

ACORNS IN THE WHEAT AGE

“ **A**PRÈS l'invention du blé, ils voulaient encore vivre du gland.”

There is a prejudice against primitive survivals. Few men to-day persist in kindling their fires with the flint-stock. The devotee who, in the twentieth century, invoked Apollo or prayed to Juno need expect scant sympathy. Manuscripts are no longer copied by hand, now that the printing press is everywhere available. The electric light has put out the feeble glimmers of thousands of tallow candles sufficient for our great-grandparents.

It had to be. We are being shoved along—willy-nilly. It is hard to kick against the pricks. The inventions of to-day leave behind the makeshift contrivances of yesterday. And to-morrow, the something newer that will be offered—at which we shall eagerly snatch—will find us as conceited and as unsatisfied as ever! Hence the diffidence of many.

Men squatted on the ground until the bright genius arose to whom we owe chairs and sofas. Food was taken up with the fingers before seemliness suggested knives and forks. The strongest male carried off by force his mate until customs of wooing introduced refinements and sentiment into courtship and marriage. Grunts, scowls, nods and imitative gestures were the means of communicating ideas ere the wonders of language revealed a better way. And so forth.

But a general advance drops stragglers on its route. There are those who resent any pressure which impels them forward. Such would fain abide where they are. All they demand is to act, to think, to believe as their fathers. They see no reason—but rather discomfort—in shifting and changing, in learning novel tricks, in handling more complicated machinery, in playing the game of life under a fresh code of rules. In short, they hate the fidget and the fuss involved in taking new lines. What is the use, they say, of the struggle to keep pace with an eager crowd of intoxicated explorers? It may be wisdom; it may be sloth—perhaps both; but, at any rate, their attitude is one not difficult to understand.

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You may sneer; but you cannot always shake the confidence of the reactionaries—as we call them. Very likely they have their reward. Besides which, these reactionaries are disillusioned persons shocked by the glaring follies decked out as “modernity.” We need not wonder at doubt or hesitation, or even despair, when we remember the cruel deceptions practised upon the ignorant and the inexperienced who are afraid of failing to respond to the goad. Searchers after the new are ransacking the rubbish-heaps of history for some bauble to seize our imagination. These are the heralds, not of fresh dawns, but of past sunsets. They inspire the chase after futilities.

With regard, however, to exertions which do tend to supplant the bad and to substitute the better, the reward of stolidity is a reward that no pioneers would covet. Still, there is ever a kind of compensation. Nor is it impossible to construct a fairly plausible case for laggards of every description. For there is a comfort, even a luxury, in unshakable conservatism. Behind the natural disinclination to effort felt by the majority, there is also the rooted suspicion that it is silly not to let well alone. Is the goal to be won worth the fag of the training and the sacrifices of the course? The race is not always to the swift. The battle is not ever to the strong. Strange surroundings, too, are uncongenial. Unfamiliar tools cut one’s fingers. Advance means shock and jolt. Attainment may be bought at too high a price, by the forced surrender of cherished possessions.

Thus, we suppose, may run the argument of those who stay behind to keep the traditions of the elders. After the invention of wheat, they would still live on acorns!

Acorns certainly contain nutriment; but wheat is a finer, more human food. Let us call to mind a few out of the thousands of survivals, still retaining place and holding affection in certain quarters. A brief study of them may be as fruitful in surprises as humiliating to self-esteem. We shall have to notice not only queer freaks and ante-diluvian grotesques, but also smart follies with outrageously modern looks.

One might start with biology. Vestiges of organs which

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have outlasted their use are detected in the higher animals : fish-fins in human bodies, for instance. Our business, however, is with other vestiges—vestiges which play a large, often a tragic, part in human nature.

We are to walk, as it were, through a museum, containing examples of a number of obsolete objects, much alive and most energetic. And why ? Because the clinging to the outworn is one of man's fundamental failings. We nurse old prejudices and despise young hopes. A call comes to prepare the new way ; but only too willingly do we heed counsels of unworthy sloth.

To the great adventure that denotes progress, we prefer promises of prudent stagnation :

“And enterprises of great pith and moment,
In this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.”

That expresses precisely the upshot of this refusal. For, by failing to co-operate, men drift into the shallows. Isolation is the penalty. You become unprofitable to your fellows. You are a social anomaly. You linger purely upon sufferance.

Entering the museum, we pause before some of the exhibits. The catalogue bewilders us with their number and their variety.

To begin with national acorn-eating and national acorn-eaters. So-called progressive countries not seldom furnish the most pitiable examples. These examples fall into four chief groups, of which the Ape, the Tiger, the Bat, and the Pig may be taken as the types. (No offence is meant to those animals, all of which serve good ends in the economy of beasts !)

An Ape nation is one that still lives by imitation—imitation of its past, the copying of its neighbours. It fails to rise to any initiative. Pursuing these methods, it will ultimately cease to count. Sooner or later it must be over-ridden, over-ruled by some eager and pushing rival.

A Tiger nation, again, keeps itself alive by claws and by teeth ; by murderous menace, by lurking treachery, by brutal pillage, by ancient envy, by predatory hatred. But, inasmuch as these qualities are being superseded

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to-day, such a nation will have to be crushed, or forcibly taught its salutary lesson, for the salvation of the peoples that base dominion upon righteousness.

A Bat nation gropes in the glooms of its origin, is blind to all the light of history; and, in a wild uncertainty, desperate in a darkness from which it cannot escape, it shall surely, at last, be flung bruised and battered to the ground.

A Pig nation is no better off. In the sluggish existence of the sty it finds the be-all and the end-all of its destiny. Swilling at unholy troughs, it accumulates the fatty loathsomeness that precedes and hastens decay.

The same preference for acorns to wheat guides some of the human units of our communities in their life, their thought, their art and their Faith. Of this fact the historical museum which we have chanced to enter is crammed with interesting if painful examples.

A notable, a much self-praised class of acorn-eaters is formed by those who are training to become supermen, or rather, superbeasts; for they aspire to combine the unchecked ferocity of the brute with the cunning of the intelligent human. Despite their claims, they are hopelessly atavistic, reverting to the prehistoric, tricked out with a brave show of modernity. In point of fact, a superman is really on the lower level of the sub-human for with the stupendous audacity of the megalomaniac he wants to trample under foot the very powers and graces that are slowly lifting up the soul—[and protecting him, the superman, from strangulation]!—graces such as sacrifice, long-suffering, sympathy, and compassion.

Now, the reason that superman may sink so low in his impotence is this: that he cherishes nothing but contempt for the superhuman. Strange, but illuminating paradox! For, as we gather from his heralds and his sponsors, superman is going to have nothing whatever to do with what is above the finite. He will have climbed his way up out of the fogs of "superstition," and will look down thence, with scorn, upon the dwellers in the valleys who have pitched their tents beside waters of comfort. From the summits of his self-sufficiency, protected, as he is, by irresponsible selfish-

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ness, one must expect from him no consideration for the "slaves" who strive to live by the laws of Love, and are stirred by its ancient types. In the estimate of supermen there will be naught for the human being to revere outside of or over himself. In vain shall he quote Wordsworth's great aphorism :

"Unless above himself he can erect himself, how poor a thing is man." Because to do that, man must "hitch his wagon to a star," as Emerson puts it ; not drive in triumph in the cruel car of juggernaut, crashing along over the prostrate bodies of his bleeding fellow-creatures. That is a difference to be marked ! This superman is a dangerous and demented acorn-eater ; and nothing more respectable at all !

Members of another variety of the acorn-eaters throng Throgmorton Street and other tortuous alleys of the world's Babylons. With peacock strut, these men of purple and fine linen swagger before adoring and envious crowds. Bejewelled and clad in the fashions of Bond Street, they flaunt before the world the baseness of "success"—success rooted and grounded in pelf ! Behold the Kings of Finance, the slaves of a convention long threadbare, tattered and torn. They nibble their acorns with complacent unconcern ; and the idolatry that surrounds them is but the signal and evidence of an obstinate atavism still dragging back the judgments of the majority. For we know—or ought to know—that mammon is a dead god whose mortification set in ages ago ; and that his votaries, for all their incoherent shrieks, are proclaiming a creed of social disorder flatly contradicted by every religion and by every philosophy since Moses led his tribes out of Egyptian bondage, since Christ our Lord taught the blessedness of poverty and lived the life of surrender and obedience.

A so-called "Scientific" Age has nourished its own special progeny of acorn-eaters. An unaccountable delusion as to the conclusions to be drawn from scraps of half-information about the movements and compositions of objects gave birth to a ridiculous thing called "rationalism." Sundry inferences, guesses and opinions blandly announced as facts, led to denials of that upon which every possible or probable fact rests ! Dim eyes, searching the semi-

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darkness of a tiny prison, announced the astounding revelation of the emptiness of a universe that held no secrets and that worked by a meaningless jostle of forces! What a paltry clique of professional fools, nibbling their sack of acorns as industriously as Lucretius and the rest, who expounded their theories *De Naturâ deorum* two thousand years since! We have long outstripped these crude sophistries of logic-chopping infants.

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every wayside bush afire with God!"

On all sides are we overwhelmed with miracles. Through each second of time roll the surges of eternity. Legions of angels ambush us on the daily journey. The mysteries of the Divine preside over the ordinary daily tasks and trials. It is too late in the ages of Catholic Faith for the "wise" to grope about, on hands and feet, for the acorns of doubt and folly that litter the ground in the dismal forests of "rational" speculation!

So far, we have cited the three largest societies of acorn-eaters. Others are represented in our museum.

First of all you have the champions of extinct types of social pleasure. There are the parties, over tea and toast, for the exchange of local scandal. There are the gatherings convened by plausible people to ventilate imaginary grievances. There are the congregations, docile and gregarious as sheep, that collect periodically to discuss weird fads. There are the housewives and the house-husbands who cling superstitiously to means of domestic bliss that should long ago have become extinct—rooms choked with furniture and other dirt-harboured contrivances. There are the pestilent folk who stir up bazaar furies. There are, again, those long-suffering creatures in families who *create* contingencies that never ought to arise—such as choosing wall-papers, taking up stair-carpets, trifling with toilet toys. All these are out-of-date.

In the realms of Art and Letters we have long since done away with the Autocracies, and even with the Theocracies—if I may so call the bad old systems of one-man rule. The Limited Monarchy, also, has slowly prepared the way for a Liberal Republic in which canons of taste or ancient formulæ may

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no longer be imposed as inflexible dogma. Yet this is far indeed from claiming that the barbarians at their play must again be admitted to rule in our civilized houses of culture. Let us put the position in this way: with the enlargement of our appreciation of actual values, with the immense extension of our means of expression in every art, we cannot wish our dramatists to write moralities of the deadly sins, or our epic poets (if we had any) to draw up catalogues like Homer, or our musicians to stick to the strict tone-phraseology of Corelli, or our painters to paint pictures in the style of Cimabue. No; that would be acorn-eating to us of the twentieth century.

But, taking the other end of the story, a still more lamentable instance of acorn-eating is exhibited in the latest inroads of those who would fain claim up-to-dateness for their wild vagaries. I refer to the monstrous lawlessness by which we are to be thrown back thousands of years. I refer to the case of the destroyers of all tradition—the cubists, the futurists, and others in picture work. I refer to the ravings of the latest maniacs in music. I refer to the people who deliberately—with malice aforethought—write English in Chinese puzzles: the folk who introduce themselves as the masters of a new era of literary beauty. I refer, once again, to the smug rhymsters who dally with the lilt of words, who—aside from sense and meaning—busy themselves with patchwork quilts of vowels and consonants; feeling that they are doing their fellows a good turn by pouring into their ears streams of melodious drivel, and subtly compounded syrups of sound! These are all acorn-eaters of the most unregenerate sort. And yet our tormentors are convinced that they are the heralds of the future instead of being—as they are—exploiters of a past, long suppressed. We have a Strauss, like a brutal Hun, smashing the fabric of an art with a ruthlessness in keeping with the ignorant hatred of the fine fellows who sacked Rome. We have a Meredith and a Henry James developing a lack of literary style that would have disgraced the experimenters of Tudor times. We have a Bernard Shaw grinding out pages on pages of cynical dialogue twaddle, and twisting and turning and jumping his dolly characters as

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in a Punch and Judy show. Worst of all, we have the poets of scanty parts, and scantier promise, performing upon an instrument without acquainting themselves with even the rudiments of its study!

Verily, it is a set-back to our pride to have to confess that, in spite of so diligent tilling of corn-lands and raising of corn-crops, an altogether disproportionate number of us find satisfaction and a sort of hard sustenance in the indigestible nuts that fall from the oak trees.

Yet fretfulness, complaint, and irritability never worked any appreciable good. Let us turn from them, and see if there be not ground for thankfulness when we remember that we have not been left to gather our food in the primeval forests. A kind providence designed for its creatures an ideal food for the body, viz. bread. Milk for babes, bread for men.

For their minds and souls, no less than for their bodies, men have all down the long ages been busily engaged bringing larger and larger areas of life and thought and feeling under cultivation. Glad autumn fields of wheat have never failed. The bread has been milled differently; it has been baked differently; it has been eaten in divers fashions. But a constant supply has never been lacking to the hungry. Wise laws, sound letters, simple and reverent habits are practically continuous in their beneficent influence upon such as are ready and willing to rise from the animal to the human, to dispense with Ape and Tiger, to construct buildings that may adorn and dignify humanity.

And the leaven of the kingdom of heaven has assuredly been working steadily, if slowly, within the huge lump of the world's wheat—meal, from time immemorial. We can, if we will, trace its movements, in their divine restlessness, secretly, but how potently, stirring, permeating, transforming the mass of nutriment into which it has introduced itself. Hence, nothing can have been left to chance in a government conspicuously supernatural.

The bread-making of God is so vast in its significance. Through all the provinces of the human empire the food passes. It may be eaten with gratitude; it may be left with disdain. When once received, its giving up marks an

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execrable folly. Because it is a sign and a quality of the best wheaten bread that a power outreaching, although never wholly superseding the human has played a certain determining, or, at least, uplifting part in its production.

Nobler political ideals, realizing the graces of love and of solemn liberty, convey to men bread stamped with some measure of the diviner sanctions : a Divine hand is manifest in their energy of hope and in their championship of right. How wretched to fall back—as nations do and may—to the acorns of old devil-made tyrannies !

When, again, the superbully renounces his ghastly philosophy to learn gentleness, weakness, soft-heartedness, and surrender of self for others ; then he, too, receives his Bread of the Word. When the mammonist begins to store up riches that do not corrupt, treasures that never will rust, he, also, discovers a nourishment compared with which the pomps and glories of worldliness prove apples of Sodom.

When the semi-ignorant rationalist, puffed up with conceit, becomes fired with the spiritual enthusiasm that sweeps over the sandy desert parched by his blasting “logic,” he, equally, passes into the same Kingdom of Faith. The acorns of doubt and pessimism may rot for him who feeds upon a Bread of Life !

Our daily conduct is changed by the sustenance it chooses. To be simple is to be great ; to be controlled is to be brave ; to be quiet is to be eloquent ; to be good is to be happy.

In the arts, too, there are acorns in plenty : there is yet more abundant wheat—wheat white, well ground, sweet, wholesome, and strengthening. Inspired are the men who have dwelt upon the peaks of our several arts. They have made fine bread for us—bread whose dough the Divine has helped to knead, the atoms in which have been stirred by the Leaven of the Kingdom. Believe this, or how else shall we explain Virgil and Dante, Isaiah and St. John, Shakespeare, Beethoven, Michael Angelo ; Milton and Raphael and Giotto ; Pascal, Augustine, and Newman ; Mozart, Racine, and Watts ? I cordially pity the man who prefers Wilde to Wordsworth, Meyerbeer to Bach, Voltaire to Fénelon, Beard-sley to Leighton, Shaw to Alice Meynell, Zola to Dickens, Heine to Browning, Boccaccio to Dante, Swift to Milton !

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Still, there is a diet more pitiable, more disgusting even than that of acorns. It is that to which the Prodigal in the Parable was driven when he left his father's house to batten on the husks that the swine did eat ! But from the misery and despair of that death in life he was restored, rose up and returned to blessing. Some have to experience the worst to know the best. Any gospel worth its name of good-tidings is nothing but a proclamation of sanity and of health ; how to reach them when lost, how to preserve them when gained.

One reaches them by giving up the acorns and husks of folly and sin, and by arising from the stagnation of self and its weight of death. One preserves them by the persistent exercise of virtue, and by feeding upon the Bread of Angels which came down from Heaven, which contains in itself all sweetness, and by which the life of the soul is so sustained that it earns the immortal wages of

“Going on and still to be.”

G. E. BIDDLE.



THE NUN

SOMETIMES across the spacious silent hills
I walk alone in thought at evening-time,
And see in skies of palest daffodil,
The faint warm crescent sleep, . . . then slowly climb
Over the dreaming sea, all broad and still.

She is a cloistered maid, whose glimmering face
Is turned to watch the fiery setting sun,
She wears the holy veil, of cobweb lace,
That silver-violet spider-clouds have spun
To hide her strange unearthly grace
From those who know not that she is a nun.

VIVIENNE DAYRELL (aged 15).