

# **Superstition**

Robert Ingersoll



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# Superstition

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## I. WHAT IS SUPERSTITION?

To believe in spite of evidence or without evidence.

To account for one mystery by another.

To believe that the world is governed by chance or caprice.

To disregard the true relation between cause and effect.

To put thought, intention and design back of nature.

To believe that mind created and controls matter.

To believe in force apart from substance, or in substance apart from force.

To believe in miracles, spells and charms, in dreams and prophecies.

To believe in the supernatural.

The foundation of superstition is ignorance, the superstructure is faith and the dome is a vain hope.

Superstition is the child of ignorance and the mother of misery.

In nearly every brain is found some cloud of superstition.

A woman drops a cloth with which she is washing dishes, and she exclaims: "That means company."

Most people will admit that there is no possible connection between dropping the cloth and the coming of visitors. The falling cloth could not have put the visit desire in the minds of people not present, and how could the cloth produce the desire to visit the particular person who dropped it? There is no possible connection between the dropping of the cloth and the anticipated effects.

A man catches a glimpse of the new moon over his left shoulder, and he says: "This is bad luck."

To see the moon over the right or left shoulder, or not to see it, could not by any possibility affect the moon, neither could it change the effect or influence of the moon on any earthly thing. Certainly the left-shoulder glance could in no way affect the nature of things. All the facts in nature would remain the same as though the glance had been over the right shoulder. We see no connection between the left shoulder glance and any possible evil effects upon the one who saw the moon in this way.

A girl counts the leaves of a flower, and she says: "One, he comes; two, he tarries; three, he courts; four, he marries; five, he goes away."

Of course the flower did not grow, and the number of its leaves was not determined with reference to the courtship or marriage of this girl, neither could there have been any intelligence that guided her hand when she selected that particular flower. So, counting the seeds in an apple cannot in any way determine whether the future of an individual is to be happy or miserable.

Thousands of persons believe in lucky and unlucky days, numbers, signs and jewels.

Many people regard Friday as an unlucky day — as a bad day to commence a journey, to marry, to make any investment. The only reason given is that Friday is an unlucky day.

Starting across the sea on Friday could have no possible effect upon the winds, or waves, or tides, any more than starting on any other day, and the only possible reason for thinking Friday unlucky is the assertion that it is so.

So it is thought by many that it is dangerous for thirteen people to dine together. Now, if thirteen is a dangerous number, twenty-six ought to be twice as dangerous, and fifty-two four times as terrible.

It is said that one of the thirteen will die in a year. Now, there is no possible relation between the number and the digestion of each, between the number and the individual diseases. If fourteen dine together there is greater probability, if we take into account only the number, of a death within the year, than there would be if only thirteen were at the table.

Overturning the salt is very unlucky, but spilling the vinegar makes no difference.

Why salt should be revengeful and vinegar forgiving has never been told.

If the first person who enters a theater is cross eyed, the audience will be small and the "run" a failure.

How the peculiarity of the eyes of the first one who enters, changes the intention of a community, or how the intentions of a community cause the cross-eyed man to go early, has never been satisfactorily explained. Between this so-called cause and the so-called effect there is, so far as we can see, no possible relation.

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To wear an opal is bad luck, but rubies bring health. How these stones affect the future, how they destroy causes and defeat effects, no one pretends to know.

So, there are thousands of lucky and unlucky things, warnings, omens and prophecies, but all sensible, sane and reasoning human beings know that every one is an absurd and idiotic superstition.

Let us take another step:

For many centuries it was believed that eclipses of the sun and moon were prophetic of pestilence or famine, and that comets foretold the death of kings, or the destruction of nations, the coming of war or plague. All strange appearances in the heavens — the Northern Lights, circles about the moon, sun dogs, falling stars — filled our intelligent ancestors with terror. They fell upon their knees — did their best with sacrifice and prayer to avoid the threatened disaster. Their faces were ashen with fear as they closed their eyes and cried to the heavens for help. The clergy, who were as familiar with God then as the orthodox preachers are now, knew exactly the meaning of eclipses and sun dogs and Northern Lights; knew that God's patience was nearly exhausted; that he was then whetting the sword of his wrath, and that the people could save themselves only by obeying the priests, by counting their beads and doubling their subscriptions.

Earthquakes and cyclones filled the coffers of the church. In the midst of disasters the miser, with trembling hands, opened his purse. In the gloom of eclipses thieves and robbers divided their booty with God, and poor, honest, ignorant girls, remembering that they had forgotten to say a prayer, gave their little earnings to soften the heart of God.

Now we know that all these signs and wonders in the heavens have nothing to do with the fate of kings, nations or individuals; that they had no more reference to human beings than to colonies of ants, hives of bees or the eggs of insects. We now know that the signs and eclipses, the comets, and the falling stars, would have been just the same if not a human being had been upon the earth. We know now that eclipses come at certain times and that their coming can be exactly foretold.

A little while ago the belief was general that there were certain healing virtues in inanimate things, in the bones of holy men and women, in the rags that had been torn from the foul clothing of still fowler saints, in hairs from martyrs, in bits of wood and rusty nails from the true cross, in the teeth and finger nails of pious men, and in a thousand other sacred things.

The diseased were cured by kissing a box in which was kept some bone, or rag, or bit of wood, some holy hairs, provided the kiss was preceded, or followed by a gift — a something for the church.

In some mysterious way the virtue in the bone, or rag, or piece of wood, crept or flowed from the box, took possession of the sick who had the necessary faith, and in the name of God drove out the devils who were the real disease.

This belief in the efficacy of bones or rags and holy hair was born of another belief — the belief that all diseases were produced by evil spirits. The insane were supposed to be possessed by devils. Epilepsy and hysteria were produced by the imps of Satan. In short, every human affliction was the work of the malicious emissaries of the god of hell. This belief was almost universal, and even in our time the sacred bones are believed in by millions of people.

But to-day no intelligent man believes in the existence of devils — no intelligent man believes that evil spirits cause disease — consequently, no intelligent person believes that holy bones or rags, sacred hairs or pieces of wood, can drive disease out, or in any way bring back to the pallid cheek the rose of health.

Intelligent people now know that the bone of a saint has in it no greater virtue than the bone of any animal. That a rag from a wandering beggar is just as good as one from a saint, and that the hair of a horse will cure disease just as quickly and surely as the hair of a martyr. We now know that all the sacred relics are religious rubbish; that those who use them are for the most part dishonest, and that those who rely on them are almost idiotic.

This belief in amulets and charms, in ghosts and devils, is superstition, pure and simple.

Our ancestors did not regard these relics as medicine, having a curative power, but the idea was that evil spirits stood in dread of holy things — that they fled from the bone of a saint, that they feared a piece of the true cross, and that when holy water was sprinkled on a man they immediately left the premises. So, these devils hated and dreaded the sound of holy bells, the light of sacred tapers, and, above all, the ever-blessed cross.

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In those days the priests were fishers for money, and they used these relics for bait.



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### II

Let us take another step:

This belief in the Devil and evil spirits laid the foundation for another belief: Witchcraft.

It was believed that the devil had certain things to give in exchange for a soul. The old man, bowed and broken, could get back his youth — the rounded form, the brown hair, the leaping heart of life's morning — if he would sign and seal away his soul. So, it was thought that the malicious could by charm and spell obtain revenge, that the poor could be enriched, and that the ambitious could rise to place and power. All the good things of this life

were at the disposal of the Devil. For those who resisted the temptations of the Evil One, rewards were waiting in another world, but the Devil rewarded here in this life. No one has imagination enough to paint the agonies that were endured by reason of this belief in witchcraft. Think of the families destroyed, of the fathers and mothers cast in prison, tortured and burned, of the firesides darkened, of the children murdered, of the old, the poor and helpless that were stretched on racks mangled and flayed!

Think of the days when superstition and fear were in every house, in every mind, when accusation was conviction, when assertion of innocence was regarded as a confession of guilt, and when Christendom was insane!

Now we know that all of these horrors were the result of superstition. Now we know that ignorance was the mother of all the agonies endured. Now we know that witches never lived, that human beings never bargained with any devil, and that our pious savage ancestors were mistaken.

Let us take another step:

Our fathers believed in miracles, in signs and wonders, eclipses and comets, in the virtues of bones, and in the powers attributed to evil spirits. All these belonged to the miraculous. The world was supposed to be full of magic; the spirits were sleight-of-hand performers — necromancers. There were no natural causes behind events. A devil wished, and it happened. One who had sold his soul to Satan made a few motions, uttered some strange words, and the event was present. Natural causes were not believed in. Delusion and illusion, the monstrous and miraculous, ruled the world. The foundation was gone — reason had abdicated. Credulity gave tongues and wings to lies, while the dumb and limping facts were left behind — were disregarded and remained untold.

#### WHAT IS A MIRACLE?

An act performed by a master of nature without reference to the facts in nature. This is the only honest definition of a miracle.

If a man could make a perfect circle, the diameter of which was exactly one-half the circumference, that would be a miracle in geometry. If a man could make twice four, nine, that would be a miracle in mathematics. If a man could make a stone, falling in the air, pass through a space of ten feet the first second, twenty-five feet the second second, and five feet the third second, that would be a miracle in physics. If a man could put together hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen and produce pure gold, that would be a miracle in chemistry. If a minister were to prove his creed, that would be a theological miracle. If Congress by law would make fifty cents worth of silver worth a dollar, that would be a financial miracle. To make a square triangle would be a most wonderful miracle. To cause a mirror to reflect the faces of persons who stand behind it, instead of those who stand in front, would be a miracle. To make echo answer a question would be a miracle. In other words, to do anything contrary to or without regard to the facts in nature is to perform a miracle.

Now we are convinced of what is called the "uniformity of nature." We believe that all things act and are acted upon in accordance with their nature; that under like conditions the results will always be substantially the same; that like ever has and ever will produce like. We now believe that events have natural parents and that none die childless.

Miracles are not simply impossible, but they are unthinkable by any man capable of thinking.

Now an intelligent man cannot believe that a miracle ever was, or ever will be, performed.

Ignorance is the soil in which belief in miracles grows.

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### III

Let us take another step:

While our ancestors filled the darkness with evil spirits, enemies of mankind, they also believed in the existence of good spirits. These good spirits sustained the same relation to God that the evil ones did to the Devil. These good spirits protected the faithful from the temptations and snares of the Evil One. They took care of those who carried amulets and charms, of those who repeated prayers and counted beads, of those who fasted and performed ceremonies. These good spirits would turn aside the sword and arrow from the breast of the faithful. They made poison harmless, they protected the credulous, and in a thousand ways defended and rescued the true believer. They drove doubts from the minds of the pious, sowed the seeds of credulity and faith, saved saints from the wiles of women, painted the glories of heaven for those who fasted and prayed, made it possible for the really good to dispense with the pleasures of sense and to hate the Devil.

These angels watched over infants who had been baptized, over persons who had made holy vows, over priests and nuns and wandering beggars who believed.

These spirits were of various kinds: Some had once been men or women. some had never lived in this world, and some had been angels from the commencement. Nobody pretended to know exactly what they were, or exactly how they looked, or in what way they went from place to place, or how they affected or controlled the minds of men.

It was believed that the king of all these evil spirits was the Devil, and that the king of all the good spirits was God. It was also believed that God was in fact the king of all, and that the Devil himself was one of the children of this God. This God and this Devil were at war, each trying to secure the souls of men. God offered the rewards of eternal joy and threatened eternal pain. The Devil baited his traps with present pleasure, with the gratification of the senses, with the ecstasies of love, and laughed at the joys of heaven and the pangs of hell. With malicious hand he sowed the seeds of doubt — induced men to investigate, to reason, to call for evidence, to rely upon themselves; planted in

their hearts the love of liberty, assisted them to break their chains, to escape from their prisons and besought them to think. In this way he corrupted the children of men.

Our fathers believed that they could by prayer, by sacrifice, by fasting, by performing certain ceremonies, gain the assistance of this God and of these good spirits. They were not quite logical. They did not believe that the Devil was the author of all evil. They thought that flood and famine, plague and cyclone, earthquake and war, were sometimes sent by God as punishment for unbelief. They fell upon their knees and with white lips, prayed the good God to stay his hand. They humbled themselves, confessed their sins, and filled the heavens with their vows and cries. With priests and prayers they tried to stay the plague. They kissed the relics, fell at shrines, besought the Virgin and the saints, but the prayers all died in the heartless air, and the plague swept on to its natural end. Our poor fathers knew nothing of any science. Back of all events they put spirits, good or bad, angels or demons, gods or devils. To them nothing had what we call a natural cause. Everything was the work of spirits. All was done by the supernatural, and everything was done by evil spirits that they could do to ruin, punish, mislead and damn the children of men. This world was a field of battle, and here the hosts of heaven and hell waged war.

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### IV

Now no man in whose brain the torch of reason burns, no man who investigates, who really thinks, who is capable of weighing evidence, believes in signs, in lucky or unlucky days, in lucky or unlucky numbers. He knows that Fridays and Thursdays are alike; that thirteen is no more deadly than twelve. He knows that opals affect the wearer the same as rubies, diamonds or common glass. He knows that the matrimonial chances of a maiden are not increased or decreased by the number of leaves of a flower or seeds in an apple. He knows that a glance at the moon over the left shoulder is as healthful and lucky as one over the right. He does not care whether the first comer to a theater is cross-eyed or hump-backed, bow-legged, or as well-proportioned as Apollo. He knows that a strange cat could be denied asylum without bringing any misfortune to the family. He knows that an owl does not hoot in the full of the moon because a distinguished man is about to die. He knows that comets and eclipses would come if all the folks were dead. He is not frightened by sun dogs, or the Morning of the North when the glittering lances pierce the shield of night. He knows that all these things occur without the slightest reference to the human race. He feels certain that floods would destroy and cyclones rend and earthquakes devour; that the stars would shine; that day and night would still pursue each other around the world; that flowers would give their perfume to the air, and light would paint the seven-hued arch upon the dusky bosom of the cloud if every human being was unconscious dust.

A man of thought and sense does not believe in the existence of the Devil. He feels certain that imps, goblins, demons and evil spirits exist only in the imagination of the ignorant and frightened. He knows how these malevolent myths were made. He knows

the part they have played in all religions. He knows that for many centuries a belief in these devils, these evil spirits, was substantially universal. He knows that the priest believed as firmly as the peasant. In those days the best educated and the most ignorant were equal dupes. Kings and courtiers, ladies and clowns, soldiers and artists, slaves and convicts, believed as firmly in the Devil as they did in God.

Back of this belief there is no evidence, and there never has been. This belief did not rest on any fact. It was supported by mistakes, exaggerations and lies. The mistakes were natural, the exaggerations were mostly unconscious and the lies were generally honest. Back of these mistakes, these exaggerations, these lies, was the love of the marvelous. Wonder listened with greedy ears, with wide eyes, and ignorance with open mouth.

The man of sense knows the history of this belief, and he knows, also, that for many centuries its truth was established by the Holy Bible. He knows that the Old Testament is filled with allusions to the Devil, to evil spirits, and that the New Testament is the same. He knows that Christ himself was a believer in the Devil, in evil spirits, and that his principal business was casting out devils from the bodies of men and women. He knows that Christ himself, according to the New Testament, was not only tempted by the Devil, but was carried by his Satanic Highness to the top of the temple. If the New Testament is the inspired word of God, then I admit that these devils, these imps, do actually exist and that they do take possession of human beings.

To deny the existence of these evil spirits, to deny the existence of the Devil, is to deny the truth of the New Testament. To deny the existence of these imps of darkness is to contradict the words of Jesus Christ. If these devils do not exist, if they do not cause disease, if they do not tempt and mislead their victims, then Christ was an ignorant, superstitious man, insane, an impostor, or the New Testament is not a true record of what he said and what he pretended to do. If we give up the belief in devils, we must give up the inspiration of the Old and New Testament. We must give up the divinity of Christ. To deny the existence of evil spirits is to utterly destroy the foundation of Christianity. There is no half-way ground. Compromise is impossible. If all the accounts in the New Testament of casting out devils are false, what part of the Blessed Book is true?

As a matter of fact, the success of the Devil in the Garden of Eden made the coming of Christ a necessity, laid the foundation for the atonement, crucified the Savior and gave us the Trinity.

If the Devil does not exist, the Christian creeds all crumble, and the superstructure known as "Christianity," built by the fathers, by popes, by priests and theologians — built with mistakes and falsehoods, with miracles and wonders, with blood and flame, with lies and legends borrowed from the savage world, becomes a shapeless ruin.

If we give up the belief in devils and evil spirits, we are compelled to say that a witch never lived. No sensible

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human being now believes in witchcraft. We know that it was a delusion. We now know that thousands and thousands of innocent men, women and children were tortured and burned for having been found guilty of an impossible crime, and we also know, if our minds have not been deformed by faith, that all the books in which the existence of witches is taught were written by ignorant and superstitious men. We also know that the Old Testament asserted the existence of witches. According to that Holy Book, Jehovah was a believer in witchcraft, and said to his chosen people: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

This one commandment — this simple line — demonstrates that Jehovah was not only not God, but that he was a poor, ignorant, superstitious savage. This one line proves beyond all possible doubt that the Old Testament was written by men, by barbarians.

John Wesley was right when he said that to give up a belief in witchcraft was to give up the Bible.

Give up the Devil, and what can you do with the Book of Job? How will you account for the lying spirits that Jehovah sent to mislead Ahab?

Ministers who admit that witchcraft is a superstition will read the story of the Witch of Endor — will read it in a solemn, reverential voice — with a theological voice — and will have the impudence to say that they believe it.

It would be delightful to know that angels hover in the air; that they guard the innocent, protect the good; that they bend over the cradles and give health and happy dreams to pallid babes; that they fill dungeons with the light of their presence and give hope to the imprisoned; that they follow the fallen, the erring, the outcasts, the friendless, and win them back to virtue, love and joy. But we have no more evidence of the existence of good spirits than of bad. The angels that visited Abraham and the mother of Samson are as unreal as the ghosts and goblins of the Middle Ages. The angel that stopped the donkey of Baalim, the one who walked in the furnace flames with Meshech, Shadrack and Abednego, the one who slew the Assyrians and the one who in a dream removed the suspicions of Joseph, were all created by the imagination of the credulous, by the lovers of the marvelous, and they have been handed down from dotage to infancy, from ignorance to ignorance, through all the years. Except in Catholic countries, no winged citizen of the celestial realm has visited the world for hundreds of years. Only those who are blind to facts can see these beautiful creatures, and only those who reach conclusions without the assistance of evidence can believe in their existence. It is told that the great Angelo, in decorating a church, painted some angels wearing sandals. A cardinal looking at the picture said to the artist: "Whoever saw angels with sandals?" Angelo answered with another question: "Whoever saw an angel bare-footed?"

The existence of angels has never been established. Of course, we know that millions and millions have believed in seraphim and cherubim; have believed that the angel Gabriel contended with the Devil for the body of Moses; that angels shut the mouths of the lions for the protection of Daniel that angels ministered unto Christ, and that countless angels will accompany the Savior when he comes to take possession of the world. And we know that all these millions believe through blind, unreasoning faith, holding all evidence and all facts in theological contempt.

But the angels come no more. They bring no balm to any wounded heart. Long ago they folded their pinions and faded from the earth and air. These winged guardians no longer protect the innocent; no longer cheer the suffering; no longer whisper words of comfort to the helpless. They have become dreams — vanished visions.

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### V

In the dear old religious days the earth was flat — a little dishing, if anything — and just above it was Jehovah's house, and just below it was where the Devil lived. God and his angels inhabited the third story, the Devil and his imps the basement, and the human race the second floor.

Then they knew where heaven was. They could almost hear the harps and hallelujahs. They knew where hell was, and they could almost hear the groans and smell the sulphurous fumes. They regarded the volcanoes as chimneys. They were perfectly acquainted with the celestial, the terrestrial and the infernal. They were quite familiar with the New Jerusalem, with its golden streets and gates of pearl. Then the translation of Enoch seemed reasonable enough, and no one doubted that before the flood the sons of God came down and made love to the daughters of men. The theologians thought that the builders of Babel would have succeeded if God had not come down and caused them to forget the meaning of words.

In those blessed days the priests knew all about heaven and hell. They knew that God governed the world by hope and fear, by promise and threat, by reward and punishment. The reward was to be eternal and so was the punishment. It was not God's plan to develop the human brain, so that man would perceive and comprehend the right and avoid the wrong. He taught ignorance, nothing but obedience, and for obedience he offered eternal joy. He loved the submissive — the kneelers and crawlers. He hated the doubters, the investigators, the thinkers, the philosophers. For them he created the eternal prison where he could feed forever the hunger of his hate. He loved the credulous — those who believed without evidence — and for them he prepared a home in the realm of fadeless light. He delighted in the company of the questionless.

But where is this heaven, and where is this hell? We now know that heaven is not just above the clouds and that hell is not just below the earth. The telescope has done away with the ancient heaven, and the revolving world has quenched the flames of the ancient hell. These theological countries, these imagined worlds, have disappeared. No one knows, and no one pretends to know, where heaven is; and no one knows, and no one pretends to know, the locality of hell. Now the theologians say that hell and heaven are not places, but states of mind—conditions.

The belief in gods and devils has been substantially universal. Back of the good, man placed a god; back of the evil, a devil; back of health, sunshine and harvest was a good deity; back of disease, misfortune and death he placed a malicious fiend.

Is there any evidence that gods and devils exist? The evidence of the existence of a god and of a devil is substantially the same. Both of these deities are inferences; each one is a perhaps. They have not been seen — they are invisible — and they have not ventured within the horizon of the senses. The old lady who said there must be a devil, else how could they make pictures that looked exactly like him, reasoned like a trained theologian — like a doctor of divinity.

Now no intelligent man believes in the existence of a devil — no longer fears the leering fiend. Most people who think have given up a personal God, a creative deity. They now talk about the "Unknown," the "Infinite Energy," but they put Jehovah with Jupiter. They regard them both as broken dolls from the nursery of the past.

The men or women who ask for evidence — who desire to know the truth — care nothing for signs; nothing for what are called wonders; nothing for lucky or unlucky jewels, days or numbers; nothing for charms or amulets; nothing for comets or eclipses. and have no belief in good or evil spirits, in gods or devils. They place no reliance on general or special providence — on any power that rescues, protects and saves the good or punishes the vile and vicious. They do not believe that in the whole history of mankind a prayer has been answered. They think that all the sacrifices have been wasted, and that all the incense has ascended in vain. They do not believe that the world was created and prepared for man any more than it was created and prepared for insects. They do not think it probable that whales were invented to supply the Eskimo with blubber, or that flames were created to attract and destroy moths. On every hand there seems to be evidence of design, design for the accomplishment of good, design for the accomplishment of evil. On every side are the benevolent and malicious — something toiling to preserve, something laboring to destroy. Everything surrounded by friends and enemies — by the love that protects, by the hate that kills. Design is as apparent in decay, as in growth; in failure, as in success; in grief, as in

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joy. Nature with one hand building, with one hand tearing down, armed with sword and shield — slaying and protecting, and protecting but to slay. All life journeying toward death, and all death hastening back to life. Everywhere waste and economy, care and negligence.

We watch the flow and ebb of life and death — the great drama that forever holds the stage, where players act their parts and disappear; the great drama in which all must act — ignorant and learned, idiotic and insane — without rehearsal and without the slightest knowledge of a part, or of any plot or purpose in the play. The scene shifts; some actors disappear and others come, and again the scene shifts; mystery everywhere. We try to explain, and the explanation of one fact contradicts another. Behind each veil removed, another. All things equal in wonder. One drop of water as wonderful as all the seas; one grain of sand as all the world; one moth with painted wings as all the things that live; one egg from which warmth, in darkness, woos to life an organized and breathing form — a form with sinews, bones and nerves, with blood and brain, with instincts, passions, thoughts and wants — as all the stars that wheel in space.

The smallest seed that, wrapped in soil, has dreams of April rains and days of June, withholds its secret from the wisest men. The wisdom of the world cannot explain one blade of grass, the faintest motion of the smallest leaf. And yet theologians, popes, priests, parsons, who speechless stand before the wonder of the smallest thing that is, know all about the origin of worlds, know when the beginning was, when the end will be, know all about the God who with a wish created all, know what his plan and purpose was, the means he uses and the end he seeks. To them all mysteries have been revealed, except the mystery of things that touch the senses of a living man.

But honest men do not pretend to know; they are candid and sincere; they love the truth; they admit their ignorance, and they say, "We do not know."

After all, why should we worship our ignorance why should we kneel to the Unknown, why should we prostrate ourselves before a guess?

If God exists, how do we know that he is good, that he cares for us? The Christians say that their God has existed from eternity; that he forever has been, and forever will be, infinite, wise and good. Could this God have avoided being God? Could he have avoided being good? Was he wise and good without his wish or will?

Being from eternity, he was not produced. He was back of all cause. What he is, he was, and will be, unchanged, unchangeable. He had nothing to do with the making or developing of his character. Nothing to do with the development of his mind. What he was, he is. He has made no progress. What he is, he will be, there can be no change. Why then, I ask, should we praise him? He could not have been different from what he was and is. Why should we pray to him? He cannot change.

And yet Christians implore their God not to do wrong.

The meanest thing charged against the Devil is that he leads the children of men into temptation, and yet, in the Lord's Prayer, God is insultingly asked not to imitate the king of fiends.

"Lead us not into temptation."

Why should God demand praise? He is as he was. He has never learned anything; has never practiced any self-denial; was never tempted, never touched by fear or hope, and never had a want. Why should he demand our praise?

Does anyone know that this God exists; that he ever heard or answered any prayer? Is it known that he governs the world; that he interferes in the affairs of men; that he protects the good or punishes the wicked? Can evidence of this be found in the history of mankind? If God governs the world, why should we credit him for the good and not charge him with the evil? To Justify this God we must say that good is good and that evil is also good. If all is done by this God we should make no distinction between his actions — between the actions of the infinitely wise, powerful and good. If we thank him for sunshine and harvest we should also thank him for plague and famine. If we thank him for liberty, the slave should raise his chained hands in worship and thank God that he toils unpaid with the lash upon his naked back. If we thank him for victory we should thank him for defeat.

Only a few days ago our President, by proclamation, thanked God for giving us the victory at Santiago. He did not thank him for sending the yellow fever. To be consistent the President should have thanked him equally for both.

The truth is that good and evil spirits — gods and devils — are beyond the realm of experience; beyond the horizon of our senses; beyond the limits of our thoughts; beyond imagination's utmost flight.

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Man should think; he should use all his senses; he should examine; he should reason. The man who cannot think is less than man; the man who will not think is traitor to himself; the man who fears to think is superstition's slave.

## Superstition

### VI

What harm does superstition do? What harm in believing in fables, in legends?

To believe in signs and wonders, in amulets, charms and miracles, in gods and devils, in heavens and hells, makes the brain an insane ward, the world a madhouse, takes all certainty from the mind, makes experience a snare, destroys the kinship of effect and cause — the unity of nature — and makes man a trembling serf and slave. With this belief a knowledge of nature sheds no light upon the path to be pursued. Nature becomes a puppet of the unseen powers. The fairy, called the supernatural, touches with her wand a fact, it disappears. Causes are barren of effects, and effects are independent of all natural causes. Caprice is king. The foundation is gone. The great dome rests on air. There is no constancy in qualities, relations or results. Reason abdicates and superstition wears her crown.

The heart hardens and the brain softens.

The energies of man are wasted in a vain effort to secure the protection of the supernatural. Credulity, ceremony, worship, sacrifice and prayer take the place of honest work, of investigation, of intellectual effort, of observation, of experience. Progress becomes impossible.

Superstition is, always has been, and forever will be, the enemy of liberty.

Superstition created all the gods and angels, all the devils and ghosts, all the witches, demons and goblins, gave us all the augurs, soothsayers and prophets, filled the heavens with signs and wonders, broke the chain of cause and effect, and wrote the history of man in miracles and lies. Superstition made all the popes, cardinals, bishops and priests, all the monks and nuns, the begging friars and the filthy saints, all the preachers and exhorters, all the "called" and "set apart." Superstition made men fall upon their knees before beasts and stones, caused them to worship snakes and trees and insane phantoms of the air, beguiled them of their gold and toil, and made them shed their children's blood and give their babes to flames. Superstition built the cathedrals and temples, all the altars, mosques and churches, filled the world with amulets and charms, with images and idols, with sacred bones and holy hairs, with martyrs' blood and rags, with bits of wood that frighten devils from the breasts of men. Superstition invented and used the instruments of torture, flayed men and women alive, loaded millions with chains and destroyed hundreds of thousands with fire. Superstition mistook insanity for inspiration and the ravings of maniacs for prophesy, for the wisdom of God. Superstition imprisoned the virtuous, tortured the thoughtful, killed the heroic, put chains on the body, manacles on the brain, and utterly destroyed the liberty of speech. Superstition gave us all the prayers and ceremonies; taught all the kneelings, genuflections and prostrations; taught men to hate themselves, to despise pleasure, to scar their flesh, to grovel in the dust, to desert their wives and children, to shun their fellow-men, and to spend their lives in useless pain and prayer. Superstition taught that human love is degrading, low and vile; taught that monks are purer than fathers, that nuns are holier than mothers, that faith is superior to fact, that credulity leads to heaven, that doubt is the road to hell, that belief is better than knowledge, and that to ask for evidence is to insult God. Superstition is, always has been, and forever will be, the foe of progress, the enemy of education and the assassin of freedom. It sacrifices the known to the unknown, the present to the future, this actual world to the shadowy next. It has given us a selfish heaven, and a hell of infinite revenge; it has filled the world with hatred, war and crime, with the malice of meekness and the arrogance of humility. Superstition is the only enemy of science in all the world.

Nations, races, have been destroyed by this monster. For nearly two thousand years the infallible agent of God has lived in Italy. That country has been covered with nunneries, monasteries, cathedrals and temples — filled with all varieties of priests and holy men. For centuries Italy was enriched with the gold of the faithful. All roads led to Rome, and these roads were filled with pilgrims bearing gifts, and yet Italy, in spite of all the prayers, steadily pursued the downward path, died and was buried, and would at this moment be in her grave had it not been for Cavour, Mazzini and Garibaldi. For her poverty, her misery, she is indebted to the holy Catholic Church, to the infallible agents of God. For the life she has she is indebted to the enemies of superstition. A few years ago Italy was great enough to build a monument to Giordano Bruno — Bruno, the victim of the "Triumphant Beast;" — Bruno, the sublimest of her sons.

Spain was at one time owner of half the earth, and held within her greedy hands the gold and silver of the



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world. At that time all nations were in the darkness of superstition. At that time the world was governed by priests. Spain clung to her creed. Some nations began to think, but Spain continued to believe. In some counties, priests lost power, but not in Spain. The power behind her throne was the cowed monk. In some countries men began to interest themselves in science, but not in Spain. Spain told her beads and continued to pray to the Virgin. Spain was busy saving her soul. In her zeal she destroyed herself. She relied on the supernatural; not on knowledge, but superstition. Her prayers were never answered. The saints were dead. They could not help, and the Blessed Virgin did not hear. Some countries were in the dawn of a new day, but Spain gladly remained in the night. With fire and sword she exterminated the men who thought. Her greatest festival was the Auto da Fe. Other nations grew great while Spain grew small. Day by day her power waned, but her faith increased. One by one her colonies were lost, but she kept her creed. She gave her gold to superstition, her brain to priests, but she faithfully counted her beads. Only a few days ago, relying on her God and his priests, on charms and amulets, on holy water and pieces of the true cross, she waged war against the great Republic. Bishops blessed her armies and sprinkled holy water on her ships, and yet her armies were defeated and captured, her ships battered, beached and burned, and in her helplessness she sued for peace. But she has her creed; her superstition is not lost. Poor Spain, wrecked by faith, the victim of religion.

Portugal, slowly dying, growing poorer every day still clings to the faith. Her prayers are never answered, but she makes them still. Austria is nearly gone, a victim of superstition. Germany is traveling toward the night. God placed her Kaiser on the throne. The people must obey. Philosophers and scientists fall upon their knees and become the puppets of the divinely crowned.

The believers in the supernatural, in a power superior to nature, in God, have what they call "inspired books." These books contain the absolute truth. They must be believed. He who denies them will be punished with eternal pain. These books are not addressed to human reason. They are above reason. They care nothing for what a man calls "facts." Facts that do not agree with these books are mistakes. These books are independent of human experience, of human reason.

Our inspired books constitute what we call the "Bible." The man who reads this inspired book, looking for contradictions, mistakes and interpolations, imperils the salvation of his soul. While he reads he has no right to think, no right to reason. To believe is his only duty.

Millions of men have wasted their lives in the study of this book — in trying to harmonize contradictions and to explain the obscure and seemingly absurd. In doing this they have justified nearly every crime and every cruelty. In its follies they have found the profoundest wisdom. Hundreds of creeds have been constructed from its inspired passages. Probably no two of its readers have agreed as to its meaning. Thousands have studied Hebrew and Greek that they might read the Old and New Testament in the languages in which they were written. The more they studied, the more they differed. By the same book they proved that nearly everybody is to be lost, and that all are to be saved; that slavery is a divine institution, and that all men should be free; that polygamy is right, and that no man should have more than one wife; that the powers that be are ordained of God, and that the people have a right to overturn and destroy the powers that be; that all the actions of men were predestined — preordained from eternity, and yet that man is free; that all the heathen will be lost; that all the heathen will be saved; that all men who live according to the light of nature will be damned for their pains; that you must be baptized by sprinkling; that you must be baptized by immersion; that there is no salvation without baptism that baptism is useless; that you must believe in the Trinity; that it is sufficient to believe in God. that you must believe that a Hebrew peasant was God that at the same time he was half man, that he was of the blood of David through his supposed father Joseph, who was not his father, and that it is not necessary to believe that Christ was God; that you must believe that the Holy Ghost proceeded; that it makes no difference whether you do or not; that you must keep the Sabbath holy; that Christ taught nothing of the kind; that Christ established a church; that he established no church; that the dead are to be raised; that there is to be no resurrection; that Christ is coming again; that he has made his last visit; that Christ went to hell and preached to the spirits in prison; that he did nothing of the kind; that all the Jews are going to perdition; that they are all going to heaven; that all the miracles described in the Bible were performed, that some of them were not, because they are foolish, childish and idiotic; that all the Bible is inspired; that some of the books are not inspired; that there is to be a general judgment, when the sheep and goats are to be divided; that there never will be any general judgment; that the sacramental bread and wine are changed into the flesh and blood of God and the Trinity; that they are not changed; that God has no flesh or blood; that there is a place called "purgatory;" that there is no such place; that unbaptized infants will be lost; that they will be saved; that we must believe the Apostles' Creed; that the apostles made no creed; that the Holy Ghost was the father of Christ; that Joseph was his father; that the Holy Ghost had the form of a dove; that there is no Holy Ghost; that heretics should be killed; that you must not resist evil; that you should murder unbelievers that you must love your enemies; that you should take no thought for the morrow, but should be diligent in business; that you should lend to all who ask, and that one who does not provide for his own household is worse than an infidel.

In defence of all these creeds, all these contradictions, thousands of volumes have been written, millions of sermons have been preached, countless swords reddened with blood, and thousands and thousands of nights made lurid with the faggot's flames.

Hundreds and hundreds of commentators have obscured and darkened the meaning of the plainest texts, spiritualized dates, names, numbers and even genealogies. They have degraded the poetic, changed parables to history, and imagery to stupid and impossible facts. They have wrestled with rhapsody and prophecy, with visions and dreams, with illusions and delusions, with myths and miracles, with the blunders of ignorance, the ravings of insanity and the ecstasy of hysterics. Millions of priests and preachers have added to the mysteries of the inspired

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book by explanation, by showing the wisdom of foolishness, the foolishness of wisdom, the mercy of cruelty and the probability of the impossible.

The theologians made the Bible a master and the people its slaves. With this book they destroyed intellectual veracity, the natural manliness of man. With this book they banished pity from the heart, subverted all ideas of justice and fairness, imprisoned the soul in the dungeon of fear and made honest doubt a crime.

Think of what the world has suffered from fear. Think of the millions who were driven to insanity. Think of the fearful nights — nights filled with phantoms, with flying, crawling monsters, with hissing serpents that slowly uncoiled, with vague and formless horrors, with burning and malicious eyes.

Think of the fear of death, of infinite wrath, of everlasting revenge in the prisons of fire, of an eternity, of thirst, of endless regret, of the sobs and sighs, the shrieks and groans of eternal pain.

Think of the hearts hardened, of the hearts broken, of the cruelties inflicted, of the agonies endured, of the lives darkened.

The inspired Bible has been and is the greatest curse of Christendom, and will so remain as long as it is held to be inspired.

Our God was made by men, sculptured by savages who did the best they could. They made our God somewhat like themselves, and gave to him their passions, their ideas of right and wrong.

As man advanced he slowly changed his God — took a little ferocity from his heart, and put the light of kindness in his eyes. As man progressed he obtained a wider view, extended the intellectual horizon and again he changed his God, making him as nearly perfect as he could, and yet this God was patterned after those who made him. As man became civilized, as he became merciful, he began to love justice, and as his mind expanded his ideal became purer, nobler, and so his God became more merciful, more loving.

In our day Jehovah has been outgrown. He is no longer the perfect. Now theologians talk, not about Jehovah, but about a God of love, call him the Eternal father and the perpetual friend and providence of man. But, while they talk about this God of love, cyclones wreck and rend, the earthquake devours, the flood destroys, the red bolt leaping from the cloud still crashes the life out of men, and plague and fever still are tireless reapers in the harvest fields of death.

They tell us now that all is good; that evil is but blessing in disguise, that pain makes strong and virtuous men — makes character — while pleasure enfeebles and degrades. If this be so, the souls in hell should grow to greatness, while those in heaven should shrink and shrivel.

But we know that good is good. We know that good is not evil, and that evil is not good. We know that light is not darkness, and that darkness is not light. But we do not feel that good and evil were planned and caused by a supernatural God. We regard them both as necessities. We neither thank nor curse. We know that some evil can be avoided and that the good can be increased. We know that this can be done by increasing knowledge, by developing the brain.

As Christians have changed their God, so they have accordingly changed their Bible. The impossible and absurd, the cruel and the infamous, have been mostly thrown aside, and thousands are now engaged in trying to save the inspired word. Of course, the orthodox still cling to every word, and still insist that every line is true. They are literalists. To them the Bible means exactly what it says. They want no explanation. They care nothing for commentators. Contradictions cannot disturb the faith. They deny that any contradictions exist. They loyally stand by the sacred text, and they give it the narrowest possible interpretation. They are like the janitor of an apartment house who refused to rent a flat to a gentleman because he said he had children. "But," said the gentleman, "my children are both married and live in Iowa." "That makes no difference," said the janitor, "I am not allowed to rent a flat to any man who has children."

All the orthodox churches are obstructions on the highway of progress. Every orthodox creed is a chain, a dungeon. Every believer in the "inspired book" is a slave who drives reason from her throne, and in her stead crowns fear.

Reason is the light, the sun of the brain. It is the compass of the mind, the ever-constant Northern Star, the mountain peak that lifts itself above all clouds.

There were centuries of darkness when religion had control of Christendom. Superstition was almost universal. Not one in twenty thousand could read or write. During these centuries the people lived with their back to the sunrise, and pursued their way toward the dens of ignorance and faith. There was no progress, no invention, no discovery. On every hand cruelty and worship, persecution and prayer. The priests were the enemies of thought, of investigation. They were the shepherds, and the people were their sheep and it was their business to guard the flock from the wolves of thought and doubt. This world was of no importance compared with the next. This life was to be spent in preparing for the life to come. The gold and labor of men were wasted in building cathedrals and in supporting the pious and the useless. During these Dark Ages of Christianity, as I said before, nothing was invented, nothing was discovered, calculated to increase the well-being of men. The energies of Christendom were wasted in the vain effort to obtain assistance from the supernatural.

For centuries the business of Christians was to wrest from the followers of Mohammed the empty sepulcher of Christ. Upon the altar of this folly millions of lives were sacrificed, and yet the soldiers of the impostor were victorious, and the wretches who carried the banner of Christ were scattered like leaves before the storm.

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There was, I believe, one invention during these ages. It is said that, in the thirteenth century, Roger Bacon, a Franciscan monk, invented gunpowder, but this invention was without a fellow. Yet we cannot give Christianity the credit, because Bacon was an infidel, and was great enough to say that in all things reason must be the standard. He was persecuted and imprisoned, as most sensible men were in those blessed days. The church was triumphant. The scepter and maitre were in her hand and yet her success was the result of force and fraud, and it carried within itself the seeds of its defeat. The church attempted the impossible, it endeavored to make the world of one belief; to force all minds to a common form, and utterly destroy the individuality of man. To accomplish this it employed every art and artifice that cunning could suggest. It inflicted every cruelty by every means that malice could invent.

But, in spite of all, a few men began to think. They became interested in the affairs of this world — in the great panorama of nature. They began to seek for causes, for the explanations of phenomena. They were not satisfied with the assertions of the church. These thinkers withdrew their gaze from the skies and looked at their own surroundings. They were unspiritual enough to desire comfort here. They became sensible and secular, worldly and wise.

What was the result? They began to invent, to discover, to find the relation between facts, the conditions of happiness and the means that would increase the well-being of their fellow-men.

Movable types were invented, paper was borrowed from the Moors, books appeared, and it became possible to save the intellectual wealth so that each generation could hand it to the next. History began to take the place of legend and rumor. The telescope was invented. The orbits of the stars were traced, and men became citizens of the universe. The steam engine was constructed, and now steam, the great slave, does the work of hundreds of millions of men. The Black Art, the impossible, was abandoned, and chemistry, the useful, took its place. Astrology became astronomy. Kepler discovered the three great laws, one of the greatest triumphs of human genius, and our constellation became a poem, a symphony. Newton gave us the mathematical expression of the attraction of gravitation. Harvey discovered the circulation of the blood. He gave us the fact, and Draper gave us the reason. Steamships conquered the seas and railways covered the land. Houses and streets were lighted with gas. Through the invention of matches fire became the companion of man. The art of photography became known; the sun became an artist. Telegraphs and cables were invented. The lightning became a carrier of thought, and the nations became neighbors. Anaesthetic were discovered and pain was lost in sleep. Surgery became a science. The telephone was invented — the telephone that carries and deposits in listening ears the waves of words. The phonograph, that catches and retains in marks and dots and gives again the echoes of our speech.

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### IX

Then came electric light that fills the night with day, and all the wonderful machines that use the subtle force — the same force that leaps from the summer cloud to ravage and destroy.

The Spectrum Analysis that tells us of the substance of the sun; the Roentgen rays that change the opaque to the transparent. The great thinkers demonstrated the indestructibility of force and matter — demonstrated that the indestructible could not have been created. The geologist, in rocks and deposits and mountains and continents, read a little of the story of the world — of its changes, of the glacial epoch — the story of vegetable and animal life.

The biologists, through the fossil forms of life, established the antiquity of man and demonstrated the worthlessness of Holy Writ. Then came evolution, the survival of the fittest and natural selection. Thousands of mysteries were explained and science wrested the scepter from superstition. The cell theory was advanced, and embryology was studied; the microscope discovered germs of disease and taught us how to stay the plague. These great theories and discoveries, together with countless inventions, are the children of intellectual liberty.

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### X

After all we know but little. In the darkness of life there are a few gleams of light. Possibly the dropping of a dishcloth prophesies the coming of company, but we have no evidence. Possibly it is dangerous for thirteen to dine together, but we have no evidence. Possibly a maiden's matrimonial chances are determined by the number of seeds in an apple, or by the number of leaves on a flower, but we have no evidence. Possibly certain stones give good luck to the wearer, while the wearing of others brings loss and death. Possibly a glimpse of the new moon over the left shoulder brings misfortune. Possibly there are curative virtues in old bones, in sacred rags and holy hairs, in images and bits of wood, in rusty nails and dried blood, but the trouble is we have no evidence. Possibly comets, eclipses and shooting stars foretell the death of kings, the destruction of nations or the coming of plague. Possibly devils take possession of the bodies and minds of men. Possibly witches, with the Devil's help, control the winds, breed storms on sea and land, fill summer's lap with frosts and snow, and work with charm and spell against the public weal, but of this we have no evidence. It may be that all the miracles described in the Old and New Testament were performed; that the pallid flesh of the dead felt once more the thrill of life; that the corpse arose and felt upon his smiling lips the kiss of wife and child. Possibly water was turned into wine, loaves and fishes increased, and possibly devils were expelled from men and women; possibly fishes were found with money in their mouths; possibly clay and spittle brought back the light to sightless eyes, and possibly words cured disease and made the leper clean, but of this we have no evidence.

Possibly iron floated, rivers divided, waters burst from dry bones, birds carried food to prophets and angels flourished drawn swords, but of this we have no evidence.

Possibly Jehovah employed lying spirits to deceive a king, and all the wonders of the savage world may have happened, but the trouble is there is no proof.

So there may be a Devil, almost infinite in cunning and power, and he may have a countless number of imps whose only business is to sow the seeds of evil and to vex, mislead, capture and imprison in eternal flames the souls of men. All this, so far as we know, is possible. All we know is that we have no evidence except the assertions of ignorant priests.

Possibly there is a place called "hell," where all the devils live — a hell whose flames are waiting for all the men who think and have the courage to express their thoughts, for all who fail to credit priests and sacred books, for all who walk the path that reason lights, for all the good and brave who lack credulity and faith — but of this, I am happy to say, there is no proof.

And so there may be a place called "heaven," the home of God, where angels float and fly and play on harps and hear with joy the groans and shrieks of the lost in hell, but of this there is no evidence.

It all rests on dreams and visions of the insane.

There may be a power superior to nature, a power that governs and directs all things, but the existence of this power has not been established.

In the presence of the mysteries of life and thought, of force and substance, of growth and decay, of birth and death, of joy and pain, of the sufferings of the good, the triumphs of wrong, the intelligent honest man is compelled to say: "I do not know."

But we do know how gods and devils, heavens and hells, have been made. We know the history of inspired books — the origin of religions. We know how the seeds of superstition were planted and what made them grow. We know that all superstitions, all creeds, all follies and mistakes, all crimes and cruelties, all virtues, vices, hopes and fears, all discoveries and inventions, have been naturally produced. By the light of reason we divide the useful from the hurtful, the false from the true.

We know the past — the paths that man has traveled — his mistakes, his triumphs. We know a few facts, a few fragments, and the imagination, the artist of the mind, with these facts, these fragments, rebuilds the past, and on the canvas of the future deftly paints the things to be.

We believe in the natural, in the unbroken and unbreakable succession of causes and effects. We deny the existence of the supernatural. We do not believe in any God who can be pleased with incense, with kneeling, with bell-ringing, psalm-singing, bead-counting, fasting or prayer — in any God who can be flattered by words of

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faith or fear.

We believe in the natural. We have no fear of devils, ghosts or hells. We believe that Mahatmas, astral bodies, materializations of spirits, crystal gazing, seeing the future, telepathy, mind reading and Christian Science are only cunning frauds, the genuineness of which is established by the testimony of incompetent, honest witnesses. We believe that Cunning plates fraud with the gold of honesty, and veneers vice with virtue.

We know that millions are seeking the impossible — trying to secure the aid of the supernatural — to solve the problem of life — to guess the riddle of destiny, and to pluck from the future its secret. We know that all their efforts are in vain.

We believe in the natural. We believe in home and fireside — in wife and child and friend — in the realities of this world. We have faith in facts — in knowledge — in the development of the brain. We throw away superstition and welcome science. We banish the phantoms, the mistakes and lies and cling to the truth. We do not enthrone the unknown and crown our ignorance. We do not stand with our backs to the sun and mistake our shadow for God.

We do not create a master and thankfully wear his chains. We do not enslave ourselves. We want no leaders — no followers. Our desire is that every human being shall be true to himself, to his ideal, unbribed by promises, careless of threats. We want no tyrant on the earth or in the air.

We know that superstition has given us delusions and illusions, dreams and visions, ceremonies and cruelties, faith and fanaticism, beggars and bigots, persecutions and prayers, theology and torture, piety and poverty, saints and slaves, miracles and mummeries, disease and death.

We know that science has given us all we have of value. Science is the only civilizer. It has freed the slave, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, lengthened life, given us homes and hearths, pictures and books, ships and railways, telegraphs and cables, engines that tirelessly turn the countless wheels, and it has destroyed the monsters, the phantoms, the winged horrors that filled the savage brain.

Science is the real redeemer. It will put honesty above hypocrisy; mental veracity above all belief. It will teach the religion of usefulness. It will destroy bigotry in all its forms. It will put thoughtful doubt above thoughtless faith. It will give us philosophers, thinkers and savants, instead of priests, theologians and saints. It will abolish poverty and crime, and greater, grander, nobler than all else, it will make the whole world free.