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THE  
PAST AND THE FUTURE,

BY  
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THE following short address was delivered before a small body of persons of kindred religious thought. It was not intended for publication ; but as the writer has since been called to join the loved ones to whom he so feelingly refers, and as even a slight memento of him will be very precious to many who held him in especial esteem and veneration, as a man of unwonted purity and nobleness of mind, it has been thought well to print a few copies for private circulation.

Other members of the same circle have been called from this earth within the past year, or have had to lament the loss of those dear to them. May not these pages help to strengthen and encourage such on the earthly path that yet lies before them ?

A. W.

Dublin, January, 1869.

# THE PAST AND THE FUTURE.

JANUARY, 1868.

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“One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh.”

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SINCE we last met together, another year has closed upon us—another year has opened. Once again has our earth in its ceaseless never-ending whirl, completed its great circle—swift as the lightning—deep and calm and solemn as a midnight bell:—another year has formed the connecting link between two eternities—THE PAST and THE FUTURE.

What a world of solemn meaning there is in the words. But a while ago and the past was ours—ours to use and to enjoy; it is gone from us, never, never to return. All those loves and affections; those kindnesses given and received; those high resolves; those manifestations of pure and exalted soul, of tender loving nature; all are but memories—sweet and beautiful—yet but memories. As time draws over them his dark and shadowy pall, are they indeed quite gone from us for ever—nothing done that we might retouch, nothing said that we might unsay, nothing omitted that we might now supply? Alas, yes! The present moment only is ours; the past is irrevocable. Yet it lives for ever in memory; it writes its history upon our souls with an “iron pen and lead as upon a rock for ever.” Let us therefore be careful that we use it aright; let our acts

not alone be good, but our very best, our wisest, our most saintly. Let us throw into them all our thought, all our energy, all our devotion, for when once done they must remain ever as they are. No after-thought can alter them, however thoughtlessly or recklessly they may have been performed; under whatever impulse of passion, however instigated, they can never be blotted out. Rarely is the opportunity granted us even to make amends when we have done wrong, and even then we do it with sorrow and humiliation. And let us remember that although irremediable they are not therefore inactive. Not alone in memory do they live; yea are they not all as seed put into the ground which WILL grow. Every act brings another, aye ten others, we know not how many, after it.

By our acts our minds are formed, and our position, and that of those around us fixed; and we *must* act—life is a succession of acts—well or ill, wisely or unwisely, usefully or injuriously. Life means action. Life is before us to act in—in time or in eternity. It is no choice of ours. We are here. We cannot annihilate ourselves, as surely as we cannot create ourselves. Nay we could not if we would annihilate one particle of the matter of which even our bodies are composed; how much less can we destroy our souls. It is no choice of ours that we are here, and that we must act; our acts are the seed of future action, of future joy or future sorrow. And they are eternal. Therefore we must get knowledge, so as to act with greater wisdom. It is a sacred duty, for we cannot be too wise. Therefore let us cultivate holy and blessed thoughts; let us cleanse our minds of everything that is impure and that is unlovely.

We cannot be too good. Alas, at our very best, with our greatest care, with our greatest energy, how full of sorrow and regret are our lives. What a consciousness of

errors and short comings. How frail, how feeble are we. We fail in will, and we fail in knowledge, and no prayer suits us so well as that of the desponding publican—"God be merciful to us sinners." Almost does the crushed soul cry out "The work is too great for me, I cannot undertake it. I cannot act wisely and well. Take back, oh! Creator, thy great but too perilous gift." But it cannot be. We cannot falter or turn back in the great journey—no, nor even halt on the way. With fear and trembling it may be, or with a firm and reliant step; in cloud, and darkness, and trouble it may be, or in sunshine and prosperity. Through well-known beaten paths it may be, or in devious and uncertain ways where there is nothing but the inner light to guide us,—still must we ever onward. Well may the faint and weary heart fail within us, as we tread that path on which there must be no faltering, no false step, no going aside to the right or to the left; for assuredly if we do, trouble and tribulation, suffering and sorrow, will inevitably follow—for such is the decree that has gone forth from Eternity, that has resounded through the ages. It is undeviating. It is unavoidable. The wisest, the most loving, the holiest are not exempted from it. Ye must always act wisely and well. There is no exception either in time, place, or person.

This is a great subject, including all of religion, morals, and philosophy. Let us think well over it. There are laws of being in all its phases; laws of our material bodies, of health and disease; laws of our moral nature; of our fellow beings—the society in which we move; and laws of our spiritual nature—our duties to our souls—of our relations to the Great Author of our being. And the breach of any one of those laws, any misunderstanding and consequent misapplication of them, any want of knowledge of them whereby they may be set aside or disregarded, is

followed by the inevitable sentence "Retribution." No plea of ignorance, inadvertence, forgetfulness, will avail us. Nay, no appeal to higher duty will supersede in the smallest iota the divine laws of nature. Fatigue follows over-exertion, in however holy a cause it may be undergone; disease follows infection, however benevolent or loving the motive which drew us to the bedside of sickness. In every instance the punishment is inexorably demanded. Suffering, physical or mental—sorrow, pain, or loss of some sort—follows every breach, however occasioned, of those varied and all-pervading laws. How necessary is all our care and all our thoughtful anxiety.

If, indeed, we must tread this path—this path that is marked out for us—do this work that is set before us, and do it always perfectly, always wisely and well, surely every nerve should be strung, every power and faculty heightened, every means and opportunity of gaining knowledge resorted to, so that we should be prepared in body and mind, ready for every emergency, like men of God, "perfect and entire, wanting nothing." Alas, how far from such a condition do we find ourselves; how feeble and frail; how fickle; how ignorant, and short-sighted; how often forgetful or reckless of our highest duties!

And for us there is no substitute, no mediator, no atonement in the orthodox and usually accepted sense. We are face to face with God; there is no go-between. We live surrounded by His laws, always within His influence. Thankful are we that God, as we believe Him, is not a hard task-master, expecting perfect service from imperfect creatures. True obedience is required to all His laws, and their breach is ever followed by the appointed punishment. Yet is it ever inflicted as by the ever-loving Father, to warn us of our danger, or to guide us into life. Anger or vengeance belong not to Him. His justice requires not satisfaction. It is for

ourselves alone, and for our soul's good, that His laws exist ; and this His awful law of Retribution, is but one amongst His many mercies. If wise and good actions were to bring no happy pleasurable results, or unwise or simple ones no painful, then indeed would we lose our chief guide and warning. Better for us to bear the inevitable penalty, and be lead back again to the path of life.

I will not pursue this subject further—it is too wide and many-sided—only so far as to indicate the nature of the Divine dealings. Thus, the rewards and punishments that flow from obedience or disobedience to the divine laws participate in the nature of those laws themselves. The physical have relation to health of body—and the effect of neglect of them, or defiance from whatever cause, is bodily pain, weakness, infirmity, death. The moral laws, having relation to our dealings with our fellow beings, have their punishment in mental and moral debasement, social exclusion and self condemnation ; and the spiritual laws, having relation to our own soul, and its connection with the great soul of the universe, have also their glorious rewards and most terrible penalties.

Of those penalties how shall I speak ? Is there any bodily anguish so severe as the consciousness of having lost—aye, though inadvertently—the tender affection or even the confidence of a loved or valued friend—of a brother or sister, father or mother, or dear, dear, relative. How will the recollection of the act haunt our thoughts by day, and our dreams by night ; until we seek by unwearied assiduity and thoughtfulness to win back again the affection and esteem of our friend. So also in our relation to our God, if we feel that we have polluted our soul, that we have lowered it from its high position, and that we dare not come into the presence of our Maker, that at best we can but stand trembling in the

outer court of the temple, and smite upon our breasts, saying "God be merciful to me a sinner," there is no anguish equal to our anguish, and we are ready to exclaim with him of old "my punishment is greater than I can bear." Yet how beautiful and excellent is the retributive law, which brings us in sorrow and anguish to the footstool of the throne, and, opening our bleeding heart to our Heavenly Father, makes us resolve upon renewed and holier life.

So also of the rewards of the spiritual life, of the intense delight which follows a loving, true, and devoted action. Who can tell the joy that is concentrated in the expiring moments of the martyr for truth, for love, or for liberty; nay, we none of us can express it, but we all instinctively feel that we would not exchange its joy or its triumph for all the glory or the glitter of an earthly conqueror.

Thus have I endeavoured to explain the nature of our destiny, and the complication and variety of the laws we are compelled to understand and obey. But it is important we should view them also in their relation to each other. No doubt each is obligatory. Retribution follows their breach or non-observance with equal certainty; but yet are they placed one above another. We must, as far as it is in our power, build up a healthy body, and guard its health with scrupulous care, but at the slightest whisperings of the soul, must we put all its warnings aside. We must at the call of duty overtask its powers, expose it to hardship, stint its food; at the call of love, expose it to contagion, weariness, anxiety; aye in the cause of truth, humanity, and progress, peril to the uttermost even its very existence; and we feel that we can point to acts, which if judged of the material laws solely, were undoubtedly foolish—examples of extravagant enthusiasm and infatuation—but judged of by the spiritual laws, become our highest wisdom. Thus can we join in the true spirit of the popular song



“ John Brown’s body is mouldering in the clay,  
But his soul keeps marching on.”

So say we of all the martyrs who have died for truth and humanity—sowing the earth wide with lessons of truth and heroism ; of love and virtue. They died not in vain for their own or for their race’s benefit. A little more knowledge, perhaps a little more insight into human affairs, would have saved their lives for a time. Others, perhaps with more wisdom or greater knowledge, may have doubted or disbelieved the righteousness of their cause or the justice of their measures. What matters it to them ? It was their highest light—their loftiest duty. They have gone through with it “ and their souls keep marching on,” a countless and innumerable army.

Let us gather up the great subject. Here have we thrust upon us this glorious and blessed patrimony of life, with its countless duties, laws and responsibilities ; its struggles, its trials, and its dangers, but oh ! with its gracious blessings, its loving providences, and its most glorious anticipations. Who will halt or falter on the way ? Who will not “ be strong and of a good courage ? ” The path is clearly marked and well defined, full of snares and pitfalls for the unwary and ignorant, and of delusions for the heedless. All the laws of our being must be attended to, and while “ the mint and cummin ” of the bodily life are duly regarded, Justice, Mercy, Truth, (the soul’s high watchwords) must be the touchstones of every thought and action. Then shall we move gloriously forward in the path of duty with certain and sure footsteps, with the everlasting arms supporting us, and the voice of the Eternal Father ever sounding in our ears.

Ours is no Simplon pass of eternal snows, lighted by dim twilight, with a grim devil ever at our elbow, seeking how he may entangle our slippery feet—obscuring still

more the paths before us, or hurling us headlong into the abyss below; while in the dim misty light, many voices sound in our ears, each one shrieking in his peculiar key, "No! this is the way;" "This is the true way;" "This is the infallible light; all others leadeth to destruction," and each holds up his little lurid light, and now and again shouts "We alone shall climb the holy hill; we alone shall see the celestial city." No! our step is ever on the solid earth, and the sunshine of Heaven rests upon it. We feel the Holiest ever at our side; often do we struggle on in sad forgetfulness, yet do we know He is ever there, helping our weaknesses, healing our backslidings, and ever making our cup run over with blessings, heedless of our unthankfulness, of our ingratitude, often even of our grumblings and discontent. No! our faith is firm, leading, it is true, from we know not where, commencing from before our consciousness—but ever lying in pleasant places, ever resounding with cheering voices and beaming with cheerful faces; sometimes overcast with cloud and storm, and anon aglow with light and love.

Many a trial and hard fought struggle have we gone through. Each heart knows its own bitterness; yet is hopeful life strong within us, and we trust we have gathered strength from sufferings. We would fain bind up our loins for our eternal journey; and while we add another mark to the record of our lives, prepare ourselves with joyful alacrity for whatever the future has in store for us.

During the last revolution, two beautiful spirits have passed from us—passed within the veil into the Holy of Holies; and while we try and peer beneath the curtain into the resplendent glories beyond—where they have gone to meet the noble army of martyrs, the glorious company of the just made perfect, to join the seraphim who love most,

and cherubim who know most—fain would we see the meeting with the other loved ones, who one after another long before had left our own circle—some in mature years, some amid abundant cares and useful life, and some in bounding youth and toddling infancy—fain would we witness the raptured embrace, the endearing, loving remembrance. Nay, it is not given us to see. We cannot enter within that veil with our mortal bodies, yet can we with the soul's eyes sometimes see them round about the eternal throne, ever circling joyfully, not without song, not without holy work in everlasting jubilee. But surely, we hear some scorner whisper in our ears, "How know you that we live again? What you call revelation is but old wives' tales—give us facts—facts—all else is worthless." Ah! friend, one great stupendous fact has been pealing in our ears since childhood, has been about our path and about our bed, has beset us behind and before, from infancy up to manhood—through it we live, and move, and have our being. Oh! it has been very bountiful to us. It has given us thought and affection, and hope, and memory. It has, science tells us, moulded this beautiful world myriads of years ago, far longer than thought can reach; has taken it atom by atom, and minute crystal by crystal, until through ceaseless never-ending change this beautiful world has been produced, every operation carefully, thoughtfully prepared for—never missing of its purpose, never failing—nothing forgetting, nothing misplaced, nothing wasted or lost, an undeviating movement onward—onward through all ages—from glory to glory. Do we not see it even in our own short lives?

Shall we, then, separate our loved ones from the same kindly Providence which we feel within us and in every atom around us, animate and inanimate? Their bodies may moulder in the ground. They were beautiful, but they

were of the earth, and have returned to their beautiful mother. But their souls cannot die. Their love, their truth, their hope, their faith, their devotion—these live for ever. They are entities. They have life. Their souls keep marching on ; and when one by one *we* too are called to tread the darksome valley, we shall, as we hope, tread fearlessly, aye joyously. We shall feel “ our Father’s right hand in the darkness, and be lifted up and strengthened ;” we shall hear His soft kind voice sounding in our ears “ It is I, be not afraid ;” and with trusting fearless hand, shall we lift that mystic awful veil, and stand with Him within the Holy of Holies.

