

THE CONTENTED MAN

The word content is not inspiring nowadays; rather it is irritating because it is dull. It prepares the mind for a little sermon in the style of the Vicar of Wakefield about how you and I should be satisfied with our countrified innocence and our simple village sports. The word, however, has two meanings, somewhat singularly connected; the "sweet content" of the poet and the "cubic content" of the mathematician. Some distinguish these by stressing the different syllables. Thus, it might happen to any of us, at some social juncture, to remark gaily, "Of the content of the King of the Cannibal Islands' Stewpot I am content to be ignorant"; or "Not content with measuring the cubic content of my safe, you are stealing the spoons." And there really is an analogy between the mathematical and the moral use of the term, for lack of the observation of which the latter has been much weakened and misused.

The preaching of contentment is in disrepute, well deserved in so far that the moral is really quite inapplicable to the anarchy and insane peril of our tall and toppling cities. Content suggests some kind of security; and it is not strange that our workers should often think about rising above their position, since they have so continually to think about sinking below it. The philanthropist who urges the poor to saving and simple pleasures deserves all the derision that he gets. To advise people to be content with what they have got may or may not be sound moral philosophy.

But to urge people to be content with what they haven't got is a piece of impudence hard for even the English poor to pardon. But though the creed of content is unsuited to certain special riddles and wrongs, it remains true for the normal of mortal life. We speak of divine discontent; discontent may sometimes be a divine thing, but content must always be the human thing. It may be true that a particular man, in his relation to his master or his neighbour, to his country or his enemies, will do well to be fiercely unsatisfied or thirsting for an angry justice. But it is not true, no sane person can call it true, that man as a whole in his general attitude towards the world, in his posture towards death or green fields, towards the weather or the baby, will be wise to cultivate dissatisfaction. In a broad estimate of our earthly experience, the great truism on the tablet remains: he must not covet his neighbour's ox nor his ass nor anything that is his. In highly complex and scientific civilisations he may sometimes find himself forced into an exceptional vigilance. But, then, in highly complex and scientific civilisations, nine times out of ten, he only wants his own ass back.

But I wish to urge the case for cubic content; in which (even more than in moral content) I take a personal interest. Now, moral content has been undervalued and neglected because of its separation from the other meaning. It has become a negative rather than a positive thing. In some accounts of contentment it seems to be little more than a meek despair.

But this is not the true meaning of the term; it should stand for the

idea of a positive and thorough appreciation of the content of anything; for feeling the substance and not merely the surface of experience. "Content" ought to mean in English, as it does in French, being pleased; placidly, perhaps, but still positively pleased. Being contented with bread and cheese ought not to mean not caring what you eat. It ought to mean caring for bread and cheese; handling and enjoying the cubic content of the bread and cheese and adding it to your own. Being content with an attic ought not to mean being unable to move from it and resigned to living in it. It ought to mean appreciating what there is to appreciate in such a position; such as the quaint and elvish slope of the ceiling or the sublime aerial view of the opposite chimney-pots. And in this sense contentment is a real and even an active virtue; it is not only affirmative, but creative. The poet in the attic does not forget the attic in poetic musings; he remembers whatever the attic has of poetry; he realises how high, how starry, how cool, how unadorned and simple—in short, how Attic is the attic.

True contentment is a thing as active as agriculture. It is the power of getting out of any situation all that there is in it. It is arduous and it is rare. The absence of this digestive talent is what makes so cold and incredible the tales of so many people who say they have been "through" things; when it is evident that they have come out on the other side quite unchanged. A man might have gone "through" a plum pudding as a bullet might go through a plum pudding; it depends on the size of the pudding—and the man. But the awful and sacred question is "Has the pudding been through him?" Has he tasted, appreciated, and

absorbed the solid pudding, with its three dimensions and its three thousand tastes and smells? Can he offer himself to the eyes of men as one who has cubically conquered and contained a pudding?

In the same way we may ask of those who profess to have passed through trivial or tragic experiences whether they have absorbed the content of them; whether they licked up such living water as there was. It is a pertinent question in connection with many modern problems.

Thus the young genius says, "I have lived in my dreary and squalid village before I found success in Paris or Vienna." The sound philosopher will answer, "You have never lived in your village, or you would not call it dreary and squalid."

Thus the Imperialist, the Colonial idealist (who commonly speaks and always thinks with a Yankee accent) will say, "I've been right away from these little muddy islands, and seen God's great seas and prairies." The sound philosopher will reply, "You have never been in these islands; you have never seen the weald of Sussex or the plain of Salisbury; otherwise you could never have called them either muddy or little."

Thus the Suffragette will say, "I have passed through the paltry duties of pots and pans, the drudgery of the vulgar kitchen; but I have come out to intellectual liberty." The sound philosopher will answer, "You have never passed through the kitchen, or you never would call it vulgar. Wiser and stronger women than you have really seen a poetry

in pots and pans; naturally, because there is a poetry in them." It is right for the village violinist to climb into fame in Paris or Vienna; it is right for the stray Englishman to climb across the high shoulder of the world; it is right for the woman to climb into whatever cathedrae or high places she can allow to her sexual dignity. But it is wrong that any of these climbers should kick the ladder by which they have climbed. But indeed these bitter people who record their experiences really record their lack of experiences. It is the countryman who has not succeeded in being a countryman who comes up to London. It is the clerk who has not succeeded in being a clerk who tries (on vegetarian principles) to be a countryman. And the woman with a past is generally a woman angry about the past she never had.

When you have really exhausted an experience you always reverence and love it. The two things that nearly all of us have thoroughly and really been through are childhood and youth. And though we would not have them back again on any account, we feel that they are both beautiful, because we have drunk them dry.