

A Short, Short Story About a Sunday Morning

By Jack Evans

Steiner sat on the hard wooden bench and suffered. He hated church. He had always hated it, ever since childhood. Always there had been someone dragging or pushing him to this place, breaking the peaceful late slumber of his one weekly holiday that he might waste half of it. True, he went seldom now; but in his early years he had gone every Sunday, and he had come to feel eventually that to go at all was too much to ask of him. This, thought Steiner, is the way a man is punished for being irreligious; no one could have invented a more narrowing form of torture.

The minister offered up a prayer and Steiner automatically ducked his head, glancing sidewise at his wife as he did so. Her eyes were closed and she sat straight and relaxed in the hard-backed pew, hands folded quietly in her lap. She really looks very sweet today, thought Steiner. I suppose I'd look that way if I believed in anything. He studied her calm expression, noting that the powder was a little thick at the side of her nose; noting the way her soft dark hair curled out from under the little hat, noting her long eyelashes. He thought of counting the eyelashes. Anything in the way of mental occupation would be relief—anything to keep from sitting hopelessly through the tedium of that prayer.

The prayer seemed very long and in that respect up to the usual standard of the Rev. Potter. Steiner fidgeted in his seat, gave up looking at his wife (after all, he had been married ten years and there was nothing very distracting in gazing at her) and let his eyes wander along the lower part of the wooden backrest in front of him—and wished that he might raise his eyes to the top of the backrest so he could analyze the row of heads that protruded above it. His neck began to feel cramped.

Why not? he asked himself. Everyone else has his head bent and Potter has his eyes shut. No one will notice. And my neck's tired. But he didn't look up, any farther than his eyes could turn. He sat there concentrating on the wish, and the cramped sensation in his neck seemed to grow.

Steiner had finally steeled himself to raise his head when Potter said "Amen," and called out the number of a hymn. There was an instant murmur throughout the building as a multitude of heads bobbed up in unison and everyone reached for a hymnal.

Steiner clutched for the one in the rack in front of him. At last he could move! He automatically found the number and held the open book so that his wife could look on with him, noticing as he did so that she kept her eyes averted from his. Steiner quirked his mouth. All right then—let her sulk.

The minister raised his arms in an age-old gesture, and another

was that. Steiner sang with such enthusiasm that his wife turned to look at him.

Steiner saw the timid smile that hovered on her lips, and in that briefest instant of observation, the ugly impulse came to his mind. He assumed an expression of utter disgust, and noted with a sort of perverse pleasure the hurt in her eyes as she turned her head away again. Good, he said to his mental self. She drags me to this damn place, knows I'm miserable here. Now I'll let her suffer a little.

The minister had gestured once more, and the congregation was reseating itself.

"My text for today," said the Rev. Potter, breaking open the big pulpit Bible at its green marker, "is the twelfth verse of the seventh



A caustic glance at hats

chapter of the gospel of St. Matthew." He paused again, then spoke:

"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law of the prophets..."

The fluid beauty of the lines was lost on Steiner, who was already settled down in the pew, resolved to hate the sermon and to be bored by it.

Steiner dulled his ears to the sermon and started dwelling morbidly on all the unpleasantness prior to his arrival at the church. His wife coaxing him from his bed at the ungodly hour of eight, denying him the holiday sleep he felt entitled to. Trying to be pleasant to him when he didn't feel like responding, trying to smooth over his surly remarks, coaxing him further when he flatly refused to attend church, and almost crying when the coaxing failed to move him. And finally, to prevent the tears, he had said: "Oh hell," crawled into his blue suit, put on this damned shirt with the too-small collar, and let her have her way.

Why must she want to go to church? Or better still, why didn't

she just go and let him alone? So it was their wedding anniversary. So what. Why spoil it this way?

When he had first married her—yes, and before, too—he hadn't particularly minded going to the Sunday services; being with her had been reward enough for whatever might otherwise have inconvenienced him. But that had worn off by the end of a year, and after trying to get Steiner to keep on going, and failing at it, his wife had given up.

The sermon began to insinuate itself into his consciousness, not as a coherent message, but as a throbbing undertone, a far off chant like that of a swarm of bees.

It was stuffy in the church, too, and outside there was the green sunlit warmth of late May. The outer air seemed as remote as Paradise to Steiner, and as impossible of achievement. He was perspiring under the arms and his shirt began clinging to his chest; that collar was stifling him, and he lifted his eyes longingly to the windows.

He was bored and restless, and a survey of the female half of the congregation, with special caustic attention to hair styles and hats, did not occupy him long nor help to relieve the boredom.

Steiner fell to watching the Reverend Potter, determined to analyze the motives and mental processes of such a person. The analysis did not progress far, however; Steiner relapsed into a sort of passive contemplation, and just watched.

There was something almost hypnotic about the man. His droning voice, his easy gestures, the shining cross behind him, all combined to fix the attention of Steiner, and the words that Potter intoned sifted into Steiner's brain, affixing to it the tenor of the sermon: "Do unto others..."

With an effort, Steiner broke the contact and let his resentment come back. He glanced at his wife. Calm, sober, she listened attentively; and the sight of her thus awoke a childish rage in Steiner. She knows I'm bored, he thought. If I embarrass her, I may end this farce once and for all.

He began to tap his foot softly. He did not have to keep it up more than a few moments; his wife leaned over to him almost instantly and spoke in a whisper that would have been inaudible a foot away, but that rang in his head as clearly as if she had shouted. A note of sanity, it brought him up short:

"For heaven's sake, Gene, stop acting like a spoiled child!"

Steiner sat rigid, feeling as if he had been ducked under a cold shower. Then he boiled internally with emotions, of which indignation, anger, and remorse were predominant. Affecting indifference as a

disguise for shock, he again gazed round the church, but there seemed to be a subtle change in the atmosphere of the building. The founders, hanging in their antique frames, appeared to eye him accusingly, the cross to mock his glance, the backs of all the heads around to silently upbraid him. His agonized self-pity faded, and on the heels of shock came deep regret.

Steiner began to be ashamed of himself; and in trying to fight off the growing conviction that he had been ridiculous and an ass, he merely hastened its growth.

He glanced cautiously at his wife. Of course I love her. I don't really want to hurt her the way I do.

His conscience prodded him unmercifully.

I wonder what it is that makes me say a cruel thing, or what it is in me that enjoys the pain I give by saying it? And always, I'm sorry after I've said it. Sooner or later I'm sorry.

A new thought struck him. But if I were to back down now, here at this point, wouldn't I be conceding defeat, and always give

as he would wish for himself, then the day of pestilence and famine and war shall pass, and the kingdom of the Lord shall rule the earth in love and harmony."

Steiner heard the words, and thought about the great truth of them as he contributed to the collection plate and passed it along.

Once more the congregation rose to sing, and as he sang the ageless hymn with his wife singing beside him, a great resolve possessed the soul of Steiner.

I will be the husband that I should, the man I should. I will learn understanding and kindness for the one who loves me most.

Steiner, glowing with the heat of resolution, scarcely heard when the minister gave his benediction.

As people fumbled for belongings on and beneath the seats, the Rev. Potter hurried to his stand by the auditorium door, that he might shake the hands of all who passed him.

Steiner's wife rose and went up the aisle ahead of Steiner, and did not speak to him or look in his direction. He had hoped she would, for he would have told her of the



Steiner looked around the church

in from now on? He hesitated a moment; but the sudden change of mood that everyone at times experiences was growing stronger, and he forced himself to reject the stand of human pride. The tide of shame had reached its peak; Steiner sat with bowed head, deeply self-accusing.

It's not much help to feel sorry for something after it's already done... It must be awful for her sometimes; she always has to go more than halfway... She does so much more than her share to keep us a decent home; if I weren't always spoiling all her efforts, all her joys, we wouldn't be at odds so much of the time.

The minister closed his sermon with these words: "When all the world can learn this simple law, when everyone the world over can give his fellow man such treatment

change in him, had she done so. She said something pleasant to the minister and went on, not waiting for her husband. Steiner paused long enough to compliment Potter on his sermon, and then hurried after her.

He must tell her, and it seemed imperative that he tell her now. It could not wait. Remorse was an ache inside him, and almost there were tears in his eyes.

She was just going through the outside door when he caught up with her, and he put out a hand, suddenly timid now, to touch her on the arm. "Helen," he said softly.

Someone stepped between them, jostled him, and she had gone through the door, unhearing. Steiner was forced to wait a moment; then he slipped through the crowded space and was outside, standing in the shaded entranceway. His wife had reached the bottom of the steps.

The sunlight hit him with a million darts of gold and green and blue; the force of the bright warmth and beauty of spring struck his consciousness like a blow, and suddenly there was a reversal, a revulsion, within him. The shaded heavy masonry of the entranceway was like a prison door; like the mouth of a pit that had disgorged him. He had emerged from darkness into the daylight.

Steiner took a deep, grateful breath. The collar was beginning to stifle him again. More than ever he wanted to tear it open.

He hurried down the steps. His wife, waiting at the foot of them, turned and smiled up into his face. "Oh, Gene," she said, "Isn't it a perfect day?"

The old resentment flooded back into Steiner's being, and his lips grimaced.

"Yeah," he said. "Shame we had to waste it in that damned church."

The Need of Sewage Disposal Plants

By Elmarie Wendell

The City Council of Eugene passed a resolution October 24 "to employ consulting engineers for survey work for a new sewage disposal plant, which would include Eugene, Springfield, and fringe areas—cost not to exceed \$5,000."

Vic Morgan, county sanitarian, opened the meeting with a resume of sanitary needs in the area; stating that the problems of Eugene and Springfield were also similar to outlying districts. He said, "A cooperative movement which could solve our sewage treatment under a Metropolitan Sanitation arrangement was a move in the right direction."

The State Sanitation Engineer advises that rural districts and fringe areas are just as responsible

and subject to State Sanitation laws in affording proper sewage facilities as cities are, and that within a few years all districts needing a treatment plan will be forced to get them for the health and sanitation of the entire Willamette Valley. These are those areas:

Bethel, College Crest, River Rd., Cal Young, Glenwood, Rainbow, Springfield area, McKenzie, and Eugene area.

Combining Eugene, Springfield, and the rest of the water board districts, acreage covered is 19,400, and population is 71,500.

That's 71,500 people being served by a poor sewage system.

A Flowing Garbage Dump

Poor is hardly the word for it. The Willamette river has and is being used as the sewer system of Eugene and the surrounding territory. It is ancient history that Eugene and other river towns have

been, and will continue using the river as a garbage dump.

Serious pollutions come from the discharge of liquid wastes into the river, both domestic and industrial. Besides contamination to foods grown on farms which use the river water for irrigation, it kills much of the dissolved oxygen in the river water.

The result has been a terrific decrease of oxygen in the river from 1920 till today. The fall run of the Chinook has been completely eliminated and the Silver Salmon run has been almost destroyed. This has resulted in thousands of dollars lost annually in the Oregon fish industry. So this thing, so seemingly civic, effects the entire state.

A program for clearing the river was started in 1938. It is now almost 1950. Is this hold-up due to the infernal wrangling of the com-

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Singing—the nice thing

wave of relief went through Steiner. He arose with alacrity and drew a deep breath. To sing—if there was anything good about church, it