

**BLESSED BE VAGUENESS.**

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**T**HE intrusion upon the modern eye with such a subject as this is bound to administer more or less of a shock to the modern mind. It sounds almost as bad as to shout at a Friends' meeting, or to put back the hands of a town clock, or to revert to the dark ages of the world. "Blessed be clearness rather," we expect the modern voice to say admonishingly, while the modern eye looks on us pityingly, and the modern head shakes at us with an action almost threatening. Nevertheless, I venture to repeat it, and, at the risk of being written down a fool, venture to give a reason or two for my contention. In these days, when the most forlorn cases are taken up and argued, I claim my right to say my say on the blessedness of the vague.

Blessed be vagueness in the realms of nature and art and general life. This is my first position. For here, at least, vagueness lends a charm and glory all its own.

## I.

Nature is full of dim, dark places, half revealed and half concealed, high lights flecked with great shadows. Who cares to gaze at mountain peaks standing out in midday clearness, sharp and vivid and hard? The educated eye prefers to see them shimmering through a haze, or with white fleecy scarves thrown across their great bosoms. Who wants to see distances seemingly almost within touch in their sharp outlines? Better far, most men think, to see them in dimness and ghostly shadowiness. Their vagueness constitutes their chief charm. It is not the scientific explanation of the rainbow which appeals to our hearts and minds, but the marvellous beauty of the bow itself. Its glorious gradation of colours as they melt into one another without a join, the spectral beauty of it all is largely due to its vagueness. The contrast of cloud and colour strikes our deepest soul as we look and wonder. As Wordsworth says, "Our hearts leap up when we behold a rainbow in the sky," but not because we can make the colours with a prism and a ray of white light ourselves, but because nature's

bow is not clear, is not self-evident, is not tangible. It is but a vague general impression we get of an old English flower garden when first we step into it, but its glory falls upon our eyes and hearts at once. All is aflame with beauty, and we do not stay to pick out its individualities before we admire. You can render it less vague if you choose. You can pick out flower by flower, study their parts, count their petals and stamens, and you can hang long labels around their necks, and so get clearness in plenty, but you have lost the vague, charming, haunting beauty in the clear particulars. A lark sings up in the heavens, and you catch glimpses, vague glimpses, of the little plain songster, as he shakes down his waves of melody. By and bye he will descend, and, for clearness of exposition, you catch and kill him, and lay bare with your scalpel the glorious little throat. And now you know all about it. You have a clear view of the singing organ of the lark. But, look you, you have lost that song for ever, and the song, I think, is better than the knowledge, the vagueness than the clearness.

## II.

As it is with nature, so is it with art ; the life of art, too, depends much upon vagueness. Your microscopic painter will paint you every leaf and stone with all the fidelity of a photograph. But under the process the picture vanishes. A truer artist will abound rather in vagueness with shadows more or less transparent, in which more is suggested than expressed, and with the atmosphere as much like nature as he can portray it. He is careful to leave much to the imagination, and only to help it by suggestions here and there. Your admiration of an old Cathedral, to what is it due ? Not merely to its grand proportions, its massive structure, its traceried roof, and the sentiment which clings to all old things with a history. These make their own great appeal. But, deeper than these, lies the charm of vagueness. The glorious old windows filter the light through them, and throw upon the pavement splashes of commingled colours, and we do not try to form them into shapes, and trace them to their Sources. We are content to admire, and not to define. In the dim religious light all outlines are broken, shadows deepen in the darker corners, and the imagination is allowed to play about in the dimness and vagueness. Where this vagueness is absent, as in the newer buildings, all their costliness does

not compensate for the glories of the old and dim and ill defined, for they are too hard and clear in their white glare and ample light.

So it is with music. An arithmetical genius was once at the pains to count the notes which a celebrated pianist struck in his performance, and they were, of course, multitudinous. But through his clever exertions and care he lost the music in the notes. Isolate and define, and you are lost to the true enjoyment of music, for you will probably miss the theme. It is in the skilful blending of all the notes that the music emerges.

### III.

As it is with nature and art, so the salt of vagueness savours our general life.

What do we know of one another? We form vague estimates, and find them sufficient. Suppose we knew all, and all vagueness passed, how many of our present intimacies would persist? Definite and accurate knowledge of one another's characters would dissolve Society at a stroke. Here and there some friendships might bear the strain, but not many. It is better for our friendships that we do not, and cannot, know. Blessed be vagueness.

What do we know, again, of our future fortunes or misfortunes? Almost nothing. Would it be good to know, think you. If all vagueness passed away, and all was clearly revealed, what a paralysis would fall upon innumerable lives! It might not be amiss to know our future good fortunes, but to know our ill ones, to see them spread out before us in the mass, would assuredly embitter life, and doom it to unmitigated gloom. Some foolish people consult fortune-tellers, and seek to dive by their arts and tricks into futurity. It is their salvation that they only partially believe the revelations of the occult powers. Happily, vagueness prevails in the realm of the future, and a merciful Providence Who knows better what is good for us has dropped a thick veil before our eyes to compel us to short views. Blessed be that vagueness, too.

Let us not say, then, that vagueness is a defect and a hard limitation. It is better so. God might have given us a telescopic vision to see far, or He might have endowed us with a microscopic vision to see deep, but He has done neither. Short sight is ever the strongest and the best sight for the generality of people. And, although we are inclined to resent life's many mysteries, and quarrel

with the Power which permits them, or fails to prevent them, we must remember that He Who forms the decision to reveal or conceal knows better than we what is best.

Some knock their heads against the dark problems of pain and privations and life's inequalities. Why should they quarrel with this vagueness of understanding? It may be better for us not to know. Does a child understand all that his parents do on his behalf? The reasons are beyond our present intelligence. But, later on, the veil will drop. Can we not wait and trust? Meanwhile we have the bright assurance: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter."

The horrors of war stiffened many necks in strong rebellion, for it seemed to them an arraignment of Divine love and power. But an event is not unreasonable because we do not see the reason for it. To argue furiously against the Ruler of life is hardly wise until we know a little more of the issues and the aftermaths of war. It is early days yet to see the harvest from the present bloody sowing. But many of us believe that blessings will assuredly come, if not at once, later. Socially, nationally, personally, there shall be a resurrection which shall be due to the recent horrible clashings of men on the stricken field. In the Great Plague, in the Great Fire of London, nobody at the time saw anything but evil, but we who look back over the centuries know that the Plague destroyed all future plagues of the same type, and the fire swept away huddled masses of insanitary dwellings. Things grow clearer as time passes, and then the true perspective appears, and men bless where once men cursed. Terrific thunderstorms are nature's safety valves for purifying the air and making it possible to breathe freely amid the stifling heats of life. Meanwhile, until the clearness and the answer come, blessed be vagueness.

#### IV.

Some, no doubt, who have accompanied me thus far with more or less tacit consent will break away from my next contention, that as it is with nature and art and general life so also is it with the religious life. Blessed be vagueness in the sphere of religion too.

That vagueness exists no one will dispute. That it could not but exist is equally evident, for the great religious ideas are unlimited in their nature and range and immensity. A God Whom we could

wholly understand would cease to be a God for us. It is no reflection on the great religious facts that, as with nature, there are yawning gaps and gulfs and chasms which are unbridgeable, that, as with the sun, there are black depths which are unfathomable. It is easier to ask questions than to answer them. God is great, and we are small. God's shuttles flash across great looms of which we can only see a fragment, and His tapestries show so large a pattern that we fail to grasp their wholeness. But that there is a pattern we are sure, and that He is at work in the world we have no doubt. Some are foolish enough to deny Worker and loom and pattern because their dim eyes are too weak to see them. So may a child deny his father's actions of love and wisdom because he cannot trace them. So may an imbecile deny the assured findings of the philosophers. Neither do we make a virtue of necessity when we laud vagueness in this religious sphere. It is really the best for us here and now; no intolerable position, but a positive boon. Let us see how this must be.

It is in the sphere of vagueness that faith walks serene and bright; and faith is better than sight in this particular realm of religion. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." "Seeing is believing" is the world's view, and a false view on every ground. For sight is short, and most fallible, and cannot be trusted without confirmation. There is an inner vision, which we call faith, which sees infinitely better and infinitely further, and, compared with physical sight, is far more satisfactory in its issues. It is faith which throws out its tentacles, and like the amoeba grasps its spiritual provender and absorbs it. Faith may not know all, and may move amidst much vagueness, but it knows enough for its life and existence. Clarity of view may give intellectual satisfaction, but it is faith which feeds the inner fires.

It is in vagueness, too, that the spirit of worship is evoked. When we realize something of the eternal greatness and love we are filled with a sense of wonder, and we stretch out our hands in the immensity and adore. The spirit spreads itself out in the vastness, is awed by the infinite purity, and rests secure in the infinite tenderness. In that atmosphere of necessary vagueness the spirit of reverence, confidence, and prayer springs up. If vagueness went, as it never can so long as man retains his comparative littleness and unimportance, worship and adoration would lose their wonted fires.

The immensity of greatness might make us grovel, but the immensity of love compels us to look up and adore.

It is in vagueness, too, that we grasp the idea of super-abundance, the more-than-enough for human needs. A God Who can only love a little, and extend His favours to but a few, would come into our compass and stand out clearly enough, but, with such unhappy limitations, He would be too like ourselves. The very meagreness of the supplies would reduce Him to littleness and mere human limits. It is only when the reservoirs are eternal, and the world is grasped in their supplies, that we are, if vaguely, yet immensely impressed. We cannot grasp an inexhaustible vastness, and we cannot imagine a commissariat which meets the needs of a whole universe, but we do not want to grasp them. We prefer to gaze upon the vague vastness because we know that through its very vagueness we are touching God. A little lake I can sweep with the eye, and I know it to be little because I can take it in so easily, but the great seas are beyond me, and I appreciate their vastness because I know that beyond the horizon there are many more in the great vague beyond.

Just as the vagueness of God's great Being impresses me, so do His dealings with me, and His provisions for my dealings with Him.

There are mysteries about *prayer* which baffle men's understanding, and throw many into sad attitudes. They jib at its vague and twilight features. But rather should they have expected them, and be thankful that they exist, God being what He is, and man being such as he is. But be prayer even vaguer than it is, men must and will pray despite science and the scoff of unreasonable men. For the fact is clear enough, and the promises are beyond doubt, and the fruits are notoriously splendid, and, if vagueness lies about the philosophy of prayer, let it lie. The electric current flies from pole to pole, and the messages arrive sure enough, but no man alive can tell you of what the current itself consists. The message is clear, the results are evident, but what constitute the intermediary is darkness itself.

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(To be concluded.)