

III

AES TRIPLEX[1]

The changes wrought by death are in themselves so sharp and final, and so terrible and melancholy in their consequences, that the thing stands alone in man's experience, and has no parallel upon earth. It outdoes all other accidents because it is the last of them. Sometimes it leaps suddenly upon its victims, like a Thug;^[2] sometimes it lays a regular siege and creeps upon their citadel during a score of years. And when the business is done, there is sore havoc made in other people's lives, and a pin knocked out by which many subsidiary friendships hung together. There are empty chairs, solitary walks, and single beds at night. Again in taking away our friends, death does not take them away utterly, but leaves behind a mocking, tragical, and soon intolerable residue, which must be hurriedly concealed. Hence a whole chapter of sights and customs striking to the mind, from the pyramids of Egypt to the gibbets and dule trees^[3] of mediaeval Europe. The poorest persons have a bit of pageant going towards the tomb; memorial stones are set up over the least memorable; and, in order to preserve some show of respect for what remains of our old loves and friendships, we must accompany it with much grimly ludicrous ceremonial, and the hired undertaker parades before the door. All this, and much more of the same sort, accompanied by the eloquence of

poets, has gone a great way to put humanity in error; nay, in many philosophies the error has been embodied and laid down with every circumstance of logic; although in real life the bustle and swiftness, in leaving people little time to think, have not left them time enough to go dangerously wrong in practice.

As a matter of fact, although few things are spoken of with more fearful whisperings than this prospect of death, few have less influence on conduct under healthy circumstances. We have all heard of cities in South America built upon the side of fiery mountains, and how, even in this tremendous neighbourhood, the inhabitants are not a jot more impressed by the solemnity of mortal conditions than if they were delving gardens in the greenest corner of England. There are serenades and suppers and much gallantry among the myrtles overhead; and meanwhile the foundation shudders underfoot, the bowels of the mountain growl, and at any moment living ruin may leap sky-high into the moonlight, and tumble man and his merry-making in the dust. In the eyes of very young people, and very dull old ones, there is something indescribably reckless and desperate in such a picture. It seems not credible that respectable married people, with umbrellas, should find appetite for a bit of supper within quite a long distance of a fiery mountain; ordinary life begins to smell of high-handed debauch when it is carried on so close to a catastrophe; and even cheese and salad, it seems, could hardly be relished in such circumstances without something like a defiance of the Creator. It should be a place for nobody but hermits dwelling in prayer and maceration, or mere

born-devils drowning care in a perpetual carouse.

And yet, when one comes to think upon it calmly, the situation of these South American citizens forms only a very pale figure for the state of ordinary mankind. This world itself, travelling blindly and swiftly in overcrowded space, among a million other worlds travelling blindly and swiftly in contrary directions, may very well come by a knock that would set it into explosion like a penny squib. And what, pathologically looked at, is the human body with all its organs, but a mere bagful of petards? The least of these is as dangerous to the whole economy as the ship's powder-magazine to the ship; and with every breath we breathe, and every meal we eat, we are putting one or more of them in peril. If we clung as devotedly as some philosophers pretend we do to the abstract idea of life, or were half as frightened as they make out we are, for the subversive accident that ends it all, the trumpets might sound[4] by the hour and no one would follow them into battle--the blue-peter might fly at the truck,[5] but who would climb into a sea-going ship? Think (if these philosophers were right) with what a preparation of spirit we should affront the daily peril of the dinner-table: a deadlier spot than any battlefield in history, where the far greater proportion of our ancestors have miserably left their bones! What woman would ever be lured into marriage, so much more dangerous than the wildest sea? And what would it be to grow old? For, after a certain distance, every step we take in life we find the ice growing thinner below our feet, and all around us and behind us we see our contemporaries going through. By the time a man gets well into

the seventies, his continued existence is a mere miracle; and when he lays his old bones in bed for the night, there is an overwhelming probability that he will never see the day. Do the old men mind it, as a matter of fact? Why, no. They were never merrier; they have their grog at night, and tell the raciest stories; they hear of the death of people about their own age, or even younger, not as if it was a grisly warning, but with a simple childlike pleasure at having outlived someone else; and when a draught might puff them out like a fluttering candle, or a bit of a stumble shatter them like so much glass, their old hearts keep sound and unaffrighted, and they go on, bubbling with laughter, through years of man's age compared to which the valley at Balaclava[6] was as safe and peaceful as a village cricket-green on Sunday. It may fairly be questioned (if we look to the peril only) whether it was a much more daring feat for Curtius[7] to plunge into the gulf, than for any old gentleman of ninety to doff his clothes and clamber into bed.

Indeed, it is a memorable subject for consideration, with what unconcern and gaiety mankind pricks on along the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The whole way is one wilderness of snares, and the end of it, for those who fear the last pinch, is irrevocable ruin. And yet we go spinning through it all, like a party for the Derby.[8] Perhaps the reader remembers one of the humorous devices of the deified Caligula:[9] how he encouraged a vast concourse of holiday-makers on to his bridge over Baiae[10] bay; and when they were in the height of their enjoyment, turned loose the Praetorian guards[11] among the

company, and had them tossed into the sea. This is no bad miniature of the dealings of nature with the transitory race of man. Only, what a chequered picnic we have of it, even while it lasts! and into what great waters, not to be crossed by any swimmer, God's pale Praetorian throws us over in the end!

We live the time that a match flickers; we pop the cork of a ginger-beer bottle, and the earthquake swallows us on the instant. Is it not odd, is it not incongruous, is it not, in the highest sense of human speech, incredible, that we should think so highly of the ginger-beer, and regard so little the devouring earthquake? The love of Life and the fear of Death are two famous phrases that grow harder to understand the more we think about them. It is a well-known fact that an immense proportion of boat accidents would never happen if people held the sheet in their hands instead of making it fast; and yet, unless it be some martinet of a professional mariner or some landsman with shattered nerves, every one of God's creatures makes it fast. A strange instance of man's unconcern and brazen boldness in the face of death!

We confound ourselves with metaphysical phrases, which we import into daily talk with noble inappropriateness. We have no idea of what death is, apart from its circumstances and some of its consequences to others; and although we have some experience of living, there is not a man on earth who has flown so high into abstraction as to have any practical guess at the meaning of the Word life. All literature,

from Job and Omar Khayyam to Thomas Carlyle or Walt Whitman,[12] is but an attempt to look upon the human state with such largeness of view as shall enable us to rise from the consideration of living to the Definition of Life. And our sages give us about the best satisfaction in their power when they say that it is a vapour, or a show, or made out of the same stuff with dreams.[13] Philosophy, in its more rigid sense, has been at the same work for ages; and after a myriad bald heads have wagged over the problem, and piles of words have been heaped one upon another into dry and cloudy volumes without end, philosophy has the honour of laying before us, with modest pride, her contribution towards the subject: that life is a Permanent Possibility of Sensation.[14] Truly a fine result! A man may very well love beef, or hunting, or a woman; but surely, surely, not a Permanent Possibility of Sensation. He may be afraid of a precipice, or a dentist, or a large enemy with a club, or even an undertaker's man; but not certainly of abstract death. We may trick with the word life in its dozen senses until we are weary of tricking; we may argue in terms of all the philosophies on earth, but one fact remains true throughout--that we do not love life, in the sense that we are greatly preoccupied about its conservation; that we do not, properly speaking, love life at all, but living. Into the views of the least careful there will enter some degree of providence; no man's eyes are fixed entirely on the passing hour; but although we have some anticipation of good health, good weather, wine, active employment, love, and self-approval, the sum of these anticipations does not amount to anything like a general view of life's possibilities and issues; nor

are those who cherish them most vividly, at all the most scrupulous of their personal safety. To be deeply interested in the accidents of our existence, to enjoy keenly the mixed texture of human experience, rather leads a man to disregard precautions, and risk his neck against a straw. For surely the love of living is stronger in an Alpine climber roping over a peril, or a hunter riding merrily at a stiff fence, than in a creature who lives upon a diet and walks a measured distance in the interest of his constitution.

There is a great deal of very vile nonsense talked upon both sides of the matter: tearing divines reducing life to the dimensions of a mere funeral procession, so short as to be hardly decent; and melancholy unbelievers yearning for the tomb as if it were a world too far away. Both sides must feel a little ashamed of their performances now and again when they draw in their chairs to dinner. Indeed, a good meal and a bottle of wine is an answer to most standard works upon the question. When a man's heart warms to his viands, he forgets a great deal of sophistry, and soars into a rosy zone of contemplation. Death may be knocking at the door, like the Commander's statue;[15] we have something else in hand, thank God, and let him knock. Passing bells are ringing all the world over. All the world over, and every hour,[16] someone is parting company with all his aches and ecstasies. For us also the trap is laid. But we are so fond of life that we have no leisure to entertain the terror of death. It is a honeymoon with us all through, and none of the longest. Small blame to us if we give our whole hearts to this glowing bride of ours, to the appetites, to

honour, to the hungry curiosity of the mind, to the pleasure of the eyes in nature, and the pride of our own nimble bodies.

We all of us appreciate the sensations; but as for caring about the Permanence of the Possibility, a man's head is generally very bald, and his senses very dull, before he comes to that. Whether we regard life as a lane leading to a dead wall--a mere bag's end,[17] as the French say--or whether we think of it as a vestibule or gymnasium, where we wait our turn and prepare our faculties for some more noble destiny; whether we thunder in a pulpit, or pule in little atheistic poetry-books, about its vanity and brevity; whether we look justly for years of health and vigour, or are about to mount into a Bath-chair, as a step towards the hearse; in each and all of these views and situations there is but one conclusion possible: that a man should stop his ears against paralysing terror, and run the race that is set before him with a single mind. No one surely could have recoiled with more heartache and terror from the thought of death than our respected lexicographer; and yet we know how little it affected his conduct, how wisely and boldly he walked, and in what a fresh and lively vein he spoke of life. Already an old man, he ventured on his Highland tour; and his heart, bound with triple brass, did not recoil before twenty-seven individual cups of tea.[18] As courage and intelligence are the two qualities best worth a good man's cultivation, so it is the first part of intelligence to recognise our precarious estate in life, and the first part of courage to be not at all abashed before the fact. A frank and somewhat headlong carriage, not looking too

anxiously before, not dallying in maudlin regret over the past, stamps the man who is well armoured for this world.

And not only well armoured for himself, but a good friend and a good citizen to boot. We do not go to cowards for tender dealing; there is nothing so cruel as panic; the man who has least fear for his own carcass, has most time to consider others. That eminent chemist who took his walks abroad in tin shoes, and subsisted wholly upon tepid milk, had all his work cut out for him in considerate dealings with his own digestion. So soon as prudence has begun to grow up in the brain, like a dismal fungus, it finds its first expression in a paralysis of generous acts. The victim begins to shrink spiritually; he develops a fancy for parlours with a regulated temperature, and takes his morality on the principle of tin shoes and tepid milk. The care of one important body or soul becomes so engrossing, that all the noises of the outer world begin to come thin and faint into the parlour with the regulated temperature; and the tin shoes go equably forward over blood and rain. To be overwise is to ossify; and the scruple-monger ends by standing stockstill. Now the man who has his heart on his sleeve, and a good whirling weathercock of a brain, who reckons his life as a thing to be dashingly used and cheerfully hazarded, makes a very different acquaintance of the world, keeps all his pulses going true and fast, and gathers impetus as he runs, until, if he be running towards anything better than wildfire, he may shoot up and become a constellation in the end. Lord look after his health, Lord have a care of his soul, says he; and he has at the key of the

position, and swashes through incongruity and peril towards his aim. Death is on all sides of him with pointed batteries, as he is on all sides of all of us; unfortunate surprises gird him round; mim-mouthed friends[19] and relations hold up their hands in quite a little elegiacal synod about his path: and what cares he for all this? Being a true lover of living, a fellow with something pushing and spontaneous in his inside, he must, like any other soldier, in any other stirring, deadly warfare, push on at his best pace until he touch the goal. "A peerage or Westminster Abbey!"[20] cried Nelson in his bright, boyish, heroic manner. These are great incentives; not for any of these, but for the plain satisfaction of living, of being about their business in some sort or other, do the brave, serviceable men of every nation tread down the nettle danger,[21] and pass flyingly over all the stumbling-blocks of prudence. Think of the heroism of Johnson, think of that superb indifference to mortal limitation that set him upon his dictionary, and carried him through triumphantly until the end! Who, if he were wisely considerate of things at large, would ever embark upon any work much more considerable than a halfpenny post card? Who would project a serial novel, after Thackeray and Dickens had each fallen in mid-course?[22] Who would find heart enough to begin to live, if he dallied with the consideration of death?

And, after all, what sorry and pitiful quibbling all this is! To forego all the issues of living in a parlour with a regulated temperature--as if that were not to die a hundred times over, and for ten years at a stretch! As if it were not to die in one's own

lifetime, and without even the sad immunities of death! As if it were not to die, and yet be the patient spectators of our own pitiable change! The Permanent Possibility is preserved, but the sensations carefully held at arm's length, as if one kept a photographic plate in a dark chamber. It is better to lose health like a spendthrift than to waste it like a miser. It is better to live and be done with it, than to die daily in the sickroom. By all means begin your folio; even if the doctor does not give you a year, even if he hesitates about a month, make one brave push and see what can be accomplished in a week. It is not only in finished undertakings that we ought to honour useful labour. A spirit goes out of the man who means execution, which outlives the most untimely ending. All who have meant good work with their whole hearts, have done good work,[23] although they may die before they have the time to sign it. Every heart that has beat strong and cheerfully has left a hopeful impulse behind it in the world, and bettered the tradition of mankind. And even if death catch people, like an open pitfall, and in mid-career, laying out vast projects, and planning monstrous foundations, flushed with hope, and their mouths full of boastful language, they should be at once tripped up and silenced: is there not something brave and spirited in such a termination? and does not life go down with a better grace, foaming in full body over a precipice, than miserably straggling to an end in sandy deltas? When the Greeks made their fine saying that those whom the gods love die young,[24] I cannot help believing they had this sort of death also in their eye. For surely, at whatever age it overtake the man, this is to die young. Death has not been suffered to

take so much as an illusion from his heart. In the hot-fit of life, a tip-toe on the highest point of being, he passes at a bound on to the other side. The noise of the mallet and chisel is scarcely quenched, the trumpets are hardly done blowing, when, trailing with him clouds of glory,[25] this happy-starred, full-blooded spirit shoots into the spiritual land.

NOTES

This essay, which is commonly (and justly) regarded as Stevenson's masterpiece of literary composition, was first printed in the *Cornhill Magazine* for April 1878, Vol. XXXVII, pp. 432-437. In 1881 it was published in the volume *Virginibus Puerisque*. For the success of this volume, as well as for its author's relations with the editor of the *Cornhill*, see our note to *An Apology for Idlers*. It was this article which was selected for reprinting in separate form by the American Committee of the Robert Louis Stevenson Memorial Fund; to every subscriber of ten dollars or more, was given a copy of this essay, exquisitely printed at the De Vinne Press, 1898. Copies of this edition are now eagerly sought by book-collectors; five of them were taken by the Robert Louis Stevenson Club of Yale College, consisting of a few undergraduates of the class of 1898, who subscribed fifty dollars to the fund.

Stevenson's cheerful optimism was constantly shadowed by the thought

of Death, and in Aes Triplex he gives free rein to his fancies on this universal theme.

[Note 1: The title, AEs Triplex, is taken from Horace, aes triplex circa pectus, "breast enclosed by triple brass," "aes" used by Horace as a "symbol of indomitable courage."--Lewis's Latin Dictionary.]

[Note 2: Thug. This word, which sounds to-day so slangy, really comes from the Hindoos (Hindustani thaaa, deceive). It is the name of a religious order in India, ostensibly devoted to the worship of a goddess, but really given to murder for the sake of booty. The Englishmen in India called them Thugs, hence the name in its modern general sense.]

[Note 3: Pyramids ... dule trees. For pyramids, see our note 25 of chapter II above... Dule trees. More properly spelled "dool." A dool was a stake or post used to mark boundaries.]

[Note 4: The trumpets might sound. "For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" I Cor. XIV, 8.]

[Note 5: The blue-peter might-fly at the truck. The blue-peter is a term used in the British navy and widely elsewhere; it is a blue flag with a white square employed often as a signal for sailing. The word is corrupted from Blue Repeater, a signal flag. Truck is a very

small platform at the top of a mast.]

[Note 6: Balaclava. A little port near Sebastopol, in the Crimea.

During the Crimean War, on the 25 October 1854, occurred the cavalry charge of some six hundred Englishmen, celebrated by Tennyson's universally known poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. It has recently been asserted that the number reported as actually killed in this headlong charge referred to the horses, not to the men.]

[Note 7: Curtius. Referring to the story of the Roman youth, Metius Curtius, who in 362 B.C. leaped into a chasm in the Forum, in order to save his country. The chasm immediately closed over him, and Rome was saved. Although the truth of the story has naturally failed to survive the investigations of historical critics, its moral inspiration has been effective in many historical instances.]

[Note 8: Party for the Derby. Derby Day, which is the occasion of the most famous annual running race for horses in the world, takes place in the south of England during the week preceding Whitsunday. The race was founded by the Earl of Derby in 1780. It is now one of the greatest holidays in England, and the whole city of London turns out for the event. It is a great spectacle to see the crowd going from London and returning. The most faithful description of the event, the crowds, and the interest excited, may be found in George Moore's novel, *Esther Waters* (1894).]

[Note 9: The deified Caligula. Caius Caligula was Roman Emperor from 37 to 41 A. D. He was brought up among the soldiers, who gave him the name Caligula, because he wore the soldier's leather shoe, or half-boot, (Latin caliga). Caligula was deified, but that did not prevent him from becoming a madman, which seems to be the best way to account for his wanton cruelty and extraordinary caprices.]

[Note 10: Baiae was a small town on the Campanian Coast, ten miles from Naples. It was a favorite summer resort of the Roman aristocracy.]

[Note 11: The Praetorian Guard was the body-guard of the Roman emperors. The incident Stevenson speaks of may be found in Tacitus.]

[Note 12: Job ... Walt Whitman. The book of Job is usually regarded as the most poetical work in the Bible, even exceeding Psalms and Isaiah in its splendid imaginative language and extraordinary figures of speech. For a literary study of it, the student is recommended to Professor Moulton's edition. Omar Khayyam was a Persian poet of mediaeval times, who became known to English readers through the beautiful paraphrase of some of his stanzas by Edward Fitzgerald, in 1859. If any one will take the trouble to compare a literal prose rendering of Omar (as in N.H. Dole's variorum edition) with the version by Fitzgerald, he will speedily see that the power and beauty of the poem is due far more to the skill of "Old Fitz" than to the original. Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) was perhaps the

foremost writer of English prose in the nineteenth century. Although a consummate literary artist, he was even more influential as a moral tonic. His philosophy and that of Omar represent as wide a contrast as could easily be found. Walt Whitman, the strange American poet (1819-1892), whose famous *Leaves of Grass* (1855) excited an uproar in America, and gave the author a much more serious reputation in Europe. Stevenson's interest in him was genuine, but not partisan, and his essay, *The Gospel According to Walt Whitman* (*The New Quarterly Magazine*, Oct. 1878), is perhaps the most judicious appreciation in the English language of this singular poet. Job, Omar Khayyam, Carlyle and Whitman, taken together, certainly give a curious collection of what the Germans call *Weltanschauungen*.]

[Note 13: A vapour, or a show, or made out of the same stuff with dreams. For constant comparisons of life with a vapour or a show, see Quarles's *Emblems* (1635), though these conventional figures may be found thousands of times in general literature. The latter part of the sentence refers to the *Tempest*, Act IV, Scene I.

"We are such stuff

As dreams are made on, and our little life

Is rounded with a sleep."]

[Note 14: Permanent Possibility of Sensation. "Matter then, may be defined, a Permanent Possibility of Sensation."--John Stuart Mill, *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, Vol. I. Chap. XI.]

[Note 15: Like the Commander's Statue. In the familiar story of Don Juan, where the audacious rake accepts the Commander's invitation to supper. For treatments of this theme, see Molière's play Don Juan, or Mozart's opera Don Giovanni; see also Bernard Shaw's paradoxical play, Man and Superman.... We have something else in hand, thank God, and let him knock. It is possible that Stevenson's words here are an unconscious reminiscence of Colley Cibber's letter to the novelist Richardson. This unabashed old profligate celebrated the Christmas Day of his eightieth year by writing to the apostle of domestic virtue in the following strain: "Though Death has been cooling his heels at my door these three weeks, I have not had time to see him. The daily conversation of my friends has kept me so agreeably alive, that I have not passed my time better a great while. If you have a mind to make one of us, I will order Death to come another day."]

[Note 16: All the world over, and every hour. He might truthfully have said, "every second."]

[Note 17: A mere bag's end, as the French say. A cul de sac.]

[Note 18: Our respected lexicographer ... Highland tour ... triple brass ... twenty-seven individual cups of tea. Dr. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary appeared in 1755. For his horror of death, his fondness for tea, and his Highland tour with Boswell, see the latter's Life of

Johnson; consult the late Dr. Hill's admirable index in his edition of the Life.]

[Note 19: Mim-mouthed friends. See J. Wright's English Dialect Dictionary. "Mim-mouthed" means "affectedly prim or proper in speech."]

[Note 20: "A peerage or Westminster Abbey!" Horatio Nelson (1758-1805), the most famous admiral in England's naval history, who won the great battle of Trafalgar and lost his life in the moment of victory. Nelson was as ambitious as he was brave, and his cry that Stevenson quotes was characteristic.]

[Note 21: Tread down the nettle danger. Hotspur's words in King Henry IV, Part I, Act II, Sc. 3. "Out of this nettle, danger, we pluck this flower, safety."]

[Note 22: After Thackeray and Dickens had each fallen in mid-course? Thackeray and Dickens, dying in 1863 and in 1870 respectively, left unfinished *Denis Duval* and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Stevenson himself left unfinished what would in all probability have been his unquestioned masterpiece, *Weir of Hermiston*.]

[Note 23: All who have meant good work with their whole hearts, have done good work. See Browning's inspiring poem, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, XXIII, XXIV, XXV:--

"Not on the vulgar mass
Called "work," must sentence pass,
Things done, which took the eye and had the price;
O'er which, from level stand,
The low world laid its hand,
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb
And finger failed to plumb,
So passed in making up the main account;
All instincts immature,
All purposes unsure,
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed
Into a narrow act,
Fancies that broke through language and escaped;
All I could never be,
All, men ignored in me,
This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped."]

[Note 24: Whom the Gods love die young. "Quem di diligunt adolescens moritur."--Plautus, Bacchides, Act IV, Sc. 7.]

[Note 25: Trailing with him clouds of glory. This passage, from

Wordsworth's Ode on the Intimations of Immortality (1807), was a favorite one with Stevenson, and he quotes it several times in various essays.]