

MR PAYN ON THE 'BACKWATER OF LIFE.'

WE have not the pleasure of personal acquaintance with Mr James Payn, but his closest friends could scarcely be more touched than we have been with his short description, in the 'Cornhill,' of the mental attitude to which he has been reduced by a severe illness. It is a piece of the finest literary art, revealing as much of its author as is revealed in all his novels, though in them much of the charm they have, which is a real charm, though not of the highest kind, is due to the glimpses they afford of their author's personality. No one not possessed of breezy good humour, high spirits, and a habit of regarding life with humorous yet not satirical eyes, could have written those numerous stories, and to reveal in the compass of five pages the same man, with all those qualities subdued and allowed by an exquisite and incurable sadness, is a feat of literary power such as we hitherto have not had the insight or the justice to expect from Mr Payn. We should, in truth, have expected it as little as we should have expected from him those which when read aloud has in it melody and a ring of high poetic feeling. Take this paragraph, for example—

"To 'kindly Nature,' as she is called by those who have experienced only her good offices, we have, to tell the honest truth, but little to be thankful for; it is to men and women that our feebly beating hearts go forth in unspeakable gratitude. There is one—consolation in our miserable lot, that it has brought us face to face with the immeasurable goodness of Humanity. Let the divines say what they will of those who have been made after the image of their Creator; let them heap upon them all the faults of their fallen nature; let the cynics aver that what seems good in them is only another form of selfishness; we on the Backwater have good cause to know that these traducers lie. Oh, Love that cherishes its object when all that makes it lovely has departed, that prefers to possess it useless as a broken toy rather than to lose it, that slaves for it and sacrifices its all to give it daily comfort, that holds all menial offices as gracious opportunities, for mitigation of discomfort and pain; we know you now as we have never known you before. Oh, Friendship, whose smile has been always dear to us, but of the greatness of whose fond and faithful heart we have never guessed, forgive us for our former ignorance. If even there be no heaven hereafter, there are angels here. Alas! though our gratitude can be told, it can never be shown. There are two words that ring in our ears far more sorrowfully than the warning of the weir: 'Too late! Too late!' We are as dead men, though (thanks to these angelic visitors) not 'out of mind.' We think, if a miracle were worked and we could 'get about again,' that we should spend the remainder of our lives in striving to repay them, in doing the like kind offices we have received from them to others in the same sad case as ourselves. There is no harm in having such thoughts, and, alas! no good."

We feel the impression of those touching words the more strongly, perhaps—though they will appeal to thousands of readers—because we cannot believe that the effects of grave illness are for the majority those which Mr Payn depicts. He finds himself driven by such illness—in his case, we fear, a touch of paralysis, which is not, however, so incurable an infirmity as he evidently thinks—into what he calls a 'Backwater of Life,' a place on the shallower water which is separated from the ocean or the great stream by a dyke, which intercepts the waves, but not the sight of them. There sitting, he looks through the osiers on the passenger vessels and the pleasure boats, and without grudge or envy, but with exquisite pain meditates on his own separation from the fullness of the stream, from love and laughter and bustle, all the business of the world, and laments, without anaesthetising, the hardship of nature:—

'There has been a deal of nonsense written, chiefly by doctors who have their reasons for being upon good terms with her, about "kindly Nature." Nature, like many other folk, can, when in good humour, be kind enough; but she is also capable of great cruelties, which she inflicts with no enjoyment to herself indeed, but with the most absolute indifference to the sufferings of humanity. Her character, for all her smiles and superficial attraction, is that of the genial tavern brawler who, after grievously ill-using his boon companion, takes him home and tends him, whereat all the neighbours exclaim: "How tender are his ministrations!" but they forget that it was he who caused the patient to be in want of healing. She does but pick you up—and not always that—after she has knocked you down. To speak of her in this fashion will doubtless appear shocking to most people, but on the Backwater we speak as we find. It is one of the peculiarities—I do not say the advantages—of our position that things seem as they are, and not as they look to be, and very, very far, alas! from what we wish them to be. That Nature should be "so careful of the Type" is no doubt a reflection consolatory to the philosophic mind, but we cannot all be philosophers, and it must be owned she is strangely reckless of the Composer. If one has owed her something in the past, we of the Backwater are by this time quits with her.'

The pun is curiously characteristic of Mr Payn. It is a blot alike on the humour and the pathos of his description, but the opportunity to make it was there, and was to the inveterate punster irresistible. Friends visit Mr Payn and console him, and reveal to him in unexpected extent the goodness of humanity, but in their kindness is pain, for 'they are unaware—as, indeed, how could it be otherwise?—that their lightest remarks sometimes distress us. They forget when they praise the weather that we shall never more feel the sunshine, nor breathe the fresh air, nor put foot to the ground again. Again, in their wish to cheer us, they profess to see some improvement in our condition, which, in fact, never takes place. The best that happens is that the change for the worse, which is continuous, is imperceptible. Ordinary invalids have their "good days." With us

on the Backwater it is not so; there are only days that are less bad than the others. What is worse than all, some good folks think to raise our spirits by the reflection that we may live for months, and even years, longer. Because they are in love with life themselves, they think that, though in some less degree perhaps, it is dear to us also; they cannot conceive a state of existence in which one's chief hope and constant prayer are to get it ended. Others, from equally kind motives, find another ground of congratulation in the fact that, though the nearness of the Weir is evident, we are not moved by it. They do not understand that one of the saddest conditions to which the human mind can be reduced—not from faith, but from pain and weariness—is no longer to fear the Shadow feared of man.' That this is an accurate description of the condition of many who, declining in years, are also invalidated, we do not doubt, for how else could it touch us so deeply? but that it is as general as Mr Payn imagines we are compelled to disbelieve. It is the description only of a class, and there are many classes, the description in fact being true only of those to whom the bustle of active life, its 'frictions which are not intimacies,' its ceaseless changes of mental scenery, are part of the very constituents of happiness. There are men of other tempers than that, to whom, for example, the loss of the great Fear is a source, not of sadness, but of calm, who, so long as direct pain is absent—Heine, remember, was always in pain—and in distance from the great stream, in the absence of the bustle of life, in the sense that they are only onlookers, and therefore detached, compensation for most, or even all, of the sadness which those who are in the Backwater must necessarily endure. There is pleasure, even keen pleasure, in watching Life without sharing it; in looking on, as at a stage, and feeling that we can judge better than the actors; in sympathizing without being carried away by sympathy; in enjoying with smiles and not laughter; and in lamenting tearlessly. The entrancingness of life, of which Mr Payn is so vividly conscious, that even on a sick bed it is his strongest perception, is unfelt by many, perhaps by a majority; and to them to be aware that life can entrance them no more, that their fears and hopes and immergements are all changed, as mercury is changed when it is frozen yet remains the same, is the source, if not of pleasure, at least of a quiet calm in which there is no pain, of the tranquillity which men spend their lives in seeking, yet till they reach the Backwater so seldom find. If it were not so, the lot of the aged would be wretched indeed, for they remain longest on the Backwater, and are most conscious, far more conscious than invalids, that for them there is no return to the broad stream. Yet they are often happy, and lie in their motionless boats 'looking through the osiers' on the brilliant panorama as it passes, not only without envy, but with something of an intellectual delight, which, if they could themselves use the oars, would be wholly wanting. Exertion is happiness only at one period of life; and the old in their quiet and their reflectiveness are not without their pleasures, one of them, at least, being the sympathy with each other which pages like Mr Payn's are so calculated to provoke. Invalidism, even of the most serious physical kind, when we can hear, so to speak, the sound of the Falls which must one day suck us down, is, if only direct pain is absent, very like old age, except perhaps in this, that probably no invalid in the world was ever quite sure that his *malaise* would not pass away. There is the same sense of detachment, the same longing for peace, the same intense consciousness of the lovingness, when there is love, of those around. We Europeans all exaggerate, as it is well we should exaggerate, the pleasure-giving qualities of health, and forget that with full health tranquillity is not, and that tranquillity is at least one of the ideals. We have seen among the sick those who never were happier in their lives.—Spectator.

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