

PARABLE XIX.

THE RICH FOOL.

LUKE xii. 16-21.

IN the midst of a discourse of Christ's an interruption occurs. One among his hearers is so slightly interested in his teaching, but has so much at heart the redressing of a wrong, which he has, or believes that he has, sustained in his worldly interests, that, unable to wait for a more convenient season, he breaks in with that request, at all events untimely, which gave occasion for this parable—' *Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me.*' From this confident appeal, made in the presence of so many, it is likely that his brother did withhold from him a share of the patrimony which was justly his. The contrary is often taken for granted—that he had no right, and knew that he had none, to what he is here claiming, but hoped to win from the Lord's insufficient acquaintance with the matter a decision in his favour. There is much in the parable which found its motive in this request, to lead us to the opposite conclusion. That contains a warning, not against unrighteousness, but against ' *covetousness*' (ver. 15); which may display itself quite as much in the spirit wherewith we hold or reclaim our own, as in the undue snatching at that of another. It was the extreme inopportuneness of the time he chose for urging his claim, which showed him one in whom the worldly prevailed to the danger of making him totally irreceptive of the spiritual, and drew this warning word from the lips of the Lord. That he should have desired Christ as an umpire or arbitrator,—for this was all he claimed (see Acts vii. 27, 35; Exod. ii. 14);

and this was all which the Lord, without publicly recognized authority, could have been,¹—in itself was nothing sinful. St. Paul himself recommended the settling of differences among brethren by means of such an appeal (1 Cor. vi. 1-6); and how serious a burden this arbitration afterwards became for the bishops of the Church is sufficiently known.²

But although no fault could be found with the request itself, Christ absolutely refused to accede to it; declined here, as ever, to interfere in affairs of civil life. It was indeed most certain that the truth He brought, received into the hearts of men, would modify and change the whole framework of society, that his word and his life were the seed out of which Christian States, with laws affecting property as every thing else, in due time would unfold themselves; but his work was from the inward to the outward. His adversaries more than once sought to thrust upon Him the exercise, or to entangle Him in the assumption, of a criminal jurisdiction, as in the case of the woman taken in adultery (supposing John viii. 3-11 to be authentic); or else in a jurisdiction civil and political, as in the matter of the Roman tribute (Matt. xxii. 17). But on each such occasion He carefully avoided the snare laid for Him, the rock on which so many religious reformers, as eminently Savonarola, have made shipwreck; keeping Himself within the limits of that moral and spiritual world, from which alone an effectual renovation of the outer life of man could proceed. The language in which He puts back this claimant of his interference, '*Man, who made me a judge or a divider over you?*' contains an allusion, which it is impossible to miss, to Exod. ii. 14. Almost repeating the words there spoken, He

¹ Grotius explains *μεριστής*: 'One who is taken as an arbitrator for dividing an inheritance, apportioning a joint property or settling boundaries.'

² Augustine (*Enarr. in Ps. cxviii. 115*) complains of this distraction from spiritual objects, and that he was not allowed to say to those who came to him with cases for arbitration, 'Who made me a judge or a divider over you?' And St. Bernard warns Pope Eugenius of the dangers which from this quarter would beset him.

declares plainly that He will not fall into the error of Moses, nor thrust Himself into matters which lie outside of the present range of his mission.¹ But though refusing this man what he sought, He gives to him something much better than he sought, a warning counsel; and not to him only, but to that whole multitude present: '*Take heed, and beware of covetousness,*'²—or better, '*of all covetousness;*'—'*for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.*'

Fully to understand these words we must understand what '*a man's life*' is, which thus does not stand in the abundance of his earthly goods; of which life therefore this petitioner would not have had more, if, instead of half, he had secured the whole of the disputed inheritance. While we have but one word for '*life,*' the Greek possesses two—one to express the life *which we live*, another to express that life *by which we live*; and it is of this latter which Christ is speaking here. A man may have his living, his βίος, the sustenance of his lower life, out of his earthly goods; nay more, they may themselves be called by this very name (Mark xii. 44; Luke viii. 43; xv. 12; xxi. 4; 1 John iii. 17); but his life itself, his ζωή, he cannot draw from them.³ The breath of his nostrils is of God; not all his worldly possessions, be they ever so large, will retain his spirit an instant if that breath be withdrawn. And if this be true of life, merely as the animating principle of man's earthly existence, how much less can life, as identical with peace, joy, blessedness here, and with immortality hereafter, consist in these things which are at once outside of a man and beneath him.

¹ See Hammond, *Paraphrase* (in loc.).

² Ἀπὸ πείρας πλεονεξίας (Lachmann, Tischendorf); ab omni avaritiâ (Vulg.). Augustine (*Serm.* cvii. 3) urges well the force of this '*all:*' '*Perhaps thou wouldst call a man avaricious and covetous if he sought that which belonged to another. But I say that thou must not seek covetously and avariciously even that which is thine. . . . Not only is he avaricious who grasps another's; but he too is avaricious who covetously keeps his own.*'

³ See my *Synonyms of the New Testament* § 27.

They may overlay, hinder, strangle this life; they were threatening to do this in one who evidently cared so much more for a patch of earth than for the kingdom of heaven; but they cannot produce it. This life is *from* God, as it is *to* God. In this double meaning of 'life' lies the key to this passage, all whose force they fail to educe who accept 'life' either exclusively in the lower, or exclusively in a higher, sense.

And this solemn truth, that a man's life consists not in his goods; that his lower life may come to an abruptest end, and that losing hold of this, he may have lost hold of all, this Christ proceeds to illustrate by the parable which follows. '*The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully.*' We have no spoiler here, no extortioner, no remover of his neighbour's landmark. His riches are fairly gotten; ¹ the earth empties its abundance into his lap; his wealth has come to him in ways than which none can be conceived more innocent, namely, through the blessing of God on toils which He has Himself commanded. But here, as so often, the Giver is forgotten in the gift, and that which should have brought nearer to Him only separates further from Him. The wise king had said long before, 'The prosperity of fools shall destroy them' (Prov. i. 32): this man sets his seal to this word, his prosperity ensnaring him in a deeper worldliness, drawing out the selfish propensities of his heart into stronger action; ² for indeed out of how profound a heart-knowledge that warning word of the Psalmist proceeds, 'If riches increase, set not thy heart upon them.' It might beforehand be assumed that the danger of setting the heart on riches would be the greatest when these were escaping from our grasp, perishing under our hand. Experience teaches another lesson, that earthly losses are remedies for covetousness, while increase in worldly goods rouses and provokes it;

¹ Augustine (*Serm.* clxxviii. 2): 'Not by removing a landmark, not by robbing the poor, not by defrauding the innocent.'

² Ambrose: 'God gives thee abundance that He may either overcome or condemn thine avarice.'

servicing, not as water to quench, but as fuel to feed, the fire :¹ 'He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase' (Eccl. v. 10).

'And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?' Some find in these words the anxious deliberations of one brought into sore straits by that very abundance for which others were envying him; not knowing which way to turn, and as painfully perplexed through his riches as another through his poverty.² Better to say, that the curtain is here drawn back, and we are admitted into the inner council-chamber of a worldling's heart, glorying in his abundance, and realizing to the very letter the making 'provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.' To his first words, '*I have no room where to bestow my fruits,*' it has been answered well, '*Thou hast barns,—the bosoms of the needy,—the houses of the widows,—the mouths of orphans and of infants.*'³ Had he listened to the admonition of the Son of Sirach, 'Shut up alms in thy storehouses' (xxix. 12), he would not have found his barns too narrow. To one about to bestow his fruits amiss, and so in danger of losing them, Augustine addresses this affectionate admonition: 'God desires not that thou shouldst lose thy riches, but that thou shouldst change their place;

¹ Plutarch applies to the covetous the line, τὸ φάρμακόν σου τὴν νόσον αὐεῖζω ποιεῖ, 'Thy remedy but worsens thy disease,' and so the Latin proverb: *Avarum irritat pecunia, non satiat*, 'Money goads the miser, it does not sate him;' compare Seneca, *Ad Helv.* 11; Augustine, *Serm.* i. 4; and the fine Eastern tale of Abdallah the camel-driver.

² So Augustine: 'Man is more perturbed by abundance than by need;' thus too Gregory the Great (*Moral.* xv. 22): 'O the straits that are begotten of satiety! Because of the fertility of his fields the soul of the covetous man is straitened. For by saying "What shall I do," he plainly shows that, overwhelmed with passionate desires, he was labouring beneath the load of his affairs;' and Grotius quotes in this view: *Crescentem sequitur cura pecuniam*, 'As money increases, care follows it.' But Unger much better: 'The parable describes the *rapturous* deliberations of the rich man.'

³ Ambrose (*De Nabuthe*, 7); cf. Augustine, *Serm.* xxxvi. 9.

He has given thee a counsel, which do thou understand. Suppose a friend should enter thy house, and should find that thou hadst lodged thy fruits on a damp floor, and he, knowing by chance the tendency of those fruits to spoil, whereof thou wert ignorant, should give thee counsel of this sort, saying, "Brother, thou lovest the things which with great labour thou hast gathered: thou hast placed them in a damp place; in a few days they will corrupt;"—"And what, brother, shall I do?"—"Raise them to a higher room;"—thou wouldest listen to thy brother suggesting that thou shouldst raise thy fruits from a lower to a higher floor; and thou wilt not listen to Christ advising that thou raise thy treasure from earth to heaven, where that will not indeed be restored to thee which thou layest up; for He bids thee lay up earth, that thou mayest receive heaven, lay up perishable things, that thou mayest receive eternal.'¹

This would have been *his* wisdom, to provide thus for himself 'bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens which faileth not' (ver. 33). But he determines otherwise; he has another scheme altogether: '*This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul,² thou hast³ much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.*' Having now at last a citadel and strong tower, to which he may flee and be safe, he will rest from his labours, and henceforth, to put heathen language into the mouth of this truly heathen man, not defraud his genius any more. There is again an irony as

¹ *Enarr. in Ps. xlviii. 9; cf. in Ps. xxxviii. 6.*

² So Theognis: 'Rejoice with me, dear soul,' Τέρπεό μοι, φίλε θυμέ.

³

— *tanquam*

*Sit proprium quidquam, puncto quod mobilis horæ,
Nunc prece, nunc pretio, nunc vi, nunc morte supremâ,
Permutet dominos, et cedat in altera jura.*—Horace, *Ep. ii. 2. 171.*

'As if aught could be ours, and ours alone,
Ours whom a turn of fortune may dethrone,
Which force or favour, money, death, may take
From us, another o'er it lord to make.'—*Martin.*

melancholy as profound in making him address this speech, not to his body, but to his *soul*;—for that soul, though capable of being thus dragged down to a basest service of the flesh, embodied and imbruted, was also capable of being quickened by the divine Spirit, of knowing and loving and glorifying God.¹ And then, though the wise king had said, ‘Boast not thyself of to-morrow’ (Prov. xxvii. 1), he boasts himself of ‘*many years*’ (cf. Ecclus. v. 1); expects, like Job, to multiply his days as the sand, and to die in his nest (Job xxix. 18).² Some words in the Apocrypha (Ecclus. xi. 18, 19) constitute a remarkable parallel: ‘There is that waxeth rich by his weariness and pinching, and this is the portion of his reward: whereas he saith, I have found rest, and now will eat continually of my goods, and yet he knoweth not what time shall come upon him, and that he must leave those things to others, and die.’ Such a man is here. We have heard what he was saying to himself; it is now permitted us to hear what God at the same instant was saying to him: ‘*Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.*’ ‘*Thou fool,*’³—this title is opposed to the opinion of

¹ This is finely brought out by Basil the Great in his noble sermon on this parable: ‘Alas for thy folly! Hadst thou a swine’s soul how else wouldst thou congratulate it but thus? So beastlike art thou, so ignorant of the goods of the soul, feasting it thus with meats of the flesh; and what the privy shall receive, is it this thou preparest for the soul?’

² Tertullian: ‘As his crops prospered he thought of the widening of his barns, and long days of ease.’

³ Seneca, in an epistle (the 101st) on the sudden death of a rich acquaintance: ‘How foolish is it to map out one’s life! we are masters not even of the morrow! O what madness is theirs who enter into hopes for the far future! I will buy, I will build, I will trust, I will exact, I will take office, and then I will devote to ease my wearied and ripe old age.’ Compare Horace (*Carm.* ii. 18. 17):

Tu secanda marmora
Locas sub ipsum funus, et sepulcri
Immemor struis domos.

‘Yet you, upon death’s very brink,
Of piling marbles only think,

his own foresight which he entertained,—‘*this night,*’ to the ‘*many years*’ which he promised to himself,—and that ‘*soul*’ which he purposed to nourish and make fat, it is declared shall be inexorably ‘*required*’ of him, and painfully rendered up.¹ But how, it is sometimes asked, did God speak to him? Was it by a sudden presentiment of approaching death, by some strong alarm of conscience, by some mortal sickness at this instant falling upon him, or by what other means? In none of these or like ways, as I understand the words. It fared not with him as with the Babylonian king, to whom, while the word of pride was yet in his mouth, there came a voice from heaven, announcing that the kingdom was departed from him (Dan. iv. 31); nor yet as it fared with Herod, stricken in the hour of his profane apotheosis (Acts xii. 23). Not thus, but more awfully still, while those secure deliberations were going on in his thoughts, this sentence was being determined in the counsels of God;² for so does the Lord in heaven deride the counsels of sinners, knowing how soon He will bring them to nothing. Not *as yet* was there any sign or token importing the nearness of the divine judgment; but at the very moment when the decree was going forth that his thread of life should so soon be cut in twain, he was promising himself the long spaces of an uninterrupted security.³

Nor is it merely, as our Translation has it, that his soul ‘*shall be required,*’—it ‘*is required,*’—of him; the doom is so

That yet are in the quarries’ womb,
And, all unmindful of the tomb,
Rear gorgeous mansions everywhere.’—*Martin.*

So too a Greek epigram reminds us, that with all his heaping a man is not able ‘to heap up measures of life beyond his due.’

¹ Vitringa (*Erklär. der Parab.* p. 781) makes ingenious reference here to 1 Sam. xxv. 25, observing that this rich fool is the Nabal of the New Testament: ‘As his name is, so is he: Nabal is his name, and folly is with him.’ Compare ver. 36–38 there with this ver. 20 of our parable.

² God, as Grotius explains it, and I believe rightly, said to him this, ‘not by way of revelation, but of decree.’

³ If this be right, Godet is wrong, who writes: ‘The words “God said to him” express more than a decree: they refer to a warning which the man hears within him before he dies.’

fearfully near that the present can alone express its nearness. In another point our Version may be bettered. Why not render, '*This night do they require thy soul of thee*' (cf. Job xxvii. 20), leaving who '*they*' are that shall thus require it in the fearful obscurity of the original? Violent men, it may be; but more probably the avenging angels are intended, the ministers of judgment (cf. Job xxxiii. 22: '*Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers*'); so that we have here the reverse of that '*carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom,*' of Luke xvi. 22. The force of this '*required*' (cf. Wisd. xv. 8: '*His life which was lent him shall be demanded*'), is well brought out by Theophylact: '*For like pitiless exactors of tribute, terrible angels shall require thy soul from thee unwilling, and through love of life resisting. For from the righteous his soul is not required, but he commits it to God and the Father of spirits, pleased and rejoicing, nor finds it hard to lay it down, for the body lies upon it as a light burden. But the sinner who has enfleshed his soul, and embodied it, and made it earthy, has prepared to render its divulsion from the body most hard: wherefore it is said to be required of him, as a disobedient debtor that is delivered to pitiless exactors;*'¹ cf. Job xxvii. 8: '*What is the hope of the hypocrite, though he hath gained, when God taketh away his soul?*' God '*taketh it away;*' for he is not as a ship, which has long been waiting in harbour, and when the signal is given, lifts joyfully its anchors, and makes sail for the haven of eternity; but like one by fierce winds dragged from its moorings, and driven furiously to perish on the rocks. The mere worldling is violently separated from the world, the only sphere of delight which he knows, as the fabled mandrake is torn from the earth, shrieking and with bleeding roots.²—'*Then whose shall those things be,*

¹ As the other side of the same truth, the Jewish doctors taught that the angel Gabriel drew gently out with a kiss the souls of the righteous from their mouths: with which we may compare the Christian phrase, '*to sleep in the kiss of the Lord,*' in *osculo Domini* obdormire.

² See Lucian's inimitable sixteenth *Dialogue (Cataplus)*, for a commentary, in its way, on these words.

which thou hast provided ? ' He heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them ' (Ps. xxxix. 6). Solomon long before had noted, among the vanities that cling to wealth, the uncertainty upon whom at the death of the gatherer it would devolve, as of the uses to which he would turn it : ' Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun, because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me : and who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool ? ' (Eccles. ii. 18, 19, 21, 26 ; cf. Ps. xlix. 6-20 ; Jer. xvii. 11 ; Job xxvii. 16, 17).

' *So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.*' Self and God are here contemplated as the two poles between which the soul is placed, for one or other of which it must determine, and then constitute that one the end and object of all its aims and efforts. If for the first, then the man '*layeth up treasure for himself,*' and what the issue of this is, we have seen ; the man and his treasure come to nothing together. He has linked himself to the perishable in his inmost being, and he must perish with it. The very enriching of himself outwardly, being made the purpose of his existence, is an impoverishing of himself inwardly, that is, '*toward God*' and in those which are the true riches : for there is a continual draining off to worldly objects, of those affections which should have found their only satisfying object in God ; where his treasure is, there his heart is also. Now the Scripture ever considers the heart as that which constitutes a man truly rich or truly poor. He that has no love to God, no large spiritual affections, no sympathies with his brethren, is '*wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked,*' and shall one day discover that he is so, however now he may be saying, '*I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing*' (Rev. iii. 17). He is poor toward God ; he has nothing with God ; he has laid up in store no good foundation against the time to come. On the other hand, he only is truly rich, who is '*rich toward God,*' who is rich in God ; who has made the eternal and unchangeable the first object of his desires and his efforts.

He in God possesses all things, though in this world he may have nothing ; and for him to die will not be to quit, but to go to, his riches.¹

Christ, having thus warned his hearers against covetousness, and knowing how often it springs from distrust in the fatherly providence of God (Heb. xiii. 5), proceeds to remind them where they may find the best antidote to this and to all over-anxious thoughts for the future, namely, in the assurance of his tender watchfulness and care over them (ver. 22-30) ; the connexion being thus as close as it is beautiful between this parable and the instructions which immediately follow. In the mention of the ravens, which are fed, though they neither sow nor reap, have neither storehouse nor barn (ver. 24), there is, perhaps, a distinct reminiscence of the feeding of Elijah by the same birds, and allusion to it (1 Kin. xvii. 4, 6).

¹ Cyprian's words addressed to the covetous involve the true interpretation of the passage (*De Op. et Eleem.*) : 'The darkness of barrenness has beset thy soul, and as the light of truth departs from it the deep and profound mist of avarice has blinded thy carnal breast. Of thy money thou art the captive and slave ; thou guardest money, which, however it be guarded, cannot guard thee ; thou increasest an estate which burdens thee the more grievously with its weight ; thou rememberest not what God answered to the rich man who with insensate exultation boasted of the plenty of his abounding crops. Why dost thou brood alone over thy wealth ? Why dost thou increase the burden of thy estate to thine own punishment, so that the richer thou art in the world, the poorer thou art before God ?' See Suicer, *Thes.* s. v. *■λουτέω*.