

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

BY THE

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OF L'ÉGLISE DE L'ÉTOILE, PARIS.

WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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XXV.

LAZARUS AT THE RICH MAN'S GATE.

“There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores.”—LUKE xvi. 20, 21.

ARE you not amazed at the striking contrast contained in these simple words? They were uttered eighteen centuries ago. Have they lost their actuality? Wealth, misery! ever in presence, now as then, and so constantly in presence that the conflict between them is, of all social questions, the greatest and most difficult, the darkest and the most pregnant with dismal forebodings for the future. And yet for this terrible problem many a solution has been proposed. “Down with the rich!” some have said, and we have heard the crowds repeating that senseless cry. “Down with the rich! Let us strike down opulence, let us attack capital, let us destroy the right of inheritance!” and men have not seen that, in this way, they aimed a deadly blow against liberty, and with liberty against energy, and with energy against labour itself, and left us nothing but the equality of savages, who, without laying up anything for the morrow, unconcernedly fall asleep until hunger again rouses them and sends them forth in search of their prey. “No more poverty!” other voices have exclaimed; and in this age a loud echo has repeated—“No more poverty!” Ah! if this had been a mere desire, a mere impulse of charity! but it has become a motto, a promise. No more poverty! and, some said, “The State must provide labour for all;” others, “The State will feed the needy;” and, men saw not that they assigned to the State an impossible part, and created the most artificial and the most tyrannical utopia; they saw not that they were mistaken concerning human nature, for to decree that there will be no more misery comes to enacting that there will be no more idleness, no more vice, no more passions, no more sin. But whilst all these theories succeeded one another, and led into the most delusive and cruel dreams, multitudes, whom they were to leave without consolation and without bread, the social evil pursued its slow and fatal march. No more rich, no more poor! See what takes place in England, in that classical land of philanthropy and social economy; there, beside the most colossal opulence derived from all parts of the world, you will find the most squalid pauperism which, after having exhibited its more than heathen degradation in the full light of day, repairs at night to haunts of which a generous-hearted man who visited them once said, in a famous article, that Sodom alone could have sheltered the infamy he had seen. That is the state of things in the days in which we live. The rich, the poor, in presence as in the words of our text; and if the abundance and resources of the former have

increased in reason of the progress of eighteen centuries' civilisation, the misery of the latter is as real, as appalling as ever.

What social remedy is to be applied to this evil? That enters not into my subject; such a question it is not my part to decide. I do not mean to analyse systems; I take Humanity such as I find it. Now, before me I see two classes of men, the rich and the poor; I believe these two classes will exist tomorrow as they existed yesterday, and, in the name of the Gospel, I come once more to remind the former of their duties towards the latter. The subject is not new, I admit; it is as ancient as suffering itself. I will, doubtless, repeat only what you have a hundred times heard. But what matters? From the day when selfishness will have died away in our midst, I promise, brethren, never to speak to you again of charity or sacrifice.

Here, then, is Lazarus lying at the rich man's gate. Well! what I ask, in the first place, is that the rich man cast his eyes upon Lazarus. Here I mean by the rich man all who have beneath them some Lazarus, all who have it in their power to succour and comfort him.

To look upon Lazarus! But understand me well. The question is not to be stirred, in passing, by the account of some misfortune. To cast one's alms at it, to act a certain part in some charitable work, and after having thus quieted one's conscience, to comfort oneself by saying that this age is an eminently philanthropic and generous age. The question is to look at suffering in the face, and become acquainted with it. That is what I call looking upon Lazarus. Do you think that is what men do? Our age is the age of systems of charity, of associations, of institutions. Grand progress! some will say. Yes, but fatal progress too, if it should prevent the immediate contact between rich and poor, between the happy and the wretched, which the Gospel enforces in each of its pages, and whose salutary action no institution could ever replace.

I know what objection people bring forward; they say, "Time fails us!" and I am not of those who disdain this excuse. In all vocations, life is becoming more and more like a forced march; everybody wishes to arrive first at the goal. Every career is crowded, the newcomers press forward impatiently, anxious to find their place. It is a struggle, a rush, through which all must advance on pain of being very soon supplanted. Never, perhaps, since the law of labour exists, has work been so intense, so crushing. Men no longer walk, they run. Woe betide him who stops too long to take breath! But is it always duty which thus straitens life? I ask it of those to whom God has given a certain measure of ease and fortune. Is it true that you can never in any way find a few spare hours? Now, in a society in which reigns, I will not say the Christian spirit, but mere justice, do you not think that the leisure hours of the well-to-do providentially belong to those whom daily labour fully absorbs? Of this spare time what share do you give

Lazarus, what portion of your life do you devote to the poor and the suffering? Ah? leisure thus consecrated is indeed a sublime mission, an immense boon for the unfortunate and for yourselves too! We shall, therefore, see you set to work; and the humble and the lowly who are overpowered by toil, and chained to their post by the necessity of earning their daily bread, will henceforth rely upon you to whom God has allotted the most privileged of all portions. Alas! it might be so, were it not for the ambition, selfishness, and worldliness which take up all this leisure and absorb it completely.

I take an example, and I choose it amongst the class which is continually brought into contact with the sufferings of the masses, and which cannot justify itself by pleading its ignorance of them.

Here is a great manufacturer whose fortune well-nigh reaches opulence; in his mills and factories the operatives are numbered by thousands; all these hands, wills, energies are his, and from morn to night they obey him; he has disciplined these creative forces, and by dint of skill and experiments he has contrived to obtain from them all they were capable of giving. But in these factories men suffer: the air is tainted, faces grow pale and thin; then men and women all work together in one confused mass; the moral atmosphere is foul, baneful and corrupt; the apprentice to whom the law insures at least the rest of the Sabbath, is often deprived of it, as is the case in most of the great manufactories in Paris; and there, bent over his loom, stupefied by a precocious and unremitting labour, deprived more and more of religious and moral life, he droops, the victim of a vitiated blood and of the general decay of mind and body.

But the man on whom this serious responsibility rests, this man, the life and soul of that industry, what is he then that he should pass coldly beside those sufferings which he might assuage by applying to them, were it but for one moment, that penetrating glance, that clear-sightedness, that resolute action which he brings to bear upon all he undertakes? Brethren, he has no time! . . . To look upon Lazarus, he! and do you not see what engrosses his attention, what wrinkles his brow, what fills his heart and his thoughts? Yonder, before him, see those rivals whom he must still outrun, see those fortunes whose colossal amount seems a perpetual insult to his own, see that opulence, that splendour which float before his imagination! This end, he must attain it; he must march on, press on, run on, without losing a moment. But this man, has he not a Christian wife, has he no Christian daughters capable of feeling for those thousands of beings whose existence and happiness are so closely connected with him? They have a pious soul, a sensitive heart; they have shed torrents of tears at the touching accounts of imaginary woes, they have mourned, like you, over the lot of the people, over those poor children so early degraded and deprived of all which ours

possess in abundance. They will, no doubt, set to work; they will visit those families, look closely into all those sorrows, hold out a helping hand to those women, to those miserable young girls. Ah! this might have been but for worldliness! To look upon Lazarus! They! But their heart is elsewhere. Between the pleasures of today and those of tomorrow, between the last ball and the next concert, between the recollections of the past and the pre-occupations of dress for the coming season, between all these ambitions, all these jealousies, all these questions of self-love, how do you think they can find time to care for what goes on yonder, in the suburb, within those bare and gloomy walls, amongst that needy, irreligious, and miserable population? The suburb, why, they will pass through it one day, proud, decked out in bright jewels, borne swiftly away by their fiery horses, and so will the people learn to know them. Then the following Sabbath, seated, like you, my sisters, in their pew, they will condemn, like you also, the rich man in the parable who leaves Lazarus to suffer abandoned at the gate of his palace!

Let us go further and say on this point what everybody knows and what everybody thinks. If there are many who, today, will not look at Lazarus, it is because they are no strangers to his misery, and because their conscience could not but find in this sight a subject of remorse. The Gospel tells us of unrighteous wealth. What name must we give to much of that which is being acquired today? A man enters upon an enterprise which, if it be not thoroughly evil, is at least exposed to fearful chances of failure. What matters? He will launch into it; once undertaken, it must be carried on; the ordinary means present themselves unlooked for; without any effort on his part, he will simply allow them to follow their habitual course; soon enticing announcements fill all the newspapers; the most pressing solicitations, the most brilliant promises lay before the eyes of the most ignorant all the attractions of an easy, rapid, and certain gain. Alas! poor wretches! they come, they give up for this tempting speculation, the one the hard-earned savings of his life, the other the marriage-portion of his children and their daily bread. And why should they not come? Who warns them, who enlightens them? They come, then, and with all these spoils extorted from honest labour, the capital goes on increasing till the hour when suddenly the whole fabric totters and crumbles. Now, miserable fathers; now, unfortunate servants, who for thirty or forty years had faithfully fulfilled your duty; now, poor needle-women who, refusing yourselves necessities, had carefully laid by a small treasure for the evil days; go now and seek the fruit of your labours; claim it of those sumptuous buildings rising as by magic, claim it of all those splendours which dazzle your eyes, of all that wealth against which Christ would have thundered forth His anathemas! Is this fiction? Is it not the true and distressing tale of thousands of unfortu-

nate beings? And you who hear me, are you sure, before God who sees you, that you have never, directly or indirectly, shared in these iniquities? Have you decried and denounced them by your attitude and your example? Who will do so, if not Christians? Who will rouse modern conscience which is so lenient, so tolerant for the evil which is crowned with success? Who will remind it that God reigns, that He counts the sufferings of the poor, that He hears the complaints of the oppressed, and that the lot of the rich man in the parable is a hundred times to be preferred to that of those who themselves have laid Lazarus upon his bed of poverty and abjection?

Therefore, to look upon Lazarus, to become acquainted with his sufferings, such is our first duty. But that is not all. We must do more. We must draw near to him, he must feel our presence, hear our voice. I have already said that charity exercised at a distance will not suffice. Moreover, it is this charity which is often mistaken and often deceived; it is this charity which encourages the vice and intrigue that skilfully cover themselves with the rags of poverty. Nothing can replace a direct and personal intercourse with those who suffer. Accordingly, in each of its pages, the Gospel bids us visit the poor and comfort them directly. And what exhortation can have the same value as the beautiful example which Jesus Christ has left us?

Have you never remarked the brief and striking feature which accompanies almost all the cures and deeds of mercy wrought by the Saviour? "Jesus drew near, *touched* the sick man or the leper, and said, 'Be thou clean, go in peace.'" He *touched* them, and this reminds me of a word pronounced by the most learned of the modern adversaries of Christian faith. "What!" says Strauss, in his criticism of the Gospels, "Jesus touches the sick, and when He wishes, He can cure them at a distance! Do you not see in this the thaumaturgist who aims at acting upon the popular imagination?" No! learned doctor, we see in this only the partiality of your criticism and the shallowness of your soul. Jesus can cure at a distance, but He will not do so; it pleases Him to touch with His divine hands those lepers, those sinners, those demoniacs from whom everybody fled with disgust; and it is precisely in this fact that we recognise the miracle of miracles, that of a charity which the world had no conception of. Admirable example which we must imitate if we would follow Jesus Christ

I do not hesitate to say that sympathy thus understood is a great step towards the restoration of the suffering classes. You cannot avoid having been struck with one of the consequences which inevitably follow extreme want and misery. The wretch, as he falls lower and lower, believes he sees the whole of society turn against him; it seems to him that he is excluded and banished, as it were, from its midst, and that he is treated as an outcast. A wall rises, so to speak, between himself and the rest of mankind. Thence those bitter accusations against the world, against society, against the

Church, which escape him, as if that world, that society, that Church, did not contain beings who suffer as he does, and who, they also, are subject to this strange hallucination of excessive grief. Well! suppose that, while indulging in those angry feelings, that miserable creature sees one of those prosperous and privileged ones, whom fatality appears to have spared, come and sit at his bedside, suppose he feels your hand grasp his own, suppose he hears words of sympathy fall from your lips, do you think his evil dreams will not soon be dispelled? That is not all; as he listens to you, he will perhaps learn that sorrow can dwell in the heart of those who seem to him happy; he will see by your mourning garb that fortune does not save from the most cruel trials, and in that ulcerated heart compassion for you will perhaps be awakened by the thought that you also have wept. Do you remember what happened some years ago in England? A fearful explosion had buried in the bowels of the earth more than two hundred unfortunate miners; there, upon the yawning chasm, their widows and mothers lamented, seeking their dead, and asking themselves with bitter anguish whence would come the bread for the morrow. It came; the morrow's bread, it was assured them for the future, and she who sent it joined to her gift these words: "From a widow." A widow! This widow was the Queen; but on that day she had descended from her royal state to weep with them that wept. The Queen! What! yonder, upon that throne, in those palaces, in the midst of that wealth, of that splendour, there is a widow who weeps with us, who mourns as we mourn! I dare affirm that the children of those poor widows will never learn to hate or despise the rich, and none can tell how much of bitterness and revolt that cry, that simple cry issuing from the heart, has stayed and rendered for ever impossible!

Those who suffer must, therefore, learn to know you. It must be so for themselves, it must be so because God commands it, it must be so for your own good. You will never know what life should be so long as you will not have seen misery face to face. There are things which can only be learned there, and which nevertheless must be known. When you, for instance, who rejoice at the birth of a little child, will have seen, beneath another roof than your own, the entrance of an infant into the world looked upon as a cause of sorrow and anxious grief, when you will have seen this little child hold out its tiny arms confidently and joyously towards a world which rejects it; when you, who mourn over the death of a father or mother, will have seen a sorrow such as yours comforted by a brutal and cynical word expressive only of delight at being relieved of too heavy a burden, then you will learn what is the world; you will question whether it be right for you to live in it in unconcern and pleasure, and you will know what it is to yearn after the reign of righteousness and love. Such is the lesson which misery teaches. Do we understand it? Alas when today, by a hideous reversal, I see the up-

per classes turn their looks, not towards honest suffering, but towards vile corruption, borrow its fashions, its manners, its very language, or its slang, rather, I question what must be the effect of this monstrous spectacle upon the suffering and labouring classes, and towards what nameless abjection it is dragging them down. But of what avail is our indignation, I ask, if we do not oppose to the spread of corruption the spread of charity? We must set to work, we must descend to those low grounds, we must learn to look evil closely and unflinchingly in the face.

I know that this contact is painful; there are sights that wound our delicacy; extreme poverty hurts our sensibility; it requires a certain amount of bravery to face it. A filthy and winding staircase, a low and narrow room in which one breathes a close, foul atmosphere, and that undefinable smell which misery imparts to whatever it touches; children in tatters, a pallet upon which a sick man moans, and upon the table food, the very sight of which is sickening; all this is hard to bear. Moreover, confess it, it troubles and saddens us, for it preaches in such heart-stirring accents the necessity of sacrifice! How can one think of gratifying one's fancies in presence of beings who have not so much as the barest necessities of life? How can one allow one's thoughts to dwell upon a handsome dress when one is surrounded by creatures who have not even the luxury of a little linen? How can one reflect upon the enjoyments of a banquet when one sees the unpalatable remains with which a whole family will satisfy its hunger? You suffer at this sight, and beforehand you are anxious to avoid it. But who are you that you should refuse to suffer? Is the service of God always easy? Is it by a sinuous, gentle, and shady path that heaven is to be reached? Christians, you to whom God has spared the persecutions and the bloody sacrifices required of your fathers, do you find your lot so hard that you would retrench from it even the acts of self-denial which charity involves? You follow Jesus Christ, but who is your Saviour? In that vague and gentle figure that leads you only upon the ideal heights of a poetical reverie, I recognise indeed the Christ whom our age has moulded in its own image, but it is no longer the Man of Sorrows, it is no longer the Christ of publicans and outcasts, it is no longer He who sought out vice and sorrow, however low they had fallen. You suffer in contact with want! Well! what is your suffering compared with that of the beings who must live and die in that atmosphere which you cannot for a moment breathe without disgust? If the mere sight of wretchedness appals you, what then must be the condition of those who cannot escape it for a single instant? You suffer, but to efface your painful impressions, you have in summer your parks and shady bowers; in winter your comfortable dwellings, and your hearth in which a bright fire sparkles; while they have only their four bare and murky walls, their attics in which they suffer the extremes of heat and cold, their fireless

hearth, the spectacle of other woes as repulsive as their own, and in their mind the incessant and cruel anxiety of the daily gain—of that gain without which, at the first touch of disease, their last refuge will fail them. The sight of their destitution is painful to you; your increasing ease and luxury keep you so completely enchained that you can no longer obey God who sends you towards those who suffer; but how will you dare appear before God and give an account of your task? What will you have to answer if God, in His turn, rejects you? Will you be surprised if your selfishness, your cowardice, your idleness, are offensive to supreme love? Do you think you are a more attractive spectacle in His sight than the wretchedness of the indigent is in yours? Do you think that, even under the most lovely appearances, a heart without charity is not in the eyes of the Supreme Judge an object of just aversion? Do you think you will be able to justify yourselves by alleging your native delicacy and your instinctive sensibility? Answer—or rather, obey that secret voice which troubles and annoys you, and cries out loudly that there is no salvation without sorrow, no eternal felicity without sacrifice.

Have I exhausted my subject, and to have gained my cause, is it enough to have placed you in presence of suffering? Yes, if the heart were upright, if it followed the instructive logic of devotion and charity. But such is not the case, and even in presence of sorrow, it argues, it negotiates, it disputes love every inch of ground. You acknowledge that the task is immense, that it imposes itself upon you; but who knows if, of the first appeal of charity, you will not silence us with these simple words, “I cannot?” I cannot! This answer, I hope, is not lightly given, neither will I accept it lightly. No, I will not judge you; if, before God, you cannot, that is enough for me. I know that there are limits to everything, I know that liberty must be respected, and I will respect it. And what would we become, I pray you, without that mutual respect which the Gospel enforces? What should we become if the spirit of judgment should, under pretence of charity, allow itself full scope and exact a certain amount of abnegation from each? I will respect your answer, but nevertheless permit me to beg of you, ere you reply, to examine whether you are sincere and in earnest. You cannot! And why cannot you? Might it not be because the world has invaded everything, even the portion which should have belonged to the poor? Might it not be because you also have yielded to that tide of luxury which nothing ere long will be able to resist? Ah! it was to the world you should have said, “I cannot!” You should have answered this firmly and bravely when it required of you that useless expense, that extravagance of dress and furniture, those refinements of delicacy to which your vanity so readily consented. What would you have lost by this? A triumph of self-love which, while it has excited the envy of others, has merely straitened your own heart. Suppose even you had been

judged, suppose you had been accused of rigour and sternness, could you not have accepted this? Will there be henceforth no distinction between the Christian and the worldly dwelling, and must we make up our mind to see those who profess Christianity follow docilely upon the track of a world whose approbation is a snare and whose applause is a danger? But though you have not dared to oppose the world, you are now compelled to say no to your Saviour. It is to your Saviour you will reply, "I cannot!" to your Saviour, whose kingdom progresses but slowly, and whose needy members are neglected. It is for your Saviour that you have kept the courage of a refusal. Oh! you are not afraid to grieve Him. His approval, His blame, what are these to you? True, He has redeemed you at the price of an unutterable sorrow; true, He comes to you with His crown of thorns, with His pierced hands and feet; true, in your dying hour, when the world will have no charm for you, you will call Him to walk with you through the gloomy valley and to appear with you before the eternal tribunal. It matters not! today, coldly, after having given the world its share, you will say to Him, "I have nothing left for Thee!"

I will not conclude without unmasking a sophism beneath which it is fashionable today to conceal luxury and worldliness. Men tell us, "Rather than give to the poor, spend money and enjoy yourselves. Your luxury is the people's labour; your expenses are their profit. The more costly your garments will be, the more heavily laden with delicacies will be your table, the more ornamented will be your dwelling, the more hands also will work, the greater number of families also will be snatched from misery." This is indeed a charming remedy, an admirable process which men do not always dare to affirm, but by means of which they often lull their conscience to sleep when they intend to yield to their tastes or to gratify their fancies.

Well, is this excuse valid, and does it rest upon a solid basis? That is what remains to be examined.

The best way to test the truth of a principle is to see how far it may lead. You say that luxury is the redeemer of misery. Well, if you are right, spend, spend on, exhaust your wealth in extravagant fancies, invent new pleasures and unparalleled refinements. Ye apostles of a new charity, at work, at work then for the redemption of mankind! Oh! how convenient, in truth, is this religion, and how well it answers to the secret instincts of our nature! How it will be gladly hailed everywhere! Away with that gloomy piety that preached sacrifice and abnegation! Luxury, give us luxury, more and more, and when you shall swim in an opulence which had not its equal in Rome or Babylon, then the people, saved by you, will for evermore ignore suffering, and heaven will be begun upon earth!

You smile, but beware. If the principle proposed to us be true, that will be its direct and legitimate consequence; but if this consequence is absurd

and cruel, must we not come to the conclusion that the principle is an absurdity? Common sense, in harmony with experience, has long since told us that the expenses of luxury are absolutely unprofitable, that the greater the amount of the vital forces consecrated to the production of what is superfluous, the smaller the portion that is left for the production of necessities. When you will have torn a hundred thousand labourers from our rural districts to cast them into the workshops where your palaces are being prepared, or into the factories where your sumptuous materials are being woven, is it not most certain that, to obtain an unproductive luxury, you will have lessened, in the same proportion, the fecundity of your native soil? When you will have transformed heaps of gold into jewels or delicate ornaments, is it not most sure that you will not have added one farthing to the capital upon which humanity lives? Your principle, therefore, is false; false and cruel, for its final result would be famine. You would soon see this on the first occasion of a social commotion. When, at the first alarm of a revolution or of some unforeseen crisis, all this purely conventional wealth would dwindle away in an instant, what would become of those hundreds and thousands of men torn by your luxury from the manly and healthful labours of agriculture? Cast out of employment in your large towns, accustomed to an easily acquired and as easily expended gain, they would become for you a real danger, and all the more to be dreaded that, having become acquainted with your senseless luxury, their hearts would be torn by envy and hatred at sight of their own wretchedness.

That is not all. Not only is this principle cruel, but it is immoral. It is immoral for yourselves; for luxury, after all, is enjoyment, and unlimited enjoyment, however refined it be, is the degradation of soul and will, the satisfaction of selfishness, and by a natural consequence, the narrowing of the heart. It is immoral also for those to whom your example is a lesson. Beside you, the workman who sees your life will say, he also: "Why should I not enjoy? why should I not shake off the stern and cruel law of abnegation?" And he will enjoy, and he will waste in coarse pleasures his daily earnings. Instead of your refined delights, he will seek the cynical joys of the gin palace or of the haunts of vice. I defy you to prevent this consequence. Suppose it extending more and more. Ere long, from the depths of convulsed society will rise, like the dismal sound of the storm, the voice of an immense people exclaiming: "Enjoyment is the right of all! Paradise, O ye Christians, you tell me that it is in heaven, but you lie, for I have seen you seek it upon earth! I have seen you, would-be religious men, cull here below all the pleasures, all the refinements, all the delights that my toil could provide. Well! I, too, must have my Paradise on earth. I must have it tomorrow; I must have it today. Long enough you have pointed it out to me beyond the grave; but science has instructed me, and I will no longer waste

my sweat and my tears for what is a mere intangible nothing. I am weary of waiting. I must have happiness; I must have it in this life, of which hitherto I have known nought but the self-denial. My happiness is luxury also, it is wealth, it is pleasure, it is the produce of the earth which was given to me as well as to you. My happiness is there, before me—I may take it when I will. Woe to him who would stay my hand! Woe to him who would stand across my path! Enjoyment is the last word of life. I must enjoy, I will enjoy, for my name is legion. Upon my robust arms I bear the whole of society. With a lift of my finger, when the time is ripe, I will overthrow it! “

That is what the masses will say if it be true that the enjoyment of some redeems the misery of others. You will be unable to escape this terrible logic. God grant that our country may never witness its fearful demonstration! Moreover, I do not expect you to be moved by such arguments. If fear alone was to be your motive for doing good, I would prefer descending from this pulpit whence another language, more elevated, more worthy of God and of yourselves should be heard. To succour misery I will propose but one remedy—the spirit of Christ; that spirit which is at the same time righteousness and love. At work in that spirit, brethren!—at work today, tomorrow, ever, so long as there will be upon earth a misery to alleviate or a sorrow to comfort!