

Chapter V - The Lost England

Telling the truth about Ireland is not very pleasant to a patriotic Englishman; but it is very patriotic. It is the truth and nothing but the truth which I have but touched on in the last chapter. Several times, and especially at the beginning of this war, we narrowly escaped ruin because we neglected that truth, and would insist on treating our crimes of the '98 and after as very distant; while in Irish feeling, and in fact, they are very near. Repentance of this remote sort is not at all appropriate to the case, and will not do. It may be a good thing to forget and forgive; but it is altogether too easy a trick to forget and be forgiven.

The truth about Ireland is simply this: that the relations between England and Ireland are the relations between two men who have to travel together, one of whom tried to stab the other at the last stopping-place or to poison the other at the last inn. Conversation may be courteous, but it will be occasionally forced. The topic of attempted murder, its examples in history and fiction, may be tactfully avoided in the sallies; but it will be occasionally present in the thoughts. Silences, not devoid of strain, will fall from time to time. The partially murdered person may even think an assault unlikely to recur; but it is asking too much, perhaps, to expect him to find it impossible to imagine. And even if, as God grant, the predominant partner is really sorry for his former manner of predominating, and proves it in some unmistakable manner--as by saving the other from robbers at great personal risk--the victim may still be unable to repress an abstract psychological wonder about when his companion first began to feel like that. Now this is not in the least an exaggerated parable of the position of England towards Ireland, not only in '98, but far back from the treason that broke the Treaty of Limerick and far onwards through the Great Famine and after. The conduct of the English towards the Irish after the Rebellion was quite simply the conduct of one man who traps and binds another, and then calmly cuts him about with a knife. The conduct during the Famine was quite simply the conduct of the first man if he entertained the later moments of the second man, by remarking in a chatty manner on the very hopeful chances of his bleeding to death. The British Prime Minister publicly refused to stop the Famine by the use of English ships. The British Prime Minister positively spread the Famine, by making the half-starved populations of Ireland pay for the starved ones. The common verdict of a coroner's jury upon some emaciated wretch was "Wilful murder by Lord John Russell": and that verdict was not only the verdict of Irish public opinion, but is the verdict of history. But there were those in influential positions in England who were not content with publicly approving the act, but publicly proclaimed the motive. The Times, which had then a national authority and respectability which gave its words a weight unknown in modern journalism, openly exulted in the

prospect of a Golden Age when the kind of Irishman native to Ireland would be "as rare on the banks of the Liffey as a red man on the banks of the Manhattan." It seems sufficiently frantic that such a thing should have been said by one European of another, or even of a Red Indian, if Red Indians had occupied anything like the place of the Irish then and since; if there were to be a Red Indian Lord Chief Justice and a Red Indian Commander-in-Chief, if the Red Indian Party in Congress, containing first-rate orators and fashionable novelists, could have turned Presidents in and out; if half the best troops of the country were trained with the tomahawk and half the best journalism of the capital written in picture-writing, if later, by general consent, the Chief known as Pine in the Twilight, was the best living poet, or the Chief Thin Red Fox, the ablest living dramatist. If that were realised, the English critic probably would not say anything scornful of red men; or certainly would be sorry he said it. But the extraordinary avowal does mark what was most peculiar in the position. This has not been the common case of misgovernment. It is not merely that the institutions we set up were indefensible; though the curious mark of them is that they were literally indefensible; from Wood's Halfpence to the Irish Church Establishment. There can be no more excuse for the method used by Pitt than for the method used by Pigott. But it differs further from ordinary misrule in the vital matter of its object. The coercion was not imposed that the people might live quietly, but that the people might die quietly. And then we sit in an owlish innocence of our sin, and debate whether the Irish might conceivably succeed in saving Ireland. We, as a matter of fact, have not even failed to save Ireland. We have simply failed to destroy her.

It is not possible to reverse this judgment or to take away a single count from it. Is there, then, anything whatever to be said for the English in the matter? There is: though the English never by any chance say it. Nor do the Irish say it; though it is in a sense a weakness as well as a defence. One would think the Irish had reason to say anything that can be said against the English ruling class, but they have not said, indeed they have hardly discovered, one quite simple fact--that it rules England. They are right in asking that the Irish should have a say in the Irish government, but they are quite wrong in supposing that the English have any particular say in English government. And I seriously believe I am not deceived by any national bias, when I say that the common Englishman would be quite incapable of the cruelties that were committed in his name. But, most important of all, it is the historical fact that there was another England, an England consisting of common Englishmen, which not only certainly would have done better, but actually did make some considerable attempt to do better. If anyone asks for the evidence, the answer is that the evidence has been destroyed, or at least deliberately boycotted: but can be found in the unfashionable corners of literature; and, when found, is final. If anyone asks for the great men of such a potential democratic England, the answer is that the great men are labelled small

men, or not labelled at all; have been successfully belittled as the emancipation of which they dreamed has dwindled. The greatest of them is now little more than a name; he is criticised to be underrated and not to be understood; but he presented all that alternative and more liberal Englishry; and was enormously popular because he presented it. In taking him as the type of it we may tell most shortly the whole of this forgotten tale. And, even when I begin to tell it, I find myself in the presence of that ubiquitous evil which is the subject of this book. It is a fact, and I think it is not a coincidence, that in standing for a moment where this Englishman stood, I again find myself confronted by the German soldier.

The son of a small Surrey farmer, a respectable Tory and churchman, ventured to plead against certain extraordinary cruelties being inflicted on Englishmen whose hands were tied, by the whips of German superiors; who were then parading in English fields their stiff foreign uniforms and their sanguinary foreign discipline. In the countries from which they came, of course, such torments were the one monotonous means of driving men on to perish in the dead dynastic quarrels of the north; but to poor Will Cobbett, in his provincial island, knowing little but the low hills and hedges around the little church where he now lies buried, the incident seemed odd--nay, unpleasing. He knew, of course, that there was then flogging in the British army also; but the German standard was notoriously severe in such things, and was something of an acquired taste. Added to which he had all sorts of old grandmotherly prejudices about Englishmen being punished by Englishmen, and notions of that sort. He protested, not only in speech, but actually in print. He was soon made to learn the perils of meddling in the high politics of the High Dutch militarists. The fine feelings of the foreign mercenaries were soothed by Cobbett being flung into Newgate for two years and beggared by a fine of £1000. That small incident is a small transparent picture of the Holy Alliance; of what was really meant by a country, once half liberalised, taking up the cause of the foreign kings. This, and not "The Meeting of Wellington and Blucher," should be engraved as the great scene of the war. From this intemperate Fenians should learn that the Teutonic mercenaries did not confine themselves solely to torturing Irishmen. They were equally ready to torture Englishmen: for mercenaries are mostly unprejudiced. To Cobbett's eye we were suffering from allies exactly as we should suffer from invaders. Boney was a bogey; but the German was a nightmare, a thing actually sitting on top of us. In Ireland the Alliance meant the ruin of anything and everything Irish, from the creed of St. Patrick to the mere colour green. But in England also it meant the ruin of anything and everything English, from the Habeas Corpus Act to Cobbett.

After this affair of the scourging, he wielded his pen like a scourge until he died. This terrible pamphleteer was one of those men who exist to prove the distinction between a biography and a life. From his biographies you will learn that he was a Radical who had once been a Tory. From his life, if there were one, you would

learn that he was always a Radical because he was always a Tory. Few men changed less; it was round him that the politicians like Pitt chopped and changed, like fakirs dancing round a sacred rock. His secret is buried with him; it is that he really cared about the English people. He was conservative because he cared for their past, and liberal because he cared for their future. But he was much more than this. He had two forms of moral manhood very rare in our time: he was ready to uproot ancient successes, and he was ready to defy oncoming doom. Burke said that few are the partisans of a tyranny that has departed: he might have added that fewer still are the critics of a tyranny that has remained. Burke certainly was not one of them. While lashing himself into a lunacy against the French Revolution, which only very incidentally destroyed the property of the rich, he never criticised (to do him justice, perhaps never saw) the English Revolution, which began with the sack of convents, and ended with the fencing in of enclosures; a revolution which sweepingly and systematically destroyed the property of the poor. While rhetorically putting the Englishman in a castle, politically he would not allow him on a common. Cobbett, a much more historical thinker, saw the beginning of Capitalism in the Tudor pillage and deplored it; he saw the triumph of Capitalism in the industrial cities and defied it. The paradox he was maintaining really amounted to the assertion that Westminster Abbey is rather more national than Welbeck Abbey. The same paradox would have led him to maintain that a Warwickshire man had more reason to be proud of Stratford-on-Avon than of Birmingham. He would no more have thought of looking for England in Birmingham than of looking for Ireland in Belfast.

The prestige of Cobbett's excellent literary style has survived the persecution of his equally excellent opinions. But that style also is underrated through the loss of the real English tradition. More cautious schools have missed the fact that the very genius of the English tongue tends not only to vigour, but specially to violence. The Englishman of the leading articles is calm, moderate, and restrained; but then the Englishman of the leading articles is a Prussian. The mere English consonants are full of Cobbett. Dr. Johnson was our great man of letters when he said "stinks," not when he said "putrefaction." Take some common phrase like "raining cats and dogs," and note not only the extravagance of imagery (though that is very Shakespearean), but a jagged energy in the very spelling. Say "chats" and "chiens" and it is not the same. Perhaps the old national genius has survived the urban enslavement most spiritedly in our comic songs, admired by all men of travel and continental culture, by Mr. George Moore as by Mr. Belloc. One (to which I am much attached) had a chorus--

"O wind from the South Blow mud in the mouth Of Jane, Jane, Jane."

Note, again, not only the tremendous vision of clinging soils carried skywards in the tornado, but also the suitability of the mere sounds. Say "bone" and "bouche"

for mud and mouth and it is not the same. Cobbett was a wind from the South; and if he occasionally seemed to stop his enemies' mouths with mud, it was the real soil of South England.

And as his seemingly mad language is very literary, so his seemingly mad meaning is very historical. Modern people do not understand him because they do not understand the difference between exaggerating a truth and exaggerating a lie. He did exaggerate, but what he knew, not what he did not know. He only appears paradoxical because he upheld tradition against fashion. A paradox is a fantastic thing that is said once: a fashion is a more fantastic thing that is said a sufficient number of times. I could give numberless examples in Cobbett's case, but I will give only one. Anyone who finds himself full in the central path of Cobbett's fury sometimes has something like a physical shock. No one who has read "The History of the Reformation" will ever forget the passage (I forget the precise words) in which he says the mere thought of such a person as Cranmer makes the brain reel, and, for an instant, doubt the goodness of God; but that peace and faith flow back into the soul when we remember that he was burned alive. Now this is extravagant. It takes the breath away; and it was meant to. But what I wish to point out is that a much more extravagant view of Cranmer was, in Cobbett's day, the accepted view of Cranmer; not as a momentary image, but as an immovable historical monument. Thousands of parsons and penmen dutifully set down Cranmer among the saints and martyrs; and there are many respectable people who would do so still. This is not an exaggerated truth, but an established lie. Cranmer was not such a monstrosity of meanness as Cobbett implies; but he was mean. But there is no question of his being less saintly than the parsonages believed; he was not a saint at all; and not very attractive even as a sinner. He was no more a martyr for being burned than Crippen for being hanged.

Cobbett was defeated because the English people was defeated. After the frame-breaking riots, men, as men, were beaten: and machines, as machines, had beaten them. Peterloo was as much the defeat of the English as Waterloo was the defeat of the French. Ireland did not get Home Rule because England did not get it. Cobbett would not forcibly incorporate Ireland, least of all the corpse of Ireland. But before his defeat Cobbett had an enormous following; his "Register" was what the serial novels of Dickens were afterwards to be. Dickens, by the way, inherited the same instinct for abrupt diction, and probably enjoyed writing "gas and gaiters" more than any two other words in his works. But Dickens was narrower than Cobbett, not by any fault of his own, but because in the intervening epoch of the triumph of Scrooge and Gradgrind the link with our Christian past had been lost, save in the single matter of Christmas, which Dickens rescued romantically and by a hair's-breadth escape. Cobbett was a yeoman; that is, a man free and farming a small estate. By Dickens's time,

yeomen seemed as antiquated as bowmen. Cobbett was mediaeval; that is, he was in almost every way the opposite of what that word means to-day. He was as egalitarian as St. Francis, and as independent as Robin Hood. Like that other yeoman in the ballad, he bore in hand a mighty bow; what some of his enemies would have called a long bow. But though he sometimes overshot the mark of truth, he never shot away from it, like Froude. His account of that sixteenth century in which the mediaeval civilisation ended, is not more and not less picturesque than Froude's: the difference is in the dull detail of truth. That crisis was not the foundling of a strong Tudor monarchy, for the monarchy almost immediately perished; it was the founding of a strong class holding all the capital and land, for it holds them to this day. Cobbett would have asked nothing better than to bend his mediaeval bow to the cry of "St. George for Merry England," for though he pointed to the other and uglier side of the Waterloo medal, he was patriotic; and his premonitions were rather against Blucher than Wellington. But if we take that old war-cry as his final word (and he would have accepted it) we must note how every term in it points away from what the modern plutocrats call either progress or empire. It involves the invocation of saints, the most popular and the most forbidden form of mediævalism. The modern Imperialist no more thinks of St. George in England than he thinks of St. John in St. John's Wood. It is nationalist in the narrowest sense; and no one knows the beauty and simplicity of the Middle Ages who has not seen St. George's Cross separate, as it was at Crécy or Flodden, and noticed how much finer a flag it is than the Union Jack. And the word "merry" bears witness to an England famous for its music and dancing before the coming of the Puritans, the last traces of which have been stamped out by a social discipline utterly un-English. Not for two years, but for ten decades Cobbett has been in prison; and his enemy, the "efficient" foreigner, has walked about in the sunlight, magnificent, and a model for men. I do not think that even the Prussians ever boasted about "Merry Prussia."