

THE OLD-TIME RELIGION

BY KENNETH CAMPBELL

MY PARENTS were members of the Christian Church, and long before I could read and write, I knew that we must excuse as ignorant, misguided, or vindictive those Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians who insisted on calling our denomination "Campbellites". For was it not clearly written in the New Testament that the disciples were first called *Christians* at Antioch? And was there any Biblical authority for *Baptist*, *Methodist*, or *Presbyterian*? Obviously the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians had taken liberties with Holy Writ. We risked no such tamperings with the Word of God. Our creed, short and modest, was: "Where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent."

We Christians gave much thought to the errors of the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. There was always the hope that they might be reclaimed. But no similar hope was fostered for the few Catholics and Episcopalians in town. From what we knew of their

departure from the teachings of the Good Book, we judged them already in outer darkness, far beyond the light of salvation. The Catholics worshipped idols, paid priests to forgive their sins, were ready, willing, and even anxious to kiss the Pope's big toe. The Episcopalian preachers (the use of the word *rector* was, in an attempt to curb village ribaldry, discouraged in our community) actually wore nightgowns in the pulpit! All these pagan shenanigans horrified us, and made us realize how doubly fortunate we were in belonging to the One True Church.

Vigorous in our defense of the faith, ardent in our prayers for the unregenerate, we nevertheless, as a body, did not stress religion all the week. Like our best clothes, it was in effect stored from Sunday to Sunday. No Christian adult doubted it was sinful to absent himself from Sunday services; no Christian child but felt himself flirting with the fiery pit if he played hookey from Sunday school: it was plainly set forth in the Bible that the first

day of the week was to be observed by the Faithful. But few under sixty had come to think of the Wednesday evening prayer-meeting as essential to safety in the life beyond. Certainly there was nothing in the New Testament that set Wednesday as a date for worship. There was, furthermore, nothing there indicating the necessity for the family altar, which the preacher occasionally sought to establish in the homes of his flock. His efforts thus to improve on the outline of salvation met, I believe, with total defeat. I was seventeen, and visiting Presbyterian friends, before I knew family worship as part of a daily routine.

My formal religious education, then, was confined mainly to the Sunday school. It has been years since I have attended Sunday school, but I understand that modern youngsters resent going, and are so stubborn in their refusals that anxious parents are consulting psychiatrists. Claiming no psychiatric skills, I think the statement of the problem a simple one. Nowadays, I hear, Sunday-school teachers are trained; therefore they must naturally attempt to teach in a somewhat formal manner, reflecting, even though perhaps faintly, the schoolchild's weekly existence. Therein lies the rub.

With us, Sunday school was unlike anything else the week had offered. It was a social gathering where instruction was an entirely negligible force. We liked it.

There we sang boisterously a few songs like *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* and *Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam* (called hymns with a superb disregard for hymnology), and then rushed pell-mell to our "room". Our teacher was always a popular matron or maiden lady, unless, by chance, there had been found a settled young girl who could be counted on not to dance or to play cards. Pedagogically in advance of her time, our teacher had discovered the modern educational principle of allowing children to do as they pleased. Manners that would have brought out the peach-tree switch or razor-strop at home were countenanced smilingly by this martyr.

In the midst of our unbridled exuberance, our teacher tried woe-fully hard to interest us in the memorizing of Golden Texts, and in the Bible stories illustrated in color on our lesson cards. Although unimpressed by the *raison d'être* of the cards, we liked them for themselves, and regarded them as high art. The infant Moses, none the worse for his solitary voyage in the basket, smiled up happily at

Pharaoh's daughter, who, apparently in no hurry to take her plunge, directed his rescue from the river bank. The ravens hovered over Elijah, whose upstretched hands indicated his implicit trust in the dietary discretion of the birds. Christ, just delivered of the Beatitudes, floated miraculously in a small cloud on the mountain. Adam and Eve in the Garden, a popular number because of its questionable modesty, was the card most treasured by juvenile collectors.

Our teacher struggled courageously to teach us, by the Socratic method, whatever of virtue there was in the historical incidents depicted on our cards, but usually resorted, after a few moments, to a rapid summation of her own. This good woman had, there is little doubt, the stuff of heroes in her, else she could not have endured the weekly thirty minutes alone with a group of uninhibited brats who, by interruptions, personal disputes, and primitive attempts at practical joking, made any orderly procedure impossible. Only a full share of the Holy Spirit restrained her, I am now convinced, from kicking us severally back into the church auditorium when the lesson period was over.

We learned even less of religion

at day school. The Bible reading (muttered without comment by the teacher) was followed by the Lord's Prayer recited in unison. The cumulative value of this species of daily devotions may be guessed from the fact that we were never able at the end to agree on the exact order of "the kingdom, the power, and the glory". These phrases I mastered only years later, when I found them printed in the Book of Common Prayer.

It was at home, under the simple guidance of my own curiosity, that my interest in the Bible was stimulated. In the bookcase, with the Complete Works of Dickens, Thackeray, Eliot, and Scott, was a copy of *The Bible Gallery*, illustrated by Gustave Doré. This book enchanted me. Being used to no art more elevated than *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, I here had my circumscribed little soul lifted to the heights. The Flood, where man and beast forgot their natural enmity in desperate attempts at self-preservation, filled me with an ecstatic horror. Samson Slaying the Lion inspired me with dreams of physical prowess. Belshazzar's Feast depicted an architectural spaciousness that aroused my esthetic appreciation even before I knew what architecture was. I saw Jesus Walking on

the Water, and there grew in me a belief in miracles that still persists. The dark mood of *The Crucifixion* drained the sunlight from the bright day outside, and taught me the beauty of tragedy before I knew the Greeks had a word to say on the subject.

The text accompanying these pictures led me to read the various chapters indicated in the Bible itself. Today, when critics condemn certain movies as vicious, and dangerous to the morals of children, they are answered by others who submit certain portions of the Bible as immoral, and consequently perilous to the young. It has not remained for me to call such a procedure the cheap thing that it is. It is granted that some portions of the Bible, studied from an adult point of view, contain elements that are to some persons immoral. But to the ordinary child, only "the story" stands out, and he is at no pains to subject the narrative to a moral scrutiny. Perhaps it was criminal for Abraham to frighten young Isaac nearly to death on the mountain; perhaps the boy was, from that day on, a neurotic. I saw in the story only the devotion of an old man to his God, and his anguish at thinking he had to slay his beloved son. Perhaps Ruth was a forward hussy to lay herself invitingly at

the feet of Boaz. I did not think of her as a delinquent. To me, she was the faithful woman whose speech beginning "Intreat me not to leave thee" represented the epitome of loyalty and self-sacrifice. Perhaps Christ was a Communist, one whose ideas put into practice would destroy our economic system. To me he said, "Suffer little children to come unto me", and thereby illuminated childhood with an hitherto unsuspected dignity and glory.

II

Until I was eleven, the Bible was a source of comfort. Then, instead of continuing to leave church after Sunday school, I began sitting through the preaching service immediately following, and realized that I must have misunderstood entirely the purpose of the Bible. It was not a collection of inspiring, exciting stories; it was the Word of God, and by its standards I was a lost soul. From its pages the preacher proved that the unbaptized could never "enter the kingdom of Heaven or partake of the joys therein". Using it as a syllabus, he expatiated on the sins deadly to the Christian life — dancing, card-playing, theater-going, drinking. These four he described repeatedly

in minute detail. They were to him a quartet of horrors, but were apparently as nothing compared to another sin he excoriated — “the sin of the flesh”. This special sin he did not anatomize, but I guessed vaguely that all the others were but as mileposts along the Broad Highway leading toward it.

The thoughts of sin confused me. At eleven, I had no first-hand knowledge of any of the pitfalls mentioned, but from the preacher’s descriptions I concluded that they all seemed agreeable, and that the one mysterious sin — “the sin of the flesh” — must be downright pleasant. I suspected my impressions to be in some way faulty, for from the pulpit the preacher assured me weekly of the one distinctly unpalatable feature common to all the sins: they damned me to eternal fire if I did not take steps to combat them. And I was in a state of sin whether I realized it or not. Baptism “of the water and of the Spirit” — that was the only hope of safety in this world and the one to come. The Lord had no pity on procrastinators.

Convinced of my unsaved and extremely dangerous position, I delayed each week the necessary steps to salvation. All I had to do to make the Devil howl in defeat was to make the profession of faith and

submit to baptism. But each Sunday, when the invitation hymn was sung, the Devil drew a red herring across my path. He hinted that maybe I ought to sin a little before I gave up the evil of the world. And so I had the experience of going through my first “protracted meeting” as an unsaved soul.

Our meeting was held in the Summer, during the month when both townsfolk and farmers could most easily attend. As the church was too small to accommodate the crowds attracted, services were held in a renovated warehouse. The standpatters of other denominations scoffed openly at the idea of worship in a former tobacco storehouse, but our leaders attributed such criticism to jealousy. For what other church in town was financially able to hire “a world-famous evangelist” and his chorus leader?

These other churches were also suspected of being fearful of losing members who, attracted by the novelty of worship in a warehouse, would incidentally hear, for the first time, the Good Tidings correctly interpreted. They made efforts, none too secret, to prevent their members from affiliating with us during the meeting. And though they were successful with their more docile adults, theirs was, with

their children, a lost cause. While our meeting was in progress, the other Sunday schools were lamentably small. One Baptist sister made herself annually very unpopular by trying to waylay the urchins of her church as they passed in droves on Sunday morning to the then-hallowed site of the warehouse. Even threats that they would be disbarred from attendance at the annual Baptist Sunday-school picnic were fruitless. Well the children knew that the Campbellites would, at the close of their meeting, stir up a picnic of proportions to make the Baptist outing an amateur event.

The church furniture in the converted warehouse was rigidly unecclesiastical. For pews, there were folding chairs rented from undertaking establishments in the nearest city; for pulpit, a table placed in the center of a large platform raised four feet from the floor. The table was flanked on either side with chairs for the evangelist, our deacons and elders, visiting ministers of the faith, and an occasional clergyman of another denomination—the sporadic harbinger of that spirit which today would prove all denominations alike under the skin, and even the Jew and the Christian to have so much in common that they are not justified

in remaining apart. At the back of the platform were seats for the chorus and the orchestra, the latter being composed of a piano, a violin or two, and whatever brasses were available. Over the platform floated banners bearing no strange device, but such certain truths as “Jesus Saves”, “God Will Take Care of You”, and “Come to Him Today”.

The morning, afternoon, and evening services, primarily for adults, were urged on all who had reached the “age of accountability”. To help us youngsters know when we had arrived at this mystic period in our development, a special worker held daily Bible classes, and another organized a Children’s Choir. We learned all the fundamental Biblical statistics, such as the names of the major and the minor prophets; we sang with roof-lifting abandon. From time to time we were put through our paces at the evening services. Our plaintively flat enunciation of the names of the prophets evoked only smiles of approval from parents and relatives; but one of our songs, set to the tune of *Red Wing*, a popular dance-number of the day, scandalized many pillars of the church. Foot-tapping ditties were unseemly in the praise of the Lord! They had forgotten, soothed the

preacher, that David danced joyously before the Ark. A tune as good as *Red Wing* must not be left unredeemed in the service of the Devil, must not be played only in places where men and women, God save their sinful souls, danced so close together that a sheet of tissue-paper could not be wedged between them. With holy words, *Red Wing* was sweet music to the ears of the Almighty. I hope the evangelist was right, for *Red Wing* became the revival theme song.

Stuffed with statistics, overflowing with rhythm, still I was unsaved. The evangelist did not fail to locate for me the fiery hell I was headed for, but he did not succeed in giving me courage to turn back to the foot of the platform and openly "make confession". I procrastinated with the hope that I was in good health. But I prayed God to warn me in fair time if I were deceived, if I were doomed to an early death. Whenever they sang *O Why Not Tonight?* I was in agony. What if the Lord should harden his heart against me in my iniquity? What if there should be no morning for me? What if I should wake up roasting in hell? How long was eternity? . . . The meeting closed, the saved were joyously counted; but I was not among them.

III

The Sunday before the next revival, my great-aunt Cleora, rustling in taffeta and fanning the heart disease that had made her sacrosanct for forty years, stood ominously before me as I was leaving church.

"Come with me . . . to my carriage . . . Ken."

I walked beside her, and helped her into her low phaeton. Looking straight over my head, she gasped without preliminaries: "I'm not . . . much longer for . . . this world . . . Ken. I'd like to . . . know . . . before I go . . . I'll meet you . . . over there. You are thirteen . . . now . . . and must . . . know right from wrong. Have . . . you thought of . . . giving yourself . . . to God . . . at the big meeting? I shall . . . pray for you . . . child. Drive home . . . Henry."

A clatter of wheels, and she was gone. I stood trembling where she left me, lost to the after-church chatter on all sides. Give myself to God! The words stripped me bare, invaded the deepest privacy of my life. In unutterable consternation, I knew that the good Lord had sent Aunt Cleora to give me fair warning. I saw my duty clear. But Aunt Cleora's phraseology so hor-

rified me that when I reached home and timidly spoke to my mother, I merely said:

"Aunt Cleora wants me to join the church."

Mother placidly closed the oven-door on a pan of biscuits within, looked at me calmly, and replied:

"I have never talked to you about that, Ken, for I felt when the time came you would do what was right. Don't be disturbed by your Aunt Cleora. Take your time about deciding."

Nothing more was said. But I had no peace of mind. The next day I discovered that three of my playmates were undergoing the same emotional turmoil, and, almost by way of a dare, the four of us agreed to make confession the first Sunday of the revival. Our compact was: "I will if you will. Don't you back out, now!"

That Sunday, I could eat no breakfast. Shame, pure shame, had made it impossible for me to tell my parents, and consequently my mother suspected chills and fever. But she postponed the "course of medicine" until that night, and sent me off to Sunday school.

Thus, before the World War, I learned the meaning of "zero hour". Would the time never pass? Would my three companions fail me, and would I have to walk

down the long aisle alone? Would my legs crumple beneath me before I reached the front row of chairs?

The church service began. The four of us sat together, voiceless during the congregational singing, hearts thumping audibly during prayer. Would the dull pump-pump disturb other worshipers, would the ushers ask us to leave the building? Could I plead sudden illness, and leave the three others to their fate? The surrounding congregation became a dim blur before my eyes. I should faint, I knew, when the moment came.

The sermon! The very nature of it added to my terror, but gave me the desperate courage I needed. The discourse was so scented with brimstone that I realized I was just in time to escape dire eternal punishment. What if I should drop dead before the singing of the invitation hymn? But no. My heart held out noisily, the singing began, and above the voices rose the hypnotic tones of the evangelist, pleading with the lost to beware of trying God's patience, to delay no longer, to accept Christ today.

I forgot my three companions. In a stupor, I rose and staggered into the aisle. Then the four of us were huddled together, hands joined, and advancing almost in a

trot toward the front. The evangelist cried high and loud, "Jesus be praised, these young people have seen the light", and we sank into rickety chairs. The last verse of *Almost Persuaded* was repeated — "for maybe the example of these brave boys and girls will lead others to Jesus, blessed be His name" — the congregation rustled itself into avid attention. The evangelist stood over us, and talked long. I heard no word of what he said until he took my hand, and bade me rise.

"Do you, Ken Campbell, believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and do you accept Him as your Savior?"

"Yes," I whispered.

A few nights later, with other candidates for baptism, I sat in a corner of the warehouse. Before us was a sheep-dip of shining galvanized tin. It was filled with water, and in this we were "to be buried with Christ in baptism". The faithful and the curious,

gathered to see us through the ordeal, sang lustily verse after verse of *O Happy Day*.

A girl just immersed stood for a moment on the top step leading from the sheep-dip. Her dripping clothes clung to her body. As I looked at her, Satan made his first recognizable bid for my immortal soul, and I blushed with shame at the thought that she should have worn her corset. I closed my eyes, prayed for forgiveness, prayed that the waters would wash me clean. Then I stood waist-deep in the water, my eyes raised toward heaven. My mind was swept free of everything but the rhythmic spell of *O Happy Day* and the preacher's words:

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

I was plunged under, I was raised, half-strangled, to my feet. Slowly I began the ascent out of the water.

Thus was I saved.



HERO OR HACK ?

THE MERCURY presents herewith two somewhat different reactions to the recent passing of Joe Robinson, the Senator from Arkansas. The first, by Mr. Mencken, appeared in the pages of the distinguished Baltimore Evening Sun, at somewhat greater length. The second, plus several more stanzas, graced the columns of the celebrated North Little Rock (Ark.) Times. It was written especially for the Times by former State Senator Paul R. Grabiell. We offer these two pieces to our readers as AMERICANA, and with the feeling that there may be a lesson in them somewhere.

I. SEMPER FIDELIS

By H. L. MENCKEN

WHEN in response to a natural law which even the wizards in Washington hesitate to monkey with, an American politician is summoned to bliss eternal, the newspapers always print editorials allowing politely that he was a statesman. This has been done of late in the case of old Joe Robinson. There is seldom any objective justification for such post-mortem anointings, and this time there has been none whatever. Old Joe, in fact, was no more a statesman than I am an archbishop. He was, from end to end of his forty years at the public teat, a politician pure and

simple, and he was nothing else.

I use the word in its sorriest sense. I mean by a politician a man who is willing to sacrifice anything at any time, including especially truth, justice, dignity and candor, to get and hold a job. The definition, it will be observed, excludes honest idiots, frenzied fanatics, and the whole confraternity of jitney messiahs. It includes only men who know better, but do worse. In that shabby company old Joe was always a shining light, and toward the end of his days he was its recognized grand master in the Republic.