

# ADVOCATUS DIABOLI

BY ADOLPH E. MEYER

WHEN, on a frigid day in January, 1855, the Rev. Noble Brann emitted his humble thanks to God for having hallowed his household with an infant son, the good gentleman little realized that God was in an ironical mood, and that he was being pitilessly duped. For, despite the purifying insulation of a pious paternal environment, the new-born William was destined eventually to enroll as a shameless disciple of Satan. Tragically and unwittingly the lad's mother played a part in bringing about his unforeseen apostasy. Her untimely death, when he was but two-and-a-half years old, completely disrupted the Brann home. So thoroughly, indeed, did it demoralize her reverend relict that he found himself unequal to the task of rearing little Willy, so the boy was handed over to Pa Hawkins, a laborious peasant of Coles county, Illinois, and a good Christian of the sterner, straight-laced variety. For the next ten years William stayed with his foster-father. It was a decade of toil and while it rolled wearily on the boy gradually learned that while Pa Hawkins was without question a God-fearing man, he was nevertheless much more appreciative of the immediate needs of his hogs and horses than of the remoter surgings of adolescent boyhood. So, one dark night, William Cowper Brann quietly slipped away.

Endowed with the peculiar vocational versatility that has been typical of nearly every self-made American, young Brann confidently started upon his life career as a bell-boy. From that profession he emigrated in more or less rapid succession to the status of painter, grainer, drummer,

printer, reporter, editorial writer, and finally owner of his own periodical. Meanwhile, he undertook the task of filling in the rather conspicuous holes of a neglected education. These were large, for Pa Hawkins had never been more than a lukewarm friend of learning. Brann's pursuit of culture was, however, without the friendly help of the handy night-school, or correspondence-school, both now so common. Thus he was thrust into the dual rôle of learner and teacher. After a fashion this self-instruction of his was successful. For today his collected writings require a dozen volumes to hold them, and his vocabulary is rated as larger than that of any other writer ever heard of South of the Potomac. The reader who dares to approach him without a dictionary of phrase and fable at hand is either very learned or very foolhardy. Brann was a colossal reader, and he had a perfect memory.

Of the various vocations at which he tried his hand that of the newspaper man made the strongest appeal to him. Gradually he worked up a considerable reputation as an editorial writer on the smaller Illinois papers. Then he wandered to Missouri, where he wielded his pen for the benefit of the once-eminent *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Finally he landed in Texas. In the Lone Star State there were, at that time, hardly more than three newspapers of any appreciable glory. In point of news the *Houston Post* and the *Galveston-Dallas News* ranked first, and of the two, the *Post* was the more stalwart. It was the favored journal of the haughty Houston *noblesse*, and was immaculately conservative. Beside its news items, it also ran the usual

assortment of patent-medicine announcements, church notices, and editorial moralizings. When occasion demanded there was included a directory of Houston's red-light district, with the names and addresses of the more prominent madames and their internes. Brann joined the *Post*, and soon his pen earned for him the title—but not the salary—of chief editorial writer. But for so conservative a journal his outlandish views, expressed as they were in a lush and scintillating lingo, were the source of frequent annoyance and no inconsiderable embarrassment. Stirring up cesspools and allowing the resultant stench to shock the squeamish was ever one of his delights. Fortunately for the owners of the *Post*, their chief editorial writer was already a Benedict with a family, and thus for a time at least his superiors were able to keep him within bounds with the cudgel of threatened dismissal. But the patience of even a Benedict with a family has its limits, and so, finally worn weary by the constant necessity of checking his opinions to suit those of somebody else, Brann quit the “fecular *Post*.” This was in 1891—the time when, as he calls it, he suddenly “became pregnant with an idea.” Concerning this unusual predicament he later said:

Being at that time the chief editorial writer on the Houston *Post*, I felt dreadfully mortified, as nothing of the kind had ever occurred before in that eminently moral establishment. Feeling that I was forever disqualified from the place by this untoward incident, I resigned and took sanctuary in the village of Austin, and as swaddling clothes for the expected infant I established the *Iconoclast*.

## II

In July of the same year appeared the first issue of the *Iconoclast*. It is doubtful whether the good people of the “village of Austin” have ever quite recovered from the shock. Critical opinion at the time was almost undivided. Only the Austin *Statesman* showed any leniency. It saw the new monthly's mission as an attempt “to make a large quantity of Sheol, and to make a

good sized portion of the human race wish they or it had never seen the light of day.” Brann's paper, said the *Statesman*, “strikes at pretty much everything it sees and at quite a number of things it don't (*sic*) see, but imagines it does, and it strikes below the belt with both hands, and doesn't scruple to use its teeth.” There were many other more caustic and also several more grammatical objections and on the whole, there was little doubt that the inhabitants of Austin did not care very much for the *Iconoclast*. For a time Brann stuck to his guns, but soon his lack of cash forced him to suspend publication.

He returned to the *Globe-Democrat* in St. Louis, but stayed only long enough to become initiated into the mysteries of the lecture platform. Then the deserts of Texas called him once more. This time it was to San Antonio, where he proceeded to serve a couple of years as editor of the *Express*. Here, again, he raised the ire of numerous readers—especially of the gentlemen of the cloth, who did not relish his pronouncements that “too many preachers imagine that a criticism of themselves is an insult to the Almighty,” and that a certain well-known Baptist divine was “not even an itch bacillus.” On the Houston *Post* such malicious persiflage would certainly have wrought its author's immediate dismissal. On the *Express*, however, matters were somewhat different. Not that its owners were more tolerant or more fearless. Theirs was merely a better business sagacity. For, after all, hundreds of sinful readers bought the *Express* simply to enjoy the heretical shots of its editor. And so the owners did the wise thing—for their pocket-books: openly they remonstrated with their fiery money-getter, and secretly they supported him.

Brann's services as a lecturer were now in great demand, for the infidels of those wastes had all heard of him. With ever increasing profit he discoursed to them on “Gall,” “Humbug,” and “Iconoclasm.” By 1894 he had apparently lost all save a nominal interest in the idea with which

he had once been so scandalously pregnant. Now, for a consideration, he relinquished even this little. Before the end of the year he sold his disused printing press and the name *Iconoclast* to O. Henry, then a druggist's clerk at Austin, but already full of literary yearnings. Only two numbers were ever issued by the new owner. Then, of a sudden, the editor of the *Express* once again became pregnant with his idea. The fact that O. Henry had transformed the once bitter *Iconoclast* into a humorous weekly may or may not have been one of the causes of his relapse. At any rate Brann repurchased his paper, and by February, 1895, he moved to Waco and resumed its publication. He called it, sardonically, "The Official Organ of the Texas Ministers."

Brann believed, and very shrewdly, that for his business of assailing quacks and shams no more suitable place than Texas existed. Once, when he was asked to "touch up those intolerant Jerseyites" he preferred to be excused on the ground that "Texas can furnish forth more hidebound dogmatists, narrow-brained bigots and intolerant fanatics in proportion to the population than can any other section of these United States." The *Iconoclast* was not revived with the expectation that it would "drag the Golden Age in by the ears or pull the millennium before it is ripe." No, Brann merely hoped that "if it can but recover a few square acres of Mother Earth from the domain of Falsehood and Folly . . . it will not have lived in vain." And so unmolested now by decorous superiors, he gave full blast to his unbridled heresies. At once he found himself in bitter conflict with the ancient stock company of preachers, pedagogues, and other such obscurantists. They vilified him with Christian passion and charged him with being a shallow attitudinizer. But as usually happens in such instances, the *Iconoclast* steadily waxed stronger and more buxom, and though it cost more than ten times the price of an ordinary paper, nevertheless within three years it was able to attain a

circulation of ninety thousand. It was almost devoid of advertising, had no covers, and contained no illustrations. Right, indeed, was the befuddled Waco critic when he described it as "as much a miracle as the parting of the Red Sea."

Which side Brann would take on any question no one could ever accurately foretell. The safest guess was that it probably would be the unpopular side. Thus he proceeded to tell his readers that "Alexander of Macedon was the most miserable failure known to human history—with the possible exception of Grover Cleveland." He hurled his thunderbolts, too, at the then popular "Quo Vadis," which he called a "mental moon-calf," which, where "it is not morally corrupt and bestially bad, is either puerile or blasphemous." Upon "Trilby," then being devoured by all the Texas *intelligentsia*, he bestowed a similar order of merit. He hauled out his full artillery against "Fake Journalism," such as he had encountered in the sanctum of the "Holy Houston *Post*." He scoffed at the Monroe Doctrine: "Uncle Sam's promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine proves him a fool; Europe's frantic objection to it demonstrates that she is a knave." His diatribes against the advocates of drought, while dreadfully archaic to-day, were new and original in his own age. "The Prohibs," he told his customers, "probably mean well, but they are incapable of learning, even in the school of experience, that just so long as whisky is made, it will be drunk—that Prohibition means simply a poorer brand of booze." For the frills and fancies of the fashionable world he had little use, and nothing enraged him more than the marriage of American money to a foreign title. At such times he would become almost frantic. Thus, when the American democracy was swooning with plebeian delight while the Duke of Marlborough and Consuelo Vanderbilt were preparing themselves for the wedding of the season, the editor of the *Iconoclast* made so bold as to inquire "who the devil these two were." Without waiting for a reply

he proceeded to announce that the Duke was "a tough of toughs who has a head like a Bowery bouncer and the mug of an ape who has met with an accident." As for the bride, she was "a long, gaunt, skinny young female whose face would frighten any animal but a pauper Duke."

But Brann's heaviest cannonading was saved for those consecrated Christian men who still harry the poor South. He defended the Jews and refused to denounce the Catholics, and thus laid himself open to the ancient charge of being a Jesuit in disguise. He denounced and ridiculed the American Protective Association, an anti-Catholic organization which long antedated the Ku Klux Klan, the Bible Crusaders, and the Methodist Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals. Taking up the Bible itself, he excoriated what he called its lies, absurdities, and obscenities. He defended Potiphar's wife and poked fun at the "he-virgin, Joseph." About Jonah he said that there seemed to be plenty of "pictures of the Prophet walking ashore, with the lower jaw of the whale for a gang-plank. The kodak fiend seems to have been waiting for him, but the ubiquitous interviewer failed to get in his graft." The broadside which bowled over every Christian minded inhabitant of the Lone Star State portrayed Christ secretly returned to earth and the milieu of hypocritical Texas.

### III

But in ripping out the Bible's defects the editor of the "Great Religious Monthly" did not restrict himself to the use of vitriol. Sometimes the pace of his pen would become less scorching. It is such moments that his apologists had in mind when they used to speak of his religion. Thus he would burble:

What matters it whether we call our Creator Jehovah or Jupiter, Brahma or Buddha? Who knoweth the name by which the seraphim address him? Why should we care whether Christ came into the world with or without the intervention of an earthly father? Are we not all sons

of the Most High God—"bright sparkles of the Infinite?" Suppose that the story of the Incarnation (older than Jerusalem itself) be literally true—that the Almighty was the immediate father of Mary's child: is not the birth of each and all of us as much a mystery, as great a "miracle," as though we sprang full-grown from the brow of Olympian Jove?

Speaking of God, he once affirmed: "I seek to know nothing of His plans and purposes. I ask no written covenant with God, for He is my Father. I will trust Him without requiring priests or prophets to indorse His note." There is obviously an echo of Ingersoll here. And there is another in this:

I know nothing of the future: I spend no time speculating upon it—I am overwhelmed by the Past and at death grips with the Present. At the grave God draws the line between two eternities. Never has man lifted the somber veil of Death and looked beyond.

Brann was very proud of his self-acquired learning and loved to heave classical allusions at his audience. In a single passage he mentioned Diana's bosom, Memnon's martin hymn, Zephyrus' musky wing, the Rubicon, and Gehenna's sulphurous hills. On a single page he cited Goethe, Shakespeare, Dante, and Byron. His style, when he spat on his hands, became a weird mélange of Ingersollian oratory and Elbert Hubbard's worst babble:

In a city beyond far seas there dwelt a youth who claimed not land nor gold, yet wealthier was than sceptered sovereign, richer far than fancy ever feigned. The great round earth, the sun, the moon and all the stars that flame like fireflies in the silken web of night were his, because garnered in the salvatory of his soul. And the beaded dew upon the morning-glories, the crimson tints of dawn, Iris' bended bow and all the cloth-of-gold and robes of purple that mark the royal pathway of the descending sun; the perfume of all the flowers, the bulbul's sensuous song, and every flowing line that marks woman's perfect form he hoarded in his heart and gloated as a miser does his gain. And the youth was in love with life and held her to his heart as God's most gracious gift.

His customers wallowed in this rubbish. But they liked him best, perhaps, when he was on the other tack:

Mrs. Bradley-Martin's sartorial kings and pseudo-queens, her dukes and Du Barrys, princes and Pompadours, have strutted their brief hour upon

the mimic stage, disappearing at daybreak like foul night-birds or an unclean dream—have come and gone like the rank eructation of some crapulous Sodom, a malodor from the cloacæ of ancient capitals, a breath blown from the festering lips of half-forgotten harlots, a stench from the sepulcher of centuries devoid of shame. Uncle Sam may now proceed to fumigate himself after his enforced association with royal bummers and brazen bawds; may comb the Bradley-Martin itch bacteria out of his beard, and consider, for the ten-thousandth time, the probable result of his strange commingling of royalty-worshipping millionaire and sanscullicotic mendicant—how best to put a ring in the nose of the golden calf ere it become a Phalaris bull and relegate him to its belly.

Toward the end of his life Brann's lectures were drawing full houses, with the "Standing Room Only" placard hung out. Everywhere he went he was stormed by ecstatic admirers. It was one of his special delights to flaunt his success in the face of the Texas pastors, who were tortured by the problem why the Almighty did not strike down this fiend from Hell. To his friends, Brann was sometimes serious and sad. "I am only a fad," he once said. "I'll pass away when my vogue is done." Like Ingersoll, he made the Bible as popular as a new novel. The more he trampled upon it, the more the pious would dash to its defence. Again like Ingersoll, the Advocate was the possessor of a crude but killing repartee. To a certain A. L. Jenks, who once was so bereft of reason as to rush to the editor of the *Iconoclast* a criticism of his grammar, Brann replied: "Thanks, Jenks. Even the best of us will inadvertently get over on the haw side of the median line in our syntax sometimes, and I am so grateful to you for setting me right that I will not only put your name in print and immortalize you as the prize jackass of your day and generation, but tell you a little story—in the humble hope that all your busy tribe of professional grammar sharps and pestiferous pismires will profit by it."

Obviously, these antics were in time almost certain to kindle a homicidal mania in their Christian victims. No self-respecting protagonist of the Confederate brand of Christian charity could ever have

been expected to love such an enemy as Brann. Here he was defaming the noblest ideals that immaculate Texas had ever cherished. "The Lord never yet 'called' a preacher to serve for a smaller salary," he announced. And to this he joined the remark that "America sends missionaries to the philosophic Hindus—and licenses houses of prostitution." And that "a Christian world does not remember that the Jews gave birth to Christ, but never forgets that they crucified Him." The good Baptists he humiliated with the taunt that "they were not held under water long enough." And he wrote this:

When a priest or preacher lets slip a curse at those who presume to question the supernal wisdom of his creed, the angels are supposed to flap their wings until Heaven is filled with flying feathers, while every blatant jackass who takes his spiritual fodder at that particular rick unbraids his ears and brays approvingly.

#### IV

Sudden and unheralded, an opportunity for Christian reciprocity presented itself. Providence, in its infinite wisdom, was all the while on the side of the saviors of Texas. So it sent them a so-called fugitive nun and an ex-priest by the name of Slattery. These stopped at Waco, where they were received with gusto by the local Protestant divines. Lectures of enlightenment were organized and many a hard-earned Baptist and Methodist dollar flowed into the coffers of this quaint couple. For its money, however, the audience demanded a fair exchange. And so Slattery and his "nun" did their best to paint a harrowing picture. Convents were depicted as bagnios, wherein the sisters were the mistresses of lecherous priests.

One night Brann was present at one of these pious gatherings, and when the exposition grew amicably warm and titillating, he was lamentably incapable of exercising Christian self-control. So he jumped from his place, and, pointing his finger at Slattery, shouted: "You lie and you know



it, and I refuse to listen to you." Then he tried to go home. But the Baptist throng objected. It aspired to finish Brann on the spot. Unfortunately, however, the Waco police were on the job, and so he was saved.

Eager for a return match under somewhat more equitable conditions, Brann, soon thereafter, hired the same house, where at his own expense he replied to Slattery. The ex-priest's threat that he would sue Brann for libel met with defiance and reviling. He denounced Slattery as "a malicious liar and a blatant bully" who had been kicked out of his priestly job for immorality. The "ex-nun" consort, moreover, Brann exposed as an artless *fille de joie* whose only institutional environment had been, not a convent, but a Canadian reformatory. Slattery and his "nun" suddenly evaporated without waiting to press the charge of libel. The Baptists felt that they had been horribly duped.

But to trick the pious is a dangerous game. Their resentment was transferred to Brann. The next time, assuredly, the police would use saner judgment. And the next time soon came. It started at Baylor University, a citadel of Baptist higher learning and the pride of Waco. A fourteen-year-old Brazilian girl, brought to Baylor as the ward of the Baptist Church, was outraged by the brother of the son-in-law of Baylor's president. At once Brann fired off one of his tremendous shots: "Baylor in Bad Business." The victimized girl, he said, "cannot cast a single vote" but the "Baptist Church holds the political destiny and offices of this judicial district in the hollow of its hand. Of course she may get justice—but it's a hundred to one shot." Hardly had this prognostication been set in print, when the brother of the son-in-law of Baylor's president was liberated without trial. Now the Idol Smasher banged off a whole broadside:

The Baptists will continue to send missionaries to Brazil to teach the heterosclian heathen what to do with their young daughters, and the godly people to rail at prize-fighting as a public disgrace

—while Antonia Teixeira clasps her fatherless babe to her childish breast . . . and wonders if God knows there's such a place as Texas.

That night a group of male Baylor partisans visited Brann. With them they brought ropes and revolvers, for it was their mission to defend "the honor of Southern womanhood," which, they maintained, he had shamelessly traduced. With the connivance of the police these young Galahads dragged the traducer of Southern womanhood out upon the campus of their Baptist alma mater. There it was their intention to hang him. But after a while better counsels prevailed—or was it Brann's luck? Whatever it was, the defenders of Southern womanhood were content to appease their indignation by administering a merciless clubbing. Then they made Brann sign an apology for his alleged offence. Finally, after forcing him to promise to quit Waco the very next day, they permitted him to go home.

The next day came and with it the anticipation of Brann's promised exodus. In the interim, however, the editor of the *Iconoclast* had thought things over, and he had come to the conclusion that with his departure Waco would lose the major portion of its charm. Consequently, instead of keeping faith with the chivalrous youths who had treated him so magnanimously the night before, he resolved to be a dutiful citizen rather than an upright gentleman. So he hobbled to his sanctum, where he enjoyed "the first holiday in fifteen years" by telling his readers:

I have been publicly warned on pain of death, and Heaven alone knows what hereafter, not to speak "disrespectful" against Baylor; but I feel in duty bound to caution parents against committing their children to such a pestiferous plague-spot, such a running sore upon the body social.

To this he added that he hoped Baylor would not continue to manufacture ministers and Magdalens. An uproar followed, and this time Brann was beaten up by three adult defenders of Southern womanhood. But again his good fortune saved him from death.

Twice, now, he had been in the clutches of the pious. Twice he had returned from his punishment, refreshed and revitalized, ready to give back much more than even measure for what he had received. Such a game, however, was obviously bound to be a losing one. For one thing, Texas swarmed with Baptists, and all of them were more than eager to do their share. For another thing—and this is perhaps somewhat more important—Texas was not bothered by such foolishness as a concealed weapons law. Then there was Tom E. Davis, a bulwark of Baylor and a social pillar, about whom Brann once wrote that “he was the kind of a dog who wouldn’t hesitate to shoot you in the back.” These words were prophetic. One late April afternoon in 1898, when Brann was strolling downtown, he felt the sudden burn of a bullet in his back. Before he completely kicked over, however, he had a chance to face his foe, and to empty his own revolver into him. When the danger was over, the police arrested Brann, who, though well punctured, was still half-conscious. During the night both men died.

Waco now heaved a sigh of relief. The newspapers lauded the great “courage” of Tom Davis, “whose loyalty to the town and whose devotion to his family brought about his premature and unfortunate demise.” The *Times-Herald* openly avowed its veneration for him, “though it makes no war upon the dead.” Upon the bier of

Davis, it said, “we will lay the myrtle of never-dying remembrance. Over the coffin of the other let the mantle of forgetfulness rest.” Another journal with the word *Christian* at its head explained that Brann had been killed “because he had slandered his slayer’s daughter,” that, of course, it regretted the bloodshed, but that there was such a thing as “an unwritten law which required the death of a man who would slander the female relatives of another.” Baylor also “regretted the bloodshed.” Yet since its fallen foe had cast off no eleventh hour repentance, it was “sure that no women would attend the funeral, and that no flowers would be sent.” Its prediction, however, was somewhat erroneous, for “hundreds of men and women who had no carriages walked from his home over two miles to the cemetery.” And as to flowers, “no greater profusion was ever seen on any other grave in Waco, or, perhaps, in Texas.”

Brann was not a hero. Many, and perhaps most of his utterances were unalloyed nonsense. His attitude towards the Negro was worse than even the traditional stand of the Southerner. But in his main activity as a smasher of fakes and shams, he did what should have been a useful work. His efforts, however, came to naught. Texas is worse today than it was before he began. His prediction that he was only a vogue, and that after his death he would be forgotten, has been turned into truth.

# THE SACRED POESY OF THE SOUTH

BY CLAY FULKS

THOSE bilious Eastern critics who are scornful of the scarcity and contemptuous of the quality of literary production in the South have strangely overlooked one prodigious output of the artists of that great section. I refer to the voluminous, consecrated writings of the Fundamental prophet-bards who rage and roar from the Potomac to the Gulf. This host of psalmists flourishes throughout the South and, when not driven by the cruel requirements of the flesh to hoe cotton or waste time in other worldly pursuits, its members lift their lays to the Saviour and teach singing-schools. In the more bucolic communities they bear with becoming gravity the impressive title of professor; and throughout vast areas the names of Professors Patton, Perry, Showalter, Mosley, Eagle and scores of others are household words. Dozens of Southern publishing concerns pour forth perennial floods of their lyric verse, flavored with home-made choral music; the anthologies thereof are almost as numerous as Autumn leaves. So there is little excuse for the ignorance of contemporary Southern letters betrayed by, say, Messrs. Van Doren and Krutch. The most casual survey of Southern hymnody should moderate the judgment of those who rashly conclude either that the South has no literary genius or that her Miltons are mute and inglorious.

The rustic Southern literati could, no doubt, write heavy scientific treatises, terrible fiction, and profound secular histories if they wanted to. But why, they argue, clutch at the cheap, ephemeral honors of this world? Why trifle with the vain inventions of impious men when they may be

laboring in the vineyard of the Lord? Why grieve the Spirit by bowing to strange Baals? This deliberate rejection of science and its handmaiden, prose, is exemplified by the eminent poet, Loy E. Foust, who, after abjuring fiction and the other foibles of the learned world, exclaims:

Take all your science, you old monkey man,  
Deny, if you will, the great creation plan;  
Just follow the Devil, for he loveth the crook,  
But give me the blessed old Book!

Nor does any prostituted Muse or hireling bard pollute the sacred scroll on which their poetry is writ. They sing:

Lord, I care not for riches,  
Neither silver nor gold,

and,

Here to earthly fortune I  
Have forever said good-bye.

Another eminent poet, Lethal A. Ellis, in "Is There a Dollar Mark on Your Soul?" thus portrays the meanness of the acquisitive spirit:

Some will live in great want and need,  
Thinking only of gain and greed,  
And cheating both the young and old;  
They have heard the orphan's cry,  
With a frown they've passed them by,  
For they had that dollar mark on their soul.

These holy Southern troubadours invoke only the sacred Muses; they sing the glad, immemorial songs of Jehovah and the Holy Ghost, of Moses and the Lamb. No infantine jingles about sixpence and pockets full of rye; no voluptuous, unseemly songs about peeping at Susie; no Lydian lyrics of women and wine; no epics of any doughty heroes save soldiers of the cross; in short, no mere worldly themes engage their gen-