

Don't Risk It

(Hell, I Mean.)

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“The rich man also died: and he was buried in hell.” (Luke 16:22)

DO NOT RISK IT!

We have often read, or heard told, the story of the rich young man who refused the call of Christ, and we remember Our Lord's words on that occasion: “Amen, I say to you, that a rich man shall hardly enter the Kingdom of Heaven... it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven!” (Matt. 19.)

With his refusal of grace that rich young man passes from our ken and we hear of him no more. Naturally we sometimes wonder, did he indeed save his soul in the end? St. Augustine fears not, but whether or no he is certainly a type quite frequent in the history of souls, — men and women singled out by God for great things, and seemingly by their own efforts frustrating His plans. It might be of interest to take such a soul, and in the light of revealed Truth, trace its possible course in time and eternity. After the manner of Christ let us call him simply Dives, the rich man.

He comes of good respectable stock. His parents are both excellent Catholics. He has been educated in the fear and love of God; taught to be generous and observant. During his early years he has lived far from sin and worldliness, and seen nothing but what was good, pure and honourable, both at home and at school. To him, as to many such, comes the call to serve God all the days of his life in a very special manner as priest or religious, “Go, sell what you have, give to the poor, and come follow Me!”

The annual school retreat had been acclaimed by all a great success. The priest who gave it was rousing, inspiring and full of high ideals. He put the highest motives before the boys, gently suggesting that maybe one or two listening to him were called by God to the generous service of the priesthood. As he emphasised his words by forceful gestures, drove home his points, smiled kindly, allowed himself to be worked up to a fever-pitch of earnestness and zeal, a moment later slipping into whimsical humour, Dives could not but be attracted to him, and laid his thoughts before him in confession. He found patience and sympathy such as he had never before experienced. It looked to him as if in the eyes of this kind man the other hundred and twenty or so boys did not matter. There was plenty of time, plenty of fatherly advice, interest, and a very decided statement of the director's views. And so Dives had made up his mind. Yes indeed he would like to be a foreign missionary very much, but still he must get time to think it over. After all it was not a thing to be decided in a hurry: there was so much to be considered. And so as the retreat ended he was happy and decided in a vague kind of way. After all it was only September. He had till the following June before school ended. A lot could happen in that time. Indeed a good deal did: influences came to bear almost immediately on his fervour, working stronger and stronger as the year wore on, and so retreat

impressions waned or grew tarnished. Finally came June. Exams are over now. He must think it out. There can no longer be any delay.

Now Dives, need we say it, is rich.

His father has succeeded in business far beyond his most sanguine hopes. He is one of those rare people in whose hands everything turns to gold. But that has in no way affected him. He is a well-known figure at the 8.30 morning Mass, a noted social worker, and at the same time a popular and much sought-after companion. Dives' mother too, while a devout and exemplary woman in every way, is wealthy in her own right — property, shares, business interests and a considerable bank balance. Dives, being an only child is sole heir to all this. Must he then renounce it to save his soul? Surely there is some easier way? He knows there is no surer way, but it is hard to turn his back on it for ever. And so he is pensive and sad.

A persistent voice within he muffles relentlessly, throwing himself into the active life of his post-school days. Thoughts of death, eternity and God he shuns. Not that he is bad, or even, so he thinks, indifferent. Yes, later perhaps he will consider it, but not now. The world has so much to offer: there is so much to be seen and tasted. And so he refuses grace.

Dives had always been interested in drama at school, and now he joins the little group of local players, most of whom are old school-companions, their sisters and the sons and daughters of friends and acquaintances of the family. Having a decided talent, it is not long before a leading role falls to his lot.

Playing opposite him is Deirdre, a girl well known to him and his parents. He never really noticed her before, having grown up a healthy boy full of interest in sport and games. Indeed girls played little part either in his life or his thoughts so far. But week after week rehearsals throw them a great deal together, and for the first time Dives feels an awakening interest and pleasure in her company.

Of course he knows her history. She is a really excellent Catholic girl, passionately devoted to her home and parents, a model of piety and modesty. The fact cements a strong friendship founded on similar tastes and mutual understanding, a friendship fostered by both families. By the time the Christmas play is ready for the stage it has ripened into love.

Both are still young and inexperienced and, as often happens, they fail to distinguish two very different and yet similar things, love and passion. Alas how often parents are at fault for this neglect. How frequently young people could be helped avoid sins which haunt them in maturer years. The attempt can be made, though it is true it will not always succeed,

“She sang as she danced along the path

And the words came down to me,

What matter a thought for future years

When love and youth are free.

Singing she danced along the path,

With myriad flowers entwined,

Fairer her face than the days of spring,

But her eyes - oh, her eyes were blind!”

And so neither is Dives the innocent boy, nor Deirdre the modest girl of a few months back. What a tragedy that it should be so! Deirdre had always been delicate and subject to frequent colds and 'flu, and one day on opening a note Dives finds that on this occasion the doctor holds out no hope of recovery. Her lungs have become affected, and will he come and see her?

But what need is there for us to go through the oft-told story? In a mere matter of weeks it is all over, and the girl, that once spotless lily, whom Dives tempted and led from God has stood before her judge and rendered her last account. Certainly she had done all she could to make amends to Him, and her death was holy and happy. But yet Dives cannot help recriminating himself for what he has destroyed. Yes, any fool can besmirch virtue, but he is helpless to give back innocence once destroyed.

But life has hardened him a trifle now. With a cynical curl of his lip he says, well who cares? An adolescent romance! Why cry over spilt milk? Isn't life, novelty, adventure and happiness before me?

Such a mind, shutting itself off from God and prayer, and turning its affections almost exclusively to the things of time, has already begun to orientate itself very definitely; already it has started a downward course, imperceptible perhaps at first, but downward for all that. Gradually such a soul grows careless and tepid. A conscience once so scrupulous and exact hesitates a little, wavers a while, and then plunges recklessly and defiantly.

Into Dives' life creeps for the first time repeated deliberate sin, not mortal it is true, but still a habit of turning deliberately from God, a habit bred of love of self, love of ease and comfort.

We catch a glimpse of him as he drives his expensive motor-car with the reckless laugh and abandon of youth. We can pick him out at the race meeting, or amongst his influential friends in the lounge of the luxury hotel. In the ballroom, at the card-table or in the cocktail bar he is the leader of the revelry. We could not say that these things are sinful in themselves - the late night, the company of beautiful if worldly women, the companionship of careless friends. But there is more to it than that - the conversations, the drunkenness, the dangerous company of heedless girls, forgetful as himself of Christian restraint.

To sermons, the promptings of grace and the advice of friends he still turns a deaf ear. Someone, no doubt his own good mother, has warned him

“Touch the goblet no more,

It will make your heart sore to the core.

Its perfume is the breath of the Angel of death,

And the light that therein lies,

Is the flash of his evil eyes!

Beware, oh beware,

For sickness, sorrow and care are all there.

Like a vapour the vision shall pass,

And you still find in your heart

Only sorrow, and bitter, bitter contrition.”

But then Dives has all those attractive qualities which are dangerous. More than ordinarily handsome, of good height and appearance, he has an affable and even charming manner. He is intelligent, interesting, a favourite with men and much admired by womankind. About him there is nothing sinister. He is open and frank, but lacks that balance necessary to carry his talents and his great fortune safely. Yes, in his heart he knows things have gone wrong, and one day, one day soon he will fix it all up, but not yet.

And so the years pass.

Now he is his own master. His parents are dead and with his great possessions and the flattery of friends the wine of life has gone to his head. He is often drunk, and the women with whom he associates have already cost him much in gold and virtue. Great gaps have been made in the family possessions, but still the pace of living calls for further sacrifice. Always it is the same — money, money and still more money. Recklessly he gambles life and wealth. But nothing can, it appears, avert the coming ruin.

By now too he has plunged into matrimony with a woman whose influence and advice have, if anything, hastened the disaster. It is a marriage in which greed and lust have played the leading roles. It is a marriage prepared for by a life of sin, and in which the laws of God for man and wife are carelessly and continually flouted. Alas, there is no longer anyone to warn: no mother now to cry,

“Beware, my son, beware.”

“It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God!”

“One day, perhaps soon, even you must make the reckoning!”

Still the game goes fast and loose. There are other men’s wives and daughters who, after the fashion of women, are fascinated by the rake’s progress, and drawn into the whirlpool.

An unending round of riotous living and profligacy, sin and indulgence can be, indeed cannot be otherwise than expensive. To balance mounting bills and diminishing resources there is but one answer, and to right his fortunes temporarily he gambles business, stocks and ready cash, as already he has gambled life and health. It is a wild and reckless bid but for once successful. Alas, if only he had failed! For often failure can avert success. Now, once again insecurely on his feet, he mocks the just and the good and their timorous way, their haggling with life and eternity.

No wonder Christ warned against riches! Can they not harden the heart, and steel the soul with pride and contempt? He has but one merciless objective now, success and influence amongst his fellows. And so he oppresses the poor and the worker to make unjust gains, reaping where he has not sown.

And the world calls him a success!

Years ago his father had acquired a splendid estate of well-wooded land with lake and pastures, and there at considerable expense he had built his home in the most suitable setting, surrounded by beech-trees and approached by a magnificent avenue: In the layout money had not been spared. It is true he had been a most charitable man, freely giving to the poor, but his resources had been very vast. Everything about the place had been the most modern. There was stabling for many horses, lairs for great numbers of cattle, and outhouses far beyond the dreams of the most ambitious farmer. Within, the house had been appointed in the most exquisite taste, and there was furniture and

fittings of the most expensive varieties. What a home! And what scenes of revelry and licentiousness it now witnesses! What sorrow and disgrace this once respectable mansion must silently watch!

Yes, the world calls him a success. It is true he has wrecked women's lives, besmirched their virtue, broken their hopes and cast them aside as useless lumber on his path to prominence. True, he has sullied and brought shame on the family name. No heir of his shall go unspoken. Truer still he has wearied himself in the ways of iniquity and wickedness: life is now a shadow, all empty unreality, meaningless, insipid and disappointing. Nor has his way of life failed to make him old and tired before his time. The uselessness of it all now oppresses him, and so the reins hang loose, unheld. Oblivion is sought in wine, and drunkenness holds him abed on Sundays when others go to Mass. His days are passed in listless idleness, his mind and conversation steeped in vice. The card-table claims his money; womankind his virtue; the poor his ruthlessness and dishonesty; his home and wife his contempt and disregard. Yes, he is a blackguard and a swindler, a father even who is guilty of the foulest murder, out-heroding Herod. Indeed it is all true, but the world says he is a success and the world is always right!

On one occasion there had been a mission in the parish church, and a couple of times a friend had prevailed upon him to attend the evening sermons. He had been momentarily stirred by the earnestness and the eloquence of the preacher. Taking for his subjects salvation and sin on two separate nights it looked to Dives as if the missionary quite knew his whole story and was speaking to him personally. Every word he said, every bit of advice appeared aimed at him, and as he rose with the congregation to sing "God of Mercy and Compassion" there was little chance of escaping true compunction of heart. Really he had said to himself, this life could not go on. It was entirely too dangerous. He must not jeopardise his eternity. And as he left the church after Benediction and the final soul-stirring strains of "Faith of Our Fathers," sung by close on a thousand men — a moving manifestation of faith, even if true musical quality had been swallowed up in lusty and vigorous penitence — he was quite decided on his course.

But outside he had met some of the old companions who soon banished all thoughts of God and eternity from his mind. And crushing down an uneasy feeling of insecurity he once again plunged into the old life, all the persuasion of the good friend who had hoped for better things proving futile.

"Don't be a bore, old man," he had said. "I'm O.K. There is plenty of time. I'll make it all right. And whatever you do don't send that missionary after me, or you and I will cease to be friends!"

Taking his defeat in good grace, and choosing what seemed the lesser evil, the good Samaritan had held his peace.

But fortune's wheel turns swiftly. How frequently a man is dazed to find that while a moment ago he rode the crest of the wave, he is now in the trough. The next we see of Dives is in his physician's consulting room.

"You have asked me a straight question," says the doctor, "and I'm afraid I must give you a straight answer. You have played havoc with your constitution; you have ruined your health; you are eaten up with disease, and you cannot possibly live longer than a month!"

So now at last the bolt has fallen. It came so tardily he had almost begun to deny its possibility. True enough, others die, but somehow he had the feeling, quite against reason and common sense, that for him it was far off — so far off as to be altogether outside the picture.

But something must be done about the future. He recalls he is a Catholic. He will send for the priest and set right forty years of misspent life. And so, as the confessor sits by the bedside of the dying man, he dons his purple stole to hear a last confession.

And now we must chronicle a fact hard to read, but harder still to write. Shame, fear and a heart confirmed in sin make that last confession a bad one. There are some who will doubt such a possibility. Clearly then they have never come across a soul fast in Satan's meshes. Grace so often offered and rejected is rejected still.

With bewildered brain and staring eyes Viaticum is received unworthily. Nor have the Last Anointing and Apostolic Blessing availed anything to a man who now has turned his back on God finally and for ever.

O My God, what a destiny! And life and career once looked so promising! The start was good: a childhood so pure; an adolescence so unworldly; even early manhood was not entirely beyond hope. And now, carefully forging each link in his chains and manacles as he went, he has bound himself a captive, destined himself to torture for all eternity. We said this makes hard reading; its writing is harder still.

Friends and relations console themselves at the peaceful death. They will see him one day in glory. Alas how little do they know! How often some of us have said these things and wondered! For of what avail is a peaceful death, features youthful and composed in the last sleep, to one who will never be seen in paradise? Dives is dead and his soul is buried in hell. Now indeed the loom is silent. The shuttles have ceased to fly. The pattern is complete: the tapestry is one of hatred and sin, vice and indulgence, scandal and injustice. And the weaver's hand is stilled for ever!

On the coffin lid as it leans against the wall stands the sign of salvation, but it is of no avail.

Mass cards lie upon the bed and counterpane. They will not mean anything to him.

The Requiem Mass will be said in the parish church with chanting, incense and much solemnity. But its fruits are not for Dives. He is buried in hell.

Past the gates of his splendid and luxurious home the funeral cortege will pass. The blinds will be drawn in mourning, and within the women will recite the Rosary for his soul. But he is no longer a son of Mary's. He is buried in hell and has lost his all. He bartered soul for this world's goods and now he has lost both the one and the other.

At the graveside there will be the final prayers and Absolution. But they will profit him not. His body will be lowered into the consecrated ground and rest beneath the shadow of the cross. But his soul? Surely it is unnecessary to repeat that awe-inspiring sentence!

Looking at human existence in the light of revealed Truth we see all this to be a frightful possibility, and it is quite unnecessary to paint a lurid or startling picture. It is best left to quiet thoughtful prayer.

But now we venture forth on the wings of Revelation to regions unexplored by human science. We do so of set purpose, for we would learn a salutary, a profitable lesson for ourselves. So let us approach in spirit and see the fate of this luckless man. Let us draw near to the terrible region of torment over whose portals, written in fiery letters, stand the words: "This is the entrance to the city of grief; this is the way to the lost race; let those who enter here leave hope behind!"

Some time ago a Catholic magazine published an article on our neighbour, the sun. In that essay some startling facts were given which, even if we are not in a position to verify accurately, may at the same time give us some faint idea of the power of God to punish sin.

We are told, amongst other facts, that the surface of the sun has a temperature of 11,000° F. and that a difference of 2,500° makes the sunspots appear black by comparison. According to the account the sun is made up of five different layers, each fiercely burning and chemically active; the core is atomic energy with a temperature of 22,000,000° F. Just to think of it!

Surely such astronomical figures, so great as to be almost meaningless to our little minds, convey to us something of the infinite greatness and power of God, of Him Who created the vast heavens, the mighty restless oceans, the monsoon, the tornado and the lightning flash. Yes, it is the same Lord Who punishes sin, and we can be sure He uses no half-measures. God loves Himself infinitely, and hates sin as intensely as He loves Himself. Who then shall measure the punishment? Who shall form the vaguest notion of it? Surely we can say, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God has prepared for those who..." ... offend Him by mortal sin unrepented! (See 1 Corinthians 2:9. "But, as it is written: That eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for them that love him.")

Let us try to state facts soberly and with restraint. Approach then while we speak to and question the hapless victim of his own misdeeds.

But first of all you say, how shall we picture hell?

It is an immense prison, whose gates are shut and bolted by eternal decrees, darker than the darkest winter night, hideous and loathsome, where fires are kindled by the infinite and eternal wrath of God. Furnaces and boilers in which metals are melted or water heated have such a suffocating blast, that even for a brief space of time and at a distance, they are calculated to overcome the stoutest constitution. They are such that not for one second would we dare thrust the tip of our finger within. What then shall we say of a fire united to the being of the damned as heat to the glowing horseshoe, as soul to body, making the blood to boil within the veins and the marrow within the bones?

Is it not rather a mockery to try to describe the pains of hell? How our blood runs cold when we read of martyrs burned at the stake: of St. Isaac Jogues and companions, whose eyes were plucked out and replaced by burning coals; under whose nails white-hot metal wedges were driven; about whose naked necks fearsome metal chains, raised to scaring heat, were placed. If we stand speechless and horrified at such torture, what shall, what can we say of hell?

In the modern world there are many who cannot get themselves to believe in the fact. They say it is too awful. A good God could never permit it. It could never fit in with the scheme of things. To these objections there are many answers, as when the old parson said, "A religion without a hell is not worth a d—!" But let us take one fact only. In every age of history there have been characters almost without redeeming goodness, wicked and evil men whom in life we would shun, whose very presence would fill us with loathing and a cold paralysing fear. Of course no human being is entirely evil, but with such men we approach as near to unrelieved evil as ever we shall in human affairs. Somehow they do not easily fit in with a theology without a hell. Admitting the immortality of the soul where shall we place them? Where else but hell?

Draw near then as we make our way to the luckless victim of his own malice. What human words shall speak the agony of the damned? Their cries of despair, anguish and hatred; their curses against

their neighbour and their blasphemies against God? How bitterly they bewail the day they were born! What shall we say of the moans, the shrieks of pain, of the fearful company of Satan and the Fallen Angels? When we conjure up the picture of this hapless people, this forgotten race, the off-scourings of humanity, loathsome, diabolical, impure, sadistic and satanical, our minds are filled with indescribable terror and anguish. Should we see those contorted malicious faces filled with malevolence and every evil; could we fathom their wicked minds, or watch them lay sinful, murderous hands on one another, the sight would be too much for human endurance. For them there is no longer any peace, rest or happiness, only terror, horror and soul-searching agony. Of this bodily and spiritual suffering Christ solemnly warns us, not once but many times: the salting with fire and the worm that dies not. "... but rather fear Him," says Our Saviour, " that can destroy both soul and body into hell." (Matt. 10:28.)

It is of course true that men and women can bear almost unbelievable sufferings and intense pain of long duration. Given a good night's rest or buoyed up with the hope of deliverance at some future date, we human beings can surprise even ourselves. A small thing may distract our minds. A little kindness shown may help us on our way. The presence of a friend may solace us; we may build our hope in God alone; our doctor may drug us into senselessness. But no such solace can be found in hell as long as God is God.

By the light of Revelation we might easily work all this out for ourselves. But let us now rather question Dives on the anguish of mind known only to the lost. He will tell us: "Yes, I am lost. For all eternity I am fated to meditate and say, I am lost, lost through my own fault. I am lost because of the misuse of God's creatures; I have laboured to secure my own destruction, and now eternally I perish and yet I live."

Timidly we ask: "Is there no small solace, comfort of any kind? Surely it can't be entirely evil; our human minds could hardly grasp such an idea!"

"My soul," answers the tortured Dives amid revolting blasphemy and soul-sickening curses, "my soul," he pants, "was made for God. Have you never read the words of St. Augustine? 'Our hearts were made for You, O Lord, and they shall never rest unless they rest in You!' There can be no comfort or solace without Him. Ah, if only I had realised this in time! If I had served and loved God upon earth I could have been joyously happy in life, for happiness comes only from a heart at peace with God. Believe you nothing else, on your lives! Yes, happy in life and blissful for all eternity!"

"And how I ridiculed and scoffed at the lives of those now in heaven. But now that I am lost I see: fool that I was I esteemed their lives madness and their end without honour, therefore I erred from the way of truth and wearied myself in the way of iniquity!"

If we can bring ourselves to raise our eyes and look upon this tortured soul in the light of faith; if we can prevent a shudder of revulsion and terror, we will most assuredly be harrowed by pity and the deepest feelings of sorrow and sympathy.

Bravely, and a little innocently, we ask: "And what do you blame for your misfortune? Alas we fully realise we can never help you, but perhaps we may be able to help others avoid this cruel terrifying fate."

"Alas indeed, but no one is to blame but myself. Such wonderful graces did I receive in life.

"Was I not called to the true Faith?

“Did I not have the best parents in the world?

“Good teachers, true friends and holy priests?

“And all the while my talents lay unused, and grace and good advice unheeded. I never looked before me or thought of death or the possibility of hell. I have been able to show no smallest grain of virtue, and now I am consumed in my own sinfulness. You ask, what brought about my ruin? I will tell you: something unjustly acquired — a miserable earthly fortune which even in life troubled my conscience, and which now my heirs are recklessly squandering. Of what avail is it to me now? Oh, if only I had one hour’s freedom! A second chance!

“Then there were sinful friendships. And now having renounced me to my fate, my former companions in sin are reconciled to God in heaven and triumph eternally. Oh, if God would only give me one hour, a second chance!

“Then there were filthy sins of the flesh which made me despise myself. There was passing pleasure which for the moment I hardly enjoyed because of remorse. Oh, if God would only give me a second chance, how careful I would be!”

‘Time’s value he who loses understands,

‘Fierce is the wish of men tonight in hell

‘That they might once more grasp with nervous hands

‘The mighty instrument and use it well.’

“And how easily it could all have been done! God created me for heaven. He loved me. He gave me all. He even died for me. And it was all in vain because I loved the worthless tinsel of wealth; I loved senseless honour and reputation; I was a slave to passion, impurity, drink and sloth. For these have I sold my soul! Ah now I understand fully the words of Christ, ‘What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?’ Beware!”

As we listen we are preoccupied with our own thoughts, for we know his history — what it cost him to lose his soul, wearying himself in the way of iniquity and perdition; walking difficult paths and ignoring the paths of justice and honour; ruining health, losing worldly position, bringing shame and disgrace on the once honourable family name. We cannot but feel, as the sad confession unfolds a tragic story, that had he taken half the pains to save his soul that he did to lose it, he could this day be numbered amongst the saints of God. But now lost eternally he shall never see God, never escape these hideous sufferings, this terrible awe-inspiring company. Surely the hand of God is upon him as he writhes in the fierce flame of hell.

Again it strikes us that if Dives had been told that, let us say, for one sin of impurity he would be condemned to suffer a loathsome disease confined to bed in torture and mental suffering for, let us suppose, twenty, thirty or forty years, he would at least have hesitated?

Most certainly. Unless we are bad judges of human nature he would have striven by every means within his power to reject temptation. Strange indeed and yet he feared not hell! Or is it perhaps not truer to say that he had no appreciation of it? That he shut out the thought? That is pretty certainly the truer way of putting it — so many men and women do likewise. But recall, this is of no mere few years’ duration.

A sick man may ask from his bed of pain, what time is it? Should we answer, midnight, he will groan aloud and cry, if only morning would come. Dives may well ask, how long must I suffer? And the vaulted roof of hell replies, eternally. A hundred years* have passed. How long, he cries, how long now?

(Footnote: * This is a manner of speaking. There is no time, no duration in hell. Eternity is ever completely and entirely present.)

As many stars as the firmament holds, as many drops of water as the sea contains, as many grains of sand as the shores support, add them up. Call the number years. How much is left? Eternity, eternity, whole and undivided.

And when, he asks of us, shall it end? We answer, never, never. Fill the heavens, the surface of the globe with the number of the years spent by a soul in torment. Multiply it by the number of the stars, the leaves, the grains of sand, the drops of water. When, that has passed Dives asks, how long remains? We answer, eternity. God is still God, sin is still sin, and the lost are still lost — lost for all eternity!

Of a truth may we reflect — Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive what God has prepared for those who offend Him by unrepented mortal sin!

But one thing Dives craves us to remember. Already he has spoken of it in a passing way, but it is too important to be lightly passed over. It deserves special attention. It is the kernel and the centre-point of eternal punishment — the pain of loss, eternal loss of God, for Whom every human soul, even when it little realises, longs with a desire, never otherwise to be appeased.

“Remember as you value your eternity,” Dives says, “that you were created for God. No mere creature can ever fill that little human heart. You may have seen the hardened drunkard crave for drink, torn almost by unseen demons if he does not get his wish; or it may have been the rolling eye of the incurable drug-addict; or perhaps you have read about the impure in the clutch of his unchaste desires; or you have witnessed the bird of the forest, caged and beating itself to death against its prison bars in hopeless bids for freedom, but all these give no faint idea of the soul’s restless yearning for God, never, never, never to be satisfied in hell!”

“Beware then,” he begs, “beware of my pitiless fate. You may have lost wife or child or parent. You know full well what that sad loss meant at the time. Multiply it a million times and you know not mine. Perhaps you blamed yourself that you did not do all you could to save them — you could have got medicines, called in specialists, procured a change of air, or given more personal attention and taken greater care. But of course there is no remedy against death. It was God’s will, not your fault. But lose God in hell and the fault is yours and yours alone. Beware, in God’s name, beware! Time is no healer here! We, the Lost Race, alas we never forget! We have seen God once in Judgement. Now we realize — ‘Oh, Beauty ever ancient, ever new, too late have we known You! Too late! Too late!’ Beware!”

You will say no doubt that possibly all this is exaggerated. Is that possible?

A certain priest, let us call him Fr. X, once met Dives and spoke to him as really as these lines speak to you. Naturally the reader might ask, and how could that be? Well, Fr. X met a man whose last confession was a bad one. It was all over and he lay with multiple sacrilege, and the many and grievous sins of a dissipated lifetime uneasily awaiting the end. Quietly he fell into semi-consciousness and then everything blacked out. The end?

For some unaccountable reason — the ever beautiful Mercy of God no doubt — it was not the end. Contrary to all human expectation he lived. Awakening hours afterwards he felt slightly better, and after weeks of painful convalescence he could manage to crawl about. When he was sufficiently strong he made his way to a church, told his hair-raising story to Fr. X and made his peace with the All-merciful God. Where he is now, or who he is, or whether he is dead or alive, Fr. X could never say, even if he knew. All we need know is that the story is a true one, and that it brings home to us the mind of God, Who wills not the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live.

Dives then is not a pure figment of the imagination. And it is to be hoped that his history will one day fall into the hands of a life-long sinner, not to discourage but to warn and to help. God grant that it may be so, for there are unfortunately many men and women who, regardless of eternity, still play with hell-fire, standing as it were on the brink of perdition, riotously and recklessly joking.

To such these pages speak: “Tell us, O sinner, do you still think sin a joke? Something to be trifled with? The merciful, just and good God punishes mortal sin by hell. Speak, do you still think it a casual matter of no importance? Many are perhaps in hell for a mortal sin. Indeed in the last resort all who die in mortal sin are there because of one mortal sin, their last, and for the hardened sinner that might have been any one of a long series. We might indeed ask such, how many times they have already merited eternal punishment? Or could they give any valid reason why they are not already there?”

There is indeed a reason.

O Jesus, crucified for us men and for our sins, it is Your mercy alone, Your immense patience! Exalted on Your cross of suffering and humiliation You have closed and scaled the gates of hell! O Holy Mary, was it not You who placated the fury of a just God and withheld the avenging blow?

But of course there is an end to all things in human affairs. The sands of time run out, and if the sinner continues in his sin not even the crucified Christ in His infinite Mercy, nor our Holy Mother Herself can save him. We may only hope that through the Merits of Christ applied by Mary and the Catholic Church he will throw himself upon his knees in sorrow and gratitude before it is too late, promising to amend and make satisfaction.

The thought of hell is indeed the expression of God’s all-embracing Love — Its cogent appeal. This is not so evident on first thoughts, but when we remember that God knows us as we can never know ourselves, knows us as a Creator knows His creature, in all our weakness, folly and waywardness, then perhaps we will come to understand that for our own good He will go very near to forcing us to love Him. “He knows our frame. He remembers that we are but dust.” (Ps. 102: 14. It is 103:14 in the Hebrew, but read the entire Psalm!) And so the thought of hell should awaken in us in the first place an appreciation of God’s boundless Love and infinite Mercy.

For each and all of us it has its lesson. Broadly speaking men can be divided into three classes, the good, the lukewarm, and the sinner, and to each of these it has its appeal.

To the just. Christ warns them to watch and pray continually that they enter not into temptation and so endanger their souls.

The thought of hell warns them that they dare not fail, but be ever ready and watchful.

“Blessed is that servant, whom when the lord shall come, he shall find watching. Verily I say to you, he will set him over all that he possesses.” (Luke 12:43-44.)

Then the tepid, the penitent but wavering sinner. Hell is the constant reminder that he must not, dare not fall back, or turn to creatures instead of God. “Do penance for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 3:2.)

Lastly the hardened and the careless sinner. The message of hell is the importance of saving his soul, that he turn back before it is too late, for God wills not the death of the sinner but that he be converted and live.

In our modern age we are constantly looking for the secret of this and the secret of that: some easy formula that, as the saying goes, will do the trick. We speak of the secret of success, the secret weapon that will win wars, the secret of the atomic bomb and the like. Frequently we moderns demand a simple solution which will solve quite complicated problems. It might be suggested that here we have a simple and most useful secret — the secret of salvation, the secret even of great sanctity.

The thought of hell, that is the abiding thought of hell, has made great saints. It is not untrue to say that all holiness is built upon it, the fear of God and His judgements; for the fear of God is, according to Revelation, the beginning of wisdom.

We might then with great profit cherish this thought always and ever. If we do so we are building a solid edifice for eternity. And as we lay our heads upon our pillows at night let us ask ourselves, are we ready? And as we rise in the morning, go about our work, meet our daily temptations, in our hours off, in our homes, amongst our friends, let us remember the words of St. Paul and our eternal salvation is secure:

“It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 10:31.)
