

NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

A LIE IN FIVE CHAPTERS?

OR THE

REV. HUGH PRICE HUGHES'S

“CONVERTED ATHEIST.”

BY

G. W. FOOTE

(President of the National Secular Society).

SECOND EDITION.

[COMPLETING TEN THOUSAND.]

Price One Penny.

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PROLOGUE.

STORIES of converted Atheists are part of the business stock of theologians. I have disposed of some of them in my *Infidel Death-Beds*. I now dispose of another in this pamphlet.

The Rev. Hugh Price Hughes is a smart young man. He combines the revival preacher with the enterprising showman. By means of unstinted cash, constituting a heavy drain on the resources of Wesleyan Methodism, he has drawn together large audiences in the West of London. But Christian ministers complain that he has done this at the expense of their congregations. Neither "infidels" nor indifferentists are attracted. All Mr. Hughes does is to draw away from sober churches and chapels a number of Christians who prefer a more exciting form of religious service.

Money, more money, was wanted for the West End Mission. In this extremity, Mr. Hughes published a story of a converted Atheist in the *Methodist Times*. It was written in the form of a penny novel, and designed to catch pious flat-fish. Very likely it has succeeded. At any rate, the story is now reprinted in a little volume, at the modest price of eighteenpence.

My exposure is reprinted from the *Freethinker*, and published at the price of one penny. My object is to get the exposure widely circulated. I appeal to Freethinkers to distribute it among their orthodox acquaintances. Mr. R. Forder, 28 Stone-cutter-street, London, E.C., is instructed to supply parcels of fifty copies and upwards at trade price; that is, at the rate of ninepence for thirteen copies.

I do not imagine that the exposure will greatly affect Mr. Hughes or his clerical brethren. They know what pays, and while orthodoxy has long ears they will find their profit in tickling them. But I venture to think that the exposure *will* affect a certain number of honest men and women, and open their eyes to the arts by which a false system is supported.

A LIE IN FIVE CHAPTERS ?

DURING August, 1889, the *Methodist Times* published in five chapters the story of "The Atheist Shoemaker ; a Page in the History of the West London Mission. By the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes." Probably it was reckoned good copy—something to tickle the ears of Methodist readers, who are always strong on "conversion"; and something to tickle the purses of the wealthy subscribers to the new and costly experiment of evangelising the West End. Anyhow, the author had to undergo no very close editorial scrutiny; no questions were asked as to the truth of the story, in case anyone should make inquiries; for, in fact, the author and the editor were the same person—the Rev. Hugh Price Hughes.

From the little we know of this gentleman we should not be disposed to accept his bare word on any matter in which "religion" or "morality" is in question. We had to report a meeting of the Christian Evidence Society he attended in Exeter Hall, on May 20, 1887, at which he told a monstrous false story about a Free-thought lecturess, and promulgated a most ridiculous fable as to the proceedings of the Council of Nice.* More recently we had occasion to animadvert on his appalling looseness of statement at a great "purity" meeting in St. James's Hall, where the reverend gentleman, trusting to information he never took the trouble to examine, perpetrated a gross libel on the Aquarium; a libel which he was subsequently obliged to eat every word of, under a threat of prosecution. Mr. Hughes may be honorable enough in private. As to that we know nothing and care as little. But we believe his mind is easily perverted by sentiment, and a pretty extensive acquaintance with the history of his church convinces us that the best of Christians have not been

* See *Freethinker*, May 29, 1887.

very particular about "stretching" for the glory and honor of God.

It is not our intention to assert anything worse of Mr. Hughes's story than that it *looks* a lie. This may sound as good, or as bad, as calling it a lie straight out. But a little reflection will show that we make a reservation. If Mr. Hughes furnishes us with *proofs* we will confess our mistake, and apologise for throwing a doubt upon his honor. But until then, we can only judge upon the evidence before us, and we say deliberately that we never met with a story which bore more obvious marks of concoction.

To begin with, the interests of Methodism are kept very carefully in view. When the Atheist shoemaker goes with his pious young wife to an afternoon Conference, he finds himself sitting next to a parson. Now the parson, of course, belonged to a rival church, and it was a good stroke to make him jealous. The Atheist remarks, "It's really wonderful to get such crowds as these at the West End. This Mission is a great success." Whereupon the parson, "lifting his eyebrows and sniffing in the air," remarks that "It costs a great deal of money." To which the Atheist rejoins, "Why, sir, if I believed in God, I should not think all the money in the Bank of England too much to carry on a work like this." Capital! Mr. Hughes is anything but a fool. It is a clever touch, well brought in. The Mission *does* cost a good deal, the money had to be raised by vigorous begging, and perhaps there were subscribers who hardly thought the results commensurate with the outlay. How judicious, then, to put this financial reflection into the mouth of an Atheist—a most impartial witness!—and in reply to a parson, belonging to a church that spends a great deal more money than Methodists have the luck to lay their hands on!

Curiously enough, again, when the sick Atheist shoemaker, after finding Jesus by the aid of a Methodist Sister, goes to a Convalescent Home, it turns out to be a High Church establishment, and Sister Agatha nearly undoes all the good work of Sister Beatrice. She asks him to join her gospel-shop, tells him "There is only

one Church in this country," and says that "Dissenters are going to heaven by the back stairs." Could there be a shrewder way of suggesting that Methodist Sisters are better Christians, and better worth supporting, than High Church Sisters? Sectarian bitterness reigns in the Convalescent Home. Sister Agatha gets at him, the inmates get at him, and they get at each other; so that he has a two-hours' agony and bloody sweat in wrestling with the Devil, who asks him whether it is worth his while to remain with this happy family of Christians. He pulls through, however, by turning his mind from the *High Church* Sister and thinking of the *Methodist* Sister. More business, Mr. Hughes, more business! and very good business, too.

Here is another bit of business, rather more subtle and delicate, thrown in with rarer skill, and apt to escape a superficial reader. The Atheist's young wife, who goes first to the Sunday afternoon meetings, is of Celtic origin, and "by birth and early training a Roman Catholic." After hearing Mr. Hughes preach about "the living Christ and present salvation," she silently resolves to "trust that Christ more fully than she had ever trusted him before." This is one of Mr. Hughes's master-strokes. How soft and insinuating is the suggestion of the religious superiority of Methodism over Catholicism! It is these nice hints and flying touches that reveal the artist.

Then again—and this is a bolder stroke of policy; a blow from a bludgeon, so to speak, rather than a thrust of a fine rapier—Mr. Hughes guards himself at the very outset against the embarrassment of prying sceptics. The Atheist shoemaker, who is happily dispatched to glory—not by "the back stairs"—in the fifth and last chapter, willingly consented to the publication of all the facts of his case, and indeed "there is no reason for concealment." Here the unsuspecting reader would imagine that he was going to *get* all the facts. But Mr. Hughes is not so simple as that. There is a "But"—not too much "But," but just "But" enough. "Some of those who must appear on the scene shrink from publicity," so fictitious names are given to all the characters, including the converted Atheist, and all the

clues are discreetly cut away with a single snip of the artist's scissors. It is the old, old story. Names, dates and places are carefully withheld. Investigation is baffled, and everything is left to faith.

Mr. Hughes has been pressed on this matter. Free-thinkers, we understand, have written to him. We have seen his reply to Mr. Robert Forder, the secretary of the National Secular Society. Mr. Hughes refers him to the introductory paragraph, which explains why he is unable to give information. Any other information as to the mission work is at Mr. Forder's service, but not this. Of course not!

Were there a substratum of truth in the story, clear proof would remain of its having been cooked. "One dark night last winter," as an opening sentence, is enough to satisfy an intelligent reader. Conversations are given, not in substance, but verbally, although they took place in circumstances in which it was impossible for them to be recorded. The Atheist's tones, gestures, and expression are described, although nearly everything happens in the writer's absence. In short, we have every characteristic of a pious invention.

We have now to qualify our praise of Mr. Hughes's cleverness by pointing out a very serious mistake. He has fallen into the error of being too precise. This is doubtless a merit in ordinary romances, to which it imparts a life-like air; but it is a glaring fault when you are palming off lies as truth. Mr. Hughes should have remembered that discretion is sometimes the better part of valor. He would have been better advised if he had made his converted Atheist older and less notorious, and had given fewer details of his character and personal appearance. As it is, he has drawn a picture which, whatever are its merits, has the signal disadvantage of being plainly apocryphal.

"John Herbert" was a shoemaker. He had a brother at Northampton (Bradlaugh's borough—how pat!), who has become a convert to Christianity through John's edifying death. He was a young man, "about thirty years of age," with a young wife, and apparently no children. He was passionately fond of music. He had "delicate intellectual features, and deep, inquisi-

tive, penetrating eyes." He was a "well-known London Atheist." He "possessed a large collection of Atheist literature. Everything ever written by Mr. Bradlaugh, Mrs. Besant, and Colonel Ingersoll he had at his fingers' ends." He was an orator on Clerkenwell-green, and seemingly at the Hall of Science. The breadth of his fame may be seen from the following passage :—

Soon after the foregoing incidents had occurred, I asked a journeyman shoemaker in Soho if he knew John Herbert.

"Know him!" said he, turning round suddenly, quite astonished that I should ask so foolish a question. "Why everybody knows Herbert."

Then, striking an eccentric attitude and drawing up his tall body to its full height, he said,

"I tell you what it is, sir. Herbert is a far-larn'd man; he will just suit a young gentleman like you. Why, when he used to speak in Victoria-park there was such continuous cheering that you could scarcely hear what he was saying. Again and again have some of our chaps tried to get up a discussion between him and Bradlaugh, but we could never manage it. They were always on the same side. Ah! it would have been a fine game if we could have made these two argue with one another. Many of us thought that Herbert would get the best of it.

There is some extraordinary nonsense in this paragraph. "Far-larn'd" is a curious idiom for a Cockney shoemaker, and the idea of Freethinkers getting up a discussion between one of their own speakers and Mr. Bradlaugh—chiefly, it would appear, for the fun of the thing—is so ineffably preposterous that we fear our readers will go into a convulsion of laughter. We want them to do nothing of the kind, but to keep their attention fixed upon John Herbert.

The Atheist shoemaker lived at Islington, occupying a floor in an ordinary lodging-house. He was very happy with his wife. His atheist companions said he was under petticoat government. "Whenever he and his comrades arranged a day's excursion, he stubbornly refused to accompany them unless he was allowed to take his devoted little wife with him." This is one of the richest follies in the whole of the story. Mr. Hughes does not know that no distinction of sex is recognised in Secular Societies, that excursions are of rare occurrence, and that when they *are* "arranged,"

the male members are only too happy to have ladies in the company.

John Herbert finally went down with his wife to Devonshire, where it was hoped he would recover from his illness. But he died there (of course !) and his exit from this world to the better one promised by Methodists occurred some time in last spring.

Here, then, is a sufficiently detailed picture, yet we are unable to identify the original. We know something of Freethought propagandists in London, but we cannot call to mind a single person who answers in the slightest degree to the description. Mr. Forder is positive against the existence of such a person. Not one Freethinker, among the scores who have spoken to us on the subject, is able to recognise this well-known London Atheist, this speaker on Clerkenwell-green, this wonderful orator of Victoria-park, this match for Bradlaugh.

Let us narrow the issue. When the Devil is carrying on a long conversation with John Herbert, he remarks, "What you used to say in the Hall of Science and on Clerkenwell-green is quite true." Who could help inferring that John Herbert was a speaker at the Hall of Science? But this is not all. While in Devonshire he was prayed for—apparently with small success—by the Methodists in London. "It seemed to us," Mr. Hughes says, "of such immense importance that he should himself go to his old workshop, and to the Hall of Science, and to Clerkenwell-green, and to all his former haunts, and with his own lips tell the story of his conversion." Again he says, "We had thought of accompanying him to Clerkenwell-green and the Hall of Science, and wherever he was known, that all his old friends might have an opportunity of sharing his immortal joy." Now if this does not mean that he was a speaker at the Hall of Science, articles and stories might as well be composed by pulling out words at hazard from a bag.

Who, then, are the lecturers at the Hall of Science? They can almost be counted on the fingers of one hand. We know all the men and women who have lectured there during the last ten years—not to go back farther

—and we declare that the list does not include any person like John Herbert, or any person resembling him in the remotest degree. We will give Mr. Hughes a complete list of all who have lectured there during that period, and we defy him to name one among them who was working as a shoemaker, or who was “about thirty years of age” last winter, or who died last spring.

Here is a clear challenge. What will Mr. Hughes do? Will he skulk behind his well-calculated opening paragraph? Will he sit silent and smile? Will he flatter himself that the Methodists will believe his story though every Atheist in London should brand it as a lie? Or will he say that the Hall of Science portion is a mistake, and that he was misled, or that he wrote a little too much in the spirit of romance? Let him do what he will, we defy him to move without damning himself.

We will put Mr. Hughes another poser. John Herbert was an Atheist; he was popular; he had many Atheist comrades, with whom he took “excursions.” He was as fierce an Atheist as ever when Sister Beatrice was brought to his bedside. Now how was it that none of his Atheist comrades came to his sick room? Why did he not send to tell them of his plight? What will Mr. Hughes reply? We have no hesitation in expressing our belief that they did not come because Mr. Hughes did not want them there. Their presence would have thwarted his purpose. He wanted the sick room clear for Sister Beatrice and her Methodist spells.

Atheism is as much a *terra incognita* to Mr. Hughes as equatorial Africa. His idea of Atheists is childish in the extreme. His prevailing notion seems to be that men become Atheists from watching the spectacle of Christian disunion and inconsistency. Now these phenomena are peculiar to Protestantism, which puts an open Bible into people’s hands and foolishly expects them all to deduce exactly the same doctrines from such a conglomerate volume. Catholicism follows a different plan. By means of the Church, which is the living voice of God, it has an infallible interpreter of

Scripture, and disunion and inconsistency are thus reduced to a minimum. Rome boasts herself *semper eadem*, and the boast is not a vain one. Still, there are Atheists in Catholic countries; and this single fact explodes Mr. Hughes's theory of Atheism.

Were Mr. Hughes to rely more on knowledge than on imagination, he would soon discover that Atheism is a rational and not a sentimental belief. Were every Christian a good man—a most prodigious hypothesis!—honest, truthful, generous, and compassionate; were there no serious differences of opinion amongst them; were they in the habit of consistently practising the doctrines they profess; the Atheist would probably change the tone of his criticism, but the philosophy of Atheism would remain unaltered.

The burden of John Herbert's diatribes against religion is that Christians hate and mistrust each other, and that he and his fellow workmen are sweated by a Christian employer. But he soon comes to think better of the Methodist circle of which Mr. Hughes is the centre, for the simple and sufficient reason that Mr. Hughes is the author of the story. "I admit," says John Herbert, "that your kind of Christianity is quite different. I know what you are doing for the poor. If all Christians were like you——." Thus Mr. Hughes lauds his own little ring at the expense of other Christian bodies, and snuffles like a first-rate Pharisee.

Sister Beatrice pays John Herbert a visit, talks the most unmistakable Hugh-Price-Hughese, and storms all the Atheist's positions in a single interview. The orator of the Hall of Science, the match for Bradlaugh, gives in to a Methodist young lady, who boasts not a shred of argument, but asks him to "accept Christ, the Son of God," before the sick man is persuaded that *there is* a God to have a son or a daughter. After firing off what reads like a long extract from one of Mr. Hughes's sermons, Sister Beatrice rises to leave; and the orator of the Hall of Science, the match for Bradlaugh, is so struck with the twaddle that he is on the point of yielding. "If it were not such a cowardly

business to do it on my death-bed," he says, "I feel almost inclined to give in."

The next interview settles the business. John Herbert is going to swallow the medicine, but the interest of the story demands some reluctance. "I can't do it," he says; "I've been awful—I've been a ringleader." But Sister Beatrice holds out the spoon coaxingly. She has a sweet voice and a fair hand; it is ten to one she will win. "The agony of the spiritual struggle" reaches its climax, and "great drops of perspiration started out of his white forehead." The Sister and the wife prayed, and presently John took the medicine at a gulf. Hallelujah! The two women were "strangely conscious" that God was in the room. They *knew* their prayer was answered, and felt no surprise when converted John said, "It's all right now. I've given in."

Such is Mr. Hughes's idea of converting Atheists! No wonder he has achieved such magnificent success that he is obliged to conceal the identity of the only bird he has caught.

John seemed to get better. The medicine appeared to agree with him. He looked forward to his recantation at the Hall of Science. But it never came off. Oh dear no! Not for Hugh Price Hughes! That meant producing your bird, which couldn't be done without buying one at the poulterer's, and the bird was out of season. So the nameless converted Atheist, who lived in an unspecified street in Islington, died in a nameless village in Devonshire, and was buried in an undiscoverable grave; while his dear little wife vanishes into the infinite azure of the past, and the very memories of this popular Atheist, who died only last spring, is mysteriously blotted out from the minds of all the Atheists who knew him so well. Truly, the age of miracles is *not* past. Nor is it likely to be while Methodist preachers are able to manufacture them for a steady and profitable market.

Mr. Hughes says he called on John Herbert, some weeks after his conversion, to give him a dose of the body and blood of Christ; the precious articles being carried, to use the preacher's own words, in "the little

Communion Service case which the ladies of Leeds gave to my sainted father-in-law, Alfred Barrett, forty-six years ago." Apparently the body and blood of Christ disagreed with him. Perhaps the body was too new, and the blood was only ten shillings a dozen. Anyhow, we read that "John Herbert seldom sat up after that day. He grew worse and worse."

John took his large collection of Atheist literature from the shelves and put it under the sofa. "He inclined to burn them." Oh, Hugh Price Hughes, is your invention so barren? Could you think of nothing but this ancient "chesnut"? You might have had them put in a glass case, marked "Poison!" in one of your Sunday-schools. You might have taken them home and read them yourself. They would have given you a lesson in veracity; at any rate, they would have enabled you to write about Atheism with a little knowledge instead of the most contemptible ignorance.

What *did* become of the books we are not told. Mr. Hughes leaves them under the sofa. Were they sold after John's seraphic death to a second-hand dealer, and dispersed by him over the whole of Islington? If so, they are likely to make more Atheists than Mr. Hughes will ever convert.

Mr. Hughes went beyond himself in ignorance of Atheists, and in ignorance of High Churchwomen too, when he wrote the conversation between John Herbert and Sister Agatha at the Convalescent Home. Sister Agatha tries to show him the impossibility of approaching God except through a priest of the church, and in doing so she plunges into "ancient ecclesiastical history" and quotes "a large number of Saints and Fathers." This is extraordinary on the part of a Sister in a Convalescent Home, but John Herbert's reply was more extraordinary still. "As I had been an Atheist," he says, "I had not studied ancient church history." Mr. Hughes actually imagines that Atheists are, as such, ignorant of ecclesiastical history; and that a casual Sister in a charitable institution could quote "a large number of Saints and Fathers," whose "names Herbert had never heard of before"—this Herbert

being a Hall of Science orator and a match for Bradlaugh !

Mr. Hughes is also rather loose in his arithmetic. He introduces John Herbert as "about thirty years of age," and kills him off at "the early age of twenty-eight." Had the converted Atheist lived a little longer he would have been a boy again. His death occurred in the presence of his wife and "the gardener's wife." Mr. Hughes was not there, but he is able to tell us all that happened, and every word that was said ; and of course we are treated to "the last words of John Herbert, the Atheist."

Poor Mr. Hughes was very much disappointed at losing the opportunity of assisting at his convert's recantation at the Hall of Science, but he yields to the will of the Lord, and hopes that "this short and simple biography" will be made "a blessing to Christian Atheists and to Atheist Christians in all parts of the world." That the biography is "simple" few intelligent readers will dispute ; but as to its being a blessing, there are likely to be opposite opinions. No doubt it will bamboozle the readers of the *Methodist Times*, and bring in subscriptions for the West End Mission. But if we take a larger view, we shall hardly regard the deliberate dissemination of lies as a blessing to mankind. In the long run nothing serves us but Truth. But this is a goddess whom the Christians seldom worship. From the first century to the nineteenth, they have circulated pious frauds without a blush. Amidst all its rancid cant and maudlin sentiment, the story of Mr. Hughes's converted Atheist shows us that the good old trade of lying for the Church still flourishes ; and we understand what Herder meant in saying that "Christian veracity" deserved to rank with "Punic faith."

EPILOGUE.

MR. HUGHES was furnished with marked copies of the *Free-thinker* in which this exposure was first printed. In face of a direct challenge from myself, as editor of that journal and President of the London Secular Federation, he pursues a cowardly policy of silence. Once more I defy him to prove his story. I will pass over the details of incident and conversation, and challenge him again on the main point. Let him establish the substantial truth of his narrative. Let him prove the existence of an Atheist who lectured on Clerkenwell-green, in Victoria-park, and at the Hall of Science; who was converted by Mr. Hughes or his Wesleyan Sisters; who was a shoemaker, about thirty years of age; and who died last spring. Here is a clear challenge. An honest man would accept it. Should Mr. Hughes still decline it, I shall do more than say his story *looks* a lie. I shall say it *is* a lie. And I am sure every honest reader will endorse the brand.

POSTSCRIPT TO SECOND EDITION.

(January, 1892.)

FIVE thousand copies of this pamphlet having been sold, and the demand still continuing, another edition of five thousand is now published.

Mr. Hughes has ignored my challenge. He has also ignored the challenge of the late Charles Bradlaugh. It is time, therefore, to fling aside all reserve, and I unhesitatingly call Mr. Hughes's story *a lie* from beginning to end. It does not contain even a mixture of truth; it is pure, unadulterated falsehood.

Although the author of this fraud has maintained the "dignified silence" which is customary in the prisoners' dock, he has in one instance exposed the hollowness of his plea that the names of the personages of his story could not be given. Writing to a Freethinker at Nelson, whom he took to be a Methodist, Mr. Hughes said that the names would be given presently. Eighteen months have elapsed, and "presently" has not yet arrived.

Mr. Hughes's concealment is even too much for Mr. Spurgeon, who has advised him to make a clean breast of everything, and so disarm all critics and cavillers. But this advice is not taken, and it never will be taken. Mr. Hughes sees the policy of not answering questions that might tend to criminate himself. He belongs to a very familiar species of Christians, and should henceforth be known as the Rev. Ananias Hughes.

Works by G. W. Foote.

The Grand Old Book ...	1 0	Christianity and Progress	0 2
A Reply to the Grand Old Man. An Exhaustive Answer to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone's <i>Impregnable Rock of Holy Scripture.</i>		Reply to Mr. Gladstone.	
<i>Bound in cloth</i> ...	1 6	Mrs. Besant's Theosophy	0 2
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