

ATHANASIUS CONTRA DECANUM

[To comfort him with the thought that a Dean may be damned without being a liar and slanderer, I offer this poem to the Rev. R. St. John Parry, M.A., D.D., Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge.]

I

THE Anglicans (whose curious cult
Still entertains "Quicumque vult")
Boasted a grave and pious Dean
Ecclesiastically lean,
Grey-haired and spectacled, sharp-nosed,
Whose tract on "Truth," it was supposed,
Had in its day done much to stem
The tide of Error among them
Who, though well-meaning, nearly ripped your
Church up by wetting tusks on Scripture.

II

Some men arrive at ruin's brink
By dice and drugs and dogs and drink;
Some drab, some dissipate, some drench
Life through a weakness for a wench!
Our Dean, immune from all of these,
Reached threescore years in honoured ease,
When, controversies being over,
He found no thistles in his clover.
Who sleeps too soft is slow to wake,
And finds himself with limbs that ache.
No wolves were prowling round his fold;
He noticed he was getting old.
Leisure, the vampire of the earth,
Conceived by Satan, brought to birth
A fiend, who said: "Respected Dean,
You're not as young as you have been.
The time is not far distant when
Six other worthy clergymen
Will put your body in a hole—
And what will happen to your soul?"

III

The blameless Dean conceived a doubt.
As humble as he was devout,
All he would utter was a trust
That God was good as He was just.

Though he had doubtless been the means
Of saving others, even Deans
(Since St. Paul said it) well may say
"If I myself were cast away!"
"Ah!" said the demon, "simple trust
Becomes the ignorant, who must.
But you have means whereby to test
Your faith. I shall not let you rest,
Till under cross-examination
You prove your title to salvation.
Let us begin—Who runs may read—
With Athanasius his creed."

IV

He got through "neque confundentes"
Gay as a boy is in his twenties.
With sang-froid mingled with afflatus,
He gladly uttered "Increatus."
"Immensus" and "omnipotens"
Were meat to his "divinior mens."
"Tamen non tres dii" he smiled,
"Sed unus Deus," suave and mild;
Reciting thus the Creed verbatim
To "Quia, sicut singillatim."
He slapped his venerable femur:
"Religione prohibemur."

V

"A haughty sprite," (said Solomon)
"Goeth before destruction!"
"Pride goes before a tumble!" we
Learnt early, at our mother's knee.
This was to crush the cleric's crest:
"Filius a patre solo est."
Incomprehensibly, to us,
He boggled at "sed genitus."

VI

The good Dean knitted noble brows
That had been wont at ease to rouse
Solution from the deepest lair
Of whatsoever thoughts were there.
Yet, here he stuck. If he were walking,
"A patre solo" stopped him. Talking?
"A patre solo" dammed the flood
Of discourse, or it made it mud.
"A patre solo" spoiled his sleep;
"A patre solo" soured his sheep;
"A patre solo" made him ill;
His thought-chops burned on conscience' grill.

The grave, acute, enlightened mind
Contemporaries left behind,
Yet was an abscess crammed with pus
Round that sand-grain "sed genitus."
"Non possum" (inquit) "tanquam volo"
"Credere hoc 'a patre solo.'" "
He corresponded for a year
With doctors there and doctors here;
He wrote to brethren near and far,
To Ebor and to Cantuar;
He even risked (half fear half hope)
A private letter to the Pope.
These creatures of a clotted church
Left our inquirer in the lurch;
There was not one could reconcile
By ancient thought or modern style,
Two knights, each fit to lay his foe low,
"Genitus" and "a patre solo."

VII

"A matre sola" were enough
To make anatomists grow gruff!
Yet he could postulate a post—
"Colomba," scilicet "The Ghost."
A thousand ways of thought he'd trod,
Where God seem bread and bread seemed God.
It did not ruffle up his plumes
To think that one should open tombs.
He thought it simple work to see
That Three in One was one in Three.
But he thought lost whoe'er affirms
A contradiction in terms:
"Without a mother" (was his reading)
" 'Begotten' merely means 'proceeding.'
'Begotten' to my mind implies
Some anatomic qualities.
Seed cannot sprout without a soil;
Oil fills the cruse, the cruse holds oil.
A Word begotten of I AM
Is nothing but to milk the ram!
We know of things whose modest mission
Is to give life by simple fission.
The hydra, too, where pools are flooding
Gemmates, *i.e.* gives birth by budding.
The earliest forms of sex are seen
Nor male nor female, but between.
Do these 'beget,' may one affirm,
In the strict meaning of the term?
Even so, did we admit this right, God would appear hermaphrodite!"

VIII

This thought so shocked the worthy Dean
Black bile corrupted his machine.
Limbo of many a likely lad,
The Dean went melancholy mad.
It is with sorrow like a sword
Cutting my heart that I record,
In this account I dare not "cook,"
The fatal form his madness took.
By Athanasius still obsessed,
He was The Father, and his quest
To solve the problem that had turned
His spirit's sword-edge, that had burned
His mental fingers, by a means
Fitter for schoolboys than for Deans.
Theology has never lent
Her sanction to Experiment!

IX

At death his sanity's last glimpse
Scattered the cohorts of the imps.
Yet on all hope the door was slammed;
He knew that he was surely damned.
Despite his gaiters and his hat,
He failed with "Ita" on the mat
"De Trinitate sentiat."
It said as plain as words can say
"Haec est Fides Catholica,"
Adding a warning of the risk we
All of us run: "Quam nisi quisque
Fideliter crediderit,
Non salvus esse poterit."

X

Horribly frightened and alone,
Before the awful judgment throne
The poor Dean stood, the myriad eyes
Of Wheels and of Activities,
Glitterers, Fiery Serpents, Kings,
Gods, Sons of Gods (and other things)
Fixed on him. "Waste no time!" he cried,
"I own me guilty. I denied—
Or could at least not acquiesce
In—Athanasius. I confess
'A patre solo' hard for throats.
'Genitus?'—put me with the goats!"

XI

"Is this recorded?" asked the Lord.
"No," said the angel. "Yet Thy sword
Of wrath avenging is his meed.
Alas! he played the goat indeed.
The life Thou gavest him, full store
Of opportunities galore,
He wasted all and brought to naught.
Ass-feeding thistles were his thought.
He used his intellectual hammer
On minor points of Latin grammar,
Ruined an excellent digestion
By brooding on a sterile question,
And went beside himself through fretting
About 'proceeding' and 'begetting.' "

XII

Damnation's tones in thunder roll:
Gehenna caught the accursed soul.

XIII

"Satan," said God, "has always been
Too clever for us with a Dean!"

ALEISTER CROWLEY.