



# The H. Mann will. Prook. Collection

XXIV

## PURELY PERSONAL

Every man, I suppose, has notable moments in his personal spiritual life — not at all identical with notable moments of his earthly career. A number of such occasions stand out for me with remarkable vividness. Among them have been some associated with an outward scene or incident — quite some associated with an outward scene or incident — quite apart from public affairs or services — which in some way brought a new awe upon the soul. The first in point of time was, I think, connected with a visit which I paid to Tintern Abbey when I was but a boy of thirteen or fourteen. It seemed as though there was something in those wonderful ruins by the winding Wye which suddenly became vocal to me and something in me which spoke back again. I had a similar feeling, years afterwards, when in Rome I visited the Colosseum. This time it came as a deep sense of the inner spiritual conflicts through which the martyrs must have passed. So real it was that I seemed able to apprehend a little of what must have been experienced in those far-off days on the very stones on which we knelt, I and the two men who were with me. I felt a mysterious liberation, an enlargement, a mounting up — what shall I call it? — of the spirit within.

It was not the mere passing impression of the traveller. Little else in Rome, at any rate during that visit, affected me in anything like the same way, except, perhaps, the Corso, the street through which many of the martyrs passed amid hostile multitudes to their condemnation and death. Certainly I found that some of the basilicas appealed greatly to the eye, but I cannot say that they touched me very deeply. The pictures in the Vatican galleries were wonderful, though in some cases I thought them overdone. The tapestries in the Sistine Chapel stirred me in some degree: but very slightly as compared with a little scene that I witnessed in a side chapel in, I believe it was, S. Maria Maggiore. The priest, a minor canon, had just concluded a service, when an old woman, bent with age and, I should think, with trouble, came in his path and bent herself yet more to receive his blessing! He put out two fingers, mumbled a word or two, and passed on. Here was a poor hungry creature, type of a stricken humanity, looking up with a wistfulness no one could mistake. And there was the smooth priest in his elaborate vestments, bestowing his perfunctory benison! It struck home to my heart!



# The H. Mann will Brooks Collection

The same transfiguring influence which I had experienced in the old English Abbey and in the Roman amphitheatre came upon me again on a journey from New York. How mighty the ocean and how passing small the ship! And from that a sense of how helpless and yet how secure the human spirit on a Mighty Bosom. We had a good passage, the water was comparatively quiet, and I, a bad sailor, was able to look about a little. The sense of distance, of solitariness, of being at the mercy of the purely physical, a new perspective of oneself and of the world, of the visible and the invisible, made it one of those moments when again something inward seemed to rise up and take wing.

Yet I have been scarcely affected by some of the things which are supposed to appeal, and indeed do appeal, to the traveller. Niagara did not make any very great impression upon me, though I admired the rainbows, of which I saw a gay succession in a few minutes. When the sun is in a certain direction the humidity of the atmosphere caused by the waterfalls makes the most beautiful iridescence, one rainbow embracing another. Even the Alps did not arouse in me the feeling that they do in many. The people who were with me on my first visit thought me unresponsive, although, there in the Alps, I had something of the same sense as later I had on the Atlantic, at once of helplessness and security, of coming to one's own limits and finding beyond them — God!

During a large part of my life many of the laws and facts of nature have seemed to me, though not alive, to have in them a spirit of life, separate from them, but working in them.

The Lord of all, Himself through all diffused,  
Sustains and is the life of all that lives.  
... one spirit, His Who wore the plaited thorns with bleeding brows,  
Rules universal nature.

But I have felt more than this. The universe itself, as one of our poets has it, has murmured to the ear of love and faith tidings of invisible things, secrets from the everlasting silence. These have seemed like the echo of the voice of God. They have been more than illustrations of



# The H. Mann will.brook Collection

something higher than themselves, more than mere analogy. They have been more than the thoughts which Pope's fine lines envision for us, though he does take care to separate the work from the Great Worker.

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,  
Whose body Nature is and God the soul;  
That changed through all, and yet in all the same;  
Great in the earth, as in th' ethereal frame;  
Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,  
Glow in the stars, and blossoms in the trees,  
Lives through all life, extends through all extent,  
Spreads undivided, operates unspent;  
Breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part;  
As full as perfect in vile man that mourns  
As the rapt seraph, that adores and burns.  
To Him, no high, no low, no great, no small  
He fills, He bounds, unites and equals all.

I have felt, indeed, that I could go further even than the Psalmist, when he said, 'Marvellous are Thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well,' for they have been more to me than manifestations of divine power, or divine order, or divine beauty. It is as though at times they have given to me something living, which He had given them that they might communicate to me. It has been as though He was not only outside His own creation as a builder is outside the house he builds or the artist is outside the picture he paints, but there within it all, a living personal power, an inspiring and communicating Spirit; as though there was something of His abiding word in the trees and flowers, in the rocks and seas, a spirit in the hills and vales which could call to me and which my own spirit, starting up at that call, was able to answer. This has helped me to keep my heart in patience, in faith and hope. It has strengthened my hold on the secret of the Lord. It has deepened my knowledge that I live and move within the victorious purpose of God's will.



# The H. Mann Willbrook Collection

The contemplation of extremes of human misery affects me somewhat in the same way. I believe that our religion does enable us to account for much that is extremely baffling in human history and in the conditions of human life. One problem there is, however, in the presence of which I always feel dumb. It is the problem of suffering children. I cannot grasp anything tangible in the Divine purpose which permits little children to suffer. I cannot doubt His love. I know that wisdom belongeth unto Him. All the same, I feel, not merely pain, but a sense of profound mystery when I approach the suffering of children. I hear above the voice of the crippled and starved another voice which stirs me. I am in the presence of the insoluble. I realize this in connexion with those states of misery of the innocent and helpless, as I do not realize it even in experiences which might be thought more solemn, such as the presence of death or of widespread calamity.

My experience from time to time in prayer has also made me conscious of the new life unexpectedly emerging within the life I am living. It is in such moments as though I come to a rift in the great wall of circumstance and look out upon a free and boundless sea. In my early life my experience of prayer was, to a large extent, bound up with the fight against temptation, and I cannot say that in those early years, apart from prayer for those I loved, and for pressing needs, that I prayed with very deep desire or real understanding for anything except deliverance in temptation or trial of one kind or another.

But there stand out in my life now various occasions when, in praying for help for myself or for the souls of men, there has been this same deep consciousness of something new added to me, some awakening of a new spiritual faculty, or, shall I say, a new spiritual sense, with which to realize the Divine. I have had many remarkable answers to prayer in the way of material gifts and signs and leadings. Those, however, appear quite small in retrospect, so far as their permanent value is concerned, compared with these inward uprisings of my spirit — which have often had little or nothing to do with requests for any particular thing — to meet, I humbly believe, to know and to meet the Spirit of God.

Another, and in a way kindred, experience in succeeding visitations I have had, which though difficult to write of, may be of service to some. Will it be understood if I put it in this way? Through a great part of my life I have felt a reverent sympathy with God. I passed through a deeply



# The *H. Mann will. Prook.* Collection

harrowing period of perplexity over the question of punishment and the relation of the Father to the whole matter of retribution. I have never been a 'treacle and water' person. I have always felt that there must be some moral test supreme over men, and that it must be the one laid down by Jesus Christ: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' I have always felt that the love of God must be a holy love. I have always felt that the love of God must have an exclusive, as well as an inclusive, character. Nevertheless, when, while relatively a young man, I was confronted with the arguments of a certain school, I was brought up very short on the question. I had great strivings over it. My dear father and General helped me greatly, although he never pushed me. He was infinitely patient. And I came through.

But it was in that stress of mind and soul that I began to feel a humble reverent sympathy with my God in the unmeasured responsibility and difficulty that were His of administering justice in a rebel world - responsibility and difficulty made greater just in proportion as He understood and loved that world and as that world misunderstood and hated Him. I knew that He was bound by the laws of His own nature — that His Omnipotence is a rational omnipotence. I knew that He could not contradict Himself. I knew, for example, that He could no more make a lie into a truth than I — the nature of things being what it is could make two and two into five. A lie being a lie, I knew that the punishment of the liar is the inherent inevitable consequence of the lie. And so it has seemed to me that love for God involved such true sympathy with Him as His child could feel in the tremendous task that is His of vindicating and a world smitten by the inevitable consequences of sin, the mercy and the justice which are the support of His throne.

This sympathy has been a conscious reality in my inner life and has helped me all along my way. It has opened to me new views of the Divine Mind and Will. It has led me to the masters of other emotions of my nature, so that they also could be used to glorify God. It has carried me through many dark hours of misgiving and weakness. It has strengthened my faith for the ultimate triumph of good. It has inspired me to work for my God. It has helped me also to do many things required in that work which have been painful to a more or less sensitive nature. I have felt that in doing that which was just and right towards others when it was so very painful for me, as well as for them, I, one of His servants, was tasting with the great Father and Saviour, of the cup that He must drink in contemplating and judging a rebel and ruined world.



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In all these experiences, and above and beyond them all, there has been the spiritual awakening of spiritual wants, and the union — the beginning of the union of the drop with the Everlasting Ocean.