

5: 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.