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## The Wisdom of the Vulgar

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I have addressed the Canadian Club on more than one occasion, but never, I hope, willingly; you sympathize with me and easily guess why; it is against all academic scruples, and academic scruples after forty years make a large part of academic life, to talk publicly to a body like this, and talk through my hat.

There is only one sort of talking with a hat which would distress and disturb me more: to talk publicly to a Canadian Club and talk to it *into* my hat. You know what that means; many of you are old enough to remember the old-fashioned English gentleman, who on Sunday when he enters his pew, stands upright, stock still, and gazes intently and mutters for a few moments into his silk hat. But he doesn't let us hear what he says; and to say aloud what he says *sotto voce* to his hat, and to say it to a Canadian Club would shock any man's scruples, academic or not, besides being a contravention of the New Testament and of a certain memorable text about street corners (Matthew VI: 5). Only the Salvation Army can disregard that text, and they have a right to do so, and one admires their courage; but they are not addressing a Canadian Club at those street corners and are not seeking to while away the half hour after luncheon.

But the next scruple to that of talking into one's hat to a Canadian Club is the academic scruple of talking through one's hat, and it is so fatally easy to do so: to talk glittering generalities and pattering platitudes, perfunctory politenesses, and conventional commonplaces; and as I cannot talk about freight rates and MacKenzie King clubs, or the Caledonia Ghost, or Woman Suffrage, or Prohibition, or the prohibited festivities of the Ontario Legislature, or on the other burning questions and vital issues which fill my morning *Globe*, I find it hard to avoid my hat.

But, gentlemen, I am so often perplexed and disturbed by the progress of democracy and the methods of democracy and the credulity of democracy, and by the progress and credulity also of the physicists—these are the ages of Faith, gentlemen, I remind you, just as much as the Middle Ages were, only the

faith to-day is in democracy and self-determination, and in physical science, not in theology.

I am so often scandalised by what I read in the credulous morning papers, that *e.g.* India is as ready for self-government as Canada, or that some physicist, *e.g.* some professor from Chicago sees his way to soon abolish death; that another professor and physicist is just about ready to enable the Ethiopian to change his skin, and in six months will show him to you white as driven snow; and that another professor and physicist, in company with a famous novelist, are in daily intercourse with the spirits of the other world, and are privileged to report to us the cheap jests of those beyond the grave, and are prepared to demonstrate that we need not be afraid any longer of joining them; that the standards of jesting, of conversation after death, are no higher or hardly higher than they are here; that in fact we shan't notice the difference, and shall hardly feel the change from Toronto when we get there: we shall imagine ourselves seated again at a Canadian Club luncheon.

I am so scandalised in short, perturbed by the scientific novelties of the subconscious self and the democratic novelties of self-determination, which I am expected to believe, that I have thought it wise to-day for once to look at the other side of the picture and to try to realize for myself, and to put before you for a few minutes, the proposition and the reminder that after all popular ideas and the man in the street, even in this credulous-incredulous age, have still some sound sense and solid instinct to show for themselves, and are not always merely the voices of credulity and prejudice and ignorance.

After all, even the democratic hero of the hour, even Mr. Lloyd George himself, is not merely or chiefly the megaphone or the bell man of popular prejudice and credulity, but is the greatest natural orator, and the shrewdest man of instinct and insight which this generation of public men has provided in Great Britain. There is all this in his favor: no man can deny it, to be set against his uncertain standards and shifting principles and Limehouse limelight and general opportunism: at least he reaches the heart of a subject and the heart of a nation after all, with his instincts and his oratory, as the academic product of Oxford and Cambridge, as Mr. Asquith and Mr. Balfour do not: it is the most vivid illustration I can choose of the wisdom of the vulgar, and I have met other simple people, no better educated in the academic sense than Mr. George, who read as few books as Mr. George is said to read, who seem to me to reach the root of a matter sometimes by instinct, as

quickly as he does, and who make me stop and think and wonder and ask myself if schools, universities and books are not much overrated and by no means as necessary as I had supposed.

I remember meeting an ordinary school girl, a heedless, dancing school girl, a common or garden flapper, so to speak, who knew nothing of books and philosophy, but yet who knew enough by instinct to be indignant and scandalised when some one spoke of atheism. She knew, this chit of a girl, from instinct and a woman's insight, what it took the tedious philosophy of Voltaire sixty years of painful thought to rediscover by abstruse thinking, that if all the churches and creeds and theologies were abolished to-morrow, the Legislature would have to re-establish them the day after to-morrow; she knew enough by instinct to know that there is no other force but these to make a decent life possible, and to keep our civilization—staggering and stumbling and reeling, as we see it go to-day—upon its feet at all. She knew—even she,—that you cannot keep civilization on its feet with enlightened selfishness and self-regarding prudence, that no man ever yet was honest because honesty is the best policy, and if he was, he wasn't.

I remember, too, another woman, older and more thoughtful, but with nature's thought and wisdom, not with a University education, who was trying to amuse some young soldiers home on leave from the front, from the horrors of the trenches, with a jigsaw puzzle. "What's the use of it," said one impatient nerve-wracked grumbler: "What's the use of it?" Quick as instinct, quicker than thought, came the only answer: "What's the use of anything." That is the answer: the only answer: ancient, simple, true: the answer of Socrates himself, though she was certainly not quoting Socrates and never read him: the only answer to such doubters: go them one better on their doubts, doubt a little farther, and you doubt their doubt away. Nine men out of ten instinctively believe that there is a use in things: that it is better anyway to take the chance, and assume a use in things and a purpose in life: that it is better to use your wits and exert your faculties even over a jig-saw puzzle, than just to sit and doubt, if it be only to kill time inoffensively and tide over the tedious minutes to the next meal.

That is the wisdom of the vulgar, the instinct of every common wholesome man and woman, to assume that effort is worth while, all innocent and inoffensive effort.

I will take next a vulgar jury of twelve men and their vulgar verdict. Some poor fellow has grown tired of all the effort, has chucked up effort as a bad job, has despaired of him-

self and life, and has gone west by his own hand: and the jury find "suicide while of unsound mind." What a farce at first superficial sight the verdict seems: unsound mind forsooth! Why the man may have been a thinker: sick with thinking and reasoning: with trying to justify the ways of God to men: trying to rationalise and explain life: his mind may have been the only thing in him that was alive: that was sound: the only unsoundness in him was to make too much of it: to think too much: to live with unsolvable problems: to be obsessed with the riddle and mystery of life: the only unsoundness in his mind was not to forget itself: and to think a little more about his dinner: not to forget his mind, distract himself with flowers, instead, or music or pictures, or the theatre, or with horses and dogs or chess, or even at the worst with bridge and other brigandage, the stock market for example.

What a farcical verdict, and yet after all how sound, how absolutely sound at bottom! He has an unsound mind who lives only in his mind and forgets the spring and mealtime, and the country and health and sunshine and youth and children, and all the other blessed sources of illusion, and the divine bliss of ignorance, the most divine bliss of this world. Whom the gods love die young and ignorant, and the verdict is doubly sound for it discourages other men from following the bad example. People don't like to think that if they take this fatal step, which seems logical to them in their darkest mood, twelve average vulgar men will pronounce them "lunatics" (not logicians), and that their friends will blush for them and tap their foreheads.

The verdict is doubly sound: sound in theory and science, and sound in practice and application. It is the same instinct which makes all vulgar, simple souls congratulate a newly wedded couple: poor bride and bridegroom, they need congratulation sometimes so badly; they need to be made to fancy they are very happy, and they can generally be made to fancy it if every one assures them it is so; they become almost sure of themselves; they may be in fact, some are, quite unhappy; they are passing through a difficult and critical time: they are just apprenticed to a life-long trade and profession, which needs a world of self-restraint and unselfishness, a sense of duty and conscience, if it is to come out right; and very likely it will come out right in the end, if they are God-fearing and considerate, and conciliatory and ready to put up with difficulties and misunderstandings; but they have sometimes a bad quarter of an hour ahead of them when they are just married. There is more of truth sometimes than poetry in the

quaint epitaph of the married couple: "Sacred to the memory of John Jones and Jane his wife: their warfare is accomplished." Anyhow, the beginning of that apprenticeship must have some warfare, and you tide them over that awkward interregnum, when the reigning monarch is not yet disclosed, or when, better still, a generous and wise democracy is not yet established in that household, by your congratulations. It is a wise instinct which prescribes congratulations: the wisdom of the vulgar, who know so much more than academic philosophers about life and human nature, and brides and bridegrooms. And then there is wisdom in the frank realism of the peasant and country man. I recollect a fastidious Anglican, who made it his duty to visit the peasants of a little place in Shropshire, and talk to them of their little lives. He was amused but also a trifle shocked when he consoled with one old woman who had lost her husband: "Yes," she said, "the Lord has taken my good man, but the Lord has been merciful too: he was with me over my potatoes."

The fastidious, academic mind wants to forget potatoes and temporalities, and think only of spiritualities; but the old peasant woman knew better and knew life, and how much potatoes count in life.

A great Oxford don, now the chief figurehead of his University, was once sent forty-five years ago by his classmates to approach the Master of Balliol, and reproach the Master, about the quality of the potatoes served in the college kitchen, which have been at all times, I believe, both then and now, somewhat inferior tubers. The young student and philosopher was annoyed and indignant at the errand. "I apologize, Master," he said, "I apologize profusely for distracting your attention to these trifles." "Don't apologize," answered the philosopher more mature, "Life is made up of trifles: be young, my young friend, be young." Life is small potatoes in short, and other small things, even in this enlightened province where it is no longer small beer.

That young man lost a good deal, you perceive, by going to Balliol College: his comprehension of little things.

My colleague, Professor Alexander, has often remarked what a mercy it was that Dickens did not go to Balliol. There would have been no Dickens, only a faked philosopher. Just as Mr. Forsyth at Hart House was telling us the other day the story of Master Betty, the infant prodigy: the child who made a fortune on the stage at the age of twelve; and then retired and read and studied and matriculated at Cambridge University, and was never any good after—he could never act

again: his genius was snuffed out; all the nonsense was knocked out of him. He lived to reach the age of eighty-eight, a mere country squire; and died bucolic in the odour of dullness and fertilisers. It is not always wise to go to what the vulgar call "Cambridge College"; to what the vulgar call in this city "Toronto University."

I take next quite a different series of illustrations of the wisdom of the vulgar. Many years ago, when Dr. Ahmroth Wright was visiting Dr. George Ross in this city, I asked him if there was not sound philosophy and scientific fact under many of the picturesque phrases of the vulgar, about flesh and spirit, and the close connection between them. We speak vulgarly of a *thin-skinned* man, meaning a sensitive man: we speak of a man without backbone: of a weak-kneed man: of a soft man and a hard man: of a man "without guts" and of a *stiff-necked* man. I asked if there was not probably some scientific truth in these artistic and picturesque phrases. I don't want to hold the doctor to his answer—I cannot: but I understood him to agree that probably there was some sense and science in these popular summaries of mind and body, some sense and science on the whole I mean, not always, or in detail. For instance, I have observed myself that some of these vulgar phrases seem to be misfits rather, or to miss fire: I seem to have observed myself for example,—that a head-strong man is generally a man weak in the head: that is an exception: a bad shot of the wisdom of the vulgar. But what about "bowels of mercy"—is there not truth there?

I'll take a very recent, rather quaint and a quite local illustration of the wisdom of the vulgar. The academic Professor Bateson came here at Christmas to lecture to an academic handful of students and professors in some forgotten corner of the University, upon Mendelism and other biological minutiae. But the great public of Toronto—Leviathan—the vulgar—were all there, crowding out the elect, the professors and the students; and no corner was large enough for the hosts, and no large lecture room would contain them: only our Convocation Hall would hold them: and why? Why, all because the *Toronto Globe*, which is about in equal proportions sensational and theological, yellow of the journalists and blue of the Presbyterians, had caught hold of a chance word or two from a previous speech of the Professor's and had magnified and misrepresented, and then the scare-head typesetters of the press got in their Italian hand, and the trick was done. It seemed to announce to Toronto that the Professor was out to

contradict Darwin (and inferentially to restore the Book of Genesis).

Now the vulgar are not fools: they used to live in and on the book of Genesis: they found in it not only the book of life, but the book of their own daily experience; they found in it that the root of all trouble came from knowing too much, from eating of the tree of knowledge, instead of from the tree of life; and they had also found in their own small lives that their troubles had often come from knowing too much, and that their virtues on the other hand had often come from not knowing too much. "Virtue is knowledge," said the highbrows of ancient Greece, but the vulgar know from personal experience that virtue is more often ignorance: and they know, too, from their own lives of toil, that the earth has been cursed for man's sake, and that only by the sweat of his brow can he get a living out of it, and very often not even then: yes, and the vulgar man knows also from his own experience, that he used to rule over his own vulgar wife, to some extent at least, in the old days while the book of Genesis ruled him and her and before Darwin interfered with all this sound doctrine, and put nothing in its place but the quite uninspiring and unedifying notion that we were all just monkeys, a thought, which after all, had necessarily occurred to every man amongst us, from time to time before, but of which we did not want to be reminded.

So the great public, finding their anchors up and the ship drifting, and no land in sight except a fevered jungle, full of apes and tigers, and nail and claw struggle for existence,—the great public naturally flocked to hear Genesis restored.

They were wrong in a sense, because the Professor never approached the subject and never intended to. It was all a mistake: but the instinct of the crowd, the wish to learn that Darwin was all wrong, was sound and wise. Life is much less tolerable and much less intelligible to-day, and virtue much harder and more difficult to justify and follow since Darwin brushed aside Genesis and enthroned the struggle for existence and the survival only of the fittest: the fittest to survive in such a struggle of claw and tooth.

There was a wise Greek, who antedated Darwin by many ages, though he was later than the writer of Genesis, who has left his sting in all the ages that have come after him, and that was Socrates—(I always hark back to Socrates) and the sting which he left in us is the interest in theology, and in the meaning of life and in the justification of the ways of God to men. Socrates took little stock in the monkey theory; he brushed it

aside when he heard it. It took him all his time, he said, to discover what sort of a monster he was himself, and he had no leisure to bother himself with speculating about prehistoric monsters of ancestors. Socrates took no stock in archæology, and a great deal of stock in theology; and Socrates would have joined the vulgar and have gone to Convocation Hall, in the hope of hearing some theology, rather than with the idea of learning about the details of Mendelism: learning about the variations of the skins of mice from black to white, or the Hibernian alternatives of the leaves of primulas between orange and green, and the other details of the science of Genetics.

The vulgar and Socrates are in full agreement on these high themes: they want to know the beginning of man's life only for the sake of knowing the end. It is only the end which gives any interest or significance to the beginning. Genesis seems to give both, directly or indirectly. Darwin gives only the beginning; the vulgar demand the end, demand eschatology, the theory of man's end, much more urgently than evolution, which is only the theory of his beginning. Not that we expect, of course, any longer, all the details from eschatology: we know from Socrates as well as from the New Testament, that eschatology is not a science like gem-cutting, like jewel engraving; it is not a very exact, minute, delicate and precise science, but just a loose and broad doctrine. We are content to get from it *a day of judgment and a great assize, and Socrates and the New Testament agree in those broad outlines, those broad outlines which must be true because they ought to be true* (not of course merely because Socrates and the Apostles say so) but must be true because they have to be true. I mean that all vulgar people are pragmatists (though they don't know it and never heard the word) but they believe a doctrine to be true if its results are good: they test doctrines by their values; and if without them there are no good results to be had, they measure theories by their fruits in life. They demand from eschatology and accept from eschatology these broad outlines of a hereafter, a judgment and a great assize; and so they crowded, crowded, crowded around Prof. Bateson like a Woodbine mob, and returned and returned and returned to him, even when thrice disappointed because they supposed that he would restore to them at last those broad outlines, and relegate Darwin to the limbo of the tree tops—the home of the Bandarlog.

Because Darwin's evolution seems too negative to the vulgar mind, seems even to suggest quite a different, though also

quite a popular fancy and surmise, which has occurred at times to all of us that there is nothing to follow after all this curious experience called life: it comes and goes and there's an end of it and us. "All religion"—thought one of Socrates' elderly friends, just before his Master drank the hemlock, "all religion and philosophy is just a whistling to keep one's courage up: there is only the body and when the body ends, ends Socrates." "Don't you believe it," said Socrates to him, "Socrates is the man talking to you and trying to reason with you, (and very hard it is to reason with such men) Socrates is not the carcass you're going to see in two minutes when I've had my drink: do what you like with the carcass, but you won't catch me: sacrifice a cock for me, though, to the gods of healing: I am just about convalescent from this sickness which is called life—soon I shall be well again, at least that is the chance on which I have gambled for seventy years, and I think it was worth it: the chance that life is more than body, and the soul more than wind, and death more than an end. It is a great gamble, the greatest there is; and the stakes are worth it."

And there, gentlemen, I leave it, with one last suggestion that the vulgar show their wisdom like Socrates in not gambling much with cards, or dice, at horse races or on stock markets, either for wine, or women, but in gambling ohly with religion.

The most wretched of men—Chinese paupers, and the most aimless of women—Russian Princesses. (before the war) have been used to gamble with cards or dice at Monaco, or Chinatown, at rouge-et-noir, or fantan; but the ordinary person, the general vulgar, does not gamble in these ways. He feels, I suppose, that it cheapens and degrades the most inspiring, the most adventurous and most enterprising gamble that there is,—that gamble with life, wherein a man has religion and the soul and the great assize, etc., for the stakes, and bets his life upon them: and would fain lead his years—little or many—in faith and fear and hope of them. Therein lies the last and the supreme wisdom of the vulgar.