

DIRECTION

A Quarterly of New Literature

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BRANCH CABELL:

To Ananias, Citizen of Jerusalem

In whatsoever limbo you now abide, Ananias, all grace to you! May your peace be multiplied through knowledge of your exceeding glory! For of the citizens of Jerusalem there is none of more wide repute than is Ananias; in every land is his name rumored; even unto the far ends of earth has sped his fame.

I must add, a bit more prosaically, that your fame appears undeserved. For we know of you only that you were an early convert to Christianity; that when, in the year 33, the Apostles inaugurated the ecclesiastical and since then ever-crescent ceremony of "taking up a collection," you sold an unspecified possession, bringing some part of its proceeds to the Apostles; and that Peter reproved you for not contributing the entire sales price, in such terms that you straightway fell down at his feet, and in place of your deficit yielded up a ghost. Upon this slender foundation has been builded, like an inverted huge pyramid, your enduring and your magnificent fame as the chief of earth's liars.

That outcome defies human reason. It is not recorded you spoke at all. You came forward merely, with your money, a proceeding which, it is my experience, many modern pastors regard with indulgence. There was no verbal, no outright lie involved in the affair one way or the other: at utmost, your offence might be described, by the hypercritical, as *suppressio veri*, with a mild tacit tinge of *suggestio falsi*. And in passing, one really does think that St. Peter, who had adorned the early morning hours of the first Good Friday with three out-and-out, outrageous whoppers, might more graciously have ceded the task of criticizing your veracity to some other Apostle.

At all events, such was your entire story, as it survives in six brief Biblical verses: and the considerate persons (in a land where each one of us annually fills out both his Federal and his State tax returns with the aid of much salutary self-abasements as to his earnings and worldly possessions) cannot but wonder over the titles of your pre-eminence. It is not that one envies you, exactly. Your glory arouses, rather, an odd mixture of surprise and of memory, a slight flavor of contrition, and some sly self-complacency in having outrivaled you, Ananias, over and yet over again, without being caught at it.

We do not then plot to displace you in your ever-living fame, I can assure you. You incite nobody to any infraction of the tenth commandment. No: we do not presume for one instant to covet the great fame of Ananias. Instead, we remark humbly, provided that we are sound classical scholars, "*Sic nos, non nobis.*"

In brief, your celebrity appears wholly undeserved. About you there was, in so far as our era knows, no suggestion of the unique, whether in your deeds or in your temporal gear or in your personal qualities. So of all them whose names have passed into proverb your case stays, by long odds, the most unexplainable; your claims upon our human attention are so tenuous that their bland inadequacy rivets attention with firmness; and provokes the considerate to wonder upon what principle, if any, fate does choose her pets.

I refer thus to those people who are really famous, upon more or less the same gigantic scale as you, Ananias—to those favored and those ever-glorious dead who remain known to that unpedantic if semi-fabulous creature, the man in the street. For he—that John Doe, who is himself a celebrity of sorts—even he, is familiar with the entire alphabet of them, from the Ananias who was a liar and the Amato who was a violin, down to the Volstead who was an act and the Zepelin who was, and remains, a dirigible. Each one of us, in fact, knows all about the achievements of these most memorable persons. We very well know that King Alfred let his cakes burn, and Bruce looked at a spider, and Nebuchadnezzar ate grass, and Mahomet went to a mountain—in or about that period, of course, when the Borgias poisoned, upon the same broad principles that King Henry the Eighth married, pretty much everyone within sight, while somewhere in the immediate neighborhood Nimrod was hunting, and William Tell shot at apples, and Nero combined music with arson.

But not only do we recount their names. We cherish also each attribute of all these proverbial beings, remembering no less reverently the mark of Cain than the coats of Joseph and Prince Albert, the line of Messrs. Mason and Dixon, and the locker of Davy Jones. We recall daily that Damocles had a sword, Oedipus a complex, Job a comforter (in addition to a blue turkey hen), Titian a blonde, Juliet a balcony, Bright a disease, and Monroe a doctrine, so great is our love for all those of our race who are undisputedly famous. In brief, these people who have aided mankind by contributing to our language a familiar allusion—a scant two hundred persons, it may be, out of the billions of unfeathered bipeds who have strutted at odd times about the planet—are actually and forever famous; and down “the vast Mississippi of falsehood” they sail statelily, a multi-colored and a bewilderingly mixed crew, all traveling in the same huge gleaming galleon of romance.

Ah, but what, Ananias, one must ask perforce, are you doing in that galley? As a liar your record remains, at best, obscure. It may be granted by the charitable that, for aught we know to the contrary, you did perhaps lie to the tax collectors of Tiberius, and to your wife Sapphira, with some traces of real ingenuity. Nevertheless were your

talents for mendacity so inadequately bolstered by bravado that before the first hint of St. Peter's doubt you succumbed, in circumstances from which one bare "Cockadoodledo!" would have loosed you triumphantly. To none thus insulse is it granted to win the victor's palm in the most ancient and human sport of perjury.

And so to you, Ananias, in whatsoever limbo you now abide, may grace be with you; but not—upon reflection—no, not that glory which, living, you did not earn, as so many others have earned in this flesh, with their tongues and their pens, tirelessly. For you were not ready of wit; you lacked any sprightly meed of imagination; you were but a pettifogger. In brief, I have no least doubt that Simon Peter, having been fulfilled with a knowledge of things to come, put a sudden destruction upon you, Ananias, not so much for being backward with your church dues as for being a humbug who was making ready to swindle the next two thousand years of what we politely call civilization.