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ENTERING SOCIETY:

A DISCOURSE

BY

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ENTERING SOCIETY.

EVERY physical law runs through the universe; explains equally the rolling world and rolling pebble; harmonises flowers and constellations. In the moral and social world there is a like self-similarity. A certain unity may be discovered in the culture of a child, a nation, or the human race.

Constant is the unity of interests, feelings, thoughts, making what we term society. There is an endless variety in human nature, but its distinction from all lower nature is that its varieties can be utilized to form a society. In animal swarms and herds sameness is their strength; feather flocks with its feather. There is a strange tribe of American Indians who have a tradition that mankind is descended from the animal world. There was, they say, a mountainous monster who devoured all manner of animals. He swallowed them alive, and once, when he had taken this various meal, a certain Little Wolf that had

been swallowed, found the animals inside the monster quarrelling with each other ; and he persuaded them that instead of quarrelling they should one and all unite, and contribute their several powers of horn, tooth, or other faculty to get out of the monster and slay him. The animals co-operated ; liberated themselves ; slew the monster ; and, in doing that, they were changed to men, and the human race began. It is a much more moral and scientific genesis of man than that in the Bible. Intelligent co-operation of different species imply humanity ; and there are facts enough to show that, on the other hand, prolonged strife disintegrates society, and men may be transformed back to animals.

All human beings are born members of society. Some pietists and fanatics have tried to escape this necessity, because society is what they call worldly ; but, though they hide in nunneries, monasteries, caves and deserts, they do not get out of society any more than they get out of the world. If society were to cease its work of coining, baking, weaving, trading, then the hermit would get out of it in the one way possible—death.

There is nothing more grotesque, were we not so familiar with it, than where the abject language of hermits who fled society,—and sometimes escaped from it by the door of death,—and their anathemas on the

world are repeated by Christians enjoying society and ambitious of its rewards. Possibly they feel bound for form's sake to carry the skeleton of asceticism round the banquet, but, as in the Egyptian custom, the performance only seems to stimulate the more the avidity with which the so-called pious utilise and enjoy the kingdom of this world. The Church of England merits the credit of having to a large extent abolished the fiction of a world of sinners and an un-world (so to say) of saints; and it might become a fairly good church if it were to lay aside its pretence that the world is morally an invalid in need of its holy medicaments. The temptation is great where the deceived patient is rich, for priests as well as for the doctors who proffer bread-pills. (The "Priest in Absolution" really believes in the deadly situation of human nature, and goes on with the old practice of drugging, blistering and bleeding.)

The unpardonable sin of nearly every theology—the sin by which it must perish—is the separation it has effected between two parts of man's nature, the antagonism instituted between his social and spiritual activities, in whose harmony man's well-being can alone be found. That only a few eccentric priests believe and act on that principle does not mitigate the evil fact that all are taught it, and that the young and simple have their consciences bruised and their lives

misdirected by it. A result of this figment has been that the strongest moral agencies, which a true religion would have cultivated, have been left to trail or climb as they could ; no sect being willing to acknowledge that any good force belonged to human nature. Still, without any aid from the churches, and mostly against their opposition, Society has been partially able to cultivate the motives, feelings, aims which constitute the actual religion,—the guiding, moulding, animating religion,—of each civilised community, so far as it is really guided, leaving the churches to become more and more museums of antiquarian dogmatic remains.

What is the Social Religion? Its motive is the sentiment of honour, the sin it specially hates is meanness : these two—love of the honourable, hatred of the dishonourable—branch out from the individual heart into endless adaptations. Out of the social sentiment of honour emerge patriotism, justice, fortitude, supporting states ; and that loyalty in personal relations, generating sympathy and friendliness, which, when men make the most of them, will cement the world better than gunpowder. No state can ever be perfectly civilised until it is held together by simple force of friendliness.

There is a print often seen in shop-windows which has been sent by thousands through the world. It is inscribed—“Simply to thy cross I cling,” and repre-

sents a young woman with the waves of a sea dashing around her, clasping for safety a cross which rises from the mid-ocean. It is a perfect mirror of Christian idolatry: it is translatable into many systems of superstition, where above the billows Faith clings now to a lingam, next to a wheel, or it may be, to the symbol of a serpent. But from what engulfing waves will a stone cross, or any of the like idols, save those who cling to them? From billows of sorrow, loss of their friends, or from disease, pain, and death? By no means. It is truly written in the Bible that one fate happens to all alike, whatever be their prayers and sacrifices; and it almost broke the hearts of the old prophets and psalmists that the pious got no advantage at all over others in these things; in fact, nature's strict impartiality between the prayerful and the prayerless was a main reason why priests fell to abusing nature and building up a cloudy realm, in which, being its sole creators, they could like other romancers have things turn out as they liked—all the "pious" happy, all the rest damned. In that world where cause and effect are of no importance all the stone crosses are in order. They are effective enough to save clinging Faith from imaginary billows, from storms that are not raging, floods non-existent, waves of delusive sin against a demonic majesty, and fabulous furies of a phantasmal hell.

But for all of these the real religion that grows around us day by day will substitute the definite recognition of actual moral dangers, and the study of rational methods by which they may be escaped, and the health of man and society be preserved. Even now the finest hearts and minds in this world are impressing upon us the real hells beside which those of the sects appear petty and ridiculous. While the "lake of fire," to an increasing number, reads like something seen by Baron Munchausen on his travels, it is no dream that bright and sweet children are growing up to people asylums and prisons, to break hearts and desolate homes, and to pass into degradations which sometimes make death seem a tardy joy. If a man has ever had the sorrow of seeing one youth beginning with promise, throwing away his life in debauchery and selfishness, much more if he have seen the anguish of a home when all its fairest promises are broken, he will hardly require more to show him the absurdity of priest-made horrors in the presence of these that are real.

I think it not too soon to maintain that somewhat more gravity—even solemnity, if you please—should be associated with what is called "entering society." That phrase usually denotes participation in festal society—a realm of gaiety, beauty, mutual felicitation, where persons are seen in picturesque tableau.

There are some silly moralists who look upon all that as vanity ; all the beauty of raiment, each effort to look the best, to be happy and make others happy, as ministering to ostentation and selfishness, and as injurious to modesty, humility, and simplicity. Nothing of the kind. It will never harm the modesty of youth to enjoy life's springtide, as nature invites with her blossom and melody. All that purity requires is that their mirth and dance keep always in the light, and that there be no blind ways such as "priests in absolution" provide, and other spiders that weave their webs along the flower-fringed paths of early life. There are hard, odious men (not many women I hope), who would turn this world into a coal depôt, or a grocer's shop ; but the social health is too vigorous for them ; and it is a satisfaction to know that there is a demand for roses as well as cabbages. They who wear the roses, or other decoration, are they vain? On the contrary they are conscious of their need of the rose or the gem to supply that wherein they fall short. Nor are they selfish ; they do not array themselves for self-admiration ; they long to contribute their part to the general happiness, to make the social circle beautiful, tasteful, and worthy of the enormous cost and toil by which it is supported.

The only danger is that the young will believe some

evil whisper that their circle of social enjoyment is quite apart from their round of religious interests and moral duties. They may not indeed adopt the vulgar cant that these are opposed to each other—one holy, the other wicked. But even where that notion is not found, some regard society as a worldly thing, a region of persons not of principles. The merchant who regards religion as a thing for Sunday and not Monday; who conceives the commandments proper between lids of the Bible, out of place between lids of the ledger; the preacher who on Sunday rehearses creeds declaring the human race under a doom, and everybody moving amid satanic snares, and then passes the rest of his week as smilingly as if there were no danger;—these, and others like them, are generally so unconscious of the duplicity of their lives that we may see plainly that the actual every-day world and the so-called religious world are to those they represent as different as two planets. But it is impossible that this tradition can be suffered to go on much longer. That religious world which has no relation to society, but only to an anthropomorphic deity and another world, has already received the verdict of human intelligence—that it is no real religion at all, but a morbid excrescence on the body of Humanity. The verdict has been passed, and the sentence can not long be delayed; for it is impossible that the real interests of man can be

preserved if his energies, his means, above all his moral enthusiasm, are diverted from a society in need to a deity not in need ; from actually existent men and women to possibly existent angels ; from the momentous day that is to that which is not.

The fundamental law of society is one with the fundamental law of religion. It is a higher law than the Hebrew golden rule (though not inharmonious with it), for it teaches us that our self-love must not equal our love of others. In every case the social instinct requires our personal interest to be held subordinate to the general good ; and there is no other foundation of either morality or religion than just that : self-denial, self-restraint, even self-sacrifice, for things larger than self, are varied growths from the one germ of our moral nature—the social self rising above the personal self.

Unless the endless combinations of society be attended and supervised by the moral principle just stated, increase of wealth and power is but increase of things anti-social, selfish, unprogressive. An irreligious society is self-disintegrating ; but how is society to be kept in pure elevation when religion is off attending to mansions in heaven ; and when the majority of young people are taught such notions of religion that they are only too glad to get rid of it during the rational days of the week ? They are perfectly right ;

the introduction of cant and sanctimoniousness into the drawing-room, or theatre, or club, or business, would be like the new beetle amid grain ; for that is vast selfishness disguised as religion. But there is such a religion as charity and kindness, as self-control and love and service to others ; the spirit that desires to learn and be set right ; the courtesy, the sympathy, which alone can make the true gentleman or gentlewoman ; and if this kind of religion does not beat as pulse of the social heart to transfuse the social body and all its members, the life of these will be coarse, their end corruption.

Let us for example consider one of the great social growths of modern times—the club system. To what is called polite society the club is almost as important a development as the railway system to trade. It results from the application of the principle of co-operation to secure personal intercourse under favourable conditions, and all manner of comfort and culture with utmost economy of means. That is the most powerful principle in the world—combination—and though society is itself a product of it, it has hardly imagined its farther results. But what are the social effects of club life at present ? It appears to me that great as are their advantages they are fostering some very serious evils, and it is to be feared, even vices. Every respectable young man has the opportunity of

entering one or another of the innumerable clubs, and if he obtains a little means the club almost doubles them. The average home cannot rival the average club for comfort, luxury, or various society. The wife may make herself a slave, but if great wealth be not given her she cannot make her home compete with the ample attractions of the club. And how little the cost! A young man, for little more than half of what it would cost him to marry and found a home of moderate comfort, may live luxuriously, passing his free hours in the finest library, with all the current literature of the world, amid decorated rooms for use or amusement, dining magnificently with clever company; and all by combining his small means with the small means of other young men. All very good, and rightly helpful to many a youth. But for that youth duties are waiting, tasks presently clamour to be done by him; and if he remains in his palace after he has heard their voice, it becomes to him the Castle of Indolence, and probably also the home of sensuality. It is no narrow or ascetic judgment to say that large numbers of young men of high tastes and talents are sinking into lives of selfishness, dilettantism, and worthlessness through the enticing luxuries of club-life. Nor is the evil much, if at all, diminished when we consider how many homes after they are formed are robbed of their rights by this overpowering growth of modern society.

How are such evils to be met? Is there any case for a crusade against clubs? If there were it would be a quixotic crusade. But clubs are not an evil; they supply great and necessary advantages. All we need is that there shall be a social religion attending and guarding these vast social formations. Our need is that moral culture shall turn from star-gazing and face moral facts, and a religion rise up to teach every man from the cradle to the grave that his duty is not to a dead Christ but to a living humanity, not to a Virgin Mary but to womanhood around him, not to a "Holy Ghost" but to a principle of honour,—aye, an honour which, when it has a religious sanction, will not be unarmed, but remand every idler in club or elsewhere to his task, will place every self-indulgent circle under ban of intolerable shame, and get from each his or her high duty, with every pure pleasure in its train.

When there is a religion appealing to the highest motives in every human heart, that leads each youth of either sex who enters society to consider that every advantage corresponds with a duty, then all developments of power and wealth in any direction must be diffused through every part of society as benefit. We hear a great deal of social science; there is one very old piece of social science confirmed by ages of experience—that we are members one of another. Hand

cannot be so well off if foot is lame ; all are weak if one is weak. Great nations have learned at terrible cost that when one class or interest advances very far it is sure to be brought to a stop till other classes gain their share. The white people in America found lately that their own freedom could not last another year unless the black people enjoyed the same. Europe is learning a severe lesson of the same kind about some long neglected Eastern tribes. But the law holds with equal truth of any community, or any social circle in it. If, for example, co-operation has exemplified its power in the club, the club cannot monopolise it without danger ; it must become the economy of homes also ; both sexes must share it ; working men and working women must share it. And if there is any society where wise principles are not thus diffused those who belong to it will be themselves fragmentary and inharmonious.

Every man or woman entering society should carry a whole heart into it. Not one instinct or faculty should be reserved, or left to take the veil. Each and all, let them enter into life, love it, enjoy it, and not fail to do their duty by it. The price is not fairly paid unless you endeavour to diffuse what there is acquired. You enter the hive to create the sweet as well as to enjoy it. And in the human hive the creation means the progressive purification and per-

fection of it. In society you have found new thoughts—higher truth—liberal views ; they all belong to the hive. And in a high sense your debt to all is secured : you can have no benefit genuinely unless by giving it. If God himself were to offer you a private favour and advantage of which nobody else could reap the least good, far better decline it. That which is sweet to you is sweet to others. That which is pure and true to you, would be so to others if they felt it as you do. Then give others your very best. So shall you stimulate them to diffuse their best ; and all shall become apostles of the sunshine.