

Soul of a Bishop

By

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"Man's true Environment is God"

J. H. OLDHAM in "The Christian Gospel" (Tract of the N. M. R. and H.)

THE SOUL OF A BISHOP

CHAPTER THE FIRST - THE DREAM

(1)

IT was a scene of bitter disputation. A hawk-nosed young man with a pointing finger was prominent. His face worked violently, his lips moved very rapidly, but what he said was inaudible.

Behind him the little rufous man with the big eyes twitched at his robe and offered suggestions.

And behind these two clustered a great multitude of heated, excited, swarthy faces....

The emperor sat on his golden throne in the midst of the gathering, commanding silence by gestures, speaking inaudibly to them in a tongue the majority did not use, and then prevailing. They ceased their interruptions, and the old man, Arius, took up the debate. For a time all those impassioned faces were intent upon him; they listened as though they sought occasion, and suddenly as if by a preconcerted

arrangement they were all thrusting their fingers into their ears and knitting their brows in assumed horror; some were crying aloud and making as if to fly. Some indeed tucked up their garments and fled. They spread out into a pattern. They were like the little monks who run from St. Jerome's lion in the picture by Carpaccio. Then one zealot rushed forward and smote the old man heavily upon the mouth....

The hall seemed to grow vaster and vaster, the disputing, infuriated figures multiplied to an innumerable assembly, they drove about like snowflakes in a gale, they whirled in argumentative couples, they spun in eddies of contradiction, they made extraordinary patterns, and then amidst the cloudy darkness of the unfathomable dome above them there appeared and increased a radiant triangle in which shone an eye. The eye and the triangle filled the heavens, sent out flickering rays, glowed to a blinding incandescence, seemed to be speaking words of thunder that were nevertheless inaudible. It was as if that thunder filled the heavens, it was as if it were nothing but the beating artery in the sleeper's ear. The attention strained to hear and comprehend, and on the very verge of comprehension snapped like a fiddle-string.

"Nicoea!"

The word remained like a little ash after a flare.

The sleeper had awakened and lay very still, oppressed by a sense of intellectual effort that had survived the dream in which it had arisen.

Was it so that things had happened? The slumber-shadowed mind, moving obscurely, could not determine whether it was so or not. Had they indeed behaved in this manner when the great mystery was established? Who said they stopped their ears with their fingers and fled, shouting with horror? Shouting? Was it Eusebius or Athanasius? Or Sozomen.... Some letter or apology by Athanasius?... And surely it was impossible that the Trinity could have appeared visibly as a triangle and an eye. Above such an assembly.

That was mere dreaming, of course. Was it dreaming after Raphael? After Raphael? The drowsy mind wandered into a side issue. Was the picture that had suggested this dream the one in the Vatican where all the Fathers of the Church are shown disputing together? But there surely God and the Son themselves were painted with a symbol--some symbol--also? But was that disputation about the Trinity at all? Wasn't it rather about a chalice and a dove? Of course it was a chalice and a dove! Then where did one see the triangle and the eye? And men disputing? Some such picture there was....

What a lot of disputing there had been! What endless disputing! Which had gone on. Until last night. When this very disagreeable young man with the hawk nose and the pointing finger had tackled one when one was sorely fagged, and disputed; disputed. Rebuked and disputed. "Answer me this," he had said.... And still one's poor brains disputed and would not rest.... About the Trinity....

The brain upon the pillow was now wearily awake. It was at once hopelessly awake and active and hopelessly unprogressive. It was like some floating stick that had got caught in an eddy in a river, going round and round and round. And round. Eternally--eternally--eternally begotten.

"But what possible meaning do you attach then to such a phrase as eternally begotten?"

The brain upon the pillow stared hopelessly at this question, without an answer, without an escape. The three repetitions spun round and round, became a swiftly revolving triangle, like some electric sign that had got beyond control, in the midst of which stared an unwinking and resentful eye.

(2)

Every one knows that expedient of the sleepless, the counting of sheep.

You lie quite still, you breathe regularly, you imagine sheep jumping over a gate, one after another, you count them quietly and slowly until you count yourself off through a fading string of phantom numbers to number Nod....

But sheep, alas! suggest an episcopal crook.

And presently a black sheep had got into the succession and was struggling violently with the crook about its leg, a hawk-nosed black sheep full of reproof, with disordered hair and a pointing finger. A young man with a most disagreeable voice.

At which the other sheep took heart and, deserting the numbered succession, came and sat about the fire in a big drawing-room and argued also. In particular there was Lady Sunderbund, a pretty fragile tall woman in the corner, richly jewelled, who sat with her pretty eyes watching and her lips compressed. What had she thought of it? She had said very little.

It is an unusual thing for a mixed gathering of this sort to argue about the Trinity. Simply because a tired bishop had fallen into their party. It was not fair to him to pretend that the atmosphere was a liberal and inquiring one, when the young man who had sat still and dormant by the table was in reality a keen and bitter Irish Roman Catholic. Then the question, a question-begging question, was put quite suddenly, without preparation or prelude, by surprise. "Why, Bishop, was the Spermaticos Logos identified with the Second and not the Third Person of the Trinity?"

It was indiscreet, it was silly, to turn upon the speaker and affect an air of disengagement and modernity and to say: "Ah, that indeed is the unfortunate aspect of the whole affair."

Whereupon the fierce young man had exploded with: "To that, is it, that you Anglicans have come?"

The whole gathering had given itself up to the disputation, Lady Sunderbund, an actress, a dancer--though she, it is true, did not say very much--a novelist, a mechanical expert of some sort, a railway peer, geniuses, hairy and Celtic, people of no clearly definable position, but all quite unequal to the task of maintaining that air of reverent vagueness, that tenderness of touch, which is by all Anglican standards imperative in so deep, so mysterious, and, nowadays, in mixed society at least, so infrequent a discussion.

It was like animals breaking down a fence about some sacred spot. Within a couple of minutes the affair had become highly improper. They had raised their voices, they had spoken with the utmost familiarity of almost unspeakable things. There had been even attempts at epigram. Athanasian epigrams. Bent the novelist had doubted if originally there had been a Third Person in the Trinity at all. He suggested a reaction from a too-Manichaeism at some date after the time of St. John's Gospel. He maintained obstinately that that Gospel was dualistic.

The unpleasant quality of the talk was far more manifest in the retrospect than it had been at the time. It had seemed then bold and strange, but not impossible; now in the cold darkness it seemed sacrilegious. And the bishop's share, which was indeed only the weak

yielding of a tired man to an atmosphere he had misjudged, became a disgraceful display of levity and bad faith. They had baited him. Some one had said that nowadays every one was an Arian, knowingly or unknowingly. They had not concealed their conviction that the bishop did not really believe in the Creeds he uttered.

And that unfortunate first admission stuck terribly in his throat.

Oh! Why had he made it?

(3)

Sleep had gone.

The awakened sleeper groaned, sat up in the darkness, and felt gropingly in this unaccustomed bed and bedroom first for the edge of the bed and then for the electric light that was possibly on the little bedside table.

The searching hand touched something. A water-bottle. The hand resumed its exploration. Here was something metallic and smooth, a stem. Either above or below there must be a switch....

The switch was found, grasped, and turned.

The darkness fled.

In a mirror the sleeper saw the reflection of his face and a corner of the bed in which he lay. The lamp had a tilted shade that threw a slanting bar of shadow across the field of reflection, lighting a right-angled triangle very brightly and leaving the rest obscure. The bed was a very great one, a bed for the Anakim. It had a canopy with yellow silk curtains, surmounted by a gilded crown of carved wood. Between the curtains was a man's face, clean-shaven, pale, with disordered brown hair and weary, pale-blue eyes. He was clad in purple pyjamas, and the hand that now ran its fingers through the brown hair was long and lean and shapely.

Beside the bed was a convenient little table bearing the light, a water-bottle and glass, a bunch of keys, a congested pocket-book, a gold-banded fountain pen, and a gold watch that indicated a quarter past three. On the lower edge of the picture in the mirror appeared the back of a gilt chair, over which a garment of peculiar construction had been carelessly thrown. It was in the form of that sleeveless cassock of purple, opening at the side, whose lower flap is called a bishop's apron; the corner of the frogged coat showed behind the chair-back, and the sash lay crumpled on the floor. Black doeskin breeches, still warmly lined with their pants, lay where they had been thrust off at the corner of the bed, partly covering black hose and silver-buckled shoes.

For a moment the tired gaze of the man in the bed rested upon these

evidences of his episcopal dignity. Then he turned from them to the watch at the bedside.

He groaned helplessly.

(4)

These country doctors were no good. There wasn't a physician in the diocese. He must go to London.

He looked into the weary eyes of his reflection and said, as one makes a reassuring promise, "London."

He was being worried. He was being intolerably worried, and he was ill and unable to sustain his positions. This doubt, this sudden discovery of controversial unsoundness, was only one aspect of his general neurasthenia. It had been creeping into his mind since the "Light Under the Altar" controversy. Now suddenly it had leapt upon him from his own unwary lips.

The immediate trouble arose from his loyalty. He had followed the King's example; he had become a total abstainer and, in addition, on his own account he had ceased to smoke. And his digestion, which Princhester had first made sensitive, was deranged. He was suffering chemically, suffering one of those nameless sequences of maladjustments that still

defy our ordinary medical science. It was afflicting him with a general malaise, it was affecting his energy, his temper, all the balance and comfort of his nerves. All day he was weary; all night he was wakeful. He was estranged from his body. He was distressed by a sense of detachment from the things about him, by a curious intimation of unreality in everything he experienced. And with that went this levity of conscience, a heaviness of soul and a levity of conscience, that could make him talk as though the Creeds did not matter--as though nothing mattered....

If only he could smoke!

He was persuaded that a couple of Egyptian cigarettes, or three at the outside, a day, would do wonders in restoring his nervous calm. That, and just a weak whisky and soda at lunch and dinner. Suppose now--!

His conscience, his sense of honour, deserted him. Latterly he had had several of these conscience-blanks; it was only when they were over that he realized that they had occurred.

One might smoke up the chimney, he reflected. But he had no cigarettes! Perhaps if he were to slip downstairs....

Why had he given up smoking?

He groaned aloud. He and his reflection eyed one another in mutual

despair.

There came before his memory the image of a boy's face, a swarthy little boy, grinning, grinning with a horrible knowingness and pointing his finger--an accusing finger. It had been the most exasperating, humiliating, and shameful incident in the bishop's career. It was the afternoon for his fortnightly address to the Shop-girls' Church Association, and he had been seized with a panic fear, entirely irrational and unjustifiable, that he would not be able to deliver the address. The fear had arisen after lunch, had gripped his mind, and then as now had come the thought, "If only I could smoke!" And he had smoked. It seemed better to break a vow than fail the Association. He had fallen to the temptation with a completeness that now filled him with shame and horror. He had stalked Dunk, his valet-butler, out of the dining-room, had affected to need a book from the book-case beyond the sideboard, had gone insincerely to the sideboard humming "From Greenland's icy mountains," and then, glancing over his shoulder, had stolen one of his own cigarettes, one of the fatter sort. With this and his bedroom matches he had gone off to the bottom of the garden among the laurels, looked everywhere except above the wall to be sure that he was alone, and at last lit up, only as he raised his eyes in gratitude for the first blissful inhalation to discover that dreadful little boy peeping at him from the crotch in the yew-tree in the next garden. As though God had sent him to be a witness!

Their eyes had met. The bishop recalled with an agonized distinctness

every moment, every error, of that shameful encounter. He had been too surprised to conceal the state of affairs from the pitiless scrutiny of those youthful eyes. He had instantly made as if to put the cigarette behind his back, and then as frankly dropped it....

His soul would not be more naked at the resurrection. The little boy had stared, realized the state of affairs slowly but surely, pointed his finger....

Never had two human beings understood each other more completely.

A dirty little boy! Capable no doubt of a thousand kindred scoundrelisms.

It seemed ages before the conscience-stricken bishop could tear himself from the spot and walk back, with such a pretence of dignity as he could muster, to the house.

And instead of the discourse he had prepared for the Shop-girls' Church Association, he had preached on temptation and falling, and how he knew they had all fallen, and how he understood and could sympathize with the bitterness of a secret shame, a moving but unsuitable discourse that had already been subjected to misconstruction and severe reproof in the local press of Princhester.

But the haunting thing in the bishop's memory was the face and gesture

of the little boy. That grubby little finger stabbed him to the heart.

"Oh, God!" he groaned. "The meanness of it! How did I bring myself--?"

He turned out the light convulsively, and rolled over in the bed, making a sort of cocoon of himself. He bored his head into the pillow and groaned, and then struggled impatiently to throw the bed-clothes off himself. Then he sat up and talked aloud.

"I must go to Brighton-Pomfrey," he said. "And get a medical dispensation. If I do not smoke--"

He paused for a long time.

Then his voice sounded again in the darkness, speaking quietly, speaking with a note almost of satisfaction.

"I shall go mad. I must smoke or I shall go mad."

For a long time he sat up in the great bed with his arms about his knees.

(5)

Fearful things came to him; things at once dreadfully blasphemous and

entirely weak-minded.

The triangle and the eye became almost visible upon the black background of night. They were very angry. They were spinning round and round faster and faster. Because he was a bishop and because really he did not believe fully and completely in the Trinity. At one and the same time he did not believe in the Trinity and was terrified by the anger of the Trinity at his unbelief.... He was afraid. He was aghast.... And oh! he was weary....

He rubbed his eyes.

"If I could have a cup of tea!" he said.

Then he perceived with surprise that he had not thought of praying. What should he say? To what could he pray?

He tried not to think of that whizzing Triangle, that seemed now to be nailed like a Catherine wheel to the very centre of his forehead, and yet at the same time to be at the apex of the universe. Against that--for protection against that--he was praying. It was by a great effort that at last he pronounced the words:

"Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee, O Lord"

Presently he had turned up his light, and was prowling about the room.

The clear inky dinginess that comes before the raw dawn of a spring morning, found his white face at the window, looking out upon the great terrace and the park.