

THE hours lay heavily upon the heart of the old man.
Years of waiting and longing had dimmed his eyes;
Before him there stretched the long interminable hours
With no fulfillment.

"How long, O Jehovah, before the Hope takes flesh,
Before the sons of Israel may shout aloud
A new song:
'Behold, He is here!
The Deliverer has come at last!'"

In a quiet manger, full of the animal sweat,
The healthy sounds of tired beasts,
The Virgin womb of Israel's Daughter
Opened wide its flood gates pushing into a waiting moment
The expected child!

When the old man saw what God had wrought,
His heart flung off the weight of years
To give wide sweep to urgent words:
"Now, Lord, let thy servant depart in peace
For mine eyes have seen. . . .
This child is the sign of man's attack."

I

The family was poor!
The Day of Consecration came;
But the price for the Lamb of Sacrifice could not be found:
Only the doves of the poor to use.
Poverty, the watchword of the mass of men,
Marked him early as Son of Man.
The child was a Jew:
The challenge to all the funded hates of men
Who through centuries struggled against the imperious demand
Of an ultimate ethic:
Men must be brothers achieved
As they are brothers in blood and seed.
Blessed Israel, guardian of the One God Dream—
The eternal sufferer whose agony is the anguished cry of all
mankind,
In hectic, patient, turbulent search for
The Great Fulfillment.

II

He was a word made flesh!
But the word, what was it?
Not for the proud, not for the mighty,
The dominant aggressive cornerers of the groans and struggles
Of the sweating masses.
[There is no future for the proud—
Only a past.
The gaze of the powerful
Must always focus on yesterday!]
The word, what was it?
It was for men whose backs are against the wall;
Whose hope feeds eternally on itself, always consuming but
never consumed.
Fear not, that was the word.
Fear, the great companion of the poor;
The creeping slinking Hound ever on the trail of the
Bedevilled seekers for surcease from oppression and wrong.
The poor know fear:
Fear of a special breed.
[If a woman fears a mouse that runs across her path
There is a scream, a leap, a release.
The tension breaks and calm is restored.]
But the fear of the weak is a special breed.

The Great Inc

Howard

For them fear is a climate closing in;
It is breathless humidity!
It clings like dampness in the air
When long hours of steady rain
Crush the days and nights with wetness.
There is no fear of death.
All men soon or late make calm their minds
And quiet their anxious spirits before the sure
Relentless fact of Death.
This is the fear of being finally outraged by life—
Cast upon by violent hands,
Unrestrained by order of the mind or heart,
Caught in the terrible grapple of blind or
Calculating brutality with no defense of public will or
Private conscience to avail.
To die without benefit of Cause—
No great end served!
No trumpet blasts!
No banners wave—
Not even the bright transcendent glow of martyrs' fire!
Only the sordid overflow of passions,
Catching in their swirling churn the hopeless victims
Of a brother's scorn.
This is the final degradation,
The ultimate shame.
The weak, the poor, the dispossessed are schooled in fear.
It presides over decisions,
Weighs all choices of the simplest kind.
It reaches into the quiet places of the fireside
And conditions the behavior of young and old alike,
It causes the body to learn by rote
Complex behavior patterns, to check
Some mindless slip—
Some thoughtless move;
That will send crashing down on innocent heads
A terrible judgment!
Fear becomes the great Assurance
Against floating violence!
Jesus knew all this.
His days were nurtured in great hostilities
Focused upon His kind, the sons of Israel.
There was no moment in all His years
When He was free;
Sometimes
In lonely places, beneath burning stars
Wrapt in the silence of the hills. . . .
He felt Eternal stirrings at His roots
And knew that always
Beneath Him, above, beyond, within,
The God of life kept watch.
This was the truth he felt;
To make it clear, to announce
Its clarion meaning—what greater
Boon to man?
Strange, to know all this:
To be thus assured;
Then bow before some great arrogance.

"Fear not them who kill the body
And after that there is nothing more
That they can do. But fear God."
That is it—the fear of God!
the fear of man!
Which shall it be?
The one lays bare the heart of reverence;
Pours wave after wave of healing balm
Upon the broken and forlorn—
Makes strong the failing spirit;
Renews the mind and affirms the craven will.
It frees the self of carking care,
Nourishing the life in strange new courage.
It is what the birds know as their wings
Lift them high above the plains.
It is the quiet trust glimpsed in the eyes of carefree children.
It is the blushless blossoming of roadside flowers,
Or the gliding confidence of fish through quiet or troubled
waters.
It is what burns in the prophet's eyes or
Glow in the tranquil spirits of those
Who have come through great tribulations!
The fear of God, the beginning of Wisdom!
Before the altars of its searching fire
The fear of man is rank and vile!
The great Blasphemy,
The supreme Sacrilege,
The final Corrosion.
"Fear not" says Jesus,
And all the Sons of men
Echo in their hearts,
The triumphant word.

III

The word—*Be genuine!*
Let your words be yea, yea; nay, nay!
All else obscures truth
Tempting man to betray the Eternal.
What a hard word for the weak!
It brings crashing down around their heads
The great fortress of defense
Against embattled power.
Somewhere in a past forgot
In the first moments of internecine strife.
The weak took refuge behind deception's web
Stretching their bristle threads of guarded life
Against odds too great to meet on equal terms.
The will to live made all else dim.
By circuitous route, by devious means
Weaving a pattern of false leads and feinting starts,
Life kept itself intact
And did not die.
The little birds know this:
Feeding in meadows under sun-drenched skies
The shadow of the Hawk appears.
Time stops! all else forgot—

Conditioned feet gather dead brown grass;
A quick somersault and all is changed.
High above, the Hawk clears his eyes,
Shifts his course, and seeks his meal
In other fields.
One with grass and root they live
For yet another day.
Little children know this:
When parental will looms threatening
To deter or interfere.
Defiance is not wise
By route direct and unabashed!
A steely web of chaste deception
Trips and holds in firm embrace
The parental power. . . .
Until at last it yields to the little will
As if it were its own.
The weak know this:
All victims of the strong
Draw from this churning source.
By the waters of Babylon they mingled tears
With flowing streams.
Into their midst Ezekiel came
To comfort, soothe, make unafraid.
Words like liquid fire gushed forth at eventide.
Flaming words but hidden in a vibrant code—
Crystal clear to all with ears to hear.
Distant Tyre and far off Egypt named he them;
But all the biting anger of prophetic ire
Bespoke in deftest phrase of Babylon.
The Exiles knew and were consoled,
While Babylon kept watch unconscious of the work the
prophet wrought.
Who said: I am God?
Poor old Hiram of struggling Tyre?
It was the mighty King of Babylon.
Hardly.
The captives knew and found fresh strength.
It is an age old way the weak have found;
To fight the strong with hidden tools.
The African slave had learned this lesson well:
The master's priest with fervid tones
Splashed in a canvass broad and high,
The glories of another world where God would add
New comforts to the blest of earth.
The slave listened well and deep within his soul
A melody stirred:
"Everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven ain' goin' there."
There must be two heavens—he queried.
No, for there is only one God.
Ah! the old man said.
I'm having my hell now,
When death calls me, I go to heaven.
He is having his heaven now,
When death calls him, he goes to hell.
Next day 'neath withering sun deep in the rows of blos-
soming cotton,
The old man cries: "Ah got shoes—you got shoes,
All God's chillun got shoes—"
His eyes fell on all his fellows acres 'round.
"But everybody talkin' 'bout Heaven"—
His eyes held the big house for one elastic minute—
"Ain' goin' there."
But the word would not be stilled:
Let your motive be simple,
Your words yea, yea; nay, nay.
Hypocrisy for self-defense—
Is that the sinless sin?
Does it degrade the soul at last

And sweep the raft against the hidden rocks?
Deceive and live for yet another day;
Declare and run the risk of sure destruction.
But why?

The Word knew:

There is a point beyond which man cannot go
Without yielding his right to try again.
To play God false to save one's skin
May jeopardize all there is that makes man, man.
"What would man give in exchange for his soul?"
This is the great Decision!
Even death becomes a little thing.
To survive with inner cleanness:
To compromise where ground forsook can be retrieved:
To stand unyielding when the moment comes:
This is the meaning of the word.

IV

The Word was *Love*.
Hate is the last great fortress of the weak.
The deadly moving current of resentment sweeps through the
channels of the mind
When overarching wrong inflicts its bitter lash.
But this may pass and leave no trace save the quivering after-
math of fading pain.
The subtle thrust of implied scorn may trip the mind,
To send the spirit hurtling down crazy stairs
To land at last where clever thoughts
May find retreat.
"Who is my neighbor?"
"Is it lawful to do this or that today?"
"Why do your followers eat with hands unwashed?"
"The tribute, is it lawful to pay it?"

But Hate is something more.
A time does come when the dregs of all the piled up scorn
Of men's contempt
Mount high to overrun the cup of great endurance;
When like a flash of light that blinds,
There bursts upon the soul, the stark alarm:
The last substance of self-respect
Is spilled.
Alone and desperate;
Desperate and alone,
Pitiless and scarred
The weak stand crushed.
Something stirs—the strength of bitterness.
The iron fiber of great revenge melts

The shattered feelings into one great block—
And hate is born.
Hate becomes the validation;
The ground of courage.
New power surges—a vast fresh cunning goads the mind.
Blind to good and evil, reckless of all consequence,
The weak strike out!
Even a fresh resourcefulness moves dead plans
Into new hopes.
Now, there is no need of fellowman.
Out of the depths of his new arousal
The cry goes forth:
I, I am autonomous!
I, I am independent!
I, I am God!

The world grows dark—there is no light now anywhere.
[The green grass fades, the flowers die.
The music of the birds is still.
There is nothing anywhere but death and ashes.]
The power that saved, destroys.
All this Jesus knew,
The Word was *Love*.

The meaning of life, what is it?
Down through the ages the deathless words ring out—
Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one.
And thou shalt love the Lord thy God
With all thy heart, mind, soul and strength
And thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.
And thy neighbor? Any man whose need of thee lays claim:
Friend and foe alike. Thou must not make division.
Thy mind, heart, soul and strength must ever search
To find the way by which the road
To all men's need of thee must go.
This is the Highway of the Lord.

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