

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

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VOL. XXXV (No. 4)

APRIL, 1921

NO. 779

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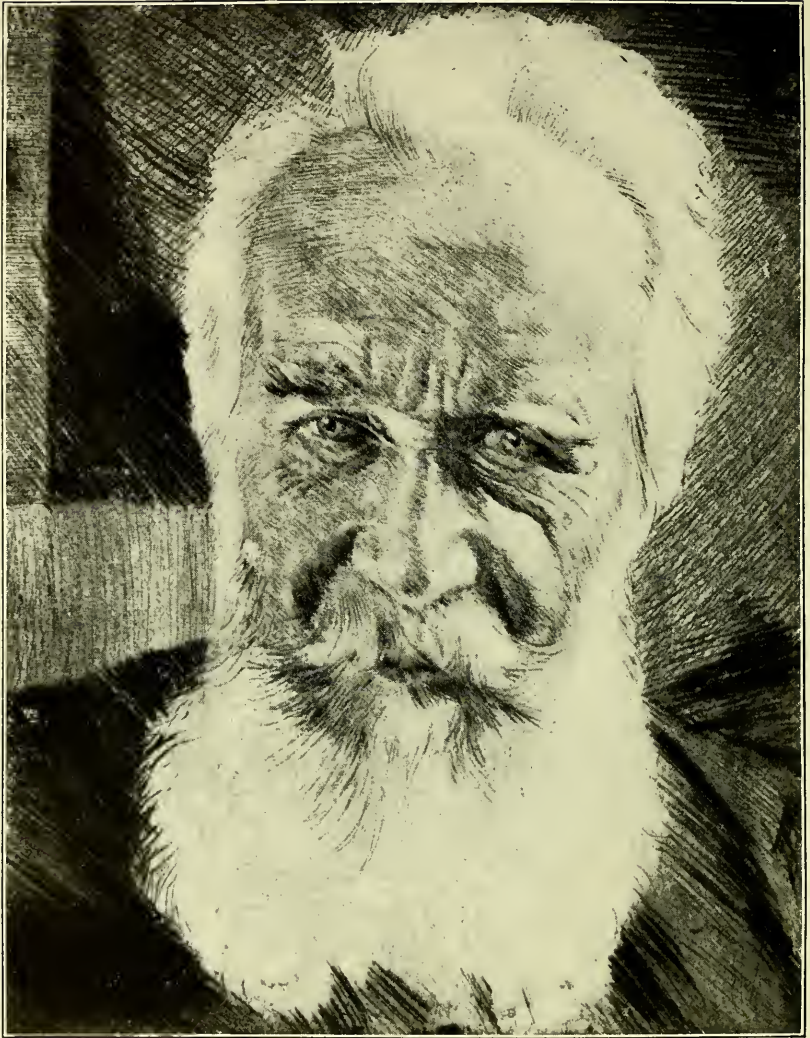
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ERNST HAECKEL.  
Etching by Karl Bauer.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## THE LEAR-TRAGEDY OF ERNST HAECKEL.

BY HERMAN GEORGE SCHEFFAUER.

"Huxley once said of me, that I was the Bismarck of zoölogy. I do not know if that be true. But if I am to have the honor of being compared to that great man, it must follow as a natural consequence in my destiny that I too am to be deposed in my old age from my place in the foundation that I have created."

*Ernst Haeckel, on Jan. 21, 1910.*

ERNST Haeckel, the last of the great Darwinians, died on August ninth, 1919. During the days and the weeks following, solemn memorial services took place in halls, schools and groves in Germany. Goethe's invocation to *Gott-Natur* rolled forth in measured recitative. Requiems were played and chorals were sung. Altars to the immortality of his labors arose, decked in green and black. The benign face of the sage, snow-white of hair and beard, gazed down from countless walls and tribunes upon the throngs that came to do him the last honors as master and as man.

He had gone to his rest in a dark hour. His country's fate oppressed him. But this Luther of Science, one of the last Great Ones of the nineteenth century, had departed, as all men thought, bearing no other burden than the fullness of days, had fallen asleep like a weary king with a crown overheavy with honor, throned on a pyramid of incomparable achievement. He had fought many battles, even with Church and Kaiser in his passionate crusade for scientific truth. But was not his old age beautiful, sunny and serene?

Up to his death few in his own land and perhaps no one among his millions of followers abroad knew of the personal tragedy which had embittered his last years, the grim feud with one whom he had

royally benefited, or of the scandal in the idyllic old university town of Jena, the battle for his dignity and peace of mind, even his good name and honor.

This sordid Golgotha which Haeckel was forced to climb, this gauntlet of ingratitude, pedantic-Torquemadism, and incredible bureaucratic harshness, has been called the "Lear-Tragedy" of Haeckel's last years. It has broken beyond the confines of the university and of Jena and has lately aroused a Germany torpid with its own griefs. It has brought about a bitter fight in the newspapers between two of Haeckel's pupils—Prof. Ludwig Plate, his successor and persecutor, and Dr. Adolf Heilborn, his champion—the publication of pamphlets and a trial before the District Court of Jena, whose judgment against Professor Plate has just been sustained by a higher court at Leipzig. The quarrel has been furthermore complicated by party strife among certain newspapers, Professor Plate being an active anti-Semite.

On August seventeenth, 1920, Dr. Heilborn in an article in the *Berliner Tageblatt* threw down a public gage to Professor Plate. A man of distinguished scientific prestige, Professor Plate had been appointed to the important chair of Zoölogy upon Haeckel's own recommendation. The old scientist saw in him his most gifted pupil and took no heed of the warnings he had received against his personal character. Ingratitude, petty persecution and aspersions, a systematized torture of his venerable master,—these were the charges brought against him by Dr. Heilborn. He declared that Professor Plate had turned the last decade of Haeckel's life into a martyrdom. Professor Plate's reply was a suit for libel. Thereupon Dr. Heilborn published his accusing pamphlet.\*

This ordeal was hidden even to many of Haeckel's friends and it is said that he begged them to maintain silence respecting it. I myself had been in personal touch and correspondence with the master ever since the friendship we struck up in 1904, and to me he had written only a hint of his troubles. When my wife and I visited him in December 1915, he seemed, though greatly aged, to be his old happy and exuberant self. Only the shadow of the war and the wreck of the great hopes he had built up for mankind, darkened his spirits. It is true that he spoke vaguely of unpleasant relations with his successor.

For almost two generations Ernst Haeckel had carried on his teachings at Jena, as well as the Directorship of the Zoölogical

\* *Die Lear-Tragödie Ernst Haeckels*, Dr. Adolf Heilborn, Hoffmann & Campe, Berlin-Hamburg.



Institute and the Phyletic Museum. Generously and in absolute trust he gave all these honors and offices into the hands of his former pupil, Dr. Ludwig Plate of Berlin, on April first, 1909. Haeckel, though capable of a stout intellectual belligerency, was of a child-like ingenuousness of soul: he remained the simple-hearted and unsophisticated scientist, the poet, the scientific devotee of Nature to his last days and a lamentably poor judge of men and character. And who more Christian in his practice than this great anti-Christ of Evolution?

Haeckel had written Professor Plate on March twentieth, 1919:

"I write once more to reassure you that it is with the greatest confidence that I place the entire organization in your hands and that I shall always subordinate my plans to your own—which have proved themselves to be so much better in practise."

Professor Plate replied, obsequiously, but with stunted admiration:

"Your Honored Excellency:

Under date of December tenth, 1908, the Ministry of Education at Weimar has sent me my appointment to the Chair of Zoölogy at Jena, which you have occupied with such great success for more than forty-eight years. In heartily thanking Your Excellency for the great trust which you have shown in your old pupil, and in promising to further our branch of science to the best of my ability in the sense of a liberal research in the theory and teaching of Evolution, I shall esteem it a particular pleasure as the Director of the Phyletic Museum, to give Your Excellency the use of the three rooms desired in the upper story (archive-room, library and study) and to equip the Museum with your cooperation and according to your intentions.

Your most sincere and devoted

Ludwig Plate."

One of the first acts of the officious Professor Plate, after having ensconced himself in the chair of his great master, was to demand that Haeckel should immediately vacate his study in the Zoölogical Institute. The aged scientist was at that time suffering from a severe attack of rheumatism. As Haeckel's faithful old servant Pohle relates amidst tears and objurgations, it was necessary to carry Haeckel to the Institute, where the precipitate removal took place amidst immense discomfort and confusion. In two days, however, all the books, documents, manuscripts, etc., were installed

in the Phyletic Museum. Plate once more appeared and declared that he would require the assistant's room for the purpose of installing 84 cases full of living mice for experimental purposes! Haeckel protested against this desecration of the handsome new structure and the unbearable smell and dirt which the mice would occasion and suggested that they be installed in the Ceylon Room in the Zoölogical Institute. This, however, did not suit Plate, as they would then have been in too close proximity to *his* laboratory! Haeckel pointed out that the Phyletic Museum had been his own individual foundation, had cost him ten years of work and the greater part of his fortune, and that it was destined for other purposes than mice-breeding. Under the circumstances it was reasonable that he, its founder, should have something to say in the matter of the arrangements.

Professor Plate, touched to the quick of his petty and drill-sergeant dignity, exclaimed grandiosely: "Since April first, *I* am the sole Director of the Phyletic Museum and you must submit unconditionally to all my orders!"

This led to a wordy battle in which the white-haired Haeckel expressed his grief and anger at this offensive and unwarranted behavior. He is said to have exclaimed: "You are a Shylock and insist upon your bond." As soon as the matter became known, all Jena glowed with indignation, and this was so great in university circles that Dr. Plate suddenly felt himself isolated and ostracized. This new and bristling broom was bent on achieving a reputation for "making a clean sweep of things." His favorite *bête noire* was the Library of the Zoölogical Institute—to a large extent composed of donations of Haeckel's and kept in good order.

Haeckel had proposed that three rooms in the upper story of the Phyletic Museum be reserved for his personal use during his lifetime—as a study and library, and an archive-room for the preservation of artworks, manuscripts and other personal souvenirs after his death. Surely a modest request, this, in view of the fact that Haeckel was practically the founder and donor of this institute. Professor Plate, however, stubbornly opposed this concession, and yielded only after the District Court had formally declared it to be an integral provision of the donation.

The venerable Haeckel expressed his relief at this and departed for Baden-Baden to take the waters. Professor Plate, assuming a friendliness he did not feel, now devised a new instrument of torture for his former master. Grubbing among paid bills and book-lists of the preceding twenty years, he had discovered that a certain

number of volumes were missing from the library of the Institute and that these were either in Haeckel's home or in the Phyletic Museum. In tactless and offensive language, making the utmost use of his formal rights, he issued a demand for the return of these works.

It was eminently natural that a genius such as Haeckel, despite his infinite attention to scientific detail, should be free of the meticulousness of a pedagogic machine in the smaller affairs of daily life. He was occasionally afflicted with a slight dash of the *laissez-faire* of the artist, for artist at heart he was. And the unworldliness and abstractedness of the professor likewise clung to him. What more natural than that he should make use of his privilege of purchasing such books as he needed for his studies, or that he should occasionally fail to have one stamped or returned to the Institute Library? It must not be forgotten that the Zoölogical Institute itself was established by Haeckel, who had donated his entire sociological library to it, as well as thousands of volumes that were sent him regularly from all parts of the world. He had also arranged a system of exchanges. His bills for books had been revised yearly by the Government and found correct. Donations, legacies, gifts were showered upon the University of Jena through Haeckel's activity. What Goethe had been to Weimar, that Haeckel was to Jena. Haeckel replied briefly to Professor Plate's pettifogging accusations. By return post a still more aggressive letter, dated May twentieth, 1909, full of veiled threats and reproaches, swooped upon him like some ill-omened raven.

The effect of this onslaught upon Haeckel's delicate nerves and sensitive spirit was devastating. Professor Plate's blows and incessant poisonous pin-pricks were beginning to tell upon him. The old man finally summoned up strength enough to reply to his tormentor—on June fourth,—in a letter of such nobility of feeling and calm dignity, that anyone but a hide-bound fanatic, rivetted to the letter of the law, would have been touched by it and remained silent. No trace of the reverence due a world-famous master from his comparatively obscure pupil, not even of the courtesy due an older man from a younger, is visible. The intimation he makes is crass and clear. Haeckel is supposed to have *filched* the missing books! During Haeckel's absence Dr. Plate had even gone so far as to have a key made to Haeckel's exclusive private rooms in the Phyletic Museum! By means of this he had entered these rooms and had gone burrowing among all the papers and manuscripts of the great biologist.

Further acrimonious and unedifying differences demanded the judicial intervention, and decision of Dr. Vollert, the Curator of the University. Dr. Plate, the slave of implacable "devotion to duty" whines of the "great wrong done him by Haeckel," of the "false game he had played": and allots to himself the mantle of magnanimity in extending the hand of forgiveness because of Haeckel's great services to science and because Haeckel had once been his teacher. Jena grew hotter and hotter for Professor Plate, and although indurated to disfavor, he seriously contemplated resignation.

In a letter to his friend and pupil, Dr. Wilhelm Breitenbach, (July seventh, 1909) Haeckel wrote:

"Actually I have surrendered everything (with the exception of these three rooms) to my successor in office, who is certainly by far my superior as a talented teacher, a splendid speaker and a practical Director of the Institute—surrendered everything which I had created in the course of my forty-eight years of activity as a teacher here in Jena." He adds that "this horrible fight extending over three months—now definitely decided in my favor by the Ministry and the University—has injured me greatly in body and mind. After this saddest of all my experiences, I shall withdraw myself entirely and seek solace in common with Mother Nature, ever benign and faithful, and in my artistic pastimes, the writing of my memoirs and the like."

Professor Plate in an article published in a review called *Die Umschau*, declared: "It is untrue that our conflict was decided in favor of Haeckel by the Ministry and the University. On the contrary he was forced to keep the oral and written promises he had made, namely that I was to be the sole Director of the Museum, and he was also obliged to return the books of which he had illegally possessed himself. . . . Haeckel had reserved the three rooms in the Museum only for his personal 'use,' but subsequently he demanded that after his death they were to remain as he had arranged them. He wished to establish here a kind of 'Goethe House' to himself. Later on he voluntarily gave up this plan and surrendered these rooms to me, whereupon my protest was withdrawn."

The spirit of this casuistic self-justification is clear—the words are adroitly chosen and the aged Haeckel's illegal practices cunningly suggested. The allusion to the Goethe House is an example of Professor Plate's delicate epistolary manner and the adroit "voluntarily" an ironic mockery of the tragedy of an old man, a travesty of his spiritual suffering.

Dr. Heilborn, who visited Haeckel in the summer of 1909, was

startled at the change in his appearance; the harrow of grief had gone over him all too heavily.

For ten long years this silent yet fatal feud cast its shadow over Ernst Haeckel. If Dr. Heilborn's comparison of Haeckel with King Lear be too strong there were at least parallels in the fate of the two kingly greybeards which must be obvious to all. Both had given up everything, reserving only a few small requisites. Both learned "how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is to have a thankless child"—or pupil. In Haeckel's case two personalities, two ages, two philosophies of life had clashed with each other—Haeckel, the generous pantheistic spirit and lover of nature—Plate, the rigid and frigid pedagogue and specialist—the one the child-like poet and enthusiast, the other the correct, meticulous official—philosopher against bureaucrat, the expansive searcher and creator against the narrow organizer and director.

When asked how this almost pathological rancor of Professor Plate's was to be explained, Haeckel had once said:

"I do not know. Presumably it is ambition accentuated almost to a disease, perhaps the oppressive feeling that he cannot attain to full validity beside me. And yet there is no reason why he should fear this. For Plate is an efficient scholar and above all—something which I have never been—an excellent teacher. In this connection I cannot sufficiently praise him. Were it otherwise I should never have proposed him as my successor. Moreover, the Institute which I created out of nothing—which I raised to one of the most honored in all Germany,—I have permitted to go to seed, as he declares—so that it was necessary for him to establish order. Well, I shall be glad if he improves things—for natural science will profit thereby."

Dr. Heinrich Schmidt, the director of the Haeckel archives, proved that Professor Plate was congenitally incapable of understanding a man of genius. The famous Swiss psychologist Prof. Otto Binswanger, declared Haeckel's persecutor to be a "malicious psychopathic."

During these bitter years Haeckel worked almost entirely in his home, the "Villa Medusa"—writing his last works, painting water-colors and dictating his memoirs. Now and again his faithful old servant Pohle would fetch him books from the Institute or Museum—Dr. Plate handing them out only upon the signing of a receipt, and demanding their return as soon as the lending period had expired!

When Haeckel's eightieth birthday came, on April fourth, 1914, and the whole world showered honors and congratulations upon him,

Dr. Plate remained dumb and even left on a long voyage so as not to be present at the university festivities.

After Haeckel's death, his former pupil adopted an attitude of what may be called pragmatic magnanimity:

"Haeckel permitted me to look deeply into the recesses of his heart, and what I saw there was surely not always edifying. He was no saint, and he who regards every line and every action of his as the expression of infallible wisdom and virtue, will be doomed to severe disillusionings and will deliver him into the hands of his numerous opponents. Where there is much light there is also much shadow. His weaknesses, in my opinion, are only small, disturbing spots in a great painting rich in colors and figures. They cannot darken Haeckel's greatest achievement—the unprecedented success with which he labored for the extension of scientific thought. For this reason I have remained silent concerning Haeckel's attitude towards me, something which constitutes the most painful disillusion of my entire life."

After Heilborn's disclosures, Professor Plate felt himself called upon to "reveal the whole truth." He went so far as to accuse Haeckel of deliberately misappropriating the funds of the Institute in order to buy books for himself and friends and even hinted indirectly at worse things—at scandal—belief in which, of course, he virtuously and indignantly repudiated. It need only be said that Haeckel's indifference to money was so great that on more than one occasion I found him perfectly disinterested in the value of the English and American rights of some of his books.

In reply to a letter which I had written Professor Plate, expressing my indignation at his treatment of Haeckel, I received an answer, dated December sixth, 1920. The general spirit of his reply amply supports the charge brought against him by Dr. Heilborn. After denying that he was in any way under obligations to Haeckel, Dr. Plate proceeds to declare that he had damaged his position and his income in every way by leaving Berlin and going to Jena. He then strives to cast an oblique pity upon himself and a jibe at Haeckel's *Riddle of the Universe*—a book which—quite overlooking its absolutely unprecedented success and influence,—he declared "unloosed a storm of indignation throughout the world." Nay, he goes further than this and ventures to repeat some of the unfounded slanders circulated against Haeckel by his clerical and scientific enemies—respecting his alleged "forgeries" of certain evolutionary plates—slanders long since refuted. "To be the successor of such a man is surely not exactly pleasant," remarks the virtuous

Professor, as though he had just bethought himself of the heritage of crime left by some malefactor which he had been seduced into accepting in the simplicity of his soul.

"Even the judge,—" he continues, "who was a venerator of Haeckel's, acknowledged that no thanks were due Haeckel from me—the same is true of Haeckel's friend, Privy Councillor Rosenthal. It is my opinion that I made a sacrifice for Haeckel's sake (something which he also acknowledged), because I valued his scientific achievements and because so far as the main points are concerned, I follow the same path he pursued in the Study of Evolution. I was therefore all the more indignant when Haeckel, after I had settled in Jena, *fulfilled none of his promises*. There is no doubt that he played me false, just as previously in Hamman's case."

Hamman, a so-called "pious biologist," had been an assistant to Haeckel and differences had arisen between them. There can be no doubt that despite the open-heartedness, the sunny and boyish *insouciance* of Haeckel and his ardour in the search for truth, his temperament sometimes betrayed him in his relations with his colleagues, as his imagination sometimes betrayed him in his daring scientific hypotheses. To expect that the great should not be human must be left to a hierarchy of academic pharisees such as Professor Ludwig Plate, in whom not the counsel to, but the realization of perfection has become possible. If one be permitted to draw another Shakespearian parallel, there can be no doubt that, according to his lights, this stiff, straight pedagogue is like Brutus, an "honorable man." And yet by the sheer preponderance of human character, essential greatness and the force of an upright nature, the personal and scientific honor of Ernst Haeckel, one of the greatest pillars of our modern enlightenment, remain unsmirched and unshaken.