GARDINER ALFRED GEORGE

LEAVES IN THE WIND

Alfred Gardiner

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Gardiner A.

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Содержание

A. G. Gardiner
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A FELLOW TRAVELLER

I do not know which of us got into the carriage first. Indeed I did not know he was in the carriage at all for some time. It was the last train from London to a Midland town – a stopping train, an infinitely leisurely train, one of those trains which give you an understanding of eternity. It was tolerably full when it started, but as we stopped at the suburban stations the travellers alighted in ones and twos, and by the time we had left the outer ring of London behind I was alone – or, rather, I thought I was alone.

There is a pleasant sense of freedom about being alone in a carriage that is jolting noisily through the night. It is liberty and unrestraint in a very agreeable form. You can do anything you like. You can talk to yourself as loud as you please and no one will hear you. You can have that argument out with Jones and roll him triumphantly in the dust without fear of a counter-stroke. You can stand on your head and no one will see you. You can sing, or dance a two-step, or practise a golf stroke, or play marbles on the floor without let or hindrance. You can open the window or shut it without provoking a protest. You can open both windows or shut both. Indeed, you can go on opening them and shutting them as a sort of festival of freedom. You can have any corner you choose and try all of them in turn. You can lie at full length on the cushions and enjoy the luxury of breaking the regulations and possibly the heart of D.O.R.A. herself. Only D.O.R.A. will not know that her heart is broken. You have escaped even D.O.R.A.

On this night I did not do any of these things. They did not happen to occur to me. What I did was much more ordinary. When the last of my fellow-passengers had gone I put down my paper, stretched my arms and my legs, stood up and looked out of the window on the calm summer night through which I was journeying, noting the pale reminiscence of day that still lingered in the northern sky; crossed the carriage and looked out of the other window; lit a cigarette, sat down and began to read again. It was then that I became aware of my fellow traveller. He came and sat on my nose… He was one of those wingy, nippy, intrepid insects that we call, vaguely, mosquitoes. I flicked him off my nose, and he made a tour of the compartment, investigated its three dimensions, visited each window, fluttered round the light, decided that there was nothing so interesting as that large animal in the corner, came and had a look at my neck.

I flicked him off again. He skipped away, took another jaunt round the compartment, returned, and seated himself impudently on the back of my hand. It is enough, I said; magnanimity has its limits. Twice you have been warned that I am someone in particular, that my august person resents the tickling impertinences of strangers. I assume the black cap. I condemn you to death. Justice demands it, and the court awards it. The counts against you are many. You are a vagrant; you are a public nuisance; you are travelling without a ticket; you have no meat coupon. For these and many other misdemeanours you are about to die. I struck a swift, lethal blow with my right hand. He dodged the attack with an insolent ease that humiliated me. My personal vanity was aroused. I lunged at him with my hand, with my paper; I jumped on the seat and pursued him round the lamp; I adopted tactics of feline cunning, waiting till he had alighted, approaching with a horrible stealthiness, striking with a sudden and terrible swiftness.

It was all in vain. He played with me, openly and ostentatiously, like a skilful matador finessing round an infuriated bull. It was obvious that he was enjoying himself, that it was for this that he had disturbed my repose. He wanted a little sport, and what sport like being chased by this huge, lumbering windmill of a creature, who tasted so good and seemed so helpless and so stupid? I began to enter

into the spirit of the fellow. He was no longer a mere insect. He was developing into a personality, an intelligence that challenged the possession of this compartment with me on equal terms. I felt my heart warming towards him and the sense of superiority fading. How could I feel superior to a creature who was so manifestly my master in the only competition in which we had ever engaged? Why not be magnanimous again? Magnanimity and mercy were the noblest attributes of man. In the exercise of these high qualities I could recover my prestige. At present I was a ridiculous figure, a thing for laughter and derision. By being merciful I could reassert the moral dignity of man and go back to my corner with honour. I withdraw the sentence of death, I said, returning to my seat. I cannot kill you, but I can reprieve you. I do it.

I took up my paper and he came and sat on it. Foolish fellow, I said, you have delivered yourself into my hands. I have but to give this respectable weekly organ of opinion a smack on both covers and you are a corpse, neatly sandwiched between an article on "Peace Traps" and another on "The Modesty of Mr. Hughes." But I shall not do it. I have reprieved you, and I will satisfy you that when this large animal says a thing he means it. Moreover, I no longer desire to kill you. Through knowing you better I have come to feel – shall I say? – a sort of affection for you. I fancy that St. Francis would have called you "little brother." I cannot go so far as that in Christian charity and civility. But I recognise a more distant relationship. Fortune has made us fellow travellers on this summer night. I have interested you and you have entertained me. The obligation is mutual and it is founded on the fundamental fact that we are fellow mortals. The miracle of life is ours in common and its mystery too. I suppose you don't know anything about your journey. I'm not sure that I know much about mine. We are really, when you come to think of it, a good deal alike – just apparitions that are and then are not, coming out of the night into the lighted carriage, fluttering about the lamp for a while and going out into the night again. Perhaps…

"Going on to-night, sir?" said a voice at the window. It was a friendly porter giving me a hint that this was my station. I thanked him and said I must have been dozing. And seizing my hat and stick I went out into the cool summer night. As I closed the door of the compartment I saw my fellow traveller fluttering round the lamp…

ON A FAMOUS SERMON

I see that Queen Alexandra has made a further distribution among charities of the profits from the sale of the late Canon Fleming's sermon, "On Recognition in Eternity." The sermon was preached on the occasion of the death of the Duke of Clarence, and judging from its popularity I have no doubt it is a good sermon. But I am tempted to write on the subject by a mischievous thought suggested by the authorship of this famous sermon. There is no idea which makes so universal an appeal to the deepest instincts of humanity as the idea that when we awake from the dream of life we shall pass into the companionship of those who have shared and lightened our pilgrimage here. The intellect may dismiss the idea as unscientific, but, as Newman says, the finite can tell us nothing about the infinite Creator, and the Quaker poet's serene assurance —

> Yet love will hope and faith will trust
> (Since He Who knows our needs is just)
> That somehow, somewhere, meet we must —

defies all the buffetings of reason.

Even Shelley, for all his aggressive Atheism, could not, as Francis Thompson points out, escape the instinct of personal immortality. In his glorious elegy on Keats he implicitly assumes the personal immortality which the poem explicitly denies, as when, to greet the dead youth,

> The inheritors of unfulfilled renown
> Rose from their thrones, built beyond mortal thought
> Far in the unapparent.

And it is on the same note that the poem reaches its sublime and prophetic close: —

> I am borne darkly, fearfully afar;
> Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of heaven,
> The soul of Adonais like a star
> Beacons from the abode where the eternal are.

The ink of that immortal strain was hardly dry upon the page when the vision was fulfilled, for only a few months elapsed between the death of Keats and the drowning of Shelley, and in the interval the great monody had been written.

I refuse, for the sake of the feelings of Mr. J. M. Robertson and Mr. Foote and the other stern old dogmatists of Rationalism, to deny myself the pleasure of imagining the meeting of Shelley and Keats in the Elysian Fields. If Shelley, "borne darkly, fearfully afar" beyond the confines of reason, could feel that grand assurance, why should I, who dislike the dogmatists of Rationalism as much as the dogmatists of Orthodoxy, deny myself that beautiful solace? I like to think of those passionate spirits in eternal comradeship, pausing in their eager talk to salute deep-browed Homer as, perchance, he passes in grave discourse with the "mighty-mouthed inventor of harmonies." I like to think of Dante meeting Beatrice by some crystal stream, of Lincoln wandering side by side with Lee, of poor Mary Lamb reunited to the mother she loved and whom she slew in one of her fits of insanity, and of an innumerable host of humbler recognitions no less sweet.

But Canon Fleming's name reminds me that all the recognitions will not be agreeable. I cannot imagine that eminent Court preacher showing any eagerness to recognise or be recognised by that other eminent preacher, Dr. Talmage. For it was Talmage's sermon on the wickedness of great

cities that Fleming so unblushingly preached *and published* as his own, simply altering the names of American cities to those of European cities. Some cruel editor printed the two sermons side by side, I think in the old *St. James's Gazette*, and the poor Canon's excuse only made matters rather worse. The incident did not prevent him securing preferment, and his sermon on "Recognition in Eternity" still goes on selling. But he will not be comfortable when he sees Talmage coming his way across the Elysian Fields. I do not think he will offer him the very unconvincing explanation he offered to the British public. He will make a frank confession and Talmage will no doubt give him absolution. There will be many such awkward meetings. With what emotions of shame, for example, will Charles I. see Strafford approaching. "Not a hair of your head shall be touched by Parliament" was his promise to that instrument of his despotic rule, but when Parliament demanded the head itself he endorsed the verdict that sent Strafford to the scaffold. And I can imagine there will be a little coldness between Cromwell and Charles when they pass, though in the larger understanding of that world Charles, I fancy, will see that he was quite impossible, and that he left the grim old Puritan no other way.

It is this thought of the larger understanding that will come when we have put off the coarse vesture of things that makes this speculation reasonable. That admirable woman, Mrs. Berry, in "Richard Feverel," had the recognitions of eternity in her mind when she declared that widows ought not to remarry. "And to think," she said, "o' two (husbands) claimin' o' me then, it makes me hot all over." Mrs. Berry's mistake was in thinking of Elysium in the terms of earth. It is precisely because we shall have escaped from the encumbering flesh and all the bewilderments of this clumsy world that we cannot merely tolerate the idea, but can find in it a promised explanation of the inexplicable.

It is the same mistake that I find in Mr. Belloc, who, I see from yesterday's paper, has been denouncing the "tomfoolery" of spiritualism, and describing the miracles of Lourdes as "a special providential act designed to convert, change, upset, and disintegrate the materialism of the nineteenth century." I want to see the materialism of the nineteenth century converted, changed, upset and disintegrated, as much as Mr. Belloc does, but I have as little regard for the instrument he trusts in as for the "tomfoolery" of spiritualism. And when he goes on to denounce a Miss Posthlethwaite, a Catholic spiritualist, for having declared that in the next world she found people of all religions and did not find that Mohammedans suffered more than others, I feel that he is as materialistic as Mrs. Berry. He sees heaven in the terms of the troublesome little sectarianisms of the earth, with an ascendancy party in possession, and no non-alcoholic Puritans, Jews, or Mohammedans visible to his august eye. They will all be in another place, and very uncomfortable indeed. He really has not advanced beyond that infantile partisanship satirised, I think, by Swift: —

> We are God's chosen few,
> All others will be damned.
> There is no place in heaven for you,
> We can't have heaven crammed.

No, no, Mr. Belloc. The judgments of eternity will not be so vulgar as this, nor the companionship so painfully exclusive. You will not walk the infinite meadows of heaven alone with the sect you adorned on earth. You will find all sorts of people there regardless of the quaint little creeds they professed in the elementary school of life. I am sure you will find Mrs. Berry there, for that simple woman had the root of the true gospel in her. "I think it's al'ays the plan in a dielemma," she said, "to pray God and walk forward." I think it is possible that in the larger atmosphere you will discover that she was a wiser pupil in the elementary school than you were.

ON POCKETS AND THINGS

I suppose most men felt, as I felt, the reasonableness of Mr. Justice Bray's remarks the other day on the preference of women for bags instead of pockets. A case was before him in which a woman had gone into a shop, had put down her satchel containing her money and valuables, turned to pick it up a little later, found it had been stolen, and thereupon brought an action against the owners of the shop for the recovery of her losses. The jury were unsympathetic, found that in the circumstances the woman was responsible, and gave a verdict against her.

Of course the jury were men, all of them prejudiced on this subject of pockets. At a guess I should say that there were not fewer than 150 pockets in that jury-box, *and not one satchel*. You, madam, may retort that this is only another instance of the scandal of this man-ridden world. Why were there no women in that jury-box? Why are all the decisions of the courts, from the High Court to the coroner's court, left to the judgment of men? Madam, I share your indignation. I would "comb-out" the jury-box. I would send half the jurymen, if not into the trenches, at least to hoe turnips, and fill their places with a row of women. Women are just as capable as men of forming an opinion about facts, they have at least as much time to spare, and their point of view is as essential to justice. What can there be more ridiculous, for example, than a jury of men sitting for a whole day to decide the question of the cut of a gown without a single woman's expert opinion to guide them, or more unjust than to leave an issue between a man and a woman entirely in the hands of men? Yes, certainly madam, I am with you on the general question.

But when we come to the subject of pockets, I am bound to confess that I am with the jury. If I had been on that jury I should have voted with fervour for making the woman responsible for her own loss. If it were possible for women to put their satchels down on counters, or the seats of buses, or any odd place they thought of, and then to make some innocent person responsible because they were stolen, there would be no security for anybody. It would be a travesty of justice – a premium upon recklessness and even fraud. Moreover, people who won't wear pockets deserve to be punished. They ask for trouble and ought not to complain when they get it.

I have never been able to fathom the obduracy of women in this matter of pockets. It is not the only reflection upon their common-sense which is implicit in their dress. If we were to pass judgment on the relative intelligence of the sexes by their codes of costume, sanity would pronounce overwhelmingly in favour of men. Imagine a man who buttoned his coat and waistcoat down the back, so that he was dependent on someone else to help dress him in the morning and unfasten him at night, or who relied on such abominations as hooks-and-eyes scattered over unattainable places, in order to keep his garments in position. You cannot imagine such a man. Yet women submit to these incredible tyrannies of fashion without a murmur, and talk about them as though it was the hand of fate upon them. I have a good deal of sympathy with the view of a friend of mine who says that no woman ought to have a vote until she has won the enfranchisement of her own buttons.

Or take high-heeled boots. Is there any sight more ludicrous than the spectacle of a woman stumbling along on a pair of high heels, flung out of the perpendicular and painfully struggling to preserve her equilibrium, condemned to take finicking little steps lest she should topple over, all the grace and freedom of movement lost in an ugly acrobatic feat? And when the feet turn in, and the high heels turn over – heavens! I confess I never see high heels without looking for a mindless face, and I rarely look in vain.

But the puzzle about the pockets is that quite sensible women go about in a pocketless condition. I turned to Jane just now – she was sitting by the fire knitting – and asked how many pockets she had when she was fully dressed. "None," she said. "Pockets haven't been worn for years and years, but now they are coming in – in an ornamental way." "In an ornamental way?" said I. "Won't they carry anything?" "Well, you can trust a handkerchief to them." "Not a purse?" "Good gracious, no. It would

simply ask to be stolen, and if it wasn't stolen in five minutes it would fall out in ten." The case was stranger than I had thought. Not to have pockets was bad enough; but to have sham pockets! Think of it! We have been at war for three and a half years, and women are now beginning to wear pockets "in an ornamental way," not for use but as a pretty fal-lal, much as they might put on another row of useless buttons to button nothing. And what is the result? Jane (I have full permission to mention her in order to give actuality to this moral discourse) spends hours looking for her glasses, for her keys, for the letter that came this morning, for her purse, for her bag, for all that is hers. And we, the devoted members of the family, spend hours in looking for them too, exploring dark corners, probing the interstices of sofas and chairs, rummaging the dishevelled drawers anew, discovering the thing that disappeared so mysteriously last week or last month and that we no longer want, but rarely the article that is the very hub of the immediate wheel of things.

Now, I am different. I am pockets all over. I am simply agape with pockets. I am like a pillar-box walking about, waiting for the postman to come and collect things. All told, I carry sixteen pockets – none of them ornamental, every one as practical as a time-table – pockets for letters, for watch, for keys, for handkerchiefs, for tickets, for spectacles (two pairs, long and short distance), for loose money, for note-wallet, for diary and pocket-book – why, bless me, you can hardly mention a thing I haven't a pocket for. And I would not do without one of them, madam – not one. Do I ever lose things? Of course I lose things. I lose them in my pockets. You can't possibly have as many pockets as I have got without losing things in them. But then you have them all the time.

That is the splendid thing about losing your property in your own pockets. It always turns up in the end, and that lady's satchel left on the counter will never turn up. And think of the surprises you get when rummaging in your pockets – the letters you haven't answered, the bills you haven't paid, the odd money that has somehow got into the wrong pocket. When I have nothing else to do I just search my pockets – all my pockets, those in the brown suit, and the grey suit, and the serge suit, and my "Sunday best" – there must be fifty pockets in all, and every one of them full of something, of ghosts of engagements I haven't kept, and duties I haven't performed, and friends I have neglected, of pipes that I have mourned as lost, and half packets of cigarettes that by some miracle I have not smoked, and all the litter of a casual and disorderly life. I would not part with these secrecies for all the satchels in Oxford Street. I am my own book of mysteries. I bulge with mysteries. I can surprise myself at any moment I like by simply exploring my pockets. If I avoid exploring them I know I am not very well. I know I am not in a condition to face the things that I might find there. I just leave them there till I am stronger – not lost, madam, as they would be in your satchel, but just forgotten, comfortably forgotten. Why should one always be disturbing the sleeping dogs in the kennels of one's pockets? Why not let them sleep? Are there not enough troubles in life that one must go seeking them in one's own pockets? And I have a precedent, look you. Did not Napoleon say that if you did not look at your letters for a fortnight you generally found that they had answered themselves?

And may I not in this connection recall the practice of Sir Andrew Clarke, the physician of Mr. Gladstone, as recorded in the reminiscences of Mr. Henry Holiday? At dinner one night Sir Andrew was observed to be drinking champagne, and was asked why he allowed himself an indulgence which he so rigorously denied to his patients. "Yes," he said, "but you do not understand my case. When I go from here I shall find a pile of fifty or sixty letters awaiting answers." "But will champagne help you to answer them?" asked the other. "Not at all," said Sir Andrew, "not at all; but it puts you in the frame of mind in which you don't care a damn whether they are answered or not." I do not offer this story for the imitation of youth, but for the solace of the people like myself who have long reached the years of discretion without becoming discreet, and who like to feel that their weaknesses have been shared by the eminent and the wise.

And, to conclude, the wisdom of the pocket habit is not to be judged by its abuse, but by its obvious convenience and safety. I trust that some energetic woman will be moved to inaugurate a crusade for the redemption of her sex from its pocketless condition. A Society for the Propagation of

Pockets Among Women (S.P.P.A.W.) is a real need of the time. It should be a part of the great work of after-the-war reconstruction. It should organise opinion, distribute leaflets and hold meetings, with the Mayor in the chair and experts, rich in pockets and the lore of the subject, to light the fire of rebellion throughout the land. Women have won the vote from the tyrant man. Let them win their pockets from the tyrant dressmaker.

ON A COUNTRY PLATFORM

The fields lie cheek-by-jowl with the station, and a group of high elms, in which dwells a colony of rooks, throws its ample shade over the "down" platform.

From the cornfield that marches side by side with the station there comes the cheerful music of the reaper and the sound of the voices of the harvesters, old men, some women and more children – for half of the field has been reaped and is being gathered and gleaned. They are so near that the engine-driver of the "local" train exchanges gossip with them in the intervals of oiling his engine. They talk of the crops and the bad weather there has been and the change that has come with September, and the news of boys who are fighting or have fallen…

A dozen youths march, two by two, on to the "up" platform. They are in civilian dress, but behind them walks a sergeant who ejaculates "left – left – left" like the flick of a whip. They are the latest trickle from this countryside to the great whirlpool, most of them mere boys. They have the self-consciousness of obscure country youths who have suddenly been thrust into the public eye and are aware that all glances are turned critically upon their awkward movements. They shamble along with a grotesque caricature of a dare-devil swagger, and laugh loud and vacantly to show how much they are at ease with themselves and the world. It is hollow gaiety and suggests the animation of a trout with a hook in its throat.

The booking-clerk, lounging at the door of the booking-office, passes a half-contemptuous remark upon them to a companion.

"Wait till they come for you, Jimmy," says the other. "You won't find it so funny then."

Jimmy's face falls at the reminder, for he is nearly ripe for the great harvest, and the reaper will soon come his way…

A few people drift in from outside as the time for the departure of the London train approaches. Among them, a young woman, hot and flushed and carrying a country basket, is greeted by an acquaintance with surprise.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to London – just as I am – a telegram from Tom – he's got leave from the front – isn't it glorious – and all so unexpected – couldn't change, or even drop my basket – the messenger met me in the street – hadn't a moment to lose to catch the train." …

A little group brushes by her with far other emotions. A stalwart soldier, a bronzed, good-looking fellow, with three stripes, who has evidently seen much service, is returning from leave. His wife, neatly dressed and with head down, wheels a perambulator beside him. Inside the perambulator is a child of three years or so. Two other children, of perhaps five and six, walk with the soldier, each clasping a hand. The little procession passes in silence to the end of the platform, full of that misery which seeks to be alone with itself…

Over the wooden bridge that connects the two platforms comes a solitary soldier, laden with his belongings. He has come in from some other village by the local train. He flings himself down on the form and stares gloomily at the elms and the cornfield and the sunshine. A comfortable-looking, elderly man, who has a copy of the *London Corn Circular* in his hand, turns to him with that amiable desire to be friendly which elderly people have in the presence of soldiers.

"And how long have you been out at the war, sonny?" he asks, much as he might ask how long holiday he had had.

"I'm sick of the bloody war," says the soldier, without even turning his head.

The comfortable, elderly man collapses into silence and the *Corn Circular*…

A young officer who has been driven up in a dog-cart comes on to the platform accompanied by a dog with tongue lolling from its mouth and with the large, brown, affectionate eyes of the Airedale.

The train thunders in, and the officer opens a carriage door. The dog tries to enter with his master.

"No, no, old chap," says the latter, gently patting him and pulling him back. "Go home. They don't want you where I'm going."

The dog stands for a moment on the platform, panting and gazing at his master as if hoping that he will relent. Then he turns and trots away, throwing occasional glances back on the off-chance of a whistle of recall…

The moment has come for the separation of the little family at the end of the platform. The soldier leans from the carriage window and his wife clings about his neck. The two children stand by the perambulator. They are brave little girls and remember that they have not to cry. The train begins to move and the woman unclasps herself, leaving her husband at the window, smiling his hardest and throwing kisses to the children. The train gathers speed and takes a curve and the soldier has vanished. The mother turns to the perambulator and seeks to hide her face as she hurries with her little charges along the platform and through the gate. The two little girls stifle their sobs in their aprons, but the child in the carriage knows nothing of public behaviour. He knows in that dim way that is the affliction of childhood that something terrible is happening, and as the forlorn little group hurries by to escape into the lane hard by where grief can have its fill he rends the air with his sobs and cries of "Poor dada, poor dada!"

Poor little mite, he is beginning his apprenticeship to this rough, insane world betimes…

And now the platform is empty, and the only sound of life is the whirr of the reaping machine and the voices from the harvest field. Through the meadow that leads to the village the dog is slowly trotting home, still casting occasional glances backwards on the chance…

ON A DISTANT VIEW OF A PIG

Yes, I would certainly keep a pig. The idea came to me while I was digging. I find that there is no occupation that stimulates thought more than digging if you choose your soil well. Digging in the London clay does not stimulate thought; it deadens thought. It is good exercise for the body, but it is no exercise for the mind. You can't play with your fancies as you plunge your spade into this stiff and stubborn medium. But in the light, porous soil of my garden on the chalk hills digging goes with a swing and a rhythm that set the thoughts singing like the birds. I feel I could win battles when I'm digging, or write plays or lyrics that would stun the world, or make speeches that would stir a post to action. Ideas seem as plentiful as blackberries in the autumn, and if only I could put down the spade and capture them red-hot I feel that I could make *The Star* simply blaze with glory.

It was in one of these prolific moments that I thought of the pig. Like all great ideas there was something inevitable about it. The calculations of Le Verrier and Adams proved the existence of Neptune before that orb was discovered. They knew it was there before they found it. My pig was born without my knowledge. In the furnace of my mind he took shape merely by the friction of facts. He was a sort of pig by divine right. It happened thus. In the midst of my digging Jim Squire, passing up the lane, had paused on the other side of the hedge to discuss last night's frost. I straightened my back for a talk, and naturally we talked about potatoes. If you want to get the best out of Jim Squire you must touch him on potatoes. There are some people who find Jim an unresponsive and suspicious yokel. That is because they do not know how to draw him out. Mention potatoes, or carrots, or the best way of dealing with slugs, or the right manure for a hot-bed, or any sensible subject like these, and he simply flows with wisdom and urbanity.

He observed that I should have a tidy few potatoes, what with the garden I was digging, and the piece I'd turned over in the orchard, and that there bit o' waste land on the hillside which he *had* heard as I was getting Mestur Wistock to plough up for me. Yes, there'd be a niceish lot. And he *did* hear I was going to set King Edwards and Arran Chiefs. Rare and fine potatoes they were too. He had some King Edwards last year – turned out wonderful, they did. One root he pulled up weighed 12 lb. Yes, Miss Mary weighed 'em for him in the scale at the farm – just for a hobby like as you might say. It was like this. He'd seen a bit in the paper about a man as had 8 lb. on a root, and he (Jim) said to himself, "This root beats that by a long chalk *I* know." And Miss Mary come by and she said she'd weigh 'em. And she did. And it was 12 lb. full, she said. If anything, she said, 'twas a shade over. *She* said as they'd have took a prize anywhere – that's what she said… Well, you couldn't have too many potatoes these days. Wonderful good food they were, for man *and* pig…

As he went on up the lane my spade took up that word like a refrain. At every rhythmic stroke it seemed to cry "pig" with increasing vehemence.

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies,
> When a new planet swims into his ken.

A pig? Why not? – and I straightened my back again. I felt that something prodigious was taking shape. My eye wandered across the orchard. There were the hives standing in a row – three of them, to be increased to twelve as fast as the expert, who has set up her carpenter's shop in the barn, can get the parts to put together. And beyond the hives three sheds – one for poultry, one for the hot-bed for mushrooms, the third – why, the very thing… Concrete the floor and it would be a very palace for a pig.

I took a turn up the garden to look this thing squarely in the face, and at the gate I saw the farmer's wife coming down the lane. We stopped, and she talked about her cows and about an order she had got from the Government to plough up more pasture, and then – as if echoing the very thought

that was drumming in my head – about the litter of pigs she was expecting and of her wish to get the cottagers to keep pigs. Why, this was a very conspiracy of circumstance, thought I. It seemed as though man and events alike were engaged in a plot to make me keep a pig.

With an air of idle curiosity I encouraged the farmer's wife to talk on the thrilling theme, and she responded with enthusiasm. The pig, I found, was a grossly maligned animal. It had lain uncomplainingly under imputations that were foul slanders on its innocent and lovable character. Yes, lovable. She had had pigs who were as affectionate as any dog – pigs that followed her about in sheer friendliness. And as for the charge of filthiness, who was to blame? We gave them dirty styes and then called them dirty pigs. But the pig was a clean animal, loved cleanliness, thrived on cleanliness. It was man the dirty who kept the pig foul and then called him unclean. And what a profitable animal. She had had a sow which had produced 108 pigs and 102 of them came to maturity. What an example to Shoreditch, I said. Perhaps they don't give them clean styes in Shoreditch, she said. No, I replied, they give them dirty styes…

I went indoors, suffused with the vision of the transfigured pig, the affectionate, cleanly, intelligent pig, and took up a paper, and the first thing my eye encountered was an article on "The Cottager's Pig." I read it with the frenzy of a new religion and rose filled to the brim with lore about the animal to whose existence (except in the shape of bacon) I had been indifferent so long. And now, fully seized with the idea, it seemed that the world talked of nothing but pig. It was only that my ears were unstopped and my eyes unsealed by an awakened curiosity; but it seemed to me that the pig had suddenly been born into the universe, and that the air was filled with the rumour of his coming. I encountered the subject at every turn. In the *Times* I read a touching lament over the disappearance of the little black pig. Elsewhere I saw a facsimile letter from Lord Rhondda, in which he declared his loyalty to the pig and denied that he had ever spoken evil of him.

It was a patriotic duty to keep a pig. He was an ally in the war. I saw the whole German General Staff turning pale at his name, as Mazarin was said to turn pale at the name of Cromwell. Arriving in town I met the eminent politician Mr. R – and he began to tell me how he had started all his cottagers in the North growing pig. By nightfall I could have held my own without shame or discredit in any company of pig dealers, and in my dreams I saw the great globe itself resting on the back, not of an elephant, but of a pig with a beautiful curly tail.

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Later: I have ordered the pig.

IN DEFENCE OF IGNORANCE

A young man wrote to me the other day lamenting his ignorance and requesting me to tell him what books to read and what to do in order to become learned and wise. I sent him a civil answer and such advice as occurred to me. But I confess that the more I thought of the matter the less assured I felt of my competence for the task. I ceased to be flattered by the implied tribute to my omniscience, and felt rather like a person who gives up a third-class ticket after he has ridden in a first-class carriage might feel. I surveyed my title to this reputation for learning, and was shocked at the poverty of my estate. As I contrasted the mountain of things I didn't know with the molehill of things I did know, my self-esteem sank to zero. Why, my dear young sir, thought I, I cannot pay twopence in the pound. I am nothing but the possessor of a wide-spread ignorance. Why should you come to me for a loan?

I begin with myself – this body of me that is carried about on a pair of cunningly-devised stilts and waves a couple of branches with five flexible twigs at the end of each, and is surmounted by a large round knob with wonderful little orifices, and glittering jewels, and a sort of mat for a covering, and which utters strange noises and speaks and sings and laughs and cries. Bless me, said I, what do I know about it? I am a mere bundle of mysteries in coat and breeches. I couldn't tell you where my epiglottis is or what it does without looking in a dictionary. I have been told, but I always forget. I am little better than the boy in the class. "Where is the diaphragm?" asked the teacher. "Please sir, in North Staffordshire." said the boy. I may laugh at the boy, but any young medical student would laugh just as much at me if I told him honestly what I do not know about the diaphragm. And when it comes to the ultimate mysteries of this aggregation of atoms which we call the human body the medical student and, indeed, the whole Medical Faculty would be found to be nearly as ignorant as the boy was about the diaphragm.

From myself I pass to all the phenomena of life, and wherever I turn I find myself exploring what Carlyle calls the "great, deep sea of Nescience on which we float like exhalations that are and then are not." I see Orion striding across the southern heavens, and feel the wonder and the majesty of that stupendous spectacle, but if I ask myself what I know about it I have no answer. And even the knowledge of the most learned astronomer only touches the fringe of the immensity. What is beyond – beyond – beyond? His mind is balked, as mine is, almost at the threshold of the mighty paradox of a universe which we can conceive neither as finite nor as infinite, which is unthinkable as having limits and unthinkable as having no limits. As the flowers come on in summer I always learn their names, but I know that I shall have to learn them again next year. And as to the mystery of their being, by what miracle they grow and transmute the secretions of the earth and air into life and beauty – why, my dear young sir, I am no more communicative than the needy knife-grinder. "Story? God bless you, I have none to tell, sir."

I cannot put my hand to anything outside my little routine without finding myself meddling with things I don't understand. I was digging in the garden just now and came upon a patch of ground with roots deep down. Some villainous pest, said I, some enemy of my carrots and potatoes. Have at them! I felt like a knight charging to the rescue of innocence. I plunged the fork deeper and deeper and tore at the roots, and grew breathless and perspiring. Even now I ache with the agonies of that titanic combat. And the more I fought the more infinite became the ramifications of those roots. And so I called for the expert advice of the young person who was giving some candy to her bees in the orchard. She came, took a glance into the depths, and said: "Yes, you are pulling up that tree." And she pointed to an ivy-grown tree in the hedge a dozen yards away. Did I feel foolish, young sir? Of course I felt foolish, but not more foolish than I have felt on a thousand other occasions. And you ask me for advice.

I recall one among many of these occasions for my chastening. When I was young I was being driven one day through a woodland country by an old fellow who kept an inn and let out a pony and

chaise for hire. As we went along I made some remark about a tree by the wayside and he spoke of it as a poplar. "Not a poplar," said I with the easy assurance of youth, and I described to him for his information the characters of what I conceived to be the poplar. "Ah," he said "you are thinking of the Lombardy poplar. That tree is the Egyptian poplar." And then he went on to tell me of a score of other poplars – their appearance, their habits, and their origins – quite kindly and without any knowledge of the withering blight that had fallen upon my cocksure ignorance. I found that he had spent his life in tree culture and had been forester to a Scotch duke. And I had explained to him what a poplar was like! But I think he did me good, and I often recall him to mind when I feel disposed to give other people information that they possibly do not need.

And the books I haven't read, and the sciences I don't know, and the languages I don't speak, and the things I can't do – young man, if you knew all this you would be amazed. But it does not make me unhappy. On the contrary I find myself growing cheerful in the contemplation of these vast undeveloped estates. I feel like a fellow who has inherited a continent and, so far, has only had time to cultivate a tiny corner of the inheritance. The rest I just wander through like a boy in wonderland. Some day I will know about all these things. I will develop all these immensities. I will search out all these mysteries. In my heart I know I shall do nothing of the sort. I know that when the curtain rings down I shall be digging the same tiny plot. But it is pleasant to dream of future conquests that you won't make.

And, after all, aren't we all allotment holders of the mind, cultivating our own little patch and surrounded by the wonderland of the unknown? Even the most learned of us is ignorant when his knowledge is measured by the infinite sum of things. And the riches of knowledge themselves are much more widely diffused than we are apt to think. There are few people who are not better informed about something than we are, who have not gathered their own peculiar sheaf of wisdom or knowledge in this vast harvest field of experience. That is at once a comfortable and a humbling thought. It checks a too soaring vanity on the one hand and a too tragic abasement on the other. The fund of knowledge is a collective sum. No one has all the items, nor a fraction of the items, and there are few of us so poor as not to have some. If I were to walk out into the street now I fancy I should not meet a soul, man or woman, who could not fill in some blank of my mind. And I think – for I must not let humility go too far – I think I could fill some blank in theirs. Our carrying capacity varies infinitely, but we all carry something, and it differs from the store of any one else on earth. And, moreover, the mere knowledge of things is not necessary to their enjoyment, nor necessary even to wisdom. There are things that every ploughboy knows to-day which were hidden from Plato and Cæsar and Dante, but the ploughboy is not wiser than they. Sir Thomas Browne, in his book on "Vulgar Errors," declared that the idea that the earth went round the sun was too foolish to be controverted. I know better, but that doesn't make me a wiser man than Browne. Wisdom does not depend on these things. I suppose that, on the whole, Lincoln was the wisest and most fundamentally sane man who ever took a great part in the affairs of this planet. Yet compared with the average undergraduate he was utterly unlearned.

Do not, my young friend, suppose I am decrying your eagerness to know. Learn all you can, my boy, about this wonderful caravan on which we make our annual tour round the sun, and on which we quarrel and fight with such crazy ferocity as we go. But at the end of all your learning you will be astonished at how little you know, and will rejoice that the pleasure of living is in healthy feeling rather than in the accumulation of facts. There was a good deal of truth in that saying of Savonarola that "a little old woman who kept the faith knew more than Plato or Aristotle."

ON A SHINY NIGHT

The pleasantest hour of my day is the hour about midnight. It is then that I leave the throbbing heart of Fleet Street behind me, jump on to the last bus bound for a distant suburb, and commandeer the back corner seat. If the back seat is not vacant I sit as near as I can and watch the enemy who possesses it with a vigilant eye. When he rises I pounce on the quarry like a kestrel on its prey. I love the back seat, not only because it is the most comfortable, but also because it gives you the sense of solitude in the midst of a crowd, which is one of the most enjoyable sensations I know. To see, and not be seen, to watch the human comedy unobserved, save by the friendly stars who look down very searchingly but never blab, to have the advantages of both solitude and society in one breath, as it were – this is my idea of enjoyment.

But most of all I love the back seat on such a night as last night, when the crescent moon is sailing high in a cloudless sky and making all the earth a wonder of romance. The garish day is of the earth, "the huge and thoughtful night" when no moon is seen and the constellations blaze in unimaginable space is of the eternal; but here in this magic glamour of the moon where night and day are wedded is the realm of romance. You may wander all day in the beech woods and never catch a glimpse of Tristan and Iseult coming down the glades or hear an echo of Robin Hood's horn; but walk in the beech woods by moonlight and every shadow will have its mystery and will talk to you of the legends of long ago.

That is why Sir Walter Scott had such a passion for "Cumnor Hall." "After the labours of the day were over," said Irving, "we often walked in the meadows, especially in the moonlight nights; and he seemed never weary of repeating the first stanza:

The dews of summer night did fall —
  The moon, sweet regent of the sky,
Silvered the walls of Cumnor Hall,
  And many an oak that stood thereby."

There you have the key to all the world of Sir Walter. He was the King of the Moonlighters. He was a man who would have been my most dreaded rival on the midnight bus. He would have wanted the back seat, I know, and there he would have sat and chanted "Cumnor Hall" to himself and watched the moonlight touching the suburban streets to poetry and turning every suburban garden into a twilight mystery.

There are, of course, quite prosaic and even wicked people who love "a shiny night." There is, for example, the gentleman from "famous Lincolnshire" whose refrain is:

Oh, 'tis my delight
On a shiny night,
In the season of the year.

I love his song because it is about the moonlight, and I am not sure that I am much outraged by the fact that he liked the shiny night because he was a poacher. I never could affect any indignation about poachers. I suspect that I rather like them. Anyhow, there is no stanza of that jolly song which I sing with more heartiness than:

Success to every gentleman that lives in Lincolnshire,
Success to every poacher that wants to sell a hare.
Bad luck to every gamekeeper that will not sell his deer.

Oh, 'tis my delight, etc.

And there was Dick Turpin. He, too, loved the moonlight for very practical reasons. He loved it not because it silvered the oak, but because of that deep shadow of the oak in which he could stand with Black Bess and await the coming of his victim.

And it is that shadow which is the real secret of the magic of moonlight. The shadows of the day have beauty but no secrecy. The sunlight is too strong to be wholly or even very materially denied. Even its shadows are luminous and full of colour, and the contrast between light and shade is not the contrast between the visible and the invisible, between the light and the dark: it is only a contrast between degrees of brightness. Everything is bright, but some things are more bright than others. But in the moonlight the world is etched in black and white. The shadows are flat and unrevealing. They have none of the colour values produced by the reflected lights in the shadows of the day. They are as secret as the grave; distinct personalities, sharply figured against the encompassing light, not mere passages of colour tuned to a lower key. And the quality of the encompassing light itself emphasises the contrast. The moon does not bring out the colour of things, but touches them with a glacial pallor:

… Strange she is, and secret.
Strange her eyes; her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells.

See the moonlight fall upon your house-front and mark the wonderful effect of black and white that it creates. Under the play of the moonbeams it becomes a house of mysteries. The lights seem lighter than by day, but that is only because the darks are so much darker. That shadow cast by the gable makes a blackness in which anything may lurk, and it is the secrecy of the shadow in a world of light that is the soul of romance.

Take a walk in the woods in the bright moonlight over the tracks that you think you could follow blindfold, and you will marvel at the tricks which those black shadows of the trees can play with the most familiar scenes. Keats, who was as much of a moonlighter in spirit as Scott, knew those impenetrable shadows well:

… tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

In this moonlight world you may skip at will from the known to the unknown, have publicity on one side of the way and secrecy on the other, walk in the light to see Jessica's face, and in the shadow to escape the prying eyes of Shylock. Hence through all time it has been the elysium of lovers, and "Astarte, queen of heaven, with crescent horns," has been the goddess whom they serve,

To whose bright image nightly by the moon,
Sidonian virgins paid their vows and songs.

Perhaps it is the eternal lover in us that responds so unfailingly to the magic of the moonlight.

ON GIVING UP TOBACCO

This evening I am morally a little unapproachable. I feel too good to be true. Perhaps it would be possible for me to endure the company of Mr. Pecksniff; but that good man is dead, and I am lonely in a world that is not quite up to my moral handicap. For I have given up tobacco. For a whole day not a wreath of smoke has issued from my lips, not a pipe, or a cigar, or a cigarette has had the victory over me… For a whole day! I had not realised how long a day could be. It is as though I have ceased to live in time and have gone into eternity. I once heard a man say: "Dear me! How time flies!" It struck me at the moment as a true and penetrating remark, and I have often repeated it since. But now I know it to be false. I know that that man must have been a slave to tobacco, that subtle narcotic that gives the illusion of the flight of time. If he had the moral courage to follow my example, he would not say "How time flies!" He would say, as I do (with tears in his voice, and with a glance at his pipe on the mantel-piece), "How time stands still!" He would find that a day can seem as long as a year; that he can lengthen his life until he is terrified at the prospect of its endlessness.

I have been contemplating this thing for years. Some day, I have said to myself, I will have a real trial of strength with this Giant Nicotine who has held me thrall to his service. Long have I borne his yoke – ever since that far-off day when I burned a hole in my jacket pocket with a lighted cigar that I hid at the approach of danger. (How well I remember that day: the hot sunshine, the walk in the fields, the sense of forbidden joys, the tragedy of the burnt hole, the miserable feeling of physical nausea.) I have kicked against the tyranny of a habit that I knew had become my master. It was not the tobacco I disliked. Far from it. I liked the tobacco; but disliked the habit of tobacco. The tendency of most of us is to become creatures of habit and to lose our freedom – to cease to be masters of our own actions. "Take away his habits, and there is nothing of him left," says a character in some play, and the saying has a wide application. I did not possess a pipe: it was the pipe that possessed me. I did not say with easy, masterful assurance, "Come, I have had a hard day (or a good dinner); I will indulge myself with a pipe of tobacco." It was the pipe which said, "Come, slave, to your devotions." And though as the result of one of my spiritual conflicts I threw away my pipe and resolved to break the fall with an occasional cigarette, I found it was the old tyrannous habit in a new disguise. The old dog in a new coat, as Johnson used to say.

There are some people who approach the question frivolously. The young man called John in the "Breakfast Table" is an example. When the lady in bombazine denounced tobacco and said it ought all to be burned, the young man John agreed. Someone had given him a box of cigars, he said, and he was going to burn them all. The lady in bombazine rejoiced. Let him make a bonfire of them in the backyard, she said. "That ain't my way," replied the young man called John. "I burn 'em one at a time – little end in my mouth, big end outside." Similarly wanting in seriousness was the defence of tobacco set up by the wit who declared that it prolonged life. "Look at the ancient Egyptians," he said. "None of them smoked, *and they are all dead*." Others again discover virtues to conceal the tyranny. Lord Clarendon, when he was Foreign Minister, excused the fact that his room always reeked with tobacco smoke on the ground that it was necessary to his work. "The art of diplomacy," he said, "is the judicious administration of tobacco." No one knew better how to handle a cigar case than Bismarck, and it is no very extravagant fancy to see in the events of to-day the enormous fruit of an interlude of tobacco between him and Disraeli in the council chamber at Berlin.

There are some who say they smoke because it soothes their nerves, and others who say they smoke because it is an aid to social intercourse. It is true that you can sit and smoke and say nothing without feeling that the spirit of communion is broken. That was the case of Carlyle and his mother and of Carlyle and Tennyson, brave smokers all and silent to boot. They let their pipes carry on a conversation too deep for words. And lesser people, as Cowper knew, conceal their bankruptcy of words in wreaths of smoke:

The pipe, with solemn, interposing puff,
Makes half a sentence at a time enough;
The dozing sages drop the drowsy strain,
Then pause, and puff, and speak, and puff again.

And, while some say they smoke for company, others claim to smoke for thought and inspiration. "Tobacco is the sister of Literature," says Sir Walter Raleigh, loyal in this to his great namesake who brought the good gift to our shores. Heaven forbid that I should deny the debt we who write owe to tobacco, but I am bound to confess that brother Literature did some handsome things before he found his sister. Homer and Euripides, Virgil and Horace wrote quite tolerably without the help of tobacco, though no one can read Horace without feeling that he had the true spirit of the tobacco cult. Had he been born a couple of thousand years later, what praises of the weed of Havana he would have mingled with his praises of Falernian!

But if we are honest with ourselves we shall admit that we smoke not for this or that respectable reason – not always even because we enjoy it – but because we have got into the habit and can't get out of it. And in this, as in other cases, it is the surrender of the will more than the thing yielded to that is the mischief. All the great systems of religion have provided against the enslavement of the individual to his habits. The ordinances of abstinence are designed, in part at all events, to keep the will master of the appetites. They are intended – altogether apart from the question of salvation by works – to serve as a breach with habits which, if allowed uninterrupted sway, reduce the soul to a sort of bondage to the body.

It is against that bondage of habit that I have warred to-day. I shall not describe the incidents of the struggle: the allurements of the tobacconists' shops – and what a lot of tobacconists' shops there are! – the insidious temptation of a company of men smoking contentedly after lunch, the heroism of waving away the offered cigarette or cigar as though it were a matter of no importance, the constant act of refusal. For this is no case of one splendid deed of heroism. You do not slay Apollyon with a thrust of your sword and march triumphantly on your way. You have to go on fighting every inch of the journey, deaf to the appeals of Gold Flake and Capstan and Navy Cut and the other syrens that beckon you from the shop windows. And now evening has come and the victory is mine. I have singed the beard of the giant. I am no longer his thrall. To-morrow I shall be able to smoke with a clear conscience – with the feeling that it is an act of my own free choice, and not an act of slavish obedience to an old habit…

How I shall enjoy to-morrow!

THE GREAT GOD GUN

A few days ago I saw the Advent of the Great God Gun. The goddess Aphrodite, according to ancient mythology, rose out of the foam of the sea, and the Great God Gun, too, emerged from a bath, but it was a bath of fire – fire so white and intense that the eyes were blinded by it as they are blinded by the light of the unclouded sun at midday.

Our presence had been timed for the moment of his coming. We stood in a great chamber higher than a cathedral nave, and with something even less than the dim religious light of a cathedral nave. The exterior of the temple was plain even to ugliness, a tower of high, windowless walls faced with corrugated iron. Within was a maze of immense mysteries, mighty cylinders towering into the gloom above, great pits descending into the gloom below, gigantic cranes showing against the dim skylight, with here and there a Cyclopean figure clad in oily overalls and with a face grimy and perspiring.

The signal was given. Two shadowy figures that appeared in the darkness above one of the cylinders began their incantations. A giant crane towered above them and one saw its mighty claw descend into the orifice of the cylinder as if to drag some Eurydice out of the hell within. Then the word was spoken and somewhere a lever, or perhaps only an electric button, was touched. But at that touch the whole front of the mighty cylinder from top to bottom opened and swung back slowly and majestically, and one stood before a pillar of flame forty feet high, pure and white, an infinity of intolerable light, from whence a wave of heat came forth like a living thing. And as the door opened the Cyclops above – strange Dantesque figures now swallowed up in the gloom, now caught in the light of the furnace – set the crane in motion, and through the open door of the cylinder came the god, suspended from the claw of the crane that gripped it like the fingers of a hand.

It emerged slowly like a column of solid light – mystic, wonderful. All night it had stood imprisoned in the cylinder enveloped by that bath of incalculable hotness, and as it came out from the ordeal, it was as white as the furnace within. The great hand of the crane bore it forward with a solemn slowness until it paused over the mouth of one of the pits. I had looked into this pit and seen that it was filled nearly to the brim with a slimy liquid. It was a pit of oil – tens of thousands of gallons of high-flash rape oil. It was the second bath of the god.

The monster, the whiteness of his heat now flushing to pink, paused above the pit. Then gravely, under the direction of the iron hand that held him suspended in mid-air, he began to descend into the oil. The breech end of the incandescent column touched the surface of the liquid, and at that touch there leapt out of the mouth of the pit great tongues of flame. As the red pillar sank deeper and deeper in the pit the flames burst up through the muzzle and licked with fury about the ruthless claw as if to tear it to pieces. But it would not let go. Lower and lower sank the god until even his head was submerged and he stood invisible beneath us, robed in his cloak of oil.

And there we will leave him to toughen and harden as he drinks in the oil hungrily through his burning pores. Soon he will be caught up in the claw of the crane again, lifted out of his bath and lowered into an empty pit near by. And upon him will descend another tube, that has passed through the same trials, and that will fit him as the skin fits the body. And then in due course he will be provided with yet another coat. Round and round him will be wound miles of flattened wire, put on at a tension of unthinkable resistance. And even then there remains his outer garment, his jacket, to swell still further his mighty bulk. After that he will be equipped with his brain – all the wonderful mechanism of breech and cradle – and then one day he will be carried to the huge structure near by, where the Great God Gun, in all his manifestations, from the little mountain ten-pounder to the leviathan fifteen-inch, rests shining and wonderful, to be sent forth with his message of death and destruction.

The savage, we are told, is misguided enough to "bow down to wood and stone." Poor savage! If we could only take him, with his childlike intelligence, into our temple to see the god that the genius

and industry of civilised man has created, a god so vast that a hundred men could not lift him, of such incredible delicacy that his myriad parts are fitted together to the thousandth, the ten-thousandth, and even the hundred-thousandth of an inch, and out of whose throat there issue thunders and lightnings that carry ruin for tens of miles – how ashamed the poor savage would be of his idols of wood and stone! How he would abase himself before the god of the Christian nations!

And what a voracious deity he is! Here in the great arsenal of Woolwich one passes through miles and miles of bewildering activities, foundries where the forty-ton hammer falls with the softness of a caress upon the great column of molten metal, and gives it the first crude likeness of the god, where vast converters are sending out flames of an unearthly hue and brightness, or where men clothed in grime and perspiration are swinging about billets of steel that scorch you as they pass from the furnace to the steam-press in which they are stamped like putty into the rough shape of great shells; shops where the roar of thousands of lathes drowns the voice, and where the food of the god is passing through a multitude of preparations more delicate than any known to the kitchens of Lucullus; pools of silence where grave scientific men are at their calculations and their tests, and where mechanics who are the princes of their trade show you delicate instruments gauged to the hundred-thousandth of an inch that are so precious that they will scarcely let you handle them; mysterious chambers where the high explosives are handled and where the shells are filled, where you walk in felt slippers upon padded floors and dare not drop a pin lest you wake an earthquake, and where you see men working (for what pay I know not) with materials more terrible than lightnings, themselves partitioned off from eternity only by the scrupulous observance of the stern laws of this realm of the sleeping Furies.

A great town – a town whose activities alone are equal to all the labour of a city like Leeds – all devoted to the service of the god who lies there, mystic, wonderful, waiting to speak his oracles to men. I see the poor savage growing more and more ashamed of his wood and stone. And this, good savage, is only a trifling part of our devotions. All over the land wherever you go you shall find furnaces blazing to his glory, mountains shattered to make his ribs, factories throbbing day and night to feed his gigantic maw and to clothe his servants.

You shall go down to the great rivers and hear a thousand hammers beating their music out of the hulls of mighty ships that are to be the chariots of the god, in which he will go forth to preach his gospel. You shall go down into the bowels of the earth and see half-naked men toiling in the blackness by the dim light of the safety lamp to win that wonderful food which is the ultimate food of the god, power to forge his frame, power to drive his chariots, power to wing his bolts. You shall go to our temples of learning and the laboratories of our universities and see the miracles of destruction that science, the proudest achievement of man, can wring out of that astonishing mystery coal-tar. You shall go to our ports and watch the ships riding in proudly from the seas with their tributes from afar to the god. And behind all this activity you shall see a nation working day and night to pay for the food of the god, throwing all its accumulated wealth into the furnace to keep the engines going, pawning its future to the uttermost farthing and to the remotest generation.

And wherever the white man dwells, good savage, the same vision awaits you —

> … where Rhine unto the sea,
> And Thames and Tiber, Seine and Danube run,
> And where great armies glitter in the sun,
> And great kings rule and men are boasted free.

Everywhere the hammers are ringing, the forests are falling, the harvests are being gathered, and men and women toil like galley slaves chained to the oar to build more and more of the image and feed him more lavishly with the food of death. You cannot escape the great traffic of the god though you go to the outposts of the earth. The horses of the pampas are being rounded up to drag his wagons, the sheep of Australia are being sheared to clothe his slaves, the pine trees of Lapland

are being split for his service, the silence of the Arctic seas is broken by the throbbing of his chariots. As a neutral, good savage, you shall be free to go to Essen and see marvels no less wonderful than these you have seen at Woolwich, and all through Europe from Bremen to the Golden Horn the same infinite toil in the service of the Great God Gun will greet your astonished eyes.

Then, it may be, you will pass to where the god delivers his message; on sea where one word from his mouth sends a thousand men and twenty thousand tons of metal in one huge dust storm to the skies; on land where over hundreds of miles of battle front the towns and villages are mounds of rubbish, where the desolate earth is riven and shattered by that treacly stuff you saw being ladled into the shells in the danger rooms at Woolwich or Essen, where the dead lie thick as leaves in autumn, and where in every wood you will come upon the secret shrines of the god. At one light touch of the lever he lifts his head, coughs his mighty guttural speech and sinks back as if convulsed. He has spoken, the earth trembles, the trees about him shudder at the shock. And standing in the observatory you will see far off a great black, billowy mass rise in the clear sky and you will know that the god has blown another god like unto him into fragments, and that in that mass that rises and falls is the wreckage of many a man who has looked his last upon the sun and will never till the home fields again or gladden the eyes of those he has left in some distant land.

And then, to complete your experience, you shall hear from the prophets of the Great God Gun the praises of his gospel, how that gospel is an abiding part of the white man's faith, how it acts as a moral medicine to humanity, purging it of its vices and teaching it the higher virtues (a visit to the music halls and the Strand at midnight will help your simple mind to realise this), and how the words of the poet, uttered in satire —

> That civilisation doos git forrad
> Sometimes upon a powder cart —

were in truth the words of eternal wisdom.

I see the poor savage returning sadly to his home and gazing with mingled scorn and humiliation at his futile image of wood and stone. Perhaps another feeling will mingle with his sadness. Perhaps he will be perplexed and puzzled. For he may have heard of another religion that the white man serves, and it may be difficult for his simple mind to reconcile that religion with the gospel of the Great God Gun.

ON A LEGEND OF THE WAR

I was going down to the country the other night when I fell into conversation with a soldier who was going home on leave. He was a reservist, who, after leaving the Army, had taken to gardening, and who had been called up at the beginning of the war. He had many interesting things to tell, which he told in that unromantic, matter-of-fact fashion peculiar to the British soldier. But something he said about his cousin led him to make a reference to Lord Kitchener, and I noticed that he spoke of the great soldier as if he were living.

"But," said I, "do you think Kitchener wasn't drowned?"

"Yes," he replied, "I can't never believe he was drowned."

"But why?"

"Well, he hadn't no escort. You're not going to make me believe he didn't know what he was doing when he went off and didn't have no escort. It stands to reason. He wasn't no stick of rhubub, as you might say. He was a hard man on the soldier, but he had foresight, he had. He could look ahead. That's what he could do. He could look ahead. What did he say about the war? Three years, he said, or the duration, and he was about right. He wasn't the man to get drowned by an oversight – not him. Stands to reason.

"Same with Hector Macdonald," he said, warming to his theme. "He's alive right enough. He's fighting for the Germans. Why, I know a man who see him in a German uniform before the war began. I should know him if I see him. He inspected me often. He made a fool of himself at Monte Carlo and that sort o' thing, and just went off to get a new start, as you might say.

"And look at Hamel. He ain't dead – course not. He went to Germany – that's what he did. Stands to reason."

"And what has become of Kitchener?" I asked. "Is he fighting for the Germans too?"

Well no. That was too tall an order even for his credulity. He boggled a bit at the hedge and then proceeded:

"He's laying by – that's what he's doing. He's laying by. You see, he'd done his job. He raised his army and made the whole job, as you may say, safe, and he wasn't going to take a back seat and be put in a corner. Not him. Stands to reason. Why should he? And him done all what he had done. So he just goes off and lays by until he's wanted again. Then he'll turn up all right. You'll see."

"But the ship was blown up," I said, "and only one boatload of survivors came to shore. There were 800 men who perished with Lord Kitchener. Not one has been heard of. Are they all 'laying by'? And where are they hiding? And why? And were they all in Lord Kitchener's secret?"

He seemed a little gravelled by these considerations, but unmoved.

"I can't never believe that he's dead," he said with the air of a man who didn't want to be awkward and would oblige if he possibly could. "I can't do it… With his foresight and all… And no escort, mind you… No, I can't believe it… Stands to reason."

And as he sank back in his seat and lit a cigarette I realised that the legend of Kitchener had passed beyond the challenge of death. I had heard much of that legend, much of mysterious letters from prisoners in Germany who had seen a very tall and formidable-looking man and hinted that that man's name was – well, whose would you think? Why, of course… But here was the popular legend in all its naked simplicity and absoluteness. It did not rest upon fact. It defied all facts and all evidence. It was an act of tyrannic faith. He was not dead, because the mind simply refused to believe that he was dead. And so he was alive. And there you are.

No doubt there was much in the circumstances of the great soldier's end that helped the growth of the myth. He filled so vast a place in the public mind and vanished so swiftly that his total disappearance seemed unthinkable. No living man had seen him die and no man had seen his body in death. He had just walked out into the night, and from the night he would return.

But, apart from the mystery of circumstance, the legend is a tribute to the strange fascination which this remarkable man exercised over the popular mind. It endowed him with qualities which were supernatural. In a world filled with the tragedy of mortality, here was a man who could daunt death itself. And when death stabbed him suddenly in the dark of that wild night off the Orkneys and flung his body to the wandering seas, the popular mind rejected the thought as a sort of blasphemy and insisted on his victory over the enemy. "Stands to reason." That's all. It just "stands to reason."

It seems a childish superstition, and yet if we could probe this belief to the bottom we might find that there is a truth beneath the apparent foolishness. It is that truth which Whitman, in his "Drum Taps," expresses over his fallen comrade —

O the bullet could never kill what you really are, dear friend,
Nor the bayonet stab what you really are!

There is something in the heroic soul that defies death, and the simple mind only translates that faith in the deathlessness of the spirit into material terms. Drake lies in his hammock in Nombre Dios Bay, but he lies "listening for the drum and dreamin' arl the time of Plymouth Hoe."

Call him on the deep sea, call him up the Sound,
Call him when your powder's running low —
"If the Dons sight Devon
I'll leave the port of Heaven,
And we'll drum them up the Channel as we drummed them long ago."

And so the legend of Drake's drum lives on, and long centuries after, in the midst of another and fiercer storm, men sail the seas and hear that ghostly inspiration to brave deeds and brave death. The torch of a great spirit never goes out. It is handed on from generation to generation and flames brightest when the night is darkest. And that I think is the truth that dwells at the back of my companion's obstinate credulity. Kitchener has become to him a symbol of something that cannot die, and his non-metaphysical mind must have some material immortality to give his faith an anchorage. And so, out in the vague shadows of the borderland he sees the stalwart figure still at his post – "laying by," it is true, but watching and waiting and "listening for the drum" that shall summon him back to the field of action.

As the train slowed down at a country station and he prepared to go out into the night, he repeated in firm but friendly accents: "No, I can't never believe that he's dead… Stands to reason." And as he bade me "Good-night," I said, "I think you are right. I think he is living, too." And as the door closed, I added to myself, "Stands to reason."

ON TALK AND TALKERS

The other day I went to dine at a house known for the brilliancy of the conversation. I confess that I found the experience a little trying. In conversation I am naturally rather a pedestrian person. The talk I like is the talk which Washington Irving had in mind when he said that "that is the best company in which the jokes are rather small and the laughter abundant." I do not want to be expected to be brilliant or to be dazzled by verbal pyrotechnics. I like to talk in my slippers, as it were, with my legs at full stretch, my mind at ease, and with all the evening before me. Above all, I like the company of people who talk for enjoyment and not for admiration. "I am none of those who sing for meat, but for company," says Isaac Walton, and therein is the secret of good talk as well as of cheerful song. But at this dinner table the conversation flashed around me like forked lightning. It was so staccato and elusive that it seemed like talking in shorthand. It was a very fencing match of wit and epigram, a sort of game of touch-and-go, or tip-and-run, or catch-as-catch-can, or battledore and shuttlecock, or demon patience, or anything you like that is intellectually and physically breathless and baffling. I thought of a bright thing to say now and then, but I was always so slow in getting away from the mark that I never got it out. It had grown stale and out of date before I could invest it with the artistic merit that would enable it to appear in such brilliant company. And so, mentally out of breath, I just sat and felt old-fashioned and slow, and tried to catch the drift of the sparkling dialogue. But I looked as wise as possible, just to give the impression that nothing was escaping me, and that the things I did not say were quite worth saying. That was Henry Irving's way when the conversation got beyond him. He just looked wise and said nothing.

There are few things more enviable than the quality of good talk, but this was not good talk. It was clever talk, which is quite a different thing. There was no "stuff" in it. It was like trying to make a meal off the east wind, which it resembled in its hard brilliancy and lack of geniality. It reminded me of the tiresome witticisms of Mr. Justice Darling, who always gives the impression of having just come into court from the study of some jest book or a volume of appropriate quotations. The foundation of good talk is good sense, good nature, and the gift of fellowship. Given these things you may serve them up with the sauce of wit, but wit alone never made good conversation. It is like mint sauce without the lamb.

Fluent talkers are not necessarily good conversationalists. Macaulay talked as though he were addressing a public meeting, and Coleridge as though he were engaged in an argument with space and eternity. "If any of you have got anything to say," said Samuel Rogers to his guests at breakfast one morning, "you had better say it now you have got a chance. Macaulay is coming." And you remember that whimsical story of Lamb cutting off the coat button that Coleridge held him by in the garden at Highgate, going for his day's work into the City, returning in the evening, hearing Coleridge's voice, looking over the hedge and seeing the poet with the button between forefinger and thumb still talking into space. His life was an unending monologue. "I think, Charles, that you never heard me preach," said Coleridge once, speaking of his pulpit days. "My dear boy," answered Lamb, "I never heard you do anything else."

Johnson's talk had the quality of conversation, because, being a clubbable man, he enjoyed the give-and-take and the cut-and-thrust of the encounter. He liked to "lay his mind to yours," as he said of Thurlow, and though he was more than a little "huffy" on occasion he had that wealth of humanity which is the soul of hearty conversation. He quarrelled heartily and forgave heartily – as in that heated scene at Sir Joshua's when a young stranger had been too talkative and knowing and had come under his sledge hammer. Then, proceeds Boswell, "after a short pause, during which we were somewhat uneasy; – Johnson: Give me your hand, Sir. You were too tedious and I was too short. – Mr. – : Sir, I am honoured by your attention in any way. – Johnson: Come, Sir, let's have no more of it. We offend one another by our contention; let us not offend the company by our compliments." He

always had the company in mind. He no more thought of talking alone than a boxer would think of boxing alone, or the tennis player would think of rushing up to the net for a rally alone. He wanted something to hit and something to parry, and the harder he hit and the quicker he parried the more he loved the other fellow. That is the way with all the good talkers of our own time. Perhaps Mr. Belloc is too cyclonic and scornful for perfect conversation, but his energy and wit are irresistible. I find Mr. Bernard Shaw far more tolerant and much less aggressive in conversation than on paper or on the platform. But the princes of the art, in my experience, are Mr. Birrell, Lord Morley, and Mr. Richard Whiteing, the first for the rich wine of his humour, the second for the sensitiveness and delicacy of his thought, the third for the deep love of his kind that warms the generous current of his talk. I would add Mr. John Burns, but he is really a soloist. He is too interesting to himself to be sufficiently interested in others. When he is well under way you simply sit round and listen. It is capital amusement, but it is not conversation.

It is not the man who talks abundantly who alone keeps the pot of conversation boiling. Some of the best talkers talk little. They save their shots for critical moments and come in with sudden and devastating effect. Lamb had that art, and his stammer was the perfect vehicle of his brilliant sallies. Mr. Arnold Bennett in our time uses the same hesitation with delightful effect – sometimes with a shattering truthfulness that seems to gain immensely from the preliminary obstruction that has to be overcome. And I like in my company of talkers the good listener, the man who contributes an eloquent silence which envelops conversation in an atmosphere of vigilant but friendly criticism. Addison had this quality of eloquent silence. Goldsmith, on the other hand, would have liked to shine, but had not the gift of talk. Among the eloquent listeners of our day I place that fine writer and critic, Mr. Robert Lynd, whose quiet has a certain benignant graciousness, a tolerant yet vigilant watchfulness, that adds its flavour to the more eager talk of others.

It was a favourite fancy of Samuel Rogers that "perhaps in the next world the use of words may be dispensed with – that our thoughts may stream into each other's minds without any verbal communication." It is an idea which has its attractions. It would save time and effort, and would preserve us from the misunderstandings which the clumsy instrument of speech involves. I think, as I sit here in the orchard by the beehive and watch the bees carrying out their myriad functions with such disciplined certainty, that there must be the possibility of mutual understanding without speech – an understanding such as that which Coleridge believed humanity would have discovered and exploited if it had been created mute.

And yet I do not share Rogers's hope. I fancy the next world will be like this, only better. I think it will resound with the familiar speech of our earthly pilgrimage, and that in any shady walk or among any of the fields of asphodel over which we wander we may light upon the great talkers of history, and share in their eternal disputation. There, under some spreading oak or beech, I shall hope to see Carlyle and Tennyson, or Lamb and Hazlitt and Coleridge, or Johnson laying down the law to Langton and Burke and Beauclerk, with Bozzy taking notes, or Ben Jonson and Shakespeare continuing those combats of the Mermaid Tavern described by Fuller – the one mighty and lumbering like a Spanish galleon, the other swift and supple of movement like an English frigate – or Chaucer and his Canterbury pilgrims still telling tales on an eternal May morning. It is a comfortable thought, but I cannot conceive it without the odd, cheerful din of contending tongues. I fancy edging myself into those enchanted circles, and having a modest share in the glorious pow-wows of the masters. I hope they won't vote me a bore and scatter at my approach.

ON A VISION OF EDEN

I had a glimpse of Eden last night. It came, as visions should come, out of the misery of things. In all these tragic years no night spent in a newspaper office had been more depressing than this, with its sense of impending peril, its disquieting *communiqué*, Wytschaate lost, won, lost again; the eager study of the map with its ever retreating British line; the struggle to write cheerfully in spite of a sick and foreboding heart – and then out into the night with the burden of it all hanging like a blight upon the soul. And as I stood in the dark and the slush and the snow by the Law Courts I saw careering towards me a motor-bus with great head-lights that shone like blast furnaces on a dark hillside. It seemed to me like a magic bus pounding through the gloom with good tidings, jolly tidings, and scattering the darkness with its jovial lamps. Heavens, thought I, what strangers we are to good tidings; but here surely they come, breathless and radiant, for such a glow never sat on the brow of fear. The bus stopped and I got inside, and inside it was radiant too – so brilliant that you could not only see that your fellow-passengers were real people of flesh and blood and not mere phantoms in the darkness, but that you could read the paper with luxurious ease.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.