Midnight talks at the club

Fiske Amos Kidder
MIDNIGHT TALKS
At the Club

REPORTED

BY AMOS K. FISKE

The people's prayer, the glad diviner's theme,
The young men's vision and the old men's dream.

Dryden.

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By AMOS K. FISKE
PREFATORY NOTE.

Most of the papers in this volume originally appeared as a series in the Sunday issues of the *New York Times*, where they excited sufficient interest to elicit many enquiries as to their possible appearance in book form. As these enquiries continued for months after the "Talks" had ceased to appear, it seemed as though the papers must have touched matters of living and enduring interest, upon which many people are thinking and craving something fresh in the thoughts of others. Hence the author feels justified in rescuing them from the quick oblivion of the newspaper, and putting them into a form which may give them a place in those circles—whether in the club or the home or the study—where talk ranges upon themes of more than trivial or ephemeral significance. The papers have been gone over carefully for this volume and expanded in some points,—from the carefully preserved notes of the "Listener"—and con-
cluded with a final contribution from the “Judge,” sojourning in lands remote.

In addition to the offence of making public the conversation of his friends in the privacy of their club, the reporter of the “Midnight Talks” wishes to confess to this further pecadillo. In the interval between the publication of the “talks” in a serial way and the collection of them in this volume, he took the liberty of appropriating as his own many of the ideas and sentiments of the “Judge” and putting them forth as such in a magazine article which appeared in *The Forum*, even going so far as to “convey” bodily into that article some of the extracts from the “Judge’s” Amalfi letter. As he has made his peace with those chiefly concerned, his readers will doubtless care little for this; but he wishes to forestall detection by the keen critics, if any should go so far as to look into his conduct in this matter.

Amos K. Fiske.
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MIDNIGHT TALKS

AT THE CLUB.

I.

THE "OWL PARTY" AT THE ASPHEDEL.

When I was induced by my old college friend, Tom Benedict, to join the Asphodel Club it was not with the expectation of taking part in midnight discussions of any kind: not that I am at all averse to the "wee sma' hours," for the most irksome of all things human is the conventional necessity of going to bed every night; but I presumed that if there were such diversions within those mysterious precincts they were of a hilarious kind, and my tastes in matters of conversation are quiet.

I have a notion there is "no use talk-
ing” where more than two or three are gathered together, unless it is a family party or a group of very intimate friends.

But I had not long enjoyed the luxurious ease of the Asphodel before I discovered that almost every Saturday night there was in a quiet inner room a little knot of persons holding high converse at about the time Sunday is supposed to be “ushered in” everywhere but in clubs. This knot of persons appeared to be known as the “Owl Party” by those casual members who observed the regularity of their convocation on Saturday nights and the lateness with which they indulged in their periodical talks, perhaps also with a delicate reference to the profound wisdom occasionally overheard by the light minded.

I was introduced into this party the more promptly because, to my surprise, I found that Tom Benedict was himself a member of it. I was surprised at this simply on account of Tom’s character and habits, as they were familiar to me. I took him to be a man who reposed in the bosom of his family long before mid-
night any night in the week, and was a little astonished even that he should belong at all to a club that had rather a reputation for conviviality than otherwise. For Tom is not only a family man, but a rather staid person, as properly domesticated as any one you could meet in a summer’s day. Very strictly brought up was Tom, and he was always submissive to discipline, and became rather a stickler for the proprieties, even for the conventionalities. He married the daughter of a clergyman, very charming in her way, a paragon of virtue and propriety, but rather narrow in her views of this life and broad in her conceptions of the superior importance of some other life. And like a dutiful husband he joined the church, became a Vestryman or some such thing, and took his part in improving the wretched human race through Sunday-schools and missions.

I like Tom right well when we are together by ourselves or with congenial friends, but on the rare occasions on which I have visited him at his home I have not found myself quite at ease.
There is too much propriety and virtuous sensibility about, for my careless ways, and I am in constant danger of hurting somebody or something, and Tom seems to be in constant fear that I will; while his wife has a kind of open-eyed, half-startled wonder at my free-and-easy remarks about people and things. I can't even smoke a cigar in their house. It is one of those peculiarly refined nests of domestic purity, in which tobacco smoke is regarded as a sort of profanation and in which it clings to curtains and hangings with wicked tenacity. I believe the delicate nostrils of Tom's wife would be offended with the fumes of a single cigar for a week afterward, even though it were smoked in the attic or the basement.

Imagine my surprise, then, that Tom should not only be a member of the Asphodel Club, but should even belong to an "Owl Party" that sat discoursing at a little round table garnished with glasses into the small hours of Sunday morning. His individual glass contained generally nothing worse than ginger ale or Apollinaris water, though he is not