HE origin, growth, and present condition of
the singular sect calling themselves the 'Church
of Latter-day Saints,' form a curious and instruc-
tive chapter in the history of fanaticism. Within
the space of twenty years since they first sprung into
existence, they have gone on rapidly increasing in
influence and numbers, and are now an established
and organised society, amounting to not less than 300,000
people. They have borne the brunt of calumny and misre-
presentation, endured the severest persecutions, and, in spite
of every conceivable obstruction, triumphantly vindicated the
candor and sincerity of their mistaken faith, and the practical
objects which they have considered it their special mission to realise
in the world. Their progress within the last ten years has been
extraordinarily rapid, and is utterly unparalleled in the history of
any other body of religionists. They are now a distinct and
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and of the gospel of remission and of baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; and this shall never be taken again from the earth until the sons of Levi do offer again an offering unto the Lord in righteousness." He says, the messenger told them that "this Aaronic priesthood had not the power of laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost," but that this should be conferred on them thereafter. "And," says Joseph, "he commanded us to go and be baptized, and gave us directions that I should baptize Oliver Cowdery, and afterwards that he should baptize me. Accordingly, we went and were baptized. I baptized him first, and afterwards he baptized me. After which I laid my hand upon his head, and ordained him to the Aaronic priesthood; afterwards he laid his hands on me, and ordained me to the same priesthood, for so we were commanded. The messenger who visited us on this occasion, and conferred this priesthood upon us, said that his name was John, the same that is called John the Baptist in the New Testament; and that he acted under the direction of Peter, James, and John, who held the keys of the priesthood of Melchisedek, which priesthood, he said, should in due time be conferred on us, and that I should be called the first elder, and he the second. It was on the 15th day of May 1829 that we were baptized and ordained under the hand of the messenger."

Before the publication of the Book of Mormon, Joseph had already gathered to himself a small number of adherents. In 1830, the year after he began to announce his visions and to speak of the discovery of the plates, his followers amounted to five persons. Among these were included his father and three brothers, but in the course of a few weeks the number increased to thirty. On the 1st of June, the year just mentioned, the first conference of the sect, as an organized church, was held at Fayette, where the prophet at that time resided. As the people of the neighborhood generally regarded him as an impostor, his proceedings from the outset met with considerable opposition. Joseph, on the present occasion, had ordered the construction of a dam across a stream of water, for the purpose of baptizing his disciples. But before the ceremony was commenced, a mob collected, and broke down the preparations, using such language toward the prophet as was anything but flattering to him or his followers, threatening him with violence, and accusing him of robbery and swindling. They derided his prophetic pretensions, charged him with having lived the life of a reprobate, and in every way did their utmost to make him the object of ridicule and suspicion. Joseph, however, was nothing daunted. With singular tact, as well as courage, he bore down all detraction by confessing boldly that he had once led an improper and immoral life; but, unworthy as he was, the Lord had chosen him—had forgiven him all his sins, and intended, in his own inscrutable purposes, to make him—weak and erring as he might have been—the instrument of his glory. Unlettered and comparatively ignorant he acknowledged himself to be; but then, said he, was not St Peter illiterate? Were not John and the other Christian apostles men of low birth and mean position before they were called to the ministry? And what had been done before, might it not be done again, if God willed it? By arguments such as these he strengthened the faith of those who were inclined to believe in the divinity of his mission, and partially foiled the logic of those that were opposed to him. Absurd and fanatical as his theology may seem, it is not to be denied that he shewed thus early an unquestionable talent for influencing the opinions and commanding the sympathies of persons in any way disposed to credulity and enthusiasm.

It appears he had had many contests with the preachers and leading people of other religious sects, and to have exasperated them against him by the boldness of his self-sufficiency, and the boundless resources of his ingenuity and impudence, in asserting and defending his pretensions. Yet, if he was arrogant and presumptuous, they were not the less dogmatic and intolerant. When Joseph proved himself utterly invincible by his logic, and was not to be put down by any taunts concerning his unworthiness as a man, or his incompetency as a scholar, they had recourse to the ordinary expedient of persecution. Their animosity rose so high at last, that the prophet and his followers found the place too strait for them; and, accordingly, to escape from the virulent opposition they had to contend with, the whole family of the Smiths and the most pious of their adherents deemed it prudent to remove from Palmyra and Fayetteville, and to settle themselves in other quarters. The place they selected was Kirtland, in Ohio; but this they regarded only as a temporary resting-place. The attention of the sect was directed, from the very commencement of their organisation, to the desirableness of establishing themselves in the "Far West" territories, where, in a thinly-settled and partially-explored country, they might squat down or purchase lands at a cheap rate, and clear the wilderness for their own purposes. Shortly after their removal to Kirtland, Oliver Cowdery was sent out on an exploratory expedition, and, coming back, reported so favorably of the beauty, fertility, and cheapness of the land in Jackson County, in Missouri, that Joseph Smith himself determined to go and visit the location.

Leaving his family and principal connections in Kirtland, he proceeded with Sidney Rigdon and some others upon a long and arduous journey, his object being to fix upon a site for the "New Jerusalem"—the future city and metropolis of the divine kingdom, where Christ was to reign over the saints as a temporal king, in "power and great glory." They started, apparently, about the middle of June 1831, travelling by wagons or canal-boats, and sometimes on foot, as far as Cincinnati. From this place they proceeded by steamer to Louisville and St Louis, where at length all the civilised means of transport failed them. The rest of the journey, a distance of 300 miles, had to be performed on foot.
altogether new, and it had sufficient novelty to strike the attention and inflame the imagination of many whose minds would have been totally uninfluenced by current and established dogmas, however powerfully preached. Basing his faith upon isolated passages of the Bible; claiming direct inspiration from Heaven; possessing possession of the earth, and limiting eternal blessings, to all true believers; and, moreover, announcing his mission with a courage and audacity that despised difficulty and danger; it is not surprising that ignorant and credulous people should everywhere have listened to him, and reverently credited his extravagant pretensions. Nevertheless, his success as a propagandist was not without some drawbacks. Never, perhaps, until this enlightened nineteenth century, was it the lot of a prophet to be tarred and feathered! Such, however, was the ridiculous martyrdom which Mohammed Smith was called upon to suffer at the hands of lawless men. One night, in the month of March 1802, ‘a mob of Methodists, Baptists, Campbellites,’ and other miscellaneous zealots, broke into his peaceable dwelling-house, and dragging him from the wife of his bosom, stripped him naked, and in the way just indicated, most despitefully maltreated him. Under the bleak midnight sky, they carried him into a meadow a little distance from the house, and there, with curses and wild uproar, anointed his sacred person with that dark impurity which Falstaff mentions as having a tendency to defile; and then rolling him well in feathers, set him at liberty—a spectacle not inappropriate for a scarecrow! Sidney Rigdon was similarly handled, and rendered temporarily crazy by the treatment. As to the prophet, it took the whole night for his friends to cleanse his polluted skin.

Yet, the next day being the Sabbath, with his ‘flesh all scarified and defaced,’ he preached to the congregation as usual, and in the afternoon of the same day baptised three individuals. Thus, under the most despicable persecution, the church prospers and increases, and Prophet Joseph loses nothing of his natural audacity, nor abates one whit in his confident self-assertion. However, calling to mind the scriptural injunction: ‘If they persecute you in one city, flee into another,’ Joseph seems to have thought that it would not be amiss to absent himself a little from the scene of so ethereal a disaster. Accordingly, he started on the 2d of April, with a small company of adherents, for the settlement in Missouri, designing, as he said, to fulfil the revelation. Some of his inhuman persecutors dogged his steps as far as Louisville, taunting and harassing him by the way; but getting protection from the captain of a steam-boat, he arrived in safety at Independence on the 26th. Here he found the Saints going ahead with great rapidity. In obedience to a revelation which he had sent them, a printing-press had been established, and the work of proselytising was advancing famously. A monthly periodical, called the Morning and Evening Star, was conducted by Mr Phelps, the printer to the church; and a weekly newspaper, devoted exclusively to the interests of Mormonism, had been started under the title of the Upper Missouri Advertiser. The number of the disciples amounted to nearly 3000; while in Kirtland, including women and children, they had not yet exceeded 100. The new Zion was clearly thriving, and would soon be ready for the gathering of the brethren from other quarters. Being enthusiastically received by the congregation, and solemnly acknowledged as their ‘prophet, seer, and president of the high-priesthood of the church,’ Joseph, after a brief and pleasant sojourn, left the place in perfect confidence that all was going on prosperously.

Perhaps he ought to have remembered, that often when things are most prosperous in appearance, there is apt to be some latent mischief or misfortune in process of development. And, to speak truly, the manner in which the Saints behaved themselves in Zion, was anything but calculated to make friends among the Gentiles. They assumed an offensive superiority over their neighbours, and spoke rather too boldly of their determination to take possession of the whole state of Missouri, and to permit no one to live in it who did not conform themselves to the Mormon creed and discipline. Strange rumours also began to spread concerning their peculiarities of intercourse and ways of living. They were accused of communism, and not merely of a community of goods and chattels, but also of a community of wives. This charge appears to have been utterly unfounded, but it was not the less effective in arousing the indignation of the people of Independence and Missouri against the Mormons. A party was secretely formed, whose object was to expel them from the state. The printing-office of the Star was razed to the ground, and the types and presses confiscated. A Mormon bishop was tarred and feathered, and Editor Phelps had a narrow escape from a touch of the like treatment. Outrages of almost every description were committed by armed mobs upon the Mormons, till at length they saw no chance or likelihood of ever being left at peace; and the final result was, that—having no other resource—the leaders agreed that if time were given, the people should remove westward to some other situation.

Under circumstances of such peril and humiliation, the Saints, not unadvisedly, despatched Oliver Cowdery to Kirtland with a message to the prophet. Joseph Smith, as became his situation, proved himself not unfertile in resources. He decided that the Morning and Evening Star should be thenceforth published in Kirtland, and that another newspaper should be started to supply the place of the one lately printed in Missouri. He also resolved to apply to the governor of that state, and to demand justice for the outrages inflicted upon the sect. Anything that could be done to aid the brethren from a distance he was prompt and ready to undertake; but, under the circumstances, he did not deem it circumspect to venture personally into Zion. He sent his followers a prophet’s blessing and a word of comfort; and then, in company
the United States. They began to be a distinct and imposing power in the country, and in various places influenced the elections. On all political questions they were perfectly united. So bold did they become, that in 1844 they put Joseph Smith in nomination for the presidency. This was considered an absurd movement; but the Mormons, nevertheless, asserted that he lived for the next trial after he would have been elected. No opportunity, however, was afforded him to test the truth of the prediction. A dark day for the Mormons was approaching. The people amidst whom they lived complained that their property was constantly disappearing, and that traces of it were often found in the city of Nauvoo. The redress proposed to be given them by the Mormon court was declared to be unavailing, as the causes tried there always went against them. No Mormon could by any chance be brought to justice, they said. The leaders of the sect were likewise charged with political aspirations. It was said that they aimed to rule the state, and, under the pretense of a spiritual direction, set the laws at defiance. But more than all, intestine quarrels conspired to bring about a distressing crisis in their affairs. Many influential and talented persons, finding themselves deceived, both in the sanctity of the prophet and in advancing their temporal fortunes, deserted his standard, and denounced him for licentiousness, drunkenness, and tyranny. Women impeached him of attempted seduction; which his apology, that it was merely to see if they were virtuous, could not satisfy. Crimes brought back recriminations against certain men. A newspaper under the prophet's control lashed the dissenters with great bitterness; and, on the other hand, the dissenters set up a counter-organ, wherein they detailed the most offensive charges of debauchery against the prophet and his principal supporters. A city-council was then convened, and measures were immediately taken to silence the defamers. A mob of the 'faithful' destroyed their printing-press, scattering the types in the streets, and burning an edition of their paper. After finishing this work of demolition, they repaired to head-quarters, and were complimented by the prophet and his brother Hyrum, and received from them the promise of some appropriate reward. This, however, they never got, for a grand and fatal outrage was presently transacted, which brought both the power and the life of the prophet suddenly to an end.

It being impossible to bring the Mormon mob to justice through the Nauvoo courts, the officer who undertook to deal with them procured a county writ, and attempted to enforce it in the manner resorted to against ordinary offenders. But this attempt was opposed and prevented by the people and troops in Nauvoo; and when at length the militia were called out, Joseph Smith, as mayor and commanding-general of the legion, declared the city under martial law. Thereupon an appeal was made to the governor of the state, who forthwith ordered out three companies of the state militia, to bring the prophet and his adherents to submission, and to enforce their obedience to the laws. An officer was despatched to arrest Joseph and his brother Hyrum; but to avoid the indignity, they crossed over the Mississippi into Iowa, and there stayed to watch events, keeping up by a boat a correspondence with the Mormon council. Finding at length that their own people were incensed at their desertion, the council advised the Smiths to surrender to the governor, and to stand their trial for violating the laws as they could be charged with. They, accordingly, repaired to Carthage, where the seat of government, and were there indicted for treason, and, in company with two of their apostles, were lodged in the county jail.

It is related that the prophet had a presentiment of evil in this affair, and said, as he surrendered: 'I am going like a lamb to the slaughter, but I am calm as a summer morning; I have a conscience void of offence, and shall die innocent.' As the mob still breathed vengeance against the prisoners, and as the militia aided with the people, and were not to be depended upon in the way of preventing violence, the governor was requested by the citizens of Nauvoo and other Mormons to set a guard over the jail. But the governor, seeing things apparently quiet, discharged the troops, and simply promised justice to all parties. It now began to be rumoured that there would be no case forthcoming against the Smiths, and that the governor was anxious they should escape. Influenced by this belief, a band of about 200 ruffians conspired to attack the jail, and take justice into their own hands. 'If law could not reach them,' they said, 'powder and shot should.' On the 27th of June, 1844, they assaulted the door of the room, in which the prisoners were incarcerated, and having broken in, fired upon the four all at once. Hyrum Smith was instantly killed. Joseph, with a revolver, returned two shots, hitting one man in the elbow. He then threw up the window, and attempted to leap out, but was killed in the act by the balls of the assailants outside. Both were again shot after they were dead, each receiving no less than four balls. One of the two Mormons who were with them was seriously wounded, but afterwards recovered; and the other is said to have escaped 'without a hole in his robe.'

Here, then, ends the life and prophetic mission of Joseph Smith. Henceforth the Mormons are left to be guided by another leader. Of himself it has been said: 'He founded a dynasty which his death rendered more secure, and sent forth principles that take fast hold on thousands in all lands; and the name of Great Martyr of the nineteenth century, is a tower of strength to his followers. He lived fourteen years and three months after founding a society with six members, and could boast of having 150,000 ready to do his bidding when he died; all of whom regarded his voice as from Heaven. Among his disciples he bears a character for talent, uprightness, and purity, far surpassing all other men with whom
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ball with prayer, asking the blessing of God upon their amusements, as well as prayer for any other engagement; and then will follow the most sprightly dancing, in which all join with hearty good-will, from the highest dignitary to the humblest individual; and this exercise is to become part of the temple-worship, to “praise God in song and dances.” These private balls and soirees are frequently extended beyond the time of cock-crowing by the younger members; and the remains of the evening repast furnish the breakfast for the jovial guests. The cheerful happy faces, the self-satisfied countenances, the cordial salutation of brother or sister on all occasions of address, the lively strains of music pouring forth from merry hearts in every domicile, as women and children sing their “songs of Zion,” while plying the domestic tasks, give an impression of a happy society in the vale of Deseret.

In only one respect can the Mormons be said to outrage the ordinary morality of mankind—and that is in what has been styled “the peculiar institution of polygamy.” That many have a large number of wives in Deseret,” says Oram, “is perfectly manifest to any one residing among them; and indeed, the subject begins to be more openly discussed than formerly; and it is announced that a treatise in preparation, to prove by the Scriptures the right of plurality by all Christians, if not to declare their own practice of the same.” This we must regard as a serious and deploring blemish in their traditional mode of life, pungently, as it manifestly does, to the inevitable dishonouring of women, and the decimation of the holy ties of family. It seems probable, however, that among a people so generally earnest and sincere, there is natural health and virtue enough to lead them back eventually to a nobler and purer relation of the sexes—to that sacred and only natural relation which from the first has been ordained to man and woman.

There are some other disturbing elements in Mormonism, which are most likely destined to be cast out or modified, if their peculiar social policy is ever to be anything but a temporary experiment. Right as they may be, theoretically, in holding that just and proper human government rests upon a true interpretation of the divine will, their practical exemplification of the principle is nothing more than a product of the human will—the will, namely, of the seer—supported and directed by such judgment, intelligence, and other mere natural ability which he may happen to possess. If the voice of the seer were, in fact, the voice of God, all would indeed be well, and their theoretical pretensions might seem to be sufficiently established. But so long as we have only the seer’s word, and the assertions of his disciples in support of the assumption, the claim of a divine right to govern must be tested by its results; and whether these be admirable or the contrary, the power of a ruler acting by so indefinite a right, resolves itself into a manifestation of pure despotism. While the despotism is just, and the people comparatively incompetent to take part in the management of their political affairs, such a system of government may be productive of advantages, and in most respects answer the needs and ends of the society; but as education spreads, and the perennial inspiration of the seer comes to be doubted or denied, a pretension so arrogant and pretentious will inevitably produce rebellions, and must finally go the way of all the shamms that have been annihilated. This the present president, Brigham Young, apparently perceives, for we hear that, with praiseworthy caution, he is “wary of giving revelations,” and seems to be waiting for the time when they may be quietly dispensed with. He tells the people that the prophet has left more work carved out, than several years of faithful diligence will accomplish; and until all the duties thus enjoined have been fulfilled, he does not consider it needful to ask for any more light from Heaven!

In drawing what we have written to a close, our own conclusion is, that the Mormon doctrines are for the most part nonsense, but that what the Mormons do is in many ways commendable. The world may very well permit them to indulge in their millennial fancies and patriarchal crotchets, so long as they live peaceably and honest among themselves, and make no intolerable aggressions on the beliefs and religious systems that differ from their own. Their steadfast and honourable industry, the unity of aim and sentiment that sustains among them, their zealous devotion to a central idea, their reverence, if perverted, recognition of a Supreme Power over them, the pleasant fellowship that results from their social regulations, and the robust and serene independence by which they are distinguished as a community; these, and other highly creditable qualities and characteristics, assuredly entitle them to the most respect of all candid and discriminating persons, and must sooner or later secure for them an extensive and deserving admiration. Nothing but good-will and an indulgent charity are due to these earnest, stalwart children of the desert—these rough and intrepid backwoodsmen of the universe who, called by a voice which they but imperfectly understand, have nevertheless gone forth to subdue and cultivate a remote and barren region, so that, instead of the heath and the bushwood, it may bear grain for the food of man, and become a blossoming and fruitful garden for his habitation and delight. Not impartly have they been likened to the Puritans of New England; for although their professing faith is different, they resemble them thoroughly in their hardy isolation and exclusiveness, and are endowed with the like invincibility of purpose; they are as energetic and as enduring; they have sustained persecutions more trying and deplorable, have toileted against all imaginable obstructions for liberty to work and live, contended bravely with wild Indians and the hordes of pestilent outlaws that lurk about the frontiers of civilization; they have passed through many and enormous perils in roadless prairies and primeval forests, in rocky fastnesses and on the waves of bridgeless rivers, and after the severest struggles and endurance, they have at last made for