

# MORAL COURAGE

BY M. GRIER KIDDER



MORAL COURAGE is defenseless fact facing fortified falsehood. But originality may be a coward; many may believe what but one dare utter.

Conservatism and caution are twins. Again, by saying what you think you know, you risk saying what you don't, and, if what you do, what nobody else believes. The original man, until his ideals are realized, is only a social curiosity. To learn, doubt and be doubted. Talk of what you know nothing? Of course—talk breeds talk. Everybody knows something everybody else doesn't. Few listen without learning, talk without teaching. Believing the silent man knows all he doesn't say is like believing the same of the dead man. Half the "good listeners" are too stupid to talk; t'other half, too indifferent to differ.

When Lamarck sprang his baboon pedigree on people, they were as much shocked as the baboon would have been if he had heard of it. Lamarck escaped burning, but nothing else. The flames of the Inquisition had been quenched with the blood of brave men, the tears of good women and little children before his day. But the superb effrontery of the man! He told those who were certain they were little lower than angels that he knew they were little higher than apes! They could not see that starting at monkey and rising to man is better than starting at angel and dropping to man. The first and most difficult step in teaching is unteaching. I know of nothing harder than convincing a man in a short time that he has been a damn fool for a long time. No matter how modest the patient, he invariably imagines there is room for argument. Lamarck gained few adherents, but he gained the world's attention. Of course, "he recanted on his death-bed." I suppose he said: "O God—if there be a God—have

mercy on my soul if I have a soul!" I wonder who invented that valedictory. I have seen some smart people die, and all talked dying like all fools talk in good health. The man almost dead thinks no more of his whither than the baby just born of his whence. Lamarck was a great man. A greater, however, was coming. He was the biological John the Baptist who prepared the way for the lord of evolution—Charles Darwin.

Darwin settled what Lamarck stirred up. Above all, he gave us "natural selection," which clinched the business. Now we know why species vary, that functionally acquired traits are inheritable, that "God-given instinct" is inherited experience, that even morality is a baboon feature fitted by adaptation to preserve and ornament society. He did something else—buried himself in Westminster Abbey, the first to enter that pantheon feet first, who knew whence he came and was uncertain whether he was going any farther. Some of the "replies" to Darwin suggest the venomous vomitings devoted to Ingersoll. Every ass had anti-evolutionary brays to spare. Darwin was accused of statements that would have disgraced even the intelligence of those who originated them; called everything he wasn't—nothing he was.

Father Warman, the entomological big bug of the Jesuits, accepts ape ancestry. But he says God injected souls into us after we cut loose from the old folks; draws the immortal "color line," so to speak—allows anthropoids but insists on angels. However, we won't fuss over a few feathers. But what a victory! A prominent canon in the Catholic Church, big gun as it were, helping to demolish Adam and Eve! At any rate, Dubois found the skeleton of the *pithecanthropus erectus*, thereby filling the gap between quadrumana and man, so I am satisfied, soul or no soul.

But what a price was paid for all this:

how much did it cost for a wise child to know his own father? All but bipedal donkeys are satisfied that we are nothing but prehistoric ourang-outangs fashioned by environment to turn up our noses at our grand-daddies, somewhat removed. I am not particularly proud of the fact that the distant author of my being swung by the tail I lack. But I am proud to know my pedigree is complete. I believe in family. I had an uncle living in Boston. We applaud moral courage till it wars with some inherited absurdity. Nothing seems more vulgarly impertinent than a newly found truth questioning the veracity of a dignified moss-grown lie. Two-thirds the conventionalities are lies adapted to etiquette. Nor would I impair ceremony with too much truth. A little insincerity is the subtle perfume of good breeding, the bouquet of politeness. Truth may be brutal, may "lack the gentleness and time to speak it in," precipitancy in securing or imparting facts be in bad taste. But our biases and prejudices are linked with our fondest recollections. For this cause, no man considerate of the majority's feelings ridicules the devil. Destroying belief in hell is destroying the comfort of those who believe everybody is going there but themselves. I don't know which is worse taste, telling the sinner that he is going to hell or the saved that there is no hell to go to.

I have in a modest way exploited my moral intrepidity, but I lack staying powers. On dress parade, a daisy; on a charge, a thunderbolt; on a sustained retreat a Xenophon. But I am deficient in siege requirements. The cross seems so eternally present, the crown so everlastingly future. I am now devoting myself to guerilla warfare, bushwhacking on the flanks of conservatism. When I was in the regular army of cranks, those who agreed with me said I was a lunatic for telling the little I know to the many who know more, and to the more who know less and believe they "know it all." I have given the "underdog" proposition my most prayerful consideration, and I have decided that he is woefully, most woefully deficient in variety. To retain your mental credit, never tell your thoughts to those who don't think; ever meet a man who doesn't think he knows? Look out when you leave the beaten track

that you be not charged with intellectual vagrancy.

What a man was La Place! Alone and unaided, the sublimity of his theme, the majesty of his courage and the lucidity of his logic have won the victory. He didn't say his nebular hypothesis is true—only thought so. But what La Place thought true can be accepted by the thoughtful as true. If it be false, no other falsehood looks so much like truth. This great man's intellectual endowments were in harmonious co-ordination with his moral gifts. To him, truth was a sun; duty a guiding star; obstacles an inspiration. Lamponed by those who could not answer him, the butt of ignorance, execrated by the clergy, his name grows brighter as the years fade into eternity. The Newton of the nineteenth century! the Napoleon of the cosmos! "Agamemnon, king of men."

You've heard of Bruno?—the man who was pursued by falsehood for pursuing truth. Delivered by that personification of evangelical infamy, John Calvin, to a Catholic pope, who burnt him! Presbyterians and Catholics agreed on only two things, burning each other when they could—anybody else when they couldn't. Do you wonder Calvin invented Presbyterianism? Wouldn't you wonder if he hadn't? The heart that doesn't melt at the thought of those flames belongs to the pope who kindled them. I had a dog named "Bruno." I know of no greater compliment to a good man than naming a good dog after him. Think of naming any kind of a dog "Calvin!" Calvin also burnt Servetus for not agreeing with him. What should have been done with Servetus if he *had* agreed with him? Can anybody given to comparisons think of John Calvin without feeling a profound admiration for the devil?

Yet I shall ever appreciate the fact that, with my exuberance of diction, I was not Calvin's contemporary. If I had graced that epoch my eloquence would have been regulated by thermal possibilities. Think of choosing between saying nothing and something the majority wants to hear; silence, and what everybody else would like you to talk about! Nothing but mental concentration on the culinary department would have sufficed in my case. And why was Bruno murdered? For preaching

what the wise didn't believe then and fools know now.

And grand old Luther! Of course, medieval Catholicism was the only thing Luther could have reformed, and the only thing that could not have reformed Luther. But he was great and good for his time. Singly he faced the emperor of this world and the vicegerent of the next. What inspired such courage? Protestants say "God." Catholics declare the "devil." Others suggest "beer." It was that grand thing, individuality, that magnificent gift, the courage to bring forth what the mind has the power to conceive. It shows what a Dutchman will do when he gets started. I never smell sauer-kraut without grateful emotions. To me, a brewery is a serious matter. It's true, a modern reformer who couldn't reform the Reformation needs reforming as much as the thing he reforms. But the modern reformer wasn't there, and Luther was. Catch on? The Reformation only proves that at that time any new thing could reform "any old thing."

Yet most of those who have moral courage have nothing else. The man who dares heaven and earth generally has little treasure laid up in either. Few risk a reputation worth keeping.

Poverty is the monotonous mother of change, despair the fecund dam of variety. Any difference is novelty to a poor man; any variation, recreation. Almost all we have was conceived by appetite and born of an empty stomach, that womb of ingenuity. But all glory to the innovator, whether his innovation be dictated by duty, diet or discontent.

For the abolitionists I have little good to say. But, while none of them invite my sympathy, some of them command my admiration. Wendell Phillips gave up all for his hobby. Well born, intellectual, wealthy, he repudiated everything for contempt, rancor and social ostracism. His life was in continual danger; he was mobbed and all but murdered. His eyes were fixed upon one thing, his aspirations concentrated upon a single object; blind to all but his convictions, deaf to everything but the whisperings of what I think was fanaticism—what he thought was conscience. It is hard to ascribe honesty to an opponent. But if Wendell Phillips was "playing to the gallery," Jesus Christ

was masquerading to the mob; even if my daddy did lose a hundred and fifty niggers.

He who advertises his novelty, advertises his nonsense. Nothing is more suspicious than the new vouching for its own respectability, the unknown commending itself. The worst of the new is its own precedent. Ever pose as your own precedent? I've been in "the first great cause" business and don't like it. Don't be a cause without an effect handy, nor an effect without a cause for public inspection. The majority who become great become great to escape becoming less. Columbus discovered America because he could discover nothing else. If he had had anything, he wouldn't have done anything.

I like to think of Thomas Paine who, looking before he leaped, leaped; sacrificed what he won by doing good by doing more. We hear no anti-Paine tirades to-day. It takes a brave blackguard to besmirch him, an ingenious rascal to "answer" him. Besides, we are "letting up" on the objects of ancestral hatred, deciding that many we were taught to abuse were better than we or worse because their conditions were worse. The devil, for instance. Why hate him? What would we be with his environments, trying climate and earthy associations? Paine shocked the devout by calling Christ a man, intensified the shock by calling Satan mythical, and God merciful. Under Paine's cold logic, hell's temperature has fallen, God's reputation risen.

When I was in the Calvinist fold, God and the devil, in reputation, were running neck and neck, the devil perhaps leading by a nose. There seemed to be an agreement between them excessively uncomfortable to a boy. If he escaped sulphur, brimstone, pitchfork and other juvenile post mortem essentials, he was slated for the milk and honey rations, heavenly catgut and everlasting Sunday; simply a case of hell or hallelujah! If the devil didn't catch the boy, the boy caught the devil.

Paine assailed orthodoxy, hammer and tongs, and though he was dust and ashes before we began to reap his sowing, we are reaping it all right. That our asylums are not packed with religion—crazed lunatics and bogus Messiahs, we owe to such men as Paine and Ingersoll.

Today anybody but a lunatic can die

without raising a false alarm of fire. I know not whether I be scheduled for the sheep or the goats; goats most likely, as I was somewhat of a William in my youth. But if Lamarck, La Place, Darwin, Paine, Ingersoll, etc., are bunched with different livestock, I am going to jump the dividing fence. Listening to your uncle?

A strange truth is an intellectual tramp. Few look for evidence against the character of a pedigreed falsehood. It requires nerve to oppose a stale mistake with a fresh correction. We are mostly victims of progressive heredity. The accumulated absurdities of past generations are ancestral gifts; every generation adding to its stock of sense and nonsense. Our intellectual traits are inherited, each beneficiary adding or subtracting before passing them on.

People are more or less inclined to believe any unknown thing of the known.

Did you ever hear of a new creed that hadn't pilfered orthodox prestige? that doesn't use Jesus Christ as a stalking horse? It is relatively easy to make a man swallow the new if it be sauced with the old.

As I said above, the first step in teaching is unteaching, which places the mind of the pupil in a negative state. Then, if you don't have to furnish the brains, you stand some chance of success. But the vast majority of teachers have nothing but evolution to aid them, and evolution is a snail. How many have enjoyed the fruition of their work? The number is far, very far from legion. How many magnificent men have gone down willingly into their graves, driven to despair by the brainless pack yelping at their heels? Verily, moral courage obeys the injunction, "Take up your cross and follow me."



## A PRUDENT PROPOSAL

BY IVY KELLERMAN

Maid of my choice, I do not ask  
That in your care entirely  
You take my heart, for such a task  
Would weary you too direly.

Nor do I foolishly implore  
You keep my heart forever,  
Or on each new love shut the door,  
For fear our souls it sever.

I would not give or sell my heart  
For even your sweet smile,  
But, darling, just to make a start,  
Please rent it for a while!