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"TWO OR THREE BERRIES,"

AN AUTUMN SUBJECT,

BY THE

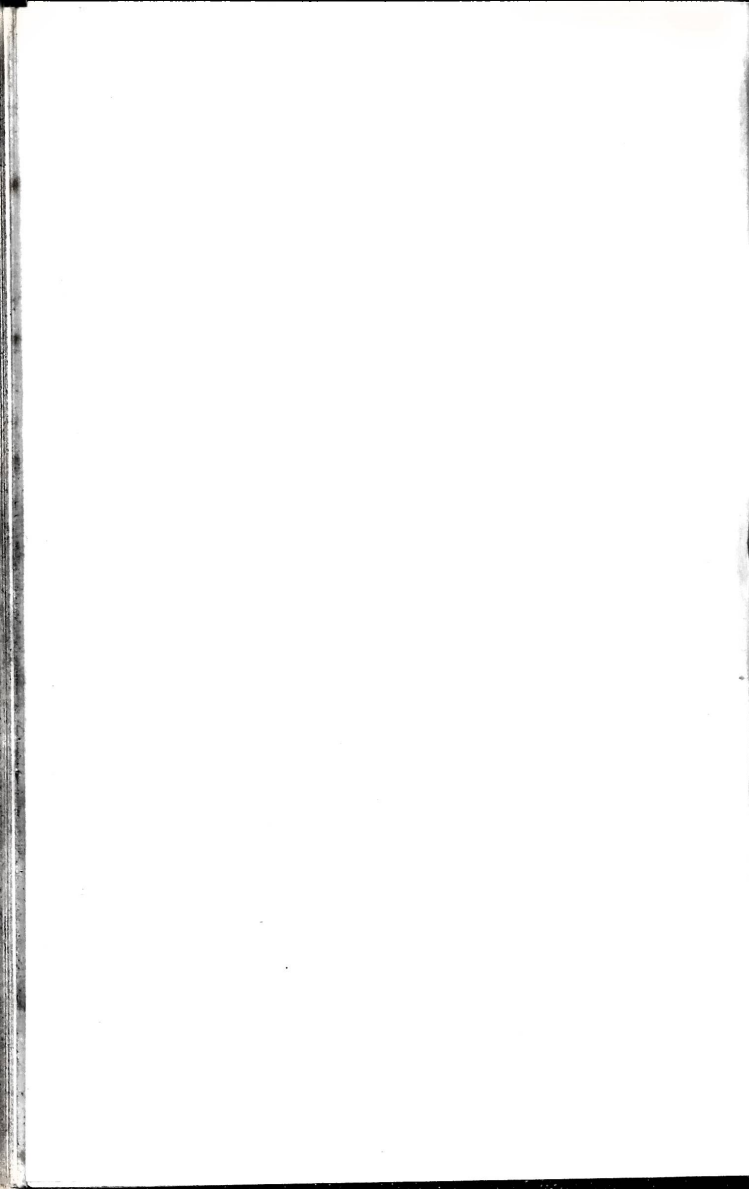
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OF HALIFAX,

DELIVERED AT

SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL, FINSBURY,

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## "TWO OR THREE BERRIES."

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In that day it shall come to pass that the glory of Jacob shall be made thin ;

And it shall be as when the harvest man gathereth the corn and reapeth the ears with his arm ;

And it shall be as he that gathereth ears in the valley of Rephaim.

Yet gleaning, grapes shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree.

Two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough. Four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the Lord God of Israel.—ISAIAH xvii., 4-6.

"Two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough. Four or five in the outmost fruitful branches."

It is strange to note the enduring value of a true image. Here is a sight, which we may see now in every hedge-row, on the skirts of the woods, in the thickets of our gardens, and we find that it was seen and mused upon in the far-off ages, when the Jewish prophet lived, and that it seemed to him to be the very best illustration of his thought. His

message was that with the downfall of Damascus should come ruin to Israel. Drawing an illustration from the bareness of the land after the harvest, the prophet says—"It shall be as when the harvest man gathereth the corn, and reapeth the ears with his arm; as when they have gleaned after the reaper in the valley of Rephaim," till the land is stripped of its last show of fertility. But the very image that he has used calls to his mind another, the recollection of what he has seen in the time of the latter harvest; and, when that flashes on his mind, he adds some words of consolation—all shall not be taken away, and the land made utterly desolate. There shall be a gleaning of grapes in it, the shaking of an olive tree; two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough—four or five in the utmost fruitful branches thereof. In the general bareness of the land, these, "the things that remain," have a peculiar beauty, and a value which we should never think of giving them, when we are in the full enjoyment of the luxurious abundance, the full clusters and many fruits of summer. It is the true autumn lesson—as new and as valuable now as it was in those old days, taught to us quite as impressively as ever it was. *Value the things that are left to you, they are worth more because they are left*

and have survived ; and, if the crop is but small, it is, at any rate, all that there is. We have the suggestive imagery about us now, meeting us in our rambles, speaking to us in the shining berries which have taken the place of the richly coloured foliage, most of all, perhaps, in the shy, solitary rose, mounted almost out of sight to the very topmost twig—more beautiful than the somewhat rampant glories of the summer roses, for it has to contrast and to set out its perfection, the damp and decay, the blackening leaves and naked stems, dripping and sodden with the showers. It has the beauty and the value of the things that are left, and the suggestiveness to thought of all these later autumn beauties is just this, that they seem to say to us, “ We are all that are left to you, make of us all that you can. Yet, in spite of the general ruin and decay, earth is not left without some beauty ; pale, scentless, it is true, but prized perhaps more than the common beauties of the summer and the spring.” *Make the most of the things that remain.* We may very usefully apply the lesson to our *circumstances of life*. How seldom is it given to any one to enjoy full summer all his days, to live a prosperous life quite to the end. Circumstances are but surroundings. They are not ourselves ; and often it is well for us that

we should be taught by sharp experience that this is so. They drop away from us and leave us, even as the summer glories fade away from the earth; and the man who was rich and influential, who seemed to be secure in the possession of all that he could wish, finds that he can be separated from it, and that sometimes it leaves him little more than a late autumn crop, of property and possession, two or three berries only, and those on the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruiting branches of his life. It is the part of a true wisdom to make the most of them—from all that is left to seek for the greatest gain, surely not to despair and to refuse to see any beauty of advantage or use in the wrecks and shattered remains of what was once so fair a show. It is so, because the law of our life is like that scientific law of evolution in this, that the things which remain to us are usually those which deserved to remain, the *fruits* of our life. Success may have gone and failure come, but the failure may bring with it *patience* and *endurance*, earned by the qualities which once ensured success; now ornamenting the career which has no longer any other fruits of its success to show. “Not what they have failed in, not what they have suffered, but what they have done, ought to occupy the survivors,”

says Göethe. And it is a true saying, the man who has lived a true life, always obeying the demands of conscience, is released from the tyranny of circumstance, and if but little is left him of the things, riches, honour, wealth, which seemed so essential to his condition whilst he had them, he can do without them, having in himself the well-ordered mind which can find good in little. Such was Jeremy Taylor, who, when his house had been plundered and his family driven out of doors and his worldly estate sequestrated, wrote, "I am fallen into the hands of publicans and sequestrators, and they have taken all from me. What now? Let me look about me. They have left me the sun and the moon, much to see, many friends to pity me and some to relieve me; and I can discourse still, and, unless I list, they have not taken away my merry countenance and my cheerful spirit and a good conscience; they have still left me the providence of God and all the hopes of the gospel and my religion, and my hopes of heaven and my charity to them too; and he that hath so many causes of joy and so great, is very much in love with sorrow and peevishness, who loves all these pleasures and chooses to sit down upon his little handful of thorns."

This seems to me to be in the right, cheerful spirit of contentment, which is not by any means the abstract virtue that it is supposed to be, but may be easily acquired by those who know its secret, which is only to make the most of the things that remain, admiring the two or three berries which cling to the uppermost bough of life. As you look at them you find that they are not merely "two or three," there are "four or five," and to the wintry landscape with its bareness they impart some of the beauty and colour of summer. Discontent always remains discontent so long as it is occupied with itself; but, if once we look outside ourselves, nature makes the present things, the claims of the day, of paramount interest to us, and we are gradually coaxed back again into activity and hope. As we have often found—have we not?—some sorrow or change has come upon us, and for a time all the interests of life seemed to be carried into the past and life itself to be turned into stagnancy; but sorrow generally brings with it its occupancies and duties, and they win back the mind to calm and resignation. You may note this in any sorrow of your own or of your friends. There is a little history of it in those successive Christmas-days in "In Memoriam." The poet has lost his friend, and Christmas brings him only



sadness and a quick feeling of his loss. It is merely for *use and wont*, in obedience to old custom, that Christmas is kept at all. "They gambol, making vain pretence" of gladness, and "sadly falls the Christmas eve." Another Christmas has the "quiet sense of something lost;" but now the game and dance and song have place, none "shows a token of distress," and the poet asks almost self-accusingly; Can grief be changed to less? and answers his own thought—

" O, last regret ; regret can die !  
 No—mix't with all this mystic frame,  
 Her deep relations are the same  
 But with long use her tears are dry."

This is the lesson, then of the season. Look for the few beauties that it has. They may, perhaps, prove to be as suggestive, almost as satisfying, as the summer glories or the hopefulness of spring. And, learning a lesson from nature, practise it in life. Do not allow sorrow or discontent to master the soul. They will if you are always thinking about them, but fix your attention on present duties. Make life happier for those about you, be helpful and useful so far as you can. Now and then "take stock" of the pleasures that remain to you, and, as Jeremy Taylor did in his deprivation, you will find

that life is still endurable—nay, that it has some pleasures, which, like the late berries on the trees, are, if not very sweet to the taste, at least cheerful to the eye.

There is a similar wisdom which may be shown in our judgments of and dealing with our *characters*. Many a man reaches the autumn of his days only to find that of the seeds of endeavour which he has sown there have come up but a very poor crop. He has conscientiously striven and has often failed. Many good resolutions, much earnest effort, a great deal of self-denial, and many very seeming successes, have ended in little real gain. The besetting sin, whatever it may be, has proved too strong for the resisting will; and I have noticed that it is characteristic of such a life to grow bitter against itself at the end. It is as if a husbandman had ploughed, and sown, and weeded, and found but in the end a very scanty crop—ground nearly as bare as if it had been reaped already; and in such a case it is cold comfort, I know, to point out a few ears, or, if his crop is of the vineyard, some straggling grapes; but there is some comfort in it too, for a vine that will grow some grapes has the possibility, under more favourable circumstances, of growing more, and there is the chance of a full harvest another year.

Much of the shameless sin that marks the end of some lives that have never been quite free from very conscientious efforts at self-improvement come, I am convinced, of hopelessness. A man is weary of trying to overcome some temptation. He has tried for years, perhaps, and some strong inner-tendency, some weakness, which it seems as if he could not help, has got the better of him again and again. So he gives up all effort, loses all self-respect, and resigns himself up to sin. It is a weakness which none of us can greatly blame, which he certainly who knows how hardly he preserves the balance of his own soul, will look at with a very pitying eye, and perhaps the wisest word that can be spoken in such a case is this—don't say that you are altogether bad. You have still the preference for what is right—the wish to do well. It is but a poor crop of a life to have only that, but it is much better than no crop at all, infinitely superior to the luxuriance of wilful sin, for it means that, so long as we feel this dissatisfaction with ourselves—so long as we keep a clear notion of the right which we ought to do, we are not left quite to ourselves, are not, therefore, in an altogether hopeless condition. I suppose that most of us can remember that when we were children the hardest punishment to bear,—

the most effectual, too, I believe,—was that of being left to ourselves—forbidden nothing—restrained in nothing—treated as if we were nothing. God never so treats us. He never leaves us to our own devices, never lets us put ourselves outside his suggestions of right and wrong, and to these we ought to cling, when they are all that we have left to us. When will is weakness and good examples fail us, and respect even for the opinion of our friends is not a strong enough compulsion, then do not let us be blind to this last chance, and, refusing to see it, rush into sin. “At that day a man shall look to his Maker,” says the prophet, speaking of Israel in its utmost need, and as with the nation so with the man—the last glimmer of a sense of right, the poorest gleanings of a crop of good resolutions, even the wish to do right, may avail to save us from the utter despair which strives no more, and is led away helpless by temptation.

How I wish that any words of mine could make this a real truth to those who are in such danger as I have described! But words are very powerless in such a case as this. Only I would suggest the thought.

One other thought the picture which is my text suggests to me. It is that which is contained in the

practical conclusion of the passage which I have read to you. "At that day shall man look to his Maker, and his eye shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel." The religious attitude of mind forgotten in the midst of plenty is recovered when want is felt. And is it not so, that there is a moral lesson for us in the scantiness and rarity of natural beauty in the wintry landscape? Two or three berries then, when we see them on the mountain ash making a scarlet glow amidst the bare woods or on the long-swinging rose-tendrils where the clusters of flowers have been, or on the thorn, which has lost its delicate texture of flowers and the dense green of its foliage, even two or three catch the eye and fix the attention, and stimulate the thought which the wealth and luxuriance of summer had only distracted. *Meditation* is the autumnal mood, for then the mind finds enough of beauty to suggest, and not enough to oppress reflection. Autumn is for this reason the poet's fruitful season. Fancy is not over-weighted with imagery; and of natural beauty there is enough to suggest and to quicken thought. So Milton, and Wordsworth, and Coleridge all found late autumn and early winter their most fruitful and productive time of the year. The things that

remain, few as they are, may suggest, will very likely, in consequence of their fewness, suggest, religious reflection, for we seek God in our needs more readily than when we abound in all things, and a few objects of beauty amidst a world of bareness and sterility may lead the thoughts, which are troubled at the loss of summer wealth and spring suggestiveness, to seek, in reflection, the meaning and lesson of it all.

These are the thoughts, a little far-fetched it seems to me as I write them, which the image of my text suggests. They are thoughts of cheerfulness under disappointments, and courage to persevere when the sense of repeated failure oppresses the mind, and suggestions of the thoughtfulness that comes to the mind which is compelled to concentrate itself on a few objects ; and if we can find these in them, the "two or three berries," our autumn picture may teach us more than we can learn from summer flowers.

Leaf by leaf the roses fall,  
 Drop by drop the springs run dry,  
 One by one, beyond recall,  
 Summer beauties fade and die.  
 But the roses bloom again,  
 And the springs will gush anew,  
 In the pleasant April rain  
 And the summer sun and dew.

So in hours of deepest gloom,  
 When the springs of gladness fail,  
 And the roses in their bloom  
 Droop like maidens wan and pale ;  
 We shall find some hope that lies,  
 Like a silent germ apart,  
 Hidden far from careless eyes  
 In the garden of the heart :

Some sweet hope to gladness wed,  
 That will spring afresh and new,  
 When grief's winter shall have fled,  
 Giving place to sun and dew :  
 Some sweet hope that breathes of spring  
 Through the weary, weary time,  
 Budding forth its blossoming  
 In the spirit's silent clime.

HOWE.

