

DO WE SURVIVE DEATH?

A Conversation with Martin.

By John Claverhouse.

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A DAY OF MOURNING.

It had been raining hard all day, and as I joined Martin at his study window, I saw that a mist covered the valley below, hiding the lake entirely from view, though the hills beyond loomed up like ghosts in the fast waning light. Our mood was in sympathy with Nature — for we had been attending the funeral of his young nephew, Gerald Lowe. Love for the boy had been one of the many bonds between us — for I, too, had known him from childhood. His death in an air accident near home, soon after returning from service in the R.A.A.F. in Europe, had been a heavy blow to both of us.

Martin had begged me to come home with him after the ceremony was over — he couldn't stand being alone with his thoughts, he said. As we looked out over the grey, rain-filled, darkening scene, he poured out all the bitterness of his heart. All his hopes had been bound up in the career of his dead brother's son: he had intended to send him to the United States to complete his scientific studies, and to give him the house after his marriage, as well as making him his heir. We mourned together over Gerald and the young fiancée from whom he had been so tragically torn by death: we recalled his happy, charming childhood, his brilliant youth, the eagerness with which he had answered his country's call and his pride in her service. . . . Then the Gerald who had come back, graver now — saddened and made older by the war, but grown from a splendid youth into a fine man — brave, intelligent, high-minded. . . .

“He was the flower of Australian manhood,” I said. Martin's face was turned away to the far hills; I heard his voice very low, as though weighted with his grief. He was quoting Scripture. “Man that is born of woman has but a little time to live and is full of sorrow — he comes up as a flower and is cut down. . . .” His voice ceased suddenly, and there was a long pause. Then I spoke softly.

RESURRECTION — OR THE DUST-CART?

“Don't take it like that, old friend,” I said. “You know, the Bible has other things than that to say about life and death — and what lies beyond death. It isn't the end of everything. ‘The souls of the just are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them . . . in the sight of the unwise, they seem to die; but they are at peace.’” He still did not speak, and I continued. “And, though you may not be exactly orthodox, I think, if I know you, that Christ's own word means something to you: ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life . . .’”

He went on then. . . . “If a man believe in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live” But there, his voice broke. “It's no good, John, I tell you — it's no good. I'm not a man of faith like you. . . . I wish it could be so, but I can't feel any confidence. Aren't you afraid it may all prove to be just “wishful thinking”? We don't want to die, we don't want to lose the ones we love for ever and so we wrap ourselves in dreams about a future life. But what does it all amount to?”

Martin turned round and went to the table, switching on the lamp that stood upon it. I saw that a book lay open there, and he took it up to read.

“Listen to this,” he said. “It was written by one of the most brilliant men of our time, who knew himself to be near death.

“He writes: ‘The severer our thinking, the plainer it is that the dust-carts of time trundle that dust off to the incinerator and there make an end of it’.”

“That’s H. G. Wells, isn’t it?” I said. “I read ‘*Mind at the End of Its Tether*’ the other day. The sad and despairing testament of a man in some ways great — but not at all convincing, in my opinion.”

Martin set the slim volume down. “I was hoping you’d ‘bite’,” he said quietly, “because I’ve been wanting to chew over this subject with you ever since . . . ever since I got the news. I can’t just rest in emotional hopes about this — I want reasons for believing that there’s life beyond death and I think arguing with you will take the edge off my misery, anyhow.”

“And mine, too,” I said. “I have faith to comfort me, of course — but I feel pretty desolate, and just about twice as old as last week.”

IS MIND “A FUNCTION OF MATTER?”

“Let’s draw up the chairs to the fire, then,” said my friend. He brought some whisky from the sideboard, and sherry for me; and filling our glasses, we drank silently for a few minutes.

At last Martin leaned back, and spoke again. “To begin with, what ground is there, in reason, for believing that the soul is anything but a “function of matter”, or that it survives death? Of course, I know the spiritualists and table-rappers claim to have demonstrated it — but I can’t say I find their stuff very convincing.”

“If you don’t mind,” I said, “I think we’ll begin by collecting your objections to the proposition that the soul survives. After all, I can claim that my view has been established among men for thousands of years. It’s you who are making the challenge.”

“All right,” said Martin. “Well — scientists tell us that our mental processes are all conditioned by the motions of atoms in our brains: we all know that the action of what we call our “immaterial” part is strictly dependent upon the state of our bodies. All our thinking is based on sense-perceptions which we gain through the body: and our state of mind depends largely on the state of our health, our physical habits, age, and so on. Accidental changes in physical structure, may transform a sane man into a melancholic, a victim of sex-mania or a criminal lunatic. Our mind grows with our body, works through our body, and ceases to work when it sleeps; it is affected by its ills and old age. Why shouldn’t we believe, then, that it is a “function of matter” which perishes when the material body dies?”

“Fairly put,” I said. “Your first case is that of the pure materialist — that what we call “mental phenomena” are simply due to a lot of chemical changes. Of course, nobody in their senses is going to deny the observed facts which prove that the mind gains its impressions and expresses itself through the body, so that physical defects often involve defects of impression and expression. If a piano is out of tune, or has dumb notes, I can’t play a Beethoven Sonata decently on it, however great a musician I am: but that doesn’t prove that the music is “a function of the piano” and that there isn’t any musician. And if the piano was closed, or smashed, or burnt, the player would still be alive, wouldn’t he? And he might find other means of uttering his melodies, even if he had no piano?”

“Very well,” answered Martin. “Suppose I grant that things may be as you say — the body the instrument, the soul the player, so to speak. Is it possible to prove that my position is certainly false? Doesn’t it describe mental action sufficiently well, without having to drag in the notion of a governing, immaterial soul?”

“I can give you a straight answer to that — No!” I said.

“Why not, then?”

PURE MATERIALISM REFUTES ITSELF.

“Well, let’s suppose that we are just matter, as you suggest, and our thoughts are just chemical processes in the brain. I believe that the world is round: a planet moving round the sun. You, on the contrary, are an unenlightened person, like the late President Kruger, of the Transvaal. You believe it’s flat, with the sky set over it like a soup-tureen. One of those beliefs is true and the other false — you agree?”

“Certainly — your Martin Kruger’s an ass”

“But let’s look a bit closer. What do those mental phenomena, those “beliefs” amount to? I have a chemical process in my brain which has produced one — you have a process which has produced the other. In what way, then, is one “truer” than the other? All you can say is that both exist as thought-processes.”

“Hang on a bit. . . I want to think this out; it’s tough,” said Martin. He poured out another whisky, and sipped it slowly. Then he smiled.

“I think I can add a bit to your argument,” he said. “On the premises I laid down, I don’t see how you can even say that the “thought-processes” exist and mean anything; because that judgment itself is just a chemical product of your brain, and there’s no meaning in calling it “true” or “false”. And, in the final analysis, you can’t use any process of reasoning, or establish any fact whatever.”

“Exactly,” I answered. “Even the words “I have reason to suppose” has no meaning. In fact, the proposition that the mind is simply a material product refutes itself.

“It reminds me of a story I once read in a book about an artist-lunatic who wanted to paint the universe. When he finished his picture, he saw it wasn’t complete — you see, he was still outside the picture himself. So then, he painted himself in. But then, there was the “self” outside still distinct from the image in the picture and so the problem of finishing the picture could never be solved. In the same way, if we describe ourselves as “material beings” we give no account of our own belief or knowledge that this is true. We can’t be the matter and also the knowing that we are the matter.”

“You’re making my head go round,” said Martin. “But — excuse me — don’t you think you’ve proved a bit too much?”

“What do you mean?”

“If I can’t know my mind as matter, how can I know it as mind? When I think of myself, aren’t I making another “self” like your lunatic artist?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “When the thinking subject is once admitted as something different from a mere chemical process, truth and reason have a real meaning: you can think thoughts and form judgments about either the material world or yourself. The mind is conscious and self-conscious, which means that it can double back and think of itself; and all the while it is aware that it is both the thinking subject and the object thought of — it isn’t just “painting a picture”. Incidentally, the fact that the mind can do this is another reason for believing that it is non-material.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, no material action that we know has any resemblance to this action of the mind. A knife doesn’t cut itself, an eye doesn’t look at itself, a mouth doesn’t eat itself . . .”

“ENERGY PATTERNED INTO WORLDS.”

Martin said “We seem to have got to the point of knowing definitely that mind isn’t just a by-product of matter. But couldn’t they be just different aspects of the same phenomenon — some stuff which isn’t either mental or material?”

It was my turn now to ask for an explanation.

“A lot of scientists,” said my friend, “have got the notion that the distinction between mind and matter is what they call “departmental thinking”. They run together, it is said. Nature is “energy patterned into worlds,” and it includes purpose, working itself up into organic life and then into conscious, thinking life.”

“In that case,” I said, “the lowest matter must be spiritual as well as material; because the original “stuff” of the universe must contain the mind which becomes manifest later.”

“It’s only in the higher stages of evolution that the power of universal energy shows itself as mind.” said Martin.

“Come, come,” I said. “You can’t have that, you know, The word “energy” you use is pinched from the material world — and applied to a quite different kind of activity — and the difference is quietly ignored. The idea of unconscious “power” and “energy” having purpose and aim is a lot of nonsense; and it’s only made plausible by slipping in words which suggest an Agent — a real mind — behind the scene. To call “mind” and “matter” the same thing is to use words which haven’t any real meaning. A real egg you can eat, and my thoughts about an egg remain as different as ever. And don’t chuck the word “evolution” at me, either — because it’s just another magic word which explains nothing at all. You say matter and material energy engender life and mind in the course of a long and complicated process. It seems to me like saying that if you leave a top hat standing around long enough its “purposive activity” will produce a rabbit — without the aid of a magician! Only one thing is apparent to me: that some people are desperately anxious to dispense with the magician somehow, even if they have to invent the weirdest fancies to do it!”

“You mean that all this is an attempt to escape from the necessity of admitting the existence of God?”

“Yes — the habit of “Theophobia” is pretty deeply-rooted in the thought of a number of our scientific thinkers but it’s not the sort of “Fear of God” which is the beginning of wisdom!”

“Well, John,” said Martin, “I think you’ve done all right so far: I can see that mind and matter must be distinct. And now, where do we go from there?”

LOOKING AT A PICTURE.

“I just want to emphasise again” I said “that every attempt to translate the processes of thought into terms of mere matter makes nonsense. Consider the painter of a modernist picture, and a number of spectators looking at it. There’s the picture — an arrangement of colour on canvas. There’s the subject (say, a village street). Both these are undoubtedly material. Then there’s the thought of the artist as he originally conceived it — and as it grew in the course of the painting. Then there are the thoughts of the spectators — of whom three don’t understand it, one thinks it’s something else, one has a vague idea, and one has an understanding somewhere near the artist’s. How can all this be conveyed in terms either of a materialistic philosophy or one which regards mind and matter as one? All these thoughts are real, yet none of them affect the artist, or the picture by way of material modification. Are we to make one material object of the picture and all the thoughts about it — with their various accuracies and inaccuracies?”

“Consider how the human mind works. It can think of itself and it can also think of anything else in nature; it draws “universal ideas” from the world of matter, and thereby attains to knowledge of the world of reality and the laws that govern it. It can devise signs to preserve the records of the past: it can throw itself ahead to contemplate future possibilities. It can deal in forms which could never materialize — mental abstractions, mathematical symbols, and so forth.”

THE CANDLE FLAME.

Martin got up to throw a log on the fire, and then knocked out his pipe on the mantelpiece. He filled it, lit up and puffed reflectively a minute before sitting down again. “Well, John,” he said, “You’ve certainly carried the argument so far without indulging in anything like vague hopes or wishful thinking. But, even if the mind is immaterial, need we suppose it to be undying? After all, it is born with the body and lives with it, gathering sense impressions as the raw material for it to work upon. Isn’t it, in effect, ‘extinguished like a candle flame, when the candle is worn down?’”

“Once again,” I replied, “you’re comparing the action of the mind with something material to which it has no real resemblance. A candle flame is exactly what we showed that the mind wasn’t — the effect of a chemical process, which can continue only as long as there are suitable materials to be consumed — or transformed.”

“Queer, isn’t it?” said Martin. “How liable even serious thinkers are to allow themselves to be deceived by false symbols in this particular question? My mind seems to be filled with romantic symbols of despair — the dying lamp, the fading flower, and so on. I think it’s Sir Arthur Keith who uses the candle flame metaphor to describe death, isn’t it?”

A QUESTION OF IDENTITY.

“He wasn’t being very scientific about it, then,” I said. “Well — so far we’ve seen that the mind enables us, so to speak, to stand outside ourselves as spectators. Now I want you to look at this faculty a bit more closely. I think of myself, and I throw myself back into the past. I remember how I used to play alone in the spare-room at home, the first lessons I had from my mother: country holidays and school life as a boy: the friendships and troubles of adolescence: my life at Cambridge — sunny afternoons in the “Backs”; the entrance of Christ’s College: my army days and difficulties; my return to Australia after the first World War — life in Melbourne and in the country, past happy days in your company, Martin. I go into my room and turn over some old photographs — a family group: a boy in a sailor suit — that’s me, John Claverhouse. Again, a dishevelled looking youth with glasses and untidy hair — me again. . . .”

I stopped to pour out another sherry, and took a cigarette. Martin was silent, looking at the fire.

“Well — what the devil is this, “Me”? I’ve changed my body — every cell of it — many times since the first “me” I remember, peeping over the table to look at a silver sphinx ornament on a fruit dish. My character has changed, too, and a lot of my opinions and tastes. But there’s something that hasn’t changed — a unity that has persisted through all this flow of physical changes and mental developments, linking them together. So, you see, I’m not just a “coagula” — a bundle of changing sensations and experiences. They dissolve, I remain the same.”

GROWTH AND DECAY.

“Still, John, your mind does grow — and is liable to decay, if you live to be old, before the end.”

“What do we mean by “growth” and “decay” when we talk of the mind?” I answered. “Again, we’re using terms derived from the material world. The child’s mind “grows” not because it becomes bigger like its body, but because it gathers understanding and knowledge of itself and the world, and learns how to express itself through the body, and the instrument it uses is improving all the time. On the contrary, the old person’s mind “decays” because the instruments it uses are no longer working so well. The brain’s fatigue weakens attention — the sense perceptions grow weaker, the association between events is confused, and sometimes strange phantasmagoria of the brain stampede the processes of thought. That’s what we mean by “thinking badly” . . . The thinking subject is either there, or not there; we can’t think of it growing or decaying in the sense that the body does. And — this is the point — it can’t die after the fashion of the body, either.”

“How do you make that out?” said Martin. His voice had fallen, and he had turned away to look at the fire. I knew he was thinking of Gerald — his splendid body, horribly charred, as it had been drawn out of the burning plane.

HOW COULD THE SOUL DIE?

I resumed quietly. “The death of the body takes place when the material law of dissolution operates upon it. First, the physical organism no longer functions as a single entity; then it begins to fall apart and undergo transformation. Now this “breaking up” can’t happen to the mind, because there’s no material to be broken. We can’t suppose that it depends for its existence on the body, without making it a quality of the body or a “function of matter” — which, I think we agreed, leads us into absurdity. How, then, could it perish?”

“It could be annihilated, couldn’t it?”

“The first answer to that,” I said, “is that Nature does not know such a thing as “annihilation”. If you extinguish a candle flame, the elements composing it change their form, but they are still somewhere in the atmosphere. A burnt paper has become ash — a dead body enters, by degrees, into the substance of the earth, of plants, of other animal bodies as the time passes. The universe moves and changes — but nothing is utterly lost. What reason is there for making an exception of the human spirit? What could cause this ‘annihilation’?”

“God could do it — couldn’t He?”

“Theoretically, of course, He has the power to do so, but it is difficult to see what reason could lead Him to reverse the creative act in this particular case — and destroy mind after making it naturally immortal. If you have formed any clear idea of God — “the strength and stay of all creation,” and the ground of its ordered movement, irrational caprice of this kind will seem inconceivable in Him. And in any case, if you are a Theist, there are plenty of other reasons for believing in the immortality of the soul.”

CAN MINDS MERGE?

Martin was puffing at his pipe again, and looking at the fire with unseeing eyes. A burnt-out log fell apart with a small sound, and the flame flickered up, casting a shimmering red glow which made the shadows dance. He spoke again. “All right, John. Let’s admit that the immaterial spirit survives the body. If I recall rightly, even J. B. S. Haldane, infidel as he is, is inclined to think that that is not improbable. Only he seems to think that the mind will lose its limitations and be merged in an “infinite mind” or something of the sort, which he suspects to exist behind Nature. Have you any fault to find with that suggestion?”

“It reminds me of Sir Edwin Arnold’s rhapsody about the Buddhist Nirvana — “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” As a poetical image, of course, Arnold’s line is very charming — but it doesn’t add much to our knowledge of the soul’s destiny. We know that material drops can slip into a great ocean — but the merging of immaterial minds into a great mind is another question entirely.”

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“First of all — what do we mean by “mind”? You and I have used it, up till now, pretty freely to describe thinking persons — ourselves and others. We speak of our mind or our reason instead of the thinking self, just as we speak of our will when we mean the self which wills and chooses or the imagination when we mean the self that imagines. But we have no right to solidify these abstractions as though they could exist unattached of their own accord. There is no such thing as a mind which is not the mind of a person — the “thinking” can’t just rush off on its own like a genie out of a bottle. Still less can it combine with a multitude of other thinkings to form a composite “infinite mind”. All that’s just false imagery, which we derive from material things like the sea or clouds, which have parts. If the spiritual being that thinks is wiped out as a person, then his mind is wiped out. If the mind is undying by nature, then the thinking person is also undying.”

“But Christians, and all theists, believe in an Infinite Mind — ‘In whom we live and move and have our being’,” said Martin.

“Certainly,” I answered, “and we believe in Infinite Wisdom, Will, Power, Truth, Goodness and Love — but all these attributes reside in the Infinite Being of a Personal God. All things live “within” in the sense of being held in existence by His creative power — but not in the sense that their being or not being adds or subtracts anything from His reality. My thinking self, my mind, is God-created: it is not part of God. God does not grow, or change, with the growth and changing of the universe.”

“WHAT SORT OF AFTER LIFE?”

“All right,” said Martin. “I think you’ve disposed successfully of my doubts about the survival of the soul — anyhow, I can see that you can find grounds for holding it which are solidly rational, and not just “wishful thinking” or traditional belief. But it’s pretty difficult, isn’t it, to conceive of the sort of life the disembodied soul can live? I know you used the image of the player and the piano — but we both have enough science to know that bonds which link soul and body are a lot more intimate than that.”

“You mean the soul isn’t just an angel living in a machine?” I said.

“That’s it,” he answered. “Man is a whole, a body-soul: and it looks to me as if the thinking soul, alone after death, might be in the situation that it is in when we’re asleep, and our physical communication system is closed down for the time being. Wasn’t it Mirabeau who had it inscribed on his tomb that ‘Death is an eternal sleep’?”

“Sleep,” I said, “may be the image of death, as far as appearances go — but there seems to me no good reason for thinking that the situation of the soul which is no longer animating the body bears any resemblance to its situation when it is still animating a body which is “closed down” for an interval. I’ll grant you, however, that it’s pretty hard to imagine what the state of the separated spirit can be if we’re simply left to our natural human understanding. We can say, however, that as the spiritual self was the means of our knowing ourselves, it will continue to have that knowledge.

“As for the rest, whether it develops any new method of communication in its new bodiless condition, and what that method may be, is a matter of conjecture, if we are left without Divine Revelation. The pre-Christian world and the pagan world of today are united in believing in some sort of “survival”, but there’s precious little in some of their notions about the fate of human souls to suggest that their belief has “wishful thinking” back of it. Too often they are conceived as wandering, unhappy shadows, who hate and envy the living, and must be “appeased”: or as dwelling in tombs, or in a dark, cold world beneath the earth. The spaces of their immortality stretch out into an unending Limbo of frustration.”

“I know,” said Martin. “Do you remember the horrid blood-drinking ghosts in Virgil? And the ghastly world of Hela, in the Norse mythology? If that was all survival meant, I’d think that there was a lot to be said for Wells and the dust-cart!”

IS IMMORTALITY BORING?

“Still, I think you can say this,” I went on: “That even without Revelation we should suspect that the universal fate of immortal spirits couldn’t be this frustration. It makes their natural immortality meaningless if they’re just piled up alive into a sort of universal dustbin of lost souls, growing bigger and bigger and bigger. The idea isn’t only intolerable — I think it’s ridiculous.”

Martin got up to draw the curtains, since it was now quite dark. Then he threw another log on the fire, and stood watching it.

“I agree with you about that,” he said. “Whatever the fate Nature — or God, if you will — intends for immortal beings, it can’t be the same everlasting emptiness for all. But, you know, I think a lot of people refuse to consider the idea of immortality, because they think of it as some sort of unending repetition, which they are sure would bore them stiff, and be frustration, not fulfilment. If I remember, that’s Shaw’s position. He says that those who want to live for ever just don’t know what they’re talking about — such a life would be penitential, not by any means pleasing.”

“Hmmm, ‘One crowded hour of glorious life’ would be the thing, wouldn’t it?” I said: “if only the point of brief joy could somehow remain a point, and not be dragged out into a monotonous line?”

TIME AND ETERNITY.

“Yes,” said Martin. “That’s the sort of thing. We want all that we love restored, fresh and untarnished, without the tears and weary monotony. We want our dreams to prove a foretaste of happy reality in eternity. Even if we are sure of survival — and I find your arguments for it pretty convincing, John — it’s not much without that.”

“Don’t ask too much of unaided natural reason, Martin,” I replied. “We’re getting to the point at which we need the help of a Divine message to amplify the vague “intimations” about immortality that we find in our own lives and in the lives of others. We know enough, however, to know that time is the enemy in our best experiences. It “flies” when we are gloriously happy in love or busy with interesting work or fascinating recreation. It “drags” when we are tired and sleepless, or in a treadmill of hateful drudgery. From this experience, we may perhaps get an inkling of the existence of two sorts of immortality — one an endless succession of weary, flat, repetitions: the other a sort of vertical timeless leaping upward from joy to joy. The last is the true fulfilment of the soul’s life — the other, its frustration.

“There are mystics — of my own faith and others — who have had experiences which confirm this conclusion — moments in which it seemed to them that time and eternity closed up, and the soul leapt into its proper domain. You remember St. Augustine and St. Monica at Ostia, in the ‘*Confessions*’?”

“It’s years since I opened it, I’m afraid.”

“I was reading it the other day,” I said. “Let’s see — I wonder if I can remember the passage. ‘The very highest delight’ — yes, that’s it — ‘The very highest delight of the earthly senses, in the very purest material light, was in respect to the sweetness of that life not only not worthy of comparison, but not even of mention’ . . . and . . . let me see, ‘and we came to our own minds and went beyond them, that we might arrive at that region of never-failing plenty, where You feed Israel for ever with the food of truth ‘ Ah! ’”

THE DESIRE OF LIFE.

Martin said nothing: but I saw his face soften and lighten in the glow of the fire. We were silent for a little: then he stirred and spoke again. “I was just reflecting,” he said, “about how a bogey-word like “wishful thinking” can oppress a man when he’s wretched.”

“I wanted to get round again to that same “wishful thinking”, Martin,” I said. “I tried to show you that belief in immortal life had a good bit more behind it than human desire: whether Mr. Shaw likes it or not, I’m afraid he’s “stuck with it” in view of the nature of the thinking self. But I don’t think we ought to be too contemptuous of the folk who argue from desire to a life after death.”

“You mean that you have to account for the desire itself — the thirst for more life . . . the reaching out for those who have gone from us?” He sighed. . . .

“That’s it,” I replied. “Do you remember the way Nietzsche inveighs, in ‘*Zarathustra*’, against the people he calls ‘Backworldsmen’? The um, — the chaps who will try to stick their heads out of the universe in quest of a life beyond? He attacked their obsession — but he never explained it. . . . And you know, it’s pretty deeply ingrained, even in the habit of thought of people who wouldn’t admit to religious belief. You hear old people worrying about the future prospects of the world — as though fifty or a hundred years hence would be as real to them as the present time. Unconsciously, they project their life beyond the span allotted to them — thinking of themselves as still concerned in the fate of their descendants. Others trouble about their reputation after death . . . they burn letters which might lead men to think ill of them; they hope their writings or deeds will live in memory; they even compose their epitaphs! The desire for enduring fame speaks of “immortal longings” despite all their denials.”

“But not all desires are fulfilled by Nature,” said Martin.

“That’s true, of course,” I answered. “Men — and animals, too — often desire things they don’t find. But no animals desire things that aren’t to be found anywhere: and man, considered as an animal, has no physical desires which can’t be satisfied. Why should we hold that only his highest aspirations as an Immaterial, Thinking Self are not merely sometimes unreachd, but for ever unreachd?”

IS BELIEF IN THE AFTER-LIFE “ANTI-SOCIAL”?

“I think there’s one more point,” said Martin. “I want to throw at your head one last objection — the favourite Communist one that belief in a future life of happiness is anti-social, because it makes men neglect their earthly business and remain patient under earthly injustice, ugliness and misery.”

“The answer to that one, I should say, is — ‘look around’. We live in an age when religious belief is at a low ebb, and the business of the world is generally run with the tacit assumption that it belongs to man, and not to God, and that nothing is important but earthly well-being. The fruits of this doctrine are various, but they all stink. The godless ‘liberal’ bourgeois, first of all, produces a city of avarice: when it begins to become fetid — he can only think of another one built on the same plan. He disestablishes religion, gives freedom to every sort of anti-social theory, and wonders that Hitlers grow up . . . then, after fighting against them, proceeds to foster a secularist education which breeds more Hitlers. The “planners” — Nazi, Communist and secular-democratic, all move along lines of ‘social progress’ at the end of which lies the ‘mass-man’ — products of

‘planned’ breeding, cog in an industrial machine, spiritually fed with ‘strength through joy’ and physical culture, emotionally satisfied by mass-entertainment, ‘conditioned’ by education not only to submit to social regimentation, but to accept it as the new sort of freedom and well-being. Our new cities are hideous monstrosities, even when they are well-aired and well-drained: our art and music reflect sensuality, perversion, madness and chaos.

HEAVENLY AND EARTHLY CITIES.

Martin was grinning. “I gather, John,” he said, “that you don’t think much of our modern times.”

“I don’t think, at least,” I said, “that the age of the Gestapo, the N.K.V.D., the atomic bomb, the child-gangster”

“And all the rest —”

“. . . . has a right to criticise the beliefs of those who created all the great civilisations of the past. The ideas of justice and humanity which we inherit, the sense of human dignity and freedom which is at the basis of the democratic ideal, the charity towards the poor, the sick, the defective which has reared countless hospitals and works of mercy — all these owe their original impulse to men who held that man is an immortal being. And — if we turn to the beauty of life — well, I ask you if the men who built the Parthenon, Chartres, the Taj Mahal were “anti-social” when they made things of loveliness which remain a joy from generation to generation?

“No — it is those who have had their eyes on the design of the heavenly city who have known how to bring something of it down to earth. The muck-raking society of today is perishing of the effluvia from its own offal.”

“Yes, ‘Hear, hear,’ says the man below the soap-box.” Martin’s grin was broader than ever.

“All right, I’m off it now,” I answered. “But I’ll say this — a society which believes that human life is restricted to the short span of man’s time on earth is going to be a jerry-building society, with low aims and ideals, a society whose members will occupy themselves with trivial momentary enjoyment, and shrink from serious thinking and serious sacrifice. They will prefer ‘social well-being’ in the form of goods and enjoyments, to freedom and personal dignity. The sharing out of goods will cause unending envy and hatred and quarrelling: the ears of the world’s fortunate will be more and more stopped to the crisis of its victims.”

THE FLAME OF HOPE.

“Well,” said Martin, “I think we’ve gone about as far as we can in this discussion for the present; and you’ve cleared up my mind a lot about how far natural reason and human speculation can carry us in the question of human immortality. It’s been a real comfort to me, John, in a pretty bad hour and at the end, if I haven’t quite your certainties, I find I’m at least full of hope that Gerald is safe in God’s hand and that he is not lost for ever to me. As you’re staying on, we may be able to go on further in another talk — and pass from ‘intimations of immortality’ to your Christian faith about the future life.”

“Out of shadows and images to the truth” I said: and as I filled my glass for a last drink, I murmured a prayer for the brave soul of Gerald Lowe “Eternal rest give to him, O Lord. . . .”
