

THOUGHTS BEFORE A DUEL.

BY ERNEST HELFENSTEIN.

THERE are periods when we live not in the immediate nor the future, but when we find ourselves conversant with scenes and events of which we could have had no cognizance except in some separate state of existence anterior to our presence on this little orb, or in some spiritual exodus, when we wandered forth, dwelling in tents, partaking of crystal waters, and hearing voices of great power uttering new truths to the heart.

It was thus to-night that I dwelt no more in this new world, brave as it is. The true German hearts about me were no more the beings with whom my lot was cast; the Juniatta was the Rhine, and the old woods about my dwelling were the borders of the Hartz forest.

All things were familiar to me. The rude landway, the moss upon the ruin, and the ivy upon the dismantled tower. I was seated in the home of my fathers, and the lovely dames of the olden time moved in stately grace before me; I heard their breathings of womanly love, knew their sorrows, their bereavements, and their undying truth.

And the robust men of other times, with their noble and generous impulses, their manly devotion, and their chivalric constancy, grasped me with mailed hand, or swept by on heavy charger, full men and hardy, equal to any emergency, and ready to face peril in whatsoever shape it might come.

This worn and time-discolored scroll that I take from this black cabinet was penned by a descendant of such men as these. It is the best earthly thoughts of a high souled youth who fell in single combat with a man who had wronged him most deeply.

He was the friend, the companion of my father in his early days, and this record of "An Hour before the Duel," with other papers, was bequeathed to his keeping.

Bernard — possessed every quality of mind and person capable of winning regard. Brave almost to recklessness, accomplished in all manly studies, skillful in those exercises that impart freedom and strength to the system, and most tender and refined in his devotion to the gentler sex.

In a moment of convivial excitement, words were uttered reflecting upon the fair fame of an only sister, and, though acknowledged to be false, the romantic honor of Bernard rejected all conciliation, and demanded the blood of the traducer.

From the first he knew it would be fatal to himself, and he calmly arranged those matters that appertain to earth, and then traced the records of his last hour with a firm hand, and a mind alive to the dread realities about him. Indeed, he would seem to have grasped the pen at this fearful hour in order to preserve the clearness and continuity of thought which

one, so reflective and imaginative as he, might dread would desert him.

My father received his last breath, and carried his last tender farewell to the ill-fated Mary. And this solitary relic of a noble but misguided mind is all that remained of the accomplished and chivalric Bernard —.

He perished ere those subtle essences, those perfect, distinct beings which go to make up one human soul, were conjoined in the person of the student. Yet he hath a strange sense of companionship, a feeling that he must have shared the agency and the peril. Why not, indeed? Doth not the great human heart pulsate in unison, and if one of its members be wrung with anguish, doth not a wild sadness, a terrible foreboding, a weight, we cannot tell whence or why, come upon us?

These are the moods of mystery, and it behoveth us to kneel and pray if so be the cup may pass from us, for verily sorrow broodeth everywhere, and the sighs must be echoed in our own bosoms. The mood of mystery may have had its origin in hearts years, long years ago, and the pang hath touched our own but even now; as light emitted, as astronomers tell us, from some distant star, speedeth onward, but ages elapse before the ray reaches our own globe, and the orb from which it started may have ceased to exist, and become a lost Pleiad of the heavens ere our eyes are greeted with its beam; or like a pebble cast into the waters, that may displace particles in the universal field of matter, the widening circles, mottling the shadows of some still inland lake, to give at length an impulse to the wave that beats upon the shores of the vast Pacific. If it be so in the material, surely it must be still more so in the spiritual world, where the great heavings of soul and mind in their perpetual progress are felt forever and forever.

It is the early twilight. A faint tinge of crimson as yet dimmeth not the radiance of Hesperus, the tranquil harbinger of morn. The meek blossom unfoldeth its leaf and thus gently displaceth the dew that had stolen to its covert; these old majestic woods are hushed in their solitudes, for the bird hath not as yet waked from its dream of love.

Softly deepeneth the crimson tinge—the blossom is perfect in its beauty, and now one universal gush of melody is vocal in the dim woods. And thus will it be to-morrow—thus will the earth brighten in its gladness, while I—I—. My God, where will be the creature thou hast created?

I will no more, for "that way madness lies," and, erring as I may be, I would not shake off this "mortal coil" in the bewilderment of half bereaved reason. I would not enter the dread portals of the everlasting, the eternal, the vast, infinite space; how these ideas

expand and swell into immensity at an hour like this, and how the littleness of human passions and human pursuits shrink me into nothingness! I would not enter the dread portal with a craven soul thrown from its balance, but with the concentrated manhood of him who hath been made little lower than the angels.

Craven soul—manhood—mockery, mockery all! And life is but one vast field of falsehood, and delusion. We bind ourselves by enactments, by conventionalisms, the violations of which constitute crime or debasement, while the broad principles of justice remain inviolate. A crime in the eyes of man, but none at the throne of the Eternal; dishonor here, and it may be virtue before "Him, who seeth not as man seeth." Who shall open the sealed book of truth and virtue, and dare convict his brother of crime? Who hath looked into the counsels of the Almighty, and dare say thou hast sinned? Alas! alas! I feel as impelled by an invincible fate. Step by step have I been brought to this, feeling the error yet powerless to resist.

Oh, false mockery of life! Yet one must stand with his foot at the verge of the grave, and one hand grasping, as I do now, the vast folds of the veil that divides the seen from the unseen ere he can realize this.

The clock strikes; every sound is told upon my heart. One—two—three. My God! how fearfully loud doth that small chronicle repeat the hour! It is as if all sounds were merged in that fearful toll, that shall no more come to my ears.

One hour more, and I shall be—what! O thou blessed and glorious light, how thrice blessed and glorious dost thou not appear to him who shall soon leave thee, and forever. And then, "brave o'erhanging firmament," that dost bend as in love over the poor erring child of earth, hast thou no voice but this of serene rebuke? Ye woods, and thou full-volumed river, ye will be the same, though he who delighted in ye shall know ye no more forever.

"List, list, O list. My hour is almost come."

Methinks a gibbering ghost is at my ear, and I hear his sepulchral tones uttering—

"Ay, but to die and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction, and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice."

Avaunt! I will no more. With what a terrible solemnity every word awakens an echo in the dim chambers of my soul. I feel as even now had commenced the fearful doom—

"To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those, that lawless and uncertain thoughts
Imagine howlings!—'tis too horrible!"

I shall go mad at this. No, my own strong will, that hath dared to seize upon the distaff of fate, shall even grasp the reins of reason, and compel her to my bidding. She *shall* not abandon her throne till the last pulse hath ceased its beating.

"The firmament passeth away as a scroll, and the elements melt with fervent heat. And the seals are

loosed, and the book is opened." Life is but a point of existence—I behold all, all the records of the past. The faint, sweet revelations of childhood, the burning characters of youth, the stains of manhood, all, all are before me!

Oh, thou Searcher of hearts, who can hope for heaven, except through thy mercy? Let it suffice that thy weak and erring child, in his heart of hearts, did yet adore the good and the true.

My mother, thy gray locks rise even now to reproach me, and I feel it were a blessedness to kneel once more at thy feet and crave thy forgiveness. But thou wilt not curse me; if prayers and tears may change the fate of the doomed, thine, I know, will prevail.

Mary, my own sweet Mary, I have chased thy image from my sight lest it should plead, "angel-tongued." But I feel thy meek arms about me, and thy tear upon my cheek. There are thy trusting eyes, thy low tones of tenderness. I had not dreamed of this, my beloved. I had thought to die apart from thee, but already I am independent of the laws of matter, and our spirits commingle. Thou wilt not mourn, my own dearest, my well beloved. Thou wilt even bring to thine aid a spirit equal to that of thy lover. Wilt thou not, sweet? Surely, surely it is but a moment. And say, my own true Mary, thou wilt never, even in thy soul, say, "he loved a phantom better than me."

It is false, Mary. Nay, verily it is true. For I leave thee to a broken heart, rather than face the bronzed visage of the world. Honor, honor! thou art a mockery.

Last night, my beloved, as we sat in that dim, old chamber, with its long rows of antique tomes, and the portraits of mailed knight and gentle ladye looking from the folds of the dark tapestry, while the moonbeams rested upon the chiseled features of Dian and her nymphs, methought strange shadows were moving in dusky recess; that lord and lady, and beautiful maid of which these were the semblance, animated canvas and marble shared again human emotions—that men and women, whose thoughts peopled that old library, lingered amid these memorials of their existence, and claimed companionship with me, who was so soon to be a shadow like themselves.

My cheek grew pale to meet their strange eyes, and I strained thee to my breast, as if thy truth and innocence might shield me from the phantoms. Dear Mary, in part thou didst rightly interpret that tenderest embrace. Soul-felt, unutterable love stirred the bosom of thy lover, and thy dove-like eyes, and the meek pressure of thy arms were those of the saint-like, the sinless. Thou wert shrined in thy nun-like grace, and I was a spirit bridegroom.

Do you remember how long we sat, and neither spoke; and how the tears gathered in your eyes, and a mysterious sadness grew upon you? and then when I kissed away the drops, the words of endearment died upon your lips, and you leaned your head upon my shoulder, and wept like a sweet child.

Ay, my beloved, it was one of those marvelous presentiments that sometimes come to the good and

the true to herald approaching evil, and to soften its infliction. Take comfort from this. Had you known that he, whose arms held you to his bosom, whose eyes but faintly imaged the love he bore you, would in a few hours become a "kneaded clod," a cold tenement, to be approached with fear and trembling, how would you have shrunk from his side, and have recoiled from the glance of the doomed.

Even now, dearest, you will recall every word then uttered, and the slightest saying will appear to bear upon it the shadows of the eternal world. Years of sorrow will not efface them from thy memory. "The spirit will bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you." And this will become the comforter.

My time is expired. Farewell, dearest and best.

THE SEAT OF THE SOUL.

BY A NEW CONTRIBUTOR.

WHERE holds the soul its regal seat?
This question did I oft repeat,
Nor once received an answer meet

Some in undoubting tones proclaim,
It is a swift and subtle flame,
Running about through all the frame

And others place it in the breast,
A soft and warm and pleasant nest,
For all but an immortal guest.

But metaphysic aid is vain—
A fog which rises in the brain
And darkens what it would explain.

But One did all my doubts displace:
She spoke, and, lo! I quick did trace
The soul all radiant in her face.

For up the dark heaven of her eyes,
With modest beam, which lit its skies,
Thought, like a spirit-star, did rise.

Then Passion's blinding glare was sent
Over the same dark firmament,
And "trailing glory" as it went.

Imagination met the sight,
Enthroned upon her temples white,
With bright eyes blazing with delight

And ever and anon it flings
Soft radiance from its golden wings,
And of a chime immortal sings.

While Fancy, culling fragrant flowers,
Within her fair cheeks rosy bowers,
Sits weaving gurlands for the Hours.

And from her eyelid's tiny tip
Swift-footed Mirth would gaily trip
To wed with Feeling on her lip.

Pity, whom blight nor pain could sear,
With trembling pace to Sorrow dear,
Slid down her face upon a tear.

And Sentiment, a spangled haze,
With shifting shapes and hues and rays,
O'er each harmonious feature plays.

Hope's glittering footprints, too, are there,
And the soft busy feet of Prayer,
Both hunting on the trail of Care.

And there was sweet Affection, too,
Nursed on the heart's unwithering dew,
With changeless face, forever true.

Keen Anger once, half hid by Grace,
Shot its sharp lightning o'er her face,
But sunk in Pity's mild embrace.

Earth's shadows dim with swiftness fled
As moral beauty o'er her head
Its consecrating radiance shed.

An unseen presence, ever near,
Her spirit's breath, her being's cheer,
Her soul's divinest atmosphere.

A Beauty, free from earthly ill,
Which Time's thick snow-flakes cannot chill,
From age to age unwithered still.

And when her voice, its chains unbound,
Music, with odors circled round,
Came sailing on the waves of sound.

Its light skiff skimmed that sparkling sea,
And ripples of sweet melody
Went singing to the shore in glee.

And as you listened to the chime
Unheeded sped the feet of Time,
And earth seemed in its sinless prime.

Last, as the ruler of her mien,
Virtue upon her brow is seen,
Her mind's defence, her spirit's queen.

And regally, in white array,
In ample state doth Virtue sway,
And Passion, Thought and Will obey.

All these bright shapes of woven air,
The varied soul, whose hues they wear,
Are tenants of a face as fair.

Where holds the soul its regal seat?
'T is where such radiant visions meet,
Dazzling with light the eye they greet.

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