

27: THE TRIUMPH OF THE DONKEY

Doubtless the unsympathetic might state my doctrine that one should not own a motor like a horse, but rather use it like a flying dragon in the simpler form that I will always go motoring in somebody else's car. My favourite modern philosopher (Mr. W. W. Jacobs) describes a similar case of spiritual delicacy misunderstood. I have not the book at hand, but I think that Job Brown was reproaching Bill Chambers for wasteful drunkenness, and Henery Walker spoke up for Bill, and said he scarcely ever had a glass but what somebody else paid for it, and there was "unpleasantness all round then."

Being less sensitive than Bill Chambers (or whoever it was) I will risk this rude perversion of my meaning, and concede that I was in a motor-car yesterday, and the motor-car most certainly was not my own, and the journey, though it contained nothing that is specially unusual on such journeys, had running through it a strain of the grotesque which was at once wholesome and humiliating. The symbol of that influence was that ancient symbol of the humble and humorous--a donkey.

When first I saw the donkey I saw him in the sunlight as the unearthly gargoyle that he is. My friend had met me in his car (I repeat firmly, in his car) at the little painted station in the middle of the warm wet woods and hop-fields of that western country. He proposed to drive me first to his house beyond the village before starting for a longer spin of adventure, and we rattled through those rich green lanes which have in them something singularly analogous to fairy tales: whether the lanes produced the fairies or (as I believe) the fairies produced the lanes. All around in the glimmering hop-yards stood those little hop-kilns like stunted and slanting spires. They look like dwarfish churches--in fact, rather like many modern churches I could mention, churches all of them small and each of them a little crooked. In this elfin atmosphere we swung round a sharp corner and half-way up a steep, white hill, and saw what looked at first like a tall, black monster against the sun. It appeared to be a dark and dreadful woman walking on wheels and waving long ears like a bat's. A second glance told me that she was not the local witch in a state of transition; she was only one of the million tricks of perspective. She stood up in a small wheeled cart drawn by a donkey; the donkey's ears were just set behind her head, and the whole was black against the light.

Perspective is really the comic element in everything. It has a pompous Latin name, but it is incurably Gothic and grotesque. One simple proof of this is that it is always left out of all dignified and decorative art. There is no perspective in the

Elgin Marbles, and even the essentially angular angels in mediaeval stained glass almost always (as it says in "Patience") contrive to look both angular and flat. There is something intrinsically disproportionate and outrageous in the idea of the distant objects dwindling and growing dwarfish, the closer objects swelling enormous and intolerable. There is something frantic in the notion that one's own father by walking a little way can be changed by a blast of magic to a pigmy. There is something farcical in the fancy that Nature keeps one's uncle in an infinite number of sizes, according to where he is to stand. All soldiers in retreat turn into tin soldiers; all bears in rout into toy bears; as if on the ultimate horizon of the world everything was sardonically doomed to stand up laughable and little against heaven.

It was for this reason that the old woman and her donkey struck us first when seen from behind as one black grotesque. I afterwards had the chance of seeing the old woman, the cart, and the donkey fairly, in flank and in all their length. I saw the old woman and the donkey *PASSANT*, as they might have appeared heraldically on the shield of some heroic family. I saw the old woman and the donkey dignified, decorative, and flat, as they might have marched across the Elgin Marbles. Seen thus under an equal light, there was nothing specially ugly about them; the cart was long and sufficiently comfortable; the donkey was stolid and sufficiently respectable; the old woman was lean but sufficiently strong, and even smiling in a sour, rustic manner. But seen from behind they looked like one black monstrous animal; the dark donkey cars seemed like dreadful wings, and the tall dark back of the woman, erect like a tree, seemed to grow taller and taller until one could almost scream.

Then we went by her with a blasting roar like a railway train, and fled far from her over the brow of the hill to my friend's home.

There we paused only for my friend to stock the car with some kind of picnic paraphernalia, and so started again, as it happened, by the way we had come. Thus it fell that we went shattering down that short, sharp hill again before the poor old woman and her donkey had managed to crawl to the top of it; and seeing them under a different light, I saw them very differently. Black against the sun, they had seemed comic; but bright against greenwood and grey cloud, they were not comic but tragic; for there are not a few things that seem fantastic in the twilight, and in the sunlight are sad. I saw that she had a grand, gaunt mask of ancient honour and endurance, and wide eyes sharpened to two shining points, as if looking for that small hope on the horizon of human life. I also saw that her cart contained carrots.

"Don't you feel, broadly speaking, a beast," I asked my friend, "when you go so easily and so fast?" For we had crashed by so that the crazy cart must have

thrilled in every stick of it.

My friend was a good man, and said, "Yes. But I don't think it would do her any good if I went slower."

"No," I assented after reflection. "Perhaps the only pleasure we can give to her or any one else is to get out of their sight very soon."

My friend availed himself of this advice in no niggard spirit; I felt as if we were fleeing for our lives in throttling fear after some frightful atrocity. In truth, there is only one difference left between the secrecy of the two social classes: the poor hide themselves in darkness and the rich hide themselves in distance. They both hide.

As we shot like a lost boat over a cataract down into a whirlpool of white roads far below, I saw afar a black dot crawling like an insect. I looked again: I could hardly believe it. There was the slow old woman, with her slow old donkey, still toiling along the main road. I asked my friend to slacken, but when he said of the car, "She's wanting to go," I knew it was all up with him. For when you have called a thing female you have yielded to it utterly. We passed the old woman with a shock that must have shaken the earth: if her head did not reel and her heart quail, I know not what they were made of. And when we had fled perilously on in the gathering dark, spurning hamlets behind us, I suddenly called out, "Why, what asses we are! Why, it's She that is brave--she and the donkey. We are safe enough; we are artillery and plate-armour: and she stands up to us with matchwood and a snail! If you had grown old in a quiet valley, and people began firing cannon-balls as big as cabs at you in your seventieth year, wouldn't you jump--and she never moved an eyelid. Oh! we go very fast and very far, no doubt--"

As I spoke came a curious noise, and my friend, instead of going fast, began to go very slow; then he stopped; then he got out. Then he said, "And I left the Stepney behind."

The grey moths came out of the wood and the yellow stars came out to crown it, as my friend, with the lucidity of despair, explained to me (on the soundest scientific principles, of course) that nothing would be any good at all. We must sleep the night in the lane, except in the very unlikely event of some one coming by to carry a message to some town. Twice I thought I heard some tiny sound of such approach, and it died away like wind in the trees, and the motorist was already asleep when I heard it renewed and realized. Something certainly was approaching. I ran up the road--and there it was. Yes, It--and She. Thrice had she come, once comic and once tragic and once heroic. And when she came again

it was as if in pardon on a pure errand of prosaic pity and relief. I am quite serious. I do not want you to laugh. It is not the first time a donkey has been received seriously, nor one riding a donkey with respect.