

30: ETHANDUNE

Perhaps you do not know where Ethandune is. Nor do I; nor does anybody. That is where the somewhat sombre fun begins. I cannot even tell you for certain whether it is the name of a forest or a town or a hill. I can only say that in any case it is of the kind that floats and is unfixed. If it is a forest, it is one of those forests that march with a million legs, like the walking trees that were the doom of Macbeth. If it is a town, it is one of those towns that vanish, like a city of tents. If it is a hill, it is a flying hill, like the mountain to which faith lends wings. Over a vast dim region of England this dark name of Ethandune floats like an eagle doubtful where to swoop and strike, and, indeed, there were birds of prey enough over Ethandune, wherever it was. But now Ethandune itself has grown as dark and drifting as the black drifts of the birds.

And yet without this word that you cannot fit with a meaning and hardly with a memory, you would be sitting in a very different chair at this moment and looking at a very different tablecloth. As a practical modern phrase I do not commend it; if my private critics and correspondents in whom I delight should happen to address me "G. K. Chesterton, Poste Restante, Ethandune," I fear their letters would not come to hand. If two hurried commercial travellers should agree to discuss a business matter at Ethandune from 5 to 5.15, I am afraid they would grow old in the district as white-haired wanderers. To put it plainly, Ethandune is anywhere and nowhere in the western hills; it is an English mirage. And yet but for this doubtful thing you would have probably no Daily News on Saturday and certainly no church on Sunday. I do not say that either of these two things is a benefit; but I do say that they are customs, and that you would not possess them except through this mystery. You would not have Christmas puddings, nor (probably) any puddings; you would not have Easter eggs, probably not poached eggs, I strongly suspect not scrambled eggs, and the best historians are decidedly doubtful about curried eggs. To cut a long story short (the longest of all stories), you would not have any civilization, far less any Christian civilization. And if in some moment of gentle curiosity you wish to know why you are the polished sparkling, rounded, and wholly satisfactory citizen which you obviously are, then I can give you no more definite answer geographical or historical; but only toll in your ears the tone of the uncaptured name--Ethandune.

I will try to state quite sensibly why it is as important as it is. And yet even that is not easy. If I were to state the mere fact from the history books, numbers of people would think it equally trivial and remote, like some war of the Picts and Scots. The points perhaps might be put in this way. There is a certain spirit in the world which breaks everything off short. There may be magnificence in the

smashing; but the thing is smashed. There may be a certain splendour; but the splendour is sterile: it abolishes all future splendours. I mean (to take a working example), York Minster covered with flames might happen to be quite as beautiful as York Minster covered with carvings. But the carvings produce more carvings. The flames produce nothing but a little black heap. When any act has this cul-de-sac quality it matters little whether it is done by a book or a sword, by a clumsy battle-axe or a chemical bomb. The case is the same with ideas. The pessimist may be a proud figure when he curses all the stars; the optimist may be an even prouder figure when he blesses them all. But the real test is not in the energy, but in the effect. When the optimist has said, "All things are interesting," we are left free; we can be interested as much or as little as we please. But when the pessimist says, "No things are interesting," it may be a very witty remark: but it is the last witty remark that can be made on the subject. He has burnt his cathedral; he has had his blaze and the rest is ashes. The sceptics, like bees, give their one sting and die. The pessimist must be wrong, because he says the last word.

Now, this spirit that denies and that destroys had at one period of history a dreadful epoch of military superiority. They did burn York Minster, or at least, places of the same kind. Roughly speaking, from the seventh century to the tenth, a dense tide of darkness, of chaos and brainless cruelty, poured on these islands and on the western coasts of the Continent, which well-nigh cut them off from all the white man's culture for ever. And this is the final human test; that the varied chiefs of that vague age were remembered or forgotten according to how they had resisted this almost cosmic raid. Nobody thought of the modern nonsense about races; everybody thought of the human race and its highest achievements. Arthur was a Celt, and may have been a fabulous Celt; but he was a fable on the right side. Charlemagne may have been a Gaul or a Goth, but he was not a barbarian; he fought for the tradition against the barbarians, the nihilists. And for this reason also, for this reason, in the last resort, only, we call the saddest and in some ways the least successful of the Wessex kings by the title of Alfred the Great. Alfred was defeated by the barbarians again and again, he defeated the barbarians again and again; but his victories were almost as vain as his defeats. Fortunately he did not believe in the Time Spirit or the Trend of Things or any such modern rubbish, and therefore kept pegging away. But while his failures and his fruitless successes have names still in use (such as Wilton, Basing, and Ashdown), that last epic battle which really broke the barbarian has remained without a modern place or name. Except that it was near Chippenham, where the Danes gave up their swords and were baptized, no one can pick out certainly the place where you and I were saved from being savages for ever.

But the other day under a wild sunset and moonrise I passed the place which is best reputed as Ethandune, a high, grim upland, partly bare and partly shaggy;

like that savage and sacred spot in those great imaginative lines about the demon lover and the waning moon. The darkness, the red wreck of sunset, the yellow and lurid moon, the long fantastic shadows, actually created that sense of monstrous incident which is the dramatic side of landscape. The bare grey slopes seemed to rush downhill like routed hosts; the dark clouds drove across like riven banners; and the moon was like a golden dragon, like the Golden Dragon of Wessex.

As we crossed a tilt of the torn heath I saw suddenly between myself and the moon a black shapeless pile higher than a house. The atmosphere was so intense that I really thought of a pile of dead Danes, with some phantom conqueror on the top of it. Fortunately I was crossing these wastes with a friend who knew more history than I; and he told me that this was a barrow older than Alfred, older than the Romans, older perhaps than the Britons; and no man knew whether it was a wall or a trophy or a tomb. Ethandune is still a drifting name; but it gave me a queer emotion to think that, sword in hand, as the Danes poured with the torrents of their blood down to Chippenham, the great king may have lifted up his head and looked at that oppressive shape, suggestive of something and yet suggestive of nothing; may have looked at it as we did, and understood it as little as we.