TEMPTATIONS OF THE WICKED. The king of Persia fell at once into the trap of Haman. He accepted his report without investigation, and delivered over to his will the Jews and their possessions. His proclamation, ordering the destruction of all the men, women, and children belonging to the Jewish race, was soon on its way to the authorities of every province in the empire.

V. THAT THOUGHTLESSNESS, OR A FOOLISH CONFIDENCE, DOES NOT RELIEVE MEN OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR ACTIONS. There is, perhaps, more misery caused in the world by want of thought than by evil intention. We are bound to consider the quality and issues of our conduct, and to examine carefully the counsel of others before committing ourselves to it. It will not diminish our responsibility to say that we acted without thought, or from an inconsiderate trust in designing men. The royal seal appropriated to the king the terrible iniquity of Haman.

VI. THAT EVIL CAN MAKE MERRY IN PRESENCE OF THE MISERY IT CREATES. Nero, after he had set fire to Rome, fiddled as he sat and looked at the blaze. So, while Shushan was agitated by fear, the king and his favourite "sat down to drink." The contrast here is most striking; it was evidently designed to impress the imagination and heart. We think of the fearfulness that entered into every household of the city; and then we turn to the two revellers, who, having issued the terrible edict, betook themselves to the wine-cup, that they might drown thought and care. Human nature may become so wanton in its allegiance to evil as to laugh at the suffering it works.

VII. THAT COMMUNITIES OF PEOPLE ARE OFTEN BETTER THAN THEIR RULERS. The citizens of Shushan had sympathy with the innocent multitudes whose blood was to be so needlessly shed. They knew their peaceful virtues. They were united with them in many interests. They grew afraid of a licentious power which could without reason decree the massacre of an unoffending race. It is rather in the common heart of a people than in the will of selfish potentates that we look for a recognition of what is sound and good in feeling or action.—D.

Ver. 8.—*The true Church described by untruthful lips.* Infant lips sometimes utter greatest truths. Shallowest brain sometimes originates most politic scheming. Swine root out and tread underfoot pearls of unpriced value. Bad men often preach good doctrine. Now "the Jews' enemy" (ver. 10) volunteers the highest description, the most complimentary characterisation, of the Jew. And this passage proffers for notice a contrast not only full as remarkable in the depth of it as any of these, but far *more* remarkable when its subject matter is also taken into account. It might be stated thus: A PEOPLE'S RELIGION RIGHTLY DESCRIBED, WRONGLY CONSTRUED, by one who was "none of them," and who had none of it. The case is that of a man bearing witness against a people and their religion; he is at the same time a willing and an unwilling witness; his words are true; the meaning he wishes to be drawn out of them is untrue. His indictment is verbally correct; the charge he launches out by means of it has no foundation of fact. His description is good for what it says, bad for what it means. And by chance it happens to be so good for what it says that it tempts the thoughtful reader to pause, to ask whether he cannot learn a lesson of value from it. Haman dares a description of the nominal people of God; is he not in truth unconsciously throwing off a telling description of the real people of God, of God's real Church in the world? For this plain, brief description of the people to whom Mordecai belonged, which Haman now offers to the credulity of Ahasuerus, happens to seize three leading

facts distinctive of the Church of God. Nor is it altogether to be assigned to the realm of chance. The fact was that, shaded though their race was now, dimmed though their glorious history, the people of Mordecai *were* the separate people of God, and that Haman had noticed and scrutinised their essential peculiarities. These peculiarities, false as is the gloss he puts upon them, he has in some degree correctly caught. These are the shadows of answering realities in the economy of the Church, the kingdom of God. They remind us of—

I. THE FOOTHOLD THE KINGDOM OF GOD HAS IN THE WORLD. For whatever may be its exact position at any given hour of the world's clock—1. Its genius is towards *ubiquity*. "There is a certain people . . . in all the provinces of thy kingdom." 2. Its genius is towards being "scattered abroad," "dispersed," intermingled "among the people." Once for a short time, and for the special need of preparatory education, it is true that God's elect people were locally as well as morally separate from others, *i. e.* when they sojourned in the wilderness. But this was only a phase, and a transient one, of their national existence. Again, for a longer time, and with fonder prospect, they dwelt in comparative seclusion in their own land. But this also was quite as transient a phase of their national life, taking into consideration the settlement there. What a business it was! And the true place of the people of God is not merely to find a settlement and found a colony everywhere, but to mix among men, and to seek health of every sort in work and fidelity, rather than in retirement and the infolding of self. And this actual contact with all the varieties of human character, position, life, is in order to two ends: *first*, for the proof and the growth of individual goodness; *secondly*, for the gradual leavening with a little leaven of the whole lump. 3. Its genius is towards working its way among men, day and night, and growing into their affection and confidence, rather than summoning them to capitulate either to fear or to admiration.

II. THE OUTSIDE APPEAL WHICH THE SUBJECTS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD EVER CLAIM AND EVER HOLD IN RESERVE. Their special laws are, and are to be, "diverse from all people" who are not of themselves. And when these *clash* with any other, they are not to "keep the king's laws," but to keep their own distinguishing and esoteric laws (Acts iv. 19; v. 29). To know well, to do well, these "diverse laws" is the sustained aspiration of the Church of God. There is such a thing as unity in variety, and there is, and is to be, on the part of the Church of God, the close union of all its own members, by one common fellowship, by obedience to one common code of laws, by acknowledgment of one standard Bible authority, amid all their intermixture, in every conceivable relationship, with all the rest of the world and "the kingdoms of the world." The genuine, hearty, living obedience of a thousand, of a hundred persons to "laws diverse from all people" is an enormously strong link of connection among themselves, and an enormously significant testimony to the outside world of something special at work. If we as Christian people rose to this conception, to the eager veneration of it, to the hearty practice of it, what a witness ours would be! Meantime Haman's allegation against the "certain people scattered abroad"—that while their own laws were "diverse from all people," they did "not keep the king's laws"—was untrue. Mordecai had indeed withheld obedience to the law which "the king had commanded" (ver. 2), that "all the king's servants in the king's gate should bow and reverence Haman," and his non-obedience was no doubt covered, by his fealty to the "diverse laws;" but this was by no means enough to cover a charge against all the Jews, or even against Mordecai in his general conduct and life. The kingdom of God then does glory to follow the lead and command of "laws diverse from all people," to claim the ultimate appeal as lying always to these; and in any conceivable case of option to decide in one moment for obedience to God rather than to men.

III. THE FORESEEN DESTINY OF THE CHURCH OF GOD. Haman's apprehension was perhaps *not* very genuine, and any way was premature, but his instinct in the real matter at issue was only too unerring and correct. The Church of God—"that certain people scattered abroad among the people," with their diverse laws, and their first heed given to *them*—beyond a doubt *has* its eye on all other kingdoms, is *not* what those other kingdoms would now think "for their profit," is destined to absorb them, gives evidence of that destiny as a very *intention* in those same manifestations

of its genius, and in its appeal to the unseen, and in its first obedience thereto. Oh for the time when the chorus shall indeed open, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."—B.

Ver. 7.—*Consulting omens.* "They cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day." "Pur" is an old Persian word said to signify "part" or "lot." Haman resorted to the practice of casting a lot to find out what he believed would be a lucky day for his design. He had a blind faith in the unseen, and in the overruling of supernatural powers. He inquired of his idols, and acted according to received superstitions. His object was an evil one, but he supposed that his god would be on his side.

I. WE MUST LEARN TO SUBMIT TO THE OVERRULING OF PROVIDENCE. Haman was consistent with his superstition. We are oftentimes inconsistent in our acts. We profess to believe that God will overrule all for the best, and then we become doubtful and fretful because things turn not out as we expected.

II. WE MUST IMITATE THE PERSISTENT WAITING OF HAMAN. He must have found it wearying work to inquire so frequently, casting lots for one day after another, and having no favourable reply. The lot was cast for all the days of eleven months ere he had a period fixed which promised to be fortunate for him. He that believeth shall not make haste.

III. WE SHOULD SEEK NOT LUCKY PERIODS, BUT FITTING OPPORTUNITIES OF SERVICE. There are many foolish ideas as to periods, as those among sailors about Friday, and sailing on that day.

IV. THAT WHICH APPEARS MOST PROMISING FOR THE PLOTTER MAY BE THE WORST. The delay had given Mordecai and Esther time to act. God's hand may have been in this. "The lot was cast into the lap, but the whole disposal was of the Lord" (Prov. xvi. 33). Haman was misled by his inquiries, but God's people saved by Haman's delay through his superstition. Providence never misleads men; it leads to the best issues.—H.

Ver. 11.—*A greedy grand vizier.* "The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee." One man alone was instrumental in placing the Jews in danger of complete extermination. This happened during the period of their subjection. To supply the record of their wondrous deliverance the Book of Esther, primarily, was written. The man who wrought this danger was Haman, the grand vizier to the king of Persia. He was second only to the king. Through flattering he had attained the coveted position. He was an astute politician, and apparently as unscrupulous as he was cunning. The king heaped riches upon his favourite. He would have Haman's means adequate to his position. Many houses and much land confiscated, often on the slightest excuse, would be handed over to him. The post of grand vizier would afford ample opportunities of self-enrichment. We read of the conspiracy of Bigthan and Teresh against the king, and of its discovery. To whom would fall the large possessions of these hitherto influential men? What more probable than that the next favourite should receive a great share of their forfeited property?

I. IT IS TO THE MATERIAL REWARDS OF OFFICE THAT SUCH MEN AS HAMAN TURN AN EAGER EYE. He well understood the ways of court, so as to secure the tangible results of favouritism. Conceptions of higher honour expand in proportion to elevation. A thought enters his mind to which if he gave utterance his immediate deposition and death would ensue. This thought will leak out by and by. It only needs a fitting opportunity. Nay, it will seize and make an opportunity out of the flimsiest pretext. Meanwhile he is as contented as an ambitious man ever can be. Under an outward calm he is hiding a flame of impatient expectancy. See him going forth from Shushan the palace. The gates are scarcely high enough for the proud-hearted man. Mark that smile on his countenance. Haman is "exceedingly glad of heart." Some further honour has been put upon him, and he goes to his home to reveal it to his friends. Why, may not a man of his calibre be proud? Can his honour ever be eclipsed? Can his glory ever be overshadowed? Can his name, handed

down by his many children, ever die? Who can supplant him in the king's favour, seeing that he knows so well the arts of courtiers, and exercises his office apparently only with respect to the pleasure of the king? Do not all the rest of the courtiers and place-seekers look to him for advancement? Is not his favour, in turn, the sun that "gilds the noble troops waiting upon his smile"? "If ever man may flatter himself in the greatness and security of his glory," thinks Haman, "surely I may do so." Ah, Haman! thy pride is dangerous; it is like a high-heeled shoe, fitting thee only for a fall. Take care, the least stone may cause thee to stumble. Be not over-sure of thy position. Pitfalls are around. Ambition and pride are like heavy, widely-spread canvas on a ship, and need much ballast. Great is thy risk. Thou art like one standing on the narrow apex of a mountain. One false step will set thee rolling to the very abyss.

II. **WORLDLY POSSESSIONS OR POSITIONS CAN NEVER GIVE FULL SATISFACTION.** If they could, the result would have been injurious to man's moral nature. No thought of higher things entering man's mind, he would soon be degraded to the level of the brute creation. True pleasure arises from the attainment of some possession or object, but not full satisfaction. It is pleasant to have wealth wherewith to gratify desire, to be able to confer benefits on others; but if we make these things the one aim in life we are sure to reap but little joy. The drawbacks and counter-balancings are great. Much wealth, much furniture, many servants, a large house, and great popularity are only extra anxieties. The pleasure soon passes, the possession soon palls. Still, a man without any passion or aim is simply like "a speaking stone." Yet as a horse, too restive and fiery, puts his rider in danger, so do our passions. Ambition in moderation is an advantage, and few men become very useful who have none; but if we give the reins to our ambition we may be sure that such a fiery charger will dash away over rocks or into floods to our great hazard. A man when at sea, cares neither for calm nor for a hurricane, but he enjoys a stiff breeze which helps the vessel along and braces his nerves. We suggest, therefore, not the banishment of all ambition, but its moderation; not the despising of all possessions, but that we should not be disappointed if we do not receive so much joy therefrom as we expected. Nay, we may thank God that we cannot live on stones, nor satisfy our hunger with husks; that in us has been cultivated the longing for those things which really afford satisfaction, viz., righteousness, peace, faith, and love.—H.

Ver. 15.—*Swift couriers.* "And the posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment." The Persians had good arrangements for interchange of thought and desires. A nation's civilisation may be gauged by its facilities for intercommunication. Roads, canals, and railways, penny posts, and electric telegraphs are the present means of communication in this country. The ancient Romans sought to facilitate interchange. They were great road builders. The English have more than any nation helped to cover the world with a net-work of railways. Their couriers are in every land.

I. **PREACHERS SHOULD BE DILIGENT, AS HASTENED BY THE KING'S COMMANDMENT.** They carry good news to souls. They are to do what their hands find to do with all their might. If Christ was "straitened," they should be.

II. **PREACHERS ARE TO BE FAITHFUL, WHETHER THEIR MESSAGE BE A "SAVOUR OF LIFE UNTO LIFE OR OF DEATH UNTO DEATH."** The couriers of Ahasuerus faithfully delivered the despatches they carried. In the eighth chapter (ver. 14) we see how extra means and greater pressure were used to overtake wrong.—H.

Ver. 15.—*Life contrasts.* "And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed." Here is indeed a pair of pictures to look at—the subjects very different. They are not a pair of pastoral scenes, nor of family groups related, nor are they of sympathetic historical sort. But a pair they certainly are; as such they are hung, and they bear out the position, for one strictly and directly rises out of the other. The one shows two figures, as of men, sitting in a palace drinking. If we are to judge anything from their attitude and their occupation, their minds are perfectly at ease, and they are happy. The figures are life-size, and lifelike. The countenances, however, scarcely improve by dwelling upon

Very quickly the too plainly-marked impress of the Eastern aristocrat's effeminacy, and excessive luxuriousness, and unrecking pride of heart dispel the faintest suggestion that their apparent ease and happiness have any of the higher elements in them. We recognise in the men types of self-indulgence, even if it should prove nothing worse. The other picture shows a city in miniature, in broken, disconnected sections, interiors and exteriors together. The eye that is sweeping it turns it into a moving panorama. Whatever it is that is seen, an oppressive, ominous stillness seems to brood over it. An unnatural stoppage of ordinary business is apparent. The market, the bazaars, the exchange, the heathen temple, the Jews' meeting-place, and in fact every place where men do congregate, seems in a certain manner stricken with consternation. The faces and the gestures of the people agree therewith. These, at all events, betoken anything but peace and content and happiness. They give the impression of a "perplexity" rapidly inducing stupor, and a stupor ominous of paralysis itself. One malignant thought of Haman was answerable for all this. He had of late been obeying with completest self-surrender his worse genius; that was about the only self-surrender he practised or knew. His one malignant thought, the thought of "scorn," had rapidly ripened into determination, shaped into place and method, been clothed in the dress of consummate policy, and sealed with the signet of royal ring (ver. 10). That thought, so wrought up, was now sent forth, "hastened by the king's commandment," to a thousand cities and corners of the whole realm. Its publication made in Shushan the palace, and to the same hour "the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed." We have here—

I. SOME UTTERLY CONCLUSIVE FACTS OF HUMAN LIFE. 1. A leading instance of the glaring disproportions of human fortune and circumstance. In closest juxtaposition are found, on the one hand, two men, sated with ease and all they can ask. On the other, a city, a whole city, throbbing with all the most various life, but—condensed into this brief description—"perplexed." These are, as matter of fact, the two experiences of human life found in the same place, on the same day, at the same hour; and they are the result of what we should be generally content to call human fortune. Is it such contrarieties as these, that can subsist side by side; and is it not the irresistible conclusion that either human life is the sport of the arbitrary and the mockery of the malign; or that human *fortune* is but an earthly phrase for a Providence, at present most inscrutable, but with which all is to be trustfully left, for that it will ere long *give* account and require account? Once satisfied of this, a heathen poet has taught us the words, *Permitte cætera Deo*. 2. A leading instance of the disproportion of human rights and powers. One might almost be tempted to call it a violent instance of an intolerable anomaly. But in various ways, in more subdued form, by removes far more numerous, and the contrasts accordingly far less striking, we can see this violent case to be but a *plain* case of what permeates the structure of human society. Yet ponder the facts here. There are thousands upon thousands whose life, humanly speaking, is not in their own hands; and there are two in whose hands those lives are! *This* disproportion must dwarf every other. Compared with it, that of possession, of education, of brain, of opportunity, of genius, of position and birth *must* seem small matters. For life *holds* all the rest. Like a vessel, for the time it contains all. The aggregate of humanity is the history to a tremendous extent of an aggregate of vicariousness. The tangle human fingers cannot undo. Out of the labyrinth human wisdom cannot guide itself. One hand alone holds the thread, one eye alone commands the bird's-eye position and view. But in all we must remember these two conclusions: *first*, that the vicariousness counts sometimes for unmeasured help, and advantage, and love: *secondly*, that it were better far to be of the "perplexed city" and the jeopardised Jews than to be either of those two men "who sat down to drink" after what they had done. Who would buy their position to pay the price of their responsibility? Who would accept all their possessions at the risk of using them as they did?

II. SOME UTTERLY CONDEMNING FACTS OF HUMAN NATURE. 1. A leading instance of the attitude in which a bad conscience will suffer a man to place himself; the exact opposite of that for which conscience was given, the exact opposite of that which a good conscience would tolerate. The very function of conscience may be impaired, may be a while ruined. See its glory departed now. Haman now is a leading instance

of the satisfaction which a bad conscience shall have become able to yield, of the *content* a bad conscience will in the possibility of things provide. He has actually filled up the measure of his iniquities (as appears very plainly), and, worse by far than Judas, whose conscience sent him to hang himself, he "sits down to drink" with his king! 2. A leading instance of the destruction of the tenderest *relic* of perfect human nature. For in the last analysis we must read here, *the extinction of sympathy*! It is true there may have been left with the man who could do what Haman did sympathy with evil, and yet rather with *the* evil; sympathy with the gratuitous causing of woe and the causers of woe. But this is not what we dignify with the name sympathy. This sweet word, standing for a sweeter thing, has not two faces. Its face is one, and is aye turned to the light, to love, to the good. 'Tis a damning fact indeed among the possibilities and the crises of human nature, and of the "deceitful and desperately wicked" human heart, when sympathy haunts it no more, has forsaken it as its *habitat*, hovers over it no longer, fans the air for it with its beneficent pinion for the last, last time! Oh for the Stygian murkiness, the sepulchral hollowness, the pestilent contagion that succeeds, and is thenceforward the lot of that heart! The point of supreme selfishness is reached when all sympathy has died away. For those whose terrible woe himself had caused, it is Haman who has less than the least pity, and *no* fellow-feeling with them whatever! The lowest point of loss which our nature can touch here is surely when it has lost the calm energy of sympathy—to show it or to feel it. The proportion in which any one consciously, and as the highest achievement of his base skill and prostituted opportunity, either causes unnecessary woe or leaves it unpitied, unhelped, measures too faithfully the wounds and cruel injuries he has already inflicted on the tenderest of presences within him, the best friend to himself as well as to others. The wounds of sympathy are at any time of the deadly kind, and it only needs that they be one too many, when at last she will breathe out her long-suffering, stricken spirit! For him who is so forsaken it may well be that "he sits down to drink." For the knell is already heard, and "to-morrow he dies."—B.

EXPOSITION. § 7.

CHAPTER IV.

MOURNING OF MORDECAI, AND OF THE JEWS GENERALLY, ON HEARING OF THE DECREE (ch. iv. 1—3). Haman had no doubt kept his intentions secret until the king's consent to them was not only granted, but placed beyond his power to recall. The Jews first heard of the terrible blow impending over them by the publication of the edict. Then they became acquainted with it quickly enough. The edict was for a while the talk of the town. Placarded openly in some conspicuous and frequented place, every loiterer read it, every gossip spoke of it, every one whom it threatened could with his own eyes see its exact terms. Mordecai soon "perceived all that was done" (ver. 1)—perused the edict, understood whence it had originated, was fully aware that he himself and his whole nation stood in the most awful peril. His first impulse was to rend his garments and put on sackcloth and ashes; after which

he quitted the environs of the palace, and "went out into the midst of the city," where he gave free vent to his grief and alarm, "crying with a loud and bitter cry." The signs of mourning were not permitted within the walls of the royal residence, and Mordecai could come no nearer than the space before the gate, where he probably sat down in the dust "astounded" (see Ezra ix. 4). Nor was he long alone in his sorrow. In *every* province—and therefore at Susa, no less than elsewhere—"there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing" (ver. 3). The proscribed race made bitter lamentation—"lay in sackcloth and ashes," humbled itself before God, and waited. As yet no thought of escape seems to have occurred to any, no resolution to have been taken. Even Mordecai's thoughtful brain was paralysed, and, like the rest, he gave himself up to grief.

Ver. 1.—*Mordecai rent his clothes.* Compare Ezra ix. 3, 5 with the comment. The

moaning of the act was well understood by the Persians. **Put on sackcloth with ashes.** So Daniel (Dan. ix. 3), and the king of Nineveh (Jonah iii. 6). Either act by itself was a sign of deep grief; both combined betokened the deepest grief possible. **And went out into the midst of the city.** The palace was not to be saddened by private griefs (see the next verse). Mordecai, therefore, having assumed the outward signs of extreme sorrow, quitted the palace, and entered the streets of the town. There, overcome by his feelings, he vented them, as Asiatics are wont to do, in loud and piercing cries (comp. Neh. v. 1).

Ver. 2.—And came even before the king's gate. After some aimless wandering Mordecai returned toward the palace, either as his proper place, or with some incipient notion of obtaining Esther's help. He was not allowed, however, to pass the outer gate on account of his garb of woe, and so remained outside (see ver. 6).

Ver. 3.—And in every province. As fast as the news spread, as province after province received the decree, the Jews spontaneously did as Mordecai had done—everywhere there was great sorrow, shown commonly by **fasting, weeping, and wailing**, while in numerous instances the mourners even went the length of putting on **sackcloth and ashes**. Thus an ever-increasing cloud of grief overshadowed the land.

§ 8. GRIEF OF ESTHER. HER COMMUNICATIONS WITH MORDECAI. SHE CONSENTS TO RISK MAKING AN APPEAL TO THE KING (ch. iv. 4—17). Esther, in the seclusion of the harem, knew nothing of what the king and Haman had determined on. No one in the palace suspected how vitally she was concerned in the matter, since none knew that she was a Jewess, and state affairs are not commonly discussed between an Oriental monarch and a young wife. It was known, however, that she took an interest in Mordecai; and when that official was seen outside the palace gate in his mourning garb, it was reported to the queen. Not being aware why he grieved, but thinking that perhaps it was some light matter which he took too much to heart, she sent him a change of raiment, and requested him to put off his sackcloth. But Mordecai, without assigning any reason, refused (ver. 4). Esther upon this caused inquiry to be made of Mordecai concerning the reason of his mourning, and in this way became acquainted with what had happened (vers. 5—9). At the same time she found herself called on

by Mordecai to incur a great danger, since he requested her to go at once to the king, and to intercede with him for her people (ver. 8). In reply, the queen pointed out the extreme risk which she would run in entering the royal presence uninvited, and the little chance that there was of her receiving a summons, since she had not had one for thirty days (ver. 11). Mordecai, however, was inexorable. He reminded Esther that she herself was threatened by the decree, and was not more likely to escape than any other Jew or Jewess; declared his belief that, if she withheld her aid, deliverance would arise from some other quarter; warned her that neglect of duty was apt to provoke a heavy retribution, and suggested that she might have been raised to her queenly dignity for the express purpose of her being thus able to save her nation (vers. 13, 14). The dutiful daughter, the true Jewess, could resist no longer; she only asked that Mordecai and the other Jews in Susa would fast *for her* three days, while she and her maidens also fasted, and then she would take her life in her hand, and enter the royal presence uninvited, though it was contrary to the law; the risk should be run, and then, as she said with a simple pathos never excelled, "if I perish, I perish" (ver. 16). Satisfied with this reply, Mordecai "went his way," and held the three days' fast which Esther had requested (ver. 17).

Ver. 4.—Esther's maids and her chamberlains. A queen consort at an Oriental court is sure to have, besides her train of maids, a numerous body of eunuchs, who are at her entire disposal, and are especially employed in going her errands and maintaining her communications with the outer world. **Told her.** Esther's interest in Mordecai would be known to the maids and eunuchs by Mordecai's inquiries about her (ch. i. 11) and communications with her (*ibid.* ver. 22).

Ver. 5.—To know what it was, and why it was. *I. e.* "to know what the mourning garb exactly meant, and for what reason he had assumed it."

Ver. 6.—The street of the city. Rather, "the square."

Ver. 7.—The sum of money. Mordecai evidently considered that the money was an important item in the transaction, and had mainly influenced Ahasuerus. This would not have been the case if Ahasuerus had at once given it back (see the comment on ch. iii. 9).

Ver. 8.—**Also he gave him the copy.** In the original it is “a copy.” Mordecai had had a copy made for the purpose of handing it to Esther. **To make request to him for her people.** If this was the phrase used by Mordecai to Hatach, Esther’s nationality must now have ceased to be a secret, at any rate so far as her immediate attendants were concerned. Probably Mordecai felt that the truth must now be declared. It was only as the compatriots of the queen that he could expect to get the Jews spared.

Ver. 11.—**All the king’s servants** seems to mean here “all the court,” “all those in the immediate service of the king.” **The inner court.** The palace had, as it would seem, only two courts, the “outward court” of ch. vi. 4, and the “inner court” of the present passage. **There is one law of his to put him to death.** Rather, “there is one law for him.” Whoever he be, there is one and the same law regarding him—he must suffer death. Herodotus excepts six persons from the operation of this law (iii. 84, 118), but in making the exception shows the general rule to have been such as here represented. **Except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre.** No other writer tells us of this custom, but it is in perfect harmony with Oriental habits and modes of thought. Some have objected that the king would not always have a golden sceptre by him; but the Persepolitan sculptures uniformly represent him with a long tapering staff in his hand, which is probably the “sceptre” (*sharbitih*) of Esther. **I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.** The king’s passion had cooled, and Esther now, like his other wives, waited her occasional summons to his presence. She had not been called for a whole month, and did not know when a summons might come. It would not do to trust to so mere a chance; and therefore, if she was to interpose on behalf of her nation, she must intrude on the king uninvited, and risk being put to death.

Ver. 13.—**Think not with thyself.** Literally, “imagine not in thy mind.” **That thou shalt escape in the king’s house.** *I.e.* “that being an inmate of the palace will be any protection to thee;” it will be no protection—you will no more escape than any other Jew.

Ver. 14.—**Then shall there enlargement, or respiration** (*marg.* literally, “breath”), **and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place.** Mordecai is confident that God will not allow the destruction of his people. Without naming his name, he implies a trust in his gracious promises, and a conviction that Haman’s purpose will be frustrated; how, he knows not, but certainly in some way or other. If deliverance does not come through Esther, then it will arise from some other quarter. **But thou and thy father’s house shall be destroyed.** A denunciation of Divine vengeance. Though the nation will be saved, it will not benefit you. On you will fall a just judgment—having endeavoured to save your life, you will lose it—and your “father’s house” will be involved in your ruin. We may gather from this that Esther was not Abihail’s only child. **Who knoweth, &c.** Consider this also. Perhaps (who knows?) God has raised you up to your royal dignity for this very purpose, and none other, that you should be in a position to save your nation in this crisis.

Ver. 15.—**Fast ye for me.** Fasting for another is fasting to obtain God’s blessing on that other, and is naturally accompanied with earnest prayer to God for the person who is the object of the fast. Thus here again the *thought* of God underlies the narrative. It has been supposed that Esther could not have meant an absolute fast—complete abstinence from both food and drink—for so long a period as three days; but Oriental abstemiousness would not be very severely taxed by a fast of this length. The time intended—from the evening of the first to the morning of the third day—need not have much exceeded thirty-six hours. **I also and my maidens will fast likewise.** “Likewise” is to be taken here in its proper sense, as meaning “in like manner.” We also will abstain both from meat and drink during the same period.

Ver. 17.—**Mordecai . . . did according to all that Esther had commanded.** *I.e.* gathered the Jews together, and proclaimed a three days’ fast. Though without authority, he would naturally, under the circumstances, have sufficient influence over his countrymen to induce them to do his bidding.

HOMILETICS.

Vers. 1—3.—**The cry of a doomed people.** The decree against the Jews was not yet known in the palace; Esther herself was not yet informed of it. And the signs of sorrow and mourning were prohibited within the royal precincts; nothing of ill omen was suffered to come before the king and his household. But in the city evil tidings (which ever travel fast) soon came abroad.

I. THE FIRST NOTE OF LAMENTATION WAS UTTERED BY MORDECAI. The rending

of clothes in grief was practised by the Persians as well as by the Jews. The Ninevites in their penitence sat in sackcloth and ashes. It was and is the custom of Orientals to weep aloud in times of mourning. All these expressions of sorrow and lamentation were in the circumstances natural and proper. It was the woe of a patriot. Mordecai was not thinking so much of himself as of his people; he made their sorrows and alarms his own. It was the sorrow of a godly man. He did not simply mourn; he evidently humbled himself before God, and implored Divine pity and help.

II. THE CRY WAS COMMUNICATED TO AND TAKEN UP BY THE JEWS THROUGHOUT THE EMPIRE. The news of a great victory flies and flashes through a land, awakens the universal joy, and the land is filled with gladness and song. And the tidings of the impending calamity spread far and wide through the provinces of Persia, and created consternation in thousands of hearts. They mourned as they thought of the land of their fathers, and of all the privileges enjoyed in that sacred and fertile territory—their proper home and inheritance. For now they were not only doomed to exile; they were marked for destruction. They fasted, doubtless, as a religious exercise, accompanying their fasting with repentance and with prayers. They wept and wailed, knowing that though their cry could not pierce the walls of the palace at Shushan, it would penetrate the gates of heaven, and reach the ear of the King of kings. They lay in sackcloth and ashes, as permitting themselves no comfort or ease in prospect of their own and their brethren's ruin. Thus they prepared a way for the tender mercy of God to visit them from on high.

Practical lesson:—Sinners against whom a sentence of Divine wrath might rightfully be issued should lose no time in humbling themselves before the Lord, and confessing their sins with contrition and repentance, that they may partake in the mercy of heaven, and, through the redemption of Christ Jesus, be saved from the wrath to come.

Vers. 4—9.—*Sympathy*. Although Esther was lodged in a palace and surrounded with luxury and honour, she did not lose sight of her kinsman, Mordecai. Least of all was she indifferent to his trouble and sorrow. Hence, when informed of his mourning, she sent to him, and, when aware of the cause of his distress, entered into it, taking his grief as her own. A beautiful illustration of sympathy—an emotion and disposition which adorns our humanity, and relieves men of many of their sorrows, and lightens many of their cares.

I. SYMPATHY IS BASED UPON OUR COMMON HUMANITY AND KINDRED. "I am a man, and deem nought human foreign, a matter of unconcern, to me." The sympathies of some are restricted to their own household, or their own nation; but it becomes us to cherish a fellow-feeling for all mankind. Still, as in this narrative, kindred is a proper ground for special sympathy.

II. SYMPATHY HAS ITS SUREST BASIS IN RELIGION. The Scriptures teach us that God has made of one blood all nations of men. We are children of one family. Not only so, but the same Father has pitied us, and the same Saviour has died for us. What emphasis do these facts give to the inspired admonitions: "Look not every man upon his own things, but every man also upon the things of others." "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." "Rejoice with those who do rejoice, and weep with them that weep."

III. SYMPATHY IS BENEFICIAL, ALIKE TO HIM WHO DISPLAYS IT, AND TO HIM WHO IS ITS OBJECT. The heart is richer and happier for entering into the feelings of another. And the heart is relieved that feels another shares its burden. Human society is made more bright and blessed by the prevalence of the sacred habit of sympathy. Of this virtue, as of mercy, it may be said, "It blesseth him that gives and him that takes."

IV. SYMPATHY IS THE FLOWER OF WHICH THE FRUIT IS HELP. Mere sentimental, unpractical sympathy is worse than vain; it is a mockery. But where right feeling leads to right action, it proves its intended value. In the case before us, Esther's sympathy with her kinsman's anxiety and sorrow led her to put forth all her efforts, in compliance with his wish, to secure the end dear to his heart.

Practical lessons:—1. Shut not up your heart from sympathising with your

neighbour's woe. To do so will be more harmful to you even than to him. 2. Let sympathy be expressed. It is well that those in trouble should know that you feel with and for them. 3. Let sympathy take a practical form. If tears and prayers are all you can give to show your sympathy, well and good. But if you have more to give, withhold it not, for Christ's sake.

Ver. 8.—*An intercessor.* If Haman's influence with the king of Persia was used for harm, why should not Esther's be used for good? It was a natural and happy thought on the part of Mordecai to use his ward's influence with Ahasuerus for the deliverance and safety of the Jews. And the sequel shows the wisdom of Mordecai's counsel, and the efficacy of Esther's pleading. Christ, our High Priest, is, as such, our Advocate with the Father. He ever liveth to make intercession for us. As a figure of our Redeemer, the Intercessor, consider Esther, as possessing two qualifications for successful advocacy.

I. An intercessor should have **SYMPATHY WITH, AND INTEREST IN, THE CASE OF THOSE FOR WHOM HE PLEADS.** Esther had this qualification; she loved her cousin, she loved her people. She could not think of the destruction of the Jews without distress. She was prepared to plead hard for her people's life. So with Christ. He is the Son of man, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities; for he was tried and tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. How fitted is he then to represent our case, to plead our cause! We have in God the Father a Sovereign waiting to be gracious, and in Christ the Son a Mediator and Advocate who will do his part to secure our salvation.

II. An intercessor should have **INFLUENCE WITH THE PERSON WHOSE FAVOUR IS TO BE SOUGHT.** Esther had this qualification. The king loved her above his other wives, and would naturally be disposed to please her, and receive her requests with favour. So with Christ. He is the Son of God, the "beloved Son," in whom the Father is "well pleased." Him, therefore, the Father "heareth always." His relation to the Father, his obedience and devotion, all entitle him to the Father's confidence. And, as a matter of fact, he does not, cannot plead in vain. To have the advocacy of Christ is to have the favour of God. Gratefully avail yourselves of Christ's prevailing intercession, and through him let your requests be made known unto God.

Ver. 11.—*The golden sceptre.* The superstitious reverence which surrounded the throne of Ahasuerus is manifest from the whole tenor of this narrative. Capricious and absolute, his frown was feared as the most awful of earthly ills; and his smile was sought, with abject slavishness and adulation, as the herald of honour, riches, and power. Even his wife could not approach unbidden into the presence of the "great king," save at the peril of her life. When he was pleased to stretch forth the golden sceptre of clemency and mercy, all was well. The golden sceptre, which encouraged the timid, assured the suppliant of a gracious reception, and was the earnest of royal favours and blessings, may be taken as an emblem of the merciful regard and purposes of the King of kings. In the gospel of his Son our heavenly Ruler and Lord extends to us the golden sceptre of his grace.

I. It is a sceptre of **ROYAL POWER.** Originally the sceptre was the rod of the chief with which he smote the cowardly and the recreant, and thus it became the emblem of kingly rule. All God's acts are acts of a just authority, enforced by an irresistible power. Whilst his sway extends over his whole creation, as a moral sway it is exercised upon righteous principles over his moral and accountable subjects.

II. It is a sceptre of **ROYAL FAVOUR.** It is evident from the narrative that Esther had no hope except from the clemency of the king. Her position as queen did not even give her the right to approach the throne unbidden. When Ahasuerus stretched forth the golden sceptre she knew that she was regarded with favour. Our heavenly King extends to us the favour of his royal nature. His word, his gospel, is the expression of his regard for men. His anger is turned away, and he comforts us.

III. It is a sceptre of **ROYAL MERCY.** Esther's approach was a presumption, an offence. But the symbolical act we are considering assured her that her offence was overlooked, and she herself accepted. In the gospel God appears not only as kind, but as merciful. He addresses the sinful suppliant, and says, Fear not! I am the

Lord that hath mercy on thee! Thou shalt not perish, but shalt have pardon and life eternal.

IV. It is a sceptre of ROYAL BOUNTY. The act of Ahasuerus was the earnest of further kindness. "What is thy petition, and what is thy request?" She had, in response, only to ask, and to have. God has given us his Son, and the gospel, which tells us of this gift, tells us that all provision is made for us. This is the language of our royal Father: "All that I have is thine!"

Ver. 14.—*Enlargement and deliverance.* What a sublime confidence is apparent in this language of Mordecai to Esther! He took a very different mode of reasoning and persuasion from what might have been expected. Why did he not say, My only hope, the only hope of the nation, is in thee; if thou fail us we are undone? Because he believed Israel's salvation to be dear to Israel's God. This led him to put the matter thus: "If thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place."

I. GOD, IN HIS PROVIDENCE, OFTEN ACCOMPLISHES GREAT WORKS BY THE HANDS OF HUMAN AGENTS.

II. IF THE LIKELIEST FAIL, THEN THE UNLIKELIEST WILL BE RAISED UP AND EMPLOYED.

III. ALL THINGS AND POWERS THAT ARE ADVERSE NOTWITHSTANDING, THE PURPOSES OF GOD SHALL CERTAINLY BE FULFILLED.

IV. IT IS A GREAT PRIVILEGE TO HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY OF CARRYING OUT THE PLANS OF THE ALL-WISE. Especially is this so when we have the means of bringing enlargement and deliverance to the people of God. See to it that you do not mistake the "time to speak" for the "time to be silent."

Ver. 14.—*The purpose of power.* "Purpose" is a watchword of modern intellectual warfare. "Cause" and "purpose" are words that awaken keenest intellectual strife. Thinkers are divided into those who believe that the will is the cause of human acts, and that many of those acts are evidence of purpose; and those who believe our acts to be the necessary results of physical antecedents acting upon our nervous system. And those who do not believe in human purpose naturally enough have no belief in Divine purpose. According to them mind counts for nothing as a factor in the universe. Believing in purpose, both human and Divine, we may nevertheless be on our guard against dogmatically affirming that this and that event is evidence of the intention of Heaven. Purpose is in the life of man; yet when we endeavour to fathom its mysteries, it is well that we should propose the question with the moderation and tentativeness which characterised the language of Mordecai: "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

I. THERE ARE EVIDENCES OF DIVINE PURPOSE IN THE LIFE OF MEN GENERALLY. Whatever doubt we may have of individual cases, however much we may be influenced by our own prejudices and fancies in judging of such cases, it scarcely admits of doubt that human life has a reason for its existence and for its opportunities. Especially in reading the biographies of great and good men we are impressed with this belief. And what strength does it impart to a man to believe that God has a work for him to do. Divine purpose may be wrought out by unconscious agents.

"There's a Divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will!"

II. PROVIDENCE SOMETIMES MAKES IT CLEAR WHAT THE DIVINE PURPOSE IS. Observe the expression: "such a time." A crisis is observable in the life of most men. An opportunity opens up. The vocation is made apparent, or rather audible. A relationship is appointed. A service is required. God's finger is visible, and he is heard saying, "This is the way; walk ye in it!"

III. AT SUCH TIMES THERE IS IMPOSED A SACRED RESPONSIBILITY. The call of Providence may be disregarded. Through negligence, or fear, or distrust persons may shrink from responding to the requirement of Heaven. But at how fearful a cost! On the other hand, to have wrought the work of God is to have lived not in vain. And Divine grace is sufficient for us.

Practical lessons:—1. Study the indications of God's will. Ask, "Lord, what

wilt thou have me to do?" 2. Follow the leadings of God's providence. Say, "Lead Lord, and thy servant shall be found in thy steps!"

Ver. 16.—*A fast.* Fasting is often mere superstition, as when men suppose that there is merit in their abstaining on certain days from certain kinds of food, thinking that mortification of appetite is in itself a virtue, and that God must needs be pleased with what pains or distresses his creatures. Fasting is sometimes a mockery. It is well known that many religionists keep the letter whilst they break the spirit of a fast. It is certainly difficult to sympathise with the asceticism of those who fast on Fridays upon salmon and champagne. Yet this, like other religious observances that are now largely superstitious, or at all events formal, has its origin in laudable desires, and springs from good tendencies in human nature.

I. A COMMON SORROW NATURALLY SEEKS A COMMON EXPRESSION. When a community is smitten by a general calamity, it is unbecoming that any members of that community should indulge in feasting and mirth. When the Jews were threatened with destruction, how natural that, at Esther's suggestion, the Hebrew population of the city should join in a general fast.

II. A COMMON WANT NATURALLY LEADS TO UNITED SUPPLICATION. Together the people were endangered; together they sought deliverance from their redeeming God. A fast is not only a time of abstinence from pleasure, it is a time of prayer; and God in heaven is gratified by conjoined and blended supplication and intercession. What mercies await the society, the city, the nation which will agree with one heart to seek the Lord.

III. IT IS THE SPIRITUAL FASTING WHICH IS ACCEPTABLE TO THE SEARCHER OF HEARTS. Often, in the presence of fasts which are merely outward, has he addressed the indignant question to formal religionists, "Is it such a fast that I have chosen?" Often has the appeal been addressed to such, "Rend your hearts, and not your garments!" The case of the Ninevites is an illustration of the combination of a formal with a real fast, and is a proof that such a fast is not disregarded by God. Let the words of our Saviour be remembered: "When thou fastest, anoint thy head and wash thy face, that thou appear not unto men to fast; and thy Father who seeth in secret shall reward thee openly."

Ver. 16.—"*If I perish, I perish!*" The bosom of the queen must, when she uttered these affecting words, have been rent with diverse emotions. The entreaty of Mordecai, the danger of her people, the benevolence of her own nature, all urged her to venture into the presence of the august yet capricious king. Yet her knowledge of the court rules, her fears for herself, must have withheld her from the daring act. She faced the possible consequences, she prepared herself for the worst. Doubtless she commended herself to the care of Heaven, and, forming the resolve, exclaimed, "If I perish, I perish!" Hearers of the gospel have sometimes been convinced of their sin, and yet have not been able to appropriate to themselves the promises of God's word. They have felt that there is no refuge save in the cross of Christ, and no hope save in the mercy of God. After long, sore conflict, such anguished sufferers, with a faith which is half despair, have been able to cast themselves before the feet of the King, whose displeasure they dread, and in whose mercy they scarcely dare to hope. They have ventured all upon Divine compassion, and the earnestness, the distress, the utter helplessness of their hearts have found utterance in the cry of Esther, "If I perish, I perish!"

I. The cry is the utterance of SINCERITY AND EARNESTNESS. The language is full of feeling, of passion. It was no feeble emotion which could prompt to such a determination. This is the spirit in which a sinner should come into the presence of the King, seeking for pardon.

II. It is the utterance of FELT UNWORTHINESS. And none can come aright unto God save he who comes with the cry of the penitent publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner!"

III. It is the utterance of CONSCIOUS NEED. Nothing but the keenest sense of the necessity of the case could have impelled Esther to the course of action she took. Similar is the motive which brings the sinner to the Lord.

"Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling."

IV. It is the utterance of MINGLED FEAR AND HOPE. Uncertainty and dread mingled in the queen's mind with some gleam of hope. It is not unnatural that the poor helpless sinner should shrink from the view of a holy God, should scarcely dare to hope for his favour.

V. It is the utterance of A MIND UPON WHICH THE KING WILL HAVE MERCY. As Esther's fears were dispelled by the attitude and language of her consort, so the penitent, lowly, believing, and prayerful suppliant shall never be rejected by a God who delighteth in mercy. The spirit which God will not disdain is that of the lowly suppliant who casts aside every plea save the Divine compassion.

"I have tried, and tried in vain,
Many ways to ease my pain ;
Now all other hope is past,
Only this is left at last :
Here before thy cross I lie,
Here I live, or here I die.

"If I perish, be it here,
With the Friend of sinners near ;
Lord, it is enough—I know
Never sinner perished so :
Here before thy cross I lie,
Here I cannot, *cannot* die !"

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Vers. 1—3.—*Distress*. We have a very vivid picture, in these few touches, of a nation's exceeding sorrow. We are reminded of—

I. THE HEARTLESSNESS AND IMPOTENCE OF TYRANNY IN REGARD TO IT. The king could cheerfully speak the word which caused the calamity, and then, when its sorrow surged up to his palace wall, shut his doors against the entrance of any sign of it ; "for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth" (ver. 2). The tyrant first becomes responsible for grievous and widespread woe, and then takes measures to prevent its utterance from disturbing his royal pleasure or repose. Such is selfishness in unchecked power. But though heartless, it will discover the limits of its sway ; the hour will come when it will find itself impotent as a leaf in the flood ; when the loud and bitter cry of a people's wrongs and sufferings will pass the sovereign's guards and penetrate his gates, will find entrance to his chamber and smite his soul.

II. ITS CRAVING FOR EXPRESSION. "Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes, . . . and cried with a loud and bitter cry" (ver. 1). "And in every province . . . there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing, and many lay in sackcloth and ashes" (ver. 3). All strong feeling craves utterance ; joy in song, grief in tears. In this case intensity of national distress found expression in the most speaking and striking forms to which Eastern misery and despair were accustomed to resort—in "sackcloth and ashes ;" a "loud and bitter cry ;" "fasting, and weeping, and wailing." To command ourselves when we suffer pain or stand in grave peril is manly and virtuous. Yet it is but shallow wisdom to say that crying will not make it better. There is real and valuable relief in the act of utterance. In saddest griefs the worst sign of all is a dead silence, the undimmed eye.

"Home they brought her warrior dead ;
She nor swooned nor uttered cry.
All her maidens, watching, said,
She must weep, or she will die."

Even the "loud and bitter cry" is not without its worth to the heart that utters it (Esau—Gen. xxvii. 34). Sorrow may utter itself in many ways ; the best of all is *in*

prayer—in hallowed, soothing, reassuring communion with our heavenly Father, telling all our tale of grief in the ear of our Divine Friend. Next best is *human sympathy*—the unburdening of our souls to our most tried and sympathising friend. We may well be thankful that he has so “fashioned our hearts alike” that we can reckon on true and intense sympathy in the time of our distress. A third channel is in *sacred poetry*. How many of the bereaved have had to bless God for the hymns and poems in which their own grief has found utterance, through which it has found most valuable relief.

III. ITS PITEROUSNESS. 1. *We are moved by it.* Our hearts are stirred to their depth by the recital of the woes which are endured by great numbers of men and women, when fire, or flood, or famine, or the sword of man comes down upon them in irresistible calamity. 2. *Are not the angels of God moved by it, and do not these “ministering spirits” with unseen hands minister then to the children of need and sorrow?* 3. *God himself, we know, is moved by it.* “I have surely seen the affliction of my people” (Exod. iii. 7). He “heard their groaning” (Exod. ii. 24). If the woe of the world is not doubled, it is largely swollen by the sorrowful sympathy it excites. But it is well it should be so, for such sympathy is good for those who feel it, and it is the spring of remedy and removal.

IV. THE DISTRESS OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST. Looking on the afflicted Israelites at this crisis of their history, we may regard them as a type of the *Church of God* in its distress. Thus regarding the subject, we remark—1. *That God allows his Church to pass through very strange and trying scenes.* It is wholly inexplicable to us, but it is a certain fact that he has done so, and it is probable that he will do so again. There have been, and will be, crises in its history. *Persecution* will assail it. *Infidelity* will seek to undermine it. *Worldliness* will endeavour to corrupt it. It may go hard with it, and its very life be threatened. 2. *That in its distress and danger it must seek Divine deliverance.* God only can, and he will rescue and restore. At the eleventh hour, perhaps, but then, if not earlier, he will interpose and save. But his aid must be (1) *earnestly*, (2) *continuously*, (3) *believingly* sought by his faithful children.—C.

Vers. 1—3.—*An unyielding grief.* I. THE SUFFERING CAUSED BY ONE EVIL ACT CANNOT BE ESTIMATED. It was easy for Haman to draw up the instrument of destruction, and for the king to let him affix his signet to it, and then for both to sit down to drink; but very soon through that easily-performed act thousands of families were plunged into an agony of terror and grief. One sin committed lightly may extend widely, and descend to many generations in its disastrous effects. There is no calculating the issues of evil. The chief enemy to the happiness of men is man, through the evil that is in him. “Man’s inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn.”

II. A RELIGIOUS VIRTUE MAY BE BROUGHT TO SPECIAL SUFFERING BY GIVING OCCASION TO THE MALEVOLENT WRATH OF AN EVIL MIND. We can understand how Mordecai, when he learned the diabolic scheme of revenge which Haman had set on foot, should have been almost unmanned by his horror and grief. Was not the decreed slaughter of all his countrymen the result of his own conduct towards Haman? This thought would bite into his soul. Israel might have been in safety and peace but for him. Of all the griefs awakened by the king’s proclamation, Mordecai’s would be the greatest. See here—1. How grief varies in its outward manifestations. To us Mordecai’s behaviour may seem wild and unreasonable. But in the East such signs of mourning were the rule, and even amongst Western peoples *wailings* in times of bereavement are not uncommon. Real sorrow is glad to embrace any outlet that may ease its inward burden. Differences of temperament also, as well as of custom, have much to do with differing expressions of grief. 2. How deep grief kills every sense of danger. Mordecai raised his “loud and bitter cry in the midst of the city,” and at length seemed about to enter the king’s palace, when he was reminded that sackcloth was not allowed to show itself there. Such conduct was very bold; the king and his favourite were set at nought by it. But it must be attributed to the fearlessness of a profound grief which could not but tell itself forth in spite of consequences. 3. How vain the attempt is to enclose any

spot or circle of human life from the inroads of suffering. Esther's elevation to the throne did not make the happiness secure which it brought to herself and Mordecai. Neither did the foolish law that prohibited sackcloth or any sign of mourning from entering the king's gate prevent the intrusion of sorrow into that guarded sanctuary of ease and lust. Many hope to avoid grief by avoiding its signs and scenes, and by surrounding themselves with all that is pleasant and joyous. But the hope is vain. Whatever may be their success or failure, there is one visitor which cannot be warded off. Into every palace and cottage alike death perforce enters, and brings its own solemn gloom. Every human life, however resplendent in worldly attributes, must in the end succumb to that assailant. Happy the soul that possesses the life eternal, God's gift to men in his Son, which swallows up death in victory (1 Cor. xv. 54—57).

III. GODLY PRINCIPLE SHOWS ITS STRENGTH BY REMAINING FIRM IN PRESENCE OF ANY SUFFERING WHICH IT MAY BRING ON ITSELF OR ON OTHERS. Amidst all his grief and fear Mordecai never entertained the idea of withdrawing from the stand which he had made against Haman. We find him some time afterwards still maintaining his erect and defiant attitude, and thereby increasing the malignity of the favourite. His example is a noble one, but it is not singular. Our Lord himself forewarned his disciples of the sufferings they would have to endure for his name's sake (John xvi. 1—4), yet he calmly pursued his course, and laid on his followers all the burden of his cross. Nor were his apostles unlike him. Taking up his cross, they freely laid it on others. They were never weakened in their labours by fear of the persecutions, cruelties, losses, and deaths which resulted from the reception of their gospel. If we do our duty to God we may safely leave results in his hand. Mordecai's firmness in obeying religious principle at all costs ultimately taught him and others this great lesson.—D.

Vers. 4—12.—*Sympathy.* Mordecai's strange appearance at the king's gate made a stir in the palace. It was seen by Esther's "maids and chamberlains," and by them it was described to the queen. When Esther heard of the condition of the man whom she loved as a parent she was "exceedingly grieved." Then she took such measures as she could to show how much she felt and suffered with Mordecai. Let us learn from her conduct—

I. THAT IN TIMES OF TRIAL THE SYMPATHY OF THOSE WHOM WE LOVE IS A PRECIOUS THING. When Esther sent robes to Mordecai to replace his sackcloth, and loving messages with them, she would pour a real solace into his sorely-tried heart. She did not know at first the cause of his anguish, but she did her best to put her own loving heart beside his, and by the sweet contact to comfort and strengthen him in his mysterious sorrow. In many cases of suffering we can do little more than pour into the ear a breath of sympathy. *That* often is the best blessing that can be given or received. We should all cherish and freely exhibit "a fellow-feeling" with those of our friends who are "in any distress."

II. THAT A TRUE SYMPATHY IS EAGER TO EXPRESS ITSELF IN BENEFICIAL ACTION. Esther's first attempt to comfort Mordecai having failed, she sent a trusted servant to him to ascertain what his so loudly-pronounced manifestations of sorrow really meant. She could not live in peace while he was in such visible unrest. She longed to know all, that she might do all that she could. It is not good to indulge in idle sentiment. Many are content if they *feel* well, or surrender themselves for a time to tender emotions. No practical good results from their sensibility, nor is any intended. There is a good feeling which is satisfied with itself. Such was not Esther's. Let us beware of it (see Matt. vii. 21; xxi. 28—31; Luke x. 33—35).

III. THAT THE MOST EAGER SYMPATHY MAY SEEM HELPLESS IN PRESENCE OF THE OBJECTS THAT ATTRACT IT. When Esther learned through Hatach the cause of Mordecai's distress, and received the copy of the royal decree, her sorrow and sympathy would be greatly intensified. They were now extended to all her people. Yet, queen as she was, she felt unable to do anything to give help. There are troubles before which the most powerful have to confess themselves powerless. Few griefs are so keen as that which springs from a conscious inability to satisfy the heart's compassionate yearnings. In connection with Esther's difficulties let us

notice here—1. Mordecai's charge. It was that, after reading the royal decree, Esther should go to the king and make supplication before him for her people (ver. 8). This he laid upon her as a solemn duty. The obligations of duty are increased by high position and influence. 2. Esther's strait. However willing to obey Mordecai, Esther was aware of a twofold obstacle to her following his guidance in this instance. It was a universally known law of the Persian court that no one, man or woman, should approach the king uninvented under the penalty of death (ver. 11). The life of any intruder, on whatever mission, could only be saved by the king's holding out to him or her his golden sceptre. In ordinary circumstances the unbidden entrance of the queen would be most likely to receive the royal sign of safety and welcome. But Esther had a special fact to communicate to Mordecai on this point. For thirty days, or a month, the king had never sought her company, and she had no hope that he might now give her an opportunity of speaking to him. This forgetfulness of Esther on the part of the king may perhaps have been owing to the vicious influence of Haman.

IV. THAT TESTING OCCASIONS ARISE IN THE HISTORY OF EVERY LIFE. No position, however exalted, is free from them. Many fail to meet them honestly and heroically, and therefore suffer more than they gain by them. Happy are those who, under the power of faith and a sense of duty, withstand and conquer them to good ends (1 Pet. i. 6, 7).—D.

Ver. 5.—*The cry of the wretched.* "Then called Esther for Hatach, . . . and gave him a command to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was." Esther *hears* of Mordecai's grief from her maids and chamberlains. She sends raiment first. She then sends Hatach to ask Mordecai "what his grief is, and why it is." She is much troubled when she learns the real state of danger in which he and herself are placed. She does not seem to have thought so much about her people as about her uncle, who had been unto her as a father.

I. THOSE LIVING IN LUXURY AND EASE, AWAY FROM THE SIGHT OF THE TROUBLES OF THE POOR, OFTEN DO NOT FEEL ANXIOUS FOR THEIR WELFARE. This is the tendency of all luxurious life, that we measure the position of others by our own; or we think not of others as having such fine feelings. We believe it is one of the great evils of the present day that the struggle to attain and maintain what is called refined life and position, society, is crushing out the sympathy once felt for those on the lower levels. An indifference to their claims springs up in proportion to the anxiety to gratify personal selfishness.

II. THERE ARE MANY MORDECAIS IN EVERY CITY WEARING THE SACKCLOTH OF POVERTY, AND BEARING THE ASHES OF SORROW, WHO HAVE A STRONG CLAIM ON THE SYMPATHY OF CHRISTIANS. They want something more than mere doled-out crumbs of charity; they need a heartfelt sympathy, and real help. This is what Christ gave them on earth. He, the most intellectual, refined, and sinless Being that ever lived, bent to the lowliest, strengthened the weakest, bore with the frailest, came into closest contact with disease and sin, so that it seemed that he "himself took our infirmities," and became "sin for us." His whole life was a going out of self and living for others.—H.

Ver. 14.—*Discerning opportunities.* "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" We can imagine Esther saying to herself, "Away with all my cowardice, my weak-heartedness. Why should I fear to go and plead for my people?" She says to herself, "Can I be so unworthy of my descent as an Israelite? Will God forsake me when striving to save and serve his chosen people? Come, O thou that leddest thy people as a flock, and lead me now to a prosperous ending of my hazardous work! O thou that didst break the power of Pharaoh, restrain that of our enemy! O thou that didst go forth with Joshua and help him by hailstorms from heaven against the Amalekites, unsheathe thy sword against this Agagite, this Haman who seeks our hurt! Cause me, O God, like Miriam, to praise thee in glad song because the enemy and his designs are alike overthrown. Unworthy am I to be an instrument in thine hands; yet, if I come to the kingdom for such a time as this, make me ready to do thy will."

I. OPPORTUNITIES FOR DOING GOOD COME TO CHRISTIANS IN EVERY PLACE. They can benefit their family, the nation, or the Church.

II. Opportunities of doing good SHOULD BE SEIZED. Gone, they may have passed for ever. Generally the opportunities of doing the greatest good are brief. The time of the death edict is approaching.

III. If opportunities are neglected it is well to have REMINDERS. Parents, friends, or ministers may be as reminding Mordecai.

IV. The thought that an opportunity is SPECIALLY GIVEN BY GOD FOR SERVING HIM has a great effect in leading to the performance of duty.—H.

Vers. 13—17.—*A bold faith.* I. DIFFICULTIES DO NOT DAUNT THE STRONG. Mordecai quite understood the force of the twofold barrier to Esther's appealing to the king. Yet if it had been a hundredfold he would have urged her to face it. Neither a legal folly nor any amount of personal risk could justify irresolution or inaction when a whole people might be saved by a bold attempt. Obstacles that seem insurmountable in ordinary times dwindle much in presence of great emergencies.

II. IF WE ARE TRUE TO GOD OURSELVES WE SHALL WISH AND PRAY THAT OUR BELOVED ONES MAY BE TRUE ALSO. No being on earth was so precious to Mordecai as Esther, but his very love would long to see her faithful to her God and country. Esther would have been to him no longer what she had been in the past if now she had failed to undertake the mission which God seemed to lay upon her. Parents send forth their sons to do battle for their country, and they would much rather that they should die on the field than prove recreant to honour and duty.

III. A FAITHFUL LOVE IS RATIONAL IN ITS DEMANDS. We should neither make sacrifice ourselves, nor ask sacrifice from others, without good cause. In such cases we should be clear in our faith and judgment. To Mordecai Esther seemed the one appointed instrument of thwarting Haman and saving Israel. The reasons of this conviction he stated to the queen with great simplicity and force. Let us look at them. 1. As a Jewess, her life was already doomed. Let the edict once be put in force, let blood once be shed, and even she would not escape, any more than Vashti, the immutability of Persian law. Better to risk life in trying to prevent a dreadful iniquity than to expose it by a timid quiescence to almost certain death. 2. If she failed, deliverance would come by another. Here was an expression of a strong and prophetic faith; and in it we learn the secret of Mordecai's persistent opposition to Haman. He trusted in God, and had a firm persuasion that God would yet deliver his people. Esther and her house might be destroyed, but some other saviour would be raised up to testify to the faithfulness and omnipotence of the God of Israel. God is not dependent on any one instrument, or on any multiple of one. He raises up and casts down at will, and chooses his servants. Amidst all the weaknesses of his people his covenant stands sure. 3. She might have been raised to the throne just for the purpose of saving her people at this juncture. The circumstances of her elevation were peculiar. There was a mystery in them which indicated to the thoughtful Mordecai the hand of God. To some extent the mystery was now explained. Esther was the instrument provided by God for the "enlargement and deliverance of Israel." Every opportunity of doing good is virtually a Divine call. When God points the way we should pursue it, at whatever cost, as the only right way. The providence of God is often remarkably shown in the occasions which demand from us special service for him and his people.

IV. A MIND THAT CLOSES ITSELF AGAINST CONVICTION IS ITS OWN ENEMY. Whether from fear, or pride, or evil inclinations, many harden themselves against the demonstrations of reason and experience; they shut the window of the soul against any fresh light. They take a stand which implies the impossibility of any change or advancement. Reasoning is lost on them. But Esther at once felt and acknowledged the force of Mordecai's argument. She could not resist it, and did not try. Her heart was convinced, and in the answer she returned she frankly confessed it. An openness to conviction is a condition of growth and usefulness; stubborn prejudice is a bar to wisdom and its fruits.

V. CONVICTIONS SHOULD BE CARRIED OUT IN ACTION. We are often tempted to act in opposition to the dictates of our inward judgment. The will may fail to be

governed even by the deepest conviction. It is sad when acknowledged truth and actual conduct are at variance with each other. Esther affords us an example of loyal obedience to conviction, in face of the weightiest temptation to set it aside. Having been convinced by Mordecai's representations, she resolved to do what these urged upon her as a sacred duty. And in the words by which she conveyed her purpose to Mordecai she gave a remarkable display of—1. Piety. The three days' fast which she laid on herself and her maidens inside the palace, and on Mordecai and the Jews of Shushan, was a humble and prayerful casting of the whole matter on Divine help. No mention is made of prayers, but the fast was all a prayer. The queen knew her own weakness; she knew also the true Source of strength; she felt that the work was God's, and that she was but a feeble instrument in his hands; and, therefore, she desired her countrymen to unite with her in humiliation and supplication before the God of Israel. Trial achieves much of its purpose when it brings a soul thus to the feet of God under a sense of dependence on his merciful succour. Victory is really won when endangered weakness feels itself under the shadow of the Almighty. 2. Heroism. All irresolution had now faded from Esther's mind. Having appealed to God, she was no longer doubtful; strength had already been given her. She was prepared for the sacrifice. "*If I perish, I perish.*" A godly heroism!—one inspired by God and fed by communion with him. Esther's words were not emotional, or self-confident, or desperate; they were the result of earnest meditation, and must not be separated from her proposal of a three days' fast. We are reminded by them of the words of our Lord when communing with his Father before he went to the cross: "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done." Esther is that type of Israel's Messiah. We see in her conduct at this time the working of that Holy Spirit who led God's Son to the sacrifice of himself for the salvation of men.

VL THE WAY INTO THE PRESENCE OF THE KING OF KINGS is open and free to all who truly seek him. To the earnest suppliant or loving child the Divine majesty is not hedged round by formalities that create distance and terror. God is near to all who call upon him. He dwells with the humble and contrite. All may come to him by the way that he has consecrated in his Son, and come at any time. None are refused a hearing and a welcome. There is joy in the presence of his angels over every one that seeks his face.—D.

Vers. 15—17.—*Resolving to run risks.* Deep and intense, if not prolonged, must have been the struggle in the breast of the beautiful queen of Persia. The doom that awaited her if she was unfavourably received was terrible, and would be immediately executed. She had not only to do that which was "not according to the law" (ver. 16), but also to ask a great boon of the king, to bring before him her Jewish extraction, and to measure her influence against that of the great favourite. She did not seem at this time to be in any especial favour with Ahasuerus (ver. 11), and it appeared as if the human chances were much against success. But the nobler motives triumphed in the struggle; she would not refuse to attempt this great deliverance, let come what might. The worst was death, and "if she perished, she perished" (ver. 16). These are memorable words; if they are not often on human lips, the thought which breathes in them is often in human minds, and the feeling of which they are eloquent is often in human hearts. Men in every age and land are running great risks, trusting everything to one cast of the dice, imperilling life, or much if not all that makes life dear, on some one hazard. The words of Esther are sometimes found on lips unworthy to use them; they are perverted or misapplied. Sometimes they are (1) *the motto of a foolish fatalism*. There is a certain keen but desperate pleasure in the intense excitement which precedes the moment when fortunes are either made or lost. The gambler, as well as the hypocrite, "has his reward," such as it is, in the slaking of that feverish thirst for highly-wrought feeling, and he either wins what he has not fairly earned, and what he is certain to squander in dissipation, or he loses perhaps all the precious fruits of many years' toil. He risks everything on one throw, and "if he perishes, he perishes." In whatever ways men run such risks, whether it be a kingdom or a fortune or a competency, they greatly exceed their rights; they run risks which they have no

moral right to run, and are walking in a perilous and guilty path. These words are (2) *the expression of a needless fear*. It is sometimes said by those who are anxiously seeking salvation, that *if they perish, they will perish at the foot of the cross*. This is, perhaps, only the trembling of a great hope, the shadow of a new and great joy. The earnest soul seeking salvation from sin through Christ Jesus cannot perish. He that believeth *shall not* perish. God's word, which is the very strongest basis on which to build any hope, is our sure guarantee. So also with the future blessedness. We need not, in presence of death, indulge even in this measure of uncertainty. Death is finally conquered. Christ is the Lord of life eternal, and will most assuredly bestow it on all who love his name. We shall not perish in the darkness of death, but live on in the brightness of immortal glory. That, however, to which these words of Esther are specially applicable is this; they are—

THE UTTERANCE OF MORAL HEROISM. Esther came to her conclusion after serious and earnest thought. Her life was dear to her. She had everything to make it precious and worth keeping if she honourably could, but affection for her kindred and interest in her race weighed all selfish considerations down. She would go forward, and if she did perish, her life thus lost would not be a vain and worthless sacrifice, but a glorious martyrdom. Such struggles men are still called on to pass through, such victory to gain: the soldier as he steps into rank on the day of battle; the philanthropist as he visits the hospital or waits on the wounded ones lying stricken on the field of slaughter; the physician as he goes his round when the pestilence is raging; the sailor as he mans the lifeboat; the evangelist as he penetrates into the haunt of the vicious and the violent criminal; the missionary as he lands among the savage tribe. In presence of this risk-running of ours, we remark—1. *That though we may timidly shrink at first, yet afterwards we may do noble service*. Witness this case of Esther, and that of Moses (Exod. iv. 13). 2. *That if not the greater, yet the lesser risks we should all be ready to run*. If not life itself (1 John iii. 16), some precious things in life. Something surely, if not much, in health, or money, or friendship, or reputation, or comfort we will venture for Christ and for our fellows. If we never undertake anything but that in which there is perfect security from injury and loss, we shall do nothing, we shall "stand all the day idle." 3. *That we have the very strongest inducement to run great risks*. The will of Christ (Matt. xvi. 25); the example of Christ; the example of Christian heroes and heroines; the crying need of the world; the blessed alternative of present triumph, for if we perish we do not perish, but live eternally. 4. *That we should sustain the hands of those who are passing through perils for us*. Esther's maidens and "the Jews present in Shushan" (ver. 16) fasted (and prayed), that the end might be as they hoped. We who wait while others labour or fight must "strengthen our brethren;" we must seek by our earnest prayer to touch the hand that turns the heart of kings, and that holds and guides all the threads of human destiny.—C.

Ver. 14.—*The suggestion for the hour*. "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" The history is very easily understood as carried forward in the preceding thirteen verses of this chapter. The faith of Mordecai does not always seem at its best, and his apparent suspicion of Esther (ver. 14) seems scarcely in close accord with the thought that "deliverance will arise to the Jews" from some quarter. Probably he felt that it was his to use *all* the means, to let nothing go by default, and to tax himself with an hundredfold earnestness of effort, since by his conduct it was that the present calamity had found its occasion. And, on the other hand, one cannot but notice and admire how his mind evidently searched all round for the providence of the God of himself and his people. This it is which transpires in this passage, "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" We may forget awhile the relation which existed between Mordecai and Esther; for it is neither teacher nor taught that need monopolise attention, though in this case they naturally attract it. But let us notice—

I. THE EXACT POSITION WHICH NEEDED STIMULATING HELP AND DIRECTION. 1. It was one that could not have been calculated for or provided against. It was unforeseen,

and it would have been unreasonable to exact that it should have been foreseen. As matter of fact, Mordecai's stored memory might possibly have been able to produce historical instances of atrocities in their outside like the present. But, even *then*, not as the result of the offence of one unimportant individual offered to one courtier. The hand of Mordecai had indeed touched a spring which set going unexpected machinery of fearful kind to unexpectedly threatening effect. But the touching of that spring was not an idle act. It was not an accidental or an inquisitive act. It was better even than an innocent act. For it was right and brave, and full of moral courage. Of the many times we find ourselves involved in perplexity, in unexpected danger, how often can we say as much as this? 2. It was one involving the tenderest considerations. Apprehensions were indefinitely intensified by the interests of incalculable moment which were known to be concerned. Hearts inexpressibly dear, lives innumerable, and invested now more than ever with an awful and mysterious sacredness, were in question. These were the very things to unedged discernment and to unnerve purpose. 3. It was an occasion, the whole weight of which showed now as if gathering into one bulk, and moving over the head and anxious heart of one woman. It is apparent throughout, even when Mordecai seems to *urge* Esther, and not to pity, that her one, her only unresting desire was to know the rightest, best course to take. She was already a gilded victim, a captive bird that had ever most of all loved freedom, a prisoner in fetters, not less fetters because each link was of wrought gold. How could she tune her harp, and sweep its strings, and sing her song in that strange place? Yet he who loved her dearest and most prized all that she was, helpless to resist the rapacity of those who rifled his honest threshold, kept as near as possible to that prison of a palace, that it was, which held her (ch. ii. 11). He found in his heart the undying seed of some faith, and some inexplicable hope, that there was possibly a reason in it all, and a use for it all, and that "somehow good would be the final goal of ill" so hard to bear. In all the inimitable brevity of Scripture, what a tale of love and loss, and of the hanging on to uncertain hope, escapes from within these fewest words! And was it she, the object of this tender solicitude, who was competent to bear the overhanging load of responsibility, and the brunt of blame, in case of failure? Stouter hearts and of sterner stuff than all with which we can credit Esther would collapse before the prospect. 4. It was an occasion distracted by aggravating contradictions. If all is to depend on Esther, as she is now urged to believe, there was every *motive* for action, but overwhelming *reasons* for inaction. Love, apparent duty, urgent expostulation, the pressure of beloved command, the impetus of long habits of obedience, all pointed one way, and said one thing. But it was not the merely slothful man's lion in the way that bid her beware of that way, and think of another. No; it was reason, by the dictates of which men not only rightly act, but also rightly abstain from acting. It was calmness of judgment, the more to be admired because the circumstances were enough to *unbalance* almost any judgment. It was matter of knowledge with Esther, and of universal consent in addition, that the peril was what none but the madman, or the desperate, or the extremity of despair itself would dare to face. Can this be defended then as just ground for moral action, when there are ten thousand chances against you, and what you endanger is your all? There can be no doubt as to the right answer to this, except for the occasion, the emergency of which lies in the fact that some advance *must* be made. Those passages of life, far from unknown to us, which are of this kind still present the most trying problems of our whole history.

II. THE EXACT POSITION WHICH THE INSTRUCTOR TOOK. 1. It was one that seemed hard, that inclined to the unfeeling. This is exactly what a teacher's position must not unfrequently seem, *seem* without being so. Even to those who overhear, his tones sound sharp and quick, just as those of Mordecai do now to *us* . We must do justice to Mordecai. We may justly suppose that he knew the circumstances precisely, the mental character of Esther precisely, the precise point of the dangerous way where she would need a moment's quick help, the momentary stimulus of the master's sharp summons, lest she should yield. "Even as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty." Mordecai knew that history, and dared not take for granted that his Esther was better, safer, stronger than God's Eve. The luxurious palace of Persia

was a poor travesty of the charms of Eden, but it had its seductions. And there was no knowing where the serpent did *not* lurk. 2. It was one that applied itself to move at once that whole description of hindrance to right action which arises from *self-regard*. This is a native principle, one of the greatest significance, of essential and unnumbered uses. The vast mass of humanity could never be moved along of any external force whatsoever; but this Divine contrivance, this merciful provision—a spring of energy and action in each and every unit of which the mass is made—throws life into it. The unwieldy loses its unwieldiness, its movements are determined, and its advance is irresistible. Valuable, however, as this principle of self-regard, it easily oversteps a certain border-line. All the indications with regard to Esther look another way. She has self-regard, she is the opposite of *selfish*. At first the tone of Mordecai seems somewhat out of harmony, however, with this supposition. But, on the other hand, it is quite open to us to believe that he had no individual suspicion of Esther. He distrusted not her, but the extreme peril of the situation for human nature. His well-versed knowledge, by experience and by observation, of the dangerous points where human nature was liable to the most sudden and disastrous break-downs made him tremble for the Esther he loved so well. These two things he knew: *first*, that there was in sight a certain powerful assault of temptation for Esther; *secondly*, that one of the grandest achievements of any shepherd of souls is when he *cuts off* the enemy's approach by the simple method of preventing the object of attack from straying away alone. 3. Last of all, when these negative preparations were made a great step in advance is taken. We will suppose that Mordecai had done some little violence to his own feelings and affections, for he had not been accustomed before to use such peremptory tones or personal arguments to Esther. But it was worth while to take some pains, in order to prepare for the moment that was coming. The moment *had* come. He plies his last argument. He knows it is his best by far. He watches for its effect, but without much doubt as to what it would be. From the lower arguments of policy, of appeal to feeling, of memory dishonoured, he crosses over to religious appeal. It scarcely amounted to appeal. It was a fruitful *hint*. Let it fall in the right soil, and fertile as the soil, so fruitful would the seed be. A woman's discernment is notably quick, and her sight intuition, and the eye of Esther opened and met the eye of Heaven falling on her and on all her anxiety. This eye, like that of a portrait, followed her now everywhere. And timid, baffled, almost numb faith felt its own hand again, and reached it forth to that which was offered to it. This was the suggestion that solved the problem, exiled hesitation, and decided that *action* should get the better of inaction,—“And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”—B.

Ver. 16.—*Self's supreme capitulation*. “If I perish, I perish.” The suggestion of Providence being concerned in the matter was like life from the dead to Esther. The idea of Providence having been now some time working up to this point was an immense comfort and impulse to her mind. It was a flash of light that lit up the whole scene for one moment. And when that one moment was sped, the darkness that returned was not, as before, unrelieved. There was a distinct line of light athwart it. Confidence as to the final issue of all was far from present. Nothing like absolute conviction that in the end all would be well could Esther boast. Suspense in some shape still prolonged its unwelcomed sojourn. But it was no longer the agonised suspense of not knowing what to do, of not knowing whether to move at all. The pent-up heart is bad enough, but solitary confinement must make it much worse. Pent-up hope is a terrible strain, but the strain becomes much worse when it must be tolerated without one active effort, one healthy struggle. This phase of things had now passed by for Esther. She had gone faithfully through it, and was none the worse for having treated it as a thing that needed to be gone through faithfully and unhurriedly. Mordecai was not necessarily in the right when he seemed to wonder at Esther's hesitation. Though we credit him with being a wise man, a good man, and very full of pride in Esther and love to her, Esther very likely felt that he had not put himself quite in her position, and could not do so. But it was because she had gone faithfully through the struggle, and well looked at the question on both sides, and considered its alternative difficulties and perils, that when enough light did

come she used it in a moment; and when thought had done its fair amount of work, hesitation fled, and determination succeeded to its place. To wearied human inquiry, to exhausted human resources, to bewildered human wisdom, comes in most welcome the ministry little thought of before, of the Invisible. You are immediately disposed to gift it with omniscience and all power. And the *theory* of a Providence, anticipating, interposing, overruling, becomes faith. It is embraced with ardour, and soon shows that it possesses the highest stimulus to duty. This never fails to answer obedient to its call, even though when it answers obedient it brings this exclamation to the steps of the altar, "If I perish, I perish!" Let us observe that this is the impassioned exclamation—

I. Of one WHO FELT THE RELIEF OF AT LAST SEEING DUTY. The mind must have groped about in darkness, must have been distressed by doubt, must have known conflict even to anguish, before it would have expressed itself thus, and here is some part of its relief. Esther had come to see it, not "through tears," perhaps, with their more purified light, but through the most painful obscurities and harassing incertitude.

II. Of one WHO SAW DUTY TO FOLLOW IT at its proper cost. The sight of duty is often the signal for shutting the eyes, for turning the back, for filling the mind with diverting occupation, for trying, by one method or another, to forget it. Not so here.

III. Of one whose fixed resolve WAS NOT DUE TO DESPERATION, nor to stoicism; not due to over-wrought feeling, nor to blunted sense and affection and faculty. The fixed determination here betokened was that of one who had "counted the cost," who evidently felt the cost to be that denoted by a very large price, and one which merited consideration first.

IV. Of one WHO HAD SO ESTIMATED THE TASK WHICH SHE WAS TO ATTEMPT THAT SHE BEGGED HELP, begged sympathy—begged that chiefest kind of help, the union of all kindred souls in religious exercises, in religious prostration before the Unseen, in the faith unfeigned which believed it possible and right to strive with all conceivable endeavour to influence and prevail upon the sovereign Disposer of all things.

V. Of one WHOSE ENTERPRISE, IF FATAL, WAS BOUND TO WIN THE CROWN OF THE MARTYR. Whose enterprise, if not fatal, but yet unsuccessful, bore testimony to the will, the courage, the spirit of the martyr. Whose enterprise, if neither fatal nor unsuccessful, but, on the contrary, leading the way to more abundant glory and joy here, yet still had this testimony about it, that it had practically shown the best part of any sacrifice, and through the cross had reached the crown.

VI. Of one WHOSE SPIRIT BREATHED RESIGNATION WHERE IT DID NOT REACH TO THE SUBLIMER HEIGHT OF TRUST. For whatever reason, Esther had not attained to the exercise of a calm trust. She more distrusted the badness of the circumstances than she trusted the goodness of her cause; the badness of the king's whim than the goodness of the purpose which was far above his; the badness of the earthly law than the goodness of that mercy which is "high as the heavens and vast as the clouds." It would seem evident that her knowledge was not *clear*. One of the people of God, yet, for want of priest and prophet, of sacrifice and of temple-worship, of dream, of oracle, of seer, times went hard with her religious education. The "word of God was precious in those days," and in that land of her captivity; and she the sufferer thereby.

The lessons suggested by the language of this supreme scene in the conflict of Esther are numerous, and of a remarkably diversified kind. 1. The figure of human virtue here is impressive in its *consent* to bow to vicarious suffering, though it were only consent; in its love, and solicitude, and obedience, and in the conduct of its own struggles. 2. The reproach is ever memorable which it conveys to how many—whose knowledge is light itself, yet whose thought and deed fall so far below those of one whose knowledge was manifestly very partial, very clouded. 3. The cry is arresting because of its strong sympathy of tone with the cry of one who feels himself a real sinner against the law of God, and finds himself as yet more "*driven*" because of the conviction of that sin, and the overshadowing dread of its liability to punishment, than he finds himself drawn of the mercy of his God, and able to repose deep, calm trust in his Saviour. The soul urged by conviction of sin, oppressed with the sense

of its desert of wrath, and tremblingly afraid of death, has often found its way aright to the cross, though to use words carrying the most impossible of significations for any, once arrived there—"If I perish, I perish!" 4. Whatever we may justly admire of the spirit of Esther here displayed, and of the steps by which she rose to it as she contemplated her own possible and, as she thought, likely sacrifice, how glad we are to turn away to the tremendously favourable contrast of him whose vicarious sufferings, whose infinite love, whose eternal sacrifice, was *certain*, was voluntary, was cheerful amid surpassing anguish, and patient with the patience of the lamb sacrificed.—B.

Ver. 16.—*Prayer and resolve.* "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me," &c.

I. ESTHER'S FAITH IN PRAYER. She looks to God, not to man. She has faith not only in her own prayers, but in those of others. She feels her need of the prayers of others. She is ready to share that which she enjoins on others.

II. ESTHER'S PIETY KNOWN IN THE PALACE. Her maidens are so under her influence that she knows that they all will be ready to join in the observance of fasting and in offering prayer to the God of Israel. This was a remarkable thing, remembering that these maidens belonged to an Oriental and pagan court.

III. ESTHER'S DECISION TO DARE ANYTHING FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS. Great her decision of character! She will not let the opportunity for helping others pass, and then strive to atone for her neglect by useless regrets. How great her devotion! "If I perish, I perish!" She would certainly have perished if she had not gone in to the king. The decrees of a Persian monarch were unalterable. Remember how Darius was sore displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him, and laboured to the going down of the sun to deliver him. He doubtless sought to devise means of maintaining the law and yet evading its import. Into the den of lions Daniel, the king's favourite, was cast, and to the slaughter Esther, though queen, would have been, by ruthless decree, when the time was come; but prayer, fasting, decision, saved her. God interposed to soften the heart of the king, as well as to give him a sleepless night, perhaps from a disturbed conscience.—H.

Ver. 14.—*Providence and human agency.* We are very apt to under-estimate the value of our own lives. When we contemplate the countless worlds which constitute the universe, the countless ages which make up duration, how unspeakably insignificant do we and our affairs appear! But we must not be misled by such reflections. Even as the presence of the least particle conceivable affects all material existence, so the most insignificant human life influences in some measure the eternal course of events. Mordecai wished to impress Esther with a due sense of her own responsibility. She was not an ordinary individual, but a queen; she was allied to the man who swayed the destinies of nations; her position invested her with boundless power for good or evil. The time had come when she must either act in a manner becoming her resources, must use the opportunities at her disposal to save her people, or incur the guilt of neglecting her duty at the most momentous crisis. As a Jew, Mordecai believed in Providence, but not in a Providence that weakened human responsibility. Let us consider the main points emphasised here.

I. THAT PROVIDENCE IS INDEPENDENT OF HUMAN AGENCY. "For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place." These words suggest—1. *That Providence is a well-established fact.* The confidence of Mordecai was doubtless begotten of a conviction that God governs the affairs of men. To him this was not a matter of speculation; for, apart from the teaching of reason, he enjoyed the light of revelation, and was familiar with the wonderful history of his people. Some profess to derive comfort from their atheism. They rejoice to think that there is no God; or, if there be one, that he has left the world to manage for itself. As well might the passengers in a railway train be jubilant because they had got rid of the engineer, and were left to the mercy of an unguided locomotive. 2. *That the designs of Providence are never thwarted.* The Jews had not yet fulfilled their mission. The great Deliverer of mankind who was to come out of Judah had not appeared. Mordecai knew that until

the Divine purposes were accomplished the nation could not be destroyed. Hence the sublime assurance of his speech. The Jews had passed through a similar crisis before, when Pharaoh pursued them through the Red Sea. Profane history abounds with like instances. The Greeks were about to be crushed by the iron heel of the invader when they won the battle of Marathon. The English nearly lost their independence through the Spanish Armada, which the tempest scattered to the four winds of heaven. We should never be bowed down by calamities. If we are children of the great Father we need not fear. Above, beneath, and around us there are unseen powers which steadily carry out his eternal decrees. 3. *That Providence is the refuge of the oppressed.* To no other power could the Jews have appealed in their dire distress. The wealth, and rank, and influence of the greatest empire in the world were against them. We need not wonder if they gave way to despair. But the God of Abraham had arranged for their sure deliverance. The labours of legislators, philanthropists, and divines had been powerless to release the negro race in the United States of America from their intolerable bondage. Their wrongs seemed to multiply, and their fetters to be more securely fastened, as the years rolled on. But an incident as terrible as it was unexpected—the civil war—led them to liberty. Let the oppressor tremble, and the oppressed be encouraged; for the triumph of might over right cannot be permanent.

II. *THAT PROVIDENCE AVAILS ITSELF OF HUMAN AGENCY.* "But thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Providence is not a synonym for fate. While it employs human agency, it never interferes with individual liberty; it leaves every man accountable for his conduct, whether of omission or commission. The words of Mordecai imply—1. *That Providence places men in certain positions for definite ends.* "Who knoweth," &c. The supposition in this case was natural. The elevation of Esther, just before the threatened destruction of the Jews, was most significant. It pointed out to her the way of duty with unmistakable precision. Are we in difficulties as to what our own life-work may be? If so, it must be due to want of reflection. Rulers and subjects, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, have their distinct spheres of action in reference to material interests; their work is cut out for them, so to speak, by the very circumstances in which they are placed. In like manner we might nearly always answer the question, "Lord, what wilt thou have us to do?" by answering another question far less profound, "What can we do?" 2. *That Providence chastises men for their unfaithfulness.* "But thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed." Mordecai felt certain that if Esther failed to do what lay in her power to avert the coming calamity she would be singled out for retribution. To be in a position of influence at the very time when that influence could be turned to such a noble account, and yet remain culpably inactive, would have been to invite the reproaches of men and the anger of God. Deliverance would doubtless have arisen from another quarter, and in that case she might have persuaded herself that her own efforts were superfluous; but the sophistry which so easily deluded her own mind would have been powerless to arrest the course of righteous punishment. The ways of Providence are very mysterious; things come to pass in the most inexplicable manner; but we need not be baffled thereby. What is to be will be, in spite of our negligence, in spite of our indolence, in spite of our opposition; but woe be to us, for all that, if we fulfil not the duties of our position. In the checking of war, in the progress of civilisation, in the diffusion of knowledge, in the advancement of religion, we have each his allotted share, and there is a tribunal before which we must all answer for the manner in which we acquit ourselves. The Jews in the time of Deborah and Barak triumphed over their enemies, but Meroz was not therefore excused for its cowardly inactivity. "Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty."—R.

Ver. 16.—*Esther's resolve.* The absence throughout this book of any reference to God is a most peculiar feature. Some have, on this ground, gone the length of denying its Divine authority. But the religious spirit is so prominent in this verse as to deprive such an objection of its force. Note that the proof of piety should not be

sought in the language men employ, but rather in the principles which guide their conduct. There are circumstances which compel men to be real. In the presence of a great disaster, a great sorrow, or a great danger they manifest their true character. Esther had at this time comprehended the awful possibilities of the situation; cruel, speedy, certain death stared her in the face; and the first thing she did in her agony was to appeal to God, the God of her fathers, whom she now openly acknowledged as the arbiter of events. Observe—

I. THAT THE BELIEVER NEVER ENTERS UPON A SOLEMN UNDERTAKING WITHOUT INVOKING THE FAVOUR OF GOD. "Go and gather all the Jews," &c. The fast was to be long and general, such as became the solemnity of the occasion. Fasting must be regarded as an Oriental custom, which well suits the demonstrative disposition of the people, who give vent to their griefs, their joys, and their religious ardour in extravagant outward manifestations. The custom is not enjoined upon us in Scripture, though doubtless it ought not to be prohibited in cases where it may be of spiritual advantage. But the principle which underlies the custom is universal, namely, that increased devotion gives strength for the performance of duty. 1. *Esther desired others to interest themselves in her behalf.* "Fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day." The human heart craves for sympathy, which, when obtained, gives it courage in the hour of trial. Thus the missionary in foreign lands, when he remembers that thousands of his brethren are pleading his cause with God at a certain appointed season, forgets his isolation and nerves himself afresh for his work. Besides this, we have reason to believe that the fervent prayers of righteous men, even when offered for others, avail on high. 2. *Esther, while she sought the sympathy of others, was careful also to perform her own part.* "I also and my maidens will fast likewise." The aid of others is liable to be over-estimated, and thus may become a snare to those who seek it. No scene on earth is more deeply affecting than that presented by a minister of religion kneeling at the bedside of a dying sinner, praying God to have mercy upon his soul; but if the dying man relies solely upon what the minister can do for him he is the victim of a terrible delusion. "The consolations of the Church," administered to the impenitent in his extremity, are sometimes worse than a mockery; for a notion is entertained that the priest relieves him of all responsibility as regards his spiritual condition. The prayers of others may help our own, but can never make them unnecessary. Observe again—

II. ESTHER'S APPEAL TO THE KING AS COMPARED WITH THE PENITENT'S APPEAL TO GOD. "And so will I go unto the king," &c. We are struck, in the first place, by several *points of resemblance*. 1. *Esther was bowed down by a crushing load of sorrow.* Her nation, her kindred, and even her own life, were in jeopardy. Their enemies were already making preparations for the ghastly carnival of blood. The thought of innocent babes and helpless women being dragged to the slaughter, amidst the derisive shouts of furious crowds, thrilled her heart with unutterable anguish. The penitent has been brought face to face with his lost condition. Ruin, death, despair, encompass him round about. Like the publican, he smites upon his breast and cries, "Lord be merciful to me a sinner." 2. *Esther felt that no one besides the king had power to help her.* To propitiate Haman would have been impossible, for the infamous plot was of his contrivance. To gain the favour of any other prince would have been useless so long as Haman occupied such an exalted position. There was no one left but the king to whom it was advisable to appeal. The penitent looks up to God as his only refuge. He abandons indifference, he renounces pleasure, he spurns self-righteousness; for he perceives how utterly powerless they are to shelter him from the wrath to come. He is persuaded that if he is to be rescued it must be through the intervention of the Almighty. 3. *Esther was willing to stake all upon one bold appeal.* "If I perish, I perish!" She knew the stern law which ordained certain death for those who came unbidden into the king's presence, unless he held out the golden sceptre to them. She knew also the capricious temper of the king, who, after such ardent professions of attachment, had not wished to see her for the last thirty days. Still she had sufficient faith in his generosity to put it to the test, in spite of unfavourable appearances. The penitent is probably not without some misgivings when he first turns to God. Not that he doubts for a moment the goodness, mercy, and loving-kindness of God, but because he sees the enormity of his own

guilt. Yet he ventures into the Divine presence; and when he remembers that God spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, he is confident that his suit will not be in vain.

But we are struck, in the second place, with several *points of contrast*. 1. *The penitent is encouraged by God's express invitation—Esther had no encouragement of the kind.* For various reasons the king desired that his privacy should be undisturbed. Hence the severity of the law in reference to intruders. But God's heart yearns over the penitent, and, like the prodigal's father in the parable, eagerly watches for his approach. "Look unto me," saith he, "and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else." "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." 2. *The penitent appeals to God with the certainty of being heard—Esther had no certainty of the kind.* Her confidence at best amounted to no more than a hope; and we can easily conceive that this hope varied in strength, from hour to hour, according to her frame of mind. But not a shadow of doubt need ever cross the penitent's mind. He can lay hold on the Divine promises—promises whose foundations are firmer than those of the eternal hills. 3. *The penitent can appeal to God whenever and wherever he will—Esther had to wait her opportunity.* The king, no doubt, had his own way of spending his time, with which Esther must have been well acquainted. He would not be seen anywhere and at any time even by those who might venture into his presence without permission. And had he been far from home at this very time, a circumstance which sometimes happened, access to him would have been absolutely impossible. But God is not subject to the limitations of time and space. At midnight as at midday, in the wilderness as in the city, in adversity as in prosperity, the penitent can always find him. "Out of the depths," saith the Psalmist, "have I cried unto thee, O Lord."—R.

EXPOSITION. § 9.

CHAPTER V.

AHASUERUS RECEIVING ESTHER FAVOURABLY, SHE INVITES HIM AND HAMAN TO A BANQUET. ALLOWED TO ASK WHATEVER BOON SHE LIKES, SHE INVITES THEM BOTH TO A SECOND BANQUET (ch. v. 1—8). Esther, we must suppose, kept her fast religiously for the time that she had specified (ch. iv. 16), and then, "on the third day," made her venture. It has been asked, Why did she not request an audience, which any subject might do, and then prefer her request to the king? But this would probably have been wholly contrary to Persian custom; and to do such a thing may not even have occurred to her as a possible course. Set audiences were for strangers, or at any rate for outsiders, not for the members of the court circle. To have demanded one would have set all the court suspecting and conjecturing, and would certainly not have tended to predispose the king in her favour. She took, therefore, the step which had seemed to her the one possible thing to do from the time that Mordecai made his application to her, and entering the inner court, stood conspicuously opposite the

gate of the king's throne-room, intending to attract his regard. It happened that the king was seated on his throne, looking down the pillared vista towards the door (ver. 1), which was of course open, and his eye rested on the graceful form (ch. ii. 7) of his young wife with surprise, and at the same time with pleasure (ver. 2). Instantly he held out to her the golden sceptre, which showed that her breach of etiquette was forgiven; and, assuming that nothing but some urgent need would have induced her to imperil her life, he followed up his act of grace with an inquiry and a promise—"What is thy request, queen Esther? It shall even be given thee to the half of the kingdom" (ver. 3). The reader expects an immediate petition on the part of the queen for the life of her people; but Esther is too timid, perhaps too wary, to venture all at once. She will wait, she will gain time, she will be sure that she has the king's full affection, before she makes the appeal that must decide everything; and so for the present she is content with inviting Ahasuerus and Haman to a "banquet of wine" (ver. 4). It is not quite clear why she associates Haman with the king; but

perhaps she wishes to prevent him from suspecting that she looks on him as an enemy. At the customary time, towards evening, the banquet takes place; and in the course of it the king repeats his offer to grant her any boon she pleases, "even to the half of the kingdom" (ver. 6). Still doubtful, still hesitating, still unwilling to make the final cast that is life or death to her, she once more temporises, invites the pair to a second banquet on the morrow, and promises that then at last she will unbosom herself and say what it is which she desires (vers. 7, 8). The king once more accedes to her wish, as we gather from the sequel (ch. vii. 1); and so the final determination of the matter is put off for another day.

Ver. 1.—**On the third day.** The third day from that on which Esther and Mordecai had communicated together through Hatach (ch. iv. 5—17). **Esther put on her royal apparel.** This is certainly the meaning, though the elliptical phrase used is uncommon. Esther, while she fasted, had worn some garb of woe; now she laid it aside, and appeared once more in all the splendour of her royal robes. She took up her position directly in front of the king's apartment, with the object of attracting his attention, and perhaps with the knowledge that he was upon his throne, whence he could not fail to see her. **The king sat upon his royal throne, . . . over against the gate.** In a Persian pillared hall the place for the throne would be at the further end, midway between the side walls. The throne would be elevated on steps, and would command a view down the midmost avenue of columns to the main entrance, which would commonly occupy that position.

Ver. 2.—**Esther . . . touched the top of the sceptre.** This was, no doubt, the customary act by which the king's grace was, as it were, accepted and appropriated. It is analogous to that touch of the person or of the garments which secured the suppliant mercy among the Greeks.

Ver. 3.—**What is thy request? It shall be even given thee.** The practice of grant-

ing requests beforehand is one common among Oriental monarchs. Sometimes no limit at all is placed to the petitioner's liberty of choice—seldom any less wide limit than that of the present passage. According to Herodotus (ix. 111), there was one day in the year on which the king was bound to grant *any* request made by a guest at his table. To the half of the kingdom. Compare Mark vi. 23, where Herod Antipas makes the same limitation.

Ver. 4.—**Let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared.** Such an invitation as this was very unusual. Ordinarily the king and queen dined separately, each in their own apartments; family gatherings, however, not being unknown (Plut., 'Vit. Artaxerx.', § 5; Athen., 'Deipnosoph.', iv. p. 145, A). But for the queen to invite not only the king, but also another male guest, not a relation, was a remarkable innovation, and must have seemed to the fortunate recipient of the invitation a high act of favour.

Ver. 6.—**What is thy petition?** Ahasuerus has understood that it was not for the mere pleasure of entertaining himself and his prime minister at a banquet that Esther adventured her life. He knows that she must still have a request—the real favour that she wants him to grant—in the background. He therefore repeats the inquiry and the promise that he had made previously (ver. 3).

Ver. 7.—**My petition and my request is.** Esther still hesitates to prefer her real request. We are not likely to be able in the nineteenth century to understand all the motives that actuated her, or all the workings of her mind. Perhaps nothing kept her back but the natural fear of a repulse, and a desire to defer the evil day; perhaps she saw some real advantage in putting off the determination of the matter. At any rate, she again declined to declare herself, and merely gave her two guests a second invitation for the ensuing evening. She concludes, however, with a promise that she will ask no further respite. **I will do to-morrow as the king hath said.** *I. e.* I will prefer my real request; I will ask the favour which was in my thoughts when I adventured myself in the inner court without having received an invitation.

HOMILETICS.

Ver. 1.—**A royal throne.**—This verse is full of royalty. Esther put on "her royal apparel," and stood in the inner court of "the king's house." "The king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house." This royal throne may suggest to us some thoughts concerning the throne of "the King of kings."

I. This royal throne must be approached with REVERENCE. The blessed and only Potentate sits thereon. Before his seat it behoves the creatures of his power to fall prostrate in reverential adoration.

11. This royal throne must be approached with **CONFIDENCE**. "He that cometh unto God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." It is not honouring God to come to him doubtfully or distrustfully. On the contrary, it is to question his faithfulness and his truth.

III. This royal throne must be approached by us in the attitude of **SINNERS AND SUPPLIANTS**. It is a throne of grace, and to it we come boldly, that we may "obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." Let us draw near as those whose only claim is upon Divine mercy, whose only hope is in Divine condescension and bounty.

IV. This royal throne must be approached by the way of **FAITH IN THE DIVINE MEDIATOR, JESUS CHRIST**. The High Priest and Intercessor both removes every difficulty in our access, and inspires us with those sentiments of confidence and filial love which will animate us in laying our many petitions for urgent blessings at the very footstool of the throne. Asking through Christ, and in his name, we cannot be refused and disappointed.

Ver. 3.—*What is thy request?* With what trembling and anxiety did the queen—uncalled—venture into the presence of Ahasuerus! She was supported by the knowledge that she was doing her duty to her kindred, and that the prayers of thousands were accompanying her, and seeking a blessing upon her application. Still it must have been to her a relief, a joy, when the golden sceptre was held out for her to touch, and when the king said to her, "What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom." The whole tenor of the Scriptures, and some express statements and promises, justify us in believing that very similar to this is the declaration and assurance of the Most High to those who draw near to his throne of grace in his appointed way, and in the spirit he approves. To such the King of grace and mercy says, "What is thy request? It shall be given thee."

I. Here is a **TOKEN OF FAVOUR**. This is not the language of rebuff, of indifference; it is the expression of a gracious regard. There is evinced a disposition, a readiness to bless.

II. Here is a **SIGN OF INTEREST**. Whatever is necessary for the satisfaction of the suppliant shall receive the king's consideration. He is concerned for the petitioner's welfare.

III. Here is an **ENCOURAGEMENT TO PREFER REQUESTS**. If before the lips were sealed through fear, language like this is enough to open them. Who can refrain from asking who feels the pressure of his need, and at the same time hears a voice like this drawing him onwards?

IV. Here is a **PROMISE OF LIBERALITY**. This language was the earnest of good things to come. The petitions are virtually answered before they are presented. Is it not amazing that when we have such inducements to pray our prayers should be so infrequent and so cold?

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Vers. 1—8.—*Human and Divine sovereignty. Prayer.* These verses suggest thoughts on the sovereignty of man and of God, the suggestion being almost entirely one of contrast rather than comparison.

I. **THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN MONARCH AND THAT OF THE DIVINE**. "The king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house" (ver. 1). The words are suggestive of the exceeding pomp and state with which Persian majesty surrounded itself, of the power it wielded, of the obsequious reverence it claimed. We are reminded of—1. *Royal rank*. We make much of the different degrees of dignity that exist amongst us; from the common walks of life we look up beyond the knight to the baronet, to the earl, to the marquis, to the duke, to the king, to the emperor, and feel something approaching to awe in the presence of exalted human rank. But what are these human distinctions to that which separates the mightiest monarch on earth from him who *is* (what they call themselves) the "King of kings," who sits not "in the royal house," but on

the throne of the universe? Merest bubbles on the surface! invisible specks in the air! small dust of the balance! (Isa. xl. 22—25). 2. *Royal power.* Some human sovereigns have "the power of life and death"—an awful prerogative for mortal man to wield. They can exalt or humiliate, enrich or impoverish. But they have "no more that they can do" (Luke xii. 4). What is their power to his, who "is able to destroy both soul and body in hell"? (Matt. x. 28). 3. *Royal will.* The will of the human monarch is often exercised quite capriciously. Esther could not tell whether, when "she stood in the inner court of the king's house" (ver. 1), she would be graciously welcomed or instantaneously ordered for execution. All turned on the mood of the moment. God's will is sovereign, but never capricious. He doeth "according to his will," &c. (Dan. iv. 35), but never wills to do that which is unwise, unjust, unkind. By everlasting and universal principles of righteousness he decides what he will do toward the children of men.

II. THE ACCESSIBILITY AND TREATMENT OF THE HUMAN AND THE DIVINE SOVEREIGN. The subject wants to approach the sovereign; he has requests to make of him. Let us contrast the accessibility and treatment of the earthly with that of the heavenly monarch. 1. *When he may be approached.* Esther was not acting "according to law" (ch. iv. 16) in now drawing near. She did it at the peril of her life. We picture her waiting for the king's notice with tearful eye and trembling heart, lest the "golden sceptre" (ver. 2) should not be held out to her. Our great and gracious King is accessible to the meanest of his subjects at any moment. There is indeed a Mediator (1 Tim. ii. 5) between him and us, but through him we may come "at all times." His throne on which he sits is a throne of grace. His sceptre is one of boundless beneficence. We may touch it when we will (ver. 3). If he rebukes us, it is not for coming when he does not send; it is for not coming oftener than we do. "*Men ought always to pray.*" 2. *How he may be pleased.* Queen Esther sought acceptance by attention to her personal appearance; she "put on her royal apparel." That which we are to wear to gain the favour of our Sovereign is other than this. We are to "be clothed *with humility*" (1 Pet. v. 5). "He has respect unto the lowly" (Ps. cxxxviii. 6). Of such as the poor in spirit is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. v. 3). Another garment we must have on in our approach to the king is that of *faith*. Without that it is "impossible to please him" (Heb. xi. 6). 3. *What it is he promises.* The king of Persia made promise to Esther in very "royal" fashion; he offered her, in word, much more than he had any intention of granting. "It shall be given thee to the half of the kingdom" (vers. 3, 6). To-day he promises superfluously; to-morrow he may virtually withdraw his word. There is no wisdom, carefulness, certainty about it. God's promises are righteous, wise, generous. (1) *Righteous*, for he gives nothing to those who are deliberately vicious or impenitent, who "regard iniquity in their heart" (Ps. lxxvi. 18). (2) *Wise*, for he gives sufficiency to those who are his servants, and who, as such, ask for their daily bread (Ps. l. 15; Prov. xxx. 8; Matt. vi.). (3) *Generous*, for he gives abounding spiritual blessings to those who seek them in Christ Jesus (Luke xi. 13; Rom. viii. 32). Not tremblingly to an earthly throne, like Esther, do we come, but "boldly to the throne of grace" (Heb. iv. 16; Eph. iii. 12), to find grace for all our sin and help for all our need.—C.

Vers. 1—3.—*Self-devotion encouraged.* "On the third day," when the fast was over, Esther proceeded to visit the king on her mission of deliverance. We notice here—

I. A PROMISE FAITHFULLY KEPT. Whatever tremblings may have visited her heart, Esther gave no signs of hesitation. Good resolutions often fade before the time of performance arrives. Promises are often forgotten or wilfully broken in the presence of danger. 1. Let us keep truthfully our promises to men. An easy breaking of our word to others is inconsistent with a good conscience or a Christian spirit. Besides, it destroys confidence, imperils success, and is the parent of much unhappiness. Our word should be as "good as our bond" (Matt. v. 37). 2. Let us hold sacred our promises to God. Vows to the Most High should not be lightly made; when made they should be religiously performed. All who confess Christ should strive earnestly and prayerfully to fulfil their engagement to be his. The son in our Lord's parable who promised to go into his father's vineyard, but did not go, is a warning against all false or unfulfilled profession (Ps. lxxvi. 13, 14; 1 Cor. xv. 58). 3. Let us remem-

ber that "God is faithful." His "word endureth for ever." His promise is sure. He is the unchanging One. Read 1 Cor. i. 9; 2 Cor. i. 20; 1 Thess. v. 24; Heb. x. 23; Rev. xxi. 5.

II. A BEFITTING ATTIRE. Before going to the king Esther put off her sackcloth, and clothed herself in her royal robes. We are struck by the contrast between her conduct now and her conduct when, as a maiden, she was being prepared to make her first appearance before the king. Changed circumstances account for it. 1. Now she was queen. There is a propriety in dress as in all other things. Inattention to bodily attire is no sign of virtue or religion. It may be the mark of (1) an idle and slovenly spirit, (2) a want of self-respect, (3) a vanity which affects the singular, (4) a desire to show disrespect to others. Dress in all stations is a visible indication of character. Simplicity is to be studied, but also appropriateness. Women who have the "inward adorning" referred to in 1 Pet. iii. 3, 4 will hardly fail with respect to a suitable "outward adorning." 2. Now she had to consider not herself only, but others. The destiny of Israel seemed to rest on this one act of hers. So she prepared herself carefully for it. We are not at liberty to be indifferent to our conduct when the happiness or life of other people may be affected by it. Matters of personal taste or feeling may well be sacrificed for the benefit of those who need our help. Even with respect to conscience we should beware of so narrowing it by prejudice as to cripple our freedom in doing good. What to Esther was a little extra care in the arranging of her apparel, when she had resolved to transgress the king's law, and to risk her own life in her effort to save her people? Some Christians in primitive times could make no concessions to their brethren or to Christian liberty with respect to meats, and drinks, and holy days, and traditional ceremonies; and some now-a-days have the same difficulty. But what are such things compared with the salvation of men? Relatively to the great gospel end, and the spirituality of Christ's kingdom, all things connected with outward rite and arrangement should be esteemed of small value. The action of God in Christ is presented to us in this same light (Rom. viii. 32).

III. A GOOD BEGINNING. It was not a long way from Esther's apartments to the king's throne-room; but there are short journeys—even from room to room—more trying than the traversing of deserts. We have a most pitiful sympathy with Esther when we see her in the inner court adjoining the hall in which the king sat on his throne—royally clad, yet unbidden, and perhaps stared at in silent wonder by the officials; and we are relieved and delighted when we find the king observing her through the door and giving her a sign of welcome. The golden sceptre was held out, and Esther advanced to touch it. Thus the broken law was condoned. The first braving of perilous duty often scatters the fears of anticipation. A happy beginning may not insure a prosperous end, but it stimulates faith and energy, and has, therefore, much influence in shaping things towards the end desired.

IV. A RESTORED FAVOUR. The sight of Esther revived in the king's heart the affection which had been cooled under the influence of the favourite. We must not take the offer of "half of the kingdom" in a literal sense. It was an Eastern phrase which indicated on the part of kings a special favour. So far down as our Lord's time we find Herod making the same promise to the daughter of Herodias. Esther would quite understand its meaning. It expressed affection, and promised a gracious hearing to any request she had to make. This was the second and best encouragement to the self-devoted servant of Israel. 1. A formal sign may conceal thought or feeling, but in words the heart betrays itself. An acute hearer will easily detect sincerity or insincerity in the words of a speaker. Even adepts in dissimulation deceive less than they imagine by false and artful words. Our language should be the true and honest reflex of what is in our hearts. Every species of lying is hateful. 2. A misreckoning of our own influence may lead us to misjudge the feelings of others. A better acquaintance with those whom we think dislike us may show that we have been mistaken. We should be on our guard against harbouring ungrounded prejudices or mistrusts with respect to friends or neighbours. Especially should we avoid misjudging God, or shrinking from his presence when we need help, under mistaken notions and fears as to his character and will. 3. The helps and rewards of duty grow with the faithful discharge of duty. Encouragements rise in

the path of the man who faces self-denials and dangers at the call of God or conscience. Every step will disclose new springs of help and hope. "*Light is sown for the righteous*" (Ps. xcvi. 10, 11).—D.

Vers. 4—14.—*Prudence versus Guile.* I. EVERYTHING HAS ITS SEASON. Why did not Esther at once lay open her heart to the king? Was she confused by his unexpected kindness, or seized with timidity at the moment of peril? Most likely she was prompted by an intuitive feeling that the time was not fit. She might lose everything by precipitancy. It is wise to study occasion or opportunity. Many failures have resulted solely from want of attention to time and place (Eccles. iii. 1).

II. PRUDENCE WORKS PATIENTLY. The invitation to the banquet would provide a better opportunity. Yet Esther again deferred her request, though the king repeated his promise to grant her any boon, to "the half of his kingdom." She was acting now not in the dark, or under impulse, but under a new light and in watchful thought. Her regaining of influence over the king gave her confidence and made her patient. Her woman's instinct told her that by prolonging suspense she would increase her power. The king once hers, she could defy Haman. So she worked and waited. The prudence of the righteous may be more than a match for the guile of the wicked. These sometimes seem to resemble each other; but the distinction between is, that while prudence is honourable in method and pure in motive, guile is impure and unscrupulous. God disciplines his people into patience, and then sends them deliverance through it. It is often harder to wait than to work or to suffer. Patience, therefore, is an excelling grace (Ps. xl. 1—4; James i. 3, 4).

III. THE BITTER MINGLES WITH THE SWEET IN THE CUP OF THE WICKED. Haman was a proud man when he went forth from the banquet. To have been alone with the king and queen at their private feast, and to be invited to a similar feast on the next day, was almost too much honour for his vain soul to bear. But he had not gone far when his eye fell on the unbending Mordecai. Then indignation took possession of his heart. What a humbling of pride! what a beclouding of joy! So it is always with the happiness of the wicked. It is ever meeting with signs of menace—a word, a look, an attitude, an enemy—which make it fade. A Mordecai sits at the gate that leads from its feasting. Evil joys are attended by a mocking shade which has only to appear to turn them into wormwood.

IV. HOUSEHOLD SYMPATHIES. It was natural that Haman, on reaching home from the palace, should call his friends around him, and tell them of the double honour he had received. Nothing is pleasanter to behold than a united family in which there is a free sharing of confidences and sympathies, all the members rejoicing in the happiness of each. But if the family be godless and wicked, and bound together by common interests of an evil kind, then all the pleasantness of the picture vanishes. Such was the family of Haman. His wife and friends knew the arts by which he had gained the royal favour, and the terrible revenge he was about to execute on the whole Jewish race for the offence of Mordecai. Yet they flattered him as he flattered the king, and stimulated him in his abounding crimes. Saddest of sights that of a family whose bond is wickedness! Learn, further—1. How character influences. A man who acquires power draws about him his own circle, and infuses his spirit into all the members of it. Children catch the spirit and habits of their parents. Men are known by the companions that attract them. 2. How pride puffs itself up. It was a glowing story which Haman told of his wealth, and grandeur, and promotions, and of the special honours which even Esther was conferring on him. His vanity plumed itself rarely before his admiring hearers. But to us the exhibition is repugnant. It was a self-feeding of all that was worst in the man, and a kindling of hateful fires in the hearts that were listening. The boaster little suspected what the favour of Esther meant. "Pride goeth before destruction." 3. How pride resents affront. The recital of an ill-gotten glory was ended by a confession that all was dimmed by the remembrance of one man. The higher his advancement to honour, the more deeply did the iron of the Jew's contempt enter into Haman's soul. He described to his home circle his passing of Mordecai at the king's gate, and the difficulty with which he had restrained an outflow of his passion. The self-restraint of evil men in presence of supposed insult is exercised not that they may overlook

or forget, but that they may inflict a deadlier vengeance. 4. How the result of consultations will be in accordance with the spirit that governs them. The practical question before Haman and his friends came to be, How should Mordecai be dealt with? There was no thought of pity or forgiveness, or even of silent contempt. The insulted favourite could no longer, even in prospect of the coming slaughter, possess his soul in patience. The conclusion arrived at was consistent with the fierce animosity that had communicated itself to every breast. Justice, compassion, wisdom were swallowed up in the common hatred. Notice—(1) The proposer of the scheme of punishment. We infer that it was Zeresh, the wife of Haman. She, as his most intimate companion, would be most influenced by his spirit, and would enter most sympathetically into his ambitious projects. The tenderest nature may become brutalised by the dominance of evil. (2) The nature of the adopted proposal. It consisted of three parts:—(a) That a gallows fifty cubits high should be constructed for the hanging of Mordecai. The higher the gibbet, the more conspicuous, and therefore the more satisfying the vengeance of the favourite. (b) That Haman was to get the king's sanction for the hanging of the Jew on the morrow. Having secured a decree for the destruction of all the Jews, it would be an easy matter to obtain the premature sacrifice of this one Jew. (c) That Haman, having done this business, was to "go in *merrily* with the king unto the banquet." *Merrily!* with so much evil in his heart! with so much blood on his head! (Ps. i. 1; ii. 1—4).

V. GOD SENDS BLINDNESS TO THOSE WHOM HE MEANS TO DESTROY. Haman had no perception of any influences that were working against him. So vainly secure was his sense of power with the king, that he took Esther's banquets as intended to confer special honour on himself. God had entered the lists against him. It was God who had given to Mordecai the heroism of faith. It was God who had strengthened the timid Esther, and given her "a mouthpiece and wisdom." And it was God who had allowed Haman to erect a gallows for himself. How blind we become when we fight against God!—D.

Ver. 2.—*The hour that revealed duty.* This verse speaks of an hour when darkness turned to light, gloomy foreboding to well-grounded hope; and when the anguish of trembling suspense was lifted off many a heart, as an unhealthy vapour lifts itself and vanishes before the growing sun. Though it was most true that many a heart was this hour relieved of its strain of anxiety, and was immensely gladdened, yet, as the immediate task had devolved upon Esther, so no doubt the immediate relief was hers. In her first and chiefly the battle was fought and the victory won. In what she thought, did, and obtained we may find concentrated the important suggestions of the hour in question. Notice three things:—

I. THE UNPROMISING APPEARANCES WHICH THIS HOUR PRESENTED. They were not mere dim, vague impressions which it made, nor were they fancies. These appearances were true for the human point of view, however they might be overruled by Divine power and goodness. For men they were hard facts, with which it was necessary to deal. Thus it was certain that—1. The hour was one which found incalculable human interests at stake. The blotting out of existence, the swift swallowing up of human lives innumerable, with all their precious freightage of love and joy, of purpose and hope, was no light fancy, no vague fear now. Yet that was the appalling uncertainty beneath the burden of which the solemn hour bended. It was not dull cloudiness of sky alone, and that made worse by unnecessary apprehension and weak fearfulness. It was one defined dark mass of cloud. 2. To all human appearance the question of the hour depended on the caprice of one man. It did not resemble some case of great interest, which was going to have the best attention of a select number of the best of people, and thereupon a deliberate decision be taken. In that hour the *momentary whim* of a capricious despot would decide the question of life or death, for the innocent Esther first, and after her for a whole race, of which she was then the head and representative. But all the while this is, truly speaking, only a forcible case of a constant phenomenon, a genuine fact of human life. We can see, when shown in the dimensions of the instance before us here, the same thing which, because it is on a lesser scale, eludes both belief and even

notice in our ordinary life. 3. The responsibility of doing the best possible, or all that was possible, for that hour rested on one gentle, loving woman. What a disproportion! The case is that of the lives of perhaps a million people. The judge is a sensual, capricious Eastern despot. The advocate and intercessor is Esther. And it may be immediate death to her so much as to stand where she does. The occasion witnesses her not defiant, not overcome. It exhibits her a pattern of human self-forgetfulness—that secret of so much of a soul's highest influence on earth, and of its "power to prevail" with heaven. She has collected most calmly a soul's whole force; strength sufficient to the day is hers; and in her may most truly be seen an example of "strength made perfect in weakness."

II. THE CAREFUL PREPARATIONS MADE FOR THIS HOUR. 1. The crisis had not been recklessly nor negligently met. Deep thought had been spent upon it. Anxious consultation had been held upon it. Loving and mature advice had been offered and accepted regarding it. 2. To meet and counteract the things of sight, and "that do appear," resort had been had to faith. The interposition of the Unseen had been sought in "fastings oft" and long. Esther had sent word to Mordecai (ch. iv. 16), "I also and my maidens will fast likewise." 3. In this supplication of Heaven the aid of intercession had not been forgotten. Esther had not overlooked the importance of a general union of her people in religious exercise. She called into vitality and determined activity the whole combined and sympathetic force of multitudes, who at her instance did for three days put away from themselves every other thought, care, hope, that they might be found "watching" as regards the crisis of this hour. What an interesting suggestion arises from the words (ch. iv. 17), "So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him." The tender ward has become the strong, firm, religious teacher of her guardian.

III. THE GRAND RESULTS OF THIS HOUR. 1. The event of the hour disappointed all fear, rewarded amply all anxious preparation, fulfilled more than the most that hope had dared contemplate. 2. The event of the hour proved different from all that could be reckoned upon at the hands of mere human goodness. And an impressive lesson of religion was taught: "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord" (Prov. xxi. 1). This was what secured the rest. "The king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre." 3. The event of the hour was grander because of its contrasts. (1) Esther's darkest hour changes to light; Haman's day, ablaze with light and confidence and boasting, is overspread, and goes out in darkness and storm. (2) The change for Esther and her people themselves is great indeed between the beginning and the end of that hour. Toil brought rest so quickly. Fierce struggle brought peace so sweet. Anguish brought bliss so full. These are the contrasts, as safe, as blessed, as they were sudden.—B.

EXPOSITION. § 10.

HAMAN, EXULTING AT THESE SIGNS OF ROYAL FAVOUR, IS THE MORE EXASPERATED AT MORDECAI'S CONTEMPT OF HIM. AT THE BIDDING OF HIS WIFE HE RESOLVES TO IMVALE MORDECAI, AND CAUSES A LOFTY CROSS TO BE ERECTED FOR THE PURPOSE (ch. v. 9-14). The favour shown him by the king and queen in admitting him to the very close intimacy implied in their making him the sole companion of their private hours, produced in Haman a dangerous exaltation of spirit. He seemed to himself to have attained the pinnacle of a subject's greatness. Returning home in this frame of mind, and

having to pass through the gate where Mordecai was on duty, he was more vexed than usual with that official's disrespect, which was more pointed and open than it had ever been before (ver. 9). However, he took no immediate notice of the porter's conduct (ver. 10), but proceeded to his own house, where he assembled his friends, and communicated to them, and at the same time to Zeresh his wife, the circumstances which had so greatly raised his spirits. The climax was that "Esther the queen had let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but himself; nay, more, he

was again invited on the morrow to banquet with her and the king" (ver. 12). He added, however, Mordecai's insult remaining fresh in his recollection, that all his glory, all his honours, availed him nothing—were as nothing in his eyes—so long as he was condemned to see Mordecai the Jew every time that he passed through the palace gate, and to be treated by him with contempt and contumely (ver. 13). Upon this Zeresh made, and Haman's friends approved, a proposal that a lofty cross should be at once erected in the court of Haman's house, on which Mordecai should be impaled, with the king's consent, as soon as it was finished. Haman agreed to this, recovered his spirits, and gave orders for the cross to be made (ver. 14).

Ver. 9.—**Mordecai . . . stood not up, nor moved for him.** Originally Mordecai had merely declined to prostrate himself before Haman on religious grounds. Now he looked upon Haman as his personal enemy, and would not even acknowledge his presence. There is nothing more galling than such utter contempt shown openly in the presence of others.

Ver. 10.—**Haman refrained himself.** That is to say, so far as speech and act went. He said nothing; he did not strike his insulter; he did not order his servants to drag the fellow outside the gate and give him the bastinado. But he did not "refrain his heart." He allowed the affront that he had received to remain in his mind and rankle there. It poisoned his happiness, marred all his enjoyment, filled him with hatred and rage. **When he came home, he sent and called for his friends.** It was not so much to be partners in his joy that Haman called

his friends around him as to be companions in his grief. It is true that his speech to them was chiefly occupied with boasts; but the true intention of the discourse is seen in its close—"All this availeth me nothing," &c.

Ver. 11.—**The multitude of his children.** Literally, "of his sons." Of these we see by ch. ix. 7—10 that he had ten. To be the father of many sons was accounted highly honourable by the Persians (Herod., i. 136). **How he had advanced him above the princes.** See above, ch. iii. 1.

Ver. 13. **All this availeth me nothing.** The bitter drop in his cup deprived Haman's life of all sweetness. He had not learned the wisdom of setting pleasure against pain, joy against sorrow, satisfaction against annoyance. Much less had he taught himself to look upon the vexations and trials of life as blessings in disguise. His was a coarse and undisciplined nature, little better than that of a savage, albeit he was the chief minister of the first monarch in the world. So little proof is worldly greatness of either greatness or goodness of soul.

Ver. 14.—**Let a gallows be made.** Rather, "a pale" or "cross." The Persians did not hang men, as we do, but ordinarily executed them by impalement (see the comment on ch. ii. 23). **Fifty cubits high.** This is a very improbable height, and we may suspect a corruption of the number. It occurs, however, again in ch. vii. 9. **Speak thou unto the king.** Haman's wife and friends assume that so trifling a matter as the immediate execution of one Jew will be of course allowed at the request of the chief minister, who has already obtained an edict for the early destruction of the entire people. It certainly would seem to be highly probable that Xerxes would have granted Haman's petition but for the accident of his sleeplessness, as narrated in the next chapter.

HOMILETICS.

Vers. 11, 12.—**Prosperity and self-gratulation.** In Oriental courts, where promotion depends upon the favour of the sovereign, it is sometimes as rapid as it is undeserved, and as insecure as it is rapid. So was it with the worthless, vain, arrogant Haman. His career is full of instruction, especially as an instance of the effects and perils of prosperity.

I. Observe THE ELEMENTS of worldly prosperity. 1. Riches. The minister's position gave him the opportunity of acquiring vast wealth, especially by means of extortion, and oppression, and bribes. And the king gave his favourite large sums of money, in that lavish and insane capriciousness which distinguished him. 2. Family. We are told that Haman had ten sons, and we know that a large number of sons was counted in Persia the highest blessing of fortune. 3. Promotion and power. What Haman's origin was we are not told, but that he was raised by royal favour to a station he could never have anticipated is clear enough. He was the first of subjects, and had the ear of the king, who delegated to him his authority, handing him his signet to use as he thought fit. 4. Pre-eminence over rivals. This,

to such a nature as Haman's, was no mean element in joy and self-gratulation. To pass others in the race, to see them behind him, to have them supplicating his favour and good word with the monarch, all this was very gratifying to the minister of state. 5. Favour with the queen. He only was invited to the banquet given by Esther. True, he misconstrued the motive of the invitation; but, at the time, to himself and to the courtiers this must have been regarded as a proof how high he stood in royal favour. 6. The companionship of the monarch. Haman was evidently admitted to frequent audiences; he had the ear of the king, and was not presuming when he deemed himself "the man whom the king delighted to honour."

II. Observe THE NATURAL EFFECTS of prosperity. That Haman's "head was turned" by the giddy elevation to which he had climbed is clear enough. 1. Joy and elation. 2. Boasting and self-confidence. So convinced was he that he was secure of favour and power, that he vaunted of his greatness before his family and friends. 3. Contempt of those in adversity. This is ever a proof of a mean, a little mind. Remark, that the higher Haman rose, the more did he despise the lowly.

III. Observe THE DANGERS of worldly prosperity. 1. There is danger lest men forget the vicissitudes of life. "In my prosperity I said, I shall never be moved." "Riches take to themselves wings and flee away." "Man that is in honour continueth not." 2. There is danger lest men forget the approach of death. How often has God said to the prosperous, the boastful, the self-confident, "Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee!" 3. There is danger lest men lose sympathy with those in obscurity or adversity. 4. There is danger lest men forget God. They say, like the great king, "Is not this great Babylon that I have built?" like Israel, "My power, and the might of my hand, hath gotten me this wealth." Let these considerations lead the prosperous to reflection, to trembling, to searching of heart.

Ver. 13.—*Happiness marred.* A little "screw loose" may spoil the working of a vast and powerful engine. A clot of blood upon the brain may suddenly deprive of life a man seemingly healthy and certainly powerful. A seeming trifle may spoil the content and embitter the life of a prince. And so mean a person as Mordecai, by so insignificant an act of disrespect as is here mentioned, may mar the happiness of a great minister of state like Haman, and may make even his prosperity miserable.

I. Consider THE UNSATISFACTORY NATURE OF ALL EARTHLY HAPPINESS. 1. It is at the mercy of circumstances. Ahab was a powerful and prosperous king; but whilst he could not have Naboth's vineyard for his own pleasure nothing gave him any satisfaction. Place your welfare in worldly good, set your heart upon an earthly object, and something will certainly occur to show you the vanity of such an aim and of such a trust. Whatever Haman gained, it was insufficient to make him happy. A poor Jew would not do him reverence; it was the fly in the apothecary's ointment. 2. It is at the mercy of an evil heart. The same circumstances which spoil the pleasure of a worldling have no power to occasion a Christian one moment's distress or anxiety. If Haman had not been a bad, and selfish, and vain man he would never have troubled himself about the conduct of Mordecai. A good conscience and a quiet heart, with the habit of referring to God's judgment rather than to men's, will render you largely independent of common causes of solicitude and vexation.

II. This consideration should lead us to SEEK OUR HAPPINESS THERE WHERE EARTHLY TROUBLES WILL HAVE LITTLE POWER TO MAR IT. Not in outward prosperity, not in the approval or the applause of men, not in pre-eminence and authority, is true happiness to be found. But in the favour, the fellowship, and the approbation of him "who searcheth the heart and trieth the reins of the children of men." They who make this choice choose that good part which shall not be taken away from them.

Ver. 14.—*Malevolent purpose and pleasure.* This one verse contains the record of "a world of iniquity," and shows us to what lengths sinners may proceed in their evil plans. Happily the sequel shows us that there is One who says to the raging

sea of human malevolence and impiety, "Hitherto shalt thou go, and no further; and here shall thy proud waves be stayed!" Follow the clauses of the verse, and behold the progress of atrocious crime.

I. WICKED COUNSELLORS. Wife and friends, instead of expostulating with Haman because of his folly, "fooled him to the top of his bent." They counselled him as they knew he would fain be counselled. It is too generally so with the families and companions of the great. Haman's responsibility was not diminished because his friends were partakers of his sin.

II. UNJUST PROPOSALS. What had Mordecai done that deserved hanging? His offence was trifling, and should have been altogether disregarded. It is a serious thing to take away the life even of a murderer; how much more of an innocent, unoffending man.

III. INFLUENCE ABUSED. The minister could not put the poor Jew to death by his own authority. The plan was to speak to the king, and to get his sanction for the detestable deed. It is well when a sovereign is reluctant to use his prerogative and order the execution of a capital sentence; as the Roman emperor, who in such a case exclaimed, I would I could not write my name; or as Edward VI., who could hardly be persuaded to sign the order for burning one condemned. There was no apprehension of any difficulty with Artaxerxes; let him but be urged by his favourite, and the deed was done. An awful responsibility, to give such advice.

IV. THE HEART RELIEVED AND REJOICED BY AN UNJUST ACT. As Stephen Gardiner would not dine until the tidings reached him that the Protestant bishops were burnt at Oxford, so Haman could not enjoy the banquet until the order for Mordecai's impalement or crucifixion had been given by the king. They sleep not, except they do evil.

V. PLEASURE IN THE PROSPECT OF SIN. "The thing pleased Haman!" What a "thing!" and what a man to be pleased therewith!

VI. MISCHIEF ANTICIPATED. Already, before the project was sanctioned by the king, the order was given to rear the gallows, that the evil work might be accomplished. Little thought they whose body should be hanged thereon, ere many hours were passed.

Practical lesson:—The heinousness of sin; the need of a Divine remedy; the wisdom and grace of God in the gospel of Christ.

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Ver. 13.—*The bathos of confession.* After all necessary allowances and substitutions have been made, it may be very justly said that Shakspeare's Wolsey is essentially dwarfed by Scripture's Haman, and that not the finest of Shakspeare's five act plays—wonderful products of human genius as they are—but must yield to the ten briefer chapters, with their five chief characters, of our Book of Esther. The book is indeed a consummate epic of the human heart. Its photographs are vivid and accurate, but they are not the facsimile of a countenance alone, but of things revealed and laid bare, in the fallen type of man, by the most skilful anatomy. What an extraordinary proclamation it makes, at one and the same time, of the vanity of human greatness and of the greatness of human vanity. How forcibly does it remind us of that Scripture that saith not in vain, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked;" and *there* bids us hold our breath awhile. We can scarcely go on to say, "Who can know it?" for we find it manifestly set forth as known by One at all events, whose finger guides us to the observation of it, and whose pencil limns it. Certainly the present passage lays bare such a heart to the core of it, and at the core it is bad. It is of an aggravated type. It reveals a miserable creature on his own showing, judged by his own standard, and at the confession of his own lips. We have no difficulty in understanding the description which Haman gives of himself. But the difficulty would lie in crediting the phenomenon of any man, knowing his own symptoms so well, being ready to speak them so frankly, where they are what they are here. Let us notice—

I. SOME STRIKING AND DISCREDITABLE FACTS WHICH HAMAN'S OWN LANGUAGE REVEALS ABOUT HIMSELF. Haman finds himself in trouble. He analyses it himself, and unhesitatingly publishes the results. And in doing so he shows these two things about himself:—1. He can confess without penitence, without shame. In confession one would have hoped to find a favourable symptom. But it aggravates the case if what in ten thousand other instances would have been some redeeming feature, is none here. His confession proves that his trouble is of the smallest kind, and of the smallest quantity. He is exalted with honour, he is laden with wealth, he is closely surrounded with a profusion of earthly blessings. It is the very point of his own representation that he had touched the summit of success. But there was a humble man, no competitor whatever of his, low down on the rungs of the ladder, nor seeking to climb higher. He did not cross Haman's path, but Haman sometimes crossed *his*. This man, not for whim, nor to affront, but for his religion's sake, did not make the obeisance which the rest around were making to this rising or risen sun. Haman did not know the loss by feeling it. He did not know it till some one, who owned to the gift of not being able to do anything so well as *mischief*, informed him of the fact. And on this omission, recurring at a critical moment of Haman's glory, it is that Haman *confesses* to himself, to his wife, to his friends specially called together, that all his wealth, glory, promotion are "nothing" to him while Mordecai withholds his obeisance. This is the confession he makes without one expression of penitence, without one sign of shame. 2. He is content to have self-knowledge without realising any of the benefits that might accompany it. It is not every one who knows his nature's and his own disease so well. There are few who could speak the plague of their own heart so plainly. There was also, apparently, freedom from that form of deception which in things of high moment must ever be the worst—*self-deception*. Yet if we want to commend Haman for all this, it is impossible. We have to take away more with our left hand than we give with the right. He is not ignorant of self, yet he has no idea of improving self. He is *not* self-deceived, yet he is not awake to the enormity of his danger. He describes his own loathsome symptoms, yet loathes them not. He speaks them, to boast them.

II. THE TERRIFIC FORCES OF EVIL WHICH UNDERLAY THOSE FACTS. 1. Immoderate ambition. From the moment that his lip made the confession which it did make, Haman should have seemed to hear it as charging him to come down and "avoid ambition." His confession should have sounded the knell of ambition, since, if not, it were certain to sound another knell. 2. The intense worship of self. Haman must be all, and have all. He cannot let an obscure exile in the land have a thought, a liberty, a conscience, a will of his own. He cannot tolerate the slightest infringement of his own rights. 3. The rankling of unforgiveness. A forgiving spirit would have saved Haman all the destruction that was about to descend upon his head. No wound of any sort whatsoever has such a determined bias towards a fatal result as the wound received and *not forgiven*. Do whatsoever else you will for that wound, *this undone*, it is almost certain that, if in itself not fatal, it will become so. 4. A greed that had grown with getting, an appetite that increased with feeding, and which was now rapacious as the grave. Haman had everything except one thing which he would never have missed unless he had been told of it. The whole day was bright but one moment of it, and then it was only overcast. The whole sky was fair and shining except one little touch of it. The whole prospect was glorious except for one duller spot. Life was a luxurious banquet, immensely to his taste, and there were no fingers of a hand writing dread things on the wall to spoil, but it *was* spoiled. Haman says it was utterly spoiled, profoundly unsatisfactory. One little diminution of dignity, one little drop of incense withheld, one little humble, harmless presence, fascinates him, as a basilisk would, nor releases him till he is lured to his ruin. "Dead flies cause the apothecaries' ointment to stink," says Solomon; and "the buzzing of an insect too near the ear may," says Pascal, "thwart a thought and put back a discovery fifty years;" but who can defend the man who says, "I have millions of money, multitudes of titles, honour and glory beyond any one beside, 'yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.'"

Lessons:—1. In the larger, bolder, blacker portrait of Haman is there not some semblance of self, when, amid opportunities and advantages innumerable, comforts and joys innumerable, bright prospects and hopes innumerable, we put them all far from us just because *everything* conceivable is not to our mind. 2. We are prone to share the *perverse* nature of Haman when, as mere matter of fact, we overlook a thousand mercies we possess in favour of keenly noticing the absence of one withheld, like Eden's apple, or withdrawn after long enjoyment of it. 3. We are prone to share the *unfruitful* nature of Haman. No fact has come to be better ascertained in human life than this, that it is not those who have most who give most. The greatest opportunity often witnesses the least improvement of it.—B.

Ver. 13.—*Unavailing honour*. "Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long," &c. How many look with envy upon Haman as he rides forth. His servants hasten on before him, crying, "Bow the knee, bow the knee." Grateful to him is the reverence he receives. He cares not that it is reverence lacking respect, so long as there is outward obeisance. Such an one is sure to observe the least slight. His temper will not endure to see one erect head among so many bowed backs.

I. THE CAUSE OF A PRIME MINISTER'S DISCONTENT. One day Haman, as he goes forth, cannot help seeing that there is one who bows not before him. He pretends not to see the slight, but with difficulty he refrains from commanding his attendants to inflict summary vengeance on the offender. Mordecai thus treated Haman not only once, but constantly. It has been suggested that as the king claimed in some sense Divine honours, so by his command he intended that Haman should have in some degree Divine honour paid to him. Knowing this, Mordecai dare not bend. Some may have called it obstinacy, but it was in reality consistency. Allurements and threats are tried upon him, but in vain. Now if Mordecai refused honour to whom honour was due, he was in the wrong. None may practise incivility. Religion teaches us that we should "be courteous." After all, what a trifle it was that vexed the mind of this grand vizier! It was the one drop of poison in the cup of his joy. It was the black cloud glooming the sunshine of his prosperity. Although he has attained an elevation that may at one time have seemed far beyond his reach, he finds that thorns bestrew his path, and even leave their sharp points on his pillow.

II. MODERN INSTANCES OF SIMILAR DISCONTENT. Who that looked upon Haman as he rode forth in all the glory of purple and gold, or as he lounged on his divan in the midst of his friends, would have supposed that he had anything to cause him so much annoyance? And yet is it not always so? There is a skeleton in every house, the worm in every rose, sorrow in every heart. Look at that stately mansion; see how richly it is furnished; pictures of the choicest character deck the walls; busts and antiques are here and there; the velvety carpet feels like a mossy bank beneath the feet. Ask the occupants of the mansion if they are content, and perhaps the owner will tell you, "All this availeth me nothing," so long as my neighbour on the hill has a house larger and better furnished. The wife will perhaps tell you that "all this availeth nothing," so long as a certain family is accounted as higher in the social scale than hers; or because at a dinner-party she noticed with annoyance that some one had taken precedence of herself; or because she had not been invited to some great gathering where certain persons of higher rank were expected. The vexations of the weak-minded and exclusive are more than equal to those of the excluded. The petty social, fanciful annoyances oft make all comforts and possessions to "avail nothing" in the production of real happiness. Enter the shop of that tradesman. What a large business he carries on; yet he in his soul is not happy. He is envious. He will confess to himself, if not to you, "All this availeth me nothing," so long as a certain competitor in the same business can buy cheaper, or make money more rapidly. Go along a country road, and note some pretty homestead nestling among the trees; surely that must be the abode of content and peace! You approach it. Meeting the occupant thereof, you congratulate him on the beauty of his dwelling-place and on the charm of the surrounding hills; he, haggard and worn, only replies, "All this availeth me nothing." Look at my neighbour's barn, how much larger, and his crops, how much finer than mine. So the warrior or statesman,

the preacher and the potentate, are often alike discontented. They are dissatisfied, successful men. The blessings and privileges they possess are nothing; the trifling lack or annoyance is everything. Their state is as sinful as it is miserable. They are lineal descendants of Haman the Agagite. All the joys, honours, comforts of the world are after all only "as a lamp that goeth out, leaving a disagreeable smell; whereas the peace which flows from an eternal God is like a sun which shineth more and more to the perfect day." To prefer the world to heavenly and spiritual delights is to act according to the folly of one who, being heir to a kingdom, should yet prefer some map or model to the kingdom itself. How easily might the map be torn or the model be broken! The possession of the kingdom of heaven in the heart can never be destroyed. Those who possess it will not make Haman's confession, "All this availeth me nothing." They will say rather, "Seeking first the kingdom of heaven and its righteousness, all other things are added thereunto."—H.

EXPOSITION. § 11.

CHAPTER VI.

AHASUERUS, BEING WAKEFUL DURING THE NIGHT, HAS THE BOOK OF THE CHRONICLES READ TO HIM, AND FINDS THAT MORDECAI HAS RECEIVED NO REWARD. HE MAKES HAMAN NAME A FITTING REWARD, AND THEN DEPUTES HIM TO CONFER IT ON MORDECAI (ch. vi. 1—11). It is among the objects of the writer of Esther to show how the smallest circumstances of life, those most generally regarded as left to chance, work together for good to such as deserve well, and for evil to such as deserve evil. He now notes that the turning-point in Haman's and Mordecai's fortunes was the apparently trivial circumstance of Ahasuerus on a particular night being troubled with sleeplessness. This led to his having the book of the chronicles read to him (ver. 1). Another seeming chance caused the reader to include in what he read the account of Bigthan's and Teresh's conspiracy (ver. 2). This brought Mordecai's name before the king, and induced him to ask the question, "What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?" The question could only be answered in one way—"There is nothing done for him" (ver. 3). Such neglect being a gross breach of Persian law, and a great dishonour to the king who had allowed it, Ahasuerus naturally takes the matter up with earnestness. Something must be done at once to remedy the neglect, some agent must be found to set it right, and so the king asks, "Who is in the court?" Morning has probably arrived during the reading, and Haman, impatient to get the king's consent to Mordecai's

execution, has come with the dawn to prefer his request. The king is told that Haman waits without, and sending for him, anticipates the business that his minister had intended to lay before him by the sudden question, asked the moment he has entered, "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour?" It was natural that Haman, after the favour shown him on the preceding day, should imagine himself the person aimed at, and should therefore fix upon the very highest honour that was within the range of his conceptions (vers. 8, 9). He thus became the suggester of honours for Mordecai which might otherwise not have occurred to any one. Ahasuerus, full of the idea of his own neglect, and ready to make any reparation, consents to all that is proposed, and, unaware that there is any unpleasantness between Haman and Mordecai, bids his minister confer the honours which he has suggested (ver. 10). The royal command cannot be disputed or evaded, and so Mordecai is escorted through the city by his enemy, who had expected about that very time to be superintending his impalement (ver. 11).

Ver. 1.—The book of records of the chronicles. Compare ch. ii. 23, where the title is given more briefly, as "the book of the chronicles." See also ch. x. 2. The character of the book has been already explained (see comment on ch. ii. 23). They were read. Either because the king could not read himself ('Ancient Monarchies,' vol. iv. p. 184), or because the sound of a man's voice might (it was thought) induce drowsiness.

Ver. 2.—It was found written. See the

last words of ch. ii. **Bigthana.** "Bigthan" in ch. ii. 21; "Bigtha" in ch. i. 10. The Persian name would be best represented by the fullest form of the three.

Ver. 3.—**The king said, What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?** The discoverer of a conspiracy against the life of the king would in any country have been regarded as entitled to some reward. In Persia, where "royal benefactors" formed a distinct class, and had their names inscribed on a special list (Herod., viii. 85), it was especially incumbent on the monarch to see that every such person received a return proportioned to the value of his service. Ahasuerus seems to have supposed that some honour or dignity must have been conferred upon Mordecai, though he could not recollect what it was; and it is difficult to understand how the omission to reward him had occurred, unless there was a prejudice against him among the high court officials, who may have known that he was a Jew, though his fellow-servants did not (ch. iii. 4).

Ver. 4.—**The king said, Who is in the court?** Probably some high officer of state was required to be always in attendance upon the monarch, to take his orders at any moment. **Now Haman was come.** Early morning is a common time for the transaction of business at an Eastern court. Haman was so anxious to get the business on which he was bent despatched, that he had come perhaps even before daybreak, and was waiting in the outer court, to get, if possible, the first audience. This haste of his to effect Mordecai's destruction led to his being the person deputed to do him the highest honour.

Ver. 5.—**And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court.** The servants looked into the court, and seeing, somewhat to their surprise, Haman there, mentioned him to the king. They would naturally mention the highest official whom they saw in attendance.

Ver. 6.—**Haman thought in his heart.** Literally, "said in his heart" *i. e.* "thought."

Ver. 8.—**Let the royal apparel be brought.** To wear a dress previously worn by the king was, under ordinary circumstances, a breach of Persian law (Plut., 'Vit. Artax.' § 5); but the king might allow it (Herod., vii. 17) or condone it (Plut., l. s. c.). **The horse that the king rideth upon.** Rather, "a horse that the king hath ridden." **And the crown royal which is set upon his head.** Rather, "and that hath a crown royal set on his head." Some peculiar ornament by which the royal steed was made conspicuous is intended, not his own crown, which even Xerxes would scarcely have allowed another to wear. See vers. 9 and 11, where the dress

and the horse are referred to, but the crown, as an adjunct of the horse, not particularised.

Ver. 9.—**Bring him on horseback through the city, and proclaim before him.** Compare the honours given to Joseph in Egypt (Gen. xli. 43).

Ver. 10.—**Make haste.** The king will have no more delay in a matter which has been delayed far too long. Haman is to "hasten," and confer the honour at once. **Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth in the king's gate.** Mordecai's nationality and his employment were probably mentioned in the book of the chronicles. From these the king has learnt them, and he uses probably the very phrase of the records. **Let nothing fail.** Observe every particular of honour that you have mentioned; let there be no omission of one jot or tittle.

Ver. 11.—**Then took Haman the apparel.** It was impossible for Haman to excuse himself; there was no ground on which he could decline the office thrust upon him. Reluctantly, without a word, he performed the king's bidding.

§ 12. **HAMAN RETURNS HOME. DESPONDENCY OF HIMSELF AND HIS FRIENDS** (ch. vi. 12-14). There was as yet no real reason for Haman to feel depressed, or to regard himself as having lost favour with the king. He had been made an instrument in another man's honour, and had suffered a disappointment; but otherwise he was situated as on the day preceding, when he "went forth" from the palace "joyful and with a glad heart" (ch. v. 9). But he seems to have had a presentiment of impending calamity. All had as yet gone so well with him that the first vexation seemed like a turn in the tide, ominous of coming evil. And the fear of his own heart found an echo in the hearts of his wife and friends. Among the last were some who had the reputation of being "wise men"—perhaps Magians, acquainted with arts from which it was supposed they could divine the future. These persons ventured on a prediction. "If Mordecai, before whom thou hast begun to fall, be of the seed of the Jews, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely (or utterly) fall before him." With this evil presage ringing in his ears, Haman quitted his house, and accompanied the palace eunuchs who had been sent to conduct him to Esther's second banquet.

Ver. 12.—**And Mordecai came again to**

the king's gate. Returned, *i. e.*, to his former condition and employment. The high honour done him was regarded as sufficient reward. **Having his head covered.** Like David when he fled from Absalom (2 Sam. xv. 30; comp. Ps. xlv. 15).

Ver. 13.—**His wise men.** Magians, perhaps, whom he was in the habit of consulting concerning the future. On the supposed prophetic powers of the Magians see Herod., i. 107, 120; vii. 19; Duris, Fr. 7, &c. **If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews.** It is difficult to understand how this could any longer be regarded as doubtful. His fellow-

servants knew it (ch. iii. 4); Haman knew it (*ibid.* ver. 6); Ahasuerus knew it (*supra*, ver. 10). The "wise men" profess to regard it as uncertain, perhaps to give their words a more oracular character. **Thou shalt surely fall.** Rather, "thou shalt *utterly* fall."

Ver. 14.—**Came the king's chamberlains, and hasted to bring Haman.** This is a custom not elsewhere mentioned as Persian, but quite in accordance with Oriental ideas. The polite host sends his servants to escort guests of importance from their own homes to the place of entertainment.

HOMILETICS.

Ver. 1.—*A wakeful and eventful night.* There is something dramatic in this remarkable story. The movement is so regular and orderly, the plot unfolds itself so effectively, the crisis is reached so opportunely, that the story might be taken for a consummate work of art. In reality it is a work in which nature, or rather Providence, is signally conspicuous. This verse introduces the second part of the narrative. Hitherto Mordecai has been depressed, and Haman has been exalted. But the tide has now turned. From this point pride is to fall, and humility is to be raised.

I. A KING CANNOT COMPEL SLEEP. Sleep is one of the best, most precious gifts of God to man. "He giveth his beloved sleep." The cares of business, of state, of pastoral life, may sometimes banish slumber, of which it is well said—

"The wretched he forsakes,
Swift upon downy pinions flies from grief,
And lights on lids unsullied with a tear."

It is not every statesman who, like Lord Burleigh, can take off his gown and say, Lie there, Lord Treasurer; or who, like Lord Liverpool, can draw off the cares of a kingdom with his stockings. Ruminating upon the affairs of his empire, his ambitious projects, Ahasuerus could not sleep.

II. A SEEMINGLY SLIGHT INCIDENT MAY INVOLVE GREAT, MOMENTOUS ISSUES. Often may sleep have gone from the king's eyes and nothing of consequence have followed. But *that* night was memorable, for that night's sleeplessness was the occasion of the salvation of Mordecai, and perhaps of Israel. In the providence of God, as though to rebuke men's self-confidence, little things are sent on high errands. Solomon speaks of small things which are yet exceeding great.

III. RECORDS PROVE SERVICEABLE TO KINGS AND TO KINGDOMS. Books record what men forget. We know, not only from sacred, but also from profane history, that the Persian kings kept chronicles of all the important transactions of their reigns. It is believed that these great kings were unable to read themselves, and that there were educated attendants whose business it was to read aloud, in the hearing of the monarch, from the state records preserved in manuscript. Thus, on this occasion, the services of Mordecai were, so to speak, disinterred and brought to light.

IV. AN AROUSED CONSCIENCE REPROACHES FOR FORGETFULNESS AND INGRATITUDE. How easy it is for the great to overlook benefits they have received, to take them as matters of course! But the inquiry Ahasuerus made shows that he was not altogether insensible to the claims which the Jew had upon his memory and his gratitude. It was late, but not too late, to make some recompense for a neglected and forgotten service.

V. Thus SELF-INDULGENCE IS AROUSED TO ACT WITH JUSTICE AND GENEROSITY. The king had slept long enough; it was time to awake and to act. And this night's vigil prompted him to a day's justice.

Lessons:—1. Let waking hours of night be spent in profitable thoughts. 2. Let

us be convinced of the overruling providence of God. 3. Let us remember that "man's extremity is God's opportunity."

Ver. 3.—*Royal ingratitude.* The awakening conscience of Ahasuerus deserves our attention.

I. HE IS SENSIBLE THAT HIS PRESERVER DESERVED "HONOUR AND DIGNITY." The king had rewarded a worthless favourite with wealth and power; but, as he now learned, a man who had preserved his life had been passed over unnoticed and unrewarded. It was discreditable in the sight of the nation and before his own judgment that it should have been so.

II. HE IS SURPRISED AT HIMSELF UPON LEARNING THAT NOTHING HAS BEEN DONE FOR HIM. How this could have happened we do not know. It was customary for "royal benefactors" to be lavishly rewarded with riches, jewels, offices, or favour. But Mordecai had been left at the gate of the palace, as though he had done nothing but porter's work, as though the king had not been indebted to him for his life.

III. HE AWAKES TO SELF-REPROACH AND TO A PURPOSE OF RECOMPENSING THE NEGLECTED. It is too customary for the great to take all services as a matter of course. Well is it when such a mood gives place to a juster view and endeavour—

"Sweet music's melting fall, but sweeter far
The still, small voice of gratitude."

Practical lessons:—1. Gratitude is a duty and a virtue. Nothing is baser than ingratitude. Those who have served us should never be forgotten by us, and when opportunity occurs we should testify our gratitude by deeds. 2. As we owe more to God than to our fellow-men, to be ungrateful towards him is to be insensible of the highest benefits, is to incur the sharpest condemnation. "Forget not all his benefits." And show forth his praise not only by your lips, but by your lives.

Vers. 6-9.—"*Whom the king delighteth to honour.*" It does not seem that Ahasuerus had any intention at this time to humiliate Haman. His whole mind was set upon restitution and compensation to Mordecai, whom he had so long neglected. As he had no knowledge of his favourite's dislike to the Jew, his only motive in requiring Haman to lead Mordecai through the city was to show his gratitude to his humble friend and benefactor. The honour which Mordecai received was indeed, in its circumstances, very unusual, yet perhaps not unparalleled. Doubtless the minister thought he was preparing honour for himself when he was really unconsciously arranging a triumph for the man whom he hated, and whose death he was compassing. The magnificence, the royal splendour of the Jew's progress through the city afforded satisfaction to the king's heart, whilst they were as gall and wormwood to Haman. For Mordecai was "the man whom the king delighted to honour." God, having reconciled and pardoned the penitent sinner through Jesus Christ, the Mediator, takes pleasure in putting upon the accepted and beloved all the honour he can bestow and we can receive.

I. THE HONOUR GOD PUTS UPON HIS PEOPLE IS HEIGHTENED BY THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THEIR FORMER AND THEIR PRESENT STATE. The change between Mordecai in sackcloth and ashes, uttering a loud and bitter cry, and Mordecai upon the king's horse, and arrayed in royal robes, is as nothing compared with the contrast between the impenitent and unforgiven sinner and the justified and rejoicing believer in Christ.

II. CHRISTIANS ARE HONOURED IN BEING MADE "KINGS AND PRIESTS UNTO GOD." The Jewish exile clad in regal attire may be a figure of the Christian whom God crowns and honours, whom he exalts to his favour and unites to his Son.

III. CHRISTIANS ARE ADOPTED INTO THE FAMILY OF GOD—ARE MADE HIS SONS.

IV. CHRISTIANS ENJOY THE ATTENDANCE AND MINISTRY OF GLORIOUS ANGELS. Mordecai was led through Shushan by "the first minister of the crown." For the children of God are provided the ministrations of the angels, who "are sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation."

V. CHRISTIANS SHALL BE BROUGHT, SHARING THE NATURE OF GOD, TO SHARE ALSO HIS ETERNAL HOME. As Mordecai came to take his place in the palace, at the door of

which he had sat, and to wield power over the empire, so those whom the heavenly King delighteth to honour shall enter his presence, share his joy, and sit with his Son upon the throne of dominion.

Ver. 12.—*Glory exchanged for woe.* “Boast not thyself of to-morrow,” says the wise man, “for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.” Yesterday Haman was full of exultation and of boasting; his place was by the throne; his enemy was at his feet. This morning that enemy is in favour; his own position is imperilled; his vaunting seems vain; his prospects gloomy. As Haman goes to his house, after executing the king’s behest, his heart is filled with apprehensions.

I. HIS MALICE IS DISAPPOINTED AND DEFEATED.

II. HIS JOY IS EXCHANGED FOR MOURNING.

III. HIS GLORYING IS SUCCEEDED BY SHAME. He covers his head, as not daring to look any one in the face, as fearing that disgrace and disaster are at hand.

Practical lessons:—1. Remember the vicissitudes of human affairs. 2. “Put not your trust in princes,” or “in the son of man, in whom is no help.” 3. “Humble yourselves before the mighty hand of God.” It is better to come before him in lowliness and contrition now than to appear before him in shame hereafter.

Ver. 13.—*Forebodings of ruin.* Bad counsellors are poor comforters. Haman had recourse to his wife, the wise men, and his friends, only yesterday; and they advised that a gallows should be reared, and that the king should be petitioned that Mordecai might there be hanged. To-day Haman comes to the same circle of his intimates, tells what has befallen, and unfolds his fears. They do but predict his speedy ruin. He might well have used the language of Job—“Miserable comforters are ye all!” They foretell—

I. THE GOOD FORTUNE OF MORDECAI, CONTRASTING WITH HAMAN’S ILL FORTUNE. “Thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.” The rise and fall of favourites at court was a familiar spectacle. That Mordecai should displace Haman in royal favour seemed, after the events of the day, probable enough.

II. THE FAILURE OF HAMAN’S PROJECT, CONTRASTING WITH THE ADVANCEMENT AND SECURITY OF THE JEWS. The plot and decree against the captive Hebrews were well known; and it was well known that Haman was the origin of these nefarious designs. Now those who had aided and abetted the unprincipled favourite foresee that he will be disgraced, and that his devices will all be brought to nothing.

Application:—1. Let persecutors tremble. All things are not in their power. When they rage and imagine a vain thing, he that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh. The day of their downfall and defeat is near at hand. 2. Let the persecuted take heart. “The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation.” The enemies of the righteous man shall “surely fall before him.”

“God on his saints looks watchful down,
His ear attends their cry.
The wicked sink beneath his frown,
Their very name shall die;
But he, at length, the just will crown
With victory and joy!”

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Ver. 1.—*The sleepless.* We are not surprised to read that “on that night could not the king sleep.” Not, indeed, that there was anything in Ahasuerus (Xerxes) to make us expect a restless night; he appears to us here, as elsewhere, as a *painful illustration of human heartlessness*. That many thousands of his subjects were about to be butchered in order that his coffers might be filled *should* have caused the monarch many a troubled day and many a sleepless night; but such was the character of the man that no one suggests the impending massacre as the explanation of the king’s restlessness. He had reached that fearful spiritual condition in which human life was of no account to him so that his power might be continued

and his pleasures multiplied or secured. It is a *striking instance of Divine providence*. He who "holds the king's heart in his hand," who can touch with the finger of his power the secret springs of our thought and feeling, now sent troubled thoughts to this Persian king. That Lord of heaven, Keeper of Israel who slumbers not nor sleeps (Ps. cxxi. 4), now gave a wakeful night to this earthly monarch. He was interposing on behalf of his chosen people. God willed that the sovereign should not slumber in order that he might thus be led to have "the book of records of the chronicles brought and read before the king," and Mordecai's services be thus brought to his royal notice. Little did Ahasuerus, as he tossed his restless head on the pillow, imagine that a Divine hand was laid on his troubled brain. As little do we know when the finger of God is working on us, with us, for us, or mercifully against us. Thinking of the sleepless sons and daughters of men, we may have in view—

I. THE SLEEPLESS WHOM WE PITY. We do well to pity with heartfelt compassion those who tell us that they "cannot sleep at night." Scarcely a sentence comes more plaintively from human lips. Well does one of our own poets write—

"Pity! oh, pity the wretches who weep,
For they must be wretched who cannot sleep
When God himself draws the curtain."

Whether it be pain, or trouble, or sorrow that causes the sleepless hours, we may pity sincerely and pray earnestly for these.

II. THE SLEEPLESS WHOM WE ADMIRE. Those who (1) tenderly nurse the sick through the livelong night, or (2) sympathetically attend the sorrowful in their sleepless hours, or (3) are "about the Father's business," seeking the salvation of others. It is the women who "watch" the best. There were, humanly speaking, at least three women who *could* have watched that "one hour" (Matt. xxvi. 40), and would not have been found asleep by the agonising Master. Few of the children of men are more worthy of our admiring affection than those self-denying sisters who watch so patiently lest there should be need of the ministering hand or the comforting word.

III. THE SLEEPLESS WHOM WE ARE OBLIGED TO BLAME. There are those in every city who cannot sleep *because they cannot forget*. They shut their book at night, but have soon to sigh—

"Oh God! could I so close my mind
And clasp it with a clasp."

They pay in restless hours the dark penalty of vice or crime; they are pursued and punished by dread of the wrath of God or of the justice of man, or by the rebukings of their own conscience. For such there is no remedy or escape but confession, reparation, forgiveness, human and Divine. "Return on thy way" at once.

IV. THE SLEEPLESS WHOM WE MUCH WISH TO SERVE. Those who cannot sleep because of "great searchings of heart;" who are asking that old new question, "How shall mortal man be just with God?" who will give themselves no rest till the way of peace is found, till they have "peace with God through Jesus Christ." There are none anywhere so deserving and demanding, so certain to receive, the tender sympathy and delicate help of those who minister in the gospel of the Saviour.

V. THE SLEEPLESS WHOM WE HOPE TO JOIN. On the other side of the river of death is a land where that which has been will not be, where we shall change this "body of our humiliation," and shall be clothed upon with the "body of his glory." *There* will be no sleeplessness like that of which we have spoken; no weary tossing, no heart-ache, no distress, no agitation. But there *will* be sleeplessness of another kind, for there will be no more need of long periods of unconsciousness and inactivity there. There will be "no more fatigue, no more distress," no more exhaustion; and therefore "there will be no night there," and no sleep, but ceaseless, tireless, unexhausting energy; there they serve him "day without night." These we hope one day to join. Let us live "in Christ;" then shall we "fall asleep in him," and then

shall we awake in the morning of an everlasting day where the shadows never fall, a land full of light because full of the near presence and the glory of the Lord.—C.

Vers. 2—14.—*The honour that cometh from man.* Unable to sleep, the king calls for something to beguile the weary hours; he has the chronicles of his reign read to him; he is struck with the fact of his own life having been saved by Mordecai, inquires what has been the reward given to this dutiful subject, discovers that nothing whatever has been done for him, and calls for Haman to ask his counsel. Haman is at hand, full of his murderous design against Mordecai. We picture to ourselves his impatience as the king broaches another subject; his secret exultation as Ahasuerus proposes to do honour to some favourite, and as he himself suggests that which would feed his own vanity. We see his astonishment and chagrin as he finds that it is none other than the hated Jew himself who is to be honoured. We mark his prolonged and intolerable vexation as he acts as the agent in carrying out the king's commandment. Concerning the honour that comes from man, we learn here—

I. THE RIGHTNESS OF PAYING THAT WHICH IS DUE AND OF ACCEPTING THAT WHICH IS EARNED (vers. 10, 11). Mordecai, who evidently and commendably made much of self-respect, did not think it wrong to accept the honour the king now laid upon him. He suffered himself to be arrayed in the "royal apparel," he mounted the "horse that the king rode upon," and was led with acclamation through the streets (vers. 8—11). He may have enjoyed it; it was in accordance with Eastern tastes and habits, and he had fairly earned it. It is lawful in God's sight to enter upon and enjoy the fruits of our own exertions; "the labourer is worthy of his hire." Among the rewards that men give their fellows is that of honour. And rightly so. Adulation or flattery is, on the part of those who pay it, simply contemptible, and on the part of those who receive it both childish and injurious; it is a thing to be unsparingly condemned in others, and religiously avoided in ourselves. But to congratulate on hard-won success, to praise the meritorious product of toil and skill, to pay honour to those who have lavished their energies or risked their lives to serve their fellows, this is right and good. And to *receive* such honours from the lips or the hands of men—if they be meekly and gratefully taken—this too is right. "If there be any . . . praise," we are to "think on" and to practise it. We should praise the praiseworthy as well as condemn the faulty. The approval of the wise and good has had much to do with building up fine characters, and bringing forth the best actions of noble lives.

II. THE VANITY OF RECKONING ON THE HONOUR OF THE GREAT (vers. 6, 10, 13). Haman had risen to high dignity; he enjoyed much of royal favour; he now felt that he might certainly reckon on being the chief recipient of the most signal honour the sovereign could pay. But God has said, "Cursed is the man that trusteth in man, that maketh flesh his arm;" "Put not your trust in man, nor in the son of man;" "Put not your trust in princes." Their favour is fickle; their countenance is changeable; their hand may caress to-day and crush to-morrow. To his unspeakable chagrin, Haman found that the royal hand was about to distribute favour to his bitterest foe, and thus pierce his soul by kindness to another. Covetousness of human honour is a sin and a mistake; it ends in disappointment, sooner or later, as the records of every kingdom, ancient or modern, Eastern or Western, will prove abundantly. It injures the soul also, for it begets a selfishness which finds a horrible satisfaction in others' humiliation, and keeps from a generous joy in others' preferment. Honour "from man only" is *good in a low degree*. It must not be eagerly coveted as the chief prize, or heavily leant upon as the chief staff of life. "Seek it not, nor shun it."

III. THE WISDOM OF SEEKING THE HONOUR THAT IS OF GOD (ver. 3). "What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?" "There is nothing done for him." Five years had passed, and Mordecai had found his reward in his own sense of doing his duty, and in the approval of the God he served. Apart from the praise and recompense of man, it is worth while to do right, to act faithfully; for there is one Sovereign that does not overlook, and is sure to bless in his own time and way. "Them that honour me I will honour," he says. This honouring of God may be either (1) that which he causes men to give us, or (2) his own Divine approval. This latter is the better of the two, for it (a) is intrinsically the more worth having; (b) leads to no disappointment; (c) "sanctifies and satisfies" the heart; and (d) is

consistent with the enjoyment of the same thing by every one else, and even prompts us to strive to make others possessors of it. It is not the seed of selfishness, but the germ of generosity.—C.

Vers. 1—4.—*A forgotten service brought to mind.* I. GRANDEUR OF OUTWARD CONDITION DOES NOT PROTECT MIND OR BODY AGAINST ORDINARY INFIRMITIES. The king of Persia could not at will command sleep. The loss of the power to sleep is not confined to any position, though it is perhaps more common amongst the rich than the poor. The humble labourer may find sounder and sweeter sleep on his hard couch than a mighty and luxurious king on his bed of down.

II. HOW TO SPEND SLEEPLESS HOURS BECOMES AN IMPORTANT QUESTION TO MANY. The nervous, the heart-burdened, and the invalided often sigh in vain for sleep, and many are the devices contrived to relieve the monotony of wakefulness. Some resort to anodynes which enforce sleep, but at the same time destroy vitality, and subject their victims to a terrible bondage. Others seek help from the reading of sensational or impure books, which defiles the heart and weakens the conscience. The king might have done worse than call for the chronicles of his reign. It is good to review the past. Nor could there be a better time for looking back at what is gone and done than in the still solemnity of the night watches. A man is unjust to himself, and incurs great loss, who cannot devote occasional hours to retrospection. Many a godly man has found sweet profit in following David's method of occupying a sleepless mind (Ps. iv. 4; lxiii. 5, 6).

III. A REVIEW OF THE PAST WILL IN EVERY CASE RECALL THE MEMORY OF MERCIES RECEIVED AND OF DUTIES UNDONE. The king had not listened long to the reading before he heard the record of the conspiracy of the two chamberlains against his life, and of his deliverance from it through the faithfulness of Mordecai. Arrested by this, there rose in his mind, in connection with it, not the thought of the suitable reward which had been bestowed on his deliverer, but the question whether any reward had been bestowed at all. He soon found that the great service of Mordecai had been unacknowledged. In the record of every man's life there are notes of thoughtlessness, ingratitude, and wrong-doing. None of us can look back without being convicted of many sins and neglects. This thought should keep us humble, and lead us to seek the Divine mercy and help. Past failures should be as "stepping-stones to higher things."

IV. REPARABLE OMISSIONS OR INJURIES DONE IN THE PAST SHOULD BE REPAIRED. Here the king sets us a lesson. If we can now pay in full creditors whose bygone claims we failed to meet, it is our duty to do so. It is not enough to express sorrow for any evil we have done if we can in any measure make amends for it. Deeds in such a case are better than words. Zaccheus (Luke xix. 8).

V. A WORK OF REPARATION SHOULD BE DONE AT ONCE. There is no time unfit to begin it. The king, while still in bed, in the early morning, bestirred himself without a moment's delay to discharge his neglected duty. He remembered his former good intentions, and the forgetfulness that followed delay. Unfulfilled obligations are often the result of a disposition to put off. Happy the man who has the will to obey at once every clear sense of duty. He will save himself and others from much suffering. How many lose themselves by putting off decision for Christ (Ps. xc. 12; 2 Cor. vi. 2).—D.

Vers. 4, 14.—*Exaltation and humiliation.* I. HASTE. Having seen the gallows prepared for Mordecai over-night, Haman was early astir next morning. He was in the court of the palace while the king was yet having the chronicles read to him, resolved to seize the first moment to get permission to hang the Jew. His plan of revenge was to be executed and done with long before the hour of the queen's banquet (Prov. i. 16). "The children of this world are wiser," because *more diligent*, "in their generation than the children of light." If the self-denial and earnestness with which men pursue evil and worldly things were equally exhibited by all the righteous in pursuit of the things of Christ, the world itself would soon be brought to the feet of God.

II. COINCIDENCE. When the king wanted an adviser at that early hour, Haman

happened to be in the court. The thoughts of both the king and his favourite *happened* to be occupied and excited by the same man. The haste of Haman to get Mordecai hanged *happened* to meet the haste of the king to get him rewarded. Faith can often discern the marks of a Divine providence in what men call accidents or coincidences. Belief in a living God is inconsistent with belief in any "fortuitous concurrence."

III. ERROR. The question put by the king to Haman at once led him astray. Whose honour would the king delight to promote if not that of the man on whom he had already bestowed such unusual distinction? His vain heart betrayed him. How greedy is vanity. How selfish are the slaves of sin. The answer of Haman was shaped by his own desires. The honour he suggested would have been foolish and worthless as given to any other person than himself. But the only thing left for his ambition to aspire to was such a public and resplendent exhibition of the royal delight in him as that which he described. A man of evil does not easily suspect good feeling or good purpose in any associate. He projects himself into his judgment of others. Thus he is very liable to make mistakes. His whole life is a mistake—an error from beginning to end.

IV. DISAPPOINTMENT. When the king commanded Haman to do unto Mordecai every whit of what he had recommended, the blow that fell on the astonished favourite must have been heavy. That the man for whom he had made a gallows should receive the honour which he had proposed for himself! what a reversing of things. There are many disappointments and reverses which attract our entire sympathy, but we can only rejoice when the expectation of the wicked is cut short. It was a fit measure of justice that Haman should have proposed the honour which Mordecai was to wear. Judgment pursues the evil-doer. In the end all his hopes will be disappointed.

V. HUMILIATION. Haman had not only to see done, but to do, what the king commanded. He was the "one of the king's most noble princes" who had to array Mordecai in royal apparel, and place him on a horse, and lead him through the city, and proclaim before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour." And all this he did to the man whom he most hated, and for whom he had erected a gallows. It was a bitter humiliation, but there was no escape from it. Those who climb to worldly greatness by wrong ways have to eat much dirt. They sharpen the knife that will sooner or later enter their soul.

VI. EXALTATION. Mordecai yielded himself up to the king's mode of honouring him. He put himself in the hands of Haman, and went quietly through the whole process. It was a triumph that might be justly enjoyed, and one too that promised greater things. God was manifestly with his servant. Unseen influences were at work. The attempt to deliver Israel was prospering. This public honour would strengthen Esther, and have some effect on the king. The bad man who led the Jew's horse and proclaimed his favour with the king was declining in power, and the desired redemption of a devoted people was drawing near. Thus God encourages those who trust him. He makes their enemies serve them. Amidst much darkness and fear he causes his light to shine, and gives his servants bright indications of a coming victory.

VII. HUMILITY. A Haman would have been intoxicated by such an honour as was conferred on his enemy. To Mordecai the parade through the city was but an empty pageant, except in so far as it might contribute to his purpose of saving Israel. Hence we find him, after putting off the royal robes, returning to his post at the king's gate. The passing honours of the world make no change in those who are weighted with the pursuit of honours which the world cannot give. Their chief desire is to be at their post and do the work given them by a higher than an earthly master—"to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with their God" (Micah vi. 8). It required no effort for Mordecai to descend from his momentary exaltation to his humble position as a palace servitor. His duty was in the king's gate. How blessed to be able to subordinate all merely personal or earthly things to the service of God.

VIII. OMENS. The result of that morning's proceedings was depressing to Haman. He retired to his home again to consult his wife and friends. How

different his tale now from that which had inspired him and them the night before. The tall gallows in the courtyard was a gaunt mockery. The shame that had so unaccountably overtaken its lord laid a cold hand on the hearts of all his household. The fear of Israel, that strange people who trusted in a God of gods, entered strongly into their thoughts, and made their words ominous. The conviction was felt and expressed by them that if Mordecai were a Jew, Haman had already begun to fall, and that a disastrous end was inevitable. History affords many instances of the power of omens to destroy the happiness and hope of bad men. The silent workings of Divine providence have their effect on the wicked as well as on the good. In the one they inspire a fear which saps energy and skill; in the other they work a faith which gives strength and light. King Saul is not the only one whose heart and hand have been paralysed by superstitious fears arising from a rebellion against Divine rule. In the path of the wicked spectres of a holy and avenging power are ever rising up to throw blight on their aims and hopes. There is judgment even in this world. God reigns.—D.

Ver. 1.—*A sleepless monarch and a wakeful Providence.* The place of this verse fully vindicated by its contents. When its position is observed in the original it is found to be very nearly the bisection of the book. Certainly it is the critical point, the hinge on which the deep moral and religious interest of the history turns. There is a sense in which it might seem that up to this point the reader has but groped his way. He has asked for a little more distinctly religious light and speech. He craves to see a Divine presence, and to hear the accents of a Diviner voice than have been hitherto vouchsafed. Perhaps these are still withheld in their fullest manifestation, but it can no longer be felt that any vital element of evidence is absent. The night in question was the night between the two banquets of Esther, the night before the almost certainly foregone conclusion of permission to hang Mordecai on the new-made gallows of Haman. Everybody was not in the secret. Neither Esther, nor Mordecai, nor the king himself knew of the project. Yet from a merely human point of view it was all but certain. How the night passed for Esther and for Mordecai we know not. Both had to acknowledge distinguishing mercies which the preceding day had brought. But they both knew that one crisis happily passed did but usher in another, and if this should not issue as favourably, vain were the promise of the day before. Likely enough, then, the solemn hours of that night were counted by them with wakeful anxiousness. For what issues of life or death hung upon the next day. Haman's night invites not a solitary sympathy. This much we may surmise about it, that it was disturbed by the noise of those who "made the gallows" (ch. v. 14; vi. 4; vii. 9), and that its length was not prolonged over-far into the morning. But the storm-centre travels toward the night of Ahasuerus, and there very soon it threateningly hangs. Ahasuerus was not a good man; he was not a good king. How otherwise could he have permitted an insufferably vain, self-seeking minion like Haman to be such a welcome and close companion? How could he have committed to such a subject an authority so dangerously approaching his own? Yet, as we have before seen (ch. i. 4), there was a certain large lavish way about Ahasuerus—the outside of a certain kindness, impulsiveness, unthinking trustfulness within, which proved a heart not callous. These qualities did indeed harmonise well with what we read elsewhere of Xerxes, and how his feelings so overcame him when, from his throne of marble, he reviewed his innumerable troops crossing the Hellespont, and reflected upon human mortality. Ahasuerus was thoughtless and rash—the very things that cannot be defended in either king or man—but he was not yet abandoned of every higher presence; he was not yet "let alone." As the word of God here detains us to make special remark on the sleepless night of this king, and exhibits it as the very crisis of the providential history under relation, let us note—

1. SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT FACTS GATHERING ROUND IT AS THE EXPERIENCE OF THE KING. 1. We observe, and with some surprise, that there seems not the slightest disposition on the part of the king, or of any one else, to attribute it to a physical cause, nor to minister to it any physical antidote. Neither the soporific of a drug or of drinking, nor the soothing of music, nor any diversion are offered to it. Nor

is it possible to suppose—as will hereafter appear—that “the book of records of the chronicles” was sent for under the expectation that it would serve simply to amuse, or to dissipate thought and kill time. 2. However harassing it may have been, it seems to have been endured till morning. The brief description which follows the statement, that “the king’s sleep fled that night,” argues that what ensued happened all in close connection, and so as to end with an hour that found men gathered in their usual way in the gate, and Haman arrived (doubtless not late) in the court. This would give time for thought’s growth into determination. 3. Whether the sleeplessness of the night was occasioned by any moral thoughtfulness or not, it was in this direction that the mind of Ahasuerus ran. Sleepless hours are often enough weary hours, yet perhaps more than we think they open opportunity and offer choice to us. They ripen the thought of iniquity, as they were at this very time doing for Haman; or they are *precipitating* thought of good quality and beneficent result, as they were now doing for Ahasuerus. Either, then, the sleeplessness of Ahasuerus was occasioned by a moral movement of things within, or it turned to that use. In either alternative there was a moral strangeness and significance about it. The dark and imperfect religiousness, which was all that can be claimed for it in and of itself, does in some senses add to its interest. 4. The thoughts of that sleepless night did not die away. Generally, how soon they do pass away, like the dreams of deep sleep. They are “like the morning cloud and the early dew; as the chaff that is driven of the whirlwind out of the floor, and as the smoke out of the chimney.” Nature’s darkness, human stillness, even the body’s attitude of repose, all favour highly-stimulated forms of thought. The sleepless night is often memory’s field-day. Regrets and new resolutions meet together; repentance and remorse alternate; the thoughts of happier days and the projects of more innocent ones crowd the mental rendezvous—but with dawn they have trooped away. But now not so with the thoughts of the sleepless night of the King Ahasuerus. They last, and they lead on to action. Purpose and determination do not die away. They live, and to good purpose. In his own way, and for once true to his light, though a light that burned lurid and low, he will hearken to his “law and testimony,” if haply they have anything to say to him.

II. SOME OF THE SIGNIFICANT SUGGESTIONS ARISING OUT OF IT IN EVIDENCE OF AN EVER-WAKEFUL PROVIDENCE. 1. The evidence of the simple facts of this night is in favour of the interference of some external cause. It is not straining facts to take this view of them, it would be restraining their legitimate force not to do so. There is no known cause for the restlessness, but it is decided. The two things that might have been expected to constitute a cause evidently exert no influence. The proximate effect, for all that, nevertheless looks in that direction. 2. The *kind* of use to which the sleeplessness is turned argues not only external interference, but the external interference of One above. This man, a most extremely unpromising subject on whom to work, is wrought upon practically to religious purpose. Thought, and reading, and listening, and question, and action follow one another in quick, orderly, Divine kind of succession. 3. The means employed are *like* those of Divine operation, very simple, awhile mistakable for most natural events. 4. The beneficent *nature* of the results of that night—opportune, to the exact moment of time—and the exceeding greatness of them evidence together a merciful wakeful Providence. That Providence is ever wakeful when men are most deep asleep, but is not then least wakeful when sometimes it bids us wake and keeps us sleepless.—B.

Ver. 6.—*Vanity*. “Now Haman thought in,” &c. It sometimes seems as though the satire of circumstance and human event could go no further. But the fact in such case is, that nothing can surpass the exactness of the Divine aim for the mark which it is intended to reach, and for the moment at which it reaches it. The present point of the history shows a conjunction of four events, which, so far as all human design went, might certainly have been the last to meet together. But they produce a brilliant effect. Four moments meet, and their work is the work of years of preparation, and of consequences never to be forgotten. A humble and good man, but one dishonoured, is in supreme danger. The very acme of the iniquitous purpose of a revengeful heart, surfeited with self and vanity, is touched. An arbitrary despot suddenly remembers an omission on his part, and resolves upon making a profuse

compensation for it. And lastly arrives on the scene the form of Divine retribution. Of these four there can be no doubt which was the dominant fact. The rest were accurately timed to it. One led the way; the rest were irresistibly, if unconsciously, attracted to it. This verse gives us what purports to be a statement or description of a "thought in the heart." It may be called the natural history of a "thought in the heart;" not, indeed, of any or every such thought, but of one that once literally was, and which may have had many like it. We may notice—

I. ON WHAT AUTHORITY THIS DESCRIPTION RESTS. For the history is not of a flattering kind. In all its brevity it is of an exceedingly cutting nature. It is of the nature of a stricture, and a severe one. It is a keen incisive thrust into an individual character. In every such case it behoves us to be more than ever careful "not to judge, lest we be judged," and to scrutinise narrowly the authority on which they speak when others pronounce judgment in our hearing. For if the judgment of what is in the depth of another's heart be not absolutely true, it is essentially unjust and uncharitable. Our own superficial criticisms often err. They carry on their face their condemnation, and but for this would be more reprehensible and more disastrous than they are. But what we have before us is no superficial critique, it is the pronouncement of the authoritative Spirit of all truth himself. The scalpel of the inspired anatomist cuts deep, and as trenchantly as deep. We are glad to recollect whose is the responsibility; and when we recollect we think with firmer thought and tread with surer step.

II. WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF THE THOUGHT IT REVEALED. It was a thought of self, and of what was supposed to be self's glory and advancement. There are times for all when it is right and needful to think of self, and to act for what shall seem, on the whole, the best for self. There are other times when it is the greatest mistake to think of self. The occasion in question was one of this kind. It is an occasion in itself far from destitute of its own proper honour. 1. Haman is called in as a counsellor, and a counsellor of his king. 2. He is appealed to for something beyond advice. With him lies the determining of a certain case laid before him. To be the dispenser of dignities and rewards is to sit upon a throne very near royalty itself. 3. The occasion is not a mere formality, to be guided only by precedents, and requiring a musty search to find them. 4. The recipient of the distinction, whoever he might be, would also be ever beholden in some sort to the word that should drop from Haman's lip. The occasion, therefore, was one which especially begged for a single eye, a clear judgment, transparency of motive. But, in fact, self blocks up the whole prospect. The thought in the heart of the king's counsellor at that moment was this: "To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to *myself*?" Among all unjust and partial judges, was there ever any more unjust?

III. WHAT WERE SOME OF THE MORE CONDEMNING OR AGGRAVATING SYMPTOMS OF THE THOUGHT ITSELF. 1. It was not only self, but self in the shape of insufferable vanity. It mounted to the pitch of morbid vanity. Some are hurried on by selfishness headlong. But it is a sleek, a smiling, a self-garlanded victim we have here. To the dignity of position already belonging to him fuller gratification (as has been seen) is offered; but it is not *honour* that his eye can see, that his mind can appreciate. The grace and the force of his honoured position weigh nothing with him. But the most egotistic *vanity* shuts out, and at a most critical moment, the very idea of the barest possibility of a worthy competitor with himself! He cannot credit the notion of a fellow-creature to compare with himself. Alas, from "flattering lips and double tongue" he had neither prayed nor striven to be saved; but least of all from those flattering lips, above all measure the worst, which first *belong* to self and then *flatter* the *vanity* of self. 2. It was not only self, but self in the shape of an unchastised, unmortified haughtiness of heart. How exquisitely beautiful the reverse of this. How plaintive the honest and deeply-felt disowning of it: "Lord, my heart is *not* haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me. Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child" (Ps. cxxxi. 1, 2). Turn from David in this psalm to Haman, and how is one revolted! The thoughts of yesterday afternoon and last night, which saw such an amazing fitness in a "gallows fifty cubits high" for the obscure and sorrowful and stung man Mordecai,

who did not so much as turn round upon him like the trodden worm, but who only *could not bring* himself "to rise nor move to him"—these were the "imaginations and the high things" which, because he had not mortified them nor cast them down, were now going to mortify him to the quick, and to cast him down for ever. He had schooled himself to "refrain himself"—no, not to refrain himself, but only for a short while, for policy's sake (ch. v. 10), the manifestations of self.

IV. TO WHAT THIS "THOUGHT IN THE HEART" LED. It is to be remarked, and with the seriousness that belongs to a moral phenomenon and fact in our life, with what unerring certainty, with what unpitying pace, the moment travels on which shall prove the fatal, because unguarded, moment for those who knowingly and continuously "regard iniquity in their heart." It may linger, but it is on the move. It may not *be* seen, yet it is only just out of sight. Till that which is snatched at, as the crowning moment of choicest opportunity of all the life, proves that which peremptorily seals the man's fate. Never with surer conviction, never with more intuitive perception, never with more ill-concealed self-gratulation, never with glibber tongue, had moment come to Haman than that which sounded for him the knell of death itself, and left him to the company of stricken amazement for ever. And though as yet no one uttered a whisper of this to Haman, and he bowed his neck to the yoke and did the day's dread task to the minutest point, "letting nothing fail," Haman knew it all. Then wife and friends confirmed it. And for the first time this many a day he saw himself and his position when "he hastened to his house mourning, and having his head covered." How strange the contrast to the Haman who the morning of that day "thought in his heart," &c.—B.

Ver. 13.—*Conjugal confidences*. "And Haman told Zeresh his wife." The first indication of Haman's falling from power was when he was commanded by the king to array Mordecai in the royal robes and lead him through the city. His mortification was great. Directly he could escape from his hateful duty he hastened home and told his wife.

I. THERE SHOULD BE NO SECRETS BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE. Where there are secrets there is always a danger of an outbreak of passion or jealousy. Happiness is endangered.

II. HAMAN TOLD OF HIS CHECKS AS WELL AS HIS ADVANCES; HIS DISAPPOINTMENTS AS WELL AS HONOURS. Sometimes men tell their good fortune and hide the bad; and, on the other hand, some husbands make their wives miserable from fear of approaching disaster.

III. HAMAN HAD A FAITHFUL WARNING, BUT LITTLE CONSOLATION, IN HIS CONJUGAL CONFIDENCE. Zeresh told him that "if Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him," &c. She was a candid friend and a true prophet. Wives should, however, seek to comfort the bread-winner under his trials.

IV. HAMAN HAD TO INVOLVE HIS WIFE IN HIS OVERTHROW, AND RIGHTLY LETS HER KNOW ALL THAT BEFALLS HIM. No man can suffer alone. As Achan "perished not alone in his iniquity," so Haman. His bitterest regrets must have been that he had to involve wife and family in ruin.—H.

EXPOSITION. § 13.

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE SECOND BANQUET ESTHER DENOUNCES HAMAN, AND THE KING CONDEMNS HIM TO BE IMPEALED ON THE CROSS PREPARED FOR HAMAN (ch. vii. 1—10). Esther had promised to make her true petition at the second banquet (ch. v. 12), and now kept her word. When the king for the third time put the question, "What is thy

petition, queen Esther? and what is thy request? It shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom," she opened all her mind. "If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it seem good to the king, let my life be given to me at my petition, and my people at my request" (ver. 2). My supplication is for my own life and for that of my people—no less a danger than this has moved me. "We are sold, I and my

people, to be destroyed, slain, made to perish." Had it been anything less than this, had we been merely sentenced to be sold as slaves, I had kept my peace (ver. 4); but that did not content "the enemy"—we are, one and all, to suffer death. Esther's answer must have made all clear to the king—that his wife was a Jewess; that *her* life was forfeit, like those of her countrymen, by the terms of the decree; that Haman was "the enemy" whom she feared. But he will assume nothing, he will have all clearly set before him, and therefore he asks, "Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to act so?" Then comes Esther's final declaration, clear, direct, unmistakable: "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman" (ver. 6), this man here before you, this man who eats our salt, and would take one of our lives. Fiercely angry, but confused and hesitating, the king rises from the banquet, and quits the room, stepping probably through an open door into the palace garden. Now is Haman's last chance. Can he excite the pity of the queen? Can he prevail on her to intercede for him and make his peace with the king? He entreats, he supplicates, he "falls upon the couch" on which Esther reclines, in his eagerness to win her consent (ver. 7). At this moment the king re-enters the room (ver. 8), and takes advantage of Haman's breach of etiquette to accuse him of rudeness to the queen. The attendants see in the accusation a sentence of death, and "cover Haman's face" (ver. 8). Then one of the eunuchs, who knows all the circumstances of the case, anxious for that kind of retribution which is known to moderns as "poetic justice," suggests that the cross prepared for Mordecai will serve well for the execution of Haman. The king readily consents to the suggestion (ver. 9), and Haman is impaled on the cross which he had erected for his enemy in the court of his own house (ver. 10).

Ver. 1.—**The king and Haman came to banquet (marg. drink).** In Persian feasts the solid dishes were few, and the time was mainly passed in drinking and eating dessert (Herod., i. 133).

Ver. 2.—**And the king said again.** Esther had promised to let her real request be known at this banquet (ch. v. 8). The king therefore once more gives her the opportunity.

On the second day. On the second occasion of being entertained by Esther.

Ver. 3.—**Let my life be given me, &c.** First of all, I ask at the king's hands my own life, which is threatened (ch. iv. 13); secondly, I ask the life of my people, in whose sentence it is that I am involved. Some rhetorical skill is shown in separating the two, so as to make them correspond to the two clauses of the king's address—"What is thy petition?" and "What is thy request?"

Ver. 4.—**For we are sold, I and my people.** Haman has paid our price, has given ten thousand talents for us, and you, O king, have sold us to him. The reproach is covert, but clearly contained in the words; and so the king must have understood Esther. **To be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish.** The use of three synonyms for one and the same thing is not mere verbiage, but very expressive. "We are sold, all of us, to be overwhelmed in one universal, promiscuous, unsparing destruction." **Although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage.** "Although, even in that case, the enemy (Haman) could not (by the payment that he has made) compensate the king for the damage that he would suffer by losing so many subjects." So Gesenius, Rambach, Dathe, and others. But it is simpler, and perhaps better, to understand the passage as Bertheau does: "for the enemy (Haman) is not worthy to vex the king," or "is not worth vexing the king about."

Ver. 5.—**Who is he?** Ahasuerus asks the question to "make sure," as we say—not that he could really be in any doubt. **That durst presume.** Rather, "that hath presumed" (ὁσως ἐτόλμησεν.—LXX.).

Ver. 6.—**The adversary and enemy.** Esther adds a second term of reproach—"enemy"—stronger than the one which she had used before (ver. 4), to stir up the king to greater anger.

Vers. 7, 8.—Ahasuerus rose up from the banquet "in his wrath"—he could no longer remain quiet—and entered the palace garden, on which Esther's apartment probably looked; partly, perhaps, as Bertheau says, to cool the first heat of his fury in the open air; partly to give himself time for reflection, and consider what he would do. Haman also rose from table, and standing near her, began pleading with Esther for his life, which he felt that she, and she alone, could save. Evil, he saw, was determined against him by the king; but a woman's heart might be more tender, and he might perhaps move the queen to allay the storm that she had raised, and induce the king to spare him. He therefore pleaded with all the earnestness in his power, and at last threw himself forward on the couch where Esther reclined, seeking

perhaps to grasp her foot or her garments, as is usual with suppliants in the East. At this crisis the king returned, and misconstruing Haman's action, or pretending to do so, exclaimed aloud, "Will he even force the queen with me in the house?" The terrible charge brought matters to a conclusion—it was taken as a call on the attendants to seize the culprit and execute him. They covered his face, apparently, as that of a condemned man not worthy any more to see the light, according to a practice common among the Romans (Liv., i. 26; Cic. 'pro Rabir.', iv. 13) and the Macedonians (Q. Curt., 'Vit. Alex.', vi. 8), but not elsewhere mentioned as Persian.

Ver. 9.—**Harbonah, one of the chamberlains, said before the king.** Rather, "Harbonah, one of the chamberlains (eunuchs) that served before the king, said." The "eunuchs that served before the king" were those of the highest grade, as appears from ch. i. 10. Harbonah was one of them. **Who had spoken good for the king.** Or, "who spake good." The reference is to his detection of the conspiracy (ch. ii. 22). **In the house of Haman.** This had not been mentioned previously. It adds one touch of extra barbarity to Haman's character, that he should have intended the execution to take place within the walls of his own house.

HOMILETICS.

Ver. 3.—*Spare our life!* Was ever so unexpected a request presented as this? When the king in his capricious favour offered his consort whatsoever she desired, even to the half of his kingdom, she asked what might have been naturally enough implored from the royal clemency by some wretched malefactor condemned to expiate his crimes by death. Give us, me and my people, our life! How strange a boon to beg! A queen high in favour, at a royal banquet, to ask that her life should be spared, and her kindred delivered from an unjust and violent end—in fact, a massacre! Thus were the eyes of the king opened to the infamy of his minister, and thus was Esther made the agent in the redemption of Israel. In this petition we have an example of the request which, as suppliant sinners, we are bound to offer before the throne of grace. It implies—

I. A SENSE OF DANGER. It is something to be alive to this. Esther had only lately come to know of the peril in which she and her countrymen and countrywomen stood. Awake to the impending danger, she was emboldened to urge her plea. So with us. A worse enemy than Haman has plotted against the children of men. A worse fate than massacre awaits those who fall into the snare of the foe. The word of God comes to us as a word of warning, urging us to "flee from the wrath to come." Bondage is bad, but death is worse. And "the wages of sin is death."

II. A HOPE OF DELIVERANCE. Esther had her fears; she had gone in, saying, "If I perish, I perish!" Yet she was encouraged by the gracious demeanour and the generous promise of the king. Therefore she said, "If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king." We have no need of such "ifs" in our approach and our prayer to the King of heaven. He "delighteth in mercy." "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Our hope in Divine mercy is well founded; for it is founded both upon Divine promises and upon the "unspeakable gift," which is both the means and the pledge of the gift of pardon and the gift of life.

III. A DESIRE FOR THE SALVATION OF OTHERS. Esther was not so selfish as to ask that she and her kinsman, Mordecai, might be spared; her desire was that the whole nation of the Jews might be delivered. Similar was the attitude of Paul, who said, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they may be saved!" When we seek salvation through Christ we cannot seek it for ourselves alone; we shall pray for our households, for our nation, for our race.

"Thy light, that on our souls hath shone
Leads us in hope to thee:
Let us not feel its rays alone—
Alone thy people be.
O bring our dearest friends to God;
Remember those we love;
Fit them on earth for thine abode,
Fit them for joys above."

Vers. 9, 10.—*The oppressed avenged.* This was indeed the hand—as the heathen would have said, of Nemesis—as we Christians say, of a righteous God and Ruler. Upon the tree erected for the impalement of Mordecai, the cruel, bloodthirsty conspirator Haman was sentenced himself to die. “The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices make whips to scourge us.”

I. OFTEN WE OBSERVE, FOR A WHILE, INNOCENCE SUFFERING AND THREATENED, AND SIN POWERFUL, INSOLENT, AND TRIUMPHANT. Never was a more striking instance of this than was furnished at the court of the Persian king. Yet since the world began similar spectacles have been beheld.

II. A RIGHTEOUS AND ALMIGHTY RULER LOOKS DOWN FROM HIS THRONE AND OBSERVES SUCH SCENES. It is not we only who mark the inequalities and apparent wrongs of human life. An all-seeing Eye is ever upon the prosperous sinner and the afflicted saint. “All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.”

III. THE TIME WILL COME WHEN THE OPPRESSOR SHALL BE BROUGHT LOW, AND THE LOWLY AND RIGHTEOUS SHALL BE EXALTED. Perhaps, as in the case before us, in this world: assuredly in the general judgment. “The Lord reigneth;” and though he may have reasons we cannot fully understand for permitting the temporary reign of injustice, the Judge of all the earth shall assuredly do right.

Ver. 10.—*Wrath pacified.* Ahasuerus, unlike Jonah, “did well to be angry.” Haman had plotted against the life of his favourite queen, and one of his most serviceable friends, and against an unoffending community. And he had all but usurped the royal authority in causing the gallows to be reared on which he intended that Mordecai should be put to death. A righteous anger led to what would have been deemed in him, an arbitrary sovereign, a just act of retribution. And only when the judicial sentence was carried out against the offender was “the king’s wrath pacified.”

I. HUMAN ANGER. 1. This is sometimes righteous. “Be ye angry and sin not.” Indignation against wrong and wrath with the oppressor are virtues, without which man is scarcely human. 2. Anger is always to be treated with suspicion. We are all prone, like Ahasuerus, to be angry with what hurts ourselves, and our sense of our rights and dignity, rather than with what is evil in the sight of the Lord. Let us ask ourselves whether our anger is justifiable—is sympathy with the Divine righteousness, or is mere selfish passion. 3. Anger should not be confounded with personal revenge. Wrath may be pacified by malevolent action, and then “sin lieth at the door.”

II. DIVINE ANGER. 1. God is angry—with the wicked—every day. The Scriptures represent him as regarding the evil-doing of men with displeasure and with wrath. 2. In the midst of wrath God remembers mercy. This is the message of the gospel, which does not conceal God’s indignation at sin or his displeasure with the sinner; but shows that he is just, and the Justifier of the believer in Christ. He condemns the sin in pardoning the sinner. “Thou wast angry; but thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst us.”

Lessons:—1. Rejoice that God is pacified and reconciled. 2. Accept his offers of mercy. 3. Seek to share his placable and forgiving spirit.

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Vers. 3, 4.—*The effectual prayer of a true priestess.* From the darker side of human nature and its painful suggestions we are glad to come out to the light and air of its more hopeful aspects. We are able to do this now without presumption or incaution. A brittle thread of hope for the very despondent is still a welcome sight to the eyes of those who look on. The plaintive prayer of the oppressed is touching not least to those who may happen to overhear. And the signs of a deep sorrow sinking almost to abject submission, rather than bearing the marks of a healthy resignation, will not fail to wake betimes our tenderest sympathy. These are the more inviting conditions under which the scene now presents itself to us. King Ahasuerus is present, on the grandeur of his throne, and with the dread

authority of his golden sceptre. But it is not he who is the central figure. Esther is the central figure. Haman also is there, the would-be destroyer of a scattered nation of people, whose head is already bowed in the day of punishment. But the eye shuns him, and flees past him to the vista which shows that same people reviving their hope and lifting again the head. And in the background of this scene there is one specially hopeful sign. It is not much that can be said at any time to the honour of Ahasuerus, yet we feel somewhat propitiated towards him when we remember that the arbitrary, imperious monarch has waited, and has even asked three times, for the prayer which Esther is now at last about to offer before him. Upon her he is bending a gracious eye, and to her he is lending an attentive ear. Esther has become awhile the priestess of her people. Let us consider her appearance in this character. We have from her lips—

I. A PRAYER, THE SUBJECT OF WHICH WAS LIFE. The prayer asked for *life*. It asked the least, for anything less would be of no worth without this being secured first. It asked the least, but what signified everything beside. Esther's prayer told its tale, and told it all, but told it most simply. No general phrases, no hasty sentences; each word had been weighed, not indeed to produce an artificial, but a transparent effect. The skill in it was the skill of sincerity and profound earnestness alone. There was art in it, but the art of artlessness, not of artfulness. This prayer for just life and breath for herself and the congregation of her people breathes a tone of wonderful humility, and has an extraordinary promise of *content* in it. The voice of it surely must have faltered through falling tears, or been choked in sobs, when, in the name of all that venerable nation, so long lifted above all nations of the earth, Esther adds that if it had been only a question of bondage, and of selling into such bondage of every man and woman of them, it was not her voice that should have been heard to deprecate, nor her lips that should have been parted in prayer to prevent it. But, she says, the case was one of greater, even of *supreme* extremity. They were sold—to death. They were sold, in the words of the opportunely-quoted "decree," "to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish." Many drops of big tears had those words been to an unnumbered multitude of sensitive and high-spirited people; but now were they not for the first time like drops of molten lead to the hearing of Haman? For him they were hot with terror, heavy with doom, while their effect upon Ahasuerus was electric. Who does not feel that a prayer for *life* must be respectfully listened to, at least?

II. A PRAYER THAT RESTED ON SACRIFICE. Esther does not purport to bring an outer sacrifice. A most real and precious sacrifice she does in fact bring. She was herself the sacrifice, and she knew it full well. Though with modesty, and as mute as could be under the circumstances, she *does* in a veiled manner utter the fact, and claim the plea. She pleads, as she had been taught and urged by Mordecai to plead, that she had been raised up by Providence for this hour, and "to this end" had been placed where of late she was found. There are many outer forms of sacrifice, but the principle at work here, and but thinly concealed, is the leading principle invoked in them all. So Esther makes this the plea: "*If I have found favour* in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king." And "if she had found favour," was it not the result of a most real intrinsic sacrifice of self?

III. A PRAYER WHICH HAD FOR ITS CHIEFEST BURDEN INTERCESSION. Esther was as "merciful" a priestess as she was a skilful one. She lets not go of the argument, the plea, the sacrifice which was found in *herself*; and she keeps this well in the foreground. But our ear can hear well that her prayer is really *intercession*. It is "my people" she has ever in sight, ever "deep graven on her heart." Her people's name is kept close linked with her own. She had no thought of permitting them to get separated from her. They and she had the prospect of being about to share and share alike the "decree," and she takes care to pray and pray alike. This was necessary with all the old high priests under the law. Only of Christ was it not true, who "needed *not* to offer a sacrifice first for his own sins, and then for the people's." But this is the language of Esther: "Let *my life and my people* be given me: . . . for *we* are sold, I and *my people*."

IV. A PRAYER WHICH IN MANY RESPECTS IS A SUBLIME TYPE OF THE SOUL'S PRAYER TO GOD. Within the four corners of Esther's prayer there are some amazing

analogies with the prayer of man to God, of the sinner trembling between fear and hope to the Saviour, of the helpless creature stricken with the sense of unparalleled need to the Possessor and Spirit of *life*. Esther's prayer is indeed horror to our ears to hear, and grates on every highest sensibility of our nature, when (though no fault to her) we think of it as addressed to a fellow-creature. But we may now put this out of sight. The postulates of prayer are here—1. In the praying disposition of the suppliant. Here are the deep feeling, the just estimate of the critical character of the occasion, the overwhelming sense of the prize of *life*. There are also to be noticed the natural selection of simplest language, the choice of briefest arguments, and all these held in hand with a self-command almost inconceivable—another touch of a true analogy. All these are the things which characterise heavenward prayer where intense spiritual importunity exists. 2. In the absolute ownership, the omnipotent power, the sovereign sceptre of the being addressed. These *do* belong to him whom man addresses in prayer when he prays heavenward. And when these two postulates of prayer meet, rare indeed are the exceptions to that result which in one blessed word we call mercy.—B.

Ver. 6.—*A changed attitude.* The priestess has risen from her knees, and appears suddenly transmuted into prosecutrix for herself and her people. The posture of prayer is exchanged for the full-drawn height. The suppliant attitude is replaced in a second by the defiant. Inclining arms, and hands clasped in prayer, are flung wide apart. The extended right hand points a finger of vigorous decision at Haman, that type of monstrous iniquity. The averted eye, shunning *him*, is to Ahasuerus, the present object of hope and trust. As one looks on from the distance, the tones scarcely heard just now have risen from suppliant earnestness to the pitch of indignant force and unmistakable denunciation. Such the transformation. And one token of genuineness, it was the work of an instant. The explanation of so violent a contrast and so rapid a change is the extreme opposite of any native fickleness, of any tendency to infidelity, of any unreality of heart. The opposed appearances are due to one fixed purpose, one imperious necessity, one unalterable religion. In the midst of most unpromising surroundings we seem to see here the long prostrate image of righteousness upraised again. Truth and goodness, oppressed and down-trodden without mercy, recover their standing. There rises in the centre before our vision what might seem a Divinely-sculptured form, for its beauty, its truth of outline, and its suddenness. Let us note some of its suggestions.

I. IT STANDS FOR THE PRESENT A SOLITARY TESTIMONY TO REBUKE INIQUITY. Such has been almost always *at the first*, and often for a while, the history of integrity, of truth, of conscience. A unit of these heavenly forms appears. The individual is raised up. Strength is made perfect in the weakness of one. One has to bear, and bears the brunt. One has to do the work, and does it. One has to set the example, and show the way, and leap into the gulf, and unfurl the banner, and uplift the standard. ONE HANGS UPON THE CROSS. And there stands here, in the person of Esther denouncing the "wicked adversary Haman," one figure, absolutely alone, testifying rebuke of sin, and of the sin of the mighty. There are few positions more dangerous to the person who takes it than this. The one rebuker of the iniquity of the many, or of the powerful, needs to be sure of his cause, and supported by an informed conscience; otherwise he has little to expect from those on whom he visits rebuke.

II. THE ATTITUDE OF IT HAS SUCCEEDED IMMEDIATELY TO THAT OF PRAYER. How many of the greatest works have, in point of historical fact, grown out of prayer. They have taken form after the silence and meditation of prayer. They have grown out of the strength given in answer to strong supplication and tears. The illustrations which Scripture offers are many, and are *the* beacons for us. But the illustrations of all history, and of our own lives, far surpass them in number.

III. IT IS OF THE TYPE OF THE GENTLE AND WEAK AND DEPENDENT, THOUGH FOR ITS WORK ONE WOULD HAVE EXPECTED THE CONTRARY. At any time gentleness has its own proper force, tenderness its peculiar strength, and dependence can often summon a far vaster might to its service than any independence possesses of itself. But there are times when the feminine and the tender is manifestly endowed with an *unusual*.

force, and then it takes additional advantage from the background of weakness which belongs inherently to it. So now we are the more bound to study the reason of it when we find the eye of this one woman, with an *unusual* exercise of it, flashing a force of conviction which rends in twain the hard, gnarled courage of one of the worst of hearts, and shivers the flint. Tenderness is one thing, and strength another. Yet here we find the type of the one usurping the prerogative of the other, and to almost unequalled advantage. Not only "out of the mouths of babes and sucklings has God perfected praise;" but often does God choose "the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." And so he brings it to light that it is not the force of man at all which really wins the victory, but the force of his truth, his goodness, his justice, HIMSELF.

IV. THIS IS A FORM WHICH DIVIDES SO MUCH OF THE WORLD AS IS IN ITS PRESENCE INTO TWO GREAT PARTS. We have here an humble instance of what the cross of Christ did when it stood betwixt the two other crosses. It showed the world divided into the penitent and the impenitent, the believing and the unbelieving. So now the world is forced into one of two classes: there is he who consents to the judgment of Esther and will execute it, and there is he who is convicted and condemned irresistibly by it. The one consents with the deepest emotions, the other suffers conviction with a fear and trembling that positively incapacitate him from governing his actions or taking the most ordinary precaution. When truth and justice are the vision, the background being really nothing else than the sky, then the immediate consequences to all beholders are either those of consenting sympathy, or of stricken amazement and confusion of face. Seldom was the work of severance better done than by Esther now. Her form seems to bring the whole scene to life again, as though we were there. And the more we gaze, the more we justly wonder at the achievement of the moment, which shows Esther with finger pointed at Haman, and saying, "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman."

V. THIS IS THE FORM OF CONVICTION LEFT MISTRESS OF THE SITUATION. The position is evidently in many respects more impressive than that which found Nathan confronting David, and saying, "Thou art the man." Nathan had a heart not callous, a conscience not lifelong injured, to deal with—those of one man. How different the conditions of Esther's task! What a contrast this moment to the moment when, after the fasting of herself, her maidens, and her people, she presented herself within sight of the despot, nor breathed freely till the golden sceptre was extended to her! Such the change for those who watch and pray, who pray and fight, who know and follow and trust the good that is above. They come to a point sometimes where all seems endangered, but prayer and trust and work convert that very time into the date of an exceeding great moral victory. Up to this time Esther had been a queen but in name; now she was a queen in deed and of a truth. The form of Esther is a very faint type, but a very true prophecy, of that great victory, which is ever drawing nearer, which shall show wickedness prostrate, righteousness supreme.—B.

Ver. 7.—*Moments that flash.* "And the king arising . . . went into the palace garden." Esther spoke plainly enough when she turned and charged as her "enemy this wicked Haman." Her words seemed almost incredible to the king. Haman watches to see how they are taken. The king rises in anger from the table and steps out into the garden. Here he paces to and fro meditating. He is wise to have a few quiet moments before deciding as to his action. Perhaps they were only moments of delay before announcing sentence. They were also moments in which would flash upon him—1. The reckless character of his own dealings with an innocent and captive people. 2. His complicity in the designs of a murderous and greedy wretch.

I. THERE ARE MOMENTS WHICH COME TO US AT DIFFERENT PERIODS WHICH FLASH LIKE THOSE IN THE PALACE GARDEN. We have had some problem to work out; or we have been going through a series of circumstances, the end of which we could not comprehend, when at one point all becomes clear. We are like men on board a vessel when the fog lifts and shows them to be near, unexpectedly, to some well-known headland. Or we have "tracked" through a dense forest, and have come to its edge at last, when a wide view opens out before us. These moments come to the youth when a friend or parent dies; or when he first finds out how faithless is

some professed friend. Or they come when, later in life, we listen to some searching sermon; or when affliction falls upon us. To some they come most unexpectedly, when engaged in ordinary affairs. The Holy Spirit uses such moments. Paul knew what such moments meant when, outside Damascus, the light flashed from heaven, and he saw himself in his real state.

II. IT IS WELL TO TAKE TIME FOR MEDITATION AFTER ANY SUDDEN REVELATION. When angry we should pause. He that ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city. On the meditation of a few moments how much may depend. Here it was the deposition and execution of a prime minister, and the salvation of a whole nation.—H.

Ver. 8.—*The covered countenance.* "As the word went out of the king's mouth they covered Haman's face." A hint is sufficient for the king's servants. It is to them a matter of little import whether they robe Haman for exaltation or cover his face for execution; whether they lead him to a banquet or to a gallows. Their duty is to obey their king. So with the angels; they minister for joy or punishment.

I. TO BE IN DISGRACE WAS TO BE UNWORTHY TO SEE THE KING. Nathaniel Hawthorne represented, in one tale, a man as wearing ever a crape veil, and in death wishing it to be kept over his face, because he felt his own unworthiness.

II. TO BE CONDEMNED OF GOD WOULD RENDER US UNABLE TO SEE HIM. As light dazzles, so God's purity alone would blind us. Our own sin will be the covering. When death shall throw his black pall over us, unless mercy lifts it, our own hands will never tear it away. We should examine our hearts, and see whether there is any cherished sin which may eventually lead to our rejection and condemnation. Let there be no "veil" on our hearts as on those of Israel, that there may be no covering our faces as Haman's was covered.—H.

Ver. 9.—*Righteous retribution.* "Hang him thereon." Short time elapsed between the discovery of Haman's crime and his suffering for it. He had observant enemies around. Those who had been willing to fawn upon him while he was in power are ready to turn against him on his fall. They let the king know of the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. "Hang him thereon," says the king, with respect to the huilder.

I. WE CANNOT FAIL TO BE STRUCK WITH THE SUITABILITY OF THE PUNISHMENT TO THE CRIME. Haman "hoisted with his own petard." Into the trap he digged for another he fell. See another fitting illustration of this in Adoni-bezek, who, having disabled seventy-two by the excisions of thumbs and great toes, was himself served in the same way, and confessed, "As I have done, so God hath required me" (Judges i. 7).

II. IN THE FUTURE THE SUITABILITY OF THE PUNISHMENT TO THE SIN OF THE LIFE WILL BE CLEARLY SEEN. It will be the outgrowth naturally of our sin, and not an arbitrary infliction on the part of God. Despisers of parents, oppressors of the weak, the intemperate and sensual, will find how fitting is the retribution to the sin, and will have to confess, as Haman must have done in his heart, that it is just.—H.

Ver. 10.—*The terrible consummation of a wicked life.* Our first impulse on reading these words is to praise Ahasuerus for his faithful administration of justice; for if ever a man deserved summary vengeance at the hands of the law, it was Haman. But a little reflection must correct our judgment. The whole transaction reveals the fickle, passionate, unscrupulous disposition of the tyrant. Without any apparent reason, or at least without any regard to his merits, he had made a special favourite of Haman, and had lavished upon him all the honours at his command; and now, in a fit of uncontrollable rage, he hurries him, without any pretence of a trial, to a felon's death. Flatterers are the most unreliable of men. Those who lick the dust at your feet in prosperity are the most likely to tread upon your neck in adversity. There is but one step between "Hosanna to the Son of David," and "Away with him! crucify him!" The king's servants, who vied with each other in their obsequiousness to Haman while he enjoyed their master's favour, were now so eager to execute him that they could scarcely wait for the sentence. The text is in many respects one of the most striking in the whole Bible, and is fraught with weighty and permanent lessons. Note—

I. THE TERRIBLE CONSUMMATION OF A WICKED CAREER. It sometimes happens that the ungodly flourish in the world to such an extent that our faith in eternal righteousness is staggered. We could point to men whose road to power was paved with injustice, treachery, and bloodshed. Many an upright heart, crushed for its very uprightness, has poured forth, in contemplating such men, the despairing complaint of the Psalmist, "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency." But a careful observation of facts would doubtless show that even in this world excessive wickedness frequently brings about its own requital. Pharaoh perished in the Red Sea; the dogs licked the blood of Ahab in Samaria; Herod was eaten of worms upon his throne. There are circumstances about the case of Haman which separate it from all others, but in its essential features it is but one among thousands. Three elements in Haman's character may be mentioned which, while they contributed to his temporary success, led to his final ruin. 1. *Boundless ambition.* 2. *Boundless pride.* 3. *Boundless cruelty.*

II. THE IGNOMINIOUS EXTINCTION OF AN INFAMOUS RACE. Some think that Haman was an Amalekite; and we are told that the Amalekites, for their hostility to the Israelites, had been singled out for retribution. The Lord said to Moses, "I will utterly put out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven." The threat was not carried out at once; for ages the footsteps of justice seemed to linger, and the delay had only intensified their malignity. But here the last of the race dies upon the gallows, for after this they disappear altogether from history. Piety runs in families, and so does wickedness. God's blessing rests upon families, and so does his curse. This is not due to haphazard, caprice, or favouritism; but there is always a definite cause for it. Think of the Stuarts of England, and the Bourbons of France. By trampling upon the rights of the people, and seeking self-aggrandisement at the expense of righteousness, they sinned no less against Heaven than against humanity. But, as if pursued by an inexorable fate, they were hurled from the summit of power to the ignoble obscurity which they so richly deserved. Let us beware of committing "presumptuous sins," lest they should taint our families, and doom them as well as ourselves to eternal disgrace.

III. THE SIGNAL DEFEAT OF A HEARTLESS PURPOSE. The incident before us is one of those incidents which cannot be accounted for except on the supposition of an overruling Providence. We perceive cunning baffled, crime punished, impiety abashed in such a wonderful way, that to attribute the whole affair to mere chance would be the height of folly. 1. *Haman was degraded just when he thought of reaching the goal of his ambition.* The highest dignities of the kingdom, next to those enjoyed by the king, were his already. His vanity, his love of authority, his fondness for display had nothing to desire. And now the only annoyance that disturbed him was about to be removed—the people which he hated was about to be annihilated—and he was about to become absolute master of the situation. Henceforth he would be admired, courted, envied by all the world. But, alas, it was not to be. "There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand." Haman had left that counsel out of his calculation; hence, when he thought of attaining the climax of honour, he was plunged into the abyss of shame. Prosperity is the worst thing that can happen to the wicked man. Adversity may mellow his heart, and produce reflection, repentance, and reformation; but a course of unbroken triumph only hardens his heart, and hastens the inevitable catastrophe. "For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape." 2. *Haman perished on the very gallows that he had erected for another.* This was probably the bitterest ingredient in his cup of woe. Imagine his chagrin, his confusion, his despair, when he found that the huge instrument of death which he had set up at such great expense to punish his unbending antagonist was to be employed for no other purpose than his own execution! And who knows but that Mordecai himself was among the crowd who witnessed the scene? There was an awful fitness about the punishment. After-ages have with one consent pronounced it just. No utterance commends itself to universal approval with greater force than this: "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein; and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him." We are reminded here that as virtue is its own reward, so sin is

its own punishment. Haman died on a gallows of his own construction; so shall every impenitent sinner perish through his own waywardness. "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee."—R.

Vers. 1—6.—*Accused and convicted.* I. **TARNISHED GILT.** Haman would hardly go "merrily" to Esther's second banquet. His heart would be heavy with the day's disappointments, and his ears would be haunted with the gloomy vaticinations of his friends. The glory of the honour which had so inflated him was dimmed. Worldly delights that are ardently anticipated may be robbed of their promise even before they are touched.

II. **WHETTED CURIOSITY.** The king's desire to hear Esther's petition grew with delay. For a third time he asked her to speak, and encouraged her by the largest promise. Idle curiosity is a weakness and a snare. There may be a legitimate and even dutiful curiosity, and that too in connection with individual cases. A loving desire to give help will often justify even a seeming intrusion into the privacy of a friend's sorrow. A sympathetic word may cause a secretly-burdened heart to open and relieve itself, and thus give an opportunity of affording it the benefit of wise counsel and timely succour. Our Saviour has "a fellow-feeling with our infirmities," and desires the full confidence of his people, that he may help them in their "time of need."

III. **UNBURDENED DESIRE.** The queen knew that the time had come for her to speak. She could no longer delay without injuring her cause. If it is well to know when to be silent, it is also well to know when to speak. It is folly to expose a great matter to a heart that may be cold or hostile. Esther's matter was exceedingly great, and she could not subject it to any needless risk by a premature disclosure. But now the king was so favourable to herself, and so interested in her secret, as to make it plain that she must tell all. So she laid before the king the weighty burden she had been silently carrying. What a relief to open a secret sorrow to those who can feel for us and give us an effective solace! We can at all times speak to God. Whatever barriers of fear and distrust stand between us and him are of our own making. The Redeemer of men is ready to share our every burden and to exceed our largest desires.

IV. **POWERFUL PLEADING.** Much wisdom and much pathos mark the words in which Esther presented her petition. Observe—1. How heroically she united herself with her people. It was for her own life and the life of her people that she prayed. That the queen was a Jewess would be startling news to the king and Haman, and would certainly quicken the fears of the latter. Esther calmly elected to be numbered with the Israelites, and to die with them if they were to die. She only cared to live if they were permitted to live. It was a strong way of putting the matter before the king. It is better to suffer with God's people than to share the splendours of their enemies. The example of Moses is suggested (Heb. xi. 24—26). That of Joshua too (Josh. xiv. 15). Especially that of Christ, who made himself one with us that he might redeem us from evil. 2. How energetically she described the doom contrived for her people. She used the very words of the royal proclamation—"To destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish"—showing the ruthless determination of the enemy. Then there was an indignant allusion to the bribe. "We are sold, I and my people," to be thus destroyed. A further sting to the listening Haman. Hatred of wrong and pity for the oppressed give force to the tongue of the advocate, when it is free to speak. Strong feeling can only express itself in strong words. Direct and plain are the utterances of a heart that is breaking with a desire to save the innocent. Happy are the victims of evil who have an advocate like Esther. She reminds us of the great Advocate, the one Mediator between God and man. Our elder Brother, the vanquisher of the giant oppressors of our race, ever works and pleads for his people (Heb. vii. 25; 1 John ii. 1). 3. How pathetically she pleaded the submissive spirit of herself and her race. If it had been only bondage that was threatened she would have been silent. Her scattered people were used to hardships, and had been trained to quiet submission. Yet, as she gently insinuated, even if the enemy had been content to reduce the Israelites to serfdom and poverty, he would not have saved the king from damage. A free, orderly, and industrious people was of more value to the state than a race of slaves. This was a far-sighted truth much in advance of her day. Insub-

ordination of peoples has generally been the result of oppressive rule. Nations have been wonderfully patient under all sorts of unjust exactions and crushing burdens; but there is a point beyond which the most patient submission cannot go. All are free in the kingdom of God. No oppressions there. Citizens are sons (John i. 12; Rom. viii. 14, 15, 21).

V. RESPONSIVE EMOTION. The pleading of Esther instantly roused within the king's mind a turbulence of feeling. "Who or where is the man who durst presume in his heart to do so?" Was he ignorant of the decree against the Jews? Had he sealed it in a careless or drunken moment? Or was he thinking of Haman and his presumption when he cried, "Who or where is the man?" We cannot say. All we know is that he yielded himself up to the power of Esther's words. We learn several things here. 1. That the worst men may retain a certain amount of good which only requires occasion to be inflamed into indignation against heartless sin. There is a point in every heart which the truth may peradventure reach. This should be encouragement to all workers for God. 2. That it is a good thing to be susceptible to the accents of injured innocence. We should cherish sympathy with the weak suffering, and be ever ready to set our faces against injustice and violence. 3. That false friends are worse than avowed enemies. Flatterers like Haman, who use the power they acquire for selfish and pernicious ends, are more to be feared than rebels or conspirators. A smooth tongue may work greater evil than an unsheathed sword. 4. That we should be thankful for awakenings to unconscious peril, even though they cover us with shame. It is less disgraceful to confess our weakness and folly than by persistence in them to allow wickedness to run its course. It may be noble to welcome a light that condemns us, but it can only be despicable and ruinous to close our eyes against the truth in order to shield our pride.

VI. RESISTLESS ACCUSATION. Esther's opportunity had come at last. "Who is the man?" cried the excited king. There is the man, answered the queen, pointing her finger to her second guest. "The adversary and the enemy is this wicked Haman." The charge fell like a thunderbolt on the culprit; a deadly fear seized his heart. There he stood convicted, speechless and trembling. We think of David before God and his prophet Nathan: "Thou art the man" (2 Sam. xii. 7). The avenger may wait, but his time will come. God is long-suffering, but even his patience may be exhausted.—D.

Vers. 7—10.—*Judgment.* I. A SILENT WRATH. Feeling may be too deep for utterance. The king's silence was ominous. He could not speak for the moment in answer to Esther's charge, but neither could he sit still; and when he rose and went out Haman felt that the king had abandoned him. Whenever God turns from an evil-doer, and ceases to speak to him, the end is not far off. It is a solemn thought that God may thus withdraw his mercy, and leave a sinner to himself. That is fatal.

II. A VAIN PRAYER. In the absence of the king Haman besought his life at the hands of Esther. But the queen was now powerless. She could render no help to the intended destroyer of her race. In presence of the Judge prayer will be too late. Vainly shall the impenitent cry to the mountains and rocks to fall on them and hide them from "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. vi. 15—17).

III. A SIGN OF DOOM. On his return from the garden the king saw Haman at the feet of Esther in an agony of imploration. He uttered a harsh word at the sight, and perhaps gave a signal, whereupon his attendants "covered Haman's face." A sign of death! Judgment had been pronounced, and the great man had fallen. In a moment the brilliant fabric which wickedness had reared crumbled into the dust. How many are thus startled by the signs of approaching death! How many will be similarly overtaken in "the day of the Son of man!"

IV. A FITILESS SUGGESTION. Harbonah's name is memorable and blessed among the Jews; but his words seem servile and heartless. He and his companions had probably fawned on the favourite whilst he was in power; but now, in his eagerness to please the wrathful king, he suggests the infliction of a special ignominy. No confidence can be placed in the sycophants of the great. When the wicked fall their friends turn into enemies. The same motives that make men flatter them in prosperity make men insult them in adversity. Nor will the impenitent derive any

advantage before the tribunal of God from the things or beings in which they trusted on earth. All refuges will then fail them. Their boasted defences will prove a mockery.

V. AN APPROPRIATE END. When Harbonah spoke of the gallows in Haman's house, the king said, "Hang him on it." And so Haman was hanged on the very gibbet which he had prepared for Mordecai. A most fit yet terrible retribution! The would-be murderer was "hoist with his own petard." Evil contrived against the innocent recoils with deadly force on the contriver. The person who maliciously injures receives more harm than the person on whom he inflicts injury. The wicked themselves fall into the pit which they dig for the righteous (Ps. vii. 15, 16).

VI. AN APPEASED WRATH. The execution of Haman gave quiet to the king's mind. Justice had been done, and the way opened up for a great deliverance. The mediation of the queen had been effective. The enemy of Israel had been destroyed. We have little sympathy with the king in connection with the death of Haman; yet his action serves to remind us of the justice and mercy of God. The Bible tells us of a Divine wrath against sin, and of the way in which that wrath satisfied itself. Justice was appeased and sin was punished and slain in the sacrifice of God's Son. On the cross justice and mercy meet in amity. "He who knew no sin was made sin for us" (2 Cor. v. 21). "Christ suffered for sins, the just for the unjust" (1 Pet. iii. 18). And now the salvation of a doomed race is heralded by the gospel throughout the earth (Isa. lv. 1; Matt. xi. 28, 30; John iii. 14—18).—D.

Vers. 1—7.—*A crisis, a plea, and a deliverance.* We have here—1. *A most serious crisis.* "So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen" (ver. 1). The culminating point in this great issue is now reached. The lives of the chosen people of God throughout all Persia, in all her provinces, hang on this interview between an arbitrary sovereign, his wife, and his minister. Except the wife shall prevail over the crafty and all-powerful statesman, the race must die by one cruel blow. 2. *A powerful plea.* At the king's invitation (ver. 2) the queen makes her appeal in simple but forcible language. She appealed (1) to his affection for herself: "Let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request" (ver. 3); (2) to his pity for a suffering people: "We are sold," and sold not even to bitter bondage, but "to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish" (ver. 4); (3) to his sense of what was politic: the loss of so many subjects would be greatly to "the king's damage" (ver. 4). 3. *A great deliverance* (vers. 5, 6). Having readily consented to the slaughter of thousands of his subjects, the king with equal readiness consents to their lives being spared. He appears to have been shocked at the idea of what was contemplated; but he had not reckoned on the sanguinary decrees including his own wife in its evil range. We learn—

I. THE MYSTERIOUSNESS OF GOD'S GOVERNMENT. Why the Divine Ruler should allow his Church to come into such terrible danger, barely escaping from utter destruction; why he should sometimes permit such fearful atrocities to be inflicted, not interposing, as here, to save them, but allowing the beheadings, burnings, burials alive, imprisonments, &c. on which so many skies have looked down in different centuries; why he should allow a Haman of ancient times, or an Alva or Claverhouse of more recent times, to wreak such cruelties on the people of God, and why he should choose such instruments to avert and overthrow as one woman's beauty—this we cannot tell. God does and suffers many things which we do not understand. He declines to interpose when we should have confidently expected his aid. The truth is that he is too high and too great, and we are too low and too small to understand him. "His way is in the sea, his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known." "His ways are past finding out." We are but very little children before him, and must wait awhile; we shall understand hereafter what we know not now (John xiii. 7).

II. THE GOOD WORK THAT ONE WEAK VOICE MAY DO. Little did Esther think, when she was first accepted as queen, that she would do a good work for her race which should never be forgotten. But the hour came for her to make a great attempt; she made it, and succeeded. Her success was due to her courage and her charms and her address. But *these were the outcome of a life of virtue and piety.* By the exercise

of these she had "bought up the opportunity" (redeemed the time), and "when the occasion came she was equal to the occasion." Wisely use the present, and when the hour of opportunity comes you will be ready to speak, to strike, to suffer, or to save.

III. THE UNENVIABLENESS OF RANK AND POWER WITHOUT WISDOM. Judging from the notion of mere worldliness, we should say that Ahasuerus occupied the most enviable position in Persia. As king of that great empire, he held in his hand all that men usually desire. But judging from a distance, impartially, and in the light of God's truth, how little should we care to be such as he was. How unlovely the haste and passion of the man. Hungrily seizing the opportunity of reimbursing his treasury, he makes a decree which would have the effect of slaughtering a race, of ultimately weakening his resources, and of taking the life of his own queen. Happily, but accidentally, in the right mood when the chance is given him of retrieving his error, he turns with characteristic passion and precipitancy on his favourite minister, and wreaks vengeance on his head. Moral littleness in high places is very pitiable.

IV. THE UNSUSPECTED RANGE OF OUR ACTIONS IN THEIR EFFECTS. How amazed was Ahasuerus to find that in striking at the Jews he was aiming a blow at his own wife, and so at himself. All our actions, good and bad, stretch further and come closer home than we realise at the time when we do them.—C.

Vers. 8—10; viii. 1, 2.—*Reversals*. Human life is well likened to the river which glides smoothly and evenly along from the spring where it rises to the sea into which it falls. But it is also well compared to the wheel which takes to the bottom that which was at the top, and to the top that which was at the bottom. There is much of orderly and regular procedure; there is much also of change and reversal. Seldom, indeed, does human life present before our eyes the picture of so signal and complete a reversal as that told in the text. Haman, the favourite, the prime minister of state, the all-powerful courtier, the wealthy and strong noble, hanged on the gallows; Mordecai, the despised Jew, whose life was seriously threatened, and likely to end most ignominiously, promoted to highest favour and greatest influence with the king. These reversals were not mere accidents; they illustrate the truths—

I. THAT, SOONER OR LATER, SUCCESSFUL SIN WILL BE OVERTHROWN (vers. 9, 10). We all "see the prosperity of the wicked," as the Psalmist did, and, like him, we are grieved and troubled by it. But we must be like the patriarch, and wait to see "the end of the Lord." If we wait long enough we shall find that sin meets with its due award. The guilty empire founded in usurpation and bloodshed, and maintained by violence and corruption, goes down and goes out in ignominy and disaster. The guilty adventurer rears his head for many years, but misfortune and misery overtake him in time. Haman goes to the gallows at last.

"The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small;
With patience he stands waiting, but with exactness grinds he all."

The truth is, that sin carries in itself the seeds of its own discomfiture; these must germinate, and grow, and bear fruit in time. "I have seen the wicked in great power," &c.; but wait awhile, and "lo, he is not: he has passed away" (Ps. xxxvii. 35).

II. THAT, SOONER OR LATER, PERSECUTED RIGHTEOUSNESS WILL TRIUMPH (ch. viii. 1, 2). Haman has gone to the gallows, and now Mordecai takes the chief chair of state. Honesty proves the true policy in the end. Purity, uprightness, integrity, kindness—these have in them the power and prophecy of ultimate success. Let the godly man who is oppressed by iniquity bear his burden, and also his testimony; let him patiently pursue his course, looking *up* and looking *on*, and somewhere in the future the crown of a pure success awaits him—if not here, hereafter. "Weeping may endure for a night"—possibly a long night—but "joy comes in the morning." It may be the morrow of the distant future, but it will then be the beginning of a cloudless and endless day.

III. THAT SIN CONTINUALLY SUFFERS FROM ITS OWN HAND. "They hanged Haman

on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai" (ver. 10). Into the very trap he laid for another his own foot falls. We learn—1. *That sin frequently brings on itself the very evil it designed for others.* A man bent on ruining another (by legal measures, or unfair under-selling, &c.) often impoverishes himself. A man in his wrath goes out to slay, and is himself the slain one. The accuser of others is condemned by others, and suffers general reprobation. 2. *That sin invariably suffers as the consequence of the evil which it does.* If it does not endure the very evil it designs, it does bear its penalty. No man can hurt another without being hurt himself. The chief victim, the principal sufferer from sin, is the sinner. Every act of evil, every thought of sin, inflicts a damaging wound, more or less obvious, in the breast of the evil-doer, in the heart of the sinner. Contrast with this stern truth the obverse—

IV. THAT GOODNESS ALWAYS BLESSES THE AGENT AS WELL AS THE OBJECT. It is not mercy only, but every kind of work, that "blesses him that gives and him that takes." "Give, and it shall be given unto you." "He that watereth shall himself be watered."—C.

EXPOSITION. §§ 14, 15, 16.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAMAN'S HOUSE GIVEN TO ESTHER, AND THE KING'S SIGNET MADE OVER TO MORDECAI (ch. viii. 1, 2). Two consequences followed immediately on Haman's execution. His property escheating to the crown, Ahasuerus made the whole of it over to Esther, either simply as a sign of favour, or in compensation of the alarm and suffering which Haman had caused her. Further, Haman's office being vacant, and Mordecai's close relationship to Esther having become known to the king, he transferred to Mordecai the confidence which he had been wont to repose in Haman, and gave him the custody of the royal signet. Under these circumstances Esther placed Mordecai in charge of the house which had been Haman's, as a suitable abode for a minister.

Ver. 1.—*On that day did the king . . . give the house of Haman.* When a criminal was executed, everything that belonged to him became the property of the crown, and was disposed of according to the king's pleasure. It pleased Ahasuerus to make over to Esther the house of Haman, with, no doubt, all its contents, attendants, furniture, and treasure. *The Jews' enemy.* This now becomes Haman's ordinary designation (see ch. ix. 10, 24). Traditional practices have in many places kept up his memory as one of the most hated adversaries of the nation (see Stanley, 'Lectures on the Jewish Church,' Third Series, pp. 177, 178). *And Mordecai came before the king.* Mordecai became a high official—one of those in constant attendance on the king. *For Esther had told what he was to her.* *I. e.* had revealed his

relationship, had told that he was her cousin. Mordecai having been recognised as a "king's benefactor" (ch. vi. 3—11), and Esther having been forced to confess herself a Jewess in order to save her nation (ch. vii. 3, 4), there was no object in any further concealment.

Ver. 2.—*And the king took off his ring.* The king's signet would, as a matter of course, be taken from Haman before his execution and restored to Ahasuerus, who now once more wore it himself. Business, however, was irksome to him, and, having resolved to make Mordecai minister in Haman's room, he very soon took the signet off again, and made it over to the new vizier. *And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.* It would not have been seemly for Esther to give away what she had received as a gift from the king. She was therefore unable to make Mordecai a present of the house. But she did what was equivalent—she set him over it, made him practically its master. Thus he was provided with a residence suitable to his new dignity.

AT ESTHER'S REQUEST AHASUERUS ALLOWS THE ISSUE OF A SECOND EDICT, PERMITTING THE JEWS TO RESIST ANY WHO SHOULD ATTACK THEM, TO KILL THEM IN THEIR OWN DEFENCE, AND TO TAKE POSSESSION OF THEIR GOODS (ch. viii. 3—14). The execution of Haman, the confiscation of his property, the advancement of Mordecai into his place, though of favourable omen, as showing the present temper and inclination of Ahasuerus, left the Jews in as great danger as before. In most countries there would neither have been delay nor difficulty. The edict which went forth on the 13th of Nisan (ch. iii. 12), and which could not be executed till the 13th

of Adar, would have been cancelled, revoked, recalled. But in Persia this could not be done; or at any rate it could not be done without breaking one of the first principles of Persian law, the principle that "the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse" (ver. 8). It was therefore necessary to devise a mode whereby the desired escape of the Jews might practically be obtained, and yet the edict remain unrevoked, and the king's honour be saved. At first Mordecai and Esther do not appear to have seen this, and Esther asked openly for the reversal of the decree, only representing it as the writing of Haman, and not the writing of the king (ver. 5). But Ahasuerus pointed out that this could not be done. Anything short of a reversal, any new decree, he would sanction; but he could do no more—he could not revoke his own word (ver. 8). The course actually followed was then devised, probably by Mordecai. The old decree was allowed to stand; but a new decree was issued and signed in the usual way, whereby the Jews were allowed and encouraged to resist those who should attack them,—to "gather themselves together, and to stand for their life; to destroy, slay, and cause to perish all the power of the people of the province that would assault them,"—and were further permitted to "take the spoil of them for a prey," or, in other words, to seize the property of all whom they should slay (ver. 11). The royal posts carried out this decree (ver. 14), as they had the former one; and it was publicly set forth and proclaimed in every province, that if the Jews were attacked under the terms of the one, they might defend themselves and retaliate on their foes under the terms of the other (ver. 13). As the second decree was issued on the 23rd of Sivan, the third month (ver. 9), and the day appointed for the attack was the 13th of Adar, the twelfth, there was ample time—above eight months—for the Jews to make preparations, to organise themselves, to collect arms, and to arrange an effective resistance.

Ver. 3.—*Esther spake yet again before the king.* It might have seemed to be the business of Mordecai, as the king's chief minister, to advise him in a matter of public policy and one in which the interests of so

many of his subjects were vitally concerned. But the new minister did not perhaps feel sure of his influence, or quite know what to recommend. Esther was therefore again put forward to address the king. *Fell down at his feet.* Compare 1 Sam. xxv. 24; 2 Kings iv. 37, &c. *And besought him . . . to put away the mischief of Haman.* *I. e.* begged him, first of all, in a vague way, to "cause to pass"—put away, or undo—the mischief of Haman—not suggesting how it was to be done.

Ver. 4.—*Then the king held out the golden sceptre.* Either Esther had again intruded on the king uninvited, or there was a double use of the golden sceptre. 1. In the pardon of those who so intruded; and, 2. In the ordinary granting of requests. It was perhaps held out on this occasion simply to express a readiness to do as Esther desired.

Ver. 5.—*If it please the king, &c.* The long preface of four clauses, winding up with "If I be pleasing," is indicative of Esther's doubt how the king will receive her suggestion that it should be written to reverse the letters (comp. ch. iii. 13) devised by Haman. To ask the king to unsay his own words was impossible. By representing the letters as devised by Haman, and written by Haman, Esther avoids doing so. But she thereby blinks the truth. In excuse she adds the striking distich contained in the next verse—"For how could I endure to see the evil that is coming on my people? or how could I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?"

Vers. 7, 8.—*Then the king . . . said unto Esther the queen and unto Mordecai.* The king, it would seem, took time to give his answer; and when he gave it, addressed himself to Mordecai, his minister, rather than to Esther, his wife. "See now," he said, "I have done what I could—I have given Esther Haman's house; I have had Haman himself executed because he put forth his hand against the Jews. What yet remains? I am asked to save your countrymen by revoking my late edict. That may not be. The writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's seal, may no man reverse. But, short of this, I give you full liberty of action. Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring. Surely you can devise something which will save your people without calling on me to retract my own words, and at the same time break a great principle of Persian law."

Ver. 9.—*Then were the king's scribes called.* The king had said enough. Mordecai saw a means of reconciling the king's scruple with the safety—or if not with the absolute

safety, yet with the escape and triumph—of his people. The Jews should be allowed to stand on their defence, should be encouraged to do so, when the time came should be supported in their resistance by the whole power of the government (ch. ix. 3). A new decree must issue at once giving the requisite permission, and copies must be at once distributed, that there might be no mistake or misunderstanding. So the “king’s scribes” were summoned and set to work. In the third month, the month *Sivan*. This is another Babylonian name. The month was sacred to the moon-god, *Sin*, and its name may be connected with his. It corresponded with the latter part of our May and the early part of June. **To the lieutenants, and the deputies and rulers.** Compare ch. iii. 12, where the same three classes of rulers are mentioned. **An hundred twenty and seven.** See the comment on ch. i. 1. **And to the Jews.** Copies of the former edict had not been sent especially to the Jews. They had been left to learn their danger indirectly from the people among whom they dwelt; but Mordecai took care that they should be informed directly of their right of defence.

Ver. 10.—**He wrote in the king’s name.** As Haman had done (ch. iii. 12). **And riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries.** There is no “and” before “riders” in the original, and the clause is clearly exegetical of the preceding. Neither “mules,” nor “camels,” nor “young dromedaries” are mentioned in it, and the best translation would seem to be—“the riders on coursers of the royal stud, the offspring of thorough-breeds.” It is noticeable that both Herodotus (viii. 98) and Xenophon (“Cyrop.” viii. 6, § 17) speak of *horses* as alone employed in carrying the Persian despatches.

Ver. 11.—**Wherein the king granted.** Rather, “that the king granted.” Mordecai sent “letters,” which said “that the king granted to the Jews to gather themselves together,” &c. **To gather themselves together.** Union is strength. If all the Jews of a province were allowed to collect and band themselves together, they would at once be a formidable body. Scattered in the various towns and villages, they might easily have been overpowered. **To stand for their life.** The Jews have sometimes been spoken of as the aggressors on the actual 13th of Adar, but there is no evidence to support this view. The edict clearly only allowed them to stand on the defensive. Of course, when fighting once began, both sides did their worst. In repelling attack the Jews had the same liberty to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish as their adversaries (ch. iii. 13). **Little ones.** Rather, “families.” **Take the spoil of them for a prey.** *I. e.* “seize their property.” The earlier edict had given

the same permission to the Jews’ enemies (ch. iii. 13).

Ver. 13.—This verse reproduces ver. 14 of ch. iii., with a slight modification of the last clause. It is probable that a copy of the decree was originally inserted at the end of the verse.

Ver. 14.—**The posts that rode upon mules and camels.** Rather, “that rode on coursers of the stud royal” (see the comment on ver. 10). The verse repeats ch. iii. 15, with small additions. It appears that the later posts were urged to haste still more strongly than the earlier ones—not that time really pressed, but from superabundant caution—that there might be an opportunity for further communications between the provinces and the court, if doubt was anywhere entertained as to the king’s intentions.

MORDECAI’S HONOUR AND THE JEWS’ JOY (ch. viii. 15—17). Ahasuerus was not content even now with what he had done for Mordecai. Before his minister quitted the presence, the king presented him with a crown of gold, and a robe and vest of honour; and thus arrayed he proceeded into the city of Susa, where the new edict was already known, and had been received with satisfaction (ver. 15). The Persians, who formed the predominant element in the population of the town, sympathised with the Jews, and rejoiced in the king’s favour towards them; while the Jews of Susa, having passed from despair to confident hope, were full of gladness and thankfulness. In the provinces the decree had a still warmer welcome. Its arrival was celebrated with “a feast” (ver. 17) and “a good day.” It led also to many of the heathen becoming proselytes to the Jewish religion—some perhaps from conviction, but others because they thought it safer to place themselves manifestly on the Jews’ side before the day of the struggle.

Ver. 15.—**Royal apparel of blue and white.** The Persian monarch himself wore a purple robe and an inner vest of purple striped with white (“Ancient Monarchies,” vol. iv. pp. 153, 154). The robes of honour which he gave away were of many different colours, but generally of a single tint throughout (Xen., “Cyrop.” viii. 3, § 3); but the one given to Mordecai seems to have been blue with white stripes. These were the colours of the royal diadem (Q. Curt., “Vit. Alex.,” iii. 3). **A great crown of gold.** Not a tall crown, like that of the monarch, which is called in Hebrew *kether* (Greek *κίραψ*), but *atdráh*, a crown of an inferior kind, frequently worn

by nobles. And with a garment of fine linen and purple. The "fine linen" was of course white. The real meaning of the word *thakrik*, translated "garment," is doubtful. Gesenius understands an outer garment—"the long and flowing robe of an Oriental monarch;" in which case the "apparel" previously mentioned must be the inner vest. Others, as Patrick, make the *thakrik* to be the inner, and the "apparel" (*l'bdsh*) the outer garment. The Septuagint, however, translates *thakrik* by *diadēma*, and its conjunction with the "crown" favours this rendering. The *diadem* proper of a Persian monarch was a band or fillet encircling the lower part of his crown, and was of blue, spotted or striped with white. Ahasuerus seems to have allowed Mordecai to wear a diadem of white and purple. The city of Shushan rejoiced. As the Susanchites had been "perplexed" at the first edict (ch. iii. 15), so were they "rejoiced" at the second. Such of them as were Persians would naturally sympathise with the Jews. Even the others may have disliked Haman's edict,

and have been glad to see it, practically, reversed.

Ver. 16.—**The Jews had light.** A metaphor for "happiness" (comp. Isa. lvi. 8).

Ver. 17.—**A feast and a good day.** The provincial Jews made the whole day on which they heard the news into a holiday, and not only rejoiced, but feasted. Many of the people of the land became Jews. Applied for and obtained admission into the Jewish nation as full proselytes (comp. Ezra vi. 21, with the comment). The fear of the Jews fell upon them. There was about to be in each great city where there were Jews a day of struggle and bloodshed. The Jews would have authority on their side (ch. ix. 3), and might be expected to be victorious. Persons feared lest, when victorious, they might revenge themselves on all who had not taken their part, and thought it safer to become Jews than remain neutral. But it can only have been a small minority of the population in each city that took this view. There was no sudden great increase in the numbers of the Jewish nation.

HOMILETICS.

Vers. 1, 2.—**The lowly exalted.** In the East, where monarchs are absolute, and where king's favourites are ministers of state, changes of fortune are familiar and proverbial. When one of our statesmen quits office he usually does so in an honourable way, and loses little of consideration by the change. But a vizier when deposed is disgraced, his property is often forfeited, and he himself is often put to a violent death. So was it with Haman. When the king's wrath turned against him he was slain, and his palace and establishment given to the queen, and his office and authority to Mordecai.

I. IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE THE RIGHTEOUS AND LOWLY ARE, EVEN IN THIS WORLD, OFTEN EXALTED TO HONOUR. "The Lord bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dung-hill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory." History records many striking instances of the elevation to high positions in Church and State of those born in poverty, but qualified by natural gifts, by high character, by faithful service, for exalted station. It is a Divine law, and no artificial regulations should interfere with its working. In Scripture we often meet with instances of the younger, the weaker, the despised being raised to honour and power.

II. UNDER GOD'S RIGHTEOUS GOVERNMENT THE LOWLY AND FAITHFUL ON EARTH SHALL BE RAISED TO HONOUR AND HIGH SERVICE HEREAFTER. If it be asked why so many pure and gentle characters are allowed by Providence to remain through life in positions of obscurity, the true answer is this: They are training for positions of authority and honour in the future life. Those who here are faithful over a few things shall there be made rulers over many things, shall enter into the joy of their Lord. There are mansions for them there to inhabit; there is authority for them there to exercise; there is favour for them there consciously and eternally to enjoy.

Ver. 3.—**Putting away mischief.** There was great wisdom in Esther's application to the king. In appearing before him unbidden she did so, as before, at the risk of her life. But her confidence in the power of her charms over the king was not unwarranted. She was too prudent to ask Ahasuerus to revoke his own decree for the destruction of the Jews. She treated it as the decree of the wicked Haman, and implored him to "put away the mischief of Haman, and the device that he had devised

against the Jews." This expression, "putting away mischief," is striking and suggestive.

I. THERE IS SOME MISCHIEF WHICH, ONCE DONE, CANNOT BE UNDONE. Set a huge stone rolling down a mountain's side, and you cannot stop its descent until it reach the lake below the precipice. Open the sluice, or make a breach in the dyke, and you cannot keep out the flood of waters. So if in anger you slay a man, if in lust you ruin a woman, if in wanton wickedness you corrupt and mislead a child, the evil is largely irremediable. A bad book, once issued, does its deadly work; a false report, once spread, creates misery and distress.

II. THERE ARE CASES IN WHICH MISCHIEF MAY, TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, BE PUT AWAY. A misstatement may be corrected; a calumny may be retracted; an alarm may be contradicted. Restitution may be made for theft; reparation for injury. Governments which have done harm by unjust and unwise enactments may undo something of the harm by repealing bad laws, and replacing them by laws that are righteous. Amendment and reversal are permissible, and are indeed morally obligatory, where evil has been wrought or intended.

III. THE WISDOM OF GOD HAS DEVISED A WAY FOR PUTTING AWAY THE MISCHIEF OF SIN IN THE WORLD. A God who is just, and the Justifier of the ungodly who repents and believes in Jesus, is a Being who demands our grateful and lowly adoration. In Christ Jesus he "reconciles the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them."

Practical lessons:—1. The consideration of the difficulty there is in undoing mischief should make us cautious, and watchful, and prayerful that no evil in society may originate in us. 2. Yet this difficulty should not deter us from making strenuous effort to repair mischief when mischief has been done. Esther and Mordecai were, with God's blessing, successful in their efforts, partially at all events, to undo Haman's mischief. Let their example stimulate and encourage us in every benevolent task and undertaking.

Ver. 6.—*Patriotism.* Esther's life was now safe, and probably her cousin's too. But that was not enough. Her nation was still in danger. The royal decree had delivered the Jews throughout the empire into the hands of their enemies. In a few months, unless measures were meantime taken to check and hinder the malice of their foes, thousands of Israelites might be exposed to violence, pillage, and massacre. The thought was to Esther cruel beyond bearing. "How," said she, "can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people, the destruction of my kindred?" This was patriotism indeed.

I. PATRIOTISM IMPLIES A SENTIMENT OF SYMPATHY. Esther felt for her people, her kindred. Every lover of his country will not only rejoice in its prosperity, cherish a glow of pride and satisfaction in any great deeds of his countrymen, but will grieve over national calamities and mourn over national sins; will "sigh and cry for the abominations that are done in the land."

II. PATRIOTISM DETERS MEN FROM DOING ANYTHING THAT CAN INJURE THEIR COUNTRY. If personal advantage can be secured by any harm to his country, the patriot will spurn the thought of so profiting himself at the expense of the nation. As a citizen, whose life must have some influence, he will refrain from conduct by which his countrymen might suffer.

III. TRUE PATRIOTISM WILL LEAD MEN TO SEEK NOT ONLY THE MATERIAL PROSPERITY, BUT THE REAL AND MORAL GREATNESS OF THEIR COMMON COUNTRY. They cannot contemplate uninterested, unmoved, a state of society

"Where wealth accumulates, and men decay."

The progress of knowledge, of virtue, of true religion amongst their kindred will be sought with ardour and zeal.

IV. PATRIOTISM WILL LEAD TO PRACTICAL EFFORT TO AVOID THREATENING DANGERS. The patriot is unwilling to contemplate, to anticipate evil. But mere sentiment is insufficient, and he will exert himself to avert the evil he dreads. Especially will he use any influence he possesses with those who have the means, the power, the opportunity of assisting to secure the safety and welfare of the country. The examples

of Ezra and of Nehemiah, among the children of the captivity, show us what true patriotism will lead men to undertake and do and bear. But the supreme example, alike of patriotism and of philanthropy, is to be beheld in Jesus Christ, who wept over Jerusalem as well as over the world, and who would fain have averted ruin from the city he favoured with his teaching and ministry, and in which he shed his precious blood.

Vers. 7—14.—*Self-defence.* The permission of Ahasuerus appears to us singular almost to madness. Indeed, it could only have been such a character as we know Xerxes to have been that could have coolly contemplated plunging every province and every city of his empire into the horrors of civil war. However, it seemed better to him to grant permission to the Jews to arm and to defend themselves than to reverse formally the decree he had already issued for their destruction. So first the despot commands the enemies to arm against the Jews, and then commands the Jews to arm themselves against their enemies.

I. SELF-DEFENCE IS, WITHIN LIMITS, A NATURAL RIGHT. What is the alternative? In the case of an individual it may be a violent death; in the case of a nation it may be either subjection or annihilation. Thus, civilisation may be replaced by barbarism, and Christianity by idolatry or fetishism.

II. SELF-DEFENCE IS A LEGAL RIGHT. Here the Jews were expressly directed to defend and deliver themselves. And there are cases where the law justifies the putting forth of force in defence of life and property, and he who smites his assailant is held guiltless. Great defenders of their country are enshrined in a nation's memory.

III. SELF-DEFENCE IS SOMETIMES PUT FORWARD AS A HYPOCRITICAL PRETENCE. It has often happened that an aggressive, ambitious nation has endeavoured to persuade itself, to impose upon its neighbours, to believe that its action is merely defensive in mustering armaments, enlisting warriors, and making war. All the while designs of empire, of spoliation, of subjugation may be before the nation's mind.

IV. SELF-DEFENCE IS A SPIRITUAL LAW. If we are anxious to defend ourselves, our property, our families from violence and theft, how anxious should we be to secure ourselves against the assaults of the devil. Every Church should be a confederation for common protection against the inroads of error and of sin.

Ver. 15.—*A city's joy.* It is observable that the inhabitants of Susa are represented, in more than one place in this book, as entering into the circumstances and sharing the emotions of their Hebrew neighbours. It is believed by eminent scholars that the educated Persians had strong sympathies with the religious beliefs and practices of the Jews. Thus they wept with them in their fears and griefs; they rejoiced with them in their deliverance and happiness.

I. THERE IS SUCH A THING AS CIVIC LIFE. Not only an individual, but a city, a nation, has a character, a unity, a life of its own. As in our own country Manchester and Birmingham have a distinctive life, as in France Paris has a remarkable individuality, as in the middle ages the Italian cities had each its own corporate, intellectual, and social individuality; so it is reasonable to look for the evidences of such civic life wherever a community has existed for several generations, and traditions, memories, sympathies have grown up and prevailed.

II. COMMUNITIES ARE CAPABLE OF IMPULSES AND MOVEMENTS DISTINCTIVE OF THEMSELVES. When London turned out to welcome Garibaldi, it was a remarkable instance of the way in which a population is moved as with the stirring of one mighty impulse. There is something terribly grand in the spectacle of a vast city moved with one mighty wave of emotion. Such a wave passed over London upon the occasion of the death and burial of the great Duke of Wellington.

III. THE SPONTANEOUS MANIFESTATION OF A POPULAR SENTIMENT IN A CITY HAS SOMETIMES GREAT MORAL SIGNIFICANCE. Indignation, grief, sympathy, relief, gladness, may all find a voice in the cry that rises from the bosom of a vast population. Often the popular instinct is unmistakably right. *Vox populi, vox Dei.* So in the case before us, when "the city of Shushan rejoiced, and was glad."

Vers. 16, 17.—*A nation's relief and gladness.* God often interposed on behalf of his chosen people the Jews, but never more signally than on this occasion. No wonder

that far and wide throughout the Persian empire the Israelites put forth signs of salvation and of rejoicing.

I. WHY THE JEWS REJOICED. 1. In the downfall of their enemy. Haman was hated with an especial hatred. "Cursed be Haman!" was their cry, when, in Purim, they celebrated the day when the Lord delivered them out of the hand of the enemy. 2. In their patronage by a queen of their own blood and nation. A Jewess upon the throne was the agent in bringing to the Jews security and prosperity. 3. In their countryman Mordecai being exalted to be a chief minister of state. This happened often during the captivity. Daniel especially is an instance of a Jew exalted to high rank and power in a heathen empire. 4. In the favour towards them of the great king. From being their adversary and oppressor, Ahasuerus was turned to be their friend. 5. For permission to defend themselves. If the decree against them could not be reversed, it was matter for rejoicing that a decree of the same authority warranted them in standing upon their defence. 6. In their consequent delivery from the fear of massacre. "All that a man hath will he give for his life." And now life was secure; and they rejoiced as those raised from the brink of death.

II. HOW THE JEWS REJOICED. We have in these verses a bright and vivid picture of the gladness that diffused itself throughout the empire on the occasion of the deliverance. 1. Light and gladness. 2. Feasting and a good day. 3. The adhesion of many to their religion and their fellowship. 4. The sympathy of many who respected and esteemed them, their character, and their religion.

Ver. 17.—"*A good day.*" This expression is probably figurative. The time of relief, and thanksgiving, and confidence, and hope is viewed as a day having a character of its own. And no wonder that, so viewed, it should be called here "*a good day.*"

I. IT WAS GOOD IN ITS RETROSPECT. A day of evil had been dreaded and looked forward to with justice, and it had been converted into a day of peace. A day of Divine interposition summoned all to admire the unexpected interposition of Divine providence which had taken place.

II. IT WAS GOOD IN ITS REALISATION. It was a good day for the rescued and saved, for the agents who had effected the deliverance, for the people among whom they dwelt, and even for the king, whose reign and reputation were saved from a stain both black and bloody.

III. IT WAS GOOD IN ITS ANTICIPATION. Some months were yet to elapse before all danger was past. Yet, in the changed prospect, how could the Jews do other than give thanks, rejoice, and triumph? Let this "*good day*" serve to us as an emblem of the day of Divine visitation and human privilege. "*Now is the accepted time; now is the day of salvation.*"

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Ver. 6.—*True patriotism.* Esther felt that her work was not yet done. An over-confident and sanguine disposition might have taken for granted, as we do in the mere retrospect, that all else which was requisite would follow as matter of course. She had met as yet no rebuff, had suffered no failure. Each move, well considered beforehand, had been crowned with success, surpassing the utmost that she or Mordecai had dared to imagine. In the flush of personal success, and of joy because of the safety and great promotion of Mordecai, she does not forget the larger family of her "*people*" and "*kindred.*" The fearful decree is not reversed. It still overhangs the heads of thousands upon thousands. Esther feels that her mission will not be fulfilled until she has obtained the abrogation of the decree, and secured the lives of her people. In all the methods she had employed hitherto a remarkable calmness and circumspection are observable. But now a change is visible in favour of a demonstrativeness which it must have required very strong effort to keep up to this time in such restraint. Esther "*fell down at the feet of the king, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman, and his device that he had devised against the Jews*" (ver. 3). This change is interesting to observe, as occurring at the time when thought and affection left self and home for the scattered kindred of a hundred

and twenty-seven provinces. This verse is the irrepressible outcry of true patriotism. It is the expostulation of vivid and tender sympathy. It is the argument of a forcible principle of our nature, which oversteps the boundaries of the personal and the domestic in order to travel much farther, and to embrace the national. It mounts by the stepping-stones of self-love and sacred family love to the love of vast numbers of those never seen nor personally known, yet in some special sense related. The passage suggests, by a leading illustration, the general subject of patriotism; and we may notice—

I. WHAT TRUE PATRIOTISM IS. 1. It is evidently an original and ultimate principle. As soon as ever it was possible it showed its existence. The fact of its presence, and operative presence, has been visible in all ages, traceable in all kinds and degrees of civilisation—among the barbarous, and among the most advanced and elevated nationalities. 2. It is a principle of a high moral kind. A form of love above the sympathy which is between individual and individual, above that which lies between those born of the same parents, and, on the other hand, falling short of that universal love of man, as such, which is one of the very highest teachings of Christianity. 3. It is a somewhat quickened regard for those united to us by community of race. A stronger interest in their welfare and advantage is marked by it, while divested as far as possible of any conscious reflex action or benefit to self. This affection was no doubt exceedingly strong in the Jewish race, was at Esther's time greatly intensified by adversity and persecution and natural causes, but owed its most determined hold to distinctly Divine purpose.

II. THE USE OF PATRIOTISM IN THE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER. 1. It must be enlarging to the heart. It must expand the affections in their outlook, which then seek the various and the distant instead of ever keeping at home. It must give greater and freer exercise to the more important moral elements of our nature. 2. It must operate ever as a distinct corrective to some portion of the dangers of selfishness. There is much selfishness in our self-love; there is often not a little even in the family and domestic circle; sympathies may run round indeed, but in too narrow a circle. But the circle is immensely widened by this community of interest, while yet kept within a manageable area. 3. It is able to give enough natural motive to the awakening of moral energies, which without it would have found no sufficient appeal. In point of fact, some of the grandest displays of human force, and among them that of the present history, have been due to it.

III. ITS USEFULNESS TO PUBLIC SOCIETY. There will be a vast amount of this necessarily entailed indirectly and unconsciously, as arising from the previous considerations; but, in addition, manifest practical use on a large scale will also result. 1. It secures the prospect of bringing together to one point a great aggregate of force in emergency. It is like public opinion in action, seasoned by genuine affection. 2. It is equal also to the converse of this, spreading, as in Esther's example, the willing benefit, the critical advantage of opportunity, of one loving, praying heart, over a vast area. 3. Pervading the whole mass of mankind, it so divides it up and so allots it, that in place of unwieldiness a well-knit-together organisation is found. Thus it offers a strong and very traceable analogy to the body with its members.

IV. THAT IN PATRIOTISM WE HAVE ANOTHER EVIDENCE OF DIVINE DESIGN IN THE STRUCTURE OF HUMAN SOCIETY. For—1. It cannot possibly be attributed to mere human arrangement or compact. 2. It does not at all really contravene either the descent of all from one head, or the fact that "God has made of one blood all nations of the earth." 3. Its operation is not malevolent, setting "nation against nation." It is beneficent, and is ever growing to show itself more and more so, leading up to mutual service, mutual dependence, and mutual love, to the attainment of which it were very hard to see any other way so compact, so sure.—B.

Vers. 15—17.—*A type of universal joy.* This passage tells the tale of great joy. The question of the prophet Isaiah, "Shall a nation be born at once?" asked now nearly two centuries ago, is answered in an unexpected way, and in something superior to mere literal sense. New life is a great thing, and the sensations of young life have much joy in them. But in the same kind of sense in which the father rejoiced over the prodigal son on his return with livelier and more demonstrative joy than over the

obedient son who never went astray, and in the same kind of sense in which it is said that "there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance," is it true that there is more joy in life rescued from the doom of death than in life just fresh, though it be fresh from the Creator's hand. Yes, there is more joy therein, both for those who are chiefly concerned, and for those who look on. And was it not thus in the best sense that a nation was now "born at once" when darkness, exceeding distress, and the anguish of apparent helplessness all dropped off in a moment, and "the Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour, . . . and a feast and a good day in every province, and in every city"? Evidently some special stress is laid upon the description of the gladness of the Jews. We cannot for a moment wonder at their gladness, that is one thing. But the detailed and full announcement of it on an inspired page is another thing, and leads us to expect that there are some facts about it which should invite notice and will reward more careful thought.

I. IT WAS THE GLADNESS OF A VAST NUMBER OF PEOPLE. A great philosopher of British name and reputation has remarked two things, and very truly, on this subject. *First*, how much less disposed, comparatively speaking, men are to sympathise with the manifestations of joy than with those of genuine sorrow. To the best of human nature it is easier to weep with those who weep than to laugh with those who laugh. This is a just discernment, and gives the balance of goodness to the intrinsic quality of unfallen human nature, where it may get a possibility of betraying its native worth. *Secondly*, that this is especially true when it is the joy of an individual that is ostentatiously paraded. Here the case is the opposite. The joy is the joy of all *and of each*. Gratitude and thankfulness were the spring of it, and there was no need to moderate either itself or its expression, because it was *general and universal*. There were none (at all events none entitled to consideration) on whom it would jar, or whose finer susceptibilities would suffer. On the contrary, the only discordant element would be produced by him who made himself the exception or offered to stand aloof. Note, that such real general joy is a very rare phenomenon on earth.

II. IT WAS THE GLADNESS OF EVERY CLASS AND KIND OF THE PEOPLE. Old men "little children and women" (ch. iii. 13), young men and maidens, rich and poor, strong and weak, all these could participate in it. Our human joys are often spoilt, are often much diminished to the best of persons, by the inevitable memory of those who are without what gladdens us. Think how a victorious army may rejoice, and generals and leaders be glad; but what of the hundreds of families of every class over the kingdom who have lost husbands, brothers, sons? Or think how the great body of a nation may rejoice because of the victories of its armies; but at what havoc of untold sorrow and misery of numberless others belonging to conquering or the conquered. Think how rare is the occasion of any national joy which really reaches and touches the heart of all kinds and ages of the people.

III. IT WAS A GLADNESS WHICH HAD SEVERAL ELEMENTS IN ITS COMPOSITION. The fourfold analysis of it cannot be condemned for mere surplussage of language as it lies on the page of Scripture. And these are the four elements—"light," "gladness," deep "joy," "honour." Each of these elements is a good one. The first and last speak for themselves. Let us interpret the second as the gladness of the young hearts and of manifestation, and the third as the deeper-sinking joy of the old, and those who felt and thought more than they showed or spoke.

IV. IT WAS THE GLADNESS OF A REACTION. The reaction was just. It would have argued callousness, an insensate heart indeed, if it were not felt, and very powerfully felt. To have great mercies is a common thing, to respond to them far too uncommon. The contrast of "the horrible pit and the miry clay" with the "rock and the established going" of the pilgrim is one which should waken deepest joy. It is light, joy, honour all in one.

V. IT WAS GLADNESS IN ANSWER TO A DELIVERANCE WHICH WAS NOT ONLY VERY GREAT AND VERY UNEXPECTED, BUT WHICH WAS THE RESULT OF A MARVELLOUS INTERPOSITION OF PROVIDENCE, wrought by one feeble woman, and prepared for by a most extraordinary series of precisely-adapted events. And all this was "prepared for God's people." Through much tribulation, indeed, through darkness, cruel oppres-

sion, patient endurance on the very border of despair, they had been wonderfully brought out to the light, joy, honour of that time.

VI. IT WAS A GLADNESS WHICH MAKES US THINK OF ANOTHER. It makes us feel for another, long for another. That was of a nature that *must* be rare in occurrence, nor would we wish it other. And, after all, the duration of it could only be temporary. But it may well bear our thought onward and upward. The gladness of the people of God in heaven will fill out every part of the description of this gladness. It will fill out every part of it worthily. There all will be glad. There all varieties of purified spirits will be glad. There the light and gladness and joy and honour will all be to perfection. How glorious the reaction that will then be felt for us, with the doom, and the law's decree, and the despair, and the sorrow, and the tear all and for ever gone. And when we shall all admit to what it is owing—to the most marvellous interposition of all; and to whom it is owing—to him who “with strong groaning and tears” pleaded for us and saved us.—B.

Ver. 5.—*Repairing mischief.* “Let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman.”

I. WHAT A LEGACY OF EVIL IS LEFT BY THE WICKED. *E.g.* By Voltaire, Paine, Napoleon I., and others.

II. WHAT EFFORTS ARE NECESSARY TO REPAIR EVIL ONCE WROUGHT. It is so much easier to destroy than to build up.

III. GREAT EVILS MAY BE REMOVED, OR AT LEAST OVERRULED, BY PROVIDENCE. If this were not believed, the arm of the Christian would be paralysed. We have to beware of that phase of belief which would lead to the postponement of spiritual effort because Christ is to come again. We must not let it be supposed that the work of Christ, the word of God, and the gift of the Spirit are all failures. The mischief wrought by evil is to be repaired by Christ's gospel and healed by his love. 1. What are we doing to repair the mischief others have wrought? What are we doing to undo our own wrong-doing?—H.

Vers. 16, 17.—*Brightened life.* “And the Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour,” &c. When the tide of evil turned, great advantages flowed to the Jews. So when a man forsakes his evil way he will find certain results follow.

I. LIGHT. He will see the meaning of God's word and of life.

II. GLADNESS. He will not be afraid to rejoice, but will see that the Christian has the truest right to be glad, seeing he is delivered from the bondage of sin and death.

III. HONOUR. People respect a true Christian, but they despise the hypocrite. Every man's character is rendered of greater worth by his Christianity.

IV. USEFULNESS. Others will be won to the same good way. “Many of the people of the land became Jews.” Influence will constantly spread.

V. SAFETY. The former enemies of the Jews were afraid to touch them or speak against them. The evil powers that oppose man's spiritual welfare will not be able to injure him, because God will protect, and the habit of watchfulness will be fixed.—H.

Vers. 3—14.—*Consecration, kindred, law, and folly.* In these words we have—

I. THE MANIFOLDNESS OF HUMAN CONSECRATION. “And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and *besought him with tears*,” &c. (ver. 3). Emboldened by her first success, Esther goes in again to the king, again endangering her own position, and, indeed, her own life, on behalf of her people. The former time she may have been influenced by Mordecai's reminder that her own death was determined by the king's decree. Now, however, she had no reason to be apprehensive on that ground. Her second act of intercession was purely unselfish. It is a beautiful instance of goodness. The lovely queen risking her dignity, her wealth, her happiness, her very life on behalf of others; pleading with the capricious and uncertain sovereign; shedding for others, as she had not for herself, tears of tender compassion; bringing her beauty and her charms wherewith to insure the safety of the people of God. In how many ways may we serve the cause of goodness and of God. What varied offerings may we lay on the altar of the Lord! Each man must

consecrate his best: the learned man can bring his knowledge, the wise his sagacity, the rich his wealth, the titled his rank, the fearless his courage, the energetic his vigour; the engaging woman can bring her charms, the loving her affection, the beautiful her beauty. Our God "has commanded our strength" (Ps. lxxviii. 28). It is true that he requires of us "according to that we have, not according to that we have not" (2 Cor. viii. 12); but he asks of each of us the best we have to bring, and of what he has given us *freely* to give him and his.

II. THE SPECIAL LOVE WE OWE TO OUR OWN PEOPLE. "How can I endure to see the evil that shall come upon my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" (ver. 6). Our Lord had on more than one occasion to teach that the affection of ordinary human friendship toward himself must give place to a purely spiritual attachment. In him we form and cultivate and magnify these spiritual affinities and relationships. Yet they are not inconsistent with special interest in those to whom the bonds of nature bind us. We know how intensely strong was the feeling of the Apostle Paul toward "his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. ix. 1—3). If we do not wish to endure the intolerable pain of witnessing the "evil" and destruction of our own kindred, but wish for the joy of seeing them "walking in the truth," we must bring *all* our influence to bear on their hearts *in the time* when we can teach them, touch them, lead them.

III. THE FRAILTY OF HUMAN LAW, and, we might add, the presumption of human legislators. The decree which this great "king of kings" had just issued was no sooner published than he wanted to reverse it. He and his brother kings, indeed, professed that the law of the Medes and Persians altered not (ch. i. 19), and when Esther came with her petition, Ahasuerus declared that what was "written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse" (ver. 8). Technically and formally it was so; in part it was so truly. But in substance this was but a vain pretence. Measures were instantly taken to reduce the former decree to a nullity. Much of the most beneficent legislation of later years has been the undoing of what former acts had done, the repealing of old and evil laws. Solemnly and with all the forms of state we enact, and then, a few years on, with the same solemnity we repeal. Such are the laws of man.

IV. THE IRREPARABLENESS OF HUMAN FOLLY (vers. 9—14). King Ahasuerus might hang Haman with great promptitude; a word from him, and the executioners were ready with willing hands; but he could not easily undo the evil work of his favourite. That bad man's work left dark shadows behind. He himself was disposed of, but what of the decree he had been the means of passing? That could not be quickly reversed, or its effects removed. The custom, if not the constitution, admitted of no formal repeal. Consequently the most energetic measures had to be taken to prevent a general massacre. The king's scribes had to be called together (ver. 9); letters had to be written in every language and sent to every province in the empire (ver. 9); horses had to be pressed into the service (ver. 10); and then all that could be done was to sanction and encourage a stout resistance on the part of the Jews when they were attacked: they were "to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay," &c. (ver. 11). This, no doubt, led to severe and fatal strife in some, if not in many, places. In truth, the king could not wholly undo what his thoughtless folly and excessive confidence had done. *We never can wholly wipe out the evil consequences of our folly and our sin.* We may do much to counteract, but we cannot wholly remove. Godlessness, selfishness, worldliness, vice, error, in former years, these have left their traces on our hearts and lives, and on those of others also, and all the waters of all the seas cannot wash them out. Sin may be forgiven, folly may be pardoned, but their miserable consequences flow on—who shall say how far?—in a polluting stream. It does not take a royal hand to do what is irreparable. The hand of a little child is strong enough for that.—C.

Vers. 15—17.—*Sunshine.* We have in this passage—

I. A FLASH OF HONOUR TO AN INDIVIDUAL (ver. 15). Mordecai goes forth, grandly attired, coronet on head, the recipient of highest royal favour, receiving also the honour of the acclaiming populace. He would not have been human if he had not enjoyed his triumph. Perhaps Oriental human nature counted such a public ceremony

dearer than English nature would. But this was only a flash of enjoyment, very soon gone. "What is wanted here?" said one proud spectator to another at a Roman triumph. "Permanence," said the other. One hour, and it would be over. We learn that (1) *there is a place in our life for such brief enjoyments*. We need not refuse them because they are of the world; coming to us in the course of faithful service, they may be regarded as sent of God to brighten and to cheer us. But we must remember that (2) *it is only a small place they must be allowed to occupy*. They must be counted as the small dust of the balance, not the solid weight in the scale. Our strong temptation is to make far too much of them; to rate them far above their true value; to give to their acquisition a measure of time and energy which they do not deserve; to sacrifice more precious things, even sacred principles themselves, in order to obtain them. Then they break under our hand and bruise us, and we know how foolish and wrong we have been. But Mordecai had more reason to rejoice in—

II. THE SATISFACTION OF THE CITY. "The city of Susa rejoiced and was glad" (ver. 15). It is much for one man to give satisfaction to a whole metropolis, especially if, as here, the gladness is due to real patriotism, and is a tribute to substantial worth. Men may give lightness of heart to the populace by very questionable and even unworthy means: by indiscriminate bounty, by pretentious charlatanism, by empty oratory. But to do what Mordecai now did,—to give joy to the city because all men felt that they were in the hands of an honest and capable administrator, who would seek their interest, and not his own at their expense,—this is not unworthy the ambition of a Christian man. It may be that this is beyond our reach, but we may learn from it to *indulge an honourable aspiration*. We are filling some post in the world, and probably in the Church. We should aspire to be such workmen in the narrower sphere we thus occupy that, when the hour of promotion comes to us, that will give satisfaction to our fellows, and we shall receive their congratulations. Excellency may sometimes escape the notice it deserves; yet, as a rule, men mark the faithful and devoted servant, and they rejoice when he "goes up higher." But Mordecai witnessed that which still more gladdened his heart—

III. THE JOY OF AN ENTIRE PEOPLE. "The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour," &c. (vers. 16, 17). The keenest physical gratification (it is said) is found in the sudden cessation of acute pain, in the *sense of great relief*. All Jewry, throughout the whole of Persia, now felt the keen delight of being relieved from their terrible fears. It is to render the truest and most appreciated service to relieve men's soul of great fear and dread. To give temporal, and, still more, spiritual, relief is to confer the most valuable boon. Happy is he who, like Mordecai, has the means of doing this on a large scale; he will earn the blessing, deep and fervent, of many souls. But, here again, if we cannot achieve the greater things we must attempt the smaller ones. There are anxious cares we can remove from some mind; there is a heavy spiritual burden we can help to lift from some heart. The blessing of *one* soul "ready to perish" is well worth our winning, cost what pains it may. The brightest feature in the whole scene is the—

IV. CONVERSION TO THE TRUE FAITH. "Many of the people of the land became Jews," &c. (ver. 17). The "fear of the Jews" may have been in part the *high regard* felt for them, perhaps not unmixed with some hope and apprehension. So great was this regard that their Persian neighbours even adopted their faith and worshipped the true and living God. Thus the conquered became the conquerors; thus the captives led captive. We learn here—1. *How God overrules*, making his Church the stronger for the very designs which were intended to despoil and even to extinguish. 2. *How we may prevail*, even in humble positions winning to our side, and so to his cause, them that are "our masters according to the flesh." The little maid in the Syrian general's service caused the living God to be honoured in Damascus (2 Kings v.); the captive Jews in Persia led many around them to adopt their purer faith; those among us who are "in service," who are "under authority," may live lives of such attractive worth that they will win those who rule to the service of the Divine Master.—C.

Vers. 1—3.—*Hopeful changes*. I. THE CHANGES IN HUMAN LIFE ARE OFTEN WONDERFUL. They startle us—1. By their *suddenness*. An empire, a city, a house, a

reputation, or a power which it has taken long to build up may fall in a day. 2. By their *completeness*. What may have seemed durable as time itself passes away and leaves no memorial. "Like the baseless fabric of a vision," magnificent empires have perished, and left "not a wrack behind" (Ps. ix. 6). 3. *By the rapid succession of events which lead up to them*. Our narrative includes in the history of one day the king's sleeplessness, the reading of the chronicle, the adoption of Haman's device, the honouring of Mordecai, the humiliation of Haman, Esther's banquet, the accusation, conviction, and death of Haman, the bestowal of Haman's wealth on the queen, the promotion of Mordecai to Haman's place, and the successful intercession on behalf of the Jews. God may bear long and patiently with the wicked, but when *his* time arrives, "then sudden destruction cometh upon them" (1 Thess. v. 3).

II. IT IS PLEASANT TO BESTOW AND RECEIVE JUST REWARDS. When the king gave to Esther "the house," or rather the possessions, of Haman, he expressed thereby his sense of the danger and anxiety to which his folly had exposed her; his sense too of the faithful and wise manner in which she had delivered himself from the toils of a guileful and presumptuous man. There was an evident stroke of justice in the awarding to Esther the wealth of the man who had promised to the king the wealth of the Jews as the price of their blood. Justice never sleeps.

III. GRATITUDE IS THE SIGN OF A TRUE HEART. Some easily forget benefits received. A change of position or a lapse of time will often cause the remembrance of past favours to fade. But Esther never forgot what she owed to Mordecai, and now she told the king "what he was to her;" how much he had been and still was to her! The very simplicity of these words gives them a peculiar depth and tenderness of meaning. The queen's gratitude to Mordecai was shown—1. In explaining her own indebtedness to him. 2. In describing him as the real instrument of securing the exposure of Haman and the present felicity. 3. In winning for him favour and promotion. 4. In setting him, as her manager, over the house of Haman. She could not do too much for the man who had done so much for her. The gratitude which lives unfadingly in the heart, and is ever prompt to show itself in action, is a beautiful feature of character. What gratitude is due to God! How should we remember and esteem him who "loved us and gave himself for us!" "What shall we render unto the Lord for all *his* benefits?" (Ps. cxvi. 12—14).

IV. HOW SWEET THE FREEDOM WHICH PERMITS A TRUE HEART TO POUR ITS CONFIDENCES INTO THE EAR OF AFFECTION! Till now Esther feared the king, and dared not give him her confidence. She had secrets in her breast which oppressed her, but which she could not divulge. But the removal of Haman, the enemy and obstacle, brought her near to the king, and she felt free to tell him all that was in her heart. The benefit and happiness of the marriage tie are sadly marred by the possession of secrets on either side, or by the want of a free, full, and loving confidence. The charm of friendship too is in proportion to the freedom it gives to the opening of the heart. There is no enemy on the part of our God and King to shut his heart against us. All enemies have been destroyed in Jesus Christ. It is because we will not, if we have not the freedom of intercourse with God which belong to children—"the glorious liberty of the sons of God."

V. THE PROMOTION OF THE WISE AND GOOD TO POWER IS A BLESSING TO THE WORLD. The king gave the seal which he had taken from Haman to Mordecai. Henceforth the sagacious and capable Jew was to occupy the place of grand vizier, or chief friend and counsellor. Here again justice notched a conspicuous mark. The humble and heroic man for whom Haman had erected a gallows was put in the wicked favourite's place—made second to the king. From that time the monarch and his empire had some real ground of prosperity and peace. Mordecai's influence grew and extended until it became a paramount power and blessing in all the hundred and twenty and seven provinces. Happy the monarch and nation that are under the guidance of a wisdom that is simple-hearted, clear-sighted, experienced, and godly. How many examples have we in the history of the world of the benefit conferred on nations by the promotion of the wise and good to offices of power, and of the misery and ruin effected by the promotion of the wicked!

VI. THE BENEFITS RECEIVED BY A TRUE HEART WILL ENLARGE ITS SYMPATHIES FOR OTHERS WHO ARE IN SUFFERING AND NEED. There is a joy over obtained good which is

utterly selfish. It is self-absorbed, and has no consideration for the effect it may have on others. It may be natural enough, yet nothing is more hateful. The true godly soul will long to share its own joys with those whom it loves. Beyond that, its own sense of joy will quicken its sympathy with all the distressed, and its desire to bring the light of its joy into the regions of darkness and death. Hence Esther was not content with her own happiness. She could not feel happy until she had emancipated her people from the doom that threatened them. Her own deliverance from the enemy stimulated her to work out that of Israel. So long as the edict against the Jews was in force, the purpose for which she had ventured all was unaccomplished. It is only when our Lord shall have redeemed all his people and brought them to everlasting honour that he shall "see the travail of his soul and be *satisfied*" (Isa. liii. 11).—D.

Vers. 3—6.—*An effective advocate.* A second time Esther entered into the king's presence unbidden. A second time the king's sceptre was extended to her. Her own safety and queenly state had been secured, but her people were still exposed to the murderous decree which Haman had beguiled the king to seal and promulgate. She now appeared as an advocate for Israel. Learn here—

I. THAT ADVOCACY SHOULD BE CLEAR AS TO ITS GROUNDS. The grounds on which Esther pleaded were such as the following:—1. That the edict of extermination was the device of the enemy Haman. The wicked man himself having been exposed and punished, his evil design should be countermanded. 2. That all her people throughout the empire were as innocent, and therefore as unworthy of death, as herself. Justice and mercy combined in calling for a reversal of the cruel edict. 3. That the destruction of a numerous people scattered through the empire would create universal alarm and confusion, and inflict irreparable loss on the king's estate. Esther's grounds of appeal were clear and strong. She had a good case.

II. THAT ADVOCACY SHOULD BE DISINTERESTED. The queen had gained much by the death of Haman and the restored affection of the king, but she was willing to sacrifice all on the altar of her people's deliverance. Personal honour and wealth were as nothing to her so long as Israel was trembling under the uplifted sword. She presents us with a type of Christ, who "emptied himself of his glory" and offered up his life on the cross for the salvation of a condemned world. Advocacy, to be effective, must have no back-look on self.

III. THAT ADVOCACY SHOULD BE EARNEST AND PERSUASIVE. The body in all its expressions is responsive to the soul that animates it. Cold feeling will be content with cold words and impassive features; but when the heart is swayed by strong emotion the whole outward frame will yield itself to the power of the inward force. Words, looks, movements, gesticulations, tears will all unite in expressing a desire that commands the spirit. Thus Esther, when, against the law, she again entered uninvited into the king's presence, "fell at his feet and besought him with tears." Earnestness makes short work with restrictive formalities. A full heart when once unlocked cannot but be persuasive. The whole attitude of Esther was eloquent. Such advocacy could not fail to move even an Ahasuerus. We are reminded by it of Christ's sweet, yearning, solemn prayer in behalf of his disciples as given in John xvii.

IV. THAT ADVOCACY SHOULD BE IN FULL SYMPATHY WITH THE CAUSE IN WHICH IT IS EMPLOYED. No advocate can be perfectly effective unless he can put himself in the place of those for whom he is pleading, and can plead for them as if he were pleading for himself. Listen to Esther:—"How can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" She thus identified herself with her people and kindred. If they suffered, she would suffer; if they were destroyed, how could she live? The queen took on herself the burden of her nation. Again we think of Christ, the Divine Advocate. He became "bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh," "took on himself our likeness," that he might enter into our experiences, and bear our burden before God, and become an effective and prevailing Advocate. Hence his sympathy, his "fellow-feeling," his oneness, and his all-powerful intercession (Heb. ii. 17, 18; iv. 15, 16).

V. THAT ADVOCACY FOR THE SUFFERING AND PERISHING IS THE DUTY AND PRIVILEGE OF THE GODLY. History affords many examples of noble advocacy in behalf of the

justly doomed and the unjustly oppressed. Such Bible instances as Abraham's pleading for the cities of the plain, Moses' intercession for rebellious Israel, and Paul's willingness to lose himself for the sake of his unbelieving kindred, readily occur. In modern times the long and arduous advocacy of the emancipation of the slave has become memorable. To the Christian, as to his Master, Christ, "the field is the world." Men are "perishing for lack of knowledge." Multitudes everywhere are in bondage to sin and death. It should be our part to do what we can to bring "deliverance to the captives," and to "save them who are appointed to die;" and with our labours we should unite the earnest prayer of the advocate. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James v. 16—20).—D.

Ver. 17.—*Religious prosperity.* Persecution always defeats its own object. Viewed as mere policy, it is the worst that can be employed. Persecute error, and it will spread tenfold; persecute truth, and it will spread a hundredfold. Unless, therefore, you wish the principles you hate to gain ground, persecute not at all. Haman, while he brought utter ruin upon himself by his cruel attempt to exterminate the Jews, raised the latter into an incomparably better position than they occupied before. The Jews in their triumph were likely to adopt the same persecuting policy as had been exercised against themselves. It would have been simply the natural result of the treatment they had received. The Romish persecution of Protestants in our own country led Protestants in their turn to persecute the Romanists. The people of the land were, therefore, not without reason, in mortal fear; and many of them through fear became proselytes to the Jewish religion. But a profession of faith made under such circumstances was about the most worthless that could be imagined. The Church of God has had a most chequered history. Sometimes, like the noonday sun, it has shone with unrivalled splendour; sometimes, like the cloud-wrapped moon, its light has been lost in darkness. In the captivity of Egypt it was trodden down by its oppressors; under the leadership of Moses it struggled again into freedom. In the reign of Solomon a temple was built to Jehovah; in the reign of Jeroboam, son of Nebat, the calves were worshipped at Bethel and Dan. And we may add that under the new dispensation, even as under the old, its fortunes have been variable to the last degree. The text contains a graphic description of THE CHURCH IN PROSPERITY. In times of religious depression it is customary with good people to pray for better things—a revival of the religious spirit, an outpouring of the Holy Ghost, an increase of godly enthusiasm. But frequently, when this takes place, those who desire it most are greatly disappointed, just because the form it takes is contrary to their expectation. For ages the Jews longed for the advent of the Messiah, but when he came they put him to death. It is important, therefore, that in seeking religious prosperity our minds should be free from misconceptions. This leads us to notice—

I. THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS PROSPERITY. It implies—1. *An increase of spirituality among professing Christians.* Beware of supposing that the success of a Church is identical with increased membership. This is a fatal mistake, and has led to the most lamentable consequences. True religion consists in spiritual-mindedness. It is the result of a change of heart produced by the Spirit of God. "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." It follows that a Christian is separate from the world. He views everything in the light of the world to come. He rejoices to suffer affliction with the people of God, for he has respect unto the recompense of the reward. No genuine revival can take place apart from increased purity and unworldliness. 2. *An increase of good works among professing Christians.* Good works are the necessary concomitants of spiritual-mindedness. "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit." The first proof that a man is born again is the earnestness with which he inquires what he must do. Instances—the multitude on the day of Pentecost, the jailer at Philippi, Saul of Tarsus. The Church is described as a vineyard, for which God hires labourers, whom he rewards according to their services. The absence of works is therefore a sure sign of the absence of spiritual life. What the Spirit said to each of the Churches of Asia was, "I know thy works." No real prosperity can co-exist with indifference and indolence. 3. *An increase of sinners saved.* "Many of the people of the land became Jews." A most conclusive evidence of their thriving condition. A spiritual, work-

ing Church exerts a power which attracts outsiders into its ranks. At the beginning of the apostolic age, when the disciples were in the fervour of their first love, it is recorded that "the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved." It is the business of a Church to seek the lost. This duty it owes to itself no less than to the world. Without converts it must gradually decay, and ultimately die. It enjoys the highest success, therefore, only when multitudes of the perishing flock within its gates.

II. THE CAUSES OF RELIGIOUS PROSPERITY. When possessed, to what is it due? When lost, how can it be recovered? 1. *It is in one sense the work of God.* It was God who laid down the foundation of the Church. "Thus saith the Lord, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste." And not a single stone has been subsequently placed in the spiritual edifice without his co-operation. "Without me ye can do nothing." "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." If we would have a revival, we must pray God to send down the Comforter to "reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." 2. *It is in another sense the work of man.* The grandest triumphs of the gospel have been achieved by means of human instrumentality. The Protestant reformation, the Methodist revival, the evangelisation of Madagascar. Many ask, "What have we to do?" The answer depends upon the special circumstances of the inquirers. Some are able to preach the word, some to teach the young, some to visit the poor. If your Church be languishing, seek the cause among yourselves. Are you slumbering, inactive, prayerless?

III. THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS PROSPERITY. These are represented here as threefold. 1. *Joy.* "The Jews had joy and gladness." This is invariably the case; and what more natural? The released captive is glad, the victorious army is jubilant, the flourishing city is full of glee, and shall the Church be different? "When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing." It is said of the first disciples, after they had witnessed our Lord's ascension, which was to them an earnest of the coming of his kingdom, that they "returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God." 2. *Contentment.* "A feast and a good day." With the luxuries they enjoyed they were abundantly satisfied. In religious revivals the means of grace, the services of the sanctuary, the ordinances of religion, are thoroughly appreciated. Duties which in stagnant seasons are a burden become a pleasure. Of the man who is "like a tree planted by the rivers of water," the Psalmist saith, "His *delight* is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night." The prevalence of bitterness, strife, and unrest is a sign of spiritual poverty. Cattle bred in the fertile plains are generally in good condition; cattle bred on the barren hills are not only lean, but grow immense horns. 3. *Influence.* "The fear of the Jews fell upon them." The power of the Jews was felt in the land, and they were respected accordingly. The world admires power; it is the weak, the puny, the pretentious that are held in contempt. When religion is despised, and its professors treated with scorn, it is time to inquire into the reason. May it not be due to the sentimental, enasculated caricature of godliness that is too frequently set up for the reality? Strong, robust Christian manliness commands the homage even of opponents. When the Church appears in her proper character—a pure, living, active Church—an astonished world asks, "Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?"—R.

EXPOSITION. §§ 17, 18.

CHAPTER IX.

RESULT OF THE SECOND EDITION: THE JEWS RESIST THEIR ENEMIES, AND EFFECT A GREAT SLAUGHTER OF THEM, BUT DO NOT LAY HAND ON THEIR GOODS (ch. ix. 1—16).

The Jews of all the provinces, having had ample time to prepare themselves, "gathered themselves together in their cities," as the day fixed by the first edict approached (ver. 2), and made their arrangements. Their

"enemies" no doubt did the same, and for some time before the 13th of Adar two hostile camps stood facing each other in each of the great towns throughout the empire. Mordecai's position at the capital being known, and his power evidently established, the Persian governors of all grades understood it to be their duty to throw their weight into the scale on behalf of the Jews, and lend them whatever help they could (ver. 3). At last the day arrived, and the struggle took place. The Jews everywhere got the better of their adversaries. In "Shushan the palace" as it was called, or the upper town, of which the palace formed a part, they killed 500 of them (ver. 6). In the rest of the empire, if we accept the numbers of the present Hebrew text, as many as 75,000 (ver. 16). The Septuagint translators, however, who would have no reason for falsifying the text, give the number as 15,000, which seems to be intrinsically more probable. They also, on the ensuing day, the 14th of Adar, by special permission of Ahasuerus, contended with their adversaries in Shushan a second time, and slew on this occasion 300 (ver. 16). Among the killed, the only persons mentioned by name are ten sons of Haman, who were slain in "Shushan the palace" on the first day, while on the second day permission was given to expose their bodies on crosses (ver. 14). A remarkable feature of the struggle, and one which is noticed three several times (vers. 10, 15, 16), was, that, notwithstanding the clause in the edict which allowed the Jews "to take the spoil of their enemies for a prey" (ch. viii. 11), neither in the capital nor in the provinces did the triumphant Israelites touch the property of those opposed to them. There was an evident wish to show that they were not actuated by greed, but simply desirous of securing themselves from future molestation.

Ver. 1.—**To have power over them.** Or, "to get the mastery over them" (comp. Dan. vi. 24, where the same word is used). **Had rule.** Or, "had the mastery."

Ver. 2.—**The Jews gathered themselves together.** Acting on the first clause of the edict (ch. viii. 11). **In their cities.** By "their cities" the writer means not cities exclusively Jewish, but cities where Jews

formed an element in the population, as Susa, Babylon, Damascus—perhaps Rhages and Ecbatana—and no doubt many others. Cities exclusively Jewish, like Nearda, in later times (Joseph., 'Ant. Jud.' xviii. 9, § 1), scarcely existed as yet out of Palestine. **To lay hand on such as sought their hurt.** The defensive character of the Jews' action is again noted. Only if their hurt was sought (comp. Ps. lxxi. 13, 24) did they lay hand on any; only against those who *sought their hurt* did they lift a finger. **The fear of them.** Not now such fear as is mentioned in ch. viii. 17, *ad fin.*, but a downright coward fear of their prowess. **Fell upon all people.** Rather, "all the people," i.e. all the many subject nations of the Persian empire among which the Jews were scattered.

Ver. 3.—**All the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies.** Compare ch. iii. 12 and viii. 9, where the same enumeration is made, though not quite in the same order. **And officers of the king.** Literally, "they who did the work of the king." The Septuagint renders by βασιλικοὶ γραμματεῖς, "royal scribes;" but officials of all classes seem to be intended. **Helped the Jews.** Rather, "upheld, supported." Active physical help does not seem to be meant, but rather the moral aid and support that a government easily gives to the side which it favours in a civil disturbance. **The fear of Mordecai fell upon them.** It would give the sense better to translate "had fallen."

Ver. 4.—**Mordecai was great.** Compare ch. viii. 2, 15 and x. 3.

Ver. 6.—**In Shushan the palace.** I.e. the upper city, where the palace was. The area of the hill is above a hundred acres, and there are many remains of residences on it besides the palace. It was probably densely peopled.

Vers. 7—10.—**And Parshandatha.** Haman's ten sons have unmistakably Persian names, so that no countenance is given by them to the theory that he was a foreigner. Formerly it was customary that they should be written in each MS. of the Book of Esther in three perpendicular lines, to signify (as it was said) that they were hanged on three parallel cords. In reading them the ten names were uttered in one breath, in memory of the supposed fact that they all died in one instant. It would be wrong, however, to attach credit to these traditions, which simply show the persistent hatred with which the Jews regarded their great enemy. **Slew they.** With the sword, probably (see ver. 5), and in fair fight.

Ver. 11.—**The number . . . was brought before the king.** It was customary in all wars for the number of the slain to be care-

fully made out and recorded. In the Babylonian transcript of the Behistun Inscription the numbers are given with extreme exactness—*e. g.* 546, 2024, 4203, &c. On this occasion it would seem that only a rough calculation was made. Still the king took care to be informed on the subject, and the Jews, aware of this, were not left absolutely uncontrolled.

Ver. 12.—What have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? Not an inquiry, but an exclamation. How many must they not have killed in the whole empire if they have slain 500 in Susa alone! **Now, what is thy petition?** Still, if this is not enough, if anything more is needed for the Jews' security, ask it, and "it shall be done."

Ver. 13.—Esther's request for a second day of slaughter has a bloodthirsty appearance; but, without a more complete knowledge of the facts than we possess, we cannot say that it was unjustifiable. It would seem that the Jews in Susa gathered themselves in the upper town on the appointed day, and were engaged there the whole day with their enemies. Esther asks that they may be allowed a second day—either in the upper or the lower town, it is not clear which—to complete their work, and free themselves from all danger of further persecution from their foes. She is not likely to have made this request unless prompted to make it by Mordecai, who must have had means of knowing how matters really stood, and, as the chief minister over the whole nation, is likely to have been actuated rather by general views of policy than by a blind spirit of revenge. Still it must be granted that there is something essentially *Jewish* in Esther's request, and indeed in the tone of the entire book which bears her name.

Ver. 14.—They hanged the ten sons of Haman. Exposure on a cross was regarded as a deep disgrace, and was a punishment often inflicted by the Persians on persons killed in some other way (see Herod., iii. 125; vii. 238; Xen., 'Anab.,' iii. 1, § 17; Plut., 'Vit. Artax.,' § 17).

Ver. 15.—For the Jews. Rather, "and the Jews," or "so the Jews." The Hebrew has the *vau* conjunctive, which is here certainly expressive of a sequence, or consequence.

Ver. 16.—Gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives. *I. e.* did as the edict directed them (ch. viii. 11). **And had rest from their enemies.** The idea of "rest" seems out of place when the subject of the narrative is slaughter, and the number of the slain has still to be told. Some suspect corruption, others an interpolation. **And slew of their foes seventy and five thousand.**

The LXX. had in their copies fifteen for seventy-five, or one-fifth of the received number. The smaller number is more in harmony with the 500 killed at Susa than the larger one.

FESTIVAL HELD, AND FEAST OF PURIM INSTITUTED (ch. ix. 17—32). A natural instinct led the Jews, so soon as their triumph was accomplished, to indulge themselves in a day of rest and rejoicing (ver. 17). After toil there is need of repose; and escape from a great danger is followed, almost of necessity, by "gladness." The writer of the Book of Esther, practising his usual reticence, says nothing of the character of the "gladness;" but we can scarcely be wrong in believing it to have been, in the main, religious, and to have included gratitude to God for their deliverance, the ascription of praise to his name, and an outpouring of the heart before him in earnest and prolonged thanksgiving. The circumstances of the struggle caused a difference, with regard to the date of the day of rejoicing, between the Jews of the capital and those of the provinces. The metropolitan Jews had two days of struggle, and could not "rest" until the third day, which was the 15th of Adar (ver. 18); the provincial Jews began and ended their work in one day, the 13th, and so their thanksgiving-day was the 14th, and not the 15th of the month (ver. 17). The consequence was, that when Mordecai and Esther determined on commemorating the wonderful deliverance of their time by an annual festival, analogous to that of the passover, to be celebrated by all Jews everywhere throughout all future ages, some hesitation naturally arose as to the proper day to be kept holy. If the 14th were kept, the provincial Jews would be satisfied, but those of Susa would have cause of complaint; if the 15th were the day selected, the two parties would simply exchange feelings. Under these circumstances it was wisely resolved to keep both days (ver. 21). Nothing seems to have been determined as to the mode of keeping the feast, except that both days were to be "days of feasting and joy," and days upon which the richer members of the community should send "portions" and "gifts" to the poorer ones (ver. 22). The name, "feast of Purim," was at once attached to the festival, in memory of Haman's con-

sultation of the lot, the word "Pur" meaning "lot" in Persian (ver. 24). The festival became a national institution by the general consent of the Jews everywhere (ver. 27), and has remained to the present day among the most cherished of their usages. It falls in early spring, a month before the passover, and occupies two days, which are still those fixed by Mordecai and Esther, the 14th and 15th of Adar. The day preceding the feast is observed as a fast day, in commemoration of Esther's fast before going in uninvited to the king (ch. iv. 16).

Ver. 18.—**The Jews which were at Shushan assembled together.** *I. e.* "gathered themselves together to battle." The verb is the same as that used in ver. 16 of this chapter, and in ch. viii. 11; ix. 2.

Ver. 19.—**The Jews of the villages, that dwell in the unwalled towns.** Rather, "the Jews of the country, who dwell in the country towns." There are places where the word translated "unwalled" connotes that idea—*e. g.* Ezek. xxxviii. 11; Zech. ii. 8; but the main notion which it expresses is always that of a "country region." Here walls are not at all in the thought of the writer, who intends a contrast between the Jews of the metropolis and those of the provinces. Ecbatana and Babylon are "country towns" to a Jew of Susa, such as the writer. **A good day.** Compare ch. viii. 17, with the comment. **Sending portions one to another.** Compare Neh. viii. 10; and for the precept on which the practice was founded see Deut. xvi. 14. In modern times the Jews keep up the practice, and on the 15th of Adar both interchange gifts, chiefly sweetmeats, and make liberal offerings for the poor (comp. ver. 22, *ad fin.*).

Ver. 20.—**Mordecai wrote these things.** Mordecai seems, in the first instance, to have written to the provincial Jews, suggesting to them the future observance of two days of Purim instead of one, and explaining the grounds of his proposition, but without venturing to issue any order. When he found his proposition well received (vers. 23, 27) he sent out a second letter, "with all authority" (ver. 29), enjoining the observance.

Ver. 21.—**To stablish.** *I. e.* "with a view to establishing"—not actually doing so.

Ver. 22.—**The month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy.** This was the key-note of Purim, the dominant idea, to which all else was secondary and subordinate—sorrow turned into joy, "mourning into dancing," utter destruction into a signal triumph. Pa. xxx. might well have been written at this time.

Ver. 23.—**The Jews undertook to do as they had begun.** *I. e.* "to observe the 14th day." And as Mordecai had written to them. *I. e.* "and to observe also the 15th."

Ver. 25.—**But when Esther came before the king.** Rather, "when the matter came before the king." It is impossible to supply a proper name which has not occurred once in the last eleven verses. We must suppose the feminine suffix attached to the verb *bo*, "came," to be superfluous, as it is in Ezek. xxxiii. 33. **His wicked device should return upon his own head.** Compare Ps. vii. 16. The device of Haman to massacre all the Jews turned to the destruction of the Jews' chief enemies, and of Haman himself and his sons among them.

Ver. 26.—**Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur.** They took the Persian word, that is, and gave it a Hebrew plural, either because the Persian method of casting involved the use of several lots, or because Haman cast "Pur" several times (ch. iii. 7). **For all the words of this letter.** *I. e.* "on account of what was said in Mordecai's letter to them" (ver. 20). **And of that which they had seen, &c.** "And on account of what they had themselves seen and suffered." Mordecai's arguments were backed up by their own personal experience, and the recollection of what "had come to them."

Ver. 27.—**All such as joined themselves to them.** *I. e.* "all who should become proselytes to their faith" (see above, ch. viii. 17). **According to their writing.** According to the writing concerning the days which they had received from Mordecai (ver. 20).

Ver. 28.—**That these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, &c.** The universal adoption of the Purim feast by the Jewish nation, originating as it did at Susa, among the Persian Jews, never a very important part of the nation, is a curious fact, and is certainly not satisfactorily accounted for by the beauty and popularity of the Book of Esther (Ewald), nor by the dignity and power of Mordecai. Mordecai had no ecclesiastical authority; and it might have been expected that the Jews of Jerusalem would have demurred to the imposition of a fresh religious obligation upon them by a Jew of the Dispersion, who was neither a prophet, nor a priest, nor even a Levite. The Jews of Jerusalem, in their strongly-situated city, which was wholly theirs, and with their temple-fortress complete (Ezra vi. 15), can scarcely have felt themselves in much danger from an attack which was to have begun and ended in a day. But Joiakim, the high priest of the time (Neh. xii. 10—12), to whom, as we have seen ('Introduction,' § 3), the Book of Esther was attributed by some, must have

given his approval to the feast from the first, and have adopted it into the ceremonial of the nation, or it would scarcely have become universal. Hooker ('Ecc. Pol.' v. 71, § 6) rightly makes the establishment of the feast an argument in favour of the Church's power to proscribe festival days; and it must certainly have been by ecclesiastical, and not by civil, command that it became obligatory. **That these days . . . should not fail, . . . nor the memorial of them perish.** As a commemoration of human, and not of Divine, appointment, the feast of Purim was liable to abrogation or discontinuance. The Jews of the time resolved that the observance should be perpetual; and in point of fact the feast has continued up to the present date, and is likely to continue, though they could not bind their successors.

Ver. 29.—Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, . . . wrote. The unusual designation of Esther as "daughter of Abihail" can only be accounted for by her having so designated herself in the letter. **With all authority.** Rather, "with all earnestness," or "impressiveness." Literally, the word used means "strength." **To confirm this second letter of Purim.** The first letter is the one which is mentioned in vers. 20 and 26. That letter having elicited the favourable reply contained in vers. 26—28, a "second letter of Purim" was now issued, "confirming" and establishing the observance. It went forth not as an edict, or in the king's name, but as a letter, and in the names of Esther and Mordecai.

Ver. 30.—And he sent the letters. Rather, "he sent letters." In addition to the formal "letter of Purim," which was of the nature of an ordinance, though not of legal force, Mordecai sent informal letters, which embraced other topics besides the Purim feast, as, for instance, words of salutation, and per-

haps a reference to the keeping of a fast before the two Purim days (ver. 31). These he sent to all Jews throughout the whole empire, inclosing with them the formal "letter of Purim." **With words of peace and truth.** Perhaps beginning thus: "Peace and truth be with you"—a modification of the usual, "Peace," &c. (Ezra iv. 17), or, "All peace" (*ibid.* v. 7), with which letters ordinarily began.

Ver. 31.—As they had decreed for themselves and their seed. "As they—i. e. the Jews generally—had decreed" (see ver. 27). **The matters of the fastings and their cry.** These words stand in no clear grammatical relation to the preceding, and are otherwise very difficult to explain. They are thought to allude to the establishment by the provincial Jews, apart from Mordecai and Esther, of the 13th of Adar as a day of fasting and wailing; but if so, it is strange that nothing has been previously said of this ordinance. The plural form of the word for "fastings" is also suspicious, since it does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament. Altogether, it is perhaps most probable that the words were originally the gloss of a commentator, written in the margin, and that they have been accidentally transferred to the text. They do not occur in the Septuagint.

Ver. 32.—The decree of Esther. Rather, "a commandment of Esther." Some fresh act seems to be intended—something beyond the joint letter of Esther and Mordecai; though why it was needed, or what additional authority it could give, is not apparent. **And it was written in the book.** I. e. "this commandment of Esther was inserted in the book of the chronicles," where the writer probably found it. No other book being mentioned in Esther but this, "the book" can have no other meaning (see ch. ii. 23; vi. 1; x. 2).

HOMILETICS.

Vers. 1—16.—Deliverance and victory. The history of "the chosen nation" is full of Divine deliverances. The present is only one of the many instances in which, by faith, the Israelites "escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens."

I. THE MEANS of the deliverance and victory here related. Royal authority primarily accounts for it. Only by the sanction of the king could the Jews dare to draw the sword and withstand their foes. Ministerial encouragement supported this sanction. It was known that Mordecai, the chief minister of Ahasuerus, was thoroughly earnest in the matter, and would countenance his countrymen in their proceedings. Official help was given. Probably the enemies of the Jews were among the idolatrous tribes, and the Persian officers and rulers were instructed to favour the Jews against their heathen foes. National courage explains the valiant stand which was made by the children of the captivity. "A good cause, a good conscience, and a good courage" secured the victory.

II. THE COMPLETENESS of the deliverance and victory. Fear, panic, dread of the Jews seized their enemies, and the oppressed "had rule over" the oppressors. The

enemies were slain in great numbers wherever an encounter took place. Mordecai and his party triumphed over their foes in the public hanging on the gibbet of the dead bodies of Haman's ten sons. The magnanimity of the victorious was shown in their not laying hand upon the spoil, which was wise, inasmuch as it was thus made apparent that their only aim was security, and that they sought not plunder, and also that they did not wish to avail themselves of the king's generosity, but to replenish his treasury rather than their own.

III. THE MARVEL OF THE DELIVERANCE AND VICTORY. How contrary to the designs of Haman, the most powerful personage in the realm! How contrary to the expectations of the Jews themselves, who were naturally enough oppressed with the sense of their danger, and the prospect of their extermination! How contrary to the forebodings of the neighbours of the Jews, who had joined in their distress and lamentations with true and friendly sympathy. "God's ways are not as our ways, neither our thoughts as his thoughts." This is the appropriate benediction which the reader of the Megillah, at the feast of Purim, pronounces at its close: "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast contended our contest, judged our cause, hast avenged our wrongs, requited all the enemies of our souls, and hast delivered us from our oppressors. Blessed art thou, who hast delivered thy people from all their oppressors, thou Lord of salvation."

Vers. 20—22.—*The feast of Purim.* Other Jewish festivals, as the passover and tabernacles, were instituted by express Divine authority. The feast of Purim was instituted by the authority of Mordecai and Esther. Yet its observance was undoubtedly sanctioned by the God whose merciful interposition it commemorated. The festival has been observed by the Jews from that day to this; the observance consisting of a preliminary fast; of a sacred assembly in the synagogue, when the Megillah (or roll) of the Book of Esther, is unfolded and solemnly read aloud; and of a repast at home, followed by merry-making, and the sending of presents. The feast of Purim was, and is—

I. A REMINDER OF AN ERA OF CAPTIVITY. The Jews are put in memory of the fact that a large portion of their nation was once in exile in Persia, and that, although their captivity must be regarded as a sign of their sin and of God's displeasure, yet they had not been as a nation forsaken, but had been spared and recalled to the land of promise.

II. A MEMORIAL BOTH OF THE ENEMIES AND OF THE FRIENDS OF THE NATION. When, in the reading, Haman's name is mentioned, the synagogue is filled with the noise of stamping and rattling, and with shouts of "Cursed be Haman! may his name perish!" At the same time the memory of the great benefactors of Israel, Esther and Mordecai, is cherished with gratitude and warmth.

III. A COMMEMORATION OF A DIVINE DELIVERANCE. The name "Purim" means "lots," because Haman cast lots for a lucky day for the execution of his malignant project. "The lot is cast into the lap, but the disposal thereof is of the Lord." No wonder that the joy of salvation was too great to find expression in one celebration. It was felt that one generation might well speak God's praises to another, and declare his mighty works. Purim may serve as an emblem of the deliverance which the God of all grace has wrought on behalf not of Israel only, but of all mankind. He is, in Christ Jesus, a God "mighty to save."

Ver. 22.—*Sending portions and gifts.* This usage is quite a carrying out of the principle of the Divine law, which prescribed remembrance of the widow and fatherless upon those who were prosperous in Israel. We find an interesting parallel to the present passage in Nehemiah: when the law had been read and expounded in the hearing of the people, they "went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth." These presents were sent by the people to one another in friendship and courtesy; to the poor in charity. It is a usage which, though it may be carried too far and abused, has yet its advantages.

I. IT TENDS TO CEMENT THE BONDS OF SOCIETY BY DISPOSING TO KINDLY THOUGHTS AND REGARDS. A neighbourly gift is, in some cases, better than a mere message of inquiry, or congratulation, or condolence.

II. IT AFFORDS A PURE PLEASURE TO THE GIVER. To share the gifts of Providence with the less fortunate opens the heart and enlarges its sympathies. It is a check to natural selfishness.

III. IT IS BENEFICIAL TO THE RECEIVER. A friend's gift is a token of that friend's remembrance and love. And many a poor household is, at Christmas-tide, made bright by the presents thought appropriate to the season. Children especially are pleased with such gifts, and their pleasure is worth our consideration.

IV. GIFTS RESEMBLE, IN OUR POOR WAY, THE BENEFACEMENTS OF PROVIDENCE, AND THE BENEFICENT MIRACLES OF OUR SAVIOUR. "He openeth his hand, and supplieth the wants of every living thing." Christ gave bread to the hungry, and turned water into wine for the enjoyment of the guests at a wedding-feast.

V. THE PRACTICE IS A RECOGNITION OF OUR COMMON DEPENDENCE UPON HEAVEN, AND OUR MUTUAL BROTHERHOOD. How much better to carry out such usages upon the suggestion of Christian motive, and in connection with Christian fellowship, than for worldly display, or policy, or from ordinary good-nature!

Ver. 28.—*A holy memorial.* Memory is a Divine gift, to be used for the glory of the Giver. Every individual has his memories; for his past life has been marked by events important to himself, and worthy of being now and again recalled to awaken gratitude, humility, confidence. Every family has its memories; and domestic anniversaries may be observed with advantage, especially to the young. Every nation has its memories—of great reigns, great deliverances, great conquests, &c. Every religion has its memories—of its founder, its fundamental facts, its triumphs. The Jews had reason to remember Purim.

I. WHAT IS SPECIALLY WORTHY TO BE REMEMBERED? Our deliverances. God's mercies.

II. WHY SHOULD SUCH THINGS BE REMEMBERED? To encourage us to the exercise of devout gratitude. To foster our trust and faith in him whose mercies we call to mind. To honour God. "Forget not all his benefits."

III. HOW SHOULD HOLY MEMORIALS BE OBSERVED? 1. With sacrifices of praise. "Let us exalt his name together." "The Lord hath done great things for us, whereof we are glad." 2. With gatherings of fellowship. Where mercies have been experienced in common they should be acknowledged in common. There is something inspiring and elevating in the celebration, by a multitude, of a great event, a signal mercy. So with the observance of the Lord's Supper. 3. With tokens of practical kindness. Festivals are holy in proportion as those who take part in them are unselfish, disinterested, and kind. 4. With especial reference to the young. In youth public observances impress themselves upon the memory. The Jews took pains to instruct their children in the meaning of the passover and the other national festivals. Thus the perpetuity of the memorial is secured. We should celebrate God's loving-kindness, and "tell it to the generation following."

Ver. 30.—*Words of peace and truth.* Words are of inestimable weight, for evil or for good. Human words move men mightily; and of Christ's words we know that they shall "never pass away." This description of the message which Mordecai and Esther sent to their countrymen throughout the empire is very significant. It consisted of words which, whilst they were words of truth, concealing nothing, declaring all, were yet words of peace, speaking peace unto Israel.

I. WORDS CAN REVEAL TRUTH. The speech uttered is the expression of the inner, the mental, speech. 1. This should be the case in all instruction. Teachers should make it their first concern that their words should be words of truth. Especially should this be so in all religious instruction given and received. 2. This is the case in the best and highest literature. We value language for its beauty; but its highest interest and charm lies in its power to embody truth. 3. This is the case with Divine revelation, which is the truth of God, made known to us in him who is the Word, and in all inspired words.

II. WORDS CAN DIFFUSE AND RESTORE PEACE. They may do this by—1. Assuring the endangered of protection, as was the case in the narrative before us. 2. Removing suspicion and fear, as friendly and gracious words have often power to do.

3. Assuring offenders of reconciliation and favour. It is in this manner that the words of Christ's gospel are emphatically "words of peace."

III. WORDS OF TRUTH ARE THE SUREST FOUNDATION FOR WORDS OF PEACE. The peace brought about by false words is hollow, temporary only, and vain. But the full truth being declared, a sound and lasting peace may follow, heralded and assured by appropriate words. The Christian revelation exactly agrees with the description of these words; it brings *truth* to our understanding and *peace* to heart and life.

Ver. 31.—*Fasting and crying remembered amidst feasting and singing.* It is not good to banish from the mind perils and sorrows through which we have passed, and from which we have been delivered. In times of prosperity and rejoicing it is well to keep before us the mutability of all earthly things. Life is a chequered scene, a changing landscape. To-day is unlike yesterday, and unlike to-morrow. Undue elation and undue depression are alike unworthy of the Christian. By remembering past griefs, troubles, and dangers—

I. WE DISPOSE OURSELVES TO HUMILITY. Such *was* our lot, such our position, such our apprehensions and alarms but a short time since. Let us not then be puffed up with self-satisfaction because the cloud has blown over and the sky is blue again.

II. WE ENCOURAGE GRATITUDE. *Who* has turned fasting to feasting, and crying to songs? God is our deliverer; he has "turned again our captivity." To him be praise.

III. WE SEASON AND BRIGHTEN OUR JOYS. It is pleasant to look back upon the shipwreck from which we have been rescued, the battle out of which we have come unscathed; it gives a zest to the enjoyments of to-day when we remember the bitterness and the anguish of days gone by.

IV. WE FOSTER A SPIRIT OF DEPENDENCE AND CONFIDENCE IN GOD. Unmixed prosperity is not favourable to spiritual life. "Sweet are the uses of adversity." Remember your complaints and prayers, and how they were heard and answered from above. "He drew you out of many waters." So shall your trust be steadfast and sustaining.

V. WE ENJOY A FORETASTE OF SOME OF THE JOYS OF HEAVEN. When we come to the rest above, we shall look back wonderingly, gratefully, upon the scene of conflict from which we shall then be delivered; it will seem perhaps largely a scene of fasting and of crying. And the retrospect will surely enhance the "pleasures which are for evermore."

Ver. 32.—"*Written in the book.*" Tradition is the simplest mode of transmitting what is memorable from generation to generation. Ordinances, festivals, celebrations, are a kind of acted tradition, and have always been in use among nations and religious communities. But there are certain respects in which literature is preferable to either oral tradition or commemorative festival, and certainly these receive force and point and power from what is written in their explanation. The origin of the feast of Purim was committed to the form and keeping of literature. Whether the reference is to the Book of Esther, or to the chronicles of the Persian kingdom, or to some other document, is matter of dispute. In any case, the story was "written in a book"—in a scroll of manuscript, from which copies were made for the use and information of those interested in the events recorded. This literary document—

I. SECURED AN ACCURATE RECORD. Tradition is proverbially untrustworthy. The only thoroughly trustworthy evidence for the historian is that furnished by contemporary documents.

II. DIFFUSED GOOD TIDINGS. Copies were multiplied, and wherever people of Hebrew race were found, there this delightful story pursued them.

III. PERPETUATED LASTING MEMORY, AND INSURED UNIVERSAL CELEBRATION. As a matter of fact, the record has assisted towards these ends. The roll of Esther is unfolded, and the story read, even to this day, in the Jewish synagogues throughout the world.

IV. AWAKENED UNFAILING GRATITUDE. The book does not contain the name of God, but God himself is apparent on every page, and its reading cannot fail to stimulate thanksgiving and praise. How grateful should we be that the great facts

of the gospel have been committed to writing, and that we possess in the Scriptures the means of verifying our most sacred beliefs !

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Vers. 2—5.—*A reign of terror.* "The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities," &c. There were many greedy to possess the property of the Jews, and such as cherished spite against them, who were glad of the permission to slay and plunder, which Haman's letters gave. When the king's letters which reached the Jews gave them permission to withstand those who opposed, there must have been great perplexity in many minds and fear in many hearts.

I. FOOLISH LAWS BRING ABOUT REIGNS OF TERROR. The foolish consent of the king became law, and then by another absurd law it could not be changed or checked.

II. IN REIGNS OF TERROR THE INNOCENT HAVE TO SUFFER WITH THE GUILTY.

III. IN REIGNS OF TERROR THE GOOD MUST STAND TOGETHER. In the world there is a great fight for goodness, truth, and Christ to be still waged. Anarchy suits the prince of darkness. The Christian is in every sense the friend of order, good government, and righteousness.—H.

Vers. 27, 28.—*A memorial feast.* "And the Jews ordained and took upon them . . . that these days should be remembered."

I. The memorial feast was in recognition of a great DELIVERANCE. The deliverance effected by Mordecai and Esther for the Jews, hints at that effected for us by Jesus. There are points of great similarity. The Lord's Supper is not only a feast of love, but in memory of our great deliverance from sin and death.

II. The memorial was ordained READILY. Gratitude led to this. A further object was a desire to stimulate to similar faith in God in further circumstances of trial.

III. The memorial was to be PERPETUAL. How faithfully have the Jews of every age kept that which was "ordained." We should keep that which Jesus instituted. Parents may lay upon their children certain moral obligations, but not now ceremonial burdens. That which they enjoin should be first observed by "themselves."—H.

Ver. 32.—*Valuable lessons from unpromising materials.* "The book." The Book of Esther is secular in its tone, has no mention of the name of God, and no recognition in the Gospels or Epistles ; still it is of great value.

I. It gives a VALUABLE PICTURE OF LIFE at a certain period of the world's history. The luxury of an Oriental court, the tyranny of rulers, the emptiness of regal pomp, the danger from conspiracies, the plottings of politicians, and misery of oppressed peoples, are well depicted in this book. Hints are given of the means provided for dissipating *ennui* by reading (ch. vi. 1), of the correct recording of public events (ch. ix. 32), and of the facilities provided for rapid communication (ch. viii. 10—14).

II. It gives a CLEAR INDICATION OF THE WORKING OF GOD IN THE INTERESTS OF MEN.
1. In a nation outside the pale of the covenant people. 2. In preserving at a most critical period the nation selected by himself to be the means of keeping up a knowledge of the unity of the Godhead and the hope of a Messiah. Hence, if God's name is not mentioned, his working is seen. As the name of the Queen of England is not written in full on all the ships, forts, guns, carriages, &c., but only a V. R. or the broad arrow, so the name of God may not be mentioned in the whole Book of Esther, yet his cipher is in every chapter, verse, and word. The shady parts of the Bible are to be studied as well as the bright ; its valleys are to be explored as well as its heights to be scaled.—H.

Ver. 1.—*The antagonisms of nations.* "In the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them. Though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them." This passage tells a history of vicissitude doubly remarkable. It may be put thus : there was, in the first instance, a great reverse of fortune in the experience of each of two nationalities. But this did not end all. At the same time it constituted a striking reversal of the *mutual* relations of those two peoples. In the first instance the people who had been exalted are cast

down; and the people who had been cast down, lifted up. But this was a little matter compared with the consequence immediately resulting, and which showed so prominently to view; namely, a most significant and determined alteration of the attitude of the one to the other. The lessons suggested by this passage, whatever they may be, offer themselves on the scale of national magnitude. We are reminded—

I. OF THE ANTAGONISMS TO WHICH NATIONAL LIFE OFFERS OPPORTUNITY—an opportunity which the world's history shows to have been ever lamentably improved. The antagonism of the individual is reproduced on a more terrible scale, and with consequences inconceivably disastrous. It must be noted that this spirit of national antagonism bears not only the reproach of the direct sin and miseries, of which war is the declared manifestation; it is an enemy, the indirect ravages of which add up to a fearful amount. This may be seen from observing in the place of what it is, that it so often stands. 1. It is antagonism usurping the place of natural and sympathetic love. 2. It is antagonism turning out healthy emulation, and stimulating rivalry. 3. It is antagonism hindering to an amazing degree that plenty, and wealth, and cheapness which come of mutual sustentation, of inter-trading, of each nationality, according to its physical advantages and its genius, pursuing its own bent, to share the abundance of its consequent production with other nations.

II. OF THE INSUFFICIENT CAUSES OF THE ANTAGONISMS TO WHICH NATIONAL LIFE IS EXPOSED. 1. They emphatically do not lie in any international necessity of nature. They mean always fault and sin at some door. They cannot be justified by any supposed likeness to the natural storms of our earth and skies, though these may frame into an unhappy analogy with them. 2. They do not reside in any international necessity of trade or other interest. 3. They are rarely enough owing to the determined will or fitful passion of the great body of the people. These will *adopt* them, it is true, and will soon be heated by false sense of national glory; but they do not originate them. 4. They are rarely enough due to fault on one side alone. 5. Even when mingled with some just occasion, they are rarely enough what could not be averted by the wise treatment of those in high authority. 6. They strongly resemble the antagonisms and antipathies of private individuals in these two respects—that they arise from the smallest matters, and take occasion from temper and pride.

III. OF THE MULTIPLIED RESPONSIBILITY AND IMPORTANCE WHICH NATIONAL LIFE THROWS UPON INDIVIDUALS. It is easy to see that nations the largest, the mightiest, the most complex are but made up of individuals. But it is not so easy to believe, it is not so welcome to the mind to remember at all times, how the greatest events, for good or for ill, depend very largely on the character and conduct of individuals. Thus national life immensely increases the importance of the individual. It is the highest in an ascending series of terms. For instance—1. There is the intrinsic importance of individual life to each man. 2. There is the importance that inevitably attaches to the head-of-family life. 3. There is the importance that belongs to *all public life*, in all the varying and numerous places of Church and of State. 4. There is the importance which is inseparable from the place of the *governing*, the highest places in the state. This, though strictly comprehended in the foregoing head, demands to be classified separately, because of its highest significance, its superlatively critical issues. Haman had done a world of mischief. To human eye it can scarcely be said that Mordecai had recovered the balance. The one caused the intensest hatred of "the enemies of the Jews" to blaze up, to the unmeasured misery of the Jews. And when things were reversed, and "it was turned to the contrary," though a lesson of terrible retribution was displayed, and though justice should seem to have another sacrifice offered at her shrine, yet love is left as far in the rear as ever. The whole family of envy, jealousy, malice, cruelty have it too much their own way—so far as our human point of view can see or calculate.

IV. OF THE WONDERFUL ROOM FOR DISPLAY OF THE OVERRULING PROVIDENCE OF GOD WHICH NATIONAL LIFE PRESENTS. Two centuries before the history contained in this narrative, the prophet had said, "When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." There are given to us all the quiet, urgent, infinitely numerous lessons of providence in our individual lives. How are they unobserved, lost, smothered in the thoughtless course, the hurried rate of our lives! They look in vain into our very eyes; they whisper in vain in our very ears;

they knock in vain at our very doors; they plead in vain with our reason, our self-interest, our conscience. But with overwhelming effect come at times national providences. These speak sometimes as with the voice of thunder, and they are seen sometimes with the vividness of the lightning's flash by hundreds of thousands at one and the same moment. The great subject suggested by our present history, then, demands the attention of statesmen, of legislators, of all public men in their degree, and may obtain many a valuable cross light from the subject already considered of patriotism.—B.

Ver. 16.—*The law of national self-preservation.* This passage, with two somewhat similar passages preceding it, may read at first like the narration of sanguinary cruelty, and the indefensible havoc of human life. Our strongest sympathies were but very lately with the Jews, for whom fearful destruction was devised without the slightest shadow of justifiable provocation. We rejoiced with them when the cloud that overhung burst, and they seemed to be delivered from their former terrible outlook. But already we begin perhaps to repent, and to feel that neither our sympathy nor our gratulation were well merited. Though the destruction that threatened the Jews, and with such aggravating circumstances, is averted, it is little (even though it be true that they were not the side originally in fault), if all that is gained is, that the hands that shed blood are changed from the one side to the other. If no slaughter is spared, if for pity's sake human life be not saved, if those who were the unjustly doomed become in the hour of their own mercy the first to doom others, even though they may do so with tenfold provocation and with some rough sort of justice, we may be inclined to feel for a moment that there was after all not so very much to choose between the two. A little closer study of the context, however, will suffice to show that such is not a fair description of the case. The subject suggests rather the statement of the law of self-preservation, not of the individual, but of the nation. Again, therefore, we have a question of great interest offering itself on the scale of national magnitude. This circumstance will facilitate the consideration of it under conditions in some respects more favourable. When treated as a question affecting the individual, it has often been entangled by casuistry; but when considered in the unusual proportions here presenting themselves, its broader, bolder outlines will perhaps come out to view more plainly. The right of taking life for the sake of self-preservation, or in self-defence, may be sufficiently sketched out of the material of the present narrative. If that right is to be fairly allowed for, and at the same time limited as exactly as may be, it may be said to postulate the following conditions:—

I. THAT THE OCCASION BE ONE OF UNDOUBTED NECESSITY. In the present instance the whole number of the Jews scattered throughout the 127 provinces now subject to Ahasuerus had been threatened with extermination. There could be no doubt of their imminent danger, and of their helplessness. When Esther (ch. viii. 5) supplicated the king "to reverse the letters devised by Haman . . . which he wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces," the king met the difficulty of his former *irreversible* decree and *irreversible* letters by giving authority to the threatened Jews "to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy . . . all the power of the people and province that would assault them" (ch. viii. 11). He cannot reverse his own former decree literally, but by a fiction he does so very really, very effectually. Esther and Mordecai would at that time have been gladly content to have simply removed from their own race the decree that doomed them, but from the time that this way of putting the matter was revealed by the king, and the whole responsibility of saving themselves was thrown so far on their own efforts, the occasion became one of undoubted necessity. It was not war, it was not murder, it was not gratuitous massacre—it was a case of self-defence.

II. THAT THERE BE THE LEAST SACRIFICE OF LIFE THAT WOULD ATTAIN THE NEEDFUL END. It is remarkable that the exact number should be so carefully given of the two slaughters in Shushan (vers. 6, 15), and of the aggregate of that (ver. 16) which took effect through the "king's provinces." That Esther asked for another day's opportunity of taking the lives of the enemies of her people in Shushan (vers. 13—15) may safely be understood to be owing to special necessities not given in detail.

It need not for one moment indicate any wish that one life more should be sacrificed than should be necessary for the safety of the Jews. Now when the sum-total of the slain are added, amounting to 75,800, *first*, the number, large as it seems, probably does not reach the number of the Jews who were to have been exterminated; *secondly*, it is certain there was no comparison between the numbers *relatively*—for in the case of the Jews the slaughter was to have been of *all*, while 75,800 were but a small proportion of the entire population not Jews; and *thirdly*, there not only is no evidence of there having been any indiscriminate slaughter on the part of the Jews, but presumably none were slain except such as rose up to slay. This self-defence, therefore, on the part of the Jews probably left more living men than would have been left under the circumstances if the Jews had suffered their own lives to be unresistingly taken.

III. THAT THE LEAST POSSIBLE GAIN OUTSIDE OF THE ONE GAIN OF LIFE, THE SUPREME OBJECT SOUGHT, BE TAKEN BY THE ACT OF SELF-DEFENCE. In the decree granted by King Ahasuerus special provision was spontaneously made that the Jews should appropriate the spoil on their successful resistance of the enemy. Nevertheless, when the time came they refused to do so. And evidently much significance attached to this conduct. It is repeated as many as three times in this chapter. On every occasion on which a victory on their part is announced, this is added—that instead of laying hands on the prey, they emphatically refrained from doing so. This differences self-defence, and the taking of life in self-defence, very greatly from other occasions in which life is taken.

IV. THAT REVENGE BE THE LEAST POSSIBLE ELEMENT IN IT. In cases of sudden need of self-defence there will be no room for the feeling of revenge. Self-defence, however, will by no means be requisite only in such cases. Where there is long delay it is impossible to predicate that none of the spirit of revenge may enter into the hearts of some out of the many; but there is no need to suppose that now there was any in the hearts of the *principals*. Esther and Mordecai desired *one* thing—the safety of their people. They wished for “rest from their enemies.” They probably felt that they were the ministers of righteous *retribution*. They desired that Haman's ten sons “hanged on the gallows” should still drive home on an impressed populace the sense and conviction of what a force righteous retribution was, and how much men ought “to stand in awe” because of it; but there is no proof whatever that in all the relief to the bitterness of their soul revenge played any part. The lessons of this portion of the narrative are not needed for the pulpit on every Lord's day certainly, but it may be they are provided here, in the universality of the use of the Divine book, for some special and solemn crises.—B.

Vers. 19, 22.—*The elements of perfect joy.* “A good day, and of sending portions one to another: . . . days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.” Twice then, among the other particulars of the people's glad celebration of their deliverance from a savage massacre, is this detail included, that they sent “portions one to another;” and once it is added that they sent “gifts to the poor.” This was no ancient prescription of the law, so far as literal command is concerned. But the spirit of it is no doubt to be detected even there, especially in those passages which urge the principle of taking care that days of general joy should be felt in their warming influence by “the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow.” In the same spirit we read in Nehemiah (ch. viii. 10), however, what comes verbally much nearer our present passage. A day of deep feeling and special cause of joy was to be observed as a day of feasting, and of sending “portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared.” There can be no question that we have here a portion of the genuine history of the human heart. We seem to hear some of the better and simpler utterances of human nature. The joy of the saved people of God is before us. And whatever other marks it may have, it certainly has those which make it a type of Christian joy on earth. In this light principally we may now regard it. We notice here—

I. A GENERAL AND SIMULTANEOUS JOY. It was not in every respect equal. But in one respect it *was* equal, in that wherever it spread it was the joy of *life*, of life rescued from the brink of destruction. Joy need not be equal all round a family,

nor all round the world's family; for there are in hearts exceedingly various degrees of susceptibility, and these by themselves are sure to govern largely the exact amount of what can be called happiness or joy. All that is necessary to the one largest, purest, most loving heart in the whole circle is, that all others be blessed and happy at the same time, and according to the full measure of their capacity. But a joy that is not general, that is exposed to overhearing the sounds of complaining, or the sighs of those who mourn alone, or the echoes of the outcry of pain, is deeply felt to be imperfect.

II. A JOY FULL OF MUTUAL KINDNESS. Quite independently of the differences in human life that show one man rich and possessing all things, and another poor and needy, there are differences within a far less range of compass, and yet innumerable. These do not show the extremes of condition; and by Divine wisdom they *do* make the room for all the play of sympathy, for all the works of *mutual* kindness. These save hearts from stagnation, and make the healthful ripples and movement after movement of life, stirring the affections within. Were all this at an end, the dead level of human life and feeling would be appalling indeed. The joy that does not find this room for mutual service, for "readiness to good works," for interchange of the offices of affection and friendship, if general, would nevertheless be selfish to the last degree. How happy that short reign of community of goods in the early apostolic history, when all "of them that believed were of one heart and one soul: neither said any of them that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common." And that would be inferior to the conscious pleasure of a constant exchange of the tokens of sympathy and of the deeds of kindness. In the joy that should shut out the prizes of mutual service it would be felt that there was something wanting.

III. A JOY FULL OF CHARITABLE KINDNESS. There can be no doubt that the kindness of charity is in reality an easier exercise and a less rare grace than that of a perfect mutual kindness. Yet we know the special honour put upon poverty both by the life and the lip of Jesus. And we know the abounding promises that his word makes to those who pity and give to the poor. There is indeed a certain subtle danger that may lurk in the perpetual exercise of charitable kindness. The giver can almost always reckon on the exaltation of position which belongs to the *patron*. He may be injured by what underlies the beautiful and ever-welcome words of the regretful Job: "When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me." Nevertheless, men little need at present to be warned of the danger; they seldom come near enough to this temptation. And, meantime, must not the joy that knows not the spirit of charity to the poor fatally want? There must be something different from vacant want indeed, bad as that should be. That joy must feel itself "a guilty thing." But now in this typical joy of God's suddenly-rescued people in the days of Esther all these elements were present. The people had all been in one danger, had all enjoyed one deliverance, and they all experience one general pervading joy. Common suffering while it lasts draws us near to one another by a proverb; it is rather the index of cowardice of heart. But when the return of common mercy finds us drawing near to one another in the works of practical fellowship, and showing compassion to the poor in the works of charity, then a happiness is kindled of the best that earth knows. The companions in danger and in rescue are found still companions in prosperity. In woe and in weal they have learned to be one. The common escape from danger quickens a sincere compassion. And this history cannot be judged to fall short of portraying the one danger of the whole race of mankind, the one rescue open to them, and the one united life of joy, of love, of charity that Christians ought to live here on earth.—B.

Vers. 21, 27, 28, 31.—*The religion of national gratitude.* Mordecai and Esther were not the people to receive great blessings and then at once to forget them. We not unfrequently see those who have had hair-breadth escapes from the worst of calamities recover in a moment their previous light and jaunty spirits. They seem insensible to the risk which had so imperilled them, and certainly are not grateful for the mercy which had rescued them. They do not return either to give thanks to man or glory to God. It is far otherwise now with Mordecai, with Esther, and, at their

initiative, with the mass of the people. Wherever Mordecai had sent to his people the messages of relief and the warrants to resist, there he now sends proposals which, if acceded to, will insure the perpetual memory of their deliverance, and will suggest ever new gratefulness for it. Esther joins heart and hand in the same, and the people themselves warmly approve the suggestion. They solemnly and enthusiastically adopt the proposal. They "undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written to them." The method of observing an anniversary to all generations is accepted as the means by which "the memorial" of their deliverance "shall never perish" from them or "their seed." It is evident that a deep religious interest was thrown into this matter, and the account of it is repeated as many as four times, and with minuteness of detail. The example is good for individuals. The precedent is good for nations. We have here—

I. A LEADING INSTANCE OF NATIONAL GRATITUDE. There is great danger of the fit occasions of national gratitude passing by unimproved. This may often arise simply from the fact that "what is every one's business is no one's." The danger needs to be counteracted, and sometimes it is effectually counteracted. Three conditions present, will exhibit, the fair and happy display of national gratitude. 1. The benefit must be in its character such as reaches the heart. Whether cheap bread, cheap health, or cheap Bible; whether free laws, free knowledge, or free conscience, it must be what is adapted to all, and can be appreciated by all. The blessing called *life* had perhaps never been considered in this light by the Jews till they were so near to losing it. But it was what every one of them, young and old, and of every class, appreciated. 2. The benefit must be such as has reached, either directly or indirectly, every class of the people. In highly-developed communities it should form part of the self-imposed work of all kinds of public and religious teachers to show the value of benefits which may be only indirect, and how they claim gratitude. In the present instance, the benefit for which such gladness and joy had sprung up had penetrated not only to every class, but to every individual. 3. The call to celebrate the benefit must be made so as to win the hearty approval and co-operation of the people. The moral influence of Mordecai and Esther was evidently very great. Their own example, their own deep interest in the course suggested, was contagious. The urgency with which they wrote helped to throw conviction of duty and enthusiasm toward its performance into the hearts of all the people. God never loves a cheerful giver more than when the cheerful giving is in very simple matters—that of thanks, or praise, or grateful adoration presented to himself.

II. A SOLEMN RESOLUTION FOR THE PERPETUATION OF NATIONAL GRATITUDE. Much kindly feeling passes away for want of embodiment. It dies down within, and there comes "no second spring" for it. Certainly gratitude is liable soon to die away. The most solemn claim of affection that the world knows is couched in the language of the claim of gratitude: "Do this in remembrance of me." In this perpetuation of national thanksgiving we may notice—1. The wise method by which it was obtained. (1) The happy moment was seized by the moral leaders of the people for giving a *religious character* to the joy that already possessed them. Mordecai made use of the excited state of feeling to say, Let it take the direction of thanksgiving. (2) The right moment was seized, when the "willing mind" of a whole people would be inclined to make a day into an anniversary ever to be observed. After the people had once pronounced assent, as it were with one voice, and their chief men had put their hand to the engagement, they would not be likely to turn back. The resolution of that critical time has lasted and has borne fruit now over twenty-three centuries. 2. The good ends which it would serve. Love and thankfulness, and praise and gratitude, are all alike in one respect, that they ask no utilitarian questions. Their motive lies in themselves. And probably it was never more so than in this history. Yet we are permitted to observe the many directions in which they bear good fruit. The perpetuation of national thanksgiving on the right occasion—that is to say, not after every bloody battle, to which the Lord never sent forth his people; and in the right method—i. e. not in such a way as will gratuitously wound the feeling of another nation,—is adapted to produce great and good results. (1) The acknowledgment is a direct act of glorifying God. (2) It keeps him in the memory of the people as the Giver of all good, as the Sovereign Ruler and the beneficent Friend. (3) It reminds

again and again of the need once felt so keenly, of the poverty once so trying, of the exceeding peril which once threatened, of the boundless relief once experienced. God's people were bidden to remember how "they were bondsmen in Egypt," to "look to the rock whence they were hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence they were digged." And these are the memories that chastise the pride of the human heart, and raise the tone and level of the character, and lead gradually nearer real safety and real prosperity. They are also the memories which for the future guide to the right source of confidence and of help. Of whatever advantage we know these things to be in any individual life, the advantage is one immensely multiplied in the case of a nation—multiplied, that is, by the whole number of those who go together to compose it.—B.

Vers. 17—32.—*The effects of deliverance.* Our narrative closes with a bright picture, in which all clouds are scattered; it is as sunshine after rain. Among the results of Israel's triumph we notice—

I. **REST.** All the Jews in the empire, except those in Shushan, rested on the 14th of Adar. The Jews in Shushan, after their two days' conflict, rested on the 15th of Adar. Then all had rest. So utterly broken was the power of their enemies that they had rest not only from a past fear, but from anxiety as to the future. How sweet is rest after the agitation of a long-threatened peril—to the soldier when the battle is fought and won; to the nation when the foes who sought to destroy it are bereft of power. The soul-rest of a victory over sin and death is the gift of Christ to those who follow him (Matt. xi. 28—30; John xiv. 27); and when all the conflicts of earth are over, "there remaineth a rest to the people of God," an eternal heaven (Heb. iv. 9—11).

II. **JOY.** It is natural that joy in its inward emotion and outward manifestations should be proportionate to the benefit that has occasioned it. The wonderful deliverance of the Jews filled them with a wonderful joy; their hearts ran over with gladness. So also to the man who appropriates Christ and his redemption there is a "joy of salvation," "a joy which is unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Pet. i. 8). John the Baptist's "joy was fulfilled" at the hearing of "the Bridegroom's voice" (John iii. 29). Jesus explained his object, in teaching his disciples the truth, as being "that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (John xv. 11). The religion of God is a religion of joy. It slays fear and banishes gloom. It turns all things into channels of a joy that is heaven-born. Sackcloth may be the symbolic garb of the penitent, but robes washed white and shining are the symbolic clothing of the true believer. "Songs of deliverance" encompass the saved (Ps. xxxii. 7; Phil. iv. 4; 1 Thess. v. 16).

III. **UNITY.** Common trials and common triumphs have great power in binding men together. Both in their grief and in their joy the Jews became as one family. Heart flowed into heart, and all stood up and drew close in compact oneness. The deliverance would add immensely to the sense of brotherhood which the common terror had excited. In presence of such experiences minor differences in opinion and practice vanish. The more that Christians realise their own need, and God's mercy in Christ, the more readily will they regard each other as brethren of the "household of faith." The history of the Church of God shows in a signal way how God often sends alternate tribulations and triumphs just to bring his people closer to himself, and thereby closer to each other against their common foes.

IV. **LARGE-HEARTEDNESS.** A true joy enlarges the heart; a sense of goodness received excites a desire to do good. Grace is communicative. If we love Christ, we shall love all whom Christ loves. If we have joy in God, we shall long to impart that joy to others. The gladness of a God-saved soul diffuses itself like the light. This effect of deliverance was shown by the Jews in three ways:—1. In their "feasting" together. Social gatherings in connection with great events or interests, when wisely conducted, afford a good opportunity for mutual encouragement and edification. 2. In their "sending portions one to another." Not content with words or messages, they exchanged presents, as tokens of thankful congratulation and sympathy. A sense of the Divine favour should make the heart generous and liberal. 3. In their presenting "gifts to the poor." It was remembered that there were many who had

not the means of celebrating the common deliverance; so the poor received gifts, that all might rejoice together. "Freely ye have received, freely give" (1 John iii. 17).

Memorials:—1. A written record. "Mordecai wrote these things" (ver. 20). Some have inferred from this sentence that Mordecai was the author of the Book of Esther. It is as likely, however, that the book was composed by another from writings left by Mordecai. In any case, a suitable record of the events in which the Jew played so important a part was made to become, through its insertion in the sacred canon, the best and most enduring monument of the deliverance of Israel from the wiles of Haman. 2. An annual festival. Esther and Mordecai ordained that the Jews everywhere should celebrate yearly the victory over Haman by a three days' feast. From that day to this the feast of Pur, or Purim, has held its place among the other established festivals of Israel. At the present time its observance is attended by much excess. Memorial institutions have a great evidential value. Just as the Lord's Supper and the Lord's day at once commemorate and attest the facts of our Lord's death and resurrection, so the feast of Purim is a testimony to the truth of the narrative contained in the Book of Esther. Memorials of past deliverances should—(1) Keep alive our sense of gratitude. (2) Teach us our dependence on God. (3) Strengthen our faith in God. (4) Warn us against the temptations and dangers of sin, and constrain us to lead a holy and God-fearing life. To have our "names written in heaven" is a better memorial than any that could be fashioned on earth.—D.

EXPOSITION. § 19.

CHAPTER X.

CONCLUSION.—THE GREATNESS OF AHASUERUS, AND OF MORDECAI UNDER HIM (ch. x.). The Book of Esther might have been expected to terminate with the institution of the Purim feast. All that has gone before is subordinate to this, and the reader would be satisfied, and require no more; if the book stopped at the end of ch. ix. But the writer, perhaps from personal attachment to Mordecai, perhaps from mere patriotic pride in him, cannot bring himself to lay down the pen until he has put on record the full greatness of his hero, and the strength and support that he was to the Jews of his day. He has already told us that "this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater" (ch. ix. 4). He now expands this statement. The essence of Mordecai's greatness consisted in his being "next unto king Ahasuerus" (ver. 3), his chief minister and *alter ego*. Thus the greatness of Ahasuerus is involved in his. So the chapter commences with a few words on Ahasuerus' greatness. It has already been noticed more than once (ch. i. 1; viii. 9) that he "ruled from India to Ethiopia, over an hundred and twenty-seven provinces." It is now added that he "laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea" (ver. 1). This mention of "laying a tribute" was the chief reason why in former days so many writers, including Hooker, identified

the Ahasuerus of this book with Darius, the son of Hystaspes. But it is not necessary to suppose that the *first* laying of a tribute on the provinces of the Persian empire is here intended; and Xerxes, after the Grecian expedition, which seriously altered the bounds of his dominions, may well have made a new assessment, in which the islands of the *Ægean*, or some of them, and certain other maritime tracts, were included. For the rest of Ahasuerus' "power and his might," the writer is content to refer his readers to "the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia" (ver. 2), which contained also an account of "the greatness of Mordecai, whereto the king advanced him." This greatness forms the sole subject of the concluding verse, which declares Mordecai's position—(1) with respect to the Persians—"next to the king;" and, (2) with respect to the Jews—"great among them," "accepted," and their protector and benefactor, "seeking their wealth," or welfare, and "speaking peace," or insuring tranquillity, to all the whole race or people.

Ver. 1.—King Ahasuerus laid a tribute on the land. Darius, the son of Hystaspes, was the first to do this (Herod., iii. 89); but, as the tribute had to be rearranged from time to time (*ibid.*, vi. 42), any subsequent Persian monarch who made a fresh arrangement might be said to "lay a tribute on the land." Xerxes is not unlikely to have done

so after his return from Greece, as he had lost portions of his territories. **And on the islands of the sea.** The Hebrew expression translated by "islands of the sea" includes maritime tracts. Xerxes by the Greek expedition lost the islands of the *Ægean*, but still held certain tracts upon the coast of Europe, which were occupied for a considerable time by Persian garrisons (Herod., vii. 106, 107). These would necessarily be included in any assessment that he may have made, and it is even not unlikely that Xerxes would lay his assessment on the *Ægean* islands, though he might not be able to collect it.

Ver. 2.—**All the acts of his power and of his might.** These are unknown to us. After the failure of the Grecian expedition Xerxes attempted nothing further on that side of his empire, and the Greeks consequently record nothing more concerning him. He may have made expeditions in other directions. But the chief evidences that we have of his activity point to his having sought to gratify his ambition and give vent to his grand ideas by erecting magnificent buildings. **The book of the chronicles.** See ch.

ii. 23; vi. i; ix. 32. **The kings of Media and Persia.** It is indicative of the intimate connection of the two Iranian empires that one "book" contained the records of both. The fact of the connection is fully established by profane history. Its exact nature is not perhaps even yet fully understood. "Media" seems to be placed before "Persia" in this place on chronological grounds, because the Median history preceded the Persian history, and was therefore recorded first in the "book."

Ver. 3.—**Next unto king Ahasuerus.** Compare Gen. xli. 40; Dan. v. 7; vi. 3. Profane history neither confirms this nor contradicts it. We know almost nothing of Xerxes from profane sources after his return to Susa in B.C. 479. **Accepted of.** Or, "beloved by." **The wealth of his people.** *I. e.* their welfare. **Speaking peace to all his seed.** It is generally allowed that by "his seed" we must understand those of the same stock with himself—"the seed of Israel." "Speaking peace" to them seems to mean "promoting their peace and safety"—insuring them, so long as he lived and ruled, a quiet and peaceful existence.

HOMILETICS.

Ver. 1.—**A king's tribute and power.** Ahasuerus is certainly not brought before us in this book as a model king. He was careless of the lives of his subjects, indifferent to justice, callous to suffering, capricious in his likings, and fond of his own pleasure and ease. If Xerxes be the Ahasuerus of this book, it would be hard to light in history upon a character less worthy of respect. Yet he was, if not a great king, king of a great empire—an embodiment of the idea of sovereignty and monarchy.

I. OBSERVE THE CHARACTER OF HIS DOMINION. He levied taxes upon the land and upon the isles of the sea. He exercised power and might over his subjects. He was responsible to no earthly authority.

II. OBSERVE THE EXTENT OF HIS DOMINION. Not only in this verse, but throughout the book, the vastness of the Persian empire and the might of the Persian sceptre appear as a great fact in the world's history.

III. OBSERVE THE LIMITS OF HIS POWER. The Most High ruled, as he ever does rule, and turned the heart of the subject king as he would. We feel that the moving power in the great transaction was Divine. Man rules, but God overrules.

IV. THE POWER OF AHASUERUS SUGGESTS THE AUTHORITY AND EMPIRE OF GOD HIMSELF. Not only by similitude, but also by contrast. This earthly king was defeated by the Greeks, despised by his subjects, assassinated by his servants, and his kingdom passed away to be no more seen. But "the Lord reigneth." "His dominion is an everlasting dominion." "Of his glory there is no end." He demands the submission of our will and the tribute of our praise.

Ch. ix. 4; x. 2.—**The greatness of Mordecai.** Before taking leave of this interesting and typical character, it may be well to review the elements of the greatness which, in these two passages, is so glowingly ascribed to him. Mordecai's greatness was—

i. A contrast to his former humiliation at the door of the palace. ii. A contrast to the ignominious death for which at one time he seemed destined. iii. A state for which his past sufferings and patience had probably, in a measure, prepared him. iv. Directly occasioned by his act of loyalty and faithfulness. v. Occasioned by the discovery of Haman his enemy's malice. vi. Concerted with the royalty of his relative, Esther. vii. The direct bestowment of the king, Ahasuerus. viii. Manifest in the palace. ix. Extending to all the provinces of the vast empire, where his fame

was known and his power was felt. x. Progressive, for he became greater and greater. xi. Exercised for the public good; in this respect a signal contrast to him he replaced. xii. Recorded in the chronicles of the Persian kingdom for the information of future generations. xiii. Recorded and sanctified in a book of canonical Scripture for the instruction and encouragement of fidelity and piety throughout all time. xiv. Permanently commemorated in the interesting Jewish festival of Purim.

Ver. 3.—*The wealth and peace of a people the patriot's aim.* It is a fine description of the aim of Mordecai's public life with which this book closes. What more could be said of the patriotic statesman in any kingdom than this: that he was ever found "seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed"?

I. WEALTH. Under this we include not simply riches, but welfare in every sense: prosperity, security, progress, happiness—all that can truly enrich and bless a nation. Patriotism, observe, has regard to the people. It is no special class or interest that the true patriot seeks to benefit, but all his countrymen. Now, whilst this virtue does not take so wide a range as philanthropy, it is, like philanthropy, opposed to self-seeking. It is an expansive, liberal, generous, and withal practical attitude of mind. And this end is sought by personal effort, by the exercise of wisdom in the choice of means, and by diligence in their use.

II. PEACE. Under this must be included peace of heart, such as arises from a sense of justice and security of government; social peace, such as prevails where neighbours dwell in amity; political peace, or freedom from civil broils and tumults; general peace, or concord between different races and nations; universal peace, such as is destined, according to prophetic declarations, to pervade the whole earth. All these will be dear to the patriot's heart, and he will use every endeavour to bring about these high and noble ends. Causes of disaffection and disunion and discord he will seek to remove, and he will do all that lies within his power to bring on the reign of righteousness, of liberty, of happiness, of concord. And in his endeavours the Christian patriot will be animated by the love and grace of the Divine Son of man, whose mission it was to bring "peace and good-will to men."

HOMILIES BY VARIOUS AUTHORS.

Vers. 1—3.—*Wisdom at the helm.* These concluding verses give a brief and comprehensive view of the results of Mordecai's advancement to power. The influence of the great Jew soon made itself felt to the utmost boundaries of the wide empire.

I. A UNIVERSAL TAXING. The laying of "a tribute on the land and the isles of the sea" may seem very arbitrary, but it was probably in the manner of a notable reform. It is to be attributed to Mordecai, and is given as a special instance of his wisdom and power. Despots have many ways of extracting money from those whom they govern, but the only proper way of supporting government is through just and systematic taxation. If the satraps or governors of provinces send in abundant supplies, shahs and sultans are content; they pay no heed to the manner in which the supplies have been secured. From this cause corruption and oppression still abound in the East. Mordecai adopted a system of direct taxation which embraced the whole empire, and for this he succeeded in getting the king's sanction. Let us remark—1. That tribute is necessary. Government cannot be efficiently maintained without adequate support; it is worth paying for. 2. Tribute should only be raised for necessary purposes; not for selfish indulgences or vainglorious conquests, but for the legitimate needs of the state. 3. Tribute should be equitable in its incidence. It should be borne by all, but at the same time it should exhibit a just regard to the varying conditions and abilities of citizens. 4. Tribute should be levied openly, and only through legally-appointed channels. Otherwise injustice and corruption are encouraged. 5. Tribute is most satisfactory when estimated and determined by a people themselves through appointed representatives. Self-government and self-taxation are in all respects better than an irresponsible despotism. 6. Tribute when just or necessary should always be cheerfully given. We have a duty to our rulers. The protection, freedom, and peace secured to us by a good government are cheaply purchased by a taxation that is equally levied on all. 7. Tribute is due to the heavenly King as well as to earthly monarchs and states. Whilst rendering to Cæsar what is Cæsar's, we should be careful to render to God what is God's (Matt. xxii. 21).

II. OTHER ACTS OF WISDOM AND GREATNESS. These are only noted, not described. They were many and illustrious. But though our narrative passes by these acts with a simple allusion to them, it refers us for detailed and complete information to a good authority—"are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?" No doubt the writer thought that archives of the great empire would outlive his little story. But where now are *they*? Where is the empire itself? Where are other empires, greater and more brilliant, that succeeded it as the dominant world-power? All vanished, and their records with them! The only chronicle preserved of Mordecai's doings is that given in the Book of Esther, and its preservation is owing to its having been bound up with the word of God to men. Let us learn—1. The evanescent character of all worldly things. 2. The indestructibility of God's truth and kingdom (Matt. v. 18; 1 Pet. i. 24, 25).

III. A PLEASANT RECOGNITION OF HONEST AND HONOURABLE GREATNESS. Mordecai was powerful not only with the king and his heathen subjects, but with "the multitude of his own brethren" throughout the empire. His power, however, was not forced, or grudgingly acknowledged. He was "great among the Jews" because he was "accepted of," or acceptable to them. All power that relies on force and exacts an unwilling submission is bad and precarious; that power only is legitimate and secure which is based on the confidence and affection of a willing people. Mordecai's acceptableness with his brethren of Israel sprang from two things:—1. He sought their wealth. In other words, he studied their prosperity. All the laws of the empire were so framed as to secure their freedom of industry and commercial intercourse. 2. He spoke peace to them. His acts had the effect of delivering them from the fear of their enemies. He held over them the shield of the king's protection, and enabled them to live and work in quiet contentedness. We have here an emblematic picture of Christ's kingdom. Prosperity and peace are the two great blessings promised to the people of Zion (Ps. cxxii. 6, 7). "Quietness and assurance for ever" is "the effect of righteousness" (Isa. xxxiii. 17, 18). Christ is the "King of glory" and the "Prince of peace." "The good Shepherd" watches, defends, guides, and feeds his sheep; he makes them "lie down in green pastures," and leads them "beside the still waters" (Ps. xxiii. 2).—D.

Ver. 3.—*The beneficent statesman.* It is reserved for the very last sentences of this book to give to one of the chiefest of its characters, perhaps the chiefest, the place and testimony he had well earned. For a time these seemed withheld, and both the name of Mordecai and himself also seemed kept somewhat unduly in the background. But when we come to the end, it looks rather as though all the book had been in deep reality about him, and as though all had hinged on him. We are left at the close of the book with our last impressions as of him, and he is placed before us under a very strong light. There is no doubt much of the *patriot* in the portrait we have of Mordecai. But the honourable summary of this verse reminds us that he had passed the mere politician and patriot. He has won for himself the name of the great and the good statesman. He is "next to Ahasuerus;" and what he did and what he was affected not the Jews only, but the whole empire—all of the various and wide dominion of the king. He is stamped on the sacred page as the type of A BENEFICENT STATESMAN. There have been not a few who have extorted from their own day and generation the title of *great* statesmen, but the claim has not survived them long. The number of the really *beneficent* statesmen is much smaller, but their renown is for ever. In the amazing wealth and variety of Scripture lesson for every need of human life, and of Scripture model for every office of authority and influence in human society, this of the honest and beneficent statesman is not overlooked. Neither must we overlook it, nor omit to notice, as afresh suggested by it, how intrinsic an argument is herein given us for the Divine inspiration of the Bible. Whence but from such an original could have come to us so many, so perfect models? It is doubly important that we should remark how ample a share of these the Book of Esther contains—evidences of inspiration of the highest kind and value. The brief summary of this verse is the more impressive as coming at the very end of the book. But passing by all other suggestions, it speaks of a certain *greatness*, and a greatness evidently of very comprehensive character. It is the greatness of an emphatically good statesman. Let us take the opportunity suggested by a leading instance of considering—

I. THE STATESMAN'S OFFICE. 1. It is the expression of government. If man were only *gregarious*, he would need, and undoubtedly be subjected to, government. ALL living things are subject to government, need it, and are rapidly being brought under the rule of man, according to the charter originally given to man. 2. It is the expression of order. Man is emphatically not merely gregarious; he is social. The variety of his sympathies and antipathies is very large, and their range amazing. So much so, that the saying, "The chiefest study of mankind is man," might, if reversed, express to perfection a great truth for some, and read, "The chiefest study of man is mankind." 3. It is the expression of concentrated purpose, of intelligent, united advance. The highest and most beneficent results of SOCIETY would without it be unattainable by the human species. Development of society is always tending toward higher developments of government. And the beneficial reaction is sometimes abundantly evident. Again, the higher-developed form of government is always tending to render possible higher social results. 4. It is in some degree the expression of morality and religion. Where the religious sense is lowest, then it is lowest, and *vice versâ*. It has been well said that "the organisation of every human community indicates some sense of a Divine presence, some consciousness of a higher law, some pressure of a solemn necessity." Government (and therefore the chief personage of government) is the outcome of the most elementary necessities of humanity in some of the very highest aspects of that same humanity. From the very first this was testified; and through exceedingly various forms, lower and higher in type, the principle has ever held its ground, and still excites attention and interest second to not one of the profoundest problems.

II. SOME OF THE GENERAL REQUISITES FOR IT. 1. A certain passion for humanity as considered in large masses. 2. A natural gift for discerning the genius of a people. 3. Natural qualifications for *exercising* rule. (1) Sympathy strong. (2) Justice clear and inviolable. (3) Authority, often indefinable in its elements, but evidencing its own existence conclusively. (4) Temper and moderation. 4. Carefully-trained ability to calculate the effects of certain legislative treatment on whole communities of people, and on their mutual adjustments. 5. Favourableness of position, as marked out by Providence.

III. SOME OF THE MORE SPECIALLY MORAL AND BENEFICENT REQUISITES OF IT. 1. The "greatness" which it inevitably marks will be, as far as *possible*, free from the taint of personal ambition. Surely there was a *minimum* of this in Mordecai, as there was a loathsome *maximum* of it in Haman. The very way in which high position is attained will be a happy omen, or the reverse. 2. Its "greatness" will partake largely of the *moral* element. (1) It will have ready for the hour of special need of it an inflexible moral *courage*. What an illustration of this Mordecai gave before he attained high office, and when he would not bow to wrong, and, when wrong became more wrong, still refused to "move," though dread punishment overhung. (2) The natural temper and gift of authority will more and more become transmuted into moral authority, and become superseded by moral influence. Express mention is made of this in the career of Mordecai. "The fear of him," of the moral power that was behind him, spread over enemy and grew comfortingly in friend. 3. Its greatness will lay itself out in practical devotion to the interests of the crowded multitude. Mordecai "sought the wealth of his people," and it made him "accepted of the multitude of his brethren." 4. Its greatness will speak the things of peace. Special emphasis is laid on the fact that Mordecai "spoke peace to all his seed." The statesman is *not* to seek to give the impression of *caste*. He is not to flourish upon war or strife. He is not to propagate the methods and the ideas of the high-handed, but all the contrary. Like the spiritual teacher, he also must not "cry, Peace, peace, when there is no peace;" but he is to make peace as far as may be possible by breathing peace upon all.

IV. SOME OF ITS REWARD. Beside all such as he will have in common with every obscurest fellow-man who is faithful, in the satisfaction of fulfilling duty, in peace of conscience, and in a persuasion of Divine approval, he may reckon upon—1. The joy of seeing a prospered community, due in some part to his work. 2. The gratitude of a discerning people growing round his accumulating years. 3. An honourable, enduring place on the best of the pages of history.—B.

Ver. 3.—*A life summed up.* "For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great." Gather from Mordecai's history something to stimulate our spirits in the battle of life.

I. We might remark upon THE WAY IN WHICH HE EARNED HIS ELEVATION. Perhaps as a Jew, he was a little revengeful towards aliens; but he filled well a lowly position, and so was prepared better for a higher. Shall we desire rather to reap rewards than to sow the seed which will produce them?

II. Gather stimulus from THE WAY IN WHICH HE PERFORMED HIS DUTY AND KEPT HIS INTEGRITY. In this he felt that he was already rewarded. And shall we not learn to be patient? Our impatience is our great hindrance. We do not wait, trusting in God, as Mordecai. Yet "he knoweth the way that we take," and in his own time will bring us forth when sufficiently tested.

III. Gather lessons from the fact that HIS PROSPERITY WAS MATERIALLY AIDED BY HIS FAITH AND PRAYER. By his words to Esther we are sure he looked to God for deliverance. When the deliverance came it involved his prosperity as well as that of his people, just as a stranded vessel, when again floating, carries forward not only the captain, but any passengers on board. Mordecai firmly believed that, even though Esther held her peace, "enlargement and deliverance would arise to the Jews from some other place." We can pray to be made faithful, holy, earnest, and in due time the reward will come. It will then be in a sense the result of prayer.

IV. Gather encouragement in seeing HOW HIS ELEVATION CAME WHEN HIS HOPES WERE AT THE LOWEST EBB. See on what a trifle they turned. And thus it is constantly seen in life. Be prepared to seize the trifles, and remember that the darkest night oft ushers in the brightest morning.

V. Gather also instruction in seeing HOW HIS ELEVATION WAS APPROVED BY HIS FELLOW-MEN. We are told he was "accepted of the multitude of his brethren." There was little envy at his rise, because there was much humility in the man. So there are men in whose prosperity we may delight, because, instead of being puffed up, or becoming purse-proud, they maintain their former humility, and practise greater liberality.

VI. Gather guidance from THE WAY IN WHICH MORDECAI USED HIS ELEVATION FOR THE BEST PURPOSES. He sought the welfare of his people, and spoke "peace to all his seed." Not only so, but there is a tradition that many of the Persians, and even the king, believed in God through him. Let us then go through life seeking opportunities to do good, and using those we find. Let us make the motto of Cromwell ours, not only to strike while the iron is hot, "but to make it hot by striking." As Christians, let us seek the welfare and eternal peace of others. We rust, we freeze when we live only for ourselves. We should be like the stream spoken of in a fable, "too active to freeze." "The mill-stream went dashing along, so that the frost could not seize and bind it. The traveller over the Alps in winter was so earnest in striving to save his brother, overcome by cold, that he was himself kept alive by the attempt." Remember that, after all, Mordecai's elevation was but a type of the heavenly honour and glory which awaits all those faithful in spiritual things. The "declaration of his glory" was written side by side with that of the king. He died full of years and of honour. That God who had been his guide in life was his refuge in death. When ushered into heaven, he doubtless felt that he had been, at best, an unprofitable servant. Still, God gave him, doubtless, in that world a position far more elevated, far more lasting, far more satisfactory than that which he, the whilom neglected deliverer, occupied as the prime minister of the Persian king.—H.

Ver. 3.—*Moral work.* Integrity must prosper sooner or later. Were it not so, we should lose faith in eternal righteousness. Appearances may be unfavourable for a time, wrong, sorrow, suffering may precede, but either here or hereafter a distinction will most assuredly be made between the true and the false. Joseph, though consigned to prison, was subsequently raised to power; Daniel, though cast into the lions' den, eventually sat with princes; Mordecai, though threatened with death, finally became 'next unto king Ahasuerus.' It is said that Mordecai was "great." What does greatness consist in? 1. *Physical endowments.* Strength, skill, courage are among these. The athlete, the warrior, the hunter were heroes in ancient times. The deeds of Hercules, Samson, Goliath were celebrated in song. 2. *Mental powers.*

Genius is everywhere admired. Its mighty works are the most precious inheritances of our race. In literature, in science, in art, in the numberless inventions of civilised life, it continues to bless the world. 3. *Exalted position.* This may be due to mere accident. Kings, princes, noblemen are as a rule born to their high rank. When such is the case they deserve no credit for it. High places are sometimes snatched by the unscrupulous—by men who have no better recommendation than their audacity—in the universal scramble for power which goes on round about us. There is no meanness that some will not stoop to, for the sake of the glittering honours of office, or even those petty distinctions which noble minds hold in utter contempt. But distinguished stations are also the rewards of physical endowments and mental powers honourably employed. Then are they to be coveted, to be held in high esteem. The case of Mordecai is a noted example. The text leads us to notice THE TESTS OF MORAL WORTH. Speaking generally, these are numerous; but we shall confine ourselves to those suggested here—*popularity, unselfishness, peaceableness.* Whom shall we consider morally great?

I. THE MAN WHO STANDS WELL WITH THE BEST PORTION OF THE COMMUNITY. "And accepted of the multitude of his brethren." Popularity as such has no intrinsic value, and to seek it for its own sake is degrading to the soul. Let any thoughtful man, while contemplating the quality of the exhibition that attracts the largest crowd, ask himself whether the admiration of such a crowd is really worth obtaining, and his inmost soul will answer, No. Crowds have been so often on the wrong side in great controversies that they have actually lost all claim to respect. They have generally applauded unjust wars; they have persecuted the pioneers of knowledge, both secular and religious; they acquiesced in the death of the Saviour. And yet, though the crowds of one age murder the prophets, the crowds of future ages will always build their sepulchres. History ever does justice to the memory of the martyr, and even he becomes popular when too late. But the Jews in captivity, the "brethren" of Mordecai, were a select community. They possessed a knowledge of things Divine which placed them on an incomparably higher level than the heathen among whom they lived. To be accepted of them, therefore, was a mark of worth. "The multitude of his brethren." A man may be the favourite of a party simply for party considerations. But when the upright among all parties agree to honour him, it must be on account of sterling qualities.

II. THE MAN WHO DEVOTES HIMSELF TO PROMOTE THE GOOD OF OTHERS. "Seeking the wealth of his people." Self-sacrifice was the Divinest quality in the Divinest Man. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." Into the kingdom which he came to establish no man can enter without denying himself, taking up his cross, and following him. Fallen man is essentially selfish. Look around you for a single moment, and the proofs of this will crowd upon your view. Most of the evils with which man afflicts his kind are traceable to this source. But look at the grand lives of history—lives which light up the gloom of sin and woe in which the world is enveloped—and what constitutes their glory? They are grand only in so far as they approach the sublime ideal which was fully realised only by One. Take the Apostle Paul. His memorable utterance to the Corinthians was the key-note of his entire life: "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved."

III. THE MAN WHO EXERTS HIS INFLUENCE IN THE INTEREST OF PEACE. "And speaking peace to all his seed." The primary reference in these words is probably to the kindness of Mordecai's disposition, but they are capable of a somewhat wider application, so as to include the desire of maintaining harmony, order, peace. It has been said of mankind, with too much reason, that their "state of nature is a state of war." Sin divides men. In private life, in public affairs, in international relations, this is seen daily. Envy, rivalry, strife are found everywhere. Such is the state of things even in this enlightened age, that no nation feels itself safe except it be prepared for the most deadly struggle with its neighbour. The advocate of peace is consequently a benefactor of his kind. The kingdom of God is "peace." The birth of its Founder was heralded by angels who sang of "peace on earth." The most precious legacy which Christ left his people was his "peace." And among the grand utterances of the grandest sermon is found this: "Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God."—R.

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