

# My Mormon

By HERMANN HAGEDORN

This is another of Mr. Hagedorn's "American Vistas"

I SHOULD have known better. Canaries are not confined to the Canary Islands. I have been told of proselytizing in England, of missionary journeys to the ends of the earth. There is no Chinese wall about the State of Utah, and therefore no reason under heaven why I should be surprised at finding myself dining at Tucumcari, New Mexico, with a Latter-Day Saint. But the sudden discovery, half-way through the meal, leaves me as astounded almost as I might have been if my companion had risen from the chair opposite me and, with every expression of respect, tweaked my nose.

It is a feeble excuse to say to myself that he does not look like a Mormon. The beard of Brigham Young is firmly imprinted on my consciousness; with a simple-mindedness which is spared public punishment only because it is shared by nine-tenths of mankind, I have assumed that all Mormons have beards like Brigham Young. This table companion of mine has no beard at all. His smooth face is no different in general effect from ten million other American faces; there is nothing either in his features or his expression to set him apart from all other respectable young men who make twenty-five dollars a week and "kid the girls" Saturday nights; but he is a Mormon, which for the moment makes all the difference in the world, so far as I am concerned.

I stumble upon his Mormonism as a reward for my flippancy in recounting to him the mishap of a friend who I have just heard has been indicted for bootlegging in company with a Mormon bishop.

I am puzzled why he does not seem to find the joke as funny as I do; then he explains. I throw up my hands; he shows no resentment.

"There's a black sheep or two in every fold," he remarks, "and the Mormons, I guess, have their share; especially the Utah Church. I belong to the Reorganized Church of the Latter-Day Saints. They stick to the Gospel more than the others."

I admit my ignorance; I have never heard of the Reorganized Church; I did not even know that there had been a schism. He enlightens me. When Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church, was killed, away back in the days when the sect was battling for existence with an unfriendly world, two rivals were proposed for the Mormon leadership. One

was Brigham Young, the other the infant son of the founder. Young was a man of extraordinary power; the majority rallied to him, but a remnant remained to found a new Church with Joseph Smith the younger as titular head. From a little town in Iowa the Reorganized Church, I am told, spreads over the earth the gospel of Mormonism. It is a purer Church than the Church of Utah, says my companion. The Bible is its guide, and its members live according to its commandments as no other Christians do. He makes the statement with the unhesitating certitude with which men utter axioms which demand no proof.

But if there are differences between the two branches of the one Church, it appears, they are differences only in tradition and in degree of fidelity to the one unsurpassed revelation.

I watch my Mormon as he consumes his ham and eggs. He might be a traveling salesman, at home in a smoking-car, in heaven at a lodge meeting. I would as soon suspect him of being a classic poet as a religious devotee.

"I'm surprised the way people don't know about the Church," he remarks. "There ain't scarcely no one, you might say, that knows, for instance, that the Mormon Church is the only one descended directly from Christ. Yo' see, after the twelve Apostles died, the Christian Church went into eclipse. It stayed in eclipse for eighteen hundred years, when the angel—it was the angel Moroni—appeared to Joseph Smith up in New York State telling him he was of the order of Melchisedek an' should go an' establish the Christian Church again. So it's almost as if Christ had founded the Church direct. The angel told Joseph Smith where to dig for some tablets, an' he found 'em just where the angel said. They was made of thin gold, an' there was a kind of Egyptian writing on 'em."

"How could he read them?"

"You remember about Urim an' Thummim in the Bible? Well, they was a kind of wonderful glasses, an' when you put 'em together for spectacles you could read anything, it didn't make no difference what language it was in. Well, Joseph Smith got one of his friends, Martin Harris, with a couple of others, to take down his dictation while he sat behind a curtain with the Urim an' Thummim on, an' read the writings like

they was English. An', say, it is a wonderful book. The history of America from before Christ down to about the time Columbus came. People have said it was all fake, but professors are coming round now to see it isn't. What do you call them fellows that dig up things?"

"Archæologists?"

"That's them. Well, some of them are finding things now—towns and cities down in Mexico an' South America—that Joseph Smith described line for line in the Book of Mormon. It's wonderful."

"What happened to the tablets?" I ask, innocently.

My Mormon does not turn a hair. "Oh, they was taken away again by the angel."

"I see," I murmur, bewildered by such faith. "How—how opportune!"

"Eh?" queries my companion, leaning forward. "I didn't catch what you said."

"It was not important. I was talking to myself."

My Mormon, having finished his ham and eggs, pushes the plate from him and attacks a leather-covered slice of machine-made apple pie.

"People, as I said, ought to know more about the Mormon," he goes on. "We preach only the Gospel. It ain't like these other Churches—current events, politics, prohibition, travel lectures, and those sort of things. In our Church we don't pay our ministers. They make their own living at farming or a trade, so they can preach what they want without always havin' to think of the men who pay their salaries. They just say anything they want to, letting it hit where it'll do the most good. The whole faith is built up on the Bible, an' Mormons live up to its teachings more, I guess, than members of any other Church. It ain't that we're better'n other people by nature, I guess, but just that our Church is closer to Jesus Christ than the others, an' so the standard's just higher, that's all."

He says it with a naïve lack of self-consciousness which is as staggering in its way as his credulity. I find myself slightly breathless.

"How do the Mormons stand on polygamy these days?"

"Oh, they're off that. The young people wouldn't stand for it."

"I have heard fine things said of the Mormon women."

"It's right, too. And I guess there's less divorcin' among 'em than anywhere else. Now an' then a couple even goes to the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City an' gets married for eternity."

"For—what was that? For"—

I find my breath leaving me again.

"For eternity. If they've been married regular by a Mormon bishop, they can go an' get married in the inner sanctuary of the Tabernacle for eternity."

"I see, I see. But what if the wife dies and the widower marries again?"

"Well, he can marry her just for this life or he can go to Salt Lake again an' get married to her for eternity too."

I am bewildered by such ingenuity. "Then polygamy has not been given up, only postponed. Is that it?"

That, he tells me, is it.

I feel as though I were hurtling back through ten thousand yesterdays.

It is he himself who brings me back to Tucumcari and the third decade of the twentieth century. He is on his way to Kirtland, Ohio, he says, to visit the central temple of the Reorganized Church. He tried at the railway offices at El Paso to get a job in the offices of the railway at Memphis, but—he laughs—they got on to him.

"What was the idea? I don't quite get it."

"If they'd given me a job at Memphis, they'd have let me have a pass to get there."

"Oh, I see. Then you'd planned to work there for a while?"

"That's what I wanted the general manager to think. I didn't want no job. What I was after was free transportation. Then I'd have hopped the next train for Columbus. I guess I'm out of luck." He laughs.

This little manifestation of what a cynic might term the modernistic approach to the problem of existence gives me a certain sardonic satisfaction. I had been half afraid that my Mormon was a psychic projection of a fictitious character, imperfectly imagined.

Over the cigars he continues to unfold the peculiar Christlikeness of all Mormons. I watch him enthralled, conscious that my Museum of American Character has received an addition which deserves a room to itself.

# Her Wicked Finger

By ELIZABETH WASHBURNE WRIGHT

THE monsoon, due to have broken days before, held back and would not break, and again night like a woolen blanket fell upon Calcutta. It was a suffocating and gasping town.

There was no moon, but the night was full of a great luminousness. The treacherous Hugli, slipping past Fort William and up into the heart of the native town, was silent. On the breast of her the river craft threw black and immense shadows, and the surface of the stream was smooth as a mirror, smooth as a basin of oil. Golden and greasy stars, weary of their own weight, seemed to have dropped from the low-hanging heavens and lay upon that sleek and mirror-like surface to be picked up by any passer-by.

A low hum that rose and fell—almost a moan—hung over the town. Now and then a shadow slipped down the empty roads.

There was no breeze or breath; nothing but the cloud of heavy heat that was not to be stirred, that was weighted with the breathings of thousands of souls, their strange foods cooking, the sickening fumes of incense rising from little shrines, the night fragrance of flowers cloying in their sweetness—the stale offensive breath of a community packed to suffocation and gasping for air.

From across the river there began the muffled steady beating of a tom-tom. A mechanical and rhythmic pounding, expressing dumb endurance, hopeless and hypnotized, to continue without cessation to the very end of time.

In a bungalow under the shadow of the fort three men were dining together. A

*punkah* with a flounce of red cotton swung back and forth over the length of the table. It beat rhythmically like a great red wing—a silent thing stirring the dead air into a semblance of life. The room was lighted with oil lamps that suffused a dull yellowish glow and were turned low to reduce their heat. Behind each man stood his own watchful bearer in wrappings of clean white muslin. At the host's side was stationed a native wielding an enormous fan, fashioned after the manner of a gigantic ax and crudely decorated in swirls of orange and blue paint.

The room had no windows, but numberless doors that opened on a wide veranda. The jungle itself seemed only to stop at this barrier—the reek of it was in the room and the smothering scent of rank flowers in full bloom. Little lizards darted in and out and a steady chorus of insect life rose to a shrill and metallic cadence and sank again in rhythm. Squatting without in the shadows of the veranda, the *punkah-wallah* pulled forever and let slide a rope which vanished through a tiny opening in the wall and suddenly returned.

Conversation, which had lagged and died away, that seemed to follow with unconscious rhythm the eternal sweep and swing of the *punkah*, of a sudden flared up.

"By Jove, opium again—it seems to me the subject can never be left in peace. In the old days there was no trouble about the trade." Efferton, the host, a large florid man, put down impatiently the mango he had been on the point of opening.

"I thought we'd made it plain enough, Cardwell; the Government can't assume responsibility for this trade. There's a great row on at home about it; agitators, busybodies—you know the sort—have scruples about it, talk about 'poisoning the Chinese.' All rot; does 'em good—in moderation. You know—every official in India knows—we'd be in an awful box if the trade were stopped. Where's our revenue to come from? The Puritans at home never seem to give that a thought! We can't tax our poor heathen here any more. Taxation's a ticklish question in any land, let alone out here in the East. Opium pays as nothing else does, and, in my opinion, it's a Godsend to India, and has come to stay. But of course, Cardwell," Efferton interrupted himself quickly, "you understand that this is my 'unofficial' view. Officially we can't support it—I've had it in so many words from the Viceroy himself—we know nothing about it. If you fellows care to run the risk of getting the stuff into China, why, that's your affair. The Government won't heed you; but we don't sanction it, we don't know anything about it. That's our position."

"And does nobody have any sympathy for the Trading Company? What's to become of us?" asked the man addressed as Cardwell, a singularly spare man with a face the color of white leather. "The Chinese are kicking up a devil of a row. They're such obstinate brutes, too—impossible to reason with them. My brother in Canton writes that the Emperor has sent a Commissioner—an old chap named Lin—to stop the trade entirely. Perfectly preposterous! But he's making no