THE EVENING NEWS.

Monday, - - - February 19, 1872.

WANT OF MORAL PRINCIPLE AMONG MEN IN POSITIONS OF TRUST AND POWER.

A Sermon by Rev. J. H. Bayliss, at Roberts' Park Chapel, Indianapolis, Ind., Sabbath Evening, Jan. 14.

PROVERBS xvi. 12: "It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness: for the throne is established by righteousness."

We are the victims of sudden and profound amazement. We are standing in the presence of revelations of fraud, so stupendous, so vast in extent, so unscrupulously and unblushingly perpetrated, and so persistently adhered to and defended, even now, that all our previous knowledge, and even our suspicions, of faithlessness among high officials pale into insignificance. The charge of fraud is a stock actor in every drama, and every farce, of popular election in this country. Whoever is out of power is sure to bring this accusation against whomsoever is in. But the charge is generally left unsupported by very specific proofs, and so it passes as a handy thing to say, but not remarkably powerful. But the proofs in this case seem specific and overwhelming. I say seem, because the full and formal investigation has not yet been had. But there seems no room for doubt. Even that sincerity which waits longest for proofs of guilt, and that charity which hopes most for proof of innocence, can here find scarcely any place for their feet. New York has been betrayed as no other city has been betrayed from the foundation of this government. A few men, to whom the city had committed its chief trusts, and who had promised with solemn oaths to guard those trusts well, used their opportunity to rob—I can employ no milder term—the too confiding city out of from fifty to one hundred millions of dollars, more or less. We are used to pocket-picking, and till-tapping, and burglary; we are used to express robberies and land steals; we are not acquainted with large and questionable appropriations of subsidies by private corporations; some railroads have thus come into possession of millions of dollars. But for four men to steal an average of fifteen millions each is something new; it is like finding a mastodon when you are only looking for mice. It is something prodigious; it is dishonesty so vast as not to be expressible in common language.

But these revelations do not stand alone. Of course a defalcation or robbery amounting to half a million or more seems a mere paltry catch while our ears are full of those other stupendous frauds. The newspapers can only afford a little corner for so common and trivial a "steal" as half a million, when it is just discovered that in another direction enough money has been stolen to build a city.

The careful reader of current news, however, has not failed to notice that just at this time some other very large defalcations have been discovered; so large that they would impress the nation, only that its thought is pre-occupied by others so stupendous.

And these things are not new among us. The only novelty they possess is the extent of them. It is no uncommon thing to discover that public officers, and other persons in positions of trust and power, have abused the confidence reposed in them to enrich themselves by ill-gotten gains. It is no uncommon thing to see men of small means go into loan offices, the salaries of which hardly pay necessary expenses, and in a few years emerge from those meagre offices in affluence. The little cottage on an obscure street is abandoned, and a marble front on a prominent boulevard becomes henceforth the luxuriant home of the retired official. The idea is quite common that a public office, whether it has much salary or not, is in some mysterious way the road to fortune; and so it comes to pass that many men are willing to pay large sums of money to get into the office of Alderman, or Supervisor, or Police Justice, or even Constable, when there is no possibility that the lawful salary of the office will give them even a meager support, and refund the money which they expend in getting it. And yet, somehow, these men often do well, and come out, if they ever come out at all, much better off than they went in. It argues no want of charity to suppose that men who are willing to pay so much for what is in itself so valueless, hope to make out of it something that is not quite legitimate; they intend to manage it in a way to make it pay. These men are not repeating the folly of the boy, Benjamin Franklin, who gave his all for a tin whistle. They are too old and shrewd for that. They make the investment with their eyes wide open, and for the purpose of getting gain thereby. And men who know more or less of the facts, and who are to pay the taxes, vote them in.

We must not for one moment suppose that New York is the only city thus ill-managed. It is doubtful whether the municipal affairs of any large city in the United States are conducted with entire integrity. And this proposition startles nobody. It is a mere common-place; a thing accepted of everybody; a charge which carries with it no keen sense of outraged justice and abused confidence. We are so used to it that our moral sense adjusts itself to the case as the prisoner at length adjusts himself to his dungeon, and feels quite comfortable and at home. We rather expect it will be so. Sometimes when we shake hands with an official we are liable to suspect that that very hand may have touched a bribe; and yet we do not hesitate to shake it just as cordially as though no such dark suspicion haunted us.

When this sermon was first delivered, the Common Council of that city was undoubtedly perpetrating one of the most bare-faced swindles which has ever been undertaken anywhere. I do not make this charge from what I read in the newspapers, but from information which I am compelled to accept as perfectly reliable. But I do not refer to this because I wish to make any particular point against it, or against that city. I refer to it as an illustration of what I am afraid is a general state of things throughout this country; of the want of moral principle among men in positions of trust and power; of the short cuts to fortune which many men who have the chance are constantly taking.

I little thought that in a city like this I should find the customs of the larger and more corrupt municipalities, and yet I had hardly begun to breathe the air of my new home before I found it thick with the same charges of fraud and corruption to which I had been so accustomed. The faces were all strange; the houses, streets, public buildings, all were strange; but these charges of corruption and fraud had a familiar ring; they were not as pleasant as the church bells of my childhood, but they were rather more familiar. I can not say, however, that there is much in them to give me a home feeling. I would rather live where the sounds are more strange and less suspicious. The early settlers grew familiar with the howling of wolves, but I never heard anybody say that wolves had sweet voices, nor do I know of anybody who mourned when a higher civilization drove out the howling pack of prowling robbers.

To be continued.

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