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AT THE SIGN OF THE WORLD'S END

AN OPEN LETTER TO LORD READING

By G. K. CHESTERTON

MY LORD,—I address to you a public letter as it is upon a public question: it is unlikely that I should ever trouble you with any private letter on any private question; and least of all on the private question that now fills my mind. It would be impossible altogether to ignore the irony that has in the last few days brought to an end the great Marconi duel in which you and I in some sense played the part of seconds; that personal part of the matter ended when Cecil Chesterton found death in the trenches to which he had freely gone; and Godfrey Isaacs found dismissal in those very Courts to which he once successfully appealed. But believe me I do not write on any personal matter; nor do I write, strangely enough perhaps, with any personal acrimony. On the contrary, there is something in these tragedies that almost unnaturally clears and enlarges the mind; and I think I write partly because I may never feel so magnanimous again. It would be irrational to ask you for sympathy; but I am sincerely moved to offer it. You are far more unhappy; for your brother is still alive.

If I turn my mind to you and your type of politics it is not wholly and solely through that trick of abstraction by which in moments of sorrow a man finds himself staring at a blot on the table cloth or an insect on the ground. I do, of course, realise, with that sort of dull clarity, that you are in practice a blot on the English landscape, and that the political men who made you are the creeping things of the earth. But I am, in all sincerity, less in a mood to mock at the sham virtues they parade than to try to imagine the more real virtues which they successfully conceal. In your own case there is the less difficulty, at least in one matter. I am very willing to believe that it was the mutual dependence of the members of your family that has necessitated the sacrifice of the dignity and independence of my country; and that if it be decreed that the English nation is to lose its public honour, it will be partly because certain men of the tribe of Isaacs kept their own strange private loyalty. I am willing to count this to you for a virtue as your own code may interpret virtue; but the fact would alone be enough to make me protest against any man professing your code and administering our law. And it is upon this point of your public position, and not upon any private feelings, that I address you to-day.

Not only is there no question of disliking any race, but there is not here even a question of disliking any
due and proportional part in our esteem. Because of you she shall not die.

We cannot tell in what fashion you yourself feel your strange position, and how much you know it is a false position. I have sometimes thought I saw in the faces of such men as you that you felt the whole experience as unreal, a mere masquerade; as I myself might feel it if, by some fantastic luck in the old fantastic civilisation of China, I were raised from the Yellow Button to the Coral Button, or from the Coral Button to the Peacock's Feather. Precisely because these things would be grotesque, I might hardly feel them as incongruous. Precisely because they meant nothing to me I might be satisfied with them. I might enjoy them without any shame at my own impudence as an alien adventurer. Precisely because I could not feel them as dignified, I should not know what I had degraded. My fancy may be quite wrong; it is but one of many attempts I have made to imagine and allow for an alien psychology in this matter; and if you and Jews far worthier than you are wise they will not dismiss as Anti-Semitism what may well prove the last serious attempt to sympathise with Semitism. I allow for your position more than most men allow for it; more, most assuredly, than most men will allow for it in the darker days that yet may come. It is utterly false to suggest that either I or a better man than I, whose work I now inherit, desired this disaster for you and yours. I wish you no such ghastly retribution. Daniel son of Isaac. Go in peace; but go.

Yours,

G. K. CHESTERTON.

O IN THE SMOKE OF AUTUMN

O IN the smoke of Autumn how things change,
Reeling, and pass away as in a glass
Of shadowy shapes; the fire of visible Beauty
Dies to a fretting fury on the crests.
Of reddening trees, the gilded forests fail,
The lustrous distances become so blue
That they resemble lakes of magic tears,
Scarce conscious of themselves ere they dissolve,
And through the long pale skies of windless calm
Float shining clouds whose silver wings like Swans
Flicker above the fading hues of Earth,
And pass into the Infinite beyond!—
All is a dance of weariness and sorrow,
Yet beautiful and rare and richly dim,
Like dying lilies hid in bowls of glass
Beneath blue waters mystical and sad;
The disillusioned Hours divest themselves
Of all their gilded robes of fretted fire,
And burning coronals of fading flowers,
To appear naked, slender and virginal,
White shadowy dreams exceeding wonderful,
Then also they dissolve and pass away
Into the windless, blue and calm Divine! —

W. R. CHILDE.