

THE DREAMLAND OF BELFAST

(By G. K. CHESTERTON in the *New Witness*.)

The stranger coming to the town of Belfast need employ no complications of tact in order to woo the townsman to the discussion of his town. Those who received me were most hearty and hospitable, and showed me all possible kindness; but I am sure they thought the greatest possible kindness they could show me was simply to show me Belfast. The claims of the city seemed to form part of the first social salutations; as which should say "Good morning, Belfast contains nineteen thousand twelve hundred and fourteen umbrella stands, with eight compartments each, one hole one umbrella"; or "How do you do, there are seven hundred and fifty miles of corrugated iron made into hygienic dust-bins for the city, which is unequalled in this respect by any city in the world." They asked me repeatedly if I had seen Belfast, and whether I liked Belfast, as if it were something quite visibly unique and even fanciful, like one of the seven wonders of the world; as if it were all carved out of one colossal sea-shell, or slung in terraces from tree to tree like the hanging gardens of Babylon, or floated on the seas, or visited only by flying ships. Now, since to the frivolous foreign eye the town has only a colorless resemblance to certain of the slums and suburbs of a good many other towns, there is really something arresting and mysterious about this sincere local impression of a thing unique. It is their tradition to talk, of course, of the Southern Irish as dreamers; but I do not think I ever met human beings over whom a dream had such deadly power to the denial of the daylight as it has over the men of Belfast. They are, in the hardest and plainest sense of the words, given over to believe a lie; their strong delusion is like some positive drug that prevents them seeing the streets straight in front of them, or the faces of the men with whom they speak. It is a vision that deprives men of the elementary sense that two and two make four, that rots in them all common sense about contemporary affairs. I was told again and again that the Catholic peasant of the Irish countryside was a man who always lay on his back in a dream, and never did any work. I pointed out that the proposition was starkly incredible on the face of it; that a small farmer who made his farm pay must work pretty hard; and that the usual case against such farming all over the world was that he and his family worked a great deal too hard. But it made no difference to the mystical faith of the man of Belfast. It was a delusion that was stronger than the eyes in a man's head. Several highly competent and conspicuously sincere citizens told me that there was no poverty in Belfast. They did not tell me that there was less poverty than had commonly been alleged; they did not say the poverty was exaggerated or was lessening. They said there was none. As a remark about the Earthly Paradise on the island of Atlantis, it would be arresting; as a remark about the streets through which my interlocutors and I had both passed a few moments before, it was simply a triumph of the sheer madness of man's imagination; a triumph of mind over matter. I remarked mildly that if there was no poverty among the people they must have an eccentric taste in dress. I was gravely assured that this was indeed the case; that they had a very eccentric taste. The point here, however, is that this monstrous and mystical cloud of credulity, though a wholly local is a wholly living thing. Belfast does worship itself; and it is a portent and a prodigy of what even that weakest of all forms of worship can do.

The citizen of Belfast offers the city of Belfast as something unrivalled and unequalled in the whole world; and he is right. There is nothing like it, I seriously believe, anywhere else. The grim pattern and grey coloring which are common to it and other modern capitalist centres are, after all, I believe, a superficial element of resemblance. It has all the more dismal elements of Liverpool or Leeds or Sheffield; but it is not

really like Liverpool or Leeds or Sheffield. It is no more really like the industrial society it has long ceased to represent than it is like the agricultural society it has long ceased to absorb. It is an isolated historical entity; and belongs to a special class of isolated historical entities. Belfast is an antiquated novelty. Belfast, like Berlin, has exhibited a peculiar Protestant process of success, by which a thing grows amid universal admiration like a gigantic mushroom; and then is always discovered suddenly to be not even a mushroom, but a toadstool admittedly unprofitable and poisonous. It is its mark that the whole world seems to be swelling its success, until the moment when the whole world becomes conscious of the necessity of its destruction. There is certainly this element in the problem of Belfast history, as there is I think in the history of everything that owed its origin to the strange local impulse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such a thing is still being excused for being *parvenu* when it is discovered to be *passé*. Only by coming in touch, for example, with some of the controversies surrounding the Convention could an Englishman become fully aware of how much of the Belfast attitude is made up of the mentality, not so much of a remote seventeenth century Whig as of a recent nineteenth century Radical. His conventionality seemed to be that of a Victorian rather than a Williamite; and to be less limited by the Orange Brotherhood than by the Cobden Club. This is a fact most successfully painted and pasted over by the big brushes of our own Party system, which has the art of hiding so many glaring facts. This Unionist Party in Ireland is very largely concerned to resist the main reform advocated by the Unionist Party in England. A political humorist who understood the Cobden tradition of Belfast and the Chamberlain tradition of Birmingham could have a huge amount of fun appealing from one to the other; congratulating Belfast on the bold Protectionist doctrines prevalent in Ireland; adjuring Mr. Bonar Law and the Tariff Reformers never to forget the fight made by Belfast for the sacred principles of Free Trade. In so far as there is in social philosophy anything worth calling a Belfast school it is simply the Manchester School. It is dead; but somehow it is all the more dead for being only just dead.

Nevertheless this truth by itself would be an injustice to Belfast; certainly an injustice to the Protestant North East corner of Ireland. There are things present there that cannot be found in Manchester or learnt in the Manchester school. For instance, there is superstition; a thing having always something human about it, and counting for something in time and tenacity. A gentleman of distinction among the Southern Unionists said to me apropos of the Orange prejudices (which he did not in the least share) this simple and profound thing "wherever you find religion, you will find it growing stronger as you go downwards in the social scale." The queer negative conviction of these people has really produced a sort of nihilistic mythology. I talked to people who had heard Protestant mothers warning their children away from a hole or a pool because "there were wee popes there." There is a sort of fairy tale in the fancy of a pool full of these peculiar elves, like so many efts, each with its triple crown or crossed keys all complete. There is much sturdy nonconformity in Manchester, but nobody in Manchester explains, even to children, that a pond contains an assortment of Archbishops of Canterbury, little goblins in gaiters and aprons. Belfast is built nearer to the frontiers of fairyland after all. Anyhow, it is built nearer to the frontiers of something which is not Manchester nor the nation that created Manchester. Belfast may or may not be Irish; it is a question I will leave to Irishmen. But that Belfast is not English, nor anything remotely representing anything good or bad about England, that I will swear with every atom of my own national identity.

It has another good characteristic, which may partly be Irish; which is even more I fancy Scotch; but which most certainly is not English. It not only has a far-off touch of the fairy tale, but it has traces of the

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