

Tobacco Clouds

By Lionel Johnson

CLOUD upon cloud : and, if I were to think that an image of life can lie in wreathing, blue tobacco smoke, pleasant were the life so fancied. Its fair changes in air, its gentle motions, its quiet dying out and away at last, should symbolise something more than perfect idleness. Cloud upon cloud : and I will think, as I have said : it is amusing to think so.

It is that death, out and away upon the air, which charms me : charms more than the manner of the blown red rose, full of dew at morning, upon the grass at sunset. The clouds' end, their death in air, fills me with a very beauty of desire ; it has no violence in it, and it is almost invisible. Think of it ! While the cloud lived, it was seemly and various ; and with a graceful change it passed away : the image of a reasonable life is there, hanging among tobacco clouds. An image and a test : an image, because elaborated by fancy : a true and appealing image, and so, to my present way of life, a test.

That way is, to walk about the old city, with "a spirit in my feet," as Shelley and Catullus have it, of joyous aims and energies ; and to speed home to my solitary room over the steep High Street ; in an arm-chair, to read Milton and Lucretius, with others. There is nothing unworthy in all this : there is open air,

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an ancient city, a lonely chamber, perfect poets. Those should make up a passing life well: for death! I can watch tobacco clouds, exploring the secret of their beautiful conclusion. And, indeed, I think that already this life has something of their manner, those wheeling clouds! It has their light touch upon the world, and certainly their harmlessness. Early morning, when the dew sparkles red; honey, and coffee, and eggs for a breakfast; the quick, eager walk between the limes, through the Close of fine grass, to the river fields; then the blithe return to my poets; all that, together, comes to resemble the pleasant spheres of tobacco cloud; I mean, the circling hours, in their passage, and in their change, have something of a dreamy order and progression. Such little incidents! Now, grey air and whistling leaves: now, a marketing crowd of country folk round the Cross: and presently, clear candles; with Milton, in rich Baskerville type, or Lucretius, in the exquisite print of early Italy.

Such little incidents, in a world of battles and of plagues: of violent death by sea and land! Yet this quiet life, too, has difficulties and needs: its changes must be gone through with a ready pleasure and a mind unhesitating. For, trivial though they be in aspect and amount, yet the consecration of them, to be an holy discipline of experience, is so much the greater an attempt: it is an art. Each thing, be it man, or book, or place, should have its rights, when it encounters me: each has its proper quality, its peculiar spirit, not to be misinterpreted by me in carelessness, nor overlooked with impatience. That is clear: but neither must I vaunt my just view of common life. Meditation, at twilight, by the window looking toward the bare downs, is very different from that anxious examination of motives, dear to sedulous souls. My meditation is only still life: the clouds of smoke

smoke go up, grey and blue ; the earlier stars come out, above the sunset and the melancholy downs ; and deep, mournful bells ring slowly among the valley trees. Then, if my day have been successful, what peace follows, and how profound a charm ! The little things of the day, sudden glances of light upon grey stone, pleasant snatches of organ music from the church, quaint rustic sights in some near village : they come back upon me, gentle touches of happiness, airs of repose. And when the mysteries come about me, the fearfulness of life, and the shadow of night ; then, have I not still the blue, grey clouds, *occulis de rebus quo referam* ? So I escape the tribulations of doubt, those gloomy tribulations : and I live in the strength of dreams, which never doubt.

Is it all a delusion ? But that is a foolish wonder : nothing is a delusion, except the extremes of pleasure and of pain. Take what you will of the world ; its crowds, or its calms : there is nothing altogether wrong to every one. Lucretius, upon his watch-tower, deny it as he may, found some exultation and delight in the lamentable prospect below : it filled him with a magnificent darkness of soul, a princely compassion at heart. And Milton, in his evil days, felt himself to be tragic and austere : he knew it, not as a proud boast, but as a proud fact. No ! life is never wrong, altogether, to every one : you and I, he and she, priest and penitent, master and slave : one with another, we compose a very glory of existence before the unseen Powers. Therefore, I believe in my measured way of life ; its careful felicities, fashioned out of little things : to you, the change of Ministries, and the accomplishment of conquests, bring their wealth of rich emotion : to me, who am apart from the louder concerns of life, the flowering of the limes, and the warm autumn rains, bring their pensive beauty and a store of memories.

Is it I, am indolent? Is it you, are clamorous? Why should it be either? Let us say, I am the lover of quiet things, and you are enamoured of mighty events. Each, without undue absorption in his taste, relishes the savour of a different experience.

But I think, I am no egoist: no melancholy spectator of things, cultivating his intellect with old poetry, nourishing his senses upon rural nature. There are times, when the swarms of men press hard upon a solitary; he hears the noise of the streets, the heavy vans of merchandise, the cry of the railway whistle: and in a moment, his thoughts travel away, to London, to Liverpool; to great docks and to great ships; and away, till he is watching the dissimilar bustle of Eastern harbours, and hearing the discordant sounds of Chinese workmen. The blue smoke curls and glides away, with blue pagodas, and snowy almond bloom, and cherry flowers, circling and gleaming in it, like a narcotic vision. O magic of tobacco! Dreams are there, and superb images, and a somnolent paradise. Sometimes, the swarms of humanity press wearily and hardly; with a cruel insistence, crushing out my right to happiness. I think, rather I brood, upon the fingers that deftly rolled the cigarette, upon the people in tobacco plantations, upon all the various commerce involved in its history: how do they all fare, those many workers? Strolling up and down, devouring my books through their lettered backs; remembering the workers with leather, paper, ink, who toiled at them, they frighten me from the peace. What a full world it is! What endless activities there are! And, oh, Nicomachean Ethics! how much conscious pleasure is in them all! Things, mere tangible things, have a terrible power of education: of calling out from the mind innumerable thoughts and sympathies. Like childish catechisms and categories—*Whence have we sago?*—plain substances

substances introduce me to swarms of men, before unrealised. And they all lived and died, and cared for their children, or not, and led reasonable lives, or not : and, without any alternative, had casual thoughts and constant passions. Did each one of them ever stop in his work, and think that the world revolved about him alone ; and all was his, and for him ? Most men may have thought so, and shivered a little afterwards ; and worked on steadily. Or did each one of them ever think that he was always beset with companions, hordes of men and women, necessary and inevitable ? Then, he must have struggled a little in his mind, as a man fights for air, and worked on steadily. It does not do : this interrogation of mysteries, which are also facts. Nor am I called upon, from without or from within, to write an Essay upon the Problem of Economic Distribution. *Præsentia temnis!* Nature says to me : it is the stir of the world, and the great play of forces, that I am wailing, to no end. Let the great life continue, and the sun shine upon bright palaces ; and geraniums, red geraniums, glow at the windows of dingy courts ; death and sorrow come upon both, and upon me. And on all sides there is infinite tenderness ; the invincible good-will, which says kind and cheerful things to every one sometimes, by a friend's mouth ; the humane pieties of the world, which make glad the *Civitas Dei*, and make endurable the *Regnum Hominis*. I need not make myself miserable.

Full night at last ; the dead of night, as dull folk have it ; ignorant persons, who know nothing of nocturnal beauty, of night's lively magic. It was a good thought, to come out of my lonely room, to look at the cloisters by moonlight, and to wander round the Close, under the black shadows of the buttresses, while the moon is white upon their strange pinnacles. There is no noise, but only a silence, which seems very old ; old, as the grey monuments

ments and the weathered arches. The wreathing, blue tobacco clouds look thin and pale, like breath upon a dark frosty night ; they drift about these old precincts, with a kind of uncertainty and discomfort ; one would think, they wanted a rich Mediterranean night, heavy odours of roses, and very fiery stars. Instead, they break upon mouldering traceries, and doleful cherubs of the last century ; upon sunken headstones, and black oak doors with ironwork over them. Perhaps the cigarette is southern and Latin, southern and Oriental, after all ; and I am a dreamer, out of place in this northern grey antiquity. If it be so, I can taste the subtle pleasures of contrast : and, dwelling upon the singular features of this old town, I can make myself a place in it, as its conscious critic and adopted alien. There is a curious apprehension of enjoyment, a genuine touch of luxury, in this nocturnal visit to these old northern things ! I consider, with satisfaction, how the Stuart king, who spurned tobacco contumeliously, put a devoted faith in witches, those northern daughters of the devil ; northern, and very different from the dames of Thessaly ; from the crones of Propertius, and of Horace, and of Apuleius the Golden. Who knows, but I may hear strange voices in the near aisle before cockcrow ? By night, night in the north, happen cold and dismal things ; and then, what a night is this ! Chilly stars, and wild, grey clouds, flying over a misty moon.

At last, here comes a great and solemn sound ; the commanding bells of the cathedral tower, in their iron, midnight toll. Through the sombre strokes, and striking into their long echoes, pierce the thin cries of bats, that wheel in air, like lost creatures who hate themselves ; the uncanny flutter-mice ! They trace superb, invisibles circles on the night ; crying out faintly and plaintively, with no sort of delight in their voices : things of keen teeth, furry bodies, and skeleton wings covered scantily in leather. The big
moths

moths, too : they blunder against my face, and dash red trails of fire off my cigarette ; so busily they spin about the darkness. *Sadducismus triumphatus!* Yes, truly : here are little, white spirits awake and at some faery work ; white, as heather upon the Cornish cliffs is white, and all innocent, rare things in heaven and earth. There is nothing dreadful, it seems, about this night, and this place ; no glorious fury of evil spirits, doing foul and ugly things ; only the quiet town asleep under a wild sky, and gentle creatures of the night moving about ancient places. And the wind rises, with a sound of the sea, murmuring over the earth and sighing away to the sea : the trembling sea, beyond the downs, which steals into the land by great creeks and glimmering channels ; with swaying, taper masts along them, and lantern lights upon black barges. Certainly, this is no Lucretian night : not that tremendous

*Nox, et noctis signa severa
Noctivagæque faces cæli, flammæque volantes.*

Rather, it reminds me of the Miltonic night, which is peopled alluringly with

“ faery elves,
Whose midnight revels by a forest side
Or fountain, some belated peasant sees,
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon
Sits arbitress : ”

a Miltonic night, and a Shakespearean dawn ; for the white morning has just peered along the horizon, white morning, with dusky flames behind it ; and the spirits, the visions, vanish away, “ following darkness, like a dream.”

The streets are very still, with that silence of sleeping cities, which seems ready to start into confused cries ; as though the

Smiter of the Firstborn were travelling through the households. There is the Catholic chapel, in its Georgian, quaint humility ; recalling an age of beautiful, despised simplicity ; the age of French emigrant old priests and vicars-apostolic, who stood for the Supreme Pontiff, in grey wigs. The sweet limes are swaying against its singular, umbered windows, with their holy saints and prophets in last-century design ; ruffled, querulous persons looking very bluff and blown. I wonder, how it would be inside ; I suppose, night has a little weakened that lingering smell of daily incense, which seems so immemorial and so sad. Wonderful grace of the mighty Roman Church ! This low square place, where the sanctuary is poor and open, without any mystical touch of retirement and of loftiness, has yet the unfailling charm, the venerable mystery, which attend the footsteps of the Church ; the same air of command, the same look of pleading, fill this homely, comfortable shrine, which simple country gentlemen set up for the ministrations of harassed priests, in an age of no enthusiasm. I like to think that this quiet chapel, in the obedience of Rome, in communion with that supreme apostolate, is always open to me upon this winding little by-street ; it fills me with perfect memories, and it seems to bless me.

But here is a benediction of light ! the quick sun, reddening half the heavens, and rising gloriously. In the valley, clusters of elm rock and swing with the breeze, quivering for joy : far away, the bare uplands roll against the sunrise, calm and pastoral ; *otia dia* of the morning. Surely the hours have gone well, and according to my preference ; one dying into another, as the tobacco clouds die. My meditations, too, have been peaceful enough ; and, though solitary, I have had fine companions. What would the moral philosophers, those puzzled sages, think of me ? An harmless hedonist ? An amateur in morals, who means well, though
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meaning very little? Nay! let the moralist by profession give, to whom he will, *sa musique, sa flamme*: to any practical person, who is a wise shareholder and zealous vestryman. For myself, my limited and dreamy self, I eschew these upright businesses; upright memories and meditations please me more, and to live with as little action as may be. Action: why do they talk of action? Match me, for pure activity, one evening of my dreams, when life and death fill my mind with their messengers, and the days of old come back to me. And now, homewards, for a little sleep; that profound and rich slumber at early dawn which is my choice delight. A sleep, bathed in musical impressions, and filled with fresh dreams, all impossible and happy; four hours, and five, and six perhaps: then the cathedral matin bell will chime in with my fancies, and I shall wake harmoniously. I shall feel infinitely cheerful, after the spirit of the *Compleat Angler*; I shall remember that I was once at Ware, and at Amwell, those placid haunts of Walton. A conviction of beauty, and contentment in life will lay hold on me, more than commonly; it is probable that I shall read *The Spectator*, and Addison, rather than Steele, at breakfast. And I know which paper it will be: it will be about *Will Wimble* coming up to the house, with two or three hazel twigs in his hand, fresh cut in *Sir Roger's* woods. Or, if I prove faithful to my great Lucretius: the man, not the book, for I read him in the Giuntine: I will read that marvellous *It ver et Venus*; that dancing masque of beauty. For *L'Allegro*, I do not read that; it is read aloud to me by the morning, with exquisite, bright cadences. After my honey from the flowers of a very rustic farm, and my coffee, from some wonderful Eastern place; and my eggs, marked by the careful housewife as she took them from her henhouse, covered with stoncrop over its old tiles; after all these delicacies, now comes the first cigarette, pungent and exhilarating. As the grey blue
clouds

clouds go up, the ruddy sunlight glows through them, straight as an arrow through the gold. Away they wander, out of the window, flung back upon the air, against the roses, and disappear in the buoyant morning.

My thoughts go with them, into the morning, into all the mornings over the world. They travel through the lands, and across the seas, and are everywhere at home, enjoying the presence of life. And past things, old histories, are turned to pleasant recollections: a *pot-pourri*, justly seasoned, and subtly scented; the evil humours and the monstrous tyrannies pass away, and leave only the happiness and the peace.

Call me, my dear friend, what reproachful name you please; but, by your leave, the world is better for my cheerfulness. True, should the terrible issues come upon me, demanding high courage, and finding but good temper, then give me your prayers, for I have my misdoubts. Till then, let me cultivate my place in life, nurturing its comelier flowers; taking the little things of time with a grateful relish and a mind at rest. So hours and years pass into hours and years, gently, and surely, and orderly; as these clouds, grey and blue clouds, of tobacco smoke, pass up to the air, and away upon the wind; incense of a goodly savour, cheering the thoughts of my heart, before passing away, to disappear at last.