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WAR AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

ARTHUR MACHEN

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By the Same Author

THE TERROR

THE BOWMEN

THE GREAT RETURN

DR. STIGGINS

THE HILL OF DREAMS

THE HOUSE OF SOULS

[Including THE GREAT GOD PAN
and THE THREE IMPOSTORS]

THE CHRONICLE OF CLEMENDY

HIEROGLYPHICS

War and the Christian Faith

BY
ARTHUR MACHEN
Author of "The Bowmen," etc.



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War and the Christian Faith

THE INCREDIBLE THINGS

We never can be wise—in us there is too much of imperfection and bewilderment, as of the blind man opening his eyes and seeing men as trees walking, for that—but perhaps we shall begin to be wise when we realise that there are many things in Heaven and earth that we have got to assent to and confess, though we do not understand them, and never shall understand them so long as we walk in this vesture of mortality.

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Take two insistent and unavoidable examples, space and time. No man who strolls from his armchair to the mantelpiece and watches the hands of the clock move round can deny the existence of either, since he has walked from point to point in one, and seen the other measured before his eyes. But as to understanding space and time, what highest philosophy can attain to such a pitch? The limitless cannot so much as be imagined in the mind, not imagined in a nightmare: but that space which you have traversed by some eight or ten feet is limitless, and must be so.

It is a sea without a shore. And time, that which your two-guinea clock ticks off for you, as you watch the dial: it had no beginning that you can picture; it can have no end save with God. You cannot

understand ; you must believe ; and so on your very hearthrug the infinities and eternities are before you and confront you, as truly as the clock face confronts you. There is no escape from it ; these things are contradictions in terms, but, willy-nilly, they are there. And, by the way, I have never yet heard of a man who knew what electricity was, who pretended to begin to know what it was. But on the other hand, I never knew a man who refused to avail himself of the easements of the telegraph, the telephone, or of the electric light, because he could not comprehend the nature of electricity.

Thus, then, the case stands. In the material world we are confronted by absolute contradictions which are yet undeniable, by forces absolutely unintelligible ; which we can yet use and make the servants of our

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comfort. We can send messages and read letters and roast beef by that electric force which remains an absolute mystery; we can move across the room through that unintelligible space; we can—some of us—keep appointments by that paradoxical time. Can we not then admit that in the higher sphere of the Divinity there are paradoxes and enigmas and contradictions and deep concealments, and yet for all that believe in God?

It is with some impatience, I confess, that I note the constant tendency to repeat the question: "Is it possible, in face of this war, to believe in an 'Almighty and most merciful Father'?" It must be repeated and again repeated that the war has stated no new problem. Ever since the world of men began mothers have looked on the faces of their innocent and blameless little

children, have seen those poor faces tortured and grow dim with the shadow of death, have seen unmerited anguish stilled only in the grave. The mothers have listened to the cries for help and comfort of these poor little ones ; and there is no help and no comfort, save only death. And the children have not offended in anything ; but their portion is torture and death.

That has been so from the beginning, that ever will be so till the end. It is as intolerable as time that it should be so, as unintelligible as space that it is so. But it is the order of the world ; and I cannot admit for a moment that the apparent contradiction between this order and the mercy of God is in any way changed by the horrible circumstances of the present war. Water, in certain cases, drowns. That is the proposition. It is not rendered

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more true by the drowning of a hundred men or a million men.

As to the task of justifying the ways of God to men, of showing by human analogies that apparent ferocious, undeserved cruelty may be sweet mercy: that were indeed, the task for a high theologian. I do not think that the problem should be very difficult for the orthodox Christian. For he, by the very definition of his belief, grounds all his faith on the fact of the most infamous and hideous act of cruelty and injustice, pursued to the very death, that the world has ever seen. The Christian religion is founded on a certain undeserved punishment, on the story of the Grand Master who was foully and unjustly killed by the rebellious craftsmen: it will not be strange, then, to Christians if the lower grades share the calamity of the

highest grade of all ; indeed, they are instructed that it is only by this imitative ceremony—called, technically, taking up the Cross—that they can be exalted to the Master's place. And as to the point of view which is not distinctively Christian, that point of view which confesses the creed : “ There is a God of infinite amiability ruling over a world which is an extremely pleasant place, or which can be made an extremely pleasant place by the passing of a few short Bills in Parliament ”—well, let us never heed them. For there is no God of infinite amiability—infinite love is a different matter—and the world of the natural order isn't a very pleasant place, never has been a very pleasant place, and never will be a very pleasant place, so long as water drowns and fire burns and steel cuts flesh, and lightning destroys this body.

WHITE FIRES

There is a very great deal to be said, I think, for the atheistic position with regard to the universe. It is reported that in the very crisis of the first battle of Ypres, when the scales of the fight were trembling, nay, more than trembling; when they appeared to be descending on the side of the enemy, one of our generals said to himself: "God will never let those devils win." Well, those devils did not win on that particular occasion; but was the general justified in his suggested proposition: that the wrong never triumphs? Surely not; surely, it is constantly triumphing in every part and portion of life. Let us not press too far; we need not say with Mr. Hardy that the world is

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ruled by a malignant "President of the Immortals," who delights in the anguish of his subjects. That is untrue, for the world knows many keen joys and happy hours ; still, it knows also much evil, much of undeserved misery, and many a cause in which the worse side gets a verdict. I hope with the General that the devils will not win ; still, I cannot forget that the Turks won at Constantinople five and a half centuries ago, and have been a pest and a scourge to Europe ever since.

So, as I say, there is a good deal to be said, not, perhaps, for a theoretical atheism, a reasoned disbelief in God, but for a practical atheism, an elimination of God from all our considerations. It would be easy enough to regard the chances and changes, joys and misfortunes of the world as a game of cards, a mixture of skill and luck, without

eternal significance. "Trumps!" the German soldier may be supposed to say as he breaks the baby's body into pieces; and "Our trick, I think," we hope to retort some day, when the German army lies shattered before us.

But no eternal significance in any of it, in either event; only a game; in which mercy and justice have no more title to win, because they are mercy and justice, than the king of hearts is entitled to win, clubs being trumps.

It is a possible way of looking at things. The chief argument to be urged against it is a practical one: that it would make the world so much more horrible than it is already. It would destroy all art, for art is but a search for that hidden beauty which is God. It would render all the things which we confess to be fine meaningless, for, ultimately,

the fine things are the things of God; the reflections and shadows of divinity.

Dawn and sunset would cease to be spectacles of enchantment for us, though they might speak to us as they speak to moths and owls. A court of justice would become a meaningless circumstance to us: the murdered would not claim our pity, nor the murderer our indignation. And lest this should seem a mere flourish, let it be noted that this is the actual state of mind of those persons who are called "Pacifists"; they reiterate that there is no distinction to be made between the German butcher and the Belgian butchered.

Indeed, there is a well-known, I would say, notorious writer, who maintained not so many months ago in an English paper that it is most false to say that the Germans

have violated Belgian neutrality. It is we, he said, who have violated Belgian neutrality; Germany is merely at war with Belgium; which is quite a different matter. Now many people have thought that this person talks outrageous nonsense in order to attract attention to himself. I do not think this is so. I believe that he—and those who follow him—cannot help talking nonsense, simply because they have accepted the supremely nonsensical proposition that there is no God. They have accepted the proposition that two and two make five, and, therefore, the keener their wits, the more cunning their cogitations, the more monstrous are the results that they obtain. Euclid's "which is absurd" has no restraining force for them, and so they plunge deeper and deeper into chasms and gulfs of absurdity.

The ordinary man, confronted by the daily problems of ordinary life, perceives that there are daily difficulties, daily obscurities, daily contradictions. Being a moderately sensible fellow, he makes the best of all these difficulties and contradictions, and, practically, gets on pretty well. He is bewildered, but he survives. But there are men who find life so intolerable that they take refuge in *delirium tremens*. They fly from—creditors, let us say—who are there, to snakes and rats which are not there. And that, I think, is a pretty good analogy of the atheistic solution of the universe. And, in relation to this question of "God and the War," let it be remarked that we have not to choose between the easy atheistic hypothesis and the hard orthodox hypothesis. Both are hard; only one is hopeless. It is hard, indeed, as a soldier said

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to me, to see the obscene horrors and torments of the war, and then to utter the "Almighty and most merciful Father." Yet, individually, we are, most of us, ready to confess that good things are born of torments. "These are they that have come out of great tribulation": that is a text. But what artist does not acknowledge that his book, or his picture, or his statue has come out of great tribulation. Nay, I knew an editor who used to say that every journalist worth his salt had to rack his brains before he could write half a dozen lines fit to print in the paper. Now, racking, whether of brains or of limbs, is a painful process. It is possible, then, nay, probable, that horrible and painful processes may be necessary processes. There are terrible operations in surgery, burnings and cuttings, which give life to the indivi-

dual ; it may well be that there is a surgery of nations as well as of individuals. There is Cobdenism, for example, in our system ; the belief that men's lives are a commodity - to be bought in the cheapest market, and their work to be sold in the dearest. Heaven forbid that any man should presume to pry into the counsels of God ; but is it altogether unreasonable or against the analogy of things to believe that white fires and knives that pierce almost to the heart of life should be required to cut out such a cancer as this ?

THE GREAT ADVENTURE

It is agreed, I suppose, that there is no compulsion in the region of the arts. I mean, that you cannot take hold of a man and drag him in front of a Turner or a Claude and force him, by irresistible argument, to confess that this picture and that are admirable masterpieces which he cannot help gazing on with delight. He may listen to you—if you keep a strong grip on his buttonhole—but when you have done, he may well say: “Very likely; but I don’t care for those pictures, and it bores me to look at them.” And you have nothing more to say. You know you are right, but you can’t prove it. The matter is outside the world of scientific proof.

So with literature. Your man may say to you at the end of your fine speeches : “ I don't agree with you. I think the plots of ‘ Hamlet ’ and ‘ Ædipus Tyrannus ’ are horrible, morbid plots ; as for ‘ Ædipus,’ it's a beastly plot, and the play ought to be suppressed by the police. And they're silly as well as horrible. One turns on a nonsensical oracle. The parents of Ædipus are told by the oracle that their new born child will live to murder his father and marry his mother. So, believing in the oracle and the fate, the parents expose the infant on a mountain to die. But if they believed in the oracle, where was the sense of trying to alter its decree? Hamlet? The man who saw his father's ghost, and then talked of death as a bourne from which no traveller returns ! ”

The fellow is wildly wrong, no

doubt ; but how are you to make him confess that he is wrong ? Nay ; leaving the arts, a whole council of wranglers could not convince me of the simplest proposition connected with sines, cosines, and tangents. Here is the mistress of all the sciences ; the nearest approximation to necessary and absolute truth which the human mind can conceive ; yet you must spend years of hard study and strong effort before you can begin to understand what its simplest statements signify. And those sines and things apart ; there are statements on the first page of Euclid that seem to me as difficult as anything in the creed of St. Athanasius. It is written that no man hath seen God at any time ; but has any man seen a Point or a Line or a Plane Surface at any time ? A Point has neither parts nor magnitude—I seem to remember

—but only position. Here is some thing existing in space which yet has no spatial measurement: *credo quia impossibile*. A Line is length without breadth; which is a thing utterly inconceivable. And so forth; the definitions seem contradictions, and yet we believe in them.

Now it is possible to look the universe in the face, to contemplate the mysteries and enigmas of life and death, of faith and belief, and say frankly, "I give it up. All I can say is that it seems to me a most infernal muddle, a sort of practical joke of a puzzle without any answer." This is the easiest way, but, somehow, men will not have it. A command that will not be denied compels them to reason about this life and the (presumed) life of the world to come. And it is probable that if the whole race of men "gave it up," came to believe that the

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puzzle was all nonsense, that the apparent language was not merely obscure, but unmeaning gibberish ; then, I suppose, we should turn into sheep and goats that nourish a blind life within the brain. But if we are to reason, to ask, to speculate ; then, so far as I can see, we can only proceed by the guidance of analogy, proceeding from the known to the unknown. And this being so, it seems clear that we have no right to say : “ If there were a God, if there were a true faith, if religion were anything but a sham and a delusion ; then, all would be clear, easy, and self-evident. It would be no more possible for a man to doubt of God than to doubt of the nose on his face. Is it likely that the master-truth, the great word of the enigma of the universe would be difficult, hard to understand, full of apparent contradic-

tions? ” It is not rational, I say, to talk like that; since we have seen that undoubted truth and pure beauty are hard to be understood, full of apparent contradictions, and, so far as beauty or art is concerned, unprovable. Let us not forget that the absolutely true thing is by no means also, and *ex vi termini*, the absolutely obvious thing. The answer to the question, “ Three times four? ” is not obvious to a little child; the answer to the question: “ Thirteen times nine? ” is not obvious to me; the answer to the question “ $137\frac{1}{2}$ times $193786439\frac{3}{4}$? ” is, perhaps, not obvious to any one. Yet the answer to the most difficult question is as certain and as true as the answer to the easiest. The true things and the precious things of the life of this world are by no means easy or obvious; why should we expect

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the true things and the precious things of the life of the world to come to be easy and obvious ?

The only solution of the problem which is at all tolerable is to be found by making the adventure of faith. In spite of our difficulties about that mysterious Point of Euclid's, let us believe in it and see where that belief leads us. Let us make the great experiment ; even though we make it with quaking hearts. It is probable that the hearts of Columbus and his men were faint within them as the shores of Europe grew dim and vanished in the mist. We are so made, I think, that our destiny is to voyage into the unknown, so made that we only find our true joys and our veritable treasures when we see the familiar peaks and headlands fade behind us. We are not born, as I have shown, to have certitude and scien-

tific assurance exhibited to us at the beginning of the voyage. When the future mathematical prizeman learns his multiplication table, he knows even less of the end of the adventure that he thus begins than does the boy who unwillingly admits that his name is "N. or M." as he answers the catechist.

We are born to sail through unknown seas, born, as the Flemish saint said, *vastissimum pelagus Divinitatis navigare*, to navigate the great deep of God. But it is only faith that can lift up our hearts, when the shore is no more to be seen. And, this is strange. We all know what it is to see a familiar landscape, a familiar street in the unfamiliar light of dawn. The halls, the towers, and the walls are the same; and yet they are changed, sometimes, it appears, to an awful beauty. So when the great voyage

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draws to an end, we may be amazed to find that the new haven is in fact the old, though it has been wonderfully transmuted. The walls, the heights, the gardens, and the spires are well remembered; but they shine in a new light.

And the roses; they sway over the hedgerows as of old; but they are roses of paradise.

CONFORMITY

It will seem a violent paradox ; but I do believe that the chief aim of prayer is to raise us to the condition and state of the beasts ; to raise us, not to reduce us, to their state. I think that the most profound utterance that I have ever heard in a life that is beginning to be long was this : " You must remember that it is we, not the beasts, who were driven out of paradise. They were not driven out ; they are still in paradise."

This is a saying that I have pondered for the last seven years, and I do not think that I have yet penetrated to its depths. It is a shock, at first, to think of what we call animals, or " the beasts," as occupying a higher place than our-

selves. And yet we say, "I was as happy as a bird." We use the old phrase, in a sort of half-conscious way; and I suppose if some one pulled us up and asked: "Do you really mean that? Do you seriously imagine for an instant that a bird is in any intelligible, human sense happy?" we should at once begin to excuse ourselves and to explain, and to say that the old phrase was no doubt suggested by the apparent careless fleeting of the birds through the air, and we should end: "A metaphor, of course; a way of saying, 'I feel as irresponsible as a bird on the wing, as happy as if I had no duties to discharge, no anxieties to bother me, no office to go to.'"

Thus we make void the old wisdom, which is so curiously enshrined in popular and proverbial sayings, in scraps and tags of language:

in tags so old and worn and accustomed that we have long ceased to consider them as having any meaning in particular, much less an exact and literal and often most astounding meaning. They have become phrases as devoid of significance as "Bless me!" in the West, and "Hail, Protector of the Poor: with you be peace!" in the East. They have become mere phrases, empty, formal conventions of speech. Yet I shall never forget how a friend of mine said to me eighteen years ago: "I was walking up Rosebery Avenue this morning towards Sadlers Wells, when I suddenly realised that the old phrase about 'walking on air' was not a metaphor, but literally true. The pavement was actually resilient; the treading on it was a physical delight, as the motion of a sailing boat is a delight to a good sailor. But," he added, "that's tellings."

These tags and old phrases and worn proverbs, then, may be much wiser and truer than they seem—there is, by the way, a whole secret philosophy in “Absence makes the heart grow fonder”—and so “Happy as a bird” may be a literal truth; a bird may really be happy. But, then, there is the other tag, “As busy as a bee.” This is true also; but we hardly realise that the two sayings might be varied: “As busy as a bird,” and “As happy as a bee.” These are no less true, and true for the same reason. The bird on the wing seems almost as happy as an idle man about town, the bee gathering honey seems almost as good as a Coketown factory hand. But in reality, each is equally busy. And each is absolutely happy because it is living in perfect conformity to the order of its being. Each is leading a single, and not a double,

life. A swallow, catching insects, does not long to be a bee, gathering honey. And the bee revelling in the clover does not want to eat flies. These creatures, then, the beasts, are perfectly happy because they are perfectly conformed to the rule and order of their being; in other words, they are still in paradise. They have not eaten of the fruit of that deadly tree that all we have tasted; and so, though they seem to die, they live with the joy of immortals. Dwelling wholly in the body, they suffer, indeed, the discomforts and pangs of the body; but not the anguish of anticipation and dread which gives their sting to human pains. What man cares, seriously, for the fiercest toothache? What man's spirit does not go faint and sick at certain slight painless tremors that assure him that his days in the world are numbered?

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The beasts, then, are happy, because they are wholly immersed in their proper businesses; they are fish altogether in the water; they are fishmongers, let us say, who do not even conceive the possibility of making a living by writing sonnets or painting pictures, much less desire such adventures. The bee gathers honey all the day, and would be completely wretched only if you prevented him from gathering honey all the day.

Now, our misfortune is that we are fish half in and half out of the water. We are fishmongers with an uneasy feeling that we ought to be writing sonnets for a livelihood—or, we are sonneteers who could have made a really good thing out of Billingsgate. We are not sure of our real business. We are something in the City; but we do not know which city—of London, or

of Syon. We are more or less miserable, because of this uncertainty as to our true business ; as “ the busy bee ” would be miserable if it cast an anxious eye on the ox, and tried to swallow a mouthful of clover in admiring imitation ; or as “ the happy bird ” would be miserable if it endeavoured to live on honey. We are thus distracted, and thus miserable, because we do not realise, because we cannot keep on realising, that we have only one real business : and that is God ; God immanent and transcendent, in all and above all. Prayer is the effort to realise this ; the effort to attain the state of perfect conformity to the eternal will, whatever it may be ; to attain to the state of the bee and the bird, who, being in paradise, cannot so much as conceive the desire for an order and life which do not belong to them. Our true

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order, and true life, are the Divine Will ; the ocean of our true being, in which we shall be fish in the water and not out of it, is the great deep of God.

THE BLIND

There are people who are tone-deaf. They have not merely what is called "a bad ear for music"; they lack altogether the power of distinguishing between one tone and another. I remember an instance of this incapacity—on the stage of all places! The tone-deaf person was quite unable to reproduce the intonations that the stage-manager gave her for this speech and that.

Then there are colour-blind people who confuse red and green. There are people, again, whose palates cannot distinguish between beef and mutton; they lack the sense of taste. And so, going higher, there are many people, and by no means stupid people, who would never dream of taking down Shakespeare

and reading him for the pleasure of it. Nay, there are excellent folk who would say, if they dared to speak the truth, that they preferred a good novelette before all that Shakespeare, Cervantes, Milton and Wordsworth have written.

Now the tone-deaf and the colour-blind and those who are unable to distinguish one flavour from another evidently cannot help themselves; and I wonder how far this is true of the people who find "Lycidas" a bore? Could these, by submitting to the dogmas of the Church of Letters, and by doing their very best to discern the beauties that were pointed out to them, come at last to appreciate these beauties? I suppose that the answer is, some could, and others couldn't. There must be many people, it seems probable, who are born without the sense of literature, who are

utterly incapable of relishing the exquisite savours of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," or of that great chapter which is intituled, "How they Chirruped over their Cups."

Very well ; it is a great pity, and we are sorry for them. We know that they miss a great deal of the pleasures of life—which are none too many. We will not, perhaps, go all the way with Shakespeare, and declare them fit for murders, treasons, stratagems, and spoils ; though, by the way, Shakespeare usually knew what he was talking about. But we, not having the title to use the high wrath of Shakespeare, are sorry for those poor people who say they "see nothing" in this masterpiece, and can't understand "why people make such a fuss" over that, and are "bored to tears" by the other. We are sorry for them ; but if they called their state of mind Free-

thought, I believe we should feel somewhat cross with them.

Yet it seems to me that a great deal of that attitude of mind towards the divine mysteries of life and death which is dignified by the title of Freethought is exactly answerable to that attitude of mind which "sees nothing" in one masterpiece and is "bored to tears" by the other. There is in each case a total lack of interest in certain exquisite and beautiful things, perhaps a total incapacity to discern these things. But as a rule, the man who doesn't like the masterpieces of literature or of art is content to keep silence, if you will only leave him alone. But the man who is convinced that the early martyrs were designing and crafty rogues is, often for some obscure reason, anxious to proclaim his conviction to the world, whereby he

becomes a burden and a bore. Let me distinguish. The Freethought of which I speak is not that natural hesitation to accept the unprovable—the Faith is unprovable, or else it would not bear the name of the Faith—which is often found in devout and humble minds, which is found to some extent in all minds save in the two extremes of Saints and Simpletons. The Freethought I have in view is the freethought of the tone-deaf man who insists on becoming a musical critic, so that he may prove to the world that there is no such thing as music, and that the people who say they enjoy music are fools or knaves or both. We could pity him for his lack of one of the most exquisite—and irrational—of pleasures, if he would but hold his tongue. But the Freethinker will not hold his tongue. He is not content to

keep silence and shrug his shoulders, wondering internally "what on earth these people see in it all." He is not even content to say out loud, "Well, I see nothing in it at all, and that's an end of it." He will invent reasons, which are not real reasons, to justify his own incapacity. He is not able to relish a good dinner; so he finds out all kinds of "reasons" to prove that dinner is nonsense, and poisonous nonsense at that. He will write long and learned books to show that savages in all ages liked their dinner; that people who believed in ghosts have always believed in dinner; that the dining propensities of the Samoyeds have always been notorious; that dinners were constantly eaten in the Minoan age; that the cave dwellers and the lake-dwellers were confirmed diners.

For an example :—I was saying that music is one of the most exquisite and irrational of pleasures. But, if you come to think of it, you will find that all the exquisite things of life, even the exquisite things of material life, are irrational, or, at all events, a-rational ; beyond the bounds and limits of the reason. For example ; if you kill the fatted calf and wish your friends to share in the feast, you seat them at a table covered with the fairest linen, you set flowers and lights about the board, and you and they alike put on a sacred vestment, called “evening dress.” Are these ceremonies rational adjuncts to the devouring of roast veal ?

And is dancing rational ? And, mounting higher, are romance and poetry rational ? Is it reasonable to spend time in reading about Mr.

Pickwick, who never existed? Yet, without these and many other irrational habits, interests, ceremonies, life would degenerate into brutish and intolerable savagery, or what is worse—Gradgrindery. Very good; but the most frequent of the sham arguments of our Freethinker is that the Faith is irrational. Of course it is irrational; like all the things of life which are worth anything, or worth talking about. The truth is that, whether we like it or not, we live, if we live well, in and by and through mysteries. We do not live by bread alone, even so far as mere bread, and our mere physical nourishment and well-being are concerned, but by bread eaten in cheerfulness and with charity. We call a good dinner a feast; but it is no feast at all—save to a hog—if joy and mirth be absent from it.

CHRISTIAN FAITH 45

Freethought would say that we live by proteins and calories ; wherein, as in other and higher matters, Freethought falls far short of the truth.

QUIA INCREDIBILE

Some time ago I got a letter from a man who was interested in many of the topics which I have treated in this book. He agreed with me here, he differed there; he wrote a very reasonable letter on the whole; and he ended up by quoting as the basis for his opinions the "Secret Doctrine"—which was written by Mme. Blavatsky.

Some time ago I read an article relating to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's conversion to what is called Spiritualism. The writer mentioned one of the crucial instances which had seemed to Sir Arthur Doyle absolutely decisive. Sir Arthur was looking on at a séance, not, I think, joining in it. A message "came over" to the effect that "food is to

be preferred before entomology." Nobody knew what this signified; Sir Arthur did not know: till he recollected that, the day before, he had warned his children that though caterpillars were nice beasts, yet it was necessary to kill them, because they were eating up the cabbages. Then, it would appear, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, remembering this dictum of his, was convinced of the spiritual life, and of the life of the world to come.

I do not wish to labour either of these instances. I do not wish to press the fact that Madame Blavatsky was a detected cheat, a clumsy dealer in an absurd thaumaturgy. I will not urge that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "absolute test," as I think he named it, would scarcely have been accepted by the Society of Psychical Research as a convincing proof of mere telepathy

—"entomology" will hardly bear the interpretation "love of insects." I neither urge the absurdity of building upon the doctrine of the old Russian charlatan or upon that dubious caterpillar utterance: I urge the importance of the marvelous in the matter of religion.

Once on a time I used to try to argue with dignitaries. I used to try to point out to them that religion—their presumed business—was not primarily concerned with the attendance at four-ale bars, the prevalence of bare-backed acts at the music-halls, nor with the state of Piccadilly Circus between eleven and twelve-thirty p.m. I have long abandoned this injudicious practice; firstly, because arguing with dignitaries is disrespectful; secondly, because it is absurd. I believe that the dignitaries are still worrying about the four-ale bars and Piccadilly Circus,

and latterly, the conscientious objector; and they still think that they are concerned with religious problems.

Probably they are not consciously dishonest persons. They do not deliberately say to one another: "the only aspect in which religion will ever appeal to Englishmen is the moral aspect. To Englishmen, religion is morality; and by morality they understand an abstinence from even the weakest beer and from the lighter forms of the drama. And as to conscientious objectors; they are cranks; and good Englishmen have always loved cranks."

I don't think, I say, that our dignitaries put the case to each other in quite these terms; but the attitude of most of them comes to that. But their real error is this: not that they hold this or that

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opinion about revues or taverns or conscientious objectors; but that they think that their views or any views about these matters constitute religion, or have any reference to true religion. Our divines think that religion must be in the first place and above all concerned with morality, and then that it must be practical and credible. Whereas the truth is that the plain man in the street, the Sir Arthur Conan Doyle type of man, demands of religion, in the first place, that it shall be entirely incredible. I am afraid the enemy might add, not without some justification, "and the sillier the better." Not without justification, I confess, since I remember, with respect to Madame Blavatsky, the Psychical Research people's report as to her feats with cups and saucers; with respect to her successors, a little book issued by the *Westminster*

Gazette called, "Isis Very Much Unveiled." And those caterpillars of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's. . . ! I concede the possible point ; but I still contend that the first requirement of anything worthy to be called religion in its incredibility.

Yes, but it is so. All the acknowledged joys of life, all its great adventures even in the purely physical world are achievements of the incredible. The doctors of Salamanca proved to Columbus that that wild contemplated voyage of his was against the laws of nature. When I was a schoolboy Jules Verne's submarine amused me as an impossible fantasy. Twenty years ago the airplane and the airship were jokes. Dirigible flight was an acknowledged incredibility. So, climbing higher, with the arts. The great achievements we name, and rightly, creations ; here is some-

thing where mere void was before, the incredible thing. To the stone-age man, Orestes would have been incredible; to the Athenian of the great period Galahad would have been incredible; and further, the doctrine goes back as well as forward; to the Englishman of 1700 Gothic architecture was incredible, inasmuch as he held it absurd, a barbarous monstrosity. And so again, when the Word of the Lord was delivered through Keats, it was incredible. And if these minor adventures of humanity are to be in the region of incredible things, shall we not expect the supreme adventure of all, which is called religion, to go forth into desperate seas indeed? Our divines and dignitaries are amiable and correct in their anxiety about the four-ale bar and the state of Piccadilly Circus after eleven o'clock at night; but they

are bemused when they think that these excellent anxieties have anything to do with the religion of which they are pontiffs.

Pontiff signifies bridgemaker, pathfinder, between this tangible world and the spiritual world, which is rather concealed in it than beyond it. It is the office of religion to unveil for us the incredible mysteries which lie hidden in the visible universe. "Grant, O Lord, that the veils of enigmas which are about these Holy Mysteries may be removed, that they may become gloriously manifest to us"; thus speaks an ancient Rite of the East. This prayer is a part of the Divine Liturgy; but, in a more general sense, all the visible, sensible universe may be comprehended, in the term, "These Holy Mysteries." To remove the veils of enigmas is the office of religion.

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When it has done this it may perhaps have leisure to concern itself with excess of four-ale near White-chapel and defect of underclothes near Piccadilly.

ENIGMAS

When the articles which make up the substance of this book were appearing in "The Evening News," a very courteous correspondent wrote to me about one of them. He avowed himself a mathematician; and he protested against a paragraph which seemed to him to cast a shadow of doubt on Euclid's definitions. I had said: "It is written that no man hath seen God at any time; but has any man seen a Point or a Line or a Plane Surface at any time? A Point has neither parts nor magnitude—I seem to remember—but only position. A Line is length without breadth; which is a thing utterly inconceivable."

My friendly mathematician re-

monstrated with me, and endeavoured by various examples to convince me of the truth of Euclid. He bade me, for instance, try to think of a line as the "edge" of a black surface imposed on a white surface ; and as for a plane surface, length and breadth without thickness, he declared that the surface of still water was a perfect example of it. But, I replied to him in effect, you cannot think of water without depth ; and so you cannot think of position in space which occupies no space ; and that edge of the black surface is part of the black surface, not a thing in itself, to be considered apart from the black surface. In a word : these Euclid definitions, elementary as they are, necessary as they are, seem in a sense rooted in contradiction. They are the very foundation stones of the absolute science of mathematics ;

and yet they must be presented to us in a glass darkly, by means of a mirror in an enigma. But we must firmly believe in them; for if we did not, then, the whole science of mathematics, and, *a fortiori*, all science, would become nonsense, and we should be, in fact, madmen, living in a world of chaos.

The fact is that, by the nature of the case, man is not capable of absolute truth; neither in the heights nor in the depths. Let him go to the very elements of the simplest things of the life about him, and he will find himself in a net of contradictions, obscurities, mysteries. It is idle for him to declare himself a purely rational creature, living in a rational, demonstrable universe: it is not so. It is idle for him to say: "If you can explain this to me I will believe in it." If he pursue the matter to

the end, whatsoever the matter may be, he will find that it cannot be explained to him. He seeks the Lost Word, but he finds merely a substituted word, a symbol, which is a part of the truth, or an image of the truth, but not the whole and perfect truth. This being so with respect to small things, is it then wonderful that it should be so with respect to great things? If there are enigmas in points and lines and surfaces, is it not to be expected that there should be greater enigmas in the vast scheme of all things? We say that we do not understand how an Almighty and most merciful Father can allow the abomination of the war—can allow any pain or anguish of body or spirit. But have we the slightest ground for expecting to understand this; or any other problem?

In a sense, then, it is idle to seek

the solution of the riddle of the universe, the riddle of ourselves and of our lives. Idle, that is, if we look—in this life—for an answer which will be clear, full, adequate; excluding all doubts, solving all difficulties. There is no such answer. And yet we are forced, by our very nature as men, to ask the question, to seek, at all events, for some hypothesis. And there is only one hypothesis.

For atheism is not an hypothesis at all. It is not even the “giving up” of the riddle; but rather the confession that there is no riddle. It is as if a man began the study of Greek, and was suddenly convinced that there was no such language as Greek; but merely a vast body of gibberish entirely devoid of meaning or significance; that the Greek Dictionary was an elaborate imposture, and that the tales

told of Greek literature were extraordinary delusions, a mere chapter in the history of hallucination. This would not be in any sense an attempt to solve the undoubted difficulties which confront the student of the Greek language.

There is, then, only one hypothesis; that is the hypothesis of Faith; the hypothesis of God, that is of meaning and significance in all things, both good and evil. Here is a word written on the page; the hypothesis of faith holds that it is a true word, the symbol of an idea, that it signifies some real thing; that it is not mere senseless, unmeaning gibberish, signifying nothing at all. And as the idea is in the word, so faith holds that God is in the universe. Faith holds this; but cannot prove it. The existence of beauty cannot be demonstrated, the existence of God cannot be

demonstrated. You cannot "prove" the beauty of Turner, the beauty of Bach, the beauty of Keats; the rapture of the stars and the earth and the waves upon the rocks does not exist by demonstration; there is no speech that is sufficient to declare these wonders. Gradgrind and Bounderby will grin if we speak of these things to them; they will grin if we speak of God to them; we must be content to leave Gradgrind and Bounderby grinning at God.

But as it is certain that those who make the adventure of beauty are not deluded, so it is certain that those who make the greater adventure of God are not deluded. And it is probable that this would be much clearer to many if the Faith were presented, not as a system of morals with certain supernatural sanctions, but as the supreme end of life, the

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key to all mysteries, the fulfilment of all desires, the quest of all quests.

It is very well that men should live decently ; but Galahad sought for something more than respectability. He journeyed on a stranger adventure ; he sought for a nobler chalice than the cup in which non-alcoholic beverages are contained.

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