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The Crimes of England

By

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Chapter I - Some Words to Professor Whirlwind

DEAR PROFESSOR WHIRLWIND,

Your name in the original German is too much for me; and this is the nearest I propose to get to it: but under the majestic image of pure wind marching in a movement wholly circular I seem to see, as in a vision, something of your mind. But the grand isolation of your thoughts leads you to express them in such words as are gratifying to yourself, and have an inconspicuous or even an unfortunate effect upon others. If anything were really to be made of your moral campaign against the English nation, it was clearly necessary that somebody, if it were only an Englishman, should show you how to leave off professing philosophy and begin to practise it. I have therefore sold myself into the Prussian service, and in return for a cast-off suit of the Emperor's clothes (the uniform of an English midshipman), a German hausfrau's recipe for poison gas, two penny cigars, and twenty-five Iron Crosses, I have consented to instruct you in the rudiments of international controversy. Of this part of my task I have here little to say that is not covered by a general adjuration to you to observe certain elementary rules. They are, roughly speaking, as follows:--

First, stick to one excuse. Thus if a tradesman, with whom your social relations are slight, should chance to find you toying with the coppers in his till, you may possibly explain that you are interested in Numismatics and are a Collector of Coins; and he may possibly believe you. But if you tell him afterwards that you pitied him for being overloaded with unwieldy copper discs, and were in the act of replacing them by a silver sixpence of your own, this further explanation, so far from increasing his confidence in your motives, will (strangely enough) actually decrease it. And if you are so unwise as to be struck by yet another brilliant idea, and tell him that the pennies were all bad pennies, which you were concealing to save him from a police prosecution for coining, the tradesman may even be so wayward as to institute a police prosecution himself. Now this is not in any way an exaggeration of the way in which you have knocked the bottom out of any case you may ever conceivably have had in such matters as the sinking of the Lusitania. With my own eyes I have seen the following explanations, apparently proceeding from your pen, (i) that the ship was a troop-ship carrying soldiers from Canada; (ii) that if it wasn't, it was a merchant-ship unlawfully carrying munitions for the soldiers in France; (iii) that, as the passengers on the ship had been warned in an advertisement, Germany was justified in blowing them to the moon; (iv) that there were guns, and the ship had to be torpedoed because the English captain was just going to fire them off; (v) that the English or American

authorities, by throwing the Lusitania at the heads of the German commanders, subjected them to an insupportable temptation; which was apparently somehow demonstrated or intensified by the fact that the ship came up to schedule time, there being some mysterious principle by which having tea at tea-time justifies poisoning the tea; (vi) that the ship was not sunk by the Germans at all but by the English, the English captain having deliberately tried to drown himself and some thousand of his own countrymen in order to cause an exchange of stiff notes between Mr. Wilson and the Kaiser. If this interesting story be true, I can only say that such frantic and suicidal devotion to the most remote interests of his country almost earns the captain pardon for the crime. But do you not see, my dear Professor, that the very richness and variety of your inventive genius throws a doubt upon each explanation when considered in itself? We who read you in England reach a condition of mind in which it no longer very much matters what explanation you offer, or whether you offer any at all. We are prepared to hear that you sank the Lusitania because the sea-born sons of England would live more happily as deep-sea fishes, or that every person on board was coming home to be hanged. You have explained yourself so completely, in this clear way, to the Italians that they have declared war on you, and if you go on explaining yourself so clearly to the Americans they may quite possibly do the same.

Second, when telling such lies as may seem necessary to your international standing, do not tell the lies to the people who know the truth. Do not tell the Eskimos that snow is bright green; nor tell the negroes in Africa that the sun never shines in that Dark Continent. Rather tell the Eskimos that the sun never shines in Africa; and then, turning to the tropical Africans, see if they will believe that snow is green. Similarly, the course indicated for you is to slander the Russians to the English and the English to the Russians; and there are hundreds of good old reliable slanders which can still be used against both of them. There are probably still Russians who believe that every English gentleman puts a rope round his wife's neck and sells her in Smithfield. There are certainly still Englishmen who believe that every Russian gentleman takes a rope to his wife's back and whips her every day. But these stories, picturesque and useful as they are, have a limit to their use like everything else; and the limit consists in the fact that they are not true, and that there necessarily exists a group of persons who know they are not true. It is so with matters of fact about which you asseverate so positively to us, as if they were matters of opinion. Scarborough might be a fortress; but it is not. I happen to know it is not. Mr. Morel may deserve to be universally admired in England; but he is not universally admired in England. Tell the Russians that he is by all means; but do not tell us. We have seen him; we have also seen Scarborough. You should think of this before you speak.

Third, don't perpetually boast that you are cultured in language which proves

that you are not. You claim to thrust yourself upon everybody on the ground that you are stuffed with wit and wisdom, and have enough for the whole world. But people who have wit enough for the whole world, have wit enough for a whole newspaper paragraph. And you can seldom get through even a whole paragraph without being monotonous, or irrelevant, or unintelligible, or self-contradictory, or broken-minded generally. If you have something to teach us, teach it to us now. If you propose to convert us after you have conquered us, why not convert us before you have conquered us? As it is, we cannot believe what you say about your superior education because of the way in which you say it. If an Englishman says, "I don't make no mistakes in English, not me," we can understand his remark; but we cannot endorse it. To say, "Je parler le Frenche language, non demi," is comprehensible, but not convincing. And when you say, as you did in a recent appeal to the Americans, that the Germanic Powers have sacrificed a great deal of "red fluid" in defence of their culture, we point out to you that cultured people do not employ such a literary style. Or when you say that the Belgians were so ignorant as to think they were being butchered when they weren't, we only wonder whether you are so ignorant as to think you are being believed when you aren't. Thus, for instance, when you brag about burning Venice to express your contempt for "tourists," we cannot think much of the culture, as culture, which supposes St. Mark's to be a thing for tourists instead of historians. This, however, would be the least part of our unfavourable judgment. That judgment is complete when we have read such a paragraph as this, prominently displayed in a paper in which you specially spread yourself: "That the Italians have a perfect knowledge of the fact that this city of antiquities and tourists is subject, and rightly subject, to attack and bombardment, is proved by the measures they took at the beginning of the war to remove some of their greatest art treasures." Now culture may or may not include the power to admire antiquities, and to restrain oneself from the pleasure of breaking them like toys. But culture does, presumably, include the power to think. For less laborious intellects than your own it is generally sufficient to think once. But if you will think twice or twenty times, it cannot but dawn on you that there is something wrong in the reasoning by which the placing of diamonds in a safe proves that they are "rightly subject" to a burglar. The incessant assertion of such things can do little to spread your superior culture; and if you say them too often people may even begin to doubt whether you have any superior culture after all. The earnest friend now advising you cannot but grieve at such incautious garrulity. If you confined yourself to single words, uttered at intervals of about a month or so, no one could possibly raise any rational objection, or subject them to any rational criticism. In time you might come to use whole sentences without revealing the real state of things.

Through neglect of these maxims, my dear Professor, every one of your attacks upon England has gone wide. In pure fact they have not touched the spot, which the real critics of England know to be a very vulnerable spot. We have a real critic

of England in Mr. Bernard Shaw, whose name you parade but apparently cannot spell; for in the paper to which I have referred he is called Mr. Bernhard Shaw. Perhaps you think he and Bernhardi are the same man. But if you quoted Mr. Bernard Shaw's statement instead of misquoting his name, you would find that his criticism of England is exactly the opposite of your own; and naturally, for it is a rational criticism. He does not blame England for being against Germany. He does most definitely blame England for not being sufficiently firmly and emphatically on the side of Russia. He is not such a fool as to accuse Sir Edward Grey of being a fiendish Machiavelli plotting against Germany; he accuses him of being an amiable aristocratic stick who failed to frighten the Junkers from their plan of war. Now, it is not in the least a question of whether we happen to like this quality or that: Mr. Shaw, I rather fancy, would dislike such verbose compromise more than downright plotting. It is simply the fact that Englishmen like Grey are open to Mr. Shaw's attack and are not open to yours. It is not true that the English were sufficiently clearheaded or self-controlled to conspire for the destruction of Germany. Any man who knows England, any man who hates England as one hates a living thing, will tell you it is not true. The English may be snobs, they may be plutocrats, they may be hypocrites, but they are not, as a fact, plotters; and I gravely doubt whether they could be if they wanted to. The mass of the people are perfectly incapable of plotting at all, and if the small ring of rich people who finance our politics were plotting for anything, it was for peace at almost any price. Any Londoner who knows the London streets and newspapers as he knows the Nelson column or the Inner Circle, knows that there were men in the governing class and in the Cabinet who were literally thirsting to defend Germany until Germany, by her own act, became indefensible. If they said nothing in support of the tearing up of the promise of peace to Belgium, it is simply because there was nothing to be said.

You were the first people to talk about World-Politics; and the first people to disregard them altogether. Even your foreign policy is domestic policy. It does not even apply to any people who are not Germans; and of your wild guesses about some twenty other peoples, not one has gone right even by accident. Your two or three shots at my own not immaculate land have been such that you would have been much nearer the truth if you had tried to invade England by crossing the Caucasus, or to discover England among the South Sea Islands. With your first delusion, that our courage was calculated and malignant when in truth our very corruption was timid and confused, I have already dealt. The case is the same with your second favourite phrase; that the British army is mercenary. You learnt it in books and not in battlefields; and I should like to be present at a scene in which you tried to bribe the most miserable little loafer in Hammersmith as if he were a cynical condottiere selling his spear to some foreign city. It is not the fact, my dear sir. You have been misinformed. The British Army is not at this moment a hireling army any more than it is a conscript army. It is a volunteer army in the

strict sense of the word; nor do I object to your calling it an amateur army. There is no compulsion, and there is next to no pay. It is at this moment drawn from every class of the community, and there are very few classes which would not earn a little more money in their ordinary trades. It numbers very nearly as many men as it would if it were a conscript army; that is with the necessary margin of men unable to serve or needed to serve otherwise. Ours is a country in which that democratic spirit which is common to Christendom is rather unusually sluggish and far below the surface. And the most genuine and purely popular movement that we have had since the Chartists has been the enlistment for this war. By all means say that such vague and sentimental volunteering is valueless in war if you think so; or even if you don't think so. By all means say that Germany is unconquerable and that we cannot really kill you. But if you say that we do not really want to kill you, you do us an injustice. You do indeed.

I need not consider the yet crazier things that some of you have said; as that the English intend to keep Calais and fight France as well as Germany for the privilege of purchasing a frontier and the need to keep a conscript army. That, also, is out of books, and pretty mouldy old books at that. It was said, I suppose, to gain sympathy among the French, and is therefore not my immediate business, as they are eminently capable of looking after themselves. I merely drop one word in passing, lest you waste your powerful intellect on such projects. The English may some day forgive you; the French never will. You Teutons are too light and fickle to understand the Latin seriousness. My only concern is to point out that about England, at least, you are invariably and miraculously wrong.

Now speaking seriously, my dear Professor, it will not do. It could be easy to fence with you for ever and parry every point you attempt to make, until English people began to think there was nothing wrong with England at all. But I refuse to play for safety in this way. There is a very great deal that is really wrong with England, and it ought not to be forgotten even in the full blaze of your marvellous mistakes. I cannot have my countrymen tempted to those pleasures of intellectual pride which are the result of comparing themselves with you. The deep collapse and yawning chasm of your ineptitude leaves me upon a perilous spiritual elevation. Your mistakes are matters of fact; but to enumerate them does not exhaust the truth. For instance, the learned man who rendered the phrase in an English advertisement "cut you dead" as "hack you to death," was in error; but to say that many such advertisements are vulgar is not an error. Again, it is true that the English poor are harried and insecure, with insufficient instinct for armed revolt, though you will be wrong if you say that they are occupied literally in shooting the moon. It is true that the average Englishman is too much attracted by aristocratic society; though you will be in error if you quote dining with Duke Humphrey as an example of it. In more ways than one you forget what is meant by idiom.

I have therefore thought it advisable to provide you with a catalogue of the real crimes of England; and I have selected them on a principle which cannot fail to interest and please you. On many occasions we have been very wrong indeed. We were very wrong indeed when we took part in preventing Europe from putting a term to the impious piracies of Frederick the Great. We were very wrong indeed when we allowed the triumph over Napoleon to be soiled with the mire and blood of Blucher's sullen savages. We were very wrong indeed when we allowed the peaceful King of Denmark to be robbed in broad daylight by a brigand named Bismarck; and when we allowed the Prussian swashbucklers to enslave and silence the French provinces which they could neither govern nor persuade. We were very wrong indeed when we flung to such hungry adventurers a position so important as Heligoland. We were very wrong indeed when we praised the soulless Prussian education and copied the soulless Prussian laws. Knowing that you will mingle your tears with mine over this record of English wrong-doing, I dedicate it to you, and I remain,

Yours reverently,

G. K. CHESTERTON