

THE SKEPTIC

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649542529

The Skeptic by Mrs. Eliza Lee Cabot Follen

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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MRS. ELIZA LEE CABOT FOLLEN

THE SKEPTIC

THE
SK E P T I C .

BY THE AUTHOR
OF "THE WELL-SPENT HOUR," "WORDS OF TRUTH," &c.

Mrs. Eliza Lee (Cabot) Follen.

The world 's a prophecy of worlds to come. —
If man sleeps on, untaught by what he sees,
Can he prove infidel to what he feels?
Who reads his bosom, reads immortal life.
YOUNG.

BOSTON AND CAMBRIDGE:
JAMES MUNROE AND COMPANY
1850.

THE SKEPTIC.

CHAPTER I.

REASON THE DEFENCE OF FAITH.

It was Sunday evening,—that pleasant hour to the virtuous poor,—when Alice Grey was sitting by a bright fire, in a small, comfortable-looking room. There was no one with her except her infant, which was sleeping quietly in its cradle by her side. Her calm, innocent, and intelligent face, and the decent and respectable appearance of every thing about her, gave to the little apartment a grace and attraction which larger rooms, and more elegant furniture, and greater beauty, often fail of possessing.

She would frequently look at the cradle with that indescribable expression, with which a happy mother gazes on her sleeping child, and then cast her eyes towards the door as if expecting some one to enter; one who, you would readily apprehend, was the father of her baby, and the partner of her duties and pleasures.

While she was thus sitting by the table, with her arms resting upon the great Bible which she

had been reading, her face suddenly lighted up with a still brighter glow of pleasure as the door opened, and her husband entered.

"Well, wife," he said, as he hung up his hat and great-coat, "are you not going to give me a scolding for staying away so long, when I said I should be gone only half an hour?"

"No," answered Alice, "I am not in a scolding mood; and who could be, James, with this good book on one side, and a sleeping baby on the other? both speak to me of the kingdom of Heaven, where there are no harsh words. But I have missed you very much; you know on Sunday evenings we read together, and hear Fanny and Jemmy say their hymns and the lessons they have learned at Sunday school. The children did not enjoy themselves so much as usual, and I could not help wishing you were with us."

"Well, Alice," said her husband, "don't say any more about it; I was sorry not to be here at the time they said their lessons, but I could not get away from Ralph Vincent without affronting him, he had so much to say; and he took me a long walk instead of the little round he at first intended."

"Have you been all this time with Ralph?" quickly asked Alice.

"Why not?" replied James; "what is the matter with Ralph, that I should not be with him? he knows a great deal and has a great deal to say."

"He has a great deal to say," answered Alice, "and thinks he knows a great deal."

"And perhaps," retorted James, "you think, Alice, you know more than he does."

Although this was said in a laughing tone, there was in it something painful to his wife; it was different from his usual mode of speaking, and it proved also to her that he did not agree with her in her opinion of Ralph Vincent's vain and superficial character. After a moment's pause she looked in her husband's face, and, with a tone of great seriousness but of true tenderness, said, "Dear James, I do not like Ralph; I think he has too high an opinion of himself."

"How does he show that?" said James.

"Why, he is always boasting of what he can prove, and talking about the light of reason, as he calls it, and jesting about religion; whatever he does not like, he calls priestcraft; that's his word, I believe. He seems to me to try to frighten people; he says things that he thinks very smart, because they are indelicate, or irreverent; and then he looks round to see who is astonished, and stretches himself up to his full height (and you know he is very tall), and he seems as if he thought he was a great man."

"He does know more than you or I."

"I do not," rejoined Alice, "pretend to know so much as he does, or as your wife, James, ought to know. I have read scarcely any thing except this best of all books," putting her hand on the Bible. Her humility, her affectionate tone of voice, the simple truth of her remarks on Ralph, and may-be the compliment to himself, for all men are susceptible of such things, quite subdued her

husband's slight dissatisfaction with her, — or rather with himself, for this was the real cause of his momentary captiousness towards his wife.

Ralph belonged to that set of men who call themselves free-thinkers, or free inquirers, which means, with many of them, free to inquire, and free to think, and free to rail, against the Christian religion; free to abuse and contemn what they see is held sacred, and dearer than life, by thousands of their fellow beings; free to hold up to scorn and ridicule the support of the poor, the sick, the forsaken; free to misrepresent and deride the conclusions of the philosophers and sages, — the patient, and faithful, and fearless seekers after truth, (the *true* "free-thinkers" of the world,) who have believed in the simple story of Jesus of Nazareth; free to trample upon the altars of human hope, of human trust, of human joy. This freedom they claim; but they are not free, we boldly assert, to see and to recognise the internal and the external evidences of the truth they despise; not free to estimate the worth of a faith, that not merely enables weak human nature to die with courage and calmness, — this may be done by the infidel suicide, — but enables the poor, the despised, the injured man to bear his trial with a quiet fortitude, and a holy joy, with no one but the Being in whom he believes to witness his virtue. They are not free to estimate the truth of a faith that enables the mother to consign her infant to the grave, with the consoling trust that the child liveth, though her arms cannot press it to her aching heart.

They are not free to weigh the value of "the evidence of things not seen, the substance of things hoped for," — of "that pleasing hope, that strong desire, that longing after immortality," which exists, or has existed, in the heart of every human being. They are not free to estimate the weight and importance of the fact, that almost every man believes in something invisible; that even every superstition is an argument in favor of the existence of God. They are not free fairly to examine, and calmly and faithfully to investigate, all the spiritual as well as the historical evidences of Christianity. Here the self-styled 'free-thinker' is not free; he is the very bigot he despises; he himself is among the ranks of the superstitious, for he fears religious inquiry. He is free to see defects, but not to perceive beauties; free to attack, but not to defend; free only to find objections and to discover faults; free to see the spots in the sun, but his eyes are blinded to the splendor of the glorious luminary itself.

Ralph was one of these free-thinkers; and never was the most exclusive zealot more anxious to make proselytes to a faith that he considered essential to eternal happiness, than he was to make converts to his gloomy belief, that man lies down in the dust with the beasts that perish, with no brighter hope, and no further anxiety. No wonder that Alice Grey dreaded such a companion for her husband. She had for some time suspected that Ralph was anxious to undermine James's religious belief; she knew that he had succeeded in raising some doubts in his mind, and, with all

the watchfulness natural to true affection, she had narrowly observed the growth of their intimacy. It was a startling and exquisitely painful thing to her, to find that James had passed the Sunday evening, sacred as it had hitherto been to herself and her children, with Ralph Vincent.

There is an instinctive courage and wisdom, that seem suddenly to inspire the most timid and uninstructed, in times of great danger to those they love, with the power to perceive and adopt the most effectual means for their rescue. Alice forbore to censure his conduct; she said no more to her husband upon the subject of his absence from them all the evening; but she gave him an account of the children's Sunday lessons. It happened to be the love of Jesus for little children. "I wish, James, you could have heard Fanny when she said to me, 'Mother, if I had died in that fever I had last spring, should I not have gone to Jesus Christ, and would not he have taken me in his arms, as he did little children when he was on earth?' and I said to her, 'Yes'; for I never felt so sure, as I did at that moment, of the truth of our religion. That is a dear, good child, and I sometimes feel as if she was not made for this world."

Alice had touched the right key; James loved this child with that love which is itself a proof of immortality. "Alice," said he, "I dare say that Ralph would call me superstitious; but I never look at Fanny without a feeling as if she had come from another and better world, and as if she still belonged to it."