

I HAVE SEEN AN END OF ALL PERFECTION

Mrs. Sigourney*

I have seen a man in the glory of his days, and the pride of his strength. He was built like the tall cedar that lifts its head above the forest trees,—like the strong oak that strikes its roots deeply into the earth. He feared no danger; he felt no sickness; he wondered that any should groan or sigh at pain. His mind was vigorous like his body; he was perplexed at no intricacy; he was daunted at no difficulty; into hidden things he searched, and what was crooked he made plain.

He went forth fearlessly upon the face of the mighty deep; he surveyed the nations of the earth; he measured the distances of the stars, and called them by their names; he gloried in the extent of his knowledge,—in the vigor of his understanding, and strove to search even into what the Almighty had concealed. And when I looked on him, I said, "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension (understanding), how like a God!"

I returned,—his look was no more lofty, nor his step proud; his frame was like some ruined tower; his hairs were white and scattered; and his eyes gazed vacantly upon what was passing around him. The vigor of his intellect was wasted, and of all he had gained by study nothing remained. He feared when there was no danger, and when there was no sorrow he wept. His memory was decayed and treacherous, and showed him only broken images of the glory that was departed.

His house was to him like a strange land, and his friends were counted as his enemies; and he thought himself strong and healthful, while his foot tottered on the verge of the grave. He said of his son, "He is my brother;" of his daughter, "I know her not;" and he inquired what was his own name. And one who supported his last steps, and ministered to his many wants, said to me as I looked upon the melancholy scene, "Let thine heart receive instruction, for thou hast seen an end of all earthly perfection." (Psalm 119:96)

I have seen a beautiful female treading the first stages of youth, and entering joyfully into the pleasures of life. The glance of her eye was variable and sweet, and on her cheek trembled something like the first blush of the morning; her lips moved, and there was harmony; and when she floated in the dance, her light form, like the aspen, seemed to move with every breeze.

I returned, but she was not in the dance; I sought her in the gay circle of her companions, but I found her not. Her eyes sparkled not there,—the music of her voice was silent,—she rejoiced on earth no more.

I saw a train (procession), sable and slow-paced who bore sadly to an opened grave what once was animated and beautiful. They paused as they approached, and a voice broke the awful silence: "Mingle ashes with ashes, and dust with its original dust. To the earth, whence it was taken, consign we the body of our sister." They covered her with the damp soil, and the cold clods of the valley; and the worms crowded into her silent abode. Yet one sad mourner lingered to cast himself upon the grave; and as he wept, he said, "There is no beauty, nor grace, nor loveliness, that continueth in man; for this is the end of all his glory and perfection."

I have seen an infant with a fair brow, and a frame like polished ivory. Its limbs pliant in its sports, it rejoiced, and again it wept; but whether its glowing cheek dimpled with smiles, or its blue eye was brilliant with tears, still I said to my heart, "It is beautiful." It was like the first pure blossom, which some cherished plant shot forth, whose cup is filled with a dew-drop, and whose head reclines upon its parent stem.

I again saw this child, when the lamp of reason first dawned in its mind. Its soul was gentle and peaceful; its eyes sparkled with joy, as it looked round on this good and pleasant world. It ran swiftly in the ways of knowledge; it bowed its ear to instruction; it stood like a lamb before its teacher. It was not proud, nor envious nor stubborn; and it had not heard of the vanities and vices of the world. And when I looked upon it I remembered that our Savior had said, "Except ye become as little children, ye cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven."

But the scene was changed,— and I saw a man whom the world called honorable, and many waited for his smile. They pointed out the fields that were his, and talked of the silver and gold that he had gathered; they admired the stateliness of his domes, and extolled the honor of his family. And his heart answered secretly, "By my wisdom have I gotten all this:—" so he returned no thanks to God, neither did he fear or serve Him.

And as I passed along, I heard the complaints of the laborers who reaped down his fields, and the cries of the poor, whose covering he had taken away; but the sound of feasting and revelry was in his apartments, and the unfed beggar came tottering from his door. But he considered not that the cries of the oppressed were continually entering into the ears of the Most High. And when I knew that this man was once the teachable child that I had loved, the beautiful infant that I had gazed upon with delight, I said in my bitterness, "I have seen an end to all perfection:" and I laid my mouth in the dust.

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*Mrs. Lydia Huntley Sigourney, 1791-1865, was a prolific and well loved poet.