

## PLUTARCH AND THE UNCONSCIOUS CHRISTIANITY OF THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES.

NO period of history merits a more patient and earnest study than that which intervenes between the death of Christ and the final triumph of Christianity over heathenism. It is not on any concession to the truth of the triumphant faith that we would base the claim. Those who regard the victory as that of a hurtful superstition must agree with those who regard it as the daybreak, that History knows no change of greater importance. For unquestionably it has transformed that which is deepest in man, giving new goals to admiration and desire, new points of recoil to indignation and repentance, and like some mighty upheaval of the soil, sending the streams of Duty into new channels, and in some instances even inverting their direction. Those who stand nearest to us in moral sympathy exhibit best this change of moral standard. No Greek, we suppose, would be accepted as more akin to modern life than Aristotle, and there is a sentence in his work on Politics which gathers up into a few words the whole mighty revolution that separates his nation from ours. "The artisan," he says, "only partakes of virtue so far as he partakes of slavery."\* It would not be difficult to fit that sentence for a modern work on Politics by simply inverting it. Say that the artisan only partakes of virtue so far as he is emancipated from any remains of slavery, and you put an unquestioned truth in an exaggerated form. What did "the master of those who know" mean by this denial of all that we assume? Something not unreasonable from his own point of view. The artisan—the man whose daily care it is to provide bread for himself and those dependent on him—could only partake in that political life which a Greek thought the sole sphere of virtue, so far as he was subservient to one who was free to devote himself to the aims of political life. Except as in this subservience (and

\* I. 12.

of course in the very lowest degree within it), he could be no member of the body politic, and could no more share in virtue than a severed limb could share in health. Man had no inherent, indefeasible rightness, apart from his membership of a city. The poor and the lowly therefore stood outside the sphere of virtue.

The change, which has invested the most insignificant of mankind with the sacred claims and inalienable rights of Duty, would be unlike all other change in individual or national life, if its gain were wholly unmixed. Doubtless we seem to lose sight of that which we cease to emphasize, the expansion of duty will appear, and sometimes will be, in reality, the diminution of that which was included within its original circuit. Something of this loss may be discernible in the changed meaning of the very word virtue. Its transition from valour, the excellence of the man, to purity, the excellence of the woman, is at once a clue to the contrasted tendencies of ancient and modern morality, and a warning against the dangers of the latter. Nevertheless that revolution which has made virtue possible to the weak, which has extended to the sufferer on a lonely sick bed, or a patient toiler in some obscure corner, remote from all the stir and dignity of the world, the sympathy and reverence that the antique world kept for mighty deeds or profound thoughts, has exchanged a merely masculine for a truly human ideal. It is, indeed, the origin rather than the value of the change which is matter of controversy, and here, no doubt, there is room for much controversy. For some generations before Christ lived, but still more unquestionably after He died, it is evident that the ideal of goodness must have undergone a change, whatever its nature. The object of ancient virtue had perished, patriotic devotion was as impossible in the first century as filial devotion is at the age of three-score and ten, and into the vacuum thus created another flood of duty must arise. The life of the State was withering into its long winter, what remained fresh and vigorous was the kingdom that is within. The individual no longer formed, in any important sense, the part of a whole, what then was he when he stood alone? The immortal being—or that which had seemed immortal—which had carried forward the imaginative sympathies of a citizen of Athens or Sparta, satisfying the longing of the human heart for some permanent and stable reality on which to rest in thought amid the whirl of fugitive interests—this too had perished. Was there no other immortality? It is the part of the mere Historian to declare that these questions found their answer in the words of one who held aloof from all political movement, who taught that "the kingdom of God is within you," and who was believed to have risen from the dead. But were it sufficient to destroy the importance of this teaching, that a spirit altogether in harmony with it should be shown to exist among those who had either never heard it, or who had rejected it, the claim could never have been made. The new ideal had exponents who were ignorant, probably of the name, certainly of the character, of Christ, and the most interesting

of these, to our mind, is the writer best known—it may almost be said known solely—as the chronicler of those events and characters which have made illustrious the world that belongs to the old ideal. The combination seems of itself a claim for more attention than has been paid to one-half the writings of Plutarch.

The reader will be surprised, perhaps, at a claim for more attention than has been paid to any writing of Plutarch's. The name of no other Greek writer is so familiar to all moderns. The "breviary" of Montaigne, the mine of Shakespeare, the "pasture for great souls" of Madame Roland, he may almost be called the interpreter of Greece and Rome to modern Europe. And his fame is not confined to those who are able to profit by this introduction. When Dickens makes one of his female characters describe her arduous circumstances in the assertion that "she had need of as many lives as a cat, or a Plutarch," he affords us a lively image of the extent of the radiance which fades into this twilight. Nevertheless, we venture to believe that Plutarch the biographer would be more truly appreciated if Plutarch the moralist were less forgotten. His sympathy with the heroic ideal of the classical world would be felt as a finer thing, if it were seen in conjunction with his sympathy for the saintly ideal of the Christian world. The neglect of this half of his utterance is strange, though it is not inexplicable. Plutarch is an extremely diffuse writer, he has written a treatise against garrulity, but, like many another moralist, has supplied us with plentiful illustrations of his own warnings. The suspicion that this is true of his biographies must be confessed, we believe, as an individual heresy, but there is no question that his essays are much less readable from his redundancy of expression, evidently a much greater hindrance to a preacher than to an annalist, and if it is owing to this defect that we can point to only a single quotation from writings so full of interest (the well-known saying on atheism and superstition quoted by Bacon, that he, Plutarch, would rather have his existence denied, than be called vindictive and passionate), Plutarch's fate as a moral teacher is a much greater lesson against garrulity than his precepts are. Still we are surprised that Dr. Trench's delightful little volume should afford the only instance we can call to mind (as far as our own country goes) of any attempt to give him his rights on this head; and it is the aim of the following essay to make some contribution towards filling the blank, and exhibiting the chronicler of Greece and Rome as the unconscious preacher of Christian morality.

He might easily have been the conscious preacher of Christian morality. He belongs, in fact, to the Christian world. The world through his descriptions of which he is known to all time was to him much what it is to us, a mighty world which had reached its consummation, and which he might survey through the intervening atmosphere of a different age. Its great events and characters were seen by the light of history, not of politics. We cannot contemplate the characters of our civil wars as he contemplated those of the civil wars of Rome.



The distance which separates us from Falkland and Eliot, may be represented by the hours between morning and noon. The distance which separated Plutarch from Cæsar and Pompey, almost as short in the reckoning of chronology, must be figured as the dawn of a new day. Plutarch belonged to that new day, the whole of life is seen by him in the light of its dawn. But the only passage in which it has been possible to suspect a reference to Christianity is a vague warning against foreign superstitions, and the negative testimony here is surely sufficient. He who treated of superstitions of Divine Justice, of the Cessation of Oracles and of Virtue and Vice, all within a few score of years from the arrival of St. Paul at Rome, and showed no sign of any knowledge of the faith of Christ, could not possibly have known more of it than the mere name, if he knew as much as that. His moral treatises form an opportunity for defending Christianity, or attacking it. He who did neither must surely have known it, if he knew it at all, as some insignificant and ephemeral variation of Judaism, not worth separate notice.

This indifference to, or ignorance of, the new faith, in men who were apparently best fitted to receive it, is a striking characteristic of the days of Plutarch. His maturity seems to have coincided with such an ebb in the influence of Christianity as forms a stage in most strong influences. A long life might have been passed in vainly watching for some sign that the new faith was to conquer the world. When Pliny wrote to Trajan early in the second century (when Plutarch, however, must have been already an old man) for directions as to his dealings with the perplexing sectaries, Christianity was already a subject of attention to those who felt no sympathy with it, and eighty years later, when Clement succeeded to the headship of the Alexandrian school, it was still thankful for tolerance. An attentive observer of the course of human thought might almost have felt himself at liberty to conclude that the faith which had been stationary for so long an interval was soon destined to be retrograde. This pause in its growth seems the more surprising (though perhaps in reality it is partly explained by the fact) when we remember that the century which it occupies was eminently religious. Everything that is familiar to the superficial student of the time—the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, for instance, or the sayings of Epictetus—is stamped with an impress of reverential submission to superior and beneficent power. The Voltaire of the age—Lucian—unlike his eighteenth century brother, stands alone, a solitary mocker, amid a world of believers. A vaguemystic piety pervades the atmosphere of literature—“une théosophie niaise et creuse,” Renan calls it; we would describe it as a devout Deism, combined with a mystic demonology. All the serious thought of the day, and indeed much that is not serious, bears witness to a deep-seated sense of moral disease, which stands in the closest relation to the idea of redemption. In such an age it would have seemed natural that a faith teaching a divine element in humanity, and a human element in man, should have made rapid progress. The new life that



was in the world doubtless stirred the hearts of many that knew not its source, of some that denied all connection with its source, but its conscious recognition was slow. Perhaps the stage of unconscious acceptance had to be gone through first. If the appearance of Christ on this earth was no isolated event, but like the islet which in mid-ocean marks the hidden mountain chain, the emergence into the world of the seen of that which is continued in the world of the unseen, and traceable in dim indications even where the ebb and flow of life hides it from our eyes, it should not be perplexing to believe that the very satisfaction of those who drank in the spirit of His teaching became at times a hindrance in the way of their acceptance of its historical framework—perhaps even of sufficient attention to fix it in the memory.

The divine helper who, in the belief of the best men of this time, was to pour oil and wine on the wounds of the deeply hurt race was by them called Philosophy. Their meaning for the word differed from ours, and in a different degree and manner from Plato's, as a knowledge of pharmacy differs from a knowledge of chemistry. It was not the knowledge of truth as truth that they sought. It was the knowledge of the truth that would heal. This spirit is abundantly exemplified in Plutarch. "With Philosophy as companion and guide," he says, "we are taught what to flee and what to seek; we learn the right demeanour alike to those who are above and beneath us, to parent, wife, and child, the magistrates of our city, the slaves of our house. It is she who inspires reverence to parents, subjection to law, faithful love in marriage, in friendship, and in paternity, and mildness in domestic rule."\* "The test of profitable hearing," he says elsewhere (and by hearing he always means listening to the instruction of the Philosopher), "is not the pleasure of the moment, but the subsequent result. Is any emotion calmed? is any sorrow lightened? are courage and magnanimity stronger? is any enthusiasm kindled towards virtue?"† The essay from which the last extract is taken, the title of which we may freely translate, "On the right attitude towards the Teacher," contains curious evidence of the extent to which the Philosopher was expected to take up the attitude of a spiritual director. "Do not,"‡ Plutarch addresses the youthful hearers of these homilies, "avoid any teaching, because some vivid personal feeling is touched by it. On the contrary, you should take this opportunity for remaining after the rest of the audience, for fuller instruction in private." (Confession, it appears, was to follow the sermon.) "They greatly err who admire the philosopher only as long as his discourse is applicable to others, but whenever he approaches their own case look upon him with the same kind of careless attention as they would on a performer at the theatre." Such conduct is as much

\* "De Educatione Puerorum," c. 10. We quote always from the edition (by Dübner) included in Didot's Classics; this gives the Latin titles somewhat differently from Wyttienbach.

† "De Recta Audiendi Ratione," c. 8. The quotation aims at conveying the sense of the whole chapter.

‡ *Ibid.* c. 12.

a misapplication of the healing art of the soul as would be made of the surgical art\* "by a patient who should fly the surgeon's hands after the first incision, without suffering him to bind up the wound, forcing the healer to inflict nothing but pain. For it is not only the wound of Telephus," pursues our loquacious Preacher, quitting, as is his wont, a good illustration for one much inferior—"it is not only the wound of Telephus which, as Euripides says, is healed by filings of the spear which caused it. The word that wounds is in Philosophy also the word that heals." At the risk of copying our Philosopher in this tendency to spoil a truth by redundant illustration, we must find space for a fine image which Baron Munchausen, let us suppose, has pillaged from him. "The teaching of the philosopher is not to be appreciated at first. It is the revealing influence of age which must expound to the hearer the true import of that which he has learnt in early life. We are told," by a certain Antiphanes, whoever he was, "of a town where the cold was so intense that the words spoken in winter were audible only with returning warmth. Thus it is with the teaching which falls on immature ears. It will sound in those very ears under a different moral atmosphere." We are rash in recalling to the reader's recollection, by this translation from one of the least polished of writers, one of the most beautiful passages in Dr. Newman's writings. But the truth expressed in this parable of the frozen sound—the words that await a moral thaw between their quitting the speaker's lips and reaching the hearer's ears—this surely is one of those which at all times must find a welcome alike from hearts oppressed by a sense of deafness all around them, and those that ache under the heavier load of thanks that must in this world remain unspoken for ever.

We are vividly reminded, in transcribing this picture of the moral teacher, that the idea in this closely individual aspect was altogether a new one. We discern in it the ignorance characteristic of incomplete experience. We feel as we read this description of the "surgery of the soul" that it is not an art for any human being to profess, however much under peculiar circumstances he may be forced to practise it. The best physician of the soul—surely we have all realized the paradox—is he who knows least of the patient's case. Words borne on the breath of some chance gale will plant themselves firmly in the soil when those which came from the planter's hand would fall on the rock. But this must have been much less the case in the first century of our era. This individual moral life thus preached and taught was a new thing, and men were hungry for it. The world was blank and empty. In that dim, sad age, when the old faiths were dead, when the great object of ancient life had vanished and the objects of modern life were as yet below the horizon, when the question, Is life worth living? would have had more significance than even in our own day, and the epidemic of suicide gave it a forcible answer, Plutarch's endeavour to soothe with gentle wisdom the hearts that fainted or throbbed around him, might

\* "De Recta Audiendi Ratione," c. 16

well find a response incredible to a generation which has heard most of his precepts again and again, and knows that the spirit's need is not so much a rudder as a sail. The distinction in truth is one that is not felt at the dawn of a new moral life, for the first apprehension of a new ideal requires and evokes much the same kind of power as the translation of an old ideal into action. The first sight of our goal bestows new power of movement.

We feel, directly we put any moral teaching of Plutarch's on a classical background, that a new life has come into the moral world, even when the older utterance is far more forcible. If the reader turn from Cicero's treatise on "Friendship," for instance, to that from which we will here extract the most characteristic passages, he will, of course, feel first of all that he is quitting the utterance of one gifted with consummate literary power for the utterance of one who has very little. But, though the most obvious, we do not consider this the most important part of the contrast. It appears to us that the deepest difference between them—a difference which throws even the presence or absence of genius into the shade—is implied in our consciousness that between the dates of those two essays the breath of redemption has passed over the world. To choose the worthy is no longer the sole, no longer the main difficulty of friendship. We now are confronted with an ideal which demands that we should raise the unworthy. The following extracts will enable the reader to judge of the truth of our description :\*—

"The influence of a true friend is felt in the help which he gives the noble part of the nature; nothing that is weak or poor meets with encouragement from him. While the flatterer fans every spark of suspicion, envy, or grudge, he may be described in the verse of Sophocles as 'sharing the love, and not the hatred,' of the person he cares for."† "He will not shrink from rebuke, and where it is needed even from putting rebuke into action."‡ "But let us, before we venture on rebuke, be careful to quit every emotion of selfishness, else when we would correct the errors of another, we shall be merely complaining of our own wrongs."§ "Next let us be careful to tell our friend his fault between him and us alone. The detection of evil should always be secret. 'Might you not have said that in private?' remonstrated Plato with Socrates when he commented on some error in a disciple in company. 'And might not you,' Socrates retorted, 'have done the like to me?' The rebuke that is associated with needless disgrace is not merely useless, it roots deeper the evil from which we would deliver our friend."|| "We should be careful of many other circumstances in expressing blame, we should watch for a fitting occasion, and not accustom ourselves to put *every* criticism into words at the moment of feeling it, or, indeed, at all; let us husband it rather for some fitting occasion, and not blunt the edge of rebuke by wasting it on trifles."¶ "Lastly let us beware how we ever sever what is painful in intercourse from what is encouraging, never quit a friend with words of displeasure, let your last discourse with him be always kindly, never give to censure the painful distinctness of succeeding silence."\*\*

\* In this and the following extracts much attempt is made at condensation, but there is no greater change than is necessary if we have to replace a phrase by a word, or to gather up into a single paragraph a line of argument frequently broken and confused by redundant illustration and metaphor.

† "De Discernendo Adulatore ab Amico," c. 8, 9.      ‡ c. 11.      § c. 26.      || c. 32.  
¶ c. 35.      \*\* c. 36, 37.



The advice, it may be said, is suitable rather to the parent or teacher than to the friend. It is true that the friend is contemplated as the teacher, and while it may be doubted whether one who disregarded no caution here given would ever be felt impertinent or intrusive, we must confess that there is something that strikes a modern reader as over didactic in the relation thus presupposed. But we repeat, this is because friendship, as a *spiritual* relation, is something new. Turn back to the earlier treatise, though it is full of sentences that seem to gather up the most precious recollections of years, and affect the reader often like a record of his own saddest or sweetest experience, still, as compared with this, there is something external about it. It is not a relation in which man is conceived of as ministering to his fellow man otherwise than in outward things. Men were to choose the worthy, not to raise the unworthy. Their love was to be attracted by excellence, and could not therefore be riveted by need. There was in the world no belief in a Saviour.

If friendship is changed by this belief, enmity, we may say, is abolished by it. "If ye love them that love you, what thank have ye?" is almost repeated in one passage of the treatise, "How to receive advantage from enemies." "It is not so much noble to confer benefits on those who love us as ignoble to refrain from doing so, but to pass over an occasion of revenge, to show meekness and forbearance to an enemy, to pity him in distress, to bring help to him in need—these are acts which attract love from all but the hopelessly unloving."\* These things are, it may be objected, easy enough to say! They are easy enough to say for those who have heard them said from their earliest years no doubt, but the beauty of such an ideal as is here suggested was almost as much hidden from the eyes of the ancients as the beauty of wild scenery, and they who first opened their eyes to it had as much originality as if they had been the first to discern the grandeur of the Alps. We do not probably need, in order to act up to this ideal, a greater moral energy than they wanted to discern it.

We will here add a specially characteristic, though it may seem a trivial, instance of this modern ideal in the page of our philosopher, an instance which is so deeply wrought into our whole moral constitution that we have a great difficulty in conceiving of any human standard which did not imply it. Yet nothing is more certain than that modesty was not a classical virtue. It is a word, we believe, which, as we use it, would have had no meaning for an ancient Greek (*αἰδώς* has a different, though an allied meaning), and Plutarch, when he would describe it, is driven to more than his usual cumbrousness as he advises us "How to praise oneself, without raising a grudge against oneself." The recipe does not, we confess, strike us as very valuable, but it contains some very good advice against praising oneself at all. "We are," says our teacher, with a true sense of good-breeding, "put

\* "De Inimicorum Utilitate," c. 9.

in an embarrassing position by a person who praises himself. His hearer has often to choose between ungracious silence and insincere assent, for in such a case even silence becomes ungracious.”\* “Besides the dispraise of another always seems implied by the praise of ourselves. It is well therefore to avoid speaking of ourselves, except for some large object, either for ourselves or another person.”† The modern world breathes in that atmosphere. Modesty is no more than the mere symbol of humility—often its empty symbol. But till the thing was desired, men were not careful for the appearance. Plutarch’s value for the reality is what most makes us feel him a representative of unconscious Christianity. We do not believe it would be possible to set before the reader in non-ecclesiastical Greek so much expressed admiration of meekness (*πραότης*) from any other writer whatever. His authorities are sometimes odd enough; the Bible was never cited more inappropriately, we should say (though the assertion be a bold one), than the Greek poets are by their earnest student in this case. From them, he assures us, we may derive equanimity in disaster, and meekness under opprobrium, “so that scoffs, jeers, and insults may be met by us without perturbation.”‡ We are afraid the promise would turn out as little capable of fulfilment as that of teaching us a graceful method of self-eulogium! But the thing that Plutarch means, the mysterious sense of a Nemesis for all presumptuous arrogance, is actually present at least in the Greek drama, and it seems to us very characteristic of the new spirit which Plutarch represents, that he exaggerates the remote connection in which this feeling stands to a true humility. He must have had a very strong sense of the value of humility to feel that the Greek temperance was valuable mainly as far as it is related to a quality which a true Greek would have despised.

Plutarch’s sense of the blessings of friendship, and the dangers by which they are beset,—especially when taken in connection with what has been said as to his relation to a modern ideal,—would prepare us to find in him an equal appreciation of the deepest and closest of human bonds, and the expectation would be strengthened by the beautiful letter to his wife on the death of their child, which proves him to have known that relation under its most endearing aspect. We must confess, however, that the “conjugal precepts” show more of the low standard of an age than the high standard of an individual. Yet the new ideal of life shows itself even here in the position given to the woman, who is to be instructed by her husband in all things divine,§ and to be commanded by him “not as a slave by a master, but as the body by the spirit.”|| Plutarch is the first to protest against that theory which in allotting the woman a lower standard than the man gave her the position of a slave, though he did not of course see the full scope of his protest. “Virtue differs in man and woman,” he says,¶ “just

\* “De se Ipsum,” &c., c. 1. † *Ibid.* c. 22. ‡ “De Audiendis Poetis,” 13.  
§ “Conjugal Precepta,” 48. || *Ibid.* 33. ¶ “De Mulierum Virtutibus.”

as it differs in man and man, and in no other way. It is not one thing in woman, and another in man. There is but one virtue for all human beings." The claim for one half the race to participate in the duties of another implies a much nobler kind of equality than does any claim to participate in equal rights. We cannot here wholly pass over another claim in which Plutarch stands alone,\* not only in his age, but in the sixteen centuries which followed it. Not a single voice before him, or for all that period after him, was ever raised for those who could not plead for themselves. He considered not only the rights of the weaker half of humanity, but the rights of the beings weaker than humanity. Nothing gives us a stronger sense of his moral originality. Think of all the thousands of years during which good men and Christians watched the sufferings of animals with absolute indifference, and remember that he was the solitary advocate in the world of Greek civilization for those who could make no appeal for themselves.

If Plutarch's conjugal idea is disappointing, his views as to the bond of kindred have never, we will venture to say, been surpassed for a lofty standard of mutual claim, and subtle discernment of common difficulties. Friendship indeed was to him but "the shadow of kindred," a description illustrated by his own happy experience—the possession of a loving friend in his brother Timon, commemorated in his essay on "Fraternal Love," exhibiting the disasters of brotherhood against the background of memories, from which his warnings borrow nothing. We will venture on a somewhat lengthy set of extracts from an essay so interesting, at all events, as a chapter of biography, though here as elsewhere we have aimed at large condensation. Let Timon of Cheroinea be remembered by the side of Themistocles! The unknown Greek has been sketched for us by the same hand to which we owe the portraiture of so many illustrious Greeks, and what the sketch lacks in detail is more than made up for by the lovingness of touch which suggests it. Surely the warnings which follow, if they had less interest of their own, might be perused with interest as commemorating the brother of Plutarch.† "He who deserts a brother is as one who cuts off a hand or foot." "Our relations to the passing and the coming generation alike are poisoned by any intermixture of enmity here, how shall we reverence our parents if we love not their offspring? How shall we win reverence from our children if we exhibit that which of all else we wish them to avoid? Our care to avoid all discord here should as far exceed our care to avoid discord with a friend as our carefulness for the living organism exceeds that over a mechanical work. *This* may indeed be repaired if it be injured, and the breach be as if it had not been" (though elsewhere Plutarch fully recognizes a difficulty which can seem small only in comparison with the greatest);

\* This sympathy is expressed decidedly, though not always logically, in his Essay on the "Eating of Flesh," but there are manifest indications of it in many other parts of his writings.

† "De Fraterno Amore," c. 3.



"but *that* once subject to injury if it be again made whole so far as is possible, yet bears for ever afterwards a sad memorial in the imperfect juncture, and the visible scar! And if the loss be final, it is irreparable. The lost brother can no more be replaced than the lost hand or eye."\*

"But suppose we are unfortunate in this reflection, what, an objector may ask, is to be done? Much may be remembered that shall keep the relation from shipwreck even where it is no unmixed source of blessing. The imperfection that adheres to all human relation may surely be borne most easily when it is exhibited in one whom we have not chosen. The affection that is founded on preference may be cast down by distaste, but that which merit did not attract demerit need not repel. Can we not overlook those faults for which perhaps our own parents are responsible?"† "And let us be always on the watch to spare our parents the sight of evil in their children. A true brother will even accept his father's anger in the place of the erring one; he will exert himself to put his brother's conduct in the best light, and find that excuse which will at once gladden the heart of a father (to whom nothing is sweeter than defeat in such an accusation) and restore a brother to his place.‡ Towards his brother, however, his demeanour should be different, the earnest defence in absence justifies the zealous remonstrance to the face of the offender."§ "The time will come when a common sorrow will afford a close bond for the brothers, but let them beware of the day of inheritance which must follow the day of bereavement. It may be a birthday of hatred, it may be a new birthday of love. Let the favoured brother, in such a day, remember the noble deed of Athenodorus, who not only divided his inheritance afresh with a brother whose property had been justly confiscated, but bore with a cheerful meekness the injustice and ingratitude with which his magnanimity was met."|| "Let him recall, then and always, the fame of the Socratic Euclid who answered his brother's clamorous oath that he would be avenged on him, 'And may I perish if I do not overcome your hatred, and force you to love me again as at first.'"¶ "Let brothers find their joy, in all occasions of strife, in giving rather than receiving the victory; let not the sun go down upon their wrath, but let them imitate the Pythagoreans, who would never fail to join hands at the close of a day of discord."\*\* "And let us beware that discord, if it must come, shall spring from without. Let us root out every seed of bitterness within; if strife is to spring up, at least give it no foothold in any feeling of the mind, and beware that your grievance be not the pretext rather than the cause of your division from one whom you have ceased to love."††

Does it not light up the page of history to know that at its darkest hour (and the above may possibly have been written under Domitian) it was possible to aspire after such an ideal as is here set forth? Amid the weariness and the horror of a decaying world there was, we see—

\* "De Fraterno Amore," c. 7.    † *Ibid.* c. 8.    ‡ *Ibid.* c. 9, 10.    § *Ibid.* c. 10.  
 || *Ibid.* c. 11.    ¶ *Ibid.* c. 18.    \*\* *Ibid.* c. 17.    †† *Ibid.* c. 16.

and, if then, surely always—place for the meek pieties of domestic affection, and the placid happiness of mutual and warm regard. We would have that essay bound up with the sixth satire of Juvenal, as painting the two aspects discernible in the same era, according to the eyes that saw it.

We have sufficient proof in the foregoing extracts that human relation was not more precious to any human being that ever lived, than to Plutarch. But it was not alone enough to explain life to him. At its best, it was to him but an imperfect reflection of that deepest relation in which alone the spirit could find entire repose. This relation is the keynote of his thought. His was not an original or philosophic mind, and in gathering up the various expressions of devout trust in this unseen companion, we must not expect more than gleams of a pure but not steady radiance. They are continually obscured by his tendency to diffuseness, on no subject is it more fatal not to know where to stop than on this, and his words always overflow. Perhaps, therefore, his thoughts appear to more advantage in detached extracts than in their original context—a sure condemnation as far as literary value is concerned. Yet a representative of the unconscious Christianity which may have proved often a preparation for conscious Christianity, and sometimes, perhaps, its substitute, may claim an interest that is independent of literary value. We find scattered up and down in these miscellaneous essays all that we should associate with the idea of Christianity which is not directly historical. Of the events which the word recalls, Plutarch, to judge from his writings, was entirely ignorant, but all the principles which it suggests—all in it that is independent of time—is set forth in these writings, not, indeed, in any coherent scheme, but in broken outbursts of heartfelt utterance, as it is elsewhere (so it seems to us) only by the great masters of Christian thought. The ideas of man's corruption, of a Saviour, of "the light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world," explaining man to himself and revealing to him his own true self, hidden beneath the surface of appearances—this idea is suggested by some words of Plutarch's, as by hardly any others out of the New Testament. And in some ways his thoughts in this direction appear to us especially fitted for our time. Listen, for instance, to his protest against a school of his day, whose teaching is made familiar to us by its record in the most striking verse that ever was made the vehicle of philosophy:—"Those who think nothing comes to us from the gods deprive prosperity of its joy, and adversity of its solace, they attempt to console us as one who in a storm at sea should assure his fellow sufferers, 'The ship has no pilot, the Dioscuri do nothing against the violence of the waves, but this is a matter which need trouble no one, for the ship will soon be engulfed or shattered, and there will be an end of all emotion and all sensation.' Your consolation to the storm-tossed mariner is, that shipwreck is close at hand!" Does Plutarch here answer the

\* "*Disputatio ne suaviter*," &c., c. 23. It might be read throughout as an answer to Lucretius.

Epicureans or writers familiar to our own time? The passage we have quoted is not the only one which suggests the question. We feel the atmosphere yet more modern when we come upon his assertion of man's immortality. His sense of divine justice is supported by the conviction of the fragmentary character of all that we see of human fate in this world, his hope for a development of all that we achieve or suffer here which shall make it explicable. "Does it follow from the fact of God's attention to every human being that the soul survives the body?" asks one of the interlocutors in the dialogue on divine justice. "God," he is answered, "is a pursuer of trifles if He makes so much of creatures in whom there is nothing permanent and steadfast, nothing which resembles Himself, but who are, as Homer says, the withering foliage of the day. For Him to spend his care on creatures such as these would be to imitate those who make gardens in oyster shells."\* The image seems to us a fine and original one. Goethe has used one closely allied to it in his criticism of Hamlet. A mighty purpose in the human soul, he says, is like an oak planted in a china vase, the vessel must be shattered by the expansion of the seed within. We feel our prosaic writer here the truer poet of the two. No image, it seems to us, could better gather up all that is suggested when we limit man's existence to the narrow period between the cradle and the grave than this picture of a growing germ doomed to wither undeveloped as soon as the brittle and narrow enclosure is broken or filled. Plutarch believed in an immortality of great names and great deeds, he is one of those who will ever be associated with the "great invisible choir" whose music he has helped us to hear. To this immortality in the memory of those who treasure up all recollection of the illustrious dead he has in his best known works rendered emphatic testimony, he at least will not be charged with any tendency to underrate that self-survival in which from the narrow bounds of three or four score years streams a light that traverses undimmed the space of a hundred generations. But for him this immortality was but a poor mockery, if it was the only immortality. The creator of *Lycurgus* and *Pericles* was a trifler, if all that remained of his work, in the age of Plutarch, was the memories that Plutarch had done so much to perpetuate. It was much, if it was a small part, of their immortality. It shrank to nothing, if it was the whole.

If Plutarch grasped, with no uncertain apprehension, that idea of a participation in the Divine nature which is an implicit belief in man's immortality, he discerned with no less clearness the dark shadow by which man's immortality is blurred and chequered. He saw the life through death, but he felt the death in life. Man only learnt what true existence meant (so he reasoned) as he approached God. From all other things, ourselves included, we gain an apprehension only of the perishable fugitive element, the change, the death which as it were dilutes all being, except that which is divine. "We fleeting and

\* "*De sero Numine*," &c.



uncertain beings, whose life is mingled with death, whose joys and loves are subject to continual vicissitudes, so that not even our best self has any element of permanence—we, various as we are in our complex tangle of attributes, are to find repose and stability in turning our thoughts towards one whom alone we can address 'Thou art.' Birth and death make up our being: He inhabits that unchanged eternity in which past and present lose their meaning, filling it with an everlasting now, and with that oneness which is the test of true existence."\* The last words bring to the reader's ear dim echoes of Platonic and Pythagorean teaching, but if the thought be not original to Plutarch, there is a profound apprehension of the deepest problem of philosophy in his conviction that we learn the very meaning of Oneness from our knowledge of God. We would join that assertion to one which, apparently its opposite, seems to us to give its full meaning. "God," he says elsewhere, "cannot exercise justice or love towards Himself, there must therefore be other divine beings, who are the object of His justice and His love."† A mere creature, he felt, could not suffice to explain the character of an eternal being—an eternal love must need an eternal object. No heathen, it seems to us, ever came nearer to the apprehension of all that is involved in the mystery of a Son of God.

And the human side of this faith, the trust in a being so close to each of us, that to every man he reveals the true Self, while delivering him from the crowd of passing desires that obscure it—this also is expressed by him, almost in the very words of St. John: "As each quits the control of parents or teachers he is called on to exchange an earthly for a Divine guide," receiving as a ruler that Divine Word in obedience to whom consists true freedom. "For those only live as they desire, whose mind is thus enlightened as to what they should desire; in all beside, will is a poor and ignoble thing, and the herald of much repentance."‡ Apart from this Divine emancipation man is not only incomplete and feeble, but entangled in the meshes of evil. But the very magnitude of our disease conceals it from ourselves. "If thou wouldst look within, oh man, thou wouldst find a treasury of varied ill, not imported from without, but innate and indigenous. But it is not with the diseases of the soul, as with those of the body, which he who endures recognizes; the peculiar misfortune of these is that they are born unconsciously; reason being sound, perceives the ills of the body, but has no insight where itself is the part afflicted."§ Thus we are incompetent to be physicians to each other, and must look for healing from elsewhere. Bound in the chains of evil, man cannot deliver his brother from them, cannot rise to that vision of hope without which the effort to deliver is impossible. But to one who is apart from all pollution of evil, no evil is incurable. "Human punishment

\* "De Ei apud Delphos," c. 18, 19, 17.

† *Ibid.* c. 20.

‡ "De Recta Ratione," &c., c. 1.

§ "Animi ne an Corporis Affectiones sint peiores?" c. 2-4.

can have but little remedial character. God, when he takes in hand a human soul, sees the inchoate virtue that is invisible to every human eye, and the ignorance or weakness that to human eyes has taken the aspect of vice,—sees, even in that which looks to human eyes a mere evidence of a mind inclined to evil, the signs of a latent vigour in things excellent. For while one unskilled in husbandry would not rejoice in finding many weeds on a spot he desired to bring into cultivation, the true husbandman would rejoice in recognizing a vigorous soil.”\* This sense of an unerring eye always fixed upon the soul of man, discerning not only its loves and its hatreds, its hopes and fears, but the seed of generous action in its futile effort, its vain struggles, its hidden loyalty,—this belief in God as the constant companion of the spirit of man in that region where all human companionship recedes—this seems to us the seed of all that is most vital in what Christ came to teach mankind, and not expressed anywhere else so distinctly and so fully as by Plutarch.

Plutarch was led by more than one line of thought towards the belief which, while it is the foundation of Christianity, was characteristic of the age in which Christianity arose, apart from any Christian teaching—the belief in a Mediator. He had, indeed, a sense in every direction of a sort of gradual approach towards and prophecy of another nature than that in which this gradation is manifested. Thus he sees in the senses a certain gradation, by which sense is, as it were, the prophecy of thought, hearing being chosen out by him as the most intellectual of the senses. Thus, also, he sees in the four elements, as they were then classified, a gradual prophecy of spirit—earth is the most, fire is the least material. Thus, also, in spirit itself he finds a gradual approach to the divine. God is to the soul what the soul is to the body. The thought is not unfamiliar to Christian ears; it must have occurred to all, whatever their creed, who have been conscious of an influence within, apart from which the powers of understanding and will seemed but as the eye and the hand, when the spirit no longer directs them. It is strange, however, to read it in the words of one who lived in the first century after Christ, and remember that we are reading the words of a heathen.

We have represented Plutarch chiefly as the preacher. How far this side of his character is from being the whole his better known writings are sufficient to prove, yet even in the Biographies, as Dr. Trench has well pointed out, it is the ethical rather than the political aspect of a life which interests him. The aspect under which he regarded history, indeed, may be illustrated by a fine saying of his concerning poetry (including thereby all that we mean by literature), which we are surprised never to have seen quoted, that it is “a mediator between philosophy and the world.”† The saying is one peculiarly suited to our day; there

\* “Animi ne an Corporis Affectiones sint pejores?” c. 6.

† “De Audiendis Poetis.”

never was a time when the great masters of fiction were so consciously mediators between philosophy and the world, and this conscious aim may indeed be made a reproach to our literature from certain points of view, but they are not points of view with which Plutarch would have had any sympathy. The moral aspect of literature, as of history, was that which interested him. He evidently saw clearly that literature can embody the teaching of philosophy, as history cannot. He must have felt, after all his efforts to paint the great characters of the ages which had preceded his own, how one touch of Homer had more revealing power than all the works of the historians he had studied so carefully. He only who creates can fully reveal. As we follow an actual career we see only a small part of its moral significance, and all biography, all at least which enters in the world of heroic action, contains an emphatic warning against any premature application of a moral standard. He who has to ask at every turn, How did these events actually happen? and who finds the answer to this question a difficult and arduous one, is slow to take up that office of interpretation between philosophy and the world which belongs by its very nature to him who describes events which group themselves around ideas, who deduces the fact from the thought. How much of our moral standard is moulded by the great masters of imaginative portraiture! What we shall pity, what form of evil shall stir indignation, what form shall be imprinted on our minds in connection with all that makes it excusable, what ideal shall be lighted up by the glow of vivid colouring, what picture of guilt shall be made the object of most vigorous recoil—all these questions, to answer which would be the highest aim of the moral philosopher, are solved by every great creative genius. He directs our sympathies, he rules our aspirations, he gives shape to our fleeting efforts at moral decision, and lifts the portal between the conscience and the imagination for the entrance of friend or foe. Mighty and immeasurable responsibility! would that every one on whom it lies could receive the warning of the gentle preacher, so much his inferior in genius, who would waken him to his high vocation, and call upon him to bring his vast reinforcement to the side of goodness and purity, in that great battle which lasts from age to age

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