

THE  
CRIMINAL'S ASCENSION

A DISCOURSE

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BY

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To a rational eye it would be difficult to picture a more startling scene than a man with the hangman on one side preparing to strangle him, and a clergyman on the other promising him bliss at God's right hand. But no eye can rationally take in at once a scene so familiar. It requires patient analysis to discover the full significance of a situation in which human society by one officer decides that a man is unfit to live on earth, by another officer pronounces him quite fit for the society of the beings it worships. In the majority of modern executions, the gallows has been looked upon by the criminals as a stepping-stone to eternal glory; and no clerical voice have I ever heard denying their probable ascension to Heaven. Theology still represents a Christ saying to the malefactor, "This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise." The old story was recently repeated when an exceptionally base criminal exclaimed, "I am going to Heaven;"

and the chaplain said, "Lord Jesus receive his soul." I am glad to observe that the public conscience is shocked, and common sense recoils.

Such ever-recurring facts reveal a fearful chasm dividing the practical needs of man from the alleged requirements of God. They disclose the awful fact that "religion" and morality use totally different weights and measures. The vilest scoundrel to one may be a saint to the other. What moral laws pronounce a life of villainy outraging man and woman, "religion" says may be outweighed by a few moments of prayer to God and compliments to Jesus.

I think it is not going too far to say that it is impossible for the masses of a community to obtain any apprehension of the real nature of crime, so long as the religious instruction provided for them teaches that the supreme rewards of existence are attainable without reference to life and character. It does not materially affect the case that the Ten Commandments are solemnly repeated. The power of any law to control human passions depends on the sanctions it carries; and these sanctions are penalties. A whole code of mere remonstrances against theft were vain. The Decalogue, so far as it is enacted law, is powerful simply because a punishment is affixed to each command. But if the Legislature should provide that every individual violating any law might escape its

penalty by kneeling before the Queen, it would be equivalent to abrogation of the law. Society could not exist under such conditions.

The moral sentiment of a community is not represented by its lawyers, but chiefly by its religious teachers. The law-books represent certain practical interests of society which may be of moral importance, but may not. One law preserves the life of a pheasant, another the life of a man; the same code punishes fictitious offences, like fishing out of season, and immoralities. It is a business-like matter, and, were there no moral or religious sentiment, a man might take his day of sport out of season, or his neighbour's property, and run his risk, and feel no worse morally for either.

There are indeed moral forces that can supplement social laws, forces that for some wield heavy rewards and punishments. There are men and women who live lives of honour, honesty, and virtue with as little reference to the law-books as to any future world. But, unfortunately, for the less refined but more tempted masses of the world, all the moral inducements to self-control are rendered nugatory by a sacred system which transfers the sanctions, the rewards or penalties, from moral action to a ceremony, to a motion of the lips, to that last abjectness of arrested villainy called repentance.

The voice most authentic to the masses says to them,—In the name of God we declare to you that no merits of your own are of any importance in His eyes. He sees not as man seeth. Your thefts, murders, adulteries, cruelties, and general baseness, may be to man of vast importance ; but to God the one question is, do you believe in his Son or not? If you do, the crimes, scarlet to men, are to Him white as snow. Shew by kneeling, praying, accepting Christ as your Saviour, that you are all square towards God, and it matters little what the world says and does to you. What need one care for men if God is for him, and Jesus waiting to take him to His bosom? Fear not them that kill the body and after that have no more that they can do, but fear Him who is able to cast both soul and body into hell fire !

Those who have been liberally instructed may imagine that I am stating too strongly the voice that goes forth to the masses in the name of religion ; but, in truth, I am stating not only what is largely taught, but what is the necessary sense of all teaching, however interlarded with morality, which gives man as his highest end and aim something unconnected with morality. However disguised by and for the cultivated, to the masses it must mean that at last. There is in every mind in the country which has not out-grown it a formula called the Plan of Salvation. It is declared by every

church, every sect—substantially the same, under superficial variations—to be a scheme formed by God for raising man to angelic perfection, divine virtue, eternal joy. And in this Plan of Salvation no provision is made for morality. Not one item in it refers to morality. Morality is not made a condition, nor immorality a disqualification, for its full enjoyment. Its conditions are confined to repentance for an ancient personal offence—not a moral offence—committed by Adam to his Maker, and an acceptance of a human and divine sacrifice offered for that sin. It is a corollary of that Plan that no amount of crime can prevent him who uses the charm from summoning the Holy Ghost to his side, and enjoying all the favours which God can bestow.

This Plan of Salvation may appear to you so irrational and immoral as to excite wonder how any one can believe it, and doubt whether any human lives are really practically guided by it. And this, indeed, is the vital point. Our question is not whether this notion of Salvation be really true, but whether it is genuinely believed by those most tempted to evil, and least surrounded by refined restraints. My own conviction is that no system could be conceived more exactly adapted to the rudimentary reason of the ignorant, to the pauper sense of justice, and none can so readily explain to the suffering masses the hard lot

in which they are cast. In their hereditary disease and despair, they have daily proof of hereditary sin; the pedigree of their sorrow may as well go back to Adam as to their grandfathers; they suffer for sins they never committed. And how shall they be saved? Is it reasonable to say they can only be saved by being moral, virtuous, honest, self-denying, truthful? Would it be just in God to set on Heaven a price they cannot pay? By his decree their lot is amid ignorance, vice, temptation, grossness; how then can he demand a harvest where he has not sown? The so-called Plan of Salvation is an evolution out of ages of superstition to meet just that low state of mind, that hard lot of the ignorant and suffering, of which the intelligent and the happy have little conception. High ethical science has no meaning for them; but it appeals to their sense of right that their Maker should make Heaven as cheap as earthly happiness is dear. It seems but fair to them that one of the Godhead should bear the guilt of all their sins, which grow out of that vile lot which the Godhead arranged. They did not choose a life down in the social mire. They do not feel the guilt of the immoralities besetting that lot; and they listen favourably to the preaching which tells them they will go, like the penitent thief, straight from the prison or the scaffold to the side of Jesus, there to be equals of the proudest and greatest who despised them on earth.



So runs a hymn—

“Let the world despise and leave me,  
Once they left my Saviour, too.”

In the course of its long experience, Roman Catholicism had found the danger of this notion, and the necessity of modifying the bold dogma of salvation by faith alone, and had devised a purgatory. It said to the evil man that he might be saved eventually, however wicked, but in proportion to his bad conduct would be the length and severity of his purification after death. In the course of time, this dogma of purgatory lost its value, deliverance from its pains being offered for money, and Protestantism threw away not only the theory but the experience of ages which underlay it. Protestantism offered the whole world of men the indential salvation, irrespective of their merits or demerits.

Nay, we cannot disguise from ourselves, however divines around us may try to disguise it from themselves and us, that the logic of Protestant Christianity goes even farther, and necessitates the position that mere morality is a danger to the soul. The man of cultivated reason has been found likely to trust his reason ; the man of good works has a tendency to trust to his good works ; and such have been proved less amenable to the plan of trusting solely to the divine scheme above reason and to the merits of Christ. Under pressure of this experience, the sects have been

reduced to the necessity of building up their strength from those less addicted to reason and to good works, and have evolved the doctrine that God looks with special favour on the mind that fancies itself humble when it is only uninquiring, and the character which confuses its weakness with dependence on Christ.

This positive discouragement of the formation of self-reliant and moral character has, unhappily, found a means of diffusing itself which theology could not command,—namely, by hymns. Those especially of sects that deal with the masses are pervaded with contempt of good works. The Wesleyans sing—

“Let the world their virtue boast  
 Their works of righteousness;  
 I, a wretch undone and lost,  
 Am freely saved by grace.  
 Other titles I disclaim;  
 This, only this, is all my plea—  
 I the chief of sinners am,  
 But Jesus died for me.”

This special claim to Jesus's favour—that one is the chief of sinners—has passed to many hymns from the Bible. Unhappily, there is much in the New Testament, when detached from its own time and place, to confirm the faith of the coarse and ignorant in their miserable conceit. Their teachers have perverted the liberalism of Christ and Paul to these

meanest ends. Christ, in trying to do away with the bigotry around him, seeking to expand Jewish minds so as to include Samaritans, Greeks, Romans, as children of a divine Father, sought to win them to charity by sweet parables. He told them of the merchant who paid so largely for the pearl; and what pearl was more beautiful than Greece? He told them of how the woman rejoiced when she found the lost coin, the shepherd when he found the lost lamb, the father when his prodigal son returned. All these were pictures of the hated Gentiles. They are our lost sheep, taught Christ, our wandering brother; if they will mingle with us, let us not repel them—rather we will kill the fatted calf and make merry, because the lost is found. And in his enthusiasm he may have said, "There should be more joy in our new kingdom over one such returning wanderer—one fraternal Gentile—than over ninety-nine that never went astray from the true God after images." When these poetic metaphors were written down in the doctrinal period—in the Gospels—Jesus was more than a hundred years dead, Jerusalem was destroyed, the parables had lost their special point, and so the moral was made universal and false by saying, "There is joy among the angels over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety-nine just persons who went not astray," a text either absurd, or a direct encouragement of vice.

According to that text the roughs of England may not only behold in that chief of sinners, who ascended at Sheffield, a hero bold, who long defied Great Britain, and, when overpowered, died happy, but they may also see him causing an equal commotion among the angels, though one of delight, as they leave the humdrum souls who never went astray to rejoice over this dear, daring, sensational fellow, whose salvation illustrates the potency of divine magic so much better than that of a mere moral man.

Paul has been put through the same process of perversion as Christ; his admirable statements for one situation wrested for another, and stereotyped into dogma. In furthering Christ's broad inclusiveness Paul had to confront the new difficulty that his Jewish brethren were disposed to insist on the Gentiles submitting to their ceremonial law. They were willing to receive the Gentiles as returning prodigals, but they must consent to obey all the regulations of the father's house—that is, the house of Israel. To this the Gentiles would not submit; and it cost Paul the labours of a life, and all his resources of eloquence and art, to persuade the Jewish wing that a common faith in Christ was all-sufficient without exacting from Greeks and Romans the deeds of the law—that is, of course, the rites and ceremonial deeds of the Jewish religion, circumcision and the like. When this argu-

ment was detached from its point and purpose, when it was read letter by letter by the eye of bibliolatry—as little able to see its whole meaning as a fly the statue over which it creeps—Paul's "deeds of the law" were supposed to be the moral law—English law; not circumcision and Sabbath, but laws against theft and violence; and so Paul was brought at last to sanction the dogma that men are saved by faith in Christ, without requiring any good deeds, or conformity with human laws.

It is greatly to the credit of human nature that this kind of teaching has not utterly corrupted Christian society. If human nature had been half as bad as theology says, the Christian name would to foreigners have been synonymous with barbarism. But a great many influences have intervened between the dogmas and large numbers of the people—the saving grace of common sense, pictures of virtue and vice on the stage—these and other forces too complex to be now considered have supplied some counterpoise to dogmas that despise human merit. But there is a yet very large class which may be called the potential criminal class—and against that class society is left with no defence but that of superior force. It is a war for advantages to the burglar, the murderer, in which he may be defeated, but in which he does not feel much disgrace or guilt, if any. His life is being lived in a

general way under the necessity that knows no law, and particular crimes are mere accidents in the current that masters him. And he will remain so mastered—without conscious responsibility or guilt—until a will is stimulated within him by some motive of action stronger than that which tempts him. Now, what is to stimulate in a person of strong appetites the will to control those appetites? Remember, our problem now is not that of punishing crime, but of how to keep people from committing crime. Can Christianity do that? What are the motives to which it appeals? Judgment Day and eternal Hell? Now, these would be very strong if they were penalties for immorality, but Christianity repudiates that idea. Hell it declares is for those who forget God, or do not believe on his Son. Consequently the criminal may snap his fingers at the Day of Judgment. Hell is a mere display of fireworks to the man who is insured against it by the blood of Jesus. Charles Peace, on the morning of execution, arose from pleasant sleep, breakfasted heartily, then sat down and wrote as follows :—“ To my dear wife and family,—I tell you this great joy that I could not tell you yesterday. No fear now, for it is all cleared up as to where I am going to. I am going to heaven, or to the place where the good go to that die in the Lord ; or where is the place appointed by God for the good to wait

until the resurrection of the dead. So do not forget. Our meeting place is in heaven. So do come at the last and you will find me there. This letter is wrote 25 minutes before I die, so I must say good bye to all. I am going to heaven." A few moments after he is on the scaffold preaching to the reporters, says he is going to rest with the good till Judgment Day, forgives his enemies, and says, "I wish them to come to the Kingdom, to die as I die." That is his best wish for us all, to die as he died! And that is what Judgment Day and Hell amounted to in the eyes of this criminal. But what other motives can Christianity arouse now that it has enabled the criminal to quench Hell with a drop of Christ's blood? It may say that it sets before him the life of Christ,—the perfect life,—and so makes an affecting appeal to all the good in him. Be like Christ, it says. But that ideal too it destroys by declaring Christ to be God. The criminal is not a god. The virtues of a god are no example to him. So far as Christ was a man his experiences are not attractive. We are now in Lent, and Christendom recalls a poor man wandering in a wilderness 40 days, cold and hungry, resisting all temptations to get his living by evil ways. From a loaf of bread to the kingdoms of the world, all the temptations were offered him and resisted. What did he get by it? A gallows. He might, to the criminal mind, he

might well envy the happy end of our latest ruffian. One sacrificed himself for others, and at execution cried, "My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" the other sacrificing others to himself, exclaims, "I am going to heaven." So far as the virtuous, self-sacrificing, human life of Christ is concerned the religion called after him goes into the criminal's prison, and in a few moments enables him to show vice triumphant, beside virtue agonizing on the cross of its own Saviour. So it is on earth; and Christianity assures the criminal, converted after he can sin no more, that heaven has the same place and rewards for the life of crime and the life of virtue. He gets after a life of evil just what Christ gets after a life of moral excellence. There are many Christians who are moral, many who are wiser than their creed, but they cannot alter the remorseless logic of their system. Either it is the blood of Jesus that saves men or it is not. If man is saved by the sacrifice and merits of Jesus, then he cannot be saved by his own merits or sacrifices. Consequently, so far as eternal bliss and blessedness are concerned, he may do without any merits or morality at all.

And in this claim, the very basis of Christ's atonement, lies the fact that the criminal mind finds in the orthodox system precisely its own method. For what is the criminal mind? It is a mind which seeks



to gain advantages without working for them,—that is, without fulfilling the conditions with which justice to others surrounds them. The criminal mind seeks nothing that may not be fairly sought. This miserable man, just executed, wanted beauty in dress, a neat wagonette and horses, violins, and money. He is quite credible when he declared that he never harmed living creature except when they were interfering with his appropriation of things he desired. No man loves crime for itself. But the moral law says you must seek these things by patiently working for them, not by snatching in a moment that for which others have toiled, enriching yourself through the merits of others, or by sacrificing their lives to your own happiness. But the criminal may point to a law holier than morality; to every Christian creed which is on his side. Just as he gets his neighbour's jewellery without toil, so is he to get paradise. Without money and without price is he to attain the bliss of eternity. By a great human sacrifice he is enabled to dispense with all toilsome conditions and enjoy the celestial raiment and rubies that represent the heaven of every criminal's dream—everything pretty and pleasant, and no work to obtain them.

The essential superstition represented by the criminal's ascension to the right hand of God, by divine grace, is as gross as anything among the Zulus. When

the chaplain said, "Lord Jesus, receive his soul," it either meant that the vulgarest and meanest murderer was a fit companion for Christ; or else it meant that a miracle was to be then and there wrought, and villainy at once transmuted to perfection. The ascension of the dead body through prison walls would be no greater miracle than the ascension of that evil mind to any realm of purity.

It is a superstition to suppose that animal had any soul. Nevertheless, he might have had one had he been born in a world that had made the best instead of the worst of him. From first to last his "career," as he grandly called it, reflects the unreason which from the past has come to bind the present. A pretended religion turns his earthly life to a transient trifle under the eternity to come; and tells him that his good or evil deeds here are equally unimportant; that heaven is had for the asking. Had religion told him the truth, that this life is the only one he is sure of, and that it is the only possible life he could have, unless he developed moral powers useful elsewhere, he might have ascended from animalism to manhood.

When this solemn sanction of his indolence and worthlessness have borne their evil fruit, the law proceeds to make him a hero, the sensation of months. Biographies of him, reminiscences of him, myths and legends, accounts of his down-sitting and up-rising;

and all because he is slain like some formidable prisoner of war. "I want you, sir," he said to the clergyman, "to preach a special sermon over my case . . . to hold me and my career up as a beacon"—such is his grand phraseology—"that all who see may avoid my example." But is that the effect of his eminence? Thousands of the wretched around us now see how their obscure lives may achieve fame. As the *Saturday Review* said, no statesman, author or artist could hope to receive such obsequious attention at death. Whereas it had been easy to put that man in a particoloured dress with a chain gang, paving roads for honest men, and make him a living witness to the criminal's disgrace and degradation, as he now is of the criminal's glory and ascension. He said, "I hope God will give me strength to go like a hero to the scaffold. I had much rather die than live in penal servitude." Why not, when death meant ascension to glory, and the other meant just that hard work it was the aim of his life to avoid. Years ago he attempted suicide to escape a term of hard labour. I have no sentiment about the death of such people, except that I believe such death too good for them. My objection is not sentimental, but scientific. It is a terrible error for society to suppose that swift death is the severest punishment. The Bible represents Satan as believing that all that a man hath he will give for his

life ; but that was written by a people who believed in no future life, and it was said about a man who had a great deal to lose. But our criminals come of classes to whom earth means poverty and misery, and heaven means luxurious idleness. It is a great error to believe that death is the chief deterrent to these. The main terror of it fled when theology allowed salvation to all. That was the practical abolition of hell. It has proclaimed to the scoundrel world that it may cheat men in this life, and then cheat the devil in the next. It has added to the criminal's morbid satisfaction in creating a sensation, the assurance of ascension to heaven by a more painless death than Charles Peace had twice sought by his own act.