

THE PLAYMATE OF THE UNIVERSE

Spirit of understatement, possess us now! This book¹ is worthy of its subject both in size and texture; and complete with bibliography and index, is a bit of 'orl right' as Chesterton's hansom cabby said when he had driven a long way up a blind alley. The 574 pages are packed well with matter of almost all possible variety and charm, and he who reads it through will want it by him to read in and out of. Labour of love it must have been, for the gifted authoress hints at thousands upon thousands of pages (even of Hansard) carefully perused and sifted, with thousands of letters either judiciously condensed or quoted at length. Indeed no pains have been spared to make it another Boswell, a super-Boswell let us say.

For Johnson's world was smaller if more impressive than the world of Chesterton, and it did not press so close around him, nor did Johnson re-act so vigorously or so ubiquitously to every breeze that blew from the great deep. Whether one came from the provinces with the hayseed in one's hair, or took tea with Chesterton in darkest Yorkshire, one was at a loss for nearly half a day to guess what were biting the big man at the hour of contact. For he had informations from sources unknown, tips from horses' mouths over and above the mystery of Fleet Street, tips which made him more alive to current events than the whole Press, which after all is but the opium of the people. This serious side of his life is well and truly set forth with growing emphasis throughout the body of the book, and his tragic interest in the Marconi matter is juridically dealt with by the author's barrister husband, Frank Sheed. And admirably cool it is to one who followed Cecil's stormy attacks on Godfrey Isaacs & Co., a company all too strictly limited.

But to give some slight idea of how the book deals with its subject, one who knew Chesterton long and intimately finds that it tells him vastly more than he knew. The tedious part of a careful biography is nearly always the commencement thereof—even if it is valuable it is so often paid for with boredom. But here there is not a dull paragraph. All is livened with living witnesses of the childhood of this child who never grew up but who learned to speak for himself so that all the world began to listen with an interest which grew to delight in so many cases. Even the few who were annoyed are given a few lines from time to time of petulant protest as from a self-centred uncle who finds children a distraction. But you must love some remaining childhood to enter the Kingdom of Chesterton. We did agree in our first walk that dullness was a symptom of inadequate

¹ *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*. By Maisie Ward. (Sheed & Ward; 21s.).

approach to reality and pomposity a smokescreen for incompetence.

Chesterton's father gets due recognition of his paternity to Gilbert's myriad-mindedness, both from Gilbert himself and from the biographer. Then Cecil, most tenacious and even-minded of debaters, sharpens his brother's self expression to the preternatural thing it was; whilst the Junior Debating Club, with Gilbert in the chair (at 15) ventilates all things and some others under the opening eyelids of the dawn as it is between our sixteenth and eighteenth years. They did one another the delicate service of blending backwardness and precocity into that balanced sense of competence which cures shyness and steadies forthrightness. Would that those in charge of youth movements could know these things deep down. Chesterton's upbringing was miraculously suitable, even providential, and he never belied it.

Slade School and journalistic novitiate came to him whilst the rest of the J.D.C. were sampling the two universities left over from the New Learning. 'If my father had been a Duke instead of a nice man, I should have gone to Oxford or Cambridge and learned the insane optimism of the idle rich,' I heard him say at luncheon. Bland words but heavy with judgment, even final judgment.

At the Slade School or in that period he had the experience which I remember reading in his *Daily News* column. I feared lest the passage were lost in the files of that paper, but there it is on p. 45 of the Life, showing how mature he was, this boy who could never grow up—indeed who scarcely lost his innocence. We do hope all Anglican Baptisms are valid; we fear some are not; we suspect his was, anyhow.

As gradual as real life this most adequate biography builds up his record as apprentice journalist and man of letters, letting his mastery in both steal upon us like persuasion. Only then does the author deal with the weaknesses of Gilbert Chesterton, growing from his indolent inaccuracy (neglecting to verify or correct), to his getting away with the bit in his teeth on mere hearsay upon social abuses. He needed two angels, then he had only one; later on a second came, his capable and devoted secretary. Of course he was stamped by Belloc, and by his brother Cecil, but how much worse things might have been if Fleet Street and tavern-talk had been his only pabulum. But with due circumspection he and his wife adjourned to Beaconsfield, a suburb not yet built up, nearly rural enough for two good cockneys.

Here Shaw came to see him and to talk social questions and even try to make him embark on play-writing. In spite of Gilbert's Toy Theatre (for the children when the Big Boy had done) only two plays

were ever the result. He did envisage another even to the extent of inditing a scenario, but only his literary executor can tell us if that survives. I remember the plan well enough to tell it out lamely perhaps, but that would be trespassing.

Catholic Social Guilds would do well and happily if they were to study the endless cheerful 'rag' between Shaw and Chesterton with the wise commentary of the biographer; how Shaw insisted upon opportunity fair and square for every man, and how Chesterton stuck to his thesis that the common man had to be treated as an uncommon sort of creature, one of the million masks of God who wanted to work out his mask to a closer resemblance as Lord George Hill in Max Beerbohm's *Happy Hypocrite*. In other words Shaw wanted to give them ready-made facilities, G.K. the material for making their own. They should also learn by heart or know at their finger-ends a remarkable long unpublished extract on *Christian v. Secular Socialism* on page 72 and the following pages.

A chapter on the Notebook of 1894 (when he was just twenty years old) is so couched as to show his philosophy, his religion and his poetry, and we are fortunate in knowing that it exists, for other notebooks are not known or even knowable to fame. He destroyed so much, yet he was always creating out of nothing even though he deemed it nought, that another volume might be made up of *Præterita* or *Recognita* or whatever should be the title. Even as Shaw was left lamenting genially his several failures to sting Gilbert into dramatic enterprise, so others lament that his wish or wistfulness about an essay on Savonarola, or even his projects for yet one more play could never find fulfilment. His beloved human race reciprocated his esteem and regard in its own childish way. 'Here is a jolly sort of waterworks—let's make it play.' He may have shared our snob-frivolity, but his bigger works did suffer from his unusual vogue, for how settle down to draw quiet breath when every second interview was an interruption! An interruption of a mind full of cosmic visions by a mind empty of all but itself, in too many cases. Did Henry James see all this in symbol and years beforehand when he wrote *The Death of the Lion*?

However, as Mark Twain says, let us be grateful for fools: they make the rest of us appear wise.

Reference is made frequently to *The Coloured Land*, a book of Chesterton's early or unpublished efforts in colour, verse and story which we should have seen more of had not the war disintegrated so much. It is no small feat that so much scattered Chesterton should be retrieved into safe-keeping in this biography, for many collectors there be, and each has something the other never heard of.

The middle of the book is least amusing but most profitable to read, because it deals with the unsettled debate with Shaw, the illness of the hero, and the War Years. The instruction is made amusing as good instruction should be, by the contrast between the almost mystical, yet hard-boiled informations of the Vestryman and rent-collector of St. Pancras and the highly mystical, over-simplifications of Chesterton who saw the whole as so great that the parts were not worth much thinking on. The cool rationality of Bernard Shaw (he drops the George) is as refreshing to the mind as the hot reasonableness of Chesterton. The one approves without quite understanding; the other, in his own words, understands perfectly but does not approve. When Chesterton died Shaw wrote to Frances (we quote from memory): 'This makes me feel more than ever out of it. Why does he perish in his prime, whilst I lag superfluous? If there is anything I can do to help or comfort you, let me know at once, even though it run to three figures.'

The war years' chapter is an admirable digest of the history of our own times which the author treats with impressive sympathy and clearness, supplementing Gilbert's omissions from the *Crimes of England* with the remark that if England set Prussia on her feet as a great European power, Richelieu began it all, and Napoleon's conscript armies (copied from Prussia) did really turn Christendom into an armed camp with futile pacifists as idle camp-followers. Countless wise reflections, lengthy or aphoristic, star the work, and emphasize the value of G.K.'s own flashes. He is so dazzling that something like this is needed to get him his due appreciation.

With all his faults, we love him still, for his mind was of super-human depth and his faults were of the child. He fills the vision of Tennyson written a generation before he came:

The poet in a golden clime was born
 With golden stars above;
 Dower'd with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,
 The love of love.
 He saw thro' life and death, thro' good and ill,
 He saw thro' his own soul . . .
 And freedom rear'd in that august sunrise
 Her beautiful bold brow.

Fatal gift of beauty freedom had for Chesterton. He realised more keenly as he fought on, how the power of inertia transcends thrones and dominations, and virtues; how the dumb devil entered the very soul of England when she cast out those lazy monks who prayed and fasted or at least reminded others. He did not know of

the West Indian dope which turns men into robots and is felony to use (after much investigation) but he saw, felt by its dull resistance, that the people of England was no more likely to speak in the future than it had spoken in the past. This was the envoi to his famous ballad; ' Smile at us, pay us, pass us, but do not quite forget.' The deaf become dumb. They have been dinned and dinted much by jarring sects and Bible-chopping and their virtues have been used against them. Had he been born in Ireland he would have seen this earlier, had he been bred in the faith he would have seen it clearer. One of his unwritten works is a treatise to this effect, God wot : How to poison the roots of things, or the autobiographies of William and Robert Cecil.

However his chagrin at the Peace that ended Peace and the stress of mind he felt and expressed in his terrible letter to Rufus Daniel Isaacs did not kill him, though they may have shortened his life. (If England rot, why dost thou rise, O Sun !)

Did not kill him for at the very crisis of his long endeavour divine immortal faith, grown old in ways triumphal, swam into his tired soul and gave new lease of life and peace and benediction, as witness *St. Francis* and *The Everlasting Man*. On the way from the Station Hotel, July the 31st, 1922, to tea with Lady Ruggles-Brice, I made bold to tell him he would do still better work than ever.

The more minute details of his approach to the Vision of Peace are winsomely to be found in the correspondence between him and Maurice Baring. Somewhere in the book I have seen him called an architect of Certitude and I know one of his earliest published rhymes was to the effect that the cursed serpent bites his tail and calls himself eternity. One of his rules of thumb for spotting humbugs, especially highbrow humbugs, was to see whether they were prone to use words of wandering and shifting import. He rages against the abuse of ' Infinite.' Even as Patmore, whom he did not read. (Unsafe remark this, for he read everything but forgot the name but not the thing) :

For ah ! who can express
 How full of bonds and simpleness
 Is God :
 How narrow He is ;
 And how the wide waste field of possibility
 Is only trūd
 Straight to His homestead in the human heart.

JOHN O'CONNOR.