

PENTECOSTAL PROPHETS

BY ROBERT P. RICHARDSON

NOWHERE else, perhaps, does religion in all its varieties flourish so luxuriantly as in Southern California. The atmosphere, intellectual as well as physical, seems especially favorable to a rank growth of the more extravagant forms of Christianity, and he who would study these could profitably pass a few months in the city of Los Angeles.

Of the cults which have found favor with the Angelenos one is particularly distinguished by its claims to be favored by the direct guidance of the Third Person of the Trinity. It is held by the members of the Pentecostal Church of God that the Holy Ghost manifests Himself in their bodies, and the student of religions can see an interesting resemblance between the Pentecostal People and the Montanists, that Christian sect which arose in the second century in Phrygia, and which, led by Montanus and his two female prophetesses, Maximilla and Priscilla, likewise claimed direct personal contact with the Paraclete. The Pentecostal People, however, trace their spiritual lineage to a much more distinguished ancestry, for they assert that at their services we may see reproduced the doings of that Day of Pentecost described in the second chapter of *Acts*, when the apostolic Christians were all "filled with the Holy Ghost" and began to speak in tongues. Speaking "in tongues" is indeed one of the specialities of the Pentecostal People, and when it is pointed out that this speaking in tongues is the mere utterance of unintelligible gibberish, they point to *I Corinthians*, xiv, where St. Paul himself remarks "he that speaketh in a tongue speaketh not unto men, but unto God; for no man understandeth." Nor are they abashed by the scoff of the unregenerate who designate them as Holy Rollers and flippantly describe their services as the Free Vaudeville Show on Spring St. For they tell us, with perfect

truth, that even at Jerusalem, as the Scriptures give us to understand, there were unbelievers not one whit impressed by the mighty works done under the influence of the Holy Ghost and who "mocking said: These men are full of new wine."

No adequate description appears to have been published of the events that take place at a Pentecostal service, so it may be of interest to outline a typical one, giving the reader a preliminary assurance that no part of this narrative is fictitious, all that is related having been actually witnessed by the writer.

Between two stores on lower Spring St. an open doorway gives access to a flight of steps at the top of which is Victoria Hall where nightly services are held by the "Saints" as they modestly term themselves. Every evening saints and scoffers alike wend their way to this place, for it has equal fame as a sanctuary and as a place of amusement. Victoria Hall is a large rectangular room which, if full, as it often is, can accommodate some six hundred souls. The hall is bare and unadorned; no pews or pulpits, only rows of hard uncushioned chairs and a platform furnished with a reading desk and a dozen seats for the elders who support the pastor in his work. Placards plastered over the walls tell us the coming of the Lord is nigh and urge us to "Honor the Holy Ghost."

Long before the appointed time Victoria Hall has been filling up, and a large audience is ready to greet the pastor and his chief lieutenant when they and the elders mount the platform. The pastor has a benevolent, child-like face, but his aide is more virile looking and impresses you as having more intelligence than all the rest of the Pentecostal People put together. In the audience abnormally large hirsute appendages and queer shaped heads abound, though over-sized brains are nowhere in evidence.

The service begins with congregational singing which is of great importance in Pentecostal work, for without music noteworthy manifestations seldom take place. One hymn follows another in rapid succession and soon the saints are in a frenzy of religious ecstasy. All over the hall hands are raised and twiddled convulsively in the air. Startling shrieks are uttered by the female saints, and men shake their heads to and fro so violently that the hair stands up on end. Here in the aisle is a man lustily striking out with his fist at an invisible foe. Female saints sway back and forth, contorting their bodies and writhing as though in an epileptic

fit, and from the platform comes the gleeful remark. "We'll have a good meeting to-morrow. Look at Sister X who is going to lead it. She's a wiggling already!"

Requests for prayer are now in order, but before taking them the preacher urges the saints to be steadfast in their attendance at the services. "Don't bother about washing up this week" he tells the women, "leave your dirty dishes in the sink, put the broom behind the door, leave the dust on the floor and the cobwebs on the ceiling and come straightway to Victoria Hall." The profane in the audience sense a certain relation between this admonition and the request made by one of the saints for prayer for her husband. "He packed up and left while I was at church this afternoon!" she cries pathetically.

Another saint rises to ask prayer for the soul of a backslider, a woman who was once among the elect but has now so far departed from the faith as to take medical treatment for tuberculosis. The Holy Rollers scorn the aid of physicians and put their faith in exorcism to drive out the devils who produce disease.

The next request is for prayer for a woman. "She needs it," we are told, "for her husband is a Baptist minister!" A man asks for prayer for himself; he has, says he, only one foot on the Rock of Salvation, the other is on a banana peel.

Finally comes a request for prayer from the saints of Burbank, a neighboring town. These are engaged in the popular California pastime of "saving your neighbor's soul." In California there is no excuse for not being saved, calls for repentance meet you at every turn. Pious sisters have even been known to discard their outer clothing and lie down by the roadside, clad in sackcloth and ashes, the former represented by their negligee, the latter by mud rubbed on their faces, thus mutely calling upon the passer-by to repent and be saved. Religious revivals are not confined to churches but also take place in private houses, and newcomers, misinterpreting the blessed sounds that are heard at such times, will sometimes telephone the police that a murder is being committed next door. Something like this seems to have taken place in Burbank: at all events the "pagans" there object to the noise made by the saints, and the latter are being cruelly persecuted by those whom they are trying to save. A Catholic Nun is especially unkind making sarcastic remarks every time she passes the Holy Roller conventicle.

This tale of woe arouses the ire of the preacher, and he says the enemies of the saints must cease their persecutions. "If people don't stop slurring us we'll pray that their slanderous tongues be paralysed!" he thunders, and adds "If this persecution of the saints continues the undertakers' parlors will soon be full of the bodies of the enemies of the faith!"

Many unspoken requests for prayer are made by the silent uplifting of hands, and then the actual work of supplicating the All-High begins. The Holy Rollers have two different postures for use in addressing the Deity. In one they stand on tip toe and for five minutes emit something not unlike a college yell. In the other they kneel on the floor with their backs to the altar and with their faces buried in the seats of their chairs, and groan and writhe as though in anguish for an equal length of time. The latter procedure is that commonly used in praying, the former being sometimes referred to as prayer but more frequently as "praising God."

After prayer comes a resumption of singing, interspersed with "testimony" by the saints. One woman gets up and thanks God that through the Pentecostal People she has been led to Christ. She was, she says, brought up in the Catholic Church where she never heard of Jesus! Another tells how her little daughter, scalding her finger in hot syrup, uttered her mother's favorite ejaculation, saying "Praise God, Mamma" and was at once healed. More marvellous still is the tale of a third saint. She actually dropped her little baby in a bucket of boiling water and left the infant there for five minutes. And by the grace of God the child suffered no pain and emerged from the ordeal safe and sound. Finally a fourth sister arises and thanks God that she is not intelligent, for intelligence leads, she says, to loss of faith and thus to perdition.

The assistant pastor now steps forward to give his testimony. Being in a musical mood he signals the orchestra to strike up, and sings over and over again:

"Out of the rubbish heap the Lord lifted me!

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By the rubbish heap is meant, it would appear, the Baptist Church, for the reverend gentleman was, he tells us, a minister of that denomination in Seattle when the Holy Ghost overshadowed him and casting him to the floor on the flat of his back made him dis-

course "in tongues" to his astonished congregation. His speech was, to be sure, unintelligible to himself and to most of his audience, but an eminent authority on languages, the janitor of the church, certified that it was in the language of Madras, India, spoken with the utmost purity.

The negro saints are next brought to the fore. One lusty colored lady tells us how at Fresno the white and the colored saints kiss one another, "Praise God," to show their love. "You ought all to love me" she says to the audience. "If you can't you are not true to the faith." A man from Mississippi tells us how once when he had raised a bale of cotton the Lord commanded him to break it open and, scattering the cotton over the ground, drive the cattle through the field that the cotton might be trampled into the mud. "Praise the Lord," he says, "if the white folks there had a seen me they'd have thought I was crazy." The Holy Rollers clap their hands and applaud this submission to the mysterious ways of Providence, and the preacher proceeds to introduce a saint who a week ago was inmate of a psychopathic ward. "Now," says his sponsor, "thanks to our prayers, the brother is quite sane—at least so far as I know." And as he utters the last clause the pagans on the back benches fancy they see a cynical smile flit over the face of this intelligent looking Pentecostal leader. The brother, however, shows distinct signs of cerebral excitation, and his testimony is not very intelligible. Two other brothers arise and tell of their experiences while incarcerated in lunatic asylums. The pagan doctors, it seems, refused to allow these saints to read their Bibles and confined their arms in straight jackets. A female saint seems to be heading for like troubles, since she rises and while jumping up and down and contorting her limbs convulsively denounces the judges who have decided she is not fit to care for her young daughter and declares she will prophecy under the direction of the Holy Ghost in the very presence of these wicked jurists.

Following this a sister gets up and, after praising God a number of times, declaims against righteousness which she says is a "filthy rag." Commendation comes from the platform in no uncertain tones. "The sister took the words out of my mouth" says the minister, "I was just a going to preach on the filthiness of righteousness." And he inveigles against the "gall" of those who say we are still bound by the Ten Commandments. As a finale comes the testi-

mony of a rather pretty young girl with thick sensuous lips who thanks the Lord for getting her out of the trouble she's been in for the past month. But just what her trouble was she carefully refrains from stating.

All this time the singing has been going on intermittently, and the saints are now keyed up to a high state of excitement. This is an indication of the presence of the Paraclete. All the curious antics indulged in by the Holy Rollers are supposed to be due to the influence of the Holy Ghost, and their doctrine implies that at a religious meeting a "saint" may follow his own sweet will and do whatever his disordered fancy may suggest, secure in the belief that he is following the dictates of the Deity. No matter how extravagant his actions may be these are unhesitatingly ascribed to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost. And to interfere in any way with the Holy Ghost is held to be a most grievous sin. The most important of the spiritual gifts bestowed by the Holy Ghost is the "gift of tongues" and the saints claim that in this respect and in others the phenomena of the famous day of Pentecost are duplicated at their meetings.

As the meeting gets warmed up the saints begin to speak in tongues. One woman rises and repeats over and over again for five minutes the words "Shimmy, Bolshevik, Bolshevik, Shimmy." When she sits down there is silence for a moment and then an elder arises and translates this precious communication from Heaven. "Hear my voice," says he, "I am a wrong idea. I am a wrong idea. Hear my voice." And he solemnly continues to repeat these two sentences for an equal period of five minutes.

Next another sister speaks in tongues, moaning pathetically "Pajama, Pajama, Oh Pajama, Pajama," but no one attempts to interpret this. A third saint calls out frantically something that sounds like "Hooch, Hooch, Hooch" and the pastor beaming down on his people with a kindly air, says "Surely the Lord is with us to-night!" Still another message comes from on high. It is "Icke hoola, Icke hoola, Icke hoochama hoola." But though the saint through whom the Holy Ghost is speaking repeats this fifty or sixty times, no one rises to tell us profane people on the scoffers bench what it is all about.

Concurrently with the speaking in tongues, dancing is going on. Ordinary dancing is taboo to the Holy Rollers who also ban tobacco

and the drama. But "dancing before the Lord" is wholly praiseworthy. An elderly matron arises and holding her arms out horizontally, pirouettes majestically to and fro in front of the altar. A sturdy, bearded, son of toil jumps up and down, rising each time an astonishing distance in the air. On the platform the pastor, while likewise leaping up and down, whirls around and around like a dancing dervish. A female saint takes it into her head to dance up one aisle and down the other, and proceeds to do this, keeping time to the music provided by a burly negro who follows her up with a banjo. The scoffers, as she passes whisper that the dance is much like the so-called "shimmy." One of the "pagans" in his eagerness to see what is going on stands up on his chair to obtain a better view. The Pentecostal People are tolerant, and instead of kicking him out as he richly deserves, merely call for prayers for the people who come to Victoria Hall out of curiosity. All the saints proceed to stand on tip toe and groan and shriek at the top of their voices for several minutes.

Healing of the sick is next in order. This can sometimes be done at a distance by means of "kerchiefs," little squares of linen furnished by the sisters and blessed by clergy and elders to be subsequently mailed to the patient. These, it is said, prove very efficacious in healing all manner of ills. Even the periodical published by the Pentecostal People can serve as a physician. A female saint, we are told, caused an abscess in her ear to break and heal merely by using a copy of "The Victorious Gospel" as pillow, and so victorious is this little paper that it has been known to cure a disease declared incurable by physicians, the patient having put a copy under the afflicted parts and slept upon it.

The most reliable procedure is however personal treatment by the elders. This is now in progress. A blind man and one who is deaf are brought up to the platform. Around each gathers a group of elders who in unison shake their clenched fists at him and say to the devils within: "Loosen, Loosen, Out, Out!" This exorcism is terminated by anointing the foreheads of the patients with oil, and they then resume their seats in the audience. In the case of the blind man no cure is reported; mayhap there was here lack of faith. He who was deaf however, after a little while, rises from his seat, and pointing his finger at the preacher who is bellowing like a bull of Bashan, calls out exultantly: "I can hear every word you say!"

Hallelujah!" And thus a cure can be recorded; the devils of deafness have this night been driven out of their human habitation.

Two and a half hours have now elapsed since the beginning of the services. Most of the congregation is now slipping out, and though the fervour of those who remain shows no sign of abatement we "pagans" in the rear feel that it is time to depart. And leaving the task of passing judgment upon the performance we have just witnessed to the Christians outside the Pentecostal fold we quietly make our exit.