

CHAPTER V.
SELF-CONTROL.

IN early days it always seemed to me a moot point whether it is more noble to place oneself in a position entirely away from and free from temptation, or to mix freely in situations teeming with moral dangers, and then exercise *all the time* that courage which is always on the alert, and that strength of mind which enables a man to say "No." "I recognize God's mercy, and appreciate the blessed gifts He has sent—all of which I use in moderation, so that I may be able to serve Him better."

The man who, by heroic measures, removes himself entirely from temptations, such as are to be found with the most seductive human pleasures, hardly shows that steady courage which says, "I love Thy beautiful gifts and enjoy them all with the senses Thou hast supplied me with, but I love Thee better than them all, and in the enjoyment of Thy blessings I will exercise that moderation which will redound to Thy honour and glory." Take the case of the man who absolutely shuts himself off from temptation—such as the hermit, who lives in a cave on diet of herbs and spring water. He has possibly much inward gratification, and a *feeling* that he is better than the rest of mankind; but is he useful to his fellow man? The very conditions he has imposed upon himself make him unable to set a good example of moderation, since there can be no moderation where there is no temptation. It may take a lifetime of struggle against the besetting sins; days, weeks, months, and years of prayers to God for guidance and help to overcome the

apparently irrepressible inclinations may be necessary, but the Almighty and Merciful never fails those of His children who unceasingly seek His direction in times of trial and also in times of prosperity.

The strength of a man's character is chiefly brought out by his trials and temptations, and his generous and noble qualities are shown to greatest perfection when, in the heyday of success and power, he has opportunities of showing mercy and forgiveness. A soft heart is not the only thing to be desired by a good citizen and soldier of God. No one who has not experienced the vicissitudes of life—seen poverty and affluence, misery and happiness, weakness and strength—can presume to pose as an example to mankind. You cannot be a true teacher of patience unless you have passed through a time of irritation, pain, or worry, necessitating the exercise of patience. Affliction *alone* will bring out the highest qualities in a man who has the love of God in his heart. To such an afflicted mortal every reverse of fortune, every heavy blow—possibly cutting him to the heart—is looked upon by him as the chastening of the God of Mercy. The harder the blow the deeper the reverence and contrition of the true believer, who thus knows that his Almighty and Omnipotent Protector is leading him in the straight path. He trusts in the infinite wisdom, infinite love, and infinite compassion, of his only guide in this world. He knows that his Creator is well aware that he hates and detests the devil and all his miserable devices, and that knowledge alone is sufficient to brace his energies for any struggle, however severe; because he can rely upon God's help in any situation which may arise. The very thought of the Almighty, Glorious, and Merciful Presence of God, Whose Holy Name should not, I think, be ever mentioned in the same breath with

any other name, must give to the loving believer a confidence beyond human understanding.

All the Holy Prophets, at various times charged with messages to mankind, have faithfully carried out God's instructions and, of all these Divine Messengers, there is not one who can be placed in a higher position than the Divinely inspired Mahomet (God's choicest blessings on his memory). Loss of self-control was shown on various occasions by Moses and Christ, whilst the terrible shortcomings of David would have been utterly impossible to the great Prophet of Arabia, whose chivalrous nature would have shrunk from any mean or despicable action.

It will be understood that forgiveness can be only properly realized by one who has been practically helpless in the hands of enemies, so that he may appreciate the circumstances attendant on being at the mercy of others. Then he must also understand what it is to be a conqueror, and have the power of wreaking his vengeance on those enemies. No one can claim the quality of mercy who has never had anyone at his mercy, and there is no character in history which can be so safely held up for inspection and illustration of this particular quality as the Holy Prophet Mahomet.

From being in most humble circumstances, and starting life as an orphan, but with God's protecting arms ever around him, he passed through the different stages of life allotted to him with beautiful resignation to God's Will. No mean or sordid action ever sullied his sweet character. No act of injustice was ever laid to His charge. The words of a favourite hymn come to my mind whenever I think of the struggles and conquests of Mahomet :—

“ Fight the good fight with all thy might,
God is thy strength, and God thy right ;

Lay hold on life, and it shall be
Thy joy and crown eternally.

“Run the straight race through God’s good
grace,

Lift up thine eyes, and seek His Face;
Life with its way before us lies,
God is the path and God the prize.

“Cast care aside, lean on thy Guide;
His boundless mercy will provide;
Trust, and thy trusting soul shall prove
God is its life, and God its love.

“Faint not nor fear, His arms are near,
He changeth not, and thou art dear;
Only believe, and thou shalt see
That God is all in all to thee.”

In “Hymns Ancient and Modern” these particularly beautiful verses occur; but with the name of Christ instead of God. Wherever “Christ” occurs I have substituted “God,” so that I appeal to my own conscience successfully, and do not hurt the feelings of those who composed the hymn, since they themselves say that Christ was God.

We may regard the Holy Prophet of Arabia as a real character—a real personality, who at every step was tried and weighed, but was never found wanting. As a great authority has said, we need a perfect model up to our needs in several walks of life, and the life of the Sacred Prophet eloquently promises it in itself. “The life of Mahomet is just like a mirror before us, where different characters of high-mindedness, generosity, bravery, patience, meekness, forgiveness, and other essential constituents of humanity reflect in most brilliant colours. Take any phase of morality, and you are

sure to find it illustrated in some incident in his eventful life. Jesus meekly bore the hardest hour of his life, and how noble of him to say while at the Cross: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" The Sacred Prophet had to repeat the same thing on many a time, though with slight change, as his life was full of hard trials. For full thirteen years he remains subject to a long series of persecution of variegated nature. He is tortured physically and mentally; but he is always prayerful for the welfare of his persecutor. He once went to Taif, a place at some distance from Mecca, and preached against idolatry. The idolators drove him out of the city. The rabble and the slaves followed, hooting and pelting him with stones until the evening. Wounded and bleeding, footsore and weary, he betook himself to prayer. And the following words found utterance in a moment of deep distress:—

"O Lord, I make my complaint unto Thee. Out of my feebleness and the vanity of my wishes I am insignificant in the sight of men, O Thou Most Merciful! Lord of the weak, Thou art my Lord. Forsake me not. Leave me not a prey to strangers nor to mine enemies. If Thou art not offended, I am safe. I seek refuge in the light of Thy countenance by which all darkness is dispelled and peace cometh in the near and hereafter. Solve Thou my difficulties as it pleaseth Thee. There is no power, no strength, save in Thee. Guide them to right path, as they do not know what they do."

Noble words and worthy of the noble speaker. Conscious of the insignificance he has been reduced to, and yet such splendid reliance on God. "If You are not offended, I am safe." How hopeful,

not the slightest tinge of despondency, no complaint, no doubt as to his being forsaken by God. "Solve Thou my difficulties as it pleaseth Thee," is another beautiful expression eloquent enough to enlighten a narrow-minded Church missionary who ignorantly harps on the uniqueness of "Thy will, and not mine."

A propagandist, however, fails to see one thing. He finds similarity of expression and loses his balance of mind. He has only one silly explanation to suggest. With him it is a sort of plagiarism; and Mahomet, being after Jesus, must be condemned for his literary purloining. If this is the logic which he advances, so much the worse for him; he is the loser in the long run. The Jews have been able to trace almost all the expressions and teachings of Jesus to their own literature. Besides, many parables narrated in the New Testament existed in Bhuddist literature long before the advent of Christ. Is the whole Gospel record a theft? It is on such stupid reasoning that Sale had the audacity to call the Quran "a manifest forgery." But the explanation is not far to seek. All these prophets came from one God, they drank from one Divine fountain, and learnt one and the same lesson from one Great Teacher—the Creator of the Universe—and hence this similarity. They speak under Divine inspiration, and their words sometimes convey meanings which speak of future events in their life. To illustrate it we need only refer to the noble words spoken by Jesus, and compare them with the concluding portion of the prayer by the Prophet:—

"Forgive them, for they know not what they do."—JESUS.

"Guide them in the right path, for they know not what they do."—MAHOMET.

Words suiting the circumstances of the speakers respectively, and coming events proved their truth. One had no chance of gaining that power over his enemies in his lifetime, which could enable him to show his magnanimity of soul in the form of forgiveness. He therefore implores God to do so. The other had to reach that climax. He had to forgive them himself. It was so within the knowledge of God. Besides, the words inspired on the lips of the Prophet are more comprehensive. They go further and include forgiveness in them. Forgiveness is only for the things past. Guidance to righteousness is for the past as well as for the future, because no one can tread the path of righteousness with his past sins unforgiven. So the Holy Prophet not only implores for the forgiveness of past deeds, but for their future righteousness as well. The words were prophetic, and proved to be so. Mahomet came to his full power. His oppressors came to him and received such kind treatment as was unparalleled. This led to their conversion and purity of life."

As an example of the chivalrous and open-hearted conduct towards the unfortunate, or those enemies who fell into his hands, I must quote a short story which appeared in a recent number of the "Islamic Review" relative to Mahomet's treatment of a captive Christian lady who appeared, amongst other prisoners of war, before the Lord of Arabia. From this account we learn that his amazingly untiring zeal to stamp out idolatry from his country roused terrible opposition against the founder of Islam. No Arab tribe was without its idol, and to vindicate and protect the honour of their image-god every clan rose in war. This occurred when the Prophet was at Medina. In fact he had to pass here harder days than those at Mecca. Invaded on all sides by his enemies, he had every now and then to take the

field, or to send men to meet aggression. Sometimes victorious, sometimes defeated, every incident created an appropriate occasion for the noble Prophet to manifest different phases of his grand character. One has simply to digest and codify them and the world will find in them laws and rules of war more humane and appropriate than could ever be imagined by the promoters of the Hague Conference. Never a sword was drawn but as a last resort to defend human life. Islam may be slandered for the use of the sword in propagating religion, but even its most hostile critics have absolutely failed to lay their finger even on one instance where war resulted in individual or tribal conversion to Islam. These battles no doubt, in one way, proved useful in this direction. They caused the revelation of that nobility of character in Mahomet which won the hearts of his countrymen, and was more effectual in proselytization than any form of compulsion. That noble treatment which the defeated received at the hands of the Prophet worked wonders. Never a suppliant came but he got more than he deserved or desired. The following incident occurred after the defeat of the clan of Tay, which went a long way to bring the whole tribe to Islam within a short time. Among the prisoners who came before the Prophet was a band of respectable Christian women, led by the daughter of a widely-famed Christian philanthropist, whose generosity even now is proverbial in the East, and who is known as Hatim, the generous. When the Lord of the Faithful came to know of her lineage, he showed her every respect. He addressed her courteously, and informed her that the generosity of her father called for the tender treatment of his daughter. "God loves those that are kind to His creatures." Islam, said the Prophet, aims at inculcating the higher

virtues, and consequently it must recognize them wherever they exist. A world of joy and ecstasy dawned upon the lady when thus addressed courteously. She found the conqueror free from arrogance, extremely kind and affable, who immediately ordered her release. Emboldened by the saintly appearance and kind treatment of her liberator, her self-sacrificing spirit came to the rescue of her fellow-prisoners; she refused to accept the favour if the women of her community, with whom she had shared captivity, should continue to be State prisoners. The daughter was worthy her noble descent from Hatim, and her self-abnegation could not go unrewarded, especially at the hand of Mahomet, who always proved more than a match for the nobleness shown by others. She felt transported with joy, and invoked a long prayer upon the head of her noble deliverer, who, at her intercession, liberated all her companions. The whole company was given leave very soon, and they were despatched to their town under a trustworthy escort.

The lady, who went by the name of Safana, sent for her fugitive brother Uddi, and related the whole story to him and advised him to visit her benefactor, the Prophet. Uddi came to see Mahomet, and found him more than a worldly prince. He studied Islam, and found it a science of theology to all appearance. In it he found a succinct treatment of all spiritual problems which used to trouble him before. The book of Islam provided him with a host of illustrations for inductions and deductions, and furnished everything that had any bearing on the edification of the soul. He embraced Islam after some months, and with him his clan.

Many such events enrich the life of the Prophet. He never tried to exercise his power to convert his prisoners, for he followed his instructions, "Let there be no compulsion (no violence) in Religion."