KNOWLEDGE NOT THE LIMIT OF BELIEF

"Canst thou by searching find out God?"–JOB xi. 7.

IT was but the banging of the door, blown to by a current of wind from the open window, that made that great noise, and shook the room so much!

The room was a naturalist's library, and it was a pity that some folio books of specimens had been left so near the edge of the great table, for, when the door clapt to, they fell down, and many plants, sea-weeds, &c., were scattered on the floor.

And, "Do we meet once again?" said a zoophyte to a seaweed (a *Corallina*) in whose company he had been thrown ashore,– "Do we meet once again? This is a real pleasure. What strange adventures we have gone through since the waves flung us on the sands together!"

"Ay, indeed," replied the Seaweed, "and what a queer place we have come to at last! Well, well–but let me first ask you how you are this morning, after all the washing, and drying, and squeezing, and gumming, we have undergone?"

Zoophyte. "Oh, pretty well in health, Seaweed, but very, very sad. You know there is a great difference between you and me. You have little or no cause to be sad. You are just the same now that you ever were, excepting that you can never grow any more. But *I!* ah, I am only the skeleton of what I once was! All the merry little creatures that inhabited me are dead and dried up. They died by hundreds at a time soon after I left the sea; and even if they had survived longer, the nasty fresh water we were soaked in by the horrid being who picked us up, would have killed them at once. What are you smiling at?"

Seaweed. "I am smiling at your calling our new master a horrid being, and also at your speaking so positively about the little creatures that inhabited you."

"And why may I not speak positively of what I know so well? " asked the other.

Seaweed. "Oh, of what you *know*, by all means! But I wonder what we *do* know! People get very obstinate over what they think they know, and then, lo and behold! it turns out to be a mistake."

Zoophyte. "What makes you say this?"

Seaweed. "I have learnt it from a very curious creature I have made acquaintance with here–a bookworm. He walks through all the books in this library just as he pleases, and picks up a quantity of information, and knows a great deal. And he's a mere nothing, he says, compared to the creature who picked us up–the 'horrid being' as you call him. Why, my dear friend, the Bookworm tells me that he who found us is a man, and that a man is the most wonderful creature in all the world; that there is nothing in the least like him. And this particular one here is a naturalist; that is, he knows all about living creatures, and plants, and stones, and I don't know

what besides. Now, wouldn't you say that it was a great honour to belong to him, and to have made acquaintance with his friend the Bookworm?"

Zoophyte. "Of course I should, and do."

Seaweed. "Very well, I know you would; and yet I can tell you that this naturalist and his bookworm are just instances of what I have been saying. They fancy that betwixt them they know nearly everything, and get as obstinate as possible over the most ridiculous mistakes."

Zoophyte. "My good friend, are you a competent judge in such matters as these?"

"Oh, am I not!" the Seaweed rejoined. "Why now, for instance, what do you think the Bookworm and I have been quarrelling about half the morning? Actually as to whether *I* am an animal or a vegetable. He declares that I am an animal full of little living creatures like yours, and that there is a long account of all this written on the page opposite the one on which I am gummed!"

"Of all the nonsense I ever listened to!" began the Zoophyte, angrily, yet amused–but he was interrupted by the Seaweed–

"And as for *you*–I am almost ashamed to tell you–that you and all your family and connexions were, for generations and generations, considered as vegetables. It is only lately that these naturalists found out that you were an animal. May I not well say that people get very obstinate about what they think they know, and after all it turns out to be a mistake? As for me, I am quite confused with these blunders."

"O dear, how disappointed I am!" murmured the Zoophyte. "I thought we had really fallen into the hands of some very interesting creatures. I am very, very sorry! It seemed so nice that there should be wonderful, wise beings, who spend their time in finding out all about animals, and plants, and such things, and keep us all in these beautiful books so carefully. I liked it so much and now I find the wonderfully wise creatures are wonderfully stupid ones instead."

"Very much so," laughed the Seaweed, "though our learned friend, the Bookworm, would tell you quite otherwise; but he gets quite muddled when he talks about them, poor fellow !"

"It is very easy to ridicule your betters," said a strange voice; and the Bookworm, who had just then eaten his way through the back of Lord Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, appeared sitting outside, listening to the conversation. "I shall be very sorry that I have told you anything, if you make such a bad use of the little bit of knowledge you have acquired."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, dear friend!" cried the Seaweed. "I meant no harm. You see it is quite new to us to learn anything; and, really, if I laughed, you must excuse me. I meant no harm–only I *do* happen to know–really for a fact–that I never was alive with little creatures like my friend the Zoophyte; and he happens to know–really for a fact–that he never was a vegetable; and so you see it made us smile to think of your wonderful creature, man, making such wonderfully odd mistakes."

At this the Bookworm smiled; but he soon shook his head gravely, and said–"All the mistakes man makes, man can discover and correct–I mean, of course, all the mistakes he makes about creatures inferior to himself, whom he learns to know from his own observation. He may not observe quite carefully enough one day, but he may put all right when he looks next time. I never give up a statement when I know it is true: and so I tell you again–laugh as much as you please–that, in spite of all his mistakes, man is, without exception, the most wonderful and the most clever of all the creatures upon earth!"

"You will be a clever creature yourself if you can prove it!" cried both the Zoophyte and Seaweed at once.

"The idea of taking me with my hundreds of living inhabitants for a vegetable!" sneered the Zoophyte.

"And me with my vegetable inside, covered over with lime, for an animal!" smiled the Seaweed.

Bookworm. "Ah! have your laugh out, and then listen. But, my good friends, if you had worked your way through as many wise books as I have done, you would laugh less and know more."

Zoophyte. "Nay, don't be angry, Bookworm."

Bookworm. "Oh, I am not angry a bit. I know too well the cause of all the folly you are talking, so I excuse you. And I am now puzzling my head to find out how I am to prove what I have said about the superiority of man, so as to make you understand it."

Seaweed. "Then you admit there is a little difficulty in proving it? Even *you* confess it to be rather puzzling."

Bookworm. "I do; but the difficulty does not lie where you think it does. I am sorry to say it–but the only thing that prevents your *understanding* the superiority of man, is your own immeasurable inferiority to him! However many mistakes he may make about *you*, he can correct them all by a little closer or more patient observation. But no observation can make you understand what man is. *You* are quite within the grasp of *his* powers, but *he* is quite beyond the reach of *yours.*"

Seaweed. "You are not over-civil, with all your learning, Mr. Bookworm."

Bookworm. "I do not mean to be rude, I assure you. You are both of you very beautiful creatures, and, I dare say, very useful too. But you should not fancy either that you *do* know everything, or that you are *able* to know everything. And, above all, you should not dispute the superiority and powers of another creature merely because you cannot understand them."

Seaweed. "And am I then to believe all the long stories anybody may choose to come and tell me about the wonderful powers of other creatures?–and, when I inquire what those wonderful powers are, am I to be told that I can't understand them, but am to believe them all the same as if I did?"

Bookworm. "Certainly not, unless the wonderful powers are proved by wonderful results; but if they are, I advise you to believe in them, whether you understand them or not."

Seaweed. " I should like to know how I am to believe what I don't understand."

Bookworm. "Very well, then, don't! and remain an ignorant fool all your life. Of course, you can't *really* understand anything but what is within the narrow limits of your own powers; so, if you choose to make those powers the limits of your belief, I wish you joy, for you certainly won't be overburdened with knowledge."

Seaweed. "I will retort upon you that it is very easy to be contemptuous to your inferiors, Mr. Bookworm. You would do much better to try and explain to me those wonderful powers themselves, and so remove all the difficulties that stand in the way of my belief."

Bookworm. "If I were to try ever so much, I should not succeed. You can't understand even *my* superiority."

Seaweed. "Oh, Bookworm! now you are growing conceited."

Bookworm. "Indeed I am not; but you shall judge for yourself. I can do many things you can't do; among others, I can *see.*"

Seaweed. "What is that?"

Bookworm. "There, now! I knew I should puzzle you directly! Why, seeing is something that I do with a very curious machine in my head, called an eye. But as you have not got an eye, and therefore cannot see, how am I to make you understand what seeing is?"

Seaweed. "Why, you can tell us, to be sure."

Bookworm. "Tell you what? I can tell you I see. I can say, *Now I see, now I see*, as I walk over you and see the little bits of you that fall under my small eye. Indeed, I can also tell you *what* I see; but how will that teach you what seeing is? You have got no eye, and therefore you can't see, and therefore also you can never know what seeing is."

Zoophyte. "Then why need we believe there is such a thing as seeing?"

Bookworm. "Oh, pray, don't believe it! I don't know why you should, I am sure! There's no harm at all in being ignorant and narrow-minded. I am sure I had much rather you took no further trouble in the matter; for you are, both of you, very testy and tiresome. It is from nothing but pride and vanity, too, after all. You want to be in a higher place in creation than you are put in, and no good ever comes of that. If you'd be content to learn wonderful things in the only way that is open to you, I should have a great deal of pleasure in telling you more."

Zoophyte. "And pray what way is that?"

Bookworm. "Why, from the effects produced by them. As I said before, even where you cannot *understand* the wonderful powers themselves, you may have the grace to believe in their existence, from their wonderful results."

Seaweed. "And the results of what you call 'seeing' are–"

"In man," interrupted the Bookworm, "that he gets to know everything about you, and all the creatures, and plants, and stones he looks at; so that he knows your shape, and growth, and colour, and all about the cells of the little creatures that live in you–how many feelers they have, what they live upon, how they catch their food, how the eggs come out of the egg-cells, where you live, where you are to be found, what other zoophytes are related to you, which are most like you–in short, the most minute particulars;–so that he puts you into his collections, not among strange creatures, but near to those you are nearest related to; and he describes you, and makes pictures of you, and gives you a name so that you are known for the same creature, wherever you are found, all over the world. And now, I'm quite out of breath with telling you all these wonderful results of seeing."

"But he once took me for a vegetable," mused the Zoophyte.

"Yes; as I said before, he had not observed quite close enough, nor had he then invented a curious instrument which enables his great big eye to see such little fellows as your inhabitants are. But when he made that instrument, and looked very carefully, he saw all about you."

"Ay, but he still calls me an animal," observed the Seaweed.

"I know he does, but I am certain he will not do so long! If you are a vegetable, I will warrant him to find it out when he examines you a little more."

"You expect us to believe strange things, Bookworm," observed the Zoophyte.

"To be sure, because there is no end of strange things for you to believe! And what you can't find out for yourself, you must take upon trust from your betters," laughed the Bookworm. "It's the only plan. *Observation and Revelation are the sole means of acquiring knowledge.*"

Just at that moment the door opened, and two gentlemen entered the room.

"Ah, my new specimens on the floor!" observed the Naturalist; "but never mind," added he, as he picked them up; "here is the very one we wanted; it will serve admirably for our purpose. I shall only sacrifice a small branch of it, though."

And the Naturalist cut off a little piece of the Seaweed and laid it in a saucer, and poured upon it some liquid from a bottle, and an effervescence began to take place forthwith, and the Seaweed's limy coat began to give way; and the two gentlemen sat watching the result.

"Now," whispered the Bookworm to the Zoophyte, "those two men are looking closely at your Seaweed friend, and trying what they call experiments, that they may find out what he is; and if they do not succeed, I will give up all my arguments in despair."

But they *did* succeed.

The gentlemen watched on till all the lime was dissolved, and there was nothing left in the saucer but a delicate red branch with little round things upon it, that looked like tiny apples.

"This is the fruit decidedly," remarked the Naturalist; "and now we will proceed to examine it through the microscope."

And they did so.

And an hour or more passed, and a sort of sleepy forgetfulness came over the Bookworm and his two friends; for they had waited till they were tired for further remarks from the Naturalist. And, therefore, it was with a start they were aroused at last by hearing him exclaim, "It is impossible to entertain the slightest doubt. If I ever had any, I have none now; and the *Corallinas* must be removed back once more to their position among vegetables!"

The Naturalist laughed as he loosened the gum from the specimen, which he placed on a fresh paper, and classed among Red Seaweeds. And soon after, the two gentlemen left the room once more.

"So he has really found our friend out!" cried the Zoophyte; "and he was right about the fruit, too! Oh, Bookworm, Bookworm! would that I could know what *seeing* is!"

"Oh, Zoophyte, Zoophyte! I wish you would not waste your time in struggling after the unattainable! You know what *feeling* is. Well, I would tell you that *seeing* is something of the same sort as feeling, only that it is quite different. Will that do?"

"It sounds like nonsense."

"It *is* nonsense. There *can* be no answer but nonsense, if you want to understand 'really for a fact,' as you call it, powers that are above you. Explain to the rock on which you grow, what *feeling* is!"

"How could I?" said the Zoophyte; "it has no sensation."

"No more than you have sight," rejoined the Bookworm.

"That is true indeed," cried the Zoophyte. "Bookworm! I am satisfied–humbled, I must confess, but satisfied. And now I will rejoice in our position here, glory in our new master, and admire his wonderful powers, even while I cannot understand them."

"I am proud of my disciple," returned the Bookworm kindly.

"I also am one of them," murmured the Seaweed; "but tell me now, are there any other strange powers in man?"

"Several," was the Bookworm's answer; "but to be really known they must be possessed. A lower power cannot compass the full understanding of a higher. But to limit one's belief to the bounds of one's own small powers, would be to tie oneself down to the foot of a tree, and deny the existence of its upper branches."

"There are no powers beyond those that man possesses, I suppose," mused the Zoophyte.

"I am far from saying that," replied the Bookworm; "on the contrary–"

But what he would have said further no one knows, for once more the door opened, and the Naturalist, who now returned alone, spent his evening in putting by the specimens in their separate volumes on the shelves. And it was a long, long time before the Bookworm saw them again; for the volumes in which they were kept were bound in Russia leather, to the smell of which he had a particular dislike, so that he never could make his way to them for a friendly chat again.