

## JOURNEYS TO HELL

BY MAXIMILIAN RUDWIN

AMONG the travellers' tales which delighted our wonder-loving ancestors, the greatest popularity was enjoyed by reports of journeys to the realms of the dead. Visions too numerous to tell were invented for their delectation and edification. It would, indeed, be too great a task to follow the mythical stream of a Beyond flowing out of and into the hearts and imaginations of men. It is found in Indian, Iranian, Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian mythology, and its sources reach far back, to a time whereof "the memory of man runneth not to the contrary."

Many have been the visits of the living to the dead. Some went in the body and others out of the body. Some travelled by night and others in the light of the day. The first record of a journey to the World of the Spirits is found in Plato. The Greek philosopher recorded the testimony of Er the Arminian to the effect that he had been admitted to witness the distribution of rewards and punishments to the souls of the departed and had been permitted to return to earth and tell his story (*Rep.* x. 614ff.). Homer described the descent of Ulysses to Hades to consult Tiresias (*Odyss.* xi). From the Greek poet, the idea descended to Virgil, Seneca, Ovid, Lucian, Statius, and other Greek and Roman writers. It also entered Jewish-Christian thought, the Church fathers elaborating it into a doctrinal system. The New Testament furnished the starting-point with its visions of the Beyond. The Book of Revelations offers many glimpses of the Unseen World, and in the Epistles we learn that St. Paul was caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. xii. 2). Details of this journey are suppressed by the biblical writer as "unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (*ibid.*, 4), but are given in the apocryphal Vision of St. Paul (4th cent.). Other biblical passages (Acts ii. 31; Eph. iv. 8-10; Rom. x. 7 and

especially 1 Peter iii. 19-20) were interpreted to mean that Christ after his burial descended to hell for the purpose of redeeming from infernal pain the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Dispensation. This idea was elaborated in the apocryphal *Descensus Christi ad Inferos*, which is the second part of the *Evangelium Nicodemi* (3rd cent.). It also forms part of the Apostolic formula of the Christian creed.

But while Christ visited hell after his death, others journeyed thither during their life-time. Zoroaster is said to have made mid-night journeys to heaven and hell; and, according to Jewish tradition, Moses also visited the upper and lower worlds in his body.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Virgin and the Great Apostle likewise wandered, according to tradition, through hell and witnessed the torments inflicted upon the wicked. It would seem, in fact, that when the ancient world of spirits was divided by Christianity into two realms, an upper and a lower, the majority of travellers preferred to go in the downward direction. The idea of hell seemed to have had a great fascination for the Christian mind. What wonder that hell is writ large on the manuscripts of the medieval monks and missionaries! Many, indeed, were the visions of hell in medieval times. What we call the Dark Ages were, in fact, a perpetual spiritualistic *séance* with lights lowered. We need but refer to Beda Venerabilis, St. Brandan, Tundalus, Albericus, Wettin and Hildegard. Prominent among the medieval pilgrims to the Pit is Owaine the Knight His descent into St. Patrick's Purgatory, as told by Henry of Sal-trey, took place in 1153.<sup>2</sup> The most distinguished visitor, however, that Satan ever received at his court was Dante Alighieri, the first and greatest of the poets of Italy.

Dante, to be sure, visited all the three realms, to which the Catholic Church assigned the dead. His journey included hell, purgatory and heaven. It would seem, however, that our poet was most impressed by hell. Of his trilogy, the "Inferno" undoubtedly commends itself most to our imagination. The "Inferno" is the most powerful poem in the *Divina Commedia*. Next in importance is the "Purgatorio." The "Paradiso" comes last. "If Dante's great poem," says Francis Grierson, "had been a description of heaven, no one would read it. The interest centers in hell and purgatory."

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Louis Ginzberg: *The Legends of the Jews* (4 vols., Philadelphia, 1908-25), I, 309 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See *St. Patrick's Purgatory*; an essay on the Legends of Purgatory, Hell, and Paradise, current during the Middle Ages. London, 1844.

The great Italian poet was most successful in his description of the domain of the damned. Chateaubriand has aptly remarked that it is easier to conceive of eternal unhappiness than of endless happiness (*le Génie du Christianisme*, II. iv. 14). We can, indeed, grasp hell and even purgatory but not heaven. "Our imagination," says Anatole France, "is made up of memories." We can easily form a hell out of the material taken from earth, but we lack on our planet the stuff with which to construct a heaven. Dante had no difficulty in assembling the material for his description of moral sufferings and physical pains. "I have found," said the poet of "Inferno," "the original of my hell in the world which we inhabit." It was hell and not heaven which, according to the testimony of his contemporaries, had left the deep marks on Dante's face. It is hell and not heaven which is the most real in the consciousness of man. We all know what hell is, but when questioned in regard to heaven, we feel embarrassed to answer. The information is so scanty, as a brilliant French woman once remarked to Sainte-Beuve. "There may be heaven, there must be hell," is the conclusion reached at the end of Browning's poem, "Time's Revenges" (1845). A further illustration of this idea is the legend of the three monks of Mesopotamia, who set out one day on a journey to the dwelling of the departed and who found hell and purgatory, but not heaven.

Dante's conception of hell is not original but universal. Many of his ideas were current in his days. The "Inferno" is but a highly poetical elaboration of medieval notions. The flaming and frigid divisions of hell point to the two mythical currents, the Christian and the classical, which meet in Dante's vision of the inferno. Following the lead of all Roman writers, our poet shows, in his description of the Christian Underworld, a love of horrors and a delight in terrors for their own sakes. This predilection for bloodshed and corruption is especially typical of the art of the Etruscans.

The Devil in Dante's "Inferno" is an incarnation of ugliness, foulness and corruption. As he stands half sunk into the frozen fastness of his pit, in all his pervading brutality and cruelty, malignity and monstrosity, he is an appalling rather than an appealing sight. We cannot enter into his psychology. The action of his mind or will is closed to us. We do not even know whether it is sorrow over his departed glory or impotent fury which brings the tears flowing over his three chins. "The imagination of Dante," says Chateaubriand, in his work already mentioned, "exhausted by

nine circles of torment, has made simply an atrocious monster of Satan, locked up in the center of the earth" (II. iv. 11). What wonder that the Devil in G. Bernard Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1905) is discontented with this description of himself!

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Dante had many imitators who also ventured to visit the Lower World. Emmanuel Swedenborg, in the eighteenth century, is said to have journeyed to heaven and hell. Perhaps the most prominent guest that Satan welcomed in modern times was the popular French poet Jean-Pierre de Béranger (1780-1857). In his ribald song, "la Descente aux Enfers" (1812), impiously named after the Descensus Christ ad Inferos, our ballad-maker tells how he descended to the domain of the Devil on a broomstick in company with a modern witch, a young and beautiful woman. As the imps of hell by no means lack appreciation of beauty, they came in swarms to kiss the naked feet of his companion. The nether world, according to the testimony of this modern visitor to Satan, is different from the description given by the priests, who employ the fear of hell as a means of driving men into the church. From the report of this traveller, we would say that the underworld resembles more a voluptuous Turkish harem than a vaporous Turkish bath. The court of the Kind-Devil cannot be surpassed in luxury by that of any earthly ruler. Our visitor to the infernal regions found no traces of kettles or cauldrons and heard there no howling or gnashing of teeth. On the contrary, he found the floor strewn with oyster shells and empty bottles. The souls who are fortunate enough to go to hell eat and drink and make merry. Nothing is less frightful than the sight of Satan. The infernal monarch is a devil of a good fellow *chez lui*. He issues his severest decrees to the clinking of glasses and the playing of reed-pipes. Satan is a very genial host and entertains his guests most royally. His Infernal Majesty is surrounded at the banquet table by a crowd of red-faced drinkers, for whom he keeps pouring bourgogne and champagne. There is not much decorum in the halls of hell. Ixion is sleeping on the shoulder of Tantalus, who is dead drunk, and Epicurus is making love to Ninon de Lenclos.

"After reading this poem, one is inclined to exclaim with St. Paul: O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. xv. 55). The author draws the following lesson from his description of the Devil's domain:

“Si, d’après ce qu’on rapporte,  
 On bâille au céleste lieu,  
 Que le diable nous emporte,  
 Et nous rendrons grâce à Dieu.”

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No man who descended to hell after his death is known to have returned to earth to tell others what he has seen in that dread and dismal darkness. But letters purporting to come from the inhabitants of hell appeared on several occasions during the past century.<sup>3</sup>

A very interesting visit to the infernal world has been paid some time ago by our own cartoonist, “Art” Young, who introduced himself to “Sate” as a newspaperman from Chicago and who reported that “Hell is now run on the broad American plan.”<sup>4</sup> “Captain” Charon, who began his career with a little tub of a “rowboat,” is now running big steamers on the Styx, “the only navigable river in hell.” Judge Minos sits in court, and an Irish policeman introduces the poor wretches one by one. The lawyers are condemned to be gagged, and their objections are overruled by Satan. The inventor of the barbwire fence is seated naked on a barbwire fence; tramps are washed; policemen are clubbed until they see stars; quack doctors are cured according to their own methods; poker fiends, board of trade gamblers, and fish-story tellers are treated according to their deserts; monopolists are baked like popcorn; editors are thrown into their waste-baskets, and clergymen are condemned to listen to their own sermons, which have been faithfully recorded on phonographs.

This goes to show how much truth there is in the words of the old Gæthe that

“Culture, which the whole world licks,  
 Also unto the Devil sticks.”

<sup>3</sup> Ferdinand Gregorovius: *Konrad Siebenhorns Höllenbriefe an seine lieben Freunde in Deutschland*. Hrsg. von Ferdinand Fuchsmund. Königsberg, 1843.

*Letters from Hell*. Translated from the Danish by Julie Sutter. With a Preface by George MacDonald. London, 1886. 2nd ed., New York, 1911.

B. Piscator started a series of *Modern Letters from Hell* (*Moderne Höllenbriefe*) with his book *Psychologische Studien der Hölle* (*Psychological Studies of Hell*). Berlin, 1907. Rachel Hayward published a novel with the title of *Letters from Là-Bas*, named after J. K. Huysmans' novel *Là-Bas* (1891).

On letters from heaven and hell see W. Höhler's article “Zu den Himmels—und Höllenbriefen” in the *Hessische Blätter für Volkskunde*, vol. I (1902), pp. 143-9.

<sup>4</sup> Art Young: *Hell Up to Date*. Chicago, 1892. Wilhelm Waiblinger has written a report of his subterranean sojourn under the title *Drei Tage in der Unterwelt*.