

Atheist and Agnostic

I HAVE had a shock!" announced the New Brother, sitting beside the Old Tiler.

"Shall I send for a doctor?" asked the Old Tiler.

"No, a minister," countered the New Brother. "I just met Smithkins in the lodge. He's a member and I never knew it."

"If you like Smithkins, that must have been a pleasant shock," answered the Old Tiler.

"Oh, I like him all right. But it was unpleasant to find him a member of the lodge. Smithkins is an atheist! He can't be a real Mason."

"Oh! So Smithkins is an atheist. Was he an atheist when he signed his application?"

"Of course he was! He's always been one!"

"Then your course is clear. You should prefer charges against him for un-Masonic conduct and perjury, and have him thrown out of the fraternity."

"But-but why should I do it? Smithkins never did me any harm!"

"Oh, yes, he did! If an atheist lied to gain admittance to the Masonic fraternity, he injured Masonry and injured all Masons, and you are a Mason. So he injured you."

"But, why must I do it? You do it I You know so much more about such things than I do!" answered the New Brother.

"Oh, thank you!" smiled the Old Tiler. "But I know nothing about Smithkins being an atheist. I never met an atheist. I don't know what one looks like. And if Smithkins is an atheist, then an atheist looks and acts just like a theist. Where are his horns and his tail?"

"Oh, don't make fun! This is serious! How can we allow an atheist to continue in membership of our lodge?"

"I don't think we can!" comforted the Old Tiler. "But how can you prove Smithkins to be an atheist? He must have signed his statement that he believed in God when he joined the lodge. Atheism is a matter of belief or non-belief; it isn't a thing you can prove if he chooses to deny it."

"I have heard him say he doesn't believe in the divinity (f Christ!"

"Oh! Is that what made you call him an atheist? Many thousand Masons don't believe in the divinity of Christ; some are in this lodge. Jews do not; the Chinese do not; Mohammedans do not, but that doesn't mean they don't believe in God."

"But I have heard him say he doesn't believe in the God of the church."

"There is a conception of God in several churches in which I don't believe, either I" retorted the Old Tiler. "The God in whom I put my trust is not a vengeful God, swayed by passion or prejudice. The God in whom many good people believe is a terrible God, who gets angry and is revengeful and plans horrible torments for those who do not please Him. Because I don't put my faith in that particular idea of God doesn't mean I don't believe in God. And the people who believe in the Deity as pictured by Calvin and Luther and the Puritans may think my conception of Deity is all wrong, but that doesn't make them call me an atheist.

"The atheist is a curiosity. The very fact that a man says, 'I don't believe in God,' shows that he does. Where does he get his conception of the God he denies? The only real atheist is the man who never heard of God."

"Maybe Smithkins isn't an atheist, but he is an agnostic. He doesn't know what he believes!" defended the New Mason.

"That is different!" smiled the Old Tiler. "The agnostic is a mentally lazy person without enough energy to formulate a conception of Deity. The agnostic isn't satisfied with the God of Moses, or the God of Calvin, or the God of Luther, or the God of the Jews, or the God of Jesus Christ. He wants his own little God, made according to a formula which suits his particular kind of ego. But when he tries to make such a god he runs into so many contradictions that he gives it up and solves the problem by saying, 'I don't know what I believe!' Because he is then in a class by himself he gradually evolves a queer sort of pride in the negation; he is 'different' from' his fellows, and therefore, 'superior.' But it's just a pose; let his child be desperately ill or he be in danger of drowning, and you'll hear him. Yes, and the 'atheist,' too! . . . cry to God for help.

"Luckily for poor impotent humanity the Supreme Architect is a merciful God who hears the cries of His children in distress whether they are simple men you know and like, or strange-minded men like Smithkins, who distress us with their lack of understanding."

"Then you don't think Smithkins is a menace to the lodge because he is an . . . because he believes . . . differently from you and me?"

"I do not!" smiled the Old Tiler. "I know Smithkins pretty well. He doesn't lie so he must have some belief, or he wouldn't be a Mason. It doesn't concern us, or the lodge, or Masonry, what his belief is, so it is sincere. It takes all sorts of people to make a world, and if we all thought alike . . ."

"Why, then," interrupted the New Brother, "there would be no use for Old Tilers and their talks to the ignorant!"

"That would be terrible, wouldn't it?" agreed the Old Tiler, as he rose to answer knocks from within.