

A Death Bed Repentance *to the memory of Samuel Butler*

*Originally published in the July 1917
edition of The International.*

I.

According to the local G. P., there was no hope for Timothy Bird. There was nothing the matter with him beyond the fact that he was 86 and that his weakness was alarming. People snuff out at all ages; accidents apart, our vital clocks vary immensely in the manner of mainspring.

The mind of Timothy Bird was extraordinarily clear and logical; in fact, so logical that he was unreasonable. He was unwilling to die until he had made one further effort to transform that which had most embittered his life into its crowning joy. At the last moment, said he, God will surely touch the heart of my dear lad.

He therefore telegraphed, with a faith which 30 years of disappointment had done nothing to shatter.

The telegram was worded thus:

John Nelson Darby Bird,
99 New Square,
Lincoln's Inn.

Jesus calls me at last unless He comes first
come to your father and your God. Luke XV.

Father.

The curious wording of this message mirrored infallibly the mind of Timothy Bird. Why (do you interrupt) assert religious beliefs in a telegram? Because the Holy Ghost may "use" the telegram to "reach" the clerks in

the Post Office. Enough of such querulous query; to the facts!

John Nelson Darby was the founder of the "Brethren gathered together to the name of the Lord Jesus" and called "Plymouth Brethren" owing to their early great successes having been won in Plymouth. This excellent man was a very fine Hebrew scholar, to say nothing of Greek. His eminence had entitled him to the offer of a seat on the Committee of the Revision of the Bible, but he had refused to meet other scholars of heterodox theological views, quoting:

Matthew, XVIII, 17,
II Thessalonians, III, 6 and 14,
Romans, XVI, 17,

and particularly

II John, 9, 10, 11.

His undoubtedly great all-round mind led him to see that One Infallible Authority is necessary to any religion. Rome had this in the Pope; he followed the apostasy of Luther, and proposed to replace this with the Bible. Now, since the Bible is the actual word of God, dictated by the Holy Ghost — else where is its authority? — this word must be taken literally in every part as well as in the whole. Now you may formulate a sorites from any one text and another sorites from any other. But a contradiction in your conclusions will not invalidate either of your first premises!

This involves a somewhat complex metaphysic, in spite of the fact that metaphysic, being the work of heathen philosophers, is of its father the devil.

It is, however, impossible in practice to corner a Plymouth Brother in these or any other ways, because he scents danger from afar and replies with an *argumentum ad hominem* on these simple lines:

I am saved.

You are not I.

Therefore, you are damned (I John, v, 19).

In these degenerate days fact is supposed by the ignorant to be truer than fancy, and one must therefore plead for belief by referring the sceptic to Mr. Edmund Gosse' *Father and Son*. Reviewers of that book cast doubt on the possibility of such narrow-mindedness as is shown by Philip Gosse. But in the boyhood of another writer sprung of the loins of the Brethren, the poet of *The World's Tragedy*, the name of Philip Gosse was a byword, a scorn and a reproach; he was an awful warning of the evils of latitudinarianism!

And Timothy Bird was of the anti-Ravenite section of the Exclusive Plymouth Brethren. His has been the dominant voice of that Assembly Judgment which "delivered" Philip Gosse and his kind "to Satan for a season;" and he had been the mainstay of the movement which expelled a majority of the remainder when Mr. F. E. Raven had "blasphemed" in a manner so obscure and complex that not one in twenty of the most learned of the seceders ever gained even a Pisgah glimpse of the nature of the controversy.

For Timothy Bird was indeed a Gulliver in Lilliput. He had known John Nelson Darby intimately; he had been the close friend of Wigram and Crowley, even of Kelly before his heresy; he was a scholar of merit if not of eminence; he was a baronet of the United Kingdom and a man of much property. Baronets not being mentioned in the New Testament, he had refused to use his title; but the other brethren, at least those in the lower middle classes, never forgot it.

He lived simply, using his large income principally for the distribution of tracts; he evangelized greatly while he had the strength, going from town to town to establish or confirm the brethren, and it was generally known that he had left the whole of his great fortune in trust to Arthur Horne and Henry Burton for the use of

the brethren to the entire exclusion of the aforesaid John Nelson Darby Bird, who had not only backslidden but gone over wholly to Satan, being in fact a barrister of repute, the most distinguished member of the Rationalist Press Association, and, worse than all, a zealous and irrefutable advocate for easy divorce.

The disinherittance weighed little with the younger Bird, who at 44 was earning some £5,000 a year, and who had such painful memories of eighteen years of the most cruel (because perfectly well-meaning) form of slavery that the word "home" was habitually used by him in moments of excitement instead of the familiar "hell" of the pious Englishman.

Now, as Herbert Spencer (a little late in the day) maintained, "Action and reaction are equal and opposite;" and experience teaches that fanaticism does not escape this law. There are no anti-Christians like the children of Plymouth Brethren. They have the Bible at their fingers' ends; they quite agree that Brethrenism is the only logical form of Bible Christianity; they associate it with every grand tyranny or petty spite of the hated home; and so they are frankly of Satan's party. Terrible opponents they make. The Plymouth Brother can find a text of Scripture to buttress his slightest act, and his son has consequently an equal armory of blasphemy, which, with a little knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and of various infidel writers, makes him unchallengeable in debate.

Timothy Bird had learnt to fear his son. From the age of puberty he had been in fierce revolt; it was the subtleties of that five years' intense struggle that had made him intellectually supreme both in strategy and tactics, the most dangerous advocate at the Bar. He had become a fine psychologist as well; he had penetrated every blind alley of his father's mind, and to that mind he was merciless. He, too, was a fanatic. He really wished (in a way) to avenge the tortures of his boyhood; and perhaps he felt that his emancipation was

not complete until he had converted his torturer. However this may be, year after year with ever-gathering strength, he hurled battalion on battalion at the squat blind citadel — to foreseen repulse. It was probably the parable of the importunate widow, or the endurance which his horrible boyhood had taught him, that made him continue. It is impossible to argue with a Plymouth Brother, for his religion is really axiomatic to him, so that everything he says begs the question, and you cannot get him to see that it does so. This is not so unusual as it appears; it requires a very good mind to acquiesce, even for purposes of argument, in non-Euclidean geometry, so fixed is the mind in its certainty that the whole is greater than its part, and the like.

It is good to hear them discuss anything.

Propose the question of the Origin of Evil; your Plymouth Brother will remark sooner or later, but always irrelevantly, "God is a just God." You argue that his God is certainly not just, or he would not have commanded the rape of virgins by the thousand, or sent bears to devour forty and two little children whose sole fault was to call attention to the baldness of a prophet.

This is unanswerable; give up the story, as the better mind does, and you are launched for atheism or mysticism; hold to it — the Christian's only hope — and the sole possible reply is "Shall not the judge of the whole earth do right?" "Yes," you retort, "He shall; that is just my proof that your God is a tribal fetish, and not at all the judge of the whole earth." The conversation, after a sulphurous interlude, again rises to the dignity of argument, and on some infinitely subtle and obscure minor point which he had never thought of before — I speak of a rare incident much prized by connoisseurs — you do really and truly prove to him from Scripture that he is wrong.

Is he downhearted? NO!

The momentary cloud upon his brow passes; the glorious sun shines out amid the wrack:

"The devil can quote Scripture."

In vain you reply that this consuming doubt invalidates the whole of his arguments, which are all drawn from Scripture; and this again admitting of no reply, the worthy man will continue to breathe out lightings and slaughter until physical weariness bids him desist.

Yet it was the cherished belief of John Nelson Darby Bird that the last straw will break the camel's back; or, more practically, that if you sandpaper bricks at the base of a building long enough the building will suddenly and without warning reel and fall. You remember that Noah spent 120 years building the ark — with hardly a shower. When the flood came, it came suddenly. J. N. D. Bird, K. C., was quite ready to "go to the ant, thou sluggard," or to Noah, as circumstances might indicate.

Before he answered his father's telegram he borrowed the billiard chalk from the waistcoat pockets of his clerk, whose sporting instincts had got the best briefs for his employers in horsey and divorcee circles.

(Lord John Darcy v. the Stewards of the Jockey Club, Riddell v. Riddell, Clay, Arthur, Thompson, Battersby, Jacobs, Bernheim, de la Rue, Griggles, Waite, Shirley, Willimason, Klein, Banks, Kennedy, Gregg, Greg, and others. These were the remarkable cases that established the reputation of Mr. Bird. His successful defense of Mrs. Riddell had won him, in addition, a vice-presidency of the Anthropological Society.)

To those who are not Plymouth Brethren it will not be obvious why John Bird pocketed the billiard chalk, and a new digression becomes Cocker.

Chalk is the commonest form in which carbonate of calcium is found in Nature. Under the microscope it is seen to be composed of the dust of the shells of minute marine animals. Geologists consider it impossible that a layer of chalk 10,000 feet thick should have been deposited in the course of a week, or even in the course of, say, 4,004 years.

The year after John Bird was called up to the Bar he had fleshed his maiden steel upon his father by taking a piece of chalk, a microscope, and twenty-seven volumes of geology to Carnswith Towers for the long vacation. Father and son talked chalk day and night for nine weeks. It was a drawn battle. The father had to admit the facts of geology. "Then," said the son, "I cannot believe that God wrote a lie upon the rocks." Timothy replied, "Let God be true, and every man a liar!" He also very ably urged that it was not a lie. If men of science were not blinded by the devil (owing to their seared consciences and their quite gratuitous hatred of God; they would see, as he, Timothy Bird, saw, that it was obvious from the chalk itself that it had been created in a moment. Alternately, God had written a lie upon the rocks in order to blind them. "God shall send them strong delusion, that they may believe a lie."

The immorality of this latter proceeding, of course, led to the old "God is a just God" line of argument with its inevitable conclusion in Sheol for the younger Bird.

Phoenix-like, however, he caused lumps of chalk to be conveyed to his father at irregular intervals; for he saw, with the astuteness that had discomfited Lord John Darcy, that his father's belief had really been shaken by the argument. The outworks held; the citadel crumbled. In the deepest shrine of sub-consciousness Timothy Bird, or, rather, Something that was in very truth not Timothy Bird, knew that the world was not made in six days, that the Book of Genesis was a Jewish fable, that the whole structure of "revelation" was a lie, that the Incarnation and the Atonement were but dreams.

Armed, therefore, with the integrity described by Horace and the billiard chalk, John Nelson Darby Bird went to Carnswith Towers by the 3:45 for a final wrestle with the Angel.

II.

The old man was sitting up when his son arrived. Arthur Horne and Henry Burton, the one pale, the other sallow, the one stumpy and fat, the other dried up, had come to pray with him. The doctor, who was not of the fold, appeared nauseated at the unction of the vultures, and (before he left) communicated a portion of this feeling to the nurse who, although a "Plymouth Sister," had experience in her profession of the realities of life, and consequently to some extent saw things, though dimly, as they really were.

Burton was praying audibly as John Bird entered. Without moving a muscle, he directed the current of his supplications into a new channel.

"And, dear Jesus, we beseech Thee, on behalf of one among us, or perhaps now among us, or soon to be present among us (it would not do to admit that he knew of anything that was occurring in the room), one we truly fear dead in trespasses and sins and so it seems far indeed from the precious blood. May it please Thee that this thine aged servant may at last be gladdened, ere he pass into his exceeding great reward, by Thy wonderful mercy working in this hard heart and unregenerate Adam —"

With utter weariness of tautologies and repetitions, the prayer meandered on for another ten minutes. At last came the Amen.

Not until then did Timothy Bird open his eyes and greet his son. Feeble as he was, he began to "plead with him" to "come to Jesus." The son had a terrible temptation to acquiesce, to spare the oldster "useless" pain. In the stern school of the Brethren, truth, or what passes for truth, must outweigh all human feelings, as if a sword were thrown into a scale wherein two oat-husks were contending. This obstinacy of those five terrible conscious years of revolt assisted his decision to sway to that austerity which here he thought was cruelty.

"Father," said he, "don't poison your last hours by these delusions! If there be a God, it is certain that He never trapped man as you say He did."

Arthur Horne interrupted: "God is a just God."

"Then why did he make vermin?" retorted the barrister.

A long and labored explanation followed from the excellent Horne, who never suspected that the repartee was not part of the argument.

It all wound its weary way back to the old subject of the sure and certain damnation of John Bird.

The latter paid no heed. His human feelings swamped all else. He knew instinctively at that moment the supreme human truth that the son is the father, literally identical of one substance. Also, in the great presence of death there is no place for religion of any kind. The sham of it becomes patent — a hideous masque and revelry of mocking thoughts. Even where it is the strongest of all drugs, it lowers, hypnotic cloud or levin of storm, shines never as a sun of life. The Pagans knew; try and write even a letter of condolence to a friend bereaved, and you will know it too. Glib consolations are the work of shallow hypocrites, or of cowards too scared to face their fear — the easy falsehood of immortality. The iridescent bubble of faith is easily burst — woe to the man who dares touch it by so much as one word of truth on any serious subject!

"My son," began Timothy Bird, to whom the approach of death now lent a majesty indescribable — the feeble baronet might have been a patriarch of the patriarchs — "my life has failed. Its one desire has been that God would bring my only son to His grace. It was not His will. To that I bow; my times are in His hand. His will, not mine, be done. It may be that my death may be the means —" and on he rambled the well-worn paths of "pleading with a soul," things so hackneyed that John Bird, facing his own problem as he was hardly heard them trickle through his ears. He only marked a

stumbling, a growing hesitation, and a look of trouble and of awe. It was a machine interrupted; yet, strangely, not so much as if it were breaking down, but as if a new hand were on the levers. Surely the end was near. The old man himself seemed to think so. He detected his own weakness; he flushed with a sort of shame; he seemed to gather himself for an effort.

"John," said he firmly, "shall not the Judge of the whole earth do right? You are a lawyer; you understand the value of testimony. Here are we four, three living and one almost gone to be with Christ, all ready to lift up our voices and testify to the saving grace of God. Is it not so?"

Solemnly enough, Horne, Burton, and the nurse gave their ascent. "Will you not accept their witness?"

"I, too, have witnesses," replied John Bird; and he drew the billiard chalk from his pocket and laid it on the mantle-piece. "Let God be true," said he, "and every man a liar!"

The light of fanaticism that blazed from the eyes of the moribund man flashed once, and went suddenly out. An uncomprehending stare replaced it. He seemed to search the Infinite. All thought he was at the extreme, and Horne and Butler, intent as they were on their own plans, were frightened into silence. John Bird returned to his problem; it was himself that was dying. And yet no, for the true self was living in himself. And he understood that marriage is a sacrament, and must not be blasphemed by hedging it about with laws of property, and canon prohibitions, and inspection and superintendence sacerdotal. Every man is a king and priest to God; every man is the shrine of a God; the guardian of an eternal flame, the never-extinguished lamp of the Rosicrucian allegory.

The eyes of the old man were still fixed on the chalk in an unwinking stare. His color heightened and his breath came faster. Yet his muscles grew ever more

rigid; he seemed to grip the arms of the chair in which he was propped by pillows.

It was he at last who broke the silence. "Nurse," he said, very slowly but firmly and distinctly, "take my keys and open the buhl cabinet." The woman obeyed. "Bring me the paper in the lower middle drawer." She did so.

With perfect calm and deliberation, but with more vital energy than he had yet shown, and with his eyes shining now with a warm and kindly lustre, he tore the paper across and across.

"Burn it!" said he. The nurse took it to the flame of her spirit lamp and consumed the pieces.

The son understood what had been done. "Father," said he, "I don't want the money. I didn't come down here for that."

Placidity came the amazing retort: "Then give it to the Rationalist Press Association!"

Horne and Burton broke into a shrill twittering and rumbling of protest. His mind is gone, was the burden of their swan-song. The old man smiled, like a God smiling at his puppets. Their plaint turned to denunciation.

John Bird aroused himself. "You must leave the house," said he. With barely a push they complied; they were too astounded to do themselves justice.

The dying man beckoned his son. "Your life must have been a hell," said he, "and I made it so. But it was blindness and not unkindness, Jack." His son had not heard "Jack" for thirty years. He fell on his knees beside his father, and burst into strong sobs. Those thirty years of strife and wrong and misunderstanding came back, single, and in battalions, too!

The old man's head had fallen back; a smile had softened the old stern expression; the eyes closed as if in ecstasy.

Even the nurse was mistaken; she touched the shoulder of the barrister. But John would not move; and

suddenly she recognized that the old man was breathing; from swift and shallow it deepened to strong and slow; a great sleep was upon him.

For three hours his son knelt be him, his lips fastened on one hand; and of the experience of those three hours who shall speak?

Then came the doctor — to pronounce the patient “wonderfully better.”

And indeed he lived three years, sane, healthy, and strong.

I saw him the year after at the annual dinner of the Rationalist Press Association — the weight of his theories rolled off the grand old shoulders. And far down the table I saw Messrs Horne and Burton; but not being encouraged.

There is a cenotaph in the family vault. Following the usual recital of the virtues of the deceased, written in smiling irony by his own hand, comes this text:

The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.