

We ourselves, must Pilgrims be,
Launch our Mayflower and steer boldly
Through the desperate winter sea,
Nor attempt the Future's portals
With the Past's blood-rusted key."

THE BLIGHT OF PRECEDENT

Beekman Prize Oration by Max S.
Handman.

To us, living in a civilization that puts the crown upon achievement, regardless of race and creed, it seems indeed unfamiliar to meditate upon a worthy deed being scorned as of no merit because of the race or doctrine of him who accomplished it. To us, who are proud of institutions which being thoroughly imbued with a wholesome and progressive spirit of democracy, recognize value where it is;—to us it seems merely a matter of tale and fancy, the story of a whole race scattered among the nations, driven from land to land, for no cause but groundless race antagonism. It is hard on us here to conceive the spectacle of a people slaving under the crushing load of a past imposed by others; groaning under the heavy burden of sins never committed; trembling under the fearful oppression of deeds never done, of passions never felt, of desires never known. Our mind is powerless to think of a race being singled out for disgrace and calumny accused of the impossible and punished for what is as well as for what is not. Americans can never imagine any people being constantly exposed to the killing off of what is best and noblest within them, borne down by the Blight of Precedent.

The world has ever looked down with disdain upon the Jew. Even now in most countries, his faults are not human faults, his transgressions are judged by no human code. He is to scorn the immutable laws of nature and to mankind not what mankind in its most disgraceful moments has made him, but he is to be an angel—an angel of suffering and sorrow.

For what is the history of the Jews but a story of blood, and hatred, and ruin, and destruction?

What has been their life but a constant struggle against famine, misery and persecution? What event of importance in the life of the world has passed without leaving a bloody imprint upon the life of the Jews? What have the nations done, whether in war or in peace, that the Jew has not had

to pay for with his heart's blood? Where is there one stone, in all the buildings that make up the glory of this earth, one stone that has not been bathed in a sea of tears shed by Jewish eyes?

Oh! were it that these walls were wide enough to embrace the whole world! were it that the Gods had given to my voice the strength of the thunder, that I might call out to mankind the crime it has committed against a race as great as it is unfortunate; as noble as it is oppressed!

Behold what the nations have done to us! They have scattered us over the whole face of this earth and branded us with the stigma of the outcast; they have confined us to a narrow life of activity; they have set up barriers to our progress, and have driven us on with brutal force to the piling up of gold. We have plowed their fields, builded their houses and cities, established their commerce, filled their coffers with silver and gold, and as a reward we were driven from our homes and burnt at the stake! They have shut us in dark and grimy places with out air to breathe or light to see, and have asked from us, as the price of our lives; money! And we have done everything in our power to satisfy their greed, for where is the human being that will not attempt the impossible, just to be able to live! Year after year they have asked from us, in addition to our energies, to our honor, to our souls, also our blood—and the blood of the children of Israel has crimsoned many a page of this world's history!

We have fought for liberty and have reaped the fiercest of slaveries, the slavery of the soul. They have crushed us between stones of persecution, they have pressed our heart's blood out of us drop after drop, they have torn our flesh from our bodies, they have crippled and dwarfed our minds,—and all through the ages it rang in our ears, the horrifying cries of the nations: give us money! sell your souls to the devil and give us money, money, money!

This was the life of the chosen people the special children of God! How then can we be otherwise than what such merciless cruelty has made us? How can we tear ourselves away from the curse of the past, from the Blight of Precedent? But notwithstanding all this suffering and misery and sorrow; notwithstanding all the innumerable and almost insurmountable obstacles set up before us; in spite of

all the slackening of our energies and our souls,—we have still given to the world our help to social advancement and social happiness.

But today! Today, when the light of culture and civilization is shining gloriously upon mankind; when better and stronger than ever mankind has come to the recognition that we are all children of one Father, one God has created us all, today, do our brothers give us our share of brotherly love and kindness? Have the nations learnt the value of our lives, or that our lives have any value at all? Are the one million five hundred thousand Jews of Austria, Galicia and Hungaria; are the two hundred thousand Jews of Roumania; the so-many more of France, Asia-Minor and Algeria; are the five millions of Jews in Russia; are they any surer today of their lives and liberties than they were five centuries ago?

These eyes have seen the reply to this question. These eyes have seen the misery of miseries in the life of the Jews. They have seen the outcome of groundless hatred and cruelty. I have seen, in Rumania, in Russia starving women and children, men that were giving themselves away for a crust of bread, girls that were selling their bodies and their honor, driven on by hunger and need for rest. I have seen the answer given to the hand stretched out for help; fragments of flesh and brains plastered upon the walls, limbs torn from their bodies; the horrifying remains of what an hour before were living, throbbing human beings. These hands have been splashed by the blood of powerless old men, too weak to flee from their pursuers. I have been beaten and tortured for no crime, but that of being born a Jew.

Oh God; Why hast thou chosen this race for suffering and sorrow? Why dost thou leave our lives to us after having taken all that makes life worth living? Why art thou so eager for our blood, blood? Oh God, thou art a lie, and thy law is a falsehood!

But no! Forgive my anger, Oh God! How could my soul keep its peace when my body is quivering under the most horrifying pains? But thou art just! For thee all this suffering and misery and pain? Glory to God, glory!

As for the Jews, I ask not mercy, but justice! I ask not pity, but fairness! Yet living in this beautiful and beneficial land, help us shake off our shoulders the curse of the past.—The Blight of Precedent!