

## **XXIX. Humanity: an Interlude**

Except for some fine works of art, which seem to be there by accident, the City of Brussels is like a bad Paris, a Paris with everything noble cut out, and everything nasty left in. No one can understand Paris and its history who does not understand that its fierceness is the balance and justification of its frivolity. It is called a city of pleasure; but it may also very specially be called a city of pain. The crown of roses is also a crown of thorns. Its people are too prone to hurt others, but quite ready also to hurt themselves. They are martyrs for religion, they are martyrs for irreligion; they are even martyrs for immorality. For the indecency of many of their books and papers is not of the sort which charms and seduces, but of the sort that horrifies and hurts; they are torturing themselves. They lash their own patriotism into life with the same whips which most men use to lash foreigners to silence. The enemies of France can never give an account of her infamy or decay which does not seem insipid and even polite compared with the things which the Nationalists of France say about their own nation. They taunt and torment themselves; sometimes they even deliberately oppress themselves. Thus, when the mob of Paris could make a Government to please itself, it made a sort of sublime tyranny to order itself about. The spirit is the same from the Crusades or St. Bartholomew to the apotheosis of Zola. The old religionists tortured men physically for a moral truth. The new realists torture men morally for a physical truth.

Now Brussels is Paris without this constant purification of pain. Its indecencies are not regrettable incidents in an everlasting revolution. It has none of the things which make good Frenchmen love Paris; it has only the things which make unspeakable Englishmen love it. It has the part which is cosmopolitan--and narrows; not the part which is Parisian--and universal. You can find there (as commonly happens in modern centres) the worst things of all nations--the DAILY MAIL from England, the cheap philosophies from Germany, the loose novels of France, and the drinks of America. But there is no English broad fun, no German kindly ceremony, no American exhilaration, and, above all, no French tradition of fighting for an idea. Though all the boulevards look like Parisian boulevards, though all the shops look like Parisian shops, you cannot look at them steadily for two minutes without feeling the full distance between, let us say, King Leopold and fighters like Clemenceau and Deroulède.

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For all these reasons, and many more, when I had got into Brussels I began to make all necessary arrangements for getting out of it again; and I had impulsively

got into a tram which seemed to be going out of the city. In this tram there were two men talking; one was a little man with a black French beard; the other was a baldish man with bushy whiskers, like the financial foreign count in a three-act farce. And about the time that we reached the suburb of the city, and the traffic grew thinner, and the noises more few, I began to hear what they were saying. Though they spoke French quickly, their words were fairly easy to follow, because they were all long words. Anybody can understand long words because they have in them all the lucidity of Latin.

The man with the black beard said: "It must that we have the Progress."

The man with the whiskers parried this smartly by saying: "It must also that we have the Consolidation International."

This is a sort of discussion which I like myself, so I listened with some care, and I think I picked up the thread of it. One of the Belgians was a Little Belgian, as we speak of a Little Englander. The other was a Belgian Imperialist, for though Belgium is not quite strong enough to be altogether a nation, she is quite strong enough to be an empire. Being a nation means standing up to your equals, whereas being an empire only means kicking your inferiors. The man with whiskers was the Imperialist, and he was saying: "The science, behold there the new guide of humanity."

And the man with the beard answered him: "It does not suffice to have progress in the science; one must have it also in the sentiment of the human justice."

This remark I applauded, as if at a public meeting, but they were much too keen on their argument to hear me. The views I have often heard in England, but never uttered so lucidly, and certainly never so fast. Though Belgian by nation they must both have been essentially French. Whiskers was great on education, which, it seems, is on the march. All the world goes to make itself instructed. It must that the more instructed enlighten the less instructed. Eh, well then, the European must impose upon the savage the science and the light. Also (apparently) he must impose himself on the savage while he is about it. To-day one travelled quickly. The science had changed all. For our fathers, they were religious, and (what was worse) dead. To-day humanity had electricity to the hand; the machines came from triumphing; all the lines and limits of the globe effaced themselves. Soon there would not be but the great Empires and confederations, guided by the science, always the science.

Here Whiskers stopped an instant for breath; and the man with the sentiment for human justice had "la parole" off him in a flash. Without doubt Humanity was on the march, but towards the sentiments, the ideal, the methods moral and pacific.

Humanity directed itself towards Humanity. For your wars and empires on behalf of civilisation, what were they in effect? The war, was it not itself an affair of the barbarism? The Empires were they not things savage? The Humanity had passed all that; she was now intellectual. Tolstoy had refined all human souls with the sentiments the most delicate and just. Man was become a spirit; the wings pushed....

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At this important point of evolution the tram came to a jerky stoppage; and staring around I found, to my stunned consternation, that it was almost dark, that I was far away from Brussels, that I could not dream of getting back to dinner; in short, that through the clinging fascination of this great controversy on Humanity and its recent complete alteration by science or Tolstoy, I had landed myself Heaven knows where. I dropped hastily from the suburban tram and let it go on without me.

I was alone in the flat fields out of sight of the city. On one side of the road was one of those small, thin woods which are common in all countries, but of which, by a coincidence, the mystical painters of Flanders were very fond. The night was closing in with cloudy purple and grey; there was one ribbon of silver, the last rag of the sunset. Through the wood went one little path, and somehow it suggested that it might lead to some sign of life--there was no other sign of life on the horizon. I went along it, and soon sank into a sort of dancing twilight of all those tiny trees. There is something subtle and bewildering about that sort of frail and fantastic wood. A forest of big trees seems like a bodily barrier; but somehow that mist of thin lines seems like a spiritual barrier. It is as if one were caught in a fairy cloud or could not pass a phantom. When I had well lost the last gleam of the high road a curious and definite feeling came upon me. Now I suddenly felt something much more practical and extraordinary--the absence of humanity: inhuman loneliness. Of course, there was nothing really lost in my state; but the mood may hit one anywhere. I wanted men--any men; and I felt our awful alliance over all the globe. And at last, when I had walked for what seemed a long time, I saw a light too near the earth to mean anything except the image of God.

I came out on a clear space and a low, long cottage, the door of which was open, but was blocked by a big grey horse, who seemed to prefer to eat with his head inside the sitting-room. I got past him, and found he was being fed by a young man who was sitting down and drinking beer inside, and who saluted me with heavy rustic courtesy, but in a strange tongue. The room was full of staring faces like owls, and these I traced at length as belonging to about six small children. Their father was still working in the fields, but their mother rose when I entered. She smiled, but she and all the rest spoke some rude language, Flamand, I

suppose; so that we had to be kind to each other by signs. She fetched me beer, and pointed out my way with her finger; and I drew a picture to please the children; and as it was a picture of two men hitting each other with swords, it pleased them very much. Then I gave a Belgian penny to each child, for as I said on chance in French, "It must be that we have the economic equality." But they had never heard of economic equality, while all Battersea workmen have heard of economic equality, though it is true that they haven't got it.

I found my way back to the city, and some time afterwards I actually saw in the street my two men talking, no doubt still saying, one that Science had changed all in Humanity, and the other that Humanity was now pushing the wings of the purely intellectual. But for me Humanity was hooked on to an accidental picture. I thought of a low and lonely house in the flats, behind a veil or film of slight trees, a man breaking the ground as men have broken from the first morning, and a huge grey horse champing his food within a foot of a child's head, as in the stable where Christ was born.