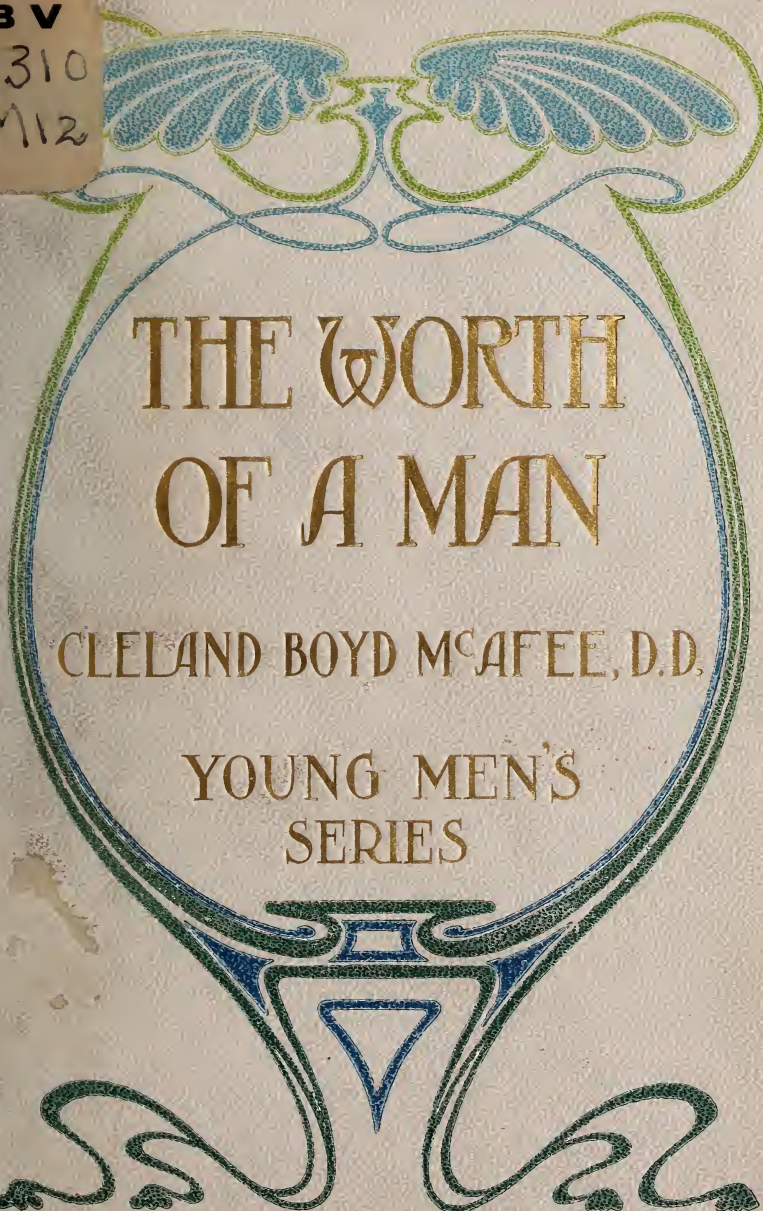


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THE WORTH
OF A MAN

CLELAND BOYD M'AFEE, D.D.

YOUNG MEN'S
SERIES



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The Worth of a Man

Y O U N G M E N ' S S E R I E S

The
Worth of a Man

BY

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"THE TENTH COMMANDMENT A PRESENT LAW,"
"WHERE HE IS," "WHEREFORE DIDST THOU
DOUBT?" "FAITH, FELLOWSHIP AND
FEALTY."

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THE YOUNG MEN'S PRESBYTERIAN UNION
OF CHICAGO

Recd. Sunday 12 April 85

*To the young men of The Forty-first
Street Presbyterian Church of Chicago,
who were much in mind when this sermon
was preached, and at whose request it is
published.*

The Worth of a Man

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“What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?”
Psalm 8:4.

The question never meant more than now. It came to David in his thinking of the heavens, of which he knew much less than we know, getting his mind charged with thought of their greatness and order and beauty; letting his thought run on to God as the Maker and Ruler of all that, and then coming to man, of whom God seems to think, and for whom He seems to plan. Think first of God, then think of the heavens, the universe, then think of man, and all personal prejudice aside, prejudice by which we magnify our own importance, answer what there is about man that makes God mindful of him.

It is not so much a query about what

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he is in himself. It is a query about him in his relations. When the heavens are considered, what is man? When God is thought of, what is man? We build our towers of three hundred feet and call them great, but what are they when we consider the distance of the sun from us? A spider's web is delicate and graceful, but when we consider the heavy cables on which the great bridges swing and do not sway—what is it? Man is great? Yes, until you think of the heavens. Man is mighty? Yes, until you consider the omnipotent God who made and controls the myriad hosts of heaven.

With one meaning and another, the question has not ceased to be asked. Not only have the schools been answering it by their study of individual man in psychology and ethics and physiology, and by their study of corporate man in sociology and political economy, but the development of science has

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forced the question as never before—what is man, and what is his place in the universe?

At least two important answers beside the answer of the Word of God have been made, and are worth your considering.

1. There are many who say that man is only a part of a general plan, part and parcel of what is all about him. Poets tell him he is “brother to the stone he kicks with shodden feet.” Some physiologists trace the close likeness between his own bones and the skeleton of the dog and the horse and the cow and tell him he is a quadruped who walks upright—that and nothing more. Some psychologists trace all his knowledge to sensations, teach him to believe that he has no soul apart from that bundle of experiences which at any moment he realizes—tell him he is a sensitive clod—that and nothing more.

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And the alleged facts are real facts. The skeleton of a man is singularly like that of other quadrupeds. No doubt he is a quadruped walking upright. But some say he is nothing more. He does receive much of his knowledge through his senses exactly as his dog receives his. But some say he has no other knowledge.

We are told that Copernicus dragged man down from his self-appointed throne. He thought he was unique in the universe, that the sun and all the system revolved around the earth. He was most important on the earth, so he became the center of the universe. All existed for him; he became the cap-sheaf; he became the climax of all existence. Then Copernicus discovered that the earth is itself revolving about the sun; others have added that the earth is a very small speck in even our own system and that our whole solar system is a mere dot in the heavens

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compared with others. We have learned that if our earth and the sun were put an inch apart, we should need to put our mark to indicate the nearest fixed star three miles away. If we seek proportions, our sun might have a globe two feet in diameter for its symbol, then being smaller than many a star that twinkles across the space to us, but even so, our earth should have but a dried pea from the garden for its symbol. As you go home this night from the house of God, the light of the Pole Star will come to you, but you are seeing light fifty years old, so far away is it, yet our sun's light comes to us in eight minutes. There are stars whose light left them when Abraham was not yet born and has not reached us. So much does our little dried pea of an earth amount to! And man on the earth—what does he amount to? Well, if he and all his race were wiped off the

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earth, there are no scales fine enough to note the difference in its weight. He is a late comer upon the globe, however long he has been here, and if the six thousand years of common belief were multiplied by ten, he is still a creature of yesterday. When he dies—what? When a tree dies—what? When a mole that burrows in the dirt dies—what? You answer all when you answer one.

I beg you to believe me, brethren, this is a most serious view that some are trying to take of man's place in the universe. He is part and parcel of all that is around him. These men die with little expectation of anything beyond. One of them wrote to the author of a book on the immortality of the soul, that he supposed he had made out his case, but why in heaven's name had he cared to do it?—that he knew no good to come from another life and hoped this life were all.

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Another has expressed his humiliation in thinking of men who must needs desire another life to reward them for what they have done in this. Another had nothing to say but that it seemed a sad waste that so much of love and thought and volition should vanish in the drawing of a breath. It is not a careless view merely, though it is often that. It is partly a sober, sad view of men who are overwhelmed by the large facts of the universe.

2. Others count man the flower of history, small, in some senses important, but no more than a part or an element in the progress of things. Here his feebleness, rather than the greatness of the facts about, is in view. Pascal's term, meant otherwise, expresses it: "Man is a mere thinking reed." Indeed, what a narrow margin man has on the earth! His animal life has narrow limits and these men count it the only life. Six miles off the

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earth even at the equator, the cold would destroy it; six miles within the earth, the heat would destroy it. Possibly he might live on one other planet in our system; he could live in his present form on no other. He is a mere dependent creature. He could neither eat nor drink but for the sun. Yet the sun's blessing must come to him tempered by the atmosphere. Let him boast of his strength and a clot forms on the brain from very pulsing of proud blood, and he becomes a pitiable imbecile or wildly insane. He is held in bondage to the conditions that brought him forth, and to the demands made on him by his own needs. He is part of a machine. He thinks he is free. He talks about how he chooses to do this or that, talks about his will and his decisions; but he is deluded. If he means that he ever breaks that chain of causation that governs his acts, he talks not truth nor falsehood,

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but simple nonsense. No man's will affects the world about him, nor is there what common men call will at all. Nature has resulted in man—that says it all.

My brethren, I have stated these two views with unwonted fullness. I do not in the slightest degree caricature them. Men in scholarly and in common life say and feel all those things. Quotations are buried in much that has been said, and I have omitted names only lest we might be diverted from the main thought. I would not have you suppose that all men who know and hold the same facts reach the same conclusions. All that about our littleness in the universe is true, whatever inferences we reach. All that about the precariousness of our lives is true, wherever it lands us. And men have reached those saddening conclusions by losing sight of other facts just as real and just as forcible.

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Of course what I care for now is the effect they have on men who hold them. They sheer man of his dignity in the effort to make him fit in humbly into physical nature. They make the most important facts of a man's being sink out of sight. And they affect the very springs of human life. Much of a man's conduct is determined by the view he takes of himself. You have seen the extreme of egotism wherein a man lives a pompous self-satisfied life. You have seen men so self-abased that they could not render the world their proper service. And thus you have seen how necessary it is for every man to estimate himself fairly. There sat in my study a little while ago a man whom I have heard mentioned as the keenest observer of conditions in lower New York. In a conversation so frank as to forbid full quotation, he told me that after the wholesale fact of sin, no obstacle so hinders the elevation of

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men and women who are deprived in that great city as the utter failure to realize the worth of a man, the dignity of a woman. The very self-satisfaction which marks them arises out of their blindness to the terrible distance between what they ought to be and what they are. And every day of their sordid lives dims their vision of God's ideal of man. The difficulty of the appeal to the upper part of town in behalf of the lower part is doubled by the query in the minds of men who are well-conditioned whether the ill-favored man will repay the labor. Are the slums after all worth the saving?—this has been the unspoken question. We have failed to realize the dignity of the man for whom we are laboring. We have failed to see that saving him saves something priceless.

The trend of much popular literature and of much scholarly study of the present day is against any worthy

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estimate of man. Some overrate him and make him a demi-god; some underrate him and make him only an animal, with no independent will, who can no more act differently from the way he does act than a lily could bear rosebuds. One of the leading English orators shocked an audience a few years ago by declaring that the robber, the ravisher and the murderer offend because they cannot help offending. It is, no doubt, a comfortable doctrine, if a man wants to be a beast. But some who hold it do not want to be beasts and they themselves call it a saddening doctrine. One man asks us to take his word with more confidence because it is a word of sheer pain. He does not enjoy his belief. None but a brutish man could enjoy it. If a man wants to feel that he may wander about the world, doing whatever he inclines to do, and that he is so much a creature of fate that he

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cannot do otherwise, that he can no more keep from sinning than a stone can keep from falling when you cast it out of your hands, if he wants to believe that it makes no difference now or hereafter what gracious impulses he restrains and what bestial ones he lets loose—why then he may find this belief which makes man merely a part of nature, a most delightful one. He may believe it and have no such wishes, but he cannot believe it gladly. There are certain facts which are always left out of the account or explained away when a man believes such doctrines at any rate. We will think of some of these.

What, now, is the place which the Word of God and the Gospel of Christ gives man in the universe? Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; Thou crownest him with glory and honor. In the image of God made He man. What man? Why, every

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man. The man who stands in presence of his fellows as an unmarred image of God and the man who is so battered and bruised that the image is almost lost. Every man is made in the image of God and because he is, God holds every man dear.

He made one man His Friend and left it for an honor that men can become Friends of God. From time to time, God has made known His will to man; He has sent him messages; He has heard his cries and answered his prayers. What place God gives man appears in the whole story of Christ. The sin of this petty creature is so painful to God, and the infinite heart yearns so for him that God will suffer and pass through death for him to make it possible to have him with Him throughout eternity. He has done it for no other part of His earthly creation. And He has by that very act set man on a throne from which no

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Copernicus can ever drag him down. You need to think that out. Almighty God, controlling the unmeasured heavens and the measureless movement of the stars, has cared for the sin of this little quadruped walking upright on his dried pea of an earth! We do not make fair estimate of man's place in God's thought until we reckon in the incarnation and its meaning. No man estimates his own life accurately until he reckons in his own relation to the fact that God cares enough about him to die for him. Of course I know that some scout at the very idea of incarnation or modify the meaning out of it. But I know also that they who do so leave out or explain away the greatest facts in the human nature and life. I asked a friend once what he thought man's chief dignity. He replied, "That he can sin." I add to that: "And that God cares enough about him to save him." No man who

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believes in the incarnation can ever consciously place a low estimate on himself and mistake his place in the universe. In physical nature he may be least and, as Scripture says, like the grass of the field, but he has that in him which lifts him so unmeasurably above nature that he cannot be ranked with it. He walks about in nature as God's deputy, lord in it, subject only to laws of God which he may apply and adjust in almost sovereign ways.

There are four facts about man which set him in this peculiar relation to God and to the rest of the world. They are not facts of his own making nor of his own controlling. They are in his nature because he was made by God in the image of God. These four facts ally him to God, and raise him above all other creatures of the world. I say four. You will miss mention of Reason, a fifth, which could be pressed but may now be omitted.

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The first fact which isolates man from the world and makes him like God, is that he has a conscience. So mighty is it that one of the wise men declares it is only fair to say that conscience has the man rather than man the conscience. He knows how to say, I ought, against any inclination or wish. He knows how to approve and condemn himself. He has the wonderful power to apprehend the law of God and to make it a motive in his life. He has an ear to hear God say: This is duty. As some one puts it: "He can taste the moral flavor of deeds." The ancients called conscience the voice of God in the soul. It is that in some true sense. It is the human recognition of divine command, and it speaks in every human soul. A school superintendent in one of our large cities remarked recently that there were probably 100,000 children in his city of school

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age who had never heard of such a book as the Bible. Let that be true, yet among these is not one who does not know that he ought *not* to do some things and that he *ought* to do some things. Conscience lifts a man above all questions of policy; it makes him see that there is law governing him. So powerful is it that men who are afraid of nothing else are afraid to do wrong—not afraid of suffering and of punishment, but afraid of that voice that will say: “You are wrong, you are wrong.” Man’s conscience lets him hear God so clearly that he cannot even ask why, when the voice says, “You ought.”

And in this man is unique. Here is a power that waits upon no public opinion or esteem. Man is the only creature who in the midst of the most desolated of earth’s desert islands may be stricken with a heartbreaking remorse. Your dog dreads the punishment you may give him. Man feels

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his sin worst when no eye sees him and he is alone with the wrong he has done. Some of you have stood by Lake Lucerne and looked up on Mount Pilatus. You may know the tradition of its name, how Pilate after he had condemned the innocent Christ, could never wash the stain from his hands though he dipped them in the water of all seas. When there came across the mountains the story of the lake on the summit of this peak, whose waters were fresh from the heavens, unsullied by the filth of earth, he climbed by painful stages to its brink and sought to wash the stain away, but when he looked, his hands yet bore the mark of the sin he had wrought and in despair he plunged into the lake to his death. From this, the Swiss say, came the mountain's name. It is a tragedy of conscience. Here is a power which could make the Lady Macbeth bemoan a stain on her little hand which no

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other eye than hers could see. No water could wash out the stain. Here verily is a marvelous power. It drives us to great deeds and shames us for mean ones. It condemns us unsparingly. It never flatters us. It throbs away in a man's life like one of God's great bells, ringing, "You ought, You ought," and it never misses a stroke.

The second fact in man's supremacy is, that he has a will. Some say that he *is* a will. He is self-governing—within bounds, yes, not an anarchist, but able to hear that bell tolling, "You ought," and to declare, "I will not," or to declare, "I will." He is the only creature of God's earth who ever rebels against God, and so he is the only creature whose obedience to God is voluntary. He cannot be *made* to submit. He can rebel through all eternity. John speaks of an eternal sin; it is possible to commit it. He can be made to yield feigned obedi-

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ence, but no power can storm the inner citadel of his will. A friend at my table spoke of a heap of ruins in an Arizona valley as the greatest of our national ruins. In God's world, man is His greatest ruin, a ruin, but a great ruin—not worth saving as a ruin, but worth using to make something other than a ruin out of him. Nor does any man lose his power of choice while here before God. Let no man judge his brother and let not us, who are here, sit in condemnation of men weaker than ourselves. But for ourselves let us blink no fact of the moral life. Whatever may be true of others, we at least have not lost our power of choice. We are driven by no merciless force into any slightest or greatest wrong which we commit. Always we are bad because we choose to be bad. Always the word is true that tells how God begins to help men by renewing their wills. Responsibility is the great,

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pressing fact which no bad man can escape. And God, by renewing his will, can make any man able to meet his responsibility without flinching.

The third fact which makes man God's chief creation, is that he is conscious of immortality. We need not quibble about the proof of that. Whoever denies it would have the human consciousness to deal with. John Fiske is right, and you know he is right, when he calls an undying human soul a postulate of all religion, and because religion postulates that true thing, it is an everlasting reality. Science does not pretend to prove the immortality of the human soul; it proves that nothing forbids it. Even religion does not pretend to prove it. It is one of the facts which underlies all religion, and which no religion has ever denied. There is no better proof of it than the conviction of every

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man's consciousness. You remember how finely Tennyson says it:

Thou wilt not leave us in the dust:
Thou madest man, he knows not why;
He thinks he was not made to die;
And Thou hast made him: Thou art just.

We often go to the mountains for our illustrations; let us seek another there. A tiny child is playing at a mountain's base, a tiny fragile being who picks up pebbles as burdens and does not reach the stature of the shrubs among which he plays. Suddenly down the slope there comes, crashing and leaping and plunging, a great boulder. The child sees and lifts tiny hands to protect himself, but in one of its final leaps the stone strikes him and leaves a mere mangled heap. Itself settles near by, unhurt. In the conflict the child went down, the stone conquered. But did it? The wise men say that after ages of years the earth and all it contains will

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be reduced to other forms and destroyed. No matter how far away that may be, when that stone has disintegrated, and the precipices over which it leaped are worn to the level and the mountain has become a rubbish heap of a ruined world, that soul, dashed out of the body on the summer day, will be still in its full vigor of life, triumphant over death, swinging on its journey in an endless life. In the conflict the stone went down, the child conquered. It passes thought, as immortality passes mortality, but be sure that the consciousness of man's heart tells him no lie, and leads him on no fruitless quest. After all the ages of the earth have gone, after all the forms to which he has been allied have ceased to be, that which was most truly himself, shall yet *be*, shall yet *live*. Such a fact, so marvelous and momentous, sets this creature of God on high. If he is brought to submission, it is for

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eternity. If he is left to rebellion, it is for equal eternity.

The fourth fact which makes man chief among God's creatures is that he has a yearning after God. He has such an intellect that he can know God. Into his finiteness can come knowledge of infinity. Into his impotence can come knowledge of omnipotence. He can look into the depths of his own nature and find there in the moral law proofs of the character of God. He can look at nature about him and think back of it to God; and as his knowledge of nature increases, his wonder and adoration can increase. There is more in man than intellect—there is heart, affection, love. And it is with this side of his nature that he reaches out most eagerly for God. But even if he should not yearn after God, God knows he *can* do so, and desires his love. That yearning of God for human love and trust came to pathetic voice

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when the God-man stood on Olivet looking across upon the holy city. I have never heard the cry He then gave quoted, without feeling that its deepest meaning cannot be put into human voice. Standing there, with consciousness of divinity, He cried: "How often would *I* have gathered thy children together—but ye would not!" No man could say that, however great he might be; but a God-man could say it and only God could feel it. Here we reach the very apex of the human character—its possibility of fellowship with God. No other earthly creature shows any such power. This one is so constituted that he can enter into such communion with God as will bring him into renewed divine likeness, and make him able to abide in God's eternal home forever. Over that new Jerusalem God's heart will never ache, and there will be no cry of: "Ye would

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not," for within shall be all those but only those who are willing that God's will shall be done in them and by them.

These are the four traits in man's nature that answer the question of God's care for him: his conscience, whereby he becomes able to know God's moral law; his will, whereby he becomes a responsible, voluntary agent under that law; his consciousness of immortality, whereby he ceases to be the creature of a day and becomes a partaker of God's own unending life; his yearning after God, whereby, through divine response, he comes into fellowship with God through all eternity.

In view of all that, true for you and for all of us, how are you, my brother, taking life? How did you live your yesterday? Did you go on the errands of your business or your profession, walking God's earth as chief in it?

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Did you live in sight of the law of God? Did you live as one whose will might hold him to the right or wreck him in the wrong? Did you live as though the day were but a part of the endless life, its deeds fitting into the plans of the eternal purpose? Did you live as one with right to look up into the face of God and see Him there your Father and your Friend? And how did you estimate the man whose life you touched on yesterday? Did he seem to you a being whose fellowship might mean great things to God? Did you touch him for eternity? Or did he pass on from your life unhelped, his soul unnoticed, his life left the petty thing of this day?

For we are great in God's world. We are set on high. Shall we then go our way proud and self-satisfied, ready to patronize God and underestimate the marvelous grace that makes us meet for such fellowship? A few weeks ago

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I received a catalogue of the output of a fine pottery-works. As I looked at the illustrations of fine vases and ewers and cups, it was difficult to remember that they were of themselves but clay, ready to thicken and clot at every rain-fall, only waste and wreck, until skilled hands laid hold upon it and worked it over and moulded it and decorated it and burned it. Then the potter might take the clay and count it joy to have it in his home, might tell his friends of its beauty and grace. But shall the clay which owes all it is to the Potter lift up proud voice against Him and claim honor for itself? Or shall it say as did the great Apostle to us Gentiles: "By His grace I am what I am!" Surely, this befits our manhood—that we should find our greatness completed by His grace who has made us all we are.

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