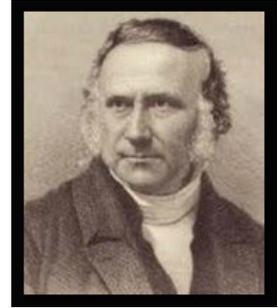


Bird of Paradise



Among my parishioners, there was a poor woman who had once seen better days. She had moved in the most respectable society, the wife of a man of wealth, who formerly held an important official station in the state, but who was now reduced to poverty; and, trembling with the weight of three score years and ten, had greatly lost the powers of his mind. She was many years younger than her husband. Neither of them was a follower of Christ. Indeed, after their early years, they had never paid anything more than a formal and fashionable attention to even the outward duties of religion. For years after their marriage, they lived in splendor; and when his extravagance had squandered his fortune, they were under the necessity of occupying the crazy old house where I first became acquainted with them. Through the benevolence of some wealthy relations, who were very kind to them, their temporal necessities were so provided for, that they did not suffer.

Earnestly I strove to interest their minds in the subject of religion. The old man appeared to me to be as stupid as any sinner can be; and he remained so, I believe, to the day of his death,—a victim, as I thought, of the foolish love of mere earthly ostentation and pleasure. Not so, his far younger wife. She listened to me with attention, and apparent interest, as I spread the subject of religion before her mind, on my first visit to her house; and when I called upon her again, a month afterwards, I found she had commenced reading her Bible with evident anxiety and prayer. The questions she asked me, and her tearful attention to my answers, clearly indicated the interest she felt in this great subject, which, she said, was

“almost new” to her thoughts; for, she had ‘scarcely given a thought to it in twenty years.” Said she, “Pleasure occupied my mind at first, and after my husband’s failure, it was all I could think of, to contrive how we should live.”

She bore her reverses with commendable fortitude,—labored hard to support herself and her husband, kept her little old cottage a pattern of neatness, and on the whole she won the respect of the few neighbors that knew her. There was nothing about her, as a woman or as an inquiring sinner, which appeared to me uncommon or peculiar. There was, indeed, as I thought, some little manifestation of a nervous excitability, when she mentioned to me her wicked heart, her struggles in prayer, and her despondency about “ever gaining the forgiveness of God!” but this I never should have thought of again, had it not been for what occurred afterwards.

About a week after I had seen and conversed with her at her house, not for the first or second time, and when I began to hope that she was ‘not far from the kingdom of God,’ she called upon me. She came to tell me of her hope in Christ, and how happy she was now, in the belief that God had forgiven and accepted her. She trusted, as she said, that God had “heard her prayers, and had sent her an answer of peace.”

By way of examining her state of mind, in order to know what to say to her, I asked her a few questions, which she answered in a manner quite satisfactory to me. I found in her nothing to make me distrust her,—indeed nothing but the contrary, till I asked her,—

“How long have you had this hope and ‘this delightful happiness,’ which you mention?” “Since last Thursday night,” was her reply. (It was now Tuesday.)

“What then led you to believe that God had ‘heard your prayer, and sent you an answer of peace?’”

“It was what I saw,” said she, with some little hesitation, as if reluctant to answer.

“What did you see?”

“It was,” said she, hesitating,—“it was a great light,” and she spoke it solemnly, and

with evident sincerity, but some excitement.

“Indeed!” said I. “And where did you see it?”

“In my room.”

“What was it?—what caused it?”

“I don’t know what it was, but it was wonderful! I shall never forget it.”

“Did it frighten you?”

“Oh no, not at all.”

“Was it moonshine?”

“No, not at all like it.”

“Did it shine in at the window? or through a crack?”

“Neither; it was just in the room.”

“What did it look like?”

“It was very wonderful, the sweetest light I ever saw. It was brighter than any sunshine; but it was so mild and soft that it did not dazzle the eyes. It ‘was perfectly beautiful—most enchanting.”

“Well now, Mrs. L—, just tell me all about it; I want to know how that was, the time, and all about it.”

Seeming to arrange her thoughts, she replied,—

“I had been sitting up a long time after Mr. L—went to bed, reading my Bible and trying to pray, and I almost despaired of mercy, because my heart was so wicked and obstinate. I felt as if I could not go to bed that night, without some proof that God would have mercy upon me. I was terrified with the thought of his wrath, but I felt that I deserved it all. Finally I went to bed. I had been lying in bed about half an hour thinking of my condition, and all at once, the most beautiful light I ever saw shined all over the room. It was a strange kind of light; brighter than day, brighter than any sunshine; but a great deal more beautiful and sweet. It was mild and so soothing, it filled me with perfect peace, a kind of sweet ecstasy, like a delightful dream. Then, in an instant, as I was thinking how delightful it was, there appeared the most beautiful creature that I ever

saw. I was perfectly enchanted and carried away with the beauty of it, its colors were so sweet and mingled, and its form so graceful. It was a bird. He had a rainbow in his bill, and a crown of glittering, soft-shining gold upon his head; he was resting on a globe of the softest blue, the most enchanting color that ever was. I never before conceived of anything so beautiful. His color, and his figure, and the crown of shining gold upon his head, the rainbow he held in his bill, and the blue globe he stood on, and the bright sweet light which filled the room, were all of them more beautiful and lovely than anything I ever thought of before. I was amazed and perfectly happy. ‘What is it?’ says I, ‘What is it?’ ‘Why it is the bird of Paradise,’ says I. ‘My precious :Father has sent it to me from heaven, I will not despair any longer.’ Then, I thought how happy I am; God has heard me and had mercy upon me. I have been perfectly happy ever since.”

She appeared to be in an ecstasy of delight.

“What makes you so happy?”

“Because, I think God has forgiven me, and because now I love Him and trust Him.” “How do you feel about sin?”

“Oh, I hate it. It displeases God, and separates me from Him.”

“What do you think of Christ?”

“He is a precious Saviour. I love Him and trust in Him.”

“For what do you trust Him?”

“For everything—for pardon, and peace, and heaven.”

“Do you think you are holy now?”

“No; I know that I sin every hour. But God is gracious to me and fills me with joy.”

“Do you rejoice because you are so good?”

“No; I rejoice because God has been so good to me.”

“What have you done to gain his favor.”

“I have done nothing only turn to Him.”

“Did you turn to Him of yourself?”

“No; I tried, but my heart would not yield, and I prayed for the Holy Spirit.”

“How do you expect to be saved?”

“By the mercy of God, through my Saviour.”

“How do you know He is your Saviour?”

“Because I trust in Him, and He has promised to save all that come unto Him.”

“Have you any doubt about your forgiveness?”

“No, sir, not much,—none that troubles me. I know my heart is deceitful; but I trust only in Christ, and then I am safe.”

“Do you think the appearance which you saw on Thursday night, was something sent by God?”

“Yes, I suppose it was.”

“How do you know but the devil sent it?”

“I never thought it could come from anything but God.”

“For what purpose do you think He sent it?”

“To give me peace.”

“What reason have you to think it was sent to assure you of God’s favor?”

“I don’t know what reason I have to think so, only I was made so happy.”

“Does the Bible teach you that God gives such visions as an evidence of His favor?”

“I think not.”

“Do you think it was a miracle?”

“I don’t know. I thought God sent it.”

“What o’clock was it when you saw the light?”

“About one o’clock, I should think.”

“Was the moon up?”

“No, it had gone down about an hour before.”

“What makes you think it was one o’clock?”

“Because it was ten when Mr. L—went to bed. Then I sat up a long time,—I should think more than two hours, reading and praying, and thinking about my danger of being lost; and I had been in bed some time,—I cannot tell exactly how long—half an hour perhaps.”

“Had you been asleep?”

“No, I think not.”

“Were you asleep when you saw it?”

“Oh no; I was as much awake as I am now.”

“Did you see the light and the bird with your natural eyes, the same as you see me now?” “Yes.”

“Where were they?”

“In my room.”

“Did Mr. L—see them?”

“No, he was asleep.”

“If he had been awake, do you think his eyes would have seen them?”

“Certainly, I suppose so.”

“Why didn’t you wake him?—is not he fond of birds?”

“I don’t know but he is fond of birds,” said she, with a very doubtful look, “but I never thought of waking him.”

“Have you got a canary-bird?”

“No, sir,” said she, as if doubtful of my meaning.

“Did you ever see a bird of Paradise?”

“No, sir, not alive. I have seen stuffed ones.”

“Which are the prettiest,—the stuffed ones or the one you saw that night?”

She cast her eyes down, with a look of mingled sadness and confusion, evidently thinking by this time that I meant to ridicule her vision; but she replied, mildly and solemnly,—

“Nothing on earth can be compared with what I saw that night.”

“Did the bird sing any?”

“No, sir.”

“That is a pity. If he had only sung, then you would have had a song of Paradise. What became of the bird?”

“It went away.”

“Why didn’t you catch it and cage it? It would have brought a good price in Boston. Did it fly out of the window?”

“I said it went away; I mean by that, that the light and all I saw vanished away, and I saw them no more.”

“How long did they stay before they vanished?”

“Only a few minutes.”

“What did you do when they were gone?”

“I lay for a long time thinking about it, and feeling delighted and grateful to God.” “Grateful for the canary bird and the rainbow? Do you mean that?”

“No sir, not that so much; but grateful for God’s great love to me, to pardon so unworthy a sinner.”

“Did the bird tell you God had pardoned you?”

“No sir.”

“What made you think he had?”

“What I saw, and my own happy feelings.”

“What makes you happy?”

“Because I love God and trust in Christ.”

“Would you have loved God, if you had not seen the bird?”

“I don’t know; I hope so.”

“When did you begin to feel so happy?”

“Thursday night.”

“Just when you saw the bird, was it?”

“Yes sir.”

“It is a great pity you did not catch that bird. If the sight of him is so effectual, we could carry him around here among impenitent sinners; and, as soon as they saw him, one after another, they would become happy, excellent Christians, and your bird would be worth more to convert sinners than forty ministers like me. Do you expect to see that bird again?”

“No, I have no such expectation.”

“Now, Mrs. L—, do you feel sure all that was not a dream?”

“It was no dream,” said she, seriously. “I was awake. Don’t you think I saw that light, sir?” said she with an imploring look.

“No, madam; I don’t believe you saw any such thing. I believe you think you saw it; but I believe it was all in your own imagination, and nowhere else.”

She shook her head very emphatically, as if fixed in the opposite opinion.

“Mrs. L—,” said I, “do you ever drink wine, or any stimulating drink?”

“No sir; not at all.”

“Do you ever take opium or laudanum?”

“Not unless the doctor orders it when I am sick.”

“Had you taken anything that night?”

“No; nothing but our tea.”

“Do you drink strong tea?”

“No sir; I don’t like it.”

“Are you a nervous woman?”

“At times, I think I am.”

“Were you nervous that night?”

“I was not sensible of being so. I was weary, and I felt very sad. I was quite excited at times before I went to bed, thinking of eternity to come.”

“Mrs. L—, can you remember particularly what you were thinking about that evening, just before you retired to rest? See if you can recollect, and tell me exactly what was in your thoughts just before you lay down.”

After a considerable pause she replied,—

“I had been thinking and praying a long time, about my sins and my wicked, miserable heart; and I tried to give up all into the hands of Christ, as you had so often told me I must. I thought I did, and then I wondered that God did not give me peace. And afterwards I thought how happy I should be, if God would give me a new heart; and then I wondered how I should know it if He did.”

“You thought,” said I, “how happy you should be, if God would give you a new heart; and then you wondered how you should know it if He did. But you did not think of seeing a bird, or a rainbow?”

She opened her lips as if to answer, but cast her eyes downwards, and said nothing. A slight flush came over her cheek, but her look was that of sorrow, not of resentment.

Said I: "Mrs. L.—, I am sorry to trouble you with so many questions, and I do not wish to afflict you. Many things you say to me would almost convince me that you really had peace with God, if these things were not so mixed up with that vision which seems to have been the origin of your joy, and which I know was only a dream, or the work of your own imagination, while you were half asleep and half awake. If you rely, in the least, upon that vision, that miracle, as an evidence of your pardon; you rely on a mere fancy, a mere nothing. It is no evidence at all. It is just as much a proof that you will be lost, as that you will be saved. At best, your vision was nothing but a fancy, an imagination, coming from your nervousness, induced by the weariness of your brain when you lay down. I can account for your vision. You have just given me the clue. You had just been thinking 'how happy you should be,' if God accepted you; and you had been 'wondering how you should know it.' With these two ideas you went to bed,—one idea of great happiness, and the other of some wonderful thing, (you knew not what,) to lead you to that happiness. Then, in a state betwixt sleeping and waking, (when the imagination is most busy, and the reason and will lie most still,) your imagination just wrought out the expected wonder, to teach you something, (or convince you,) and the expected happiness, which you so eagerly longed for. This accounts for all you thought you beheld. Your eyes saw nothing. As soon as your astonishment and ecstasy had so fully waked you up, that the spell of your imagination was broken, and your eyes really began to see; your vision vanished. This is the truth of the whole matter, probably. God had no more to do with your light, your rainbow, and your new-fashioned canary-bird, than the devil had.

"Now, Mrs. L.—, I have only one thing more to ask you; but I am not certain that I can make myself understood. I will try. You know we speak of remembering things. We remember, because something made an impression on our mind sometime before—a thing capable of being

remembered. We recollect the impression: that is remembering. Realities make an impression, and dreams make an impression also. And we remember both. But when we remember things that really took place, we have to recall the impression left on our mind by facts,—and when we remember dreams, we recall the impression left on our mind by imaginations only. Now, there is a difference betwixt the impression left on our mind by real occurrences, and the impression left on our mind by imaginations only, or by a dream; such a difference, that we are not very apt to mistake a dream for something that really took place. We can remember both, but they are not just alike. The impression of a dream is not exactly like the impression made by something when we were awake, though it may be very plain and deep. But there is a difference betwixt the impressions, and also betwixt the rememberings. Don't you think so?"

"Yes, I know there is."

"Very well. Now I want you to remember very carefully what you saw, Thursday night; and tell me whether the impression left on your mind then is most like the impression left by a dream, or most like the impression left by something when you were awake. And tell me whether your act of remembering most resembles the act of remembering a dream, or most resembles the act of remembering what took place when you were awake. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir, perfectly."

"Very well. Now carefully consider the thing. Take time to think of it. Recollect what you saw Thursday night; and tell me whether your impression and recollection of it most resemble the impression and recollection of a dream, or something not a dream."

She sat in silence for two or three minutes, closed her eyes as if absorbed in thought, then rose and looked studiously out at the window, then sat down and closed her eyes for some two or three minutes more.

"Indeed, sir," said she, "I am at a loss. That does seem more like a dream than like a real thing. But I was awake. My eyes were open. I don't remember waking up."

Said I; "I don't wish you to reason, or argue, or decide anything about it, whether you were asleep or awake. I only wish you to tell me as you remember that night, whether your impression resembles most the impression of a dream, or an impression made when you were awake."

After a pause, she replied slowly and thoughtfully,—

"It is just like a dream; but I was awake, for my eyes were open."

"Very well, madam, I will not trouble you any more. If you want to know what religion is, ask your Bible, don't ask night birds, or night rainbows."

I saw this woman afterwards and conversed with her often. Had it not been for her vision, and the use she made of it, she would have appeared to me to be a humble child of God. But I had no confidence in her conversion.

Some few months after this, she proposed to unite with the church. I discouraged her. But after she had lived about a year as a pious woman, so far as I could discover, she was, with much hesitation, received as a communicant; and I knew her for some years afterwards, presenting satisfactory evidence of being a true Christian. In one of the last interviews I had with her, she told me she had become convinced that "the strange sights she saw on that Thursday night, existed only in her own fancy."

When I asked, what had convinced her, she replied, "I have been sick since then two or three times; and when I was sick and very nervous, I had some other strange sights which I know were fancies, though they seemed as real as that one did."

"Perhaps they were not fancies."

"Yes, they were sir."

"How do you know?"

"Because, as soon as I went to examine into them they were gone. When I got up from the bed there was nothing there."

"Were you always in bed when you saw them?"

"Yes."

"What made you get up to examine?"

“Because I remembered what you said about the bird of Paradise, as I called it, and I was determined to know what these things were.”

“But you could not catch them.”

“No; as soon as I stirred and got out of bed the charm was broken.”

“What were these things you call a charm?”

“Various things, such as splendid colors, beautiful animals, ladies dressed with great taste and in very rich, gay dresses, and moving like angels.”

“Are you asleep when these things appear to you?”

“No, not at all; I am awake and thinking.”

“What do you think they are?”

“I think they are nothing. But when I have been agitated, and become nervous and tired, after I get a little calmed down, and feel quiet and happy, these beautiful things seem to be before my eyes.”

“Do you see them when your eyes are open?”

“Yes, sometimes, when the room is dark.”

“Very well, madam, you have got right now.”

“I wish,” said she, “you would not say anything about that bird of Paradise, and the blue globe I told you about at first. I was deceived. I know they had nothing to do with religion, and I do not rely upon them at all as any witness that God has given me a new heart.”

The religious treatment of persons of strong imagination and weak nerves, is one of the most delicate and difficult duties. The imagination has an extent of power over both the intellect and the body itself, of which few persons are suitably aware. The voices which are said to be heard by those religiously affected, the sights which are seen, the instances of falling down speechless and without power to move, the sudden cures of infirmity, said to be effected by the prayer of faith, the deaths which have occurred just as the persons themselves foretold, and for which they made all their temporal arrangements,—all such things are to be attributed to the power of the imagination and excited nerves, Religion has nothing to do with them. Superstition and fanaticism transform them into miracles; but there is no miracle about them. Much less is there any

religion in them. Religion is taught in the Bible. Ignorance and nerves should not attempt to add to it. The east wind is not a good gospel minister. Many of its doctrines are very incorrect.

In the case of this woman, the proper influences of divine truth were mingled up with the workings of an excited imagination and weak nerves, and her superstitious notions did not discriminate betwixt the two. She at first supposed, with solemn and grateful sincerity, that God had sent this vision to her as an assurance that she was forgiven. And it is not likely that all I said to her would entirely have corrected her erroneous idea, had not her subsequent experience lent its aid. But when she came to have other visions which resembled it, and on examination found them to be fancies only, her common sense led her to the conclusion that nothing but fancy created that beautiful light, that rainbow, that globe of blue, and bird of Paradise. There can be no security against the worst and wildest of errors, but by a close and exclusive adherence to the Word of God, to teach us what religion is.