

CHOICE LITERATURE.

TOM'S HEATHEN.

CHAPTER I.—TOM PREACHES AND I PRACTISE.

Tom and I were inseparable up to the time that he began to study divinity and I medicine; when he went to Andover while I remained in New Haven. The first year letters flew thick and fast, but as each became absorbed in his own work and in the new friends professional interests brought about him, longer intervals elapsed, till, though we were still fast friends, the same thoughts no longer ran through both as light through two divisions of one telescope.

After receiving my diploma, I went to a neighboring city, opened an office, and waited for patients to manifest their faith by trusting their lives in my hands. At about the same time came an invitation to attend Tom's installation over a thriving country parish in Massachusetts. Circumstances prevented my acceptance, whereupon I sent a letter full of good wishes, and concluded by offering my professional services gratis. For the latter I received "Thanks," with the assurance that when he became weary in well-doing I should be summoned.

Later on I heard of him as a rising man, with restless symptoms, whom orthodoxy inclined to regard with solicitude; and at length, in consequence of changes to larger fields of labor, I insensibly lost track of him for the ensuing six or seven years. In fact, Tom and I had forgotten each other—a result we once thought impossible, when one Sunday-morning Sister Mary came into my office with:

"Doctor, have you an unusual number of patients on your list this morning?"

"No, we are having a spasm of health just now. Why?"

"Nothing, only John and Annie have gone crazy over their new minister, and to quiet their ravings I promised to hear him this morning, if you would take me over."

Now I knew this was more than half a desire to get me to church, for Mary, good soul, was not a little troubled by discovering in me what she called "a growing indisposition to attend divine ordinances." But after a moment's consideration, willing to gratify her, I said, "Yes, if I have time."

We were a little late, and the new minister was speaking when we entered. Something in his voice drew my eyes to his face, and before we were fairly seated I recognized with glad surprise my old friend Tom. Yes, verily, Tom Peebles. Yes, that was the same dark face with its thin nose and sensitive mouth. Yes, even the refractory lock of hair that would fall into his eyes, threatening strabismus. The same, yet changed. Tom's face told that he had been thinking on his own account the past six or seven years. That restless metaphysical bias that began to crop out during our college days must have developed amazingly. It was evident that he had fought hard battles, not only with himself, but with powers that no man can weigh, measure, or take into account. It was also evident that he had by no means attained to a condition of absolute serenity. The old rumor that he was regarded by orthodoxy with solicitude was probably not unfounded. I could understand that he would kick like an untamed colt if the traces galled him, and I doubt not traces of man's clumsy invention would gall him sorely. But as he went farther into a discourse that claimed and held my close attention, I found that he had not only deepened but broadened, and was fearless and honest, a man thoroughly to be respected.

Before the services were half over Tom had recognized me, and at the foot of the platform began a renewal of our ancient friendship. Thereafter scarcely a day passed that he did not scud across the park and invade my private den—a narrow room in the rear of my office, fitted up with a lounge, easy-chair, book-cases, and an open fire-place. Often I found him stretched on the lounge, twisting that refractory lock of hair about his long forefinger, an old trick of his when thoughtful or perplexed.

One Monday evening after he had become an *habitué*, I found him on the lounge turning restlessly from side to side, twisting that lock of hair with unusual rapidity, a sure sign of perturbation. We rarely questioned each other; if either had aught to share it came out, in time; so now I sat and ruminated, while he fidgeted, till at length he came bolt upright, jammed both hands into his trousers pockets, and exploded:

"Doctor, do you know that if I couldn't come here and rush off my surplus steam, a catastrophe would be imminent? It is impossible to conjecture what frightful form the latent heresy in me would assume, but for this safety valve. Just now I am in an unusual ferment. 'Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon,' but that private heresy of mine concerning a personal devil, has gone higher than a kite. I must subscribe to his personality, having seen him."

"Recently?"

"Last Sunday."

"Whereabouts?"

"In one of my heathen."

"Tom, what did you have for supper last night?"

"Now, Doctor, none of that. I know what you are going to say, but I never was more free from dyspepsia in my life."

"That is not saying much."

"Doctor, you have a most absurd way of tracing everything to a man's stomach. If I were to tell you that the Republicans had been whipped in this campaign, you would say, 'Pic!'"

"Very likely. But what about the heathen, Tom? There can be no heathen in your congregation."

"There is, though, and a more unteachable set were never seen. For three years I have laid myself out to Christianize them; taught, preached, prayed, labored like a ship in a storm, and Sunday after Sunday they come up smiling, self-satisfied, content, if only they have enough to eat, drink, and wear, and some one to talk about. I am used up, and all to no purpose. I am going to beseech the A. B. C. F. M. to send up a couple of experienced missionaries,

and if they don't find it the toughest job yet! Anything but a civilized heathen. A savage you can influence; he will 'scare' at least; but a civilized heathen, a man who has been to church all his days, knows the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, accepts the creed at all hazards, gives of his filthy lucre because it is expected, but cares no more for the wants or woes of his fellow-men than if they were so many paving stones. For such a man there is no Christ, nor can be. Their lives repudiate His. Now there is one heathen in my audience who is an especial exasperation, and there seems no way to get hold of him or get rid of him. He rides me like a nightmare. Sometimes he gets on my study-table and prevents my writing at all; other times I shove him back and write a sermon that just fits his case, and go into the pulpit and preach it straight at him. And there he sits, cool and critical, as if he thought I was trying to amuse him, inclined to be indulgent if I fail, or quietly pleased if I succeed. And when I get off something I think he cannot possibly withstand, he looks into my face and smiles—slowly—and I can feel him saying, 'Well done, my lad! well done! That sounds finely, and I hope Judge Tompkins has taken it home. It fits him exactly.'

"Now, really, Doctor," continued Tom, more quietly, "that man has a soul, and I almost know that it is an unsaved soul, and at times I long with an unspeakable longing to save it. I mean, to feel that it is saved, and I have used all known means and methods, and have signally failed. There is something wrong, somewhere."

"Did you leave the Lord out of your prescription, Tom?"

"No," slowly and in a lower tone. "He knows better than I can tell, how I have besought His power and influence." After a pause he added: "One of the worst results is its disheartening influence upon me. Sometimes his cool, practical unbelief knocks all faith out of me. I go home in a thoroughly collapsed condition, feeling as if I would never write another sermon. Of course it don't last; of course the unbelief of any man, scientific or otherwise, ought not and would not betray me for any length of time. Still, not being so thoroughly rooted and grounded in the faith as I ought to be—the result of some inherited tendency—and a little over-sensitive thereby, he troubles me seriously."

"Why do you look at him, then?"

"I cannot help it. He occupies a pew well up the cent. aisle, is always there, and always looks me steadily in the face with a gaze that brings my eyes to his whether I will or not. If I look off my manuscript I have got to look at him. Sometimes it is worse than others. Last Sunday, for instance, I don't think there was any one else in the church. At least I didn't see any one else."

"Who is this mesmerizing heathen?" asked I, not a little amused.

"You must know him—Joel Dyer, banker."

"That immaculate person with a grave, scholarly face, whom I meet so regularly on the streets?"

"Probably. They tell me that he has passed the post-office at precisely ten minutes past ten and ten minutes past three o'clock every week day the past twenty years. People keep time by him. He is far more reliable than the State House clock. And yet he goes just so leisurely, his hands clasped behind him, and his eyes on the pavement, as if in a profound study."

"I know him. But he is the last man I should take for a heathen. For a long time I supposed him a minister of the gospel of the most orthodox type. I remember that I was once called to his house professionally. There was a son born, and the mother died. I suppose he married again."

"No. And he still wears his weed, from habit, they say."

"I wonder what became of the son. It was a poor, wizened specimen of humanity."

"Dead, probably, as I have never heard of a son. There is an only daughter, a Vassar student, who comes to church with her father during vacations. She, too, is a heathen; probably by inheritance."

"Where is your charity, Tom?"

"Haven't a particle, and I am going home before I say anything worse."

"Tom!" as he was closing the door.

"Well!" without looking back.

"Take a Seidlitz powder before going to bed to-night, and another in the morning."

He turned long enough to shake his fist at me, and sharply closed the door.

"Behave better when you come again."

No answer.

CHAPTER II.—A DOOMED MAN.

Tom was still in my thoughts, his earnestness, his honesty, and the, to him, unsatisfactory results of his labor; and especially the unwholesome influence of this cultivated heathen; and I was casting about for causes, when footsteps in the office suggested the possibility of his return. I opened the door to bid him enter, when to my amazement I saw not Tom, but Tom's heathen. I passed him and turned up the gas before I was fully persuaded that the object was really flesh and blood, and no optical illusion, growing out of Tom's talk and my subsequent reverie.

"Good evening, Doctor."

"Good evening—Mr. Dyer, if I mistake not."

"You are not mistaken," and he uncovered, showing a fine philosophical head, fearless, and not over reverent. He took the proffered seat, adding, "It is some years since I had occasion to call upon you."

"Yes, a dozen or more."

"More. I found you discerning and honest then, and if you are still the same, you are the man I want now."

"I blow no trumpets."

He smiled, slowly, bringing out the very expression Tom had described.

"Trumpets are not essential. You will hear what I have to say?"

"With interest."

"Then I will say that I have been well, quite well, all my life. My parents were healthy, one dying of an accident, and the other of old age. I have steered clear of excesses,

having no taste that way. (I could believe him.) Have cared for myself reasonably well; am yet middle-aged, and consequently at a loss to account for certain symptoms that manifest themselves with considerable decision of late. I have consulted supposed authorities, written and oral, and am still in the dark. I wish you to search me thoroughly, and find out where the trouble is. If a man is about to 'shuffle off this mortal coil,' it is a little satisfaction to know why."

"You look as if 'this mortal coil' would cling to you for some time yet. You are not a man to succumb easily. Mention the symptoms."

Then followed as close an examination as was possible that night. And he came the next day, and at different times for several days; and though I became as keen and eager as a politician after office, the disease, whatever it was, continued to baffle me. At time it seemed in the heart or stomach, or nerve-centres,—but when I essayed to put my finger upon it, I found that the disturbed action was sympathetic, not organic. I should have been tempted to believe it wholly or in part imaginary, for it is a curious fact that when a supposed disease has taken fast hold upon the imagination it becomes in a certain sense a real disease, with like symptoms, and not unfrequently a like fatal result; only that this man was a clear, cool, practical man,—not given to whimsies or delusions. I told him my perplexity, and was reluctantly giving up the case, when I chanced upon something that set me off on a new scent, with greater zest than ever. Now it began to unravel. A few hours' investigation enabled me to form, as I believed, a correct diagnosis,—but one that I was loath to communicate. I ever made it a point to be rigidly honest with my patients, but it was often one of the most difficult things I had to do. In this case I knew that an unfavorable result was more than half expected, for he had studied his own case as if he was a disinterested observer, and that fact helped me to tell him my apprehensions. He demanded my reasons, and once in possession of all I could give, he looked me unflinchingly in the face, and said:

"Well! Doctor, if it is that, I am a doomed man."

"So are we all, sooner or later."

After a long pause, while he stood with his hands clasped behind him and his eyes fixed on the floor, burrowing mentally, he suddenly lifted his head with this remark:

"I should have preferred almost anything else. A reasonable disease, with a direct approach and attack, not an insidious foe, ready to grab at any advantage. However, others have gone by the same road, and probably I can trudge along without making a child of myself."

"But, Mr. Dyer, I may be mistaken, even yet; you should get the opinions of others. I will give you letters to physicians in New York and Philadelphia who make a specialty of this disease. Let them go to the bottom of the case. It is a duty you owe to yourself."

He took my advice. I ceased to meet him on the street. Watches ran down; people were behind in their engagements; accidents and misunderstandings occurred before the citizens realized that they must keep time by something else. I believe "a matter of history there has been no uniform time in the city since. As witness the discrepancies between the South, the Centre, the State House clocks and the 'City time,' whatever that may be."

Four or five weeks later I found Mr. Dyer in my office awaiting my arrival. We exchanged greetings, when he said:

"You were right, Doctor, quite right."

"About what?"

"The case we have been investigating. Dr. Holdon says you have a novel way of getting at facts, but you get at them, nevertheless. The other doctors agreed with you substantially, but they all differed as to treatment."

A long conversation followed, in which I found him thoroughly posted as to supposed causes and details of his own case, and was amazed at the cool, discriminating way in which he spoke of himself, as of an individual in whom he had no concern. A unique patient, this heathen of Tom's—a petrification or a philosopher. Towards the close of our conversation he became more personal, asking this question:

"How long will it be?"

"What?"

"How long have I to live?"

"You ask me a question no mortal can answer."

"I know. But the probabilities?"

"That depends upon your constitution and mental equilibrium, and the care you give yourself. It may be ten years, or it may be three months."

"Three months." He went off in one of his fits of abstraction, giving me leisure to study his face. There was a subtle change in his mouth, that most expressive feature, so far as suffering is concerned. He was evidently enduring great physical or mental pain. And was he altogether as indifferent to his fate as he seemed? "Three months—not a long time. Well, I can adjust myself to that, too, if necessary."

"It is not necessary. You are too sensible to fix a time which must be uncertain."

"Time is of little consequence. It is not even essential 'to be, or not to be.' I don't know of anything that is worth a prolonged struggle."

"And yet you have been a successful man."

"What do you mean by success?"

"This: A young man starts with some aim—generally to be rich, sometimes to be learned—and if after years of persevering toil he attains his object, he is considered successful."

"There are two sides to that, Doctor. A man may succeed and not be successful. Taken as a whole he may have made a contemptible failure."

"That cannot be said of you."

"But it can—just that. I feel like talking, and I will bore you a moment. I began life without a dollar, and now men say I am rich. Well, I shall leave it all soon, and how much better am I, that I have spent anxious days and sleepless nights, and toiled like a slave for what avails me nothing? I have had only what I have consumed. I should have had that any way."