

J. M. WITHEROW

The Test

Dr. J. M. Witherow was a Scottish divine, learned in theology and with a great gift for warm, human relationships. He died a few years ago, but not before many Americans came to know and love him during a year of teaching at Harvard. Then it was he wrote for the ATLANTIC a little story called "The Test," which challenged the imagination of all who read it. Dr. Witherow was always concerning himself with some facet of the human problem, and he loved to deal with it in the manner of the old fairy tales. Indeed, he had some definite kinship to Hans Andersen and looked into the minds and hearts of men through a window much like the casement through which the greatest of simple storytellers looked out upon the world.

"The Test" belongs to that very select group of stories which includes Frank Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger." In its picturesque way it asks a pointed question and turns to the reader for the answer. When you have read it, give your own idea of just what happened and then turn to the notes and see whether Dr. Witherow would agree with you.

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E. S.

MR. JULIUS FAIRLEIGH STERN owned a palace on the St. Lawrence not far from Grindstone, a mansion on Fifth Avenue, New York, and a castle near Fiesole in Italy. Some of his friends were trying to persuade him to make his real home amid the romantic scenery of Cold Spring Harbor, Long Island, but Mr. Stern refused, as he preferred to give away his surplus income for the endowment of education rather than add further to his many luxuries. For some reason that no one could discover he took special interest in Tarrytown on the Hudson.

A report had just reached him from the principal of the Tarrytown High School saying that three pupils had tied for the prize of \$200 which Mr. Stern had presented for the best year's work done by pupils in their final year at the school. The percentage attained by the three equal firsts was 88, a record figure for the Stern Prize Competition. Mr. Stern replied that he would himself be present at the next graduation, as he wished to meet the three young men, and enclosed his check for \$400, so that each might receive the same amount as their predecessors in previous years.

So at the June graduation at Tarrytown High School the Stern Exhibitioners of 1920—Mr. Gerald Daly, Mr. Eric Arthur Hamlet, and Mr. Charles Burke Brookfield—were presented to Mr. Stern, who at the close of the day's proceedings carried off the young men to dinner at his hotel. In conversation there the rich man soon discovered that the three boys were keenly set upon a university career, but were all very poor.

"Very well," said Mr. Stern. "That is just what I had hoped. I am interested in the result of university education. I make a proposition to you. I will bear all your expenses at the university—traveling, board, books, fees, and personal allowances—for four years. You will choose each the university you prefer and the line of study you like best. My conditions are two—that you will all promise to do your best at college in your own line, and that four years hence you will all come to me and undergo earnestly and loyally"—Mr. Stern repeated these two adverbs slowly and with emphasis—"a test which I will then describe to you. The test will be nothing vexatious or unreasonable."

The young fellows expressed their thanks as best they could, being rather overwhelmed by what they had just heard, and gladly and enthusiastically assented to the conditions laid down. "Isn't he a jolly old chap?" said Brookfield, as the three sauntered home that night. "Isn't he splendid? And by the way, did you read his article in *Harper's* on the 'Castles of the Loire'?"

"No," said Daly, "but I have been in his castle on the St. Lawrence, and in his library there is the finest collection of British and American poets you ever saw, bound in blue morocco; and what's more, he reads them. Every volume I opened had something marked."

"My father," said Hamlet, "was once in his house on Fifth Avenue fixing the telephone wires, and the housekeeper showed him pictures by Maris and Corot and Sargent that would drive most art collectors crazy."

Time passed on, and in June 1924 three distinguished graduates appeared by appointment on a certain day in that same princely mansion on Fifth Avenue. Daly came from Yale, first-class honor man in history and law; Hamlet came from Harvard, first-class honor man in the classics; Brookfield came from Johns Hopkins, with first-class honors in German, French, and Spanish.

Mr. Stern met them and greeted them warmly. He then took them separately to his private room, gave each one a long sealed envelope on which his name was written in large letters, marked "Private," and said to each in turn: "Give me your word of honor you will not open this till you are at home and quite alone. It contains all instructions for the test."

Each promised, took his envelope, and went home to Tarrytown.

And that evening in Tarrytown each of the three young men was gazing at a check for \$5000, and a sheet of paper bearing these words: —

THIS IS YOUR TEST

1. You shall visit, within the next twelve months, Holland or Switzerland, Germany or France, Italy or Greece, and Egypt.
2. You shall write a report on what you think important in the countries visited and send your report to me within twelve months.
3. You will bring or send me a matchbox filled with sand from the desert at the foot of the Great Pyramid.

N.B. No questions shall be asked by you regarding the meaning of these instructions, either verbally or in writing, directly or indirectly. You shall not consult with anyone regarding the contents of this document or your intentions or methods in obeying it.

This is your test. Remember your promise.

JULIUS FAIRLEIGH STERN

June 18, 1924

Mr. Gerald Daly, of Yale University, first-class honor man in law and history, fastened on the phraseology, grammar, and punctuation of the document with all his faculties of meticulous scrutiny

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thoroughly aroused. To prevent himself from overlooking any qualifying word or clause, he slowly read aloud the whole composition sentence by sentence and then memorized it till he was word perfect — an expedient he had found helpful in solving many a legal puzzle.

Subconsciously Mr. Daly whispered to himself, "I promised to meet this test 'earnestly and loyally,' and I will. I will do what J. F. Stern wants done and I will do it with the utmost fidelity at my command. He does not require for his own need anything from me — neither words nor deeds nor gifts. But to test me, as he has every right to do, he tells me to obey him in certain matters. The best compliment I can render him is to respect his wishes in every particular. It is for me to understand him and then do exactly — no more, no less — whatever he has expressed or implied; no more, for that would be misusing his money; no less, for that would be disloyalty."

In this spirit Mr. Daly studied his instructions and obeyed them with scrupulous sincerity.

He saw at his first reading the effect of "or" and "and" in No. 1 — no country compulsory except Egypt, and yet a restricted choice. Very soon he had decided that his itinerary must be through Holland, France, and Italy to Egypt, and thence home. He sailed in a Dutch liner for Rotterdam, which called at Southampton, but Mr. Daly would not set foot on shore even for a few hours. Britain was not mentioned in No. 1. It was not till he had visited Leyden, Alkmaar, Utrecht, Dordrecht, and began to arrange for his departure to France, that a scruple arose in his mind about going there by rail. If he did so he must report passing through Belgium, and that would look careless. He felt he could not. It was not playing the game. So, after trying in vain to get a passenger steamer, he decided to go from Amsterdam to Paris by aeroplane, and thus recovered peace of mind.

His traveling was continued with the same carefulness to Italy, Egypt, and home again. A liner was obtained at Alexandria bound for New York, but Daly refused to go ashore at Malta or Gibraltar or the Azores.

Instruction No. 2 gave him very few qualms. "What you think important," Daly repeated to himself again. "Well, I am free from

challenge there. It cannot mean *all* that I think important — it would be unreasonable to ask that. I will choose one thing which I think important, health, and report on whatever I think benefits or injures public health."

In harmony with this view of his duty, Daly examined the duration-of-life statistics in the various countries and wrote little notes of observations on athletics, drainage, ventilation, and cookery, and so drew up a short but businesslike account of public health in the lands he had seen.

Instruction No. 3, of course, was the clearest and easiest of all. At the second reading Daly pounced on the change from "you shall" to "you will," and said, "Quite so, quite so — a request, not an injunction; but in this matter Stern's wishes are law as much as his commands."

On reaching the Pyramids he was tempted to bring also a matchbox full of sand labeled "From between the giant paws of the Sphinx," but eventually refrained. He had not sufficient authority for that.

And so Mr. Gerald Daly, of Yale University, having carefully executed all that was prescribed, drew up his report and sent it along with a carefully packed matchbox, filled with sand from the base of the Great Pyramid, by registered post to the house on Fifth Avenue at the end of May, 1925.

On reaching his home in Tarrytown, however, Daly found that he had still in his pocketbook \$523.75 unexpended out of his \$5000 check. Murmuring to himself, "This is your test," he wrote an explanatory letter and mailed the money to Mr. Stern.

Mr. Eric Arthur Hamlet, of Harvard University, first-class honor man in Greek and Latin, also read his test paper of instructions with extreme care, but he took a somewhat different view from that of Mr. Daly.

"This is some test," Hamlet murmured to himself; and then, after a second reading and a long pause, "The snag is in No. 3."

He secured a berth on a transatlantic liner at the earliest possible date, spending the few days before sailing in New York libraries. Crossing the ocean, he went straight to London and took rooms near the British Museum, where for a whole month he read as

hard as he had ever done at college, taking careful notes. Then followed a hurried visit to Holland and three months in Germany, three months in Italy, and three in Egypt.

The result of his investigations he embodied in three of the most brilliant essays he or any other Harvard graduate ever wrote. He selected certain aspects of the industrial, the educational, and the religious conditions of the three countries, and on a basis of carefully ascertained causes and consequences deduced the probable effect on Europe and America generally of the new movements in Germany, Italy, and Egypt. His incisive remarks on the decay of religion in the two former countries, his reasoned prediction that Fascism would survive Mussolini and effectually ruin Italian literature, and that Egypt would ere long alter both the commercial and the religious position in the Orient, astonishing Manchester as much as Constantinople—these reports sent in by Mr. Hamlet, when published a year afterward, attracted universal attention, evoked long-continued discussion, and are likely to retain a permanent place among the prose classics of British and American literature.

"Stern has practically asked me for my best," said Hamlet to himself. "He had a right to ask it, and I am giving it. He said he was interested in testing university culture, and every line of Orders 1 and 2 shows he wishes to test wisdom of judgment, insight, power of forming opinion, and discrimination between the really momentous and the trivial. Order 3—but is it an order?—is the catch. Did he add this to see if we should have the common sense to omit it? And in any case a matchbox is a poor thing to pack sand in."

Very strongly inclined to take no notice of No. 3, Hamlet consulted various authorities on the geological characteristics of Egyptian sand in the hope of discovering some overlooked value or rare property, but without success. Finally he returned home and sent in his reports, and after much hesitation sent in also a small bag of sand, frankly confessing his fear that he must have misunderstood instruction No. 3.

Mr. Charles Burke Brookfield, of Johns Hopkins University, first-class honor man in German, French, and Spanish, gazed one

moment in stupefied silence with open mouth after reading his test paper and his check. Then he gave forth his college yell. His mother barely saved herself from a heart attack by recognizing the "tune." Hardly had the martial strain died away when Brookfield sprang to his desk, whipped out his fountain pen, and wrote the following letter.

TARRYTOWN, *June 18, 1924*

DEAR MR. STERN: —

How to thank you for your colossal gift of a whole year of joy after all you have given already is a problem that knocks me helpless. I have dreamed again and again of at last being able to manage one month in Europe. And now a year! A whole year free of cost! Sir, you are a prince. Thank you again and again.

Yours most devotedly,

C. B. BROOKFIELD

"The dear, delicious old humbug," he said to himself more than once, as he sealed and addressed and mailed the letter, "he nearly bamboozled me with his 'shalls' and 'wills' and 'musts' and 'must nots.' But his check and his matchbox gave him away. What a heart of gold! Giving and giving all the time what will help us best and please us most, and then trying to save our faces with his 'tests' and 'promises' and 'shalls' and 'musts.' Oh, the kindness of it all! If he were only a girl I should love to kiss him and call him a peach and a darling."

Brookfield started again on his college yell, but stopped abruptly as he awoke to the fact that he was coming through the front doorway of the post office.

"Are you hurt?" said an elderly man, turning around suddenly.

"No, thank you. I was just thinking."

"Thinking — thinking you were a steamer lost in a fog."

"Steamer!" shouted Brookfield. "Of course. Thank you — that is just what I ought to be thinking about," and hurried off to the nearest shipping agent, leaving the man muttering "Crazy ass."

In England Brookfield carefully examined the National Gallery, the Tate Gallery, the Wallace Collection, and after a day at the Tower and Westminster Abbey hurried off to Oxford, where he

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made copious sketches and notes. His next stay was at Amsterdam and his next at Nuremberg, and there he wrote his first report, dwelling chiefly on the development of portraiture from Rembrandt to Sargent and a study of medieval architecture, exemplified in Nuremberg and Oxford. The latter subject he continued in a study of Lisieux, and a playful comparison of the majestic Mont St.-Michel with the Renaissance splendor of Chantilly.

His third report consisted of an almost lyrical dialogue between the Rigi, Pilatus, and the Rochers de Naye, each proudly claiming the grandest prospect of the dawn to be seen anywhere in the world.

With truly American energy he hurried from Switzerland to the South of Spain, pausing only to make a careful survey of the Pont du Gard and Carcassonne. A small steamer carried him from Gibraltar to Palermo, where amid the golden glories of Monreale and the Capella Palatina he wrote an enthusiastic essay on the respective merits of the Moors, the Normans, and the Saracens.

Girgenti and Syracuse were not forgotten; but at Taormina, in front of the indescribable magnificence of Etna, snow-robed, against the burning Sicilian blue, Brookfield laid down both brush and pen. "Oh, Mr. Stern, I can't—I can't tell you what I see and feel. How can we ever thank God for giving us a world like this?"

And so the enthusiast passed on, drinking deep drafts of the loveliness of Rome and Naples, Florence and Venice, Athens and Delphi, and writing out, as he was able, something of the overflowing joy of his heart, till at length he arrived in Egypt. There he saw the principal sights of interest, but dwelt chiefly on all that threw light on Akhenaten, the one original mind that appeared in the long procession of Pharaohs. He made some pretty sketches of boats on the Nile, but expressed his regret that he had "no art that would sketch the awesome silence of the desert."

Brookfield reached New York on the first of June. He had spent every cent of his \$5000. But twenty exquisite sketches of scenes in Athens, Cairo, and Thebes brought him \$150 from a Broadway art dealer, and after making a certain purchase he drove to the Stern mansion. The secretary told him the great man was at Grindstone. Brookfield said he wished to write a note and leave a small parcel for him. Shown into the library, he wrote as follows:—

NEW YORK, June 1, 1925

DEAR SIR:—

I return at the close of the most joyous twelve months of my life—a gift from you under the guise of what you called my “test.” Well, I have tried earnestly and loyally to satisfy my examiner. I have visited all the countries you mentioned and more. I have reported what I thought “important”—namely, the truth and the beauty in art and nature that your writings taught me to see and love, and everything that seemed likely to give a little pleasure to one who had given so much pleasure to me. Your third instruction I divined was meant to find out if in the midst of all my enjoyment I remembered the giver. My dear friend, I remembered you with loving gratitude every day. In proof of this I ask you to accept the enclosed matchbox with its Egyptian sand, and believe me

Yours ever faithfully,

C. B. BROOKFIELD

Having signed his name, Brookfield drew a small packet out of his pocket and opened it. It was an exquisitely carved little matchbox of pure gold. But alas, through careless packing most of the sand had oozed out into the paper and through the paper into Brookfield's pocket and through a tiny hole in the pocket had been steadily leaking since he left the jeweler's shop on Broadway. Scarcely a teaspoonful remained. In much distress he had to add a postscript, describing what had happened and bewailing his failure to do what he had been asked to do.

Mr. Julius Fairleigh Stern, a man without near relatives and with few intimates, died suddenly in January 1926. He left by will his three residences on Fifth Avenue, at Grindstone, and at Fiesole, with all their contents and all his invested property, amounting to \$20,000,000, to the one of the three young men “who on being tested had shown the highest quality of careful, intelligent, and noble obedience.”

Was it the graduate of Yale or of Harvard, or of Johns Hopkins?

If you can judge reasonably between Saint Paul and the Pharisees, or between Erasmus and Luther, or between Fundamentalists and Modernists—you can answer the question.