

## “THE SUNDOWN SPLENDID AND SERENE”

BY KEVORK COSTIKYAN

IF there is one thing above all others which, despite its pathos, we should seek to regard without illusions, it is the supreme mystery we call death. That devastating catastrophe which dims the light of the most luminous personalities cannot be viewed either as exclusively one of the mechanical reactions of nature or, on the other hand, as a purely mystical experience which eludes all attempt at rational interpretation. Death is a definitive tragedy, an inexorable moral reality. It is endowed with incontestable spiritual finality. Whether it be the end of all conscious personal life, or the gate to a transcendent supernatural ecstasy that orthodox religion promises to its devotees, or something wholly different from either of these, it remains the one overwhelming challenge of destiny to which we can offer no adequate resistance. Immutable as nature herself, it is the circumstance of death that invests life with meaning and makes it so precious a heritage. For if we did not constantly envisage the shadow that hovers over us with its fateful summons, life would lose much of its enchantment.

In the presence of a reality of such grandeur, reason must be both dispassionate and imaginative. It must, in the first place, survey the pretensions of science and determine whether its legitimate province extends to the realm beyond death. Once this is determined, reason must invoke its more prophetic instincts to consider what intuitions of immortality are most consonant with idealistic aspiration.

With increasing assurance, modern science is encroaching upon the boundaries of those things that are unseen and eternal. Scientists of distinction declare with temerity that the psychical is as fruitful a field of empirical investigation as the physical, and that accurate observation and logical deduction are as feasible in the world of the spirit as in the world of matter. Even

some of those who have been most skeptical of religious dogma have found in psychical research a new foundation for a conception of personal immortality.

With so intricate a relation between matter and mind, it is not surprising that the often subtle distinction between nature and spirit should tend to become impalpable. The mind that boasts of seeing life steadily will never concede that it cannot see life whole, and to see life whole, one must formulate a cogent theory of death. The synthesis of natural and supernatural, the coördination and interdependence of the two, afford a fertile field of speculation. What more plausible than that the laws which govern the one should be deemed applicable to the other, and that a fortuitous kinship of form give rise to an identification of essence?

We cannot regard with much respect the more ordinary manifestations of this tendency. Partly, perhaps, as a result of the more widespread acquaintance with death induced by the Great War, but principally as a facile adventure in a novel and forbidding realm, there has arisen a vast popular curiosity about the occult, particularly as concerns the possibility of communication with the dead and the establishment of privileged confidential relations with the invisible powers. But this popular tendency is largely an aberration; it has little profundity and still less wisdom. It does not portend a quickened sense of spiritual appreciation nor a heightened vision of ultimate truth. On the contrary, it is indicative of decadence. Among its deplorable consequences, it has cheapened the universal valuation of those verities that can never be held too dear, and has degraded the supernatural to an indignity it never suffered in the days of the most flagrant superstition.

Loftier motives have no doubt prompted those scientists who have furthered the serious study of these subjects. Starting out with an eager instinct to discover new lands for scientific observation, they have ended by ascribing moral implications to their discoveries with a view to palliating the bitterness of death. They have sought to dismiss death as a metamorphosis purely of form, an incident that neither destroys the familiar qualities of personality nor produces any vital cleavage of human associa-

tions. They have endeavored to bridge the awful chasm that separates the quick from the dead by a channel of communication which is represented to be as potent, and infallible, as the wireless telegraph.

The claims of what is called psychical research have been the object of severe critical consideration, but as a rule these criticisms have been based upon the inadequacy of the evidence to sustain the conclusions reached. It is quite true that a mass of the so-called evidence in these cases is of the most negligible, almost flippant, character and that the possibility of chicanery is infinitely great. But there are graver faults and sterner foundations for discontent with the trend of this field of investigation. There is no question that the realm that is uncovered by these intrepid observers offers one of the most attractive vistas to the human imagination. The delights it portrays and the solaces it promises to the earth-ridden mortal have an appeal that is well-nigh mystical. Yet for this very reason acceptance of these tenets is all the more insidious if it is shown that they are not the product of clear insight. If it were merely shortcomings of method that were at fault, these might be corrected. But it is worse than this, it is something more basic than the inadmissibility of the evidence that is adduced. It is the fundamental incongruity of attempting to reconcile things that are utterly irreconcilable, the tragic futility of endeavoring to unite in indissoluble harmony essences that are intrinsically incompatible.

Why is it that science is incompetent to pronounce judgment on the supernatural? Why must we distrust her voice when she speaks in the most caressing tones of her familiarity with the realm of the spirit? Why are we compelled to repudiate her authority when she ventures beyond the confines of matter? It is not because we disdain enlightenment in these obscure realms, nor because we fear to join the quest for the greatest adventure that life affords. It is rather because we know that the scope of science is coördinate with the universe of nature, and that as soon as she invades the sanctuary of the spirit, she becomes an interloper whose utterance is discredited and whose presence is resented.

Life divorced from the body is a field for speculation, for

hypothesis, for faith, if you will, but not for verification. Personality is a force so inseparably associated with the body that its independent existence is absolutely incapable of being scientifically demonstrated. The very communications with the dead which the disciples of this new superstition set forth as their consummate vindication, necessarily presage either a human voice or a written instrument, both of which are attributes of a human body which it is admitted has been forever abandoned. This is necessarily bound to be the case, for all “messages” from these ghostly visitants must be conveyed, in order to be understood, through the medium of the senses, the very senses which the emancipated soul consigned to earth with his mortal remains.

If we subscribe to the doctrine of a continued existence after death, as the advocates of psychical research would have us do, we will be compelled to accept some appalling logical corollaries. We cannot escape the fact that life, in the only form we know it, is conditioned by the common necessity to struggle for self-preservation, and the inevitable conflict between good and evil. How can we conceive a disembodied spirit struggling for self-preservation when our definition of a spirit specifies a substance that is self-existing and eternal? Similarly, can we with any sanity affirm a moral dualism in the supernatural wherein a valiant spirit can be vanquished in battling for the right and forfeit the just fruits of his moral victories on earth? Would not the suggestion of such possibilities provoke doubt of the moral significance of human life, and would not their acceptance undermine many of the rational incentives that govern both conduct and reflection?

The truth is that, so far as science is concerned, when life becomes extinct in man his fortunes and his destiny are ended. Spiritual autopsy will never disclose one iota of knowledge that is of any consequence. Until this is understood, intellectual confusion on the subject will be augmented, and death will be shrouded in a deeper obscurity and a more inconsolable despair, when it is seen that the vaunted contentions of psychical research are a mockery and a pretense.

It is the imagination to which we must turn for a coherent interpretation of the significance of death and a lucid vision of

the spiritual destiny of man. Religion has cloaked these mysteries in symbolic dogmas, whose literal acceptance has tended to invalidate the profundity underlying the original conceptions. It is philosophy, mellowed by religion, that must dissociate the abiding values from the ephemeral, and unfold the true nature of the spirit.

In the first place, it must be understood, with positive emphasis, that death, from a moral point of view, is the end of a race that man has run. The dogma of the Last Judgment has a sound moral basis. It is folly to hold out to erring man the prospect of a future existence in which he can redress the wrongs he has done in this world, and compensate himself for his temporal disappointments. Life from the cradle to the grave must be reckoned as a tale that is told. When death supervenes upon life, the die is cast forever. We have molded our spiritual destiny in an ineradicable image, our accounts have been cast up once for all. However ignoble or however glorious our encounter with life in its manifold aspects, our character is permanently fixed. Otherwise there is no potency in moral excellence, no virtue in that which our higher instincts tell us is choice-worthy. We cannot appease our conscience or stultify our intellect by anticipation of another world in which the injustices of this world are to be corrected.

The tradition that fostered belief in a concrete heaven and an even more unmistakable hell was wise in its intent. Heaven was to represent a celestial guerdon for those whose life on earth merited approbation; hell was to be the asylum of those who had fallen short of achieving the good of which their natures were capable. There was no suggestion in this tradition of another chance offered to man after death either to make good his delinquencies or to lose what he had gained at such cost. A continued existence, patterned after life on earth, presupposes both these alternatives, and for this reason is neither sound ethics nor coherent thinking.

There is, on the other hand, no valid objection to belief in a future life, provided the belief is not claimed to be a scientific certainty. Our faith is largely the child of our desire, and if we find that such a belief is congenial to our aspirations, it is wholly

proper to cherish it. The imagination may then visualize the supernatural conditions appropriate to such a belief, and, if embodied in suitable ritual, this faith may well become a vital element of religion. Without the survival of the individual consciousness and personality, most minds are unable to conceive any kind of eternal life whatever, and it is far better to have an individualistic conception of immortality than none at all. At least it will afford a shining goal that will enliven the heart in the bleak monotony of daily existence and enrich the spirit with its vivid glow. The enthusiasm thus kindled may well provide the moral energy necessary to support burdens that appear well-nigh insupportable, and the prospect of a serene, untroubled eternity may quiet the turbulent spirit that is shedding blood and tears in its grapple with circumstance.

But we must not forget that what sanctifies the faith we have been discussing is the deep religious exaltation that feeds it. Once we attempt to create the same burning enthusiasm by means of a scientific formula, we invalidate the poetic truth that vindicates faith. That is why even the most patently materialistic conceptions of the early Christians and other zealous believers were never debasing—they had a spiritual source and a spiritual meaning that created an idealized faith radiant with beauty. From the travail of human experience there comes a faith with everlasting springs, which asks no cloud of earthly witnesses to fortify or vitalize it.

No faith is contagious that is not spontaneous, no belief has vitality that leans on analysis. True faith is both discipline and adventure: it chastens the undaunted spirit with a purging fire, and at the same time beckons the aspiring soul to enter into the presence of the Most High.

The most integral element of faith is bound to be centred around some conception of immortality. Whatever is enduring in us craves its ideal affinities. Beyond the transitory delights and incurable sorrows that condition terrestrial existence, the courageous spirit is eager to explore its eternal habitations. Is it strange that the soul should seek to be delivered from bondage to caprice and should indulge its aspiration for perfection? If we yield to the sway of reason, there is in us all an impulse to



dispense with subterfuge, however glittering its aspect, and to come face to face with truth. As we become increasingly apprehensive of decay in nature, we would fain bind our allegiance to some imperishable ideal and participate in that which cannot atrophy. All the consolations of religion are illusory if they do not afford an ideal refuge from the moral catastrophes of nature or a vision of eternity that is detached from time and place.

Death can become the noblest moment of life if we will divest it of its accidental aspects and grasp its essential significance. To be sure, no reflections, however profound, can make adequate compensation for the solemn blight it casts upon human affection. There are certain intimate griefs that can never be healed, certain personal losses that are irretrievable. Denial of the mystery of evil will only intensify the inalienable tragedy of existence. But the human spirit is endowed with a native dignity which enables us to rationalize death even if we cannot circumvent it, and to discover indestructible joy in the heart of irremediable pain.

When the poet characterized death as "the sundown splendid and serene" he gave expression to a truth that all rare spirits instinctively feel when they seek communion with the eternal. The glory of life consists in the fulfillment of noble aspirations despite the clumsy interference of natural events. Even a momentary vision of an ideal in full bloom will redeem the sordid press of material circumstance. That is why, except to profoundly ungoverned souls, the discipline of life is never permanently irksome. The disclosure of excellence in any of its manifold guises affords convincing evidence that there are spiritual altitudes which no evil can reach, everlasting truths in which there is no alloy of error.

If we will temper our hope with reflection, we will not be haunted by the ghastly spectre of death. We will view life itself with more veneration when we realize that its decisions are irrevocable and that its ideal significance is not subject to revision. When our days are numbered the immortal spirit will come face to face with the eternal scrutiny, a scrutiny whose appraisal will stand forever. Once this is grasped, the worth of human life is immeasurably enhanced and its joys chastened. And the approach

of death, instead of being dreaded, as it is by the worldling and the sensualist, is accepted as a clear opportunity for the liberation of the spirit.

The knowledge that human life, with all of its intrinsic shortcomings, persists in a disembodied form after death, would fill the philosophic soul with dismay. Aside from the affront to intelligence that such a certitude would entail, it would portend the cardinal spiritual disaster to which man is prey. Thanks to the gift of reason, we need not anticipate any such tragic calamity. What the human spirit really craves after death is a tranquillity that is impossible while it is imprisoned in the flesh.

At the basis of the passion for immortality is the poignant hope that the things we cherish most dearly will not die. Refined into its essential purity, this belief is nothing but a consuming desire that the good we achieve, the truth we honor, the beauty we envisage, may not lose their potency when the body begins to dissolve into its natural elements. In short, it is the preservation of our ideal attainments that is sought. There are times when this vision of an ideal immortality is revealed to us in the most unmistakable fashion, and it is worthy of note that both philosophy and religion testify to the authenticity of the vision.

There are three obstacles to a just appreciation of ideal immortality. The first is the undue emphasis upon the accidental, rather than the essential, aspects of human personality. The second is the fallacy of identifying immortality with the persistence of consciousness, as a human phenomenon. The third is the shallow notion that immortality necessarily predicates some kind of existence. Each of these three prejudices operates as a check upon the free play which the imagination would otherwise give to the interpretation of the supernatural.

First as to personality. We may well believe that personality is a dynamic force that will survive death, for the reason that in itself it has a distinct ideal meaning. Even if there is such a thing as a universal soul, it is unquestionable that the individual soul is an ideal entity. For this reason, ideal immortality does not by any means involve obliteration of the individual. In some form that our finite minds cannot conceive, we may be confident that in the ideal economy the individual soul will have an abiding



relationship. But we may be equally certain that only the fundamental, not the superficial, characteristics of personality will be thus eternally enshrined. However dear to us even the most insignificant traits of those to whom we are bound by ties of affection, we must realize that the vistas of the spirit are illimitable and that the vital elements of personality can be superimposed from the natural to the supernatural through channels that our intelligence cannot apprehend.

Then, as to the survival of consciousness. When we make this a condition of immortality, we forget that our understanding of consciousness is contingent upon the functioning of the senses and is therefore chimerical without the latter. We also overlook, what is of greater portent, that the scope of ideal immortality is infinitely wider than the range of any human capacity such as consciousness. Granted that consciousness is something inexpressibly precious, the fact remains that it is precious as something human, not as something divine. Yet here too, as in personality, we may feel assurance that the eternal coefficient of consciousness will be transfused into some ideal agency and assume some incorruptible significance.

Finally, as to the connection between existence and immortality. Existence is the flux of destiny, the conflict of a myriad wills with the unceasing magic of nature. Immortality is a world of ideas, where nature does not intrude, a realm purely spiritual where contemplation, not action, holds sway. Existence is therefore, so far as we know, an attribute only of life on this planet, and is incompatible with any worthy concept of immortality. Unless we are seeking immortality where it is not to be found, namely, in the universe of nature, we must cease to clothe our vision of eternity in garments of corruption. Human existence may have its ideal counterpart, but this will be something ineffably more worthy.

A nobler immortality awaits those who, with their gaze fastened upon the eternal, have sufficient wisdom gladly to surrender all the trappings of life. If we would live indefinitely, beyond the brief years that are allotted to us, let us not call ourselves partners of the gods, for we have not become partakers of their counsel. There is only one way to peace and that is to renounce,

in our aspirations, all desire for survival after death which has a carnal basis. The true quest for immortality is the yearning for an ideal that we covet all the more because it is so elusive. The more closely we look into the recesses of nature for the secret of this ideal, the deeper will be our disappointment, for its temple is not there. We may find comfort and majesty in the constancy of nature, but implacable as they are, the forces of nature may yet eventually encompass their own destruction. The ideal, however, is master of nature, for it knows no change and reckons neither time nor place. It is inescapable because it is all-pervasive, and can never end for it has had no beginning. Because we are children of the infinite, we are heirs to that ideal immortality which, in the midst of death, imbues us with life.

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## MENTAL GOODNESS

BY STARK YOUNG

WE had all three descended from the same train, though from different compartments, and gone to the same hotel, the San Marco, almost the only one in Ravenna; and had been crossing one another's paths all day. And after luncheon I had seen the Englishman in carpet slippers sitting with his feet up on a chair in the *salone*, very much at home. The Frenchman had been there also, at the other end of the room, going over a portfolio of paintings and sketches that a porter had brought up from the station. But we had not spoken to each other. And then that evening at the café under the arcades of the piazza we drifted together. Our table was by one of the columns and near a flowering oleander, pale rose. A rumble of rich voices in Tuscan and Romagnese was everywhere.

The two men had already begun a conversation when I joined them, and I sat observing them a long while in silence.

The Englishman turned out to be a fellow in history at some Oxford college. He was a big man with a burly front and red eyebrows; but you could see that secretly his being swam in sentiment; he might swear gruffly enough but would fall in love with any ringlet curl. He had a way of not answering when the Frenchman expected him to; and toward both of us he manifested that huffiness of manner that so often accompanies English culture and puzzles unendingly the well-bred of other lands.

The Frenchman was a painter, a shrewd little man, climbed up from out some parental shop on the boulevards very likely. I had seen some of his paintings that afternoon in the *salone*. He was one of those busy French artists who seem to paint with milk under a magnifying-glass, smooth, creamy pictures with too much brown in the shadows, bourgeois, as apt and pat as a toilet soap; work that makes no furor, but sells, flowing to its own level