

**THE CHOIR INVISIBLE AND  
OTHER SERMONS: TWENTY-  
THIRD AND TWENTY-  
FOURTH SERIES**

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The Choir Invisible and Other Sermons:Twenty-Third and Twenty-Fourth Series by John White Chadwick

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**JOHN WHITE CHADWICK**

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FOURTH SERIES**



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# THE CHOIR INVISIBLE

AND OTHER SERMONS

BY

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*TWENTY-THIRD AND TWENTY-FOURTH SERIES*

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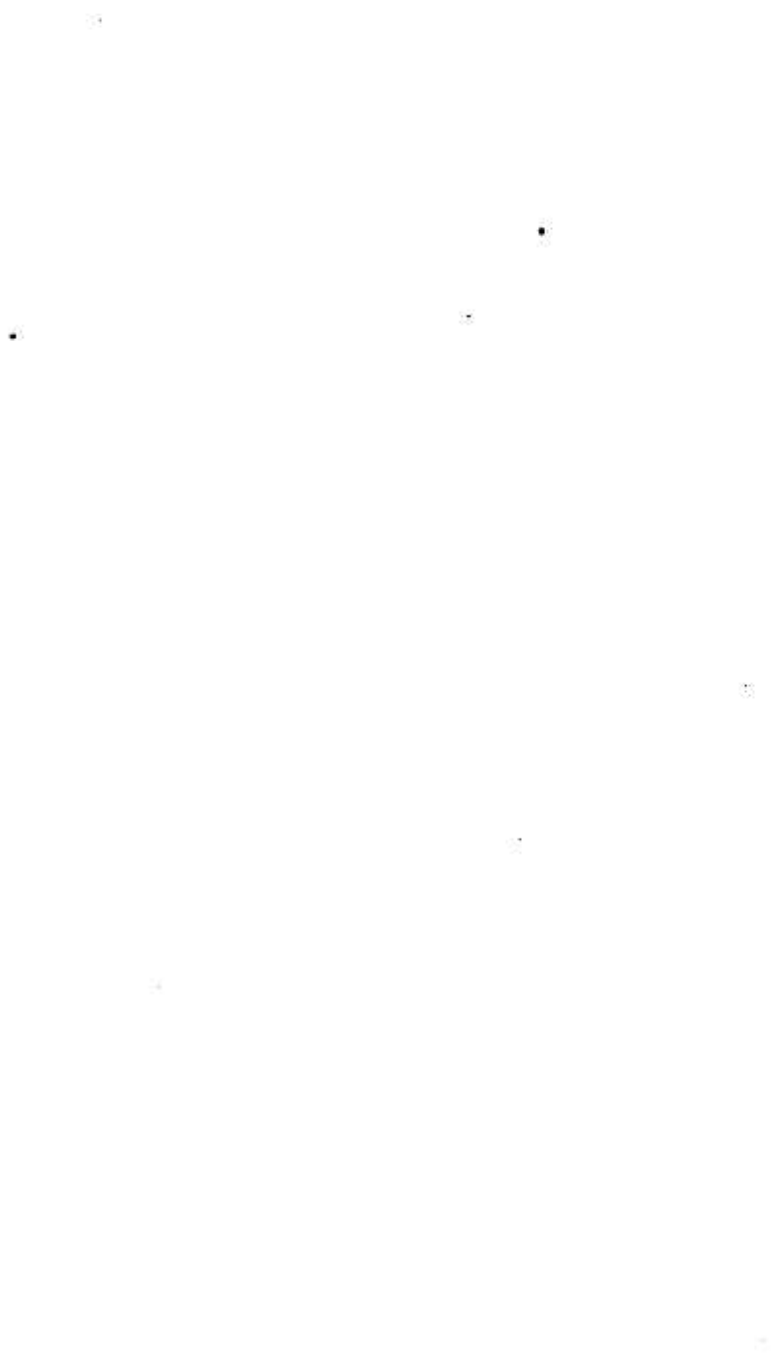
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## THE CHOIR INVISIBLE

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We have a poem and a novel with this title. Why not a sermon, too? The poem is a great one, one of the greatest. The novel? It is more than tolerably good. The sermon?

"Measure not the work  
Till the day's out and the labor done,  
Then bring your gauges."

I have no criticism to offer on Mr. Allen's novel or George Eliot's poem. Hers is the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again in lives made better by their former living in this hot and dusty world. Mine is the choir invisible of those who, while they are yet alive, do the same work as her immortal dead, and do it generally in a more effective way than they, because they are alive and here. What I am bent upon is to celebrate the quiet side of life, the silent forces of the world, the men and women who without noise or shouting, without repute or fame, contribute something, much, to the sum total of the world's work, the common good,

"The bravely dumb who do their deed,  
And scorn to blot it with a name."

In the world below man there are hints and prophecies of what is true of man's estate. How silent for the most part are the processes whereby the earth yields her increase and sustains the wasting heart of man! The tempests and tornadoes have their place and part in the economy of nature, and, roughly as they handle him, are, no doubt, the farmer's great allies; and yet not such allies as are the habit-



ual sunshine and the quiet dew and rain. Time was when the method of nature in the making of the world was regarded as a series of catastrophes; but it is not so regarded now. Not in the thunder or the fire, but in the still small voice the god resides who has decreed these things. Those processes, whereby coast lines and whole countries have been elevated or depressed have been, we are assured, as gradual as the drifting of those sands whose weight lies heavy on the cities of the Chaldean plain, a coverlet here thirty and there sixty feet in thickness folded down on their eternal sleep; or as gradual as the sinking in the sand of the beach of the fisherman's stake to which he moors his dory overnight. The wonder is how rapidly these changes are effected when the process goes on steadily from year to year. I know in Marblehead a pebbly bar, some rods in width, which, since it was my playground fifty years ago, has shifted bodily, just by the moving of a few pebbles every tide a little further to the west; and another bar, by which my grandfather used to cross on horseback to a little island off the coast, is now so washed away that even at low tide vessels of some depth of hold can sail across.

Not only have the changes in the earth's topography been of this gradual kind, but those of which the heavens are the scene. Time was, I have been reading recently, when the earth's revolution, with the moon stuck fast upon her side, was accomplished in two hours and forty minutes. Why not another story "looking backward" to those days of ideal brevity, only an hour and twenty minutes between dawn and dusk? This, by the way: the appropriate consideration is that the stupendous change involved in the transition from a day two hours and forty minutes long to a day twenty-four hours long has been as gradual as the change whereby each day is softened into evening, and the evening darkened into night, for you and me. And not only are these things true, but it is also true that, where we have catastrophe in nature, earthquake and volcanic action and the cyclone's awful whirl, these things are prepared for as

quietly and regularly as the striking of the clock by the slow regular movement of its machinery. Looking at the matter broadly, it seems to be a fact that in the shaping and the conduct of the natural world it is from the choir invisible that the best part of the great world-music comes, that the silent forces and the quiet processes are of paramount importance, and are the habitual purveyors of our human joy and peace.

Now you are all aware how dangerous it is to predicate natural law of the spiritual world, meaning by that the same kind of law in the spiritual world that we find in the natural. It is especially dangerous to do this without being very certain what the natural law is. Yet there are certainly profound analogies between the spiritual and the natural, — the moral and the physical, I might better say. And it is very certain that the processes of the moral world find an impressive analogue in the processes of the physical in the particular we are considering. In morals as in physics God is not so much in the whirlwind and the fire as in the still small voice. The great things are the little things, the infinitesimal increments of evil and of good, which, given enough of them, make up the aggregates which we call character and progress and success, — the multitudes of humble folk, the sum of whose activities are more important than the towering personalities of the exceptional and god-like men.

Consider how it is in the making and unmaking of character. Our preachers and our novelists, for the most part, — and our popular persuasions fall into line with their opinion, — place all their emphasis on the exceptional moments, the great opportunities which invite men and women to the splendor of some virtuous action or to be "magnificent in sin." It is as if life, for the most part, were a level plain which does not really count, and then there comes some valley of decision, which the great hills hem in on every side; and there, just where the pass is narrowest, the strong man meets his enemy, and fights his battle once

for all. The poets, too, have lent themselves to this view of life with much unanimity, Lowell singing, —

“Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,” —

while of Browning nothing is more characteristic than his belief in the great moment, the great opportunity, losing which everything is lost. Nothing distinguishes Browning from Tennyson so sharply as this emphasis on the dramatic situation. Tennyson is the poet of progress, of the slow accretion of the moral forces of the individual and state. In the language of geology, his doctrine is uniformitarian, while Browning's is catastrophic. Now I, too, believe in the great moments and the great men, and that we must economize them both, make the most of them when they appear. But, in order that we may make the most of the great moments, the special opportunities, we must make the most of the little moments, the little opportunities, that are coming to us all the time, thrusting their broken, rusty, not their whole and flashing, jewel-hilted swords into our hands. I have been reading somewhere lately that men are better than they think themselves, — that, given a moral crisis, the best comes to the fore; and I believe that this is so. But it is so because in the moments that we call uncritical, the moments of life's daily commonplace experience, men's moral choices are habitually of the higher rather than the lower things. And often, too, if you could analyze the critical situation, the moment “to which heaven and hell have joined great issues,” you would find that all depends upon some central will that has been hardening its strength by small innumerable fidelities from year to year. “Let there be one wise man in a company,” says Emerson, “and all are wise, so rapid is the contagion.” Let there be one brave man in a company of panic-stricken men, and straightway all are brave, or, if not brave, then calm and mindful of their common danger, not each man for himself. The one brave man summons the latent bravery or decency in all the rest. Life has unquestionably its moments of supreme importance,