

### **34: THE WHITE HORSES**

It is within my experience, which is very brief and occasional in this matter, that it is not really at all easy to talk in a motor-car. This is fortunate; first, because, as a whole, it prevents me from motoring; and second because, at any given moment, it prevents me from talking. The difficulty is not wholly due to the physical conditions, though these are distinctly unconversational. FitzGerald's Omar, being a pessimist, was probably rich, and being a lazy fellow, was almost certainly a motorist. If any doubt could exist on the point, it is enough to say that, in speaking of the foolish profits, Omar has defined the difficulties of colloquial motoring with a precision which cannot be accidental. "Their words to wind are scattered; and their mouths are stopped with dust." From this follows not (as many of the cut-and-dried philosophers would say) a savage silence and mutual hostility, but rather one of those rich silences that make the mass and bulk of all friendship; the silence of men rowing the same boat or fighting in the same battle-line.

It happened that the other day I hired a motor-car, because I wanted to visit in very rapid succession the battle-places and hiding-places of Alfred the Great; and for a thing of this sort a motor is really appropriate. It is not by any means the best way of seeing the beauty of the country; you see beauty better by walking, and best of all by sitting still. But it is a good method in any enterprise that involves a parody of the military or governmental quality--anything which needs to know quickly the whole contour of a county or the rough, relative position of men and towns. On such a journey, like jagged lightning, I sat from morning till night by the side of the chauffeur; and we scarcely exchanged a word to the hour. But by the time the yellow stars came out in the villages and the white stars in the skies, I think I understood his character; and I fear he understood mine.

He was a Cheshire man with a sour, patient, and humorous face; he was modest, though a north countryman, and genial, though an expert. He spoke (when he spoke at all) with a strong northland accent; and he evidently was new to the beautiful south country, as was clear both from his approval and his complaints. But though he came from the north he was agricultural and not commercial in origin; he looked at the land rather than the towns, even if he looked at it with a somewhat more sharp and utilitarian eye. His first remark for some hours was uttered when we were crossing the more coarse and desolate heights of Salisbury Plain. He remarked that he had always thought that Salisbury Plain was a plain. This alone showed that he was new to the vicinity. But he also said, with a critical frown, "A lot of this land ought to be good land enough. Why don't they use it?" He was then silent for some more hours.

At an abrupt angle of the slopes that lead down from what is called (with no little humour) Salisbury Plain, I saw suddenly, as by accident, something I was looking for--that is, something I did not expect to see. We are all supposed to be trying to walk into heaven; but we should be uncommonly astonished if we suddenly walked into it. As I was leaving Salisbury Plain (to put it roughly) I lifted up my eyes and saw the White Horse of Britain.

One or two truly fine poets of the Tory and Protestant type, such as Swinburne and Mr. Rudyard Kipling, have eulogized England under the image of white horses, meaning the white-maned breakers of the Channel. This is right and natural enough. The true philosophical Tory goes back to ancient things because he thinks they will be anarchic things. It would startle him very much to be told that there are white horses of artifice in England that may be older than those wild white horses of the elements. Yet it is truly so. Nobody knows how old are those strange green and white hieroglyphics, those straggling quadrupeds of chalk, that stand out on the sides of so many of the Southern Downs. They are possibly older than Saxon and older than Roman times. They may well be older than British, older than any recorded times. They may go back, for all we know, to the first faint seeds of human life on this planet. Men may have picked a horse out of the grass long before they scratched a horse on a vase or pot, or messed and massed any horse out of clay. This may be the oldest human art--before building or gravings. And if so, it may have first happened in another geological age, before the sea burst through the narrow Straits of Dover. The White Horse may have begun in Berkshire when there were no white horses at Folkestone or Newhaven. That rude but evident white outline that I saw across the valley may have been begun when Britain was not an island. We forget that there are many places where art is older than nature.

We took a long detour through somewhat easier roads, till we came to a breach or chasm in the valley, from which we saw our friend the White Horse once more. At least, we thought it was our friend the White Horse; but after a little inquiry we discovered to our astonishment that it was another friend and another horse. Along the leaning flanks of the same fair valley there was (it seemed) another white horse; as rude and as clean, as ancient and as modern, as the first. This, at least, I thought must be the aboriginal White Horse of Alfred, which I had always heard associated with his name. And yet before we had driven into Wantage and seen King Alfred's quaint grey statue in the sun, we had seen yet a third white horse. And the third white horse was so hopelessly unlike a horse that we were sure that it was genuine. The final and original white horse, the white horse of the White Horse Vale, has that big, babyish quality that truly belongs to our remotest ancestors. It really has the prehistoric, preposterous quality of Zulu or New Zealand native drawings. This at least was surely made by our fathers when

they were barely men; long before they were civilized men.

But why was it made? Why did barbarians take so much trouble to make a horse nearly as big as a hamlet; a horse who could bear no hunter, who could drag no load? What was this titanic, sub-conscious instinct for spoiling a beautiful green slope with a very ugly white quadruped? What (for the matter of that) is this whole hazardous fancy of humanity ruling the earth, which may have begun with white horses, which may by no means end with twenty horse-power cars? As I rolled away out of that country, I was still cloudily considering how ordinary men ever came to want to make such strange chalk horses, when my chauffeur startled me by speaking for the first time for nearly two hours. He suddenly let go one of the handles and pointed at a gross green bulk of down that happened to swell above us. "That would be a good place," he said.

Naturally I referred to his last speech of some hours before; and supposed he meant that it would be promising for agriculture. As a fact, it was quite unpromising; and this made me suddenly understand the quiet ardour in his eye. All of a sudden I saw what he really meant. He really meant that this would be a splendid place to pick out another white horse. He knew no more than I did why it was done; but he was in some unthinkable prehistoric tradition, because he wanted to do it. He became so acute in sensibility that he could not bear to pass any broad breezy hill of grass on which there was not a white horse. He could hardly keep his hands off the hills. He could hardly leave any of the living grass alone.

Then I left off wondering why the primitive man made so many white horses. I left off troubling in what sense the ordinary eternal man had sought to scar or deface the hills. I was content to know that he did want it; for I had seen him wanting it.