

The Story of Lazarus.

AS TOLD BY ROBERT BROWNING, POET.

THE hereafter of the Spirit, which animates and sustains man, was a source of frequent discussion between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The latter clung to the ancient faith of their fathers—that in death there is no knowledge, or wisdom, or service; or in the grave any praise or any thought—impressed upon the nation alike by psalmist, preacher, and inspired prophet. But the Pharisees, being of the priesthood, or expounders of the law, believed, or professed to believe, that man's spirit continued to exist after death and the decay of the body. Since apostolic times there has been endless controversy for and against this doctrine or belief; men still differ, and, apart from revealed religion, remain as uncertain on the subject of their speculations as ever. The resurrection of Lazarus is a fruitful source of debate, and affords grounds for both parties to advance their opinions and confirm their convictions.

The silence of Lazarus on all that befel him after death is most remarkable. It strongly confirms the views of one class—that consciousness perishes with the brain, the organ of mind—and gives an assurance to others that he was preternaturally restrained from revealing the secrets of the spirit world. With Tennyson they say:

Behold a man raised up by Christ!
The rest remaineth unreveal'd;
He told it not; for something seal'd
The lips of that Evangelist.

And if this applies to Lazarus, it would apply with equal force to the saints who came out of their graves after the Resurrection, and appeared to many; as well

as to those others cases of the dead being restored to life, recorded in the Scriptures. This must be so, or the intense craving of humanity to learn something of what lies beyond the portals of death would have in some measure been satisfied.

Nothing is known of the life history of Lazarus before the event, beyond that he was a brother of Mary and her sister Martha; nor after the event, except that he was a guest at a feast, at which Jesus also sat; and that afterwards the Jews wanted to kill him—a strange proceeding on the part of men who had so lately seen him raised from the dead and brought to life again.

Browning was moved by none of these considerations, or the mystery surrounding the event. He assumed that the account, as recorded with such circumstantiality and dramatic effect by the writer of the Fourth Gospel, was substantially correct; and he asked himself the question—What effect would the experience of a life beyond the grave have upon the life or actions of a man doomed to re-visit and live again in the world? That was the problem he set himself to consider. A man dead, lying in the grave for four days, his spirit far away in the abodes of the Spirit World, leaving the body to its natural decay; that spirit called back to re-enter the mouldering frame of flesh and blood, with the glow and glory of a heavenly habitation stamped upon it; that spirit bid to re-enter the body, to arise from the grave, and to act again his part upon earth. Truly a stupendous problem! The longer we allow our thoughts to dwell upon it, the more