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THE APOSTLES OF CHRIST:

A FARCE IN SEVERAL ACTS.

“Did it ever occur to you to read the Acts of the Apostles?”—*Bishop of Peterborough.*

BY AUSTIN HOLYOAKE.

THE Bishop of Peterborough, preaching on March 30th, 1871, in the Cathedral of Norwich to a very large congregation on “Christianity and Faith,” incidentally and with delightful simplicity asked his audience, “Did it ever occur to you to read the Acts of the Apostles?” as one might ask, “Did you ever happen to look into the Koran?” The Bishop evidently thinks that it is only by a rare chance that any lay Christians ever open the Bible, in every word and letter of which they nevertheless most fervently believe. I am not a Christian, either lay or clerical, and this may account for the fact that it *has* occurred to me to read the Acts of the Apostles; and I now lay before the Right Rev. Bishop, and the public generally, the result of my reading. If the impression produced on my mind by these remarkable stories is not what an orthodox Christian would expect, this may be because I opened the book unprejudiced by religious notions, and with the same desire for information as I should have in commencing to peruse any ordinary biographical or other narrative.

Who wrote the book called the Acts of the Apostles? It is unlikely that it was the production of any of the four Evangelists, as in style it is different from them all. It is in the shape of a letter addressed to one Theophilus, but it seems doubtful whether this was the proper name of a real personage, or was used only in the general sense of a “lover or friend of God,” according to the original meaning of the word. The first verse says—“The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.” The present treatise is but a clumsy and ungrammatical one, and is a feeble copy, in many places, of the records of the doings of Jesus. There is no originality about it. Its author, whoever he was, had evidently read some of the manuscripts, or more likely was acquainted with the traditions, which afterwards became incorporated in the collection called the New Testament. He appears to have been tolerably familiar with one or other of the synoptical Gospels; or, at any rate, with the materials used in them. He makes Peter and Paul accomplish some feats very like those of Jesus; hence one is lead to believe that there were two or three favourite tricks common to all the thaumaturgi, or miracle-workers of those days; just as we see certain tricks performed alike by all the conjurors who appear before the public in these times—such as Frikell, Robin, Houdin, and Anderson.

These Acts of the Apostles are represented as commencing in the year A.D. 33, that in which Christ was crucified; but when the book was really written cannot be determined by the most erudite scholars—it may have been one or two centuries after the occurrences narrated are said to have happened. If we were judging of an ordinary book produced under such

circumstances, an allowance would naturally be made for any discrepancies in the record; but when we have to deal with "inspired penmen" and "God's holy word," the case is very different. We are at once removed from the sphere of human things, and called upon to receive all that is set down without questioning, as infallible truth, the penalty of doubting which is the destruction of our immortal souls. If the writer of the Acts was inspired from heaven, it is to be regretted that he was not inspired to write the truth. He commences with a blunder, if judged by the Four Gospels which his book immediately succeeds. He says:—"The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was taken up." And after mentioning things which Christ said, he continues—"And while the apostles looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." Now, nothing of the kind ever happened, and nothing of the kind was ever said; it is a pure fabrication. And if a book, which purports to be a true history, divinely inspired, of the doings of certain men who were the inheritors of the supernatural powers of the Saviour of the world, actually commences with a palpable untruth, how shall we be able to trust those statements which do not admit of corroboration by, or comparison with, other parts of the Bible? Not that this kind of verification is of much value, as the Bible itself can never be taken as the proof of its own statements; we must look elsewhere for independent testimony, and where is it to be found? How can we obtain proof of the supernatural?

There were eleven apostles at the beginning of this book, who all "abode in an upper room," which, though a sign of high life, bespeaks great poverty of means. Their names were: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James the son of Alphæus, Simon Zelotes, and Judas, the brother of James; to whom was afterwards added (by lot or by ballot, the text as usual being exceedingly vague) one Matthias, to fill the place of Judas the betrayer, the man to whom the world owes its salvation, as without his so-called treachery, there would have been no crucifixion and no atonement. The first actor who enters upon the stage is Peter, who is by no means "well-graced," as he is not remarkable for his veracity. It will be remembered that he once declared to Jesus that though he should die with him, he would not deny him; yet immediately after, when asked if he had not been with Jesus, who had just been arrested, he cursed and swore that he knew not the man. In his first statement here, speaking of Judas, he says: "Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and, falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, *Aceldama*, that is to say, *The field of blood.*" This is not true. Judas was not so loose a man as to crack his sides, for he went and tied himself up with a rope, and hanged himself. One of the two accounts must be incorrect, and from what we read of Peter, we feel pretty sure that *his* should not be preferred. Judas could not well have died both ways; if he did, it is difficult to decide which he could take first. Neither did Judas purchase the field "with the reward of iniquity," but a field was purchased with it by the high priests, for a cemetery in which to bury strangers.

Chapter ii. opens with a strange story in language as strange. The

eleven apostles were all together in one place, but whether in Jerusalem is uncertain. It is supposed to have been somewhere in the East; so that if there happens to be any sceptic who wants definite information, it is to be hoped he will be quite satisfied. "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting." Seeing that the winds generally come from heaven, and sometimes make a rushing sound, there is nothing novel so far. But as it is an ill wind that blows no one any good, the apostles soon found that this breeze bore some good to them. "And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the spirit gave them utterance." What was it that sat upon the apostles? The cloven tongues or the fire? It is impossible to determine by the construction of the sentence. However, the apostles began to talk in all sorts of strange languages, which very much puzzled the devout Jews from every nation under heaven. But their discourses failed to have any very striking effect, and certainly the gift of the Holy Ghost did not count much in their favour, for after listening to them, some of their auditors said, "These men are full of new wine!" Peter rebutted this accusation in a singular manner. He said, "For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day." He did not venture to say that these holy men of God, who were specially commissioned to preach the glad tidings of great joy to all the world, never got intoxicated, but that it was absurd to suppose they were drunk so early in the day! After this Peter makes a speech, very obscure and very incoherent, about "wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke." And in the midst of this vapouring, he said to his listeners, "Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." But what benefit is there in receiving the gift of the Holy Ghost, if its manifestation is to make us appear to be "full of new wine?" Surely this is no recommendation, or advantage. But who or what is the Holy Ghost? and how do persons feel when possessed of or by that mysterious power, or person, or influence? Are they better in health, happier, or more moral? Are they able to themselves discover their new state, or do they require to be assured of it by others? It is necessary to know what advantage this gift is to any one before we can be attracted by Peter's promise.

In this same address to the men of Israel, Peter speaks of his former friend, Jesus of Nazareth, as a man "being delivered by the determinate counsel and fore-knowledge of God," and in the same breath charges his hearers with having "by wicked hands crucified and slain him." But where is the wickedness if it was all done by the determinate counsel and fore-knowledge of God? The wickedness, if possible, would have consisted in refusing to carry out the determinate counsel and foreknowledge, thus rebelling against the good God and baulking his wholescheme of redemption.

After Peter's speech, about three thousand souls were added to his followers that same day. With the slight drawback that "fear came upon every soul," or, in other words, that every soul became superstitious, one grand result was achieved for the time, which, if it was designed by God, and ordained to be preached by his chosen messenger to the people, should have endured and become the established order of society throughout the Christian world. It is said, "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and

parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart." If no other result than this had followed the preaching of the apostles, mankind would have had reason to bless their names. But who are farther away from this perfect mode of life than Christians themselves? Who have been more virulent opponents of everything in the shape of Communism, than the successors of the apostles? Who was it that preached a doctrine akin to this, and who laboured through a long and useful and honourable life to realise it in practice, but the late Robert Owen? And who were more abused, traduced, and persecuted than he and his followers, by the very men who profess to regard this book of Acts as a Divine revelation, sent as a guide to the world! What are the atoning blood of the Lamb for the sins of Adam; the hope of a resurrection from the calm sleep of death, to a life beyond the grave amid the blood, and thunder, and "all the menagerie of the book of Revelation;" compared with the life of bliss *here*, free from poverty and the crimes that inevitably follow in its track, the life of true fraternity and equality, which we are told these earliest Christians enjoyed; where competition and avarice, luxury and beggary, arrogance and envy, were unknown;

"Where the many ceased their slavery to the few?"

But where do we now find more cheating, lying, knavery, greed, misery, and starvation, than in this Christian land, where the hired priesthood, the paid exponents of this Bible, which is thrust upon us by the State, set the example of selfish clutching and hoarding of wealth? (Our bishops receive princely incomes, whilst the peasants around their palaces drag out a wretched existence, which is not so much a life as a death-in-life.

Peter of course could work miracles like his late master, but they lack originality, and are indeed so like others previously performed that they cannot help suspecting that they are the same old wonders in a new dress. One day as Peter and John were going to the temple, they saw a man who had been lame from his birth. Peter, fastening his eyes upon him, took him by the hand and lifted him up, and the man was enabled to walk. The people were astonished, but Peter told them not to wonder, as it was the name of the Prince of life through faith in his name which had made this man strong; an explanation which must satisfy the most critical reader. But this "name through faith in his name" did not prevent both Peter and John being seized for performing the miracle, and they were locked up till next day.

Peter was a desperate man, as well as a miracle-worker. His anger was sufficient to frighten some persons to death, as poor Ananias and Sapphira proved. When the Christian converts were wont to sell all their lands and possessions, and give the proceeds for distribution among the brethren, one Ananias, like many modern believers, wished to be thought generous at a small outlay; so instead of giving up all his wealth, he gave only a portion, probably thinking that if the promised millennium should not speedily arrive, it would be as well to have something to fall back upon. At least we are told that he did keep back part, but how it became known is not stated. Nobody appears to have informed Peter, yet he knew all about it, for he at once said to Ananias, "Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost." "And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him

out and buried him." Now this was a terrible rebuke, but we may attribute the mortal terror of Ananias to the weakness of his nerves. The case however was very different with his wife Sapphira, who, ignorant of the fate of her husband, on entering the place about three hours later, was suddenly and fiercely assailed by the Apostle. He said—"Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and carrying her forth, buried her by her husband."

While not for a moment wishing to palliate deception in any shape, one cannot help remarking the severity of the punishment for the reticence of Ananias and the falsehood of Sapphira. All deceivers are not equally punished in the Bible. Take the lives of some of its favourite characters to witness—Abraham deceived Pharaoh, saying that Sarah his wife was only his sister, and God plagued not the deceiver, but the dupe. Abraham deceived Abimelech, saying that Sarah his wife was only his sister, and God threatened not the deceiver, but the deceived. Jacob cheated his father and lied unto him, and thus obtained the blessing which was meant for his elder brother, and God ratified the blessing, and was always pleased to call himself and to be called the God of Jacob. Even Sarah who lied to the face of God was not punished; and Peter, who thus condemned Ananias and Sapphira, had lied three times, denying that he knew his own dear Lord and master; yet that same Lord and master afterwards trusted him to feed his lambs and his sheep. It is true that the crime involved in the deception of Ananias and Sapphira was of the most deadly nature—they did not give enough money to the church; and this crime is punished with pains and penalties even now! A few years ago a widow's two sons were shot down at Rathcormack in Ireland for refusing to pay tithes. Can it be wondered at, that such deeds should make some doubt of the humanising tendency of the glad tidings of the blessed Gospel?

These things becoming noised abroad, the authorities put Peter and John in the common prison. "But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life;" and they did so. This was an act of rebellion on the part of these escaped prisoners, which ought to have met with the severest condemnation, but it did not; on the contrary, it was approved of. Are we not told that the powers that be are ordained of God? yet here is the Lord himself breaking the peace, opening prison doors, defying the authority of the very rulers he had ordained. But one soon learns not to be astonished at anything in the Bible. The priests were much incensed, and took counsel together to slay the apostles. But one Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, exhorted them to let the delinquents go *untouched*. This they agreed to, but in the drollest way imaginable. Listen to the passage. "And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and *beaten them*, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." This striking proof of their acquiescence was feelingly acknowledged by Peter and his friend, and they went away rejoicing. This mode of treating Peter and John may be likened unto a judge who should say, "Prisoners at the bar, you are acquitted, therefore I sentence you to twelvemonths' hard labour?"

One Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Ghost, was appointed by

the twelve apostles a deacon, but his career was short and painful. He was able to do "great wonders and miracles among the people," and being clever at disputation, he naturally raised up enemies to his preaching. The same thing happens in these days. There is no Freethought advocate now who defeats his opponents in fair argument, but is denied by large numbers of Christians the possession of honour and honesty, and not a few clamour to have him silenced by means more material than reason and rhetoric. Stephen is accused of blasphemy, for he spoke against the fashionable religion of his time, and the admirers of Stephen in these days raise the same cry against all who disbelieve what *he* taught. Stephen delivered a long defence, and ended by calling his accusers uncircumcised murderers. "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God." If Stephen did see so far, he must have been blessed with wonderful powers of vision. When he announced what he saw, his hearers could restrain themselves no longer, but at once fell upon him, and stoned him to death. His assailants, probably to be more free in their actions, "laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul," and he was a consenting party to the brutal and fanatical murder. This man was afterwards known as the apostle Paul, who to some extent realised the saying, "The greater the rascal, the greater the saint," and his first appearance on the Christian stage, it must be admitted, was in a most unpromising character.

Peter went to Joppa, and there raised up from the dead Tabitha, who was called Dorcas for her good deeds. She appears to have been really dead, but on Peter taking her by the hand and calling her, she rose up. Jesus, when he raised Jairus' daughter, declared that she was not dead, but only slept; so that Peter's feat far excelled that of his master. This proves that a man need not have a miraculous birth to be able to raise people from the dead, and throws a doubt upon the value of divinity. Peter, a saint with as few virtues and as many vices as any mortal was ever blessed with, was altogether an extraordinary man; very valiant and yet a coward; an ardent disciple yet a renegade. He cut off a soldier's ear when they arrested Jesus, yet was afraid of being himself arrested; by his frown and rebuke he frightened poor Ananias and Sapphira to death; and his shadow only, as it alighted on the sick, straightway healed them.

Cornelius the centurion, who had been fasting four days, had a vision, as most hungry men will have, for an empty stomach maketh a light head; and in this vision an angel of God appeared to him, and told him to send for Peter to Casarea. This he did, and his three messengers reached Peter's house about the sixth hour on the following day, just as Peter had gone on to the house top to pray. *He* there became so hungry that he fell into a trance (or fainted), and like St. John he saw heaven opened, when a most curious sight presented itself. He saw "a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: wherein were all manner of four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him saying, Rise, Peter; kill and eat." Now Peter was a dainty man, and this dish was not dainty enough to tempt him, hungry as he was. He said, "Not so, lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." So the vessel was drawn up into heaven again, with all its strange inhabitants. It was a cruel thing to do, to mock a poor, weak, hungry man so. He had just fainted from exhaus-

tion, and he was invited to kill and eat a tiger, it might be, or a grizzly bear; but he could not bear the idea, so he refused. On being aroused from his trance, and told by the Spirit to go down and receive the three messengers from Cornelius, he did so, and went with them to the house of the centurion, though Cornelius was not a Jew. Peter interpreted the vision to be an intimation that he was to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, who were typified by the unclean beasts in the vessel—a doubtful compliment, truly, to all not of the Jewish race; that is to say, to all mankind except a most insignificant minority.

About this time Herod began to persecute the faithful, and he killed James with the sword, and had Peter arrested. But whilst Peter was lying in prison between two soldiers, bound with two chains, the angel of the Lord came and released him as easily as the spirits release the Davenport brothers. Peter thought he must still be in a dream, although he had already been delivered from gaol in much the same manner; but on finding himself in the street alone, he no longer doubted the reality of his release. He made good his escape to another place, much to the annoyance of Herod, who was shortly afterwards eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost. Thenceforward we hear but once more of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles. He perhaps was soon promoted to that situation, which he has held so long, of gate-keeper in heaven.

Philip goes down to Samaria to preach, and he too works miracles, which attract the attention of the people. "For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed." Philip is not original, for Christ did the same thing, and sent his evil spirits into the swine, much to the dismay of the poor pigs. One Simon a sorcerer fell before the prowess of Philip, and was afterwards baptised and believed in Jesus Christ, and beheld with astonishment the miracles and signs which were done, they far outstripping any witchery he had been capable of in his humble way.

An angel of the Lord spake unto Philip, and told him to go to Gaza, and he went. He there met with an Ethiopian, a man in high authority under Queen Candace. The Ethiopian was sitting in his chariot, and reading Esaias the prophet. Philip's companion, the spirit, told him to go near and join himself to the chariot. He then ran after it, and asked the Ethiopian whether he understood what he was reading. He answered, how can I, unless some man should guide me? And he desired Philip to come up and sit with him. The passage he was reading was this—"He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: in his *humiliation* his judgment was taken away; and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth." Something like this is to be found in Isaias liii., 7 and 8, and is said to have been written 1746 years before; and though more than 1800 years have elapsed since, we are still in Ethiopian darkness as to its meaning. Philip evidently did not know, for he began to preach Jesus to him. Neither did the spirit seem to know, for he said nothing. But the preaching had wonderful effect. As they went on their way, they came to some water, when the Ethiopian said, "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptised? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." Here is an instance of conversion almost with telegraphic speed. This man, who had never before heard of Jesus, and the mysteries of the incarnation, the crucifixion, and resurrection, at once de-

clares his belief, and is baptised. No other question is asked than "Do you believe?" and straightway he is received among the elect. He is not told to take time to ponder over these things, and to show by his conduct that he is sincere in his new belief; he is received at once, without any more hesitation than is shown in regard to any criminal who is about to be sent on the unknown journey from Newgate, and who, no matter what his life has been, and the crime that has caused its forfeiture, if he only call upon the name of the Lord Jesus, is assured of a blissful resurrection to eternal life. This is indeed cheap salvation—so cheap that it is not worth having. After they came out of the water, Philip's companion, the spirit, flew away with him, and the Ethiopian saw him no more, but went on his way rejoicing; whether at Philip's disappearance, or at the pleasurable sensations of the bath he had just taken, is not specified. Though the spirit flew away with Philip, it did not take him up to heaven. He "was found at Azotus, and passing through he preached in all the cities till he came to Cæsarea." Here we lose sight of him altogether, so far as this book of the Acts of the Apostles is concerned.

We now come to Saul, *alias* Paul, the tentmaker of Tarsus, who, though brought up to a trade, is supposed by some writers to have been a man of education and social position. He commenced by being an unrelenting persecutor of the new sect, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, and ended by being a devout believer. His conversion, like most of the events related in this book, was miraculous. While on his way to Damascus, seeking victims to persecute, he was suddenly surrounded by a light from heaven, which was not very extraordinary, as it happened to be in the daytime. "He fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." Let us analyse the incidents of this event. Saul was a wicked man, and yet he no sooner heard a voice, than he knew it to be the voice of the Lord; from which we may infer that he was on very familiar terms with him. And then, he not only knew the Lord, but asked the Lord who he was; and the Lord answered that he was somebody else. It can only be likened to a conversation between two friends on their sudden meeting, to this effect—"John, who are you?" And John answers, "I am Joseph." Saul trembled very much and was astonished. He asked what he was to do; and he was requested to go into the city and there he would be told. This conversation had been carried on while Saul was on the ground with his face downwards, which was a most undignified way of talking to any one; but it was a habit indulged in by one Daniel nearly 600 years before. He was then led into Damascus totally blind, where he remained three days without food or sight. It is difficult to understand why a man should be made blind to enable him to see the truth of the divinity of Christ, and why he should be starved for three days to enable him to digest the mysteries of the incarnation. After Paul had taken something really substantial, he was strengthened, and became a great preacher. The Jews were not pleased with this apostacy, so they lay in wait to kill him as he passed out of the gates. The disciples hearing of this, took Paul by night and let him down by the wall in a basket, and so he made his escape to Jerusalem. Why there was not a miraculous deliverance here is inexplicable. The spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, who was a much less important man than Paul; and Peter, who was anything but an amiable creature, was twice delivered from prison by an angel. Schamyl, the late hero of Circassia, who was called a prophet by his people,

on one occasion made his escape from a fortress in precisely the same way as Paul from Damascus, and showed his sense in trusting to the good offices of the basket, instead of praying for deliverance, for mere prayer would have been sure to leave him in the hands of the Russians.

Paul in the company of Barnabas, works miracles, and the first recorded of him is exactly the same as one wrought by Peter. He saw a man who had been lame from his birth; gazed stedfastly at him, and the man rose and leaped and walked. After this Paul was stoned and dragged out of the city, and left for dead; but he naturally rose up, and went again into the city, and left the next day as sound as ever. Soon a quarrel broke out between Paul and Barnabas, which was so sharp that they had to separate. Then Paul and Silas went together, and one day they were met by a young damsel, who was a sorceress, and who earned much money for her employers. She seems to have jeered at Paul, and vexed his Christian temper; so he turned and said to the spirit—"I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her. And he came out the same hour." Of course the damsel lost her bewitching power, and her employers lost the income derived through her, which made them so angry that they procured the arrest of Paul and Silas, who, after being stripped and scourged, were cast into prison and their feet put into the stocks. "And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed." Now all this noise and manifestation of heavenly power was for nothing, for not a prisoner escaped. It is true that the keeper was alarmed when he saw that the doors were opened, though it was dark. He called for a light, and sprang into the inner prison, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out, and said—"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" The two prisoners were not at all surprised at the abruptness of the question, but told him "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." Then followed another conversion swift as lightning. "And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes: and was baptised, he and all his, straightway." What *can* be the good of baptism under such circumstances? or of what value is a profession of faith wrung from a man in fear and trembling? Nearly all the instances of conversion given in the Bible, are brought about after the persons have had their judgments humiliated, and their nerves shocked. A faith that wins its way by such means is not a manly or reasonable faith; is unworthy the acceptance of the vigorous intellect and the self-reliant judgment.

Paul preached on Mar's Hill at Athens, and said to the Athenians—"Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you." Now, in what respect does Paul's Deity differ from that of the Athenians? Is God known more now than he was in days of old? Is he not still the *unknown* God? Has any man penetrated the secret? Can any man give an intelligent, a coherent description of the being he pretends to worship? The Christian superstition differs from the heathen, but it is a superstition. As mankind advance in knowledge, and still farther penetrate the mysteries of nature, and learn the laws around them, their ideas become expanded, and occurrences which, in their ignorance, they attributed to supernatural agency, and to the workings of good and evil spirits, they now find pro-

ceed from purely natural causes. In the dark ages of ignorance and superstition, God or the Devil was ever present at a man's side; but *now*, with increased mental light, both God and Devil are fading farther and farther away, and they will ultimately vanish from the human mind, and man will be left face to face with the nature which he knows, which ministers to his every want, and at last like a loving mother folds him to her gentle bosom as he falls into his everlasting sleep.

Paul went to Ephesus, and finding certain disciples, "he said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost." This surprised him much, so he rebaptised them all, and laid his hands upon them, and the Holy Ghost descended at once, and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. We are to suppose that these disciples understood what the Holy Ghost meant after that; and if so, it is a pity they did not leave some information behind them, which would have enlightened all succeeding generations. The mystery of the Holy Ghost is still as profound as ever. What it is no mortal can tell, whether a spirit or an influence, or both. After this act of animal magnetism performed on twelve disciples, Paul "went into the synagogue, and *spake boldly for the space of three months*, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God." This may with confidence be pronounced the longest speech on record. What a valuable party man Paul would have made in our House of Commons. He would have been without a rival as a "talker against time" when some obnoxious measure had to be got rid of. If later on a discourse of Paul's, of only a few hours' duration, brought one person to an untimely end, what must have been the fate of the listeners in this synagogue? Probably not a man was left alive at the conclusion of the sermon!

Any one attempting to infringe Paul's patent for working miracles speedily came to grief. "Certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preacheth. And there were seven sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests, which did so. And the evil spirit answered and said, Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are ye? And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded." What the evil spirit said must be taken as a great compliment to the exorcists, for while he declared his perfect knowledge of Jesus and Paul, he was totally ignorant of the vagabond Jews. If we are to judge of a man by the company he keeps, what are we to think after this declaration? And the intimacy between the Devil and the Christians has been maintained from that day to this. They first introduced him into the world, he still remains the special pet and property of the followers of the carpenter of Nazareth, and they alone are entitled to any credit accruing from the acquaintanceship.

When Paul reached Troas he preached to his disciples an uncomfortably long sermon, lasting to midnight. One young man, named Eutychus, could not for the life of him keep his eyes open any longer; so like many a modern churchgoer, he fell asleep. But the unlucky wight forgot that he was sitting in a window, so "as Paul was long preaching, he sunk down with sleep, and fell down from the third loft, and was taken up dead." But as the preacher had caused the mischief, so he repaired it. "He fell upon the young man, and restored him to life again," which was a very clever feat indeed, seeing that he was not dead at all.

Paul went to Jerusalem, and preached there more boldly than ever, and all the city was moved, and the people ran together and sought to kill him; but the chief captain with soldiers and centurions saved him from the tumult, and took him in chains to the castle. Paul, when before the Council, got struck in the mouth for saying what was unpleasant to the high priest, but when he learnt that the Council itself was composed of men of different religious beliefs, he threw a burning brand into their midst, which set them almost tearing one another, like our good churchmen at their meetings. The Pharisees strove with the Sadducees, and there arose such a fierce dissension that the chief captain feared that Paul would be pulled to pieces among them, and sent soldiers to take him away by force and lodge him in the castle again. And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome." In all previous instances of heavenly interference, it has been accomplished by the agency of the spirit of the Lord, or an angel of the Lord; but here Paul is comforted by the Lord himself. If the Lord, the very God of very God, were only to come down in these days, and prompt and empower some specially chosen servants to do certain much-needed work, what mighty things might be accomplished! Enthusiasts do assert occasionally that they are chosen vessels, but they can never convince the Commissioners in Lunacy of the truth of their assertions. Is there not as much need now as there ever was for miraculous interferences, if such can take place? We are daily performing miracles of science, but they have their limits as well as their difficulties. The world would receive with gratitude the power of raising from the dead some of the great and good men who are prematurely stricken down. We are constantly losing men and women of great intellect and virtue, the prolongation of whose lives would be of service to humanity; but there is no one gifted with the power to restore *them* to animation, and the scene of their uncompleted labours.

Paul was a brave and candid man, very earnest in all things he took in hand, from the slaughter of the Christians up to the defence of the n. When brought before Felix, the only charge against him was that of preaching the resurrection of the dead; and he said, "But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call *heresy*, so worship I the God of my fathers." Paul commenced as a persecutor, and ended in being persecuted. He attacked the heretics, and afterwards gloried in being one. It was in the days of Paul, as it is in these days, an offence to differ from the established religion. But though heresy may be shunned, and the heretic be persecuted, and lose his social position, and suffer all the annoyance of having to live on the shady side of society; still all this does not prove that the Established Religion is right, that it is the only true guide to salvation. The only way to salvation and the highest happiness is the path of progress, which leads to truth and right, and these are not bound up with any particular creed or dogma, but are attainable by every member of the human family, if he but diligently prosecute the inquiry.

Paul was handed over by Felix to Festus, his successor, who was surprised to find that his accusers had nothing against him of the nature of sedition: "But had certain questions against him of their own *superstition*, and of one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive." And here we find ourselves disputing about the same thing eighteen hundred years after. It is true that there are now more persons who believe,

or fancy they believe, in the dogma, but this is no proof of its truth; it is at most *belief*, and nothing more. But why is there more dispute about the existence of Jesus, than about that of Socrates, or Plato, or Julius Cæsar, all of whom lived before him? Simply from the fact that Jesus, the man, is taken out of the sphere of humanity, and placed where no man can comprehend him; and where his sayings and doings, instead of confirming the idea of his Godhead, only serve to make him look ridiculous. It really does not concern humanity who said this, or who did that; all that we care to know is, was the saying true, was the deed useful?

Paul was brought by Festus before King Agrippa, and their meeting was altogether a very pleasant one, notwithstanding that Paul was bound. He gave a third version of how he came to be converted by the vision of Jesus on his way to Damascus. Judas died two different deaths, and Paul was converted in three different ways. And while he was describing how Christ should suffer, and be the first that should be raised from the dead, Festus, regarding this as the veriest raving, "said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." Paul answered boldly and without hesitation, "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest." Agrippa answered, with a smile on his face, we can imagine, at Paul's earnest effrontery, and said: "Almost thou persuadest *me* to be a Christian." Paul, in the same vein, answered, "I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am—*except these bonds!*" The king was so pleased with this answer, that he agreed with Festus, "This man doeth nothing worthy of death or of bonds," and said, "This man might have been set at liberty, if he had not appealed unto Cæsar." Paul, with other prisoners, was then shipped off to Italy, to take his trial at Rome; and while the ship was on its way, he endeavoured to persuade the captain not to put out to sea from a port they had called at, owing to the lateness of the season, and the state of the weather, for if he did they would get wrecked. This showed Paul's knowledge, but not his miraculous power; for the late Admiral Fitzroy was as highly favoured as the Apostle, and daily kept the sailors on our coasts fully informed as to whether it was safe for them to venture out in their little barks in pursuit of miraculous draughts of fish. Well, as Paul had foretold, the wreck came; and while it was imminent, the sailors despaired, and fasted, and took nothing for *fourteen days*, and got very low spirited; but Paul, like a brave-hearted and sensible man, seeing the ship driving on to the shore, told the men to be of good cheer, that they would all be saved, and he persuaded them to eat that they might have strength to save themselves by swimming. In the night, when they cast anchor, to keep the ship off the rocks, Paul saw the sailors in the boat, about to make their escape, and leave the others to save themselves as best they could. Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men remain, you cannot be saved." Of course, he saw that it was necessary to have sailors in order to work the ship. To see this needed no miraculous gift of sight, and it only showed his good sense in taking every secular precaution to avoid a watery grave. However, as many a ship has done since, in spite of every effort, their vessel went to pieces on the rocks, but all were saved by the most natural means possible. "The centurion commanded that they which

ould swim should cast themselves first into the sea, and get to land; and the rest, some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship. And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land." Now if it was part of the divine plan that Paul should be saved at all costs, that he might preach the Gospel in Rome, how simple it would have been for the angel of the Lord to have whisked him off, as the spirit did Philip, and have set him down in the capital of the seven hills, without all this long and tedious process of a sea-voyage and a shipwreck. It makes Paul's life a little more picturesque, but it does not in the slightest degree enhance our estimation of his spiritual powers, or prove the truth of one tittle of his new creed. When they got to land they found themselves on the island of Melita, and were received with great kindness by the inhabitants, whom the narrator terms barbarians. A fire was kindled, and Paul gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on it, when out of the heat a viper crawled and fastened on his hand. The people when they saw this, said among themselves, "No doubt this man is a *murderer*, whom, though he hath escaped the sea, yet vengeance suffereth not to live." This was no great compliment to the heaven-sent messenger of the Gospel. But it only shows how people may be deceived by appearances; for have we not had amongst us men who have appeared as angels of light till they were found out; whose conduct proved that they were more fitted for the hulks than the pulpit? However, the viper did not sting Paul sufficiently to cause him to swell, or suddenly fall down dead; whereat the people changed their minds, and said that he was a God. Which showed that they were again mistaken. After this Paul, to show his power, healed the father of Publius, the chief man of the island, of precisely the same disease that Christ healed in a woman. The people of Melita appear to have been peculiar in their bodily conformation, for the text goes on to say, "So when this was done, others also, *which had diseases in the island*, came, and were healed." This is a part of the human frame that must be unknown to modern physiologists, as it is never mentioned in books on anatomy. Perhaps, like the modes of cure adopted by Jesus and his apostles, it has become *obsolete*. Paul then went to Rome, but was never brought to trial. "He dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him." But Paul was not quite free from the usual overbearing and uncharitable nature of the Christian. When he called the Jews, his brethren, together in Rome, he preached as usual to them from morning until evening, when some believed, and some did not, which is a very common case in the propagation of new views. But "when they agreed not among themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: for the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them." He was evidently disappointed, like all enthusiasts, that he could not make all people see as he saw, at the first time of asking.

Here closes the book of Acts, but what became of Peter, and Philip, and Paul, is not recorded. How long they lived, and where they died, or if they died at all, we know not. They were not ordinary men, and therefore we must not expect an ordinary biography of them. Hew few of the

doings of the twelve Apostles have been deemed worthy of record! Only three out of twelve did anything of note according to this book, and the greatest of the three was not added to their number till years after the death of the master. All they did was of a miraculous nature, intended to astonish and overawe the judgment of their listeners; at least so it is represented. But of what value is all this in these days? Who that makes reason his guide and nature his standard, is influenced by such exhibitions? A moral truth that cannot be enforced without the aid of startling effects, is not likely to be universally or even generally received. Truth wins its way silently and surely, and makes the greatest progress when taught in the most simple manner. If men want the marvellous now, they can have it in abundance without the aid of supernatural power. Nature furnishes marvels enough, far transcending any of the reputed miracles of the Bible.

The foregoing remarks by no means exhaust all the points worthy of comment in this most extraordinary narrative—or rather series of narratives, for it is improbable that one relator could have been an eye-witness of all the acts said to have been performed by the apostles on so many different stages. I contend that the said remarks are not unnecessarily severe, or characterised by a levity calculated to wantonly outrage the feelings of believers. Whatever partakes of the ludicrous in these pages is provoked solely by the wording of the text. And why should an absurdity, in whatever form it may present itself, escape the shafts of the satirist? Folly is folly the world over; and quite as many abuses have been “put down” by the wholesome application of ridicule as were ever preached out of existence by the sententious utterances of the pulpit. The word “farce,” employed in the heading to this paper, may seem to some readers harsh, and therefore need a justification. I would not knowingly use any word that I could not reconcile to my own mind; I therefore proceed, by giving a summary of the argument, to endeavour to justify the use of a phrase which may never have struck the ordinary reader as applicable to any Book of the New Testament. The Bible is so continuously read through the green spectacles of *faith*, that the orthodox believer is astounded and alarmed when assured that the book is simply black and white, and not of the tint his coloured medium imparts to it.

It must never be forgotten that we are dealing with a volume that claims to have supernatural advantages over every other book in the world; that its writers were specially inspired; that every word, letter, and point is in its right place; and that implicit belief in its contents is absolutely necessary to salvation. A book endowed with all these advantages should not only be easily understood, but it should be so worded that it can by no possibility be misunderstood. Its contents should appeal to every judgment alike. But does it? If so, how is it that there are hundreds and hundreds of differing sects in the Christian world? I read the Bible as I would any other book, and I cannot, spite of the most strenuous efforts on my part, see in it, as a whole, the sublimity the orthodox sects pretend they see there. In the reputed sayings and doings of Jesus I perceive the most ludicrous elements; and these Acts of the Apostles, which are so largely made up of the miraculous, and which are intended to overawe the judgment of mankind, if viewed in the light of modern intelligence, are farcical from beginning to end.

The book commences with the statement of an alleged fact totally different from any of the previous accounts, though the reader is led to suppose that it is penned by the writer of one of the Gospels. This at

once destroys its claim to infallibility, and reduces it to the level of an ordinary human production, and justifies any criticism which may be brought to bear upon it. Peter, "an unlearned and ignorant man," makes a blundering statement about the death of Judas, as might be expected of him; and he relates several other matters during his career which may be equally erroneous. We have it upon this man's authority that "God had sworn with an oath" to David, "that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne." Christ never sat upon the throne of David, and Peter's word is utterly untrustworthy.

The very first display made by the apostles, after the cloven tongues, or fire, or something, had "sat upon them," was so impressive, that their listeners mistook the outpourings of the Holy Ghost for a manifestation of drunkenness! An anti-climax, truly, not worthy of the highest order of poetry.

The one bright spot in all this book is the description of the communitistic life led by the apostles at a certain period, but this is marred by the brutal incident relating to the treatment of Ananias and Sapphira, though one cannot help smiling at the matter-of-fact way in which the young men wind up the bodies, and bury them side by side. Peter and John, as ringleaders in the murder, were put in prison; but locks, bolts, and bars, though they did not fly asunder, were unable to hold them in durance vile, for the angel of the Lord at night set them free. Notwithstanding this display of heavenly power on their behalf, both Peter and John are again taken, and get well beaten before they are allowed to go. If it was necessary to release them from prison to show that God approved of the murder of Ananias and Sapphira, why were the apostles beaten? This is as amusing as the way in which the authorities *acquiesced* in the suggestion of Gamaliel.

Peter's raising of Tabitha from the dead raises one or two pertinent questions. Do persons raised from the dead ever die again? One wonders how they can have the conscience to depart this life a second time. Peter, an ignorant, unlettered fisherman, is represented as possessing the power of recalling the spirit from its flight to the judgment seat, of keeping the court of Heaven waiting, and of causing a person to go through the agony of two deaths and two resurrections. Does any Christian ever reflect upon the disarrangement of the Divine economy which must ensue from the performance of such a miracle as this?

The kind of vision that appeared to Peter in his hungry trance, if told of Mahomet, or of Joseph Smith the Mormon, would be made the laughing-stock of the Christian world. Here we have a foreshadowing of the heaven of St. John, as depicted in the Book of Revelation, where all sorts of beasts and strange animals are kept, and which are put into a *vessel* made of a sheet, and let down from above as a meal for a man of delicate appetite. The ropes that held the vessel at the four corners, must have been of enormous length and very tough, like the "yarn" itself. Peter is the most extraordinary man of all the apostles, for though the voice of God entreated him three times to partake of the not dainty dish set before him, he flatly refused, and yet was allowed to live. After this who can say that disobedience to the will of God is a deadly sin?

Herod is represented as being smitten by the Lord and brought to a speedy end, not for any fault of his own, but because "the *people* gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." We fail to see the retributive justice here. But we have not much sympathy for a king

who could keep a chamberlain with the ominous name of Blastus! He could not expect to flourish long with such an individual as chief of his household.

Philip's proceedings are very similar to those of his fellow apostles; they are all miraculous. He is on the most intimate terms with the angel of the Lord, who prompts him what to do, and who is so obliging as to carry him from one place to another free of charge, and in a carriage not made with hands. This is the cheapest mode of locomotion yet invented. Do Christians wish us to believe that angels and devils wandered about the land of Judea as freely as sheep and goats do now? And if the Lord and his Angels and Spirits were then on the earth interfering with and influencing the actions of true believers, why are they not doing so now, and in countries where the faithful most do congregate? God's chosen ones need guidance quite as much in the nineteenth century as in the first. And the most friendly earthquakes are always at hand to shake the masonry of houses and prisons and frighten the inmates, that speedy conversions may ensue. The assertion that such events happened in order that one particular dogmatic religion might be promoted over all others, is sufficient to shake the faith of any rational man in the truth of the whole narrative. If Christianity were to be now propagated by means of earthquakes, it would speedily be put down as a shocking nuisance. But why is it not so propagated? We are told, because "the age of miracles is past"—yes, past all comprehension!

St. Paul has done more for the spread of Christianity than Christ himself, yet he is first introduced with very doubtful credentials. Several persons are mentioned in this book of Acts who meet with shameful treatment, who did not a tittle of the harm wrought by Paul. But that is strictly in accordance with *divine* justice! Paul himself was deceived by a false promise in a very glaring instance. In chapter xviii. 10, the Lord, after urging him to keep on with his preaching, distinctly says, "For I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this city." But Paul must have been very much astonished at the way in which this promise was fulfilled, for after this he is beaten by a rabble, he runs great risk of being torn to pieces, he is struck in the mouth, he is put in prison, he is sent in chains on a dangerous sea voyage, he is shipwrecked, having been consigned to the tender mercies of sailors who took nothing to eat for *fourteen days*, he is bitten by a viper, and he ends his career in this book of Acts in anything but an amiable temper, his mission to the Jews having completely broken down. This protection may have been intended to apply only to the city of Corinth in which Paul was at the time it was promised, and that the Lord did not intend to depend upon his own power, but on that of his friends who were numerous there; but if so, it is a mystery why the Lord should not have wished to protect so valuable a servant as Paul was against all trouble and suffering everywhere. But the ways of the Lord are past finding out.

If the Acts of the Apostles is not a farce, it certainly lacks the grandeur of a tragedy; perhaps it may be designated a Comedy of Errors.

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