

THE CONDUCT OF LIFE.

Two thoroughly opposed interpretations of Life and Destiny are at the present moment striving for exclusive sway over the European mind—the one old and familiar, the other new and strange in western lands. The creed of Jesus, accepted in essentials by our ancestors, still remains the purest expression of what may be called the sunshine view of existence—the belief that all things are ruled by a power of transcendent love, that a benign Father in heaven watches with never-failing care over the smallest concerns of this terrestrial scene. Unable altogether to disregard the signs of misery and disorder which even the most superficial glance cannot fail to observe, those brought up in this creed declare that the evil is only transitory, the good abiding; the dark hours are few, the bright ones many; if to-day be sad, to-morrow

will be full of joy; good alone is positive, evil mere negation; a future life will satisfy the strictest sentiment of justice. This is the preaching in every Christian church, this is the staple of religious poetry, the burden of the song of our great laureate, the stereotyped answer to "infidel" doubts, the delicious opiate wherewith we soothe our souls in the hours of deepest anguish. Things are not what they seem! There is a better life to come! With such potent solvents how readily the common metals of earth are transmuted into gold! How can our faces ever betray a "rooted sorrow"? Let the joyful music resound! A sphere of beauty! A banquet of delight! The best of all possible worlds, indeed, dear friends.

In other climes than ours, and in our own corner of the globe in these latter days, when thought has grown more fearless, and the picture of an offended Deity has somewhat lost its terrors, there have been those who have looked upon the scene with other eyes; and who, instead of finding all so bright and beautiful, have noted the hopeless poverty, the life short and pitiful, the unsparing track of the destroyer; and met by the happiness and beauty they could not miss, have treated it but as an incident of a history in the main a tale of sorrow. Not the warmth of summer, but the chilling blasts of winter, symbolize to them the meaning of the universe. To the averment that all things will be set right in a better world they

answer that that better world is only a mirage of affection—to the magic formula that things are not what they seem they reply that no conjuring can convert a pain into a pleasure—that in the last resort things *are* but as they are *felt*—that to the wretched prisoner a world of happy souls outside his dungeon-bars does but make his doom more horrible. And in place of the jubilant strains, and the thank-gods that we have been so favoured as to have been summoned into being, there arise from *these* worshippers the melancholy note of resignation to an inevitable misery, the longing to pass into the final rest—the Nirvana of the favoured, where every ray of consciousness is quenched for ever.

Between Optimism and Pessimism a war *à l'outrance* must be fought. Neither can persuade the other to abandon its pretensions. They have chosen to convert a half truth into a whole one. That in the construction of the universe either good or ill preponderates it is incompetent for either to show.

All we must allow is (it is not to be rationally refused) that both good and evil are realities. Pain is real as pleasure: and if there be a beneficent God there must also be a maleficent devil. Human thought cannot transcend consciousness, and consciousness is for ever shut up within the iron barriers of a relative dualism, and only rises to the Absolute by self-annihilation. Evil is no more (but just as much)

a "mystery" than good. To attempt to "explain" either is like asking "why" we think? Now the Optimist, unable to deny at least the appearance of evil, affirms this life to furnish the preparatory discipline for another; the Pessimist, aware that all is not gloom, affirms happiness to be a psychological impossibility; man being supposed to live a sort of a Tantalus existence, the cup of joy gliding from his grasp the instant he is about to raise it to his lips—conscious life the sum of unsatisfied longings.

That man's nature is often strengthened and deepened by the contest with hardship and disappointment, is a truth which the querulous temper may well lay to heart. Unalloyed prosperity is often accompanied by a hardness of heart, or superficiality of feeling, which moderates our first judgment as to the wide differences in human lots. And the fact that man is never satisfied, that take him at whatever height of success you please, he will be found still pining for a good he does not yet possess, shows us that the Pessimist is not altogether wrong when he affirms that the worth of life consists in the expectation of a bliss never realised. Rejecting the Optimist's explanation of the course of affairs that evil is but good in disguise (which I hold to be a meaningless phrase) we take this as the ground-assumption of our reflection on the conduct of Life, that often a higher good may be attained by the sacrifice of a lower; and denying

the Pessimist's assertion that Pain is the substance and Pleasure the shadow, we believe that the key to attainable happiness is the refusal to rest contented with present enjoyment, and the rating at its full value the possession of a pure Ideal. No gain without loss ; but increasing susceptibility to stimuli which before left the soul unaffected, a finer faculty of discrimination, limitation of the power of evil to the fatality of nature through the growth of human knowledge and good will—such I take to be the significance of progress.

Born into a world already far on the path of its development, with physical constitution and mental powers fixed by use and wont, it might seem as if the range of possibility open to human action must be continually diminishing. But although in one sense we are greater slaves than our forefathers, in another our sphere of action is vastly enlarged. To the early man the world indeed was all before him where to choose, but his capacity of choosing was reduced to the lowest terms. The great source of physical sustenance was as yet unappropriated. He might have acres to his heart's desire ; but with no conception of the way to utilize his landed property, what mattered the possession of miles of earth to him ? With no body of traditional law, no vested interests to respect, no social power backed by vast material resources to curb their wills, had not the first human beings

the rights of freemen? Free they would have been had their ill-trained imaginations not conjured up spectres in every dark corner, had not their slight capacity of drawing inferences made them see an arbitrary will in every storm or flash of lightning. Incapable of tracing consequences to their causes, too impatient to unravel the mazes of the inner and outer worlds, with insufficient faculty of mental representation to hold at once in their minds the past and present with a view to the future; notwithstanding the dimensions of their unexplored theatre of action, they were slaves by nature when not by man. The converse of all this holds with regard to us now. The world has become somewhat too small in comparison with our needs, but our capacity of using it is immeasurably increased. Innumerable checks and counterchecks hinder our advance on every hand; but if we are fortunate enough to gain the co-operation of our fellows, we may attempt and solve problems, and realize ideals in symbol or in life, which the wisest of the ancients could not conceive or imagine. This is the answer to the sentimentalists who point us back to the Age of Nature, to the melancholy prophet deploring that the Ages of Beauty and of Goodness are slipping away for ever. To a Rousseau, dreaming of a savage Paradise when man walked clad only in the grace of nature and in the simplicity of an unspoiled heart, we have

but to turn the obverse of the picture ; and show the entangled jungle which composed that Eden, and the absence of all thirst for higher ends. For a Ruskin, lamenting the loss of his Italy of the Middle Ages without the blemish of steam-ploughs and railway-engines, and sublimely scorning the Shylocks who decline to lend out money gratis ; there need only be depicted the squalid hovels of the mediæval peasantry, the utmost possible toil with the smallest possible fruit, the mass of hoarded wealth, which it was not safe to show nor honourable to lend for gain, the common labourer being stinted of his wage in the name of morality and religion. To the transcendentalists and poetic visionaries whom it is needless to particularize, who deem "might" and "force" the divinest words in the human vocabulary ; or who bewail the steady advance of science which dissipates so many illusions of the world's infancy, and trains up men to the irreverence of knowledge ; we have but to narrate a few ugly episodes of the rule of heaven-descended kings, and the cruelties, too revolting to recite, perpetrated by pious souls in the full sincerity of an unenlightened conscience. No : although in the brightest scene the dark background is always visible, it is certain that more eyes can have a vision of the glory ; that, while conceived quantitatively good and ill cannot but be constant, consciousness is always being raised to a higher plane—in other words, that

there is a compensation for the vices of civilization in the pleasures that flow from participation in the struggles and triumphs of a many-sided world.

The old avenues to action are closing up, but fresh entrances to the unexhausted field of possible action are ever being disclosed. The mass of effete custom which blocks the way to progress is often difficult enough to move, the fixity of habit is a fatality against which we often dash ourselves in vain ; but, although the strength of inheritance is great, the pliability of mind which a wider range of experience brings is a sufficient counterpoise ; and, with all the dead-weight of habit, there is a readiness to form new conceptions of life and duty at which our ancestors would have stared aghast. Let me review a few of our privileges.

Who in that distant golden age, for which the poets sigh, dared to let his mind work freely upon the material it obtained from study of the world without, and reflection on the processes within? Few or none ; for did not a God invisible frown jealously upon the slightest stir of independent effort? Who in the Middle Ages dared put his thought into words? If he so ventured, let him beware of the fate of Galileo and Jordano Bruno, and publish his researches on the rack, or discourse philosophy to the flames. Who dared, even in the Age of Reason, act out his thought? Nay ; hardly in our own day may a man wear the cap he will, or have a coat cut to a pattern different from his

neighbour. That things are on the move, though slowly, any one may convince himself who observes the growing tolerance for opinions which not long ago excited alarm and hate. Geology was for a time the child of the devil, because it pushed back the origin of the globe to some undetermined past. As if it required a less exertion of power to make a world in six million years than in six days ! What shrieks of agony when a German professor undertook to sift the chaff from the wheat in the biography of a man who perished nearly two thousand years ago ; and whose influence for good or ill not all the professors in Christendom could add to or diminish ! I suppose in a few quarters there is still some awful peril seen in the hypothesis of the development of mankind from a tribe of African monkeys ; as if human nature were in the least degree the better or the worse for such affinity. These are matters upon which we are now permitted to talk openly, need not under our breath mutter our assents or dissents in locked chambers. There are still some subjects however upon which it is even yet not quite so safe to proclaim our opinions upon the house-tops. I am not quite sure whether an anthropomorphic deity be one of these reserved points. The efficacy of prayer has certainly been questioned in most respectable quarters ; but elsewhere it is still considered the height of impiety to omit the request, "Give us this day our daily bread," in the people's schools ; yet the

farmer is not blamed for consulting his weather-glass, though the preacher read to him with the impressiveness befitting a heavenly message, "Take no thought for the morrow." Perhaps the most forbidden of all topics is that which touches us most nearly—the order of social life which we have so long possessed unchanged. Whoever would venture to suggest a large amount of imperfection there would probably do so at considerable cost. While elsewhere the logic of reason and common-sense makes way, the logic of prejudice thrives here in pristine vigour; and men, who are accounted liberals in every thing else, and who would go away indignant if you suggested that one thing yet lacked to their justification, would think it meritorious to crucify the prophet who declared that the social temple must be built anew.

The battle of human liberty is however clearly not won until every subject within the range of the thinkable is open to serious discussion; until we can hear with the utmost calmness, and indeed are eager to hear, how the code of duty may be well revised, notwithstanding the deprecating voice of authority, and the verdict of long-trying action. It is not possible, indeed, to take a profitable estimate of the conduct of life, until mankind is willing to recognize at least as much imperfection in all the institutions of society as it recognizes in the domains of art and science. Why, indeed, should it be supposed that

man's moral and social lights were heaven-sent when we freely allow his intellectual flame to be of earthly origin? Rather, indeed, should we be inclined to suspect, that there, where the methods of experiment are the most difficult to apply, where the factors concerned are the most delicate and complicated, the rudest state of things would persist exceptionally long. There is a mistaken assumption that does much to retard progress. It is frequently supposed that the recognition of imperfection carries with it the necessity of immediate improvement. The conclusion does not follow. Long after a disease is seen and known as such the knowledge of the remedy may be wanting. We may see the evil and deplore it long before the least ray of light appears to show the way to its removal. But it is a great gain to see the evil and to know it for such. Nor does it make it a whit less an evil to be aware that any conceivable change would probably cause an equal or even greater evil. When an injustice is pointed out it is common for conservatives to reply, "The world always must be imperfect," as if that were anything but an evasion of the difficulty! None but the irrational Utopist would affirm that the world will ever be other than imperfect. But whatever else may be, social institutions are no part of the unalterable; since what man has set up man can destroy. I wonder what reforms ever would have been carried out if this

plea of the world's imperfection had been recognized as a settlement of questions. Assuredly the measure of our freedom, which to-day we treat as if it were a part of the order of nature, would never have been won with so much blood and sweat. There are two most dangerous foes to social progress—the man whose life has gone to his satisfaction, and he whose career has been an unmitigated disappointment. I reckon these as even greater enemies than the traditionalist of every type. The man who himself has not felt pain, has not had the experience necessary to give him sympathy with the sufferings of others. Accordingly, evils generally become very widespread before they are removed. On the other hand, the man who has drunk to the dregs the cup of misery, who has striven hard against soul-crushing convention, and been only met with persecution and derision ; as life draws on, not seldom comes to take the forces arrayed against him as a part of the inevitable ; and, soured by repeated disappointment, in the spirit of the churl throws his weight into the scale to prevent others from having the joy he himself appeared too soon to possess. These are the foes with which the social reformer has to contend—the mind too little pliable to conceive more than that of his fellows before him ; the self-satisfied temper engendered by unchecked prosperity, and the cynicism of baffled desire. When these forces have been counted, it may readily be supposed that the odds are terribly

against any man who would strive to procure an order of things more just, more true.

The conduct of life has a two-fold object—the culture of self and the elevation of mankind. In the first respect the weightiest word that can be said is— spare no pains to appreciate the real needs of human nature. Not by suppression of any spontaneous stirrings, but by admitting every voice to the soul's audience-chamber, is the ripest word of wisdom to be gained. We should not bar the door against a single counsellor. Old-established customs, rules of different nations, desires of the heart, visions of a world which gratifies the feelings of the beautiful—all must have a place, and the rule of culture be drawn up from the widest range of obtainable experience. It has been an error of revolutionists to disregard the hived experience of the past; it is an equal error to ignore the strong impulses of actual feeling. Our present needs are but results of the conditions of our existence, which the past has prepared.

Having learnt our lesson, we have to apply it in a maze of complication. But a mind already trained in estimating the value of conflicting influences will have no difficulty in understanding the limits of practical action. The heightened force of imagination, acquired by an enlarged faculty of representation, aids the development of feeling by making us more able to understand the state of mind of others; the deepest emotion

being implicated with the widest intelligence. When we come then to apply our creed in action we shall instantaneously recognise the rights of others, shall most sacredly respect conclusions obtained by similar processes of weighed experience. No one, who claims the humblest place in the ranks of the just, can be otherwise than scrupulous of the sphere of action appropriate to his fellow-men. But, according these rights, and claiming the same measure for ourselves, there is no proper limit to the scope of our exerted influence but the resources of our minds and the capacities of our affections. A double duty indeed is imposed upon us—never to consider our self-education complete, and to enlarge to the utmost the sphere of legitimate influence. Although lying closer to us, the former is perhaps the more neglected. But there is no more sacred duty. In this moving world whoever stands still is lost. We may seem to have advanced somewhat further than many of our fellows; what is that progress but an insignificant step towards the far-off goal? And beware of being beguiled by the plausible dissuasion, “You are going too fast on the road; see how the main army lags behind you; rest and be thankful for past success.” A fatal counsel, believe me. *The measure of our conception is the measure of our duty.* And from that standard we dare not, save at soul’s peril, budge. And finally—if we think we see a better way than the one our fellows tread, modestly

but without reserve we should state our belief, animated by the sole desire of saving them a painful march. And not alone to us the delight of service, for man is never so far apart from his neighbour as that friendly offices are impossible from each to all.

As the world moves on, I have a firm trust that it will grow in love and good-will ; that, casting to the winds all its baseless fears, and obeying the impulses which now it dares not trust, it will obtain first liberty, then liberty's fruits; until the largest measure of happiness, which the constitution of our globe permits, becomes the common possession of earth's "crowning race."

