

Out of the Haze.

(Leander S. Keyser, in 'Ram's Horn.')

The Rev. Dr. Overfield was the pastor of a large church in a flourishing city. Many of his parishioners—indeed, most of them—were practical people, too busy to give current questions of human speculation very close attention. Few of them, if any, could have told you what the doctor meant when he referred to the Ritschlian theology.

But the doctor, it must be said, was enchanted by some of the 'advanced' thought of the age, especially some of the extremely 'modern' views of the Scriptures, and of certain Christian doctrines. He therefore carried the atmosphere of the study into his pulpit, and had much to say about 'truth in new forms,' 'present-day thinking,' and the 'antiquated ideas' that had once been held, but were now given up. His members began to look at one another with interrogation points in their eyes.

'I couldn't quite make out the doctor's meaning to-day,' observed Mr. Welton, a leading merchant of the city, on his way from the church service one Sunday morning. 'Perhaps it is only because he is too profound for me.'

'I was thinking along the same line myself,' responded Lawyer Bates. 'Either I am becoming obtuse, or else the doctor is growing hazy.'

'Well, then, there must be a kind of fellow feeling between us. The fact is, I don't like to talk about my pastor, and for that reason I have not said anything to any one; but I couldn't help wondering how his sermon this morning impressed you.'

'To be honest, it impressed me as lacking in clearness. Perhaps I am more than usually dull, and therefore ought not to pass any criticism. But he spoke for forty minutes this morning on the inspiration of the Bible, and yet I can't tell now whether he really believes the Scriptures to be inspired or not.'

'Ha! ha!' laughed the merchant, a little grimly. 'That's my own dilemma precisely. He said something about the old views having been exploded, but he didn't say explicitly what views had been accepted in their stead. Then, what was it he said about Homer, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare having been inspired? Did he really mean to say that those men were inspired in the same way that the Biblical writers were inspired?'

'Well, he didn't exactly say that, but he certainly hinted something of the kind,' remarked the lawyer. 'The trouble is, the whole thing was misty. One doesn't feel that one has been greatly edified by such pointless preaching.'

As the two men parted, a certain well-known 'free thinker' of the city stepped up and walked by the side of Mr. Welton.

'How do you do, Mr. Welton?' he said jovially. 'Well, I've been at the service at your church this morning, and heard Dr. Overfield's sermon.'

'What did you think of it?' asked Mr. Welton, eyeing his companion narrowly.

'It was good, excellent, first-rate!' broke out the free thinker, with not a little enthusiasm. 'Not quite as outspoken as I should have liked, but the doctor is coming around all right. I see that clearly. The old foggy ideas of one inspired book and only one are fast becoming obsolete. The doctor is catching on to the advanced thought of the day. He'll come out all right, never fear, sir! Good-day, sir. Pleasant morning.'

Mr. Welton turned the corner and walked up the street in a thoughtful frame of mind.

The next Sunday morning the doctor chose the character of Christ as the theme of his discussion. He had a good deal to say to the effect that Christ is not the same to-day as he has been in the past; that he is different in every age, fitting himself into the spirit of the times, thus assuming Protean forms.

'I couldn't understand the Doctor to-day,' said Mrs. Douglass to one of her friends, after the service. 'If I remember correctly, the Bible says that Christ is "the same yesterday, to-day, and forever."'

'Well, I suppose the doctor really meant that the age and not Christ himself changes,' replied the friend, apologetically.

'Then he should have said so,' returned the good woman, adding a little sharply: 'I believe a preacher ought always to say what he means and mean what he says.'

'Yes, that would be the better way, I admit.'

Time went on, and more and more the members of Dr. Overfield's congregation grew perplexed. Some of them sympathized with his frequent allusions to 'modern ideas'; others were grieved by his evident departure from clear and positive ground, while most of them simply looked on and wondered what he was trying to teach.

At length he announced that he would deliver a series of sermons on 'Last Things.' His first subject was stated as follows:—'Is there a heaven?' The discourse was a feat of mental gymnastics. Instead of throwing the clear light of Scripture upon the theme, he surrounded the future life with the mist and uncertainty of a certain style of modern speculation. The future life was a 'state,' but what kind of a 'state' he did not know, and the congregation filed out of the auditorium in a mystified 'state' of mind.

'I always thought there was a real heaven, a pure and attractive place worth striving for; but I am very doubtful about it now,' whispered a woman who was weary with the toils and trials of life.

Thus the seeds of doubt were sown in many minds, all of which seemed to cast a pall upon the life of the church and cut the nerve of its activities. There were few additions to the membership, and no real, earnest efforts to rescue men from the power of sin.

But God had better things in store for pastor and people. An incident worth describing occurred the day after the doctor's sermon on heaven. He was reclining on a luxurious lounge in his study, enjoying his Monday's rest, when the doorbell rang. The visitor was one of the doctor's humblest parishioners.

'How do you do, Mrs. Allen?' was the doctor's cordial greeting. 'Come in, won't you?'

When the woman was seated, she began: 'I've come to speak to you about the sermon you preached last evening.'

'Well?' said the doctor, interrogatively.

'It has troubled me so much that I felt obliged to come to you and ask you to explain some things.'

'You mean to say that my sermon troubled you? How so, Mrs. Allen?'

'Well, you see, I have always thought that there was no doubt about heaven, about its being a real place in God's presence, where all our loved ones are happy and where we shall join them by and by; but somehow your sermon made it all seem so—so—shadowy and uncertain.'

The woman looked up appealingly into the doctor's face, her eyes gleaming with tears, and continued:

'You see, doctor, two years ago I buried my only child, a bright little girl of five. Her death almost broke my heart, and for a while I felt that I could not live without her; but I have been sustained by the thought that she is with Christ in our Father's house of many mansions; that she is happy with him, and that I shall some day meet her there. I never doubted these things for a moment, and they have been my only comfort. But now, since hearing your sermon last evening, I don't know what to believe. Tell me, doctor, the woman pleaded earnestly, 'is there really so much uncertainty about the future life?'

It was a crisis in Dr. Overfield's experience. Here was a woman with definite sorrow asking for a definite solace. Could he give it? What answer had his rationalistic theology ready for such an emergency as this? None! If he would be a true pastor to this troubled parishioner, he must come to her relief with a definite message—one that his new theology could not give. He thought rapidly in the few moments of hesitation that followed, and thought to a good purpose. The only clear and authoritative court of appeal was God's inspired Word, and there must be no doubt about its infallibility. He saw that plainly.

'My good women,' he replied, 'forget and forgive my poor sermon. It was filled with the speculations of men, which drowned the voice of God with their empty clamor. You asked me for bread and I gave you a stone. Go to the old Bible with your difficulties, and believe its testimony, it rings out the only clear note on the future life.'

Then he quoted a number of verses in his rich mellow voice:—'In my Father's house are many mansions'; 'Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father'; 'to die is gain'; Christ hath 'brought life and immortality to light'; to the penitent thief on the cross the Saviour said, 'To-day shalt thou be with me in Paradise'; John the Revelator declared that the gates of the eternal city were open by day and by night.

As the Doctor quoted these familiar verses, the mists cleared away from his own mind, and the light of the future, as revealed in God's Word, shone undimmed upon him. The woman's face began to glow, and her tears flowed afresh, although now they were tears of joyful assurance.

'Thank you, doctor,' she said in parting, after they had knelt together in prayer. 'I feel now that I have stepped back upon solid ground.'

'And so have I,' quoth the astute theologian. 'Thank you for your visit. It was very timely, and has done me much good.'

It is simply necessary to add that Dr. Overfield was helped out of the haze of speculation by that morning's interview, and that the clear and positive tone of his preaching, based on God's Word, soon brought a gracious season of outpouring upon his church, as well as a great blessing upon himself.

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