

Bohemian Evening, No. 1.

By C. Elton Blanchard.

In a very large city, in which it is said that the native Americans number but twenty per cent of the population, large districts are occupied almost entirely by the Bohemians. Strange as it may seem, it is however the truth, that a large number of these young men and women have withdrawn from the Catholic church. Among this number are three young men; educated in the public schools of this city, they were far better prepared to take such a position than their parents had been or could be.

In the same city resides a man of learning, a physician by profession, but who gave up most of his time to speculations in philosophy, scientific research and economic study. He is known about the city as "Old Doctor Brown," yet his white hair and energetic manner inspires both respect and interest wherever he goes. In some manner the young men found him out. It may have been at a lecture before some learned body, but it matters not how the introduction occurred. Touched by their kindly and respectful interest, and thinking that through them he might do good to the people from whom they came, he invited the three boys to spend an evening with him in his study. This meeting was followed by others, and it is my purpose to give the readers of the TORCH OF REASON a condensed report of these meetings, which the old doctor has named his "Bohemian Evenings."

It had been agreed that each of the boys should bring with him, written on paper, one question regarding religion that most troubled him, and which seemed a stumbling block for travellers along the road of Freethought. I will, with these few words of explanation, give my report in the form of a dialogue:

The Old Doctor: "Well, boys, I am very glad to see you tonight. We will not stop for preliminaries. Mr. Votipka have you your question written out?"

Mr. Votipka: "Yes, Doctor, but Urbsky and Palivec have their's also. I hardly like to be first."

Dr. Brown: "Never mind that; let us have yours."

Mr. Votipka: "Very well, here it is: 'Is suicide, which seems to be increasing, a result of the tendency towards Freethinking, or what Christians call Infidelity?' Or, to put it another way: 'Does Christianity sustain people and keep them from acts of desperation into which the evils of this life sometimes throw us?'"

Dr. Brown: (Thrusting his hands through his silvery hair and thinking intently a moment.) "I fully appreciate the greatness of your question and I hesitate to answer it in an off-hand and brief way. Only today a friend told me of a poor fellow, a tailor by trade, who

had been discharged from one place and another until he was fully discouraged. Hope seemed dead, and when hope is gone the man is in a sorry plight. This man went home, looked into the faces of his loving wife and children, said 'I would rather be in hell than in this cruel world,' went to the attic and there put a bullet through his brain. This man was said to be a backslider from the church. I understand that some of the ministers learned of the incident and used the case as an awe-inspiring illustration of the fate of backsliders. Before we undertake to ascertain what might be called the psychological side of suicide, let us remember that we are said to be living under a Christian civilization. It matters not what the system, the laws of nature are fully active. Food, clothing and shelter must be secured in some way. Some other time I would like to discuss this Christian civilization under which we live, but now we cannot stop. If in the working of the present system the food and clothing is hard to find, and the struggle becomes so desperate that only the strong succeed and the weak go in want, it is very natural for men, especially those who cannot see into the complex science of economics, to despair. I might say as a passing comment that preachers invent all manner of schemes to make the people submit and keep quiet in their hardships. Rev. Malthus proposed a great theory, and it was widely advocated by the aristocrat classes of England and Europe, that the world had too many people anyway; that war and famine, pestilence and disaster are blessings, because they rid the world of an undesirable surplus. If this be true, what fault can the Church find with the poor fellow who cannot wait to be shot in wars, and blows his own brains out? Let us take a broad look at this subject. What is good and what is evil? A man needs but a little food each day, a little clothing during his lifetime, and for a few short decades a shelter to call a home. The earth is ever ready to support many millions more in human life than ever existed upon its islands and continents. Freethought says to men, 'obey law.' If you are cold, get warm; build a fire, make yourself clothing. If you are sick, try to know the cause of your sickness and remove it. If you are poor, work hard, work intelligently, study science and know these laws that will enable you to escape the ills of life. Pain is our greatest blessing. It is our guide and protector. Experience, aided with reason, will show you how to live on the best of terms with ill, by escaping it. Freethought says, make the most of life. Obeying law brings its own reward. To be happy obey law. Law is eternal and immutable; no offense is forgiven."

Mr. Palivec: "Excuse my interrupting, but don't the Christian

people try to make the most of life? Don't they teach the same ideas regarding material things?"

Dr. Brown: "Yes, in a measure. But the true philosophy of Christianity says, 'this world is bad. We are here to be tried. We should bear our ills, for over yonder all will be joy and peace. If we are poor, in heaven we have treasures laid up for us. If we are sick, it may be to test us to see if we are worthy of the life to come.' Such a view of life founds nunneries and other institutions which retard the progress of men. No one would commit suicide who fully appreciated the value of this life. It is usually the one who still clings to the hope of eternal bliss, or the other dogmas of the church, that gives up and takes his own life. I do not charge suicide as the result of the modern church teaching, but I fear that it is a result of the original philosophy of Christianity. There are certainly many precedents among the early Christians to fix the suicide notion in the mind of man."

Mr. Urbsky: "Is suicide increasing, Doctor?"

Dr. Brown: "We cannot know, for a certainty. The sensational press now hunt the world over for these bits of news. If indeed it be true that more people take from themselves the only thing of value they have—their lives—in later years than formerly, I would rather expect to find the cause in the evils of our Christian system of competitive production, which robs the many to enrich the few. Even Jesus Christ was in despair upon this point, for he said, the bible claims, 'the poor ye have with ye always.' Let all men have a chance to maintain themselves; let them know their children will have the same opportunities. Let their labor bring a reasonable degree of comfort, as to food, clothing and shelter, and suicides will be rare. What few that do occur will probably be confined to those desperate Christians who are in haste to get into the bliss of the celestial city. Have you other questions? Yours, Mr. Palivec."

Mr. Palivec: "I fear my question will be quite removed from that already in our minds. I have written: 'What do we really know about the bible, as to its origin and history?'"

Dr. Brown: "That will require a separate evening, and I wish to look up a little data for you before answering it. I prefer to wait until I can give you correct dates and exact statements. What is your question, Mr. Urbsky?"

Mr. Urbsky: "I fear I have equally as important a question. It is: 'What do people mean by soul? When they say, is your soul saved, what do they mean? Is there any evidence of spirit life?'"

Dr. Brown: "Well, you boys have struck the hardest questions of religious philosophy and history. Let me have the next evening for the bible and the one following for the soul. Bring any number of fellows you wish, and I will try to be better prepared for you."

(The party breaks up with pleasant conversation and leave-takings, and the old doctor sits again alone in his study. He muses over the incident, but cannot give up his belief that mankind is now strong enough to be free.)

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