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J. C. Leyendecker

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Are There Any Sinners?

MEN USED TO HAVE "CONVICTION OF SIN."

It is out of fashion now.

At one period in American church life, when the "hellfire evangelist" had more influence than now, no person was considered to have been actually converted to the Christian life unless for hours at a time—days even—he had groveled in an agony of weeping for his wickedness. This was dubbed "conviction of sin."

Such a conventional requirement of a certain quantity of tears to constitute a certificate of religion had many ill results. It set a lot of people to manufacturing tears for the occasion.

Worse yet, it kept out of the church candid souls who could not furnish to order these effusive and copious emotions.



Reaction sweeping away this stipulated toll of tears that had to flow over the "mourners' bench" might have been anticipated even in the moment when tearful conversion was least questioned.

Apart from the forced unreality to which it led, nothing could be more preposterous on the face of things than to imagine a standardized succession of feelings through which all men alike must pass in order to enter into the kingdom of God. Men do not love alike, grieve alike, nor rejoice alike. How could it ever have been expected that they would all meet God alike?

So of course the mourners' bench and its set quota of weepings had to disappear. It was contrary to both nature and piety.

Yet something very precious unfortunately disappeared with it.

And the church seems not yet conscious of the loss.

It is more than true that weeping eyes are unnecessary to make a man a Christian. But to make a man the richest and amplest kind of Christian, a contrite heart is absolutely needful. And that contrite heart is what modern religion appears to have thrown away at the same time it was discarding the mourners' bench.

Many evangelists nowadays have got so far away from the former manners of their kind that in place of trying to humble men in shame for sin, they rather exhort the irreligious to forget the evil things of the past and come with their heads up to accept Christ—"the manliest thing that a manly man can do."

So men of the world do come into the church "with their heads up" literally—come with the complacent air of doing the church a great favor by conferring on it the compliment of their support.

And the Lord Christ, like a successful innkeeper, is expected to be flattered by the exceptional character of his patrons.



The trouble, however, with this newer way of coming to Christ is not so much its failing to induce self-examination. Indeed, self-examination might quite possibly confirm the good conceit of themselves which many new members bring with them into church.

Certainly no religion with a truly religious respect for the honest facts could wish to exact from any soul a humility based on perfunctory confession of sins that do not exist. There is nothing religious in requiring an upright man to name himself a villain.

But that is not the real nub of the matter. The modern Christian is in little enough danger of underestimating himself, as everybody knows. His defect is in quite the opposite direction:

The modern Christian underestimates God.

And this is but the result of a more colossal failing:

He has not studied Christ.

How high up in the world a man imagines himself to be depends on what heights he looks to above him. With no loftier ground

rising ahead, the traveler always thinks himself high. Beside the sea he is almost a mountain-climber at a hundred feet above tide.

But amid a range of twenty-thousand-foot peaks the climber knows at ten thousand feet that he is only in the lowlands.

So he only can be a satisfied man spiritually who has not "lifted up his eyes." When the great majesty of God and the white purity of the divine Son are clearly seen, the cleanest human character shrinks in shame from the awful comparison.

It is then that the best of men must cry with Job:

"Now mine eye seeth Thee—wherefore I abhor myself."



This is the contrition—this the "conviction of sin"—that the church today is weakened by want of. There is lacking not so much a conviction of sins committed as of immeasurable challenges ignored, unstriven for—chances to "grow in grace" idly refused.

If only there could once possess the souls of Christians even a half-adequate sense of how traitorous it is, in the face of a crucified Master, to substitute for his supreme example the standards set by average respectability, there would surely pass across the face of Christendom a reconsecrating resolution not to rest complacent with less than "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

That would not indeed create overnight a perfect church. There is no indication that God conceives a perfect church in this world. He wants instead, it would seem clear, a growing church. He sets therefore before his disciples an ideal of holiness no less exalted than his own sanctity—no less appealing than the spotless life of his compassionate and brother-hearted Son.

Thus by a lure powerful as Omnipotence and appealing as the heart of infinite Love the heavenly Father calls his children to the endless strife which against the downpull of human conceit struggles ever higher in "the imitation of Christ."

And men escape that lure—only by not looking that way.



Cast your eyes across the usual audience of church members listening to the preaching of the gospel. Can you tell the response that inwardly fills their minds?

Manifestly it is languid. Not many, one can see, feel the sermon touching them. Their drowsy thought seems to run like this:

"That ought to make a wicked man determine to be better. Wonder why so many wicked men don't wish to be good."

And all the time God above, looking down on that assemblage of Christians and near-Christians, knows that the same thing which is the matter with the drunkard, the libertine, the thief and the murderer is the matter with most of them.

All are alike in not desiring a better life—in imagining that they are already as good as is profitable, comfortable or convenient, good enough at all events to induce the good God to overlook their remaining, unforgiven sins. In fact, if there is any difference between them, it is perhaps in favor of the wicked outsiders, who probably have more ambition for climbing to something morally higher than the average church-goer.

"Higher!" is God's command to every man alike.

And "conviction of sin" with rasping barbs should tear the conscience of every man who thinks he is good enough as he is.

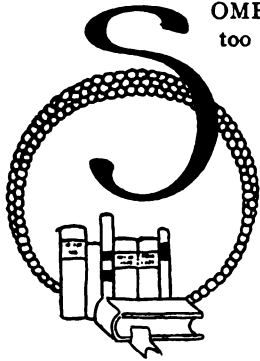
Then "judgment" would in truth begin at the house of God.

The road you have not begun to follow—the goodness you have not started to seek—is your sin.

But God "saveth such as are of a contrite spirit."

Poetry and Everyday Life

BY WILLIAM E. BROOKS



SOMETIMES I meet a man who thinks himself too practical to read poetry. Poetry, he declares, is a thing for women and children and those poor men whose imperfect equipment for the battle of life makes it impossible for them to mingle in the world of action.

"To drink the deep delight of battle with their peers": "Give me action," he cries, "and you keep the jingles. What time I have for reading I intend to devote to something real." And then he turns to the porcinity of "Main Street."

The man who turns his back on poetry is neglecting the oldest of the traditions of the race. Long centuries ago when the white-robed elders of some little city gathered in the gate or in the prince's hall, as the shadows lengthened and the day of action was done, it was to listen to the chant of the bard. He, the poet of his day, was the chronicler, the story teller, in whom these men of action delighted. Perhaps he had wandered in far lands, and he told of their glory and their beauty, the wealth that was found in their hills or the fineness of the stuffs they sold in their bazars. He told of their experiments in government, in husbandry, of the laws they made. All the modern business man finds in the reports of consuls or geographical societies these old singers brought.

Or perhaps the tale they told was of the city's past, of hero-priest and hero-king and the doings of the gods. Or men had to be aroused to face a duty, and so the bard turned prophet and spoke to them in strange and marvelous fashion, as in the tale Jotham told the men of Shechem (see Judges 9:7). For information, for recreation, for the stirring call to duty, our long-gone fathers turned ever to their poets. And those fathers, let us not forget, were practical men, men who fought the battle with the beasts and with the unknown forces of nature and laid for us the foundation of that which we call civilization.

The man who neglects poetry is also neglecting something within him which calls for the beautiful. Sometimes we are hungrier for this than we realize. A young woman whose work is mainly with girls in industry tells me that their constant demand is for poetry. When she first began to talk to them she read them an occasional poem. It was a new thing to them, shut in as they were with the limitations of practical things, of whirring spindles and jarring looms. But it was something very beautiful, and the more they heard the more they wanted to hear. So now she sometimes reads to them for an hour, tender lyrics like those of Sara Teasdale, stirring ballads such as Alfred Noyes knows how to sing, uplifting hymns of devotion. They drink it all in, it is a new and rich and satisfying experience.

More men are hungering for

beauty now than ever hungered before, and they are feeding their souls with the husks of the realistic novels that are the mode (husks meant only for swine), and wondering why the taste in their mouths is bitter. The "Oxford Book of English Verse" or one of those anthologies of Mrs. Waldo Richards—"High Tide" or "Star-points"—will do more to get that taste out of our mouths than anything I know. The world is not a vast Main street; there is beauty in it, and there is glory in it, and the poets open our eyes to see it and lift our souls to hear its call. Their task, and a high one it is, is to turn us from realism to reality. Facing the grim facts of today, we need some one, some thing that will lift our eyes from the grimness once in a while, and show us the towers of a City which may be far away but which is very sweet.

"Once upon a time—perhaps a hundred thousand years ago—
Whisper to me, Peterkin, I have forgotten when.

Once upon a time there was a way, a way I used to know,
For stealing off at twilight from the weary ways of men.

Whisper it, Oh, whisper it—the way, the way is all I need,
All the heart and soul are here and all the deep desire!
Once upon a time—ah, now the light is drawing near indeed—
I see the fairy faces flush to roses round the fire!"

The poets can be our guides to beauty.

But there is a thing which the every-day man needs even more than beauty, and this is the prophet's voice telling of truth. For the every-day life needs all of the prophet it can get. It needs the old sure things put before it in simple arresting fashion. The things that shut out beauty from a man's life are the same things that shut out truth. The noise of the machine, the struggle to keep abreast and get ahead, the deadly monotony of the days, and all that complex of things which Hamlet called

"The stings and arrows of outrageous fortune,"

these are the things that stamp a man down and are likely to change him into a part of the machine itself. He needs something outside himself to remind him of what he really is. This has ever been one of the great offices of the poet. He has always been (that is, if he be a real poet and not

"An idle singer of an empty day")

very much of a prophet. Every one of the great poets has profoundly believed in a God-made world. They have never entertained the thought of a materialistic universe, but have always held a profoundly spiritual conception of life. They have heard

"the very grass I trod
Whispering the gentle thoughts of God."

Any man who reads his Bible discriminatingly must have realized



In Sight of Shore

BY MARION HARLAND

Do I rehearse a waking dream?
The wind tonight blows from the sea:
Between me and the conscious stars
Wave pale blooms of the locust tree.
Sweet mystic stirs are in the air,
Blending in music on my ear;
The peace of heaven is in my soul
As I think what may be drawing near.

"From battle, murder, sudden death,
Good Lord, deliver us!" we say—
A silver cord with bloody chains
Twisting and tangling as we pray.
From sudden death deliver us?
Give us instead slow waste and pain,
Nights without rest, days void of ease,
Till life is spent beneath the strain.

Dear life, rich life, full life of mine
At the behest of him who gave
I'd render thee, unterrified
By dreads of dying and the grave:
With pulses calmed, with down-dropped lids
O'er eyes that will know tears no more,
I'd lie, like waiting craft at rest,
Well within hail and sight of shore.

Could I forecast that blessed hour,
The winds should blow fresh from the sea,
Swaying between me and the stars
The blossoms of my favorite tree:
With tender thoughts of home and friends,
All foes forgiven, seven times seven,
My prayer half said, I'd fall asleep
To speak a glad "Amen" in heaven.