

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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The signs of the times by M. J. Savage

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M. J. SAVAGE

He answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather: for the sky is red.

And in the morning, It will be foul weather to day: for the sky is red and lowring. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?—MATT. xvi. 2, 3.



BOSTON

GEO. H. ELLIS, 141 FRANKLIN STREET

1892

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TO

THE INCREASING NUMBERS, IN ALL SECTS, WHO ARE COMING TO
DISCERN THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES MORE AND MORE
CLEARLY, THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.

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CONTENTS

I. BREAK-UP OF THE OLD ORTHODOXY	9
II. THE ROMAN CHURCH	24
III. LIBERAL ORTHODOXY	41
IV. UNITARIANISM	56
V. FREE RELIGION AND ETHICAL CULTURE	71
VI. SCIENTIFIC MATERIALISM	87
VII. INGERSOLLISM	99
VIII. RELIGIOUS REACTION	115
IX. MIND CURE	128
X. SPIRITUALISM	142
XI. BREAK-UPS THAT MEAN ADVANCE	158
XII. THE NEW CITY OF GOD	173



BREAK-UP OF THE OLD ORTHODOXY:

WHY MEN DO NOT BELIEVE IT.

IN taking up a series of subjects like this which I propose under the general title "Signs of the Times," I have something far more important in mind than merely to amuse you by the treatment of topics that may be uppermost in the popular mind; something more important than merely criticising my neighbors, finding fault with or commending them; something more important than the giving of lectures. It seems to me that the one great thing which thoughtful, earnest men to-day need is to understand the age in which they live and of which they are a part. The influence we can exert may be comparatively little, and to us, in the modest estimate which we set upon ourselves, may seem so insignificant as to make us feel that it is hardly worth while to trouble ourselves as to the direction in which this influence is cast; yet, if you think a moment, you will see that the tendency of the age, the great trend of influence that means either decay or progress, is simply the resultant of these individual influences of ours. And which way the age shall move is a mere question, so far as we are concerned, of the majority influence,—as to whether more people shall be intelligently interested in having the world go in the right direction than in the wrong. It is, then, of vast importance that we comprehend, so far as may be, the age in which we live, and understand the forces and the movements around us. It

is not strange that we get confused, that we find ourselves drawn this way and that, that men mistake the eddy for the main current; for we are ourselves in the midst of this current. It sometimes seems to us that we are hardly more than a chip or a fragment of bark floating on the current, swirled about by it, turned this way and that whithersoever it will. It needs, then, that every man for himself, or else some one that he can trust for him, should gain some higher point of outlook if possible, should be able to look before and after, should know which way the world has been moving for certain centuries, so getting in mind the sweep of things, being able thus to separate between the main current and the eddies, and so discover which way lies the hope of mankind. It is some general work like this — an attempt, as far as may be, to help you comprehend what is going on, the meaning of the great forces and movements of which we are a part — that I have in mind. It is not for speculative ends or to satisfy your curiosity, but to help you know which way you ought to think, which way you ought to move, which way you ought to try to turn the thought and effort of others. It is for some such end as this that I have undertaken the work which now lies open before me.

We have not to go back very far in the history of the world to find a time when substantially all the people in Christendom believed about the same thing. They looked out with substantially the same eyes. They had substantially the same conceptions of God in their minds. They believed substantially the same things about the origin, the nature, and the destiny of mankind. They were at one on all main points. They answered, in some rough way at least, to the definition of the Catholic doctrine which has been held for many years. There was this homogeneity of belief at least throughout Christendom. But now what do we see? The

Church, whether people were loyal to it or not, whether people attended the services or not,— the Church then stood for and represented what were practically the common ideas of all Christendom. But to-day what? We have only to open our eyes and look about us, we have only to listen to the complaints that come to us from the pulpits, from the reviews, from the religious and secular newspapers, to see that the Church no longer holds the position which it once did in either the faith or the reverence of mankind. Men used to believe that the Church held the gift of salvation. The majority of people to-day perhaps believe nothing of the sort. They believe that the Church is a good thing, that it stands for certain high ideas, that it exerts a certain fine, elevating influence in society. Many people believe that the doctrines of the Church do really embody the one God-given plan for human salvation. But there are very few people who think that it is absolutely necessary to be a member of the Church or even to attend church, in order to please God or to serve their fellow-men. The Church, in other words, has no longer any such hold as it used to have on the belief, the reverence, or the practical obedience of men. There is a great break-up. The fragments are moving, and taking shape in this direction and that. The Roman Church itself feels the change. There is a process of disintegration going on within it. I shall have occasion to treat of this by and by. I only call your attention to it this morning.

The old Protestant Orthodoxy is being divided into innumerable sects. That was true a hundred years ago; but there is a change going on now by which one form has come to be representative of Liberal Orthodoxy,— a new kind of Orthodoxy, which the old does not recognize. The thoughts that it stands for are creeping into the work of foreign missions. They are disturbing the foundations of theological

institutions. They are at work in the minds of ministers, leading them to practically neglect or overlook the doctrines no longer acceptable to their congregations. The human element is coming forward. This great change of thought has also touched Unitarianism, which we in a way represent. There are Free Religion, Ethical Culture, Scientific Materialism, Ingersollism, Agnosticism in all its departments. Then, the head of man having become puzzled in its attempts to solve this great universe, the heart, too, finds itself hungering for spiritual food. There are signs on all hands of reaction from the extreme materialistic or purely agnostic tendencies; and so people, having lost their faith, are borrowing the old-time faiths of the East, and we find people rushing back not only into old organizations, but importing Theosophy, Metaphysics, Christian Science. Then that heart-hungering of the world for some whisper from beyond has given us Spiritualism. I simply refer to these things this morning as indications of this great break-up of the old beliefs. We are in the midst of the confusion and the conflicting demands of a thousand people, who are telling us that this way or that or the other lies the hope of mankind.

My purpose this morning is to help to answer the question as to why this condition of things is upon us. What has happened? Are the movements of which we are a part to-day indications that there is nothing true, nothing certain? Do they mean the decay of religion? Do they mean the loss of faith? Do they mean the dying out of reverence? or do they mean that mankind is ceasing to aspire, to care for spiritual satisfaction, that it is going to be content hereafter with this little world, and the common business and social engagements of life? Does it mean a revolution against recognizing and acknowledging truth? Is it impiety, this lack of