

THE LIGHT OF A HOLY EXAMPLE.

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”—MATT. v. 16.

F. G., Esq., was a “lawyer of the old school.” Born about the year 1785, the son of a large landholder in one of the Atlantic States, he was reared in the midst of that society, at once graceful, chivalrous, cultivated and irreligious, which followed the Revolutionary War and the influence of the French alliance. He was, like the lawyers of his day, deeply read in the old English law, and well acquainted with the English classics, scrupulous in his integrity, deliberate, shrewd, perspicacious in intellect, disdaining all personal and professional meanness with infinite scorn, scrupulous and gravely ornate in dress, and ever dignified and courteous in manner. The “flush times” of 1816, following the depression of the second war with Great Britain, found him in one of the Atlantic cities, in the full tide of his early success. He was tempted, like so many others, to venture everything in the purchase of real estate; and in a few years, chiefly by the treachery of some whom he had trusted, he was bankrupt. This misfortune left him a soured, if not a misanthropic, spirit. To gain the means for the more speedy payment of debts he departed alone to the extreme southwest; and for twenty years his friends saw him no more, and heard little of him, save that he was making large professional gains, had paid off his debts to the last penny, and was living the life of a *bon vivant* and man of society among the French of the gay Southern capital.

At the end of that time he returned to the home of his fathers, a man verging on old age. His caustic wit, his ancestral and intellectual pride, his fondness for elegant literature, his misanthropy, were in no wise diminished, and his irreligious and epicurean habits much increased. Although the surviving kindred whom he found were decided Christians, he never accompanied them to the house of God, spent his Sabbaths in amusements, and observed the most jealous reserve concerning his religious views. It was understood that he had long learned to disdain

both Protestantism and popery as rival delusions, and was a low-type Socinian, or rational deist. As the monotony of a celibate life crept on, his habits of free living grew upon him, until they threatened serious consequences. The account given by a simple servant, who was his valet, was as graphic as it was truthful. "My master," said he, "was very anxious to get some good old spirits, and yet he condemned all he got as adulterated. One time he says to me, 'Take my demijohn, and go to old Mr. J.; he is an honest, old-fashioned merchant; tell him to send me some genuine French brandy.' I brought it; but he was as dissatisfied as ever. Then he said, 'Do you go to Mr. H.; he deals with the honest German farmers of the West; tell him to send me some honest, farm-made, old rye whiskey.' But when this came he pronounced it 'vile stuff.' However, I noticed that, though it was 'vile stuff,' wherever it came from, the demijohn always went down very steadily. Well, so it went on, until one day he was very sick, and seemed to have a sort of fit, and not to know any thing. I was so frightened I went off for Dr. A., and he came; and he bled him in a great china basin from the washstand. However, he got entirely well; and he nibbled at the 'vile stuff' very skittishly after that."

Soon after this, Mr. G. astonished his friends by deliberately destroying his stock of drinkables with his own hands, and adopting the most rigid total abstinence customs. But he declared that he did this from no temperance principles. He considered good wines and liquors a legitimate and very pleasant indulgence, which, he said, he should certainly allow to himself if they could be procured. But he considered himself a *connoisseur*; he now found that all wines and liquors in America were adulterated. In good old times they exhilarated, now they stupified; then gentlemen could indulge, even freely, in these convivialities, and live to a ripe old age; now he noticed that free livers died in a few years. He had determined, therefore, never to taste even malt liquors again, simply because he did not wish to be poisoned like a rat.

Not long after this his solitude and approaching infirmities caused him to remove to the house of a widowed sister, where he spent the closing years of his life. Among the children of this Christian family was a son, a young minister of the gospel, but residing away from his native place in his far distant charge,

and a younger sister just budding into lovely womanhood. She was beloved by all for her sweet and consistent piety, and her gentle, disinterested charity. This change of residence brought the wearied man of the world into contact with books and associates somewhat different from the former. The son was accustomed to visit his widowed mother annually during the vacations of his pastoral care; and on one of these visits he noticed some such hint of an intellectual interest in Christianity in the uncle as led him to introduce the subject, though with trepidation. He found that the old man had been reading a number of Christian books, but only for mental amusement. He talked of their topics with the tone with which a naturalist might talk of some curious researches in entomology. "Nephew," said Mr. G., "I have been reading lately Dr. Hanna's *Life of Chalmers*. Did you know that great divine confessed he was a Presbyterian minister many years before he was a converted man? Isn't that considered very singular among you? And Dr. Hanna—who, you know, is his son-in-law—relates, that one thing which opened Dr. Chalmers's eyes was his observing that many evangelical persons, all of whom he had considered fanatical, were more zealous to live holy and diligent lives of obedience, while claiming no merit therefrom for their justification, than he and his friends were who relied on that sort of merit. I suppose it must have been true; but it strikes one as very queer, isn't it? Ha! ha! ha!"

In this strain he chatted on in the most communicative and amiable tone. He would make no avowal of any personal concern of the heart in these great truths, but admitted that his intellect was interested, and avowed himself willing to reëxamine the system of redemption, more because it would occupy his abundant leisure in a pleasing manner than for any other reason. The young minister directed him to some suitable books, and especially to the careful study of the Scriptures themselves. His visit terminated without other developments.

The next summer he again went, according to his wont, to cheer his widowed mother. Soon after his arrival, she availed herself of a moment of privacy, to say: "My son, strange things have happened here since you went last. Your Uncle F. has confessed Christ. He sent for the session of the church, excusing himself for his difficulties of locomotion, and desired them to examine

into his fitness for the communion of the church. They held a sessional meeting in his room; and the Rev. Mr. W., who moderated the proceedings, says that never was such a meeting of session seen. The elders were so astounded by the strangeness of the change, and still so overawed by his reputation for sense and cynicism, that they were the questioned rather than the questioners. And then his religious experience was so original and queer. They say he seemed only afraid that they should give him credit for more grace than he thinks he has. He regards himself as a mere babe in grace; but says his mind is clearly made up to live and die in faith, and therefore he thinks he ought to confess Christ at once. He was as methodical and lawyer-like about it as though he had been writing somebody else's will. However, he was received, and is now a regular member of the Q. church."

This narrative the young minister heard with open-eyed wonder. "Do they really think," asked he, "that there is a saving change in him?" "Indeed we do," replied she, "there has been a progressive change for some time. You know, though he was always the gentleman, we were always a little afraid of him; but now he is always gentle; his misanthropy and sarcasm are all gone, and he appears to be as willing to die as to retire to his nightly rest."

The young minister sought the first convenient opportunity to congratulate him upon the wondrous change. It must be confessed there was also a little tendency to congratulate himself as one of the instruments of it; and hence, he was curious to know how far the instructions he had given or the books he had recommended had been useful. But the developments did not seem at all to gratify that vanity.

"Had Uncle F. read such and such books, which he named last year?"

"Yes."

"Had he been impressed by them?"

"No; not particularly."

After a little while the old gentleman seemed to apprehend the drift of these inquiries, and said rather drily, "If you are asking for the means of this change, I cannot say that any of your books wrought it."

"What then," he was asked, is the instrumentality which has

wrought this great revolution? We all know that since last year your infirmities have not permitted you to go to church."

"Well," he replied, "I suppose that, so far as it was any one thing, it was Katy." (The niece.)

"Why," exclaimed the brother, "has she presumed to take on her the task of religious monitor? Does she preach to you?"

"Oh! no; she is too modest for that. But you know, nephew, she is the best person in the world" (and this he uttered with the peculiar air of nonchalance and sententiousness with which he asserted his deliberate opinions), "and what I have seen for myself of her principles and conduct since I have lived here has changed all my convictions."

Being encouraged to explain himself, he proceeded as follows: "You know that I was all my life a sort of Socinian or rational deist, and regarded the whole system of experimental religion as a fanatical delusion. I saw so much falsehood, pretense, and hypocrisy, that I believed in no pretensions of superior holiness. Of course I did not deny a God or a hereafter; but I thought Christ one of the few sincere and pure men whom the world has possessed; and I flouted the idea that there was any Holy Ghost or regeneration. I supposed that, so far as anybody could penetrate the darkness beyond the grave with his hopes, those who were philanthropic, truthful, courteous, and just, had the best chance; and I felt that our chance, who cultivated these social virtues and made none of these pretenses to superior grace, was far better than that of the Christians. My theory about conversion was this: In many, it was a rascally pretense (as my dealings with mankind showed). In the rest, it was an amiable delusion. I saw great numbers find out for themselves this fact. And they were truthful enough to avow it, and frankly go back to the world. I saw a number of others who had evidently found out also that their supposed conversion was a delusion; but they had not the candor to say so, and they therefore continued to wear the mask—some from mere cowardice and false shame, others from calculated rascality. The third class was of those who continued sincere, and, evidently, honest devotees. My theory about them was, that they also were deluded, only they had not found it out yet. Many acquaintances whom I highly esteem were among this class, and, as you know, some of my dearest relatives. I thought I saw the reason why they remained

undeceived, in the enthusiasm and romance of their natural temperament, and as they, unlike the second class, were perfectly honest in their amiable fanaticism, I could love them none the less for this social virtue, nor had I any desire to undeceive them. They seemed to enjoy the delusion, and I was glad that they should do so.

“Such was my theory, and I was thrown close to Katy, and I have studied her thoroughly. I *know* that my estimate of her principles is correct; I have seen her tried too often. I saw in her not only amiability, which I have often loved in others, but an unaffected and supreme disinterestedness and love. I saw in her one person where selfishness was not. I had seen many affect unselfishness, but this I saw was real, for I know the signs of hypocrisy only too well. She wasn't like anybody else. Now, nephew, I know human nature, unfortunately for myself; I know all about it, and I know that it is a poor, selfish thing. I know of what it is capable, in its lovelier phases, and what it is not. And it was perfectly clear that Katy had something which I with all my pride of integrity and philanthropy never had, which nobody has by nature. And it was an admirable thing, too! Now, you see, I was obliged to ask myself where it came from, and as I was sure it could not come from nature, it must come from above nature. Here, then, was a divine principle actually at work. What else could I conclude? Well, then, the doctrine of regeneration *must be true*, absurd as I had thought it was before. There was no other solution. I saw that there is such a thing as the implantation of a superhuman, divine principle in a human being. And I had to believe that it came by this gospel. You see, Katy always says that if there is anything good in her, it comes from God, through Christianity; that she gets it by believing the gospel and praying through Christ, and I am obliged to believe her. Besides, there wasn't any other way to account for it except that, which was not absurd. But *there was the thing*, and it had to be accounted for.

“Now, you see, when I saw there really was a way in which God gave a person a new nature, as a man of sense I could not but know that it was good for me too. So I desired it for myself. How can a person see perfect disinterestedness, love, purity, and truth, and not want it? At least I wanted it; I knew I had needed it all my life, amidst all my pride. Well, of course, the

only thing to do was to seek it, and I did so. And that is just the history of the matter."

"And you believe, Uncle, that you have received it?"

"Why, yes; that is my hope. Understand me, I don't think I know much about it; I know very little. I have only this one point: I know there is a redemption in Christ, for I see it wrought in one person; I know I need it; it is promised to prayer; I rely upon that."

After an interval he added, with the same tone of inimitable nonchalance: "Nephew, I am not the least afraid to die; I should like very well to die this evening. I have pains and infirmities that nobody knows of, and, as I am getting of less and less account, I should like to be gone. But it is all right; I am ready when my time comes."

His time did come after some months of increasing sufferings, which he bore with Christian resignation and gentleness, and his darling Katy was one of those who received his parting breath. A few years after she followed him, in the prime of her loveliness. We doubt not that they are now together before the throne; the old man of learning, and logic, and earthly wisdom, as spiritual child, and the gentle young maiden as spiritual parent.

This remarkable experience of a very singular man is not presented as a symmetrical type. But it is exceedingly instructive as showing how the witness of a true and holy life is made the divine warrant of the gospel. This is the continuous miracle, the spiritual resurrection which proves that "Christ is risen indeed." Mr. F. G. had doubtless been conversant with other genuine instances of holy living before, and he had not been convinced by them. But the living power of this last holy example, where previous ones had failed, may be partly explained by the exquisite tact, grace, and genius which embellished this instance of the divine life, disarming his spirit of adverse criticism, and gaining for it a dispassionate judgment; and chiefly by the fact that God's time to set to work by his Spirit had now arrived. The most valuable lesson of this history is this: We see here how "the logic of a holy life" wrought, when once it was listened to, with a mind singularly perspicacious, deliberate, and cautious, trained in all the learning of the law to the appreciation of valid evidence, and the distinguishing of false from true. When circumstances at length enabled this man to verify one

instance of undoubted spiritual mindedness, it was enough. He recognized it as the signature of a divine work, and by a process of inference as rigid as legal proof, ascending "*posteriori*" from effect to cause, he ascertained the personal agency of the Holy Ghost, the divinity of Christ, the doctrine of regeneration, the duties of faith and prayer.

The light of a holy example is the gospel's main argument.