Our Daily Bread

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The minister's sonorous voice boomed through the well-filled church. "Eternal salvation is the reward of all who serve God on earth."

And Jim's reveries shifted to the incident that morning with Fred, his roommate and a senior in journalism.

"Going to church, Jim?" Fred had asked as Jim was leaving their room.

"Yes, it's the custom you know," he had retorted.

"Pretty cold out. Must have snowed hard last night." Fred's tone had not been very encouraging.
“Oh, I’ll get there all right,” Jim answered as he raised his coat collar up about his neck.

“I’m afraid going to church is just another one of your bad habits I’ll never be able to break you of. After three years of listening to my clear and logical arguments you are still unconvinced that God is merely a fiction.”

Jim had slammed the door on his way out as Fred, a merry twinkle in his eye, had opened up the volume of Schopenhauer he was reading.

NOW SOMEONE poked Jim in the ribs. He straightened up and hurriedly glanced around from his day-dreams. Finally he noticed the collection plate thrust out at him. He fumbled around in his pocket, pulled out a coin, and mechanically dropped it in the plate.

Jim stood up with the rest of the congregation and half-heartedly mumbled the Lord’s prayer along with the rest. The service over at last, he buttoned up his coat well, fastened his gloves, and slowly pushed his way through the crowd of churchgoers who had congregated in the hallway, and finally reached the church steps.

There was not much activity outside. The department stores which had yesterday been alive and swarming with people were today dead and inanimate. Only a few pedestrians, bundled up in heavy coats, trod along the snow-covered sidewalks. Where there had been traffic jams yesterday today only a few automobiles had ventured out on the icy, treacherous pavement.

The wind bit at Jim’s cheeks as he headed homeward, crunching through the snow which had been partially beaten down by the morning’s passersby. Sunday morning had become a nuisance to Jim. Fred was right. Church going had become only an empty, meaningless habit to him. Three years ago it had been different. Then he had reverently absorbed every word that the minister had uttered. He had never dared question the existence of God and had always believed in a hereafter. Since then he had read some of Fred’s books on philosophy and had had many an argument with Fred on the subject. Slowly his thoughts had become
tainted with doubt and agnosticism. Each Sunday morning he had gone to church less eagerly, to each sermon he had listened less attentively. Church attendance was fast becoming a sham, an empty gesture.

FROM THE HITHERTO silent street came a screech of brakes, a yell, “Look out,” and a high-pitched scream of agony. Jim stopped. He rushed over and joined the crowd which had already formed in front of the car near the curbing. They were extricating a man from under the wheels. Blood streamed down his face and although his eyes were closed, his mouth was wide open, and an expression of horror distorted his face.

“He’s—dead,” one of the men who had pulled him from under the car slowly remarked. A policeman was pushing back the crowd. “All right, everybody. Out of the way. Get going. There’s nothing you can do here now.”

The small gathering dispersed as quickly as it had formed. Jim lingered behind for a moment, watching them lift the dead man into a nearby car. Then he turned around and resumed his way homeward. The snow-covered streets were again deserted; the silence was broken only by the distant rumble of the elevated.

Jim could not shut out the horrible face of the dead man from his thoughts as he plodded his way homeward, leaning forward against the wind. The phrases of the Lord’s Prayer rang in his ears, mocking him, taunting him. “Our father who art in heaven—” Had the dead man gone to heaven? Jim thought of his dead mother. Was she in heaven? . . . “Give us this day our daily bread—” He wondered if the dead man had had a wife and children. Who would give them their “daily bread”? “Deliver us from evil—” What had that unfortunate done to receive such a sad ending? . . . “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven—” Was there then a God who guarded our destinies? If so, why did he then allow human life to be snuffed out like a lighted match, for no reason at all?

“Give us this day our daily bread—” He watched a shivering old man who was wearing a shabby, torn coat and leaning on a crooked cane. He was picking stale bread out of the
trash can in the alley next to a bakery shop. Who could give that poor man his "daily bread"?

Jim passed a restaurant. Through the window he could see waiters darting here and there. He could see well-dressed men and women leisurely eating their lunches, chatting and gossiping between bites. They did not have to worry about their "daily bread". Tomorrow morning they would open their newspapers and turn to the society columns. The article about a man killed in an auto accident while crossing the street would be passed by with only a glance. They would not even look at the article about the Community Chest drive. Next Sunday would find them all in church assuming a reverent, holy attitude.

Yes, Fred had been right. There was no God. People stole, robbed, committed every conceivable sin; but when they were in trouble, they called on a God to help them. No, God was only a fiction created by a weak-livered man, someone to lean against when he was in danger, someone to call upon when he was in trouble.

"Some people call on a 'God' to explain the creation of the universe," Fred had said. "'But who created God?' I ask them. When they reply that God is infinite, 'Why?' I ask them. 'Isn't it just as logical to assume that the universe is infinite?' No, God did not create the world; neither does he shape our destinies. The world was always here, and we shape our own destinies."

Yes, there was no God, and the world was rotten. Everyone was a God unto himself, ruling his own little world, trying to crush out everyone else's little world and reign supreme. There was nothing to live for in the world, there was no rime nor reason for life, a life which ruthlessly crushed people and trampled on them, which let half the world eat stale bread while the other half ate caviar.

Jim was only a few blocks from home and a warm room now. Walking faster to keep warm, he noticed a paper boy on the corner. The lad was shivering. His gloves had holes in them, and his little fingers poked through and were numbed in the cold air. A taxi stopped near the corner and a man stuck his head out of the back seat and beckoned to the
paper boy. "Paper, mister?" The boy ran up to the taxi and gave the man a paper. The man pulled out a dollar bill and gave it to the boy.

"Hey, mister, your change! You forgot your change!" But the taxi had turned around the corner and had vanished from sight. A gleam of joy filled the boy's eyes as he looked proudly at the dollar bill, carefully folded it, and tucked it in a little wallet which he placed in his pocket.

"Paper, morning paper," he yelled confidently with a joyous tone.

White lines streaked through the air. It had started to snow again. Jim could see the smoke rolling out of the chimney of the boarding house in which he roomed. Soon he would be in his room again, talking with Fred.

He walked faster, and his thoughts, too, raced through his mind, even faster. One by one he recalled the incidents of that morning. He recalled his reveries in church; he visualized the agonized face of the unfortunate victim of the accident. Again he saw the contented expressions of the diners in the restaurant and the contrasting pitiful expression of the beggar looking for stale bread in trash cans. He would describe these scenes to Fred; he would tell Fred how empty, how rotten, how selfish the world was. Fred would listen, smile in his fatherly, knowing way, and understand.

But what of the man in the taxi who had changed the gloomy face of the newsboy to a happy one? Certainly such a person did not fit into a world steeped in selfishness. Who was that man in the taxi? Jim had caught only a fleeting glimpse of him—a black derby, a pair of kid gloves, a neatly trimmed moustache—nothing more. The newsboy's benefactor had come and gone unnoticed, yet he had filled that lad's eyes with sunshine . . . No, there was something wrong. There was no place for the man with the kid gloves in the merciless world which he had painted.

The snow was falling faster. It lent a hazy atmosphere to the streets, so that Jim saw only indistinctly the outline of the frame dwellings on either side of him. But the same snow that blurred his vision cleared his thoughts. In a flash the jumbled parts of the mental picture puzzle which he was
trying to solve seemed to piece together and form a clear, sharp picture. The world of gloom and darkness, the hopeless, godless world of defeatism which he had been fashioning for three years and which had finally crystallized that morning had melted even as the soft snow drops which lit on his cheeks were melting. In its place had come a new world, a different world, a world of hope, a world with a new spirit—a spirit that could reshape the destinies of man. That spirit was the spirit of good will, the spirit of brotherly love and benevolence.

Jim thought again of the dead man. He visioned that man’s weeping wife and his hungry children. No God in heaven could feed those hungry mouths and dry that mother’s tears. Only the spirit of good will and human kindness could do that.

Again Jim saw the faces in the restaurant, the faces of people who lifted delicate morsels of food to their mouths with silver spoons. Those were the men and women who could help that mother and her children. These were the ones to give the beggar soft, warm bread in place of stale, moldy bread. They were the ones who could fill the empty coffers of the Community Chest to the brim. All that they needed was a spark of this spirit of brotherly love.

Yes, the “spirit of brotherly love”. Jim would pray for it. It would take the place of the Lord’s Prayer. Brotherly love only could “give us our daily bread”. It alone could make earth into heaven. It alone was “the glory and power forever”.

The fresh blanket of snow was fast covering the walks, streets, and houses. Jim could see a light in his room. Fred would be home, reading his Schopenhauer.

Jim’s step was bold and confident as he ascended the porch steps. A light shone in his eyes, and he whistled a tune as he opened the front door. Yes, he would have something to tell Fred now. Fred would understand; he always did.