

*LAW, MIRACLE, AND PRAYER.**

Two children—brother and sister—were once crossing the ocean in a steamship. The captain was a relative, and showed them much kindness. They had never been on board a steamer before. The great engines attracted much of their attention. They used to stand in a safe place, and look down into the engine-house, and watch the huge, smooth, regular movements of this colossal Thing that propelled the ship. How it did this, they could not understand; and indeed they were too young to have understood any explanation. But, as they watched, they were not long in perceiving that there was a fixed order and regularity in the movement. How the whole thing had been set in motion, they could not tell; they had never seen it, except in action; and, at whatever hour of the day they might come to look at it, there it was—always moving on, in the same manner, and with the same regularity. They had asked some of the sailors whether it did not rest during the night; and the sailors told them that it kept moving on, in just the same way, all the time they were sleeping.

Now, sometimes these two children used to discuss the question whether this engine could be stopped, and whether their friend the captain had any power over its movements. The little girl, who had great faith in the captain, was sure that he could stop the machine whenever he pleased. She argued that the engine must have been set a-going when the ship started, although they had not seen it done. Besides, at the end of the voyage, would not the captain have to stop the vessel? and, to do that, would he not require to stop the machinery? Now, if he had power to set it in motion at the beginning, and had power to stop it at the end, surely he had power also to stop it at any time he pleased. Besides, she had asked some of the sailors; and they had told her that the captain could stop the engine, and that, indeed, once or twice—not often, but once or twice—they had seen him stop it, even on the voyage. So she, for her part, believed the sailors.

But the boy, who was a little sceptic in his way, was not so sure about it. He did not know when or how the engine had been set a-going; perhaps the captain had nothing to do with that: the machinery had always been moving, since *they* knew anything about it. And how did they know what would happen at the end of the voyage? For anything he knew, the ship might then be

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stopped, and yet the machinery might keep going on ; or perhaps the engine might wear its strength out ; or perhaps, if those great fires below had really anything to do with the matter, the captain, when they were getting near the end of their voyage, might give orders that the fires should be allowed to go out. But that at any moment, in the middle of the voyage, whilst the fires were all burning, and the great machine was in full motion, the captain could suddenly stop it—this was difficult to believe. How could he stop it? If he were to thrust his arm in, it would only be crushed! Besides, even if he were able, somehow or other, to stop the machinery, it did not follow that he *had* ever interfered with its regular movements. True, a few sailors said they had seen him do so ; but even they said they had only seen this once or twice ; and perhaps the sailors were mistaken, or perhaps they were even “telling a story.” Yes ; on the whole, he thought it more likely the sailors were telling a lie, than that this huge ponderous engine had ever been suddenly stopped in mid-ocean!

Thus, then, the little boy and girl used to argue the matter ; only, of course, in their own childish fashion and language. One day the boy was playing on deck with a large, bright-coloured ball, when suddenly it bounded over the side of the ship and fell into the sea. He was in great trouble about this, and ran at once to tell his sister, who happened at the moment to be sitting on the captain’s knee. “Oh, captain!” she said, looking up beseechingly into his face, “stop the engines and get the ball!” The captain only smiled, and quietly shook his head. “Oh, captain!” she said again, “I know you can do it, if only you will ; do be kind, and stop the engines!” But the captain, stroking her hair, smiled again, and said, “What! stop that great machine and this great ship for *that*? No ; little boys must be more careful of their balls!” He looked and spoke so kindly, that the little girl did not lose her faith in him ; but, for all that, she thought it strange that a friend so kind and good to children did not stop the ship, when her brother was so vexed about losing his beautiful ball. As for the boy, he was now quite confirmed in his opinion that the captain either could not stop the engines in mid-ocean, or at least never had done it, and never would do it—whatever a few sailors might say.

One day, however—not long after—as they were both standing together near the captain, and looking down into the engine-house, they heard a sudden shriek, and then a cry : “Man overboard!” Then, in a moment, they saw the captain give a sign ;

and then they heard the cry, "Stop her!"—and then, in another moment, the great engine seemed somehow to get a sudden check, and began, as it were, to pant, and to move slowly, as if it were out of breath; and then presently it came to a standstill—and the ship too. And, meanwhile, some one had thrown a life-buoy to the poor sailor who had fallen overboard; and there he was, swimming towards the life-buoy; and presently he caught it; and then they drew him in by the rope, and he was saved. Whereupon the captain suddenly gave another sign, and the huge engine began once more to move, and in a very little time was moving at its former speed. Only a few minutes had passed altogether, and there was the machine working away again with the old ponderous regularity of movement, just as if it had never been and could not be interfered with! Then the little boy saw, not only that the captain could at once stop the engine when he pleased, but also that he did stop it, *whenever he thought there was sufficient reason.*

A few days afterwards, as the little girl was standing with a large doll in her arms, looking down into the engine-house, the doll slipped out of her arms and fell into the midst of the machinery—she could not tell where—away out of her sight. She began to cry; but she thought of her friend the captain, and was for rushing off at once, to ask him to get her doll for her. But her brother, who had now (with his way of it) become quite a little philosopher, stopped her. "What is the use," said he, of going to the captain? Very likely your doll is all crushed to pieces by this time. Besides, the captain would have to stop the engines, in order to get it; and do you think a doll lost is like a man overboard? You shouldn't bother the captain about such things!" But the little girl was not to be hindered. She knew the captain was kind, and she had great faith in what he could do. "Well, he won't be angry with me," she said, "for asking him. He will be sorry that I've lost my doll. He may perhaps be able to get it for me. I need not ask him to stop the engines; perhaps he may be able to get it without doing that. I cannot tell. I can at least ask him." "Very well," says the little philosopher, "you may go; but it is all of no use. I'll tell you beforehand what he will say to you: 'Little girls must just learn to be more careful of their dolls!'" But the girl persisted and went to her friend, and said, "Oh, captain! it was very careless of me, and I am so sorry; but I have let my doll fall down amongst the engines, and I don't know where it is. Do you think you could get it for me?"

I don't ask you to stop the engines ; but, if it is possible, I wish I could have it again." And the captain was greatly pleased with the child's confidence, and he felt sorry for her loss ; and so he smiled, and said, "Well, well, we shall see what can be done." It was not a very definite promise ; but the little girl had faith in her friend, and believed that he would do what was wise and kind. The loss of the doll might not be a sufficient reason for stopping the engines ; but the fact that the captain could and did stop the engines for a man overboard might be a sufficient reason why she should trust him in her own trouble. And the captain went down into the engine-room, and spent some time in looking for the doll. At length he spied it in an out-of-the-way corner, not much the worse for its fall. It gave him some trouble to reach it, but he took the trouble ; for he knew how much pleasure he would give the child. And the brother and sister waited, and watched the engines, and saw that they never stopped. But, after a while, the captain came back, and said, "Well, here, you see, is your pretty doll ; but, you know, little girls should be more careful!" Then the child kissed and thanked him, and loved him more than ever. But the boy grew jealous, and forgot all his philosophy, and thought that his sister was a "pet" of the captain's ; and he began to quarrel with her, and said, "Oh, yes, he can take pains and trouble about *your* doll ; but he does not at all care when I lose *my* ball!" But he was wrong once more ; for, when they all came ashore at the end of the voyage, the good captain surprised him by buying for him a larger and more beautiful ball than the one he had lost at sea.

This story is a parable ; and, like all other parables, it has its necessary failures of analogy. But perhaps it may help to show how, even in front of the unchanging laws of Nature, we may cling to a reasonable faith both in the historical fact of Miracles and in the present power of Prayer.

No one doubts that there once lived in Palestine a man called "Jesus of Nazareth." No one doubts that the four Gospels represent this Jesus as an extraordinary Being. His recorded entrance into the world and final departure from the world are each so unique as to be fairly called "supernatural"—meaning by that word that they were altogether *out of the ordinary line of cause and effect in Nature*. He is represented also as doing extraordinary works, such as stilling the tempest, turning water into wine, healing the sick by a word, and even bringing back the dead to life—works which it is utterly beyond the power of man to

accomplish by means of any known processes or appliances of Nature.

Now, there are many who simply refuse to believe these records. With them it is a foregone conclusion that Miracles are impossible, or, if not impossible, at least so improbable as to be incredible. They stand in presence of the Laws of Nature—those mighty wheels which move on with such constant and undeviating order—and they refuse to believe there has ever been a single break in this regularity of movement. They think it far more likely that all stories of Miracles are due either to the delusions or falsehoods of men, than that the Miracles actually happened.

But now, suppose we put the matter thus : What are the “Laws of Nature”? Are they “Laws” which the Creator is bound to obey? Or is not the word “Law” here simply a name for the discovered Order according to which God chooses usually to operate in the sphere of Nature? Is there anything to prove that this Order never had a beginning, or that it never will have an end? Cannot the Almighty—if He pleases, and when He pleases—deviate from this usual Order? Can He not interfere with His own machinery? *Can He not break the regularity of movement, if He will?*

The Theist answers : This is not a question of what God *can* do, but of what He *has done*. We do not say that Miracles are absolutely impossible; we only deny that they have ever happened. We say it is not likely that God would at all deviate from an Order which His own perfect wisdom has prearranged; and we further say that no mere testimony is of itself adequate to convince us that He has ever done so.

I reply : But may not the blending of fixed Law and occasional Miracle be itself the highest possible manifestation of perfect Wisdom? What if the very wisest thing to be done was to establish a regular Order in Nature, and then—now and again—to depart from it for special and important ends? We may be told that, if we really believe in Miracles, we ought even nowadays to kneel down and pray that paralysis may be cured in a moment, or that our dead may be brought back to life. But we have simply no warrant for asking God to work such Miracles merely to meet our own wishes and longings, and therefore we do not offer such prayers. It does not follow, however, that there have been no Miracles in the past, because our wishes may not be a “sufficient reason” for working them now. *The captain may not stop the engines for a boy's ball; but, for all that, he may have stopped them*

to save a man from drowning. The Miracles of the Lord Jesus Christ stand in direct relation to the salvation of perishing humanity. They were not wrought merely to gratify this or that individual; they were manifestations of Himself as the Saviour of the world. *Our belief in his Miracles is therefore not founded on bare testimony.* We have testimony indeed, but we have also the presentation to our minds and hearts of *a sufficient reason.* The Advent of Christ was a crisis in the world's history. To save mankind from spiritual death, to rescue humanity, struggling in the dark waters of atheism and sin, and to bring it into a state of faith in the Heavenly Father—this we may surely regard as a worthy reason for the miraculous incarnation of the Son of God, for those wondrous works which “manifested forth his glory,” and for the Resurrection and Ascension which proclaimed Him the Conqueror of death and the ever-living Saviour of man. In the light of this “sufficient reason” for Miracles, we can hold fast our faith in them as historical facts, even in front of the great Order of Nature.

But it may be said: Well, you admit, at any rate, that the age of Miracles is now past; and therefore it is a foolish thing to pray for material blessings.

I reply: That to pray for material blessings is not necessarily to ask for a Miracle. *A captain may be so tender-hearted as to give back to a little girl her lost doll, and yet he may not need to stop the engines.* If God is my friend, He will not be angry when I lay my desires before Him. If the Lord Jesus Christ is the Captain and Ruler of the Universe, He may be able to come to my relief in ways of which I know nothing. His Miracles have revealed both his power and his love. The Miracles were exceptional, but the power and love are abiding. And so, in prayer, I make my appeal to the Divine Will. I do not ask for what I know to be a Miracle. But I am only as a little child in the presence of a Divine Friend; and for aught I know, He may be able to grant my request without any deviation from the Order of Nature. It may be that I am asking what He cannot wisely bestow. But, on the other hand, it may be that, in answer to prayer, He can and will come to my help, without working any Miracle. And so I cry, “Father, if it be possible!” and there I leave it. Nor need I imagine that those who get their requests are the petted favourites of Heaven. Rather let me believe that if, in response to the prayer of faith, God does not give me what I ask, *He will doubtless give me, by-and-by, that which is far better.* T. C. F.