

HILAIRE BELLOC: A NURSERY VIEW

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FROM what a man is, springs all that he does. The being Hilaire Belloc, a person of very much larger than life size, a natural portent, vivid, roaring, and exciting as a thunderstorm, was present to me long before I knew anything about his work, even the *Moral Alphabet* and the *Bad Child's Book of Beasts* which were kept in the back drawing-room and later filled us with a fearful joy as intense as that inspired by their creator. He had always been there: a grown man who liked children, and who could be observed with delicious awe to behave very badly, according to the standards of Nanny. We did not then know he had created an entirely apocryphal legend that there hung in our quiet rationalist nursery a card bearing the words, illuminated like a text, 'No Rot About God'; but we were acutely conscious that he did many other agreeably outrageous things. He shouted with laughter whenever he felt like it; he sometimes sang in the street as he walked along; he went into pubs; and once there was talk of his being tried in a court of justice for something he had put in a paper, talk which led me to visualise him as chained by the leg in a dark stone cell in the Tower of London, with a jailer looking in once a day to bring him a stale loaf and a jug (the large white enamelled sort used in bathrooms) of tap-water. This must have been at the time of the Marconi case libel action.

He had always been there; yet the natural self-centredness of childhood made him seem real only when he flashed through our humdrum ambience like a shooting star. To go to King's Land where he lived under the downs was for the first time to perceive him as a giant with a house, a family, a way of living quite independent of our own, continuing when we were not there to see. It is strange that a man who perforce spent so much of his time away from it, sailing, walking, travelling abroad, should have made his home so completely the focus and expression of himself; yet so it seemed in its first impact on a child, as in every reiteration of that impact. Of the first impression much is unfor-

gettable: the arrival after a long drive through a dazzling June day full of dust and the smell of beans in flower; the sight of the grey windmill, and of a white horse, an almost heraldic horse, his legs from the knee downwards hidden in the glittering yellow of buttercups; someone coming through the heat to the garden gate; the inside of the house, dark and cool and kind; and Mr Belloc trilling French R's as he talked, gigantically vehement and gay, over a luncheon where the salt was *gros-sel*.

Apart from these sharply recollected moments it is hard to tell how much of this early remembrance of King's Land has been overlaid and enriched with later knowledge. The white horse certainly recurred. He or another stood *regardant on a field* or there twenty years afterwards, and later still. There were at all times three focal points around which the life of the household flowed in intersecting circles: the long dark dining-room table, thought to have come from some pre-Reformation monastic refectory, at which people sat to eat, drink, laugh, tell stories and argue; the hearth in the living-room where logs burned and piles of dried lavender lay ready for someone to thrust a flower-head into the flame and twirl sparks and scented smoke into the candle-dusk that darkened into blackness by the bookshelves along the opposite wall; and upstairs, past the crucifix nailed over a door so low that all grown men must bow their heads to go through, the Blessed Sacrament in the room made into a chapel.

To enter King's Land was to become conscious, very often without clearly formulating it, not only of the presence of Faith, cleansing and healing the painful distortions of human vision, and setting everything in its right perspective, but also of something ancient and good in the pattern of purely natural things; almost as if one entered a household imbued with the archaic inevitable rightness of something in a fairy-tale.

Here, throughout his life, Mr Belloc returned from all his voyagings, and here he was able to live in his old age; still disconcerting, sardonic, and delighting to startle; still witty; still prone trenchantly to discuss the motives of politicians historical and contemporary; above all still singing in

the small true ghost of a voice a thousand different songs. He had sung them so often that they seemed part of him. They were to be heard as he drove a car rather alarmingly to Mass at Arundel, or to Horsham station; as he sat among his friends in country pubs or Soho restaurants; even once as he breathed the cool of a July evening in the back of an open taxi going round and round the Outer Circle of Regents Park as the moon ascended a sky whose paling rose colour shone back paler still from the water under the dark trees; marching songs and music-hall songs, *Auprès de ma blonde* and 'Strike me blind' and songs of his own like 'Tarantella' and 'The Winged Horse' and 'Beyond the Islands'.

He remained fundamentally unchanged throughout all the years in which a child grew up and married and reared children in turn, while his magnificent vigour waned at last. He dealt seismic, and sometimes much-resented, shocks to many of those assumptions on which comfortable persons unwarrantably base their lives: that the whole truth is invariably reported in the Press, for instance, and that public figures must of their nature be incorruptible. One or two sayings detach themselves from the matrix of general remembrance: 'a saint is not necessarily a gentleman'; 'in England riches and virtue are considered synonymous, and not to have enough money is not to be respectable. But our Lord blessed the poor'. In his company everything became at once larger than usual, heroic or grotesque, and more vividly coloured, and more significant, sometimes to an almost unbearable degree; and with him, stranger than anything else to the product of an agnostic tradition, one was aware of a constant flame of faith, unaltered by the changes of his mood.