

ON NEWSPAPER PROPRIETORS

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

THE weekly organ called the *Nation* might very appropriately be called the *Notion*. For it really excels, apart from all irony, in the suggestion of that sort of half-truth to which the word 'notion' can correctly be applied. Its present name, I need hardly say, is simply a joke in large letters. It is, quite simply and seriously, as if the *Church Times* were actually called the *Baptist*, or as if the *Morning Post* were actually called the *Fenian*; as if the chief vegetarian organ took the title of the *Bulcher*, or the chief teetotal organ were called the *Bacchanal*. There is no doubt about it, and certainly no disguise about it. The editor keeps the word 'nation' as a title; but he almost invariably uses the word 'national' as a term of abuse. Nor does he narrowly confine his hatred to his own nationality; with a broader sense of the human brotherhood, he bestows it upon all nationalities, and sometimes rather specially upon certain small nationalities. I doubt whether he could claim to have sneered more persistently at English patriotism than at Polish patriotism or Serbian patriotism. He is truly international; and does not limit his native and sincere loathing to the narrow boundaries of his own land.

But, as I have said, though the *Nation* has nothing to do with nations, it has a great deal to do with notions; and they are often very interesting and valuable notions. I mean by a notion an incomplete idea; and half an idea is better than no intelligence. Mr. Massingham, the editor in question, is a man of great intelligence; and has

distinguished himself very often by going further along the path of truth than any of his comrades or rivals, even if he never quite got there. He told much of the truth about Marconi; and is the only Liberal journalist alive who is not now kicking himself for having so successfully whitewashed Mr. George. He had the courage to mention the Secret Party Funds, in the days when nobody else mentioned them except ourselves. And he has recently made a somewhat similar movement in the same direction, in the particular passage with which I am concerned just now. In this case also the *Nation* got hold of half the truth; even half the truth is important, and this is a very important half. But in this case also what might have been an idea tailed off into a mere notion, which is ultimately fanciful and even false. A recent article, in the paper under discussion, actually recognized that the press is now simply the private property of an extremely small number of extremely rich men. That is, a newspaper is now about as much a popular organ as a coronet is a popular organ, or a ribbon of the Garter is a popular organ. The writer realizes that controlling journalism is now as narrow as the very narrowest aristocracy; and he proceeds to compare it with other and older forms of aristocracy. It is when he comes to this comparison that he rather abruptly misses the point. He says, truly enough, that there is a certain type of rich man who now tends to own newspapers, and, therefore, to order news. He says that

this type resembles the type of the old brutal robber barons. This, it will be agreed, is rather a hard thing to say about the brutal robber barons. Nor do I believe that it would sound convincing to repeat the ballad of Chevy Chase with the names of Harmsworth and Hulton substituted for those of Douglas and Percy. The barons had some superiorities; including the fact that they were killed sooner. Some of us may even be so romantic as to think it a superiority that they were willing to be killed sooner. The primary peculiarity of the man who comes to the top, in our own plutocratic time, is that he need not necessarily have passed through any discipline, even a militarist discipline, and need not have any virtue, even a barbaric virtue. Anyhow, the experiment of putting two of our newspaper noblemen on horses in heavy armor, and throwing them at each other like thunderbolts in a tilting yard, is an experiment that has yet to be tried. It is possible that they would enjoy it; it is at least very probable that we should.

But the writer in the *Nation* not only compares the press monopolists to robber barons, but adds a phrase which interests me even more. He says that the type in question by its nature sees no further than national boundaries. It is by no means altogether true even of the mediæval lords; and it seems to me singularly untrue of the modern lords. Touching the practical and personal test once more, there is one question that must occur to most people in most cases. If the great plutocrats have grown up only in a narrow patriotism, what is their patriotism, and for what are they patriotic? The Harmsworths, for instance, are of Irish origin, I believe; and if they are Nationalists, they must be Irish Nationalists. If they are fanatics, we must look for them among the Fenians or Sinn

Feiners; though it has hitherto been rather for a family than a nation that they have borne the motto of 'Ourselves Alone.' Anyhow, we should expect them to be concentrated on the cause of the Green Island; whereas, in truth, it has rather been Great Britain that has proved an exceedingly green island for their own pasturage. Lord Northcliffe has not concentrated on a national idea or any idea; he has concerned himself with a series of schemes and scoops as fleeting as music-hall songs. The banjo that once in Tarara-boomdeay's halls the soul of music shed, now hangs silent if not exactly amid silence; and from the offices in Carmelite Street it is really a long way to Tipperary. Lord Beaverbrooke is not very likely to be a narrow Nationalist; but if he is, I suppose he is a Canadian Nationalist, among whom there are many very interesting and enthusiastic people. Indeed, his choice of a title carries picturesque localism to quite a peculiar length; it somehow suggests not so much an American as an American Indian. The beaver seems more fitted for a totem than a crest. Nevertheless, the reader may be surprised to hear, I cannot believe that he is singly sworn to champion the Canadian nation against all the nations of the earth; any more than I believe that he wields a tomahawk for the Ojibways against all the tribes of America; that he would die for the Dakotas, or knows no loves outside the wigwams of the Blackfeet. There are many other cases that could be followed out if space permitted. There are newspaper proprietors who, if they are Nationalists, must be Zionists; and I am sure I hope they are. But I do not believe it of the general types treated above; and I do not believe it because the *Nation's* notion of these men, who rule modern journalism, happens to be, from first to last, a hopelessly wrong notion.

The modern newspaper proprietor is much more progressive than the *Nation* supposes; in fact he is a product of the progress that the *Nation* supports. He is generally an uneducated man; but for all that he is an outcome of modern education. Most outcomes of modern education are uneducated men. Our education is uneducation; its whole tendency is to unteach people the traditions of their fathers. And it is this negative character, in the second-hand and second-rate culture of uneducated people in our time, that is more determining than any positive thing, especially so positive a thing as patriotism. The truth is that the mind of a man of this sort has been swept clear of all positive convictions by the skepticism at the end of the nineteenth century. It is true that such a skeptic, like most other skeptics, gets his skepticism from authority; only it is, first, the wrong authority and, second, an authority he has not really consulted. He does not arrive at his free thought by thinking, or even by reading, but by rumor. He has not read Darwin; but he has a vague idea that Darwin has shown that men are monkeys who have left their tails behind them. Therefore, you will invariably find that he flings wide his hundred newspapers to receive anything about eugenics or evolution, or the suggestion that men can be bred like beasts. He has not read Ibsen; but he has a vague idea that Ibsen has shown that every house is a doll's house, and can be taken to pieces. Therefore, the press plutocrat will always placard the world with the need for divorce, and with every interference with domesticity; especially with those small houses which look most like dolls' houses and might easily come unglued. Chatsworth or Stafford House were toys rather too big to be

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broken. He has not read Tolstoi, the prophet of Mr. Massingham's religion; but he has a vague idea that Tolstoi has shown that the cross-hilted sword is a contradiction in terms; that there is some incompatibility between the cross and the crusade. Therefore, concluding that chivalry is as irrational as Christianity, he decides that war must be unchivalrous. Seeing only a compromise and a contradiction in the straight sword of the crusader, he prefers to conquer with the crooked sword of the Sultan. That notion, and not any national sentiment whatever, is responsible for anything called imperial or piratical in his foreign policy. He is a Jingo, but he is not a patriot; least of all an extreme or an extravagant patriot. For patriotism must at least be a love, even if it is as wild as a lust. There is nothing so positive as a love or lust in the stale and yawning cynicism of the yellow press. It is wholly negative and even nihilist; what is left in a dull mind after the destructive criticisms of the nineteenth century. Like the men who made a solitude and called it peace, they make an emptiness and call it enlightenment. It has already been noted that an open mind often means an empty mind; and Mr. Massingham will find that the millionaire newspaper proprietors have very open minds. The rich man who rules the world to-day looks like a man with an open mind; that is, he looks very like a man with an open mouth. Some would say he looks like a silly fellow; I am content to say that he does not look at all like a passionate and fanatical patriot. The diagnosis is incorrect; and the error of the newspaper trusts is not identical with the error which destroyed the Zealots in the fall of Jerusalem, or the Sinn Feiners of that awful Easter that was red rather than white.

A PRISONER OF THE BOLSHEVIKI

SOME IMPRESSIONS IN THE FORTRESS OF ST. PETER AND ST. PAUL

BY HENRY PEARSON

DURING the twenty-five years of my life in Russia I frequently gazed at the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul, and listened to the tales of horrible deeds perpetrated within those grim gray walls. But little did I think that I, a peaceable British subject, would ever be one of its tenants.

How came I to be arrested, on the charge of murder, and sentenced to be shot in a few hours, on the 31st of August last? I started off from home on a fine afternoon, carrying a small packet of sandwiches, as I intended, after calling at the British Embassy on business, to walk to the Elagin Island and the Point, and stroll about the Parks there. Almost everyone in Petrograd knows the red building where the Embassy is housed, bounded on one side by the French Quay, and on the other by the Mars Plain. I arrived there about 4.15; having finished my business, I was just preparing to go out of the small reception room which leads on to the principal staircase, when I heard a great hubbub and shouting. Suddenly a band of villainous-looking men, dressed as sailors, and led by commissaries, all armed with revolvers, burst into the room where I was with two members of the Consular Staff, and surrounded us, crying 'Hands up, or we fire.' We all put up our hands, and were led into the principal room, where most of the Consular Staff had already been rounded

up. Still with hands up I was marched past the line of officials, and put near the door leading to the private reception room of our former Ambassador (Sir George Buchanan). No sooner had I been placed into line, than from the direction of the principal staircase a tremendous shooting commenced. Immediately all the commissaries rushed out, I presume, to see what was the matter; and, as I supposed this was the signal for the cold-blooded murder of everyone of us, still with hands up I sought for a way of escape. I wandered into the next room, and from thence through a corridor, where I saw another commissary who had been shot, holding his stomach and screaming out that he was dying. I made my way down a back staircase, and was surprised at the bottom by another band of sailors, all shrieking 'Shoot him, shoot him!' However, they did not shoot me, but instead dragged me down the stairs into the yard, then through a gateway and round by the back of the Embassy, along the side by the Suvoroff Square, and on to the Quay, where I was hustled into an open motor. All the time the sailors were screaming 'Hands up, or we'll shoot you!' One of them was told off to escort me to the Gorokhovaya Street, No. 2, the headquarters of the (so-called) 'Committee for dealing with counter-revolution and speculation.' As we jolted madly along (there is no speed limit for Bolsheviks)