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# LAUREATE DESPAIR

A DISCOURSE GIVEN AT

SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL

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BY

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## LAUREATE DESPAIR.

LET me say at once that I am glad the Poet Laureate has written the poem called "Despair," which I propose to criticise. It is a cry out of the heart of an earnest man; it utters the sorrow with which many people in our time see their old dreams fading, and no new ones rising in their place; and it reminds free-thinkers that theirs is a heavy responsibility and duty. They have to meet and respond to that need and pain which thousands feel where one can give it expression. Men of science and philosophers do not always understand this. The most eminent of them are pursuing ideals far more beautiful to them than those that have set. They have special knowledge, or special aims, which kindle into pillars of fire before their enthusiasm, and cannot see how to those of other studies and pursuits their guiding splendour is a pillar of smoke rising from a fair world slowly consumed. The man of science, hourly occupied with discoveries which blaze upon him, star by star, till his reason is as a vault sown with eternal lights, feels that he is in the presence of conceptions beside which the visions of Dante and Milton are frescoes of a time-darkened dome. The enthusiast of Humanity holds

in his eye a latter-day glory of which history is the prophecy and developed man the fulfilment. Such enthusiasms imply continual studies, occupations, duties, which leave little room for attention to the shadows these lights cast upon the old world of dreams—each shadow a dogma or its phantom. Nevertheless, that world of dreams, shades, phantoms, is still real to many. It is real not only to the ignorant, whom it terrifies, and to the selfish, whose power rests on it, but to spiritual invalids, who need sympathy. And, beyond this reality, the phantasms on which religion and society were founded possess a quasi-reality even for robust minds. You may recall the saying of Madame de Stael, that “she did not believe in ghosts, but was afraid of them.” After dogmas are dead their ghosts walk the earth; and even some who no longer believe in the ghosts are still afraid of them. When their intellects are no longer haunted their nerves are.

There are others, again, for whose vision or nerves the pleasant dogmas alone survive in this attenuated, ghostly form. They no longer believe in the ghosts, but still love them. Of this class is the literary artist. To the pictorial artist a ruin is more picturesque than the most comfortable dwelling. 'Tis said of an eminent art-critic that, being invited to visit America, he replied that he could not think of visiting a country where there were no ruins. Alfred Tennyson is the consummate artist in poetry. We all know with what tender sentiment Tennyson has

painted the scenery of Arthur's time, with what felicity described many other reliques of human antiquity. "His eye will not look upon a bad colour." He sees the mouldering ruins in their picturesque aspects, leaving out of sight the noxious weeds and vermin that infest them. Where these loathsome things appear no man more recoils from them. If the White Ladies of Superstition haunt them, these he admires ; but he impales the gnomes and vampyres.

In this, his latest poem, "Despair," he shows a childlike simplicity of desire to retain all the pleasant and reject all the unpleasant consequences of the same principles. His attitude is indeed kindlier to the agnostic than to the orthodox ; for the first he has lamentation, for the other anathema. His denunciation of orthodoxy is bitter. The poem is the supposed utterance of a man to his former minister. "A man and his wife, having lost faith in God and hope of a life to come, and being utterly miserable in this, resolve to end themselves by drowning. The woman is drowned, but the man is saved by the minister of the sect he had attended." He has no gratitude for the minister who rescued him, only a curse, attributing to him the first cause of the hopeless horrors amid which the two found themselves. He tells the minister they broke away from Christ because Christ seemed to speak of hell, and so they passed from a cheerless night to a drearier day—from horrible belief to total unbelief.

Where you bawl'd the dark side of your faith, and a God of  
 eternal rage

Till you flung us back on ourselves, and the human heart, and  
the Age.

But pity—that Pagan held it a vice—was in her and in me,  
Helpless, taking the place of the pitying God that should be !  
Pity for all that aches in the grasp of an idiot power,  
And pity for our own selves on an earth that bore not a  
flower.

Again he says :

Were there a God, as you say,  
His Love would have power over hell till it utterly vanish'd  
away.

Ah, yet—I have had some glimmer at times, in my gloomiest  
woe,

Of a God behind all—after all—the Great God, for aught that  
I know :

But the God of Love and of Hell together—they cannot be  
thought :

If there be such a God, may the Great God curse him and  
bring him to nought !

This is what the Poet Laureate thinks of the God of every  
creed in Christendom, for every creed maintains an  
eternal hell.

But the agnostic, the know-nothing sceptic, is summoned  
to bear his share in this tragedy of hopelessness and  
suicide. The poet does not suggest that disbelief in a  
future life or in a Deity would alone lead to suicide. In  
his imaginary case unbelief is only a factor. The man  
and wife were in terrible trouble. One of their two sons  
had died ; the eldest had fled after committing forgery on  
his own father, bringing him to ruin. It is under such  
fearful circumstances that, without faith or hope, they sink  
into despair. The man says :

Why should we bear with an hour of torture, a moment of  
pain,

If every man die for ever, if all his griefs are in vain,

And the homeless planet at length will be wheeled thro' the  
silence of space,  
Motherless evermore of an ever-vanishing race?

\* \* \* \* \*

For these are the new dark ages, you see, of the popular press,  
When the bat comes out of his cave, and the owls are  
whooping at noon,  
And Doubt is the lord of this dunghill, and crows to the sun  
and moon,  
Till the Sun and Moon of our science are both of them turned  
to blood,  
And Hope will have broken her heart, running after a shadow  
of good.

It is a striking fact, in our sceptical age, that such lamentations as these are not heard from among the poor and the drudges of society. They who are asking whether life be worth living without the old faith in immortality, and they who say it is not, are persons of position and wealth. Any one who has taken the pains to observe the crowds of working people who attend the lectures of secularists, or to read their journals, will know they are cheery enough. We never hear any of them bemoaning the vanished faith. In truth the more important fact is not that the belief in immortality is gone, or the belief in Deity, but that belief in a desirable immortality and a desirable Deity has gone out of the hearts of many. In one of his humorous pieces Lucian, describing his imaginary journey through Hades, says he could recognise those who had been kings or rich people on earth by their loud lamentations. They had parted with so much. Those who on earth had been poor and wretched were quiet enough. We may observe similar phenomena in



this psychological Hades, or realm of the Unseen and Unknown, into which modern thought has entered. Those to whom God has allotted palaces, plenty, culture, beauty, can easily believe Him a God of Love; and it were to them heaven enough to wake from the grave to a continuance of the same. But they who have known hunger, cold, drudgery, ignorance, have no such reason to say God is Love. Such may naturally say, "If we have waked up in this world in dens of misery, why, under the same providence, may we not wake up to a future of misery?" The old creeds met that difficulty. They showed a miraculous revelation on the subject, by which God had established an insurance against future misery, an assurance of future luxury. It was all to be supernatural. By miraculous might poverty was to be changed to wealth, the hovel to a palace, rags to fine raiment, ignorance to knowledge, folly to wisdom, and scarlet sin to snow-pure virtue. Without such tremendous transformations the masses of the miserable could have no interest in immortality. But gradually the comfortable scholarship and theology of our time, in trying to prove a God of nature, have done away with the God of super-nature. Their deity of design is loaded with all the bad designs under which men suffer. Fifty years ago Carlyle groaned because he could not believe in a Devil any more. Philosophy had reasoned a Devil out of existence. The result was to make the remaining power responsible for all the evils in the world, and ultimately bring him into



doubt and disgrace too. Dismissing the Devil out of faith  
 cannot be dismissed evil, the mad work of earthquake, hurri-  
 cane and fire. As we think of the shores with their wrecks,  
 as we think of those people in Vienna gathered around the  
 charred remains of their families and friends, must we not  
 ask if this is providential work what would be diabolical  
 work? Reason says to Theology, "At least you can be  
 silent, and not malign the spirit of good within us by  
 asking us to call that without good which we know to be  
 bad!"

Similarly theologians in trying to rationalise the idea of  
 immortality have naturalised it. They have tacked it on  
 to evolution. But what the miserable suffer by *is* evolu-  
 tion: unless they can be assured of a supernatural change,  
 of a heaven, they do not want to be evolved any more.  
 Only a miraculous revelation could promise them that  
 miraculous heaven; and the only alleged revelation is  
 rejected by the culture and the charity of our age. It is  
 denied by Culture, because it reveals some impossibilities;  
 by Charity, because it reveals a God capable of torturing  
 people more than they are tortured here. What are eight  
 hundred people burned swiftly in a theatre compared to  
 millions burning in hell for ages, if not for ever, as Revela-  
 tion declares? Our Poet Laureate is a man of both  
 culture and charity; he cannot sing of a revelation which  
 concludes Hell, however he may cling to hopes that came  
 by the same revelation, or mourn at thought of parting  
 from a world so fair.

Candour compels us to admit that there is as yet no certainty of a future life for the individual consciousness. The surviving seed of the human organism if it exist has not been discovered. There is nothing unnatural in the theory. It would not be more miraculous to find ourselves in another world than to find ourselves in this. If two atoms of the primeval nebula, thrown together, had been for one instant capable of speculation, how little could they have imagined a company of men and women gathered to meditate on life and eternity! All this is very marvellous if we conceive it contemplated from a point of non-existence. For all we know there are more marvels beyond.

But suppose there are none; suppose death be the end of us; is there any reason for despair? Even for the man and woman on whom life had brought dire calamities, was there any reason for suicide? Just the reverse, I should say. Belief that this life was all were reason for making the most of it. Belief that their ruin would not be repaired hereafter were reason for trying to repair it here, as well as they could. Has Tennyson evolved his man and woman out of his inner consciousness? It is doubtful if in the annals of freethought such a case can be pointed out; though many instances may be shown where believers in a future world slew themselves to get there. Suicide was a mania in some old convents until the church fixed its 'canon 'gainst self-slaughter.'

However, it may be that instances of the kind Tennyson describes may occur. We are but on the threshold of the age when men are to live and work without certainty of future rewards and payments. The doubts now in the head must presently reach the heart, then influence the hand; if people have built their houses on the sand of mythology, and they fall, it may be that some will not have the heart to begin new buildings on the rock. What then? It will be only the continuation of the old law—survival of the fittest. Suicides at least do not live to increase their race. Only those tend to prevail in nature who can adapt themselves to the conditions of nature. If nature has arrived at a period of culture when supernaturalism passes out of the human faith, then they who sink into despair or death, on that account, show themselves no longer adapted to nature. There will be a survival of those more adapted to the new ideas; who prefer them; who do not aspire to live for ever, but have a heart for any fate, and a religion whose forces and joys are concentrated in the life that now is. If nature and humanity need such a race for their furtherance, such a race will be produced; and they will read poems like this "Despair," with a curiosity mixed with compassion, wondering how their ancestors could have been troubled about such a matter.

Something like this has occurred in the past in several instances. While Christians find fullest expression of their joyful emotions in the psalmody and prophecy of the

Hebrews they often forget that those glowing hymns say no word about a future life. There is no clear affirmation of immortality in the Old Testament, but much to the contrary. Buddhism also, which has awakened the enthusiasm of a third of a human race, arose as a protest against theism and immortality. In such instances there would appear to have been reactions against previous theologies, which had so absorbed mankind in metaphysics and speculations about the future as to belittle this life and cause neglect of this world. Despised and degraded nature avenged this wrong by making asceticism its own destruction, and worldliness a source of strength and survival.\* Some such Nemesis seems to be following the extreme other-worldliness which, for so many Christian centuries, has bestowed the fruits of human toil upon supposed supernatural interests. This earthward swing of the slow pendulum of faith is not likely to be arrested until religion has been thoroughly humanised. As a brave clergyman (Rev. Harry Jones) warned the Church Congress at York, the Church will never conquer Secularism, except by doing more for mankind than Secularism does.

We must almost remember that no oscillations of the pendulum between theology and humanity, no reactions, determine the question. As Old Testament Secularism

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\* As it is said in Ecclesiasticus: "He has also set worldliness in their heart, which man cannot understand the works that God does, from beginning to end."—DR. KALISCH'S *Translation*.

followed Egyptian Mysticism, Talmudic visions of heaven succeeded. Every ebb alternates with a flow in the tides of human feeling ; and these tides are the generations which nature successively creates to fulfil successive conditions, and to find their joy in such fulfilment, whatever be the despair of the ebbing at faith of the flowing tide.

But, no doubt, these rising and falling ages of speculation and religion will show calmer and happier phenomena in the future than in the past. There are traces in the earth of tremendous operations in the past, which geology was unable to account for by any forces now acting, until Astronomy discovered that the Moon had been steadily receding from the earth, its mother. The moon is now 240,000 miles away, but is proved to have been once only 40,000 miles distant. At that period the tides were to the tides of our time as 216 to 1. This country and many others must then have been flooded with every tide, and the enormous geologic results are now understood. There would appear to be some correspondence in all this with mental and moral phenomena. In religious geology also there are traces of convulsions and huge formations which it has been difficult to account for,—mighty religious wars, massacres, whole races committing slow suicide for the sake of their Gods. Comparative studies now show that the lunar theology was much nearer to mankind then than now, and the tides more furious. The extraneous influence is withdrawing more and more. Where theologians used to burn each other they now fight combats with pens. Where heretics were massacred they



are now only visited with dislike. Instead of crusades, with Richard and Saladin, we have young poets singing on the crest of a sparkling tide, and their elder, from reflux waves, murmuring rhythmic Despair. There is a vast difference between the emotions awakened by belief in a deity near at hand, pressing down upon the life, and those awakened by a hypothetical deity of philosophy or ethics. When men attributed their every hourly hap, good or bad, to the personal favour or to the anger of their deity, their feeling at any supposed affront to their deity, mingled with selfishness and terror, rose to a pitch very different from any now known when few men refer any event to supernatural intervention. Yet do the great movements of the universe go on, the cycles and the periods fulfil themselves, the planets roll on new orbits with changed revolutions; and, whatever be the corresponding changes in human opinion, they cannot alter the eternal fact.

If immortality be the law of the universe, it will be reached by believers and disbelievers alike. But, could the world be made absolutely certain of it beforehand, by the only means of certainty—scientific proof—what were the advantage? It would no longer be a miraculous thing promising all a leap from earthly sorrow to heavenly bliss, but merely a law of nature—mere continuance—the millions rising from their graves to go on with existence, just as they will rise from their beds to-morrow. There would be no further note of despair from the Laureates; but how would it be with the general world? One of the

most powerful poems of our time has been written by a French lady, Louise Ackermann. It is entitled "Les Malheureux"—the Unhappy. The last day has come ; the trumpet has sounded. A great angel descends ; uncovers all the graves of the dead, and bids them come forth for everlasting life. Some eagerly come forth, but a large number refuse. To the divine command that they shall emerge, their voice is heard in one utterance. They tell him they have had enough of life in His creation ; they have passed through thorns, and over flinty paths—from agony to agony. To such an existence He called them—they suffered it ; and now they will forgive Him only if He will let them rest, and forget that they have lived. Such is the despair with which one half of the world might answer the joy of the other should a mere natural immortality be proved.

A great deal of the poetry of the world has invested with glory man's visions of heaven and heavenly beings. The very greatest poets have invested nature and the earth with glory, and set the pulses of the human heart to music. This has been the greatness of Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe. But the majority have given the world visions of heaven, divine dramas, and hymns of immortality ; and it is these that have been taught to earth's millions in their infancy. These happy hymns have for ages soothed sorrowing hearts, and helped the masses of mankind to bear the burthens of life—this not only in Christendom, but in so-called Pagan lands and ages. These have been as the songs of Israfel in Eastern faith.



They said a sweet singer among the angels left heaven to go forth over the suffering world and soothe mortals with his heavenly lyre and his hymns, until all were able to bear the griefs of life because of the joys beyond, rehearsed by Israfel. But once—while this angel was singing with his celestial seven-stringed lyre—one string of it snapped. No one could be found to mend the string or supply its place; and, every time Israfel tried to make music, it was all jangling discords, through that broken string. So Israfel took his flight, and never returned to the world. The tale sounds like a foreboding of what has in these last days befallen the sacred poetry which so long made the world forget its griefs. The lyre of Israfel is the human heart, and the snapped string is its faith in a supernatural heaven. It has been snapped by the development of nature; it therefore cannot be restored unless by a further development: and so Sacred Poetry has taken its flight from the world—its last great song being of a Paradise Lost. In other words, the hope of immortality has ceased to have power to soothe and uplift those who most needed it, because the recognized reign of law forbids belief that such life—should it come—would be very different from the life that now is.

But there is another story of a broken string, with a different ending. It comes from Greece (Browning has finely told it in *The Two Poets of Croisic*), the land of Art and of the Beauty that adorns the earth. It is of a bard who came with his lyre to sing for a prize. He came with other competitors before the solemn judges.

The others had all sung their poems ; now came our youth with his. His theme rose high and higher, till at length he came to the great theme of his song—Love. Just then he felt beneath his finger that one string of his lyre had snapt, a string that presently must do its part, or else his song be put to shame. On, on, his strain went, as if to its death ; but just as he drew near his note of Despair, lo, a cricket chirped loud, chimed in with just that needed note ! Saved, he went on, and ever as he returned to this broken string the cricket duly made good the snapt string, and thus the judges missed no note of the music, which won the crown. On the poet's statue was carved the cricket which contributed from the lowly hearth the needed note in that hymn of Love, when the old string had broken. That tale too, I doubt not, came out of that truest of all poets, the human heart. For the heart of our race is aged in such experiences as those which elicit rhymes of Despair. It has seen beautiful symbols fade in myriads ; symbols of heavens innumerable, every one clung to by suffering Egyptians, Persians, Greeks, as much as any Christian clings to their successors. It has seen troops of bright gods and goddesses perish, nymphs and fairies leaving wood and vale desolate ; and yet, just as its gladdest heart-string has snapt, its faith in heaven given way, some cheery note from the earth has come to remind it of the love near at hand, of the divine joy vanished from its ancient heavens only to be revealed at the hearth.

A cricket-chirp ! That is all. While our great Laureate

is employing his art to sing of despair, and other poets aspire to ambitious themes, the notes are as yet but few and humble, which cheer man with a trust in the love that is near him. But there are such notes making up for the creed's snapped string. Nor are they near only the happy. The cricket sings from many an overshadowed hearth. It tells the heart to be brave, and never count life lost so long as courage remain. It bids man cease thinking so much about himself—whether he be likely to die next year, or die for ever—and go fall in love with something, an out-self; to dispel morbid meditations. It warns us not to worry over what may never happen, or, if it happen, may be for the best, but turn to make what paradise we can on earth; nor admit into it the destroyer of every paradise, care about the morrow, or about the far future. All these spiritual despairs are diseases of the imagination. In a sense, it is hereditary disease. For many generations our ancestors employed their imaginations for little else than to realise the charnal-house and picture happiness or horrors beyond it. So their children have inherited a morbid tendency of imagination, whereby they may turn from the happiness they have and make themselves miserable with dreams about its vanishing. Such work of the imagination is illegitimate. Imagination is the brightest angel of the head, as Love is of the heart; they are twin angels and their office is to make life rich and beautiful. And they can so enrich and adorn life, though passed in a hovel, though amid pain, though destined to end for ever, provided they be not dismissed from their

post of present duty and sent wandering through clouds to find love's objects, or digging into graves to find life's fountain. I love and admire our Laureate for his great heart and his beautiful art, but will not follow his muse, singing of Despair, except with a hope that it is his way of writing its epitaph. I will follow the happy minstrel. That poet who shows life to be environed with beauty, makes deserts blossom in his song, whose poem is a fountain of joy for all the living, bringing forgetfulness of pain, and a sweet lullaby for the dying—that shall be my poet. And if, among the minstrels of our time, such happy ones cannot be found, because some string of faith or heart is snapped, then let us listen to the cheery cricket, to the voices of children, to the gentle words of affection, to the unbroken song of the merry hearts in nature that remember only its loveliness. We will listen to these until the new Poetry shall arise—as arise it will—with fresh songs, to bid all spirits rejoice in that which to the old brought despair. That is the task of Poetry and Art. Every new thing destroying the old brings despair; none brought more than Christianity—shattering the fair gods, and Protestantism—over whose havoc of prayers and pieties Luther's poor wife wept; but Poetry and Art did their work, and none now long for restoration of Aphrodite or Madonna. So also shall our age of science find its poets and artists, and our children shall no more long for a buried faith than we for the holy dolls of crumbled altars, whose power to charm has fled.

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