

## THE CHAMELEON OF BIGOTRY

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**U**NLIKE most abuses in America, bigotry can find no advocate to excuse it at the expense of our democratic form of government; because long before any such thing as a separate government was thought of religious persecution was thriving among the first settlers. To say that it began at any certain period or to attribute it to any distinct cause is impossible; it did not really begin, it came, and though it may have had to wait for some time before showing itself in full vigor, nevertheless it was there. It would be wrong to lay any great blame on the first colonists of the New World for their point of view since they had taken their intellectual milk from the breast of a poisoned Press, poisoned from the time of Henry VIII, with the rankest falsehoods. Quite naturally, then, these stolid Britons carried in their hearts all the seemingly righteous indignation of a strong people coupled with the strange fanaticism of their harsh creeds against what they considered false and evil. The southern settlers were naturally prejudiced; but the New England colonists had come in search of religious toleration and are much less easily excused for introducing that from which they themselves had just fled.

Probably the foundation of the colony of Maryland did something to soften the harshness of religious feeling; but that it did but little is evident from the fact that one of the chief causes of the Revolutionary War was the fear lest the tolerance of the Quebec Act be extended to the colonies. The conduct of the Catholic colonists during and after the war determined every fairminded citizen upon the question of religious toleration, and in so doing determined the policy of the nation; but it far from extinguished the intolerance of the fanatics. Thus it happened that though religious freedom was incorporated into the national constitution it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the last vestige of bigotry disappeared from the different



St. Michael, the Archangel, defend  
us in battle and be our protection  
against the wiles and wickedness  
of the devil



state legislatures and then only for a time; in other words the groups of fanatics and professional bigots, though not strong enough to turn a nation against some of its citizens, still had enough force to determine the policies of the local rulers.

These few men who remained obstinate in their hatred formed what has since come to be known as the body of "Native Americans"; a comparatively small band loudly protesting their claim of protecting the rights of every American citizen and in the same breath swearing terrible oaths to keep every Roman Catholic out of public office, to wage war against the Catholic Church, and to persecute her children. Their battle cry is "Down with the Pope," their standard "one-hundred per cent American," their chief method violence, their greatest assistant ignorance.

From this first period in the history of our nation this detestable spirit has rolled down the years, mighty and terror-inspiring at first, but ever decreasing in power like a fire starting in the mighty forest of ignorance and prejudice burns itself out and ends in a harmless cloud of smoke as it reaches the great open spaces of truth, freedom and equality. Some three or four times in the course of its existence this fire has broken out in nationally organized persecution that seriously threatened religious freedom; but each time, after a short span, it has fallen back to the old smouldering that is difficult to trace to its source, that sends forth volumes of smoke, but does but little harm to any save those who meddle with it directly. Each outbreak has been more futile and pitiable in its weakness than its predecessor until each has finally reached the stage where it openly receives the contempt of all men. It is our purpose to investigate these various movements, Knownothings, American Protective Association, Guardians of Liberty, and the Ku Klux Klan, to discover if possible what motives prompted them and what contributed to their success or failure; in other words, to look at the outbreaks of bigotry in this country in a philosophical light and to construct a philosophy of bigotry.

In looking at the different high points to which the movement has attained we can easily detect certain general characteristics common to all that seem to make up the heart of each of them. The foundation of all was and is the "Native American Spirit." The attraction which has proven the greatest in their

program is the terrific secrecy which their members are oath-bound to maintain. The distinctive mark of all has been their doctrine of hate and destruction and the utter lack of constructive tendency in any of their movements. At first the feeling was purely religious and so restricted itself to a rather narrow field. However, when parties were forming, after the signing of the Constitution, those Tories who still remained in the country, and who formed by far the largest element of the fanatics, affiliated themselves with the Federalist party and did their best to force their principles into the national government; naturally when immigrants, large numbers of whom were Irish Catholics, arrived in the country of their adoption, whither they had come in search of liberty of worship, and found a great political machine fighting to reduce them to the conditions from which they had just escaped they went over almost in a body to the opposing party. And thus was born the political hatred which was to play so important a part in the religious controversy and to draw so many more men into the quarrel than would otherwise have been the case.

From then on the religious feeling kept growing stronger and stronger by reason of the political element recently injected into it; and, in accordance with the principles of "Native Americanism," the chief butt of its attacks was immigrants, particularly and practically solely, Irish Catholic immigrants, but under any conditions, Catholic immigrants. The Catholics of the country were far from numerous, poorly organized, and for the most part sufferers from the educational disadvantages which English rule had inflicted upon Ireland; their priests were few and with such great territories to cover that they were seldom able to visit each flock. And so the soil was well prepared for the sowing of the worn-out calumnies regarding priests; priests were painted as inhuman monsters, their religion misunderstood, perverted and maligned until the simple farmer folk and citizens of the small towns that made up the colonies of that time were in a positive frenzy of terror from these creatures of the fanatics' imagination.

The Catholic terror was the common subject of conversation whenever people got together, it was the stock topic for most every Sunday's sermon from the Protestant pulpits, pamphlets were published, newspapers carried long accounts of the

danger to the Republic from these foreigners and such propaganda continued for some fifty years before the organization of the Knownothing party. The people were worked up to such a stage that an occasional outbreak was unavoidable. Sometimes it was on a small scale, the burning of some Irishman's home, the killing of some citizen because of his Catholicity; again it was brutally great as the burning of the Ursuline convent at Charlestown, Mass., in 1834, and the Philadelphia riots of 1844; but always it was local.

Organization was a simple thing in a field so well prepared as this and was quickly accomplished on a large scale shortly after the attempt was made. "The National Council of the United States of North America" was formally organized in 1852 by the simple amalgamation of already existing local organizations; the high sounding title was soon discarded, however, in favor of the familiar "Knownothings," tacked on to the society because of the unvarying answer "I don't know" made by all the members to inquiries concerning the organization. The "Council" spread rapidly, soon becoming national though at first draughted for a narrower range. At its height it could count thirty-five states as being strongly in its favor and, with the consciousness of this strength, it abandoned the policy of secretly supporting political candidates and became a political power itself. It soon placed seventy-five of its men in Congress, elected governors, carried elections and absolutely ruled the smaller local governments. But quickly and almost inexplicably it died: in 1855 it met its first political defeat in the election of Wise as governor of Virginia on a platform directly opposed to its party, and in 1856 it was absolutely overwhelmed when its candidate for president, Fillmore, carried only the state of Maryland. By 1858 it was in its last agony and by 1860, when Lincoln was elected, it was a faint but distinctly unpleasant memory.

Its explanation is far more simple than that of the later movements. In the first place, its rapid rise was due in a large measure to the thoroughness with which propaganda against the Catholics had been circulated for half a century before the actual organization; other contributing causes undoubtedly were the unsettled condition of the new country whose very existence as a nation was so precarious that even the slightest national menace, real or imaginary, was looked upon with the bitterest



antagonism; the paucity of Catholic priests; the disorganization of the Catholics; the simplicity and illiteracy of the people; and finally, and probably among the most powerful of the bigots' assistants, was the veil of secrecy with which all actions and persons were clothed, thus giving a perfect guarantee to any one who desired to pay off a personal grudge or enmity. But possibly the most influential cause was the sincerity of many of the propagators of the persecution; for undoubtedly many of them acted in good faith, driven to such lengths only by ignorance and fanaticism a sincere man, no matter what his cause, commands a certain amount of respect and attention.

The most disgusting feature of the whole affair was the means used; violence in word and deed was the chief instrument and a violence that approached if it did not surpass that of the beasts. And yet, paradoxical as it may seem, this very violence by which the greatest results were attained was the most effective weapon in the possession of the Catholics for their defense. Though they suffered incredibly from it, it was the means by which men's eyes were opened to the real objectives of the Knownothing movement; the preeminent American sense of fair play and justice soon became disgusted with such actions and swung the pendulum rapidly against the fanatics. Then, too, the great questions of slavery and the right of secession were occupying men's minds and they had no time to listen to the ethical arguments against an opponent who had no chance to defend himself; so they judged solely by the results obtained from the enforcement of the bigots' principles.

The first general outbreak may be briefly summed up. It was by far the most extensive, the most destructive, the crudest and, from the fanatics' point of view, the most successful; but its very success was its ruin. It was the beginning of the end; never again would ignorance and hate obtain such a solid hold upon men for the strangely new rights of freedom of speech and democratic equality were but just beginning to be brought into play and their exercise meant the death of an ignorant reign of terror.

After the natural death of the Knownothings the "Native American" spirit was, of course, kept alive by some few faithful adherents; but not until 1891 was another nationwide organization attempted when the American Protective Association, other-

wise known as the A. P. A., came into existence. Its aims were identical with those of its predecessor but of necessity it must change its plan of attack. The country had developed considerably in the fifty years intervening and with its development education advanced with rapid strides. Catholics were more numerous, better known and also thoroughly organized; Catholic priests were members of almost every community so that the weird stories concerning their appearance would no longer carry any weight. Hence some means must be adopted suitable to the enlightenment of the people and the status of the country.

A fine object of attack presented itself in the parochial school concerning which, despite its long establishment, little general knowledge was abroad; its teachers, the nuns, a comparatively new thing in the country, would also make a fine foundation for stories about the immorality of priests. And so it came about. The new persecution quickly spread its wings and soon traversed almost the whole of the northern states; however, its leaders craftily foresaw the dangers of a new national political party on such a platform of religious intolerance and confined themselves to an impartial political attitude thus winning adherents from both parties. But in the course of the organization two serious and fatal mistakes were made: the organization concentrated its efforts in the North where the development has been the most intense and thorough and, secondly, it had its great centers in cities, the strongholds of education and intelligence. These two errors were to prove fatal to the movement after its first enthusiasm had died out.

The means employed were mainly literary and oratorical, the chief ingredients of these harangues and false compositions being a bogus Bull supposedly ordering the massacre of all Protestants and a copy of "instructions for Catholics" with the pretended signature of eighty prelates. An open bid for more numerous membership was made by conceding the privilege of enlistment to foreign born citizens, though, of course, these foreigners could not be Catholics. Just how the movement obtained as large a following as it did still remains more or less of a mystery; for the Catholics were ready for the attack at every turn and gained victory after victory in the open forum and in all controversial literature. The public press was so avowedly the enemy of the A. P. A. that it was forced to start papers of



its own to have its calumnies printed; it was repudiated by all prominent political figures of the time and when its members began to fall away from its standard it was thrown off with evident pleasure by the Republican party which it had influenced to a considerable degree because of its membership in the North.

It is quite probable that its membership roll was exaggerated by unscrupulous promoters, but even granting this, only an unsatisfactory explanation of its extension can be made, unless we remember the loosening of party ties at this time and the prevailing industrial unrest. At any rate it extended itself over a great area from 1891 to 1897, but like its forerunner it died naturally and quickly the death it deserved; the common sense of the American people could brook no such flagrant violation of truth and justice, the more so since the general level of education was now so much higher. Its death was hastened by many dishonest promoters who used the opportunity for personal aggrandizement and by its leaders who meddled too much with national politics. The uncovering of the former and the defeat of the Republicans in the election of 1892 told heavily on the ranks of the Association; so much so that from then on its decline was rapid.

So ended the second attempt to foist religious intolerance on America. Compared to the Knownothings the A. P. A. was a puny attempt, shorn of the decency of sincerity, without the primitive vigor and intensity of the first organization. Its veil of secrecy was rent early in the fray by the public debates on the question and without this frail covering the skeleton of hate stood forth in all its native hideousness. Bigotry was dying, slowly it is true like all evils, but nevertheless dying, and his gasps were becoming weaker and weaker; but so detestable had he been in the days of his vigor that his last strugglings for breath and life evoked more contempt than pity.

The next sign of life from fanaticism, that is, of organized and destructive fanaticism on a larger scale than merely local disturbance, was the organization of the Guardians of Liberty by a handful of New York politicians on the eve of the Great War. The aim of this society was simply and solely one of swindle. An agent would drop into a city, organize a branch, extract an initiation fee from each of the prospective defenders of liberty, suddenly discover "financial difficulties," and disappear. As

usual the required amount of slander and calumny was quickly manufactured to suit the times: the Catholic churches and halls were armories loaded with implements for a general insurrection, Catholic societies were so many companies of militia ready for instant service, etc. The whole attempt was so mean, small and utterly puerile that it scarcely merited contempt and died almost as soon as it had gotten a fair start.

The latest, and we may reasonably hope the last, great anti-Catholic campaign started with the organization of the Ku Klux Klan. Of all these movements it chose the most unreasonable time to spread its propaganda. The Great War had just drawn to a close, Catholics had produced an enviable record of heroism in defense of their country, people were tired of violence and bloodshed and wanted peace and justice for all. Yet the movement started with the usual quota of calumnies. The general program was the same as that of the fanatics who had gone before although of course many changes had to be made to suit particular conditions: an attack centered against Catholicism alone would not be tolerated at such a time, hence the inclusion of the negro and Jew; if for no other reason than one of distraction.

The Protestant pulpit was to a great extent closed to the new bigots, the press was unanimous in its opposition, while so great a representative of the people at large as the American Federation of Labor came out openly against them. The result was that the Ku Klux Klan had to issue all its own propaganda and give it force by means of violence and a reign of terror. The leaders realized the mistake made by the A. P. A., and corrected it by directing their first efforts to the unlettered portions of the South and to the rural districts in the other parts of the country; ignorance, as always, was their chief asset. It is true that the Klan spread to the civic centers of other states, such as Illinois, New York, and California, but after a brilliant start it quickly faded into insignificance as soon as men began to think. Once more the mistake of meddling in politics was made. The ever alluring secrecy was again introduced, with the added attraction of the ghostly night-gown to satisfy the childish cravings of infant minds, and to this decoration whole families of high sounding and mysterious titles, passwords, grips, and so on were attached.

The whole program from the very beginning took on a sordid aspect that soon earned the distrust and suspicion of every decent citizen; swindle was one of its most noticeable features; its promoters were of the shadiest character; its acts of violence the most disgusting; the falsehoods on which it was based were beyond number; while as fruit it has produced chaos, brutality, and contempt of law, as for instance in Oklahoma, that surpass anything ever seen before in the United States. Because it had chosen the strongholds of ignorance for its birth-place its rise was rapid; because of its attractive array of ghosts, wizards, etc., it soon numbered many infantile minds among its members; its garment of supposedly inviolable secrecy drew the malignant and cowardly; but it has yet to produce any one principle that will prove a means of enlisting the honest, enlightened American. Like the A. P. A. its membership roll was greatly padded; in Texas, for example, when the membership dropped from twelve to three thousand the names of the disgusted members were retained on the roll. The real strength, or rather weakness, of the Klan was soon discovered when it broke into politics and was defeated in such centers as Chicago and St. Louis.

Catholicism was too thoroughly organized for any of the other previous methods to be of any great value; the Catholic press had been molded into a most effective means of defense through the work of the N. C. W. C. news service, while the wide diffusion of the Catholic Encyclopedia nailed many a lie that had passed as a fact in former campaigns; and so the most powerful weapon left to it was terrorism and this proved the greatest factor in turning the country against it. Its period of affluence was short-lived in every enlightened community. The protection of secrecy was torn away to a great extent by the American Unity League of Chicago and New York aided by internal dissensions over the division of the spoils which split the movement into two hostile camps. Many thousands of its members consequently deserted it and fled to cover. Common sense rescued many others who had been duped into joining through misunderstanding the real motives of the organization while those who remain have placed themselves in the class of ignorant bigots who have no place in a democratic country.

Of course the movement is as yet far from being completely defeated or rather crushed; for it is being nurtured by its promoters because of the profits forthcoming from the initiation fee and the sale of the white uniform. It has still some power in local politics of some sections. This fact is somewhat perplexing though it can be explained to a great extent by the very small percentage of resident Catholics in these districts and the consequent ignorance of their beliefs and practices, as is the case in Ohio today. But as far as a national organization of any power with reputable citizens is concerned the Ku Klux Klan is as dead as the A. P. A., the Guardians and the Knownothings; in fact today thirty-six states are divided between amusement at the stupid simplicity of its adherents and resentment of its intolerant racial and religious views.

And so dies the latest attempt of bigotry. In comparison with its predecessors it is indeed a sorry spectacle. Unable to boast any of the least creditable of the motives of the others, it was begun by unscrupulous and avaricious agents, made its greatest headway among the ignorant, gave up all effort to win its cause by disputation and confined itself almost solely to acts of unheard of violence. To this has bigotry come in the United States. But yet it can hardly be said that bigotry has fallen any lower than it has always been, it could not. Rather is it that the advance of the American people has placed it in a stronger light where its despicable characteristics are the more apparent. Born of hate and misunderstanding it has more than once almost taken its own life by the violence of its attacks but each time it has been kept alive by a few devotees whose minds were incapable of an unselfish thought; nurtured back to a feeble state of health for a short time by these few adherents it has again fallen into desuetude until now it is but the scarecrow decked out in the ancient and worn out calumnies which frightens no one but merely serves as a disguise for petty thievery and personal hatred.