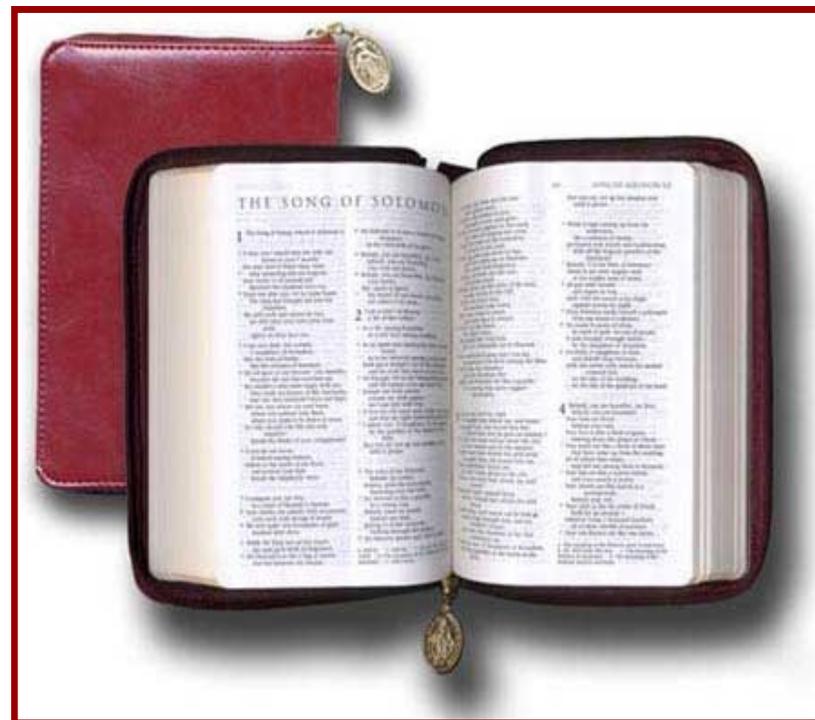




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SONG OF SONGS—34

(SONG OF SOLOMON)



***ENDS TO BE PURSUED
THE MYSTICAL NOONTIDE***

TEMPTATIONS TO BE AVOIDED

The Song of Songs is the story of the love between God and the soul. God is deeply in love with us, and wills our love in return. This love between the soul and God, which is the most intimate love possible, is expressed in the analogy of the bride (the Church) and the bridegroom (Jesus), where the intimacy of love is especially expressed. Commentary on the Song of Songs is presented by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and takes the form of sermons on the meaning of the various allegories used in the psalms and are presented in the order Saint Bernard composed the commentaries. Introductory comments are made by the Early Church Fathers.

Ends to be Pursued - The Mystical Noontide Temptations to be Avoided

"Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where you pasture your flock, where you make it to lie down at noon." But another voice, that of Job, says: "Tell me why you judge me like this?" This man does not complain of the judgment, he merely queries its cause, seeking to gain knowledge from his afflictions rather than be destroyed by them. Still another man made a similar request: "Make your ways known to me, O Lord, teach me your paths." What he means by paths he reveals in another text: "He leads me in the path of righteousness." Therefore the man who longs for God does not cease to seek these three things, righteousness, judgment, and the place where the Bridegroom dwells in glory: the path in which he walks, the wariness with which he walks, and the home to which he walks. About this home the Prophet says: "One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord;" and again: "O Lord, I love the beauty of your house, and the place where your glory dwells." Of the remaining two he says: "Righteousness and judgment are the preparation of your throne." The man who is in earnest rightly seeks these three things, since they are the throne of God and the preparation of his throne. By a special privilege of the bride, all these gifts beautifully and equally concur in the crowning of her virtues: she receives loveliness from the habit of righteousness, prudence from her knowledge of judgments, and chastity from her desire for the presence or glory of her Bridegroom. Such are the gifts that are fitting for a bride of the Lord: beauty, knowledge and chastity. Therefore the petition which I have placed last concerns the Bridegroom's dwelling-place. She asks him whom her soul loves to reveal to her where he pastures his flock, where he makes it lie down at noon.

2. But take note in the first place how exquisitely she distinguishes spiritual love from carnal desire, when, in her wish to draw her Beloved's attention by her affection rather than by his name, she does not say simply, "whom I love," but "O you whom my soul loves," thereby indicating that her love is spiritual.

Prayer of the Psalmist:

***"Let me hear in the morning of your mercy,
for in you I put my trust."***

Consider carefully then, what it is that gives her so much pleasure in the place of pasture. Nor must you overlook the reference to the hour of noon, nor above all that she looks for a place where he who feeds the flock also lies down, a sign of great security. It would seem that the expression "lie down" is used to indicate that in this place there is no need to stand and keep watch for the safety of the flock, since the flock freely wanders in the meadows while the shepherd lies down and rests in the shade. Happy the place in which the sheep move to and fro at will, and no one to frighten them! Who will grant that you and I together may be fed on the mountains, along with the ninety-nine sheep who, we read, were left there when their shepherd went down for the one who had strayed? It was because he had left them in a safe place that he was able to undertake a long journey without hesitation, and hence he could afford to lie down securely. What can the bride do but yearn for that place of rest, of security, of exultation, of wonder, of overwhelming joy. But alas! unhappy me, far from it as I am, and saluting it from afar, the very memory of it causes me to weep with the affection expressed by those exiles: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." Let me cry out both with the bride and with the Prophet: "Praise your God, O Zion! for he strengthened the bars of your gates; he blesses your sons within you." Who would not be filled with vehement longing to be fed in that place, on account of its peace, on account of its richness, on account of its super-abundance? There one experiences neither fear nor distaste, nor any want. Paradise is a safe dwelling-place, the Word is sweet nourishment, eternity is wealth beyond calculation.

3. I too have the Word, but the Word made flesh; and the Truth is set before me, but in the sacrament. An angel is nourished with the richness of the wheat, is satiated with the pure grain; but in this life I have to be content with the husk, as it were, of the sacrament, with the bran of the flesh, with the chaff of the letter, with the veil of the faith. And these are the kind of things whose taste brings death unless they are seasoned in some degree with the first fruits of the Spirit. I shall surely find death in the pot if it be not sweetened with the meal of the Prophet. For without the Spirit the sacrament is received as a judgment, the flesh is of no avail, the letter kills, and faith is dead. It is the Spirit who must give these things life if I am to find life in them. But no matter how great the effusion of the Spirit that enriches these, the husk of the sacrament is not received with the same pleasure as the fat of the wheat, nor is faith the equivalent of vision, nor memory of presence, nor time of eternity, nor a face of its reflection, nor the image of God of a slave's condition. As far as all these are concerned, faith is the source of my riches, my intellect is a pauper. Can there indeed be equal pleasure in understanding and in faith, when the latter is the source of merit, the former the reward? You see then that the foods are as different as the places where they are eaten are distant from each other; and as the heavens are raised far above the earth, so those who dwell there enjoy an abundance of greater gifts.

4. Let us make haste then my sons, let us make haste to a place that is safer, to a pasture that is sweeter, to a land that is richer and more fertile. Let us make haste to a place where we may dwell without fear, where we may abound and never want, where we may feast and never weary. For while passing judgment tranquilly on all things, O Lord of hosts, you feed in security and with fairness all who dwell in that place, you who are at the same time the Lord of armies and shepherd of sheep.

You feed your flock therefore, and at the same time make them rest, but not here below. For you were standing that time you looked down from heaven at one of your little sheep, Stephen, when he was surrounded by wolves here on earth. And so I beseech you, "show me where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon," that is, the whole day long: for that noon is a day that knows no evening. Consequently, "a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere," because its sun never sets. But perhaps it had a sunrise, when that sanctified day first dawned upon us through the tender mercy of our God, in which the Rising Sun visited us from heaven. Truly then "we received your mercy, O God, in the midst of your temple," when, as you rose out of the shadow of death, the morning light shone over us, and in the dawn we saw the glory of God. How many prophets and kings desired to see this, and did not see it! Why should this have been unless because it was night, and that long-awaited dawn on which mercy had been promised had not yet come? Hence that prayer of the Psalmist: "Let me hear in the morning of your mercy, for in you I put my trust."

16. Long ago the following prophecy was made, and now we see its fulfillment: "See how in peace my bitterness is most bitter." It was bitter at first in the slaying of the martyrs, more bitter in later times in the struggle with the heretics, but now most bitter of all in the corrupt morals of the members of the household. She cannot drive them away nor fly from them, so strong have they grown, so numerous beyond counting. This sickness of the Church is deeply rooted and incurable, which is why that during peace her bitterness is most bitter. But what is the nature of this peace? It is a peace that is not peace. She has peace from the pagans, peace from the heretics, but not from her own sons. And so today we hear her grief-laden words: "Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me." They have rebelled, they have dishonored me, by their shameful lives, their shameful gains, their shameful trafficking, by all the intrigue that is perpetuated in the darkness. Nothing remains but for the noontide devil to appear in our midst, to seduce those who still abide in Christ, who remain faithful to his truth. For he has already swallowed up the rivers of the wise and the streams of the powerful; he is even confident that Jordan will flow into his mouth, that he will devour the humble and the simple who are still in the Church. For he is Antichrist, who pretends that he is not only the day but the very noon, who "exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship," whom "the Lord Jesus will slay with the breath of his mouth," whom he will destroy with the light of his coming, because he is the true and eternal Noontide, the Bridegroom and defender of the Church; he is God, blessed for ever. Amen.

END OF SONG OF SONGS 34

14. If you are not worn out by the length of this sermon, I shall try to apply these four temptations in due order to the Church, and Body of Christ. I shall try to be as brief as possible. Consider the Church of the early centuries: was she not most bitterly afflicted by "the terror of the night"? For it was surely night when anyone who killed the saints thought he was doing a service to God. When this temptation had been overcome and the tempest stilled, she became illustrious, and in accord with the promise made to her, soon occupied a position of preeminence in the world. Disappointed by this frustration, the enemy craftily changed his tactics from "the terror of the night" to "the arrow that flies by day," by which he would now wound the Church's members. Vain and ambitious men came into power, intent on making a name for themselves; they abandoned the Church, their mother, and for long afflicted her with diverse and perverse doctrines. This scourge was in turn repelled by the wisdom of the saints, as the first had been by the endurance of the martyrs.

15. The times in which we live are, by the mercy of God, free from these two evils, but are obviously contaminated by "the pestilence that stalks in darkness." Woe to this generation because of the "yeast of the Pharisees - that is, their hypocrisy," if that can be called hypocrisy which is so prevalent that it cannot be hidden, and so impudent that it does not want to be! Today a foul corruption permeates the whole body of the Church, all the more incurable the more widespread it becomes, all the more dangerous the more it penetrates inwardly. For if a heretic were to rebel in public, he would be cast out to wither; if an enemy were to attack her violently, she could perhaps take refuge from him. But as things stand, whom will she cast out, or from whom will she hide herself? Everyone is a friend, everyone an enemy; everyone is indispensable, everyone an adversary; everyone is a member of the household, but not one is peace-loving; all are neighbors to each other, but all insist on their own way. Called to be ministers of Christ, they are servants of Antichrist. Promoted to honors over the possessions of the Lord, they pay the Lord no honor. Hence that bogus splendor that you see every day, that theatrical apparel, that regal pomp. Hence the gold embossments on their bridles, on their saddles, on their spurs: spurs that carry more costly adornment than their altars. Hence the banquet-laden tables with their glittering glassware; the carousing and drunkenness; the music of harp and lyre and flute; the vats overflowing with wine, storehouses crammed to the doors, and a surplus to be stowed elsewhere. Hence the painted casks, the packed money-bags. Such is the goal they aim at when they seek a prelacy in the Church, to be deans or archdeacons, bishops or archbishops. Nor do these come to them by way of merit, but through this agency that works in the darkness.

5. The dawning of this day began when the Sun of righteousness was announced to the earth by the Archangel Gabriel; when the Virgin conceived God in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit, and still remaining a virgin gave birth to him; and it continued as long as he was seen on earth and lived among men. For during all that time only a feeble light, just like the dusk of dawn, was visible, so that almost the whole world failed to realize that day-time for mankind had come. For "if they had known, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory." Even the small group of disciples had been told: "up to now you have but little light," because it was still only the dawn, and the beginning, or rather a token light of the coming day, for the Sun concealed his rays rather than shed them over the earth. Paul too said that "the night is far gone, the day is at hand," signifying that the light was as yet so dim that he preferred to say the day was approaching than that it had come. But when did he say this? He said it when the Sun, after its return from beneath the earth, had ascended to the heights of heaven. With what greater reason might he have said it when "the likeness of sinful flesh" still covered that dawn like a dense cloud, since his body resembled ours in its liability to all manner of suffering, to which neither the bitterness of death nor the shame of the cross was wanting? With what greater reason, I insist, might he have said it when the light was so minimal, so meager, that it seemed a reflection of the dawning rather than of the Sun itself.

6. The dawn, then, and a quite clouded one at that, was the whole life of Christ upon earth, which remained obscure until he died and rose again, to put the dawn to flight by the clearer light of his glorious presence. With the coming of sunrise, night was swallowed up in victory. And so we are told that "very early on the Sunday morning, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb." Surely it was morning when the sun had risen? But the resurrection endowed it with a new beauty, with a more serene light than usual, because "even though we once knew him according to the flesh, we know him thus no longer." The Prophet wrote: "He is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength," because he shook off the flesh's frailties like cloudlets and put on the robe of glory. Since then the Sun is risen indeed, and has gradually poured down its rays over the earth; its light has begun to appear increasingly clearer, its warmth to be more perceptible.

However, even though it increases in warmth and strength, though it multiplies and extends its rays over the whole course of our mortal lives - for it will be with us even to the end of the world - it will not attain to its noontide splendor, nor be seen here below in that fullness which it will exhibit hereafter, at least to those who are destined for the privilege of this vision. O true noontide, fullness of warmth and light, trysting-place of the sun; noontide that blots out shadows, that dries up marshes, that banishes evil odors! O perpetual solstice, day that will never decline to evening! O noontide light, with your springtime freshness, your summer-like gracefulness, your autumnal fruitfulness and - let me not seem to omit it - your winter of quiescence and leisure! Although, if you prefer it, winter alone of these is over and gone. Show me this place, she said, where there is so much brightness and peace and fullness, so that, just as Jacob while still in this life saw the Lord face to face and his soul was saved; or as Moses saw him, not by means of images and obscure sayings or through dreams like some of the other Prophets, but in a manner unrivaled and beyond the experience of all others, known only to himself and God ; or as Isaiah, after the eyes of his heart had been opened, saw him seated on a high and exalted throne; or just as Paul, rapt into Paradise, heard words that he could not explain and saw his Lord Jesus Christ, so may I too merit the ecstatic grace of contemplating you in your light and beauty, as you generously feed your flock and make them rest securely.

13. The last temptation is that of the noontide devil, whose task is to lay ambushes for the perfect, those persons of tried virtue who have survived all other temptations: pleasures, applause, honors. What further weapons has the tempter with which to fight openly against men of this kind? But what he does not dare openly he will attempt in disguise; and when he is aware that a man will abominate what he sees to be patently evil, he tries to seduce him by means of a counterfeit good. Those who can say with the Apostle: "We are not ignorant of his designs," will be all the more careful to avoid that trap the more they advance. This is why Mary was perturbed by the angel's greeting: unless I am mistaken she suspected some deceit; nor would Joshua receive the angel as a friend until he was sure he was a friend. For, like a man with experience of the plotting of the noontide devil, he enquires whether he is for him or for his enemies. Wearied at the oars, with a hostile wind lashing their ship, the apostles too cried out with fear when they saw the Lord walking over the sea, and took him for a ghost. Was not this cry of fear a sign that they clearly thought him to be the noontide devil? And you recall how Scripture says: "About the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea." In the fourth or final stage, then, let us beware of this temptation. The greater the perfection a man may seem to have attained, the more he must be convinced of the need to watch vigilantly for the noontide devil. He who was the true noontide made himself known to the disciples with the words: "It is I, have no fear," and their mistrust of this strange phenomenon was dispelled. And whenever this painted falsehood tries to take us unawares, may the true Noontide, shining from the heavens, send forth his light and his truth even to us; let him divide the light from the darkness, lest we be numbered by the Prophet among those "who put darkness for light and light for darkness."

Therefore let both sides know that there are four kinds of temptation, described by the Prophet as follows: "His truth will surround you with a shield: you will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor invasion, nor the noonday devil." You others should pay attention too, because I trust that this will be of profit to everyone. All of us who have been converted to the Lord have felt and still feel the truth of what Scripture says: "My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord, stand in fear, and prepare your soul for temptation." Our common experience tells us that it is fear which disturbs us at the beginning of our conversion, fear of that dismaying picture we form for ourselves of the strict life and unwonted austerities we are about to embrace. This is called a nocturnal fear, either because in scripture adversity is usually represented by darkness, or because the reward for which we are prepared to suffer adversity is not yet revealed to us. For if we could see the dawn of that day in whose light we should perceive the rewards as well as the trials, our desire of the rewards would entirely obliterate fear, since in the clear light it would be apparent that "the sufferings we now endure bear no comparison with the splendor, as yet unrevealed, which is in store for us." But since this is now hidden from our eyes, and darkness reigns about us, we are subjected to "the terror of the night," and face with dread the endurance of present evils in place of the blessings we do not see. Beginners on the way to God, therefore, must in particular watch and pray against this first temptation, or they will be suddenly overcome by pusillanimity of spirit as by a storm, and unfortunately recoil from the good work they have begun.

12. But when this temptation has been conquered, let us take up arms against the praises of men, who find matter for their compliments in the praiseworthy life we lead. Otherwise we shall be exposed to wounds from "the arrow that flies by day" which is vainglory. For fame is said to fly, and that by day, because it springs from works done in the light. But if this temptation is blown away like the empty air, we shall be confronted with a stronger one, with an offer of the riches and honors of the world, for the man who despises praise may hanker for position. Our Lord himself experienced this order of temptation: after the suggestion that he pitch himself from the temple for the sake of mere vanity, all kingdoms of the world were shown to him and offered to him. And you, following the Lord's example, must refuse what is offered. If not, you will become victims of "the pestilence that stalks about in the darkness," which is hypocrisy. For this has its source in ambition, its dwelling in darkness: for it conceals what it really is and pretends to be what it is not. Active at all times, it retains the appearance of piety as a mask to hide behind, and barter its virtue to purchase honors.

7. Here on earth too, you feed your sheep but not to their full satisfaction; nor is it possible for you to rest, you must stand and keep watch because of the terrors of the night. Alas! there is neither clear light, nor a full repast, nor a safe place to stay; and therefore. "Tell me where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon." You call me blessed when I hunger and thirst for righteousness. But what is this in comparison with the happiness of those who are filled with the good things of your house, who feast and rejoice in the sight of their Lord, who are jubilant with joy? But if I do suffer for the sake of righteousness you nevertheless declare me blessed. To eat is pleasurable, but one does not eat in security if fear be present. To suffer and feast simultaneously is surely a bitter pleasure? All things here below fall short of perfection, many are beyond the reach of my desires, and nothing is safe. When will you fill me with the joy of your presence? Lord, I do seek your face. Your face is the noontide. "Tell me where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon." I know well enough where you pasture it without lying down; tell me where you pasture it and make it lie down. I am not unaware of your accustomed pasturage at other times; but I do wish to know where that pasturage is at noon. For during my time in this life, in this my place of pilgrimage, I am accustomed to feed and be fed under your protection, in the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms, in the meadows of the Gospels; I have found rest too in the company of the apostles; and often I have done my utmost to beg food for myself and those belonging to me from the doings of the saints, from their words and writings. More often, however, because this was closer to hand, I have eaten the bread of pain and drunk the wine of sorrow, "my tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually: 'Where is your God?'" My one hope is your table - "for you have prepared a table before me against them that afflict me," from which I receive by favor of your mercy all that I need for refreshment when I feel sad and inwardly disturbed. This is the pasture that I have known and frequented in following you as my shepherd; but tell me also about those secret places that I do not know.

8. There are too, those other shepherds who say they are companions of yours but are not, shepherds whose flocks feed on lands filled with a deadly food; there they are fed neither with you nor by you, and I have not entered their fields nor even approached them. These are the men who say: "Look, here is the Christ," or, "Look, he is there," as they make promises of pastures more rich in wisdom and knowledge; people believe them and multitudes flock to them, to be made twice as fit for hell as they themselves are. Why this, if not because they have neither noontide nor light clear enough to see the truth in its purity? They easily accept what is false because of its likeness to the truth, since in the dusk it is far from easy to distinguish it from the truth, especially as "stolen waters are sweet and bread tastes better when eaten in secret." Hence my request that you tell me "where you pasture your flock, where you make it lie down at noon," that is, in the clear light, lest I be seduced and begin to wander after the flocks of your companions, because they are wanderers, devoid of the certain truth that gives stability. Though always learning, they never attain to knowledge of the truth. Such are the comments of the bride on the varied and vain doctrines of the philosophers and heretics.

9. I feel, however, that not alone because of these, but because of the deceits of invisible powers, spirits whose work is seduction, who lie in ambush, "fitting their arrows to the string to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart," because of these, I say emphatically, I feel that we also must yearn for that noontide, so that in its clear light we may detect the tricks of the devil, and be able to distinguish with ease between our angel and that angel of Satan who "disguises himself as an angel of light." For we cannot defend ourselves from the attack of the noontide devil except with the aid of noontide light. I believe that he is styled the noontide devil because some of those wicked spirits, who, because of their obstinate and darkened wills are like the night, even perpetual night, yet, for the purpose of deceiving men, can become bright as day, even as noon. In this they follow their prince, who, not content with being equal to God, opposes and exalts himself above everything that is called or worshiped as a god. Hence when this kind of noontide devil sets out to tempt a man, there is no chance whatever of parrying him; he will tempt and overthrow his victim by suggesting what appears to be good, by persuading him, unsuspecting and unprepared as he is, to commit evil under the guise of good, unless the Sun from heaven shines into his heart with noontide brightness. The tempter really appears like noon, clothed in a certain splendor, when he comes with the suggestion of an apparently greater good.

10. How often, for example, does he not persuade a monk to anticipate the hour of rising, and mock at him as he sleeps in choir while his brothers pray! How often does he not suggest that fasts be prolonged, until a man is so weak that he is useless for the service of God! How often, in envy of a man's fervor in community life, does he not persuade him to live as a hermit in order to achieve greater perfection, until the unhappy man finally discovers how true that saying is which he had read to no purpose: "Woe to him who is alone, for when he falls he has none to lift him up!" How often has he not inspired a man to work harder than necessary at manual labor, until exhaustion makes him unfit for the other regular observances! How many has he not won over to indiscreet indulgence in physical exercises which the Apostle considers of little value, and sapped their spiritual stamina! And lastly, you yourselves will know how some -- to their shame I say it -- were at first so filled with ardor in all they undertook that they could not be restrained, but who in the end became so indolent as to merit the reproach of the Apostle: "Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" What a degrading alliance they have made with those bodies on which they had previously waged a cruel warfare! For shame! those who once stubbornly refused what was necessary now insistently demand what is superfluous! And if they remain so invincibly obstinate, troubling with their indiscreet fasts and erratic behavior those with whom they are bound to dwell harmoniously in the home, I fail to see how they think they can maintain a loving union with them. They seem to me to have made this possibility more remote. Wise in their own eyes, and determined to accept neither advice nor command, let them reflect on what answer they shall give, not to me but to him who says: "Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness like the crime of idolatry." Just before this he had said that "to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen better than to offer the fat of rams," the offering of self-willed abstinence. Hence the Lord says through the Prophet: "Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?" to show that he will not accept fasting from the proud and the unclean.

11. My fear at the moment is, that while condemning these erring monks I may seem to encourage the gluttonous, that what I speak as a remedy for the former may be interpreted by the latter to their peril.