

THE TURNING-POINT.

BY FRANK R. WHITZEL.

"And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him."—Luke iv. 20.

ALMOST every one of mature age can look back to some incident that marked an epoch in his life. In a few cases it may have been of great immediate importance, as some poignant grief or love, some desperate struggle or perhaps darksome tragedy; but much oftener, no doubt, the incident at the time seemed trivial, even insignificant. Subject-matter for such episodes is still plentiful enough, but the modern field is quite bereft of one particular class of them which, could we but see clearly into the lives of the ancients, would no question be found exceedingly large, probably the most numerous of all, that is to say, omens. Modern rationalism has stripped from nature many attributes in which men used fondly to believe, has robbed it of its terrors, its caprice, but above all of its prophetic function, meaning its power to apprise mankind in some indirect manner of the important events which the future holds in store.

But once upon a time omens were the meat and drink of all classes. The ancients, throughout their waking moments were curiously on the lookout for a chance word, a misstep, a flash of lightning, any circumstance which might be construed as a warning or a promise. Their writings are strewn thickly with omens and prodigies; even so sane a man as Cæsar noted the portents that heralded the battle of Pharsalus. The men of the day carried their belief so far that if they found it necessary to mention anything untoward, if it were but in a private letter, they piously ejaculated, "Avert the omen."

A number of allusions to matters of this nature are to be found in history and throw a curious sidelight upon the mental processes of our ancestors. There was this same Cæsar's famous stumble

when he landed on the shore of Africa to begin his Thapsus campaign. "Africa, I take thee!" exclaimed the quick-witted Roman, thus at a word turning evil presage into good, to the no small effect on the morale of his superstitious troops. At Brindisi, when Marcus Crassus was setting out on his ill-fated Parthian expedition, the "hot dog" or "crawfish" peddlers of the day were crying their wares in the evening streets, "*Cauneas, cauneas.*" The hearers promptly noted the identity of the sound with "*Cave ne cas.*," or "Take care, do not you go," and they previsioned the disastrous event of the war.

It is difficult for us to-day to appreciate this firm and confident belief, but there is no question of the fact that omens were regarded and revered as direct revelations of deity, fully as valid to the ancients as later on Holy Writ became to Christians. It is from this standpoint that exceptional significance attaches to an incident briefly recorded in the life of a young man of Galilee, the meaning of which seems to have been almost altogether overlooked.

Something like two thousand years ago, a youthful serious-minded carpenter named Jesus heard the rumor that in a near-by region a prophet had appeared who was exhorting his hearers in a new and effective style. The young man, having himself studied attentively the sacred books of his people, and having also read deeply in the book of nature, felt that here perhaps was a chance to learn something definite about the matters that were disturbing his spirit. He laid aside his labor for a few days and betook himself to hear the prophet.

When he arrived at his destination he listened to a strange discourse indeed. This world, announced the prophet, was about to be destroyed. The Kingdom of Heaven was close at hand. It would be established immediately after the destruction of the world, but it would be open only to those who had previously forsworn their iniquities and by prayer and repentance had prepared themselves for admission. These, as a symbol of regeneration and abandonment of the present world, were required to pass through the ceremony of baptism, a rite little known at the period. The prophet told his hearers that he himself was but the forerunner or announcer of the coming events, and that another person, to him unknown, was to be the real guide into the promised haven. It is of course possible that John did not entertain the latter idea at all but that it arose subsequently among the followers of Jesus to justify his well-known previous connection, but it seems more likely that John really had some such notion.

At all events, the young carpenter was profoundly impressed.

The world as he saw it about him was so full of iniquity, his own people, the chosen of God, were so oppressed both by the careless cruelty of a conquering nation and by the formalism of their own hierarchy that mere amendment seemed impracticable. Only a plan involving destruction and a new creation could give promise of overcoming the power of Satan. Deeply religious in his nature, moved, too, by the prophet's enthusiasm and disregard of consequences, Jesus quickly announced himself a convert and submitted to baptism at the hands of John.

Apparently he did not at once return to his home but lingered for some time listening attentively to the words of the prophet who on his part had formed a liking for his youthful follower. Jesus, so far as we can conjecture, did not at this time look upon himself as any different from the hundreds of other seekers after truth who surrounded the master. But undoubtedly the question soon arose in his mind, Where do I personally fit into the scheme? What is my part to be in the work of preparing mankind for the coming Kingdom? John needed no assistant in his present labor though he had recognized the ability and enthusiasm of his new disciple, and the latter had not as yet conceived of initiating a separate evangel. His way was shrouded in darkness.

This personal question was still unanswered when Jesus, feeling nothing was to be gained by a longer stay, withdrew from the company of John and set out for his home in Nazareth to resume his usual employment. The influence of the rugged prophet remained with him, however, and on his way homeward, possibly even after his arrival there he made some addresses to the people; but in these he merely iterated the burden of John's message, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

But we can easily surmise that the part of a follower could not long satisfy the ardent and aspiring spirit of the young Nazarene. His journey and conversion were well known, and his public addresses had marked him among the peasantry as a man of unusual ability. No doubt there was much speculation as to what he would do next, for it seemed unlikely that he would be content to resume the humdrum life of a carpenter after having been so powerfully moved.

It was while in this state of suspense, uncertain of his mission, groping for guidance, that an incident took place fraught with far-reaching results not only to Jesus himself but to all succeeding generations of mankind. But a preliminary word of explanation is necessary to make the incident comprehensible.

Each community of Jews kept in its synagogue a copy of the various books of their Scriptures. These were not books as we understand the term; they were rolls of parchment attached at each end to a rod. A reader held the two rods upright before his face and about a foot apart, and after reading the page thus presented to view, rolled up the manuscript on one rod as he unrolled the other until the next page was exposed. It was the regular practice for the custodian of the books to bring them out each Sabbath day in order that the elders and any others who felt so disposed might read aloud from them to the assembled worshipers.

As a devout Jew Jesus was of course present in the synagogue the next Sabbath after his homecoming. The hour arrived when according to custom the chief men read in turn from the holy books, and the custodian was busy carrying them from one to another. Especial interest attached to Jesus, and all eyes were bent upon him when his turn to read came.

Now, one of the commonest modes of divination since the world began has been to open a book at random and apply the first passage that meets the eye to the circumstances of the moment. And just at this juncture, to Jesus, troubled by his inner emotion and anxious for a word of guidance, such a proceeding would appeal with exceptional force. Nor, as he repeatedly proved in his after-life, did he lack that supreme courage extolled by the poet, he dared to put it to the touch to win or lose it all. Resolving to cast his doubts on the bosom of God and to seek counsel in the words which divine wisdom should place before him, he took the roll of Scripture from the attendant, revolved the rods to insure a chance exposure and opened it in sight of the congregation.

Lay it to chance if you will. Ascribe it to the personal direction of the Deity if you can. The fact remains that Jesus found his eyes resting upon a passage than which none more significant could be found in all the holy books of his people. It was a direct answer to the questions agitating his soul, an oracle of his nation's God applying personally to himself and pointing out clearly his office and mission. He read from Isaiah lxi. 1:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

"To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Jesus was overwhelmed. Mechanically he handed the roll back to the attendant and sat down.

Let us make an attempt to visualize the scene. Round about the room sat the silent and absorbingly interested congregation. There were his family, his friends, his neighbors, in all stages of surprise at this apparently clear manifestation of divine will. All saw that the reader was moved to the heart by the pregnant and pertinent words which had just fallen from his lips. What would he do? Would he sit silent and let the moment pass, or would he promptly accept the oracle as a God-given command?

As for Jesus himself, his mind must have reacted powerfully to the stimulus. The passage from Isaiah was calculated to resolve all his doubts as in a flash of light. It was the *Ecce Homo* of Pilate prefigured, the visible finger pointing directly to him and the voice of God saying "Thou art the man." No doubt he envisioned all it meant should he accept, the unreasoning opposition of his family, the fickle adulation of the throng, the dangerous antagonism of authority, the complete severance from all his worldly interests. But Jesus had been taught that man's highest duty was to obey the behest of God when that behest was plainly spoken. And he was made of such stuff as are heroes and martyrs in all ages. He must go out to fight the battle of faith, to hold aloft with God's aid the banner of righteousness, to announce the catastrophic ending of the power of Satan, to preach the year of the Lord. Self must be ignored, he was God's chosen agent. He could not refuse.

He sat for a few moments while the portentous message shook his soul; then slowly he arose, and looking around on the waiting congregation he announced his irrevocable decision.

"This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears."

It was the turning-point in the life of Jesus. Never again was he troubled by uncertainty as to his mission. Never again did he show perplexity or hesitation. He knew that God had selected him to preach the advent of the Kingdom, and he carried out his work with utter singleness of purpose and disregard of personal consequences until it reached its conclusion—or was it its true commencement?—on the summit of Golgotha.

No doubt his estimate of himself and also his conception of his mission grew with the passing months, but his conviction of divine guidance became never firmer than in that instant when, obedient to the Scriptural lot, he abandoned his former life, turned all his energies in a new direction and consecrated his being to the work of redemption. Never could greater exaltation be his than that with which God illumined his soul upon that momentous morning in the synagogue at Nazareth.