

SCALE HOW "MEDITATIONS."

No. 30.

(*S. John vii., 40–50.*)

(v. 40.) "Some of the multitude." Now for the first time we find the "multitude"—the pilgrims assembled for the Feast—divided. Some said,—“This is of a truth the prophet,” that is, the prophet foretold by Moses, “A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you, like unto me; unto him shall ye hearken.”—We admire the temerity of their avowal, an avowal made at great risk to themselves. At the same time, these choose the least aggressive way of confessing the faith that is in them. “Others,” gaining greater courage from the boldness of the first speakers, ventured all in a word, and said (we may conceive with what solemnity of voice and manner),—“this is the Christ.” This bold avowal strikes the note of division among the multitude, and we find them divided, as men have been ever since, into those who recognise truth by its own light and those who require truth to be illuminated by light from without; those who receive the inner witness, and those who will be convinced only by external evidence, whether historic or scientific. That seventeenth century saint, *Brother Lawrence*, is reported to have said,—“That we ought to make a great difference between the acts of the *understanding* and those of the *will*; that the first were comparatively of little value, and the others all.” In this multitude, as in all gatherings of men, we have those who lean to their own *understanding* and those who by an act of *will* recognise Christ.

(v. 42.) In the first class we have the sceptical, whose arguments are specious, and, from their own point of view, incontrovertible; as here (v. 42),—“hath not the Scripture said that the Christ cometh of the seed of David and from Bethlehem.” The Evangelist takes no pains to point out that these people erred from an insufficient knowledge even of the facts to which they pin their faith; he is content to leave them to their intellectual difficulties; but the incident offers a lesson for us to-day. Perhaps, for example, a completer knowledge of what we call the laws of nature would silence once and for all the objections of those who believe that, in the words of *Robert Elsmere*,—“miracles do not happen.” But the temper of students, both of natural science and of historical criticism, is becoming daily more candid and gentle; they are less and less disposed to believe that the last word has been spoken, are more open to the conviction that fuller light might resolve their doubts.

(v. 44.) “And some of them would have taken Him.” Is it a fact that error, based upon an act of intellect, tends to make men vindictive? If this is so in any degree, it is only because intellectual conviction is of its nature absolute; a contrary conclusion to that which he has arrived at is unthinkable to the convinced man. The law of intellectual progress seems to be conditioned something in the same way as progress down a winding lake, where, again and again, your boat seems to be hemmed in by the final shore. It is possible that the courage of conviction—of certainty—is necessary to stimulate intellectual progress; the contest is for truth

and not for triumph; those on the other side appear as enemies to truth, and the hatred they excite is hatred of error. We see this general principle working in the "multitude" among whom that amazing word of our Lord's has fallen,—“If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink;” it is quick and powerful to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit; as in that other case when His disciples said,—“This is a hard saying; who can hear it?” The multitude that had been with Him until now sought to take Him: they were convinced that the “Jews” were right after all, and that this Man was an enemy to religion; but “no man laid hands on Him.” Something, we know not what, of ineffable in the presence of Christ kept from His person the sacrilegious hands of the enraged people.

(v. 45.) “The officers therefore came to the chief priests and Pharisees.” It would appear that the Sanhedrin was in session; possibly a special meeting had been called to deal with what the Jews felt to be a national emergency. The rulers waited with, we may believe, feverish and fretful anxiety for the return of the officials whom they had sent out earlier to apprehend Jesus; at last these return, but without a prisoner. “Why did ye not bring Him?” they cry; but these men, the creatures of the Sanhedrin, the last of whom we should expect that supreme act of *will* which lays the mind open to the truth,—these men had watched and they had listened, and to them it was given to speak the final word in all controversies which would find some other place of honour for Christ than that which He claims for Himself; which would describe Him as a good man, a prophet if you will, but no more. The one answer to all such insidious opposition is contained in the words of these servants of the Temple—“Never man so spake.”

(v. 47.) “The Pharisees therefore,” etc. The rulers forget their dignity; they condescend to angry discussion with their own servants. “Are ye also led astray? Hath any of the rulers believed on Him, or of the Pharisees?” None had declared himself, any way, so rigorous were the laws towards the excommunicate. The Western Church, at its worst, never knew how to pile terrors on excommunicated persons so extreme as those employed by the rulers of the Jews, because the Western nations had long ceased to retain the tribal character which the Jews have never lost. Therefore the Sanhedrin kept themselves a close body, without defection, so they thought, and poured scorn upon “this multitude” which “knows not the law.” The habit of regarding the “common people” is a great test of the Christian status of a nation. When the Revolution was due in France, the “multitude” were the *canaille*; we in England are learning, year by year, an ever greater respect for the people; but the Jews, sharply divided into those who knew the Law, and the ignorant, treated the latter with unmeasured scorn. They were “accursed,” not to be touched, hardly to be spoken with.

(v. 50.) “Nicodemus saith.” We can conceive the dismay of the council when one of themselves dared to utter a protest; we are glad, because we have met with Nicodemus before, and only wish that his protest had been less feeble. He attempts no defence of Jesus, but falls back on the civil law of the Jews, and proposes to defend that. “Doth our law judge a man except it first hear from himself?” but like all half-hearted advocates he reveals his own mind without helping his cause. The Pharisees turn upon him, with what bitterness we may imagine,—“Art thou also of Galilee?” Then, as now, it would seem to be the way to damn a cause by an opprobrious epithet; to fix this word of scorn, a Galilæan, upon the followers of Christ should be a sure way to injure His cause. “Search and see that out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.” It is curious to note that all the charges against Jesus, all the arguments against His claims to be the Christ, have narrowed themselves to this, namely, that He was of Galilee,

whereas the Christ should come out of Judea. The Evangelist makes no comment; by their own words they are condemned. With this scene in the Sanhedrin ends that part of our Lord's momentous controversy with the Jews.