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THE  
NEW CONVERSION.

A LECTURE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

NORTH LONDON, SOUTH LONDON, AND EAST LONDON  
ETHICAL SOCIETIES.

BY  
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## THE NEW CONVERSION.

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FROM the Christian pulpit we often hear a strange story of a dead world. The theologians tell us that this throbbing, active, eager world is dead. Men and women crowd the highways, and cross the seas, and build and sow and reap ; but they are all dead—dead in trespasses and sins. They wait for a divine touch to raise them to a new spiritual life. All human souls, so theology assures us, lie in graves till God's cry issues : "Come forth."

Sometimes, perhaps, we that do not salute the Christian crucifix may be tempted to accept this doctrine of a dead world. We look out upon mankind at large, and see so much ignorance, so much meanness, so much injustice, so much brutishness, that we are ready to say with the old Psalmist : "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." Which of us has not met the man or woman who, with a mocking smile, declares Religion to be hypocrisy, Virtue a convention, Sympathy the poetry of the amateur, Justice fear of the law-court, and Kindness a calculation of profit ? There are moments when we incline to agree. We sigh that "This people's heart is waxed gross, and their eyes are blind, and their ears deaf." The world needs wisdom ; and where is the wise man, and where the saving insight, and where the gospel ? The world needs compassion ; and where are the armies of pitiful hearts, and the hosts of redeemers ? The world needs strength ; and where is the outstretched arm, and where is the statesman to uplift, and where is the moral skill that shall work the miracle of healing, and sweep away our vice, and banish our workhouses, and clear out the filth of our competitive trade, and beat the swords of

Europe into ploughshares, and make a new church for our weary souls? Is not the world a dead world? And Christ will not come.

But no; it is not a dead world. The mean man, and the vile, and narrow-minded, and the fool are not dead. These poor souls are asleep. They sleep like that fair princess in the fairy-tale who lay dormant until the hour came, and the lover came, and the wonder-working kiss—and then her eyes saw the light, and the palace was gay with the sound of greetings, and laughter, and dancing, and music. And of the soul of the world we may say: "She is not dead, but sleepeth."

How comes it that this awakening is needed? What is the meaning of this remarkable fact—that always, in every age, the preachers, the prophets, the Messiahs, the reformers, the Protestants, the sceptics, have called upon the people to rouse themselves, and shake off prejudices, and think new thoughts, and dream new dreams, and live new lives, and build new temples? And why must each generation have a new Marseillaise which commands it to "March on, march on!" And why must even we, who meet in the Church Ethical, summon men and women to the judgment-seat of conscience, and bid them walk in newness of life? We worship not, we baptize not, we break no mystical bread, and yet we must needs lift up the prophet's cry, and tell the people that, except they be converted, they shall in no wise be found worthy, and their lives shall fall short.

Twenty-six years ago (1871) the Christian world was shocked by Charles Darwin's book on "The Descent of Man." The clergy taught that man had fallen from the bright garden of Eden as low as the battle-field, the slum, the gin-palace, the prison. They were wroth with Darwin because he taught that man had risen from darkness to light, and climbed the hill from brutality to society, and, with pain and toil and sorrow, wrestled his way from savagery to civilization. And while they took a skull and said, "This is the emblem of mankind, for it was created fair and has come to corruption," Darwin took a little child and set it in the midst of them, and said: "This is the emblem of mankind; for from the dark womb of time we issued feeble and uncomely, and we have grown in wisdom and stature, and our story is a story of progress and educa-

tion, and of the unfolding of holy faculties and glorious powers." And if we are to speak of Sacred Books, then this book of Darwin's on the Descent—better say Ascent—of Man shall be classed among the sacred. Every book is sacred that kindles our faith and hope, and points backwards to victories achieved, and onwards to victories that are possible. When Darwin tells the history of the animal world and of man ; when he tells how, among the brutes and birds, the females took on dull skins and quiet plumage, and so lay more securely hidden from foes while they nurtured their young ; and how the unusually bright feathers of some male bird attracted a mate, and a more beautiful species was founded ; and how a lengthening of the neck enabled a new family to subsist by reaching food unattainable by other quadrupeds ; and how horn, and claw, and shell evolved as means of offence and defence, and the protection of life ; and how some tree-climbing ape gained power by the spreading-out of the thumb, and the straightening of the backbone, and the articulation of the voice, and the use of tools and weapons, until our first forefathers could stand aloof from the beasts and proudly call themselves men—what is all this but a gospel that bids us take heart, and go forward ; for we have travelled far and conquered much, and we shall pass on from strength to strength ?

But evolution tells of a moral progress also. When a tribe made treaty with its neighbours, instead of war ; when barbarians who had been wont to slay infants began to cherish all their plaintive babes ; when a nation gave up slavery ; and a people broke down the walls of caste, and idols were shattered, and false watchwords uttered no more, and dead faiths cut down, and oppressive laws resisted, and unrighteous social customs overturned, and political and religious Bastilles razed to the ground—all this was but the continuation of a process that began when our first shaggy fathers learned to say, in a language we shall never recover, I am, I think, I love, I hate, I can, I ought, I will. But all this growth meant painful effort, and agony, and sweating, as it were, great drops of blood. Each step towards the light meant heartache and grief. Our morality has been bought with the price of many tears. Just as the birth of every one of us was effected in the pangs of a mother, so

all our holy things, our virtues, our moral safeguards, our freedom of soul, were brought into being by the pangs of forefathers and foremothers, whom we too often ungratefully forget.

Every time a man lifted up his eyes to conceive a nobler kind of life, a diviner doctrine, a more gracious form of society, three forces were arrayed against him. He felt the burden of the Past upon his back. Like Christian in the Pilgrim's Progress, he carried a load. The old ideas clung to his brain. Old passions burned in his veins. Old words came lightly to his lips. Old paths were easy to tread. And, next, the Present was against him. Public opinion was against him. Institutions were against him. Perhaps kings, perhaps priests, were against him. Opposite Socrates stood the cup of poison. Opposite Jesus stood the cross. Opposite Latimer stood the stake. Opposite Mazzini stood the land of exile. And then the Future might seem to discourage him. Had he a right to alter the course of the world? Could he be sure he was wiser than his fellows? Was he certain mankind would be happier if they adopted his new way of thought? Yet he felt the new way was the way of righteousness. And the pressure of the past he called Sin; or peradventure he called it the temptation of the Devil. And when the New and the Old fought for the mastery, he wept and cried, as Paul cried: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" And then came the stern word: "You must be born again. You must break with the past. You must crush the old passion, the old thought, the old habit. You must pass to a higher development. You must be the origin of a new species. You must be a new self."

" I held it truth with him who sings  
To one clear harp in divers tones  
That men may rise on stepping-stones  
Of their dead selves to higher things."

And when a man has shown the beauty of a new way of life—when he has created a new moral variety, other men follow, and imitate, and catch up the new spirit, until we see a new type, a new faith, a new people—Christians, or Buddhists, or Parsees, or Wiclifites, or Wesleyans, or Unitarians, or Deists, or Socialists, or Tolstoyans; and so the

world marches from conversion to conversion, and humanity sings its Marseillaise.

But after each advance ensues a pause. After each activity comes a rest. After action, reaction. In Bunyan's "Holy War" he pictures human nature as a city, "a fair and delicate town, a corporation called Mansoul." He tells how Diabolus the Devil took possession of it, and how Prince Emmanuel came with his mighty captains, Boanerges and Conviction and Judgment and Execution, and broke down the gates and set up a new throne and a new government. After a while the enthusiasm of Mansoul burned low, and the City grew sleepy, and Mr. Carnal Security obtained more and more influence, and the Prince withdrew, and left Mansoul without a leader, without a motive-power, without an ideal. And so it happens with the world. We have our struggles for liberty, our revolutions, our religious and moral uprisings, and then the words which once were so warm become cold; the creeds that once reflected all the soul turn dull and rusty; churches and institutions degenerate into poor-law houses in which men and women hunger and pine, and children cannot play; and the world sleeps. Then the clock of time points to the hour for a prophet to arise; and perhaps he comes as a monk, and perhaps he comes as an atheist, and perhaps he comes as a philosopher, and perhaps he comes as a Socialist in the market-place, and perhaps he speaks this language, and perhaps he speaks that. But, in effect, his message always is: "Except you are converted, and become as little children, and see life and conduct in a new view, and with a new interest, you shall not enter the kingdom of peace, and wisdom, and strength. You must be born again."

To the Ethical Church, then, conversion remains a very real thing; a thing ever happening; an indispensable thing; a thing which both Jesus and Darwin call for. It is only "new" in the sense that we no longer regard it as a yielding-up of the heart to the theology of Christ, but as a part of that immense process which we term the Evolution of Man.

But are we to have no visions? Are we to see no apocalyptic figure shining out upon us from the wayside of life? If Paul, as the legend says, saw Christ on the road to

Damascus, what are *we* to see? If Catholics have beheld visions of the Bleeding Heart, and of the Virgin-mother, and of the compassionate Saints, what are we to see? If Mohammed saw the angel Gabriel and the mysteries of the Seven Heavens, what are we to see? If Buddha's followers beheld their master transfigured in glory, what are we to see? I have heard of many visions, and read the lives of many saints. But among all the visions which saint or confessor ever saw there is none so august, so impressive, as one which is equally ready to be revealed to the pious nun of the cloister, the Secularist debater, the lord of continents and battalions, or the poor drudge that sweeps a London street. On the heart of every man a scripture is written. It admonishes him that, whatever he may be, wherever he may be, whenever he may act, there is for him, as for all men, a law of Duty. If he saw another man in like conditions to his own, he would say, Such and such is that man's duty. In judging his neighbour he passes judgment on himself. He may not *do* his duty. He may speak scorn of it, sneer at it, revile it; but in his heart he respects the Moral Law. He admits that, whatever he may do himself, it is well that other men, that the world, should render obedience to the law of righteousness. The very criminal will ask that his wife, his child, his neighbour, shall respect the Moral Law which he has himself broken. He knows, and we know, that we ought, in all circumstances, so to act that our rules of conduct would be good rules for all men in like circumstances. That law holds good yesterday, to-day, and for ever. And when we observe how men acknowledge this law; when we perceive their respect for the law as binding on all, rich or poor, learned or unlettered, capitalist or wage-earner; binding on us whether we love it or not; binding on us whether we feel joy in it or not; binding on us whether men applaud us or not; then indeed we see in the Moral Law a majestic vision that looks down upon us with a glance which we dare not defy, and issues a command, "Thou shalt," which we may disobey, but must all the while revere. "Two things," says Immanuel Kant, "fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them—the starry heavens and the Moral Law." To this noblest of all visions Ethical Religion tends, and bids us speak with Wordsworth—



" Stern daughter of the voice of God,\*  
 O Duty ! if that name thou love,  
 Who art a light to guide, a rod  
 To check the erring and reprove ;  
 Thou who art victory and law  
 When empty terrors overawe ;  
 From vain temptations dost set free ;  
 And calm'st the weary strife of frail humanity.....  
   I myself commend  
 Unto thy guidance from this hour ;  
 Oh, let my weakness have an end !  
 Give unto me, made lowly wise,  
 The spirit of self-sacrifice ;  
 The confidence of reason give ;  
 And in the light of truth thy bondman let me live."

In quoting Kant just now I left out one word. Two things fill him with awe, "the starry heavens and the Moral Law *within*." Yes, the vision of the Moral Law that we have seen by the wayside is but a picture of the Ideal that lives in the heart. It is the reflection of our better self, as the "spectre of the Brocken" reflects in the mist the form of the traveller. Or—to take an illustration from Plato—we sit like people in a cave, with our back to the entrance and to the light, and we see the shadows of the real things that pass by. And all the outer forms and doctrines which the Churches prize are but shadows of the realities of your heart and mine. The blood of Jesus, the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Tables of Stone, the Sacred Scriptures—what are all these but symbols of the power of the Moral Law within? We are greater than we know. We are of nobler blood than we think. There is royalty in our pedigree. And, if we only recognized our greatness, our souls, like the Czar of all the Russias, would crown themselves.

The error of Outerness runs through all the Christian scheme of salvation. We are to be saved by preternatural grace, by heavenly hands, by divine machinery, by things yonder. Bunyan tells, in his "Grace Abounding," how he wandered in search of redemption, pondering whether he could miraculously dry the puddles in the Bedford road; imagining that the sun grudged him its light, and that the very tiles on the roofs despised him. One day, he says, as

\* This theological term does not lessen the value of the ode. The devotion of the soul goes out, not to God, but to the ideal of Duty.

he sat by the fire, "I suddenly felt this word to sound in my heart: I must go to Jesus. At this my former darkness and atheism fled away, and the blessed things of heaven were set in my view." He looked outwards. He did not care to look within, because he saw there nothing (as he thought) but "original and inward pollution." He was mistaken: From his own heart came the moral impulse. His own self-reverence prompted his conversion to pious purpose and self-denying devotion. Theology obscured from his view the true moral process.

This search for salvation in things outward finds picturesque illustration in Tennyson's poem on the Holy Grail—that blood-red cup from which Christ drank at the Last Supper, but which, when the times grew evil, "was caught away to heaven and disappeared." The Knights of King Arthur's Round Table made a vow to go in quest of it. And what good came of it all? Sir Percivale rode out, and found himself in a land of sand and thorns, and saw goodly apples by the side of a pleasant brook, and the apples turned to dust; and met a woman who welcomed him to her threshold, and she fell to dust and nothing, and her house crumbled, and a dead babe lay in the ashes; and beheld a splendid knight, gleaming like the sun in golden armour, and the knight fell to dust, and all around was only a land of sand and thorns; and he came upon a crowd at the gateway of a city, and they too vanished, and the old man whom Sir Percivale encountered in the ruins collapsed to dust, and was no more. Another knight, Sir Bors, was made fast in a prison, until a great stone of the dungeon slipped, and he saw the stars outside, and, for a moment, caught a glimpse in the sky of the rose-red Holy Cup.

A third knight, Sir Lancelot, passed through tempests, and climbed great stairs, and burst a mystic door, and beheld for one moment the crimson Grail, and then swooned. And the purest knight of all, Sir Galahad, crossed a mountain, and came to a black swamp, and traversed it by a magic bridge, and sailed away in a wondrous boat; and over his head—as Sir Percivale saw—floated the blood-red Cup; and Sir Galahad and the Holy Grail faded from sight, and entered the Spiritual City. Only a few knights returned. All the time King Arthur had stayed in his

kingdom, and ruled the land, and done the daily task. He, too, had seen visions as he worked, and had no need to go in quest of the cup of Christ. And so neither need we. Our ideal is not far off. Our Holy Grail lies close to our heart. The Moral Law is within. To waken up to a recognition of its reality is conversion; it is the New Birth; it is becoming a new creature. The longer we wander over crag and fell; the longer we linger about church and shrine and Eucharistic table and cross—so much the longer we defer the vision of the true way, and acquaintance with the fairest ideal.

People sometimes ask, Is life worth living? I would ask, How have you hitherto *been* living? You have acted rightly. Why have you done your duty? Because you were inspired by example? The living example may be withdrawn; the past example may not fit your conditions. Because you followed a customary road? You may some day be placed where custom conflicts with righteousness. Because good-nature prompted you? Mere good-nature depends upon health and income; and health and income are not constant quantities. Because you won smiles? The world will not always smile. Because you received approving testimonies? Society will not always grant testimonials to uprightness. Because you took a joy in doing it? It will oft-times yield bitterness. Because it brought you friends? It may bring you enemies. Because it rendered profit? It will occasionally lead to loss. Because it seemed graceful and becoming? Duty will not always be picturesque. Because the law required it? Your duty and the law of the land may some day come into antagonism. Because it was easier than neglect? It will not infrequently be harder. What then? If duty does not depend upon example, custom, good nature, the world's smiles, social testimonies, joy, friends, profit, picturesqueness, legality, ease—upon what foundation does it rest?

“Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe—the starry heavens and the Moral Law within.” To act from the law of duty because you recognize that as the law of reason; as the necessary pillar of an harmonious world—this is to give purpose to life, to give it value and dignity. This helps us to originate a newer and more splendid species. This is the gospel that quickens.

It speaks no scorn of the meanest soul. It rakes up no records of sin. It knows the evil of the world, the vice, the bestiality, the cruelty, the knavery, the folly. The very fact that these are recognized as bad proves the authority of the Moral Law which condemns them. Does crime call itself crime? No; it is the Moral Law which calls it crime. And the poorest, shabbiest, timidest, most meagre soul that has strength enough to say, "That thing is bad," has strength enough to stagger to the threshold of the Moral Ideal, and offer its salute.

This gospel is a gospel for all. Just as, beside the grave, we all shed tears, so, before the Moral Law, we all stifle the light word, and check the unseemly gesture, and stand in hushed respect. If you are a Christian, and love sanctuaries and scriptures, this law appeals to you. If you are an Agnostic, and delight in Voltaire and Buckle and Spencer, this law appeals to you. If you are old, it appeals to you. If you are young \* \* \*

In one of Rossetti's pictures he shows us a woman standing sadly at a door. A vile rat grubs into the wall—emblem of the sin and care that have eaten away her peace. In the background play the children at their ring-a-ring-a-roses—emblems of hope and opportunity. The picture points to the new creation which each generation brings to the world through the freshening force of youth. It is in youth that the new varieties of thought and beauty and skill are chiefly planned. The enthusiasms of youth give the momentum to the activity of later years. Young conversion means old salvation. The Duke of Wellington used to say the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing-fields of Eton. The battles of light and progress are won in the hearts of the young man and the maid. Epictetus, the lame old Stoic, tells of a dare-devil youth named Polemon, who, with a crowd of loose companions, burst one day into the lecture-room of the philosopher Xenocrates. Polemon was sobered by the tone and aspect of the sage. He listened to the wise words. His heart was touched. He changed his manner of life, and gave himself to learning, and, in time, succeeded to the chair of Xenocrates. Now, says Epictetus, Polemon was a lover of beauty, but he looked for it in the wrong place. He found it at last in the wisdom of the academy. Young men and women are sincere lovers of

beauty, and often they look for it in the wrong place. May we not hope that they will see, in dedication to the Moral Ideal, a force that will give beauty to life, and majesty of step, and faculty of heart, and hand, and brain? Blessed, doubly-blessed, trebly-blessed will this Ethical Movement be if it gathers in the battalions of youth! It is not a Movement only for the pinched intellect, and the lame, and the blemished. It offers scope for full-blooded manhood and vigorous womanhood. While it accepts with tenderness the scant tokens of the simplest spirit, yet it can use the grace, the energy, and the gift of the bravest and the fairest.

Sometimes, from the Ethical platform, the teaching will deal with the movements of masses, nations, societies, organizations; and that is well. For the Moral Law has its message for the masses, and the classes, and the bodies that march with million feet and shape out the large policies of the world. But to-day I speak to the individual, to the one, to you, to myself.

Carlyle has told us how, in 1789, six hundred members of the States-General met in the Tennis-court of Versailles, and lifted the right hand, and swore not to separate till they had made a Constitution; and their oath "made the four corners of France tremble." The serious dedication of a Self to the service of the Moral Ideal is better done less openly, less loudly, and less after the manner of the drilled regiment. But none the less the dedication is demanded. We must remember that the building of the New Order can only advance through the consecration of a heart here, another there, and another there. And we must *know* that we consecrate ourselves. We must make the declaration and sign our name to it. We are not simply to submit to an influence, to admire, to seat ourselves passively on the footstool of the Ideal. We must not look out of a window and say: "Ah! there is an Ethical Movement on foot, and I bless the banners." That counts for nothing. It may be liberality of thought, but it is meanness of conduct. We must step in with the procession. "My son, give me thine heart," said the old Jewish teachers. The Ethical Movement will not ask for less.

And how may we know our recruits? And what are the marks of the soul that has written its name among the followers of the Great Law?

In each man or woman we shall note a cheerful sobriety of speech and demeanour ; a readiness to rejoice with those that rejoice, to console the mourner and the dejected ; an openness and moral dignity of manner ; a quick appreciation of things true and beautiful in persons, books, art, and nature ; a catholic sentiment that will find kinship with the Good among all schools of thought and religion ; a willingness to give personal service in civic, social, and humanitarian causes.

And each individual case will show its special fruit. A father will give closer heed to the moral interests of his family. A mother will put more wisdom into her discipline. The youth and maid will more diligently seek a definite purpose in life. The student will hallow his book-learning by using it for the advancement of his neighbour's culture. The commercial man will discard the trick he once stooped to. The employer will take kindly thought for those dependent upon him, and will do more than the letter of the law requires. The affluent will lead just such a simple life as he might conscientiously desire the poor to be able to lead. The politician will be as anxious for justice between class and class as for justice between his sons and daughters. The citizen will care for the honour of his parish, his city, his country, as for his own personal good name. Old duties will assume a finer import, and the clear eye will discover new duties towards one's self and towards one's fellows.

This our church should be a fount of inspiration whence all might come to draw. We are not Socialists ; we are not Individualists ; we are not politicians ; we are not anarchists ; we are not Christians ; we are not enemies of Christianity ; but, with humble resolution, we seek to keep clear the stream of the moral perception. And they that come to drink may go away to shatter an idol, or annihilate a sham, or defy an evil custom, or lay bare a fallacy, or reform an abuse, or build a house of mercy, or set up an institution for the spread of knowledge, or plead the cause of the ignorant and weak, or speak peace among the turbulent, or raise the tone of a household, or labour for that betterment of material conditions without which the Moral Law stumbles and halts in shameful numbness and inability. And they

come together again to commune one with the other in the Church Ethical; and they comfort one another, and get refreshment for the tired heart. For the process of regenerating the race is toilful, and the way is hard to the flesh, and the building is but tardy.

“ We are builders of that city ;  
 All our joys and all our groans  
 Help to rear its shining ramparts,  
 All our lives are building-stones,  
 But the work that we have builded,  
 Oft with bleeding hands and tears,  
 And in error and in anguish,  
 Will not perish with the years.”\*

Have I asked too little of those who enrol themselves under the Ethical standard? Then let each man raise the demand for himself, and respond to it.

Have I asked too much? Then tell me if you wish the world to say that all we Ethicals have done is to add to the catalogue of churches one with a strange Greek name?

If you have ever been to Strassburg, you may have witnessed a striking scene in the old cathedraï. As the famous clock nears the hour of noon every day, a closely-packed crowd of people, of many languages and modes, assemble and watch. When the very minute is at hand, their murmurs are hushed, and a solemn stillness holds them all. And the clock sounds twelve, and the figures of the twelve apostles pass before their master, each making a reverence; and, quaint and shrill, the cock crows thrice. Then, with a sigh, the throng breaks up, and passes out into the sunlight and the busy city.

So profoundly does the heart beat when the attention of many minds is fixed simultaneously on the passage of time.

And to-day, as we gather together in this stillness here, we note the indications on life's dial. We see flit by the significant figures of Duty, Righteousness, and Responsibility; and the voice of the Moral Law delivers its summons—

### And what shall we do?

\* From Dr. Adler's "Song of the Golden City."

