

THE MAN WHO THINKS BACKWARDS

The man who thinks backwards is a very powerful person to-day: indeed, if he is not omnipotent, he is at least omnipresent. It is he who writes nearly all the learned books and articles, especially of the scientific or skeptical sort; all the articles on Eugenics and Social Evolution and Prison Reform and the Higher Criticism and all the rest of it. But especially it is this strange and tortuous being who does most of the writing about female emancipation and the reconsidering of marriage. For the man who thinks backwards is very frequently a woman.

Thinking backwards is not quite easy to define abstractedly; and, perhaps, the simplest method is to take some object, as plain as possible, and from it illustrate the two modes of thought: the right mode in which all real results have been rooted; the wrong mode, which is confusing all our current discussions, especially our discussions about the relations of the sexes. Casting my eye round the room, I notice an object which is often mentioned in the higher and subtler of these debates about the sexes: I mean a poker. I will take a poker and think about it; first forwards and then backwards; and so, perhaps, show what I mean.

The sage desiring to think well and wisely about a poker will begin somewhat as follows: Among the live creatures that crawl about this star the queerest is the thing called Man. This plucked and plumeless bird, comic and forlorn, is the butt of all the philosophies. He is the only

naked animal; and this quality, once, it is said, his glory, is now his shame. He has to go outside himself for everything that he wants. He might almost be considered as an absent-minded person who had gone bathing and left his clothes everywhere, so that he has hung his hat upon the beaver and his coat upon the sheep. The rabbit has white warmth for a waistcoat, and the glow-worm has a lantern for a head. But man has no heat in his hide, and the light in his body is darkness; and he must look for light and warmth in the wild, cold universe in which he is cast. This is equally true of his soul and of his body; he is the one creature that has lost his heart as much as he has lost his hide. In a spiritual sense he has taken leave of his senses; and even in a literal sense he has been unable to keep his hair on. And just as this external need of his has lit in his dark brain the dreadful star called religion, so it has lit in his hand the only adequate symbol of it: I mean the red flower called Fire. Fire, the most magic and startling of all material things, is a thing known only to man and the expression of his sublime externalism. It embodies all that is human in his hearths and all that is divine on his altars. It is the most human thing in the world; seen across wastes of marsh or medleys of forest, it is veritably the purple and golden flag of the sons of Eve. But there is about this generous and rejoicing thing an alien and awful quality: the quality of torture. Its presence is life; its touch is death. Therefore, it is always necessary to have an intermediary between ourselves and this dreadful deity; to have a priest to intercede for us with the god of life and death; to send an ambassador to the fire. That priest is the poker. Made of a material more merciless and warlike than the other instruments of

domesticity, hammered on the anvil and born itself in the flame, the poker is strong enough to enter the burning fiery furnace, and, like the holy children, not be consumed. In this heroic service it is often battered and twisted, but is the more honourable for it, like any other soldier who has been under fire.

Now all this may sound very fanciful and mystical, but it is the right view of pokers, and no one who takes it will ever go in for any wrong view of pokers, such as using them to beat one's wife or torture one's children, or even (though that is more excusable) to make a policeman jump, as the clown does in the pantomime. He who has thus gone back to the beginning, and seen everything as quaint and new, will always see things in their right order, the one depending on the other in degree of purpose and importance: the poker for the fire and the fire for the man and the man for the glory of God.

This is thinking forwards. Now our modern discussions about everything, Imperialism, Socialism, or Votes for Women, are all entangled in an opposite train of thought, which runs as follows:—A modern intellectual comes in and sees a poker. He is a positivist; he will not begin with any dogmas about the nature of man, or any day-dreams about the mystery of fire. He will begin with what he can see, the poker; and the first thing he sees about the poker is that it is crooked. He says, "Poor poker; it's crooked." Then he asks how it came to be crooked; and is told that there is a thing in the world (with which his temperament has hitherto left him unacquainted)—a thing called fire. He points

out, very kindly and clearly, how silly it is of people, if they want a straight poker, to put it into a chemical combustion which will very probably heat and warp it. "Let us abolish fire," he says, "and then we shall have perfectly straight pokers. Why should you want a fire at all?" They explain to him that a creature called Man wants a fire, because he has no fur or feathers. He gazes dreamily at the embers for a few seconds, and then shakes his head. "I doubt if such an animal is worth preserving," he says. "He must eventually go under in the cosmic struggle when pitted against well-armoured and warmly protected species, who have wings and trunks and spires and scales and horns and shaggy hair. If Man cannot live without these luxuries, you had better abolish Man." At this point, as a rule, the crowd is convinced; it heaves up all its clubs and axes, and abolishes him. At least, one of him.

Before we begin discussing our various new plans for the people's welfare, let us make a kind of agreement that we will argue in a straightforward way, and not in a tail-foremost way. The typical modern movements may be right; but let them be defended because they are right, not because they are typical modern movements. Let us begin with the actual woman or man in the street, who is cold; like mankind before the finding of fire. Do not let us begin with the end of the last red-hot discussion—like the end of a red hot poker. Imperialism may be right. But if it is right, it is right because England has some divine authority like Israel, or some human authority like Rome; not because we have saddled ourselves with South Africa, and don't know how to get rid of it. Socialism may be true. But if it is true, it is true because the

tribe or the city can really declare all land to be common land, not because Harrod's Stores exist and the commonwealth must copy them. Female suffrage may be just. But if it is just, it is just because women are women, not because women are sweated workers and white slaves and all sorts of things that they ought never to have been. Let not the Imperialist accept a colony because it is there, nor the Suffragist seize a vote because it is lying about, nor the Socialist buy up an industry merely because it is for sale.

Let us ask ourselves first what we really do want, not what recent legal decisions have told us to want, or recent logical philosophies proved that we must want, or recent social prophecies predicted that we shall some day want. If there must be a British Empire, let it be British, and not, in mere panic, American or Prussian. If there ought to be female suffrage, let it be female, and not a mere imitation as coarse as the male blackguard or as dull as the male clerk. If there is to be Socialism, let it be social; that is, as different as possible from all the big commercial departments of to-day. The really good journeyman tailor does not cut his coat according to his cloth; he asks for more cloth. The really practical statesman does not fit himself to existing conditions, he denounces the conditions as unfit. History is like some deeply planted tree which, though gigantic in girth, tapers away at last into tiny twigs; and we are in the topmost branches. Each of us is trying to bend the tree by a twig: to alter England through a distant colony, or to capture the State through a small State department, or to destroy all voting through a vote. In all such bewilderment he is wise

who resists this temptation of trivial triumph or surrender, and happy
(in an echo of the Roman poet) who remembers the roots of things.