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The Romance of God



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The Romance of God.

By

RUTHERFORD WADDELL, M.A., D.D.

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FOREWORD.

A PORTION of this booklet appeared as an article in the 'Evening Star' of Dunedin. I have to thank the Editor for permission to reproduce it here.

Practically the whole of the booklet was in type before I had seen 'The Productive Beliefs,' by Lynn Harold Hough, President of the North Western University, America. The whole subject is treated by Dr Hough with great force and felicity, and I am sorry I had not the opportunity of reading his book before writing mine. I can but refer my readers to it for a more complete presentation of this great theme. They will find there in its fulness what is only suggested in the following pages: the picture of a "God whose own life is rich in social meaning; a God whose nature is perfect love and flaming righteousness; a God whose experience is full of audacious and daring adventure; a God who presses close to every life in His immanent activity and who came under the full burden of life in an actual human experience in the Incarnation; a God who went through the whole terrible suffering life of Calvary that men might be rescued and a new life made possible for the world. . . . He is one with us in order that we may be one with Him. Through contact with such a Deity religion becomes the most resilient and vital thing in all the world."

If this booklet helps anyone to a closer contact with such a God, my purpose in publishing it will be attained.

RUTHERFORD WADDELL.

"Dreamthorpe,"

Broad Bay, Dunedin.

"What shall we do when our illusions leave us? When the doll turns out to be sawdust and rag, when the youthful oracle speaks falsely, when the bubble bursts, what then? Why, to be sure, if our romance fails us we must get a better—that is all. . . . Everything depends on filling in the gaps. As soon as the sawdust streams out of the doll, as soon as the futility of the oracle stands exposed, we must make haste to fill the vacant place with something better."—F. W. Boreham: 'Faces in the Fire.'

"What is the view of God which is most potential for men living under the conditions and pressures and experiences of this world in process of reconstruction after the Great War? . . . It is clear at once that a God sitting in the solemn splendours of His own perfections will not move the age in which we live. And it is equally evident that a God suspended at the end of a syllogism, or a remote and bewildering Deity found at the end of some intricate and winding path of dialectic, will not master the minds and quicken the hearts and compel the consciences of men and women alive to-day.—Hough: 'The Productive Beliefs.'

"You ask me why Christianity is a romance. . . . It appeals to the elemental instincts that make great ventures and daring experiments, and risks all losses, and counts no costs, and lives by paradox. . . . All the ninety and nine go for nothing. Is not that a romance? And yet it is the very heart of the Gospel, and holds the secret of the Incarnation. Pity, adventure, sacrifice, self-abandonment—these are the driving forces which are always to carry us past the sanities of reason. Then, again, there is the trust that Christianity puts in the release of the individual character, which is the note of romance. The individual life is caught into the great paradox, 'I live, yet not I but Christ liveth in me,' and it can fling the whole universe away under this inspiration, and must always be setting out in fresh ventures under the compelling force of Him who said 'Behold, I make all things new.'"

Then, again, St Paul and all those vehement and volcanic contrasts, as "dying and behold I live," as "sorrowful yet always rejoicing," as "poor yet making many rich," "having nothing and yet possessing all things": or, again, that long string of adventures in 2 Cor., life for him is one long romance, just because it is lived in Him in whom he is already dead yet alive.

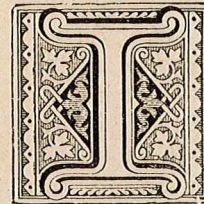
And then think of the romance that belongs to a creed which has for its living heart the tremendous adventure and tragedy of the last night in the Supper Room, and which lives for ever in the present memorial of a Body broken and a Blood shed. Is not this romance in its deepest sense, with all that is mystic, and suggestive, and inexhaustible, and magical, and unlimited?—Letter of Professor Scott-Holland, quoted in his 'Life' by Stephen Paget.

"There was never such a fateful experiment as when God trusted man with freedom. But the Christian faith is that He well knew what He was about. He did not do that as a mere adventure, not without knowing that He had the power to remedy any abuse of it that might occur, and to do this for a new creation more mighty, marvellous, and mysterious than the first. . . . To redeem creation is a more creative act than to create it. It is the last thing that omnipotence could do."—P. T. Forsyth: 'The Justification of God.'

"That a good man may have his back to the wall is no more than we knew already, but that God could have His back to the wall is a boast for all insurgents whatever. Christianity is the only religion on earth that has felt omnipotence made God incomplete. Christianity has felt that God to be wholly God must have been a rebel as well as a king. Alone of all creeds it has added courage to the virtues of this Creator. For the only courage worth calling courage must necessarily mean that the soul passes a breaking point and does not break."—Chesterton: 'Orthodoxy.'

"More than anyone else in history Christ wakes in us that temper of wonder to which romance always appeals. There is still to me something almost incredible in the idea of a young Galilean peasant imagining that he could bear on his own shoulders the burden of the entire world. . . . And not merely imagining this, but actually achieving it. . . . The absolute purity of the antagonist raises the entire scheme to a height of romantic art from which the sufferings of Thebes and Pelops' line are by their very horror excluded, and shows how wrong Aristotle was when he said in his treatise on the drama that it would be impossible to bear the spectacle of one blameless in pain."—Oscar Wilde: 'De Profundis.'

The Romance of God.



HAVE just been reading over again 'The Divine Adventure,' by that beautiful mystic writer William Sharp, or as he is better known by the name of "Fiona Macleod." It is a strange, fascinating production. But it is not of it I wish to write just now; it is of a kindred subject, 'The Romance of God.' We all love romance, even the oldest and most prosaic of us. It is the secret of the extraordinary growth of novel reading, picture shows, etc. All this is the struggle of the starved and cramped life to realise itself, to escape for a little out of the humdrum—the dull, the factual—into the world of imagination, of adventure, of idealism, of the Spirit. It is wholly in vain to seek to repress it. Adam Smith said long ago that what the world needed was the right direction of

vanity. No ; that is only part of the truth. What the world needs is the right direction of the Romantic Spirit. Rightly understood, that is the design and duty of Christmas. Let us try to understand that.

I.

Christmas opens for us the first volume of the sublimest romance in history. Let us assume that the Gospel story of the Advent and the Apostolic interpretation of it are true. It may or may not be so. That we do not now discuss. We will just suppose that the New Testament theory of the coming of Christ and its significance represents actual fact. Where will it lead us ? It will lead us surely into the presence of the most stupendous romantic adventure the world has ever seen or ever imagined. What is a romance ? You can read it at large in Scott's essays, or Stevenson's, or Theodore Watts Dunton's, and in those of other writers. For our purpose we will take the dictionary's definition. The general idea is that it is a story of surprising adventures befalling a hero or heroine—"a tale of wild adventure in love or chivalry." Now, assuming the truth of the New Testament, our proposition is that Christmas is the central chapter in the most romantic adventure known to history. Where does this romance begin ? It begins where all romances and everything else begins. It begins in an idea. It begins in an idea

in the mind of God—in the mind of the Creator and Sustainer of all life and worlds. He is the Hero of the romance. What was the idea ? It was the creation of a race of beings in His own likeness ; therefore a race of beings that would be free to differ from their Creator, and even dispute supremacy with Him. That is the first condition of all real romance. The excitement, the fascination of it depend on not knowing exactly what may be the issue. In mathematics or mechanics there is but one conclusion possible. You know that it can only work out in a certain way. "When somebody discovered the Differential Calculus," says Chesterton, "there was only one Differential Calculus he could discover. But when Shakespeare killed Romeo he might have married him to Juliet's old nurse if he had felt inclined." For a story or drama may end in a dozen ways, because the personages in it are free to do what they choose—to love or hate, curse or kill, as the wish or will dictates ; hence the philosophy that denies human freedom, that turns man into a being of necessity, is destructive of all romances, of all poetry, of all imagination, of all that makes life and literature beautiful, strong, heroic. But this by the way. So on the New Testament assumption God calls into existence a race of beings with a will like His own, free to do what they choose in His universe. That was a stupendous adventure. For if man was dowered with a will like God's, he might differ from Him ; he might

Divide the universe with God,
Keeping his will unbent, and hold a world
Where He is not supreme.

"When personality emerges and a self-conscious will has come to be, the curtain is ready to rise upon a scene packed with thrills. The God who took all the risks of a creation was the most amazing Adventurer of whom we can conceive." So there you have the elements of an unspeakable triumph—or tragedy. It was the latter that happened. And so opened and ended the first volume of this sublime romance.

II.

The second begins with the advent of the hero upon the stage of Time. What do we find as we open it? We find the world all topsy-turvy. We find the race of beings made in the Divine image struggling like rats in a cage—rebels in the Divine Kingdom.

And sad grow the toiling nations,
And red grow the battle spears,
And weary with desolations
Roll onward the laden years.

What is to be done? Destroy them? That would be a policy of despair, if not an impossible policy. It is a policy that would occur to anybody. It is commonplace and prosaic. We recall here the weird, wild story of Frankenstein. A great scientist hits on the secret of life. He aspires

to create a man. He succeeds. He is at first fascinated by his success, and ultimately terrified by the look of the creature. He tries to escape from him, but cannot. The creature feels his solitariness, and demands that Frankenstein should provide him with a companion. He consents. While engaged in the task the creature appears, and his creator is so scared that he smashes the work and flees away. The fierce, wild thing bursts bounds, kills the infant brother of his creator, and commits other dreadful crimes. Frankenstein, in an agony of revenge, resolves to kill the thing to which he had given life. He pursues him up and down the earth and away into the polar seas. He overtakes him there; but before he can reach him the ice breaks, they float apart, and Frankenstein is afterwards rescued by a vessel. But the chase has been too much for him, and he dies. The wild thing visits the ship, mourns over the dead body of his creator, and goes off again into the Polar wilds to commit suicide. It is a gruesome, terrifying romance or tragedy. But it touches in so many points the great supreme tragedy of the possibilities in the creation of man. Well, the destruction of the race, even if it were possible, would be a policy of despair. What then? Seek to redeem it, to restore the broken communion, to win it back to its true allegiance. That is right. But how? Here begins the wonder of the romance, its pathos and its passion. The Creator and Sustainer of the universe Himself

enters it. All Christendom is singing this week:

Though true God of true God,
Light of Light Eternal,
Our lowly nature He hath not abhorred.

He was born of a woman, wrapped about Him a vesture of flesh and blood, wrought in a carpenter's shop for thirty years, then came forth to reveal the Everlasting Father to men, to tell them in word and by deed that He was their friend and lover, that He grieved in their sorrows, bore their sins, and besought them by His death to be reconciled to Him.*

* I spoke of the victory over evil, cosmical or ethical, as costing God His life. . . . Of course, there is a sense in which it is nonsense, but the theologian knows there is a sense in which it is not nonsense. . . . When we speak of sin's death and God's there is a certain play upon the word. All sin inflicts a death on God. It reduces His headship. It imposes on Him a limitation which is quite unlike all His other determinations, in that it is not self-determined, and is therefore absolutely intolerable. If His self-determining were not capable of a determination mightier than the alien one from sin, sin would conquer and death would reign. But the meaning of the Incarnation is that God was capable in His self-emptying in Christ of a self-limitation—i.e., a self-mastery of holy surrender, whose moral effect was more than equal to the foreign invasion of sin. He died unto sin as a man dies by it. But, of course, death has not the same sense in each case. God carries death as a blessed sacrifice. Sin carries it as an entail of curse. Divine death is moral surrender to sin's conditions, but not to its nature. It is an exercise of moral strength and resource which increases life in losing it; whereas the only death at sin's command is decay and destruction. . . . Sin, therefore, cost the Godhead not its existence, but its bliss. It cost the Son of God not His soul, but all that makes life a conscious fullness and joy. It cost Him the Cross and all that meant for such a life as His.—Forsyth: 'The Justification of God.'

How was the message and Messenger received? Multitudes called it incredible. They turned against the Bearer of it; said He was a scoundrel or a fool. They persecuted Him; they spurned and spat upon Him, and finally hung Him up on a cross between two robbers. They did this—to whom? Froude tells of a service in St. Mary's, Oxford, when Newman was once preaching there. After describing in impressive language our Lord's passion, he paused, and then, in a low, clear voice, the preacher said: "Now, I bid you recollect that He to whom these things were done was Almighty God." It was, says Froude, as if "an electric shock had gone through the audience." Is not this a romance? What is a romance? It is a tale of extraordinary and extravagant adventure of love or chivalry. Was there ever so extraordinary or extravagant an adventure as this? Do we stagger at it? Does it seem incredible, impossible? It well might. And yet why should it? When General Stonewall Jackson was wounded, the stretcher-bearers were carrying him off the field. One of them was shot, and fell. The general rolled down. Bullets were flying thick. One of the stretcher-bearers was a trusty servant of the famous general. He put himself down in front of him, saying: "If the flying shot must hit someone, let it be me;" and he lay thus, sheltering him, till relief came. "Why did you do it?" he was asked. "Because I loved him." It is a fine story. It thrills us with admiration. It wins the V.C. We

sing songs of those who thus venture their lives for others, and give them

Names to fire men's ears with music
Till the round world's race is run.

III.

Have we a God that does anything like that? Have we a God that comes into this wild, weird fight of life and takes his place with the wounded and dying, and stands as a shield about them, and gathers into His own breast the spear-points of their death? If we have not, then no other is any use to us. If we have not, then our homage must go out to our brave human saviours. But if the Bible be true there is such a God. That is the gospel with which Christmas starts. "Why did you do that?" "Because I loved him," said Jackson's servant. But Jackson was lovable. He was a great and noble man. He had been a good friend to his servant. Right here we touch the inner nerve of this great romance of Christmas. We all can understand love giving itself for the lovely and the lovable, for the beautiful and the brave. But what are we to say to love that gives itself to the death for those who are not that; for those that spit upon it and sneer at it, and turn from it, and trample it in the dust? What is the testimony often enough we have heard recently:

"Greater love hath no man than this—that a man lay down his life for his friends"? But that's not the end. "Our Sons," says Mr Britling in H. G. Wells's story, "have shown us God." Yes, partly, but not wholly, for the adventuring God in this Christmas story goes far beyond laying down life for friends. "*God commendeth His love towards us, in that while we were enemies Christ died for us.*" That is the romance whose opening chapter unrolls itself before us this Christmas week. It is surely an amazing adventure of love and chivalry. We are offering no opinion here on its truth. We are merely affirming that it is the message of Christianity to the world. It is a message so romantic that the New Testament writers cannot find words to express their amazement. The commonplaces of wonder seem to stammer on their pens with the sudden shame of their own ineptitude. It is not that it is contrary to reason; but rather, when it is really understood with both heart and head, the verdict is that it is right—that it is what we might expect from such a God as Christ reveals. If this story be true it would give us a new conception of the worth of man, of the worst of men, because of the price paid for their redemption. It would give us also a new conception of sin—a thing urgently needed in these free-and-easy times. The tragedy of sin is not merely the existence of a bad man; it is the existence of a broken-hearted God. And it would set man right with his conscience; for when it is

alive and gets on its feet it repudiates a cheap forgiveness. It demands a reparation and atonement, which it finds itself impossible to provide. The Cross thus becomes not the evasion of conscience, but its création and satisfaction. And so, as Dr Hough writes, "it is not too much to say that the Cross as the death of God incarnate is the only thing that can keep religion alive and authentic as the race advances and becomes more highly articulated in all the relationships of life. Less than this will be too thin to meet the requirements of the turbulent and urgent experiences of men. A God who can break His way into human life on a passionate brave quest of suffering rescue is the only God who can gain the mastery of men. Only a God who has lived our life and died our death can do for us all we need to have done." If only it were true?

IV.

And so that brings us to our next point. For we are not at the end yet. Every romance closes with the triumph of the hero and those who stand in with him. The curtain is rung down to the plaudits of victory and the merry peal of wedding bells. Well, we see the Hero of this romance and His followers crowding in at last over the sea of glass to "the marriage supper of the Lamb." What this mystic imagery means we do not fully

know. It belongs to the last volume of the romance, and it is not yet written out fully for our reading here. But we know enough to believe that it must be something beyond words—something that eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man to conceive. Why? Because of the amazing cost that it involved to prepare it. The law of proportion demands that. You do not carve a 50ft block of marble for a monumental pedestal only to put a 5in putty man on the top of it. That would be ridiculous. So it would be equally ridiculous to suppose that the final close of this supreme romance should be commonplace and trivial. And it is not. As we have said, those who have seen the vision of it are bankrupt of words and images to describe it. It might be well, perhaps, if preachers were less afraid of the romantic side of their faith. They deal too much in little fiddling moralities that fail to arouse the enthusiasm of their audiences. Ruskin tells us that if you cut out a square inch of Turner's skies you would find the infinite in it. It would take a good many square inches of some sermons to make an appeal to the love of daring and romance that sleeps in every breast. Bishop Gore declared, not long ago, that the "peril of Protestant preachers is that they seek refuges from the sublimities of thought in opportunities of action." But you need the loftiest motive for the lowliest duty if it is to be worthily done. You are not going to find a dynamic for even commonplace

work by watering down the romance of religion. "A skinned theology will not produce a more intense philanthropy." And that leads us to our last point.

V.

This Divine romance, which Christmas suggests, when it is gripped is gripping. The vision of it makes those who gain it romantic themselves. Is not that so? "Wherever there is a romantic movement in Art," writes Oscar Wilde in his poignant 'De Profundis,' "there somehow and under some form is Christ or the soul of Christ. . . . We owe to Him the most diverse things and people—Hugo's 'Les Miserables'; Baudelaire's 'Fleur du Mal'; the note of pity in Russian novels; Verlaine and Verlaine's poems; the stained glass and tapestries and the quattro-cento work of Burne-Jones and Morris, no less than the tower of Giotto and the troubled romantic marbles of Michael Angelo; pointed architecture and love of children and flowers, for both of which in classical art there was but place hardly enough for both to grow or play in." Look into history. Call the muster roll of those who got a glimpse of this vision, and see how it flushed their lives with Romance: Paul, the martyrs, St. Francis of Assisi, Xavier, Luther, Knox, Gordon, Lincoln, Livingstone, Booth, and the mighty multitude of the faithful who are not famous.

And oftentimes cometh our wise Lord God,
Master of every trade,
And tells them tales of His daily toil,
Of Edens newly made;
And they rise to their feet as He passes by,
Gentlemen unafraid.

Gentlemen (and ladies, too) unafraid! Yes, that's it. And not only unafraid, but original, far-seeing and in-seeing, venturesome, romantic—the Knight Errants of Time and Eternity. And it is such knight errants that are wanted to-day. A little while ago the world rung with plaudits of those who went forth to slay the dragon of Prussianism. Now it needs to have the daring and the chivalry and the sacrifice that inspired them turned into the sluice-ways that make for peace and righteousness. And how are we to get this? Rightly comprehended, it lies hidden in the message of Christmas, in the Romance of God. Let Browning put it for us:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So the All-Great were the All-loving, too—
So through the thunder comes a human voice,
Saying "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face my hands fashioned, see it in Myself.
Thou hast no power, nor may'st conceive of Mine.
But love I gave thee, with Myself to love,
And thou must love Me Who hath died for thee."

The Romance of God! That is the message which Christmas presses home upon us all. If it be true, who dares fear? If it be false, who dares hope?

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