

LAST WORDS FROM GEORGE
ELIOT.

AS I entered the pause which precedes all effort, and which the writing of these few pages lengthens as much as it deepens, a line of Elizabeth Browning's followed me:

"By the silence of life, more pathetic than death's."

And I thought, to a nice ear how vocal death is! Then for the first time we truly listen to our friend. Then at last the brow bends, the nerve strains; we hush the foot, we still the very heart-beat, to catch the flying word. It is not until he has departed from us that we ever hold the breath of our souls to hear the finest tone, to snatch the most flexible accent of his. Death has a dynamic force—we may say death *is* a dynamic force, in which the power of a thought, a word, subtilizes while it increases upon the mind, as mysteriously yet as mightily as certain chemical effects upon the body.

Of the great woman whose name stands at the head of this fragment so little has been coherently known, and as yet we are brought so imperfectly into the atmosphere of her personality, that the slightest approach to it becomes a possession which it seems almost an offense to human fellowship to keep to one's self. The tributes to her already given to the world by those who had the blessing of her friendship have been most memorable. Some of them, especially some of those written by men, have evinced a delicacy of fibre which indicates either remarkable organization in the writers, or is a remarkable testimony to the influence of this woman upon masculine receptivity—probably both. A "massive trait," she has somewhere called the receptive. She may have had that last grace which leads a man to find the deepest sources of his strength in the more disused elements of his nature. It is to be hoped that he of all now living most fitted for such a task will give to the world the memorial volume for which we wait. Until this comes to us, all attempts to add anything to the personal estimate of her must be, however exquisitely or reverently done, so imperfect, and especially upon the part of those who were not nearest her so presumptuous, that I make no apology for sharing with the readers of this Magazine my little portion of our now precious memories

of her, almost without further comment of my own. The fragments of letters, which are all I have to offer, do not need my poor remarks, beyond a little intervertebral membrane in the shape of an explanatory word or two, to preserve their shape and vigor.

Several years ago it fell to my lot to perform in the lecture-room of a college some work for which George Eliot was the selected theme. The natural hesitation of a stranger to address her upon such a matter was overcome by the impossibility of using unauthored material, and I applied to her for permission to insert a brief biographical prelude to the studies which it was my privilege to follow with as inspiring and appreciative a class of young men and women as she could have desired to cultivate and control. To this appeal I received a prompt and cordial reply, which was the beginning of an occasional, and by no means confidential, but to me most valuable, correspondence, interrupted only by the death of Mrs. Cross.

From these letters I make such extracts as it seems right or possible to share with the public. One of the first opens with the thoughtful and gentle note which characterized every strain she struck:

"I am just come home after an absence of some weeks on the Continent, and seeing that your letter dates as far back as the 22d of July" (her own dates August 26), "I fear there has been time for you to suppose that I intended to keep silence, and had not appreciated—" An accident has here befallen the letter, and assisted me to omit the kind words with which she strove to set the writer at ease concerning the proffered request. . . . "I rejoice to read in your letter that you are unwilling to use 'hearsay facts.'" Then follow a few sentences in which she alludes to the well-known fluency with which such "facts" are reported "of persons whose names become public; it is, indeed, their common lot;" and a few scathing words in which she expresses her contempt for the "unfructifying pre-occupation of men's minds in which unkindly rumor finds such ready favor."

Again, in response to a brave and wretched entreaty, made necessary by the work in hand, we find the same swift kindness:

"I am happy to be able to remedy the little accident to your papers by copying

the passages you have extracted from my former letter.

"I certainly feel a strong disgust for any readiness to satisfy that idle curiosity which, caring little for the study of an author's works, is pleased with low gossip about his private life and personal appearance. Of every writer worth reading it may be said,

'He gave the people of his best:
His worst he kept; his best he gave.'

Can one be too severe on the spirit which neglects the 'best,' and eagerly accepts details called biographical which would be worthless even if they were accurate? Every sentence of your letter assures me that you are at one with me on this point. . . . It is interesting, I think, to know whether a writer was born in a central or border district—a condition which always has a strongly determining influence. I was born in Warwickshire, but certain family traditions connected with more northerly districts made these districts a region of poetry to me in my early childhood. I was brought up in the Church of England, and have never joined any other religious society, but I have had close acquaintance with many Dissenters of various sects, from Calvinistic Anabaptists to Unitarians. I never—to answer one of your questions quite directly—I never had any personal acquaintance with —" (naming a prominent Positivist); "never saw him to my knowledge except in the House of Commons; and though I have studied his books, especially his *Logic* and *Political Economy*, with much benefit, I have no consciousness of their having made any marked epoch in my life.

"Of Mr. —'s friendship I have had the honor and advantage for twenty years, but I believe that every main bias of my mind had been taken before I knew him. Like the rest of his readers, I am, of course, indebted to him for much enlargement and clarifying of thought."

After this transcription follow a few pages which can hardly be of interest to the general reader, except to note the sensitive expression of sympathy with invalid conditions and their frustrated aims, and perhaps to observe the fine indicative patience which leads her to re-read her letter, and, careful for the sensibilities of the stranger, to say: "I see that I wrote (automatically) 'Dear Madam' at the beginning of my letter. If that looks chill and

formal to you, believe that it does not express my feeling." These little signs are like fossil ferns; the delicacy and the indelibility present themselves to the eye together. Continually upon these few well-worn sheets the fine outline falls. Even her way of acknowledging one of the thousand tributes with which *Middlemarch* overwhelms her is to say, "I can not rest without thanking you heartily for your generous expression of feeling."

"As to the 'great novel,'" she continues, "which remains to be written, I must tell you that I never believe in future books. . . . Always after finishing a book I have a period of despair that I can ever again produce anything worth giving to the world. The responsibility of the writer grows heavier and heavier—does it not?—as the world grows older and the voices of the dead more numerous. It is difficult to believe, until the germ of some new work grows into imperious activity within one, that it is possible to make a really needed contribution to the poetry of the world—I mean possible to oneself to do it. But I do not write to you for the purpose of expressing my personal doubts."

On an almost overlooked page I find an allusion to the Woman's Lectureship in Boston, and to the new university, of which she says, all in a few kind, keen words: "An office that may make a new precedent in social advance, and which is at the very least an experiment that ought to be tried. America is the seed-ground and nursery of new ideals, where they can grow in a larger, freer air than ours."

"I hardly ever read anything that is written about myself—indeed, never unless my husband expressly wishes me to do so by way of exception. I adopted this rule many years ago as a necessary preservative against influences that would have ended by nullifying my power of writing."

"In this way," she proceeds, referring to Mr. Lewes's well-known habit of standing between her and public comment on her work, "I get confirmed in my impression that the criticism of any new writing is shifting and untrustworthy. I hardly think that any critic can have so keen a sense of the short-comings in my works as that I groan under in the course of writing them, and I can not imagine any edification coming to an author from a sort of reviewing which consists in attributing to him or her unexpressed opinions, and

in imagining circumstances which may be alleged as petty private motives for the treatment of subjects which ought to be of general human interest.... I have been led into this rather superfluous sort of remark by the mention of a rule which seemed to require explanation. It is perhaps less irrelevant to say, apropos of a distinction you seem to make between my earlier and later works, that though I trust there is some growth in my appreciation of others and in my self-distrust, there has been no change in the point of view from which I regard our life since I wrote my first fiction, the *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Any apparent change of spirit must be due to something of which I am unconscious. The principles which are at the root of my effort to paint Dinah Morris are equally at the root of my effort to paint Mordecai. Enough of me and my doings."

"You and Mrs. — might well beguile me by your loving invitation to cross the wide Atlantic, were it not—" Some serious domestic reasons follow, when she adds, "It is this that hinders me from carrying out my longing to go to the East, and that must forbid me equally from seeing your land of the Future."

From another letter I find myself able to quote only in shattered crystals. There is a tender word of "broken health as a hinderance and severe demand for submission to doing the smaller thing where one had hoped to do the greater," which will go, in her own language, "straight to the heart" of every invalid reader. "This sort of resignation," she urges, "enters more or less into the life of every ardent soul, for its vision and longing must always be larger than its achievement; but when the limit is fixed by bodily weakness or malaise, the trial is incomparably hard."

Again she writes of that "sensibility and observation which are only to be attained through much inward experience, which always means a large proportion of pain as well as enjoyment.... I can answer your kind inquiries about my health more cheerfully than usual."

And here we have a message to the moral reformers, when she cries: "Oh, that difficult question, how to make men temperate! One moves despairingly in a circle; they can't leave off drinking till they have something else to cheer them, and they can't get a taste for that something else till they leave off drinking.

At least this is the form of fact in the case of our own day-laborers. But of course we, as well as you, have the drinking mania, which is part of the idle-wealthy craving for excitement."

Once more: "But do not expect 'criticism' from me. I hate 'sitting in the seat of judgment,' and I would rather try to impress the public generally with the sense that they may get the best result from a book without necessarily forming an 'opinion' about it, than I would rush into stating opinions of my own. The floods of nonsense printed in the form of critical opinions seem to me a chief curse of our times—a chief obstacle to true culture."

"In general—perhaps I may have told you—it is my rule not to read contemporary fiction.... I am usually studying some particular subject.... I dare say you will understand that for my own spiritual good I need all other sorts of reading more than I need fiction. I know nothing of contemporary English novelists with the exception of —, and a few of —'s works. My constant groan is that I must leave so much of the greatest writing which the centuries have sifted for me unread for want of time."

But two letters in the now fast lessening little pile remain, and the hand pauses before the broad black line that like a frame incloses the changed and tremulous writing—a memorable and sacred picture. From this letter I have but one sentence to give, and give it because I think she would have given it, knowing how surely it will go "straight to the heart" of too many a mourner to be withheld:

"Your first letter has made a gentle echo in my mind ever since I read it—I mean its ending, where you say that 'Death is not the worst sorrow.'.... They are happy, in the comparative sense that belongs to the word 'happy' in this world of trouble, who see their best-loved die with a soul unblighted, leaving their image free from blot or shadow."

And now the pause of the heart is deeper than the delay of the hand which slowly lifts, or the reluctance of the eyes which blindly read the reticent but still tender letter whose unfamiliar signature is the end.

An earnest expression of interest in the health of her correspondent breaks into these wide-reaching and beautiful words—the last:

"It makes a large part of one's calm and comfort in this difficult world to think

of the lots of those we know as free from any hard pangs of either sorrow or bodily pain."

The unfinished friendships of this life are at once its dreariest experiences and most glorious hopes. No healthy heart without perversion of the intellect accepts interrupted relations as final facts. The "Story without an End" runs on; and she whose abounding personality drew to itself the depths and heights of human fellowship must live despite herself and every prophet of her creed of death, to bless and to resume her bond to us.

A HIGHLY RESPECTABLE FAMILY.

I.

THE Misses Kolstad had once been young, but it was a good while ago; and as regarded Catharine, the elder, her youth was simply a legend which nobody pretended to believe in. Miss Catharine looked like a slightly resuscitated Egyptian mummy with gray puffs. Her face seemed to be divided by deep wrinkles into various territories, like a geographical map. Her wrinkles, like everything else about her, were decisive; no mere semi-perceptible crows'-feet, but deep furrows which Time had made, not gently and apologetically, but as it were with a vindictive purpose. Her nose, which had quite a high-bred air about the nostrils, betrayed a consciousness of its own gentility; the eyes, which were of an indefinite gray color, were half covered by somewhat drooping eyelids, which peculiarity expressed not drowsiness, but hauteur. The region immediately about the eyes was slightly discolored, as if to convey a premonition of an event which, in the nature of things, could not be far distant. I forgot to observe (what Miss Catharine never forgot) that the Misses Kolstad were of a highly respectable family. They had been in a state of decline for a century or more, but they had never ceased to be genteel. Their father, who had been active in contributing to the decadence of the family, had been, as both Miss Catharine and Miss Lina expressed it, a royal Norwegian government officer, *i. e.*, he had been a clerk or copyist in one of the government departments; but his father, whom tradition asserted to have been a gay old gentleman and a trifle of a *roué*, had been a judge of

the Supreme Court, and had been the bearer of several orders. The two old ladies cherished the memory of this dissolute grandfather with a singular tenderness. They spoke of him under their breaths, however, while their niece, Olga, was in the room, but they gloried secretly in him, and were quite proud of their fate in having been ruined, before they came into the world, by such a splendid gentleman.

It was a very lugubrious existence which Olga led in the company of her two aunts. Her father, Anthony Kolstad, the only brother of the old ladies, had died when she was nine years old, and her mother, who had been pretty, but not strictly genteel, had married some exceedingly common individual, and had emigrated with him to the United States. Poor Anthony had inherited his full share of the deviltry which fell to the lot of every male in the Kolstad family, and before he was twenty-five years old he had had the indiscretion to fall in love with a scullion, and, what was worse, had married her. His married life had not been as tranquil as it might have been, but the birth of Olga had made it less miserable than otherwise it would have been. When his widow set sail for the land of liberty, having first exchanged her name for an odiously plebeian one, the Misses Kolstad had claimed the daughter, and after a brief litigation had gained possession of her.

The transfer from the easy-going and somewhat careless life of her home to the strict and inexorable routine of her aunts' household was a formidable event in Olga's career. From the first day she was mortally afraid of her aunt Catharine, whose cap strings seemed to be bristling with dignity, and whose bony hands, placed crosswise over her stomach, had something vulture-like and terrible about them. Her aunt Lina, on the other hand, who was held by her superior sister to be slightly weak-minded, could sometimes be almost merry in a hushed and guilty way, as if she were ashamed of her own frivolity. Miss Catharine's shadow seemed always to be following her about, checking her spirits, and making her demeanor timid and subdued. She felt sometimes irrepressibly gay at heart, but remembering that she was a Kolstad, she restrained her mirth, for it was not supposed to be dignified in a Kolstad to be merry. Miss Lina's meditations were never deep, and it never occurred to her to reflect upon the hardship