

Promise . . .

"A strong America is a peaceful America!"

—U. S. Army Recruiting Slogan

Yes, those are the words:
Utter them firmly, and with great respect,
For they are the Promise.

Let no one repeat them with rising inflection!
Let no one suggest that half of the meaning is hidden!

For are not these confident words
(Pronounced to assure the allegiance of those whose hope
is in power)
—Are they not the words of the wielders of power?

Who should know better than they
How peaceful is power to those who possess it?

Certainly, this is a nation
Whose chiefest distinction is strength:
So let us have more of the same, and that quickly!

Let the coal be dug more rapidly:
Turn the wheels of the mills with more haste:
Come, let us hurry the builders:
And let not the markets be idle:
Hasten the freight-laden diesels:
Speed on their way the scurrying minions of commerce:

Hearken! Do you not hear it?
Our sinews swelling with strength and bursting with pride?

The whirr of the blatant presses:
The clang of the steam-fitter's hammer:
The roar of the virtuous forge:
The whistling of steam from the laboring winch:
And can it be? the round silver chime of the dollars:

Dollars that fall to the quick and the crafty—
Dollars accepted reluctantly, modestly—
Surely the reward of virtue, deservingness—
Quickly donated to charity, yes, and the income tax—
For such is the nature of generous free competition.

But there is another sound: a sound strangely absent:
A sound not lightly neglected by any respectable nation:
Ah! there it is, in the echoing distance:
The rumble and tramp of the armies!

So: and now we are truly strong!

(Let it not even be whispered
That we are not the first to be strong!
Let never a mention be made,
Not even in jesting,
That we are treading the dust and the ruins
Of another nation, and several,
Which boasted of strength—

(Search not the past for the report of a nation
Strong with the strength of the mighty—
A nation of virile statesmen:
A nation of healthy commerce:
A nation of tramping feet:
It would never do to suggest
That another nation has worshipped
The glory of peaceable strength, and that vainly—
That strength did not save from ignominious doom
Nor power preserve from oblivion—Rome!

(Supine lies Rome in notorious dust:
Immured in the spectacular neglect
Reserved for those whose greatness
Has become a name
Too common to repeat.

(Her boast of peaceful intent did not save—
Nor pampering her restive people with sensation—
Nor binding up in bureaucratic bailing-wire the state—
Nor all the togaed senators proclaiming in the Forum
The words prepared by emperors,
Rehearsed by rhetoricians,
Recited by plebians and by slaves—
The words: "A strong Rome is a peaceful Rome!"
—They did not save.

(No: the strength of the legions did not avail:
Even the vaunted lads of the Praetorian Guard
Found each his personal night beneath the sun:
The tramp of armored feet gave way to silence—
And presently a strong Rome was a peaceful Rome.)

But Rome was not alone,
Nor is the resting-place of men and nations crowded:
The cobwebs of eternity are patient,
And they will persevere to cover
Even so exceedingly strong a nation as our own.

But ours will be a different dust
From the common dust which covers the others:
Richer with greatness and genius perhaps—
Heavier with plastics and steel, to be sure—
But different in kind:

Dust of a sort that not even innocent men
can exist on it—
Dust exuding a venom of hate so technically perfect
As to loosen the hold of the atoms composing it—
Giving forth death as a vapor,
And offering always the fragrance of desolation—
Stronger than salt strewn on the ruins of Carthage—
Longer than lava preserving the shape of Pompeii.

Our monument a desert of dust eternally deadly—
The radio-active tomb of our powerful pride.

Yes, let them have strength if they think they can tame it;
Grant them the power upon which they insist:
Let them labor a time at being Leviathan:
Let them know that we envy them not,
but greatly respect them,
and wish them success.
(Insofar as if they are successful
We live;
And if they should happen to fail,
We die in their failure.)

But cause them to hearken a moment—
(Taking the power into their hands)
To the muttering rumble of trouble,
And the sickening sway of faulty foundations
Settling under their feet.

Cause them to understand,
Before the much-needed power is given,
That it is not the tomb or the palace of only a few
they are building,
But that something more than a couple of billion
Sensitive psychosomatic existents—
The dwellers-in-apprehension of this precarious globe—
Stand or fall with them,
Bound by the shackles of fate
To the words of their mouths and the deeds of their hands.

Perhaps they already know,
But never let them forget
in the pleasure of power—
That they have guidance to give,
An example to set,
And responsibility heavier than the weight of an infinite
number of souls on the conscience
Plus the national debt.

And frequently as the voice of the clock
Remind them that the eyes of the ages are on them:
That the time for a fight is not yet;
Repeat in their ears the words of the Promise,
So that they shall not forget.

Dean M. Kelley.