

The Charlottetown Herald.

NEW SERIES

CHARLOTTETOWN, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND, EDNESDAY, NOV. 13, 1912

Vol. XLII, No. 40



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HAWTHORNE . . . N. Y.

July 8, 1912—31

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Chesterton Man of Mirth and Wisdom.

Walking down Fleet Street some day you may meet a form whose westward blot on the pavement waves of hair surge from under the that might be a legacy from Porthos floats about his colossal frame. He pauses in the midst of the pavement to read the book in his hand, and a cascade of laughter descending from the head notes to the middle voice gushes out on the listening air. He looks up, adjusts his piece, observes that he is not in a cab, remembers that he ought to be in a cab, turns and hails a cab. The vehicle sinks down under the unusual burden and rolls heavily away. It carries Gilbert Keith Chesterton.

The Most Conspicuous Figure in the Landscape.

Mr. Chesterton is the most conspicuous figure in the landscape of literary London. He is like a visitor out of some fairy tale, a legend in the flesh, a survival of the childhood of the world. Most of us are the creators of our time, thinking its thoughts, wearing its clothes, rejoicing in its chains. If we try to escape from the temporal tyranny, it is through the gate of revolt that we go. Some take to asceticism or to some fantastic foppery of the moment, some invent Utopias, lunch on nuts and proteid at Eustace Miles', and flout red ties defiantly in the face of men and angels. The world is bound, but they are free. But in all this they are still the children of our time, fleeing and self-conscious. Mr. Chesterton's extravagances have none of this quality. He is not a rebel. He is a wayfarer from the ages, stopping at the inn of life, warming himself at the fire, and making the rafters ring with his jolly laughter.

Time and place are accidents; he is elemental and primitive. He is not of our time, but of all times. One imagines him wrestling with the giant Skrymir, and drinking deep draughts from the horn of Thor, or exchanging jests with Falstaff at the Boar's Head in Bantock, or joining in the intellectual revels at the Mermaid Tavern, or meeting Johnson foot to foot, and dealing blow for mighty blow. With Rabelais he roared, and Don Quixote and Sancho were his 'vera brothers. One seems to see him coming down from the twilight of fable, through the centuries, calling wherever there is good company, and welcome wherever he calls, for he brings no cult of the time or pedantry of the schools with him.

He Lives in a World of Romance.

He has the freshness and directness of a child's vision. In a very real sense indeed he has never left the golden age—never come out into the light of common day, where the tops of the gray and things have lost their tangency. He lives in a world of romance, peopled with giants and gypsies with the light laughter of faeries. Miracles and adventure are the stuff of Mr. Chesterton's every day life. He goes out on the Sussex downs with his colored chalks—in the cavernous mysteries of his pockets there is always a box of pastels, though 'the mark of the mint' in his own phrase, may be unaccountably absent—and discovers he has no white chalk with which to complete his picture. His foot stumbles against a mound, and lo! he is standing on a mountain of chalk, and he shouts with joy at the miracle, for the world has never lost its freshness and wonder to him. It is as though he discovers it anew each day, and stands exultant at the revelation.

It is a splendid pageant that passes unceasingly before him—New and yet old. As the foundations of the heavens and earth, Familiarity has not robbed it of its magic. He sees it as the child sees its first rainbow or the lightning flashing from the thunder cloud. Most of us, before we reach maturity, find life stale and unprofitable—

A twice-old tale—

Vexing the dull ears of a drowsy man. We are like the biased policeman I met when I was waiting for a 'bus at Fitchley one Bank holiday. 'A lot of people abroad today?' I said interrogatively. 'Yes,' he said, 'thousands.' 'Where do most of them go this way?' 'Oh, to Barset. Though what they see in Barset I can't make out. I never see north' is Barset out. 'Perhaps they like to see the green fields and hear the birds?' I said. 'Well, perhaps,' he replied, in the tone of one who tolerated follies which he was too enlightened to share.

The world of culture shares the policeman's physical conundrum in a spiritual sense. It sees 'nothing in it.' We succeed in deadening the freshness of the impression and freshening the miracle under the dunder of the common day—wearing it under names and formulas. 'This green, flowery

rock-built earth, the trees, the mountains, rivers, many sounding seem—that great deep sea of azure that swims overhead; the winds sweeping through it; the black cloud fashioning itself together, now pouring out fire, now hail and rain; what is it? Aye, what? At bottom, we do not yet know; we can never know at all. It is not by our superior insight that we escape the difficulty; it is by our superior levity, our inattention, our want of insight. It is not by thinking that we cease to wonder at it. This world, after all our science and sciences, is still a miracle; wonderful, inscrutable, magical, and more, to whomsoever will think of it.' It is this elemental faculty of wonder, of which Carlyle speaks, that distinguishes Mr. Chesterton from his contemporaries, and gives him kinship at once with the seers and the children. He is an aesthete in the erudite and the exact, but he sees life in the large, with the eyes of the first man on the day of creation. As he says in inscribing a book of Caldecott's pictures to a little friend of mine—

This is the sort of book we like

(For you and I are very small) With pictures stuck in anyhow, And hardly any words at all. You will not understand a word Of all the words, including mine; Never you trouble, you can see, And all directness is divine— Stand up and keep your childlike eyes; Read all the pedant's screeds and strictures; But don't believe in anything. That can't be told in colored pictures. Life to him is a book of colored pictures that he sees without external comment or exegesis. He sees it, as it were, at first hand, and shouts out his vision at the top of his voice. Hence the audacity that is so trying to the formalist who is governed by custom and authority. Hence the rain of paradoxes that he showers down. It is often suggested that these paradoxes are a conscious trick to attract attention—that Mr. Chesterton stands on his head, as it were, to gather a crowd. I can conceive him standing on his head in Fleet Street in sheer joy at the sight of St. Paul's, but not in vanity, or with a view to a collection. The truth is that this paradox is his own comment on the colored pictures.

He Spends Like a Prodigal.

There are some men who hoard life as a miser hoards his gold—map it out with frugal care and vast precision, spend today in taking thought for tomorrow. Mr. Chesterton spends life like a prodigal. Economy has no place in his spacious vocabulary. 'Economy,' he might say, with Anthony Hope's Mr. Carter, 'is going without something you do want in case you should some day want something you probably don't want.' Mr. Chesterton lives the unconsidered, untrammelled life. He simply rambles along without a thought of where he is going. If he likes the look of a road he turns down it, careless of where it may lead to. 'He is announced to lecture at Bradford tonight,' said a speaker, explaining his absence from a dinner. 'Probably he will turn up at Edinburgh?' He will wear no harness, learn no lessons, observe no rules. He is himself, Chesterton—not consciously or rebelliously, but unapologetically, like a natural element. St. Paul's School never had a more brilliant nor a less sedulous scholar. He did not win prizes, but he read more books, drew more pictures, wrote more poetry than any boy that ever played at going to school. His house was lit with books. All attempts to break him into routine failed. He tried the Slade School, and once even sat on a stool in an office. Think of it! G. K. O. in front of a ledger, adding up figures with romantic results—figures that turned into knights in armor, broke into song, and, added together, produced paradoxes unknown to arithmetic! He saw the absurdity of it all. 'A man must follow his vocation,' he said with Falstaff, and his vocation is to have none.

With the Day With Laughter.

And so he rambles along, engaged in an endless disputation, punctuated with gushes of Rabelaisian laughter, and leaving behind a litter of fragments. You may track him by the blotting pads he decorates with his riotous angles, and may come up with him in the midst of a group of children, for whom he is drawing hilarious pictures, or to whom he is revealing the wonders of his toy theater, the chief child of his fancy and invention, or whom he is instructing in the darkly-mysterious game of 'Guppings,' which will fill the day with laughter. 'Well,' said the aunt to the little boy who had been to tea with Mr. Chesterton—'well, Frank, I suppose you have had a very instructive afternoon?' 'I don't know what that means,' said Frank, 'but oh, with enthusiasm, you should see Mr. Chesterton catch bun

with his mouth!' If you cannot find him, and Fleet Street looks lonely and forsaken, then be sure his bus has been spirited away to some solitary place by his wife, the keeper of his business conscience, to finish a book for which some publisher is angrily clamoring. For 'No clamor, no book,' is his maxim.

Chesterton and Shaw.

Mr. Chesterton's natural foil in these days is Mr. Bernard Shaw. Mr. Shaw is the type of revolt. The flesh we eat, the wine we drink, the clothes we wear, the laws we obey, the religion we affect—all are an abomination to him. He would raze the old fabric to the ground, and build all anew upon an ordered and symmetrical plan. Mr. Chesterton has none of this impatience with the external garment of society. He enjoys disorder and loves the haphazard. With Rossetti he might say, 'What is it to me whether the earth goes round the sun, or the sun round the earth?' It is not the human intellect that interests him, but the human heart, and the great comedy of life. He opposes ancient sympathies to modern antipathies. It follows that Mr. Shaw's weapon is wit, sharp-edged as the east wind, and that Mr. Chesterton's weapon is humor that buffets you like a gale from the west.

No man was ever more careless

of his reputation. He is indifferent whether from his abundant mine he shovels out diamonds or dirt. You may take it or leave it, as you like. He cares not, and bears no malice. It is all a blithe improvisation, done in sheer exuberance of spirit, and having no relation to conscious literature. He is like a child abouting with glee at the sight of the flowers and sunshine, and chalking on every vacant boarding he passes with a jolly rapture of invention and no thought beyond.

The One Thing About Which He Is Serious.

But there is one thing, and one only, about which he is serious, and that is his own seriousness. You may laugh with him and at him and about him. When, at a certain dinner, one of the speakers said that his chivalry was so splendid that he had been known to rise in a tram and 'offer his seat to three ladies,' it was his laugh that sounded high above all the rest. But if you would wound him, do not laugh at his specific gravity; doubt his spiritual gravity. Doubt his passion for justice and liberty and patriotism—most of all his patriotism. For he is, above all, the lover of little England and the foe of the Imperialist, whose love of country is 'not what a mystic means by the love of God, but what a child might mean by the love of Jim.' 'My country, right or wrong?' he cries. 'Why, it is a thing no patriot could say. It is like saying, "My mother, drunk or sober." No doubt, if a decent man's mother took to drink, he would share her troubles to the last; but to talk as if he would be in a state of gay indifference as to whether his mother took to drink or not is certainly not the language of men who know the great mystery. * * * We fall back upon gross and frivolous things for our patriotism. * * * Our school boys are left to live and die in the infantile type of patriotism which they learned from a box of tin soldiers. * * * We have made our public school the wall against a whisper of the honor of England. What have we done, and where have we wandered, we have produced sages who could have spoken with Socrates, and poets who could walk with Dante, that we should talk as if we had never done anything more intelligent than found colonies and kick niggers? We are the children of light, and it is we that sit in darkness. If we are judged, it will not be for the merely intellectual transgression of failing to appreciate other nations, but for the supreme spiritual transgression of failing to appreciate ourselves.

With the Day With Laughter.

But sincere though he is, he loves the argument for its own sake. He is indifferent to the text. You may tap any subject you like; he will find it a theme on which to hang all the mystery of time and eternity. For the ordinary material cares of life he has no taste, almost no consciousness. He never knows the time of a train, has only a hazy notion of where he will dine, and the doings of tomorrow as profound a mystery as the contents of his pocket. He dwells outside of these things in the realm of ideas. Johnson said that when he and Savage walked one night round St. James Square for want of a lodging, they were not at all depressed by the situation, but in high spirits, and beamed of patriotism, traversed against the minister, and treated that they would stand by their country.' That is Mr. Chesterton's way. But he would not walk round St. James' Square. He would, in

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Johnson's circumstances, ride round and round in a cab—even if he had to borrow the fare off the cabman. He is free from the tyranny of things. Though he lived in a tub he would be rich beyond the dream of avarice; for he would still have the anverve of his intellectual inheritance.

I sometimes think that one moonlight night, when he is tired of Fleet Street, he will scale the walls of the tower and climb the spiral of a giant mill, with his shield and sword to match. He will come forth with a vizor up, and mount the battlements, and that clatters his hoofs will ring through the quiet of the city night as he thunders through St. Paul's churchyard and down Ludgate Hill and out on to the Great North Road. And then once more will be heard the cry of St. George for Merry England! and there will be the clash of swords in the greenwood and brave deeds on the King's highway.—A. G. Gardiner, in Sydney Catholic Press.

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