

FOREWORD

Chesterton took humorous things seriously and serious things humorously. This paradox lay at the heart of his work and indeed of his character, and nothing he wrote embodies it more explicitly than *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, which is essentially the story of two men, Auberon Quin, who, put by chance into a position of political power, treats government as a colossal joke, and young Adam Wayne, who, having no sense of humour at all, treats the details of the joke as a life-and-death cause. Into Quin's absurd parody of a mediaeval court march the disciplined halberdiers of Notting Hill, with Wayne at their head. Chesterton's point is that the two men are really two sides of the same man – or of everyman. This cunningly constructed story, which begins as a mere whimsical fantasy, ends in a blaze of bugles and blood-soaked banners.

Ostensibly it is a tale of the future, written, as it actually was, in the first decade of the twentieth century and set near the century's end. The opening chapter tells how, in the meanwhile, people have been playing a silent game of 'Cheat the Prophet'. While commentators and philosophers and novelists devised every conceivable scenario for the future, the one thing happened which had never been foreseen: nothing changed.

However, this too is a device, not a prediction. Chesterton envisaged a future in which men still wore tailcoats and top hats but wider extrapolations had occurred. The world's great empires had absorbed and abolished small nations, thereby eliminating patriotism and war. Commerce had expanded to match, creating a featureless global market. All of which, seen through the eyes of Auberon Quin and Adam Wayne (although from opposite points of view), and as presented by Chesterton himself, was extremely dull, boring, a universal greyness which it would be fun to break up again into more human-sized fragments.

If this were a scenario to be taken literally, we should have to say that Chesterton himself was pretty thoroughly foxed in the game

of Cheat the Prophet, since the eighty years into which he was looking forward have included, as we now know, two world wars (in the first of which his brother was killed), the collapse of empires and the multiplication of petty nationalisms fighting each other in very unamusing small wars. So his whole concept might appear invalidated, or, worse, to have become an embittered irony. Strangely, that isn't true at all, because Chesterton wasn't really writing a tale of the future in the sense that Jules Verne and HG Wells wrote tales of the future. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* is no more about the future than about the past or indeed the present. It is purely a fantasy of ideas. Its bugles are blown (in Francis Thompson's phrase) 'from the hid battlements of Eternity'.

Chesterton recalled, in his autobiography, how the idea first came to him. 'I was one day wandering about the streets of North Kensington, telling myself stories of feudal sallies and sieges, in the manner of Walter Scott, and vaguely trying to apply them to the wilderness of bricks and mortar around me. I felt that London was already too large and loose a thing to be a city in the sense of a citadel. And something irrationally arrested and pleased my eye about the look of one small block of little lighted shops, and I amused myself with the idea that these alone were to be preserved and defended, like a hamlet in the desert. I found it quite exciting to count them and perceive that they contained the essentials of civilisation, a chemist's shop, a bookshop, a provision merchant for food and a public house for drink. Lastly, to my great delight, there was also an old curiosity shop bristling with swords and halberds; manifestly intended to arm the guard that was to fight for the sacred street. I wondered vaguely what they would attack or whither they would advance. And looking up, I saw grey with distance, but still seemingly immense in altitude, the tower of the Waterworks close to the street where I was born. It suddenly occurred to me that capturing the Waterworks might really mean the military stroke of flooding the valley; and with that torrent

and cataract of visionary waters, the first fantastic notion of a tale called *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* rushed over my mind.’

Chesterton considered it, looking back, his first important book. He recalled in an interview: ‘I was broke. Only ten shillings in my pocket. Leaving my worried wife, I went down Fleet Street, got a shave, and then ordered for myself, at the Cheshire Cheese, an enormous luncheon of my favourite dishes and a bottle of wine. It took my all, but I could then go to my publishers fortified. I told them I wanted to write a book and outlined the story of *Napoleon of Notting Hill*. But I must have twenty pounds, I said, before I begin.

‘We will send it to you on Monday.’

‘If you want the book,’ I replied, ‘you will have to give it to me today as I am disappearing to write it.’ They gave in.’

Chesterton went home, and, appearing dramatically in front of his wife, poured twenty golden sovereigns into her lap.

HG Wells, who was rather fond of arranging table-top battles, might have enjoyed the idea of fighting around Notting Hill, but he would have used it differently. He was a progressivist, a scientific utopian, and the real politics, horrors and wars of the twentieth century, as they unfolded, brought him to despair – not a sin to which Chesterton was ever inclined. Where Wells had looked forward, Chesterton looked back, to a no doubt equally mythical Merrie England. This was a much stronger position. The justification for a war, Chesterton thought, was not to produce a better world – an absurd ambition – but to prevent a worse one, and in particular to defend the little local things which are what really matter to people. He was never a pacifist, he insisted, and he was always a patriot.

Would he have been drawn to the ‘Green’ politics of today? Hardly. The Greens, like him, are anti-capitalist and against globalisation, but, very much unlike him, they tend to be self-righteous and puritanical, natural regulators and controllers. He had an artist’s eye for colour but was not particularly keen on an

THE NAPOLEON OF NOTTING HILL

‘unspoiled’ environment; he could admire the shape of a chimney pot as much as a flower-bell. He looked at everything in a way that no one else quite did or does. Like PG Wodehouse, he may seem easy to imitate or parody – until you try.

Above all, he might be serious but he was never solemn. However much one might disagree with his ideas, no-one could stay cross with him for long. His geniality was too huge, too all-embracing. Perhaps the most vivid and engaging picture of him was the most succinct and casual. A lady who was to join him for lunch at a restaurant asked if her host was there yet. ‘Your friend, the big gentleman,’ said the waiter, ‘he do write, and he do laugh, and he do laugh at what he do write.’

Quite so.

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