

Our Contributors.

The Lessons of the Sackcloth.

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"None might enter the King's gate clothed with sackcloth."—Esther 4:

Sackcloth was a coarse material out of which sacks were made. Hence its name. It was not suitable for clothing. Still, it was sometimes worn as clothing. When a man was so reduced in circumstances that he could not afford anything better, he wore sackcloth. Better even sackcloth than no clothing at all. And so the poorest of the poor wore sackcloth. Then it was worn by people who were in mourning. If a man lost the best friend he had, some one near and dear to him, or if some terrible calamity had happened to him, he put off his ordinary wearing apparel, and put on sackcloth. Sackcloth was a prison-dress too. Devotion again, when it wanted to be specially humble and virtuous, wore sackcloth. There was supposed to be a lot of virtue in wearing sackcloth next the skin, and the coarser the material the more virtue. Hence the wearing of sackcloth was quite common in the old days. Crape is the sackcloth of today. It has some of the coarseness but none of the cheapness of sackcloth.

The Law as to the Wearing of Sackcloth.

There was a law in force at the Persian Court, or an old court custom that had all the force of law, as to the wearing of sackcloth. People could wear sackcloth all they wanted to. Poverty could wear it. Sorrow could wear it. Crime could wear it. Disease could wear it. Devotion could wear it. But there was one restriction as to the wearing of it, and the rule could on no account be set aside or violated, and it was to this effect, that "none might enter within the King's gate clothed with sackcloth."

The Persians were very strict as to their laws. They might be very absurd and all that. It might be better to break them than keep them. Still, they must be carried out to the very letter, let the consequences be what they may.

You remember about the no-prayer decree and Daniel. A law was passed to the effect that no one was to pray for a month excepting to the king himself. It was aimed at Daniel. Well, Daniel prayed all the same. He opened his windows, and let all Persia see him on his knees at his devotions. So he was accused to the king of violating the no-prayer decree. And now the king saw what a mistake he had made, and what a trap Daniel's enemies had led him into. But he was helpless. He could make laws, but once made, he could not repeal them. He was supposed to be above such a thing as making a mistake, doing an unwise and impolitic thing. The divine right of Kings and popes is seen in all its absurdity and cruelty in the no-prayer decree. So Daniel had to go to the lions, and the King himself could not intervene to save him. But there was a divine power that could intervene.

And here is this court-law as to sackcloth. No matter how important the business a man might have with the King in his palace, no matter how much of interest to the King himself to have the man see him, and no matter how high his rank, he could not be admitted within the palace gates clothed

with sackcloth. And so poverty could not enter there. Sorrow could not enter there. Devotion could not enter there. A man accused of a crime could not make appeal to the King in person. "None might enter within the King's gate clothed in sackcloth."

Now, before you say hard things against the old Persian Court fashion, you had better see if we have nothing of the same sort here.

If you were in London, and wanted to pay your respects to the King and Queen at Buckingham Palace, would you go in the dress that happened to suit you? The beggar goes in his rags. The workman in his working clothes. The sick man in his hospital garb. The widow in her weeds. I see you going that way. Would you be received? I think you would find a court-customer after this tenor: "None might enter within the King's gate clothed with sackcloth."

Try it at the "White House." They say: "There is no red tape there. No absurd court customs there! No difference made there between gold lace and fustian, scarlet and sackcloth!" But if you tried it once, I do not think you would try it again. It would be the old story: "None might enter within the King's gate clothed in sackcloth."

You have a gate. It opens to you. It opens to your friends. You like to say: "There is one door that is always open, one door with the string always on the outside." But not so fast. Persian court etiquette has found its way even to your door. Let sackcloth come in hunger and need, in beggar's rags and widow's weeds, in prison garb and working clothes, and with cold politeness your servants will say in effect: "None might enter within the King's gate clothed with sackcloth."

And there is the Church door—what about it? How wide it is! Let any sort of want come making its loud appeal, and the doors of Erskine Church are flung wide open. Ah! I am afraid you will find old Persia right here. The minister, and elders, and managers, have all their hand on the door, and so often it is the old story over again: "None might enter within the King's gate clothed with sackcloth."

The Story of Siddartha.

Siddartha was an Indian prince of the long ago. His palace home was not far from Benares the sacred city of India. He was brought up within gates where sackcloth never once entered, and where everything of the sort was most strictly excluded. There was plenty of it outside the palace. The city was full of it. But there was none of it inside. And so, until he was nearly thirty years of age, he never saw want, and did not know that there was such a thing. So also with distress and disease, sorrow and pain, old age and death. Even the existence of such things was kept from him. It was held in his father's court that a prince royal should be kept strictly apart from everything that was not conducive to his pleasure. Such was Siddartha's bringing up: "None might enter within the King's gate clothed with sackcloth."

But the time came when he had to see more of life than there was to be seen within palace gates, and it made another man of him than the soft, weak, self-indulgent creature he was.

One day—so legend tells—when going

out by the eastern gate of the city to his pleasure garden, he met a decrepit old man. This old man was leaning heavily on his staff, trembling in every limb, his veins standing out on his emaciated body, his teeth loose or gone, and his voice broken or quavering. He was pained to see such a pitiful object. So he asked of his charioteer what it meant: "Is this condition peculiar to this man or to his family?" "By no means," answered his servant, for he knew more of life than his master. "This is old age. Suffering and toil have worn him to it, and now he is scorned by his kindred, and left without support. And this comes to all men; your father, your mother, every creature must come to this."

"Alas!" said the prince, "how ignorant and mistaken is man, who is proud of his youth, and filled with young life's intoxicating vanities, and sees not the old age that awaits him. Hurry back to the city! What have I to do with pleasure, who am destined to such an end?"

Another time, going out by the south gate to his pleasure-garden, he saw lying on the roadside a man seized with sickness. No one was with him taking care of him, and he seemed to be in an agony of dismay. Learning from the driver that this was no uncommon experience, he felt the incongruity of pleasure seeking, and so turned back.

He met, one day, a funeral procession, the dead man stretched on a bier. It was the first time he had seen death, although nearly thirty. He saw the mourners throw dust on their heads, and beat their breasts, and he heard their wailing cries. It was all new to him, and so sad. So he said: "Alas for youth which old age destroys! Alas for health which sickness invades! Alas for life which death ends! Oh that there was no old age, no sickness, no death! Let us go back. I cannot seek pleasures in the face of all that. I will meditate how to accomplish deliverance."

Thus sick of the pleasures he had been living his life in, and finding out how unsatisfying to a man's deepest wants is such a life, he told his royal father he must break with it, no matter what the cost. His father would not hear of it. He went so far as to offer to resign in his son's favor, rather than it should come to that. But of course Siddartha would not allow anything like that. The father, then, and the courtiers, set themselves to work to break the spell that was upon the prince, and to wear him back to the pleasures he had ceased to take interest in. So they made a grand oriental banquet, a brilliant affair. They hired men to sing and dancing-girls to perform before him, in hopes, as they thought to draw him from the skies. But they only sickened him all the more, and hastened what they thought to delay and avert. He withdrew from the giddy scene to his own chamber—to meditate there.

Some time after midnight, when all was quiet, the prince arose, and, unattended, visited the great banquet-hall, the scene of the night's revelry. He wanted to see for himself how things looked after the banquet was over. He found drunkenness sleeping off its debauch. He found beauty dishevelled. He found bitter things that filled his soul with disgust. This brought matters to a crisis with him. His mind was made up. There and then he put into effect his great renunciation.

On tiptoe he stole to his young wife's chamber, and took a long last look of her and the sweet babe beside her. They were dear to him, but even from them he must part.

Then he called his faithful charioteer, and