CHAPTER X.

EVENING OF LIFE—LAST THOUGHTS OF GREAT MEN.

Life ! we have been long together,
Through pleasant and through cloudy weather:
'Tis hard to part when friends are dear,
Perhaps 'twill cost a sigh, a tear :
Then steal away, give little warning,
Choose thine own time ;
Say not good-night, but in some brighter clime,
Bid me good-morning.—MRS. BARBAULD.

Nor love thy life, nor hate ; but what thou liv'st,
Live well ; how long or short, permit to Heaven.—MILTON.

All that have died, the Earth's whole race, repose
Where Death collects its treasures, heap on heap ;
O'er each one's busy day the night-shades close ;
Its Actors, Sufferers, Schools, Kings, Armies—sleep.—

Virtute vixit :
Memoria vivit ;
Gloria vivet.

—*Monument in Ste Maria d' Angeli, Rome.*

THE evening of life has many compensations. Youth has its pleasures, and old age its recollections. The evening hours of life may even be the most beautiful, as the finest leaves of the flower are the last to disclose themselves. The fruit grows while the flowers and leaves wither, as the mind ripens while the body appears to decay. Cornaro, at eighty-five, said: "The spirit increases in perfection as the body grows older."

The American Dr. Channing was asked, shortly before his death, what was the happiest period of life. He replied "Sixty," giving his own age. It was said of him by Coleridge, that he had the love of wisdom and the wisdom

of love. His theory of life and human nature was altogether cheerful. It might even be said of him that he was too enthusiastic an optimist, for he did not seem to see the sadness and terribleness of some of the aspects of life.

The grand climateric, at which the mind is supposed gradually to decay, has been fixed at sixty-three; but Fontenelle declared that the happiest part of his life was between his fifty-fifth and seventy-fifth years. Johnson said that Waller, at seventy-two, did not seem to have lost any portion of his poetical power. Buffon, at the age of seventy, said he had as full an enjoyment of life as he had ever before experienced. "The view of the past," he said, "which awakens the regret of old fools, offers to me, on the contrary, the enjoyments of memory, agreeable pictures, precious images, which are worth more than your objects of pleasure; for they are pleasant, these images, and they are pure, for they call up only amiable recollections."

A French moralist has said that the paradise of youth is old age, and that the paradise of old age is youth. How slowly the years seem to pass while we are young. Birthdays come at remote intervals; the paradise of age comes slowly; but as years flow on, birthdays come quicker and quicker. Then we look back at the paradise of youth, and cherish its recollections. Happy is the man who can look back with pleasure at the memory of good deeds and words. Cicero, in his work *De Senectute*, said that old age was a thing to be resisted, yet his own life exhibited an admirable example of a well-spent life—of classical elegance and refinement—so beautifully expressed in his words: *Quiete et pure, et eleganter actæ, ætatis, placida ac lenis senectus.*

The evening of life brings back many old enjoyments, especially the perusal of old and favorite books. To some it brings sports and quiet pastures, angling, planting, gardening, and herborizing. Lord Chesterfield, when quite deaf, quitted the fashionable world, and went to spend the

remainder of his life at his villa on Blackheath, near the avenue still known as Chesterfield's Walk. He amused himself with literature, which he said was the only conversation of the deaf, and the only bond which bound them to society, "I have vegetated all this year," he wrote to a friend in France, when he was about sixty, "without pleasure and without pain; my age and my deafness forbids the former, and my philosophy, or perhaps my temperament guarantees me against the latter. I derive the best part of my amusement from the tranquil pleasures of gardening, as well as from walking and reading; meanwhile waiting for death, which I neither desire nor fear." The *Letters* to his son were published after his death.

Very touching is Richard Baxter's reference to the manner in which he was led to write *The Saint's Rest.* "Whilst I was in health," he says, "I had not the least thought of writing books, or of serving God in any more public way than preaching; but when I was weakened with great bleeding, and left solitary in my chamber at Sir John Cook's in Derbyshire, without any acquaintance but my servant about me, and was sentenced to death by the physicians, I began to contemplate more seriously on the Everlasting Rest, which I apprehended myself to be just on the borders of; and that my thoughts might not scatter too much in my meditation, I began to write something on that subject."

Southey said: "I bid no man beware of being poor as he grows old, but I say to all men, beware of solitariness in age. Rest is the object to be sought." Hence the necessity for students and others seeking to acquire some amusing pursuit, disconnected as far as possible with their ordinary calling. Talleyrand once said to a person who could not play whist: "Pray, have you reflected on the miserable old age that awaits you?" Cavour was a first-rate whist-player, and quite splendid with a good hand.

During the sittings of the Paris Congress, he played every night at the Jockey Club. Metternich also was a great whist player. But there are many men, to whom a game of whist is denied, who can, nevertheless, spend many pleasant hours in the evening of their lives.

Beethoven's greatest consolation in old age was reading Scott's novels, and Homer's *Odyssey.* It was different with the late Dr. Gaisford, Master of Christ Church College. When ill, he asked for some light reading, and one of Scott's novels was handed to him. "No, no," he said, "that's too heavy. Bring me a Greek Dictionary." Sydney Smith said that, when he took to light reading when ill, he resorted to such a book as Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations.*

Even blind men may enjoy the evening of Life. Privation of sight has been one of the greatest obstacles in the way of men of genius. How touchingly Milton bewailed his loss. Bereft of light, blind among enemies, eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves, yet bating not a jot of heart and hope, the blind old man still bore up and steered right onward. Nor was his privation all loss. As the nightingale

> "Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
> Tunes her nocturnal note,"

so Milton sang no less divinely, although his eyes could "find no dawn." Indeed, but for his privation of sight, his *Paradise Lost* might never have been written, as, at the time when he became blind, he was meditating the composition of a History of England.

Great are the compensations of nature. The functions of sense are in some measure vicarious, and those which survive make up by their increased acuteness for those which are lost. When the eye becomes dark, the ear is increasingly alive to the pleasures of sound. The touch becomes more delicate; the fingers are like so many eyes;

the face itself becomes an eye, and sees and feels all over. Cheerfulness and courage in some measure supply the loss; and hence blind men are no more insulated, but sometimes less so, than others. Blindness often soothes and sweetens the temper; whilst, with deafness, it is usually the reverse. The case of Kozlor, the Russian, seemed to be an especially hard one. He was not only blind, but paralyzed in both feet. But his affliction developed in him a deep love of poetry, which he cultivated as a solace during the remainder of his life.

Euler did not lose his sight until after a long expectation of the calamity; nevertheless, after it had been entirely lost, he continued his labors, and his temper was more cheerful than before. His memory became so retentive by increased exercise that he could repeat the whole of the *Æneid*, remembering the words that began and ended on each page. Galileo became quite blind a few years before his death; but he continued his intellectual labors to the last. Dr. Tucker was struck with blindness at the age of sixty-six; but this did not interrupt his studies. His daughter read to him, and even learnt Greek in order that her father might, through her, keep up his intercourse with his favorite authors. He continued to write by means of a machine which he himself invented, and his writing was sufficiently legible to enable his aughter readily to transcribe it.

Even Thierry and Prescott were blind, though they did not become so until advanced years. To pursue historical inquiry the faculty of sight seems to be absolutely necessary. So many books have to be read and consulted from time to time. Yet, with minds originally well stored, and with the willing help of others, both these historians were able to prepare and publish works of great value and importance. While Thierry dictated to an amanuensis, Prescott wrote all his works with his own hand, making

use of the writing-case and stylus invented for the blind.

Among those who became blind comparatively late in life were Delille and La Motte, Montesquieu, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Handel, Jean Paul Richter, Isaac Disraeli,* Jussieu, Rumpf (botanist), Cassini (astronomer), Berard (mathematician), Viscount Cranbourne, and Professor Fawcett. Heinrich Heine was quite blind for eight years before his death, during which period he wrote some of his finest works. Jean Paul, long half-blind, was at length left in total darkness, in the "Orcus of Amaurosis." Yet he was inwardly full of light, and occupied his last years in writing his *Selina*, illustrative of the immortality of the soul, the unfinished MS. of which was carried on his bier to the grave.

Perhaps the most extraordinary of blind men was Lieutenant Holman, R. N.,† the great traveller. He lost his sight at twenty-five, and was under the necessity of leaving the service. He must have sorely felt the loss of sight, for he was possessed by a great spirit of enterprise. But when a sentence of total darkness was pronounced upon him he made up his mind to endure it cheerfully, and to adapt himself as best he could to his new situation. What was he to do? He had a great passion for travel; yet he

* Mr. Disraeli was enabled to pursue his literary studies by the aid of his daughter, which he gratefully records in the preface to his *Miscellanies of Literature* (edition 1840), where he says: "In the midst of my library I am as it were distant from it. My unfinished labors, frustrated designs, remain paralyzed. In a joyous heat I wander no longer through the wide circuit before me. The 'stricken deer' has the sad privilege to weep when he lies down, perhaps no more to course amid those far-distant woods where once he sought to range. . . . Amid this partial darkness I am not left without a distant hope, nor a present consolation; and to HER who has so often lent to me the light of her eyes, the intelligence of her voice, and the careful work of her hand, the author must ever owe 'the debt immense' of paternal gratitude."

† Holman's *Travels* were published by him in six volumes, and he also left a large mass of MSS. behind him, which he was preparing for publication when death terminated his labors.

was blind! Nevertheless, he could but try, and he began to travel. He journeyed first into France, though he did not know a word of the language. While in London he was attended by a servant, yet he set out alone in his travels through Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Australia, all of which countries he visited, relying entirely upon himself. The moral courage, the energy, the self-reliance, and the irrepressible spirit of enterprise in this blind man, render him altogether one of the most remarkable characters in the whole range of biography.

The history of Professor Fawcett, lecturer on political economy, afterwards Member for Brighton, and Secretary to the General Post Office—all of which positions he filled with great talent and energy—has been made the subject of an admirable biography, and therefore need not here be further described. Deafness has not usually excited so much sympathy as blindness; though judging by its effects, it is probably the most difficult privation to endure. While blind men are usually distinguished for the sweetness of their temper, deaf men are often found churlish and morose. This may probably arise from the circumstance that the deaf are shut out from the pleasures of conversation, the chief charm of social intercourse. They sit at a feast in which they cannot participate. They see the pleasures of joyous looks and laughter in those around them, which they cannot share. "The contrast in society," says Sir William Wilde, "between the frown of the partially deaf and the smile of the totally blind is very remarkable. There are, however, bright exceptions to the contrary in persons of superior understanding, and in those who, being completely deaf, are not annoyed by hearing only a portion of the conversation."*

As Handel was afflicted by blindness in his later years, so Beethoven was afflicted by deafness. The latter was

* Sir W. R. Wilde, *The Closing Years of Dean Swift's Life* p. 24.

accustomed to play on the clavier, following the combinations of notes in his ear, while, to the bystanders, many of the pedals as struck by him were mute. When deafness begun to steal upon him in his thirtieth year, he endeavored to conceal his defect from others. He shunned society, "because," said he, "it is impossible for me to say to people 'I am deaf.' Were my art not that of music, deafness would be bad enough; but to a musician it is an atrocious torture." He became more and more isolated, irritable, morbid, and despairing, as his deafness increased, untill the thought of committing suicide entered his mind. "Art," said he, "art alone restrains me. It seems to me impossible to quit the world before I have produced all of which I feel myself to be capable. I must now take Patience for my guide, and constant, I hope, shall my resolution be, to endure until the inexorable fates shall be pleased to cut the thread." It was after this gloomy period of Beethoven's life that he composed all his greatest works —his *Fidelio,* his *Prometheus,* his *Mount of Olives,* and his grand concertos and symphonies. It is even possible that his deafness, by driving his mind in upon itself, and by the solitariness of life to which the infirmity consigned him, might in no small degree tend to evoke and develope the musical powers and energies of the great master.

What chiefly differentiates middle age from old age is that the mind still retains the power of growth and is impressionable to new ideas. But even in old age, Dr. Johnson and James Watt learned new languages, and imbibed new thoughts. Berzelius worked in his laboratory in extreme old age. Many old men retain the vigor of faculty which is the prerogative of middle age. The French proverb says: "Si jeunesse savait, si viellesse pouvait." In middle life and old age we become mellower—more kindly, courteous, and considerate.

Length of years, however, is no test of length of life.

Some live more in twenty years than others in a century. A man's life is to be measured by what he does in it, and what he feels in it. The more he does and the more he feels, the more he lives. Though some have suffered from the troubles of marriage, others have bewailed their single condition; forgetting that if they have not had the joys, they have not experienced the sorrows of wedded life. Every joy, it must be remembered, throws its shadow behind it. Pope wrote to Martha Blount from Twickenham: "The comforts you received from your family put me in mind of what old Fletcher of Saltoun said one day to me: 'Alas, I have nothing to do but to die; I am a poor individual, no creature to wish, or to fear, for my life or death. It is the only reason I have to repent being a single man. Now, I grow old, I am like a tree without a prop, and without young trees to grow round me, for company and defence."*

But if he had none of the joys of children, he had none of the sorrow of losing them by early death. When Warburton lost his son by consumption he said it was losing "half his soul," and from that day his faculties began to decay. So it was with Burke, who lost his son—a young man of rare promise—at an early age. Towards the end of his life, he was reciting to his father with deep feeling the sublime lines from Milton's *Morning Hymn*—

> "His praise, ye winds, that from four quarters blow,
> Blow soft or loud; and wave your tops, ye pines,
> With every plant, in sign of worship, wave."

Just as he pronounced the last word, his strength failed him; the lamp which had flickered up so grandly in its socket was quenched; he fell forward into his father's arms, and died. Burke's grief was terrible; and he did not long survive his son. Burke's last words were the same as those of Johnson and Wordsworth—"God bless you."

* Elwin's *of Edition Pope* p. 380.

We are to a certain extent detached from life by suffering, or by the gentle pressure of sorrow. Some minds have felt the need of sorrow; and when they have not actually experienced it, have invented it. Hence the "worship of Sorrow" by Goethe in his *Werther*, the dejectedness of Rousseau in his *Consolations des Miseres de ma Vie*, the "hungering for eternity" of Coleridge, the melancholy of Chateaubriand in his *Rene*, and the longing of Keats "to ease the burdens of this mystery." Even Luther, with his joyous animal nature, "old, cold, and half-blind," as he described himself to be, struggled against the gloom which oppressed him towards the close of life. "I am indolent, weary, and indifferent," he said; "in other words, old and useless. I have finished my journey, and naught remains but for the Lord to reunite me to my fathers. . . . I am weary of life, if this can be called life."

It is sad to die young, but sadder still to outlive all lives, and drop into the grave which has already swallowed up all life's attractions. To such, death is a better gift than prolongation of life. Even a heathen writer described death as the gate of life; but to the Christian it is the threshold of heaven. Thomas à Kempis said, "Verily the life of a Christian is a cross, yet it is also a guide to Paradise."

There are many who, after taking life pleasantly, depart joyfully and die in peace. Age comes upon us before we are aware, though there are some happy natures that seem never to grow old, but remain old boys and old girls to the last. There is the spring-time, the summer, the autumn, and the winter. All these seasons are full of beauty—the brightness of the early year, the glory of summer, the yield of autumn, and the maturity of winter. Nature constantly renews itself, and there is compensation everywhere. Happiness or misery in old age is but the sediment of a past life. Sydney Smith used to quote with delight the beautiful lines of Waller:

"The soul's dark cottage, batter'd and decay'd,
Lets in new lights through chinks that time has made."

Sydney Smith was one of the most cheerful of men. At seventy-five he wrote: "I am, upon the whole, a happy man: I have found this world an entertaining world, and am thankful to Providence for the part allotted to me in it." Yet he was a man who occasionally suffered much. To one of his correspondents he said that he felt as well as a man could do with three fatal diseases in him.* To the last he could not avoid joking on his troubles. In his last letter to Lady Carlisle, referring to his declining frame, he said: "If you hear of sixteen or eighteen pounds of human flesh moving about, they belong to me. I look as if a curate had been taken out of me."

William Tytler, of Woodhouselee, the historian, enjoyed a peaceful and happy old age. He had a prescription ready for his friends, which would confer the same blessing: it was "short but cheerful meals, music, and a good conscience." Count Nesselrode, when asked how he came to be so vigorous in his old age, replied that he owed it to music and flowers. Charles Lamb, however, knew nothing of music: he said he knew only two tunes; one was, "God save the King," and the other wasn't. Once, at a musical party at Leigh Hunt's, being oppressed with what was to him no better than a prolonged noise, he said, "If one only had a pot of porter, I think one might get through this." The pot was procured, and Lamb weathered the storm.

* In his seventy-first year he wrote to the Countess of Carlisle: "I am pretty well, except gout, asthma, and pains in all the bones and all the flesh of my body. What a very singular disease gout is! It seems as if the stomach fell down into the feet. The smallest deviation from right diet is immediately punished by limping and lameness, and the innocent ankle and blameless instep are tortured for the vices of the nobler organs. The stomach, having found this easy way of getting rid of inconveniences, becomes cruelly despotic, and punishes for the least offence. A plum, a glass of champagne, excess in joy, excess in grief,—any crime, however small,—is sufficient for redness, swelling, spasms, and large shoes."—*Life and Letters*, ii. 433.

Euler's delight in his old age, after he had lost his sight was in the cheerful society of his grandchildren, and his chief relaxation from his severe studies was in teaching them the beginnings of learning. Dr. Robison, like Euler, took great pleasure in the society of his little grandson. "I am infinitely delighted," he wrote to James Watt, "with observing the growth of its little soul, and particularly with the numberless instincts which formerly passed unheeded. I thank the French theorists for more forcibly directing my attention to the finger of God which I discern in every awkward movement and every wayward whim. They are all guardians of his life, and growth and power. I regret that I had not time to make infancy, and the development of its powers, my sole study." Two years later, Dr. Robison was taken away from his little play-fellow.

Dr. Black, the venerable Professor of Chemistry at Edinburgh, a gentle and beautiful spirit, waited patiently for the last stroke of his pulse. At his death, he was sitting in his chair, and passed from life so quietly and peacefully as to leave a cup of milk and water lying unspilled upon his knee. He gave over living at seventy-one. Yet he did not die: he was merely promoted to eternal life.

Equally tranquil was the departure of Dr. Henry, the historian, at the age of seventy-two. He was living in the neighborhood of Stirling, when he wrote to his young friend Sir. Harry Moncrieff, at Edinburgh, and asked him to come out directly. "I have got something to do this week," he said, "I have got to die." Sir Harry went out at once, and found Dr. Henry sinking. Yet he sat up in his chair, conversed, and dozed. One day, he was roused by the clatter of a horse's hoofs in the court below. "Who is that?" asked the invalid. Mrs. Henry looked out, and said, "It's that wearisome body." It was a neighboring minister, famous for never leaving the house of a dying

person when he once got into it. "Keep him out," said the doctor, "don't let the cratur in here!" but "the cratur" was already at the back of the door, and entered the room. The doctor had time to wink at his wife, and pretended to be fast asleep. Sir Harry and Mrs. Henry pointed to the sleeping man, and put their fingers to their lips. The "cratur" sat down and waited long; he tried to speak, but was forbidden by gesture. At last he was waved out of the room. When the clatter of his horse's hoofs were heard in the court below, and died off in the distance, the doctor had a hearty laugh. He died that night.

Some men have even aspired after further improvement to the very close of their life. Nicholas Poussin, the artist, said, "As I grow old, I feel myself more and more inflamed with the desire of surpassing myself, and of reaching the highest perfection." In like manner, Gainsborough, after fifty years' application to painting, said, "I am just *beginning* to do something, and my life is going." On his deathbed he said, "We are all going to Heaven, and Vandyke is of the party." * Wren's delight in his old age, was in being carried once a year to see his great work. St. Paul's Cathedral.

During his last years, Cervantes was thrown into gaol in Madrid, and while there wrote *Don Quixote*. Towards the end he was very poor, and had not even the aid of paper. He had recourse to little scraps of leather, on which he scrawled his thoughts. When a Spanish Don was urged to help him, he replied, "Heaven forbid that his necessities should be relieved; it is his poverty that makes the world rich." As if hunger were the true nurse of genius! Cervantes eventually died of dropsy. During the progress of the disease, he prepared for the press his last work, *Persiles y Sigismunda*.

* Wm. Jackson, *The Four Ages*,

But perhaps the death of Peter Bayle (of the Dictionary) was the most thoroughly literary one on record. He woke up one morning, inspected a "proof" while his housekeeper lighted the fire to boil the coffee, but when the housekeeper looked round, her clear-eyed master was dead. Death had inspected his "proofs," and blotted Peter out. Dugald Stewart, during the last days of his life, corrected the proofs of the last complete edition of his works. The last recorded intellectual act of Sir William Thomson, of Edinburgh, was in correcting the proofs of an article on the poet Heine. Shortly after, he died, his last words being, "Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me."

Sir Richard Steele passed the evening of his life in a very pleasant manner. He had retired from public life in London, with shaken health and impaired fortunes, and went to reside at Llangunnor, near Caermarthen. There he spent the last few years of his life amidst the murmur of water, the whisper of breezes, and the singing of birds, still enjoying any new sense of pleasure. One of his biographers says of him, "I was told that he retained his cheerful sweetness of temper to the last, and would often be carried out of a summer evening, when the country lads and lasses were assembled at their rural sports, and with a pencil give an order on his agent, the mercer, for a new gown to the best dancer."

Adam Smith, in the evening of his life, found great delight in perusing the tragedies of Euripides and Racine. He had a fine library, and considered himself a beau only in his books. One of his principal desires, as he lay on his deathbed, was, that eighteen folio volumes of his speculations, should be destroyed. It was a fine trait of Miss Inchbald, that she twice refused £1000 for the Memoirs of her Life, containing four volumes in all. Though straitened in means, she would not barter her talents for money. Thinking that the publication of the