

THE PLYMOUTH BRETHREN

The religious movement which obtained this name through the sudden and enormous success of an evangelistic crusade at Plymouth in its early days was started in Ireland.

It was an aristocratic and intellectual movement. John Nelson Darby, a learned man of good family, reasoned thus :

The Bible is the Word of God.

If its literal interpretation is once abandoned, the whole structure crashes to earth.

This it will be seen is identically the Catholic position, save that for "literal" Rome reads "Ecclesiastical." Darby, too, found himself forced into the practical admission that "literal" meant Darbeian; for some of the more obvious contradictions and absurdities in the Bible are too necessary to the practical side of religion to be ignored.

Seeing this, they devised an elaborate system of mental water-tight compartments. The contradictions of Old and New Testament were solved by a Doctrine that what was sauce for the Jewish "Dispensation" was not necessarily sauce for the Christian "Dispensation." Cleverer than Luther, they made possible the Epistle of James by a series of sophisms which really deserve to be exposed as masterpieces of human self-deception. My space forbids.

So, despite all the simplicity of the original logical position, they were found shifting as best they might from compromise to compromise. But this they never saw themselves; and so far did

they take their principle that my father would refuse to buy railway shares because railways were not mentioned in the Bible! Of course the practice of finding a text for everything means ultimately "I will do as I like", and I suspect my father's heroics only meant that he thought a slump was coming.

Their attitude to human reason, too, was simply wonderful.

Some Wicked Man would point out that the Jonah story was contrary to our experience of possibility.

THE P. B.—The word is not "whale" in the Hebrew: it probably means "dog-shark."

(This "solution" is actually printed in a book of the liar and slanderer Torrey).

THE W. M.—Our experience of dog-sharks tells us—

THE P. B.—What, after all, is human reason?

To the Greeks foolishness, etc. The wisdom of man is foolishness, etc. We must have faith.

THE W. M.—In men?

THE P. B.—Never. In God!

THE W. M.—But you believe in the Bible?

THE P. B.—Every word of it, thank God!

THE W. M.—In the Protestant or the Catholic Bible?

The Bible was written by men, translated by men, criticised by scholars again and again. You accept all the criticisms up to 1611 and reject all later. Why?

THE P. B.—There is a place prepared for the devil and his angels to which you (my poor dear brother) will most surely go! Why not simply accept Christ as your Saviour and Lord? (Then he gets started; and the rest must be heard to be believed).

So—is it a type of all logic?—their simple Yea and Nay became more casuistical than Dens or Escobar, and their strict adhesion to the

Commands of the Bible became a mere loosening of the strings of conscience.

An irreligious man may have moral checks; a Plymouth Brother has none. He is always ready to excuse the vilest crimes by quoting the appropriate text, and invoking the name of Christ to cover every meanness which may delight his vain and vicious nature.

For the Plymouth Brethren were in themselves an exceptionally detestable crew. The aristocrats who began the movement were of course just aristocrats, and their curious system left them so. But they ran a form of "Early Christian" Spiritual Socialism, by having no appointed priest or minister, and they were foolish enough to favour their followers financially.

Thus Mr. Giblets—let us call him—the third-best butcher in the village found (on the one hand) that while at church he was nobody at all, and in the chapel and elder, in the little meeting in the Squire's morning-room he was no less than the minister of God and the mouthpiece of the Holy Ghost; just as on the other hand it was only natural that the orders from the Hall should come his way, and leave the first-best butcher lamenting, and the second-best bewildered. So that in my time the sect (though it is only fair to point out that they refused to be described as a sect, since what they had done was not to form a new sect, but to "come out of sect",—this they maintained in spite of the fact that they were far more exclusive than any other religious body in Europe) was composed of a few of the old guard, my father the last of them all, and the meanest crew of "canaille" that ever wriggled.

With my father's death the small schisms which had hitherto lopped off a few members every year or two were altogether surpassed by the great Raven heresy which split the body into two equal

halves, and extinguished the last sparks of its importance.

I am going beyond my subject, but I cannot refrain from telling the awful story of the Meeting at Oban.

The Meeting at Oban consisted of a Mr. Cameron and his wife and the bedridden mother of one of the two, I forget which. Now as it is written: "wheresoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" it was all very well: but two forms a quorum. Jesus will not come for less. This has never been disputed by any doctor of the Brethren. Wigram is clear on the point; if Darby had ever been clear on any point, it would have been on that; Kelly never denied it; even Stuart was sound in this matter, and Stoney himself (though reluctantly) gave his adhesion. To hold a Meeting you must have two persons present. Let nobody try to upset this; for once I positively insist. No less than two for a Meeting! I will brook no opposition; I mean to have my own way in the matter; I am not to be played with. Two or more make a Meeting. There; my foot is down, let's hear no more senseless cavil about it!

Well, I need hardly say that Mr. and Mrs. Cameron took opposite sides of the controversy. When the glad wires flashed the message that Mr. Raven in the Meeting at Ealing had deliberately said with slow and weighty emphasis: "He that hath the Son hath eternal life", Mrs. Cameron almost wept for joy. When (the message continued) Major Mc. Arthy had risen to his feet and retorted: "He that hath the Son of God hath everlasting life", Mr. Cameron executed a Highland though funereal fling.

When Mr. Raven, stung to the quick, had shaken his fist at the Major and yelled: "Brother, you're a sinful old man!" Mrs. Cameron "had always known

there was something” and invented a ruined governess. But—oh the laughter of her husband when the telegraph brought the Major’s retort “Brother, have you no sin?” Spoken with an accent of mildness which belied the purple of his face.

In short, the Meeting at Oban had split. Mr. Cameron had withdrawn from the Lord’s supper!!! It was therefore absolutely necessary for both of them to assure themselves that the bedridden mother was of their way of thinking, or neither could hold the “Morning Meeting”; though I suppose either could preach the Gospel—morosa voluptas!

Unhappily, that excellent lady was a hard case. She was quite deaf and very nearly blind; while mentally she had never been remarkable for anything beyond a not unamiable imbecility. However, there was but one thing to be done, to argue her into conviction.

They agreed to take eight-hour shifts; and for all I know, they are arguing still, and neither of the Meetings at Oban can meet!