

CHAUNCEY WRIGHT.

THE death which we briefly noticed last week reminds us most sadly of the law, that to be an effective great man one needs to have many qualities great. If power of analytic intellect pure and simple could suffice, the name of Chauncey Wright would assuredly be as famous as it is now obscure, for he was not merely the great mind of a village—if Cambridge will pardon the expression—but either in London or Berlin he would, with equal ease, have taken the place of master which he held with us. The reason why he is now gone without leaving any work which his friends can consider as a fair expression of his genius, is that his shyness, his want of ambition, and to a certain degree his indolence, were almost as exceptional as his power of thought. Had he, in early life, resolved to concentrate these and make himself a physicist, for example, there is no question but that his would have ranked to-day among the few first living names. As it was, he preferred general criticism and contemplation, and became something resembling more a philosopher of the antique or Socratic type than a modern *Gelehrter*. His best work has been done in conversation; and in the acts and writings of the many friends he influenced his spirit will, in one way or another, as the years roll on, be more operative than it ever was in direct production. Born at Northampton in 1830, graduating at Harvard in 1852, he left us in the plenitude of his powers. His outward work is limited to various articles in the *North American Review* (one of which Mr. Darwin thought important enough to reprint as a pamphlet in England), a paper or two in the Transactions of the Academy of Arts and Sciences, and a number of critical notices in our own pages—the latest of these being the article entitled “German Darwinism,” which we published only two weeks ago. As a writer, he was defective in the shaping faculty—he failed to emphasize the articulations of his argument, to throw a high light, so to speak, on the important points; so that many a casual peruser has probably read on and never noticed the world of searching consequences which lurked involved in some inconspicuously placed word. He spent many years in computing for the *Nautical Almanac* and from time to time accepted some pedagogic work. He gave a course of University lectures on psychology in Harvard College in 1871, and last year he conducted there a course in mathematical physics. As little of a reader as an educated man well can be, he yet astonished every one by his omniscience, for no specialist could talk with Chauncey Wright without receiving some sort of instruction in his specialty. This was due to his irrepressible spontaneous habit of subtle thinking. Every new fact he learned set his whole mental organism in motion, and reflection did not cease till the novel thought was firmly woven with the entire system of his knowledge. Of course in this process new conclusions were constantly evolved, and many a man of science who hoped to surprise him with news of a discovery has been himself surprised by finding it already constructed by Wright from data separately acquired in this or that conversation with one or other of the many scholars of Cambridge or Boston, most of whom he personally knew so well.

In philosophy, he was a worker on the path opened by Hume, and a treatise on psychology written by him (could he have been spared and induced to undertake the drudgery) would probably have been the last and most accomplished utterance of what he liked to call the British school. He would have brought the work of Mill and Bain for the present to a conclusion. Of the two motives to which philosophic systems owe their being, the craving for consistency or unity in thought, and the desire for a solid

outward warrant for our emotional ends, his mind was dominated only by the former. Never in a human head was contemplation more separated from desire. Schopenhauer, who defined genius as a cognitive faculty manumitted from the service of the will, would have found in him an even stronger example of his definition than he cared to meet. For to Wright's mode of looking at the universe such ideas as pessimism or optimism were alike simply irrelevant. Whereas most men's interest in a thought is proportioned to its possible relation to human destiny, with him it was almost the reverse. When the mere actuality of phenomena will suffice to describe them, he held it pure excess and superstition to speak of a metaphysical whence or whither, of a substance, a meaning, or an end. Just as in cosmogony he preferred Mayer's theory to the nebular hypothesis, and in one of his earliest *North American Review* articles used the happy phrase, "cosmical weather," to describe the irregular dissipation and aggregation of worlds; so, in contemplating the totality of being, he preferred to think of phenomena as the result of a sort of ontologic weather, without inward rationality, an aimless drifting to and fro, from the midst of which relatively stable and so (for us) rational combinations may emerge. The order we observe in things needs *explanation* only on the supposition of a preliminary or potential disorder; and this he pointed out is, as things actually *are* orderly, a gratuitous notion. Anaxagoras, who introduced into philosophy the notion of the *vous*, also introduced with it that of an antecedent chaos. But if there be no essential chaos, Mr. Wright used to say, an anti-chaotic *vous* is superfluous. He particularly condemned the idea of substance as a metaphysical idol. When it was objected to him that there must be some principle of oneness in the diversity of phenomena—some *glue* to hold them together and make a universe out of their mutual independence, he would reply that there is no need of a glue to join things unless we apprehend some reason why they should fall asunder. Phenomena *are* grouped—more we cannot say of them. This notion that the actuality of a thing is the absolute totality of its being was perhaps never grasped by any one with such thoroughness as by him.

However different a philosophy one may hold from his, however one may deem that the lack of emotional bias which left him contented with the mere principle of parsimony as a criterion of universal truth was really due to a defect in the active or impulsive part of his mental nature, one must value none the less his formulæ. For as yet philosophy has celebrated hardly any stable achievements. The labors of philosophers have, however, been confined to deepening enormously the philosophic *consciousness*, and revealing more and more minutely and fully the import of metaphysical problems. In this preliminary task ontologists and phenomenologists, mechanists and teleologists, must join friendly hands, for each has been indispensable to the work of the other, and the only foe of either is the common foe of both—namely, the practical, conventionally thinking man, to whom, as has been said, nothing has true seriousness but personal interests, and whose dry earnestness in those is only excelled by that of the brute, which takes everything for granted and never laughs.

Mr. Wright belonged to the precious band of genuine philosophers, and among them few can have been as completely disinterested as he. Add to this eminence his tireless amiability, his beautiful modesty, his affectionate nature and freedom from egotism, his childlike simplicity in worldly affairs, and we have the picture of a character of which his friends feel more than ever now the elevation and the rarity.