

THE POWER OF THE MORAL LAW

CIVILIZATION is always on trial. Sometimes it seems to succeed. Sometimes it seems to fail. There are those who see in the unfolding of human history the carrying out of a divine plan—the march of an inspired progress. There are others who doubt if there be any law of progress, who, matching the present genius of man with that exhibited in the earliest dawn of discovered existence, see nothing but a rise and fall of empires, an alternate broadening and narrowing of culture which leaves man unchanged.

If by this it is meant that man does not change in kind, it is undoubtedly true. Who can say that there is any keener intellect now than that which made the civilization at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, with its transportation, banking, commerce, and public laws five thousand years ago, or raised the pyramids, or wrote the Iliad, or wrought the wondrous forms of beauty in art and literature that have come down from ancient times? So near as we can read it, the history of the world has been alternate light and shadow, in which dark ages have followed golden ages. There have been eras which shine forth with great brilliancy through multitudinous records, and other eras notorious by the absence of recorded achievements. The old saying that there are but

Address at the Community-Chest Dinner, Springfield, Massachusetts, October 11, 1921.

three generations from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves, has had its counterpart in the history of nations. A people gather, grow strong under adversity, weaken under prosperity, and fall, first victims of weakness within and then victims of strength without. No one can deny this. Nor need it unduly alarm us.

The American theory of society is founded in part on this condition. It asserts the equality of men. That means equality of kind. All are endowed with the same kind of mind, for it is mind alone that makes man, the capacity to know the truth. That capacity, once it comes into being, does not change. It is the same now as at the dawn of its creation, however it was created. The quality of man with all his glories is a constant factor, but the quantity seems to vary with each individual. To some is given one talent and to some many talents, but each is equal in the fact that he has talent. Some know one truth, others know many truths, but all know the truth. We need not be disturbed then because the possession of intellect has remained constant so far as we can trace man. We need not feel that therefore there has been and will be no progress. If there be a law of progress it will be found in some other direction.

It is not to the advance of knowledge or the development of science that I refer. A stupendous advance has been made even in the last six hundred years, since the time when civilization was confined to a small part of a single hemisphere, supposed the earth was flat, and that it was the centre of the universe. A yet more powerful development of science has been witnessed in the last century, which has gone from steam to radium. In physics

and chemistry, in surgery and medicine, the distance between to-day and the seventeenth century is almost infinite. Yet the intellectual quality of Shakespeare and Milton has not been surpassed. The resources of men, the mechanical power of the world, the influence that comes in all ways from the possession of wealth, all these are greater in the present time than in any previous period of history, notwithstanding the losses of war; but this great increment does not of itself insure progress. In fact, it may all be devoted to destruction, was devoted to destruction for more than four years, in which it wrought more destruction of life and of property than had been wrought before in all the wars of which there is any authentic record. The increase of knowledge, the development of science, have only given society new weapons with which it is possible for civilization to commit suicide. So far as we can see that happened time and again in the ancient world; they obliterated Carthage with an appalling completeness, overcame Greece in spite of the brilliancy of its letters and its arts and the pleading of Demosthenes, most eloquent of men; they destroyed Rome by the very weight of the imperialism of her far-flung empire; they have cast down gigantic Russia to where, apparently, if she is rescued at all, she must be rescued from without. By how slight a margin other nations escaped perhaps we shall never know. Lands under the oppression of despotism crumbled, even if their allies won. Lands under the inspiration of freedom remained firm, enduring to the end. Neither shall we know by how wide a margin the cause of that civilization we represent, under the most tremendous shock that ever shook the world, yet survived. The

great fact is that so far it has survived. It is ours to say whether it shall survive.

No one can compare society of the twentieth century with that which has gone before without comprehending at once the tremendous differences. It is true that there have been for many centuries men of as acute intellectual ability, men moved by as high a moral purpose, as any that make up the present world. There is a significance in their being regarded among primitive peoples as supernatural. They were thought to be something more than human, or they acted under direct command of the Almighty. They did not correspond with ordinary experience. These figures stand out in Old Testament history and the early legends of Greece and Rome. There are others that stand out in well-authenticated record, leaders and lawgivers like Hammurabi and Moses. There are great captains like Alexander and Cæsar. There are philosophers and thinkers like Aristotle and Lucretius. There are men of supreme moral quality, outside the Christian faith, like Socrates and Marcus Aurelius. It is possible to bring a like record almost down to modern times. But with the exception of a limited few in Athens, in the day of her glory, and still fewer at Rome, in the day of her early power, these men represent no condition of the people. There is an early ardor of patriotism, a great beauty of literature and art, deep thought and high ideals which will be classic forevermore. But this does not represent the condition of the people any more than the piety of the Bible represents the condition of the people when it was written. Their rulers sought instructions from the Oracle of Delphi, or

followed the omens they thought were disclosed in the appearance of animals they sacrificed. There was an early freedom, and a type of democracy, later superimposed on a great mass of slaves and dwindling. The individual was without consideration, but the Roman citizen had rights. Finally, authority came to rest not with the people but with the legions. The power of the rich remained, not the just power of service, but the naked power of possessions, while all about was superstition, fear, and slavery of body and of mind. The moral force was gone; with it went intellectual force, and finally the empire itself. Might ruled, and ruled alone.

Then set in those centuries of migration, conquest, and pillage known as the Dark Ages, creating a condition where finally men bartered their liberty for the privilege of existence and security under the system of feudalism. This created a reign of order which is the beginning of progress. Under it men turned their thought to the humanities. For centuries the church frowned on slavery, though the government legalized it. William the Conqueror drove it out of England; but it was not until 1833 that Parliament outlawed it in the colonies. Through this lapse of time men had turned their thoughts both inward and outward. They discovered themselves, and they discovered humanity. What they discovered, the printing-press not only recorded in permanent form but diffused among the people. The Revival of Learning, the Reformation, the victory of Oliver Cromwell and the Glorious Revolution, the establishment of American Independence, the French Revolution, and the Reform Bill of 1832, were great movements by the people them-

selves. At the least they represented a new assertion of moral power, if not a new moral power itself. Henceforth humanity was pitched in a higher register. If the world had produced no greater intellect it had produced far greater intelligence; if it brought no new moral quality, it brought far greater morality. For the first time the mass of the people, in high places and in low, realized that the moral law was not a mere theory but a practical rule of action. For the first time the people began to live by it, and to require the sanction of its authority.

It is this quality which separates present civilization from all that has gone before. The power of the people, under the modern forms of self-government, increasingly to conform to the sanctions of the moral law, is the direction in which must be found the law of human progress, if it be found at all. It takes little study to be persuaded that this is what has been going on throughout history, with an increasing momentum during the last century. Whether it shall continue, and by what means it shall continue, are the questions eternally before the people.

No American can contemplate his own country without mingled emotions of satisfaction and responsibility. He can see it discovered, just as the Old World was taking on a new life, just as new forces were stirring among men, fitting them to take up the settlement of new lands, which were to be dedicated to a new era. He can see the line of their settlements along the Atlantic coast, long and thin and disconnected. But it was a line of pioneers, not only of discovery and of settlement but pioneers of thought. In the new birth of Europe these men had taken

the lead. They never faltered and they never turned back. They sought the New World that they might be free from the customs and traditions which hampered the progress of the Old. To them, for a time, was to be intrusted the preservation of the liberties of the world by the preservation of the moral power of the people. In this great service, performed alike for the salvation of America and of Europe, New England took a most prominent part. The English historian, John Richard Green, declares that: "In education and political activity New England stood far ahead of its fellow colonies, for the settlement of the Puritans had been followed at once by the establishment of a system of local schools, which is still the glory of America. 'Every township' it was enacted, 'after the Lord has increased them to the number of fifty householders, shall appoint one to teach all children to write and read; and when any town shall increase to the number of one hundred families, they shall set up a grammar-school.'" This clearly states both a fact and a reason. They led in the determination to live by the moral law. That meant freedom. That meant education. For those were the just portion due to that all-important being, man, rediscovered in the new birth of Europe.

This was the prologue of that strongest and most permanent of all assertions of the right of men to be free, the Constitution of the United States of America, supported by the determined loyalty of the American people.

Under this that thin and disconnected line along the eastern coast has crossed the continent. The few weak settlers, the struggling colonies have become a great nation. It saved freedom from the hand of impending des-

potism in 1776 and in 1917. Had the first been lost, where would have been the power of sacrifice by which the last was won?

Dedicated to this high purpose, America has marched on. There is her glorious history. There is her progress. There is her prosperity. There is the wonderful organization of her government, perfected in its ultimate decisions to reflect the will of the people. There is her system of education, developed in accordance with the public schools established in Massachusetts in 1647. There is her transportation, superior to that of any other country. There is her banking organization, richer than any other on earth. There is her commerce, which flows to the world markets. There is her industrial plant, superior to that of any place or time. There is her agriculture, vast beyond the imagination to comprehend. At the end of the most exhausting of wars, which left the great nations of the earth prostrate, our country finds itself burdened, but still erect, still able from current resources to meet current expense. All these are but the reflection of the genius, not of a select few but of a wonderful people, great in intelligence, great in moral power, great in character.

The trial which the civilization of America is to meet does not lie in adversity. It lies in prosperity. It will not be in a lack of power, but in the purpose directing the use of great power. There is new danger in our very greatness. There are all the old dangers in our incompleteness. It is impossible to overlook our imperfections. The war has greatly diminished the substance of some and greatly increased the substance of many. It has al-

ready given a new tongue to envy. Without doubt it will give a new grasp to greed.

In a land of schools there is a vast amount of illiteracy. Surrounded by luxury there is a wide fringe of degradation and poverty. In spite of surpassing agricultural production, there are those who lack food, and amid a flood of commerce there are those who lack clothing and shelter. Notwithstanding the wide range of industry there are those who lack employment. With all the light that comes from learning and religion, with all the deterrent power of organized society, there is still an appalling amount of vice and crime. There is no lack of those who, seeing but this side of the picture, say civilization has already failed. It has not failed, as any one can see who looks at history. It must be supported and continued. It cannot be preserved without effort, and it is not yet done. The work must go on. As society grows more complicated, as civilization advances, the burden of its support is not less; it is more. It was never so great as now. Society in America is in a healthy state of progress, but it cannot go alone; it must be supported.

There is always a tendency to point to the great business of the country, its wealth and intelligence, and say that economic laws will run their course and provide a final adjustment. They would, but these are not enough, never have been enough, and would not give the result we require. The foundations of civilization do not rest alone on economic laws. Human progress must be paid for, but it cannot be bought. The patricians of declining Rome thought they could protect themselves from uprisings at home and invasions from abroad with legions

filled with Gauls and Numidians, and other barbarian tribesmen. They found protection could not be purchased, and, beset within and without, the civilization they represented perished. Last month, in a case which almost escaped notice, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts announced a principle of great importance. "Mere intellectual power," the decision runs, "and scientific achievement, without uprightness of character, may be more harmful than ignorance. Highly trained intelligence combined with disregard of the fundamental virtues is a menace." America has not sought to purchase protection with mercenaries. When the call came Americans went themselves. They did not send. But there is in our land to-day a great mass yet to be won to the American ways of thought. Uprightness of character and the fundamental virtues prevail, but the very ease of existence leads many to disregard their laws. Nor is the application of blind justice enough.

"Use every man after his desert, and who should 'scape whipping?"

There is another element on which progress depends and without which it cannot go on. We need wealth and science and justice in human relationship, but redemption comes only through sacrifice. There is no other process that can sustain civilization; no other law of progress. If we make any headway against the perils of society it will be by that process, and that process alone. Let justice and the economic laws be applied to the strong; but for the weak there must be mercy and charity; not the gratuity which pauperizes, but the assistance which restores. That, too, is justice.

The ideals which are derived from the higher education come from college and university. They were founded by charity. The beliefs for which men have been willing to suffer martyrdom come from religion, the greatest charity of all. Ideals and beliefs determine the whole course of society.

When there has been failure it has meant that there was no longer sacrifice made to secure success. Selfishness defeated itself. That has been the malady of every empire that has fallen, from Babylon to Russia. Where there has been success it has meant that there sacrifice has prevailed. That has been the salvation of every people, from early civilization to the present day. America was laid in the sacrifices of Pilgrim and Puritan and the colonists of that day. It was defended by the sacrifices of the Revolutionary period. It was made all free by the sacrifices of those who followed Lincoln, and insured by all who accept him. It was saved by the sacrifices of the World War.

These are the great charities of man on which civilization has rested. They cannot be administered by government. They come from the heart of the people or they do not come at all. They are for the redemption of man. There is no other. Civilization is always on trial, testing out, not the power of material resources, but whether there be, in the heart of the people, that virtue and character which come from charity sufficient to maintain progress. When that charity fails, civilization, though it "speak with the tongues of men and of angels," is "become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." Its glory has departed. Its spirit has gone out. Its life is done.