

MR. JOSEPH SYMES'S CONVERSION.

We have received the following interesting summary of a lecture delivered by Mr. Joseph Symes on the subject of his conversion to Secularism:—

On April 6th, at the Hall of Science, Melbourne, Mr. Symes delivered a lecture entitled—"My path from the Wesleyan pulpit to the Secularist platform." He commenced by briefly sketching his early religious life. His parents were strict Methodists, and brought him up in their faith. He had heard since his arrival here that an Australian parson has related a sad story about his father having become broken-hearted because his son had adopted Atheism and left the pulpit. The truth was that his father had been dead fourteen years,—nearly three years before his secession from the church, so that gave the story the lie at once. Under the guidance of his father he soon became an earnest Methodist, believing in the doctrines of original sin, hellfire, &c. His father was very puritanic in his tuition, and only allowed his children to go into the garden on Sunday on one condition, and that was that they took a good book with them. In his seventeenth year his (Mr. Symes's) "conversion" took place. After a deal of putting-off he had at last resolved that he would pay his debt to his God, and after this was accomplished, he must say, he felt happy. This was only natural, as any honest man would feel so after relieving his mind of what he believed to be a big debt. Had he been a Mahomedan he would similarly have looked forward to his journey to Mecca as the great duty he had to perform. His conversion roused his whole nature and he went into the work with zeal. On Sundays he would go to the early prayer-meeting; then after breakfast he joined in the family prayers; next he went round the neighbourhood circulating tracts, and if he saw a sabbath-breaker he would reprimand him, sometimes rightly getting snubbed for his pains; Sunday School teaching came next, and it was in this capacity that he made his first speech, the superintendent calling upon him one morning to address the children. This occurred several times so that he got accustomed to it. After school there was another prayer meeting, then church, then the day ended with prayer again. This programme he adhered to for seven or eight years. One Sunday he was present at a service that was being conducted in the schoolroom. The man that was to preach was a very bad speaker, and, strange to say, he knew his failing, and asked Brother Symes to take his place. He at first refused, but the other told him it was his duty to God; that argument touching his weak point, he consented. This was his first sermon. By a strange coincidence, he delivered a freethought lecture many years after, about six years ago, in the same place, it having been since converted into a carpenter's shop. After this first attempt he went as a local preacher. In 1864 he was accepted as a minister of the Wesleyan church, and was three years in the Wesleyan college. His subsequent conversion to secularism is a difficult thing to explain. Nothing occurred in college until he had been there about a year and a half, when one day he got into a discussion with a fellow student while they were walking in the meadow. It was on the subject of original sin, his companion affirming that science proved there was death in the world before Adam; and after an attempt to defend his position, Mr. Symes was obliged to confess himself beaten. On after reflection he saw that if animals died before Adam's time death was natural and not the result of Adam's sin. This reasoning finally proved too much for his belief in original sin. During his first circuit he saw it announced that two Swedenborgian ministers would lecture on "Trinity and Unity," after which discussion was invited. He decided that his "duty" demanded his presence there. He determined to study the Testament by itself for the occasion without the aid of commentaries. This was the worst thing he could have done, for he was unable to find what he wanted, and after reading the original Greek with the same result he shut up the book much shocked in mind. During another circuit he went a step further. The Pope had called together the Ecumenical Council to decide about the infallibility of himself; and all Protestantism were abusing him for it. This caused Mr. Symes to examine the protestant sects, and finding that they also claimed infallibility indirectly, he repudiated all creeds and placed his faith only in his bible. He dismissed the belief in an intervening providence on hearing of a sermon preached on the great war, the preacher explaining how providence had guided the victors. In his last circuit, about fourteen years ago, he had so far developed as to have become a republican, and a preacher for land nationalisation. The next step was the rejection of hell-fire, and doubts on the doctrine of the atonement. He found now that he was no longer a Methodist, and he told his friends that he must resign the ministry. They urged him to modify his views, and stay in the church, and asked him what he would do for a living. He told them he had a conscience which demanded his secession, and in August 1872, after a lot of prayer about it, he wrote a letter of resignation. He had no idea then that he would finally be an Atheist. The whole family of his beliefs had been taken sick with consumption; he kept them alive as long as he could, but they died, and then he buried them. It took two more years for him to reach Atheism, and 4½ years after leaving the pulpit he took the secularist platform, that is, seven years ago. He now preaches secularism to make atonement for his past errors, as secularism, in his opinion, means the best of everything in civilization. In conclusion he recommends the orthodox to explain his conversion, as they are so fond of talking about conversions the other way.

W. C. A.

The willow which bends to the tempest often escapes better than the oak, which resists it; and so, in great calamities, it sometimes happens that light and frivolous spirits recover their elasticity and presence of mind sooner than those of a loftier character.—Walter Scott.

WHO WAS JESUS?

By CHARLES BRADLAUGH.

He had no father (Luke i. 34). His mother's husband had two fathers (Luke iii. 23; Matthew i. 16). He was born at Bethlehem (Luke ii. 4), yet accepted in silence the reproach that he was not born there, but was born at Galilee (John vii. 41, 42). He was born in the lifetime of Herod, who ordered all the little ones to be slaughtered, in order to destroy him (Matthew ii). He was not, however, born until after the death of Herod, and the abdication of Archelaus, Herod's son (Luke ii, 2). While a baby he was taken into Egypt, and remained there until after the death of Herod, and was not brought back to Judea even during the succeeding reign of Archelaus (Matthew ii.); yet he never went into Egypt at all, or, at any rate, never resided there for any such lengthy period (Luke ii. 21, 22, 39, 40, 41, 42). When thirty years of age he was baptised by John, who knew him, and forbade him to come to be baptised on account of his (John's) unworthiness to baptise Jesus (Matthew iii. 14); but John did not know Jesus until after the Baptist had baptised the Saviour (John i. 33). John knew Jesus to be "the Lamb of God" (John i. 29); yet some time after sent two of his disciples to Jesus, to enquire of the latter whether he was the real Messiah, or whether they were to look for another (Matthew xi. 3; Luke vii. 19). Jesus was immediately after the baptism led up into the wilderness, where he remained and fasted during forty days and forty nights (Mark i. 12); but before that time had elapsed, he was at a marriage feast in Cana of Galilee (John ii).

Jesus cured Peter's wife's mother of a fever before he had called Peter to be a disciple (Luke iv. 39; v. 10); but Peter's wife's mother was cured by Jesus after Peter had been called to be a disciple (Matthew viii. 14; iv. 18). Jesus, when on land near the sea, saw Simon, Peter and Andrew fishing, and called them to be his disciples; and a little further on he saw James and John, and called them (Matthew iv. 18-22); but when he called Simon, James, and John, he was in the ship with Simon, and the ship with James and John in was close alongside (Luke v. 3-10); and indeed neither Jesus nor Peter was at sea when Peter was first seen by Jesus, but on dry land, where Peter was brought to Jesus by Andrew (John i. 41).

Jesus fed 5,000 men, besides women and children, with five loaves and two fishes, and, even then, the uneaten fragments collected by the disciples after the feast filled twelve baskets (Matthew xiv.); yet these very disciples either forgot or disbelieved the miracle, for they were shortly after terribly puzzled as to how a much smaller number of persons were to be fed with a larger quantity of food (Matthew xv.) Jesus cast an unclean spirit (Mark v. 2), which one spirit was *legion*, out of a "certain man" (Luke viii. 27), which certain man was "two" (Matthew viii. 28); on the permission of Jesus, the singular plural devil (with a Latin name in a country where Latin was not the common language), went into two thousand swine, which swine ran into the sea. Jesus, being hungry, looked for figs on a fig tree when it was not yet the season, and cursed the tree because he found no fruit thereon (Mark xi. 13, 14).

Jesus came to die to save the world, but prayed that he might not die (Luke xxii. 42). He said, "I and my father are one" (John x. 30); but said, "Father, all things are possible to thee, take away this cup from me" (Mark xiv. 36). Jesus was betrayed to the officers by Judas, who kissed him (Matthew xxvi. 47); but himself answered that he was Jesus, so that Judas does not appear to have betrayed him at all by the identifying kiss (John xviii. 5, 6). Jesus was with Peter when Peter denied Jesus the third time (Luke xxii. 61); but Peter was not with Jesus at the time of the third denial (Matthew xxvi.; Mark xiv). Jesus was crucified about 9 a.m. (Mark xv. 25); yet three hours after he was still on his trial before Pilate (John xix. 14). On Friday evening (Mark xv. 42, 43) Jesus was buried; on Saturday night, towards dawn of Sunday (Matthew xxviii. 1), his body was out of the tomb; yet Jesus was to have been three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned."

Man being essentially active, must find in activity his joy; and labor, like everything else that is good, is its own reward.—Whipple.