

A CHAIR OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

IT was a widow's worm-eaten, tottering chair. And it was set up in a basement in N.W.3. In saying this I have unveiled the mystery lying behind what once I wrote under the title—her title, *Too Much for One*. For that undying story which, thank God, I had the wit to write, had been written post haste after the widow R——, R.I.P., had trudged from her basement to tell me of my mistake in giving her as a Christmas dinner what was 'too much for one.'

My readers will remember how in that quivering phrase from the bowed, half-blind, four-score year widow I had seen more political and economic wisdom than was being vouchsafed by any university, or avouched by any Government Report. Moreover, when I recalled how high finance and big business were based on the horse-leech cry, 'it is never enough,' I saw, and perhaps said that England's Saviour, if ever found, would be found not in a bank or in a manager's office, but in a hut or in a basement.

As I honoured myself and my priestly profession by burying the widow R—— in Kensal Green some twelve months ago, I will set down some of the notes I wrote after having speech with her one afternoon in the half-light of her cave-dwelling.

To-day, August 6th, 1927, Widow R—— gave me a complete dramatic Philosophy of History. In other words she showed me the right way of looking at things that happen, and even of things that seem to happen wrong. I knew she knew the right and the wrong way of looking at such things because never in all her life had she been more than a week or two from starvation, and often she had to go without food to give it to her

A Chair of the Philosophy of History

little daughter. Such training in the philosophy of history I call 'learning at the bench.'

In my time I had read Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God*, wherein that African genius at one stroke created the philosophy of history. I had even dipped into, and indeed swum about in, the *Histoire Universelle* of that greatest (?) of French geniuses, Bossuet. So that I thought myself not unprepared for what I might hear in the basement of N.W.3. Yet I believe the brother Bishops of Hippo and Meaux will understand and pardon me when I now confess that even *The City of God* and the *Histoire Universelle* were no fit preparation for the transcendent philosophy of the poor, unlettered, half-blind widow R—. There! I've said it—whether my readers believe me or not.

Talking, then, to me, or to herself—or was it to God?—she expressed the astonishment of the human mind when things happen to our hurt. A sentence or two and a gesture or two painted a complete picture of the seeming hopelessness flooding the soul at such ill happenings.

Then with a dramatic change in her voice she expressed—better than Hippo or Meaux have expressed—the still greater astonishment the human mind feels afterwards. When all these happenings are seen to have been—her word was 'beautifully'—planned I cannot convey the perfect picture this unlettered, half-blind, half-dead widow drew in one or two sentences made living with one or two untaught dramatic gestures.

She named God with a certain stillness and hush of reverence. I think she spoke of everything 'fitting in.' In listening to her I seemed to hear her words as a quiet *vox humana* against the great organ music of Augustine and Aquinas telling mankind that not one happening of earth or sky, nor yet one stirring of

Blackfriars

the mind and will of man can fall outside the encircling arms of infinite mercy.

Then this four-score-year child of Mary of Nazareth—this younger sister of 'the Chair of Wisdom'—recalled to my mind the lowliness of 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord!'; as with bowed head and a sob of self-belittling in her voice she added: 'There!—I'm not educated. But I can't help seeing it. How good God is to let me see it.'

* * * * *

Yea! woman from the crowd, blessed are the eyes that see what thou in thy half-blindness wert given by God to see; and blessed, indeed, the ears that hear what thou amidst the ceaseless din of a city thoroughfare wert given by God to hear!

For half thy sight and hearing I, whom thou dost reverence for my education, would give all I have heard and learned in the Schools. Thou, O basement-dwelling Mistress of Vision, hast been taught in another School; and by another Master. Thy school was Nazareth—or was it Calvary? Thy Master was the Word made flesh who dwelt with thee under thy roof—yea within thy soul.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.