THE SKEPTIC'S CHALLENGE.

BY HENRY FRANK.

(Concluded.)

MIND:

Then, e'en
Beside the Grave thou canst but mock the pain
That writhes and pales the heart with fear; if ask'd
The question which, unanswered, palsy's hope
And saddens sorrow, thy answer is a sigh!

Brain:

What answer can more honest comfort give,
Till Truth shall unequivocally speak?
No bars are cast by Science across thy way:
Seek thou for Truth!

Mind:

All's vain if this base life
Be all!

Brain:

Despair not. For a higher faith
Inspires the soul of Science than e'er yet
Regaled the heart of simplest sacristan;
Perchance, if Science cannot cheer the hope,
That casts a dubious radiance upon
Death's dusty darkness—like a spectral bow
That moonbeams sometimes cast on cloudy night—
She still begets a sturdier hope, which, sprung
From safer soil, shall safe fruition yield.
What though the goal is far removed on keen
Endeavor's track; what though with swiftest feet
We must needs fly nor seize th' inviting prize.
In full, but *ignes fatui* snatch betimes;
What if fruit’s promised taste oft disappoints;
What though a dream inspires, which tested, fails;
What though sometimes the house of Theory’s cards
Is dashed by empiric’s hand and Logic’s frown;
What though false hope betimes, a glittering toy
Bedangles luring to Temptation’s void;
What though a promised mine of wealth, a vacuum
Prove, and priceless ore but false pretense?
What though a thousand times cast down; again
We must needs rise and struggle on for Truth,
That, buried, lies beneath the centuried soils,
Or glimmers in a star’s faint beam, or floats
In vagrant vapor, or entombed in rock
Awaits the blow that grants its spirit release;
What though, like sylph, among the forest’s limbs,
Truth flirts and flutters, inviting but to slip
Our grasp, or teases with a perfume that
Misguides us from its source, or blindly leads
Into a *cul de sac* that halts our course?
What though thro’ myriad mazes of conceit,
She lead our wandering and bewildered feet,
Or bandage our keen view with problems dark,
That must be torn aside ere we advance?
You ask where is the peace in such pursuit?
Why follow mysteries that tantalize,
Or seek unbottomed sea for treasures ’yond
The reach of Man? Because th’ Impossible
Suggests the Real. Because the searcher’s zest
Is, by th’ Unfathomable, whetted to a keen
And sharper edge, that failure cannot dull.
Infinity invites to infinite
Research, and prizes that abide.

Mind:

But vain
That search for, if it withers to the touch!
Vain is the flower of Knowledge that shrivels in
Death’s hand!
Brain:

Nay heed! The individual,
Achieving, may himself, like bubble, burst,
And leave on ocean's breast no trace behind.
Yet he, now vanished and invisible,
Hath reared a monument, Time's hungry teeth
Cannot devour. In character, in thought,
In splendor of achievement, noble speech;
In kindly act, and neighbored aid, defence
Of Right and stern demolition of Wrong;
In succor of the weak, and plaudits for
The Brave; in courage on a thousand fields
Where moral Valor called for volunteers;
There glow the stones that shape his monument,
Immortal as the Time-defying hills.

Mind:

But what of them whose deeds have cursed the earth
With foul and devious ways, or murderous course?
Who shall revenge their deeds?

Brain:

Their own revenge
They wreak in memoried hate, and warning stern
To those who would ape their acts. As rot their bones,
So rots their memory in Oblivion's cave.
In surging sea of human life each leaves
Its momentary impress; some to stay,
And some to disappear. The great who are
Immortal are inwove in fabric of
Mankind, that clothe with beauty and with strength
Its stalwart limbs.

Have not the ages coined
The sweat and suffering of human toil,
And purchased thus each Epoch's waiting prize?
The Earth, once niggardly and crude, now yields
Exhaustless cornucopias of wealth
To Man's compulsatory, stalwart Will!
Vast centuries ago lived he, who first conceived
The cunning art that tickled sleeping soils
With the plow's awakening edge? Lives he not still.
And hath long lived, in every plowman who
For eager substance champs the idle earth?
And he who, first on rugged stone or bark,
Wrought forms that mimicked objects he observed,
Lived not his soul in Angelo again;
Did not Praxiteles his spirit breathe;
Were not Murillo's brush and Raphael's dreams,
His own returned to life and labor's love?
Of him who first the vulgar symbols of
Man's speech discerned and traced on sand or rock
The magic semblance of Man's voice, lives he
Not still in learning and in lit'ratures,
In ponderous tomes of thought: in Homer and
In Hesiod, Plato and Confucius, and
In all the Great, have trod Parnassus' heights?
And what of him who first entuned his harp,
That lingers still in trembling lays of love:
In Orpheus' and Anachreon's strains divine.
In Sappho, Byron, Goethe, Shelley, Keats,
And all whose music hath mellowed human hearts?
Is not he immortal who inspires
The race?

And he, who, first, thatched branches seized,
Himself to shelter rudely from the storms,
Lives he not still in architrave and arch,
That glorify cathedrals, or in roofs,
Whose humble gables have housed a myriad souls?
Lives he not still in gorgeous temples, domes,
In castled turrets, towering minarets,
In stately structures that adorn the marts
Of Commerce, and in architectural dreams
Divulged in statant stone and steel? Is he
Not deathless who enhances Progress thus?

Mind:

Nay, 't is but a pale and sallow ghost,
To substitute for Hope's fair form! What
Though millioned generations follow me,
Upon this globe, inspired by my deeds,
And I forever vanish, save in traces
Of dim Memory—a filmy wraith
Of Thought, that Time shall dissipate? Does this
Afford me comfort? If I, unconscious, live
In other lives, but I myself expire,
Of what avail are all my toils and tears,
The strain of labor, the fruit of sweat, the woe
That Disappointment wreathes upon the brow?
If I live not, what care I who lives after?
Though Shakespeare, once upon supernal heights,
The wing'd Pegasus be-reined, and Bruno
Peered through mystic depths of knowledge; Plato
Vied with Olympian gods, and Socrates
The masque of vapid sophistries exposed;
Though Aristotle swept all fields of thought,
And Copernicus traced the paths of distant stars;
Though Grecian lore exalt Themistocles,
And Rome the praises of a Cesar sing;
Though myriad voices laud a Luther brave,
Or Britain, trumpet-tongued, of Cromwell tells;
Though mankind, Washington shall ne'er forget,
And Lincoln be by Freedom's votaries
Forever hymned; and I were each of these,
Or all combined, what comfort this, if I
Live not?

Brain:

(derisively)
This is the native passion of
Persistent life. We live and therefore wish
To live, both now and on eternally.
It is the craving of the self for self—
Delight: it is the selfish egotism
Of Earth's supremely egotistic god—
It is the acme of self consciousness.
He who lived midst swirl of dying worlds,
That measure life by aeons as he by years,
And yet whirl on toward Dissolution's maw;
He whom dead worlds, bestrewn on vacuous skies,
Remind of fate with seal of surety;
While massive mists of incandescent worlds,
Depicting cosmic slaughter, fall round,
To suggest how suns and globes and stars,
And myriad constellations, swarming space, 
Shall all dissolve—yet, is so spurred by love
Of conscious self, he clings tenaciously
To the last straw of sinking hope—is primed
For crass and painful disappointment, should
Convincing proof disintegrate his faith.
But if this, too, should pass like else earth-sprung,
(Time's product that like Time itself shall wane); 
If, 'faith, this earth-life be but flower and fruit,
Planted in aeonic bowels of the Past,
Whose seed contains the innate worm of death.
That gnaws and gnaws and gnaws, till it devour
The last frail vestige of existence: 't were vain
To hope, in palpable defeat of hope!
If we live, we live—the Future's door is closed.
What is to be, no Pythoness reveals.
Though Fancy's gossamer threads may weave fair dreams,
And Imagination 'body, what Fantasy
Surmises, of unexplorable demesnes,
The mind but plays with toys, that please and tickle,
When it thus assures itself of fabled hope.
So please we babes, not yet begloomed by dun
Reality, and charm them with sweet lies.
So they, whose brains vacated of sane thought,
Are lured by mintage of a mind diseased.
We know not what may be; the stars say not.
The Grave evokes no voice beyond its bars.
The rest is silence; and sacred is the spell.
But if we know not what may be; what is,
We know; and what has been is finally
Incarved upon the rocks of centuries.
The Future dreams; the Past is all achieved.
What we may, in unfrequented realms
Become, none ventures to foretell. But what
Portrait of ourselves the Brush of Truth
Paints on the storied canvases of Time,
Looms high in all the Halls of Memory.
One's self is one's monument! The deeds
We do alone commemorate our lives.
Achieve! Achieve!
The Mind:

But if all yields to dust
And earth's itself consumed in final fires,
How useless is ambition, how inane
Achievement!

The Brain:

Why, with nobler faculty,
Despise the humble labor of the birds?
They gather, mark you, rubbish of the fields—
A leaf, a snapped off limb, a casual thread,
A piece of paper, a breeze-blown string—and then,
With inf'nite patience, weave therefrom a rare,
Tho' miniature, house, in which the winds shall rock
The eggs they lay, and fledglings they shall rear;
Which labor, ended, the house, abandoned, may
Be food for shattering storms. Shall we decry
Their toils as fruitless, and their noble art
And cunning craft all vain because so soon
Destroyed? Yet, note, how Nature, honoring
The Present, drives, by sheer compulsion of
Instinct, all life to more abundant life.
The species of the birds and beasts abide,
Unhindered by the thought that Death awaits!
From moment unto moment the pulse of life
Throbs on—though individuals expire.
Though death pervades, immortal is the race.
Thus Man, unreasoning, his reason scorns,
And builds for waiting generations, who
Shall thrive on what his sweating toil achieves.
Shall eyes despaire and vengefully disgorge
Their straining balls, because the covering Blue
Withholds from them the myriad spheres that lie
Beyond their ken? Or shall the hand hew off
The shortened arm, that cannot reach the stars,
Or smite the thunderous clouds?

Nay, limit is
The father of the very madness that
Begets the glorious genius of mankind!
'Tis challenge of th' Impossible that spurs
The mind to loftier endeavor; t' search
Unfathomable, super-spacial depths,
Wherein the salient mysteries abide,
Thrills the heart with passion, panoplied
With hope of promised trophies; it impels
The hungry soul to Fortune’s ripened fruit;
It lures the Intellect with splendid wreath,
A promised crown—though Ignorance deride.
’T is very scorn of mystery, that spurs
The thought to action! Each generation toils
For centuries yet unborn, and they, anon,
Their brilliant heritage impart to those
That follow them. Thus human life is thrilled
To venturous deed, inventive thought, and vast
Increasing splendors of renown. Why, then,
Repine, though these few pregnant years of earth
So soon into oblivious silence sink?
The race still lives, and Life’s inspiring still!

Mind:
I say no more; let Reason now decide.

Reason:
With patience and with pleasure have I heard
Your several discourses and appeals.
Mind truthfully hath plead, vast worlds beyond
Are ever untraversed by human thought,
And ever shall be; while Brain hath decried
The frailty and uncertainty of Faith,
Compared with usages of Knowledge brave.
Profoundly conscious of its unique power,
Intent on being, gifted with inner sight
Into regions unfrequented by the thoughts
That tenant th’ostensible houses of the Brain,
Mind justly chafes at boundaries, the flesh
Imposes, and dreams of realms whereeto, alone,
Its winged feet can fly whilst Brain still plods
The sodden and necessitous paths of earth.
Mind, life-conscious, dreams of life without
An end, eternal, sublimate, and free.
Dull sense it scorns, well knowing a better sense,
Refined with spiritual vision. Thus pinioned for
Eternal flight, it seeks the aid of faith,
And thinks itself immortal. Well it may!
Impossible it should conceive a state,
Unlike its conscious mood. Can Life know aught
Of Death? Knows Light the Dark; can Substance feel
Its shadow? Can aught its opposite discern?
Light knows but light, and darkness, darkness; else
Were Error truth, and falsehood fair. The dream
Of life beyond the dusty House of Death,
Is, therefore, justified by Life itself.
Nor more is conscious mind unjustified
In claiming thought itself immortal. For Thought
Cannot conceive of Thought unthinking, chained
In spiritual flight. Its feathered arrows reach
The outmost distances, and far impinge
On unsuspecting brains, which they impress
Unwittingly with their intelligence.
Invisible are thoughts; and, truly, Mind’s
More tenuous substance seems from substance free.
Therefore, it challenges restraint, and feels
Its habitation is not in this house of flesh,
And spurns the flesh’s power. Thus rightly, Mind
May deem itself supreme, howbeit misled
By supercilious pride. For it o’er moulds
The brain, and shapes anew its cells, that thought
Devours; it rides the rivers of the blood,
And charges them with new, invigorant life;
It e’en may poise the nerves, the pulses calm,
When feverish heat inflames; yea, some contend,
It hath such potency that Matter yields
To its invincible touch, when the temples cease
Their throbbing, and sleep secures th’ unwilling lids;
At which strange times the body is as wax,
To the controlling mind. What wonder Mind
Conceives itself of super-sensuous stuff,
And regal to all subjects else!

Mind:

O Joy!
O Gratitude! O noble Judge, be praised!
The world is saved and mankind is redeemed!
Reason:

But pause—Were this the final word; were this
The end of knowledge, the spokesman, here, of Science.
Brain, were humiliated and demeaned:
Unsolved the Ages' Riddle of the World,
And fear of the Unknowable remain,
The last and palsyng state of Man! Mind,
As Brain hath truly said, is moving stuff,
Too tenuous and immaterial
For eye's or instrument's detection; yet
Whose faintest glimpse the chemic plate may seize—
Its ghostly substance imprison and proclaim.
In essence, then, are matter and spirit, one:—
Brain and Mind, a dual-faced shield.
In Unity is ultimate and grand
Superlative, of Life's ascending scale.
'T is true, and here, perhaps, the Sphinx is slain.
In all the universe is there but One:
That One, the All: Diversity's a masque!
Though Science yet but tentatively tread
This perilous and unfrequented ground,
She hath already glimpsed sufficient of
The truth, to call for newer readings of
The Sphinx's puzzle and Nature's cryptic Book.
Here hints promised peace for conflict thought,
And settlement of Problems, Time hath vexed.
Mayhap, in this solution rests the place,
Twixt sublunar and super-starry realms,
Where Science and Philosophy, with Faith,
Shall build an honester Religion, and
Unfettering Mankind from fear of Truth,
May usher in Earth's last, irenic Age.
Then Unity shall be discerned throughout
The infinite scope of seen and unseen zones—
One life, one element, one law, alone.
Shall then prevail, and Man, supremely dowered,
Shall reign with sceptred Knowledge and Wisdom's crown.
As for that last enigma whereat mankind
So long hath shuddered, none finally has answered.
Unwise the peering of the heavens, to seek
The voice that thence shall answer. Man's faith is slight;
Yet while Disproof cannot a shattering spear
Hurl at the heart of hope, Despair repines,
Nor durst her gloomy locks shake threat’ningly.
Faith oft hath falsely used this vital hope,
Wherewith to chain the mind’s aspiring course,
And justly men revolt, preferring death
To slavery. The better part is search,
And silent waiting for the truth. Brain wins;
For that, too soon the fog of faith bedims
The vision of the intellect that peers
Into unpathed abysses of the world
None but Nature herself can answer, true,
The dread, detested Sphinx, mankind appals.
Who heeds another’s voice, though fair, is lost;
Man’s Mind with toil the shafts of search must sink,
And who forestalls with faith, unprovable,
Deludes the blind and shackles them with fear.
As star, slow rising from horizon’s skirts,
Its far, cerulean path pursues, and glows
Increasingly as ’t nears the zenith’s dome,
To sink and rise again in morrow’s dawn;
To Truth from Ignorance ascending moves,
Across the vaulted sky of doubt and search,
Outshining Error’s dimmer orbs, that pale,
To its ascendant splendor and renown;
And bides the day that yet a fairer Dawn
Shall grant, to lift still darker veils of night
From Error’s potent reign and gloomy power.
Truth’s word is forward; she never strikes the knell,
That tells the midnight of Man’s final toil.

Brain:

(courteously bending)
I thank thee, Judge, and await the larger Age.

FINIS.