The unseen world, and other essays

Fiske John
THE UNSEEN WORLD, AND OTHER ESSAYS

BY

JOHN FISKE

τίς δ' οἶδεν εἰ τὸ ζῆν μὲν ἐστὶ καθανεῖν,
τὸ καθανεῖν δὲ ζῆν;

Euripides

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TO

JAMES SIME.

MY DEAR SIME:

Life has now and then some supreme moments of pure happiness, which in reminiscence give to single days the value of months or years. Two or three such moments it has been my good fortune to enjoy with you, in talking over the mysteries which forever fascinate while they forever baffle us. It was our midnight talks in Great Russell Street and the Addison Road, and our bright May holiday on the Thames, that led me to write this scanty essay on the "Unseen World," and to whom could I so heartily dedicate it as to you? I only wish it were more worthy of its origin. As for the dozen papers which I have appended to it, by way of clearing out my workshop, I hope you will read them indulgently, and believe me

Ever faithfully yours,

JOHN FISKE.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, February 3, 1876.
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I.

THE UNSEEN WORLD.

PART FIRST.

“What are you, where did you come from, and whither are you bound?”—the question which from Homer’s days has been put to the wayfarer in strange lands—is likewise the all-absorbing question which man is ever asking of the universe of which he is himself so tiny yet so wondrous a part. From the earliest times the ultimate purpose of all scientific research has been to elicit fragmentary or partial responses to this question, and philosophy has ever busied itself in piecing together these several bits of information according to the best methods at its disposal, in order to make up something like a satisfactory answer. In old times the best methods which philosophy had at its disposal for this purpose were such as now seem very crude, and accordingly ancient philosophers bungled considerably in their task, though now and then they came surprisingly near what would to-day be called the truth. It was natural that their methods should be crude, for scientific inquiry had as yet supplied but scanty materials for them to work with, and it was only after a
very long course of speculation and criticism that men could find out what ways of going to work are likely to prove successful and what are not. The earliest think-
ers, indeed, were further hindered from accomplishing much by the imperfections of the language by the aid of which their thinking was done; for science and phil-
osophy have had to make a serviceable terminology by dint of long and arduous trial and practice, and linguistic processes fit for expressing general or abstract notions accurately grew up only through numberless failures and at the expense of much inaccurate thinking and loose talking. As in most of nature’s processes, there was a great waste of energy before a good result could be secured. Accordingly primitive men were very wide of the mark in their views of nature. To them the world was a sort of enchanted ground, peopled with sprites and goblins; the quaint notions with which we now amuse our children in fairy tales represent a style of thinking which once was current among grown men and women, and which is still current wherever men remain in a savage condition. The theories of the world wrought out by early priest-philosophers were in great part made up of such grotesque notions; and having become variously implicated with ethical opinions as to the nature and consequences of right and wrong be-
haviour, they acquired a kind of sanctity, so that any thinker who in the light of a wider experience ventured to alter or amend the primitive theory was likely to be vituperated as an irreligious man or atheist. This sort of inference has not yet been wholly abandoned, even in civilized communities. Even to-day books are written about “the conflict between religion and sci-
ence,” and other books are written with intent to recon-
cile the two presumed antagonists. But when we look