THE FREE MAN

The idea of liberty has ultimately a religious root; that is why men find it so easy to die for and so difficult to define. It refers finally to the fact that, while the oyster and the palm tree have to save their lives by law, man has to save his soul by choice. Ruskin rebuked Coleridge for praising freedom, and said that no man would wish the sun to be free. It seems enough to answer that no man would wish to be the sun. Speaking as a Liberal, I have much more sympathy with the idea of Joshua stopping the sun in heaven than with the idea of Ruskin trotting his daily round in imitation of its regularity. Joshua was a Radical, and his astronomical act was distinctly revolutionary. For all revolution is the mastering of matter by the spirit of man, the emergence of that human authority within us which, in the noble words of Sir Thomas Browne, "owes no homage unto the sun."

Generally, the moral substance of liberty is this: that man is not meant merely to receive good laws, good food or good conditions, like a tree in a garden, but is meant to take a certain princely pleasure in selecting and shaping like the gardener. Perhaps that is the meaning of the trade of Adam. And the best popular words for rendering the real idea of liberty are those which speak of man as a creator. We use the word "make" about most of the things in which freedom is essential, as a country walk or a friendship or a love affair. When a man "makes his way" through a wood he has really created, he has built a road, like the Romans. When a man "makes a friend," he makes a man. And in the third

case we talk of a man "making love," as if he were (as, indeed, he is) creating new masses and colours of that flaming material an awful form of manufacture. In its primary spiritual sense, liberty is the god in man, or, if you like the word, the artist.

In its secondary political sense liberty is the living influence of the citizen on the State in the direction of moulding or deflecting it. Men are the only creatures that evidently possess it. On the one hand, the eagle has no liberty; he only has loneliness. On the other hand, ants, bees, and beavers exhibit the highest miracle of the State influencing the citizen; but no perceptible trace of the citizen influencing the State. You may, if you like, call the ants a democracy as you may call the bees a despotism. But I fancy that the architectural ant who attempted to introduce an art nouveau style of ant-hill would have a career as curt and fruitless as the celebrated bee who wanted to swarm alone. The isolation of this idea in humanity is akin to its religious character; but it is not even in humanity by any means equally distributed. The idea that the State should not only be supported by its children, like the ant-hill, but should be constantly criticised and reconstructed by them, is an idea stronger in Christendom than any other part of the planet; stronger in Western than Eastern Europe. And touching the pure idea of the individual being free to speak and act within limits, the assertion of this idea, we may fairly say, has been the peculiar honour of our own country. For my part I greatly prefer the Jingoism of Rule Britannia to the Imperialism of The Recessional. I have no objection to Britannia ruling the waves. I draw the line when

she begins to rule the dry land—and such damnably dry land too—as in Africa. And there was a real old English sincerity in the vulgar chorus that "Britons never shall be slaves." We had no equality and hardly any justice; but freedom we were really fond of. And I think just now it is worth while to draw attention to the old optimistic prophecy that "Britons never shall be slaves."

The mere love of liberty has never been at a lower ebb in England than it has been for the last twenty years. Never before has it been so easy to slip small Bills through Parliament for the purpose of locking people up. Never was it so easy to silence awkward questions, or to protect high-placed officials. Two hundred years ago we turned out the Stuarts rather than endanger the Habeas Corpus Act. Two years ago we abolished the Habeas Corpus Act rather than turn out the Home Secretary. We passed a law (which is now in force) that an Englishman's punishment shall not depend upon judge and jury, but upon the governors and jailers who have got hold of him. But this is not the only case. The scorn of liberty is in the air. A newspaper is seized by the police in Trafalgar Square without a word of accusation or explanation. The Home Secretary says that in his opinion the police are very nice people, and there is an end of the matter. A Member of Parliament attempts to criticise a peerage. The Speaker says he must not criticise a peerage, and there the matter drops.

Political liberty, let us repeat, consists in the power of criticising those flexible parts of the State which constantly require

reconsideration, not the basis, but the machinery. In plainer words, it means the power of saying the sort of things that a decent but discontented citizen wants to say. He does not want to spit on the Bible, or to run about without clothes, or to read the worst page in Zola from the pulpit of St. Paul's. Therefore the forbidding of these things (whether just or not) is only tyranny in a secondary and special sense. It restrains the abnormal, not the normal man. But the normal man, the decent discontented citizen, does want to protest against unfair law courts. He does want to expose brutalities of the police. He does want to make game of a vulgar pawnbroker who is made a Peer. He does want publicly to warn people against unscrupulous capitalists and suspicious finance. If he is run in for doing this (as he will be) he does want to proclaim the character or known prejudices of the magistrate who tries him. If he is sent to prison (as he will be) he does want to have a clear and civilised sentence, telling him when he will come out. And these are literally and exactly the things that he now cannot get. That is the almost cloying humour of the present situation. I can say abnormal things in modern magazines. It is the normal things that I am not allowed to say. I can write in some solemn quarterly an elaborate article explaining that God is the devil; I can write in some cultured weekly an aesthetic fancy describing how I should like to eat boiled baby. The thing I must not write is rational criticism of the men and institutions of my country.

The present condition of England is briefly this: That no Englishman can say in public a twentieth part of what he says in private. One cannot

say, for instance, that—But I am afraid I must leave out that instance, because one cannot say it. I cannot prove my case—because it is so true.