

Above the Snake Line

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The story of the prodigal son has taken on a new phase to me, and a useful one, without doubt. It is a wonder, a marvel, how sayings of Christ and the prophets can be found which apply to every circumstance of human life and human thinking. When we change our circumstances, or our views of human affairs, we find them adjusting themselves to the new conditions. We need not be afraid of scientists nor of the discoveries of science. Because if science discovers a truth, the Bible throws a new light or color which we have not observed before. It does not change the Bible. It opens it out so that we understand it better. We are indebted to science, and we are not afraid of science, nor of any honest investigation in the world.

This story of the prodigal son took a rather peculiar, but an interesting, phase as I thought upon it in the last few hours. The prodigal son went down from the lovely mountains of Judea to the plains and cities by the shore. That is an ancient tradition concerning him. He entered the gay city, and, among the wicked and licentious people, spent his father's money and his inheritance. Then he was turned over to the swine.

It reminded me so fully of an old tradition concerning the Hampshire highlands of the Berkshire hills of Massachusetts. In one of his letters the great poet, William Cullen Bryant, who so loved the Berkshire hills, mentioned the fact that when the hills were first occupied by settlers, they found that down in the valleys were very dangerous serpents. The rattlesnake was there, the poisonous adder was there, the copperhead was there. In order to escape these serpents, they built their residences upon the hills. Ancient tradition related that there was a "snake line" above which no poisonous snake ever crept. If a person builded above an elevation of about twelve hundred feet above the sea, no poisonous serpents ever bit his children, or destroyed his property, or endangered his life. But if he built in the valley, he was subject to these deathly dangers. In the old times when the country was settled, every person who approached was advised to build his house "above the snake line."

Above the snake line the early settlers dwelt—those pioneer New Englanders whose emigrants formed the foundation of the middle and western states. The farms were small, the ground stony and difficult to clear for agriculture. The mountains were covered with the primitive forest. The valley soil was richer and more easily worked, but those wise and pious Pilgrim fathers endeavored to build their homes safely "above the snake line."

Above the snake line they built the red New England schoolhouses. In those schoolhouses have been inspired poets, scholars, martyrs, missionaries, statesmen, inventors, philanthropists, teachers, musicians and lovely home-makers. There education really began for America. There the boys and girls were instructed in what they needed to know of the elements of a practical education. The red schoolhouse of New England—glorified by poets and orators and patriots throughout the land, where the eternal friendships were formed by those who attended them—was indeed the palladium of American liberty. They built their schoolhouses "above the snake line"!

The churches also were constructed on the mountaintops of that portion of the Green Mountain range where Vermont and Massachusetts unite. When the farmer leaned upon his hoe, he could look over the intervening hilltops and see the spires of many churches. They built them in the highest places of New England. They could be seen forty or fifty miles, and all, like the churches of Peru, Blandford, Worthington and Chesterfield, pointed all the people by sunlight and moonlight to God. From the celebrated "Mohawk trail" the traveler's attention is called to churches sixty miles away. The farmer who built his house and made his home above the snake line, also constructed his place of worship above the snake line.

The churches are built where sin does not enter, and where it is safe for children to enter and for all people to worship. It is a wonderful illustration. The virus of temptations, the malarial of secret sins seem never to be lurking there. Above the snake line there is health!

Saranac lake, in the Adirondacks, famed for the cure of tuberculosis, has precisely the same climatic and local conditions as are found on the plateaus that crown the Berkshire hills. Tuberculosis is not native to that region and is never feared. In one of the towns of western Massachusetts—the town of Peru—there have been but two cases of death from tuberculosis since the entrance of civilization. But it is dangerous to descend to the distant valleys and live below the snake line. Above the snake line there is health, because of pure air and pure water. There is health because vigorous exercise is necessary to cultivate the stony land in order to make a living. There, too, is pure food. The most healthful food that can be found grows up where the air and the water are pure. Health was found up there above the snake line!

The illustration goes deep and grows wide as I think it out. From the tops of those hills the resident enjoyed magnificent distant views of the wider world. Down in the dark valley you could see but a few hundred yards. Down in the valley you are walled in by the sides of the rocky cliffs. But on the mountain farms you could look away to the Catskills, the White Mountains, the Green Mountains, Mount Tom and Mount Holyoke, and far south into Connecticut, far north into New Hampshire and Vermont, and far away into the southern mountains that border the Hudson river. Ah, there are beautiful views above the snake line! How much further men and women do see who live above that moral line!

The prodigal son went down below that line. He lived for a while among the serpents and poisonous insects of wickedness, that tempted him on every side, in Tyre and Sidon. He went down from that religious, praying home above the snake line, down into the dark valley, and was bitten by the serpents there. What a startling, all-including illustration Jesus selected when he told the story of the prodigal son!

There in that high land of the Berkshires the sunrise reveals the glory of God, far above the valley, before the valleys have escaped the shadows of the night. Earlier in the morning it shines on the faces of the farmers on the hilltop, as they see the approach of the coming day with a distinctive glory altogether its own. Every land from north to south, and east to west, and every continent on earth, has a different sunrise. The colors are peculiar to the locality and to the atmosphere. In the Berkshire hills the June or October sunrise is a glory which great artists travel from afar to see. The sunsets, except on the most cloudy days, are enriched by thousands of varicolored kaleidoscopic clouds. What a magnificent position for beauty it is above the snake line, where the sun rises early and sets late! Yes, the prodigal son went down below the religious snake line, down where the views were narrow and deceitful, down where he could not look away upon the white cliffs of God and realize in his soul what they all taught.

The minds of men have a snake line. The characters of men have a snake line. In those hills there was the spirit of poetry, where the trees seemed to sing, where the birds and fowls of the air, and the beasts of the field have their tuneful voices. They call in chants from hill to hill, which echo back from cliff to cliff. Wonderful sounds of music are up there.

The poetry of life is there. The father of William Cullen Bryant, warned against living below the snake line, set his home atop the hill, where his son wrote those uplifting words:

So live that when they summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan which moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,

Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him and lies down to pleasant dreams.

William Cullen Bryant wrote that as he sat beside one of the beautiful Berkshire streams, which, dancing down from the hillside, sang its own original song and inspired him to poetry. It was in these hills that Willis found the chiefest subjects for his most sublime writing. There Longfellow wrote poetry, and sought his wife. These great poets lived intellectually above the snake line. They did not descend to the swamps of life; they lived where minds were free and hearts were pure, and characters were sound. They located their hearts where the air was pure! Wonderful waterfalls glittered from hillside and flashed from every grove. The birds in that land have their peculiar color and their peculiar dialect. The foxes that find their holes in the broken, rocky mountain sides are of a most fascinating color. Inspiring birds are there! The whippoorwill, the blue jay, the swallow, the bobolink, the meadow lark, and the oriole, so harmonious in all their beautiful tribute of praise. Perhaps they are no more wonderful than in some other regions. But the birds there which live below the snake line are very different birds, having very much coarser voices. And there were once dangerous birds there. But above the snake line, where live the best of the fowl life, there is no danger to human beings.

There, the fish that flash—the speckled trout which leaps up the stream, climbing the little falls from eddy to eddy far into the hills, is one of the most beautiful sights, to a boy who goes fishing with his old fish-pole, to be found on earth—above the snake line. Down below, in the dull and slow stream, is the “sucker,” the eel, and the slow fish, which many will not eat. The enrichment of life that comes to one who wades up these mountain streams, with his fishing rod, singing to himself and thinking great thoughts, wading in the streams, taking the trout home for supper, is only known to those who live in those forests, who seek their entertainment and food above the snake line.

There are also in that land above the snake line the animals we all love. There are the wisest dogs. They seem to be so easily taught. There the farmer’s boys and girls stop to pick berries while the dog goes after the cows. In those hills has been bred the finest quality of canine life. The farmer says to his dog, as he comes from the field, “Go get the sheep!” Away he goes to the distant pastures and drives them in, to the last one. If a person falls into danger, is lost in the forest, or is hurt in a fall, the dog immediately notifies friends and brings relief. Many a little child has wandered into a stream, or into danger, and the watching dog has seen, and, understanding the situation, has raced for help for the little girl in danger. Lives are saved over and over above the snake line, where these dogs live. How much the horses seem to know! Even the wise old New Englander often felt that horses had “horse sense,” and often trusted it in the dark when he could not trust his own.

Above the snake line there was power. The cascade, in every single drop that fell, furnished power for the wheels of the manufacturer, and of commerce. Yes, these streams were once the blessing of God, supplying mankind with nearly all the manufactured articles used in American homes. In the hills of New England the streams have formed the heart and hand of the manufacturing of the United States. The stream falls through one waterwheel and a few rods on, through another, and then another, from cascade to cascade, and one brook may run a score of mills.

When the prodigal son lived above the snake line he possessed the mental power, the strength of character and the influence for good he could never secure below that religious line. It makes us think of the period when Adam and Eve descended below the snake line and became thieves.

Above the snake line there were glorious winter evenings. The snows came upon the hills and covered them with deep blanket which protected the vegetation. The land was covered for three or four months of the year. In the evening there was the sound of sleigh-bells, and the gathering of young people in some old farm house. The great enterprises that came from these winter evenings have been written in many volumes. The Yankee spent much time studying, and how many of the most useful inventions were thought out in the winter evenings “above the snake line”!

When the springtime came, life was safe above the snake line, because the streams did not stop to gather sufficient power to throw destructive volumes of ice. But in the valley, every spring, the farms were covered deep with ice, and it was late in summer before some of the ice melted from the damp valleys below the snake line.

Above the snake line, in apple blossom time, in June, the mountains and farms were covered with glorious apple blossoms. How Mr. Moody loved them! He instituted an “Apple Blossom Sunday,” still observed at Northfield. He always drove through the hills in apple blossom time to get the inspiration of the views. He said he could see heaven. But down below the snake line was shadow, and consequently the things which grew were the product of shadow, and could not compare in prophetic beauty with those above the snake line.

Many a man, when the necessities of life have taken him through the valley, has inquired: “Why did God make the mosquito?” That is like some of the theological questions that arise now to trouble people. When mosquitoes bite them they ask why God made the mosquito—and never find out! These are the temptations of life. Some kinds of berries growing in the shadow of the valley are really luscious, and boys and girls are tempted to go for them with long coats and cowhide boots to protect them. The chestnuts are down there, for the frosts come earlier there, but the people who go down after them are often bitten by snakes. The monuments in the cemeteries above the snake line show that some persons met death by venturing below the snake line.

There are wild roses down there. Sometimes they attracted people, who said: “Why should we not? God made the roses.” Immorality was there; vice was there. Life below the snake line, morally and religiously, is well illustrated by the snake line of the Berkshire hills. You see the shop girl. She had a home, but father and mother are dead. She had a little sister to care for, and undertook to get the money by going to the store or the factory, and taking an occupation there. Finding that the money she received would not supply the necessities of her little sister and care for herself properly, there came the tempter into the region, for she lived in a locality which was morally down below the snake line. There is a line in poverty that is below the snake line, and it is dangerous for any boy or girl or man or woman to take his dwelling there.

I remember a widow who was left with five children. She was determined to keep them together, though she could not live in the style her husband had maintained. So down in a narrow alley, a very narrow, dirty alley, her children were compelled to grow up, living in the temptations of that awful region. Every single one of the five children went wrong, and one is now serving time for manslaughter, and the poor woman died of a broken heart after she went away from the prison doors. Her son is condemned to live a life term in prison. Down below the snake line—God pity the poor that have to live down there amid serpents and sin, surrounded by

evil! There are tempting things there, wild roses, chestnuts, and dangerous lurking serpents—and I need not say more than the word “serpent” to convey the moral meaning back of this life below the snake line.

There are amusements below the snake line. Every one brought into association with them has his mind tainted and his heart grows cold, and his sense of right and wrong is disturbed, living among the amusements below the snake line.

A story comes to me, as I think of this interpretation of the prodigal son, of an old eagle that lived on the mountain top for years and years. He was recognized as “the old eagle of the highlands.” He was very strong, and his wings spread very wide, but he was never dangerous to man. He never interfered with anything to disturb the families or their farms. The story told to me is a striking illustration. The old eagle saw in the dark valley some five miles below his home—far down the valley—a little child with a basket, and barefooted. They tell the story that the old eagle followed down and saw the little child, whose home was above the snake line, wandering close by a dark stream in the depth of the valley. The little girl wore a white dress, with short sleeves, and with a basket was going to pick berries, unconscious of the fact that there ever was an adder or a rattlesnake. She went singing gayly. The story is repeated in almost every home in the hills, how the eagle followed the little girl, circling above and watching, and when the snake arose and prepared to strike, down swept the great eagle with its awful talons, and carried the rattlesnake, writhing and wriggling, through the air until he came to a place where he knew if he released his hold the snake would be killed by its fall on the rocks. They found it crushed to death, one of the greatest snakes ever seen in that region.

The eagle watching over the little girl who wandered into these dangers and temptations is like the missionary who goes into the slums among the heathen; the missionary that seeks to protect little children, and goes with strength of wings and power of talons, and the love of a great heart, and seizes the serpent and bears it away, protecting the innocent child. What a marvelous illustration that would be for a poem! It is a wonder to me that such a tribute has not come down in some poetical form.

The prodigal son went back to the hills above the snake line. He said: “I have seen enough of this! I have been among these vile things long enough! I know now that I am wrong, that my life must be lived above the snake line. I must live up where I can see the things of God and breathe the pure air and drink the pure water, and live upon pure food.” “Coming to himself,” he went back to his father’s home, above the snake line—above the moral line. The illustration of his return we carry beyond the story and find that he was at last welcomed by his brother, and that he doubtless lived there in peace until his dying hour.

You have read of the Hampshire hills in October! You have seen the mountains round you there in the glory of fall! But no person in America can say he has seen the full glory of an October until he has seen the Hampshire highlands at that season of the year. The automobiles go over the Mohawk trail in October in a continual stream, looking upon forests blooming like roses, and great trees like lilies, so surpassingly beautiful! Heart and mind cannot find words to picture the miles and miles of glorious combinations of every beautiful shade and color of gleam and loveliness brought forth in thrilling glory by those trees and fields—in October. All this is “above the snake line.”

When the hour of death comes; when the October of life appears; when our lives are weakening; when the time comes that the trees of life must drop their leaves; when the time comes for the death of the season, then the glory of the October day is like the death of a Christian who lives and dies above the snake line. Full of hope, full of beauty, full of glory,

surrounded by something indescribable in holiness, the most sublime gift of God is the dying hour. The Christian who loves God, in the dying hours finds heaven gleaming all around him. He is safely above the snake line. Oh, "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints!"

BENEDICTION

Now, O God, we appeal to thee for thy benediction. And if there be present in this house, now, men or women, or boys or girls, who have been living below the snake line in character or in occupation, may they be lifted, in answer to our prayer, above the snake line, where they may maintain that Christian experience, that Christian character, that Christian life which will make their lives beautiful and useful and their death glorious. We ask thy benediction; and ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.