

The Economic Tendency of Freethought

Voltairine de Cleyre

Contents

The Economic Tendency of Freethought	4
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Freethought in America was an anti-clerical, anti-Christian movement which sought to separate the church and state in order to leave religious matters to the conscience and reasoning ability of the individual involved. Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912) was prominent both as a feminist and as a freethinker. The following article, reprinted from Benjamin Tucker’s periodical *Liberty*, was originally delivered by de Cleyre as a lecture before the Boston Secular Society. It is an excellent example of the interrelationship between the individualist-feminist view of the church and of the state. In her essay “Sex Slavery,” de Cleyre reiterated this two-pronged attack. She wrote: “Let every woman ask herself, ‘Why am I the Slave of Man?’ ... There are two reasons why, and these are ultimately reducible to a single principle — the authoritarian supreme power GOD-idea, and its two instruments: the Church — that is, the priests — and the State — that is, the legislators.”

Wendy McElroy

Freedom, Feminism and the State

The Economic Tendency of Freethought

Friends, — on page 286, Belford-Clarke edition, of the “Rights of Man,” the words which I propose as a text for this discourse may be found. Alluding to the change in the condition of France brought about by the Revolution of '93, Thomas Paine says:

“The mind of the nation had changed beforehand, and a new order of things had naturally followed a new order of thoughts.”

Two hundred and eighty-nine years ago, a man, a student, a scholar, a thinker, a philosopher, was roasted alive for the love of God and the preservation of the authority of the Church; and as the hungry flames curled round the crisping flesh of martyred Bruno, licking his blood with their wolfish tongues, they shadowed forth the immense vista of “a new order of things”: they lit the battle-ground where Freedom fought her first successful revolt against authority.

That battle-ground was eminently one of thought. Religious freedom was the rankling question of the day. “Liberty of conscience! Liberty of conscience! Non-interference between worshipper and worshipped!” That was the voice that cried out of dungeons and dark places, from under the very foot of prince and ecclesiastic. And why? Because the authoritative despotisms of that day were universally ecclesiastic despotisms; because Church aggression was grinding every human right beneath its heel, and every other minor oppressor was but a tool in the hands of the priesthood; because Tyranny was growing towards its ideal and crushing out of existence the very citadel of Liberty, — individuality of thought; Ecclesiasticism had a corner on ideas.

But individuality is a thing that cannot be killed. Quietly it may be, but just as certainly, silently, perhaps, as the growth of a blade of grass, it offers its perpetual and unconquerable protest against the dictates of Authority. And this silent, unconquerable, menacing thing, that balked God, provoked him to the use of rack, thumb-screw, stock, hanging, drowning, burning, and other instruments of “infinite mercy,” in the seventeenth century fought a successful battle against that authority which sought to control this fortress of freedom. It established its right to be. It overthrew that portion of government which attempted to guide the brains of men. It “broke the corner.” It declared and maintained the anarchy, or non-rulership, of thought.

Now you who so fear the word an-arche, remember! the whole combat of the seventeenth century, of which you are justly proud, and to which you never tire of referring, was waged for the sole purpose of realizing anarchism in the realm of thought.

It was not an easy struggle, — this battle of the quiet thinkers against those who held all the power, and all the force of numbers, and all of the strength of tortures! It was not easy for them to speak out of the midst of faggot flames, “We believe differently, and we have the right”. But on their side stood Truth! And there lies more inequality between her and Error, more strength for Truth, more weakness for Falsehood, than all the fearful disparity of power that lies between the despot and the victim. So theirs was the success. So they paved the way for the grand political combat of the eighteenth century.

Mark you! The seventeenth century made the eighteenth possible, for it was the “new order of thoughts,” which gave birth to a “new order of things”. Only by deposing priests, only by rooting out their authority, did it become logical to attack the tyranny of kings: for, under the old regime, kingcraft had ever been the tool of priestcraft, and in the order of things but a secondary consideration. But with the downfall of the latter, kingcraft rose into prominence as the pre-eminent despot, and against the pre-eminent despot revolt always arises.

The leaders of that revolt were naturally those who carried the logic of their freethought into the camp of the dominant oppressor; who thought, spoke, wrote freely of the political fetich, as their predecessors had of the religious mockery; who did not waste their time hugging themselves in the camps of dead enemies, but accepted the live issue of the day, pursued the victories of Religion's martyrs, and carried on the war of Liberty in those lines most necessary to the people at the time and place. The result was the overthrow of the principle of kingcraft. (Not that all kingdoms have been overthrown, but find me one in a hundred of the inhabitants of a kingdom who will not laugh at the farce of the "divine appointment" of monarchs.) So wrought the new order of thoughts.

I do not suppose for a moment that Giordano Bruno or Martin Luther foresaw the immense scope taken in by their doctrine of individual judgment. From the experience of men up to that date it was simply impossible that they could foresee its tremendous influence upon the action of the eighteenth century, much less upon the nineteenth. Neither was it possible that those bold writers who attacked the folly of "hereditary government" should calculate the effects which certainly followed as their thoughts took form and shape in the social body. Neither do I believe it possible that any brain that lives can detail the working of a thought into the future, or push its logic to an ultimate. But that many who think, or think they think, do not carry their syllogisms even to the first general conclusion, I am also forced to believe. If they did, the freethinkers of today would not be digging, mole-like, through the substratum of dead issues; they would not waste their energies gathering the ashes of fires burnt out two centuries ago; they would not lance their shafts at that which is already bleeding at the arteries; they would not range battalions of brains against a crippled ghost that is "laying" itself as fast as it decently can, while a monster neither ghostly nor yet like the rugged Russian bear, the armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger, but rather like a terrible anaconda, steel-muscled and iron-jawed, is winding its horrible folds around the human bodies of the world, and breathing its devouring breath into the faces of children. If they did, they would understand that the paramount question of the day is not political, is not religious, but is economic. That the crying-out demand of today is for a circle of principles that shall forever make it impossible for one man to control another by controlling the means of his existence. They would realize that, unless the freethought movement has a practical utility in rendering the life of man more bearable, unless it contains a principle which, worked out, will free him from the all-oppressive tyrant, it is just as complete and empty a mockery as the Christian miracle or Pagan myth. Eminently is this the age of utility; and the freethinker who goes to the Hovel of Poverty with metaphysical speculations as to the continuity of life, the transformation of matter, etc.; who should say, "My dear friend, your Christian brother is mistaken; you are not doomed to an eternal hell; your condition here is your misfortune and can't be helped, but when you are dead, there's an end of it," is of as little use in the world as the most irrational religionist. To him would the hovel justly reply: "Unless you can show me something in freethought which commends itself to the needs of the race, something which will adjust my wrongs, 'put down the mighty from his seat,' then go sit with priest and king, and wrangle out your metaphysical opinions with those who mocked our misery before."

The question is, does freethought contain such a principle? And right here permit me to introduce a sort of supplementary text, taken, I think, from a recent letter of Cardinal Manning, but if not Cardinal Manning, then some other of the various dunce-capped gentlemen who recently "biled" over the Bruno monument.

Says the Cardinal: "Freethought leads to Atheism, to the destruction of social and civil order, and to the overthrow of government." I accept the gentleman's statement; I credit him with much intellectual acumen for perceiving that which many freethinkers have failed to perceive: accepting it, I shall do my best to prove it, and then endeavor to show that this very iconoclastic principle is the salvation of the economic slave and the destruction of the economic tyrant.

First: does freethought lead to Atheism?

Freethought, broadly defined, is the right to believe as the evidence, coming in contact with the mind, forces it to believe. This implies the admission of any and all evidence bearing upon any subject which may come up for discussion. Among the subjects that come up for discussion, the moment so much is admitted, is the existence of a God.

Now, the idea of God is, in the first place, an exceeding contradiction. The sign God, so Deists tell us, was invented to express the inexpressible, the incomprehensible and infinite! Then they immediately set about defining it. These definitions prove to be about as self-contradictory and generally conflicting as the original absurdity. But there is a particular set of attributes which form a sort of common ground for all these definitions. They tell us that God is possessed of supreme wisdom, supreme justice, and supreme power. In all the catalogue of creeds, I never yet heard of one that had not for its nucleus unlimited potency.

Now, let us take the deist upon his own ground and prove to him either that his God is limited as to wisdom, or limited as to justice, or limited as to power, or else there is no such thing as justice.

First, then, God, being all-just, wishes to do justice; being all-wise, knows what justice is; being all-powerful, can do justice. Why then injustice? Either your God can do justice and won't or doesn't know what justice is, or he can not do it. The immediate reply is: "What appears to be injustice in our eyes, in the sight of omniscience may be justice. God's ways are not our ways."

Oh, but if he is the all-wise pattern, they should be; what is good enough for God ought to be good enough for man; but what is too mean for man won't do in a God. Else there is no such thing as justice or injustice, and every murder, every robbery, every lie, every crime in the calendar is right and upon that one premise of supreme authority you upset every fact in existence.

What right have you to condemn a murderer if you assume him necessary to "God's plan"? What logic can command the return of stolen property, or the branding of a thief, if the Almighty decreed it? Yet here, again, the Deist finds himself in a dilemma, for to suppose crime necessary to God's purpose is to impeach his wisdom or deny his omnipotence by limiting him as to means. The whole matter, then, hinges upon the one attribute of authority of the central idea of God.

But, you say, what has all this to do with the economic tendency of freethought? Everything. For upon that one idea of supreme authority is based every tyranny that was ever formulated. Why? Because, if God is, no human being no thing that lives, ever had a right! He simply had a privilege, bestowed, granted, conferred, gifted to him, for such a length of time as God sees fit.

This is the logic of my textator, the logic of Catholicism, the only logic of Authoritarianism. The Catholic Church says: "You who are blind, be grateful that you can hear: God could have made you deaf as well. You who are starving, be thankful that you can breathe; God could deprive you of air as well as food. You who are sick, be grateful that you are not dead: God is very merciful to let you live at all. Under all times and circumstances take what you can get, and be thankful." These are the beneficences, the privileges, given by Authority.

Note the difference between a right and a privilege. A right, in the abstract, is a fact; it is not a thing to be given, established, or conferred; it is. Of the exercise of a right power may deprive me;

of the right itself, never. Privilege, in the abstract, does not exist; there is no such thing. Rights recognized, privilege is destroyed.

But, in the practical, the moment you admit a supreme authority, you have denied rights. Practically the supremacy has all the rights, and no matter what the human race possesses, it does so merely at the caprice of that authority. The exercise of the respiratory function is not a right, but a privilege granted by God; the use of the soil is not a right, but a gracious allowance of Deity; the possession of product as the result of labor is not a right, but a boon bestowed. And the thievery of pure air, the withholding of land from use, the robbery of toil, are not wrongs (for if you have no rights, you cannot be wronged), but benign blessings bestowed by “the Giver of all Good” upon the air-thief, the landlord, and the labor-robber.

Hence the freethinker who recognizes the science of astronomy, the science of mathematics, and the equally positive and exact science of justice, is logically forced to the denial of supreme authority. For no human being who observes and reflects can admit a supreme tyrant and preserve his self-respect. No human mind can accept the dogma of divine despotism and the doctrine of eternal justice at the same time; they contradict each other, and it takes two brains to hold them. The cardinal is right: freethought does logically lead to atheism, if by atheism he means the denial of supreme authority.

I will now take his third statement, leaving the second for the present; freethought, he says, leads to the overthrow of government. I am sensible that the majority of you will be ready to indignantly deny the cardinal’s asseveration; I know that the most of my professedly atheistic friends shrink sensitively from the slightest allusion that sounds like an attack on government; I am aware that there are many of you who could eagerly take this platform to speak upon “the glorious rights and privileges of American citizenship”; to expatiate upon that “noble bulwark of our liberties — the constitution”; to defend “that peaceful weapon of redress, the ballot”; to soar off rhapsodically about that “starry banner that floats ‘over the land of the free and the home of the brave.’” We are so free! and so brave! We don’t hang Brunos at the stake any more for holding heretical opinions on religious subjects. No! But we imprison men for discussing the social question, and we hang men for discussing the economic question! We are so very free and so very brave in this country! “Ah!” we say in our nineteenth century freedom (?) and bravery (?), “it was a weak God, a poor God, a miserable, quaking God, whose authority had to be preserved by the tortuous death of a creature!” Aye! the religious question is dead, and the stake is no longer fashionable. But is it a strong State, a brave State, a conscience-proud State, whose authority demands the death of five creatures? Is the scaffold better than the faggot? Is it a very free mind which will read that infamous editorial in the Chicago “Herald”: “It is not necessary to hold that Parsons was legally, rightfully, or wisely hanged: he was mightily hanged. The State, the sovereign, need give no reasons; the State need abide by no law; the State is the law!” — to read that and applaud, and set the Cain-like curse upon your forehead and the red “damned spot” upon your hand? Do you know what you do? — Craven, you worship the fiend, Authority, again! True, you have not the ghosts, the incantations, the paraphernalia and mummery of the Church. No: but you have the “precedents,” the “be it enacted,” the red-tape, the official uniforms of the State; and you are just as bad a slave to statecraft as your Irish Catholic neighbor is to popecraft. Your Government becomes your God, from whom you accept privileges, and in whose hands all rights are vested. Once more the individual has no rights; once more intangible, irresponsible authority assumes the power of deciding what is right and what is wrong. Once more the race must labor under just such restricted conditions as the law — the voice of the Authority, the

governmentalist's bible-shall dictate. Once more it says: "You who have not meat, be grateful that you have bread; many are not allowed even so much. You who work sixteen hours a day, be glad it is not twenty; many have not the privilege to work. You who have not fuel, be thankful that you have shelter; many walk the street! And you, street-walkers, be grateful that there are well-lighted dens of the city; in the country you might die upon the roadside. Goaded human race! Be thankful for your goad. Be submissive to the Lord, and kiss the hand that lashes you!" Once more misery is the diet of the many, while the few receive, in addition to their rights, those rights of their fellows which government has wrested from them. Once more the hypothesis is that the Government, or Authority, or God in his other form, owns all the rights, and grants privileges according to its sweet will.

The freethinker who should determine to question it would naturally suppose that one difficulty in the old investigation was removed. He would say, "at least this thing Government possesses the advantage of being of the earth, — earthy. This is something I can get hold of, argue, reason, discuss with. God was an indefinable, arbitrary, irresponsible something in the clouds, to whom I could not approach nearer than to his agent, the priest. But this dictator surely I shall be able to meet it on something like possible ground." Vain delusion! Government is as unreal, as intangible, as unapproachable as God. Try it, if you don't believe it. Seek through the legislative halls of America and find, if you can, the Government. In the end you will be doomed to confer with the agent, as before. Why, you have the statutes! Yes, but the statutes are not the government; where is the power that made the statutes? Oh, the legislators! Yes, but the legislator, per se, has no more power to make a law for me than I for him. I want the power that gave him the power. I shall talk with him; I go to the White House; I say: "Mr. Harrison, are you the government?" "No, madam, I am its representative." "Well, where is the principal?—Who is the government?" "The people of the United States." "The whole people?" "The whole people." "You, then, are the representative of the people of the United States. May I see your certificate of authorization?" "Well, no; I have none. I was elected." "Elected by whom? the whole people?" "Oh, no. By some of the people, — some of the voters." (Mr. Harrison being a pious Presbyterian, he would probably add: "The majority vote of the whole was for another man, but I had the largest electoral vote.") "Then you are the representative of the electoral college, not of the whole people, nor the majority of the people, nor even a majority of the voters. But suppose the largest number of ballots cast had been for you: you would represent the majority of the voters, I suppose. But the majority, sir, is not a tangible thing; it is an unknown quantity. An agent is usually held accountable to his principals. If you do not know the individuals who voted for you, then you do not know for whom you are acting, nor to whom you are accountable. If any body of persons has delegated to you any authority, the disposal of any right or part of a right (supposing a right to be transferable), you must have received it from the individuals composing that body; and you must have some means of learning who those individuals are, or you cannot know for whom you act, and you are utterly irresponsible as an agent.

"Furthermore, such a body of voters can not give into your charge any rights but their own; by no possible jugglery of logic can they delegate the exercise of any function which they themselves do not control. If any individual on earth has a right to delegate his powers to whomsoever he chooses, then every other individual has an equal right; and if each has an equal right, then none can choose an agent for another, without that other's consent. Therefore, if the power of government resides in the whole people, and out of that whole all but one elected you as their agent, you would still have no authority whatever to act for the one. The individuals composing

the minority who did not appoint you have just the same rights and powers as those composing the majority who did; and if they prefer not to delegate them at all, then neither you, nor any one, has any authority whatever to coerce them into accepting you, or any one, as their agent — for upon your own basis the coercive authority resides, not in the majority, not in any proportion of the people, but in the whole people.”

Hence “the overthrow of government” as a coercive power, thereby denying God in another form.

Upon this overthrow follows, the Cardinal says, the disruption of social and civil order!

Oh! it is amusing to hear those fellows rave about social order! I could laugh to watch them as they repeat the cry, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians!” “Down on your knees and adore this beautiful statue of Order,” but that I see this hideous, brainless, disproportion idol come rolled on the wheels of Juggernaut over the weak and the helpless, the sorrowful and the despairing. Hate burns, then, where laughter dies.

Social Order! Not long ago I saw a letter from a young girl to a friend; a young girl whose health had been broken behind a counter, where she stood eleven and twelve hours a day, six days in the week, for the magnificent sum of \$5. The letter said: “Can’t you help me to a position? My friends want me to marry a man I do not like, because he has money. Can’t you help me? I can sew, or keep books. I will even try clerking again rather than that!” Social Order! When the choice for a young girl lies between living by inches and dying by yards at manual labor, or becoming the legal property of a man she does not like because he has money!

Walk up Fifth Avenue in New York some hot summer day, among the magnificent houses of the rich; hear your footsteps echo for blocks with the emptiness of it! Look at places going to waste, space, furniture, draperies, elegance, — all useless. Then take a car down town; go among the homes of the producers of that idle splendor; find six families living in a five-room house, — the sixth dwelling in the cellar. Space is not wasted here, — these human vermin rub each other’s elbows in the stifling narrows; furniture is not wasted, — these sit upon the floor; no echoing emptiness, no idle glories! No — but wasting, strangling, choking, vicious human life! Dearth of vitality there — dearth of space for it here! This is social order!

Next winter, when the ‘annual output’ of coal has been mined, when the workmen are clenching their hard fists with impotent anger, when the coal in the ground lies useless, hark to the cry that will rise from the freezing western prairies, while the shortened commodity goes up, up, up, eight, nine, ten, eleven dollars a ton; and while the syndicate’s pockets are filling, the grave-yards fill, and fill. Moralize on the preservation of social order!

Go back to President Grant’s administration, — that very “pure republican” administration; — see the settlers of the Mussel Slough compelled to pay thirty-five, forty dollars an acre for the land reclaimed from almost worthlessness by hard labor, — and to whom? To a corporation of men who never saw it! whose “grant” lay a hundred miles away, but who, for reasons of their own, saw fit to hire the “servants of the people” to change it so. See those who refused to pay it shot down by order of “the State”; watch their blood smoke upward to the heavens, sealing the red seal of justice against their murderers; and then — watch a policeman arrest a shoeless tramp for stealing a pair of boots. Say to your self, this is civil order and must be preserved. Go talk with political leaders, big or little, on methods of “making the slate,” and “railroading” it through the ward caucus or the national convention. Muse on that “peaceful weapon of redress,” the ballot. Consider the condition of the average “American sovereign” and of his “official servant,” and prate then of civil order.

Subvert the social and civil order! Aye, I would destroy, to the last vestige, this mockery of order, this travesty upon justice! Break up the home? Yes, every home that rests on slavery! Every marriage that represents the sale and transfer of the individuality of one of its parties to the other! Every institution, social or civil, that stands between man and his right; every tie that renders one a master, another a serf; every law, every statute, every be-it-enacted that represents tyranny; everything you call American privilege that can only exist at the expense of international right. Now cry out, "Nihilist — disintegrationist!" Say that I would isolate humanity, reduce society to its elemental state, make men savage! It is not true. But rather than see this devastating, canker-ing, enslaving system you call social order go on, rather than help to keep alive the accursed institutions of Authority, I would help to reduce every fabric in the social structure to its native element.

But is it true that freedom means disintegration? Only to that which is bad. Only to that which ought to disintegrate.

What is the history of free thought?

Is it not so, that since we have Anarchy there, since all the children of the brain are legitimate, that there has been less waste of intellectual energy, more cooperation in the scientific world, truer economy in utilizing the mentalities of men, than there ever was, or ever could be, under authoritative dominion of the church? Is it not true that with the liberty of thought, Truth has been able to prove herself without the aid of force? Does not error die from want of vitality when there is no force to keep it alive? Is it not true that natural attractions have led men into associative groups, who can best follow their chosen paths of thought, and give the benefit of their studies to mankind with better economy than if some coercive power had said, "You think in this line — you in that"; or what the majority had by ballot decided it was best to think about?

I think it is true. Follow your logic out; can you not see that true economy lies in Liberty, — whether it be in thought or action? It is not slavery that has made men unite for cooperative effort. It is not slavery that produced the means of transportation, communication, production, and exchange, and all the thousand and one economic, or what ought to be economic, contrivances of civilization. No — nor is it government. It is Self-interest. And would not self-interest exist if that institution which stands between man and his right to the free use of the soil were annihilated? Could you not see the use of a bank if the power which renders it possible for the national banks to control land, production and everything else, were broken down?

Do you suppose the producers of the east and west couldn't see the advantage of a railroad, if the authority which makes a systematizer like Gould or Vanderbilt a curse were swept away? Do you imagine that government has a corner on ideas, now that the Church is overthrown; and that the people could not learn the principles of economy, if this intangible giant which has robbed and slaughtered them, wasted their resources and distributed opportunities so unjustly, were destroyed? I don't think so. I believe that legislators as a rule have been monuments of asinine stupidity, whose principal business has been to hinder those who were not stupid, and get paid for doing it. I believe that the so-called brainy financial men would rather buy the legislators than be the legislators; and the real thinkers, the genuine improvers of society, have as little to do with law and politics as they conveniently can.

I believe that "Liberty is the mother, not the daughter, of Order."

"But," some one will say, "what of the criminals? Suppose a man steals." In the first place, a man won't steal, ordinarily, unless that which he steals is something he can not as easily get without stealing; in liberty the cost of stealing would involve greater difficulties than producing,

and consequently he would not be apt to steal. But suppose a man steals. Today you go to a representative of that power which has robbed you of the earth, of the right of free contract of the means of exchange, taxes you for everything you eat or wear (the meanest form of robbery), — you go to him for redress from a thief! It is about as logical as the Christian lady whose husband had been “removed” by Divine Providence, and who thereupon prayed to said Providence to “comfort the widow and the fatherless.” In freedom we would not institute a wholesale robber to protect us from petty larceny. Each associative group would probably adopt its own methods of resisting aggression, that being the only crime. For myself, I think criminals should be treated as sick people.

“But suppose you have murderers, brutes, all sorts of criminals. Are you not afraid to lose the restraining influence of the law?” First, I think it can be shown that the law makes ten criminals where it restrains one. On that basis it would not, as a matter of policy merely, be an economical institution. Second, this is not a question of expediency, but of right. In antebellum days the proposition was not, Are the blacks good enough to be free? but, Have they the right? So today the question is not, Will outrages result from freeing humanity? but, Has it the right to life, the means of life, the opportunities of happiness?

In the transition epoch, surely crimes will come. Did the seed of tyranny ever bear good fruit? And can you expect Liberty to undo in a moment what Oppression has been doing for ages? Criminals are the crop of depots, as much a necessary expression of the evil in society as an ulcer is of disease in the blood; and so long as the taint of the poison remains, so long there will be crimes.

“For it must needs that offences come, but woe to him through whom the offence cometh.” The crimes of the future are the harvests sown of the ruling classes of the present. Woe to the tyrant who shall cause the offense!

Sometimes I dream of this social change. I get a streak of faith in Evolution, and the good in man. I paint a gradual slipping out of the now, to that beautiful then, where there are neither kings, presidents, landlords, national bankers, stockbrokers, railroad magnates, patentright monopolists, or tax and title collectors; where there are no over-stocked markets or hungry children, idle counters and naked creatures, splendor and misery, waste and need. I am told this is farfetched idealism, to paint this happy, povertyless, crimeless, diseaseless world; I have been told I “ought to be behind the bars” for it.

Remarks of that kind rather destroy the white streak of faith. I lose confidence in the slipping process, and am forced to believe that the rulers of the earth are sowing a fearful wind, to reap a most terrible whirlwind. When I look at this poor, bleeding, wounded World, this world that has suffered so long, struggled so much, been scourged so fiercely, thorn-pierced so deeply, crucified so cruelly, I can only shake my head and remember:

The giant is blind, but he’s thinking: and his locks are growing, fast.

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