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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

SOCIAL SALVATION

A Lay Sermon

BY

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—

In the greatest tragedy that has ever been written by man—in the fourth scene of the third act—is the best prayer that I have ever read; and when I say “the greatest tragedy,” everybody familiar with Shakespeare will know that I refer to “King Lear.” After he has been on the heath, touched with insanity, coming suddenly to the place of shelter, he says :

“I will pray first, and then I will sleep.”

And this prayer is my text :

“Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your unhoused heads, your unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend
From seasons such as this? Oh, I have ta’en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou may’st shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.”

That is one of the noblest prayers that ever fell from human lips. If nobody has too much, everybody will have enough!

I propose to say a few words upon subjects that are near to us all, and in which every human being ought to be interested—and if he is not, it may be that his wife will be, it may be that his orphans will be; and I would like to see this world, at last, so that a man could die and not feel that he left his wife and children a prey to the greed, the avarice, or the necessities of mankind. There is something wrong in our government where they who do the most have the least. There is something wrong when honesty wears a rag, and rascality a robe; when the loving, the tender, eat a crust, while the infamous sit at the banquets. I cannot do much, but I can at least sympathise with those who suffer. There is one thing that we should remember at the start, and if I can

only teach you that, to-night—unless you know it already—I shall consider the few words I may have to say a wonderful success.

I want you to remember that everybody is as he *must* be. I want you to get out of your minds the old nonsense of “free moral agency”; then you will have charity for the whole human race. When you know that they are not responsible for their dispositions, any more than for their height; not responsible for their acts, any more than they are for their dreams; when you finally understand the philosophy that everything exists by an efficient cause, and that the lightest fancy that ever fluttered its painted wings in the horizon of hope was as necessarily produced as the planet that in its orbit wheels about the sun—when you get to understand this, I believe you will have charity for all mankind.

Wealth is not a crime; poverty is not a virtue—although the virtuous have generally been poor. There is only one good, and that is human happiness; and he only is a wise man who makes himself happy.

I have heard all my life about self-denial. There never was anything more idiotic than that. No man who does right practises self-denial. To do right is the bud, and blossom, and fruit of wisdom. To do right should always be dictated by the highest possible selfishness. No man practises self-denial unless he does wrong. To inflict an injury upon yourself is an act of self-denial. To plant seeds that will forever bear the fruit of joy is not an act of self-denial. So this idea of doing good to others only for their sake is absurd. You want to do it, not simply for their sake, but for your own; because a perfectly civilised man can never be perfectly happy while there is one unhappy being in this universe.

Let us take another step. The barbaric world was rewarded for acting sensibly. They were promised rewards in another world if they would only have self-denial enough to be virtuous in this. If they would forego the pleasures of larceny and murder; if they would forego the thrill and bliss of neanness here, they would be rewarded hereafter for that self-denial. I have exactly the opposite idea. Do right, not to deny yourself, but because you love yourself, and because you love others. Be generous, because it is better for you. Be

just, because any other course is the suicide of the soul. Whoever does wrong plagues himself, and when he reaps that harvest, he will find that he was not practising self-denial when he did right.

Now, then, as I say, if you want to be happy yourself, if you are truly civilised, you want others to be happy. Every man ought, to the extent of his ability, to increase the happiness of mankind, for the reason that that will increase his own. No one can be really prosperous unless those with whom he lives share the sunshine and the joy.

The first thing a man wants to know and be sure of is when he has got enough. Most people imagine that the rich are in heaven, but, as a rule, it is gilded hell. There is not a man in the city of New York with genius enough, with brains enough, to own five millions of dollars. Why? The money will own him. He becomes the key to a safe. That money will get him up at daylight; that money will separate him from his friends; that money will fill his heart with fear; that money will rob his days of sunshine and his nights of pleasant dreams. He cannot own it. He becomes the property of that money. And he goes right on making more. What for? He does not know. It becomes a kind of insanity. No one is happier in a palace than in a cabin. I love to see a log house. It is associated in my mind always with pure, unalloyed happiness. It is the only house in the world that looks as though it had no mortgage on it. It looks as if you could spend there long, tranquil autumn days; the air filled with serenity; no trouble, no thoughts about notes, about interest—nothing of the kind; just breathing free air, watching the hollyhocks, listening to the birds and to the music of the spring that comes like a poem from the earth.

It is an insanity to get more than you want. Imagine a man in this city, an intelligent man, say, with two or three millions of coats, eight or ten millions of hats, vast warehouses full of shoes, billions of neckties, and imagine that man getting up at four o'clock in the morning, in the rain and snow and sleet, working like a dog all day to get another necktie? Is not that exactly what the man of twenty or thirty millions, or of five millions, does to-day? Wearing his life out that somebody may say,

"How rich he is!" What can he do with the surplus? Nothing. Can he eat it? No. Make friends? No. Purchase flattery and lies? Yes. Make all his poor relations hate him? Yes. And then what worry! Annoyed, his poor little brain inflamed, you see in the morning paper "Died of apoplexy." This man finally began to worry for fear he would not have enough to live clear through.

So we ought to teach our children that great wealth is a curse. Great wealth is the mother also of crime. On the other hand are the poor. And let me ask to-night, Is the world for ever to remain as it was when Lear made his prayer? Is it ever to remain as it is now? I hope not. Are there always to be millions whose lips are white with famine? Is the withered palm to be always extended, imploring from the stony heart of respectable charity, alms? Must every man who sits down to a decent dinner always think of the starving? Must everyone sitting by the fireside think of some poor mother, with a child strained to her breast, shivering in the storm? I hope not. Are the rich always to be divided from the poor.—not only in fact, but in feeling? And that division is growing more and more every day. The gulf between Lazarus and Dives widens year by year, only their positions are changed—Lazarus is in hell, Dives is in the bosom of Abraham.

And there is one thing that helps to widen this gulf. In nearly every city of the United States you will find the fashionable part and the poor part. The poor know nothing of the fashionable part, except the outside splendor; and as they go by the palaces, that poison plant called envy springs and grows in their poor hearts. The rich know nothing of the poor, except the squalor and rags and wretchedness, and what they read in the police records, and they say, "Thank God, we are not like those people!" Their hearts are filled with scorn and contempt, and the hearts of the others with envy and hatred.

There must be some way devised for the rich and poor to get acquainted. The poor do not know how many well-dressed people sympathise with them, and the rich do not know many noble hearts beat beneath rags. If we can ever get the loving poor acquainted

with the sympathising rich, this question will be nearly solved.

In a hundred other ways they are divided. If anything should bring mankind together it ought to be a common belief. In Catholic countries that does have a softening influence upon the rich and upon the poor. They believe the same. So in Mohammedan countries they can kneel in the same mosque, and pray to the same God. But how is it with us? The Church is not free. There is no welcome in the velvet for the rags. Poverty does not feel at home there, and the consequence is, the rich and poor are kept apart, even by their religion. I am not saying anything against religion, I am not on that question, but I would think more of any religion provided that even for one day in the week, or for one hour in the day, it allowed wealth to clasp the hand of poverty, and to have, for one moment even, the thrill of genuine friendship.

In the olden times, in barbaric life, it was a simple thing to get a living. A little hunting, a little fishing, pulling a little fruit, and digging for roots—all simple; and they were nearly all on an equality, and comparatively there were fewer failures. Living has at last become complex. All the avenues are filled with men struggling for the accomplishment of the same thing.

“ Emulation hath a thousand sons that
One by one pursue; and if you hedge from
The direct forthright, they, like an entered tide,
All sweep by and leave you hindmost. Or, like
A gallant horse, fallen in the front rank,
You become pavement for the abject rear.”

The struggle is so hard. And just exactly as we have risen in the scale of being, the per cent of failures has increased. It is so that all men are not capable of getting a living. They have not cunning enough, intellect enough, muscle enough—they are not strong enough. They are too generous, or they are too negligent; and then some people seem to have what is called “bad luck”—that is to say, when anything falls they are under it; when anything bad happens it happens to them.

And now there is another trouble. Just as life becomes complex and as everyone is trying to accomplish certain objects, all the ingenuity of the brain is at work

to get there by a shorter way, and, in consequence, this has become an age of invention. Myriads of machines have been invented—every one of them to save labor. If these machines helped the laborer, what a blessing they would be! But the laborer does not own the machine; the machine owns him. That is the trouble. In the olden time, when I was a boy, even, you know how it was in the little towns. There was a shoemaker—two of them—a tailor or two, a blacksmith, a wheelwright. I remember just how the shops used to look. I used to go to the blacksmith shop at night, get up on the forge, and hear them talk about turning horse-shoes. Many a night have I seen the sparks fly and heard the stories that were told. There was a great deal of human nature in those days! Everybody was known. If times got hard, the poor little shoemakers made a living mending, half-soling, straightening up the heels. The same with the blacksmith; the same with the tailor. They could get credit—they did not have to pay till the next January, and if they could not pay then, they took another year, and they were happy enough. Now, one man is not a shoemaker. There is a great building—several hundred thousand dollars' worth of machinery, three or four thousand people—not a single mechanic in the whole building. One sews on straps, another greases the machines, cuts out soles, waxes threads. And what is the result? When the machines stop, three thousand men are out of employment. Credit goes. Then come want and famine, and if they happen to have a little child, die, it would take them years to save enough of their earnings to pay the expense of putting away that little sacred piece of flesh. And yet, by this machinery we can produce enough to flood the world. By the inventions in agricultural machinery the United States can feed all the mouths upon the earth. There is not a thing that man uses that can not instantly be over-produced to such an extent as to become almost worthless; and yet, with all this production, with all this power to create, there are millions and millions in abject want. Granaries bursting, and famine looking into the doors of the poor! Millions of everything, and yet millions wanting everything and having substantially nothing!

Now, there is something wrong there. We have got into that contest between machines and men, and if extravagance does not keep pace with ingenuity, it is going to be the most terrible question that man has ever settled. I tell you, to-night, that these things are worth thinking about. Nothing that touches the future of our race, nothing that touches the happiness of ourselves or our children, should be beneath our notice. We should think of these things—must think of them—and we should endeavor to see what justice is finally done between man and man.

My sympathies are with the poor. My sympathies are with the working men of the United States. Understand me distinctly. I am not an Anarchist. Anarchy is the reaction from tyranny. I am not a Socialist. I am not a Communist. I am an Individualist. I do not believe in tyranny of government, but I do believe in justice as between man and man.

What is the remedy? Or, what can we think of—for do not imagine that I think I know. It is an immense, and almost infinite, question, and all we can do is to guess. You have heard a great deal lately upon the land subject. Let us say a word or two upon that. In the first place I do not want to take, and I would not take, an inch of land from any human being that belongs to him. If we ever take it, we must pay for it—condemn it and take it—do not rob anybody. Whenever any man advocates justice, and robbery as the means, I suspect him.

No man should be allowed to own any land that he does not use. Everybody knows that—I do not care whether he has thousands or millions. I have owned a great deal of land, but I know just as well as I know I am living that I should not be allowed to have it unless I use it. And why? Don't you know that if people could bottle the air, they would? Don't you know that there would be an American Air-bottling Association? And don't you know that they would allow thousands and millions to die for want of breath, if they could not pay for air? I am not blaming anybody. I am just telling how it is. Now, the land belongs to the children of Nature. Nature invites every babe that is born into this world. And what would you think of me, for

instance, to-night, if I had invited you here—nobody had charged you anything, but you had been invited—and when you got here you had found one man pretending to occupy a hundred seats, another fifty, and another seventy-five, and thereupon you were compelled to stand up—what would you think of the invitation? It seems to me that every child of nature is entitled to his share of the land, and that he should not be compelled to beg the privilege to work the soil, of a babe that happened to be born before him. And why do I say this? Because it is not to our interest to have a few landlords and millions of tenants.

The tenement house is the enemy of modesty, the enemy of virtue, the enemy of patriotism. Home is where the virtues grow. I would like to see the law so that every home, to a small amount, should be free, not only from sale for debts, but should be absolutely free from taxation, so that every man could have a home. Then we will have a nation of patriots.

Now suppose that every man were to have all the land he is able to buy. The Vanderbilts could buy to-day all the land that is in farms in the state of Ohio—every foot of it. Would it be for the best interest of that state to have a few landlords and four or five millions of serfs? So, I am in favor of a law finally to be carried out—not by robbery but by compensation, under the right, as the lawyers call it, of eminent domain—so that no person should be allowed to own more land than he uses. I am not blaming these rich men for being rich. I pity the most of them. I had rather be poor with a little sympathy in my heart, than to be rich as all the mines of the earth and not have that little flower of pity in my breast. I do not see how a man can have hundreds of millions and pass every day people that have not enough to eat. I do not understand it. I presume I would be just the same way myself. There is something in money that dries up the sources of affection, and the probability is, it is this: the moment a man gets money, so many men are trying to get it away from him that in a little while he regards the whole human race as his enemy, and he generally thinks that they could be rich, too, if they would only attend to business as he has. Understand, I am not blaming these people. There is a

good deal of human nature in us all. You remember the story of the man who made a speech at a Socialist meeting, and closed it by saying "Thank God, I am no monopolist," but as he sank to his seat said, "But I wish to the Lord I was!" We must remember that these rich men are naturally produced. Do not blame them, blame the system!

Certain privileges have been granted to the few by the Government, ostensibly for the benefit of the many; and whenever that grant is not for the good of the many, it should be taken from the few—not by force, not by robbery, but by estimating fairly the value of that property, and paying to them its value, because everything should be done according to law and in order.

What remedy, then, is there? First, the great weapon in this country is the ballot. Each voter is a sovereign. There the poorest is the equal of the richest. His vote will count just as many as though the hand that cast it controlled millions. The poor are in the majority in this country. If there is any law that oppresses them, it is their fault. They have followed the fife and drum of some party. They have been misled by others. No man should go an inch with a party—no matter if that party is half the world and has in it the greatest intellects of the earth—unless that party is going his way. No honest man should ever turn round and join anything. If it overtakes him, good. If he has to hurry up a little to get to it, good. But do not go with anything that is not going your way; no matter whether they call it Republican, or Democrat, or Progressive Democracy—do not go with it unless it goes your way.

The ballot is the power. The law should settle these questions—between capital and labor—many of them; but I expect the greatest good to come from civilisation, from the growth of a sense of justice; for I tell you, to-night, a civilised man will never want anything for less than it is worth; a civilised man, when he sells a thing, will never want more than it is worth; a really and truly civilised man would rather be cheated than to cheat. And yet, in the United States, good as we are, nearly everybody wants to get everything for a little less than it is worth, and the man who sells it to him wants

to get a little more than it is worth, and this breeds rascality on both sides. That ought to be done away with. There is one step toward it that we will take : we will finally say that human flesh, human labor, shall not depend entirely on "supply and demand." That is infinitely cruel. Every man should give to another according to his ability to give, and enough that he may make his living and lay something by for the winter of old age.

Go to England. Civilised country they call it. It is not. It never was. I am afraid it never will be. Go to London, the greatest city of this world, where there is the most wealth, the greatest glittering piles of gold. And yet one out of every six in that city dies in a hospital, a workhouse, or a prison. Is that the best that we are ever to know? Is that the last word that civilisation has to say? Look at the women in this town sewing for a living, making cloaks that sell for 45 dollars for less than 45 cents! Right here—here, amid all the palaces, amid the thousands of millions of property—here! Is that all that civilisation can do? Must a poor woman support herself or her child, or her children, by that kind of labor, and do we call ourselves civilised? Did you ever read that wonderful poem about the sewing woman? Let me tell you the last verse :

"Winds that have sainted her, tell ye the story
Of the young life by the needle that bled,
Making a bridge over death's soundless waters,
Out of a swaying, soul-cutting thread—
Over it going, all the world knowing
That thousands have trod it, foot-bleeding, before :
God protect all of us, should she look back
From the opposite shore !"

I cannot call this civilisation. There must be something nearer a fairer division in this world

You can never get it by strikes. Never. The first strike that is a great success will be the last strike, because the people who believe in law and order will put it down when they think it approaches success. It is no remedy. Boycotting is no remedy. Brute force is no remedy. This has got to be settled by reason, by candor, by intelligence, by kindness ; and nothing is permanently settled in this world that has not for its corner

stone justice, and is not protected by the profound conviction of the human mind.

This is no country for Anarchy, no country for Communism, no country for the Socialist. Why? Because the political power is equally divided. What other reason? Speech is free. What other? The press is untrammelled. And that is all that the right should ever ask—a free press, free speech, and the protection of person. That is enough. That is all I ask. In a country like Russia, where every mouth is a bastille and every tongue a convict, there may be some excuse. Where the nobles and the best are driven to Siberia, there may be a reason for the Nihilist. In a country where no man is allowed to petition for redress, there is a reason, but not here. This—say what you will against it—this is the best government ever founded by the human race! Say what you will of parties, say what you will of dishonesty, the holiest flag that ever kissed the air is ours!

Only a few years ago morally we were a low people—before we abolished slavery—but now, when there is no chain except that of custom, when every man has an opportunity, this is the grandest government of the earth. There is hardly a man in the United States today of any importance, whose voice anybody cares to hear, who was not nursed at the loving breast of poverty. Look at the children of the rich. My God, what a punishment for being rich! So, whatever happens, let every man say that this government, and this form of government, shall stand.

“But,” say some, “these working men are dangerous.” I deny it. We are all in their power. They run all the cars. Our lives are in their hands almost every day. They are working in all our homes. They do the labor of this world. We are all at their mercy, and yet they do not commit more crimes, according to number, than the rich. Remember that. I am not afraid of them. Neither am I afraid of the monopolists, because, under our institutions, when they become hurtful to the general good, the people will stand it just to a certain point, and then comes the end—not in anger, not in hate, but from a love of liberty and justice.

Now, we have in this country another class. We call

them "criminals." Let us take another step. It is not enough to raise the feeble up. We must support them after. Recollect what I said in the first place—that every man is as he must be. Every crime is a necessary product. The seeds were all sown, the land thoroughly plowed, the crop well attended to, and carefully harvested. Every crime is born of necessity. If you want less crime, you must change the conditions. Poverty makes crime. Want, rags, crusts, failure, misfortune—all these awake the wild beast in man, and finally he takes, and takes contrary to law, and becomes a criminal. And what do you do with him? You punish him. Why not punish a man for having the consumption? The time will come when you will see that that is just as logical. What do you do with the criminal? You send him to the penitentiary. Is he made better? Worse. The first thing you do is to try to trample out his manhood, by putting an indignity upon him. You mark him. You put him in stripes. At night you put him in darkness. His feelings for revenge grow. You make a wild beast of him, and he comes out of that place branded in body and soul, and then you won't let him reform if he wants to. You put on airs above him, because he has been in the penitentiary. The next time you try to put on airs over a convict, let me beg of you to do one thing. Maybe you are not as bad as I am, but do one thing; think of all the crimes you have wanted to commit; think of all the crimes you would have committed if you had had the opportunity; think of all the temptations to which you would have yielded had nobody been looking; and then put your hand on your heart and say whether you can justly look with scorn and contempt even upon a convict. None but the noblest should inflict punishment, even on the basest. Society has no right to punish any man in revenge—no right to punish any man except for two objects—one, the prevention of crime; the other the reformation of the criminal. How can you reform him? Kindness is the sunshine in which virtue grows. Let it be understood by these men that there is no revenge, let it be understood too that they can reform. Only a little while ago I read of a young man who had been in a penitentiary and came out. He kept it a secret, and

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went to work for a farmer. He got in love with the daughter, and wanted to marry her. He had nobility enough to tell the truth—he told the father that he had been in the penitentiary. The father said, "You cannot have my daughter, because it would stain her life." The young man said, "Yes, it would stain her life, therefore I will not marry her." In a few moments afterward they heard the report of a pistol, and he was dead. He left just a little note, saying, "I am through. There is no need of my living longer, when I stain with my life the ones I love." And yet we call our society civilised. There is a mistake.

I want that question thought of. I want all my fellow-citizens to think of it. I want you to do what you can to do away with all unnecessary cruelty. There are, of course, some cases that have to be treated with what might be called almost cruelty; but if there is the smallest seed of good in any human heart, let kindness fall upon it until it grows, and in that way I know, and so do you, that the world will get better and better day by day.

Let us, above all things, get acquainted with each other. Let every man teach his son, teach his daughter, that labor is honorable. Let us teach our children. It is your business to see that you never become a burden on others. Your first duty is to take care of yourselves, and, if there is a surplus, with that surplus help your fellow-man; that you owe it to yourself above all things not to be a burden upon others. Teach your son that it is not only his duty, but his highest joy, to become a home-builder, a home-owner. Teach your children that by the fireside is the real and true happiness of this world. Teach them that whoever is an idler, whoever lives upon the labor of others, whether he is a pirate or a king, is a dishonorable person. Teach them that no civilised man wants anything for nothing, or for less than it is worth; that he wants to go through this world paying his way as he goes, and if he gets a little ahead, an extra joy, it should be divided with another, if that other is doing something for himself. Help others to help themselves.

And let us teach that great wealth is not great happiness; that money will not purchase love; it never did,

and never can, purchase respect; it never did, and never can, purchase the highest happiness. I believe with Robert Burns :

“ If happiness have not her seat
And centre in the breast,
We may be wise, or rich, or great,
But never can be blest.”

We must teach this, and let our fellow-citizens know that we give them every right that we claim for ourselves. We must discuss these questions and have charity, and we will have it whenever we have the philosophy that all men are as they must be, and that intelligence and kindness are the only levers capable of raising mankind.

Then there is another thing. Let each one be true to himself. No matter what his class, no matter what his circumstances, let him tell his thought. Don't let his class bribe him. Don't let him talk like a banker because he is a banker. Don't let him talk like the rest of the merchants, because he is a merchant. Let him be true to the human race instead of to his little business—be true to the ideal in his heart and brain, instead of to his little present and apparent selfishness—let him have a larger and more intelligent selfishness, not a narrow and ignorant one.

So far as I am concerned, I have made up my mind that no organisation, secular or religious, shall own me. I have made up my mind that no necessity of bread, or roof, or raiment shall ever put a padlock on my lips. I have made up my mind that no hope, no preferment, no honor, no wealth, shall ever make me for one moment swerve from what I really believe, no matter whether it is to my immediate interest, as one would think, or not. And while I live, I am going to do what little I can to help my fellow-men who have not been as fortunate as I have been. I shall talk on their side, I shall vote on their side, and do what little I can to convince men that happiness does not lie in the direction of great wealth, but in the direction of achievement for the good of themselves and for the good of their fellow-men. I shall do what little I can to hasten the day when this earth shall be covered with homes, and when by the fireside of the world shall sit happy fathers and mothers and children.