

TABLE TALK

II

In my former paper I criticized and compared two plays, each of which sought in its own way to solve one bitter problem of life—what the ordinary man would be likely to do if given a chance to live again his life. The first of the two about which I have forgotten everything except its plot, denied absolutely, as I remember, that a man would be greatly different, no matter how many chances he had. The second play, by Barrie, attempted to prove that a man of good character, in misfortune through some fault of his own, might conceivably correct his error, and make a success of life, if he were given this glorious chance. As I declared in that paper, I believe that Barrie is wrong, and that the author of the first play is right, no matter to what extreme his conclusions may be forced. I promised then that I should give my reasons for so believing; and I now give them.

As you remember, we dealt with men only. In our discussion of those to whom this chance of remaking life was to be given, we took account only of persons whose character had been shaped, who were no longer youths. A boy, of course, has not yet lived. No matter how great his joys or painful his sorrows, he has not yet lost all opportunity of shaping his destiny. It is when the boy has become the man that his soul has received a definite impression, lasting and almost unchangeable. It would be folly, then, for us to consider the boy as one to whom the chance of remaking life might be given; he is still fashioning his first and truest life; and has in his hands the power of rectifying any and all errors that he may make. The time will come to him when he has lost this power; but he has then become a man.

Youth is a time for experiment. Life is so strange and wonderful to most of us that when young we seek for nothing, except new sensations. About us we see a multitude of novel things; men and women pass us in our daily life holding within them awful and fascinating mysteries that we shall never unfathom; no matter where we turn, we see before us high and impassible walls beyond which lies a land that we know nothing about. The flowers, the music, the sunsets, that come to us with every passing day are in themselves mighty dreams that we can never feel or

understand. We love them, and we wonder at them; but we know no more about them when they have gone than we did before they came. And so the boy or the young man who lives in the world, watching the things of the world, beholds before him no elaborate system of affairs, no orderly nature of things; he has not yet truly reached to God. Religion means but little to a boy. Our saints, about whom we read and at whose holy youth we silently wonder, were not, I believe, in this saintly youth, truly religious. God makes no man part of Himself without trial; and trial comes with age. It was the outward manifestation of God that they adored, that made them good and holy; God Himself waited until they were ready for Him before he breathed His soul into theirs. Good or bad, they were simply experimenting. Saint or profligate, no boy, no young man, was ever so sure in his course that he could not be made to change it.

It would be sublime indeed if the growing boy met with nothing on his journey through life but good. To be a saint is a marvellous thing, whether we count the reward on earth or in heaven. Bad or good though we may be, there are few of us, I think, who do not admire virtue. No wonder in the world is half so beautiful as the virtue of youth. There are, of course, other virtues that are greater in themselves—the virtue, for instance, that comes after long years of struggle and yielding; but they are not sweet, they do not carry with them the music of an angel, as does the virtue of youth. And it would indeed be sublime if this virtue could grow into manhood without temptation, could continue forever unsullied. God has willed otherwise, and the world is evil. Boys who in youth were saints are unholy men; some little thing has happened to drive them from the life that they once led. Some sorrow came upon them, perhaps, and they sought a new sensation to give themselves rest. Perhaps, indeed, they sickened of the goodness of their life; it is almost as hard to continue long to like the quiet of good as it is to like the neverceasing impetus of bad. At any rate, they have changed. The world is made of good and bad; holy men talk and walk with evil men, and all men take their chances.

What has this to do with Barrie and the unknown playwright? Simply this: if all men were good, they would make no mistakes, they would need no chance to turn back into the past to live their lives over again. But because youth is such a dangerous age, because most of us,

when we reach manhood, have lost a good part of the best that was in us, we are constantly regretting some false step, and picturing to ourselves a better course that we might have taken. I do not myself believe that we regret the evil of our past lives simply because it is evil; we are not good enough for that. But we realize blindly that we are not what we should be; we see that in us lies a certain cheapness, a commonness, from which we cannot escape. We do not understand the principle of the whole matter, that without God all things are cheap and common, and that true religion is the only purifier on earth; but we do admit that our cheapness rises from our sins, and that nobility can come only from the life of a saint.

Most poets describe youth in glowing words; it is a wonderful time to them, and they picture the boy at play, or in love, running freely without sin through very pleasant pastures. But they forget that this fifteen or twenty years spent in play are the weighty makers of the future man. Each sin that the boy commits means little to the boy, for he is not deep enough to comprehend except by instinct the awfulness of sin; but is everything to the man, for in some way it shapes him, and settles what he shall be. No man can flee his youth; it follows him like some terrible fate; and, indeed, the Greek tragedians might easily have understood by Nemesis the youth of a man, for no Nemesis was ever so cruel as this. Youth to most of us is, at the bottom, a horrible thing; and I for one shall be heartily glad when I shall have become old, when I shall cease to love or wish to be loved, and when I shall really know God. To me, these first years seem like one long term of probation; no matter who the boy, if he thinks, life must terrify him.

I am afraid that I have wandered far afield; but the title of this paper is my defence. I know that I really meant to defend the opinions that I expressed in my first contribution; but two plays are nothing when compared to the great problem of youth. If the boy could know how much his future depended upon his every thought and action, there would be small needs of regrets; we should all be saints. But we are very blind when most we need sight and at the time of life when should seem most horribly cruel to us, we think that it is beautiful and good. Only the old man can truly see the good in life, the young man never can. It is a glorious thing, to live, and a holy thing, to live well, but only the old and good know that. Most young men are fools, and play with their destiny.