

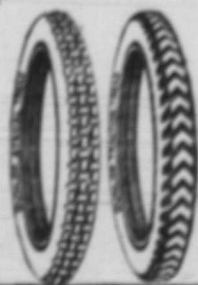
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The Deeper Life

On Human Nature

By Rev. S. G. Bland, D.D.

A FEW weeks ago I came across what seemed to me a suggestive text in an article in an American monthly by Sir Conan Doyle. Sir Conan was discussing the question of survival after death, and in the course of the discussion expressed a view of human nature which seems to me profoundly mistaken. Sir Conan has been won over to an acceptance of the claims of modern spiritualism. He is confident in his belief of the survival and activity of the soul after death, and he seems to rest this faith on the alleged phenomena of messages through table rapping, automatic writing and naturalization of spirits. Apart from these evidences he does not seem to think that there is, in the case of many people, much intrinsic probability of a life beyond death.

"Such man," he says, "in his egotism may feel that he ought to survive, but let him look, we will say, at the average loafer—he is the loafer of the street corner or even more, perhaps, the club loafer—would any one contend that there was any obvious reason why that personality should carry on?" In these words, in my judgment, is revealed an attitude towards human life profoundly mistaken and deadly in its power to wither.

If one is to permit oneself to despise a single human soul I find it difficult to stop. One can find similar reasons for despising all. On the other hand, if one finds one human soul worthy of reverence, I do not see where one can draw a line that will shut out any.

It is certain that all human beings we have known, save one, are faulty, and it seems equally clear to every thoughtful observer of human life that conditions over which a man has little or no control do largely determine character.

I know that they do not absolutely determine it. No one could see the vital importance of free will more clearly, I think, than I see it. There is a power of choice in every one. He is in a very restricted, yet in a real and momentous way the maker of his fate. But in analyzing characters and estimating the facts that go to make it I think most thoughtful people see more and more fully as their knowledge of life enlarges how much of character, good or ill, is made by environment—education, early home influences, inherited disposition. Excellence of character remains the supremely beautiful and precious thing, to whatever it is due, but the whole trend of modern social reform is an increasing recognition of the power of environment and education and prenatal influences in shaping character. Now the soul deserves no credit for the conditions under which it has found itself, any more than a flower that is beautiful because of a rich soil and favorable conditions of moisture, warmth and light.

It is the moral choice alone that determines the moral worth. And it is just in regard to this element that one finds it most difficult to classify people. The late Henry Drummond was, perhaps, one of the most flawless men of our times, at least, of men known to the public. Men like Jan MacLaren and George Adam Smith, who had known him from college days, frankly confessed that so far as they could judge he seemed without fault. Undoubtedly, Henry Drummond's own choice, and sometimes, we may be sure, under difficult conditions, counted vitally in the living of such a life, but can anyone who knows the beautiful home life in which he grew up and the rare and

gracious disposition with which he was endowed, had also much to do with it, and who can say how much more of will power Henry Drummond put into the making of that noble character than some men whom we find it hard not to despise, who inherited a mean or brutish disposition and who had grown up under conditions that seemed fitted to ripen only the worst traits.

A generation ago there lived a man in an eastern rural district who seemed to have found the lowest human level. He seemed destitute of all kindly feelings, he was dirty and drunken, and was more than suspected of living in gross immorality. When he died there were no mourners, but the neighbors felt he must not be buried like a dog. So a few assembled and conveyed the body to the

burial ground. It was a cheerless winter day. For some reason no minister was present. The coffin was lowered into the hole that had been picked in the frozen soil. There were a few moments of awkward silence. All felt that something should be said, but what word of appreciation or of sorrow or of hope could be said? Then a wise and kindly old man broke the painful silence by saying simply, "Well, neighbors, maybe he didn't get a very good start." Talking start and all other conditions into account I frankly confess that I cannot find the line which will separate the men I ought to honor from those I have the right to despise.

And in like manner the little faults of the man who has had everything to help him to be good may in God's sight be more vile than the gross delinquencies of men like the poor fellow of the little story above. I am quite sure that a mean, cutting speech from some husband or wife to the other may betoken just as much, downright "cussedness" as a blow of the fist from some drunken navvy—sometimes, I think, more.

So I find myself quite unable to decide which souls deserve a future life and what do not. It seems to me that either none of us do or all do, and as the first alternative is intolerable I find myself forced to take the second. The fact is that if we give the critical faculty free rein, we may find, taking everything into account, few left to reverence.

Under that first there is no person who will escape, at least, a scorching. And it is equally sure that there is no man or woman or child who has the normal human facilities who does not in the crucible of life reveal at least a few grains of pure gold.

It is refreshing to hear the returned soldiers speak of human nature. They will have it that every man is, potentially, at least, a hero. Such revelations the sharp test of the war has made. It is conditions, they say, that hide the good that is in everyone or warp it.

Has not many a street corner loafer, aye, and many a club loafer, such as Sir Conan has thoughtlessly allowed himself to despise, endured heroically and been a true comrade, and died sublimely in the trenches?

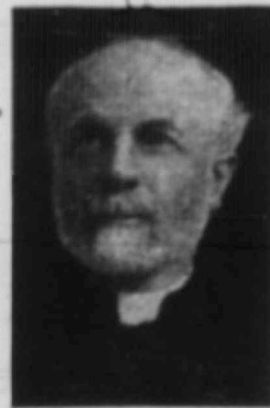
Oh, there are moods that come over us all, no doubt, when men and even women, may seem mean and little worth.

No one has expressed such a mood more pungently than Tennyson:—

"Be near me when my faith is dry,
And men the flies of latter spring,

That lay their eggs and sting and sing,
And weave their petty cells and die."

But no such word as that could last, and when we from such blindness and



Dr. Bland

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