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ALCESTIS IN ENGLAND

A DISCOURSE

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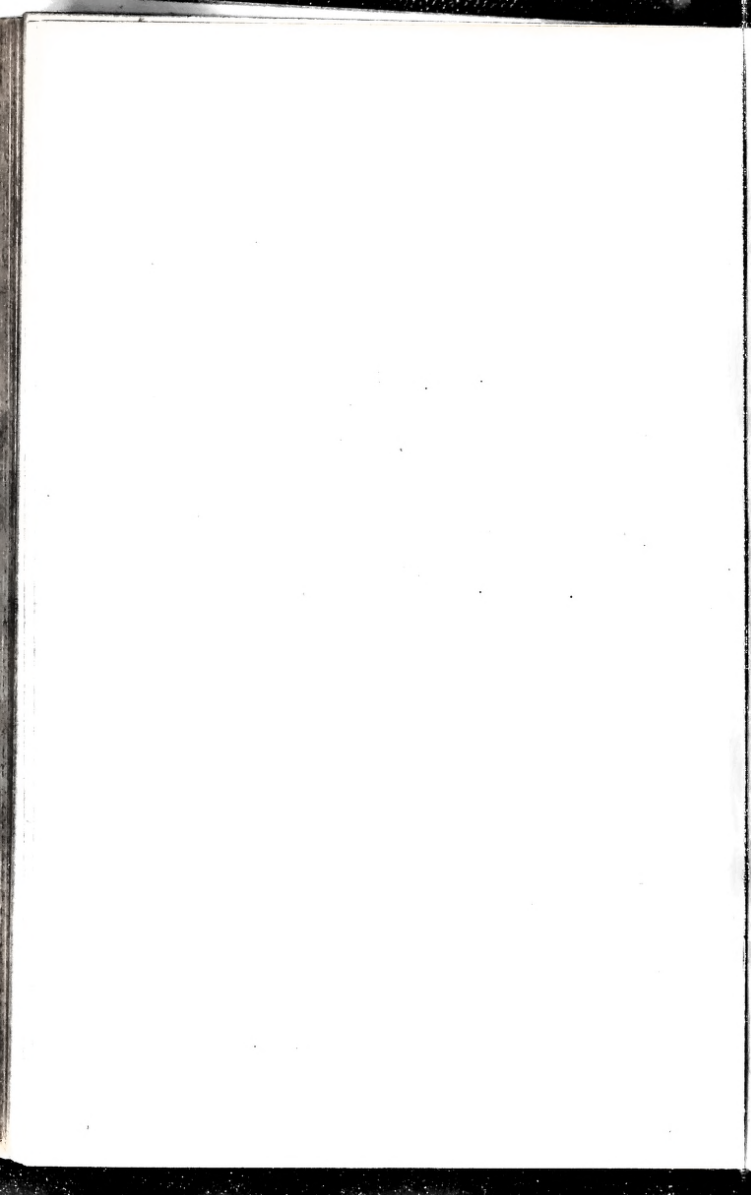
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BY

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ALCESTIS IN ENGLAND.

Not long ago the *Alcestis* of Euripides was produced at the Crystal Palace, with accompaniment of beautiful music by an English composer, Mr. Henry Gadsby. The large audience was profoundly interested, and evinced genuine sympathy with all that was noble, and abhorrence of what was base, in the characters and action brought before them. The event has appeared to me significant. *Alcestis* is one of the few ancient Greek melodramas. The majority of dramas left us by the poets of Greece turn upon religious themes, and usually they are tragedies. It is evident that to them the popular religion around them was itself a tragedy. Their heroes and heroines—such as Prometheus and Macaria—were generally victims of the jealousy or caprice of the gods; and

though the poets display in their dramas the irresistible power of the gods, they do so without reverence for that power, and generally show the human victims to be more honourable than the gods. But the *Alcestis* of Euripides is not a tragedy : it ends happily, and in the rescue of one of those victims of the gods. It stands as about the first notice served on the gods that the human heart had got tired of their high-handed proceedings, and they might prepare to quit the thrones of the universe unless they could exhibit more humanity.

The story of *Alcestis* opens with the decree of the Fates that a certain man, Admetus, shall die. But Apollo, who had been befriended by Admetus, asks the Fates to spare him. The Fates say they are willing, provided any one can be found to die in his place ; for the powers below have been promised their victim and must not be cheated, though it does not matter whether their victim be Admetus or somebody else. Upon this, Alcestis, the wife of Admetus, steps forward and offers to die in his stead. Admetus accepts this vicarious arrangement, but Apollo feels that it is a rather mean affair ; so when Death comes to claim Alcestis, Apollo tries to argue the case with him. But Death plants himself upon the principle of divine justice. The notion of justice among the gods is, that either the sentenced culprit shall die or else some innocent person for him.

Apollo is too well read in heavenly law to dispute this code, but he is rather ashamed of it, and then follows something peculiar. Knowing that neither he nor any other deity can legally resist the decree of another deity, Apollo is reduced to hope for help from man. Human justice may save where divine justice sacrifices. He prophesies to Death that although he may seize Alcestis, a man will come who will conquer him, and deliver that woman from the infernal realm. There is then a pathetic scene in which Alcestis dies, making her last request to her husband to devote himself to her children, and reminding him of the happiness she had left in her father's palace to share his destiny, and at last die for him. But, now, when she is dead, Admetus' father, Pheres, bitterly reproaches his son for accepting life on such base terms as the death of another. The people generally reproach him in the same way, and at length Admetus feels that he has acted a disgraceful part, and his life so unworthily saved becomes worthless and miserable.

Then Hercules comes on the scene. He has been slaying lion and dragon, and he now resolves to conquer Death and deliver Alcestis. This he does; he descends into Hades, and delivers her from prison. He brings her to her husband amid the general joy.

There are several points in the story which present a significant parallelism to the very letter of the legend,

that arose some centuries later, of Christ's descent into Hell. For instance, when the rescued and risen Alcestis is brought into the presence of Admetus he cannot recognise her: she has yet too much that is ghostly about her. Hercules tells Admetus it is not lawful for her to speak to him "until she is unbound from her consecration to the gods beneath, and the third day come." So we see whence this idea of rising on the third day is derived, and what notions surrounded him who reported Jesus as at first not recognised by Mary, and then as saying to her, "Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended to my Father." The consecration of Hades was still upon him.

However, it is not to such details as these that I wish to call your attention. It is more important to consider that the entire drama turns upon the same principles as the popular religion of England. It only requires a change of names to make *Alcestis* a Christian Passion-play. We have in it the unappeasable law of Fate corresponding to the divine decree, by which Jehovah himself was so fettered that there could be no remission of sentence without the shedding of blood. We have the barbaric notion that justice is satisfied by the vicarious suffering of any one at all, willing to sacrifice himself for the person involved—punishment by proxy. And then, we have a being who is a god in power, but man in heart: the god-man Hercules, whose father was Jupiter, but

whose mother was a woman, Alcmene ; and this incarnate son of God vanquishes the infernal powers, where a mere deity was powerless to do so on account of the heavenly etiquette, and the gods' peculiar notion of justice.

The god-man Hercules went through the earth destroying earthly evils in twelve great Labours. The legend was one of the most widespread and impressive throughout the Greek and Roman world at the time of the establishment of Christianity. From the old pictures of Christ's triumphal pilgrimage on earth, parallels to the chief labours of Hercules may be found. Christ is shown treading on the lion, the asp, the dragon, and Satan ; and all the myths converge in his conquest of Death and Hell. In the old pictures of Christ delivering souls from Hades, Eve is generally shown coming out first in suggestive similarity to Eurydice following Orpheus, and Alcestis Hercules.

Such Greek myths mark an ascent of the human mind above the idea of their early theology, which had become a sort of pagan Calvinism. The advanced minds had plainly grown ashamed of gods who reigned with such an unjust idea as that of vicarious suffering ; and Euripides dealt with the notion just as a Freethinker now deals with the same. The audience at the Crystal Palace applauded Pheres when he denounced his own son for the meanness of accepting

salvation through the suffering of another. What they applauded was an attack on the Christian scheme of redemption. Phœbus only anticipated James Martineau, who once similarly rebuked the baseness of those who would not rather go to hell than be saved by the death and suffering of an innocent being. What would the audience have said to Phœbus' sentiment, if it had been told them that they themselves were so many Admetuses, accepting safety at the cost of the innocent Alcestis of Calvary? What, if they had been reminded that the principle represented by Death, that justice is satisfied by so much suffering without respect to who is the sufferer, is precisely the same as that by which Christianity declares that the divine law required a victim, but was quite satisfied if the innocent suffer for the guilty? The audience would, perhaps, have regarded such suggestions with horror, and yet they applauded the principle by which Christianity is now assailed. We need not complain of this. It is much to congratulate ourselves upon that in Art, at least, we may have high and noble principles brought before the people, and responded to by them. It is much that a miserable superstition, though it may have enfeebled the moral sentiment of the people, has not yet eaten into their heart and instinct so far as to make them really put darkness for light, and honour disease as health.

In the ancient Greek religion, Jupiter stood just

where Jehovah stood in the Jewish religion. They were both stern, jealous, vindictive deities,—personifications of thunder and lightning,—with no humanity about them. Gradually, the Greeks became ashamed of Jupiter, and they began to worship heroes who had human hearts,—such as Hercules. In the same way, in another line of development, men became ashamed of Jehovah, and had to set up the human-hearted Christ instead of him. In the early days when the worship of Christ meant an appeal against deified despotism, it was a healthy and noble worship. But that was before there was anything in the world called Christianity. Christianity was the overthrow of Christ. It was the invention of a priesthood who found that this novel idea of Christ, that God is Love, sending sunshine alike on good and evil, would prove fatal to their power. For their purpose men must be terrified. So they contrived and intrigued until they unseated Christ with his Gospel of Love, by tacking on to him the discredited Jove and Jehovah, and setting their lightnings to work again. They were but too successful. He who came “not to condemn but to save” was made into an awful Judge of the quick and dead. They have transmitted to us precisely those ideas of death and hell, vicarious suffering and remorseless, divine decrees, which the Heracleian apotheosis in Greece at one period and Christ-worship at another, overthrew for a time; and they have compelled us

to do the whole protestant work over again, and recover Christ by a rebellion against Christianity.

To-day, again, we see rising a certain shame of theologic dogmas. Though the Church declares the Bible to be the word of God, it excludes much of it from its Lectionary, as unfit to be read in public. The preachers are so ashamed of their dogmas that they are angry at hearing them quoted, and say they are caricatures even when taken literally from their creeds and confessions. Lately the honour has been conferred upon us of having our heresies made the subject of special treatment by the Christian Evidence Society, over which the Archbishop of Canterbury presides, assisted by many other prelates. Some recent controversies which we have had in Holloway led that Society to delegate four eminent clergymen to demolish our principles during the Sundays of Advent. Now, those sermons have been published ; I have read them carefully ; and in not one of them is there any defence of Christianity at all. Not one of them deals with the fall of man, human depravity, the atonement, or hell-fire. Not one of them has touched on anything distinctive in Christianity. They eulogise Christ's character, applaud his charity, praise the sermon on the mount, and discourse of everything but the real points at issue. No Hindoo, reading those Advent sermons, could gather from any word in them that English religion believed in the Devil at all, much less

as the natural Father of the human family; or in eternal hell-fire, or vicarious atonement to an unrelenting God. And yet these men were especially appointed to defend Christianity!

Why did they not defend it? Why, they are scholars, and scholars are ashamed of such dogmas. They are ashamed of a God who says he will laugh at the calamity of men and mock when their fear cometh; they blush for a dogma which says there was a bargain struck between the Divine Sovereign and Christ,—so much sin ransomed with so much blood; they feel the scandal of such guilty calumnies on men and God as human depravity and future tortures: they dare not defend such things. So they surround themselves with a cloud of verbal incense to Christ and Christianity, and hope people will understand that at the heart of the rhetorical cloud there is sound orthodoxy. But I have never seen so startling a manifestation of the irresistible rationalism of this age as that four clergymen—among them a Professor of History, and a Bampton Lecturer—delegated by a Society of Bishops and clergy to defend Christianity, should pass over its every distinctive dogma to praise virtues common to all religions of the world.

As Balaam in the legend was sent for by Balak to curse Israel but proceeded to bless them, these defenders of the faith have left at the end of their labours an impressive testimony that their so-called

faith is indefensible, and that the most Superstition can hope for is a golden bridge for its retreat before the reason and sentiment of our time.

I say the "sentiment" of our time, for the orthodox theology is not only repudiated by disciplined reasoners, but the whole population have become so ashamed of it that it cannot be taught in the public schools. The religion now taught in the National Schools is nearly the religion of Dr. Channing. It mainly depends now upon the advance of a higher order of teachers, such as is sure to appear, that those schools shall diffuse a rational religion. Such a phenomenon would be impossible were it not that the people have become ashamed of the traditional dogmas. It has become possible for our daily papers to write of "the unpardonable sin" as a curious survival of antiquity, as if it were not in both Bible and Theology. An inquest was recently held on a poor lady who died of the belief that she had committed that Scriptural sin, and a leading newspaper* recommends the seaside for such diseases. It also says such persons should be surrounded by friendship and love. Exactly so. Like Alcestis they are under the dark, deadly shadow of some heartless, though happily imaginary, deity or demon—some phantom of the terrors in nature,—and like Alcestis they are to be brought from that region of shadows by such love as dwells in human hearts.

* See *Daily News*, January 19th, 1877.

All this means a new religion subtly penetrating, widely transfusing, the whole heart and brain of Society. Mankind are saved by a divine humanity. This is what our ancestors tried to express, as they fled from gods of the storm to deities of love, incarnate in human hearts,—born of human mothers that they may bear a maternal tenderness to meet the needs of a humanity born of woman. “Had men been angels,” says the Koran, “we had sent them an angel out of heaven ; but we have sent them a man like themselves.” All the incarnations believed in—Vishnu, Krishna, Christ—meant the universal love recognised in human love, as the sun might sign its course on a dial. Omar Khèyam said, “Diversity of Worship has divided the human race into seventy-two nations ; from among all their doctrines I have selected one—Divine Love.” And now, seven centuries after him, the civilised world is making the same selection. It is quietly hiding out of sight, secretly burying, the dismal dogmas of divine wrath.

But we must take warning by the fact that this process has been gone through before our time ; it has been gone through again and again, but in every case has been followed by relapse. Every bright incarnation marks a period when the human heart rebelled against some heavenly tyrant ; but invariably has the new form been coerced into the vesture of the old, and the fallen thunderbolts pressed back into his hand.

And this has always been done by one and the same power—that of self-interested priesthood. No priesthood can be strong except through fear. Many ages have proved that. To cultivate religious fear has always been their life in the past ; and now, when the community has outgrown infra-natural fears—at least in civilised centres—they must invent some new kind of terror, or else abdicate. The investment in Christianity is too great for such abdication in this country, and so the priestly interest is busily conjuring up phantoms of another—a social—kind. It is declared that all morality depends upon churches and sects. There is still enough superstition to influence women and children, and this, we are told, must be carefully retained and fostered, or else men will break all restraints and carry society to rack and ruin. We are warned that our institutions are all built up together like an arch, Christianity among them ; and if one stone gives way all the rest will tumble.

The only dark feature of our age is the spread of this guilty notion, that falsehood is essential to the welfare of human society. It is just that hypocrisy which really endangers society. If ever the loyalty of the people to law fails, it will be because the law insists on maintaining proven error, and on turning the means of education and happiness to the repression of science under superstition.

That the social edifice needs pious fraud to support

it is the last superstition surviving among the educated and it is that we have mainly to combat.

And neither Hercules or Christ ever had a more monstrous thing to encounter. To identify the interests of superstition with those of social morality is not mere atheism, it is antitheism; it is not mere belief that there is no God; it is going against God: it is pitting falsehood against truth—upholding darkness against light—ascribing to ignorance more potency than right knowledge: it is to declare a universe whose every corner-stone is a lie!

The only saving faith of to-day is a faith that right can never do wrong, that truth can never misguide those who trust in it. The absence of this faith is the only scepticism of our time worth a moment's concern. The downfall of Jehovah, or the Trinity, is no more than the vanishing away of Jupiter and Diana who preceded them. Our posterity will witness the performance of "Paradise Lost" as calmly as we now do the same plot in the play of *Alcestis*. These things will pass away. But human society will not pass away; the habit of mind—whether it be truthful or untruthful; the human character—whether it be faithful or faithless;—these will not pass away. We are to-day weaving the destinies of the future, and every false rotten thread we weave in will tell in the woof. We are weaving not for our own race alone, but for Humanity. As the priestly frauds of seventeen centuries

ago are fettering millions to-day—among them many of our own friends, and ourselves more than we know—so will every lie sustained to-day bequeath a chain to those who come after us. Is Humanity nothing to us? Then may we creep through our little conventional life, enjoy its petty rewards; but it will still be true that he who has not known the love of Humanity, nor felt its inspiration, has missed and lost the great gospel of his time.

We must learn to read these ever new, though most ancient, revelations of the life in nature to be unfolded through man. Long ago has *Alcestis* been set to the still sad music of humanity, for those who can listen deep. All around us there is a Hades, and many there be that go in thereat. Even while we claim the triumphs of reason, and mark the skulking retreat of dogmatic phantoms waylaid by the morn, the shadow falls again upon us from the miasma of moral infidelity. Out of it darts the double-tongue, striking at the heart of all manly character. This is the Inferno of those who see the truth, and applaud when it confronts the wrongs of distant ages, but before the errors of to-day cringe and crawl, and have one tongue for the conventional, another for the secret audience. Even honest ritualism is better than this unfaithful rationalism.

Each manly heart has an *Alcestis* to deliver. Each must combat with Death,—whether it be the skeleton

arms of a dead creed holding the mind in deadly grip of fear; or be it the moral death which has cheated our brother of his soul, and left him the social simulacrum of a man.

It does not require of us the might of Hercules, nor cost the blood of Christ, to make some rescues at least from the dark abodes of faithlessness and fear; but it does require still that we shall be filled with divine love, that we shall be animated by that alone, till in our human hearts there flame a passion for saving men, women and children from the bondage of fear and the degradation of falsehood.

