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THE

FLAGELLANTS.



BY

SALADIN.

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THE FLAGELLANTS.

FROM the era of its half-mythical Galilean downwards, Christianity has laid incontestable claims to be considered the Religion of Misery. A radical doctrine of the faith is that this world is only a Babelmandeb, or Gate of Tears to the "glory that shall yet be revealed." The teachings recorded of Christ have all the jaundiced acerbity of the Essenes. The son of Mary was an ascetic, or nothing. According to him, the end of the world was close at hand. Its concerns and aims were despicable, and the best that could be done was to regard its pleasures as pernicious seductions and lay up "treasures in heaven," as it would avail a man nothing should he "gain the whole world and lose his own soul."

Strictly compatible with the teachings of Christ were the doctrines of Cardinal Damiani, when he wrote a panegyric upon the efficacy of self-inflicted suffering, and those of the celebrated Dominic, when he introduced penitential hymns, to be chanted to a tune to which the self-inflicted lash kept time. Hair shirts, protracted periods of fasting, and the like, had long been in vogue as means to propitiate an angry heaven; but Dominic affirmed that twenty recitations of the Psalms, accompanied by self-inflicted scourging, was equal to a hundred years of ordinary penitence.

Dominic flourished towards the middle of the eleventh century; but it was not till about two centuries later (1260) that the seed of asceticism he had sown arose to be a great and popular tree of self-torture. It was in an age of gloom and suffering and wickedness that, at Pergugia, in Italy, a monk named Regnier, with wild and

bitter eloquence, preached Flagellation as the antidote that would restore an afflicted people to the favour of an angry God. Like Peter the Hermit in the first Crusade, like Luther at the Reformation, or Bernhardt of the Millenarian insanity, this Regnier had rightly interpreted the spirit of the times. He put in his sickle, and the corn was already ripe for the harvest. The wars of Guelph and Ghibelline, famine, pestilence, rapine, murder and misery had, after a thousand years of Christianity, made Italy and the most of Europe feel that life was, indeed, not worth living, but only a horrid and mysterious burden, which was taken up involuntarily, and which left those who bore it such cravens that they had not the courage to lay it down.

And so another violent epidemic of *Lose your Reason to Save your Soul* fell upon Christendom like a rinderpest. The memory and inspiration of the Man of Sorrows was again to lay the load of a great sorrow upon the shoulders of the world. Once more, as, under the preaching of Bernhardt and Peter the Hermit, rowdy and rascal, swashbuckler and sword-player, blackguard and blackleg, worked themselves into a frenzy concerning one Jesus, whose name has always been a spell-word with miscreants from the time of the Christian cut-throats mentioned by Tacitus down to Booth's latest prize, the "blood-washed soul" of 'Arry Juggins the burglar.

Two by two the holy ones of the whip-lash marched through the gaping multitudes on the crowded streets. Their heads were covered with sackcloth; their remaining article of attire was a bandage round the loins, which rendered them a little decent for God's sake. Their backs and breasts were entirely nude. The back bore a huge cross, daubed upon the skin with red paint; and another cross was smeared upon the naked breast. On through the town, and through the wilderness, in long and narrow file, like the march of the ducks from the dub to the midden, marched those nasty saints of God. The hand of each sacred fanatic bore a heavy and horrible whip, the thongs tipped with iron; and, with this whip, every pious madman lashed his own bare back till the thongs were clotted and gory, and long lines of blood

running down from the scapula to the pelvis defaced the red cross which had been painted on the skin.

To what shall we liken the men of that generation? To a crazy dog, refusing its food and chewing off its own hind legs to please its master. But the analogy is imperfect, and the man flogging his own back to please his Jesus is more irrational than the dog chewing off his own hind legs to please his master; for the dog is positively sure he has a master; but the ablest Christian that has ever written has not been able to establish that his Jesus ever existed. The only record of him is in four so-called "Gospels," written by nobody knows who, nobody knows where, and nobody knows when, and the statements of which are contradicted by each other and utterly unsupported by history. A pretty source, indeed, from which to derive a Jesus in whose honour you can flog your back! But backs always will be flogged, and noses ever will be held close to the grindstone, till he with the back and he with the nose takes the trouble to cultivate his brain, and dares to confront, eagle-eyed, the authorities that would make him a chattel and a poor mad cats-paw in the hands of priest and tyrant.

Jehovah has ever liked singing and dancing and capers to his glory and honour. David, the "man according to God's own heart," danced naked before God and certain young girls; and another worthy sang to God's glory with acceptance because Jael had hammered a nail into her guest's head while he slept. So the Flagellants, besides tickling their own backs with whips, deemed it would be well to tickle Jehovah's ears with music. Accordingly they sang while they flogged. If you think flogging your back is conducive to making you rival the efforts of Sims Reeves, just try the experiment. Flog your back while you sing, and you will find that many a quaver flies off into a scream, and that many a crotchet is dead-born. But Jehovah had just to content himself with such music as was obtainable under the circumstances. Certain fragments of the hymns which the Flagellants sang have been preserved. Here are brief specimens:—

"Through love of man the Saviour came,
Through love of man he died;

He suffered want, reproach, and shame,
 Was scourged and crucified.
 Oh, think, then, on thy Saviour's pain,
 And lash the sinner, lash again !"*

The following are a few lines from the metrical rendering into English of "The Ancient Song of the Flagellants" :—

"Tears from our sorrowing eyes we weep,
 Therefore so firm our faith we keep
 With all our hearts, with all our senses :
 Christ bore his cross for our offences.
 Ply well the scourge, for Jesu's sake,
 And God, through Christ, your sin will take.
 For love of God abandon sin—
 To mend your vicious lives begin ;
 So shall we his mercy win."†

Thirty-three days and a half was the shortest term in which a Flagellant must macerate and lacerate himself ; and these thirty-three and a half days were meant to be mystically symbolical of the thirty-three years and a half which the third part of God, and yet equal to the whole of God, had lived on earth "saving souls" and making wheelbarrows. The devotees fell down on their dirty knees in the dirty streets, and, setting up their naked, putrid, and horrible backs, prayed to Jah and Jesus and Mary to have mercy on their souls, before having taken the trouble to find out whether they had souls or not. Jah and Jesus and Mary had, however, something else to do than attend to kneeling lunatics with voices like cross-cut saws and backs like beef-steaks. But the cities, then as now, had plenty of fools, and certain of them rushed out at their doors or leapt from their windows for God's sake to join the ranks of those who lashed their hurdies with thongs and prayed with their knees in the gutter. When all Christendom had managed to lash its back to its own satisfaction, it threw down the whip, got up from its knees, and took to swearing and sinning in the usual way.

But, some fifty years afterwards, Christendom again took it into its head that its back would be all the better for a flogging. So, in 1296, the saints, particularly those

* Preserved by L'Evesque ; quoted by Lingard.

† Dr. Hecker.

of Strasburg, Spires, and Frankfort, took unto themselves whips, and began business in earnest. The Jews had good broad backs, which they were impious enough never to whip, and this mightily offended the Christian Flagellants. The Jews did not see their way to whip their own backs, so, in the most obliging manner, the Christians offered to whip them for them. The Jews preferred to look after their commercial enterprises to tearing away with a scourge at their own dorsal rafters; and, for this deadly sin, they were foully massacred. The wretches who did not scourge their backs had scourged the third of God and crucified him. Down with them to Tophet! One Jew, goaded to desperation by Christian persecution and outrage, set fire to the Town Hall and the Cathedral of Frankfort, and they were reduced to ashes. Down with the seed of Iscariot and Barabbas! The holy ones flung away their whips, and, seizing sword, hatchet, and knife, devoted some hours of horror to the slaughter of man, woman, and child of the seed of Israel. The God of Jacob looked on; but, apparently, did not see his way to interfere. In Frankfort, of all the sons and daughters of Salem whose ancestors had sung to the Lord by the streams of Babel, none remained alive, except a small remnant that, bursting through the carnage, had escaped into Bohemia. Christ had "redeemed" these Christians (they were well worth it) by a bloody sacrifice upon Calvary, and, out of complement—like Catherine Medici in her sanguinous bath—they set him in blood to the chin. Every tree must be judged by its fruit. I hereby defy the history of all the other faiths to produce a tree like the Christian one, which, from the deepest root to the topmost twig, is dyed with human gore.

After the Frankfort tragedy of 1296 Flagellantism did not rear its head conspicuously till the year 1348. To students of history the mention of this date recalls the deepest and widest grave that was ever dug to receive the slag and refuse of mortality. The "BLACK DEATH" took into her hands the besom of destruction, and swept into the sepulchre *twenty-five millions* of human beings! Europe fell upon her knees, and from Dirt appealed to Deity. But the appeal was in vain. In every Christian

city there was a plethora of disgusting sewage and unspeakable stench. Cleanliness is, proverbially, next to godliness; but the citizens of mediæval Europe were so godly that they forgot to be cleanly. Out of Mohammedan Constantinople there was not a bath on the entire European continent, from the Straits of Behring to the Straits of Messina. Pious Ignorance and theological Intolerance sat to the eyes in filth, which it would give my readers the jaundice to describe; and mankind perished as do clouds of locusts when overtaken by a gale at sea, or as perish at the end of autumn tens of thousands of hives of bees, when imprisoned amid the fumes of burning brimstone.

"God in heaven, Mary and all the Saints, what is the matter now?" gasped Christendom, as, with pale lips and phrenzied eye, she, in whole cityfuls, staggered into the grave. Nothing practical, as connected with this wretched "Vale of Tears," suggested itself to the follower of Jesus. He was beyond and above attending to the carnal conditions of this despicable earth, and from the midst of his priests and relics and shrines and miracles his whole hope was in heaven, and his only court of appeal his Maker and Redeemer. But neither Maker nor Redeemer could be induced to interfere; and graves were dug till there were none left to dig them, and corpses were borne out of the streets and houses till there were none left to bear them. There were only the voice of prayer, the cry of pain, and the rattle of the Death-cart; and in certain districts even these sounds died away. In the houses the dead were left with the dead. There was a disused cart and a skeleton horse. Grass and weeds flourished in the streets where a busy traffic had rolled its tides, and there the wind waved ghastly shreds of human apparel, still adhering to more ghastly relics of human beings. There was high carnival for maggot and fly, and dogs and swine tugged and snarled among the entrails of those who had trusted in Jesus and neglected their dustbins.

The New Testament was looked to as the antidote to the bane; and, whatever may be its merits, it is a poor manual of hygiene. Scrubbing is never mentioned, and there is no reference to washing, except to the washing of

“souls,” whatever they may be, in blood. There is, moreover, allusion to the washing of a certain party’s feet with tears, and then drying them with maiden’s hair; but this is a sentimental and not an efficacious lavation. It is not on record that Mary or Tabitha, or any one else, ever washed the shirt or tunica which was worn under the seamless garment of Christ, and I question if it was ever washed or changed from the day on which he left the carpenter’s bench till the day that, with his life, he expiated his sedition and folly. Through all the horrors of the Black Death we hear of no wholesome and honest washing with water; but there certainly was a washing of the streets with blood. It was surmised that this visitation of the wrath of the Almighty was instigated by the sinfulness of the Christians in allowing the Jews to live; for it was the Jews who had crucified the Lord; and yet, according to the Christian theory, if “the Lord” had not been crucified, the world would inevitably have been lost. The Black Death was accompanied with another merciless massacre of the Jews. It was also accompanied by another pitiless flogging of backs. So fanatically wild did this self-inflicted back-flogging become that many held that the rite of Flagellation should, in the Christian Church, supersede the rite of Baptism. Many literally flogged away the flesh off their bones, and yet the plague did not abate; and the sky and the earth were pregnant with supernatural terrors. A pillar of fire hung over the Pope’s palace at Avignon; a red ball of fire in the heavens blazed over Paris, and Greece and Italy were shaken with an earthquake. And the Christians flogged and prayed, and prayed and flogged, and sang and slew, and slew and sang, and still the plague went on.

Flagellatism was not without its serio-comic aspect. I cannot say whether it copied from the game of Leap-the-Frog, or whether Leap-the-Frog has copied from it. In Leap-the-Frog each boy vaults over his neighbour’s bended back, and then bends his own, and so on the process goes till each has vaulted over the back of all. The Flagellants lay in rows, and one ran along the row scourging furiously as he went with a leathern scourge tipped with iron, and then he lay down; and so on and

so on, till each had flogged the naked backs of all. In lying in the rows to be flogged, however, those who wished to do penance for certain crimes had to observe certain recognised postures indicative of these crimes. If the crime was perjury, till it was his turn to get up and flog, the penitent lay on his side, holding up three fingers; if it was adultery, he lay flat with his face on the ground; and so on, different postures of the body were fixed upon to indicate different crimes. The Flagellants, too, were not without their grotesque impostures in the shape of pious forgeries. At one of their assemblies they actually read a letter which had been sent to them direct from heaven, and in which Jesus Christ was good enough to give them his favourable opinion of the efficacy of Flagellation. The "Blessed Virgin" had, with maternal affection, given her Son some assistance in the composition of this celestial missive.

Unlike the Millenarian mania, the Flagellant craze extended even to England. In 1351 a deputation of 120 continental Flagellants visited London; but insular stolidity did not see its way to carry its piety to the extent of lacerating its own flesh with scourges. Even on the continent the frenzy began to exhaust itself. The leaders betook themselves to desperate resources to buttress up a falling cause. They set themselves to the task of restoring life to a dead child, and performed the "miracle" so clumsily that the performance hastened their dissolution instead of giving them a new lease of influence. In the hey-day of their fanaticism neither king nor pontiff saw it prudent to interfere with the Flagellants; but when the tide turned against them king and pontiff turned against them too. A bitter persecution set in, and Flagellantism, like most other isms, was called upon to furnish its roll of martyrs, and it heroically enough responded to the call. Its dying spasm—and it was a vigorous and terrible one—was in 1414, and some time later it finally expired in the dungeons and amid the fagots of the Holy Inquisition. Mankind, in the mass, continue to be fools; but, in the last four centuries, there has been some small advance towards sanity, and it is now somewhat difficult to get any one to flog his own back for the love of God.

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