

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ISLANDS.

Suppose that in some convulsion of the planets there fell upon this earth from Mars, a creature of a shape totally unfamiliar, a creature about whose actual structure we were of necessity so dark that we could not tell which was creature and which was clothes. We could see that it had, say, six red tufts on its head, but we should not know whether they were a highly respectable head-covering or simply a head. We should see that the tail ended in three yellow stars, but it would be very difficult for us to know whether this was part of a ritual or simply part of a tail. Well, man has been from the beginning of time this unknown monster. People have always differed about what part of him belonged to himself, and what part was merely an accident. People have said successively that it was natural to him to do everything and anything that was diverse and mutually contradictory; that it was natural to him to worship God, and natural to him to be an atheist; natural to him to drink water, and natural to him to drink wine; natural to him to be equal, natural to be unequal; natural to obey kings, natural to kill them. The

divergence is quite sufficient to justify us in asking if there are not many things that are really natural, which really appear early and strong in every normal human being, which are not embodied in any of his after affairs. Whether there are not morbidities which are as fresh and recurrent as the flowers of spring. Whether there are not superstitions whose darkness is as wholesome as the darkness that falls nightly on all living things. Whether we have not treated things essential as portents; whether we have not seen the sun as a meteor, a star of ill-luck.

It would at least appear that we tend to become separated from what is really natural, by the fact that we always talk about those people who are really natural as if they were goblins. There are three classes of people for instance, who are in a greater or less degree elemental: children, poor people, and to some extent, and in a darker and more terrible manner, women. The reason why men have from the beginning of literature talked about women as if they were more or less mad, is simply because women are natural, and men, with their formalities and social theories, are very artificial. It is the same with children; children are simply human beings who are allowed to do what everyone else really desires to do, as for instance, to fly kites, or when seriously wronged to emit prolonged screams for several minutes. So again, the poor man is simply a person who expends upon treating himself and his friends in public houses about the same proportion of his income as richer people spend on dinners or hansom cabs, that

is a great deal more than he ought. But nothing can be done until people give up talking about these people as if they were too eccentric for us to understand, when, as a matter of fact, if there is any eccentricity involved, we are too eccentric to understand them. A poor man, as it is weirdly ordained, is definable as a man who has not got much money; to hear philanthropists talk about him one would think he was a kangaroo. A child is a human being who has not grown up; to hear educationalists talk one would think he was some variety of a deep-sea fish. The case of the sexes is at once more obvious and more difficult. The stoic philosophy and the early church discussed woman as if she were an institution, and in many cases decided to abolish her. The modern feminine output of literature discusses man as if he were an institution, and decides to abolish him. It can only timidly be suggested that neither man nor woman are institutions, but things that are really quite natural and all over the place.

If we take children for instance, as examples of the uncorrupted human animal, we see that the very things which appear in them in a manner primary and prominent, are the very things that philosophers have taught us to regard as sophisticated and over-civilised. The things which really come first are the things which we are accustomed to think come last. The instinct for a pompous intricate and recurring ceremonial for instance, comes to a child like an organic hunger; he asks for a formality as he might ask for a drink of water.

Those who think, for instance, that the thing called superstition is something heavily artificial, are very numerous ; that is those who think that it has only been the power of priests or of some very deliberate system that has built up boundaries, that has called one course of action lawful and another unlawful, that has called one piece of ground sacred and another profane. Nothing it would seem, except a large and powerful conspiracy could account for men so strangely distinguishing between one field and another, between one city and another, between one nation and another. To all those who think in this way there is only one answer to be given. It is to approach each of them and whisper in his ear : " Did you or did you not as a child try to step on every alternate paving-stone ? " Was that artificial and a superstition ? Did priests come in the dead of night and mark out by secret signs the stones on which you were allowed to tread ? Were children threatened with the oubliette or the fires of Smithfield if they failed to step on the right stone ? Has the Church issued a bull " Quisquam non pavimento ? " No ! On this point on which we were really free, we invented our servitude. We chose to say that between the first and the third paving-stone there was an abyss of the eternal darkness into which we must not fall. We were walking along a steady, and safe and modern road, and it was more pleasant to us to say that we were leaping desperately from peak to peak. Under mean and oppressive systems it was no doubt our instinct to free ourselves. But this truth written on the paving-stones is of even

greater emphasis, that under liberal systems it was our instinct to limit ourselves. We limited ourselves so gladly that we limited ourselves at random, as if limitation were one of the adventures of boyhood.

People sometimes talk as if everything in the religious history of men had been done by officials. In all probability things like the Dionysian cult or the worship of the Virgin were almost entirely forced by the people on the priesthood. And if children had been sufficiently powerful in the state, there is no reason why this paving-stone religion should not have been accepted also. There is no reason why the streets up which we walk should not be emblazoned so as to commemorate this eternal fancy, why black stones and white stones alternately, for instance, should not perpetuate the memory of a superstition as healthy as health itself.

For what is the idea in human nature which lies at the back of this almost automatic ceremonialism? Why is it that a child who would be furious if told by his nurse not to walk off the curbstone, invents a whole desperate system of footholds and chasms in a plane in which his nurse can see little but a commodious level? It is because man has always had the instinct that to isolate a thing was to identify it. The flag only becomes a flag when it is unique; the nation only becomes a nation when it is surrounded; the hero only becomes a hero when he has before him and behind him men who are not heroes; the paving-stone only becomes a paving-stone when it has before it and behind it things that are not paving-stones.

There are two other obvious instances, of course, of the same instinct, the perennial poetry of islands, and the perennial poetry of ships. A ship like the Argo or the Fram is valued by the mind because it is an island, because, that is, it carries with it floating loose on the desolate elements the resources, and rules, and trades, and treasuries of a nation, because it has ranks, and shops, and streets, and the whole clinging like a few limpets to a lost spar. An island like Ithaca or England is valued by the mind because it is a ship, because it can find itself alone and self-dependent in a waste of water, because its orchards and forests can be numbered like bales of merchandise, because its corn can be counted like gold, because the starriest and dreariest snows upon its most forsaken peaks are silver flags flown from familiar masts, because its dimmest and most inhuman mines of coal or lead below the roots of all things are definite chatels stored awkwardly in the lowest locker of the hold.

In truth nothing has so much spoilt the right artistic attitude as the continual use of such words as "infinite" and "immeasurable." They were used rightly enough in religion because religion, by its very nature, consists of paradoxes. Religion speaks of an identity which is infinite, just as it spoke of an identity that was at once one and three, just as it might possibly and rightly speak of an identity that was at once black and white.

The old mystics spoke of an existence without end or a happiness without end, with a deliberate defiance, as they

might have spoken of a bird without wings or a sea without water. And in this they were right philosophically, far more right than the world would now admit because all things grow more paradoxical as we approach the central truth. But for all human imaginative or artistic purposes nothing worse could be said of a work of beauty than that it is infinite; for to be infinite is to be shapeless, and to be shapeless is to be something more than mis-shapen. No man really wishes a thing which he believes divine to be in this earthly sense infinite. No one would really like a song to last for ever, or a religious service to last for ever, or even a glass of good ale to last for ever. And this is surely the reason that men have pursued towards the idea of holiness, the course that they have pursued; that they have marked it out in particular spaces, limited it to particular days, worshipped an ivory statue, worshipped a lump of stone. They have desired to give to it the chivalry and dignity of definition, they have desired to save it from the degradation of infinity. This is the real weakness of all imperial or conquering ideals in nationality. No one can love his country with the particular affection which is appropriate to the relation, if he thinks it is a thing in its nature indeterminate, something which is growing in the night, something which lacks the tense excitement of a boundary. No Roman citizen could feel the same when once it became possible for a rich Parthian or a rich Carthaginian to become a Roman citizen by waving his hand. No man wishes the thing he loves to grow, for he does not wish it to alter. No

Imperialist would be pleased if he came home in the evening from business and found his wife eight feet high.

The dangers upon the side of this transcendental insularity are no doubt considerable. There lies in it primarily the great danger of the thing called idolatry, the worship of the object apart from or against the idea it represents. But he must surely have had a singular experience who thinks that this insular or idolatrous fault is the particular fault of one age. We are not likely to suffer from any painful resemblance to the men of Thermopylae, the Zealots, who raged round the fall of Jerusalem, to the thunderbolts of Eastern faith and valour who hurled themselves on the guns of Lord Kitchener. If we are rushing upon any destruction it is not, at least, upon this.

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