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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE THERSITES
OF
FREETHOUGHT.

BEING

A Reply to certain Attacks.

BY

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The Thersites of Freethought.

SAYS MASSINGER :

“ Malice scorn'd puts out
Itself ; but argued gives a kind of credit
To a false accusation.”

These wise lines ought perhaps to stop my pen as they have in many other cases. But if they fail to do so in this instance, and if despite the contempt I feel for my slanderers, I still notice false and malicious accusations as brutal as they are uncalled for, it is not to “argue”, but simply to correct some of them for the information of fair-minded people. There is a counterpart to Massinger's sage remark in as wise an Eastern proverb: “If thou dost not wash off the mud thrown at thy face, people *will* believe it dirty”.

An article which appears in *Lucifer* for September, “Lie not one to another,” and which contains a few words of sympathy for Mr. G. W. Foote, editor of the *Freethinker*, was written in Jersey for the August *Lucifer* and sent by me to Mrs. Besant to read and approve of, since she is the heroine thereof. To my surprise she kept it back, simply saying that she found it—in view of some fresh developments, the nature of which she did not communicate,—“too kind” with regard to certain Freethinkers. It is only on returning to London that I had the opportunity of fully appreciating the delicate feeling that made my friend withhold that article at the time. A bigoted pamphlet called “Mrs. Besant's Theosophy” had just been written and pub-

lished by that very G. W. Foote; and while I was expressing my sympathy with him as a persecuted Freethinker, he was abusing and denouncing me, of whom—outside of the slanders and lies so freely invented and circulated against me by Christians in connection with Theosophy—he knew, very evidently, *absolutely nothing*. Indeed, although I had never sympathised with a certain brutal caricature on the Biblical God in a now famous Christmas number of the *Free-thinker*, nor with other such caricatures, or his extreme views, I had yet sympathised with him in his trouble, and even strongly defended him, in India as well as in England, considerably to my own disadvantage. Great was my surprise, therefore, to find Mr. Foote in his last pamphlet, while nominally aiming at Mrs. Besant, continually flinging handfuls of mud at myself!

While fully admitting his right to discuss and even abuse Theosophy, for it is a public movement, I deny him that right with regard to my private life and personality. Knowing nothing or little about the Theosophical Society, and still less of Theosophy, he has an excuse—like everyone else who judges of that movement on hearsay—for misrepresenting it, though even that clashes strangely with his pretensions to be regarded as an impartial and tolerant thinker. But what right has Mr. Foote or his *alter ego*, Mr. Mazzini Wheeler, to report about me *lies which have never been proven, and on which no evidence even is adduced?* It is these that I am now determined to expose. I will begin, however, with an innocent aberration of Mr. Foote.

Speaking of Mrs. Besant's rapid conversion, who, "in less than six weeks or two months at the outside", after reviewing my "Secret Doctrine", became "a fellow of the Theosophical Society", the far-seeing editor of the *Freethinker* shrewdly remarks:—

"Surely no intellect like Mrs. Besant's could undergo such rapid changes *by itself*. Madame Blavatsky on the one side, and Mr. Herbert Burrows on the other, may supply the explanation."

This phrase, "no intellect like Mrs. Besant's could undergo such rapid changes *by itself*", has an ominous ring, when coming from a Freethinker. It suggests mental pictures of hypnotic malpractice, of witch's

envoûtement, and crafty *suggestion* to believe oneself a Theosophist. With such "an intellect" it implies more than regular hypnotism, but verily *Circean* fascination according to the rules of the black art. Does Mr. Foote believe then in such possibilities in Nature? And if he does, what a future pregnant with dangers for Freethought does it unveil! For, if even Mrs. Besant's remarkable intellect has succumbed to Herbert Burrow's or to my *magic* powers, then why not the less remarkable intellects of Mr. Foote and his friend, the champion Orientalist of the age—Mr. Mazzini Wheeler? In this case one would be inclined to believe in the truth of the *Light of the World's* assertion, that poor Mr. Foote is indeed "filled with alarm, dismay, and despair". For, as intellectually—though an undeniably clever man—he is on a far lower plane than Mrs. Besant, as will be recognised by all, what if he, the editor of the *Free-thinker*, ever fell under our lethal spells! Should he succumb next to our collective fascination, he would have to become a fellow of the Theosophical Society, or—die. And as it is not so certain at all that he would be accepted by us in his present mood, I shudder to think of the fatal consequences it would entail upon the Freethought party.

As to supplying to Mr. Foote "the explanation" he demands, perhaps Mr. H. Burrows may condescend to do so. As for "Madame Blavatsky", she has no intention whatever of supplying him with any explanation. All she has to say to him is that she is innocent of Mrs. Besant's conversion. This lady is a living witness—whose truthfulness and word even Mr. Foote would never *dare* to deny—to the fact that I had no hand at all in her joining the Theosophical Society. I had seen Mrs. Annie Besant *only once, in the presence of several other persons*, and then we engaged only in general conversation, previous to her sending in an application for membership. Nor have I ever put any pressure upon her—whether hypnotic or *magical*, since Mr. Foote seems to endow me with such power. I will say more. Had I given to the Theosophical Society such a valuable acquisition, it would have been to me a matter for pride; but it was not so, and, therefore, I feel compelled to reluctantly

deny the flattering imputation. Moreover, I do not hesitate to declare that "an intellect like Mrs. Besant's" yields to no pressure, except that of her own reasoning powers. A noble heart like Mrs. Besant's listens to no voice, save that of the *inner voice* of truth—that of man's *Divine nature*, to which Mr. Foote is deaf and blind, though it is a voice which speaks louder in us than all the tones which ever roared amid thunder and lightning on any Mount Sinai. Annie Besant has heard and recognised that voice, and—she has become a *Theosophist*—which is more than simply "a fellow of the Theosophical Society".

Such a mistake on the part of the author of "Mrs. Besant's Theosophy" is, however, a natural one, and we have no quarrel with it. But when Mr. Foote arguing "from the terms of her (Mrs. Besant's) eulogy on Madame Blavatsky" repeats satirically those terms and forthwith falls foul of the latter, the question becomes more serious.

This is what he says of one whom he ironically suspects of being Mrs. Besant's present "guide, philosopher, and friend":—

"She (Mrs. Besant) takes theosophy on trust from 'the most remarkable woman of her time'; one, who asks for no reward but 'trust', which is what every mystery-monger starts with,* and leads to everything else; one who has 'left home and country, social position and wealth', in order to bring us lessons from 'the wise men of the East'."

And then this "wise man of the West" proceeds to ask:

"Has Mrs. Besant made inquiry into these things, or has she succumbed, body and soul, to the spell of the sorceress? Where *is* Madame Blavatsky's home, what *is* her country, what *was* her social position, and what the extent of her wealth? Many persons would like these questions answered. . . ."

* Would not Mr. Foote, who is no "mystery-monger," it is evident—ask and expect "trust" from any pupil to whom he is imparting instruction, though the latter is no better than the exploded hypothesis of men descending from one common ancestor with the tailless apes? When he is able to prove beyond doubt or cavil that Madame Blavatsky has ever *asked* for or *received* any reward whatever, of a material nature, during her 15 years of voluntary hard labour, then he may have more right to sneer at the statement, than he has now.

Very well ; and I am willing to satisfy these persons. To this portion of his impertinent question "where *is* my home, what *was* my country, social position", I answer: Apply to the same source of information whence Lord Ripon, when Viceroy, and the Simla authorities derived their's when they sent to Russia the same queries. The official answers they received and which were reprinted in the *Pioneer* (1880), were presumably to their satisfaction, since they have never repeated the question again. My "home", is no State secret ; my "country" and late "social position"—no *château en Espagne*, or that of a "Swiss Admiral", but matters of official documents and records in the Anglo-Indian Political Department and the Russian Embassy. Let the pamphleteer apply there, if either will open its doors to him, or condescends to answer.

He forgets one more accusation on a par with the others. Why not add that in 1885, I was accused by the S.P.R. of being a "Russian Spy," the admitted mistake of the Anglo-Indian Government, notwithstanding? But then, had not the *gentlemanly* Psychical Researchers resorted to this last trump-card to prejudice the British public against me, and show a motive for my alleged "frauds", what fool would ever have believed in their *Report*?

But Mr. Foote does not stop here. With the air of one perfectly sure of his facts, he undertakes to answer his questions himself, and adds:

..... "Twenty years ago Madame Blavatsky was practising as a spiritist 'mejum' in America. In 1872 she gave seances in Egypt"

To this Madame Blavatsky replies to her slanderer: You speak a deliberate falsehood, slandering another more basely than you have yourself been slandered. The writer dares not attack Mrs. Besant too roughly, for there is not one honest, respectable Freethinker, who would not in that case turn his back upon him. The object of his present wrath is too well known, too much respected and admired, by friend or foe, not to find hundreds of defenders among honourable men, nor can Mr. Foote—or rather he dares not—conveniently forget the debt of gratitude he owes to her personally.

And, because he dares not ventilate all his senseless rage upon Annie Besant, he turns round, and like a coward, insults and slanders another woman, because he hopes to have nothing to fear from her!

A noble example of Freethought, forsooth! one that every fair-minded English Secularist and Freethinker may well feel proud of. The repetition of these slanders puts the editor of the *Freethinker* almost on a par with the godly Christian missionaries who have invented them—those who first bribed Madame Coulomb to play Judas, and then cheated her out of her well-earned “blood-money”—and yet he is but a poor imitator of all those Dissenters and Sectarians of the Pecksniffian type. They, at least, have the merit of original invention, while he only repeats what he hears others say, and even that he must needs sorely mix up and confuse!

I defy the whole world to bring one single respectable eye-witness to the fact that I have ever “practised” as a spiritist medium, at any time of my life, or ever given *séances*. As well call some of the English royal family, the late Napoleon III, or the Russian Emperor “mejum”, because they believed and do believe in mediumistic phænomena, and investigated them. I *paid* for my experience in abnormal manifestations, but *was never paid for them*. Nor does it behove one who experienced to his sorrow the leniency and impartiality of the courts of law, to say as he does, that though she (I) repudiated the “Coulomb letters”, she does not “vindicate herself in the law courts”. When Mr. Foote is ready to admit that the “Blasphemy Law” has been justly applied *in his case*, and that he is ready to place the vindication of *his honour* in the hands of a Christian jury, then will he have some shadow of a right to twit me for avoiding to do the same. Again; am I to assume that the shameful accusations of gross profligacy launched against the immaculate editor of the *Freethinker* by Christian agents of a type similar to those who accused me, are true because he has not condescended to prosecute them? And am I to be free to repeat these, and to give them wide circulation, merely answering when challenged: “Oh, they must be true, or he

would have disproved them in court"? Or would Mr. Foote regard it as a reputable mode of controversy if, in order to raise prejudice against Secularism, I ask insulting questions as to the details of his *private* home life? What would the Freethinkers think of me if, because a prominent Theosophist joined their ranks, thus going back on our speculative metaphysics, I should write a pamphlet over my own signature and in order to discredit Freethought, should ask (paraphrasing what Mr. Foote says of me) the following slanderous gossip about himself.

"Has Mr., or Mrs. *** made inquiry into these things . . . Where *was* Mr. Foote's home, what his social position, and the extent of his wealth before he became a Freethinker? Thirty years ago he was a Catechist and public lecturer in camp meetings taking up 'collections'. In 1883 he was tried for blasphemy and condemned to prison. He is a jail-bird. His so-called Freethought was investigated by the Christian Evidence Society and shown up as a wind-bag, and his supposed science and learning have been exploded as 'part of a huge fraudulent system'; while the Y.M.C.A. has revealed him to be 'a thorough paced *adventurer*' and his *Freethinker* and other brutal and vulgar publications, 'the work of an accomplished charlatan'—published merely for gain."

The sentences between quotation marks are Mr. Foote's own elegant expressions directed against me. Would not every decent person on reading such an attack, say that there can be very little to say against Freethought if "Madame Blavatsky" in resenting the conversion to it of a Theosophist, only repeats against a leading Freethinker stale Christian abuse? Profiting by this opportunity I will close the subject of Mr. Foote's uncalled for attack on my personality to say a few words with regard to his accusations—as muddled up and confused as his first statements—directed against Theosophy. He is quite welcome to "regard the ethics of Theosophy as detestable", for it is but a tit for tat: I regard the teachings of Materialism as detestable. So on that point, at least, we are square. But, while I have studied and know

something of his materialistic teachings, he knows nothing at all, I see, of Theosophy. It is not to answer him or dissipate his prejudices, that I notice a few of the mistakes, but to show to those who may have read his misleading pamphlet how superficially he has acquainted himself with that which he so vehemently attacks. "Spiritism", he says, "is the logical issue of this fanciful philosophy"—to wit: the *Secret Doctrine*. "Theosophists seem all infected with this melancholy superstition which flourishes in gross luxuriance among savages." And also, Mr. Foote might have added among sixty thousand Parisians, in the capital of France alone: *plus*, among several millions of more or less cultured Americans and Englishmen, without stopping to notice the "savages" of other nationalities. But it so happens that "Spiritism" or Spiritualism has not infected Theosophists at all. Fellows of our Society really "infected" (the word is happily chosen) with belief in "Spirits" are very few, and then, while remaining members of the Theosophical Society, are no "Theosophists"—but "Spiritualists", one name not interfering with the other. Spiritualism is tolerated and its rights respected in our ranks, just as is Christianity, Socialism or Freethought of any degree. Our rules do not permit us to meddle with the personal belief, religious or political views, or private life of the members, so long as these do not interfere with, or become harmful to, our three declared objects. Perhaps, before talking of and criticising a subject he knows evidently nothing about, Mr. Foote would do well to read "The Key to Theosophy" just published. Nor does "Madame Blavatsky" believe in Spiritualism or the "return of the dead"; nor does the Theosophical doctrine countenance either. Both, however, teach the occurrence of a great variety of phenomenal, or so-called mediumistic manifestations, refusing at the same time to see in them anything *supernatural*, or outside the powers of man. Surely, even Materialism, with all its arrogance, can hardly claim possession of the last word of science—its negative views being simply the result of the collective experiences of sceptics in every age—a *very small* portion of humanity. *Freethought* (when under-

stood in its general and original meaning, and before the noble term was narrowed down and dwarfed by its bigoted sectaries to its present meaning) includes even "Spiritism," as well as every other belief that happens to run off the orthodox track of Churches and Revelations (*Vide Webster's Dict.*). Under these circumstances, Mr. Foote's noiseful personality can hardly be found included in the number of those of whom Job ironically predicated that "wisdom shall die" with them; so that his opinion cannot be held to conclude the controversy. We believe in the testimony of our senses, first of all; then, in the accumulated experience and evidence of that portion of mankind which believes in unseen worlds and invisible *Presences*, and which is as 99 to 1 when compared with that fraction which denies all. Withal, I for one am not a "Spiritist" nor am I a "modern Spiritualist"; and did the editor of the *Freethinker* know anything at all of our society, he would have paused before confusing Theosophy with Spiritism. The animosity shown to Theosophy, and myself especially, by "Spiritists" the world over, is neither less deep nor more polite in its expression than the bad feeling shown by Mr. Foote. In this he is on a par with the believers in Biblical "miracles" and in rapping "spirits".

Then, we are twitted with the undeniable fact that the doctrine of re-incarnation "was not brought up by Theosophy". No one has ever thought of putting forward any such claim, and every school-boy must know that belief in re-incarnation—flippantly called *metempsychosis*—is as old as the world. Nor would it gain ground as it does were it a new-fangled belief. But as it is a doctrine believed in by the greatest and most intelligent nations of antiquity, by the greatest philosophers and sages, and that it is also the most logical doctrine which leaves no gaps, knows of no missing links, and explains almost every social and human problem—Theosophists, as the most intellectual among the members of the Theosophical Society, believe in it. But Mr. Foote—who innocently imagines that no Theosophist, nor any other mortal save himself, probably, can know that which he, and the erudite Mr. Mazzini Wheeler know—gravely brings forward against us

proofs which he believes very crushing. Had he only looked into our Theosophical literature he might have found therein ten times more evidence about the antiquity of the doctrine of reincarnation, than he has adduced. Reading his oratory one can only wonder that among his new and crushing proofs that Theosophy is an old superstition, he fails to notify his credulous readers of Queen Anne's death; but as his object is to show that we are plagiarists and frauds, he is not very careful in the selection of his weapons; hence he adduces, as one more striking argument against Mrs. Besant's delusion, that reincarnation (or "transmigration of souls" as he calls it) was taught by the Egyptians, by Plato, and the ancient Jews.

Well, and what of that? Because Mr. Foote has neither invented nor begotten Freethought, shall we therefore, be justified in asserting that there is no truth in his disquisitions against the Bible? Shall we, because Democritus, Epicurus, and even the pre-Buddhistic *Nastikas* were Atheists, and preached the infidel doctrines that we find in the *Freethinker*; shall we say that all those who join the ranks of Freethought must have been moonstruck "through the agency" of the infidel Sorcerer, who goes by the name of G. W. Foote? For such are the weighty and eloquent arguments brought by our traducer against Theosophy for Mrs. Besant's information.

Then comes the query how that devoted lady "reconciles Karma with Socialism". The denunciation of both is too sneering to be of any philosophical value. "Denunciation of landlords, capitalists, and all privileged persons, is silly screaming against 'eternal justice'" he tells us. Thus, at least, "it appears" to Mr. Foote. The subject is too wide a one to deal with here, so we refer Mr. Foote for information to an article on the subject in this month's *Lucifer*.

The altruism taught by Theosophy comes in next for a shower of delightful tropes. Our critic seems quite innocent of the distinction between *theoretical* and *practical* altruism. The "killing out of personal desires", *i.e.*, control over one's animal passions, which alone distinguishes rational man from the irrational brute, is branded as a most

"pernicious and grotesque" teaching; after which the writer approaches his final and "critical" point. He analyses the rules of the "inner circle" or rather what he thinks he knows of them on the scanty information received, and forthwith falls foul of the idea that to pursue the "path" one "must lead a celibate life". Against this rule all the materialistic instincts of one who is proud to claim kinship with the gorilla are fairly aroused. "Celibacy is *not* the loftiest rule of life", he exclaims. "Physically, mentally, and morally, it is attended with the gravest dangers", and so on, the reader being treated to almost every stale and well-known argument upon the question. The eloquent editor of the *Freethinker* fights the wind-mills of his own imagination as no Don Quixotte has ever fought them—begging pardon of the noble Spaniard's shade for the comparison. His article is brought to an end by the following solemn announcement: "Spiritism on one side and celibacy on the other, are the evil angels of Theosophy". They may lead Mrs. Besant, who "is not an adventuress", into dangers ominously hinted at.

This phrase settles Mr. Foote in our opinion. He is a very brutal but not skilful fencer, and his arguments are as—

"Blunt as the fencer's foils which hit but hurt not."

Celibacy is not enforced either in the Society or its inner circle any more than vegetarianism. Thus once more the vituperative critic is shown not to know what he is talking about. A sufficient proof of this will be found in the fact that a large proportion of the members are married people, and that some eat meat and, when sick, drink wine *even in the inner circle*. None of these rules are enforced, and they are optional. A member of the "inner circle" has just got married to a second wife, and this does not prevent him from belonging to it as in the past. Of course there are circumstances when all these injunctions become obligatory; but it also stands to reason that the details of such cases will not be made public to satisfy curiosity. Suffice it to say that whether arguing against Theosophy and the rules of the Society, or throwing mud at people who have never injured him,

Mr. G. W. Foote shows himself absurdly ignorant of the subjects of his insane attacks. It is, however, Freethought alone that he injures by such language, Theosophy being too invulnerable to be wounded by such poor logic as seems to be at his disposal. *Ex pede Herculem!* The *Freethinker* has shown its foot, and henceforth it cannot fail to be recognised by its hoof.

As to our other opponent from the same quarter—the omniscient Mr. J. Mazzini Wheeler, “whose knowledge of Brahmanism and Buddhism, as well as of general ‘occult’ literature, it would take Mrs. Besant many years of close study to rival”, as saith the editor of the *Freethinker*—it is hardly worth my while to notice his Oriental effusions, even as he has noticed my “Secret Doctrine,” which, by-the-bye, he obtained from me in somewhat dubious fashion. Having written to me a polite letter to ask for the work to review it, he took the opportunity of flinging abuse at both work and author. And yet the knowledge of this “renowned Orientalist” and daring explorer, who studied Brahmanism and Buddhism (let alone ‘occult’ literature) in the unapproachable fastnesses of the British Museum, seems shaky indeed, as I will now prove. Nevertheless, his “profound scholarship” on these subjects, attained by his indefatigable travels in the dangerous wilds and the table-lands of the Museum’s halls, is contrasted with “Madame Blavatsky’s arrogance” for assuming to know more of these religions and Occultism than does Mr. Mazzini Wheeler! Indeed, in the inexorable logic and modesty of these two apostles of Freethought, one who has been almost born and brought up among Buddhists and passed many years in India and Central Asia, is not supposed to know more than a man who has never set foot in these lands, and who certainly is not a Max Müller. I have read Mr. Wheeler’s “Buddhism in Tibet,” a long article in which, for every line which emanated from his own pensive brain, one finds fifty lines of quotations and compilations from well known works on Buddhism, in which hypothesis and conjectures supplement *personal* knowledge on every page. So learned is that profound scholar, whom Mrs. Besant “can never hope to emulate”, that, in his philo-

logical achievements, he seems even unable to recognise one Buddhist name from another, when, instead of being transliterated, it is written *phonetically!* Thus one instance will suffice to expose the ignorance of this "reputable traveller" in the unexplored lands of the London libraries. Copying and repeating, parrot-like, information culled from Schlagintweit and Sarat Chandra Das (the latter being known *personally* to Indian and some European Theosophists), he gravely declares: "Of Thibetan Buddhists there are nine sects* needless to say, the *Koot Hoompa* are not among them." We open Schlagintweit's "Buddhism in Tibet" and read page 73: "3. The *Kadampa* sect founded in the year 1002 A.D., etc." Now "Kadampa," pronounced in Bhutan, *Kau-dtompa*; is written, *Kagdamspa*; and pronounced a little further to the East, *Koot-hoompa*. Every Lama in Darjeeling will tell him so. But, of course, Mr. Wheeler cannot be expected to know the difference. His remark was meant as a *witty* sally at Theosophists and myself who wrote about that sect. And perhaps also at Koothoomi, the Sanskrit name of a sage, which name has nought to do with that of *Koothoompas*.

But, indeed, the genii of Freethought have already had more attention bestowed upon them than they are worth. Let them learn good manners first of all; then, perhaps, in their next incarnation, they may hope to learn as much about *real* Buddhism and Brahmanism (not book speculations and guesses) as I have forgotten in this one.

* There are seventeen, if you please, which can be enumerated from the work of Ugyen Gyats'ho, a learned Lama from the Pemiongchi Lamasery, an author a little more learned about his own country than Schlagintweit, and known well to the Government officials in Bengal. He was the teacher of Major Lewin, late Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling.

