

1700 wnd.

all caps

Short Story

"That reminds me of something that happened to me once."

We all broke off our laughter and looked up in surprise. Those were the first words the stranger had spoken since joining us. He was too well dressed to be a bum, so when he came over to our fire in the hobo jungle just outside of San Berdoo, we were suspicious and didn't talk to him. Now, he'd tried to break the ice, but we still wanted to ignore him.

"Jeez, it's cold!" muttered Limpy, rubbing his hands.

"Wisht I wuz in Miyamee." said Shorty, picking up the cue.

"Migawd, I come all the way from Milwaukee so I can get a little Californnee sunshine, and what happens? The sonbitchin' weatherman pulls a Pearl Harbor and makes it snow!" spat out Big Bo disgustedly.

I didn't say anything; I was watching the stranger... There were toox many things about him that wouldn't let me ignore him. In the first place, he didn't look like a bum; he was clean-shaven and ~~had~~ was wearing some pretty good clothes that weren't fit for the kind of weather we were having. It was one of Southern Cal's freakish winters, and the first snow in forty odd years had fallen in Ellay; we had some in San Berdoo too. It wasn't more than half an inch deep on the level ground, but it was plenty cold. Getting back to this strange guy, he was dressed pretty light for even a mild Southern Cal winter; he had on only a pair of slacks with a light jacket over a sport shirt. Like my buddy Mac would've said, he'd've been a swell advertisement for the Southern California Cee of Cee. But the cold weather didn't phase him none. Another thing about him

At first, he attacked ~~such~~ things in general such as school dances, school athletics, school parties, social clubs, and ad infinitum. These all ended with didactic mottos that he had learned on his miserly uncle's lap.

When he had exhausted all the subjects pertaining to school, he branched off into the correction of vices that belonged to the world at large. He tried unsuccessfully to campaign for the abolishment of movâes. When that failed, he inagurated a new prohibition movement. This too failed, but at least it gained him a sort of following, for many church women flocked to his crusading banner, and, subsequently, he was asked to take charge of a Sunday school class where he devoted himself to the further propagation of his ideas. But this did not take place until some years later after he was out of high school.

Underlying all of these arguments was a personal tone. Consumed with this almost religious fervor, the thought had long since occurred to Ernest to put forth his own impeccable character as an exemplum of virtue. "Be like me," was his impassioned appeal. More than once, his treatises carried this sentence: "Young sinners, give up your wicked habits of play and devote yourselves to the serious pursuits of life as I have done; if we give up our earthly pleasures, we will receive joy in heaven." Profound thoughts for a high school boy, but then Ernest was a profound lad.

Inevitably, this appeal that people use his character as a touchstone took the form of a personal attack on indivi-

duals whom he considered wayward. "Idleness is the root of all evil; don't fritter your time away doing nothing as Slocum Johnson is doing, but follow my example and be industrious," he pleaded earnestly and nobly. Again, he begged, "Don't go around laughing and enjoying yourselves like Johnny Jones, but be sober like me, for if you find pleasure in your life here, you will be damned." He used similar arguments against dancing and drinking and many other vices.

Thus Ernest went through life. After high school, he got a job as executive secretary of the male auxiliary of the W. C. T. U. that he had started in town. It was about this time that the churchwomen asked him to teach school. He was pleased at the good judgement the church women had in asking him to teach the wisdom of his way of life to young children and accepted. He was so near to the unusual emotion of delight at the prospect of working with such impressionable young minds that he even forgot himself so far as to give a wan smile; it was ghastly.

He had more success in propagating his dogmas during this period than at any other. The children were too young to sneer at him, and he appealed to their emotion of fear, preaching hell-fire. Most of the children outgrew their fear, but a few became staunch disciples of Ernest Trueblood.

And so his life went; he was hated and shunned by many and followed by a few.

The time eventually came for him to die, and, to his credit, it must be said that he faced the end unflinchingly.

"I thank God that I am not as others," he virtuously told people when he learned that life was drawing to a close.

"I am grateful that I have led a grave, sober life and that I have resisted the temptations of life; I have suffered at the hands of those who have sown their wild oats, but I shall reap my reward in heaven, and they shall harvest in hell."

It is doubtful that he prayed, for, by this time, he was almost of the opinion that God was ^{merely} his colleague. As he was about to gasp his last breath, he saw a little street urchin toddling along the sidewalk outside his window. Feeling that he had one last task to perform, he raised himself from the bed, leaned out the window and said, "Be ambitious, young fellow; hard work never killed anybody. Live a sober, industrious life, and you will be rewarded in heaven." Then he fell back on his bed and expired while the street urchin, uncomprehending, toddled blithely along, utterly unmindful of the golden words of wisdom that had been spoken to him.

The soul of Ernest Trueblood soared into the after-world and was greeted by a figure in black. Ernest saw the black and started to nod approvingly at the sober dress, but then remembered that this was no longer earth. What then was the significance of such somber apparel, he wondered. Was there a heaven and a hell beyond even this world?

"Are you God?" he asked.

The other shook his head and motioned to Ernest to follow him. Somewhat miffed at the Almighty for not having met such a zealous reformer as he was, Ernest sullenly followed

the figure in black. Soon they paused before a fenced-in village which Ernest assumed to be heaven. People there seemed to be very industrious and cheerful too. Off in one corner there was a group enjoying games and fellowship, apparently relaxing from their industry. Ernest was vexed at the cheerfulness of the workers and the carefree play of the others until he reminded himself again that this was heaven and that all those who had gained their goal did not have to worry about the future.

The guide got up to move on, and Ernest followed. They went past the gate, and Ernest wondered, but did not say anything. Farther on, they paused again before another fenced-in place. Ernest looked over the fence and saw clouds scattered here and there with people on them relaxing. Ernest sighed blissfully. No doubt he was to rest here before going back to the other village of heaven. He certainly deserved a rest, he thought, for all the good hard work he had done ~~in the world~~ on earth in God's name.

But when they resumed their journey, the guide, instead of turning into the gate again passed it and continued on. At length, they came to another enclosure, only this was heavily barred. Ernest was horrified; there were ^{people} within chained and working tortuously. Ernest looked into the faces of those men and was further horrified at their glum countenances. Everyone there had much the same expression he had; on earth, he had never seen such faces except when shaving; so he was quite shocked. Looking around some more,

he saw Satan himself belaboring some of the chained men and women.

Ernest turned furiously to his guide. "I'm afraid that that there's been some mistake!" he thundered, "God shall hear of this and you shall suffer for your blundering error in directing me to hell!"

Attracted by the commotion, Satan left his slaves and went up to Ernest and his guide, grabbing hold of Ernest's arm roughly. "Let's use no harsh language to my assistant," he ordered, "and let's have no mention of God here!"

"Unhand me, you devil!" said Ernest imperiously upon which the devil gave him a tremendous box on the ear.

"Mind how you speak to your master!" the prince of darkness bellowed.

"You are no master of mine; my name is Ernest Trueblood, and my rightful place is ~~in~~ in heaven," retorted Ernest.

"By all that's evil, you belong here!" Satan thundered, giving Ernest another clip and producing a memo book. "Smith, Smith, Smith, Smyth, Smythe, Stone, Timmons, Tipton, Trunkley, Trueblood," he read, flipping the pages of his memo. "Yup, you belong here all right. You have been judged by heaven and consigned to one of the sections of hell. The tribunal of hell has decided that you should rot here in the worst section for eternity.

"By what right?" asked Ernest.

"Sirrah, you have been accused of the high treason of using God's name to promote the work of the devil, ahem; you

are damned for esteeming yourself better than your fellow-men; you are damned for trying to put yourself in God's place and judge. You are condemned for trying to so conduct yourself as to purchase your way into heaven by means of what you considered righteous living; you are further accused and condemned above all for trying to deprive children especially but others too of the God-given right ~~to~~ of happiness and joy. Welcome, brother!"

"I have been maligned; those things I did in God's name; those are works of God," protested Ernest.

"Indeed they're not," said the devil. "You have been the greatest force for my cause that earth has known since the high priests caused Jesus to be crucified."

"But I see no such people as Slocum Johnson here, nor do I see any like Johnny Jones; surely they are to be more condemned than I!"

The devil laughed. "Johnny Jones was one of God's own children. A softy. He went about spreading happiness and good cheer, encouraging people by his own example while you had sour looks for everybody. Johnny is now in heaven reap in his just rewards with the rest of the softies. As for Slocum Johnson, there's no doubt that his vicious idleness was worthy of hell. But his wasn't true greatness like your genius. He had no evil influences on other people. So now he is in one of the better sections of hell; perhaps you passed it on your way here. He liked to loaf so much that we put him on a cloud where he will soon come to realize how

tedious it can be to loaf for eternity."

"Still," insisted Ernest, "There are many people who felt as I did who are not here; they thought the same things I did, but did not have the courage to speak out."

"Precisely," said Satan, "they ~~did~~ not spread their evil influences; they lacked your greatness. Consequently, they too are in a better section of hell. Where they are, there is nothing but play and leisure, but they had become so used to their sour outlook on life while on earth that they don't know how to relax and enjoy themselves. Their major crime, which is one of your many, is having lived a gloomy, rigid life on earth with the hope of getting in- to heaven thereby."

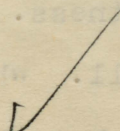
"It is obvious that the whole scheme of things here needs ~~reforming~~ reforming," said Ernest, reverting to character.

"There'll be no reforming here as long as I'm master!" bellowed Satan, grabbing Trueblood and throwing him into the enclosure and clanging the gate behind him. Trueblood was lead away and shackled and then put to work at the hard work he had preached while on earth.

2700 wnds

Ishikawa, Joseph B
English 212
Dr. Wimberley

Satire: Part two



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Baggage checks →

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