

THE DISCIPLINE OF DEATH

EDITED BY

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[What follows was not written for a critical public nor for enlightenment and edification—nor, indeed, for any save one who had no need of it to tell the story of disappointment and brave, bitter loneliness. ‘Writing things down does help, and it’s fun wondering how legible or illegible it all is!’ There was no sense of the theatre, little self-pity, only once an appeal; but the hand that let go the pen and was held out in the darkness was not to feel the answering grip of understanding. R.I.P.—J. F. T. Prince.]

I

If the chief agony of death is caused by hanging on to life, the worst thing about going blind is the way you cling to light, follow it even in your *dark* dreams. (Some dreams blaze with light and everything is seen with crystal clarity. Then waking up is frightful.) But I am thinking about real objective light, especially daylight. I hate the night now as much as I did when I was a child. I stay up, dozing or trying to get some wireless station somewhere that hasn’t gone dead, often not turning out the lamp till I hear the first birds. That is about four a.m.—just now! Then I let up the blind and the grey light comes into the room and gets warmer and warmer. I can sleep then, feeling happier, just as when, as a child, I always felt safer after I had heard them opening the bake-house doors in Church Street and knew that it was morning. That, too, used to be at about four o’clock.

It’s that now.

II

I can yet sense the still, sad beauty of that autumn evening laden with the smell of decay and the tang of a bonfire. A mist was rising over the meadow, like an army of white writhing spectres, almost hiding the cattle. I looked about me in the half light: the falling leaves suggestive of a course all but ended were infinitely more melancholy than the bleakness of winter. I hurried in,

shuddering, chased by the conviction of impending departure, anticipating, as it were, the beginning of that long search, that eternal waiting which has continued until now. . . .

Twenty-five years today since Mother died.

It was a dark providence that bade us say farewell so early in the day. It seems like last week.

After the funeral I remember Daddy saying: 'How strange a thing death is! Do you feel how strange it is to leave her there in the cold ground whom we cherished so? Do you feel it can't, it shan't be? Those features that we knew and loved and were so much a part of life—quite past, quite gone; the same and yet quite meaningless. No, it is as well we cannot realise. I wonder if life is as difficult to remember and realise by the dead—as death is by us who live?'

Once, only once, years after, when I was grown up I remember his quoting:

I shall see your secret face unclose,
And the last passion of decay create
Some stir within your bloodless cheeks.

And more often, with less of the Cathy-Heathcliff ring to it:

. . . They will not grow
Less meet for Heaven when followed by a prayer
To speed them home, like summer-scented air
From long ago.
Who shall forbid the heart's desires to flow
Beyond the limit of the things we know?

(And now they are both gone!) More certainly:

'At Thy spiritual and holy altar, O Lord, give rest, good memory and happiness to all the bodies, and the spirits of our fathers, brothers and sisters, whether of the flesh or of the spirit, who, in whatever countries, cities or states, have departed this life; whether they have been drowned in seas and rivers, or have died in their journeyings, and of whom no memorial remaineth in the Churches upon earth. . . . In the tabernacles of shadow and rest grant them the treasures of joy, whence every sorrow is excluded, and where the souls of the righteous, without labour, expect the first-fruits of eternal life.

'Remember, O Lord, God of spirits and all flesh, the faithful whom we have commemorated, from righteous Abel unto this

day. Give them rest there, in the land of the living, in Thy kingdom, in the delight of Paradise, in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, our holy fathers, whence pain, sorrow, and groaning is exiled, where the light of Thy countenance looks down and ever shines.'

(I wish I had got those prayers quite right.)

III

It's not done to recount dreams, but thinking of Jane's anniversary provided me with one that was not my usual nightmare variety. I have heard it said that as the sight perishes so other faculties and senses grow stronger and more acute. That may be — though I've not yet noticed it. What I *have* remarked, this last week or so, is the extraordinary vividness of mental pictures both sleeping and waking. Presumably the brain tries to compensate for the absence of retinal function. Or is it merely due to some neurosis? John would know. Anyway, with me this business of conjuring up subjective pictures seems to go with an equally strong excitement of the faculty of memory: a paragraph, a mere phrase, springs to the mind, and a picture or a memory with it. . . .

Verdi's friend, I remember, said how he (watching at the Master's death-bed) never felt before such hatred against death, and such contempt for its mysterious, blind, stupid, triumphant, infamous power.

But I have had read to me . . . with an infinitely more vivid picture coming up:

'And Andrew catching sight of his cross in the distance, saluted it, saying: "Hail, cross, which in the body of Christ didst receive a dedication, and wast adorned with his members as with pearls! Before the Lord clomb up on thee, thou didst inspire earthly fear; but now, since thou obtainest for us heavenly love, thou art embraced with devotion. At peace, therefore, and rejoicing unto thee do I come, that, lifting me up from the earth, thou mayest receive me as a disciple of him who hung upon thee; for I have ever been thy lover, and have longed to embrace thee. O excellent cross, which didst receive grace and beauty from the members of the Lord, long desired, earnestly loved, sought incessantly, and now at length made ready for my soul which pants for thee, receive me from among men, and restore me to my Master, that

he, who by thee redeemed me, may by thee also take me unto himself”.’

(This, a scissored page of print, comes probably from the fifteenth-century *LEGENDA AUREA*.—J.F.T.P.)

IV

I suppose I've had my *tiro di caridad*. It came in a strange way. I went to bed very sleepy and slept well till the sun was up, then (so it seemed) I lay with the sun shining on my face and closed eyes for a while. When I opened them—with the greatest thrill of delight I've ever known, I imagined I could see perfectly. I lay in ecstasy;—half asleep, I suppose, because I was awakened by the church clock striking seven. I was lying in the same position as before. My previous waking and my seeing were perfectly real to me. Yet for very fear that I had only dreamed, I lay not daring to open my eyes. The sun was shining on the closed lids again: I could feel its warmth; I could feel, yes, I could *see* the comforting blood-red of the sunlight that penetrated the lids. I began to lose my fear of disappointment and kept my eyes shut out of sheer luxury and pleasurable anticipation. It was only when I discovered that my eyes were already partly open (that I was blinking) that I realised. . . .

V

. . . And now what is prayer but life, the whole of life lived worthily (or unworthily with humility and contrition) in communication with the Father? What is Christianity but the synthesis of all true values? *With* it, do things matter so terribly much—except that effort to keep in touch with God, with Reality? I feel no moral crisis. No keen sense of conversion nor of violent rebellion. One becomes more and more indifferent as to all that has been disreputable or at the time humiliating, but increasingly conscious of all that has been mean, selfish and malicious. The past no longer worries me. 'Fiat!' is the mood we must all come to. The little animals in their unconscious witness to the Eternal proclaim it. Why, even the atheist, without the good grace of a rabbit or a blackbird, can't help giving glory to God in the final scheme. . . .

VI

At last, if I have done nothing really well, let me take this final discipline, and give the only thing that I can give with a good grace and a brave heart.