

## **26: THE STRANGENESS OF LUXURY**

It is an English misfortune that what is called "public spirit" is so often a very private spirit; the legitimate but strictly individual ideals of this or that person who happens to have the power to carry them out. When these private principles are held by very rich people, the result is often the blackest and most repulsive kind of despotism, which is benevolent despotism. Obviously it is the public which ought to have public spirit. But in this country and at this epoch this is exactly what it has not got. We shall have a public washhouse and a public kitchen long before we have a public spirit; in fact, if we had a public spirit we might very probably do without the other things. But if England were properly and naturally governed by the English, one of the first results would probably be this: that our standard of excess or defect in property would be changed from that of the plutocrat to that of the moderately needy man. That is, that while property might be strictly respected, everything that is necessary to a clerk would be felt and considered on quite a different plane from anything which is a very great luxury to a clerk. This sane distinction of sentiment is not instinctive at present, because our standard of life is that of the governing class, which is eternally turning luxuries into necessities as fast as pork is turned into sausages; and which cannot remember the beginning of its needs and cannot get to the end of its novelties.

Take, for the sake of argument, the case of the motor. Doubtless the duke now feels it as necessary to have a motor as to have a roof, and in a little while he may feel it equally necessary to have a flying ship. But this does not prove (as the reactionary sceptics always argue) that a motor really is just as necessary as a roof. It only proves that a man can get used to an artificial life: it does not prove that there is no natural life for him to get used to. In the broad bird's-eye view of common sense there abides a huge disproportion between the need for a roof and the need for an aeroplane; and no rush of inventions can ever alter it. The only difference is that things are now judged by the abnormal needs, when they might be judged merely by the normal needs. The best aristocrat sees the situation from an aeroplane. The good citizen, in his loftiest moments, goes no further than seeing it from the roof.

It is not true that luxury is merely relative. It is not true that it is only an expensive novelty which we may afterwards come to think a necessity. Luxury has a firm philosophical meaning; and where there is a real public spirit luxury is generally allowed for, sometimes rebuked, but always recognized instantly. To the healthy soul there is something in the very nature of certain pleasures which warns us that they are exceptions, and that if they become rules they will become

very tyrannical rules.

Take a harassed seamstress out of the Harrow Road and give her one lightning hour in a motorcar, and she will probably feel it as splendid, but strange, rare, and even terrible. But this is not (as the relativists say) merely because she has never been in a car before. She has never been in the middle of a Somerset cowslip meadow before; but if you put her there she does not think it terrifying or extraordinary, but merely pleasant and free and a little lonely. She does not think the motor monstrous because it is new. She thinks it monstrous because she has eyes in her head; she thinks it monstrous because it is monstrous. That is, her mothers and grandmothers, and the whole race by whose life she lives, have had, as a matter of fact, a roughly recognizable mode of living; sitting in a green field was a part of it; travelling as quick as a cannon ball was not. And we should not look down on the seamstress because she mechanically emits a short sharp scream whenever the motor begins to move. On the contrary, we ought to look up to the seamstress, and regard her cry as a kind of mystic omen or revelation of nature, as the old Goths used to consider the howls emitted by chance females when annoyed. For that ritual yell is really a mark of moral health--of swift response to the stimulations and changes of life. The seamstress is wiser than all the learned ladies, precisely because she can still feel that a motor is a different sort of thing from a meadow. By the accident of her economic imprisonment it is even possible that she may have seen more of the former than the latter. But this has not shaken her cyclopean sagacity as to which is the natural thing and which the artificial. If not for her, at least for humanity as a whole, there is little doubt about which is the more normally attainable. It is considerably cheaper to sit in a meadow and see motors go by than to sit in a motor and see meadows go by.

To me personally, at least, it would never seem needful to own a motor, any more than to own an avalanche. An avalanche, if you have luck, I am told, is a very swift, successful, and thrilling way of coming down a hill. It is distinctly more stirring, say, than a glacier, which moves an inch in a hundred years. But I do not divide these pleasures either by excitement or convenience, but by the nature of the thing itself. It seems human to have a horse or bicycle, because it seems human to potter about; and men cannot work horses, nor can bicycles work men, enormously far afield of their ordinary haunts and affairs.

But about motoring there is something magical, like going to the moon; and I say the thing should be kept exceptional and felt as something breathless and bizarre. My ideal hero would own his horse, but would have the moral courage to hire his motor. Fairy tales are the only sound guidebooks to life; I like the Fairy Prince to ride on a white pony out of his father's stables, which are of ivory and gold. But if in the course of his adventures he finds it necessary to travel on a flaming dragon, I think he ought to give the dragon back to the witch at the end

of the story. It is a mistake to have dragons about the place.

For there is truly an air of something weird about luxury; and it is by this that healthy human nature has always smelt and suspected it. All romances that deal in extreme luxury, from the "Arabian Nights" to the novels of Ouida and Disraeli, have, it may be noted, a singular air of dream and occasionally of nightmare. In such imaginative debauches there is something as occasional as intoxication; if that is still counted occasional. Life in those preposterous palaces would be an agony of dullness; it is clear we are meant to visit them only as in a flying vision. And what is true of the old freaks of wealth, flavour and fierce colour and smell, I would say also of the new freak of wealth, which is speed. I should say to the duke, when I entered his house at the head of an armed mob, "I do not object to your having exceptional pleasures, if you have them exceptionally. I do not mind your enjoying the strange and alien energies of science, if you feel them strange and alien, and not your own. But in condemning you (under the Seventeenth Section of the Eighth Decree of the Republic) to hire a motor-car twice a year at Margate, I am not the enemy of your luxuries, but, rather, the protector of them."

That is what I should say to the duke. As to what the duke would say to me, that is another matter, and may well be deferred.