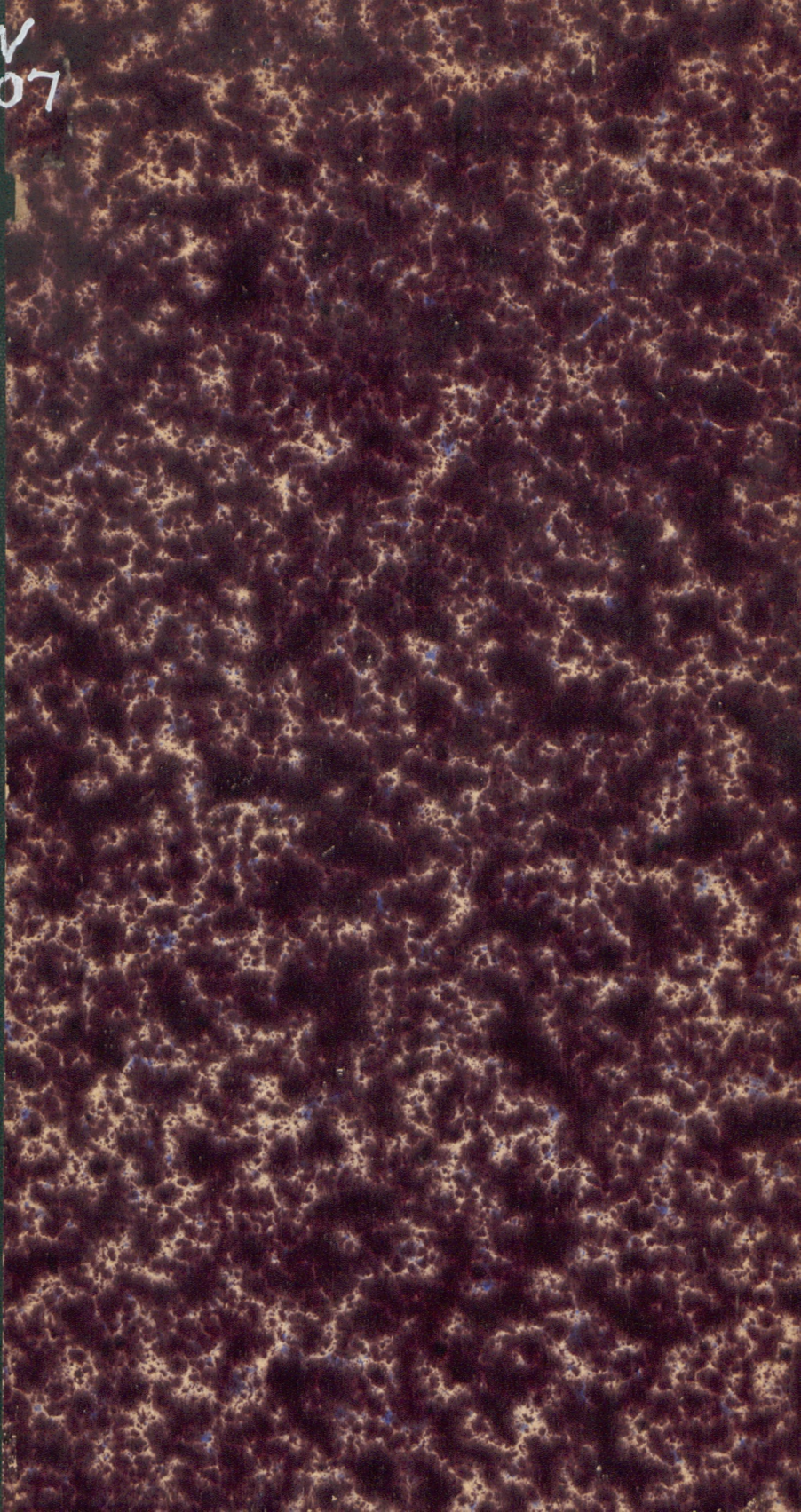


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1879.

FOURTH OF JULY

AT

AUBURN PRISON.

PROCEEDINGS,

AND

ADDRESS

OF

HORATIO SEYMOUR.

A GRATIFYING CELEBRATION FOR THE INMATES.

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AUBURN PRISON



HORATIO SEYMOUR

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PROCEEDINGS.

Governor Seymour arrived in town on Thursday afternoon, and by previous invitation of Agent and Warden Moses, visited the Prison as the guest of the latter gentleman, remaining until last evening, when he returned to Utica by the 6.38 train.

At nine o'clock, on the morning of the Fourth, the Chapel of the Prison was filled, the prisoners occupying their usual places, while the gallery and many seats below, were held by members of the families of officers and their friends, only a limited number of invitation cards being issued.

The platform was occupied by Governor Seymour, Agent and Warden Moses, Chaplain Searls, Rev. Dr. John Brainard of St. Peter's, Rev. T. Stacey of Wall Street M. E. Church, and Rev. W. H. Allbright of the Second Presbyterian Church. To the left of the platform was the full Forty-ninth Regiment Orchestra. The platform was handsomely and appropriately draped with National flags, over a portrait of Governor Seymour.

Previous to opening the exercises, the Chaplain addressed a few brief remarks to the men, requesting them to signify their approval only by the clapping of hands: an admonition which was strictly observed throughout. In fact, by their earnest attention and quiet demeanor, they earned the praise of officers and spectators. The remark was, that the occasion was the most orderly and quiet of any similar demonstration ever made in the Chapel.

The exercises opened with music by the orchestra, who gave some selections from the Opera "Pinafore" in their very best

style. The rendition was especially fine, and was deservedly received with a hearty round of applause, in which the entire audience joined.

Rev. Dr. Brainard read appropriate selections from Scripture, with the remark in preface, that he had an hour before read the same lessons to his own flock.

Music by the orchestra followed, the selections being given at good length and in the most artistic manner, in carrying out the plan of the day, as an especial treat to the prisoners, for whose benefit the exercises were presented. Their gratitude and satisfaction were earnestly expressed in the prolonged applause.

Rev. Mr. Stacey then offered an earnest and fervent prayer, the men showing by their respectful demeanor their appreciation of the solemnities, as well as they had of the enjoyments of the occasion.

More music followed, the orchestra giving "Sweet Home" with rare effect, the familiar strains of the air touching many a heart in the large assemblage of men whose homes are so widely cut off from their approaches by the frowning walls that bar them from the outer world.

Chaplain Searls then made a few remarks introductory of the distinguished speaker about to address the assemblage, in the course of which he made some facetious allusions which put his hearers into a state of smiling serenity. He alluded to the high public services and distinguished record of New York's eminent statesman, who was greeted with an enthusiastic reception as he took the desk. Governor Seymour then delivered his address.

As may be inferred from the language of the speaker, his words sank deep into the hearts of his hearers, and in many instances drew tears of regret and repentant sympathy from those who, although confined as criminals, yet have the feelings of men and are susceptible to the better influences when rightly approached. As a lasting lesson, and matter for reflection and good result, the address of the eloquent speaker will, no doubt, bear good fruit. That it sank deep into their hearts, was evinced by the frequent and prolonged applause, followed by a hushed attention which caught every word and inflection. Not even a cough or a shuffle of the foot was heard among all the

thousands and more men, and when, at the conclusion, Mr. Searls suggested that those who felt thankful to Governor Seymour for his interest in them, should express it by rising their hands, every man quickly thrust both hands above his head, with a prompt action that indicated an eager desire to show full appreciation of the Governor's kindness, in thus visiting them when in prison.

It was a most gratifying occasion and well repaid the time spent in thus making a pleasant day for the prisoners. We wish to add our thanks as a public journal, to those so expressly given by the participators in yesterday's exercises: for this good work in the cause of common humanity.

The audience dispersed, after Benediction by Rev. Mr. Albright. The orchestra continued playing afterward, for the benefit of the convicts, who showed their appreciation by hearty applause.

As Governor Seymour was escorted out of the chapel by the Agent and Warden, the men saluted them with prolonged clapping of hands, which compliment was also paid the Chaplain.

ADDRESS.

I have declined all invitations this year to make public addresses; but when your Warden asked me to speak to you to-day, I made up my mind to do so, although at the hazard of my health. My interest in the inmates of this and other prisons grows out of official duties, as I have had to act on many cases of applications for pardons. I have learned from a long experience with men in all conditions of life, that none are without faults and none without virtues. I have studied characters with care. I have had to deal with Presidents and with prisoners. I have associated with those held in high honor by the American people. On the other hand, the laws of our State have placed the lives of criminal men in my hands, and it has been my duty to decide if they should live or die. The period in which I took the most active part in public affairs was one of great excitement, when passions and prejudices were aroused; and in common with all others engaged in the controversies of the day, I have felt the bitterness of partisan strife; nevertheless experience has taught me to think kindly of my fellow men. The longer I live, the better I think of their hearts, and the less of their heads. Everywhere, from the President's mansion to the prisoner's cell, I have learned the wisdom of that prayer which begs that we may be delivered from temptation.

Another great truth is taught by experience: hope is the great reformer. We must instil this in men's minds, if we wish to cultivate their virtues, or enable them to overcome their vices. It has been said that despair is the unpardonable sin; for it paralyzes every sentiment that leads to virtue or happiness. To help

us do our duty, we must cherish hope, which gives us courage and charity, which gives us hopes for others. For this reason, when Governor of this State, I did all I could to gain the passage of laws which enable each one of you, by good conduct, to shorten the term of your imprisonment, and if I had my way, you would have a share in the profits of your labor. But I stand before you to-day to speak of another ground of hope, of a higher and more lasting character than mere gain or shortened terms of punishment; and what I have to say does not point to you alone, but to men of all conditions. I do not mean to take the place of those who teach you your religious duties. They are far more able than I am to make these clear to your minds; yet it is sometimes the case that we see things in lights in which they are not usually placed before us, and some thoughts which have occurred to me, in a review of my life, may be of interest and value to you. When we grow old we are struck with the fleetness of time; our lives seem to be compassed into one brief period; we suddenly find that pursuits we have followed are closed, and we are confronted with the question, not what we have gained, nor what positions we have held, but what we are in ourselves. We know it is our duty to do what is right, and to avoid doing wrong, but when we look back, if we add up all of our good deeds on the one hand, and our bad acts on the other, we find a startling balance against us. When men reach my time of life, their minds turn towards the past, and they travel backward the paths they have followed. They see things from the opposite side from which they were viewed in youth onward, and are struck by truths which never break upon their minds until they look back upon them.

Sitting before my fire on a winter evening, and musing, as old men are apt to do, about their acts, their errors, their successes or their failures, it occurred to me what I would do if I had the power, and was compelled to wipe out twenty acts of my life. At first, it seemed as if this was an easy thing to do. I had done more than twenty wrong things for which I had always felt regret, and was about to seize my imaginary sponge and rub them out at once, but I thought it best to move with care, to do as I had done to others, lay my character out upon the dissecting table, and trace all influences which had made or marred it. I found to my surprise, if there were any golden threads running

through it, they were wrought out by the regrets felt at wrongs; that these regrets had run through the course of my life, guiding my footsteps through all its intricacies and problems; and if I should obliterate all of these acts, to which these golden threads were attached, whose lengthening lines were woven into my very nature, I should destroy what little there was of virtue in my moral make-up. Then I learned that the wrong act, followed by the just regret, and by thoughtful caution to avoid like errors, made me a better man than I should have been if I had never fallen. In this, I found hope for myself and hope for others, and I tell you who sit before me, as I say to all in every condition, that if you will you can make yourselves better men than if you had never fallen into errors or crimes. A man's destiny does not turn upon the fact of his doing or not doing wrong—for all men will do it—but of how he bears himself, what he does and what he thinks, after the wrong act. It was well said by Confucius, that a man's character is decided, not by the number of times he falls, but by the number of times he lifts himself up. I do not know why evil is permitted in this world, but I do know that each one of us has the magical power to transmute it into good. Every one before me can, if he will, make his past errors sources of moral elevation. Is this not a grand thought, which should not only give us hope, but which should inspire us with firm purposes to exercise this power which makes us akin to the Almighty; for He has given it to us and has pointed out in His words how we shall use it. The problem meets us at every step. There is nothing we do which will not make us better or worse. I do not speak merely of great events, but of the thoughts upon our beds, the toil in the workshop, and the little duties which attend every hour. God, in his goodness, does not judge us so much by what we do; but when we have done things, right or wrong, our destiny mainly turns upon what we think and do after their occurrence. It is then we decide if they shall lift us up to a higher level, or bear us down to a lower grade of morals. Our acts mainly spring from impulses or accidents—the sudden temptation, imperfect knowledge or erring judgment. It is the after-thought that gives them their hue. The world may not see this; it may frown upon the deed and upon the man, who, nevertheless, by his regrets, makes it one which shall minister to purity and virtue in all his after-life. You, who sit before me, in some ways

have advantages over other men whose minds are agitated by the hopes and fears of active pursuits, who find no time for thoughts which tend to virtue and to happiness. With each of you, in a little time, the great question will be—not if you are to be set free, not what the world thinks of you, not what you have—but what you are; for death often knocks at the door of your cells, and some of your number are carried from their narrow walls to the more narrow walls of the grave.

Let it not be thought that I prove wrong may be done so that good may follow. With Saint Paul, I protest against such inference from the truth that men are saved by repentance of their sins.

But let us look further into this subject, for it deeply concerns us. Though we are unable to recall the errors of the past, we may so deal with them that they will promote our virtue, our wisdom and happiness. Upon this point I am not theorizing. Whoever thinks, will learn that human experience proves this. Let us take the case of our errors. We should find if we could rub them all out that we should destroy the wisdom they have given us, if we have taken care to make our errors teach us wisdom. Who could spare their sorrows? How much that is kind and sympathetic in our natures, which leads us to minister to the griefs of others, and thus to gain consolations for ourselves, grow out of what are felt as keen calamities when they befall us.

Following out the line of my thoughts, when I assumed that I had the power and was compelled to drown in Lethean waters certain acts, I found I could not spare errors which call forth regrets, mistakes which teach us wisdom, or the sorrows which soften character and make us sensible of the sympathies which give beauty to the intercourse of life. As I had to obliterate twenty events, I found I could best spare the successes or triumphs which had only served to impart courage in the battle of life and had but little influence in forming character. It is true, that wherever and whatever we are, we can so deal with the past, that we can make it give up to us virtue and wisdom. We can, by our regrets, do more than the alchemist aims at when he seeks to transmute base metals into gold, for we can make wrong the seed of right and righteousness; we can transmute error into wisdom; we can make sorrows bloom into a thousand forms like

fragrant flowers. These great truths should not only give us contentment with our positions, but hope for the future. The great question, what we are, presses itself upon us as we grow old, or flashes upon us when our lives are cut short by accident or disease. Within these walls, but few days pass without that question being forced upon the minds of some who have reached the end of life's journey. Surely, it should give hope and consolation to all to feel that they can, in the solitude of the cell, or in the gloom of the prison, by thought, by self-examination, make the past, with its crimes, its errors and its sorrows, the very means by which they can lift themselves into higher and happier conditions. This work of transmuting evil into good, is a duty to be done by all conditions of men, and it can be wrought out as well in the prisoner's cell, as in the highest and most honorable position, for when you do this, you work by the side of the Almighty. All human experience accords with the higher teachings of religion, that holds out hope to men who feel regret for every evil act. I wish to call your minds to that amazing truth, that there is a Being who rules the world with such benevolence, that He enables weak and erring mortals, if they will, to turn their very sorrows and errors into sources of happiness.

We have many theories in these days in which men try to tell us how the world, acting upon certain fixed laws, has made itself; that it goes on by a progress that regards nothing but certain rules of advancement, regardless of all other considerations save their own irresistible self-compelling principles. But here we have a truth not only given us in Holy Writ, but proved by our experience, that mental regret will convert a material wrong into a blessing, or, if the offender wills, it will make the same a hundred-fold more hurtful if he rejoices in his wrong-doing, or hardens his heart against regret. Materialism, evolution, pantheism, or any of the theories which deny the government of an intelligent God, are all phases of fatalism, and are confuted by this truth, that we can, by conforming to His laws, which demand repentance, convert evil into good, or by violating them makes evil ten-fold more deadly and destructive. We can, by our minds and sentiments, change the influence of material events, and vary the action of laws which govern the world. If man, with all his weakness, can do this, it can only be by the aid of a higher power which shapes, directs and regulates.

I know that what I have said is but an imperfect statement of great truths, compared with the teachings of the pulpit which you hear each Sunday. As my purpose is merely to speak to you of what I have learned in the walks of life, I can give you from this narrow field but partial views of great truths. They may be of no value to you, yet I trust you will accept them at least as proof of my sympathies with your condition and sorrows, for if any ambition lingers in the breast of him who speaks to you now, it is that he may be the friend and adviser of the erring and wrong-doer. He has been taught by self-examination and the study of others, that we all belong to that class, and that we owe to one another any aid we can give to our fellows when they fall by the wayside.

