

The Rich Fool.

BY PRINCIPAL GRANT, M.A., D.D.

It is an awful thing to be a fool! When any other calamity befalls a man he is conscious of his misery. But the fool does not know that he is a fool. That one fact makes a lunatic asylum the most saddening place in the whole wide world. To see one in the form of man gathering sticks and stones about him, and believing that he has great possessions; or one in the form of woman bedecking herself with bits of ribbons and faded flowers, as if to attract your admiration, or aimlessly giggling—she knows not at whom; another nursing a doll; another crowned with a mock crown,—it is more pitiable than to see them wild or moody, or than it is to visit a hospital.

And to be truly wise,—wise not in our own opinion, for the fool is that; not in the opinion of others, for "men will praise thee when thou doest well to thyself," but in the judgment of One who can neither deceive nor be deceived. Can there be any greater blessedness attainable by man?

How then shall we know whether we are fools or wise? Can there be a truer standard to test ourselves by than Christ's? How shall we know what his judgment of us would be? There is no better way of finding out than by looking at the cases with which he came in contact on earth, and seeing how he judged them.

Here is one of those cases. In a parable he draws the picture of a man whom we would have called wise, and whom he calls "fool."

How do I know that we would have called him wise? Because of what is not said and because of what is said about him. Nothing is said against him. Had he been an overt sinner, Jesus would have told us, for that would have been the ground on which he called him a fool. As nothing is said against him, we are bound to assume that he was a moral, respectable, law-abiding Jew; a man in full communion with the church of God on earth. And yet, on the other hand, how much is positively said in his favor—fairly put down to his credit, to enable us to judge him aright. In the first place, he was rich. Now, there is a natural presumption in a man's favor when he is rich. If he has made the money himself, it is implied that at least he has been industrious, economical, prudent, capable of sacrificing the present to the future. All these are good qualities. They may not be the highest, but surely, as far as they go, they are good. If he has inherited the money, he has proved that he is able to take care of it, and that implies the possession of qualities good in their way also. It is within the power of any man in ordinary circumstances, in this country, to be rich. He may not desire to be rich,—he may have set his heart on something higher. So much the better. But the prize, such as it is, is clearly within the reach of an average man. He has only to earn a dollar a day, live on the fourth of it and invest the balance wisely, and to go on thus for a few years, to be rich. Therefore, there is nothing meaner than to envy the rich. It shows that we are greedy for the prize, but have no disposition to pay the price. We are like the humble friend of Davoust, who when shown over the mansion which the emperor had given the marshal, hinted that fortune had dealt very differently with the two. "Oh!" cried Davoust, "I see that you are envious of me, old friend; well, you shall have all this for the price I paid for it. Come down into the garden, and let me shoot at you a dozen times, and then all shall be yours." Almost every rich man might say something similar to us, and in all probability we would shrink back from accepting the offer as decidedly as did Davoust's friend. Then the rich man in our parable had evidently gotten his

riches in a legitimate way,—not by cheating others, not even by speculation, or in any way at the expense of others; but from the soil, directly from the bounty of God. No way more honorable than this, all will admit. It is impossible for the farmer to become rich unless he works hard, and steadily, and for long years. And there is no form of wealth that adds more certainly to the well-being of the whole country. Again, we see in the man no boasting of his industry or skill; no foolish talking to others about his wealth; no indications of any rash action to be taken. We are simply told that when his great abundance came, through his ground bringing forth plentifully, "he thought within himself." Admirable! That is just what we would advise our friends to do in like circumstances. Fourthly, this man was not one of those penurious, close-fisted creatures, who are too mean to spend anything, even on the permanent improvement of their property. Many a farmer would have been content with the old barns, adding an unsightly addition perhaps; or building one new barn that would hold all his overplus. But this was a spirited, enterprising business man. He saw that the time had come for acting with energy, and he at once decided on doing so. He would pull down these old barns and build others that would hold all that the land was ever likely to yield. Lastly, he was not one of those restless, avaricious mortals who give themselves up to the sole task of increasing their store; who define "enough" as "a little more than what we have." He had been one of those human beavers, he would have said, "I am on the high road to be a millionaire; I can buy out my neighbor on the right of me, and next year I shall buy out my neighbor on the left; and who knows but that I may die the owner of the whole county!" Such a thought never entered into this man's mind. He was satisfied with his portion, and he aimed now at dignified repose and enjoyment. "I will say to myself, 'Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; eat, drink, be merry.'"

Is it possible to avoid thinking well of such a man? How fairly Christ draws his picture! not prejudicing us against him, taking him at his own estimate, describing him in his own language. When such a man is in our community, how anxious we are to get him into our society and our congregation. He is one of your typical, abid, model men. And yet—the one only name that the living God gives to him is "Thou fool!"

Why? The narrative supplies reasons enough for one who looks beneath the surface of things. He was a fool because he forgot—as most of us forget—and, in forgetting, he practically denied, the four great facts of life,—God, his neighbor, his soul, and death.

He forgot God. His language is "my goods," "my barns," "all my fruits and my goods." Very like the language we use, but that only shows that he is not alone in his practical atheism. There is no recognition of the Giver; no gratitude; no longing after him who never wearies in his loving-kindness towards us. God is so near to us, by night and by day. He speaks to us by so many voices. He appeals to us by so many avenues. He reveals himself so graciously. And yet we forget him. His very gifts hide him from us. Instead of making us grateful they foster pride. They make us say or feel, "How wise, how strong, how industrious, how deserving we are!" And we—fools and blind—see him not, who should be the object of all our love.

He forgot his neighbor. This folly—common enough though it is—was more surprising than the former. A man who is accustomed to go entirely by his senses may think himself excusable for not seeing Him who is invisible. But how can he help seeing

his neighbor? And, seeing him and his needs, what occasion was there to go to the expense of building new barns? Were there not barns enough ready made to his hand? Every one else had not been blessed with his abundance. Did he fancy that the reason of the difference was that God loved him more than he loved them? No! he was not such a fool as to fancy that. What other reason could there be, except that God preferred to use him as a steward, that he might be blessed in the stewarding, as well as in the getting. Look at the barns all round him that he might have filled,—the barns of that widow whose provider had been taken from her; of those orphans whose hands were too weak to hold a plow, of those afflicted who from illness had lost the spring. What an honor God put upon him when he gave him the opportunity of taking his own place to those bereaved ones! God had built barns for him. He did not see them, poor man! The chance was given him of being as a god to the poor. He lost it, and he never got another chance. Was he not a fool? And yet what a countless number of followers he has! How many of us use our money, our intellectual power, our time, our education, our opportunities, as under law to God for our brothers, for the country, for the church, for future generations, for the purifying, sweetening, ennobling of the life of the community?

He forgot his soul. This is folly still more inexcusable. A man may say, "I cannot prove that there is a God." He may also say, "As for my neighbor, am I his keeper? Every man for himself." But how is it possible to forget his own soul? And yet this forgetting or unbelief springs from the previous forms of unbelief. Deny God, and you will soon deny your neighbor; and then you are not far off from denying yourself. He that knows not God and man knows not himself. I do not wonder that such a man thought that when money was provided all had been provided.

Inexcusable as it is, this has always been the common form of infidelity, and the form that brings the most certain nemesis. Our Lord indicates that it brought the judgment of the flood on the old world, and that it will be the cause of every future judgment. "As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be." And what were the sins of the days of Noah? "They did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they married, they gave in marriage." Why, what sin is there here? He describes the ordinary work of life seemingly, and nothing more. A flood or destruction by fire for these things? Yes, if you are looking no higher. If your life is in these things, what can you expect? The end of these things is death. You call some man of science a materialist. Who is the materialist,—the searcher for truth, or you who look no higher than the possessions and coarse enjoyments of matter; you who sell your souls and your children for these things? Your creed may be orthodox, but professed skeptics are more truly spiritual, and God is not mocked by words, surely. We say loudly enough, "We are made in God's image; we are his children; he expects us to be like him," and withal we are materialists. We judge everything by a money standard. What to us is education for its own sake, the development of our natures to all their highest and rightful issues, the victory of truth and noble sentiment? And we think ourselves wise.

He forgot death. This was the crowning proof of folly. We have seen that a man may give reasons for forgetting God and his neighbor. And philosophers nowadays rather ridicule the idea of there being a soul or anything but matter in man. But even a philosopher can hardly deny that there is such a thing as death. The reality comes home to all of us. The old and the young are taken; the light of our eyes and the strength of

our life. And death forces us to think. No matter how immersed we may be in the affairs of the world, it drags us away to a silent room, and forces us to look beyond the present and the visible. It opens a door, and shows us this little inch of time and sense girdled by the impensities and the eternities,—

Now at my back I always hear
Time's winged chariots, hurrying near,
And yonder all before me lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

And yet, inexcusable as the folly is, we are all guilty of it. In forgetting death we forget eternity, and what folly can be compared to that!

Look at this picture. The prosperous man goes out in the quiet eventide to gaze upon his flocks and herds coming slowly home, and upon all the rich promise of harvest. It was a goodly sight to see under the setting sun,—a sight to draw a man into communion with heaven. This field is in the blade, that is about to ear, and the heads of the bearded barley hang gracefully under the weight of the full corn in the ear. The servants pass him with courteous salutations; he returns their greetings with the customary pious phrases that the stereotyped East has retained since the day of the patriarchs. The short twilight is over. Darkness rushes over the sky and the stars come out. He can see the far-extending fields no longer, save with the mind's eye. But just because it is dark and no one is near, and he is not given to talk, except to himself, his soul swells with emotion, that he perhaps mistakes for gratitude, but which is only the satisfaction that all is well with him, at any rate, no matter how it may be with others. He turns homeward contentedly, to sleep soundly, no matter who has to keep awake. He is not responsible for others. Who would not exchange places with that well-to-do, wise, deservedly happy man? And now for a companion picture: At midnight a cry is heard, and then the sound of feet hurrying to the master's bedside. It is too late. They have come for him,—they whom he disregarded so long; the angels who had many a

time whispered words of wisdom in his dull ears, now are the ministers of judgment. Without permission asked or given, they have hurried him away from all his fruits and goods, from his barns and banks, from his fields and their fullness,—away into the presence of that God he had ignored, that brotherhood he had forgotten, that work he had neglected, that eternity in which he had lived without being conscious of it. And the rich man stands in their awful presence, peeled of all his possessions, poorer than the poorest beggar he had ever known on earth. Who would exchange places with the poor, lost fool? Who of us will not go and do otherwise?—S. S. Times.

HUSBANDS AND WIVES.—A good husband makes a good wife. Some men can neither do without wives nor with them; they are wretched alone in what is called single blessedness, and they make their homes miserable when they get married; they are like Tompkin's dog, which could not bear to be loose, and howled when it was tied up. Happy bachelors are likely to be happy husbands, and a happy husband is the happiest of men. A well-matched couple carry a joyful life between them, as the two spies carry the cluster of Eschol. They are a brace of birds of paradise. They multiply their joys by sharing them, and lessen their troubles by dividing them. This is fine arithmetic. The wagon of care rolls lightly along as they pull together, and when it drags a little heavily, or there is a hitch anywhere, they love each other all the more, and so lighten the labor.—John Ploughman.

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