

A Talk About Heaven.

BY F. J. GOULD.

EVERY now and then, when a child applies for admission into our Secular Sunday-school at Leicester, I have to call on the father or mother, in accordance with my invariable rule, in order to make sure that he or she quite understands our non-theological position. The other day I made one of these visits of inquiry, and wanted to know if Mrs. H. cared for her daughter Lily to attend our school. Our conversation ran something in this way:

"You see, Mrs. H., our Secular Society does not teach the same things as the Churches and Chapels do, and I want you to see the difference before you send Lily to our Hall."

"Well, I should like to know what Secular means."

"We tell the children about their daily duty to parents and playfellows and neighbors, but we tell them nothing about God."

"Nothing about God!"

"We tell them that if they act harshly or untruthfully it makes other people unhappy, and the unhappiness will come back upon themselves. We think that is reason enough, without saying anything about hell."

"Nothing about hell!"

"And we remind them of the bad things in the world, and impress on them that unless they—the boys and girls, and the men and women—join together and strive, the evil will never be changed. So we try to make them think about making this world pleasanter to live in, and we say nothing about heaven."

"Nothing about heaven!"

"We persuade them into seeing the need of self-help, and so, in our school, we never say prayers."

"Never say prayers!"

"Do you agree with this way of thinking, Mrs. H.?"

"I can't let Lily come, sir."

"No?"

"What you teach the children is all right, I daresay. But I feel I must have a heaven to look forward to, and I should like Lily to look forward to it as well. This world is hard enough, with all its worries and troubles, and we should be in a poor way if we could not afterwards go to a place of rest."

"But how do you know heaven will be any more peaceful than the earth? You know no one who has ever been there and come back?"

"No; but when my son lay dying he told me he knew he was going there."

"But, Mrs. H., when your rooms get dirty you don't *hope* they will get clean; you know that unless *you* clean them, God will not. And are we likely to get a clean world or a sweet heaven unless we make it ourselves?"

"Ah, but God gives us the strength to work."

"If that is so, why does not God give strength to us all? Why does he allow many to go about crippled and palsied?"

"I don't know; but I couldn't do without the thought of heaven, and so Lily can't come."

The good woman was perfectly frank. She merely put into homely illogic what the theologians express in high-sounding and imposing, but not less illogical, affirmations. There is absolutely no proof of the existence of heaven, and yet thousands of suffering people cling to the hope, and know it is only a hope. The hope is perfectly natural. It is no more unreasonable than hoping that the noonday's pain will have passed

away at even. The evil is done when the hope is fostered and incited. Seizing on a weakness of human nature, the priest has transformed the hope into a dogma. He takes a fancy and feeds it with promises. Sadness weeps and prays for consolation, and the priest says, "Your consolation is assured in the Hereafter." Now, we all know what happens when a man begins to entertain a more or less vague expectation of a fortune. He broods, he dreams, he lives in the future. He hears not To-day whispering, "Do your work"; he hears only the lullaby of to-morrow, singing of unrealized riches.

It is chiefly the unfortunate who love the vision of heaven. Comfortable villadom prefers the substantial upholstery of earth to the ethereal accommodation of the skies. Anguish is the mother of paradise, and the New Jerusalem is built, not of pearls and jasper, but of tears and disappointments. I do not complain that the poor should try to deaden care with the narcotic of the hope of heaven. I complain that the sleek and well-provided should encourage this illusion. It is meanness made religious, and selfishness brodered with pious appearance. Every sigh directed to heaven is a loss of the energy of will which should be used in the remedy. Heaven is a perpetual invitation to laziness. If we are prosperous and we meet the miserable, we ought to do two things. We ought to search for the causes of the misery, and we ought to induce the miserable to co-operate in the struggle against injustice or unhealthy conditions.

It is often said that it would be an unkindness to rob the ignorant and the wretched of the prospect of repose in a world to come. That is not true. Go to the ignorant and the wretched and tell them honestly (a still better word would be honorably) that there is no solvency in the heaven-doctrine; that a bankrupt world is no guarantee of divine credit in Zion; that human failure can only be redeemed by human effort; and that man—man who hates, slays, steals and oppresses—is the only agent of salvation. This is a paradox, but it is not discouraging. It startles, but it does not numb. It drags us into the awful presence of facts, but there is a more deadly influence in an irrational hope than in a terrible truth. When suffering awakes to the knowledge of its real situation, it gathers up its little strength to grapple with its enemy. It silences the psalm, and puts out its hand for the sword. It gazes no longer at the clouds for the advent of angels, but at the earth for stones to fit its sling. It inspects human nature more eagerly and closely. Is it not possible that this nature which hates, slays, steals and oppresses may conceal within its bosom a store of love and helpfulness? Can this better nature be appealed to? Can the hand of tyranny be made to bless, and can the eye that despises be kindled into tenderness? We pray in vain to God to give us our daily bread. May we not succeed better if we pray to publicans, sinners, and foes? Perhaps, after all, man is more likely to aid man than God is. Matthew Arnold tells in one of his sonnets how, in a West London square, a beggar woman "let the rich pass with frozen stare." She waited till some laborers went by; these were her kinsmen in sorrow; she sent her daughter to ask alms, and the girl came back with money in her hand. The beggar pleaded not with aliens, but with

friends and sharers in a common fate.

She turns from that cold succor which attends

The unknown little from the unknown great,

And points us to a better time than ours.

It will be a better time when we turn from the alien splendor of God to the modest, but real, friendship of our fellow-man.
—*Freethinker.*