

## THE CONTRIBUTORS' CLUB

### THE REACTION OF A RADICAL

I HAVE always classed myself as a radical. I have been ever mindful of the wise man's advice to the student, to be radical while he was young, for then his chance of seeing the world grow up to him before he died would be good; whereas, if he was not radical in youth, he would spend the rest of his life seeing the world grow away from him. I have always felt confident that I was abreast of my time, possibly a step or two in advance, and I have looked with a certain gentle condescension upon those who have ignored wisdom and accepted their birthright of conservatism without struggle or protest. I have always belonged to radical organizations and contributed to radical causes. I have argued the beauties of socialism; I have been complaisant about anarchism, philosophically administered, the dynamite carefully left out; I have made scathing remarks about Capital; I have felt a warm distaste for the selfish rich who grind the faces of the poor. I have pointed morals, using as my text the possession of great country estates and many automobiles, always excepting the Ford. I have fought for the down-trodden servant-class; I have made 'waiting on yourself' a tenet of my democracy; I have been with those who scorned palliatives, who would strike at the root of society's ills, who would not hesitate to tear the world to pieces and build it anew. I envisaged this world we radicals could construct, the true *internationale*, with race-hatreds obliterated, economic inequalities forever adjusted, love and peace assured to all mankind. It was a happy life of

blithe denunciation, clear-cut theories, a pleasant sense of moral if not actual leadership, and no undue upheaval to upset my equilibrium.

And now what has happened? The new order is upon us, but where is my eager, welcoming spirit? I feel as if there were a pistol at my head and I were asked to stand and deliver. I fumble feverishly for my remembered treasures, but everywhere find only emptiness. The walls of my faith are falling in upon me, like a house built of cards.

Who am I that called himself a radical? Do I embrace Bolshevism? Not at all! My moral nature sees it as cruelty and selfishness, the old rule of force in new hands. My intelligence says that the scheme is too simple for the complexities of human nature. To take from him that hath and give to him that hath not may be all very well as far as it goes; but when you have done that, how much further along are you? I do not see, as in happier days I might, a new truth obscured by the present bloodshed and misery. I see only a great people led astray, the return to just living a path of tragic expiation.

When I turn from that picture of suffering to the easy assurance of the suffragettes of England, who are endeavoring to introduce a soviet form of government into their native land, I have a feeling of consternation. I do not say it aloud, but I wonder whether a thing, just because it is new, is better than that which is old. If we could give the old a new name, it might help. Advertisers do it with breakfast foods and cigars, to the satisfaction of the

consumer. He gets the novelty of a new expectation, with all the excellent qualities of the original article, and the world is happier thereby. Like a coward, I also wonder if it is necessary for all the changes to be made at once. Replacing old parts with new might be easier to bear than installing an entire new engine, especially when we are navigating through air which is full of holes.

I like to have the workingman receive as large wages as the industry can bear, but I am not so harsh in my judgment of Capital as I once was. During the war I saved what I could and bought bonds, Liberty and otherwise, and I find I do not regard the money-power entirely in the abstract as I once did. I cannot help wondering about my own little dividends, surely innocently enough acquired through long practice in self-denial, and hoping that they will not be jeopardized by all the labor upheaval. I even find myself thinking that violence and lawlessness are not the perquisites of Capital alone; that Labor is sometimes selfish and unreasonable; that sympathetic strikes are not necessarily altruism, but may sometimes be shocking breaches of faith; and — concession fatal to the spirit of the reformer — that there are two sides to every question. I have always believed in organized labor, as must the mildest of radicals, but I cannot quite reconcile myself to the police joining the national group. Of course, class loyalties are good and necessary, just as are family loyalties, but I wonder apologetically whether there are not impersonal loyalties which are of a still higher order. Our police are men of dignity and worth, but should we be justified in expecting that many human beings, in the presence of divided loyalties, could be like that Brutus of old who unflinchingly condemned his own son to death?

The idea of railroad ownership of the government (I started to write it the other way round, but perhaps this does fuller justice to the plan) I have applauded in my younger days. But now, baldly demanded, a threat attached to the proposal, no coating of idealism to sweeten the bolus, its very advocates hardly troubling to veil the crudity of its selfishness, the whole scheme leaves me cold. Not many years ago I should have said lightheartedly, 'On with the great experiment; let joy be unconfined.' But not now.

Is it age, or the weariness produced by the anxious years of the war? or is it that, when it comes to the real test, I am afraid of the new, of the untried? Am I, after all, only a conservator of the past, one of those obstructionists who are the despair of the young reformer? Am I a stand-patter — a creature who has always figured in my imagination as a donkey with his ears back and his feet firmly embedded in the earth?

It is a painful thought to me to contemplate changing sides and sitting on the benches of the opposition. There is cold comfort in being the tail of the kite, even though recognizing that the tail is as essential as the kite. I try to stiffen my faith in myself by saying that not every change is progress, and that restlessness is not necessarily aspiration. But why should I not frankly acknowledge that I am middle-aged, and that my reaction is a biological necessity? Youth is always for change for its own sake; and is not age, with diminishing vision, halting step, and blunted hearing, reluctant to stumble to its eternal rest in a world whose furniture has been hastily rearranged by restless youth? Or must I agree with the unflinching extremist, — whom neither life nor experience changes, — that I was never anything but a parlor radical?

## A BEING DARKLY WISE

Mr. Gorch, in that delightful, forgotten book, *The Pedagogues*, reproaches his fiancée with having lost 'that air of faith and admiration.' Had it been his pleasant fate to be engaged to J—— or to me, he could never have taxed us thus, or lodged a legitimate complaint of any such description against us. With more justice he might have re-proved a tendency in us to dispense our admiration too widely among mankind — might have repeated, with a different meaning, the words of the great mystic: 'But what have *I* to do with genera and species?' Because it is not the particular eminences, but the general level, of manly genius, which we more than daily celebrate in our well-neighbored house. It is the average man's clairvoyant understanding of any and all contraptions; his insight into those cryptographs known as 'Directions,' and his ability always to answer the question, 'How in the name of sense does this thing work?'

Raying out from the house of our neighbor, Mr. Darling, as if placed on the spokes of an invisible wheel, are a number of residences besides ours, of unmanned women. We try to observe a tacit convention to take turn and turn about with burst pipes, peculiar-sounding boilers, mysterious leaks on ceilings, and the like, so that only one head at a time, hooded in shawl or apron, shall project itself ahead of its flying galoshes, as we 'run over to get Mr. Darling.'

'O Mr. Darling, that dining-room shutter's off again, and I can't get both the spikes in at once — I've tried and tried. I did hate so to bother you.'

'O Mr. Darling, the bung's jumped out of the vinegar barrel, and I can't find the spigot — it's running all over the cellar.'

'Mr. Darling, the clothes-line's down, and none of us can reach the hook!'

'O Mr. Darling! Mr. Darling! Can you just step over and see if you smell smoke anywhere about the house?'

His interest is immediate, though his calmness is unperturbed. Unhasting, unresting is his stride across the dandelions. Without one backward look he lays his hose down on the lawn, leaves his pruning-knife hanging in the tree. He is three minutes on our premises and the clothes-line is taut, the spigot in, vinegar-tight, and the smell of burning exorcised.

Mr. Darling in the autumn often goes away on business — a ticklish time for us, and one when it almost seems that he is inconsiderate to leave us. J —— and I, during one of these intervals, undertook the purchase of a hanging lamp. It was foolhardy of us to think of such a thing while Mr. Darling was away! The directions were models of their kind for ambiguity. In tipsy and topheavy fashion we got the complicated chains and framework suspended, but it was plainly an innovation on the original design. It had an indescribably menacing look. J —— returned to the formula of those precarious days when the Darling house had been still untenanted: 'Go and look up and down the road and see if there's a man in sight.'

One of our windows commands a stretch of sidewalk toward the village. Slowly advancing from that quarter I saw the aged Town Clerk. It is true that he has spent all his life among deeds, licenses, and books of record. But mechanical directions, which are written exclusively by men and for men, all men, by some faculty higher than reason or experience, understand. The Town Clerk in the course of time entered our living-room, examined the evidence and said gently, —

'You ladies have hung it, in a way, kind of upside down.'

Men possess knowledge, exact knowledge, of conditions they have never