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The Humour of the Book of Proverbs.

IT is not the usual thing to go to the Bible for humour. The business of the writers and even the readers of the Bible is generally too serious for that. The questions there are questions of life and death. But there is humour in plenteous measure, and often we miss the point of the lesson because we do not see the wit that is behind it.

We know that there was humour in the method of Jesus. We cannot believe that He was lacking in the art of making fun. And we cannot think that He missed that most useful way of pointing a lesson, the method of poking a little bit of fun at the sinner. Often you can do more with a joke than you can with an hour's moralising. We cannot believe that Jesus had no smile on His face when he drew that incomparable picture of the man straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel. But on top of that, He showed a shrewd knowledge of human life, the way that people tried to push in front of each other as they went to a meal with a rich person, the way that they tried to get to the top of the table and then found that they were to be sent to a lower seat. Jesus had stood on one side and seen these things go on. And He dealt many a blow at the discourtesies of life and the foolishness and snobbery of men, because He had such a sense of fun. I do not think that it is at all irreverent to say that. Humour is such a salt of life. It takes us into so many places where we should never get without it. It helps us over so many difficult places that we should never cross otherwise. It enables us to get a lesson home that would otherwise fall to the ground. Often the only way you can deal with folks is to laugh at them. They are impervious to solid argument. They are deaf to any appeal that is made to their better nature. They are so dull as you try seriously to show them their error. The only way left to you to deliver them from their sin and folly is to laugh at them. That we all know, and I cannot think that Jesus was ignorant of that fact or slow to take advantage of it. If we had more records of what He said and did than we have, and had the disciples not been taken up, quite rightly, with preserving the eternal truth that came from His lips, we might have had

more of it preserved to us. But there is a little, and it makes Him all the more real and all the greater.

Now in the Book of Proverbs, whatever you have, you have a man (or men, we will not quarrel on that), who knew life, and who gazed upon it with a kindly eye, even though sometimes he had a cynical eye. He may not have had a tremendously lofty conception of religion, although even in that, he is better than appears at first sight. But he did know life. He had seen the funny things that people did and the mistakes they made by their folly. He had a sense of fun. You can imagine him standing a little on one side and watching the procession of men and women going by, and chuckling to himself at the queer things they did and the queer things they said. And he found that he could do far more with them by poking fun at them than he could by preaching sermons to them. And he pokes fun at them in this book.

Of course, he is rather ponderous. The Hebrew always is. He would not be a Hebrew otherwise. He is grave and solemn and he is suspicious of anything new to him. He can sit down with you and talk very politely to you, and ask about your wife and family and take an interest in all your affairs. But all the time you know that he is summing you up, probably adversely; and there now and again leaps out a flash of wit, or you see the blinking of an eyelid as he tries to cover up his desire to smile. But there is no other place in religious literature where the wit is so true to life, where it is more kindly, where it has more serious intention, or where it gets home with more certainty and power. There are wits and wits. Some infuriate you because you know that they are out to make a mockery of you, and of all men, and of life itself. They are bitter and morose and they hate man and all that belongs to him. They are clever, but they are not really funny and they do no good. Or the wit may be merely boisterous fun, without any serious purpose in it. But here, in Proverbs, you know that the man who is making fun of you is really trying to help you. He wants to save you from making mistakes or falling into holes. He is making fun of you very solemnly, but always to your good. You may smile at him, but when you have done that and you have gone away, you remember that there was a sting in what he said. He has shown you to yourself, and you go away with the determination to prevent him making the same joke at your expense again.

He has a way of hitting off the weaknesses of all sorts of people. There is woman, to start with. He has two or three sorts of women in his mind. There is first of all the good woman. He cannot say too much in praise of her. She may

be a stay-at-home, whose only interest in the world is to look after her husband, but she is good as far as she goes. She may not be a satisfactory ideal for women in this age, when they demand a life of their own, but in that day such things had not been heard of. It is a good picture. But there is no humour here.

There is the nagging wife. And there is the bad woman. He hates both. And it may be that he has suffered from both. You get the impression of a little personal feeling in what he says. He is not merely disinterested. He is speaking of what he knows. Take the nagging wife first. Here are a few of the things he says of her. "A golden ring in the snout of a sow" (what could be more incongruous than that?), "so is a pretty woman without sense." Only that now is not the case of a golden ring in a sow, but a sow round a golden ring. Or this. "Better a dish of vegetables with love than the best beef served with hatred." Now this man was not a gormandiser, but he was fond of his meals. And yet he knows that even a good meal can be bought at too dear a price. Or this. "Better a corner of the roof than a room with a nagging wife." Now a corner of the roof is not a comfortable place to sleep on, not even in the East, where the roof is flat. You have to be able to stand the wind and the weather. But it was better than sleeping with his wife when she was in a bad temper. "Better to live in a lonely desert," better be a Robinson Crusoe where no woman is, "than beside a nagging, quarrelsome wife." I cannot believe that this man had not some experience to go on when he said things such as those. And he says them so often, that it is plain that he is almost ready to do what he says, go into the desert or on the roof, just to escape his wife. "Endless dripping on a rainy day and a nagging wife are just the same." We know what constant rain is, not a sensible downpour which comes and then is finished, but wet from early morning until late at night, wet which makes you wretched and eats into your bones. That is what a nagging wife is.

Then there is the bad woman. He does not generally make fun of her. He hates her too much. But he makes fun of the men who are foolish enough to be taken in by her. One of his chief warnings is against the strange woman, but he seems to think that a man of sense would not need the warning. "Keep clear of her," he says in one place, "never go near her door, lest you have to part with your money and hand over all your earnings." It is not you she loves, that is the idea, it is not you, it is your money every time. Or that picture where he tells how the woman catches the eye of a fool. "She notices among the lads a brainless youth, strolling along the street in

the direction of her house," and there is the woman out to meet him. "She persuades him with coaxing words, with her smooth words she entices him away, and he is enticed to follow her, like an ox moving to the slaughter, like a dog cajoled to the muzzle, like a bird fluttering straight to the net, never dreaming that its own life is in danger." That is the Hebrew way of saying, "Come into my parlour, said the spider to the fly."

There is another favourite butt for his sarcasm, the sluggard and the lazy man. "As vinegar to the teeth, as smoke in the eyes," we know how that smarts and hurts and makes us say all sorts of things, "so is the sluggard to those who sent him with a message. He who reaps in summer is a man of sense. He who sleeps through harvest does a shameful thing." We can see that man. The corn is ripe, the man sleeps. To-morrow will do, then to-morrow. Then when he really gets up to cut the corn, it pours with rain. "A lazy man will not hunt game even for himself." He will starve himself rather than look for his food. "The lazy man drops his hand deep in the dish." It merely flops in. He can't wait to be polite about it. "He will not so much as lift it to his lips." He is too idle to carry the food to his mouth. What better picture could you have than that? "The lazy man finds his way beset with thorns." And thorns are bad for bare feet. But he would rather put up with them than bestir himself to move them away. "In the cold season the lazy man will not plough." There is the farmer again. It is too cold to-day and so he stays by the fire. And the next day and the next. And he is fool enough to look for a harvest in the autumn. "The sluggard says there is a lion in the road." Any excuse is good enough if a man wants to get out of a bit of work. "Like a door on its hinges," you have heard the creaking at night (what is more disturbing?), "so is the lazy man upon his back."

Then there is the fool. That does not refer of necessity to the man without brains: it rather means the man without a soul. He is the man who has lost all thought of God. "No cautious man blurts out all he knows, but a fool comes out with his folly. A gossiping man (there you get the same fellow) will betray all his secrets. Why does the fool offer the wise man a fee, when he has no mind to learn?" Even in Palestine then, there were people who went to college and paid heavy fees with no intention of learning anything. "The fool's eyes roam far and wide." He is always stargazing, and tripping over the thing at his feet. "Even the fool can pass for a wise man if he says nothing. If he closes his lips, he will appear sensible." The way to get a reputation for wisdom

is to look learned and say nothing. A good many have done as he told them and secured a reputation at very little cost. "A fool's talk gets him into trouble." One of the chief things about a fool is that he cannot keep his mouth closed. "A fool blurts out his wrath."

Sometimes the humour is shown in a very choice metaphor. He is fond, for example, of the idea of digging a pit and of somebody else falling in it. Maybe, he has seen that sort of thing time and time again. He is also fond of the idea of tripping over something in the road because you do keep your eyes open. "When you walk, you will never be stopped. When you run, you will not slip." That is, if you are wise. Here is the bad man. "They cannot sleep till they have done some wrong, till they have tripped someone up." You see the picture. A man is walking sedately among his fellows. A foot is put out and over he goes. That is what the bad man does. "Can a man take a fire in his lap and not burn his clothes? Can anyone walk upon hot coals without scorching his feet?" Have you tried to walk on hot coals? So is the man who does not keep clear of the wiles of a woman. "Drink water from your own cistern; drink fresh water from your own well." Milk your own cow, that is, do not go sponging upon other people. "Better a man of low rank with a servant, than one who makes a great show and has to do his own work." Solid comfort and a man to wait on you is better than poor comfort and worldly display. "Food won by fraud has a sweet taste, but later on the mouth gets filled with gravel." Have you ever put sugar in your mouth and found that it was sand? You will know what this man felt like. "Poor stuff, poor stuff, he says, when he goes to buy; but when he leaves, he boasts about the bargain." That is true to the East. And not only to the East.

Here are one or two ways of hitting off the man who drinks too much. "Who shriek? Who groan? Who quarrel and grumble? Who are bruised for nothing? Who have bleary eyes? Those who linger over the bottle, those who relish blended wines"; that is those who mix their drinks. "Look not on the wine when it is red." And this. "You will see odd things, you will be saying odd things" (strange things on the wall), "you will be like a man asleep at sea, asleep in the midst of the storm; you will mutter, I was hit, but I wasn't hurt. I was beaten but I need feel no pain." You will be dead before you know it, if you get drunk. "A loose tooth" (what a nuisance that is), "an unsteady foot, that is all that the faithless have to support them when they are in trouble." Let other people down, and you will be let down. "He catches a dog by the ears who meddles with a quarrel that

is not his own." You know what happens when you catch a dog by the ears? You dare not let go lest he should bite you in the leg. And you chase round and round trying to dodge him. So do not mix in a quarrel that is not your own. "Rascals run away, even though no man pursues," (that reveals not only wit, but very shrewd observation of life).

Here are three very delicate hits.

"There are three things that burden this earth, yea four things that it cannot bear; a slave who rises to be a king, a fool who makes a fortune, a maid who supplants her mistress, and a plain girl who at last gets married." How the pretty girls who cannot get married hate her. This man was no fool: he knew his world.

"Three things have a stately stride, yea four have a stately tread; a lion mightiest of beasts that never runs away, a strutting cock" (you see the fun is beginning), "a he-goat, and a king at the head of his army." I wonder what the King thought of that?

"Charms may wane and beauty wither, keep your praise for a wife with brains." I wonder whether he married a girl for her beauty and then found that it palled after twenty years?

He often has a sly hit at kings. They were not all that he thought they ought to be. Still he is willing to confess that a king, if he does his job, can do a lot of good. "The anger of a king is like a lion's roar. A king's threat scares men like a lion roaring. When you are sitting at table in a ruler's house, be careful how you eat. Control yourself, if you have a large appetite." Be a little gentleman or you will not be asked again. I cannot do other than believe that he had his tongue in his cheek when he said all this: "Unerring is the decree of a king, never are his rulings wrong, for the throne is maintained by justice."

He has more to say about the way that we eat our meals. He has perhaps been to dinner with men who were not quite nice. "If you find honey, eat no more than you need, you may have too much and be sick. Do not go often to the house of a neighbour, he may turn against you." But he does not like going to dinner with a man who counts how many helpings you have. "Never dine with a niggardly man. He counts his dishes even as he bids you eat and drink." He asks you to have more, but he hopes that you will not.

And so you might go on, choosing this subject and the other, and on nearly all there is something said that is of human interest, something wise, something that springs from keen insight into human nature, and something that is winged with telling wit.

H. J. FLOWERS.