

DON'T BE A LIAR!

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I was a youngster when I saw it, yet the scene is one I'm not likely ever to forget.

An all-star dramatic cast had been assembled to present the venerable classic "The Two Orphans." (Years later—in case you are interested—David Wark Griffith filmed that play under the title, "Orphans of the Storm.") From her retirement the famous actress, Clara Morris, had been coaxed to play the part of the abbess, a smart role with only one big scene. It was that scene that I still remember.

All through the play the audience had been torn and harried by the sad adventures of the two little maids lost in Paris. Now, in the swift unwinding of melodrama, their fate hung on one simple fact: Would the abbess tell a lie for their sakes? If she told the lie, they were saved. If she did not tell the lie, they were lost—or so the exigencies of the plot made it seem.

Shall She Lie?

I can still see the great Clara Morris as she faced her dilemma: She, the superior of a convent, a consecrated nun, almost a saint, confronted with the alternatives of betraying the girls or telling a lie. Her hands twisted in agony as she faced that sin. There were in her eloquent eyes tears that needed no glycerine help. And every man and woman in the audience, swept along by the power of her acting, silently begged her to tell the lie.

A final struggle. . . . She told the lie, the heroines were saved, the audience lapsed into happy relief—and the great actress, turning away, burst into tears.

It was a heroic lie, and, we all felt (indeed it seems to me that the author wrote a line to that effect), one that was laid to her credit with God.

Wrong!

This little booklet is about lies and lying.—with side references to liars. I started the booklet with that well-remembered scene because at the time I saw it even my inexperienced and quite emotional juvenile mind realised that lying must be pretty serious and important, if a lie to save a delightful young woman could cause the abbess such anguish of soul and hold the audience in such dramatic suspense.

At the risk of handicapping my booklet and turning away some potential readers, let me hasten to say that now I know that her lie was wrong. She told that lie with the best intentions in the world. As far as her own soul was concerned, she probably was guiltless. Probably she thought that what she was doing was right.

Any lie is important. And in case you ever hear us Jesuits accused of holding that "the end justifies the means," you can say that you know one Jesuit who started a booklet by saying, "Sorry, but you can't tell a lie, even to save the life of the heroine of a beloved melodrama."

We'll let that rest there. Perhaps when we've finished the booklet, you'll see what I mean.

Famous Liars

During the years of my reading and in my contact with men and women I've met my share of liars, fabricators, and exaggerators—plain, fancy, amusing, and dangerous. Baron Munchausen first crossed my horizon in "The Houseboat on the Styx," an amusing satire that was very popular during my college days. I read some of his magnificent yarns, and I even tried to continue the series by writing a few Munchausen tall tales myself.

You remember, I'm sure, Munchausen and the ducks. At the end of a day's hunting, Munchausen has only one bullet left. He comes to a lake where a hundred ducks are swimming peacefully. But alas and alack! though he has a powder horn full of powder, he has only one bullet left. Is he daunted? Not he? He puts exactly the right quantity of powder into his gun and rams home the bullet. Then he waits until the precise moment when all the ducks are swimming in a straight line, and he fires. The bullet goes through ninety-nine of the ducks, laying them dead. But because he had feared he might

need that bullet again (it was his last, remember), he had measured the powder so exactly that the bullet remained embedded in the hundredth duck, from the body of which he retrieved the bullet.

What a tall tale that is!

Major Hoople is, of course, Munchausen's modern successor.

From early consciousness I'd heard a liar called another Ananias. But it was not until I had read the tragic story of that first of Christian liars that I understood how God must feel about a man or a woman who lies to Him. At that many theologians hold that the sin of Ananias was not mortal but venial. God punished him in this world but not in the next world. So even a venial sin of lying may be pretty terrible.

History Speaks

Though today we discredit historically the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, still that story is the one thing about George the Great that no one is likely ever to forget. "I cannot tell a lie; I did it with my little hatchet," may never have been said by Washington. But we all feel that it could have been said by a man whose life was so clearly devoted to truth. Perhaps he did not need to incriminate himself. We are glad he told the truth. In fact, I've a sort of feeling that the words should have been said by him—by which I mean that fiction can sometimes be truer to the spirit of a man than can history itself.

When I reached that study of modern history, I came smack-bang into the famous lying telegram by which Bismarck lured Napoleon the Inept into the fatal France-Prussian War.

All Hate Lies

Many years ago I myself told youthful lies, and I was ashamed of them. I suffered from the lies of my young companions, and I began to know the consequences of lying.

Finally, it dawned upon me that human beings, pagan and Christian, modern and ancient, have always had the most deep-seated contempt for a liar amid the most savage resentment of lies.

Henry James, the great novelist, in his story, "The Liar," gives the graphic record of a man who is known to be utterly untrustworthy. Lies have become a habit with him. He lies more easily than he tells the truth. He lies because he likes to fool people. He lies to get himself out of even minor unpleasantnesses. He lies just to be lying. He has reached a state where the truth seems dull, unromantic, uninteresting, and not worth the telling.

The climax of the story comes when his habit of lying, the venom of his horrible untruthfulness, finally affects his wife. She has had to lie to protect his lies, to cover the yarns he has been spinning. She has for so long been living in an atmosphere of lying that lies have become more natural to her than truth. In the end she is a liar, too.

Furious Insult

No doubt of it, even a liar detests being found out; and the most brazen teller of untruths doesn't want to be told what he is.

"That's a lie!" is a phrase we use very sparingly.

Even when we simply cannot let someone's falsehood go uncorrected, even when the person has obviously told a whopper, we hesitate to say, "That's a lie!" Instead we soften the blow with, "Are you sure that's correct?" or, "Now, you may be entirely right, but it seems to me...." or the now-famous, "That ain't the way I heard it."

So, too, the most cutting insult with which we can slap a person's face is a calm, "You're a liar!"

No decent man will accept that insult. In fact, the "lyingest" liar that ever told a tall tale in place of the truth will furiously resent being called a liar. If he is strong enough, he'll swing to the offender's jaw. If he is not strong enough, he'll protest at the top of his voice that he may be guilty of a lot of other minor vices, like murder and arson and assault, but he is not—oh, no indeed!—he is not a liar.

Lying must be a pretty nasty sort of human trait if even the liar grows red and stutters indignantly when he is accused of

what he knows is the fact about himself.

What's a Lie?

It is hard to define a lie exactly. Almost it is easier to describe it.

A lie is a statement made by a person who knows or thinks that what he says is not true. It 'is a statement against the mind of the speaker. It is something that the speaker says with the intention to mislead his hearers.

Naturally enough, since we human beings communicate our ideas and intentions in many other ways than through words, a lie can be told by a nod, a shake of the head, a gesture—by any of the accepted signs for the communication of information. One can nod yes when one means no; one can point this way when the truth lies that way; one can communicate falsehood by sending it over radio, or by wig-wagging from the deck of a ship, or by using Indian smoke signals.

The things that make a lie a lie are these:

The speaker knows the truth or thinks he knows the truth.

He says something quite different from what he knows or thinks to be the truth.

Quite obviously, if a person makes a mistake in what he says and yet thinks that what he is telling is the truth, that statement is not a lie.

Thus: "Which way did my friend go?" I am asked.

Since I have a bad sense of direction, I say, "He went north," when, as a matter of fact, he went south. If I personally think he went north, though my inquirer may want to pound my head for my stupidity, he cannot rightfully call me a liar.

Almost inevitably the man telling the lie is persuaded or at least hopes that the listener will believe him. Practically this factor is the heart of the lie. For if the teller of the lie knows that he will not be believed, he has little purpose in sliding from the truth.

I've already mentioned that lying is a human vice about which almost all humanity is in agreement. Pagans and Christians. Jews and Hindus, men who believe in God and men who struggle to get along without Him all hate lies.

Poor Liars!

Towards liars the human attitude is a mixed one. Often we acutely dislike them; we see the harm they do, and we resent it. Sometimes men come very close to hating a liar and regarding him as an enemy of society—and he certainly is that.

At other times, however, people merely pity the liar.

"Poor fellow!" they say. "He just can't seem to tell the truth."

Yet wise parents take their lying children out behind the woodshed or its modern equivalent, determined that, if need be, they will beat the habit of lying out of these young people they are trying to educate to decent society. Judges on the bench tear the hide off witnesses who are found out to be lying, for in court the lie reaches the heights (or depths) of perjury. When a person who is under oath lies, the law enters in, and the liar gets a chance to meditate on his crime in a nice cool cell.

Pagans were proud of their word of honour.

Ancient history records the Roman nobleman who pledged his word that he would return and give himself up to death on a certain date. His captors let him go. On the appointed day he walked back to die; and his captors, who were also his enemies, honoured him as an honest man.

Liars' Clubs

Coming back, though, to our description of a lie. . . . We have to study the elements of a lie a little more closely.

Here's a fellow, a modern Munchausen, another Hoople, who launches forth on a tall tale. Now, the yarn is going to be so much at variance with objective facts that he is absolutely certain no one will be fool enough to believe him. His yarn is so remote from actual reality that it launches into the waters of sheer fiction and pure imagination. Of course, such a tale

is not really a lie at all, though sometimes it is referred to by theologians as a jocose lie.

“Come, look at the flock of wheelbarrows flying over the novitiate,” said the novice, in the classic religious-life story.

The novice merely had a sense of humour. Wheelbarrows don’t fly, even in and around novitiates. And, though his fellow novices thought his brand of humour distinctly worldly, none of them was stupid enough to believe him and run to look for the flying barrows.

So in America we have institutions known as liars’ clubs.

They have regular conventions, at which the members must tell the wildest tales conceivable.

One year, I remember, the prize was won by a man who told of a runner who was so swift that when he ran in the high hurdles his own shadow couldn’t keep after him. In fact, the shadow, in despair, was seen to be crawling along the ground and under the hurdles.

Hugh Fullerton, the baseball writer, once told a tall tale of a baseball player who was so fast that he pitched and caught in the same game: he threw the ball from the pitcher’s mound, ran down the field, got behind the batter, put on mask, glove, and protector, and caught the ball when it arrived.

Wavering Line

Anyone who believes a yarn like either of those isn’t sufficiently experienced with the world to be allowed to wander around without a guardian. And the man who tells such yarns knows they are so utterly at variance with reality that no one is possibly going to believe him. He makes no pretence of passing off falsehood for truth. He is simply displaying the power of his imagination. He is taking fictional flight into the realms of the ridiculous.

In this class of yarn is the ancient story of the man who trained a rattlesnake to act as a watchdog. At night he kept the snake in his bedroom, where the snake remained alert watching for burglars. One night the man awoke to find a burglar in his room. He was petrified with fright. Then across the room he saw the snake moving slowly toward the thief. The owner was terrified for fear that the rattler would kill the man. But not at all. So well trained was the snake that it wrapped itself around the thief and pulled him to the window, thrust out its tail, and rattled for a policeman.

I’ve told that story, which I heard years ago, to audiences that I thought young enough not to have heard it before. Never for an instant did I see any sign of any of my listeners, even the most guileless, believing it. I knew they wouldn’t believe it. Hence it was simply not a lie.

A wavering line, however, between tall tales and tales that we expect to be believed makes any practice of tall tale telling something that must be watched carefully. Fishermen start with tall tales. Regrettably we must note that when they come to spin the yarns about the fish they’ve caught a new desire creeps into their breasts: they really hope they will be believed. And that hope of being believed turns a tall tale into a lie.

Accepted Sense

Another factor that must be taken into consideration where lies are concerned is that some statements which seem to be not true are still not lies. They are known as conventional statements.

A caller asks to see the mistress of the house, for example. The mistress is up in her room, and she has no slightest desire to see the visitor. The maid answers the door and says, ‘My mistress is not at home.’

This is the commonest of conventional statements.

If the caller says to himself sadly, “Too bad! Why did I happen to pick a day when she is off on a picnic or gone to visit a sick aunt?” he simply doesn’t understand social usage. “My mistress is not at home,” or, “My mistress is not in,” does not mean that she is away from the house—on an ocean voyage; it simply means, “My mistress is not seeing callers today.” Or more concretely, “My mistress is not at home to you, not in to you.”

Plain Impertinence

There is, too, a certain type of direct question that comes from a person who has no right to know the answer to that

question. What's more, he knows he has no right to know it.

A relative stranger comes up to you and asks, "Is it true that you have an uncle who was hanged for horse stealing?"

Let's suppose for a moment that you had an uncle who was hanged for horse stealing. Your family has always kept this fact a dark secret. They have felt that if the truth got out it would hurt the family reputation, damage the future of brother William, who has just been made cashier in a bank, and spoil the chances of sister Alice, who is almost engaged to marry that nice young McAlister, of the Oak Park McAlisters.

Now, this stranger had no right to ask the question. It is no affair of his. He asked that question merely out of curiosity or because he would like to tell his friends about "that nice family with the skeleton in the closet—the uncle who was a horse thief." Or he runs a gossip column; and if he knows about Uncle Jake, so will all his readers.

You haven't the slightest obligation to tell him; and he knows that you have no such obligation.

First of all, you are in possession of a secret which you are obliged to keep. If that secret were made known, it would severely damage a great many reputations. It is your secret. You are no more obliged to give it up than you are to surrender your pocketbook at the call of some tramp.

But here is a man asking you a flat question. If you say, "It is none of your business," that is exactly the same as saying, "Yes; there was an Uncle Jake, and we still have the rope that hanged him. So the only way in which you can protect your secret and keep reputations safe is to use a flat denial.

Hence you can say, without hesitancy, "It is not true that we had a horse-stealing uncle."

Now, the man who asked you the question would be a fool, indeed, if he didn't know that your answer might have nothing to do with the facts of the case. All civilised men and all social beings know that there are secrets which you have no obligation—and often no right—to communicate to others.

Thus, when people ask a physician about his patients, he has no slightest obligation to tell them what he knows; in fact, he may do serious wrong by talking about his patients.

"Is it true that you took care of Bill Jukes for a buckshot wound that he got when he was robbing a hencoop?" the gossip asks.

"Most certainly I did not," the doctor answers, even if he did take care of the man.

"Did Jane Blink tell you in confession that she ran off with a married man?" the priest is asked.

He answers, "I don't know a blessed thing about Jane Blink," even though the escapades of Jane may be very clear in his mind.

This is knowledge that he has no right to communicate. He can protect this secret only by flatly denying the question.

So, people without gentility or with an instinct for prying into other people's affairs are constantly putting decent people on the spot by just such conduct. They ask the most impertinent personal questions.

"Didn't your husband come home drunk last evening?"

"Your niece is slightly crazy, isn't she?" "Didn't you go to that small lake resort last summer simply because it was so cheap?"

"Aren't you dyeing your hair?"

They have no slightest right to ask the question. What's more, they know they have no right to ask it. That puts them entirely in the wrong.

Hence you need not betray your secret just to gratify their curiosity. In fact, you can throw them completely off the track. You are protected by the fact that they really know well enough that their personal, prying, impertinent question is a direct effort to rob you of your secret, and hence deserves no consideration whatsoever.

Kinds of Lies

Lies fall, as a rule, into one of three classes:

Jocose lies;

Lies of convenience;

Destructive lies;

As a general rule, lies are venial sins. They can become mortal sins when they do real harm to someone or have some other destructive consequences. When the damage done by a lie is serious, then the lie can become seriously sinful.

Just for Fun

Jocose or humorous or boastful lies usually have some connection with personal vanity or some other small vice.

Fishermen's lies are of this type. One brags that he caught a three-pound black bass, when the bass weighed only thirteen ounces. Another tells of humorous adventures that happened to him personally, when, as a matter of fact, they happened to someone else, and he just appropriated them in order to improve his own story. Another exaggerates in order to spice his yarn. Another appropriates someone else's achievement just to make himself seem a great fellow.

Seldom do these lies hurt anyone other than the person who tells them; they do him harm. But we'll come to that after a bit.

Lies of convenience are untruths told to get oneself out of a jam, to prevent trouble, to forestall difficulties, to make up for laziness or some other fault, or to bring us some small honour or a reputation that we really do not rate.

Cheating

We arrive late for an engagement. As a matter of fact, we were just lazy; we over—slept. But we have arranged a pleasant little lie of convenience. So, when we arrive, we say: "So sorry I was late, but my car was held up at the bridge while a boat was going through; and really it was the longest boat, and it seemed to take hours before the bridge was closed again. You know how I hate to be late, but . . ."

We have simply forestalled trouble by spinning a yarn; for there was no boat, no enforced delay—except our own laziness.

We have failed to do our book report.

"Oh," we cry, indignantly, "I left it home alongside my typewriter. I'll be sure to bring it tomorrow."

And we dash home to start the thing, which thus far had never felt the impact of a typewriter key.

Says the young lady: "Oh, I got three invitations for Saturday, and I really didn't know which one to choose." Choice hadn't been so difficult; for she really had had only one invitation and had snapped at it with avidity. The two others were just little personal puffs hiding lies of convenience.

"When I was a youngster, I had the reputation for being the hardest slugger in our league. You ought to see me put that ball over the fence. . . ." "Darling, I'm sorry I came home so late, but I was sitting up with a sick friend. . . ." "My grandmother died. . . . May I go to the game—I mean to her funeral? . . ." "This hat cost eleven dollars"—minus eight dollars and ninety-five cents.

Cheating in class usually comes under this head. The student has not studied as he should have done. Along comes the examination. He can steal a few extra points, and turn the eighty, which he deserves, into a lying ninety, which he does not deserve. He cheats and lives the lie. Or he would like to be thought brighter than he really is. He rates a C; he manages to steal a B. And he struts the B as if it really belonged to him. It's a lie, a mean one, though one that lazy, vain human nature finds easy to understand.

Lies That Hurt

Destructive lies, however, are very different. These are lies that do positive harm to others.

The banker whose bank is tottering to a fall brags about how sound and solvent it is. People trust him and put their money into his bank, and his lie wipes them out. An unscrupulous doctor tells a patient he has some fatal disease, which is not there at all; by appearing to cure him, the doctor can make a fat fee. One person lies about another person, accusing him of a crime he never committed. The lie has become slander, a new and vicious type of lying. Under oath a person gives false evidence that leads to the conviction of an innocent person. This is perjury, another deadly kind of lie.

So it may happen that the lies of children deceive parents about really important things. They cover up the fact that one of the children is slipping away from school and going with bad companions. The lie will result in horrible damage to the guilty person's character. They themselves lie about where they intend to go, what they have been doing, who have been their companions. If their lie is the cover-up for their evil conduct, it is a damaging lie and hence decidedly evil.

Why Wrong?

Now, the thing that makes all lies bad, even slight lies—the lies told to make people think we are clever or to get us out of a jam, the lies that hurt no one but the teller—is best explained by these simple propositions:

Men and women were meant by God to live with their fellows in society.

In society speech is absolutely necessary. It binds men together. It makes human society entirely different from animal society—as, for example, a family or a State differs from an ant-hill or a beehive.

Now, lies destroy the trustworthiness of speech.

Hence, with the trustworthiness of speech gone, it becomes impossible to have decent, sound society itself.

Hence, lies destroy society by destroying the trustworthiness of speech, which alone makes human, properly functioning society possible.

Into Society

That is a chain of reasoning which hardly needs explanation.

We all know the human necessity and naturalness of society. We are born into the family. We enjoy constantly the privileges and advantages of the State. We are happy in the graces and blessings that come to us through the Church. Then, as if these three societies were not enough, we join our varied clubs—social, athletic, music, dramatic, political, literary, scientific.

Quite clearly we see the place of speech in these societies. Up to the time when they were taught the sign language, deaf-mutes remained alien members of society. They could not take part in social life. They lingered on its fringes, cut off from all the real privileges of society.

The family must talk and plan together. The State depends upon the power of men to convey their ideas to one another. The Church rests heavily on its liturgy and the spoken word. Indeed, all social life begins with the power of men and women to talk with one another, discussing, planning, collaborating, checking up, correcting, developing new projects and programmes.

The Lie Destroys

Along comes the lie. It attacks speech itself. It undermines that means of communication that exists for the purpose of binding men and women together in society. People lose their trust in speech. They can't believe what they hear. The results:

Well we have them simply expressed in the ancient parable of the young shepherd who cried, "Wolf! wolf!" once too often. You remember the fable, of course: The boy watched the sheep on the hillside. The villagers promised him that, if he saw a wolf and shouted for help, they would come and save his sheep. So, just for a joke—a jocose lie, you see—he cried out, "Wolf! wolf!" though there was none in sight. The villagers came running; and when he saw their angry expressions, he thought it was a great joke. He tried the joke a second time, and a third, always getting a big laugh and thinking what fools he'd made of the villagers. Then, you remember, a wolf really came along. This time the boy was perfectly sincere when he shouted, "Wolf! wolf!" But none of the villagers came. They thought he was joking again.

They'd been fooled by three of his lies, so now they took it for granted that he was telling another lie. And the boy stood helplessly by while the wolves destroyed his flock.

The very fact that the fable is ancient and stale makes it that much more valuable as illustration.

The boy was part of society. The protective arm of society was around him. All he had to do was speak, and the arm

was ready to ward off danger. He did speak, but in a lie. The arm moved to help him. The villagers, his associates, found themselves tricked, began to grow distrustful. He lied again. Their distrust deepened. He lied again. Their distrust was now established. The fourth time he spoke the truth. But nobody believed him. He had not only harmed himself; he had destroyed the belief that his little society had in the thing called speech.

Trust Gone

Reverting to Henry James's "The liar" once more, we note that, in the course of time, the liar reaches a point where his speech is absolutely valueless. He says, "I was in a drenching rain," and people smile and say, "Probably not a drop of rain for months." He says, "I've been feeling very well," and they annotate that to mean, "He must have been flat on his back." He says, "Nice fellow, that; honest as the day is long. I've associated with him for years, and he's a grand chap." And his listeners are sure that the chap is a scoundrel and a thief and probably as big a blackguard as the liar himself.

We ourselves know how we soon come to think about a person whose regard for the truth is a little casual.

"Oh, he's such an exaggerator," we say. "Maybe what he says is really true; but I always knock off about fifty per cent. just to be safe."

Or: "Really you can't believe a word she says. She'd say anything to make a good story. I honestly think she doesn't know when she's lying any more."

And that probably describes exactly her state of mind. She has made doubtful the honest coins of speech with so much counterfeit that she isn't sure any more which is genuine and which is fake. She lies without knowing that she lies. She so blends truth and lie, fact and fiction, that everyone, including herself, is confused. The result is that her speech is valueless. No one pays any attention to her. Her listeners are amused, but her speech has no connection with the important things of life.

Lying Figures

Among the Panama shopkeepers who exist for and on the American tourists, lying became the normally-accepted custom.

You entered a shop and picked up a piece of carved ivory, for example.

"How much?" you asked the Hindu who was behind the counter.

"Fifteen dollars," he said, without a blush or a flicker of his oriental eyelids.

Now, you knew, if you knew anything at all about Panama, that he was lying. Of course, if you didn't know, you might pay the fifteen dollars; and when later you learned how you'd been tricked, you'd swear never to buy another thing he offered, no matter what the price. But most travellers knew better.

"Nonsense," you said. "I'll give you a dollar."

Then began the endless haggling. In the end, you probably got your ivory trinket for about five dollars, which might at that be a dollar more than he had hoped you'd pay.

The result of this universal system of lying was that Americans stopped buying any article that they had not first priced in America. They bought French perfumes, because they knew what those perfumes were worth on Madison Avenue or Michigan Avenue. Other stuff they just let lie, unless they had with them some honest American merchant who could tell them exactly what the article was worth.

In time the merchants of Panama realised their mistake. The better shops put up the signs, "One Price Store." That meant that the articles were plainly marked; the first price asked was the price at which the goods would be sold, and the customers had some assurance that words meant what they were supposed to mean and that figures didn't lie.

At that many a Panama shop still waits to "gyp" the unwary traveller. And older travellers who return to Panama will argue and bargain in the one-price shops, taking it for granted that the first price is a lie, and that only by endless haggling will they get at the true price.

Too Funny

Even exaggerators. . .

Well, take the famous case of Proctor Knott. In Congress on a certain occasion he made a speech on Duluth that every student of oratory knows by heart. It was a highly satirical speech, a mass of exaggerations, hyperbole, high-flown nonsense, and deliberate misstatement. I need hardly say that Knott was merely being funny, very funny, and in no sense a liar. But the result of that speech on his career was disastrous. People remembered how he had misused words; and every time he rose to speak, they began to laugh. He said, "It's a nice day"; and they were sure he meant, "It's raining Airedales and maltese kittens." He asked for appropriations, and they hooted with mirth as they cut those appropriations out of the bills.

Quite without intending it, he had debased language. Once having misused it, he was never again permitted to use it correctly.

Trust is Gone

The old saying is, "Never trust a liar, even when he seems to speak the truth." All that that means is that he has so twisted speech from its real purpose that his speech doesn't deserve our attention. Maybe he is not lying. But we are safe in pretending that he is lying.

So speech, the foundation of social relationship, the bond between men, is by the lie and the liar made unfit for human use.

There's Hitler, for instance. If to-morrow he were in all sincerity to promise the United States that under no circumstances would he be other than our friend, we'd say, "You liar!" He might be telling the truth. He might have suffered a sincere repentance and developed a deep and passionate love for us Americans. But we would remember his promises made to Chamberlain, to the Czechs, to the French, to the Dutch, to the Belgians, to the Slavs. We'd say, "If he says he loves us, that probably means he hates us; and if he says he means to help us, that is a sure sign he is planning to invade us."

Social Enemy

That type of corruption of language ends all possibility of human society. The liar is one of the greatest enemies that society can have. He is the counterfeiter of words. He is the maker of false weights and measures for our speech. He is the dishonest shopkeeper whose goods are phrases and sentences. He comes to us as a friend, and he tricks our mind with the twist of his speech and the poison he injects into his words.

For that reason, because speech is right at the base of all human society, a lie can never be permitted.

If it were once permitted, where would the damage end?

Let's say we would make this rule: "You may tell a lie if that is necessary to avoid a great personal inconvenience."

What is a great personal inconvenience? For little Johnny it is not going to the movies this afternoon. For the bank cashier it is facing the bank examiner. For a wife it is the matter of making her husband angry. For a student it is getting a low mark in mathematics. So Johnny decides he can lie; and the bank cashier feels he can alter his books; and the wife tells her husband a yarn; and the student cheats in his examination. . . . And there has begun the endless chain that goes on and on and on to the complete destruction of all the trust we could possibly have in human beings.

Greater Good

For each time they told us something, we'd have to stop and ask ourselves: "Is this true? Or are they telling us this to save themselves a great inconvenience?"

The dear abbess, when she lied, thought she was saving the heroine from more trouble. She may have been doing that. But she was attacking society itself. She was corrupting truth. She argued: "A lie is all right if it prevents some great annoyance."

But, pursuing that line of thought, anyone faced with a great annoyance could do exactly the same thing. So you and I and all the rest of the human race would never know when the thing we were told was the truth and when it was merely something that saved someone else from getting into a jam.

Hence a lie is wrong because it attacks speech.

Attacking and destroying speech, it attacks our trust in our fellow men.

Once that trust is gone, society cannot exist in peace and confidence.

So a lie is a blow against society itself,

Habits Grow

All vices begin with a single act.

Every once in a while another Bluebeard darkens the pages of our criminal records. He has to his discredit a dozen or so wives all nicely buried in the back yard. The dear maiden aunts in “Arsenic and Old Lace” had a dozen old men comfortably tucked away in their basement. But both Blue-beard and the old aunts began with a single murder; the habit developed only by degrees.

Lying, however, is a vice that develops very swiftly.

The first lie is usually followed by a half-dozen protective lies. We tell a yarn, and then we find we have to tell another yarn to cover the first one, and half a dozen more to cover the original two—until we are wound round with a network of lies, each lie as fine as a strand of cobweb and the whole mass choking our very souls.

And How!

Lies are often the source of thoughtless praise, an easy reputation, a lot of convenience.

A child is in danger of being punished for disobedience, so he lies to his parents.

Since they prefer to believe him, his lie passes; he gets away with it. “Not bad.” he thinks; “in fact, positively easy. I’ll remember that the next time I’m on the spot.” So lie number one is followed swiftly by lie number two. This time the parents find him out. They are embarrassed to know they have a child who is a liar. But perhaps in the goodness—and folly—of their hearts they argue, “He’ll outgrow it.” Instead he meets fresh emergencies with fresh lies, and in no time at all he is a confirmed liar, handling all problems by lying his way out—or deeper in.

The young person finds that people look at him with astonishment and perhaps a little envy when he puffs up his personal adventures a bit. So he starts regularly to expand the truth. Boys are that way about their conquests. Young men are horrible liars in case after case about the girls who “fell victim” to their irresistible ways. Men grow to lie, too, about their golf score, their athletic prowess, their income, all their accomplishments. It is so much easier to talk big than to act big.

Bragging

Many liars develop a dramatic sense that makes the sheer truth seem almost not worth mentioning. If they catch a perch, it dramatically becomes a pickerel. If the boy tells her she looks pretty to-night, she expands the compliments into practically a proposal. If they see a strange man walking down the street in their direction, he soon becomes a footpad from whom they escaped by the skin of their teeth. If he puts over a good deal, he swells the actual commission from a reasonable sum into the salary of a bank president. If the vacation was pleasant, it is retold as a Halliburton adventure.

So new acquaintances smile bewilderedly. Old friends hoot internally. And the only one really taken in by the lies is the liar himself.

Lost

Once the habit has really gripped a victim, he is almost a lost person. I have always thought that a person who has become accustomed to saying, “I ain’t seen no guy around here,” finds it almost unemphatic to say, “I haven’t seen

anyone here.” If he has become accustomed to the power of a double negative, like “I won’t do nothing about it,” he thinks it a little sissified to say, “I won’t do anything about it.”

And a liar finds the truth a little pale and insipid after the red double negatives of his lies.

He goes on from lie to lie. In his own eyes he becomes great. He feels himself an important personage in his talk. And he fails to see the doubt and scepticism and tolerant amusement or real pity in the eyes of his listeners.

The Line

I am almost tempted to go for a minute into the sidetrack of the young people’s modern line. We emphasise the word because it verges on a foreign language; it belongs to the patois of the very young. But there is the line of exaggerated flattery and stereotyped honeyed compliments with which a young man plays the young lady whom he hopes to pull up to the boat. And there is the line of tremendous interest and alert questioning and consuming personal regard with which a young lady nets her young man.

Years ago there was current an amusing story of the young fellow whose line consisted in his telling every young woman he met that she looked like the famous operatic beauty, Nellie Melba. Since Melba was undoubtedly a glorious-looking woman, any girl naturally felt top-of-the-world when her escort announced, “Do you know, you look exactly like Melba!”

But—it happens to most liars or throwers of a line—fate caught up with the young man. The girls began to compare notes and to find that all the girls he had ever taken out looked—by some singular coincidence—exactly like the lovely Melba.

So, one morning, to his horror, and to the ending of his line, he got an invitation—signed by all the girls he had taken out—inviting him to be present at the opening meeting of the We-Look-Like-Melba Club. The girls designated him as president and organiser and themselves as charter members.

Perhaps the only thing that keeps most youthful lines from being lies (the difference rests with a single consonant) is the fact that the spinner really doesn’t think that the listener will be stupid enough to believe them. Unfortunately many listeners do believe them. And that too often kicks that important consonant right out of the line.

Found Out

This much, however, is certain: Whether the lie takes the form of the line, whether the liar lies because he wants to take to himself credit for things that he never did or for adventures that happened to another, whether he lies just to build himself up or to get himself out of corners, the one outstanding fact is that liars are always found out.

That is why we quote this second proverb: “Liars should have long memories.”

They have to hate long memories. They must have an exact recollection of the lie they told and the circumstances they built around it. And few liars have such memories. That is why district attorneys who put liars on the witness stand can make the moments of questioning utterly miserable for them and tie them into quivering knots. It is not too difficult to remember what one has done; it takes a long memory to recall just what one said one has done. And to keep in separate mental compartments the things that really have happened and the things that one has said have happened, to keep from crashing together the truth as it really was and the fiction we have built up around the truth—that takes care and mental alertness and a great gift for the untangling of twisted lines.

Liars have a way of telling one story to one person and another story to a second person and still another to a third person. Then they have the additional task of trying to remember which story it was they told to which person. There even the most expert slip—whereupon the situation becomes both funny and tragic.

Tied to Other Vices

Usually lying is not an isolated vice. It arises from some other weakness of character. If we could analyse the liar, we would find out readily enough just what makes him lie. In almost every case he lies because of some defect in his

character, some vice that is burrowing in his soul.

There is the coward, for instance, the fellow who is afraid to face life as it is or to take the consequences of his mistakes and wrongdoing. He writhes at the thought of a reprimand'. He can't stand correction. If he sees the threat of punishment over his head, he winces and "welches"...and struggles to escape. And his first recourse is to lying. A lie is the rat-hole of the coward. Envy finds its most frequent expression through a lie. The envious person can't bear to think that someone else has a virtue or an accomplishment or a record that outshines his own. So he lies away, as far as he can, the achievements of the other. Or he lies about his own dull life and lack-lustre accomplishments, hoping to puff up with words what he has not built up with deeds.

Pride is the source of vast numbers of lies. In the keen desire to be honoured, a man lies about what he is, about his family, about his income, about his business, about his athletic abilities, about his job.

Lies for Bait

And what lies are told by the lustful! The young man tells the young woman that he cannot live without her, when the lie of his words 'merely covers the lust of his' passion. The young man torments the girl with a vivid recital of how he cannot sleep because of his yearning for her, how she is responsible for his troubled state, how he means to marry her and will marry her—when all he wants is an easy partner for his sin.

The trap of lust is baited with lies. Unfortunately, even good and sensible girls who long to find love will accept its lying masquerade and allow themselves to be persuaded against what they know to be true and right and decent.

Fate Falls

The fate of all liars is the same: the universal distrust of their acquaintances, the dislike of those whom they have harmed by their lies.

People who are strong feel for liars a kind of pity. They seem so like little children to whom words mean nothing. They have so little control over their imaginations. Their tongues run away with them in a mad gallop, like frightened mules on a hillside. One pities them for their stupidity; they think they are getting away with their lies. One pities them for their cowardice; they are so obviously hiding behind a lie because they are afraid. One pities them for the contempt that surrounds them, a contempt that grows with the years.

Contempt is not too strong a word; honest men disdain and despise a liar. The braggart is a pitiful spectacle, for men of achievement look down upon the man whose deeds are done with his tongue. The woman who tries to build up her reputation by pulling down the reputation of another ends up with no friends who will trust her and few acquaintances who will even listen to her.

And, though they may not say it to his face, people soon come to summarise the liar behind his back in that blasting epitome: "What a liar!" And that is more than a statement or character summary; it is a rude and final dismissal from the ranks of civilised society.

Looking for Trouble

While it is absolutely true that a lie is always wrong, one is not always obliged to blurt out the truth.

Take, for example, the pest who says, "Believe me, I always speak my mind," or, "I told him what I thought of him!" or, "There were a lot of unpleasant things I thought he ought to know, so I took the chance to tell him."

Not lying is one thing; forcing unpleasant or uncalled-for truth on a person is quite another. Nor is one obliged or at times even permitted to tell a fact which cannot be told and must not be told, because the telling of it would betray a legitimate secret.

"I always speak my mind." Why? There are times when the one way to handle a situation is not to say anything at all. Here is a person who does not want to hear the truth. We are probably wasting good energy if we tell it to him. Here is a person whom the truth would only irritate and infuriate. Teachers have met parents who are like that; they refuse to listen

to the truth about their unruly or erring children. Here is a difficult situation, let's say, that has come to my attention. Little can be done to remedy it. I can pray over it and do my best to cure it; to tell it to someone else would only make the case worse.

Blurring Truth

An acquaintance of mine has defects that I do not like. Before I blurt out to him the raw truth, I should ask myself and answer a number of questions. Does he want to know the truth? Would the knowledge of the truth make any difference in his conduct? Would my power of influencing him for good be lost if I spoke my mind? Has he enough respect for me to care what I think about him?

The type of person who always goes about blurting out unpleasant truths is often merely a troublemaker. The truth does not make everyone glad. What I think of a certain person is my own concern, and he might be happier if he did not know what I think of him. It is not hypocrisy that keeps me silent; it is merely a decent regard for the feelings of others.

Truth-telling is a high ideal. But the telling of truth does not always mean the telling of unpleasant truth, the jolting of sensitive feelings, the disorganising—without correcting—of other people's lives.

And if the truth has been given to me in confidence, if it is a secret that I have no right to tell, I simply may not blurt it forth, nor hand it over to the chance questioner who comes prying about. I have no slightest obligation to deliver up my secret. And that is that.

Are Young People Truthful?

As I write these lines, I keep thinking of the many educators and guides of youth to-day who find truth-telling on the wane. To lie oneself out of trouble seems almost a current custom. Parents are treated to a graceful lie on the principle of "What they don't know won't hurt them." Cheating, which is an easy way to lie about our abilities when the low mark we deserve is replaced by the high mark we stole, is entirely a matter of what the student can get away with. Girls lie themselves out of one date when they see the prospects of a better one. Boys lie to girls about their complete devotion to them, lyricising the love of an evening into the light of a life.

Whether or not this is true, I leave to my friendly readers to decide.

Instead, let me remind all of you, young people and old, of the bright and shining shield that is high honour.

High Honour

"His word is as good as his bond," say his friends about this businessman. What higher tribute could be paid him in a world that will never forget the dignity of the truthful man? "In all my life I have never known her to lie," they say of the woman whose very eyes are bright with truth. A dozen other virtues are indicated in that single sentence, virtues that do not exist when love of truth is absent.

"He must be, the man I marry, utterly sincere." A thousand times over have I heard and read that from young woman. Sincerity is a quality that women list high among the virtues they want in their future husbands. Do you wonder at it?

"I could trust my wife anywhere at any time with anyone," boasts the proud husband, What a tribute to the wife he loves!

Virtuous Habit

Truth-telling is a matter of good habit, just as lying is a matter of vicious habit. Of course, truth-telling demands the courage to accept the consequences of one's mistakes and wrongdoing, the courage not to blur error with the blot of a lie. It means a calm realisation of the importance of truth to human society; for only through truth is society able to trust its members and conduct its affairs calmly and confidently. Truth-telling obliges a man to rest his reputation on what he is and what he does, not on what he says he is and what he brags he has done. The truthful man is forced to eliminate from his' soul the petty vices that flourish in the manure bed of lies. The truthful woman is almost bound to be virtuous; she has

no need of a cloak of lies that is used to cover shame and hide evil deeds.

When Christ came to characterise Himself, He stated truth as the second of His qualities; "I am the way [to eternal happiness], and the TRUTH, and the life [of man in time and forever beyond time]."

Christ and Truth

For truth Christ lived. In the cause of truth He died. Through Him truth came into the world. Because He would not forswear truth by the easy silence He might have used to cloak His divinity during an unjust trial, He went to His death.

And truth, His truth, strong human truth, too, will make us free. The liar is never free. He is not free from worry about the lies that will some day catch up with him. He is never free from the suspicion of those he has tried, to fool. He is not free from the petty vices nourished by his way of lying. He is a slave of a habit that grows and grows until it cuts him off from his fellows and makes him a lone figure, distrusted by those who know him well, regarded with instinctive aversion by those who sense that his speech is twisted.

Truth Makes Us Free

But the truth shall make us free.

I am thinking, of course, of the truth that Christ came to teach to all men, the truth that makes men free to run the road to God, and lay claim to eternity and the mansions of the blessed.

But I am thinking, too, of the freedom of those who tell the truth and who shun lies, a freedom known here and now. . .

They are free from the suspicion that hems a liar round. . .

That constant worry that his lies will not match and one lie will betray another. . .

The amused smile of the incredulous...

The bored pity of friends. .

The flat unbelief of those who have come to know him. .

Disdain of himself; for, whatever the world may call him, he knows himself to be a liar. .

The tangled web of lies that in the end drags him down to ruin.

They are free citizens who use their speech to promote human relationships and to build a stronger society. They are free to teach truth to the ignorant and give bright glimpses of truth to the young and eager. They are free with the freedom of high honour. They carry the invulnerable shield of their own strong character and the powerful lance of truth.

And while shield and lance may seem strange weapons in this age of tanks and 'planes, honour and character and truth make up the uniform of the victorious soldier of the Lord, the lovely costume of the fair lady whose tongue is trustworthy because her soul is pure.

Nihil obstat:

F. MOYNIHAN,

Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:

✠ DANIEL MANNIX,

Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.
