

A
Reading of Life

by
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I

FIRST OUTLOOKS

I

FIRST OUTLOOKS

IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED THE HEAVEN
AND THE EARTH.

What a simple, and easy and magnificent opening to the great story of Life!

That explanation of the Universe has long ceased to satisfy the questioning spirit of man; but, though the discoveries he has won from time may have led him onward in the path of truth, these are but measurable steps with the immeasurable beyond; and his baffled spirit may even return to the haven of that first simple solution.

HE MADE THE STARS ALSO, says the old legend, as if they were just a pleasant afterthought; but it was the stars that first awakened in man a sense of the immensity of the life in which he found himself. Modern astronomy has revealed to us the vastness of the material universe; it has shown us vistas into space whose distances, measured in light-years, no flight of the imagination can follow; and it has compelled us to recognise the insig-

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nificance of the Earth which is our home in the midst of this vastness.

It is remarkable that these immensities, though they may confound the intellect, do not humiliate or depress the human spirit. If it had been otherwise, if knowledge had revealed a universe whose paths were culs-de-sac, one which had limits beyond which neither life nor thought could pass, then these barriers would have appeared to us as prison walls. Though the infinite is beyond the comprehension of the mind, between the spirit and the illimitable there is a bond,—in our fearless outlook the assurance of a harmony between the spirit and the whole meaning of creation.

We are happy in the way in which the myriad worlds, sown in those awful profundities, are first presented to us. We see them through the nursery windows, or above the dark trees in the garden, or shining over still waters, and accept them as part of the scenery of our homeland. Even when we are older and have heard the bewildering tidings of astronomy, we look up into the heavens, not with dismay and fear of the unknown and alien, but with a tranquillity of spirit, an exaltation in contemplating a creation which has manifested itself to us in light and beauty.

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The place of all others from which we can most clearly realise the vastness of the heavens and the boundaries of the Earth is the deck of a ship in mid-ocean. By day we can almost see the Earth's sphericity, almost feel the curvature of our course over the blue rings of the horizons; by night it is here only that we may behold the unbroken expanse of the celestial hemisphere. Fortunate are those who have been shown this wonder from the dark decks of a sailing-ship in southern seas, when the only sound is the wash of the waves under the bows, or the ship's bell striking the hour, or the call at the change of the watch, "Lights burning brightly. All's well!"—a call, an assurance, that would then seem to apply not only to the ship's lamps but to the stars themselves. Aloft we see the masts slowly swaying against those constellations that never before shone so clearly, or seemed so far away; and then the Earth itself becomes to us like a ship sailing through the unfathomable deeps of the skies. What a different vision of the universe is that of the dwellers in great cities, where the stars shine dimly above the streets or are extinguished in the vulgar glare of illuminated advertisements.

The most startling thing we realise in contem-

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plating the universe is the fact that we live on an island world, separated by impassable deeps from every other world in that universe. Possibilities of signalled communication between one planet and another have suggested themselves, but that there is no pathway for man beyond the Earth's shores we accept as final. The dwellers on an island in the days before a ship ever put out to sea may have beheld over the horizon waters the mountains of a distant continent and dreamed of the new lands which their venturers might some day discover; but man looking out from his island Earth to the unknown spheres in that ocean of space which surrounds him, knows that no craft of his will ever reach the havens of those wonderlands.

There are tribes of uncivilised men who are unable to count beyond 5 and denote any excess over that number by the word *many*. Our measurements of the universe when they exceed a few million miles do not signify much more to us than the *many* of the savage. The nearest star outside the solar system is twenty-five millions of millions of miles away; but this is nothing compared with the distances of the Nebulae. From these, we are told, the light, travelling at the rate of eleven million miles a minute, would take from

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fifty to a hundred million years to reach us. From these tidings of the vast, of the unending succession of galaxies, of spheres of incalculable dimensions and unimaginable energies the mind recoils, the power of belief is staggered, and we almost envy the simpler point of view expressed in the words of the song,

The little stars are brightly shining,
Because they've nothing else to do.

We cannot imagine a universe which has no limits, nor can we imagine one which has no beyond: to our minds the finite and the infinite seem equally impossible. May it be that neither of these conceptions *is* a reality, and that the truth in which these contradictions are resolved must be sought along other pathways than those of the mathematician.

Is it, we ask, to miraculous accident or majestic design that we are indebted for our vision of the universe? If our planet had rotated, not from sunlight into shadow, but into the illumination of some other celestial body, or if it had been enveloped in a constant cloud canopy, these magic pathways through the heavens would never have been shown to us. Either we should

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have seen nothing but the blue void of the daylight skies, or have speculated in vain as to what mysterious regions existed beyond the veil of the clouds. We have been shown those regions, but the Earth has tempered for us the shock of the vision by the veil of loveliness which her atmosphere has drawn across it. If we could be transported beyond that atmosphere, after sailing through the blue of the noon, or across the rose-red and opal archipelagoes of the sunset and twilight, the sun and the stars would appear to us as orbs of cold white light gleaming in skies of blackness. Is the provision, which has made the revelation to us so beneficent, accident or design? We have seen, we have not comprehended, but neither are we dismayed. On pathways of beauty fear is left behind. And looking into the depths of space we have felt that within our spirits are other pathways that reach beyond the stars.

The discovery of the Earth's boundaries, the realisation of its isolation, have changed man's outlook on life. Once he inhabited a world to which he conceived no limits. Over the uncharted seas lay the undiscovered: there was endless room for exploration and adventure. Now, except for a few tracts of tropical forest, or mountain pin-

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nacles, or ice-bound waters of the Poles, no land or sea remains unsearched. Once, gazing from our western seaboard man dreamed of lands beyond the islands of the Hesperides and at last he found them. Now, looking from these same shores, he knows that, instead of the Eldorado of his dreams, he would find the roaring highways of New York and the slaughter-houses of Chicago.

The old vision must have enlarged man's conception of his destiny. In a world with unlimited room for discovery he must have felt the grandeur of the scope for the progress of his race, and had a dream of the future which enobled his present, a promise of the distant which transfigured the near.

But the old zest of the adventurer, the call to the explorer, remains for man although the earth no longer awaits his discovery; and though there is no path for his feet beyond the confines of his island world, his spirit accepts no boundaries. Within his spirit he must still travel and seek clues to the mystery of the creation of which he is a part.

The awe which man feels in contemplation of the universe of worlds beyond his reach and knowledge, is tempered by the very remoteness and

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inaccessibility of that universe. The vastness which a world such as our Earth would present in relation to an ant-hill, a vastness from whose crypts and transcendencies his paths were *not* barred, might indeed have overawed him with a realisation of his own insignificance and impotence. And is it not well that the roads beyond our dwelling-place *are* barred to us? Do we not gain more than we lose in the shelter of our homely boundaries? Can we balance our loss and gain? Here we are restricted, confined within our island, whose population is already too large for its well-being. Further increase in the numbers of the human race points to devastating inroads of the town into the country, to the complete obliteration of the wild, to the desecration of the beauty of Nature. The multiplication of man will leave no room for the animals, except such of them as may be preserved for his use. Already in such densely populated countries as Japan the wild birds have been destroyed, and in England there are regions covering half the width of a county where no field remains from which a sky-lark may rise. A world of seas uncrossed and lands unmapped would have been in no such danger. The streams of emigration would have flowed on un-

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checked. The longing for adventure, the desire in man to discover and secure possession of a place of his own would have been fulfilled; and beyond his farthest penetration into the wilderness there would still have been freedom for the wild creatures of the forests and plains.

We can picture the exhilaration of the youth of our own day with such a prospect before them. How tame would seem the flight of those who now attempt to shorten by days or hours the time records connecting the hemispheres, or who face privation and death in planting their national flag on a plateau of Polar ice, compared with the magnificence of a winged adventure beyond the last outposts of the known world. There, in the room for expansion we can imagine the prospects that are denied to us in our inhabited globe. But may it not be well that we are forbidden the stupendous adventure, protected from the dark terrors of existence in a sphere whose boundaries we could never reach? From a birthplace beyond remote horizons, extinction might have come to man in the devastating incursions of its super insects, or under the unbearable civilisation of its demigods. Even if no such danger were to threaten us, in the vastness of this habitation we

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should have lost our home and would no longer have been brothers.

Boundaries make the home. To a child the boundaries are very narrow, extending no farther than to the garden gate or the field on which it opens, or perhaps to the top of the hill beyond; and the country over the hill is an unknown world. As we grow older the boundaries of the homeland expand until they reach the coasts of our native land, and our whole native country becomes home; and now that the confines of the earth have been reached and across its widest oceans we sail into friendly havens and are greeted with familiar speech, the Earth itself has taken friendly proportions. As countries separated from each other have developed nationality, so the insulation of the Earth among the spheres has produced a comradeship of its people which is moving towards the establishment of a terrestrial patriotism, an ambition to make our little planet worthy of a place in the galaxies of creation. And like a light in our darkness may shine the faith that our labours are not in vain, our achievements not doomed to oblivion; and that though the fabric of the earth may pass away, the spirit of its life, the song of its birds, the loveliness of its

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flowers, the deeds of its heroes, the inspirations of its master minds, the love of its faithful, shall remain and form a part of life's indestructible treasury.



If we are fortunate in the way in which the stupendous spectacle of the universe is first presented to us, in aspects of beauty and light, we are no less happy in our introduction, along gentle steps of childhood, to the profound mysteries and incomprehensible decrees of life itself.

The first impression we receive on Earth is probably that of *home*,—of protection and sheltering boundaries, outside which are unknown wonderlands. We look round us with perpetual interest, almost with recognition, but without surprise. We wonder, but are not perplexed or mystified. We have not been launched on strange, wild, chartless oceans of Being; we do not arrive on the Earth as new-comers in foreign surroundings, dreaming of a past home and "that imperial palace whence we came". In the new world we are at home; and it is only after long years, when we have found this world too small, its gifts too fleeting to satisfy the desires of our hearts, that