CANON DIMNET AND DEMOCRACY

ONCE,' says Canon Dimnet, 'I heard a shepherd saying that "the wind sat in France,"' for the Canon was born in that frontier district of his country that was formerly part of the old Middle Kingdom of Lotharingia and later of the Duchy of Burgundy. Dimnet is a Frenchman born and bred; in *My Old World* he has created an unforgettable picture of the typical small town that was his birthplace, Trélon, with its gray spire dominating the flat landscape; but though the life of Trélon is French, its memories are of older allegiance, and the shepherd was recording in his phrase a time when, to the inhabitants of Trélon and all about Cambrai, the French were 'foreigners.'

It is perhaps not too fanciful to see in this frontier background an explanation of Canon Dimnet's extraordinary feeling for a language and a culture not his own. An uncle early taught him 'simple English words; door, window, pen, book . . . and had given our dog quite a standing in the street by calling him, for some reason, Euston.' The little flame lighted by his uncle grew during school days until at last, on going to teach at Douai, Ernest Dimnet came into contact with the English Benedictine community in that town. The effect upon him was startling. Even in their Catholicism they betrayed a new world: 'I used to think my Benedictine friends, monks though they were, even more unclerical than I was. Their street costume, they way of speaking, of walking, of looking at one, were English and not priestly . . . One of them, coming out of the cathedral after his ordination, remarked to me with a happy smile that it might have been hotter . . . The spirituality to which I had been used from childhood regarded the body as a restive animal, a wild ass, which could best be held in subjection by severe discipline and scarcely sufficient rations. My new friends, on the contrary, were actuated by Greek ideas. To them the body was a steed

which with proper care could gain in efficiency as it gained in beauty . . . English monks in love with the bracing wind could rise to spirituality . . . The classical French, with the appearance of finality which their clean-cut formulas gave them, did not know everything after all.'

This difference in the English living of the Faith resulted in an inrush of a new life upon the closed academic and ecclesiastical French world that Ernest Dimnet had hitherto known. It was able 'to carry the psychology of a nation into the soul of a man not belonging to it, through the medium of the language.' Canon Dimnet lives physically under the shadow of Notre Dame, but 'my soul is cold and indifferent,' he says, 'when I go up the Rue de la Paix, it is alive when I am in Madison Avenue. I keep secret foolish notebooks in which sections of New York, Chicago, San Francisco or San Antonio are described in minute detail, a well-known symptom of love.' Save for a rare slip, Canon Dimnet's prose in its perfection of scholarly English reflects this love. This gives the Canon his great importance at the present time, for he knows both the language and the psychology of the English-speaking world. The knowledge of English led to knowledge of England, and, through England, the United States. England led him to write about the great Catholic Newman, and he produced his *La Pensée Catholique dans l'Angleterre Contemporaine;* afterwards he turned to a purely literary study, *The Brontë Sisters;* this brilliant work made him known to the literary world on both sides of the Atlantic, so that when, after the War, he went to the United States to beg on behalf of Lille University, he was already a known figure. He began a yearly course of lectures in the States; one of these courses formed the basis of his *Art of Thinking,* and the *Art of Thinking,* followed up by *What We Live By,* has made Ernest Dimnet one of the great educative influences in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Is it not a matter of some importance that there should be, at this moment, one man able to speak clearly and

intimately to the three great democracies of the West, France, England, and the United States? 'We leave,' says Thucydides, 'our city open to all men, nor is it ever seen that by the banishing of strangers we deny them the learning or sight of anything. (The enemy) in their discipline hunt after valour presently from their youth with laborious exercise, and yet we who live remissly undertake as great dangers as they.' Do not the three countries feel, at this moment, that their Athenian ideal is threatened by a new and more terrible Sparta? The Long Walls are insufficient; there are rivalries within those walls; would not Socrates, by a little questioning, help the turbulent city of the West to know more clearly what she might be called upon to defend, and why? '

Canon Dimnet used to know a lady in Trélon called Mademoiselle Aline Bourgeois: 'No sooner would a child appear than she would teach it something in a way nobody else would dream of.' He is like that himself—a mixture of Socrates and Mademoiselle Bourgeois. The first chapter of his most famous book, *The Art of Thinking,* is an admirable example of this trait, a piece of experimental psychology based on the remark 'a penny for your thoughts,' which the present writer has seen enthrall a whole classroom of boys. What actually are you thinking about at this moment? And what sort, what quality of thoughts habitually occupy you? In a quiet, urbane, almost indirect way Canon Dimnet sets out, in *The Art of Thinking,* to the task of tidying ordinary people's minds. He first of all reveals, by questioning, the innumerable associated images that haunt any train of thought or any distraction, and then he sets out to direct the mind towards its most vital and important objects. 'People do not think about big issues,' he says, in *What We Live By.* 'All the time you hear them alluding to religion, morals, the principles of politics, love, death, beauty. Ask them how many hours, how many minutes they have devoted to a real examination of those questions; their smile will be an almost

touching confession. Ignorance, inertness, are the rule.'

'Their smile will be an almost touching confession.' Canon Dimnet has the rare secret of how to bring every abstract idea down to a concrete example. Throughout those two books in which he is trying to elucidate the principles of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, and to make them liveable by the ordinary man, he is constantly appealing to experience as a proof of his theses. This is his value, for, steeped in Catholic philosophy and theology as he is, he can set out to teach such things to an American business man without mentioning Catholicism, philosophy, or theology. He wants us to think; turn out of our minds, he says, all the images which are seen crowding round our proper line of thought so soon as we pay attention to what we are doing; but having turned them out, fill up the mind with harmonious images, those that stimulate our proper preoccupation. Take pencil and paper, he says, and write down those thoughts. That will drive them into clarity and order. But do the same with your life. Do not leave your desk untidy. Make dossiers of your knowledge, of your interests. Treat the newspaper as a collection of historical documents. Cut out the items you are interested in and classify them with others on the same questions; make the effort to master the terminology of foreign news; discard what is not important. Then do the same with your life; do not waste your time on trashy books; do not, on the other hand, aim at a standard too high for you out of intellectual snobbishness; do not be misled by the set phrases of conventional life; discard, choose the best, concentrate.

What is the object of all this mechanics? It is distinction, in mind and manners. Distinguished thought leads to distinguished conduct. The highest ideals of culture are, if you take them in the concrete example, attainable by people who ordinarily rise no further than the detective novel. Truth and Beauty can be a part of one's life, if not for the asking, at least for the grasping; and they will

mate to bring forth Goodness. True culture will issue into action. 'Just as we learn,' says Canon Dimnet, 'to sit up straight, or do not give in, even in our privacy, to too much freedom of attitude, we can turn out soul visitors we are not proud of. This humble beginning of sanctity will be rewarded by a straighter judgement and by that broader sympathy which as an aspect of intelligence. Good men generally think right. When they do not, it seems unnatural and the lower parts of our soul, the insurgents in us always ready for an outcry, triumph meanly.' Canon Dimnet is full of examples of his theme. Charlotte Brontë is one; 'she was, before everything, a woman living her life with intensity, with seriousness, and with courage, and never confused the artificial elements of her craft with the poignant realities of life.' Another example that he gives is of a shopkeeper in Trélon called Monsieur Pallia, who used to express his disgusted appreciation of the continuous tattle of his wife and daughters by the words ''tits détails, 'tits détails.' These words, which stood for 'petits détails,' have 'served me,' he says, 'through life to characterize inwardly nineteen twentieths of what I hear and not a little of what I say.' Here is a final and most striking example, a little girl whom Canon Dimnet met in a railway carriage. She was reading a book: 'I never saw anybody read like that. It seemed as if the old-fashioned but pretty and dainty little figure was trying to lose itself into that book . . . . "What are you reading so delightedly?" The eager little face looked up, summoned, as it were, from far away regions. "Monsieur, c'est l'Histoire Romaine" (brief pause), "et je vais arriver à Jules César." "How do you know that you are coming to Julius Caesar?" "Oh, *I have read this book many times.*" Owing to an incredible chance the little girl summed up in herself the dreams, yearnings and admirations of princesses. No wonder she looked distinguished.' Neither she nor Charlotte Brontë in her Yorkshire Vicarage would have fussed about ''tits détails.'

It may be a chance that the three nations to which Ernest

Dimnet can speak are democratic in their constitutions, but it is unquestionably fortunate that he is there to speak to them. For they have a lesson to learn, if they are to survive; democracy entails a responsibility, and a grave one —the use of freedom. Dimnet's thesis is: you must learn to discard conventional associations of ideas, you must learn to think; develop the *habit* of thinking about what you do, live tidily, in fact; by so doing you will become distinguished; a citizen as opposed to a slave should be distinguished; the effect of finding oneself distinguished is to find oneself a Leader; a leader, however unpremeditatedly so, will develop consciousness of his responsibilities; eminence will lead to morality; thought to responsible action. The citizen of democracy must learn *self*-discipline, for he will get no other.

This is the thesis implicit in what is perhaps Canon Dimnet's most absorbing book, *France Herself Again*, published in August, 1914, a review of the literary and political scene in France between that date and the Second Empire. It was a period of national decadence and recovery, and the decadence Canon Dimnet traces to 'The unwise love of dangerous ideas.' France accorded an illegitimate prominence to the writer in this period. This tendency 'reversed the scale of values in the minds of all except the lucky illiterate, placing art before action, and inducing a preference for . . . things that would look well in print, instead of the manly enjoyment of positive influence.' The contemporary writer made an illegitimate illation to his craft from the artistic vocabulary and often, to his teaching, from the artist's morals. The result of this magistral liberty without moral responsibility was the decadent life of a whole political community. The same phenomenon can be observed to-day in England: the hatred of Centre and Left Wing intelligentsia for Fascism is based on the fear of being prevented from propagating doctrine freely. In England and the United States to-day one can teach practically what moral doctrine one pleases; the writer like

Shaw or Wells or D. H. Lawrence has a vastly greater influence than the man of action like a Curzon or a Chamberlain. The proportion is an unhealthy one: it exaggerates the saving fault of democracy—that it argues before it acts; it puts too great a premium on a hostile tyrant's ability to strike swiftly and forcibly; it recalls all too grimly the title of a book by Marcel Sembat quoted by Canon Dimnet in *France Herself Again,* a book entitled *Faites un Roi, sinon faites la Paix.*

' The wind sits in France '—the political cleansing which Canon Dimnet was expecting in the last pages of *France Herself Again* has unhappily failed to appear. France is still the weakest link in the democratic chain, though neither England nor the United States are far ahead where long and secret preparation for action is concerned. One cannot help feeling that Canon Dimnet would be doing a great service to all three countries if he would write a sequel to *France Herself Again,* covering the years from 1914 to 1938. The lesson would be instructive and might, if not too late, be inspiring. Only a conscious self-discipline and sense of responsibility on the part of the great mass of democratic citizens will guarantee the continuance of their freedom. ' They in their discipline hunt after valour presently from their youth, and yet we that live remissly undertake as great dangers as they.' The speech of Pericles reads grimly in the light of what later happened to Athens; and we that ' live remissly ' to-day need to listen to so wise a Socrates as Canon Dimnet when he warns us that we must grow up.

Somewhere in *My New World* (his second volume of Autobiography) Canon Dimnet speaks of the ' subtly lyrical ' Cleveland Tower in Princeton. ' That Tower,' he says, ' needs no bell.' The remark is typical of his literary skill. Throughout his works the reader is charmed by the aptness of his descriptions as well as by the concreteness of his advice. Whether he is describing the Yorkshire moors above Haworth, the vast and pensive spaces of Douai

or the lay-out of Galveston; whether he is telling us how to make schoolboys loathe mistakes, or how to deal with dockside reporters in New York; whether he is telling us how he got from Paris to Trélon in 1919, or how one should approach the problem of the love of God; one is conscious both of a great delicacy of touch and of a corresponding acuteness of apprehension. Possessed of the French clarity of mind, Canon Dimnet yet has the secret of the psychological, rather than the logical, approach to the blundering and uncertain Anglo-Saxon heart. He has a clear grasp of world affairs; and yet a passionate desire to teach the individual how to make, how to master, those affairs. His is not a simple form of culture; he quotes with approval a Jewess who said to him 'she would not be natural if she were not affected'; he is aware that 'even an average person to-day is conscious of nuances which ancient poets never perceived'; but he is emphatic about the right order of things. Literature comes after, not before, life; ideas, if dangerous, should not be propagated; democracy is a good system, if it works. He quotes with approval Aristotle's definition of barbarians as of 'people insisting on doing what they please, without submitting to any rule.' This mixture of subtlety and force: of logic and psychology: of big apprehension and particular application: is the secret that should make Ernest Dimnet a tower of strength to three nations—a tower that needs no bell.

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