

Orion

The moonless night has a touch of frost, and is steely-clear. High and dominant amidst the Populations of the Sky, the restless and the steadfast alike, hangs the great Plough, lit with a hard radiance as of the polished and shining share. And yonder, low on the horizon, but half resurgent as yet, crouches the magnificent hunter: watchful, seemingly, and expectant: with some hint of menace in his port.

Yet should his game be up, you would think by now. Many a century has passed since the plough first sped a conqueror east and west, clearing forest and draining fen; policing the valleys with barbed-wires and Sunday schools, with the chains that are forged of peace, the irking fetters of plenty: driving also the whole lot of us, these to sweat at its tail, those to plod with the patient team, but all to march in a great chain-gang, the convicts of peace and order and law: while the happy nomad, with his woodlands, his wild cattle, his pleasing nuptialities, has long since disappeared, dropping only in his flight some store of flint-heads, a legacy of confusion. Truly, we Children of the Plough, but for yon tremendous Monitor in the sky, were in right case to forget that the Hunter is still a quantity to reckon withal. Where, then, does he hide, the Shaker of the Spear? Why, here, my brother, and here; deep in the breasts of each and all of us! And for this drop of primal quicksilver in the blood what poppy or mandragora shall purge it hence away?

Of pulpiteers and parents it is called Original Sin: a term wherewith they brand whatever frisks and butts with rude goatish horns against accepted maxims and trim theories of education. In the abstract, of course, this fitful stirring of the old yeast is no more sin than a natural craving for a seat on a high stool, for the inscription -- now horizontal, and now vertical -- of figures, is sin. But the deskmen command a temporary majority: for the short while they shall hold the cards they have the right to call the game. And so -- since we must bow to the storm -- let the one thing be labelled Sin, and the other Salvation -- for a season: ourselves forgetting never that it is all a matter of nomenclature. What we have now first to note is that this original Waft from the Garden asserts itself most vigorously in the Child. This it is that thrusts the small boy out under the naked heavens, to enact a sorry and shivering Crusoe on an islet in the duck-pond. This it is that sends the little girl footing it after the gipsy's van, oblivious of lessons, puddings, the embrace maternal, the paternal smack; hearing naught save the faint, far bugle-summons to the pre-historic little savage that thrills and answers in the tingling blood of her; seeing only a troop of dusky, dull-eyed guides along that shining highway to the dim land east o' the sun and west o' the moon: where freedom is, and you can wander and breathe, and at night tame street lamps there are none -- only the hunter's fires, and the eyes of lions, and the mysterious stars. In later years it is stifled and gagged -- buried deep, a green turf at the head of it, and on its heart a stone; but it lives, it breathes, it lurks, it will up and out when 'tis looked for least. That stockbroker, some brief

summers gone, who was missed from his wonted place one settling-day! a goodly portly man, i' faith: and had a villa and a steam launch at Surbiton: and was versed in the esoteric humours of the House. Who could have thought that the Hunter lay hid in him? Yet, after many weeks, they found him in a wild nook of Hampshire. Ragged, sun-burnt, the nocturnal haystack calling aloud from his frayed and weather-stained duds, his trousers tucked, he was tickling trout with godless native urchins; and when they would have won him to himself with honied whispers of American Rails, he answered but with babble of green fields. He is back in his wonted corner now: quite cured, apparently, and tractable. And yet -- let the sun shine too wantonly in Throgmorton Street, let an errant zephyr, quick with the warm South, fan but his cheek too wooingly on his way to the station; and will he not once more snap his chain and away? Ay, truly: and next time he will not be caught.

Deans have danced to the same wild piping, though their chapters have hushed the matter up. Even Duchesses (they say) have "come tripping doon the stair," rapt by the climbing passion from their strawberry-leaved surroundings into starlit spaces. Nay, ourselves, too -- the douce, respectable mediocrities that we are -- which of us but might recall some fearful outbreak whose details are mercifully unknown to the household that calls us breadwinner and chief? What marvel that up yonder the Hunter smiles? When he knows that every one in his ken, the tinker with the statesman, has caught his bugle blast and gone forth on its irresistible appeal!

Not that they are so easily followed as of yore, those flying echoes of the horn! Joints are stiffer, maybe; certainly the desolate suburbs creep ever farther into the retreating fields; and when you reach the windy moorland, lo! it is all staked out into building-lots. Mud is muddier now than heretofore; and ruts are ruttier. And what friendless old beast comes limping down the dreary lane? He seems sorely shrunk and shoulder-shotten; but by the something of divinity in his look, still more than by the wings despondent along his mighty sides, 'tis ever the old Pegasus -- not yet the knacker's own. "Hard times I've been having," he murmurs, as you rub his nose. "These fellows have really no seat except for a park hack. As for this laurel, we were wont to await it trembling: and in taking it we were afraid. Your English way of hunting it down with yelpings and hallooings -- well, I may be out of date, but we wouldn't have stood that sort of thing on Helicon." So he hobbles down the road. Good night, old fellow! Out of date? Well, it may be so. And alas! the blame is ours.

But for the Hunter -- there he rises -- couchant no more. Nay, flung full stretch on the blue, he blazes, he dominates, he appals! Will his turn, then, really come at last? After some Armageddon of cataclysmal ruin, all levelling, whelming the County Councillor with the Music-hall artiste, obliterating the very furrows of the Plough, shall the skin-clad nomad string his bow once more, and once more loose the whistling shaft? Wildly incredible it seems. And yet -- look up! Look up and behold him confident, erect, majestic -- there on the threshold

of the sky!