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A LAST WORD

*Spoken at the Athenæum, on the closing of
our Services there, June 27th, 1880,*

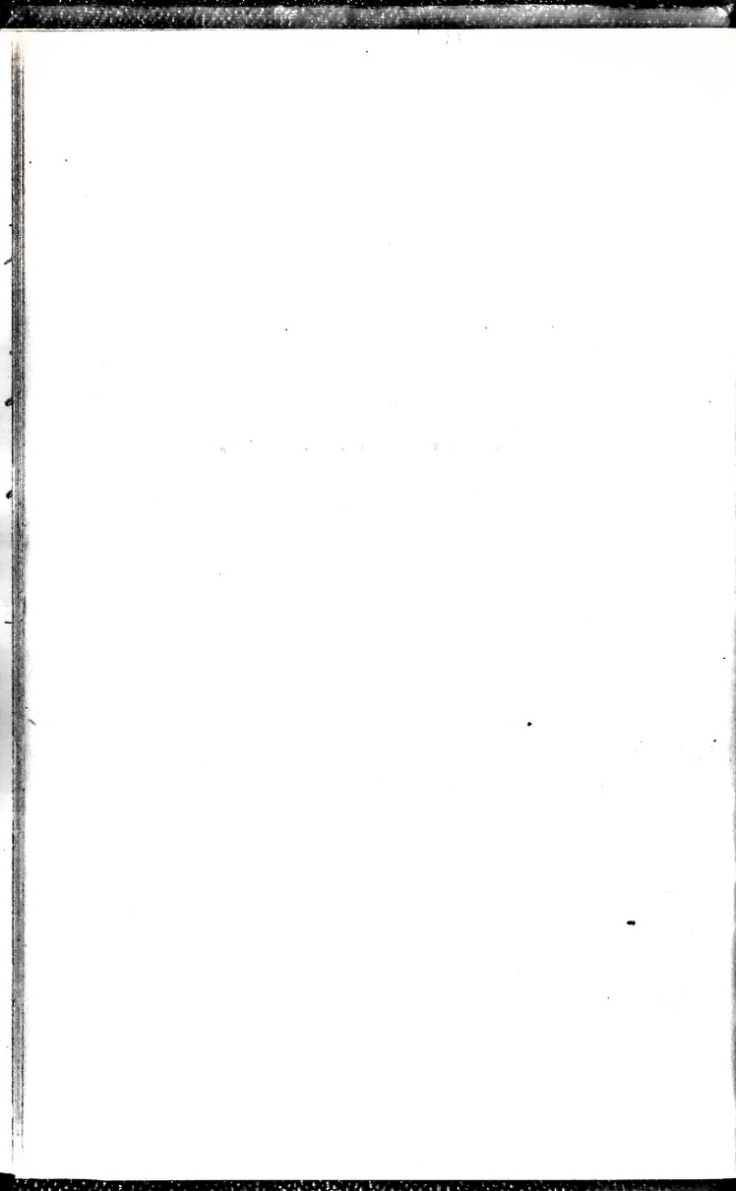
BY

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London :

PRINTED BY WATERLOW AND SONS LIMITED, LONDON WALL.

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1880.



A LAST WORD.

IT was on the seventh day of this month, 1868, that I gave at the little chapel where this society was cradled its first anniversary discourse. Thirteen years have brought us to its closing hour. As I have already stated, my ministry here ends by my own action based upon personal considerations, but having reference to the cause we have at heart. I repeat this because it would be unjust to those who have so long and earnestly worked with me, unjust to the large and sympathetic audiences which have steadily gathered here, to have it understood that it has been or is through any suggestion from others, or from any discouragement about the condition of this society, that I have resolved on this step. On the contrary, this

society appears to me more vigorous to-day than at any time of its life, and it is a distress to me that I must adhere to my resolution to close it. That resolution was formed under a sense of failing health which has passed away ; but there remains a conviction that my future work will be better done if concentrated upon one society. If it were not that I have hope of retaining the friendships formed here, and that a good many of you will be able to unite with us at South Place, it would be a greater grief than it is to speak this last word. I trust it is not a parting word. I feel sure that my friends at South Place will welcome with warm hearts those who have so valiantly, amid evil as well as good report, sustained this evening society, to the work of enlarging the strength and influence of that stronghold of religious liberty.

In that anniversary discourse of 1868, to which I have alluded, I sounded for our then small society a key-note caught from him who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews. "Seeing that we also are compassed about by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin that doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." I claimed that as that Hebrew, setting out upon a novel path against the faith of his fellows, still felt the good and great of his race to be witnesses around him, so we were surrounded by the witnesses of

liberty and truth in all time ; and never more than in abandoning their opinions in the same spirit in which they also abandoned the outgrown creeds and conventionalised errors of their time. I protested against the limitation of the great religious leaders within the mere letter of their faith, maintaining that we could be related to them and derive strength from them only as we shared their spirit, their independence, their courage, love of truth and justice ; laying aside, as they did, every weight, even their own authority, and running with patience the race set before us, not that which was before them.

On reading over that discourse I feel a strong desire to quote this evening some passages from it.

“ Each great teacher, amid many limitations, added a fresh tint to the holy ideal which our life exists to attain, and a new impulse towards it ; and each from being a wing becomes a fetter if we accept his thought or work for our own, instead of receiving his spirit as the inspiration of our own.”

“ He who gives men great names as authorities does much, as if he should ask us to put out our eyes because near by are excellent guides for the blind.”

“ There is no arrogance in refusing the absolute guidance of the greatest authority. Aristotle taught

that an amethyst worn on the breast would prevent drunkenness. Does one claim to be greater than Aristotle because he refuses to accept that superstition? Lord Bacon believed in witchcraft. Can one not accept the wisdom of Bacon without his errors? Nay, to follow out faithfully the ethics of Aristotle and the philosophy of Bacon, I must reject their errors."

"Jesus said, 'If ye believed in Moses, ye would believe in me ;' by which he would say, Moses was not like you, a preserver of rotten systems and antiquated errors : he was a reformer, an emancipator of the people, and though now long ages after he is dead, you worship the letter and form of Moses, I, in being a reformer and emancipator, am nearer him than you ; he is my witness."

"It is sometimes said of those who leave narrower church relations for larger ones that they have changed their faith. But no—they have deepened, widened, realised it. As you can trace the blossom in the apple that grew from it, so shall you find in such the essence of that which has apparently fallen from them."

"As a liberal society of believers and thinkers, not fettered to the world's infant speculations, nor con-

fined in any denominational grooves however wide, it is important we should recognise our relations to the past. We have no thought of 'sundering the sacred links which bind together the generations of men,' or 'of rudely cutting off the solemn perpetuity of the religious commonwealth.' We know that from a long and noble past come the burning visions of the future brotherhood ; but we also know that the perpetuation of the commonwealth of faithful souls up to the realisation of these visions depends on the courage with which the hearts of the present can lay aside every weight, and that dogmatism which so easily besets sects, and run with patience the race set before us in our own time."

"We should surely have learned from the ages of cruel dogma, of paralysing creeds, from which we are emerging, enough to prevent our forging new chains for our children. I would fain trust that we who have gathered into this company of worshippers recognise as the course set before us a maintenance of the spirit in its absolute purity, apart from any opinions whatever, vaulting like a pure sky above all temples, domes, spires, yet a gentle air and soft light enfolding and illumining all who worship in sincerity, even amid their errors."

"The race we are running is not always to the swift.

There was an Olympic race in which each competitor bore a lighted torch ; he won the race who came in first with his torch still burning. They who cared more for swiftness than to guard their torches, had them speedily extinguished by the opposing currents their motion excited. Let us remember, friends, that promoting a great movement here were no success at all if our torch were not kept bright—if for such success we should have sacrificed one ray of the freedom in worship and inquiry for which we exist. The rushlight that sends its light to the night-wanderer is of far greater worth than a candlestick of gold that bears no flame. No doubt, by compromising our truth—by accommodating popular superstitions, we might grow big. The appeal to pure reason is slower work. Let us press on unfaltering, unwearied, taking care above all that our torch shall not be extinguished, but shall send into the darkness and superstition of the land a steadfast light, leading all who follow it to that supreme and universal Light at which our torch was kindled. Let us press on, and though every star should set, and suns wax dim, be sure every spark of truth shall burn and glow in the firmament of God for ever and ever.”

Such were my closing words at the outset of our society. Well, it has now, in one sense, reached its goal, and, I will venture to claim, with torch still

lighted. A good many winds have blown upon it, but it has not been extinguished. Some of us may remember that it flickered considerably at one time under an internal disturbance. In the course of my inquiries some changes in my own point of view have occurred, and one of these grieved some excellent men and women who started with us. I came to the conclusion that the custom of public and formal prayer was not in harmony with our fundamental principles and convictions. It appeared to me inconsistent with the belief in Supreme Wisdom and Love that we should suggest anything to the one or petition the other. I explained this as well as I could, and with tenderness for the traditional feelings of our reverent circle. They were asked to consider whether they would like to have their own children petition them daily for their love and care ; whether they would not feel this to be rather a reproach than a truly filial feeling. Some that we loved and could little spare were nevertheless offended and left us, though we were happy to find that our personal relations with them were not impaired. But by this our movement did not seriously suffer. The larger number showed that they had counted the cost of a life of intellectual and religious progress, and were resolved to stand by every position to which they should be led by honest and logical inquiry. It is my belief that our reverence grew as the

old forms, which confined rather than expressed it, fell away from us.

It became necessary to continue this kind of self-criticism. In the course of it our use of the Christian name came under re-consideration. The name of the little iron building in St. Paul's Road, which some of us remember with much affection, was the "Free Christian Church." But it appeared to myself and others that there was justice in the orthodox assertion that it was a misuse of language to call ourselves Christians. If a man call himself a Mohammedan, it implies a belief in the position assigned to Mohammed by the Moslem world, and in the authority of the Koran. If a man call himself Christian, it conveys a similar impression of his belief in Christ and the New Testament. It is not a question of what the word ought to mean, or of its etymology, but of the sense it actually does convey to those around us. The word 'Catholic' means 'universal'; the word 'orthodox' means 'right opinion'; but because we might in an etymological sense call ourselves 'catholic' and 'orthodox,' it would none the less convey a false impression to so call ourselves by names whose popular meaning is different. To call ourselves 'Christians,' when to ninety-nine in every hundred persons that term must convey the impression that we held the opinion of Jesus above the science and discovery of our own time, was felt by

us to be the suggestion of policy rather than of simple truth. We felt, too, that our old name, 'Free Christian,' was a contradiction; we could not fairly claim to be free, and in the same phrase limit our freedom by the name of a particular system of belief. So we abandoned that name. In so doing I believe that we took a step nearer to Christ himself, who, in his time similarly abandoned all the pious titles and labels which might have gained him favour; and we shared the freedom of the apostles, among whom the Christian name was known only as an epithet of contempt, under which they suffered as much as is now suffered by its rejection.

Therefore we surrendered this title to popularity; and it is my firm conviction that thereby our society gained much in religious life and force. We left behind us the realm of disputation about words and entered a region where it became necessary for us to concentrate ourselves upon realities. We could no longer build our spiritual abodes out of the débris of crumbled creeds and the relics of tradition. We were compelled to repair to the laws of nature, to the facts of our own mind and consciousness; to build our new shelter as best we could; and in the energies which this demanded, in the freedom of spirit and earnestness which the new necessities evoked, we found a deeper, larger meaning in religion itself. We had

undergone inward experiences of our own ; we had made some sacrifices of our own ; and had discovered that the religious life consisted not in any doctrines whatever, but in the spirit in which truth was pursued and the fidelity with which that which we believed right and true was maintained.

Our trust in this principle was not without test. We were severely arraigned and criticised in high quarters. The chief clergyman of the neighbourhood denounced us as blasphemers and infidels ; the champions of the Christian Evidence Society were summoned to preach against us ; the pulpit fulminated, and the press teemed for a year with hostilities ; they who admitted us to this hall, and even the servants belonging to it, were persecuted for not persecuting us. But under that ordeal we grew strong. There was not one single instance, within my knowledge, where any member or friend of this Athenæum Society failed in heart or interest because of these denunciations. On the contrary, we were greatly benefited. It led to a complete revision of the ground on which we stood. Point by point, text by text, fact by fact, we went over the whole history of the evolution of liberalism with our opponents ; and many of our number, who had not done that before, were reassured by discovering the incredible fictions, the antiquated delusions, the defiances of common sense and common senti-

ment, upon which christian theology is founded. Many of our young people, who had not participated in the controversies through which the intellect of Europe and America had emancipated itself, were re-inforced by that memorable discussion which showed us accomplished and scholarly men driven by the remorseless necessities of their position to defend the wild speculations of primitive man about religion while rejecting the notions of corresponding times on every other subject.

On that controversy which so long agitated this community I look back with unalloyed satisfaction. It appears to me to have been a genuine and thorough one. I have always respected the clergyman who began it. When he saw what he believed a wolf near his fold he did not flee like a hireling shepherd ; he grappled the supposed wolf and did his best to slay it. He did not conceal his opinions ; he did not jesuitically smooth over his dogmas ; he stood by them honourably, even when the community was shuddering at them. By originating and maintaining that controversy he did us so much good ; he added so many to our years as a society, that I cannot grudge him and his church any satisfaction they may feel at our departure from their neighbourhood. They are welcome to their relief, for they have aided us to sow our seed as widely in thirteen years as without them we

might have done in many more ; and we know that the seeds of thought and freedom are of the kind that do not die, but must bear their fruit manifold.

This society was not begun in any formal way, and it has not been continued out of any dry sense of duty. A few families, dissatisfied with the ministrations of the chapel to which they had belonged, withdrew from it. It was not because of a doctrinal disagreement, but for other reasons. That which was so begun has been continued after the occasion for it had ceased, simply because we had come to love it. Nobody has had any pecuniary interest in keeping up this society ; indeed, it has required a good deal of self-denying energy to support an evening service in a community where most people were already supporting other societies. Had I been free to give my Sunday mornings to this place there is no doubt that this society would have grown too large for our hall. We have no reason to be ashamed either of its dimensions, its character, or its zeal. It has not catered to popular prejudices, it has had no dissensions, it finishes its course after having fought a good fight for that freedom to think and speak honest convictions, which an unjust and oppressive vote in Parliament last week shows us to be a cause not yet won. Our work has not been repaid in money, but it has not been without its reward. At least, so I feel it, and I trust it is so

felt by you. We have seen the steady expansion of our principles in social influence ; we have grown in love and sympathy for each other ; we have seen intellectual and moral activities awakened such as cannot slumber again : and as we go to our homes to return here no more, we shall be carrying our sheaves with us in the religious emotions and aspirations, the personal relations and friendships which will always be associated with our unity and co-operation in this society.

Thirteen years represent a long time in the brief life of man. The years which we have passed together as a society represent for some of us the best years of our lives. So far as they have been well lived their fruits are with us still, will remain with us, can never be taken from us. This society as a visible body ends ; but the thoughts and feelings we have had here, the resolutions that have here been formed, shall never end ; they have become parts of our being, they shall for ever radiate in our influence, and when we are no more they will still work on in the life and influence of our children and of those affected by us, however unconsciously.

And, whatever may have been my shortcomings as your minister, this at least I have never forgotten for a moment since I first stood before you,—that every principle we were here incorporating into our lives

would be one of endless influence. The community would be better or worse for it ; many families would be happier or unhappier for it ; children unborn, and children's children, would be made more glad or sad, weaker or stronger, wiser or unwiser, by our every thought and word. This responsibility has not been upon me alone but upon you also ; for I have spoken to men and women able to think for themselves, to those who had nothing to attract them here except their sympathy with our principles, and who are amply competent to sift truth from error in what they hear. Nevertheless, we have had the young here also, and I have felt profoundly the responsibility under which I uttered my thoughts in their presence, for errors do not die so easily or pass so harmless as many suppose. And now, as I prepare this my last word, it would be to me a happy relief could I recall and reverse every mistake I have made, and remove every error committed. But who can understand his errors? Perhaps time will reveal them. Perhaps when I am no longer able to stand here and point them out I shall discover that on one point and another I did not see so far as I thought while here. But I shall have this reflection also, that you and I travelled our thirteen years' pilgrimage together ; my heart and thought were shared with you ; we have grown so far together : therefore if I shall gain a new experience,

or attain a riper thought, it will be my consolation to believe that you also have attained the same, and will be able to modify and correct the errors of years less mature, both for yourselves and your children. For at least I may claim never to have tried to lord it over your conscience or your judgment. I am conscious that truths, however valued, have not been here made into absolute formulas, but every mind has been taught that its chief end is to grow. No question has been closed ; all questions are open. I have heard, from time to time, not without satisfaction, that outsiders complained that we did not label ourselves with a name, and they could not tell just what we did believe. When on one occasion the magistrates who license this hall questioned the applicants about our meetings here, and showed some signs of interference, it appeared difficult to give any clear account of us. The magistrates inquired our belief, and what we were, but no clear answer could be returned by the applicant, who was not one of us. I believe he said we were "seekers after truth and a long time finding it." If so, he was not far wrong. It has certainly been less my aim to urge and defend any doctrine that appeared to me true than to cultivate the spirit that seeks truth, the fidelity that follows its lead, and the hope that every idea reached as truth may presently pass like a blossom before the fruit of a larger conception of truth. And

this evening, in parting with this society, it is with a trust that the spirit of growth, of progress, of inquiry, of thought unfettered by authority however kindly exerted, will be antidotes against any particular mistakes or partial views which I have uttered. It is my real belief, it was stated in that first anniversary discourse which I gave at our foundation, and it shall be repeated in this last, that religion means to me no doctrine at all but a spirit and a life. An atheist, earnestly seeking truth, and speaking what he believes truth, bearing the cross of his denial in the face of the world, is a religious man, while they who persecute a man for his fidelity and scourge him for his veracity are irreligious men, though they may seem to themselves the protectors of omnipotence. It is my belief that until this principle animates society, there will be no general religion at all. The dogmas which are established in England are not more self-confident than the established dogmas which poisoned Socrates, or those which crucified Jesus ; as those proud systems turned out to be no religion at all, but the reverse of religion, so will the dogmas of our time which poison intellect with hypocrisy and crucify humanity, turn out to be the real irreligion. The coming man will preserve such dogmas as fossils belonging to a Saurian epoch of psychology, when men fancied that to crawl before a god, and venomously bite all who did not crawl with them, was religion.

But beyond these dogmas, even the finer speculations of philosophy, even many attractive generalisations, must pass away ; the best statements of truth cannot share the immortality of truth. Therefore, let us subordinate all opinions to the spirit of truth ; let us cultivate in our hearts such a love of it, that when we meet one who disagrees with our opinions, but shows veracity of mind and the earnest desire for truth, we shall recognise in him a worshipper of the holiest, a brother of the best and wisest. Nor let us confuse this love of truth with a defence of any particular doctrine or proposition. Truth is one thing ; a truth another. A man may defend his opinions ; the opinions may be true ; yet he may not be a lover of truth ; he may not reverence the spirit of truth when it denies his own opinion ; he may not love truthfulness in his neighbour when it goes against his interests ; or, if he holds an unfashionable truth, he may not bravely acknowledge it, seek to diffuse it, and be willing to suffer with it.

But why repeat this now ? I should regard our thirteen years as worse than wasted if this were not now felt by every one of us as the true religion. Yet I desire that my last word here should impress it upon old and young that it is in this spirit our inquiries must move if they are to elevate our mind, life, and character. It is this alone which makes any

opinion we may reach more than a mere opinion, makes it also an experience, an inspiration, something that quickens the moral life within us, interprets for us the wisdom of the past, and enables us to minister to the higher life of the present and future. As it is not so much to give our children wealth as to foster in them habits of prudence, industry, and enterprise ; so is it of far less importance to give others our opinions than to stimulate in them the powers, and evoke the resources by which they can form wise opinions of their own. And I will add, that it is of less importance to give them set maxims and rules of morality than it is to awaken in them the love of rectitude, the passion for justice, the sentiment of virtue, which will lead them securely through paths we cannot foresee, and instruct them in emergencies where our best maxims may be inadequate.

Finally, my friends, be of good courage ! Do not be cast down because this particular society ceases, or because its enemies rejoice. That search for truth, for which this society has stood, will not end nor fail ; that standard of a purer religion, which it has uplifted, will not trail in the dust. The constituents of this body will not lose their vitality ; they will combine in other ways, let us trust in higher, larger ways, and for more effective work. It will be a pain to us that we shall no longer gather here to sing our

hymns, to meditate on things dear to us, to clasp each other's hands, and smile in each other's faces ; but we shall still be near each other, we will still feel that wherever separated we are still one in loving and serving the good cause ; and when, after this society is dissolved, we too shall fall out of the ranks, and our hands be folded on our breast, it rests with ourselves to leave behind us the memory and influence of lives faithfully lived, of tasks honestly performed, of having done our best.

And so I bid you farewell.

