

## **XXVII. Some Policemen and a Moral**

The other day I was nearly arrested by two excited policemen in a wood in Yorkshire. I was on a holiday, and was engaged in that rich and intricate mass of pleasures, duties, and discoveries which for the keeping off of the profane, we disguise by the exoteric name of Nothing. At the moment in question I was throwing a big Swedish knife at a tree, practising (alas, without success) that useful trick of knife-throwing by which men murder each other in Stevenson's romances.

Suddenly the forest was full of two policemen; there was something about their appearance in and relation to the greenwood that reminded me, I know not how, of some happy Elizabethan comedy. They asked what the knife was, who I was, why I was throwing it, what my address was, trade, religion, opinions on the Japanese war, name of favourite cat, and so on. They also said I was damaging the tree; which was, I am sorry to say, not true, because I could not hit it. The peculiar philosophical importance, however, of the incident was this. After some half-hour's animated conversation, the exhibition of an envelope, an unfinished poem, which was read with great care, and, I trust, with some profit, and one or two other subtle detective strokes, the elder of the two knights became convinced that I really was what I professed to be, that I was a journalist, that I was on the DAILY NEWS (this was the real stroke; they were shaken with a terror common to all tyrants), that I lived in a particular place as stated, and that I was stopping with particular people in Yorkshire, who happened to be wealthy and well-known in the neighbourhood.

In fact the leading constable became so genial and complimentary at last that he ended up by representing himself as a reader of my work. And when that was said, everything was settled. They acquitted me and let me pass.

"But," I said, "what of this mangled tree? It was to the rescue of that Dryad, tethered to the earth, that you rushed like knight-errants. You, the higher humanitarians, are not deceived by the seeming stillness of the green things, a stillness like the stillness of the cataract, a headlong and crashing silence. You know that a tree is but a creature tied to the ground by one leg. You will not let assassins with their Swedish daggers shed the green blood of such a being. But if so, why am I not in custody; where are my gyves? Produce, from some portion of your persons, my mouldy straw and my grated window. The facts of which I have just convinced you, that my name is Chesterton, that I am a journalist, that I am living with the well-known and philanthropic Mr. Blank of Ilkley, cannot have anything to do with the question of whether I have been guilty of cruelty to

vegetables. The tree is none the less damaged even though it may reflect with a dark pride that it was wounded by a gentleman connected with the Liberal press. Wounds in the bark do not more rapidly close up because they are inflicted by people who are stopping with Mr. Blank of Ilkley. That tree, the ruin of its former self, the wreck of what was once a giant of the forest, now splintered and laid low by the brute superiority of a Swedish knife, that tragedy, constable, cannot be wiped out even by stopping for several months more with some wealthy person. It is incredible that you have no legal claim to arrest even the most august and fashionable persons on this charge. For if so, why did you interfere with me at all?"

I made the later and larger part of this speech to the silent wood, for the two policemen had vanished almost as quickly as they came. It is very possible, of course, that they were fairies. In that case the somewhat illogical character of their view of crime, law, and personal responsibility would find a bright and elfish explanation; perhaps if I had lingered in the glade till moonrise I might have seen rings of tiny policemen dancing on the sward; or running about with glow-worm belts, arresting grasshoppers for damaging blades of grass. But taking the bolder hypothesis, that they really were policemen, I find myself in a certain difficulty. I was certainly accused of something which was either an offence or was not. I was let off because I proved I was a guest at a big house. The inference seems painfully clear; either it is not a proof of infamy to throw a knife about in a lonely wood, or else it is a proof of innocence to know a rich man. Suppose a very poor person, poorer even than a journalist, a navy or unskilled labourer, tramping in search of work, often changing his lodgings, often, perhaps, failing in his rent. Suppose he had been intoxicated with the green gaiety of the ancient wood. Suppose he had thrown knives at trees and could give no description of a dwelling-place except that he had been fired out of the last. As I walked home through a cloudy and purple twilight I wondered how he would have got on.

Moral. We English are always boasting that we are very illogical; there is no great harm in that. There is no subtle spiritual evil in the fact that people always brag about their vices; it is when they begin to brag about their virtues that they become insufferable. But there is this to be said, that illogicality in your constitution or your legal methods may become very dangerous if there happens to be some great national vice or national temptation which many take advantage of the chaos. Similarly, a drunkard ought to have strict rules and hours; a temperate man may obey his instincts.

Take some absurd anomaly in the British law--the fact, for instance, that a man ceasing to be an M. P. has to become Steward of the Chiltern Hundreds, an office which I believe was intended originally to keep down some wild robbers near Chiltern, wherever that is. Obviously this kind of illogicality does not matter very

much, for the simple reason that there is no great temptation to take advantage of it. Men retiring from Parliament do not have any furious impulse to hunt robbers in the hills. But if there were a real danger that wise, white-haired, venerable politicians taking leave of public life would desire to do this (if, for instance, there were any money in it), then clearly, if we went on saying that the illogicality did not matter, when (as a matter of fact) Sir Michael Hicks-Beach was hanging Chiltern shop-keepers every day and taking their property, we should be very silly. The illogicality would matter, for it would have become an excuse for indulgence. It is only the very good who can live riotous lives.

Now this is exactly what is present in cases of police investigation such as the one narrated above. There enters into such things a great national sin, a far greater sin than drink--the habit of respecting a gentleman. Snobbishness has, like drink, a kind of grand poetry. And snobbishness has this peculiar and devilish quality of evil, that it is rampant among very kindly people, with open hearts and houses. But it is our great English vice; to be watched more fiercely than small-pox. If a man wished to hear the worst and wickedest thing in England summed up in casual English words, he would not find it in any foul oaths or ribald quarrelling. He would find it in the fact that the best kind of working man, when he wishes to praise any one, calls him "a gentleman." It never occurs to him that he might as well call him "a marquis," or "a privy councillor"--that he is simply naming a rank or class, not a phrase for a good man. And this perennial temptation to a shameful admiration, must, and, I think, does, constantly come in and distort and poison our police methods.

In this case we must be logical and exact; for we have to keep watch upon ourselves. The power of wealth, and that power at its vilest, is increasing in the modern world. A very good and just people, without this temptation, might not need, perhaps, to make clear rules and systems to guard themselves against the power of our great financiers. But that is because a very just people would have shot them long ago, from mere native good feeling.

## XXVIII. The Lion

In the town of Belfort I take a chair and I sit down in the street. We talk in a cant phrase of the Man in the Street, but the Frenchman is the man in the street. Things quite central for him are connected with these lamp-posts and pavements; everything from his meals to his martyrdoms. When first an Englishman looks at a French town or village his first feeling is simply that it is uglier than an English town or village; when he looks again he sees that this comparative absence of the picturesque is chiefly expressed in the plain, precipitous frontage of the houses standing up hard and flat out of the street like the cardboard houses in a pantomime--a hard angularity allied perhaps to the harshness of French logic.

When he looks a third time he sees quite simply that it is all because the houses have no front gardens. The vague English spirit loves to have the entrance to its house softened by bushes and broken by steps. It likes to have a little anteroom of hedges half in the house and half out of it; a green room in a double sense. The Frenchman desires no such little pathetic ramparts or halting places, for the street itself is a thing natural and familiar to him.

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The French have no front gardens; but the street is every man's front garden. There are trees in the street, and sometimes fountains. The street is the Frenchman's tavern, for he drinks in the street. It is his dining-room, for he dines in the street. It is his British Museum, for the statues and monuments in French streets are not, as with us, of the worst, but of the best, art of the country, and they are often actually as historical as the Pyramids. The street again is the Frenchman's Parliament, for France has never taken its Chamber of Deputies so seriously as we take our House of Commons, and the quibbles of mere elected nonentities in an official room seem feeble to a people whose fathers have heard the voice of Desmoulins like a trumpet under open heaven, or Victor Hugo shouting from his carriage amid the wreck of the second Republic. And as the Frenchman drinks in the street and dines in the street so also he fights in the street and dies in the street, so that the street can never be commonplace to him.

Take, for instance, such a simple object as a lamp-post. In London a lamp-post is a comic thing. We think of the intoxicated gentleman embracing it, and recalling ancient friendship. But in Paris a lamp-post is a tragic thing. For we think of tyrants hanged on it, and of an end of the world. There is, or was, a bitter Republican paper in Paris called LA LANTERNE. How funny it would be if there were a Progressive paper in England called THE LAMP POST! We have said, then, that the Frenchman is the man in the street; that he can dine in the street, and die in the street. And if I ever pass through Paris and find him going to bed in the street, I shall say that he is still true to the genius of his civilisation. All that is good and all that is evil in France is alike connected with this open-air element. French democracy and French indecency are alike part of the desire to have everything out of doors. Compared to a café, a public-house is a private house.

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There were two reasons why all these fancies should float through the mind in the streets of this especial town of Belfort. First of all, it lies close upon the boundary of France and Germany, and boundaries are the most beautiful things in the world. To love anything is to love its boundaries; thus children will always play on the edge of anything. They build castles on the edge of the sea, and can

only be restrained by public proclamation and private violence from walking on the edge of the grass. For when we have come to the end of a thing we have come to the beginning of it.

Hence this town seemed all the more French for being on the very margin of Germany, and although there were many German touches in the place--German names, larger pots of beer, and enormous theatrical barmaids dressed up in outrageous imitation of Alsatian peasants--yet the fixed French colour seemed all the stronger for these specks of something else. All day long and all night long troops of dusty, swarthy, scornful little soldiers went plodding through the streets with an air of stubborn disgust, for German soldiers look as if they despised you, but French soldiers as if they despised you and themselves even more than you. It is a part, I suppose, of the realism of the nation which has made it good at war and science and other things in which what is necessary is combined with what is nasty. And the soldiers and the civilians alike had most of them cropped hair, and that curious kind of head which to an Englishman looks almost brutal, the kind that we call a bullet-head. Indeed, we are speaking very appropriately when we call it a bullet-head, for in intellectual history the heads of Frenchmen have been bullets--yes, and explosive bullets.

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But there was a second reason why in this place one should think particularly of the open-air politics and the open-air art of the French. For this town of Belfort is famous for one of the most typical and powerful of the public monuments of France. From the café table at which I sit I can see the hill beyond the town on which hangs the high and flat-faced citadel, pierced with many windows, and warmed in the evening light. On the steep hill below it is a huge stone lion, itself as large as a hill. It is hacked out of the rock with a sort of gigantic impression. No trivial attempt has been made to make it like a common statue; no attempt to carve the mane into curls, or to distinguish the monster minutely from the earth out of which he rises, shaking the world. The face of the lion has something of the bold conventionality of Assyrian art. The mane of the lion is left like a shapeless cloud of tempest, as if it might literally be said of him that God had clothed his neck with thunder. Even at this distance the thing looks vast, and in some sense prehistoric. Yet it was carved only a little while ago. It commemorates the fact that this town was never taken by the Germans through all the terrible year, but only laid down its arms at last at the command of its own Government. But the spirit of it has been in this land from the beginning--the spirit of something defiant and almost defeated.

As I leave this place and take the railway into Germany the news comes thicker and thicker up the streets that Southern France is in a flame, and that there

perhaps will be fought out finally the awful modern battle of the rich and poor. And as I pass into quieter places for the last sign of France on the sky-line, I see the Lion of Belfort stand at bay, the last sight of that great people which has never been at peace.