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CHAPTER XXI

HUXLEY AND THE "CORYBANTES"

I always thought that Huxley's famous attack upon us was the result of a circumstance that occurred some little time before. The old General was giving an address — I think it was to officers — at a time when there had been a great "push" by the evolutionists. In his familiar, good-natured way the General made fun of the whole thing. He said, after briefly describing the new development, that it all began in a patch of mud, and that after a long time — ages, and ages, and ages (one needed to hear him drawl it out to get the true humour of the telling) out of the mud there came a fishy creature, something like a shrimp, and then, after more ages, and ages, and ages, the shrimp turned into a monkey, which, after yet more ages, and ages, and ages, turned into — an infidel!

The audience rocked with laughter and enthusiasm. It was not, of course, intended to be a public utterance, but somehow or other it got round to Huxley, who, while not in perfect agreement with Darwin, was the great protagonist, the heavy-axe fighter, for the doctrine of evolutionary method in the world. On the publication of "In Darkest England and the Way Out," and the public appeal for funds for the Social Work which went with it, Huxley thought the moment had arrived for reprisals. Probably he said to himself, "Now is my chance to take it out of him."

Into what was really an attack upon our enthusiasm he threw himself with all the skill of a great controversialist. He called The Army a manifestation of "corybantic Christianity." The Corybantes were the priests of Cybele who, in celebration of their festivals, beat cymbals and behaved as if delirious. It was not, perhaps, the best chosen ground on which to attack us. Many people, some of them Huxley's own admirers, held that view. But there is no doubt that Huxley really did think that what he judged to be our wild enthusiasm might lead to dangerous results. Let me add that Huxley was a fair fighter as a rule. He did not resort to those dodgeries and tricks in which some of the apologists of unbelief take refuge. A hard hitter, who stood up with courage to those who, no matter how illustrious, opposed him, but he kept a clean hand. He did not attribute to us evil



motives, or make base insinuations, and I think that later on — for he was a man with a heart, and in his home extraordinarily lovable — he must have regretted that he had associated himself with those who were opposing us just because they lived by exploiting either the people's ignorance or their vices.

The value of a movement can be assessed very largely by the character of its enemies, and Huxley, with his honest soul, must have felt himself a fish out of water among a certain “interested” section of our antagonists. Moreover, it must have been a source of perplexity to him that, apart from himself and one or two infidels, the only people who attacked the Social Work at its inauguration were the religious people — the church and chapel folk — with whom he had as little, or even less, in common than he had with us.

No doubt his attack upon us did, for a time, injure our appeal for money. But it helped us in the end. It made us much more widely known and admired by a large number of people to whom Huxley at this time was rather a terrible figure, and who were reassured by our outspoken witness to a personal religion. People wrote to us from all parts of the country saying how thankful they were that someone had raised the standard, and adding that they regarded it as a great proof of the rightness of what we were doing or proposing to do, that a man like Huxley should oppose us. Huxley also went a little off his usual line in his personalities, which in due time reacted on him and excited sympathy for us among thoughtful people. We made no reply ourselves to his attacks at the time, although some of our outside friends took up cudgels on our behalf, and wrote to *The Times*, which paper gave the matter an immense amount of space and attention.

Some time after this, one of our Indian officers, a thoughtful, educated, and talented man, conceived the idea, during one of his visits to England, of speaking with Huxley face to face and telling him of his own experience. Accordingly he wrote to the professor and asked for an interview. An appointment was at once made — at Eastbourne, if my memory serves me, where Huxley was then living. On arriving at the house he was shown into Mr. Huxley's room, and at once began to unfold his story, the story, that is to say, of his life. Born a Buddhist, he had striven after the truth and calm of which the teaching of Buddha makes so much, but which he had failed to reach. Then, after meeting with the Salvation Army, he found his way to Christ, and in Him



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and His Spirit discovered what he had so long ardently desired. All this he told, and he added that he had felt a deep concern for the professor's soul, and that with much trepidation, but after much prayer, he had resolved, as an officer of the Salvation Army, to put the matter before him and beg him also to seek after God.

This statement occupied probably a quarter of an hour, during which time Huxley appeared to be listening attentively to his visitor's words. When he had finished, feeling something of a glow of satisfaction at having achieved his purpose, there was silence. For a few moments neither man spoke nor moved. Then Huxley leaned forward and touched a bell on his table. A manservant entered, to whom his master said in quite pleasant tones, "Parker" — I do not remember the name very clearly — "Parker, show this gentleman out, I have nothing to say to him," at the same moment leaving the room.

Nothing further transpired. Was Huxley angry — too angry to speak to his visitor — or was he touched by the interest of this dark-skinned enthusiast who really seemed to have a care for his soul, and did not wish to disturb that peace of which the other had spoken, or was he pricked in his heart and desired to retreat before mischief could ensue? Our Indian friend was, I believe, firmly convinced that it was the latter.

I have always felt a little measure of satisfaction in reflecting that though so frankly opposed to us, and so remote from the spheres of activity in which our witness to Divine things was likely to be heard, Huxley did hear our testimony through the witness of one soul brought by God's grace to know the Light of life.

Huxley was a biologist, and only incidentally a philosopher. He dealt with phenomena, doing a little as a critic but not professing to lay down final rules as did Herbert Spencer. Much of his work has proved disappointing. As a scientist no doubt he trod on fairly sure ground. He was, what every real scientist ought to be, an observer of facts or of phenomena. When he left that sure ground and ventured into the realm of moral and spiritual things he was uncertain and unreliable; never, of course, consciously untrue, but out of his depth, and in trying to find his way



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in the spiritual world from indications derived from the material he soon-it appears to me, a humble admirer of his fine intellect — lost his way altogether.

Yet I wonder if the term "lost " can be used even of the man who put the word agnostic into the dictionary. May there not have come to him — indeed, there are suggestions that such did come — the reflection that vital things might lie beyond the limits prescribed by his agnosticism? Did he never look longingly across the divide? Did it never occur to him that although by the way he had set himself to walk in, the way of experiment and of interpretation based upon proved material facts, no God could be found, yet there might be some other way in which multitudes of glad souls all around him walked? Upon his tombstone in Marylebone Cemetery there was inscribed by his own direction a passage from a poem written by his wife:

“Be not afraid, ye waiting hearts that weep;
For still He giveth His beloved sleep,
And if an endless sleep He wills, so best —”

and Huxley, or the inscriber of the epitaph, did not adopt the pose of John Morley and ignore the capitals for the words which indicate the Deity. I am very far from condemning the men of science, who have constituted themselves the apologists of materialism and from whom materialism has borrowed so freely, merely because from time to time they speak with confidence of the things they know or think they know. My quarrel with them is that they, persist in setting forth their notions as though they were final. They not only talk and write as though their facts were the only facts, but as though in the deductions they make from them — and encourage the materialists to make — are to be found the only true theories of life, of conscience, of personality. They do not merely disregard the facts of revelation, but they utterly ignore alike the lessons of philosophy and the authority of philosophers from Plato to the present time. They go on pouring out their textbooks and essays, and spreading abroad their fairy-tales based on materialistic doctrines as confidently and complacently as if they could not be challenged — as if, indeed, they alone were entitled to a hearing! And yet they know quite well that all they do propound, when they leave the sure ground of observation, is challenged. It has been well said that if experts in other spheres of thought treated them as they treat the experts in philosophy



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and history and morals, they would be the first to cry out that such procedure was scarcely decent.

Take the case of the evolutionists. The idea that evolution is anything more than a method is gone for ever. Everyone who has any real knowledge of the present position knows quite well that evolution is merely the operation of some external force upon material already provided, and the variations, of which so much has been made, instead of hiding the fact, only make it more clear that every variation was present, potentially, in the original matter. And yet scarcely a week passes without some new nonsense being put forth to shake the faith of the simple!

The fact is that science — busy, as it is — has come at length, so far as morality is concerned, to nothing. What Newman said is true today:

“After high aspiration, after renewed endeavours, after bootless toil, after long wanderings, after hope, effort, weariness, failure, painfully alternating and recurring, it is an immense relief to the exhausted mind to be able to say, ' At length I know that I can know nothing about anything.' . . . Ignorance remains the evil which it ever was, but something of the peace of certitude is gained in knowing the worst, and in having reconciled the mind to the endurance of it.”

This appalling view may well be called the worst, it is indeed a ghastly doctrine.

The service which science may render to mankind must ever be a poor affair from the moment it sets up to be a substitute for religion. The influence it has gained in certain quarters has arisen from the magnification of its own accomplishments to the neglect of those infinitely more serious matters on which it cannot help us. Let us remember that, in words I recall with pleasure:

“Of the human spirit, its heights, its depths, its sense of personal duty and its sense of sin, and its justice, its loyalty, its love, science tells us nothing, or nothing, at least, that is not utterly laughable. And the few men who do not let themselves drift will still find in



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the Psalms and the Bible the best account and the best explanation of that world of 'passion and mystery' from which we may in no wise escape."

Materialism has nothing with which it can even begin to satisfy the spiritual needs, aspirations, or relations of mankind. It omits the existence of God and of the soul. It is blind to anything higher than itself or better than the temporal. Yet it is spiritual life and light and sight which are the things really worth seeking and without which, so it seems to me, we miss the very meaning of existence.