

# THE BOOK OF THE PRESENCE

By Joseph Fort Newton .

**L**AFCADIO HEARN has a story of old Japan, telling of a dark day in a tiny village by the sea. When the people were all out working in their low lying fields, an earthquake came.

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Happily one man, whose farm was on the hill behind the village, was not working beside his neighbors, and from his higher level he saw what the others did not see. He saw the sea withdraw and go swiftly back beyond all its usual limits of retreat. He knew at once that it meant the coming of a great tidal wave.

Not an instant was to be lost; the people must be gathered to the hills or perish. Hastily he set fire to his rice ricks—all the capital he had—and furiously rang the temple bell. His neighbors in the fields below heard the sound, and looked up and saw the smoke. They rushed for the hills to help their neighbor, as they thought, in his dire plight. Then, looking seaward, they saw the wild waters rushing in over the place where they had been working, overwhelming their fields and their village in ruin.

The old story goes on to tell how, after the disaster was over and the ruin repaired—the man who had done this heroic act being still alive and their neighbor—the folk of the village used to go to their temple and worship his spirit. It was as though in the saving, self sacrificing act of a neighbor and friend there had been revealed to them a swift touch and vivid glimpse of “A Living God” (the title of the story).\*

In much the same way men are now wont to think of Jesus, in whose swift and gentle years they see “the human life of God”, revealed, as Turgenev said, in a face “that looked like the face of all other men, just a common human face”. No wonder we read His life anew, seeking the source of that stream of sweetness and light—and lightning!—which entered the world

with His advent. Today, as never before, men ponder His words—fresh as the dew and bright with color—simple as the prayer of a child, yet profounder than all philosophy, finding in His truth a clue to an else ambiguous, if not disheartening, existence. No other such words have been spoken in the open space between the earth and the sky.

Papini, dramatic, volcanic, stormy—he of the staccato style and the stiletto pen—did make the whole world think about Jesus, calling us back from a wisdom that is not wise. Glover, Findlay, and others—quiet scholars and humble disciples—with the insight of love and learning have shown us the real, human Christ in the atmosphere and scenery of His time, in habit as He lived the Life that interprets life. Poets, tellers of tales, and writers of plays have followed His footsteps, until we can almost see His face, His gesture, His smile, and hear the tones of His voice as He taught on the hillside and by the sea. It is all a part of a tendency Christward, and away from the hideous gods and gospels which have muddled our faith and misled our life.

And now, almost simultaneously and quite independently, we have three new translations of the New Testament, the story of Jesus and the literature created by the impress of His personality. Taken together they make a rich gift to our generation, as much to the plain man who wants to know what the Master said in words he can understand as to the scholar who will revel in new felicities of phrase and niceties of insight. In all three there is an effort to escape from the unnatural form in which the Gospel has hitherto been printed—“its dim and crowded gray pages”—which accounts in part for much of the neg-

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\*This story was recently recalled by “The British Weekly” in an editorial essay, albeit for a different purpose.

lect to read it. Moffatt alone keeps the old verse divisions on the margin, while the other two let the Teacher and His Apostles speak to us in format, as well as the style, of our own time.

Each of the three translators is keenly aware of the difficulties of his task, of the sacred rivalry of the King James version, whose stately antique diction is entwined with the holiest memories of our hearts. Yet they freely depart from it, sacrificing association to clarity and intelligibility, and therein they are right. Of course any translation from one language to another "is like playing on the piano what was written for the violin". Even when the motif and fundamental melody are preserved, subtle effects are missed and haunting overtones are lost. But we are making gains sometimes, and one can hardly turn a page of any of these new translations without finding an old passage in a new setting, or an old text retouched until it glows like a star to light our way.

If we set the three translations side by side, we have a version of the Gospel simple but not cheap, popular but not colloquial, achieving literary beauty without academic stiffness, making the most modern of books real and vivid in the living language of living men. They give one the joy of great work greatly done, in a spirit worthy of so noble an enterprise, and for such things we give thanks. Of the three, it is not too much to say that Moffatt is the ripest and the most finished, with a grace of form and a brooding beauty of phrase all his own. His work is a model of accuracy, a marvel of insight, at once a translation and a transition, in which many echoes of the old high melody are caught and bidden to linger in the more direct and familiar speech of our day.

Almost any text taken at random and read in all these translations is like turning a gem over and over and watching it flash and sparkle from many facets. Take the Authorized Version of the words of Jesus in the Gospel of St. Luke: "In your patience possess ye your souls." The Revised Version of 1881 restored this text to its original force. "In your patience ye shall win your souls." Bishop Westcott thought all the work of the revisers well spent, had the only result been to secure this slight change. With which agree all three of the translations under notice, and together they lift the words out of the commonplace into the altitude and atmosphere of Jesus.

For, slight as the change may seem, it marks the distance between the faith of yesterday and today. Stated starkly, it is the difference between the soul as a treasure to be kept and a trophy to be won, between life as a possession and life as an adventure. The Gospel is not a soft, cushioned faith, a refuge for the timid, a shelter of frail and lovely things. It is a challenge to the heroic spirit of youth, a quest and a conquest to stir the blood and make the heart beat faster, a risk, a wager, a Divine foolishness; not a stick of candy but a stroke of lightning: "By your heroic patience you will purchase your souls!"

The Final Version of the New Testament is among the things to be awaited—the infinitely slower and more difficult translation of truth into life. Alas! the Grand Style is as rare in life as it is in literature, but now and then some heroic saint flashes upon us the wonder of what life might be. We shall have to wait much longer before we know how that great translation will read in the lives of men and nations. Today only a few

words — here a line and there a stanza — have been wrought into action. We are in the beginnings of the Life of Jesus. Low aims blur the page, low ideals turn the Divine poetry into dull and unmusical prose.

For such a task we shall have need to return again and again for cleansing, for comfort, and for command, to “the book of white samite, mystical and wonderful”, where the sweet Voice is heard and the Vision dwells. There, in a Life duplicate of our own but disinfected of the evil that makes us hateful to ourselves and others, we find the Way of the eternal life in time, and the Truth that makes all other truth true.

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The New Testament, A New Translation. By The Reverend Professor James Moffatt, D.D., D.Litt. George H. Doran Company.

The Riverside New Testament, A Translation from the Original Greek into the English of To-day. By William G. Ballantine. Houghton Mifflin Co.

The New Testament, An American Translation. By Edgar J. Goodspeed. University of Chicago Press.