

DOSTOYEVSKY.

BY THE EDITOR.

A READER has called my attention to Dostoyevsky's instructive little fable of "The Onion" which is found in the great Russian's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and reads as follows:

"Once upon a time there was a peasant woman, and a very wicked woman she was. And she died and did not leave a single good deed behind. The devils caught her and plunged her into the lake of fire. So her guardian angel stood and wondered what good deed of hers he could remember to tell to God. 'She once pulled up an onion in her garden,' said he, 'and gave it to a beggar woman.' And God answered: 'You take that onion then, hold it out to her in the lake, and let her take hold and be pulled out. If you can pull her out of the lake, let her come to Paradise; but if the onion breaks, then the woman must stay where she is.' The angel ran to the woman and held out the onion to her. 'Come,' said he, 'catch hold and I'll pull you out,' and he began cautiously pulling her out. He had just pulled her out, when the other sinners in the lake, seeing how she was being drawn out, began catching hold of her so as to be pulled out with her. But she was a very wicked woman and she began kicking them. 'I'm to be pulled out, not you. It's my onion, not yours.' As soon as she said that the onion broke, and the woman fell into the lake and she is burning there to this day."

Having myself written a little tale, the story of the spider-web, to illustrate the same idea, I naturally take an interest in all kindred expositions and come to the conclusion that this doctrine must be a very ancient inheritance of the human race, likely of a pre-Christian date. According to my version an evil-doer is suffering torture in hell, and when he calls on Buddha for succor the poor wretch cannot remember a single good deed he ever performed on earth. But the All-compassionate One, in his omniscience, recalls that once the

sinner took pity on a spider crawling before him on his path and avoided stepping on it. Then the blessed Buddha allowed the spider to go to his benefactor's rescue. He spun a web from paradise to hell and bade the evil-doer take hold of it and be drawn upward out of the fiery pools. This he did; but other denizens of hell took hold of him, and the spider-web stretched but still held out. Then, in fear that it would break, he shouted, "Let go, the web is *mine*." Thereupon it broke at once, and he fell back into hell.

Dostoyevsky's story is very similar to another version of the same thought in Italian folklore, told of St. Peter's mother. It was quoted at length some time ago in *The Open Court* (Vol. XIX, 1905, pp. 756-758), and I will add here that when I wrote the story of the spider-web I was unacquainted with either the Italian or Russian version.

The origin of my story is mainly rooted in a Buddhist tradition. We read that the man who has overcome the error of selfhood says, in reply to Mâra, the Evil One, the Tempter, "Naught is of *me*."¹ Whatever other recollections may have combined to shape the spider-web episode, they were unconscious at the time I wrote the story *Karma* in which it occurs.

Hell is the thought of "I" and "me," the thought of "myself" and "mine." Liberation or salvation is gained only through an utter abandonment of all selfhood, and even if we were living in paradise, so long as we harbored the thought of self in our heart, we would be in hell. This is the Buddhist doctrine.

Religion is ultimately an all-feeling, a panpathy, a love for all that lives, and this thought is not confined to Buddhism; it is the natural faith of mankind. Primitive religion, as it existed in the prehistoric mind and lingers still in many old traditions, as in Grimm's fairy tales, and especially in "The Ancient Mariner," is much broader than we are inclined to grant. Coleridge has faithfully expressed it in the all-comprehensive declaration:

"He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all."

This religion is not mere fancy; it has existed and still exists to a great extent among the people whom we call savages, and also characterizes Dostoyevsky's story of the onion.

Dostoyevsky was naturally of an impressionable nature, and

¹ See *Dharma*, 5th ed., p. 78, quoted from Warren's translation of the Samyutta-Nikâya.

the hardships of his life served to increase the sensitiveness of his soul.

From the "Translator's Preface" to Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, we quote the following passage:

"Though neither by temperament nor conviction a revolutionist, Dostoyevsky was one of a little group of young men who met together to read Fourier and Proudhon. He was accused of 'taking part in conversations against the censorship, of reading a letter from Byelinsky to Gogol, and of knowing of the intention to set up a printing press.' Under Nicholas I (that 'stern and just man,' as Maurice Baring calls him, this was enough, and he was condemned to death. After eight months' imprisonment he was, with twenty-one others, taken out to the Semyonovsky Square to be shot. Writing to his brother Mihail, Dostoyevsky says: 'They snapped swords over our heads, and they made us put on the white shirts worn by persons condemned to death. Thereupon we were bound in threes to stakes, to suffer execution. Being the third in the row, I concluded I had only a few minutes of life before me. I thought of you and your dear ones, and I contrived to kiss Plestcheiev and Dourov, who were next to me, and to bid them farewell. Suddenly the troops beat a tattoo, we were unbound, brought back upon the scaffold, and informed that his Majesty had spared our lives.'

"The sentence was commuted to hard labor. One of the prisoners, Grigoryev, went mad as soon as he was untied, and never regained his sanity. The intense suffering of this experience left a lasting stamp on Dostoyevsky's mind. Though his religious temper led him in the end to accept every suffering with resignation and to regard it as a blessing in his own case, he constantly recurs to the subject in his writings. He describes the awful agony of the condemned man and insists on the cruelty of inflicting such torture. Then followed four years of penal servitude, spent in the company of common criminals in Siberia, where he began the 'Dead House,' and some years of service in a disciplinary battalion.

"He had shown signs of some obscure nervous disease before his arrest, and this now developed into violent attacks of epilepsy, from which he suffered for the rest of his life. The fits occurred three or four times a year and were more frequent in periods of great strain. In 1859 he was allowed to return to Russia."

The fact that war has its benefits as well as its horrors was felt by Dostoyevsky at the time of the Crimean war when England and France were arrayed against Russia. In 1877, soon after the

outbreak of the war, he wrote a series of articles in its defense, maintaining that war is not always a scourge, but often means deliverance. This interesting work closes with the following words whose prophetic content may well be called to mind to-day:

“We may say in general that when human society is unsound and degenerate even such a useful thing as a long peace brings only injury instead of benefit. . . . It is not an accident that in the history of Europe every generation has had its war. Hence indeed war too probably has its use; it brings healing and relief to mankind. When we think of it in the abstract this may seem revolting, but it is a fact. . . . But war is really an advantage only when it is undertaken in the name of a high principle and not for material advantage, not for the purpose of greedy acquisition or haughty oppression. Otherwise war has always led nations upon false paths and brought them to ruin. If we ourselves will not live to see England’s end, at least our children will.”