

24: THE STEWARD OF THE CHILTERN HUNDREDS

The other day on a stray spur of the Chiltern Hills I climbed up upon one of those high, abrupt, windy churchyards from which the dead seem to look down upon all the living. It was a mountain of ghosts as Olympus was a mountain of gods. In that church lay the bones of great Puritan lords, of a time when most of the power of England was Puritan, even of the Established Church. And below these uplifted bones lay the huge and hollow valleys of the English countryside, where the motors went by every now and then like meteors, where stood out in white squares and oblongs in the chequered forest many of the country seats even of those same families now dulled with wealth or decayed with Toryism. And looking over that deep green prospect on that luminous yellow evening, a lovely and austere thought came into my mind, a thought as beautiful as the green wood and as grave as the tombs. The thought was this: that I should like to go into Parliament, quarrel with my party, accept the Stewardship of the Chiltern Hundreds, and then refuse to give it up.

We are so proud in England of our crazy constitutional anomalies that I fancy that very few readers indeed will need to be told about the Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds. But in case there should be here or there one happy man who has never heard of such twisted tomfooleries, I will rapidly remind you what this legal fiction is. As it is quite a voluntary, sometimes even an eager, affair to get into Parliament, you would naturally suppose that it would be also a voluntary matter to get out again. You would think your fellow-members would be indifferent, or even relieved to see you go; especially as (by another exercise of the shrewd, illogical old English common sense) they have carefully built the room too small for the people who have to sit in it. But not so, my pippins, as it says in the "Iliad." If you are merely a member of Parliament (Lord knows why) you can't resign. But if you are a Minister of the Crown (Lord knows why) you can. It is necessary to get into the Ministry in order to get out of the House; and they have to give you some office that doesn't exist or that nobody else wants and thus unlock the door. So you go to the Prime Minister, concealing your air of fatigue, and say, "It has been the ambition of my life to be Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds." The Prime Minister then replies, "I can imagine no man more fitted both morally and mentally for that high office." He then gives it you, and you hurriedly leave, reflecting how the republics of the Continent reel anarchically to and fro for lack of a little solid English directness and simplicity.

Now, the thought that struck me like a thunderbolt as I sat on the Chiltern slope was that I would like to get the Prime Minister to give me the Chiltern Hundreds, and then startle and disturb him by showing the utmost interest in my work. I

should profess a general knowledge of my duties, but wish to be instructed in the details. I should ask to see the Under-Steward and the Under-Under-Steward, and all the fine staff of experienced permanent officials who are the glory of this department. And, indeed, my enthusiasm would not be wholly unreal. For as far as I can recollect the original duties of a Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds were to put down the outlaws and brigands in that part of the world. Well, there are a great many outlaws and brigands in that part of the world still, and though their methods have so largely altered as to require a corresponding alteration in the tactics of the Steward, I do not see why an energetic and public-spirited Steward should not nab them yet.

For the robbers have not vanished from the old high forests to the west of the great city. The thieves have not vanished; they have grown so large that they are invisible. You do not see the word "Asia" written across a map of that neighbourhood; nor do you see the word "Thief" written across the countrysides of England; though it is really written in equally large letters. I know men governing despotically great stretches of that country, whose every step in life has been such that a slip would have sent them to Dartmoor; but they trod along the high hard wall between right and wrong, the wall as sharp as a swordedge, as softly and craftily and lightly as a cat. The vastness of their silent violence itself obscured what they were at; if they seem to stand for the rights of property it is really because they have so often invaded them. And if they do not break the laws, it is only because they make them.

But after all we only need a Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds who really understands cats and thieves. Men hunt one animal differently from another; and the rich could catch swindlers as dexterously as they catch otters or antlered deer if they were really at all keen upon doing it. But then they never have an uncle with antlers; nor a personal friend who is an otter. When some of the great lords that lie in the churchyard behind me went out against their foes in those deep woods beneath I wager that they had bows against the bows of the outlaws, and spears against the spears of the robber knights. They knew what they were about; they fought the evildoers of their age with the weapons of their age. If the same common sense were applied to commercial law, in forty-eight hours it would be all over with the American Trusts and the African forward finance. But it will not be done: for the governing class either does not care, or cares very much, for the criminals, and as for me, I had a delusive opportunity of being Constable of Beaconsfield (with grossly inadequate powers), but I fear I shall never really be Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds.