



THE DANCE OF LIFE

THE sorrow was bitter and hard to forget, but life and its duties remain ; so to gain fresh strength we went to the peaceful island of Iona. At first it seemed as though earth's loveliness intensified the loss, but that was before we reached the Holy Island : for there Peace fell upon us, even as the shades of evening crept silently over the land.

Amongst the sacred ruins how small the bitterest personal grief became! The grand old earth was the same as it had been even in Columba's days: the mornings were just as bright,—the waves danced just as merrily,—the larks sang just as sweetly,—nor were the gambolling lambs less happy because of those who had lived, suffered, and slept. Nay rather did Life's tragedy sink into its proper place; the pain was stilled, and one could see how the life and death of dear ones were but part of the grand endless cycle of Nature. Why cavil at Fate? Life is but as a glimpse seen through the mist of years. The world will be young when we are old. Let us play our part bravely, be it short or long, and rejoice in the thought of the eternal youth of our bounteous Mother Nature.

Every morn she gems the earth afresh with dew or frost, every Spring she scatters flowers and blossoms o'er the earth, and every day she sends fair babes to prattle of the joy and beauty of the world. Yet night follows day, and Winter kills the

Autumn flowers: but only that the dawning of another day may be gladdened by the opening of fresh baby buds.

Why for us should the perfect order be reversed? We share in the dance; is not that enough? We are part, however small, of the wondrous beauty of the day and night—the Spring and Summer: we have indeed a place midst the starry firmament. For us, and with us, is the motion of the waves, the song of the wind, the glowing of the sunset glamour, the hush of expectant twilight, the cold and glittering moonlight, the dark floating clouds of night, the stirring morning breeze, and the grand ever-new, ever-creating glory of another day. For this were we born to be in very sooth, Children of Heaven, to share in its glories here, and to know that when they have passed us by they will go on and on circling upwards and ever upwards to gladden myriads of others. To know this, if but for a little, is to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us but feel the rhythmic measure of the universe and there is no longer a gruesome Dance of Death but the joyous Dance of Life, with the music of the Spheres as part of Nature's endless chorus.

To this the whole earth moves. The tiniest atoms dance to the measured beat. If we listen intently we can almost hear the invisible gathering and grouping of dainty crystal dancers, so delicate are the mystic echoes which the ether waves bear to us. The glorious golden sunlight is but a faster movement of the dance, which, when fevered, makes the cold earth warm. The magic spark, which can slay without a struggle, flows along a glittering thread, its potential thunderings reduced to a childish tap, tap: and thus it plays its part.

When we feel the rhythmic measure, the sea is never silent. The waves no longer moan or fret, but roll on fraught with deep messages of peace and wisdom. As of yore they tell of steadfast faith and brave endurance, of losses grander than victories, and deaths nobler than any lives; but they also tell of never-ending energy, of rest after storm, the smiling morning after the wildest night, the inflooding main as surely as the gently

ebbing tide. Day after day, year after year, ever the same onward rhythmic movement.

The towering tree-tops bend to the measured song; light leaves answer to its faintest murmur, waving grasses sway to the rhythmic sound, and every fragile flower, with tiny tinted bell, rings out Life's endless melody.

Nature's humblest offspring keep time with the dance and song. The sweep of the delicate Cilia, the opening and shutting of some pale medusae, the dreamy movement of a fish's fins, the rise and fall of a golden butterfly, the beating of a linnets wings. Are they not rhythmic?

Birds rise and fall to the measured theme of the Universe. The white gulls languidly swing to it as they rest on the tranquil sea; to it they dart as they lightly kiss the foam-tipped waves; and the downward sweep of the swallow, the upward flight of the lark, are part of the dance, while the song from every sweet bird's throat swells the wondrous chorus to which they wing their flight. All good manly labour marks the rise and fall of the song: the blacksmith hammering on his anvil, the sailor pulling on his rope at sea, and the steady tramp of soldiers. Even when men try to escape from the dance, the rhythm only reappears,—though they may choose to listen to the clink of coins rather than to the lap of the sea, or the beat of a bird's light wing. Those who vainly try to stem the onward movement, or to break from the line of dancers, bring discord into the glorious theme: then rippling mirth is lost, and heart-strings are broken. But, let the song again be taken up, Harmony reigns once more; and, so natural is the concord of sweet sounds, that straightway men forget the discord and think only of the perfect rhythm. Does not the written story of the world tell this? How many wild chaotic lives have been made perfect by harmonious ends? When the singer once more takes his place, unsteady steps turn to the measured tread; and the grand world-song hushes the trivial voices of his past.

But with her newly-born Nature herself is happiest. Watch her little babes. See how they open and shut their shell-pink fingers in sleep, how the dimpled legs move in the

dance. See how they love her, how they pat and kiss her, and nestle to her. How happy they are when they can press their bare feet against her bosom. They feel that they are part of her,—they have no fear of her,—it is only when men have grown away from Nature, when they have shut themselves in cities and grown aliens in their proper home-land that they cease to feel themselves her children, and fear to meet her in death. Then they forget, and fail to see her glory, and build themselves fancies of a world beyond, the very images of which are drawn from the simple life which is within the reach of all who will quietly and reverently listen.

The cycle of the year, or seasons, can easily be traced ; but the universal spiral is indeed so vast, that mortals, seeing but a part, thought it was a straight and narrow path with a goal at the end. If goal there be, let it be that of singing our part in the chorale, so as to strengthen the weary and cheer the sad.

For the measure of the dance is varied. For the young it is 'Allegro'; for enthusiasts it must needs go faster : but Peace is with the silvery-headed old folks who glide quietly along, softly crooning their song to the end. For some it is always 'Andante'; while for the old, life's 'Ritardando' has imperceptibly begun. But weary or glad the dance must yet go on—for how shall Summer follow if Spring delay?

Then let us sing clearly as we go, and generations yet unborn shall hear the echoes of our song ; and many a watchful mother seeing the wistful smile and moving limbs shall know that her little one is with those who went before. Even as we can sometimes touch the spirits of the mighty dead. Not always—not often—but in these rare and blissful moments, when we rest in peace and humbly listen for the faintest murmur of their echoing song. Then, indeed, do we rise refreshed and gladdened, ready once more to join the dance, to chant aloud the rhythmic chorus, to share in all the mystic wonders, to spend ourselves for the ever-living Mother, and so earn for ever and ever that perfect dreamless sleep which has no rude awakening.

JANE HAY.