

THE FREETHINKER
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Thoughts Upon an Execution.

It is all very well to gird at religion, but where—oh, where the devil—should we be without it? We should have no guide to conduct, no standard of morality, no one's life or property would be safe, immorality would be as common as impecuniosity; theft would be as ordinary as thrift; murder would be as general as mumps.

The above philosophical considerations were inspired—inspired is the word, Sir!—by a perusal of that famous Secular newspaper (with Protestant leanings though!), the *Sunday Express*, edited by that light of orthodoxy, that superlord of eloquence, that pillar of popular journalism, the Almost-Reverend James Douglas, who astonishes the world every Sunday with the desiccated sob-stuff, the thunderous morality, the overwhelmingly-cheap piety that delights the warm hearts and soft heads of the Great British Public.

Sex-novels, divorce, the state of the stage, the shortcomings of politicians, the solution of sorrow, the consolations of religion, the moral of Armistice Day, the results of pessimism, bobbing, shingling, mixed marriages, bimetallism; nothing on earth, in heaven, or in hell is unknown to him; on grounds of taste, we do not mention purgatory, for that mysterious region is not popular with Protestants, but we have no doubt that he knows all about that too. As the poet so nearly wrote:—

“And still the wonder grows
One Fleet Street head can carry all he knows.”

It is a truism, familiar possibly even to popular journalists, that even Homer nods; and sometimes—but only' sometimes—even popular journalists themselves may be caught napping. For our part, my dear Editor, we wish that they would nap more frequently, for then we might be spared some of the mountains of mush that depress our spirits; some of the moonshine messes that bewilder our brains; some of the torrents of toshfulness that make us long to shake the shoulders of those

who, secretly knowing better, flood our front-parlours and back-kitchens every Lord's Day with the outpourings of their stuffed heads, the overfloodings of their abundant emotionalism, at God knows how many guineas a column.

These journalist chaps, oracles of the Press Club, purveyors of culture (complete with anecdotes) to Fleet Street bars, must be great writers, for most of them earn more in a week than Shelley (for instance) made in his whole life ; and according to suburban standards, money is the supreme test of excellence. (What is he *worth* What will it *fetch*? These be your gods, O England!) Nevertheless, in face of all the financial evidence, we have our doubts; we are incurably sceptical, even in regard to the universal omnipotence of the Great British God Mammon.

This slight and sugary exordium was occasioned by, and is preliminary to, the reprinting of a cutting from the *Sunday Express*. We give it in full, headings and all:—

100 GUESTS AT AN EXECUTION.

TICKET INVITATIONS TO DEATH CHAMBER.

Murderers' Speech.

More than a hundred people had tickets to witness the execution by the electric chair of four murderers at Trenton, New Jersey, last night. There was not enough room for them all in the death chamber at the same time, so they went in relays.

The murderers, who had killed and robbed the cashier of an ice-cream company, were all executed within half an hour. Each one made a speech proclaiming his innocence after being strapped in the chair, and each one kissed a crucifix held to his lips by the prison chaplain just before the current was turned on.

Their last meal, eaten only a few hours before their death, and which, as is customary under prison rules here, they were allowed to choose themselves, irrespective of expense, consisted of six courses. All four men were Roman Catholics, and, as it was Friday, obeyed the injunction of their faith against eating meat.

It is comforting to know that these four gentleman, who had apparently murdered their victim for money, "kissed a crucifix"

before they were "turned-off," to use the expressive old phrase; and it is perhaps even more comforting to know that they were restrained by their religion from eating meat on Friday. It would perhaps have been more comforting still (especially to the victim) had their religion restrained them from murder. But that perhaps is too much to ask; religion cannot do everything, and we must be as thankful as we can for small mercies, though we fear that this is small comfort to the unfortunate cashier, the mercy extended to whom seems to have been severely limited. But then, if there were no Catholics, what would become of all the crucifix-makers, and some of the fishmongers?

Probably not one in ten thousand of the readers of the *Sunday Express* saw the irony lurking in every line of these three brutal paragraphs, in every word of these three atrocious headlines. How should they? They have been brought up on a system of false ethical values, and have no means of appraising either life or death at its true value.

Christianity has been "in the air" for something like two thousand years, and it might have been a good thing if it had stayed there, instead of polluting the earth with its slime.

What are we to think of the millions of people in Europe and the States who lick their lips over such stuff, and see nothing wrong or funny in the extensively-advertised religiosity of sordid murderers? Such things are so common in our civilization that they are taken as a matter of course. How superior we are to the old Pagans!

What of a system under which tickets are issued to enable acquaintances to see their friends "done in"? At the old Gladiatorial shows, some of the victims at least had a sporting chance; but Christians take no chances in such matters. These four men were "certs." for death, and had there been a charge made for the tickets, members of the audience could no doubt have demanded their money back in the case of a reprieve. We wonder what "Christian" charities would have refused a share of the profits, "after all expenses were paid"?

What of the ethical code that enjoins men to believe that "God," or Jesus, or Mary, or the Holy Ghost, or the Saints, wink at murder, but cannot bear the idea of a man eating meat on Friday? What of this Jesus who is apparently willing to excuse the shed ding of blood if only the slayer will kiss the crucifix before he dies? What of the "more than a hundred people" who went to see the execution-show? We'll wager that there were no Freethinkers among them.

It cannot be denied that in this year of grace Nine-teen-twenty-seven, the blessed religion of Christianity has succeeded in obliterating all blood-lust and savagery from the purified minds of its gentle devotees. A trace of cruelty remains perhaps in a few million cases, but then the True Faith has not yet been in existence for two thousand years; and, as an Anglican friend remarked, in replying to an article of mine, "Christianity has never really had a chance." Let us hope piously that it will get its "chance" in the next three or four thousand years; otherwise we may be tempted to try something else, and the world will fall into anarchy and confusion, and produce such monsters as Confucius and Socrates; and where shall we be then?

Meantime, we note with dismay that in certain parts of Europe the holy religion of Christianity is actually being discarded. There are really men whose patience is worn out after a trifling delay of nineteen centuries. What a pity that these blasphemers do not share the pure and exalted faith common to the humble and underpaid scribes of the *Sunday Express*!

There is a postscript; it is certainly almost incredible, but we give it for what it is worth.

We showed this cutting to a friend of ours, a professional wit, a man who is a graduate, with first-class honours, of London University. He saw nothing wrong with it; but we must add that he is a convert to Roman Catholicism. So perhaps the curious lack of moral judgment that, in our view, he showed may not be so odd as it would be in a Freethinker.

Still; in our nasty, querulous, sceptical way, we can't help thinking that there's something wrong somewhere.

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