

tact with the ultimate truth and reality of the world, and that we must labour, in thought as in practice, to gather together in one all things in Him.

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THE DIABOLIC IMAGE.

(JOHN VIII. 43-47.)

TWICE over has our Lord, with fatal effect, put to a practical test the religious pretensions of the rabbis. First, they claimed to be the genuine spiritual descendants of Abraham. This claim He disposed of thus: "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham"; but ye do not. Next they claimed a still higher spiritual lineage: "We have one Father, even God Himself." This He has just answered by a similar argument: "If God were indeed your spiritual Father, ye would love Me" and the truth which He sent Me to proclaim; but ye do not.

It is at this point that Jesus quits the defensive attitude which He has thus far maintained. No longer content to refute their claims, He assumes the aggressive. If their behaviour towards Himself was enough to show that they had no moral kindred either with Abraham or with God, must it not likewise prove whose moral likeness they did wear, or who was their real spiritual parent? Already, once and again, He had hinted that they lay open to such a retort, such a turning of the tables upon themselves. Now He does more than hint it. A simple question first, to spur them to reflect and sharpen their ears to hear; then to the last and most crushing blow of all, this mighty disputant strides on!

The preliminary question, to stimulate thought, is this: "Why is it ye do not understand My speech?" Ye hear Me talk day after day of the things I have seen and heard

from God, truth which I have been sent by Him to tell ; and yet it is plain you are at a loss to understand Me, for all this while you have been questioning and replying, quite beside the point ! It is a pertinent inquiry for every one who finds himself from home in the teaching of Christ. Why is it ? Simply because you are not able to hear His word, the inner sense or meaning of what He says : not able to hear it for want of the spiritual ear, the sense to discern spiritual and Divine truth. In man there is, or there ought to be, a faculty for the perception and enjoyment of Divine truth. As St. Paul tells us, he who possesses such a faculty "judgeth all things" ; while "the natural man," wanting that faculty, "cannot know the things of the Spirit, because they are spiritually discerned." So here ; our Lord accounts for the incomprehensibility of His teaching to the priests and doctors and leading men in Israel by this simple explanation : the faculty was gone within them—the spiritual eye put out by conceit, prejudice, class interest, jealousy for their order, and hatred of One whose words rebuked them.

But this inability of theirs to receive new light was only one feature in their moral condition, to be explained at bottom by the same awful fact which explained all the rest of their conduct. So far from sharing in the nature of God, as they boasted, "ye are of your father the devil !" There, it is out at last ! Not hinted at, as twice before, but bluntly charged home, with intentional plain speaking, in the hope to reach the conscience ; the strongest and most terrible thing which Jesus ever said or could say about any sons of men ! Think for a moment, ere we go further, what precisely could be meant by such a charge, occurring where it does in the course of this conversation as we have traced it hitherto. Their latest claim had been to hold such a relationship to Jehovah as a son holds to his father ; and our Lord had argued that in that case they would be found

to wear a moral character resembling the nature of God. Now, in the place of God, He substitutes as the type of moral and spiritual character after whom they were really moulded, the implacable adversary of God, tempter of man, and head of moral evil in the universe. From this express parallel betwixt the relationship of God to good men, His children, and the relationship of Satan to these evil men, it is plainly to be inferred, first, that their character in its essential features resembled Satan's, and next, that this essential evil character had somehow been derived from Satan. It implies what the opening chapters of Genesis suggest—that an evil spirit has been the original source of human evil, and that to his action or inspiration is to be traced the possession by fallen men of a moral complexion resembling his own.

Now for the proof of this; because it is certain that Jesus will not be suffered to advance so daring an accusation if He give them time so much as to breathe, and do not instantly follow it up with palpable and notorious evidence. He has at hand the materials for doing this. Their own attitude towards Himself—their recent action in His case—was the evidence by which He judged them. They were secretly plotting to take His life. This they knew; perhaps did not know that He knew it; were at all events not prepared to have it dragged into the light; listened aghast and conscience-struck to words which looked as though He were about to expose in public their hidden plots to cut Him off, and all the villainy which they had been hatching in secret conclave. This is how we can best explain the silence of these rulers, while, with one swift and terrible sentence after another, each sentence like the lash of a whip, He pressed home on them their falsehood and their desire to murder.

The substance of this exposure lay in a single sentence: "The lusts of your father (the devil) it is your will to do."

Here the emphasis lies on the word "will." Many men do in fact accomplish the purposes of the evil one without meaning it, just as God makes tools of us all, whether we are in sympathy with His plans or not. But these men were entering, consciously and deliberately, into an iniquitous plot to bring about just what seemed best to suit the devil's plans at that moment—I mean the premature assassination of the Son of God and Saviour of the world. This was at that moment the devil's supreme desire, as our Lord (always open to the unseen world) very well saw; and this end, after which the devil lusted, he was employing these respectable agents to effect—to effect, not altogether as unconscious tools, rather as men whose own hearts jumped that same way, who liked the work they had in hand.

If anything could have held back the prevalent party in the Sanhedrim from the policy on which they were now entering, surely it would have been so fearless an exposure of its true character and of the abyss to which it was leading them; for to a certain extent these rulers were tools in the hand of an invisible master. Satan was using them, as in his turn Satan and all his accomplices were being used by Infinite Wisdom to work out the world's redemption. Had the Jews known that it was the Lord of glory whom they were conspiring to slay, they would not have slain Him. In mercy to their tempted souls Jesus showed them that He saw through the plot; told them how criminal it was, how much more criminal than they supposed; and warned them against becoming the willing instruments in a diabolic murder.

"Diabolic" it literally was, this plot which they were beginning to contrive; since it combined those two features—of falsehood and of hatred—in which our Lord finds the ruling marks of the satanic character. We have heard of these already in this discussion. It will be recollected how

He has just proved the unlikeness of the Jews to Abraham by contrasting their conduct with the two chief characteristics of that friend of God: first, his loyalty to God's truth; second, his loving attachment to God Himself. As truth and love are the key-notes of the Divine, so do the opposites of these two sum up the devilish—untruth and hatred. Going back for illustration to the earliest appearance of the evil spirit upon the field of human history, in the temptation of Eve, our Lord has no difficulty in detecting there these ground elements in his moral physiognomy. The part he played so successfully in Eden was the part of a liar and a murderer; and this part he has consistently sustained ever since. Murder of the good, his end; falsehood and denial of the true, his means.

Murder (as our Lord in His Sermon on the Mount had long before taught the people) is the last practical outcome of hatred—that to which hate in all its degrees must tend. And the root of Satan's scheme against the life of our unhappy race at its origin was a profound hatred, first of all, of the God whose wisdom and love in man's creation he thirsted to balk; next, of the innocent pair whose pure happiness filled him with envy. Thus Milton makes him soliloquise at sight of our first parents:

“Sight hateful, sight tormenting! Thus these two,
 Imparadised in one another's arms,
 The happier Eden, shall enjoy their fill
 Of bliss on bliss; while I to Hell am thrust,
 Where neither joy nor love, but fierce desire,
 Among our other torments not the least,
 Still unfulfilled, with pain of longing pines!”

—*Par. Lost*, iv. 505.

It could not often occur, even to a devil, to accomplish at one blow so gigantic a murder. To kill the body's life is little. Even to realize the ambition of that diabolic Cæsar who wished all Rome had but a single neck, to be

destroyed at one stroke, seems like nothing compared with the murder of a world's virtue. One soul slain for ever—seduced, corrupted, misled into everlasting death! But think on a race of souls dragged at once into damnation! It was a murder worthy of the prince of fiends. Yet once more, as it seemed, had such a chance come round again. That illustration from the fall of the first Adam, in whose death the race died, wore a marvellous appositeness when our Lord spoke. Once more there lived upon the earth another Adam, Son of man, second Head of the race, with whose life and victory over Satan were bound up anew all hopes and possibilities for mankind; and against Him it was possible for "this manslayer from the beginning" to weave new plots, with a desperate hope that, in slaying Him through these rabbis' willing hands, he might remurder all mankind.

As hate was still his motive, and theirs who served him, so was his instrument and theirs a lie. In Paradise he overcame by a falsehood—setting his lie against the truth of God. Through his subtlety it was that he beguiled the mother of all living;

". . . the first
That practised falsehood under saintly show,
Deep malice to conceal, couched with revenge."

—*Paradise Lost*, iv. 121.

For, as our Lord tells us here, in memorable words, which cleave like sword strokes, and yet are aglow with a suppressed scorn and wrath: "There is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own; for he is a liar, and the father of it." The meanness of God's enemy seems to inflame this Son of God, when He thinks of it, even more than his malice did; so much so, that these wily Jews, who cower before His words, appear to vanish out of His sight, and the gigantic form alone remains, of one whom, through this long duel of His, ever since in the

wilderness He encountered him, Jesus has recognised as His true antagonist. Truly, our champion was not ignorant of Satan's devices. The mean artifice by which he imposed on Eve is a specimen of his art, by which you may know the rest. On that first untruth his kingdom stands. By untruth has it to be for ever bolstered up. Falsehood is the devil's element, his tool and his armour, his meat and his drink. Knowing the truth as he does, believing it, as in a sense he also does, trembling before it, as he is compelled to do, he yet hates it, gives it no place within him, but fights against it with envenomed falsehoods. This is the dreadful feature by which the spiritual children of evil are to be known, by which Jesus identified the Jews. He came to speak to them God's truth; which, when they heard it, perhaps they half suspected to be the truth of God, but for that very reason they shut their ears to His word, and tried to shut His mouth in death. Yet not by open, manly opposition. "Which of you convicteth Me of sin?" demanded the righteous One. They could not convict Him of sin. That of itself showed Him to be a true man. But what they could not do by open prosecution, they were craftily considering how they might effect by secret assassination, by illegal charges, by perjured evidence, by a popular tumult—by any means, if only the mouth of Him were stopped whose words were of God, and therefore hateful to men who were children of the devil!

Whatever might come of it, our Lord had now at length fairly broken with the most powerful party in the nation. With extraordinary courage He had uttered words in the hearing of the people which could neither be forgiven nor forgotten. Let us consider whether His words could be applicable only to the handful of His enemies who heard them, and to no one else. Can we suppose that these men possessed a nature radically different from that of other men? or, might we not, in their place, with their

training, have done the same things? Is there not in every human being a natural disposition to dislike the truth when it tells against one's self, and to deny it? Granting that there are many degrees in sinfulness, and that it is comparatively few who indulge party passion to the extent these men did, of plotting to kill a good man, who of us all can say that we have always been free from the sin of resenting God's truth, and veiling our dislike of it in falsehood? Think then what an appalling shadow these words of Christ cast over the spiritual condition of all men, in spite of the remains of natural virtue or of that universal instinct which approves the good and feels after God! There is something which may well make any sober-minded person shudder in this solemn utterance of Him who is the Truth. The doctrine of human depravity, or of the extent to which man's nature has been brought under a fatal influence from beneath, by him who is the finished embodiment of the bad, is a doctrine always objectionable to the mass of mankind; and the Church has had to sustain no slight share of obloquy for professing it in her belief. But He who speaks in this text is at least no gloomy theorist who pushes his dark view of human life to an extreme, nor is He one to fling about such strong words at random. He is not speaking in anger, nor would He asperse or vilify human nature for His personal quarrel with the Jews. It is impossible therefore to break the edge of His statements, as might have been done with another man's. Moreover, the more closely His statements are looked at, the less easy does it become for any of us to evade them. When the real badness of our common nature is traced back to a diabolic origin or authorship, no matter what may be the degree of it, then neither apology nor palliation will avail us. To be slightly tainted with hatred or with falsehood is to be tainted, and the taint is Satan's. To be only now and then like the liar and murderer is still to bear his mark.

So that, when you come to face it, every wilful sin against God must be held to indicate some connexion with that realm of utter sinfulness and godlessness of which God's personal enemy is the embodiment and the chief. From that quarter of the moral sphere does every human sinner derive his tendency to sin; to it his sins attach him; and the more he sins the more surely is he moving thitherward.

Let this unvarnished revelation, so damaging to the credit of human nature, yet roundly asserted by the lips of Him who made and who redeems man, be seriously pondered by all of us for practical ends. For once the Lord Jesus has here broken through that discreet reticence about the dark, diabolic background of our experience which is customary even in Scripture; for it is not on every page even of the Bible that our moral kinship to the world of darkness is nakedly exposed. The same apostle indeed who reports this conversation of his Master was subsequently inspired to expand it at some length. But not in Scripture, any more than in the press or in the pulpit, is this topic frequently discussed. There is a reverential reserve, which for the most part it is seemly to maintain, upon an aspect of human character so awful. Yet our thoughts of it can never again be quite the same, after our Lord and Saviour has even once spoken thus in our hearing. Consider how it ought to affect us. It has been witnessed to us that these ground elements of all sin which is not sensuous but spiritual—spite and falsehood—are of diabolic birth, and set us at the opposite diameter of moral existence from God our Maker. Seeing we are every one of us aware that such evil feelings do work in our hearts, and that such wicked things have been done with our will, ought we not to feel crushed before God in shame and sorrow? Especially, ought we not to realize how nothing short of a new birth from above will avail for creatures whose moral parentage (to begin with) is from

beneath? What will education do for us, or self-control, or membership in the Church? What but regeneration by the Spirit of the holy God will do for those whose evil is not skin deep, to be remedied by superficial treatment, but (as Christ tells) is a congenital taint in the blood, an antigodly nature come of the lineage of the very devil himself? No wonder the same Teacher had to say: "Except a man be born over again from above—becoming a child of God—he cannot see the kingdom of heaven." Surely too it will be each man's wisdom to inquire diligently wherein or how far such diabolic features show themselves in his own conduct. It may be that in our life, as it relates to God and to religion at all events, dislike of God's truth is actually the deepest seated thing in us and the motive which determines our general behaviour. Or it may appear that at bottom we are really lovers of God and of the truth, yet can detect in many a minor detail of our conduct something of the evil one: a little spite, a little detraction, a touch of envy when others are happier, self-conceit which we would rather believe true than have proved false, or a clinging to opinions which are agreeable and a creed that is easy, disliking to be troubled with truths that pain while they correct us. How anxiously do we all need (even though we be sons of God through Christ's grace) to trample down and root out with utmost diligence these roots of bitterness, purging the soul of evil to its last fibre! For while these things are in us, are they not relics of that venom of ill which was at the first inbreathed into the sweet blood of our nature by the poisoned breath of Satan, and which it is Christ's work to expel that we may be wholly a "new lump," all good, the product of that wholesome Spirit from on high whose name is holy, whose word is truth, whose fruit is love?

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