

HERE A F T E R ?

“*Warte nur; bald ruhest du auch.*”—GOETHE.

From ‘THE INDEX.’

TIME, *Midnight.*—Scene, a sick chamber: *Julius sits by the bedside of his dying father.*

FATHER.

Julius, my sands of life are running low.
My hours are numbered, and thou holdst a hand
Which soon must rest as marble in thy grasp.
To-morrow’s sun will look on thee bereaved
Of him who gave thee life and who has reared
His only son with tender, loving care.

JULIUS.

Father, I cannot through my blinding tears
See now thy features, which to me have seemed
The index of a soul so pure and kind,
That I have almost worshipped while I loved
Him who to me was father, brother, friend.
My life will seem all desolate when thou,
My guardian and instructor, art no more.
I cannot think it true that I so soon
Must hear for the last time thy gentle voice
Inciting me to noble aims of life.

(Weeps).

Yet tell me, father, is there aught that thou
 Wouldst give me as a last, a dying charge?
 Doubt not, I'll do it, if 'tis in my power.

FATHER.

Nothing, my son; the wishes of my heart
 For thy great life-work are already known.
 Go steadfast on with nobleness of soul
 In the high path thou treadst with honour now;
 So shalt thou also, when life's evening comes,
 Lie down with equanimity to die.

JULIUS.

Father, of all the problems of the soul
 Which we have oft discussed, there is not one
 Which has so occupied our thoughts as this:—
Is man immortal? Is he still to live
In conscious being after this frail clay
Is decomposed to native dust once more?
 When last we spoke of this, thou hadst no light,
 No fixed assurance of another life;
 The future looked impenetrably dark,
 And immortality was held by thee
 Not as a certainty, but as a *hope*.
 How does this awful question now appear,
 Now when the flame of life is burning low
 And Death's dread shadow holds thee in its gloom?

FATHER.

The same, my son, as when the ruddy blood
 Was coursing healthfully through all my veins,
 And when that seemed a subject quite abstract,
 Which never could have reference to *me*,
 A living, breathing man in the full flush

Of health and vigour. It is as you say:
 I then could find no *proof* that we should live
 Beyond this brief existence, though I held
 Of such a future life a solemn *hope*.
 I see no clearer light than then I saw,
 Yet I am calm and die without a fear,
 Of this assured, that nothing I can do
 Will change a hair's breadth that which is to be.
 'Tis well if I awake; 'tis also well
 (Perchance e'en better), if I sleep; for who
 Can tell what *mode* of being may await
 The soul which leaves its tenement of clay?
 Therefore I rest in perfect peace of mind:
 My only grief to say farewell to thee.

JULIUS.

My Father, I confess 'tis without hope
 That I approach thee with a strange request;
 But I would fain try every mode which may
 Throw light upon the gloom beyond the grave.
 'Tis claimed by many that their absent dead
 Hold converse with them still from spirit realms.
 We oft have smiled at this thought in contempt,
 And ridiculed such fancies as absurd;
 Yet, father, if in truth thou still shouldst live
 After thy spirit quits this mortal frame,
 And canst by any means convey to me
 News merely of the *fact* of such a life,
 I do implore thee, by our mutual love,
 Reveal it to my lonely, broken heart!
 Come to me as I sit beside thy form,
 Before I lay it in the silent grave!
 A constant, loving watch I'll keep for thee,
 Longing and waiting for thy slightest sign.

FATHER.

My son, thou knowst I had a brother once,
Who died a score of years since, in the flower
Of beautiful young manhood ?

JULIUS.

Father, yes.

FATHER.

When he lay dying, as I do to-night,
His bright eyes clouding in the film of death,
With bitter tears of grief and broken words
I made of him the same request which thou
Hast made of me.

JULIUS.

And what was the result ?

FATHER.

Dead silence ! Never from behind the veil,
The dark, thick shroud which hid him from my sight,
Came voice or sign. And so it is with all.
I pity those deluded souls who sit
Gaping and trembling round a creaking board,
Invoking through shrewd tricksters their loved dead !
Dismiss all possibility of such
A revelation from another world,
And learn to live on, patient and resigned,
Until the mystery is solved by Death.

JULIUS.

So be it, then ! But how profoundly sad
That such must be the fate of every soul !

To yearn unutterably for the light,
 To crave with bitter tears that blessed boon—
 The sweet assurance of a future life,
 And yet to be compelled to calmly *wait*,
 See one by one the dear ones all depart,
 Nor know what fate is theirs beyond the tomb !
 How horrible that not a ray of light
 Comes from that darkness, on whose border land
 We say the last farewell to those we love !
 Alas ! what are we ? Puppets that are made
 To dance their part out on a reeling stage ?
 Or, weaklings though we be, have we a spark
 Of that diviner essence which shall live,
Nay, more, must live through everlasting years ?

FATHER.

Draw back the curtain, Julius ; let me look
 Once more upon the glorious expanse
 Of glittering worlds upon their rhythmic dance.

(Julius draws back the curtain.)

See yonder brilliant orb ! Its waves of light,
 Moving with swift pulsations through the depths
 Of azure space, fall now upon my eye
 Fatigued with years of travel since they left
 With lightning-like velocity their source.
 Around that distant sun move glowing worlds,
 Abounding doubtless like our own with life.
 Such suns and systems are dispersed through space
 As motes in sunbeams,—what then is our earth ?
 A speck in vast immensity's domain !
 Moreover, from this speck, while yonder clock
 Ticks out its smallest increment of time,
 There pass away full thirty human lives !
 What then is mine ? By what audacity

Can I claim endless being as my right ?
 If it shall be my lot to re-awake
 In conscious continuity of self,
 Why then I shall rejoice,— *(gasps suddenly.)*
 Ah ! this keen pain
 Comes once more—in my heart. Thy hand, my son !
 'Tis dark !—I see no more thy face. Farewell !
 I'll press thy hand—till—I—

JULIUS

(kneeling and clasping his father's hand: after a pause.)

And this is death !

His hand grows icy cold within my own ;
 His breath grows fainter, and the flame of life
 But flickers in its socket ere it dies !
 My father ! Canst thou hear me ? It is I !
 Press but my hand once more if thou dost hear !
 Gone ! Gone ! and whither ? Is this icy clay,
 Which here I kiss, the *father* whom I loved ?
 These are his features,—these his loving hands
 Which but a moment since pressed mine again.
 So have I seen him often lie in sleep ;
 But from this sleep, alas ! no filial voice
 Can e'er awake him ! Still the starry light
 Falls gently on his eyes, which take no note
 Of that which kindled thought a moment since !
 Was there a soul which ruled in this dear form,
 Which willed, and loved, and thought,—a conscious *self* ?
 Distinct and free from its environment ?
 An entity which nothing can destroy
 Nor yet diffuse or merge into aught else ?
 Or was it but a part of the great *whole*,
 A drop of water prisoned in a shell

And floating on the bosom of the sea,
 Which at the breaking of the shell by Death
 Has mingled once more with its parent waves ?
 Or yet again, was it a kind of force,
 Like that which animates the waving plant
 And draws the juices upward to its leaves,
 Which now has been released from this poor form
 To work in others that we know not of ?
 If so,—'twere vain to ask its present place
 Or mode of action, as 'twould be to seek
 The whereabouts of an extinguished flame,
 Or of the breeze which lately fanned my cheek.
 Insoluble enigmas ! who can know
 The end of this poor, transitory life ?
 Well did my father say : " I calmly rest
 In peaceful equanimity of soul,
 With firmness waiting that which is to be."
 With such a calm philosophy of life
 He passed away, without a shade of fear.
 He could look back upon a life well spent,
 With powers used wisely for a noble end.
 'Tis well. If still he lives, those powers will be
 More ripe for future usefulness. If not,
 Yet think upon the good they *have* achieved,
 Which still remains on earth in worthy lives
 Ennobled, aided, and reclaimed by him.
Such immortality he has attained,
 And thus can well dispense with added life,
 If it should be denied. Here, father, here
 On thy dead form, which I bedew with tears,
 I vow to strive thus for a deathless life :
 A life which shall continue in men's souls
 Long after I am gone ; a constant power
 Inspiring them to pure and noble deeds,

And raising them from worthlessness and vice !
Such power is now *thy* immortality !
Thou liv'st again in me and hundreds more,
To whom thou didst impart thy lofty thoughts,
Thy generous impulses, thy tender love.
So may I live, for evermore a source
Of lasting good on this evolving globe
In the sad drama of our human life !

J. L. STODDARD.

