

EULOGY.

ON THE DEATH OF CONGRESSMAN JAMES N. BURNES, OF
 MISSOURI.

January 24, 1889.

Mr. President: These are the culminating hours of a closing scene in the drama of national life. When this day returns, one political party will relinquish and another assume the executive functions of government. On every hand are visible the preparations to "welcome the coming and speed the parting guest." At the eastern portico already stands the stage on which the great actors will play their parts, in the presence of a mighty audience, amid the mimic pomp and circumstance of war, with the splendor of banners, music's martial strains, and the hoarse salutations of accentuating guns.

"Enterprises of great pith and moment" wait upon the event of the brief interval. While Pleasure wanders restlessly through the corridors of the Capitol, Hope and Fear, Ambition, Cupidity, and Revenge sit in the galleries or stand at the gates, eager, like dying Elizabeth, to exchange millions of money for the inch of time upon which success or failure, wealth or penury, honor or obloquy depend.

At this juncture and crisis, when each instant is priceless, disregarding every inducement, resisting every incentive and solicitation, the Senate proceeds, by unanimous consent, to consider resolutions of the highest privilege, reported from no

committee, having no place upon any calendar, but which take precedence of unfinished business and special order, upon which the yeas and nays are never called, and no negative vote is ever recorded, and reverently pauses, in obedience to the holiest impulse of human nature, to contemplate the profoundest mystery of human destiny—the mystery of death.

In the democracy of the dead all men at last are equal. There is neither rank nor station nor prerogative in the republic of the grave. At this fatal threshold the philosopher ceases to be wise, and the song of the poet is silent. Dives relinquishes his millions and Lazarus his rags. The poor man is as rich as the richest, and the rich man is as poor as the pauper. The creditor loses his usury, and the debtor is acquitted of his obligation. There the proud man surrenders his dignities, the politician his honors, the worldling his pleasures; the invalid needs no physician, and the laborer rests from unrequited toil.

Here at last is Nature's final decree in equity. The wrongs of time are redressed. Injustice is expiated, the irony of fate is refuted; the unequal distribution of wealth, honor, capacity, pleasure, and opportunity, which make life such a cruel and inexplicable tragedy, ceases in the realm of death. The strongest there has no supremacy, and the weakest needs no defense. The mightiest captain succumbs to that invincible adversary, who disarms alike the victor and the vanquished.

James Nelson Burnes, whose death we deplore to-day, was a man whom Plutarch might have described or Van Dyke delineated; massive, rugged, and robust; in motion slow; in speech sonorous and deliberate; grave in aspect; serious in demeanor; of antique and heroic mould; the incarnation of force, energy, and power.

Not perplexed by moral abstractions nor mental subtleties, he possessed that assemblage of qualities which makes success in practical affairs inevitable. Great enterprises were natural to him. Breadth, grasp, and comprehension characterized his projects. Early perceiving the enormous possibilities of the valley of the Missouri, longer than the Amazon and more fertile than the Nile, he immediately identified himself with the forces which have developed the empire of the Northwest, made the American Desert an oasis, and abolished the frontier. At the bar, on the bench, in business and politics, he was foremost for a quarter of a century.

When we first met, St. Louis was an outpost of civilization, and Jefferson City the farthest point reached by railroad. In all that vast region, from the sparse settlements along the Missouri to the Sierra Nevada, from the Arkansas to the Yellowstone—now the abode of millions, soon to be represented in this chamber—there was neither husbandry nor harvest, habitation nor home, save the casual encampments of the Bedouins of the plains, more savage than the beasts they slew.

We were neighbors, as that word goes in the West. Twenty miles to the northward, across the turbid stream, the level bars of tawny sand, and the vast expanse of primeval forest, were visible from my door, in the morning and evening sun, the spires and the towers of the city where he dwelt, and with whose history his name will be indissolubly associated. Here, in a stately home, with ample fortune, equipage, and retinue, surrounded by a family he adored, by friends devoted to him, and by enemies whom he had overcome, he confidently anticipated larger triumphs and loftier honors yet to be.

As I looked for the last time upon that countenance from which for the first time in so many years no glance of kindly

recognition nor word of welcome came, I reflected upon the impenetrable and insoluble mystery of death. But if death be the end; if the life of Burnes terminated upon "this bank and shoal of time," if no morning is to dawn upon the night in which he sleeps—then sorrow has no consolation, and this impressive and solemn ceremony which we observe to-day has no more significance than the painted pageant of the stage. If the existence of Burnes was but a troubled dream, his death oblivion, what avails it that the Senate should pause to recount his virtues; and that his associates should assemble in solemn sorrow around his voiceless sepulchre? Neither veneration nor reverence is due the dead if they are but dust; no cenotaph should be reared to preserve for posterity the memory of their achievements if those who come after them are to be only their successors in annihilation and extinction.

Unless we survive, the ties of birth, affection, and friendship are a delusive mockery; the structure of laws and customs upon which society is based, a detected imposture; the codes of morality and justice, the sentiments of gratitude and faith, are empty formulas, without force or consecration. If in this world only we have hope and consciousness, why should their inculcations be heeded? Duty must be a chimera. Our passions and our pleasures should be the guides of conduct, and virtue is indeed a superstition if life ends at the grave.

This is the conclusion which the philosophy of negation must accept at last. Such is the felicity of those degrading precepts which make the epitaph the end. If these teachers are right, if the life of Burnes is like an arrow that is spent, then we are atoms in a moral chaos; obedience to law is indefensible servitude; rulers and magistrates are despots tolerated only by popular imbecility; justice is a denial of liberty;

honor and truth are trivial rhapsodies; murder and perjury are derisive jests, and their harsh definitions are frivolous phrases invented by tyrants to impose on the timidity of cowards and the credulity of slaves.

If the life of Burnes is as a taper that is burned out, then we treasure his memory and his example in vain, and the latest prayer of his departing spirit has no more sanctity to us, who soon or late must follow him, than the whisper of winds that stir the leaves of the protesting forest, or the murmur of waves that break upon the complaining shore.