

Four Prose Fancies

By Richard Le Gallienne

I.—On Loving One's Enemies

LIKE all people who live apart from it, the Founder of the Christian religion was possessed of a profound knowledge of the world. As, according to the proverb, the woodlander sees nothing of the wood, because of its trees, so those who live in the world know nothing of it. They know its gaudy, glittering surface, its Crystal Palace fireworks, and the paste-diamonds with which it bedecks itself; they know its music halls and its night clubs, its Piccadillies and its politics, its restaurants and its salons; but of the bad—or good?—heart of it all, they know nothing. In more meanings than one, it takes a saint to catch a sinner; and Christ certainly knew as well as saved the sinner.

But none of His precepts show a truer knowledge of life and its conditions than His commandment that we should love our enemies. He realised—can we doubt?—that without enemies the Church He bade His followers build could not hope to be established. He knew that the spiritual fire He strove to kindle would spread but a little unless the four winds of the world blew against it. Well, indeed, may the Christian Church love its enemies, for it is they who have made it.

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Indeed, for a man, or a cause, that wants to get on there is nothing like a few hearty, zealous enemies. Most of us would never be heard of if it were not for our enemies. The unsuccessful man counts up his friends, but the successful man numbers his enemies. A friend of mine was lamenting, the other day, that he could not find twelve people to disbelieve in him. He had been seeking them for years, he sighed, and could not get beyond eleven. But, even so, with only eleven he was a very successful man. In these kind-hearted days enemies are becoming so rare that one has to go out of one's way to make them. The true interpretation, therefore, of the easiest of the commandments is—make your enemies, and your enemies will make you.

So soon as the armed men begin to spring up in our fields, we may be sure we have not sown in vain.

Properly understood, an enemy is but a negative embodiment of our personalities or ideas. He is the involuntary witness to our vitality. Much as he despises us, greatly as he may injure us, he is none the less a creature of our making. It was we who put into him the breath of his malignity, and inspired the activity of his malice. Therefore, with his very existence so tremendous a tribute, we can afford to smile at his self-conscious disclaimers of our significance. Though he slay us, we *made* him—to “make an enemy,” is not that the phrase?

Indeed, the fact that he is our enemy is his one *raison d'être*. That alone should make us charitable to him. Live and let live. Without us our enemy has no occupation, for to hate us is his profession. Think of his wives and families!

The friendship of the little for the great is an old-established profession; there is but one older—namely, the hatred of the little for the great; and, though it is perhaps less officially recognised, it is without doubt the more lucrative. It is one of the shortest roads

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to fame. Why is the name of Pontius Pilate an uneasy ghost or history? Think what fame it would have meant to be an enemy of Socrates or Shakespeare! *Blackwood's Magazine* and *The Quarterly Review* only survive to-day because they once did their best to strangle the genius of Keats and Tennyson. Two or three journals of our own time, by the same unfailing method, seek that circulation from posterity which is denied them in the present.

This is particularly true in literature, where the literary enemy is as organised a tradesman as the literary agent. Like the literary agent, he naturally does his best to secure the biggest men. No doubt the time will come when the literary cut-throat—shall we call him?—will publish dainty little books of testimonials from authors, full of effusive gratitude for the manner in which they have been slashed and bludgeoned into fame. "Butcher to Mr. Grant Allen" may then become a familiar legend over literary shop-fronts:

Ah! did you stab at Shelley's heart
 With silly sneer and cruel lie?
 And Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Keats,
 To murder did you nobly try?

You failed, 'tis true; but what of that?
 The world remembers still your name—
 'Tis fame, *for you*, to be the cur
 That barks behind the heels of Fame.

Any one who is fortunate enough to have enemies will know that all this is far from being fanciful. If one's enemies have any other *raison d'être* beyond the fact of their being our enemies—what is it? They are neither beautiful nor clever, wise nor good,
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famous, nor, indeed, passably distinguished. Were they any of these, they would not have taken to so humble a means of getting their living. Instead of being our enemies, they could then have afforded to employ enemies on their own account.

Who, indeed, are our enemies? Broadly speaking, they are all those people who lack what we possess.

If you are rich, every poor man is necessarily your enemy. If you are beautiful, the great democracy of the plain and ugly will mock you in the streets.

It will be the same with everything you possess. The brainless will never forgive you for possessing brains, the weak will hate you for your strength, and the evil for your good heart. If you can write, all the bad writers are at once your foes. If you can paint, the bad painters will talk you down. But more than any talent or charm you may possess, the pearl of price for which you will be most bitterly hated will be your success. You can be the most wonderful person that ever existed so long as you don't succeed, and nobody will mind. "It is the sunshine," says some one, "that brings out the adder." So powerful, indeed, is success that it has been known to turn a friend into a foe. Those, then, who wish to engage a few trusty enemies out of place need only advertise among the unsuccessful.

P.S.—For one service we should be particularly thankful to our enemies—they save us so much in stimulants. Their unbelief so helps our belief, their negatives make us so positive.

II.—The Dramatic Art of Life

It is a curious truth that, whereas in every other art deliberate choice of method and careful calculation of effect are expected from the artist, in the greatest and most difficult art of all, the art of life, this is not so. In literature, painting, or sculpture you first evolve your conception, and then after long study of it, as it still glows and shimmers in your imagination, you set about the reverent selection of that form which shall be its most truthful incarnation, in words, in paint, in marble. Now life, as has been said many times, is an art too. Sententious morality from time past has told us that we are each given a part to play, evidently implying, with involuntary cynicism, that the art of life is—the art of acting!

As with the actor we are each given a certain dramatic conception for the expression of which we have precisely the same artistic materials—namely, our own bodies, sometimes including heart and brains. One has often heard the complaint of a certain actor that he acts himself. On the metaphorical stage of life the complaint and the implied demand are just the reverse. How much more interesting life would be if only more people had the courage and skill to act themselves, instead of abjectly understudying some one else. Of course, there are supers on the stage of life as on the real stage. It is proper that these should dress and speak and think alike. These one courteously excepts from the generalisation that the composer of the play, as Marcus Aurelius calls him, has given us a certain part to play—that part simply oneself: a part, need one say, by no means as easy as it seems; a part most difficult to study, and requiring daily rehearsal. So difficult is it, indeed, that

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most people throw up the part, and join the ranks of the supers—who, curiously enough, are paid much more handsomely than the principals. They enter one of the learned or idle professions, join the army or take to trade, and so speedily rid themselves of the irksome necessity of being anything more individual than “the learned counsel,” “the learned judge,” “my lord bishop,” or “the colonel,” names impersonal in application as the dignity of “Pharaoh,” whereof the name and not the man was alone important. Henceforth they are the Church, the Law, the Army, the City, or that vaguer profession, Society. Entering one of these, they become as lost to the really living world as the monk who voluntarily surrenders all will and character of his own at the threshold of his monastery: bricks in a prison wall, privates in the line, peas in a row. But, as I say, these are the parts that pay. For playing the others, indeed, you are not paid, but expected to pay—dearly.

It is full time we turned to those on whom falls the burden of those real parts. Such, when quite young, if they be conscientious artists, will carefully consider themselves, their gifts and possibilities, study to discover their artistic *raison d'être* and how best to fulfil it. He or she will say: Here am I, a creature of great gifts and exquisite sensibilities, drawn by great dreams, and vibrating to great emotions; yet this potent and exquisite self is as yet, I know, but unwrought material of the perfect work of art it is intended that I should make of it—but the marble whereupon with patient chisel I must liberate the perfect and triumphant ME! As a poet listening with trembling ear to the voice of his inspiration, so I tremulously ask myself—what is the divine conception that is to become embodied in me, what is the divine meaning of ME? How best shall I express it in look, in word, in deed, till my outer self becomes the truthful symbol of my inner self

self—till, in fact, I have successfully placed the best of myself on the outside!—for others besides myself to see, and know and love!

What is my part, and how am I to play it?

Returning to the latter image, there are two difficulties that beset one in playing a part on the stage of life, right at the outset. You are not allowed to “look” it, or “dress” it! What would an actor think, who, asked to play Hamlet, found that he would be expected to play it without make-up and in nineteenth-century costume? Yet many of us are in a like dilemma with similar parts. Actors and audience must all wear the same drab clothes and the same immobile expression. It is in vain you protest that you do not really belong to this absurd and vulgar nineteenth century, that you have been spirited into it by a cruel mistake, that you really belong to mediæval Florence, to Elizabethan, Caroline, or at latest Queen Anne England, and that you would like to be allowed to look and dress as like it as possible. It is no use; if you dare to look or dress like anything but your own tradesmen—and other critics—it is at your peril. If you are beautiful, you are expected to disguise a fact that is an open insult to every other person you look at; and you must, as a general rule, never look, wear, feel, or say what everybody else is not also looking, wearing, feeling, or saying.

Thus you get some hint of the difficulty of playing the part of yourself on this stage of life. In these matters of dressing and looking your part musicians seem granted an immunity denied to all their fellow-artists. Perhaps it is taken for granted that the musician is a fool—the British public is so intuitive. Yet it takes the same view of the poet—without allowing him a like immunity. And, by the way, what a fine conception of his part had Tennyson: of the dignity, the mystery, the picturesqueness of it. Tennyson would have felt it an artistic crime to look like
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his publisher ; yet what poet is there left us to-day half so distinguished-looking as his publisher ?

Indeed, curiously enough, among no set of men does the desire to look as commonplace as the rest of the world seem so strong as among men of letters. Perhaps it is out of consideration for the rest of the world ; but whatever the reason, immobility of expression and general mediocrity of style are more characteristic of them at present than even the military.

It is surely a strange paradox that we should pride ourselves on schooling to foolish insensibility, on eliminating from them every mark of individual character, the faces that were intended subtly and eloquently to image our moods—to look glad when we are glad, sorry when we are sorry, angry in anger, and lovely in love.

The impassivity of the modern young man is indeed a weird and wonderful thing. Is it a mark to hide from us the appalling sins he none the less openly affects ? Is it meant to conceal that once in his life he paid a wild visit to "The Empire"—by kind indulgence of the County Council ? that he once chucked a barmaid under the chin, that he once nearly got drunk, that he once spoke to a young lady he did not know—and then ran away ?

One sighs for the young men of the days of Gautier and Hugo, the young men with red waistcoats who made asses of themselves at first nights and on the barricades, young men with romance in their hearts and passion in their blood, fearlessly sentimental and picturesquely everything.

The lover then was not ashamed that you should catch radiant glimpses of his love in his eyes—nay ! if you smiled kindly on him, he would take you by the arm and insist on your breaking a bottle with him in honour of his mistress. Joy and sorrow then wore their appropriate colours, according, so to say, to the natural sumptuary

sumptuary laws of the emotions—one of which is that the right place for the heart is the sleeve.

It is the duty of those who are great, or to whom great destinies of joy or sorrow have been dealt, to wear their distinctions for the world to see. It is good for the world, which in its crude way indicates the rudiments of this dramatic art of life, when it decrees that the bride shall walk radiant in orange blossom, and the mourner sadden our streets with blacks—symbols ever passing before us of the moving vicissitudes of life.

The mourner cannot always be sad, or the bride merry; the bride indeed sometimes weeps at the altar, and the mourner laughs a savage cynical laugh at the grave; but for those moments in which they awhile forget parts more important than themselves, the tailor and the dressmaker have provided symbolical garments, just as military decorations have been provided for heroes without the gift of looking heroic, and sacerdotal vestments for the priest, who, like a policeman, is not always on duty.

In playing his part the conscientious artist in life, like any other actor, must often seem to feel more than he really feels at a given moment, say more than he means. In this he is far from being insincere—though he must make up his mind to be accused daily of insincerity and affectation. On the contrary, it will be his very sincerity that necessitates his make-believe. With his great part ever before him in its inspiring completeness, he must be careful to allow no merely personal accident of momentary feeling or action to jeopardise the general effect. There are moments, for example, when a really true lover, owing to such masterful natural facts as indigestion, a cold, or extreme sleepiness, is unable to feel all that he knows he really feels. To “tell the truth,” as it is called under such circumstances, would simply be a most dangerous form of lying. There is no duty we owe to
truth

truth more imperative than that of lying stoutly on occasion—for, indeed, there is often no other way of conveying the whole truth than by telling the part-lie.

A watchful sincerity to our great conception of ourselves is the first and last condition of our creating that finest work of art—a personality; for a personality, like a poet, is not only born, but made.

III.—The Arbitrary Classification of Sex

In an essay on Vauvenargues Mr. John Morley speaks with characteristic causticity of those epigrammatists “who persist in thinking of man and woman as two different species,” and who make verbal capital out of the fancied distinction in the form of smart epigrams beginning “*Les femmes.*” It is one of Shakespeare’s cardinal characteristics that *he understood woman*. Mr. Meredith’s fame as a novelist is largely due to the fact that he too *understands women*. The one spot on the sun of Robert Louis Stevenson’s fame, so we are told, is that he could *never draw a woman*. His capacity for drawing men counted for nothing, apparently, beside this failure. Evidently the Sphinx has not the face of a woman for nothing. That is why no one has yet read her riddle, translated her mystic smile. Yet many people smile mysteriously, without any profound meanings behind their smile, with no other reason than a desire to mystify. Perhaps the Sphinx smiles to herself just for the fun of seeing us take her smile so seriously. And surely women must so smile as they hear their psychology so gravely discussed. Of course, the superstition is invaluable to them, and it is only natural that they should make the most of it. Man is supposed to be a complete ignoramus in
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regard to all the specialised female "departments"—from the supreme mystery of the female heart to the humble domestic mysteries of a household. Similarly, men are supposed to have no taste in women's dress, yet for whom do women clothe themselves in the rainbow and the sea-foam, if not to please men? And was not the high-priest of that delicious and fascinating mystery a man—if it be proper to call the late M. Worth a man?—as the best cooks are men, and the best waiters?

It would seem to be assumed from all this mystification that men are beings clear as daylight, both to themselves and to women. Poor simple manageable souls, their wants are easily satisfied, their psychology—which, it is implied, differs little from their physiology—long since mapped out.

It may be so, but it is the opinion of some that men's simplicity is no less a fiction than women's mysterious complexity, and that human character is made up of much the same qualities in men and women, irrespective of a merely rudimentary sexual distinction, which has, of course, its proper importance, and which the present writer would be the last to wish away. From that quaint distinction of sex springs, of course, all that makes life in the smallest degree worth living, from great religions to tiny flowers. Love and beauty and poetry; "Romeo and Juliet," "Helen of Troy," Shakespeare's plays, Burne-Jones's pictures, and Wagner's operas—all such moving expressions of human life, as a great scientist has shown us, spring from the all-important fact that "male and female created He them."

This everybody knows, and few are fool enough to deny. Many people, however, confuse this organic distinction of sex with its time-worn conventional symbols; just as religion is commonly confused with its external rites and ceremonies. The comparison naturally continues itself further; for, as in religion so

soon as some traditional garment of the faith has become outworn or otherwise unsuitable, and the proposal is made to dispense with or substitute it, an outcry immediately is raised that religion itself is in danger—so with sex, no sooner does one or the other sex propose to discard its arbitrary conventional characteristics, or to supplement them by others borrowed from its fellow-sex, than an outcry immediately is raised that sex itself is in danger.

Sex—the most potent force in the universe—in danger because women wear knickerbockers instead of petticoats, or military men take to corsets and cosmetics !

That parallel with religion may be pursued profitably one step further. In religion, the test of your faith is not how you live, not in your kindness of heart or purity of mind, but how you believe—in the Trinity, in the Atonement ; and do you turn to the East during the recital of the Apostles' Creed ? These and such, as every one knows, are the vital matters of religion. And it is even so with sex. You are not asked for the realities of manliness or womanliness ; but for the shadows, the arbitrary externalities, the fashion of which changes from generation to generation.

To be truly womanly you must never wear your hair short ; to be truly manly you must never wear it long. To be truly womanly you must dress as daintily as possible, however uncomfortably ; to be truly manly you must wear the most hideous gear ever invented by the servility of tailors—a strange succession of cylinders from head to heel ; cylinder on head, cylinder round your body, cylinders on arms and cylinders on legs. To be truly womanly you must be shrinking and clinging in manner and trivial in conversation, you must have no ideas and rejoice that you wish for none ; you must thank Heaven that you have never ridden a bicycle or smoked a cigarette ; and you must be
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prepared to do a thousand other absurd and ridiculous things. To be truly manly you must be and do the opposite of all these things, with this exception—that with you the possession of ideas is optional. The finest specimens of British manhood are without them, but that, I say, is, generally speaking, a matter for yourself. It is indeed the only matter in which you have any choice. More important matters, such as the cut of your clothes and hair, the shape of your face, the length of your moustache and the pattern of your cane—all these are very properly regulated for you by laws of fashion, which you could never dream of breaking. You may break every moral law there is—or rather, was—and still remain a man. You may be a bully, a cad, a coward and a fool in the poor heart and brains of you ; but so long as you wear the mock regimentals of contemporary manhood, and are above all things plain and undistinguished enough, your reputation for manhood will be secure. There is nothing so dangerous to a reputation for manhood as brains or beauty.

In short, to be a true woman you have only to be pretty and an idiot, and to be a true man you have only to be brutal and a fool.

From these misconceptions of manliness and womanliness, these superstitions of sex, many curious confusions have come about. The, so to say, professional differentiation between the sexes had at one time gone so far that men were credited with the entire monopoly of a certain set of human qualities, and women with the monopoly of a certain set of other human qualities ; yet every one of these are qualities which one would have thought were proper to, and necessary for, all human beings alike, male and female.

In a dictionary of a date (1856) when everything on earth and in heaven was settled and written in penny cyclopedias and books of deportment, I find these delicious definitions :

Manly :

Manly : becoming a man ; firm ; brave ; undaunted ; dignified ; noble ; stately ; not boyish or womanish.

Womanly : becoming a woman ; feminine ; as *womanly* behaviour.

Under *Woman* we find the adjectives—soft, mild, pitiful and flexible, kind, civil, obliging, humane, tender, timorous, modest.

Who can doubt that the dictionary maker defined and distributed his adjectives aright for the year 1856? Since then, however, many alarming heresies have taken root steadily in our land, and some are heard to declare that both these sets of adjectives apply to men and women alike, and are, in fact, necessities of any decent human outfit. Otherwise the conclusion is obvious, that no one desirous of the adjective “manly” must ever be—soft, mild, pitiful and flexible, kind, civil, obliging, humane, tender, timorous, or modest ; and no one desirous of the adjective “womanly”—be firm, brave, undaunted, dignified, noble, or stately.

But surely the essentials of “manliness” and “womanliness” belong to man and woman alike—the externals are purely artistic considerations, and subject to the vagaries of fashion. In art no one would think of allowing fashion any serious artistic opinion. It is usually the art which is out of fashion that is most truly art. Similarly, fashions in manliness or womanliness have nothing to do with real manliness or womanliness. Moreover, the adjectives “manly” or “womanly,” applied to works of art, or the artistic surfaces of men and women, are irrelevant—that is to say, impertinent. You have no right to ask a poem or a picture to look manly or womanly, any more than you have any right to ask a man or a woman to look manly or womanly. There is no such thing as looking manly or womanly. There is looking beautiful or ugly, distinguished or commonplace. The one law or externals is beauty in all its various manifestations. To ask the sex of a beautiful person is as absurd as it would be to ask the
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publisher the sex of a beautiful book. Such questions are for midwives and doctors.

It was once the fashion for heroes to shed tears on the smallest occasion, and it does not appear that they fought the worse for it : some of the firmest, bravest, most undaunted, some dignified, most noble, most stately human beings have been women ; as some of the softest, mildest, most pitiful and flexible, most kind, civil, obliging, humane, tender, timorous and modest human beings have been men. Indeed, the bravest men that ever trod this planet have worn corsets, and it needs more courage nowadays for a man to wear his hair long than to machine-gun a whole African nation. Moreover, quite the nicest women one knows ride bicycles—in the rational costume.

IV.—The Fallacy of a Nation

It is, I am given to understand, a familiar axiom of mathematics that no number of ciphers placed in front of significant units, or tens or hundreds of units, adds in the smallest degree to the numerical value of those units. The figure one becomes of no more importance however many noughts are marshalled in front of it—though, indeed, in the mathematics of human nature this is not so. Is not a man or woman considered great in proportion to the number of ciphers that walk in front of him, from a humble brace of domestics to guards of honour and imperial armies ?

A parallel profound truth of mathematics is that a nought, however many times it be multiplied, remains nought ; but again we find the reverse obtain in the mathematics of human nature. One might have supposed that the result of one nobody multiplied even

even fifty million times would still be nobody. However, such is far from being the case. Fifty million nobodies make—a nation. Of course, there is no need for so many. I am reckoning as a British subject, and speak of fifty million merely as an illustration of the general fact that it is the multiplication of nobodies that makes a nation. “Increase and multiply” was, it will be remembered, the recipe for the Jewish nation.

Nobodies of the same colour, tongues, and prejudices, have but to congregate together in a crowd sufficiently big for other similar crowds to recognise them, and they are given a name of their own, and become recognised as a nation—one of “the Great Powers.”

Beyond those differences in colour, tongue, and prejudices, there is really no difference between the component units—or rather ciphers—of all these several national crowds. You have seen a procession of various trades-unions filing towards Hyde Park, each section with its particular banner of a strange device: “the United Guild of Paperhangers,” “the Ancient Order of Plumbers,” and so on. And you may have marvelled to notice how alike the members of the various carefully differentiated companies were. So to say, they each and all might have been plumbers; and you couldn’t help feeling that it wouldn’t have mattered much if some of the paperhangers had by mistake got walking amongst the plumbers, or *vice versa*.

So the great trades-unions of the world file past, one with the odd word “Russia” on its banner; another boasting itself “Germany”—this with a particularly bumptious and self-important young man walking backward in front of it, in the manner of a Salvation Army captain, and imperially waving an iron wand; still another “nation” calling itself “France”; and yet another boasting the biggest brass band, and called “England.” Other smaller bodies of nobodies—that is, smaller nations—file past with humbler

humbler tread—though there is really no need for their doing so. For, as we have said, they are in every particular like to those haughtier nations who take precedence of them. In fact, one or two of them such as Norway and Denmark—were a truer system of human mathematics to obtain—are really of more importance than the so-called greater nations, in that among their nobodies they include a larger percentage of intellectual somebodies.

Remembering that percentage of wise men, the formula of a nation were perhaps more truly stated in our first mathematical image. The wise men in a nation are as the units with the noughts in front of them. And when I say wise men I do not, indeed, mean merely the literary men or the artists, but all those somebodies with some real force of character, people with brains and hearts, fighters and lovers, saints and thinkers, and the patient industrious workers. Such, if you consider, are really no integral part of the nation among which they are cast. They have no part in what are grandiloquently called national interests—war, politics, and horse-racing to wit. A change of Government leaves them as unmoved as an election for the Board of Guardians. They would as soon think of entering Parliament or the County Council, as of yearning to manage the gasworks, or to go about with one of those carts bearing the legend “Aldermen and Burgesses of the City of London” conspicuously upon its front. Their main concern in political change is the rise and fall of the income-tax, and, be the Cabinet Tory or Liberal, their rate papers come in for the same amount. It is likely that national changes would affect them but little more. What would a foreign invasion mean more than that we should pay our taxes to French, Russian, or German officials, instead of to English ones? French and Italians do our cooking, Germans manage our music, Jews control our money markets; surely it would make little difference to us for
France,

France, Russia, or Germany to undertake our government. Japan, indeed, already dictates our foreign policy. The worst of being conquered by Russia would be the necessity of learning Russian ; whereas a little rubbing up of our French would make us comfortable with France. Besides, to be conquered by France would save us crossing the Channel to Paris, and then we might hope for cafés in Regent Street, and an emancipated literature. As a matter of fact, so-called national interests are merely certain private interests on a large scale, the private interests of financiers, ambitious politicians and soldiers, and great merchants. Broadly speaking, there are no rival nations—there are rival markets, and it is its Board of Trade and its Stock Exchange rather than its Houses of Parliament that virtually govern a country. Thus one seaport goes down and another comes up, industries forsake one country to bless another, the military and naval strengths of nations fluctuate this way and that ; and to those whom these changes affect they are undoubtedly important matters—the great capitalist, the soldier, and the politician ; but to the quiet man at home with his wife, his children, his books and his flowers, to the artist busied with braver translunary matters, to the saint with his eyes filled with “ the white radiance of eternity,” to the shepherd on the hillside, the milkmaid in love, or the angler at his sport—what are these pompous commotions, these busy, bustling mimicries of reality ? England will be just as good to live in though men some day call her France. Let the big busybodies divide her amongst them as they like, so that they leave one alone with one’s fair share of the sky and the grass, and an occasional not too vociferous nightingale.

The reader will perhaps forgive the hackneyed reference to Sir Thomas Browne peacefully writing his *Religio Medici* amid all the commotions of the Civil War, and to Gautier calmly correcting

recting the proofs of his new poems during the siege of Paris. The milkman goes his rounds amid the crash of empires. It is not his business to fight. His business is to distribute his milk—as much after half-past seven as may be inconvenient. Similarly, the business of the thinker is with his thought, the poet with his poetry. It is the business of politicians to make national quarrels, and the business of the soldier to fight them. But as for the poet—let him correct his proofs, or beware the printer.

The idea, then, of a nation is a grandiloquent fallacy in the interests of commerce and ambition—political and military. All the great and good, clever and charming people belong to one secret nation, for which there is no name unless it be the Chosen People. They are the lost tribes of love, art and religion, lost and swamped amid alien peoples, but ever dreaming of a time when they shall meet once more in Jerusalem.

Yet though they are thus aliens, taking and wishing no part in the organisation of the “nations” among which they dwell, this does not prevent those nations taking part and credit in them. And whenever a brave soldier wins a battle, or an intrepid traveller discovers a new land, his particular nation flatters itself as though it—the million nobodies—had done it. With a profound indifference to, indeed an active dislike of, art and poetry, there is nothing on which a nation prides itself so much as upon its artists and poets, whom, invariably, they starve, neglect, and even insult as long as it is not too silly to do so.

Thus the average Englishman talks of Shakespeare—as though he himself had written the plays; of India as though he himself had conquered it. And thus grow up such fictions as “national greatness” and “public opinion.”

For what is “national greatness” but the glory reflected from the memories of a few great individuals? and what is “public opinion”

opinion ” but the blustering echoes of the opinion of a few clever young men on the morning papers ?

For how can people in themselves little become great by merely congregating into a crowd, however large ? And surely fools do not become wise, or worth listening to, merely by the fact of their banding together.

A “public opinion ” on any matter except football, prize-fighting, and perhaps cricket, is merely ridiculous—by whatever brutal physical powers it may be enforced—ridiculous as a town council’s opinion upon art ; and a nation is merely a big fool with an army.