

The full text of Henry Scott Holland's poem "Death is Nothing at all"

"Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as He is pure." — 1 John iii.2,3

I suppose all of us hover between two ways of regarding death, which appear to be in hopeless contradiction with each other. First, there is the familiar and instinctive recoil from it as embodying the supreme and irrevocable disaster. It is the impossible, the incredible thing. Nothing leads up to it, nothing prepares for it. It simply traverses every line on which life runs, cutting across every hope on which life feeds, and every intention which gives life significance. It makes all we do here meaningless and empty. "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." Everything goes to one place, good and bad, just and unjust; happy and unhappy, rich and poor, all lie down together in one common ruin. All are cut off by the same blind inexorable fate. So stated it is inexplicable, so ruthless, so blundering— this death that we must die. It is the cruel ambush into which we are snared. It is the pit of destruction. It wrecks, it defeats, it shatters. Can any end be more untoward, more irrational than this? Its methods are so cruelly accidental, so wickedly fantastic and freakish. We can never tell when or how its blow will fall. It may be, no doubt, that it may come to the very old as the fitting close of an honourable life. But how often it smites, without discrimination, as if it had no law! It makes its horrible breach in our gladness with careless and inhuman disregard of us. We get no consideration from it. Often and often it stumbles, in like an evil mischance, like a feckless misfortune. Its shadow falls across our natural sunlight, and we are swept off into some black abyss. There is no light or hope in the grave; there is no reason to be wrung out of it. Life is the only reality, the only truth. Death is mere blindness, mere negation. "Death cannot praise, Thee, O God; the grave cannot celebrate Thee. The living, the living, they can only praise Thee, as I do this day."

So the Scripture cried out long ago. So we cry in our angry protest, in our bitter anguish, as the ancient trouble reasserts its ancient tyranny over us today. It is man's natural recoil. And the Word of God recognizes its and gives it vigorous expression.

But, then, there is another aspect altogether which death can wear for us. It is that which first comes down to us, perhaps, as we look down upon the quiet face, so cold and white, of one who has been very near and dear to us. There it lies in possession of its own secret. It knows it all. So we seem to feel. And what the face says to us in its sweet silence to us as a last message from the one whom we loved is: "Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I, and you are you, and the old life that we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. Whatever we were to each other, that we are still. Call me by the old familiar name. Speak of me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. Laugh as we always laughed at the little jokes that we enjoyed together. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it. Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute and unbroken continuity. What is this death but a negligible accident? Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am but waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just round the corner. All is well. Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost. One brief moment and all will be as it was before. How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!"

So the face speaks. Surely while we speak there is a smile flitting over it; a smile as of gentle fun at the trick played us by seeming death. It is not death; nobody is dead. It would be too ludicrous to suppose it. What has death to do with us? How can we die? Everything that we cared for and loved exists. Physical death has no meaning, no relation to it. Reason refuses to bring the two together. There is no common term. Nothing that we see in this dead material now laid out under our eyes represents or involves or includes the thing that was or is alive. That which we loved is not here. That is all. It has dropped out. It has slid away. We are as sure of this as we are of our own identity. We cannot conceive any other possibility. Reason and imagination alike repudiate it. And, as we stand there, death seems a very little thing. What really matters is the life with its moral quality, its personal characteristics, its intense and vivid charm, its individual experiences, its personal story; the tone of its voice, the pressure of its presence felt as surely now as once through eye and hand; the tenderness, the beauty, the force of the living will— its faults, and its struggles,

and its victories, and its maturity, and its quivering affection. What has death to do with these? They are our undying possession.

Still are your pleasant voices,

Your nightingales awake.

For death he taketh all away.

But these he cannot take.

There is no severance, no gulf fixed. We can send out hearts over the silent frontier into the secret land. We hold converse with them that are gone from us. Not a tie is cut. They know it, we know it. The spirit bands hold. We can be content to bury this poor body, left behind, out of sight. It has nothing in it that really counts. We can be quiet and calm over it. There is no need for violent distress. All that matters shall go on as if death had never been. Have we all felt like that now and again standing by the bed? True, we shall not be able to keep that mind. Alas! it will pass from us. The long, horrible silence that follows when we become aware of what we have lost out of our daily intercourse by the withdrawal of the immediate presence will cut its way into our souls. We shall feel it impossible to keep at the high level without a word, without a sign to reassure us of its truth. The blank veil will hang on unlifted, unstirred. Not a glimpse to be had of the world inside and beyond! How black, how relentless, this total lack of tangible evidence for the certainty that we believe in! Once again the old terror will come down upon us. What is it that happens over there? What are the dead about? Where are they? How picture it? How speak of it? It is all blind, dismal, unutterable darkness. We grope in vain. We strain our eyes in vain. "Oh, death is, after all, a fearful thing," so we say with the old cringing fear that clings to the known, the familiar scene, and abhors the untravelled bourne. Yes, but for all that our high mood was real, though it passes. It was a true experience; it gave us authentic intelligence. We were better able to win an insight into the real heart of things as we stood there by the bedside of the dead in spiritual exaltation, with every capacity raised to its highest level, than now when we are drawn under the drag of days, submerged, unnerved, wearied, out of spirits,

disheartened. Therefore it is our reasonable act of faith to stand by our highest experience, and to assert its validity even when its light has faded out of our lives and we have sunk back under the shadows. Though we have returned to the twilight of the valleys, yet we will ever recall the moment when we stood upon the sunlit heights and saw the far horizons. It was a true value that we then gave to life and death. That act of insight cannot be disproved or discredited; even though there be a counter judgement which will not be gainsaid, and which still presses its conclusion and penetrating insistence.

Our task is to deny neither judgement, but to combine both. The contrasted experiences are equally real, equally valid. How can they be reconciled? That is the question. Only through their reconciliation can the fitness of our human experience be preserved in its entirety. How shall this be done? Is it not through the idea of growth? We are in a condition of process, of growth, of which our state on earth is but the preliminary condition. And this must mean that in one sense we know all that lies before us; and in another sense that we know nothing of it. "Brethren, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be." Think that well over. We are now the sons of God. That we can know for certain. That is a direct and absolute experience. And that means that we are already now that which we shall be hereafter. "There is no other world." So said the crooked spirit of Voltaire. For the "other world" has come here. It is already over here with us, on our side. Its powers are ours. We are in possession of its resources. We have been born into it, born of its spirit, born in its freedom. Within us its secret is germinally lodged. "Our life is hid with Christ in God." The channels are open; communications pass. It is no novel world, then, into which we shall enter when we pass away, but our own familiar world in which we shall have had our conversation and fellowship. Therefore, from this point of view, death is but an accident. Nothing is broken in our vital continuity. What we shall be there will be the inevitable continuation and development of what we are now and here. We shall simply go on being what we already are, only without disguise, without qualification. We shall use the same forces, live according to the same methods, be governed by the same motives, realize the same intention. We are what we shall be. That is why, standing by the dead, we know nothing for them is changed. We are to use the same language as of old, to think of them under the same form, to follow them with our intimate and habitual familiarities. Yes, for they are what they were. Death does not count.

And yet, and yet, "it doth not yet appear what we shall be." "It doth not yet appear." Ah! How dreadfully true that is! Even though it be ever so true that this after state will be an outgrowth from what we are, yet we can have no notion beforehand of what the outgrowth will actually mean. We can see nothing ahead. No hint reaches us to interpret it. How can we picture it? How can we give it concrete and actual expression? We gaze and gaze, and the abyss is blind and black. Death shuts fast the door. Beyond the darkness hides its impenetrable secret. Not a sound comes back! Not a cry reaches us! Dumb! Dumb as the night, that terrifying silence! "It doth not yet appear." Gaze as we may, we can make nothing of it. The very fact that it will be the inevitable result of what we are has its terrors as much as its consolations. Alas! what will the results be? What will show itself to be the issue of our days on earth? Who can say? And therefore it is a fearful thing to go out into the night alone, carrying the irrevocable past— to be changed we know not how, to remain in our alarming identity through the change, to be ourselves for ever and ever under unimaginable conditions which no experience enables us to anticipate or forestall. Dreadful, the darkness, the silence of the unknown adventure. We know nothing of what will befall. Only we know that all which is already ours, by living experience, by intimate attachment, will be gone. The warmth of the present companionship, the comfort of familiar habits, the loving intimacy of deep and dear associations, the tender presence of this fond earth, the joy, the love, the hands that touch, the voices that charm, the hearts that beat. Ah! woe, woe! They must be surrendered. We go out stripped of all that has made us intelligible to ourselves, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be. Death, then, must retain its terror, even though it is but a stage in our growth, the terror of the unknown, the terror of loss, the terror of finality to what have been hitherto the movements of our very life.

Yet, beloved, if we recall the idea of growth, then we can afford to be in ignorance of what lies ahead; we can afford to live solely in the present hour. We can afford to be stripped of our earthly investiture, and go out into the naked silence of the beyond, because still

through being sons of God we have secured to us the very powers which will avail us in the untravelled land. We are already equipped with all that we can ever need. We shall hold in our hands the resources which will justify themselves under these strange conditions in the unseen world. We can never be found wanting if we are true to ourselves. We can never fail over these if we cling to what God has already given. The method by which we control life here and now is the very method which will hold good there. The strength which is now our stay will prove itself still our strength there. We shall use the same forces, we shall rely on the same assurances, we shall feed on the same food, we shall grow by the same process, we shall follow the same laws, we shall pray the same prayers, we shall rejoice in the same hopes, we shall speak the same language. All that is ours now will be ours then. For we are already sons of God; already we are in Jesus; already we are of His Body; already we live by His life and taste His pardon and His peace. The Jesus whom we see and know now, is the Jesus whom we shall still see and know then; only, since we shall see Him nearer we shall grow more like Him; since we shall know Him better, we shall be more closely conformed to His image. Ah! why need we know more? Why should we be afraid of the great venture? We have Jesus now, and even now we can make ourselves more ready to draw closer to Him. We can begin to purify ourselves even as He is pure, to make ourselves more utterly His in the sure hope that at last we shall see Him as He is.

Brethren, today these two moods which we have rehearsed are peculiarly ours— the mood of violent recoil, the mood of quiet continuity. Today the white light of Pentecost pours itself around us, and we know ourselves to be in the possession of the first fruits of the Spirit. Yet the white light breaks itself against the blackness of a closed coffin, flung up before the eyes of all, to embody the irreparable disaster of a death which has touched the very heart of our National life. Sinister and silent the coffin lies there in the sunlight, and its very pomp of state makes its silence more sinister yet. We shall creep around it in dismay as it lies in Westminster Hall. Is this all that is left? Is this the end of that royal splendour of life? Ah, then death is a dreadful thing. It is blind. It is dumb. It is stupid. What does it hold in it? “We know not yet what we shall be.” “We know not.” We can tell nothing of what the change will mean to the dead. For a change it most certainly will be. “We shall be made like unto Him.” What will that not involve? What purging? What cleansing? How much of ourselves that is now part and parcel of our nature must go, must be cut away, if we are

ever to be like Him? "We shall see Him as He is." So the text says. Can you and I bear so to see Him? Dare we make the awful venture? Who can endure such a sight and not die? Who would not shrink from so fierce a test? So this unknown experience which awaits us on the far side is charged with the terror of the unknown. We flinch from it as we look merely at the isolated coffin awaiting its last burial, the symbol of disaster. Oh that we might be left inside the familiar conditions that are ours already! They may not be wholly good, but at least they are known. They are our own. We must cling to them with the desperation of habit. As for the far beyond, it may have its wonder and its joys. But we cannot be sure. "We know not now what we shall be." If that black coffin were all, then, we should be left to these blind broodings. So that black coffin harbours its black secret. But over it and round it and about it the light of Whitsuntide sweeps in to scatter all our fears. Why are we afraid? Have we not the gift of the Spirit? Has it not swept in upon us with a mighty wind? Is it not in our heart as a fire? Surely it has become our very own possession, one with our very life. And the Spirit which we now possess is itself the Life of all Life, the Life of the Life beyond death. It is the Eternal Life of God. And yet it is here, as our earnest of the hereafter, as our pledge and guerdon of all that must follow. What will follow we know not. Why should we? We must wait until we experience it in order to know. But whatever it is, it will be the outcome of what we are. It will be the work of the same Spirit who works in us today.

And in the power of the Spirit we are already passed from death to life. Death is behind us, not in front. "Ye were dead." "Ye were baptized by the Spirit into Christ's death." The old sinful self, the man after the flesh, the old Adam in us, is already under the doom of death. It is stricken with a mortal blow. The grip of death has overtaken it. It is given over to death, with its greeds and lusts, with its envies and cruelties, with its meannesses and deceits. It is dead. It must be buried. We can commit it to the worm of destruction, to the avenging fire, without a shudder, without a fear. For it is not ours now. We have shaken ourselves free. We are in the Spirit. We have passed over to the other side. Now, even now, brethren, we are the sons of God; we have the Spirit of Him Who says: "I am the Resurrection and the Life; He that believeth on Me, though he die, yet shall he live. And whoso liveth and believeth on Me shall never die."

Stand on the strong Word. In its strength you can even now use your remaining days to bury that which is already dead. You can strip off the clinging garments of decay, the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Has not the Spirit in you convicted you of sin? Has it not shown you the deadly thing that must be rooted out? In this light, this Pentecost, you know your sin, your own personal sin, the sin that is under condemnation.

Well, let this sin go, then. Uproot it. Cut it away. Bury it. Burn it out. Die to it. Kill it. You can, for you are a son of God, and the spirit of sonship will do its good work in you. It will slay in you the thing that offends. It will kill in you that sin which is the only sting in death. It will expel the devil from you who alone has power in death. It gives you the weapon. Trust the sword of the Spirit. Yield to it. Let the dead things go, and lay hold on life. Purify yourself as He bids you Who is pure. Then the old will drop away from you, and the new wonder will begin. You will find yourself already passed from death to life, and far ahead strange possibilities will open out beyond the power of your heart to conceive. For, "it doth not yet appear what you shall be." Only, you will somehow become aware of what it might mean to become more and more alike to the Lord Jesus Whom you adore, as more and more in the infinite amazement of an ever-growing surprise you learn to see Him as He really is.