



On Acquiring a Soul

I FOUND my friend the Connecticut farmer in his apple orchard, carefully and tenderly fingering the buds on the end of a low branch.

Not much time was consumed on the usual pleasantries. Very suddenly but casually he said, "I've been worrying about your soul. Now you needn't look so frightened. I've been worrying about my own soul, too. In fact, I've been worrying about all our souls."

Like an obedient Timaeus responding to a challenging opening statement on a metaphysical theme by Socrates, I made the appropriate murmuring sound of "Um-mmm?" with a sufficient rising inflection to indicate my respectful attention and interest.

"Didn't you happen to see that news item the other day about the Congressman who said that war is inevitable with Russia because the Godless Russians have no souls? Well, he advised the Russians to get themselves some souls; until then, there would be no use even in trying to talk to them.

"I wrote to that Congressman and asked him just how you go about getting a soul if you don't happen to have one handy. Listening to him speak, it almost sounded like as though it were a spare part you could acquire by looking through the index of a mail-order catalogue.

"Seriously, I hope he can come up with an answer, for there's a real soul shortage going around these days—and I have a hunch that it may not be localized.

"You know," he said, "you're not a very good conversationalist. You're supposed to interrupt at this point and ask me just what I'm driving at.

At the very least, you could ask me what I mean by soul."

I nodded apologetically. "Yes, of course," I said, "just what is this all about?"

"Well, after I read that news item, I got to thinking about the soul in its relation to the business of making the peace. I'd try to define the soul at this point except that Emerson gave me a good excuse for not doing so when he said that the more you thought about the soul, the greater the difficulty of defining it—and also the smaller the need for defining it.

"Let's take it on the religious level first. Our friend the Congressman seemed to be saying this: if only the Russians could believe in God and religion as the Americans do, then the world might be all right.

"This raises some interesting questions: how do we rate as a model? When we say America is a Christian nation, just what do we mean? If we mean that a good many people go to church on Sunday, yes, I guess maybe we are a Christian nation. But if we mean that we are all guided by Christian principles in our everyday life, and in our dealing with the rest of the world, then I'm not so sure.

"Let's take our friend the Congressman for example. Let us suppose he decided, like the central character in Sheldon's 'In His Steps,' to do nothing that Christ would not have done. Let us suppose that he accepted literally the Sermon on the Mount as Gospel and decided to live out his life according to the Golden Rule. Let us suppose that he decided that his every action would reflect applied Christianity.

"How far do you think he would get? Seriously, now? How long do you think it would be before they marked him down as a crackpot or subversive?

"Suppose he would attempt to in-

voke truly Christian doctrine as the sole guide to domestic and foreign policy. Suppose each time he got up to speak he did it in the spirit of Psalms CV.22 [. . . 'to teach his Senators wisdom.']* Suppose he were to quote from the Sermon in deploring the evil of profit-grabbing and high-pressure lobbying for high prices? Suppose he were to express his sense of the grotesque disparity between Christ's abhorrence of materialism and the American obsession with the dollar? ['Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth . . . but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven']?

"And can you imagine what the uproar would be if he implored our State Department to deal with Russia according to Christ's own precepts—if he urged us to win over Russia through benevolence and brotherliness? Suppose he were to urge that we love our enemies and 'bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you. . . .'

"Now, mind you, I'm not urging anything. Maybe the world isn't ready for true Christianity; I dunno. All I know is that we look pretty awkward sometimes when we strike a pose before the world as the executor of Christ's will.

"What about the large church membership? All right, what about it? Come with me to a nice, respectable church for nice, respectable people. Look around you for persons of somewhat darker skin. How welcome do you think they would be in the midst of people who would feel awfully uncomfortable in the presence of God if they had to brush elbows with the janitor's colored assistant or with the elevator man? I assume that all these nice, respectable people believe in the concept of soul. I wonder if they believe there are restrictive covenants in

Lullaby

By Hassoldt Davis

OUR cousin, the moon, on a golden morning.
Our moon which is blackened and ripe as a plum,
our moon with the grin of a cretin will turn
a bare cheek to us, once we are gone.

Watch from your shallows this golden morning,
the moon, the black disk of it, dwindling;
count the one spark in the hair of the night
and fly from the world of its kindling.

Here is your ghost for a golden morning,
A virginal moon and as black as hell.
Save us the sun as a penny to place
on our eyes, the bright pennies of hell.

heaven which protect the lighter hued souls from direct association with the darker?

"Let's consider for a moment the question of the group soul, or a group conscience, as it concerns all Americans acting as a nation. What do you think happened to our soul at Hiroshima—especially in view of the flat admission later by high military officials that there was no military justification for the bombing and that the war was won without it? And if there was justification for Hiroshima, how about Nagasaki?"

"And if we believe the quality of mercy is not strained, how do you account for all the dawdling and doodling before getting through an adequate relief program for Europe? Three years now since the end of the war. We abolish the UNRRA, saying the job is about done; then we say the job isn't done, but take almost a year before we square away to do it. And what happens to the millions of people who have to live in the meanwhile?"

"No, I'm not griping. I've just been wondering whether we know that the

struggle between the United States and Russia won't be decided by either nation, but by the billion and a half people outside both nations. And I've been wondering how long it is going to be before we understand that no amount of armament will give us security unless we can find it in our bones or in our stars to come up with some real moral leadership.

"But these aren't popular ideas these days. And I'm afraid popularity for too many people means conforming—and conforming means not only playing it safe but suspecting anyone who doesn't conform. You know — and I'm not being sacrilegious — I actually believe that if Christ were alive today he'd be hailed before the un-American Activities Committee.

"I can see from that adding-machine look in your eye that you wonder just what all this amounts to. I'm not sure I know myself. Except perhaps this. That maybe old Montaigne called the turn on it all when he wrote that 'on the most exalted throne in the world we are still seated on nothing but our arse.'" N. C.

Bookmarks

THERE was a time, not so long ago, when many slick-paper writers were shying away from "he said" and "she said" as if those simple and honest locutions were poison ivy, and substituting therefor over-vivid descriptive verbs that distracted the reader's attention from the dialogue to the manner of its reporting—and that is terribly bad writing. The passion has largely spent itself, but enough practitioners of the anti-said school are still flourishing, in a manner of speaking, to cause us some mild concern. We therefore took a modest sampling of a few old-timers—Scott, Cooper, Hawthorne, Poe, O. Henry—to see how they had managed the business. We took the first chapter of one novel, and the second of each of two others because they were the first to contain dialogue, and two short stories complete. The box score:

"Ivanhoe," Chapter I: *Said*, 9; *answered*, 5; *quoth*, 1; *demanded*, 1; *rejoined*, 1.

"The Last of the Mohicans," Chapter II: *Said*, 6; *returned*, 4; *answered*, 2; *asked*, 2; *demanded*, 2; *exclaimed*, 2; *inquired*, 1; *replied*, 1; *cried*, 1; *continued*, 1.

"The Scarlet Letter," Chapter II: *Said*, 2; *cried*, 2; *added*, 1; *interposed*, 1; *exclaimed*, 1; *remarked*, 1; *muttered*, 1; *whispered*, 1.

"The Purloined Letter": *Said*, 41; *replied*, 10; *asked*, 7; *continued*, 3;

observed, 2; *roared*, 1; *interposed*, 1; *suggested*, 1; *exclaimed*, 1; *reasoned*, 1.

"The Gift of the Magi": *Said*, 9; *asked*, 2; *cried*, 2.

Said has sixty-seven of 130 votes cast—a slim but authentic majority. Its closest competitors, *asked* and *replied*, a pretty redoubtable team, have only eleven each.

* * *

Least Biblical, certainly, of all household - word Biblical quotations is "filthy lucre." See I Timothy iii, 3.

For several years we have been wondering, in a vague, purposeless way, if it were possible to shrug anything besides one's shoulders, or to place anything akimbo other than one's arms. We finally got around to consulting the Oxford English Dictionary about the matter, and now have the answers. They are no. To shrug, says the O.E.D., is "to raise (and contract) the shoulders, esp. as an expression of disdain, indifference, disclaiming responsibility, etc." Of akimbo it reports: "Of the arms: In a position in which the hands rest on the hips and the elbows are turned outwards." Akimbo, over the centuries, has appeared as *in kenebowe*, *a kemball*, *a kenbol*, *a-gambo*, and in other similarly cockeyed variants. You might want to know how these words got started. So did we. Shrug is "of obscure origin." Akimbo? "Deriv. unknown." That settles that.

J. T. W.

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