

Chapter 58

The word eternity represented itself with all its incomprehensible additions, and I had such extended notions of it, that I know not how to express them. Among the rest, how vile, how gross, how absurd did every pleasant thing look!--I mean, that we had counted pleasant before--especially when I reflected that these sordid trifles were the things for which we forfeited eternal felicity.

With these reflections came, of mere course, severe reproaches of my own mind for my wretched behaviour in my past life; that I had forfeited all hope of any happiness in the eternity

that I was just going to enter into, and on the contrary was entitled to all that was miserable, or had been conceived of misery; and all this with the frightful addition of its being also eternal.

I am not capable of reading lectures of instruction to anybody, but I relate this in the very manner in which things then appeared to me, as far as I am able, but infinitely short of the lively impressions which they made on my soul at that time; indeed, those impressions are not to be explained by words, or if they are, I am not mistress of words enough to express them. It must be the work of every sober reader to make just reflections on them, as their own circumstances may direct; and, without question, this is what every one at some time or other may feel something of; I mean, a clearer

sight into things to come than they had here, and a dark view of their own concern in them.

But I go back to my own case. The minister pressed me to tell him, as far as I thought convenient, in what state I found myself as to the sight I had of things beyond life. He told me he did not come as ordinary of the place, whose business it is to extort confessions from prisoners, for private ends, or for the further detecting of other offenders; that his business was to move me to such freedom of discourse as might serve to disburthen my own mind, and furnish him to administer comfort to me as far as was in his power; and assured me, that whatever I said to him should remain with him, and be as much a secret as if it was known only to God and myself; and that he desired to know nothing of me, but as above to qualify him to apply proper advice and assistance to me, and to pray to God for me.

This honest, friendly way of treating me unlocked all the sluices of my passions. He broke into my very soul by it; and I unravelled all the wickedness of my life to him. In a word, I gave him an abridgment of this whole history; I gave him a picture of my conduct for fifty years in miniature.

I hid nothing from him, and he in return exhorted me to sincere repentance, explained to me what he meant by repentance, and then drew out such a scheme of infinite mercy, proclaimed from heaven to sinners of the greatest

magnitude, that he left me nothing to say, that looked like despair, or doubting of being accepted; and in this condition he left me the first night.

He visited me again the next morning, and went on with his method of explaining the terms of divine mercy, which according to him consisted of nothing more, or more difficult, than that of being sincerely desirous of it, and willing to accept it; only a sincere regret for, and hatred of, those things I had done, which rendered me so just an object of divine vengeance. I am not able to repeat the excellent discourses of this extraordinary man; 'tis all that I am able to do, to say that he revived my heart, and brought me into such a condition that I never knew anything of in my life before. I was covered with shame and tears for things past, and yet had at the same time a secret surprising joy at the prospect of being a true penitent, and obtaining the comfort of a penitent--I mean, the hope of being forgiven; and so swift did thoughts circulate, and so high did the impressions they had made upon me run, that I thought I could freely have gone out that minute to execution, without any uneasiness at all, casting my soul entirely into the arms of infinite mercy as a penitent.

The good gentleman was so moved also in my behalf with a view of the influence which he saw these things had on me, that he blessed God he had come to visit me, and resolved not to leave me till the last moment; that is, not to leave visiting me.

It was no less than twelve days after our receiving sentence before any were ordered for execution, and then upon a Wednesday the dead warrant, as they call it, came down, and I found my name was among them. A terrible blow this was to my new resolutions; indeed my heart sank within me, and I swooned away twice, one after another, but spoke not a word. The good minister was sorely afflicted for me, and did what he could to comfort me with the same arguments, and the same moving eloquence that he did before, and left me not that evening so long as the prisonkeepers would suffer him to stay in the prison, unless he would be locked up with me all night, which he was not willing to be.

I wondered much that I did not see him all the next day, it being the day before the time appointed for execution; and I was greatly discouraged, and dejected in my mind, and indeed almost sank for want of the comfort which he had so often, and with such success, yielded me on his former visits. I waited with great impatience, and under the greatest oppressions of spirits imaginable, till about four o'clock he came to my apartment; for I had obtained the favour, by the help of money, nothing being to be done in that place without it, not to be kept in the condemned hole, as they call it, among the rest of the prisoners who were to die, but to have a little dirty chamber to myself.

My heart leaped within me for joy when I heard his voice at the door, even before I saw him; but let any one judge what kind of motion I found in my

soul, when after having made a short excuse for his not coming, he showed me that his time had been employed on my account; that he had obtained a favourable report from the Recorder to the Secretary of State in my particular case, and, in short, that he had brought me a reprieve.

He used all the caution that he was able in letting me know a thing which it would have been a double cruelty to have concealed; and yet it was too much for me; for as grief had overset me before, so did joy overset me now, and I fell into

a much more dangerous swooning than I did at first, and it was not without a great difficulty that I was recovered at all.

The good man having made a very Christian exhortation to me, not to let the joy of my reprieve put the remembrance of my past sorrow out of my mind, and having told me that he must leave me, to go and enter the reprieve in the books, and show it to the sheriffs, stood up just before his going away, and in a very earnest manner prayed to God for me, that my repentance might be made unfeigned and sincere; and that my coming back, as it were, into life again, might not be a returning to the follies of life which I had made such solemn resolutions to forsake, and to repent of them. I joined heartily in the petition, and must needs say I had deeper impressions upon my mind all that night, of the mercy of God in sparing my life, and a greater detestation of my past sins, from a sense of the goodness which I had tasted

in this case, than I had in all my sorrow before.

This may be thought inconsistent in itself, and wide from the business of this book; particularly, I reflect that many of those who may be pleased and diverted with the relation of the wild and wicked part of my story may not relish this, which is really the best part of my life, the most advantageous to myself, and the most instructive to others. Such, however, will, I hope, allow me the liberty to make my story complete. It would be a severe satire on such to say they do not relish the repentance as much as they do the crime; and that they had rather the history were a complete tragedy, as it was very likely to have been.

But I go on with my relation. The next morning there was a sad scene indeed in the prison. The first thing I was saluted with in the morning was the tolling of the great bell at St. Sepulchre's, as they call it, which ushered in the day. As soon as it began to toll, a dismal groaning and crying was heard from the condemned hole, where there lay six poor souls who were to be executed that day, some from one crime, some for another, and two of them for murder.

This was followed by a confused clamour in the house, among the several sorts of prisoners, expressing their awkward sorrows for the poor creatures that were to die, but in a manner extremely differing one from another.

Some cried for them; some huzzaed, and wished them a good journey; some

damned and cursed those that had brought them to it--that is, meaning the evidence, or prosecutors--many pitying them, and some few, but very few, praying for them.

There was hardly room for so much composure of mind as was required for me to bless the merciful Providence that had, as it were, snatched me out of the jaws of this destruction. I remained, as it were, dumb and silent, overcome with the sense of it, and not able to express what I had in my heart; for the passions on such occasions as these are certainly so agitated as not to be able presently to regulate their own motions.

All the while the poor condemned creatures were preparing to their death, and the ordinary, as they call him, was busy with them, disposing them to submit to their sentence--I say, all this while I was seized with a fit of trembling, as much as I could have been if I had been in the same condition, as to be sure the day before I expected to be; I was so violently agitated by this surprising fit, that I shook as if it had been in the cold fit of an ague, so that I could not speak or look but like one distracted. As soon as they were all put into carts and gone, which, however, I had not courage enough to see--I say, as soon as they were gone, I fell into a fit of crying involuntarily, and without design, but as a mere distemper, and yet so violent, and it held me so long, that I knew not what course to take, nor could I stop, or put a check to it, no, not with all the strength and courage I had.