

but ceaselessly recede and fail. You might mark, were you a watching angel, how this point is reached, and that passed; and how, though (and better for them here and now) the sighing waters perceive it not, each day's expiring and almost despairing, but still earnest and prayerful efforts, have increased a little upon the shore to-day, and deepened and secured yesterday's work. And quiet earnestness seems recommended by this thought: for have we not seen some impetuous waves come dashing in, as though to take the shore at one rush? And it is these most commonly which, meeting resistance steady and sustained, and feeling the strength which excitement had lent dying out from them; it is these impatient spirits that then lose heart most deeply, and sink back farther, and sometimes fall away with a shrill and bitter cry, and lose themselves in the deep, too dismayed to return; rather, too little really in earnest to face the necessity of the daily, hourly strife,—the inch by inch advance, the little by little, the day of small things.

If we are in earnest really, and steadfastly, quietly striving, with unyielding watch and instant prayer, and faithful use of every means of grace, then we may hope, amid that which seems sometimes scarce anything but a sad history of failures, that there is yet *advance upon the whole*.

But now I remember that there is, in appearance, and to the unpractised or uncareful beholder, little difference between the tide that is advancing and that which is going down. Still the endless hurry of flocking waves, still the appearance of life and purpose, still the advance and retreat upon the shore,—and what is the difference? If there are many, many broken, defeated and baffled endeavours, why so there were when the tide was rising. Ay, but there we found advance.—here we find retrogression—*upon the whole*. Alas! how great is the danger that is subtle and unseen; and in a spiritual falling back, it is the very slightness and imperceptibility of the loss of ground that makes the case so perilous. They have given over their watchfulness, their close observation of marks; the breath of prayer has fallen to a stillness; the waves seem to gleam and ripple and rustle as of old, and how shall the unearnest heart and the unwatchful eye ever know that *the tide is going down*?—so gradual, so stealthy, with such slight difference from day to day. Many causes there are of this failure and decline, many

subtle enemies, that is to say, to diligent watchfulness and continual prayer. "Much trading, or much toiling for advancement, or much popularity, or much intercourse in the usages and engagements of society, or the giving up of much time to the refinements of a soft life,—these, and many like snares, steal away the quick powers of the heart, and leave us estranged from God." "How awfully do people deceive themselves in this matter! We hear them saying, 'It does me no harm to go into the world. I come away, and can go into my room and pray as usual.' Oh, surest sign of a heart half laid asleep! You are not aware of the change, *because it has passed upon you*. Once, in days of livelier faith, you would have wept over the indcouthness of your present prayers, and joined them to the confession of your other backslidings; but now your heart is not more earnest than your prayers, and there is no index to mark the decline. Even they that lament the loss of their former earnestness do not half know the real measure of their loss. The growth of a duller feeling has the power of masking itself. Little by little it creeps on, marked by no great changes." And yet you would start, had you an angel's point of view, to see how wide a strip of former advance is relinquished now. The treacherous sands suck in the wet line, and it ever seems just before you,—just a narrow band such as always edges the advancing and retiring waters, whether at ebb or flow. And how great does this danger then appear to be! how deadly the craft of an enemy too subtle ever to startle us!—how needful to watch for that retrogression which can hardly be perceived! Little by little we advance, and commonly little by little we decline. Even a great fall, it has been pointed out,—one which seemed a sudden catastrophe, unheralded by any warnings,—what a long, gradual process of "retirement neglected and hurried prayers" had been long preparing secretly for this. But now a saint, men think,—and on a sudden a notorious sinner! But they know not how long, how secretly, how imperceptibly and undetected, how surely and how fatally *the tide had been going down*.

Enough of these desultory musings. Let us pause awhile in silence, contemplating the mighty Sea as a whole, of things upon this earth our greatest emblem,—an emblem grand, oppressive in its vastness,—of Eternity and Infinity.