

HOW THE WORLD WILL END

Without trying to determine how many thousands of years ago the curtain went up on the great human drama, it is nevertheless natural for man to speculate about when and how the play will end. When a moving picture is produced, an actor may be told only the part he is to play and how he must play it, but how these various scenes are related and how and when the drama is to end, must be known to the director. In like manner man knows only the part he is to play in the great mystery of life. What relation he bears to the whole play, and what is to be end of the great pageant which humanity is enacting is known only to the great Director—God. Just as the actors speculate about the ending of the play, so men try to fathom the last act in the drama of mankind on earth.

The spectators who sit in the theatre of life to watch the unfolding of the great human mystery play, various as may be their temperaments, and diverse as may be their cast of mind, nevertheless, naturally fall into two classes. The pessimist, whether studying the program of life or reflecting on his own emotions, sees nothing but the shadowy side of things. For him the world is a dreary place, and he foolishly concludes that the sooner the curtain is rung down on the miserable spectacle the better for everybody. The optimist, on the contrary, whose philosophy of life has more of sunshine and salvation in it, feels that, all things considered, life is worth living; that the universe after all is a fair place; that, in a word:

"God's in His heaven
All's right with the world!"

Thus men view the play with different eyes: one wants the end hurried: the other would linger after the lights are out.

That the play is to end has never been doubted by any considerable group of the spectators. Among the primitive peoples we find records of a belief in the end of all things. Perhaps, if not the earliest of these, at least the most explicit is found in the canticle of Moses: "A fire is kindled in my wrath, and shall burn even to the lowest hell: and shall devour the earth with her increase, and shall burn the foundations of the moun-

¹ Robt. Browning—"Pippa Passes."

tains" (Deut. XXXII, 22). This conviction was popular with the pagans. Thus Ovid sings: "The fates record that there shall come a time when the sea, the land, and heaven's ruined citadel shall burn, and the artfully constructed fabric of the universe will be oppressed."² The old philosophers also busied themselves with the idea. Seneca wrote: "There will be a mighty fire, and it will burn all things mortal. With the destruction of matter whatever now exists of orderly arrangement will burn in an immense flame."³ The New Testament confirms this belief. In the eighth chapter of the Apocalypse is a vivid description of the world's last agony:—First an angel sounds a trumpet—hail and fire are cast on the earth, and a third part of the earth is burned up. At the sound of the second trumpet a great mountain, burning with fire, is cast into the sea. At the sound of the third trumpet a great star fell from heaven burning as if it were a torch.

This doctrine caused much speculation among the early Christians, and the false interpretations given to Christ's predictions gave rise to the fantastical hypothesis—"The Millennium"—"The thousand years of the glorious reign of Christ and His Saints on earth." This was probably a remnant of the old Jewish belief of a worldly Messianic Kingdom. A great many Jewish converts brought over their prejudices with them, and infected not only other Christians, but also many heretics with the hope of a Millennium.

In the fourth century St. Augustine was an ardent advocate of this doctrine, but later he was convinced that there will be no Millennium. During this century the idea of the Millennium almost passed into oblivion. In the Middle Ages belief took a more rational form, due probably to the domination of St. Thomas Aquinas, who was the intellectual leader of his time. The Thomistic teaching, based on the correct interpretation of the Holy Scripture and the Apostolic Traditions, is in harmony with the findings of modern science. In the sixteenth century the principle of private interpretation advocated by Protestantism gave rise again to many wild and fanciful speculations. The old Millennium notion was resurrected. Bizarre beliefs were spread abroad by the Anabaptists. Among other things they

² Metam. Lib. 1. 256.

³ Ad Marciam.

taught that the end of the world must be preceded by a new kingdom of God in which there was to be a communism of property and women. These practices were actually carried out in Germany.

The past century is remarkable for the number of pseudo-prophets who predicted the consummation of all things. William Miller of New York assigned the harrowing catastrophe to 1834. The expectation of his followers, the Adventists, was aroused to the height of frenzy. In their enthusiasm they gave away all their goods, and, attired in ascension robes, they awaited the great event. In our own time Pastor Russell caused no little commotion by predicting the end of everything. He picked out the year 1914. His disciples likewise abandoned all occupation and anxiously expected, and even demanded, the end of the world. These enthusiasts have passed away with their prophecies unfulfilled. The drama of life still continues. The Great Director has not disclosed the date of its completion. "It is not for you to know the times or moments which the Father hath put in His own power" (Acts I, 7).

While men may be uncertain as to the exact time of the end of the world, they remain interested in how it will come about. Holy Scripture has not divulged the exact time, but gives us some indications as to the nature of the catastrophe: "And immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be moved" (Matt. xxiv, 29). Thus the end will not be the annihilation of the universe, for the same inspired book says: "There will be a new heaven and a new earth" (Apoc. xxi, 1). It is true the omnipotent power of the Almighty could reduce to nothingness those things which in His power and goodness He brought forth from nothingness. To do this, however, would not be in harmony with the divine plan, because, "God created things that they may be" (Wisdom. i, 14).

In the natural order He Himself fixed the laws for the conservation and preservation of all things. This does not exclude, from the universe, those necessary changes which are ordained by Providence for its wellbeing. He who closely observes the various changes that occur, will discover an incorruptible element in the material world. In the spring the tree draws its nourishment from the earth, and from the earthly materials

puts forth leaves. In the fall these leaves fade, drop off, and before long return to the elements of the earth from which they came. But though there are changes from dirt to leaf, and to dirt again, there is something that is never destroyed. Our very mode of speech recognizes this: we say: It has changed. Would it then be a violation of the law of matter if God were to conserve it for all time? Quite the contrary. But it is fitting then that matter should be purged of its defects, when it is clothed in an unchanging form at the end of the world. According to the dispositions of His divine Providence, God manifests in a special way His love, goodness, and power toward His creatures. But who will not say that it is more in keeping with His love and goodness to preserve rather than to destroy? since it is the property of love to cherish and protect the object of its affection. Envy and hate alone seek to destroy, and these imperfections have no place in the divine plan.

"Everywhere there is change, but nowhere annihilation," is the dictum of science, as well as theology. Take for instance the simple atom of carbon, which you will find in the lump of coal in your cellar. Is that annihilated when the coal is burned in your furnace? No; linking its destinies with those of oxygen, it whirls away with the smoke under the form of carbon dioxide. How long carbon dioxide will wander in the air depends on its fortune. It may find a new home in the leaf of an apple tree, there by the energy of the sun's rays to be linked with water from the soil and ultimately constructed into sugar to be stored away in the trunk as starch. At harvest time our carbon atom is part of an apple. It finds its way into the cells of man, only to be released again as carbon dioxide. Thus the cycle is completed from carbon dioxide to carbon dioxide, only to recommence again. Such is the economy of nature, that the smallest substance is never lost, never annihilated. So it is with all other elements. Though their relations are always changing, their identity and existence will never perish unless God Himself reduce them to nothingness.

Since the end of the world is dependent on the Divine Will it does not lie within the province of experimental science. Whatever reliable knowledge we have about the manner of its fulfillment comes exclusively from revelation: "But the day of the Lord shall come as a thief, in which the heavens shall pass away with great violence, and the elements shall be melted with

heat, and the works which are in it shall be burnt up" (II Epist. Peter iii, 10). This dissolution will not be the complete destruction of the corporal world. As an instrument of Divine Power, the universal fire will cleanse the universe from corruption and restore it to its former beauty. For fire does not destroy utterly, but only transmutes and refines.

This teaching of Holy Scripture is reinforced by the researches of science. It recognizes the possibility of a universal conflagration without, however, being able to affirm it as a fact. Nearly all geologists admit that the earth contains vast reservoirs of heat. By the command of the Divine Will the combined forces of this heat could reduce the universe to ashes in no time. Astronomers say that the shock from a comet would suffice to burn up the earth immediately. This phenomenon, however, would be the result of an extraordinary catastrophe and the effect of an accidental cause. The regular orbits of the planets known to us, exhibit a mutual attraction, so balanced, that the danger of a collision is almost impossible. A rather recent discovery of astronomy is the "Nova" or temporary star. These are heavenly bodies which may increase many hundred, or even thousandfold in brightness during a few hours, or days. Some scientists think that our sun may undergo this phenomenon. The effect of such a tremendous increase of heat might be sufficient to make cinders of all combustible matter.⁴

Other scientists advance a different theory. According to them, the differences in temperature tend to equalize themselves. Under the present laws, the only state of things to which the universe can tend, is one in which all space, and all bodies contained in space, would be at a uniform temperature. This equal distribution of heat would separate the molecules of bodies and reduce the universe to a mass of nebulous and dissociated matter devoid of all movement. According to this theory the universe, following out the natural laws, is from day to day fatally approaching a state of final equilibrium of temperature. It is fast returning to chaos whence it sprung. When it reaches this equilibrium, it will not possess the movement of rotation, which the original chaos had, and which permitted it to separate into different groups by contraction and attraction. This movement of rotation will have been converted into heat.

⁴ Literary Digest, Jan. 13, 1923.

While these theories are reasonable from the point of possibility, nevertheless the conflagration will not end in chaos. Though revelation leaves us practically to ourselves in solving this question, tradition is quite explicit. The Fathers of the Church and all Catholic theologians unanimously teach that the present world will, at the end of time, be purified, transformed and renovated by fire: "The creature also itself shall be delivered from the servitude of corruption, into the liberty of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. viii, 21). The creature awaits and desires to be freed from the contamination of sin, to which it has been subjected for a time. The irrational no less than the rational creation moans and suffers in awaiting the realization of its hopes.

The cleansing element will be like our fire, differing only in the intensity of its purifying qualities. By it the face of the earth will be renewed. The world, fitted as it is to minister to man, acquired a certain unfitness because of the sins committed in it. After its final purification, the inanimate creation will be renewed and made conformable to the glorified state of man. For if in our present state: "The invisible things of Him are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made" (Rom. i, 20); then when we no longer see through a glass in a dark manner, they will be as a resplendent mirror showing to the glorified eye the beauty, glory, and power of the Creator. In the increased brilliancy of the sun, moon, stars, and other heavenly bodies, the wonderful ways of God will be made visible. These celestial searchlights will play their effulgent glow, reflected on the translucent surface of the earth, and the earth will cast it back in unwearied reflection. The crystal waters of the oceans, seas, and lakes, will enhance the brightness of the new paradise. Such will be the future state of our present abode: a garden of delights for the beatified soul to gaze on.

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