

BESIDE THE STILL WATERS

by Charles Beard

Beard's devotional reflections drawing on the imagery of Psalm 23, offering meditations on God's provision, guidance, and comfort in the quiet places of the spiritual life.

2 Chapters

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Beside The Still Waters

BESIDE THE STILL WATERS.

"He leadeth me beside the still waters."

PSALM xxiii.2. There has been a period of geological speculation, at which all the changes which have taken place upon the earth's surface, and have left their unmistakable marks in countless relics of animal and vegetable life, were attributed to the action of sudden and violent forces, of which, to-day, earthquake and tempest and volcano are only the feeble and transitory types. Those changes have manifestly been so great and so universal, as to stand out in vivid contrast to the imperceptibly slow, the gently gradual processes, which are all that we are now able to watch and to record: surely we can attribute them only to causes as exceptional as themselves. We see Niagara cutting its backward way through the ravine, so many feet in a thousand years; the lava stream descends the mountain-side like a black and burning glacier, and destruction too plainly marks its path; a storm bursts upon the hills, and for long miles the valleys are choked with barren mud, the bridges scattered in ruin through the stream, the cheerful husbandry of men laid hopelessly waste. But we cannot watch the slow upheaval of a long line of coast, where the fisherman hardly knows at the end of a lifetime whether the sea has drawn back or his own landmarks have been moved; we are all unable to note how new continents are now being formed in the ocean's stillest depths, from whose hardened and uplifted strata future ages may dig out the relics of so much that has been dear and precious to us; we fail to notice how every running stream, from the tiniest mountain rill to muddy Po and fertilizing Nile, is perpetually at work to carry down the hills into the plains, and to change the world's familiar face. But so it is, and so, we have some right to conclude, it has been always. God's chosen ways of working in the physical world are not wholly of the sudden and violent sort. Storm and earthquake and flood have undoubtedly played their part; but not more than -- perhaps hardly as much as -- the perpetually dropping rain, the wind that seems to blow as it listeth, the tides that come and go and no man heeds them, the sun that shines upon barren rock and fertile meadow with serene impartiality of blessing. God seems to work, by preference, slowly and in silence. To Him a thousand years are but as yesterday when it is past, and the dial on which His operations are recorded takes no note of human thoughts and expectations. The same is true, I think, in the moral world. It is indeed difficult to over-estimate the force of a great soul; though it is needful to remark that not all great souls work in the full light of publicity and have their path marked by revolution, and equally needful to remember that not all dislocating and disturbing spirits put forth any true claim to greatness. We are far too apt to confound the occasions with the causes of any great change, and to forget that if fire do indeed come out of a noble heart, it can only kindle other hearts that are already prepared to burn. Many souls were hot with Luther's indignation, before he burned the Bull in the market-place of Wittenberg; many spirits had inwardly rebelled against the deadness of the age, before Wesley told the Gospel tale to the colliers of Kingswood. One indeed speaks what the many feel; to him has been given a clearer insight, a diviner ardour, a more articulate speech; but his word is with power because of the dumb aspirations stirring in many breasts, and an universal emotion which has not yet found fit expression. And this is even more the case with regard to

moral operations of a quieter and less signal, though hardly less important kind; forces which do not so much suddenly change the world, as keep it (in some poor and imperfect way) sweet and pure, and perhaps, in the course of ages, urge it a little nearer the throne of God. Is the faith of Christendom sustained from generation to generation by the succession of heroes and saints, to whose achievements all men look up with despairing admiration, and in whose acknowledged and recorded excellence they see the full embodiment of their own desire, or by the thousand nameless fidelities to duty, and obscure victories of self-devotion, and hidden glories of purity, that pass away without celebration? If you, my brethren, have any stoutness of heart to resist mean temptation, if you are conscious of any uplifting of desire towards better and more stable things than form the common stuff of life, if any quiet trust in God sustains you amid the world's chance and change, to what do you owe them? In the last resort, doubtless, to God Himself, and to God working through Christ; but immediately, and in a large measure, to hidden forces, unseen influences, which you perhaps can track only in part, but of which others know nothing. A father's integrity -- a mother's sweet goodness -- the quiet air of a happy home -- a domestic courage and patience, at which you have looked very closely, and whose every line and lineament you know -- some ancestral saintliness, which is a household tradition and no more, but which has never withered in the fierce light of public estimate, -- these things have inspired and nourished your nobler part. They are the refreshing dew and the fertilizing rain, the restful night and the kindling day, of God's moral world. We grow up with them, and hardly know them for His activity; they are among the necessary conditions of our existence; and when we seek for tokens of Him, it is rather in the crises and catastrophes of life -- in the sharp wound that pricks a sleeping conscience, in the call of duty which turns the whole current of our energy, in the sorrow which destroys for ever our trust in the world. But He has been with us all the while in the gentler motions of His will. Sometimes, I am inclined to think, we insist too much on our own estimate of small and great in the moral world, forgetting that any single fact or individual life is but one link in an endless chain of causes and consequences, of which we ought to know the whole before we can rightly estimate a part. And looking back where some light seems to rest upon our own or others' history, it is easy to see how what we should call great and signal, stands next in the line of causation to what seems (but only seems) to be trivial, and is certainly obscure. Let us take the most remarkable instance of all, -- the Christ, whom no scepticism can dethrone from the foremost place in human history, -- who, whatever else he was, must be admitted even by unbelief to have set his mark upon mankind more deeply than any other son of men. Yet how he emerges upon the world out of secrecy and silence! Whatever bright cloud of hope and prophecy had formerly floated about his cradle, has long been scattered and forgotten; and he comes, from his Galilean hills, one of the simple folk who earned their bread in the sweat of their brow, unlearned save in the ancestral wisdom of his people, unheralded but by the village estimate of a sweet and innocent life, to finish the work of a long line of prophets, and to lift humanity nearer to God. And we are often so eager to prove the singularity of his mission, and to take him out of the category of other workers for God, as to miss the great lesson which is to be learned of the way in which the Father always trains and educates a faithful and victorious Son. Of his mother, who knows anything, save what the few hints and statements of the Evangelists disclose? A superstition, not without its tender and graceful side, has taken her from her cottage home at Nazareth, and crowned her Queen of Heaven; till all the familiar extravagances of mythology have obliterated even from men's imagination the lines of a sweet and strong human character. And yet what a marvellous woman must have been this

unknown mother of Christ! What depth of tenderness, what steadiness of judgment, what a majestic and yet winning purity, what a faculty of self-devotion (not yet too hardly tried), what a simple intensity of devoutness, must have watched and helped the child, as he grew and blossomed into man! What airs from heaven must have blown about that lowly roof, filling all who dwelt beneath it with a noble simplicity of content with their own lot, and one, with a nobler discontent with the world's innumerable wrongs and sufferings! These were God's quiet ways, and the very record of them has disappeared; they survive only in their result. But there is no son in whom mother's blood does not flow, and though now we know not how or where, the Mary of whom the world is ignorant, lived and spoke and died in the Christ, to whom the world looks up. So no mistake can be greater than to suppose that all the world's best work is done by the eloquent tongue and the busy hand. I will not compare what may be achieved by these means, with the less conspicuous results of a goodness which propagates itself less by word and act than by the unconscious contagion of example; for it is not given to us to choose the form and method of our obedience. The call of conscience is to action; God cannot be acceptably served in inglorious ease. The command comes in many forms: "Work while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work," cries one voice; and then another, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might;" and again a third, "The fields are white unto harvest, but the labourers are few." But God Himself provides a diversity of work for His own purposes, and at the same time a variety of example for us, when He chooses some lives, and laying upon them, what seems to be a heavy burthen of sickness and infirmity, or filling them with a great modesty and retiringness of spirit, or shutting them up within very narrow and insurmountable barriers of circumstance, says to them, in a voice which it is impossible to misinterpret, "Serve Me in darkness and in silence; and let it be enough that I accept the faithfulness which is unknown of men." Sometimes a command like this finds a ready echo in a timid and sensitive spirit, to which it is a deliverance not to be compelled by conscience to go down into the throng of life; quite as often it lies, at least for awhile, like a galling fetter upon the active mind and the eager will. But God tempers His weapons in His own way, and all to the best effect; and presently the busiest and most versatile intellect finds new depths and fresh possibilities of interest in the things that lie closest at home; the widest and the warmest heart learns that faltering feet and feeble hands cannot restrain love's farthest and highest flight; and as for God, with all that is involved in the soul's upward strain towards communion, and His descent of help, He may easily be nearer to the silence of an enforced quietness, than to the noise and press of men's common life. And so it often happens that, under circumstances like these, a character is built up which, if it necessarily shine upon but a few lives, shines for them with a brightness all the purer and more intense. Such virtue is not the beacon flame upon the hill-top, wakening half the land to heroic courage and stern endurance, but the quiet lamp which giveth light to all that are in the house, for sweet patience, and fine courtesy, and the practice of all homely goodness. Such a life, withdrawn as it is from common temptations, is not without trials and difficulties peculiarly its own; but of these it is not needful now to speak. It is more to my purpose to point out that it is susceptible of a singular symmetry and completeness. The very narrowness which has been imposed upon it by God, and which we are so ready to regard as a privation, is only in another shape the restriction upon the indefiniteness of duty which many dutiful souls so passionately desire. For the claims upon an energetic nature are so many, so various, often so conflicting; it is so hard to know which of two competing duties ought to take precedence, so impossible to adjust effort at precisely its right intensity, and to hit the mean between base

self-saving and foolish self-squandering, -- that I think it must be a common wish for keen consciences to have the boundaries of industry a little more plainly marked out by God, and to be relieved from the perpetual perplexity of choice. If only one had but a fixed and limited place to fill! If only one could always clearly distinguish between what one ought to do, and what it would be wrong and foolish to attempt! And therefore, in this sense, God's prison may be the soul's liberty, and no round of duty so cheerfully and completely trodden as one which we, who are burthened with too large a capacity of flight, think sadly and hopelessly circumscribed. Then, so God has willed it, Quietness and Pain are sister angels, that have a singular privilege of access to Him; and the soul to which they minister, through the weary hours of the day and in the long watches of the night, may frequently mount upon their friendly wings into the sanctuary of His Presence, bringing with it, upon its return earthward, one knows not what glow caught from the infinite and eternal Brightness. The difficulties of a busy life are apt to throw mind and heart back upon themselves; the necessities of a quiet life have in them this fine quality, that they directly lead mind and heart to God. So ripen, slowly as the seasons pass and the years come and go, that sweetness and roundness of character which we call saintliness; and as we come in from our worldly work and struggle, with its soil still clinging to us, and the joy of achievement always dashed with the recollection of failure, we wonder at a goodness in which we can hardly detect a flaw, and upon which already rests a foregleam of the presence of God. For one secret source of the influence which such a life may exercise, undoubtedly lies in its contrast to men's common and more active existence. I have just indicated one element of that contrast; the completeness with which a comparatively narrow place may be filled, over against the want of balance, and symmetry, and thoroughness, of which all day-workers in the world must be conscious. But this is not all. There is a great charm in the difference between the heated air in which we fight our battles even for goodness, and the still atmosphere which environs these quiet lives: we come back to them from the struggle, and find that while they too are full of all fine aspiration for right, and thrill with a divine indignation against wrong, their aspiration is without restlessness, their indignation has no root of bitterness in it; they are not unduly elated by successes which have turned our heads, nor daunted by failures which have utterly cast us down; their faith is, as ours should be, far more in God than in any of His human instruments. Their characteristic excellences answer in many respects to our weaknesses, and we admire and love them all the more: we cannot wait, and their existence is one long patience: the noise and the light of publicity are our life, and God has hidden them in His pavilion from the strife of tongues: we argue, and wrangle, and fight, while they but love and pray: health and energy are the very conditions of our activity, and their life is rooted in weakness and in pain: we converse continually with men, and it is a familiar thing with them to be alone with God. And so it often happens that the chamber of long and disabling sickness, or the sofa from which the invalid rarely moves, is the fountain of the finest influence, and the centre of the noblest activities. For there the charities of life may be all astir, and the quick affections thence make their far journeys of sympathy; thither may come the workers, now for the refreshment of peace, now for the balm of consolation, now, again, for the inspiration of a purer dutifulness; while over all constantly broods the presence of God, who gives and who denies the power of active service; who bids this child toil and struggle, while from that He asks only that she should "stand and wait." So in the weakness of one many are made strong; and the activities of earth are bathed and freshened in the airs of heaven. Such lives are rarely counted happy; the world pities, while it admires them; and there is often a note of commiseration even upon the lips of those who know

them best. I cannot think that it ought to be so; that it is so, arises from the fact, that when we speak of happiness, we use the word in some shallow and conventional sense which does not answer to our best and deepest knowledge. For although one who lives so narrowed a life as I have described, and, like a caged lark, praises God in clear strains and out of a full heart, might well desire, were such a thing yet possible, a restored activity and an enlarged power of service, it would almost always be for others' sake rather than her own; not that she might multiply occasions of pleasure, but that she might extend the ministry of love. The truth is, that such an one has penetrated far more deeply than most into the true secret of human happiness; learning that, so far as external things go, it stands much more in the limitation than in the satisfaction of desire; and that for the things within, to lie close to God, and to be able to do and bear all His will with a complete and ready assent, is the single sufficient source of a Peace which the world can neither give nor take away. And then there is a grace of character which is one of the rarest gifts of healthy, active life; but which, wherever it shews itself, is almost always a plant of God's own rearing and tending, -- I mean a willingness to live or die, as He pleases; and a genuine conviction, that whatever He pleases in this respect is wisest, kindest, best. How little do we feel this, my brethren, we who come here for an hour's repose from the world's turmoil! Our life's work, we think, is half undone; our best hopes have not yet reached fruition; our vital capacity is still unexhausted; a thousand interests claim us. If God called us now, we should obey the call with sorrowful reluctance, and innumerable backward glances to the work and love in which our hearts are centred. Not so with those who have long dwelt in the silence and the seclusion which lie between life and death. It is the counterpoise of their suffering and the reward of their patience, that to them there is no terror, but a great deliverance, in God's last message. It opens the door of the prison-house, and sets the captive free. It is the summons to exchange pain for peace, and enforced quietness for the vigour and the joy of service. The God who has straitened them so long is He who now sets their lives in a large place; and from the twilight of faith they pass into the noon of sight. Amen.

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