

THE FIRE-BRINGER¹

Luke XII, 48, 49—"I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with: and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"

ONE of the noblest of the Greek myths tells how Prometheus scaled the wall of heaven, stole fire from the sky, and gave it in blessing to the sons of men. For that too bold love for mankind Jupiter bound him to a great rock on Mount Caucasus, leaving him to the mercy of an eagle which ever pecked at his vitals but could not consume him. At any moment he could have been set free, had he been willing to submit to the lordship of Jupiter; but he preferred to keep a free soul, though his flesh might be in chains and torment. So he endured until the rescuing Hercules slew the eagle, and struck off the imprisoning chains.

A noble myth is the attempt of a primitive, but wondering and reverent, mind to hint at a mystery whose meaning can never fully be explained. These are the hints in that old story: first, there is a spirit among mankind, a vital quickening, best symbolized by fire; second, a lover of mankind must bring it to earth; third, the fire-bringer pays for the gift in his own blood. Now see the ancient myth become life in Christ: "I am come to send fire on the earth . . . but I have a baptism to be baptized with." Jesus is the real Prometheus.

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Men have always been fascinated by fire. We must hope that science will not cancel that wonder. The cheerful hearthstone is still the center of the home; and what would summer be without the camp-fire in the woods? That man is poor in imagination who cannot see "faces in the fire" and a "light that never was on sea or land." What better token of the mystery of the Divine than fire?—ever-changing, never dying—leaping from black embers, coming whence? going whither?—fierce in its consuming, gentle in its light and warmth! To this day in a Brahmin wedding the bride and groom join hands and walk three times round a flame: fire is the witness of their vows, and if they break them fire shall be the avenger! Not strange that, in the old story, God should have guided Israel by a pillar of fire. Not strange that an altar with an undying flame should have been their emblem of a Presence. Not strange that Jesus (the gentle Jesus "meek and mild")—at least, not strange if we understand Him aright—should call Himself the Fire-bringer. It is one of His best names.

Fire has a two-fold energy. It cleanses. The Greek word for fire is "p-u-r": it is our word "pure": we cannot be pure except through some fire-cleansing. We look at a maple-covered hill in the Fall, and remark that it is as red as fire. We speak more accurately than we know: the chemist will tell you that the hillside *is* aflame. The red *is* a fire, God's tide of purifying sent forth to consume decay and make ready the world for another springtime. Fire will destroy almost anything except sterling metal—and therein is a parable. After we have had a contagious disease in the house do we not fumigate by means of smoke from a flame, sometimes burning books and clothing that have been used during the sickness? Fire can cleanse where water would fail. "I indeed baptize you with water," said John the Baptist; "but

He that cometh after me is mightier than I: He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire" . . . When the Great Plague raged in London men despaired of checking it. They seemed to have stayed its ravages, but again and again it would break out once more in this dark alley or that congested dwelling. But the next year came the Great Fire: the city was outwardly destroyed, but the plague was conquered. . . .

Is there not need for a spirit in our modern life that will be as fire to our plagues? Here are some glimpses of our time: officials bribed by corporations for special favors given—the corporations and the officials being equally culpable, both of them making the poor more poor and turning public welfare into a scandal. Congressmen playing politics with a national emergency (able to add to the budget through long practice in the patronage that wins votes, but unwilling to subtract from it) until the rising tide of public indignation threatened to engulf them. Gangsters counting money precious and human life cheap, willing to sink to the bottom-most depth and draw ransom from the grief of a noble-spirited father and mother. Do we not need fire to rid us of our plagues? I do not mean merely punishment or destruction: these would not save us. Nor do I mean merely legislation: that is a poor chisel that can never rid ore of its impurities. I mean a new and passionate motive that will be as furnace-heat to purge the ore of dross and leave the good metal burnished and clear.

Fire not only cleanses: it quickens. We speak of the *flame* of life, the *glow* of enthusiasm, the *warmth* of emotion. In wintertime we have perhaps on occasion returned home to find it cold. It matters not then that the house is beautifully furnished and soundly built: if it is cold, it is cheerless. Cold, quite literally, is death; and warmth is life. The magic that

has brought another springtime to the earth is in the fact that the sun's rays are now shining more directly on us. The story is told of a group of valiant knights waiting near Marseilles in a vessel that would carry them on their Crusade to the Holy Land. Day after day they were becalmed, their venture thwarted, the Sacred City in the hands of those they called infidels. One night they sang from the vessel's prow an old hymn :

"Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire
And lighten with celestial fire,"

and suddenly new breath came from the dying sun, and a breeze to speed them across the sea.

Call that story legend or coincidence: its texture is true. Our age needs the fire of a splendid passion. Indeed, without that passion our purity, could we find it, would not avail us. No virtue is safe unless it is enthusiastic. Jesus was sinless not merely because he abstained from doing wrong, but because He flamed with a love of doing right—and in that flame no sin could live. But our righteousness is not a zeal: graft flourishes almost unrebuked, and candidates eager for office make it a policy to be innocuous both in act and opinion. Why? Oh, because we prefer the system of advancement by drag, of rewards without labor; or because, lacking moral passion, we just do not care. Our generation is clever and cynical (hard and bright like a pavement in the sun), but it does not glow. It is smart, but not eager. Its eyes are sophisticated, but robbed of wonder and the sense of mystery. It breeds dilletantes and critics, but not crusaders. It needs a Fire-bringer!—some breath from the dying sun to stir the stagnant sea, some song to make the spirit childlike, some banner lifted to make us once again followers of the Gleam!

"I am come to send fire on the earth." He was a *purifying* flame: in His presence Peter cried out: "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." In the Temple the traders cowered before Him, not because He carried a whip of small cords, but because His eyes were a light and His majesty a fire.

He was a *quickenning* flame. His was no reasonable doctrine that conformity could accept. Our attempts to accommodate Christianity to the thinking of this age or any other belie Christ and indite our understanding of Him: "Think you that I am come to send peace on the earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division." There was an overmastering zeal about Him—fires below the surface even when His face and teaching were in repose. When it was told Him that "certain Greeks seek thee," He saw in their coming the first-fruits of a worldwide harvest, the token that final victory would be His; and He exclaimed (not quietly in answer to their sober word, but almost in an ecstasy): "I beheld Satan fall like lightning from the sky!" This zeal drew some men to Him, just as it inevitably repelled others. It is not possible to be neutral in regard to a flame. Men loved Him unto their death, or hated Him unto His death. He was a sign of division. "I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled?" If it has caught hold there is nothing more He can desire. But has it caught hold?

It is not easy to arouse mankind to a noble enthusiasm. The young crusader thinks it is: he goes forth waving his firebrand in the confidence that soon the whole world will be burning with the truth that is in him. But he finds the world inert and cold. Do we not need a new penology? Our prison system quite obviously leaves everybody worse: it leaves the man wronged with a more implacable foe, the criminal with a hardened nature, and society with an increased menace on its hands. But how much enthusiasm can

be roused for a new penology? Do we not need a new international order? When our breakfast table speaks to us of half a dozen countries from which its food or implements have come, a world organized in independent compartments is plainly foolish. But how much enthusiasm can be aroused for a new international order? Do we not need a new strategy of peace? If there are six million men unemployed in these United States (and there are many more than six million), and if the money we alone spent in the last war were invested at five per cent, we could give every unemployed man in America one hundred dollars a month in perpetuity, and never touch the capital investment. But where is our overwhelming passion for the outlawry of war? No; it is hard to arouse mankind to a noble enthusiasm. Thus the young crusader soon returns with ardor quenched, and either dies of a broken heart or resigns himself to an acceptance of a present world. Business and the professions are full of young crusaders in whom the fire has gone out . . . quenched by a cold world.

Of course it is easy to quicken men to a small cause. Money will quicken them or the chance of personal gain—that is why the Tammany ward-heeler will wear out shoe-leather stumping his ward. Factionalism can easily be stirred: the yellow press can increase its circulation by exploiting the “Yellow Peril.” Small and selfish causes can at once be kindled to a flame: that is why it is a cinch to organize a beer parade such as we had in New York two or three weeks ago. A parade for free subway-rides (if there had been any chance to get them) would have been just as easy to organize. And just because our beer parade was as easy as falling off a log, and because it was demagogic and paid returns in cheap popularity, it was admirably suited to the talents and tastes of its prime organizers. (I am not

discussing the Prohibition issue now, but only indicating how quickly small causes can kindle enthusiasm.) The following Saturday to that of the beer parade there was held in New York a parade against war. There were not a hundred thousand people in line of march; there were only two thousand. The police re-routed them onto a side street. It takes some courage to march in a parade against war—courage because onlookers will immediately brand those who march as cowards, and nobody would choose (without real conviction to move him) to be called a coward. Small causes quickly flame; or, as a negro friend of mine once said, it is easy to make combustible things come bust.

All this is not said with any cynicism or any disheartenment, but in a quiet facing of facts. The saving grace of the situation is that if small causes quickly flame they quickly die; whereas a great cause once kindled can never be extinguished. But how can a great cause be kindled? Let Christ tell us: "What would I, if it were already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I afflicted until it be accomplished!"

Example alone will not kindle a great cause: we have had enough example in human history (both bad and good example) to warn and save us a million times. Counsel will not save us: some long-suffering person has remarked that the world has been advised almost to the doors of hell. But a life baptized in blood, pains endured, calumny faced, a Cross accepted—*that* is the invincible argument, *that* kindles an unquenchable flame! *Why* it should be so, why the world has been ordered after that strange rule, I cannot tell you.

"Why grass is green, and blood is red
Are mysteries that none approach unto."

That it is so every crusade verifies, and all history is the footnote. And those who have been willing to live within this

law of self-sacrifice, even though they could not understand the necessity (except by some deep surmise of the soul) have found strange joy therein and have been friends with life.

In the olden days when a leader wished to rouse the Scottish clans to battle at the approach of the foe, he would make a rough cross of wood, burn its ends in a fire, and when they were alight quench them and sear them in the blood of a newly slain goat. This token was then sent round from clan to clan—a “fiery cross.” It travelled, carried in human hands, with amazing speed. Once the whole district of Breadelbane (a tract thirty-two miles wide) was thus aroused in three hours. We reverently make the comparison with One with Whom nothing can compare: He set a cross on fire, but first He sealed it with His own blood. That Cross sped so fast across a world that within three hundred years it had driven the eagle from the banners of that country that slew Him. “What would I, if it were already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened (with pain, with eager desire, with misunderstanding, with self-discipline)—how am I straitened until it be accomplished.”

I plead today for real crusaders. Not crusaders for little causes: it is a cheap business to set hay-stacks on fire—and nothing could be much smaller than organizing forced applause at political conventions for candidates whose main virtue is that they have offended nobody. Not crusaders for little causes; no, and not easily-disheartened crusaders for big causes. I plead today for crusaders who, born of God with the fire of Heaven within them, are willing to seal that fire in their own blood: who will say with Christ: “I am come to fling fire on the earth. I wish it were already kindled. But first I have a baptism to be baptized in.”

This is not a plea for an outmoded morality. There is need that every true crusader shall be "straitened." He must cleave to simple rectitude in word, imagination, and deed. But this rectitude is not for a code, but for a cause—even the cause of Christ. God has given you a fire of the spirit. You know that war is wrong and peace is glorious when dedicated to human joy. You know our present order of toil is ramshackle and cruel. You know our civic life is often a hissing and a shame. And God has given you a fire of the spirit that you may fling fire on the earth. Now you are called to be true, at cost of rigor and self-discipline, not for a moral convention but for a cause! Now you are called to be loyal and to live in an abandon of self-giving, not for a system of conduct, but as that straitening of baptism without which the world cannot be kindled to the truth! Now you must pay the price daily in discipline, calumny, misunderstanding and pain! Now you must seal your fire in your blood.

Only thus can the world be cleansed. Counsel and wise plans will not do it. Only sacrifice will do it. Only thus can the world be quickened. The world waits for fire-bringers! "I am come to send fire on the earth; and what will I, if it be already kindled? But I have a baptism to be baptized with: and how am I straitened till it be accomplished."

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