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# INFIDEL DEATH-BEDS.

BY  
G. W. FOOTE.

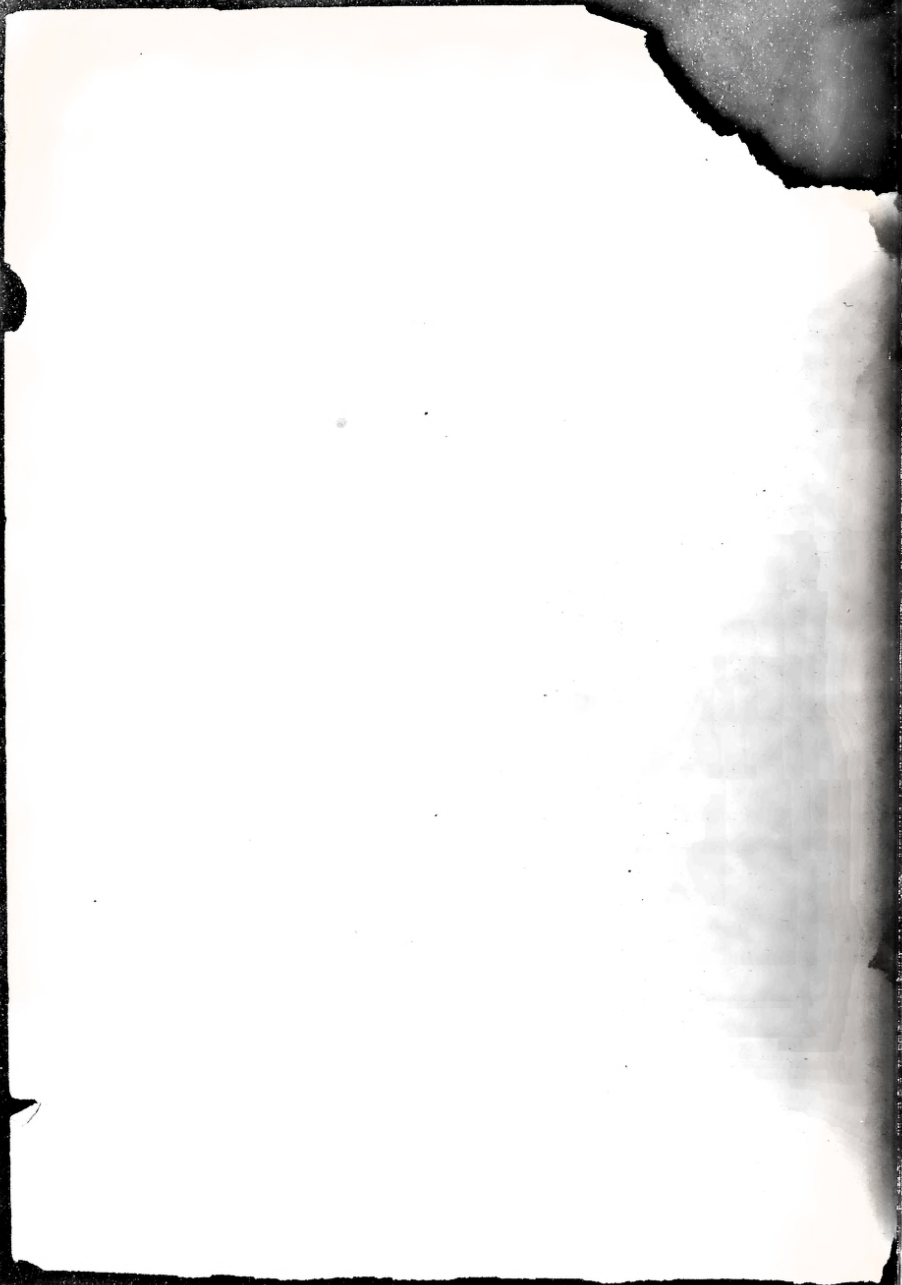
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PRICE SIXPENCE.  
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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

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## INFIDEL DEATH-BEDS.

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INFIDEL death-beds have been a fertile theme of pulpit eloquence. The priests of Christianity often inform their congregations that Faith is an excellent soft pillow, and Reason a horrible hard bolster, for the dying head. Free-thought, they say, is all very well in the days of our health and strength, when we are buoyed up by the pride of carnal intellect; but ah! how poor a thing it is when health and strength fail us, when, deserted by our self-sufficiency, we need the support of a stronger power. In that extremity the proud Freethinker turns to Jesus Christ, renounces his wicked scepticism, implores pardon of the Savior he has despised, and shudders at the awful scenes that await him in the next world should the hour of forgiveness be past.

Pictorial art has been pressed into the service of this plea for religion, and in such orthodox periodicals as the *British Workman*, to say nothing of the horde of pious inventions which are circulated as tracts, expiring sceptics have been portrayed in agonies of terror, gnashing their teeth, wringing their hands, rolling their eyes, and exhibiting every sign of despair.

One minister of the gospel, the Rev. Erskine Neale, has not thought it beneath his dignity to compose an extensive series of these holy frauds, under the title of *Closing Scenes*. This work was, at one time, very popular and influential; but its specious character having been exposed, it has fallen into disrepute, or at least into neglect.

The real answer to these arguments, if they may be called such, is to be found in the body of the present work. I have narrated in a brief space, and from the best authorities, the "closing scenes" in the lives of many eminent Freethinkers during the last three centuries. They are not anonymous persons without an address, who cannot be located in time or space, and who simply serve "to point a moral or adorn a tale." Their names are in most cases historical, and in some

cases familiar to fame; great poets, philosophers, historians, and wits, of deathless memory, who cannot be withdrawn from the history of our race without robbing it of much of its dignity and splendor.

In some instances I have prefaced the story of their deaths with a short, and in others with a lengthy, record of their lives. The ordinary reader cannot be expected to possess a complete acquaintance with the career and achievements of every great soldier of progress; and I have therefore considered it prudent to afford such information as might be deemed necessary to a proper appreciation of the character, the greatness, and the renown, of the subjects of my sketches. When the hero of the story has been the object of calumny or misrepresentation, when his death has been falsely related, and simple facts have been woven into a tissue of lying absurdity, I have not been content with a bare narration of the truth; I have carried the war into the enemy's camp, and refuted their mischievous libels.

One of our greatest living thinkers entertains "the belief that the English mind, not readily swayed by rhetoric, moves freely under the pressure of facts."\* I may therefore venture to hope that the *facts* I have recorded will have their proper effect on the reader's mind. Yet it may not be impolitic to examine the orthodox argument as to death-bed repentances.

Carlyle, in his Essay on Voltaire, utters a potent warning against anything of the kind.

"Surely the parting agonies of a fellow-mortal, when the spirit of our brother, rapt in the whirlwinds and thick ghastly vapors 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 imperishable 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."†

There is a great deal of truth in this vigorous passage. I fancy, however, that some of the dupes of priestcraft are not absolutely impregnable to terrestrial logic, and I discuss the

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\* Dr. E. B. Tylor: Preface to second edition of *Primitive Culture*.

† *Essays*, Vol. II., p. 161 (People's edition).

subject for their sakes, even at the risk of being held guilty of "ineptitude."

Throughout the world, the religion of mankind is determined by the geographical accident of their birth. In England men grow up Protestants; in Italy, Catholics; in Russia, Greek Christians; in Turkey, Mohammedans; in India, Brahmans; in China, Buddhists or Confucians. What they are taught in their childhood, they believe in their manhood; and they die in the faith in which they have lived.

Here and there a few men think for themselves. If they discard the faith in which they have been educated, they are never free from its influence. It meets them at every turn, and is constantly, by a thousand ties drawing them back to the orthodox fold. The stronger resist this attraction, the weaker succumb to it. Between them is the average man, whose tendency will depend on several things. If he is isolated, or finds but few sympathisers, he may revert to the ranks of faith; if he finds many of the same opinion with himself, he will probably display more fortitude. Even Freethinkers are gregarious, and in the worst as well as the best sense of the words, the saying of Novalis is true—"My thought gains infinitely when it is shared by another."

But in all cases of reversion, the sceptic invariably returns to the creed of his own country. What does this prove? Simply the power of our environment, and the force of early training. When "infidels" are few, and their relatives are orthodox, what could be more natural than what is called "a death-bed recantation?" Their minds are enfeebled by disease, or the near approach of death; they are surrounded by persons who continually urge them to be reconciled to the popular faith; and is it astonishing if they sometimes yield to these solicitations? Is it wonderful if, when all grows dim, and the priestly carrion-crow of the death-chamber mouths his perfunctory shibboleths, that the weak brain should become dazed, and the poor tongue mutter a faint response?

Should the dying man be old, there is still less reason for surprise. 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."

The "recantation" of old men, if it occurs, is easily under-

stood. Having been brought up in a particular religion, their earliest and tenderest memories may be connected with it; and when they lie down to die they may mechanically recur to it, just as they may forget whole years of their maturity, and vividly remember the scenes of their childhood. Those who have read Thackeray's exquisitely faithful and pathetic narrative of the death of old Col. Newcome, will remember that as the evening chapel bell tolled its last note, he smiled, lifted his head a little, and cried "Adsum!"—the boy's answer when the names were called at school.

Cases of recantation, if they were ever common, which does not appear to be true, are now exceedingly rare; so rare, indeed, that they are never heard of except in anonymous tracts, which are evidently concocted for the glory of God, rather than the edification of Man. Sceptics are at present numbered by thousands, and they can nearly always secure at their bedsides the presence of friends who share their unbelief. Every week, the Freethought journals report quietly, and as a matter of course, the peaceful end of "infidels" who, having lived without hypocrisy, have died without fear. They are frequently buried by their heterodox friends, and never a week passes without the Secular Burial Service, or some other appropriate words, being read by sceptics over a sceptic's grave.

Christian ministers know this. They usually confine themselves, therefore, to the death-bed stories of Paine and Voltaire, which have been again and again refuted. Little, if anything, is said about the eminent Freethinkers who have died in the present generation. The priests must wait half a century before they can hope to defame them with success. Our cry to these pious sutlers 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 tombs.

Supposing, however, that *every* Freethinker turned Christian on his death-bed. It is a tremendous stretch of fancy, but I make it for the sake of argument. What does it prove? Nothing, as I said before, but the force of our surroundings and early training. It is a common saying among Jews, when they hear of a Christian proselyte, "Ah, wait till he comes to die!" As a matter of fact, converted Jews generally die in the faith of their race; and the same is alleged as to



the native converts that are made by our missionaries in India.

Heine has a pregnant passage on this point. Referring to Joseph Schelling, who was "an apostate to his own thought," who "deserted the altar he had himself consecrated," and "returned to the crypts of the past," Heine rebukes the "old believers" who cried *Kyrie eleison* in honor of such a conversion. "That," he says, "proves nothing for their doctrine. It only proves that man turns to religion when he is old and fatigued, when his physical and mental force has left him, when he can no longer enjoy nor reason. So many Free-thinkers are converted on their death-beds! . . . But at least do not boast of them. These legendary conversions belong at best to pathology, and are a poor evidence for your cause. After all, they only prove this, that it was impossible for you to convert those Freethinkers while they were healthy in body and mind."\*

Rénan has some excellent words on the same subject in his delightful volume of autobiography. After expressing a rooted preference for a sudden death, he continues: "I should be grieved to go through one of those periods of feebleness, in which the man who has possessed strength and virtue is only the shadow and ruins of himself, and often, to the great joy of fools, occupies himself in demolishing the life he has laboriously built up. Such an old age is the worst gift the gods can bestow on man. If such a fate is reserved for me, I protest in advance against the fatuities that a softened brain may make me say or sign. It is Rénan sound in heart and head, such as I am now, and not Rénan half destroyed by death, and no longer himself, as I shall be if I decompose gradually, that I wish people to listen to and believe."†

To find the best passage on this topic in our own literature we must go back to the seventeenth century, and to Selden's *Table Talk*, a volume in which Coleridge found "more weighty bullion sense" than he "ever found in the same number of pages of any uninspired writer." Selden lived in a less mealy-mouthed age than ours, and what I am going to quote smacks of the blunt old times; but it is too good to miss, and all readers who are not prudish will thank me for citing it. "For a priest," says Selden, "to turn a man

\* *De L'Allemagne*, Vol. I., p. 174.

† *Souvenirs D'Enfance et de Jeunesse*, p. 377.

H. D. S. I. R. S. S.

when he lies a dying, is just like one that hath a long time solicited a woman, and cannot obtain his end; at length he makes her drunk, and so lies with her." It is a curious thing that the writer of these words helped to draw up the Westminster Confession of Faith.

For my own part, while I have known many Freethinkers who were stedfast to their principles in death, I have never known a single case of recantation. The fact is, Christians are utterly mistaken on this subject. It is quite intelligible that those who believe in a vengeful God, and an everlasting hell, should tremble on "the brink of eternity"; and it is natural that they should ascribe to others the same trepidation. But a moment's reflection must convince them that this is fallacious. The only terror in death is the apprehension of what lies beyond it, and that emotion is impossible to a sincere disbeliever. Of course the orthodox may ask "But is there a sincere disbeliever?" To which I can only reply, like Diderot, by asking "Is there a sincere Christian?"

Professor Tyndall, while repudiating Atheism himself, has borne testimony to the earnestness of others who embrace it. "I have known some of the most pronounced among them," he says, "not only in life but in death—seen them approaching with open eyes the inexorable goal, with no dread of a hangman's whip, with no hope of a heavenly crown, and still as mindful of their duties, and as faithful in the discharge of them, as if their eternal future depended on their latest deeds."\*

Lord Bacon said "I do not believe that any man fears to be dead, but only the stroke of death." True, and the physical suffering, and the pang of separation, are the same for all. Yet the end of life is as natural as its beginning, and the true philosophy of existence is nobly expressed in the lofty sentence of Spinoza, "A free man thinks less of nothing than of death."

"So live, that when thy summons comes to join  
The innumerable caravan, which moves  
To that mysterious realm, where each shall take  
His chamber in the silent halls of death,  
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,  
Scourged to his dungeon, but sustained and soothed  
By an unflinching trust, approach thy grave,  
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch  
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."†

\* *Fortnightly Review*, November, 1877.

† Bryant, *Thanatopsis*.

### LORD AMBERLEY.

Viscount Amberley, the eldest son of the late Earl Russell, and the author of a very heretical work entitled an *Analysis of Religious Belief*, lived and died a Freethinker. His will, stipulating that his son should be educated by a sceptical friend, was set aside by Earl Russell; the law of England being such, that Freethinkers are denied the parental rights which are enjoyed by their Christian neighbors. Lady Frances Russell, who signs with her initials the Preface to Lord Amberley's book, which was published after his death, writes: "Ere the pages now given to the public had left the press, the hand that had written them was cold, the heart—of which few could know the loving depths—had ceased to beat, the far-ranging mind was for ever still, the fervent spirit was at rest. Let this be remembered by those who read, and add solemnity to the solemn purpose of the book."

### LORD BOLINGBROKE.

Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, was born in 1672 at Battersea, where he also died on December 12, 1751. His life was a stormy one, and on the fall of the Tory ministry, of which he was a distinguished member, he was impeached by the Whig parliament under the leadership of Sir Robert Walpole. It was merely a party prosecution, and although Bolingbroke was attainted of high treason, he did not lose a friend or forfeit the respect of honest men. Swift and Pope held him in the highest esteem; they corresponded with him throughout their lives, and it was from Bolingbroke that Pope derived the principles of the *Essay on Man*. That Bolingbroke's abilities were of the highest order cannot be gainsaid. His political writings are masterpieces of learning, eloquence, and wit, the style is sinewy and graceful, and in the greatest heat of controversy he never ceases to be a gentleman. His philosophical writings were published after his death by his literary executor, David Mallet, whom Johnson described as "a beggarly Scotchman" who was "left half-a-crown" to fire off a blunder-

bus, which his patron had charged, against "religion and morality." Johnson's opinion on such a subject is, however, of trifling importance. He hated Scotchmen and Infidels, and he told Boswell that Voltaire and Rousseau deserved transportation more than any of the scoundrels who were tried at the Old Bailey.

Bolingbroke's philosophical writings show him to have been a Deist. He believed in God but he rejected Revelation. His views are advanced and supported with erudition, eloquence, and masterly irony. The approach of death, which was preceded by the excruciating disease of cancer in the cheek, did not produce the least change in his convictions. According to Goldsmith, "He was consonant with himself to the last; and those principles which he had all along avowed, he confirmed with his dying breath, having given orders that none of the clergy should be permitted to trouble him in his last moments."\*

#### GIORDANO BRUNO.

This glorious martyr of Freethought did not die in a quiet chamber, tended by loving hands. He was literally "butchered to make a Roman holiday." When the assassins of "the bloody faith" kindled the fire which burnt out his splendid life, he was no decrepit man, nor had the finger of Death touched his cheek with a pallid hue. The blood coursed actively through his veins, and a dauntless spirit shone in his noble eyes. It might have been Bruno that Shelley had in mind when he wrote those thrilling lines in *Queen Mab* :

"I was an infant when my mother went  
To see an Atheist burned. She took me there:  
The dark-robed priests were met around the pile,  
The multitude was gazing silently;  
And as the culprit passed with dauntless mien,  
Tempered disdain in his unaltering eye,  
Mixed with a quiet smile, shone calmly forth:  
The thirsty fire crept round his manly limbs;  
His resolute eyes were scorched to blindness soon;  
His death-pang rent my heart! The insensate mob  
Uttered a cry of triumph, and I wept."

Giordano Bruno was born at Nola, near Naples, in 1548,

\* *Life of Lord Bolingbroke*; Works, Vol. IV, p. 248. Edition: Tegg, 1835.

ten years after the death of Copernicus, and ten years before the birth of Bacon. At the age of fifteen he became a novice in the monastery of San Domenico Maggiore, and after his year's novitiate expired he took the monastic vows. Studying deeply, he became heretical, and an act of accusation was drawn up against the boy of sixteen. Eight years later he was threatened with another trial for heresy. A third process was more to be dreaded, and in his twenty-eighth year Bruno fled from his persecutors. He visited Rome, Noli, Venice, Turin and Padua. At Milan he made the acquaintance of Sir Philip Sidney. After teaching for some time in the university, he went to Chambery, but the ignorance and bigotry of its monks were too great for his patience. He next visited Geneva, but although John Calvin was dead, his dark spirit still remained, and only flight preserved Bruno from the fate of Servetus. Through Lyons he passed to Toulouse, where he was elected Public Lecturer to the University. In 1579 he went to Paris. The streets were still foul with the blood of the Bartholomew massacres, but Bruno declined a professorship at the Sorbonne, a condition of which was attending mass. Henry the Third, however, made him Lecturer Extraordinary to the University. Paris at length became too hot to hold him, and he went to London, where he lodged with the French ambassador. His evenings were mostly spent with Sir Philip Sidney, Fulke Greville, Dyer, and Hervey. So great was his fame that he was invited to read at the University of Oxford, where he also held a public debate with its orthodox professors on the Copernican astronomy. Leaving London in 1584, he returned to Paris, and there also he publicly disputed with the Sorbonne. His safety being once more threatened, he went to Marburg, and thence to Wittenburg, where he taught for two years. At Helenstadt he was excommunicated by Boëtius. Repairing to Frankfort, he made the acquaintance of a Venetian nobleman, who lured him to Venice and betrayed him to the Inquisition. Among the charges against him at his trial were these: "He is not only a heretic, but an heresiarch. He has written works in which he highly lauds the Queen of England and other heretical monarchs. He has written divers things touching religion, which are contrary to the faith." The Venetian Council transferred him to Rome, where he languished for seven years in a pestiferous dungeon, and was repeatedly

tortured, according to the hellish code of the Inquisition. At length, on February 10, 1600, he was led out to the church of Santa Maria, and sentenced to be burnt alive, or, as the Holy Church hypocritically phrased it, to be punished "as mercifully as possible, and without effusion of blood."

Haughtily raising his head, he exclaimed: "You are more afraid to pronounce my sentence than I to receive it." He was allowed a week's grace for recantation, but without avail; and on the 17th of February, 1600, he was burnt to death on the Field of Flowers. To the last he was brave and defiant; he contemptuously pushed aside the crucifix they presented him to kiss; and, as one of his enemies said, he died without a plaint or a groan.

Such heroism stirs the blood more than the sound of a trumpet. Bruno stood at the stake in solitary and awful grandeur. There was not a friendly face in the vast crowd around him. It was one man against the world. Surely the knight of Liberty, the champion of Freethought, who lived such a life and died such a death, without hope of reward on earth or in heaven, sustained only by his indomitable manhood, is worthy to be accounted the supreme martyr of all time. He towers above the less disinterested martyrs of Faith like a colossus; the proudest of them might walk under him without bending.

### HENRY THOMAS BUCKLE.

The author of the famous *History of Civilisation* believed in God and immortality, but he rejected all the special tenets of Christianity. He died at Damascus on May 29, 1862. His incoherent utterances in the fever that carried him off showed that his mind was still dwelling on the uncompleted purpose of his life. "Oh my book," he exclaimed, "my book, I shall never finish my book!"\* His end, however, was quite peaceful. His biographer says: "He had a very quiet night, with intervals of consciousness; but at six in the morning a sudden and very marked change for the worse became but too fearfully evident; and at a quarter past ten he quietly breathed his last, with merely a wave of the hand."†

\* *Pilgrim Memories*, by J. Stuart Glennie, p. 508.

† *Life and Writings of Henry Thomas Buckle*, by A. Huth; Vol. II. 252

## LORD BYRON.

No one can read Byron's poems attentively without seeing that he was not a Christian, and this view is amply corroborated by his private letters, notably the very explicit one to Hobhouse, which has only been recently published. Even the poet's first and chief biographer, Moore, was constrained to admit that "Lord Byron was, to the last, a sceptic."

Byron was born at Holles Street, London, on January 22, 1788. His life was remarkably eventful for a poet, but its history is so easily accessible, and so well known, that we need not summarise it here. His death occurred at Missolonghi on April 19, 1824. Greece was then struggling for independence, and Byron devoted his life and fortune to her cause. His sentiments on this subject are expressed with power and dignity in the lines written at Missolonghi on his thirty-sixth birthday. The faults of his life were many, but they were redeemed by the glory of his death.

Exposure, which his declining health was unfitted to bear, brought on a fever, and the soldier-poet of freedom died without proper attendance, far from those he loved. He conversed a good deal at first with his friend Parry, who records that "he spoke of death with great composure." The day before he expired, when his friends and attendants wept round his bed at the thought of losing him, he looked at one of them steadily, and said, half smiling, "Oh questa è una bella scena!"—Oh what a fine scene! After a fit of delirium, he called his faithful servant Fletcher, who offered to bring pen and paper to take down his words. "Oh no," he replied, "there is no time. Go to my sister—tell her—go to Lady Byron—you will see her, and say——." Here his voice became indistinct. For nearly twenty minutes he muttered to himself, but only a word now and then could be distinguished. He then said, "Now, I have told you all." Fletcher replied that he had not understood a word. "Not understand me?" exclaimed Byron, with a look of the utmost distress, "what a pity!—then it is too late; all is over." He tried to utter a few more words, but none were intelligible except "my sister—my child." After the doctors had given him a sleeping draught, he muttered "Poor Greece!—poor town!—my poor servants!—my hour is come!—I do not care for death—but

why did I not go home?—There are things that make the world dear to me: for the rest I am content to die.” He spoke also of Greece, saying “I have given her my time, my means, my health—and now I give her my life! what could I do more?” About six o’clock in the evening he said “Now I shall go to sleep.” He then fell into the slumber from which he never woke. At a quarter past six on the following day, he opened his eyes and immediately shut them again. The physicians felt his pulse—he was dead.\*

His work was done. As Mr. Swinburne wrote in 1865, “A little space was allowed him to show at least an heroic purpose, and attest a high design; then, with all things unfinished before him and behind, he fell asleep after many troubles and triumphs. Few can have ever gone wearier to the grave; none with less fear.”† The pious guardians of Westminster Abbey denied him sepulture in its holy precincts, but he found a grave at Hucknall, and “after life’s fitful fever he sleeps well.”

#### RICHARD CARLILE.

Richard Carlile was born at Ashburton, in Devonshire, on December 8, 1790. His whole life was spent in advocating Freethought and Republicanism, and in resisting the Blasphemy laws. His total imprisonments for the freedom of the press amounted to nine years and four months. Thirteen days before his death he penned these words: “The enemy with whom I have to grapple is one with whom no peace can be made. Idolatry will not parley; superstition will not treat on covenant. They must be uprooted for public and individual safety.” Carlile died on February 10, 1843. He was attended in his last illness by Dr. Thomas Lawrence, the author of the once famous Lectures on Man. Wishing to be useful in death as in life, Carlile devoted his body to dissection. His wish was complied with by the family, and the post-mortem examination was recorded in the *Lancet*. The burial took place at Kensal Green Cemetery, where a clergyman insisted on reading the Church Service over his remains. “His eldest son Richard,” says Mr. Holyoake, “who represented his sentiments as well as

\* *Byron's Life and Letters* by Thomas Moore, pp. 684—688.

† Preface (p. 28, to a Selection from Byron's poems, 1865.



his name, very properly protested against the proceedings, as an outrage upon the principles of his father and the wishes of the family. Of course the remonstrance was disregarded, and Richard, his brothers, and their friends, left the ground.\* After their departure, the clergyman called the great hater of priests his "dear departed brother," and declared that the rank Materialist had died "in the sure and certain hope of a glorious resurrection."

### WILLIAM KINGDON CLIFFORD.

Professor Clifford died all too early of consumption on March 3, 1879. He was one of the gentlest and most amiable of men, and the centre of a large circle of distinguished friends. His great ability was beyond dispute; in the higher mathematics he enjoyed a European reputation. Nor was his courage less, for he never concealed his heresy, but rather proclaimed it from the housetops. A Freethinker to the heart's core, he "utterly dismissed from his thoughts, as being unprofitable or worse, all speculations on a future or unseen world"; and "as never man loved life more, so never man feared death less." He fulfilled, continues Mr. Pollock, "well and truly the great saying of Spinoza, often in his mind and on his lips: *Homo liber de nulla re minus quam de morte cogitat*. [A free man thinks less of nothing than of death.]"† Clifford faced the inevitable with the utmost calmness.

"For a week he had known that it might come at any moment, and looked to it stedfastly. So calmly had he received the warning which conveyed this knowledge that it seemed at the instant as if he did not understand it. . . . He gave careful and exact directions as to the disposal of his works. . . . More than this, his interest in the outer world, his affection for his friends and his pleasure in their pleasures, did not desert him to the very last. He still followed the course of events, and asked for public news on the morning of his death, so strongly did he hold fast his part in the common weal and in active social life."‡

Clifford was a great loss to "the good old cause." He was a most valiant soldier of progress, cut off before a tithe of his work was accomplished.

\* *Life and Character of Richard Carlile*, by G. J. Holyoake.

† *Lectures and Essays*, by Professor Clifford. Pollock's Introduction, p. 25.

‡ *Ibid*, p. 26.

## ANTHONY COLLINS.

Anthony Collins was one of the chief English Freethinkers of the eighteenth century. Professor Fraser calls him "this remarkable man,"\* Swift refers to him as a leading sceptic of that age. He was a barrister, born of a good Essex family in 1676, and dying on Dec. 13, 1729. Locke, whose own character was manly and simple, was charmed by him. "He praised his love of truth and moral courage," says Professor Fraser, "as superior to almost any other he had ever known, and by his will he made him one of his executors."\* Yet bigotry was then so rampant, that Bishop Berkeley, who, according to Pope, had every virtue under heaven, actually said in the *Guardian* that the author of *A Discourse on Freethinking* "deserved to be denied the common benefits of air and water." Collins afterwards engaged in controversy with the clergy, wrote against priestcraft, and debated with Dr. Samuel Clarke "about necessity and the moral nature of man, stating the arguments against human freedom with a logical force unsurpassed by any necessitarian."† With respect to Collins's controversy on "the soul," Professor Huxley says: "I do not think anyone can read the letters which passed between Clarke and Collins, without admitting that Collins, who writes with wonderful power and closeness of reasoning, has by far the best of the argument, so far as the possible materiality of the soul goes; and that in this battle the Goliath of Freethinking overcame the champion of what was considered Orthodoxy."‡ According to Berkeley, Collins had announced "that he was able to demonstrate the impossibility of God's existence," but this is probably the exaggeration of an opponent. We may be sure, however, that he was a very thorough sceptic with regard to Christianity. His death is thus referred to in the *Biographia Britannica*:—

"Notwithstanding all the reproaches cast upon Mr. Collins as an enemy to all religion, impartiality obliges us to remark, what is said, and generally believed to be true, upon his death-bed he declared 'That, as he had always endeavored to the best of his abilities, to serve his God, his king, and his country, so he was persuaded he was going to the place which God had designed for those who love him': to which he added that 'The catholic religion is to love God, and to love

\* Berkeley, by A. C. Fraser, LL.D., p. 99.  
 † Critiques and Addresses, p. 324.

‡ Ibid, p. 99.

man'; and he advised such as were about him to have a constant regard to these principles."

There is probably a good deal apocryphal in this passage, but it is worthy of notice that nothing is said about any dread of death. Another memorable fact is that Collins left his library to an opponent, Dr. Sykes. It was large and curious, and always open to men of letters. Collins was so earnest a seeker for truth, and so candid a controversialist, that he often furnished his antagonists with books to confute himself.

## CONDORCET.

Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas, Marquis de Condorcet, was born at Ribemont in Picardy, in 1743. As early as 1764 he composed a work on the integral calculus. In 1773 he was appointed perpetual secretary of the French Academy. He was an intense admirer of Voltaire, and wrote a life of that great man. At the commencement of the Revolution he ardently embraced the popular cause. In 1791 he represented Paris in the Legislative Assembly, of which he was immediately elected secretary. It was on his motion that, in the following year, all orders of nobility were abolished. Elected by the Aisne department to the new Assembly of 1792, he was named a member of the Constitutional Committee, which also included Danton and Thomas Paine. After the execution of Louis XVI., he was opposed to the excesses of the extreme party. Always showing the courage of his convictions, he soon became the victim of proscription. "He cared as little for his life," says Mr. Morley, "as Danton or St. Just cared for theirs. Instead of coming down among the men of the Plain or the frogs of the Marsh, he withstood the Mountain to its face." While hiding from those who thirsted for his blood, and burdened with anxiety as to the fate of his wife and child, he wrote, without a single book to refer to, his novel and profound *Esquisse d'un Tableau Historique des Progrès de l'Esprit Humain*. Mr. Morley says that "Among the many wonders of an epoch of portents this feat of intellectual abstraction is not the least amazing." Despite the odious law that whoever gave refuge to a proscribed person should suffer death, Condorcet was offered shelter by a noble-hearted woman, who said "If you are outside the law, we are not outside humanity." But he would not bring peril upon her house

and he went forth to his doom. Arrested at Clamart-sous-Meudon, he was conducted to prison at Bourg-la-Reine. Wounded in the foot, and exhausted with fatigue and privation, he was flung into a miserable cell. It was the 27th of March, 1794. "On the morrow," says Mr. Morley, "when the gaolers came to see him, they found him stretched upon the ground, dead and stark. So he perished—of hunger and weariness, say some; of poison ever carried by him in a ring, say others."\* The Abbé Morellet, in his narrative of the death of Condorcet (*Memoires*, ch. xxiv.), says that the poison was a mixture of stramonium and opium, but he adds that the surgeon described the death as due to apoplexy. In any case Condorcet died like a hero, refusing to save his life at the cost of another's danger.

#### ROBERT COOPER.

Robert Cooper was secretary to Robert Owen and editor of the London *Investigator*. His lectures on the Bible and the Immortality of the Soul still enjoy a regular sale, as well as his *Holy Scriptures Analysed*. He was a thorough-going Materialist, and he never wavered in this philosophy. He died on May 3, 1868. The *National Reformer* of July 26, 1868, contains a note written by Cooper shortly before his death.

"At a moment when the hand of death is suspended over me, my theological opinions remain unchanged; months of deep and silent cogitation, under the pressure of long suffering, have confirmed rather than modified them. I calmly await therefore all risk attached to these convictions. Conscious that, if mistaken, I have always been sincere, I apprehend no disabilities for impressions I cannot resist."

It may be added that Robert Cooper was no relation to Thomas Cooper.

#### DANTON.

Danton, called by Carlyle the Titan of the Revolution, and certainly its greatest figure after Mirabeau, was guillotined on April 5, 1794. He was only thirty-five, but he had made a name that will live as long as the history of France. With all his faults, says Carlyle, "he was a Man; fiery-real, from the great fire-bosom of Nature herself." Some of his phrases are like pyramids, standing sublime above the drifting

\* *Miscellanies*. By John Morley. Vol. I., p. 75.

sand of human speech. It was he who advised "daring, and still daring, and ever daring." It was he who cried "The coalesced kings of Europe threaten us, and as our gage of battle we fling before them the head of a king." It was he who exclaimed, in a rapture of patriotism, "Let my name be blighted, so that France be free." And what a saying was that, when his friends urged him to flee from the Terror, "One does not carry his country with him at the sole of his shoe!"

Danton would not flee. "They dare not" arrest him, he said; but he was soon a prisoner in the Luxembourg. "What is your name and abode?" they asked him at the tribunal. "My name is Danton," he answered, "a name tolerably known in the Revolution: my abode will soon be Annihilation; but I shall live in the Pantheon of History." Replying to his infamous Indictment, his magnificent voice "reverberates with the roar of a lion in the toils." The President rings his bell, enjoining calmness, says Carlyle, in a vehement manner. "What is it to thee how I defend myself?" cries Danton; "the right of *dooming* me is thine always. The voice of a man speaking for his honor and life may well drown the jingling of thy bell!"

Under sentence of death he preserved, as Jules Claretie says, that virile energy and superb sarcasm which were the basis of his character. Fabre d'Eglantine being disquieted about his unfinished comedy, Danton exclaimed "Des vers! Des vers! Dans huit jours tu en feras plus que tu ne voudras!" Then he added nobly, "We have finished our task, let us sleep." Thus the time passed in prison.

On the way to the guillotine Danton bore himself proudly. Poor Camille Desmoulins struggled and writhed in the cart, which was surrounded by a howling mob. "Calm, my friend," said Danton, "heed not that vile canaille." Herault de Séchelles, whose turn it was to die first, tried to embrace his friend, but the executioners prevented him. "Fools," said Danton, "you cannot prevent our heads from meeting in the basket." At the foot of the scaffold the thought of home flashed through his mind. "O my wife," he exclaimed, "my well-beloved, I shall never see thee more then!" But recovering himself, he said "Danton, no weakness!" Looking the executioner in the face, he cried with his great voice, "You will show my head to the crowd; it is worth showing; you

don't see the like in these days." The next minute that head, the one that might have guided France best, was severed from his body by the knife of the guillotine. What a man this Danton was ! With his Herculean form, his huge black head, his mighty voice, his passionate nature, his fiery courage, his strong sense, his poignant wit, his geniality, and his freedom from cant, he was a splendid and unique figure. An Atheist, he perished in trying to arrest bloodshed. Robespierre, the Deist, continued the bloodshed till it drowned him. The two men were as diverse in nature as in creed, and Danton killed by Robespierre, as Courtois said, was Pyrrhus killed by a woman !

[The reader may consult Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Book vi., ch. ii. ; and Jules Claretie's *Camille Desmoulins et les Dantonistes*, ch. vi.,

#### DENIS DIDEROT.

Rarely has the world seen a more fecund mind than Diderot's. Voltaire called him *Pantophile*, for everything came within the sphere of his mental activity. The twenty volumes of his collected writings contain the germ-ideas of nearly all the best thought of our age, and his anticipations of Darwinism are nothing less than extraordinary. He had not Voltaire's lightning wit and supreme grace of style, nor Rousseau's passionate and subtle eloquence ; but he was superior to either of them in depth and solidity, and he was surprisingly ahead of his time, not simply in his treatment of religion, but also in his view of social and political problems. His historical monument is the great *Encyclopædia*. For twenty years he labored on this colossal enterprise, assisted by the best heads in France, but harassed and thwarted by the government and the clergy. The work is out of date now, but it inaugurated an era ; in Mr. Morley's words, "it rallied all that was then best in France round the standard of light and social hope." Diderot tasted imprisonment in 1749, and many times afterwards his liberty was menaced. Nothing, however, could intimidate or divert him from his task ; and he never quailed when the ferocious beast of persecution, having tasted the blood of meaner victims, turned an evil and ravenous eye on him.

Carlyle's brilliant essay on Diderot is ludicrously unjust. The Scotch puritan was quite unable to judge the French

atheist. A greater than Carlyle wrote : "Diderot is Diderot, a peculiar individuality ; whoever holds him or his doings cheaply is a Philistine, and the name of them is legion." Goethe's dictum outweighs that of his disciple.

Diderot's character, no less than his genius, was misunderstood by Carlyle. His materialism and atheism were intolerable to a Calvinist steeped in pantheism ; and his freedom of life, which might be pardoned or excused in a Scotch poet, was disgusting in a French philosopher. Let not the reader be biassed by Carlyle's splenetic utterances on Diderot, but turn to more sympathetic and impartial judges.

Born at Langres in 1713, Diderot died at Paris 1784. His life was long, active and fruitful. His personal appearance is described by Mr. Morley :—"His admirers declared his head to be the ideal head of an Aristotle or a Plato. His brow was wide, lofty, open, gently rounded. The arch of the eyebrow was full of delicacy ; the nose of masculine beauty ; the habitual expression of the eyes kindly and sympathetic, but as he grew heated in talk, they sparkled like fire ; the curves of the mouth bespoke an interesting mixture of finesse, grace, and geniality. His bearing was nonchalant enough, but there was naturally in the carriage of his head, especially when he talked with action, much dignity, energy and nobleness."\*

His conversational powers were great, and showed the fertility of his genius. "When I recall Diderot," wrote Meister, "the immense variety of his ideas, the amazing multiplicity of his knowledge, the rapid flight, the warmth, the impetuous tumult of his imagination, all the charm and all the disorder of his conversation, I venture to liken his character to nature herself, exactly as he used to conceive her—rich, fertile, abounding in germs of every sort, gentle and fierce, simple and majestic, worthy and sublime, but without any dominating principle, without a master and without a God."

Diderot was recklessly prodigal of his ideas, flinging them without hesitation or reticence among his friends. He was equally generous in other respects, and friendship was of the essence of his life. "He," wrote Marmontel in his Memoirs, "he who was one of the most enlightened men of the century,

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\* *Diderot and the Encyclopedists*. By John Morley, Vol. I., pp. 39-40.

was also one of the most amiable; and in everything that touched moral goodness, when he spoke of it freely, I cannot express the charm of his eloquence. His whole soul was in his eyes and on his lips; never did a countenance better depict the goodness of the heart."

Chequered as Diderot's life had been, his closing years were full of peace and comfort. Superstition was mortally wounded, the Church was terrified, and it was clear that the change the philosophers had worked for was at hand. As Mr. Morley says, "the press literally teemed with pamphlets, treatises, poems, histories, all shouting from the house-tops open destruction to beliefs which fifty years before were actively protected against so much as a whisper in the closet. Every form of literary art was seized and turned into an instrument in the remorseless attack on *L'Infâme*." Diderot rejoiced at all this, as largely the fruit of his own labors. He was held in general esteem by the party of progress throughout Europe. Catherine the Great's generosity secured him a steady income, which he had never derived from his literary labors. His townsmen of Langres placed his bust among the worthies in the town hall. More than a hundred years later a national statue of Diderot was unveiled at his native place, and the balance of subscriptions was devoted to publishing a popular selection of his works. Truly did this great Atheist say, looking forward to the atoning future, "Posterity is for the philosopher what the other world is for the devout."

*notice*  
In the spring of 1784 Diderot was attacked by what he felt was his last illness. Dropsy set in, and in a few months the end came. A fortnight before his death he was removed from the upper floor in the Rue Taranne, which he had occupied for thirty years, to palatial rooms provided for him by the Czarina in the Rue de Richelieu. Growing weaker every day, he was still alert in mind.

"He did all he could to cheer the people around him, and amused himself and them by arranging his pictures and his books. In the evening, to the last, he found strength to converse on science and philosophy to the friends who were eager as ever for the last gleanings of his prolific intellect. In the last conversation that his daughter heard him carry on, his last words were the pregnant aphorism that the first step towards philosophy is incredulity."

*notice*  
"On the evening of the 30th of July, 1784 he sat down to table, and at the end of the meal took an apricot. His wife, with kind solicitude, remonstrated. *Mais quel diable de mal veux-tu que cela me fasse?* [How



the deuce can that hurt me?] he said, and ate the apricot. Then he rested his elbow on the table, trifling with some sweetmeats. His wife asked him a question; on receiving no answer, she looked up and saw that he was dead. He had died as the Greek poets say that men die in the golden age—they passed away as if mastered by sleep.\*

Grimm gives a slightly different account of Diderot's death, omitting the apricot, and stating that his words to his wife were, "It is long since I have eaten with so much relish."† With respect to the funeral, Grimm says that the curé of St. Roch, in whose parish he died, had scruples at first about burying him, on account of his sceptical reputation and the doctrines expounded in his writings; but the priest's scruples were overcome, partly by a present of "fifteen or eighteen thousand livres."

According to Mr. Morley, an effort was made to convert Diderot, or at least to wring from him something like a retraction.

"The priest of Saint Sulpice, the centre of the philosophic quarter, came to visit him two or three times a week, hoping to achieve at least the semblance of a conversion. Diderot did not encourage conversation on theology, but when pressed he did not refuse it. One day when they found, as two men of sense will always find, that they had ample common ground in matters of morality and good works, the priest ventured to hint that an exposition of such excellent maxims, accompanied by a slight retraction of Diderot's previous works, would have a good effect on the world. 'I dare say it would, monsieur le curé, but confess that I should be acting an impudent lie.' And no word of retraction was ever made."‡

If judging men by the company they keep is a safe rule, we need have no doubt as to the sentiments which Diderot entertained to the end. Grimm tells us that on the morning of the very day he died "he conversed for a long time and with the greatest freedom with his friend the Baron D'Holbach," the famous author of the *System of Nature*, compared with whom, says Mr. Morley, "the most eager Nescient or Denier to be found in the ranks of the assailants of theology in our own day is timorous and moderate." These men were the two most earnest Atheists of their generation. Both were genial, benevolent, and conspicuously generous. D'Holbach was learned, eloquent, and trenchant; and Diderot, in Comte's opinion, was the greatest genius of the eighteenth century.

\* Morley, Vol. II., pp. 259, 260.

† Quoted from the *Revue Retrospective* in Assézat's complete edition of Diderot.

‡ Morley, Vol. II., p. 258.

## GEORGE ELIOT.

Marian Evans, afterwards Mrs. Lewes, and finally Mrs. Cross, was one of the greatest writers of the third quarter of this century. The noble works of fiction she published under the pseudonym of George Eliot are known to all. Her earliest writing was done for the *Westminster Review*, a magazine of marked sceptical tendency. Her inclination to Freethought is further shown by her translation of Strauss's famous *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, the latter being the work of a profound Atheist. George Eliot was, to some extent, a disciple of Comte, and reckoned a member of the Society of Positivists. Mr. Myers tells us that in the last conversation he had with her at Cambridge, they talked of God, Immortality and Duty, and she gravely remarked how hypothetical was the first, how improbable was the second, and how sternly real the last. Whenever in her novels she speaks in the first person she breathes the same sentiment. Her biography has been written by her second husband, who says that "her long illness in the autumn had left her no power to rally. She passed away about ten o'clock at night on the 22nd of December, 1880. She died, as she would herself have chosen to die, without protracted pain, and with every faculty brightly vigorous."\* Her body lies in the next grave to that of George Henry Lewes at Highgate Cemetery; her spirit, the product of her life, has, in her own words, joined "the choir invisible, whose music is the gladness of the world."

## FREDERICK THE GREAT.

Frederick the Great, the finest soldier of his age, the maker of Prussia, and therefore the founder of modern Germany, was born in January, 1712. His life forms the theme of Carlyle's masterpiece. Notoriously a disbeliever in Christianity, as his writings and correspondence attest, he loved to surround himself with Freethinkers, the most conspicuous of whom was Voltaire. When the great French heretic died, Frederick pronounced his eulogium before the Berlin Academy, denouncing "the imbecile priests," and declaring that "The best destiny they can look for is that

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\* *Life and Letters of George Eliot*, by J. W. Cross, Vol. III., p. 439.

they and their vile artifices will remain forever buried in the darkness of oblivion, while the fame of Voltaire will increase from age to age, and transmit his name to immortality."

When the old king was on his death-bed, one of his subjects, solicitous about his immortal soul, sent him a letter full of pious advice. "Let this," he said, "be answered civilly; the intention of the writer is good." Shortly after, on August 17, 1786, Frederick died in his own fashion. Carlyle says:

"For the most part he was unconscious, never more than half conscious. As the wall clock above his head struck eleven, he asked: 'What o'clock?' 'Eleven,' answered they. 'At four,' murmured he, 'I will rise.' One of his dogs sat on its stool near him; about midnight he noticed it shivering for cold: 'Throw a quilt over it,' said or beckoned he; that, I think, was his last completely conscious utterance. Afterwards, in a severe choking fit, getting at last rid of the phlegm, he said, *La montagne est passé, nous irons mieux*—We are on the hill, we shall go better now."\*

Better it was. The pain was over, and the brave old king, who had wrestled with all Europe and thrown it, succumbed quietly to the inevitable defeat which awaits us all.

### LEON GAMBETTA.

Gambetta was the greatest French orator and statesman of his age. He was one of those splendid and potent figures who redeem nations from commonplace. To him, more than to any other man, the present Republic owes its existence. He played deeply for it in the great game of life and death after Sedan, and by his titanic organisation of the national defence he made it impossible for Louis Napoleon to reseat himself on the throne with the aid of German bayonets. Again, in 1877, he saved the Republic he loved so well from the monarchical conspirators. He defeated their base attempt to subvert a nation's liberties, but the struggle sapped his enormous vitality, which had already been impaired by the terrible labors of his Dictatorship. He died at the early age of forty-four, having exhausted his strength in fighting for freedom. Scarcely a dark thread was left in the leonine mane of black hair, and the beard matched the whiteness of his shroud.

France mourned like one man at the hero's death. The

\* *Frederick the Great*, Vol. VI., p. 694; edition, 1869.

people gave him a funeral that eclipsed the obsequies of kings. He was carried to his grave by a million citizens. Yet in the whole of that vast throng, as Mr. Frederic Harrison remarked, "there was no emblem of Christ, no priest of God, not one mutter of heaven, no hollow appeal to the mockery of the resurrection, no thought but for the great human loss and human sorrow. It was the first time in the history of Europe that a foremost man had been laid to rest by a nation in grief, without priest or church, prayer or hymn."

Like almost every eminent Republican, Gambetta was a Freethinker. As Mr. Frederic Harrison says, "he systematically and formally repudiated any kind of acceptance of theology." During his lifetime he never entered a church, even when attending a marriage or a funeral, but stopped short at the door, and let who would go inside and listen to the mummery of the priest. In his own expressive words, he declined to be "rocked asleep by the myths of childish religions." He professed himself an admirer and a disciple of Voltaire—*l'admirateur et le disciple de Voltaire*. Every member of his ministry was a Freethinker, and one of them, the eminent scientist Paul Bert, a militant Atheist. Speaking at a public meeting not long before his death, Gambetta called Comte the greatest thinker of this century; that Comte who proposed to "reorganise society, without God and without king, by the systematic cultus of humanity."

When John Stuart Mill died, a Christian journal, which died itself a few weeks after, declared he had gone to hell, and wished all his friends and disciples would follow him. Several pious prints expressed similar sentiments with regard to Gambetta. Passing by the English papers, let us look at a few French ones. The Duc de Broglie's organ, naturally anxious to insult the statesman who had so signally beaten him, said that "he died suddenly after hurling defiance at God." The *Pays*, edited by that pious bully, Paul de Casagnac, said—"He dies, poisoned by his own blood. He set himself up against God. He has fallen. It is fearful. But it is just." The Catholic *Univers* said "While he was recruiting his strength and meditating fresh assaults upon the Church, and promising himself victory, the divine Son of the Carpenter was preparing his coffin."

These tasty exhibitions of Christian charity show that

Gambetta was a Freethinker

his death was a national loss

Gambetta lived and died a Freethinker. Yet the sillier sort of Christians have not scrupled to insinuate and even argue that he was secretly a believer. One asinine priest, M. Feuillet des Conches, formerly Vicar of Notre Dame des Victoires, and then honorary Chamberlain to the Pope, stated in the London *Times* that, about two years before his death, Gambetta came to his church with a brace of big wax tapers which he offered in memory of his mother. He also added that the great orator knelt before the Virgin, dipped his finger in holy water, and made the sign of the cross. Was there ever a more absurd story? Gambetta was a remarkable looking man, and extremely well known. He could not have entered a church unobserved, and had he done so, the story would have gone round Paris the next day. Yet nobody heard of it till after his death. Either the priest mistook some portly dark man for Gambetta, or he was guilty of a pious fraud.

According to another story, Gambetta said "I am lost" when the doctors told him he could not recover. But the phrase *Je suis perdu* has no theological significance. Nothing is more misleading than a literal translation. Gambetta simply meant "It is all over then." This monstrous perversion of a simple phrase could only have arisen from sheer malice or gross ignorance of French.

While lying on his death-bed Gambetta listened to Rabelais, Molière, and other favorite but not very pious authors, read aloud by a young student who adored him. Almost his last words, as recorded in the *Times*, were these—"Well, I have suffered so much, it will be a deliverance." The words are calm, collected, and truthful. There is no rant and no quailing. It is the natural language of a strong man confronting Death after long agony. Shortly after he breathed his last. The deliverance had come. Still lay the mighty heart and the fertile brain that had spent themselves for France, and the silence was only broken by the sobs of dear friends who would have died to save him. No priest administered "the consolations of religion," and he expressly ordered that he should be buried without religious rites. His great heroic genius was superior to the creeds, seeing through them and over them. He lived and died a Freethinker, like nearly all the great men since Mirabeau and Danton who have built up the freedom and glory of France.

## ISAAC GENDRE.

The controversy over the death of this Swiss Freethinker was summarised in the London *Echo* of July 29, 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 this 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.

## EDWARD GIBBON.

Edward Gibbon, the greatest of modern historians, was born at Putney, near London, on April 27, 1737. His monumental work, the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Carlyle called "the splendid bridge from the old world to the new," is universally known and admired. To have your name mentioned by Gibbon, said Thackeray, is like having it written on the dome of St. Peter's which is seen by pilgrims from all parts of the earth. Twenty years of his life were devoted to his colossal History, which incidentally conveys his opinion of many problems. His views on Christianity are indicated in his famous fifteenth chapter, which is a masterpiece of grave and temperate irony. When Gibbon wrote that "it was not in *this* world that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful," every sensible reader understood his meaning. The polite sneer rankled in the breasts of the clergy, who replied with declamation and insult. Their answers, however, are forgotten, while his merciless sarcasms live on, and help to undermine the Church in every fresh generation.

Gibbon did not long survive the completion of his great

work. The last volumes of the *Decline and Fall* were published on May 8, 1788, and he died on January 14, 1794. His malady was dropsy. After being twice tapped in November, he removed to the house of his devoted friend, Lord Sheffield. A week before he expired he was obliged, for the sake of the highest medical attendance, to return to his lodgings in St. James's Street, London. The following account of his last moments was written by Lord Sheffield :

"During the evening he complained much of his stomach, and of a feeling of nausea. Soon after nine he took his opium draught and went to bed. About ten he complained of much pain, and desired that warm napkins might be applied to his stomach. He almost incessantly expressed a sense of pain till about four o'clock in the morning, when he said he found his stomach much easier. About seven the servant asked whether he should send for Mr. Farquhar [the doctor]. He answered, No; that he was as well as the day before. At about half-past eight he got out of bed, and said he was 'plus adroit' than he had been for three months past, and got into bed again without assistance, better than usual. About nine he said he would rise. The servant, however, persuaded him to remain in bed till Mr. Farquhar, who was expected at eleven, should come. Till about that hour he spoke with great facility. Mr. Farquhar came at the time appointed, and he was then visibly dying. When the *valet-de-chambre* returned, after attending Mr. Farquhar out of the room, Mr. Gibbon said, 'Pourquoi est ce que vous me quittez?' [Why do you leave me?] This was about half-past eleven. At twelve he drank some brandy and water from a teapot, and desired his favorite servant to stay with him. These were the last words he pronounced articulately. To the last he preserved his senses; and when he could no longer speak, his servant having asked a question, he made a sign to show that he understood him. He was quite tranquil, and did not stir, his eyes half shut. About a quarter 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."

Mr. James Cotter Morison, in his admirable monograph on Gibbon, which forms a volume of Macmillan's "English Men of Letters" series, quotes the whole of this passage from Lord Sheffield with the exception of the last sentence. It is not easy to decide whether Mr. Morison thought the sentence trivial, or hesitated to affront his readers' susceptibilities. In our opinion the words we have italicised are the most important in the extract, and should not have been withheld.

## GOETHE.

The greatest of German poets died at a ripe old age on March 22, 1832. He was a Pantheist after the manner of

Spinoza, and his countrymen called him the "great pagan." In one of his epigrams he expresses hatred of four things—garlic, onions, bugs, and the cross. Heine, in his *De l'Allemagne*, notices Goethe's "vigorous heathen nature," and his "militant antipathy to Christianity." His English biographer thus describes his last moments :

"His speech was becoming less and less distinct. The last words audible were: More light! The final darkness grew apace, and he whose eternal longing had been for more Light, gave a parting cry for it, as he was passing under the shadow of death. He continued to express himself by signs, drawing letters with his forefinger in the air, while he had strength, and finally as life ebbed away drawing figures slowly on the shawl which covered his legs. At half-past twelve he composed himself in the corner of the chair. The watcher placed a finger on her lips to intimate that he was asleep. If sleep it was, it was a sleep in which a great life glided from the world."\*

Let us add that infinite nonsense, from which even Lewes was obviously not free, has been talked and written about Goethe's cry "More light." His meaning was of course purely physical. The eyesight naturally fails in death, all things grow dim, and the demand for "more light" is common enough at such times.

#### HENRY HETHERINGTON.

Henry Hetherington, one of the heroes of "the free press," was born at Compton Street, Soho, London, in 1792. He very early became an ardent reformer. In 1830 the Government obtained three convictions against him for publishing the *Poor Man's Guardian*, and he was lodged for six months in Clerkenwell gaol. At the end of 1832 he was again imprisoned there for six months, his treatment being most cruel. An opening, called a window, but without a pane of glass, let in the rain and snow by day and night. In 1841 he was a third time incarcerated in the Queen's Bench prison for four months. This time his crime was "blasphemy," in other words, publishing Haslam's *Letters to the Clergy*. He died on August 24, 1849, in his fifty-seventh year, leaving behind him his "Last Will and Testament," from which we take the following extracts :

"As life is uncertain, it behoves every one to make preparations for death; I deem it therefore a duty incumbent on me, ere I quit this life, to express in writing, for the satisfaction and guidance of

\* *Life of Goethe*, by G. H. Lewes, p. 559.



esteemed friends, my feelings and opinions in reference to our common principles. I adopt this course that no mistake or misapprehension may arise through the false reports of those who officiously and obtrusively obtain access to the death-beds of avowed infidels to priestcraft and superstition; and who, by their annoying importunities, labor to extort from an opponent, whose intellect is already worn out and subdued by protracted physical suffering, some trifling admission, that they may blazon it forth to the world as a Death-bed Confession, and a triumph of Christianity over infidelity.

"In the first place, then, I calmly and deliberately declare that I do not believe in the popular notion of the existence of an Almighty, All-Wise and Benevolent God—possessing intelligence, and conscious of his own operations; because these attributes involve such a mass of absurdities and contradictions, so much cruelty and injustice on his part to the poor and destitute portion of his creatures—that, in my opinion, no rational reflecting mind can, after disinterested investigation, give credence to the existence of such a Being. 2nd. I believe death to be an eternal sleep—that I shall never live again in this world, or another, with a consciousness that I am the same identical person that once lived, performed the duties, and exercised the functions of a human being. 3rd. I consider priestcraft and superstition the greatest obstacle to human improvement and happiness. During my life I have, to the best of my ability, sincerely and strenuously exposed and opposed them, and die with a firm conviction that Truth, Justice, and Liberty will never be permanently established on earth till every vestige of priestcraft and superstition shall be utterly destroyed. 4th. I have ever considered that the only religion useful to man consists exclusively of the practice of morality, and in the mutual interchange of kind actions. In such a religion there is no room for priests—and when I see them interfering at our births, marriages, and deaths, pretending to conduct us safely through this state of being to another and happier world, any disinterested person of the least shrewdness and discernment must perceive that their sole aim is to stultify the minds of the people by their incomprehensible doctrines, that they may the more effectually fleece the poor deluded sheep who listen to their empty babblings and mystifications. 5th. As I have lived so I die, a determined opponent to their nefarious and plundering system. I wish my friends, therefore, to deposit my remains in unconsecrated ground, and trust they will allow no priest, or clergyman of any denomination, to interfere in any way whatever at my funeral. My earnest desire is, that no relation or friend shall wear black or any kind of mourning, as I consider it contrary to our rational principles to indicate respect for a departed friend by complying with a hypocritical custom. 6th. I wish those who respect me, and who have labored in our common cause, to attend my remains to their last resting-place, not so much in consideration of the individual, as to do honor to our just, benevolent and rational principles. I hope all true Rationalists will leave pompous displays to the tools of priestcraft and superstition."

Hetherington wrote this Testament nearly two years before his death, but he signed it with a firm hand three days before

he breathed his last, in the presence of Thomas Cooper, who left it at the *Reasoner* office for "the inspection of the curious or sceptical." Thomas Cooper is now a Christian, but he cannot repudiate what he printed at the time, or destroy his "personal testimony," as he called it, to the consistency with which Hetherington died in the principles of Freethought.

### THOMAS HOBBS.

The philosopher of Malmesbury, as he is often called, was one of the clearest and boldest thinkers that ever lived. His theological proclivities are well expressed in his witty aphorism that superstition is religion out of fashion, and religion superstition in fashion. Although a courageous thinker, Hobbes was physically timid. This fact is explained by the circumstances of his birth. In the spring of 1588 all England was alarmed at the news that the mighty Spanish Armada had set sail for the purpose of deposing Queen Elizabeth, bringing the country under a foreign yoke, and re-establishing the power of the papacy. In sheer fright, the wife of the vicar of Westport, now part of Malmesbury, gave premature birth to her second son on Good Friday, the 5th of April. This seven months' child used to say, in later life, that his mother brought forth himself and a twin brother Fear. He was delicate and nervous all his days. Yet through strict temperance he reached the great age of ninety-one, dying on the 4th of December, 1679.

This parson's son was destined to be hated by the clergy for his heresy. The Great Fire of 1666, following the Great Plague of the previous year, excited popular superstition, and to appease the wrath of God, a new Bill was introduced in Parliament against Atheism and profaneness. The Committee to which the Bill was entrusted were empowered to "receive information touching" heretical books, and Hobbes's *Leviathan* was mentioned "in particular." The old philosopher, then verging on eighty, was naturally alarmed. Bold as he was in thought, his inherited physical timidity shrank from the prospect of the prison, the scaffold, or the stake. He made a show of conformity, and according to Bishop Kennet, who is not an irreproachable witness, he partook of the sacrament. It was said by some, however, that he acted thus in compliance with the wishes of the Devonshire family,

who were his protectors, and whose private chapel he attended. A noticeable fact was that he always went out before the sermon, and when asked his reason, he answered that "they could teach him nothing but what he knew." He spoke of the chaplain, Dr. Jasper Mayne, as "a very silly fellow."

Hated by the clergy, and especially by the bishops; owing his liberty and perhaps his life to powerful patrons; fearing that some fanatic might take the parsons' hints and play the part of an assassin; Hobbes is said to have kept a lighted candle in his bedroom. The fact, if it be such, is not mentioned in Professor Croom Robertson's exhaustive biography.\* It is perhaps a bit of pious gossip. But were the story authentic, it would not show that Hobbes had any supernatural fears. He was more apprehensive of assassins than of ghosts and devils. Being very old, too, and his life precarious, he might well desire a light in his bedroom in case of accident or sudden sickness. The story is too trivial to deserve further notice. Orthodoxy must be hard pushed to dilate on so simple a thing as this.

According to one Christian tract, which is scarcely worth mention, although extensively circulated, Hobbes when dying said "he was about to take a leap in the dark." Every dying man might say the same with equal truth. Yet the story seems fictitious. I can discover no trace of it in any early authority.

Hobbes does not appear to have troubled himself about death. Bishop Kennet relates that only "the winter before he died he made a warm greatcoat, which he said must last him three years, and then he would have such another." Even so late as August, 1676, four months before his decease, he was "writing somewhat" for his publisher to "print in English." About the middle of October he had an attack of strangury, and "Wood and Kennet both have it that, on hearing the trouble was past cure, he exclaimed, 'I shall be glad then to find a hole to creep out of the world at.'"† This story was picked up thirty years after Hobbes's death, and is probably apocryphal. If the philosopher said anything of the kind, he doubtless meant that, being very old, and without wife, child, or relative to care for him, he would be glad to find a shelter for his last moments, and to expire in

\* *Hobbes*. By George Croom Robertson. Blackwood and Sons; 1886.

† Robertson, p. 203.

comfort and peace. At the end of November his right side was paralysed, and he lost his speech. He "lingered in a somnolent state" for several days, says Professor Robertson, and "then his life quietly went out."

Bishop Kennet was absurd enough to hint that Hobbes's "lying some days in a silent stupefaction, did seem owing to his mind, more than his body."\* An old man of ninety-one suffers a paralytic stroke, loses his speech, sinks into unconsciousness, and quietly expires. What could be more natural? Yet the Bishop, belonging to an order which always scents a brimstone flavor round the heretic's death-bed, must explain this stupor and inanition by supposing that the moribund philosopher was in a fit of despair. We have only to add that Bishop Kennet was not present at Hobbes's death. His theory is, therefore, only a professional surmise; and we may be sure that the wish was father to the thought.

#### AUSTIN HOLYOAKE.

This stedfast Freethinker was a younger brother of George Jacob Holyoake. He was of a singularly modest and amiable nature, and although he left many friends he left not a single enemy. He was entirely devoted to the Freethought cause, and satisfied to work hard behind the scenes while more popular figures took the credit and profit. His assiduity in the publishing business at Fleet Street, which was ostensibly managed by his better-known and more fortunate brother, induced a witty friend to call him "Jacob's ladder." Afterwards he threw in his lot with Charles Bradlaugh, then the redoubtable "Iconoclast," and became the printer and in part sub-editor of the *National Reformer*, to whose columns he was a frequent and welcome contributor. He died on April 10, 1874, and was interred at Highgate Cemetery, his funeral being largely attended by the London Freethinkers, including C. Bradlaugh, C. Watts, G. W. Foote, James Thomson, and G. J. Holyoake. The malady that carried him off was consumption; he was conscious almost to the last; and his only regret in dying, at the comparatively early age of forty-seven, was that he could no longer fight the battle of freedom, nor protect the youth of his little son and daughter.

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\* *Memoirs of the Cavendish Family*, p. 108.

Two days before his death, Austin Holyoake dictated his last thoughts on religion, which were written down by his devoted wife, and printed in the *National Reformer* of April 19, 1874. Part of this document is filled with his mental history. In the remainder he reiterates his disbelief in the cardinal doctrines of Christianity. The following extracts are interesting and pertinent :

"Christians constantly tell Freethinkers that their principles of 'negation,' as they term them, may do very well for health ; but when the hour of sickness and approaching death arrives they utterly break down, and the hope of a 'blessed immortality' can alone give consolation. In my own case I have been anxious to test the truth of this assertion, and have therefore deferred till the latest moment I think it prudent to dictate these few lines.

"To desire eternal bliss is no proof that we shall ever attain it ; and it has long seemed to me absurd to believe in that which we wish for, however ardently. I regard all forms of Christianity as founded in selfishness. It is the expectation held out of bliss through all eternity, in return for the profession of faith in Christ and him crucified, that induces the erection of temples of worship in all Christian lands. Remove the extravagant promise, and you will hear very little of the Christian religion.

"As I have stated before, my mind being free from any doubts on these bewildering matters of speculation, I have experienced for twenty years the most perfect mental repose ; and now I find that the near approach of death, the 'grim King of Terrors,' gives me not the slightest alarm. I have suffered, and am suffering, most intensely both by night and day ; but this has not produced the least symptom of change of opinion. No amount of bodily torture can alter a mental conviction. Those who, under pain, say they see the error of their previous belief, had never thought out the subject for themselves."

These are words of transparent sincerity ; not a phrase is strained, not a line aims at effect. Reading them, we feel in presence of an earnest man bravely confronting death, consciously sustained by his convictions, and serenely bidding the world farewell.

#### VICTOR HUGO.

The greatest French poet of this century, perhaps the greatest French poet of all time, was a fervent Theist, reverencing the prophet of Nazareth as a man, and holding that "the divine tear" of Jesus and "the human smile" of Voltaire "compose the sweetness of the present civilisation." But he was perfectly free from the trammels of creeds, and he hated priestcraft, like despotism, with a perfect hatred.

In one of his striking later poems, *Religion et les Religions*, he derides and denounces the tenets and pretensions of Christianity. The Devil, he says to the clergy, is only the monkey of superstition; your Hell is an outrage on Humanity and a blasphemy against God; and when you tell me that your deity made you in his own image, I reply that he must be very ugly.

As a man, as well as a writer, there was something magnificently grandiose about him. Subtract him from the nineteenth century, and you rob it of much of its glory. For nineteen years on a lonely channel island, an exile from the land of his birth and his love, he nursed the conscience of humanity within his mighty heart, brandishing the lightnings and thunders of chastisement over the heads of the political brigands who were stifling a nation, and prophesying their certain doom. When it came, after Sedan, he returned to Paris, and for fifteen years he was idolised by its people. There was great mourning at his death, and "all Paris" attended his funeral. But true to the simplicity of his life, he ordered that his body should lie in a common coffin, which contrasted vividly with the splendid procession. France buried him, as she did Gambetta; he was laid to rest in the Church of St. Geneviève, re-secularised as the Pantheon for the occasion; and the interment took place without any religious rites.

Hugo's great oration on Voltaire, in 1878, roused the ire of the Bishop of Orleans, who reprimanded him in a public letter. The freethinking poet sent a crushing reply:

"France had to pass an ordeal. France was free. A man traitorously seized her in the night, threw her down, and garroted her. If a people could be killed, that man had slain France. He made her dead enough for him to reign over her. He began his reign, since it was a reign, with perjury, lying in wait, and massacre. He continued it by oppression, by tyranny, by despotism, by an unspeakable parody of religion and justice. He was monstrous and little. The *Te Deum*, *Magnificat*, *Salvum fac*, *Gloria tibi*, were sung for him. Who sang them? Ask yourself. The law delivered the people up to him. The church delivered God up to him. Under that man sank down right, honor, country; he had beneath his feet oath, equity, probity, the glory of the flag, the dignity of men, the liberty of citizens. That man's prosperity disconcerted the human conscience. It lasted nineteen years. During that time you were in a palace. I was in exile. I pity you, sir."

Despite this terrible rebuff to Bishop Dupanloup, another

priest, Cardinal Guibert, Archbishop of Paris, had the temerity and bad taste to obtrude himself when Victor Hugo lay dying in 1885. Being born on February 26, 1802, he was in his eighty-fourth year, and expiring naturally of old age. Had the rites of the Church been performed on him in such circumstances, it would have been an insufferable farce. Yet the Archbishop wrote to Madame Lockroy, offering to bring personally "the succor and consolation so much needed in these cruel ordeals." Monsieur Lockroy at once replied as follows :

"Madame Lockroy, who cannot leave the bedside of her father-in-law, begs me to thank you for the sentiments which you have expressed with so much eloquence and kindness. As regards M. Victor Hugo, he has again said within the last few days, that he had no wish during his illness to be attended by a priest of any persuasion. We should be wanting in our duty if we did not respect his resolution."\*

Hugo's death-chamber was thus unprofaned by the presence of a priest. He expired in peace, surrounded by the beings he loved. According to the *Times* correspondent in Paris, "Almost his last words, addressed to his granddaughter, were, 'Adieu, Jeanne, adieu!' And his last movement of consciousness was to clasp his grandson's hand." The hero-poet bade his charming grandchildren adieu; but the world will not bid them adieu, any more than him, for he has immortalised them in his imperishable *L'Art d'être Grand-père*, every page of which is scented with the deathless perfume of adorable love.

#### DAVID HUME.

Professor Huxley ventures to call David Hume "the most acute thinker of the eighteenth century, even though it produced Kant."† Hume's greatness is no less clearly acknowledged by Joseph De Maistre, the foremost champion of the Papacy in our own century. "I believe," he says, "that taking all into account, the eighteenth century, so fertile in this respect, has not produced a single enemy of religion who can be compared with him. His cold venom is far more dangerous than the foaming rage of Voltaire. If ever, among men who have heard the gospel preached, there has existed a veritable Atheist (which I will not undertake to decide) it is he."‡ Allowing for the personal animosity in his estimate

\* London *Times*, May 23, 1885: Paris Correspondent's letter.

† *Lay Sermons*, p. 141.

‡ *Lettres sur l'Inquisition*, pp. 147, 148.

of Hume, De Maistre is as accurate as Huxley. The immortal *Essays* attest both his penetration and his scepticism; the one on Miracles being a perpetual stumbling-block to Christian apologists. With superb irony, Hume closes that portentous discourse with a reprimand of "those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian Religion, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason." He reminds them that "our most holy religion is founded on *faith*, not on *reason*." He remarks that Christianity was "not only attended by miracles, but even at this day cannot be believed by any reasonable person without one." For "whoever is moved by *faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding, and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."

Hume was born at Edinburgh on April 26, 1711. His life was the uneventful one of a literary man. Besides his *Essays*, he published a *History of England*, which was the first serious effort in that direction. Judged by the standard of our day it is inadequate; but it abounds in philosophical reflections of the highest order, and its style is nearly perfect. Gibbon, who was a good judge of style, had an unbounded admiration for Hume's "careless inimitable beauties."

Fortune, however, was not so kind to him as fame. At the age of forty, his frugal habits had enabled him to save no more than £1,000. He reckoned his income at £50 a year, but his wants were few, his spirit was cheerful, and there were few prizes in the lottery of life for which he would have made an exchange. In 1775 his health began to fail. Knowing that his disorder (hemorrhage of the bowels) would prove fatal, he made his will, and wrote *My Own Life*, the conclusion of which, says Huxley, "is one of the most cheerful, simple and dignified leave-takings of life and all its concerns, extant." He died on August 25, 1776, and was buried a few days later on the eastern slope of Calton Hill, Edinburgh, his body being "attended by a great concourse of people, who seem to have anticipated for it the fate appropriate to wizards and necromancers."\*

Dr. Adam Smith, the great author of the *Wealth of Nations*,

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\* *Hume*, by Professor Huxley, p. 43.



was one of Hume's most intimate friends. He tells us that Hume went to London in April, 1776, and soon after his return he "gave up all hope of recovery, but submitted with the utmost cheerfulness, and the most perfect complacency and resignation." His cheerfulness was so great that many people could not believe he was dying. "Mr. Hume's magnanimity and firmness were such," says Adam Smith, "that his most affectionate friends knew that they hazarded nothing in talking and writing to him as a dying man, and that, so far from being hurt by this frankness, he was rather pleased and flattered by it." His chief thought in relation to the possible prolongation of his life, which his friends hoped, although he told them their hopes were groundless, was that he would "have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of some of the prevailing systems of superstition." On August 8, Adam Smith went to Kirkcaldy, leaving Hume in a very weak state but still very cheerful. On August 28, he received the following letter from Dr. Black, the physician, announcing the philosopher's death.

"EDINBURGH, MONDAY, AUG. 26, 1776. DEAR SIR, Yesterday, about four o'clock, afternoon, 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 no longer rise out of his 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, always did it with affection and tenderness. I thought it improper to write to bring you over, especially as I heard that he had dictated a letter to you, desiring you not to come. When he became weak it cost him an effort to speak, and he died in such a happy composure of mind that nothing could exceed it."

"Thus," says Adam Smith, "died our most excellent and never to be forgotten friend. . . . Upon the whole, I have always considered him, both in his lifetime and since his death as approaching as nearly to the idea of a perfectly wise and virtuous man as perhaps the nature of human frailty will permit."\*

#### M. LITTRÉ.

This great French Positivist died in 1882 at the ripe age of eighty-one. M. Littré was one of the foremost writers in

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\* Letter to *William Strahan*, dated November 9, 1776, and usually prefixed to Hume's *History of England*.

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 were 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*, admitted 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, Revolution, 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 im-

possible 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 everything absolute; of these I have in the preceding pages made an examination, 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. Wyruboff, 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 to science and an enemy to superstition."

#### HARRIET MARTINEAU.

This gifted woman died on May 27, 1876, after a long and useful life, filled with literary labor in the cause of progress. On April 19, less than six weeks before her death, she wrote her last letter to Mr. H. G. Atkinson, from which the following is taken.

"I cannot think of any future as at all probable, except the 'annihilation' from which some people recoil with so much horror. I find myself here in the universe—I know not how, whence, or why. I see everything in the universe go out and disappear, and I see no reason for supposing that it is an actual and entire death. And for my part, I have no objection to such an extinction. I well remember the passion with which W. E. Forster said to me 'I had rather be damned than annihilated.' If he once felt five minutes' damnation, he would be thankful for extinction in preference. The truth is, I care little about it any way. Now that the event draws near, and that I see how fully my household expect my death pretty soon, the universe opens so widely before my view, and I see the old notions of death, and scenes to follow so merely human—so impossible to be true, when one glances through the range of science,—that I see nothing to be done but to wait, without fear or hope or ignorant prejudice, for the expiration of life. I have no wish for future experience, nor have I any fear of it. Under the weariness of illness I long to be asleep."†

These are the words of a brave woman, who met Death

\* To a Frenchman. Catholicism and Christianity mean one and the same thing  
 † *Autobiography of Harriet Martineau*, Vol. III, p. 454; edition 1877.

with the same fortitude as she exhibited in the presence of the defenders of slavery in the United States.

### JOHN STUART MILL.

Mill was born in Rodney Street, Pentonville, London, on May 20, 1806, and he died at Avignon on May 8, 1873. Notwithstanding the unguarded admissions in the one of his three *Essays on Religion* which he never prepared for the press, it is certain that he lived and died a Freethinker. His father educated him without theology, and he never really imbibed any afterwards. Professor Bain, his intimate friend and his biographer, tells us that "he absented himself during his whole life from religious services," and that "in everything characteristic of the creed of Christendom he was a thorough-going negationist. He admitted neither its truth nor its utility."\* Mr. John Morley also, in his admirably written account of the last day he spent with Mill,† says that he looked forward to a general growth of the Religion of Humanity. There is no extant record of Mill's last moments, but there has never been any pretence that he recanted or showed the least alarm. One Christian journal, which died itself soon after, declared its opinion that his soul was burning in hell, and expressed a pious wish that his disciples would soon follow him. We may therefore conclude that Mill died a Freethinker as he had always lived.

### MIRABEAU.

Gabriel Honoré Biquetti, son and heir of the Marquis de Mirabeau, was born on March 9, 1749. He came of a wild strong stock, and was a magnificent "enormous" fellow at his birth, the head being especially great. The turbulent life of the man has been graphically told by Carlyle in his *Essays* and in the *French Revolution*. Faults he had many, but not that of insincerity; with all his failings, he was a gigantic mass of veracious humanity. "Moralities not a few," says Carlyle, "must shriek condemnatory over this Mirabeau; the Morality by which he could be judged has not yet got uttered in the speech of men."

\* *John Stuart Mill*, by Alexander Bain, pp. 139, 140. † *Miscellanies*, Vol. III.

Mirabeau's work in the National Assembly belongs to history. It was mighty and splendid, but it cannot be recited here. His life burned away during those fateful months, the incessant labor and excitement almost passing credibility. "If I had not lived with him," says Dumont, "I never should have known what a man can make of one day, what things may be placed within the interval of twelve hours. A day for this man was more than a week or a month is for others." One day his secretary said to him "Monsieur le Comte, what you require is impossible." Whereupon Mirabeau started from his chair, with the memorable ejaculation, "Impossible ! Never name to me that blockhead of a word" — *Ne me dites jamais ce bête de mot.*

But the Titan of the Revolution was exhausted before his task was done. In January, 1791, he sat as President of the Assembly with his neck bandaged after the application of leeches. At parting he said to Dumont "I am dying, my friend ; dying as by slow fire." On the 27th of March he stood in the tribune for the last time. Four days later he was on his death-bed. Crowds beset the street, anxious but silent, and stopping all traffic so that their hero might not be disturbed. A bulletin was issued every three hours. "On Saturday the second day of April," says Carlyle, "Mirabeau feels that the last of the Days has risen for him ; that on this day he has to depart and be no more. His death is Titanic, as his life has been ! Lit up, for the last time, in the glare of the coming dissolution, the mind of the man is all glowing and burning ; utters itself in sayings, such as men long remember. He longs to live, yet acquiesces in death, argues not with the inexorable."\*

Gazing out on the Spring sun, Mirabeau said, *Si ce n'est pas là Dieu, c'est du moins son cousin germain*—If that is not God, it is at least his cousin german. It was the great utterance of an eighteenth-century Pagan, looking across the mists of Christian superstition to the saner nature-worship of antiquity.

Power of speech gone, Mirabeau made signs for paper and pen, and wrote the word *Dormir* "To sleep." Cabanis, the great physician, who stood beside him, pretended not to understand this passionate request for opium. Thereupon,

\* *French Revolution* Vol. II., p. 120.

writes the doctor, "he made a sign for the pen and paper to be brought to him again, and wrote,—'Do you think that Death is dangerous?'—Seeing that I did not comply with his demand, he wrote again,—'. . . How can you leave your friend on the wheel, perhaps for days?'" Cabanis and Dr. Petit decided to give him a sedative. While it was sent for "the pains became atrocious." Recovering speech a little under the torture, he turned to M. de la Marek, saying, "You deceive me." "No," replied his friend, "we are not deceiving you, the remedy is coming, we all saw it ordered." "Ah, the doctors, the doctors!" he muttered. Then, turning to Cabanis, with a look of mingled anger and tenderness, he said, "Were you not my doctor and my friend? Did you not promise to spare me the agonies of such a death? Do you wish me to expire with a regret that I trusted you?"

"Those words," says Cabanis, "the last that he uttered, ring incessantly in my ears. He turned over on the right side with a convulsive movement, and at half-past eight in the morning he expired in our arms."\* Dr. Petit, standing at the foot of the bed, said "His sufferings are ended." "So dies," writes Carlyle, "a gigantic Heathen and Titan; stumbling blindly, undismayed, down to his rest."

Mirabeau was an Atheist, and he was buried as became his philosophy and his greatness. The Assembly decreed a Public Funeral; there was a procession a league in length, and the very roofs, trees, and lamp-posts, were covered with people. The Church of Sainte-Geneviève was turned into a Pantheon for the Great Men of the Fatherland, *Aux Grands Hommes la Patrie reconnaissante*. It was midnight ere the ceremonies ended, and the mightiest man in France was left in the darkness and silence to his long repose. Of him, more than most men, it might well have been said, "After life's fitful fever he sleeps well." *Dormir* "To sleep," he wrote in his dying agony. Death had no terror for him; it was only the ringing down of the curtain at the end of the drama. From the womb of Nature he sprang, and like a tired child he fell asleep at last on her bosom.

#### ROBERT OWEN.

Robert Owen, whose name was once a terror to the clergy

\* *Journal de la Maladie et de la Mort d'Honoré—Gabriel Mirabeau*. Paris, 1791; p. 263.



and the privileged classes, was born at Newtown, Montgomeryshire, on May 14, 1771. In his youth he noticed the inconsistency of professing Christians, and on studying the various religions of the world, as he tells us in his *Autobiography*, he found that "one and all had emanated from the same source, and their varieties from the same false imaginations of our early ancestors." We have no space to narrate his long life, his remarkable prosperity in cotton spinning, his experiments in the education of children, his disputes with the clergy, and his efforts at social reform, to which he devoted his time and wealth, with singular disinterestedness and simplicity. At one time his influence even with the upper classes was remarkable, but he seriously impaired it in 1817, by honestly stating, at a great meeting at the City of London Tavern, that it was useless to hope for real reform while people were besotted by "the gross errors that have been combined with the fundamental notions of every religion." After many more years of labor for the cause he loved, Owen quietly passed away on November 17, 1858, at the great age of eighty-eight. His last hours are described in the following letter by his son, Robert Dale Owen, which appeared in the newspapers of the time, and is preserved in Mr. G. J. Holyoake's *Last Days of Robert Owen*.

"NEWTOWN, NOVEMBER 17, 1858. My dear father passed away this morning, at a quarter before seven, and passed away as gently and quietly as if he had fallen asleep. There was not the least struggle, not a contraction of a limb, of a muscle, not an expression of pain on his face. His breathing gradually became slower and slower, until at last it ceased so imperceptibly, that, even as I held his hand, I could scarcely tell the moment when he no longer breathed. His last words distinctly pronounced about twenty minutes before his death, were 'Relief has come.' About half an hour before he said 'Very easy and comfortable.'"

Owen's remains were interred in the churchyard of St. Mary's, Newtown, and as the law then stood, the minister had a right, which he exercised, of reading the Church of England burial service over the heretic's coffin, and the Free-thinkers who stood round the grave had to bear the mockery as quietly as possible. In Owen's case, as in Carlyle's, the Church appropriated the heretic's corpse. Even Darwin's body rests in Westminster Abbey, and that is all of him the Church can boast.

## THOMAS PAINE.

George Washington has been called the hero of American Independence, but Thomas Paine shares with him the honor. The sword of the one, and the pen of the other, were both necessary in the conflict which prepared the ground for building the Republic of the United States. While the farmer-general fought with unabated hope in the darkest hours of misfortune, the soldier-author wrote the stirring appeals which kindled and sustained enthusiasm in the sacred cause of liberty. *Common Sense* was the precursor of the Declaration of Independence. *The Rights of Man*, subsequently written and published in England, advocated the same principles where they were equally required. Replied to by Government in a prosecution for treason, it brought the author so near to the gallows that he was only saved by flight. Learning afterwards that the Rights of Man can never be realised while the people are deluded and degraded by priestcraft and superstition, Paine attacked Christianity in *The Age of Reason*. That vigorous, logical, and witty volume has converted thousands of Christians to Freethought. It was answered by bishops, denounced by the clergy, and prosecuted for blasphemy. But it was eagerly read in fields and workshops; brave men fought round it as a standard of freedom; and before the battle ended the face of society was changed.

Thomas Paine was born at Thetford, in Norfolk, on January 29, 1736. His scepticism began at the early age of eight, when he was shocked by a sermon on the Atonement, which represented God as killing his own son when he could not revenge himself in any other way. Becoming acquainted with Dr. Franklin in London, Paine took his advice and emigrated to America in the autumn of 1774. A few months later his *Common Sense* announced the advent of a masterly writer. More than a hundred thousand copies were sold, yet Paine lost money by the pamphlet, for he issued it, like all his other writings, at the lowest price that promised to cover expenses. Congress, in 1777, appointed him Secretary to the Committee for Foreign Affairs. Eight years later it granted him three thousand dollars on account of his "early, unsolicited, and continued labors in explaining the principles of the late Revolution." In the same year the State of Pen-

sylvania presented him with £500, and the State of New York gave him three hundred acres of valuable land.

Returning to England in 1787, Paine devoted his abilities to engineering. He invented the arched iron bridge, and the first structure of that kind in the world, the cast-iron bridge over the Wear at Sunderland, was made from his model. Yet he appears to have derived no more profit from this than from his writings.

Burke's *Reflections* appeared in 1790. Paine lost no time in replying, and his *Rights of Man* was sold by the hundred thousand. The Government tried to suppress the work by bribery; and that failing, a prosecution was begun. Paine's defence was conducted by Erskine, but the jury returned a verdict of Guilty "without the trouble of deliberation." The intended victim of despotism was, however, beyond its reach. He had been elected by the departments of Calais and Versailles to sit in the National Assembly. A splendid reception awaited him at Calais, and his journey to Paris was marked by popular demonstrations. At the trial of Louis XVI., he spoke and voted for banishment instead of execution. He was one of the Committee appointed to frame the Constitution of 1793, but in the close of that year, having become obnoxious to the Terrorists, he was deprived of his seat as "a foreigner," and imprisoned in the Luxembourg for no better reason. At the time of his arrest he had written the first part of the *Age of Reason*. While in prison he composed the second part, and as he expected every day to be guillotined, it was penned in the very presence of Death.

Liberated on the fall of Robespierre, Paine returned to America; not, however, without great difficulty, for the British cruisers were ordered to intercept him. From 1802 till his death he wrote and published many pamphlets on religious and other topics, including the third part of the *Age of Reason*. His last years were full of pain, caused by an abscess in the side, which was brought on by his imprisonment in Paris. He expired, after intense suffering, on June 8, 1809, placidly and without a struggle.\*

Paine's last hours were disturbed by pious visitors who wished to save his immortal soul from the wrath of God.

One afternoon a very old lady, dressed in a large scarlet-hooded

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\* *Life of Thomas Paine*. By Clio Rickman. 1819. P. 187.

cloak, knocked at the door and inquired for Thomas Paine. Mr Jarvis, with whom Mr. Paine resided, told her he was asleep. 'I am very sorry,' she said, 'for that, for I want to see him particularly.' Thinking it a pity to make an old woman call twice, Mr. Jarvis took her into Mr. Paine's bedroom and awoke him. He rose upon one elbow; then, with an expression of eye that made the old woman stagger back a step or two, he asked 'What do you want?' 'Is your name Paine?' 'Yes.' 'Well then, I come from Almighty God to tell you, that if you do not repent of your sins, and believe in our blessed Savior Jesus Christ, you will be damned and—' 'Poh, poh, it is not true; you were not sent with any such impertinent message: Jarvis make her go away—pshaw! he would not send such a foolish ugly old woman about his messages: go away, go back, shut the door.'\*†

Two weeks before his death, his conversion was attempted by two Christian ministers, the Rev. Mr. Milledollar and the Rev. Mr. Cunningham.

"The latter gentleman said, 'Mr. Paine, we visit you as friends and neighbors: you have now a full view of death, you cannot live long, and whoever does not believe in Jesus Christ will assuredly be damned.' 'Let me,' said Mr. Paine, 'have none of your popish stuff; get away with you, good morning, good morning.' The Rev. Mr. Milledollar attempted to address him, but he was interrupted in the same language. When they were gone he said to Mrs. Hedden, his housekeeper, 'do not let them come here again; they intrude upon me.' They soon renewed their visit, but Mrs. Hedden told them they could not be admitted, and that she thought the attempt useless, for God did not change his mind, she was sure no human power could."†

Another of these busybodies was the Rev. Mr. Hargrove, a Swedenborgian or New Jerusalemite minister. This gentleman told Paine that his sect had found the key for interpreting the Scriptures, which had been lost for four thousand years. "Then," said Paine, "it must have been very rusty."

Even his medical attendant did not scruple to assist in this pious enterprise. Dr. Manley's letter to Cheetham, one of Paine's biographers, says that he visited the dying sceptic at midnight, June 5-6, two days before he expired. After tormenting him with many questions, to which he made no answer, Dr. Manley proceeded as follows:

"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 the subject."

\* Rickman. pp. 182-183.

† Rickman, p. 184.

Sherwin confirms this statement. He prints a letter from Mr. Clark, who spoke to Dr. Manley on the subject. "I asked him plainly," says Mr. Clark, "did Mr. Paine recant his religious sentiments? I would thank you for an explicit answer, sir. He said, 'No he did not.'"\*

Mr. Willet Hicks, a Quaker gentleman who frequently called on Paine in his last illness, as a friend and not as a soul-snatcher, bears similar testimony. "In some serious conversation I had with him a short time before his death," said Mr. Hicks, "he said his sentiments respecting the Christian religion were precisely the same as they were when he wrote the *Age of Reason*."†

Lastly, we have the testimony of Cheetham himself, who was compelled to apologise for libelling Paine during his life, and whose biography of the great sceptic is a continuous libel. Even Cheetham is bound to admit that Paine "died as he had lived, an enemy to the Christian religion."

Notwithstanding this striking harmony of evidence as to Paine's dying in the principles of Freethought, the story of his "recantation" gradually developed, until at last it was told to the children in Sunday-schools, and even published by the Religious Tract Society. Nay, it is being circulated to this very day, as no less true than the gospel itself, although it was triumphantly exposed by William Cobbett over sixty years ago. "This is not a question of religion," said Cobbett, "it is a question of moral truth. Whether Mr. Paine's opinions were correct or erroneous, has nothing to do with this matter."

Cobbett investigated the libel on Paine on the very spot where it originated. Getting to the bottom of the matter, he found that the source of the mischief was Mary Hinsdale, who had formerly been a servant to Mr. Willet Hicks. This gentleman sent Paine many little delicacies in his last illness, and Mary Hinsdale conveyed them. According to her story, Paine made a recantation in her presence, and assured her that if ever the Devil had an agent on earth, he who wrote the *Age of Reason* was undoubtedly that person: When she was hunted out by Cobbett, however, "she shuffled, she evaded, she affected not to understand," and finally said she had "no recollection of any person or thing she saw at Thomas Paine's

\* Sherwin's *Life of Paine*, p. 225.

† Cheetham's *Life of Paine*, p. 152.

house." Cobbett's summary of the whole matter commends itself to every sensible reader.

"This is, I think, a pretty good instance of the lengths to which hypocrisy will go. The whole story, as far as it relates to recantation, . . . is a lie from beginning to end. 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. Willet 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*?"\*

I have already said that the first part of the *Age of Reason* was entrusted to Joel Barlow when Paine was imprisoned at Paris, and the second part was written in gaol in the very presence of Death. Dr. Bond, an English surgeon, who was by no means friendly to Paine's opinions, visited him in the Luxembourg, and gave the following testimony :

"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."†

Surely when a work was written in such circumstances, it is absurd to charge the author with recanting his opinions through fear of death. Citing once more the words of his enemy Cheetham, it is incontestible that Thomas Paine "died as he had lived, an enemy to the Christian religion."

#### PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

This glorious poet of Atheism and Republicanism was born at Field Place, near Horsham, Sussex, on August 4, 1792. His whole life was a daring defiance of the tyranny of Custom. In 1811, when less than nineteen, he was expelled from Oxford University for writing *The Necessity of Atheism*. After writing *Queen Mab* and several political pamphlets, besides visiting Ireland to assist the cause of reform in that unhappy island, he was deprived of the guardianship of his two children by Lord Chancellor Eldon on account of his heresy. Leaving England, he went to Italy, where his principal poems were composed with remarkable rapidity during the few years of life left him. His death occurred on July 8, 1822. He was

\* *Republican*, February 13, 1824, Vol. IX., p. 221.

† Rickman p. 194.

barely thirty, yet he had made for himself a deathless fame as the greatest lyrical poet in English literature.

Shelley was drowned in a small yacht off Leghorn. The only other occupants of the boat were his friend Williams and a sailor lad, both of whom shared his fate. The squall which submerged them was too swift to allow of their taking proper measures for their safety. Shelley's body was recovered. In one pocket was a volume of *Æschylus*, in the other a copy of Keats's poems, doubled back as if hastily thrust away. He had evidently been reading "Isabella" and "Lamia," and the waves cut short his reading for ever. It was an ideal end, although so premature; for Shelley was fascinated by the sea, and always expressed a preference for death by drowning. His remains were cremated on the sea-coast, in presence of Leigh Hunt, Trelawney, and Byron. Trelawney snatched the heart from the flames, and it is still preserved by Sir Percy Shelley. The ashes were coffered, and soon after buried in the Protestant cemetery at Rome, close by the *old* cemetery, where Keats was interred—a beautiful open space, covered in summer with violets and daisies, of which Shelley himself had written "It might make one in love with death to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place." Trelawney planted six young cypresses and four laurels. On the tomb-stone was inscribed a Latin epitaph by Leigh Hunt, to which Trelawney added three lines from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, one of Shelley's favorite plays.

## PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY.

COR CORDIUM

Natus iv. Aug. MDCCXCII

Obit vii. Jul. MDCCCXXII

"Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange."

And there at Rome, shadowed by cypress and laurel, covered with sweet flowers, and surrounded by the crumbling ruins of a dead empire, rests the heart of hearts.

Shelley's Atheism cannot be seriously disputed, and Trelawney makes a memorable protest against the foolish and futile attempts to explain it away.

"The principal fault I have to find is that the Shelleyan writers being Christians themselves, seem to think that a man of genius cannot be an Atheist, and so they strain their own faculties to disprove

what Shelley asserted from the very earliest stage of his career to the last day of his life. He ignored all religions as superstitions. . . . A clergyman wrote in the visitors' book at the Mer de Glace, Chamouni, something to the following effect: 'No one can view this sublime scene, and deny the existence of God.' Under which Shelley, using a Greek phrase, wrote 'P. B. Shelley, Atheist,' thereby proclaiming his opinion to all the world. And he never regretted having done so.\*

Trelawny's words should be printed on the forefront of Shelley's works, so that it might never be forgotten that "the poet of poets and purest of men" was an Atheist.

### BENEDICT SPINOZA.

Benedict Spinoza (Baruch Despinosa) was born at Amsterdam on November 24, 1632. His father was one of the Jewish fugitives from Spain who settled in the Netherlands to escape the dreaded Inquisition. With a delicate constitution, and a mind more prone to study than amusement, the boy Spinoza gave himself to learning and meditation. He was soon compelled to break away from the belief of his family and his teachers; and, after many vain admonitions, he was at length excommunicated. His anathema was pronounced in the synagogue on July 27, 1656. It was a frightful formula, cursing him by day and night, waking and sleeping, sitting and standing, and prohibiting every Jew from holding any communication with him, or approaching him within a distance of four cubits. Of course it involved his exile from home, and soon afterwards he narrowly escaped a fanatic's dagger.

The rest of Spinoza's life was almost entirely that of a scholar. He earned a scanty livelihood by polishing lenses, but his physical wants were few, and he subsisted on a few pence per day. His writings are such as the world will not willingly let die, and his *Ethics* places him on the loftiest heights of philosophy, where his equals and companions may be counted on the fingers of a single hand. Through Goethe and Heine, he has exercised a potent influence on German, and therefore on European thought. His subtle Pantheism identifies God with Nature, and denies to deity all the attributes of personality.

His personal appearance is described by Colerus, the Dutch pastor, who some years after his death gathered all the in-

\* *Records of Byron and Shelley*, Vol. I., pp. 243-245



formation about him that could be procured. He was of middle height and slenderly built; with regular features, a broad and high forehead, large dark lustrous eyes, full dark eyebrows, and long curling hair of the same hue. His character was worthy of his intellect. He made no enemies except by his opinions. "Even bitter opponents," as Mr. Martineau says, "could not but own that he was singularly blameless and unexacting, kindly and disinterested. Children, young men, servants, all who stood to him in any relation of dependence, seem to have felt the charm of his affability and sweetness of temper."\*

Spinoza was lodging, at the time of his death, with a poor Dutch family at the Hague. They appear to have regarded him with veneration, and to have given him every attention. But the climate was too rigorous for his Southern temperament.

"The strict and sober regimen which was recommended by frugality was not unsuited to his delicate constitution: but, in spite of it, his emaciation increased; and, though he made no change in his habits, he became so far aware of his decline as on Sunday, the 20th of February, 1677, to send for his medical friend Meyer from Amsterdam. That afternoon Van der Spijck and his wife had been to church, in preparation for the Shrovetide communion next day: and on their return at 4 p.m., Spinoza had come downstairs and, whilst smoking his pipe, talked with them long about the sermon. He went early to bed; but was up again next morning (apparently before the arrival of Meyer), in time to come down and converse with his host and hostess before they went to church. The timely appearance of the physician enabled her to leave over the fire a fowl to be boiled for a basin of broth. This, as well as some of the bird itself, Spinoza took with a relish, on their return from church about midday. There was nothing to prevent the Van der Spijcks from going to the afternoon service. But on coming out of the church they were met by the startling news that at 3 p.m. Spinoza had died; no one being with him but his physician."†

Mr. Martineau hints that perhaps "the philosopher and the physician had arranged together and carried out a method of euthanasia," but as he admits that "there is no tittle of evidence for such a thing," it is difficult to understand why he makes such a gratuitous suggestion.

Pious people, who judged every philosopher to be an Atheist, reported that Spinoza had cried out several times in dying "Oh God, have mercy on me, a miserable sinner!"

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\* *A Study of Spinoza.* By Dr. James Martineau, p. 104. † *Ibid*, pp. 101 102

Colerus investigated this story and found it an invention. Dr. Meyer was the only person with Spinoza when he died, so that it was impossible for the scandal-mongers to have heard his last words. Besides, his hostess denied the truth of all such statements, adding that "what persuaded her of the contrary was that, since he began to fail, he had always shown in his sufferings a stoical fortitude."\*

#### DAVID FREDERICK STRAUSS.

Strauss's *Life of Jesus* once excited universal controversy in the Christian world, and the author's name was opprobrious in orthodox circles. So important was the work, that it was translated into French by Littré and into English by George Eliot. Subsequently, Strauss published a still more heterodox book, *The Old Faith and the New*, in which he asserts that "if we would speak as honest, upright men, we must acknowledge we are no longer Christians," and strenuously repudiates all the dogmas of theology as founded on ignorance and superstition.

This eminent German Freethinker died in the spring of 1874, of cancer in the stomach, one of the most excruciating disorders.

"But in these very sufferings the mental greatness and moral strength of the sufferer proclaimed their most glorious victory. He was fully aware of his condition. With unshaken firmness he adhered to the convictions which he had openly acknowledged in his last work [*The Old Faith and the New*] and he never for a moment repented having written them. But with these convictions he met death with such repose and with such unclouded serenity of mind, that it was impossible to leave his sick room without the impression of a moral sanctity which we all the more surely receive from greatness of soul and mastery of mind over matter, the stronger are the hindrances in the surmounting of which it is manifested."†

Strauss left directions for his funeral. He expressly forbade all participation of the Church in the ceremony, but on the day of his interment a sum of money was to be given to the poor. "On February 10 [1874] therefore," says his biographer, "he was buried without ringing of bells or the presence of a clergyman, but in the most suitable manner, and amid the lively sympathy of all, far and near."

\* *La Vie de Spinoza*, par Colerus: Saisset's *Œuvres de Spinoza*, Vol. II., p. xxxvii.

† Edward Zeller, *David Frederick Strauss in his Life and Writings*, p. 148.

## JOHN TOLAND.

Toland was one of the first to call himself a Freethinker. He was born at Redcastle, near Londonderry, in Ireland, on November 30, 1670; and he died at Putney on March 11, 1722. His famous work *Christianity not Mysterious* was brought before Parliament, condemned as heretical, and ordered to be burnt by the common hangman. One member proposed that the author himself should be burnt; and as Thomas Aitkenhead had been hung at Edinburgh for blasphemy in the previous year, it is obvious that Toland incurred great danger in publishing his views.

Among other writings, Toland's *Letters to Serena* achieved distinction. They were translated into French by the famous Baron D'Holbach, and Lange, in his great *History of Materialism*, says that "The second letter handles the kernel of the whole question of Materialism." Lange also says that "Toland is one of those benevolent beings who exhibit to us a great character in the complete harmony of all the sides of human existence."

For some years before his death, Toland lived in obscure lodgings with a carpenter at Putney. His health was broken, and his circumstances were poor. His last illness was painful, but he bore it with great fortitude. According to one of his most intimate friends, he looked earnestly at those in the room a few minutes before breathing his last, and on being asked if he wanted anything, he answered "I want nothing but death." His biographer, Des Maizeaux, says that "he looked upon death without the least perturbation of mind, bidding farewell to those that were about him, and telling them he was going to sleep."

## LUCILIO VANINI.

Lucilio Vanini was born at Taurisano, near Naples, in 1584 or 1585. He studied theology, philosophy, physics, astronomy, medicine, and civil and ecclesiastical law. At Padua he became a doctor of canon and civil law, and was ordained a priest. Resolving to visit the academies of Europe, he travelled through France, England, Holland, and Germany. According to Fathers Mersenne and Garasse, he formed a project of promulgating Atheism over the whole of Europe. The same priests allege that he had fifty thousand

Atheistic followers at Paris! One of his books was condemned to the flames by the Sorbonne. Vanini himself met eventually with the same fate. Tried at Toulouse for heresy, he was condemned as an Atheist, and sentenced to the stake. At the trial he protested his belief in God, and defended the existence of Deity with the flimsiest arguments; so flimsy, indeed, that one can scarcely read them, without suspecting that he was pouring irony on his judges. They ordered him to have his tongue cut out before being burnt alive. It is said that he afterwards confessed, took the communion, and declared himself ready to subscribe the tenets of the Church.

But if he did so, he certainly recovered his natural dignity when he had to face the worst. *Le Mercure Français*, which cannot be suspected of partiality towards him, reports that "he died with as much constancy, patience, and fortitude as any other man ever seen; for setting forth from the Conciergerie joyful and elate, he pronounced in Italian these words—'Come, let us die cheerfully like a philosopher!'" There is a report that, on seeing the pile, he cried out "Ah, my God!" On which a bystander said, "You believe in God, then." "No," he retorted, "it's a fashion of speaking." Father Garasse says that he uttered many other notable blasphemies, refused to ask forgiveness of God, or of the king, and died furious and defiant. So obstinate was he, that pincers had to be employed to pluck out his tongue. President Gramond, author of the *History of France Under Louis XIII.*, writes: "I saw him in the tumbril as they led him to execution, mocking the Cordelier who had been sent to exhort him to repentance, and insulting our Savior by these impious words, 'He sweated with fear and weakness, and I, I die undaunted.'" 

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Vanini's martyrdom took place at Toulouse on February 19, 1619. He was only thirty-four, an age, as Camille Desmoulins said, "fatal to revolutionists."

[The reader may consult M. X. Rousselot's *Œuvres Philosophique de Vanini*, Avec une Notice sur sa Vie et ses Ouvrages. Paris, 1842].

#### VOLNEY.

The author of the famous *Ruins of Empires* was a great traveller, and his visits to Oriental countries were described so graphically and philosophically, that Gibbon wished he

might go over the whole world and record his experiences for the delight and edification of mankind. I have not been able to ascertain how he died, but I have tracked for exposure a very foolish story about his "cowardice" in a storm in America, which is still circulated in pious tracts. It is said that he threw himself on the deck of the vessel, crying in agony, "Oh, my God, my God!" "There is a God, then, Monsieur Volney?" said one of the passengers. "Oh, yes," he exclaimed, "there is! there is! Lord save me!" When the vessel arrived safely in port, says the story, he "returned to his Atheistical sentiments." I have traced this nonsense 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*. Beyond that it is lost in obscurity. The story is an evident concoction; it bears every appearance of being "worked up" for the pious public; and it could not be credited for a moment by any one acquainted with Volney's life and writings.

## VOLTAIRE.

François Marie Arouet, generally known by the name of Voltaire, was born at Chatenay on February 20, 1694. He died at Paris on May 30, 1778. To write his life during those eighty-three years would be to give the intellectual history of Europe.

While Voltaire was living at Ferney in 1768, he gave a curious exhibition of that diabolical sportiveness which was a strong element in his character. On Easter Sunday he took his secretary Wagnière with him to commune at the village church, and also "to lecture a little those scoundrels who steal continually." Apprised of Voltaire's sermon on theft, the Bishop of Anneci rebuked him, and finally "forbade every curate, priest, and monk of his diocese to confess, absolve or give the communion to the seigneur of Ferney, without his express orders, under pain of interdiction." With a wicked light in his eyes, Voltaire said he would commune in spite of the Bishop; nay, that the ceremony should be gone through in his chamber. Then ensued an exquisite comedy, which shakes one's sides even as described by the stolid Wagnière. Feigning a deadly sickness, Voltaire took to his bed. The

surgeon, who found his pulse was excellent, was bamboozled into certifying that he was in danger of death. Then the priest was summoned to administer the last consolation. The poor devil at first objected, but Voltaire threatened him with legal proceedings for refusing to bring the sacrament to a dying man, who had never been excommunicated. This was accompanied with a grave declaration that M. de Voltaire "had never ceased to respect and to practise the Catholic religion." Eventually the priest came "half dead with fear." Voltaire demanded absolution at once, but the Capuchin pulled out of his pocket a profession of faith, drawn up by the Bishop, which Voltaire was required to sign. Then the comedy deepened. Voltaire kept demanding absolution, and the distracted priest kept presenting the document for his signature. At last the Lord of Ferney had his way. The priest gave him the wafer, and Voltaire declared, "Having my God in my mouth," that he forgave his enemies. Directly he left the room, Voltaire leapt briskly out of bed, where a minute before he seemed unable to move. "I have had a little trouble," he said to Wagnière, "with this comical genius of a Capuchin; but that was only for amusement, and to accomplish a good purpose. Let us take a turn in the garden. I told you I would be confessed and commune in my bed, in spite of M. Biord."\*

Voltaire treated Christianity so lightly that he confessed and took the sacrament for a joke. Is it wonderful if he did the same thing on his death-bed to secure the decent burial of his corpse? He remembered his own bitter sorrow and indignation, which he expressed in burning verse, when the remains of poor Adrienne Lecouvreur were refused sepulture because she died outside the pale of the Church. Fearing similar treatment himself, he arranged to cheat the Church again. By the agency of his nephew, the Abbé Mignot, the Abbé Gautier was brought to his bedside, and according to Condorcet he "confessed Voltaire, receiving 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 Gautier's declaration to the Prior of the Abbey of Scellières, where Voltaire's remains

\* Parton's *Life of Voltaire*, Vol. II. pp. 410—415.  
 Condorcet's *Vie de Voltaire*, p. 144.

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 Gautier, 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, who was an eyewitness to 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 St. Sulpice and the Abbé Gauthier, and brought them into his uncle's sick room; who, on being informed that the Abbé Gautier 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 St. 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 the philosopher. He made the sick-nurse give him a little brushing, and then went out with the Abbé Gautier."\*

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.

Voltaire's last moments are recorded by Wagnière. I again take Carlyle's translation.

"He expired about a quarter past eleven at night, *with the most perfect tranquillity*, after having suffered the cruellest 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."†

Such are the facts of Voltaire's decease. He made no recantation, he refused to utter or sign a confession of faith,

\* Carlyle's *Essays*, Vol. II. (People's Edition), p. 161.

† Carlyle, Vol. II. p. 160.

but with the connivance of his nephew, the Abbé Mignot, he tricked the Church into granting him a decent burial, not choosing to be flung into a ditch or buried like a dog. His heresy was never seriously questioned at the time, and the clergy actually clamored for the expulsion of the Prior who had allowed his body to be interred in a church vault.\*

Many years afterwards the priests pretended that Voltaire died raving. They declared that Marshal Richelieu was horrified by the scene and obliged to leave the chamber. From France the pious concoction spread to England, until it was exposed by Sir Charles Morgan, who published the following extracts from a letter by Dr. Burard, who, as assistant physician, was constantly about Voltaire in his last moments :

“ I feel happy in being able, while paying homage to truth, to destroy the effects of the lying stories which have been told respecting the last moments of Mons. de Voltaire. I was, by office, one of those who were appointed to watch the whole progress of his illness, with M. M. Tronchin, Lorry, and Try, his medical attendants. I never left him for an instant during his last moments, and I can certify that we invariably observed in him the same strength of character, though his disease was necessarily attended with horrible pain. (Here follow the details of his case.) We positively forbade him to speak in order to prevent the increase of a spitting of blood, with which he was attacked ; still he continued to communicate with us by means of little cards, on which he wrote his questions ; we replied to him verbally, and if he was not satisfied, he always made his observations to us in writing. He therefore retained his faculties up to the last moment, and the fooleries which have been attributed to him are deserving of the greatest contempt. It could not even be said that such or such person had related any circumstance of his death, as being witness to it ; for at the last, admission to his chamber was forbidden to any person. Those who came to obtain intelligence respecting the patient, waited in the saloon, and other apartments at hand. The proposition, therefore, which has been put in the mouth of Marshal Richelieu is as unfounded as the rest.”

(Signed) “ BURARD.”

“ Paris, April 3rd, 1819.” †

Another slander appears to emanate from the Abbé Barruel, who was so well informed about Voltaire that he calls him “ the dying Atheist,” when, as all the world knows, he was a Deist.

“ 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

\* Parton, Vol. II., p. 615.

† *Philosophy of Morals*, by Sir Charles Morgan.



six months' 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."

When the clergy are reduced to manufacture such contemptible rubbish as this, they must indeed be in great straits. It is flatly contradicted by the evidence of every contemporary of Voltaire.

My readers will, I think, be fully satisfied that Voltaire neither recanted nor died raving, but remained a sceptic to the last; passing away quietly, at a ripe old age, to "the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller returns," and leaving behind him a name that brightens the track of time.

#### JAMES WATSON.

James Watson was one of the bravest heroes in the struggle for a free press. He was one of Richard Carlile's shopmen, and took his share of imprisonment when the Government tried to suppress Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* and several other Freethought publications. In fighting for the unstamped press, he was again imprisoned in 1833. As a publisher he was notorious for his editions of Paine, Mirabaud, Volney, Shelley and Owen. He died on November 29, 1874, aged seventy-five, "passing away in his sleep, without a struggle, without a sigh."\*

#### JOHN WATTS.

John Watts was at one time sub-editor of the *Reasoner*, and afterwards, for an interval, editor of the *National Reformer*. He was the author of several publications, including *Half Hours with Freethinkers* in collaboration with Charles Bradlaugh. His death took place on October 31, 1866, and the following account of it was written by Dr. George Sexton, and published in the *National Reformer* of the following week.

"About half-past seven in the evening he breathed his last, so gently that although I had one of his hands in mine, and his brother the other in his, the moment of his death passed almost unobserved by either of us. No groan, no sigh, no pang indicated his departure. He died as a candle goes out when burned to the socket."

George Sexton has since turned Christian, at least by profession; but, after what he has written of the last moments of John Watts, he can scarcely pretend that unbelievers have any fear of death.

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\* *James Watson*, by W. J. Linton, p. 86.

## WOOLSTON.

Thomas Woolston was born at Northampton in 1669, and he died at London in 1733. He was educated at Sidney College, Cambridge, taking his M.A. degree, and being elected a fellow. Afterwards he was deprived of his fellowship for heresy. Entering into holy orders, he closely studied divinity, and gained a reputation for scholarship, as well as for sobriety and benevolence. His profound knowledge of ecclesiastical history gave him a contempt for the Fathers, in attacking whom he reflected on the modern clergy. He maintained that miracles were incredible, and that all the supernatural stories of the New Testament must be regarded as figurative. For this he was prosecuted on a charge of blasphemy and profaneness, but the action dropped through the honorable intervention of Whiston. Subsequently he published *Six Discourses on Miracles*, which were dedicated to six bishops. In these the Church was assailed in homely language, and her doctrines were mercilessly ridiculed. Thirty thousand copies are said to have been sold. A fresh prosecution for blasphemy was commenced, the Attorney-General declaring the Discourses to be "the most blasphemous book that ever was published in any age whatever." Woolston ably defended himself, but he was found guilty, and sentenced to one year's imprisonment and a fine of £100. Being too poor to pay the fine, Christian charity detained him permanently in the King's Bench Prison. With a noble courage he refused to purchase his release by promising to refrain from promulgating his views, and prison fever at length released him from his misery. The following account of his last moments is taken from the *Daily Courant*, London, Friday, January 29, 1733 :—

"On Saturday night, about nine o'clock, died Mr. Woolston, author of the 'Discourses on our Savior's Miracles,' in the sixth year of his age. About five minutes before he died he uttered these words: 'This is a struggle which all men must go through, and which I bear not only with patience but willingness.' Upon which he closed his eyes, and shut his lips, with a seeming design to compose his face with decency, without the help of a friend's hand, and then he expired."

*Without the help of a friend's hand!* Helpless and friendless, pent in a prison cell, the brave old man faced Death in solitary grandeur, yielding, for the first and last time, to the lord of all.



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