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## SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

APRIL, 1875.

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SILENCE is brooding over the world ecclesiastical, and there are no "signs" of any importance to chronicle. The month has been singularly deficient in stirring events, and there is a general hush of expectancy among the people. The two armies of Free Thought and of Superstition lie face to face, but no general engagement is threatening just at present. Here and there, there is a slight skirmish; now and then two champions, such as Dr. Tyndall and the Archbishop of Canterbury, charge out, strike a few sharp blows at each other, and then disappear. But none the less are the two parties hard at work, entrenching the positions they hold, undermining the fortress of the opposing army, burnishing up their shields, and sharpening anew the keen edges of their swords. Professor Lightfoot and the Author of 'Supernatural Religion' keep up a somewhat bitter duel in the *Contemporary* and the *Fortnightly*. The attack of the orthodox Defender of the Faith lacks interest because of its pettiness; it does not even shake that heavy wall of evidence built up by the rationalist. The whole affair reminds us of the charge by cavalry against British infantry squares: here and there a man may go down, here and there a momentary flaw may be detected in the defence; but at once the stern line closes up again, and the firm square is as strong and as unbroken as ever. Professor Lightfoot is proving how impregnable are the positions taken up, and entrenched so carefully, by the Author of 'Supernatural Religion.'

The *Contemporary* is, as usual, full of theological articles. Mr. W. R. Greg contributes a short paper on "Can truths be apprehended which could not have been discovered?" He appears to answer the question in the negative; but the article is in his worst style, and totally unworthy of his fame. Then we have an interesting article on "The Laws of England as to the Expression of Religious Opinion," by Mr. Fitzjames Stephens, Q.C. This essay is very good, barring the cynicism and patronising tone which disfigures it here and there, and which is inseparable from all which this author writes; and it closes with a short Act of Parliament, proposed by Mr. Stephens as a remedy for the present state of things, which strikes us as very suitable to its purpose, and one which a Liberal member of Parliament would do well to take up, and bring to the notice of the Legislature. The present state of the law as regards blasphemy and cognate offences is simply disgraceful. The law is a dead letter wherever the "blasphemer" is a man of mark or of power; while, on the other hand, it can be invoked to crush such a helpless and foolish offender as Thomas Pooley. A law, the general enforcement of which would outrage public opinion, is a disgrace and a serious injury to any country; for it discredits all law by its own uselessness, and weakens that reverence for law which is the safeguard of a free community. A law which is constantly and openly broken ought to be abolished if public opinion will not allow it to be enforced. A law against "depraving the Christian religion," and against denying "the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures," is an absurd anachronism in a country where Colenso undermines the Pentateuch, and Huxley and Tyndall sap the foundations of popular belief, and crowds of cultivated and refined men and women openly turn their backs on the churches, and devote themselves

to spreading and popularising rational and scientific Free Thought.

The controversy on "Is man an automaton?" is raging fiercely in the scientific world. Professors Huxley and Clifford have contributed able papers on the one side, while Dr. Carpenter fights boldly on the other. The automatism of man is, of course, an inference from that of animals, the arguments for which were so powerfully stated by Professor Huxley in his address at Belfast, before the British Association. All those who see no gaps in natural order, who trace one unbroken line of gradually ascending organisations from the lowest form of animal life to the crowning-point of highly-developed human intelligence, will naturally accept, as regards man, the automatism which is almost proved as regards the lower phases of animal life. The clear proofs afforded by repeated experiment, that actions which have been considered as conscious and purposive, are simply due to what is termed reflex action, in which consciousness has no share—these proofs are naturally making people ask, "How far, then, is man an automaton?" Science here, as in so many other places, is invading the dominion which theologians thought their own; she is beginning to speak in that old controversy of Free Will and Determinism, which has been so fruitful a field for argument; she is having her say on human responsibility. Naturally, theologians do not like it, and they are thundering out anathemas against the bold pioneers of Science; but Huxley pushes them out of his way with a scornful defiance, and Clifford blandly declines to leave any portion of ground uncultivated by the ploughshare of Science; and so the Truth-seekers go on, peering into nature's secrets, and telling out all their discoveries. We cannot but hope that in time Science will prove that all crime is only a disease, of which men may be cured as of any other disease, so that we may at last

have some hope of grappling with the terrible human degradation which religion has failed to cure, and that men may at last be able, generations hence, to look back on the brutality and on the ruffianism which now disfigure society, as we look back upon the plagues and black death which once decimated our ancestors. Truly, Science is becoming the hope of men, the true revelation, the true saviour, the future king of the world.

Mr. Gladstone has struck another blow at his enemies, and, ingeniously picking up their own stones flung at him, has armed his sling with these same pebbles, and with their own missiles has he slain them. His generous and noble courtesy to Dr. Newman is a pleasant feature in the warfare, and the chivalrous tone of the antagonism between the two great men is an example to all controversialists. Mr. Gladstone is perfectly successful in maintaining his original position, and he has absolutely fortified it with his enemies' missiles. The answers to his "Ex-postulation" have proved the justice of the original challenge, and the necessity for the appeal to the loyalty of Englishmen. He has shaken the Roman Church in England more than could have been thought possible; and he has, however unwittingly, encouraged that spirit of free inquiry which, when once it truly inspires a man, leads him through the wilderness of doubt, and across the river of despair into the fair land of truth and rational freedom.

The Pope, on the other hand, true to his logical position of Defender of the Faith, as against human knowledge, champion of the supernatural, as against the natural, leader of the forlorn hope of theology, as against science, has spoken fiercely against the education of the young in schools which are not controlled by the priesthood, and bitterly complains that the lambs of the Church are being turned into devouring wolves. Wise is the Pope in his generation, wiser,



unfortunately, than many of the children of light; he knows the vast importance of impressing dogmas on the ductile childish mind, and appreciates the advantages gained by the Church, if the priest be allowed to mould the minds of the children. The question of education is a question of tremendous importance to all those who are interested in the spread of Free Thought; yet, over and over again, do we find free-thinking parents sending their children to schools where they become indoctrinated with orthodox beliefs. The cowardly fear of injury to social position drives parents to inflict this great mental and moral injury on their children; but if only free-thinkers would be a little braver, if only they would speak out publicly that which they believe privately, they would find themselves so strong, both in numbers and in position, that they would not need to trouble themselves about these petty social considerations. Never yet in history has a great religious movement triumphed where its pioneers have always been asking themselves, "Will this line of thought or this action be considered by the people about me as thoroughly respectable?" All great reforms must be carried in the teeth of the world; always, *when carried*, they become popular, and then the cross, borne by the reformer as the symbol of the lowest degradation is transformed into the symbol of victory, shines on the topmost spires of the temples, and adorns the crowns which circle the brows of kings.

It would not be right to omit all mention of the glory shed upon the Church, of which he is a minister, by the Rev. Mr. Coley, the vicar of Cowley, near Oxford. This truly pious man had had his righteous soul vexed day by day, by the ungodly deeds which one Moses Merritt had ungodly committed. Moses appears to have been given to intoxication; Moses' language was not always of the most refined description; and Moses had once, alas!

for the depravity of human nature, "brawled" in Church. When this ungodly Moses died, it became necessary to bury him, even as though he had been a saint of the Lord. But Mr. Coley refused. Day after day went on, and still Moses remained unburied, lying all this time in his poor cottage, where, around the coffin, the survivors must eat, and drink, and sleep. When ten days had passed, authority stepped in, and ordered burial within twenty hours. Mr. Coley then had it borne in upon his mind, that Moses, on his death-bed, had spoken words of repentance, and he thought himself justified, therefore, in allowing the burial. Why Mr. Coley took ten days to find this out, deponent sayeth not: perhaps Moses had visited the parson spiritually, and rapped out on the clerical table a message of regret for his past offences. Even then, however, Mr. Coley could not give way entirely, but locked the Church doors against the eleven-days-dead sinner. So the disgraceful business ended with a final struggle; the people broke open the Church doors, and carried the coffin in; after that all went quietly. We scarcely wonder at reading that Merritt's widow had to be supported at the grave; between being obliged to live for eleven days in a small cottage with a corpse, and the painful scene at the funeral, the poor woman must have sustained serious injuries both to mind and body. It will be wrong if such conduct as this of Mr. Coley's be allowed to go unpunished. Probably, however, it will serve as a new argument to help on the Burials' Bill, and so Mr. Coley may have done good service despite himself. Such parsons work hard for disestablishment, and they help forward disendowment too, for Parliament will scarcely be foolish enough to consider men like Mr. Coley fit custodians of national property. Every parson who discredits the Church does us more service than our most energetic propagandists. We ought to elect Mr. Coley, by acclama-

tion, one of the provincial agents of the Liberation Society.

"Wrath is gone out against the people; the plague is begun." Messrs. Moody and Sankey are now in London, and the Agricultural Hall at Islington and her Majesty's Opera House are already engaged "for the Lord's work." Moody has asked—modest man!—for 15,000*l.*, and already 8,000*l.* has been collected. These Christians shame us by the liberality with which they support an antiquated superstition. London is being mapped out into districts, and to each district a certain number of visitors are appointed, who are to call at each house in their "vineyard," and "present a leaflet with a few loving words, so that every one may know that Jesus of Nazareth passeth by." This is a trying prospect, and doubtless these "messengers of the Lord" will not always find that their "paths are paths of peace." If the excitement in London equal that which has swept—in a hysterical wave—over provincial towns visited by these two spiritual mountebanks, Moody and Sankey will become a downright nuisance. People rushing about the streets, accosting harmless passers-by with the question, "Have you found him? have you got the blood?" ought to be handed over to the police. From Salford and from Prestwich we hear of cases of religious mania "due to attendance at the recent meetings of Moody and Sankey," and the unfortunate sufferers have to be sent to the lunatic asylums. It is pitiful that, in this nineteenth century, crowds of men and women should be carried away by a spiritual epidemic that reminds one of the excesses of the devotees of the Middle Ages, and should bend their necks under a yoke of coarse and blatant superstition. We have searched in vain through Mr. Moody's discourses for the secret of his influence; he appears to string together silly little stories, with here and there a touch of drollery that

reminds one of his American extraction, but of true eloquence, or even of passion, there seems no trace whatever. Mr. Sankey's power is more easily understood; he has, we believe, a really fine voice, and uses it well and effectively, and as he starts off his choruses with the true music-hall appeal to the audience to "join in," the hymns carry all before them. They are generally plaintive melodies, of the Christy Minstrel type, such as "Lay me in my little bed," or "Just before the battle, mother;" and we know, by long experience of the "Original Christy Minstrels," how strangely attractive these songs are to the crowd. It is popularly reported, that before Moody and Sankey sailed for England, they tossed up to see if they should come as Revivalists or as Christy Minstrels: *si non è vero, è ben trovato*, but we fear the story is too good to be true. It appears that these gentlemen once before favoured us with a visit, in 1870, I believe, but no one appears to have been aware of their presence; this time they have "come with power," and by vast outlay in advertising and puffing they have made their visit a success. A few more years of this work and they may retire with handsome fortunes, for truly, in their case, it is proved that "Godliness is great gain."

The Church Disestablishment movement is quietly gathering strength, and it is rumoured that a party is being formed in Parliament, under the leadership of Mr. John Bright, whose "cry" is to be, "Disestablishment and the Repeal of the 25th Clause." If this be true, stirring times are coming for all those interested in theological matters, and soon we shall hear the trumpet-call which sounds the summons to the assault. "God defend the right!" used to be the ancient device; "Man fight for the right!" must be the motto of the modern champions.