

**VITAL LIES; STUDIES OF SOME
VARIETIES OF RECENT
OBSCURANTISM, VOL. II, PART
II: APPLIED OBSCURANTISM**

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Vital lies; studies of some varieties of recent obscurantism, Vol. II, Part II: Applied
obscurantism by Vernon Lee

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BEAUTY AND UGLINESS

VITAL LIES
STUDIES OF SOME
VARIETIES OF RECENT
OBSCURANTISM ❧ ❧ ❧

BY
VERNON LEE

VOL. II

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How then may we devise one of those falsehoods in the hour of need, I said, which we lately spoke of—just one royal lie [*γενναῖόν τι ἐν ψευδομένους*] which may deceive the rulers, if that be possible, and at any rate the rest of the city?

Plato, *Republic*, iii. 414

(Jowett's Translation).

Relling. I'm fostering the vital lie in him.

Gregers. Vital lie? Is that what you said?

Relling. Yes—I said vital lie—for illusion, you know, is *the* stimulating principle.

Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*.

PART II
APPLIED OBSCURANTISM
(continued)

"On pragmatic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. Now, whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it certainly does work and that the problem is . . . to determine it so that it will combine with all the other working truths."—W. James, "Pragmatism," p. 299.

"There is sound human nature behind the instinct, as we may properly call it, which leads men to distrust an 'atheist.'"—Crawley, "Tree of Life," p. 296.

CHAPTER II

ANTHROPOLOGICAL APOLO- GETICS AND THE WILL TO MAKE OTHERS BELIEVE¹

I

FROM the *Will to believe* we pass on to the *Will to make others believe*.

Modernism, represented by Father Tyrrell's very beautiful posthumous book, has afforded me an example of how statements admittedly false in the usual sense of that word, may be accepted as *true* in the sense of truly adapted to certain spiritual demands. It is in the books of an anthropologist, of all improbable people, that I have found the explicit theory, no longer that opinions may be true because they are desirable, but, on the contrary, that opinions which are false have been and should continue to be fostered because of their usefulness.

Mr Ernest Crawley is not himself a believer, or at

¹ Ernest Crawley, "The Tree of Life, a Study of Religion." 1905. Same author, "The Mystic Rose : a Study of Primitive Marriage." 1902.

least, he does not proceed as if he were one; for the critical chapters of Father Tyrrell's "Christianity at the Cross Roads" make one cautious in the presence of the amazing apparent openness of minds which reveal themselves afterwards as quite amazingly made up. Be this as it may, even as Father Tyrrell begins by a thorough critical demolition of the Catholicism which he intends to rebuild, so Mr Crawley sets out with a half volume destructive of the official, the usual, claims of Christianity in particular and of supernaturalism in general. A *Priest-Eater*, according to the Italian phrase, could do no better than to carry about and if possible get by heart those chapters of "The Tree of Life" which deal with the historical genuineness of the Christian Myth. If toleration had not taught agnostics a certain perhaps prudish respectfulness, what a storehouse of Voltairian jests those chapters would be!

And now I come to think of it, are we latter-day rationalists so absolutely right in behaving as if we really respected every "honest religious opinion"? Should we be less serious if we honestly laughed at the ideas of our adversaries? And are not certain ideas grotesque, or merely delightfully, childishly funny when held or taught nowadays, which may have been venerable and tremendous in their original intellectual surroundings? Why should I have restrained delighted laughter at the sight of a certain Madonna's complete *trousseau*, handkerchiefs, garters and all, and