

Book 1: Chapter 2 The Ford of Hurdles

THERE was a Philosopher once who lived in a little room in a tumbledown house in a back lane off Stoneybatter; which is not a place prolific in philosophers, for the reason that the folk there are too busy picking up half a living to have time for the cultivation of wisdom. The Philosopher himself could only make time for it by giving up the food-scramble entirely; which he was able to do because he had been left a share of money by his father, who had been left it before by his grandfather, a man of exceeding wealth and wickedness—not the kind of wickedness that would give any one a thrill in the reading: I wish it had been, for I would like well to entertain you with the clink and chatter of banquets, or to drape alluring phrases round the limbs of dancing girls. But the truth is that the Philosopher's grandfather was a water-drinker, and a water-drinker of the worst kind: that is to say, he drank it between meals for his health, not at meals for his pleasure. Moreover, he cared nothing for women; and it is not on record that he ever missed a Mass. His wickedness was none of this sort; which indeed the gods readily forgive, knowing the weakness of man. His sins were those that cry to heaven for vengeance: not murder, for he feared the rope; nor the sin of the cursed cities, for nature had not treated him so unkindly; but the other two, on which no god could have mercy, but which are none the less so commonly committed that if they were legally punishable there would not be enough free men to be gaolers to the others; and yet are so universally denounced that if I were to take up testimony against them I should be called a mere speaker of platitudes. I must be original at all costs, for my livelihood depends on it: therefore I dismiss the wickedness of the Philosopher's grandfather without further comment. Peace to his ashes: for his spirit shall have none.

The room inhabited by the Philosopher was at the top of the house, but that was all the good that could be said for it. It was neither large nor lofty, and had but one window, which was so close to the floor that the Philosopher had to stoop as low as to his waist to look out of it: not that there was much to see: only the tenement opposite: and even that was not visible unless he opened the window; for the glass was encrusted with the dirt of civilised ages, and, though the Philosopher had frequently rubbed it off the inside, it never occurred to him to clean the outside, his mind being so occupied with other matters that he overlooked that solution to the difficulty. In this room the Philosopher kept all his worldly goods, namely, a bedstead, a chair, a table, a cooking stove, some crockery, an old trunk full of spare clothes, and a heap of books; and for it he paid five shillings and sixpence a week to his landlord, an excellent man and a patriot, who, if the girls in his employment were sometimes driven to supplement their wages with what they could earn on the street, made ample atonement for it by valiant assaults upon any book or play that denied the superhuman chastity of the women of Ireland.

The Philosopher was not very old: only about sixty: but he looked more, because in his search for wisdom he had been forced to deny himself much air and sunshine; which is the same reason why most of the people in the streets look older than their years. For in a progressive age man wants so much, and wants that much so quick (time being valuable, though why I know not, when it is so equitably distributed, each of us having his twenty-four hours a day of it) that fellow-man must stay out of the sunshine to accommodate him. This is a clumsy sentence; but a man who has a long tale to tell, and has little leisure and no patience, must use language as best he can, and the reader must act as he would if some one were to pour him a pint of wine into a gill measure: lap up what's spilt if he thinks it worth

while, and if not let it go and nothing lost. As it is, I let a thought go when I found the parenthesis getting overweighted, as the waiter might have held back a finger or so of the wine, and it concerns this matter of the distribution of time. It seems to me a most unjust, unwise, and altogether reprehensible course to apportion this with rigid equality when the needs of men are so manifestly unequal. Surely the captain needs more than the cabin boy? the head clerk more than his junior? the ministers of State more than the teachers of children? Surely the director of a large business needs more for his plans and combinations than those whose sole function is to work for him and serve him? Surely the man who has three houses needs more than the man who has only one room? And surely the man who owns yachts and motors and deer forests needs more time for their enjoyment than he who is limited to a tram-ride on Sunday to the seaside? Consider, too, the effects of this soul-killing equality upon the enterprise and initiative of the individual. Where is the incentive to speed and punctuality when everybody, whether slothful or energetic, can command his twenty-four hours a day? And by what means can we prevent the lazy and the unscrupulous from wasting the precious commodity so lavishly bestowed on them? When one realises the temptation to idleness offered by this unnatural apportionment of award without regard to desert, one marvels that any work is ever done by anybody, and that the world has not long since lapsed into chaos.

But to return to our Philosopher. Was he happy? Was he sad? Wisdom brings neither happiness nor sadness but a remarkable lack of both: for happiness is possible only where there is a sense of finality, and the wise man knows there is finality in nothing; by which knowledge also he escapes sadness. Mundane things worried the Philosopher not at all. He never noticed whether he was comfortable or not, and he never cared what he ate. He did not even lament his lack of books, believing that there was more to be learnt from the talk of a child, the smile of a woman, or the folly of men than from all the books that ever were written. His wisdom had not been gained in the way which, if it were efficacious, would make Croagh Patrick wiser than the saint who prayed on its summit: to wit, by experience. If experience were necessary to wisdom he would have been a fool, for he never had been out of Dublin in his life, his father having dissipated in folly what his grandfather had accumulated in sin, so that the Philosopher never had more than a tram-fare to travel with, and no way of getting it without dropping the search for wisdom and going down to fight for money amongst those who were far better equipped for the struggle than he was. "What matter anyway?" he said. "There are four hundred thousand people in Dublin, and if I went round the world itself I wouldn't be able to talk with half that number. And when you come to think of it, the people of Dublin are as much different from one another as any one of them from a person of Paris or Budapest or Lhasa or San Francisco or the Patagonian hinterland." This is not to say that if some one had offered to pay his fare he would not have relished a talk with a lama of Tibet, or a geisha of Japan, or a vendor of spices in the bazaars of the East. He would; and he would have gained great profit therefrom. But as these were inaccessible he did the best he could with the Jesuits of Milltown, and the girls of the canal banks, and the vendors of newspapers in the streets of Dublin; and from these he learned a good deal. But he learned most from the inhabitants of his own back lane off Stoneybatter.

One morning the Philosopher opened his newspaper and read the following passage:

GOSHAWK BUYS BIRDS

WHEAT KING'S LATEST ENTERPRISE

A New York message just received states that King Goshawk has completed negotiations for the purchase of all the blackbirds, robins, larks, and nightingales in the world. The vast bulk of these will be removed at an early date to the great park of Goshawk Palace, but a few will be kept in aviaries near the principal cities for the delectation of their inhabitants.

On King Goshawk's well-known principle that "Anything free is not valued", it is understood that there will be a small charge for admission to these aviaries.

King Goshawk deserves the gratitude of the public for having thus taken one more step in harnessing Nature to the service of mankind.

After reading this the Philosopher passed his hand three or four times through his hair. Then he went to the window, opened it, and looked down the street. There was a dead wall not far away, on which two flamboyant election posters had been fixed the day before. The Philosopher could read them from where he was. The first ran thus:

VOTE FOR O'CODD

The Yallogreen Party stands for

MAJORITY RULE

If you want PEACE

UNITY

FREEDOM

VOTE FOR O'CODD

The other said:

VOTE FOR CODDO

The Greenyallo Party is out for

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT

If you want TRANQUILLITY

HOMOGENEITY

LIBERTY

VOTE FOR CODDO

The Philosopher smiled. Then he noticed that two mean little hand-bills had been stuck up underneath the flamboyant posters, and he went down into the street to read them. The one under O'Codd's poster said:

O'CODD DRINKS

Would you entrust the
Destinies of Ireland
to such a man?

and the one under Codd's poster said:

CODDO KEEPS A MISTRESS

Is such a man fit
to legislate for the
Island of Saints?

And lastly he noticed that underneath each mean little hand-bill some franker spirit had chalked the same accusation in blunter language than I care to record.

As long as the Philosopher could remember, the Yallogreens and the Greenyallos had been thus abusing one another: nor had they always confined themselves to flamboyant posters, mean little hand-bills, and dirty language. The Philosopher sadly recalled to mind the great civil war that had been waged between them over the question of rejoining the British Empire, from which the Irish people had seceded some years earlier. The reunion was proposed in the Dail by Seumas Vanderbags, leader of the Yallogreen party, and supported with fiery speeches by Madame Przemysl and Miss O'Grady. The Philosopher had listened to that

acrimonious debate from the Strangers' Gallery; had watched the members file into the Division lobbies; and had heard the ringing cheers that greeted the announcement that the motion was lost by seven votes. He could still see in imagination the pale thin face of Vanderbags as he rose to his feet to announce that he would not abide by the verdict, and to utter his famous pronouncement that the people had no right to do wrong. Never could the Philosopher forget the horrors of the subsequent righting. The Government had been unprepared; the rebels had been silently perfecting their plans for years. Liquid fire, poison gas, infernal machines of every description were brought into play. Half the city of Dublin was laid in ashes, and most of the country devastated. The army of the Republic was annihilated in less than a month; it only remained to dragoon the civil population into submission, and send a formal demand to London for incorporation in the Empire. The Philosopher felt again the shame of that disgraceful day, and at the memory of what followed his whole body blushed: for the English Government curtly rejected the application, and one by one the Dominions endorsed their decision. But the Yallogreens were not to be daunted by such a repulse. Vanderbags declared that the right of Ireland to belong to the British Empire was inalienable and indefeasible; and Miss O'Grady said that the Irish People were citizens of the British Empire whether they or the British liked it or not: such was their love for the Empire that they would lay all its cities in ashes and slaughter every man, woman, and child within its borders sooner than be thrust out of their inalienable inheritance. The sequel of all this was burnt deep into the Philosopher's recollection: the mad declaration of war against the British Empire; the destruction of the Irish navy; the invasion of Ireland by the British; and the forcible re-establishment of the Republic. Neither could he forget the campaign of flamboyant posters, mean little hand-bills, and dirty language that followed.

Regarding the specimens of statecraft now plastered on the wall before him, the Philosopher began to realise that the song-birds could hope for little succour at the hands of his countrymen; but the rest of Europe had no more consolation to offer. Half a century of history now whirled like a nightmare before his vision. In his childhood he had seen the French, who once had been content to be the leaders of the world in art, science, thought, manners, and the cultivation of the vine, suddenly seized with the ambition to be its leaders in covetousness, ruthlessness, and hypocrisy as well; under which impetus he had seen them trample for long years upon their neighbours the Germans, a good-natured, industrious people, who once had put on imperialism like a garment, only to have it torn from their shoulders by others more fitted by nature to wear it. Through those years he had seen France preparing her own doom; had seen her filling her pockets, glutting her hatred and fear, and losing her soul. He had seen her building barracks while the Germans built nurseries; drilling armies while the Germans begot children. Then one day the giant nation of eighty millions of people had arisen, and shaken off its tormentors as a man might shake dust out of his coat. Once more German armies were on the soil of France; once more the world was in a ferment. Nation after nation was drawn by its fears or its interests into the fray. The war was waged with the utmost ferocity of which human nature is capable, aided by the destructive efficiency attained by generations of scientific progress. Forty million fighting men fell on the fields of battle; a hundred million women and children perished of famine and disease. One-third of the cities and three-fifths of the shipping of the world were destroyed. Two hundred thousand square miles of land was rendered useless. Europe and half America were stripped bare of forests. The world's supply of copper and tin was exhausted. There was no formal peace: the nations simply stopped fighting because they were unable to go on.

These were sad memories for the Philosopher who stood ankle-deep in dust and rubbish contemplating the flamboyant posters and the mean little hand-bills and the dirty language scrawled on the dead wall in the back lane off Stoneybatter; for to one to whom things external to himself are a matter of serious import, there is

cause for sorrow and apprehension in the discovery that whereas a man in fifty years may grow from helplessness and innocence to strength and wisdom, mankind in a hundred does not change at all. But no sooner had this reflection entered the Philosopher's mind than he began to examine it, to question it, and to doubt it, as was his nature.

" Hold," he said. " This may be a misjudgement: for it is many years since I have given any thought to public affairs. I will go down and speak to the people and see whether I am wrong."

He went down accordingly, and came upon a public meeting among the ruins of College Green, where an orator, standing upon the pile of wrecked masonry that had once been Trinity College, was urging the claims of Codd upon the suffrage of the multitude. With the birds of Eirinn in jeopardy, the Philosopher could not long endure such folly. Mounting therefore upon the pedestal that had once borne Grattan's statue, he began to harangue the people near him. " Citizens," he said, " I am a foolish and ignorant man."

" Indeed y'are," replied some of them.

" I am," said the Philosopher, " and I know it. You also are foolish and ignorant."

" What!!! " yelled the citizens.

" But you do not know it," said the Philosopher.

" Ye're right there," said the citizens.

" Do not vote for O'Codd," said the Philosopher.

" Hear, hear," said the supporters of Codd.

" Don't vote for Codd either," said the Philosopher.

" Hear, hear," cried the supporters of O'Codd.

" What does it matter to you," said the Philosopher, " which of these fools misrepresents you in Parliament? "

Here the Philosopher's speech was cut short by an egg, which came sailing through the air and smashed in his mouth. Next minute he was plucked from Grattan's pedestal and fell among a roaring, raging mob, who began beating him and kicking him and tearing him and trampling on him, and even fighting with one another in their efforts to get a blow at him. Some spat in his face; others threw dirt at him; one died of rage because he could not reach him. Nor were the women backward in the fray. Some stabbed him with hatpins; others clawed his face; more, who could not get near him, went into paroxysms of fury, foaming at the mouth and yelling " Kill him! Tear his eyes out! " and similar objurgations. Several fainted with fury; others in their transports went black in the face, and with hideous grimaces and frantic bodily contortions flung themselves on the ground, kicking up their legs and screeching like demoniacs. In the end some stout young fellows picked up what was left of the Philosopher and flung him in the river; whence he was with much difficulty and some danger rescued by a man who was later prosecuted under the Blasphemy and Indecency laws and the Treason-felony laws for the utterance of a blasphemous, indecent, treasonable, and felonious sentiment, to wit: " Politics in this country are a damned cod "; and being duly convicted was sentenced to penal servitude for life.

