

At The Gate of Death

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One of the most interesting signs of the times is the increasing tendency of conservative thinkers to feel their way cautiously into what seems to them a novel line of thought, but which to those accustomed to theosophical teachings, appears to be a very slight deviation from the ordinary conceptions of life and death. It is nevertheless always an advantage to see what we call truth, and perhaps even self-evident truth, put in a new and tentative form, so that we suddenly awake to the perception of possible outlines that we had never seen before, as when a much-belated spring like the present gives one glimpse of rugged mountain sides and abrupt cliffs through the delicate tracery of the half-opened leaves, that had been hidden in other years by the luxuriant foliage of summer.

The more Mr. Arthur Benson writes, the closer he seems to come to theosophical ideas without actually expressing them, so that he reminds one of the blind man in a game of blind-man's bluff, who comes straight toward one for a breathless instant, and when just within touching distance suddenly dashes off to the other side of the room, quite unconscious that a captive was so nearly within his grasp.

Mr. Benson's recently published book (by G.P. Putnam's Sons) is in the form of a diary, and is founded on an experience—not so rare perhaps as the author seems to think—of two returns from the very gate of death. The first time it was an accident, a fall from a tree, that brought him almost within the dark portals, and some months afterwards an attack of pneumonia and heart failure very nearly swept him once more out of our world.

The accident that had such disastrous results occurred on January 27th, and had the rather singular effect of obliterating not only all recollection of the unconscious interval of a week or more which followed it, but also all memory of the five days preceding it, even when confronted with the careful record of them in a diary. The writer feels that in sleep there is “a sort of subterranean consciousness,” but that death, by closing all the avenues of sensation, might leave one for a time in a state of perfect isolation. “I have always believed in the preservation of identity,” says Mr. Benson, “and I have sometimes wondered whether the reason why the spirits of the dead have no power of communicating with the spirits of the living may not be that the soul that has suffered death may have to learn its new conditions,” just as a child born into this world does. But then the terrible question arises—why do we not become more conscious of the presence of the spirits of the dead when some time has elapsed after death, and they have learned these new conditions?

Mr. Benson speaks of his slow and interrupted return to consciousness, and the first real perception of objective realities, when he saw his sister sitting by his bed, and she asked him if he knew her. “Yes,” he said, “of course I know you, but I am not sure that I know who I am.” He says this seemed to him a very witty repartee at the time, at which he laughed in a feeble and drowsy way. After that, the glimpses of life became more frequent, but the one overpowering desire was to be let alone. He would not allow himself to groan, for fear that his brother and sister would be summoned, to kneel beside him, to pray over him, perhaps to touch his hand. How wise are the teachings of theosophy, that bid the parting soul be left in undisturbed peace during those solemn moments when it is withdrawing itself from the body!

“It had always seemed to me a wanton cruelty,” says Mr. Benson, “to fill the room of a dying person with

relations and friends, when he could not remonstrate or resist. If the sense of privacy dictate that one should lie down to sleep and rise and dress again alone, it had always seemed to me that when the spirit was about to lay aside its human vesture for ever, it might at least demand to suffer death in solitude.” Then he fell asleep, and when he awoke he was still in the body, but nothing left to him but just life. He desired nothing and feared nothing, but merely watched life as a man might watch an expiring flame, wondering whether it would go out or not. One thing seemed to him certain, that there is no terror in death to the dying. This is an almost universal experience—there may be dread of suffering, sorrow at leaving one’s dear ones, but to the actual passing out of life, only a quiet indifference, a blunting of the sensibilities, a floating away on a calm tide of sleep.

When the well of life began slowly to fill, says Mr. Benson, the deep, real, vital thoughts came back first. The memories that he treasured then were the thought that he had made a few happier, that he had done a few kindnesses, that he had won some love, nothing else seemed to matter. And here again we have the same note struck that filled the other messages we have read lately purporting to come from another state of being, the *Letters of Julia*, *Interwoven*, the *Gray World*, and many others, all proclaiming with one accord that *Love* is the all-important thing.

When the all absorbing and terrible clinging to mere life subsided, two emotions came back to our writer, the first, a tender consciousness of the love he held most dear, and with it a wide love for the whole beautiful world, for the little race of men, faring on so patiently to the unknown goal, followed by an intense sense of God and His fatherly nearness to him, that swallowed up all other thoughts.

Then when the high tide of his universal love had subsided, he began to put together the lessons he had learned at the Gate of Death. And here he comes again very close to theosophical teachings, and states perhaps the strongest of all arguments for continuous life. “Just as I cannot conceive of the annihilation of existing matter, neither can I conceive of the annihilation of what I call vital force and consciousness. The life that animates matter is to my mind fully as real and actual as matter itself. As to consciousness, that is a different question. . . . It may be that consciousness is dependent upon the union of life and matter; but I believe with all my heart in the indestructibility of life, and I thus believe that when I die, when my body moulders into dust, the life that animated it is as much in existence as it was before. . . . It may be that the vital force which I call myself may be distributed again among other lives, it may be that it is a definite and limited thing, a separate cell or center; and thus it may hereafter animate another body—such things are not incredible. But in any case it is all in the hands of God.”

Is it any less in the hands of God if we separate the vital force from the “I am I” consciousness, the intellectual soul from the emotional soul, the individual Ego from the personality? This is one of the many places where the writer seems to skim over the clear depths of thought like a swallow that dips a hasty wing and is off again, before one realizes that he is there.

Mr. Benson comments at some length upon the doctrine of probation, which some think explains everything in the nature of sin and suffering in this world, but which he says with swift decision, “does not explain a thousand things.” He confuses continuously probation with punishment—surely a man may be *proved* by happiness, good fortune, health of body and mind, as well as by the reverse of all these. We are reduced to assuming, he says, that there must be a new life to redress the balance of the old, because if there were not another life the inequalities, the injustices of this life would be intolerable. Well, why not? Why should we not assume that not one but many lives are given us in which to work out our salvation,

and believe too, that the whips which scourge us, the fetters that bind, were forged by our own hands in the many lives that lie behind our present consciousness? But with the keys of Karma and reincarnation in his hands, with some little knowledge of what he calls “the Oriental doctrine of metempsychosis” he is nevertheless confronted by the, to him, insurmountable difficulty involved in the death of babies and little children, and all the consequent sorrow of their parents. But there is no pain, no suffering which would not become bearable, he is sure, could we look forward with a certain hope to the possibility of feeling ourselves one with God, and God one with us.

Much that we can heartily agree with, is in Mr. Benson’s comments upon our funeral ceremonies, which he calls utterly heathen and barbarous things, and for children especially, a revolting cruelty. “For them at least death should be veiled in the same mystery as birth.” Not till the body is laid in the ground, would he have any solemnity or function, and then he would have a service as beautiful and hopeful as possible, with the mind directed to the thoughts of life and the mystery of the future.

One of the strange things about our view of the future life and those who have gone before, is our constant tendency to think of them as changed, and to feel that we should regret that change. Mr. Benson confesses that it would be repellent to him, but that he cannot believe that the essential differences of human beings would cease with death. Some tinge of humor he hopes will survive, and though many of his best and dearest friends are clergymen, he would be sorry to have to think that the after-life was going to be run, so to speak, on strictly clerical lines.

Outside of the thoughts I have taken up as more or less like our own, there are many wise and beautiful sayings in this book, and some exquisite bits of description, sometimes perhaps, a little too exquisite. The temptation of work, he says, “is to sacrifice kindly and generous intercourse with others to it. Christ rather indicated that life should be lived on the simplest lines; and if we were only content to do that, what a network of small social chains and ties would be immediately unloosed! I have learnt that one perceives things by resting, in a way in which one does not always perceive them by working.” And again, “the light by which we walk is within us, rather than outside of us; and it is in our souls that we must seek for it, rather than in any external illumination.”

Mr. Benson is not only a mystic, but a poet, even if he does not write in verse, and his prose sometimes runs in perfect rhythm, as in this line: “charged with the sweet secrets, musical with dreams.” And very beautiful is his description of a dim orange sunset, that concludes his book. “Just at that moment over the stream sailed a great heron, with curved wings black against the sky, dipping and sinking with a deliberate poise to his sleeping place.

“So would I that my soul might fall with a glad and contented tranquility to the shining waters of death; to rest while all is dark, until the dawn of that other morning. . . . God rests, but ceases not. Through day and night alike beats the vast heart pulsing in its secret cell. Through me, too, throbs that vital tide. What pain, what silence shall ever avail to bind that mighty impulse, or make inanimate whatever once has breathed and loved?”

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