

ABOUT CHESTERTON AND BELLOC

It has been one of the less possible dreams of my life to be a painted Pagan God and live upon a ceiling. I crown myself becomingly in stars or tendrils or with electric coruscations (as the mood takes me), and wear an easy costume free from complications and appropriate to the climate of those agreeable spaces. The company about me on the clouds varies greatly with the mood of the vision, but always it is in some way, if not always a very obvious way, beautiful. One frequent presence is G.K. Chesterton, a joyous whirl of brush work, appropriately garmented and crowned. When he is there, I remark, the whole ceiling is by a sort of radiation convivial. We drink limitless old October from handsome flagons, and we argue mightily about Pride (his weak point) and the nature of Deity. A hygienic, attentive, and essentially anaesthetic Eagle checks, in the absence of exercise, any undue enlargement of our Promethean livers.... Chesterton often--but never by any chance Belloc. Belloc I admire beyond measure, but there is a sort of partisan viciousness about Belloc that bars him from my celestial dreams. He never figures, no, not even in the remotest corner, on my ceiling. And yet the divine artist, by some strange skill that my ignorance of his technique saves me from the presumption of explaining, does indicate exactly where Belloc is. A little quiver of the paint, a faint aura, about the spectacular masses of Chesterton? I am not certain. But no intelligent beholder can look up and miss the remarkable fact that Belloc exists--and that he is away, safely away, away in his heaven,

which is, of course, the Park Lane Imperialist's hell. There he presides....

But in this life I do not meet Chesterton exalted upon clouds, and there is but the mockery of that endless leisure for abstract discussion afforded by my painted entertainments. I live in an urgent and incessant world, which is at its best a wildly beautiful confusion of impressions and at its worst a dingy uproar. It crowds upon us and jostles us, we get our little interludes for thinking and talking between much rough scuffling and laying about us with our fists. And I cannot afford to be continually bickering with Chesterton and Belloc about forms of expression. There are others for whom I want to save my knuckles. One may be wasteful in peace and leisure, but economies are the soul of conflict.

In many ways we three are closely akin; we diverge not by necessity but accident, because we speak in different dialects and have divergent metaphysics. All that I can I shall persuade to my way of thinking about thought and to the use of words in my loose, expressive manner, but Belloc and Chesterton and I are too grown and set to change our languages now and learn new ones; we are on different roads, and so we must needs shout to one another across intervening abysses. These two say Socialism is a thing they do not want for men, and I say Socialism is above all what I want for men. We shall go on saying that now to the end of our days. But what we do all three want is something very alike. Our different roads are parallel. I aim at a growing collective life, a

perpetually enhanced inheritance for our race, through the fullest, freest development of the individual life. What they aim at ultimately I do not understand, but it is manifest that its immediate form is the fullest and freest development of the individual life. We all three hate equally and sympathetically the spectacle of human beings blown up with windy wealth and irresponsible power as cruelly and absurdly as boys blow up frogs; we all three detest the complex causes that dwarf and cripple lives from the moment of birth and starve and debase great masses of mankind. We want as universally as possible the jolly life, men and women warm-blooded and well-aired, acting freely and joyously, gathering life as children gather corn-cockles in corn. We all three want people to have property of a real and personal sort, to have the son, as Chesterton put it, bringing up the port his father laid down, and pride in the pears one has grown in one's own garden. And I agree with Chesterton that giving--giving oneself out of love and fellowship--is the salt of life.

But there I diverge from him, less in spirit, I think, than in the manner of his expression. There is a base because impersonal way of giving. "Standing drink," which he praises as noble, is just the thing I cannot stand, the ultimate mockery and vulgarisation of that fine act of bringing out the cherished thing saved for the heaven-sent guest. It is a mere commercial transaction, essentially of the evil of our time. Think of it! Two temporarily homeless beings agree to drink together, and they turn in and face the public supply of drink (a little vitiated by private commercial necessities) in the public-house. (It is horrible

that life should be so wholesale and heartless.) And Jones, with a sudden effusion of manner, thrusts twopence or ninepence (got God knows how) into the economic mysteries and personal delicacy of Brown. I'd as soon a man slipped sixpence down my neck. If Jones has used love and sympathy to detect a certain real thirst and need in Brown and knowledge and power in its assuaging by some specially appropriate fluid, then we have an altogether different matter; but the common business of "standing treat" and giving presents and entertainments is as proud and unspiritual as cock-crowing, as foolish and inhuman as that sorry compendium of mercantile vices, the game of poker, and I am amazed to find Chesterton commend it.

But that is a criticism by the way. Chesterton and Belloc agree with the Socialist that the present world does not give at all what they want. They agree that it fails to do so through a wild derangement of our property relations. They are in agreement with the common contemporary man (whose creed is stated, I think, not unfairly, but with the omission of certain important articles by Chesterton), that the derangements of our property relations are to be remedied by concerted action and in part by altered laws. The land and all sorts of great common interests must be, if not owned, then at least controlled, managed, checked, redistributed by the State. Our real difference is only about a little more or a little less owning. I do not see how Belloc and Chesterton can stand for anything but a strong State as against those wild monsters of property, the strong, big private owners. The State must be complex and powerful enough to prevent them. State or plutocrat there is really no

other practical alternative before the world at the present time. Either we have to let the big financial adventurers, the aggregating capitalist and his Press, in a loose, informal combination, rule the earth, either we have got to stand aside from preventive legislation and leave things to work out on their present lines, or we have to construct a collective organisation sufficiently strong for the protection of the liberties of the some-day-to-be-jolly common man. So far we go in common. If Belloc and Chesterton are not Socialists, they are at any rate not anti-Socialists. If they say they want an organised Christian State (which involves practically seven-tenths of the Socialist desire), then, in the face of our big common enemies, of adventurous capital, of alien Imperialism, base ambition, base intelligence, and common prejudice and ignorance, I do not mean to quarrel with them politically, so long as they force no quarrel on me. Their organised Christian State is nearer the organised State I want than our present plutocracy. Our ideals will fight some day, and it will be, I know, a first-rate fight, but to fight now is to let the enemy in. When we have got all we want in common, then and only then can we afford to differ. I have never believed that a Socialist Party could hope to form a Government in this country in my lifetime; I believe it less now than ever I did. I don't know if any of my Fabian colleagues entertain so remarkable a hope. But if they do not, then unless their political aim is pure cantankerousness, they must contemplate a working political combination between the Socialist members in Parliament and just that non-capitalist section of the Liberal Party for which Chesterton and Belloc speak. Perpetual opposition is a dishonourable aim in politics; and a man who mingles in

political development with no intention of taking on responsible tasks unless he gets all his particular formulae accepted is a pervert, a victim of Irish bad example, and unfit for decent democratic institutions ...

I digress again, I see, but my drift I hope is clear. Differ as we may, Belloc and Chesterton are with all Socialists in being on the same side of the great political and social cleavage that opens at the present time. We and they are with the interests of the mass of common men as against that growing organisation of great owners who have common interests directly antagonistic to those of the community and State. We Socialists are only secondarily politicians. Our primary business is not to impose upon, but to ram right into the substance of that object of Chesterton's solicitude, the circle of ideas of the common man, the idea of the State as his own, as a thing he serves and is served by. We want to add to his sense of property rather than offend it. If I had my way I would do that at the street corners and on the trams, I would take down that alien-looking and detestable inscription "L.C.C.," and put up, "This Tram, this Street, belongs to the People of London." Would Chesterton or Belloc quarrel with that? Suppose that Chesterton is right, and that there are incurable things in the mind of the common man flatly hostile to our ideals; so much of our ideals will fail. But we are doing our best by our lights, and all we can. What are Chesterton and Belloc doing? If our ideal is partly right and partly wrong, are they trying to build up a better ideal? Will they state a Utopia and how they propose it shall be managed? If they lend their weight only to such

fine old propositions as that a man wants freedom, that he has a right to do as he likes with his own, and so on, they won't help the common man much. All that fine talk, without some further exposition, goes to sustain Mr. Rockefeller's simple human love of property, and the woman and child sweating manufacturer in his fight for the inspector-free home industry. I bought on a bookstall the other day a pamphlet full of misrepresentation and bad argument against Socialism by an Australian Jew, published by the Single-Tax people apparently in a disinterested attempt to free the land from the landowner by the simple expedient of abusing anyone else who wanted to do as much but did not hold Henry George to be God and Lord; and I know Socialists who will protest with tears in their eyes against association with any human being who sings any song but the "Red Flag" and doubts whether Marx had much experience of affairs. Well, there is no reason why Chesterton and Belloc should at their level do the same sort of thing. When we talk on a ceiling or at a dinner-party with any touch of the celestial in its composition, Chesterton and I, Belloc and I, are antagonists with an undying feud, but in the fight against human selfishness and narrowness and for a finer, juster law, we are brothers--at the remotest, half-brothers.

Chesterton isn't a Socialist--agreed! But now, as between us and the Master of Elibank or Sir Hugh Bell or any other Free Trade Liberal capitalist or landlord, which side is he on? You cannot have more than one fight going on in the political arena at the same time, because only one party or group of parties can win.

And going back for a moment to that point about a Utopia, I want one from Chesterton. Purely unhelpful criticism isn't enough from a man of his size. It isn't justifiable for him to go about sitting on other people's Utopias. I appeal to his sense of fair play. I have done my best to reconcile the conception of a free and generous style of personal living with a social organisation that will save the world from the harsh predominance of dull, persistent, energetic, unscrupulous grabbers tempered only by the vulgar extravagance of their wives and sons. It isn't an adequate reply to say that nobody stood treat there, and that the simple, generous people like to beat their own wives and children on occasion in a loving and intimate manner, and that they won't endure the spirit of Mr. Sidney Webb.

ABOUT SIR THOMAS MORE

There are some writers who are chiefly interesting in themselves, and some whom chance and the agreement of men have picked out as symbols and convenient indications of some particular group or temperament of opinions. To the latter it is that Sir Thomas More belongs. An age and a type of mind have found in him and his Utopia a figurehead and a token; and pleasant and honourable as his personality and household present themselves to the modern reader, it is doubtful if they would by this