

The
SEVEN
Riddles
of Life

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INTRODUCTION

The Pulpit of the Cross

Friends:

A thousand years before Christ, Homer, one of the world's greatest poets, threw a great challenge into the face of history: namely, how could a man be victorious in defeat and how could a woman be glorious in suffering?¹ Two of his works, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, were like a poetic John the Baptist unconsciously preparing the way of the Lord. The sympathy of the reader of *The Iliad* is directed not to the hero Achilles, but to the conquered Hector, who is painted not only as better than the rest of men but even more important than any of the gods. The poem ends not in the glorious pageantry

of the sack of Troy or in the death of Achilles, but in the lamentation of the Trojans over the corpse of Hector, with whom all heroism passes out of the poem.

As the conquered man is the real hero of *The Iliad*, so the sorrowful woman Penelope is the heroine of *The Odyssey*. While her husband is away on his voyages, for twenty years she remains faithful in loneliness and tears, so that she might have said in the language of another poet, "Sorrow sits on my soul as on a throne. Bid kings come and bow down to it."² This woman's constancy and love were not a mere mechanical obedience to a country's code but, rather, an affirmation of decency and faithfulness amid the anarchy and disorder of the suitors' world.³

For over a thousand years men pondered the mystery of why a poet should make men feel it was worthwhile being like Hector and why he should make women strive to be like Penelope. No answer was given to that riddle of triumph in defeat of a man and joy in the sorrow of a

woman until the day a man unfurled upon a cross of Calvary spoke the word of triumph, “I have overcome the world”⁴ and when a woman beneath the cross, whose heart was pierced with seven swords, became known in history as the cause of our joy. Never before was there a pulpit like the cross, a preacher like the dying Christ, an audience like Golgotha’s, or a sermon like the Seven Last Words.

Beneath that pulpit was that broken flower, that wounded thing, Magdalene, forgiven because she had loved much. And there, with a face like a cast molded out of love, was John. And there, God pity her, his own mother. Mary, Magdalene, John—innocence, penitence, apostolate—the three types of souls forever to be found beneath the pulpit of the cross. And as they listen, they hear the seven answers to the Seven Riddles of Life.



THE FIRST RIDDLE

Hate

*“Father, forgive them,
they know not what they do.”*

The first of life's riddles is why there should be anger, hate, and persecution in a world made by Love. The answer given most often is that men still bear within themselves the traces of their animal origin, and that to preserve one's life, one must seek an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.¹

Calvary's answer to this riddle is quite different. It reveals that hate comes from evil men who cannot stand the reproach of goodness because it makes demands upon them that they are unwilling to accept. The more intense the evil, the greater the fear of goodness. That is

why Supreme Goodness is nailed to a cross. Most of that crowd on Calvary expected the divine Savior to curse and blaspheme as all other condemned men had done. And if there was ever anyone who had a right to protest against injustice it was he whom the wife of a Roman judge had called “the just man.”²

And yet at that moment when a tree of his own creation turned against him and became a cross, when the iron of his earth reacted against him and became nails, when roses rebelled against him and became thorns, at that second when a sickle and a hammer³ combined to cut down the weeds on Calvary’s hill to erect a gallows and drive nails through hands to render impotent the blessings of love incarnate, he, like a tree which bathes in perfume the ax which kills it, lets fall from his lips for the earth’s first hearing the answer to the riddle of hate and anger: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”⁴

Behind these words was a lifetime of teach-

ing as to why we should forgive those who hate us. First, because God has forgiven us greater sins than our enemies have ever committed against us. The man who thinks he has no need of pardon is apt to be the most unforgiving of men. Only the merciful will ever receive mercy. Only the forgiving will ever be forgiven.

And the second reason for forgiving is to prevent the multiplication of hate, which is a seed and grows like a weed. If a number of men are standing in a line and the first slaps the cheek of the second, and the second the third, the only way to stop hate would be for one man in that crowd to turn his other cheek. By doing so he would say, "If I hate you, I add my quota to the sum total of the world's hate. This I refuse to do. I will kill your hate. I will drive it even from the face of the earth. And I will do it by loving you."

The real test, then, of the Christian is not how much he loves his friends (for do not the heathens do this?) but, rather, how much he

loves his enemies. God cannot write on the pages of a heart when they are covered with the scribbling of hate. But he can write straight even with crooked lines on the blank page of he who loves. For by putting love where we do not find it, then everyone becomes lovable.