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AN ORATION OF
MARCUS AURELIUS
BY WALTER PATER

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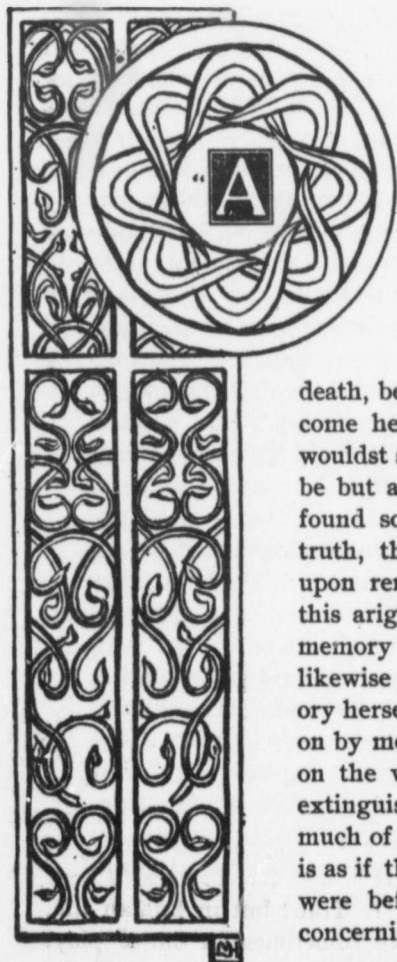
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JOHN MACAULAY
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AN ORATION
OF
MARCUS AURELIUS.



RT thou in love with men's praises, get thee into the very soul of them, and see!—see what judges they be, even in those matters which concern themselves. Wouldst thou have their praise after

death, bethink thee, that they who shall come hereafter, and with whom thou wouldst survive by thy great name, will be but as these, whom here thou hast found so hard to live with. For of a truth, the soul of him who is aflutter upon renown after death, presents not this aright to itself, that of all whose memory he would have each one will likewise very quickly depart, until memory herself be put out, as she journeys on by means of such as are themselves on the wing but for a while, and are extinguished in their turn.—Making so much of those thou wilt never see! It is as if thou wouldst have had those who were before thee discourse fair things concerning thee.

Margin design by
L. M. HAGAR.

I am indebted to *Messrs. Macmillan & Co., Ltd., London*, for permission to reprint the above from *Marius the Epicurean—1899*. J. M.

“To him, indeed, whose wit hath been whetted by true doctrine, that well-worn sentence of Homer sufficeth, to guard him against regret and fear.—

Like the race of leaves

The race of man is:—

The wind in autumn strows

The earth with old leaves; then the spring the woods
with new endows.

Leaves! little leaves!—thy children, thy flatterers, thine enemies! Leaves in the wind, those who would devote thee to darkness, who scorn or miscall thee here, even as they also whose great fame shall outlast them. For all these, and the like of them, are born indeed in the spring season—*ἔαρος ἐπιγίγνεται ὄρη*: and soon a wind hath scattered them, and thereafter the wood peopleth itself again with another generation of leaves. And what is common to all of them is but the littleness of their lives: and yet wouldst thou love and hate, as if these things should continue for ever. In a little while thine eyes also will be closed, and he on whom thou perchance hast leaned thyself be himself a burden upon another.

“Bethink thee often of the swiftness with which the things that are, or are even now coming to be, are swept past thee: that the very substance of them is but the perpetual motion of water: that there is almost nothing which continueth: of that bottomless depth of time, so close at thy side. Folly! to be lifted up, or sorrowful, or anxious, by reason of things like these! Think of infinite matter, and thy portion—how tiny a particle, of it! of infinite time, and thine own brief point there; of destiny, and the jot thou art in it; and yield thyself readily to the wheel of Clotho, to spin of thee what web she will.

“As one casting a ball from his hand, the nature of things hath had its aim with every man, not as to the ending only, but the first beginning of his course, and passage thither. And hath the ball any profit of its rising, or loss as it descendeth again, or in its fall? or the bubble, as it groweth or breaketh on the air? or the flame of the lamp, from the beginning to the end of its brief story?”

“All but at this present that future is, in which nature, who disposeth all things in order, will transform whatsoever thou now seest, fashioning from its substance somewhat else, and therefrom somewhat else in its turn, lest the world grow old. We are such stuff as dreams are made of—disturbing dreams. Awake, then! and see thy dream as it is, in comparison with that erewhile it seemed to thee.

“And for me, especially, it were well to mind those many mutations of empire in time past; therein peeping also upon the future, which must needs be of like species with what hath been, continuing ever within the rhythm and number of things which really are; so that in forty years one may note of man and of his ways little less than in a thousand. Ah! from this higher place, look we down upon the shipwrecks and the calm! Consider, for example, how the world went, under the emperor Vespasian. They are married and given in marriage, they breed children; love hath its way with them; they heap up riches for others or themselves; they are murmuring at things as then they are; they are seeking for great place; crafty, flattering, suspicious, waiting upon the death of others:—festivals, business, war, sickness, dissolution: and now their whole life is no longer anywhere at all. Pass on to the reign of Trajan: all

things continue the same : and that life also is no longer anywhere at all. Ah ! but look again, and consider, one after another, as it were the sepulchral inscriptions of all peoples and times, according to one pattern.—What multitudes, after their utmost striving—a little afterwards ! were dissolved again into their dust.

“ Think again of life as it was far off in the ancient world ; as it must be when we shall be gone ; as it is now among the wild heathen. How many have never heard your names and mine, or will soon forget them ! How soon may those who shout my name to-day begin to revile it, because glory, and the memory of men, and all things beside, are but vanity—a sand-heap under the senseless wind, the barking of dogs, the quarrelling of children, weeping incontinently upon their laughter.

“ This hasteth to be ; that other to have been : of that which now cometh to be, even now somewhat hath been extinguished. And wilt thou make thy treasure of any one of these things ? It were as if one set his love upon the swallow, as it passeth out of sight through the air !

“ Bethink thee often, in all contentions public and private, of those whom men have remembered by reason of their anger and vehement spirit—those famous rages, and the occasions of them—the great fortunes, and misfortunes, of great men’s strife of old. What are they all now, and the dust of their battles ? Dust and ashes indeed ; a fable, a mythus, or not so much as that. Yes ! keep those before thine eyes who took this or that, the like of which happeneth to thee, so hardly ; were so querulous, so agitated. And where again are they ? Wouldst thou have it not otherwise with thee ?

“Consider how quickly all things vanish away—their bodily structure into the general substance; the very memory of them into that great gulf and abysm of past thoughts. Ah! ’tis on a tiny space of earth thou art creeping through life—a pigmy soul carrying a dead body to its grave.

“Let death put thee upon the consideration both of thy body and thy soul: what an atom of all matter hath been distributed to thee; what a little particle of the universal mind. Turn thy body about, and consider what thing it is, and that which old age, and lust, and the languor of disease can make of it. Or come to its substantial and causal qualities, its very type: contemplate that in itself, apart from the accidents of matter, and then measure also the span of time for which the nature of things, at the longest, will maintain that special type. Nay! in the very principles and first constituents of things corruption hath its part—so much dust, humour, stench, and scraps of bone! Consider that thy marbles are but the earth’s callosities, thy gold and silver its *faeces*; this silken robe but a worm’s bedding, and thy purple an unclean fish. Ah! and thy life’s breath is not otherwise, as it passeth out of matters like these, into the like of them again.

“For the one soul in things, taking matter like wax in the hands, moulds and remoulds—how hastily!—beast, and plant, and the babe, in turn: and that which dieth hath not slipped out of the order of nature, but, remaining therein, hath also its changes there, disparting into those elements of which nature herself, and thou too, art compacted. She changes without murmuring. The oaken chest falls to pieces with no more complaining than when the carpenter fitted it together. If one told thee

certainly that on the morrow thou shouldst die, or at the furthest on the day after, it would be no great matter to thee to die on the day after to-morrow, rather than to-morrow. Strive to think it a thing no greater that thou wilt die—not to-morrow, but a year, or two years, or ten years from to-day.

“I find that all things are now as they were in the days of our buried ancestors—all things sordid in their elements, trite by long usage, and yet ephemeral. How ridiculous, then, how like a countryman in town, is he, who wonders at aught. Doth the sameness, the repetition of the public shows, weary thee? Even so doth that likeness of events in the spectacle of the world. And so must it be with thee to the end. For the wheel of the world hath ever the same motion, upward and downward, from generation to generation. When, when, shall time give place to eternity?”

“If there be things which trouble thee thou canst put them away, inasmuch as they have their being but in thine own notion concerning them.

“Consider what death is, and how, if one does but detach from it the appearances, the notions, that hang about it, resting the eye upon it as in itself it really is, it must be thought of but as an effect of nature, and that man but a child whom an effect of nature shall affright. Nay! not function and effect of nature, only; but a thing profitable also to herself.

“To cease from action—the ending of thine effort to think and do: there is no evil in that. Turn thy thought to the ages of man’s life, boyhood, youth, maturity, old age: the change in every one of these also is a dying, but evil nowhere. Thou climbedst into the ship, thou hast made thy voyage and touched the shore: go forth now! Be

it into some other life : the divine breath is everywhere, even there. Be it into forgetfulness for ever : at least thou wilt rest from the beating of sensible images upon thee, from the passions which pluck thee this way and that like an unfeeling toy, from those long marches of the intellect, from thy toilsome ministry to the flesh.

“ Art thou yet more than dust and ashes and bare bone—a name only, or not so much as that, which, also, is but whispering and a resonance, kept alive from mouth to mouth of dying objects who have hardly known themselves ; how much less thee, dead so long ago !

“ When thou lookest upon a wise man, a lawyer, a captain of war, think upon another gone. When thou seest thine own face in the glass, call up there before thee one of thine ancestors—one of those old Cæsars. Lo ! everywhere, thy double before thee ! Thereon, let the thought occur to thee : And where are they ? anywhere at all, for ever ? And thou, thyself—how long ? Art thou blind to that thou art—thy matter, how temporal ; and thy function, the nature of thy business ? Yet tarry, at least, till thou hast assimilated even these things to thine own proper essence, as a quick fire turneth into heat and life whatsoever be cast upon it.

“ As words once in use are antiquated to us, so is it with the names that were once on all men’s lips : Camillus, Volesus, Leonnatus : then, in a little while, Scipio and Cato, and then Augustus, and then Hadrian, and then Antoninus Pius. How many great physicians who lifted wise brows at other men’s sick beds have sickened and died ! Those wise Chaldeans, who foretold, as a great matter, another man’s last hour, have themselves

been taken by surprise. Ay! and all those others, in their pleasant places: those who doated on a Capreæ like Tiberius, on their gardens, on the baths: Pythagoras and Socrates, who reasoned so closely upon immortality: Alexander, who used the lives of others as though his own should last for ever—he and his mule-driver alike now!—one upon another. Well-nigh the whole court of Antoninus is extinct. Panthea and Pergamus sit no longer beside the sepulchre of their lord. The watchers over Hadrian's dust have slipped from his sepulchre.—It were jesting to stay longer. Did they sit there still, would the dead feel it? or feeling it, be glad? or glad, hold those watchers for ever? The time must come when they too shall be aged men and aged women, and de cease, and fail from their places; and what shift were there then for imperial service? This too is but the breath of the tomb, and a skinful of dead men's blood.

“Think again of those inscriptions, which belong not to one soul only, but to whole families: *Ἐσχάτος τοῦ ἰδίου γένους*: *He was the last of his race*. Nay! of the burial of whole cities: Helice, Pompeii: of others, whose very burial-place is unknown.

“Thou hast been a citizen in this wide city. Count not for how long, nor repine; since that which sends thee hence is no unrighteous judge, no tyrant, but Nature, who brought thee hither; as when a player leaves the stage at the bidding of the conductor who hired him. Sayest thou, ‘I have not played five acts’? True! but in human life, three acts only make sometimes an entire play. That is the composer's business, not thine. Withdraw thyself with a good will; for that too hath, perchance, a good will which dismisseth thee from thy part.”



