THE CARVING

'Wish you weren't such an old pagan,' sighed Paul Lane, as he strayed around the combination library and studio of his friend, Philip Pierson.

'I am not actually a pagan, you know. I really lack the essentials,' laughingly declared the young artist.

'No use protesting,' interrupted Paul. 'This profusion of your incriminating handiwork indicts you.'

Paul waved his hand accusingly around the room. Assuredly, the objects included in his sweeping gesture seemed to support his statement. They were carvings, sculptures in wood, clay, and marble. Though the artist was but beginning his career, there was variety; but the subjects were chiefly little fauns, mischievous rather than wicked young satyrs, queer little woodsy figures, presumably dryads, eerie, light-footed, fanciful wild things. Not definitely, perhaps, might they be classed as pagan. They had a wholesome, lovable, half-human quality. They were not unlike some of the fancies which the early Gothic builders wrought in stone —reminders of creatures met in quaint medieval legends; strange, half-guileless, half-knowing wood folk, figuring in primitive stories and pictures of the saints, descendants perhaps of those gentle creatures who heard and loved a St. Francis, a St. Anthony, and could never again be entirely like their fellow beasts and birds.

However, Paul was not well-versed in such lore, nor would his serious young mind have been hospitable to such fanciful ideas. To his casual observation, these exuberant fashionings of his friend's deft hands and fancy recalled the fabulous folk of pre-Christian times —and toward such he was now in no mood to be amiable.

'I don't mind your having an active fancy, but you're so behind the times! Isn't there anything in this big life of to-day to inspire your eyes and hand?'

'Yes, but I don't like realism: the Man with the Hoe and such things depress me. But why quarrel? My graven images are technical exercises, plays of fancy, not idols. I do know more about the art game than you, old man, though I can't hit the right terms to discuss systems of ethics with you. Come, let's have a pipe and hear if any plans have ripened over night.' And they seated themselves before the old-fashioned fireplace.

Both young men were obviously idealists, men of dreams. Strength and significance of purpose were clearly stamped upon the features of each, different as these were in contour. Paul's face was finely chiselled and somewhat austere, Philip's features were more rotund. Philosopher, poet, priest?—these might have been the speculations as to Paul's future vocation. About his comrade there had likely been less choice of alternatives. Artist, even a superficial observer might have prophesied correctly. It was not necessary to discover Philip red-handed in his studio.

Though knit by many bonds they were as different in temperament as in appearance. Their respective attitude toward things spiritual was somewhat indicated by Paul's jocular-serious regret that his friend was 'such an old pagan' -a formula for Philip's exuberant youth. Paul was far graver. They had gone through college together in a happy boyhood friendship, and their loyalty had strengthened with time and association. This evening their college work was over, so there was to begin a parting of the ways. Philip was to go to Italy to work at his art. And now Paul, whose plans had not developed to his own satisfaction until to-day, was about to disclose his prospects.

'I've decided to study theology, and if possible to enter the priesthood.'

The tone of the statement indicated that the speaker expected to create surprise. But Philip was not startled. 'Old pagan' though he might be, Philip had always discerned a fine spiritual quality in Paul. Though this quality was one which Philip himself possessed in a lesser degree, he gloried in it in his 'great St. Paul,' as he sometimes called his companion.

Yet, if not surprised, he was somewhat grieved by Paul's announcement. It meant separation—perhaps for life. Therefore, he felt called upon to enter an objection:

'I say, old fellow, are you sure? Is it settled? I thought you were going to pull off some big philosophical stunt.—some thesis to knock Bergson into a cocked hat!'

'Maybe I shall,' laughingly answered Paul. 'The seminary offers a good chance even for that.'

'But you won't have time! You'll have to dig so in theology and all that, won't you?'

'Yes, but it will not blur my philosophical vision —it really ought to clear it.'

'Hang it, I wish you wouldn't,' groaned Philip, 'but I know there is no use arguing—it's in you! I've known it all along.'

'You have always been most decent,' murmured Paul, shyly giving a boyish tribute which Philip received with equal coyness.

'It just goes against the grain to lose you, that's all.'

Paul smiled with the serenity of one whose measurement of human loss and gain was already different from the standards of other youths.

'But you can't lose me,' he protested.

'However sanctified you're going to be, you're not ready for miraculous appearances and all that mystical stuff yet. You'll be just as good as lost yonder in that town of my French ancestors. And I thought you were coming to prowl in the Vatican this winter while I'm working in Rome.'

'Maybe I'll visit you before you leave Italy.'

'Yes, a pretty pair we would be! You, a recollected seminarian and a gay Bohemian—Lord knows what I'll become without your influence! No use talking, we're parted forever.'

'Nonsense! I'll soon be hunting you down with a commission for some church of mine.'

But for all the loyal avowals, the next years did lead the young men far apart. They wrote to each other periodically, but each was so intense a worker that the letters became less and less frequent.

Meantime, each was striding ahead. Philip was taking the prizes in his classes and bidding fair to be one of the best artists of his epoch. And far away in the famous old university, Paul was winning laurels of another type—for his rare spiritual nature and intellectual achievements. But he was too absorbed in study and discipline to note what others thought of him, and his ardent heart and mind burned for the accomplishment of his allotted probation, that he might go forth as an accepted laborer in his Master's vineyard.

At last, strong, eager, and well-equipped, he was ready to go forth—one more Melchisedech for the service perpetual.

His plans were made. With the approval of his spiritual adviser, he intended to go back to America, the particular vineyard which especially called to him. Though its railroads were now flung from ocean to ocean, from the Gulf to the Canadian North, there were regions still untilled by spiritual ploughs. In the strength of his young manhood he longed to help in the folding of that great country, still young compared with Christian Europe.

The role he expected to play in such an undertaking was modest enough, however. He preferred to go to some newly opened missionary field, rather than to the booming cities whose fabulous material growth was so astonishing to the European mind. Such cities must necessarily have prosperous churches—hence his choice of a less thriving community.

With the prospect of eventual departure for America, Father Paul spent some weeks after his ordination with friends whom he was not likely to see again for many years. And in these hours of parting his thoughts and affections turned to his old comrade, Philip. Philip had tried repeatedly to persuade his