

XXII. The Orthodox Barber

Those thinkers who cannot believe in any gods often assert that the love of humanity would be in itself sufficient for them; and so, perhaps, it would, if they had it. There is a very real thing which may be called the love of humanity; in our time it exists almost entirely among what are called uneducated people; and it does not exist at all among the people who talk about it.

A positive pleasure in being in the presence of any other human being is chiefly remarkable, for instance, in the masses on Bank Holiday; that is why they are so much nearer Heaven (despite appearances) than any other part of our population.

I remember seeing a crowd of factory girls getting into an empty train at a wayside country station. There were about twenty of them; they all got into one carriage; and they left all the rest of the train entirely empty. That is the real love of humanity. That is the definite pleasure in the immediate proximity of one's own kind. Only this coarse, rank, real love of men seems to be entirely lacking in those who propose the love of humanity as a substitute for all other love; honourable, rationalistic idealists.

I can well remember the explosion of human joy which marked the sudden starting of that train; all the factory girls who could not find seats (and they must have been the majority) relieving their feelings by jumping up and down. Now I have never seen any rationalistic idealists do this. I have never seen twenty modern philosophers crowd into one third-class carriage for the mere pleasure of being together. I have never seen twenty Mr. McCabes all in one carriage and all jumping up and down.

Some people express a fear that vulgar trippers will overrun all beautiful places, such as Hampstead or Burnham Beeches. But their fear is unreasonable; because trippers always prefer to trip together; they pack as close as they can; they have a suffocating passion of philanthropy.

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But among the minor and milder aspects of the same principle, I have no hesitation in placing the problem of the colloquial barber. Before any modern man talks with authority about loving men, I insist (I insist with violence) that he shall always be very much pleased when his barber tries to talk to him. His barber is humanity: let him love that. If he is not pleased at this, I will not accept any substitute in the way of interest in the Congo or the future of Japan. If a man

cannot love his barber whom he has seen, how shall he love the Japanese whom he has not seen?

It is urged against the barber that he begins by talking about the weather; so do all dukes and diplomatists, only that they talk about it with ostentatious fatigue and indifference, whereas the barber talks about it with an astonishing, nay incredible, freshness of interest. It is objected to him that he tells people that they are going bald. That is to say, his very virtues are cast up against him; he is blamed because, being a specialist, he is a sincere specialist, and because, being a tradesman, he is not entirely a slave. But the only proof of such things is by example; therefore I will prove the excellence of the conversation of barbers by a specific case. Lest any one should accuse me of attempting to prove it by fictitious means, I beg to say quite seriously that though I forget the exact language employed, the following conversation between me and a human (I trust), living barber really took place a few days ago.

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I had been invited to some At Home to meet the Colonial Premiers, and lest I should be mistaken for some partly reformed bush-ranger out of the interior of Australia I went into a shop in the Strand to get shaved. While I was undergoing the torture the man said to me:

"There seems to be a lot in the papers about this new shaving, sir. It seems you can shave yourself with anything--with a stick or a stone or a pole or a poker" (here I began for the first time to detect a sarcastic intonation) "or a shovel or a---"

Here he hesitated for a word, and I, although I knew nothing about the matter, helped him out with suggestions in the same rhetorical vein.

"Or a button-hook," I said, "or a blunderbuss or a battering-ram or a piston-rod---"

He resumed, refreshed with this assistance, "Or a curtain rod or a candle-stick, or a----"

"Cow-catcher," I suggested eagerly, and we continued in this ecstatic duet for some time. Then I asked him what it was all about, and he told me. He explained the thing eloquently and at length.

"The funny part of it is," he said, "that the thing isn't new at all. It's been talked about ever since I was a boy, and long before. There is always a notion that the

razor might be done without somehow. But none of those schemes ever came to anything; and I don't believe myself that this will."

"Why, as to that," I said, rising slowly from the chair and trying to put on my coat inside out, "I don't know how it may be in the case of you and your new shaving. Shaving, with all respect to you, is a trivial and materialistic thing, and in such things startling inventions are sometimes made. But what you say reminds me in some dark and dreamy fashion of something else. I recall it especially when you tell me, with such evident experience and sincerity, that the new shaving is not really new. My friend, the human race is always trying this dodge of making everything entirely easy; but the difficulty which it shifts off one thing it shifts on to another. If one man has not the toil of preparing a man's chin, I suppose that some other man has the toil of preparing something very curious to put on a man's chin. It would be nice if we could be shaved without troubling anybody. It would be nicer still if we could go unshaved without annoying anybody--

"But, O wise friend, chief Barber of the Strand, Brother, nor you nor I have made the world.'

"Whoever made it, who is wiser, and we hope better than we, made it under strange limitations, and with painful conditions of pleasure.

"In the first and darkest of its books it is fiercely written that a man shall not eat his cake and have it; and though all men talked until the stars were old it would still be true that a man who has lost his razor could not shave with it. But every now and then men jump up with the new something or other and say that everything can be had without sacrifice, that bad is good if you are only enlightened, and that there is no real difference between being shaved and not being shaved. The difference, they say, is only a difference of degree; everything is evolutionary and relative. Shavedness is immanent in man. Every ten-penny nail is a Potential Razor. The superstitious people of the past (they say) believed that a lot of black bristles standing out at right angles to one's face was a positive affair. But the higher criticism teaches us better. Bristles are merely negative. They are a Shadow where Shaving should be.

"Well, it all goes on, and I suppose it all means something. But a baby is the Kingdom of God, and if you try to kiss a baby he will know whether you are shaved or not. Perhaps I am mixing up being shaved and being saved; my democratic sympathies have always led me to drop my 'h's.' In another moment I may suggest that goats represent the lost because goats have long beards. This is growing altogether too allegorical.

"Nevertheless," I added, as I paid the bill, "I have really been profoundly interested

in what you told me about the New Shaving. Have you ever heard of a thing called the New theology?"

He smiled and said that he had not.