

## FAMILY HISTORY

PETER, a clergyman's son, the only child of a late marriage, was born in '92. To his father's superlatively unstable career and change from place to place, he attributed not only his own tendency to gyrovagrancy—but the passion for nature, for the elemental, for width of vision, for adventure in human contingency that for him was character and fate. For the parsonages in which his childhood was spent looked in rapid turn on the watery business of the Mersey, the chimney stacks of Birmingham, the ivied fragments and vistaed landscape of Hazelcrom, on Yorkshire moors, and the expanse of tidal flood at Southampton. The Reverend Walter Michaelham, a rebel spirit clad picturesquely in Pauline pate and beard, with haggard, restless eyes, might in other circumstances have been an anarchist. But the temperamental egotism, irritability, energy and heroic generosity that might (half a century later) have been enlisted by Socialism and Revolution found vent in a rebellious Evangelicalism. At Oxford as a young man, he was a fierce opponent of the Oxford movement, then for most a living memory. Evangelical reaction was gaining strength and the prospect of discrediting Tractarianism captured his imagination. Pusey a ghost from sad years appeared infrequently in the pulpit, amongst the rising generation, at least, a diminishing influence, a robed stooping figure, going to and fro the Cathedral, and little more. Wilberforce was in a weak way. Jowett professed Greek, Arnold poetry. With the latter many of the rising generation professed affinity. And there were those of exploratory and dialectic turn of mind to whom the legacy of Whately was a stronger appeal than the teaching of Keble or Pusey. Even a Don (whose sense of perspective was not his strong point) was heard to declare in his contempt for the Romeward movement that "if Oxford produced John Henry Newman and Hurrel Froude, my dear sir, it produced, too, Francis Newman and J. A. Froude!"

Walter continued along the rebellious evangelical way.

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He tasted the delicious spice of persecution. For in those days at Oxford, Meeting-houses were like steeplechases—a censurable irregularity: and Walter's friends were dissenters, covenanters and evangelists.

For him there was no career; he was a thorn in the side of bishops and patrons.

"Poor Walter!" his mother would say listening to her husband's contemptuous tirades. "Poor Walter!" the more tolerant continued to say . . . till the bleak winter's morning when he was stricken in death.

The last act of his apostolate had been to visit a house of ill-repute, there the shaggy, inversed figure had knelt by a prostitute, in whom death (he forbore to remind her) had been the wages of Sin. There in an evil-smelling attic the strident voice softened and became a little tremulous in the narrative of the woman which was a sinner.



This was in 1909. Walter Michaelham died appositely enough in his comfortless study, feebly grasping the sides of his hard armchair. Peter was called from school, attended the obsequies and returned for his last term with a half-conscious feeling of emancipation and a delicious sense of importance and responsibility. He had often hated his father, kicked at the restraint and the sacrifices he imposed, it was not till long after his death that he discovered how greatly he had loved him, how much they had shared.

Looking down in the darkened room, it was not the waxen face with sunken and half-shut eyes, so utterly blank in death, that made him turn away and sob—but the little worn woman with the coverlet drawn back in her hands, her lips quivering as she watched him. For his mother, since his earliest memory of the chapped toiling hands and tired patient eyes, Peter had felt a devotion that was a passionate and desperate pity.

There was a photograph that Peter would come across in after years of the bearded clergyman (scowling over a new Testament) and his wife, seated together on a sofa. Very like them both. She, a trifle self-conscious in her unwonted brocade, a little too tidy, perhaps, to be real, with remnant

good looks and the old patient smile, as if saying, "Of course, Walter, you're right and the Archdeacon is very, very silly. But it upsets you so to be angry . . . and I've got a duck's egg for your supper."

Since babyhood, Peter had dreamed of what he would do when he grew up, to make her happy. He returned to school more elated than depressed, had a good term, lived ecstatically on the prospect of emancipation, holidays in the new little home, and career.

When he got home, however, it was to find his mother ailing. A month later she died, and Peter, laden with a memory of unrelieved pathos, found himself confronted with a drastic revision of the human outlook.

There had been an announcement in the *Times*, "To Modern History Exhibition (Welsh) Peter Davis Michaelham—College (Principal's Exhibition)." And he had passed Responsions in June. Some prosperous relatives saw to it that he started in October. But Oxford did not exist; or at best was an irksome continuation of school: "Kindergarten—with a few big boys in it." Exhilarating contacts (now and again) merely increased the contempt for Academy, the "longing for Reality—I long to get on with it." Then August, 1914.

Peter belonged less to an affected reaction against imperialism (incipient in those days) than a more personal tendency to analyst and dissent. He used occasionally the prevalent catchword "Sincerity"—but, for all that, was sincere. Perfervid war-patriotism like everything else lay on the dissecting table. Dissection was perhaps a trifle savage and youthful, but done without prejudice. Peter enquired with an open mind.

He and his cousin, Henry, joined up together; Henry because (being a recent convert to Rome) he had listened to Father Bernard Vaughan recruiting—Peter because there was nothing else to do. Consciously Peter found his friend's Faith unimpressive; though there was final witness to its comforts in an abomination of desolation, a havoc of shell-holes, unfathomable mud, and slime that was generously streaked with red. Henry was killed in 1917. In 1918 Peter

was invalidated out of the Army with gassed lungs and the seeds of tuberculosis.

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Whatever may be said by the prosperous of "a wasted life," I prefer to think of the remaining few years as a protest against the impertinence of humbug. In 1918 Peter helped A.T. to found a Press agency that would tell the Truth. The N.I.P.A. like most honest, unsycophant things was bound to fail, and it failed because of its courage and honesty. Its most powerful enemy was mercantile christianity (or Atheism). By the spring of the year in which Peter died it found itself boycotted and bankrupt. The Truth is not popular; towards it Peter and A.T. had steered since the war and on it they foundered. In its service Peter wandered, a sick man, all over Europe.

It is, I have always felt, indicative of an historical situation that the most urgent invitation to Catholicism (to Christianity, for Peter was a Christian no more than any average Englishman) came from A.T., a professional revolutionary, (psychologically), a type profoundly oriental. Indeed Peter had discovered in Catholicism a unity and a universality that he deemed might distinguish the Church of Jesus Christ from the welter of man-made sects instituted since the reformation. Like many another, without even discussing her integrity, in her incomparable consistency he suspected a miracle.

Nevertheless, it was A.T., under God, who would force Catholicism upon him as something inevitable, unescapable.

There are those, of course (in whom an honest prejudice becomes conveniently an article of Faith), who assure me that Peter Michaelham's conversion was conversion not to Catholicism but to A.T.'s Catholicism. Had Peter lived he might perhaps (or *would* he?) have followed the prevalent fashion of "giving his reasons." His apologia would have been more valuable than most. He would (I believe) have distinguished between Catholic Socialism (which does not exist) and Social Catholicism (which is the only Catholicism). He would have told us about the sociocentricity which penetrates to Christ Who died to save Society; of the

Humanitarianism which becomes a permanent Value because of the Humanity crucified on Golgotha.

This is not the story of a conversion, but a bare account of the type converted; of an antecedence of conversion which (even as the apostolate of Christ is perennial and not doomed to perish in catacombs with the *Bien Pensant*) the Church will not fail to recognize.

There is not much more to say, then, saving to quote from a letter or two.

(1) 'I've always been terribly worried by the system of the cruelty of life from the lowest living organism right up to Man. I mean the fiendishly perfect killing apparatus (for instance) in animals and the defencelessness of their victims; the cruel relentlessness of one thing living on another all the way through. The same thing in human life, people living on one another, bullying, oppression: sometimes perhaps in a more subtle way, moral cruelty, spiritual bullying. I have begun to wonder if my sense of revulsion from life is a sort of accident, all 'conscience,' too, a sort of accident: the real law governing us in the same way that all other animals are governed—a sort of loathsome gigantic game with money prizes, sex prizes, where the weak or luckless go to the wall. I half believe this to be a logical view of life—no wonder I think of suicide and so on. I haven't grasped Christianity as a fact at all. I have placed Evil in my mind as selfishness because that seems to be the main cause of all the trouble; and Good as unselfishness. And I feel that the lower things get, the more self-centred and unconscious they get of the *whole*, while the higher things go, the more feeling and conscious they seem to be. The less conscious you are, the less you exist. I think that absolute unselfishness must be divine, or absolute consciousness of God. I feel that Jesus must be God in the flesh because he was superlative unselfishness. Everything seems to jar one at present, from the silly chattering newspapers to the 'arty' book, or the mere face of some inoffensive passer-by. People seem either servile or aggressive (everybody is really frightened of everybody else, I suppose), why can't people be more frank with each other? They seem so proud of their little business

successes or triumphs over one another, which are about on the level of bag-snatching and pick-pocketing. On the one hand you have the miserable fighting for the crumbs from the rich man's table, amongst themselves, pathetically fierce; on the other the well-to-do man who has had the wit, or the lack of scruple, to amass money enough to become more than sufficiently comfortable, the fat, contented middle-class, his slaves, and slaves of the callous Owner and Business Magnate. . . . Life is one miserable Kow Tow to Wealth and Power. . . . No wonder there are criminals and window-breakers and asylums full of maniacs. . . . I want to know whether Christianity means '*laissez-faire*' or revolution—or whether it . . . simply explains. . . ."

(2) "It's the amazing futility of everything that gets me. I spent the first years of my life longing for freedom. That was all I wanted. I used to climb up hills and look down and say, 'As far as I can see . . . and beyond it . . . one day!' I got freedom and too much of it. Then I longed, in the war years, for comfort and safety. I suppose I've got them all now. And now I'm going mad with wondering what I really want. You do understand, Daph, don't you? You've not got Theology in the bone as I have. But you're . . . interested in the Res Novissimas of Theologians, the ultimate things, the things that really matter."

Then a month before he was received: "Heard X preach. . . . 'Young and good-looking,' nice accent: and quite persuasive with the Elect. Some of the congregation were very, very poor. He preached on Christian resignation.

(Work and pray, live on hay,  
You'll get pie, in the sky, when you die.)"

Nevertheless he became and died a Catholic, but died (as far as I know) without Catholic friendship. Though that was not his fault.

J. F. T. PRINCE.