

10: THE REDTOWN

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."

Who first invented these violent felicities of language? Who first spoke of a man "being off his head"? The obvious comment on a lunatic is that his head is off him; yet the other phrase is far more fantastically exact. There is about every madman a singular sensation that his body has walked off and left the important part of him behind.

But the cases of this popular perfection in phrase are even stronger when they are more vulgar. What concentrated irony and imagination there is for instance,

in the metaphor which describes a man doing a midnight flitting as "shooting the moon"? It expresses everything about the run away: his eccentric occupation, his improbable explanations, his furtive air as of a hunter, his constant glances at the blank clock in the sky.

No; the English democracy is weak enough about a number of things; for instance, it is weak in politics. But there is no doubt that democracy is wonderfully strong in literature. Very few books that the cultured class has produced of late have been such good literature as the expression "painting the town red."

Oddly enough, this last Cockney epigram clings to my memory. For as I was walking a little while ago round a corner near Victoria I realized for the first time that a familiar lamp-post was painted all over with a bright vermilion just as if it were trying (in spite of the obvious bodily disqualification) to pretend that it was a pillar-box. I have since heard official explanations of these startling and scarlet objects. But my first fancy was that some dissipated gentleman on his way home at four o'clock in the morning had attempted to paint the town red and got only as far as one lamp-post.

I began to make a fairy tale about the man; and, indeed, this phrase contains both a fairy tale and a philosophy; it really states almost the whole truth about those pure outbreaks of pagan enjoyment to which all healthy men have often been tempted. It expresses the desire to have levity on a large scale which is the essence of such a mood. The rowdy young man is not content to paint his tutor's door green: he would like to paint the whole city scarlet. The word which to us best recalls such gigantesque idiocy is the word "mafficking." The slaves of that saturnalia were not only painting the town red; they thought that they were painting the map red--that they were painting the world red. But, indeed, this Imperial debauch has in it something worse than the mere larkiness which is my present topic; it has an element of real self-flattery and of sin. The Jingo who wants to admire himself is worse than the blackguard who only wants to enjoy himself. In a very old ninth-century illumination which I have seen, depicting the war of the rebel angels in heaven, Satan is represented as distributing to his followers peacock feathers--the symbols of an evil pride. Satan also distributed peacock feathers to his followers on Mafeking Night...

But taking the case of ordinary pagan recklessness and pleasure seeking, it is, as we have said, well expressed in this image. First, because it conveys this notion of filling the world with one private folly; and secondly, because of the profound idea involved in the choice of colour. Red is the most joyful and dreadful thing in the physical universe; it is the fiercest note, it is the highest light, it is the place where the walls of this world of ours wear thinnest and something beyond burns

through. It glows in the blood which sustains and in the fire which destroys us, in the roses of our romance and in the awful cup of our religion. It stands for all passionate happiness, as in faith or in first love.

Now, the profligate is he who wishes to spread this crimson of conscious joy over everything; to have excitement at every moment; to paint everything red. He bursts a thousand barrels of wine to incarnadine the streets; and sometimes (in his last madness) he will butcher beasts and men to dip his gigantic brushes in their blood. For it marks the sacredness of red in nature, that it is secret even when it is ubiquitous, like blood in the human body, which is omnipresent, yet invisible. As long as blood lives it is hidden; it is only dead blood that we see. But the earlier parts of the rake's progress are very natural and amusing. Painting the town red is a delightful thing until it is done. It would be splendid to see the cross of St. Paul's as red as the cross of St. George, and the gallons of red paint running down the dome or dripping from the Nelson Column. But when it is done, when you have painted the town red, an extraordinary thing happens. You cannot see any red at all.

I can see, as in a sort of vision, the successful artist standing in the midst of that frightful city, hung on all sides with the scarlet of his shame. And then, when everything is red, he will long for a red rose in a green hedge and long in vain; he will dream of a red leaf and be unable even to imagine it. He has desecrated the divine colour, and he can no longer see it, though it is all around. I see him, a single black figure against the red-hot hell that he has kindled, where spires and turrets stand up like immobile flames: he is stiffened in a sort of agony of prayer. Then the mercy of Heaven is loosened, and I see one or two flakes of snow very slowly begin to fall.