CONFUSION OF TONGUES

BY DOROTHY GUNNELL JENKINS

THE little girl woke in a sudden frenzy of fear. The shriek that had startled her awake was repeated, and she stared wide eyed into the dark waiting for the flare of light. Her heart beat wildly. She clutched the covers and waited, waited. Again the shriek, but this time nearer, and accompanied by the comfortable roar that identified the disturbance as a train. The little girl relaxed slowly. Her heart finally beat normally again, but she lay awake for an eternity. She was spared tonight, but a time was coming, inevitably, apace.

"Repent ye, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" She repented terribly, but her little past provided her but poorly with the means.

It had happened so over and over . . . the silence of the night shatered by the train's whistle, the little girl's dreams, broken by the sudden sure knowledge that the trump of doom had sounded and that, as soon as the light came, she and the rest of the horrified quick were to foregather with the immense and dreadful army of the dead. And they were to be judged by a God who had said of himself that he was a jealous God and—here was the utter hopelessness of it—visited the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation!

The two little girls walked slowly behind the storehouse each with a lump of sugar in her extended hand. Anon they raised their voices and called "Here Jack! Here Prince!" Anon they closed their eyes and prayed "Oh Lord, in Thee do I put my trust," and again aloud, "Here Jack! Here Prince!"

"Ask and it shall be given ye," they had been taught by Aunt Addie, the same dear aunt who had put into their hands the influential volume *Touching Incidents and Remarkable Answers to*

Prayer. She had promised them that if they prayed enough they would be granted their desires, provided they had faith.

"Oh Lord, in Thee do I put my trust." That was prayer, reiterated to the five hundredth time, and so fervent that their cheeks were wrinkled from the vigor with which they closed their eyes. "Here Jack, Here Prince." That was faith, that and the sugar, faith to provide the long expected pony with a welcoming sweet and a name of his own choice.

But prayer was ineffectual and faith betrayed. The pony remained in his far undreamed of pastures. There too, perhaps, played the baby brother, for whom nightly the little girls prepared a bed beside their own before they knelt to pray for him.

The little girl was so sleepy she could hardly open her eyes, but her sister punched her relentlessly for they had agreed to get up early to pray. At last she shook herself awake and joined her sister at the open window they believed to be most nearly toward Jerusalem. They prayed in the language of the hymns they knew, petitioning to be among the ninety and nine in the fold instead of wandering in the mountains bleak and bare. They begged to be piloted over the tempestuous sea of life. They prayed to be washed whiter than snow in the fountain filled with blood. And for each of the somber images they employed they saw themselves wandering over stony heights, tossing in a small boat on an angry ocean, or washing in a crimson flood that flowed forever from a side grievously pierced.

They prayed till the lavender twilight brightened into day, until their matins were interrupted by Hip Lee who came in to set the breakfast table.

The little girl woke but sank again into sleep. It was only her sister's hand that had roused her, feeling, as it so often felt, to discover whether her heart still beat. For Elizabeth suffered always from a fear of sudden death, and often woke up in a panic lest the little sister beside her had been stricken—perhaps for her sins. The little girl herself had more or less had out this matter of sudden death.

"Well, I won't die tonight," she had said to Aunt Addie one night when she was five.

"Oh *don't* say that!" Aunt Addie had entreated.

"Why?" she had asked hardily. "I *wont* die. Not tonight. You wait and see."

Aunt Addie had collapsed beside the bed to pray. "God may smite you down tonight for defying Him," she had cried, but the little girl had gone right on defying.

"I *wont* die tonight. I *wont*. You see!" And she hadn't, that night. But might God not perhaps merely have delayed his punishment? In any case Elizabeth liked to be sure. Often the little girl felt her hand feeling about on her chest seeking assurance that her life had not been suddenly snuffed out. When her fingers stopped above the right spot Elizabeth could go comfortably back to sleep, lulled by the beating of a living heart.

Although such a faith was painful to hold, the pain was not to be compared with that of losing it. The little girl, grown up long ago, will never forget the throes she experienced after she was fourteen and had begun to question her old beliefs. At first she felt alone in a terrible chaos of darkness while every one else walked happily in the light. There were years when she went regularly to church striving to establish the relation between the mystic splendid things she heard in the dim colored light of the church, and the tangible and yet beautiful things she discovered in the rest of her world. She definitely abandoned the jealous dreadful God of her childhood, but she was dismayed to find that she could not accept the whole of even a kindly doctrine of love because she could not believe in physical miracles.

This, however, is not the story of that little girl at all, therefore I pass over the pain of those adolescent years. Yet, although my body has undergone the seven-years' change many times since then, I can still hardly look back on the groping of that child to find the light without lapse into the pathetic fallacy.

What concerns me here is the adventures we have encountered, my husband and I, while trying to bring up three children in what we hoped would be religious freedom.

"They may choose for themselves when they are old enough," we said, both of us hoping to spare Sylvia—it was upon her arrival that the decision was made—some of the terrors and hurts that had beset the way I wandered in.

Consequently Sylvia's name was entered in no baptismal records, nor was Seton's when he followed fifteen months behind her.

Their first induction into formalized religion took place accidentally when Sylvia had just turned four, Seton was nearly three, and the family perambulator was occupied by Elizabeth of very tender months.

I sent them out to walk one Sunday morning with a "mother's helper" who judged that the opportunity had been given her to present the unchurched children at Sunday School.

They came home into the midst of a late breakfast and announced where they had been. We inquired politely into the order of the program. They gave a jumbled account of a birthday cake with candles, to which the children had presented pennies.

"And they sang," said Sylvia.

"What did they sing?"

"We didn't know the song," she told us, "but Seton and I sang too."

"What did you sing?"

"Well, we didn't know their song, but we sang 'K-K-K-Katy'—not very loud, just like this, *'K-K-K-Katy'*" and she produced the immortal lyric in a discreet whisper. (Sylvia has always been like that—a credit to us. If she has been reduced to subterfuges she has always rendered them not very loud.)

It was the following winter that I met Mrs. Tower on the bridge one snowy afternoon.

"How old is Sylvia now?" she asked.

"Four."

"When she is just a little bit older," said Mrs. Tower (whose name might better have been Pillar) with a positive air that admitted no denial. "I shall take her to Sunday School." Mrs. Tower was no relation of mine or in any way connected with my family. I mention her only because she represents the large group whose members believe themselves called upon to supply what is lacking in homes like ours.

Meanwhile at home Sylvia and Seton and, as she grew older, small Elizabeth were hearing stories of Christ's life. They said His prayer and sang carols and hymns. Presently they learned and repeated many times the tolerant and lovely poem of our dear friend Dr. William Herbert Carruth, *Each in his Own Tongue.* It was not Christianity we wished to keep from them, but rather the too graphic orthodoxy children so easily fall victim to. Further,

they were given the whole truth, so far as we could supply it, concerning any question they asked. And consequently, being forthright infants, they sometimes contradicted statements that would have been better left alone.

"An angel brought Mrs. Marten a baby!" our six year old neighbor told us breathlessly one day.

"An angel didn't!" declared Seton. I diverted the conversation into a general rejoicing for Mrs. Marten. But later when we were alone:

"Josephine said an angel brought that baby, Mother."

"Well," I said, having previously explained to the best of my ability the love and travail implicit in a baby, "Why shouldn't Josephine call it an angel?"

"But there aren't any real angels, are there, Mother?" (They look you straight in the eye when they ask such a question.)

"I can't believe in angels," I said, "but there is a Mother's love and her desire for a baby, and her suffering to bear it, and the father's and Mother's love for each other and the baby—Josephine calls it an angel. You say the baby grew from a tiny egg. Each speaks in his own tongue, you know."

We never worried about the children in matters religious while they stayed almost wholly in our home. Their only problem was to differentiate between the God we tried to express to them and the much more tangible God of their few little friends—a personal guardian who, though rather less terrible in these later days than the fearful God of my own troubled childhood—was nevertheless watching pretty closely with a fairly palpable eye, and was very likely to smite if you told lies. There were occasional difficulties in our way, of course. Probably all parents who have followed a course similar to ours can remember moments of bewilderment and genuine discomfort, as in the case of Seton's *coup d'état.*

"What Sunday School do you go to?" he was asked by a devoted member of one of the churches in the little college town we lived in.

"We don't go to any," Seton said stoutly. (And how much easier it would have been for him then and in many like cases if he could simply have said Episcopalian, Baptist, or Presbyterian, and closed the discussion.)

"Not to *any* Sunday School? Why not?"

"Because," said my young son who always talked to me sweetly and naturally of spiritual things, "Mother doesn't believe in God."

"Oh Seton," I asked when he told me about it, "Why did you say that?"

"I meant a man-God," he said, "and you don't."

Presently people began to invite the children to go to Sunday School, and since they had grown old enough to have choice in the matter we let them go. There were churches of various denominations in our town, the ministers men of varying vision. I believe in that particular case the Catholic Father was the most intellectual, broad-minded and highly educated of the leaders, but the children never attended a Catholic service. We would never have chosen the leaders in any of the churches to guide our children's spiritual development, but we predicted, and as it proved, rightly, that their experience was to be social rather than spiritual.

Elizabeth had a natural leaning toward angels, but Sylvia and Seton were matter-of-fact infants who loved to feel their feet on very solid ground. They loved fairy tales and myths above all things, but they insisted on the difference between a fact and a fancy. It developed when they went to Sunday School that they knew many more Bible stories than most of the children in their classes. This fact was sometimes misinterpreted as devotion when instead it was merely the natural delight of a child of good imagination in a first-rate story which had never been offered him as anything but a story. Therefore during the time they went to Sunday School they acquitted themselves very well and frequently brought home prizes. Seton and Elizabeth, however, soon came to the conclusion that since Sunday was the only morning their father could spend at home they might as well stay and spend it with him.

Sylvia went on with considerable regularity and tremendous credit to herself until her career was interrupted and all but terminated by an accident which put her in the hospital for many months. During this time she fought extreme suffering and weakness without any self-pity at all—a sporting attitude which did much to bring her through—but boredom she disliked heartily. When at last she came home to us and had suffered the ennui of convalescence in a wheel-chair, and was finally able to get about

on crutches, she was ready for any social activity, that might present itself.

School had just closed and the children in our town were looking forward to beguiling the summer days with a Bible School of three weeks duration. Our children all wanted to attend, especially Sylvia, and happily their three boy cousins arrived for a visit in time to join the group.

I am sure the Bible School desired sincerely to help all the children. What it brought to the surface in ours was an illuminating if not a very comfortable study. Each child kept a notebook and every day a written exercise followed a little preparatory talk by the leader. Our children were perfectly shameless. They listened to the prefatory talk, and then, although they had hitherto been, in general, very truthful, they proceeded to set down the results obviously desired by headquarters. Elizabeth was not involved in this career of wickedness. She and the youngest cousin were only five, and were relegated to a kindergarten department where they folded paper and colored pictures and sang, "Jesus loves me, this I know."

"What do you intend to be when you grow up?" the leader asked the older children one day.

"A missionary nurse," the girls' pens wrote glibly. "A missionary," a few boys wrote expediently. "An engineer," wrote most of the rest who valued the truth.

"Why do you like to come to Bible School?"

"Because," my guileful Seton answered, "it makes every day seem like Sunday." (Seton, who had long since given up Sunday School because of the broader possibilities of the basement workshop.)

"What did you do to help Mother yesterday?"

"I made the beds," Sylvia wrote, purely romantically, "I also made the salad and dusted the living room." (A basis in fact for the salad—she had mixed the mayonnaise; but the living room was only a theoretical service.)

"Excellent," said the leader, "especially for a little girl on crutches." And my little girl on crutches was only one out of dozens who improvised their domestic activities.

"What have you learned at Bible School?"

"To control my temper," Sylvia lied outrageously, "not to

quarrel with my brother and sister, and to come at once when Mother calls."

"Tell a good deed you did yesterday."

"When I came home," Seton wrote, "I found the dishes unwashed. I washed and dried them." This was solemn truth, only it had happened three months before when the sudden departure of one cook sent us on a sudden mission to the next town to find another. "I had to borrow a good deed," Seton explained to me, "but I borrowed it from myself."

"If you could have three wishes," Mr. Tarpey, the affable leader inquired, "what would you choose?"

Sylvia's answers neatly inscribed in her little blue notebook were a touching example of youthful piety.

"First I would wish that everybody would love me; second, to do good in the world; and third, to be more like Jesus every day."

The boys achieved nothing to compare with that. The oldest cousin and Seton were simply conservative, but the middle cousin, David, contributed a really healthful influence in the sentimental slough the children were wading in.

"A Ford car," he put himself on record as desiring, "twelve arms, and a motorcycle."

In fairness to my own children I must say that they were by no means alone in reacting so diabolically as the leader wanted them to. There were dozens of pious wishes written down, virtuous aims expressed, helpful deeds recorded. There were doubtless many children who were perfectly sincere in their efforts, but certainly there were as many who were dealing either purely hypocritically or humorously with the situation. In spite of their innocent youth they were as certainly "drawing" that leader as any class of sophomores ever drew a trusting professor.

When I presented the case to them I saw that they realized an ethical offense. We agreed that they should never attend a religious organization again in such a frame of mind. They admitted that they had been ridiculing what was doubtless an attempt to interest and instruct them. They became ashamed of their mendacious little notebooks, and we regard that period as a blot in our 'scutcheon, especially the culmination the last morning of the Bible School.

I stopped at the church to collect my six young scholars, going in quietly and sitting in a back pew, for Mr. Tarpey was addressing the assembled school.

"The grand prize of this Bible School is not," he was saying, "to be presented to any of you older boys and girls. Many of you have been faithful. I am proud of all of you. But the one who by her faithfulness, her enthusiasm, and her sincere effort has done the most for all of us as an inspiration, is Sylvia, the little girl who has come every day on crutches, and to her I present the major prize of the Bible School!"

She was called to the front, and although she knew she had not been an inspiration, at least for the good, she went forward and accepted the large illustrated book of Old Testament stories, and so brought to a triumphant finish the career of our children in Bible School.

Thereafter Sylvia's attendance at Sunday School was rather fitful. She went for a time to the United Church because they had a troop of Junior Girl Scouts there. Later Seton followed her because of the Cub Scouts, but he did not stay long. If you promise yourself that your children are to be free in matters pertaining to the church you find them impelled by various motives. Presently Sylvia changed to the Episcopal Church because of the children's vested choir. She sang only fairly well, and it was again chiefly as an inspiration that she figured. People often told me what a beautiful sight it was to see my little girl in her white robes which only partially concealed the crutches she still used.

"Why, especially, do you go to church and Sunday School now?" we asked her.

"Oh, you know," she said, "it's just to see the sights." At the same time, however, she differed considerably with the creed and with the church catechism her class was engaged in learning.

But Sylvia's days of being an inspiration came mercifully to an end. She became able to abandon her crutches and to engage in the normal walking, running and swimming of any healthy little girl. This change came, too, just as we had occasion to move to the other side of the world. At present in the East Indies where we make our temporary home there is nobody who knows that Sylvia has ever served as an example of youthful devotion. The change is good for her. For a time here she attended the children's service at the British Protestant church, but latterly she has left it

since some public notice, which she considered childish, was taken of her eleventh birthday.

Our difficulties in these matters seem to have ended, and we can consider now what have been the advantages of the course we pursued. We are far from believing our children particularly good. They quarrel and devastate just as all nice children do, but owing, perhaps, to their perfect frankness and their assumption of frankness in others, and to their broad sense of humor, they are the most companionable children I have ever seen, at least with older people. They are self-determining little citizens, but clear thinkers and truth-seekers. I have never known them to be hypocritical except in the case of the Bible School.

They have accepted from babyhood their relationship to the rest of the life on our planet. As becomes children with an ancestry of biologists they have always been familiar with applications of the facts of evolution. There can never be a bitter period when they must forswear a special creation.

At seven, nine and eleven they have already long ago faced dark facts and without the comfort of assurance, for we had no assurance to give them.

"After we die do we live again here or somewhere else?" they have all asked. We could show them how race after race has held to a belief in immortality, how countless thoughtful people have reached assurance for themselves. And yet when faced with the final question,

"Do *you* believe we live after death so we can think and remember our lives here?" our answer has always been,

"I do not know."

And yet we believe they are as strong in the things of the spirit as other people. They know Christ's teachings and believe him the greatest teacher in the world. They love music and natural beauty and they are loyal, affectionate and just. We can trust their ethical code.

They have seen prayers inscribed on paper in Japanese temples. They have stood beneath the great bronze Buddha at Kamakura and seen worshipers bowing before it. And here in Java they have seen old Mohammedans prostrating themselves along the roadsides at the hour of prayer and murmuring "There is no God but Allah." Are they too young to understand that each in his own tongue is seeking communion with the same spirit?