

Journey into Light

By Emile Cailliet

A World War I wounded veteran and French scholar finds a Bible and then the One of whom the Word speaks. Emile Cailliet, a former professor of philosophy at Princeton, shares his testimony:

To say that this “naturalistically inspired education” proved of little help through front-line experiences as a lad of twenty in WW1 would amount to quite an understatement. What use, the ill-kept ancient type of sophistry in the philosophic banter of the seminar, when your own buddy (at the time speaking to you of his mother) dies standing in front of you, a bullet in his chest? Was there a meaning to it all?

A man can endure anything if only it appears meaningful. But what of the caprices of Fate, what of random killing, of senseless ordeal? Deep in the mud during long winter nights when silent knives became arms of predilection on both sides, I wondered. By then, my thinking had no longer anything to do with philosophy taken for the sake of a qualifying exam. I asked myself the same questions as did Levin in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* while sitting beside his dying brother: Where did life come from? What did it mean, if anything? What price even scientific laws and theories in the face of reality? And like laws and theories in the face of reality? And like Levin, I too felt, not with my reason but with my whole being, that I was naked and (war or no war) destined to perish miserably when the hour came.

Let me insist, as one who had not been drafted, but had volunteered in the war, that patriotism was not at stake in my cogitation; neither was the conviction that we fought “to make the world safe for democracy.” To me, the crux of the matter was that the total impact of the naturalistic presuppositions I had absorbed, proved one of utter pessimism. After having contended with a rat who claimed his share of my bread ration, I remember having ironically said to myself: “What a perfect setting for the Wessex novels of Thomas Hardy?” The same relentless fate; the

same uncompromising determinism! Indeed, I lived, and moved, and had my being in what James Thomson had called "The City of Dreadful Night." The naturalistic outlook which had been forced upon me over the years meant, in his own words, that

*every struggle brings defeat
Because Fate holds no prize to crown success;
That all the oracles are dumb or cheat
Because they have no secret to express,
That none can pierce the vast black veil uncertain
That all is vanity and nothingness. (Stanza xxi)*

And yet, as I pondered the agonizing anguish of such a destiny, a lump choked my throat and caused me to set my face against the baleful decree. The moment came when I was overwhelmed by the inadequacy of my views. What could be done about it? I did not know. Who was I, anyway? Nay, *what* was I? These fundamental questions of human existence remained unanswered.

One night a bullet got me, too. An American field ambulance crew saved my life and later the use of a badly shattered arm was restored. After a nine-month stay at the hospital, I was discharged and resumed graduate work.

Although the intellectual climate had changed as far as I was concerned, I remained under the spell of early influences in my attitude toward Christianity. During my stay at the American Hospital, I had married a Scotch-Irish girl who I had met in Germany on Christmas Eve the year before the war had broken out. We must have been deeply attuned, for the day I was wounded, as she walked along the quay de la Tournelle in Paris, she had *known* suddenly that I was in trouble. Years later, she told me that right there and then, she had prayed as she had never done before. She was, and has always remained, a deeply evangelical person. Both her Irish father and her Scotch mother had shown solicitude for her Christian upbringing, that she had been made to attend both the low Church of England Sunday School and the Presbyterian Sunday School. I am ashamed to

confess that she must have been hurt to the very core of her being as I made it clear to her that religion would be taboo in our home. I did not realize at the time that a militant attitude often betrays an inner turmoil.

I had returned to my books, but they were no longer the same books. Neither was my motivation the same motivation. Reading in literature and philosophy, I found myself probing in depth for meaning. During long night watches in the foxholes I had in a strange way been longing (I must say it, however odd it may sound) for a book that would understand me. But I knew of no such book. Now I would in secret prepare one for my own private use. And so, as I went on reading for my courses I would file passages that would speak to my condition, then carefully copy them in a leather-bound pocket book I would always carry with me. The quotations, which I numbered in red ink for easier reference, would lead me as it were from fear and anguish, through a variety of intervening stages, to supreme utterances of release and jubilation.

The day came when I put the finishing touch to "the book that would understand me." speak to my condition, and help me through life's happenings. A beautiful, sunny day it was. I went out, sat under a tree, and opened my precious anthology. As I went on reading, however, a growing disappointment came over me. Instead of speaking to my condition, the various passages reminded me of their context, of the circumstances of my labor over their selection. Then I *knew* that the whole undertaking would not work, simply because it was of my own making. It carried no strength of persuasion. In a dejected mood, I put the little book back in my pocket.

At that very moment, my wife (who, incidentally, knew nothing of the project on which I had been working) appeared at the gate of the garden, pushing the baby carriage. It had been a hot afternoon. She had followed the main boulevard only to find it too crowded. So she had turned to a side street which she could not name because we had only recently arrived in the town. The cobblestones had shaken the carriage so badly that she had wondered what to do. Whereupon, having spotted a patch of grass beyond a small archway, she had gone in with the baby for

a period of rest. It turned out that the patch of grass led to an outside stone staircase which she had climbed without quite realizing what she was doing. At the top, she had seen a long room, door wide open. So she had entered. At the further end, a white-haired gentleman worked at a desk. He had not become aware of her presence. Looking around, she noticed the carving of a cross. Thus she suddenly realized that this office was part of a church building of a Huguenot church (hidden away as they all are, even long after the danger of persecution has passed). The venerable-looking gentleman was the pastor. She walked to his desk and *heard herself* say, "Have you a Bible in French?" He smiled and handed over to her a copy, which she eagerly took from his hand; then she walked out with a mixed feeling of both joy and guilt. As she now stood in front of me, she meant to apologize. This was the way things had happened...not of their own account, I now am sure! She had no idea...But I was no longer listening: "A Bible, you say? Where is it? Show me. I have never seen one before!"

She complied. I literally grabbed the book and rushed to my study with it. I opened it and chanced upon the Beatitudes! I read, and read, and read; now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within...I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me! I needed it so much, yet, unaware, I had attempted to write my own-in vain. I continued to read deeply into the night, mostly from the Gospels. And lo and behold, as I looked through them, the One of whom they spoke, the One who spoke and acted in them, became alive to me. This vivid experience marked the beginning of my understanding of prayer. It also proved to be my initiation to the notion of Presence which later would prove crucial in my theological thinking.

The providential circumstances amid which the Book had found me now made it clear that while it seemed absurd to speak of a book understanding a man, this could be said of the Bible because its pages were animated by the Presence of the Living God and the Power of His mighty acts. To this God I prayed that night, and the God who answered was *the same* God of Whom it was spoken in the Book.

A decisive insight flashed through my whole being the following morning as I probed the opening chapters of the gospel according to John. The very clue to the secret of human life was disclosed right there, not stated in the foreboding language of philosophy, but in the common, everyday language of human circumstances. And, far from moving on their own accord, these circumstances seemed to yield themselves without striving; obedient unto One who inexorably stood out from the gospel narrative-indeed a person of far more than human nature and stature.

The preceding testimony was taken from the book, "Journey Into Light," by Emile Cailliet, published by Zondervan Publishing House. The book is out of print.