

CHAPTER 1

A silent Heaven is the greatest mystery of our existence. Some there are, indeed, for whom the problem has no perplexities. In a philosophy of silly optimism, or a life of selfish isolation, they have "attained *Nirvana*." For such, the sad and hideous realities of life around us have no existence. Upon their path these cast no shadow. The serene atmosphere of their fools' paradise is undisturbed by the cry of the suffering and the oppressed. But earnest and thoughtful men face these realities, and have ears to hear that cry; and their indignant wonder finds utterance at times in some such words as those of the old Hebrew prophet and bard, "Does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?"

Society, even in the great centers of our modern civilization, is all too like a slave ship, where, with the sounds of music and laughter and revelry on the upper deck, there mingle the groans of untold misery battened down below. Who can estimate the sorrow and suffering and wrong endured during a single round of the clock even in the favored metropolis of highly favored England? And if it be thus in the green tree, what shall be said of the dry! What mind is competent to grasp the sum of all this great world's misery, heaped up day after day, year after year, century after century? Human hearts may plan, and human hands achieve, some little to alleviate it, and the strong and ready arm of human law may accomplish much in the protection of the weak and the punishment of the wicked. But as for God--the light of moon and stars is not more cold and pitiless than *He* appears to be!

Every new chapter in the story of Turkish misrule raises a fresh storm of indignation throughout Europe. The conscience of Christendom is outraged by tales of oppression and cruelty and wrong inflicted on the Christian subjects of the Porte. Here is a testimony to the Armenian massacres of 1895:--

"Over 60,000 Armenians have been butchered. In Trebizond, Erzeroum, Erzinghian, Hassankaleh, and numberless other places the Christians were crushed like grapes during the vintage. The frantic mob, seething and surging in the streets of the cities, swept down upon the defenseless Armenians, plundered their shops, gutted their houses, then joked and jested with the terrified victims, as cats play with mice. The rivulets were choked up with corpses; the streams ran red with human blood; the forest glades and rocky caves were peopled with the dead and dying; among the black ruins of once prosperous villages lay roasted infants by their mangled mothers' corpses; pits were dug at night by the wretches destined to fill them, many of whom, flung in when but lightly wounded, awoke underneath a mountain of clammy corpses, and vainly wrestled with death and with the dead, who shut them out from light and life forever.

"A man in Erzeroum, hearing a tumult and fearing for his children, who were playing in the street, went out to seek and save them. He was borne down upon by the mob. He pleaded for his life, protesting that he had always lived in peace with his Moslem neighbors, and sincerely loved them. The statement may have represented a fact, or it

may have been but a plea for pity. The ringleader, however, told him that that was the proper spirit, and would be condignly rewarded. The man was then stripped, and a chunk of his flesh cut out of his body and jestingly offered for sale: 'Good fresh meat, and dirt cheap,' exclaimed some of the crowd. 'Who'll buy fine dog's meat?' echoed the amused bystanders. The writhing wretch uttered piercing screams as some of the mob, who had just come from rifling the shops, opened a bottle and poured vinegar or some acid into the gaping wound. He called on God and man to end his agonies. But they had only begun. Soon afterwards two little boys came up, the elder crying, '*Hairik, Hairik* (Father, father), save me! See what they've done to me!' and pointed to his head, from which the blood was streaming over his handsome face and down his neck. The younger brother--a child of about three--was playing with a wooden toy. The agonizing man was silent for a second and then, glancing at these his children, made a frantic but vain effort to snatch a dagger from a Turk by his side. This was the signal for the renewal of his torments. The bleeding boy was finally dashed with violence against the dying father, who began to lose strength and consciousness, and the two were then pounded to death where they lay. The younger child sat near, dabbling his wooden toy in the blood of his father and brother, and looking up, now through smiles at the prettily dressed Kurds and now through tears at the dust-begrimed thing that had lately been his father. A slash of a sabre wound up his short experience of God's world, and the crowd turned its attention to others.

"These are but isolated scenes revealed for a brief second by the light, as it were, of a momentary lightning-flash. The worst cannot be described."--*Contemporary Review*, January, 1896.

The following refers to still more recent horrors:--

"In no place in this region has the attack upon the Christians been more savage than in Egin. Every male above twelve years of age who could be found was slain. Only one Armenian was found who had been seen and spared. Many children and boys were laid on their backs and their necks cut like sheep. The women and children were gathered together in the yard of the Government building and in various places throughout the town. Turks, Kurds, and soldiers went among these women, selected the fairest, and led them aside to outrage them. In the village of Pinguan fifteen women threw themselves into the river to escape dishonor."--*The Times*, December 10, 1896.

And what is the element in all this which most exasperates the public sentiment? It is that the Sultan has the power to prevent all this, but will not. That, while possessing ample means to restrain and punish, he remains unmoved, and in the safe seclusion of his palace gives himself up to a life of luxury and ease. But has Almighty God no power to check such crimes? Even Abdul Hamid has been shamed into laying aside the dignity of kingship, and making heard his personal voice in Europe to repel the charge his seeming inaction has raised to his discredit.¹ But in vain do we strain our ears to hear some voice

1 The Marquis of Salisbury's speech at the Pavilion, Brighton, on the 19th of November, 1895.

from the throne of the Divine Majesty. The far-off heaven where, in perfect peace and unutterable glory, God dwells and reigns, is SILENT!

"So I returned, and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun; and behold, the tears of such as were oppressed, and they had no comforter; and on the side of their oppressors there was power; but they had no comforter." And this in a world ruled and governed by a God who is Almighty!

And when we withdraw our thoughts from the great world around us and fix them upon the narrow circle of His faithful people, the facts are no less stern, and the mystery grows more inscrutable. Devoted men leave our shores, forsaking the security, the comforts, the charms, the countless benefits of life in the midst of our Christian civilization, to carry the knowledge of the true God to heathen lands. But by and by we hear of their massacre by the hands of those whom thus they sought to elevate and bless. And where is "the true God" they served? The little band of Christian men who were in a special sense His accredited ambassadors, noble women too who shared in their exile and their labors, and little children whose tender helplessness might excite the pity of a very devil, in their terror and agony cried to Heaven for the succor which never came. The God they trusted might surely have turned the hearts, or restrained the hands, of their brutal murderers. Is it possible to imagine circumstances that would more fitly claim the help of Him whom they worshiped as all-powerful both in heaven and on earth? But the earth has drunk in their blood, and a silent Heaven has seemed to mock their cry!

And these horrors are but mere ripples on the surface of the deep, wide sea of the Church's sufferings throughout the ages of her history. From the old days of Pagan Rome right down through the centuries of so-called "Christian" persecutions, the untold millions of the martyrs, the best and purest and noblest of our race, have been given up to violence and outrage and death in hideous forms. The heart grows sick at the appalling story, and we turn away with a dull but baseless hope that it may be in part at least untrue. But the facts are too terrible to make exaggeration in the record of them possible. Torn by wild beasts in the arena, torn by men as merciless as wild beasts, and, far more hateful, in the torture chamber of the Inquisition, His people have died with faces turned to heaven and hearts upraised in prayer to God. But the heaven has seemed as hard as brass, and the God of their prayers as powerless as themselves or as callous as their persecutors!

But most men are selfish in their sympathies. Some private grief at times looms greater than all the sum of the world's miseries and the Church's sufferings. If ever there was a saint on earth, it is the mother to whose deathbed sons and daughters have been summoned from various pursuits of business or of pleasure. In all their wanderings, that mother's piety and faith have been a guiding and restraining influence. And now, thus gathered once more in the old home, they are keen to watch how, in the solemn crisis of her last days on earth, God will deal with one of the loveliest and truest of His children. And what do they behold? The poor body racked with pain that never ceases till all capacity of suffering is quenched by the hand of Death! If human skill could give relief, the attending physician would be dismissed as heartless or incompetent. Is *God*, then,

incompetent or heartless? To Him they look to relieve the death agonies of the dying saint, but they look to Him in vain!

Or it may be some grief more selfish still. The crash of some great sorrow that turns a bright home into a waste, and leaves the heart so benumbed and hard that even the so-called "consolations of religion" appear but hollow platitudes. Why should God be so cruel? Why is Heaven so terribly silent?

The most prolific fancy, the most facile pen, would fail to picture or portray in their endless variety the experiences which have thus stamped out the last embers of faith in many a crushed and desolated heart. "There are times," as a Christian writer² puts it, "when the heaven that is over our heads seems to be brass, and the earth that is under us to be iron, and we feel our hearts sink within us under the calm pressure of unyielding and unsympathizing law." How true the statement, but how inadequate! If it were merely on behalf of this or that individual that God failed to interfere or on one occasion or another, belief in His infinite wisdom and goodness ought to check our murmurs and soothe our fears. And further, if, as in the days of the patriarchs, even a whole generation passed away without His once declaring Himself, faith might glance back and hope look forward amidst heart searchings for the cause of His silence. But what confronts us is the fact, explain it as we may, that for eighteen centuries the world has never witnessed a public manifestation of His presence or His power.

"Does God know?" At first the thought comes up as an impatient yet not irreverent appeal. But presently the words are formed upon the lip to imply a challenge and suggest a doubt; and at last they are boldly uttered as the avowal of a settled unbelief. And then the sacred records which awed and charmed the mind in childhood, telling of "mighty acts" of Divine intervention "in the old time" begin to lose their vividness and force, till at last they sink to the level of Hebrew legends and old-world myths. In presence of the stern and dismal facts of life, the faith of earlier days gives way, for surely a God who is entirely passive and always *unavailable* is for all practical purposes non-existent.