

Illusion

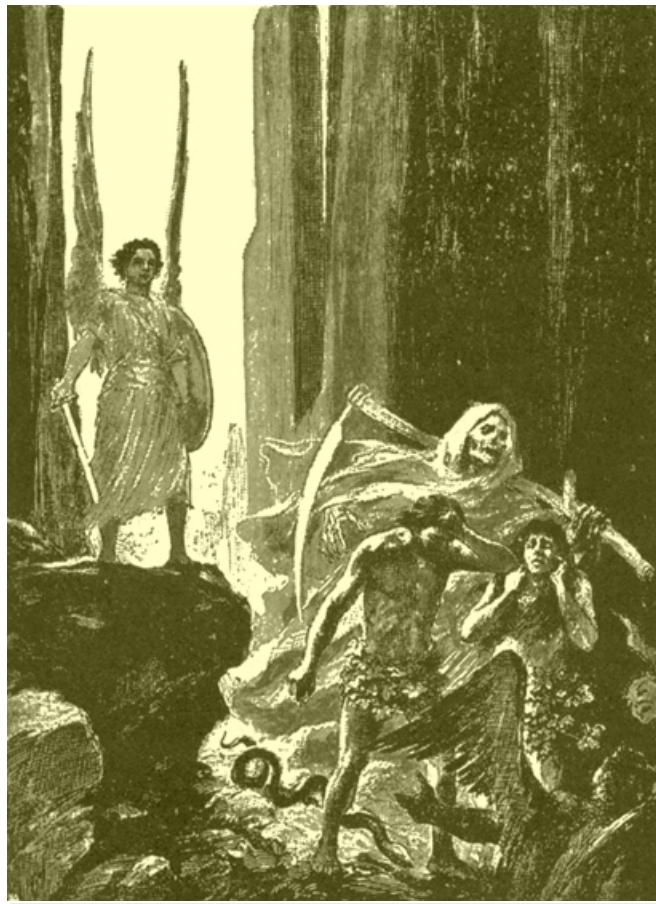
THE WOMAN SAT in the darkened room and wept quietly into her hands. If she sobbed any louder it would awaken her husband and the baby.

They would want to know why she cried, and she could not put into words why she felt this great pressure of tears. Part of it was the disappointments that life had continually brought her, but worse was the disappointment she had brought herself. Nothing had turned out the way she had expected it to. Nothing. And now she had a terrible fear that all her life it would continue on the same way.

None of the spiritual truths she had believed in so long had worked for her. She made no spiritual advancement. She was trapped in the worry and terror of the circumstances that made up her life. She did not have time to meditate. She did not serve so she might merit spiritual illumination. Her husband who once talked so understandingly with her about their mutual ideals had long ago forgotten them. He worked and slept. Did he ever miss the vision they had started with? She didn't know. It was so long since they had ever really talked to one another. They were strangers living side by side. Had they loved one another once? There was little exchange of affection between them now. They were caught in the monotonous routine of merely living, paying bills, trying to get ahead.

Her sobs grew more convulsive, but she muffled the sound so it could not be heard. Yearning, praying, wanting to live spiritually—none of it had succeeded. If there had only been a teacher to help her.

There had been none. She had hoped there would be someone to guide her, to tell her of her



Created by Ariel Agemian exclusively for the Confraternity of the Precious Blood

"The Banished children of Eve lament that this our day is bitter and tedious." We do so until we discover that worldly difficulties are divine opportunities and that personal well-being and advancement is achieved by helping our fellows.

mistakes, to point out the way. All the books she had read had promised that the teacher would come to the sincere seeker, but none had come to her though she had wept and prayed and yearned.

She had stopped reading the books, and her prayers and meditations were less frequent, though spasmodically she had continued them through the years—always hoping one day the miracle would happen. A teacher would come and with his strength she could go forward.

She bit at her lips and the racking sobs stopped. There were no tears left. She felt barren and empty. She was beyond the point of despair. Somehow, somewhere, all of this must have been her fault.

Her head was tired, and the bitter pain so great she could not perceive what the faults might have been.

Then she must have fallen asleep in her chair. She was sure of it later. But at the time she was unaware of dropping off. The dream was vivid, and much of it hurt more than all the pains she had felt before. She was alone. Oh, so very much alone. She walked on an empty desert. The sand stung her feet and the Sun's heat beat mercilessly upon her. Far, far ahead she was certain there was a cool oasis, and in its shade waited comfort and peace and friends to help her. However, no matter how she strove to push ahead the sand held her back, and she got nowhere.

Bewildered she cried out, "Is there no one to save me? No one to help?"

From somewhere a deep voice answered, "To be saved one must first save. To be helped one must first help."

She wept without understanding, but there was no more voice. She knew she must go on or perish in the heat. She struggled and as she moved forward, she became aware that at her feet where she had not noticed it before, lay a child reaching up to her. The child's small arms held her fast, and she knew a moment of irritation that it should be there. She also felt anger. It took all of her strength to move at all, and here was a struggling baby holding her back. For a while she tried to move ahead and leave it there. By pulling frantically she did move ahead a few steps and leave it behind, but as she pulled free her conscience bothered her. The child would die, and she would be to blame. It was her duty, she knew it. She would have to bring the child with her. Whoever waited at the oasis would somehow know if she didn't, and they would be displeased. Without love, without sympathy, only because she must, she returned and picked up the child. It hampered her as she knew it would. It made the walking all the harder, and the child was not quiet and grateful, but squirmed and tossed in her arms making their progress difficult. She willed herself to go on. At the baby's wailing she closed her mind. "At the oasis they will reward me for this trouble," she comforted herself. But she gave no comfort to the baby.

It seemed at last she could see the dim outline of

the trees. Finally she was nearer. It made her quicken her steps though now she was gasping hard for breath. Then she stumbled over the man. The sand cut her lips, and bruised her legs and arms. It seared her eyes, and she was blinded. The baby spilled from her grasp and wailed all the louder. For a time she only wept in fury. Her strength was nearly gone. If she did not go on at once she would never make it.

She rubbed at her eyes and cleared the sand from them. She picked up the crying baby and pulled herself to her feet. Then the realization struck her: She could not leave the man. Though she could not see him clearly through the haze which had settled over her eyes, she knew that he was hurt and that she must give him help. She must let him lean on her and somehow bring him also to the oasis. There was no love, no pity in the gesture. They would reward her at the oasis. It was the only motivation she knew, and she pulled him up beside her. With his weight against her she steadied him on his feet and half dragged him along beside her. It was as though he were in a coma, for he neither helped nor hindered her. He could not. He moved mechanically as she dragged him, and the baby still cried, rasping her nerves. She moved on and on, and then sank in the sand. Before she lost consciousness she knew one moment of regret: "I've failed to make it. Too bad I couldn't have gotten the baby and the man there and saved them."

It was her last conscious thought. She awoke and found she was beneath a palm. Cool water bubbled in a spring nearby. She was at the oasis. Nearby were the baby and the man, both still unconscious. The voice spoke again. She saw no one, but knew there were Presences near.

The voice said, "You were brought here only because of the one good thought you had before you collapsed." She thought and remembered that at the last moment she had felt real regret that the baby and the man were lost with her,

The voice continued, "Duty done without love is a worthless coin and will not buy illumination and spirituality." There was no accusation in the voice, only a statement of fact. She had been judged, she knew. It was the story of her life. Always she had done her duty, but it was in pain and a struggle.

There had been no joy in it. She had sought her own spiritual illumination. She had thought little of others.

The voice spoke, "Well, there lie the baby and man. Will you minister to them and give them life? Or will you let them die there of your neglect?"

Then, strangely, the biting sand and pall of heat ceased to trouble her. Her eyes cleared. She knew the baby and the man. It was her child, her husband. She knew the years of duty she had given them, but they had been years of actual neglect.

She understood it all so clearly now. One didn't progress by miracles. One walked slowly by doing the routine things of life. One made truth by living it in just such a way. Stern duty done without love, without compassion, was worthless. Worse, it was sinful!

She pulled herself up to her feet and went to the spring and brought water for the baby and the man. Tears sprang into her eyes—not for herself, but for the wasted baby and the crippled man. The baby had been wasted for lack of joyous loving, the man crippled because she had not given him loving understanding and walked truly by his side.

Tears of remorse stung her cheeks. The baby opened its eyes and its face broke into a smile. The man sighed and reached out his hand to her.

She opened her eyes. She was in her own darkened room. Her husband was asleep on the bed. She hurried to the next room, and the baby slept quietly.

Every scene of the dream was vivid upon her. She understood now. "I'll try. I'll try," she promised. She hadn't been alone. Somehow a wisdom within her told her that she would fall and stumble and make mistakes she might regret, but at last she would know it was not her own progress she must fret over, it was how well she could serve in joyful love those about her.

As for the teacher—the dream had given her faith. When she needed help, there would be other dreams. She was certain of it now. As she truly was able to apply truth, then truth would be given her. As she lived honestly in the light, so the light in her life would increase.

It was her mistaken selfishness which had kept her chained as her feet had felt chained in the

GOD'S AUTOGRAPHS

I stood upon a hill one night
And saw the great Creator write
His autograph across the sky
In lightning strokes, and there was I
A witness to this great event
And signature magnificent!

I stood one morning by a stream
When night was fading to a dream,
The fields were fair as fields may be
At spring, in golden mystery
Of dandelion—then God came on
And wrote His signature in Dawn.

One afternoon long years ago,
Where glacial tides had ebb and flow,
I found a cliff God's hand had smote;
I scanned its breast, whereon God wrote
With some great glacier for a pen
His signature for time and men.

One night I stood and watched the stars:
The Milky Way and ranging Mars,
Where God in letters tipped with fire
The tale of every tall desire
Had writ in rhyme and signed His name
A stellar signature of flame.

Creation's dawn was deep in night
When suddenly, "Let there be light!"
Awakened grass, and flower, and tree,
The starry skies, the earth, and sea;
Then to complete Creation's span
In His own image, God made man,
And signed His name, with stroke most sure:
Man is God's greatest signature!

—William L. Stidger

desert she had dreamed about. She bent to kiss the sleeping baby, and then she went to bed. In his sleep, as though he felt the change, her husband reached out his arms for her, and she slipped gratefully into them. □

—D. D. Arroyo