

V. S. Pritchett

THE SAINT

When I was seventeen years old I lost my religious faith. It had been unsteady for some time and then, very suddenly, it went as the result of an incident in a punt on the river outside the town where we lived. My uncle, with whom I was obliged to stay for long periods of my life, had started a small furniture-making business in the town. He was always in difficulties about money, but he was convinced that in some way God would help him. And this happened. An investor arrived who belonged to a sect called the Church of the Last Purification, of Toronto, Canada. Could we imagine, this man asked, a good and omnipotent God allowing His children to be short of money? We had to admit we could not imagine this. The man paid some capital into my uncle's business and we were converted. Our family were the first Purifiers—as they were called—in the town. Soon a congregation of fifty or more were meeting every Sunday in a room at the Corn Exchange.

At once we found ourselves isolated and hated people. Everyone made jokes about us. We had to stand together because we were sometimes dragged into the courts. What the unconverted could not forgive in us was first that we believed in successful prayer and, secondly, that our revelation came from Toronto. The success of our prayers had a simple foundation. We regarded it as "Error"—our name for Evil—to believe the evidence of our senses, and if we had influenza or consumption, or had lost our money or were unemployed, we denied the reality of these things, saying that since God could not have made them they therefore did not exist. It was exhilarating to look at our congregation and to know that what the vulgar would call miracles were performed among us, almost as a matter of routine, every day. Not very big miracles, perhaps; but up in London and out in Toronto, we knew that deafness and blindness, cancer and insanity, the great scourges, were constantly vanishing before the prayers of the more advanced Purifiers.

"What!" said my schoolmaster, an Irishman with eyes like broken glass and a sniff of irritability in the bristles of his nose. "What! Do you have the impudence to tell me that if you fell off the top floor of this building and smashed your head in, you would say you hadn't fallen and were not injured?"

I was a small boy and very afraid of everybody, but not when it was a question of my religion. I was used to the kind of conundrum the Irishman had set. It was useless to argue, though our religion had already developed an interesting casuistry.

"I would say so," I replied with coldness and some vanity. "And my head would not be smashed."

"You would not say so," answered the Irishman. "You would not say so." His eyes sparkled with pure pleasure. "You'd be dead."

The boys laughed, but they looked at me with admiration.

Then, I do not know how or why, I began to see a difficulty. Without warning and as if I had gone into my bedroom at night and had found a gross ape seated in my bed and thereafter following me about with his grunts and his fleas and a look, relentless and ancient, scored on his brown face, I was faced with the problem that prowls at the centre of all religious faith. I was faced by the difficulty of the origin of evil. Evil was an illusion, we were taught. But even illusions have an origin. The Purifiers denied this.

I consulted my uncle. Trade was bad at the time and this made his faith abrupt. He frowned as I spoke.

"When did you brush your coat last?" he said. "You're getting slovenly about your appearance. If you spent more time studying books"—that is to say, the Purification literature—"and less with your hands in your pockets and playing about with boats on the river, you wouldn't be letting Error in."

All dogmas have their jargon; my uncle as a businessman loved the trade terms of the Purification. "Don't let Error in" was a favourite one. The whole point about the Purification, he said, was that it was scientific and therefore exact; in consequence it was sheer weakness to admit discussion. Indeed, betrayal. He unpinched his pince-nez, stirred his tea, and indicated I must submit or change the subject. Preferably the latter. I saw, to my alarm, that my arguments had defeated my uncle. Faith and doubt pulled like strings round my throat.

"You don't mean to say you don't believe that what our Lord said was true?" my aunt asked nervously, following me out of the room. "Your uncle does, dear."

I could not answer. I went out of the house and down the main street to the river, where the punts were stuck like insects in the summery fash of the reach. Life was a dream, I thought; no, a nightmare, for the ape was beside me.

I was still in this state, half sulking and half exalted, when Mr. Hubert Timberlake came to the town. He was one of the important people from the headquarters of our church and he had come to give an address on the Purification at the Corn Exchange. Posters announcing this were everywhere. Mr. Timberlake was to spend Sunday afternoon with us. It was unbelievable that a man so eminent would actually sit in our dining-room, use our knives and forks, and eat our food. Every imperfection in our home and our characters would jump out at him. The Truth had been revealed to man with scientific accuracy—an accuracy we could all test by experiment—and the future course of human development on earth was laid down, finally. And here in Mr. Timberlake was a man who had not merely performed many miracles—even, it was said with proper reserve,

having twice raised the dead—but had actually been to Toronto, our headquarters, where this great and revolutionary revelation had first been given.

"This is my nephew," my uncle said, introducing me. "He lives with us. He thinks he thinks, Mr. Timberlake, but I tell him he only thinks he does. Ha, ha." My uncle was a humorous man when he was with the great. "He's always on the river," my uncle continued. "I tell him he's got water on the brain. I've been telling Mr. Timberlake about you, my boy."

A hand as soft as the best quality chamois leather took mine. I saw a wide upright man in a double-breasted navy-blue suit. He had a pink square head with very small ears and one of those torpid, enamelled smiles which were said by our enemies to be too common in our sect.

"Why, isn't that just fine?" said Mr. Timberlake, who, owing to his contacts with Toronto, spoke with an American accent. "What say we tell your uncle it's funny he thinks he's funny?"

The eyes of Mr. Timberlake were direct and colourless. He had the look of a retired merchant captain who had become decontaminated from the sea and had reformed and made money. His defence of me had made me his at once. My doubts vanished. Whatever Mr. Timberlake believed must be true, and as I listened to him at lunch, I thought there could be no finer life than his.

"I expect Mr. Timberlake's tired after his address," said my aunt.

"Tired?" exclaimed my uncle, brilliant with indignation. "How can Mr. Timberlake be tired? Don't let Error in!"

For in our faith the merely inconvenient was just as illusory as a great catastrophe would have been, if you wished to be strict, and Mr. Timberlake's presence made us very strict.

I noticed then that, after their broad smiles, Mr. Timberlake's lips had the habit of setting into a long depressed sarcastic curve.

"I guess," he drawled, "I guess the Almighty must have been tired some times, for it says He relaxed on the seventh day. Say, do you know what I'd like to do this afternoon?" he said, turning to me. "While your uncle and aunt are sleeping off this meal let's you and me go on the river and get water on the brain. I'll show you how to punt."

Mr. Timberlake, I saw to my disappointment, was out to show he understood the young. I saw he was planning a "quiet talk" with me about my problems.

"There are too many people on the river on Sundays," said my uncle uneasily.

"Oh, I like a crowd," said Mr. Timberlake, giving my uncle a tough look. "This is the day of rest, you know." He had had my uncle gobbling up every bit of gossip from the sacred city of Toronto all the morning.

My uncle and aunt were incredulous that a man like Mr. Timberlake should go out among the blazers and gramophones of the river on a Sunday afternoon. In any other member of our church they would have thought this sinful.

"Waal, what say?" said Mr. Timberlake. I could only murmur.

"That's fixed," said Mr. Timberlake. And on came the smile as simple, vivid, and unanswerable as the smile on an advertisement. "Isn't that just fine!"

Mr. Timberlake went upstairs to wash his hands. My uncle was deeply offended and shocked, but he could say nothing. He unpinched his glasses.

"A very wonderful man," he said. "So human," he apologized.

"My boy," my uncle said, "this is going to be an experience for you. Hubert Timberlake was making a thousand a year in the insurance business ten years ago. Then he heard of the Purification. He threw everything up, just like that. He gave up his job and took up the work. It was a struggle, he told me so himself this morning. 'Many's the time,' he said to me this morning, 'when I wondered where my next meal was coming from.' But the way was shown. He came down from Worcester to London and in two years he was making fifteen hundred a year out of his practice."

To heal the sick by prayer according to the tenets of the Church of the Last Purification was Mr. Timberlake's profession.

My uncle lowered his eyes. With his glasses off, the lids were small and uneasy. He lowered his voice too.

"I have told him about your little trouble," my uncle said quietly with emotion. I was burned with shame. My uncle looked up and stuck out his chin confidently.

"He just smiled," my uncle said. "That's all."

Then we waited for Mr. Timberlake to come down.

I put on white flannels and soon I was walking down to the river with Mr. Timberlake. I felt that I was going with him under false pretences; for he would begin explaining to me the origin of evil and I would have to pretend politely that he was converting me when already, at the first sight of him, I had believed. A stone bridge, whose two arches were like an owlish pair of eyes gazing up the reach, was close to the landing-stage. I thought what a pity it was the flannelled men and the sunburned girls there did not know I was getting a ticket for the round for him and when I saw him I was a little startled. He was standing at the edge of the water looking at it with an expression of empty incomprehension. Among the white crowds his air of brisk efficiency had dulled. He looked mid-dle-aged, out of place, and insignificant. But the smile switched on when he saw me.

"Ready?" he called. "Fine!"

I had the feeling that inside him there must be a gramophone record going round and round, stopping at that word.

He stepped into the punt and took charge.

"Now I just want you to paddle us over to the far bank," he said, "and then I'll show you how to punt."

Everything Mr. Timberlake said still seemed unreal to me. The fact that he was sitting in a punt, of all commonplace material things, was incredible. That he should propose to pole us up the river was terrifying. Suppose he fell into the river? At once I checked the thought. A leader of our church under the direct guidance of God could not possibly fall into a river.

The stream is wide and deep in this reach, but on the southern bank there is a manageable depth and a hard bottom. Over the clay banks the willows hang, making their basketwork print of sun and shadow on the water, while under the gliding boats lie cloudy, chloride caverns. The hoop-like branches of the trees bend down until their tips touch the water like fingers making musical sounds. Ahead in midstream, on a day sunny as this one was, there is a path of strong

light which is hard to look at unless you half close your eyes, and down this path on the crowded Sundays go the launches with their parasols and their pennants; and also the rowboats with their beetle-leg oars, which seem to dig the sunlight out of the water as they rise. Upstream one goes, on and on between the gardens and then between fields kept for grazing. On the afternoon when Mr. Timberlake and I went out to settle the question of the origin of evil, the meadows were packed densely with buttercups.

"Now," said Mr. Timberlake decisively when I had paddled to the other side. "Now I'll take her."

He got over the seat into the well at the stem.

"I'll just get you clear of the trees," I said.

"Give me the pole," said Mr. Timberlake, standing up on the little platform and making a squeak with his boots as he did so. "Thank you, sir. I haven't done this for eighteen years, but I can tell you, brother, in those days I was considered some poler."

He looked round and let the pole slide down through his hands. Then he gave the first difficult push. The punt rocked pleasantly and we moved forward. I sat facing him, paddle in hand, to check any inward drift of the punt.

"How's that, you guys?" said Mr. Timberlake, looking round at our eddies and drawing in the pole. The delightful water sished down it.

"Fine," I said. Deferentially I had caught the word.

He went on to his second and his third strokes, taking too much water on his sleeve, perhaps, and uncertain in his steering, which I corrected, but he was doing well.

"It comes back to me," he said. "How am I doing?"

"Just keep her out from the trees," I said.

"The trees?" he said.

"The willows," I said.

"I'll do it now," he said. "How's that? Not quite enough? Well, how's this?"

"Another one," I said. "The current runs strong this side."

"What? More trees?" he said. He was getting hot.

"We can shoot out past them," I said. "I'll ease us over with the paddle."

Mr. Timberlake did not like this suggestion.

"No, don't do that. I can manage it," he said. I did not want to offend one of the leaders of our church, so I put the paddle down; but I felt I ought to have taken him farther along away from the irritation of the trees.

"Of course," I said, "we could go under them. It might be nice."

"I think," said Mr. Timberlake, "that would be a very good idea."

He lunged hard on the pole and took us towards the next archway of willow branches.

"We may have to duck a bit, that's all," I said.

"Oh, I can push the branches up," said Mr. Timberlake.

"It is better to duck," I said.

We were gliding now quickly towards the arch; in fact, I was already under it.

"I think I should duck," I said. "Just bend down for this one."

"What makes the trees lean over the water like this?" asked Mr. Timberlake.

"Weeping willows—I'll give you a thought there. How Error likes to make us

dwell on sorrow. Why not call them *laughing willows*?" discoursed Mr. Timberlake as the branch passed over my head.

"Duck," I said.

"Where? I don't see them," said Mr. Timberlake, turning round.

"No, your head," I said. "The branch," I called.

"Oh, the branch. This one?" said Mr. Timberlake, finding a branch just against his chest, and he put out a hand to lift it. It is not easy to lift a willow branch and Mr. Timberlake was surprised. He stepped back as it gently and firmly leaned against him. He leaned back and pushed from his feet. And he pushed too far. The boat went on. I saw Mr. Timberlake's boots leave the stem as he took an unthoughtful step backwards. He made a last-minute grasp at a stronger and higher branch, and then there he hung a yard above the water, round as a blue damson that is ripe and ready, waiting only for a touch to make it fall. Too late with the paddle and shot ahead by the force of his thrust, I could not save him.

For a full minute I did not believe what I saw; indeed, our religion taught us never to believe what we saw. Unbelieving, I could not move. I gaped. The impossible had happened. Only a miracle, I found myself saying, could save him.

What was most striking was the silence of Mr. Timberlake as he hung from the tree. I was lost between gazing at him and trying to get the punt out of the small branches of the tree. By the time I had got the punt out, there were several yards of water between us, and the soles of his boots were very near the water as the branch bent under his weight. Boats were passing at the time but no one seemed to notice us. I was glad about this. This was a private agony. A double chin had appeared on the face of Mr. Timberlake and his head was squeezed between his shoulders and his hanging arms. I saw him blink and look up at the sky. His eyelids were pale like a chickens. He was tidy and dignified as he hung there, the hat was not displaced, and the top button of his coat was done up. He had a blue silk handkerchief in his breast pocket. So unperturbed and gentle he seemed that as the tips of his shoes came nearer and nearer to the water, I became alarmed. He could perform what are called miracles. He would be thinking at this moment that only in an erroneous and illusory sense was he hanging from the branch of the tree over six feet of water. He was probably praying one of the closely reasoned prayers of our faith, which were more like conversations with Euclid than appeals to God. The calm of his face suggested this. Was he, I asked myself, within sight of the main road, the town, recreation ground, and the landing-stage crowded with people, was he about to re-erect a well-known miracle? I hoped that he was not. I prayed that he was not. I prayed with all my will that Mr. Timberlake would not walk upon the water. It was my prayer and not his that was answered.

I saw the shoes dip, the water rise above his ankles and up his socks. He tried to move his grip now to a yet higher branch—he did not succeed—and in making this effort his coat and waistcoat rose and parted from his trousers. One seam of shirt with its part-loops and brace-taps broke like a crack across the middle of Mr. Timberlake. It was like a fatal flaw in a statue, an earthquake crack that made the monumental mortal. The last Greeks must have felt as I felt then,

when they saw a crack across the middle of some statue of Apollo. It was at this moment I realized that the final revelation about man and society on earth had come to nobody and that Mr. Timberlake knew nothing at all about the origin of evil.

All this takes long to describe, but it happened in a few seconds as I paddled towards him. I was too late to get his feet on the boat and the only thing to do was to let him sink until his hands were nearer the level of the punt and then to get him to change hand-holds. Then I would paddle him ashore. I did this. Amputated by the water, first a torso, then a bust, then a mere head and shoulders. Mr. Timberlake, I noticed, looked sad and lonely as he sank. He was a declining dogma. As the water lapped his collar—for he hesitated to let go of the branch to hold the punt—I saw a small triangle of deprecation and pathos between his nose and the corners of his mouth. The head resting on the platter of water had the sneer of calamity on it, such as one sees in the pictures of a beheaded saint. "Hold on to the punt, Mr. Timberlake," I said urgently. "Hold on to the punt."

He did so. "Push from behind," he directed in a dry, business-like voice. They were his first words. I obeyed him. Carefully I paddled him towards the bank. He turned and, with a splash, climbed ashore. There he stood, raising his arms and looking at the water running down his swollen suit and making a puddle at his feet.

"Say," said Mr. Timberlake coldly, "we let some Error in that time."

How much he must have hated our family. "I am sorry, Mr. Timberlake," I said. "I am most awfully sorry. I should have paddled. It was my fault. I'll get you home at once. Let me wring out your coat and waistcoat. You'll catch your death—"

I stopped. I had nearly blasphemed. I had nearly suggested that Mr. Timberlake had fallen into the water and that to a man of his age this might be dangerous.

Mr. Timberlake corrected me. His voice was impersonal, addressing the laws of human existence rather than myself.

"If God made water it would be ridiculous to suggest He made it capable of harming His creatures. Wouldn't it?"

"Yes," I murmured hypocritically. "O.K.," said Mr. Timberlake. "Let's go."

"I'll soon get you across," I said. "No," he said. "I mean let's go on. We're not going to let a little thing like this spoil a beautiful afternoon. Where were we going? You spoke of a pretty landing-place farther on. Let's go there."

"But I must take you home. You can't sit there soaked to the skin. It will spoil your clothes."

"Now, now," said Mr. Timberlake. "Do as I say. Go on." There was nothing to be done with him. I held the punt into the bank and he stepped in. He sat like a bursting and sodden bolster in front of me while I paddled. We had lost the pole, of course. For a long time I could hardly look at Mr. Timberlake. He was taking the line

that nothing had happened and this put me at a disadvantage. I knew something considerable had happened. That glaze, which so many of the members of our sect had on their faces and persons, their minds and manners, had been washed off. There was no gleam for me from Mr. Timberlake.

"What's the house over there?" he asked. He was making conversation. I had steered into the middle of the river to get him into the strong sun. I saw steam rise from him.

I took courage and studied him. He was a man, I realized, in poor physical condition, unexercised and sedentary. Now the gleam had left him, one saw the veined empurpled skin of the stoutish man with a poor heart. I remember he had said at lunch:

"A young woman I know said: 'Isn't it wonderful? I can walk thirty miles in a day without being in the least tired.' I said: 'I don't see that bodily indulgence is anything a member of the Church of the Last Purification should boast about.'"

Yes, there was something flaccid, passive, and slack about Mr. Timberlake. Bunched in swollen clothes, he refused to take them off. It occurred to me, as he looked with boredom at the water, the passing boats, and the country, that he had not been in the country before. That it was something he had agreed to do but wanted to get over quickly. He was totally uninterested. By his questions—What is that church? Are there any fish in this river? Is that a wireless or a gramophone?—I understood that Mr. Timberlake was formally acknowledging a world he did not live in. It was too interesting, too eventful a world. His spirit, inert and preoccupied, was elsewhere in an eventless and immaterial habitation. He was a dull man, duller than any man I had ever known; but his dullness was a sort of earthly deposit left by a being whose diluted mind was far away in the effervescence of metaphysical matters. There was a slightly pettish look on his face as (to himself, of course) he declared he was not wet and he would not have a heart attack or catch pneumonia.

Mr. Timberlake spoke little. Sometimes he squeezed water out of his sleeve. He shivered a little. He watched his stream. I had planned, when we set out, to go up as far as the lock, but now the thought of another two miles of this responsibility was too much. I pretended I wanted to go only as far as the bend we were approaching, where one of the richest buttercup meadows was. I mentioned this to him. He turned and looked with boredom at the field. Slowly we came to the bank.

We tied up the punt and we landed.

"Fine," said Mr. Timberlake. He stood at the edge of the meadow just as he had stood at the landing-stage—lost, stupefied, uncomprehending.

"Nice to stretch our legs," I said. I led the way into the deep flowers. So dense were the buttercups there was hardly any green. Presently I sat down. Mr. Timberlake looked at me and sat down also. Then I turned to him with a last try at persuasion. Respectability, I was sure, was his trouble.

"No one will see us," I said. "This is out of sight of the river. Take off your coat and trousers and wring them out."

Mr. Timberlake replied firmly: "I am satisfied to remain as I am."

"What is this flower?" he asked, to change the subject.

"Buttercup," I said.

"Of course," he replied.

I could do nothing with him. I lay down full length in the sun, and, observing this and thinking to please me, Mr. Timberlake did the same. He must have supposed that this was what I had come out in the boat to do. It was only human. He had come out with me, I saw, to show me that he was only human. But as we lay there I saw the steam still rising. I had had enough.

"A bit hot," I said, getting up.

He got up at once.

"Do you want to sit in the shade?" he asked politely.

"No," I said. "Would you like to?"

"No," he said. "I was thinking of you."

"Let's go back," I said. We both stood up and I let him pass in front of me. When I looked at him again, I stopped dead. Mr. Timberlake was no longer a man in a navy-blue suit. He was blue no longer. He was transfigured. He was yellow. He was covered with buttercup pollen, a fine yellow paste of it made by the damp, from head to foot.

"Your suit," I said.

He looked at it. He raised his thin eyebrows a little, but he did not smile or make any comment.

The man is a saint, I thought. As saintly as any of those gold-leaf figures in the churches of Sicily. Golden he sat in the punt; golden he sat for the next hour as I paddled him down the river. Golden and bored. Golden as we landed at the town and as we walked up the street back to my uncle's house. There he refused to change his clothes or to sit by a fire. He kept an eye on the time for his train back to London. By no word did he acknowledge the disasters or the beauties of the world. If they were printed upon him, they were printed upon a husk.

Sixteen years have passed since I dropped Mr. Timberlake in the river and since the sight of his pant-loops destroyed my faith. I have not seen him since, but today I heard that he was dead. He was fifty-seven. His mother, a very old lady with whom he had lived all his life, went into his bedroom when he was getting ready for church and found him lying on the floor in his shirt-sleeves. A stiff collar with the tie half inserted was in one hand. Five minutes before, she told the doctor, she had been speaking to him.

The doctor, who looked at the heavy body lying on the single bed, saw a middle-aged man, wide rather than stout and with an extraordinarily box-like thick-jawed face. He had got fat, my uncle told me, in later years. The heavy liver-coloured cheeks were like the chaps of a hound. Heart disease, it was plain, was the cause of the death of Mr. Timberlake. In death the face was lax, even coarse and degenerate. It was a miracle, the doctor said, that he had lived as long. Any time during the last twenty years the smallest shock might have killed him.

I thought of our afternoon on the river. I thought of him hanging from the tree. I thought of him indifferent and golden in the meadow. I understood why he had made for himself a protective, sedentary blandness, an automatic smile, a

collection of phrases. He kept them on like the coat after his ducking. And I understood why—though I had feared it all the time we were on the river—I understood why he did not talk to me about the origin of evil. He was honest. The ape was with us. The ape that merely followed me was already inside Mr. Timberlake eating out his heart.



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V(ictor) S(awdon) Pritchett (1900-1997)

Prolific English writer, essayist, critic, novelist, and journalist, whose career spanned over 60 years. Pritchett gained fame with his short stories, in which he described ordinary or eccentric Englishmen with respect and understanding humor. Pritchett's autobiographies, *A Cab at the Door* (1968) and *Midnight Oil* (1971), are also considered among his finest achievements.

"If I were to write an account of my education the city of Dublin would have to appear as one of my schoolmasters, a shabby, taunting, careless, half-laughing reactionary. His subject? History, of course. I did in fact have such an Irish master at my London school. His name was Callaghan; he glittered with mocking amusement during school prayers and was famous for his tempers, his personal disasters and his scorn. After reading something I had written, he delighted himself and our class by demonstrating to all of us, and with exact command of language, that I was raving mad. When I first came to Dublin, he was often in my mind." (from *Dublin*, 1967)

Victor Sawdon Pritchett was born in Ipswich, Suffolk. His mother, who expected a girl, wanted to name her child after the Queen, and Pritchett never felt himself comfortable with his first name. Pritchett's father was a Christian Scientist and a travelling salesman. His business failures forced the family move from place to place. In his childhood, Pritchett lived in the north and in London suburbs with members of his mother's family. He studied at Alleyn's School, Dulwich, and Dulwich College in south London for a short time.

When his father went to fight in World War I, Pritchett left school. He worked in the leather trade from 1916 to 1920. At the age of 20 he moved to Paris, where he worked as a shop assistant and during one period he sold shellac and glue. In 1923 he became a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor*, first in Ireland, then in Spain. From 1926 he wrote reviews for the paper.

After walking across Spain, Pritchett published a book about his journey, *Marching Spain* (1928). He correctly anticipated that extreme right-wing rule would continue in the country. *Clare Drummer* (1929) was based on his experiences as a reporter in Ireland. *Nothing Like Leather* (1935) drew on the period in Pritchett's youth, when he sorted skins on the London docks. Its main character was based on his father. Upon publishing five novels, Pritchett complained that the work felt monotonous. *Mr. Beluncle* (1951), Pritchett's last novel, is considered his best.

From 1926 Pritchett wrote reviews for the *New Statesman* and was made later its literary editor. *The Spanish Virgin and Other Stories* (1932) established Pritchett's place among the new and interesting writers of the 1930s.

In 1936 Pritchett divorced his first wife, Evelyn Vigors, an Irish actress – "I had known only sexual misery and frustration," he wrote in his

diary. Evelyn had been with him in Spain and had felt there miserable. Most of his travel pieces he Pritchett wrote in the first-person singular. In a draft of *Midnight Oil* he confessed that basically he was fanatical about art and writing. With his second wife, Dorothy Rudge Roberts, he had two children. The marriage lasted until Pritchett's death although they both also had other affairs.

During World War II Pritchett wrote a weekly essay for the *New Statesman* and worked for the BBC and the Ministry of Information. Pritchett was knighted in 1975 for his services to literature and in 1993 he became Companion of Honour. Pritchett's several awards include Heinemann Award (1969), PEN Award (1974), W.H. Smith Award (1990), and Golden Pen Award (1993). Pritchett died in London on March 21, 1997.

"For myself, the short story springs from a spontaneously poetic as distinct from a prosaic impulse – yet is not 'poetical' in the sense of shuddering sensibility," Pritchett said in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Short Stories* (1981). "Because the short story has to be succinct and has to suggest things that have been 'left out', are, in fact, there all the time, the art calls for a mingling of the skills of the rapid reporter or traveller with an eye for incident and an ear for real speech, the instincts of the poet and ballad-maker, and the sonnet writer's concealed discipline of form. The writer has to cultivate the gift for aphorism and wit."

'The Voice' (from *It May Never Happen*, 1945) has all the distinctive marks of a classic V.S. Pritchett story. The main characters are described with a few but vivid strokes. The setting, World War II years, is left in the background after the opening. Pritchett was more interested in the psychological reactions of his characters than external events. The tone is mildly satirical, adjectives and poetic expressions are sprinkled in the narration. However, Pritchett has also confessed that he never cared much for poetry.

Usually Pritchett described lower-middle class people, in this particular story two reverends with opposite personalities. In his book of memoir, *Midnight Oil*, Pritchett said: "I have done, given my circumstances and my character, what I have been able to do and I have enjoyed it." Although Pritchett viewed his lower middle-class characters in a more or less humorous light, he did not make them comical, but depicted their disappointments, dreams, fears, sufferings, and fates with a deep psychological understanding that had connections to the work of Chekhov and Turgenev.

In the story a bomb has brought down the front wall and the roof of a church. A pigeon crosses the building "like an omen of release." Mr. Morgan, an unfrocked priest, is buried under the debris. He sings and the rescue workers know he is alive. Morgan is the predecessor of Rev. Frank Lewis in the church. Lewis considers the care-free and joyful Morgan "a hook-nosed satyr", the nearest human thing to the devil. After a landslide and fall of stone the singing stops. "How unbearable this silence was. A beautiful proud voice, the voice of a man, a voice like a tree, the soul of a man spreading in the air like the cedars of Lebanon."

Lewis is ready to forgive Morgan everything to hear his voice again. He goes after Morgan into a tunnel. The floor crashes down in the darkness. Lewis hangs over a pit and cries for help: "Morgan, are you there? Catch me. I'm going." He falls exactly two feet. "Haven't you ever felt rotten with fear," Morgan asks, "like an old tree, infested and worm-eaten with it, soft as a rotten orange." He tells him that he has been in the church ever since raids got bad, and sings because he is afraid. Lewis hears for the first time Morgan's voice, and understands his prejudices. At the end of the story the rescue party hear something new: "A ruddy Welsh choir!"

Pritchett's short stories map the change of moral values, customs, speech, and details of everyday life of commonplace people in England from the 30's to the 90's. During the years Pritchett developed his own quiet style of expression. "... the writer of short stories has to catch our attention at once not only by the novelty of his people and scene but the distinctiveness of his voice, and to hold us by the ingenuity of his design..." (Pritchett in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Short Stories*, 1981) In his essays Pritchett showed interest in all kinds of subjects, from antiques to horticulture and the rag trade. He read for delight from Gibbon to Virginia Woolf, as one can find from *The Complete Collected Essays of V. S. Pritchett* (1991).

V.S. Naipaul described Pritchett as a benign man, who had "a well-modelled, humorous face and a humorous, absent-minded air" (*Half a Life*). Pritchett did not worry about his lack of university studies: "It was even good luck to grow up among nonintellectual people, all in trades; better luck, to have a vocation fixed in my mind..." His years in France, Ireland, and Spain became his universities. However, in later life he taught at the University of California at Berkeley, Princeton, Columbia and Smith. Pritchett's biographies on Chekhov (1988) and Turgenev (1977) were well received by critics, although Pritchett did know Russian and had never been in the Soviet Union. He was fluent in German, Spanish, and French, and published also a biography on Balzac (1973).

As an essayist Pritchett avoided academic jargon and theorizing and wrote in a clear, seemingly effortless style. From his travels in Ireland and Spain Pritchett produced several reportages. *Spanish Temper* (1954) has been compared to George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Pritchett's own career in literature manifested itself in his insightful comments on other writers and their work. Sheridan Le Fanu was "the Simenon of the peculiar" and D.H. Lawrence's characters and settings were "grasped with both hands, with mind and senses." In Ireland he met the writer William Butler Yeats: "He was the only man I have known whose natural speech sounded like verse."

Pritchett often introduced older writers to his readers, to show their relevance to our own time. "... the art of writing dramatic stories in verse seems to have gone for good," Pritchett stated in 'Our Half-Hogarth' (1947), which dealt with the English humorist Thomas Hood. As Pritchett, Hood had also a serious side, and a deep sympathy for the poor. Pritchett notes that Hood draws our attention to the poor by shuddering and laughing with them at the same time. "But writers are

urged and taught not by society only but by other writers whose background and intention make them utterly different from their pupils. It is a strange fact that the England of Hood is not delineated by revolutionary realists, but has come down to us in the fantastic dress of German Gothic. The Cruikshank who frightens us; Mr Punch, with his pot belly, his fairy legs and the arching nose like some cathedral fragment, who squats on Dicky Doyle's cover, are part of the Gothic colony that settle like a migration of gargoyles among the English chimneys and their myth-creating smoke."

For further reading: *V.S. Pritchett* by D. Baldwin (1987); *V.S. Pritchett* by J. Stinson (1992); *World Authors 1900-1950*, Vol. 3, by Martin Seymour-Smith and Andrew C. Kimmens (1996); *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, Vol. 3, ed. by Steven R. Serafin (1999); *V.S. Pritchett: A Working Life* by Jeremy Treglown (2005); *The Art of Revision in the Short Stories of VS Pritchett and William Trevor* by Jonathan Bloom (2006)

Selected works:

- Marching Spain, 1928
- Clare Drummer, 1929
- The Spanish Virgin and Other Stories, 1930
- Shirley Sanz, 1932
- Nothing Like Leather, 1935
- Dead Man Leading, 1937
- This England, 1938 (ed.)
- You Make Your Own Life, 1938
- In My Good Books, 1942
- It May Never Happen, 1945
- Novels and Stories by Robert Louis Stevenson, 1945 (ed.)
- Build the Ships, 1946
- The Living Novel, 1946
- Why Do I Write?, 1948
- Mr. Beluncle, 1951
- Books in General, 1953
- The Spanish Temper, 1954
- Collected Stories, 1956
- The Sailor, The Sense of Humour and Other Stories, 1956
- When My Girl Comes Home, 1961
- London Perceived, 1962
- The Key to My Heart, 1963
- Foreign Faces, 1964
- New York Proclaimed, 1965
- The Working Novelist, 1965
- The Saint and Other Stories, 1966
- Dublin, 1967
- A Cab at the Door, 1968
- Blind Love, 1969
- George Meredith and English Comedy, 1970
- Midnight Oil, 1971
- Penguin Modern Stories, 1971 (with others)
- Balzac, 1973
- The Camberwell Beauty, 1974
- The Gentle Barbarian: the Life and Work of Turgenev, 1977

- Selected Stories, 1978
- On the Edge of the Cliff, 1979
- Myth Makers, 1979
- The Tale Bearers, 1980
- The Oxford Book of Short Stories, 1981 (ed.)
- The Turn of the Years, 1982 (with R. Stone)
- Collected Stories, 1982
- More Collected Stories, 1983
- The Other Side of a Frontier, 1984
- A Man of Letters, 1985
- Chekhov, 1988
- A Careless Widow and Other Stories, 1989
- Complete Short Stories, 1990
- At Home and Abroad, 1990
- Lasting Impressions, 1990
- Complete Collected Essays, 1991
- The Pritchett Century, 1997 (The Essential Pritchett: Selected Writings of VS Pritchett VS Pritchett, 2004)
- Essential Stories, 2005 (selected and with an introduction by Jeremy Treglown)



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