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DEATH'S TEST [FOOTE, G. U.]

OR

CHRISTIAN LIES ABOUT DYING INFIDELS.

“THESE THEIR IDLE TALES OF DYING HORRORS.”—*Carlyle*.

THERE has recently been hawked about the streets of London a penny pamphlet, called “Death’s Test on Christians and Infidels—Echoes from Seventy Death Beds.” It is not an original performance, but has been “compiled by R. May,” who appears to be a city missionary, and who evidently possesses about as much intelligence and knowledge of literature as usually belongs to that class of men. Intrinsically, the pamphlet is beneath contempt, but it may deceive many unsuspecting minds, and in response to numerous invitations I have decided to honor it with a reply. Reuben May is an insignificant person; yet like other venomous little creatures he may cause annoyance to his betters. I detest all vermin and would gladly shun them. But sometimes they pester one beyond endurance, and then one is obliged to sacrifice his dignity and to act in the spirit of Swift’s maxim, “If a flea bite me I’ll kill it if I can.”

Before, however, I reply to Reuben May’s ridiculous compilation, let me deal briefly with the subject of

DEATH-BED REPENTANCE.

Carlyle, in his essay on Voltaire, has a memorable passage on this subject. Reuben May, with other Christian scribblers, is probably alike ignorant and careless of its existence; but the great authority of Carlyle will have its due weight in the minds of unprejudiced seekers for truth.

“Surely the parting agonies of a fellow-mortal, when the spirit of our brother, rapt in the whirlwinds and thick ghastly vapours of death, clutches blindly for help, and no help is there, are not the scenes where a wise faith would seek to exult, when it can no longer hope to alleviate! For the rest, to touch farther on those *their idle tales of dying horrors*, remorse, and the

like; to write of such, to believe them, or disbelieve them, or in anywise discuss them, were but a continuation of the same ineptitude. He who, after the imperturbable exit of so many Cartouches and Thurtells, in every age of the world, can continue to regard the manner of a man's death as a test of his religious orthodoxy, may boast himself impregnable to merely terrestrial logic."—"Essays," vol. ii., p. 161.

Reuben May and his silly coadjutors are no doubt "impregnable to merely terrestrial logic." It would probably require a miracle to drive common sense into their heads. But I trust there are other readers more accessible to reason, and it is for them I write, even at the risk of being thought guilty of "the same ineptitude" as those who manufacture or believe the "idle tales of dying horrors."

Suppose an "infidel" recants his heresy on his death-bed, what does it prove? Simply nothing. Infidels are comparatively few, their relatives are often orthodox; and if, when their minds are enfeebled by disease or the near approach of death, they are surrounded by persons who continually urge them to be reconciled with the religion they have denied, it is not astonishing that they sometimes yield. But such cases are exceedingly rare. Most men die as they have lived.

Old men form the majority of these rare cases, and their recantation is easily understood. Having usually been brought up in the Christian religion, their earliest and tenderest memories are probably connected with it; and when they lie down to die they may naturally recur to it, just as they may forget whole years of their maturity and vividly remember the scenes of their childhood. Old age yearns back to the cradle, and as Dante Rossetti says—

"Life all past
Is like the sky when the sun sets in it,
Clearest where furthest off."

It is said that converted Jews always die Jews; and missionaries in India know well that converts to Christianity frequently, if not generally, die in their native faith. The reason is obvious. Only strong minds can really emancipate themselves from superstition, and it needs a lifetime of settled conviction to undo the work of the pious misguiders of our youth.

Christians who attach importance to the "death-bed

recantations of infidels" pay their own religion a poor compliment. They imply that the infidel's rejection of their creed while his mind is clear and strong is nothing to his acceptance of it when his mind is weak and confused. They virtually declare that his testimony to the truth of their creed is of most value when he is least capable of judging it. At this rate Bedlam and Colney-Hatch should decide our faith. There are some people who think it could not be much more foolish if they did.

Cases of recantation are rarer now than ever. Sceptics are numbered by thousands and they can nearly always secure the presence at their bedsides of friends who share their unbelief. Freethought journals almost every week report the quiet end of sceptics who having lived without hypocrisy have died without fear.

Christians know this. They therefore abandon the idea of manufacturing fresh death-bed stories, and stick to the old ones which have been refuted again and again. But surely it is time we had some fresh ones. Voltaire and Paine have been dead a long time, and many great Freethinkers have died since. Why do we hear nothing about *them*? Why have not the recantation-mongers concocted a nice little story about the death of John Stuart Mill, of Professor Clifford, of Strauss, of Feuerbach, or of Comte? Because they know the lie would be exposed at once. They must wait until these great Freethinkers have, like Voltaire and Paine, been dead a century, before they can hope to defame them with success. Our cry to such pious rascals is "Hands off!" Refute the arguments of Freethinkers if you can, but do not obtrude your disgusting presence in the death chamber, or vent your malignity over their graves.

On the Continent, however, there have been a few recent attempts in this line. One was in the case of

ISAAC GENDRE, THE SWISS FREETHINKER.

The controversy over this gentleman's death was summarised in the London *Echo*, of July 29th, 1881.

"A second case of death-bed conversion of an eminent Liberal to Roman Catholicism, suggested probably by that of the great French philologist Littré, has passed the round of the Swiss papers. A few days ago the veteran Leader of the Freiburg Liberals, M. Isaac Gendre, died. The *Ami du Peuple*, the

organ of the Freiburg Ultramontanes, immediately set afloat the sensational news that when M. Gendre found that his last hour was approaching he sent his brother to fetch a priest, in order that the last sacraments might be administered to him, and the evil which he had done during his life by his persistent Liberalism might be atoned by his repentance at the eleventh hour. This brother, M. Alexandre Gendre, now writes to the paper stating that there is not one word of truth in the story. What possible benefit can any Church derive from the invention of such tales? Doubtless there is a credulous residuum which believes that there must be 'some truth' in anything which has once appeared in print."

It might be added that many people readily believe what pleases them, and that a lie which has a good start is very hard to run down.

Another case was that of

M. LITTRÉ,

the great French Positivist, who died a few months ago at the ripe age of eighty-one. M. Littré was one of the foremost writers in France. His monumental "Dictionary of the French Language" is the greatest work of its kind in the world. As a scholar and a philosopher his eminence was universally recognised. His character was so pure and sweet that a Catholic lady called him "a saint who does not believe in God." Although not rich, his purse was ever open to the claims of charity. He was one who "did good by stealth," and his benefactions were conferred without respect to creed. A Freethinker himself, he patronised the Catholic orphanage near his residence, and took a keen interest in the welfare of its inmates. He was an honor to France, to the world, and to the Humanity which he loved and served instead of God.

M. Littré's wife was an ardent Catholic, yet she was allowed to follow her own religious inclinations without the least interference. The great Freethinker valued liberty of conscience above all other rights, and what he claimed for himself he conceded to others. He scorned to exercise authority even in the domestic circle, where so much tyranny is practised. His wife, however, was less scrupulous. After enjoying for so many years the benefit of his steadfast toleration, she took advantage of her position to exclude his friends from his death-bed, to have him baptised in his last

moments, and to secure his burial in consecrated ground with pious rites. Not satisfied with this, she even allowed it to be understood that her husband had recanted his heresy and died in the bosom of the church. The Abbé Huvelin, her confessor, who frequently visited M. Littré during his last illness, assisted her in the fraud.

There was naturally a disturbance at M. Littré's funeral. As the *Standard* correspondent wrote, his friends and disciples were "very angry at this recantation *in extremis*, and claimed that dishonest priestcraft took advantage of the darkness cast over that clear intellect by the mist of approaching death to perform the rites of the church over his semi-inanimate body." While the body was laid out in Catholic fashion, with crucifixes, candles, and priests telling their beads, Dr. Galopin advanced to the foot of the coffin, and spoke as follows :

"Master, you used to call me your son, and you loved me. I remain your disciple and your defender. I come, in the name of Positive Philosophy, to claim the rights of universal Freemasonry. A deception has been practised upon us, to try and steal you from thinking humanity. But the future will judge your enemies and ours. Master, we will revenge you by making our children read your books."

At the grave, M. Wyruboff, editor of the *Comtist* review, *La Philosophie Positive*, founded by M. Littré, delivered a brief address to the Freethinkers who remained, which concluded thus :—

"Littré proved by his example that it is possible for a man to possess a noble and generous heart, and at the same time espouse a doctrine which admits nothing beyond what is positively real, and which prevents any recantation. And, gentlemen, *in spite of deceptive appearances, Littré died as he had lived, without contradictions or weakness.* All those who knew that calm and serene mind—and I was of the number of those who did—are well aware that it was irrevocably closed to the 'unknowable,' and that it was thoroughly prepared to meet courageously the irresistible laws of nature. And now sleep in peace, proud and noble thinker! You will not have the eternity of a world to come which you never expected; but you leave behind you your country that you strove honestly to serve, the Republic which you always loved, a generation of disciples who will remain faithful to you, and last, but not least, you leave your thoughts and your virtues to the whole world. Social immortality, the

only beneficent and fecund immortality, commences for you to-day."

M. Wyruboff has since amply proved his statements.

The English press creditably rejected the story of M. Littré's recantation. The *Daily News* sneered at it, the *Times* described it as absurd, the *Standard* said it looked untrue. But the *Morning Advertiser* was still more outspoken. It said—

"There can hardly be a doubt that M. Littré died a steadfast adherent to the principles he so powerfully advocated during his laborious and distinguished life. The Church may claim, as our Paris correspondent in his interesting note on the subject tells us she is already claiming, the death-bed conversion of the great unbeliever, who for the last thirty-five years was one of her most active and formidable enemies. She has attempted to take the same posthumous revenge on Voltaire, on Paine, and on many others who are described by Roman Catholic writers as calling in the last dreadful hour for the spiritual support they held up to ridicule in the confidence of health and the presumption of their intellect."

In the Paris *Gaulois* there appeared a letter from the Abbé Huvelin, written very ambiguously and obviously intended to mislead. But one fact stands out clear. This priest was only admitted to visit M. Littré as a friend, and he was not allowed to baptise him. The Archbishop of Paris also, in his official organ, *La Semaine Religieuse*, admits that "he received the sacrament of baptism on the morning of the very day of his death, *not from the hands of the priest, who had not yet arrived, but from those of Madame Littré.*" The Archbishop, however, insists that he "received the ordinance in perfect consciousness and with his own full consent." Now as M. Littré was eighty-one years old, as he had been for twelve months languishing with a feeble hold on life, during which time he was often in a state of stupor, and as this was the very morning of his death, I leave the reader to estimate the value of what the Archbishop calls "perfect consciousness and full consent." If *any* consent was given by the dying Freethinker it was only to gratify his wife and daughter, and at the last moment when he had no will to resist; for if he had been more compliant they would certainly have baptised him before. Submission in these circumstances counts for nothing; and in any case there is forceful truth in M. Littré's words, written

in 1879 in his "Conservation, Révolution, et Positivisme" — "*a whole life passed without any observance of religious rites must outweigh the single final act.*"

Unfortunately for the clericals there exists a document which may be considered M. Littré's last confession. It is an article written for the Comtist review a year before his death, entitled "Pour la Dernière Fois"—For the Last Time. While writing it he knew that his end was not far off. "For many months," he says, "my sufferings have prostrated me with dreadful persistence. . . . Every evening, when I have to be put to bed my pains are exasperated, and often I have not the strength to stifle cries which are grievous to me and grievous to those who tend me." After the article was completed his malady increased. Fearing the worst he wrote to his friend, M. Caubet, as follows:—

"Last Saturday I swooned away for a long time. It is for that reason I send you, a little prematurely, my article for the Review. *If I live*, I will correct the proofs as usual. *If I die*, let it be printed and published in the Review as a posthumous article. It will be a last trouble which I venture to give you. The reader must do his best to follow the manuscript faithfully."

If I live—If I die! These are the words of one in the shadow of Death.

Let us see what M. Littré's last confession is. I translate two passages from the article. Referring to Charles Greville, he says:—

"I feel nothing of what he experienced. Like him, I find it impossible to accept the theory of the world which Catholicism* prescribes to all true believers; but I do not regret being without such doctrines, and I cannot discover in myself any wish to return to them."

And he concludes the article with these words:—

"Positive Philosophy, which has so supported me since my thirtieth year, and which, in giving me an ideal, a craving for progress, the vision of history and care for humanity, has preserved me from being a simple negationist, accompanies me faithfully in these last trials. The questions it solves in its own way, the rules it prescribes by virtue of its principle, the beliefs it discountenances in the name of our ignorance of every thing absolute; of these I have, in the preceding pages made an ex-

* To a Frenchman Catholicism and Christianity mean one and the same thing.

amination, which I conclude with the supreme word of the commencement: for the last time."

So much for the lying story of M. Littré's recantation. In the words of M. Wyrouboff, although his corpse was accompanied to the grave by priests and believers, his name will go down to future generations as that of one who was to the end "a servant of science and an enemy to superstition."

Having disposed of M. Littré's case I return to Reuben May's trumpety pamphlet, dealing first with

HIS PREFACE,

which is a wonderful piece of writing. His fitness to write on any subject is shown by the following passage:

"I have avoided selecting cases which some would call 'dying fancies,' 'imagination,' and 'visions.' Such cases there are, both on record and within the observation of many of those who have widely attended the sick and dying; and although we refrain from entering into the subject here, this is remarkable about such cases, viz., that they are generally of two distinct classes—(1) visions of angels, hearing beautiful music, seeing beautiful places, etc.; (2) of those who have great fear, despondency, and alarm; seeing fiends, smelling brimstone, feeling scorched by a huge fire, etc. I believe invariably the first are those who have professed religion in health, and the latter those who have neglected it. Anyhow, my personal observation confirms this opinion."

If ever a *Colney Hatch Gazette* is started the proprietors would do well to engage Reuben May as editor.

Another passage is very interesting:

"There is an intelligent man, close upon fourscore years of age, now residing in the centre of London, and who I hope is a Christian, who has for the greater part of his life—for reasons not necessary to mention here—been conversant and mixed up with, the followers of the leading infidel lecturers, past and present, who says, that he has had an opportunity to watch very many such to their closing earthly days, and that never has a single instance come under his notice but that there was a desire to turn from infidelity and in most to receive the consolations of religion."

Why is not this "intelligent man's" name given? Because the lie might then be exposed. Why has he watched so many infidel death-beds, and how did he obtain so many opportunities? Why does Mr. May only *hope* the man is a

Christian? If he does not know him well enough to be sure, how can he have the audacity to publish such a sweeping assertion on the man's bare word? Against this anonymous and general testimony I put the specific fact that our journals constantly publish cases of Freethinkers who have died thoroughly convinced of the truth of their principles, and without the slightest misgiving; cases in which the names and addresses are given, not only of the deceased, but also of the friends who were with him to the last. For my own part, I have known many Freethinkers who were steadfast unto death, but I have never known a single case of recantation. Nor do I believe Reuben May has. If he has let him give name, address, place and time, so that it may be authenticated.

A word as to this pious scribbler's method of compilation. He says that "the cases selected are from various published and acknowledged authentic works." What does the man mean? An *authentic* work is simply one written by the author whose name it bears. Am I to suppose that Mr. May believes everything he sees in print? If not, I should like to know what trouble he has taken to verify the stories he has printed. My belief is that he has taken none. He seems to have become possessed of a few antiquated works, and to have spoiled a quantity of good paper in copying from them what suited his purpose. What are

HIS AUTHORITIES?

Dr. Simpson's "Plea for Religion," the Rev. Erskine Neale's "Closing Scenes," and a few more works of that kind. They are all written by special pleaders; not one of them has any authority in the world of literature; and at the very best they are worth very little, since none of their authors witnessed the scenes which are alleged to have taken place at the death-beds of infidels. Mr. May should have gone to *original sources*. No doubt his meagre acquaintance with literature prevented him from doing so, and perhaps he thought any stick was good enough to beat the infidel dog. In exposing him, however, I *shall* go to original sources, and the information I give may be useful to ignorant Reuben May as well as to other readers.

Erskine Neale's "Closing Scenes" is first laid under contribution in the case of

THOMAS PAINE

The author's strong bias is apparent in almost every line. He describes "Common Sense" as a "clever but *malignant* pamphlet." He states that Paine, when he returned to America in 1802, was suffering from "intemperance and a complication of disorders." He does not cite any authority in support of the charge of intemperance, nor does he inform the reader that hard drinking was the custom in Paine's time. Fox, the great Whig statesman, was frequently inebriated, and his great Tory rival, William Pitt, the Premier of England, was often carried drunk to bed. Mr. Neale also omits to mention the honorable circumstance that Paine's "complication of disorders" was brought on by his long imprisonment in a dungeon of the Luxembourg, for having, as a member of the National Assembly, spoken and voted against the execution of Louis XVI.

Mr. Neale cites "an eyewitness" of Paine's "closing scene," but this anonymous person* does not pretend that Paine recanted. He dwells on the fact that the dying infidel "required some person to be with him at night, urging as his reason that he was afraid he should die unattended." There is, however, nothing wonderful in this. Few men, I presume, would like to be left alone on their death-bed. He further states that Paine called out, in his paroxysms of pain, "O Lord, help me! God, help me! Jesus Christ, help me! O Lord, help me!" But surely no man would attach any importance to ejaculations like these. Hospital attendants will tell you that patients utter all sorts of cries in their agony, without meaning anything by them. Vanini, who was burnt to death as an Atheist at Toulouse, in 1619, is reported to have cried out on seeing the stake, "Ah, my God!" On which a bystander said, "You believe in God, then;" and he retorted, "No, it's a fashion of speaking."

This anonymous eyewitness himself refutes the story of Paine's recantation, in the following passage:—

"I took occasion, during the night of the 5th and 6th of June, to test the strength of his opinions respecting revelation. I purposely made him a very late visit; it was a time which seemed to suit my errand; it was midnight. He was in great distress, constantly exclaiming the words above-mentioned, when, after a

* Probably Dr. Manley.

considerable preface, I addressed him in the following manner, the nurse being present :—

“ Mr. Paine, your opinions, by a large portion of the community, have been treated with deference; you have never been in the habit of mixing in your conversation words of coarse meaning; you have never indulged in the practice of profane swearing; you must be sensible that we are acquainted with your religious opinions, as they are given to the world. What must we think of your present conduct? Why do you call upon Jesus Christ to help you? Do you believe that he can help you? Do you believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ? Come, now, answer me honestly; I want an answer as from the lips of a dying man, for I verily believe that you will not live twenty-four hours.’ I paused some time at the end of every question. He did not answer, but ceased to exclaim in the above manner. Again I addressed him: ‘ Mr. Paine, you have not answered my questions: will you answer them? Allow me to ask again, do you believe, or—let me qualify the question—do you wish to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?’ After a pause of some minutes he answered, ‘ I have NO WISH TO BELIEVE on that subject.’ I then left him, and know not whether he afterwards spoke to any person on any subject, though he lived, as I before observed, a few hours longer—in fact, till the morning of the 8th.”

Reuben May probably thought it impolitic to rest here. He therefore made another extract from “ The Life and Gospel Labours of Stephen Grellet.” This pious worthy states that a young woman, named Mary Roscoe, frequently took Paine some delicacies from a neighbor. To this young woman, according to Stephen Grellet, he confided a secret which he never revealed to his dearest friends. He told her, with respect to his “ Age of Reason,” that “ if ever the devil had any agency in any work, he has had it in my writing that book ;” and she repeatedly heard him exclaim “ Lord Jesus, have mercy on me !”

Now this young woman is no doubt Mary *Hinsdale*, the servant of Mr. Willett Hicks, a Quaker gentleman who showed Paine great kindness during his last days. Her story was published and widely circulated by the Religious Tract Society in 1824. William Cobbett, who admired Paine as a politician although he dissented strongly from his religious views, published a conclusive reply. While in America he had investigated the affair. He had called on Mary Hinsdale herself, at the instance of Charles Collins, who wanted him to state in his contemplated Life of Paine

that he had recanted. She shuffled, evaded, and equivocated; she said it was a *long time ago*, and she could not speak *positively*. Cobbett left in disgust, thinking the woman a match for the Devil in cunning. He concludes his exposure of the recantation story thus :

"This is, I think, a pretty good instance of the lengths to which hypocrisy will go. . . . Mr. Paine declares in his last will, that he retains all his publicly expressed opinions as to religion. His executors, and many other gentlemen of undoubted veracity, had the same declaration from his dying lips. Mr. Willett Hicks visited him to nearly the last. This gentleman says that there was no change of opinion intimated to *him*; and will any man believe that Paine would have withheld from Mr. Hicks that which he was so forward to communicate to Mr. Hicks's *servant girl*?"

Cheetham, who libelled Paine in everything else, acknowledged that he died without any change in his opinions. And this Mary Hinsdale, subsequently trying to play the same trick on the reputation of an obnoxious young lady, Mary Lockwood, as she had played on Paine's, was proved by the young lady's friends to be a *deliberate liar*.

Perhaps the best answer to the lying story of Paine's recantation, is to be found in the fact that he wrote the second part of his "Age of Reason" in the Luxembourg, while under apprehension of the guillotine. He states this in the Preface. "I had then," he writes, "little hope of surviving. I know, therefore, by experience, the conscientious trial of my principles." Clio Kickman (p. 194) gives also the testimony of Dr. Bond, an English surgeon in the suite of General O'Hara, who said :

"Mr. Paine, while hourly expecting to die, read to me parts of his "Age of Reason;" and every night when I left him to be separately locked up, and expected not to see him alive in the morning, he always expressed his firm belief in the principles of that book, and begged I would tell the world such were his dying opinions."

The subject may be left here. I think I have disposed of Reuben May's authorities, and satisfactorily shown that Thomas Paine died as he lived "an enemy to the Christian religion."

Next comes the case of

VOLTAIRE.

This splendid Freethinker, whose name is a battle-flag in

the hottest strife between Reason and Faith, has been the subject of more malignant slander than even Thomas Paine. Superstition has reeled from the blows of his arguments and writhed from the shafts of his wit, but it has partly avenged itself by heaping upon his memory a mountain of lies.

Reuben May does not name the author of his section on Voltaire. Most of it is a translation from the Abbé Barruel, who evidently wrote for pious readers ready to believe anything against "infidels." His diatribe bristles with falsehoods and absurdities.

Voltaire is charged with "a want of sound learning and moral qualifications," which will "ever prevent him from being ranked with the benefactors of mankind by the wise and good." The writer meant by *hypocrites* and *fools!* Voltaire's reputation is too firmly established to be overthrown by Christian scribblers. Our greatest living poet, Robert Browning, salutes him thus—

Ay, sharpest shrewdest steel that ever stabbed
To death Imposture through the armor-joints!*

Carlyle, who is very grudging in his admissions of Voltaire's worth, says "He gave the death-stab to modern superstition," and adds "It was a most weighty service."† Elsewhere Carlyle reluctantly admits his nobility of character: "At all events, it will be granted that, as a private man, his existence was beneficial, not hurtful, to his fellow-men: the Calases, the Sirvens, and so many orphans and outcasts whom he cherished and protected, ought to cover a multitude of sins."‡

Buckle, the historian of civilisation, writes:—

"No one could reason more closely than Voltaire, when reasoning suited his purpose. But he had to deal with men impervious to argument; men whose inordinate reverence for antiquity had only left them two ideas, namely, that everything old is right, and that everything new is wrong. To argue against these opinions would be idle indeed; the only other resource was, to make them ridiculous, and weaken their influence, by holding up their authors to contempt. This was one of the tasks Voltaire set himself to perform, and he did it well. He, therefore, used ridicule, not as the test of truth, but as the scourge of folly. And with such effect was the punishment

* "The Two Poets of Croisie." St. 107.

† "Essays." Vol. II., p. 181.

‡ Ibid. P. 154.

administered, that not only did the pedants and theologians of his own time wince under the lash, but even their successors feel their ears tingle when they read his biting words; and they revenge themselves by reviling the memory of that great writer, whose works are as a thorn in their side, and whose very name they hold in undisguised abhorrence. . . . His irony, his wit, his pungent and telling sarcasms, produced more effect than the gravest arguments could have done; and there can be no doubt that he was fully justified in using those great resources with which nature had endowed him, since by their aid he advanced the interests of truth, and relieved men from some of their most inveterate prejudices."—"History of Civilisation," Vol. II, p. 308-9.

Taking him as a whole, Buckle thinks he is probably the greatest historian Europe has produced. Lamartine characterises him as "*ce génie non le plus haut, mais le plus vaste de la France*"—not the loftiest but the greatest genius of France. And lastly, Brougham, in his "Life of Voltaire," says—

"Nor can any one since the days of Luther be named, to whom the spirit of free inquiry, nay, the emancipation of the human mind from spiritual tyranny, owes a more lasting debt of gratitude."

What does Reuben May think now? These great writers regard Voltaire as a "benefactor of mankind." Surely they are as "wise" as Reuben May's anonymous author, and probably as "good."

The Abbé Barruel's first misstatement is glaring and unpardonable. He writes of Voltaire as "the dying Atheist." Now, Voltaire was a Theist, and he penned arguments in favor of the existence of God such as few theologians have equalled. He is credited with the saying that "If God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him." He described an Atheist as a monster created by nature in a moment of madness. He quarreled with some of the most eager spirits engaged on the great Encyclopedia for going too far in a negative direction. During his last visit to Paris, only a few weeks before his death, when Benjamin Franklin's grandson was presented to him, he said "*God and Liberty*, that is the only benediction which befits the grandson of Dr. Franklin."* Yet the Abbé

* Condorcet, *Vie de Voltaire*, p. 141.

Barruel calls Voltaire an *Atheist*. A writer so grossly inaccurate is scarcely worth notice.

He also says that Voltaire in his famous phrase *Ecrasez L'Infame* (crush the Infamous) referred to Jesus Christ. This is another gross mistake. Voltaire had great respect and admiration for Jesus as a man. By the Infamous he meant the Church with its dogmas, its priestcraft, its oppressions, and its crimes.

He states that the Abbé Gauthier, with the curate of St. Sulpice, was unable to gain admission to Voltaire's apartment, in consequence of Diderot, D'Alembert, and other "conspirators" surrounding him. This is another falsehood, as the sequel will show.

Now for the story of Voltaire's "recantation." In those days every Freethinker wrote with the halter round his neck. Voltaire was always in peril, from which only his wonderful adroitness saved him. He disliked martyrdom, had no wish to be burnt to please the faithful, and thought he could do Truth more service by living than by courting death. Consequently, his whole life was more or less an evasion of the enemy. Many of his most trenchant attacks on Christianity were anonymous; and although everyone knew that only one pen in France could have written them, there was no legal proof of the fact. When Voltaire came to die, he remembered his own bitter sorrow and indignation, which he expressed in burning verse, at the ignominy inflicted many years before on the remains of the poor actress, Adrienne Lecouvreur, which were refused sepulture because she died outside the pale of the Church. Fearing similar treatment himself, he is said to have sent for the Abbé Gauthier, who, according to Condorcet, "confessed Voltaire, and received from him a profession of faith, by which he declared that he died in the Catholic religion wherein he was born." This story is generally credited, but its truth is by no means indisputable; for in the Abbé Gauthier's declaration to the Prior of the Abbey of Scellieres, where Voltaire's remains were interred, he says that "when he visited M. de Voltaire he found him *unfit to be confessed*."

The Curate of St. Sulpice was annoyed at being forestalled by the Abbé Gauthier, and as Voltaire was his parishioner, he demanded "a detailed profession of faith and a disavowal of all heretical doctrines." He paid the

dying Freethinker many unwelcome visits, in the vain hope of obtaining a full recantation, which would be a fine feather in his hat. The last of these visits is thus described by Wagnière, one of Voltaire's secretaries, and an eye-witness of the scene. I take Carlyle's translation :—

Two days before that mournful death, M. l'Abbé Mignot, his nephew, went to seek the Curé of Saint Sulpice and the Abbé Gauthier, and brought them into his uncle's sick-room; who, on being informed that the Abbé Gauthier was there, "Ah, well!" said he, "give him my compliments and my thanks." The Abbé spoke some words to him, exhorting him to patience. The Curé of Saint Sulpice then came forward, having announced himself, and asked of M. de Voltaire, elevating his voice, if he acknowledged the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ? The sick man pushed one of his hands against the Curé's *calotte* (coif), shoving him back, and cried, turning abruptly to the other side, "Let me die in peace (*Laissez-moi mourir en paix!*)!" The Curé seemingly considered his person soiled, and his coif dishonored, by the touch of a philosopher. He made the sick-nurse give him a little brushing, and then went out with the Abbé Gauthier.

A further proof that Voltaire made no real recantation lies in the fact that the Bishop of Troyes sent a peremptory dispatch to the Prior of Scellieres, which lay in his diocese, forbidding him to inter the heretic's remains. The dispatch, however, arrived too late, and Voltaire's ashes remained there until 1791, when they were removed to Paris, and placed in the Pantheon, by order of the National Assembly.

Having disposed of the "recantation," I must refute another lie. Reuben May's pamphlet states that—

"In his last illness he sent for Dr. Tronchin. When the Doctor came, he found Voltaire in the greatest agony, exclaiming with the utmost horror—"I am abandoned by God and man." He then said, "Doctor, I will give you half of what I am worth, if you will give me six month's life." The Doctor answered, 'Sir, you cannot live six weeks.' Voltaire replied, 'Then I shall go to hell, and you will go with me!' and soon after expired."

Was there ever a sillier story? Who, except a lunatic or a Christian, could believe it? Why did Voltaire want exactly six months' life? He was then in his eighty-fifth year, and had surely lived long enough. Why did he say he was going to hell when he believed there was no such place? And why did he suppose the Doctor would go to hell too for

being unable to prolong his existence? The person who invented this story was a fool, and Reuben May is a ninny to print it.

The story is an evident lie. After this funny conversation, Voltaire "soon expired." Now Wagnière has left an account of Voltaire's end which disproves this. Carlyle translates it thus:—

"He expired about quarter past eleven at night, *with the most perfect tranquillity*, after having suffered the cruelest pains, in consequence of those fatal drugs, which his own imprudence, and especially that of the persons who should have looked to it, made him swallow. Ten minutes before his last breath, he took the hand of Morand, his valet-de-chambre, who was watching him; pressed it, and said, "*Adieu, mon cher Morand, je me meurs*" Adieu, my dear Morand, I am gone." These are the last words uttered by M. de Voltaire."

Wagnière's narrative *looks* true, unlike the rubbish of Dr. Tronchin, the Abbé Barruel, and Reuben May.

Further on in Reuben May's pamphlet we read of a parson who was told by another parson that a friend of his had seen an old nurse who waited on Voltaire in his last illness, and who declared that "not for all the wealth of Europe would she see another infidel die." But as no one who visited Voltaire mentions this woman, and as no nurse is alluded to by friend or enemy, I unceremoniously dismiss her as "a mockery, a delusion and a snare."

My readers must, I think, be fully satisfied that Voltaire neither recanted nor died raving, but remained a sceptic to the last, and passed away quietly to "the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns."

I take next a foolish story about

VOLNEY,

another great Frenchman, and author of the famous "Ruins of Empires":—

"VOLNEY IN A STORM.—Volney, a French infidel, was on board a vessel during a violent storm at sea, when the ship was in imminent danger of being lost. He threw himself on the deck, crying in agony, 'Oh, my God! my God!' "There is a God, then, Monsieur Volney?' said one of the passengers to him. 'Oh, yes,' exclaimed the terrified infidel, "there is! there is! Lord, save me!" The ship, however, got safely into port. Volney was extremely disconcerted when his confession was publicly re-

lated, but excused it by saying that he was so frightened by the storm that he did not know what he said, and immediately returned to his atheistical sentiments."

Reuben May gives no authority for this story. He seems to think that his readers, like himself, will believe anything they see in print. I have traced it back to the "Tract Magazine" for July, 1832, where it appears very much amplified and in many respects different. It appears, in a still different form, in the eighth volume of the "Evangelical Magazine," where it professes to be taken from Weld's "Travels in America." This date is a great many years after Volney's time. I cannot find any earlier trace of the story, and I therefore ask the reader to reject it as false and absurd.

The next case is that of "the noble Altamont," but as I cannot discover who the noble Altamont was, and suspect him to be the aristocratic hero of some eighteenth-century romance, I pass on to the case of

HOBBS.

This great thinker, who knew Bacon, Selden, and Ben Jonson in his youth, and Dryden in his old age, lived to be upwards of ninety. Reuben May's pamphlet states that, when dying, he said "he was about to take a leap in the dark." Well, that was only an emphatic way of expressing his doubt whether there is a future life or not. We are also told that he always had a candle burning in his bedroom, as he was afraid of the dark. So are thousands of true believers. In Hobbes's case, this was partly due to an accident which caused his premature birth, and partly to the fact that at the time of the "candle" story he was a very old man, and in dread that some religious fanatic might carry out the threats of assassination which were frequently made. He knew that the Church of England wanted to burn him alive, and that he was saved from martyrdom only by the protection of eminent personages in the State.

COOKE, THE LEICESTER MURDERER

is the next case. He attributed his wickedness to "infidel associations." But we have no statement from his own hand, and his "confession," like that of Bailey, the Gloucester murderer, was no doubt fabricated or *improved*

by the chaplain. All the other murderers of this century have been undoubted Christians.

DAVID HUME

comes next. Reuben May gives an extract from one of his essays, but says nothing about his end. I will supply the omission. Dr. Adam Smith, author of the "Wealth of Nations," received the following letter from Dr. Black, Hume's physician, the day after his death:—

"EDINBURGH, August 26th, 1776.—*Dear Sir,*—Yesterday, about four o'clock, Mr. Hume expired. The near approach of his death became evident in the night between Thursday and Friday, when his disease became excessive, and soon weakened him so much that he could not rise out of bed. He continued to the last perfectly sensible, and free from much pain or feelings of distress. He never dropped the smallest expression of impatience, but, when he had occasion to speak to the people about him, he always did it with affection and tenderness. . . . When he became very weak it cost him a great effort to speak, and he died in such a happy composure of mind that nothing could exceed it."

Adam Smith, in sending this letter to his friend William Stratham, wrote:

"Upon the whole I have always considered him, both in his life-time and since his death, as approaching as near to the ideal of the perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will admit."

What a contrast to Doctor Johnson, his great contemporary, the champion of piety as Hume was of scepticism, who had such a morbid horror of death! While the pious Johnson quailed at the very thought of death, the sceptical Hume confronted it placidly, regarding it only as the ringing down of the curtain after the great drama of life.

Let us take another sceptic, whom Reuben May does not mention, the great historian,

EDWARD GIBBON.

Lord Shaftesbury, his confidential friend, wrote thus of his death:

"To the last he preserved his senses, and when he could no longer speak, his servant having asked him a question, he made a sign to him that he understood him. He was quiet, tranquil, and did not stir; his eyes half shut. About a quarter of an hour before one he ceased to breathe. The valet-de-chambre observed

that he did not, at any time, evince the least sign of alarm or apprehension of death."

In his second pamphlet Reuben May gives a long extract on the death of

FREDERIC THE GREAT.

He admits that the old king remained a sceptic to the last, and when a pious Christian wrote to him on his death-bed about the prospects of his soul, he only remarked, "Let this be answered civilly: the intention of the writer is good."

Reuben May fills up the rest of his stupid pamphlets with cases of dying Christians. The first of these is unfortunate. Addison, when nearing his end, sent for his noble son-in-law to "See in what peace a Christian can die." Now Joseph Addison was a frightful brandy-drinker, and it has been satirically hinted that in order to go through this pious and edifying performance he braced himself up with half-a-pint of his favorite liquor.

The rest I leave without comment. Christians, like other people, doubtless die in the religion of their childhood. The adherents of every other creed do the same. My purpose is simply to show that Freethinkers neither recant their heresy nor quail before inevitable death, and I think I have succeeded.

When Mirabeau, the mighty master-spirit of the Revolution, lay dying in Paris amid the breathless hush of a whole nation, he was attended by the great Cabanis. After a night of terrible suffering, he turned to his physician and said, "My friend, I shall die to-day. When one has come to such a juncture there remains only one thing to do, that is to be perfumed, crowned with flowers, and surrounded with music, in order to enter sweetly into that slumber from which there is no awakening." Then he had his couch brought to the window, and there the Titan died, with his last gaze on the bright sunshine and the fragrant flowers. He was an Atheist. Why should the Atheist fear to die? From the womb of nature he sprang and he will take his last sleep on her bosom.

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