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Miscellanea

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Miscellanea.

Father Divine.

The following paragraphs are taken from an article by Sutherland Denlinger, which appeared in a recent number of *The Forum* (quoted by permission).

"On the evening of November 5, 1933, it had pleased the black "God" to descend from that 'main branch' of 'Heaven' which is at 20 West 115th Street, Manhattan, and appear, a short, stout, dignified figure with the wistful eyes of a setter dog, before some five thousand true believers gathered at the Rockland Palace, Harlem dance-hall, to sing his praises.

"He sat on the stage, surrounded by his angels — Faithful Mary and Satisfied Love, Wonderful Joy and Sweet Sleep, Good Dream and Bouquet, and all the rest of them — and his thick lips parted in a wide smile beneath his scraggly moustache, as he watched the folks stowing away his free chicken dinners in the balcony and the folks shouting, 'Peace, Father! It's wonderful!' on the main floor.

"Father Divine heard the chanting (He's God, He's God, He's God, He's God, He's God), to the tune of "Marching through Georgia", and he heard the rhythmic thumping of the big bass drum and the hypnotic blare of the trombone, and he witnessed the fervent enthusiasm of this comparatively small segment of his two million followers, and he obviously found it good. He beamed, his almost bald pate bedewed with perspiration. . . .

"The story of Father Divine is a story so fantastic that only the boldest and most imaginative of fiction-writers could send anything like it clattering from his typewriter and still make it seem plausible. Disregard both the statements of the credulous and the cynical explanations of the heathen, and the mystery surrounding the source of his income alone is as absorbing as any problem ever tackled by the most resourceful of pulp-paper sleuths. Real-life detectives of one sort or another have often tried to get to the bottom of it, without success.

"Father feeds thousands every day without charge. Father maintains heavenly dormitories, in which hundreds live on his bounty. Father travels in limousines and maintains a fleet of busses to take the faithful to meetings, and when Easter comes, Father rides the skies in a big red airplane while Harlem's thousands, gazing ecstatically upward from the curbs, hail him as God. And when Father has to go to court, which happens occasionally, his roll of bills draws envious comment from the magistrate on the bench. Father says that the money comes from heaven, and since he takes no collections and none of the cynic theories would account for any sizable portion of his expenses, it seems as good an explanation as any — for the moment. . . .

"By the late autumn of 1934, Father Divine had come a long way from the heavenly mansions in Sayville. It was beginning to keep him busy just 'swinging around' the fifteen branch heavens in the metropolitan district alone. He had an increasing number of white followers throughout the country, too, and the main branch of God's kingdom just off the Avenue resembled the headquarters of the Abyssinian high command.

"The five-story building at 20 West 115th Street, in that no man's land which lies between black Harlem and the habitat of the mestizo Spanish peoples, has a somewhat ecclesiastical air, due largely to its Gothic trimmings. At every hour, from morning until the morrow's dawn, there are always disciples at the door to greet every arrival with a hearty cry, 'Peace, Brother, it's wonderful! Peace!'

"Enter the vestibule, and you can hear, above the clamor of the disciples who are just 'standing around,' the din of the diners in the basement. The luscious odor of corned beef and cabbage or fried chicken is wafted upward, together with an industrious rattle of tableware and the chant of the singers of hymns, sometimes muffled as though their mouths were very full. 'I can't give you anything but love, Father,' sing the hungry ones, in fervent parody of the song made famous by the not at all religious Blackbirds.

"On the main floor is an auditorium; above the auditorium are dormitories (as the kingdom grows, Father simply reaches into his pocket and rents another brownstone-front 'annex'); and on the topmost floor are the divine offices. Climbing, one hears the temporal click of a busy typewriter, and one's eyes light upon signs painted on canvas and hung against the walls to the greater glory of the Father.

"'Peace,' reads one, 'Father Divine is the light of the world. The tree of life is blooming, blooming for one and all. Father Divine, I thank you, Father.'

"And another: 'Father Divine has brought peace to the Nation. He is God. If you keep his sayings, you will never see death.'

"'Every language, tongue, and nation must bow,' screams a sign. 'Father Divine is God, His Blood has Paid It,' shouts a banner propped into an angle of the wall. And, ambiguously: 'Peace! I am that I am, and Who can Hinder Me? The Lord is My Shepherd and I shall Not Want; I Mean Father Divine!'"

According to the latest reports Father Divine has now bought a large estate, where he will establish himself with his followers. P. E. K.

Are the Comics Moral?

There is food for thought in an article by John K. Ryan in a recent number of *The Forum*, from which we quote (by permission):—

"Sadism, cannibalism, bestiality. Crude eroticism. Torturing, killing, kidnaping. Monsters, madmen, creatures half brute, half human. Raw melodrama; tales of crimes and criminals; extravagant exploits in strange lands and on other planets; pirate stories; wild, hair-raising adventures of boy heroes and girl heroines; thrilling accounts in word and picture of jungle beasts and men; marvelous deeds of magic and pseudoscience. Vulgarity, cheap humor, and cheaper wit. Sentimental stories designed for the general level of a moronic mind. Ugliness of thought and expression. All these, day after day, week after week, have become the mental food of American children, young and old.

"With such things are the comic strips that take up page upon page in the average American newspaper filled. Repeated and drilled into their readers countless times by vivid pictures and simple words, the crude,

trivial, debased, and debasing features of the comic strips are more than a sign of the prevailing infantilism of the American mind. They are at once an effect and a powerful contributing cause of that infantilism. The number and character of the comic strips at the present time are a cultural phenomenon and psychological portent of the most serious kind.

"The change that has come over the comic section in recent years is an episode in journalism that most Americans have watched with interest. Perhaps the interest has been in many cases unconscious, but it has been extremely real. The fact that the comic section has reached its present size and power is ample proof of the tremendous interest it holds for American readers of all ages and classes. The power of a popular strip over circulation is notorious. For a paper to lose its best strips means disaster, almost ruin. The Supreme Court itself had to decide which Washington paper was to have exclusive rights to the deeds of Andy Gump, Dick Tracy, and their friends.

"Starting in most cases with a single comic strip,—the *Katzenjammer Kids*, *Buster Brown*, the *Van Loons*, or the like,—the typical large-city paper had added first one and then another. To-day it is difficult to find an important paper (there are a few notable exceptions) without at least one full page of comics on weekdays. Other strips will be spotted at strategic points in the news and advertising sections.

"Sunday of course is the field-day for the artists of the comic world. The colored supplements vary in size in competing papers, but growth in size is the rule. For a time Hearst's *Comic Weekly* reached a peak of fifty comics in thirty-two tabloid pages. However, readers of the comic section evidently like both print and pictures large, clear, and untaxing; so the *Comic Weekly* has been restored to the standard size.

"This growth in size and importance of the comic section has brought startling changes in the subjects and nature of the strips themselves. To-day the term 'comic section' and the older term 'funny pictures' are misnomers, for the newspapers are now showing strips that make no pretense of wit or humor. Along with funny pictures of the traditional type the comic section now shows pictured stories that have all the worst features of the lowest type of fiction and some features peculiar to itself. . . .

"Crimes, killings, torturings, not all so horrible or pictured so vividly as the death of Doc Hump, are essential ingredients in the criminal-detective strips. It is true that virtue is invariably triumphant, that the law is vindicated, that the police are the heroes and the criminals the villains. But the evil effects of prolonged and repeated brutalities are not wiped out by a final and rather hurried triumph of law and virtue. In fact, this triumph itself may take the form of more death and carnage, of more crude scenes.

"This brutal and brutalizing element is found in other strips besides those dealing with criminals. Pictured stories of wild, extravagant adventure (like Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*; *Brick Bradford* and *The Time Top*, by William Ritter and Clarence Gray; Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan* pictures; Lee Falk's *Mandrake the Magician*) are guilty of like things. Nor is one of the most popular of all features, *Little Orphan Annie*, without its quota of crimes, criminals, and deeds of death. . . .

"For a still more elaborate and consistent use of some of the things that have just been mentioned Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes* strip is outstanding. Popular for over twenty years in books and movies, Tarzan's adventures among men and beasts in strange places are now extending their popularity in a syndicated feature made up of pictures and running commentary. A single episode in the life of Tarzan usually lasts about six months, appearing six days a week. On Sundays, in the colored supplement, Tarzan is engaged in further adventures. In his exploits sadism, exhibitionism, savagery, and animalism are skilfully used, along with the familiar characters and situations of melodrama—villains and villainesses, heroes and heroines, plots and counterplots, and the rest.

"In one of the episodes in Tarzan's career as a hero of the comic strips a Hollywood movie company making a picture in Africa is attacked by savages, with plenty attendant slaughter. Two American girls in the company are captured by Arabs, who are in turn attacked by huge gorillas. The gorillas are shown overpowering the Arabs and finishing them off by sinking their 'great fangs into the throats of their adversaries.' The sex interest of this fable had been kept somewhat in reserve while the girls were in the movie company and among the Arabs, but now that they are in the hands of gorillas, it is given a larger and more hideous place. These are gorillas with a difference. They speak Elizabethan English, are called by such quaint names as Henry VIII, Wolsey, and Buckingham. They are, in fact, the results of the experiments of a mad English scientist whom they call the Maker. . . .

"The repetition in word and picture of sadism, bestial and degenerate scenes and characters, is a more serious matter. Such things make their deep impression upon the plastic minds of growing children and have their dangers for the never-to-mature minds of countless adults. The effects of the worst type of comic strip upon immature minds should prove an enlightening study to educators and psychologists. The prevention and correction of such effects are a task for an aroused public conscience."

Saving the Young.

That the Roman Catholic Church is wide awake to the special difficulties connected with early and middle adolescence appears from an article by John P. McCaffrey in *The Commonweal* for April 24, 1936. Some statements from this article are worthy of careful study, as when the author states:—

"No one will deny that society has a part of the responsibility for crime. Those who have studied the matter know that environment plays a heavy part in leading the boy into trouble. Society is mainly responsible for this unhealthy environment. In a general way we know that slum areas are the breeding-grounds of crime, the cancer spots of our social life. The efforts of cities and States and Federal agencies to replace these slum areas are well aimed. The danger, however, is that the people who now live in the slums will not be able to pay the rents asked in the new developments, and the net result will be not the abolition of the slums, but their removal to a new area. The rent of these new projects must be kept as low as possible to achieve the desired reforms.

"It is in the slum areas that the street gang starts. The step that the street gang takes in becoming a criminal mob is a short one. We know that the gang starts as a protest on the part of the boys in a neighborhood against their living in that neighborhood, which most of the time is a slum area. Boys need companionship, and they find it in the gang. The gang is often the one bright spot for them as a refuge from the homes they live in. The gang does things that are attractive. The common activities of the gang give the thrill of living to its members. A dashing leader, the thrill of common stealing and fighting, the roar of a bonfire, the gang club house in a vacant lot or an old cellar, form the setting that lures the boy into the meshes of the gang. In a word, he wants to belong, and soon he is initiated into the gang. He picks up the gang code, a set of rules of conduct that makes the gang a little society within the social structure. The great rule of the gang law is not to tell, not to squeal on another gang member. The gang interests become the interest of each member — 'One for all and all for one' makes of the gang a band of adventurous musketeers in the midst of the squalor and dirt of the slums. A new spirit, a dangerous spirit, is born.

"I firmly believe that society should *move in* on the gang and control it. There is not much sense in trying to destroy it because it is the answer to the fundamental needs of the boys, but society can direct it and keep it from becoming an antisocial mob. It can sublimate the ebullient spirit of the gang and lift it up.

"How can this be done?

"The adventurous spirit of the gang is usually harmless when the boys are very young. It is when they enter the dangerous years between fourteen and eighteen that serious trouble is encountered. *Just before this time the substitution for the gang should come.*"

The care of the confirmed youth is included in the work of every faithful pastor. Guiding the junior is one of the specific jobs of the pastor. The Walther League is trying very hard to give assistance. It will pay our pastors to study its literature on this question. P. E. K.

Our Weaker Freshmen.

In the Catholic weekly *America* of May 16, 1936, the following editorial appeared, the force of which seems obvious.

"In a recent issue of a popular weekly, an American long resident in England hesitatingly offers a comparison between British and American secondary schools. He does not state openly that our institutions are inferior, but merely that the English schools are 'different.' On closer examination it becomes quite evident that the differences between the two systems are neither few nor light. Boys who propose to enter one of the great English public schools are carefully examined, and those who cannot show that they are capable of profiting by the course are rejected. In the United States we proceed on an entirely different principle. All boys and girls under sixteen years of age must attend school regardless of their ability to profit by further educational opportunities. Consequently Americans who go to Oxford are often surprised to discover that youngsters

of sixteen who come from Eton, Harrow, or Winchester are far better prepared than Americans two or three years their seniors.

"This is now an oft-told tale. Its moral has been put before us again and again, but we have not been impressed. We still cling to the delusion that education must be 'democratic,' and interpret the Declaration of Independence to mean that all Americans are endowed not only with equal political rights, but with equal intellectual ability. Consequently we insist that every boy and girl not absolutely a moron shall go to school until he or she is sixteen years of age. From grade to grade they pass, being lifted from the lower to the higher not by their advance in knowledge, but by the procession of the calendar years. It is inevitable that this automatic process will bring the majority to the portals of the secondary school, and through them all who have not completed the sixteenth year must pass.

"What they do after the door has closed behind them, is, as Mr. Toots would say, of no consequence. The law is satisfied as long as they are in school, interpreting *school* as a building which contains a certain number of men and women who are styled 'teachers.' What is taught does not seem to be of much consequence either, except that it must be something that the pupil will condescend to notice, such as tap-dancing or how to repair a radio or the care of hens. The great American principle of accommodation removes all difficulties. Since the pupil must go to school or his parents must go to jail, and since the pupil is incapable of further intellectual progress, the problem is solved by hiring men and women under the authority of the local board of education, hoping that they will know what can be done under the circumstances. Just how the problem can be met when President Roosevelt has succeeded in persuading the States that all boys and girls ought to go to school until they have finished their eighteenth year, is merely another question which the next generation must answer.

"The real point of importance is not whether our secondary schools are better than those in England, but whether they may rightly be deemed schools at all. At the recent faculty convocation at Fordham University the Rev. Charles J. Deane, S. J., dean of St. John's College of the University, deplored the fact that the freshmen who come up for examination are much inferior to those of other years. This deterioration Father Deane traced, according to the report in the *New York Times*, to the tendency away from liberal-arts courses in our high schools, and particularly to their neglect of Latin and of mathematics. Father Deane also blamed the shortening of school hours and the reduction of school- and home-study periods. Briefly, our boys and girls are the victims of an unsound educational system which is apparently growing stronger year by year. With the classes in the high schools filled with pupils unable to do the work proper to these grades, but compelled to attend school, standards are lowered until the chief difference between one of our high schools and any other building in which young people are kept for three or four hours per day is in the name.

"Up to the present, we have been glad to subsidize our schools without questioning the results. It is high time to ask whether what we have been paying for is worth the price."

Modern Mass Music.

Under this caption Alastair Guinan wrote in the *Commonweal* a few years ago:—

"With the means as such by which composers express the words of the liturgy ecclesiastical lawgivers have no concern; nor have they legitimately laid claim to any. From the viewpoint of canon law—let us remember that the late Dr. Adrian Fortescue has reminded us that all rubrics are but special cases of canon law—it is a matter of indifference whether the *Gloria in Excelsis* be clothed in the simple plain-song melody called the Ambrosian, in the elaborate melismatic chant of the *Missa Magnae Deus Potentie*, in the polished polyphony of Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli*, in the German classicism of Anton Bruckner's *Mass in F Minor*, or in the strange, new harmonies of a strictly modern composition like Hendrik Andriessen's *Missa in Festo Assumptionis*. Let the music express the text: it is holy; let it conform to the canons of the style to which it belongs: it is true art; let it appeal to its hearers: it is universal. Evidently laws so truly catholic leave open a large field for personal taste; and this is well; it is desirable that the artistic judgment of the musician be allowed full scope.

"Recent writers have dwelt with unnecessary emphasis on what they call the 'impersonal character of the liturgy and of plain-song.' Nor have they neglected to bemoan 'the inability of modern composers to write in an impersonal manner.' To my mind nothing can be more mischievous than undue insistence on the idea that the liturgy is impersonal. This notion, in which there is a germ of truth, is one of those ideas of which Cardinal Newman said that to explain them adequately it is necessary to explain them away. Because the liturgy is a corporate act, it does not thereby cease to be a personal act on the part of each doer. It grew out of the personal devotion of generations of Christians. All the prayers and texts have strikingly personal applications, as may be seen by any one who reads them even cursorily.

"One has only to consider such melodies as the sequence *Victimae Paschali Laudes* as the type of high jubilation and the gradual *Christus Factus Est* as the type of meditative sadness and holy awe (the third section of course has a triumphal character all its own in harmony with the thought '*Deus exaltavit illum . . .*'), to understand that the composers of these melodies were thinking, not impersonally, but in distinctly personal fashion; they hoped, by recording in tone pictures their personal reactions to the words, to intensify the meaning of those words and to bring this meaning to each of their hearers in a personal way. It is so that each member of the body makes his personality a part of the corporate act, not by extinguishing it, but by dedicating it. All do this: the composer, the singer, the hearer, each in his own fashion."—That represents the Roman Catholic viewpoint.

P. E. K.