

Mr. franklin and mr.
lyndon discuss the
virtuous life.



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BUSTER**

Dear Son, It is with great pleasure and gratitude for your most recent missive, received this third day of October, that I must write at once in the hope of conveying the most unusual and perhaps enlightening conversation I entertained last evening at the home of one, Mr. Charles B. Lyndon, of Concord and New York, though how Mr. Lyndon explains the bifurcation of his very self leads me to wonder if he might be a Papist in Puritan woolens, given the Roman belief in the bi-location of their many saints.

Suffice it to say such thoughts of sainthood and the conduct precedent to such an exalted (dare I say, unenlightened) station stands within this correspondence very close to the topic we held under discussion at the wide oak table in Mr. Lyndon's kitchen, accompanied by his daughter, Elizabeth, on the retirement of his wife, Matilda. Mr. Lyndon and I and his daughter (Mr. Lyndon being a progressive soul in many ways, who saw no reason why his daughter should not be included in our after-dinner discussion, though of course she was not allowed to smoke tobacco) set about like Socrates' devotees with the proposition stated admirably by my host that the virtuous life is one that can be lived (though his exact word was the imprecise "attained") with an exercise of constant vigilance, diligence and hard, hard work.

Far be it from me to openly argue with a host whose very wife had fed me so well, yet I was struck so with the open and apparent inconsistency and contradiction hidden in plain sight, that I rose from my chair, walked about the kitchen with my hands behind my back, leaned into the table, lowered myself so that my face rested like a balloon on a string but a few inches from Mr. Lyndon's nose and, with the boldness that has served me so well in life,

despite a ruffled feather here or there, I uttered the expletive " balderdash," and re-took my seat.

Mr. Lyndon's daughter, the plain but intelligent Elizabeth, held her hand to her lips as her father nearly sputtered his surprise, though without displeasure. Perhaps he believes us to be better acquainted than we are and relies upon that familiarity, real or apparent, to afford him the easier avenue of good humor rather than the more difficult and adversarial stance taken on by the lightly insulted. " Your reasoning, Mr.

Franklin," he said, the question implicit in the salutation, and I set about framing my argument as one sets about building a house that will withstand summer's heat and winter's cold. " Are you a Papist, Mr. Lyndon," I asked, and he sat back, again surprised if not outright offended, and replied, " No, sir. You know that I am a member of the First Congregational Church of Lexington, and a proud member at that. " " Then Mr.

Lyndon," I said, " Insofar as you and your loved ones are members in good standing in a church that clearly subscribes to the enlightened and reformatory principles of the Great Reformation, which find their genesis in the theology of the late German monk, and his revolutionary reading of Paul's Letter to the ..." I hesitated on purpose. " Romans," Elizabeth said which afforded me a desired alliance in the middle-game of our discussion. " Yes, Romans it is," I said, continuing on, preparing my lance for the final assault on the citadel of proud humanism's excesses, " Then, Mr.

Lyndon, my fine host, how can you say in the face of Luther's doctrine of salvation by faith and not by works that the road to virtue is the one set down by laborers, sweating their earth-bound bodies in some vain attempt,

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like the ancients of Babel, to obtain some blessed state by dint of human, and therefore ultimately corruptible effort. " Mr. Lyndon sat back in his chair, while his daughter's eyes, tawny with candlelight did not leave me. Only silence was our companion, silence and from time to time a brush of the wind through trees bare and dressed only with autumn's wind.

" Then, my good friend," Mr. Lyndon rejoined in sur-reply, " allowing for the theology of two hundred years or more, drafted by a man who died with a legacy of troubles, if not shame, how do you suggest that one live a virtuous life?. " I told him that he was a brilliant host and that his generosity was only matched by his daughter's considerable beauty and that having been the beneficiary of his kindness, his wife's cooking and his daughter's fond company, I would set forth my findings as follows.

Virtues are but the white angels who sit across the balance of the more popular and burned umber of the seven deadly sins: Pride, Envy, Anger, Lust, Avarice, Gluttony and Sloth. I said that although we who admit to some belief, the nature, width and depth thereof known to no one, not even ourselves, despite all proclamations to the contrary, are by reason of our fallen natures, far more conversant with the left handed path of the more exotic predispositions to sin than we are to the more rigorous climbs to virtue.

Therefore, to live the virtuous life one must enter the realms of gold through the back door known well to God's most humble servants and on the occasion of our entrance argue that we were not so much virtuous in this life, poor vessels of grace doled out by an often chary God, as we were masters of avoidance, such that despite the siren call of experience and its joys, real

or false, lasting or short-lived, the measure of our virtue can only be assessed by the evil we did not do, rather than by the good we tried to do.

“ That is wrong,” Mr. Lyndon said. “ Truly you don’t mean that, Mr. Franklin. ” “ Perhaps not, Mr. Lyndon,” I said, “ and yet between the two alternatives well framed by this enjoyable discussion, I will opt for that statement which sounds in humility concerning the struggle not to sin, rather than swab these meaty arms with the subtle and oily brush of pride that accompanies all claims to virtue. ” Yours Very Truly, Father I read a good deal of Franklin’s writing out loud and allowed the “ ear” to do the work of imitation.

Any comedian will tell you the ear is the agent of mimicry. Sight, i. e. , analysis is a distant second. I tried to visualize an 18th century candlelit evening, after dinner, and then listened to the voices of the “ actors” as they discussed with all the benevolence (real or not) and grace of sitting congressmen an issue on which they disagreed. I set it in the form of a letter so as to afford Franklin an ironic point of view.