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SIGNS OF THE TIMES.

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THE last Signs chronicled promise well for the Times, for the Free-Thought horizon is brightening day by day. All along the line the advance is clear and marked, and the present orthodoxy is, among cultured people, as rationalistic as the heterodoxy of twenty years ago. No one dreams of prosecuting the Dean of Westminster, although many of his utterances are quite as heretical as anything said by the Bishop of Natal; Convocation itself shuts its eyes to the decanal heresies, and would promptly silence any unwise zealot who whispered a motion of censure against the Broad Church dignitary. The whole of

the Broad Church school are now disseminating heresy broadcast. Some years ago the Rev. Mr. Robertson, of Brighton, was regarded as "dangerous" and the words "infidel" and "unbeliever," were freely bandied about concerning him; now, a feeble evangelical or High-church curate might preach his sermons in a small town, and the most critical of heretic-hunters would "sit under" him complacently. In the sects, as in the Establishment, the same kind of progress is visible, although here, from a lower average of education among the clergy, there is found a larger proportion of bigotry and narrow-mindedness. Outside orthodoxy, in the Free-Thought party itself, advance may be noted; heterodoxy is more scientific, more assured, more aggressive, more confident. The vast progress made in natural science, the new discoveries of Geology, and the investigations of Astronomy have built up such bulwarks of defence around heresy as to make for ever impossible the triumph of ecclesiasticism. On the other side may be remarked the increasing struggles of the Roman Communion to regain her old position, struggles that have been—and are being—to a certain extent successful. The two opposing armies are each calling in their stragglers. It becomes more and more apparent that there is no sure resting-place between "complete submission to authority and complete submission to reason," and so Rome attracts the weak, the timid, the dependent, while Rationalism enrols the strong, the bold, the self-reliant. Of the issue of the conflict between these two vast armies there can be no doubt; the battle will be long; it will shake many countries; it will rage over many lands; but ultimately the Star of Reason and of Science will triumph, and the white flag of peace will wave over a human race which is free from the bondage of superstition, and unfettered by the shackles of the priest.

Mr. Tooth has at last been stopped, but the stoppage of the clergyman involved the stoppage of the services. After some delay, a writ was issued against the recalcitrant priest for contempt of Court; when this was issued, a difficulty arose as to serving it; the writ was issued for Surrey, and Mr. Tooth, who preferred Maidstone to Horsemonger-lane Gaol, was abiding in Kent. It is only fair to say that Mr. Tooth acted, under these circumstances, with considerable submission, as though to show that his previous resistance had been really conscientious; on learning that another writ could not be served on him for a month, he went up to London and gave himself over to the officers. He was duly conducted to Horsemonger Gaol, and placed on the debtors' side of the prison; there he holds a *levée* of his friends, a specified clergyman, acting as Lord Chamberlain and issuing cards of admission to those favoured ones who are privileged to enter the court and pay their respects to the imprisoned monarch of Hatcham. The Church of St. James's was desolate; a Mr. Chambers held the bishop's appointment as curate-in-charge, and curate he was, but in charge he was not. The souls of the people rejected his curing powers; the church itself was locked against him; the keys were in unknown hands. "Order reigned in Hatcham," but it was the order of silence and of death. At length Mr. Chambers fled, and a Mr. Day was appointed. The new curate sent to Horsemonger Gaol for the keys, but Mr. Tooth had "no answer to give;" he applied to the churchwardens, but they were keyless. So the arm of the locksmith was called in, and nine iron wedges burst open the vestry door. Mr. Day marched in, in triumph, and on Sunday, Feb. 11, St. James's was once more open to the public. How the matter will end for the Establishment it needs a prophet to say; at this present writing Mr. Tooth shows no signs of giving in, and many

another priest is said to be emulous to share the martyr's palm.

Mr. Ridsdale, a Folkestone Ritualist, is another of the "persecuted;" he is more objectionable than Mr. Tooth, inasmuch as he takes more time. Mr. Tooth simplified all matters by refusing to plead, or to in any way recognise the authority of the Court presided over by Lord Penzance. But Mr. Ridsdale, discontented with the judgment pronounced upon him by the Court of Arches, appealed to the Privy Council, and day after day ten judges and five assessors have sat to decide the shape into which the sacrament-bread may be cut, and how high a parson may raise his hands with a chalice in them. When we remember how great is the pressure of business in the law-courts, and how heavy are judicial expenses in this country, it is nothing short of scandalous that ten judges should waste day after day, listening to long-drawn historical arguments, in order to decide points which are absolutely immaterial. For the sake of common sense and for the comfort of the country, parsons, and lay church-people, ought to be allowed to wrangle over the shape of clothes and the lighting of candles among themselves, and these absurdities ought not to be intruded among the really vital interests, the decision on which lies in the hands of our judges. Men selected for their strong brains and acute intellects ought not to be compelled to devote themselves to matters of man-millinery, while the important work for which they are really needed is put aside and neglected. "Out of evil comes good," however, and the country, weary of the folly and the waste, will the sooner call for disestablishment in a voice whose tone cannot be misunderstood.

Already we find the *Times* bitterly complaining of the state of affairs, and gibing at the triviality of the points under dispute, winding up a leader by remark-

ing that if "the only matters which absorb the attention of the clergy are such as are raised in 'the Folkestone case,' they will soon find out that the nation cares very little for anything they may do or anything they may say."

While the English Establishment is thus torn with strife, the Scotch sister is also in sore trouble. In the northern part of the island, the conflict which ends in the law-courts seems to begin in a free fight. A most ludicrous scene occurred at Strichen, where the Presbytery was gathered together to sanction the appointment to the parish of New Deer of a gentleman elected by the parishioners. The Presbytery—for some reason unknown—objected to the cleric on whom had fallen the choice of the people, a Rev. Mr. Bruce, and refused to endorse the election; the indignant parishioners surrounded the Presbytery, shut the doors upon it, clamoured for justice at it, and howled disapproval in fashion most unmistakable. But the Presbytery was equal to the occasion; it put itself in fighting attitude, and glanced around for arms; the sword of the Lord was not visible, but a substitute presented itself in the shape of a map of the district; the Rev. P. M'Laren was the new Gideon; he seized the map, rolled it up tightly, and charged for the door, clearing a path for his comrades in the faith. The Presbytery escaped, the M'Laren triumphed, and—two summonses for assault have been taken out against the militant cleric.

The Rev. Dr. Cunningham of Crieff, lecturing on the Westminster Assembly, made some strong statements of the opinions held concerning "the Confession of Faith." Among other things, he pointed out the objections raised to its theory of creation of the world in six days, as being incompatible with geology, and to "its doctrine of the non-salvability of the heathen," which condemns

millions of human beings to eternal torment for the crime of not believing in a Christ of whom they have never heard. "For this innocent ignorance," says the reverend doctor, "they are to be tormented for ever in hell-fire If this be so, it is said, God's tender mercies cannot be over all his works: he cannot be the Common Father of all mankind; nay, they who worship such a being must be worshippers of a bad devil and not of the Good Lord." It is impossible to judge from the report, whether or no Dr. Cunningham sympathises with these objections, but, in any case, it is very useful to have them repeated and published, as some of these who hear and see them are sure to be struck with their force, and thus may be sown in many a mind the first seeds of inquiry.

It is curious what strange ideas of "Providence" some people have. A terrible colliery disaster took place at Farnworth, and eighteen men and boys were suffocated. At the burial service, the vicar, the Rev. C. Heath, gave a short address, in which he declared that "it was no accident by which the deceased met their deaths, but a dispensation of Providence, which ought to be a warning to all." Such "dispensations" can scarcely recommend Providence to the people who suffer by them; one poor woman, for instance, had lost, in colliery accidents, her husband and three sons; her feelings towards "Providence" cannot well be of a grateful character.

Lord Shaftesbury and Lord Kinnaird have been falling out bitterly over the position of the Episcopal Church of Scotland. It seems that "a number of new congregations" have been formed in Scotland, by people who object to the Liturgy of the Episcopal Church there, and that they are proposing to start an episcopate of their own; they are known as "English

congregations," but are not part of the English Establishment. Lord Shaftesbury, probably regarding the movement as anti-ritualistic—the Scottish Episcopal Church having leanings in that direction—gave it his sanction and encouragement, and Lord Kinnaird wrote to him, complaining of his "advocating and supporting a schismatical sect." Lord Shaftesbury retorted that the congregations in question were a "branch of the Church of England," and tartly remarked that he traces in Lord Kinnaird's expressions

"as directed to myself, the language, though I hope not the spirit, of Ahab, 'Art thou he that troubleth Israel?' I may answer with Elijah, 'I have not troubled Israel, but,' &c. Let conscience and examination supply the remainder of the verse."

Lord Kinnaird replied that the bishops in Scotland disapproved of the "English congregations," and that their disapproval was shared by the English prelates. But Lord Shaftesbury would permit no talk about schism, and wrote with but scant courtesy: "From all quarters I am accustomed to very curious language, and specially from those who have no understanding of the words which they use. But when you apply such a term as 'schismatic' to the conduct of a man like the Rev. Mr. Drummond, I must confess to you that I had rather betake myself to the General Assembly than live under the government of bishops, who have taught you so to think and speak of sincere and humble followers of Jesus Christ."

In reply, Lord Kinnaird plunged boldly into the mazes of Christian theology, and, assisted by some theologian more skilful than himself, he strove to shake the gaunt Earl's Low Church theories. Happless controversialist! Roused into fury, Lord Shaftesbury shouts angrily:

"These thunderbolts, launched by the Scotch bishops from behind your shield, exhibit a furious spirit, feeble minds, and feeble hands; what effect they may produce on the world at large I cannot say, but on myself they produce nothing beyond a sense of astonishment and pity."

When, after this, Lord Shaftesbury prays that "by God's blessing, the old Protestant spirit be revived among us," he makes us feel inclined to put up a petition to the contrary effect to the goddess of courtesy and good taste. If his style of controversy be the result of an old Protestant spirit, then from that spirit "Good Lord deliver us."

Strange methods of reaching God are now used in this country. Everybody knows that "missions" form one of the most popular amusements of the day; services at unusual hours, hymns sung to bright negro melodies, whispered confidences into the ear of the "missioner;" all these are a charming diversion, quite out of the usual way. A mission has been going on in Manchester, and not only are the hoardings placarded with enormous "posters," setting forth the amusements provided, but there are also to be seen large bills bearing an appeal from the committee to all "earnest Christians," requesting them to pray for God's blessing on the mission. Advertising for prayer seems a strange device to the earnest non-Christian; why not placard the prayer itself, and then it would appeal directly to God?

The Indian famine is a punishment for our national sin in having proclaimed Queen Victoria Empress of India without saying any prayers. The famine came before the proclamation, but such trifles are, of course, unworthy of notice by the devout student of God's mysterious ways. The potato famine arrived as a chastisement for endowing Maynooth College. Other revelations are shortly expected, explaining for what sore sins we are visited with cattle-plague, Australian mutton, and expounders of prophecy. The *Rock*—for every one will at once recognise the master-hand who drew the above—winds up with this terrible warning:

"Our diplomacy has failed at Constantinople, and greatly

aggravated the peril and confusion which it vainly sought to allay. At home 'the waters are out,' and the extraordinary and unseasonable character of the weather is already causing grave disquietude. Then look at the state of our Church and the tremendous conflict through which she will have to pass ere she can be purged of the defilements which wring the hearts of her friends, and make her a byword and a mockery in the eyes of her foes! Those who fear the Lord have indeed cause to besiege His mercy-seat."

The parson who objected to the title of "Rev." as applied to a Wesleyan minister has been outdone in absurdity by the Rev. Mr. Mickelthwaite, Vicar of a parish near Sheffield. This herald of peace complained that on the tombstone of one Thomas Vokes it should be recorded that the deceased had "laboured in the capacity of a local preacher twenty years." The clergy seem to be growing more and more intolerant in country parishes, and there is sore need of a "Public Burial Act" to compel them to behave with some decency towards the dead, and some respect towards the living.

The question of Disestablishment is coming rapidly to the front, so rapidly, that resolutions on the subject in Parliament would scarcely seem premature. The *Church Times* loudly proclaims that the only choice now left is between "retractation on the part of the State, or disestablishment." It is stated that Mr. Gladstone has announced that the "Church will be compelled to claim spiritual independence, and that she can only secure that result through disestablishment." Already High Churchmen are raising the cry for "Gladstone and Disestablishment." The meetings held in favour of disestablishment are larger, more numerous, and more unanimous than ever. On the other hand, the Church Defence Association is endeavouring to make head against the storm, and sows defence-tracts broadcast in every direction. Thus the strife waxes warm, and the final struggle, we may hope, will not be much longer delayed.

We will conclude with one of the most cheering Signs of the Times, and that is the increased and increasing Liberalism of the daily and weekly press. No more certain mark of the direction of public opinion can be seen than the fact that column after column of so many newspapers is devoted to the full and free discussion of the dogmas of the Christian creed. Editors find that these papers sell better when such controversy is admitted into their pages, and they naturally, therefore, welcome it. What surer hope of triumph can the Free Thinker have than this open discussion on religious topics? Devoted to the elucidation of Truth, and desiring only to discover it, he asks for, he desires, nothing more than a fair field of argument. Confident that Truth is to be found by fullest investigation, he sees in discussion the promise of her speedy triumph, and in the interest now taken in religious problems, and the earnestness with which they are debated, he sees the sign of a dawning light which shall soon arise upon an enfranchised world.

We regret to state that this number of "Signs of the Times" will be the last. Advancing age and failing health compel the publisher to cease a work that has been to him an ever-growing pleasure and most congenial occupation.

The pamphlets have made their mark, have done their work; the old foundations are undermined; superstition is tottering to its fall; the sower now stays his hand, full of hope and courage for the future, full of content for the past, sure that others will carry on the same work, in other fashions, and that the seed he has scattered so widely will spring up in rich harvest of freedom to be reaped in the days to come by those for whom he has laboured.