

## 14: THE WRATH OF THE ROSES

The position of the rose among flowers is like that of the dog among animals. It is so much that both are domesticated as that have some dim feeling that they were always domesticated. There are wild roses and there are wild dogs. I do not know the wild dogs; wild roses are very nice. But nobody ever thinks of either of them if the name is abruptly mentioned in a gossip or a poem. On the other hand, there are tame tigers and tame cobras, but if one says, "I have a cobra in my pocket," or "There is a tiger in the music-room," the adjective "tame" has to be somewhat hastily added. If one speaks of beasts one thinks first of wild beasts; if of flowers one thinks first of wild flowers.

But there are two great exceptions; caught so completely into the wheel of man's civilization, entangled so unalterably with his ancient emotions and images, that the artificial product seems more natural than the natural. The dog is not a part of natural history, but of human history; and the real rose grows in a garden. All must regard the elephant as something tremendous, but tamed; and many, especially in our great cultured centres, regard every bull as presumably a mad bull. In the same way we think of most garden trees and plants as fierce creatures of the forest or morass taught at last to endure the curb.

But with the dog and the rose this instinctive principle is reversed. With them we think of the artificial as the archetype; the earth-born as the erratic exception. We think vaguely of the wild dog as if he had run away, like the stray cat. And we cannot help fancying that the wonderful wild rose of our hedges has escaped by jumping over the hedge. Perhaps they fled together, the dog and the rose: a singular and (on the whole) an imprudent elopement. Perhaps the treacherous dog crept from the kennel, and the rebellious rose from the flower-bed, and they fought their way out in company, one with teeth and the other with thorns. Possibly this is why my dog becomes a wild dog when he sees roses, and kicks them anywhere. Possibly this is why the wild rose is called a dog-rose. Possibly not.

But there is this degree of dim barbaric truth in the quaint old-world legend that I have just invented. That in these two cases the civilized product is felt to be the fiercer, nay, even the wilder. Nobody seems to be afraid of a wild dog: he is classed among the jackals and the servile beasts. The terrible *cave canem* is written over man's creation. When we read "Beware of the Dog," it means beware of the tame dog: for it is the tame dog that is terrible. He is terrible in proportion as he is tame: it is his loyalty and his virtues that are awful to the stranger, even the stranger within your gates; still more to the stranger halfway over your gates.

He is alarmed at such deafening and furious docility; he flees from that great monster of mildness.

Well, I have much the same feeling when I look at the roses ranked red and thick and resolute round a garden; they seem to me bold and even blustering. I hasten to say that I know even less about my own garden than about anybody else's garden. I know nothing about roses, not even their names. I know only the name Rose; and Rose is (in every sense of the word) a Christian name. It is Christian in the one absolute and primordial sense of Christian--that it comes down from the age of pagans. The rose can be seen, and even smelt, in Greek, Latin, Provencal, Gothic, Renaissance, and Puritan poems. Beyond this mere word Rose, which (like wine and other noble words) is the same in all the tongues of white men, I know literally nothing. I have heard the more evident and advertised names. I know there is a flower which calls itself the Glory of Dijon--which I had supposed to be its cathedral. In any case, to have produced a rose and a cathedral is to have produced not only two very glorious and humane things, but also (as I maintain) two very soldierly and defiant things. I also know there is a rose called Marechal Niel--note once more the military ring.

And when I was walking round my garden the other day I spoke to my gardener (an enterprise of no little valour) and asked him the name of a strange dark rose that had somehow oddly taken my fancy. It was almost as if it reminded me of some turbid element in history and the soul. Its red was not only swarthy, but smoky; there was something congested and wrathful about its colour. It was at once theatrical and sulky. The gardener told me it was called Victor Hugo.

Therefore it is that I feel all roses to have some secret power about them; even their names may mean something in connexion with themselves, in which they differ from nearly all the sons of men. But the rose itself is royal and dangerous; long as it has remained in the rich house of civilization, it has never laid off its armour. A rose always looks like a mediaeval gentleman of Italy, with a cloak of crimson and a sword: for the thorn is the sword of the rose.

And there is this real moral in the matter; that we have to remember that civilization as it goes on ought not perhaps to grow more fighting--but ought to grow more ready to fight. The more valuable and reposeful is the order we have to guard, the more vivid should be our ultimate sense of vigilance and potential violence. And when I walk round a summer garden, I can understand how those high mad lords at the end of the Middle Ages, just before their swords clashed, caught at roses for their instinctive emblems of empire and rivalry. For to me any such garden is full of the wars of the roses.