

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

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COURAGE THE CHIEF VIRTUE.

BY WOODS HUTCHINSON.

NOWHERE is the divergence between the Old Gospel and the New more decided than at this point. The attitude of the Synoptics and of "John" is equally unmistakable and deplorable. The "kingdoms of the world and the glory of them" are in the complete possession of Satan, the sole expectation of the believer is that "in this world ye shall have tribulation only." The world "hateth" the Christian, and the "Prince of this world" is his bitterest enemy; hence both improvement and opposition are out of the question, in the very nature of things, and a policy of absolute non-resistance and patient endurance is his only resource. "My kingdom is not of this world, else would my servants fight," "Resist not evil," "Blessed are the meek," "Submit yourselves unto the powers that be," are but a few of the scores of forms, under which the doctrine is reiterated again and again, through all the Gospels.

It has been accepted as a formal article of belief by the Church in almost every age, but fortunately for the race has never been lived up to by any of her Western branches; indeed only a few very small and eccentric sects, like the Quakers and the Mennonites, have even attempted to reduce it to practice. And yet its influence has been most disastrous, for it has in every age had the double effect of casting a paralysing blight over the aggressive activities of the noblest and purest minds, and serving as an excuse for indolent and cowardly submission to injustice, or toleration of abuses, by the baser sort of natures. In its scheme of the virtues there is absolutely no place for courage, except in the passive forms of endurance, patience under persecutions, continuing "steadfast unto the end." Christ repeatedly compares himself to a shepherd

and his followers to his sheep, his lambs, his flock. And as Paul Carus aptly remarks in his *Homilies of Science*, "This comparison "was sufficient to give a crown of glory to the sheep. Christians "forget that similes remain similes: that they do not cover the "truth in all respects but at one or two points only. And thus "it happened that the weakness of the sheep, its simplicity, nay, "its very stupidity became an ideal of moral goodness and Chris- "tian virtue. Humanity, Christian and non-Christian, is under "the influence of the sheep allegory still. . . . Let us beware of the "ethics of ovine morality." Paul's celebrated list of the "fruits of the spirit" contains nothing approaching courage except "long-suffering." Consequently Christianity was an almost complete failure as a factor in the world's progress, until it was grafted upon races whose irresistible vigor and sturdy combativeness made a fighting religion out of it, in spite of its doctrines. Indeed, for everything in it which makes for liberty, justice, and progress it is vastly more indebted to the Teuton and the Celt, than they to it. When the stern old Puritan wanted a fighting text, he was driven perforce to the otherwise despised Old Testament with its pathetically irrelevant "smitings of Amalek," and hewings of Agag in pieces. And this omission accounts for a large share of the alleged negativeness and passivity, or as it has sometimes been expressed, the "feminineness" of Christianity, its fatal substitution first of being, then of believing, for *doing*. The sin which drove the hermit into the desert and the monk into the shades of the cloister was cowardice and the selfishness born of it. And this again left nothing in the body of all its teaching to prevent an abject and cowardly submission to the fiat of an irresponsible and often irrational tyrant, for fear of unpleasant consequences in this life and the next, being made the chief motive of human action; as in much of our modern evangelicism even to-day.

Of the passive sort of courage there was a splendid abundance among its adherents, as the superb record of its "noble army of martyrs," witnesses in letters of fire and blood upon every page of its history. But of the active sort, in the way of aggressive, reformatory action of any description, there was a deplorable lack until it had been assimilated and supplemented by the sturdy Teuton and Slav soul, in Luther, Wyclif, Huss, and their spiritual ancestors and descendants. And while no one would be further from wishing in any way to detract from the richly deserved glory of the martyr's crown, yet in strict justice, it must be reluctantly admitted that sadly too much of the endurance and fortitude displayed

was from fear of worse consequences and more lasting punishment in the future life, should recantation be made, than from pure love of the truth or unwillingness to be false to one's own convictions. We repeatedly meet with the statement by the martyr himself, as a final argument of the highest and most unanswerable nature, that he *dared* not refuse to do or say such and such a thing, however perilous, or deny such and such a vital tenet, lest he endanger the salvation of his own soul thereby. And with a pathetic perversion of the mystic words of the Master, "it is better to enter into life maimed, than having both hands to be cast into hell," sufferers have actually sustained themselves and each other in the torments of the stake with the reminder of how much preferable these brief agonies are to ages of eternal torture. From Paul to George Fox, one of the chief burdens of the meditations of the saints has ever been, "*Woe* is unto me if I preach not the Gospel!" All honor to their dauntless bravery, upon whatever it was based, whether from or in spite of their creed, but more deaths upon the field of battle, fighting against oppression and fewer at the stake would have been more to the advantage of humanity at large. It was magnificent, but it wasn't progress, and there is little reason to lament the decay of the martyr spirit. Nor can it be said that their protest took this form from sheer lack of strength or numbers to make any other hopeful, for at a very early date the heads of the primitive church were able to say in a petition to the Emperor Julian asking for liberty of belief and practice, that if it were not for their being forbidden to take up the sword, they could seriously endanger his throne, so large a proportion of his subjects did they form.

In fact, if we look into the matter more closely we shall find that not only was active courage, of any sort, not adequately recognised by the four Gospels, but that they positively discouraged such frames of mind in the tremendous stress which they laid upon faith and submission. So that gradually any sort of self-assertion or initiative came to be regarded as actually sinful. And it needs only to be mentioned what a calamity to human welfare this accursed, intentional cowardice of the good has been and is. It has robbed humanity of the better half of the influence of its best and noblest elements and has done more to give reality to the conception of the poet, "Right forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne," than all other influences put together. It alone is chiefly responsible for the fact, that in every age, a mere handful of bold, unscrupulous rascals have succeeded in terrorising and even op-

pressing and abusing half a nation of well-meaning but timid and irresolute good people. Nor can we flatter ourselves that we have escaped its influence yet, for it is to-day, to mention one field alone, the curse of modern politics. In which we have the astounding and humiliating spectacle of entire municipalities, states, nay, even the nation of honorable, intelligent citizens, not merely ruled but robbed and insulted by a mere corporal's guard of the most contemptible curs and cads imaginable, known as "bosses," whose sole source of power is their unparalleled "nerve" and activity, *plus* the unspeakable cowardice and indolence of the "better classes."

As to the real value of courage, active courage, that of the soldier rather than of the martyr, too much can hardly be said, and yet very little is needed. It would be conceded at once as one of the absolutely indispensable conditions of progress. Willingness to risk the untried, to run the gauntlet of danger, for the sake of possible advantage, to imperil safety for the chance of improvement, is a factor which is always presupposed in the accomplishment of any upward step. And seldom is it lacking "under Nature." Although primarily a self-regarding virtue, it is in its ultimate results and often directly, a race-regarding one also, and any individual's first duty to himself and to his kind is to be brave. He may get through life decently and even honorably lacking any other one virtue, but without this, never. No other virtue is of real effect without it. The chief value, both objective and subjective, of love lies in the bravery which it develops in behalf or defence of its object. The supreme test and criterion of any virtue is whether it develops courage or not. Love must express itself in deeds of devotion involving risk of injury or loss, "faith" by "works" of the same character, patience by fortitude under trial. In short, it comes nearer to being the one element, according to whose presence and degree we call an action "virtuous," the one great criterion of morality, than any other quality or grace. It is no mere coincidence that the primitive meaning of "virtue" is "bravery," which again is by further analysis that which distinguishes "*a uan*" (*virtus—vir*). Neither nature nor man, neither Church nor State, biology or morals has any use for the coward. Conversely our chief criterion in judging of the nature and degree of a crime or vice, is the degree to which courage is absent from it. The essence of cruelty, for instance, lies not so much in the infliction of suffering, for that may be absolutely necessary and blameless, but in its infliction under such circumstances, that there is no balancing risk of possible equivalent suffering on the part of the inflictor,

as in the case of women and children, or of unarmed or prostrate foemen. One of the weightiest considerations in determining the murderous or justifiable character of a homicide is the amount of risk run by the aggressor, as to the strength, weapons, and warning of his opponent; in short, the amount of cowardice displayed by him.

While the essence and only ascertainable "sin" of the commonest of offences, lying, is its cowardice, the desire to gain an advantage, inflict an injury, which we dare not affect by open means, or to escape a punishment or avoid a loss which we haven't the courage to face squarely or submit to. In fact, there is scarcely a crime or vice into which it does not enter as an important element. And the instinctive respect and admiration for courage which we find everywhere fully corroborates our view of its supreme value and importance. It is not merely respected because it makes its possessor formidable, but it provokes a spontaneous and irresistible respect and even love for its own sake, which is utterly unparalleled by any other virtue or grace except beauty. We do homage and reverence to bravery upon the same sort of irresistible impulse as we worship beauty and purity in a woman. It is one of the great pass-words of nature. One touch of it unites all conditions, all beliefs, and all ages in an instructive throb of sympathy. How a brave deed stirs us in spite of ourselves whether in friend or foe, black or white, man or beast! Kipling has well voiced this universal sympathy in his stirring refrain:

" For there is neither East nor West,
Border nor breed nor birth,
When two strong men stand face to face,
Though they come from the ends of the earth."

It has been the never-failing theme of song and story through all the ages from the "dark wrath of Achilles" and the "*Arma virumque cano*" to the charge of the Light Brigade. Courage has no need to sue for a place in the list of virtues of any religious code. It has a religion of its own, whose sacred books are the whole heroic literature of the world, and whose worshippers include the entire human family. In our heart of hearts we feel and know it to be the supreme virtue. Not even love takes precedence of it, for this without courage would be as dead as "faith without works." To dare to be true to ourselves, to our highest convictions, no matter what comes of it—this is our crowning glory. Nothing has ever struck a deeper chord of response in every true, manly soul, than Henley's lyric:

" Out of the dark that covers me
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul."

Courage, sheer, dauntless, inexhaustible, was the supreme glory of Calvary, the one thing which all true hearts have ever worshipped and will ever worship as divine. And the more so as they regard Jesus of Nazareth as man rather than God. Rightly has the Church ever insisted upon the supreme importance of the death of Christ. Without it his life had made no lasting impression upon the heart of the world. The profound simplicity of his moral precepts, the spotless purity of his life, the sweetness and gentleness of his nature, would have won the admiration and respect of the student, the philosopher ; but it was the striking combination with all these graces of a high-souled courage, which any iron-gloved fighting-man might have envied, a courage which would not fight but scorned to flee, that has compelled the love and reverence of the entire Western world. Sooner than surrender one iota of his convictions, sooner than delay a moment longer the proclaiming of that reign of love, justice, and peace which was literally a "kingdom of heaven" he deliberately dared and unflinchingly suffered a death of shame and torture. All risk of which might have been completely avoided by ceasing to preach, or by an hour's midnight flight beyond Jordan. But from his fearless, sensitive soul "this cup could not pass" in any such fashion. And to the spotless courage of his love the whole world bows in reverence, and shall bow as long as humanity endures.

Wherefore the Church, being vindictive and cowardly, slew him, as she has done his memory scores of times since, and is doing to-day. For obvious reasons, she has never approved of minds of this type, who cannot be driven even by the certainty of future damnation, and besides burning and massacring all such, whenever she dared, she has ostentatiously thrust forward into the front rank of the virtues the more ladylike graces of love, faith, and meekness. Hence the necessity felt by men, in all ages, of having a code of their own as to courage, honor, justice, etc., outside of the standards of the Church.

And while this code has generally tacitly accepted the stigma placed upon it, of being built upon simply "carnal pride," and "worldly ambition," it has usually been equal and often superior to the ecclesiastical, and deserves formal recognition as a moral source and sanction. In fact, the one-sided "gospel of love"

needs to be supplemented by the gospel of courage. Love as a motive and the Golden Rule as a principle of action are of the highest value in all cases in which they apply, i. e., in man's relations to his fellow-men. But in the wide range of his relations to the great forces and movements of the universe, between him and the gods, or the fates, or the times, they simply have no bearing. But there is one principle which is always to be relied upon, even here,—one beacon whose light never falters, even in the wildest storm, one rock to which a man can cling through all the fury of the elements though it be with clinched teeth and bleeding hands, and that is the courage that is in him.

Never has a deeper-reaching, truer precept of human conduct been laid down than in Kipling's wondrous refrain :

" Whatever comes
Or does not come,
We must not be afraid."

This and this only will carry a man through the blackest night and most furious war of the elements. It may not be much "consolation," but it is all there is, and it does remain as a living principle of action and a reality when everything else has become an empty form of words. So long as a man is true to this faith, all is well; let him be false to it, and neither Sinai nor Mecca nor Calvary can save him. If there be an "unpardonable sin," a "sin against the Holy Ghost which shall not be forgiven," it is cowardice.