

# Science First

by William  
Slavens  
McNutt



I'M not knocking science. No! I like sugar in my coffee. I like two tea-spoonfuls or two lumps to a cup. If some one hands me a cup of coffee with seven lumps or seven teaspoonfuls in it, I don't like it. Just because I don't care for it that sweet, that don't argue that I'm opposed to sugar, does it? Not a bit of it! It only goes to show that I don't like seven teaspoonfuls of sugar in one cup of coffee. The proportion ain't right.

Same way with science. Give the world seven lumps of scientific knowledge in only one cup of love, and it's got a bum drink. Do you get me?

I mean that all scientific knowledge, together with all the comforts that come from its application to life, bears the same relation to the life of the world, or any individual in it, that sugar bears to a cup of coffee. You drink the coffee for the coffee, and add sugar to it same as science has added aeroplanes and limousines and telephones and "one-dollar-and-sixty-eight-cents—F. O. B. Detroits" —or whatever the price is now—to life.

Mind you, now, I don't think any the less of a man who finds out by a lifetime of study of the subject that the left hind toe of a sand flea

bears a family resemblance to the starboard fin of a blue-striped flying fish, found only in the Sulu Sea during the dark of the moon. Not a bit! But when he believes—and most especially when he tries to make other people believe—that his discovery will do for Jim Jones's wife what only Jim's love and devotion can do, then I think more kindly of an old prospector I met in the brush in upper Montana, about fifteen years ago, who'd never heard that Lincoln was shot, and who spent a whole evening at my camp-fire explaining that gold was formed by the rays of the sun acting on certain forms of rock.

Science is all right; but when a man who serves it begins to believe that a fact is worth more than a friend, and that love bears the same relation to knowledge that a busted flush bears to four aces—

Listen:

After I sold my claim on Annil Creek, up in the Nome country, I went broke on an oil proposition in California, and a bunch of reformed sourdoughs in San Francisco—boys I'd known in the North—staked me for a whirl at the alleged Peruvian gold-fields. The result: a year later I was in Lima, Peru, down to my last *centava*, and hoping that the Lord would be

good to me, because I was perfectly certain no one else would.

I was standing on the street, wondering whether it would be better to die slow of starvation or be shot for attempted robbery, when a white man came around the corner and looked as though he'd seen me before.

"Dan Cavanaugh!" he yells out loud, and grabbed me with a grip that led me to believe I might touch him for at least fifty dollars if I could make him think that I remembered him—which I didn't.

"Think of seeing you here!" I stalled, and he laughed right in my face.

"Don't pretend that you know me, Dan," he said. "I know you don't, because you haven't seen me since I was in short pants. I'm Charley Mason."

Gee! His family lived right across the street from mine in Marshalltown, Iowa. When I first went a wandering, following the mining camps and the boom towns, I used to make an occasional trip home, when I had a stake, and impress the natives. I was younger then, and thought I was a hero. Aside from myself, no one else was as sure of it as little Charley Mason.

And there he was in Peru, all grown up and everything!

And he was a scientist. A real, live scientist. He was down there with John Bragdon, the archeologist, outfitting in Lima for a trip into the southern Peruvian Andes. Little Charley Mason, a protégé of the great John Bragdon! Yes, sir. Regular scientist, Charley was. Too young to have whiskers, him being only a short while out of college, but he had the thoughts that go with 'em. And some that go without 'em, as I soon found out.

Charley enticed me into a cafe, and when I'd outflanked the first real meal I'd had in two days, I 'fessed up and told him how I was fixed.

He didn't say anything for so long that I'd decided he was going to refuse me the loan I'd suggested. He was awfully white and serious

looking; but I'd met scientists before, and knew something of how their thoughts often hurt them. Finally he leaned over the table toward me and gave me a shock.

"Will you take my place with the expedition, Dan?" he asked me.

"No," I said, "I didn't ask you for your job, even granting that I could fill it, which of course I couldn't. All I want is the price of my fare back to San Francisco, or even enough to cable there."

"But if I wanted you to take my place, would you?" he kept at me.

And then it came out with a rush. There was a girl back in Marshalltown. Her name was Ethel Curtis; but, according to what Charley said about her, it should have been Saint Something-or-other. She and Charley had had a perfect understanding, even before he went away to college. When Charley graduated, and came home to take charge of his father's planing mill and lumber yard, they two would call on the minister for the keys to heaven, which would be duly presented, with the customary trimmings of orange-blossoms, rice, old shoes, *et cetera*.

Fine!

But Charley studied under Bragdon, and for some reason the old-bone hound took a fancy to him, and decided to make him his successor in the gentle art of totting up as to whose wife ran away with who, some thousands of years back. He talked to Charley about his duty to science and humanity, until the poor kid got it all down by heart, went home and recited what he'd learned to Miss Ethel.

Of course, he pointed out to her, it wouldn't be possible for them to marry as soon as if he took over the planing mill, but he begged her to think of his duty to science. He'd got around to calling it his "life work" by that time.

Ethel said "Nix!" and after she'd kissed him a couple of times, he agreed with her.

It was just the turn of the luck that Ethel

should be traveling in Europe immediately after Charley's graduation, when the hunch for one final exploration trip hit Bragdon.

You know those old Inca people that used to live down there in the Peruvian Andes didn't leave any historical documents—or if they did, some Spanish bird burned 'em all. All the scientists have to go on, in doping out an authoritative "Who Was Who" among the Incas, is a lot of old ruins. Well, Bragdon got the hunch that he knew where a complete history was to be found, and how to get it. He had his spot all picked out away up in the Andes beyond Cuzco, where there's an old Inca city; and nothing would do but he must discover that record and give it to the world as his contribution to the happiness and well-being of suffering humanity.

Well, some play chess, and there are those who read the *Congressional Record*, while others leave their umbrellas home when the weather bureau predicts fair and warm. Each man to his own folly, say I; but Bragdon had no business to ring poor little Charley in on the trip.

He had the boy hypnotized! Charley had something of the same feeling for Bragdon that a soldier has for his country. The boy was an idealist, and the old man appealed strongly to his instinct for disinterested service, self-sacrifice for a worthy cause; see?

So Charley ambled away with him to Peru and explained—by letter—to Ethel that they could be married—maybe—when he got back, which might be two years and might be longer.

I reckon the young lady wasn't more than average cruel, nor unreasonable. I gathered from what Charley told me that she was just a nice, sensible, loving girl who wanted a home and a husband. Charley was the one she wanted for a hubby to make a home with. They'd planned that home together, and she'd shaped her life for some years to that end. They'd figured out together just what they could afford the first

year Charley took over the planing mill, and what they might hope for the second if he succeeded as well as they both knew he would.

I reckon that if Charley's natural line of business had been digging up dead ones, she'd have been glad to wait for him as long as necessary, or follow him wherever he could afford to take her, but—

Well, that morning there in Lima, the boy had gotten his answer from the girl. Briefly it was, "Come back and get on the job, or I won't be here for you when you do come."

"I almost believe my meeting with you to-day was an act of Providence," the poor kid told me with tears in his eyes. "I've got to go back, Dan, and yet I couldn't leave Mr. Bragdon without some one to take my place. He's getting old, you know, and he's relied on me for so many things. But you've been prospecting right down near the country where he's going, and you can be of great service to him; and I'll just sit up nights giving you the run of things I've had charge of before you leave."

"And will Bragdon be as enthusiastic about my substituting for you as you are?" I asked him.

"He'll be terribly sore," Charley said. "He's taken such an interest in me and trusted me so much. But I've *got* to go back, Dan. Why, Ethel, is—well, she's just all there is, so far as I'm concerned. I'll take you over and introduce you to Bragdon, and make a clean breast of it."

"You think he'll see it your way at all, if you give him the details?" I asked him.

"I'm afraid not," Charley admitted. "I dread telling him. What makes matters worse is that he had a love affair when he was a young fellow, and he was strong enough to put the girl out of his life and devote himself to the work. That's the rumor, though I don't know if it's true. Well, let's go and have it over with."

I was game to go on the expedition, because it gave me a chance to do some further prospecting, and then I'd heard tales of gold

idols and ornaments in some of those old ruins that might make a discovery worth while to me. So we drifted over to the hotel, and I met John Bragdon.

Oof! When I saw him, I understood the hold he had on Charley. He was past seventy then, and only a shell of the giant he'd once been—but *what* a man! He was well over six feet tall, stoop-shouldered, raw-boned, with enormous hands and feet. His beard and hair were snow-white, and he had the blackest, most compelling eyes I ever saw in a human head. They were very deep-set, and his bristly white eyebrows hanging over them reminded me somehow of bared teeth.

He was a dour, sour, savage-looking piece of old Scotch granite, and I knew he had a temper before he proved it—which he blamed soon did!

"I've loved you like a son!" he roared at Charley as soon as he got the gist of the boy's proposition. "But I'd rather see you dead here in this room than a traitor to me and the work you've sworn yourself to! You come puling to me of love and its claim! I met that temptation like a man, and I expect you to do the same. When I was twenty-four—going with the Fenster expedition to Asia Minor—she bade me stay. I conquered, and I look to you to do the same.

"Hard? No! Love? Hah! Put it on the scales against your work, and see how light a thing it proves! A figment of the imagination! A delusion! A mania! A snare to bless you for the moment, and damn you through all life and eternity for your acceptance of the moment's blessing! Do your duty, and in ten years you'll only remember her to give thanks that you escaped to the freedom of work!"

I could see him realize that he wasn't getting anywhere on that tack, and he took a new slant. He began painting poor Charley as a traitor, and it was *some* portrait! The way he made him out. Benedict Arnold was a regular Nathan Hale

alongside of him. The savagery of that denunciation made the flesh on my back actually crawl!

And then, all of a sudden, he turned soft and began to plead. And that's where Charley fell, science gained a devotee, and a mighty fine little girl back in Iowa lost out.

"I'll stay, sir," Charley promised.

That was all. No heroics. No throaty quavers in his voice. But you listen to me. I know just what the Christian martyrs looked like when they refused to deny their religion to save themselves from the torch. They looked just like Charley did, only not quite so much so.

I horned in on the expedition, nevertheless; not as Charley's substitute, but as his assistant. I had the hang of the country and a certain knack with the natives in the region Bragdon was heading for, so they took me along.

I've never been able to figure out whether Bragdon was plain crazy in his old age, or really had a cinch on the biggest thing any archeologist ever got hold of yet. He kept his scheme a secret from all of us until he was taken sick, and we were where we couldn't go any farther. Then he flipped up his ace for us all to see, and I don't know yet whether it *was* an ace or just a cold deuce with one of the spots knocked off.

We'd got away up into the Andes north of Cuzco, and as far as we could go without fighting the Indians—which was out of the question, there being only three white men with the party besides Charley, Bragdon, and myself—or playing the ace that Bragdon seemed to think he had, and on the strength of which he'd made the trip.

We'd got in touch with the Quichera Indians, and they were all little pals together with us until we got to a certain point. That certain point was an old stone hut on an old stone road through the jungle, in a valley away up on the yon side of nowhere, in a country that

looked like the Colorado Rockies on a jag.

Just beyond this hut the road—which was nothing more than a tunnel through the jungle—forked. Just in front of this stone hut I speak of, one tunnel veered off to the right, while another led away to the left. The natives were real pleasant about it; but they gave us to understand that if we came a step farther than that fool stone hut, they'd dig a sweet, sweet home for us right there in the valley, and we could settle right down among 'em.

They were courteous, but firm, so to speak.

They weren't bluffing, either, hear me! The jungle in front of that old hut where the road forked was alive with 'em all the time we was there. They didn't have nothing but bows and arrows, but that was enough in that green smother of foliage that you couldn't see your own length through. Oh, plenty!

So we stopped there at the hut, with them guarding us, and old Bragdon showed us his hole card.

It was kind of impressive and solemn. The old boy'd been pretty sick for several days, and he was getting mighty weak. The excitement was lapping up what little strength he had left. He figured, you see, that he was mighty near his goal, or the natives wouldn't have stopped us; and he was as het up over it as a piker with a dollar on a hundred-to-one shot that's watching the goat that carries his money come down the stretch neck and neck with the favorite.

He had us unpack a steel box that he hadn't opened since we started, and set it before him. He opened the box and took out two things and laid them on the canvas table in front of him. One was an old black wallet, and the other was a little stone Billiken sort of thing about three inches high. It was some kind of an old god or something—I've seen lots like it in museums—but it was Bragdon's ace!

I've forgot just where he said he'd got it—from some collection of Inca relics; the point was that nobody but him knew the significance

of the dog-gone stone joss. It was the key to the place the Indians in front of us was holdin' us back from—and when they seen it in our possession, they'd lead us to the place where the history of the Incas was to be found. That history had been guarded for some odd thousands of years, so Bragdon tells us, and would only be revealed to the chap that presented the stone doll he had in front of him as a calling card.

You wouldn't believe how het up the old boy was.

"The supreme moment of a thousand years," he says, his voice shaking. "We will call the Quicheras from the forest now and show them this—our passport to the history of a wonderful race! I won't live to give it to the world, my son," he goes on, speaking to Charley. "That I leave to you. My life and my life-work must continue in you. You are the added years I need. Promise that nothing shall turn you back when I am gone!"

"I promise!" Charley says, his face shining.

I reckon Ethel Curtis and Marshalltown, Iowa, were a long way from his thoughts just then.

"The supreme moment," Bragdon says again. "Ah, but it's been worth it! It's been worth it all! Call them from the forest!"

We couldn't see any of the Indians, though we knew the brush was alive with 'em. I took a few steps toward the fork of the roads with my hands up—palms out—and called for them to come have a powwow with us.

After a minute two of 'em showed up, one coming out of the tunnel through the underbrush that led off to the left, and the other from the tunnel that led to the right.

Bragdon had spread his coat over the table on which lay the stone god, and the black wallet he'd taken from the steel box, and he only removed it when the two natives stood directly in front of the table. Then Bragdon drew off the coat from the table, pointed to the little stone,

image, and shouted:

“Look!”

What happened then happened as fast as death from a stroke of lightning. It was only about three jumps from that table in the hut to where those little dark tunnels through the forest forked off the road, left and right; and those tunnels were just tunnels—nothing more. Just little tunnels through foliage and underbrush that was almost as solid as dirt.

One of the Indians gave a kind of squeak when he seen that stone image, grabbed it up in his hands, and was off for the tunnel that led away to the *left* before any of us could move.

He was almost at the mouth of the tunnel when the other Indian grabbed the black leather wallet and made a dive for the tunnel that led away to the *right*.

And right then, sir, old John Bragdon went into action. He went over that table, hell bent, roaring like a mad bull, and jumped for the mouth of the tunnel that led away to the right, hot after the Indian that had that *black wallet*.

Bragdon reached for his gun as he went over the table, and he fired just as he dove into the mouth of that accursed tunnel of foliage that a man of his height had to bend double to get into.

I've been in a place or two where I had to move quick or never move no more at all, and I've never been counted slow when action was necessary. I was right after Bragdon, and as I went into that dark tunnel just behind him, with my gat ready for business, I heard the twang of a number of bow strings, and ahead of me I thought I saw a brown arm with some sort of club in the hand reach out from the green and

strike downward.

I fired at the arm and heard a grunt. Then I stumbled over Bragdon and the Indian who had stolen the wallet, lying together on the ground.

I caught him by the shoulders and dragged him back out of that dark tunnel. As I dragged him away I could hear the gradually receding rustle of the foliage that assured me the natives were on the run.

But they'd done for poor Bragdon. He had a half-dozen arrows in him, and his head was crushed.

But he'd got that wallet back. The little stone image was gone for good, but he sure had that wallet for his life. We had to pry his fingers away from it by main strength. This is what we found in it:

*A daguerreotype of a young girl dressed in the style that prevailed when John Bragdon was about twenty-four.*

*A solitaire diamond ring that seemed about big enough to fit the third finger of the girl whose face was pictured in the daguerreotype.*

*A lady's handkerchief, yellow with age.*

I reckon I hadn't realized before what a sincere affection Charley had for the old professor. He knelt over his body for quite some time, and when he stood up the tears were still flooding down over his cheeks.

He done a funny thing then. He looked up at the sky, and spoke to his girl back in Marshalltown just as natural as though she'd been standing right in front of him.

“Ethel,” he said, “he knows now; and if he could speak, he'd tell me to go back to you. I'm coming, Ethel!”