

An Unwanted Gift.

SOME half century ago, so I am told, a certain professor published a book that had a wide circulation in which he worked out a sensational idea. I have never seen the book. But when I was told the idea, it so got hold of me that I thought I would work it out for myself. And this is the result. I have imagined a world, a generation hence, in which things have come to pass as certain clamant sections of the community seem to desire. And I have been wondering what God would do about it. I do not present this picture as a prophecy, but as a parable.

In the year of my vision, civilisation has made considerable progress on scientific lines. We have not yet reached the condition of things in Mr. Huxley's *Brave New World*, but we have moved somewhat in that direction. Technocracy has had an innings, but the human material is still a bit refractory to scientific handling. And it cannot be said to have fulfilled the hopes of its pioneers, still less to have achieved human salvation. In spite of shorter hours of work and an improved system of wages, unemployment is still with us; for the mechanisation of the means of production has proceeded at an astonishing pace, and we seem to have reached saturation point as to the number of new devices and commodities that the art of advertising can induce us to buy. Neither mass production nor mechanisation, nor a new monetary system, nor even the new morality has brought the millennium. Material comforts were never so plentiful, but human society has not yet solved the problem of the use of its greatly increased leisure, and men are not noticeably happier.

Much has been done ostensibly to add to the sum total of human happiness, though actually the increase of happiness is less obvious than the increased wealth of various company-promoters.

The cinema, for example, has passed through further evolutions. Not only are scenes visible and talk audible, but scents and smells are reproduced—the whiff of the ocean breeze and the heavy perfume of tropical gardens. And attempts are being made by ingenious electrical devices to induce also appropriate physical sensations.

Sport has developed amazingly. Old-fashioned sports like cricket are dying out as too slow. But with the abolition of

restrictions on betting and gambling, in response to the successful agitations of the *Daily Clamour*, all manner of new races and competitions have been instituted. Almost every species of beast and bird that can be induced to run, crawl, creep or fly against others of its kind, now has its race-course, its Derby Day and its sweepstake. Proceedings are enlivened by an almost unrestricted sale of alcohol. In response to the pathetic appeals from the windows of public houses to write to M.P.'s, M.P.'s have been written to and induced to vote the tax off beer, and the restrictions off the sale of liquor. The increase of drunkenness, crime, cruelty to children, and family tragedies, is as regrettable, of course, as the increase of suicides from betting and gambling losses; but then England is a "free country" at last, and the price of freedom has to be paid!

In the interests of a brighter Sunday, and because the working man has his weekly holiday on Sunday for the most part—though Sunday work has increased more than even the trade unions like—Sunday has become the day *par excellence* for sports meetings of all kinds, for the first nights of new super-films, and for entertainments, outings and jollifications of every description. The "dull old Sundays," when no pubs, picture palaces, playing-fields, and race-courses were opened, are things of the past. Churches and Chapels, of course, are nearly deserted now. The pictures and playing-fields have proved a greater attraction than the Sunday Schools to the rising generation, whose parents have duly brought them up on the approved modern motto, "We let the children please themselves." The children have pleased themselves, with the result that as the old worshippers pass away, few young worshippers are forthcoming to take their places. Indeed, many chapels are now turned into cinemas. Beautiful organs that with pure diapasons once sounded forth to the glory and praise of God, are now filled with new gadgets to twitter like the lark, or roar like the bull, or make a noise like an aeroplane dropping bombs. Ministers are fewer. Young men are not forthcoming to tackle the job, and in fact, most Churches have the utmost difficulty in raising stipends for those who do. But, somehow, people still like to feel the Churches are here. Many girls who never dream of attending divine worship, still like a Church wedding. And a minister is still useful for a funeral. When a dear one dies, it seems somehow the thing still that some prayers should be said over the grave, even if the deceased never prayed in his lifetime himself. Yes, even those who do not go to Church, or support the Church, like to feel it is there, if and when wanted.

There are, to be sure, some very disquieting factors in our new civilisation. The increase in juvenile crime, for example,

especially the daring banditry of boys in their early teens, is not a little alarming. Not all the increased severity of magistrates with the birch seems to avail to check it. It is beginning to be recognised that the virtual disappearance of voluntary organisations for boys and girls has not a little to do with it. The gentleman who is usually credited with finding mischief for idle hands seems to have lost none of his ingenuity. Certainly we are missing such organisations as Scouts and Guides, Brigades, Clubs, Institutes, and all the other beneficent activities that grew out of and were largely sustained by the Sunday Schools of bygone times. There seems to be a terrible dearth now of self-sacrificing volunteers to step forward and undertake such valuable social work. It is a pity, but the new age with its brighter Sundays and its worship under Dr. Greenfields in the open air, doesn't seem to breed them as in the days of old.

It is realised now how much the youth of the land owed to the Churches that fathered its numerous organisations and supplied them with leaders.

A second disquieting factor is the condition of the hospitals. Since they learnt to depend on sweepstakes, voluntary contributions naturally have fallen off almost to nothing. And now the trouble is that sweeps are so numerous, and the competition to get subscribers so keen, that the promoters are reluctantly compelled to increase the prize money and reduce proportionately their hospital contributions. The taxes are too high to permit of a government grant, and the old spirit of generous giving, fostered largely by the Churches, seems to be incapable of revival. Already some hospitals are bankrupt. Moreover, girls are more than ever reluctant to take on the arduous and sacrificial task of nursing for the meagre pittance that is all the hospitals can offer.

Things are going badly, too, in other directions. There is an ugly spirit growing up in many quarters, and a sad lack of those outstanding personalities who have character, and that ability to exercise a ministry of reconciliation that makes for goodwill and peace in the community.

However, there is none of the old antagonism to religion. Most men of sense regret its decline. They recognise now that if it produced its hypocrites, it also produced its saints. And they are glad that even while they don't attend themselves, there are a few churches that still survive in the land.

It is a strange thing, though, that they don't go. That they deplore the decline, and lament the emptiness and ineffectiveness, and yet do nothing about it themselves! They will assure the ministers that they have their sympathy; but they refrain from giving the one thing that would be of real value, their help. They are most anxious to explain that they are not really

irreligious. They "enjoy listening in to a wireless service, and that's really as good as going to Church, isn't it?" they ask innocently. In their hearts they think it is better, but don't like to hurt the minister by saying so. For they can listen in a comfortable chair by a cosy fire. They can get the very best in the way of sermons and music—something better than the local minister and choir can manage. They don't have the bother of dressing up, or going out, or making an effort to be agreeable to people they are not keen on meeting. They can, moreover, switch off to something brighter when they have had enough. And, above all, there is no collection. It is a pity, they say, as they settle into their chairs to be religiously entertained for an hour, that the churches are falling off so; they ought to look after the girls and boys better; they ought to do something to stop this drunkenness and this crime; they ought to settle this dispute and solve that problem.

But no one seems to see that the need constitutes a call. That it is contemptible to criticise when one is doing nothing to help. That to profess a faith one makes no effort to practise, is hypocrisy; and to ignore a gift God offers, rank ingratitude. But so it is in the days of my dream when the astounding thing I am about to narrate happened.

The aged minister of a dwindling congregation of elderly people came downstairs to breakfast one morning. And as his custom was, he took up his Bible to read his morning portion of the Word of God with his wife, before the food was served. "The bread of life first, before the bread that perisheth," he was wont to say. But this morning when he opened the book—the pages were blank! The fulsome preface to "the most high and mighty Prince James" was there intact. But not a line of the Holy Word itself was to be seen! The minister felt that he must be afflicted by some queer hallucination, and handed the book to his wife. But the book was a complete blank to her also. Thinking that they must be the victims of some mischievous trick on the part of a small grandson, the wife went up to her bedroom to fetch the Bible she kept by her bed. To her horror every page of it was blank also. Her hand trembled as she showed the book to her husband. What could have happened? They had no explanation. The old man recited the twenty-third Psalm from memory, they prayed together and had their meal. After breakfast he went across the road, Bible in hand, to the home of a well-beloved deacon, only to find his friend in like plight. Blank Bible in his hand, and blank look on his face.

It soon transpired that here and there others who kept the habit of daily Bible reading had made the same discovery. And the rumour swiftly sped round. There was an excited hunt

round for Bible in many homes where Bibles had not been used for years. The big family Bible under the photo album in the front room was unearthed and dusted in one home. An old school Bible was dug out of a cupboard in another. In a third, a man took down from a top shelf a Bible inscribed to "my dear John on his thirteenth birthday, from his loving mother, hoping he will read a portion and prove its strength and power every day of his life." With a pang, he realised he had never opened it from that day to this.

He opened it now and found, as every one else found, the pages were a complete blank. For the first time in his life he felt a desire to read what had once been written, now that he could read it no more.

In the city that day, the news flew swiftly round. It was received with incredulity. But nevertheless hard-headed business men hurried home that night to turn up their neglected Bibles to see if it were true. And shuddered at what they found.

In the museums and libraries where ancient manuscripts and books were stored the ink had faded from all the sacred words of Scripture. Priceless documents were rendered waste-paper. It was noticed, too, that all quotations from Scripture on public buildings were erased. Oxford University and the City of London alike lost their noble Latin mottoes. Even the graveyards where the faithful departed slept their last sleep, had been visited. Every line of hope and consolation from the sacred book inscribed upon their headstones was gone. No word of Him who is "the resurrection and the life" remained; nor line of comfort concerning the Father's house of many mansions. Than this discovery, nothing struck icier chill to the hearts of the people.

At the House of the Bible Society consternation reigned. Concern had reigned there these many years at the declining demand for the Word of God. And yet the concern at the diminished circulation of the Word was as nothing to the consternation caused by the discovery that there was no Word left to circulate. But that was indeed the fact. Throughout the length and breadth of the world, no copy, no version, no verse, no quotation even, of the Holy Book survived.

The noblest literature was strangely emasculated. *Pilgrim's Progress* was a pitiful remnant of shreds and patches. In fact it was astonishing to discover how much the Bible, Bible phrases, Bible ideas, Bible hopes, Bible faith had been interwoven into our language and literature without our being fully aware of it. But men knew it now. And not only into our literature, but into the very warp and woof of everything that was most excellent and most stable in human life. It was as if the rock

beneath our feet were shattered and we were precipitated into a bottomless abyss.

There was, it is true, a certain pleasurable excitement at first that mingled with the more sober and sombre concern. There were the rejoicings of irresponsible school children, for example, that there would be no more Scripture to learn for "Old Nosey." There was also the somewhat bewildered satisfaction of Communists and those others to whom religion is dope, who rejoiced to see the Bible gone, even while baffled to account for the manner of its going. But apart from such as these, it seemed as if darkness had fallen upon the nation and thick darkness upon the people. It seemed as if somehow the bottom had fallen out of things.

The next Sunday the Churches and Chapels were thronged. The accommodation available was all too scant for the thousands upon thousands who sought to get in. People who for many years had paid little heed to these things, who had ignored God, or just taken Him for granted without a thought or a prayer or the smallest act of love and devotion, wended their unwonted way to the sanctuary. There was a strain of curiosity and suppressed excitement in their going. But there was also pathos in it. They were like foolish children upon whom unexpected retribution has fallen, hungry, frightened, and eager for what they had once spurned. They had ignored their heavenly food while it was before them on the table. Now that it was there no more they came seeking it. But like Esau they had "sold their birthright for a morsel of meat," and afterwards, when they would have inherited the blessing, it was not to be found, not even when sought diligently with tears.

So it was that they came to the House of God that Sunday for the bread of life so long neglected; and there was no bread to be distributed. Everywhere the hungry sheep looked up and had to go unfed. All that the aged minister of God could say to the people was: "God gave you a gift, an unspeakably precious gift, the gift of His well-beloved Son. Some of you rejected Him outright. Some of you were quite nice about it, quite polite and kindly, but left His gift, so to speak, lying on the table. But few of you really seemed to want Him, to value Him, to love Him, to accept Him and take Him to your homes and hearts. So after long waiting, much patience and grievous disappointment, God has withdrawn the unwanted gift, and the precious records in which it is imperishably enshrined. His Son was content once to be despised and rejected of men, if through His costly love He might win their hearts. But God cannot suffer Him to be rejected for ever. He is God's Son, God's only-begotten Son, and He must reign. And those who *will* not have

Him—what more can He do for them? And what else can be left to them, but the outer darkness, where shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth? The mystery of the blank Bibles," concluded the aged saint, with tears in his eyes, "is plain. It is the withdrawal by God of His unwanted gift."

As the voice of the old minister ceased, God received his spirit into the eternal light. But a chill as of death descended upon the congregation. They went out. And behold, it was night.

F. C. BRYAN.

Calendar of Letters, 1742-1831.

(Continued from page 226.)

80. 1801. Jul. 29.

From D. BRUNSDON to SUTCLIFF (Olney).

Mentions Miss Johnstone and Mrs. Elstone—presumably of Olney. Says Deism and Atheism are strong and quotes a letter from a Mr. I. (?) to Carey in which he says he never knew a person examine Xty. without receiving it, and it was analogous to drinking brandy—it produced intoxication. Therefore he never argued it. B. further states that Thomas has been deranged and sent to Calcutta Hospital, but is better and has gone up country with "bro. Powell, Mrs. Thomas and Betty." Regrets so much has been said about Fountain. "Had he been alive I can't tell you how much trouble it might have cost us" . . . "I think if it had been addressed to me it certainly would have killed me. I hope nothing about T's derangement or those resolutions will be made public." Mentions several names of people in India; Brown, Buchanan, and Cunninghame.

81. 1801. Aug. 19.

From THOMAS TAYLOR (Witney) to BENJ. TOMKINS (Southwark).

Petition for "an interest in the distribution of your donations for the assistance of ministers of low salaries." Supported by James Hinton (Oxford), Jos. Stennett (Bampton).

[Tomkins was of an Abingdon family, which had long provided trustees for the Bristol Baptist Fund. It is not clear whether Taylor expected help from this, or from the London Particular Baptist Fund; letters 83 and 84 suggest that now Tomkins had settled in London, he was concerned with the latter.]