

THE MINISTRATION OF OUR DEPARTED FRIENDS.

A NEW YEAR'S REVERY.

"It is a beautiful belief,
That ever round our head
Are hovering on viewless wings
The spirits of the dead."

While every year is taking one and another from the ranks of life and usefulness, or the charmed circle of friendship and love, it is soothing to remember that the spiritual world is gaining in riches through the poverty of this.

In early life, with our friends all around us,--hearing their voices, cheered by their smiles,--death and the spiritual world are to us remote, misty, and half-fabulous; but as we advance in our journey, and voice after voice is hushed, and form after form vanishes from our side, and our shadow falls almost solitary on the hillside of life, the soul, by a necessity of its being, tends to the unseen and spiritual, and pursues in another life those it seeks in vain in this.

For with every friend that dies, dies also some especial form of social enjoyment, whose being depended on the peculiar character of that friend; till, late in the afternoon of life, the pilgrim seems to

himself to have passed over to the unseen world in successive portions half his own spirit; and poor indeed is he who has not familiarized himself with that unknown, whither, despite himself, his soul is earnestly tending.

One of the deepest and most imperative cravings of the human heart, as it follows its beloved ones beyond the veil, is for some assurance that they still love and care for us. Could we firmly believe this, bereavement would lose half its bitterness. As a German writer beautifully expresses it, "Our friend is not wholly gone from us; we see across the river of death, in the blue distance, the smoke of his cottage;" hence the heart, always creating what it desires, has ever made the guardianship and ministration of departed spirits a favorite theme of poetic fiction.

But is it, then, fiction? Does revelation, which gives so many hopes which nature had not, give none here? Is there no sober certainty to correspond to the inborn and passionate craving of the soul? Do departed spirits in verity retain any knowledge of what transpires in this world, and take any part in its scenes? All that revelation says of a spiritual state is more intimation than assertion; it has no distinct treatise, and teaches nothing apparently of set purpose; but gives vague, glorious images, while now and then some accidental ray of intelligence looks out,--

"----like eyes of cherubs shining

From out the veil that hid the ark."

But out of all the different hints and assertions of the Bible we think a better inferential argument might be constructed to prove the ministrations of departed spirits than for many a doctrine which has passed in its day for the height of orthodoxy.

First, then, the Bible distinctly says that there is a class of invisible spirits who minister to the children of men: "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister to those who shall be heirs of salvation?" It is said of little children, that "their angels do always behold the face of our Father which is in heaven." This last passage, from the words of our Savior, taken in connection with the well-known tradition of his time, fully recognizes the idea of individual guardian spirits; for God's government over mind is, it seems, throughout, one of intermediate agencies, and these not chosen at random, but with the nicest reference to their adaptation to the purpose intended. Not even the All-seeing, All-knowing One was deemed perfectly adapted to become a human Savior without a human experience. Knowledge intuitive, gained from above, of human wants and woes was not enough--to it must be added the home-born certainty of consciousness and memory; the Head of all mediation must become human. Is it likely, then, that, in selecting subordinate agencies, this so necessary a requisite of a human life and experience is overlooked? While around the throne of God stand spirits, now sainted and glorified, yet thrillingly conscious of a past experience of sin and sorrow, and trembling in sympathy with

temptations and struggles like their own, is it likely that he would pass by these souls, thus burning for the work, and commit it to those bright abstract beings whose knowledge and experience are comparatively so distant and so cold?

It is strongly in confirmation of this idea, that in the transfiguration scene--which seems to have been intended purposely to give the disciples a glimpse of the glorified state of their Master--we find him attended by two spirits of earth, Moses and Elias, "which appeared with him in glory, and spake of his death which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." It appears that these so long departed ones were still mingling in deep sympathy with the tide of human affairs--not only aware of the present, but also informed as to the future. In coincidence with this idea are all those passages which speak of the redeemed of earth as being closely and indissolubly identified with Christ, members of his body, of his flesh and his bones. It is not to be supposed that those united to Jesus above all others by so vivid a sympathy and community of interests are left out as instruments in that great work of human regeneration which so engrosses him; and when we hear Christians spoken of as kings and priests unto God, as those who shall judge angels, we see it more than intimated that they are to be the partners and actors in that great work of spiritual regeneration of which Jesus is the head.

What then? May we look among the band of ministering spirits for our own departed ones? Whom would God be more likely to send us? Have we in heaven a friend who knew us to the heart's core? a friend to whom we

have unfolded our soul in its most secret recesses? to whom we have confessed our weaknesses and deplored our griefs? If we are to have a ministering spirit, who better adapted? Have we not memories which correspond to such a belief? When our soul has been cast down, has never an invisible voice whispered, "There is lifting up"? Have not gales and breezes of sweet and healing thought been wafted over us, as if an angel had shaken from his wings the odors of paradise? Many a one, we are confident, can remember such things--and whence come they? Why do the children of the pious mother, whose grave has grown green and smooth with years, seem often to walk through perils and dangers fearful and imminent as the crossing Mohammed's fiery gulf on the edge of a drawn sword, yet walk unhurt? Ah! could we see that attendant form, that face where the angel conceals not the mother, our question would be answered.

It may be possible that a friend is sometimes taken because the Divine One sees that his ministry can act more powerfully from the unseen world than amid the infirmities of mortal intercourse. Here the soul, distracted and hemmed in by human events and by bodily infirmities, often scarce knows itself, and makes no impression on others correspondent to its desires. The mother would fain electrify the heart of her child; she yearns and burns in vain to make her soul effective on its soul, and to inspire it with a spiritual and holy life; but all her own weaknesses, faults, and mortal cares cramp and confine her, till death breaks all fetters; and then, first truly alive, risen, purified, and at rest, she may do calmly, sweetly, and certainly, what, amid the tempests and tossings of life, she labored for painfully and fitfully.

So, also, to generous souls, who burn for the good of man, who deplore the shortness of life, and the little that is permitted to any individual agency on earth, does this belief open a heavenly field.

Think not, father or brother, long laboring for man, till thy sun stands on the western mountains,--think not that thy day in this world is over. Perhaps, like Jesus, thou hast lived a human life, and gained a human experience, to become, under and like him, a savior of thousands; thou hast been through the preparation, but thy real work of good, thy full power of doing, is yet to begin.

But again: there are some spirits (and those of earth's choicest) to whom, so far as enjoyment to themselves or others is concerned, this life seems to have been a total failure. A hard hand from the first, and all the way through life, seems to have been laid upon them; they seem to live only to be chastened and crushed, and we lay them in the grave at last in mournful silence. To such, what a vision is opened by this belief! This hard discipline has been the school and task-work by which their soul has been fitted for their invisible labors in a future life; and when they pass the gates of the grave, their course of benevolent acting first begins, and they find themselves delighted possessors of what through many years they have sighed for--the power of doing good. The year just past, like all other years, has taken from a thousand circles the sainted, the just, and the beloved; there are spots in a thousand graveyards which have become this year dearer than all the living world; but in the loneliness of sorrow how cheering to think that our lost ones are not wholly gone from us! They still may move about in

our homes, shedding around an atmosphere of purity and peace, promptings of good, and reproofs of evil. We are compassed about by a cloud of witnesses, whose hearts throb in sympathy with every effort and struggle, and who thrill with joy at every success. How should this thought check and rebuke every worldly feeling and unworthy purpose, and enshrine us, in the midst of a forgetful and unspiritual world, with an atmosphere of heavenly peace! They have overcome--have risen--are crowned, glorified; but still they remain to us, our assistants, our comforters, and in every hour of darkness their voice speaks to us: "So we grieved, so we struggled, so we fainted, so we doubted; but we have overcome, we have obtained, we have seen, we have found--and in our victory behold the certainty of thy own."