

The Best Best-Seller

By DANIEL A. LORD, S.J.

HE said he lived an hour and a half by motor from town,” grinned the young man, snapping off his ignition and shoving a loose glove into the pocket of his greatcoat.

“Probably he was thinking of a Model-T Ford.”

“What was the driving time?”

“Door to door, fifty-seven minutes.”

“Heaven help the motor cops lying in the gutter along the way,” she said and slipped open the door of the coupe. “Let’s go.”

Then, with her foot on the running board, she stopped dead.

Skeered.

“Golly gosh!” she almost whispered. “My teeth are chattering.”

“Cold?” he asked, solicitously. “The wind was pretty crisp at sixty-five an hour.”

“Cold nothing!” she gibed. And then in an awestruck voice, “I’m skeered. Honest, were you ever in a priest’s house before?”

“Well, once in my cubbing days with the ‘News’ I covered a wedding. But the priest’s housekeeper sent me around to the back door, and I worked the cook for a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Sly always did believe that I was a tramp. Looked like it in those days. No reason to be afraid. He asked us, didn’t he?”

“Are you sure he invited us?”

“You heard him as well as I did. Of course he invited us, and we said we’d come, and here we are.”

“You don’t think he’ll try to convert us, do you?”

Ford Osborne laughed.

“If he has any luck with that, I’ll get him working on you to speed up the day of the wedding. He’ll be a better persuader than I am. Let’s go.”

And seizing her by the arm, he almost ran her across the wintry yard next to the church, up the crunchy steps of the rectory, and on to the little porch of Father Hall’s dwelling at Lakeside.

“I just hope he recognises us,” she said, with a final qualm, as he pulled off his other glove and jabbed a long finger at the door-bell.

Welcome.

Ten minutes later the three of them sat in Father Hall’s happily disorderly study, with cigarettes glowing and the steam of hot coffee rising in pungent aroma to their nostrils. Father Hall had known them instantly, called them both by name, hit off a bit of their history as he remembered it, and ushered them into the library—the heart of his little home.

From a low table covered with magazines, Father Hall had dug the current issue of “The Manhattanite.”

“So you both made it in one week,” he said, holding it out smilingly. “I liked your verse, Miss Webb. But there was a touch of Dorothy Parker about it, and too much Dorothy Parker is very much like too much poison ivy. It’s certainly startling, but it does leave an itch.”

“I promise you, on my solemn word,” she cried delightedly, “that I’ll never imitate the dear Dorothy again.”

“If you do,” grinned Osborne, “I’ll call you Ivy.”

“In my case,” said the girl to Father Hall, “do you think you could with great effort bring yourself to call me Helen? ‘Miss Webb’ sounds so like a middle-aged schoolmarm.”

“I’ve got an easy first name, too,” said Osborne. “Named before the cars got famous and funny. Ford.”

They found places in Father Hall’s comfortable chairs. Inside herself Helen Webb wondered how any man could combine in his tastes a magnificent Oberammergau carved crucifix, a complete set of Conrad, a volume of Ogden Nash, a very small golfing cup, stacks of magazines, what clearly were thumbed volumes of theology, a framed and autographed picture of a celebrated actor, of a famous radio announcer and of an illustrious prelate, a

very beautiful Madonna and a collection of pipes hanging against the pelt of a mountain lion.

The coffee had been brought in by the faithful Hilda, who served it with an air and departed with a gesture. They jumped from politics to literature, to the weather, to Lakeside as a resort, to the unconsciously amusing people who had surrounded them at that famous meeting of the Open-Mind Forum, and then to themselves.

“You see,” said Osborn”, spreading out his hands, “we accepted your invitation—And here we are,” concluded Helen.

And Books.

“And more welcome than I can say,” topped the priest. “I must admit that the chapter was going vilely this evening.” He indicated a stack of yellow sheets resting on the floor, flanked by a platoon of pencils. “So you’re a grand relief.”

Helen and Osborne shot a quick glance at each other. Father Hall intercepted it and laughed reassuringly.

“Don’t worry,” he soothed them. “I don’t expect you to have the slightest idea of what I write. Novels, if you must know, and I must break down and confess; novels that are read by a faithful few, essays that sometimes appear under various noms-de-plume. and once in a while a pamphlet. But rest assured, though I read your poetry and your most delightful criticism of life, I haven’t the slightest expectation that you’ll ever read a line I’ve put on paper.”

“Maybe we’ll fool you there,” said Helen.

“Dull stuff,” said the priest.

“From you?” scoffed Osborne. “That’s funny.”

A Gentle Snub.

Father Hall waved the subject aside as concluded.

For a peaceful moment they sipped coffee and felt between their teeth the crispness of ginger cookies. Then Helen, always direct, leaned forward in her low chair.

“Perhaps you don’t remember all about it, but after you had finished your talk to the Open-Mind Forum on ‘Christ the Modern,’ we told you we knew you had something that interested us tremendously, and we asked if you’d tell us more about . . . Christ.”

Father Hall nodded.

“Now, don’t think,” she hurried on, “that we have any intention of becoming Catholics. “

It was rude, and it deserved the gentle snub with which Father Hall met it.

“It is a great privilege to become a Catholic,” he said quietly, “and one does not force privileges on anyone.”

Ford took up the train of thought.

“We were dining together tonight and I said, ‘Let’s trot out to Lakeside and pay that call.’ And we up and hop into my new sport coupe and make it—“

“In exactly fifty-seven minutes and I don’t know how many gasps from his fair passenger.”

“So here you are,” said the priest appreciatively.

“And there you are,” echoed Helen.

“And it isn’t often you have two thorough-going pagans seated at your feet.”

A Well-Thumbbed Book.

Father Hall walked over to his pipe rack, took out his favourite meerschaum (when he smoked that, the tobacco companies declared extra dividends), filled and tamped it, lighted it in elaborate ritual, picked up a small, well-worn book from the table, returned, flipped the pages with his thumb, and then sat back in his chair reflectively.

“I was reading a best-seller tonight just before you came in,” he began, clearly miles off any subject they had anticipated.

“My dear Father,” protested Osborne in mock horror, “the average best-seller is nothing for your chaste eyes.”

“This is the best best-seller ever written,” the priest continued, but with a twinkling glance at the interrupter. “Written by the man I honestly believe to be the world’s greatest writer.”

“If you had your choice of any book to take with you to a desert island” mocked Helen, “you’d take

Shakespeare.”

“Or the World Almanac,” supplemented Osborne.

Helen leaned forward once more.

“We’re really interested. What is the book?”

Unique.

“Oddly enough,” continued the priest, plainly ignoring her question and following his own line of thought, “it was written by a man who, as far as we know, never put pen to paper, never dictated to a secretary, never went to school in his life, wasn’t really interested in writing at all, never lived to see the book of which he is the author, and who is yet the greatest of all authors, and the man who has had the most profound influence on the literature of all the world.”

“You out-Ripley Ripley,” cried Osborne.

“And, believe it or not, it’s true.” Quietly Father Hall opened the thumbed book on his knee, put his palm flat down upon it, and, taking his pipe from his mouth with his free hand, pointed it first at the young man and then at the girl. “The book is the Gospels, and the author is Jesus Christ. And we, you and I, are not going to talk religion at all, but a subject you know a lot more about, literature.”

Men of Deeds; Men of Words.

The two young people sat back and almost gasped. But Father Hall was now launched on a theme, and he sailed into it to the accompaniment of great puffs of smoke.

“As a literary man Christ is strangely unique. Did you ever notice how seldom it is that men of action are men of words? Men who can accomplish great deeds can seldom write great books. Or perhaps, in the midst of their magnificent achievements, they haven’t the time to bother producing books.”

“There are Julius Caesar and Disraeli,” put in Helen.

“Who in the world, outside of an English classroom, ever reads a novel of Disraeli’s? And though it’s heresy to say it, in all my life I’ve never been so bored as with the pompous ponderosities of Julius Caesar. He fought stirring wars, but the way he wrote them up turned them into perfect bedtime stories.”

The young couple both threw back their heads and roared with mirth.

“We’ve thought so since second-year high school,” Osborne almost choked. “And aren’t we tickled to hear you say it?”

Ghost Writers.

“The autobiographies of great men are usually tiresome, windy, bombastic manifestations of swelled egos. And the memoirs of famous generals are saved from complete oblivion because they are writing about such stirring events that the most laborious style and the most tantalising failure to grasp vivid features can’t altogether kill the interest of the events narrated. Great doers of deeds are usually dull users of words.”

“Which explains,” commented Osborne, “precisely why we have ghost writers.”

“Correct,” said Father Hall. “Clever newspaper men can put into the mouths of famous men smart and interesting and telling phrases that never in a thousand years could they have formulated for themselves.”

The Exception.

“So, as I said, Christ is almost unique. By nature and the will of His Father, a man who had to cram into three short years work that was to last till the end of time, a trainer of men, the builder of a universal Church, spending His days in human contacts and His nights in divine contemplation, active with all the fierce energy of a man who knew the work to be done was tremendous and His time pitifully short; He yet had time to create a world literature and, by the very fact of His existence, inspire another world literature. It’s simply incredible.”

In his excitement he allowed his pipe to go out. Osborne offered him a pocket lighter.

“Can’t use ‘em on this pipe,” he said. “I need two matches, and they have to have thick sticks.”

He got his light and was off again.

Worldwide.

“I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about the quantity of literature that He has inspired. Marvellous when you come to think of it! The libraries of the world are packed with it. The greatest letter writer in the world—that’s St. Paul, you know—and his brother letter writers filled their pages with Him. Around Him was written the mass of literature that fills the first centuries of the Church. He enters into existing pagan legends and epics and dominates them as He came to dominate the whole cycle of Grail legends. He crops out in Hindu literature. He appears in the books of every nation.

“You can no more read world literature without a thorough knowledge of Him, what He said, what He did, the parables He uttered, than you can read Greek literature without knowing Homer or—and you know how true this is—English literature without knowing ‘Alice in Wonderland.’ Just within the past few years (you remember I referred to this at the Forum meeting) two best-sellers were Lives of Christ—Papini’s and Bruce Barton’s.”

Books About Books.

“But that,” protested Osborne mildly, “is literature about Him. I’ve never been interested in books about books. I like books, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course he knows what you mean,” interjected Helen.

“I was just dismissing all that with a gesture,” said Father Hall. “It turned out, perhaps, to be a rather long gesture.”

“But a very graceful one.” This from Helen.

“She will keep her hand in practice,” apologised Osborne. “Compliments well turned are part of her irresistible charm.”

“Note, please, that I never waste them on you.”

“To my sorrow, it is true.”

“We’re interrupting, Father. Please go on.”

A Mother Who Was a Poet.

“It was quite natural that Christ should have been a literary man of the highest quality. His Mother, you see, was a high-type poet.”

“Not really!”

“That I never heard before.”

The sentences synchronised.

“We have very few of her utterances, but she spoke naturally in lovely figures of speech, in beautiful rhythm, or in poetry.”

Father Hall turned the pages of the book on his knee, but did not even glance at them.

“When the Angel Gabriel announced her tremendous dignity and she was ready to give her consent, she did not simply say, ‘Yes,’ or ‘Whatever God wants is my wish.’ She broke at once into a perfect figure of speech. ‘Behold the handmaid of the Lord,’ she said; and if she had talked for paragraphs she could not have indicated more clearly her humility, her eagerness to nurse the Son of God, her thought of herself, not as the Queen mothering the King, but as His little servant busy about His house and His needs.

Rhythm.

“Find me a more beautifully rhythmical sentence than this one: ‘Behold, thy father and I have sought Thee sorrowing.’ There’s music enough in that phrase to furnish the score for most modern operas. And when Elizabeth greeted her, she burst forth in the magnificent rhapsody that we know as the Magnificat. ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God, my Saviour.’ Read it. It’s free verse before Walt Whitman was thought of or Amy Lowell smoked her first cigar.”

“That’s an interesting case of inherited literary instinct, isn’t it?” suggested Osborne.

“Yes,” agreed Father Hall. “And for Helen’s consolation it’s pleasant to note that, like so many literary men, Christ got this natural instinct from His Mother’s side.”

“Oh!” Helen clasped her hands. “Think of the genius I’ll pass on to my children!”

“Poor little future half-wits,” sighed Osborne.

Never Bromidic.

“The thing that I have always thought so particularly interesting about the Saviour is the fact that never in His life did He say a commonplace thing.”

“What a record that is!”

“Yes, isn’t it? Though He was called on to talk constantly, though He was reaching the mentalities of every sort of people, He never says an ordinary thing, a thing that suggests that it is just stuck in as a filler. He is a literary man without a single pot-boiler.”

“Long desired of editors,” Osborne sighed.

Phrase Maker.

“I’ve read the Gospels through, Heaven knows how many times, not looking for bromidioms, platitudes, or commonplaces, but conscious that I would feel one should it crop out. But it never does. Instead, each phrase is as clear-cut, vivid, unusual, out of the ordinary, as if His mind were always sparking at the highest possible tension. Chesterton noticed this, too. Loving phrases, he naturally loved this maker of phrases. Christ speaks of mountains falling on people; men so terrified that they wither away with fear; camels struggling through the eyes of needles; vast regiments of heavenly angels marching on to the last judgment; millstones hung about the necks of men who give scandal; great beams of wood unnoticed in the eye of a man looking upon the tiny faults of his neighbour.

“It is simply a source of overwhelming joy to pick up these isolated phrases. He is the one author who never has a common-place moment, but who can take the most universal idea and phrase it in words that ring in our ears with a perfection of tonal combination we simply cannot forget. No wonder Lord Dunsany and a hundred others could boast that they had modelled their style directly on the New Testament.”

“You’re right,” said Osborne, taking the book from Father Hall’s unresisting fingers. “Here’s a phrase; I just hit it at random: ‘He lifted Himself up and said to them, He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone.’ What a summing up of a whole situation in a single sentence!”

A Woman’s Selection.

“I do know that episode,” said Helen, glad to be included in the conversation. “I’ve always thought that for sheer drama there is nothing quite like it in the world—the setting against the temple steps; the men dragging in this poor woman fresh from her sin; the conviction that they had Jesus in their power; the dilemma that put Him in such a tight position; His ironic writing in the sand; the sentence Ford just read; and the whole crowd of them creeping away one by one. And then Jesus and the poor woman and His ‘Neither do I condemn thee.’ “

“Go and sin no more,” added the priest quietly.

“I forgot that.”

“That’s why I added it. Too many people do.”

Parody Not Imitation.

“I remember,” said Osborne, “not long ago Woolcott got off a smart one on that expression. It was a particularly wretched theatrical season, and he wrote in his column: ‘Let him that is without sin among you stone the first cast.’”

Helen laughed. Father Hall smiled, and then pressed a point home.

“The interesting part about the expressions of Christ is that, like all great literature, they are relatively easy to parody and practically impossible to imitate.”

“I don’t understand that,” said the girl.

“A great piece of literature, a magnificent phrase, so rings in a person’s ear that he can take the rhythm and the sound of the words and with a slight change completely alter the sense. Children do it all the time. I remember the youngster who used to talk about the ‘Hello Prayer.’ I didn’t know what in the world he meant until he said it for me. ‘Our Father, who art in heaven, hello, what’s your name?’ You see, parody is easy, very easy. But take another thought and try to put it in a phrase that will match the phrase of Christ.”

“Oh, I think I see.”

Can't Be Rewritten.

"A friend of mine," went on the priest, "was once engaged in a most difficult task. He had to boil down the sentences of Christ, rearrange them, and possibly rewrite them, to suit the needs of sub-titles for a Biblical film. After three weeks he was simply wild with the impossible job. It was flatly impossible to rewrite anything that Christ had said. His form was perfect. Any change was not merely desecration; it was a total loss of force, a complete cutting away of strength and beauty; the substitution of the tawdry and second rate for what came close to perfection. Try it sometime. I did. Believe me, you suddenly realise the sheer beauty of Christ's literary style."

"More coffee?" asked the voice of Hilda from the doorway. She had learned to wait for the conclusion of a thought before she interrupted. Father Hall looked inquiringly at his guests, but they were too interested, shook their heads, and he in turn waved the old servant away.

Crammed Sentences.

"In a single word or part of a sentence He can sum up a whole philosophy of life. 'Take up your cross daily and follow me' has contained enough philosophy to make millions of men walk courageously into martyrdom or under the heaviest trial of life. 'My yoke is sweet and my burden light,' He said. No one wanted to put on a yoke, until one realised that Christ had chosen the neck piece that must be worn by two; and that if we put our necks into His yoke, His neck would occupy the empty opening beside us. And when He talks of buildings, we can just see the tall tower shivering as it rises on the sands, and the firm building defying all the storms that beat about its rocky base."

Sparkling Epigram.

"Now that we come to think of it," Osborne commented, "it strikes me that Christ is one of the world's few great creators of epigram."

"Correct; and the writing of epigrams is one of the most notable of literary characteristics. Christ shot off epigrams and startling phrases without apparent thought of their perfect fitness and rounded charm."

Osborne looked up from the book he was fingering.

"I've just stumbled on the Sermon on the Mount," he said.

"There are plenty of epigrams in that," the priest nodded.

"Judge not that you may not be judged; for with that judgment you judge you shall be judged . . . If a man's son ask for bread, will he reach him a stone? Or if he shall ask him a fish, will he reach him a serpent?"

. . . Do men gather grapes from thorns or figs from thistles? . . . When you do an alms-deed, sound not a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do, that they may be honoured by men. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward . . . When thou dost alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth."

Slogans.

"And here's some grand stuff about plucking out one's eye and cutting off one's hand rather than let them be a cause of sin. And here's one that is the slogan for all the advertising men who are flooding Broadway with Mazdas."

"Let's hear it," demanded Helen.

"Neither do men light a candle and put it under a bushel, but upon a candlestick, that it may shine to all that are in the house. So let your light shine before men that they may see your good works . . ."

"Go on," urged the priest.

"No," said Osborne, shaking his head. "That's as far as it applies to most advertising men I know. They're not much interested in glorifying their Father in heaven. I'm afraid."

A Majestic Pun.

"At any rate, all we can do is point out how, phrase after phrase, He piled epigrams one on top of another. Did it ever occur to you that Christ actually founded His Church on a pun?"

"No!"

"A magnificently dignified pun, a superb play on words that only a master of literature would dare to attempt. Pointing to Simon, He reminded him of his new name, Peter. 'Thou art Peter,' He said, 'and upon this rock I shall

build my Church.”

“I don’t see the pun,” said Helen.

“Why, the name Peter meant a rock. ‘You have a new name, a Rock,’ He said equivalently. ‘Thou art a Rock, and on this rock I will build My Church.’ And the world has never forgotten that play on words which runs through His conferring the keys of the kingdom of heaven, His command to feed lamb and sheep and His magnificent promise to the fishermen apostles, ‘I will make you to be fishers of men.’”

From the Heart.

“And there,” said Osborne, his fine critical sense coming to his aid, “is where He is magnificently sure of Himself. He talks, as I glance through here, continuously in figures of speech, but they are always figures so clear to his listeners that the thing He is explaining becomes positively vivid.”

Father Hall nodded.

“Though, like all great literary men, He is talking to all ages and all people in a language they all can understand, He still talks right out of the heart of His audience.

From Simple to Sublime.

“The birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the grain of mustard seed, the vine and the branches, the signs in the heavens that forecast the weather, the women in labour, the farmer going out to sow his fields, the fisherman letting down his nets, the householder breaking in a new yolk of oxen, the bridal party and the maidens that attend it, the widow with the lost farthing and the fuss she makes till she finds it, the shepherd who owns the sheep and the shepherd who is only hired to take care of them, the man with the troublesome neighbour who gets him out of bed at night—He takes these simple, prosaic, matter-of-fact, everyday occurrences and uses them to teach the most sublime truths.

“The birds and the lilies become proof of God’s providence. The mustard seed is the whole prophecy of His growing and spreading Church. The farmer is Himself as He stood on the mount and cast the message of His Gospel upon stony hearts and crowded hearts and weedy hearts and receptive hearts. The shepherd becomes one of our loveliest images of religion and art. And so it goes. Here is sheer literary genius, touching the most common objects and lifting them to a level on which they teach the grandest truths.”

“And what genius that is!” Osborne spoke with the reverence of a literary man who is suddenly faced with a master of ideas and a mightier wielder of words.

Limited Expansion.

“We should expect Him to preach the world’s most perfect sermons.”

“Naturally,” Helen nodded.

“But we sometimes forget how packed with thought are those sermons which, after all, only fill a few pages of a small book.”

Father Hall walked across the room to his bookcase and ran his finger along the backs of a set of fat volumes bound alike.

“I don’t know whether you’ve ever heard of these,” he said.

“I’m not sure,” they answered in unison.

“The ‘Summa Theologica’ of St. Thomas. The greatest treatise on God’s truth that the world holds. Interestingly enough, those fat volumes, the whole row of them, are hardly more than an amplification of the sermons Christ preached to the people of His day. Men have dug and dug, written book after book, and they have not begun to exhaust all that Christ succeeded in jamming into those brief sermons.

The Greatest Story Teller.

“Take a phrase like ‘Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.’ You could spend a lifetime explaining and amplifying that and at the end have failed to exhaust its meaning. Here’s a little book (over three hundred pages) which really does nothing more than explain what Christ crammed into the phrase ‘I am the vine, you are the branches.’ Sometime I’ll tell you about the glorious doctrine of the Mystical Body.”

“I’d like to hear it,” said Helen, evidently speaking for both.

“Any third-rate writer can be prolix and verbose. It takes a genius to pack thought into a few words. And Christ did just that.”

“What a short-story writer He would have been!” exclaimed Osborne. “Why Maupassant and O. Henry wouldn’t have been in His class.”

Father Hall’s eyes fairly gleamed.

“In view of the fact that He actually wrote the world’s greatest short story you are hardly making an overstatement.”

“You mean—”

“The story of the Prodigal Son,” said Helen quietly but with an air of certainty. Father Hall nodded.

“There is simply everything in that one story—broad human appeal, fundamental human qualities, conflict, compression, suspense, adventure, father love, youthful caprice, irony in the conduct of the brother, and the smashing climax of the final sentences, ‘For this thy brother was dead and is come to life again; he was lost, and is found.’”

Source Material.

“I’ve always been deeply interested in that story,” said Helen, “simply because it seems to me that no story in the world (except possibly the story of Cinderella, and I’m not sure that is the case), has been the basis for so many different treatments. I know that just in the last few years it has been a spectacle on Broadway, a great motion picture, a novel, a modernised novel, and goodness knows how many poems and short stories.”

“And its appeal will last as long as young men run wild and the hearts of mothers and fathers are torn with grief.”

“As you’ve been talking, I’ve been reading it again,” said Osborne. “Once more, it has all the compression of Maupassant, increased a score of times, plus the continued forward movement of Kipling at his best. I’d never realised before what magnificent story telling, what sheer narrative this is.”

Other Tales.

“And because it is such an outstanding story, we forgot the other stories almost as good. There is the story of the man who rents out his vineyard; the story of the man who invites his friends to supper; the intense little domestic drama of the wise and the foolish virgins; and the magnificent story that put a new word into world language and a new virtue into human hearts, the story of the Good Samaritan. The prolix writers who take a thousand words to depict a smile and five thousand to cover an episode could do very well to go back and study the masterly economy practised by Christ when He had a story to tell.”

Repartee.

They sat for a moment in thoughtful silence. Father Hall was the first to speak.

“Christ, quite aside from His literary power, would have made a great trial lawyer. No one could handle a difficult situation with the sheer power that He displayed. It’s beautiful to see Him put the sly lawyers and clever priests who came to catch Him at His words completely to an about-face. No one ever had so complete a mastery over that turn of thought that is necessary to overwhelm a tricky opponent.

“Do you remember the time they tried to catch Him in the matter of the tribute money? ‘Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar?’ they wanted to know. If He said yes, the mobs of Jerusalem would stone Him for siding with the hated Romans. If He said no, they could turn Him over to the Roman authorities as a man who encouraged the people in their rebellion.

“It was a moment that called for mastery of thought and the most delicate of phrasing. You know what He did. He called for a coin. He looked at it with elaborate and slightly ironical care. ‘Whose image and inscription is this?’ He asked. ‘Caesar’s,’ they answered. And as He returned the coin, He not only hung them with their own rope, but He laid down the principle of political economy that has held from His day until Al Smith ran for President in 1928, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.’” And all the tricky talk in the world never could get around and never has got around that foundation on which loyalty to country and loyalty to God stand.

“And like a brilliant trial lawyer, He had turned their admission against them, caught them on the hook they

meant for Him.

Divine Humour.

“He did something deliciously like this on an occasion when they came to demand by what right He dared preach at all. In one phrase He had them helplessly silent. ‘The baptism of John’s, was it of God?’ If they answered it was not, the people would turn upon them, for they loved John. If they answered it was, He would fling in their hypocritical faces the inevitable question. ‘Then why did you not let John baptize you?’ They shifted as clumsy, lying witnesses always do, and answered, ‘We do not know.’ Then, turning from them, with the divine humour that showed itself in splendid flashes, He answered, ‘Then neither will I tell you by what right I do what I do.’ And we may be sure that a howl of delighted mirth went up from the crowd as the tricky shysters gnashed their teeth in helpless rage.”

There was a smile of real delight on the face of Helen as she listened.

Unforgettable.

“How I love a clever mind!” she cried involuntarily. “A man who can cut through a lie with a sentence and smash home a truth in a single phrase!”

“Especially when those phrases are simply unforgettable. Do you think a man could ever forget that he had been told, ‘You are the light of the world; you are the salt of the earth?’ Could he ever forget his responsibility for a good example and the fact that he was set up where the eyes of the whole world were upon him once he had been told, ‘You are a city seated upon a mountain’? Was he likely to forget that he must forgive his enemy when he was told, ‘If a man smite thee on the one cheek, turn the other’? He could have no doubt about the impossibility of divided allegiance when he had listened to the single memorable phrase, ‘No man can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and mammon.’”

Drama in Life.

Father Hall paused to knock the ashes out of his pipe and fill and light it again. Osborne was turning slowly the pages of the New Testament, while Helen was gazing straight ahead as if her mind was too crowded for interruption.

“As I recall it,” said Osborne at last, “the Jews had no drama.”

“Not strictly so called. They had the most dramatic religion in the world, with the elaborate ceremonial of the temple, sheep and oxen and doves offered up in magnificent dramatic rites, and scapegoats loaded with the sins of the people and turned loose to die in their stead, and symbolic washings, and...”

“Oh, I think I see what you mean. Christ would miss one line of literature; He would miss drama. Is that what you were thinking?”

Osborne looked up from his book and nodded. “Precisely. I was just wondering how so vivid a thinker would manifest himself in dramatic form.”

“He would probably,” Father Hall said, “dramatise His miracles. He might even institute the Sacraments.”

“You’ve got me there,” said Osborne, and Helen nodded her puzzled assent.

“You’re right,” said the priest, “in thinking that every literary man is naturally a dramatist. He must be if he is to see his truth vividly and have the characters of his stories pass before him acting out their parts.”

Drama in Action.

“Christ was a dramatist of action rather than of words. He created drama rather than wrote it.”

“Still not clear,” protested Osborne.

“Let’s take a case. He is curing the deaf boy. With a word He could have worked His miracle. He did not. He dramatised it. He made mud mixed with spittle. He groaned. He put the spittle in the boy’s ear. He uttered solemn words. For the sake of the people who stood about, He made of the miracle a symbolic drama of the release of this boy from the bondage of his silence.

“When the time comes to drive the legion of devils out of the possessed, He engages in a dramatic dialogue with them, demands their names, crows them with a word. Then, to signify in dramatic form the essential filthiness of the devils, He accedes to their request, dispatches them into the swine who were wallowing nearby, and in a

magnificent dramatic conclusion which, with all respect, would delight the heart of a motion-picture producer, sends the herd of swine galloping over the cliff and into the sea.

Sacramental Drama.

“Then, when He came to leave behind His Sacraments, those beautiful outward signs of the inward grace He meant to give to human hearts, He built each one into a lovely little drama. I wish I could sometime enact for you the drama that is baptism. Certainly you will come some morning while I go through the majestic drama that is the Mass. I’ll even explain to you the beautiful drama of Confirmation, and though—as yet—I couldn’t marry you, I can assure you that the Catholic Sacrament of Matrimony is one of the most beautiful and complete of happy dramas, with an unseen Actor playing a most important role—Christ of the wedding feast of Cana, who is the unseen but fully recognised and gladly welcomed Guest of each Nuptial Mass.

“No, the dramatic instinct is not lacking in Christ. He did not write drama; there was no one really fitted to act the sort of drama He could write. He constructed drama for the people and the Church. He produced and Himself acted in the most wonderful drama.

Varied.

“Bethlehem, with all the varied actors who come and go through that pastoral scene, is simple and refreshing drama. The glorious dinner party of which Magdalen becomes the heroine, flinging herself at the feet of Christ, is drama of the highest order, the sort Pinero tried to write some thirty years ago and failed. The long, silent, hidden dueling with the Scribes and Pharisees is the drama of intrigue, with Christ the innocent victim. There is the drama of mistaken identity in the appearance to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus and the manifestation to Mary Magdalen when she thought the risen Christ to be the gardener.

Tragedy.

“And there is the most oppressive tragedy in the events which lead in sweep and rush through the Garden of Gethsemane, the courts of rotten judges, the cellars of torture, the road of ignominy, and the final crushing of the hero of Calvary. No one needs to write drama when He has lived and left behind for easy transcript into literature such drama as that. Certainly we have classic comedy and the tragedy of which Aristotle writes, that purges through pity and fear.”

“I feel,” Osborne said after the lapse of a few minutes, “as if I had had an entire new world opened to me tonight.”

“And I too,” echoed Helen.

A Classic Whole.

“Somehow I had always thought of the Scriptures as beautiful but vague, and of Christ as one who had said splendid things but certainly nothing that a great literary genius would have been proud to claim as his own.”

Father Hall nodded understandingly.

“It’s perfectly clear why you should have thought that way. The Scriptures are so often treated in small, isolated, chopped-off sections that one misses the tremendous onward sweep of the story of the Gospels. One never realises that here are the adventures of the world’s most fascinating Hero, rising in a series of sharp climaxes, meeting the most subtle, open, and concealed enemies, struggling against overwhelming odds, charming as no character of fiction has ever been charming, throwing into a single episode the staggering achievement of cleaning out the temple and then in almost the next breath speaking sentences that are the essence of poetry.

“We have used the Scriptures as a series of isolated texts with which to point a moral and adorn a tale. We have seen Christ as a signpost for virtues and moral precepts instead of a Man who never did a stupid or dull thing and never uttered a thought that was not saturated with meaning and phrased in perfect rhythm, in exact words and with a power of condensation and vividness of imagery that put His style beyond all possibility of imitation.

Hollow Brilliance. .

“And to us who have to live surrounded by writers who worship only one thing, style, style, style, the glorious point is that the content of His literature is true. Half our popular writers today don’t care whether the thing they

say is true or not, provided only it is brilliant. They would slay the truth for an epigram. They would kill a fact to make a phrase. They would rather be clever than right, amusing than honest, smart than true.

“Probably never before in modern times, perhaps not since the Greeks went mad over form, have we had such perfection of style. There is no trick of words that we have not learned. We can swing sentences in a fashion to make literary men of other ages blush with envy. We know all the architecture of form. We have the great masterpieces and we pull them to pieces so that we can copy them from cornerstone to highest pinnacle.

Poisoned Perfection.

“And into this lovely form what are the authors of the present day packing? Clever lies, smart dirt, sophisticated defence of the very things that would overthrow society, brilliant characterisations of people right from the gutter and the lowest night clubs, morality that reeks of the pigpen and the barnyard, philosophy that would cause an ancient Sophist to hide his head, and a vague uncertainty about everything that makes us long for an honest yes and a candid no.

Beautiful Truth.

“And then we turn back to Christ, the Man of letters and the Man of sublime truth. His literary form is beyond compare. But it is only the chaste setting for truth that has stood the refining test of ages and human experience. His style is magnificent; but His thought warms the heart, lifts the eyes, puts humanity on its feet, and turns the soul up from the earth to the heaven in which dwells a merciful Father.

“Nothing can be more painful than truth limpingly expressed. Nothing can more easily drive clever people away from that truth than to see it dressed in tawdry raiment or walking about in literary rags. But Christ, the Master of thought and style, the Creator of a new message of faith and home, and the Maker of an incomparable literary vehicle to contain it—to Him we can bring the most brilliant mind, the most widely read critic, the most cynical traveller down the world’s literary highways, and know that they will be charmed by the beauty of His language and style; but when they leave, their hearts will bum within them, not because of the style of His thought, but because of the burning love, the boundless hope, the tremendous depths of truth revealed in it.”

Quietly, as if it were a dismissal, Father Hall once more knocked the ashes from his pipe.

“You may find even the ‘Manhattanite’ superficial, forcedly clever, and terribly on the surface if you give a little thoughtful reading to Christ, the greatest literary figure that ever walked into world literature.”

Homeward.

For some reason Osborne did not make the return journey in fifty-seven minutes. He kept the car going at a steady though not an alarming pace, but his eyes seemed to be fastened, not upon the road ahead, but on a somewhat vague and distant pathway.

Finally Helen spoke.

“What a new world he opened to us!” she said.

Osborne nodded.

“It’s funny. I thought that he would talk religion to us all the time.”

Osborne was silent, still gazing intently.

“And he never mentioned religion. He talked literature to us all the time.”

The car seemed hardly to be moving as Osborne shifted his glance toward the girl at his side.

“When a man like Jesus Christ, without training or education, coming out of the heart of a carpenter shop in a wretched hill town like Nazareth, with fishermen and paupers and mothers of families and ditch diggers for his audience, becomes the dominating figure in the literature of modern times, masters every type of literary style, and speaks the most glorious thoughts in the most perfect language, I wonder if He is just a man.”

He was silent again while the machine picked up slightly. Then suddenly it spurted under the impulse of his toe. And as it did, Osborne threw back his head and laughed.

“And you say Father Hall did not mention religion to us all evening? My dear, I’m beginning to think he talked nothing else.”
