

19: THE ANARCHIST

I have now lived for about two months in the country, and have gathered the last rich autumnal fruit of a rural life, which is a strong desire to see London. Artists living in my neighbourhood talk rapturously of the rolling liberty of the landscape, the living peace of woods. But I say to them (with a slight Buckinghamshire accent), "Ah, that is how Cockneys feel. For us real old country people the country is reality; it is the town that is romance. Nature is as plain as one of her pigs, as commonplace, as comic, and as healthy. But civilization is full of poetry, even if it be sometimes an evil poetry. The streets of London are paved with gold; that is, with the very poetry of avarice." With these typically bucolic words I touch my hat and go ambling away on a stick, with a stiffness of gait proper to the Oldest Inhabitant; while in my more animated moments I am taken for the Village Idiot. Exchanging heavy but courteous salutations with other gaffers, I reach the station, where I ask for a ticket for London where the king lives. Such a journey, mingled of provincial fascination and fear, did I successfully perform only a few days ago; and alone and helpless in the capital, found myself in the tangle of roads around the Marble Arch.

A faint prejudice may possess the mind that I have slightly exaggerated my rusticity and remoteness. And yet it is true as I came to that corner of the Park that, for some unreasonable reason of mood, I saw all London as a strange city and the civilization itself as one enormous whim. The Marble Arch itself, in its new insular position, with traffic turning dizzily all about it, struck me as a placid monstrosity. What could be wilder than to have a huge arched gateway, with people going everywhere except under it? If I took down my front door and stood it up all by itself in the middle of my back garden, my village neighbours (in their simplicity) would probably stare. Yet the Marble Arch is now precisely that; an elaborate entrance and the only place by which no one can enter. By the new arrangement its last weak pretence to be a gate has been taken away. The cabman still cannot drive through it, but he can have the delights of riding round it, and even (on foggy nights) the rapture of running into it. It has been raised from the rank of a fiction to the dignity of an obstacle.

As I began to walk across a corner of the Park, this sense of what is strange in cities began to mingle with some sense of what is stern as well as strange. It was one of those queer-coloured winter days when a watery sky changes to pink and grey and green, like an enormous opal. The trees stood up grey and angular, as if in attitudes of agony; and here and there on benches under the trees sat men as grey and angular as they. It was cold even for me, who had eaten a large breakfast and purposed to eat a perfectly Gargantuan lunch; it was colder for the

men under the trees. And to eastward through the opalescent haze, the warmer whites and yellows of the houses in Park-lane shone as unsubstantially as if the clouds themselves had taken on the shape of mansions to mock the men who sat there in the cold. But the mansions were real--like the mockery.

No one worth calling a man allows his moods to change his convictions; but it is by moods that we understand other men's convictions. The bigot is not he who knows he is right; every sane man knows he is right. The bigot is he whose emotions and imagination are too cold and weak to feel how it is that other men go wrong. At that moment I felt vividly how men might go wrong, even unto dynamite. If one of those huddled men under the trees had stood up and asked for rivers of blood, it would have been erroneous--but not irrelevant. It would have been appropriate and in the picture; that lurid grey picture of insolence on one side and impotence on the other. It may be true (on the whole it is) that this social machine we have made is better than anarchy. Still, it is a machine; and we have made it. It does hold those poor men helpless: and it does lift those rich men high... and such men--good Lord! By the time I flung myself on a bench beside another man I was half inclined to try anarchy for a change.

The other was of more prosperous appearance than most of the men on such seats; still, he was not what one calls a gentleman, and had probably worked at some time like a human being. He was a small, sharp-faced man, with grave, staring eyes, and a beard somewhat foreign. His clothes were black; respectable and yet casual; those of a man who dressed conventionally because it was a bore to dress unconventionally--as it is. Attracted by this and other things, and wanting an outburst for my bitter social feelings, I tempted him into speech, first about the cold, and then about the General Election. To this the respectable man replied:

"Well, I don't belong to any party myself. I'm an Anarchist."

I looked up and almost expected fire from heaven. This coincidence was like the end of the world. I had sat down feeling that somehow or other Park-lane must be pulled down; and I had sat down beside the man who wanted to pull it down. I bowed in silence for an instant under the approaching apocalypse; and in that instant the man turned sharply and started talking like a torrent.

"Understand me," he said. "Ordinary people think an Anarchist means a man with a bomb in his pocket. Herbert Spencer was an Anarchist. But for that fatal admission of his on page 793, he would be a complete Anarchist. Otherwise, he agrees wholly with Pidge."

This was uttered with such blinding rapidity of syllabification as to be a better

test of teetotalism than the Scotch one of saying "Biblical criticism" six times. I attempted to speak, but he began again with the same rippling rapidity.

"You will say that Pidge also admits government in that tenth chapter so easily misunderstood. Bolger has attacked Pidge on those lines. But Bolger has no scientific training. Bolger is a psychometrist, but no sociologist. To any one who has combined a study of Pidge with the earlier and better discoveries of Kruxy, the fallacy is quite clear. Bolger confounds social coercion with coercional social action."

His rapid rattling mouth shut quite tight suddenly, and he looked steadily and triumphantly at me, with his head on one side. I opened my mouth, and the mere motion seemed to sting him to fresh verbal leaps.

"Yes," he said, "that's all very well. The Finland Group has accepted Bolger. But," he said, suddenly lifting a long finger as if to stop me, "but--Pidge has replied. His pamphlet is published. He has proved that Potential Social Rebuke is not a weapon of the true Anarchist. He has shown that just as religious authority and political authority have gone, so must emotional authority and psychological authority. He has shown--"

I stood up in a sort of daze. "I think you remarked," I said feebly, "that the mere common populace do not quite understand Anarchism"--"Quite so," he said with burning swiftness; "as I said, they think any Anarchist is a man with a bomb, whereas--"

"But great heavens, man!" I said; "it's the man with the bomb that I understand! I wish you had half his sense. What do I care how many German dons tie themselves in knots about how this society began? My only interest is about how soon it will end. Do you see those fat white houses over in Park-lane, where your masters live?"

He assented and muttered something about concentrations of capital.

"Well," I said, "if the time ever comes when we all storm those houses, will you tell me one thing? Tell me how we shall do it without authority? Tell me how you will have an army of revolt without discipline?"

For the first instant he was doubtful; and I had bidden him farewell, and crossed the street again, when I saw him open his mouth and begin to run after me. He had remembered something out of Pidge.

I escaped, however, and as I leapt on an omnibus I saw again the enormous

emblem of the Marble Arch. I saw that massive symbol of the modern mind: a door with no house to it; the gigantic gate of Nowhere.