

**THE MINISTERS' CLUB, 1870-
1899: AN HISTORICAL SKETCH
READ AT THE HOTEL BRUNSWICK
IN BOSTON, PP. 6-56**

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THE MINISTERS' CLUB.

who are among the foremost preachers of this community. Some of the Essays which have been read to us were originally designed as Lectures for college students, so that we have been kept informed of the most recent discoveries in Archæology and the latest theories and results of Biblical Criticism.

Several years ago in England there existed a club, which in some respects was similar to this, so that a description of it may properly be introduced here. It was composed of the most eminent men in various walks of life,—Scientists and Theologians, Churchmen and Unitarians, Roman Catholics and Agnostics, as well as prominent literary writers and public leaders of Great Britain. The whole number included about sixty persons, which was almost exactly the same as ours; and they met once a month, usually at a hotel, but occasionally at the house of one of the members, where, after dining together, a paper was read and afterwards was discussed by the company. The Chairman was appointed annually, but sometimes served for two years successively. The first meeting was held on April 21, 1869,—a year before this Club was formed. It was at first intended that the organization should be called the "Theological Society;" but that name was dropped and the title "Metaphysical Society" was adopted, because it was thought that under that designation all questions could be considered without restraint and from every point of view, as they would be in a scientific society. It was felt also that by such an interchange of views much might be done to remove misunderstandings and promote charity and mutual esteem.

The idea of establishing such a club was first suggested by Richard Holt Hutton, editor of the *Spectator*, who subsequently became Honorary Secretary of the Club. He offered to bring about the assembling of such a body of gentlemen, if the poet Tennyson and Rev. Charles Pritchard,—Savilian Professor of

Astronomy, — who were guests in his house at the time, would belong to it. He then consulted other friends, beginning with Dean Stanley, Dean Alford, Archbishop (afterward Cardinal) Manning, Rev. James Martineau, the Bishop of Gloucester and Bristol, and Dr. Ward of the *Dublin Review*. He next went to "the opposition," and, explaining the plan, found Professors Huxley and Tyndall, Walter Bagehot, editor of the *Economist*, and others, equally ready to co-operate. Afterwards there were added to the list of members the names of Gladstone, the Duke of Argyll, the Bishop of St. David, the Archbishop of York, the Bishop of Peterborough, Dr. William B. Carpenter, Frederic Harrison, Lord Selborne, Professor Clifford, Father Dalgairns, Sir James Stephen, the Dean of St. Paul's, Professor Maurice, Professor Seeley, John Morley, George Grove, Rev. Dr. Mozley, St. George Mivart, Professor Henry Sidgwick, William R. Greg, Frederick Pollock, and many more. At the outset it was regarded as doubtful how long an association containing such discordant and contradictory elements could subsist; and Froude declared that if they "hung together" for twelve months it would be one of the remarkable facts in history. At one of the early meetings, Tennyson said that modern science ought at least to have taught one thing, — how to separate light from heat. The Society acted on this principle, and continued in entire harmony for nearly twelve years; and it came to an end — according to the statement of its founder — because there seemed little to be said which had not already been repeated more than once. The last meeting was held at the house of Dr. Martineau, on May 16, 1880.

Among the subjects considered by this Society were the following: —

Is God unknowable?

The Personality of God.

The Theory of a Soul.

Has a Frog a Soul ?

The Soul before and after Death.

Can Experience prove the Uniformity of Nature ?

The words Nature, Natural, and Supernatural.

The Authority of Miracle.

The Evidence of the Miracle of the Resurrection.

Will and Responsibility.

The Nature of the Moral Principle.

What is a Lie ?

The Ethics of Belief.

What is Matter ?

Matter and Force.

The Nature of Things in Themselves.

The Absolute.

The Arguments for a Future Life.

Hospitals for Incurables from a Moral Point of View.

Double Truth.

It must have been a rare privilege to have been present at these high debates, when Martineau measured swords with Huxley, and Tennyson read a poem on "The Higher Pantheism," and Ruskin declared, "If a second Joshua to-morrow commanded the sun to stand still, and it obeyed him, and he therefore claimed deference as a miracle-worker, I am afraid I should answer, 'What! a miracle that the sun stands still? Not at all. I was always expecting it would. The only wonder to me was its going on.'" One of the company expressed the wish that they all would sink their differences and pull together for the bettering of the world; while another declared that he was glad of an endeavor in the churches to march side by side with science, and bring their teaching into living relation with the movement of modern thought. A student who attended the lectures of Martineau has related an incident which took place at Manchester New College, which then was located in London. One day, he

said, a bearded stranger, clad in a big felt hat and long black cloak, mounted the steps of University Hall, and asked if Dr. Martineau was there. Receiving the answer that he was, but was engaged with a class, he proceeded, to the amazement of all, to interrupt that class, and, instead of being rebuked for his audacity, actually carried off the Principal a good quarter of an hour before the time was up. It soon dawned upon them that the visitor was none other than Alfred Tennyson; and they afterwards learned that he came to fetch Martineau to a special meeting of the Metaphysical Society. So they concluded that under these circumstances his conduct might be condoned, yet with a distinct feeling that such a breach of rules required much for its justification.

Some of the topics brought before the Metaphysical Society were taken up by ours, showing that there was an interest in the same themes on both sides of the Atlantic. Our range of subjects, however, has been much wider, covering almost the whole field of a minister's study and work. It has embraced history, biography, literature, philosophy, and has included ethics, dogmatics, exegesis, social science, as well as matters of direct practical importance. This has given variety and freshness to our discussions, so that the interest in them has not flagged, as otherwise it might have done; and although this Club has lived more than twice as long as its English contemporary, it is to-day as vigorous and flourishing as ever.

Our association has won the attachment and regard of all who have belonged to it. This is evident from the spontaneous utterances which have been made by one and another from time to time; and it is manifest also from the expressions of those who have been obliged by urgent reasons to sever their connection with it, or temporarily to be detained from it. Dr. Andrew P. Peabody, who seldom failed in his attendance, wrote: "Absence

from our monthly gathering always leaves a felt blank and void in the month's life." Dr. Frederick Courtney, who was called to the Bishopric of Nova Scotia, wrote: "It is with no small regret that I tender my resignation, and know that I shall no more enjoy the intercourse which has consciously enriched my life. With every kind greeting to the members and best wishes for the prosperity of the Club," etc. Rev. William Lawrence, on becoming Bishop of Massachusetts, said: "I find myself driven to write you, resigning my position as member of the Club. I do so with great reluctance, but the added duties of the past year have compelled me to draw in my lines in several directions. It is needless to add how grateful I am to the Club for the privilege of these years of membership, and the many pleasant evenings of Christian conversation together. The spirit of Unity and Charity in diversity is a glimpse of heaven which I am loath to lose." The venerable Dr. J. H. Morison thus wrote: "I am constrained by advancing years to give up the privilege of being any longer a member of the Minister's Club. I have never belonged to any association which has been to me the source of more unalloyed satisfaction and enjoyment." In almost the same words a Presbyterian brother repeated the remark of the Unitarian above quoted: "I have never belonged to another clerical circle whose meetings I enjoyed so much." One of our number, who had accepted a call to a Congregational church in a distant city, declared: "This removal unsolders the goodliest fellowship of its kind I have ever known or expect to know on earth, and the loss of which is among my heaviest deprivations in moving to the Northwest. Thanks to you all for all you have been to me." Dr. A. J. Gordon, a leading Baptist minister in Boston, wrote: "Owing to my constant inability to be at the meetings of the Club, I must withdraw from its membership. I cannot take leave of the brethren without the heartiest expressions of good-will and esteem to them all, and an earnest desire for the continued

prosperity of this ministerial circle." Another, who was one of the early members, sent the following letter:—

I beg you to believe that it pains me to withdraw; but I am compelled to make the sacrifice by the fact that my professional duties are increasing rather than diminishing. Besides, having enjoyed the privilege of membership for so many years, I feel that I ought to yield my place as an Episcopalian to some younger man. I shall still think of all the members as friends, from association with whom I have derived inestimable benefit. In resigning my place in their monthly meetings I shall keep a vivid memory of the sweet and Christian temper which has characterized the discussions, and which has been to me an education in the true spirit of free thinking and free expression; and delightful recollection too of the sympathetic social intercourse enjoyed in the meetings.

An honored Universalist associate, who contemplated the necessity of leaving our body in consequence of ill health, wrote: "It costs me a good deal to say that I must give up the Club, that has been so much to me all these years; but I see that it is best for me to give place for some new man, who will attend the meetings and do his part in word and work. My membership goes back to the early days; and there will always be with me the memory of a noble fellowship, and in all the days to come it will be good to name the names of those I have known so well and loved so much."

At the time of the formation of our Fraternity there was not that generous feeling between religious societies which prevails now. Broad-minded and catholic individuals were indeed to be found in all places. But the spirit of Sectarianism was rife, and an individual who was known to be a dissenter from the approved standards was regarded with disfavor and was made to feel that he was under the ban. Christians of opposite tendencies and tenets did not meet as often as they do to-day. Ten years before this Club was started, its existence would have been im-