

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

ALARMS AND
DISCURSIONS

Gilbert Chesterton

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G. K. Chesterton

Alarms and Discursions

Introductory: On Gargoyles

Alone at some distance from the wasting walls of a disused abbey I found half sunken in the grass the grey and goggle-eyed visage of one of those graven monsters that made the ornamental water-spouts in the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. It lay there, scoured by ancient rains or striped by recent fungus, but still looking like the head of some huge dragon slain by a primeval hero. And as I looked at it, I thought of the meaning of the grotesque, and passed into some symbolic reverie of the three great stages of art.

I

Once upon a time there lived upon an island a merry and innocent people, mostly shepherds and tillers of the earth. They were republicans, like all primitive and simple souls; they talked over their affairs under a tree, and the nearest approach they had to a personal ruler was a sort of priest or white witch who said their prayers for them. They worshipped the sun, not idolatrously, but as the golden crown of the god whom all such infants see almost as plainly as the sun.

Now this priest was told by his people to build a great tower, pointing to the sky in salutation of the Sun-god; and he pondered long and heavily before he picked his materials. For he was resolved to use nothing that was not almost as clear and exquisite as sunshine itself; he would use nothing that was not washed as white as the rain can wash the heavens, nothing that did not sparkle as spotlessly as that crown of God. He would have nothing grotesque or obscure; he would not have even anything emphatic or even anything mysterious. He would have all the arches as light as laughter and as candid as logic. He built the temple in three concentric courts, which were cooler and more exquisite in substance each than the other. For the outer wall was a hedge of white lilies, ranked so thick that a green stalk was hardly to be seen; and the wall within that was of crystal, which smashed the sun into a million stars. And the wall within that, which was the tower itself, was a tower of pure water, forced up in an everlasting fountain; and upon the very tip and crest of that foaming spire was one big and blazing diamond, which the water tossed up eternally and caught again as a child catches a ball.

“Now,” said the priest, “I have made a tower which is a little worthy of the sun.”

II

But about this time the island was caught in a swarm of pirates; and the shepherds had to turn themselves into rude warriors and seamen; and at first they were utterly broken down in blood and shame; and the pirates might have taken the jewel flung up for ever from their sacred fount. And then, after years of horror and humiliation, they gained a little and began to conquer because they did not mind defeat. And the pride of the pirates went sick within them after a few unexpected foils; and at last the invasion rolled back into the empty seas and the island was delivered. And for some reason after this men began to talk quite differently about the temple and the sun. Some, indeed, said, "You must not touch the temple; it is classical; it is perfect, since it admits no imperfections." But the others answered, "In that it differs from the sun, that shines on the evil and the good and on mud and monsters everywhere. The temple is of the noon; it is made of white marble clouds and sapphire sky. But the sun is not always of the noon. The sun dies daily, every night he is crucified in blood and fire." Now the priest had taught and fought through all the war, and his hair had grown white, but his eyes had grown young. And he said, "I was wrong and they are right. The sun, the symbol of our father, gives life to all those earthly things that are full of ugliness and energy. All the exaggerations are right, if they exaggerate the right thing. Let us point to heaven with tusks and horns and fins and trunks and tails so long as they all point to heaven. The ugly animals praise God as much as the beautiful. The frog's eyes stand out of his head because he is staring at heaven. The giraffe's neck is long because he is stretching towards heaven. The donkey has ears to hear – let him hear."

And under the new inspiration they planned a gorgeous cathedral in the Gothic manner, with all the animals of the earth crawling over it, and all the possible ugly things making up one common beauty, because they all appealed to the god. The columns of the temple were carved like the necks of giraffes; the dome was like an ugly tortoise; and the highest pinnacle was a monkey standing on his head with his tail pointing at the sun. And yet the whole was beautiful, because it was lifted up in one living and religious gesture as a man lifts his hands in prayer.

III

But this great plan was never properly completed. The people had brought up on great wagons the heavy tortoise roof and the huge necks of stone, and all the thousand and one oddities that made up that unity, the owls and the efts and the crocodiles and the kangaroos, which hideous by themselves might have been magnificent if reared in one definite proportion and dedicated to the sun. For this was Gothic, this was romantic, this was Christian art; this was the whole advance of Shakespeare upon Sophocles. And that symbol which was to crown it all, the ape upside down, was really Christian; for man is the ape upside down.

But the rich, who had grown riotous in the long peace, obstructed the thing, and in some squabble a stone struck the priest on the head and he lost his memory. He saw piled in front of him frogs and elephants, monkeys and giraffes, toadstools and sharks, all the ugly things of the universe which he had collected to do honour to God. But he forgot why he had collected them. He could not remember the design or the object. He piled them all wildly into one heap fifty feet high; and when he had done it all the rich and influential went into a passion of applause and cried, "This is real art! This is Realism! This is things as they really are!"

That, I fancy, is the only true origin of Realism. Realism is simply Romanticism that has lost its reason. This is so not merely in the sense of insanity but of suicide. It has lost its reason; that is its reason for existing. The old Greeks summoned godlike things to worship their god. The medieval Christians summoned all things to worship theirs, dwarfs and pelicans, monkeys and madmen. The modern realists summon all these million creatures to worship their god; and then have no god for them to worship. Paganism was in art a pure beauty; that was the dawn. Christianity was a beauty created by controlling a million monsters of ugliness; and that in my belief was the zenith and the noon. Modern art and science practically mean having the million monsters and being unable to control them; and I will venture to call that the disruption and the decay. The finest lengths of the Elgin marbles consist splendid houses going to the temple of a virgin. Christianity, with its gargoyles and grotesques, really amounted to saying this: that a donkey could go before all the horses of the world when it was really going to the temple. Romance means a holy donkey going to the temple. Realism means a lost donkey going nowhere.

The fragments of futile journalism or fleeting impression which are here collected are very like the wrecks and riven blocks that were piled in a heap round my imaginary priest of the sun. They are very like that grey and gaping head of stone that I found overgrown with the grass. Yet I will venture to make even of these trivial fragments the high boast that I am a medievalist and not a modern. That is, I really have a notion of why I have collected all the nonsensical things there are. I have not the patience nor perhaps the constructive intelligence to state the connecting link between all these chaotic papers. But it could be stated. This row of shapeless and ungainly monsters which I now set before the reader does not consist of separate idols cut out capriciously in lonely valleys or various islands. These monsters are meant for the gargoyles of a definite cathedral. I have to carve the gargoyles, because I can carve nothing else; I leave to others the angels and the arches and the spires. But I am very sure of the style of the architecture, and of the consecration of the church.

The Surrender of a Cockney

Evert man, though he were born in the very belfry of Bow and spent his infancy climbing among chimneys, has waiting for him somewhere a country house which he has never seen; but which was built for him in the very shape of his soul. It stands patiently waiting to be found, knee-deep in orchards of Kent or mirrored in pools of Lincoln; and when the man sees it he remembers it, though he has never seen it before. Even I have been forced to confess this at last, who am a Cockney, if ever there was one, a Cockney not only on principle, but with savage pride. I have always maintained, quite seriously, that the Lord is not in the wind or thunder of the waste, but if anywhere in the still small voice of Fleet Street. I sincerely maintain that Nature-worship is more morally dangerous than the most vulgar man-worship of the cities; since it can easily be perverted into the worship of an impersonal mystery, carelessness, or cruelty. Thoreau would have been a jollier fellow if he had devoted himself to a greengrocer instead of to greens. Swinburne would have been a better moralist if he had worshipped a fishmonger instead of worshipping the sea. I prefer the philosophy of bricks and mortar to the philosophy of turnips. To call a man a turnip may be playful, but is seldom respectful. But when we wish to pay emphatic honour to a man, to praise the firmness of his nature, the squareness of his conduct, the strong humility with which he is interlocked with his equals in silent mutual support, then we invoke the nobler Cockney metaphor, and call him a brick.

But, despite all these theories, I have surrendered; I have struck my colours at sight; at a mere glimpse through the opening of a hedge. I shall come down to living in the country, like any common Socialist or Simple Lifer. I shall end my days in a village, in the character of the Village Idiot, and be a spectacle and a judgment to mankind. I have already learnt the rustic manner of leaning upon a gate; and I was thus gymnastically occupied at the moment when my eye caught the house that was made for me. It stood well back from the road, and was built of a good yellow brick; it was narrow for its height, like the tower of some Border robber; and over the front door was carved in large letters, "1908." That last burst of sincerity, that superb scorn of antiquarian sentiment, overwhelmed me finally. I closed my eyes in a kind of ecstasy. My friend (who was helping me to lean on the gate) asked me with some curiosity what I was doing.

"My dear fellow," I said, with emotion, "I am bidding farewell to forty-three hansom cabmen."

"Well," he said, "I suppose they would think this county rather outside the radius."

"Oh, my friend," I cried brokenly, "how beautiful London is! Why do they only write poetry about the country? I could turn every lyric cry into Cockney.

"My heart leaps up when I behold
A sky-sign in the sky,'

"as I observed in a volume which is too little read, founded on the older English poets. You never saw my 'Golden Treasury Regilded; or, The Classics Made Cockney' – it contained some fine lines.

"O Wild West End, thou breath of London's being,'

"or the reminiscence of Keats, beginning

"City of smuts and mellow fogfulness.';

"I have written many such lines on the beauty of London; yet I never realized that London was really beautiful till now. Do you ask me why? It is because I have left it for ever."

“If you will take my advice,” said my friend, “you will humbly endeavour not to be a fool. What is the sense of this mad modern notion that every literary man must live in the country, with the pigs and the donkeys and the squires? Chaucer and Spenser and Milton and Dryden lived in London; Shakespeare and Dr. Johnson came to London because they had had quite enough of the country. And as for trumpety topical journalists like you, why, they would cut their throats in the country. You have confessed it yourself in your own last words. You hunger and thirst after the streets; you think London the finest place on the planet. And if by some miracle a Bayswater omnibus could come down this green country lane you would utter a yell of joy.”

Then a light burst upon my brain, and I turned upon him with terrible sternness.

“Why, miserable aesthete,” I said in a voice of thunder, “that is the true country spirit! That is how the real rustic feels. The real rustic does utter a yell of joy at the sight of a Bayswater omnibus. The real rustic does think London the finest place on the planet. In the few moments that I have stood by this stile, I have grown rooted here like an ancient tree; I have been here for ages. Petulant Suburban, I am the real rustic. I believe that the streets of London are paved with gold; and I mean to see it before I die.”

The evening breeze freshened among the little tossing trees of that lane, and the purple evening clouds piled up and darkened behind my Country Seat, the house that belonged to me, making, by contrast, its yellow bricks gleam like gold. At last my friend said: “To cut it short, then, you mean that you will live in the country because you won’t like it. What on earth will you do here; dig up the garden?”

“Dig!” I answered, in honourable scorn. “Dig! Do work at my Country Seat; no, thank you. When I find a Country Seat, I sit in it. And for your other objection, you are quite wrong. I do not dislike the country, but I like the town more. Therefore the art of happiness certainly suggests that I should live in the country and think about the town. Modern nature-worship is all upside down. Trees and fields ought to be the ordinary things; terraces and temples ought to be extraordinary. I am on the side of the man who lives in the country and wants to go to London. I abominate and abjure the man who lives in London and wants to go to the country; I do it with all the more heartiness because I am that sort of man myself. We must learn to love London again, as rustics love it. Therefore (I quote again from the great Cockney version of *The Golden Treasury*) —

“Therefore, ye gas-pipes, ye asbestos? stoves,
Forbode not any severing of our loves.
I have relinquished but your earthly sight,
To hold you dear in a more distant way.
I’ll love the ‘buses lumbering through the wet,
Even more than when I lightly tripped as they.
The grimy colour of the London clay
Is lovely yet,”

“because I have found the house where I was really born; the tall and quiet house from which I can see London afar off, as the miracle of man that it is.”

The Nightmare

A sunset of copper and gold had just broken down and gone to pieces in the west, and grey colours were crawling over everything in earth and heaven; also a wind was growing, a wind that laid a cold finger upon flesh and spirit. The bushes at the back of my garden began to whisper like conspirators; and then to wave like wild hands in signal. I was trying to read by the last light that died on the lawn a long poem of the decadent period, a poem about the old gods of Babylon and Egypt, about their blazing and obscene temples, their cruel and colossal faces.

“Or didst thou love the God of Flies who plagued
the Hebrews and was splashed
With wine unto the waist, or Pasht who had green
beryls for her eyes?”

I read this poem because I had to review it for the Daily News; still it was genuine poetry of its kind. It really gave out an atmosphere, a fragrant and suffocating smoke that seemed really to come from the Bondage of Egypt or the Burden of Tyre. There is not much in common (thank God) between my garden with the grey-green English sky-line beyond it, and these mad visions of painted palaces huge, headless idols and monstrous solitudes of red or golden sand. Nevertheless (as I confessed to myself) I can fancy in such a stormy twilight some such smell of death and fear. The ruined sunset really looks like one of their ruined temples: a shattered heap of gold and green marble. A black flapping thing detaches itself from one of the sombre trees and flutters to another. I know not if it is owl or flittermouse; I could fancy it was a black cherub, an infernal cherub of darkness, not with the wings of a bird and the head of a baby, but with the head of a goblin and the wings of a bat. I think, if there were light enough, I could sit here and write some very creditable creepy tale, about how I went up the crooked road beyond the church and met Something – say a dog, a dog with one eye. Then I should meet a horse, perhaps, a horse without a rider, the horse also would have one eye. Then the inhuman silence would be broken; I should meet a man (need I say, a one-eyed man?) who would ask me the way to my own house. Or perhaps tell me that it was burnt to the ground. I could tell a very cosy little tale along some such lines. Or I might dream of climbing for ever the tall dark trees above me. They are so tall that I feel as if I should find at their tops the nests of the angels; but in this mood they would be dark and dreadful angels; angels of death.

Only, you see, this mood is all bosh. I do not believe in it in the least. That one-eyed universe, with its one-eyed men and beasts, was only created with one universal wink. At the top of the tragic trees I should not find the Angel's Nest. I should only find the Mare's Nest; the dreamy and divine nest is not there. In the Mare's Nest I shall discover that dim, enormous opalescent egg from which is hatched the Nightmare. For there is nothing so delightful as a nightmare – when you know it is a nightmare.

That is the essential. That is the stern condition laid upon all artists touching this luxury of fear. The terror must be fundamentally frivolous. Sanity may play with insanity; but insanity must not be allowed to play with sanity. Let such poets as the one I was reading in the garden, by all means, be free to imagine what outrageous deities and violent landscapes they like. By all means let them wander freely amid their opium pinnacles and perspectives. But these huge gods, these high cities, are toys; they must never for an instant be allowed to be anything else. Man, a gigantic child, must play with Babylon and Nineveh, with Isis and with Ashtaroth. By all means let him dream of the Bondage of Egypt, so long as he is free from it. By all means let him take up the Burden of Tyre, so long as he can take it lightly. But the old gods must be his dolls, not his idols. His central sanctities, his true possessions, should be Christian and simple. And just as a child would cherish most a wooden horse

or a sword that is a mere cross of wood, so man, the great child, must cherish most the old plain things of poetry and piety; that horse of wood that was the epic end of Ilium, or that cross of wood that redeemed and conquered the world.

In one of Stevenson's letters there is a characteristically humorous remark about the appalling impression produced on him in childhood by the beasts with many eyes in the Book of Revelations: "If that was heaven, what in the name of Davy Jones was hell like?" Now in sober truth there is a magnificent idea in these monsters of the Apocalypse. It is, I suppose, the idea that beings really more beautiful or more universal than we are might appear to us frightful and even confused. Especially they might seem to have senses at once more multiplex and more staring; an idea very imaginatively seized in the multitude of eyes. I like those monsters beneath the throne very much. But I like them beneath the throne. It is when one of them goes wandering in deserts and finds a throne for himself that evil faiths begin, and there is (literally) the devil to pay – to pay in dancing girls or human sacrifice. As long as those misshapen elemental powers are around the throne, remember that the thing that they worship is the likeness of the appearance of a man.

That is, I fancy, the true doctrine on the subject of Tales of Terror and such things, which unless a man of letters do well and truly believe, without doubt he will end by blowing his brains out or by writing badly. Man, the central pillar of the world must be upright and straight; around him all the trees and beasts and elements and devils may crook and curl like smoke if they choose. All really imaginative literature is only the contrast between the weird curves of Nature and the straightness of the soul. Man may behold what ugliness he likes if he is sure that he will not worship it; but there are some so weak that they will worship a thing only because it is ugly. These must be chained to the beautiful. It is not always wrong even to go, like Dante, to the brink of the lowest promontory and look down at hell. It is when you look up at hell that a serious miscalculation has probably been made.

Therefore I see no wrong in riding with the Nightmare to-night; she whinnies to me from the rocking tree-tops and the roaring wind; I will catch her and ride her through the awful air. Woods and weeds are alike tugging at the roots in the rising tempest, as if all wished to fly with us over the moon, like that wild amorous cow whose child was the Moon-Calf. We will rise to that mad infinite where there is neither up nor down, the high topsy-turveydom of the heavens. I will answer the call of chaos and old night. I will ride on the Nightmare; but she shall not ride on me.

The Telegraph Poles

My friend and I were walking in one of those wastes of pine-wood which make inland seas of solitude in every part of Western Europe; which have the true terror of a desert, since they are uniform, and so one may lose one's way in them. Stiff, straight, and similar, stood up all around us the pines of the wood, like the pikes of a silent mutiny. There is a truth in talking of the variety of Nature; but I think that Nature often shows her chief strangeness in her sameness. There is a weird rhythm in this very repetition; it is as if the earth were resolved to repeat a single shape until the shape shall turn terrible.

Have you ever tried the experiment of saying some plain word, such as "dog," thirty times? By the thirtieth time it has become a word like "snark" or "pobble." It does not become tame, it becomes wild, by repetition. In the end a dog walks about as startling and undecipherable as Leviathan or Croquemitaine.

It may be that this explains the repetitions in Nature, it may be for this reason that there are so many million leaves and pebbles. Perhaps they are not repeated so that they may grow familiar. Perhaps they are repeated only in the hope that they may at last grow unfamiliar. Perhaps a man is not startled at the first cat he sees, but jumps into the air with surprise at the seventy-ninth cat. Perhaps he has to pass through thousands of pine trees before he finds the one that is really a pine tree. However this may be, there is something singularly thrilling, even something urgent and intolerant, about the endless forest repetitions; there is the hint of something like madness in that musical monotony of the pines.

I said something like this to my friend; and he answered with sardonic truth, "Ah, you wait till we come to a telegraph post."

My friend was right, as he occasionally is in our discussions, especially upon points of fact. We had crossed the pine forest by one of its paths which happened to follow the wires of the provincial telegraphy; and though the poles occurred at long intervals they made a difference when they came. The instant we came to the straight pole we could see that the pines were not really straight. It was like a hundred straight lines drawn with schoolboy pencils all brought to judgment suddenly by one straight line drawn with a ruler. All the amateur lines seemed to reel to right and left. A moment before I could have sworn they stood as straight as lances; now I could see them curve and waver everywhere, like scimitars and yataghans. Compared with the telegraph post the pines were crooked – and alive. That lonely vertical rod at once deformed and enfranchised the forest. It tangled it all together and yet made it free, like any grotesque undergrowth of oak or holly.

"Yes," said my gloomy friend, answering my thoughts. "You don't know what a wicked shameful thing straightness is if you think these trees are straight. You never will know till your precious intellectual civilization builds a forty-mile forest of telegraph poles."

We had started walking from our temporary home later in the day than we intended; and the long afternoon was already lengthening itself out into a yellow evening when we came out of the forest on to the hills above a strange town or village, of which the lights had already begun to glitter in the darkening valley. The change had already happened which is the test and definition of evening. I mean that while the sky seemed still as bright, the earth was growing blacker against it, especially at the edges, the hills and the pine-tops. This brought out yet more clearly the owl's secrecy of pine-woods; and my friend cast a regretful glance at them as he came out under the sky. Then he turned to the view in front; and, as it happened, one of the telegraph posts stood up in front of him in the last sunlight. It was no longer crossed and softened by the more delicate lines of pine wood; it stood up ugly, arbitrary, and angular as any crude figure in geometry. My friend stopped, pointing his stick at it, and all his anarchic philosophy rushed to his lips.

“Demon,” he said to me briefly, “behold your work. That palace of proud trees behind us is what the world was before you civilized men, Christians or democrats or the rest, came to make it dull with your dreary rules of morals and equality. In the silent fight of that forest, tree fights speechless against tree, branch against branch. And the upshot of that dumb battle is inequality – and beauty. Now lift up your eyes and look at equality and ugliness. See how regularly the white buttons are arranged on that black stick, and defend your dogmas if you dare.”

“Is that telegraph post so much a symbol of democracy?” I asked. “I fancy that while three men have made the telegraph to get dividends, about a thousand men have preserved the forest to cut wood. But if the telegraph pole is hideous (as I admit) it is not due to doctrine but rather to commercial anarchy. If any one had a doctrine about a telegraph pole it might be carved in ivory and decked with gold. Modern things are ugly, because modern men are careless, not because they are careful.”

“No,” answered my friend with his eye on the end of a splendid and sprawling sunset, “there is something intrinsically deadening about the very idea of a doctrine. A straight line is always ugly. Beauty is always crooked. These rigid posts at regular intervals are ugly because they are carrying across the world the real message of democracy.”

“At this moment,” I answered, “they are probably carrying across the world the message, ‘Buy Bulgarian Rails.’ They are probably the prompt communication between some two of the wealthiest and wickedest of His children with whom God has ever had patience. No; these telegraph poles are ugly and detestable, they are inhuman and indecent. But their baseness lies in their privacy, not in their publicity. That black stick with white buttons is not the creation of the soul of a multitude. It is the mad creation of the souls of two millionaires.”

“At least you have to explain,” answered my friend gravely, “how it is that the hard democratic doctrine and the hard telegraphic outline have appeared together; you have... But bless my soul, we must be getting home. I had no idea it was so late. Let me see, I think this is our way through the wood. Come, let us both curse the telegraph post for entirely different reasons and get home before it is dark.”

We did not get home before it was dark. For one reason or another we had underestimated the swiftness of twilight and the suddenness of night, especially in the threading of thick woods. When my friend, after the first five minutes’ march, had fallen over a log, and I, ten minutes after, had stuck nearly to the knees in mire, we began to have some suspicion of our direction. At last my friend said, in a low, husky voice:

“I’m afraid we’re on the wrong path. It’s pitch dark.”

“I thought we went the right way,” I said, tentatively.

“Well,” he said; and then, after a long pause, “I can’t see any telegraph poles. I’ve been looking for them.”

“So have I,” I said. “They’re so straight.”

We groped away for about two hours of darkness in the thick of the fringe of trees which seemed to dance round us in derision. Here and there, however, it was possible to trace the outline of something just too erect and rigid to be a pine tree. By these we finally felt our way home, arriving in a cold green twilight before dawn.

A Drama of Dolls

In a small grey town of stone in one of the great Yorkshire dales, which is full of history, I entered a hall and saw an old puppet-play exactly as our fathers saw it five hundred years ago. It was admirably translated from the old German, and was the original tale of Faust. The dolls were at once comic and convincing; but if you cannot at once laugh at a thing and believe in it, you have no business in the Middle Ages. Or in the world, for that matter.

The puppet-play in question belongs, I believe, to the fifteenth century; and indeed the whole legend of Dr. Faustus has the colour of that grotesque but somewhat gloomy time. It is very unfortunate that we so often know a thing that is past only by its tail end. We remember yesterday only by its sunsets. There are many instances. One is Napoleon. We always think of him as a fat old despot, ruling Europe with a ruthless military machine. But that, as Lord Rosebery would say, was only “The Last Phase”; or at least the last but one. During the strongest and most startling part of his career, the time that made him immortal, Napoleon was a sort of boy, and not a bad sort of boy either, bullet-headed and ambitious, but honestly in love with a woman, and honestly enthusiastic for a cause, the cause of French justice and equality.

Another instance is the Middle Ages, which we also remember only by the odour of their ultimate decay. We think of the life of the Middle Ages as a dance of death, full of devils and deadly sins, lepers and burning heretics. But this was not the life of the Middle Ages, but the death of the Middle Ages. It is the spirit of Louis XI and Richard III, not of Louis IX and Edward I.

This grim but not unwholesome fable of Dr. Faustus, with its rebuke to the mere arrogance of learning, is sound and stringent enough; but it is not a fair sample of the mediaeval soul at its happiest and sanest. The heart of the true Middle Ages might be found far better, for instance, in the noble tale of Tannhauser, in which the dead staff broke into leaf and flower to rebuke the pontiff who had declared even one human being beyond the strength of sorrow and pardon.

But there were in the play two great human ideas which the mediaeval mind never lost its grip on, through the heaviest nightmares of its dissolution. They were the two great jokes of mediaevalism, as they are the two eternal jokes of mankind. Wherever those two jokes exist there is a little health and hope; wherever they are absent, pride and insanity are present. The first is the idea that the poor man ought to get the better of the rich man. The other is the idea that the husband is afraid of the wife.

I have heard that there is a place under the knee which, when struck, should produce a sort of jump; and that if you do not jump, you are mad. I am sure that there are some such places in the soul. When the human spirit does not jump with joy at either of those two old jokes, the human spirit must be struck with incurable paralysis. There is hope for people who have gone down into the hells of greed and economic oppression (at least, I hope there is, for we are such a people ourselves), but there is no hope for a people that does not exult in the abstract idea of the peasant scoring off the prince. There is hope for the idle and the adulterous, for the men that desert their wives and the men that beat their wives. But there is no hope for men who do not boast that their wives bully them.

The first idea, the idea about the man at the bottom coming out on top, is expressed in this puppet-play in the person of Dr. Faustus’ servant, Caspar. Sentimental old Tones, regretting the feudal times, sometimes complain that in these days Jack is as good as his master. But most of the actual tales of the feudal times turn on the idea that Jack is much better than his master, and certainly it is so in the case of Caspar and Faust. The play ends with the damnation of the learned and illustrious doctor, followed by a cheerful and animated dance by Caspar, who has been made watchman of the city.

But there was a much keener stroke of mediaeval irony earlier in the play. The learned doctor has been ransacking all the libraries of the earth to find a certain rare formula, now almost unknown, by which he can control the infernal deities. At last he procures the one precious volume, opens it at the proper page, and leaves it on the table while he seeks some other part of his magic equipment.

The servant comes in, reads off the formula, and immediately becomes an emperor of the elemental spirits. He gives them a horrible time. He summons and dismisses them alternately with the rapidity of a piston-rod working at high speed; he keeps them flying between the doctor's house and their own more unmentionable residences till they faint with rage and fatigue. There is all the best of the Middle Ages in that; the idea of the great levellers, luck and laughter; the idea of a sense of humour defying and dominating hell.

One of the best points in the play as performed in this Yorkshire town was that the servant Caspar was made to talk Yorkshire, instead of the German rustic dialect which he talked in the original. That also smacks of the good air of that epoch. In those old pictures and poems they always made things living by making them local. Thus, queerly enough, the one touch that was not in the old mediaeval version was the most mediaeval touch of all.

That other ancient and Christian jest, that a wife is a holy terror, occurs in the last scene, where the doctor (who wears a fur coat throughout, to make him seem more offensively rich and refined) is attempting to escape from the avenging demons, and meets his old servant in the street. The servant obligingly points out a house with a blue door, and strongly recommends Dr. Faustus to take refuge in it. "My old woman lives there," he says, "and the devils are more afraid of her than you are of them." Faustus does not take this advice, but goes on meditating and reflecting (which had been his mistake all along) until the clock strikes twelve, and dreadful voices talk Latin in heaven. So Faustus, in his fur coat, is carried away by little black imps; and serve him right for being an Intellectual.

The Man and His Newspaper

At a little station, which I decline to specify, somewhere between Oxford and Guildford, I missed a connection or miscalculated a route in such manner that I was left stranded for rather more than an hour. I adore waiting at railway stations, but this was not a very sumptuous specimen. There was nothing on the platform except a chocolate automatic machine, which eagerly absorbed pennies but produced no corresponding chocolate, and a small paper-stall with a few remaining copies of a cheap imperial organ which we will call the Daily Wire. It does not matter which imperial organ it was, as they all say the same thing.

Though I knew it quite well already, I read it with gravity as I strolled out of the station and up the country road. It opened with the striking phrase that the Radicals were setting class against class. It went on to remark that nothing had contributed more to make our Empire happy and enviable, to create that obvious list of glories which you can supply for yourself, the prosperity of all classes in our great cities, our populous and growing villages, the success of our rule in Ireland, etc., etc., than the sound Anglo-Saxon readiness of all classes in the State “to work heartily hand-in-hand.” It was this alone, the paper assured me, that had saved us from the horrors of the French Revolution. “It is easy for the Radicals,” it went on very solemnly, “to make jokes about the dukes. Very few of these revolutionary gentlemen have given to the poor one half of the earnest thought, tireless unselfishness, and truly Christian patience that are given to them by the great landlords of this country. We are very sure that the English people, with their sturdy common sense, will prefer to be in the hands of English gentlemen rather than in the miry claws of Socialistic buccaneers.”

Just when I had reached this point I nearly ran into a man. Despite the populousness and growth of our villages, he appeared to be the only man for miles, but the road up which I had wandered turned and narrowed with equal abruptness, and I nearly knocked him off the gate on which he was leaning. I pulled up to apologize, and since he seemed ready for society, and even pathetically pleased with it, I tossed the Daily Wire over a hedge and fell into speech with him. He wore a wreck of respectable clothes, and his face had that plebeian refinement which one sees in small tailors and watchmakers, in poor men of sedentary trades. Behind him a twisted group of winter trees stood up as gaunt and tattered as himself, but I do not think that the tragedy that he symbolized was a mere fancy from the spectral wood. There was a fixed look in his face which told that he was one of those who in keeping body and soul together have difficulties not only with the body, but also with the soul.

He was a Cockney by birth, and retained the touching accent of those streets from which I am an exile; but he had lived nearly all his life in this countryside; and he began to tell me the affairs of it in that formless, tail-foremost way in which the poor gossip about their great neighbours. Names kept coming and going in the narrative like charms or spells, unaccompanied by any biographical explanation. In particular the name of somebody called Sir Joseph multiplied itself with the omnipresence of a deity. I took Sir Joseph to be the principal landowner of the district; and as the confused picture unfolded itself, I began to form a definite and by no means pleasing picture of Sir Joseph. He was spoken of in a strange way, frigid and yet familiar, as a child might speak of a stepmother or an unavoidable nurse; something intimate, but by no means tender; something that was waiting for you by your own bed and board; that told you to do this and forbade you to do that, with a caprice that was cold and yet somehow personal. It did not appear that Sir Joseph was popular, but he was “a household word.” He was not so much a public man as a sort of private god or omnipotence. The particular man to whom I spoke said he had “been in trouble,” and that Sir Joseph had been “pretty hard on him.”

And under that grey and silver cloudland, with a background of those frost-bitten and wind-tortured trees, the little Londoner told me a tale which, true or false, was as heartrending as Romeo and Juliet.

He had slowly built up in the village a small business as a photographer, and he was engaged to a girl at one of the lodges, whom he loved with passion. "I'm the sort that 'ad better marry," he said; and for all his frail figure I knew what he meant. But Sir Joseph, and especially Sir Joseph's wife, did not want a photographer in the village; it made the girls vain, or perhaps they disliked this particular photographer. He worked and worked until he had just enough to marry on honestly; and almost on the eve of his wedding the lease expired, and Sir Joseph appeared in all his glory. He refused to renew the lease; and the man went wildly elsewhere. But Sir Joseph was ubiquitous; and the whole of that place was barred against him. In all that country he could not find a shed to which to bring home his bride. The man appealed and explained; but he was disliked as a demagogue, as well as a photographer. Then it was as if a black cloud came across the winter sky; for I knew what was coming. I forget even in what words he told of Nature maddened and set free. But I still see, as in a photograph, the grey muscles of the winter trees standing out like tight ropes, as if all Nature were on the rack.

"She 'ad to go away," he said.

"Wouldn't her parents," I began, and hesitated on the word "forgive."

"Oh, her people forgave her," he said. "But Her Ladyship..."

"Her Ladyship made the sun and moon and stars," I said, impatiently. "So of course she can come between a mother and the child of her body."

"Well, it does seem a bit 'ard..." he began with a break in his voice.

"But, good Lord, man," I cried, "it isn't a matter of hardness! It's a matter of impious and indecent wickedness. If your Sir Joseph knew the passions he was playing with, he did you a wrong for which in many Christian countries he would have a knife in him."

The man continued to look across the frozen fields with a frown. He certainly told his tale with real resentment, whether it was true or false, or only exaggerated. He was certainly sullen and injured; but he did not seem to think of any avenue of escape. At last he said:

"Well, it's a bad world; let's 'ope there's a better one."

"Amen," I said. "But when I think of Sir Joseph, I understand how men have hoped there was a worse one."

Then we were silent for a long time and felt the cold of the day crawling up, and at last I said, abruptly:

"The other day at a Budget meeting, I heard."

He took his elbows off the stile and seemed to change from head to foot like a man coming out of sleep with a yawn. He said in a totally new voice, louder but much more careless, "Ah yes, sir... this 'ere Budget... the Radicals are doing a lot of 'arm."

I listened intently, and he went on. He said with a sort of careful precision, "Settin' class against class; that's what I call it. Why, what's made our Empire except the readiness of all classes to work 'eartily 'and-in-'and."

He walked a little up and down the lane and stamped with the cold. Then he said, "What I say is, what else kept us from the 'errors of the French Revolution?"

My memory is good, and I waited in tense eagerness for the phrase that came next. "They may laugh at Dukes; I'd like to see them 'alf as kind and Christian and patient as lots of the landlords are. Let me tell you, sir," he said, facing round at me with the final air of one launching a paradox. "The English people 'ave some common sense, and they'd rather be in the 'ands of gentlemen than in the claws of a lot of Socialist thieves."

I had an indescribable sense that I ought to applaud, as if I were at a public meeting. The insane separation in the man's soul between his experience and his ready-made theory was but a type of what covers a quarter of England. As he turned away, I saw the Daily Wire sticking out of his shabby pocket. He bade me farewell in quite a blaze of catchwords, and went stumping up the road. I saw

his figure grow smaller and smaller in the great green landscape; even as the Free Man has grown smaller and smaller in the English countryside.

The Appetite of Earth

I was walking the other day in a kitchen garden, which I find has somehow got attached to my premises, and I was wondering why I liked it. After a prolonged spiritual self-analysis I came to the conclusion that I like a kitchen garden because it contains things to eat. I do not mean that a kitchen garden is ugly; a kitchen garden is often very beautiful. The mixture of green and purple on some monstrous cabbage is much subtler and grander than the mere freakish and theatrical splashing of yellow and violet on a pansy. Few of the flowers merely meant for ornament are so ethereal as a potato. A kitchen garden is as beautiful as an orchard; but why is it that the word “orchard” sounds as beautiful as the word “flower-garden,” and yet also sounds more satisfactory? I suggest again my extraordinarily dark and delicate discovery: that it contains things to eat.

The cabbage is a solid; it can be approached from all sides at once; it can be realized by all senses at once. Compared with that the sunflower, which can only be seen, is a mere pattern, a thing painted on a flat wall. Now, it is this sense of the solidity of things that can only be uttered by the metaphor of eating. To express the cubic content of a turnip, you must be all round it at once. The only way to get all round a turnip at once is to eat the turnip. I think any poetic mind that has loved solidity, the thickness of trees, the squareness of stones, the firmness of clay, must have sometimes wished that they were things to eat. If only brown peat tasted as good as it looks; if only white firwood were digestible! We talk rightly of giving stones for bread: but there are in the Geological Museum certain rich crimson marbles, certain split stones of blue and green, that make me wish my teeth were stronger.

Somebody staring into the sky with the same ethereal appetite declared that the moon was made of green cheese. I never could conscientiously accept the full doctrine. I am Modernist in this matter. That the moon is made of cheese I have believed from childhood; and in the course of every month a giant (of my acquaintance) bites a big round piece out of it. This seems to me a doctrine that is above reason, but not contrary to it. But that the cheese is green seems to be in some degree actually contradicted by the senses and the reason; first because if the moon were made of green cheese it would be inhabited; and second because if it were made of green cheese it would be green. A blue moon is said to be an unusual sight; but I cannot think that a green one is much more common. In fact, I think I have seen the moon looking like every other sort of cheese except a green cheese. I have seen it look exactly like a cream cheese: a circle of warm white upon a warm faint violet sky above a cornfield in Kent. I have seen it look very like a Dutch cheese, rising a dull red copper disk amid masts and dark waters at Honfleur. I have seen it look like an ordinary sensible Cheddar cheese in an ordinary sensible Prussian blue sky; and I have once seen it so naked and ruinous-looking, so strangely lit up, that it looked like a Gruyere cheese, that awful volcanic cheese that has horrible holes in it, as if it had come in boiling unnatural milk from mysterious and unearthly cattle. But I have never yet seen the lunar cheese green; and I incline to the opinion that the moon is not old enough. The moon, like everything else, will ripen by the end of the world; and in the last days we shall see it taking on those volcanic sunset colours, and leaping with that enormous and fantastic life.

But this is a parenthesis; and one perhaps slightly lacking in prosaic actuality. Whatever may be the value of the above speculations, the phrase about the moon and green cheese remains a good example of this imagery of eating and drinking on a large scale. The same huge fancy is in the phrase “if all the trees were bread and cheese,” which I have cited elsewhere in this connection; and in that noble nightmare of a Scandinavian legend, in which Thor drinks the deep sea nearly dry out of a horn. In an essay like the present (first intended as a paper to be read before the Royal Society) one cannot be too exact; and I will concede that my theory of the gradual vire-scence of our satellite is to be regarded rather as an alternative theory than as a law finally demonstrated and universally accepted

by the scientific world. It is a hypothesis that holds the field, as the scientists say of a theory when there is no evidence for it so far.

But the reader need be under no apprehension that I have suddenly gone mad, and shall start biting large pieces out of the trunks of trees; or seriously altering (by large semicircular mouthfuls) the exquisite outline of the mountains. This feeling for expressing a fresh solidity by the image of eating is really a very old one. So far from being a paradox of perversity, it is one of the oldest commonplaces of religion. If any one wandering about wants to have a good trick or test for separating the wrong idealism from the right, I will give him one on the spot. It is a mark of false religion that it is always trying to express concrete facts as abstract; it calls sex affinity; it calls wine alcohol; it calls brute starvation the economic problem. The test of true religion is that its energy drives exactly the other way; it is always trying to make men feel truths as facts; always trying to make abstract things as plain and solid as concrete things; always trying to make men, not merely admit the truth, but see, smell, handle, hear, and devour the truth. All great spiritual scriptures are full of the invitation not to test, but to taste; not to examine, but to eat. Their phrases are full of living water and heavenly bread, mysterious manna and dreadful wine. Worldliness, and the polite society of the world, has despised this instinct of eating; but religion has never despised it. When we look at a firm, fat, white cliff of chalk at Dover, I do not suggest that we should desire to eat it; that would be highly abnormal. But I really mean that we should think it good to eat; good for some one else to eat. For, indeed, some one else is eating it; the grass that grows upon its top is devouring it silently, but, doubtless, with an uproarious appetite.

Simmons and the Social Tie

It is a platitude, and none the less true for that, that we need to have an ideal in our minds with which to test all realities. But it is equally true, and less noted, that we need a reality with which to test ideals. Thus I have selected Mrs. Buttons, a charwoman in Battersea, as the touchstone of all modern theories about the mass of women. Her name is not Buttons; she is not in the least a contemptible nor entirely a comic figure. She has a powerful stoop and an ugly, attractive face, a little like that of Huxley – without the whiskers, of course. The courage with which she supports the most brutal bad luck has something quite creepy about it. Her irony is incessant and inventive; her practical charity very large; and she is wholly unaware of the philosophical use to which I put her.

But when I hear the modern generalization about her sex on all sides I simply substitute her name, and see how the thing sounds then. When on the one side the mere sentimentalist says, “Let woman be content to be dainty and exquisite, a protected piece of social art and domestic ornament,” then I merely repeat it to myself in the “other form,” “Let Mrs. Buttons be content to be dainty and exquisite, a protected piece of social art, etc.” It is extraordinary what a difference the substitution seems to make. And on the other hand, when some of the Suffragettes say in their pamphlets and speeches, “Woman, leaping to life at the trumpet call of Ibsen and Shaw, drops her tawdry luxuries and demands to grasp the sceptre of empire and the firebrand of speculative thought” – in order to understand such a sentence I say it over again in the amended form: “Mrs. Buttons, leaping to life at the trumpet call of Ibsen and Shaw, drops her tawdry luxuries and demands to grasp the sceptre of empire and the firebrand of speculative thought.” Somehow it sounds quite different. And yet when you say Woman I suppose you mean the average woman; and if most women are as capable and critical and morally sound as Mrs. Buttons, it is as much as we can expect, and a great deal more than we deserve.

But this study is not about Mrs. Buttons; she would require many studies. I will take a less impressive case of my principle, the principle of keeping in the mind an actual personality when we are talking about types or tendencies or generalized ideals. Take, for example, the question of the education of boys. Almost every post brings me pamphlets expounding some advanced and suggestive scheme of education; the pupils are to be taught separate; the sexes are to be taught together; there should be no prizes; there should be no punishments; the master should lift the boys to his level; the master should descend to their level; we should encourage the heartiest comradeship among boys, and also the tenderest spiritual intimacy with masters; toil must be pleasant and holidays must be instructive; with all these things I am daily impressed and somewhat bewildered. But on the great Buttons’ principle I keep in my mind and apply to all these ideals one still vivid fact; the face and character of a particular schoolboy whom I once knew. I am not taking a mere individual oddity, as you will hear. He was exceptional, and yet the reverse of eccentric; he was (in a quite sober and strict sense of the words) exceptionally average. He was the incarnation and the exaggeration of a certain spirit which is the common spirit of boys, but which nowhere else became so obvious and outrageous. And because he was an incarnation he was, in his way, a tragedy.

I will call him Simmons. He was a tall, healthy figure, strong, but a little slouching, and there was in his walk something between a slight swagger and a seaman’s roll; he commonly had his hands in his pockets. His hair was dark, straight, and undistinguished; and his face, if one saw it after his figure, was something of a surprise. For while the form might be called big and braggart, the face might have been called weak, and was certainly worried. It was a hesitating face, which seemed to blink doubtfully in the daylight. He had even the look of one who has received a buffet that he cannot return. In all occupations he was the average boy; just sufficiently good at sports, just sufficiently bad at work to be universally satisfactory. But he was prominent in nothing, for prominence was to him a thing like bodily pain. He could not endure, without discomfort amounting to desperation,

that any boy should be noticed or sensationally separated from the long line of boys; for him, to be distinguished was to be disgraced.

Those who interpret schoolboys as merely wooden and barbarous, unmoved by anything but a savage seriousness about tuck or cricket, make the mistake of forgetting how much of the schoolboy life is public and ceremonial, having reference to an ideal; or, if you like, to an affectation. Boys, like dogs, have a sort of romantic ritual which is not always their real selves. And this romantic ritual is generally the ritual of not being romantic; the pretence of being much more masculine and materialistic than they are. Boys in themselves are very sentimental. The most sentimental thing in the world is to hide your feelings; it is making too much of them. Stoicism is the direct product of sentimentalism; and schoolboys are sentimental individually, but stoical collectively.

For example, there were numbers of boys at my school besides myself who took a private pleasure in poetry; but red-hot iron would not have induced most of us to admit this to the masters, or to repeat poetry with the faintest inflection of rhythm or intelligence. That would have been anti-social egoism; we called it “showing off.” I myself remember running to school (an extraordinary thing to do) with mere internal ecstasy in repeating lines of Walter Scott about the taunts of Marmion or the boasts of Roderick Dhu, and then repeating the same lines in class with the colourless decorum of a hurdy-gurdy. We all wished to be invisible in our uniformity; a mere pattern of Eton collars and coats.

But Simmons went even further. He felt it as an insult to brotherly equality if any task or knowledge out of the ordinary track was discovered even by accident. If a boy had learnt German in infancy; or if a boy knew some terms in music; or if a boy was forced to confess feebly that he had read “The Mill on the Floss” – then Simmons was in a perspiration of discomfort. He felt no personal anger, still less any petty jealousy, what he felt was an honourable and generous shame. He hated it as a lady hates coarseness in a pantomime; it made him want to hide himself. Just that feeling of impersonal ignominy which most of us have when some one betrays indecent ignorance, Simmons had when some one betrayed special knowledge. He writhed and went red in the face; he used to put up the lid of his desk to hide his blushes for human dignity, and from behind this barrier would whisper protests which had the hoarse emphasis of pain. “O, shut up, I say... O, I say, shut up... O, shut it, can't you?” Once when a little boy admitted that he had heard of the Highland claymore, Simmons literally hid his head inside his desk and dropped the lid upon it in desperation; and when I was for a moment transferred from the bottom of the form for knowing the name of Cardinal Newman, I thought he would have rushed from the room.

His psychological eccentricity increased; if one can call that an eccentricity which was a wild worship of the ordinary. At last he grew so sensitive that he could not even bear any question answered correctly without grief. He felt there was a touch of disloyalty, of unfraternal individualism, even about knowing the right answer to a sum. If asked the date of the battle of Hastings, he considered it due to social tact and general good feeling to answer 1067. This chivalrous exaggeration led to bad feeling between him and the school authority, which ended in a rupture unexpectedly violent in the case of so good-humoured a creature. He fled from the school, and it was discovered upon inquiry that he had fled from his home also.

I never expected to see him again; yet it is one of the two or three odd coincidences of my life that I did see him. At some public sports or recreation ground I saw a group of rather objectless youths, one of whom was wearing the dashing uniform of a private in the Lancers. Inside that uniform was the tall figure, shy face, and dark, stiff hair of Simmons. He had gone to the one place where every one is dressed alike – a regiment. I know nothing more; perhaps he was killed in Africa. But when England was full of flags and false triumphs, when everybody was talking manly trash about the whelps of the lion and the brave boys in red, I often heard a voice echoing in the under-caverns of my memory, “Shut up... O, shut up... O, I say, shut it.”

Cheese

My forthcoming work in five volumes, “The Neglect of Cheese in European Literature” is a work of such unprecedented and laborious detail that it is doubtful if I shall live to finish it. Some overflowings from such a fountain of information may therefore be permitted to springle these pages. I cannot yet wholly explain the neglect to which I refer. Poets have been mysteriously silent on the subject of cheese. Virgil, if I remember right, refers to it several times, but with too much Roman restraint. He does not let himself go on cheese. The only other poet I can think of just now who seems to have had some sensibility on the point was the nameless author of the nursery rhyme which says: “If all the trees were bread and cheese” – which is, indeed a rich and gigantic vision of the higher gluttony. If all the trees were bread and cheese there would be considerable deforestation in any part of England where I was living. Wild and wide woodlands would reel and fade before me as rapidly as they ran after Orpheus. Except Virgil and this anonymous rhymer, I can recall no verse about cheese. Yet it has every quality which we require in exalted poetry. It is a short, strong word; it rhymes to “breeze” and “seas” (an essential point); that it is emphatic in sound is admitted even by the civilization of the modern cities. For their citizens, with no apparent intention except emphasis, will often say, “Cheese it!” or even “Quite the cheese.” The substance itself is imaginative. It is ancient – sometimes in the individual case, always in the type and custom. It is simple, being directly derived from milk, which is one of the ancestral drinks, not lightly to be corrupted with soda-water. You know, I hope (though I myself have only just thought of it), that the four rivers of Eden were milk, water, wine, and ale. Aerated waters only appeared after the Fall.

But cheese has another quality, which is also the very soul of song. Once in endeavouring to lecture in several places at once, I made an eccentric journey across England, a journey of so irregular and even illogical shape that it necessitated my having lunch on four successive days in four roadside inns in four different counties. In each inn they had nothing but bread and cheese; nor can I imagine why a man should want more than bread and cheese, if he can get enough of it. In each inn the cheese was good; and in each inn it was different. There was a noble Wensleydale cheese in Yorkshire, a Cheshire cheese in Cheshire, and so on. Now, it is just here that true poetic civilization differs from that paltry and mechanical civilization which holds us all in bondage. Bad customs are universal and rigid, like modern militarism. Good customs are universal and varied, like native chivalry and self-defence. Both the good and bad civilization cover us as with a canopy, and protect us from all that is outside. But a good civilization spreads over us freely like a tree, varying and yielding because it is alive. A bad civilization stands up and sticks out above us like an umbrella – artificial, mathematical in shape; not merely universal, but uniform. So it is with the contrast between the substances that vary and the substances that are the same wherever they penetrate. By a wise doom of heaven men were commanded to eat cheese, but not the same cheese. Being really universal it varies from valley to valley. But if, let us say, we compare cheese with soap (that vastly inferior substance), we shall see that soap tends more and more to be merely Smith’s Soap or Brown’s Soap, sent automatically all over the world. If the Red Indians have soap it is Smith’s Soap. If the Grand Lama has soap it is Brown’s soap. There is nothing subtly and strangely Buddhist, nothing tenderly Tibetan, about his soap. I fancy the Grand Lama does not eat cheese (he is not worthy), but if he does it is probably a local cheese, having some real relation to his life and outlook. Safety matches, tinned foods, patent medicines are sent all over the world; but they are not produced all over the world. Therefore there is in them a mere dead identity, never that soft play of slight variation which exists in things produced everywhere out of the soil, in the milk of the kine, or the fruits of the orchard. You can get a whisky and soda at every outpost of the Empire: that is why so many Empire-builders go mad. But you are not tasting or touching any environment, as in the cider of Devonshire or the grapes of the Rhine. You are not approaching Nature in one of her myriad tints of mood, as in the holy act of eating cheese.

When I had done my pilgrimage in the four wayside public-houses I reached one of the great northern cities, and there I proceeded, with great rapidity and complete inconsistency, to a large and elaborate restaurant, where I knew I could get many other things besides bread and cheese. I could get that also, however; or at least I expected to get it; but I was sharply reminded that I had entered Babylon, and left England behind. The waiter brought me cheese, indeed, but cheese cut up into contemptibly small pieces; and it is the awful fact that, instead of Christian bread, he brought me biscuits. Biscuits – to one who had eaten the cheese of four great countrysides! Biscuits – to one who had proved anew for himself the sanctity of the ancient wedding between cheese and bread! I addressed the waiter in warm and moving terms. I asked him who he was that he should put asunder those whom Humanity had joined. I asked him if he did not feel, as an artist, that a solid but yielding substance like cheese went naturally with a solid, yielding substance like bread; to eat it off biscuits is like eating it off slates. I asked him if, when he said his prayers, he was so supercilious as to pray for his daily biscuits. He gave me generally to understand that he was only obeying a custom of Modern Society. I have therefore resolved to raise my voice, not against the waiter, but against Modern Society, for this huge and unparalleled modern wrong.

The Red Town

When a man says that democracy is false because most people are stupid, there are several courses which the philosopher may pursue. The most obvious is to hit him smartly and with precision on the exact tip of the nose. But if you have scruples (moral or physical) about this course, you may proceed to employ Reason, which in this case has all the savage solidity of a blow with the fist. It is stupid to say that “most people” are stupid. It is like saying “most people are tall,” when it is obvious that “tall” can only mean taller than most people. It is absurd to denounce the majority of mankind as below the average of mankind.

Should the man have been hammered on the nose and brained with logic, and should he still remain cold, a third course opens: lead him by the hand (himself half-willing) towards some sunlit and yet secret meadow and ask him who made the names of the common wild flowers. They were ordinary people, so far as any one knows, who gave to one flower the name of the Star of Bethlehem and to another and much commoner flower the tremendous title of the Eye of Day. If you cling to the snobbish notion that common people are prosaic, ask any common person for the local names of the flowers, names which vary not only from county to county, but even from dale to dale.

But, curiously enough, the case is much stronger than this. It will be said that this poetry is peculiar to the country populace, and that the dim democracies of our modern towns at least have lost it. For some extraordinary reason they have not lost it. Ordinary London slang is full of witty things said by nobody in particular. True, the creed of our cruel cities is not so sane and just as the creed of the old countryside; but the people are just as clever in giving names to their sins in the city as in giving names to their joys in the wilderness. One could not better sum up Christianity than by calling a small white insignificant flower “The Star of Bethlehem.” But then, again, one could not better sum up the philosophy deduced from Darwinism than in the one verbal picture of “having your monkey up.”

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