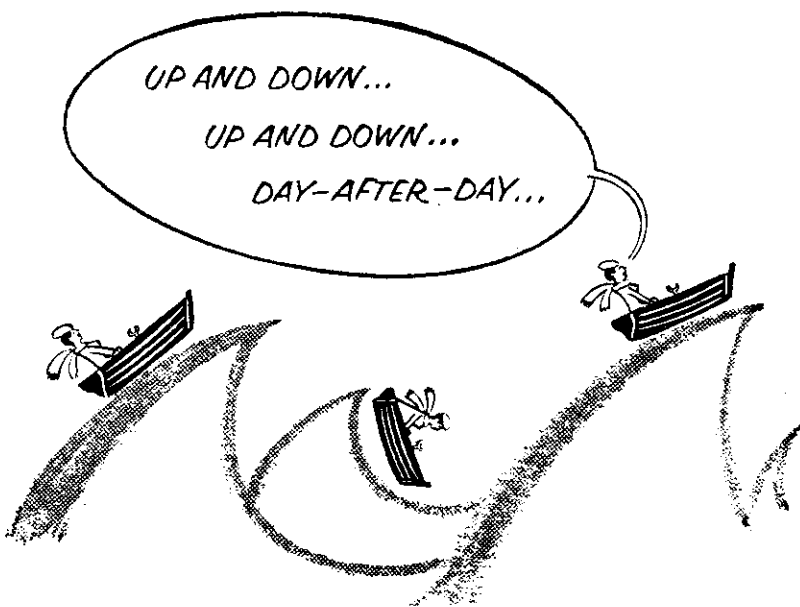
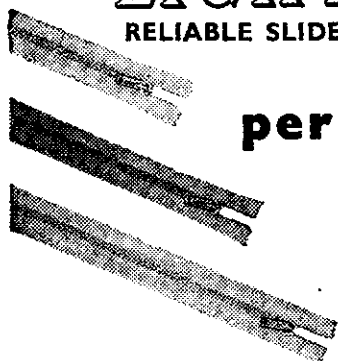




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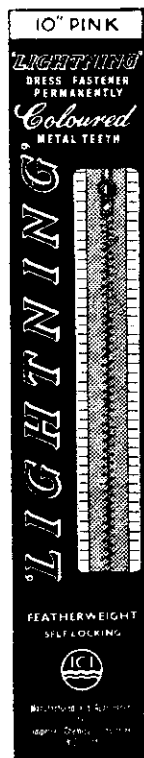
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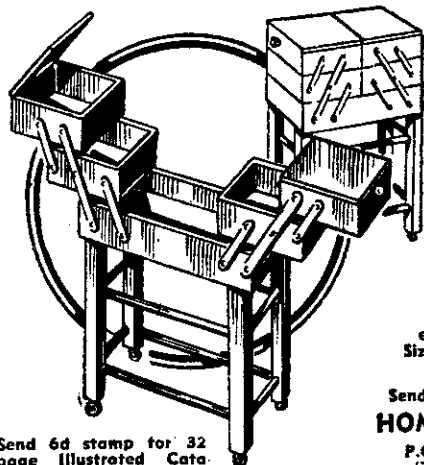
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The Returning Tide

IN 1867 Matthew Arnold published a poem, "Dover Beach," in which he developed his metaphor of "the sea of faith." Once it was at the full, he said, "and round earth's shore/Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled." But now, as he watched the sea going out from the beach, he seemed to hear also the ebbing of that other tide, "its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar" as it retreated to "the vast edges drear/And naked shingles of the world." The poet's vision came from doubts which were then felt by thoughtful men who watched the advance of materialism. In the years of industrial growth it was easy to feel a deluding sense of power. Many people believed that the mastery of nature was in their hands: they could make the world a better place to live in by their own efforts; and the use of reason, freed from superstition, would bring them finally to a golden age. Progress was the watchword.

After two world wars the mood is different. The signs are so unmistakable that the *New Statesman and Nation*, a journal sensitive to changes in the intellectual climate, has announced a competition for a prize essay on Faith and Reason. "What is particularly difficult to assess," says the editorial statement, "is whether this tendency (the new interest in religious problems) is merely an ephemeral phase reflecting the disillusion with science, which threatens us with the H-bomb and seems to offer us not Utopia but an unattractive Brave New World. Or are we witnessing the beginning, as some say, of a serious Christian revival?" The essays may provide some of the answers, though in limiting the age of competitors to 26 the sponsors seem to be excluding ideas most likely to be rooted in experience.

It has become hard to believe that men could put all their trust in reason. In practice, however, this trust could never be absolute. To say that death is final is as much an act of faith as to believe

in personal immortality; and to seal off the deepest mysteries of life, dismissing them as "the unknowable," is to go against the strongest impulse of the human spirit. Some men of excellent character have been able to accept a barren philosophy, and to work unselfishly for good causes. Yet in doing so, they have followed Christian principles. The man who is ready to shorten his own life in order that other people may be safer or happier does not always understand that he is sustained in his efforts by attitudes which have been formed by religious experience. It is possible for a generation to live partly on spiritual reserves; but a time comes when these must be replenished. And then it is seen that mankind, no matter what is done for its material welfare, is still unhappy and afraid.

The secure man is one who has overcome fear; and he cannot do this by putting up defences against poverty, illness or war. It may be true that the H-bomb is now the symbol of danger; but it merely emphasises a situation which has always been precarious. A wider interest in religion could not, however, be in any sense a return to the past. Reason has its kingdom, and has won great victories; and what has been gained must be preserved. Men cannot live safely in this world without a faith to guide them, but neither can they live by faith alone. The sea which Matthew Arnold saw encircling the world has existed only in a poet's dream. A Utopian attitude is not scientific: it comes simply from the stubborn belief that the purpose of living is to be happy, and it can be found among the devout as well as among unbelievers. Religion has its own temptations. The pride of spirit and of reason are equally dangerous, and there will always be disputed ground between them. It will be a continuing task to find that balance of experience which allows both faith and reason to play their necessary parts in human destiny.

N.Z. LISTENER, JANUARY 21, 1955.