

MURRAY HILL BIDS MR. CHESTERTON GOODBY

NEW YORK, April, 1921.

THE note, which came altogether as a surprise, read: "My husband suggests that if you have nothing better to do perhaps you would look in upon us on Wednesday evening at about eight thirty." Mrs. Chesterton further said, in giving the address, that they had a little apartment lent to them for the last week of their stay here. She had asked Mr. Woollcott to come, too, and Gerald Stanley Lee.... "We can only promise you smokes and talk."

I wondered, as I hurried for the bus, whether I'd have time to get my shoes polished. It was precisely the hour appointed when I reached what I took to be the door. The hall man declared that Mr. Chesterton had "gone out". I insisted that the hall man telephone up. "No answer," he said, after a bit, and hung up. Now what do you think of that! Well, I'd take a walk and return a little later.

As I was rounding the corner coming back I saw an agile, rotund figure, with a gleam of white shirt-front in the half-darkness, mounting the dusky steps instead of descending into the lighted area-way. Looked kinda like Mr. Woollcott. If so, the gentleman was going wrong, so I called to him.

"He has not come back," the hall man asserted, but assented to our demands to ring up again. No response. "It was about an hour ago he went out," he replied to our question. Standing there, Mr. Woollcott and I contrived several theories. One was that Mr. Chesterton had intended to return by now but had lost track of

the time. Another was that possibly Mrs. Chesterton had invited us on her own hook and had overlooked notifying Mr. Chesterton of the matter. "Has a third gentleman been here?" we asked, meaning Mr. Lee. No. We went for a stroll.

It was nine o'clock. And Mr. Woollcott's manner indicated that he was inclined to take some sort of revenge on the hall man. Was he, the hall man, certain that he had everything straight? "Sure," he nodded; "it's Mr. Cushman's apartment." Mr. Cushman's apartment! Had we, then, been blundering in the wrong place all this time! "Mr. Chesterton!" roared Mr. Woollcott. Yes, yes; he understood that...the gentleman had come in yesterday. That was right according to the note I had had from Mrs. Chesterton; so we demanded that the man make another effort at the telephone. Ah!...he heard something. "It's all right," he mumbled; "they are there."

As we got out of the car Mr. Chesterton was cramming the tiny hall. He was in an attitude which I took to be that of a bow, but I later discovered, as he shuffled back and forth about the apartment, that he walks that way all the time now when in the privacy of his own quarters. Mrs. Chesterton greeted us as we entered the room, Mr. Chesterton trailing in behind us and continuing a welcoming murmur which had somewhat the sound of a playful brook. Mrs. Chesterton ensconced herself behind a tea table. Mr. Chesterton lumbered about with cigars. He disclaimed the great easy chair by the electric table lamp

in which it was unmistakable that he had been sitting, but was prevailed upon to return to it.

In apology for the lateness of our arrival we mentioned our difficulties in discovering that he was in. Mr. Chesterton seemed bewildered by the circumstance. He shook his head and (evidently referring to the hall man) said he was not able to understand "that foreigner" at all. "That foreigner?" we smiled at the Englishman. I think it most likely that the explanation of his not having heard our earlier rings was that he was not familiar with the system of bells in the apartment. They had not been out, he declared; oh, yes! they had been out, too, a good while ago, to get something to eat. "We are camping here," he said, "in a rather bohemian fashion." Didn't they enjoy that as a change from life in fashionable hotels? Oh, yes! Very much.

They wondered if Mr. Lee were not coming. Yes; he had assured me that he was, when I had seen him that afternoon at the club. In fact, we had discussed what we would wear, and had agreed on dinner jackets. Mr. Chesterton was wearing a braid-bound cutaway coat of felt-like material (very much wrinkled in the skirt) and dark striped trousers of stiffish quality, but not recently pressed. His batwing collar had a sharp crease extending outward at one side as though it were broken. Though it was a very warm night for early spring—a hot night, indeed—he wore uncommonly heavy woolen socks, which were very much "coming down" about his ankles. His comically small English eyeglasses, with a straight rod joining them across the top, were perpetually coming off his nose. On one finger he wore a rather large ring. I noticed that for so large a man his hands were

somewhat small, and were delicately made. At one side of him were three ashtrays (one of them a huge brass bowl well filled with tobacco ash) and at the other side of him one tray.

Well, what sort of time had he been having? How far west had he got? He had been as far (I think) as Omaha. "Half way across," he said. He had been much mystified by a curious character he had run into there: a strange being whose waistcoat and coat-front were covered by symbolic emblems, crescents, full moons, and stars. This person had accosted him in the street, saying, "And so you are a lecturer." The man had then informed him that he also was a lecturer. He lectured, he said, on astronomy. "Indeed, in my country," Mr. Chesterton had said, "it is not the custom for astronomers to display on their person devices symbolic of the science in which they are engaged." Next, the man had opened his coat and exhibited the badge of a sheriff, or some sort of officer of the peace. Mr. Chesterton had been astounded to discover the functions of a man of science, a lecturer, and a policeman united in one and the same person. It was quite evident that this (as I assume he was) harmless lunatic had made a most decided impression upon Mr. Chesterton's mind; he took the eccentric individual with much seriousness, apparently as some kind of type; indeed, I feared that we would never get him switched off from talking about him; and I have no doubt that, in the course of time, this ridiculous astronomer will appear as a bizarre character in some fantastic tale, a personage perhaps related to Father Brown, or something like that.

Mr. Chesterton observed that he had enjoyed the opportunity of seeing

various grades of American life, that he had been in the homes of very humble people as well as in houses of persons of wealth and social and intellectual position. In a former article in this magazine I noted how Mr. Chesterton had been greatly startled to find (what he then called) "wooden houses" in this country, and such multitudes of them. He now returned to this phenomenon. What was his one outstanding impression of the United States? Well, he remarked that he had said it before, but he continued to be chiefly struck by the vast number of "frame houses" here.

Mr. Lee arrived. A gentleman who looks very much as though you were looking at his reflection in one of those trick mirrors (such as they have at Coney Island) which humorously attenuate and elongate the figures before them. Or, again, perhaps more justly still, a gentleman who looks as though Daumier had drawn him as an illustration for "Don Quixote". In his evening clothes (to put it still another way), a gentleman who looks much like a very lengthened shadow dancing on a wall. Whistler would have made something very striking indeed out of Mr. Lee in a dinner coat, something beautifully strange. I do not know that I have ever seen anything finer, in its own exceedingly peculiar way, than Mr. Lee, thus attired, with a cup of tea in his hand.

"Do you like wine?" Mr. Woolcott asked Mr. Chesterton, and told him of a restaurant nearby where this could be obtained. Our prohibition, Mr. Chesterton said, did not bother him so much as might be thought, as for reasons having to do with his health he was (as you or I would say) "off the stuff" at present.

One of us, Mr. Woolcott I think, commented upon the sweep of Mr.

Chesterton's fame in the United States. The opinion was advanced that the evening of the day he landed his arrival was known in every literate home in New York. Mr. Chesterton was inclined to think that his "notoriety" in large measure came from his "appearance", his "avoirdupois". Knowledge of him had spread through the notion that he was a "popular curiosity". It was contended that his writing had been well known over here ten years before his pictures became familiar to us. (Though, of course, I myself do think that the pictorial quality of his corporeal being has been very effective publicity for him.)

Then there was another thing which Mr. Chesterton thought might to a considerable degree account for his American celebrity. That was this "tag" of "paradox". People loved "easy handles" like that, and they went a long way. Somehow or other we let this point pass, or it got lost in the shuffle, and the discussion turned to the question of whether there was an American writer living whose arrival in England would command anything like the general attention occasioned by Mr. Chesterton's entrance into the United States. We could not think of anyone.

Mark Twain, of course; yes. O. Henry, doubtless, too. And, indeed, in the matter of years O. Henry might very well be living now. Mr. Chesterton quite agreed as to the English welcome of Mark Twain or of O. Henry. Tom Sawyer and Huck, he said, musingly, certainly were "universal". Then, ponderingly, he observed that English and American literature seemed to be getting further and further apart, or more and more distinct each from the other. He remembered that when he was a boy his father and his uncles simply spoke of

a new book having come out whether it had been written in England or in the United States. As in the case of "The Autocrat of the Breakfast-table"; when it appeared it was enjoyed and talked about by everybody in England; but not spoken of there as a new American book: it was a new book, that's all. Now, however, with Englishmen impressed by the "Spoon River Anthology", "and rightly so", or by "Main Street", "it would not be that way".

He had much liking for O. Henry. But he had begun him by not liking him. He had been puzzled by the "queer commercial deals" on which so many of the stories turned—"buying towns, selling rivers". He had, even now, to reread much of the slang to get the meaning. And so we talked awhile of slang.

"You have an expression here," said Mr. Chesterton, shaking his head as though that were something very remarkable indeed, "'a bad actor'." Much mirth from Woollcott, Lee, and Hill. "Now in England," Mr. Chesterton continued, "we mean by that one who has mistaken his vocation as to the stage. But I discovered that here it has nothing to do with the theatrical profession." Then, it developed, some reporter in the west had referred to him as "a regular guy". At first Mr. Chesterton had been for going after the fellow with a stick.... Certainly a topsy-turvy land, the United States, where you can't tell opprobrium from flattering compliment.

Then one of us told Mr. Chesterton a story of a prize line of American slang. He (the teller of the story) had got a letter in which a friend of his had been spoken of in a highly eulogistic fashion. Thinking this opinion would please his friend, the man showed the letter to him. The

gentleman so much praised in it read the letter and remarked: "Well, whenever I get the hand I always see the red light." Mr. Chesterton looked dazed. "You'll have to translate that to me," he said. We explained it as meaning that whenever this person heard applause of himself he scented danger. "Oh, oh! I see!" crowed Mr. Chesterton,—"the hand, the hand"; and he began clapping his hands with much glee in illustration of the figure.

"Glee", yes, And "crowed", also. They are the words, some of the words, to describe Mr. Chesterton's sounds. His utterance was rapid, melodious. The modulations of his softly flowing voice had curiously somewhat the effect of a very cheerful music box. His easy and very natural command of a great multitude of words was striking. And yet there was something decidedly boyish about the effect of his talk. I think the cause of this was, for one thing, the rather gurgling enjoyment with which he spoke. For another thing, in his impulsive concern for the point of his idea he frequently did not trouble to begin or end sentences. He just let 'er go. But the fundamental source of this boyishness of spirit I think is this: I do not believe I have ever seen a man who has borne the brunt of life for some forty-five years and still retains such complete, abounding, unaffected, and infectious good humor as Mr. Chesterton.

"As I believe I have said somewhere before," Mr. Chesterton was saying, "it seems to me that the best-known character in literature is Sherlock Holmes." Mr. Woollcott was inclined to consider Svengali. Dear me! Svengali may have been in the running at one time, but it strikes me that today he has pretty much gone by the board, to mix the figure somewhat.

As to detective stories. "They are essentially domestic," declared Mr. Chesterton. "Intimate, all in the household, or ought to be. The children's nurse should murder the Bishop. These things where the Foreign Office becomes involved and" (chuckling) "Indian rajahs and military forces come in, are never right. They are too big. The detective story is a fireside story."

Had Mr. Chesterton been much to the theatre while here? No; the only thing he had seen was "The Bat". Something like anguish on the face of the dramatic critic of the New York "Times". Why, he, Mr. Chesterton, had liked "The Bat", a good deal. Speaking of plays, the American presentation of "Magic" came into the conversation. It was remarked that the extremely mystical character of the setting rather crushed the mysticism of the play itself. The idea was advanced that a very simple, matter of fact, even bleak setting, would have been the thing to act as an effective foil to this play. Mr. Chesterton seemed to be not the slightest interested in stage settings. And he knew next to nothing at all about the career of "Magic". He wasn't even sure whether or not he held any proprietary rights in the play. There was, he said as though fumbling around in his mind, something involved about the matter. Friend of his wanted a play. Necessary to finish it in a hurry. He didn't really know, answering a question to this purpose, whether or not he had received any royalties from it.

Mrs. Chesterton handed about some fudge. The collection of ashtrays and bowls surrounding Mr. Chesterton had become jovially freighted with tobacco ash and cigar ends. He smoked his cigars in an economical fashion,

down as far as they could comfortably be held.

There was one thing (the talk had turned to his lecturing) Mr. Chesterton "wished you wouldn't do in this country, or that we didn't do in England, either". That was for the gentleman who "introduced" a lecturer to refer to his "message". In his own case, for instance, how ridiculously was this term misapplied. The word *message* conveyed something "quite the opposite of personality". Or, that is, before its popular corruption it had meant something very different. It meant that something was carried. One with a message was a messenger, a vessel, an envelope. It was hard to think of a figure who could rightly be said to have a message. The Old Testament prophets, Mohammed, perhaps. Whitman now, certainly you couldn't say that Whitman had a message.

A ring; and Mr. Cushman came in. Youthfully cropped grey hair. A gentleman who looked like an habitual first-nighter.

Yes, Mr. Chesterton was telling us, it was a curious thing. He had always heard that Americans worshiped machines. A machine everywhere here, and a machine brought to an amazing state of mechanical perfection, was the elevator, as we called it. When he had first got into an American elevator he had been arrested by the fact that the men entering it took off their hats and stood silently with bared heads as it ascended. It is so, he had said to himself; they are at worship, at prayer, this is some religious rite, mystic ceremony, the elevator is their temple.

Had he been in our subway? someone asked. No; he had been down in a station one time, but he had not ridden on one of the trains. I wish now that I had thought to cut into the

rapid battledore and shuttlecock of the conversation to learn why he had not. Was he scared of 'em?

What were the things which Mr. Chesterton particularly liked in the United States? Well, for one thing, he very much liked the "elevated". He thought it was grand up in the air that way.

And what had he especially *disliked*? Mr. Lee apparently had knowledge of a memorandum book kept by Mrs. Chesterton, known to their intimate little circle as her "Book of Likes and Dislikes". She was, with some difficulty, prevailed upon to read from this—which she did very guardedly, clutching the book firmly before her. Among the things put down in it as not liked were ice cream, ice water, "American boots" (by which were meant women's high-heeled shoes), and interviewers, reporters, and camera men. Things especially liked included parlor car seats. Mr. Chesterton: "I don't dislike it, now. I've got the evil habit of ice water."

Lift, it was generally agreed, was a happier word than *elevator*. Mrs. Chesterton thought that the scientific, technical, correct, or whatever-you-call-them words for things always took all the feeling of life out of them. Aviator, for example, had no color at all. But how fine in the spirit of the things was the popular term *flying-man*, or *fly-man*.

The conversation had got momentarily divided into groups. Mr. Chesterton was heard saying to Mr. Woollcott, "The time I mean was when

Yeats was young—when mysticism was jazz."

Just how he got started in on them I do not recall. He began with Belloc's most entertaining and highly vivacious ballade which has the refrain, "And Mrs. James will entertain the king"; a kind of piece among friends, which unfortunately is not in any book. He recited with a kind of joyous unction, nodding his head forward and back and from side to side, thus keeping time to the music of the verse, punctuating the close of each stanza with a bubble of chuckles. On and on and on and on he went through goodness knows how many bits of rollicking literary fooling.

It was half-past eleven. I saw Mr. Chesterton, when someone else was speaking, yawn slightly now and then. The four callers arose to go. Some one of us asked Mr. Chesterton if he expected to be back in America soon. Through a wreath of smiles he replied that he was not getting a return ticket on the boat.

The two of them were framed in their doorway as we got into the "foreigner's" car. Mrs. Chesterton called to us that she hoped to see us all in England, "singly or together". As the car dropped from their floor both were beaming a merry, friendly farewell.

Suddenly it struck me that they were very like a pair of children—they were so happy, so natural, so innocent of guile, and obviously so fond of one another.

MURRAY HILL

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF DUNRAVEN BLEAK

(Another adventure of Dove Dulcet, the literary detective)

By Christopher Morley

The conscientious high standards that literary artists impose upon themselves are illustrated by an announcement from Decameron Jones and Company that Dunraven Bleak, the famous author of detective stories, has postponed to the autumn his new novel, "Silver Hair", originally scheduled for this spring. Mr. Bleak, after working hard on his manuscript all winter, has (as he expresses it) "struck a snag", and intends to rewrite the story. He has decided to take a vacation before resuming his task, and is now traveling for recuperation. Those who have seen the earlier chapters of the manuscript describe it as a delightful and whimsical mystery story, with a pleasing allegory of old age, which explains the fanciful title.

BUNK!" I said to myself as I read the typed paragraph in the publisher's batch of "publicity notes" sent to me in my capacity as literary editor of the "Planet". A few strokes of my Raisewell 334—the softest and blackest pencil I know; very useful in dealing with publishers' press notes—reduced the paragraph to the following:

Dunraven Bleak has postponed to the autumn his new novel, "Silver Hair".

I pasted this on a sheet of copy paper, added it to the other paragraphs for the weekly column of confidential book chat called "Behind the Arras", and called a boy to take the lot to the composing room. Then I went out for lunch.

At The Snails (which is my club) I saw Dove Dulcet, the literary agent, sitting alone at one of the little tables on the back porch. The first warm sunshine of spring filled the small courtyard with a gentle toasting glow. Lost in meditation, Mr. Dulcet seemed to have fallen into reverie. He was gaz-

ing absently at the shallow pool of goldfish in the graveled yard.

I know Dove well enough to take liberties, so I sat down at his table. "Sorry to disturb your eupepsia," I said, "but I haven't seen you for weeks. What's going on?"

He murmured some greeting, but did not rouse himself from his dreamy fit. I ordered my lunch, and did not further interrupt his privacy.

It was a curious irony (I was thinking) that Dulcet, who carried in his lively mind the material of fine literary achievement, should spend his life reading and marketing the writings of others. He was an "authors' representative" and transacted a profitable brokerage in literary wares. It was his business (he was a man of discreet taste) to read the scripts of many well-known authors, to sell them to editors and publishers and producers for handsome sums. Surely he himself, with more energy, might have created fiction equally viable and vendible. But in Dulcet's case, the gap that lies between conception and execution was even larger than usual. His mind was generally busy with florid schemes of empire; the thought of fame haunted him like hunger; but the sorrowful discipline of the literary art was but little practised. He was, to be sure, a poet. Though his published verses were few and somewhat scran-nel, they did no violence to the laws of prosody. But if there was little poetry in his verses, there was a wild and