

English.

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FOURTH READER LITERATURE.

AFTER DEATH IN ARABIA.

BY EDWIN ARNOLD.

I.—INTRODUCTION.

THE belief of the Christian regarding death and the future world is familiar to us all; the poem "After Death in Arabia" is intended to portray poetically the belief of the Mohammedan concerning the same things. The name of the poem suggests this: It treats of death ("after death") as viewed in the source and centre of the Mohammedan religion ("in Arabia"). The poem, therefore, is of interest to us as illustrating Mohammedan doctrine as compared with Christian doctrine. The introduction to the poem will therefore naturally be, first, some reference to the faith of a dying Christian. The teacher might depict the death-bed of such a one, calling up or having the pupils call up the belief that would sustain his last moments; second, he might add a few words on the Mohammedan religion, touching on its author, Mohammed (570-632), his birth at Mecca, his adoption in free outlines of the theology of the Old Testament, believing in the unity and supremacy of God, and not entirely rejecting Christ, whom he looked upon as a prophet inferior only to himself; the spread of his doctrines and power over Arabia, Syria, etc. Thus having a rough outline of the Mohammedan faith (any encyclopædia will give full details), we may naturally read with intelligence this poem which treats of a special feature of the Mohammedan faith, how it regards death from the point of view of the hereafter.

II.—THE PLAN OF THE POEM.

It will be noticed that instead of a dry exposition of the Mohammedan doctrine, the poet gives us a vivid picture in which much personal interest is evoked. Abdullah, a true Mohammedan, had died at the time the muezzins from the minarets of the mosque called the faithful to prayer. He knows how his friends gather about his lifeless body, weeping his loss, and sends a message to them from beyond the grave to comfort them in affliction. This message is made in the form of a letter or epistle, having the eastern mode of address (compare our own), showing first the writer and the person addressed:

"He who died at Azan sends
This to comfort all his friends."

and concluding with reference to the bearer of the letter:

"He who died at Azan gave
This to those who made his grave."

The latter reference, with the first lines of the epistle itself,

"it lies, I know,
Pale and white and cold as snow."

shows that the message comes to the mourners immediately after Abdullah's death.

The epistle itself gives a series of reasons why the mourners about Abdullah's [corpse should not weep but be comforted:

Stanza one depicts the mourners weeping around the dead body which Abdullah assures them was *his*, but was not his real self.

Stanza two illustrates this distinction between the body and the soul, or real personal being, by reference to (1) a hut and the inmate, (2) the garment and the wearer, (3) the cage and the hawk.

Stanza three still further strengthens this distinction by more beautiful comparisons, by reference to (1) the sea-shell and the pearl, (2) the jar and the gold concealed in it.

Stanza four shows what death really is: (1) The reading of the riddle of life that had long

perplexed the living man, (2) the entrance into paradise and endless life.

Stanza five still further illustrates what death is: It is not an eternal farewell, since those who now mourn will soon join him in happiness; it is the entrance into the only true and perfect life. In view of these things Abdullah bids his friends be of good cheer, since death is only a form of Allah's love, and march on bravely towards God, who is all love.

III.—EXPLANATORY NOTES.

L. 1. *Azan*.—An Arabic word: "in Mohammedan countries, the call to public prayers, proclaimed by the crier from the minaret of the mosque." The pronunciation is usually *a-zan'* but here *a'-zan*. This day-call, chanted at sunrise, noon, and sunset, begins with the Mohammedan confession of faith. God is most great, Mohammed is God's apostle—come to prayer, come to security."

L. 3. *it*.—The body of the dead Abdullah, who is supposed to have addressed this epistle to those who mourn his death.

L. 5. *ye*.—This old nominative form of the pronoun is more in keeping with the solemn cast of the poem than the every-day "you."

L. 13. *the women lave*.—"Lave" (*lav*) is from the French *laver*, to wash. It is a more formal word than "wash." The custom of washing the dead before burial is practised by Eastern and Western nations.

L. 16. *no more fitting*.—No longer a suitable covering for a soul that has reached Paradise.

L. 17. *Is a cage . . . my soul has passed*.—Lowell has the same figure in *The Changeling*:

"Or perhaps those heavenly Zingari,
But loosed the hampering strings,
And when they opened her cage-door
My little bird used her wings."

L. 21. *falcon*.—One of the "noble birds of prey," bolder in proportion to their size than even eagles, acute in vision, and very powerful in flight. Falcons have been domesticated and trained to serve man in capturing on the wing birds like the heron, partridge, wild duck. Falconry was once the favorite sport of every one of noble birth.

L. 24. *Straightway*.—An archaic (old fashioned) poetical word,—at once.

L. 26. *wistful tear*.—A tear of regret and of longing to have Abdullah alive. "Wistful" here is equal to "wishful."

L. 31f. *whose lid Allah sealed*.—God placed the soul in the body, enclosing it there till it was His pleasure it should depart.

L. 32. *the while*.—At the same time that. "While" was originally a noun meaning time, but its use, except in such old-fashioned phrases as this, is now entirely adverbial. Give examples.

L. 35. *shard*.—A piece of fragment of any earthenware vessel or brittle substance.

L. 37. *Allah*.—The Arabic word for God, contracted from *al*, the, and *ilah*, God. (The word *ilah* is the same as the Hebrew word *elohim*, God, which we find in our Bible).

L. 38. *Now Thy world is understood*.—The spirit having reached Paradise, now understands the divine plan governing this world of ours, a plan it could not understand while on earth. This recalls St. Paul's words, 1 Corinth. xiii., 12.

L. 39. *the long, long wonder ends*.—The mysteries of this world, sin, crime, sorrow, suffering, etc., are revealed to the soul after death, and the wonder they occasioned throughout life is over.

L. 40. *erring friends*.—They do wrong ("err") to weep for one who is in Paradise.

L. 42. *unspoken bliss*.—Unspeakable bliss—a happiness words cannot describe.

L. 44f. *lost . . . By such light*.—Lost, as you view it, having only human intelligence to enlighten you. Compare Longfellow's lines in *Resignation*:

"We see but dimly through the mists and vapors;
Amid these earthly damps,
What seem to us but sad funereal tapers
May be heaven's distant lamps."

L. 46ff. *Of unfulfilled felicity, etc.*—Of a happiness that is never completed, but always brings new joys to the soul.

These obscure lines may be paraphrased, while the soul is lost as earth views lost, it lives an undying life in the light of unending felicity in Paradise, which it makes greater by its presence.

L. 51. *I am gone before your face*.—Compare Rogers' lines,

"Those that he loved so long and sees no more,
Loved and still loves,—not dead, but gone before."

L. 56. *here . . . there*.—Paradise . . . earth.

L. 57. *fain*.—Desirous. To be fain, to be desirous, to wish.

L. 59ff. *death . . . is the first breath, etc.*—The writer asks his mourners not to weep because of death, since death is the beginning of the true Life, life in Paradise, from which ("centre") as from the throne of God, all life proceeds. Compare

"There is no death! What seems so is transition;
This life of mortal breath

Is but a suburb of the life elysian,
Whose portal we call death."

—LONGFELLOW, *Resignation*.

L. 67. *La Allah illa Allah!* (Arab.) No God but the one God (*la' ila'h illa 'Ua'h*), the sun of Moslem dogma and the watchword and battle-cry of the Moslem soldiers.

IV.—QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES.

SUPERSCRPTION.—What relation do lines one and two hold to the poem? What is eastern in the superscription? Explain "Azan."

STANZA I.—1. Depict the scene described in this stanza. 2. What is represented by "it?" 3. Who is represented by "I?" 4. What feeling is signified by "Yet I smile?" 5. Account for the epithet "thing." 6. Explain the statement in "It was mine, it is not I."

STANZA II.—1. Tell briefly the substance of this stanza. 2. Do you recognize any difference between "lave" and "wash?" 3. How is the figure "last bed" appropriate to the grave? 4. Show the appropriateness of the comparisons of the body to a "hut," to a "garment," to a cage;" of the soul to an "inmate," to a "wearer," to a "falcon." 5. What is characteristic in the falcon to suggest the cage keeping him "from the splendid stars?" 6. In the soul? 7. Explain "splendid" as applied to "stars?"

STANZA III.—1. Give briefly the substance of this stanza. 2. "Be wise." In what are the friends unwise? 3. "What ye lift upon the bier." Give one word for this clause. 4. Why is this one word not used? (Note that the clause suggests what the speaker desires to suggest, the mere coarse, material substance—"what ye lift.") 5. Explain "wistful tear." 6. Show the appropriateness of the metaphor, "an empty sea-shell." "Why not say "oyster-shell?" 8. How is the comparison in "earthen jar, treasure" a suitable one for body and soul? 9. Explain "whose lid sealed." 10. Give the meaning of "Allah." What language is it? 11. Explain "the while." 12. "Let it lie." Explain "it." What thought prompts the exclamation? 13. Explain "shard." How is it an appropriate comparison for a dead body? 14. How is "gold" an appropriate comparison for "the mind that loved him?"

STANZA IV.—Tell briefly what this stanza is about. 2. Explain "now thy world is understood." 3. Explain "the long, long wonder." 4. In "yet we weep," does "yet" mean "still" or "however?" 5. Justify the use of "erring" to his friends. Explain "unspoken bliss." 7. Paraphrase to show the meaning, "Lost for you;" "in the light, felicity;" "in enlarging Paradise."

STANZA V.—1. Give the substance of this stanza. 2. What thought is in the speaker's mind that he says "Farewell, yet not farewell?" 3. Explain "where I have stepped." 4. What is the meaning of "here is all," "there