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# CONSEQUENCES.

BY

MONCURE. D. CONWAY, M.A.

"The destroyer of all successes is ill-timed apprehension of danger."

HITOPADESA.



PUBLISHED BY THOMAS SCOTT,

NO. 11, THE TERRACE, FARQUHAR ROAD,

UPPER NORWOOD, LONDON, S.E.

*Price Threepence.*

1915

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AMOUNT OF ...

## CONSEQUENCES.

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AN eminent writer has lately caused some agitation by warning the country that there are certain "rocks ahead" on the track of its present course. He sees danger to the wealth, the greatness, and even the stability of the nation in every direction. The rocks concerning which he is most apprehensive are, first, that the coal will give out, and with it all the manufacturing and railway enterprises which make the commercial supremacy of England; and secondly, that the intelligence of the country is alienated from its religion, which renders it certain that the masses of the people will presently be also alienated from it; and since they will be without the restraints of culture, the downfall of creeds will involve the downfall of social and political institutions which have grown up along with the creeds. It will require, he thinks, a culture and refined thought, which the masses do not possess, to detach the social organism from the dogmatic parasite which has grown around it; and when the scepticism of the educated has filtered down into them, they will make a rude, indiscriminate sweep of good and evil alike.

It is not within the scope of this essay to consider the particular "rocks ahead" pointed out by our "Cassandra." I merely refer to his warnings as illustrative of apprehensions felt by many in another direction, namely, the effect of religious inquiry on human happiness and character. And I do so because his apprehensions appear to me to rest upon fallacies quite

similar to those treacherous fears of the results of free inquiry which I propose to consider. His main fallacy is the fear that the same intelligence which has adapted man to his present condition is to remain standing still while everything else changes. Our coal mines, it may be, are gradually to diminish, possibly to fail; but will that intellect which has invented steam engines, and other machinery, lose its power of invention, and for the first time show itself inadequate to meet emergencies as they arise? Is the future to have all our problems, and to be without brains of its own? So also in the case of the violent revolution apprehended, when the masses share the scepticism of the educated. Our prophet of evil forgets, apparently, that such a change as that cannot be an isolated one. He forgets that in the same length of time a thousand other changes will also occur; that, for instance, the masses must acquire some of the calmness and self-control of the cultivated along with their scepticism; and, on the other hand, that the social fabric will improve, that the state will become nobler, and all classes possess too much interest in both to handle rashly any real and healthy institution.

This whole method of apprehension is treacherous. When Jesus said, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof; to-morrow will take care of to-morrow's affairs," he uttered a thought as pregnant with philosophy as with faith. The plan of prognosticating practical evil has now become a favourite method of trying to intimidate free thought and free speech. This plan has been carried to its extreme by the Bishop of Peterborough, who lately said that he would not stop to inquire whether the tidings of science were true or not; he only asked whether they were glad tidings. Not finding them glad tidings—and they certainly are not promising for bishops—his lordship unhesitatingly rejects them, irrespective of their truth or untruth. This Bishop only caricatures a way of dealing with new

truth which is being more plausibly used by many others than by this bishop, who has so well merited the thanks of scientific men by his naïve utterance.

Most of us, whose memories run back towards the beginning of this generation, must recognise a marked change in the tone of orthodoxy towards rationalism. In place of the old intolerance, we now find a tone of apology, and meet with numbers of people who are eager to persuade us that they are not so orthodox as they seem. Again, we are as often appealed to to exercise charity as we have had, in earlier times, to appeal for it ourselves. It is to be hoped we shall all cultivate that virtue, but heretics cannot shut their eyes to the novelty of the situation. When cremation was lately proposed, and was bitterly denounced by the Catholic clergy in Belgium, a paper in that country remarked that it was a pity the Church which so opposed burning the bodies of the dead had not always manifested an equal repugnance to burn the bodies of the living; similarly, it is an instance of the irony of history that the religionists who so long ruled England by reign of terror should now appeal for charity. Even Protestantism, when it succeeded Romanism in power, did not break its terrible weapons; it used them until they became dull. Reduced at last to battle in an Age of Reason, and to answer argument with argument instead of with prisons and persecutions, it calls for the toleration it so long denied. Very well, let us have it,—charity for all! We may doubt whether we should have heard so much about it had Superstition continued as strong as of old,—but still the high rule of reason is to speak the truth in love.

At the same time, long experience should make us prudent. The more valuable a coin is the more dangerous is its counterfeit, and the more attractive a virtue the more necessary is it that its garb shall not be conceded to its opposite. Charity is due to every sincere man, but not to proven error. If a man be in

error, the more I love him the more will I hate the falsity that misleads him. When the wolf pleaded for compassion, the shepherd replied, "Mercy to you were cruelty to the lamb." It is difficult to see how it can be consistent with love to our fellow-beings that we should be tender to the errors that afflict them, or the superstition that devours them. Clemency becomes cruelty when it parts from common sense.

All this is too plain to require argument. But of late its force has been escaped by another plea. We are now told that in the progress of the world the old beliefs have lost their darker features. The old talons of persecution have been pared away; fanaticism has become unfashionable; hell has been spiritualised; and creeds that once roused agony, fear, and consequent intolerance are now softened into unrealised words or mystical meanings. Superstitions may remain, but they are now pretty superstitions, like a child's belief in fairies. And we are asked, Is it not unnecessary, nay cruel, to take away such sweet illusions, when they are so harmless? A gentleman who takes his family to church regularly, said to me, "I know as well as any one that the clergyman preaches fables, but I do not care to worry my children by telling them so. When I take them to the pantomime, I don't tell them, All that scenery is only daubed pasteboard, the fairy there is merely a painted woman, and her jewels only glass, bought for a penny. Whether at church or theatre I prefer to humour their pleasant illusions, and let them remain happy in them as long as they can." It appeared to me strange that this gentleman should not see the great difference between transient illusion and permanent delusion. He humours the illusions of the pantomime, because he knows very well that his child will outgrow them. It would distress him very much if he thought that, when his child grew to be twenty years of age, it would still believe in the reality of fairies. But, in encouraging the pulpit fables, he is

fostering things that, from being the illusions of childhood, harden into the delusions of the whole life.

Mr Tennyson has put this common notion into rhyme, and his verses are the favourite quotation of the school we are considering. They were recently offered by the *Athenæum* as a rebuke to Mr Morley for his excellent work "On Compromise," and again by a plausible writer in censure of the plain-speaking of certain pulpits. The verses run thus :

"O thou that after toil and storm  
 May'st seem to have reach'd a purer air,  
 Whose faith has centre everywhere,  
 Nor cares to fix itself to form,  
 Leave thou thy sister, when she prays,  
 Her early heaven, her happy views,  
 Nor thou with shadow'd hint confuse  
 A life that leads melodious days."

These verses are nearly the only ones which the poet and his friends might wish obliterated from his fair pages, as representing (one must believe) his first timorous and unsteady step on a path which we may hope has since lead to heights that shame their faithless fears. Passing their undertone of contempt for the female intellect, of which the poet was probably unconscious, let us consider what our duty is to that praying sister, or brother either, whose illusions we are called upon to spare. If our sister is praying in earnest, if doubt has not crept into her heart—we must not call it her intellect, I suppose—then her faith does not merely include

"Her early heaven, her happy views,"

but also her early hell, and some most unhappy views. If her prayer be not a mere attitude, she is probably imploring an angry God not to send her children, brothers, or friends into everlasting anguish and despair. If that be her creed, she can hardly be leading such melodious days that it should be cruel to hint that her apprehensions may be unfounded.

But the poet might remind us that he asks us to leave her the pleasing side of her creed only—to remove her fears, but humour her hopes though they be false. Our sister must be feeble indeed if this be possible; her powers must be very weak if she does not perceive that her Bible and her Prayer-book tell her as much of God's wrath as of his love, correlate hell and heaven, and that she has no better authority for her hopes than for her fears. But granting that the process be possible, and that we find her living in an atmosphere of rosy delusions, the question arises, ought we to avoid disturbing them? Do not let us confuse that question with any other. It is not whether we should obtrude our opinions on others, but whether we should sanction their opinions when we believe them false; it is not whether we should be rude, but whether we should be sincere. One who loves truth will not need exhortation to try and make it attractive instead of repulsive. The danger is the other way, that truth will be so smooth and polite as not to be recognized for what it really is. The real question is whether truth should be concealed and suppressed out of consideration for any one's pleasant prejudices.

It is perfectly easy to show on general principles that such tampering with truth is disloyal and more dangerous than honest error itself. It is easy to show that to suppress truth is to suggest falsehood; that it is to foster a malarious atmosphere which brings forth not only pretty superstitions but ugly ones, and leaves the mind to be overgrown not only with gay weeds but rank poisons; that where a pleasant fiction finds shelter a dangerous error may nestle at its side; and that if the great souls of history had smoothed over falsehood because it was agreeable, and remained silent before the pet prejudices of weak minds, we should all be worshipping to-day the painted fetish dolls of the world's infancy.



But I propose at present to look at the matter from another and somewhat lower point of view. This theory of suppression is not only immoral, but rests upon an essential delusion. That delusion is that truth is hard, cold, unlovely, and that all the beauty rests with the illusions. The prevalence of this notion is easily explained. It is the natural tendency of an existing dogmatic system, when it finds some of its points coming into collision with common sentiment, to smooth and explain them away, cover them with velvet, so as to make itself as attractive as possible; and one of the oldest tricks of dogmatic art is to paint the opposing view in as dark colours as possible to make itself more pleasing by the contrast. The early Christians painted their own saints with beautiful tints on church windows, but the saints of other religions they painted as demons with terrible horns and flaming eyes; and the descendants of those early Christians have not lost their art. We know their skill in painting the infidel on his death-bed surrounded with horrors, the materialist given up to sensuality, the man of science living in an Arctic sea of negation, perishing without hope. It is no wonder that with these forbidding pictures in the distance so many are frightened back from the search for truth, and beg that the realm of delusions may be spared.

But there is one suspicious circumstance about all these pictures of the results of beliefs so invested with horrors; they are depicted by those who have never held those beliefs, who have no experience of their real bearings, and who must therefore have drawn upon their imagination for their facts. We do not hear the actual materialists complaining that their belief is hopeless, nor the real heretic crying out that he is in icy despair. They seem about as hearty and cheerful as other people. In one of our popular dramas, a rigidly righteous old lady is troubled because a certain blind youth is constantly cheerful; regarding blindness as

sent by an afflicting providence she shakes her head at the young man's happiness, and says that when tribulation is sent to us we ought to tribulate. This old lady, who, never having been blind knew nothing of its resources, seems to have written a good deal of modern theology. I do not deny that there is a certain naturalness about her inferences concerning things she knows nothing about. When she appears in the guise of a popular preacher or a doctor of divinity, he sits down to consider what he would be and do if he (otherwise, of course, retaining his present views) were a materialist, or a sceptic, and how Paine and Voltaire must have died—if they died logically. But having never tried it, he is compelled to evolve each result out of his inner consciousness. The image so evolved must sooner or later be brought face to face with the fact, and the contrast between the two is sometimes astonishing. Let us review a few examples.

In former times, theologians could not imagine that any man could have an actual and conscientious disbelief of their dogmas. They attributed all scepticism to an evil heart, or to a desire to forget and hide the truth lest it might check their evil propensities. This being their premiss, it was but a natural inference that all sceptics must be wicked men. Thus Thomas Paine was branded as a drunkard—a pure fabrication—and Voltaire stigmatised for immoralities of which he was innocent. But there was another inference. These men being only pretended unbelievers, it was but natural that when the hour of death arrived, the disguise should fall, the truth come out, and the terrors it was impossible really to disbelieve then come so close that they would cry for mercy and die in the agonies of remorse. To suit that theory, fictitious scenes were invented for the deathbed of Paine, who died most peacefully, and that of Voltaire, whose only trouble in his closing hours was that the priests hung about him like vultures.

But that old theory broke down. The upright lives of such men as Hume, and Herbert, and Bolingbroke, and Franklin, and their peaceful deaths, reduced it to absurdity. There has succeeded to it another, which is, that unless a man believe in immortality, his life must be selfish, and he must have an excessive horror of death. While, on the other hand, the believer in heaven sacrifices present for future happiness, and dies with joyful hope. But this theory breaks down under the facts just like the other. The sceptical philosophers around us are apparently no more selfish than other people. If they were devoted to self, they would take care first of all not to express their scepticism. There are eminent men of science around us, disbelievers in Animism, whose abilities might have made them bishops, but whose self-sacrificing devotion to what they believe true, causes them to live in poverty, and under the denunciation of the comfortable souls who find godliness to be great gain. Nor do we find that heretics have any greater dread of death than believers in a future life. The orthodox man for whom the grave is a gate to Paradise, sends for the doctor just as fast as the sceptic, and never seems in any hurry to enjoy his future bliss. On the other hand, no martyrs have ever marched more fearlessly to death than the revolutionists of France and Germany, who, in nine cases out of ten were unbelievers in any future life. The unbeliever in a future life has not, indeed, much reason for the gloom commonly ascribed to him. If he has lost expectation of future joys, he has equally lost all apprehension of future woes; and, so far as the natural desire for continued existence is concerned, he knows that, if it is to be, he will attain it just as much as any believer in it, with the advantage that it will not have for a part of it the torture of some of his friends.

Let us take another case,—the common idea of what it is to be a fatalist or necessitarian. The believer in

Free-Will sits down and evolves from his inner consciousness, the typical believer in necessity. As the fatalist believes that what will be will be ; that nothing can be altered by the will of man ; so, he must assuredly be a man who sits passive and allows things to take their own course. If he be a Calvinist, and believes that God has predestined from before the foundation of the world those who are to be saved and those who are to be lost, he will not fail to give himself up to sensual pleasures, knowing well that if he is one of the elect, self-indulgence cannot harm him, and if not, he will at least enjoy this life while it lasts. But when our speculative believer in free-will comes to examine the facts, he finds that the most active figures in history have been those same believers in fate. They are such men as the heroes of Greece ; as Paul and Mahomet ; Luther, Calvin, and John Knox ; as Cromwell and his soldiers ; as the Puritans who founded the American Commonwealth ; men, aggressive, powerful, irresistible, who have left their impress on the world in epochs ; men, too, who, instead of finding in their election to divine favour, a reason for self-indulgence, felt in it an inspiration to surrender their every power to what they conceived to be the will of God.

As a final example, we have before us the ordinary conception of a materialist. Very few people are competent to pursue those philosophical studies which underlie the various conclusions called nominalism, realism, intuitionism, utilitarianism, idealism, materialism. But the latter word has a familiar sound : materialism is related to matter, and matter plainly means the earth, and flesh and blood, food and drink ; consequently a materialist must mean a gross, fleshly character, a man who believes in nothing he cannot bite, and, as opposed to the idealist, he must be a man without ideas. This popular notion of a materialist recalls the sad fate of one of our artists, who made a sea-side picture, and among the common objects of the

sea-side which he painted on the sands was a blood-red lobster. He had never seen a lobster, except as boiled for the table, and he supposed it had the same colour when washed up from the sea. He painted in accordance with his experience; and his surprising work so added to his experience, that he is now, I believe, a respectable merchant. And so the average orthodox man bestows on the materialist his own experience of matter, and boils him in the hot water of his theologic consciousness very red. But when we come to consider the materialists as they are, we find them quite the reverse. It would be difficult—I might almost say impossible—to find in the long list of eminent materialists a single gross or sensual character. English materialists have been known to us as men especially consecrated to ideas. They have been such men as Shelley, in whose poems of Nature Robert Browning found a high correspondency with the divine; or Robert Owen, and his fellow-socialists, giving up life and fortune in the pursuit of an ideal society; and such men are fairly followed to-day by the men of science, and the positivists, and the secularists—men of plain living and high thinking, almost ascetic in their self-denial, and ever dreaming of higher education, of co-operation, and of other schemes for the moral, intellectual, or social advancement of mankind. Such are the men for whom Christians in their palaces sigh, deploring, amid their luxury, the gross materialism of the times!

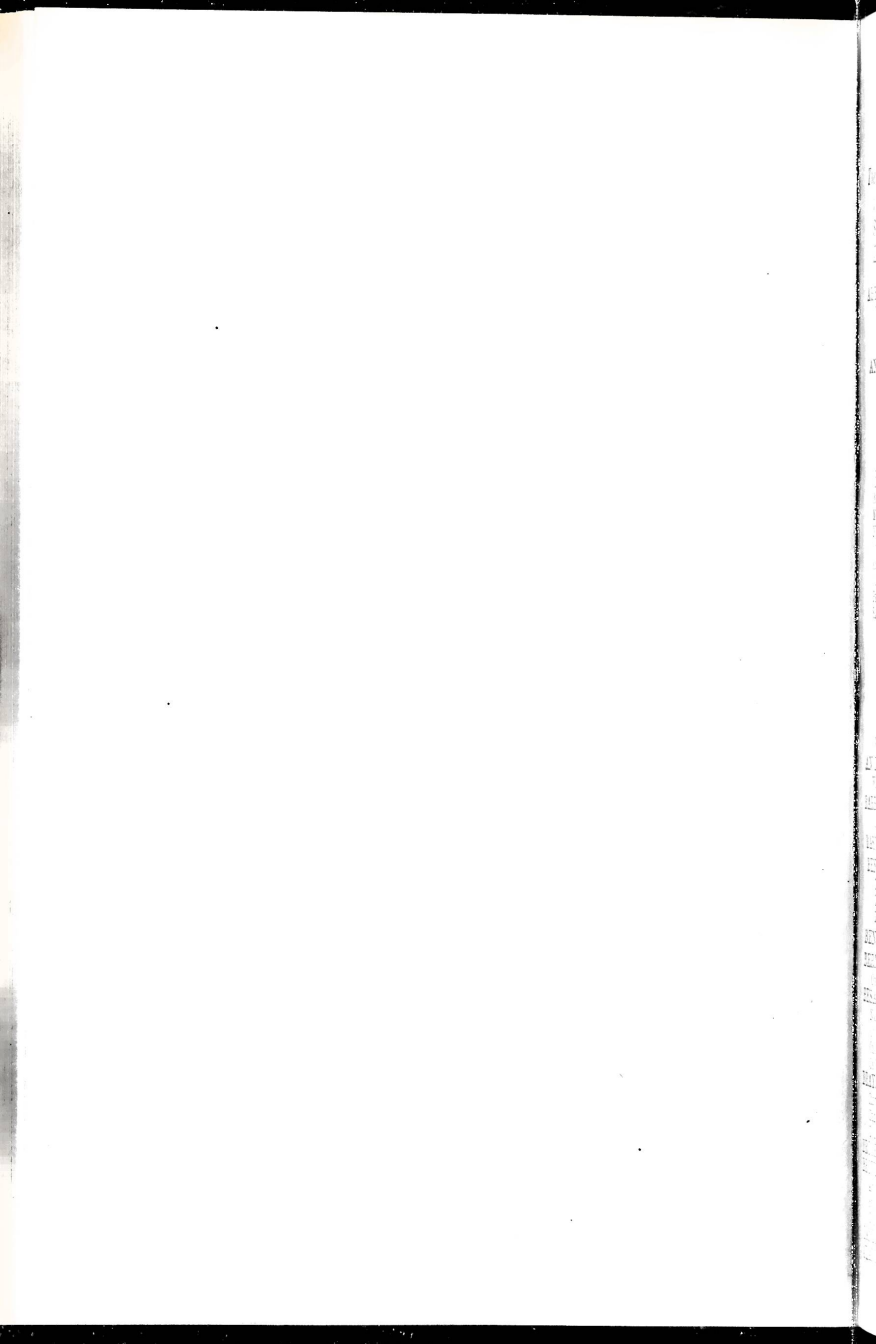
Now, let me not be misunderstood. The fact that believers in these several doctrines have contradicted by their lives and characters the *à priori* theories formed about them, does not prove their doctrines true. The fact that Paine, when the American Congress voted him money for his writings, refused to take it, poor as he was, but devoted it to the cause of liberty, refutes the idea that an infidel must be selfish; but it does not prove Paine's belief to be true. Nor does the

life of Paul prove the truth of predestination, nor that of Shelley the truth of materialism. As little do such facts show that there is no connection between intellectual convictions and practical life. What such facts do show, is just this: that the implied method of dealing with questions is treacherous. Truth is not to be tested by anyone's speculative apprehensions as to its results. It is as if a painter should sit down at the base of a hill he has never ascended to sketch the landscape which he supposes to be seen from its summit. The height may command out-looks he cannot imagine until he has climbed it. If the orthodox believer really occupied the point of view reached by the thinker seen only from his own, he might find him surrounded by prospects, forces, influences, which alter the case materially. Every liberal thinker's experience must confirm this. The free-thinker knows well that it is the sign of an embryonic phase of inquiry, to dread its consequences upon the character or happiness of any man, woman, or child. It has not brought gloom to himself, nor demoralization; he does not find his life a discord in contrast with any "melodious days" when he believed in a jealous God and a yawning hell; he knows that truthfulness is the sustaining thing, and the ardent pursuit of truth able to fill heart and brain with enthusiasm and hope. Why should he imagine that what has brought to himself liberation and light should bring a shadow on the life of his "praying sister," whom he can only regard as a victim on whom Superstition, like a ghoul, is preying?

The free inquirer will discover full soon that the only "saving faith" is a perfect trust in truth, and that the only real infidelity is the belief that a lie can do better work than truth. He will take to heart Montaigne's advice, and fear only Fear. No alarms about the consequences of the diffusion of truth can shake his nerves or cause the balance to tremble in his

hand. Truth has ever justified herself. She can look back to fair results, to the noblest triumphs, and in their light see the chains that bind all the lions on her path. We pursue our inquiries, not without experience, not in the infancy of the world, but amid the mighty shades of heroic forerunners; amid a cloud of brave witnesses, who knew that the children of Truth have nothing to fear, living or dying; whose fidelities have built up the temples of Science and Civilization amid the clamours of cowards; and they all cry shame on the fears that would betray our reason and sap our strength; they cry Onward! to the heart that abandons the flesh-pots of falsehood, even for a wilderness where leads the pillar of truth—be it fire, be it cloud.







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