

UP FROM SIN

The Fall and Rise of a Prodigal
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by

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE HOPEFUL SIGN

“And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger?” (Luke 15:17)

In our past three chapters we have been trying to show the causes which operated in bringing our young man to ruin. Now we take an entirely different and a more hopeful view of him. He has at last, after a good deal of lost time and wasted opportunity, with a spent fortune and shattered constitution, come to himself.

HE IS THINKING

Thinking of the past. Of the day, perhaps, when he left home. Thinking of his father's advice and his mother's tears. Of his eventful journey to this strange country. Thinking of his friends. How considerate they once were! How they had led him into sin and ruin, obtained what he had, and are now gone. Thinking of the present, with its loathsome surroundings. Of the future; what he should do with himself. Thinking! Meditating! O, how sad! And yet there is a great comfort to be obtained as we look upon him in this condition. It is always encouraging to find a young man thinking. Well might the poet sing:

“In solitude I often come
And find my sweetest joys.”

O, if he had stopped sooner and thought, things would certainly have been different! He would never have gone so far; no, no, he would have seen the end. But this he would not do. Now, as he sees himself he would give the world to retrace his steps, but it is too late. His time has been lost. His money is all gone. His character is ruined, and the world has turned its back upon him. A sad, sad picture!

But, my friends, it is but the experience of many men today. I remember talking to a criminal once who pointed out to me in his Bible, **“The wages of sin is death.”**

“O,” said he, “I wish I could have understood this a year ago as I understand it today.”

He had not thought about it. O the need of thinkers! Men who will stop business and pleasure and think.

The fact is the great need of this age is more men who do their own thinking.

Nothing is accomplished without it. We turn our eyes today up to the starry heavens, calculate the distances and dimensions of those sparkling bodies. But we must remember that it has taken thought to accomplish all this.

We have harnessed the lightning and chained it to the earth. But it has taken thought. We have penetrated the bowels of the earth and brought therefrom its hidden treasures. But this, too, has taken thought. Without thought the world is chaos and ruin. With it, the world is one vast ever-blooming flower garden, yielding its sweet perfume to the patient toiler.

If we go back in the history of arts and inventions, we shall see an Englishman seated under a tall oak. He spies a spider spinning his web from tree to tree. He goes home and shuts himself up in his room, where he remains for days thinking. And when he comes forth he astonishes the world with a plan for a suspension bridge, with which he could bridge hitherto bridgeless chasms. You say he was a genius. No, he was a thinker. After all, genius is the power to think.

The greatest need of the age is men who think.

MAN VS. A MACHINE

First – Men who think concerning themselves.

It is one thing to be an ape, and another to be a man. The ape acts because he sees a man act. The man acts, or should act, because he chooses to act. But alas! There are many human apes in the world – men who act just because somebody else acts. Go into any calling of life; how few people act upon their judgment of a thing! How few men really do any thinking! We are too content to live the machine life.

I went into a shoe factory once and found one machine turning out more shoes in a day than 100 men could turn out in the same time. But after all, though a machine can and does turn out a hundred times more shoes, hats or caps than a man, still the lowest down criminal who peeps from behind prison bars or is chained to the floor of the lowest room in the lowest dungeon of earth is worth all the machinery of the world, because he is endowed with the faculty of thought.

Beecher said one day he stood and watched a Hoe printing press, with the latest improvements, taking the paper, wetting it and printing it on both sides, and with nimble fingers drawing it this way and that way and turning it over and folding it and throwing it into a box, five or ten thousand an hour ready for mail. He says it was hard to realize that somehow the thing did not think. He says further the first time he ever saw the looms in a great factory at work that they were so life-like that he remarked to a friend, "That thing ought to vote."

And by the way, it was about just as well qualified to perform this sacred rite as many who go year after year to our ballot-boxes, and with all eyes closed saved the ever-open eye of prejudice, deposit their ballots. Yet we boast of our freedom at the ballot-box. It is the freedom of a slave.

Man is not a machine. The machine never changes. It beats along in an old beaten path, performing its functions according to the will of the operator. Man thinks, or is at least able to think, to plan for himself according to the exigencies of the case. But alas, how many of our young men today are content with merely being human machines. They beat along in the old paths, not thinking or caring whither they are going or what will be their end.

THE BOOK TO STUDY

But what shall we, as young men, consider? What book shall we study? I answer that there is no greater book than the book of self.

Do not study only the external part, although there is ample study along this line. Open its lids. Go down into its secret parts. See its composition. I saw a Bible being prepared for the World's Fair that cost \$1000, but when the lids were opened it was nothing more than any other Bible. All the extra work was on the outside. So it is not the outside of self you ought to be so much concerned with. They may for the time enhance your value, but the real value of yourself is to be realized only from within, in your soul and spirit.

“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?” (II Corinthians 13:5).

THE POWER OF HABIT

Study to see your real condition; your strong points; your weak points; your habits. O, the power of habit! If you could only be fired early with the power of good habits, what a blessing!

A story is told in the life of General Sheridan that a battle occurred near a canal where a large number of his old worn-out horses were confined. During the heavy firing they grew warlike, formed in squadrons and charged upon a number of mules, two of whom they killed, when the rest fled. They next charged upon and overthrew a high rail fence, and did not cease their wild demonstrations until the firing had entirely ceased.

If, now, my young friends, habit is so powerful with the brute, may it not likewise be true of man? Say what we will, we are largely creatures of habit.

Young man, look to your habits. It is all right if you are forming good habits. But it will be awful if they are bad. Stop, then, and think on these things.

MEN AND THINGS

Second – We want men today who will think concerning men and things. We want to know our relations to others. We want to know their strong points and their weaknesses.

But above all give independent thought to things and circumstances around you. This is needful in order that you may know where to place yourself wisely. There is too much taking things for granted today. Our actions are too largely determined by prejudice. We make up our minds aforehand. It was so when our Saviour was here. They asked then if any good thing could come out of Nazareth. This is what corrupts our politics and ruins our government.

I knew a young man just about the right age to begin loving the girls, and to love hard. He lived next door to a revenue officer. It was in the days of republican rule. The revenue officer had a pretty little blue-eyed girl, and the young man fell in love with her. He would steal away occasionally and chat with the girl. One day the father saw him over there and called him home.

“Son,” said the angry, distracted father, “if I ever catch you over there again I’ll give you a whaling.”

“Why, father?” said the scared lad.

“Why, don’t you know that girl’s daddy is an old whiskey noser – an old revenue officer?”

“Well, yes, father, but what of that?”

“Why I feel disgraced! Don’t you ever let me ever catch you there again.”

The boy was likewise ashamed, and did not go any more, at least for a while. A year or two brought a change. Mr. Cleveland was president. One day the boy heard his father talking, and saw a great petition. What do you think it was? Why, he was ransacking creation to get that same old “noser’s” job.

“Ah, ha,” said the lad, “I see a thing is right when a fellow is in, and wrong when a fellow is out; yes, yes; I see, I see.”

What the world wants to-day, dear friends, is men who will think and decide according to the real merits of a thing, and not by blind prejudice. Our whole life, political and social, would be changed if only this were true.

MY IMPRESSIONS OF GENERAL GRANT

I remember when I was a boy it was thought at one time that General Grant, with a party of Northern men, would visit Raleigh. I shall never forget my feelings then. I first thought it would be death to Raleigh and everybody there. What! General Grant coming to Raleigh. Who could have been so foolish as to have consented for him to come there with a gang of Yankees? But today, as I study for myself the history of great men, I accord to General Grant a place among the greatest men of his time, and were he living today I would feel honored for life to have him visit my city and my home. I say this in spite of the fact that I am as true a Southerner as walks the face of the earth.

THE HIGHEST MEDITATION

Third – we want men, above everything else, who will think concerning God and their relationship to Him.

It is well enough to be fitted for life. Be wise in all of your actions pertaining to the things of life. But whatever you do, don't fail to think of God. O that I could get you young men to come with me while we talk of God and Jesus Christ! O that you could see Him – the crucified One; that you could get a glimpse into Gethsemane's garden, and there behold the agonizing Christ as He wrestles with the load of the sin of earth's unnumbered millions. O that you could see Him on the cross as your substitute! A finished salvation through a simple acceptance of His offering.

Come to yourself, and you will have achieved a mighty victory. Come, feeling with the poet –

“When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

“Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

“See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

“Were all the realms of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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