

## IN MEMORY OF CECIL CHESTERTON

(By HILAIRE BELLOC, in the *New Witness*.)

Cecil Chesterton is dead. He has left the only place which we know and understand and gone to better and more permanent things which we shall understand in our turn. Later, when the deadening effect of such a blow has passed it will be possible to write, though hardly worthily, the panegyric which is his due. It may be possible (though I have never found such a thing possible even after the passage of many years) to express the intolerable sense of loss and grief which follows upon such a departure in us who remain. To-day I am incapable of either of these high things, but there is one thing I can do—which is to put upon record the greatness of what has gone away from us at this critical time and the consequent loss to England which he loved and served as very few modern Englishmen in public life love and serve her.

There is a worn phrase, used indifferently of the few great and the many little when they die, that the loss is to us "irreparable." In this one case of Cecil Chesterton it is, in relation to his country, for once a word strictly true. Nothing can replace him, nor exercise the function which he exercised, nor do what he did for his country; the gravity of that judgment weighs upon me as I write so that I feel it like any other great public calamity—the loss of a battle, or a plague.

For this country is in high peril. For all the vigor of its blood, for all the heroism and tenacity which it has displayed and will continue to display it is yet in peril, because the peril concerns not the blood or the stock or the race, but its institutions; and by institutions, their vigor and their authority this ancient state, aristocratic in origin, lives. If they fall below a certain level of contempt and disease, with them the State falls, for all its other virtues may perish. There was no modern State the institutions of which were as strong but a generation ago as were those of this country. There is none in which so prodigious a revolution has been working. Everywhere else the tidal wave of the late eighteenth century had swept over Society and things had begun anew: but here continuity and all the strength which accompanies it, an oaken stuff, distinguished the public affairs of the English. In no other country had authority a stronger moral basis, nowhere were the servants of the State put higher in public esteem and more respected by those whom they lightly governed. All that is gone, and it is gone through the cowardice and the falsehood of those who should have been the conservators of England. When it was perceived that wealth could purchase anything from a useless honor to a vital policy, that membership of the various public bodies—particularly of the House of Commons—rendered a man immune, no matter what his treachery, meanness, swindling, or theft, there naturally arose an attraction between public affairs and whatever was worst in the State. It was inevitable that it should be so, for laws written or unwritten live by their sanctions not by their mere statement. With amazing rapidity the thing developed until we came to the point where we are to-day. One of a victorious league of great nations; one which has presented the most marvellous picture of strained endeavor, is nominally represented by men and by a system containing those men, which men and which system have fallen beneath the level of scorn.

Now when a State comes to this very grave pass—and history is there to show what such a pass means in the story of nations—there is one function of supreme value to the commonwealth. It is the function exercised by the man who will bring out corruption into the air: oxydise it: burn it up. But the exercise of such a function in such times can be undertaken only by, at the best, a very small number of men, at the worst by only one man or perhaps by none. For this function requires a combination of

three things, each rare, and in combination, of course, much rarer still. These three things are knowledge, the power of lucidity in expression, and, lastly, courage.

Knowledge of what political corruption had become, of its incredible extent and degree, was, when Cecil Chesterton began his effort, confined almost entirely to those who benefited by that corruption. It was not in those days (I speak of about a dozen years ago, when, if I remember rightly, he wrote his first book upon the growing falsehood of public life) anything like what it is to-day. Men at the head of the State were still men reputable in private life. Their connection with finance was at least not a connection of the taking and giving of petty bribes, and there was still some moderate distinction between the political ideals of nominal opponents. Still, the thing had begun and had already reached a height sufficient for attack: and Cecil Chesterton attacked. Through him much more than through any other man, the knowledge of the rapidly increasing evil was spread, until now you may say that some thousands among our millions are well acquainted with the way in which they are governed and the sort of men that govern them. Those thousands will be turned into millions by the effect of this war and of the ludicrous election to which we are at this moment invited by the politicians and their financial masters. When the thing is thoroughly done, when the exposure is complete and the knowledge is universal, we shall be able to say that the great fruits of that time by which we hope to correct its great dangers will have been due in the main to the man who conducted this paper and who has now died as a soldier in France, after, thank God, he had lived to see the destruction of Prussia.

So much for knowledge. It is rare; but the power of lucid expression is much rarer. It is of the talents as distinguished from virtues the rarest of all. For twenty men who can write good rhetoric, or even good verse, there is not one who can with intelligence seize at once the heart of a subject and present it in the shortest space so vividly and so framed that all his audience receives his own knowledge and are in communion with it. Look up and down the history of English Letters and see how rare is that gift. Swift had it, and Cobbett. Perhaps if you search you might find a half-dozen other names. There was certainly no one in our time who had it except my friend. I speak here of something which I know, for I myself, with I know not what labor, have attempted and have failed in the same task, and I have seen around me other men far more gifted than I, admirable at illustration and rhythm, at strong picturing of things, who have failed in this complete task of rapidity of synthesis informed by lucidity.

How formidable is the combination of this extremely rare type of genius with a sufficient knowledge!

Yet that combination would be sterile, were it not for the third quality which is the rarest of all.

Much might be written upon the strange paradox that at a moment and in a society where courage in almost every other form is conspicuous and splendid, public courage, the courage of the forum dies away. It is inevitable. Were it not so the peril and the decline would never have come about. So it is. Of all men who speak upon the intolerable condition of our public life, of all the hundreds and thousands of men who speak of it in tones varying from contempt to anger, only some tiny fraction dares to *print*: that is, under modern conditions, to speak publicly in the market place. And of these Cecil Chesterton was by far the highest example. His courage was heroic, native, positive, and equal: always at the highest potentiality of courage. He never in his life checked an action or a word from a consideration of personal caution, and that is more than can be said of any other man of his time. We can say of him, what is sometimes said indifferently in connection with other persons, that he was incapable of such caution: that