



Is the World Getting Softer?

THREE mental pictures, seemingly unrelated.

First picture: Sunday morning in July, 1894, in a modest home in Boston. The head of the household, a young clergyman, comes down to breakfast, and from the grave tone of his voice and the tense look around his eyes it is evident even to the six-year-old son that he is deeply troubled. A frightful railroad strike is going on in Chicago, men are being killed, houses burned, women and children wounded; the President of the United States has ordered out the troops. The young minister feels that he *must* know what has happened during the night. His congregation will expect him to know, to make some reference to this awful bloodshed in his sermon or his prayer. Yet how can he know without buying a Sunday paper? And never in his whole life has he bought a Sunday paper. Long and earnestly he and his wife argue, and in the end decide that even in such an emergency they must stand firm. The six-year-old boy looks on in silence.

Second picture: Six years later, and a sunny Saturday afternoon in a Chicago suburb. The family has moved out from Boston and is unpacking its slender belongings and getting settled in the rambling old wooden parsonage with its mansard roof. A knock on the door. The eldest son, now twelve, opens it to find a midget messenger on the doorstep. "You the new parson's kid?" the messenger demands. The bigger boy nods. "Bill Jones sent me. He says to get ready. He'll fight you Wednesday afternoon." The new boy in town has never heard of Bill Jones; there is no occasion for bad blood between them. This he explains to the little messenger as well as he can, and asks for further details. But little information is forth-

coming. Bill Jones is the leader of the Central School gang; of course, the new parson's son will have to fight him.

Sunday, Monday and Tuesday are unpleasant days. No move toward conciliation can be made: that would be only an advertisement of cowardice. Every new boy coming to town must fight; it is the accepted ritual. If the new boy happens to be the parson's boy the obligation is more emphatic, for preachers' sons are traditionally tough. One has to fight for peace and public respect. There is no alternative.

Third picture: A dark night on the campus of an old New England college. A group of tense, white-faced boys kneeling on the ground, six on each side, holding for dear life to a giant "cane." Behind them the dark swaying masses of their classmates, the freshmen and sophomores. A whistle blows, the two fighting mobs move forward, diving with shrill cries for the cane. Blows, curses, sobs, tearing of clothes; finally, after what seems hours of agony another whistle. The hands on the cane are counted, the winning class is declared; those who cannot get up are carried off the field. The annual "cane rush" is done.

Three musty memories, not very important. But sometimes a very little thing gives a clue to greater happenings. Are these three incidents straws in the wind? And are the winds softer than they used to be?

My son, when he started to school, was not called upon to fight for his right to be there. Nor were the sons of my friends, with whom I have checked, though the friends themselves had experiences almost exactly like my own. Is it possible that there is less violence among the young than there was a generation ago?

The "cane rush" was long since abolished, though not until after a student had been trampled to death. Such rushes, and the awful snowball fight with its toll of cut faces and blackened eyes, seemingly have almost disappeared from the American campus. Is there less violence in men of college age than there was a generation ago?

As for the third incident, the Chicago strike, where is there anything in our day that resembles it? Strikes we have aplenty. But even the sitdowners somehow give the impression of naughty schoolboys sticking out their tongues at the teacher. Isn't it a fact that there is far less violence in labor disputes than there was a generation ago?

Is the world, perhaps, in spite of all its disorders, growing tired of violence? It talks violently. It arms for violence. In the treatment of unhappy minorities in Europe, and in the conduct of the Spanish revolution, there has been a shocking recrudescence of the old-time savagery. But isn't it a fair hope that, even with all the talk of war in Europe, there may not be a general war? It is one thing for a ruler or a cabinet to vote for a war when the fighting is to be done in Flanders fields; it is something very different to face the prospect of a war that will be fought over the roofs of London, Paris, Rome, Berlin.

Dictators roar, newspapers print frightened headlines, the armament race goes forward. But to one old-timer, at least, the whole thing sounds somehow hollow. The world got sick of violence in 1914-18. It had been growing less and less fond of violence for quite a while before that. Even as far back as that day in 1900 when, much against my wishes, I had to fight Bill Jones.

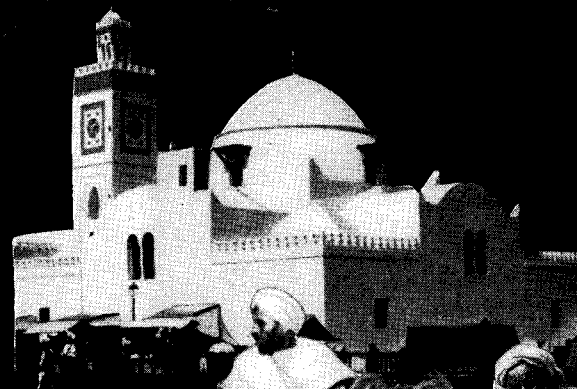
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