

A Sermon Under Six Heads

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

I have emphasised, perhaps too often, the first fact that America is a foreign country, that is an independent nation. Apart from all external evidence of it, I had the internal evidence of a most acute sensation of being an exile. It may seem absurd to use so tragic a term for so short an expatriation. But indeed I think that in this case the vast stretches of space in some fashion do the work of vaster spaces of time. A man feels as if he had not only travelled for thousands of miles, but for thousands of years. I, for one, felt as if I were wandering in one of the moons of some other solar system; and wondering if I should ever find my way back to the world. And there came to me those traditional signs of exile; those dislocated pictures that have been turned into so many poems. The common things of the exile's daily life; seem too good ever to happen again. I had many of these piercing hints of home; I had one when I heard an English voice in the telephone far away in the Red Indian province of Oklahoma. I had another when I saw the chief pinnacle of Philadelphia, with William Penn standing high above the whole city, like the statue of some pagan protecting deity under the stars; and remembered that his body lay behind low hedges at the turning of a lane, within a walk of my own door.

But the most consoling of all these wandering voices from home came to me in the midst of the sea within sight of the New World, with the Statue of Liberty beginning to loom up on the horizon. From the lips of a young Scotch engineer, of all people in the world, I heard for the first time these immortal words from a London music-hall song:—

"Father's got the sack from the water-works
For smoking of his old cherry-briar;
Father's got the sack from the water-works
'Cos he might set the water-works on fire."

As I told my friends in America, I think it no part of a patriot to boast; and boasting itself is certainly not a thing to boast of. I doubt the persuasive power of English as exemplified in Kipling, and one can easily force it on foreigners too much, even as exemplified in Dickens. I am no Imperialist, and only on rare and proper occasions a Jingo. But when I hear those words about Father and the water-works, when I hear under far-off foreign skies anything so gloriously English as that, then indeed (I said to them) then indeed:—

"I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my birth have smiled,
And made me, as you see me here,
A little English child."

But that noble stanza about the water-works has other elements of nobility besides nationality. It provides a compact and almost perfect summary of the whole social problem in industrial countries like England and America. If I wished to set forth systematically the elements of the ethical and economic problem in Pittsburg or Sheffield, I could not do better than take these few words as a text, and divide them up like the heads of a sermon. Let me note the points in some rough fashion here.

1.—*Father*. This word is still in use among the more ignorant and ill-paid of the industrial community; and is the badge of an old convention or unit called the family. A man and woman having vowed to be faithful to each other, the man makes himself responsible for all the children of the woman, and is thus generically called "Father." It must not be supposed that the poet or singer is necessarily one of the children. It may be the wife, called by the same ritual "Mother." Poor English wives say "Father" as poor Irish wives say "Himself," meaning the titular head of the house. The point to seize is that among the ignorant this convention or custom still exists. Father and the family are the foundations of thought; the natural authority still comes natural to the poet; but it is overlaid and thwarted with more artificial authorities; the official, the schoolmaster, the policeman, the employer, and so on. What these forces fighting the family are we shall see, my dear brethren, when we pass to our second heading; which is:—

2.—*Got the Sack*. This idiom marks a later stage of the history of the language than the comparatively primitive word "father." It is needless to discuss whether the term comes from Turkey or some other servile society. In America they say that father has been fired. But it involves the whole of the unique economic system under

which father has now to live. Though assumed by family tradition to be a master, he can now, by industrial tradition, only be a particular kind of servant; a servant who has not the security of a slave. If he owned his own shop and tools, he could not get the sack. If his master owned him, he could not get the sack. The slave and the guildsman know where they will sleep every night; it was only the proletarian of individualist industrialism who could get the sack, if not in the style of the Bosphorus, at least in the sense of the Embankment. We pass to the third heading.

3.—*From the Water-works*. This detail of Father's life is very important; for this is the reply to most of the Socialists, as the last section is to so many of the Capitalists. The water-works which employed Father is a very large, official and impersonal institution. Whether it is technically a bureaucratic department or a big business makes little or no change in the feelings of Father in connection with it. The water-works might or might not be nationalised; and it would make no necessary difference to Father being fired, and no difference at all to his being accused of playing with fire. In fact, if the Capitalists are more likely to give him the sack, the Socialists are even more likely to forbid him the smoke. There is no freedom for Father except in some sort of private ownership of things like water and fire. If he owned his own well his water could never be cut off, and while he sits by his own fire his pipe can never be put out. That is the real meaning of property, and the real argument against Socialism; probably the only argument against Socialism.

4.—*For Smoking*. Nothing marks this queer intermediate phase of industrialism more strangely than the fact that, while employers still claim the right to sack him like a stranger, they are already beginning to claim the right to supervise him like a son. Economically he can go and starve on the Embankment; but ethically and hygienically he must be controlled and coddled in the nursery. Government repudiates all responsibility for seeing that he gets bread. But it anxiously accepts all responsibility for seeing that he does not get beer. It passes an Insurance Act to force him to provide himself with medicine; but it is avowedly indifferent to whether he is able to provide himself with meals. Thus while the sack is inconsistent with the family, the supervision is really inconsistent with the sack. The whole thing is a tangled chain of contradictions. It is true that in the special and sacred text of scripture we are here considering, the smoking is forbidden on a general and public and not on a medicinal and private ground. But it is none the less relevant to remember that, as his masters have already proved that alcohol is a poison, they may soon prove that nicotine is a poison. And it is most significant of all that this sort of danger is even greater in what is called the new democracy of America than in what is called the old oligarchy of England. When I was in America, people were already "defending" tobacco. People who defend tobacco are on the road to proving that daylight is defensible, or that it is not really sinful to sneeze. In other words, they are quietly going mad.

5.—*Of his old Cherry-briar*. Here we have the intermediate and anomalous position of the institution of Property. The sentiment still exists, even among the poor, or perhaps especially among the poor. But it is attached to toys rather than tools; to the minor products rather than to the means of production. But something of the sanity of ownership is still to be observed; for instance, the element of custom and continuity. It was an old cherry-briar; systematically smoked by father in spite of all wiles and temptations to Woodbines and gaspers; an old companion possibly connected with various romantic or diverting events in father's life. It is perhaps a relic as well as a trinket. But because it is not a true tool, because it gives the man no grip on the creative energies of society, it is, with all the rest of his self-respect, at the mercy of the thing called the sack. When he gets the sack from the water-works, it is only too probable that he will have to pawn his old cherry-briar.

6.—*'Cos he might set the water-works on fire*. And that single line, like the lovely single lines of the great poets, is so full, so final, so perfect a picture of all the laws we pass and all the reasons we give for them, so exact an analysis of the logic of all our precautions and preventions at the present time, that the pen falls even from the hands of the commentator; and the masterpiece is left to speak for itself.

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