

CHAPTER THE SIXTH

MODERN IDEAS OF SIN AND DAMNATION

1. THE BIOLOGICAL EQUIVALENT OF SIN

If the reader who is unfamiliar with scientific things will obtain and read Metchnikoff's "Nature of Man," he will find there an interesting summary of the biological facts that bear upon and destroy the delusion that there is such a thing as individual perfection, that there is even ideal perfection for humanity. With an abundance of convincing instances Professor Metchnikoff demonstrates that life is a system of "disharmonies," capable of no perfect way, that there is no "perfect" dieting, no "perfect" sexual life, no "perfect" happiness, no "perfect" conduct. He releases one from the arbitrary but all too easy assumption that there is even an ideal "perfection" in organic life. He sweeps out of the mind with all the confidence and conviction of a physiological specialist, any idea that there is a perfect man or a conceivable perfect man. It is in the nature of every man to fall short at every point from perfection. From the biological point of view we are as individuals a series of involuntary "tries" on the part of an imperfect species towards an unknown end.

Our spiritual nature follows our bodily as a glove follows a hand.

We are disharmonious beings and salvation no more makes an end to the defects of our souls than it makes an end to the decay of our teeth or to those vestigial structures of our body that endanger our physical welfare. Salvation leaves us still disharmonious, and adds not an inch to our spiritual and moral stature.

2. WHAT IS DAMNATION?

Let us now take up the question of what is Sin? and what we mean by the term "damnation," in the light of this view of human reality. Most of the great world religions are as clear as Professor Metchnikoff that life in the world is a tangle of disharmonies, and in most cases they supply a more or less myth-like explanation, they declare that evil is one side of the conflict between Ahriman and Ormazd, or that it is the punishment of an act of disobedience, of the fall of man and world alike from a state of harmony. Their case, like his, is that THIS world is damned.

We do not find the belief that superposed upon the miseries of this world there are the still bitterer miseries of punishments after death, so nearly universal. The endless punishments of hell appear to be an exploit of theory; they have a superadded appearance even in the

Christian system; the same common tendency to superlatives and absolutes that makes men ashamed to admit that God is finite, makes them seek to enhance the merits of their Saviour by the device of everlasting fire. Conquest over the sorrow of life and the fear of death do not seem to them sufficient for Christ's glory.

Now the turning round of the modern mind from a conception of the universe as something derived deductively from the past to a conception of it as something gathering itself adventurously towards the future, involves a release from the supposed necessity to tell a story and explain why. Instead comes the inquiry, "To what end?" We can say without mental discomfort, these disharmonies are here, this damnation is here--inexplicably. We can, without any distressful inquiry into ultimate origins, bring our minds to the conception of a spontaneous and developing God arising out of those stresses in our hearts and in the universe, and arising to overcome them. Salvation for the individual is escape from the individual distress at disharmony and the individual defeat by death, into the Kingdom of God. And damnation can be nothing more and nothing less than the failure or inability or disinclination to make that escape.

Something of that idea of damnation as a lack of the will for salvation has crept at a number of points into contemporary religious thought. It was the fine fancy of Swedenborg that the damned go to their own hells of their own accord. It underlies a queer poem, "Simpson," by that interesting essayist upon modern Christianity, Mr. Clutton Brock, which

I have recently read. Simpson dies and goes to hell--it is rather like the Cromwell Road--and approves of it very highly, and then and then only is he completely damned. Not to realise that one can be damned is certainly to be damned; such is Mr. Brock's idea. It is his definition of damnation. Satisfaction with existing things is damnation. It is surrender to limitation; it is acquiescence in "disharmony"; it is making peace with that enemy against whom God fights for ever.

(But whether there are indeed Simpsons who acquiesce always and for ever remains for me, as I have already confessed in the previous chapter, a quite open question. My Arminian temperament turns me from the Calvinistic conclusion of Mr. Brock's satire.)

3. SIN IS NOT DAMNATION

Now the question of sin will hardly concern those damned and lost by nature, if such there be. Sin is not the same thing as damnation, as we have just defined damnation. Damnation is a state, but sin is an incident. One is an essential and the other an incidental separation from God. It is possible to sin without being damned; and to be damned is to be in a state when sin scarcely matters, like ink upon a blackamoor. You cannot have questions of more or less among absolute things.

It is the amazing and distressful discovery of every believer so soon as the first exaltation of belief is past, that one does not remain always in touch with God. At first it seems incredible that one should ever have any motive again that is not also God's motive. Then one finds oneself caught unawares by a base impulse. We discover that discontinuousness of our apparently homogeneous selves, the unincorporated and warring elements that seemed at first altogether absent from the synthesis of conversion. We are tripped up by forgetfulness, by distraction, by old habits, by tricks of appearance. There come dull patches of existence; those mysterious obliterations of one's finer sense that are due at times to the little minor poisons one eats or drinks, to phases of fatigue, ill-health and bodily disorder, or one is betrayed by some unanticipated storm of emotion, brewed deep in the animal being and released by any trifling accident, such as personal jealousy or lust, or one is relaxed by contentment into vanity. All these rebel forces of our ill-coordinated selves, all these "disharmonies," of the inner being, snatch us away from our devotion to God's service, carry us off to follies, offences, unkindness, waste, and leave us compromised, involved, and regretful, perplexed by a hundred difficulties we have put in our own way back to God.

This is the personal problem of Sin. Here prayer avails; here God can help us. From God comes the strength to repent and make such reparation as we can, to begin the battle again further back and lower down. From God comes the power to anticipate the struggle with one's rebel self,

and to resist and prevail over it.

4. THE SINS OF THE INSANE

An extreme case is very serviceable in such a discussion as this.

It happens that the author carries on a correspondence with several lunatics in asylums. There is a considerable freedom of notepaper in these institutions; the outgoing letters are no doubt censored or selected in some way, but a proportion at any rate are allowed to go out to their addresses. As a journalist who signs his articles and as the author of various books of fiction, as a frequent NAME, that is, to any one much forced back upon reading, the writer is particularly accessible to this type of correspondent. The letters come, some manifesting a hopeless disorder that permits of no reply, but some being the expression of minds overlaid not at all offensively by a web of fantasy, and some (and these are the more touching ones and the ones that most concern us now) as sanely conceived and expressed as any letters could be. They are written by people living lives very like the lives of us who are called "sane," except that they lift to a higher excitement and fall to a lower depression, and that these extremer phases of mania or melancholia slip the leash of mental consistency altogether and take abnormal forms. They tap deep founts of impulse, such as we of the safer

ways of mediocrity do but glimpse under the influence of drugs, or in dreams and rare moments of controllable extravagance. Then the insane become "glorious," or they become murderous, or they become suicidal. All these letter-writers in confinement have convinced their fellow-creatures by some extravagance that they are a danger to themselves or others.

The letters that come from such types written during their sane intervals, are entirely sane. Some, who are probably unaware--I think they should know--of the offences or possibilities that justify their incarceration, write with a certain resentment at their position; others are entirely acquiescent, but one or two complain of the neglect of friends and relations. But all are as manifestly capable of religion and of the religious life as any other intelligent persons during the lucid interludes that make up nine-tenths perhaps of their lives. . . . Suppose now one of these cases, and suppose that the infirmity takes the form of some cruel, disgusting, or destructive disposition that may become at times overwhelming, and you have our universal trouble with sinful tendency, as it were magnified for examination. It is clear that the mania which defines his position must be the primary if not the cardinal business in the life of a lunatic, but his problem with that is different not in kind but merely in degree from the problem of lusts, vanities, and weaknesses in what we call normal lives. It is an unconquered tract, a great rebel province in his being, which refuses to serve God and tries to prevent him serving God, and succeeds at times in wresting his capital out of his control. But his relationship to that

is the same relationship as ours to the backward and insubordinate parishes, criminal slums, and disorderly houses in our own private texture.

It is clear that the believer who is a lunatic is, as it were, only the better part of himself. He serves God with this unconquered disposition in him, like a man who, whatever else he is and does, is obliged to be the keeper of an untrustworthy and wicked animal. His beast gets loose. His only resort is to warn those about him when he feels that jangling or excitement of the nerves which precedes its escapes, to limit its range, to place weapons beyond its reach. And there are plenty of human beings very much in his case, whose beasts have never got loose or have got caught back before their essential insanity was apparent. And there are those uncertifiable lunatics we call men and women of "impulse" and "strong passions." If perhaps they have more self-control than the really mad, yet it happens oftener with them that the whole intelligent being falls under the dominion of evil. The passion scarcely less than the obsession may darken the whole moral sky. Repentance and atonement; nothing less will avail them after the storm has passed, and the sedulous preparation of defences and palliatives against the return of the storm.

This discussion of the lunatic's case gives us indeed, usefully coarse and large, the lines for the treatment of every human weakness by the servants of God. A "weakness," just like the lunatic's mania, becomes a particular charge under God, a special duty for the person it affects.

He has to minimise it, to isolate it, to keep it out of mischief. If he can he must adopt preventive measures. . . .

These passions and weaknesses that get control of us hamper our usefulness to God, they are an incessant anxiety and distress to us, they wound our self-respect and make us incomprehensible to many who would trust us, they discredit the faith we profess. If they break through and break through again it is natural and proper that men and women should cease to believe in our faith, cease to work with us or to meet us frankly. . . . Our sins do everything evil to us and through us except separate us from God.

Yet let there be no mistake about one thing. Here prayer is a power. Here God can indeed work miracles. A man with the light of God in his heart can defeat vicious habits, rise again combative and undaunted after a hundred falls, escape from the grip of lusts and revenges, make head against despair, thrust back the very onset of madness. He is still the same man he was before he came to God, still with his libidinous, vindictive, boastful, or indolent vein; but now his will to prevail over those qualities can refer to an exterior standard and an external interest, he can draw upon a strength, almost boundless, beyond his own.

5. BELIEVE, AND YOU ARE SAVED

But be a sin great or small, it cannot damn a man once he has found God. You may kill and hang for it, you may rob or rape; the moment you truly repent and set yourself to such atonement and reparation as is possible there remains no barrier between you and God. Directly you cease to hide or deny or escape, and turn manfully towards the consequences and the setting of things right, you take hold again of the hand of God. Though you sin seventy times seven times, God will still forgive the poor rest of you. Nothing but utter blindness of the spirit can shut a man off from God.

There is nothing one can suffer, no situation so unfortunate, that it can shut off one who has the thought of God, from God. If you but lift up your head for a moment out of a stormy chaos of madness and cry to him, God is there, God will not fail you. A convicted criminal, frankly penitent, and neither obdurate nor abject, whatever the evil of his yesterdays, may still die well and bravely on the gallows to the glory of God. He may step straight from that death into the immortal being of God.

This persuasion is the very essence of the religion of the true God. There is no sin, no state that, being regretted and repented of, can stand between God and man.