

## A CHRISTMAS SERMON.

The following article is one of the latest productions of the eminent writer, Robert Louis Stevenson, who died a few weeks ago.

By the time this paper appears I shall have been talking for twelve months; and it is thought I should take my leave in a formal and seasonable manner. Valedictory eloquence is rare, and death-bed sayings have not often hit the mark of the occasion. Charles II., wit and skeptic, a man whose life had been one long lesson in human incredulity, an easy-going comrade, a maneuvering king, remembered and embodied all his wit and scepticism along with more than his usual good humor in the "I'm afraid, gentlemen, I am unconscionable time a-dying."

I.—An unconscionable time a-dying. There is the picture ("I am afraid, gentlemen") of your life and of mine. The sands run out and the hours are "numbered and imputed," and the days go by; and when the last of these finds us we have been a long time dying, and what else? The very length is something, if we reach that hour of separation undishonored; and to have lived at all is doubtless (in a soldierly expression) to have served. There is a tale in Tacitus of how the veterans mutinied in the German wilderness; of how they mobbed Germanicus, clamoring to go home, and of how, seizing their General's hand, these old, war-worn exiles passed his finger along their toothless gums. Sunt lacrymæ rerum, this was the most eloquent of the songs of Simeon. And when a man has lived to a fair age he bears his marks of service. He may have never been remarked upon the breach at the head of the army; at least he shall have lost his teeth on the camp bread.

The idealism of serious people in this age of ours is of a noble character. It never seems to them that they have served enough; they have a fine impatience of their virtues. It were perhaps more modest to be singly thankful that we are no worse. It is not only our enemies, those desperate characters—it is we ourselves who know not what we do. Thence springs the glimmering hope that perhaps we do better than we think; that to scramble through this random business with hands reasonably clean, to have played the part of a man or woman with some reasonable fulness; to have often resisted the diabolic, and, at the end, to be still resisting it, is for the poor human soldier to have done right well. To ask to see some fruit of our endeavor is but a transcendental way of serving for reward; and what we take to be contempt of self is only greed of hire.

And, again if we require so much of ourselves, shall we not require much of others? If we do not genially judge our own deficiencies, is it not to be feared that we shall be even stern to the trespasses of others? And he who (looking back upon his own life) can see no more than that he has been unconscionably long a-dying, will he not be tempted to think his neighbor unconscionably long of getting hanged? It is probable that nearly all who think of conduct at all, think of it too much; it is certain we all think too much of sin. We are not damned for doing wrong, but for not doing right. Christ would never hear of negative morality; thou shalt, was ever His word with which he superseded thou shalt not. To make our idea of morality centre on forbidden acts is to defile the imagination and to introduce into our judgment of our fellow-men a secret element of gusto. If a thing is wrong for us, we should not dwell upon the thought of it, or we shall soon dwell upon it with inverted pleasure. If we cannot drive it from our minds, one thing of two, either our creed is in the wrong and we must more indulgently remodel it, or else, if our morality is in the right, we are criminal lunatics, and should place our persons in restraint. A mark of such unwholesomely divided minds is the passion for interference with others. The Fox without the tail was of this breed, but had (if his biographer is to be trusted) a certain antique civility now out of date. A man may have a flaw, a weakness, that unfits him for the duties of life, that spoils his temper, that threatens his integrity, or that betrays him into cruelty. It has to be conquered, but it must never be suffered to engross his thoughts. The true duties lie all upon the farther side, and must be attended to with a whole mind so soon as this preliminary clearing of the decks has been effected. In order that he may be kind and honest, it may be needful he become a total abstainer; let him become so then, and the next day let him forget the circumstance. Trying to be kind and honest will require all his thoughts. A mortified appetite is never a wise companion; in so far as he has had to mortify an appetite, he will still be the worse man, and of such an one a great deal of cheerfulness will be required in judging life, and a great deal of humility in judging others.

It may be argued again that dissatisfaction with our life endeavor springs in some degree from dullness. We require higher tasks because we do not recognize the height of those we have. Trying to be kind and honest seems an affair too simple and too inconsequential for gentlemen of our heroic mould; we had rather set ourselves to something

bold, arduous and conclusive; we had rather found a schism or suppress a heresy, cut off a hand or mortify an appetite. But the task before us, which is to co-endure with our existence is rather one of microscopic fineness, and the heroism required is that of patience. There is no cutting of the Gordian knots of life; each must be similarly unravelled. To be honest, to be kind, to earn a little and to spend a little less, to make upon the whole a family happier for his presence, to renounce when that shall be necessary, and not be embittered, to keep a few friends, but these without capitulation—above all, on the same grim condition, to keep friends with himself—here is a task for all that a man has of fortitude and delicacy. He has an ambitious soul who would ask more; he has a hopeful spirit who should look on such an enterprise to be successful. There is, indeed, one element in human destiny that not blindness itself can controvert; whatever else we are intended to do, we are not intended to succeed; failure is the fate allotted. It is so in every art and study; it is so above all in the continent art of living well. Here is a pleasant thought for the year's end or for the end of life; only self-deception will be satisfied, and there need be no despair for the despairer.

But Christmas is not only the mill-mark of another year, moving us to thoughts of self-examination; it is a season from all its associations, whether domestic or religious, suggesting thoughts of joy. A man dissatisfied with his endeavors is a man tempted to sadness. And in the midst of the winter when his life runs lowest, and he is reminded of the empty chairs of his beloved, it is well he should be condemned to this fashion of the smiling face. Noble disappointment, noble self-denial are not to be admired, not even to be pardoned if they bring bitterness. It is one thing to enter the kingdom of heaven maim; another to maim yourself and stay without. And the kingdom of heaven is of the childlike, of those who are easy to please, who love and give pleasure. Mighty men of their hands, the smiths and the builders and the judges, have lived long and done sternly, and yet preserved this lovely character, and among our carpet interests and two-penny concerns the shame were indelible if we should lose it. Gentleness and cheerfulness, these come from all mortality. They are the perfect duties, and it is the trouble with moral men that they have neither one nor the other. It was the moral man, the Pharisee, whom Christ could not away with. If your morals make you dreary depend upon it you are wrong. I do not say "give them up," for they may be all you have, but conceal them like a vice lest they should spoil the lives of better and simpler people.

A strange temptation attends upon man, to keep his eye on pleasures, even when he will not share in them; to aim all his morals against them. This very year a lady (singular iconoclast!) proclaimed a crusade against dolls, and the racy sermon against lust is a feature of the age. I venture to call such moralists insincere. At any excess or perversion of a natural appetite, their lyre sounds of itself like relishing denunciations, but for all displays of the truly diabolical—envy, malice, the mean lie, the mean silence, the culminating truth, the backbiter, the petty tyrant, the peevish prisoner of family life—their standard is quite different. These are wrong, they admit, yet somehow not so wrong. There is no zeal in their assault on them, no secret element of gusto warms up the sermon. It is for things not wrong in themselves that they reserve the choicest of their indignation. A man may naturally disclaim all moral kinship with the Rev. Mr. Zola or the hobgoblin old lady of the dolls, for these are gross and naked instances, and yet in each of us some similar element resides. The sight of a pleasure in which we cannot or else will not share moves us to a particular impatience. It may be because we are envious, or because we are sad, or because we dislike noise and romping—being so refined, or because so philosophic we have an ever-weighting sense of life's gravity. At least, as we go on in years, we are all tempted to frown upon our neighbor's pleasures. People are nowadays so fond of resisting temptations, here is one to be resisted. They are fond of self denial; here is a propensity that cannot be too preemptorily denied. There is an idea abroad among moral people that they should make their neighbors good. One person I have to make good—myself. But my duty to my neighbor is much more nearly expressed by saying that I have to make him happy—if I may.

Happiness and goodness, according to canting moralists, stand in the relation of effect and cause. There was never anything less proved or less probable. Our happiness is never in our own hands; we inherit our constitutions; we stand buffet among our friends and enemies; we may be so built as to feel a sneer or an aspersions with unusual keenness, and so circumstanced as to be unusually exposed to them; we may have nerves very sensitive to pain, and be afflicted with a disease very painful. Virtue will not help us, and it is not meant to help us. It is not even its own reward, except for the self-centred and—I had almost said—the unamiable. No man can pacify his conscience; if quiet be what he want he shall do better to

let that organ perish from disease. And to void the penalties of the law and the minor capitis diminutio of social ostracism, is an affair of wisdom—of cunning, if you will—and not of virtue.

In his own life, then, a man is not to expect happiness, only to profit by it gladly when it shall arise; he is on duty here, he knows not how or why, and does not need to know; he knows not for what hire, and must not ask. Somehow or other, though he cannot tell what will do it, he must try to give happiness to others. And, no doubt, there comes in here a frequent clash of duties. How far is he to make his neighbor happy? How far must he respect that smiling face, so easy to cloud, so hard to brighten again? And how far, on the other side, is he bound to be his brother's keeper and the prophet of his morality? How far must he resent evil?

The difficulty is that we have little guidance, Christ's sayings on the point being hard to reconcile with each other, and (the most of them) hard to accept. But the truth of His teaching would seem to be this: in our own person and fortune we should be ready to accept and to pardon all; it is our cheek we are to turn, our coat that we are to give away to the man who has taken our cloak. But when another's face is buffeted, perhaps a little of the lion will become us best. That we are to suffer others to be injured and stand by is not conceivable, and surely not desirable. Revenge, says Bacon, is a kind of wild justice; its judgments at least are delivered by an insane judge, and in our own quarrel we can see nothing truly and can do nothing wisely. But in the quarrel of our neighbor let us be more bold. One person's happiness is as sacred as another's. When we cannot defend both let us defend one with a stout heart. It is only in so far as we are doing this, that we have any right to interfere. The defence of B is our only ground of action against A. A has as good a right to go to the devil as we have to go to glory, and neither knows what he does.

The truth is that all these interventions and denunciations, and militant mongerings of moral half truths, though they be sometimes needful, though they are often enjoyable, do yet belong to an inferior grade of duties. Ill temper and envy and revenge find here an arsenal of pious disguises. With a little more patience and a little less temper, a quieter and wiser method might be found in almost every case; and the knot that we cut by some fine heady quarrelsome in private life, or, in public affairs, by some denunciatory act against what we are pleased to call our neighbor's vices, might yet have been unwoven by the hand of sympathy.

To look back upon the past year, and see how little we have striven, and to what small purpose, and how often we have been cowardly and hung back, or temperamental and rushed unwisely in; and how every day and all day long we have transgressed the law of kindness; it may seem a paradox, but in the bitterness of these discoveries a certain consolation resides. Life is not designed to minister to a man's vanity. He goes upon his long business, most of the time with a hanging head, and all the time like a blind child. Full of rewards and pleasures as it is; so that to see the day break, or the moon rise, or to meet a friend, or to hear the dinner call when he is hungry, fills him with surprising joys—this world is yet for him no abiding city. Friendships fall through, health fails, weariness assails him; year after year he must thumb the hardly varying record of his own weakness and folly. It is a friendly process of detachment. When the time comes that he should go, there need be few illusions left about himself. Here lies one who meant well, tried a little, failed much—surely that may be his epitaph, of which he need not be ashamed. Nor will he complain at the summons which calls a defeated soldier from the field; defeated, aye, if he were Paul or Marcus Aurelius—but, if there is still one inch of fight in his old spirit, undishonored. The faith which sustained him in his lifelong blunders and lifelong disappointment will scarce even be required in this last formality of laying down his arms. Give him a march with his old bones; there, out of the glorious sun-colored earth, out of the day and the dust and the ecstasy—there goes another Faithful Failure! From a recent book of verse, where there is more than one such beautiful and manly poem, I take this memorial piece. It says better than I can what I love to think. Let it be our parting word:—

A late lark twitters in the quiet skies,  
And from the west,  
Where the sun, his day's work ended,  
Lingers as in content,  
There falls on the old grey city  
An influence luminous and serene,  
A shining peace.

The smoke ascends  
In a rosy and golden haze. The spires  
Shine, and are changed. In the valley  
Shadows rise. The lark sings on. The sun  
Closes his benediction,  
Sinks, and the darkening air  
Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night,  
Night, with her train of stars,  
And her great gift of sleep.

So be my passing!  
My task accomplished, and the long day done,  
My wages taken, and in my heart  
Some late lark singing,  
Let me be gathered to the quiet west,  
The sundown, splendid and serene,  
Death.

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