

IN JUSTICE TO JONAH

by BRANCH CABELL

THE notion survives among us, Jonah, that you were treated a bit unconscionably in high quarters. Yet, if you also feel that your Employer displayed a certain instability—not here to call it obtuseness,—or that He evaded His share of a bargain which, if not ever formally ratified, was at least a moral obligation, nevertheless may you rest content, now that time has avenged you, very prodigally.

You had sought in all possible ways, as one recalls your story, to avoid the sad honor of becoming a celestial envoy to announce the impending destruction of Nineveh. You were haled back from your attempted evasion; embarked upon the most famous sea voyage in history; and compelled to deliver a prophecy of which both your philanthropy and your common-sense disapproved. Thereafter the people of Nineveh retired each family to their own ash-heap, and piously sat down upon it. Your Employer (drawing, one infers, some natural conclusions as to the mental gifts which prompted this special form of worship) decided not to plague any further "a city wherein are more than sixscore persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle." Upon this abrupt, this oddly bucolic note, your story ends; and you vanish from human knowledge after having been discredited by your mutable-minded Employer.

In this fashion were you compelled to set up unwillingly as a prophet, and forthwith deprived of all future prospects as a prophet. It is not recorded that you had ever foretold anything before your enforced *faux pas* in dealing with Nineveh: it is self-evident that when the destruction of this city failed to take place as announced, you could no longer hope to be regarded seriously as a soothsayer. Your reputation, as must beyond any doubt have been made plain to you by your aunts and your cousins, was destroyed utterly.

Yet, in the odd way these things fall about, your reputation has survived. Your name is familiar above that of any other prophet; and your fame thrives handsomely, if but as a simile. Jeremiah and Daniel one esteems to be your sole rivals among the prophets of the house of Jacob, and they are very far out-distanced. We may yet speak, upon rare occasions, of a "jeremiad"; and those of us who have cultivated no wholesome horror of the cliché may refer now and again, without incurring any fit punishment, to "a Daniel come to judgment." But daily does somebody describe this or the other acquaintance, or it may be himself, as "a Jonah." By so generous a margin is Jonah, the son of Amittai, made the most celebrated of the prophets of Israel "where fame most lives, even in the mouths of men."

It would no doubt surprise you to learn that when the unthinking refer to you in this manner they appraise you as synonymous with a being unblest, and ill-starred, and unlucky in every chance-taking, or, in fine, as we would say, "hoodooed." With "a Jonah" (for so very strangely do giddyheads and simple Simons misinterpret your story) the worst always does come to the worst; and his one possible avenue of escape is to jump from the frying-pan into the fire. Which means, in other terms, that "a Jonah" is born with a wooden ladle in his mouth, and lives in perpetual hot water, with a hornet's nest or two always about his ears; so that he finds the ground crumbling under his feet in the while he goes rapidly to the dogs, on his very last legs. That, Sir, in the Oriental profusion of metaphor which your profession favored, is what the unreflective mean by "a Jonah."

So is it that we cling to our human habit of misconstruing most matters, and make of you, who were thrice-blessed among the men of old time, a synonym for calamity. That outcome appears astounding; but it remains true, in the teeth of your never-failing, your almost incredible good luck, over which the considerate yet marvel. Did you happen, for example, to go overboard at sea? Out of the many millions who have met that fate, for you alone a great fish was in attendance to see that you suffered no hurt. It is rumored, I admit, that your good fortune in this respect was once equalled by Arion, a Greek music maker, and yet again by a Hanoverian raconteur, one Baron Munchausen; but neither of these gentry has back of him the supreme authority of Holy Writ.

So too, through your ever-present good luck, was your sole essay in prophecy a flat failure. That failure, as the wise see it, was for you a peculiar if a bit blasphemous triumph, in that from the first you had not believed in the destruction of Nineveh, whatsoever your Employer might believe; and in that you alone put no faith in the prophecy which you delivered under supernal compulsion. I do not find that mortal skepticism ever went farther, or was rewarded more pleasantly. For in the end you turned out to have been right all along; and you were allowed the prized human pleasure of remarking to your Employer, "Was not this my saying when I was yet in my own country?"—or, as we would translate it, more modernly, "Well, but didn't I tell You so?"

The question, in so far as we know, was not answered. Indeed, one does not see how it could have been, except with some illogical, if familiar, repartee in the form of leprosy or of lightning.

But above all, Jonah, your never-failing good luck served you most handsomely in that you were the one prophet who was permitted to retire from the dreary vocation of prophesying. One infers so, at least, since there was clearly no point to entrusting you with any further celestial messages after your public discrediting by Heaven. Before another prophecy by Jonah, the doubting would but have exchanged their doubts for snickers. Obviously, you must have been authorized to settle down in some more congenial pursuit; and to do that was all clear gain for a sociable person of your trouble-shunning disposition. Prophets might be looked up to and respected, with something of the uneasy deference which we accord to Commissioners of Internal Revenue; but prophets could hardly hope to be popular or much sought after. Their official forecasts of the future were too depressing; their standards of propriety were not the sort of thing to which well-bred Canaanites were accustomed; and their language turned far too readily toward tropes such as, in any mixed gathering, must be regarded as an embarrassing social blunder.

So I do not imagine that Isaiah and Amos and Ezekiel, or any other of those extreme faddists, were asked out a great deal, or that their private lives were of a particularly happy nature. To be the wife of a Hebrew prophet, I suspect, was not an enviable lot,—nor, indeed, had the poor woman any chance to bring up her children in a proper state of biological ignorance. And I am certain that you, Jonah, were the most lucky of all the prophets in that you failed completely at outset, and were thus rescued from a profession in which no philanthropic or peace-loving person could hope to find real contentment.

For the rest, if at odd times in your later life some bitterness rankled when you thought over the contretemps in which you had been involved willy-nilly, you would nowadays, I think, incline to overlook the affair magnanimously. In fact I am afraid that, knowing everything, you would grin. For the method employed to coerce you has turned out to be a strategic blunder of prime and perpetual importance. I refer, of course, to that great fish in whose belly you were incarcerated, and set to psalm-making.

Your fish, Jonah (as I fear, in the current state of human nature, it would rejoice you to learn) has been the unfailing delight of irreverence, and the mainstay of the village atheist, for a huge number of centuries. The half-educated everywhere have declined to swallow your fish, quite as resolutely as they have declined to stop talking about your fish. As in metaphor you outrank your compeers, so among all creatures of the deep is your great fish the most famous—and especially with those persons who have followed after you (if but at a considerable distance) in skepticism. Voltaire has made superb play with your fish; with Thomas Paine also was your fish a familiar pet; and your fish frolicked constantly among the torrents of the late Colonel Robert G. Ingersoll's eloquence.

But I desist here from any vain cataloguing of your disciples in unbelief: it is beyond arithmetic to estimate how many over-rational persons have gagged daily at Jonah's fish. I would but assure you, Jonah, that if there be any topic of which your Employer has very long ago wearied, and before which, it is conceivable, He colors up rather, it must be that great fish which in a misguided moment He borrowed from Babylonian mythology, and sent to include you. That He regrets the entire affair, there can be no possible doubt, now that this fish has so far parted with every piscine attribute as to become a thorn in the side of the devout, a stumbling-block for the feet of the convert, and a peashooter in the ever nimble hands of agnosticism.

In imagination, O son of Amittai, I can see you weighing the outcome of your ichthyological jailing. By the beard of the prophet your grin is not hidden to an extent quite consistent with utter politeness. And I infer that of your Employer you are perhaps asking, yet again, "Well, but didn't I tell You so?"