

How say you, Gilbert Keith Chesterton—are you guilty or not guilty?

Of course, Mr. Chesterton talks nonsense sometimes, and often he is right rather by a divine luck than by conscious effort. Of much of his work he can say, like Petruchio, "It is extempore, from my mother-wit." His insight, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say his power of guessing, almost approaches a sixth sense. His dexterity in using words is like that of a gifted stock-rider in using whips; he seems almost to misuse them in the sense of forcing them to do more than their proper work. It seems as unnatural to smash a rationalist with a pun as to flick a fly off a lady's back with a 30ft. lash. Of Mr. Chesterton's wit there can be no question: it is stressed most by those least inclined to take him seriously. But the praise is nearly always wrongly given. The popular idea of him is of a man perpetually standing on his head, and shouting joyously how funny things look from that standpoint; whereas the whole point of his best jokes is that he is astonished to be flat on his feet, while other men (quite gravely and naturally) are careering about upside-down.

But wit, readiness, and even genius, fail to account for all the rare merit there is in much of Mr. Chesterton's work. This undisciplined jester, this wayward Bohemian, has done some remarkable things. For example, there is his *Pictorial Age in Literature*. It is a trifle, of course, but such a trifle! An essay is often condensed in a phrase, such as that which describes Macaulay's prose as "at its best like steel and at its worst like tin," or Tennyson's work as that of "a provincial and sometimes a suburban Virgil." "not a balance of truths, like the universe, but a balance of whims, like the British constitution." Again, it is no light business to set about telling the history of England in 240 pages. Mr. Chesterton does not tell it: no god or mortal could. But, with much fancy, perhaps some fantasy, and a wealth of incidental wisdom, he gives more essential truth than has ever been packed in such a space by any English historical writer.

There is, of course, another and weaker side to Mr. Chesterton. His proper business is to give us great truths if possible, and, failing that, what the schoolboy would call "whopping" great lies, lies so vast and provocative as to make the defence of truth a necessity. We want to know from him the rough and thorny path to one considerable place, and the broad road to another resort, even more fashionable and populous. But we do not look to him for a directory of Houndsditch or a plan of the underground places of Westminster. He is just as likely to be wrong in very small things as he is to be right in very large things. Not that the small things are unimportant, but they are work for lesser men. By all means let Mr. Chesterton thunder at Parliamentary corruption and Parliamentary futility in general; but the special case of the notorious Mr. Snide, M.P., is better left to another. It may be for the public good as well as for the comfort of Mr. Chesterton's own soul that he should rail at Israel, or, as he would himself put it, rescue the Jew from the unfair position he occupies in the modern State. But Mr. Chesterton is too big a man to spit upon a single Jewish gaberdine. It may be possible to respect and even sympathise with Terquemada. But nobody would like to think of him as taking a turn at the rack with his own hand.

It is this local lack of balance, much more than fear of the omnipresent and omnipotent Israelite, that prevents timid souls from adopting Mr. Chesterton as a leader. They are afraid that, if there happens to be no crusade, they will be invited to share in a pogrom. Yet he does, in a roundabout way, influence many who in turn have an effect on public opinion. These men quote his jests to point morals they have furtively borrowed from him. If you are fairly familiar with Mr. Chesterton's thought you will recognise it as easily in the leading columns as in the "Pithy Paragraphs" or "Wisdom of the Week." Of course, as in most cases of theft, the thief mars what he steals. But the merchandise does reach some sort of market that way. One catches thought, like disease, without knowing

whence, and Mr. Chesterton, if he takes notice at all, must sometimes smile at finding in the primmest quarters a faint echo of his most revolutionary slogans.

For Mr. Chesterton, though and perhaps because he is an optimist, is a decided revolutionary. It must be added a generous one, for his compelling motive is a noble and comprehensive sympathy with the captive and the oppressed. He sees in modern civilisation a Bastille in which there are very vile dungeons, moderately comfortable cells, and pleasant quarters for the governor and his staff, but in which all, governor and staff included, are true prisoners. It is dull work for Baisemau, the gaoler, as well as for the young prince, the unlucky pamphleteer, and the nameless wretches below the moat; and Mr. Chesterton would set them all free.

It is the tyranny of civilisation itself, the bondage of things rather than the incidental cruelties of men themselves bound (though in chains of gold and swathes of precious paper) that he is out to fight. He sympathises with a strike as a strike, without regard to the ostensible merits of the dispute. It is an attempt of the victim bound to the tyrannous wheel of routine to throw it momentarily out of gear if he cannot subdue it to his own rational wants. Such an attempt, if it asserts only for a moment the sovereignty of man over things, is worth the while.

THE RELIGIOUS STRUGGLE IN THE NEW PRUSSIA

On November 27, 1918 (says *The Tablet*), an edict was issued by the Prussian Minister of Education, Adolf Hoffman, suspending ecclesiastical inspection, Catholic or Lutheran, in State schools. In the apprehension aroused in religious circles, it was assumed that the decree foreshadowed further and more drastic measures; and these fears proved to be well founded. A week later, and the papers contained an amplification of the edict, including clauses prohibiting *inter alia* all forms of denominational religious instruction in schools, the offering of prayers before and after study, and compulsory attendance of scholars at church. It was then obvious that the aim of Hoffman, long notorious for his antipathy towards religion, was to effect a complete separation between Church and State. This complex and intricate question, involving a basic alteration in the relations between the spiritual and temporal powers within the confines of the Kingdom of Prussia, has been the subject of comment, calm and heated, in the German press. Generally speaking, it may be said that the Socialist parties approve the proposed measure of separation, which was, indeed, one of the main planks of their Erfurt programme of 1891. On the other hand, that divorce met at once with the disapproval of the great Centre Catholic Party and of the old Conservative (now German National) Party, which before the cataclysm represented the interests of the Lutheran State Church. Certain Radical papers, such as the *Berliner Tageblatt*, join forces with the Catholics. They condemn any precipitate change, from considerations of expediency. They, too, fear that the secularisation of education, if ultimately carried through, will give a strong impetus to the rapidly increasing Separatist movements all over the Empire. The dreaded atheism of Berlin impels those provinces where strong religious feeling predominates—Westphalia and the Rhineland, Bavaria and the Polish border regions—to seek safety in central government. *Deutsche Tageszeitung*, the organ of the Prussian militarist clique, also falls into line, and denounces the appointment of Hoffman as a mistake calling for instant rectification. It is evident enough that, in the event of separation, the position of the Lutheran Church will be very precarious, as it has hitherto been mainly dependent upon the support of the various kings, now "the broken brood" of the poet's strangely fulfilled prophecy. The result, therefore, is a widespread movement in favor of sinking