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ART. II.—SCHOPENHAUER OR ST. JOHN?

THOUGHTS ON ST. JOHN I. 5.

“**I**N my younger days I was always pleased to hear a ring at the door. ‘Ah,’ thought I, ‘now for something pleasant!’ In my later life my feelings are rather described by the cry, ‘Heaven help me; what am I to do?’”

It is strange to observe with what different feelings men look out on the world. But perhaps some of our readers have found an echo in their hearts to this sentence of the apostle of pessimism. The splendid hopefulness of youth is seldom lasting. The “eyes which see all around, in gloom or glow, hues of their own fresh borrowed from the heart,” do not, as life advances, usually find the glow prevail over the gloom. “In childhood,” writes the author quoted, “life looks like the scenery of a theatre viewed from a distance; in advancing age it is like the same scenery when you come up close to it.”

One more quotation from this writer, who reflects, as a rule, all the more piteous parts of the Book of Ecclesiastes: “The later period of youth, as distinguished from childhood, is made miserable by the pursuit of happiness, as though there were no doubt it lay somewhere if only it could be found. . . . The chief feature of the earlier part of life is a never-satisfied longing for happiness. The latter is characterized particularly by the dread of misfortune.”

These quotations from the apostle of unhappiness may be looked upon as hopelessly one-sided, but it is not well to refuse our sympathy to those who cannot help feeling as he did. There is no doubt an increasing tendency among us, in our struggling and increasingly costly civilization, towards this pessimist view of life. We have had our eyes opened, not alone, as all ages have, to a view of our own want of rest and satisfaction; but the impression has for us been much deepened by the growth of sympathy with the misfortunes of others. We cannot ignore other men’s sorrows now, nor leave them out of account in our estimate of life. We cannot any longer hug our own comforts to our breast and let the world go on its sorrowful way. Personal doubts and fears, personal conflicts and disappointments, are not made less trying by this modern habit of recognising the brotherhood of our race.

The result of our increased civilization and of the growth of wealth has been to increase the cost of living, if not by raising the cost of necessaries, by adding largely to the number of things thought to be necessary. We cannot be content unless we have a number of luxuries which our fathers

happily did without. But if anyone asks, Are we happier than our forefathers? the answer must be at best a very dubious one, and most people would reply in the negative. Life seems less happy, though there are so many more things to enjoy, for the craving (which the Buddhists hold to be the great curse of life) goes on, and it is but commonplace to say that we are never satisfied. The daily struggle to be happy, with the inevitable daily failure to be satisfied, tends to make the world seem to many a perplexed and disjointed thing. We do not say that it is such, or that everybody finds it to be such, but we do say that to an increasing number of persons the result of their experience is a growing perplexity and difficulty of hopefulness, or even a sombre apathy which falls back on little bodily comforts and ease, as the best that can be had, when higher pleasures pall.

We are leaving out of consideration that fairly large class of optimists whom good health, light-heartedness, the possession of money in abundance, and a faith which, if not deep, is at least unclouded by doubts, guard against the habit of brooding on the ills of life. And we leave out also those happy souls who have "cast all their care on the Lord" and have found the rest denied to others.

We speak to those who are not protected either by prosperity or faith from taking their impression of life from contact with, and reflection on, its perplexities. Shadows fall on their path, and though shadows may be cast by very different objects, the result is the same if the sunshine be gone. It is a time of doubt, for example, when many cling only as drowning men to such spars as they find floating from what they imagine is the wreck of the old faith. They may be most foolish to imagine this, but they do imagine it, and feel that they have little left for faith to cling to; and so they are unhappy.

It is a time also for the breaking loose from old restraints. Once everything was called right or wrong, now a hundred things lie, like the question of Sunday observance, on the border-line, and people hesitate about duty because they no longer see plain commands and prohibitions. It is a time when social questions press for solution and a bloodless revolution is going on, and that which was above is going down, and that which was below is forcing its way up; and those who are destined to be the losers in this exchange are unhappy.

It is a time when the truth of a Divine Providence is questioned because men cannot understand the flood of misery which sometimes overwhelms the innocent.

The struggle for means of livelihood seems to grow more

intense, and there is an increased number of men who must always be out of work; and when idleness and want are enforced on those who are sober and willing to work, we feel there is something amiss in our civilization, and do not at all require to be told by the Socialists that "something ought to be done" which would make the wealth of the country bring happiness or comfort to a much wider circle of its inhabitants. But the difficulty of wisely apprehending what that "something" is does not lessen the pressure of the burden.

It is not necessary to go on collecting reasons to explain why a number of thoughtful people are feeling more oppressed than formerly with the burden of life, in spite of the many evils which have been remedied by philanthropy. There are irremediable evils, or such as seem irremediable—sin, sorrow, doubt, and care; overwork, nervous strain; divisions in the Church, controversies and self-will; and in the physical world, new epidemics, convulsions of nature, earthquake, fire and flood. Such evils seem to be forcing on our more thoughtful age a haunting fear that darkness and evil prevail over light and good. It is serious when we find even young people taking on their lips—not as a piece of fashionable cant, but with genuine pain—the cry of Solomon, "*All is vanity and a striving after wind!*"

Have we, in addition to manly and vigorous effort to remedy wrongs, any means of relief from all these troubled, pessimistic thoughts? Surely we have. If the Book of Ecclesiastes, written by one satiated but not satisfied, takes that tone, we come into quite another climate when we open the Gospels. Take, to go no further, the opening of St. John.

St. John's lifelong reflection did not leave out of deep consideration human sin and sorrow. Nevertheless, he was at rest. Years of life and of inspired apostleship had planted in his mind some certainties. These he notes down in a few crisp words. He does not argue up to them. He just states them and leaves them. He knows well, none better, how dark this world is with sin and suffering. But he starts from the pole exactly opposite to that of Solomon or Schopenhauer. He does not begin by dwelling on the darkness, and wondering whether there is anywhere a ray of light. He begins with light and life. He starts with the being of the eternal Word of God, the Creator, Life-giver, Enlightener. And when he has well placed this eternal, living brightness before us in a few words, almost all of which are monosyllables, he adds, showing how well aware he is of the awful contrasts and conflicts of life: "*And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehendeth it not.*"

These words have a wide and general application. You may

apply them to the darkness of sin, or of doubt, or of sorrow ; but, apply them as you will, they amount to the same thing. In St. John's view, the view of the aged Christian philosopher who had known Christ in the flesh, and in the spirit, there was an intimate contact between light and darkness ; but one of these two was to prevail. Which ?

According to many, perhaps a majority, of commentators, St. John means to teach that light failed to dissipate darkness. It was like the electric ray, which, dazzling though it be, is not able to pierce through a dense fog. The darkness was so great that it could not comprehend or receive or be conquered by the light.

But, in all probability, with due respect to the great names to be quoted in support of the view that St. John sorrowfully records the failure of the light, we submit that, on the contrary, he teaches the failure of the darkness. "The darkness overcame (*κατέλαβεν*) it not."¹ It is not that the darkness could not understand the light, but that it could not quench it. Side by side light and darkness must coexist during the whole life of man. Faith in Christ cannot in this life banish sin and sorrow ; but then, on the other hand, sin and sorrow need not, shall not, banish faith in Christ, and the more that faith is grasped by Christian hearts, the more inroads it will make on the darkness.

Nothing in the world can be more true than that the light of Christ's Incarnation and Atonement shines in darkness. Darkness shows but small promise of yielding. Take the diagram of the Church Missionary Society, graphically indicating the relative proportions of Christianity, Mahometanism, and heathenism. Take the diagrams of temperance societies, which show the comparative sums spent on the missionary work of the Church and on the support of the liquor traffic. Walk through the poorer streets of any city, study from a window the aspect of an East-End street on Sunday evening, listen to the cries of women in the hands of their drunken husbands, and there is no doubt that if Church, and Nonconformity, and philanthropy are spreading the light, it truly is shining in darkness.

Which wins ? The Apostle lived long ago. He could tell but of what had occurred up to his time. But he was well aware that the character of the conflict was permanent. The words he spoke were designed to be words of cheer. The

¹ Bishop Westcott, *in loc.*, has fully justified this interpretation, and refers to chap. xii. 35, and to an old reading of chap. vi. 17, in both which the words refer to darkness overtaking, or overcoming, or enwrapping men. The Bishop's note should be read at length.—St. John, "Speaker's Commentary."

darkness comprehended not the light. In the awful struggle light was not swallowed up by darkness. Light is the positive; darkness the negative or privative element. In the long run the besiegers must prevail against the besieged, the force of truth and light against the forces of falsehood and darkness.

The interpretation is full of promise. It grants to the full the terrible strength of the kingdom of darkness which seems to prevail everywhere. But it proclaims that it has no power to quench the light which Christ has brought, and which is shining in the midst of it still after nearly 2,000 years.

Now this is our confidence and our hope. The tendency to pessimism or a hopeless fear that everything is going wrong, that Churches are losing power, and God's Word is being enfeebled, and criticism is getting the upper hand, grows stronger, we fear, in the minds of many. Prayer loses its confidence, and zeal its force, under the influence of doubts. The relief of such a state of depression must depend on several things.

1. Trouble must be taken to learn what a vast development is visible in the work of Christian evangelization and philanthropy. Never for 2,000 years has so much money been spent and so many lives dedicated to Christian and humane work. And in proportion as the lives are devoted the success is achieved. Multiply this devotion and you multiply the success. If you are less zealous than the agents of evil, you are giving over the cause to the prince of darkness. The fault is not with the light, but with those to whom it is entrusted. Learn all this, and you will be braced up to join the ranks of workers, instead of those of the hopeless complainers who sell the pass.

2. Strength comes from the fact that the Holy Scripture everywhere witnesses that light and darkness will be in hostile contact till the coming of the kingdom of the glorified Redeemer. What we see, therefore, is a confirmation of the faith, because it is the fulfilment of prophecy.

3. Lastly, the light which alone can resist the devouring darkness must be the pure and unadulterated Gospel of Christ. His person and His work; His resurrection and ascension, and eternal priesthood. The purity of the light is essential to its piercing power.

For each clergyman and Church worker who complains that his work seems to be hopeless and unsuccessful this question should be a vital one: Am I in very deed causing to shine in word and life, through my ministry, the true Light of which St. John wrote, free from the adulterations which mediæval or modern times have mingled with it? Am I confident in the power of proclaiming Christ alone, the Light of the World?

G. R. WYNNE, D.D.