

CHAPTER XVII

The Love of God (III)

THE GOD OF THE LOST (I)

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

"Now all the publicans and sinners were drawing near unto him to hear him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.

"And he spake unto them this parable, saying, What man of you, having a hundred sheep, and having lost one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost until he find it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and his neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that even so there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, who need no repentance."

(Luke 15: 1-7)

(Parallel passage: Matthew 18: 12-14)

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN

"Or what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a lamp, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth together her friends and neighbors, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost. Even so, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth."

(Luke 15: 8-10)

CHAPTER XVII

THE GOD OF THE LOST (I)

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

The Parable of the Lost Coin

The grouping of the three parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son is as deliberate and masterly as the collection of the "kingdom" parables in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel. In the latter instance the connecting idea is "the kingdom of heaven," in this the leitmotif is sounded in the word "lost." "Lost" recurs like a bell to warn and plead. Each of the three stories presents the theme in a new key and with a different development, but in none is it overlaid. The parables are a true trinity.

But the first two are also twin parables. As in the case of the "Mustard Seed" and the "Leaven" one is pastoral in setting and the other domestic. Not only are the two strikingly alike but there is a line dividing them¹ from the Parable of the Lost Son. In the twin parables Jesus defends Himself against the charge of association with "publicans and sinners," whereas in the story of the Prodigal and the Elder Brother He carries the issue to His critics. Again, in the twin parables God is represented as actively seeking the lost, whereas in the third the Lost Son is shown undertaking the return journey for himself and welcomed by his Father's compassion and joy. This chapter considers the twin parables.

Jesus was being assailed for the company He kept. He welcomed "publicans and sinners" and He ate with them.² To the ceremonial righteousness of His critics the latter offense was

¹ The line of separation is shown also in the introductory words: "and he spake unto them" introduces the first parable, while "or" is sufficient to lead into the second. "And he said," repeated at the beginning of the third, indicates the separation.

² There can be little doubt that Luke has supplied the proper setting of these parables. In Matthew the context (the receiving of little children) is suitable but not nearly as convincing as the background which Luke provides. See Matthew 18 and Luke 15.

worse than the former, for the rabbinical law governing meals was rigid. Publicans were socially abhorrent and "sinners" were regarded as morally beyond the pale. The Pharisees made it clear to the crowd thronging about Jesus that a man is known by the company he keeps! Yet there was no flash of anger in His answer, but only a gentle reasonableness. "What man of you³ losing even a sheep would not seek it? Or what woman losing even a coin would not search through the house for it? You say these 'sinners' are lost. Surely a lost man is more precious and demands a more urgent seeking than a lost sheep or a lost coin, and his recovery gives a fuller joy. God sent me to seek lost people." It is so gentle, so incontrovertible a defence. . . .

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Jesus regarded a shepherd's toil with feelings deeper than admiration. As often as He thought of the faithful vigil, tender care, and sacrificing heroism of those who kept their flocks on Judean hills His nature kindled. They were men worthy to receive the Angels' Song! The imagery of shepherd life is recurrent in His teaching.⁴ "Good Shepherd" was a title He justly claimed, and was one of His best names for God.

Who—or what—is God like? We try to slay the question but ever and again it revives. During most of our waking hours God is no more than an Abstract Noun. But sometimes, as we look on "the wide composure of the sky" or the radiance of a child, He becomes a Presence though vague. Occasionally, in some flaming hour—in the impact of death, the thrill of human love, the throes of conscience, or the pleading of prayer—He becomes the living Fact of facts. "What is God like?"—in no life can that question be finally dismissed:

"Just when we're safest, there's a sunset-touch,
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,
A chorus-ending from Euripides,—
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears
As old and new at once as Nature's self,
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,

³ This appeal to ordinary instinct was a favorite appeal with Jesus. See Luke 11: 5; 14: 5, 28, and many other examples.

⁴ John 10: 1-18; Mark 6: 34, and Matthew 25: 32 will come to mind.

Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,
Round the ancient idol, on his base again,—
The grand Perhaps!"⁵

The church-spires which pierce our sky-line are the outward symbol of spires raised wistfully in the city of Man-Soul: "What is God like?"

Jesus answered the question. The world's instinctive faith is that He answered it from veritable experience. His friendship with God was not intermittent. God was never an Abstract Noun to Him, but always the Fact of facts. So He journeyed through the narrow valley of our earth answering our deepest question. He drew word-pictures of God that we might understand. Thus He said, "God is the Good Shepherd."

On the human plane the story is poignant. Not without stirring of heart can we hear of a shepherd seeking a lost sheep, despising distance and darkness in the search. But on the divine plane (humanity the flock and God the Shepherd) the story is like a daybreak. The Presence sometimes felt and sometimes feared, the Power Who rolls the planets on their course and draws the line of death across our human days—Who is He? "Our dearest faith, our ghastliest doubt"—what is He like? He is like a shepherd! He led us into this pasture of mortal life. He knows the folly by which we wander, drawn by this pleasant tuft and that lush water-course, until the night is on us and the mountains rise like walls of rock. He seeks us through pain and peril. He will lead us at the last through the Valley of the Shadow, His lifted rod our guide!

"He is the Drover of the soul; He leads the flock of men
All wistful on that weary track and brings them back again.
The dreaming few, the slaving crew, the motley caste of life—
The wastrel and artificer, the harlot and the wife. . . ."

"Yet not unled, but shepherded by one they may not see—
The one who walked with starry feet the western road by me!"⁶

Human life is so frequently loveless that it is not easy for mankind to think of God as a Shepherd. We can believe in

⁵ Robert Browning, "Bishop Bloughram's Apology."

⁶ Evelyn Underhill, "Uxbridge Road." ("Immanence," E. P. Dutton and Co.)

His power—those flames of fire incredibly vast leaping forth from æonian suns into a gulf of space incredibly deep are tokens of power. We can believe in His holiness—the moral law written on tablets of conscience speaks of an eternal Right. We can believe in His beauty—the fringe of the sunset is His garment's hem. Jesus taught us to believe also in His love—His courage of love which bestowed our freedom, His pain of love which seeks us when freedom has become our ruin!

The message of the story—this avowal of God's love—is concentrated in three of its words:

"LOST." Jesus seldom called people "sinners"; He called them "lost."⁷ Sometimes they are lost like sheep, not from viciousness or deliberate choice but from weak will and heedlessness. Sometimes they are lost like coins, not from their own guilt but from another's fault or the mischances of life. Sometimes they are lost like the prodigal through calculated self-will. The word breathes pity more than condemnation, and it reveals God's loneliness!

It is a universal word. The Pharisees never classed themselves as lost. They were quick to fling the title "sinner" at other men. But their barren self-righteousness seen in the white light of the spirit of Jesus brands them as more hopelessly lost than those whom they deemed outside the pale. Jesus has destroyed for all time the pretensions of the "unco guid." Who the "ninety and nine" may be we do not know. Possibly they are the "angels" of whom the story later speaks. As for human nature, it is "lost"⁸—not in the sense of being irreparably damned (these parables were given to contradict the horror of any such creed) but in the sense of being away from the fold of true blessedness, away from the currency of true service, away from the home of God's presence. Like sheep, men follow the zest of the moment—this transitory thrill of pleasure, that passing enrichment—until they reach darkness and the brink of the precipice! "Lost" is the final description of a civilization which has not given peace. . . .

⁷ Matthew 10: 6; 15: 24; 18: 11, and John 17: 12, beside the references in Luke 15.

⁸ Matthew's account uses the word "astray" instead of "lost." There are other interesting differences: Matthew says, "If so be that he find it" and Luke "until he find it." Luke adds significant details such as "he puts it on his shoulders" and "he gathers his friends and neighbors."

"SEEKING." Jesus tells us that human experience, if we would interpret it aright, is God's quest of us. The upstarting of duty, the torment of our sins, the dim unrest which is the undertone of all our joys—these we usually call "moods," but Jesus calls them the echoing footfall of the seeking Shepherd and the call of His voice. He bids us believe that our hopes fulfilled and our hopes blasted, the gleam of noble character in past or present, and above all, that "Staff" set up on Calvary for the world's comfort—the whole range of human experience—is a Divine pursuit. If we ask "What does life mean?", Jesus answers: "It means God seeking, seeking, because you are precious to Him."

There are those who in the name of modern science pour scorn on the Christian doctrine of the preciousness of the individual. "Did God come to this molehill of a planet and die for men?"—so the sneer runs! It leaves us with a picture of a universe composed of vast wheels. Humanity is the little dust which the wheels raise for a moment into the light of mortal days. Sometime we shall learn that preciousness is not determined by physical size, and then we shall know the folly of the sneer. That was a wise Scot who refused to be "astronomically intimidated." A true father owning a mountain (even a mountain of gold) would part with the mountain sooner than part with his child. Furthermore the sneer can be confronted with facts. Conscience is a fact—and not less a fact if science should prove that it has risen to its high estate by lowly paths. Human love is a fact. Prayer, the deep which answers to the Deep, is a fact. Jesus is a fact. The soul asserts that in all these facts God draws near. Such experience of God is valid as any finding of the senses. Love is not less real because it cannot be poured into a test-tube. . . .

The human flock is all God's flock. We do not acknowledge one another's company. Modern self-righteousness says "moron" instead of "sinner," but we are nevertheless one flock, and every sheep is precious to the Shepherd. Therefore He is ever seeking.

"UNTIL." There are ninety and nine safely in the fold, but love is not satisfied by a favorable percentage between those safe and those lost. Souls are not digits. It is not tactful

to say to a father when one child has gone: "Oh, well, you need not worry. You have others left." God seeks *one* life. When He has found it He does not upbraid, nor drive it home. He carries it on His shoulder. He rejoices more over the recovery of the one lost than in those who have not strayed.

Millennium doctrine is of value in that it keeps alive the mood of instancy in the Christian faith, but it is a dark perversion in its portrayal of the character of God. Will God save good people in a mass, gathering them into His garner, and consign the bad people in a mass to unquenchable fire? Will He make perfect His world by sweeping out of it all who are imperfect? The doctrine is a flat contradiction of these parables. Jesus said with reiteration that all the forces of a benignant heaven are released for one lost spirit. If God forgets any, He forgets the good—if good there are! If He remembers any, He remembers those whom men despise. The only obstacle is our foolish self-will. The faith abides

"That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroyed,
Or cast as rubbish to the void. . . ."⁹

For God—Godlike in patient love—will seek the lost "until He find it."

The Parable of the Lost Coin

Jesus may have seen the "woman" of this story during His Nazareth years. Perhaps the "coin" was a large fraction of her scanty savings or the last coin needed to complete the sum carefully accumulated for the payment of a temple tax.¹⁰ Perhaps it was one piece of a circlet of coins which she wore about her head.¹¹ In any event it was precious. She lit her candle—for her humble cottage received light only through the low door—and searched diligently. Dust rose from the reeds spread thick on the floor and the little house was filled with commotion. No nook or corner was left unvisited until at last a gleam of silver rewarded her toil. At once she gathered

⁹ Tennyson, "In Memoriam" (Canto LIV).

¹⁰ Bruce makes this suggestion (*op. cit.*, p. 275).

¹¹ Plummer ("I.C.C." *in loc.*) precludes this interpretation, but Grieve (Peake's Commentary), Burton (Expositor's Bible) and others hold it admissible. There is nothing in the Greek "drachma," so it would seem, to forbid it.

around her the women¹² of the village and told the exciting incident—doubtless with elaborations. A simple story!—but Jesus prints it across the face of the earth and heaven: "Likewise there is joy in the presence of the angels of God. . . ."

Again there is the word "lost," and the suggestion is that people are sometimes lost like a coin which slips from the hand. The fault is a fault of the hand, not of the coin. We cannot dogmatically say that Jesus had the fact in mind, but fact it is that many of the "publicans and sinners" lived in gloom not from choice but rather from cruel circumstances or the lapse of other men. What of little children crippled by congenital disease or torn by unruly temper? Lost, not from blame of theirs but through hereditary taint! Oliver Twist was taught to steal in such tender years that theft was as much his second nature as walking. He was lost through another's guilt! Wrong committed often rests in heavier consequence on the innocent than on the wrongdoer. When a father is sentenced to jail, the stigma branded on his children is more tragic than his imprisonment.

Sometimes it seems as if the insensate harshness of life causes the "loss" of character. A wandering microbe destroys health and hope. A wandering hurricane destroys a city and with the city many a human dream. A wandering temptation catches the spirit off guard. There are times when our human lot appears a meaningless clash of blind forces. We are cast aside in their unfeeling play. The human coin rolls into a dark corner. . . .

Again the story asserts the value of one life lost. Our modern civilization is strangely contradictory in regard to the "lost." On the one hand, it builds schools for the "underprivileged" child, engages in costly research for the sake of those smitten by incurable disease, and experiments with prison reform by which to reclaim the criminal. In these endeavors it is "come to seek and to save that which is lost." On the other hand, it permits and by crass "statescraft" invites the scourge of war, degrades a man to a number on a metal disc,

¹² Trench suggests that the "woman" may symbolize the Church or Divine Wisdom, and that the story with a "nice observance of proprieties" makes Wisdom (a female personification) call her female friends together. (*Op. cit.*, pp. 385, 389.) It is an allegorizing which we may gladly ignore.

and drives him in his thousands in mass formation into a bloody maw. Likewise it herds men and women in factories, crushes them by mechanical and monotonous toil, buys them in the "labor market" and starves or feeds them according to "supply and demand." Our civilization is sometimes civil, sometimes uncivil, and always weirdly inconsistent. But the gospel of Jesus is committed, once and forever, to the value of the individual. By His cross He has bound all into a world-wide brotherhood and set on each the seal of preciousness. Men are no longer flung to wild beasts in the Coliseum to make a public holiday, and Jesus will "overturn, overturn" until people no longer sit long hours before a factory belt which is timed to their "highest working capacity." Jesus concentrates on the unit—the unit of the individual and the unit of a friendly human order. "There is joy in heaven over *one* sinner"—the fortunes of the lowest and least are followed with impassioned interest in the presence of God. Jesus called Himself "Son of man," and thus claimed kinship with every life shadowed or bright, known or obscure.

His mind is slowly conquering the earth. When a drunken sot is rushed from the gutter to the hospital, there to be healed by gentle skill and ministered unto from the public funds, we acknowledge the mind of Christ. His word about the "lost" constrains us, or at least an instinct tells us (an instinct which He quickens and interprets) that the life of a sot has intrinsic worth. So long as any glimmer of conscience is there, or any movement of love, it has bonds with the Eternal—for conscience and love witness to their own eternity. . . .

The story makes clear the intensity and thoroughness of the Divine search: "The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord." He lights the candle and searches the house. In one Life the candle burned with so bright a glow that the whole earth became radiant:

"And so the Word hath breath, and wrought
With human hands the creed of creeds
In loveliness of perfect deeds. . . ." ¹³

¹³ Tennyson, "In Memoriam" (Canto XXXVI).

The search is not without dust! God often disturbs the wonted floor of life. Happily, the prayer for "normalcy" is as vain as it is unworthy. Consider the history of mankind—what dust-clouds of controversy, what shaking of kingdoms, what wars and rumors of wars, what overturnings of fixed habit! Consider the cottage of individual life—swept by joy and then by sorrow, by fortune and misfortune, by holy aspiration and by agony of remorse! The little house is often in disorder! We wonder why. We talk of "good luck" and "bad luck," or (if the affairs of a larger world are in question) of tyrannies and bolshevisms, the uprising of races, and the ambitions of classes. Are these but names for the Divine search? Is He seeking us through the sweeping of change—His human coins besmirched but with the royal image uneffaced? He searches "diligently"!

The parable concludes with an amazing picture of heaven's joy. We do not easily think of God as joyous, and consequently our theologies are stilted and barren. We often think of Him as impassive. The ocean of His being is neither torn by storms nor shimmers in sunlight; it is constantly grey. An impassive God, nevertheless, is not Godlike. A man rich in play of feeling is worthier the name. Our mortal spirit suffering and rejoicing is more divine in aspect than an Unconscious Force. Jesus speaks of the joy of God. We do not know what Jesus meant by "angels." Our earth-born life is more radiant than the pre-natal world, and, if analogy can be trusted, life hereafter will make this life seem a drab imprisonment. God has there His shining servants even as here He has His messengers of duller wing. . . .

There is a river whose waters rise with the tides of the sea. Miles inland muddy banks are filled, grounded boats are floated. Occasionally the inrush takes the form of a wave. The people on that river call the wave "the Ægir." The boys cry on its approach: "The Ægir, the Ægir!" It is a name of noble origin in Icelandic myths, the name of the Giant of the Calm Sea, and it has remained in the language of that river as the sigil of the early Norse invaders. Tennyson, who lived in the same western country, caught the picture of that calm tide:

"But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound or foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home."¹⁴

The joy of heaven is like an ægir. It floods every inlet. It redeems muddy flats. It floats all the vessels of delight. It moves like a quiet wave through angelic worlds and thrills into worlds beyond. "There shall be joy in the presence of the angels of God. . . ."

And why? Because a "lost" coin has been found, because there is a character-gain revealed in some soul. If two men should come to us, the first saying, "A rich uncle has left me a million dollars" and the other saying, "By much struggle I have learned that what I own makes me neither rich nor poor, but rather what I am and what I give"—it is to be feared that our congratulation would be quicker and more sincere to the first man than to the second! Meanwhile heaven watches the issues of *character* with intense concern, and as souls grow more tender and truthful the tides of joy overflow. God is plunged in loss when any soul is "lost," diligent in search that the "lost" may be found, and glad with exceeding joy in the day of recovery. It is a gospel of hope which will yet transform the earth!

¹⁴ Tennyson, "Crossing the Bar."