

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Leslie Henry Flaubert Nietzsche Turgenev Balzac Crane
Dumas Stockton Vatsyayana Verne
Burroughs Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Curtis Homer Tolstoy Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato
Potter Zola Lawrence Stevenson Dickens Harte
Kant Freud Jowett Andersen London Descartes Cervantes Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Burton Hesse
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Chambers Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov da Shaw Wodehouse
Doré Dante Swift Pushkin Alcott
Newton



tredition was established in 2006 by Sandra Latusseck and Soenke Schulz. Based in Hamburg, Germany, tredition offers publishing solutions to authors and publishing houses, combined with worldwide distribution of printed and digital book content. tredition is uniquely positioned to enable authors and publishing houses to create books on their own terms and without conventional manufacturing risks.

For more information please visit: www.tredition.com

TREDITION CLASSICS

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series. The creators of this series are united by passion for literature and driven by the intention of making all public domain books available in printed format again - worldwide. Most TREDITION CLASSICS titles have been out of print and off the bookstore shelves for decades. At tredition we believe that a great book never goes out of style and that its value is eternal. Several mostly non-profit literature projects provide content to tredition. To support their good work, tredition donates a portion of the proceeds from each sold copy. As a reader of a TREDITION CLASSICS book, you support our mission to save many of the amazing works of world literature from oblivion. See all available books at www.tredition.com.



The content for this book has been graciously provided by Project Gutenberg. Project Gutenberg is a non-profit organization founded by Michael Hart in 1971 at the University of Illinois. The mission of Project Gutenberg is simple: To encourage the creation and distribution of eBooks. Project Gutenberg is the first and largest collection of public domain eBooks.

The Child of the Dawn

Arthur Christopher Benson

Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Arthur Christopher Benson

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-7992-0

www.tredition.com

www.tredition.de

Copyright:

The content of this book is sourced from the public domain.

The intention of the TREDITION CLASSICS series is to make world literature in the public domain available in printed format. Literary enthusiasts and organizations, such as Project Gutenberg, worldwide have scanned and digitally edited the original texts. tredition has subsequently formatted and redesigned the content into a modern reading layout. Therefore, we cannot guarantee the exact reproduction of the original format of a particular historic edition. Please also note that no modifications have been made to the spelling, therefore it may differ from the orthography used today.

To

MY BEST AND DEAREST FRIEND

HERBERT FRANCIS WILLIAM TATHAM

IN LOVE AND HOPE

INTRODUCTION

I think that a book like the following, which deals with a subject so great and so mysterious as our hope of immortality, by means of an allegory or fantasy, needs a few words of preface, in order to clear away at the outset any misunderstandings which may possibly arise in a reader's mind. Nothing is further from my wish than to attempt any philosophical or ontological exposition of what is hidden behind the veil of death. But one may be permitted to deal with the subject imaginatively or poetically, to translate hopes into visions, as I have tried to do.

The fact that underlies the book is this: that in the course of a very sad and strange experience—an illness which lasted for some two years, involving me in a dark cloud of dejection—I came to believe practically, instead of merely theoretically, in the personal immortality of the human soul. I was conscious, during the whole time, that though the physical machinery of the nerves was out of gear, the soul and the mind remained, not only intact, but practically unaffected by the disease, imprisoned, like a bird in a cage, but perfectly free in themselves, and uninjured by the bodily weakness which enveloped them. This was not all. I was led to perceive that I had been living life with an entirely distorted standard of values; I had been ambitious, covetous, eager for comfort and respect, absorbed in trivial dreams and childish fancies. I saw, in the course of my illness, that what really mattered to the soul was the relation in which it stood to other souls; that affection was the native air of the spirit; and that anything which distracted the heart from the duty of love was a kind of bodily delusion, and simply hindered the spirit in its pilgrimage.

It is easy to learn this, to attain to a sense of certainty about it, and yet to be unable to put it into practice as simply and frankly as one desires to do! The body grows strong again and reasserts itself; but the blessed consciousness of a great possibility apprehended and grasped remains.

There came to me, too, a sense that one of the saddest effects of what is practically a widespread disbelief in immortality, which affects many people who would nominally disclaim it, is that we think of the soul after death as a thing so altered as to be practically unrecognisable—as a meek and pious emanation, without qualities or aims or passions or traits—as a sort of amiable and weak-kneed sacristan in the temple of God; and this is the unhappy result of our so often making religion a pursuit apart from life—an occupation, not an atmosphere; so that it seems impious to think of the departed spirit as interested in anything but a vague species of liturgical exercise.

I read the other day the account of the death-bed of a great statesman, which was written from what I may call a somewhat clerical point of view. It was recorded with much gusto that the dying politician took no interest in his schemes of government and cares of State, but found perpetual solace in the repetition of childish hymns. This fact had, or might have had, a certain beauty of its own, if it had been expressly stated that it was a proof that the tired and broken mind fell back upon old, simple, and dear recollections of bygone love. But there was manifest in the record a kind of sanctimonious triumph in the extinction of all the great man's insight and wisdom. It seemed to me that the right treatment of the episode was rather to insist that those great qualities, won by brave experience and unselfish effort, were only temporarily obscured, and belonged actually and essentially to the spirit of the man; and that if heaven is indeed, as we may thankfully believe, a place of work and progress, those qualities would be actively and energetically employed as soon as the soul was freed from the trammels of the failing body.

Another point may also be mentioned. The idea of transmigration and reincarnation is here used as a possible solution for the extreme difficulties which beset the question of the apparently fortuitous brevity of some human lives. I do not, of course, propound it as literally and precisely as it is here set down—it is not a forecast of the future, so much as a symbolising of the forces of life—but *the renewal of conscious experience*, in some form or other, seems to be the only way out of the difficulty, and it is that which is here indicated. If life is a probation for those who have to face experience and

temptation, how can it be a probation for infants and children, who die before the faculty of moral choice is developed? Again, I find it very hard to believe in any multiplication of human souls. It is even more difficult for me to believe in the creation of new souls than in the creation of new matter. Science has shown us that there is no actual addition made to the sum of matter, and that the apparent creation of new forms of plants or animals is nothing more than a rearrangement of existing particles—that if a new form appears in one place, it merely means that so much matter is transferred thither from another place. I find it, I say, hard to believe that the sum total of life is actually increased. To put it very simply for the sake of clearness, and accepting the assumption that human life had some time a beginning on this planet, it seems impossible to think that when, let us say, the two first progenitors of the race died, there were but two souls in heaven; that when the next generation died there were, let us say, ten souls in heaven; and that this number has been added to by thousands and millions, until the unseen world is peopled, as it must be now, if no reincarnation is possible, by myriads of human identities, who, after a single brief taste of incarnate life, join some vast community of spirits in which they eternally reside. I do not say that this latter belief may not be true; I only say that in default of evidence, it seems to me a difficult faith to hold; while a reincarnation of spirits, if one could believe it, would seem to me both to equalise the inequalities of human experience, and give one a lively belief in the virtue and worth of human endeavour. But all this is set down, as I say, in a tentative and not in a philosophical form.

And I have also in these pages kept advisedly clear of Christian doctrines and beliefs; not because I do not believe wholeheartedly in the divine origin and unexhausted vitality of the Christian revelation, but because I do not intend to lay rash and profane hands upon the highest and holiest of mysteries.

I will add one word about the genesis of the book. Some time ago I wrote a number of short tales of an allegorical type. It was a curious experience. I seemed to have come upon them in my mind, as one comes upon a covey of birds in a field. One by one they took wings and flew; and when I had finished, though I was anxious to

write more tales, I could not discover any more, though I beat the covert patiently to dislodge them.

This particular tale rose unbidden in my mind. I was never conscious of creating any of its incidents. It seemed to be all there from the beginning; and I felt throughout like a man making his way along a road, and describing what he sees as he goes. The road stretched ahead of me; I could not see beyond the next turn at any moment; it just unrolled itself inevitably and, I will add, very swiftly to my view, and was thus a strange and momentous experience.

I will only add that the book is all based upon an intense belief in God, and a no less intense conviction of personal immortality and personal responsibility. It aims at bringing out the fact that our life is a very real pilgrimage to high and far-off things from mean and sordid beginnings, and that the key of the mystery lies in the frank facing of experience, as a blessed process by which the secret purpose of God is made known to us; and, even more, in a passionate belief in Love, the love of friend and neighbour, and the love of God; and in the absolute faith that we are all of us, from the lowest and most degraded human soul to the loftiest and wisest, knit together with chains of infinite nearness and dearness, under God, and in Him, and through Him, now and hereafter and for evermore.

A.C.B.

THE OLD LODGE, MAGDALENE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE,
January, 1912.

The Child of the Dawn

I

Certainly the last few moments of my former material, worn-out life, as I must still call it, were made horrible enough for me. I came to, after the operation, in a deadly sickness and ghastly confusion of thought. I was just dimly conscious of the trim, bare room, the white bed, a figure or two, but everything else was swallowed up in the pain, which filled all my senses at once. Yet surely, I thought, it is all something outside me? ... my brain began to wander, and the pain became a thing. It was a tower of stone, high and blank, with a little sinister window high up, from which something was every now and then waved above the house-roofs.... The tower was gone in a moment, and there was a heap piled up on the floor of a great room with open beams—a granary, perhaps. The heap was of curved sharp steel things like sickles: something moved and muttered underneath it, and blood ran out on the floor. Then I was instantly myself, and the pain was with me again; and then there fell on me a sense of faintness, so that the cold sweat-drops ran suddenly out on my brow. There came a smell of drugs, sharp and pungent, on the air. I heard a door open softly, and a voice said, "He is sinking fast—they must be sent for at once." Then there were more people in the room, people whom I thought I had known once, long ago; but I was buried and crushed under the pain, like the thing beneath the heap of sickles. There swept over me a dreadful fear; and I could see that the fear was reflected in the faces above me; but now they were strangely distorted and elongated, so that I could have laughed, if only I had had the time; but I had to move the weight off me, which was crushing me. Then a roaring sound began to come and go upon the air, louder and louder, faster and faster; the strange pungent scent came again; and then I was thrust down under the weight, monstrous, insupportable; further and further down; and there came a sharp bright streak, like a blade severing the strands of a rope drawn taut and tense; another and another; one was left, and the blade drew near....

I fell suddenly out of the sound and scent and pain into the most incredible and blessed peace and silence. It would have been like a sleep, but I was still perfectly conscious, with a sense of unutterable and blissful fatigue; a picture passed before me, of a calm sea, of vast depth and clearness. There were cliffs at a little distance, great headlands and rocky spires. I seemed to myself to have left them, to have come down through them, to have embarked. There was a pale light everywhere, flushed with rose-colour, like the light of a summer dawn; and I felt as I had once felt as a child, awakened early in the little old house among the orchards, on a spring morning; I had risen from my bed, and leaning out of my window, filled with a delightful wonder, I had seen the cool morning quicken into light among the dewy apple-blossoms. That was what I felt like, as I lay upon the moving tide, glad to rest, not wondering or hoping, not fearing or expecting anything—just there, and at peace.

There seemed to be no time in that other blessed morning, no need to do anything. The cliffs, I did not know how, faded from me, and the boundless sea was about me on every side; but I cannot describe the timelessness of it. There are no human words for it all, yet I must speak of it in terms of time and space, because both time and space were there, though I was not bound by them.

And here first I will say a few words about the manner of speech I shall use. It is very hard to make clear, but I think I can explain it in an image. I once walked alone, on a perfect summer day, on the South Downs. The great smooth shoulders of the hills lay left and right, and, in front of me, the rich tufted grass ran suddenly down to the plain, which stretched out before me like a map. I saw the fields and woods, the minute tiled hamlet-roofs, the white roads, on which crawled tiny carts. A shepherd, far below, drove his flock along a little deep-cut lane among high hedges. The sounds of earth came faintly and sweetly up, obscure sounds of which I could not tell the origin; but the tinkling of sheep-bells was the clearest, and the barking of the shepherd-dog. My own dog sat beside me, watching my face, impatient to be gone. But at the barking he pricked up his ears, put his head on one side, and wondered, I saw, where that companionable sound came from. What he made of the scene I do not know; the sight of the fruitful earth, the homes of men, the fields and waters, filled me with an inexpressible emotion, a wide-flung

hope, a sense of the immensity and intricacy of life. But to my dog it meant nothing at all, though he saw just what I did. To him it was nothing but a great excavation in the earth, patched and streaked with green. It was not then the scene itself that I loved; that was only a symbol of emotions and ideas within me. It touched the spring of a host of beautiful thoughts; but the beauty and the sweetness were the contribution of my own heart and mind.

Now in the new world in which I found myself, I approached the thoughts of beauty and loveliness direct, without any intervening symbols at all. The emotions which beautiful things had aroused in me upon earth were all there, in the new life, but not confused or blurred, as they had been in the old life, by the intruding symbols of ugly, painful, evil things. That was all gone like a mist. I could not think an evil or an ugly thought.

For a period it was so with me. For a long time—I will use the words of earth henceforth without any explanation—I abode in the same calm, untroubled peace, partly in memory of the old days, partly in the new visions. My senses seemed all blended in one sense; it was not sight or hearing or touch—it was but an instant apprehension of the essence of things. All that time I was absolutely alone, though I had a sense of being watched and tended in a sort of helpless and happy infancy. It was always the quiet sea, and the dawning light. I lived over the scenes of the old life in a vague, blissful memory. For the joy of the new life was that all that had befallen me had a strange and perfect significance. I had lived like other men. I had rejoiced, toiled, schemed, suffered, sinned. But it was all one now. I saw that each influence had somehow been shaping and moulding me. The evil I had done, was it indeed evil? It had been the flowering of a root of bitterness, the impact of material forces and influences. Had I ever desired it? Not in my spirit, I now felt. Sin had brought me shame and sorrow, and they had done their work. Repentance, contrition—ugly words! I laughed softly at the thought of how different it all was from what I had dreamed. I was as the lost sheep found, as the wayward son taken home; and should I spoil my joy with recalling what was past and done with for ever? Forgiveness was not a process, then, a thing to be sued for and to be withheld; it was all involved in the glad return to the breast of God.

What was the mystery, then? The things that I had wrought, ignoble, cruel, base, mean, selfish—had I ever willed to do them? It seemed impossible, incredible. Were those grievous things still growing, seeding, flowering in other lives left behind? Had they invaded, corrupted, hurt other poor wills and lives? I could think of them no longer, any more than I could think of the wrongs done to myself. Those had not hurt me either. Perhaps I had still to suffer, but I could not think of that. I was too much overwhelmed with joy. The whole thing seemed so infinitely little and far away. So for a time I floated on the moving crystal of the translucent sea, over the glimmering deeps, the dawn above me, the scenes of the old life growing and shaping themselves and fading without any will of my own, nothing within or without me but ineffable peace and perfect joy.

II

I knew quite well what had happened to me; that I had passed through what mortals call Death: and two thoughts came to me; one was this. There had been times on earth when one had felt sure with a sort of deep instinct that one could not really ever die; yet there had been hours of weariness and despair when one had wondered whether death would not mean a silent blankness. That thought had troubled me most, when I had followed to the grave some friend or some beloved. The mouldering form, shut into the narrow box, was thrust with a sense of shame and disgrace into the clay, and no word or sign returned to show that the spirit lived on, or that one would ever find that dear proximity again. How foolish it seemed now ever to have doubted, ever to have been troubled! Of course it was all eternal and everlasting. And then, too, came a second thought. One had learned in life, alas, so often to separate what was holy and sacred from daily life; there were prayers, liturgies, religious exercises, solemnities, Sabbaths—an oppressive strain, too often, and a banishing of active life. Brought up as one had been, there had been a mournful overshadowing of thought, that after death, and with God, it would be all grave and constrained and serious, a perpetual liturgy, an unending Sabbath. But now all was deliciously merged together. All of beautiful and gracious that there had been in religion, all of joyful and animated and eager that there had been in secular life, everything that amused, interested, excited, all fine pictures, great poems, lovely scenes, intrepid thoughts, exercise, work, jests, laughter, perceptions, fancies—they were all one now; only sorrow and weariness and dulness and ugliness and greediness were gone. The thought was fresh, pure, delicate, full of a great and mirthful content.

There were no divisions of time in my great peace; past, present, and future were alike all merged. How can I explain that? It seems so impossible, having once seen it, that it should be otherwise. The day did not broaden to the noon, nor fade to evening. There was no

night there. More than that. In the other life, the dark low-hung days, one seemed to have lived so little, and always to have been making arrangements to live; so much time spent in plans and schemes, in alterations and regrets. There was this to be done and that to be completed; one thing to be begun, another to be cleared away; always in search of the peace which one never found; and if one did achieve it, then it was surrounded, like some cast carrion, by a cloud of poisonous thoughts, like buzzing blue-flies. Now at last one lived indeed; but there grew up in the soul, very gradually and sweetly, the sense that one was resting, growing accustomed to something, learning the ways of the new place. I became more and more aware that I was not alone; it was not that I met, or encountered, or was definitely conscious of any thought that was not my own; but there were motions as of great winds in the untroubled calm in which I lay, of vast deeps drawing past me. There were hoverings and poisonings of unseen creatures, which gave me neither awe nor surprise, because they were not in the range of my thought as yet; but it was enough to show me that I was not alone, that there was life about me, purposes going forward, high activities.

The first time I experienced anything more definite was when suddenly I became aware of a great crystalline globe that rose like a bubble out of the sea. It was of an incredible vastness; but I was conscious that I did not perceive it as I had perceived things upon the earth, but that I apprehended it all together, within and without. It rose softly and swiftly out of the expanse. The surface of it was all alive. It had seas and continents, hills and valleys, woods and fields, like our own earth. There were cities and houses thronged with living beings; it was a world like our own, and yet there was hardly a form upon it that resembled any earthly form, though all were articulate and definite, ranging from growths which I knew to be vegetable, with a dumb and sightless life of their own, up to beings of intelligence and purpose. It was a world, in fact, on which a history like that of our own world was working itself out; but the whole was of a crystalline texture, if texture it can be called; there was no colour or solidity, nothing but form and silence, and I realised that I saw, if not materially yet in thought, and recognised then, that all the qualities of matter, the sounds, the colours, the scents—all that depends upon material vibration—were abstracted from it;

while form, of which the idea exists in the mind apart from all concrete manifestations, was still present. For some time after that, a series of these crystalline globes passed through the atmosphere where I dwelt, some near, some far; and I saw in an instant, in each case, the life and history of each. Some were still all aflame, mere currents of molten heat and flying vapour. Some had the first signs of rudimentary life – some, again, had a full and organised life, such as ours on earth, with a clash of nations, a stream of commerce, a perfecting of knowledge. Others were growing cold, and the life upon them was artificial and strange, only achieved by a highly intellectual and noble race, with an extraordinary command of natural forces, fighting in wonderfully constructed and guarded dwellings against the growing deathliness of a frozen world, and with a tortured despair in their minds at the extinction which threatened them. There were others, again, which were frozen and dead, where the drifting snow piled itself up over the gigantic and pathetic contrivances of a race living underground, with huge vents and chimneys, burrowing further into the earth in search of shelter, and nurturing life by amazing processes which I cannot here describe. They were marvellously wise, those pale and shadowy creatures, with a vitality infinitely ahead of our own, a vitality out of which all weakly or diseased elements had long been eliminated. And again there were globes upon which all seemed dead and frozen to the core, slipping onwards in some infinite progress. But though I saw life under a myriad of new conditions, and with an endless variety of forms, the nature of it was the same as ours. There was the same ignorance of the future, the same doubts and uncertainties, the same pathetic leaning of heart to heart, the same wistful desire after permanence and happiness, which could not be there or so attained.

Then, too, I saw wild eddies of matter taking shape, of a subtlety that is as far beyond any known earthly conditions of matter as steam is above frozen stone. Great tornadoes whirled and poised; globes of spinning fire flew off on distant errands of their own, as when the heavens were made; and I saw, too, the crash of world with world, when satellites that had lost their impetus drooped inwards upon some central sun, and merged themselves at last with a titanic leap. All this enacted itself before me, while life itself flew like a pulse from system to system, never diminished, never in-

creased, withdrawn from one to settle on another. All this I saw and knew.