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THE CHURCHMAN

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CONDUCTED BY
CLERGYMEN AND LAYMEN OF THE
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The War and the Other World.

I. INTRODUCTORY.

THE present war has had, and continues to have, incalculable influence upon the thoughts of most of us, giving them new directions and a great change of subjects, both for speculation and meditation. This applies obviously to the innumerable questions about military, naval, and international affairs which are implied in discussions about war, and especially about the combinations of wars which are now being waged in various parts of the globe, not only by sea and by land, but under the sea and in the air above both sea and land. These, however, are not the questions which concern us here.

Never before in the history of the world have so many millions of human beings been brought daily, and even hourly, face to face with the possibility of death—the death of themselves, or (what in some cases is much harder to face) the death of those nearest and dearest to them. Millions of men are often, for days together, doing their work under conditions which render it not merely possible, but probable, that in a very short time their life will be ended—indeed, that the next moment may be their last. Millions of families are in the condition that we read of as the case in Egypt at the time of the Exodus—"not one in which there was not one dead"—and there are thousands in which there are already three or four dead. Indeed one reads of families from which all the males have been taken. The "mourning for an only son" has for centuries been proverbial as implying an exceptional intensity of sorrow. In the last eighteen months it has lost none of its bitterness, but it has lost all its rarity. When the war was only ten months old a friend told the present writer that he had already written nine letters of condolence to personal friends, and that in every one of the cases it was condolence for the loss of an only son.

Facts like these might be multiplied a hundredfold and more. In the case of those whose lives are so frequently in extreme danger such facts can hardly fail to send the mind, far more often than has hitherto been the case, into that region which is of such vast interest to us, and about which we know so very little, the region

which lies on the other side of the grave. No doubt in the daily lives of those who are in the thick of the fighting there are plenty of exigencies and excitements which keep the attention fixed on the things which pertain to this life : the mind must be constantly on the alert to note every movement of the enemy. But even those who are most strenuously employed have occasional opportunities of reflection, when thoughts about the other world almost inevitably arise. That much we may conjecture with some approach to certainty, and hints in private letters show that such conjectures are correct. But what those of us who remain at home know most about is what has happened to ourselves, and to those with whom we are intimate, since the war began. We can safely affirm that those whose husbands, or sons, or brothers are constantly in extreme danger think far more frequently than they have hitherto done about the possibilities and probabilities respecting the unseen world. And this is still more true of those whose husbands, sons or brothers have already sacrificed their lives at the call of duty. It seems incredible that these millions of precious lives have been absolutely extinguished for ever, simply because, through the dissolution of the bodily frames in which hitherto their activities have been exhibited, they have disappeared from this world.

It is poor consolation to be told that they will continue to live on in the memories of their fellow men. What will that manner of living be worth when the last person who knew them has passed away ? And it is hardly more substantial comfort to be reminded that their noble examples have influenced for good the characters of most of those who knew anything about their heroism, and that this influence will spread from generation to generation and never die. To the bereaved mourner all this seems to be little better than—

Empty chaff well meant for grain.

Nor can Stoicism, with its proud self-sufficiency, give much help to those who are in sorrow for bereavements which are all the more difficult to bear because they seem to be so unnecessary. The Stoic tells us that we must simply bow to the rulings of the unseen Power which some call Providence and others Fate ; and so far he points in the right direction. But he also adds that we ought never to have formed these close attachments to relations and friends : then we should not have been distressed at the loss of them. The wise man strips himself bare at the outset, and, having nothing

that he greatly cares for, he leaves nothing for Fortune to take away. *Cantabit vacuus coram latrone viator*. A man who has shaped his life on these lines cannot be bereaved. Teaching of this kind may possibly fortify, but it cannot console. And it is consolation, and consolation of a very real and sustaining kind, which those who are feeling deeply bereaved are craving. To tell them that, if they were wise, they would not feel bereaved, merely augments their distress. The one thing which, in addition to loyal submission to the Divine will, can give them consolation is the belief that those whose loss they are mourning are not dead, but are alive under new, but only partially known, conditions. Like those who miss them and mourn for them, they still have a Father who loves them, and in whom they live and move and have their being ; they still have a God whom they can adore. Unlike those who mourn for them, they have been freed from life in the body, with its wants and temptations and pains. From this it follows that the present separation, which cannot be wholly freed from sadness, is not hopeless and final ; it is temporary, and will certainly have an end as soon as those who at present are left behind receive their summons to follow.

Is this belief well founded ? Or is it only a fond dream, the offspring of men's cravings rather than of their reason or experience ?

If physical death is not annihilation, but a mere change from one condition of life to another, can we know anything of this new condition of existence ?

Can we who remain behind continue to influence in any way those who have passed into the new condition of existence ? Can we still do them service ?

Some attempt will be made, in the papers which are to follow, to find an answer to these questions, interest in which, it is believed, has been greatly increased by the war. With many persons these questions have ceased to be academical and speculative, and have become intensely personal. To most people it would be a great aggravation of their sorrow to be obliged to believe that those who have been taken from them have utterly ceased to exist, and that therefore there is no hope whatever of ever being conscious of reunion with them, for the only reunion possible would then be that of following them into nothingness. It would be some mitigation

of the present bereavement to be able to believe that those who have been taken from life in this world are still alive in another world, where there is at least a possibility that they may be found once more, be recognized, and be cherished for ever. And it would be a still greater mitigation to be convinced that even during this time of separation (when we are in one world and they in another) we can still do something to help them, and can believe that they are doing something to help us. It is in the hope of being able to contribute something towards the solution of this last problem that these papers have been written. Persons who had hardly given the question a thought until a year and a half ago have been thinking a good deal about it since it has assumed for them a personal interest ; and not a few who have hitherto been convinced that between the dead and the living there can be no mutual services have had that conviction shaken by what has happened to themselves and their neighbours. To these may be added a third class, which is perhaps the largest of all, viz., those who would gladly believe that mutual service is still possible between themselves and the dear ones whom they have lost awhile, but who have heard such confident declarations made as to the impossibility of anything of the kind, and the folly of acting on the assumption that such things are possible, that they have sorrowfully abstained from seeking consolation in that direction. Seeing that the one hypothesis is capable of bringing great comfort to those who hold it, while the other lacks this advantage, it would seem to follow that the side which has no advantage to offer should very carefully make sure of their own position, by patient examination of the pros and cons, before attempting to deprive the other side of the very real consolation which their estimate of the probabilities allows them. But further notice of these considerations may be deferred until the third question comes before us for consideration. We have first to consider what solid grounds there are for believing that there is any other world in which those who have departed from this world may continue to exist. If there are no such grounds, then the discussion of the other questions has little practical value. This will be considered in the next paper.

A. PLUMMER.