

**MORAL NERVE,  
AND THE ERROR OF  
LITERARY VERDICTS**

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Moral nerve, and the error of literary verdicts by Furneaux Jordan

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# MORAL NERVE

AND

## THE ERROR OF LITERARY VERDICTS.

BY

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## P R E F A C E .

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IN the early stages of civilisation men delighted in beads, polished buttons, and bright colours. Their descendants, when, in process of time, they became accomplished writers and speakers, continued to take delight in the gaudy, the marvellous, and the sudden. Even now the majority of writers, of purely literary training, dip their pens not only 'in dyes of earthquake and eclipse,' but in the more lurid colours of creations, destructions, supernaturalisms, 'immaterial entities,' and cataclysms generally.

The smaller number of thinkers recognise the basic fact in science that matter in its various forms, and with its varying energy and forces, is uncreateable, indestructible, eternal, limitless. They confess that of this so-called matter, 'the thing in itself,' nothing is known save that it and its properties are constantly changing with a change that never began—a change that will never end. Man himself was not created and time did not begin.



Long-continued familiarity with the ideas of instantaneous origins, rapid transmutations, and supernatural interventions on the one hand; and habitual contemplation of inconceivably minute beginnings, incalculably slow methods and perpetual change on the other hand, give rise to two outlooks and to two modes of interpreting the phenomena of life, man, and the universe.

And let me say here that the student of evolution and of its noblest product, 'nerve,' although compelled by reverence for truth, to relinquish supernatural heights and to dwell in the humbler domains of naturalism and law, has one great compensation—he values more deeply than others the creed left to him (and to others) by the development of nerve: that creed is, honestly to find out what is true; strenuously to do what is right; unceasingly to foster the finer feelings—above all the ethical, affectional, and poetical.

The less diffident—and perhaps the less wise—of the literary multitude are disposed to exclaim "a plague on your 'heredity' and on your bodily-organisation!"—vaguely imagining that if they laboured sedulously

enough, cared deeply enough, willed strongly enough, and if, above all, circumstance were sufficiently opportune it is in them to become Tennysons or Brownings. A few animated by the literary spirit and characterised also by lively fancy and uncritical judgment, actually imagine that they can see the invisible, hear the inaudible, and touch the intangible. Students of science, with more modesty and composure, recognise that nerve-organisation puts definite limits on every individual—limits, narrow in the idiot, not wide in the average man, and very wide in the genius.

Justly to appraise the relative magnitude of truths is the beginning of wisdom. One massive truth is the uninterrupted decay of supernatural beliefs. Evil spirits, witches, miracles, and even 'immaterial entities' call for no disproof—they simply, one after another, cease to be credible.

It is not the aim of these pages either to prove this or to disprove that, but rather to throw some light on the effects, in life and literature, of two widely differing points of view. I venture to think however that, in passing from page to page, the

unreasonableness of the one view, and the reasonableness of the other, will become more and more manifest.

I have intentionally given disproportionate attention to the moral element in our nervous organisation. Moral nerve, as I venture to call it, is unique in this respect—its action can be simulated seeing that other nerve endowments may, to a great extent, take its place. But, if there be no nerve of high capacity, or of poetry, or of eloquence, or of earnestness, within the skull, there can be no appearance of either capacity, or poetry, or eloquence, or earnestness in the character. These qualities cannot be simulated; and, what is more, if they are not within the skull by inheritance, no pressure of circumstance can put them there. Of what stuff moral nerve is made, whether of matter or spirit or deity (as pantheism teaches),—does not affect the arguments herein put forward. The foremost living biologist, who is popularly looked upon as 'materialism' incarnate, is in reality a pronounced pantheist.

It is not proposed that all men of letters who