

CHRISTMAS CLASSICS



**SAMUEL McCHORD
CROTHERS**

**BY THE
CHRISTMAS
FIRE**

By the Christmas Fire
Samuel McChord Crothers

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By the Christmas Fire

I - The Bayonet-Poker



As I sit by my Christmas fire I now and then give it a poke with a bayonet. It is an old-fashioned British bayonet which has seen worse days. I picked it up in a little shop in Birmingham for two shillings. I was attracted to it as I am to all reformed characters. The hardened old sinner, having had enough of war, was a candidate for a peaceful position. I was glad to have a hand in his reformation.

To transform a sword into a pruning hook is a matter for a skilled smith, but to change a bayonet into a poker is within the capacity of the least mechanical. All that is needed is to cause the bayonet to forsake the murderous rifle barrel and cleave to a short wooden handle. Henceforth its function is not to thrust itself into the vitals of men, but to encourage combustion on winter nights.

The bayonet-poker fits into the philosophy of Christmas, at least into the way I find it easy to philosophize. It seems a better symbol of what is happening than the harps of gold and the other beautiful things of which the hymn-writers sing, but which ordinary people have never seen. The golden harps were made for no other purpose than to produce celestial harmony. They suggest a scene in which peace and good-will come magically and reign undisturbed. Everything is exquisitely fitted for high uses. It is not so with the bayonet that was, and the poker that is. For it peace and good-will are afterthoughts. They are not even remotely suggested in its original constitution. And yet, for all that, it serves excellently as an instrument of domestic felicity.

The difficulty with the Christmas message is not in getting itself proclaimed, but in getting itself believed; that is, in any practicable fashion. Every one recognizes the eminent desirability of establishing more amicable relations between the members of the human family. But is this amiable desire likely to be fulfilled in this inherently bellicose world?

The argument against Christmas has taken a menacingly scientific form. A deluge of cold water in the form of unwelcome facts has been thrown upon our enthusiasm for humanity.

"Peace on earth," it is said, "is against Nature. It flies in the face of the processes of evolution. You have only to look about you to see that everything has been made for a quite different purpose. For ages Mother Nature has been keeping house in her own free-and-easy fashion, gradually improving her family by killing off the weaker members, and giving them as food to the strong. It is a plan that has

worked well—for the strong. When we interrogate Nature as to the 'reason why' of her most marvelous contrivances, her answer has a grim simplicity. We are like Red Riding-Hood when she drew back the bed-curtains and saw the wolfish countenance.—'What is your great mouth made for, grandmother?'—'To eat you with, my dear.'

"To eat, while avoiding the unpleasant alternative of being eaten, is a motive that goes far and explains much. The haps and mishaps of the hungry make up natural history. The eye of the eagle is developed that it may see its prey from afar, its wings are strong that it may pounce upon it, its beak and talons are sharpened that it may tear it in pieces. By right of these superiorities, the eagle reigns as king among birds.

"The wings of the eagle, the sinews of the tiger, the brain of the man, are primarily weapons. Each creature seizes the one that it finds at hand, and uses it for offense and defense. The weapon is improved by use. The brain of the man has proved a better weapon than beak or talons, and so it has come to pass that man is lord of creation. He is able to devour at will creatures who once were his rivals.

"By using his brain, he has sought out many inventions. The sum total of these inventions we call by the imposing name Civilization. It is a marvelously tempered weapon, in the hands of the strong races. Alas, for the backward peoples who fall beneath it. One device after another has been added for the extermination of the slow-witted.

"Even religion itself assumes to the anthropologist a sinister aspect. The strong nations have always been religious. Their religion has helped them in their struggle for the mastery. There are many unpleasant episodes in

history. Spiritual wealth, like material wealth, is often predatory.

"In the Book of Judges there is a curious glimpse into a certain kind of religiousness. A man of Mt. Ephraim named Micah had engaged a young Levite from Bethlehem-Judah as his spiritual adviser. He promised him a modest salary, ten shekels of silver annually, and a suit of clothes, and his board. 'And the Levite was content to dwell with the man; and the young man was unto him as one of his sons. And Micah consecrated the Levite, and the young man became his priest, and was in the house of Micah. Then said Micah, Now know I that the Lord will do me good, seeing I have a Levite to my priest.'

"This pleasant relation continued till a freebooting party of Danites appeared. They had discovered a bit of country where the inhabitants 'dwelt in security, after the manner of the Zidonians, quiet and secure; for there was none in the land, possessing authority, that might put *them* to shame in any thing, and they were far from the Zidonians.' It was just the opportunity for expansion which the children of Dan had been waiting for, so they marched merrily against the unprotected valley. On the way they seized Micah's priest. 'And they said unto him, Hold thy peace, lay thine hand upon thy mouth, and go with us, and be to us a father and a priest: is it better for thee to be priest unto the house of one man, or to be priest unto a tribe and a family in Israel? And the priest's heart was glad, and he took the ephod, and the teraphim, and the graven image, and went in the midst of the people.'

"Of course, Micah didn't like it, and called out, 'Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and the priest, and are gone away, and what have I more?' The Danites answered after the manner of the strong, 'Let not thy voice be heard

among us, lest angry fellows fall upon you, and thou lose thy life, with the lives of thy household. And the children of Dan went their way: and when Micah saw that they were too strong for him, he turned and went back unto his house.'

"Is not that the way of the world? The strong get what they want and the weak have to make the best of it. Micah, when he turned back from a hopeless conflict, was a philosopher, and the young Levite when he went forward was a pietist. Both the philosophy and the piety were by-products of the activity of the children of Dan. They sadly needed the priest to sanctify the deeds of the morrow when 'they took that which Micah had made, and the priest which he had, and came unto Laish, unto a people quiet and secure, and smote them with the edge of the sword; and they burnt the city with fire. And there was no deliverer, because it was far from Zidoh, and they had no dealings with any man; and it was in the valley that lieth by Beth-rehob.'

"The wild doings in the little valley that lieth by Beth-rehob have been repeated endlessly. Whittier describes the traditional alliance between Religion and sanguinary Power:—

Feet red from war fields trod the church aisles holy,

With trembling reverence, and the oppressor there

Kneeling before his priest, abased and lowly,

Crushed human hearts beneath the knee of prayer.

"When we inquire too curiously about the origin of the things which we hold most precious, we come to suspect

that we are little better than the receivers of stolen goods. How could it be otherwise with the descendants of a long line of freebooters? How are we to uphold the family fortunes if we forsake the means by which they were obtained? Are we not fated by our very constitutions to continue a predatory life?"

There are lovers of peace and of justice to whom such considerations appeal with tragic force. They feel that moral ideals have arisen only to mock us, and to put us into hopeless antagonism to the world in which we live. In the rude play of force, many things have been developed that are useful in our struggle for existence. But one faculty has developed that is destined to be our undoing,—it is Conscience. Natural history does not give any satisfactory account of it. It runs counter to our other tendencies. It makes us miserable just when we are getting the advantage of others. Now, getting the advantage of others we had understood was the whole of the exciting game of life. To plot for this has marvelously sharpened human wit. But Conscience, just at the critical moment, cries "For shame!" It is an awkward situation. Not only the rules of the game, but the game itself, is called in question.

As a consequence, many conscientious persons lose all the zest of living. The existing world seems to them brutal, its order, tyranny; its morality, organized selfishness; its accepted religion, a shallow conventionality. In such a world as this, the good man stands like a gladiator who has suddenly become a Christian. He is overwhelmed with horror at the bloody sports, yet he is forced into the arena and must fight. That is his business, and he cannot rise above it.

I cannot, myself, take such a gloomy view of the interesting little planet on which I happen to find myself. I take great

comfort in the thought that the world is still unfinished, and that what we see lying around us is not the completed product, but only the raw material. And this consolation rises into positive cheer when I learn that there is a chance for us to take a hand in the creative work. It matters very little at this stage of the proceedings whether things are good or bad. The question for us is, What is the best use to which we can put them? We are not to be bullied by facts. If we don't like them as they are, we may remould them nearer to our heart's desire. At least we may try.

Here is my bayonet. A scientific gentleman, seeing it lying on my hearth, might construct a very pretty theory about its owner. A bayonet is made to stab with. It evidently implies a stabber. To this I could only answer, "My dear sir, do not look at the bayonet, look at me. Do I strike you as a person who would be likely to run you through, just because I happen to have the conveniences to do it with? Sit down by the fire and we will talk it over, and you will see that you have nothing to fear. What the Birmingham manufacturer designed this bit of steel for was his affair, not mine. When it comes to design, two can play at that game. What I use this for, you shall presently see."

Now, here we have the gist of the matter. Most of the gloomy prognostications which distress us arise from the habit of attributing to the thing a power for good or evil which belongs only to the person. It is one of the earliest forms of superstition. The anthropologist calls it "fetichism" when he finds it among primitive peoples. When the same notion is propounded by advanced thinkers, we call it "advanced thought." We attribute to the Thing a malignant purpose and an irresistible potency, and we crouch before it as if it were our master. When the Thing is set going, we observe its direction with awe-struck resignation, just as