

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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PERICLES OF ATHENS.

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THE OVERTHROW OF HELL AND ITS RESTORATION.¹

BY LEO TOLSTOY.

I.

IT WAS at the time when Jesus was revealing his teaching to men.

This teaching was so clear—it was so easy to follow, and delivered men from evil so obviously, that it seemed impossible not to accept it, or that anything could arrest its spread.

Beelzebub, the father and ruler of all the devils, was alarmed. He clearly saw that if only Jesus did not renounce his teaching, the power of Beelzebub over men would cease forever. He was alarmed, yet did not lose heart, but incited the Pharisees and Scribes, obedient to him, to insult and torture Jesus to the utmost of their power, and also counselled the disciples of Jesus to fly and abandon him to himself. Beelzebub hoped that the condemnation of Jesus to infamous execution, and his being reviled and deserted by all the disciples, and also that the sufferings themselves and the execution would cause Jesus at the last moment to renounce his teaching. And a recantation would destroy all its power.

This was being decided on the cross. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Beelzebub was overjoyed. He snatched up the fetters prepared for Jesus, and, trying them on his own legs, proceeded to adjust them, so that when he should apply them to Jesus, they could not be undone.

Then, suddenly, from the cross came the words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

¹ Translated by V. Tchertkoff and I. F. M.

Then Jesus cried out, "It is finished," and gave up the ghost. Beelzebub understood that all was lost. He wished to take the fetters from his legs and to flee, but he could not move from his place—the fetters had become welded on him and bound his own limbs. He wished to use his wings, but could not unfold them. And Beelzebub saw how Jesus, enveloped in a shining light, appeared at the gates of Hell, he saw how sinners from Adam to Judas came out of Hell, he saw how all the devils fled in affright, he saw the very walls of Hell silently fall to pieces on all sides. He could endure this no longer, and with a piercing shriek he fell through the rent floor to the basement.

II.

One hundred, two hundred, three hundred years passed.

Beelzebub did not count the time. Around him spread black darkness and dead silence. He lay immovable, trying not to think of what had happened, yet he could not help thinking, and he helplessly hated him who had caused his ruin.

Then suddenly—and he did not remember, nor know how many hundred years elapsed—he heard above his head sounds resembling the trampling of feet, groans, cries, and the gnashing of teeth.

Beelzebub lifted his head and listened.

That Hell could be re-established after the victory of Jesus, Beelzebub could not believe; and yet the trampling, the groans, the cries and gnashing of teeth grew louder and louder.

Beelzebub raised his body and doubled up his hairy legs with their overgrown hoofs. To his astonishment the fetters fell off of themselves, and flapping his liberated wings he gave that signal whistle by which in former times he gathered his servants and helpers around him.

He had hardly time to draw breath, when from an opening overhead red flames glared, and a crowd of devils hustling each other, rushed through the hole into the basement and seated themselves round Beelzebub like birds of prey round carrion.

These devils were big and small, stout and thin, with long and with short tails, with horns pointed straight and crooked.

One of them,—naked, but for a cape thrown over his shoulders—of a shining black color, with a round hairless face, and with an enormous pendulous belly, sat on his heels in front of Beelzebub and turned up and down his fiery eyeballs, continuously smiling and regularly wagging his long thin tail from side to side.

III.

"What does this noise signify?" said Beelzebub, pointing upwards. "What's going on there?"

"Just the same as has always gone on," answered the shining devil in the cape.

"But are there really any sinners now?" asked Beelzebub.

"Many," answered the shining one.

"But how about the teaching of him whom I do not wish to name?" asked Beelzebub.

The devil in the cape grinned, disclosing his sharp teeth, while suppressed laughter was heard amongst all the devils.

"This teaching does not hinder us. Men do not believe in it," said the devil in the cape.

"But this teaching obviously saves them from us, and he sealed it by his death," said Beelzebub.

"I have transformed it," said the devil in the cape, thumping his tail on the floor.

"How have you transformed it?"

"So that men do not believe in his teaching but in mine, which they call by his name."

"How didst thou do this?" asked Beelzebub.

"It was done of itself. I only helped."

"Tell me about it quickly," said Beelzebub.

The devil in the cape bent down his head and was silent a while, as if leisurely considering, then he said:

"When that dreadful event happened, that Hell was overthrown and our father and ruler departed from us," said he, "I went to those places where that very teaching which so nearly destroyed us was taught. I wished to see how those people lived who fulfilled it, and I saw that the people who lived according to this teaching were perfectly happy and quite out of our reach. They did not quarrel with each other, they did not give way to women's charms, and either they did not marry, or if they married they kept to one wife; they had no property, holding all as common, and they did not defend themselves against attacks, but repaid evil by good.

"Their life was so good that many were attracted to them more and more. When I saw this I thought that all was lost, and was just going to quit. But then occurred a circumstance, in itself insignificant, yet which appeared to me to deserve attention, and I remained. Amongst these people some regarded it as neces-

sary that all should undergo circumcision, and that none should eat meat offered to idols; whereas others were of opinion that these matters were not essential, and that one might abstain from circumcision and eat anything. So I began to instil into all their minds that this difference of opinion was very important, and that as the question concerned the service of God, neither side could possibly give way. They believed me, and the disputes became more obdurate. On both sides they began to be angry, and then I proceeded to instil into each of them that they might prove the truth of their teaching by miracles. Evident as it is that miracles cannot prove the truth of a teaching, yet they so desired to be in the right that they believed me, and I arranged miracles for them. It was not difficult to do this. They believed anything which supported their desire to prove that they only held the truth.

“Some said that tongues of fire descended upon them; others said that they had seen the risen body of the Master himself, and much else. They kept inventing what had never taken place, and lied in the name of him who called us liars, worse than we do ourselves—and did not know it. One party said of the other: ‘Your miracles are not genuine; ours are genuine.’ Whereupon the other retorted: ‘No, yours are a fraud; ours are real.’

“Matters were going on well, but as I was afraid they might discern the too-evident trick, I invented the ‘Church.’ Once they believed in ‘the Church,’ I was at peace. I recognised that we were saved, and that Hell was restored.”¹

¹ See the note “Count Leo Tolstoy’s Article” under the department *Miscellaneous* in the present number.