

TEA WITH THE CHESTERTONS

Written for "The Listener" by G. R. ALLEN

"GILBERT, remember that you promised to send to *The Listener* the text of that talk on Dr. Johnson." This is not a verbatim report of what Mrs. Chesterton said to her husband upon a thunder-ridden Sunday afternoon at Top Meadow, Beaconsfield, but it is near enough. Word had come to me that the Chestertons would like to see me at their tea-table. This was equivalent to a royal command, so I rose from the bed which had received me after an encounter with a car in the vicinity of Slough, and made my way to the house which Chesterton, or more probably Mrs. Chesterton, had selected.

Apropos of this selection I may as well repeat the story as I heard it that afternoon. A day came when Mrs. Chesterton said unto her

spouse "Go to. We have dwelt by the Brown Dog at Battersea too long. I pine for fresh woods and pastures new." This is not a verbatim report either.

Chesterton replied in the manner of John Gilpin to Mrs. Gilpin. They left Battersea Park and saw a bus labelled "Hamwell." "This looks like ours," said Chesterton, and they boarded it. Arrived at Paddington Mr. Chesterton went to the ticket office.

"I want to go in one of your trains," he confided to the clerk.

"Which one?" inquired that functionary.

"What trains have you got?" demanded Chesterton.

"You'd better go to Slough," said the clerk. So to Slough they went. Alighting there they walked to Beaconsfield, and there was Top

Meadow waiting for a tenant. In "The Laughing Philosopher" Emile Cammaerts gives us a description of Top Meadow. In this rather fulsome panegyric we are encouraged to be fanatical about Chesterton, and I, for one, have never required encouragement in that direction.

Chesterton's Voice

I did not hear the talk on Dr. Johnson, but I did hear the talk on the genesis of "Father Brown," and another in the series on "The Spice of Life" which must have been one of Chesterton's last public utterances.

Frank Swinnerton in "The Georgian Literary Scene" describes Chesterton's voice as something between a hum and a flute. In latter years it seemed to be pushed up into his head from below. When I went to say good-bye to him he appeared from a sanctum sanctorum, and having adjusted his bulk to certain respiratory and digestive urgencies he explained that Mrs. Chesterton had gone away because a member of her family had just died, and that he was getting something ready for Methuens. He had been at work with his secretary, a lady to whom he bequeathed his papers. (He bequeathed his entire fortune to Mrs. Chesterton.)

Dark Room, Large Man

Readers of "The Man Who Was Thursday" will remember how Sime is taken into a dark room and introduced to a large man. That is precisely what befell me. The room was dark, not because Chesterton emulated Edgar Allan Poe and the later Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and liked dark rooms, but because all rooms are much of a muchness to me. There was the model theatre stage at one end of it. Mrs. Chesterton propelled me within. I fear I was not so responsive as I should have been, for as they used to say of



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the cricketers who were leather-hunting, I was looking both ways for Sunday. Sunday eventually defined himself heralded by the inevitable cigar. I heard the flute-like voice which suggested an aloof squire to me. I was a little chilled, but tea and seed-cake warmed me, and I said something about Cecil Chesterton's History of America.

Chesterton sat at one end of the table, and Mrs. Chesterton at the other, as was meet and right, and opposite me sat Beatrice Harraden. We were driven home in the Chestertonian car. "I hope we shall meet in London," said Beatrice Harraden, and I missed my opportunity by not replying, "Ships that pass in the night."

Donkey and Dog

I perceive, however, that I am wandering from my caption. There was a hot time in the Old Town, Beaconsfield, when Chesterton went to live there. He took his donkey and his dog with him. The donkey we all know. The dog is perhaps not so well known. He was a fox terrier—that is to say if she wasn't a bitch—and has a place in the cast of "The Flying Inn." I was introduced to the dog, but I suppose that innate delicacy which in spite of outward appearances characterised Chesterton, may have precluded him from introducing me to the donkey.

Now the small voice of that big man is silent. Like John Milton, who also spent some time in Buckinghamshire, he will be remembered as a poet long after he is forgotten as a controversialist.

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