

**MR. TENNYSON'S
"DESPAIR": A
LECTURE ON ITS
RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE**

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Mr. Tennyson's "Despair": A Lecture on Its Religious Significance by Thomas Walker

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A Lecture

ON THE

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THOMAS WALKER.

"The Reason and the Conscience of Man are for him the Image of God, and as such are as sacred as anything can be; it is therefore not irreverent, but most reverent, to compare with these whatever is asserted to be Good or Evil. God is greater than our hearts, and knoweth all things, yet in those things which our hearts do know they anticipate his sentence. This it is absolutely necessary to believe, if we would not cut from under ourselves all the foundations on which any moral judgment whatsoever can be based."—FREDERIC MYERS.

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MDCCCLXXXII.

THE following lecture was prepared and delivered at the request of a number of believers in the Christian Revolution, who had been accustomed to read Mr. Tennyson's writings with admiration, but were startled and perplexed on reading "Despair." No apology is offered for the treatment of the dogma of Endless Punishment from the Christian point of view by a layman. The interest of the so-called laity in the subject cannot be inferior to that of the clergy, and if the author felt that any additional justification of his attempt were necessary, he would point to the zealous and too-often successful endeavours of some influential laymen to make it dangerous for ministers of religion to treat the question with the freedom which befits earnest inquiry.

MR. TENNYSON'S "DESPAIR."

IF there is one living author between whom and the public a complete mutual understanding might have been believed to exist, that author is Mr. Tennyson. Yet after nourishing and forming the thought of two generations, he has compelled some of the most trustful of his readers to pause and ask with surprise—What does he mean? Whither would he lead us? A first glance at "Despair; a Dramatic Monologue," showed that the old unimpaired power of the Laureate had been employed for purposes beyond the common scope of the poetic art. Here certainly was no "joy for ever." In truth the highest literary skill had been exerted to produce one of the most unpleasant poems ever written or to be imagined. If, then, the verses could not minister delight, they must surely have been intended for instruction. But what was to be learned from the disordered fancies and angry recriminations of a madman? Evidently if the poem was to serve any useful purpose whatever, it must do so by first stimulating inquiry and provoking reflection. But reflection and inquiry are troublesome processes, seldom undertaken without some definite view of the gain by which they are to be recompensed. The reception of the poem corresponded to its contents. Art

and Culture could no more accept than disown it, and sulked. Society was vexed that its conventional decorum had been set at nought, and muttered "indiscretion" and "scandal." The religious world groaned as if under a benumbing torpedo shock. And had the farseeing Poet braved so much hostility, and provoked all this dislike, for nothing? For an enterprise so perilous were there not a reason and a compensation? Some answer to this inquiry will emerge, it may be hoped, as we examine "Despair."

The poem opens with an outburst of bitter reproaches—for the monologue is not a soliloquy—addressed to a person who is present throughout the piece, and whose unreported suggestions are seen to give frequent turns and new animation to the action. From the prefixed "argument" we learn that the speaker is one who together with his wife had lost faith in God, and hope of a life to come, and that being utterly miserable in this, the pair had resolved to end themselves by drowning. In the attempt the woman was drowned, but the man was rescued by a minister of the sect he had abandoned. The rescued man is the monologist of the poem, and the minister the person reproached in its first verses. How, the speaker asks, could any one deserve his thanks for bringing him back to

. . . . "three more dark days of the Godless gloom
Of a life without sun, without health, without hope, without
any delight
In anything here upon earth"?

On that fatal night, as the two walked self-doomed to the sea, they passed the lighthouse—symbol of salvation.

. . . . "They had saved many hundreds from wreck. Does it matter how many they saved? We are all of us wreck'd at last."

They went on with unfaltering step, for they were "frightened at life, not death." The stars shone and sparkled, "flashing with fires as of God"; but "their light was a lie"; they were only lighting other worlds as dark as our own.

Next, these dismal convictions are accounted for, and the minister who had prepared the way for them, by making the faith of earlier days impossible, must take his share in the blame.

"See, we were nursed in the dark night-fold of your fatalist creed."

The word "fatalist" suggests a difficulty here which recurs when we read of one who

"Made us, foreknew us, foredoom'd us, and does what He will with His own."

Fatalism, in the common acceptation of the term, is preached in very few, and those very small, congregations in England, and only by hyper-Calvinists. As Dr. Pusey correctly states: "The rigid Calvinistic school is happily all but extinct, if not altogether extinct in England," * although its doctrines may be found in "confessions" and trust deeds. Probably Mr. Tennyson employs the word with an enlarged meaning, for we may not suppose that he intended to offer an exceptional case as a type. But to return. From the dark creed of their youth, the pair revolted:

* "What is of Faith?" etc., p. 6.

"And we turned to the growing dawn,—we had hoped for a dawn indeed,
 When the light of a Sun that was coming would scatter the
 ghosts of the Past,
 And the cramping creeds that had maddened the people would
 vanish at last."

But they found the new light even less supportable than the old darkness. They had

"Hoped for a dawn, and it came, but the promise had faded away.
 We had passed from a cheerless night to the glare of a drearier day."

The materialistic Agnosticism to which they had turned taught them that they were "poor orphans of nothing," alone on a lonely shore. For these are "the new dark ages"

"When the bat comes out of his cave, and the owls are whooping at noon,
 And Doubt is the lord of this dunghill, and crows to the sun and the moon,
 Till the Sun and the Moon of our sciences are both of them turned into blood,
 And Hope will have broken her heart, running after a shadow of good."

The severest trials of life were added to those of the mind. The eldest son had forged on his father and fled, and the second was better dead than alive. The wife had a grief which could only be cured, if at all, by the knife of the surgeon; and the man, ruined by his sons' misconduct, dreaded being at last mocked in a madhouse. Why should all this be borne if men die for ever and all griefs are in vain? So the fatal resolve is taken. If there is no other pity

in heaven or on earth, the two will pity one another and die together. But the unlooked-for intervention of the minister gives the husband new opportunities for reflection, and we have the result in agonizing passages which disclose most clearly the purpose of the poem. The rescued man justifies his renunciation of existence by asserting the impossibility of believing in God as represented in the only religious teaching he had known, and of which he lets us see the character.

"And we broke away from the Christ, our human Brother and Friend,
For He spoke, or it seemed that He spoke, of a Hell without help, without end."

And again—

"What! I should call on that Infinite Love that has served us so well?
Infinite wickedness rather, that made everlasting Hell.
. Were there a God as you say,
His Love would have power over Hell till it utterly vanished away."

One glimmer of hope at times relieves his gloom. May there not be "a God behind all—after all—the great God," for aught that one knows?

"But the God of Love and of Hell together—they cannot be thought.
If there be such a God, may the Good God curse Him and bring Him to nought."

After this the minister can only cry "Blasphemy!" and the suicide replies, "The blasphemy to *my* mind lies all in the way that you walk," and renews his vows of self-destruction.