

## Literature, &amp;c.

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## THE END OF THE WORLD.

A VISION.

By James K. Paulding.

HAPPENING, the other day, to meet with an account of a mighty gathering of the disciples of a certain great prophet, who, I believe, has, in spite of the proverb, rather more honour in his own country than any other country, I fell upon a train of reflections on the probability of this world to come to an end the first of April next, as predicted by that venerable seer. That it will come to an end, sometime or other, is certain, for nothing created can last forever; and that this event may happen to-morrow, is, for aught we know, just as likely as that it will take place an hundred or a thousand years hence. The precise hour is, however, wisely hidden from all but the eyes of our inspired prophet, although, for the credit of the prediction, I could wish it had been fixed for some other day than that so specially consecrated to making fools.

It appeared to me, however, on due consideration, that there were startling indications that this world of ours was pretty well worn threadbare, and that it was high time to lay it aside, or get rid of it altogether, by a summary process, like the Bankrupt Law. Nor am I alone, among very discreet reflecting persons, in this opinion. I was lately conversing with an old gentleman of great experience and sagacity, who has predicted several hard winters, and who assured me he did not see how it was possible for this world to last much longer. "In the first place," said he, "it has grown a great deal too wise to be honest, and common sense, like a specie currency, becomes the most uncommon of all commodities. Now I maintain that, without the ballast of common sense, the world must inevitably turn upside down, or, at least fall on its beam ends, and all the passengers fall overboard. In the second place, it is perfectly apparent that the balance-wheel which regulates the machine, and keeps all its functions in equilibrium, is almost worn out, if not entirely destroyed. There is now no medium in anything. The love of money has become a raging passion, a mania equally destructive to morals and happiness. So with every pursuit and passion of our nature. Every man is 'like a beggar on horseback,' and the old proverb will tell where he rides. All spur away, until they break down, ride over a precipice, or tumble into the mire. If a man, as every man does now-a-days, pines for riches, instead of seeking for them in the good old-fashioned way of industry, prudence and economy, he plunges heels over head in mad, extravagant and visionary schemes, that lead inevitably, not only to his own ruin, but that of others, and in all probability, in the end, leave him as destitute of destitute of character as of fortune. Or if he is smitten with a desire to benefit his fellow citizens, he carries his philanthropy into the camp of the enemy, that is, to the opposite extreme of vice. His sympathies for one class of human suffering entirely shut his eyes and his heart to the claims and rights of others, and he would sacrifice the world to an atom. His pity for the guilty degenerates into the encouragement of crime, and instead of an avenger he becomes an accomplice. No man, it would seem, in this most enlightened of all ages, appears to be aware of what is irrefragably true, that an honest abhorrence of guilt is one of the most powerful preservations of human virtue; and that one of the most effectual modes of engendering vice in our own hearts, is to accustom ourselves to view it merely as an object of pity and forgiveness. It seems to be a growing opinion, that the punishment of crime is an usurpation of society, a despotic usurpation of power over individuals, and, in short, 'a relic of the dark ages.'

My excellent old friend is a great talker when he gets on a favorite subject—though he rails by the hour at members of Congress for their long speeches—and proceeded, after stopping to take breath as follows:—'There are other pregnant indications of this world being on its last legs, in the fashionable cant—so my friend called it, most irreverently—of ascribing almost all the great conservative principles of the social state to 'the dark ages.' The laws, indispensable to the security of property, the restraint of imprudence and extravagant, the safety of persons, and the punishment of their transgressors—those laws, in short, that constitute the great pillars of society, and without which barbarity and violence would again overrun the world, are, forsooth, traced by the advocates of 'progress' to those very dark ages, whose ignorance and barbarism they contributed more than all other causes to dissipate and destroy. An honest man who resorts to those laws which are founded in the first principles of justice, for the recovery of that which is necessary to his comfort, perhaps his very existence, or for the purpose of punishing some profligate spendthrift for defrauding him, is now denounced by philanthropic legislators, and mawkish moralists, as a dealer in human flesh, a Shylock demanding his pound of flesh, and whetting his knife for performing the sacrifice. The murderer—the cool, premeditated murderer—is delicately denominated 'an unfortunate man,' lest we should wound his fine feelings. Our sympathies are invoked when he is called upon to pay the penalty of his crime, while the poor victims, living and dead, are left, the one without pity, the other without relief.

'Not only this,' continued the worthy old gentleman, who gradually waxed warmer and warmer as he proceeded—'not only this, but as

if to give the last most unequivocal evidence of dotage, we have become puffed up with the idea of this being the most enlightened of all the ages of the world, for no other reason, that I perceive, than that we are become very great mechanics, and have, in consequence of the wonderful perfection to which machinery has been brought, depreciated the value of human labor, until it has become insufficient for human support, and beggared ourselves and our posterity, in making canals for frogs to spawn in, and railroads from interminable forests to flourishing towns that never had existence. It is perfectly evident to me, that matters are speedily coming to a crisis, and that a world, in which there is no other pursuit but money, where all sympathy is monopolized by guilt, and where common sense and common honesty are considered as relics of the dark ages, cannot last much longer, unless,' added he, with a peculiar expression of his eye, 'unless Congress takes it in hand, and brings about a radical reform, by speechification. The truth is, it owes so much more than it can pay, that the sooner it winds up its concerns the better.'

Saying this, my worthy and excellent friend, after predicting a hard winter, left me to cogitate alone in my old arm chair, very much inclined to a nap, as I generally am after listening to a long harangue. It was in a quiet back room, where I could see nothing but the smoke of my opposite neighbour's chimney; nothing disturbed me but a fly, which, notwithstanding the world was wide enough for us both, I should have utterly exterminated, if I could; and I continued to ponder over the subject, till, by degrees, sleep overpowered me, and the following vision passed over my bewildered brain.

Methought the eve of the first of April had come, and with it every indication that the prediction of the prophet was about to be fulfilled. The waters of the rivers, brooks and springs became gradually warmer and warmer, until some of them began to boil; hot currents of air issued from the fissures of the earth, whose surface became so heated that the bare-footed urchins rather danced than walked upon it; a thick, dun-colored vapor, by degrees, involved the world from the horizon to the skies, and there prevailed a dead, oppressive calm, without a single stirring breath of air. The earth became, as it were, one vast heated oven. The air was dry and parching, the turkeys lay sprawling on their breasts, with expanded wings; the dogs strolled wistfully around, seeking some cool retreat, panting and lolling out their tongues; the little birds hid themselves in the recesses of the woods, and ceased to sing; the leaves of the trees and flowers wilted and shrivelled up under the excessive heat of the burning sun—and the world ceased to revolve, either from a suspension of the laws of nature, or for fear of dissolving in a profuse perspiration.

Other fearful auguries proclaimed that the hour had come. The sun was like a red ball of living fire; the whole firmament rocked and trembled, as if panting with the throes of suffocation; ever and anon, long flashes of zig-zag lightning shot athwart the heavens in dead silence, for no thunder followed; and all nature, rational and irrational, animate and inanimate, seemed awaiting in death-like silence the hour of their final dissolution, as predicted by the prophet.

Methought I wandered about in that unhappy and distracted state of mind which generally ensues when we are haunted by some dim, half visible spectre of undefined misery, whose presence we feel, but whose persecutions we cannot avoid. It seemed that I strolled to the river side, in the hope of inhaling the cool, refreshing breezes from its bosom, but it sent forth nothing but scalding vapor, like that from a steam engine. The fishes lay sprawling and panting, and dying on its surface; and a hungry hawk, that had plunged down for his prey, being exhausted by the consuming heat, lay fluttering helplessly on the waters. From the mountains of the opposite shore, columns of blood-red smoke and flashes of sulphurous fire issued with an angry roaring vehemency; and in some of the deep fissures of the rocks, methought I could see the raging fires, as through the bars of a furnace. Then came rolling out of the bowels of the earth torrents of liquid flame; then came on the dread struggle of the rebel elements, released from the guiding hand of their great Master. The dissolving earth rushed into the waters; a noise, like the hissing of millions of serpents, succeeded, and when I looked again the river was dry.

I fled from the appalling spectacle, and sought the city, where all was dismay and confusion. Some were shrieking and tearing their hair, in guilty apprehension of the horrors of death, and the sufferings of the world to come. Others sat in mute despair, awaiting in dumb insensibility the fate of all the rest of their race; while others, impelled by the instinct of self-preservation, and forgetful of the inevitable doom that awaited them, were devising various expedients for escaping, and securing their most valuable articles about their persons. A little love-sick maiden had hung the picture of her lover about her snowy neck; an anxious mother sat weeping and wringing her hands by the side of a cradle, where lay a little laughing cherub playing with a kitten; while another was rushing madly about, with a child in her arms, which she had squeezed to death in her convulsive writhings. Thousands of scenes like these occurred all around, but I delight not to dwell on horrors, and will proceed to state what I saw of the exhibitions of the various modes of grief, disappointment and despair, which served to convince me that the ruling passion will struggle in the last agonies of existence, and triumph at the moment of the dissolution of nature itself.

In the course of my wanderings, methought I encountered the celebrated Fire-King, who was sitting at home, quietly smoking his cigar, and calculating that being the destined survivor

of all his race, he would succeed to an immense landed estate, and become lord proprietor of the whole earth. Having agreed upon the terms, he furnished me with an antidote against the heat of the most raging anthracite furnace, and being now assured of safety, I made my observations with more coolness and precision. Being rather of a prying disposition, I conceived that as every thing was in a state of utter confusion, the doors and windows all open, and no police officers on duty, there was no occasion to stand upon ceremony.

I accordingly made my way into the most private recesses of various habitations, where I saw many things which I would not disclose, were it not that all this is nothing but a dream. Entering a handsome house, rather splendidly furnished, I saw an old man of upwards of fourscore, who was bitterly complaining of being thus suddenly cut off, without time to make his will, and repent of his sins; while an elderly woman, whom I took to be one of Job's comforters, was upbraiding him for not taking her advice, and attending to these matters long ago. In another miserable house, without furniture, and destitute of every comfort of life, I discovered a shrivelled, cadaverous spectre, hugging a bag of gold, and lamenting the hardship of being called away just a day before the interest became payable on his bank stocks. I met in another place a speculator, with the perspiration rolling down his face in torrents, who was calculating the immense profits he might have made if he had only foreseen this sudden catastrophe. A little farther on, I saw a glutton devouring a pair of canvass backs, and heard him at intervals mumbling to himself—'They shan't cheat me of my dinner.' The next person I particularly noticed, was a staunch believer in 'progress,' who was terribly out of humor that the world should be destroyed just as it was on the high road to perfectibility. He had an essay in his hand, which he was rolling up to enclose in a bottle, hermetically sealed, in the hope that it might float down to posterity, and make him immortal, forgetting, as I supposed, that the world was now about to perish by fire, and not by water. In the course of my farther peregrinations, I fell in with a father, very busy in making a will, dividing his property among his children; and another disinheriting his son for marrying against his wishes. A usurer was lamenting that he was not aware of what was coming, as he would certainly have borrowed a good round sum, and thus escaped paying the interest. A worthy dealer in political haberdashery, who had been seeking office, I believe, ever since the flood, was exclaiming against fate for casting him off, now that he had actually received a promise of succeeding a gentleman who was only five years younger than himself, immediately on his death. This example, by the way, brought to my recollection a circumstance that actually happened in real life, and within my own knowledge, where an old man of upwards of threecore and ten actually hanged himself on the marriage of his daughter, to whose fortune he looked forward to becoming heir, provided she died without issue. It is somewhat singular that people always calculate on outliving those by whose deaths they expect to be benefited.

In the course of my peregrinations, I encountered some of the disciples of the prophet, who one might have supposed, would have been prepared for the event they had so long confidently anticipated. But it seemed they were as much taken by surprise as their unbelieving neighbors, and were running to and fro in great consternation, or preparing in all haste for what they had been expecting at leisure, according to the ways of the wise people of this world, who see further into futurity than their neighbors. Entering the chamber of a middle-aged widow, a staunch follower of the prophet, who had retreated somewhere, I found an open letter, not quite finished, which purported to be an answer to a proposal of marriage from another disciple, and in which the prudent dame very judiciously postponed her final decision until after the first of April. I own I proceeded to other unwarrantable indulgences of curiosity, only pardonable in a person fast asleep, in the course of which I made several discoveries, which, now that I am awake, I scorn to disclose to the world. All I will venture to say is, that I saw enough to convince me that if the widow really believed in the approaching dissolution of the world, she had determined to make the most of it while it lasted. It is impossible to say what other discoveries I might have achieved if I had not heard footsteps approaching; and apprehending it might be the lady herself, I retreated with considerable precipitation, in doing which I encountered, and overthrew, a fat cook maid, who was coming up in great haste to apprise her mistress that the kitchen was so hot she could not breathe in it any longer, and who, notwithstanding the solemnity of the occasion, gave me a most awful benediction.

The next house I entered was that of a notorious usurer, who was never known to do a kindness to any human being. He had accumulated millions by a rigid, inflexible system of preying upon the wants of his fellow creatures, and denying himself the common necessities of life, except on rare occasions, when his vanity got the better of his avarice; and he would give some great party or ostentatious feast; in order to excite the envy of his neighbors, and get puffed in the newspapers, always making himself amends for his prodigality by squeezing additional sums out of his unfortunate clients. I found him busily employed in making his will, and talking to himself by fits and starts, from which I gathered there was a great contest going on between the ruling passion and the fear of the future, which prompted him to make reparation, as far as possible, for his past transgressions. From what I could gather, he had come to a determination to restore the principal of all the money he had screwed from his

debtors by his usurious practice, but could not bring himself to give back the interest on these exactions, which he said would utterly ruin him. As the heat became more intense, he seemed gradually to relax; but the moment it subsided a little, relapsed again. This happened several times, until at length the old man quieted his conscience by leaving his whole estate for the purpose of erecting a hospital for the reception of the families of all those he had reduced to beggary by his frauds and inhumanity, at the same time saying to himself, 'I shall go down to posterity as a great public benefactor.' As I looked over his shoulder, I, however, observed that the bequest was conditional on the fulfilment of the prophecy.

Leaving the house of this repentant sinner, I proceeded on my way without any definite object, and met a fellow in irons, who had taken advantage of the confusion which reigned every where around, to make his escape from prison. He had committed a wanton and atrocious murder; and his execution was fixed for the next day. He seemed so elate at his escape, that I could not forbear reminding him that he had only got out of the frying-pan into the fire. He briskly replied, 'O, but you forget that I have escaped the disgrace of hanging.' On my reminding him that the disgrace was in the crime, not the punishment, he answered, 'I differ entirely with you in this matter,' and proceeded on, rattling his chains as if in triumph.

My next encounter was with a person who had distinguished himself in several controversies on questions which, admitting of no demonstration either of facts or arguments, afford the finest scope for terminable discussion. He had written more than one dissertation to prove that the prophet knew nothing about what he had predicted, and gone nigh to convince his readers that he was in the same predicament. I was proceeding to converse with him on the unexpected catastrophe so rapidly approaching, when he impatiently interrupted me: "Unexpected, indeed!" said he, "I have been so busy in proving it to be all humbug, that I am sorry to say that I am altogether unprepared. But that is not the worst. The most provoking part of the business is, that this old blockhead should be right and I wrong. My reputation is entirely ruined; and I shall go down to posterity as a teacher of false doctrines and a bad reasoner." "Don't be uneasy on that score," I replied, "prosperity will know nothing of the matter." Upon which he left me in a great passion, affirming that I had reflected on himself and his works, which, upon my honor, was not my intention.

The philosopher had scarcely left me when there approached an old man of rather venerable appearance, who seemed an exception to the rest of the world—being evidently elated at what filled all others with horror and dismay. He was rubbing his hands in great glee, ever and anon exclaiming, "I told them so; I predicted all this years ago, but the blockheads wouldn't believe me. They have got it now, and may laugh as much as they please." Anxious to know the meaning of all this, I ventured to ask an explanation: "What?" said he, "don't you know I am the prophet who foretold the destruction of the world by fire, the first of April, 1843! The clergy preached against me in their pulpits; the philosophers laughed; and the would-be wise ones hooted at me as a fool, or an impostor. But they have got it now—they have got it now—ha! ha! ha!" and the worthy old prophet went his way delighted at the fulfilment of his prediction. He had not proceeded far, however, when he came in sight of the bed of the river, which was now one vast volcano of consuming fires, and encountered such a searing blast from that quarter, that he turned round and approached me again with great precipitation. On inquiring where he was going in such a hurry, he replied, "Going? why to make preparations for this awful catastrophe, which, to tell you the truth, I have entirely neglected, being altogether taken up with predicting it. Bless my soul! I had no idea it would be so hot! At that moment it seemed that he took fire, and in a few minutes was consumed to ashes, exclaiming to the last, "Well, well! it matters not, I shall go down to posterity as the last of the prophets!"

The last person I recollect meeting, was the worthy old gentleman who railed against the world so copiously at the commencement of this vision. He was puffing and blowing, and fanning himself with his hat at a prodigious rate. "Well, my friend, said I, coolly and quietly, 'well, my friend, you are quite right in your opinion that the world was pretty well worn out, and on its last legs. It is in truth, an old, superannuated concern, not worth mending; and as you truly stated, so over head and ears in debt, that the sooner it winds up its affairs, and calls its creditors together, the better.' The old gentleman, however, did not seem altogether to agree with me in this opinion. He hesitated, wiped his brow, and at length replied: 'Why, ay—yes—to be sure! I confess I thought so yesterday, but had no idea it was going to happen so soon; and besides, really when one comes to consider the matter coolly, and then he puffed and panted as if almost roasted to death; 'when one, I say, considers the matter coolly, this world, after all is said and done, is not so bad but an honest man might have made up his mind to live in it a little longer. It might have been mended so as to be tolerable; and considering the pains everybody is taking to make it better, I don't think the case was hopeless. Really, it had scarcely had a fair trial, and with a few scores of years more, what with a great improvement in machinery, the wonderful facilities in travelling; and the exertions of a comprehensive philanthropy, I see no reason to despair of the millenium. But it is all over now; the advocates of 'progress,' will never know whether they were dreaming or awake;