

## CHAPTER XV

### AN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN POEM

A CENTURY ago, when the hieroglyphical script of the Ancient Egyptians first began to be deciphered, it would hardly have been believed possible that scholars would one day find themselves possessed of such a vast literature as is now at the disposal of Egyptologists ; nor would it have been dreamed that the subtleties of the language, the idioms, or even the grammatical structure, would ever be so fully understood as they are at the present day. Thanks mainly to the diligent work of a group of painstaking German Jews, and to the brilliant labours of a handful of European and American scholars, we can now translate the many hieroglyphic or hieratic texts which have come down to us, with a degree of accuracy almost equal to that obtained in our renderings of Greek and Latin. Poems, prayers, tales serious and comic, historical narratives, satires, and letters, are now able to be put into modern language with the full certainty that the meaning has been grasped ; and the wealth and variety of the material thus presented to us is astonishing.

One of the most remarkable documents of all those which have come down from Pharaonic times is that which records the dialogue between a man about to commit suicide and his own soul, composed somewhere about the year B.C. 2000. The papyrus upon which it is written is now preserved in Berlin ; and the text has been translated by Professor Erman and Professor Breasted, whose renderings I have, in the main, here followed. The man is supposed to be weary of his mortal life, owing, it would seem, to the fact that his body has been disfigured by some dreadful mutilation, perhaps inflicted by his enemies ; and the burden of the flesh has

become intolerable to him. His soul, however, enjoys its sojourn upon earth, and has no desire to be launched into another sphere. The distinction between soul and body is somewhat difficult for us to understand, but actually it may be supposed that the dialogue represents the battle in the unfortunate man's mind between the desire for freedom from bodily pain on the one hand, and the dread of death on the other.

"Recollect," says the life-loving soul, "that burial is lamentation and a bringer of tears, causing a man to be full of sorrow. It is taking a man from his home and casting him out upon the heights (of the desert). But you will not be going up there that you may see the sun, There are those who build (their tombs) in red granite. who construct their sepulchres within a pyramid; there are those who (lie) splendidly in splendid structures . . . . But their memorial altars are as forsaken as are (the bodies of) those weary-ones who, without a surviving relative, die on the pathway across the inundation, the flood taking hold of them on the one side, the heat (of the sun) on the other, and to whom (alone) the fish along the brink of the water speak. Harken to me!—pursue the gladness of the day and forget sorrow."

But the man does not fear death so greatly as he dreads life now that his body has become hideous and an object to be shunned by others. "My name," he cries in the bitterness of his distress, "is more horrible than the stench of a (dead) bird on a summer day when the sun is hot. . . . Yea, my name is more abhorrent than a woman against whom gossip is told to her husband." He then burst into a tirade against humanity in general. "The quiet man perishes," he declares; "the bold-faced walk abroad. Hearts are full of thieving; the (only) man in whom one can trust is he of no understanding . . . I am burdened with misery, and have no faithful friend . . . ."

Then, in the anguish of his mind, he utters a welcome to Death which will stand for all time amongst the greatest

poems in existence. The brevity of his metaphors, which are yet amply descriptive, are reminiscent of the best Japanese poetry, and show the same masterly handling of the structure of imagination, the same ability in the selection of the essential materials for the formation of a mind-picture.

" Death is before me to-day  
 Like the recovery of a sick man ;  
 Like going out into the garden after an illness.  
 Death is before me to-day  
 Like the fragrance of myrrh ;  
 Like sitting under a (ship's) sail on a windy day.  
 Death is before me to-day  
 Like the scent of lotus flowers ;  
 Like resting on the roadside to drink deep.  
 Death is before me to-day  
 Like the course of the overflowing water-channel,  
 Like the return of a man from a ship of war to his house.  
 Death is before me to-day  
 Like the clearing of (mist from) the sky ;  
 Like a man fowling therein toward that of which he was not aware.  
 Death is before me to-day  
 As a man craves to see his home  
 When he has spent years in captivity."

I doubt whether, in the whole world's literature, Death has ever been portrayed in more alluring fashion or so sweetly sung. Could one but think of the experience of life's termination as being like that of going out from the monotony of the sick-room into the vivid freshness of the garden, when one's senses are all quickened by long absence from growing things, truly Death would be a sensation which would make all the distress of life worth while. Or does the reader know the enchantment of sitting upon the deck of a Nile-vessel when the steady north wind fills out the great sail above him, white against the deep blue of the sky, and drives the prow through the waters with the insistency of nature itself? Does he know that indefinable sense of reliability which is conveyed to a sailor by the straining sail spread above him in the sunlight? Has he felt the confident exultation of that passage through the waters, when the mind, aware of the destination, is absorbed by the majesty of

the journey? Even so, says our poet, is Death; the triumphant rush forward to a sure harbour. The picture of the over-flowing water-channel is one that will best be appreciated by those who have lived amongst the fields of Egypt. The farmer digs a rough channel through the soil with his hoe, and into this he suddenly releases the water which has been held back awhile by a little bank of earth, so that it rushes forward on to the rich ground, travelling along its appointed way in the sunlight. And to the joyful overflow of the cool water upon the prepared earth the poet tells us that Death is to be likened.

The metaphor in regard to the clearing of the mist requires to be explained before its extreme beauty can be appreciated by those unfamiliar with Egypt. Upon a reed-covered lake of the Delta a hunter's canoe is silently propelled through the dense, white mist of early morning, as yet undissolved by the risen sun. Presently the little craft comes to rest amidst the tall stems of the papyrus-plants; and in the stillness of the morning the clearing of the air is awaited, in order that the hunter may learn in which direction to move towards his quarry. Then, of a sudden, the sun breaks through the vapour, the white volume of the mist rolls aside, and he finds himself already in full, close view of the flock of duck and wild-fowl which he is seeking but of whose presence he was not aware. Even so is Death: the rending of the mist, and the sudden, proximate vision of that which stirs a hunter's heart.

As the lines of this poem are read and their sense is received by the brain, the series of pictures spring into life in the imagination with a clarity which is evidence of the author's mastery in the selection of words. Each sentence is expressed with such lucidity, such poignancy, and such convincing brevity, that the brain responds almost automatically. The meaning of the words leaps to the mind, the curtain swings up, the picture is seen in its perfection; and so clear is the vision that one is almost loath to read on and thus to change the scene. But not only is a series of pictures called before the

imagination : there is also their application to the poet's imagery of Death ; and, line by line, the reader is introduced to mankind's ultimate tragedy in a new and wondrous aspect.

In spite of this laudation of Death, the soul still protests against the destruction of its earthly home ; and thereupon the man describes the great privileges enjoyed by "those who are yonder", that is to say, the dead. They shall sit, he declares, in the barque of the sun and shall traverse the sky like the stars ; they shall converse face to face with the solar gods and shall not be repelled by them ; and they shall at last be able to inflict punishment for evil-doing where punishment is due, and shall seize hold of the wicked in the manner of the living gods. The idea of an ultimate Justice, and of the ability of the dead to sit in judgment upon those who had wronged them in life, at length overcome the scruples of the soul ; and the embittered man is thus left free to put an end to his existence.

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