

The Sceptic

By

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With Critical Annotations

THE SCEPTIC.

“ Leur raison, qu'ils prennent pour guide, ne présente à leur esprit que des conjectures et des embarras ; les absurdités où ils tombent en niant la Religion deviennent plus insoutenables que les vérités dont la hauteur les étonne ; et pour ne vouloir pas croire des mystères incompréhensibles, ils suivent l'une après l'autre d'incompréhensibles erreurs.”

BOSSUET, *Oraisons Funébres.*

WHEN the young Eagle, with exulting eye,
Has learn'd to dare the splendour of the sky,
And leave the Alps beneath him in his course,
To bathe his crest in morn's empyreal source ;
Will his free wing, from that majestic height,
Descend to follow some wild meteor's light,
Which, far below, with evanescent fire,
Shines to delude, and dazzles to expire ?

No ! still through clouds he wins his upward way,
And proudly claims his heritage of day !
—And shall the spirit, on whose ardent gaze
The dayspring from on high hath pour'd its blaze,
Turn from that pure effulgence, to the beam
Of earth-born light, that sheds a treacherous gleam,

Luring the wanderer, from the star of faith,
 To the deep valley of the shades of death?
 What bright exchange, what treasure shall be given,
 For the high birthright of its hope in Heaven?
 If lost the gem which empires could not buy,
 What yet remains?—a dark eternity!

Is earth still Eden?—might a Seraph guest,
 Still 'midst its chosen bowers delighted rest?
 Is all so cloudless and so calm below,
 We seek no fairer scenes than *life* can show?
 That the cold Sceptic, in his pride elate,
 Rejects the promise of a brighter state,
 And leaves the rock, no tempest shall displace,
 To rear his dwelling on the quicksand's base?

Votary of doubt! then join the festal throng,
 Bask in the sunbeam, listen to the song,
 Spread the rich board, and fill the wine-cup high,
 And bind the wreath ere yet the roses die!
 'Tis well, thine eye is yet undimm'd by time,
 And thy heart bounds, exulting in its prime;
 Smile then unmoved at Wisdom's warning voice,
 And, in the glory of thy strength, rejoice!

But life hath sterner tasks; e'en youth's brief
 hours
 Survive the beauty of their loveliest flowers;
 The founts of joy, where pilgrims rest from toil,
 Are few and distant on the desert soil;
 The soul's pure flame the breath of storms must fan,
 And pain and sorrow claim their nursling—Man!

Earth's noblest sons the bitter cup have shared—
Proud child of reason! how art *thou* prepared?
When years, with silent might, thy frame have
 bow'd,
And o'er thy spirit cast their wintry cloud,
Will Memory soothe thee on thy bed of pain
With the bright images of pleasure's train?

Yes! as the sight of some far-distant shore,
Whose well-known scenes his foot shall tread no
 more,
Would cheer the seaman, by the eddying wave
Drawn, vainly struggling, to th' unfathom'd grave!
Shall Hope, the faithful cherub, hear thy call,
She who, like heaven's own sunbeam, smiles for all?
Will *she* speak comfort?—Thou hast shorn her
 plume,
That might have raised thee far above the tomb,
And hush'd the only voice whose angel tone
Soothes when all melodies of joy are flown!

For she was born beyond the stars to soar,
And kindling at the source of life, adore;
Thou could'st not, mortal! rivet to the earth
Her eye, whose beam is of celestial birth;
She dwells with those who leave her pinion free,
And sheds the dews of heaven on all but thee.

Yet few there are so lonely, so bereft,
But some true heart, that beats to theirs, is left,
And, haply, one whose strong affection's power
Unchanged may triumph through misfortune's hour,

Still with fond care supports thy languid head,
And keeps unwearied vigils by thy bed.

But thou whose thoughts have no blest home
above !

Captive of earth ! and canst thou dare to *love* ?
To nurse such feelings as delight to rest,
Within that hallow'd shrine—a parent's breast,
To fix each hope, concentrate every tie,
On one frail idol—destined but to die ;
Yet mock the faith that points to worlds of light,
Where sever'd souls, made perfect, re-unite ?
Then tremble ! cling to every passing joy,
Twined with the life a moment may destroy !
If there be sorrow in a parting tear,
Still let "*for ever*" vibrate on thine ear !
If some bright hour on rapture's wing hath flown,
Find more than anguish in the thought—'tis gone !

Go ! to a voice such magic influence give,
Thou canst not lose its melody, and live ;
And make an eye the lode-star of thy soul,
And let a glance the springs of thought control ;
Gaze on a mortal form with fond delight,
Till the fair vision mingles with thy sight ;
There seek thy blessings, there repose thy trust,
Lean on the willow, idolize the dust !
Then, when thy treasure best repays thy care,
Think on that dread "*for ever*"—and despair !

And oh ! no strange, unwonted storm there needs,
To wreck at once thy fragile ark of reeds.

Watch well its course—explore with anxious eye
Each little cloud that floats along the sky—
Is the blue canopy serenely fair?
Yet may the thunderbolt unseen be there,
And the bark sink, when peace and sunshine sleep
On the smooth bosom of the waveless deep!
Yes! ere a sound, a sign, announce thy fate,
May the blow fall which makes thee desolate!
Not always Heaven's destroying angel shrouds
His awful form in tempests and in clouds;
He fills the summer air with latent power,
He hides his venom in the scented flower,
He steals upon thee in the Zephyr's breath,
And festal garlands veil the shafts of death!

Where art thou *then*, who thus didst rashly cast
Thine all upon the mercy of the blast,
And vainly hope the tree of life to find
Rooted in sands that flit before the wind?
Is not that earth thy spirit loved so well
It wish'd not in a brighter sphere to dwell,
Become a desert *now*, a vale of gloom,
O'ershadow'd with the midnight of the tomb?
Where shalt thou turn?—it is not thine to raise
To yon pure heaven thy calm confiding gaze,
No gleam reflected from that realm of rest
Steals on the darkness of thy troubled breast;
Not for thine eye shall Faith divinely shed
Her glory round the image of the dead;
And if, when slumber's lonely couch is prest,
The form departed be thy spirit's guest,
It bears no light from purer worlds to this;
Thy future lends not e'en a dream of bliss.

But who shall dare the gate of life to close,
Or say, *thus far* the stream of mercy flows?
That fount unseal'd, whose boundless waves embrace
Each distant isle, and visit every race,
Pours from the throne of God its current free,
Nor yet denies th' immortal draught to thee.
O! while the doom impends, not yet decreed,
While yet th' Atoner hath not ceased to plead,
While still, suspended by a single hair,
The sharp bright sword hangs quivering in the air,
Bow down thy heart to Him who will not break
The bruised reed; e'en yet, awake, awake!
Patient, because Eternal,¹ He may hear
Thy prayer of agony with pitying ear,
And send his chastening Spirit from above,
O'er the deep chaos of thy soul to move.

But seek thou mercy through His name alone,
To whose unequal'd sorrows none was shown.
Through Him, who here in mortal garb abode,
As man to suffer, and to heal as God;
And, born the sons of utmost time to bless,
Endured all scorn, and aided all distress.

Call thou on Him—for He, in human form,
Hath walk'd the waves of life, and still'd the storm.
He, when her hour of lingering grace was past,
O'er Salem wept, relenting to the last,
Wept with such tears as Judah's monarch pour'd
O'er his lost child, ungrateful, yet deplored;
And, offering guiltless blood that guilt might live,
Taught from his Cross the lesson—to forgive!

Call thou on Him—his prayer e'en then arose,
Breathed in unpitied anguish for his foes.
And haste!—ere bursts the lightning from on high,
Fly to the City of thy Refuge, fly!²
So shall th' Avenger turn his steps away,
And sheath his falchion, baffled of its prey.

Yet must long days roll on, ere peace shall brood,
As the soft halcyon, o'er thy heart subdued;
Ere yet the dove of Heaven descend, to shed
Inspiring influence o'er thy fallen head.
—He, who hath pined in dungeons, 'midst the shade
Of such deep night as man for man hath made,
Through lingering years; if call'd at length to be,
Once more, by nature's boundless charter, free,
Shrinks feebly back, the blaze of noon to shun,
Fainting at day, and blasted by the sun.

Thus, when the captive soul hath long remain'd
In its own dread abyss of darkness chain'd,
If the Deliverer, in his might, at last,
Its fetters, born of earth, to earth should cast,
The beam of truth o'erpowers its dazzled sight,
Trembling it sinks, and finds no joy in light
But this will pass away—that spark of mind,
Within thy frame unquenchably enshrined,
Shall live to triumph in its bright'ning ray,
Born to be foster'd with ethereal day.
Then wilt thou bless the hour, when o'er thee pass'd,
On wing of flame, the purifying blast,
And sorrow's voice, through paths before untrod,
Like Sinai's trumpet, call'd thee to thy God!

But hopest thou, in thy panoply of pride,
 Heaven's messenger, affliction, to deride?
 In thine own strength unaided to defy,
 With Stoic smile, the arrows of the sky?
 Torn by the vulture, fetter'd to the rock,
 Still, demigod! the tempest wilt thou mock?
 Alas! the tower that crests the mountain's brow
 A thousand years may awe the vale below,
 Yet not the less be shatter'd on its height,
 By one dread moment of the earthquake's might!
 A thousand pangs thy bosom may have borne,
 In silent fortitude, or haughty scorn,
 Till comes the one, the master-anguish, sent
 To break the mighty heart that ne'er was bent.

Oh! what is nature's strength? the vacant eye,
 By mind deserted, hath a dread reply!
 The wild delirious laughter of despair,
 The mirth of frenzy—seek an answer there!
 Turn not away, though pity's cheek grow pale,
 Close not thine ear against their awful tale.
 They tell thee, Reason, wandering from the ray
 Of Faith, the blazing pillar of her way,
 In the mid-darkness of the stormy wave,
 Forsook the struggling soul she could not save!
 Weep not, sad moralist! o'er desert plains,
 Strew'd with the wrecks of grandeur—mouldering
 fanes,
 Arches of triumph, long with weeds o'ergrown,
 And regal cities, now the serpent's own:
 Earth has more awful ruins—one lost mind,
 Whose star is quench'd, hath lessons for mankind,

Of deeper import than each prostrate dome,
Mingling its marble with the dust of Rome.

But who, with eye unshrinking, shall explore
That waste, illumed by reason's beam no more?
Who pierce the deep, mysterious clouds that roll
Around the shatter'd temple of the soul,
Curtain'd with midnight?—low its columns lie,
And dark the chambers of its imag'ry,³
Sunk are its idols now—and God alone
May rear the fabric, by their fall o'erthrown!
Yet, from its inmost shrine, by storms laid bare,
Is heard an oracle that cries—"Beware!
Child of the dust! but ransomed of the skies!
One breath of Heaven—and thus thy glory dies!
Haste, ere the hour of doom—draw nigh to him
Who dwells above between the cherubim!"

Spirit dethroned! and check'd in mid career,
Son of the morning! exiled from thy sphere,
Tell us thy tale!—Perchance thy race was run
With science, in the chariot of the sun;
Free as the winds the paths of space to sweep,
Traverse the untrodden kingdoms of the deep,
And search the laws that Nature's springs control,
There tracing all—save Him who guides the
whole!

Haply thine eye its ardent glance had cast
Through the dim shades, the portals of the past;
By the bright lamp of thought thy care had fed
From the far beacon-lights of ages fled,

The depths of time exploring, to retrace
The glorious march of many a vanish'd race.

Or did thy power pervade the living lyre,
Till its deep chords became intinct with fire,
Silenced all meaner notes, and swell'd on high,
Full and alone, their mighty harmony,
While woke each passion from its cell profound,
And nations started at th' electric sound?

Lord of th' ascendant! what avails it now,
Though bright the laurels waved upon thy brow?
What, though thy name, through distant empires
heard,
Bade the heart bound, as doth a battle-word?
Was it for *this* thy still-unwearied eye
Kept vigil with the watchfires of the sky,
To make the secrets of all ages thine,
And commune with majestic thoughts that shine
O'er Time's long shadowy pathway?—hath thy mind
Sever'd its lone dominions from mankind,
For *this* to woo their homage?—Thou hast sought
All, save the wisdom with salvation fraught,
Won every wreath—but that which will not die,
Nor aught neglected—save eternity!

And did all fail thee, in the hour of wrath,
When burst th' o'erwhelming vials on thy path?
Could not the voice of Fame inspire thee then,
O spirit! scepter'd by the sons of men,
With an immortal's courage, to sustain
The transient agonies of earthly pain?

—One, one there was, all-powerful to have saved,
 When the loud fury of the billow raved ;
 But him thou knew'st not—and the light he lent
 Hath vanish'd from its ruin'd tenement,
 But left thee breathing, moving, lingering yet,
 A thing we shrink from—vainly to forget !
 —Lift the dread veil no further—hide, oh ! hide
 The bleeding form, the couch of suicide !
 The dagger, grasp'd in death—the brow, the eye,
 Lifeless, yet stamp'd with rage and agony ;
 The soul's dark traces left in many a line
 Graved on *his* mein, who died,—“ and made no
 sign !”

Approach not, gaze not—lest thy fever'd brain
 Too deep that image of despair retain ;
 Angels of slumber ! o'er the midnight hour,
 Let not such visions claim unhallow'd power,
 Lest the mind sink with terror, and above
 See but th' Avenger's arm, forget th' Atoner's
 love !

O Thou ! th' unseen, th' all-seeing !—Thou whose
 ways,
 Mantled with darkness, mock all finite gaze,
 Before whose eyes the creatures of Thy hand,
 Seraph and man, alike in weakness stand,
 And countless ages, trampling into clay
 Earth's empires on their march, are but a day ;
 Father of worlds unknown, unnumber'd !—Thou,
 With whom all time is one eternal *now*,
 Who know'st no past, nor future — Thou whose
 breath

Goes forth, and bears to myriads, life or death!
 Look on us, guide us!—wanderers of a sea
 Wild and obscure, what are we, reft of Thee?
 A thousand rocks, deep-hid, elude our sight,
 A star may set—and we are lost in night;
 A breeze may waft us to the whirlpool's brink,
 A treach'rous song allure us—and we sink!

Oh! by *His* love, who, veiling Godhead's light,
 To moments circumscribed the Infinite,
 And Heaven and Earth disdain'd not to ally
 By that dread union—Man with Deity;
 Immortal tears o'er mortal woes who shed,
 And, ere he raised them, wept above the dead;
 Save, or we perish!—Let Thy word control
 The earthquakes of that universe—the soul;
 Pervade the depths of passion—speak once more
 The mighty mandate, guard of every shore,
 “Here shall thy waves be stay'd”—in grief, in pain,
 The fearful poise of reason's sphere maintain,
 Thou, by whom suns are balanced!—thus secure
 In Thee shall Faith and Fortitude endure;
 Conscious of Thee, unfaltering, shall the just
 Look upward still, in high and holy trust,
 And by affliction guided to Thy shrine,
 The first, last thought of suffering hearts be Thine.

And oh! be near, when, clothed with conquering
 power,
 The King of Terrors claims his own dread hour:
 When, on the edge of that unknown abyss,
 Which darkly parts us from the realm of bliss,

Awe-struck alike the timid and the brave,
 Alike subdued the monarch and the slave,
 Must drink the cup of trembling⁴—when we see
 Nought in the universe but Death and Thee,
 Forsake us not—if still, when life was young,
 Faith to thy bosom, as her home, hath sprung,
 If Hope's retreat hath been, through all the past,
 The shadow by the Rock of Ages cast,
 Father, forsake us not!—when tortures urge
 The shrinking soul to that mysterious verge;
 When from Thy justice to Thy love we fly,
 On Nature's conflict look with pitying eye,
 Bid the strong wind, the fire, the earthquake cease,
 Come in the still small voice, and whisper—peace!⁵

For oh! 'tis awful—He that hath beheld
 The parting spirit, by its fears repell'd,
 Cling in weak terror to its earthly chain,
 And from the dizzy brink recoil, in vain;
 He that hath seen the last convulsive throes
 Dissolve the union form'd and closed in woe,
 Well knows that hour is awful.—In the pride
 Of youth and health, by sufferings yet untried,
 We talk of Death, as something, which 'twere sweet
 In Glory's arms exultingly to meet,
 A closing triumph, a majestic scene,
 Where gazing nations watch the hero's mien,
 As, undismay'd amidst the tears of all,
 He folds his mantle, regally to fall!

Hush, fond enthusiast!—still, obscure and lone,
 Yet not less terrible because unknown,

Is the last hour of thousands—they retire
From life's throng'd path, unnoticed to expire ;
As the light leaf, whose fall to ruin bears
Some trembling insect's little world of cares,
Descends in silence—while around waves on
The mighty forest, reckless what is gone !
Such is man's doom—and, ere an hour be flown,
—Start not, thou trifle !—such may be thine own.

But, as life's current in its ebb draws near
The shadowy gulf, there wakes a thought of fear,
A thrilling thought, which haply mock'd before,
We fain would stifle—but it sleeps no more !
There are who fly its murmurs 'midst the throng,
That join the masque of revelry and song ;
Yet still Death's image, by its power restored,
Frowns 'midst the roses of the festal board,
And when deep shades o'er earth and ocean brood,
And the heart owns the might of solitude,
Is its low whisper heard ?—a note profound,
But wild and startling as the trumpet sound,
That bursts, with sudden blast, the dead repose
Of some proud city, storm'd by midnight foes !

Oh ! vainly Reason's scornful voice would prove
That life hath nought to claim such lingering love,
And ask if e'er the captive, half unchain'd,
Clung to the links which yet his step restrain'd ?
In vain Philosophy, with tranquil pride,
Would mock the feelings she perchance can hide,
Call up the countless armies of the dead,
Point to the pathway beaten by their tread,

And say—"What wouldst thou? Shall the fix'd
 decree,
 Made for creation, be reversed for *thee?*"
 —Poor, feeble aid!—proud Stoic! ask not why,
 It is enough, that nature shrinks to die!
 Enough, *that* horror, which thy words upbraid,
 Is her dread penalty, and must be paid!
 —Search thy deep wisdom, solve the scarce defined
 And mystic questions of the parting mind,
 Half check'd, half utter'd—tell her, what shall burst,
 In whelming grandeur, on her vision first,
 When freed from mortal films?—what viewless
 world
 Shall first receive her wing, but half unfurl'd?
 What awful and unbodied beings guide
 Her timid flight through regions yet untried?
 Say, if at once, her final doom to hear,
 Before her God the trembler must appear,
 Or wait that day of terror, when the sea
 Shall yield its hidden dead, and heaven and earth
 shall flee?

Hast thou no answer?—then deride no more
 The thoughts that shrink, yet cease not to explore
 Th' unknown, th' unseen, the future—though the
 heart,
 As at unearthly sounds, before them start;
 Though the frame shudder, and the spirit sigh,
 They have their source in immortality!
 Whence, then, shall strength, which reason's aid
 denies,
 An equal to the mortal conflict rise?

When, on the swift pale horse, whose lightning pace,
 Where'er we fly, still wins the dreadful race,
 The mighty rider comes—O whence shall aid
 Be drawn, to meet his rushing, undismay'd?
 —Whence, but from thee, Messiah!—thou hast
 drain'd
 The bitter cup, till not the dregs remain'd;
 To thee the struggle and the pang were known,
 The mystic horror—all became thine own!

But did no hand celestial succour bring,
 Till scorn and anguish haply lost their sting?
 Came not th' Archangel, in the final hour,
 To arm thee with invulnerable power?
 No, Son of God! upon thy sacred head
 The shafts of wrath their tenfold fury shed,
 From man averted—and thy path on high
 Pass'd through the strait of fiercest agony;
 For thus th' Eternal, with propitious eyes,
 Received the last, th' almighty sacrifice!

But wake! be glad, ye nations! from the tomb
 Is won the vict'ry, and is fled the gloom!
 The vale of death in conquest hath been trod,
 Break forth in joy, ye ransom'd! saith your God!
 Swell ye the raptures of the song afar,
 And hail with harps your bright and Morning Star.

He rose! the everlasting gates of day
 Received the King of Glory on his way!
 The hope, the comforter of those who wept,
 And the first-fruits of them, in Him that slept.

He rose, he triumph'd ! he will yet sustain
 Frail nature sinking in the strife of pain.
 Aided by Him, around the martyr's frame
 When fiercely blazed a living shroud of flame,
 Hath the firm soul exulted, and the voice
 Raised the victorious hymn, and cried, Rejoice !
 Aided by Him, though none the bed attend,
 Where the lone sufferer dies without a friend,
 He whom the busy world shall miss no more
 Than morn one dewdrop from her countless store,
 Earth's most neglected child, with trusting heart,
 Call'd to the hope of glory, shall depart !

And say, cold Sophist ! if by thee bereft
 Of that high hope, to misery what were left ?
 But for the vision of the days to be,
 But for the comforter, despised by thee,
 Should we not wither at the Chastener's look,
 Should we not sink beneath our God's rebuke,
 When o'er our heads the desolating blast,
 Fraught with inscrutable decrees, hath pass'd,
 And the stern power who seeks the noblest prey,
 Hath call'd our fairest and our best away ?
 Should we not madden when our eyes behold
 All that we loved in marble stillness cold,
 No more responsive to our smile or sigh,
 Fix'd—frozen—silent—all mortality ?
 But for the promise, all shall yet be well,
 Would not the spirit in its pangs rebel,
 Beneath such clouds as darken'd, when the hand
 Of wrath lay heavy on our prostrate land ;

And thou,* just lent thy gladden'd isles to bless,
 Then snatch'd from earth with all thy loveliness,
 With all a nation's blessings on thy head,
 O England's flower! wert gather'd to the dead?
 But Thou didst teach us. Thou to every heart,
 Faith's lofty lesson didst thyself impart!
 When fled the hope through all thy pangs which
 smiled,
 When thy young bosom, o'er thy lifeless child,
 Yearn'd with vain longing—still thy patient eye,
 To its last light, beam'd holy constancy!
 Torn from a lot in cloudless sunshine cast,
 Amidst those agonies—thy first and last,
 Thy pale lip, quivering with convulsive throes,
 Breathed not a plaint—and settled in repose;
 While bow'd thy royal head to Him, whose power
 Spoke in the fiat of that midnight hour,
 Who from the brightest vision of a throne,
 Love, glory, empire, claim'd thee for his own,
 And spread such terror o'er the sea-girt coast,
 As blasted Israel, when her Ark was lost!

“It is the will of God!”—yet, yet we hear
 The words which closed thy beautiful career;
 Yet should we mourn thee in thy blest abode,
 But for that thought—“It is the will of God!”
 Who shall arraign th' Eternal's dark decree,
 If not one murmur then escaped from thee?
 Oh! still, though vanishing without a trace,
 Thou hast not left one scion of thy race,

* The Princess Charlotte.

Still may thy memory bloom our vales among,
 Hallow'd by freedom, and enshrined in song!
 Still may thy pure, majestic spirit dwell,
 Bright on the isles which loved thy name so well,
 E'en as an angel, with presiding care,
 To wake and guard thine own high virtues there.

For lo! the hour when storm-presaging skies
 Call on the watchers of the land to rise,
 To set the sign of fire on every height,⁶
 And o'er the mountains rear, with patriot might,
 Prepared, if summon'd, in its cause to die,
 The banner of our faith, the Cross of victory!

By this hath England conquer'd—field and flood
 Have own'd her sov'reignty—alone she stood,
 When chains o'er all the scepter'd earth were thrown,
 In high and holy singleness, alone,
 But mighty in her God—and shall she now
 Forget before th' Omnipotent to bow?
 From the bright fountain of her glory turn,
 Or bid strange fire upon his altars burn?
 No! sever'd land, 'midst rocks and billows rude,
 Throned in thy majesty of solitude,
 Still in the deep asylum of thy breast
 Shall the pure elements of greatness rest,
 Virtue and faith, the tutelary powers,
 Thy hearths that hallow, and defend thy towers!

Still, where thy hamlet-vales, O chosen isle!
 In the soft beauty of their verdure smile,

Where yew and elm o'ershade the lowly fanes,
That guard the peasant's records and remains,
May the blest echoes of the Sabbath-bell
Sweet on the quiet of the woodlands swell,
And from each cottage-dwelling of thy glades,
When starlight glimmers through the deep'ning
shades,
Devotion's voice in choral hymns arise,
And bear the land's warm incense to the skies.

There may the mother, as with anxious joy
To Heaven her lessons consecrate her boy,
Teach his young accent still the immortal lays
Of Zion's bards, in inspiration's days,
When angels, whispering through the cedar shade,
Prophetic tones to Judah's harp convey'd;
And as, her soul all glistening in her eyes,
She bids the prayer of infancy arise,
'Tell of his name, who left his Throne on high,
Earth's lowliest lot to bear and sanctify,
His love divine, by keenest anguish tried,
And fondly say—"My child, for thee He died!"

NOTES.

Note 1, page 6, line 13.

Patient, because Eternal.

“ He is patient, because He is eternal.”

ST AUGUSTINE.

Note 2, page 7, line 4.

Fly to the City of thy Refuge, fly!

“ Then ye shall appoint you cities, to be cities of refuge for you; that the slayer may flee thither which killeth any person at unawares.—And they shall be unto you cities of refuge from the avenger.”—NUMBERS, chap. 35.

Note 3, page 9, line 8.

And dark the chambers of its imag'ry.

“ Every man in the chambers of his imagery.”

EZEKIEL, chap. 8.

Note 4, page 13, line 3.

Must drink the cup of trembling.

“ Thou hast drunken the dregs of the cup of trembling, and wrung them out.”—ISAIAH, chap. 51.

Note 5, page 13, line 14.

Come in the still small voice, and whisper—peace.

“ And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.”

KINGS, book i. chap. 19.

Note 6, page 19, line 9.

To set the sign of fire on every height.

“ And set up a sign of fire.”—JEREMIAH, chap. 6.

CRITICAL ANNOTATIONS

ON

"THE SCEPTIC."

"In 1820 Mrs Hemans published *The Sceptic*, a poem of great merit for its style and its sentiments, of which we shall give a rapid sketch. She considers the influence of unbelief on the affections and gentler part of our nature, and, after pursuing the picture of the misery consequent on doubt, shows the relief that may be found in the thoughts that have their source in immortality. Glancing at pleasure as the only resort of the sceptic, she turns to the sterner tasks of life.

'E'en youth's brief hours
Survive the beauty of their loveliest flowers ; * * *
The soul's pure flame the breath of storms must fan,
And pain and sorrow claim their nursling—Man.'

But then the sceptic has no relief in memory, for memory recalls no joys but such as were transitory, and known to be such; and as for hope—

She, who like heaven's own sunbeam, smiles for all,
Will she speak comfort?—Thou hast shorn her plume,
That might have raised thee far above the tomb,
And hush'd the only voice whose angel-tone
Soothes when all melodies of joy are flown.'

"The poet then asks, if an infidel dare love; and, having no home for his thoughts in a better world, nurse such feelings as delight to enshrine themselves in the breast of a parent. She addresses him on the insecurity of an attachment to a vain idol, from which death may at any time divide him '*for ever.*' . . . For relief the in-

fidel is referred to the Christian religion, in a strain, which unites the fervour of devotion with poetic sensibility. .

. . . The poem proceeds to depict, in a forcible manner the unfortunate state of a mind which acquires every kind of knowledge but that which gives salvation; and, having gained possession of the secrets of all ages, and communed with the majestic minds that shine along the pathway of time, neglects nothing but eternity. Such a one, in the season of suffering, finds relief in suicide, and escapes to death as to an eternal rest. The thought of death recurs to the mind of the poet, and calls forth a fervent prayer for the divine presence and support in the hour of dissolution; for the hour, when the soul is brought to the mysterious verge of another life, is an 'awful one.' . .

. . . This is followed by an allusion to the strong love of life which belongs to human nature, and the instinctive apprehension with which the parting mind muses on its future condition, and asks of itself mystic questions, that it cannot solve. But through the influence of religion—

'He whom the busy world shall miss no more
Than morn one dewdrop from her countless store,
Earth's most neglected child, with trusting heart,
Call'd to the hope of glory, shall depart !'

“ After some lines expressing the spirit of English patriotism, in a manner with which foreigners can only be pleased, the poem closes with the picture of a mother teaching her child the first lessons of religion, by holding up the divine example of the Saviour.

“ We have been led into a longer notice of this poem, for it illustrates the character of Mrs Hemans's manner. We perceive in it a loftiness of purpose, an earnestness of thought, sometimes made more interesting by a tinge of melancholy, a depth of religious feeling, a mind alive to all the interests, gratifications, and sorrows of social life.”
—PROFESSOR NORTON (in *North American Review*, April 1827)

“ We have, on more than one occasion, expressed the very high opinion which we entertain of the talents of this

lady ; and it is gratifying to find, that she gives us no reason to retract or modify in any degree the applause already bestowed, and that every fresh exhibition of her powers enhances and confirms her claims upon our admiration. Mrs Hemans is indeed but in the infancy of her poetical career ; but it is an infancy of unrivalled beauty, and of very high promise. Not but that she has already performed more than has often been sufficient to win for other candidates no mean place in the roll of fame, but because what she has already done, shrinks, when compared with what we consider to be her own great capacity, to mere incipient excellence—the intimation rather than the fulfillment of the high destiny of her genius.

. . . The verses of Mrs Hemans appear the spontaneous offspring of intense and noble feeling, governed by a clear understanding, and fashioned into elegance by an exquisite delicacy and precision of taste. With more than the force of many of her masculine competitors, she never ceases to be strictly *feminine* in the whole current of her thought and feeling, nor approaches by any chance the verge of that free and intrepid course of speculation, of which the boldness is more conspicuous than the wisdom, but into which some of the most remarkable among the female literati of our times have freely and fearlessly plunged. She has, in the poem before us, made choice of a subject of which it would have been very difficult to have reconciled the treatment, in the hands of some female authors, to the delicacy which belongs to the sex, and the tenderness and enthusiasm which form its finest characteristics. A coarse and chilling cento of the exploded fancies of modern scepticism, done into rhyme by the hand of a woman, would have been doubly disgusting, by the revival of absurdities long consigned to oblivion, and by the revolting exhibition of a female mind shorn of all its attractions, and wrapt in darkness and defiance. But Mrs Hemans has chosen the better and the nobler cause, and, while she has left in the poem before us every trace of vigorous intellect of which the subject admitted, and has far transcended in energy of thought

the prosing pioneers of unbelief, she has sustained throughout a tone of warm and confiding piety, and has thus proved that the humility of hope and of faith has in it none of the weakness with which it has been charged by the arrogance of impiety, but owns a divine and mysterious vigour residing under the very aspect of gentleness and devotion."—*Edinburgh Monthly Review*, vol. iii.

"Her last two publications are works of a higher stamp; works, indeed, of which no living poet need to be ashamed. The first of them is entitled *The Sceptic*, and is devoted, as our readers will easily anticipate, to advocating the cause of religion. Undoubtedly the poem must have owed its being to the circumstances of the times—to a laudable indignation at the course which literature in many departments seemed lately to be taking in this country, and at the doctrines disseminated with industry, principally (but by no means exclusively, as has been falsely supposed) among the lower orders. Mrs Hemans, however, does not attempt to reason learnedly or laboriously in verse; few poems, ostensibly philosophical or didactic, have ever been of use, except to display the ingenuity and talent of the writers. People are not often taught a science or an art in poetry, and much less will an infidel be converted by a theological treatise in verse. But the argument of *The Sceptic* is one of irresistible force to confirm a wavering mind; it is simply resting the truth of religion on the necessity of it—on the utter misery and helplessness of man without it. This argument is in itself available for all the purposes of poetry: it appeals to the imagination and passions of man; it is capable of interesting all our affectionate hopes and charities, of acting upon all our natural fears. Mrs Hemans has gone through this range with great feeling and ability; and, when she comes to the mind which has clothed itself in its own strength, and relying proudly on that alone in the hour of affliction, has sunk into distraction in the contest, she rises into a strain of moral poetry not often surpassed:—

'Oh, what is nature's strength?—the vacant eye,
By mind deserted, hath a dread reply,' &c."

Quarterly Review, vol. xxiv.