

I LOVE St. PETER

By HELEN WALKER HOMAN

I LOVE Saint Peter. Millions have always been dying to meet him, but when it comes my turn, that will be true of me in a twofold sense. For though I only know him now as one upon whom I have pondered much, it will be like meeting a very old and very dear friend. And this is not meant as a subversive bid for his leniency toward my credentials, when that hour shall come—I hasten to tell you that, Saint Peter—though I have to admit that it might be, if I thought it would do me any good. Those poor things—*eh, bien, parlons d'autre chose*. It's far pleasanter to talk about Saint Peter.

I first began to love him when I had long curls and freckles and a propensity to use and mispronounce all new and strange words that fell upon mine ear. Particularly did those I heard in Bible History class fascinate me. I remember that I insisted on pronouncing "martyrs" as though it were spelled "mortars," believing that the broad "a" in the former was an inaccuracy on the part of the dear nun who taught us—a lamentable trace of the Irish brogue which caressed all her speech.

It was at this serious stage and age that Saint Peter came into my life. As his history was unfolded by the holy nun, my eager ears drew in every word of it. From the first, I loved him madly. I think it was because I felt so sorry for him. Insanely jealous was I for his sake, of Saint John, because John was the Beloved Disciple—and I longed for an opportunity of explaining to Our Lord what a really fine man Saint Peter was.

When the little convent class was told how Peter had gone and wept bitterly in penitence for the terrible denial, and how legend had it that he continued to weep so all the days of his life, the course of the tears leaving definite marks on his dear face, I too wept. Between sobs, I went home and explained that Saint Peter had wept until he had "two little gutters running down each side of his face." "Furrows," my precise mother corrected. Whenever he was mentioned in the Gospel on Sundays, I exulted—I took a personal pride in him—and if no mention were made of him, I sulked.

Nor shall it be said that my love for him was a mere childish fancy. Not at all, for even now, as I am passing into the sere and yellow, he is still, of all the Apostles, nearest my heart—and I love him just as dearly, if not as intelligently, as I did at seven.

To the theologians let it remain to extol and explain the high sanctity which shines so benignly down upon the world from the beautiful halo of Saint Peter. My own present, inconsequential concern is with his humanness. All mankind, whether believer or agnostic, must be touched by the appealing accounts of this charming figure, and must find him possessed of the simplicity of greatness, the impetuosity of the idealist, the eagerness of the quick-hearted, the fire of the *exalté*, the unreasoning love of a child—and the error of human frailty.

What an assemblage of lovable qualities is there! Particularly the last one, with which we ourselves are so intimately and personally acquainted. Now Peter, I hope you are not going to be insulted when I say that in this respect, if in no other, we are very like you. How well we understand that wonderfully wistful, somehow pathetic question you formed: "Lord, how often shall I forgive my brother? Till seven times?" Seven seemed plenty, didn't it, Peter? And then that little matter of falling asleep over your prayers. Alas,

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that I too—but never mind, we're discussing your shortcomings now. You'll have a chance to discuss ours later; and how! Among others of yours is reckoned the perfectly regardless way you had with you when handling a sword. I agree that ears can be particularly obnoxious features, and to slice at them, at times, irresistible—and I'm sure that Malchus's were of the unpleasant, protuberant variety, flapping back and forth in the breeze and listening to things it was no business of theirs to hear. There have been times when I've wished for a sword, Peter.

Superbly impervious were you to getting your feet wet, though all prudent people will tell you that such is the height of folly. Nevertheless I love to read about you plunging heedlessly out of the boat to be the first to greet your Lord. I'm so glad the Gospels don't say: "And Peter, seeing Who it was, stooped down and put on his galoshes, and carefully stepped out upon the water."

You weren't so good at winning foot-races, either. There was that time that you and John ran to the Sepulchre to verify the tidings brought by Mary Magdalen. The record has it that John outran you (were you, perchance, a bit overweight?) and that you came in a puffing second. Nevertheless, though beaten, you contrived to be the first to enter into the Sepulchre. I so admire you for that, though it baffles me to understand quite how you were able to accomplish it! One day I shall ask you to tell me—that, and another thing—don't you ever grow weary, carrying those keys? Last Sunday, on a stained glass window, they seemed to be weighing you down. Aren't you ever tempted to mislay them, and to utter the perfectly human excuse, "You see, I've lost my keys"? Being a fisherman, you would be pardoned for fibbing a little—and it must be such a dreary business, to be forever opening and shutting a door!

Therein you have my sympathy—and also in another matter which must be infinitely more irksome. I refer to the tedious and everlasting repetition of jokes about yourself which mankind has made down through all the Christian centuries, and to which you have had to listen, probably yawning your head off the while. If the strains of "The Sidewalks of New York" have palled a bit upon the ears of ex-Governor Smith during a brief span, what must not have you suffered for almost two thousand years by hearing: "The man died, and as he stood at the gates of heaven, Saint Peter said," etc., etc. And all the time you have been thinking, "When that one was first perpetrated, the infant King Arthur kicked the slats out of his cradle crowing over it"—or words to that effect. Beware, you jokers! Even Saint Peter's patience may be tried too far, and remember that to him belongs the last laugh, and that he who laughs last—well, you know.

However, I dare to think that Saint Peter, tried as he has been, will be indulgent in this matter, for he knows that the very fact that he, of all the Apostles, has been the most frequent subject of jokes by mankind, is only an added proof that he has been the most beloved by mankind. Whatever the worst that can be said of these jests, yet have they all been imbued with a sort of spirit of affection—the kind one might make about a dear brother, for whom one's affection is so sure that a little teasing only reaffirms it.

Even I must have my turn. "Leaving all things, Peter followed Him." (Ah, Peter, haven't I heard that you, alone among the Apostles, had to live in the same house with your mother-in-law?)

To you it was said: "Thou shalt catch men." You caught me long ago, Saint Peter. Even today, true to your old impetuosity, you are always bobbing up suddenly, when most needed. Not long ago, far downtown in New York, remote from all my daily and familiar haunts, I was walking, weary

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and depressed, and turned a sudden corner. Pop! There you were, standing on top of a nice old church, as comforting and dear and human as ever. Well deserved was the scolding you gave me—I have felt better for it ever since.

I often wonder if you really wore whiskers, as you are always depicted. I rather hope you did, for I even think that whiskers are human things—though there are some who would hold otherwise. If you did, I regret that I cannot also share these in common with you. However, there is yet another small something which we do share most emphatically—a prejudice upon which we think exactly alike. I've always hated chickens and all barnyard fowl; and as for cock-crow—I simply detest it!