

Part 1--The Remembrance of Death

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A TREATISE (UNFINISHED)
UPON THESE WORDS OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Memorare novissima, & in aeternum non peccabis
“Remember the last things, & thou shalt never sin.”—Ecclus. 7.

Made about the year of our Lord 1522, by Sir Thomas
More then knight, and one of the Privy Council
of King Henry VIII, and also Under-Treasurer
of England.

If there were any question among men whether the words of holy Scripture or the doctrine of any secular author were of greater force and effect to the weal and profit of man's soul (though we should let pass so many short and weighty words spoken by the mouth of our Saviour Christ Himself, to Whose heavenly wisdom the wit of none earthly creature can be comparable) yet this only text written by the wise man in the seventh chapter of Ecclesiasticus is such that it containeth more fruitful advice and counsel to the forming and framing of man's manners in virtue and avoiding of sin, than many whole and great volumes of the best of old philosophers or any other that ever wrote in secular literature.

Long would it be to take the best of their words and compare it with these words of holy Writ. Let us consider the fruit and profit of this in itself: which thing, well advised and pondered, shall well declare that of none whole volume of secular literature shall arise so very fruitful doctrine. For what would a man give for a sure medicine that were of such strength that it should all his life keep him from sickness, namely, if he might by the avoiding of sickness be sure to continue his life one hundred years? So is it now that these words giveth us all a sure medicine (if we forsooth not the receiving) by which we shall keep from sickness, not the body, which none health may long keep from death (for die we must in few years, live we never so long), but the soul, which here preserved from the sickness of sin, shall after this eternally live in joy and be preserved from the deadly life of everlasting pain.

The physician sendeth his bill to the apothecary, and therein writeth sometimes a costly receipt of many strange herbs and roots, fetched out of far countries, long-lain drugs, all the strength worn out, and some none such to be got. But this physician sendeth his bill to thyself, no strange thing therein, nothing costly to buy, nothing far to fetch, but to be gathered all times of the year in the garden of thine own soul.

Let us hear, then, what wholesome receipt this is. “Remember,” saith this bill, “thy last things, and thou shalt never sin in this world.” Here is first a short medicine containing only four herbs,

common and well known, that is to wit, death, doom, pain, and joy.

This short medicine is of a marvellous force, able to keep us all our life from sin. The physician cannot give no one medicine to every man to keep him from sickness, but to divers men divers, by reason of the diversity of divers complexions. This medicine serveth every man. The physician doth but guess and conjecture that his receipt shall do good; but this medicine is undoubtedly sure.

How happeth it, then, thou wilt haply say, that so few be preserved from sin, if every man have so sure a medicine, so ready at hand? For folk fare commonly as he doth that goeth forth fasting among sick folk for sloth, rather than he will take a little treacle ³ before.

Thou wilt say, peradventure, that some part of this medicine is very bitter and painful to receive. Surely there can be nothing so bitter but wisdom would brook it for so great a profit? But yet this medicine, though thou make a sour face at it, is not so bitter as thou makest for. ⁴ For well thou wottest, he biddeth thee not take neither death, nor doom, nor pain, but only to remember them, and yet the joy of heaven therewith to temper them withal. Now if a man be so dainty stomached that going where contagion is he would grudge to take a little treacle, ⁵ yet were he very nicely wanton if he might not at the leastwise take a little vinegar and rose water in his handkercher.

Yet wot I well that many one will say that the bare remembrance of death alone, if a man consider it and advise it well, were able to bereave a man of all the pleasure of his life. How much more, then, should his life be painful and grievous if, to the remembrance and consideration of death, a man should add and set to, the deep imagination of the dreadful doom of God, and bitter pains of purgatory or hell, of which every one passeth and exceedeth many deaths. These are the sage saws of such as make this world their heaven, and their lust their God.

Now see the blindness of us worldly folk, how precisely we presume to shoot our foolish bolt, in those matters most in which we least can skill. ⁶ For I little doubt but that among four thousand taken out at adventure, we shall not find four score but they shall boldly affirm it for a thing too painful, busily to remember these four last things. And yet durst I lay a wager that of those four thousand ye shall not find fourteen that hath deeply thought on them four times in all their days.

If men would vouchsafe to put in proof and experience the operation and working of this medicine, the remembrance of these four last things, they should find therein, not the pleasure of their life lost, but so great a pleasure grow thereby that they never felt the like before nor would have supposed that ever they should have felt any such. For it is to be known that, like as we be made of two far divers and unlike substances, the body and the soul, so we be apt and able to receive two diverse and unlike pleasures, the one carnal and fleshly, the other ghostly and spiritual. And like as the soul excelleth the body, so doth the sweetness of spiritual pleasure far pass and excel the gross and filthy pleasure of all fleshly delight, which is of truth no very true pleasure, but a false counterfeit image of pleasure. And the cause why men be so mad thereon is only for ignorance and lack of knowledge of the other,—as those that lack insight of precious stones hold themselves as well content and satisfied with a beryl or crystal well counterfeited, as with a right natural diamond. But he that by good use and experience hath in his eye the right mark and very true lustre of the diamond, rejecteth anon and listeth not to look upon the

counterfeit, be it never so well handled, never so craftily polished. And trust it well that, in likewise, if men would well accustom themselves in the taste of spiritual pleasure and of that sweet feeling that virtuous people have of the good hope of heaven, they should shortly set at naught, and at length abhor, the foul delight and filthy liking that riseth of sensual and fleshly pleasure, which is never so pleasantly spiced with delight and liking but that it bringeth therewith such a grudge and grief of conscience that it maketh the stomach wamble ⁊ and fare as it would vomit. And that notwithstanding, such is our blind custom that we persevere therein without care or cure of the better, as a sow content with draff, ⁊ dirt and mire careth neither for better meat nor better bed.

Think not that everything is pleasant that men for madness laugh at. For thou shalt in Bedlam see one laugh at the knocking of his own head against a post, and yet there is little pleasure therein. But ye think peradventure this example as mad as the mad man, and as little to the purpose. I am content ye so think. But what will ye say if ye see men that are taken and reputed wise laugh much more madly than he? Shall ye not see such laugh at their own craft, when they have, as they think, wilfully done their neighbour wrong? Now whoso seeth not that his laughter is more mad than the laughter of the mad man, I hold him madder than they both. For the mad man laughed when he had done himself but little hurt, by a knock of his head to the post. This other sage fool laugheth at the casting of his own soul into the fire of hell, for which he hath cause to weep all his life. And it cannot be but the grudge and fear thereof followeth his laughter, and secret sorrow marreth all such outward mirth. For the heart of a wicked wretch is like a stormy sea that cannot rest, ⁊ except a man be fallen down into the dungeon of wretchedness, and the door shut over his head. For when a sinner is once fallen down into the depth, he waxeth a desperate wretch and setteth all at naught, and he is in the worst kind of all, and farthest from all recovery. For like as in the body his sickness is most incurable that is sick and feeleth it not, but weeneth himself whole (for he that is in that case is commonly mad), so he that by a mischievous custom of sin perceiveth no fault in his evil deed nor hath no remorse thereof, hath lost the natural light of reason and the spiritual light of faith, which two lights of knowledge and understanding quenched, what remaineth in him more than the bodily senses and sensual wits common to man and brute beasts?

Now albeit so that the fleshly and worldly pleasure is of truth not pleasant but bitter, and the spiritual pleasure is of truth so sweet that the sweetness thereof many times darkeneth ⁊ and diminisheth the feeling of bodily pain, by reason whereof good virtuous folk feel more pleasure in the sorrow of their sins and affliction of their penance than wretches feel in the fulfilling of their foul delight, and credible is it that the inward spiritual pleasure and comfort which many of the old holy martyrs had in the hope of heaven darkened ⁊ and in manner overwhelmed the bodily pains of their torment,—yet this notwithstanding, like as a sick man feeleth no sweetness in sugar, and some women with child have such fond lust that they had liefer eat tar than treacle and rather pitch than marmalade, and some whole people love tallow better than butter, and Iceland loveth no butter till it be long barrelled, so we gross carnal people, having our taste infected by the sickness of sin and filthy custom of fleshly lust, find so great liking in the vile and stinking delectation of fleshly delight that we list not once prove what manner of sweetness good and virtuous folk feel and perceive in spiritual pleasure. And the cause is why? Because we cannot perceive the one, but if we forbear the other. For like as the ground that is all forgrown ⁊ with nettles, briars, and other evil weeds, can bring forth no corn till they be weeded out, so can

our soul have no place for the good corn of spiritual pleasure as long as it is overgrown with the barren weeds of carnal delectation. For the pulling out of which weeds by the root, there is not a more meet instrument than of the remembrance of the four last things, which as they shall pull out these weeds of fleshly voluptuousness, so shall they not fail to plant in their places, not only wholesome virtues, but also marvellous ghostly pleasure and spiritual gladness, which in every good soul riseth of the love of God, and hope of heaven, and inward liking that the godly spirit taketh in the diligent labour of good and virtuous business.

I would not so long tarry in this point nor make so many words of the pleasure that men may find by the receipt of this medicine, were it not that I well perceive the world so set upon the seeking of pleasure, that they set by pleasure much more than by profit. And therefore, to the intent that ye may perceive that it is not a fantasy found ¹³ of mine own head, that the abandoning and refusing of carnal pleasure and the ensuing of labour, travail, penance and bodily pain, shall bring therewith to a Christian man, not only in the world that is coming but also in this present life, very sweetness, comfort, pleasure, and gladness, I shall prove it to be true by their testimony and witness whose authority, speaking of their own experience, there will, I ween, none honest man mistrust.

Lo, the holy doctor, Saint Austin, exhorting penitents and repentant sinners to sorrow for their offences, saith unto them: “Sorrow,” saith this holy man, “and be glad of thy sorrow.” In vain should he bid him be glad of his sorrow, if man in sorrow could not be glad. But this holy father showeth by this counsel, not only that a man may be joyful and glad for all his sorrow, but also that he may be and hath cause to be glad because of his sorrow.

Long were it to rehearse the places that prove this point among the holy doctors of Christ’s Church; but we will, instead of them all, allege you the words of Him that is doctor of them all, our Saviour Jesu Christ. He saith that the way to heaven is strait and aspre ¹⁴ or painful. ¹⁵ And therefore He saith that few folk find it out or walk therein. And yet saith He for all that, “My yoke is easy and my burden light.” ¹⁶ How could these two sayings stand together, were it not that as the labour, travail, and affliction of the body is painful and sharp to the flesh, so the comfort and gladness that the soul conceiveth thereof, rising into the love of our Lord and hope of His glory to come, so tempereth and overmastereth the bitterness of the grief, that it maketh the very labour easy, the sourness very sweet, and the very pain pleasant?

Will ye see the example? Look upon His holy apostles,—when they were taken and scourged with whips for Christ’s sake, did it grieve them, think ye? Imagine yourself in the same case, and I think ye will think yea. Now see, then, for all the pain of their flesh, what joy and pleasure they conceived in their soul. The holy Scripture saith ¹⁷ that they rejoiced and joyed that God had accounted them worthy for Christ’s sake, not only to be scourged, but also—which would be far greater grief to an honest man than the pain itself—to be scourged with despite and shame, so that the more their pain was, the more was their joy. For as the holy doctor, Saint Chrysostom, saith, though pain be grievous for the nature of the affliction, yet is it pleasant by the alacrity and quick mind of them that willingly suffer it. And therefore, though the nature of the torments make great grief and pain, yet the prompt and willing mind of them that were scourged passed and overcame the nature of the thing, that is to wit, mastering the outward fleshly pain with inward spiritual pleasure. And surely this is so true that it may stand for a very certain token that

a penitent beginneth to profit and grow in grace and favour of God when he feeleth a pleasure and quickness in his labour and pain taken in prayer, almsdeeds, pilgrimage, fasting, discipline, tribulation, affliction, and such other spiritual exercise, by which the soul willingly worketh with the body by their own punishment to purge and rub out the rusty, cankered spots that sin hath defiled them with in the sight of God, and to leave the fewer to be burned out in the fire of purgatory. And whensoever, as I say, that a man feeleth in this pain a pleasure he hath a token of great grace and that his penance is pleasant to God, for, as the holy Scripture saith, our Lord loveth a glad giver. ¹⁸ And on the other side, whereas one doth such spiritual business with a dulness of spirit and weariness of mind, he doth twice as much and thereby taketh four times as much pain, since his bodily pain is relieved with no spiritual rejoice nor comfort. I will not say that his labour is lost, but I dare be bold to say that he profiteth much less with much more pain. For certain it is that the best souls and they that have best travailed in spiritual business, find most comfort therein. ¹⁹ And therefore if they most pleased God that in the bodily pain of their penance took less spiritual pleasure, it should thereof follow that the farther a man proceeded in the perfection of spiritual exercise, in the worse case he were. Which can in no wise be so, since that we see the holy apostles and other holy men and women, the better that they were, the more pleasure they perceived in their fleshly afflictions, either put unto them by God, or taken by themselves for God's sake.

Therefore let every man by the labour of his mind and help of prayer, enforce himself in all tribulation and affliction, labour, pain and travail, without spot of pride or ascribing any praise to himself, to conceive a delight and pleasure in such spiritual exercise, and thereby to rise in the love of our Lord, with an hope of heaven, contempt of the world, and longing to be with God. To the attaining of which mind, by the putting away of the malicious pleasures of the devil, the filthy pleasures of the flesh, and the vain pleasures of the world, which once excluded there is place made and clean purged to receive the very sweet and pure pleasure of the spirit,—there is not any one thing lightly, as I have said, more accommodated nor more effectual than this thing that I have begun with and taken in hand to entreat, that is to wit, the remembrance of the four last things, which is, as the Scripture saith, so effectual that if a man remember it well, he shall never sin.

Thou wilt haply say that it is not enough that a man do none evil, but he must also do good. This is very truth that ye say. But first, if there be but these two steps to heaven, he that getteth him on the one is half up. And over that, whoso doth none evil, it will be very hard but he must needs do good, since man's mind is never idle but occupied commonly either with good or evil.

And therefore, when folk have few words and use much musing, likewise as among many words all be not always well and wisely set, so, when the tongue lieth still, if the mind be not occupied well it were less evil, save for worldly rebuke, to blabber on trifles somewhat sottishly, than while they seem sage in keeping silence, secretly peradventure the meanwhile to fantasy with themselves filthy sinful devices, whereof their tongues, if they were set on babbling, could not for shame utter and speak the like.

I say not this for that I would have folks fall to babbling, well wotting that, as the Scripture saith, in many words lacketh not sin ²⁰ —but that I would have folk in their silence take good heed that their minds be occupied with good thoughts, for unoccupied be they never. For if ever the mind

were empty, it would be empty when the body sleepeth. But if it were then all empty, we should have no dreams. Then, if the fantasies leave us not sleeping, it is not likely that ever they leave us waking. Wherefore, as I say, let us keep our minds occupied with good thoughts, or else the devil will fill them with evil.

And surely everything hath his mean. There is, as Scripture saith, time to speak and time to keep thy tongue. ²³ Whensoever the communication is naught ²⁴ and ungodly, it is better to hold thy tongue and think on some better thing the while, than to give ear thereto and underpin ²⁵ the tale. And yet better were it than holding of thy tongue, properly to speak, and with some good grace and pleasant fashion to break into some better matter; by which thy speech and talking, thou shalt not only profit thyself as thou shouldst have done by thy well minded silence, but also amend the whole audience, which is a thing far better and of much more merit. Howbeit, if thou can find no proper means to break the tale, then, except thy bare authority suffice to command silence, it were peradventure good, rather to keep a good silence thyself, than blunder forth rudely and irritate them to anger, which shall haply therefor not let ²⁶ to talk on, but speak much the more, lest they should seem to leave at thy commandment. And better were it for the while to let one wanton word pass uncontrolled, than give occasion of twain. But if the communication be good, then is it better not only to give ear thereto, but also first well and prudently to devise with thyself upon the same, and then moderately and in good manner, if thou find aught to the purpose, speak thereto and say thy mind therein. So shall it appear to the presence, ²⁷ that your mind was well occupied the while and your thought not wandering forty miles thence while your body was there; as it often happeth that the very face showeth the mind walking a pilgrimage, in such wise that, not without some note and reproach of such vagrant mind, other folk suddenly say to them: 'A penny for your thoughts.' Which manner of wandering mind in company may percase be the more excusable sometimes by some chargeable business of the party, but surely it is never taken for wisdom nor good manners.

But now to return to my purpose, since the remembrance of these four last things is of such force and efficacy that it is able always to keep us from sin, and since we can never be long void of both, it must thereof ensue that we shall consequently do good; and thereof must it needs follow that this only lesson well learned and busily put in ure ²⁸ must needs lead us to heaven.

Yet will ye peradventure say that ye know these four things well enough, and if the knowledge thereof had so great effect as the Scripture speaketh of, there should not be so many naught ²⁹ as there be. For what Christian man is he, that hath wit and discretion, but he hath heard and, having any faith, believeth these four last things, of which the first, that is to say, death, we need no faith to believe, we know it by daily proof and experience?

I say not nay, but that we know them either by faith or experience,—and yet not so very thoroughly as we might, peradventure, and hereafter undoubtedly shall. Which if we knew once thoroughly, and so feelingly perceived as we might, percase, and namely as we surely shall, there would be little doubt but the least of all the four would well keep us from sin. For as for yet, though we have heard of the doom, yet were we never at it: though we have heard of hell, yet came we never in it; though we have heard of heaven, yet came we never to it; and though we daily see men die, and thereby know the death, yet ourselves never felt it. For if we knew these things thoroughly, the least of all four were, as I said, enough to keep us from sin.

Howbeit, the foresaid words of Scripture biddeth thee not know the four last things, but remember thy four last things, and then, he saith, thou shall never sin.

Many things know we that we seldom think on: and in the things of the soul, the knowledge without the remembrance little profiteth. What availeth it to know that there is a God, which thou not only believest by faith but also knowest by reason, what availeth that thou knowest Him, if thou think little of Him? The busy minding of thy four last things, and the deep consideration thereof, is the thing that shall keep thee from sin. And if thou put it in essay and make a proof, thou shalt well find, by that thou shalt have no lust to sin for the time that thou deeply thinkest on them, that if our frailty could endure never to remit or slacken in the deep devising of them, we should never have delight or pleasure in any sinful thing.

For the proof whereof, let us first begin at the remembrance of the first of these four last, which is undoubtedly far the least of the four, and thereby shall we make a proof what marvellous effect may grow by the diligent remembrance of all four, towards the avoiding of all the trains, ²⁸ darts, sleights, enticings, and assaults of the three mortal enemies, the devil, the world, and our own flesh.

The Remembrance of Death. What profit and commodity cometh unto man's soul by the meditation of death is not only marked of ²⁹ the chosen people of God, but also of such as were the best sort among gentiles and paynims. For some of the old famous philosophers, when they were demanded what faculty philosophy was, answered that it was the meditation or exercise of death. For like as death maketh a severance of the body and the soul, when they by course of nature must needs depart asunder, so (said they) doth the study of philosophy labour to sever the soul from the love and affections of the body while they be together. Now if this be the whole study and labour of philosophy, as the best philosophers said that it is, then may we within short time be well learned in philosophy. For nothing is there that may more effectually withdraw the soul from the wretched affections of the body than may the remembrance of death,—if we do not remember it hoverly, ³⁰ as one heareth a word and let it pass by his ear, without any receiving of the sentence ³¹ into his heart. But if we not only hear this word 'death,' but also let sink into our hearts the very fantasy and deep imagination thereof, we shall perceive thereby that we were never so greatly moved by the beholding of the Dance of Death pictured in Paul's, as we shall feel ourselves stirred and altered by the feeling of that imagination in our hearts. And no marvel. For those pictures express only the loathly figure of our dead bony bodies, bitten away the flesh; which though it be ugly to behold, yet neither the light thereof, nor the sight of all the dead heads in the charnel house, nor the apparation of a very ghost, is half so grisly as the deep conceived fantasy of death in his nature, by the lively imagination graven in thine own heart. For there seest thou, not one plain grievous sight of the bare bones hanging by the sinews, but thou seest (if thou fantasy thine own death, for so art thou by this counsel advised), thou seest, I say, thyself, if thou die no worse death, yet at the leastwise lying in thy bed, thy head shooting, thy back aching, thy veins beating, thine heart panting, thy throat rattling, thy flesh trembling, thy mouth gaping, thy nose sharpening, thy legs cooling, thy fingers fumbling, thy breath shortening, all thy strength fainting, thy life vanishing, and thy death drawing on.

If thou couldst now call to thy remembrance some of those sicknesses that have most grieved

thee and tormented thee in thy days, as every man hath felt some, and then findest thou that some one disease in some one part of thy body, as percuse the stone or the strangury, have put thee to thine own mind to no less torment than thou shouldst have felt if one had put up a knife into the same place, and wouldst, as thee then seemed, have been content with such a change,—think what it will be then when thou shalt feel so many such pains in every part of thy body, breaking thy veins and thy life strings, with like pain and grief as though as many knives as thy body might receive should everywhere enter and meet in the midst. A stroke of a staff, a cut of a knife, the flesh singed with fire, the pain of sundry sickness, many men have essayed in themselves; and they that have not yet, somewhat have heard by them that felt it. But what manner dolour and pain, what manner of grievous pangs, what intolerable torment, the silly creature feeleth in the dissolution and severance of the soul from the body, never was there body that yet could tell the tale.

Some conjecture and token of this point we have of the bitter passion and piteous departing of our Saviour Jesu Christ, of Whom we nothing read that ever He cried for any pain, neither for the whips and rods beating His blessed body nor the sharp thorns pricking His holy head, or the great, long nails piercing His precious hands and feet. But when the point approached in which His sacred soul should depart out of His blessed body, at that point He cried loud once or twice to His Father in heaven, into Whose mighty and merciful hands, at the extreme point, with a great loud cry He gave up the ghost. ³³ Now if that death was so painful and ragious to our Saviour Christ, Whose joy and comfort of His godhead, if He would have suffered it, might in such wise have redounded into His soul, and so forth into His body, that it should not only have supped up all His pain, but also have transformed His holy body into a glorious form and made it impossible,— what intolerable torment will death be then to us miserable wretches, of which the more part among the pangs of our passage shall have yet so painful twitches of our own conscience that the fear of hell, the dread of the devil, and sorrow at our heart at the sight of our sins, shall pass and exceed the deadly pains of our body.

Other things are there which will peradventure seem no great matter to them that feel them not, but unto him that shall lie in that case, they shall be tedious out of all measure.

Have ye not ere this, in a sore sickness, felt it very grievous to have folk babble to you, and namely ³³ such things as ye should make answer to, when it was a pain to speak? Think ye not now that it will be a gentle pleasure, when we lie dying, all our body in pain, all our mind in trouble, our soul in sorrow, our heart all in dread while our life walketh awayward, while our death draweth toward, while the devil is busy about us, while we lack stomach and strength to bear any one of so manifold heinous troubles, will it not be, as I was about to say, a pleasant thing to see before thine eyes and hear at thine ear a rabble of fleshly friends, or rather of flesh flies, skipping about thy bed and thy sick body, like ravens about thy corpse, now almost carrion, crying to thee on every side, “What shall I have? What shall I have?” Then shall come thy children and cry for their parts; then shall come thy sweet wife, and where in thine health haply she spake thee not one sweet word in six weeks, now shall she call thee sweet husband and weep with much work and ask thee what shall she have; then shall thine executors ask for the keys, and ask what money is owing thee, ask what substance thou hast, and ask where thy money lieth. And while thou liest in that case, their words shall be so tedious that thou wilt wish all that they ask for upon a red fire, so thou mightest lie one half-hour in rest.

Now is there one thing which a little I touched before, I wot not whether more painful or more perilous,—the marvellous intent business and solicitation of our ghostly enemy the devil, not only in one fashion present, but surely never absent from him that draweth towards death. For since that of his pestilent envy conceived from the beginning of man's creation, by which he lay in wait to take our first mother, Eve, in a train, and thereby drawing our former father, Adam, into the breach of God's behest, found the means not without the grievous increase of his own damnation, to deprive us of paradise and bereave us our immortality, making us into subjection not only of temporal death but also of his eternal tormentry, were we not by the great bounty of God and Christ's painful passion, restored to the possibility of everlasting life, he never ceased since to run about like a ramping lion, ³⁴ looking whom he might devour,—it can be no doubt but he most busily travaileth in that behalf at the time that he perceiveth us about to depart hence. For well he knoweth that then he either winneth a man for ever, or for ever loseth him; for have he him never so fast afore, yet if he break from him then he can after his death never get him again. Well he may, peradventure, have him as his gaoler in his prison of purgatory for the time of his punishment temporal; but as he would have him for his perpetual slave, shall he never have him after, how sure soever he had him afore, if he get from him at the time of his death. For so lost he suddenly the thief that hung on the right hand of Christ. And on the other side, if he catch a man fast at the time of his death, he is sure to keep him for ever. For as the Scripture saith, “Wheresoever the stone ³⁵ falleth, there shall it abide.” ³⁶ And since he knoweth this for very surety and is of malice so venomous and envious that he had liefer double his own pain than suffer us to escape from pain, he, when we draw to death, doth his uttermost endeavour to bring us to damnation, never ceasing to minister, by subtle and incogitable ³⁷ means, first unlawful longing to live and horror to go gladly to God at His calling.

Then giveth he some false glade ³⁸ of escaping that sickness, and thereby putteth in our mind a love yet and cleaving to the world, keeping of our goods, loathsomeness of shrift, sloth towards good works. And if we be so far gone that we see we cannot recover, then he casteth in our minds presumption and security of salvation as a thing well won by our own works, of which, if we have any done well, he casteth them into our minds with over great liking and thereby withdraweth us from the haste of doing any more, as a thing that either needeth not or may be done by our executors. And instead of sorrow for our sins and care of heaven, he putteth us in mind of provision for some honourable burying,—so many torches, so many tapers, so many black gowns, so many merry mourners laughing under black hoods, and a gay hearse, with the delight of goodly and honourable funerals: in which the foolish sick man is sometimes occupied as though he thought that he should stand in a window and see how worshipfully he shall be brought to church.

And thus inveigleth he them that either be good, or but meetly ³⁹ bad.

But as for those that he hath known for special wretches, whose whole life hath in effect been all bestowed in his service, whom he hath brought into great and horrible sins by the horror whereof he hath kept them from confession, these folk at their end he handleth on another fashion. For into their minds he bringeth their shameful sins by heap, and by the abominable sight thereof draweth them into desperation. For the aggrieving whereof our Lord, after their deserving, suffereth him to show himself to them for their more discomfort in some fearful figure and

terrible likeness, by the beholding whereof they conceive sometimes despair of salvation and yield themselves as captives quick, beginning their hell in this world, as hath appeared by the words and wretched behaviour of many that of a shameful, sinful life have died and departed with heavy desperate death. Now death being such as I have described, or rather much more horrible than any man can describe, it is not to be doubted but if we busily remembered the terror and grief thereof, it must needs be so bitter to the fleshly mind that it could not fail to take away the vain delight of all worldly vanities. But the thing that letteth us to consider death in his kind, and to take great profit that would arise of the remembrance thereof is that for by the hope of long life, we look upon death either so far off that we see him not at all, or but a slight and uncertain sight, as a man may see a thing so far off that he wotteth not whether it be a bush or a beast. And surely so fare we by death, looking thereat afar off through a great long space of as many years as we hope to live,—and those we imagine many, and perilously and foolishly beguile ourselves. For likewise as wives would their husbands should ween by the example of Sarah that there were no woman so old but she might have a child, so is there none old man so old but that, as Tully saith, he trusteth to live one year yet. And as for young folk, they look not how many be dead in their own days younger than themselves, but who is the oldest man in the town, and upon his years they make their reckoning,—where the wiser way were to reckon that a young man may die soon, and an old man cannot live long, but within a little while die the one may, the other must. And with this reckoning shall they look upon death much nearer hand, and better perceive him in his own likeness, and thereby take the more fruit of the remembrance and make themselves the more ready thereto.

Thou wouldst somewhat remember death the more effectually, and look upon him somewhat the more nearly, if thou knewest thyself sick, and specially of any perilous sickness that would make an end of thee though thou feltest yet little pain. For commonly when we be sick then begin we to know ourselves, then pain bringeth us home, then we think how merry a thing it were to be praying in health, which we cannot now do for grief. Then care we little for our gay gear, then desire we no delicate dainties; and as for Lady Lechery, then abhor we to think on. And then we think in ourselves that if ever we recover and mend in body, we will amend in soul, leave all vices and be virtuously occupied the remnant of our life. Insomuch that very true we find the words of the epistle that the well-learned man, Plinius Secundus, after his sickness wrote unto his friend, wherein, after the description of men's fantasies in their disease, he closeth up his letter in this wise: "Look," saith he, "all the good counsel and precepts that all the philosophers and wise men in this world give us for instruction of virtuous living, all that can I compendiously give to myself and thee in few words: no more, lo, but let us be such when we be whole, as we think we will be when we be sick."

Now then if thou be ever sick, and ever sick of a perilous sickness, wouldst thou not, if thou knewest thyself in such case, have better remembrance of death than thou hast? It would be hard, peradventure, to make thee believe thyself sick while thou feelest no harm, and yet is that no sure knowledge of health. Trow ye not that many a man is infected with the great sickness a good while ere he perceive it, and the body sore corrupt within ere he feel the grief? How many men have there been that have gone about with God's marks on their body, never perceiving themselves to be sick, but as merry as ever they were in their lives, till other men gave them warning how near they were their deaths? And therefore never reckon thyself whole, though thou feel no grief.

But thou wilt haply say, “Be it that I cannot surely reckon myself whole, yet ye show me not why I should reckon myself sick.” Thou sayest right well, and that shall I show thee now. Tell me, if one were in case that he must be fain once or twice a day to swaddle and plaster his leg and else he could not keep his life, wouldst thou reckon his leg sick or whole? I ween ye will agree that his leg is not well at ease, nor the owner neither. Now if ye felt your belly in such case that ye must be fain all day to tend it with warm clothes ⁴³ or else ye were not able to abide the pain, would ye reckon your belly sick or whole? I ween ye would reckon your belly not in good quart. ⁴⁴ If thou shouldst see one in such case that he could not hold up his head, that he could not stand on his feet, that he should be fain to lie down along and there lie speechless as a dead stock an hour or two every day, wouldst thou not say that he were perilously sick and had good cause to remember death, when he lieth every day in such case as though he were dead already?

Now then I pray thee consider me that all our bodies be ever in such case so tender of themselves that except we lapped them continually with warm clothes, we were not able to live one winter week. Consider that our bodies have so sore a sickness and such a continual consumption in themselves that the strongest were not able to endure and continue ten days together, were it not that once or twice a day we be fain to take medicines inward to clout them up withal and keep them as long as we can. For what is our meat and drink but medicines against hunger and thirst, that give us warning of that we daily lose by our inward consumption? And of that consumption shall we die in conclusion, for all the medicines that we use, though never other sickness came at us.

Consider also that all our swaddling and tending with warm clothes and daily medicines, yet can our bodies not bear themselves but that almost half our time ever in twenty-four hours we be fain to fall in a swoon which we call sleep, and there lie like dead stocks by a long space ere we come to ourselves again: insomuch that among all wise men of old it is agreed that sleep is the very image of death.

Now thou wilt peradventure say that this is but a fantasy. For though we call this hunger sickness and meat a medicine, yet men know well enough what very ⁴⁵ sickness is and what very medicines be, and thereby we know well enough that they be none.

If thou think this, then would I wit of thee what thou callest a sickness. Is not that a sickness that will make an end of thee if it be not helped? If that be so, then I suppose thou bearest ever thy sickness with thee,—for very sure art thou that it will make an end of thee if thou be not helped.

What callest thou, then, a medicine? Is it not such a thing as either applied outwardly to thy body, or received inward, shall preserve thee against that sore or sickness that else would put thee or some part of thee in peril? What can be, then, more properly and more verily a medicine than is our meat and drink, by which is resisted the peril and undoubted death that else should in so few days follow, by the inward sickness of our own nature continually consuming us within? For as for that ye reckon that we know which be sickness, that is but a custom of calling, by which we call no sickness by that name but such as be casual and come and go. For that that is common to all men, and never from any man, because we reckon it natural, we give it not the name of sickness, but we name sickness a passion ⁴⁶ that cometh seldomer and, as we reckon,

against nature, whereas the conflict of the divers qualified elements tempered in our body, continually labouring each to vanquish other and thereby to dissolve the whole, though it be as sore against the continuance of our nature and as sore laboureth to the dissolution of the whole body as other sickness do, yet we neither call it sickness, nor the meat that resisteth it we call no medicine, and that for none other cause but for the continual familiarity that we have therewith.

But now consider, if it were so that one whole country were born all lepers, which is a sickness rather foul and perilous than painful, or all an whole country born with the falling sickness, so that never any of them had ever in their lives known or heard either themselves or any other void of those diseases, trow ye this, then, that they would ever have reckoned them for sickness? Nay surely, but they would have counted for sickness the colic and the stone and such other like as come and go. But as for their leprosy and falling evil, they would never account it other than we account hunger or sleep. For as for that thy hunger doth thee pleasure when it is fed, so doth sometimes the itch of a sore leg when thou clawest about the brinks. ⁴⁷

And thus mayest thou surely see that all our whole life is but a sickness never curable, but as an incurable canker, with continual swaddling and plastering botched up to live as long as we may, and in conclusion undoubtedly to die of the same sickness, and though there never came other. So that, if you consider this well, thou mayest look upon death, not as a stranger, but as a nigh neighbour. For as the flame is next the smoke, so is death next an incurable sickness; and such is all our life.

And yet if this move you little, but that ye think for all this that death is far from you, I will go somewhat nearer you. Thou reckonest every man near his death when he is dying. Then if thyself be now already dying, how canst thou reckon thyself far from death? Some man saith merrily to his fellow, "Be merry, man,—thou shalt never die as long as thou livest." And albeit he seem to say true, yet saith he more than he can make good. For if that were true, I could make him much merrier, for then he should never die. Ye will peradventure marvel of this, but it is easy to prove. For I think ye will grant me that there is no time after that a man hath once life, but he is either alive or dead. Then will there no man say that one can die either before he get life or after that he hath lost it, and so hath he no time left to die in but while he hath life. Wherefore, if we neither die before our life nor when we be dead already, needs must it follow that we never die but while we live.

It is not all one to die and to be dead. Truth it is that we be never dead while we live; and it is, meseemeth, as true, not only that we die while we live, but also that we die all the while we live. What thing is dying? Is it any other thing than the passage and going out of this present life?

Now tell me, then, if thou were going out of an house, whether art thou going out only when thy foot is on the uttermost inch of the threshold, thy body half out of the door, or else when thou beginnest to set the first foot forward to go out, in what place of the house soever ye stand when ye buskle ^{*} forward? I would say that ye be going out of the house from the first foot ye set forward to go forth. No man will think other, as I suppose, but all is one reason in going hence and coming hither. Now if one were coming hither to this town, he were not only coming hither while he were entering in at the gate, but all the way also from whence he came hitherward. Nor, in likewise, in going hence from this town,—a man is not only going from this town while he

hath his body in the gate going outward, but also while he setteth his foot out of his host's house to go forward. And therefore, if a man met him by the way, far yet within the town, and asked him whither he were going, he should truly answer that he were going out of the town, all were the town so long that he had ten miles to go ere he came at the gate.

And surely, methinketh that in likewise a man is not only dying, that is to say, going in his way out of this life, while he lieth drawing on, but also all the while that he is going towards his end,—which is by all the whole time of his life, since the first moment till the last finished, that is to wit, since the first moment in which he began to live, until the last moment of his life, or rather the first in which he is fully dead.

Now if this be thus, as meseemeth that reason proveth, a man is always dying from afore his birth, and every hour of our age, as it passeth by, cutteth his own length out of our life and maketh it shorter by so much, and our death so much the nearer. Which measuring of time and diminishing of life, with approaching towards death, is nothing else but from our beginning to our ending, one continual dying: so that wake we, sleep we, eat we, drink we, mourn we, sing we, in what wise soever live we, all the same while die we. So that we never ought to look towards death as a thing far off, considering that although he made no haste towards us, yet we never cease ourselves to make haste towards him.

Now if thou think this reason but a sophistical subtlety, and thinkest while thou art a young man thou mayest for all this think thy death far off, that is to wit, as far as thou hast by likelihood of nature many years to live, then will I put thee an homely example, not very pleasant, but none the less very true and very fit for the matter.

If there were two, both condemned to death, both carried out at once towards execution; of which two, the one were sure that the place of his execution were within one mile, the other twenty miles off, yea an hundred, an ye will, he that were in the cart to be carried an hundred miles would not take much more pleasure than his fellow in the length of his way, notwithstanding that it were a hundred times as long as his fellow's and that he had thereby a hundred times as long to live, being sure and out of all question to die at the end.

Reckon me now yourself a young man in your best lust, twenty years of age, if ye will. Let there be another, ninety. Both must ye die, both be ye in the cart carrying forward. His gallows and death standeth within ten miles at the farthest, and yours within eighty. I see not why ye should reckon much less of your death than he, though your way be longer, since ye be sure ye shall never cease riding till ye come at it. And this is true, although ye were sure that the place of your execution stood so far beyond his. But what if there were to the place of your execution two ways, of which the one were four score miles farther about than your fellow's, the other nearer by five miles than his; and when ye were put in the cart, had warning of both; and though ye were showed that it were likely that ye should be carried the longer way, yet it might hap ye should go the shorter, and whether ye were carried the one or the other, ye should never know till ye come to the place: I trow ye could not in this case make much longer of your life than of your fellow's.

Now in this case are we all. For our Lord hath not indented * with us of the time. * He hath

appointed what we may not pass, but not how soon we shall go, nor where, nor in what wise. And therefore if thou wilt consider how little cause thou hast to reckon thy death so far off by reason of thy youth, reckon how many as young as thou have been slain in the selfsame ways in which thou ridest, how many have been drowned in the selfsame waters in which thou rowest. And thus shalt thou well see that thou hast no cause to look upon thy death as a thing far off, but a thing undoubtedly nigh thee, and ever walking with thee. By which, not a false imagination but a very true contemplation, thou shalt behold him and advise ^{s1} him such as he is, and thereby take occasion to flee vain pleasures of the flesh that keep out the very ^{s2} pleasures of the soul.

From *The English Works of Sir Thomas More*, vol. 1, edited by W. E. Campbell. London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931, pp. 459-476.

¹ especially.

² postpone.

³ a prophylactic.

⁴ pretend.

⁵ a prophylactic.

⁶ have least knowledge.

⁷ uneasy.

⁸ refuse, hogwash.

⁹ Is. lvii. 20.

¹⁰ deadens.

¹¹ deadens.

¹² overgrown.

¹³ contrived, invented.

¹⁴ sharp.

¹⁵ Matt. vii. 14.

¹⁶ Matt. xi. 30.

¹⁷ Acts. v. 41.

¹⁸ 2 Cor. ix. 7.

¹⁹ Cf. Dialogue Concerning Tyndale, p. 151.

²⁰ Prov. x. 19.

²¹ Eccles. iii. 7.

²² the talk is evil.

²³ support.

²⁴ refrain.

²⁵ those present.

²⁶ into practice.

²⁷ evil.

²⁸ schemes, plots.

²⁹ observed in.

³⁰ inattentively.

³¹ meaning.

³² Matt. xxvii. 50; Mark xv. 37; Luke xxiii. 46.

³³ especially.

³⁴ Ps. xxi. 14; 1 Pet. v. 8.

³⁵ rather, tree.

³⁶ Eccles. xi. 3.
³⁷ incalculable.
³⁸ opening.
³⁹ moderately.
⁴⁰ prevents.
⁴¹ Cicero.
⁴² brings things home to us.
⁴³ hot compresses.
⁴⁴ health, condition.
⁴⁵ real.
⁴⁶ suffering.
⁴⁷ edges.
⁴⁸ start.
⁴⁹ entered into an agreement.
⁵⁰ Job xiv. 13.
⁵¹ mark, heed, consider.
⁵² true.