

"BEHOLD, A SOWER WENT FORTH TO SOW"

Slocum Johnson was blessed with his odd name either because he had a rich progenitor who had been cursed with it, or else because his parents had had twelve other children, nine of them boys, and were possibly getting desperate for a different name. Or again, the same misfortune may have befallen him that befell Tristram Shandy. Whatever the cause of his being christened "Slocum," the name easily lent itself to evolution, soon being changed to "Slo" and then to "Slow-motion" by his grade school mates. This was quite appropriate because, if the truth must be known, our hero was lazy.

His wasn't the indolence due to any physical or mental defect; in fact, he was built both inside and out the same as any normal child and was as bright as the next and perhaps a little more so because, early in life, his sly perverse nature discovered that the goodness of human nature that existed in other people caused them to go out of their way to help him out whenever he was slow in accomplishing his ends. And when he discovered this, he figured, possibly by some profound childish instinct that we seem to lose with the development of our intelligence which inadequately takes its place, that there was no use of his developing his human nature in that direction inasmuch as it was so strongly manifest in others as to be almost wasteful unless used on such people as himself. He did not have to read Rousseau to discover that human nature is basically good; he knew it by his childish instinct and decided that there was a surplus of it

already in existence without his adding to it. Consequently, he started out, unconsciously or, rather, instinctively, to be a parasite.

By the time his parents heard of such a thing as psychology, "Slow-motion" Johnson was beyond redemption; he was too thoroughly addicted to the habit. It would have been all right if he'd been merely a good-natured loafer as were some people who had reduced loafing to a fine art, but he was viciously lazy; he was just a plain, shiftless parasite. There is a limit to the goodness of human nature despite anything Rousseau may have said, and it wasn't more than ten years before the townspeople in general followed the lead of the children, who were more discerning and less euphemistically inclined in their innocence, and also began calling him "Slow-motion." They even called him that to his face, but he was too exaninate to do anything about it. In truth, he was as lazy as Ludlam's legendary dog.

He took his education in the same leisurely fashion that he did everything else. It took him nine years to get through the first six grades of grammar school, and by the time he was graduated from junior high school, he was of such an age that it was no longer compulsory for him to attend school. At that, he did speed up to the point where he beat his education, for his sixth grade learning didn't catch up with him until he was almost through junior high school.

He became the town's leading loafer because no one would employ him, and he was too lazy to go elsewhere to look for

work. Even had somebody offered him a job, he would no doubt have been too lazy to take it. But in spite of the fact that the townspeople were wise to him, they were such pious people that, despite their disgust for him, they took care of him for fear of being accused of the sin of not ~~taking care~~^{caring for} of the indigent.

People often said that his laziness would be the death of him yet, and, strangely enough, it was. One day, he got a sliver in a delicate portion of his anatomy; it was probably from his favorite loafing bench. It festered, but "Slow-motion's" otiosity was stronger than his pain. So he didn't bother to extract the vagrant sliver. However, his groans were so pitéous that someone finally investigated the cause and performed the operation of extracting it. But it was too late; as a consequence of the sliver, "Slow-motion" contracted blood-poisoning.

He was a pretty sick pigeon for awhile, and, soon, it became obvious that he was not far from being a dead duck. Feeling the imminence of the grim reaper, "Slow-motion" Johnson turned his thoughts to life after death. Like most people, his idea of heaven was a pretty subjective thing; so it isn't strange that he thought of it as a place where he'd be able to sink his body into a nice cottony cloud and loll there for eternity. With this delectable vision of paradise, it behooved him to pray. It did not occur to him that he might not be deserving; he did not pray for forgiveness for having lived such an unproductive

life; he merely prayed that he might go to heaven so that he would be able to continue his loafing career. Hot summer days had always been his bane; so he had no desire to roast in the hell-fires where he feared that he would be put to work under a whip.

Entertained by this anticipation of heaven, "Slow-motion" Johnson, in due course of time, died. That is to say, his spirit left his earthly body. Death is a great leveler and lends dignity to any creature; so henceforth, we shall refer to our hero as "Slocum Johnson" as befits the dignity of a spirit and dispense with his earthly nickname.

The last earthly thing the soul of Slocum Johnson had been aware of was his vision of heaven which had remained until expiration; the next thing he knew, he was in a strange misty place. Before long, an old bearded gent with a white robe and wings approached and motioned Slocum to follow him. Ordinarily, Slocum was disinclined to such strenuous activity as walking, but the vision of eternal repose on a heavenly cloud was fresh in his memory; so he followed the bearded gent with alacrity and without protestation.

After a bit, just about the time Slocum was beginning to wonder if even a soft downy cloud would be worth all the walking, they came to what seemed to be a fence around a village. Spurred on by curiosity of what his future life for eternity was to be like, Slocum actually accelerated his speed until he was fairly treading on the heels of his guide.

Yes, it must be admitted that it sounds fantastic, but there are witnesses that he actually did show signs of ~~animation~~^{life} for the first time since his terrestrial birth; it's a pity that he had to die to do it.

After a bit, they came to a place where they could see into the village and paused. Slocum gave a doleful groan, more terrible than any groan he had voiced on earth. His indolent nature was not only shocked but nauseated as well, for everywhere, there was great activity and industry. Everyone seemed to be working on some constructive project; nowhere did Slocum see an idle soul. He felt miserable; how cruel fate was. He groaned again and said, "I wish I was dead!"

His bearded companion raised an amused eyebrow and replied, "That you are, friend."

Slocum could hardly bear the sight of so much industry, but a sort of morbid curiosity caused him to turn his horrified gaze toward the village again. Either his conception of heaven had been all shot, or this was hell and he was eternally damned. It was true that off in a corner there was a sort of recreational square, but obviously people were only relaxing there in order to be able to renew their work refreshed. Besides, there were games going on there, and even that activity was repugnant to Slocum. It outraged his sense of the lassitude.

"Let's be on our way," suggested the bearded gent.

"Oh, gosh, I don't want to go in there," whined Slocum,

cringing.

This time, the guide registered horror and astonishment. "In there? of course not!" he said. Then lowering his voice, he added, "Don't be silly; that's the opposition's camp. We couldn't get in there if we wanted to, and they couldn't get out and into our place if they wanted to either."

Slocum's heart beat with renewed joy. So that wasn't heaven after all in all likelihood, but hell. He hadn't thought that heaven would be the scene of such obnoxious activity. Thus rejoicing, he followed the white-robed figure even more rapidly than before in his haste to leave the scene that had given him such a start.

"Our camp is a short way off," the bearded gent explained as they were going along.

"How come?" asked Slocum. "I always thought that heaven was above and hell below."

"Nonsense," replied his companion, "that's pure earthly prejudice; just another rumor gone wrong. Why, we're practically neighbors."

"Neighbors?" Slocum shuddered. "But they can't get into our place, and we won't be sent back there?" he asked anxiously.

"Certainly not," his guide said reassuringly.

Before long, they came to an elaborate gate. The guide pushed a button, and the gate swung open. Within was the registration desk with another bearded fellow sitting there.

"Well, Pete, here's the new roomer," said the guide,

propelling Slocum forward.

Slocum looked beyond the desk and beamed as he saw the soft downy clouds scattered all over the panorama. Joyfully, he turned to the bearded one ~~and~~ the desk and said, "Glad to meet you, St. Peter."

The other nodded and pushed one of the buttons on the desk. Then a voice came out of a speaker in back of St. Peter. "Just call me Pete," it said. "You must be Slocum Johnson; we've been expecting you and are glad to see that you got here on schedule. With all that medical progress down on earth, we're just never sure when a man's going to die. We're sort of crowded now because of the darned war going on, but you'll be able to share one of the clouds with a few others until we get some more manufactured. You're going to be free to take it easy, but there are a few taboos that you'll have to learn. I'll only tell you one now, and that's that you musn't send spirit messages home. Oh yeah, and another thing is that the big boss is pretty busy and can't be bothered; so if you want anything, you'll have to ask your guide who is to be your eternal companion." Here the guide made Slocum a low bow. The speaker went on, "You'll be issued a pair of wings, a white robe, and a harp; by the way, can you play the harp?" The voice faded suddenly.

"No," was Johnson's economic reply.

"St. Peter pushed the button again, and the same voice spoke again. "Then you'll have to have an instruction book too."

too."

St. Peter pushed another button, and a small cart laden with a harp, an instruction book, a robe, and wings came coasting up to the desk.

"Get on," said the guide.

Slocum Johnson got on, followed by the guide; St. Peter pushed another button, sending the cart away to one of the clouds. Johnson and the guide got off, taking Johnson's new paraphernalia; the cart sped back, and Slocum donned his new clothes. On this cloud and all the neighboring ones, all was restful and soothing. The other souls resting on Slocum's particular cloud were inclined as he was and, not being of energetic bent, didn't bother to speak to him or to one another. The harp, however, strangely fascinated everyone, and as they lay supine, they twanged discordantly on their instruments. Ah, this was the life, thought Slocum. Or more accurately, this was the after-life! He tried for fifty years to master the harp, but got nowhere with the instruction book; so he ceased to read his lessons and merely plucked the strings aimlessly. All of his neighbors had long since abandoned their books too; so the result was a disharmonious and monotonous cacophony. But Slocum was happy. This was the sort of thing he had dreamed of all during his mortal existence, to be able to loaf for eternity on a nice downy cloud.

He got along fine for the first nine hundred years, but all of a sudden, he became strangely restless. The

ceaseless loafing and the disharmonious notes of the ill-played harps were getting on his nerves. So he went to his guide and said, "My gosh, this doggone loafing is getting on my nerves. Can't we find something to do around here? Isn't there a U. S. O. ~~around here~~ somewhere? And can't you make some of these guys stop twanging on their damn harps for awhile?"

The guide was surprised. "That's the last thing I expected to hear from you," he said. "Didn't you want to loaf forever? What you've been proposing is almost heresy. You know what happened to Satan when he tried to rebel against his society, don't you?" "What's gotten into you anyway? This must be the first time in history that you've even thought of doing something besides loafing; what's eating you anyway?"

Slocum gulped, and hung his head sheepishly. But then, taking a firm grip on his courage, he plunged boldly ahead and said, "Well, this darned loafing is actually getting tedious; I didn't think it would be like this. I'm getting plenty fed up with it. Why, I almost wish I was in hell."

"Almost wish you were in hell!" The guide exploded in astonishment.

Slocum was afraid that he'd said too much, but ~~want~~ recklessly went on, "Yeah, I almost wish I was in hell!"

The guide, still astonished, stared at Slocum and then suddenly burst into wild laughter. Slocum was uncomfortable and afraid that ~~maybe~~ ^{perhaps} he'd caused the guide to have a fit of

hysteria. Tentatively, he gave an uncertain smile.

The guide controlled his laughter with great effort and asked, "Why, man, where do you think you're at? This is hell."

Slocum's jaw dropped. "Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed.

"That's right," the other replied; "you're damned, and that's the reason you're here in hell."

"The hell you say!" ejaculated Slocum.

"That's what I said, 'hell!'"

Slocum was nonplussed for awhile. But what about St. Peter? How come he was at the gate? He's supposed to be at the gate of heaven, not the gate of hell."

"Well, I'll tell you," the other started to explain, "The greatest sin after pride and hypocrisy is the vicious indolence of which you are a good example."

"How come?" asked Slocum sullenly.

"Well, indolence breeds pride and sometimes hypocrisy. Heaven has no room for hypocrisy, pride, and indolence. Now, Satan was thrown into hell because of his excessive pride. St. Peter was thrown out of heaven because of his laziness."

"I don't get it," said Slocum bewildered.

"Well, you saw that fancy desk of Pete's with all of those damn buttons. When he was in heaven, he didn't want to do all the work he was supposed to do; so he just naturally started tinkering around trying to find some easier method of getting things done. ^{Finally,} ~~So~~ he fixed a system of buttons and an amplifier that would voice his thoughts."

"But that's scientific progress," protested Slocum.
"I don't see how God could be so narrow-minded as to try to block St. Peter's inventive genius."

"It was just the principle of the thing, I guess," said Slocum's companion. "The Almighty didn't mind those inventions, but one day he heard that St. Peter was trying to think of a way to invent a button that would push itself. He didn't succeed, but the idea of anyone being so lazy that he didn't want to push a button made the Omnipotent ~~One~~ sore, and he banished St. Peter from heaven."

"Well, I'm damned!" said Slocum.

"So's St. Peter," returned the other.

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