



THE
WOMEN OF THE BIBLE;

DELINEATED IN A SERIES OF

SKETCHES OF PROMINENT FEMALES

MENTIONED IN

HOLY SCRIPTURE.

BY CLERGYMEN OF THE UNITED STATES.

ILLUSTRATED BY EIGHTEEN CHARACTERISTIC STEEL ENGRAVINGS.

EDITED BY

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HAGAR.

Who that has ever read the story of Hagar, has not felt himself enchained by its almost matchless attractions? The incidents of which it is composed,—can any thing be more touching and beautiful, more illustrative of the simplicity of the patriarchal age, or of the strangely diversified operations of human nature, or of the movements of a wise and wonder-working Providence? And the materials are moulded with admirable skill and effect. Throughout the whole narrative, it is nature herself speaking with inimitable grace and tenderness. And herein consists the charm of Scripture narratives generally: there is an unstudied ease about them, which no words can describe and no art can counterfeit. Among the manifold evidences that the Bible is the product of divine inspiration, this is not to be overlooked—that the pictures of characters and scenes which it presents far transcend the highest human skill; so that we are forced to the conclusion that they must have been sketched by a divine hand, and with colors which Heaven alone can supply.

It is not necessary for the present purpose to attempt a connected narrative of the life of this extraordinary person. I propose to contemplate her simply at one point, and that perhaps the point of greatest interest in her history;—I mean at the moment of her having laid her son down under a tree, as she supposed, to die for the

want of water, when the voice from Heaven was just about to speak words of consolation to her, and her eyes were almost in the act of being opened to behold the relief which Providence had provided. A little reflection will show that her condition at this critical moment was the result of a singular combination of influences, affecting several individuals beside herself, while there was also bound up in it the germ, not only of her own future history, but of the history of no inconsiderable portion of the race.

Hagar, at the period referred to, was in the depths of sorrow, while yet she was on the eve of being cheered by the most welcome and grateful revelation. The suffering and the relief, then, are the two points which here claim our consideration.

THE SUFFERING.

That it must have been intense suffering, no one can doubt who considers either the demonstrations by which it was attended or the causes in which it originated. There is nothing recorded of her, either before or after this event, that would suggest even the probability that she was deficient in natural fortitude, or that she would, under any circumstances, make an unreal display of grief: on the contrary, there were some things in her conduct in Abraham's house that indicated rather a hardy and even insolent spirit; and it is reasonable to suppose that she had, to say the least, the ordinary ability to meet difficulties of any kind with calmness and firmness. And yet we find her overwhelmed with emotion: the language of the inspired record is that she "lifted up her voice and wept." And is it any wonder that she should have done this, in view of the sad and strange condition into which she had fallen? No doubt the immediate cause of her grief was the fact that she supposed her son was dying at a

little distance from her;—dying for the mere want of water, which it was not in her power to furnish. Every mother who has lost a son at the age of fifteen or sixteen, under any circumstances, has been conscious of a deep wound in her heart; and though she may afterwards regain her spirits, and seem to the world as before, yet that wound will never be so entirely healed to her dying day, but that recollection will often set it to bleeding afresh. But in the case of *this* mother, there were ingredients in her cup of sorrow which few mothers have ever known. She was alone with her child in the wilderness, and had become bewildered and lost her way. The bottle of water with which her master had provided her was exhausted; and her son, wearied with the journey, and having nothing to sustain or refresh him, found it impossible to proceed any farther. She was beyond the reach of all human help, and there was no ear but that of God on which her supplicatory voice could fall. Sad would it have been for her to have stood by the death-bed of her child, with all the grateful appliances that friendship and sympathy could furnish; but to have laid him down to die alone,—to die for want of that of which she knew there was an abundance somewhere,—and then to go on her way a solitary wanderer, reflecting that she should see the face of her beloved child no more,—surely it must have been among the bitterest experiences incident to bereavement. She did for him the best that she could: not doubting that he must die, and die soon, she could not bear to witness the final scene; but she laid him beneath the shade of a tree,—the best alleviation to his sufferings that she could provide; and then went and seated herself at a little distance, in what seemed to her like the shadow of death, to struggle with her maternal sensibilities. Surely the most stoical could not elude the deep grief of a mother on losing a son, especially under such trying circumstances.

But there were yet other circumstances that served to increase the

anguish of her spirit. There can be little doubt that the affliction took her by surprise. If we can anticipate any particular afflictive dispensation, we have time to prepare for it; to surrender our minds to the special contemplation of those truths which are fitted to inspire a calm and filial resignation, and thus abate the violence of the shock or prevent it altogether. The mother who sees her child gradually sinking under the power of an insidious but fatal malady, has an opportunity to discipline her spirit to meet with composure the final issue; but the mother who sees her child stricken in a moment with a malignant disease, and, in a few brief hours, placed by death beyond the reach of maternal kindness, — oh, she finds the path from the heights of prosperity, as it may be, to the depths of adversity, so very short, that it is more than probable that she will be overwhelmed by the sad transition. There is nothing in the narrative that would seem to indicate that Hagar had apprehended any untoward event in connection with her journey; least of all, that she had anticipated any thing like what actually occurred. She knew that she was setting off on a journey under somewhat peculiar circumstances; but probably she thought of nothing but that she should be carried safely and mercifully through it. She knew that she was not provided with any considerable quantity of water; but she doubted not that she should be able to obtain, as often as she needed it, a fresh supply. She knew that she had to make her way through a wilderness; but there is no reason to believe that she expected to *lose* her way, and be thrown into an attitude of hopeless uncertainty. She knew that her son was to accompany her; but she might reasonably expect to be entertained and cheered by his conversation, rather than be obliged to lay him down to die. In short, we have every reason to believe that sad disappointment was one of the bitter ingredients in her cup; that when she stood there sorrowing for her beloved child, she experienced that which not only had

never entered her thoughts, but for which she had made no adequate preparation.

It is the dictate of true wisdom to be always prepared for affliction. We live in a world of perpetual vicissitude. No sun can rise upon us so brightly, but that it may set in a cloud, or even in a storm. No earthly hopes can be so well founded, no earthly possessions so secure, but that they may be blown away by a single blast of calamity. We may not be able to anticipate the particular trials that are in store for us; but trials of some kind or other we may regard as inevitable. We may not be able to calculate the precise periods when desolation and sorrow shall hang upon our footsteps; but that such periods will occur, is as certain as the ordinance of Heaven can render it. Surely, then, the only wisdom, the only safety, consists in being always ready to bear the rod. A principle of true religion in the heart, kept in habitual and vigorous operation, is the appropriate preparation for affliction in every form. Only let the great truths which Christianity presents have a firm lodgment in the mind, let them be rendered real and practical through the influence of a lively faith, and the floods may rise and the storms beat, the sun may be turned into darkness and the moon into blood, and still nothing will have happened but what can be met with an undisturbed tranquillity. Yes, Christianity, all-glorious Christianity, furnishes an antidote to every sorrow; and if it is ever unavailing, the only reason is, that it is not suitably applied.

There was yet another characteristic of Hagar's grief that served greatly to increase its intensity—or rather it may be said to have constituted its sting: I refer to the fact that it was to some extent retributive grief; and the remark applies as well to her son as to herself. Hagar's conduct in Abraham's family, at a preceding period, had been far from being exemplary; she seems to have manifested an

arrogant and supercilious spirit, which was utterly inconsistent with her humble station; and her mistress never forgot this amidst all subsequent changes. Ishmael, too, had conducted himself towards Isaac in a most unworthy manner; insomuch that Sarah refused any longer to tolerate his presence. Both the mother and the child, therefore, notwithstanding they may have felt that they had been to some extent cruelly dealt by, could not but feel that they had been the culpable instruments of their own sufferings; and nothing appears but that if they had behaved themselves discreetly, they might have remained unmolested in the house of their master. That Sarah, in consideration of the peculiar circumstances, may have been predisposed to fault-finding, seems more than probable; but there is no reason to believe that she would have ever meditated the design of their expulsion from the family, had it not been for the insolent treatment which both herself and her son received at their hands.

It will be found, in respect to a large part of the afflictions which mankind suffer, that, either directly or indirectly, they bring them upon themselves. How common is it for persons to make enemies in the same way that Hagar and Ishmael did; and as a remoter consequence, to bring upon themselves a train of the most serious evils. An unkind action, an indiscreet word, a haughty look, may leave a sting behind, whose poison no subsequent acts can ever neutralize. And when the poison begins to make itself felt in its manifold operations of evil, then begins an inward scrutiny in respect to the cause; and conscience, in an honest and earnest ministration, throws it into the light of noonday. There is nothing like trouble to put conscience at its appropriate work; especially where the evil experienced is the result of evil committed. Joseph's brethren, while they continued in prosperity, seem to have escaped the visitations of remorse; but when the night-clouds of adversity gathered around them, and every thing

seemed ominous of disaster and ruin, the ghosts of their misdeeds came trooping before their imaginations, and one of their first reflections was, "We are verily guilty concerning our brother." Oh! there is no grief but what can be well enough borne if remorse be not one of its elements; but if with the burden that oppresses us we are obliged to associate the recollection of our own corrupt dispositions or evil doings, then what might otherwise seem light, becomes intolerable. Let every one keep a conscience void of offence in every thing; and then his spirit may sustain itself in joyful serenity, even though he should be called to lay himself down in a wilderness to die, or to sit by in gloomy solitude, and watch the last exercises of a friend in his passage through the dark valley.

No one can adequately appreciate the importance of a good conscience as an element of manly and vigorous endurance. Let the records of martyrdom speak; from Stephen down to the last disciple that has sealed his testimony with his blood. Those men, so strong and glorious in suffering, were not haunted by unforgiven crimes: conscience witnessed to their sincerity, their integrity, their unyielding devotion to the best of masters; and under this all-sustaining influence they could march calmly and triumphantly into the fire. We may not be called upon to offer up our lives at the altar of our religion; but so long as we continue in the world we shall be heirs of calamity, and no one can tell how bitter may be the sufferings that are ordained for us. As we would find the most effectual alleviation to our woe, let us take heed that we suffer with a good conscience; let us see to it, not only that our trials do not originate immediately in our own misconduct, but that our character in every respect be such as to furnish no ground for inward accusations.

It was a bitter cup that was put into the hands of this unfortunate woman, and not the less but the more bitter, because she had to share

it with her own child.—But this is but one side of the picture : from the suffering it is grateful to turn to

THE RELIEF.

There lies Ishmael under a shrub, where he has been placed by his mother to die. There sits Hagar, with a mother's heart beating, as she supposes, to the agonies of her dying child. The sobs of the mother and the cries of her son seem to be wasted upon the desert air. Perhaps they are within the sound of each other's voices ; but they look not upon each other, because the mother's eye suffused with tears, the mother's heart bursting with anguish, cannot endure the appalling spectacle ; and though it is not stated in the narrative, possibly the son might have chosen to die without being an eye-witness to the struggles of maternal affection. The case has now become an extreme one, and is every way ripe for God's gracious interposition. The voice of the suffering child, though it reached no human ear, unless it was the ear of his despairing and wretched mother, was heard in Heaven ; and God's commissioned angel took the case into his own hands : and he not only assured the mother that her son's life should be preserved, and that he should be the germ of a great nation, but he showed her a refreshing spring almost by her side, from which his wants might be, actually were, supplied. It was just at the moment when the darkness seemed the deepest and the most portentous, that light burst upon her path and joy kindled in her soul. God saw and pitied his poor sorrowing creatures ; but he suffered them to be reduced to a state that seemed not only helpless, but hopeless, before the source of relief was discovered to them.

And thus God often deals even with his own children ; especially when they are subjected to chastisement for great and signal delin-

quencies. He suffers them not only to lose their way in the wilderness, but to remain there long enough to make them sensible how dreary and desolate a place they are in; long enough to impress them with their inability to effect their own deliverance. When they are first carried thither, they may perhaps be insensible how sad their condition is; and they may rely with confidence on their own unassisted strength to bring them out of it; but as the days, or perhaps weeks and months pass off, they find the burden upon their spirits grows heavier and heavier, till at length it becomes well nigh insupportable. And then they lift up the voice of lamentation, and cry for help; and perhaps, by some most unexpected divine ministration, the help which they need is afforded. It comes not, however, until the requisite preparation is made in their being rebuked into an humble and dependent spirit. Or if there be apparent relief, while another spirit is predominant, the result will show that it was deceptive, and had in it the elements of ultimate dissatisfaction.

In the case contemplated in this affecting narrative, the relief was strictly miraculous; for it is not now, and was not even then, according to the common course of nature, that man or woman should be found in colloquy with an angel. But we are expressly informed that “the angel of the Lord called to Hagar out of Heaven,” and bade her take courage in that hour of her calamity, and indicated to her the source of relief, and added some most encouraging words in respect to the future. Miraculous interpositions for the relief of human woe are not indeed now to be looked for; but who that notices the gracious dealings of our Heavenly Father with his children, is not ready to testify that he not unfrequently stretches out his arm for their protection or defence or consolation, in so signal a manner as to be a matter of grateful surprise to those who are witnesses, as well as to him who is the subject, of the interposition. Infinite wisdom and

Almighty power are not straitened in respect to the accomplishment of any purpose ; and there is no darkness so deep but that Heaven may find means of dissipating it in a moment,—no cup so bitter, but that, by some new ingredient graciously infused into it, it may become a cup of joy. Let any Christian, especially any one who has had long experience in the religious life,—nay, let any one who is a stranger to the quickening power of Christianity,—review the path by which he has been led, and he will find that he has been the subject of many signal deliverances and preservations ; and that, but for the ever-watchful Eye and the ever-active Hand, he would not have continued in this world of danger and calamity to this day.

I may not conclude these remarks without adverting to the fact that the events recorded in this narrative have a high typical reference, and connect themselves in their consequences with the history of not a small portion of the human race. In this most simple and touching tale, on the face of which appears little else than a case of deep suffering relieved by an unlooked-for visitation of mercy, were hid the elements of a nation's destiny through a long course of ages. And thus it is always: "God moves in a mysterious way." The scheme of universal Providence is too deep for any mortal line to fathom. Events are continually occurring that seem to us of small moment ; and yet, when contemplated in their connections, they are seen to have an importance that outruns all human calculation. Let man sink into the dust, when he attempts to scan the mighty works of the Ruler of the world !