

The Worst Thing I Have Ever Done

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I have done a few bad things in my life. I would not think that I will ever become famous for the enormity of my crimes, but I have committed my share of sins. I have committed fornication and other sins against chastity, although I have committed more by desire than in actual fact, thus incurring the guilt without enjoying any of the pleasure. As a child, I was cruel to babysitters, I disobeyed my parents, and occasionally hit my sister and brother. I have told lies, and been both lazy and gluttonous. I have betrayed confidences and spread calumnies. I pretended to be a conscientious objector when I was really nothing but a coward. Before I became a Christian, I blasphemed God and despised those who believed in Him. My sins of omission have no doubt been much greater, but my conscience is so weak that I do not even know what they are. But the worst thing I ever did is a sin whose name I do not even know.

Dr. Alston Hurd Chase was one of the finest teachers I have ever had. He taught my senior Greek class at Andover, shortly before he retired. I had heard of him before I came to Andover, as the coauthor of Chase and Phillips's *New Introduction to Greek*, which my father had used to teach himself Greek several years earlier. It was he and my father who convinced me to study Greek when I came to Andover, although for the first two years I had neither him nor his book. But I had him for Greek 3, chiefly Homer, and I now think it a great honor to have studied Homer under Dr. Chase.

He was a man who had devoted his life to the classics and to teaching. He was a prep school teacher of the old kind that has since vanished from the earth. He knew the Greek and Latin classics intimately, as well as much English poetry. As we boys worked our way through the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a passage might call forth from him some reference to the *Aeneid*, or to Shakespeare or Wordsworth, recited from memory with obvious devotion. The classics were his life, and the life he brought to them made the mazes of Homeric language much easier to navigate. Catching a bit of his vision, we saw more clearly than we ever imagined we could. This is, I now see, the mark of a great teacher.

Those who teach adolescents have the most ungrateful and unresponsive audience there is. And those who had to teach adolescents at the end of the 1960s were doubly cursed with a perverse time of history, when good was even more despised, and vice even more exalted, than at most times. We who were so privileged beyond our deserts despised Dr. Chase as a relic of that civilization we were bent on turning into a new barbarism. He was devoted to the traditional life of the boys' prep school that we were foolishly eager to discard. A conservative even among the faculty, he dressed in dark suits with white socks and shiny black shoes. His rounded features, bald head, and snub nose inspired us to give him the undeserved nickname "Piggy." But we were the true swine before whom he cast the pearls of his great learning.

Back in those days, I was still trying to write what I thought of as poetry. When I graduated from Andover and went off to Antioch, determined to squander the great gift I had been given on what I imagined to be a life of

pleasure, writing was one of the less unprofitable ways in which I wasted the time I might have used to get an education. Among the topics my unformed fancy touched was my recent experience of Andover. Young fool that I was, I turned on it a naively cynical eye in a number of poems, most of which I have forgotten and of which, I hope, no copy is in existence today. One was about Dr. Chase.

The title, "White Flannel Trousers," proclaims its dependence on T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a work I had read avidly but with little understanding. It took the point of view of an old man unable to understand a world that has changed. The tone was plaintive, one might think sympathetic, but in fact as insulting and demeaning toward its protagonist as Eliot's was to his own. And even had I sincerely pitied my former teacher for some reason that legitimately might inspire pity, the sheer presumption of a youth of eighteen extending sympathy to a man of such age and dignity would nevertheless have been insulting.

Just to have written such a poem would have been bad enough, but I did something much worse. I sent it to him.

I could hope that the letter miscarried in the Post Office, or that he threw it out unopened, or at least that having opened it, he ignored the contents or dismissed them with the contempt they deserved and promptly forgot them. Many times I have looked back with shame on this insulting and ungrateful act. For years I thought of trying to write to him to ask his forgiveness. But, unable to bear the thought of owning the shame, I never did, and now he is dead. I can only hope that he has received from his Maker a hundred-fold reward for the suffering inflicted by me and hundreds of other ungrateful pupils.

One may well ask why this act is worse than anything else I have done. It might seem relatively trivial beside some of my other sins. But most of the other sins I have committed were done in ignorance, or in pursuit of physical pleasure, or to avoid physical pain, or out of fear or laziness or bad temper. Therefore, while they were wrong, they were sins of merely human weakness. This was an act of pure malice, designed to hurt someone to whom I owed nothing but gratitude and honor; it was not a human but a demonic act. For one terrible moment I fell beneath even fallen humanity and tasted the sin of Satan himself. My other sins may have been in larger doses, but of far less potent poisons.

For myself, I know that the grace of Baptism has washed out the guilt of the numerous sins of my youth, and that recourse to the sacrament of Penance has brought forgiveness from God for the sins I have committed since, at least for those I have not been too blind to acknowledge. And yet I still feel the shame of many wicked and foolish acts, especially this one. Since I can never receive it in this world, I must seek forgiveness from Dr. Chase the next, if that is possible. Until then, I cannot look God in the face.