

## THE MEANING OF DEATH

Theological and scientific dogmas that represent man's thought about himself and his environment at its worst, whether savage or sage, have exhibited what Schopenhauer calls "the will to live quite in the primitive biological way," says the *London Light*, in discussing a book called *La Sens de la Mort* (The Meaning of Death), by M. Paul Bourget. The story itself is of the present day, but lack of space prevents us from repeating even the most abbreviated form of the plot. What immediately concerns us is the divergent views touching life and death that are made manifest during the discussion between two of the leading characters. One of these men is a famous surgeon who has just discovered himself to be doomed to death in a few months by cancer. The other is a healthy young man.

These two gentlemen are inspecting a hospital together when the young man remarks that the arrangements there are almost too comfortable. To this the great surgeon objects, "No, what is the use of suffering when it is possible to escape it." His question is passionately resentful because he is suffering very much himself.

The young man, who has never suffered, answers, "To pay." "Pay what?" demanded the surgeon, who has not told the secret of his suffering to others. "The debts of our faults and the faults of others," answers the young man. This interpretation the elder man resents, for his conceptions are mainly materialistic.

"Our faults, as if we had asked to be born! and the faults of others—it is monstrous!" "But," says the young man, "since everything in life leads up to suffering and death, if suffering and death have not that meaning of expiation, what meaning have they, what meaning has life?" The answer of the great surgeon is short, for he is filled with intense resentment. "None," he concludes.

It is, needless to say to the student of the deeper philosophies that both are wrong. It is not true that everything in life leads up to suffering and death. The mission of pain and suffering is not merely expiation. There is no angry God, who aims to get even with us for our wrongdoings; but we stand here face to face with a law, a good law, designed to teach us the lessons that are necessary for our advancement to greater heights in the scale of evolution.

So that, by a succession of existences in earthy bodies of increasingly finer texture, we learn the lessons of life and how to adjust ourselves to the conditions here by right thought and right action. Who has a body so good and perfect that he would like to dwell in it forever? Surely no one. We all have our pains and aches and all are subject to suffering. Therefore death should be looked upon not as the king of terrors but as the merciful relief from an outgrown garment that a new one and better may serve us in a future life and enable us to progress further upon the path of unfoldment. This is seen in all kingdoms.

If the primordial flora had not been subject to death and decay, no higher forms of plant life could ever have come into existence upon earth; and if death had not released the spirit that ensouled the primitive animal form, reptiles would still inhabit the earth, to the exclusion of the higher mammalian types. Similarly, if man had not died, the primitive human forms absolutely unfit for the expression of life and intellect to which we have today attained would still be the only ones here. It is true that we reap what we have sown, but the only purpose of this reaping is not expiation; we are at the same time

learning lessons how to avoid past mistakes on future occasions and conform to the laws of nature.

We are not here only to pay for our mistakes, but to learn by them, and such primitive ideas of atonement as expressed in the answer of the young man must be rooted out of human conception, that nobler forms of religion may take its place. All through the constitution of the Universe runs the principle of justice, but not cold, hard justice; justice it is, tempered with mercy, for that which we recognize as the laws of nature in their manifestations are, in fact, great Intelligences, the ministers of God, the Seven Spirits before the Throne, and the Recording Angels. They are compassionate beyond any conception we can have of this term, and whatever befalls a human being under their guidance is suited just to his needs.

We are told that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without Our Father in Heaven wills it. And if nature—or God—or the Universe—however we name the power that progressively brought to birth the nonindividualized spirit in forms ascending upwards in the scale to man, conserving in each form all progressive developments of lower forms, if this ineffable power is justified even to man as regards the destiny of all creatures below him, the plain assumption in reference to his own fate is that he, being the highest in the four kingdoms of life now evolving in this world, must be provided for when he dies, as well as before he was born. Such is the logical conclusion, and the more we examine the question, the more is that conclusion justified among those who have studied the matter and are in a position to know.

In this connection, it is as strange as it is illuminating to note the different ways in which the war affects people of different religious beliefs. Speaking generally, we may say that there are three great religious systems represented among the combatants: the Hindus, the Mohammedans, and the Christians. Each of these three classes meets death in a different way, on account of what they believe during life. Moreover, their belief makes them act differently when they enter the invisible worlds. For the sake of elucidation and comparison, we may take the Hindu first. He believes in karma, that is to say, that most of the things which befall him in this life are the result of action in former lives, and this karma, it seems, is, to say the least, very difficult to change, if it can be done at all. Perhaps to some extent, some of the most intelligent believe that this karma may be changed, but as a race it is the writer's understanding that they believe that kind of karma cannot be avoided and they are here for the purpose of working it out. But while they are thus expiating the result of their past actions in former lives, they are also making new karma and thus laying the foundation for their future lives. In this respect they believe that they have free will, except as restricted by their environment, and thus they are able to change their lives in the future.

When a man is imbued with this belief and goes to war, he takes it as a matter of course that if he meets death, then it is karma. He fights fearlessly because he feels that if it is not his karma to die then he will come out safe, whatever he does. If suffering comes to him, he looks upon that also as karma and strives to take it as patiently as possible. Furthermore, when after death he finds himself in the invisible world, he is calm and collected; he knows that his relatives, though they may grieve for him, will not do so in an inordinate measure, because they know that it is karma and therefore feel that it is no use to rebel. Furthermore, he believes that in due time he will come to birth again and will meet his dear ones in altered forms; thus, there is no real cause for unrestrained grief.

The Turks have a somewhat similar belief in kismet, which is their name for fate. They believe that every thing in human life to the very smallest detail is predestined and that therefore it does not matter how they act or do not act, whatever is to befall will befall, regardless of any action or exercise of ingenuity of their part; hence it has always been reported that Mohammedan soldiers went forth to war in an absolute disregard of their lives; that they fought with unexcelled bravery, and endured all privations without a murmur, knowing that when they had fought the good fight, they would be translated to paradise, where the beautiful Houris would minister to their welfare forever. Though at the present time all religions seem to have fallen more and more into indifference, the effect of this belief is still seen to a considerable extent by the Invisible Helpers who take care of the victims of war when they pass over. They find usually the Moslems to be calm and resigned to their fate.

But when we consider the case of the Christians, the matter is very different. It is true that the Christian religion also teaches that what a man sows that shall he also reap, but in the first place, the religious teachings have had but a very small place among the Western nations compared to the grip which they have upon the people of the East, such as the Hindus and Mohammedans. Their religion is part of every day life. At certain times, the Orientals, of whatever religion, devote themselves to prayer and are very sincere in their religious observance.

In the Western world, on the other hand, people are generally ashamed of being thought too religious. Recently, one of the New York papers had a full page advertisement, if the writer remembers rightly, which stated that business men ought to go to church as that is a good asset in business, for it marked them as respectable citizens and would gain for them more credit. What an unworthy motive to hold out as an inducement! There was, 'of course, considerable indignation over this advertisement, but it shows the dilemma of the church, how they are put to it to keep up their membership' and attendance, and how few even among students seeking mystic development read this great book, the Bible.

The writer has often noticed that whenever a question comes up concerning the Bible, or someone is asked to read from the Bible, very few can pronounce the names properly, or name the various books of the Bible. These are all signs that go to show that religion with us in the western world is neither studied nor practiced daily by the great majority. On one occasion, while discussing this question with a business man, he remarked that he had no time for the study of religion during the week, therefore he paid a minister to study, and went to church on Sunday in order that the minister might there give him the benefit of what he had learned during the past week.

Those who study the Bible are called cranks and shunned as such. Hence the idea concerning the meaning of suffering and death expressed by the surgeon in the book which gave rise to the thoughts here expressed. But even where the idea of mercy and vicarious atonement is embraced, that goes to the opposite extreme and teaches that immediately a man feels that he has sinned and is sorry, he is at once forgiven as expressed in the couplet,

*Between the stirrup and the ground,  
He pardon sought, and pardon found.*

This conveys the idea that one may live a life of sin up to the very moment of death and then on the deathbed, by saying that we are sorry, we may be forgiven for the whole score of our life. This wrong idea has become so ingrained in the public consciousness that we have lost respect for the law that "as we sow, so shall we also reap," and are depending altogether on grace; that is to say, if we ever give the matter any thought at all, and in the writer's estimation, nothing short of a thorough education of the people of the Western world to the fact of their responsibility can ever awaken the religious life again.

If the churches want to succeed and increase their attendance, if they want to spread the kingdom of Christ upon earth, then this is really the way. They must reawaken the sense of individual responsibility, which has been lost partly by the sale of indulgences practiced by the Catholic Church, which has given those who believe in it the feeling that the justice and equality, which are rooted in universal law, could be cheated by the payment of a few paltry dollars. This was a blow at the very foundation upon which religion stands, and as a result we have today in the present war a spectacle which is too horrible for contemplation. And while our brothers whom we call heathen face death and adjust themselves to conditions in the world beyond because they are imbued with a sense of this responsibility for their own actions and a sense of the divine guardianship which has all things in its great care, we who pride ourselves upon being the most civilized people, Christians, face death in a manner that is altogether unbecoming. When we are not beside ourselves in anger and rage and pass over in that condition, we cry and are unhappy because of the dear ones we left behind, and a small class is commiserating itself for having been taken out of earthly life and enjoyments there experienced.

There is sorrow and mental suffering among the Christians, so-called, that is unequalled and unparalleled among those who come from the East, and were it not that relatives of those people who are now passing over by the hundreds of thousands have pressed into service to soothe and quiet them until they find their balance, and thus minimize the dreadful condition, it seems as if this earth must have been swallowed up in an ocean of sorrow.

It seems therefore to the writer that in order to effect the regeneration of the Western world, people must be educated concerning the action of the twin laws which are at the root of human progress; for when we thoroughly understand that under the law of consequence we are responsible for our actions, but that the retribution is not meted out by an angry God, any more than when we throw a stone up in the sky God takes that stone and throws it back at us. Action and reaction follow each other just as ebb and flow, night and day, winter and summer, and this law, coupled with the law of rebirth, which gives us a new chance in a new environment and better body, enables us to work our way from the human to the divine, as we have worked our way from microbe to man.