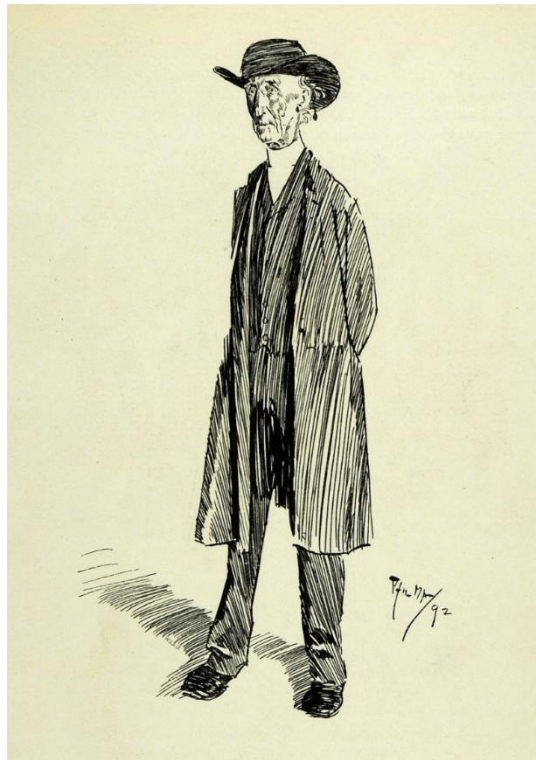


A CHRISTIAN

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One day this summer, after a luncheon party, I came away with an old college friend. It is always exciting to meet those one hasn't seen for years; and as we walked across the park together I kept looking at him askance. He had altered a good deal. Lean he always was, but now very lean, and so upright that his parson's coat was overhung by the back of his long and narrow head, with its dark grizzled hair which thought had not yet loosened on his forehead. His clean-shorn face, so thin and oblong, was remarkable only for the eyes: dark-browed and lashed, and coloured like bright steel, they had a fixity in them, a sort of absence, on one couldn't tell what business. They made one think of torture. And his mouth always gently smiling, as if its pinched curly sweetness had been commanded, was the mouth of a man crucified — yes, crucified!

Tramping silently over the parched grass, I felt that, if we talked, we must infallibly disagree; his straight-up, narrow forehead so suggested a nature divided within itself into compartments of iron.

It was hot that day, and we rested presently beside the Serpentine. On its bright waters were the usual young men, sculling themselves to and fro with their usual sad energy, the usual promenaders loitering and watching them, the usual dog that swam when it did not bark, and barked when it did not swim; and my friend sat smiling, twisting between his thin fingers the little gold cross on his silk vest.

Then all of a sudden we did begin to talk; and not of those matters of which the well-bred naturally converse, — the habits of the rarer kinds of ducks, and the careers of our college friends, but of something not mentioned in polite society.

At lunch our hostess had told me the strange sad story of an unhappy marriage, and I itched spiritually to find out what my friend, who seemed so far away from me, felt about such things. And now I determined to find out.

"Tell me," I asked him, "which do you consider most important — the letter or the spirit of Christ's teaching?"

"My dear fellow," he answered gently, "what a question! How can you separate them?"

"Well, is it not the essence of His doctrine that the spirit is all important, and forms of little value? Does not that run through all the Sermon on the Mount?"

"Certainly."

"If, then," I said, "Christ's teaching is concerned with the spirit, do you consider that Christians are justified in holding others bound by formal rules of conduct, without reference to what is passing in their spirits?"

“If it is for their good.”

“What enables you to decide what is for their good?”

“Surely, we are told.”

“Not to judge, that ye be not judged.”

“Oh! But we do not, ourselves, judge; we are but impersonal ministers of the rules of God.”

“Ah! Do general rules of conduct take account of the variations of the individual spirit?”

He looked at me hard, as if he scented heresy.

“You had better explain yourself more fully,” he said “I really don’t follow.”

“Well, let us take a concrete instance. We know Christ’s saying of the married that they are one flesh! But we know also that there are wives who continue to live the married life with dreadful feelings of revolt — wives who have found out that, in spite of all their efforts, they have no spiritual affinity with their husbands. Is that in accordance with the spirit of Christ’s teaching, or is it not?”

“We are told —” he began.

‘I have admitted the definite commandment, ‘They twain shall be one flesh.’ There could not be, seemingly, any more rigid law laid down; how do you reconcile it with the essence of Christ’s teaching? Frankly, I want to know: Is there or is there not a spiritual coherence in Christianity, or is it only a gathering of laws and precepts, with no inherent connected spiritual philosophy?’

“Of course,” he said, in his long-suffering voice, “we don’t look at things like that — for us there is no questioning.”

“But how *do* you reconcile such marriages as I speak of, with the spirit of Christ’s teaching? I think you ought to answer me.”

“Oh! I can, perfectly,” he answered; “the reconciliation is through suffering. What a poor woman in such a case must suffer, makes for the salvation of her spirit. That is the spiritual fulfilment, and in such a case the justification of the law.”

“So, then,” I said, “sacrifice or suffering is the coherent thread of Christian philosophy?”

“Suffering cheerfully borne,” he answered.

“You do not think,” I said, “that there is a touch of extravagance in that? Would you say, for example, that an unhappy marriage is a more Christian thing than a happy one, where there is no suffering, but only love?”

A line came between his brows. “Well!” he said at last, “I would say, I think, that a woman who crucifies her flesh with a cheerful spirit in obedience to God’s law, stands higher in the eyes of God than one who undergoes no such sacrifice in her married life.” And I had the feeling that his stare was passing through me, on its way to an unseen goal.

“You would desire, then, I suppose, suffering as the greatest blessing for yourself?”

“Humbly,” he said, “I would try to.”

“And naturally, for others?”

“God forbid!”

“But surely that is inconsistent.”

He murmured: “*You see, I have suffered.*”

We were silent for some time. At last I said: “Yes, that makes much which was dark quite clear to me.”

“Oh?” he asked.

I answered slowly: “Not many men, you know, even in your profession, have really suffered. That is why they do not feel the difficulty which *you* feel in desiring suffering for others.”

He threw up his head as if I had hit him on the jaw. “It’s weakness in me, I know,” he said.

“I should have rather called it weakness in them. But, suppose you are right, and that it’s weakness not to be able to desire promiscuous suffering for others, would you go further and say that it is Christian for those who have not experienced a certain kind of suffering, to force that particular kind on others?”

He sat silent for a full minute, trying evidently to reach to the bottom of my thought.

“Surely not,” he said at last, “except as ministers of God’s laws.”

“You do not then think that it is Christian for the husband of such a woman to keep her in that state of suffering — not being, of course, a minister of God?”

He began stammering at that: “I — I —” he said. “No; that is, I think not — not Christian. No, certainly.”

“Then, such a marriage, if persisted in, makes of the wife indeed a Christian, but of the husband — the reverse.”

“The answer to that is clear,” he said quietly: “the husband must abstain.”

“Yes, that is perhaps coherently Christian, on your theory: they would then both suffer. But the marriage of course has become no marriage. They are no longer one flesh.”

He looked at me almost impatiently, as if to say: do not compel me to enforce silence on you!

“But suppose,” I went on, “and this, you know, is the more frequent case, the man refuses to abstain. Would you then say it was more Christian to allow him to become daily less Christian through his unchristian conduct, than to relieve the woman of her suffering, at the expense of the spiritual benefit she thence derives? Why, in fact do you favour one case more than the other?”

“All question of relief,” he replied, “is a matter for Caesar; it cannot concern me.”

There had come into his face a rigidity — as if I might hit it with my questions till my tongue was tired, and it would be no more moved than the bench on which we were sitting.

“One more question,” I said, “and I have done. Since the Christian teaching is concerned with the spirit and not forms, and the thread in it which binds all together and makes it coherent is that of suffering —”

“Redemption by suffering,” he put in.

“If you will — in one word, self-crucifixion — I must ask you, and don’t take it personally, because of what you told me of yourself: In life generally, one does not accept from people any teaching that is not the result of first-hand experience on their parts. Do you believe that this Christian teaching of yours is valid, from the mouths of those who have not themselves suffered — who have not themselves, as it were, been crucified?”

He did not answer for a minute; then he said with painful slowness, “Christ laid hands on his apostles and sent them forth; and they in turn, and so on, to our day.”

“Do you say, then, that this guarantees that they have themselves suffered, so that in spirit they are identified with their teaching?”

He answered bravely: “No — I do not — I cannot say that in fact it always is so.”

“Is not then their teaching born of forms, and not of the spirit?”

He rose, and with a sort of deep sorrow at my stubbornness, said, “We are not permitted to know the way of this; it is so ordained; we must have faith.”

As he stood there, turned from me, with his hat off and his neck painfully flushed under the sharp outcurve of his dark head, a feeling of pity surged up in me, as if I had taken an unfair advantage.

“Reason — coherence — philosophy,” he said suddenly. “You don’t understand. All that is nothing to me — nothing — nothing!”