



I Am Going Mad

Samuel Cox
(1826-1893)

Iwould beg any of my brethren who still hesitate to preach a hope for mankind which they themselves cherish, to bear in mind what harm they may be doing by their silence ...

This book [*Salvator Mundi!*] had an origin in an incident so pathetic that the story of it is well worth telling for its own sake; and is all the more worth telling because it may bring home to those who need it the warning which I have just uttered.

In. A.D. 1876, then, there had been in my congregation for many years, a poor and elderly workingman – not even a skilled artisan, but a man of proved character and fidelity, who filled some such slenderly paid office of trust as timekeeper, or gatekeeper, in a factory. He had never in his life, I should suppose, earned more than five and twenty shillings a week, and yet had contrived, by the aid of a good wife and industrious children, to live in comfort and in the respect of his neighbors. He was, as a man of his time and rank was sure to be, wholly uneducated, save that he had taught himself to read, and was fond of reading. But he had the precious habit of reflection, and would brood quietly and patiently over any great thought he met till it became his own, a veritable companion to his mind, an authoritative and molding influence on his life ...

There was no man in the whole circle of my acquaintance with whom I more enjoyed an hour's talk when it was to be had; for there was in his talk that spice of originality which is commonly to be found in that of men whose thoughts have been gathered not so much from books as from the working of their own minds. But he was very modest, very conscious of his own lack of culture, very fearful of intruding on the time of a busy man, or of seeming to presume on our relation as members of the same Church, and could not be induced to pay me more than a rare occasional visit.

Judge, then, of my surprise and concern, when, on a quiet evening in the summer of 1876, this calm, sensible, retiring man came, uninvited and unannounced, hastily into my room, and after wringing me by the hand, broke out with, "Mr. Cox, I'm going mad!" and sat, a picture of consternation, breathing hard and quick, as if it took the whole force of his will to hold himself in.

“But, Foster, what makes you think so?”

“May I tell you all about it, sir? It will be a great relief.”

“Why, of course you may. I want to hear all about it, and to do anything I can for you.”

“Well, sir, do you remember what a lovely evening we had on Sunday week? It was so fine that I did what I don’t often do – went out for a walk instead of coming to Chapel. You see, sir, my hours of work all the week are so long, and I’m so tired when they’re done, that I never get a chance of seeing the country unless I take a walk now and then on a fine Sunday. Well, I had had my walk through the fields, and my heart was full of praise ‘for the beauty of the earth and the glory of the skies’ (a quotation from one of our hymns), and was coming home over the river (Trent). When I got on the bridge the river was so lovely, with the bright sky reflected in it, that I folded my arms on the parapet, and looked up the stream a good while. And then I fell a-thinking. I thought within myself, ‘How full the river is, and how fast it runs! What a deal of water runs through the bridge every day, and what a many years it’s been running at pretty much the same pace.’ And then I said to myself, ‘Suppose every drop of water that ever ran through this bridge was to be brought back, and dammed up, beyond yon bend, into a vast lake, and then let down again a drop a minute. When all that water had run through the bridge once more, eternity would be no nearer an end than it is now.’ And then I said, ‘Suppose it was all brought back again, and let out a drop an hour, a drop a week, a drop a month, a drop a year –why, it would all run by, and God would be as young as He is today.’ And then, sir, while I was trying to stretch my mind out, and get some notion of what the eternity of God was like, all of a sudden I bethought me of them poor souls down in the pit! And my head reeled, and my heart stood still, and I cried out quite loud, ‘O, my God, can it be true that after all those dreadful years their torment would be no nearer an end than it is now?’ The thought was too horrible, it was too much for me, sir; but I couldn’t shake it out of my head, and I can’t. It has haunted me ever since, and it’s well-nigh killing me. I can’t hear a bell toll, or a clock tick, but what I go off calculating, and calculating and calculating, just as I did on the bridge – so many ticks, so many years, and the end no nearer than before. I can’t eat; I can’t sleep; I can get no good or comfort of my life. In fact, sir, I’m going mad; and if you can’t help me, I shall be mad before long.”

As my poor friend concluded his sad tale with this wistful but almost hopeless appeal, he lifted his thick brows, and let me see the dull lire of misery and fear burning in his eyes. I confess I was as astonished that he should have listened to me for years without apprehending that, for me at least, no such dreadful dogma was taught by Christ and his Apostles as I was grieved by his misery and despair. For though I had never attempted a formal demonstration of “the larger hope” in a series of discourses, I had always assumed it, and had let it shape and color all my teaching, while I had often inferred it and given explicit expression to it when the text in hand led that way. I spent an hour with him in going through the leading passages of the New Testament which bore on the question, and in answering any difficulties or objections which he brought forward. And at the end of that memorable hour he went away a new man, so transformed in appearance as well as in spirit, that anyone who had seen him enter and leave my house would have had much ado to have known him for the same man.

When he had gone I could not but reflect that if he had failed to gather the truth I believed, the hope I cherished, from the sermons he had chanced to hear me preach, there might be other members of my congregation to whom it would be as new and helpful as to him, and hence I resolved that this should be my theme at the next session of my Bible Class. In due course the lectures were delivered, discussed, and published in “Salvator Mundi.”

Salvator Mundi: Or, Is Christ the Saviour of All Men?
(1877)

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