

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BREATH OF LIFE.

EVERY living being nurses life—life, which rests as a film over the face of every living world. It is not necessary to look for life as a variable thing, influencing by its own varied nature and accounting for caprice, but rather as an invariable thing, which, entering the animal substance more or less, and moulding it, animates it, enables it to grow, to move, to live. We should be vain if we supposed that the film of life existed only on our little planet, for the suggestion is that it extends through all the mighty space, and is the soul which envelops each planet that is alive. The wonder is that so many millions of suns and planets, vastly mightier than our own, should not have furnished richly trained beings who could more frequently have visited these smaller spheres and dealt with us according to their might, as we have dealt with lower creatures than ourselves when we have visited obscure and remote corners or parts of our globe. I suppose it is merely a matter of time, which, in the grand total, is after all nothing to the Founder and Governor of all. It concerns us, however, in our

little ways, to feel and know that we are of two parts—of an instrument, mouldable, pliable, variable, of the earth earthy, and of a soul, comparatively eternal and unchangeable. With such an ideal before us such terms as materialism and spiritualism, as separate systems of belief, pass away.

The atmospheric sea of life in which we breathe may be expressed as meaning the existence in which we are, for the moment, cast, so that as we are moulded and maintained in the mould we are what we are. Our differences depend, not on the animating spirit, but on the mould that receives it, and we are progressive or stationary, civilised or uncivilised, according as we are corporeally fitted. The first and prime duty, therefore, is to adapt the instrument to its correct uses; to adjust the fleeting body, assured that the animating soul is provided for us eternally, as we understand the phrase. The breath of life will respond to the instrumental constructions, whatever they may be—the minutest insect, the man, the bird of the air, or the monster of the sea.

All nature opens to the candid teacher and expounder of Life the two manifestations, (1) the breath of life, (2) the impressionable body or instrument. The breath of life exists in every human being, in every animal, in every flower, and even in the earth itself, rendering parts alive, in a certain degree, which, from their apparent motionlessness, may be considered dead. We may look upon this presence of life as a breath, and may account for the pheno-

mena of the highest character as understandable on the ground of its invariability and immortality. I live, but I converse with Cæsar, who lived ages before, and Cæsar and his followers conversed with those who lived ages and ages before their time in chaos, as chaos was according to their conception. We live, in fact, eternally, as the breath of life—our true potential—while our material half is undergoing the very havoc of changes from day to day.

It is our material half that does change, and makes us what we are—a passing crowd of moulds under the influence of a permanent power. In ourselves we are mere earth moulded into form, changing, changed: here present, there gone; but, while extant, changed, animated, and moved by that which exists but cannot be touched, measured, or weighed; by that which to us is strictly immaterial, and yet, like time and motion, is, ever has been, and ever is to be.

The universality of the breath of life is the universality of the world, and accounts for that which has never been attributed to it. We, mere passing shadows, in all our presumed greatness or debased lowliness, know, as a rule, nothing more than what we see, hear, taste, and feel. The breath of life we know not, although it is the primary part of our nature and our existence. No disturbance influences it, yet all disturbances influence through it—for it fills all space in us, and we cannot, in the

minutest part or for the shortest time, be physically changed without it in so far as we, personally, are concerned—affecting it as if it were a wave of motion that has been touched, and being touched by our physical nature is felt, indeed moves, in us, and, for anything we are conscious of, throughout all the spheres.

The breath of life is staid as well as widespread. It never corrupts, and, therefore, is immortal; so that death of the instrument or animal body is the one perfect purification of the soul or eternal spirit that animated it. There is in my memory a man—very many men are there, but one particularly—who feels the breath of life and at the same time does not feel it; he is to me both alive and dead. From a purely physical cause he began to die in his foot, and the foot refusing the breath, his breath of life, became corrupt and died, whilst the rest of him did receive it and lived down to the line that lay between the living and the dead—a strange and wonderful phenomenon.

I have seen the dead many times: they are not in a condition to take in the breath of life, the soul in which the living animal world is enfolded; but the physical conditions go on just as iron rusts, and they decompose, or, in common language, become corrupt. In plain words, the change of the physical, and therefore visible, has taken place, while the breath of life, which is not visible, continues the same for ever.

The breath of life binds together all living things, animal and vegetable, man and beast, world and world, as far as worlds are animate. In respect to it the cat at my foot, the bird that flies by the window, the fish that float in the glass bowl, and the flower that stands in earth in the balcony, are all one. All the difference is that I am of a different shape and form, which distinguishes me as apart from them. So all beings of the human sort on the earth, big or little, young or old, are one, as all living things are. They may differ through the effects of place on the earth, of temperature, of height, or depth, or construction, but that is merely physical difference; they are one with me as regards the breath of life, they are in regard to it everything or they are nothing, except in respect to the breath, or enveloping life.

Sometimes we wonder how we can know so much and be so little. I once met on a pleasure trip he whom we men, in our physical way, recognised as Adams the astronomer—Neptune Adams—who first pointed out to wondering men the place, time, and character of one of the orbs that roll round the sun. He was much pleased with a little spectroscope of mine which I had the delight of presenting to him, and which he placed among his treasures. We were in a steamboat and as we leaned over its side, peering at the big waves that passed us, we conversed on many scientific subjects. He charmed me by pouring into my ear how he had found far-distant

Neptune. He explained how he, originally a very plain, simple, and homely lad, had traced mere lines on maps, sometimes on nothing more than bricks and mortar, to the great astonishment of his parents and schoolmates. Then he had gone on, even to his own astonishment, and by study of lines in varied forms had become, under education, a mathematician. It was a simple, yet wonderful and artful science he had mastered; it seemed to him beyond every possible expectation. In time he was a teacher; in further time a professor, and amongst the envied. His eye turned into the illimitable space; he conjured with his lines there, and discovered a body he had neither seen nor heard of. He told the world, through the Royal Society, where it was he found the planet, and when. In his calculations he was right to the letter—the first right amongst all men. From the words and thoughts relating to physical discovery we passed to other subjects bearing on the field of astronomy, when, for my part, I ventured to wonder why we, such small and, compared with the universe, petty creatures, should be able in our intelligence to grasp the infinite and write on paper the widest and greatest problems of suns and worlds. Adams agreed in the idea. It was wonderful, truly, to know and weigh a sun which could not be seen without a glass—that glass a mere man's invention. And so we spent our day in wondering consideration.

I saw Professor Adams more than once after that interview, and I heard from him more than once; but we never met without a recurrence to it, and it has many times rested in my mind. It recurs less since I formed this conclusion about the breath of life as the eternal animator, and the body as an instrument moved by it. It is not startling any longer to me why the owner of such a breath, even for the briefest period, should be familiar for the time with all that can be grasped and retained. The whole universe is his universe; he is immortal while he can hold, but when he falls to pieces physically he is dead, and is no more immortal than the thing on which he has written his learning—a parchment, or, better perhaps, a stone, and is just as mutable. The breath of life never dies, although the instrument that receives it may everlastingly perish.

The breath of life connects us altogether,—suns, worlds, human beings, animals, plants,—and we are in respect to it all one while we have it. Entirely passive itself, it adumbrates or vibrates through immensity, if I may use such a term. It is neither old nor young: it stirs or influences all that it enters; it never decomposes, calls neither for food nor drink, wears not, nor sleeps. Like light, it is ready for any instrument or organ that is fitted to receive it and be animated by it—and is eternal.

That which seems to be stronger than the breath of life, and as invisible, is what men call attraction—

attraction of the earth, that in its way governs the animal instrument. A man, as an instrument, wears because the attraction of the earth is pulling upon him. A man falls from the same cause. A man bends, and we say he is getting old, while the fact is that it is a mechanical bending of the instrument in obedience to the attraction of the earth. A young man is so placed that he can draw in the breath of life, and by the power it gives him can resist the attraction; but he matures, gains his full capacity as an instrument, and then begins to decline, because the persistent attraction, ever present, gradually overcomes his vitality. So the needle of my galvanometer stands at a fixed point, as the earth bids it stand, until I vitalise it with an electrical current, when it diverges so long as the current is supplied, but not a moment more. The attraction in the end wins. Invisible, therefore, and as mysterious as the breath of life itself, made obvious only through an instrument, attraction is a primary power, ruling probably over life, the key of the world's vitality.

What is the vital power that moves an engine?

When we construct an engine of our own we use a power for movement. We may not know the nature of the power, but we know it by name—heat, light, or electricity. But when we watch the movements of a living engine we do not know the motor or propelling power, that appears to act spontaneously. We may give it a name, but we are not sure

about it as yet, and this is what has ever been the case, although recent investigations tend to bring us nearer to the truth.

It is not necessary that we should unite the vital power with the vital understanding: they may be one, or two, or more in combination; yet the vital power or force we ought to understand, for it is something universal and possesses distinct properties. The ancient fathers seem to have conceived that it was light, and the expression in which they spoke that "God is Light" gives a grand definition of their idea. To one looking with modern eyes at the subject the old idea has presented much that is valid. Light is everywhere, promotes many things, and even in some instances—as in the muscular fibres of the living iris—creates motion, all of which acts are in its favour. When Galvani found muscular motion was excited by electric force, everyone jumped at the idea that "electricity was life," and there is no force we have investigated, in regard to its vital activity, with more care. When Samuel Metcalfe, an American philosopher, produced two volumes on *Caloric and its Vital Agencies*, a book I have studied ever since it fell unnoticed from the press over fifty years ago, he insisted on the existence of a subtle power which he called caloric, which repelled its own particles and attracted all those of other bodies, and by which he endeavoured to account for the commencement and continuance of movement. We have since inferred that there are

other powers which are none of these named, or are some of them in subtle combination. They are spiritual essences according to our limited appreciation, but they are as mighty as subtle, and the breath of life is one of them.