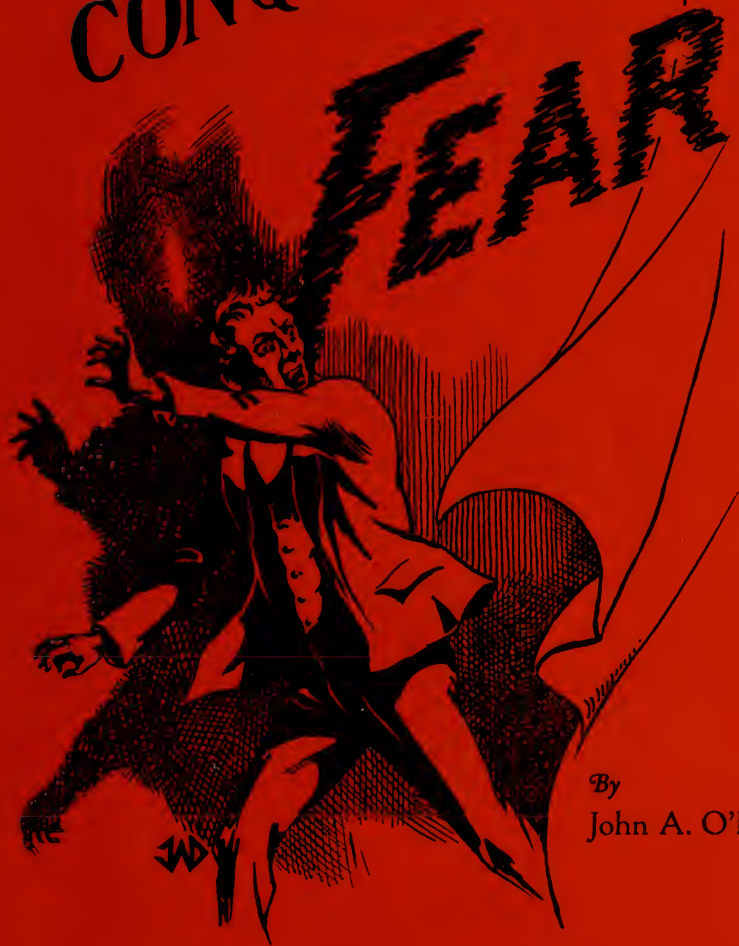


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THE CONQUEST OF



By
John A. O'Brien

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THE CONQUEST OF FEAR

Religion Points the Way to Abiding Peace

By

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THE CONQUEST OF FEAR

IN many of his addresses President Roosevelt called upon the citizens of America to unite in a nationwide crusade for the conquest of fear. Since the first tidal wave of the depression swept across our land in October, 1929, jolting us out of our sense of security and abiding prosperity, our nerves have become frayed and jittery as a result of six years' exposure to the continued pounding of the tumultuous waves of a disturbed economic sea. The crash of the stock market, investments suddenly washed away, the savings of a lifetime lost in banks, closed never to reopen, unemployment breeding its sense of futility, have brought insecurity, hardship and suffering in some form to most of us.

Mrs. Edith Rockefeller McCormick, with holdings estimated at over a hundred million dollars in 1928, dying in bankruptcy a few years later, is the symbol of what every one of us has experienced in some degree. It is no wonder that nerves are jumpy, and fear stalks like a monster through the land. Indeed, medical authorities inform us that worry, directly or indirectly, takes a larger annual toll of human life than any other disease. It is scarcely too much to assert that if fear were abolished from modern life, the work of the psychotherapist would be nearly gone.

What help does religion offer in this battle against worry that is making people sick, and against fear that is scaring most of us half to death? It offers the greatest help of all. While the psychiatrist may counsel, and common sense may suggest, religion offers an unfailing solution and points to the specific means of achieving it. Our

Christian faith lays down the fundamental principle, which should be the solvent of all our worries: Do the best you can. Then you have nothing to fear from either God or man. Do your best and then with a good conscience leave the rest to God. Whether you succeed or whether you fail, should cause you no concern because you have done your best. More no one can do.

AN UPRIGHT LIFE

Religion penetrates beyond this general principle and proposes three specific remedies. The first is this: Live a clean upright life, and peace will hug your pillow. Like moths that wither under the sunlight, fear thrives in the dark places of character, in the secret closet wherein there dangles a family skeleton with the ever present danger of being pulled out into public view. Bluebeard presents a poised exterior, but he quakes in his shoes before the ghosts of his clandestine amours. Every form of double dealing begets its secret dread.

Haunted by the ghosts of his embezzlement and double dealing, Ivar Krueger, with palatial yachts, with summer homes in five countries, with millions of dollars deposited in his name, seizes his pearl-handled revolver and shoots himself in his luxurious suite in Paris. No army of liveried servants or bodyguards could ward off the invasion of the ghosts of his secret thefts.

Some years ago there came to the church office a young man whom I recognized at once as a prominent student on the campus. "Father," he said, "I'm sitting on the top of a volcano, and the lid is liable to blow off any time."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Why," he replied, "I'm strutting about in the lime-light of popularity, enjoying the friendship and esteem of the student body. But," he continued, "I feel like a hypocrite that's living a double life. Sooner or later the mask will be pulled off and they'll know what I really am." As we talked together, he told me that from the very beginning of his downward path he had not known one hour of peace or happiness. Remorse had proven an uncomfortable pillow. Worry and fear had dogged his footsteps.

He showed me a frayed newspaper clipping. It quoted his old coach as predicting he would be All-American before his Senior year. "Father," he said, "it isn't that I'm undermining my morale and throwing that chance away. What hurts me most, aside from the fact that I have offended my God, is that I've won the love of a good girl. She believes in me and trusts me. I suffer the tortures of the damned when I think of her finding out about my checkered past and my none too steady present. I want to make a clean breast of it all and with God's help start anew."

As he stood there before me, like a bronzed Apollo, with gleams of hope breaking at times through the clouds of fear and anguish mantling his countenance, I wished that I had the skill of a playwright to depict the drama being enacted before me. Lifting his tear dimmed eyes toward heaven, he cried out, in words I shall never forget, "O God! Let me begin . . . again." I led him to the confessional, as the first step in the path to win back his self-respect and his lost manhood.

AN AGE-OLD CRY

As the young man unfolded his story to me, I wondered: Will youth ever learn from the experience of the past? Or will it learn only by the painful process of burning its own fingers? I thought of that distant scene, that occurred at the very dawn of the race's history. Adam sinning against God, and then feeling the pangs of fear. "I was afraid," he cried out, ". . . and I hid myself." How ancient and how modern is this reaction of the human soul to the consciousness of guilt.

I thought of Macbeth, after he had stained his hands with the murder of his king. Every noise affrights him. Ghosts are lurking in the dark corridors ready to spring at him. He hears a voice crying: "Macbeth shall sleep no more!" Then a knocking. Terrified, he cries out:

*"Whence is that knocking?
How is't with me, when every noise appals me?
What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes!"*

Then he utters those tremendous words which reflect the sense of an overwhelming guilt:

*"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No? this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnardine,
Making the green—one red."*

What a contrast is Lady Macbeth! She showers contempt upon her husband for his inability to throw off the sense of guilt. Upbraiding him for his chicken-heartedness, she displays a stony front that gives no

inkling of fear or remorse. But what a different picture she presents in the final act. Her iron nerve is breaking. She sleeps poorly. She walks at night through the dark corridors carrying a candle. The nurse is perplexed at seeing her arise at night to scrub and scrub her hand. At last, terrified and unable to wash the blood away, she cries out: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say! . . ." After more scrubbing, she exclaims: "Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

Whereupon a physician, who has been standing in the darkened corridor and watching this scene with amazement, comments:

*"Foul whisperings are abroad: Unnatural deeds
Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.
More needs she the divine, than the physician.—
God, God, forgive us all!"*

I know of no more powerful portrayal of the paralyzing effect of fear from unrepented sin in all the literature of the world than these two scenes from "Macbeth." They echo the experience of the race through all the ages.

Young men and young women, if you have a virtuous character, hold fast to it. If you have lost it, win it back. It is the jewel that passeth all price, the pearl that is richer than all our tribe. For among all the dire consequences of wrongdoing, the worst on this earth is that an evil life is haunted by the ghost of a sleepless fear.

FAITH IN GOD

The second specific which religion proposes for the conquest of fear is this: Have a deep and abiding faith in God. How paltry and inconsequential the things that frighten us become, when once we realize that we are in the shadow of the everlasting arms capable of protecting us from every foe. "Why are ye fearful?" Christ asked of His Apostles when they feared the waves would overwhelm their bark. Then He pointed to the real cause of their fear, when He added: "O ye of little faith." Fearing when I am with you!

"God and one," said Lincoln, "constitute a majority." With God on our side, we have nothing to fear. St. Teresa was noted for her serenity. On her bookmark she had written these words, which reveal the secret of her unbroken calm:

*"Let naught disturb thee,
Naught fright thee ever,
All things are passing
God changeth never.
Patience e'er conquers;
With God for thine own
Thou nothing dost lack—
He sufficeth alone!"*

LOVE FOR ALL

The third specific which religion proposes is this: Have a constant love for all mankind. Carry about no grudges. Don't strike back. The pus pockets of hatred

are the favorite breeding ground of strife, irritation and worry. "But, Father," said a person to me some time ago, "there are some people who have wronged me, and hurt me deeply. Resentment rankles in me still. I can't forgive them, much less love them."

Two considerations are helpful here. First, the words of Christ: "Vengeance is mine. I will repay." We need not usurp God's prerogative of meting out punishment. Secondly, love here does not necessarily imply an emotional fondness, but the wish for their welfare and eternal salvation. It is not possible to have an emotional enthusiasm for all types of people. But it is possible to desire the salvation of every one. It is possible to pray that God will help them, and if they are wrong, show them the error of their ways, and lead them to the living of the good life.

The second consideration is contained in the words of a man who once said to me: "Father, when I find myself hating a person who did me a grievous wrong, I get down on my knees and pray for him. It is the only way I can overcome the temptation to hate him. When I arise, I find a spirit of peace in my heart. And I find myself reflecting: That man injured me! How foolish. Why, the only one who can injure me is myself. If I have sense enough to bear it patiently, and not to strike back with hatred, I'll convert it into merit." How true indeed!

"LOVE CASTETH OUT . . ."

Love your friends and hate your enemies was the practice of the pagans as it is of unredeemed human nature today. But Christ said: "Love your enemies,

do good to them that hate you." It is not easy. But it is the distinctive mark of a true Christian. It begets the richest premium in peace of mind and true happiness, both in time and in eternity. When Christ said, "Perfect love casteth out fear," He epitomized for all mankind a volume of psychotherapy, which psychiatrists will be but unraveling for centuries to come.

All of us need to pray for strength to rise to the heights of the true Christian. We need to utter the words of Rosa Marinoni in her "Plea for Greater Strength":

*"I do not want
The bravery of those
Who, gun in hand,
Rush forth to slay their foes,
Not hatred, greed,
Or glory of conquest,
Would I find rooted
In my human breast.
But this of God I ask:
'Please make me strong
To offer Love to those
Who do me wrong.'"*

PAST MISTAKES

In addition to the specific remedies which religion proposes for the conquest of fear, it should be pointed out that many of the worries which afflict mankind arise from the recollection of past mistakes or misfortunes. There is a widespread tendency to cry over spilled milk, to lament mistakes long past, which no amount of lamen-

tation can undo. Why worry and fret over past mistakes when such fretting only robs one of the physical and mental strength to solve present problems? Persons who made investments in the halcyon days before October, 1929, and have sustained heavy losses from the world-wide depression, will never recoup their losses by any amount of grieving and regretting. True, people should profit by their past mistakes. But they should not allow them to become a source of constant misery, depleting their energy and robbing them of the initiative to try again.

Practically everyone sustained losses from a depression which was no respecter of persons, but which struck alike at high and low. Religion as well as common sense suggests that they face the realities of the situation honestly and bravely, and make the best out of a situation which has entangled every nation in the world. Instead of merely repeating the doleful words, "Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: it might have been," they might follow a more rational procedure and, "Add this suggestion to the verse; it might have been a great deal worse."

NEEDLESS BRIDGES

Even more prolific of worry than brooding over past mistakes is the chronic fear of future ills. We are constantly concerned over something which may happen, but which never does. We worry about the possibility of failing in our studies, in our business, in our social endeavors, in our work. We are continually building bridges for streams that never need to be crossed and

climbing mountains that never beset our path. We are constantly imagining difficulties and envisaging misfortunes which we never actually have to face. "Most of our worries," as some one has aptly observed, "never happen."

To permit dark melancholy thoughts over purely problematic difficulties and imaginary misfortunes to paralyze and cripple us is to convert life into a slow death. How true are the words of Shakespeare: "Cowards die many times before their death, the valiant never taste of death but once."

The story is told of a soldier who was trembling like a leaf at the thought of what might happen to him when the signal sounded for his battalion to go over the top. A braver comrade calmly counseled: "What, after all, is there to worry about? One of two things will happen. You are either going to be shot or to escape unhurt. If you escape, then there is nothing to worry about. If you are wounded, one of two things will happen. Either you will be mortally wounded, or you will recover. If you recover, then there is nothing to worry about. If you don't recover, then all your worries are ended." This matter of fact analysis of all conceivable possibilities serves to characterize much of the purely anticipatory and imaginary anxieties which are making psychopaths and neurotics out of so many people today.

ROOTS OF WORRY

Worry may have its root in either physical weakness or mental maladjustment. If a person is "run down," and his nervous energy depleted, he lacks the proper re-

sistance to worry, and is much less capable of expelling it after it has entered. He becomes the easy prey to a host of phobias, hallucinations, obsessions and complexes which fight vigorously the attempts to expel them. They interfere with digestion, disturb the sleep, and further lower the body's resistance to other diseases.

Mental maladjustments constitute a still more prolific source of worry. Persons who are introverts, constantly turning their thoughts in upon themselves rather than upon the external world, are especially susceptible to habits of worrying. "A great need today," said a distinguished psychiatrist, "is self-decentralization."

Most of us are too self-centered. We make ourselves and our petty concerns the center of the universe. Everything else in the universe revolves around our trivial cares. We become petulant and querulous if the entire cosmos does not bow to our whims and caprices. Our only interest in other things is indirect, namely, how they affect our happiness and well-being. Our world is egocentric, and whenever things do not go our way, we are angry at the universe for not adjusting itself to our wishes, without suspecting that it is we who might well do the adjusting.

The habit of brooding over our troubles tends not only to aggravate and prolong our worries but also to endanger our mental health as well. In shying away from the realities of life, we build private worlds within our minds into which we withdraw in increasing measure. We allow our feelings and emotions to people it with characters of their own creation. The phantasies of our dream world become increasingly real, while the objective realities of life fade off into wraithlike un-

realities. The wholesome corrective which comes from the rubbing of shoulders with the grim realities of the external universe, which keeps us normal, is lacking. The result is we become singular and queer. The psychiatrist has more complexes to straighten out, more tangles to unsnarl. We need to reflect upon the wise proverb of the ancient Chinese: "The legs of the stork are long; the legs of the duck are short. You cannot make a stork's legs short, nor a duck's legs long. So why worry?"

THINGS WORTH WHILE

The remedy for self-centralization is to think less of ourselves and more of others, to become absorbed in some transcending cause which makes our petty troubles sink into insignificance and gradually to be forgotten. Instead of introverts we must become extroverts, focusing our interest upon the external world, instead of brooding on our own likes and dislikes and forever mulling over our subjective reactions to life's colorful drama. Athletes have been known to be so intent upon helping the team to win a victory that they were not conscious of bruises and hurts until after the contest. Persons who become passionately devoted to a great cause forget themselves and find that in struggling for a noble enterprise their worries fade into a happy oblivion. It is one of life's paradoxes that in pursuing happiness we miss it, while in forgetting about ourselves and seeking to bring happiness to others, we find it.

Religion helps a person to achieve a proper perspective in life, to secure a sense of values. What are the

things which occasion so much worry? Are they not for the most part such as the loss of money, the inability to "keep up with the Joneses," the necessity to get along without a servant, or to move to humbler quarters? What trivial mundane things these are after all. The Christian knows that even though he lose all these treasures, so highly prized in a materialistic age, he can still achieve the supreme values of life—unsullied character, noble manhood, virtue and kindliness which never cease to win the honor, esteem and love of friends. With all the losses which a world economically awry can inflict on one, there is still enough to make life worth while—wife, children, friends, self-respect, spotless character, noble aspirations, high endeavors.

These are the values which challenge us each day and fill life with the thrill of adventure and the bright colors of romance. Their achievement is dependent not upon the whims of external circumstances, but solely upon ourselves. The achievement of the supreme values of life challenge us to throw off fear, with its paralyzing effect, scaring us stiff and making us die many times before our death. It summons us to leave the slum district of the mind, with its black pessimism and haunting fears, and climb to the mountain peaks where the air is fresh and pure, and bathed in the sunlight of heaven. "He has not learned the lesson of life," says Emerson, "who does not every day surmount a fear."

We do not seek to lift ourselves, however, merely by tugging at our boot straps. We do our best and then appeal to the unfailing assistance of Almighty God. St. Paul reflects the secret of his amazing courage in confronting a hostile world and in reshaping its faith. "I

can do all things," he says, "in Him that strengtheneth me." It is that Divine Being in Whom the Apostle found strength Who speaks again to a world frightened and disturbed, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" In an upright life, an unfaltering faith and a love that embraces enemies, mankind has a divine prescription for the conquest of fear and the achievement of that high courage of soul, that looks out into the faces of men through eyes that are unafraid.

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