

A DEATH-BOUQUET

Pick'd Noontime, early January, 1890

Death--too great a subject to be treated so--indeed the greatest subject--and yet I am giving you but a few random lines about it--as one writes hurriedly the last part of a letter to catch the closing mail. Only I trust the lines, especially the poetic bits quoted, may leave a lingering odor of spiritual heroism afterward. For I am probably fond of viewing all really great themes indirectly, and by side-ways and suggestions. Certain music from wondrous voices or skilful players--then poetic glints still more--put the soul in rapport with death, or toward it. Hear a strain from Tennyson's late "Crossing the Bar":

Twilight and evening bell,

And after that the dark!

And may there be no sadness of farewell,

When I embark;

For tho' from out our bourne of Time and Place

The floods may bear me far,

I hope to see my Pilot face to face

When I have crost the bar.

Am I starting the sail-craft of poets in line? Here then a quatrain of Phrynichus long ago to one of old Athens' favorites:

Thrice-happy Sophocles! in good old age,
Bless'd as a man, and as a craftsman bless'd,
He died; his many tragedies were fair,
And fair his end, nor knew he any sorrow.

Certain music, indeed, especially voluntaries by a good player, at twilight--or idle rambles alone by the shore, or over prairie or on mountain road, for that matter--favor the right mood. Words are difficult--even impossible. No doubt any one will recall ballads or songs or hymns (may-be instrumental performances) that have arous'd so curiously, yet definitely, the thought of death, the mystic, the after-realm, as no statement or sermon could--and brought it hovering near. A happy (to call it so) and easy death is at least as much a physiological result as a psychical one. The foundation of it really begins before birth, and is thence directly or indirectly shaped and affected, even constituted, (the base stomachic) by every thing from that minute till the time of its occurrence. And yet here is something (Whittier's "Burning Driftwood") of an opposite coloring:

I know the solemn monotone
Of waters calling unto me;
I know from whence the airs have blown,

That whisper of the Eternal Sea;
As low my fires of driftwood burn,
I hear that sea's deep sounds increase,
And, fair in sunset light, discern
Its mirage-lifted Isles of Peace.

Like an invisible breeze after a long and sultry day, death sometimes sets in at last, soothingly and refreshingly, almost vitally. In not a few cases the termination even appears to be a sort of ecstasy. Of course there are painful deaths, but I do not believe such is at all the general rule. Of the many hundreds I myself saw die in the fields and hospitals during the secession war the cases of mark' d suffering or agony in extremis were very rare. (It is a curious suggestion of immortality that the mental and emotional powers remain to their clearest through all, while the senses of pain and flesh volition are blunted or even gone.)

Then to give the following, and cease before the thought gets threadbare:

Now, land and life, finale, and farewell!
Now Voyager depart! (much, much for thee is yet in store;)
Often enough hast thou adventur'd o'er the seas,
Cautiously cruising, studying the charts,
Duly again to port and hawser's tie returning.
--But now obey thy cherish'd, secret wish,

Embrace thy friends--leave all in order;
To port and hawser's tie no more returning,
Depart upon thy endless cruise, old Sailor!