

THE SHORTEST-WAY WITH THE DISSENTERS [CA. 1704]

Daniel Defoe

Sir Robert L'Estrange tells us a story in his collection of Fables, of the Cock and the Horses. The Cock was gotten to roost in the stable among the horses; and there being no racks or other conveniences for him, it seems, he was forced to roost upon the ground. The horses jostling about for room, and putting the Cock in danger of his life, he gives them this grave advice, "Pray, Gentlefolks! let us stand still I for fear we should tread upon one another!"

There are some people in the World, who, now they are *unperched*, and reduced to an equality with other people, and under strong and, very just apprehensions of being further treated as they deserve, begin, with ESOP'S COCK, to preach up Peace and Union and the Christian duty of Moderation; forgetting that, when they had the Power in their hands, those Graces were strangers in their gates!

It is now, near fourteen years, that the glory and peace of the purest and most flourishing Church in the world has been eclipsed, buffeted, and disturbed by a sort of men, whom, GOD in His Providence, has suffered to insult over her, and bring her down. These have been the days of her humiliation and tribulation. She has borne with an invincible patience, the reproach of the wicked: and GOD has at last heard her prayers, and delivered her from the oppression of the stranger.

And now, they find their Day is over! their power gone! and the throne of this nation possessed by a Royal, *English*, true, and ever constant member of, and friend to, the Church of England! Now, they find that they are in danger of the Church of England's just resentments! Now, they cry out, "Peace!" "Union!" "Forbearance!" and "Charity!": as if the Church had not too long harboured her enemies under her wing! and nourished the viperous brood, till they hiss and fly in the face of the Mother that cherished them!

No, Gentlemen! the time of mercy is past! your Day of Grace is over! you should have practised peace, and moderation, and charity, if you expected any yourselves!

We have heard none of this lesson, for fourteen years past! We have been huffed and bullied with your *Act of Toleration*! You have told us, you are the Church established by Law, as well as others! have set up your canting Synagogues at our Church doors! and the Church and her members have been loaded with reproaches, with Oaths, Associations, Abjurations, and what not! Where has been the mercy, the forbearance, the charity you have shewn to tender consciences of the Church of England that could not take Oaths as fast as you made them? that having sworn allegiance to their lawful and rightful King, could not dispense with that Oath, *their King being still alive*; and swear to your new hodge podge of a Dutch Government? These have been turned out of their Livings, and they and their families left to starve! their estates double taxed to carry on a war they had no hand in, and you got nothing by!

What account can you give of the multitudes you have forced to comply, against their consciences, with your new sophistical Politics, who, like New Converts in France, sin because they cannot starve? And now the tables are turned upon you; you must not be persecuted! it is not a Christian spirit!

You have butchered one King! deposed another King! and made a Mock King of a third! and yet, you could have the face to expect to be employed and trusted by the fourth! Anybody that did not know the temper of your Party, would stand amazed at the impudence as well as the folly to think of it!

Your management of your Dutch Monarch, who you reluced to a mere King of Cls [Clubs], is enough to give any future Princes such an idea of your principles, as to warn them sufficiently from coming into your clutches; and, GOD be thanked! the Queen is out of your hands! knows you! and will have a care of you!

There is no doubt but the Supreme Authority of a nation has in itself, a Power, and a *right to that Power*, to execute the Laws upon any part of that nation it governs. The execution of the known Laws of the land, and that with but a gentle hand neither, was all that the Fanatical Party of this land have ever called Persecution. This they have magnified to a height, that the sufferings of the Huguenots in France were not to be compared with them. Now to execute the known Laws of a nation upon those who transgress them, after having first been voluntarily consenting to the making of those Laws, can never be called Persecution, but Justice. But Justice is always Violence to the party offending! for every man is innocent in his own eyes.

The first execution of the Laws against Dissenters in England, was in the days of KING JAMES I; and what did it amount to? Truly, the worst they suffered was, at their own request, to let them go to New England, and erect a new colony; and give them great privileges, grants, and suitable powers; keep them under protection, and defend them against all invaders; and receive no taxes or revenue from them!

This was the cruelty of the Church of England! Fatal lenity! It was the ruin of that excellent Prince, King CHARLES I. Had King JAMES sent all the Puritans in England away to the West Indies; we had been a national unmixed Church! the Church of England had been kept undivided and entire!

To requite the lenity of the Father, they take up arms against the Son, conquer, pursue, take, imprison, and at last to death the Anointed of GOD, and destroy the very Being and Nature of Government: setting up a sordid Impostor, who had neither title to govern, nor understanding to manage, but supplied that want, with power, bloody and desperate counsels and craft, without conscience.

Had not King JAMES I. withheld the full execution of the Laws: had he given them strict justice, he had cleared the nation of them! And the consequences had been plain; his son had never been murdered by them, nor the Monarchy overwhelmed. It was too much mercy shewn them that was the ruin of his posterity, and the ruin of the nation's peace. One would think the Dissenters should not have the face to believe, that we are to be wheedled and canted into Peace and Toleration, when they know that they have once requited us with a Civil War, and once with an intolerable and unrighteous Persecution, for our former civility.

Nay, to encourage us to be easy with them, it is apparent that they never had the upper hand of the Church, but they treated her with all the severity, with all the reproach and contempt as was possible! What Peace and what Mercy did they shew the loyal Gentry of the Church of England, in the time of their triumphant Commonwealth? How did they put all the Gentry of England to ransom, whether they were actually in arms for the King or not! making people compound for their estates, and starve their families! How did they treat the Clergy of the Church of England! sequester the Minifers! devour the patrimony of the Church, and divide the spoil, by sharing the Church lands among their soldiers, and turning her Clergy out to starve! Just such measure as they have meted, should be measured to them again!

Charity and Love is the known doctrine of the Church of England, and it is plain She has put it in practice towards the Dissenters, even beyond what they ought, till She has been wanting to herself, and in effect unkind to her own sons: particularly, in the too much lenity of King JAMES I., mentioned before. Had he so rooted the Puritans from the face of the land, which he had an opportunity early to have done; they had not had the power to vex the Church, as since they have done.

In the days of King CHARLES II., how did the Church reward their bloody doings, with lenity and mercy! Except the barbarous Regicides of the pretended Court of Justice, not a soul suffered, for all the blood in an unnatural war! King CHARLES came in all mercy and love, cherished them, preferred them, employed them, withheld the rigour of the Law; and oftentimes, even against the advice of his Parliament, gave

them Liberty of Conscience: and how did they requite him? With the villainous contrivance to depose and murder him and his successor, at the Rye Plot!

King JAMES, as if mercy was the inherent quality of the Family, began his reign with unusual favour to them. Nor could their joining with the Duke of MONMOUTH against him, move him to do himself justice upon them. But that mistaken Prince, thinking to win them by gentleness and love, proclaimed a Universal Liberty to them! and rather discountenanced the Church of England than them! How they requited him, all the World knows!

The late reign is too fresh in the memory of all the World to need a comment. How under pretence of joining with the Church in redressing some grievances, they pushed things to that extremity, in conjunction with some mistaken Gentlemen, as to depose the late King: as if the grievance of the Nation could not have been redressed but by the absolute ruin of the Prince!

Here is an instance of their Temper, their Peace, and Charity!

To what height they carried themselves during the reign of a King of their own! how they crope into all Places of Trust and Profit! how they insinuated themselves into the favour of the King, and were at first preferred to the highest Places in the nation! how they engrossed the Ministry! and, above all, how pitifully they managed! is too plain to need any remarks.

But particularly, their Mercy and Charity, the spirit of Union, they tell us so much of, has been remarkable in Scotland. If any man would see the spirit of a Dissenter, let him look into Scotland! There, they made entire conquest of the Church! trampled down the sacred Orders and suppressed the Episcopal Government, with an absolute, and, as they supposed, irretrievable victory! though it is possible, *they may find themselves mistaken!*

Now it would be a very proper question to ask their impudent advocate, the Observer, "Pray how much mercy and favour did the members of the Episcopal Church find in Scotland, from the Scotch Presbyterian Government?" and I shall undertake for the Church of England, that the Dissenters shall still receive as much here, though they deserve but little.

In a small treatise of *The Sufferings of the Episcopal Clergy in Scotland*, it will appear what usage they met with! How they not only lost their Livings; but, in several places, were plundered and abused in their persons! the Ministers that could not conform, were turned out, with numerous families and no maintenance, and hardly charity enough left to relieve them with a bit of bread. The cruelties of the Party were innumerable, and are not to be attempted in this short Piece.

And now, to prevent the distant cloud which they perceive to hang over their heads from England, with a true Presbyterian policy, they put it for a Union of Nations! that England might unite their Church with the Kirk of Scotland, and their Assembly of Scotch canting Long-Cloaks in our Convocation. What might have been, if our Fanatic Whiggish Statesmen continued, GOD only knows! but we hope we are out of fear of that now.

It is alleged by some of the faction, and they have begun to bully us with it, that "if we won't unite with them, they will not settle the Crown with us again; but when Her Majesty dies, will choose a King for themselves!"

If they won't we must make them! and it is not the first time we have let them know that we are able! The Crowns of these Kingdoms have not so far disowned the Right of Succession, but they may retrieve it again; and if Scotland thinks to come off from a Successive to an Elective State of Government; England has not promised, not to assist the Right Heir, and put him into possession, without any regards to their ridiculous Settlements.

THESE are the Gentlemen! these, their ways of treating the Church, both at home and abroad!

Now let us examine the Reasons they pretend to give, why we should be favourable to them? why we should continue and tolerate them among us?

First. *They are very numerous, they say. They are a great part of the nation, and we cannot suppress them!*

To this, may be answered,

First. They are not so numerous as the Protestants in France: and yet the French King effectually cleared the nation of them, at once; and we don't find he misses them at home!

But I am not of the opinion, they are so numerous as is pretended. Their Party is more numerous than their Persons; and those misaiaken people of the Church who are misled and deluded by their wheedling artifices to join with them, make their Party the greater: but those will open their eyes when the Government shall set heartily about the Work, and come off from them, as some animals, which they say, always desert a house when it is likely to fall.

Secondly. The more numerous, the more dangerous; and therefore the more need to suppress them! and GOD has suffered us to bear them as goads in our sides, for not utterly extinguishing them long ago.

Thirdly. If we are to allow them, only because we cannot suppress them; then it ought to be tried, Whether we can or not? And I am of opiniou, it is easy to be done! and could prescribe Ways and Means, if it were proper: but I doubt not the Government will find effectual methods for the rooting of the contagion from the face of this land.

Another argument they use, which is this. *That this is a time of war; and we have need to unite against the common enemy.*

We answer, This common enemy had been no enemy, if they had not made him so! He was quiet, in peace, and no way disturbed and encroached upon us; and we know no reason we had to quarrel with him.

But further. We make no question but we are able to deal with this common enemy without their help: but why must we unite with them, because of the enemy? Will they go over to the enemy, if we do not prevent it, by a Union with them? We are very well contented they should! and make no question, we shall be ready to deal with them and the common enemy too; and better without them than with them! Besides, if we have a common enemy, there is the more need to be secure against our private enemies! If there is one common enemy, we have the less need to have an enemy in our bowels!

It was a great argument some people used against suppressing the Old Money, that "it was a time of war, and it was too great a risque for the nation to run! If we should not master it, we should be undone!" And yet the sequel proved the hazard was not so great, but it might be mastered, and the success was answerable. The suppressing the Dissenters is not a harder work! nor a work of less necessity to the Public! We can never enjoy a settled uninterrupted union and tranquility in this nation, till the spirit of Whiggism, Faction, and Schism is melted down like the Old Money!

To talk of difficulty is to frighten ourselves with Chimeras and notions of a powerful Party, which are indeed a Party without power. Difficulties often appear greater at a distance than when they are searched into with judgement, and distingyished from the vapours and shadows that attend them.

We are not to be frightened with it! This Age is wiser than that, by all our own experience, and theirs too! King CHARLES I. had early suppressed this Party, if he had taken more deliberate measures! In short, it is not worth arguing, to talk of their arms. Their MONMOUTHS, and SHAFTESURYS, and ARGYLES are gone! Their Dutch Sanctuary is at an end! Heaven has made way for their destruction! and if we do not close with the Divine occasion, we are to blame

ourselves! and may hereafter remember, that we had, once, an opportunity to serve the Church of England, by extirpating her implacable enemies; and having let slip the Minute that Heaven presented, may experimentally complain, *Post est Occasio CALVO!*

Here are some popular Objections in the way.

As First, *The Queen has promised them, to continue them in their tolerated Liberty; and has told us She will be a religious observer of her word.*

What Her Majesty will do, we cannot help! but what, as the Head of the Church, she ought to do, is another case. Her Majesty has promised to protect and defend the Church of England, and if she cannot effectually do that, without the destruction of the Dissenters; she must, of course, dispense with one promise to comply with another!

But to answer this cavil more effectually. Her Majesty did never promise to maintain the Toleration to the destruction of the Church; but it was upon supposition that it may be compatible with the well-being and safety of the Church, which she had declared she would take especial care of. Now if these two Interests clash, it is plain Her Majesty's intentions are to uphold, protect, defend, and establish the Church! and this, we conceive is impossible.

Perhaps it may be said, *That the Church is in no immediate danger from the Dissenters; and therefore it is time enough.*

But this is a weak answer. For first. If the danger be real, the distance of it is no argument against, but rather a spur to quicken us to Prevention, lest it be too late hereafter.

And secondly. Here is the opportunity, and the only one perhaps, that ever the Church had to secure herself, and destroy her enemies.

The Representatives of the Nation have now an opportunity! The Time is come, which all good men have wished for! that the Gentlemen of England may serve the Church of England, now they are protected and encouraged by a Church of England Queen!

What will you do for your Sister in the day that she shall be spoken for?

If ever you will establish the best Christian Church in the World?

If ever you will suppress the Spirit of Enthusiasm?

If ever you will free the nation from the viperous brood that have so long sucked the blood of their Mother?

If ever you will leave your Posterity free from faction and rebellion, this is the time This is the time to pull up this heretical Weed of Sedition, that has so long disturbed the Peace of the Church, and poisoned the good corn!

But, says another hot and cold Objector, *This is renewing Fire and Faggot! reviving the Act, De heretico comburendo! This will be cruelty in its nature! And barbarous to all the World!*

I answer, It is cruelty to kill a snake or a toad in cold blood, but the poison of their nature makes it a charity to our neighbours, to destroy those creatures! not for any personal injury received, but for prevention; not for the evil they have done, but the evil they may do! Serpents, toads, vipers, &c., are noxious to the body, and poison the sensitive life: these poison the soul! corrupt our posterity! ensnare our children! destroy the vitals of our happiness, our future felicity! and contaminate the whole mass!

Shall any Law be given to such wild creatures! Some beasts are for sport, and the huntsmen give them the advantages of ground: but some are knocked on the head, by all possible ways of violence and surprise!

I do not prescribe Fire and Faggot! but as SCIPIO said of Carthage, *Delende est Carthago!* They are to be rooted out of this nation,

if ever we will live in peace! serve GOD! or enjoy our own! As for the manner, I leave it to those hands, who have a Right to execute GOD'S Justice on the Nation's and the Church's enemies.

But if we must be frighted from this Justice, under the specious pretences, and odious sense of cruelty; nothing will be effected! It will be more barbarous to our own children and dear posterity, when they shall reproach their fathers,' as we ours, and tell us, "You had an Opportunity to root out this cursed race from the World, under the favour and protection of a True Church of England Queen! and out of your foolish pity, you spared them: because, forsooth, you would not be cruel! And now our Church is suppressed and persecuted, our Religion trampled under foot, our estates plundered; our persons imprisoned, and dragged to gaols, gibbets, and scaffolds! Your sparing this Amalekite race is our destruction! Your mercy to them, proves cruelty to your poor posterity!"

How just will such reflections be, when our posterity shall fall under the merciless clutches of this uncharitable Generation! when our Church shall be swallowed up in Schism, Faction, Enthusiasm, and Confusion! when our Government shall be devolved upon Foreigners, and our Monarchy dwindled into a Republic!

It would be more rational for us, if we must spare this Generation, to summon our own to a general massacre: and as we have brought them into the World free, to send them out so; and not betray them to destruction by our supine negligence, and then cry "It is mercy!"

MOSES was a merciful meek man; and yet with what fury did he run through the camp, and cut the throats of three and thirty thousand of his dear Israelites that were fallen into idolatry. What was the reason? It was mercy to the rest, to make these examples! to prevent the destruction of the whole army.

How many millions of future souls, we save from infection and delusion, if the present race of Poisoned Spirits were purged from the face of the land!

It is vain to trifle in this matter! The light foolish handling of them by mulcts, fines, &c.; 'tis their glory and their advantage! If the Gallows instead of the Counter, and the galleys instead of the fines; were the reward of going to a conventicle, to preach or hear, there would not be so many sufferers! The spirit of martyrdom is over! They that will go to church to be chosen Sheriffs and Mayors, would go to forty churches, rather than be hanged!

If one severe Law were made, and punctually executed, that *Whoever was found at a Conventicle should be banished the nation, and the Preacher be hanged;* we should soon see an end of the tale! They would all come to church again, and one Age would make us all One again!

To talk of Five Shillings a month for not coming to the Sacrament, and One Shilling per week, for not coming to Church: this is such a way of converting people as was never known! This is selling them a liberty to transgress, for so much money!

It is not a crime, why don't we give them full license? and if it be, no price ought to compound for the committing of it! for that is selling a liberty to people to sin against GOD and the Government!

If it be a crime of the highest consequence, both against the peace and welfare of the nation, the Glory of GOD, the good of the Church, and the happiness of the soul: let us rank it among capital offences! and let it receive punishment in proportion to it!

We hang men for trifles, and banish them for things not worth naming; but that an offence against GOD and the Church, against the welfare of the World, and the dignity of Religion shall be bought off for FIVE SHILLINGS: this is such a shame to a Christian Government, that it is with regret I transmit it to posterity.

If men sin against GOD, affront His ordinances, rebel against His Church, and disobey the precepts of their superiors; let them suffer, as

such capital crimes deserve! so will Religion flourish, and this divided nation be once again united.

And yet the title of *barbarous* and *cruel* will soon be taken off from this Law too. I am not supposing that all the Dissenters in England should be hanged or banished. But as in case of rebellions and insurrections, if a few of the ringleaders suffer, the multitude are dismissed; so a few obstinate people being made examples, there is no doubt but the severity of the Law would find a stop in the compliance of the multitude.

To make the reasonableness of this matter out of question, and more unanswerably plain, let us examine for what it is, that this nation is divided into Parties and factions? and let us see how they can justify a Separation? or we of the Church of England can justify our bearing the insults and inconveniences of the Party.

One of their leading Pastors, and a man of as much learning as most among them, in his Answer to a Pamphlet entitled *An Enquiry into the Occasional Conformity*, hath these words, p. 27: “Do the Religion of the Church and the Meeting Houses make two religions? Wherein do they differ? The Substance of the same Religion is common to them both, and the Modes and Accidents are the things in which only they differ.” P. 58: “Thirty nine Articles are given us for the Summary of our Religion: thirty-six contain the Substance of it, wherein we agree; three are additional Appendices, about which we have some differences.”

Now, if as, by their own acknowledgment, the Church of England is a true Church; and the difference is only in a few “Modes and Accidents”: why should we expect that they will suffer the gallows and galleys, corporal punishment and banishment, for these trifles? There is no question, but they will be wiser! Even their own principles won't bear them out in it!

They will certainly comply with the Laws, and with Reason! And though, at the first, severity may seem hard, the next Age will feel nothing of it! the contagion will be rooted out. The disease being cured, there will be no need of the operation! But if they should venture to transgress, and fall into the pit; all the World must condemn their obstinacy, as being without ground from their own principles.

Thus the pretence of cruelty will be taken off, and the Party actually suppressed; and the disquiets they have so often brought upon the Nation, prevented.

Their numbers and their wealth make them haughty; and that is so far from being an argument to persuade us to forbear them, that it is a warning to us, without any more delay, to reconcile them to the Unity of the Church, or remove them from us.

At present, Heaven be praised! they are not so formidable as they have been, and it is our own fault if ever we suffer them to be so! Providence and the Church of England seem to join in this particular, that now, the Destroyers of the Nation's Peace may be overturned! and to this end, the present opportunity seems to put into our hands.

To this end, Her present Majesty seems reserved to enjoy the Crown, that the Ecclesiastic as well as Civil Rights of the Nation may be restored by her hand.

To this end, the face of affairs has received such a turn in the process of a few months as never has been before. The leading men of the Nation, the universal cry of the People, the unanimous request of the Clergy agree in this, that the Deliverance of our Church is at hand!

For this end, has Providence given such a Parliament! such a Convocation! such a Gentry! and such a Queen! as we never had before.

And what may be the consequences of a neglect of such opportunities? The Succession of the Crown has but a dark prospect! Another Dutch turn may make the hopes of it ridiculous, and the practice impossible! Be the House of our future Princes ever so well inclined, they

will be Foreigners! Many years will be spent in suiting the Genius of Strangers to this Crown, and the Interests of the Nation! and how many Ages it may be, before the English throne be filled with so much zeal and candour, so much tenderness and hearty affection to the Church, as we see it now covered with, who can imagine?

It is high time, then, for the friends of the Church of England to think of building up and establishing her in such a manner, that she may be no more invaded by Foreigners, nor divided by factions, schisms, and error.

If this could be done by gentle and easy methods, I should be glad! but the wound is corroded, the vitals begin to mortify, and nothing but amputation of members can complete the cure! All the ways of tenderness and compassion, all persuasive arguments have been made use of in vain!

The humour of the Dissenters has so increased among the people, that they hold the Church in defiance! and the House of GOD is an abomination among them! Nay, they have brought up their posterity in such prepossessed aversion to our Holy Religion, that the ignorant mob think we are all idolaters and worshippers of BAAL! and account it a sin to come within the walls of our churches! The primitive Christians were not more shy of a heathen temple, or of meat offered to idols; nor the Jews, of swine's flesh, than some of our Dissenters are of the church and the Divine Service solemnized therein.

The Obstinacy must be rooted out, with the profession of it! While the Generation are left at liberty daily to affront GOD Almighty, and dishonour His holy worship; we are wanting in our duty to GOD, and to our Mother the Church of England.

How can we answer it to GOD! to the Church! and to our posterity; to leave them entangled with Fanaticism! Error, and Obstinacy, in the bowels of the nation? to leave them an enemy in their streets, that, in time, may involve them in the same crimes, and endanger the utter extirpation of the Religion of the Nation!

What is the difference betwixt this, and being subject to the power of the Church of Rome? from whence we have reformed. If one be an extreme to the one hand, and one on another: it is equally destructive to the Truth to have errors settled among us, let them be of what nature they will! Both are enemies of our Church, and of our peace! and why should it not be as criminal to admit an Enthusiast as a Jesuit? why should the Papist with his Seven Sacraments be worse than the Quaker with no Sacraments at all? Why should Religious Houses be more intolerable than Meeting Houses?

Alas, the Church of England! What with Popery on one hand, and Schismatics on the other, how has She been crucified between two thieves. Now, LET US CRUCIFY THE THIEVES !

Let her foundations be established upon the destruction of her enemies! The doors of Mercy being always open to the returning part of the deluded people, let the obstinate be ruled with the rod of iron!

Let all true sons of so holy and oppressed a Mother, exasperated by her afflictions, harden their hearts against those who have oppressed her!

And may GOD Almighty put it into the hearts of all the friends of Truth, to lift up a Standard against Pride and ANTICHRIST! that the Posterity of the Sons of Error may be rooted out from the face of this land, for ever!

See also “A Modest Proposal” by Jonathan Swift (1729).