

LEGENDS OF THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD

A Tale of the "Beggars"

Before God wrote the Decalogue (which is the substance of the law) with His own hand, He had engraved its capital precepts on the heart of man; and, notwithstanding the wanderings of the children of Adam, they yet everywhere knew that they had not made themselves, and they raised to Heaven their adorations and their homage. But this worship was perverted among the scattered nations, and each formed gods according to its fancy: Satan obtained adoration; idolatry, magic, superstitions, spread themselves abroad. As to atheism, that incredible negation, which has perhaps never existed, except as a piece of braggadocio, it was for a long time unknown.

God determined to preserve among a small and faithful nation the deposit of truth, and gave them the written law. The first of those Ten Commandments, which comprise it, obliges to the three primary virtues; namely, Faith, Hope, and Charity; and of all the commandments it is the greatest. If we were not hastening to our tale, but writing a dogmatic treatise, we would show how it establishes the worship of adoration which we owe to God, and the worship of honor which we owe to the holy Virgin, the angels, and the saints; how, in forbidding us to make idols for the purpose of adoring them, He does not forbid us to reverence relics, and images of the saints; how, on the contrary, He sees with approbation the homage we humbly tender to His faithful friends, who have become our intercessors with Him.

We shall tell how He reprobates and punishes those who attack, not only Himself, which is the height of insensate frenzy, but His saints, His temples, His ministers, and His worship. We are scarcely out of an epoch in which our eyes have seen God proscribed and his saints outraged: if we were to venture here on the sad catalogue of those puny wretches who, with an incredible madness, laid their bold hands upon the things of God, we should have to record so many visible chastisements, that the reader would be moved. He would bow before that great oracular sentence of St. Augustine, that if God does not inflict all His punishments here below, but resolves to remind us without ceasing that there is another life in which He will do justice, He yet punishes sufficiently before our eyes to show us that the temporal government of His Providence is not a vain word.

But it is not, perhaps, expedient to stir ashes which are not yet cold, and to cite names still familiarly sounded. Be it enough to record some facts of the time which has passed away. A gentleman of England, Henry Spelman, wrote, in 1632, a book on this subject; ** and, though he was an Anglican, he has shown, in good faith, what happened to the profaners of holy things, in the persecution raised by his party against the Catholics. After having related several stories of foreign countries and old times, he shows what judgments overtook William the Conqueror, a distinguished spoiler of churches; and enumerates a great number of sacrileges punished in an evident manner. The seventh and eighth chapters, which present a rapid view of the sacrileges committed by the English schism, are full of traits so striking, that we will transcribe some passages.

** *"The History and Fate of Sacrilege."* Feller has published an abridgement of this very curious work. We avail ourselves of his labors.

“Henry VIII had found in his father’s coffers more than two million pounds sterling. The confiscation of the monasteries, the property of which he appropriated to himself, furnished him with more than quadruple the revenue of the crown lands; besides a magazine of treasure raised out of the money, plate, jewels, ornaments, and implements of churches, with their first fruits and tenths. A man may justly wonder how such an ocean of wealth should come to be exhausted in so short a time of peace; but God’s blessing, as it seemeth, was not upon it; for, within four years after he had received all this, and had ruined and sacked 376 of the monasteries, he was drawn so dry, that the parliament was constrained to supply his wants with the residue of all the monasteries of the kingdom. “

This not serving his turn, he was yet driven not only to enhance his gold and silver money in the 36th year of his reign, but to coin base money.

He had two sons and three daughters; whereof one of each kind died infants; the other three succeeding in the crown without posterity. His base son, the duke of Richmond, died also without issue; and in the 68th year after he began to sack the monasteries, with their churches, was his whole issue extinct, and his kingdom transferred to another nation.

Let us cast our eyes upon what happened to the principal agents and contrivers of this business. The Lord Cromwell, who in the 31st year was created Earl of Essex, in the 32nd was beheaded. His grandchild, wasting the whole inheritance, left himself as little land as his grandfather left to the monasteries.

The secular lords who specially assisted Henry VIII in the pillage of holy places were seventeen in number. Spelman gives their names, and relates their end. The greater part perished by the hand of the executioner; others by fatal accidents. Few among them left posterity; and it was extinct before the fourth generation.

The twenty-five barons who countenanced these lords met with an analogous destiny. The Anglican author afterwards shows, from verified facts, that the unjust acquisition, and even the mere administration, of usurped church property inevitably draws down the curse of God upon the acquirers, administrators, and their posterity. He dwells particularly, in the eighth chapter, on the county of Norfolk; and says that, in 1615, in a circle of seventy-two miles, were enclosed twenty-five monasteries, and as many distinguished houses, which existed at the time of the dissolution in the year 1536 ; that is to say, seventy-nine years before the time at which he made this calculation. After some reliefs to conscience, he remarks, that all the possessions of the distinguished families mentioned, to the number of twenty-five, existed still in his time in the same families, which had all preserved their splendor and their name; but, with the exception of two monasteries, all the goods of the other abbeys had changed owners, — some at least three times, and many even as often as five or six. He adds, that these frequent changes had taken place, not only through failure of lineage, or by common sales, but more commonly through misfortunes and disasters happening to the possessors.

I urge nothing,” says he; “as not meddling with the secret judgments of God; but relate *rem gestam* , only as I have privately gotten notice of it.” He adds, that he may well be believed; since, having dwelt almost all his life in those districts, he was in a condition to know everything in detail and with the most exact certainty.

We shall not relate with him the particular history of each of the twenty-five monasteries and of their unfortunate possessors. We shall confine ourselves to a transcription of what he

says of the abbey of Coxford, known afterwards under the name of Rotha. The duke of Norfolk, though a Catholic, was its first possessor. As he had declared himself in favor of Mary Stuart, whom he wished to marry, Elizabeth had him beheaded on the 2nd of June, 1572*. The monastery, confiscated in consequence of this execution, was given to Edward, earl of Oxford, who wasted all his estate. Roger Townsend bought it. He had two sons, one of whom died without children, and the other had a boy and a girl. The girl was married to John Spelman, who fought a duel with Matthew Brown; and both were left dead on the spot. The son, in another duel in the Low Countries, was mortally wounded; and thus Roger lived to see his posterity extinct.

Before the great sacrilege of Henry VIII., Cardinal Wolsey had asked of Rome the suppression of forty small monasteries, in order to the erection of two collegiate churches. The five persons principally employed by him in this work perished miserably. The first was assassinated by the second, who was hanged in his turn. The third was reduced from a state of wealth to the lowest beggary. The fourth drowned himself in a well. The fifth (Dr. Allen, promoted afterwards to a bishopric in Ireland) was horribly mutilated. Wolsey himself, who had amassed immense riches, was arrested for high treason, being conducted to the Tower, but died on the way; it is pretended that he was poisoned.

We might enlarge, without measure, a collection of parallel facts. A similar story will occur at the Fifth Commandment. Let us retrace a scene of the time of the disturbances in the sixteenth century.

When at Paris, in 1792, some caustic spirits adopted a tone of reproach toward the new deputies who had just filled the place of the Constituent Assembly, on account of their inelegant air and slovenly appearance, and one voice in particular had treated them to the term *sans culottes*, they proudly raised their heads, and made it a title of honor, which every citizen should be obliged to bear; and the article of dress referred to was even proscribed; there were festivals called *Sans-culottides*; — a name still given to the complimentary days of that absurd calendar in which the saints were replaced by the carrot, the cauliflower, the parsnip, the turkey, the dunghill, the hog, and the harrow.

This exaggeration has resulted at all times of great crises. When the Low Countries, under Philip II, were disturbed, through the secret agitation of the Reformed party, three hundred nobles of the provinces arrived at Brussels, with the declared pretense of representing the Confederates, This was the title taken by those who called rebels by the court. They met at the palace of Margaret of Parma, then governor of the Low Countries; they were on horseback, proceeding two by two, and holding each other by the hand, in token of union. Mamix of St. Aldegonda was at their head. As the governor was frightened at their number, the count of Berlaimont, who was near her, and who saw them dirty and ill- equipped, said to the princess, “Why do you fear these people, madam? they are no better than beggars”

Some of the three hundred, having heard this injurious expression, cried as they went out “that if one was a beggar for defending his country’s rights, they felt honored by the title. They bought wooden porringers and at their great dinner at the hotel of Culenburgh, they drank out of these porringers, crying, “The beggars forever!” Next day, the three hundred and their numerous partisans ran through the streets of Brussels, clothed in grey, girt with a leathern

strap, with a porringer hanging from it, and wearing that large-brimmed mendicant's hat, which the Flemish Revolution has since carried on the top of its pike, just as the Republic of 1793 carried the red cap. They had medals struck, which represented two hands joined over a wallet, with the legend, "Even to the Wallet." And as soon as the beggars had formed armies, each soldier adorned his buttonhole with a little porringer of metal, of the size of a two-franc piece.

These details were necessary for those who do not happen to know the origin of the Beggars of history. The same men were called Huguenots in France.

The Beggars of the Low Countries were rapidly drawn farther, without doubt, than they had foreseen. This is the course of things. The most part separated from Philip II., and, uneasy under the restraints of Catholicism, adopted the new opinions of Luther and Calvin, made war on religion, and sacked the churches, in the name of liberty. The most important towns of the Low Countries, like those in which the Protestants domineered in France, were the theatres of scandalous scenes, which would have been laughable if they had not been still more hideous and bloody, and if, in these frightful saturnalia, people had not at once destroyed the monuments of the fine arts, and crushed without regard the most holy and precious thing men have in the world, — their religious belief. The beautiful church of St. Gudule, at Brussels, was thus devastated. They broke the holy images, crosses, altars, baptistery, tabernacles: stalls, chairs, chapels, organs, were dashed to splinters; rich missals torn, and precious pictures cut in pieces. Chandeliers, censers, sacred vessels, were stolen and profaned. Drunken Beggars took the holy oils and greased their shoes with them.

Among these pillagings, there was acted a frightful comedy, mentioned by all historians. These men took Heaven on their side, and would have miracles. At the devastation of St. Gudule's, a tall Beggar, armed from head to foot, posted himself, as such do in all the churches, before a revered crucifix.

"If thou art the Son of God," said he to it, "cry, The Beggars forever!" and I will do nothing to thee. As the holy image did not answer, the soldier replied, "Ah! thou wilt not cry, 'The Beggars forever!' — down with the enemies of union!"

And he struck the crucifix a great blow with his sabre. After this, other profaners put a rope round its neck, and tore it from the cross with cries. A silver crown, which had been placed by devotion on the head of the pious effigy, was divided among the performers, who, though they made loud pretenses of being no robbers, took care to despise nothing that would sell.

In another part of the church, a group stopped before a picture of the Assumption. They declared to the holy Virgin that they would respect her, provided she would be of their party.

"If thou art the mother of God," said they to the holy likeness in their usual style, "cry, 'The Beggars forever!'"

And, as the picture did not cry, they cut it in pieces with their lances.

In a similar way they broke the painted glass, blotted the frescoes, mutilated the sculptures, and turned a splendid church into a place of desolation and ruins.

They treated in the same manner the relics of the saints, which they threw into the air; but they carried away the shrines of value.

Now, there was among the Beggars a Ghent man, who had preserved some veneration for his patron, St. Michael. Although, in his madness, he had abjured Catholicism, and destroyed the images of the saints, he excepted St. Michael out of his list of proscription. He perceived, above an altar, a large picture, which represented the holy archangel, by the protector of Brussels, striking the devil with a thunderbolt. He wished to save it. With such furious companions as those who surrounded him, he could not procure respect for a reason founded on feeling — a stratagem was needful. The idea struck him, to slip behind the picture, and answer for the image, when one should apostrophize it, a miracle, he thought, capable of heightening the reputation of his saint. He did not hesitate, but glided, without being seen, between the canvas and the wall, while his comrades were pillaging a little way off. Unfortunately for the Ghent man, he had been drunk for two days. He had no sooner arranged himself behind the saint, than he fell asleep ; and, although his prominent corporation made the canvas swell a little, no one perceived him. The Beggars came in a quarter of an hour, all drunk too, but able to stand. The least intoxicated of the set impudently ordered the saint to cry, “ The beggars for ever ! ” — an injunction which was repeated three times ; after which, hearing nothing — for the Ghent man’s snoring could not be heard for the tumult — the chief Beggar struck a great blow with his halberd, and thus pierced at once the picture of the archangel and the Ghent man’s body. The blood spouted violently. Terror, like a clap of thunder, threw on their knees all the image-breakers, who thought themselves struck by a redoubtable miracle. But the canvas, already old, profited by the rent just made in it to yield to the weight of the Ghent Beggar. It split from top to bottom, and the expiring man ended with falling on the assailant, whom he killed with his fall. The other Beggars, recognizing the cause of their fright, recovered with impudent laughter, and, leaving the two dead men there, pursued their orgies. What was the end of these wretches, we could not precisely say. But it is easy to suppose it, when one sees in what manner their leaders expired. The three names most renowned in those disturbances were Nassau, Horn, and d’Egmond. The first died assassinated, and his posterity was extinct in the middle of the following century. The other two left their heads upon the scaffold. The last descendant of Count Horn was broken on the wheel at Paris, in the Place de Greve ; and the eleven children of Count d’Egmond have not been able to preserve his name upon the earth. To these examples we might add, as we have already said, striking facts which are performing under our eyes by the recompense of contemporary sacrileges. But it would be hard to collect them.

Luther himself has this expression in reference to the robbery of church estates : “ Experience proves, that those who have appropriated to themselves the estates of the church have become poorer by it, and at last fallen into beggary ”

He afterwards recites these words of John Hund, counsellor of the elector of Saxony : “ We nobles have seized on the spoils of the monasteries. These monastic riches have eaten and devoured our feudal riches, or these have devoured those ; so that there remains nothing to us of either the one or the other.”

On this, Luther relates the apologue of the eagle, who, stealing meat from Jupiter’s altar, carried off, at the same time, a coal, which set fire to her nest, and consumed her young ones.