

doctor who lacks official training and sets himself up as an authority on his own limited experience. Nevertheless medicine has often benefited by the ideas or chance discoveries of the 'layman' who has had the humility to submit them to the experts. It may be that the lay-medico might do yet more were he able to publish his findings or suggestions under expert supervision.

So we hope to be able to encourage lay writers to send their contributions especially with a view to assisting the lay reader to live 'The Life' in the ordinary surroundings of daily life.



TOBIAS—A NEGLECTED CLASSIC

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IT is a pity that the story of Tobias is not more widely read by Christians and that it is used so little in the religious instruction of children. Although one of the inspired books of the Old Testament, it is also, as the Monks of Maredsous have pointed out,¹ 'a true guide for the righteous which the Christian can use with practically no modification'.

We need not worry if the versions of the story contain dubious details, or if St Jerome took only one day to translate the Aramaic text into the Latin of the Vulgate. However much they may vary the antics of young Tobias's dog or the description of his adventure with the large fish, all the different versions give a vivid account of the lives of an impoverished and uprooted Jewish family which is at the same time a work of art.

The hardships endured by old Tobias and his family are familiar enough to our world where mass deportations are so nearly accepted as part of the technique of government that newspaper editors have tired of reporting them. Its happy ending is the main difference between the story of Tobias and nearly all the accounts

¹ *A Guide to the Bible*. By the Monks of Maredsous. (Sands & Co.).

we know of the sufferings of the millions of persons displaced since 1940.

The principal characters show an unbreakable faith in God's final mercy. Tobias himself is introduced as one who was righteous from his youth. He would have nothing to do with the idolatry under Jeroboam. He shared his goods with his fellow men. He clothed and fed the destitute and buried the dead with particular reverence and care. After the deportation to Assyria of large numbers of Jews he tried to take on his own shoulders as much as possible of the sufferings of his people, and his charity and integrity won him the approval of the Assyrian king Sargon who seems to have employed him as a kind of Purchasing Officer. The insecurity and fear of those who live under tyranny is skilfully conveyed. After the king's death his son reverses his policy of moderation, and after a massacre of the Jewish exiles in revenge for the Assyrian disaster in Palestine Tobias is caught burying the bodies and forced to flee into hiding with his wife and son.

After the tyrant's assassination the family return but their fragile prosperity does not last. The reminder repeated throughout the story that prayer and fasting should precede indulgence, however normal, is given by the mention of the festival banquet which Tobias leaves untasted after the sudden announcement that the body of a murdered member of his race lies unburied outside. The loneliness of the man who strives to lead a virtuous life in the face of tyranny and the opposition of his own household is well brought out, and the murmuring against him seems to be justified when he is suddenly deprived of his sight after a particularly exhausting round of good works.

His blindness forces his wife Anna to find weaving work outside their home to earn 'what she could get for their living by the labour of her hands', and when one day she comes home exhausted carrying a kid which is a present from her employer she is understandably exasperated by her husband's scruples about accepting it lest it be stolen. Her outburst expresses the familiar impatience of the practical person who has delivered the goods with those who must quibble about the means.

It is evident thy hope is come to nothing and thy alms now appear.

From the two great prayers which follow springs the subsequent action of the story. Both are made simultaneously by per-

sons living far from one another and ignorant of each other's plight. Tobias resigns himself to God's will and asks only that he may be delivered from his present helplessness by a peaceful death. Sara prays that she may be delivered from the curse that has already killed her seven previous husbands or allowed to die.

Both prayers start by praising God and they contain no suggestion of self-pity. Sara ends hers on a splendid trumpet-note of confidence.

For thou art not delighted in our being lost: because after a storm thou makest a calm and after tears and weeping thou pourest in joyfulness.

The manner in which the prayers are made should be noted. They are not formal, prescribed utterances but spontaneous and uninhibited cries for help directed loudly but privately to the ear of God. Sara's is particularly interesting, not only because of the beauty of its words but also on account of the circumstances in which it is made. She secludes herself in a room at the top of the house and prays for three days in tears, fasting all the time. To be nearer God one must withdraw further from the world and its appetites, and fasting helps this withdrawal.

Their prayers are heard and the angel Raphael is sent 'to heal them both', but before he appears old Tobias is certain his prayer has been answered and that he will be allowed to die. He sends for his son Tobias the younger and delivers his parting instructions. The whole passage is a noble summary of the Christian social virtues.

The young man must ensure decent burial for his parents. He is to keep the commandments of the Lord and be charitable in a practical way.

Eat thy bread with the hungry and the needy and with thy garments cover the naked.

The exhortation ends on a more material level when he is told he must immediately arrange to travel to Persia to recover the money his father lent to Gabelus during one of his missions on behalf of King Sargon many years before.

Young Tobias promises immediate obedience. His part so far has been a passive one and we are not told what contribution he makes to the family income. He suggests obstacles to the recovery of the loan: he has never met Gabelus and they would be unable to identify one another. Besides, he doesn't know the way. His

father gently demolishes these objections. Young Tobias has only to show Gabelus the receipt he gave in acknowledgement of the loan and find an expert guide to accompany him.

His son goes forth, probably with very little confidence in his own powers, and almost walks into Raphael who is 'standing girded and as it were ready to walk'. Two questions are enough to establish that the stranger not only knows the route into Persia but has travelled extensively in that country and, most satisfactory of all, has even 'abode with Gabelus our brother'. We can almost hear Tobias catch his breath in 'Stay for me I beseech thee till I tell these same things to my father'. The old man's reply to the angel's salute—'What manner of joy shall be to me who sit in darkness and see not the light of heaven'—is the only remark he ever makes which has a taste of bitterness.

The description of the interview between employer and hired man is strikingly authentic. Raphael's readiness to act as a guide for his son does not at once convince old Tobias and he has to ask a question about his pedigree. The angel's retort—'Dost thou seek the family of him thou hirest or the hired servant himself to go with thy son?'—is the traditional counter to snobs, but he softens it at once by agreeing, 'lest I make thee uneasy', to let Tobias know that he is Azarias (the help of God), the son of Amanias (the grace of God), and the exchange ends with the old man's unconscious irony: 'Thou art indeed of a great family'.

As the two young men set out the figure of Anna springs vividly before us. During the preparations for the journey she has remained in the background, a silent, apprehensive spectator. Now as she watches the figure of her son grow smaller in the distance she can contain her heavy grief no longer:

Thou has taken the staff of our old age and sent him away from
us.

I wish the money for which thou hast sent him had never
been.

It is the outburst of an exhausted old woman who, after long years of destitution, sees herself robbed of her last chance of a little joy before her life's end.

From this point the plot quickens its pace with the progress of the two travellers. The mention that young Tobias's dog followed them, apparently uninvited, is one of the author's most skilful touches and contributes much of the story's naturalness. After the

heat of the first day's march they bivouac on the bank of the Tigris. Tobias washes his feet in the river and is badly frightened by a large fish which he catches on the angel's instructions and hauls onto the bank. The fish is the key to the future action of the tale, since out of it comes the cure for old Tobias's blindness and the means whereby Sara is relieved from her affliction.

There is nothing especially fanciful about the reference to the gall of the fish as being a cure for diseases of the eye. It is believed that it was commonly used in ancient times for this purpose.

The travellers arrive and in response to young Tobias's query about lodgings Raphael tells him they must go to the house of Raguel, Sara's father, who is a kinsman of Tobias and a wealthy man as the subsequent references to camels and servants seem to testify. The angel now reveals briefly the divine plan for the succour of Sara and the future of young Tobias. He must marry the young woman who, like himself, is an only child and her father's sole legatee.

The young man remarks that he has heard of the deaths of Sara's seven husbands and he has misgivings lest he be the eighth victim. The angel reassures him in words which are a concise expression of the Christian doctrine concerning the end of marriage and the preparation for it. The bride and bridegroom should spend three days together in prayer before the marriage is consummated. When it is they must be 'moved rather for love of children than for lust'. This seems to imply that the seven previous husbands omitted the preparatory period, that their relations with Sara were dominated exclusively by desires of the flesh, and that there must always be this danger if husband and wife do not spend the first few days of their marriage in the way that Tobias and Sara are instructed to do.

Young Tobias is also commanded to throw the liver of the fish onto the fire as soon as he joins Sara and thus drive away the evil spirit which has caused her so much suffering.

They enter Raguel's house and are received with joy. From this moment young Tobias seems to develop character. The rejoicings and congratulations on the discovery of his parentage do not divert him from his purpose and he will join no feasts until Raguel has consented to his marriage with Sara. Raguel, remembering the fate of the seven, is silent and it is not until Raphael reassures him that he consents to the marriage. That he is not

entirely free from anxiety is clear from the account of the grave-digging which he orders the following morning.

Tobias carries out the angel's instructions and the curse is lifted from Sara. They 'prayed earnestly together that health might be given them'. The young husband utters a brief hymn of praise and declares that he has taken his sister to wife only for the love of posterity in which God's name may be blessed forever.

One of Raguel's maidservants reports to her master and mistress that what they dreaded has not happened and Raguel orders a banquet 'for all his neighbours and all his friends'.

At Tobias's request Raphael takes four of Raguel's servants and two camels and brings Gabelus to the wedding feast after reclaiming the loan from him. The subsequent marriage feast is the occasion for great joy now that all the anxieties of those concerned are dissolved and 'is celebrated also with the fear of the Lord'.

Raguel tries in vain to persuade his son-in-law to remain with him indefinitely on the assurance that he will send a messenger to convince his parents he is safe.

I know that my father and mother now count the days and their spirit is grievously afflicted within them.

His father-in-law detains him no longer. A large convoy is made ready to carry the wealth which he bequeaths to Tobias and they leave, sped by the farewell blessing of Raguel and his wife. This expresses all the longing of people who are separated from their loved ones by vast and dangerous distances.

Immediately following the description of the marriage feast we are shown old Tobias saddened only that his son did not return on 'the day appointed'. In contrast his wife is without hope and 'could by no means be comforted'. With the awful routine of despair she strains her eyes on behalf of both of them, scanning the distance for any sign of her son, and eventually it is during one of these daily vigils on a hill that she sights young Tobias and Raphael who have left the main body at the halfway mark, in the angel's words, to 'follow softly after', which conveys perfectly the leisurely padding of the camels.

Then the dog, which had been with them in the way, ran before, and coming as if he had brought the news, showed his joy by his fawning and wagging his tail. And his father that was blind, rising up began to run stumbling with his feet: and

giving a servant his hand went to meet his son. And receiving him kissed him, as did also his wife, and they began to weep for joy. And when they had adored God, and given him thanks, they sat down together.

Raphael's proposal to Tobias the younger that they should try to reach his home before Sara and her retinue shows great delicacy. Their arrival in advance would allow the young man and his parents to show their joy unrestrainedly without any feeling of embarrassment in the presence of strangers and would also allow the cure of the old man's blindness to take place in time for his eyes to become accustomed once again to his domestic world which has been hidden from him for four years so that he may fittingly welcome his daughter-in-law.

After Sara's arrival has been celebrated by a banquet, Tobias and his son discuss the payment which should be made to 'Azarias'. They offer him one half of their newly acquired riches and immediately he reveals to them the secret of their redemption and the central doctrine contained by the narrative: prayer to be effective should always be reinforced by corporal works of mercy.

When thou didst pray with tears and didst bury the dead, and didst leave thy dinner, and hide the dead by day in thy house and bury them by night, I offered thy prayer to the Lord. The angel then revealed his identity and after a tender farewell 'he was taken from their sight'.

The story is over and the last two chapters really form an epilogue. Old Tobias's great song of praise fills the whole of the thirteenth chapter and ends in a serene vision of a restored Jerusalem which is repeated in greater detail in the final chapter when he utters his parting message to his son just before his death.

Finally, after the death of his parents, the younger Tobias returns with his whole family to the house of his wife's parents.

And all his kindred, and all his generation continued in good life, and in holy conversation so that they were acceptable both to God and to men, and to all that dwelt in the land.