

## **XXVI. The Two Noises**

For three days and three nights the sea had charged England as Napoleon charged her at Waterloo. The phrase is instinctive, because away to the last grey line of the sea there was only the look of galloping squadrons, impetuous, but with a common purpose. The sea came on like cavalry, and when it touched the shore it opened the blazing eyes and deafening tongues of the artillery. I saw the worst assault at night on a seaside parade where the sea smote on the doors of England with the hammers of earthquake, and a white smoke went up into the black heavens. There one could thoroughly realise what an awful thing a wave really is. I talk like other people about the rushing swiftness of a wave. But the horrible thing about a wave is its hideous slowness. It lifts its load of water laboriously: in that style at once slow and slippery in which a Titan might lift a load of rock and then let it slip at last to be shattered into shock of dust. In front of me that night the waves were not like water: they were like falling city walls. The breaker rose first as if it did not wish to attack the earth; it wished only to attack the stars. For a time it stood up in the air as naturally as a tower; then it went a little wrong in its outline, like a tower that might some day fall. When it fell it was as if a powder magazine blew up.

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I have never seen such a sea. All the time there blew across the land one of those stiff and throttling winds that one can lean up against like a wall. One expected anything to be blown out of shape at any instant; the lamp-post to be snapped like a green stalk, the tree to be whirled away like a straw. I myself should certainly have been blown out of shape if I had possessed any shape to be blown out of; for I walked along the edge of the stone embankment above the black and battering sea and could not rid myself of the idea that it was an invasion of England. But as I walked along this edge I was somewhat surprised to find that as I neared a certain spot another noise mingled with the ceaseless cannonade of the sea.

Somewhere at the back, in some pleasure ground or casino or place of entertainment, an undaunted brass band was playing against the cosmic uproar. I do not know what band it was. Judging from the boisterous British Imperialism of most of the airs it played, I should think it was a German band. But there was no doubt about its energy, and when I came quite close under it it really drowned the storm. It was playing such things as "Tommy Atkins" and "You Can Depend on Young Australia," and many others of which I do not know the words, but I should think they would be "John, Pat, and Mac, With the Union Jack," or that

fine though unwritten poem, "Wait till the Bull Dog gets a bite of you." Now, I for one detest Imperialism, but I have a great deal of sympathy with Jingoism. And there seemed something so touching about this unbroken and innocent bragging under the brutal menace of Nature that it made, if I may so put it, two tunes in my mind. It is so obvious and so jolly to be optimistic about England, especially when you are an optimist--and an Englishman. But through all that glorious brass came the voice of the invasion, the undertone of that awful sea. I did a foolish thing. As I could not express my meaning in an article, I tried to express it in a poem--a bad one. You can call it what you like. It might be called "Doubt," or "Brighton." It might be called "The Patriot," or yet again "The German Band." I would call it "The Two Voices," but that title has been taken for a grossly inferior poem. This is how it began--

"They say the sun is on your knees    A lamp to light your lands from harm,  
They say you turn the seven seas    To little brooks about your farm.    I hear the  
sea and the new song    that calls you empress all day long.

"(O fallen and fouled! O you that lie    Dying in swamps--you shall not die,  
Your rich have secrets, and stronge lust,    Your poor are chased about like dust,  
Emptied of anger and surprise--    And God has gone out of their eyes,    Your  
cohorts break--your captains lie,    I say to you, you shall not die.)"

Then I revived a little, remembering that after all there is an English country that the Imperialists have never found. The British Empire may annex what it likes, it will never annex England. It has not even discovered the island, let alone conquered it. I took up the two tunes again with a greater sympathy for the first--

"I know the bright baptismal rains,    I love your tender troubled skies,    I  
know your little climbing lanes,    Are peering into Paradise,    From open  
hearth to orchard cool,    How bountiful and beautiful.

"(O throttled and without a cry,    O strangled and stabbed, you shall not die,  
The frightful word is on your walls,    The east sea to the west sea calls,    The  
stars are dying in the sky,    You shall not die; you shall not die.)"

Then the two great noises grew deafening together, the noise of the peril of England and the louder noise of the placidity of England. It is their fault if the last verse was written a little rudely and at random--

"I see you how you smile in state    Straight from the Peak to Plymouth Bar,  
You need not tell me you are great,    I know how more than great you are.    I  
know what William Shakespeare was,    I have seen Gainsborough and the grass.

"(O given to believe a lie, O my mad mother, do do not die, Whose eyes turn all ways but within, Whose sin is innocence of sin, Whose eyes, blinded with beams at noon, Can see the motes upon the moon, You shall your lover still pursue. To what last madhouse shelters you I will uphold you, even I. You that are dead. You shall not die.)"

But the sea would not stop for me any more than for Canute; and as for the German band, that would not stop for anybody.