

weak. The energetic man would become powerful, and the indolent would sink into insignificance. All the old differences would reappear. And then would follow all that admiration of what is worthless, if it has a name to make it honourable—and all that imitation of what is bad, if it is sanctioned by the rich—and all those social hindrances to a good and holy life, which cause men, in the language of the prophet, “to stumble in their ways.” (Jer. xviii. 15.)

And again, if education could be equalized, if all men could be suddenly made equally learned or equally ignorant, the old intellectual differences would immediately reappear. The man who acquires the most quickly, who retains the most exactly, who judges the most wisely, would again become eminent: and rising with his eminence, would be felt his influence. Nothing is more impossible than to push aside the influence of a superior mind. And since the gifts of the intellect have no necessary connection with moral goodness, you have here again Sin acting at an advantage. You see the man of practical wisdom giving his sanction to the lowest motives.—the man of imagination making the vilest doctrines decent and attractive:—the man of cunning argument entangling the unwary in the meshes of his subtlety; and the result is, in the words of another prophet, that men “grope like the blind and stumble at noon-day as in the night, erring in vision, and stumbling in judgment.” (Isaiah xxviii. 7, lix. 10.)

And, just to say one word again of those relations which are still more essential parts of the framework of society,—can the Father divest his actions of that authority which God Himself has given to them—can the Brother or the Sister set a bad example and resolve that it shall not be followed—can the Friend and Companion deliberately lead a sinful life, and forbid its natural and inevitable consequences? No: they cannot. Unless we can dis sever those bonds which are nearly all that is valuable here, we cannot unbind that necessity which clasps this fallen world, “offences must needs come.”

If such is the hopeless state of the world, if offences must needs come by reason of the very constitution of society, if the “woe because of offences” is inevitable, would it not be better to resign ourselves to that which we cannot avoid? Would it not be better to live easily and carelessly, to enjoy life while we can, though such a life should add a few more stumbling-blocks to those which are almost innumerable already?

Yes! such an argument might have some show of wisdom, if we could divest ourselves of personal responsibility. But the world is governed, not by Fate, but by God: and God

has given to every man his own conscience. Though individuals are forgotten in that which we call History, every man has his separate Biography. Though he associates others in his sin, he is alone in the account he must render. Though he is occupied all life long in the busy market of human affairs, the eye of God’s observation is ever upon him, and the foot of God’s justice follows him to the last. Our blessed Saviour, after He had said that “woe was unto the world because of offences,” and that “it must needs be that offences come,” added in the third place, “*woe unto that man by whom the offence cometh.*”

He who has thoughtlessly done harm—he who, by a selfish life, has brought others into sin—he who has been determined to pursue his profits, his amusements, his fancies and his follies, without any regard to the souls of his brethren, what will he say at the Great Judgment, when Christ reminds him of those words? None of those differences of condition which make in this world the sin of doing harm to others so easy, and its effects so extensive, will remain in the next world to shelter the guilty. All the glory which dazzled and blinded the eyes of men, will fade before the Judge’s coming. Everything will be seen as it is. The power which fostered evil instead of good, the wealth which was made the encouragement of sin, the intellect which sowed the seeds of falsehood, the genius which made vice attractive, will be held responsible for the mischief they have caused. The differences of condition and capacity were ordained on earth to be the opportunities of good, and if they have been made the opportunities of evil, all that remains is a greater condemnation. To one is given ten talents, to another five, to another one. No one can be excused because his responsibilities are heavy, and no one can be excused because they are light. If any one is burdened with the thought of the effect his own miserable infirmities may have on the spiritual welfare of others, let him remember for his encouragement that he that was faithful and most highly honoured by his Lord, was he that had received ten talents. And if any thinks his own position in society is so small and insignificant that he cannot hope to do good and can hardly do harm, let him remember that he that was condemned, was he that received one.

And leaving now these general distinctions, which belong rather to the surface of society, let me glance, for the third time, at the closer and dearer relations of life. If on anyone the woe denounced on him who makes his brother to offend, if on anyone that woe will descend with terrible weight, it will be on him who, being linked to others by the ties of close Friendship, might employ his influence