

**THE BELFAST NEWS-LETTER
BELFAST, IRELAND
28 SEPTEMBER 1956**

Study Chair

On the Side of the Angels

When we say that someone "is on the side of the angels" when we mean that he is a good man, that his weight and influence are in favour of goodness, and that he can be trusted to do always what is just and righteous, when justice and righteousness are in question. All life is a matter of sides, and taking sides, yet some people are not always happy about the idea. They think that a well-balanced, unprejudiced emancipated person ought not to look at things in that fashion. They cannot bear to be thought narrow-minded, they dislike the party attitude, they deprecate rash judgments, or harsh judgments, and they point out that if you say downrightly that you are on one side, well, it is obviously a clear and definite assessment of the other side, and not a very charitable one. If we say that we are on the side of the angels, it suggests pretty plainly that we believe not only in angels, but in devils, and, of course, the less said in these days about the devil or his kin the better. This is no time for dealing, we are reminded, in abstractions and old-fashioned fancies. There is, it is admitted, a lot of evil in the world. But you do not need to postulate the devil to account for it. Man is himself the only devil we need in order to explain our situation. In the North of Ireland we say, "It's just 'badness,' " "Badness," in this sense, is held to explain practically everything.

"Badness—and goodness"

It might be said that "badness" is only another name for "original sin." This "badness" or "original sin" is a human quality, declare the emancipated. And, it goes without saying, if you are thinking along these lines so is "goodness," "original righteousness." And it all comes out of ourselves. It is all due to the kind of beings we are. It's our own pidgin. So there can't be any question of taking sides with devil or angel. You must accept yourself, and be yourself, not seeking to shift the

responsibility for your evil-doing on to any other shoulders than your own, not hoping vainly for any angelic assistance in the working of righteousness. Is the angel a passing racial fancy that has already passed? Is the devil as little substantial? Even those who think so will hardly dispute that our own humanity looks up and down, has aspirations to higher things than we know here, and hankerings after lower things, whereof we are, even here, ashamed. Call it imagination, if you will, call it hallucination, call it illusion, or delusion, call it what you like, we all hear voices. And some of the voiced seem to say to us that we are not alone, that we are not the only beings who know of our struggles, of our falling, or our rising again, and of our fighting on, on and up. But other voices seem to call to us that it is easier to go down than up, indeed that we cannot avoid our nature, that we must go down. For we are kin of the beasts at the last. The voices call, and we listen, and answer, as in dream, or a nightmare, "I'm coming." Some, responding, climb, they are drawn upward. Some, responding, turn down, sliding or falling or drifting—down. Perhaps they have not meant, do not mean, to take sides. Perhaps they have meant simply to be themselves, to be uncommitted, free. But, they have taken sides. The angel or the devil comes to life and gives the lead.

Taking sides

It is very seldom that a man decides in cool blood to be on the side of the devil. Such a one was the late Aleister Crowley, whose narrowly pious parents had sickened him of religion and orthodoxy. He aspired to be the most wicked man in the world in his day. In the event posterity remembers him as one of the most absurd and ridiculous. He turned his back on the angels, serving the devil religiously till death. And to-day he is a grotesque. It is impossible to take him seriously. He is a mere oddity. St. Francis of Assissi was an oddity, too, but he is no figure of fun, he is never absurd, never ridiculous, never a laughing-stock. And he must be taken seriously. "He was on the side of the angels." It is the only side that is worth taking. It is the only side that gives meaning and purpose to the life of man.