

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

A MISCELLANY OF MEN

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G. K. Chesterton

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THE SUFFRAGIST

Rightly or wrongly, it is certain that a man both liberal and chivalric, can and very often does feel a dis-ease and distrust touching those political women we call Suffragettes. Like most other popular sentiments, it is generally wrongly stated even when it is rightly felt. One part of it can be put most shortly thus: that when a woman puts up her fists to a man she is putting herself in the only posture in which he is not afraid of her. He can be afraid of her speech and still more of her silence; but force reminds him of a rusted but very real weapon of which he has grown ashamed. But these crude summaries are never quite accurate in any matter of the instincts. For the things which are the simplest so long as they are undisputed invariably become the subtlest when once they are disputed: which was what Joubert meant, I suppose, when he said, "It is not hard to believe in God if one does not define Him." When the evil instincts of old Foulon made him say of the poor, "Let them eat grass," the good and Christian instincts of the poor made them hang him on a lamppost with his mouth stuffed full of that vegetation. But if a modern vegetarian aristocrat were to say to the poor, "But why

don't you like grass?" their intelligences would be much more taxed to find such an appropriate repartee. And this matter of the functions of the sexes is primarily a matter of the instincts; sex and breathing are about the only two things that generally work best when they are least worried about. That, I suppose, is why the same sophisticated age that has poisoned the world with Feminism is also polluting it with Breathing Exercises. We plunge at once into a forest of false analogies and bad blundering history; while almost any man or woman left to themselves would know at least that sex is quite different from anything else in the world.

There is no kind of comparison possible between a quarrel of man and woman (however right the woman may be) and the other quarrels of slave and master, of rich and poor, or of patriot and invader, with which the Suffragists deluge us every day. The difference is as plain as noon; these other alien groups never came into contact until they came into collision. Races and ranks began with battle, even if they afterwards melted into amity. But the very first fact about the sexes is that they like each other. They seek each other: and awful as are the sins and sorrows that often come of their mating, it was not such things that made them meet. It is utterly astounding to note the way in which modern writers and talkers miss this plain, wide, and overwhelming fact: one would suppose woman a victim and nothing else. By this account ideal, emancipated woman has, age after age, been knocked silly with a stone axe. But really there is no fact to show that

ideal, emancipated woman was ever knocked silly; except the fact that she is silly. And that might have arisen in so many other ways. Real responsible woman has never been silly; and any one wishing to knock her would be wise (like the streetboys) to knock and run away. It is ultimately idiotic to compare this prehistoric participation with any royalties or rebellions. Genuine royalties wish to crush rebellions. Genuine rebels wish to destroy kings. The sexes cannot wish to abolish each other; and if we allow them any sort of permanent opposition it will sink into something as base as a party system.

As marriage, therefore, is rooted in an aboriginal unity of instincts, you cannot compare it, even in its quarrels, with any of the mere collisions of separate institutions. You could compare it with the emancipation of negroes from planters – if it were true that a white man in early youth always dreamed of the abstract beauty of a black man. You could compare it with the revolt of tenants against a landlord – if it were true that young landlords wrote sonnets to invisible tenants. You could compare it to the fighting policy of the Fenians – if it were true that every normal Irishman wanted an Englishman to come and live with him. But as we know there are no instincts in any of these directions, these analogies are not only false but false on the cardinal fact. I do not speak of the comparative comfort or merit of these different things: I say they are different. It may be that love turned to hate is terribly common in sexual matters: it may be that hate turned to love is not uncommon in the rivalries of race or class. But

any philosophy about the sexes that begins with anything but the mutual attraction of the sexes, begins with a fallacy; and all its historical comparisons are as irrelevant and impertinent as puns.

But to expose such cold negation of the instincts is easy: to express or even half express the instincts is very hard. The instincts are very much concerned with what literary people call “style” in letters or more vulgar people call “style” in dress. They are much concerned with how a thing is done, as well as whether one may do it: and the deepest elements in their attraction or aversion can often only be conveyed by stray examples or sudden images. When Danton was defending himself before the Jacobin tribunal he spoke so loud that his voice was heard across the Seine, in quite remote streets on the other side of the river. He must have bellowed like a bull of Bashan. Yet none of us would think of that prodigy except as something poetical and appropriate. None of us would instinctively feel that Danton was less of a man or even less of a gentleman, for speaking so in such an hour. But suppose we heard that Marie Antoinette, when tried before the same tribunal, had howled so that she could be heard in the Faubourg St. Germain – well, I leave it to the instincts, if there are any left. It is not wrong to howl. Neither is it right. It is simply a question of the instant impression on the artistic and even animal parts of humanity, if the noise were heard suddenly like a gun.

Perhaps the nearest verbal analysis of the instinct may be found in the gestures of the orator addressing a crowd. For the

true orator must always be a demagogue: even if the mob be a small mob, like the French committee or the English House of Lords. And “demagogue,” in the good Greek meaning, does not mean one who pleases the populace, but one who leads it: and if you will notice, you will see that all the instinctive gestures of oratory are gestures of military leadership; pointing the people to a path or waving them on to an advance. Notice that long sweep of the arm across the body and outward, which great orators use naturally and cheap orators artificially. It is almost the exact gesture of the drawing of a sword.

The point is not that women are unworthy of votes; it is not even that votes are unworthy of women. It is that votes are unworthy of men, so long as they are merely votes; and have nothing in them of this ancient militarism of democracy. The only crowd worth talking to is the crowd that is ready to go somewhere and do something; the only demagogue worth hearing is he who can point at something to be done: and, if he points with a sword, will only feel it familiar and useful like an elongated finger. Now, except in some mystical exceptions which prove the rule, these are not the gestures, and therefore not the instincts, of women. No honest man dislikes the public woman. He can only dislike the political woman; an entirely different thing. The instinct has nothing to do with any desire to keep women curtained or captive: if such a desire exists. A husband would be pleased if his wife wore a gold crown and proclaimed laws from a throne of marble; or if she uttered oracles from the

tripod of a priestess; or if she could walk in mystical motherhood before the procession of some great religious order. But that she should stand on a platform in the exact altitude in which he stands; leaning forward a little more than is graceful and holding her mouth open a little longer and wider than is dignified – well, I only write here of the facts of natural history; and the fact is that it is this, and not publicity or importance, that hurts. It is for the modern world to judge whether such instincts are indeed danger signals; and whether the hurting of moral as of material nerves is a tocsin and a warning of nature.

THE POET AND THE CHEESE

There is something creepy in the flat Eastern Counties; a brush of the white feather. There is a stillness, which is rather of the mind than of the bodily senses. Rapid changes and sudden revelations of scenery, even when they are soundless, have something in them analogous to a movement of music, to a crash or a cry. Mountain hamlets spring out on us with a shout like mountain brigands. Comfortable valleys accept us with open arms and warm words, like comfortable innkeepers. But travelling in the great level lands has a curiously still and lonely quality; lonely even when there are plenty of people on the road and in the market-place. One's voice seems to break an almost elvish silence, and something unreasonably weird in the phrase of the nursery tales, "And he went a little farther and came to another place," comes back into the mind.

In some such mood I came along a lean, pale road south of the fens, and found myself in a large, quiet, and seemingly forgotten village. It was one of those places that instantly produce a frame of mind which, it may be, one afterwards decks out with unreal details. I dare say that grass did not really grow in the streets, but I came away with a curious impression that it did. I dare say the marketplace was not literally lonely and without sign of life, but it left the vague impression of being so. The place was large and even loose in design, yet it had the air of something hidden

away and always overlooked. It seemed shy, like a big yokel; the low roofs seemed to be ducking behind the hedges and railings; and the chimneys holding their breath. I came into it in that dead hour of the afternoon which is neither after lunch nor before tea, nor anything else even on a half-holiday; and I had a fantastic feeling that I had strayed into a lost and extra hour that is not numbered in the twenty-four.

I entered an inn which stood openly in the market-place yet was almost as private as a private house. Those who talk of "public-houses" as if they were all one problem would have been both puzzled and pleased with such a place. In the front window a stout old lady in black with an elaborate cap sat doing a large piece of needlework. She had a kind of comfortable Puritanism about her; and might have been (perhaps she was) the original Mrs. Grundy. A little more withdrawn into the parlour sat a tall, strong, and serious girl, with a face of beautiful honesty and a pair of scissors stuck in her belt, doing a small piece of needlework. Two feet behind them sat a hulking labourer with a humorous face like wood painted scarlet, with a huge mug of mild beer which he had not touched, and probably would not touch for hours. On the hearthrug there was an equally motionless cat; and on the table a copy of 'Household Words'.

I was conscious of some atmosphere, still and yet bracing, that I had met somewhere in literature. There was poetry in it as well as piety; and yet it was not poetry after my particular taste. It was somehow at once solid and airy. Then I remembered that it

was the atmosphere in some of Wordsworth's rural poems; which are full of genuine freshness and wonder, and yet are in some incurable way commonplace. This was curious; for Wordsworth's men were of the rocks and fells, and not of the fenlands or flats. But perhaps it is the clearness of still water and the mirrored skies of meres and pools that produces this crystalline virtue. Perhaps that is why Wordsworth is called a Lake Poet instead of a mountain poet. Perhaps it is the water that does it. Certainly the whole of that town was like a cup of water given at morning.

After a few sentences exchanged at long intervals in the manner of rustic courtesy, I inquired casually what was the name of the town. The old lady answered that its name was Stilton, and composedly continued her needlework. But I had paused with my mug in air, and was gazing at her with a suddenly arrested concern. "I suppose," I said, "that it has nothing to do with the cheese of that name." "Oh, yes," she answered, with a staggering indifference, "they used to make it here."

I put down my mug with a gravity far greater than her own. "But this place is a Shrine!" I said. "Pilgrims should be pouring into it from wherever the English legend has endured alive. There ought to be a colossal statue in the market-place of the man who invented Stilton cheese. There ought to be another colossal statue of the first cow who provided the foundations of it. There should be a burnished tablet let into the ground on the spot where some courageous man first ate Stilton cheese, and survived. On the top of a neighbouring hill (if there are any neighbouring

hills) there should be a huge model of a Stilton cheese, made of some rich green marble and engraven with some haughty motto: I suggest something like ‘Ver non semper viret; sed Stiltonia semper virescit.’” The old lady said, “Yes, sir,” and continued her domestic occupations.

After a strained and emotional silence, I said, “If I take a meal here tonight can you give me any Stilton?”

“No, sir; I’m afraid we haven’t got any Stilton,” said the immovable one, speaking as if it were something thousands of miles away.

“This is awful,” I said: for it seemed to me a strange allegory of England as she is now; this little town that had lost its glory; and forgotten, so to speak, the meaning of its own name. And I thought it yet more symbolic because from all that old and full and virile life, the great cheese was gone; and only the beer remained. And even that will be stolen by the Liberals or adulterated by the Conservatives. Politely disengaging myself, I made my way as quickly as possible to the nearest large, noisy, and nasty town in that neighbourhood, where I sought out the nearest vulgar, tawdry, and avaricious restaurant.

There (after trifling with beef, mutton, puddings, pies, and so on) I got a Stilton cheese. I was so much moved by my memories that I wrote a sonnet to the cheese. Some critical friends have hinted to me that my sonnet is not strictly new; that it contains “echoes” (as they express it) of some other poem that they have read somewhere. Here, at least, are the lines I wrote:

SONNET TO A STILTON CHEESE

Stilton, thou shouldst be living at this hour
And so thou art. Nor lovest grace thereby;
England has need of thee, and so have I —
She is a Fen. Far as the eye can scour,
League after grassy league from Lincoln tower
To Stilton in the fields, she is a Fen.
Yet this high cheese, by choice of fenland men,
Like a tall green volcano rose in power.

Plain living and long drinking are no more,
And pure religion reading 'Household Words',
And sturdy manhood sitting still all day
Shrink, like this cheese that crumbles to its core;
While my digestion, like the House of Lords,
The heaviest burdens on herself doth lay.

I confess I feel myself as if some literary influence, something that has haunted me, were present in this otherwise original poem; but it is hopeless to disentangle it now.

THE THING

The wind awoke last night with so noble a violence that it was like the war in heaven; and I thought for a moment that the Thing had broken free. For wind never seems like empty air. Wind always sounds full and physical, like the big body of something; and I fancied that the Thing itself was walking gigantic along the great roads between the forests of beech.

Let me explain. The vitality and recurrent victory of Christendom have been due to the power of the Thing to break out from time to time from its enveloping words and symbols. Without this power all civilisations tend to perish under a load of language and ritual. One instance of this we hear much in modern discussion: the separation of the form from the spirit of religion. But we hear too little of numberless other cases of the same stiffening and falsification; we are far too seldom reminded that just as church-going is not religion, so reading and writing are not knowledge, and voting is not self-government. It would be easy to find people in the big cities who can read and write quickly enough to be clerks, but who are actually ignorant of the daily movements of the sun and moon.

The case of self-government is even more curious, especially as one watches it for the first time in a country district. Self-government arose among men (probably among the primitive men, certainly among the ancients) out of an idea which seems

now too simple to be understood. The notion of self-government was not (as many modern friends and foes of it seem to think) the notion that the ordinary citizen is to be consulted as one consults an Encyclopaedia. He is not there to be asked a lot of fancy questions, to see how he answers them. He and his fellows are to be, within reasonable human limits, masters of their own lives. They shall decide whether they shall be men of the oar or the wheel, of the spade or the spear. The men of the valley shall settle whether the valley shall be devastated for coal or covered with corn and vines; the men of the town shall decide whether it shall be hoary with thatches or splendid with spires. Of their own nature and instinct they shall gather under a patriarchal chief or debate in a political market-place. And in case the word "man" be misunderstood, I may remark that in this moral atmosphere, this original soul of self-government, the women always have quite as much influence as the men. But in modern England neither the men nor the women have any influence at all. In this primary matter, the moulding of the landscape, the creation of a mode of life, the people are utterly impotent. They stand and stare at imperial and economic processes going on, as they might stare at the Lord Mayor's Show.

Round about where I live, for instance, two changes are taking place which really affect the land and all things that live on it, whether for good or evil. The first is that the urban civilisation (or whatever it is) is advancing; that the clerks come out in black swarms and the villas advance in red battalions. The other is that

the vast estates into which England has long been divided are passing out of the hands of the English gentry into the hands of men who are always upstarts and often actually foreigners.

Now, these are just the sort of things with which self-government was really supposed to grapple. People were supposed to be able to indicate whether they wished to live in town or country, to be represented by a gentleman or a cad. I do not presume to prejudge their decision; perhaps they would prefer the cad; perhaps he is really preferable. I say that the filling of a man's native sky with smoke or the selling of his roof over his head illustrate the sort of things he ought to have some say in, if he is supposed to be governing himself. But owing to the strange trend of recent society, these enormous earthquakes he has to pass over and treat as private trivialities. In theory the building of a villa is as incidental as the buying of a hat. In reality it is as if all Lancashire were laid waste for deer forests; or as if all Belgium were flooded by the sea. In theory the sale of a squire's land to a moneylender is a minor and exceptional necessity. In reality it is a thing like a German invasion. Sometimes it is a German invasion.

Upon this helpless populace, gazing at these prodigies and fates, comes round about every five years a thing called a General Election. It is believed by antiquarians to be the remains of some system of self-government; but it consists solely in asking the citizen questions about everything except what he understands. The examination paper of the Election generally consists of some

such queries as these: "I. Are the green biscuits eaten by the peasants of Eastern Lithuania in your opinion fit for human food? II. Are the religious professions of the President of the Orange Free State hypocritical or sincere? III. Do you think that the savages in Prusso-Portuguese East Bunyi-land are as happy and hygienic as the fortunate savages in Franco-British West Bunyi-land? IV. Did the lost Latin Charter said to have been exacted from Henry III reserve the right of the Crown to create peers? V. What do you think of what America thinks of what Mr. Roosevelt thinks of what Sir Eldon Gorst thinks of the state of the Nile? VI. Detect some difference between the two persons in frock-coats placed before you at this election."

Now, it never was supposed in any natural theory of self-government that the ordinary man in my neighbourhood need answer fantastic questions like these. He is a citizen of South Bucks, not an editor of 'Notes and Queries'. He would be, I seriously believe, the best judge of whether farmsteads or factory chimneys should adorn his own sky-line, of whether stupid squires or clever usurers should govern his own village. But these are precisely the things which the oligarchs will not allow him to touch with his finger. Instead, they allow him an Imperial destiny and divine mission to alter, under their guidance, all the things that he knows nothing about. The name of self-government is noisy everywhere: the Thing is throttled.

The wind sang and split the sky like thunder all the night through; in scraps of sleep it filled my dreams with the divine

discordances of martyrdom and revolt; I heard the horn of Roland and the drums of Napoleon and all the tongues of terror with which the Thing has gone forth: the spirit of our race alive. But when I came down in the morning only a branch or two was broken off the tree in my garden; and none of the great country houses in the neighbourhood were blown down, as would have happened if the Thing had really been abroad.

THE MAN WHO THINKS BACKWARDS

The man who thinks backwards is a very powerful person today: indeed, if he is not omnipotent, he is at least omnipresent. It is he who writes nearly all the learned books and articles, especially of the scientific or skeptical sort; all the articles on Eugenics and Social Evolution and Prison Reform and the Higher Criticism and all the rest of it. But especially it is this strange and tortuous being who does most of the writing about female emancipation and the reconsidering of marriage. For the man who thinks backwards is very frequently a woman.

Thinking backwards is not quite easy to define abstractedly; and, perhaps, the simplest method is to take some object, as plain as possible, and from it illustrate the two modes of thought: the right mode in which all real results have been rooted; the wrong mode, which is confusing all our current discussions, especially our discussions about the relations of the sexes. Casting my eye round the room, I notice an object which is often mentioned in the higher and subtler of these debates about the sexes: I mean a poker. I will take a poker and think about it; first forwards and then backwards; and so, perhaps, show what I mean.

The sage desiring to think well and wisely about a poker will begin somewhat as follows: Among the live creatures that crawl

about this star the queerest is the thing called Man. This plucked and plumeless bird, comic and forlorn, is the butt of all the philosophies. He is the only naked animal; and this quality, once, it is said, his glory, is now his shame. He has to go outside himself for everything that he wants. He might almost be considered as an absent-minded person who had gone bathing and left his clothes everywhere, so that he has hung his hat upon the beaver and his coat upon the sheep. The rabbit has white warmth for a waistcoat, and the glow-worm has a lantern for a head. But man has no heat in his hide, and the light in his body is darkness; and he must look for light and warmth in the wild, cold universe in which he is cast. This is equally true of his soul and of his body; he is the one creature that has lost his heart as much as he has lost his hide. In a spiritual sense he has taken leave of his senses; and even in a literal sense he has been unable to keep his hair on. And just as this external need of his has lit in his dark brain the dreadful star called religion, so it has lit in his hand the only adequate symbol of it: I mean the red flower called Fire. Fire, the most magic and startling of all material things, is a thing known only to man and the expression of his sublime externalism. It embodies all that is human in his hearths and all that is divine on his altars. It is the most human thing in the world; seen across wastes of marsh or medleys of forest, it is veritably the purple and golden flag of the sons of Eve. But there is about this generous and rejoicing thing an alien and awful quality: the quality of torture. Its presence is life; its touch is death. Therefore, it is always necessary to have an

intermediary between ourselves and this dreadful deity; to have a priest to intercede for us with the god of life and death; to send an ambassador to the fire. That priest is the poker. Made of a material more merciless and warlike than the other instruments of domesticity, hammered on the anvil and born itself in the flame, the poker is strong enough to enter the burning fiery furnace, and, like the holy children, not be consumed. In this heroic service it is often battered and twisted, but is the more honourable for it, like any other soldier who has been under fire.

Now all this may sound very fanciful and mystical, but it is the right view of pokers, and no one who takes it will ever go in for any wrong view of pokers, such as using them to beat one's wife or torture one's children, or even (though that is more excusable) to make a policeman jump, as the clown does in the pantomime. He who has thus gone back to the beginning, and seen everything as quaint and new, will always see things in their right order, the one depending on the other in degree of purpose and importance: the poker for the fire and the fire for the man and the man for the glory of God.

This is thinking forwards. Now our modern discussions about everything, Imperialism, Socialism, or Votes for Women, are all entangled in an opposite train of thought, which runs as follows: – A modern intellectual comes in and sees a poker. He is a positivist; he will not begin with any dogmas about the nature of man, or any day-dreams about the mystery of fire. He will begin with what he can see, the poker; and the first thing he sees

about the poker is that it is crooked. He says, "Poor poker; it's crooked." Then he asks how it came to be crooked; and is told that there is a thing in the world (with which his temperament has hitherto left him unacquainted) – a thing called fire. He points out, very kindly and clearly, how silly it is of people, if they want a straight poker, to put it into a chemical combustion which will very probably heat and warp it. "Let us abolish fire," he says, "and then we shall have perfectly straight pokers. Why should you want a fire at all?" They explain to him that a creature called Man wants a fire, because he has no fur or feathers. He gazes dreamily at the embers for a few seconds, and then shakes his head. "I doubt if such an animal is worth preserving," he says. "He must eventually go under in the cosmic struggle when pitted against well-armoured and warmly protected species, who have wings and trunks and spires and scales and horns and shaggy hair. If Man cannot live without these luxuries, you had better abolish Man." At this point, as a rule, the crowd is convinced; it heaves up all its clubs and axes, and abolishes him. At least, one of him.

Before we begin discussing our various new plans for the people's welfare, let us make a kind of agreement that we will argue in a straightforward way, and not in a tail-foremost way. The typical modern movements may be right; but let them be defended because they are right, not because they are typical modern movements. Let us begin with the actual woman or man in the street, who is cold; like mankind before the finding of fire. Do not let us begin with the end of the last red-hot discussion –

like the end of a red hot poker. Imperialism may be right. But if it is right, it is right because England has some divine authority like Israel, or some human authority like Rome; not because we have saddled ourselves with South Africa, and don't know how to get rid of it. Socialism may be true. But if it is true, it is true because the tribe or the city can really declare all land to be common land, not because Harrod's Stores exist and the commonwealth must copy them. Female suffrage may be just. But if it is just, it is just because women are women, not because women are sweated workers and white slaves and all sorts of things that they ought never to have been. Let not the Imperialist accept a colony because it is there, nor the Suffragist seize a vote because it is lying about, nor the Socialist buy up an industry merely because it is for sale.

Let us ask ourselves first what we really do want, not what recent legal decisions have told us to want, or recent logical philosophies proved that we must want, or recent social prophecies predicted that we shall some day want. If there must be a British Empire, let it be British, and not, in mere panic, American or Prussian. If there ought to be female suffrage, let it be female, and not a mere imitation as coarse as the male blackguard or as dull as the male clerk. If there is to be Socialism, let it be social; that is, as different as possible from all the big commercial departments of to-day. The really good journeyman tailor does not cut his coat according to his cloth; he asks for more cloth. The really practical statesman does not fit himself to

existing conditions, he denounces the conditions as unfit. History is like some deeply planted tree which, though gigantic in girth, tapers away at last into tiny twigs; and we are in the topmost branches. Each of us is trying to bend the tree by a twig: to alter England through a distant colony, or to capture the State through a small State department, or to destroy all voting through a vote. In all such bewilderment he is wise who resists this temptation of trivial triumph or surrender, and happy (in an echo of the Roman poet) who remembers the roots of things.

THE NAMELESS MAN

There are only two forms of government the monarchy or personal government, and the republic or impersonal government. England is not a government; England is an anarchy, because there are so many kings. But there is one real advantage (among many real disadvantages) in the method of abstract democracy, and that is this: that under impersonal government politics are so much more personal. In France and America, where the State is an abstraction, political argument is quite full of human details – some might even say of inhuman details. But in England, precisely because we are ruled by personages, these personages do not permit personalities. In England names are honoured, and therefore names are suppressed. But in the republics, in France especially, a man can put his enemies' names into his article and his own name at the end of it.

This is the essential condition of such candour. If we merely made our anonymous articles more violent, we should be baser than we are now. We should only be arming masked men with daggers instead of cudgels. And I, for one, have always believed in the more general signing of articles, and have signed my own articles on many occasions when, heaven knows, I had little reason to be vain of them. I have heard many arguments for anonymity; but they all seem to amount to the statement that anonymity is safe, which is just what I complain of. In matters

of truth the fact that you don't want to publish something is, nine times out of ten, a proof that you ought to publish it.

But there is one answer to my perpetual plea for a man putting his name to his writing. There is one answer, and there is only one answer, and it is never given. It is that in the modern complexity very often a man's name is almost as false as his pseudonym. The prominent person today is eternally trying to lose a name, and to get a title. For instance, we all read with earnestness and patience the pages of the 'Daily Mail', and there are times when we feel moved to cry, "Bring to us the man who thought these strange thoughts! Pursue him, capture him, take great care of him. Bring him back to us tenderly, like some precious bale of silk, that we may look upon the face of the man who desires such things to be printed. Let us know his name; his social and medical pedigree." But in the modern muddle (it might be said) how little should we gain if those frankly fatuous sheets were indeed subscribed by the man who had inspired them. Suppose that after every article stating that the Premier is a piratical Socialist there were printed the simple word "Northcliffe." What does that simple word suggest to the simple soul? To my simple soul (uninstructed otherwise) it suggests a lofty and lonely crag somewhere in the wintry seas towards the Orkneys or Norway; and barely clinging to the top of this crag the fortress of some forgotten chieftain. As it happens, of course, I know that the word does not mean this; it means another Fleet Street journalist like myself or only different from myself in so far as he has sought to secure money

while I have sought to secure a jolly time.

A title does not now even serve as a distinction: it does not distinguish. A coronet is not merely an extinguisher: it is a hiding-place.

But the really odd thing is this. This false quality in titles does not merely apply to the new and vulgar titles, but to the old and historic titles also. For hundreds of years titles in England have been essentially unmeaning; void of that very weak and very human instinct in which titles originated. In essential nonsense of application there is nothing to choose between Northcliffe and Norfolk. The Duke of Norfolk means (as my exquisite and laborious knowledge of Latin informs me) the Leader of Norfolk. It is idle to talk against representative government or for it. All government is representative government until it begins to decay. Unfortunately (as is also evident) all government begins to decay the instant it begins to govern. All aristocrats were first meant as envoys of democracy; and most envoys of democracy lose no time in becoming aristocrats. By the old essential human notion, the Duke of Norfolk ought simply to be the first or most manifest of Norfolk men.

I see growing and filling out before me the image of an actual Duke of Norfolk. For instance, Norfolk men all make their voices run up very high at the end of a sentence. The Duke of Norfolk's voice, therefore, ought to end in a perfect shriek. They often (I am told) end sentences with the word "together"; entirely irrespective of its meaning. Thus I shall expect the Duke

of Norfolk to say: "I beg to second the motion together"; or "This is a great constitutional question together." I shall expect him to know much about the Broads and the sluggish rivers above them; to know about the shooting of water-fowl, and not to know too much about anything else. Of mountains he must be wildly and ludicrously ignorant. He must have the freshness of Norfolk; nay, even the flatness of Norfolk. He must remind me of the watery expanses, the great square church towers and the long level sunsets of East England. If he does not do this, I decline to know him.

I need not multiply such cases; the principle applies everywhere. Thus I lose all interest in the Duke of Devonshire unless he can assure me that his soul is filled with that strange warm Puritanism, Puritanism shot with romance, which colours the West Country. He must eat nothing but clotted cream, drink nothing but cider, reading nothing but 'Lorna Doone', and be unacquainted with any town larger than Plymouth, which he must regard with some awe, as the Central Babylon of the world. Again, I should expect the Prince of Wales always to be full of the mysticism and dreamy ardour of the Celtic fringe.

Perhaps it may be thought that these demands are a little extreme; and that our fancy is running away with us. Nevertheless, it is not my Duke of Devonshire who is funny; but the real Duke of Devonshire. The point is that the scheme of titles is a misfit throughout: hardly anywhere do we find a modern man whose name and rank represent in any way his type, his

locality, or his mode of life. As a mere matter of social comedy, the thing is worth noticing. You will meet a man whose name suggests a gouty admiral, and you will find him exactly like a timid organist: you will hear announced the name of a haughty and almost heathen grande dame, and behold the entrance of a nice, smiling Christian cook. These are light complications of the central fact of the falsification of all names and ranks. Our peers are like a party of mediaeval knights who should have exchanged shields, crests, and pennons. For the present rule seems to be that the Duke of Sussex may lawfully own the whole of Essex; and that the Marquis of Cornwall may own all the hills and valleys so long as they are not Cornish.

The clue to all this tangle is as simple as it is terrible. If England is an aristocracy, England is dying. If this system IS the country, as some say, the country is stiffening into more than the pomp and paralysis of China. It is the final sign of imbecility in a people that it calls cats dogs and describes the sun as the moon – and is very particular about the preciseness of these pseudonyms. To be wrong, and to be carefully wrong, that is the definition of decadence. The disease called aphasia, in which people begin by saying tea when they mean coffee, commonly ends in their silence. Silence of this stiff sort is the chief mark of the powerful parts of modern society. They all seem straining to keep things in rather than to let things out. For the kings of finance speechlessness is counted a way of being strong, though it should rather be counted a way of being sly. By this time the

Parliament does not parley any more than the Speaker speaks. Even the newspaper editors and proprietors are more despotic and dangerous by what they do not utter than by what they do. We have all heard the expression “golden silence.” The expression “brazen silence” is the only adequate phrase for our editors. If we wake out of this throttled, gaping, and wordless nightmare, we must awake with a yell. The Revolution that releases England from the fixed falsity of its present position will be not less noisy than other revolutions. It will contain, I fear, a great deal of that rude accomplishment described among little boys as “calling names”; but that will not matter much so long as they are the right names.

THE GARDENER AND THE GUINEA

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an English Peasant. Indeed, the type can only exist in community, so much does it depend on cooperation and common laws. One must not think primarily of a French Peasant; any more than of a German Measle. The plural of the word is its proper form; you cannot have a Peasant till you have a peasantry. The essence of the Peasant ideal is equality; and you cannot be equal all by yourself.

Nevertheless, because human nature always craves and half creates the things necessary to its happiness, there are approximations and suggestions of the possibility of such a race even here. The nearest approach I know to the temper of a Peasant in England is that of the country gardener; not, of course, the great scientific gardener attached to the great houses; he is a rich man's servant like any other. I mean the small jobbing gardener who works for two or three moderate-sized gardens; who works on his own; who sometimes even owns his house; and who frequently owns his tools. This kind of man has really some of the characteristics of the true Peasant – especially the characteristics that people don't like. He has none of that irresponsible mirth which is the consolation of most poor men in England. The gardener is even disliked sometimes by the owners

of the shrubs and flowers; because (like Micaiah) he prophesies not good concerning them, but evil. The English gardener is grim, critical, self-respecting; sometimes even economical. Nor is this (as the reader's lightning wit will flash back at me) merely because the English gardener is always a Scotch gardener. The type does exist in pure South England blood and speech; I have spoken to the type. I was speaking to the type only the other evening, when a rather odd little incident occurred.

It was one of those wonderful evenings in which the sky was warm and radiant while the earth was still comparatively cold and wet. But it is of the essence of Spring to be unexpected; as in that heroic and hackneyed line about coming "before the swallow dares." Spring never is Spring unless it comes too soon. And on a day like that one might pray, without any profanity, that Spring might come on earth as it was in heaven. The gardener was gardening. I was not gardening. It is needless to explain the causes of this difference; it would be to tell the tremendous history of two souls. It is needless because there is a more immediate explanation of the case: the gardener and I, if not equal in agreement, were at least equal in difference. It is quite certain that he would not have allowed me to touch the garden if I had gone down on my knees to him. And it is by no means certain that I should have consented to touch the garden if he had gone down on his knees to me. His activity and my idleness, therefore, went on steadily side by side through the long sunset hours.

And all the time I was thinking what a shame it was that

he was not sticking his spade into his own garden, instead of mine: he knew about the earth and the underworld of seeds, the resurrection of Spring and the flowers that appear in order like a procession marshalled by a herald. He possessed the garden intellectually and spiritually, while I only possessed it politically. I know more about flowers than coal-owners know about coal; for at least I pay them honour when they are brought above the surface of the earth. I know more about gardens than railway shareholders seem to know about railways: for at least I know that it needs a man to make a garden; a man whose name is Adam. But as I walked on that grass my ignorance overwhelmed me – and yet that phrase is false, because it suggests something like a storm from the sky above. It is truer to say that my ignorance exploded underneath me, like a mine dug long before; and indeed it was dug before the beginning of the ages. Green bombs of bulbs and seeds were bursting underneath me everywhere; and, so far as my knowledge went, they had been laid by a conspirator. I trod quite uneasily on this uprush of the earth; the Spring is always only a fruitful earthquake. With the land all alive under me I began to wonder more and more why this man, who had made the garden, did not own the garden. If I stuck a spade into the ground, I should be astonished at what I found there...and just as I thought this I saw that the gardener was astonished too.

Just as I was wondering why the man who used the spade did not profit by the spade, he brought me something he had found actually in my soil. It was a thin worn gold piece of the Georges,

of the sort which are called, I believe, Spade Guineas. Anyhow, a piece of gold.

If you do not see the parable as I saw it just then, I doubt if I can explain it just now. He could make a hundred other round yellow fruits: and this flat yellow one is the only sort that I can make. How it came there I have not a notion – unless Edmund Burke dropped it in his hurry to get back to Butler's Court. But there it was: this is a cold recital of facts. There may be a whole pirate's treasure lying under the earth there, for all I know or care; for there is no interest in a treasure without a Treasure Island to sail to. If there is a treasure it will never be found, for I am not interested in wealth beyond the dreams of avarice since I know that avarice has no dreams, but only insomnia. And, for the other party, my gardener would never consent to dig up the garden.

Nevertheless, I was overwhelmed with intellectual emotions when I saw that answer to my question; the question of why the garden did not belong to the gardener. No better epigram could be put in reply than simply putting the Spade Guinea beside the Spade. This was the only underground seed that I could understand. Only by having a little more of that dull, battered yellow substance could I manage to be idle while he was active. I am not altogether idle myself; but the fact remains that the power is in the thin slip of metal we call the Spade Guinea, not in the strong square and curve of metal which we call the Spade. And then I suddenly remembered that as I had found gold on my ground by accident, so richer men in the north and west counties

had found coal in their ground, also by accident.

I told the gardener that as he had found the thing he ought to keep it, but that if he cared to sell it to me it could be valued properly, and then sold. He said at first, with characteristic independence, that he would like to keep it. He said it would make a brooch for his wife. But a little later he brought it back to me without explanation. I could not get a ray of light on the reason of his refusal; but he looked lowering and unhappy. Had he some mystical instinct that it is just such accidental and irrational wealth that is the doom of all peasantries? Perhaps he dimly felt that the boy's pirate tales are true; and that buried treasure is a thing for robbers and not for producers. Perhaps he thought there was a curse on such capital: on the coal of the coal-owners, on the gold of the gold-seekers. Perhaps there is.

THE VOTER AND THE TWO VOICES

The real evil of our Party System is commonly stated wrong. It was stated wrong by Lord Rosebery, when he said that it prevented the best men from devoting themselves to politics, and that it encouraged a fanatical conflict. I doubt whether the best men ever would devote themselves to politics. The best men devote themselves to pigs and babies and things like that. And as for the fanatical conflict in party politics, I wish there was more of it. The real danger of the two parties with their two policies is that they unduly limit the outlook of the ordinary citizen. They make him barren instead of creative, because he is never allowed to do anything except prefer one existing policy to another. We have not got real Democracy when the decision depends upon the people. We shall have real Democracy when the problem depends upon the people. The ordinary man will decide not only how he will vote, but what he is going to vote about.

It is this which involves some weakness in many current aspirations towards the extension of the suffrage; I mean that, apart from all questions of abstract justice, it is not the smallness or largeness of the suffrage that is at present the difficulty of Democracy. It is not the quantity of voters, but the quality of the thing they are voting about. A certain alternative is put before

them by the powerful houses and the highest political class. Two roads are opened to them; but they must go down one or the other. They cannot have what they choose, but only which they choose. To follow the process in practice we may put it thus. The Suffragettes – if one may judge by their frequent ringing of his bell – want to do something to Mr. Asquith. I have no notion what it is. Let us say (for the sake of argument) that they want to paint him green. We will suppose that it is entirely for that simple purpose that they are always seeking to have private interviews with him; it seems as profitable as any other end that I can imagine to such an interview. Now, it is possible that the Government of the day might go in for a positive policy of painting Mr. Asquith green; might give that reform a prominent place in their programme. Then the party in opposition would adopt another policy, not a policy of leaving Mr. Asquith alone (which would be considered dangerously revolutionary), but some alternative course of action, as, for instance, painting him red. Then both sides would fling themselves on the people, they would both cry that the appeal was now to the Caesar of Democracy. A dark and dramatic air of conflict and real crisis would arise on both sides; arrows of satire would fly and swords of eloquence flame. The Greens would say that Socialists and free lovers might well want to paint Mr. Asquith red; they wanted to paint the whole town red. Socialists would indignantly reply that Socialism was the reverse of disorder, and that they only wanted to paint Mr. Asquith red so that he might resemble the

red pillar-boxes which typified State control. The Greens would passionately deny the charge so often brought against them by the Reds; they would deny that they wished Mr. Asquith green in order that he might be invisible on the green benches of the Commons, as certain terrified animals take the colour of their environment.

There would be fights in the street perhaps, and abundance of ribbons, flags, and badges, of the two colours. One crowd would sing, "Keep the Red Flag Flying," and the other, "The Wearing of the Green." But when the last effort had been made and the last moment come, when two crowds were waiting in the dark outside the public building to hear the declaration of the poll, then both sides alike would say that it was now for democracy to do exactly what it chose. England herself, lifting her head in awful loneliness and liberty, must speak and pronounce judgment. Yet this might not be exactly true. England herself, lifting her head in awful loneliness and liberty, might really wish Mr. Asquith to be pale blue. The democracy of England in the abstract, if it had been allowed to make up a policy for itself, might have desired him to be black with pink spots. It might even have liked him as he is now. But a huge apparatus of wealth, power, and printed matter has made it practically impossible for them to bring home these other proposals, even if they would really prefer them. No candidates will stand in the spotted interest; for candidates commonly have to produce money either from their own pockets or the party's; and in such circles spots are not worn.

No man in the social position of a Cabinet Minister, perhaps, will commit himself to the pale-blue theory of Mr. Asquith; therefore it cannot be a Government measure, therefore it cannot pass.

Nearly all the great newspapers, both pompous and frivolous, will declare dogmatically day after day, until every one half believes it, that red and green are the only two colours in the paint-box. THE OBSERVER will say: "No one who knows the solid framework of politics or the emphatic first principles of an Imperial people can suppose for a moment that there is any possible compromise to be made in such a matter; we must either fulfil our manifest racial destiny and crown the edifice of ages with the august figure of a Green Premier, or we must abandon our heritage, break our promise to the Empire, fling ourselves into final anarchy, and allow the flaming and demoniac image of a Red Premier to hover over our dissolution and our doom." The DAILY MAIL would say: "There is no halfway house in this matter; it must be green or red. We wish to see every honest Englishman one colour or the other." And then some funny man in the popular Press would star the sentence with a pun, and say that the DAILY MAIL liked its readers to be green and its paper to be read. But no one would even dare to whisper that there is such a thing as yellow.

For the purposes of pure logic it is clearer to argue with silly examples than with sensible ones: because silly examples are simple. But I could give many grave and concrete cases of the kind of thing to which I refer. In the later part of the Boer War

both parties perpetually insisted in every speech and pamphlet that annexation was inevitable and that it was only a question whether Liberals or Tories should do it. It was not inevitable in the least; it would have been perfectly easy to make peace with the Boers as Christian nations commonly make peace with their conquered enemies. Personally I think that it would have been better for us in the most selfish sense, better for our pocket and prestige, if we had never effected the annexation at all; but that is a matter of opinion. What is plain is that it was not inevitable; it was not, as was said, the only possible course; there were plenty of other courses; there were plenty of other colours in the box. Again, in the discussion about Socialism, it is repeatedly rubbed into the public mind that we must choose between Socialism and some horrible thing that they call Individualism. I don't know what it means, but it seems to mean that anybody who happens to pull out a plum is to adopt the moral philosophy of the young Horner – and say what a good boy he is for helping himself.

It is calmly assumed that the only two possible types of society are a Collectivist type of society and the present society that exists at this moment and is rather like an animated muck-heap. It is quite unnecessary to say that I should prefer Socialism to the present state of things. I should prefer anarchism to the present state of things. But it is simply not the fact that Collectivism is the only other scheme for a more equal order. A Collectivist has a perfect right to think it the only sound scheme; but it is not the only plausible or possible scheme. We might have peasant

proprietorship; we might have the compromise of Henry George; we might have a number of tiny communes; we might have co-operation; we might have Anarchist Communism; we might have a hundred things. I am not saying that any of these are right, though I cannot imagine that any of them could be worse than the present social madhouse, with its top-heavy rich and its tortured poor; but I say that it is an evidence of the stiff and narrow alternative offered to the civic mind, that the civic mind is not, generally speaking, conscious of these other possibilities. The civic mind is not free or alert enough to feel how much it has the world before it. There are at least ten solutions of the Education question, and no one knows which Englishmen really want. For Englishmen are only allowed to vote about the two which are at that moment offered by the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition. There are ten solutions of the drink question; and no one knows which the democracy wants; for the democracy is only allowed to fight about one Licensing Bill at a time.

So that the situation comes to this: The democracy has a right to answer questions, but it has no right to ask them. It is still the political aristocracy that asks the questions. And we shall not be unreasonably cynical if we suppose that the political aristocracy will always be rather careful what questions it asks. And if the dangerous comfort and self-flattery of modern England continues much longer there will be less democratic value in an English election than in a Roman saturnalia of slaves. For the powerful class will choose two courses of action, both of

them safe for itself, and then give the democracy the gratification of taking one course or the other. The lord will take two things so much alike that he would not mind choosing from them blindfold – and then for a great jest he will allow the slaves to choose.

THE MAD OFFICIAL

Going mad is the slowest and dullest business in the world. I have very nearly done it more than once in my boyhood, and so have nearly all my friends, born under the general doom of mortals, but especially of moderns; I mean the doom that makes a man come almost to the end of thinking before he comes to the first chance of living.

But the process of going mad is dull, for the simple reason that a man does not know that it is going on. Routine and literalism and a certain dry-throated earnestness and mental thirst, these are the very atmosphere of morbidity. If once the man could become conscious of his madness, he would cease to be man. He studies certain texts in Daniel or cryptograms in Shakespeare through monstrously magnifying spectacles, which are on his nose night and day. If once he could take off the spectacles he would smash them. He deduces all his fantasies about the Sixth Seal or the Anglo-Saxon Race from one unexamined and invisible first principle. If he could once see the first principle, he would see that it is not there.

This slow and awful self-hypnotism of error is a process that can occur not only with individuals, but also with whole societies. It is hard to pick out and prove; that is why it is hard to cure. But this mental degeneration may be brought to one test, which I truly believe to be a real test. A nation is not going mad

when it does extravagant things, so long as it does them in an extravagant spirit. Crusaders not cutting their beards till they found Jerusalem, Jacobins calling each other Harmodius and Epaminondas when their names were Jacques and Jules, these are wild things, but they were done in wild spirits at a wild moment.

But whenever we see things done wildly, but taken tamely, then the State is growing insane. For instance, I have a gun license. For all I know, this would logically allow me to fire off fifty-nine enormous field-guns day and night in my back garden. I should not be surprised at a man doing it; for it would be great fun. But I should be surprised at the neighbours putting up with it, and regarding it as an ordinary thing merely because it might happen to fulfill the letter of my license.

Or, again, I have a dog license; and I may have the right (for all I know) to turn ten thousand wild dogs loose in Buckinghamshire. I should not be surprised if the law were like that; because in modern England there is practically no law to be surprised at. I should not be surprised even at the man who did it; for a certain kind of man, if he lived long under the English landlord system, might do anything. But I should be surprised at the people who consented to stand it. I should, in other words, think the world a little mad if the incident, were received in silence.

Now things every bit as wild as this are being received in silence every day. All strokes slip on the smoothness of a polished wall. All blows fall soundless on the softness of a padded cell.

For madness is a passive as well as an active state: it is a paralysis, a refusal of the nerves to respond to the normal stimuli, as well as an unnatural stimulation. There are commonwealths, plainly to be distinguished here and there in history, which pass from prosperity to squalor, or from glory to insignificance, or from freedom to slavery, not only in silence, but with serenity. The face still smiles while the limbs, literally and loathsomely, are dropping from the body. These are peoples that have lost the power of astonishment at their own actions. When they give birth to a fantastic fashion or a foolish law, they do not start or stare at the monster they have brought forth. They have grown used to their own unreason; chaos is their cosmos; and the whirlwind is the breath of their nostrils. These nations are really in danger of going off their heads en masse; of becoming one vast vision of imbecility, with toppling cities and crazy countryside, all dotted with industrious lunatics. One of these countries is modern England.

Now here is an actual instance, a small case of how our social conscience really works: tame in spirit, wild in result, blank in realisation; a thing without the light of mind in it. I take this paragraph from a daily paper: – “At Epping, yesterday, Thomas Woolbourne, a Lambourne labourer, and his wife were summoned for neglecting their five children. Dr. Alpin said he was invited by the inspector of the N.S.P.C.C. to visit defendants’ cottage. Both the cottage and the children were dirty. The children looked exceedingly well in health, but the conditions

would be serious in case of illness. Defendants were stated to be sober. The man was discharged. The woman, who said she was hampered by the cottage having no water supply and that she was ill, was sentenced to six weeks' imprisonment. The sentence caused surprise, and the woman was removed crying, 'Lord save me!'"

I know no name for this but Chinese. It calls up the mental picture of some archaic and changeless Eastern Court, in which men with dried faces and stiff ceremonial costumes perform some atrocious cruelty to the accompaniment of formal proverbs and sentences of which the very meaning has been forgotten. In both cases the only thing in the whole farrago that can be called real is the wrong. If we apply the lightest touch of reason to the whole Epping prosecution it dissolves into nothing.

I here challenge any person in his five wits to tell me what that woman was sent to prison for. Either it was for being poor, or it was for being ill. Nobody could suggest, nobody will suggest, nobody, as a matter of fact, did suggest, that she had committed any other crime. The doctor was called in by a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Was this woman guilty of cruelty to children? Not in the least. Did the doctor say she was guilty of cruelty to children? Not in the least. Was there any evidence even remotely bearing on the sin of cruelty? Not a rap. The worse that the doctor could work himself up to saying was that though the children were "exceedingly" well, the conditions would be serious in case of illness. If the doctor will tell me any

conditions that would be comic in case of illness, I shall attach more weight to his argument.

Now this is the worst effect of modern worry. The mad doctor has gone mad. He is literally and practically mad; and still he is quite literally and practically a doctor. The only question is the old one, *Quis docebit ipsum doctorem?* Now cruelty to children is an utterly unnatural thing; instinctively accursed of earth and heaven. But neglect of children is a natural thing; like neglect of any other duty, it is a mere difference of degree that divides extending arms and legs in calisthenics and extending them on the rack. It is a mere difference of degree that separates any operation from any torture. The thumb-screw can easily be called Manicure. Being pulled about by wild horses can easily be called Massage. The modern problem is not so much what people will endure as what they will not endure. But I fear I interrupt... The boiling oil is boiling; and the Tenth Mandarin is already reciting the “Seventeen Serious Principles and the Fifty-three Virtues of the Sacred Emperor.”

THE ENCHANTED MAN

When I arrived to see the performance of the Buckinghamshire Players, who acted Miss Gertrude Robins's POT LUCK at Naphill a short time ago, it is the distressing, if scarcely surprising, truth that I entered very late. This would have mattered little, I hope, to any one, but that late comers had to be forced into front seats. For a real popular English audience always insists on crowding in the back part of the hall; and (as I have found in many an election) will endure the most unendurable taunts rather than come forward. The English are a modest people; that is why they are entirely ruled and run by the few of them that happen to be immodest. In theatrical affairs the fact is strangely notable; and in most playhouses we find the bored people in front and the eager people behind.

As far as the performance went I was quite the reverse of a bored person; but I may have been a boring person, especially as I was thus required to sit in the seats of the scornful. It will be a happy day in the dramatic world when all ladies have to take off their hats and all critics have to take off their heads. The people behind will have a chance then. And as it happens, in this case, I had not so much taken off my head as lost it. I had lost it on the road; on that strange journey that was the cause of my coming in late. I have a troubled recollection of having seen a very good play and made a very bad speech; I have a cloudy recollection

of talking to all sorts of nice people afterwards, but talking to them jerkily and with half a head, as a man talks when he has one eye on a clock.

And the truth is that I had one eye on an ancient and timeless clock, hung uselessly in heaven; whose very name has passed into a figure for such bemused folly. In the true sense of an ancient phrase, I was moonstruck. A lunar landscape a scene of winter moonlight had inexplicably got in between me and all other scenes. If any one had asked me I could not have said what it was; I cannot say now. Nothing had occurred to me; except the breakdown of a hired motor on the ridge of a hill. It was not an adventure; it was a vision.

I had started in wintry twilight from my own door; and hired a small car that found its way across the hills towards Naphill. But as night blackened and frost brightened and hardened it I found the way increasingly difficult; especially as the way was an incessant ascent. Whenever we topped a road like a staircase it was only to turn into a yet steeper road like a ladder.

At last, when I began to fancy that I was spirally climbing the Tower of Babel in a dream, I was brought to fact by alarming noises, stoppage, and the driver saying that "it couldn't be done." I got out of the car and suddenly forgot that I had ever been in it.

From the edge of that abrupt steep I saw something indescribable, which I am now going to describe. When Mr. Joseph Chamberlain delivered his great patriotic speech on the inferiority of England to the Dutch parts of South Africa, he

made use of the expression "the illimitable veldt." The word "veldt" is Dutch, and the word "illimitable" is Double Dutch. But the meditative statesman probably meant that the new plains gave him a sense of largeness and dreariness which he had never found in England. Well, if he never found it in England it was because he never looked for it in England. In England there is an illimitable number of illimitable veldts. I saw six or seven separate eternities in cresting as many different hills. One cannot find anything more infinite than a finite horizon, free and lonely and innocent. The Dutch veldt may be a little more desolate than Birmingham. But I am sure it is not so desolate as that English hill was, almost within a cannon-shot of High Wycombe.

I looked across a vast and voiceless valley straight at the moon, as if at a round mirror. It may have been the blue moon of the proverb; for on that freezing night the very moon seemed blue with cold. A deathly frost fastened every branch and blade to its place. The sinking and softening forests, powdered with a gray frost, fell away underneath me into an abyss which seemed unfathomable. One fancied the world was soundless only because it was bottomless: it seemed as if all songs and cries had been swallowed in some unresisting stillness under the roots of the hills. I could fancy that if I shouted there would be no echo; that if I hurled huge stones there would be no noise of reply. A dumb devil had bewitched the landscape: but that again does not express the best or worst of it. All those hoary and frosted forests expressed something so inhuman that it has no human name. A

horror of unconsciousness lay on them; that is the nearest phrase I know. It was as if one were looking at the back of the world; and the world did not know it. I had taken the universe in the rear. I was behind the scenes. I was eavesdropping upon an unconscious creation.

I shall not express what the place expressed. I am not even sure that it is a thing that ought to be expressed. There was something heathen about its union of beauty and death; sorrow seemed to glitter, as it does in some of the great pagan poems. I understood one of the thousand poetical phrases of the populace, "a God-forsaken place." Yet something was present there; and I could not yet find the key to my fixed impression. Then suddenly I remembered the right word. It was an enchanted place. It had been put to sleep. In a flash I remembered all the fairy-tales about princes turned to marble and princesses changed to snow. We were in a land where none could strive or cry out; a white nightmare. The moon looked at me across the valley like the enormous eye of a hypnotist; the one white eye of the world.

There was never a better play than POT LUCK; for it tells a tale with a point and a tale that might happen any day among English peasants. There were never better actors than the local Buckinghamshire Players: for they were acting their own life with just that rise into exaggeration which is the transition from life to art. But all the time I was mesmerised by the moon; I saw all these men and women as enchanted things. The poacher shot pheasants; the policeman tracked pheasants; the wife hid

pheasants; they were all (especially the policeman) as true as death. But there was something more true to death than true to life about it all: the figures were frozen with a magic frost of sleep or fear or custom such as does not cramp the movements of the poor men of other lands. I looked at the poacher and the policeman and the gun; then at the gun and the policeman and the poacher; and I could find no name for the fancy that haunted and escaped me. The poacher believed in the Game Laws as much as the policeman. The poacher's wife not only believed in the Game Laws, but protected them as well as him. She got a promise from her husband that he would never shoot another pheasant. Whether he kept it I doubt; I fancy he sometimes shot a pheasant even after that. But I am sure he never shot a policeman. For we live in an enchanted land.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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