

### III THE AGE OF LEGENDS

We should be startled if we were quietly reading a prosaic modern novel, and somewhere in the middle it turned without warning into a fairy tale. We should be surprised if one of the spinsters in Cranford, after tidily sweeping the room with a broom, were to fly away on a broomstick. Our attention would be arrested if one of Jane Austen's young ladies who had just met a dragoon were to walk a little further and meet a dragon. Yet something very like this extraordinary transition takes place in British history at the end of the purely Roman period. We have to do with rational and almost mechanical accounts of encampment and engineering, of a busy bureaucracy and occasional frontier wars, quite modern in their efficiency and inefficiency; and then all of a sudden we are reading of wandering bells and wizard lances, of wars against men as tall as trees or as short as toadstools. The soldier of civilization is no longer fighting with Goths but with goblins; the land becomes a labyrinth of faërie towns unknown to history; and scholars can suggest but cannot explain how a Roman ruler or a Welsh chieftain towers up in the twilight as the awful and unbegotten Arthur. The scientific age comes first and the mythological age after it. One working example, the echoes of which lingered till very late in English literature, may serve to sum up the contrast. The British state which was found by Cæsar was long believed to have been founded by Brutus. The contrast between the one very dry discovery and the other very fantastic foundation has something decidedly comic about it; as if Cæsar's "Et tu, Brute," might be translated, "What, you here?" But in one respect the fable is quite as important as the fact. They both testify to the reality of the Roman foundation of our insular society, and show that even the stories that seem prehistoric are seldom pre-Roman. When England is Elfland, the elves are not the Angles. All the phrases that can be used as clues through that tangle of traditions are more or less Latin phrases. And in all our speech there was no word more Roman than "romance."

The Roman legions left Britain in the fourth century. This did not mean that the Roman civilization left it; but it did mean that the civilization lay far more open both to admixture and attack. Christianity had almost certainly come to Britain, not indeed otherwise than by the routes established by Rome, but certainly long before the official Roman mission of Gregory the Great. It had certainly been largely swamped by later heathen invasions of the undefended coasts. It may then rationally be urged that the hold both of the Empire and its new religion were here weaker than elsewhere, and that the description of the general civilization in the last chapter is proportionately irrelevant. This, however, is not the chief truth of the matter.

There is one fundamental fact which must be understood of the whole of this period. Yet a modern man must very nearly turn his mind upside down to understand it. Almost every modern man has in his head an association between freedom and the future. The whole culture of our time has been full of the notion of "A Good Time Coming." Now the whole culture of the Dark Ages was full of the notion of "A Good Time Going." They looked backwards to old enlightenment and forwards to new prejudices. In our time there has come a quarrel between faith and hope--which perhaps must be healed by charity. But they were situated otherwise. They hoped--but it may be said that they hoped for yesterday. All the motives that make a man a progressive now made a man a conservative then. The more he could keep of the past the more he had of a fair law and a free state; the more he gave way to the future the more he must endure of ignorance and privilege. All we call reason was one with all we call reaction. And this is the clue which we must carry with us through the lives of all the great men of the Dark Ages; of Alfred, of Bede, of Dunstan. If the most extreme modern Republican were put back in that period he would be an equally extreme Papist or even Imperialist. For the Pope was what was left of the Empire; and the Empire what was left of the Republic.

We may compare the man of that time, therefore, to one who has left free cities and even free fields behind him, and is forced to advance towards a forest. And the forest is the fittest metaphor, not only because it was really that wild European growth cloven here and there by the Roman roads, but also because there has always been associated with forests another idea which increased as the Roman order decayed. The idea of the forests was the idea of enchantment. There was a notion of things being double or different from themselves, of beasts behaving like men and not merely, as modern wits would say, of men behaving like beasts. But it is precisely here that it is most necessary to remember that an age of reason had preceded the age of magic. The central pillar which has sustained the storied house of our imagination ever since has been the idea of the civilized knight amid the savage enchantments; the adventures of a man still sane in a world gone mad.

The next thing to note in the matter is this: that in this barbaric time none of the heroes are barbaric. They are only heroes if they are anti-barbaric. Men real or mythical, or more probably both, became omnipresent like gods among the people, and forced themselves into the faintest memory and the shortest record, exactly in proportion as they had mastered the heathen madness of the time and preserved the Christian rationality that had come from Rome. Arthur has his name because he killed the heathen; the heathen who killed him have no names at all. Englishmen who know nothing of English history, but less than nothing of Irish history, have heard somehow or other of Brian Boru, though they spell it Boroo and seem to be under the impression that it is a joke. It is a joke the

subtlety of which they would never have been able to enjoy, if King Brian had not broken the heathen in Ireland at the great Battle of Clontarf. The ordinary English reader would never have heard of Olaf of Norway if he had not "preached the Gospel with his sword"; or of the Cid if he had not fought against the Crescent. And though Alfred the Great seems to have deserved his title even as a personality, he was not so great as the work he had to do.

But the paradox remains that Arthur is more real than Alfred. For the age is the age of legends. Towards these legends most men adopt by instinct a sane attitude; and, of the two, credulity is certainly much more sane than incredulity. It does not much matter whether most of the stories are true; and (as in such cases as Bacon and Shakespeare) to realize that the question does not matter is the first step towards answering it correctly. But before the reader dismisses anything like an attempt to tell the earlier history of the country by its legends, he will do well to keep two principles in mind, both of them tending to correct the crude and very thoughtless scepticism which has made this part of the story so sterile. The nineteenth-century historians went on the curious principle of dismissing all people of whom tales are told, and concentrating upon people of whom nothing is told. Thus, Arthur is made utterly impersonal because all legends are lies, but somebody of the type of Hengist is made quite an important personality, merely because nobody thought him important enough to lie about. Now this is to reverse all common sense. A great many witty sayings are attributed to Talleyrand which were really said by somebody else. But they would not be so attributed if Talleyrand had been a fool, still less if he had been a fable. That fictitious stories are told about a person is, nine times out of ten, extremely good evidence that there was somebody to tell them about. Indeed some allow that marvellous things were done, and that there may have been a man named Arthur at the time in which they were done; but here, so far as I am concerned, the distinction becomes rather dim. I do not understand the attitude which holds that there was an Ark and a man named Noah, but cannot believe in the existence of Noah's Ark.

The other fact to be remembered is that scientific research for the last few years has worked steadily in the direction of confirming and not dissipating the legends of the populace. To take only the obvious instance, modern excavators with modern spades have found a solid stone labyrinth in Crete, like that associated with the Minotaur, which was conceived as being as cloudy a fable as the Chimera. To most people this would have seemed quite as frantic as finding the roots of Jack's Beanstalk or the skeletons in Bluebeard's cupboard, yet it is simply the fact. Finally, a truth is to be remembered which scarcely ever is remembered in estimating the past. It is the paradox that the past is always present: yet it is not what was, but whatever seems to have been; for all the past is a part of faith. What did they believe of their fathers? In this matter new

discoveries are useless because they are new. We may find men wrong in what they thought they were, but we cannot find them wrong in what they thought they thought. It is therefore very practical to put in a few words, if possible, something of what a man of these islands in the Dark Ages would have said about his ancestors and his inheritance. I will attempt here to put some of the simpler things in their order of importance as he would have seen them; and if we are to understand our fathers who first made this country anything like itself, it is most important that we should remember that if this was not their real past, it was their real memory.

After that blessed crime, as the wit of mystics called it, which was for these men hardly second to the creation of the world, St. Joseph of Arimathea, one of the few followers of the new religion who seem to have been wealthy, set sail as a missionary, and after long voyages came to that litter of little islands which seemed to the men of the Mediterranean something like the last clouds of the sunset. He came up upon the western and wilder side of that wild and western land, and made his way to a valley which through all the oldest records is called Avalon. Something of rich rains and warmth in its westland meadows, or something in some lost pagan traditions about it, made it persistently regarded as a kind of Earthly Paradise. Arthur, after being slain at Lyonesse, is carried here, as if to heaven. Here the pilgrim planted his staff in the soil; and it took root as a tree that blossoms on Christmas Day.

A mystical materialism marked Christianity from its birth; the very soul of it was a body. Among the stoical philosophies and oriental negations that were its first foes it fought fiercely and particularly for a supernatural freedom to cure concrete maladies by concrete substances. Hence the scattering of relics was everywhere like the scattering of seed. All who took their mission from the divine tragedy bore tangible fragments which became the germs of churches and cities. St. Joseph carried the cup which held the wine of the Last Supper and the blood of the Crucifixion to that shrine in Avalon which we now call Glastonbury; and it became the heart of a whole universe of legends and romances, not only for Britain but for Europe. Throughout this tremendous and branching tradition it is called the Holy Grail. The vision of it was especially the reward of that ring of powerful paladins whom King Arthur feasted at a Round Table, a symbol of heroic comradeship such as was afterwards imitated or invented by mediæval knighthood. Both the cup and the table are of vast importance emblematically in the psychology of the chivalric experiment. The idea of a round table is not merely universality but equality. It has in it, modified of course, by other tendencies to differentiation, the same idea that exists in the very word "peers," as given to the knights of Charlemagne. In this the Round Table is as Roman as the round arch, which might also serve as a type; for instead of being one barbaric rock merely rolled on the others, the king was rather the keystone of an arch. But to this

tradition of a level of dignity was added something unearthly that was from Rome, but not of it; the privilege that inverted all privileges; the glimpse of heaven which seemed almost as capricious as fairyland; the flying chalice which was veiled from the highest of all the heroes, and which appeared to one knight who was hardly more than a child.

Rightly or wrongly, this romance established Britain for after centuries as a country with a chivalrous past. Britain had been a mirror of universal knighthood. This fact, or fancy, is of colossal import in all ensuing affairs, especially the affairs of barbarians. These and numberless other local legends are indeed for us buried by the forests of popular fancies that have grown out of them. It is all the harder for the serious modern mind because our fathers felt at home with these tales, and therefore took liberties with them. Probably the rhyme which runs,

"When good King Arthur ruled this land      He was a noble king,      He stole  
three pecks of barley meal,"

is much nearer the true mediæval note than the aristocratic stateliness of Tennyson. But about all these grotesques of the popular fancy there is one last thing to be remembered. It must especially be remembered by those who would dwell exclusively on documents, and take no note of tradition at all. Wild as would be the results of credulity concerning all the old wives' tales, it would not be so wild as the errors that can arise from trusting to written evidence when there is not enough of it. Now the whole written evidence for the first parts of our history would go into a small book. A very few details are mentioned, and none are explained. A fact thus standing alone, without the key of contemporary thought, may be very much more misleading than any fable. To know what word an archaic scribe wrote without being sure of what thing he meant, may produce a result that is literally mad. Thus, for instance, it would be unwise to accept literally the tale that St. Helena was not only a native of Colchester, but was a daughter of Old King Cole. But it would not be very unwise; not so unwise as some things that are deduced from documents. The natives of Colchester certainly did honour to St. Helena, and might have had a king named Cole. According to the more serious story, the saint's father was an innkeeper; and the only recorded action of Cole is well within the resources of that calling. It would not be nearly so unwise as to deduce from the written word, as some critic of the future may do, that the natives of Colchester were oysters.