

the hard but not over-hard crust. Fain would I sing with the poet—

Oh, cease to affirm that man, since his birth
From Adam till now, has with wretchedness strove,
Some portion of Paradise still is on earth
And Eden revives *at the touch of the loaf.*

L. K. B.

A Short essay on Death.

The very utterance of the word—death—involves a mystery too hard to be explained away by human intellect. Philosophers of various ages have endeavoured to solve it, but there has always been a difference of opinion. Some have regarded the question as involved in mystery and terror, and the passage into the region after death as a leap in the dark, into some awful unknown void. Others again take a very happy and consolatory view of the question. Physically death is but a permanent cessation of the vital functions of the body—an event to which all created beings are liable. But the difficulty arises when we raise the question ‘what is death’? ‘what does it imply’? ‘what is its connection with life’?

The first thought that strikes a common mind with regard to death is its terrible character. Alas! what a terror of terrors it is, inconsiderate of time, place and person! It comes with its scythe equally to the poor and the rich, the small and the great, to cut the thread of their life. The youngman with his bosom full of fresh vigour and ardent hopes, engaged in doing his duties, is suddenly snatched out of his dearest and nearest surroundings and taken to that “bourne from which no traveller returns”.! Death is the great leveller to which time and space, as it were, seem to succumb. Thus the general tendency is to surround death with all the trappings of woe, and with everything calculated to make it seem darker and more terrible.

But the theistic's view of the question is altogether poetic. It realises death as a perfectly natural incident in the course of our life. Recognising the omnipotence of One Who is the sole

Master of the universe, and firmly believing in His love and intelligence these wise men take it to be fate which in the shape of death comes to us all alike, and cannot therefore have in it aught of evil. According to them, death is not something to be dreaded, but only a necessary step in the course of our evolution. It brings no suffering, no fear, but only joy for those who live the true, the unselfish life. They announce that there is no gloomy impenetrable abyss beyond the grave but instead a world of life and light. "Death," according to them, "is no darksome king of terrors," but rather an angel bearing a golden key with which he unlocks for us the door into a higher and fuller life than "this." It is the gate of life—*Mors Janua Vitæ*. On the other side of the grave, as well as on this, they say, prevails the great law of divine justice, and we can trust as implicitly there as here to the action of that law with regard both to ourselves and to those we love.

But however beautiful this view of theism may appear to be, it is not held in precisely the same form by all theists. The Christians, the Hindus, and the Muhammadans have their own peculiar conception of the subject. But none ever dispute the immortality of the soul, though they hold a variety of opinion with regard to the form or shape of its existence. Among the Hindus, as to life after death, one school of philosophers believes in the theory of the transmigration of souls i. e., the theory that a man when he next returns to physical existence is likely to be reborn in the form of an animal if his *Karmas* (acts) in his previous life resembled that of the animal. Western philosophy again teaches us in the theory of Evolution—that man has arisen through the animal kingdom, but has long passed the stage at which it is possible for him to fall back into it. These philosophers hold that the whole world is moving in one mighty graded course of evolution working always in obedience to the law of conservation of energy. However, these are, strictly speaking, questions of the philosophy of religion, and much beyond the scope of the present essay which aims at inculcating moral rather than religious lessons.

Whatever might be the divine purpose in making man subject to the hard and fast laws of mortality, however dark might be the mystery of an after-life through which human intellect can seldom penetrate, the induction that death is a necessary end is, as it were, a scourge to lead men on to the path of virtue to a practical realisation of a good and moral life. The moral obligation which we owe to God becomes, as it may be said, more obligatory and compulsory, as we come to perceive the hard fate which binds us on all sides, and which we must have to experience when our time and turn comes. The shadow of an unfailing end is a living picture of which we cannot for a moment lose sight throughout our existence, and its implications are those which explain life to us and lead us to live it better and worthier. We cannot realise life apart from its antithesis death. Life and death are, as it were, two great links in the chain of the world's evolution. The moral effects, therefore, arising out of a notion of death are of immense importance in forming a man's character and developing his faculties. Since they have all to retire from the world, men have a tendency to feel the momentary pleasurable or painfulness of earthly things, and thus the powerful tend to avoid an abuse of their power, the poor are able to keep from getting extremely hopeless under their poverty. Moreover by showing the frailties and insignificance of human kind, death shows life in its humbler and truer aspect. Life is not a mere dream, but a dream with its hard, substantial laws of duty, of plain living and high thinking.

"The lives of great men all remind us
We can make our life sublime
And departing leave behind us
Foot prints in the sands of time" "

It is from this point of view of death as implying life, of death as merely a stage of preparation to a higher and more perfect one, that poets have sung various melodious songs to rouse the hearts of people to the true state of things. Life requires us to be dutiful to self as well as to others. This is the narrower, but by no

means the ignoble implication of life. In its broader, and as such nobler sense, it requires us to acquire merit towards our fellow-men i. e., to do them more than our duty and thus to pay off in part, if possible, the great debt of obligation we owe to our Father in heaven. I cannot more beautifully close this essay than by recalling that beautiful passage of Browning in Abt Vogler, breathing in every word of it the noblest music and the grandest hopes for mankind :

“There shall never be one lost good ! what ‘was shall
 live as before ;
 The evil is nill, is nought, is silence implying sound ;
 What was good ‘shall be good,, with, for evil, so much
 good more ;
 Or the earth the broken arcs ; in the heaven a perfect
 round
 All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall
 exist ;
 Nor its semblance, but itself ; no beauty, ‘nor good, nor
 power
 Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the
 melodist,
 When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
 The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too
 hard,
 The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
 Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard ;
 Enough that He heard it once ; we shall hear it by
 and by.”

Let every man in the above spirit follow his life.

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