

SCALE HOW "MEDITATIONS."

Dominus Illuminatio Mea.

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THE IMPOTENT MAN.

(*S. John v., 1–16.*)

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(v. 1.) "A feast" of the Jews, not evident what feast.

(v. 2.) A "pool" by the sheep market,—a reservoir surrounded by porticos or porches, a colonnade, which, like all public places of the kind in the East and in the South, was made the resort of the deformed and diseased. But, "in these lay a *multitude*," because the reservoir seems to have been fed by a spring which had medicinal qualities. Eusebius speaks of the red colour of the water, possibly caused by iron, and it appears to have been an intermittent spring; hence, perhaps, the legend of the angel coming down and troubling the waters, interpolated into the Gospel narrative and omitted in the Revised Version. One is unwilling to give up the gracious legend which might serve to remind us that when we derive health from medicinal springs, the spring itself is a divinely-sent messenger of health.

(v. 5.) "A certain man." As ever, Christ singles out the individual for His divine dealings. We again watch the revelation of personality brought vividly before us under the searching rays of the Light of the world. Our first thought is compassion—eight and thirty years, a lifetime, during which the man lay as a log, perhaps for many years amongst those others—sick, blind, halt, withered. Many have seen in this concourse types of the spiritual condition of the world which Christ came to save; the sick, those who are weary of the world and of all that life offers; the blind, those whose eyes are sealed to the vision of Christ, and open only to the material revelations of science; the halt, those whose progress in the higher life is slow and distressing; and the withered, those who are insensible, who have no stirrings of aspiration, no regrets, no repentings.

(v. 6.) For all of these, as for this man, Christ has one question—"Wouldest thou be made whole?" He, Who came for the healing of the nations, makes one condition—the active *will*. "Heigho! I wish I were a better man" or a "better woman"—does not count. Nothing but that strenuous bending of the attention, which we have seen to be the mode in which the will acts, can fulfil the conditions. We all know of people who continue in bodily illness because they have not sufficient power of self-discipline to use the means of cure. They *will* not take the necessary exercise, or air, or food. So, too, of the spiritual life, though the Bread of Life, and the Water of Life, and the Light of Life, are brought to our very doors, though He stand at the door and knock. We must eat, we must drink, we must open, that is, we must turn our thoughts steadfastly upon Him Who is our salvation, and He will meet the willing will and fill us with Himself.

(v. 7.) "Sir, I have no man," etc. The sick man takes our Lord's question as a reproach;

instead of answering frankly, he defends himself peevishly. He says, in many words, "It's not my fault." In fact he has grievances—"another steppeth down before me."

(v. 8.) But the patience of Christ is infinite. He is not repelled by the unlovely. "Arise, and walk." For the moment anyway, Christ succeeded in gaining the attention of this feeble soul. He looked into the divine countenance, some degree of faith came with even this slight effort. He was even able to obey.

(v. 9.) "He took up his bed and walked." But we are disappointed in the man. He does not turn back to give thanks; there is no word of gratitude or recognition, no "Lord," not even "Rabbi."

"Now, it was the Sabbath on that day." In this clause we have the key to the fact that henceforth the character of our Lord's mission undergoes a change. Hitherto He has been free to go and come, has been regarded with attention and interest, if not with faith; there has been no show of active hostility. Henceforth all is altered. His steps are dogged, His words are watched, He is, we may believe, worn and wearied with controversies, and the Jews go about to kill Him. He had not only made a man whole, but had bidden him carry his pallet on the Sabbath. This, of bearing a burden, was an offence punishable with death by stoning. It would seem as if our Lord had gone out of His way to proclaim His controversy with the Jews. The impotent man would have been in his place the next day and the next, and, even had he been healed on the Sabbath, was it necessary to carry his miserable pallet? As with Luther, when he nailed up his thesis on the Church door, there comes in the life of every reformer a moment when he must proclaim his controversy with the world, and our Lord did not exempt Himself from this condition. First, in act, and then, in memorable words—"the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath"—our Lord removed the keystone from the arch which held together the whole fabric of the Jewish ritual and polity. *We* lead, alas, a double life, social and religious, and it is difficult for us to realise how this act of Christ's should affect a people whose every-day whole life was ordered and bounded to the minutest detail by their ritual. The very existence of the Jews as a nation, and their peculiar relation to Almighty God, would seem to their leaders to turn upon this question of Sabbath observance, upon which our Lord thus entered into open controversy with them. There was nothing for it but that the Jews must accept Christ or repudiate Him and seek His life. Henceforth no middle course was open to them. "One like unto a Son of Man" had come amongst them, "and out of His mouth proceeded a sharp, two-edged sword"¹ for the dividing asunder of spiritual worship and mere ritual.

(v. 10.) "The Jews said unto Him," etc. The Jews attack the man whom they catch in the unlawful act, but we may believe that their desire was to find the worker of this untoward miracle.

(v. 11.) "He that made me whole," etc. One reads the words at first with some relief as an expression of loyalty, but the rest of the story condemns the man. Again he says—"It's not my fault." He hastens to excuse himself and lay the blame on another, though that other had been to him a saviour.

(v. 12.) "Who is the man?" One sees the keen, eager faces of the questioners as they catechised the healed man. The zest of pursuit is in their tones. Already the tragedy which ended on Calvary has begun.

(v. 14.) [sic] "Wist not who it was." "Conveyed Himself away." It would appear as if our Lord's action [sic] were very sudden. Before the man had so far come to himself as to look

about him and ask questions Jesus had conveyed Himself away, disappeared in the throng, for there was a "multitude in the place."

(v. 14.) The persistency with which a human soul is put through its trial, its testing before God, is well shown in the sequel. The trial of the man so far has taken the shape of an amazing miracle of mercy. He had been found wanting, but Christ does not give him up nor let him alone. "Jesus findeth him in the temple"; "findeth" implies after having sought. Christ in the very crisis of His life had made leisure to go after this single unworthy soul. Again he has a trial which is his opportunity. "Thou art made whole. . . . Sin no more." Generosity had roused no gratitude. How will he answer to the test of rebuke? We all know that there are few surer tests of character than the way rebuke is sustained. The meek, frank soul accepts reproof with unclouded brow and simple gratitude; the ungentle soul resents. "Lest a worse thing befall thee." The worse thing did befall him instantly; he added vindictiveness to resentment, and went and told the Jews "it was Jesus which had made him whole." We try in vain to think that he did this thing in ignorance. A man could not have lived, as he had, apparently, upon the pity and the alms of the public without becoming a shrewd reader of countenance. He knew the law as all Jews knew it, and he knew well with what intent the Jews sought Christ. He anticipated the part of Judas and delivered Jesus to be killed.

(v. 16.) We know no more of this man impotent, for good to the last, but "for this cause did the Jews persecute Jesus, because He did these things on the Sabbath day."

¹ Rev. i., 13 and 16.