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**THE LOW VALUE SET UPON  
HUMAN LIFE IN THE U. STATES.**

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C. SHERMAN, PRINTER.

PHILADELPHIA.

THE  
LOW VALUE  
SET UPON  
HUMAN LIFE

IN THE UNITED STATES:

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED ON THANKSGIVING-DAY,

NOVEMBER 24th, 1853,

BY

H. A. BOARDMAN, D.D.

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PHILADELPHIA:  
JOSEPH M. WILSON.  
228 CHESTNUT STREET.

1853  
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**C. SHERMAN, PRINTER.**

PHILADELPHIA, November 28th, 1853.

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR:—

We beg leave very respectfully to request a copy of your Discourse on the late Thanksgiving-Day for publication. The subject is of the deepest interest to the whole country; and, fully concurring, as we do, in the sentiments so ably expressed by you, we should much regret if the important lessons inculcated in this Discourse were confined to those who had the satisfaction of hearing it.

With the highest regard and esteem, we are

Your friends and obedient servants,

CHARLES B. PENROSE.

JOHN R. VOGDES.

R. C. GRIER.

R. PATTERSON.

LYMAN COLEMAN.

FREDERICK BROWN.

WINTHROP SARGENT.

WILLIAM HARRIS.

To the Rev. HENRY A. BOARDMAN, D.D.

PHILADELPHIA, November 30th. 1853.

GENTLEMEN :—

It is not without some hesitation and reluctance that I accede to the request with which I am honored in your note of the 28th instant. The facts adverted to in my Thanksgiving Discourse are sufficiently familiar, but the *subject* is comparatively new. The causes of that disparaging estimate of human life, which has well-nigh become one of our national characteristics, are much less obvious than the evil itself. I have ventured to suggest two or three of them, omitting others altogether, and barely glancing at one which I believe to be of radical efficiency, to wit, our defective systems of education. The discussion is very incomplete; and, apart from my desire to comply with any request proceeding from the gentlemen whose signatures I have before me, there is only one consideration which makes me willing to send this Discourse to the press. It is, in my opinion, the duty of every good citizen to do what he can to arrest this wholesale destruction of human life, and to reform the vicious public sentiment which shelters and virtually encourages it. I place my manuscript at your disposal, in the hope that it may promote, in some humble degree, these important objects.

I remain, Gentlemen,

With great respect,

Your friend and fellow-citizen,

HENRY A. BOARDMAN.

To the Hon. CHARLES B. PENROSE,

JOHN R. VOGDES, Esquire,

Hon. ROBERT C. GRIER,

Major-General PATTERSON,

and others.

## DISCOURSE.

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AND YE SHALL TAKE NO SATISFACTION FOR HIM THAT IS FLED TO THE CITY OF HIS REFUGE, THAT HE SHOULD COME AGAIN TO DWELL IN THE LAND, UNTIL THE DEATH OF THE PRIEST.—NUMBERS XXXV. 32.

It is both natural and becoming to make this annual festival an occasion for reviewing our mercies, and expatiating on the goodness of God to our beloved country. Where this is done to invigorate our gratitude and stimulate us to duty, it is eminently useful. But it is a great abuse of such a retrospect, to convert it into food for our national vanity. We are so much accustomed to the language of self-eulogy, and our condition is so manifestly superior, in many particulars, to that of most other nations, that we are apt to overlook those features in our social or religious state, which are adapted rather to humble than exalt us. It will not, I hope, be deemed inappropriate to the occasion, if I select one of these characteristics for our consideration this morning—especially as it has a vital connexion with our true prosperity.

I propose, then, to offer a few observations on THE LOW VALUE SET UPON HUMAN LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES.

The very announcement of the theme may awaken emotions of surprise in some quarters. You may think

of our numerous and learned Medical Profession, and the liberality with which it is supported; of the well-endowed hospitals and asylums which adorn our cities; of the great army of philanthropists, male and female, who are perpetually carrying forward their ministrations of mercy among the sick and the suffering; of the general benevolence of feeling and amenity of manners, you meet with in the intercourse of society; and you may be ready to ask, how, in the face of facts like these, the imputation can be laid upon us, of "setting a low value upon human life." This, however, is more specious than solid: it certainly proceeds upon a very partial view of the case. Without attempting to deny the statements just cited, or to weaken their legitimate force, it must still be maintained that we are open to the grave allegation in question. There are notorious and decisive facts in support of this charge, embodied in the records of our public conveyances. It is scarcely a figure to say that the history of many a steamboat and railroad line, in the Union, has been written in blood. The statistics would probably show, that a greater number of travellers perish by these agencies in our country, than in all the rest of the civilized world combined. An accident which destroys a single human being, or three or four, is nothing thought of. Even those which involve the destruction of scores of lives, produce but a temporary ripple in the current of public feeling, and are presently forgotten. Men are allowed to erect buildings which may tumble down of their own frailty, and bury a crowd of inmates beneath their ruins.

Steamboats are permitted to navigate our tempestuous lakes and dangerous sea-coast, of such fragile construction, that there is less to wonder at when we hear that they have gone down into the abyss, with a load of passengers, than when they survive a storm of ordinary violence. Conductors and engineers may whirl their crowded trains into other trains, down precipices, and into drawbridges; and superintendents and boards of management may so frame their arrangements as almost to insure the frequent occurrence of these disasters, without exposing themselves to any adequate penalties. Homicides are rapidly multiplying; but, with occasional exceptions, justice is slow in securing the murderers, and slower still in convicting and punishing them. Society has so far reverted towards its primitive condition, that even in our older States, the practice has become common of carrying deadly weapons, and avenging affronts, real or imaginary, with instant death. The generation of young men now coming forward in our cities, seem to think it manly to wear dirks and pistols, and to use them on the slightest provocation. Approximating to savages in their equipment, they resemble them no less in the value they put upon human life. And if matters proceed much further in this direction, the shooting of a man will soon come to be looked upon as very little more than the shooting of a beast. If these practices were properly rebuked—if the force of law and of public sentiment were adequately employed to repress them—it might be inapposite to cite them in this connexion. But they meet with a degree of tole-



rance which indicates anything but a just appreciation of their enormity, on the part of the community.

As the natural result of these things, the feeling of personal insecurity has become very general. The unavoidable hazards of travelling are so multiplied, that a journey is a source of incessant anxiety, from its commencement to its close, both to the travellers themselves, and to their friends and families. Even in traversing the streets of a metropolis, people feel that they are liable to plunge, inadvertently, into some unprotected pitfall, or to be crushed by having building-materials or bales of merchandise precipitated upon them from above. Nor can thoughtful parents rid themselves of solicitude for the safety of their sons, lest they may some day be brought home to them "in their blood," victims to that fashionable code which makes every man the avenger of his own wrongs, and converts into a "wrong" every hasty utterance or passionate gesture.

That this insensibility to the true value of life, is a mark of our *imperfect civilization*, is a humiliating truth which it were quite useless to deny. If there is any gauge by which the progress of a people from barbarism to refinement can be tested, it lies in THE ESTIMATE THEY ATTACH TO HUMAN LIFE, and the pains which are taken to preserve and prolong it. If a nation fails in this point, the defect is one which admits of no compensation. It is idle to talk of its arts and arms, its literature and religion, its wise laws, its schools, its contented and thriving populations,—if it holds human life at a cheap rate, the less it boasts of its cultivation the better.

Other nations, certainly, will concede to it nothing beyond a second or third rate type of civilization, while it is disfigured by one of the radical characteristics of barbarism.

If we inquire into the CAUSES which have impressed this stigma upon our national character, we shall find it traceable, in no small degree, to *the peculiar circumstances of our country*. However we may be disposed to resent the intimation, it cannot be denied that there are large portions of the confederacy, which are very immature in their social organization,—and for obvious reasons. Within the memory of persons now living, the territory comprising a considerable part of the Union, was the abode of wild beasts and savages. This immense domain has been settled with a rapidity unprecedented, it is believed, in the annals of the race. The older States have poured their tens of thousands into the valley of the Mississippi. This majestic tide has been swelled by an uninterrupted stream of European immigration. The colonizing of the country has outstripped its means of personal and social improvement. The attention of communities like these, would be chiefly occupied with their physical wants. The clearing of the ground, the seeding of the soil, the erection of suitable dwellings, and other urgent objects, would engross their time. School-houses, churches, well-digested legislation, and a sound and effective jurisprudence, would be postponed to earlier and more pressing exigencies. Unchastened by culture, and unrestrained by legal or military authority, the bad passions of humanity would ferment; frequent outbreaks and

violences would occur, and summary crimes would meet with as summary a retribution. People would vindicate their own rights. Popular convocations would arrogate the supreme judicial power; injuries would be redressed with rifles and bowie-knives; and signal transgressions would be honored with the form of a legal trial, and the reality of an execution, after that inflexible Draconian code, entitled "*Lynch Law*," which never tries but to convict, and never convicts but to burn or hang.

To say that all this has been verified on our own soil, is simply to state a familiar fact. That there are numerous facts of a different kind, which enter into the history of our new States, and reflect the highest credit upon them, is indisputable. If they have not made all the provision which was desirable for the moral and intellectual wants of the people, they have accomplished far more in this way, than could have been anticipated. Many things in the condition of our country have excited the astonishment of the nations; but nothing has produced a profounder impression upon them, than to see commonwealth after commonwealth springing up on the bosom of our great prairies, and from the heart of our primeval forests, and putting on, with a magic celerity, the aspect of well-ordered communities, replenished not only with the appliances of physical comfort, but with the ordinances of Christianity, and efficient systems of common school instruction. Still, the irresistible course of events has been such as to concentrate in these new organizations, the most heterogeneous and intractable elements, which have, to the present day, occa-

sioned frequent outrages and convulsions, like those just recited. The effect has been to familiarize the population with the shedding of blood. They are too conversant with assassinations, and fatal street-fights, and Lynch-law executions, to be horrified by them. And we, on this side of the mountains, scarcely less conversant with them, through the medium of the newspaper press, read of these massacres with little emotion. Surprise is out of the question. Transactions of this sort have become too much a part of the staple material of our journals, to awaken surprise in any quarter. And where homicides are so frequent as to be looked for as a matter of course, and read about with composure, there can be no just appreciation of the value of human life. I am not speaking simply of our frontier States. I am speaking of our own State, and of the entire Union. And I assert, not without shame and sorrow, that these atrocities, so abundant, and so often unpunished, have had a most debasing influence upon our national character, in a point of the highest moment : that is to say, they have contributed to weaken our sense of the worth of a human being, and to blind us to the enormity of sending such an one prematurely into eternity.

Nearly allied to this source of the evil we are considering, may be mentioned *the dominant spirit of the country*,—the *animus* which pervades the entire nation, and distinguishes us, characteristically, from other nations. This cannot be defined by any single phrase. The words, progress, excitement, money-making, restlessness, self-satisfaction, all belong to the subject. The

nation is not only in its youth, and, therefore, imbued with the buoyancy and energy of youth, but all its antecedents and its present circumstances, conspire to stimulate these qualities to their utmost possible activity. If one wished to convey to a foreigner, some idea of the country, he might do it, not inaptly, by telling him that "the Americans were a people *all alive*." Look at our legislative halls, our elections, our commercial marts, our railroads and canals, our manufacturing districts, new towns and cities springing up in every direction, crowds of young men flocking to the cities to engage in business, other crowds abandoning their homes, to seek their fortunes in Texas, in Iowa, in California, the intense competition of trade, the hankering after sudden wealth, the universal discontent with the present and grasping after something better, the noise and rush on every side, the unceasing stir and strife of a nation "all alive." Why, it is in strict logical harmony with this state of things that human life should be but little cared for. There is no time to care for it. People are otherwise occupied. There is an office to be secured. There is a fortune to be made. And there must be no delay. The train is in motion, and they must go on. If a passenger falls overboard and gets crushed, they are "very sorry" for his misfortune, but stopping to pick him up, could not restore him to life, and "business" might suffer by the detention. It is better to acquiesce in the dispensation, and let the survivors learn a lesson of prudence from it. This is the feeling: business is of more importance than life, and speed is better than safety.

Avarice is at the bottom. The country is crazed with the love of money. Hence we have unstable and precarious railroads, a single track, often, on our greatest thoroughfares, fragile cars, incompetent conductors and engineers, unfaithful or overworked attendants, no adequate signals, no systematic inspection of machinery and running-gear at the stopping-places; steamboats like eggshells, worthless boilers, cabins constructed with a single outlet, by a narrow and spiral staircase, for two or three hundred passengers, moveable lamps and candles in the hands of servants and children at pleasure, reckless captains, intemperate pilots, racing, audacious tempting of storms, everything in the way of comfort and safety sacrificed to speed and a paltry economy. And the public tolerate all this. Not unfrequently passengers are more foolhardy than the owners and officers of these conveyances; they are not only willing to run risks, but angry if they are prevented from running risks. And where disasters occur (such, at least has been the case until within a recent period), they are prompt, if they themselves are uninjured, to excuse or justify the parties by whose neglect or rashness the mischief has been brought about. Of course these things could not occur, if either travellers (a term which is, in the United States, nearly synonymous with the population at large), or the proprietors and managers of the conveyances on our leading thoroughfares, had any just sense of the sacredness of human life. But they have not. This sentiment is swallowed up in the lust of gain or some kindred passion. If life can be protected without dimi-

nishing profits or retarding business, it should be ; but of the two evils, it is better that life should be exposed to additional hazards, than that the process of large and speedy accumulation should be impeded.

The commercial spirit has a powerful auxiliary in depreciating the value of life ; it is the spirit of *partisan-ship and political ambition*. The general course of legislation in this country, betrays a strange and criminal indifference to the most important interest committed to its custody. For of what moment are agriculture, commerce, finance, corporate rights, foreign relations, any of the confessedly great subjects confided to our law-makers, when compared with human life ? Yet it constantly happens, when bills appertaining to this matter are introduced into our legislative assemblies, state or national, that they are thrust aside for other measures. Whole sessions are wasted in frivolous speech-making, while acts designed to insure protection against reckless daring or wicked improvidence, are laid upon the table. Many years must elapse, and thousands of lives must be sacrificed, before a law can be procured supplying even a partial safeguard against these evils. And I speak of this as a "strange" circumstance, because it proves that our legislators do not put even their own lives into the scale against the partisan debates of a session.

Nor is it necessary to restrict this censure to enactments bearing upon the safety of travellers ; it applies, in all its force, to dangers of other sorts, which imperil life. What, for example, is more fatal to human life, than *intemperance* ? Our locomotives and steamboats

have acquired some distinction as slaughtering-machines, but they are inert and tame, when compared with the grog-shop. The cholera and yellow fever burst forth at times; and shroud the land in mourning; but where these slay their thousands, strong drink slays its ten thousands. Its ravages are patent to every eye. There is no representative in any legislative assembly of the Union, who is not familiar with them. They have all seen so much of drunkenness in its causes and its consequences,—they have seen so many young men of promise blasted by it, so many rich men impoverished, so many fathers and husbands converted into fiends, so many widows and orphans overwhelmed with sorrow and misery, so many graves opened to receive the victims of this terrific curse, that they would deem it an impertinence if you should attempt to instruct them on these points. But as to suppressing this vice—as to throwing the ægis of a wise and paternal legislation over their constituents, and protecting them from the monster, that is another question; and ordinarily, it is a question which has to give way, no less to the most trivial enactments and the most profitless debates, than to matters of real importance.

That all this indicates a humiliating disparagement of human life, must be evident to any one who will take the trouble to interpret it. There are probably States in this confederacy, where, if all the victims intemperance has slain since the American Revolution, could be brought together, the representatives who live furthest off could walk every step of the way from the Capitol to



their homes, upon their dead bodies; and where this appalling manslaughter is still going forward with accelerated energy. Will it be denied that the supreme authorities in these States, have, virtually, given the whole weight of their sanction to the idea, that human life is of little value? And is it fanciful to suggest, that if this sentiment finds countenance in the current tone of our legislation, and goes forth from those elevated seats to which the people are accustomed to look, as well for counsel as for protection, it will by degrees impregnate the public mind? Is it to be expected that the masses will value what their rulers condemn? that the accidental or violent death of an individual or two, will produce any impression upon a community whose law-makers can see hundreds and thousands prematurely cut off, without trying to save them?

The transition is but too natural here, from the hall of legislation to the forum. Just in proportion as a nation confides in the wisdom and integrity of its judicial tribunals, will the decisions of these tribunals mould its lineaments and determine its opinions. In this view, it is of some moment to learn whether the jurisprudence of this country has tended, on the whole, to enhance or to impair the popular reverence for human life. And here we encounter a very ominous demonstration. We find a numerous body of citizens, belonging to various sects and political parties, and not deficient in talent or zeal, who are laboring (and in some of the States not without success) to effect a repeal of the law inflicting capital punishment. The oldest statute on this subject,—a

statute which antedates the Levitical dispensation more than eight hundred years, and which was addressed to the second progenitor of the race, runs in these words: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God made He man."—Gen. ix. 6. Our philanthropists deny the obligation of this command, and are bold in maintaining that the murderer ought *not* to be put to death. With the arguments by which they would subvert the authority of this Divine statute, and replace it with a mere dictum of expediency (expediency, as we contend, falsely so called), I am not now concerned; I have to deal only with the fact, that there is a powerful and vigilant party in the country, having the control of numerous pulpits and presses, who are perpetually iterating the cry, that the worst assassins "have done nothing worthy of death," and that the execution of a convicted and confessed homicide, is itself "a judicial murder." The legitimate effect of this, is, to awaken sympathy in behalf of murderers, and to obliterate all proper concern for the fate of their victims. It tends (I do not say it is so designed) to mitigate the atrocity of murder; to foster the feeling that it is not, after all, so flagitious a crime to deprive a fellow-creature of life. In other words, the whole drift of this outcry against capital punishment, is, to rob life of its sanctity, and degrade it to a level with, at least, some other possessions.

The mischievous effect of this upon the administration of justice, may be seen in the extreme difficulty with which, in some parts of the country, capital con-

victions can be obtained, even on plenary evidence. Nor is this the only result. Whatever abates the general horror of murder, must contribute to lessen the reprobation with which we naturally regard unintentional homicide occasioned by ignorance or carelessness. If a wilful murderer has not forfeited his life, it would be cruelty to deprive the conductor or pilot, whose recklessness has hurried a score of persons into eternity, of his liberty. If killing people by design, merits no penalty but imprisonment, killing them "by accident," as the courtly phrase is, must deserve something less than the penitentiary. And, as a matter of fact, it generally goes unpunished. With every disposition to sustain the legal tribunals, intelligent and patriotic citizens find it impossible to sanction the results usually reached in investigations of this kind. No verdicts can invalidate the settled conviction of the public mind, that these wholesale slaughters on our thoroughfares are the fruit of wicked and inexcusable carelessness or rashness; that the moral turpitude of manslaughter attaches to them; and that to acquit the agents who perpetrate them, indicates a culpable indifference to the worth of human life, in some quarter. It is of no avail to reply that the charge of "manslaughter" cannot, ordinarily, be made out; or that there is a difficulty in determining the relative responsibility of the several parties implicated. This only transfers the blame from the courts to the legislatures. If human life were rated at its true value, these meshes would be better woven. Justice would not be baffled by mere technicalities; or rather,

new definitions would be framed, which should refer these acts to their appropriate place in the category of *crimes*. And we should cease to have our humanity, our love of justice, and our common sense, confounded by such verdicts as those which usually follow these catastrophes.

Another cause, no doubt, contributes to this result—I allude to the *composition of juries*. Trial by jury is esteemed by every nation enjoying a constitutional government, as one of its greatest bulwarks against oppression, one of the chief supports and ornaments of its civilization. But institutions, like individuals, differ widely, often, in theory and in practice. Theoretically, the twelve men who sit in yonder jury-box, are men, not only of integrity, but of intelligence and discrimination, free from all vicious habits, and every way competent to issue the cause they have sworn to decide according to the testimony presented to them. Practically, those twelve jurors, or a majority of them, may happen to be men whose meagre intellectual furniture is exceeded only by the penury of their moral endowments. The genius of our government may require that all voters should be eligible as jurymen; but for myself, I am no believer in this doctrine. I utterly eschew it as romantic and pernicious. In its practical working, it is hostile to our institutions. It embarrasses the courts. It increases litigation. It is oppressive to the citizen. It corrupts the fountains of justice. It impairs the popular respect for the judiciary. It is fruitful of evil, and has, in so far as I know, *nothing* to recommend it. To make

this great institute what it should be, and what, in all the fine declamation of our orators about it, it is assumed to be, jurors must be men, not necessarily of wealth, nor of liberal culture, but of character and average information. The incongruity of submitting causes involving large amounts of property, or still more, personal liberty, and even life, to the arbitrament of such personages as frequently appear on the panel, is so gross as to seem absolutely ludicrous. Here, it cannot be doubted, we have the key to many of the verdicts alluded to, in capital cases, and deaths by so-called "accidents." And I cite it with confidence, as one of the reasons why human life has so insufficient a valuation put upon it by the tribunals.

Candor requires that we should go a step further in this direction. Judges and juries may discharge their duty, and executive clemency may turn their labors to nought. The facility with which pardons are procured, is one of the crying evils of the day. It is currently reported that this has even become a function of the legal profession; that there are unworthy members of the fraternity in our cities, who make it a part of their regular business to procure pardons for such convicts as can command liberal fees. Of the policy usually pursued in these cases, it is not for me to speak. But it is reasonable to presume, that the petitions put in circulation, are sustained by plausible misrepresentations; that the daily press is induced, whenever practicable, to lend its columns to the object; that the whole machinery of pseudo-philanthropy is set in motion; and that the ex-

executive authority is at length approached with a demonstration which makes the liberation of the culprit simply a becoming concession to a supposed "public sentiment." If there be a system of this sort in operation, it is high time it should be suppressed. All persons will agree, that convictions may occur which will justify and even demand a remission of the legal penalties. But the facile exercise of this lofty prerogative, is a capital offence against the spirit of the social compact. It is due, no less to the supreme magistracy in our commonwealths, than to society, that the same publicity should attach to a pardon, which attaches to a conviction; that as every step of the process by which a man is brought into condemnation, is open to the world, so the community which has so vital a stake in the question, should be allowed to inspect the entire proceedings by which a condemned man is absolved from punishment and set at liberty. That community should have a legal, as it has a moral right, to know who are interceding for the pardon of a prisoner, and upon what grounds the executive compassion is invoked. This would at once protect the executive against fraudulent applications, and shield the country from the numerous evils incident to the abuse of this delicate, and, under some circumstances, dangerous power. It is not the least of these evils that the frequent absolution extended to murderers, has tended to paralyse the arm of justice, and to lend the highest sanction known to our charters to the pernicious sentiment, that the destruction of human life is but a venial offence.

Without insisting unduly upon this explanation of the fact, no one will controvert the fact itself, that life *is* disparaged, as well in the established working of our judicial system, as in the current routine of our legislation. To ascertain what influence this has had upon the popular estimate of life, let the supposition be made, that from this time forth, the policy of our courts and legislatures on this subject, should be reversed; that every commonweath should enact a body of laws for the protection of life and the punishment of offences against life, of the most discriminating, comprehensive, and stringent character; that Congress should follow this example; that the entire magistracy, from the humblest police justice up to the highest criminal tribunals, should set themselves to the enforcement of these statutes with exemplary industry and firmness; that under this course of administration, capital crimes should receive their righteous desert, and stupidity and carelessness occasioning a loss of life, *their* desert; that it should come to be understood, that every instance of death occurring otherwise than by the usual course of nature, would be thoroughly investigated, and the responsibility of it, so far as possible, fastened upon the proper parties; in a word, that our governments, state and national, should begin to treat human life as their most inviolable deposit, and the guardianship of it as their noblest function. What would be the effect upon the public mind? Can it be doubted, that corresponding sentiments would be generated throughout the Republic; that life would be regarded with more reverence; that murders and

assassinations would awaken greater abhorrence; that an increased attention to personal safety would disclose itself in all the processes of the mechanical arts; that amusements which imperil life would be regulated, and altercations more rigorously repressed; that individuals and companies engaged in the carrying of passengers, would cast away their worthless stock, frame better rules, look more to the competency of their officials and agents, and exercise a more jealous supervision over them; that in every department of society there would be an abatement of the heedlessness and impetuosity now so prevalent and so mischievous; in fine, that there would be a gradual and beneficent amelioration in that sordid estimate of life which has hitherto scandalized us? If these and similar results might be expected from a change of policy on the part of our constituted authorities, then are we warranted in specifying the past and (with some honorable local exceptions) present policy of these authorities, as one of the chief agencies in degrading human life almost to a par with the lives which are bought and sold at the shambles.

Various other causes might be enumerated as having contributed to fix this reproach upon us, but I am admonished of the danger of protracting this discussion beyond reasonable limits. Whatever may be thought of this attempt to solve the problem, it is of manifest and urgent importance, that the country should awake to very different views of the destruction of human life, from those which now prevail.

The wrong done to the *individual*, in every example



of this sort, is the greatest of all wrongs. Life is not a blessing to be *compared* with anything else. The simplest statement about it, is the most impressive that can be made. When you have said of a man, "He is dead!" you have said everything. Illustrations and analogies but weaken its force. You may talk of affluence ending in beggary, of domestic unhappiness, of pining sickness, of treacherous friends, of calumny, of persecution, of exile, of imprisonment; and you may accumulate all these in the experience of a single individual; how little do they weigh against that terse and awful sentence, "He is dead!" You have all felt this. You know what your emotions were, when you watched at the bedside of a beloved relative or friend, until, after days or weeks of unavailing conflict with the destroyer, you caught the last sigh, received the last look of recognition, felt the familiar hand grow cold in yours, saw the lamp of life go out, and heard some tremulous voice at your side utter those dreadful words, "He is gone!" And as you gazed upon that pallid corpse, which returned your friendly gaze no more, and thought of what he had been and what he was, and recalled the hopes that were crushed, and the ties that were sundered, and the hearts that were riven by this stroke, you felt that every other calamity was tolerable when compared with *death*. Nor were you mistaken. The estimate you put upon death in that hour of gloom and anguish, was just and fitting. It *is* all that you felt it to be; and life has all the untold value which you then ascribed to it. "Life," I say,—not the life, only, which you saw go out, and the extinction of which

pierced you with such sorrow, but human life, as such. The life of every murdered man, the life of every child that is run over in our streets, the life of every laborer who falls a victim to the crude and penurious appointments of his employer, the life of every stoker who perishes in doing the bidding of an incompetent engineer, the life of every traveller who is precipitated over a cliff by an intoxicated stage-driver, the lives of all those passengers who are swept into eternity by railroad and steamboat disasters,—every one of them was of “untold value.” Had they died a natural death, the same spectacle would, with many of them, have been presented, which occurred in your dwelling. And even had there been none to mourn for them, as you have mourned, their lives would have had the same inherent value, and death would have been the same unutterable evil. I do not mean to say that all lives are of equal value; but I mean, that in any and all cases, life derives its paramount value from the vital principle itself, not from its concomitants and circumstances. These are as diversified as men’s talents and relations, their employments and conditions; and they affect the relative importance of different lives; but this is very subordinate to the intrinsic value attached to the vital principle, which they hold as a common possession. The great, irreparable, universal evil which death involves, is, not that it strips men of their adventitious distinctions; not, even, that it dissolves the tenderest earthly relations; but that it extinguishes the principle of life. In so far as this world is concerned, the man ceases to be. It is as

though he had never been. This embosoms all minor evils; and we do well to consider those evils, in estimating the extent of the calamity. It is proper to embrace in our survey, the whole field of a man's relations and duties, his endowments, his occupation, his possessions, his family, his influence, all the hopes and all the interests that were bound up in his life, and all the losses and trials that are incident to his untimely death.

And here, if the time would permit, it might be pertinent to show, that every instance of death caused by design or by criminal carelessness, is no less a flagrant assault upon the *rights of society*, than the greatest of all possible wrongs (in so far as this world is concerned) to the individual; but I waive all reference to the politico-economical aspects of the question, to advert, for a moment, to a still higher and more pregnant view of its personal bearings.

It is impossible to frame any suitable conception of the value of life, or of the criminality of abridging its duration, without viewing man as an immortal being. The moment this idea is admitted into the inquiry, it overshadows everything else. The pains of dissolution, the pang of parting, the blighted hopes, the sorrows of widowhood and orphanage, the destruction of the vital spark, and whatever of grief and woe we may be accustomed to associate with the name of death considered simply as a temporal event—all becomes insignificant when we think of its future issues. It is the dismissal of an individual from time into eternity. It is the send-

ing him to the bar of his Maker. It is a terminating of all his opportunities for repentance and reformation. He is, thenceforth, done with the Bible and the throne of grace, with Sabbaths and sermons, with offers of pardon and tenders of reconciliation, with the Saviour's invitations and the Spirit's strivings,—all these are finished. He goes to appear before the "great white throne," and to receive his award of everlasting life, or of shame and everlasting contempt.

The responsibility of producing this change in the situation of a fellow-being, is tremendous. Words are as inadequate to define it, as they are to describe the change itself. But this is the responsibility of the wilful homicide, and, in his measure, of every one who causes death by sinful improvidence or presumption. If it were felt as it should be, life would not be so often sacrificed to passion and to folly. But it is not felt. This is a view of death which scarcely enters into the popular conception of it, as connected with these too familiar casualties. The record runs, that so many persons have been killed, or so many drowned, or so many burned to death in a steamboat. But how few there are who enter at all into the full import of such an announcement; who, though not insensible to its minor relations and mere secular bearings, are mainly impressed with it as a record, that so many accountable beings, some or all of them, possibly,

"Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd,"

have been dismissed, in the twinkling of an eye, into the presence of a holy God! To every believer in

Christianity, it is this consideration which must impress upon death its deepest solemnity, and upon life its highest value. Let it be lodged effectually in the public conscience, and interlaced, as it deserves to be, with all the ligaments of the social fabric, and human life, from being cast out as a thing of nought, will have the whole community keeping watch over it with sleepless and affectionate vigilance.

I have spoken of death (in the modes so frequently mentioned in this discourse) as being the greatest wrong which can be inflicted upon the individual and upon society. It only remains to be said, that it is a most daring and wicked *invasion of the Divine prerogative*.

There is nothing over which the Deity has reserved to himself a more implicit control than life and death. "The Lord killeth and maketh alive; he bringeth down to the grave and bringeth up." "I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal." As He alone can give life, so no creature may take it away without His permission. The wilful destruction of it, He has not only forbidden in the decalogue, but marked with His special abhorrence, by requiring every murderer to be put to death. And, as if to set forth in a yet more emphatic way, His estimate of the sacredness of life, and of the enormity of extinguishing it, he required even the involuntary homicide, among the Hebrews, to be tried; and if proved innocent, he was still treated as a quasi-prisoner, and prohibited, on pain of death, from quitting the city of refuge during the life of the high-priest. If further proof were wanting of the value He sets upon life, it

offers itself to us on every side, in the various and inexhaustible provision He has made for its nurture and protection; in the antidotes He has prepared to the diseases sin has introduced; and above all, in the infinite love He has displayed towards our race in sending His beloved Son into the world to redeem us.

These are all His mercies. We are responsible to Him for the use we make of them. It is for Him to say how long, and under what circumstances, we shall enjoy them. Upon our conduct here, "everlasting things" are suspended. This is our probation; heaven and hell hang upon it. Nor is this all. We are so implicated with one another, that we are all helping to determine each other's characters and destiny. Our life or death may seriously affect, for good or ill, the welfare of a nation, or the prosperity of the church. Nay, we are even allowed to say, that the glory of God Himself, the ever-blessed and incomprehensible Jehovah, may have some connexion with our longer or shorter continuance here.

These are sublime interests, if earth has any interests which can be called sublime. And the more they are pondered, the more apparent will it become that God must retain the power of life and death in His own hands; that it would be a surrender of His prerogative to transfer it to His creatures. Yet this august prerogative is usurped by every murderer; and it is virtually impugned by every one whose recklessness precipitates a fellow-man into eternity. The most solemn and eventful thing which occurs in this world, is, *the termi-*

*nating a man's probation.* This is a proper function of the Deity. It would be safe in no other hands. But multitudes dare to seize and wield it as if they were heaven's vicegerents. They would shrink from laying the weight of a finger upon the lever which guides a piece of massive enginery. But they have no proper horror of the inadvertence or the passionate impulse which may prove the instrument of destroying the wondrous mechanism of the human frame, and sending its terror-stricken tenant to the judgment-seat without a moment's warning. Whatever else may be understood, there is no just sense of the temerity of cutting short the probation of a being whose life, if extended to four-score years and ten, would be brief enough for the great work to be accomplished here. And, perhaps, the most serious and startling view which can be taken of this revolting indifference to the value of life, is, the irreverence and impiety involved in it. It is not simply an irreparable injury to the victim, and an aggravated wrong to society, but a direct assault upon the moral government of God—an audacious arrogating of His sovereignty. In this aspect, it is not to be "lamented" merely, but to be abhorred. The community which tolerates this low appreciation of life, is chargeable not simply with a defective civilization, but with deep criminality. The guilt of a most aggravated and inexcusable *sin* lies at its door; and every member of that community who is not exerting himself for its removal, is, in some degree, responsible for its existence.

We are called upon, then, as a nation, to wash our

hands of this great iniquity. Humanity and piety unite their remonstrances, and bid us stay this effusion of innocent blood. Victims enough have been sacrificed. Families enough have been shrouded in mourning. But for our remissness, peradventure, useful lives might have been spared, and many a household might have found this a festival of joy, to whom it is now only a memento of their bereavements.

Undoubtedly it is a difficult task which we have to accomplish. It is hard to revolutionize the habits of a people, but much harder to change their principles; and it has well-nigh become a principle with this nation, that human life is a possession of but trivial value. But the work is not hopeless, and, by the blessing of God, it can be achieved. The reformation must begin where the evil has originated, in the nursery. Our children must be *governed* as well as instructed. Filial reverence must take the place of filial insubordination. Our systems of education must be so modified, as to lay more restraint upon the passions, to inculcate the sinfulness of revenge and of all ungoverned tempers, and to inspire a profound veneration for human life. The pulpit must seek to imbue the public mind with more enlightened and scriptural views of this momentous subject. The press must lend its potential influence to the same beneficent reform. The legislatures must manifest their appreciation of life, by throwing around it every possible defence. The courts must enforce the laws, as well against fatal carelessness, as against deliberate murder, with inflexible firmness and rectitude. And execu-



tive magistrates must forbear the too frequent display of that well-meant but mistaken lenity, which so often defeats the ends of justice, and secures the immunity of criminals at the cost of the public safety.

Let these and other kindred agencies be brought to bear upon this subject, and with the favor of a benignant Providence, human life in the United States, may be restored to the sphere for which the Creator designed it, and become, once more, a SACRED THING.

THE END.