

37: THE HIGH PLAINS

By high plains I do not mean table-lands; table-lands do not interest one very much. They seem to involve the bore of a climb without the pleasure of a peak. Also they are vaguely associated with Asia and those enormous armies that eat up everything like locusts, as did the army of Xerxes; with emperors from nowhere spreading their battalions everywhere; with the white elephants and the painted horses, the dark engines and the dreadful mounted bowmen of the moving empires of the East, with all that evil insolence in short that rolled into Europe in the youth of Nero, and after having been battered about and abandoned by one Christian nation after another, turned up in England with Disraeli and was christened (or rather paganed) Imperialism.

Also (it may be necessary to explain) I do not mean "high planes" such as the Theosophists and the Higher Thought Centres talk about. They spell theirs differently; but I will not have theirs in any spelling. They, I know, are always expounding how this or that person is on a lower plane, while they (the speakers) are on a higher plane: sometimes they will almost tell you what plane, as "5994" or "Plane F, sub-plane 304." I do not mean this sort of height either. My religion says nothing about such planes except that all men are on one plane and that by no means a high one. There are saints indeed in my religion: but a saint only means a man who really knows he is a sinner.

Why then should I talk of the plains as high? I do it for a rather singular reason, which I will illustrate by a parallel. When I was at school learning all the Greek I have ever forgotten, I was puzzled by the phrase OINON MELAN that is "black wine," which continually occurred. I asked what it meant, and many most interesting and convincing answers were given. It was pointed out that we know little of the actual liquid drunk by the Greeks; that the analogy of modern Greek wines may suggest that it was dark and sticky, perhaps a sort of syrup always taken with water; that archaic language about colour is always a little dubious, as where Homer speaks of the "wine-dark sea" and so on. I was very properly satisfied, and never thought of the matter again; until one day, having a decanter of claret in front of me, I happened to look at it. I then perceived that they called wine black because it is black. Very thin, diluted, or held-up abruptly against a flame, red wine is red; but seen in body in most normal shades and semi-lights red wine is black, and therefore was called so.

On the same principles I call the plains high because the plains always are high; they are always as high as we are. We talk of climbing a mountain crest and looking down at the plain; but the phrase is an illusion of our arrogance. It is

impossible even to look down at the plain. For the plain itself rises as we rise. It is not merely true that the higher we climb the wider and wider is spread out below us the wealth of the world; it is not merely that the devil or some other respectable guide for tourists takes us to the top of an exceeding high mountain and shows us all the kingdoms of the earth. It is more than that, in our real feeling of it. It is that in a sense the whole world rises with us roaring, and accompanies us to the crest like some clanging chorus of eagles. The plains rise higher and higher like swift grey walls piled up against invisible invaders. And however high a peak you climb, the plain is still as high as the peak.

The mountain tops are only noble because from them we are privileged to behold the plains. So the only value in any man being superior is that he may have a superior admiration for the level and the common. If there is any profit in a place craggy and precipitous it is only because from the vale it is not easy to see all the beauty of the vale; because when actually in the flats one cannot see their sublime and satisfying flatness. If there is any value in being educated or eminent (which is doubtful enough) it is only because the best instructed man may feel most swiftly and certainly the splendour of the ignorant and the simple: the full magnificence of that mighty human army in the plains. The general goes up to the hill to look at his soldiers, not to look down at his soldiers. He withdraws himself not because his regiment is too small to be touched, but because it is too mighty to be seen. The chief climbs with submission and goes higher with great humility; since in order to take a bird's eye view of everything, he must become small and distant like a bird.

The most marvellous of those mystical cavaliers who wrote intricate and exquisite verse in England in the seventeenth century, I mean

Henry Vaughan, put the matter in one line, intrinsically immortal and practically forgotten--

"Oh holy hope and high humility."

That adjective "high" is not only one of the sudden and stunning inspirations of literature; it is also one of the greatest and gravest definitions of moral science. However far aloft a man may go, he is still looking up, not only at God (which is obvious), but in a manner at men also: seeing more and more all that is towering and mysterious in the dignity and destiny of the lonely house of Adam. I wrote some part of these rambling remarks on a high ridge of rock and turf overlooking a stretch of the central counties; the rise was slight enough in reality, but the immediate ascent had been so steep and sudden that one could not avoid the fancy that on reaching the summit one would look down at the stars. But one did not look down at the stars, but rather up at the cities; seeing as high in heaven

the palace town of Alfred like a lit sunset cloud, and away in the void spaces, like a planet in eclipse, Salisbury. So, it may be hoped, until we die you and I will always look up rather than down at the labours and the habitations of our race; we will lift up our eyes to the valleys from whence cometh our help. For from every special eminence and beyond every sublime landmark, it is good for our souls to see only vaster and vaster visions of that dizzy and divine level; and to behold from our crumbling turrets the tall plains of equality.