

# ON ISOLATION, WHETHER IN WAR OR IN PEACE

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AS we all know, one of the main duties of the scientist is so to distinguish and separate things from one another that each may be assigned to its proper class and have its special purposes discovered. This duty, as we also know, is now being accomplished with a brilliancy and effectiveness that can but amaze the minds of men. But there is another and very different way of looking at these same things, a way which both the scientists and the poets have long been urging upon us, and with which alone I should like to deal in this paper. Looked at in this way, all things will be found to be so joined together, and so dependent on one another, that, bold as the statement may sound, it may well be asserted that even in the whole universe there is no such thing as isolation; no isolation either for the merest trifle on this earth, or, so far as we know, for the mightiest planet that soars above us:

"All things, by immortal power,  
Near or far  
Hiddenly so linked are  
That thou canst not stir a flower  
Without troubling of a star."

And, again, "There is a power that guards as jealously the rights of every wandering grain of sand as those that bring the princes tribute". Isolation is, in truth, a reality only to him who knows nothing either of the laws of nature or of the destiny of man. It is the mere vaporous rampart of the selfish, and the pitiable castle of the weak.

But now, to get down to details, let me begin by outlining very briefly, and not I fear very accurately, the history of our race, the growth of the tongue we speak, and the origin of that spirit which is ours to-day.

First, then, the history of our race. Nearly two thousand years ago, Boadicea reigned supreme in her little part of the British Kingdom, secure, as she thought, through the isolation of her land. But, even before her time, the Romans had come up from beyond the Alps, and in the end that Queen died fighting bravely to save what she was unable to defend. Then, after some four hundred years, all told, the Romans departed, taking

little with them and leaving much behind; leaving something of civilization and a wiser religion; leaving laws, roads, buildings, and, here and there, a brave Roman lad wedded to a British lassie.

But still there was no isolation for that Sea-girt Kingdom. Still the invaders came: the Vikings and the Norsemen; the Germanic Angles and Saxons, and the Danes; the Normans—and the Spaniards. All came to conquer; and one alone failed. But always they of that Island Kingdom fought on; and always they seemed able to draw strength and power from the very foes that came to destroy them. Nor ever were love and womanhood to be denied their rights in that island home; no more when came the doomed galleons of the Armada than when the mighty Caesar came; for who knows what daring English girl, or Scottish, or Irish, here and there, rescued, nursed back to life, and married, this or that dark alluring Spanish lad whom the pride and arrogance of a far off king had shipwrecked on an alien shore?

Thus was our race—beginning, so far as our records tell us, with the Britons of Caesar's time and the kindred Celtic tribes of Scotland and Ireland, thus was our race enriched for over a thousand years by them, and they were many, who came from far and near to conquer those little islands of the North. Nor did our race, having thus learnt the vanity of isolation in the bitter school of adversity, end its enrichment here; for, as has been hinted, with the coming of the Armada had come a change—for once, the invader had been defeated. He had been defeated because the seafaring life of our people, begun earlier no doubt, had at last under the courtly Raleigh and the dauntless Drake attained its full Elizabethan glory. Now our race not only could defend itself, but could send its ships to tell the tale of its commerce to every nook and corner of the furthest seas. Forth went our ships; and back to us, in return, began to come, in never ending flow, the dreamers, the exiled, and the persecuted, from every land and race; each to add in turn, if may be, his little gleam of ideality and splendour to the land that gave him sanctuary.

So came into existence, and so grew to its present stature, that mighty power known as the English race—a race that by disdaining isolation has achieved for itself a largeness of outlook and a sense of its obligations that has won for it the admiration of the world.



Next let us consider for a moment the growth of the tongue we speak. Strangely enough its basis is not to be found in that Celtic which was spoken, I presume, by the various tribes of the British Isles when the Romans came; nor yet even in their more cultured Latin tongue. On the contrary, it is to be found in the language of those Germanic Angles and Saxons whom I have already mentioned, and who gave us alike the name of "England" for our land, and of "Anglo-Saxon" for the tongue we speak. True, some words have come to us from our earlier Celtic ancestors, and some direct from the Romans that warred upon them, but the main basis of our language is Anglo-Saxon. Soon, however, this basis, influenced a little of course by the coming of the Danes and the like, was to be greatly influenced by the coming of the Normans. Indeed, so greatly influenced was it, that while French became the language of the court and the nobility, and Latin that of the Church and the scholars, the Anglo-Saxon tongue on the contrary was regarded with so little respect that it was left mainly to the poorer classes—the smaller tradesmen, the tillers of the soil, and the servitors. But this Anglo-Saxon part of our tongue was not for long thus to be subdued. Presently, its native vitality—if I may be pardoned the word native—began once more to assert itself; and there was that stirring at the roots, that sending out of little branches here and there, which one day was to bud in the tender roughness of Chaucer, and the next to blossom in the fuller glory of Shakespeare. And, with such a beginning, and such a growth, it is not surprising that our tongue, instinctively scornful of isolation, should continue to go on down the centuries borrowing new words, and new charm, from almost every land and race, borrowing them alike from the breed of the stubborn North and from them that live in the gentler South. This is not surprising; but it is surprising I think that our tongue, with its Germanic basis, should now be telling of security and justice for all, while the tongue of them from whom that basis came is telling but of outrage and oppression.

And now, what of the spirit of this strange race of ours, thus recruited from other races, and speaking a tongue thus enriched by other tongues? Whence this spirit that has wed itself to freedom, loves beauty, and reveres its God; and yet a spirit over which there ever plays that sense of merriment and humour which neither disaster can quench nor success deceive? What part in it did Boadicea play when she battled so bravely

for our race, and what part the mighty Caesar who held himself our conqueror? What part those other endless invaders? What part those rescued Spaniards, sent by hate and redeemed by love? What part did our heroes, scholars, kings, and poets play? Or, again, how much of that spirit came from the land itself, from the meadows of England and the hills of Wales, from Scotland's heathered moors and those lovely dells of Ireland where the fairies dance and the pixies play? How much of it came from the winds and the waves of ocean, sea, and channel—from those winds that sweep through the souls of men and leave naught that is little behind; from those waves no hand can chain? Whence this spirit, who shall say? But whither, who can doubt?

Such our race, our tongue, and our spirit; each in itself such an example of isolation rejected, and of benefits gained by that rejection, as might well rouse even the coldest of men to some conception of life's vast unity and time's high scorn of littleness.

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But turn now to another side of life, turn to science, and what of isolation do you find? Do you find one mathematics for the North and another for the South, one medicine for the Old World and another for the New? Or do you find any one branch of science isolated from the other branches? On the contrary, do you not find them all struggling together toward one end, and that end truth?

And in the arts what of isolation do you find? Does Homer sing to none beyond the Grecian bounds, or Vergil but to Roman ears? Is Shakespeare heard alone in "England's green and pleasant land"?—Shakespeare, "whose divine control", it has been said, "even from the grave governs each human soul"? Or take those tiny churches of simplest stone and wood that are the pride of the New England States. Are they, and their little slender spires that ever climb so bravely to the skies—are they strangers, think you, to the pencil of that Sir Christopher Wren who gave the world St. Paul's, and crowned it with a dome to the glory of his God? Or, again, where is the Venus De Milo to-day? And why should it be otherwise?

No land or age can beauty hoard, or stay  
The flight of loveliness to other shores.

The Old World is no more isolated from the New World than the past is isolated from the present. As all time is but one



stream, so all nations are but one world. There is, to repeat a little, no isolation save that which we coin in our folly from the littleness of our own minds.

I ventured to say, a moment or two ago, that no one branch of science was isolated from the other branches; and the same may, I think, be said of the arts. But I must go further than this, and point out that art and science are in no sense isolated from each other. For, on the contrary, they are the closest of kin, each in its own way striving for one and the same goal, call it truth or beauty as you will. And, so striving, can they in turn possibly be regarded as isolated from that third great thing, religion, the recognition of a power beyond our own? Rather, are they not ever seeking more and more to satisfy that unconquerable longing of the human heart which demands, and will ever demand, something of permanence, or of eternity if you like, for its aims and its purposes, its triumphs and its loves? Are they not ever coming closer and closer to a better understanding of that which, under many forms, and through many creeds, has guided the steps of men, and sustained their hopes, beyond all else on earth—has guided and sustained despite the efforts of human passion to limit and confuse?

In a word, let petty jealousies quarrel as they will, science, art, and religion are not separate things, but parts of one great whole; and they can no more be isolated from each other than can the rivers be isolated from those oceans into which they flow, and from which, in nature's habitual circle, they are ever, in turn, replenished.

And, after all, there is no great novelty in this, no spinning of new and subtle theories; for when we say that no smallest thing in all this world is isolated from the rest, what more are we expressing than that brotherhood, not of men alone, but of all things, for which Burns pleads so wisely and so well? What more are we expressing than that creed of universal tenderness and understanding which Coleridge has told so beautifully in the extraordinarily simple, yet extraordinarily significant words of his *Ancient Mariner*:

He prayeth well, who loveth well  
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth most  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all.

What a creed to oppose to the wretched Hitler's lust for cruelty and war! What a creed to oppose to the pitiable Mussolini's attempt to found the glory of his kingdom on the slaughtering of the practically defenceless natives of another's land!

But, granted that there is no isolation in this world, certainly there are what may be called isolationists—isolationists in all things, and at all times. And nowhere, perhaps, is there to be found a more marked example of this than in that great and warm-hearted land to the south of us, where, even in the midst of the present war, the most clear-cut struggle between right and wrong the world has ever known, there are isolationists. And these in the main are, I take it, sincere and well-intentioned men, as certainly they are men of great courage, since they have formed their opinions, and maintain their opinions, in opposition to practically every authoritative voice in their own and every other land—yes, men of great courage, who, now that their own country has been attacked, will doubtless be found fighting with the best to defend what is theirs.

But, be all this as it may, I take it as an established truth that there can be no decent man in the world to-day to whom such things as the outrage of Poland are matters of indifference; though exactly what each shall do to remedy the wrong, and when he shall do it, must of course be left to him to decide. And so, as one that loves human nature, and as a neighbour of the United States, and a very admiring neighbour, I think I may well be pardoned if I consider for a moment these isolationists I have just mentioned, and enquire a little into the workings of their minds. Do they, for instance, ever recall that Statue of Liberty which stands at their eastern gateway, proclaiming to all that it holds high its torch to enlighten, not the States alone, but the world? And do they ever reflect that the once happy land of France, now desolate and oppressed, gave them that statue, and owned the hand that shaped its beauty? Do they think that when Washington fought to save the Colonists from what he held to be unjust taxation, he had in view the creation of a people who could sit still unmoved when other peoples were being, not merely unjustly taxed, but pillaged and destroyed? Do they think that when Lincoln fought to keep his nation united and to free it of slavery, he had in view the creation of a nation to whom it could be of no concern that other nations were being torn asunder and reduced to slavery? Or, again, do such men reflect that were they stricken with disease, they would in all likelihood be taken to some



hospital to whose equipment, and to the genius of whose staff, probably the whole world had contributed? And, once more, do they reflect that the very words they are using in their plea for isolation are those of a tongue which, as has been said, has drawn its strength and beauty from well-nigh every race that has ever been known in this happy brotherhood of sea and land which nature has contrived for our habitation?

However, some may object that these men are no longer isolationists since they too have entered the war. But does not the very fact that they will fight for their own land, and would not fight for Poland, only prove the more clearly how essentially they are isolationists? They fight for their own land—but is it enough? It depends, I suppose, upon whether the world must still be regarded as a mere collection of unrelated and often hostile nations, or whether it must now be regarded as a family of nations, not even the smallest of which can be attacked without endangering the safety of all. It depends upon the use to which the miracles of science shall be put: shall they have ended the ocean as a barrier in order to advance commerce, or conquest? Shall they have turned the skies into a highway in order to help, or to destroy? In a word, it depends upon whether the views of Burns and Coleridge shall prevail, or the views of Hitler and Mussolini. Each of us must answer for himself, and answering, must act as he sees fit. It is liberty. Still, I cannot help thinking that to the imaginative and the generous isolation must ever appear as the mere refusal of the eye to see and the heart to feel—an attitude at once cold, cramping, and inglorious; a prison that the prisoner builds for himself from the stones of his own narrowness.

And now, as I close, let me turn to the old, old parable of the Good Samaritan, him who, seeing a stranger lying robbed and wounded by the roadside, went to him, bound up his wounds, set him upon his own beast, and brought him to an inn, to the host of which, as he was departing on the morrow, he gave for the care of him that was wounded those two pence which to-day rank higher in the minds of men than all the fabled gold of Midas and all the pillaged wealth of Lydia's king. But what now of those other two men, the priest and Levite, who passed by on the other side? Doubtless they went their way comforted by the thought of the trouble they had spared themselves and the pence they had saved, little knowing that they should go forever down the ages as an example of those that can see another's pain unmoved, and can take their way indifferent to another's

wants. May not we, then, as a nation, well pray that, be our other faults what they will, none shall ever be found to say of us that, seeing another sore stricken and in anguish as we journeyed along life's highway, we yet trusted to the false gods of isolation, and, unmoved, passed by on the other side?

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