

For the Torch of Reason.

## ONE BOY'S EXPERIENCE.

## A True Story.

BY GEORGE RYAN.

As a boy I believed implicitly in the infallibility of the Bible and in the goodness and mercy of God. I stood in awe of the parson, and for a long time I believed that he was in direct communication with the Almighty and held the fate of the neighborhood in his hand. As time wore on and I began to take notice of things and reason a little, a suspicion crept into my mind that things were not exactly as he represented.

Little by little I discovered discrepancies in his stories, those little anecdotes that pulpiteers are in the habit of telling to illustrate a pointless argument; they did not amount to much individually, but collectively they were enough to create a fair sized doubt in my mind concerning either his veracity or memory, and as I grew, the doubt followed suit, until it had outgrown me, two to one.

In the meantime the parson's son and I had become chums, and from observing his easy familiarity with things sacred and religious, I soon lost all fear of the parson, especially when parson, jr., confided such ecclesiastical secrets to me as that his "old man" worked nearly the whole week writing, copying from books and papers and memorizing his Sunday sermon, and that he had never held any communication with the Almighty any more than my "old man" had. He also told me in the strictest confidence that the "old man" made him weary with his "old guff" about heaven and hell, and the only difference between ministers and other business men was that the ministers lied twice as much for half the money, or words to that effect. I have since come to the conclusion that parson, jr., was an exceptionally bright boy.

Now that I had become enlightened regarding the man, I began to be a trifle suspicious about the book, and started out on a sort of still hunt for some one capable of enlightening me on that point. I met quite a number that did not believe in all the ghost, fish, snake and Balaam's ass stories, but at the same time did not feel safe in disbelieving the authenticity of the whole book. The ideas derived from these kind of people and the contradictions and inconsistencies I had discovered in the little examination I had given the book, convinced me that I was on the right track anyhow, and the habit of asking such questions as "Who was Cain's wife?" "Is the earth flat and has it four corners, as the Bible states?" "Did not God establish polygamy, slavery and cannibalism, and is either one of these cus-

toms right?" developed to such a degree that I became a family nuisance and was denounced as a very "fresh kid." My opponents took the ground that a boy of my age had no right to investigate, and even if I did find mistakes in the Bible I had no right to ridicule them, as they were holy. That must have made Gabriel roar.

About this time I paid a visit to my grandparents, a sanctified old couple, in the northern part of Illinois. There I became acquainted with my evil genius, a young minister named Brown, and I am under the impression that he is identical with the San Francisco parson of Mattie Overman fame. By the way, how is it that there is such a host of Browns doing such yeoman service in the army of the Lord? Witness the Rev. C. O., San Francisco; Rev. T. J., late chaplain of the Wisconsin state prison, accused of stealing convicts' money; Rev. Samuel F., St. Louis, arrested for adultery and attempting to poison his wife, and several other Browns that I have read of but can't place just at present.

I am wandering from the subject. To return, this Brown, that I have to do with, was apparently an honest(?) earnest(?) Christian worker, doing his utmost to convert the world to his way of thinking, believing, in fact knowing that his way was the right way and that all other roads led to hell. In some manner he learned that I was inclined to be a scoffer, and thinking perhaps he could gain a point on satan, he forthwith presented himself to me in his role of sky pilot.

He first took soundings and, as I was not a bit backward in putting forth my little stock of questions, he soon had my depth. I suppose he fairly gloated over his prospective victory. He was an oily tongued "Holy Joe from the old house," and the ease with which he disposed of my stock of goods was horrible. How he did explain this, that and the other away, and interpret! Why, he could interpret the wolfish snarls of the anthropophagi over their periodical feast and translate it into a nightingale's love song.

He would bring up a bunch of so called facts to offset one contradiction, and then go back and dig up some old prophecy to prove that the one inconsistency was absolutely necessary in the scheme of salvation. He so turned and twisted words, verses and chapters that I was soon placed hors de combat, and he then sermonized for an hour or so, and finally left me with the parting shot: "Think! just think of the consequences of your unbelief. I will see you again soon."

I did think, too. "Here, old boy," I said to myself. "you are about to get into trouble if you don't quit doubting and making fun of His book," or something like

that. I actually repeated the Lord's prayer several times, in the vain hope that it might offset any remark I may have made derogatory to His character.

Parson Brown, and I can't disassociate him from the Rev. C. O., came around the following Sunday, but, owing to the fright he gave me on his previous visit, I made myself scarce for the time being. He was hot on my trail, though, and made arrangements to have me attend prayer meeting Wednesday evening with the old folks. On receiving this announcement, my thinker was again put in motion, and I began figuring on my chances with Him and the parson, but the proposition was too strong for me. I knew that I could expect little or no sympathy or help from the old folks, as they had cited several cases of heavenly retribution for blasphemy and had often predicted the gallows, at least, for me, if I did not make a radical change in my mode of thought, but this fact did not cause them any special uneasiness; they would have been perfectly satisfied if I had only conformed outwardly to the village customs.

Once I asked grandfather if he didn't feel sorry when he thought of how I was doomed to everlasting fire and brimstone. He replied, with a beautiful smile, that was my lookout, not his; salvation was free and if I did not see fit to accept, it was my own fault—surely he himself had often warned me.

This jolly old couple used to lead in prayer and eloquently exhort at the Wednesday night prayer meetings, and always touched with peculiar modesty upon the fact that they themselves were without sin. They held their condition quite as a matter of course, so can not be accused of an overweening egotism. They were confident that for themselves there was a paradise of unending bliss in the world to come, and were equally certain that most other folks were going to perdition; still they claimed to be happy.

So for want of a better confidant, I told my troubles, past, present and future to an old fellow that used to go around with a barrel on wheels, gathering swill for his pigs. The village gossips called him eccentric, slightly demented, foolish, crazy, anti-Christ and infidel, according to their capacity for recognizing right thinking and right living. The old gentleman, whose name was Patton, was a veritable Klondike for sympathy and encouragement. Ditto on Bible myths, church history, evolution, etc.

He told me about the council of priests, held for the purpose of determining which of the many Bibles, then in existence, was the true word of God. How their arguments waxed so warm that one delegate

was killed and several wounded, and they finally settled matters by casting votes, as men do nowadays at church fairs for the purpose of electing the most popular or beautiful young lady in the parish. Just think of it! a dozen or more bibles, and men actually casting votes to determine which of those books was the inspired word of God!

Such things as that ought to convince any one with a thimbleful of brains that man made God and the Bible instead of God making man and the Bible; but there are very few Christians that ever heard of such a council. I have generally found infidels better posted on the Bible and church history than Christians. Perhaps that is what makes them infidels.

The old gentleman talked clear and plain, and his statements were self evident truths, which only needed his simple language for me to recognize them as such. His ideas appealed to my reason, while the parson's preyed on my fears, consequently I was more than willing to shake the parson, which I did—but of that, later on.

He quoted Thomas Paine: "Any system of religion that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system"; "No man ought to make a living by religion"; "One person cannot act religion for another—every person must act for himself". From his own experience he said, "Religion must be regarded, not as a speculative moral supposition, but as a real moral problem, a thing to be enacted in every day society, and not necessarily, not wisely, not safely compromised with theological dogmas, church rules, discipline or observance of any formulated belief in things mysterious, mythical, speculative or at all outside of the practical obligations of life. All these should be discarded as non-essential, divisive and injurious, and only that accepted which actually bonds the intelligence and affections to the whole human family, to treat them all according to their just demands. There exists in human nature those powers of instinct, reason, sentiment and emotion which are the sources of purity and truth, and these are:

"1. Approval of what is true and just, pure and good.

"2. Delight in what is beautiful and lovely.

"3. Disapproval of what is false and unjust, ugly and evil.

"4. A sense of gratitude for favors bestowed.

"5. A sense of compassion for suffering.

"6. A sense of guilt for failure to cherish and execute any of these inborn sentiments or for any other wrong doing.

These are the increased constitutional endowments of human nature, and to cultivate and utilize