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# A CROYDON EPISODE.

BY

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MAY BE HAD OF  
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IT may be interesting to you if I recount the origin of the Religious Society whose fifth anniversary we celebrate to-day.

You will be surprised when I tell you that Croydon occurred to me as the possible scene of my future life whilst I was still a Roman Catholic ecclesiastic. I did not know a single individual in this locality, with the exception of the lately-deceased Congregationalist Minister, the Rev. Joseph Whiting. When I was in office at Woodchester, in Gloucestershire, he was Minister at Stroud. We became acquainted in consequence of his expressing a desire to confer with me on religious matters in presence of a young lady who had some idea of embracing the Roman Catholic faith. In 1862, in the guest-room of the Dominican Priory at Woodchester, the conference took place, and lasted three hours; it was conducted on both sides with the most perfect temper, fairness, and courtesy. Those who remember Mr. Whiting will easily understand that the violation of such virtues will not have disfigured his side of the controversy. At that time the Roman Catholic doctrine of Infallibility was the twofold Infallibility of the Bible and of the Church. Papal Supremacy was held, but Papal Infallibility was not an article of Faith, except so far as it might be supposed to flow out of the two other dogmas.

We took Bible Infallibility as the basis of agreement and argument.

I thought, and still think, that I had the best of the argument; anyhow, so thought the young lady, for the conference decided her to embrace the Roman Catholic faith.

Given Bible Infallibility, and take for granted that Jesus Christ founded a dogmatic sect and that it exists, it would be less difficult to prove the Papal than the Anglican or the Evangelical to be that sect.

Seven years passed by. During that period ecclesiastical duties had removed me from Gloucestershire and carried me over many parts of England. The great controversy regarding Infallibility arose within the Roman Catholic Church—the controversy which has shaken the German Church to its centre and lost to it its most illustrious defenders. Many minds became anxious, some determined not to investigate or think, others were by circumstances almost reluctantly *compelled* to investigate and think. I was amongst the latter class: doubts arose, these were again earnestly banished amidst unceasing work in missions, in preaching, and in the confessional. The doubts kept forcing themselves before my mind. In accordance with the sad teaching of ecclesiastical theology, I regarded these doubts, not as the noble utterances of the intelligence, but as temptations to be suppressed. I tried to remove them by reading, by occupation, by prayer.

A confessor told me that my position was too prominent, that it fostered pride, and hence came these temptations. It often happens that those accused of pride, are in fact but the victims of disappointment. What so sad as to give your mind and energy to a service, and to begin to suspect that the service is an illusion.

However, I asked to withdraw from all public

offices, and I withdrew to a country village, during two years, only leaving it when the calls of duty or of friendship rendered absence imperative. I was sickened by the spectacle of religion deforming itself into a scheming Papal faction, headed in England by a diplomatic and ambitious convert, in Rome by a Pope who knew nothing, and by a Cardinal who believed nothing—if the testimony of intimates can be trusted.

Amidst peasants, and country scenes, and village children, I strove to forget the present, and to fortify my faith by the theologies of the past.

Many a long evening have I sat in my garden at Bosworth, when the nightingale's song was the only voice to be heard, and prayed that I might die ere the illusion had utterly passed away.

During that time I happened to have been at Arundel Castle. It was perhaps the autumn of 1868, on my way home to Leicestershire, a gentleman entered the carriage at Red Hill. I did not recognise him at first, but he reminded me of our interview at Woodchester—it was Mr. Whiting. We did not discuss theology: theology had become my enemy. It was a beautiful autumn evening; the valley of Caterham and the pleasant white houses about looked beautiful and cheering. Mr Whiting got out at Croydon, telling me he had come to live there. I remember wishing that I had never been bound to impossible creeds, but could be free from the galling yoke of a human authoritative belief, and able to mingle as a man amongst my fellow men and not as a priest amongst subjects.

It is one of the singular coincidences of life, that in the year 1870, when I distinctly apprehended that as soon as the time of deliberation arranged with my confessor had terminated, I should probably be compelled to say to myself that the faith had no

basis, I happened to see in a Unitarian paper a notice that a Free Christian Church might be desirable in Croydon. The thought flashed through my mind how pleasant it would be if there happened to be in such a place a few earnest unfettered minds, who would like to combine for worship and edification, if it were only in the parlour of one's house. That same year Mr. Martineau came to Bosworth to confer with me. On the 9th of August, 1870, I left my quiet country home and went to Birmingham. With the exception of superiors at a distance, no one knew when I left, for I loved the villagers and they loved me, and I did not wish to give or to receive the pain of parting; so I walked through the quiet straggling village on foot, passed the old church and the little Roman Catholic school, listened for a moment to the children's morning hymn to our Lady, and left the past for ever behind—the stately, not unpoetic past! and it ranged itself amidst the grand mythologies of the days of old; like the statue of a goddess on the niche of a colonnade, you admire it and you leave it behind. The road leads through the images of gods and of heroes to the temple of the Universal.

When Mr. Martineau came to visit me, I told him that there could be to me no half-way house; that either the Roman Catholic Church was a religion or a mythology; if it were proved to me to be a mythology, it was because the Bible was mythological and all orthodox Christianity mythological. I saw only two alternatives, the Religion of Rome; or the Religion of Nature, of the Soul, of the Universe—either a Religion denouncing all, or a Religion embracing all. If the Roman Catholic Church is not the special Church of God, then, the whole of humanity, must be my Church; either does Revelation speak through the Roman Catholic Church,

or it speaks through all Religions, all Souls, all Nature.

At length I arose from the limited into the universal. To a stranger, it might have seemed like passing from a great Church into a very small Sect. A great Church may hold what is narrow and transitory, a mere handful of men may hold what is all-embracing. In former times, all knowledge of external things was based on theory or on magic. Lord Bacon arose, and taught that it must be based solely on experimental knowledge; he did not pretend to have acquired the knowledge, but he affirmed the true principle—the principle is a universal one—but it is called the Baconian, and for long it was only held by a few—by a small school of thought. Three hundred years have past, and that school of thought has conquered the whole domain of science; we apply similar principles to religion. Like Jesus Christ, we appeal to the soul and to nature; we are a small school of thought, we bear the apparent limitation of a name; of a name representing at once a history and a principle, but that principle is a universal one, and in three hundred years and less, will doubtless have possessed the whole domain of religion. A time will come—you help to prepare the time—when men will say, not “God is in the Church,” but “all nature is full of God.” A time dawns, you invoke its horizon, when all dogmatic Churches will have passed away, and ranged themselves in the stately mausoleum of the past.

When there will be juster views of God, and of man in relation to God; when society will feel the change in all its departments from state government to domestic service; when every wrong will be righting, every mischief removing, every mistake correcting, every sorrow alleviating. When there will be the worship of the absolute perfection, allegiance

to eternal law, loving fidelity to all humanity, the development of the power of mind; then, in the human hierarchy, we shall behold the true ascension—saint, lover, hero, thinker. Then the sense of the divine, the infinite, and the immortal, born of reverence, trust, affection, deep in the ineradicable qualities of our being, will create a faith and a feeling of divine truth, not faint in its glow, not damped by misgiving, not dimmed by doubt, or tainted by selfishness.

Then the intuition of God will be natural; the perception of His laws intellectually certain. Such a religion will be "broad as humanity, frank as truth, stern as justice, loving as Christ." Only a few as yet adopt openly and religiously the extreme of our protests, but I venture to say that Croydon is nobler, purer, braver, more loving, more Christian to-day; *because* the glow of humanity's glorious future is shining on the brows of a few.

Through the friendly offices of Mr. Martineau I was made personally known to a very small handful of Liberal thinkers in this neighbourhood. Two gentlemen came over to Manchester to invite me to this place. They found me in the midst of a committee of gentlemen offering to me the beautiful Upper Brook-street Church. I felt myself not ready for work in a great city, and accepted the invitation to a very small beginning in a locality which seemed to me more like retirement than publicity. The foundation and outline of my religious position were clear to me; the details were not filled in. Everything around me seemed strange and new. I felt like a boy beginning amongst men. A few of us met for our first religious service on October 2, 1870, in the Nonconformist Chapel, London-road, lent to us for a couple of months. It was the day observed by Roman Catholics as "Rosary Sunday." On Sun-



day, December 11, 1870, we assembled for the first time in this building. The purchase of the ground on which it stands was only completed on June 12 of the present year, when we celebrated the occasion by a numerous, distinguished, but private, social gathering. We commenced with about eight adherents—three or four soon seceded from our infant cause, though continuing personal friends up to the present moment; they would have continued with us if we had adopted a line of action which never for a moment approved itself to our intelligence or our aspirations. Though we have lost nineteen by death, we have gradually grown into a congregation, into a testimony, into an influence, more than local.

As a congregation we are entirely independent, but we find ourselves in sympathy of opinion and fundamental principle with many congregations which, in our own country and in various parts of Europe and America, under the name of Unitarian, Free Christian, Liberal Christian, Liberal Protestant, Theistic, and other titles, proclaim the supremacy of reason and conscience, and yet maintain themselves in the line of historic religious development. We are in religious sympathy with all who anywhere trust in God; we are in moral sympathy with all who anywhere strive to learn and to realise in act the moral laws existing behind the visible; we are in human sympathy with all men everywhere; we are in spiritual sympathy with all Nature, for all Nature is full of God, though Nature is not God, but the garment of God.

Although we possess our congregational government, committee, and officers, our classes for the young, our library, our means for intelligent discussion and kindly intercourse, we, in accordance with our principle of individualism in collective humanity, throw ourselves into the general human and civic life in matters charitable, political, recreative, literary,

educational, local, national. In all these interests we find ourselves continually meeting, not necessarily to agree with one another as a clique having small sectional sympathies, but cordially and heartily entering as individuals into the general interests. Humanity is *our* church, and wherever we find men we find the members of our church. This religious society is like a spiritual sub-committee to help on the general religious and moral interests of the great fraternity of humanity.

As a religious society, in this town, we are only five years old; but our sympathies have been sought and imparted here and there widely over the country in many places. We have been asked to assist in the government of the associations which concern themselves with the interests of all those liberal churches which seek sympathy, help, or encouragement. We have specially helped to found a society in London, wherein all the sections of liberal religious thought find a social bond. Such facts as these prove that our religious position is not one of isolation and eccentricity, but in harmony with the higher religious thought of our country. I say "we" when I speak not merely of what you have directly conducted and presided over, but as regarding what has fallen to my lot to do; for such has been accomplished in consequence of your co-operation and sympathy. I am almost ashamed to own to the extent of the injury received into the life of a sincere and consistent Roman Catholic. Actual faults in the ordinary sense of the word may be very few; he may obtain any amount of patience, gentleness, purity, submission, passive resistance, and power of endurance. But the power of self-help out of prescribed limits is perceptibly crippled. The Roman Catholic system is unceasingly occupied with seeking consolation and imparting it. Affectionate sympathy is encouraged

till it becomes at once a weakness and a necessity. Jesus the Man of Sorrows, Christ the Consoler, the Mater Dolorosa, and the Virgin Mother are fit symbols of a system which promotes tenderness and depreciates self-reliance. The more that a Roman Catholic realises his religion, so much the more does the conception of life become dreary; it is a vale of tears; the sweet sunshine cannot be trusted; the loveliness of the landscape is a delusion; the conscience has only two offices, *i.e.*, to obey and to repress. Thus I was almost of necessity compelled to supplement myself with your corporate action. As Frothingham in another place says, the Old Faith came as a comforter, our New Faith comes as an inspirer, with industry, philosophy, art, literature, with all the regenerating thoughts of humanity, with all the vigour and vitality of the creative; the old songs of Faith have to be sung with the accompaniment of all human interests; our New Faith dreads inaction, lassitude, melancholy; it brings a brighter view of life and of man, a higher conception of God, a nobler ideal of the future, as progress out of imperfectness. The Roman Catholic Church presents to the votary Jesus stripped and scourged, weeping, downcast, and contemplative; our New Faith presents Jesus as the friend and companion of men and of sinners, the manly, outspoken reformer, the earnest enthusiast in the cause of humanity, the foe of cant and of hypocrisy, the unmasker of shams, the hero who could stand alone and do battle for the true, the righteous, and the just. The Old Faith wailed out its litanies of servile supplication; the New Faith, brave, cheerful, thoughtful, hopeful of the future because it remembers the past, likes *sentiment* in poetry, but in religion above all things *intelligence* and *reality*. The Old Faith appealed to prophecy, to miracles, to authoritative books and authoritative churches; the New Faith

appeals to the prophetic instincts of the human soul, to the miracle of the universe, to every noble and righteous utterance which the human reason or human conscience has ever recognised as religious, inspiring, and good. The New Faith has not to defend itself against history, science, and philosophy, they are its natural allies. The New Faith has not to condemn humanity, for it is the expression of humanity in its highest, most thoughtful, and noblest mood. The New Faith does not go about cautiously and girt with a panoply of defence; it can afford to lay aside its armour, to throw its weapons down, to go forth with upright confidence, and consort peacefully with thoughtful people, feeling secure in the honest sympathy of all intelligent, sincere, earnest, and liberal men. The Old Faith had creeds received upon authority; the New Faith goes forth with convictions profound, because they have been forged in the fiery furnace of the heart, and approved by the science, by the reason, by the conscience, by the intuitions of mankind.

Accustomed as I had been to the simple-hearted, straightforward honesty of the Old English Roman Catholics, accustomed as I had been to admire similar characteristics amongst Unitarians, nothing shocked me so much at the very beginning of my new life, and since, as the discovery that such honesty was not deemed by all a virtue, but rather a reproach. I found in London and elsewhere fathers disbelieving the popular mythology, and yet rearing their children to its practice. I found here and there persons professing our religious opinions, yet too indolent, or too cowardly, or too inconstant to testify to them. I had no sooner left the Roman Catholic Church because I could not accept its creeds (they had disappeared in the quicksands on which rested their foundations), but I was solicited to embrace the very same creeds

and liturgy in the Church of England; and, to my amazement and indignation, the very persons who urged upon me that unrighteous suggestion did not accept those creeds and litanies in any ordinary use of language, but only by some quibble of speech such as I had always spurned when to a slighter degree (according to popular rumour) permitted by the Jesuits. I realised more than ever the necessity of *above all things, sincerity*. If I reject hell as an impiety, I cannot belong to a Church which declares that persons who disbelieve the Trinity and the Incarnation must go into hell's everlasting fires. Veracity is essential to true piety; veracity is founded on faith in man. You tell a man the truth when you can trust him with it, and are not afraid. As Professor Clifford says, it is not English to tell a man a lie, or to suggest a lie by your silence or by your actions because you are afraid he is not prepared for the truth, because you do not quite know what he will do when he knows it, because perhaps after all this lie is a better thing for him than the truth would be. Surely this craven crookedness should be the object of our detestation. Yet do I often hear it whispered that it would be dangerous to divulge certain truths to the masses. I know the thing is untrue; but in a certain sense, after a fashion, it may be made to be considered true; anyhow it is picturesque, consoling, and useful for children, for women, for common people. "Crooked ways are none the less crooked because they are meant to deceive a great many. If a thing is true, let us all believe it: rich and poor—men, women, and children. If a thing is untrue, let us all disbelieve it: rich and poor—men, women, and children. Truth is a thing to be shouted from the house-tops, not to be whispered after dinner, over rose-water, when the ladies are gone away." Life must first of all be made straight and true; falsehood

can never be necessary to morality or to *true* piety. "It cannot be true of our neighbours, or of their children, that to keep them from becoming scoundrels they must believe a lie, or make pretence to believe it." The sense of right and wrong—piety to God and piety to man—such truths are too real to need the doubtful help of insincerities and of mystification.

Thus, whatever errors we unhappily make, we will at least be truthful, and not mystify away that human trust without which society would be an impossibility, business a fraud, the family a cabal—each individual man, woman, and child a hypocrite or an imbecile.

