

THE ELDER'S FEAST.

A TRADITION OF LAODICEA.

At a certain time in the earlier ages there lived in the city of Laodicea a Christian elder of some repute, named Onesiphorus. The world had smiled on him, and though a Christian, he was rich and full of honors. All men, even the heathen, spoke well of him, for he was a man courteous of speech and mild of manner.

His wife, a fair Ionian lady but half reclaimed from idolatry, though baptized and accredited as a member of the Christian church, still lingered lovingly on the confines of old heathenism, and if she did not believe, still cherished with pleasure the poetic legends of Apollo and Venus, of Jove and Diana.

A large and fair family of sons and daughters had risen around these parents; but their education had been much after the rudiments of this world, and not after Christ. Though, according to the customs of the church, they were brought to the font of baptism, and sealed in the name of the Father, and the Son, and Holy Ghost, and although daily, instead of libations to the Penates, or flower offerings to Diana and Juno, the name of Jesus was invoked, yet the spirit of Jesus was wanting. The chosen associates of all these children, as they grew older, were among the heathen; and daily they urged their parents, by their entreaties, to

conform, in one thing after another, to heathen usage. "Why should we be singular, mother?" said the dark-eyed Myrrah, as she bound her hair and arranged her dress after the fashion of the girls in the temple of Venus. "Why may we not wear the golden ornaments and images which have been consecrated to heathen goddesses?" said the sprightly Thalia; "surely none others are to be bought, and are we to do altogether without?" "And why may we not be at feasts where libations are made to Apollo or Jupiter?" said the sons; "so long as we do not consent to it or believe in it, will our faith be shaken thereby?" "How are we ever to reclaim the heathen, if we do not mingle among them?" said another son; "did not our Master eat with publicans and sinners?"

It was, however, to be remarked, that no conversions of the heathen to Christianity ever took place through the means of these complying sons and daughters, or any of the number who followed their example. Instead of withdrawing any from the confines of heathenism, they themselves were drawn so nearly over, that in certain situations and circumstances they would undoubtedly have been ranked among them by any but a most scrutinizing observer. If any in the city of Laodicea were ever led to unite themselves with Jesus, it was by means of a few who observed the full simplicity of the ancient faith, and who, though honest, tender, and courteous in all their dealings with the heathen, still went not a step with them in conformity to any of their customs.

In time, though the family we speak of never broke off from the Christian church, yet if you had been in it, you might have heard much

warm and earnest conversation about things that took place at the baths, or in feasts to various divinities; but if any one spoke of Jesus, there was immediately a cold silence, a decorous, chilling, respectful pause, after which the conversation, with a bound, flew back into the old channel again.

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It was now night; and the house of Onesiphorus the Elder was blazing with torches, alive with music, and all the hurry and stir of a sumptuous banquet. All the wealth and fashion of Laodicea were there, Christian and heathen; and all that the classic voluptuousness of Oriental Greece could give to shed enchantment over the scene was there. In ancient times the festivals of Christians in Laodicea had been regulated in the spirit of the command of Jesus, as recorded by Luke, whose classical Greek had made his the established version in Asia Minor. "And thou, when thou makest a feast, call not thy friends and thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbors, lest they also bid thee, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, and the maimed, and the lame, and the blind, and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee, but thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just."

That very day, before the entertainment, had this passage been quoted in the ears of the family by Cleon, the youngest son, who, different from all his family, had cherished in his bosom the simplicity of the old

belief.

"How ridiculous! how absurd!" had been the reply of the more thoughtless members of the family, when Cleon cited the above passage as in point to the evening's entertainment. The dark-eyed mother looked reproof on the levity of the younger children, and decorously applauded the passage, which she said had no application to the matter in hand.

"But, mother, even if the passage be not literally taken, it must mean something. What did the Lord Jesus intend by it? If we Christians may make entertainments with all the parade and expense of our heathen neighbors, and thus spend the money that might be devoted to charity, what does this passage mean?"

"Your father gives in charity as handsomely as any Christian in Laodicea," said his mother warmly.

"Nay, mother, that may be; but I bethink me now of two or three times when means have been wanting for the relieving of the poor, and the ransoming of captives, and the support of apostles, when we have said that we could give no more."

"My son," said his mother, "you do not understand the ways of the world."

"Nay, how should he?" said Thalia, "shut up day and night with that old

papyrus of St. Luke and Paul's Epistles. One may have too much of a good thing."

"But does not the holy Paul say, 'Be not conformed to this world'?"

"Certainly," said the elder; "that means that we should be baptized, and not worship in the heathen temples."

"My dear son," said his mother, "you intend well, doubtless; but you have not sufficient knowledge of life to estimate our relations to society. Entertainments of this sort are absolutely necessary to sustain our position in the world. If we accept, we must return them."

But not to dwell on this conversation, let us suppose ourselves in the rooms now glittering with lights, and gay with every costly luxury of wealth and taste. Here were statues to Diana and Apollo, and to the household Juno--not meant for worship--of course not--but simply to conform to the general usages of good society; and so far had this complaisance been carried, that the shrine of a peerless Venus was adorned with garlands and votive offerings, and an exquisitely wrought silver censer diffused its perfume on the marble altar in front. This complaisance on the part of some of the younger members of the family drew from the elder a gentle remonstrance, as having an unseemly appearance for those bearing the Christian name; but they readily answered, "Has not Paul said, 'We know that an idol is nothing'? Where is the harm of an elegant statue, considered merely as a consummate work

of art? As for the flowers, are they not simply the most appropriate ornament? And where is the harm of burning exquisite perfume? And is it worse to burn it in one place than another?"

"Upon my sword," said one of the heathen guests, as he wandered through the gay scene, "how liberal and accommodating these Christians are becoming! Except in a few small matters in the temple, they seem to be with us entirely."

"Ah," said another, "it was not so years back. Nothing was heard among them, then, but prayers, and alms, and visits to the poor and sick; and when they met together in their feasts, there was so much of their talk of Christ, and such singing of hymns and prayer, that one of us found himself quite out of place."

"Yes," said an old man present, "in those days I quite bethought me of being some day a Christian; but look you, they are grown so near like us now, it is scarce worth one's while to change. A little matter of ceremony in the temple, and offering incense to Jesus, instead of Jupiter, when all else is the same, can make small odds in a man."

But now, the ancient legend goes on to say, that in the midst of that gay and brilliant evening, a stranger of remarkable appearance and manners was noticed among the throng. None knew him, or whence he came. He mingled not in the mirth, and seemed to recognize no one present, though he regarded all that was passing with a peculiar air of still and

earnest attention; and wherever he moved, his calm, penetrating gaze seemed to diffuse a singular uneasiness about him. Now his eye was fixed with a quiet scrutiny on the idolatrous statues, with their votive adornments--now it followed earnestly the young forms that were wreathing in the graceful waves of the dance; and then he turned towards the tables, loaded with every luxury and sparkling with wines, where the devotion to Bacchus became more than poetic fiction; and as he gazed, a high, indignant sorrow seemed to overshadow the calmness of his majestic face. When, in thoughtless merriment, some of the gay company sought to address him, they found themselves shrinking involuntarily from the soft, piercing eye, and trembling at the low, sweet tones in which he replied. What he spoke was brief; but there was a gravity and tender wisdom in it that strangely contrasted with the frivolous scene, and awakened unwonted ideas of heavenly purity even in thoughtless and dissipated minds.

The only one of the company who seemed to seek his society was the youngest, the fair little child Isa. She seemed as strangely attracted towards him as others were repelled; and when, unsolicited, in the frank confidence of childhood she pressed to his side, and placed her little hand in his, the look of radiant compassion and tenderness which beamed down from those eyes was indeed glorious to behold. Yet here and there, as he glided among the crowd, he spoke in the ear of some Christian words which, though soft and low, seemed to have a mysterious and startling power; for one after another, pensive, abashed, and confounded, they drew aside from the gay scene, and seemed lost in

thought. That stranger--who was he? Who? The inquiry passed from mouth to mouth, and one and another, who had listened to his low, earnest tones, looked on each other with a troubled air. Ere long he had glided hither and thither in the crowd; he had spoken in the ear of every Christian--and suddenly again he was gone, and they saw him no more. Each had felt the heart thrill within--each spirit had vibrated as if the finger of its Creator had touched it, and shrunk conscious as if an omniscient eye were upon it. Each heart was stirred from its depths. Vain sophistries, worldly maxims, making the false look true, all appeared to rise and clear away like a mist; and at once each one seemed to see, as God sees, the true state of the inner world, the true motive and reason of action, and in the instinctive pause that passed through the company, the banquet was broken up and deserted.

"And what if their God were present?" said one of the heathen members of the company, next day. "Why did they all look so blank? A most favorable omen, we should call it, to have one's patron divinity at a feast."

"Besides," said another, "these Christians hold that their God is always every where present; so, at most, they have but had their eyes opened to see Him who is always there!"

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What is practically the meaning of the precept, "Be not conformed to the world?" In its every-day results, it presents many problems difficult of

solution. There are so many shades and blendings of situation and circumstances, so many things, innocent and graceful in themselves, which, like flowers and incense on a heathen altar, become unchristian only through position and circumstances, that the most honest and well-intentioned are often perplexed.

That we must conform in some things, is conceded; yet the whole tenor of the New Testament shows that this conformity must have its limits--that Christians are to be transformed, so as to exhibit to the world a higher and more complete style of life, and thus "prove what is the good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."

But in many particulars as to style of living and modes of social intercourse, there can be no definite rules laid down, and no Christian can venture to judge another by his standard.

One Christian condemns dress adornment, and the whole application of taste to the usages of life, as a sinful waste of time and money.

Another, perceiving in every work of God a love and appreciation of the beautiful, believes that there is a sphere in which he is pleased to see the same trait in his children, if the indulgence do not become excessive, and thus interfere with higher duties.

One condemns all time and expense laid out in social visiting as so much waste. Another remembers that Jesus, when just entering on the most vast and absorbing work, turned aside to attend a wedding feast, and wrought

his first miracle to enhance its social enjoyment. Again, there are others who, because some indulgence of taste and some exercise for the social powers are admissible, go all lengths in extravagance, and in company, dress, and the externals of life.

In the same manner, with regard to style of life and social entertainment--most of the items which go to constitute what is called style of living, or the style of particular parties, may be in themselves innocent, and yet they may be so interwoven and combined with evils, that the whole effect shall be felt to be decidedly unchristian, both by Christians and the world. How, then, shall the well-disposed person know where to stop, and how to strike the just medium?

We know of but one safe rule: read the life of Jesus with attention--study it--inquire earnestly with yourself, "What sort of a person, in thought, in feeling, in action, was my Savior?"--live in constant sympathy and communion with him--and there will be within a kind of instinctive rule by which to try all things. A young man, who was to be exposed to the temptations of one of the most dissipated European capitals, carried with him his father's picture, and hung it in his apartment. Before going out to any of the numerous resorts of the city, he was accustomed to contemplate this picture, and say to himself, "Would my father wish to see me in the place to which I am going?" and thus was he saved from many a temptation. In like manner the Christian, who has always by his side the beautiful ideal of his Savior, finds it a holy charm, by which he is gently restrained from all that is unsuitable

to his profession. He has but to inquire of any scene or employment, "Should I be well pleased to meet my Savior there? Would the trains of thought I should there fall into, the state of mind that would there be induced, be such as would harmonize with an interview with him?" Thus protected and defended, social enjoyment might be like that of Mary and John, and the disciples, when, under the mild, approving eye of the Son of God, they shared the festivities of Cana.