

## Adrift for Heresy

Orion Clemens's desire for public recognition manifested itself no less picturesquely in matters of religion than in matters of politics. To Mark Twain, far removed and feverishly engaged in his own projects, literary and otherwise, the incidents that featured Orion's progress toward agnosticism must have been perplexing indeed. Aware of the major events which marked this progress, he did not understand, and probably never troubled himself to discover the precise nature of Orion's attitude toward orthodoxy. All he could see was that "Orion is a field which grows richer and richer the more he mulches it with each new topdressing of religion or other guano."

As a matter of fact Orion was always unwaveringly religious, and the topdressings were not so much mulches as manifestations of Orion's vital religious experience. He sought to satisfy his religious nature by church membership. For many years he was a member of the Presbyterian church, having united with that denomination in 1864 while he was Secretary of Nevada Territory. He not only belonged to the church, but was, in Keokuk, one of its most active members. Yet from the first he was not fundamentally orthodox. It is true that he supported the church faithfully, for he looked upon it as

an institution capable of great good, but he questioned some of the principles upon which it professed to offer salvation.

If the impulse came to Orion in the earlier years to give public expression to his views, the straight-laced orthodoxy of his mother and the desire for social tranquillity on the part of his wife must have restrained him. By 1876, however, it appears that Orion was no longer inclined to remain silent. The occasion which prompted the explanation and defense of his faith is not now known, but the following letter to his mother is entirely creditable to Orion. It shows not only the orderliness of his thinking, despite the phrenology, but a fine and sensitive nature as well.

Keokuk, Aug. 10, 1876.

My dear mother :

It grieves me to see you and Mollie so distressed over a difference of opinion. It is not as if I believed in crime; it is merely that I question that certain facts reported to have occurred a long time ago really occurred. There is nothing in this to indicate depravity. But if I profess to believe certain facts to have taken place when I do not believe it — this is hypocrisy in religion. A hypocrite who is right by accident in his profession is worse than one who honestly professes wrong views, for he is merely wrong by accident — the accident of a wrong mental vision. Belief in the facts recorded in the old and new testament, may grow out of a combination of circumstances, both outside of and inside of the mind. These operating together through a long series of years, mentally acquire a con-

sistency, a complexion, and an aspect as peculiar to the individual, and as distinctly marking him, as the circumstances of shape, exposure and age, mark, tan, or freckle, and wrinkle the face of an individual, so that he can be like himself and no other. For instance, it is now impossible for you to believe in the Catholic religion. You once had the power, if you had properly cultivated it, but it is now lost. So you may put your finger on Catholics who have similarly lost the power, which they all had in greater or less degree when young to believe in Christianity. This formation of a believing character is the work of books, of association, and of phrenological bumps, taking those bumps as insignia of separate faculties of the brain. Do not misunderstand what I say. Do not suppose that I allude to anything occurring to myself in childhood. The books I had and the influences around me were towards belief in all that is in both the old and new testament. But I am thankful that I have always felt free, whatever I might openly say, to think and read on both sides of any question which was sufficiently supplied with two sides to become a question. It thus happens that in the exercise of an unchained, God-given freedom, I have looked at both sides, and ventured to question what was backed by insufficient evidence. In doing this I cast aside the mere characteristics that might have adhered to me merely because I brushed past them in life, and have thought upon the subject. Hence, I say there are some things in the old and new testament concerning which I cannot say "I believe," because the evidence has not been sufficient to command my belief.

I do not therefore necessarily throw aside belief in God or a future state. I only question whether God and the

future have been interpreted to us aright. I fear that we have in those venerable books but the works of successive ages, each of which has said — Let us make God in our image. If we study the character of Moses, and the character of God interpreted by Moses, we find the two characters agree at every point. Moses passed in and out among the idolaters, saying “Let every man slay his brother, and there fell that day three thousand.” God commanded Moses to leave not one inhabitant of Canaan alive. We find the characters, both of God and Moses, as developed in the early history of the Jews, precisely agreeing.

When Christ came, his character and that of God precisely agreed, and were both at all points antagonistic to the characters of Moses and of the God whom he depicts. Can Christ himself have been a God whose character should have totally changed in a few thousand years? How much more reverent to God to suppose that the change was in man and not in Him! The change in the character of God marks the progress of man through the centuries, for, as he was himself he painted God. As Moses was, a barbarian, with a powerful fraternal and national love, to the scorn of all other nations, and all other rights of man, he made God, an enlarged, but exact image of himself — a magnified photograph. Barbarism was at its end when Christ came to lead the van of a civilization founded on love and self-sacrifice for others, for which I sincerely love and adore him. But the photograph of God copied from himself is the civilized man’s God, and not the Barbarian’s.

Let us be thankful for the Christian religion, for our hopes of a future, and for all we are taught in the Bible, without being compelled to believe that Christ, who taught

us to love one another, was the God who taught the Jews to hate and murder and rob their neighbors.

Our cow had a little calf yesterday afternoon. I have to feed it with a bottle.

Glad to hear Annie and the baby are doing so well, and that Sammie has gone into Greek.

Orion.

Holding such opinions, it is evident from what followed that Orion voiced them from time to time until finally he was "earnestly counseled and repeatedly besought by the Presbyterian session not to give utterance to these views."

Early in May, 1879, affairs culminated in an episode still memorable to the older people of Keokuk. On the evening of May 6th Orion engaged himself for a lecture at Red Ribbon Hall, the subject of the lecture being "Man the Architect of Our Religion". Members of the Presbyterian session must have suspected what the nature of his remarks would be, for several of them were in the audience that night with pencil and pad to record the heresies of their church brother.

That was on Monday night. The very next day Orion received a citation from the session to appear before it and answer the charges preferred against him. A copy of the charges was appended to the citation in order that the matter might be heard and immediately decided. Orion acknowledged acceptance the same day, and on Wednesday evening he presented himself at the pastor's study where the

session was assembled. In addition to Doctor W. G. Craig, the pastor, there were in the room P. T. Lomax, clerk of session, George B. Smyth, prosecutor, and four others who had attended the lecture and upon whose testimony the charges had been drawn up. In brief the charges were as follows:

First, that he denied the presence of the supernatural in the Old Testament scriptures by asserting that the last six commandments of the decalogue were moral rules, always practiced by mankind, the formal statement of which was like naming a river for a mountain.

Second, that he denied the doctrine of the church that the Old Testament scriptures are the inspired word of God, by asserting that inspiration is simply a higher development of thought in a special direction, or a dream; that there was nothing in the Old Testament indicating a belief of its writers that anything thought, said, or done in this life would affect the condition of the soul in the life to come, and that Abraham was a sun and fire worshiper.

Third, that he had avowed sentiments contrary to the fundamental doctrines of the Presbyterian church in that he had denied the divinity of Christ and the sanctity of the Sabbath day.

The four witnesses were then called upon to testify what they had heard Orion say and what they had understood him to mean. The charges were repeated with greater elaboration. Presently the moderator asked Orion, "Did you feel impelled by a

sense of duty and privilege to give public utterance to these views?"

"Yes," replied Orion. "I consider it the duty of every man to think soberly upon these subjects, to make up his views satisfactorily to himself and then express them to others, in order that if he be in error he may be corrected and the truth reached through free, full and open discussion."

"Were you earnestly counseled and repeatedly besought by the session *not* to give utterance to these views?"

"I was."

"Do you understand the views enunciated in your lecture and freely expressed here to be directly contrary to the fundamental teaching of the Presbyterian church?"

"I do."

"Have we, the session, according to our best ability, sought to resolve your doubts?"

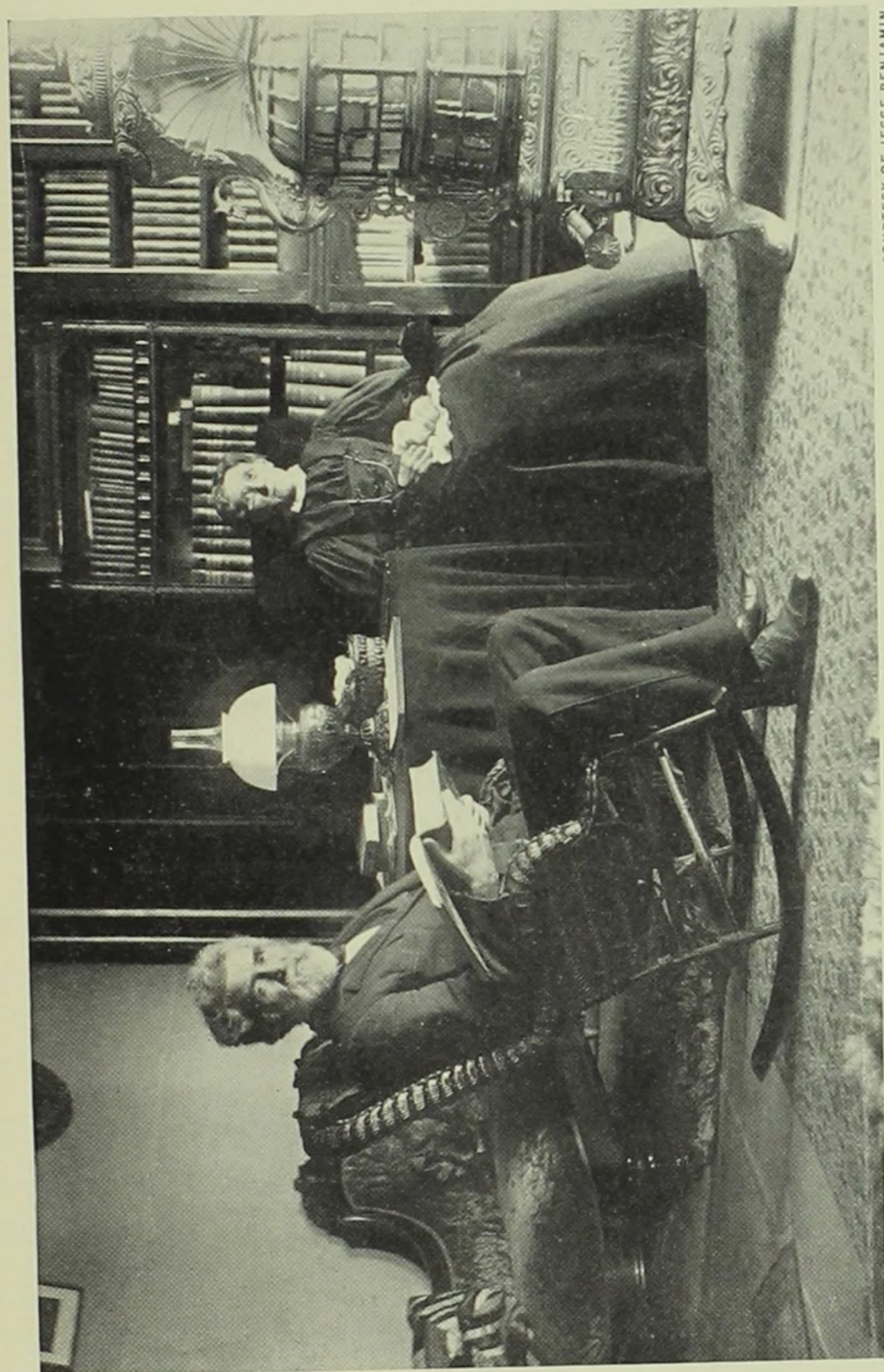
"You have sought to resolve my doubts. You will have to judge as to the best of your ability."

"That is a correct answer."

Two days later Orion was apprised of the decision of the session when he received through the mail a notice of excommunication. It read as follows:

Mr. Orion Clemens:

Dear Sir — I have to inform you that the session on Wednesday evening last, unanimously found you guilty under the charges tabled against you, and their sentence was that you should therefore be excommunicated from the



COURTESY OF JESSE BENJAMIN

ORION AND MOLLY CLEMENS AT HOME



church, and said excommunication be pronounced at morning service on Sabbath next.

Very respectfully,

P. T. Lomax, clerk of session.

That Orion Clemens was sufficiently curious to attend Presbyterian services the next Sunday to hear Doctor Craig's sermon, adapted to the occasion, and to listen to the formal announcement of his excommunication is extremely doubtful. Had he been there he would have heard the minister narrate the steps leading to the excommunication, showing the authority of the church to cast out unworthy members, pointing out the nature, use, and consequence of the censure, and finally he would have heard him warn the congregation to avoid all unnecessary intercourse with Clemens that they might not be contaminated by his opinions.

But Orion Clemens was apparently undaunted. On Monday the local papers informed the public that "Orion Clemens will repeat his lecture on 'Man the Architect of Our Religion', at Red Ribbon Hall, on Monday evening May 19. Admission 25 cents." In view of the fact that the first lecture was given with free admission, it would be interesting to know whose idea it was to have the lecture repeated and to charge admission. Perhaps Orion was not quite so destitute of business acumen after all.

In the meantime the newspapers printed contributions of people commending Clemens for his frank expression of opinion. "Is it wise," asked

one person addressing himself to the church, "to so commit yourself to any religious creed that you expel really honest and worthy men from your church simply because their thinking has been too free? Should not character and character alone, be the test of church membership?"

Whether or not Doctor Craig's warning against contamination actually served as a deterrent, the fact remains that despite the publicity which Orion Clemens received in the newspapers the second lecture was not well attended. In closing, Orion referred briefly to his expulsion from the church. He claimed that no attempt had been made to refute his statements, but that the session had merely determined that he had formed incorrect conclusions from his materials owing to his weakness of mind, and that because of that weakness he was accused of heresy and sent where he would catch worse than a sick headache. As a parting shot he said he did not desire to advise people not to associate with Doctor Craig, but trusted that every one would associate with him as heretofore.

If Orion Clemens ventured again to express his religious opinions publicly, it is not a matter of record.

FRED W. LORCH