

## BLACKFRIARS

### G.K.C.—THE WRITER

I AM brought face to face with the story, which most of you probably already know, about the pavement-artist.

He was a very good pavement-artist, was this one—quite at the head of his profession, with a very popular pitch, with the right knack of elaborating just the mottos which got under the skin of his public and taking home to his wife quite a fine bunch of assorted coins every night, including a few foreign ones.

But the Evil One was watching his good fortune and sent a wealthy American philanthropist to him, who noticed his work and his talent, and with the best intentions took him to visit the great galleries of the world. Here our pavement-artist saw Raphael's Madonna and so deeply was he affected that upon his return to the dull streets and the sad faces of London he could do nothing day after day, week in and week out, but struggle to recapture in chalk on rough paving-stone the inspired glory of Raphael.

He was a good pavement artist but a bad portrait painter. The popularity of his pitch dwindled to nothing. His philanthropic friend went his way with that warm feeling which possesses the hearts of stupid but well-meaning humanity after performing a kind action. At last, deserted by wife and children, dying of neglect on a public bench, our pavement-artist uttered these last and immortal words: "I have made a mess of things, but, by St. Raphael, archangel and artist, it was worth it!"

I, ladies and gentlemen, am nothing but the pavement-artist in this matter of writing—one whose duty it is to arrest the fleeting attention of the masses. Gilbert Keith Chesterton was a Raphael in our midst and more than a Raphael, as I hope to show. How, then, shall the one pay just tribute to the other, much of whose work is great enough to be beyond comprehension? We can but try . . . .

We are here concerned with G.K.C. as a writer, and as such it would be as well to agree that by a writer we mean one who has views to express, and expresses them by means

of the written word as against, for example, the spoken word of rhetoric or drama, or the pictorial artist and cartoonist.

Allowing that we are agreed as to this, we see the first shadow, as it were, of the immensity of the problem before us. We look at a thing so vast that it impresses us, as did our first view of snow-mountains while we were children born on the plains. G.K.C. was poet, satirist, fighter, wit, controversialist, novelist, humorist, mystic, and, in a large sense, a philosopher. How shall one set about assaying in a few brief pages the work of a man who, in *Lepanto*, wrote one of the five finest poems in contemporary English?

Dim drums throbbing, in the hills half-heard,  
or again—

Don John pounding from a slaughter-painted poop,  
and again—

. . . velvet that is black and soft as sin,  
And little dwarfs creep out of it and little dwarfs creep in.

This is the man who wrote in *The Ballade of the White Horse*:

. . . tiger skies, striped terribly,  
With tints of tropic rain.

This is the man who wrote that this world is such a topsyturvy place that you only get a true perspective of it when you look at it from between your legs!

Perhaps I could scarcely have taken a better example than this last to illustrate the two fundamental qualities which are found in every thought he ever expressed on paper, namely simplicity in its most limpid clarity and humour of a nature so vigorous and incisive as to be unparalleled in contemporary English letters. He used both these qualities with finest effect in controversy, at which he was a master.

He had the style of the fencer who, rather than weary himself with unnecessary play for the sake of showing-off, allowed his apponent to make a slip and then thrust at him with one energetic *point en tierce* which ended the matter. Thus, you remember the occasion on which he was in controversy with one of our prominent alleged atheists, who accused him of not fighting his adversary with his own wea-

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pons. G.K.C. replied that were he to do so it would be equivalent to his attempting to sting a wasp!

In controversy his especial genius was to make the other fellow look a fool, but always in the very best of humour! Who but G.K.C. could have remarked that we should not only suffer fools gladly but should also enjoy them enormously? I often think that that was his greatest quip, for St. Paul requires a powerful brain to stand up to him!

It is best that a man should write of the things about which he knows most. This brings me to that aspect of "G.K.C." as a Writer, which I consider to be by far the most important to the future of our civilization—that is, Gilbert Keith Chesterton as the journalist.

It is not so many nights since I was considering the obituaries, written of him by his fellow journalists, which have been devoured by the masses. Some of them contained misrepresentations which could not have been other than deliberate; for they were written by equally cultured, though possibly less intelligent, men. Others were the efforts of children playing Blind-Man's Buff with that of which they knew nothing, and the remainder attempted, and in some sort succeeded, in making "news" of the fact that he was dead. Not a single one mentioned, let alone commented on, the fact that he was one of the greatest journalists of the twentieth century.

Was it because they were afraid to admit the fact? Very likely.

Could it have been that they were ignorant of the fact? Possibly.

Had they never heard of his journalistic career? I'll give them the benefit!

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was among the first men to observe, and furthermore to take a life-lasting note of, the fact that the individual liberty of the average Englishman and the whole essence of the doctrine of personal property, both as an economic and spiritual asset, were at stake. There are reasons, which must be obvious to all, why I am precluded from quoting here (but if my name were Smith I could) *The Servile State*. Thirty years ago "G.K.C."

saw the perilous waters which threaten our civilization to-day.

Out of a condition of affairs as jagged as broken glass, out of a State as fragile as glass requiring only stones to be thrown in the right direction to burst it all to splinters and bring about the downfall of our centuries-old culture, "G.K.C." saw the advent of Communism as the logical conclusion of the destruction of man's right to personal property and individual liberty. He saw, as a writer, and he wrote, as a journalist, more pungently than any of his contemporaries on these twin rights of liberty and property. I have listened to innumerable senseless conversations and read endless fatuous correspondence to the effect that "G.K.C." and his writings were nothing but subversive to the ordered state (meaning the Capitalist state) and communistic in tendency.

Never was there—scarcely could there be—a greater error! It was "G.K.C." and his confrères who saw in the re-distribution of English property (shall we define it as meaning the *allowing* to the producer of the wealth of a nation—i.e. the labourers and the craftsmen—a share in the *ownership* of the *means* of *production* of that *wealth*?) the only solution to the problem which on the one hand was leading Christian English craftsmen back to pagan slavery and on the other was turning the most peaceful, the most humorous and most work-loving nation into a country of revolting slaves.

To this end did he devote unflinchingly the whole of his journalistic career against untold odds.

I have thrown myself open to attack by merely suggesting that so low an individual as the English craftsman (and there are plenty left, as you will soon discover if you try using a pneumatic drill, laying six courses of bricks, or budding roses) should have any right to property at all.

As a writer "G.K.C." has left us with a moral too powerful to be neglected by any except the professional writers of obituaries. In brief, the message of this champion of our individual liberty is this terrible dilemma: "Deprive mankind of individual liberty and personal property and you

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make slaves. Make mankind into slaves and their *natural* urge for liberty will lead them to revolt with the ultimate result of a yet worse and more exacting slavery—communism.”

If this be so, you may say that all the ideals of individual liberty for which “G.K.C.” worked so hard and wrote so well have come to naught. The servile state and economic slavery are more pronounced to-day than they were before first he took up his pen.

You would be wrong. The servile state and economic slavery are more pronounced in this country to-day than ever they were, but he has created an opposition which would never have come into being without the clearly expressed wisdom of his views. He has left behind him a small band of men whose joint incomes could not buy one acre of Oxford Street but whose courage will one day (please God) reclaim the Western world to the true responsibilities of the Christendom he loved so well. Had he neither lived nor written as he did, this band of men—of whom I number myself the least—would never have existed.

PETER BELLOC.