

PRESENTIMENTS.

There is something strangely fascinating in the discussion of matters which admit of no explanation. Utilitarians would, perhaps, look on it as a waste of breath, or censure it even more as leading to rash conclusions. Many men, as we too often see, insist on making up their mind on everything, and will have a consistent theory for every subject under the sun. The result of this is that they waver backwards and forwards with every new fact that is produced on one side or the other. If they could be content to suspend their judgment till all the facts were known, to accept each new fact as having a certain relation to the whole aspect of the case, and not as settling the whole, they would have to forego the satisfaction of laying down the law, but when they established a law it would be more generally received. It cannot be pleasant to feel that you are always contradicting yourself, that your great energy of to-day whom you crush with such vehement sarcasm is yourself of yesterday. And though the confession of ignorance or indecision seems humiliating at first, it comes with peculiar grace from those who really endeavor to learn and to form their judgment. A Hellenic can say that he has not read some book, when other critics of not half his learning and not tenth of his ability would never dream of such an avowal. It is true that rash conclusions are more often formed in regard to subjects which lie partly out of the world, and which we can only know in part, than in regard to those which are decided. But is this any reason for not discussing them? Or is it a waste of breath to accumulate all we can know, in order to guess at or infer what lies out of the sphere of knowledge? I am afraid many other kinds of discussion are to be classed with it. Some slight link falls in many a chain of causes, and till we get this link our chain must needs be imperfect. But we make the rest of it. The link may be faulty when it comes, or it may support our reasoning. All we can do is to make the rest as strong as we can, and allow for the possibility of correction.

This, then, is one of the instances which we must exclude from our list. It is not the less curious, from the circumstance of the impression which seized on the negroes just at the time of their manumission. But there are plenty of other cases to which no such objection can be made; many of them are fully authenticated, and cannot be explained away. Mrs. Crow's "Night side of Nature," and a small book called "Communications with the Unseen World" (which I should judge, from internal evidence, to be written by the Rev. J. M. Neal), are a bazaar of such stories. It is true that all of them profess to take the words of the original narrator as they are, and that they depart a little from the inflexible exactness which should mark such statements. The writer in taking down the account may have imparted it some slight inaccuracies. And the only means of detecting these slips is cross-examination, which is, he one thing denied us. But allowing for all this, the stories are almost marvellous. If we grant that one of them is true, it is enough for our purpose. One is sufficient to show that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in material philosophy, and to make us think many times before we bound the world by the evidence of our senses.

It would be superfluous to quote any of the stories given by these two authors, except in rare cases where I have anything to allege against them. But it is unfortunate that the book of presentiments should be confined to books which profess to treat that class of subjects alone, and that general history should furnish so few corroborations. Poetry gives us more. Shakespeare's treatment of presentiments is a masterpiece of dramatic art, and the psychology of his plays. There is something in the subject in Schiller's "Wallenstein," and Wordsworth has devoted to it one of his minor poems. He talks of presentiments as heaven-born intimations, which stir the touch of vulgar sense.

"The star whose aureole I could not gaze, The deep sign that seemed to breathe in air." Some busy folk to good, they lurk near them, and tap the health which they infuse; but faith proceeds from them, and bodings un- sanctioned by the will, which teach us to beware. He talks of the bosom weight which no philosophy can lift, and says their instruments are— "A rainbow, a sunbeam A subtle smell that spens unbinds, Dimly about or midnight winds, An echo or a dream."

We know full well what are the busy folk to good. One of them is the love of torturing every feeling into a presentiment. Another is the quick who has his nostrum of spiritual manifestations always at hand, and who wavers between occult sciences and the kitchen. Another is the conviction that every one who has had a presentiment, and found it true, is a sort of seer or prophet for all time to come. The man easily persuades himself that he is waited on by presentiments, as the man who has once dreamed forces himself to go on dreaming. The scene in "Wallenstein" is in this respect peculiarly significant. "Wallenstein" is just as much oppressed by dreams or omens. He is a firm believer in the stars, and "Semi" came to warn him of immediate danger. He had taken a perilous step, had seen his best friends fall away from him, and feared nothing but the sword. He did not trust him fully. Yet when the "Countess," his sister-in-law, tells him of her dreams and forebodings, he tries to explain them away. He says that her mind was occupied with the subject, and therefore she dreamt about it; that the foreboding was not spontaneous, but produced by her own fears. She asks if he does not believe in such warning voices, and he replies, "Yes, there are such voices; there is no doubt of that. Yet I would hardly call those warning voices which are the voice of fate inevitable. As the appearance of the sun paints itself on the atmosphere before it rises, so the spirit of great events strikes on before them, and to-morrow walks to-day. I have always believed in this, and I have seen it made out of the death of the Fourth Henry. He felt the ghost of the dagger in his breast long before the murderer Ravallion aimed himself with it. Rested from him, the thought seized on him that he would die, and he was ordered to the coronation feast of his consort, sounded to him like a funeral; he heard with boding ear the footsteps that sought him through the streets of Paris. "Does the inner bidding voice say to you, 'You are to die?'" he asked. "No," she replies; "be calm." And then the "Countess" tells of another dream, in which she saw "Wallenstein" going before her through a long passage and never-ending halls, doors opening and closing, and a light which touched her, and on looking to see whose it was, she found that it was "Wallenstein's," while over them both a red carpet seemed to be laid. "That is the red carpet of my doom," says "Wallenstein," and he is hurried to his chamber, and the doors are burst open by the murderer, and "Wallenstein's" body is carried across the stage wrapped in a red carpet.

Here we have the true law about presentiments laid down by a firm believer in them. "Wallenstein" is not a firm believer, but his train could be impartial at such a moment. Anything of the nature of a warning may be suspected as springing from native apprehension. Though he himself was calm at the hour of his death, the imperial service, and joining the Swedes, his followers were full of the regrets and possibilities which a man who has resolved on a great step generally dismisses as idle, but which his friends feel strongly for him. But the true law is laid down by the "Countess," and the doors are burst open by the murderer, and "Wallenstein's" body is carried across the stage wrapped in a red carpet.

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His countenance was villanous, or at least highly unprepossessing, for he was "flow of stature, meagre, and his eyes were black as night." And moreover, within the last two years there had been five attempts to assassinate William of Orange. All these facts combined give us plenty of material for the presentiments which are the result of natural fear on the subject of the assassin. What we want to establish a presentiment is something preternatural, an involuntary and unaccountable feeling. A good instance of this was communicated to me by a near relation, a young lawyer, who had chambers in the Temple, and a nodding acquaintance with an old gentleman living on the same staircase. The old man was a wealthy old bachelor, and had a place in the country, to which he went for a week every year. His servants had charge of the place while he was away—an old married couple who had lived with him for twenty-seven years, and were typical of the fine old English domestic. One Easter Tuesday the old gentleman had been in the country, and had returned to his Temple staircase, and made some remark about it. The old man asked him into his room, and said he had received a fearful shock. He had gone down as usual to breakfast, and had found his dinner cooked to perfection, and everything as it had been from the beginning. When the cloth was removed his faithful butler put his bottle of port on the table, and made the customary inquiries about his health, and then he turned to the subject of the journey, had enjoyed his cutlet, and so on. The old gentleman was left alone, his hand was on the neck of the bottle of port, and he was thinking of the country, and the old man's remark about it. "Here I am, a lonely old man, no one cares for me; there is no one near to help me if anything should happen to me. What if my old servant and his wife have been cheating me all this time? What if they have been waiting to get rid of me, and have poisoned the bottle of wine?" The idea took hold of him so strongly that he could not touch his port. When the man came in again he said he did not feel well, and he had a glass of wine, but he would not have a glass of wine, and no one answered. He got up, found his way downstairs, the house was empty, his two faithful old servants in the kitchen. When he came to look for his cutlet, which he had ordered to be further he found that his cutlet, which ought to have contained two or three thousand pounds' worth of wine, was empty, and the bottle they had brought him last night was poisoned. He had told the story at length, because it has not appeared in print before, and because it seems to answer all our requirements. It is the only place in which you can find a whole is one which, after all, does not affect the whole. It is this—Did the butler, in putting the wine on the table, betray the signals of treachery? If he did, there might be good cause to be suspicious of master being aroused. But if master suspected a servant of twenty-seven years' standing, is it not likely that he would have remarked it in time before, and by some trepidation or uneasiness, would have detected such a train of reflections. There is also a remarkable accuracy about the train of reflections which leads one to a preternatural cause. Granting that suspicion was aroused, the solution arrived at is neither the easiest nor the most likely. The singular thing here is that the master should have yielded so readily to the impression, and that if should afterwards have proved accurate in the most minute details. Another point in the story is remarkable. It so seldom happens that presentiments of any kind are acted upon, that Wallenstein may well deny them the name of warnings. Yet when, as in this case, they have been acted upon, it is that they do so spontaneously, but produced by her own fears. The singular thing here is that the master should have yielded so readily to the impression, and that if should afterwards have proved accurate in the most minute details.

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