THE TWIN SERPENTS.

And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand. A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. — GEN. iv. 8-13.

THE story of Cain is the story of all ages. Sin, suffering; the one following the other by a law fixed and imperative like that by which pain agonizes a burning hand. A living poet speaks of

"The coils
Of those *twin serpents*, — Sin and Suffering."

So far as the narrative informs us, the suffering of the first murderer was mental suffering. Disease did not blast him; chains did not bind him; the mysterious mark on his forehead was not a burning brand. He went his way like other men. He had sons and daughters: he built the first city known in history. Tradition says that he founded

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many cities, and became the head of a great empire. Yet Cain "*went out from the presence of the Lord.*" He lived a life of conscious curse. The serpents coiled within. Cursed in thought, cursed in feeling, cursed in fears, cursed in blasted hopes, cursed in one long despair: such was life to the first man who bore the fruit of the first matured and ripened sin. And such will be the life of the last man who shall go out from the presence of the Lord, bearing the burden of a finished crime unrepented of and unforgiven.

Sin finds in the very constitution of the human mind the enginery of its own retribution. Let us note some of these retributive experiences of sin, as developed in the common life of men.

1. *The very consciousness of sin is destructive of a sinner's peace.* The consciousness of sin is itself suffering. "Sin revived, and I died," is the testimony of St. Paul. And this is the testimony of every sinner of every age. The bare conviction of guilt in having transgressed the law of God is the basis of the keenest anguish a man ever suffers in this world or any other.

We are so made that it cannot be otherwise. God has so constituted our nature that no man ever yet lived who felt absolutely no emotion when the naked fact of sin was laid on his conscience by the Spirit of God, and held there. That fact of guilt, to a soul thus compelled to face it, is like a live coal to a naked eyeball.

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Moreover, the worst of it is that conscience, if left to itself, never finds an adequate remedy. It never teaches a sinner how he may gain deliverance from sin or suffering. It never hints to him the possibility of deliverance from either. That is no part of its design. The design of conscience is simply to express God's law. Therefore, in a sinner's experience, its working is to express the evil of transgressing that law. Its legitimate work is to pour out upon a sinner burning and indignant accusations of guilt, of folly, of dishonor, of degradation, of moral defilement, of offensiveness to the holy universe, and of exposure to the wrath of a holy God, and — leave them there.

2. The destructive working of sin in a sinner's experience is further seen *in the fact that sin tends to develop sin.* Like all other forms of character, sin grows. Never for an hour is it at a standstill. No soul can live in eternal infancy. One sin begets another sin. Nothing else in nature is so prolific. One sin roots itself in the soil of character, and spreads itself outward, and lifts itself heavenward defiantly. Sin penetrates the underground of character, and forms there hidden enormities and unconscious depths of passion. A man of long experience in sin is always a worse man than he seems to himself to be. The day of judgment is to be a day of fearful surprises and overwhelming revolutions in self-knowledge.

Sin full-grown defies law because it is law; re-

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sists restraint because it is restraint; contests authority with God because he is God. Says Cain, as depicted by Lord Byron in colloquy with Lucifer, "I bend to neither God nor thee." Lord Byron knew whereof he affirmed. This is the legitimate heroism of sin.

Sin runs to passion; passion, to tumult in character; and a tumultuous character tends to tempests and explosions, which scorn secrecies and disguises. Then the whole man comes to light. He sees himself, and others see him, as he is in God's sight. Those solemn imperatives and their awful responses, "Thou shalt not," — "I will," — "Thou shalt," — "I will not," — make up then all that the man knows of intercourse with God. This is sin in the ultimate and finished type of it. That is what it grows to in every sinner, if unchecked by the grace of God. Every man unredeemed becomes a demon in eternity.

3. The destructiveness of sin is still further seen *in the apprehension of its discovery, with which the consciousness of guilt is always more or less painfully attended.* Our souls are so made as to tremble at the thought of detection in wrong. This is often quite distinct from the fear of other suffering.

A burglar, not long ago, entered and rifled the contents of an unoccupied dwelling at the seaside. He ransacked the rooms from attic to cellar, and heaped his plunder together in the parlor. There were evidences that there he had sat down to rest,

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perhaps to think. On a bracket in the corner stood a marble bust of Guido's "Ecce Homo," Christ crowned with thorns. The guilty man had taken it in his hands, and examined it. It bore the marks of his fingers. But he had replaced it, and *turned its face to the wall*, as if he would not have even the cold, sightless eyes of the marble Saviour look upon his deed of infamy. Be it so, or not, there is in every human soul an instinct of concealment of sin, of which that act is a truthful emblem. The instinct of hiding clutches at every act of wrong-doing, and would bury it forever from the vision of pure eyes. The first act of the first sinner, when the fact of sin grew into his consciousness, was to hide himself at the sound of God's voice in the garden. Never till then had it been needful that God should ask, "Where art thou?" Thus human nature anticipated all through earth's history the craving for a hiding-place. Thus it foreshadowed the last prayer of the last sinner: "Rocks and mountains, fall on us, and hide us from the face of Him that sitteth on the throne!"

But what is the effect of this craving for concealment on a sinner's life? It dooms him to moral solitude. It shuts him into the society of his own outraged conscience. He must bear the torture of an inevitable Nemesis alone. That sometimes goads him by the sheer dread of detection to forestall it by confession, that he may be

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rid of the torment of anticipating it. Do not the history of suicide in this world, and the records of tribunals of human justice, confirm this working of the law of conscience?

These bodies of ours are so made as to be allies of conscience in this thing. They are sometimes all aglow and quivering with the signs by which this fear of detection in wrong discloses itself to the beholder. An eminent jurist in England, after long practice at the bar, said that he was awe-struck by the machinery for the discovery of falsehood which God had constructed in the muscles of the human countenance. The human face, he said, was the most honest thing he had ever found in man. If every thing else bore the mask of perjury, he said, there was an involuntary muscle in one of the lips, which he had never known a witness to be able to control in the act of giving perjured testimony. The labial muscle, true to the hand of Him who made it, would start and vibrate at the thrill of the fear of detection, in the soul which crouched at bay behind it. So impossible is it, in the last extremity, for a guilty being to suppress its dread of discovery as a distinct and positive source of suffering in the experience of sin.

4. Once more, the destructiveness of sin in the experience of the sinner is seen *in the foreboding of judicial and eternal retribution which is incident to sin.* No two ideas are more indissolubly joined

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in the working of the human mind than these two of suffering and sin. "Sin — suffering; suffering — sin." To a logical mind it is inevitable to reason from the one to the other, even to the tracery of a hair in the proportion of effect to cause. "So much sin, so much suffering:" this is law. And again, "So much suffering, so much sin:" this is law. Think what we may of it, this is law. Job's friends were true to the law of nature in this thing. These two angels of despair have trodden the ages as a winepress. It is the natural working of an honest conscience, unrelieved by the grace of God, to weld these two things together in the forebodings of a guilty soul.

Hence, in the experience of sin, it is sheer nature to anticipate suffering. And eternal sin must involve eternal suffering: this is nature. Yes; "it must be so: thou reasonest well." By nature, as well as by revelation, the worm dieth not. It is not superstition to fear an eternal hell; it is not bigotry to believe in it and to teach it: it is simple nature acting out one of its involuntary and elementary instincts. The heart's throbbing is not more natural. A fearful looking-for of judgment is, sooner or later, in the order of nature, the fruitage of all sin.

Besides, the human conscience finds no end to it. Once a sinner, always a sinner: this is nature. Therefore, once a sinner, always a sufferer: this, too, is nature. Again we must say, think what we

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may of it, this is law. It is no peculiarity of the Bible. Priests have not made it so. The Bible is no more responsible for it than the Koran. It is an obstinate *fact* in the make of the human soul. It declares the doom of any and every soul, if left to itself to drag a history of sin behind it.

Consequently man the world over trembles at something. Guilt sooner or later makes us all cowards. We are naturally afraid of God. We dread our own immortality. Who knows what is to come of it? We are afraid of death. Who has ever got an answer from the awful silence beyond? An English general of unquestioned courage confessed that he always trembled at the first boom of the cannon in battle. He feared it as much in his fiftieth fight as in his first. Do not such moments of standing eye to eye with death, and trembling at the booming echoes of eternity, occur in the lives of the best and the bravest of us?

But why? Why should a man fear death? A caterpillar does not fear the chrysalis through which it passes to a thing of beauty. Ah! but we are not butterflies. We are souls. We are images of God. Our dread of death, of immortality, of God, is the hammer of a deathless conscience falling on the anvil of eternal right, with the power of an almighty will in the arm that wields it. Woe to any thing that lies between!

An honest conscience, then, can never point a

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man to himself for peace. It never tells him to look within for that. It shuts him in to his despair, and leaves him there. This is all that nature can do for him. If there is no other source of hope, he "goes out," like Cain, "from the presence of the Lord," to return no more. The *twin serpents* are the companions of his solitude, forever and forever.

From this review of the working of sin in the experience of men, two things become obvious: —

It is reasonable that a sinner should inquire anxiously, "What shall I do to be saved?" No man has any reason to be ashamed of anxiety for the salvation of his soul.

Equally obvious is *the preciousness of the work of Christ.* Christ becomes a reality to us, only by being felt to be a necessity. He *is* a reality only because he is a necessity. Here our thought should culminate, — in the preciousness of Christ to lost souls. Yes, lost! No other one word expresses so truthfully the condition in which Christ finds us all. Lost to virtue; lost to the respect and trust of the holy universe; lost to the benignant operation of conscience; lost to self-respect, to hope, to peace, to the conscious blessedness of being; lost to the complacent love of God, — the past all guilt, and the future all despair!

It is to such a being, to a crowded and forlorn world of such beings, that Christ gives himself. He gives himself to blot out the past. Oh, to

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blot out the past! We know little of ourselves if our experience has not taught us the need of that. We know as little of Christ's work for us, if we have not experienced the reality of that.

Yet how tame is language to express that experience! Are there not hours in which we can only adore in grateful silence the love of which we cannot speak? If we would speak, do we not fall back upon some such simple speech as that of those lines which have already been the solace of multitudes on death-beds, —

"Just as I am, without one plea,
Save that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bid'st me come to thee,
O Lamb of God, I come!"

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