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GAMBLERS AND
GAMBLING

Henry Beecher

Gamblers and Gambling

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Gamblers and Gambling

GAMBLERS AND GAMBLING

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments and made four parts, to every soldier a part, and also his coat. Now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots far it, whose it shall be. These things therefore the soldiers did.

I have condensed into one account the separate parts of this gambling transaction as narrated by each evangelist. How marked in every age is a Gambler's character! The enraged priesthood of ferocious sects taunted Christ's dying agonies; the bewildered multitude, accustomed to cruelty, could shout; but no earthly creature, but a Gambler, could be so lost to *all* feeling as to sit down coolly under a dying man to wrangle for his garments, and arbitrate their avaricious differences by casting dice for his tunic, with hands spotted with his spattered blood, warm and yet undried upon them. The descendants of these patriarchs of gambling, however, have taught us that there is nothing possible to hell, uncongenial to these, its elect saints. In this lecture it is my disagreeable task to lead your steps down the dark path to their cruel haunts, there to exhibit their infernal passions, their awful ruin, and their ghastly memorials. In this house of darkness, amid fierce faces gleaming with the fire of fiercer hearts, amid oaths and groans and fiendish orgies, ending in murders and strewn with sweltering corpses, – do not mistake, and suppose yourself in Hell, – you are only in its precincts and vestibule.

Gambling is the staking or winning of property upon mere hazard. The husbandman renders produce for his gains; the mechanic renders the product of labor and skill for his gains; the gambler renders for his gain the sleights of useless skill, or more often, downright cheating. Betting is gambling; there is no honest equivalent to its gains. Dealings in fancy-stocks are oftentimes sheer gambling, with all its worst evils. Profits so earned are no better than the profits of dice, cards, or hazard. When skill returns for its earnings a useful service, as knowledge, beneficial amusements, or profitable labor, it is honest commerce. The skill of a pilot in threading a narrow channel, the skill of a lawyer in threading a still more intricate one, are as substantial equivalents for a price received, as if they were merchant goods or agricultural products. But all gains of *mere* skill which result in no real benefit, are gambling gains.

Gaming, as it springs from a principle of our nature, has, in some form, probably existed in every age. We trace it in remote periods and among the most barbarous people. It loses none of its fascinations among a civilized people. On the contrary, the habit of fierce stimulants, the jaded appetite of luxury, and the satiety of wealth, seem to invite the master-excitant. Our land, not apt to be behind in good or evil, is full of gambling in all its forms – the gambling of commerce, the gambling of bets and wagers, and the gambling of games of hazard. There is gambling in refined circles, and in the lowest; among the members of our national government, and of our state governments. Thief gambles with thief, in jail; the judge who sent them there, the lawyer who prosecuted, and the lawyer who defended them, often gamble too. This vice, once almost universally prevalent among the Western bar, and still too frequently disgracing its members, is, however, we are happy to believe, decreasing. In many circuits, not long ago, and in some now, the judge, the jury, and the bar, shuffled cards by night, and law by day – dealing out money and justice alike. The clatter of dice and cards disturbs your slumber on the boat, and rings drowsily from the upper rooms of the hotel. This vice pervades the city, extends over every line of travel, and infests the most moral districts. The secreted lamp dimly lights the apprentices to their game; with unsuspected disobedience, boys creep out of their

beds to it; it goes on in the store close by the till; it haunts the shop. The scoundrel in his lair, the scholar in his room; the pirate on his ship, gay women at parties; loafers on the street-corner, public functionaries in their offices; the beggar under the hedge, the rascal in prison, and some professors of religion in the somnolent hours of the Sabbath, – waste their energies by the ruinous excitement of the game. Besides these players, there are troops of professional gamblers, troops of hangers-on, troops of youth to be *drawn* in. An inexperienced eye would detect in our peaceful towns no signs of this vulture-flock; – so in a sunny day, when all cheerful birds are singing merrily, not a buzzard can be seen; but let a carcass drop, and they will push forth their gaunt heads from their gloomy roosts, and come flapping from the dark woods to speck the air, and dot the ground with their numbers.

The universal prevalence of this vice is a reason for parental vigilance; and a reason of remonstrance from the citizen, the parent, the minister of the gospel, the patriot, and the press. I propose to trace its opening, describe its subjects, and detail its effects.

A young man, proud of freedom, anxious to exert his manhood, has tumbled his Bible, and sober books, and letters of counsel, into a dark closet. He has learned various accomplishments, to flirt, to boast, to swear, to fight, to drink. He has let every one of these chains be put around him, upon the solemn promise of Satan that he would take them off whenever he wished. Hearing of the artistic feats of eminent gamblers, he emulates them. So, he ponders the game. He teaches what he has learned to his shopmates, and feels himself their master. As yet he has never played for stakes. It begins thus: Peeping into a book-store, he watches till the sober customers go out; then slips in, and with assumed boldness, not concealing his shame, he asks for cards, buys them, and hastens out. The first game is to pay for the cards. After the relish of playing for a stake, no game can satisfy them *without* a stake. A few nuts are staked; then a bottle of wine; an oyster-supper. At last they can venture a sixpence in *actual money*– just for the amusement of it. I need go no further – whoever wishes to do anything with the lad, can do it now. If properly plied, and gradually led, he will go to any length, and stop only at the gallows. Do you doubt it? let us trace him a year or two further on.

With his father's blessing, and his mother's tears, the young man departs from home. He has received his patrimony, and embarks for life and independence. Upon his journey he rests at a city; visits the "school of morals;" lingers in more suspicious places; is seen by a sharper; and makes his acquaintance. The knave sits by him at dinner; gives him the news of the place, and a world of advice; cautions him against sharpers; inquires if he has money, and charges him to keep it secret; offers himself to make with him the rounds of the town, and secure him from imposition. At length, that he may see all, he is taken to a gaming-house, but, with apparent kindness, warned not to play. He stands by to see the various fortunes of the game; some, forever losing; some, touch what number they will, gaining piles of gold. Looking in thirst where wine is free. A glass is taken; another of a better kind; next the best the landlord has, and two glasses of that. A change comes over the youth; his exhilaration raises his courage, and lulls his caution. Gambling *seen*, seems a different thing from gambling *painted* by a pious father! Just then his friend remarks that one might easily double his money by a few ventures, but that it was, perhaps, prudent not to risk. Only this was needed to fire his mind. What! only prudence between me and gain? Then that shall not be long! He stakes; he wins. Stakes again; wins again. Glorious! I am the lucky man that is to break the bank! He stakes, and wins again. His pulse races; his face burns; his blood is up, and fear gone. He loses; loses again; loses all his winnings; loses more. But fortune turns again; he wins anew. He has now lost all self-command. Gains excite him, and losses excite him more. He doubles his stakes; then trebles them – and all is swept. He rushes on, puts up his whole purse, and loses the whole! Then he would borrow; no man will lend. He is desperate, he will fight at a word. He is led to the street, and thrust out. The cool breeze which blows upon his fevered cheek, wafts the slow and solemn stroke of the clock, – one, – two, – three, – four; *four of the morning!* Quick work of ruin! – an innocent man destroyed in a night! He staggers to his hotel, remembers as he enters it, that he has not even enough to pay his bill. It now flashes upon him that his friend, who never had left him for an hour before, had stayed

behind where his money is, and, doubtless, is laughing over his spoils. His blood boils with rage. But at length comes up the remembrance of home; a parent's training and counsels for more than twenty years, destroyed in a night! "Good God! what a wretch I have been! I am not fit to live. I cannot go home. I am a stranger here. Oh! that I were dead! Oh! that I had died before I knew this guilt, and were lying where my sister lies! Oh God! Oh God! my head will burst with agony!" He stalks his lonely room with an agony which only the young heart knows in its first horrible awakening to remorse – when it looks despair full in the face, and feels its hideous incantations tempting him to suicide. Subdued at length by agony, cowed and weakened by distress, he is sought again by those who plucked him. Cunning to subvert inexperience, to raise the evil passions, and to allay the good, they make him their pliant tool.

Farewell, young man! I see thy steps turned to that haunt again! I see hope lighting thy face; but it is a lurid light, and never came from heaven. Stop before that threshold! – turn, and bid farewell to home! – farewell to innocence! – farewell to venerable father and aged mother! – the next step shall part thee from them all forever. And now henceforth be a mate to thieves, a brother to corruption. Thou hast made a league with death, and unto death shalt thou go.

Let us here pause, to draw the likeness of a few who stand conspicuous in that vulgar crowd of gamblers, with which hereafter he will consort. The first is a taciturn, quiet man. No one knows when he comes into town, or when he leaves. No man hears of his gaining; for he never boasts, nor reports his luck. He spends little for parade; his money seems to go and come only through the game. He reads none, converses none, is neither a glutton nor a hard drinker; he sports few ornaments, and wears plain clothing. Upon the whole, he seems a gentlemanly man; and sober citizens say, "his only fault is gambling." What then is this "*only fault?*" In his heart he has the most intense and consuming lust of play. He is quiet because every passion is absorbed in one; and that one burning at the highest flame. He thinks of nothing else, cares only for this. All other things, even the hottest lusts of other men, are too cool to be temptations to him; so much deeper is the style of his passions. He will sit upon his chair, and no man shall see him move for hours, except to play his cards. He sees none come in, none go out. Death might groan on one side of the room, and marriage might sport on the other, – he would know neither. Every created influence is shut out; one thing only moves him – the *game*

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