

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST.

When darkness gathers over all,
And the last tottering pillars fall,
Take the poor dust Thy mercy warms
And mould it into heavenly forms.

O. WENDELL HOLMES.

I hear a voice you cannot hear,
Which says I must not stay;
I see a hand you cannot see,
Which beckons me away.

TICKELL.

O life! O death! O world! O time!
O grave, where all things flow!
'Tis yours to make our lot sublime,
With your great weight of woe.

This is our life, while we enjoy it. We lose it like the sun, which flies swifter than an arrow; and yet no man perceives that it moves. . . . Is not earth turned to earth; and shall not our sun set like theirs when the night comes?—HENRY SMITH.

THE young man enters life with joy and enthusiasm. The world lies all enamelled before him, as a distant prospect sun-gilt. But time quickly cools his enthusiasm. He cannot carry the freshness of the morning through the day and into the night. Youth passes, age matures, and at length he must resign himself to growing old.

But the end is the result of his past life. Words and deeds are irrevocable. They mix themselves up with his character, and descend to futurity. The past is ever present with us. "Every sin," says Jeremy Taylor, "smiles in the first address, and carries light in the face and honey on the

lip." When life matures, and the evil-doer ceases not from his ways, he can only look forward to old age with fear and despair.

But good principles, on the other hand, form a suit of armor which no weapon can penetrate. "True religion," says Cecil, "is the life, health, and education of the soul; and whoever truly possesses it is strengthened with peculiar encouragement for every good word and work."

Yet we must all go away; and the place that knew us shall know us no more. The invisible messenger is always at hand—"the messenger," says Carlyle, "which overtakes alike the busy and the idle, which arrests man in the midst of his pleasures or occupations, and changes his countenance and sends him away." "Poor Edward," said Balzac, "has been stopped in the grooves of life. He has begun to send his equipages and jockeys on an embassy to the greatest sovereign in the sublunary world—Death."

It comes to all. We each day dig our graves with our teeth. The hour-glass is the emblem of life. It wanes low, to the inevitable last grain, and then there is silence—death. Even the monarch walks over the tombs of his forefathers to be crowned; and is afterward taken over them to his grave.

When Wilkie was in the Escorial, looking at Titian's famous picture of the Last Supper, an old Jeronimite said to him, "I have sat daily in sight of that picture for now nearly threescore years. During that time my companions have dropped off, one after another—all who were my seniors, all who were my contemporaries, and many, or most of those who were younger than myself. More than one generation has passed away, and there the figures in the picture have remained unchanged! I look at them till I sometimes think that they are the realities, and we are but shadows." And yet the time came when the old monk himself was taken away.

The old men must give way to the young, and these too for men who are younger than themselves. When time has tugged at us long, we cease to do more than vegetate; we become a burden to ourselves and to others, and, what

is worst of all, we get a longing for a still longer life. "When I look at many old men around me," said Perthes, "I am reminded of Frederick the Great's expostulation with his grenadiers, who demurred at going to certain death, 'What, you dogs! would ye go on living forever?'"*

The great Cyrus had placed upon his tomb these words: "Oh, man! whosoever thou art, and whencesoever thou comest (for come I know thou wilt), I am Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire; envy me not the little earth that covers my body." Alexander the Great visited the tomb, and was much affected by the inscription, which placed before him the uncertainty and vicissitude of earthly things. The tomb was broken open, and Alexander caused the author of the sacrilege to be put to death.

The only wise thing recorded of Xerxes was his reflection on the sight of his army of over a million of men in arms—that not one of that immense multitude would survive a hundred years. The thought seemed to be a momentary gleam of true light and feeling.†

Pericles, at the last moment of his life, said that while those about him were commending him for things that others might have done as well as himself, they took no notice of the greatest and most honorable part of his character—"that no Athenian, through his means, ever went into mourning."

Despair seizes the minds of men whose desires are boundless, and who see at last a limit set to their ambition. Alexander cried because there were no more kingdoms to conquer. It was the same with Mahmoud, the Ghiznevide, the first Mohammedan conqueror of India. When he felt himself dying he caused all his treasures of gold and jewels to be displayed before him. When he surveyed them he wept like a child. "Alas!" said he, "what dangers, what fatigues of body and mind, have I endured for the sake of acquiring those treasures, and what cares in preserving them! And now I am about to die and leave them!" He was interred

* "Life of Perthes," ii. 473.

† For the death of Ninus, the great Assyrian monarch, see *Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Dying,"* chap. i. sec. ii.

in his palace, where his unhappy ghost was afterward believed to wander.

Thus the poor Manchester manufacturer, who had accumulated an immense fortune, had a pile of new sovereigns brought to him and laid upon the coverlet of his bed. He gloated over and fondled them, feasted his eyes upon them, filled his hands with them, and let them fall in a stream upon each other, thus making music in his ears. When he died he was no richer than the beggar at his door.

The death of Charles IX. of France was a terrible one. He had authorized the massacre of the Huguenots on the fearful night of St. Bartholomew, and was haunted by its horrors during his dying moments. "I know not how it is," he said to his surgeon, Ambrose Pare, "but for the last few days I feel as in a fever. My mind and body are both disturbed. Every moment, whether I am asleep or awake, visions of murdered corpses, covered with blood and hideous to the sight, haunt me. Oh, I wish I had spared the innocent and the imbecile?" He died two years after the massacre, and to the last moment the horrors of the day of St. Bartholomew were present without ceasing to his mind.

Sydney Smith once visited Castle Howard, and stood with Sir Samuel Romilly on the steps of the portico. He gazed around on the beautiful landscape before him, and then at the family mausoleum which was in sight. After a long pause he exclaimed, lifting up his arms, "Ah! these are the things that make death terrible."

When Cardinal Mazarine was told that he had only two months to live he paced along his beautiful galleries, filled with exquisite works of art, and exclaimed, "I must quit all that. What pains I have had in acquiring all these things. And yet I must see them no more!" Brienne approached, and the Cardinal took his arm, saying, "I am very feeble; I cannot see more." And yet he returned to his tribulations. "Do you see, my friend, that beautiful picture of Corregio, and, again, that Venus of Titian, and that incomparable picture of Annibale Carracci? Ah! my poor friend, I must quit all that. Adieu, dear paintings that I have loved so much, and that have cost me so dear!"*

* St. Beuve's "Causeries du Lundi," ii. 249.

But there are worse things than death. That is not the greatest calamity that can befall a man. Death levels, yet ennobles. Love is greater than death. Duty fulfilled makes death restful; dishonor makes death terrible. "I bless the Lord," said Sir Harry Vane, before his execution on Tower Hill, "that I have not deserted the righteous cause for which I suffer!" When Sir Walter Raleigh was laid on the block he was told by the executioner to lie with his head toward the east. "No matter how the head lies," was his reply, "so that the heart be right."

Once when a great marshal was about to die, those about his bedside spoke to him of his victories, and the number of colors which he had taken from the enemy. "Ah!" said the old warrior, "how little avail all the actions which you call 'glorious!' All these are not worth one single cup of cold water given for the love of God."

Sir John Moore was struck down on the field of Corunna, and the doctor arrived to his help. "No, no!" he said. "You cannot be of use to me; go to the soldiers, to whom you may be useful." The last words that Nelson said were, "Thank God, I have done my duty, I have done my duty!" "My dear," said Sir Walter Scott to his son on his death-bed, "be a good man; be virtuous, be religious, be a good man. Nothing else can give you comfort when you come to lie here." "Live well!" said the dying Samuel Johnson.

Kant died at eighty. He retained his powers almost to the last. During his illness he spoke much of his approaching end. "I do not fear death," he said, "for I know how to die. I assure you that if I knew this night were to be my last, I would raise my hands and say, 'God be praised!' The case would be very different if I had ever caused the misery of any of my fellow-creatures."

Kant once said, "Take from man Hope and Sleep, and you make him the most wretched being on the earth. We then feel that life's weary load is more than our weak nature can abide, and are only cheered onward in the toiling ascent of Pisgah by the great hope of yet beholding the promised land."

We have only one way into life, and a thousand ways out

of it. Birth and death are but the circling of life in itself. God gives us our being, and gives us the custody of the keys of life. We can do, and labor, and love our fellow-creatures, and do our duty to them. "The way to judge of religion," says Jeremy Taylor, "is by doing our duty. Religion is rather a divine life than a divine knowledge. In heaven, indeed, we must first see, and then love; but here, on earth, we must first love, and love will open our eyes as well as our hearts, and we shall then see and perceive and understand."

If we would face the future, we must work on courageously from day to day. It is in the steadfast hope of an existence after death, where tears shall be wiped from every eye, that we are enabled to live through the sorrows and troubles of this life. A man's true wealth hereafter is the good he does in this world to his fellow-creatures. When he dies people will say, "What property has he left?" But the angels who examine him will ask, "What good deeds hast thou sent before thee?"

To everything under the sun there is a last. The last line of a book, the last sermon, the last speech, the last act of a life, the last words at death. "Bring my soul out of prison, that I may give thanks unto Thy name," were the last words of St. Francis of Assisi. *Hic jacet* is the universal epitaph. Then the secrets of all hearts shall be finally revealed—at the last day.

"Even such is Time, which takes in trust
Our Youth, our joys, and all we have,
And pays us naught but Age and Dust,
When in the dark and silent grave,
When we have wandered all our ways,
Shuts up the story of our days,
And from which grave and earth and dust,
The Lord shall raise me up, I trust."



