

Portfolio of Select Literature.

NATURAL LAW AND MORAL FREEDOM.

All men do not follow out their own logic ; but if we regard this world only as a scene for the manifestation of law, it is difficult to find any line of separation between the lowest result and the first cause that produced it. The mineral presses closely on the vegetable, the vegetable on the animal, the animal on the instinctive, the instinctive on the intelligent, the intelligent on the moral, the moral on the immortal, the immortal on the Divine. But it has been the great error of men of science to look on creation as a manifestation of but one half of the Deity, forgetting that He is not only the source of law, but of freedom ; and that just in proportion as His creatures approach His throne, they too become free. We do not find this principle in some fields of creation : mineral combinations are wholly without it ; vegetable organisms do not possess it, though they form an intermediate link between the forces of chemistry and the movements of life. The lowest forms of animal existence are almost destitute of it ; but as creatures advance in the scale of being, it begins to dawn upon them, first in freedom of motion, then in freedom of choice. We may not be able to demonstrate that the bird, which flies here and there at its pleasure, and which chooses its own mate, and tree, and food, is not following a law as blindly as the sulphur and copper which rush into chemical combination, or the lightning that flies across half the earth : we may not be able to prove this ; but we believe in the spontaneity we cannot prove. Next comes instinct, another intermediate link between law and liberty—a shackled intelligence pointing on to the intellect that is free. And rising above instinct, there is the teachableness of domestic animals, their endeavour to understand us, their power of yielding to or resisting temptation, their consciousness of having disobeyed,—all speaking of an imperfect choice and will, which they seem to derive from their intercourse with man. Yet, in spite of all this, we cannot fail to see how little each animal's welfare depends on the exercise of choice. The brute is at best an enslaved creature ; but when man comes on the scene, he comes as the ruler of his own destiny. He is not a better and wiser beast formed to conquer others by a law of natural advantage, but the appointed heir of dominion, which he is free to keep or lose at his pleasure. Look at the educated Englishman and the Australian aboriginal ; the one gaining more and more mastery over this world, the other almost as helpless a victim of those laws as the brutes around him. Never in nature's kingdom do we see this immense gulf between individuals of the same species ; we see it in man alone, because he alone in creation was free to rise or fall. We need scarcely say how closely this freedom in working out his own physical destiny is associated with that higher freedom which belongs to the knowledge of good and evil. We conceive that in the creation of man God's attribute of freedom and earth's law of natural sequence were accurately balanced in the fact of probation. We know the fatal result ; man used his free will to destroy his freedom, and thrust himself back by deliberate choice upon that natural