

The Celestial Railroad

by Nathaniel Hawthorne

The sermon warns against the dangers of a socially fashionable brand of 'easy religion' and the importance of following the narrow way to eternal life.

Scripture: Psalm 139:23, Matthew 7:13, Mark 9:24, John 14:6, Romans 6:23, 2 Corinthians 6:14, 1 Peter 5:8, Revelation 21:27, Revelation 22:14

Topics: "Narrow Path", "Eternal Life"

Description

Nathaniel Hawthorne preaches a sermon based on a dream inspired by Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress', highlighting the contrast between the broadness of contemporary Christianity and the narrowness of Biblical Christianity. The dream journey depicts a railroad from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, symbolizing the easy path of 'easy religion' that leads to destruction. Along the way, various biblical references are intertwined with modern elements, showcasing the challenges and temptations faced by pilgrims on the narrow path to eternal life.

Transcript

by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 - 1864)

Introduction

This little booklet is a spin-off from Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress". It is an allegory depicting the radical distinction between "the broadness of contemporary Christianity", and "the narrowness of Biblical Christianity". The vast majority of Christian professors have abandoned the Bible's demanding lifestyle of the narrow way, which alone leads to eternal life. A socially fashionable brand of 'easy religion' now masquerades as biblical Christianity.

Hawthorne's dream carries him off to Bunyan's 'City of Destruction' where to his surprise, he is told that a RAILROAD has recently been built from the 'City of Destruction' to the 'Celestial City'. Sadly, this railroad never arrives at its promised destination.

"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."
Matthew 7:13-14

THE CITY OF DESTRUCTION

Not a great while ago, passing through the gate of dreams, I visited that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction. It interested me much to learn that by the public spirit of some of the inhabitants a railroad has recently been established between this populous and flourishing town and the Celestial City. Having a little time upon my hands, I resolved to gratify a liberal curiosity by making a trip thither. Accordingly one fine morning, after paying my bill at the hotel, and directing the porter to stow my luggage behind a coach, I took my seat in the vehicle and set out for the station house. It was my good fortune to enjoy the company of a gentleman - one Mr. Smooth-it-away - who, though he had never actually visited the Celestial City, yet seemed as well acquainted with its laws, customs, policy and statistics as with those of the city of Destruction, of which he was a native townsman. Being, moreover, a director of the railroad corporation, and one of its largest stockholders, he had it in his power to give me all desirable information respecting this praiseworthy enterprise.

THE SLOUGH OF DESPOND

Our coach rattled out of the city, and at a short distance from its outskirts passed over a bridge of elegant construction, but somewhat too slight, as I imagined, to sustain any considerable weight. On both sides lay an extensive quagmire, which could not have been more disagreeable, either to sight or smell, had all the kennels of the earth emptied their pollution there.

"This," remarked Mr. Smooth-it-away, "is the famous Slough of Despond - a disgrace to all the neighborhood; and the greater that it might so easily be converted into firm ground."

"I have understood," said I, "that efforts have been made for that purpose from time immemorial."

"Very probable - and what effect could be anticipated from such unsubstantial stuff?" cried Mr. Smooth-it-away. "You observe this convenient bridge. We obtained a sufficient foundation for it by throwing into the Slough some editions of books of morality, volumes of French philosophy and German rationalism, tracts, sermons, and essays of modern clergymen, extracts from Plato, Confucius, and various Hindoo sages, together with a few ingenious commentaries upon texts of Scripture; all of which, by some scientific process, have been converted into a mass like granite. The whole bog might be filled up with a similar matter."

It really seemed to me, however, that the bridge vibrated and heaved up and down in a very formidable manner; and in spite of Mr. Smooth-it-away's testimony to the solidity of its foundation, I should be reluctant to cross it in a crowded omnibus, especially if each passenger were encumbered with as heavy luggage as that gentleman and myself.

THE WICKET GATE AND EVANGELIST

Nevertheless, we got over without accident, and soon found ourselves at the station little Wicket Gate, which formerly, as old pilgrims will recollect, stood directly across the highway, and by its inconvenient narrowness, was a great obstruction to the traveler of liberal mind and expansive stomach.

A large number of passengers were already at the station house, awaiting the departure of the cars. By the aspect and demeanor of the persons, it was easy to judge that the feelings of the community had undergone a very favorable change, in reference to the celestial pilgrimage. It would have done Bunyan's heart good to see it. Instead of a lonely and ragged man with a huge burden on his back, plodding along sorrowfully on foot while the whole city hooted after him, here were parties of the first gentry and most

respectable people in the neighborhood, setting merely a summer tour.

Among the gentlemen were characters of deserved eminence, magistrates, politicians, and men of wealth, by whose brethren. In the ladies' apartment, too, I rejoiced to distinguish some of most elevated circles of the Celestial City. There was much pleasant conversation about the news of the day topics of business, politics, or the lighter matters of amusement; while religion though indubitably the main thing at heart, was thrown tastefully into the background. Even an infidel would have heard little or nothing to shock his sensibility.

THE BURDEN OF SIN

One great convenience of the new method of going on pilgrimage I must not forget to mention. Our enormous burdens, instead of being carried on our shoulders, as had been the custom of old, were all snugly deposited in the baggage car, and, as I was assured, would be delivered to their respective owners at the journey's end. Another thing, likewise, the benevolent reader will be delighted to understand. It may be remembered that there was an ancient feud between Prince Beelzebub and the keeper of the Wicket Gate, and that the adherents of the former distinguished personage were accustomed to shoot deadly arrows at honest pilgrims while knocking at the door.

This dispute, much to the credit as well as the illustrious potentate above mentioned, as of the worthy and enlightened directors of the railroad, has been practically arranged upon the principle of mutual 'compromise'. The Prince's subjects are now pretty numerously employed about the station house, some in taking care of the baggage, others in collecting fuel, feeding the engines, and such congenial occupations; and I can conscientiously affirm, that persons more generally agreeable to the passengers, are not to be found on any railroad. Every good heart must surely exult at so satisfactory an arrangement of an immemorial difficulty.

MR. GREATHEART

"Where is Mr. Greatheart?" inquired I. "Beyond a doubt the directors have engaged that famous old champion to be chief conductor of the railroad?"

"Why no," said Mr. Smooth-it-away, with a dry cough; "he was offered the situation of brakeman; but to tell you the truth, our friend Greatheart has grown preposterously stiff and narrow in his old age. He has so often guided pilgrims over the road on foot, that he considers it a sin to travel in any other fashion. Besides, the old fellow had entered so heartily into the ancient feud with Prince Beelzebub, that he would have been perpetually at blows or ill language with some of the Prince's subjects, and thus have embroiled us anew. So, on the whole, we were not sorry when honest Greatheart went off to the Celestial City in a huff, and left us at liberty to choose a more suitable and accommodating man. Yonder comes the engineer of the train; you will probably recognize him at once."

APOLLYON

The engine at this moment took its station in advance of the cars, looking, I must confess, much more like a sort of mechanical demon that would hurry us to the infernal regions, than a laudable contrivance for smoothing our way to the Celestial City. On its top sat a personage almost enveloped in smoke and flame, which (not to startle the reader) appeared to gush from his own mouth and stomach as well as from the engine's brazen abdomen.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" cried I. "What on earth is this? A living creature? If so, he is own brother to the engine he rides upon."

"Poh, poh, you are snippety," said Mr. Smooth-it-away, with a hearty laugh. "Don't you know Apollyon, Christian's old enemy, with whom he fought so fierce a battle in the Valley of Humiliation? He was the very fellow to manage the engine, and so we have reconciled him to the custom of going on pilgrimage, and engaged him as chief engineer."

"Bravo, bravo!" exclaimed I, with irrepressible enthusiasm. "This shows the 'liberality' of the age. This proves, if anything can, that all musty prejudices are in a fair way to be obliterated. And how will Christian rejoice to hear of this happy transformation of his old antagonist. I promise myself great pleasure in informing him of it when we reach the Celestial City."

THE PILGRIMS ON THE OLD FOOTPATH

The passengers being all comfortably seated, we now rattled away merrily, accomplishing a greater distance in ten minutes than Christian probably trudged over in a day. It was laughable while we glanced along, to observe two dusty foot-travelers in the old pilgrim guise, with their staffs, and their mystic rolls of parchment in their hands, and their intolerable burdens on their backs. The preposterous obstinacy of these honest people in persisting to groan and stumble along the difficult pathway, rather than take advantage of modern improvements, excited great mirth among our wiser brotherhood. We greeted the two pilgrims with many pleasant gibes and a roar of laughter; whereupon they gazed at us with such woeful and absurdly compassionate visages, that our merriment grew ten-fold more obstreperous. Apollyon, also, entered heartily into the fun, and contrived to blow the smoke and flame of the engine, or of his own breath, into their faces, and envelop them in an atmosphere of scalding steam. These little practical jokes amused us mightily, and doubtless afforded the pilgrims the gratification of considering themselves martyrs.

THE INTERPRETER'S HOUSE

At some distance from the railroad, Mr. Smooth-it-away pointed to a large, antique edifice, which he observed was a lodge of a long standing, and had formerly been a noted stopping-place for pilgrims. In Bunyan's road-book it is mentioned as the Interpreter's House.

"I have long had a curiosity to visit that old mansion," remarked I.

"It is not one of our stations, as you perceive," said my companion. The keeper was violently opposed to the railroad; and well he might be, as the track left his house of instruction on one side, and thus was pretty certain to deprive him of all his reputable customers. But the foot-path still passes his door, and the old gentleman now and then receives a call from some simple traveler, and entertains him with fare as old-fashioned as himself."

THE CROSS

Before our talk on this subject came to a conclusion, we were rushing by the place where Christian's burden fell from his shoulders at the sight of the cross. This served as a theme from Mr. Smooth-it-away, Mr. Live-for-the-world, Mr. Hide-sin-in-the-heart and Mr. Scaly-conscience, and a group of gentlemen from the town of Shun-repentance, to discourse upon the inestimable advantages resulting from the safety of our baggage. Myself, and all the passengers indeed, joined with great unanimity in this view of the matter;

for our burdens were rich in many things esteemed precious throughout the world; and especially, we each of us possessed a great variety of favorite habits, which we trusted would not be out of fashion, even in the polite circles of the Celestial City. It would have been a sad spectacle to have seen such an assortment of valuable articles tumbling into the sepulcher.

THE HILL DIFFICULTY AND THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION

Thus pleasantly conversing on the favorable circumstances of our position as compared with those of past pilgrims, and of narrow-minded ones of the present day, we soon found ourselves at the foot of the Hill Difficulty. Through the very heart of this rocky mountain a tunnel has been constructed of most admirable architecture, with a lofty arch and a spacious double track; so that unless the earth and rocks should chance to crumble down, it will remain a lasting monument of the builder's skill and enterprise. It is a great though incidental advantage that the materials from the heart of Hill Difficulty have been employed in filling up the Valley of Humiliation; thus obviating the difficulty of descending into that disagreeable and unwholesome hollow.

THE PALACE BEAUTIFUL AND ITS LADIES

"This is a wonderful improvement indeed," said I. "Yet I would have been glad of an opportunity to visit the Palace Beautiful, and be introduced to the charming young ladies - Miss Prudence, Miss Piety, Miss Charity and the rest - who have had the kindness to entertain pilgrims there."

"Young ladies," cried Mr. Smooth-it-away, as soon as he could speak for laughing. "And charming young ladies! Why, my dear fellow, they are old maids, every one of them - prim, starched, dry and angular - and not one of them, I will venture to say, has altered so much as the fashion of her gown since the days of Christian's pilgrimage."

"Ah, well," said I, much comforted, "then I can well dispense with their acquaintance."

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH

The respectable Apollyon was now putting on the steam at a prodigious rate, anxious perhaps to get rid of the unpleasant reminiscences connected with the spot where he had so disastrously encountered Christian. Consulting Mr. Bunyan's road-book, I perceived that we must now be within a few miles of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, into which doleful region, at our present speed, we should plunge much sooner than seemed at all desirable. In truth, I expected nothing better than to find myself in the ditch on one side, or in the quag on the other. But, on the communicating my apprehensions to Mr. Smooth-it-away, he assured me that the difficulties of this passage, even in its worst condition, had been vastly exaggerated, and that, in its present state of improvement, I might consider myself as safe as on any railroad in Christendom.

Even while we were speaking, the train shot into the entrance of this dreaded valley. Though I plead guilty to some foolish palpitations of the heart during our headlong rush over the causeway here constructed, yet it were unjust to withhold the highest acclamation on the boldness of its original conception, and the ingenuity of those who executed it.

It was gratifying, likewise, to observe how much care was taken to dispel the everlasting gloom, and supply the deficit of the cheerful sunshine, not a ray of which has ever penetrated these awful shadows. For this purpose the inflammable gas, which exudes plentifully from the soil, is collected by means of

pipes, and thence communicated to a quadruple row of lamps along the whole extent of the passage. Thus a radiance has been created, even out of the fiery and sulphurous curse that rests forever upon the valley; a radiance hurtful, however, to the eyes, and somewhat bewildering, as I discovered by the changes which it wrought in the visages of my companions.

In this respect, as compared with natural daylight, there is the same difference as between truth and falsehood; but if the reader has ever traveled through the dark valley, he will have learned to be thankful for any light that he could get; if not from the sky above, then from the blasted earth beneath. Such was the red brilliancy of these lamps that they appeared to build walls of fire on both sides of the track, between which we held our course at lightning speed, while a reverberating thunder filled the valley with its echoes.

Had the engine run off the track (a catastrophe it is whispered by no means unprecedented), the bottomless pit, if there be any such place, would undoubtedly have received us. Just as some dismal fooleries of this kind had made my heart quake, there came a tremendous shriek careering along which proved to be merely the whistle of the engine on arriving at a stopping place.

TOPHET

The spot where we had now paused was the same that our friend Bunyan - a truthful man, but infected with many absurd notions - has designated, in terms plainer than I like to repeat, as the mouth of the infernal region. This, however, must be a mistake, inasmuch as Mr. Smooth-it-away, while we remained in the smoky and ghastly cavern, took occasion to prove that Tophet has not even a metaphorical existence. The place, he assured us, is no other than the crater of a half-extinct volcano, in which the directors had caused iron-forges to be set up for the manufacture of railroad iron. Hence also is obtained a plentiful supply of fuel for the use of the engines.

Whoever had gazed into the dismal obscurity of the broad cavern mouth, whence, ever and anon, darted huge tongues of dusky flame--and had seen the strange, half-shaped monsters, and visions of faces horribly grotesque into which the smoke seemed to wreath itself--and had heard the awful murmurs, and shrieks, and deep shuddering whispers of the blast, sometimes forming themselves into almost articulate words, would have seized upon Mr. Smooth-it-away's comfortable explanation as greedily as we did.

The inhabitants of the cavern, moreover, were unlovely personages, dark, smoke-begrimed, generally deformed, with misshapen feet, and a glow of dusky redness in their eyes, as if their hearts had caught fire, and were blazing out of the upper windows. It struck me as a peculiarity that the laborers at the forge and those who brought fuel to the engine, when they began to draw short breath, positively emitted smoke from their mouth and nostrils.

Among the idlers about the train, most of whom were puffing cigars which they had lighted at the flame of the crater, I was perplexed to notice several who, to my certain knowledge, had before set forth by railroad to the Celestial City. They looked dark, wild and smoky, with a singular resemblance, indeed, to the native inhabitants, like whom, also, they had a peevish propensity to ill-natured gibes and sneers, the habit of which had wrought a settled contortion on their visages. Having been on speaking terms with one of them - an indolent, good-for-nothing fellow, who went by the name of Take-it-easy - I called to him, and asked what was his business there.

"Did you not start," said I, "for the Celestial City?"

"That's a fact," said Mr. Take-it-easy, carelessly puffing some smoke into my eyes. "But I heard such bad accounts that I never took pains to climb the hill on which the city stands. No business doing, no fun going on, nothing to drink and no smoking allowed, and a thrumming of church music from morning till night. I would not stay in such a place, if they offered me a free house and living."

"But, my good Mr. Take-it-easy," cried I, "why take up your residence here, of all places in the world?"

"Oh," said the loafer, with a grin, "it is very warm hereabouts, and I meet with plenty of old acquaintances, and altogether the place suits me. I hope to see you back again some day soon. A pleasant journey to you."

While he was speaking the bell of the engine rang, and we dashed away after dropping a few passengers, but receiving no new ones. Rattling onward through the valley, we were dazzled with the fiercely gleaming gas lamps, as before; but sometimes, in the dark or intense brightness, grim faces, that bore the aspect of individual sins or evil passions, seemed to thrust themselves through the veil of light, glaring upon us and stretching forth a great dusky hand, as if to impede our progress. These were 'freaks of imagination', nothing more, mere delusions, which I ought to be heartily ashamed of; but all through the dark Valley I was tormented and pestered, and dolefully bewildered with the same kind of waking dreams. The noxious gases of that region intoxicate the brain. As the light of the natural day however began to struggle with the glow of the lanterns, these vain imaginations lost their vividness, and finally vanished with the first ray of sunshine that greeted our escape from the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Ere we had gone a mile beyond it, I could well-nigh have taken my oath that this whole gloomy passage was a dream.

A MODERN EVIL GIANT

At the end of the Valley, as John Bunyan mentions, a cavern, where, in his days, dwelt two cruel giants, 'Pope' and 'Pagan', who had stewn the ground about their residence with the bones of slaughtered pilgrims. These vile old cave-dwellers are no longer there; but into their deserted cave another terrible giant has thrust himself, and makes it his business to seize upon honest travelers, and fatten them for his table with plentiful meals of smoke, mist, moonshine, raw potatoes and sawdust. He is a German by birth, and is called Giant Transcendentalism. But as to his form, his features, his substance, and his nature generally, it is the chief peculiarity of this huge scoundrel, that neither he for himself, nor anybody for him, has ever been able to describe them. As we rushed by the cavern's mouth, we caught a hasty glimpse of him, looking somewhat like an ill-proportioned figure, but considerably more like a heap of fog and duskiness. He shouted after us, but in so strange a phraseology that we knew not what he meant, nor whether to be encouraged or affrighted.

VANITY FAIR

It was late in the day when the train thundered into the ancient city of Vanity, where Vanity Fair is still at the height of prosperity, and exhibits an epitome of whatever is brilliant, gay and fascinating beneath the sun. As I proposed to make a considerable stay here, it gratified me to learn that there is no longer the lack of harmony between the townspeople and pilgrims, which impelled the former to such lamentable mistaken measures as the persecution of Christian, and the fiery martyrdom of Faithful. On the contrary, as the new railroad brings with it great trade and a constant influx of strangers, the lord of Vanity Fair is its chief patron, and the capitalists of the city are among the largest stockholders.

Many passengers stop to take their pleasure or make their profit in the Fair, instead of going onward to the Celestial City. Indeed, such are the charms of the place, that the people often affirm it to be the true and only Heaven; stoutly contending that there is no other, that those who seek further are mere dreamers, and that, if the fabled brightness of the Celestial City lay but a bare mile beyond the gates of Vanity, they would not be fools enough to go thither. Without subscribing to these, perhaps, exaggerated encomiums, I can truly say that my abode in Vanity Fair was mainly agreeable, and my converse with the inhabitants productive of much amusement and instruction.

Being naturally of a serious turn, my attention was directed to the solid advantages derivable from a residence here, rather than to the effervescent pleasures, which are the grand object with too many visitants. The Christian reader, if he have had no accounts of the city later than Bunyan's time, will be surprised to hear that almost every street has its church, and that the reverend clergy are nowhere held in higher respect than at Vanity Fair. And well do they deserve such honorable estimation--for the maxims of wisdom and virtue which fall from their lips, come from as deep a spiritual source, and tend to as lofty a religious aim, as those of the sagest philosophers of old.

In justification of this high praise, I need only mention the names of the Rev. Mr. Shallow-deep; the Rev. Mr. Stumble-at-truth; that fine old clerical character, the Rev. Mr. This-today, who expects shortly to resign his pulpit to the Rev. Mr. That-tomorrow; together with the Rev. Mr. Bewilderment; the Rev. Mr. Clog-the-spirit; and last and greatest, the Rev. Mr. Wind-of-doctrine. The labors of these eminent divines are aided by those of innumerable lecturers, who diffuse such a various profundity, in all subjects of human nature or celestial science, that any man may acquire an extensive knowledge, without the trouble of even learning to read. Thus literature is etherealized by assuming for its medium the human voice; and knowledge depositing all its heavier particles - except, doubtless, its gold - becomes exhaled into a sound, which forthwith steals into the ever open ear of the community. These ingenious methods constitute a sort of machinery, by which thought and learning are conveyed to every person's mind, without his putting himself to the slightest inconvenience in the matter.

There is another species of machine for the wholesale manufacture of individual MORALITY. This excellent result is effected by societies for all manner of virtuous purposes--with which a man has merely to connect himself, throwing, as it were, his quota of virtue into the common stock; and the president and directors will take care that the aggregate amount be well applied. All these, and other wonderful improvements in ethics, religion and literature, being made plain to my comprehension by the ingenious Mr. Smooth-it-away, inspired me with a vast admiration of Vanity Fair.

It would fill a volume, in an age of 'pamphlets', were I to record all my observations in this great capital of human business and pleasure. There was an unlimited range of society - the powerful, the wise, the witty, and the famous in every walk of life - princes, presidents, poets, generals, artists, actors and philanthropists, all making their own market at the Fair, and deeming no price too exorbitant for such commodities as hit their fancy. It is well worth one's while, even if he had no idea of buying or selling, to loiter through the bazaars, and observe the various sorts of traffic that were going forward.

Some of the purchasers, I thought, made very foolish bargains. For instance, a young man, having inherited a splendid fortune, laid out a considerable portion of it in the purchase of diseases, and finally spent all the rest for a heavy lot of repentance and a suit of rags. There was a sort of stock, called Conscience, which seemed to be in great demand, and would purchase almost anything. Indeed few rich commodities were to be obtained without paying a heavy sum in this particular stock, as a man's business

was seldom very lucrative, unless he knew precisely when and how to throw his hoard of Conscience into the market. Yet, as this stock was the only thing of permanent value, whoever parted with it was sure to find himself a loser in the long run. Thousands sold their happiness for a whim.

Gilded chains were in great demand, and purchased with almost any sacrifice. In truth, those who desired, according to the old adage, to sell anything valuable for a son, might find customers all over the Fair; and there were innumerable bowls of pottage, piping hot, for those who chose to buy them with their birthrights.

A few articles, however, could not be found genuine at Vanity Fair. If a customer wished to renew his stock of youth, the dealers offered him a set of false teeth and an auburn wig; if he demanded peace of mind, they recommended opium or a brandy bottle.

Tracts of land and golden mansions, situated in the Celestial City, were often exchanged, at very disadvantageous rates, for a few years' lease of small, dismal, inconvenient tenements in Vanity Fair.

Prince Beelzebub himself took great interest in this sort of traffic, and sometimes condescended to meddle with small matters. I once had the pleasure to see him bargaining with a miser for his soul, which, after much ingenious skirmishing on both sides, his highness succeeded in obtaining for a few dollars. The prince remarked with a smile, that he was a loser by the transaction.

SIMPLE PILGRIMS AT THE FAIR

Day after day, as I walked the streets of Vanity, my manners and deportment became more and more like those of the inhabitants. The place began to seem like home; the idea of pursuing my course to the Celestial City was almost obliterated from my mind. I was reminded of it, however, by the sight of the same pair of simple pilgrims at whom we had laughed so heartily when Apollyon puffed smoke and steam into their faces, at the commencement of our journey. There they stood amid the densest bustle of Vanity - the dealers offering them their purple, and fine linen, and jewels; the men of wit and humor gibing at them; a pair of well-proportioned ladies ogling them askance; while the benevolent Mr. Smooth-it-away whispered some of his wisdom at their elbows, and pointed to a newly erected temple; but there were these worthy simpletons, making the scene look wild and monstrous, merely by their sturdy repudiation of all part in its business or pleasures.

One of them - his name was Stick-to-the-right - perceived in my face, I suppose, a species of sympathy and almost admiration, which to my own great surprise, I could not help feeling for this honest couple. It prompted him to address me.

"Sir," inquired he, with a sad, yet mild and kindly voice, "do you call yourself a pilgrim?"

"Yes," I replied, "my right to that appellation is indubitable. I am merely a sojourner here in Vanity Fair, being bound to the Celestial City by the new railroad."

"Alas, friend," rejoined Mr. Stick-to-the-right, "I do assure you, and beseech you to receive the truth of my words, that that whole enterprise is a bubble. You may travel on it all your lifetime, were you to live thousands of years, and yet never get beyond the limits of Vanity Fair! Yea, though you should deem yourself entering the gates of the Blessed City, it will be nothing but a miserable delusion."

"The Lord of the Celestial City," began the other pilgrim, whose name was Mr. Go-the-old-way, "has refused, and will always refuse, to grant an act of incorporation for this railroad; and unless that be obtained no passenger can ever hope to enter His dominions. Therefore, every man who buys a ticket must lay his account with losing the purchase-money - which is the value of his soul."

"Poh! nonsense!" said Mr. Smooth-it-away, taking my arm and leading me off; "these fellows ought to be arrested for libel. If the law stood as it once did in Vanity Fair, we would see them grinning through the iron bars of the prison window."

This incident made a considerable impression on my mind, and contributed with other circumstances to indispose me to a permanent residence in Vanity; although, of course, I was not simple enough to give up my original plan of gliding along easily and commodiously by railroad. Still I grew anxious to be gone. There was one strange thing that puzzled me; amid the occupations and amusements of the Fair, nothing was more common than for a person - whether at a feast, theatre, or church, or trafficking for wealth and honors, or whatever he might be doing, and however unseasonable the interruption - suddenly to vanish like a soap bubble, and be never more seen of his fellows; and so accustomed were the latter to such little incidents, that they went on with their business as quietly as if nothing had happened. But it was otherwise with me.

DEMAS AND LOT'S WIFE

Finally, after a pretty long residence at the Fair I resumed my journey towards the Celestial City, still with Mr. Smooth-it-away by my side. At a short distance beyond the suburbs of Vanity we passed the ancient silver mine, of which Demas was the first discoverer, and which is now operated to great advantage, supplying nearly all the coined currency of the world. A little further onward was the spot where Lot's wife had stood for ages, under the semblance of a pillar of salt. Curious travelers have carried it away piecemeal. Had all lapses been punished as rigorously as this poor dame's were, my yearnings for the relinquished delights of Vanity Fair might have produced a similar change in my own body, and left me a warning to future pilgrims.

DOUBTING CASTLE AND GIANT DESPAIR

The next remarkable object was a large edifice, constructed of moss-grown stone, but in a modern and airy style of architecture. The train came to a pause in its vicinity with its usual tremendous shriek.

"This was formerly the castle of the formidable Giant Despair," observed Mr. Smooth-it-away; "but, since his death, Mr. Flimsy-faith has repaired it, and now keeps an excellent house of entertainment here. It is one of our stopping places."

"It seems but slightly put together," remarked I, looking at the frail, yet ponderous walls. "I do not envy Mr. Flimsy-faith his habitation. Some day it will thunder down upon the heads of the occupants."

"We shall escape, at all events," said Mr. Smooth-it-away; "for Apollyon is putting on the steam again."

THE DELECTABLE MOUNTAINS AND THE BY-WAY TO HELL

The road now plunged into a gorge of the Delectable Mountains, and traversed the field where, in former ages, the blind men wandered and stumbled among the tombs. One of these ancient tombstones had been thrust across the track by some malicious person, and gave the train of cars a terrible jolt. Far up the

rugged side of a mountain I perceived a rusty iron door, half-overgrown with bushes and creeping plants, but with some smoke issuing from its crevices.

"Is that," inquired I, "the very door in the hillside which the shepherds assured Christian was a by-way to hell?"

"That was a 'joke' on the part of the shepherds," said Mr. Smooth-it-away, with a smile. "It is neither more nor less than the door of a cavern, which they use for a smoke house for the preparation of mutton hams."

THE ENCHANTED GROUND AND BEULAH LAND

My recollections of the journey are now, for a little space, dim and confused, inasmuch as a singular drowsiness here overcame me, owing to the fact that we were now passing over the enchanted ground, the air of which encourages a disposition to sleep. I awoke, however, as soon as we crossed over the borders of the pleasant land of Beulah. All the passengers were rubbing their eyes, comparing watches, and congratulating one another on the prospect of arriving so seasonably at their journey's end. The sweet breezes of this happy climate came refreshingly to our nostrils; we beheld the glimmering gush of silver fountains, overhung by trees of beautiful foliage and delicious fruit, which were propagated by grafts from the celestial gardens.

Once, as we dashed onward like a hurricane, there was a flutter of wings, and the bright appearance of an angel in the air, speeding forth on some heavenly mission. The engine now announced the close vicinity of the final station house, by one last and horrible scream, in which there seemed to be distinguishable every kind of wailing and woe, and bitter fierceness of wrath, all mixed up with the wild laughter of a devil or a madman. All through our journey, at every stopping place, Apollyon had exercised his ingenuity in wrenching the most abominable sounds out of the whistle of the steam engine; but in this closing effort he outdid himself, and created an infernal uproar, which, besides disturbing the peaceful inhabitants of Beulah, must have sent its discord even through the celestial gates.

A TRIUMPHANT ARRIVAL

While the horrid clamor was still ringing in our ears, we heard an exulting strain, as if a thousand instruments of music, with height, and depth, and sweetness in their tones, at once tender and triumphant, were struck in unison, to greet the approach of some illustrious hero, who had fought the good fight and won a glorious victory, and was come to lay aside his battered arms forever. Looking to ascertain what might be the occasion of this glad harmony, I perceived, on alighting from the cars, that a multitude of 'shining ones' had assembled on the other side of the river to welcome two poor pilgrims who were just emerging from its depths. They were the same ones whom Apollyon and ourselves had persecuted with taunts and gibes, and scalding steam, at the commencement of our journey, the same whose unworldly visage and impressive words had stirred my conscience amid the wild revelers of Vanity Fair.

"How amazingly well those men have got on!" cried I to Mr. Smooth-it-away. "I wish we were secure of so good a reception."

"Never fear, never fear!" answered my friend. "Come, make haste; the ferry-boat will be off directly, and in three minutes you will be on the other side of the river. No doubt you will find coaches to carry you up to the city gates."

CONCLUSION

A steam ferry-boat, the last improvement on this important route, lay at the river side, puffing, snorting, and emitting all those other disagreeable utterances, which betoken the departure to be immediate. I hurried on board with the rest of the passengers, most of whom were in great uneasiness; some blubbering out for their baggage; some tearing their hair and declaring the boat would explode or sink; some already pale with the heaving of the stream; some gazing affrighted at the ugly visage of the steersman; and some still dizzy with the slumbering influences of the Enchanted Ground. Looking back to the shore I was amazed to discern Mr. Smooth-it-away waving his hand in token of farewell.

"Don't you go over to the Celestial City?" exclaimed I.

"Oh, no!" answered he, with a curious smile, and that same disagreeable contortion of visage which I had remarked in the inhabitants of the Dark Valley. "Oh, no! I have come thus far only for the sake of your pleasant company. Good-by. We shall meet again."

And then did my excellent friend, Mr. Smooth-it-away, laugh out-right, in the midst of which extreme laughing, a smoke wreath issued from his mouth and nostrils, while a twinkle of ghastly flame darted out of either eye, proving indubitably that his heart was all of a red blaze.

The impudent fiend! To deny the existence of Tophet, when he felt its fiery tortures ringing in his breast! I rushed to the side of the boat, intending to fling myself on shore; but the wheels, as they began their revolutions, threw a dash of spray over me so cold - so deadly cold, with the chill that will never leave those waters until Death be drowned in his own river, that, with a shiver and a heart-quake, I awoke.

Thank Heaven, it was a Dream!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/nathaniel-hawthorne/the-celestial-railroad/>

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