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IN OUR PARISH.*

THE GREAT DISCOVERY.

WHILE the thing is still fresh in my mind I will try to put it down on paper—the incredible thing that has happened in our parish. When we had least thought about life's great things, we have come face to face with the greatest. We have been for long years living on the surface of things. The sun basked on the slopes of the hills, purple at eve; we came back from the offices in town, plunged *through the tunnel*, and hastened to our gardens. We lifted up our eyes to the hills, and our security seemed as immovable as their crests soaring above the little dells that were haunts of ancient peace around their foundations. Long years of ease dimmed our vision. The church bell rang in vain for many of us. Those who had six whole days in the week to devote to their own pleasure began to devote the seventh also to that same end. The day of peace was becoming a day of unrest.

Thus it was with us when, with the suddenness of a lightning flash, the incredible overtook us.

I.

If only one could put it into words! But words can never express this sudden meeting of man and God when that meeting was least expected. It was heralded by the booming of guns across the sea. The great city lay slumbering between us and the shore, but over the turrets and spires

it came—boom, boom—under the stars. It was war. That far-away echo might not itself be the grim struggle of death, but it was its harbinger. Over all the seas death would soon be riding on the billows. Faces became stern. Good-byes were spoken. Ah! that word "Good-bye," which we hear every day and which, like those old coins which have passed from hand to hand so long until at last the image and superscription are gone, had lost all trace of its original meaning, retaining nothing but a faint aroma of courtesy, which sometimes vanished in the inflection of the voice until the word became only a discourteous dismissal—that word was born for us anew. We heard it on the lips of mothers clinging to the hands of their sons, who were summoned away to join their regiments, and as white lips said "Good-bye" to those whose blood was to water the fair fields of France, we suddenly realised what it meant. The word, meaningless yesterday, to-day expressed the greatest wish that the lips of man can utter—God be with thee. On the mother's lips the word was the commitment of her boy to the charge of the encompassing God. Then, when the harvest was ripening on the slopes and the drum sounded "Come," and the young and the strong went forth with a smile to the great harvesting of death, we learned again the meaning of a phrase. But we were yet to learn the meaning of a word.

It is in the darkness that the stars appear and the immeasurable abysses of the infinite universe, and it was when the dusk sank into the deep night that the word rose

* Note.—The parish of these sketches is nowhere; yet in these days, it is everywhere throughout Britain.

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high in the firmament of life and burned red into our souls. And that word was God. It seemed so incredible to us that we should need that old word. We were so powerful and so rich. Our faith was strong, but it was in the reeking tube and in the smoking shard, and in the number of our Dreadnoughts. Then all these things seemed to fail us. A nightmare seemed to fall on us—a nightmare which lifted not night or day. Our soldiers were driven back, back, back. They fought by day and marched by night, and we heard in the night watches the beating of their wearied feet, blood stained. Was there to be no end to that tramp, tramp of men yielding before death? Was the Empire reared by the heroism of generations to crumble under our feet? The ghastly deeds of shame—were they to come to our doors? We looked at our children, and they could not understand the light in our eyes. These deeds of hell—they might occur even now under the shadow of our hills. It was then that the word began to blaze in the heavens. And the word was—God.

II.

We had built a new church in our parish, that those who built pleasant houses on the slopes, fleeing from the restless city that lay below, might have room to worship. But the desire to worship was dying of attrition. And the old church where the quarriers and farm servants assembled and worshipped in an atmosphere that on a warm day became so thick that one could cut it with a knife—that old church would have been quite big enough to hold all who came, for the instinct to pray seemed to be dying. And many, because the new church was now too big, regretted the old. Then, suddenly, the new church was filled to the door. Men and women discovered the road leading down to the hollow where the church stands amid the graves of the generations. With wistful faces they turned towards it. While the bell rang they stood in groups among the graves. And if you listened there was but one word—war, war, war. Over and over again just that one word. Until the bell was silent, and they turned into the now crowded church.

As I sat there and cast a glance around me, I felt a sudden amazement. Those who never before had come down the steep brae when the bell was ringing were sitting here and there just as if they had been there every Sunday when the beadle, with head erect, ushers the minister to the pulpit and snips him in. (Though the church is new, the minister is yet snipped in by the beadle—a lonely prisoner there on his perch, and it is an uncanny sound to hear the click of that snip shutting in the solitary man.) In the pew in front of me sat a burly man with a head like a dome. He never came to church. When I met him he would stand for an hour in the lane among the hawthorns explaining his views.

Prayer was mere superstition. Cosmic laws unchanging and unchangeable held the universe in their grasp. To ask that one of these laws should be altered for a moment that a boon might be conferred on us was to ask that the universe might be shattered. Prayer was immoral, the asking for what could not be granted, and what we knew could not be granted. If he went to church it would be hypocrisy on his part. And thus it came that when the farm servants came up the Gallows road on their way to church on a summer morning, they often heard the whirr of my friend's mowing machine as he mowed his lawn. It was the way he took of letting the parish know that culture could have no dealings with effete superstitions.

And yet there he sat in front of me with a hymn-book which he picked up from the shelf at the door, where such books are piled for the use of camp-followers. The tune of the opening Psalm was Kilmarnock, and my friend sang it in a way which showed that his mother had trained him well. Then I forgot him, but after a while something like a stifled sob in front of me brought him again to my consciousness. The minister began to pray for the King's forces "on the sea, on the land, and in the air." My mind was playing round the words "in the air," for they were an intrusion into the familiar order—an innovation! Every invention of man seemed doomed to become a weapon in the hand of the devil. But the prayer went on—for the sailors keeping their watches in the darkness of the night that God might watch over them, that through their unfaltering courage our shores might be inviolate; for the soldiers now facing the enemy, grappling with death, that God might succour them, covering their heads in the day of battle. "Break Thou down the fierce power of our enemies," cried the minister suddenly, "that with full hearts we may praise Thee, the God of our fathers." A great hush fell on the crowded church. The shut eyes saw the red battlefields, with the lines swaying to and fro, while the shrapnel burst and the aeroplanes whirled in the smoke of the cannon. The cries of men suddenly smitten smote on the inner ear. It was then that the great thing happened. All of a sudden the voice broke, recovered, and broke again, and the minister was swept away from the well-ordered, beautiful words he had prepared. He began to speak of the stricken hearts at home, of fathers and mothers to whom their sons would never come back, of women in empty houses with their husbands laid in nameless graves, of little children who would never learn to say "Father" . . . It was then that my friend stifled a sob. There was Something after all, Someone greater than cosmic forces, greater than law—with an eye to pity and an arm to save. There was God. And my friend's son was with the famous regiment that was swaying to and fro, grappling with destiny. He was helpless—and there was only God to appeal to. There comes an hour in life when the heart realises that instinct is mightier far than

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that logic which is the last refuge of the feeble-minded. There came like the sudden lifting of a curtain the vision of a whole nation—nay, of races girdling the whole earth—to whom the same high experience has come. Everywhere the sanctuaries filled, the eyes turned upward, for instinct is mightier than reason. The smoke of battle has revealed the face of God.

III.

With us in the parish churches of Scotland the great thing is the sermon. But to-day it is different; the great thing now is prayer. And the minister preached about prayer. He set forth in clear and ordered language, with a felicitous phrase now and then lighting up his sentences, that prayer was not a mere relic of fanatical superstition but a mighty power. He discussed with a wealth of learning whether God had shut Himself in behind a prison-house of cosmic laws that made it impossible for Him to answer prayer. He reasoned the worshippers cold. But there in that hour reason was bound to give way before intuition. "If I am free," cried the preacher, "to rush to the help of my child when he crieth in terror; and if, when the creatures of His hand cry to God He is bound and cannot help or soothe, then He is poorer than I, so great a thing is freedom." Prayer was not mere spiritual gymnastics. A God immured in cold laws, barred for ever from the play of love or tenderness, would be the one being in the universe most to be pitied. The Creator did not sit deaf and dumb on the Throne of indifference answering nothing, doing nothing. History was the proof that right ever prevailed. Then the measured tones went on to speak of the difficulty of believing in the efficacy of prayer when Christians faced Christians in mortal conflict, and they both cried for victory—both the children of the One Father crying for victory over each other. But the difficulty was of appearance only. For the only prevailing prayer was prayer in the name of Christ. "Whatsoever ye shall ask in *My name* that will I do." To ask in His name was to ask in His spirit—the spirit of humility, self-sacrifice, and love—the spirit of self-surrender to the *will* supreme. The question was which of the prayers for victory was prayer in the name of Christ.

This was clear, convincing, but cold. Only at rare intervals does the minister of our parish give way to passion. Suddenly there came a wave of emotion. He flung his head back, and his eyes glowed. His voice vibrated through the church. "When I think," he exclaimed, "of the things that have been done with the name of God on men's lips; of atrocities such as the unspeakable Turk never perpetrated; of war waged not upon to-day but upon the centuries of faith that reared great cathedrals now in flames; of women and

children laid upon the reeking altars of human passion; and all this in the name of culture, the culture of the superman who deems himself superior to the Ten Commandments—then, I say, may God grant that the culture which beareth such fruit may perish from off the face of the earth. Prayer for the triumph of such a cause cannot be in Christ's name. . . ."

But the preacher never got any further.

This was what happened, and I am afraid some will not believe me, for a Scotoman in church is a stoic, motionless, and dumb, as he listens to the Word. But all the traditions of the parish were snapped in a second. In the side gallery sat the General, sitting as he always does with his back to the minister. This he does that he may mark who are in church of his servants and tenants, and who absent. When I read of the nobles in France who went to the scaffold with a jest in the days of the Terror, I always think of the General. He is that sort of man. To-day little by little, as the sermon went on, he turned round. At last he was facing the pulpit. His gleaming eyes were fixed on the preacher. His son was dead. And when the words rang through the church, may God grant that such culture may perish . . . the General sprang to his feet. "Amen" rang his voice through the church. There was a sudden movement; as one man they all rose to their feet. Hands were lifted up to heaven. "Amen," "Amen," they cried—and then there rose a cheer—muffled, but still a cheer. In the pulpit the words died on the preacher's lips. He seemed as one suddenly stricken. He gazed bewildered over the sea of faces. They sank back into the pews as though suddenly ashamed. The last man to sit was my friend, who stood to the last with uplifted hand. I think it was he who cried "Hear, hear"—the only sign he gave of his long absence from church. The sermon was never finished. The preacher in a low voice said, "Let us pray." And he humbled himself as one who enters the valley of humiliation. And then he gave out this psalm:—

Now Israel

May say, and that truly
Is that the Lord
Had not our cause maintained.

Then certainly
They had devoured us all.

But blessed be God,
Who doth us safely keep,
And hath not gi'n
Us for a living pray
Unto their teeth
And bloody cruelty.

This psalm as we sang it that day was a psalm of triumph. The clouds suddenly broke. We heard our fathers singing

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it in their dark days. When the Lords of the Congregation came from Leith to St Giles' they sang it. On the moors fighting for freedom the Covenanters sang it. Those who sang in the long-gone years conquered, for the cause of freedom must conquer. And we now singing it must conquer. For there was a power behind us mightier far than sword or shell—even the Lord God Omnipotent. And that was how we made the greatest of all discoveries; we found God.

IV.

Yesterday morning I went early to the station, and there in the booking office I found my friend talking to the ticket-collector. The ticket-collector is a philosopher, and I mean to tell you about him some day. He comes to church, for he loves the old psalm tunes; but when one of our parishioners who goes now and then to Keswick comes to the booking office, the ticket-collector calls him in and reasons with him gently. "Mon, there's naething in it," he says; "I can tell you for a fact there's naething in it—all a whack of fables." "Some day you'll find out there's something in

it," flashes the man from Keswick. "If ye wad only reid philosophies," says the ticket-collector, "ye would ken better." But to-day my friend and the ticket-collector had their heads close together, and I only heard the conclusion of their argument. "Mon," said the ticket-collector, "I am beginning to think there may be something in it." And in the evening near the top of the brae I saw the General standing erect with his little cane in his hand. He was talking to the shoemaker, the greatest Radical in the parish—one of a party with which the General has no dealings. But talked like brothers. For the shoemaker has a son fighting at the front, and his heart is sore troubled within him. And the General's son is dead. And as I came up the brae I saw the General putting his hand on the shoemaker's shoulder and turn away, walking slowly up the brae. The old shoemaker saluted and came down the brae. There was a tender look in the old man's eye as he greeted me. In our parish we have truly made the greatest of all discoveries. We have found God, and, finding Him, we have found each other. The man who in his madness kindled the lurid flames of war little dreamed of this fire which he kindled.

