

THE WRONG INCENDIARY

I stood looking at the Coronation Procession—I mean the one in Beaconsfield; not the rather elephantine imitation of it which, I believe, had some success in London—and I was seriously impressed. Most of my life is passed in discovering with a deathly surprise that I was quite right. Never before have I realised how right I was in maintaining that the small area expresses the real patriotism: the smaller the field the taller the tower. There were things in our local procession that did not (one might even reverently say, could not) occur in the London procession. One of the most prominent citizens in our procession (for instance) had his face blacked. Another rode on a pony which wore pink and blue trousers. I was not present at the Metropolitan affair, and therefore my assertion is subject to such correction as the eyewitness may always offer to the absentee. But I believe with some firmness that no such features occurred in the London pageant.

But it is not of the local celebration that I would speak, but of something that occurred before it. In the field beyond the end of my garden the materials for a bonfire had been heaped; a hill of every kind of rubbish and refuse and things that nobody wants; broken chairs, dead trees, rags, shavings, newspapers, new religions, in pamphlet form, reports of the Eugenic Congress, and so on. All this refuse, material

and mental, it was our purpose to purify and change to holy flame on the day when the King was crowned. The following is an account of the rather strange thing that really happened. I do not know whether it was any sort of symbol; but I narrate it just as it befell.

In the middle of the night I woke up slowly and listened to what I supposed to be the heavy crunching of a cart-wheel along a road of loose stones. Then it grew louder, and I thought somebody was shooting out cartloads of stones; then it seemed as if the shock was breaking big stones into pieces. Then I realised that under this sound there was also a strange, sleepy, almost inaudible roar; and that on top of it every now and then came pigmy pops like a battle of penny pistols. Then I knew what it was. I went to the window; and a great firelight flung across two meadows smote me where I stood. "Oh, my holy aunt," I thought, "they've mistaken the Coronation Day."

And yet when I eyed the transfigured scene it did not seem exactly like a bonfire or any ritual illumination. It was too chaotic, and too close to the houses of the town. All one side of a cottage was painted pink with the giant brush of flame; the next side, by contrast, was painted as black as tar. Along the front of this ran a blackening rim or rampart edged with a restless red ribbon that danced and doubled and devoured like a scarlet snake; and beyond it was nothing but a deathly fulness of light.

I put on some clothes and went down the road; all the dull or startling

noises in that din of burning growing louder and louder as I walked. The heaviest sound was that of an incessant cracking and crunching, as if some giant with teeth of stone was breaking up the bones of the world. I had not yet come within sight of the real heart and habitat of the fire; but the strong red light, like an unnatural midnight sunset, powdered the grayest grass with gold and flushed the few tall trees up to the last fingers of their foliage. Behind them the night was black and cavernous; and one could only trace faintly the ashen horizon beyond the dark and magic Wilton Woods. As I went, a workman on a bicycle shot a rood past me; then staggered from his machine and shouted to me to tell him where the fire was. I answered that I was going to see, but thought it was the cottages by the wood-yard. He said, "My God!" and vanished.

A little farther on I found grass and pavement soaking and flooded, and the red and yellow flames repainted in pools and puddles. Beyond were dim huddles of people and a small distant voice shouting out orders. The fire-engines were at work. I went on among the red reflections, which seemed like subterranean fires; I had a singular sensation of being in a very important dream. Oddly enough, this was increased when I found that most of my friends and neighbours were entangled in the crowd. Only in dreams do we see familiar faces so vividly against a black background of midnight. I was glad to find (for the workman cyclist's sake) that the fire was not in the houses by the wood-yard, but in the wood-yard itself. There was no fear for human life, and the thing was seemingly accidental; though there were the usual ugly whispers about rivalry and revenge. But for all that I could not shake off my dream-drugged soul a

swollen, tragic, portentous sort of sensation, that it all had something to do with the crowning of the English King, and the glory or the end of England. It was not till I saw the puddles and the ashes in broad daylight next morning that I was fundamentally certain that my midnight adventure had not happened outside this world.

But I was more arrogant than the ancient Emperors Pharaoh or Nebuchadnezzar; for I attempted to interpret my own dream. The fire was feeding upon solid stacks of unused beech or pine, gray and white piles of virgin wood. It was an orgy of mere waste; thousands of good things were being killed before they had ever existed. Doors, tables, walking-sticks, wheelbarrows, wooden swords for boys, Dutch dolls for girls I could hear the cry of each uncreated thing as it expired in the flames. And then I thought of that other noble tower of needless things that stood in the field beyond my garden; the bonfire, the mountain of vanities, that is meant for burning; and how it stood dark and lonely in the meadow, and the birds hopped on its corners and the dew touched and spangled its twigs. And I remembered that there are two kinds of fires, the Bad Fire and the Good Fire the last must surely be the meaning of Bonfire. And the paradox is that the Good Fire is made of bad things, of things that we do not want; but the Bad Fire is made of good things, of things that we do want; like all that wealth of wood that might have made dolls and chairs and tables, but was only making a hueless ash.

And then I saw, in my vision, that just as there are two fires, so there are two revolutions. And I saw that the whole mad modern world is a race

between them. Which will happen first—the revolution in which bad things shall perish, or that other revolution, in which good things shall perish also? One is the riot that all good men, even the most conservative, really dream of, when the sneer shall be struck from the face of the well-fed; when the wine of honour shall be poured down the throat of despair; when we shall, so far as to the sons of flesh is possible, take tyranny and usury and public treason and bind them into bundles and burn them. And the other is the disruption that may come prematurely, negatively, and suddenly in the night; like the fire in my little town.

It may come because the mere strain of modern life is unbearable; and in it even the things that men do desire may break down; marriage and fair ownership and worship and the mysterious worth of man. The two revolutions, white and black, are racing each other like two railway trains; I cannot guess the issue...but even as I thought of it, the tallest turret of the timber stooped and faltered and came down in a cataract of noises. And the fire, finding passage, went up with a spout like a fountain. It stood far up among the stars for an instant, a blazing pillar of brass fit for a pagan conqueror, so high that one could fancy it visible away among the goblin trees of Burnham or along the terraces of the Chiltern Hills.