

THE
WORKS
OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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LETTER III.

DEAR SIR,

A FEW days before my intended journey into Kent, I received an invitation to visit a family in that county. They were distant relations, but very intimate friends of my dear mother: she died in their house; but a coolness took place upon my father's second marriage, and I had heard nothing of them for many years. As my road lay within half a mile of their house, I obtained my father's leave to call on them. I was, however, very indifferent about it, and sometimes thought of passing on: however I went. I was known at first sight, before I could tell my name, and met with the kindest reception, as the child of a dear deceased friend. My friends had two daughters. The eldest (as I understood some years afterwards) had been often considered, by her mother and mine, as a future wife for me from the time of her birth. I know indeed, that intimate friends frequently amuse themselves with such distant prospects for their children, and that they miscarry much oftener than succeed. I do not say that my mother predicted what was to happen, yet there was something remarkable in the manner of its taking place. All intercourse between the families had been long broken off; I was going into a foreign country, and only called to pay a hasty visit; and this I should not have thought of, but for a message received just at that crisis (for I had not been invited at any time before). Thus the circumstances were precarious in the highest degree, and the event was as extraordinary. Almost at the first sight of this girl (for she was then under fourteen), I was impressed with an affection for her, which never abated or lost its influence a single moment in my heart from that hour. In degree, it actually equalled all that the writers of romance have imaged; in duration, it was unalterable. I soon lost all sense of religion, and became deaf to the remonstrances of conscience and prudence; but my regard for her was always the same; and I may perhaps venture to say, that none of the scene, of misery and wickedness I afterwards experienced, ever banished her a single hour together from my waking thoughts, for the seven following years.

Give me leave, Sir, to reflect a little upon this unexpected incident, and to consider its influence upon my future life, and how far it was subservient to the views of divine providence concerning me, which seem to have been twofold; that by being given up, for a while, to the consequences of my own wilfulness, and afterwards reclaimed by a high hand, my case, so far as it should be known, might be both a warning and an encouragement to others.

In the first place, hardly anything less than this violent and commanding passion would have been sufficient to awaken me from the dull melancholy habit I had contracted. I was almost a misanthrope, notwithstanding I so much admired the pictures of virtue and benevolence as drawn by lord Shaftesbury: but now my reluctance to active life was over-powered at once, and I was willing to be or to do anything, which might subserve the accomplishment of my wishes at some future time:

Farther, when I afterwards made shipwreck of faith, hope, and conscience, my love to this person was the only remaining principle, which in any degree supplied their place; and the bare possibility of seeing her again was the only present and obvious means of restraining me from the most horrid designs against myself and others.

But then the ill effects it brought upon me counterbalanced these advantages. The interval, usually styled the time of courtship, is indeed a pleasing part of life, where there is a mutual affection, the consent of friends, reasonable prospect as to settlement, and the whole is conducted in a prudential manner, and in subordination to the will and fear of God. When things are thus situated, it is a blessing to be susceptible of the tender passions; but when these concomitants are wanting, what we call love is the most tormenting passion in itself, and the most destructive in its consequences, that can be named: and they were all wanting in my case. I durst not mention it to her friends, or to my own, nor indeed for a considerable time to herself, as I could make no proposals: it remained as a dark fire, locked up in my own breast, which gave me a constant uneasiness. By introducing an idolatrous regard to a creature, it greatly weakened my sense of religion, and made farther way for the entrance of infidel principles: and though it seemed to promise great things, as an incentive to diligence and activity in life, in reality it performed nothing. I often formed mighty projects in my mind, of what I would willingly do or suffer, for the sake of her I loved; yet while I could have her company, I was incapable of forcing myself away, to improve opportunities that offered: still less could it in regulating my manners. It did not prevent me from engaging in a long train of excess and riot, utterly unworthy the honourable pretensions I had formed. And though through the wonderful interposition of divine goodness, the maze of my follies was at length unravelled, and my wishes crowned in such a manner as overpaid my sufferings; yet, I am sure, I would not go through the same series of trouble again, to possess all the treasures of both the Indies. I have enlarged more than I intended on this point, as perhaps these papers may be useful to caution others against indulging an ungovernable passion by my painful experience. How often may such headstrong votaries be said “to sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind.”

My heart being now fixed and riveted to a particular object, I considered everything I was concerned with in a new light. I concluded it would be absolutely impossible to live at such a distance as Jamaica, for a term of four or five years, and therefore determined at all events that I would not go. I could not bear either to acquaint my father with the true reason, or to invent a false one; therefore, without taking any notice to him why I did so, I staid three weeks instead of three days in Kent, till I thought (as it proved) the opportunity would be lost, and the ships sailed. I then returned to London. I had highly displeased my father by this disobedience; but he was more easily reconciled than I could have expected. In a little time I sailed with a friend of his to Venice. In this voyage, I was exposed to the company and ill example of the common sailors among whom I ranked. An importunity and opportunity presenting every day, I once more began to relax from the sobriety and order which I had observed, in some degree, for more than two years. I was sometimes pierced with sharp convictions; but though I made a few faint efforts to stop, as I had done from several before; I did not, indeed, as yet turn out profligate; but I was making large strides towards a total apostasy from God. The most remarkable check and alarm I received (and, for what I know, the last), was by a dream, which made a very strong, though not any abiding impression upon my mind.

In the consideration of whom I am writing to renders it needless for me either to enter upon a discussion of the nature of dreams in general, or to make an apology for recording my own. Those who acknowledge scripture will allow that there have been monitory and supernatural dreams, evident communications from heaven, either directing or foretelling future events: and those who are acquainted with the history and experience of the people of God are well assured, that such intimations have not been totally withheld in any period down to the present times. Reason, far from contradicting this supposition, strongly pleads for it, where the process of reasoning is rightly understood, and carefully pursued. So that a late eminent writer, [Baxter on the *Vis Inertia*.] who, I presume, is not generally charged with enthusiasm, undertakes to prove, that the phenomenon of dreaming is inexplicable at least, if not absolutely impossible, without taking in the agency and intervention of spiritual beings, to us invisible. I would refer the incredulous to him. For my own part, I can say, without scruple, "The dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure." I am sure I dreamed to the following effect, and I cannot doubt, from what I have seen since, that it had a direct and easy application to my own circumstances, to the dangers, into which I was about to plunge myself, and to the unmerited deliverance and mercy which God would be pleased to offer me in the time of my distress.

Though I have wrote out a relation of this dream more than once for others, it has happened that I never reserved a copy; but the principal incidents are so deeply engraven in my memory, that I believe I am not liable to any considerable variations in repeating the account. The scene presented to my imagination was the harbour of Venice, where we had lately been. I thought it was night, and my watch upon the deck; and that, as I was walking to and fro by myself, a person came to me (I do not remember from whence), and brought me a ring, with an express charge to keep it carefully; assuring me that while I preserved that ring, I should be happy and successful: but, if I lost, or parted with it, I must expect nothing but trouble and misery. I accepted the present and the terms willingly, not in the least doubting my own care to preserve it, and highly satisfied to have my happiness in my own keeping. I was engaged in these thoughts, when a second person came to me, and observing the ring on my finger, took occasion to ask me some questions concerning it. I readily told him its virtues, and his answer expressed a surprise at my weakness, in expecting such effects from a ring. I think he reasoned with me some time upon the impossibility of the thing, and at length urged me in direct terms to throw it away. At first, I was shocked at the proposal; but his insinuations prevailed. I began to reason and doubt myself, and at last plucked it off my finger, and dropped it over the ship's side into the water, which it had no sooner touched, than I saw, the same instant, a terrible fire burst out from a range of mountains (a part of the Alps), which appeared at some distance behind the city of Venice. I saw the hills as distinct as if awake, and they were all in flames. I perceived too late my folly; and my tempter, with an air of insult, informed me, that all the mercy God had in reserve for me, was comprised in that ring, which I had wilfully thrown away. I understood that I must now go with him to the burning mountains, and that all the flames I saw were kindled upon my account. I trembled, and was in a great agony; so that it was surprising I did not then awake: but my dream continued, and when I thought myself upon the point of a constrained

departure, and stood self-condemned, without plea or hope; suddenly, either a third person, or the same who brought the ring at first (I am not certain which), came to me, and demanded the cause of my grief. I told him the plain case, confessing that I had ruined myself wilfully, and deserved no pity. He blamed my rashness, and asked if I should be wiser, supposing I had my ring again. I could hardly answer to this; for I thought it was gone beyond recall. I believe, indeed, I had not time to answer, before I saw this unexpected friend go down under the water, just in the spot where I dropped it; and he soon returned, bringing the ring with him. The moment he came on board, the flames in the mountains were extinguished, and my seducer left me. Then was “the prey taken from the hand of the mighty, and the lawful captive delivered.” My fears were at an end, and with joy and gratitude I approached my kind deliverer to receive the ring again, but he refused to return it, and spoke to this effect: “If you should be entrusted with this ring again, you would very soon bring yourself into the same distress; you are not able to keep it; but I will preserve it for you, and whenever it is needful, will produce it in your behalf.”—Upon this I awoke, in a state of mind not to be described: I could hardly eat, or sleep, or transact my necessary business for two or three days; but the impression soon wore off, and in a little time I totally forgot it; and I think it hardly occurred to my mind again, till several years afterwards. It will appear, in the course of these papers, that a time came, when I found myself in circumstances very nearly resembling those suggested by this extraordinary dream, when I stood helpless and hopeless upon the brink of an awful eternity: and I doubt not, but had the eyes of my mind been then opened, I should have seen my grand enemy, who had seduced me, wilfully to renounce and cast away my religious profession, and to involve myself in the most complicated crimes; I say, I should probably have seen him pleased with my agonies, and waiting for a permission to seize and bear away my soul to this place of torment. I should perhaps have seen likewise that Jesus, whom I had persecuted and defied, rebuking the adversary, challenging me for his own, as a brand plucked out of the fire, and saying, “Deliver him from going down into the pit; I have found a ransom.” However, though I saw not these things, found the benefit; I obtained mercy. The Lord answered for me in the day of my distress; and, blessed be his name, he who restored the ring (or what was signified by it), vouchsafes to keep it. O what an unspeakable comfort is this, that I am not in mine own keeping. “The Lord is my shepherd:” I have been able to trust my all in his hands, and I know in whom I have believed. Satan still desires to have me, that he might sift me as wheat; but my Saviour has prayed for me, that my faith may not fail. Here is my security and power; a bulwark, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. But for this, many a time and often, if possible, I should have ruined myself, since my first deliverance; nay, I should fall, and stumble, and perish still, after all that the Lord has done for me, if his faithfulness was not engaged in my behalf, to be my sun and shield even unto death.—“Bless the Lord, O my soul.”

Nothing very remarkable occurred in the following part of that voyage. I returned home in December, 1743, and soon after repeated my visit to Kent, where I protracted my stay in the same imprudent manner I had done before, which again disappointed my father's designs in my favour, and almost provoked him to disown me. Before anything suitable offered again I was impressed (owing entirely to my own thoughtless conduct which was all of a

piece), and put on board a tender: it was a critical juncture, when the French fleets were hovering upon our coast, so that my father was incapable to procure my release. In a few days I was sent on board the Harwich man-of-war, at the Nore. I entered here upon quite a new scene of life, and endured much hardship for about a month. My father was then willing that I should remain in the navy, as a war was daily expected, and procured me a recommendation to the captain, who took me upon the quarter deck as a midshipman. I had now an easy life, as to externals, and might have gained respect; but my mind was unsettled, and my behaviour very indifferent. I here met with companions who completed the ruin of my principles; and though I affected to talk of virtue, and was not utterly abandoned as afterwards, yet my delight and habitual practice was wickedness: my chief intimate was a person of exceeding good natural talents, and much observation; he was the greatest master of what is called the free-thinking scheme, I remember to have met with, and knew how to insinuate his sentiments in the most plausible way. And his zeal was equal to his address; he could hardly have laboured more in the cause, if he had expected to gain heaven by it. Allow me to add, while I think of it, that this man, whom I honoured as my master, and whose practice I adopted so eagerly, perished in the same way as I expected to have done. I have been told, that he was overtaken in a voyage from Lisbon with a violent storm; the vessel and people escaped, but a great sea broke on board and swept him into eternity. Thus the Lord spares or punishes according to his sovereign pleasure! But to return:—I was fond of his company, and having myself a smattering of books, was eager enough to show my reading. He soon perceived my case that I had not wholly broke through the restraints of conscience, and therefore did not shock me at first with too broad intimations of his design; he rather, as I thought, spoke favourably of religion; but when he had gained my confidence he began to speak plainer; and perceiving my ignorant attachment to the Characteristics, he joined issue with me upon that book, and convinced me that I had never understood it. In a word, he so plied me with objections and arguments, that my depraved heart was soon gained, and I entered into his plan with all my spirit. Thus, like an unwary sailor, who quits his port just before a rising storm, I renounced the hopes and comforts of the gospel at the very time when every other comfort was about to fail me.

In December, 1744, the Harwich was in the Downs, bound to the East Indies. The captain gave me liberty to go on shore for a day; but, without consulting prudence, or regarding consequences, I took horse, and followed the dictates of my restless passion; I went to take a last leave of her I loved. I had little satisfaction in the interview, as I was sensible that I was taking pains to multiply my own troubles. The short time I could stay passed like a dream, and on new-year's day, 1745, I took my leave to return to the ship. The captain was prevailed on to excuse my absence; but this rash step (especially as it was not the first step of the kind I had taken) highly displeased him, and lost me his favour, which I never recovered.

At length we sailed from Spithead with a very large fleet. We put into Torbay with a change of wind; but it returning fair again, we sailed the next day. Several of our fleet were lost in attempting to leave that place: and the following night the whole fleet was greatly endangered upon the coast of Cornwall, by a storm from the southward. The darkness of the night, and the number of the vessels, occasioned much confusion and damage. Our ship,

though several times in imminent danger of being run down by other vessels, escaped unhurt; but many suffered much, particularly the admiral. This occasioned our putting back to Plymouth.

While we lay at Plymouth, I heard that my father, who had interest in some of the ships lately lost, was come down to Torbay. He had a connection at that time with the African company. I thought if I could get to him, he might easily introduce me into that service, which would be better than pursuing a long uncertain voyage to the East Indies. It was a maxim with me in those unhappy days, never to deliberate; the thought hardly occurred to me before I was resolved to leave the ship at all events: I did so, and in the wrongest manner possible. I was sent one day in the boat, to take care that none of the people deserted; but I betrayed my trust, and went off myself. I knew not what road to take, and durst not ask for fear of being suspected; yet having some general idea of the country, I guessed right; and, when I had travelled some miles, I found upon inquiry, that I was on the road to Dartmouth. All went smoothly that day, and part of the next: I walked apace, and expected to have been with my father in about two hours, when I was met by a small party of soldiers; I could not avoid or deceive them. They brought me back to Plymouth; I walked through the streets guarded like a felon. My heart was full of indignation, shame, and fear. I was confined two days in the guard house, then sent on board my ship, and kept awhile in irons, then publicly stripped and whipped; after which I was degraded from my office, and all my former companions forbidden to show me the least favour, or even to speak to me. As midshipman, I had been entitled to some command, which (being sufficiently haughty and vain) I had not been backward to exert. I was now in my turn brought down to a level with the lowest, and exposed to the insults of all.

And as my present situation was uncomfortable, my future prospects were still worse; the evils I suffered were likely to grow heavier every day. While my catastrophe was recent, the officers and my quondam brethren were something disposed to screen me from ill usage; but, during the little time I remained with them afterwards, I found them cool very fast in their endeavours to protect me. Indeed they could not avoid it without running a great risk of sharing with me: for the captain, though in general a humane man, who behaved very well to the ship's company, was almost implacable in his resentment, when he had been greatly offended, and took several occasions to show himself so to me; and the voyage was expected to be, as it proved, for five years. Yet I think nothing I either felt or feared distressed me so much, as to see myself thus forcibly torn away from the object of my affections, under a great improbability of seeing her again, and a much greater of returning in such a manner as would give me hopes of seeing her mine. Thus I was as miserable on all hands as could well be imagined. My breast was filled with the most excruciating passions, eager desire, bitter rage, and black despair. Every hour exposed me to some new insult and hardship, with no hope of, relief or mitigation, no friend to take my part, or to listen to my complaint. Whether I looked inward or outward, I could perceive nothing but darkness and misery. I think no case, except that of a conscience wounded by the wrath of God, could be more dreadful than mine. I cannot express with what wishfulness and regret I cast my last looks upon the English shore; I kept my eyes fixed upon it till, the ship's distance increasing, it sensibly disappeared; and when I could see it no longer, I was tempted to throw myself into the sea,

which (according to the wicked system I had adopted) would put a period to all my sorrows at once. But the secret hand of God restrained me.—Help me to praise him, dear Sir, for his wonderful goodness to the most unworthy of all creatures.

I am,
Your most obliged servant.

January 15, 1763.