

ORIGINAL SINNERS

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Original sinners by Henry W. Nevinson

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HENRY W. NEVINSON

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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of East End Life.

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PREFACE

THERE has been some discussion lately about "The Fall of Man," and English ecclesiastics, appealing to higher authorities than the mere sciences of geology, morphology, biology, zoology, and the history of mankind, have confidently maintained the truth and value of that theological hypothesis. It is very natural. I suppose that every mythology, whether Hebrew, Greek, Roman, German, Celtic, or Norse, has imagined a distant age of innocence and happiness to which those races looked back with a regretful yearning, such as many middle-aged people feel in looking back upon a childhood fondly pictured as innocent and happy. Every one knows how rapidly the past becomes idealised—how rapidly the black shadows of bodily pain, grief, fear, and anxiety fade from the picture that we recall. Unconsciously, and even unwillingly, memory works at her selection, and, like a sun-dial which boasts

"*Nullas numero horas nisi serenas,*" she records only the feelings and incidents that were comparatively bright. The process of elimination is so quick that almost every day of our lives we can say to ourselves, "Tomorrow how I shall long for yesterday!"

So it is no wonder that the traditions of mankind, extending over many thousand years, should often have called up dissolving visions of ancient peace and virtue and joy—an Age of the Elder Gods, a Golden Age, a Garden of Eden, where was neither grief nor pain nor parting nor any sin. Even historians, poets, and novelists, who limit themselves to more definite history than the theologians, love to dwell upon the imagined charms of the "Violet-crowned City," or of mediæval chivalry, or Elizabethan spaciousness, or even of our rollicking Civil Wars and the romantic 'Forty-five. It seems as though "The Fall" were not merely a decline from Adam and a Saturnian Age, but a recurrent or perpetual process—as though man were for ever declining and falling down a slippery slope. Indeed, for any one who has survived the last six years and been

present at scenes of bloodthirstiness, lust, and cruelty far surpassing the imagination or capacity of any other animal, the continuous Fall of Man is a doctrine easily believed. There was a time when man could be described as a little lower than the angels, and crowned with glory and honour ; but large numbers of our genus have lately shown themselves immeasurably lower than the beasts, amid the applause of many who were debarred by age or sex or religion from enjoying opportunities for similar conduct.

And yet, however natural the doctrine of the Fall may be, it appears to me too like despair. If we have always to keep our backward-turning eyes fixed upon a retreating past of innocuous joy, while we drag at each remove a lengthening chain, what inducement has mankind for proceeding upon the way ? Let us, rather, leave the world to the superior wisdom, morality, and beauty of elephants, apes, and peacocks. Only if we remain obstinately deaf to the poetic allurements of the Fall and heroically cleave to the repellent old doctrine of Original Sin (its contrary, though many contrive to accept both)—only

then does the outlook grow a little brighter. Take our sins as original, as part of man's very essence from the beginning; assume, with Mephisto, that we have used our glimmering light of reason only to become more bestial than the beasts; put mankind at its worst within historic times, and in the present appalling years; still, we may now and again perceive in men and women something which makes us hold our breath, as at a sudden revelation of splendour. Kindliness, courage, laughter—all simple things, but how unexpected and startling! We talk of "common honesty!" It is so rare and so welcome that the merest touch of it makes one jump like the touch of an angel's hand. Fidelity, self-sacrifice, and shame—many animals and birds display those qualities, and many have a highly-developed sense of beauty and art. A dog can smile and laugh, or "grin," as the Psalmist knew. Horses, asses, and cats maintain profound convictions. Camels and trek-oxen practise prudence and resource. But in all these characteristics man at times surpasses them, as he surpasses them in bestial ways. That is where the wonder comes