

THE SECOND MILE

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31708

The Second Mile

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Whosoever shall compel
thee to go one mile,
go with him two



ASSOCIATION PRESS

NEW YORK: 347 MADISON AVENUE

1919

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Young Men's Christian Associations

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WHEN Iago says about Desdemona that "she holds it a vice in her goodness not to do more than is requested," he lays his discriminating finger on a trait of character not ordinarily worked up in the systems of ethics. Nowhere does he better justify his own comment on himself, "I am nothing if not critical." And it is precisely this trait of character on which Iago with his devilish ingenuity lighted for his evil purpose, that Jesus made the crown of the moral life. The distinctively Christian quality is to hold it a vice in our goodness not to do more than is requested.

Indeed, when it comes down to doing the bare stint of requirement, and

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nothing more, Jesus calls that “unprofitable.” When he describes the servants who, after their day’s work in the field, wait upon their lord at supper, he takes obvious satisfaction in the paradox that, though they have fulfilled their obligations from plowing in the morning to serving at night, they deserve no thanks at all. Lest his disciples should doubt the application, he says distinctly and peremptorily, “Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do.’” Not until a man’s willingness overflows his obligation, so that what he has to do is seen as a segment in the circle of what he would be willing to do, does he become what Jesus would call profitable—nor even what Shakespeare would count worthy a character like Desdemona.

Now, when the Sermon on the Mount faces us with those strict and startling injunctions to give coat and

The Austere Truth

cloak when a coat is wanted, or to take two blows when one is offered, or to travel two miles when but one is compulsory—injunctions that are either stark nonsense or supernally divine sense—we are manifestly dealing with a dramatic presentation of this favorite and characteristic truth of Jesus, that only an unstinted willingness to do more than anyone can ask makes possible a liberal and Christian character.

To be sure, he stated his truth in an austere and formidable way. His figures of speech startle us with their severe requirements, and to those who first heard them they must have been bewildering in their difficulty. When Jesus said, "Whosoever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him two," a concrete picture rose before his Jewish audience, a hateful picture of a Roman soldier, under the sanction of his military law, compelling a Jew to the defiling business of carrying his burden for a mile. To hear this new Rabbi say that under such

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compulsion a Jew should be willing to go two must have clashed with the Jewish temper, as it would with the American. This sounded like gratuitous surrender of a man's just rights. This looked like generosity gone to seed. And any hearer, knowing the history of that Roman word "angario," whose Aramaic equivalent Jesus doubtless used when he said "compel," must have found acquiescence in Jesus' command even more unreasonable. As though it were the badge of tyranny, that word had been handed down by the Persian Empire to the Greek, and by the Greek to the Roman, and from the beginning it had stood for military power to impress into unwilling service all men or horses whose help the soldiery desired. The word was saturated with the hatefulness of age-long tyranny. The unrelenting visages of Persian satraps, Greek governors, and Roman generals were conjured up by its ominous sound, and Jesus' injunction to superabundant willingness was

Roman Law Unrepealed

made by its use to seem impossibly difficult.

Nevertheless, the aptitude of the principle to our experience is obvious at least in this regard, that while the old military empires long since have gone and Roman soldiers no longer draft into grudging service, compulsion, as a permanent factor in human life, remains. Whether we face it Jesus' way or not, we must face it somehow. We do have our Roman couriers that light upon us trudging our chosen path and, whether we will or no, take us along with them. The word "must" belongs in our lives as truly as in any Jew's forced into service by an imperial messenger.

Young folk, like rollicking colts in a lush meadow, have preëminently the sense of freedom, but no colt ever pranced far without coming to a fence. One of the signs of dawning maturity appears when this first consciousness of liberty gives place to perception of limitations, to insight into the compelling power of necessity,

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to audience that often hears the magisterial words "You must!" The body says "Must"; the demands of social life say "Must"; the necessities of business say "Must"; at every other milestone we meet a courier to impress us into service. Like springs, bubbling up in a first ecstasy of unfettered freedom, but soon finding that every brook has its banks, so men out of the youthful sense of unrestricted liberty flow into a life-course, held in on either side by unescapable necessities. Sooner or later every man finds his boundaries, and while poets may sing their songs of pathos over the fact, practical people have a more serious problem: to find out, that is, how a man ought to face life's compulsions, in what attitude of mind and spirit he should meet the "Must" of the world. And Jesus said, "Who-soever shall compel thee to go one mile, go with him two." At first sight that is about the strangest prescription for the trouble a man could well imagine. It proceeds upon

A Plant Parable

the homœopathic principle that "like things cure like," and would drive out the poison of a disease by injecting more of the same kind. If you are compelled to go one mile, of your own free will go two, it says, and so defeat the malice of the necessity by voluntarily going it one better.

Indeed, it is clear that if the earth should say to two plants in a garden, "You must grow," and if one plant should accept the bare necessity, and sullenly grow its stint and no more, that would be slavish business with no glory in it. But if its companion should say: "It is my delight to grow! Come on, O Earth, with all your bounty! You say I must grow, but lo! I am twice as willing as you are to make me!" that would be a free plant, with worth and distinction in its growing. It is found true at even a cursory glance that the sting of compulsion is gone when a man is twice as willing to act as necessity is to make him.

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Now among all the ways in which we feel the Roman hand upon our shoulder, none is more unescapable than the compulsion of time. This is the most inevitable of all inevitable things. Tie what you will to the tail of the seconds, they are sublimely indifferent to your hindrances. If you watch the passing days closely, you find a tyrannic oppression in their noiseless and unceasing march. The Valley of Ajalon where the sun stands still and the retreating shadow on Ahaz's dial have long vanished into the limbo of the eternally lost. When in Congress the sergeant moves back the hands of the government clock, making an artifice of time to pass the last bills in, he must do it with a sardonic grin, for he knows what a futile fraud he is perpetrating on the sun, and how the constellations laugh at him. This slow inevitableness of time is a small matter indeed to the youth, but it puts compulsion on a man not easy to be glad about. So Jesus said to Peter, "When thou wast

Fretful Man

young thou girdedst thyself and wentest whither thou wouldst, but when thou shalt be old another shall gird thee and carry thee where thou wouldst not."

How men rebel against this unevadable fatality! How they fret over declining powers, and grudgingly submit to limitation, like free lakes poured into narrowing canyons and tumbling upon themselves in fury! Because men take it so, because they enter their cramped confines with such ill grace, they make sorry business out of age, with never a touch of Rabbi Ben Ezra's mellow and radiant spirit:

"Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be;
The last of life for which the first
was made!"

Rabbi Ben Ezra had the spirit of the second mile. His years were no less implacable in their compulsion and his limitations no less carking than is

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the lot of other men, but he could see
in both years and limitations

“Machinery just meant
To give thy soul its bent;
Try thee and turn thee forth
Sufficiently impressed.”

And whenever you seek the secret of this kind of age, you will not fail to find a man who has gone the second mile; who has faced time and said, “O Time, you are a stern fellow, but you have a godlike power of beauty in you. You can make souls deep and rich and fruitful, as you make old violins musical with the stored-up melodies of years; as you make old wine perfect with the ripeness of long generations. You say that I ‘must’ go this mile with you, but I am wise enough to look upon my necessities as though they were my luxuries, and I will go with you so willingly that men shall learn from me to say anew, ‘The hoary head is a crown of glory!’” The more one

The Elemental Must

considers it, the more it is clear that when a man must go one mile, the only spirit that can save his soul from bitterness is the willingness to go two.

There is another Roman also, who levies his draft upon us, and that is the Roman of work. Underneath every other practical necessity, is this elemental "must" of the breadwinner; and unless a man has been so hapless as to receive a legacy, youth's heaviest handicap, he needs no one to tell him what an inexorable master this necessity is. Now this compulsion, which sooner or later most men are sure to encounter, may be faced in one of two ways. If he will, a man may accept it doggedly and go about the demanded labor like the Sultan's Janizaries under the lash. He may take work as an unfortunately necessary part of life, and let himself be beaten to it by the cat-o'-nine-tails in the hand of Need. He may skimpingly perform the bare requirements and, hating his taskmaster as a ran-

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corous old Jew hated a Roman courier, may bitterly trudge that one scant mile, as unwilling as Bryant's "quarry-slave at night scourged to his dungeon." That is one way to face the necessity of work and thousands of men with their eyes on the clock are working that way to-day. Or if he will, a man may rise to the measure of Antonio Stradivari, in George Eliot's poem, and say of his humblest daily tasks what Stradivari said about his violins:

"If my hand slacked
I should rob God, since he is fullest
good,
Leaving a blank instead of violins.

* * * * *

He could not make
Antonio Stradivari's violins
Without Antonio."

Whenever a man glorifies his work in that way he has gone the second mile; he has translated duty into privilege. He has seen that while God supplies quarries he never carves

My Work My Friend

statues or piles cathedrals save by the hand of a man; he has perceived that the earth was not built like Aladdin's Palace, by magic spells for lazy occupancy, but is an unfinished world into which men are ushered in time to bear a part in its completion; and he has reached the dignity of believing that every honest piece of work is coöperation with God in building the universe. Such a man can follow the Master's word and can give glad welcome to the necessity of work, as it accosts him on the road. He can say, and mean it too, "O Work, you are my best friend in disguise. God sent you to me. You come with a stern face, but your heart is full of strength and courage and good cheer. You demand that I travel with you that one hard mile? Then, my task, doff that scowl, for to the limit of my strength I am twice as willing to work as you are to make me." Work, greeted like that, loses the frown of compulsion and begins to smile. When a man works that way

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because he thinks it is his Father's business, feels that it is his meat and drink to do the will of him that sent him, wishes there were more hours in the day than twenty-four, and dreams of Heaven as a place where a man can work all the time at his best and never be tired—all the slavery of work has vanished for such a man and he and his task, good friends, walk arm in arm, and will be sorry when the second mile is done. It looks as though Jesus were right, after all. The way to avoid the slavishness of necessity is of your own accord to be willing, if possible, to do more than is demanded. The first mile alone is drudgery. The glory comes with the second mile!

Another kind of compulsion faces every man in some degree—the compulsion of limiting circumstances and restricted powers that shut him up to narrow and obscure activities. There are more people than perhaps we think, whose aspirations for preëminence have been snuffed to a smoul-