

MIDNIGHT TALKS AT THE CLUB.

TOM GETS LIGHT ON THE BEARING OF PREVIOUS REMARKS.

XIV.

I made one of my rare visits to Tom Benedict's fireside last night and we walked down to the club together. It looked as though Tom had been imprudently taking his wife into his confidence in the matter of the discussions of the "Owls." She had an uneasy, half-anxious way about her that was not usual, and I felt more constraint in her presence than before, though I never could get on any sort of easy terms with the too-angelic creature. She said nothing to betray her anxiety, but I could see that she really wished that Tom would not go out, and half-resented my presence as an obstacle to her saying so. When we were on the street Tom said:

"I have been thinking a good deal about the application of those last two talks, and of course I see, the drift of them, but I am really interested to hear Judge Truman carry out his ideas to the conclusion on the religious question. Do you suppose he will take the subject up again to-night?"

"I don't believe he will," I replied, "unless somebody else starts it or invites a continuation of the discussion. He is a man who seems to be full of ideas which he is just as willing to keep to himself as to express, unless somebody shows a desire to hear them. He is as likely to talk about arctic exploration or the stock market as anything else if nobody indicates a preference."

"Well, I believe I will try to start him on the old track, for my mind is full of the subject," said Tom, "and as I cannot get it out of my head I may as well go on to some kind of satisfactory stopping place with it."

"I am afraid you won't reach it," I replied, "but you may be carried far enough so that you can worry along alone and find rest for yourself as best you may."

We completed the walk in silence, and found the Judge and the Colonel in what we had come to regard as a sanctum of our own for the late hours of Saturday night quietly conversing upon their exclusive and inexhaustible stock of common interests.

"Well," exclaimed the Judge in his cheery way, "you old fellows are getting averse to meeting before midnight, while we youngsters would like to break up without encroaching too much upon the Sunday. I hope you haven't lost any friends, Tom, you are looking a bit gloomy."

"Oh, no; not gloomy, I hope, only serious," Tom responded. "I have been thinking a good deal of late and studying some, and perhaps it doesn't agree with me. Do you know, I have spent all my spare time for the last two or three weeks reading the Old Testament in the light of what you were saying to us about it, and I must confess that I am inclined to take a different view of it, but really I do not see that it makes much difference with the Christian faith. I do not find that after all that depends very much upon anything in the Hebrew Scripture, except perhaps in the Commandments."

"Why make that exception?" queried the Judge. "They were a sort of solemn and impressive formulation of the most essential principles of the old law. The first four had reference to the exclusive worship of Jehovah and the observances that were to guard against the idolatries of Moab and Edom and the rest, and the others embody certain ethical principles common to all people and all time, recognized as soon as there is civilization enough to demand protection for society. A purely secular moral standard now would include all there is in them, and more too. The Christian faith need not be independent of anything in the shape of truth and sound principle, but it is not dependent on any particular statement of them in past ages."

"But what most troubles me," exclaimed the anxious Thomas, "is the effect upon the New Testament of giving up the sacredness of the Old as a revelation of the Divine will."

"Oh, that is a mere matter of words," replied the Judge. "'Sacredness,' 'revelation,' 'Divine will,' what do they mean? Is not the Divine will revealed in all human experience and knowledge and in human thought and reason as well? and is it not as sacred in one place and time as another? What the Hebrew Scripture really is and means cannot be changed by any juggle of words, and the results of historical and scientific criticism will have to be accepted. It is useless trying to resist it. But the anxiety you express is the common one. There would not be much clinging to the idea of peculiar sacredness or of special inspiration in the Old Testament if it were not for fears on account of the New. Give up the idea in the one case and you cannot hold on to it in the other, and good people think they must have it in order to retain belief in what they have been taught to believe and what they still wish to believe. They are quite right about that, but they overrate the importance of the dogmas in which they believe, either to moral conduct or a religious life in the highest and best sense. The life, character, and teachings of Jesus in their purity are all there is essential, it seems to me, to a Christian religion adapted as much to these times as any other, and these cannot be obliterated from history. The more clearly they can be brought out from the record and the more exclusively they can be made the basis of preaching and organized religious work, the more effectual they will be for the regeneration of mankind. They have become so involved in mysticisms and dogmatisms, and covered over with such an accumulation of creeds and doctrines, that what ought to attract has come to repel the very people who most need the benefit of religious faith."

"Then you would treat the New Testament record in the same critical spirit as the Old?" Tom asked, as if he could possibly have thought otherwise.

"Why, of course, or any other record. Why not? You doubtless think that you must retain the theory of Divine inspiration in order to retain your belief in the miraculous, and that you must hold to that belief in order to have any bottom for faith or confidence in the truth of religion. I do not think so. But whatever you think, if you really make a critical study of this record, you cannot avoid the conclusion that it has all the defects and imperfections of a human work, based upon the uncertainties of human testimony, under the circumstances that made it exceptionally uncertain, and I do not see how you are going to escape the logical deductions from that conclusion."

"Now, look here, Tom. I do not care at all to expatiate on this subject unless you wish it; but if I do, of course I shall say just what I think, and I hope I have made it plain that I believe in the necessity of religious faith and worship for mankind and of the immense value and importance of the Christian Church. What I contend for here in the privacy of our circle is that the Church, in order to maintain its great influence and power for good and do the work which most needs to be done, absolutely must range itself in line with modern progress in knowledge and thought. It cannot retain an effectual hold upon the convictions of men by requiring them to believe what the most honest and serious of students and thinkers cannot believe and the ordinary every-day common sense of the people will reject."

"You know there has been a good deal of critical study of the New Testament literature in recent years, and it yields readily to the same tests as are universally accepted for all other human records, and honesty requires us to accept the results. Really very little study is necessary to verify them. I don't want to make myself tiresome by talking about the political, social, and literary conditions under which that record was produced, but I suppose you know this. Christianity as a system was founded, though not fully organized, a generation or so after Jesus finished His teaching by Paul and the apostles. Their work was carried forward by the so-called 'Fathers of the Church,' whose writings were not made canonical, as those of the first Christian writers were. Paul was the father of Christian dogma and it was multiplied and extended by his successors, and why have not the religious leaders of today as much right to modify it as they had? You must remember that the letters of Paul and the apostles were written before the Gospels. These men founded the Christian system, not simply on the life and teachings of Jesus, but still more on His birth and death, which they used as a means of introducing that mysticism which in those times seemed to be a necessity of religion. It was after this had been done, after the Messianic idea had been modified and accepted and the prophecies had been interpreted to support it, after the idea of the miraculous birth, the mystic meaning of the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and the resurrection had been adopted and wrought into the texture of the new faith and a hundred years and more after the actual events, that the Gospel record was made up. What is the natural and inevitable consequence? Actual written records were imperfect and fragmentary, oral tradition was dim and distorted, and the doctrines already promulgated and accepted necessarily affected the writers and colored the narrative. Compare the four different records and see if they do not bear all the marks of human production. They are not consistent with each other in details. The same events are related with material variations; they are differently connected and assigned to different times, places, and situations, and conspicuous and well-remembered teachings and sayings are put in with no sort of agreement as to the occasions that brought them out. This does not impugn the authenticity or good faith of the writings, but it gives them a very human character, does it not?"

There was a slight pause here, and the perturbation of the devout Thomas was plainly visible. He seemed to be trying to get his shattered ideas together for some kind of protest or reply, but the Judge, noticing that he was bewildered and would not do himself justice, kindly relieved him of all occasion for saying anything by proceeding.

"I know, my dear boy, that this view is shocking to you, and I only wish I could get you to regard it as really in the interest of the highest religion and the purest Christianity, and I think you may come to that some time if you study it out. I know what is at the bottom of your troubled mind—the miracles and all that they are supposed to sanction and to sanc-

tify. Well, you must see by this time that I think too much importance is attached to belief in them. I do not accept them as miracles, of course, but I do not pretend to say just how much of fact the stories may have sprung from. You well remember what we were saying about the value of human testimony, especially when it relates to mysterious phenomena which people do not understand, and to that border land of human experience which has so long baffled psychological inquiry. Get it on record through the oral traditions of a hundred years in an uncritical time, and it becomes impossible to sift it down to facts. You know also that we admitted that there is or may be much of reality of some kind—not supernatural, but belonging to the unexplored realm of the natural—in all this clairvoyant, spiritual medium, faith cure, hypnotism, personal magnetism business; in short, that some personalities peculiarly endowed have a marvelous ascendancy over others and produce strange effects. I can easily imagine that this wonderfully constituted and endowed teacher of humanity who came out of Nazareth had such a command over the faith of the simple and devout souls of the time as to produce very remarkable effects upon those afflicted with many of the infirmities that flesh is heir to. Do we not occasionally hear of similar cures and similar control over conduct even nowadays? All that was real in what came to be known as the miracles may possibly be accounted for by natural forces and influences, not much understood even now, and not at all at the time. But that the reports of them should become magnified and distorted was simply inevitable, and that they were so is certain.

"As a test of the record of these things, let me ask: Do you suppose that any man of sense really believes that insane or epileptic or cataleptic or any other persons are or ever were possessed by demons who could be driven out of them and made to enter a herd of hogs? For my part, I cannot be made to believe that any person actually dead was ever brought back to life, though I do not marvel at all that there should have been reports and stories of such things. Does it ever strike you as significant that the most remarkable of the alleged miracles, the raising of Lazarus, is mentioned only in the latest and most doctrinized of the Gospels? Would such an amazing exhibition have escaped the knowledge and memory of the earlier evangelists, those who were nearest to the events and may have derived their knowledge directly or indirectly from eye and ear witnesses? But the fourth Gospel differs from the others to such an extent as to seem like a record of different events and different personages. The inconsistencies are irreconcilable and to be explained only on the theory that the latest book was written to support the doctrines and interpretations that had by that time been established by the founders of the Church."

"Now I want you clearly to understand my position on this matter. It is simply that of freedom of study, freedom of thought, and freedom of belief. I do not object to others believing in the miraculous and the supernatural, if they can honestly do so, and if it affords the most satisfactory solution of the problem for them. I object only to such belief being required, being obligatory in order that a person may be admitted to Christian fellowship, for honest and devout minds must differ and some of them cannot avoid what I and many others regard as rational conclusions. As I have said more than once, the ordinary intelligence, the every-day common sense, of people is pretty sure to respond nowadays to the conclusions of science and reason, to accord with them in a rough way, and people cannot be won to better and higher lives by imposing upon them conditions of belief which they cannot and will not accept. If the churches would broaden their limits by letting ancient dogmas go and giving liberty to honesty of belief and honesty of doubt, they could maintain as high a standard of moral purity and integrity, as lofty a form of a worship and as spiritual a view of religion—aye, more so—and greatly increase their power and influence for good."

"But I am talking too long and having it too much to myself. I wish the rest of you would interrupt and stop me more, and have your own say about these things. Suppose we wind up the whole subject next time with a symposium in which each shall express his particular view, for in two weeks from this night I expect to be on the ocean, bound for a two months' stay abroad."

"Count me out!" ejaculated the Colonel, who had sat grim and silent throughout. "The whole thing worries me to death. I am glad you speak of winding up next time, so far as this subject is concerned, but I am sorry you are going abroad, though I suppose I shall be off somewhere myself pretty soon."

"But you must help wind up, for I particularly wish to hear what you will say after thinking the matter over," responded the Judge.

"All right; if I find I can think it over, I will, and let you know the result. And Tom will come around with the latest and most approved weapons of orthodoxy. And our silent friend, here, I hope we may hear from him."

"No, I thank you," I replied. "I have no views, and prefer to be the audience, making up in attention for lack of numbers. Silent and listen are anagrams, and I prefer to be a silent LISTENER."