



WORD ON FIRE
Classics

LORD OF THE WORLD

ROBERT HUGH BENSON

FOREWORD BY BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

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FOREWORD

by Bishop Robert Barron



The *Lord of the World* is an extraordinary novel, one that sheds considerable light on the spiritual predicaments of our own time. The odd thing is that it was written over a hundred years ago. It was authored by Robert Hugh Benson, the son of the Archbishop of Canterbury. To the shock and chagrin of much of British society, Benson left the Anglican church and became a Catholic priest. He died young at forty-one, just after finishing this book.

The Lord of the World is an apocalypse. It tells the story of the cataclysmic struggle between a radically secularist society and the one credible alternative to it—namely, the Catholic Church. In Benson's imagined future, Europe and America are dominated by a rationalist regime bent on making life as technologically convenient and politically harmonious as possible. The leaders of this government see the Catholic Church, with its stress on the supernatural, on divisive dogma, and on the enduring power of sin, as the principal obstacle to progress. A great messianic figure—Julian Felsenburgh—emerges from the heart of the secularist political structure, and he prosecutes a progressively brutal persecution of the Church, culminating in the elimination of the pope, the curia, and most of the bishops of the world. He then establishes an alternative liturgy, predicated upon the worship of an idealized humanity and the rhythms of nature. (In a delicious touch, Benson imagines a former Catholic priest as the master of ceremonies of the new secular liturgy.) In the meantime, one surviving cardinal—an Englishman who

bears a striking physical resemblance to Felsenburgh—becomes the pope and takes up his administration of the Church in simple quarters in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth. The novel concludes with the climactic struggle between Felsenburgh’s secular power and the spiritual power of the Church.

Now, like any apocalypse, this one is a bit exaggerated and melodramatic; nevertheless, there are a lot of lessons for us in it. It is truly impressive that, in 1907, Benson saw as clearly as he did the dangerous potential of the secularist ideology. By this I mean the view that this world, perfected and rendered convenient by technology, would ultimately satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. One of the most elemental truths that the Catholic Church preserves is that human beings have been created by and for God and that they will therefore be permanently dissatisfied with anything less than God. In his monumental study of modern society, *The Secular Age*, the philosopher Charles Taylor speaks of the “disenchanted universe” that has come about as a result of the eclipse of religion. This means a world without ultimate meaning or a transcendent reference, a world that speaks only of itself. Benson’s book paints a distressing but realistic picture of people moving about in a disenchanted universe, oscillating between the poles of boredom and fear. One of the most pathetic characters in the novel is Mabel Brand, the wife of a leader of the English political establishment and a woman who once believed in the new secular religion with all her heart. When she sees through its façade to its underlying brutality and inhumanity, she cracks and sees no way out. Like many in her exhausted society, she opts for self-induced and state-sponsored euthanasia. One doesn’t have to be terribly perceptive to appreciate how prophetic all of this has proven to be.

The other truth that Benson grasped was that the Catholic Church, with its firm teaching on the reality of the supernatural, is, finally, the single great opponent to this worldview. There is a high paradox here. Catholics know that what makes this world fascinating and enticing is precisely the conviction that it is not ultimate, that there is

a denser and more permanent world that transcends it. In the light of faith, the things of this ordinary universe, which in themselves would never be enough to satisfy us, become sacraments of an eternal reality. Someone who caught this same paradox was Benson's contemporary, G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton said that when he was an agnostic and expected to find joy in this world, he was always listless and depressed, but when he found faith, and realized that he was not meant to be fulfilled in this world, he actually became happy and took delight in ordinary things. A younger contemporary of both Chesterton and Benson, Evelyn Waugh, expressed much the same thing when he observed, "For Catholics, the supernatural is the real."

There are many fights: political, cultural, ethnic, etc. What Robert Hugh Benson saw with extraordinary clarity is that these are all relatively superficial struggles. The final—and finally interesting—battle is metaphysical and religious. It comes down to this question: Do we live in an enchanted universe or not? Everything hinges on the way that question is answered.

DEDICATION



CLAVI DOMUS DAVID

PREFACE



I am perfectly aware that this is a terribly sensational book, and open to innumerable criticisms on that account, as well as on many others. But I did not know how else to express the principles I desired (and which I passionately believe to be true) except by producing their lines to a sensational point. I have tried, however, not to scream unduly loud, and to retain, so far as possible, reverence and consideration for the opinions of other people. Whether I have succeeded in that attempt is quite another matter.

Robert Hugh Benson
CAMBRIDGE 1907

Persons who do not like tiresome prologues, need not read this one. It is essential only to the situation, not to the story.

PROLOGUE



“You must give me a moment,” said the old man, leaning back.

Percy resettled himself in his chair and waited, chin on hand.

It was a very silent room in which the three men sat, furnished with the extreme common sense of the period. It had neither window nor door; for it was now sixty years since the world, recognising that space is not confined to the surface of the globe, had begun to burrow in earnest. Old Mr. Templeton’s house stood some forty feet below the level of the Thames embankment, in what was considered a somewhat commodious position, for he had only a hundred yards to walk before he reached the station of the Second Central Motor-circle, and a quarter of a mile to the volor-station at Blackfriars. He was over ninety years old, however, and seldom left his house now. The room itself was lined throughout with the delicate green jade-enamel prescribed by the Board of Health, and was suffused with the artificial sunlight discovered by the great Reuter forty years before; it had the colour-tone of a spring wood, and was warmed and ventilated through the classical frieze grating to the exact temperature of 18 degrees Centigrade. Mr. Templeton was a plain man, content to live as his father had lived before him. The furniture, too, was a little old-fashioned in make and design, constructed however according to the prevailing system of soft asbestos enamel welded over iron, indestructible, pleasant to the touch, and resembling mahogany. A couple of book-cases well filled ran on either side of the

bronze pedestal electric fire before which sat the three men; and in the further corners stood the hydraulic lifts that gave entrance, the one to the bedroom, the other to the corridor fifty feet up which opened on to the Embankment.

Father Percy Franklin, the elder of the two priests, was rather a remarkable-looking man, not more than thirty-five years old, but with hair that was white throughout; his grey eyes, under black eyebrows, were peculiarly bright and almost passionate; but his prominent nose and chin and the extreme decisiveness of his mouth reassured the observer as to his will. Strangers usually looked twice at him.

Father Francis, however, sitting in his upright chair on the other side of the hearth, brought down the average; for, though his brown eyes were pleasant and pathetic, there was no strength in his face; there was even a tendency to feminine melancholy in the corners of his mouth and the marked droop of his eyelids.

Mr. Templeton was just a very old man, with a strong face in folds, clean-shaven like the rest of the world, and was now lying back on his water-pillows with the quilt over his feet.

At last he spoke, glancing first at Percy, on his left.

“Well,” he said, “it is a great business to remember exactly; but this is how I put it to myself.”

“In England our party was first seriously alarmed at the Labour Parliament of 1917. That showed us how deeply Herveism had impregnated the whole social atmosphere. There had been Socialists before, but none like Gustave Herve in his old age—at least no one of the same power. He, perhaps you have read, taught absolute Materialism and Socialism developed to their logical issues. Patriotism, he said, was a relic of barbarism; and sensual enjoyment was the only certain good. Of course, every one laughed at him. It was said that without religion there could be no adequate motive among the masses for even the simplest social order. But he was right, it seemed. After the fall of the French

Church at the beginning of the century and the massacres of 1914, the *bourgeoisie* settled down to organise itself; and that extraordinary movement began in earnest, pushed through by the middle classes, with no patriotism, no class distinctions, practically no army. Of course, Freemasonry directed it all. This spread to Germany, where the influence of Karl Marx had already—”

“Yes, sir,” put in Percy smoothly, “but what of England, if you don’t mind—”

“Ah, yes; England. Well, in 1917 the Labour party gathered up the reins, and Communism really began. That was long before I can remember, of course, but my father used to date it from then. The only wonder was that things did not go forward more quickly; but I suppose there was a good deal of Tory leaven left. Besides, centuries generally run slower than is expected, especially after beginning with an impulse. But the new order began then; and the Communists have never suffered a serious reverse since, except the little one in ’25. Blenkin founded ‘*The New People*’ then; and the ‘*Times*’ dropped out; but it was not, strangely enough, till ’35 that the House of Lords fell for the last time. The Established Church had gone finally in ’29.”

“And the religious effect of that?” asked Percy swiftly, as the old man paused to cough slightly, lifting his inhaler. The priest was anxious to keep to the point.

“It was an effect itself,” said the other, “rather than a cause. You see, the Ritualists, as they used to call them, after a desperate attempt to get into the Labour swim, came into the Church after the Convocation of ’19, when the Nicene Creed dropped out; and there was no real enthusiasm except among them. But so far as there was an effect from the final Disestablishment, I think it was that what was left of the State Church melted into the Free Church, and the Free Church was, after all, nothing more than a little sentiment. The Bible was completely given up as an authority after the renewed German attacks in the twenties; and the Divinity of our Lord, some think, had gone all but in name by the beginning of the century. The Kenotic theory had

provided for that. Then there was that strange little movement among the Free Churchmen even earlier; when ministers who did no more than follow the swim—who were sensitive to draughts, so to speak—broke off from their old positions. It is curious to read in the history of the time how they were hailed as independent thinkers. It was just exactly what they were not. . . . Where was I? Oh, yes. . . . Well, that cleared the ground for us, and the Church made extraordinary progress for a while—extraordinary, that is, under the circumstances, because you must remember, things were very different from twenty, or even ten, years before. I mean that, roughly speaking, the severing of the sheep and the goats had begun. The religious people were practically all Catholics and Individualists; the irreligious people rejected the supernatural altogether, and were, to a man, Materialists and Communists. But we made progress because we had a few exceptional men—Delaney the philosopher, McArthur and Largent, the philanthropists, and so on. It really seemed as if Delaney and his disciples might carry everything before them. You remember his ‘Analogy’? Oh, yes, it is all in the textbooks. . . .

“Well, then, at the close of the Vatican Council, which had been called in the nineteenth century, and never dissolved, we lost a great number through the final definitions. The ‘Exodus of the Intellectuals’ the world called it—”

“The Biblical decisions,” put in the younger priest.

“That partly; and the whole conflict that began with the rise of Modernism at the beginning of the century but much more the condemnation of Delaney, and of the New Transcendentalism generally, as it was then understood. He died outside the Church, you know. Then there was the condemnation of Sciotti’s book on Comparative Religion. . . . After that the Communists went on by strides, although by very slow ones. It seems extraordinary to you, I dare say, but you cannot imagine the excitement when the *Necessary Trades Bill* became law in ’60. People thought that all enterprise would stop when so many

professions were nationalised; but, you know, it didn't. Certainly the nation was behind it."

"What year was the *Two-Thirds Majority Bill* passed?" asked Percy.

"Oh! long before—within a year or two of the fall of the House of Lords. It was necessary, I think, or the Individualists would have gone raving mad. . . . Well, the *Necessary Trades Bill* was inevitable: people had begun to see that even so far back as the time when the railways were municipalised. For a while there was a burst of art; because all the Individualists who could went in for it (it was then that the Toller school was founded); but they soon drifted back into Government employment; after all, the six-per-cent limit for all individual enterprise was not much of a temptation; and Government paid well."

Percy shook his head.

"Yes; but I cannot understand the present state of affairs. You said just now that things went slowly?"

"Yes," said the old man, "but you must remember the Poor Laws. That established the Communists for ever. Certainly Braithwaite knew his business."

The younger priest looked up inquiringly.

"The abolition of the old workhouse system," said Mr. Templeton. "It is all ancient history to you, of course; but I remember as if it was yesterday. It was that which brought down what was still called the Monarchy and the Universities."

"Ah," said Percy. "I should like to hear you talk about that, sir."

"Presently, father. . . . Well, this is what Braithwaite did. By the old system all paupers were treated alike, and resented it. By the new system there were the three grades that we have now, and the enfranchisement of the two higher grades. Only the absolutely worthless were assigned to the third grade, and treated more or less as criminals—of course after careful examination. Then there was the reorganisation of the Old Age Pensions. Well, don't you see how strong that made the Communists? The Individualists—they were still called Tories when I was a boy—the Individualists have had no chance since. They are no more than a

worn-out drag now. The whole of the working classes—and that meant ninety-nine of a hundred—were all against them.”

Percy looked up; but the other went on.

“Then there was the Prison Reform Bill under Macpherson, and the abolition of capital punishment; there was the final Education Act of ’59, whereby dogmatic secularism was established; the practical abolition of inheritance under the reformation of the Death Duties—”

“I forget what the old system was,” said Percy.

“Why, it seems incredible, but the old system was that all paid alike. First came the *Heirloom Act*, and then the change by which inherited wealth paid three times the duty of earned wealth, leading up to the acceptance of Karl Marx’s doctrines in ’89—but the former came in ’77. . . . Well, all these things kept England up to the level of the Continent; she had only been just in time to join in with the final scheme of Western Free Trade. That was the first effect, you remember, of the Socialists’ victory in Germany.”

“And how did we keep out of the Eastern War?” asked Percy anxiously.

“Oh! that’s a long story; but, in a word, America stopped us; so we lost India and Australia. I think that was the nearest to the downfall of the Communists since ’25. But Braithwaite got out of it very cleverly by getting us the protectorate of South Africa once and for all. He was an old man then, too.”

Mr. Templeton stopped to cough again. Father Francis sighed and shifted in his chair.

“And America?” asked Percy.

“Ah! all that is very complicated. But she knew her strength and annexed Canada the same year. That was when we were at our weakest.”

Percy stood up.

“Have you a Comparative Atlas, sir?” he asked.

The old man pointed to a shelf.

“There,” he said.

Percy looked at the sheets a minute or two in silence, spreading them on his knees.

“It is all much simpler, certainly,” he murmured, glancing first at the old complicated colouring of the beginning of the twentieth century, and then at the three great washes of the twenty-first.

He moved his finger along Asia. The words EASTERN EMPIRE ran across the pale yellow, from the Ural Mountains on the left to the Behring Straits on the right, curling round in giant letters through India, Australia, and New Zealand. He glanced at the red; it was considerably smaller, but still important enough, considering that it covered not only Europe proper, but all Russia up to the Ural Mountains, and Africa to the south. The blue-labelled AMERICAN REPUBLIC swept over the whole of that continent, and disappeared right round to the left of the Western Hemisphere in a shower of blue sparks on the white sea.

“Yes, it’s simpler,” said the old man drily.

Percy shut the book and set it by his chair.

“And what next, sir? What will happen?”

The old Tory statesman smiled.

“God knows,” he said. “If the Eastern Empire chooses to move, we can do nothing. I don’t know why they have not moved. I suppose it is because of religious differences.”

“Europe will not split?” asked the priest.

“No, no. We know our danger now. And America would certainly help us. But, all the same, God help us—or you, I should rather say—if the Empire does move! She knows her strength at last.”

There was silence for a moment or two. A faint vibration trembled through the deep-sunk room as some huge machine went past on the broad boulevard overhead.

“Prophesy, sir,” said Percy suddenly. “I mean about religion.”

Mr. Templeton inhaled another long breath from his instrument. Then again he took up his discourse.

“Briefly,” he said, “there are three forces—Catholicism, Humanitarianism, and the Eastern religions. About the third I cannot prophesy,

though I think the Sufis will be victorious. Anything may happen; Esotericism is making enormous strides—and that means Pantheism; and the blending of the Chinese and Japanese dynasties throws out all our calculations. But in Europe and America, there is no doubt that the struggle lies between the other two. We can neglect everything else. And, I think, if you wish me to say what I think, that, humanly speaking, Catholicism will decrease rapidly now. It is perfectly true that Protestantism is dead. Men do recognise at last that a supernatural Religion involves an absolute authority, and that Private Judgment in matters of faith is nothing else than the beginning of disintegration. And it is also true that since the Catholic Church is the only institution that even claims supernatural authority, with all its merciless logic, she has again the allegiance of practically all Christians who have any supernatural belief left. There are a few faddists left, especially in America and here; but they are negligible. That is all very well; but, on the other hand, you must remember that Humanitarianism, contrary to all persons' expectations, is becoming an actual religion itself, though anti-supernatural. It is Pantheism; it is developing a ritual under Freemasonry; it has a creed, 'God is Man,' and the rest. It has therefore a real food of a sort to offer to religious cravings; it idealises, and yet it makes no demand upon the spiritual faculties. Then, they have the use of all the churches except ours, and all the Cathedrals; and they are beginning at last to encourage sentiment. Then, they may display their symbols and we may not: I think that they will be established legally in another ten years at the latest.

"Now, we Catholics, remember, are losing; we have lost steadily for more than fifty years. I suppose that we have, nominally, about one-fortieth of America now—and that is the result of the Catholic movement of the early twenties. In France and Spain we are nowhere; in Germany we are less. We hold our position in the East, certainly; but even there we have not more than one in two hundred—so the statistics say—and we are scattered. In Italy? Well, we have Rome again to ourselves, but nothing else; here, we have Ireland altogether

and perhaps one in sixty of England, Wales and Scotland; but we had one in forty seventy years ago. Then there is the enormous progress of psychology—all clean against us for at least a century. First, you see, there was Materialism, pure and simple that failed more or less—it was too crude—until psychology came to the rescue. Now psychology claims all the rest of the ground; and the supernatural sense seems accounted for. That’s the claim. No, father, we are losing; and we shall go on losing, and I think we must even be ready for a catastrophe at any moment.”

“But—” began Percy.

“You think that weak for an old man on the edge of the grave. Well, it is what I think. I see no hope. In fact, it seems to me that even now something may come on us quickly. No; I see no hope until—”

Percy looked up sharply.

“Until our Lord comes back,” said the old statesman.

Father Francis sighed once more, and there fell a silence.

“And the fall of the Universities?” said Percy at last.

“My dear father, it was exactly like the fall of the Monasteries under Henry VIII—the same results, the same arguments, the same incidents. They were the strongholds of Individualism, as the Monasteries were the strongholds of Papalism; and they were regarded with the same kind of awe and envy. Then the usual sort of remarks began about the amount of port wine drunk; and suddenly people said that they had done their work, that the inmates were mistaking means for ends; and there was a great deal more reason for saying it. After all, granted the supernatural, Religious Houses are an obvious consequence; but the object of secular education is presumably the production of something visible—either character or competence; and it became quite impossible to prove that the Universities produced either—which was worth having. The distinction between *οὐ* and *μῆ* is not an end in itself; and the kind of person produced by its study was not one which appealed to England in the twentieth century. I am not sure that it appealed even

to me much (and I was always a strong Individualist)—except by way of pathos—”

“Yes?” said Percy.

“Oh, it was pathetic enough. The Science Schools of Cambridge and the Colonial Department of Oxford were the last hope; and then those went. The old dons crept about with their books, but nobody wanted them—they were too purely theoretical; some drifted into the poorhouses, first or second grade; some were taken care of by charitable clergymen; there was that attempt to concentrate in Dublin; but it failed, and people soon forgot them. The buildings, as you know, were used for all kinds of things. Oxford became an engineering establishment for a while, and Cambridge a kind of Government laboratory. I was at King’s College, you know. Of course it was all as horrible as it could be—though I am glad they kept the chapel open even as a museum. It was not nice to see the chantries filled with anatomical specimens. However, I don’t think it was much worse than keeping stoves and surplices in them.”

“What happened to you?”

“Oh! I was in Parliament very soon; and I had a little money of my own, too. But it was very hard on some of them; they had little pensions, at least all who were past work. And yet, I don’t know: I suppose it had to come. They were very little more than picturesque survivals, you know; and had not even the grace of a religious faith about them.”

Percy sighed again, looking at the humorously reminiscent face of the old man. Then he suddenly changed the subject again.

“What about this European parliament?” he said.

The old man started.

“Oh! . . . I think it will pass,” he said, “if a man can be found to push it. All this last century has been leading up to it, as you see. Patriotism has been dying fast; but it ought to have died, like slavery and so forth, under the influence of the Catholic Church. As it is, the work has been done without the Church; and the result is that the world is beginning to range itself against us: it is an organised antagonism—a kind of

Catholic anti-Church. Democracy has done what the Divine Monarchy should have done. If the proposal passes I think we may expect something like persecution once more. . . . But, again, the Eastern invasion may save us, if it comes off. . . . I do not know. . . .”

Percy sat still yet a moment; then he stood up suddenly.

“I must go, sir,” he said, relapsing into Esperanto. “It is past nineteen o’clock. Thank you so much. Are you coming, father?”

Father Francis stood up also, in the dark grey suit permitted to priests, and took up his hat.

“Well, father,” said the old man again, “come again some day, if I haven’t been too discursive. I suppose you have to write your letter yet?”

Percy nodded.

“I did half of it this morning,” he said, “but I felt I wanted another bird’s-eye view before I could understand properly: I am so grateful to you for giving it me. It is really a great labour, this daily letter to the Cardinal-Protector. I am thinking of resigning if I am allowed.”

“My dear father, don’t do that. If I may say so to your face, I think you have a very shrewd mind; and unless Rome has balanced information she can do nothing. I don’t suppose your colleagues are as careful as yourself.”

Percy smiled, lifting his dark eyebrows deprecatingly.

“Come, father,” he said.

The two priests parted at the steps of the corridor, and Percy stood for a minute or two staring out at the familiar autumn scene, trying to understand what it all meant. What he had heard downstairs seemed strangely to illuminate that vision of splendid prosperity that lay before him.

The air was as bright as day; artificial sunlight had carried all before it, and London now knew no difference between dark and light. He stood in a kind of glazed cloister, heavily floored with a preparation of rubber on which footsteps made no sound. Beneath him, at the

foot of the stairs, poured an endless double line of persons severed by a partition, going to right and left, noiselessly, except for the murmur of Esperanto talking that sounded ceaselessly as they went. Through the clear, hardened glass of the public passage showed a broad sleek black roadway, ribbed from side to side, and puckered in the centre, significantly empty, but even as he stood there a note sounded far away from Old Westminster, like the hum of a giant hive, rising as it came, and an instant later a transparent thing shot past, flashing from every angle, and the note died to a hum again and a silence as the great Government motor from the south whirled eastwards with the mails. This was a privileged roadway; nothing but state-vehicles were allowed to use it, and those at a speed not exceeding one hundred miles an hour.

Other noises were subdued in this city of rubber; the passenger-circles were a hundred yards away, and the subterranean traffic lay too deep for anything but a vibration to make itself felt. It was to remove this vibration, and silence the hum of the ordinary vehicles, that the Government experts had been working for the last twenty years.

Once again before he moved there came a long cry from overhead, startlingly beautiful and piercing, and, as he lifted his eyes from the glimpse of the steady river which alone had refused to be transformed, he saw high above him against the heavy illuminated clouds, a long slender object, glowing with soft light, slide northwards and vanish on outstretched wings. That musical cry, he told himself, was the voice of one of the European line of volors announcing its arrival in the capital of Great Britain.

“Until our Lord comes back,” he thought to himself; and for an instant the old misery stabbed at his heart. How difficult it was to hold the eyes focussed on that far horizon when this world lay in the foreground so compelling in its splendour and its strength! Oh, he had argued with Father Francis an hour ago that size was not the same as greatness, and that an insistent external could not exclude a subtle internal; and he had believed what he had then said; but the doubt yet

remained till he silenced it by a fierce effort, crying in his heart to the Poor Man of Nazareth to keep his heart as the heart of a little child.

Then he set his lips, wondering how long Father Francis would bear the pressure, and went down the steps.

BOOK I

THE ADVENT

CHAPTER I

I

Oliver Brand, the new member for Croydon (4), sat in his study, looking out of the window over the top of his typewriter.

His house stood facing northwards at the extreme end of a spur of the Surrey Hills, now cut and tunnelled out of all recognition; only to a Communist the view was an inspiring one. Immediately below the wide windows the embanked ground fell away rapidly for perhaps a hundred feet, ending in a high wall, and beyond that the world and works of men were triumphant as far as eye could see. Two vast tracks like streaked race-courses, each not less than a quarter of a mile in width, and sunk twenty feet below the surface of the ground, swept up to a meeting a mile ahead at the huge junction. Of those, that on his left was the First Trunk road to Brighton, inscribed in capital letters in the Railroad Guide, that to the right the Second Trunk to the Tunbridge and Hastings district. Each was divided length-ways by a cement wall, on one side of which, on steel rails, ran the electric trams, and on the other lay the motor-track itself again divided into three, on which ran, first the Government coaches at a speed of one hundred and fifty miles an hour, second the private motors at not more than sixty, third the cheap Government line at thirty, with stations every five miles. This was further bordered by a road confined to pedestrians, cyclists and ordinary cars on which no vehicle was allowed to move at more than twelve miles an hour.

Beyond these great tracks lay an immense plain of house-roofs, with short towers here and there marking public buildings, from the Caterham district on the left to Croydon in front, all clear and bright

in smokeless air; and far away to the west and north showed the low suburban hills against the April sky.

There was surprisingly little sound, considering the pressure of the population; and, with the exception of the buzz of the steel rails as a train fled north or south, and the occasional sweet chord of the great motors as they neared or left the junction, there was little to be heard in this study except a smooth, soothing murmur that filled the air like the murmur of bees in a garden.

Oliver loved every hint of human life—all busy sights and sounds—and was listening now, smiling faintly to himself as he stared out into the clear air. Then he set his lips, laid his fingers on the keys once more, and went on speech-constructing.

He was very fortunate in the situation of his house. It stood in an angle of one of those huge spider-webs with which the country was covered, and for his purposes was all that he could expect. It was close enough to London to be extremely cheap, for all wealthy persons had retired at least a hundred miles from the throbbing heart of England; and yet it was as quiet as he could wish. He was within ten minutes of Westminster on the one side, and twenty minutes of the sea on the other, and his constituency lay before him like a raised map. Further, since the great London termini were but ten minutes away, there were at his disposal the First Trunk lines to every big town in England. For a politician of no great means, who was asked to speak at Edinburgh on one evening and in Marseilles on the next, he was as well placed as any man in Europe.

He was a pleasant-looking man, not much over thirty years old; black wire-haired, clean-shaven, thin, virile, magnetic, blue-eyed and white-skinned; and he appeared this day extremely content with himself and the world. His lips moved slightly as he worked, his eyes enlarged and diminished with excitement, and more than once he paused and stared out again, smiling and flushed.

Then a door opened; a middle-aged man came nervously in with a bundle of papers, laid them down on the table without a word, and turned to go out. Oliver lifted his hand for attention, snapped a lever, and spoke.

“Well, Mr. Phillips?” he said.

“There is news from the East, sir,” said the secretary.

Oliver shot a glance sideways, and laid his hand on the bundle.

“Any complete message?” he asked.

“No, sir; it is interrupted again. Mr. Felsenburgh’s name is mentioned.”

Oliver did not seem to hear; he lifted the flimsy printed sheets with a sudden movement, and began turning them.

“The fourth from the top, Mr. Brand,” said the secretary.

Oliver jerked his head impatiently, and the other went out as if at a signal.

The fourth sheet from the top, printed in red on green, seemed to absorb Oliver’s attention altogether, for he read it through two or three times, leaning back motionless in his chair. Then he sighed, and stared again through the window.

Then once more the door opened, and a tall girl came in.

“Well, my dear?” she observed.

Oliver shook his head, with compressed lips.

“Nothing definite,” he said. “Even less than usual. Listen.”

He took up the green sheet and began to read aloud as the girl sat down in a window-seat on his left.

She was a very charming-looking creature, tall and slender, with serious, ardent grey eyes, firm red lips, and a beautiful carriage of head and shoulders. She had walked slowly across the room as Oliver took up the paper, and now sat back in her brown dress in a very graceful and stately attitude. She seemed to listen with a deliberate kind of patience; but her eyes flickered with interest.

“Irkutsk—April fourteen—Yesterday—as—usual—But—rumoured—defection—from—Sufi—party—Troops—continue—gathering—

Felsenburgh—addressed—Buddhist—crowd—Attempt—on—Llama—last—Friday—work—of—Anarchists—Felsenburgh—leaving—for—Moscow—as—arranged—he . . . ' There—that is absolutely all," ended Oliver dispiritedly. "It's interrupted as usual."

The girl began to swing a foot.

"I don't understand in the least," she said. "Who is Felsenburgh, after all?"

"My dear child, that is what all the world is asking. Nothing is known except that he was included in the American deputation at the last moment. The *Herald* published his life last week; but it has been contradicted. It is certain that he is quite a young man, and that he has been quite obscure until now."

"Well, he is not obscure now," observed the girl.

"I know; it seems as if he were running the whole thing. One never hears a word of the others. It's lucky he's on the right side."

"And what do you think?"

Oliver turned vacant eyes again out of the window.

"I think it is touch and go," he said. "The only remarkable thing is that here hardly anybody seems to realise it. It's too big for the imagination, I suppose. There is no doubt that the East has been preparing for a descent on Europe for these last five years. They have only been checked by America; and this is one last attempt to stop them. But why Felsenburgh should come to the front—" he broke off. "He must be a good linguist, at any rate. This is at least the fifth crowd he has addressed; perhaps he is just the American interpreter. Christ! I wonder who he is."

"Has he any other name?"

"Julian, I believe. One message said so."

"How did this come through?"

Oliver shook his head.

"Private enterprise," he said. "The European agencies have stopped work. Every telegraph station is guarded night and day. There are lines

of volors strung out on every frontier. The Empire means to settle this business without us.”

“And if it goes wrong?”

“My dear Mabel—if hell breaks loose—” he threw out his hands deprecatingly.

“And what is the Government doing?”

“Working night and day; so is the rest of Europe. It’ll be Armageddon with a vengeance if it comes to war.”

“What chance do you see?”

“I see two chances,” said Oliver slowly: “one, that they may be afraid of America, and may hold their hands from sheer fear; the other that they may be induced to hold their hands from charity; if only they can be made to understand that co-operation is the one hope of the world. But those damned religions of theirs—”

The girl sighed, and looked out again on to the wide plain of house-roofs below the window.

The situation was indeed as serious as it could be. That huge Empire, consisting of a federalism of States under the Son of Heaven (made possible by the merging of the Japanese and Chinese dynasties and the fall of Russia), had been consolidating its forces and learning its own power during the last thirty-five years, ever since, in fact, it had laid its lean yellow hands upon Australia and India. While the rest of the world had learned the folly of war, ever since the fall of the Russian republic under the combined attack of the yellow races, the last had grasped its possibilities. It seemed now as if the civilisation of the last century was to be swept back once more into chaos. It was not that the mob of the East cared very greatly; it was their rulers who had begun to stretch themselves after an almost eternal lethargy, and it was hard to imagine how they could be checked at this point. There was a touch of grimness too in the rumour that religious fanaticism was behind the movement, and that the patient East proposed at last to proselytise by the modern equivalents of fire and sword those who had laid aside for the most part all religious beliefs except that in Humanity. To Oliver it

was simply maddening. As he looked from his window and saw that vast limit of London laid peaceably before him, as his imagination ran out over Europe and saw everywhere that steady triumph of common sense and fact over the wild fairy-stories of Christianity, it seemed intolerable that there should be even a possibility that all this should be swept back again into the barbarous turmoil of sects and dogmas; for no less than this would be the result if the East laid hands on Europe. Even Catholicism would revive, he told himself, that strange faith that had blazed so often as persecution had been dashed to quench it; and, of all forms of faith, to Oliver's mind Catholicism was the most grotesque and enslaving. And the prospect of all this honestly troubled him, far more than the thought of the physical catastrophe and bloodshed that would fall on Europe with the advent of the East. There was but one hope on the religious side, as he had told Mabel a dozen times, and that was that the Quietistic Pantheism which for the last century had made such giant strides in East and West alike, among Mohammedans, Buddhists, Hindus, Confucianists and the rest, should avail to check the supernatural frenzy that inspired their exoteric brethren. Pantheism, he understood, was what he held himself; for him "God" was the developing sum of created life, and impersonal Unity was the essence of His being; competition then was the great heresy that set men one against another and delayed all progress; for, to his mind, progress lay in the merging of the individual in the family, of the family in the commonwealth, of the commonwealth in the continent, and of the continent in the world. Finally, the world itself at any moment was no more than the mood of impersonal life. It was, in fact, the Catholic idea with the supernatural left out, a union of earthly fortunes, an abandonment of individualism on the one side, and of supernaturalism on the other. It was treason to appeal from God Immanent to God Transcendent; there was no God transcendent; God, so far as He could be known, was man.

Yet these two, husband and wife after a fashion—for they had entered into that terminable contract now recognised explicitly by the State—these two were very far from sharing in the usual heavy dulness

of mere materialists. The world, for them, beat with one ardent life blossoming in flower and beast and man, a torrent of beautiful vigour flowing from a deep source and irrigating all that moved or felt. Its romance was the more appreciable because it was comprehensible to the minds that sprang from it; there were mysteries in it, but mysteries that enticed rather than baffled, for they unfolded new glories with every discovery that man could make; even inanimate objects, the fossil, the electric current, the far-off stars, these were dust thrown off by the Spirit of the World—fragrant with His Presence and eloquent of His Nature. For example, the announcement made by Klein, the astronomer, twenty years before, that the inhabitation of certain planets had become a certified fact—how vastly this had altered men’s views of themselves. But the one condition of progress and the building of Jerusalem, on the planet that happened to be men’s dwelling place, was peace, not the sword which Christ brought or that which Mahomet wielded; but peace that arose from, not passed, understanding; the peace that sprang from a knowledge that man was all and was able to develop himself only by sympathy with his fellows. To Oliver and his wife, then, the last century seemed like a revelation; little by little the old superstitions had died, and the new light broadened; the Spirit of the World had roused Himself, the sun had dawned in the west; and now with horror and loathing they had seen the clouds gather once more in the quarter whence all superstition had had its birth.

Mabel got up presently and came across to her husband.

“My dear,” she said, “you must not be downhearted. It all may pass as it passed before. It is a great thing that they are listening to America at all. And this Mr. Felsenburgh seems to be on the right side.”

Oliver took her hand and kissed it.

II

Oliver seemed altogether depressed at breakfast, half an hour later. His mother, an old lady of nearly eighty, who never appeared till noon, seemed to see it at once, for after a look or two at him and a word, she subsided into silence behind her plate.

It was a pleasant little room in which they sat, immediately behind Oliver's own, and was furnished, according to universal custom, in light green. Its windows looked out upon a strip of garden at the back, and the high creeper-grown wall that separated that domain from the next. The furniture, too, was of the usual sort; a sensible round table stood in the middle, with three tall arm-chairs, with the proper angles and rests, drawn up to it; and the centre of it, resting apparently on a broad round column, held the dishes. It was thirty years now since the practice of placing the dining-room above the kitchen, and of raising and lowering the courses by hydraulic power into the centre of the dining-table, had become universal in the houses of the well-to-do. The floor consisted entirely of the asbestos cork preparation invented in America, noiseless, clean, and pleasant to both foot and eye.

Mabel broke the silence.

"And your speech to-morrow?" she asked, taking up her fork.

Oliver brightened a little, and began to discourse.

It seemed that Birmingham was beginning to fret. They were crying out once more for free trade with America: European facilities were not enough, and it was Oliver's business to keep them quiet. It was useless, he proposed to tell them, to agitate until the Eastern business was settled: they must not bother the Government with such details just now. He was to tell them, too, that the Government was wholly on their side; that it was bound to come soon.

"They are pig-headed," he added fiercely; "pig-headed and selfish; they are like children who cry for food ten minutes before dinner-time: it is bound to come if they will wait a little."

"And you will tell them so?"

“That they are pig-headed? Certainly.”

Mabel looked at her husband with a pleased twinkle in her eyes. She knew perfectly well that his popularity rested largely on his outspokenness: folks liked to be scolded and abused by a genial bold man who danced and gesticulated in a magnetic fury; she liked it herself.

“How shall you go?” she asked.

“Volor. I shall catch the eighteen o'clock at Blackfriars; the meeting is at nineteen, and I shall be back at twenty-one.”

He addressed himself vigorously to his *entree*, and his mother looked up with a patient, old-woman smile.

Mabel began to drum her fingers softly on the damask.

“Please make haste, my dear,” she said; “I have to be at Brighton at three.”

Oliver gulped his last mouthful, pushed his plate over the line, glanced to see if all plates were there, and then put his hand beneath the table.

Instantly, without a sound, the centre-piece vanished, and the three waited unconcernedly while the clink of dishes came from beneath.

Old Mrs. Brand was a hale-looking old lady, rosy and wrinkled, with the mantilla head-dress of fifty years ago; but she, too, looked a little depressed this morning. The *entree* was not very successful, she thought; the new food-stuff was not up to the old, it was a trifle gritty: she would see about it afterwards. There was a clink, a soft sound like a push, and the centre-piece snapped into its place, bearing an admirable imitation of a roasted fowl.

Oliver and his wife were alone again for a minute or two after breakfast before Mabel started down the path to catch the 14-½ o'clock 4th grade sub-trunk line to the junction.

“What's the matter with mother?” he said.

“Oh! it's the food-stuff again: she's never got accustomed to it; she says it doesn't suit her.”

“Nothing else?”

“No, my dear, I am sure of it. She hasn’t said a word lately.”

Oliver watched his wife go down the path, reassured. He had been a little troubled once or twice lately by an odd word or two that his mother had let fall. She had been brought up a Christian for a few years, and it seemed to him sometimes as if it had left a taint. There was an old “Garden of the Soul” that she liked to keep by her, though she always protested with an appearance of scorn that it was nothing but nonsense. Still, Oliver would have preferred that she had burned it: superstition was a desperate thing for retaining life, and, as the brain weakened, might conceivably reassert itself. Christianity was both wild and dull, he told himself, wild because of its obvious grotesqueness and impossibility, and dull because it was so utterly apart from the exhilarating stream of human life; it crept dustily about still, he knew, in little dark churches here and there; it screamed with hysterical sentimentality in Westminster Cathedral which he had once entered and looked upon with a kind of disgusted fury; it gabbled strange, false words to the incompetent and the old and the half-witted. But it would be too dreadful if his own mother ever looked upon it again with favour.

Oliver himself, ever since he could remember, had been violently opposed to the concessions to Rome and Ireland. It was intolerable that these two places should be definitely yielded up to this foolish, treacherous nonsense: they were hot-beds of sedition; plague-spots on the face of humanity. He had never agreed with those who said that it was better that all the poison of the West should be gathered rather than dispersed. But, at any rate, there it was. Rome had been given up wholly to that old man in white in exchange for all the parish churches and cathedrals of Italy, and it was understood that mediaeval darkness reigned there supreme; and Ireland, after receiving Home Rule thirty years before, had declared for Catholicism, and opened her arms to Individualism in its most virulent form. England had laughed and assented, for she was saved from a quantity of agitation by the immediate departure of half her Catholic population for that island, and had, consistently with her Communist-colonial policy, granted every facility for Individualism to

reduce itself there *ad absurdum*. All kinds of funny things were happening there: Oliver had read with a bitter amusement of new appearances there, of a Woman in Blue and shrines raised where her feet had rested; but he was scarcely amused at Rome, for the movement to Turin of the Italian Government had deprived the Republic of quite a quantity of sentimental prestige, and had haloed the old religious nonsense with all the meretriciousness of historical association. However, it obviously could not last much longer: the world was beginning to understand at last.

He stood a moment or two at the door after his wife had gone, drinking in reassurance from that glorious vision of solid sense that spread itself before his eyes: the endless house-roofs; the high glass vaults of the public baths and gymnasiums; the pinnacled schools where Citizenship was taught each morning; the spider-like cranes and scaffoldings that rose here and there; and even the few pricking spires did not disconcert him. There it stretched away into the grey haze of London, really beautiful, this vast hive of men and women who had learned at least the primary lesson of the gospel that there was no God but man, no priest but the politician, no prophet but the schoolmaster.

Then he went back once more to his speech-constructing.

Mabel, too, was a little thoughtful as she sat with her paper on her lap, spinning down the broad line to Brighton. This Eastern news was more disconcerting to her than she allowed her husband to see; yet it seemed incredible that there could be any real danger of invasion. This Western life was so sensible and peaceful; folks had their feet at last upon the rock, and it was unthinkable that they could ever be forced back on to the mud-flats: it was contrary to the whole law of development. Yet she could not but recognise that catastrophe seemed one of nature's methods. . . .

She sat very quiet, glancing once or twice at the meagre little scrap of news, and read the leading article upon it: that too seemed

significant of dismay. A couple of men were talking in the half-compartment beyond on the same subject; one described the Government engineering works that he had visited, the breathless haste that dominated them; the other put in interrogations and questions. There was not much comfort there. There were no windows through which she could look; on the main lines the speed was too great for the eyes; the long compartment flooded with soft light bounded her horizon. She stared at the moulded white ceiling, the delicious oak-framed paintings, the deep spring-seats, the mellow globes overhead that poured out radiance, at a mother and child diagonally opposite her. Then the great chord sounded; the faint vibration increased ever so slightly; and an instant later the automatic doors ran back, and she stepped out on to the platform of Brighton station.

As she went down the steps leading to the station square she noticed a priest going before her. He seemed a very upright and sturdy old man, for though his hair was white he walked steadily and strongly. At the foot of the steps he stopped and half turned, and then, to her surprise, she saw that his face was that of a young man, fine-featured and strong, with black eyebrows and very bright grey eyes. Then she passed on and began to cross the square in the direction of her aunt's house.

Then without the slightest warning, except one shrill hoot from overhead, a number of things happened.

A great shadow whirled across the sunlight at her feet, a sound of rending tore the air, and a noise like a giant's sigh; and, as she stopped bewildered, with a noise like ten thousand smashed kettles, a huge thing crashed on the rubber pavement before her, where it lay, filling half the square, writhing long wings on its upper side that beat and whirled like the flappers of some ghastly extinct monster, pouring out human screams, and beginning almost instantly to crawl with broken life.

Mabel scarcely knew what happened next; but she found herself a moment later forced forward by some violent pressure from behind, till she stood shaking from head to foot, with some kind of smashed body of a man moaning and stretching at her feet. There was a sort of articulate

language coming from it; she caught distinctly the names of Jesus and Mary; then a voice hissed suddenly in her ears:

“Let me through. I am a priest.”

She stood there a moment longer, dazed by the suddenness of the whole affair, and watched almost unintelligently the grey-haired young priest on his knees, with his coat torn open, and a crucifix out; she saw him bend close, wave his hand in a swift sign, and heard a murmur of a language she did not know. Then he was up again, holding the crucifix before him, and she saw him begin to move forward into the midst of the red-flooded pavement, looking this way and that as if for a signal. Down the steps of the great hospital on her right came figures running now, hatless, each carrying what looked like an old-fashioned camera. She knew what those men were, and her heart leaped in relief. They were the ministers of euthanasia. Then she felt herself taken by the shoulder and pulled back, and immediately found herself in the front rank of a crowd that was swaying and crying out, and behind a line of police and civilians who had formed themselves into a cordon to keep the pressure back.

III

Oliver was in a panic of terror as his mother, half an hour later, ran in with the news that one of the Government volors had fallen in the station square at Brighton just after the 14-1/2 train had discharged its passengers. He knew quite well what that meant, for he remembered one such accident ten years before, just after the law forbidding private volors had been passed. It meant that every living creature in it was killed and probably many more in the place where it fell—and what then? The message was clear enough; she would certainly be in the square at that time.

He sent a desperate wire to her aunt asking for news; and sat, shaking in his chair, awaiting the answer. His mother sat by him.

“Please God—” she sobbed out once, and stopped confounded as he turned on her.

But Fate was merciful, and three minutes before Mr. Phillips toiled up the path with the answer, Mabel herself came into the room, rather pale and smiling.

“Christ!” cried Oliver, and gave one huge sob as he sprang up.

She had not a great deal to tell him. There was no explanation of the disaster published as yet; it seemed that the wings on one side had simply ceased to work.

She described the shadow, the hiss of sound, and the crash.

Then she stopped.

“Well, my dear?” said her husband, still rather white beneath the eyes as he sat close to her patting her hand.

“There was a priest there,” said Mabel. “I saw him before, at the station.”

Oliver gave a little hysterical snort of laughter.

“He was on his knees at once,” she said, “with his crucifix, even before the doctors came. My dear, do people really believe all that?”

“Why, they think they do,” said her husband.

“It was all so—so sudden; and there he was, just as if he had been expecting it all. Oliver, how can they?”

“Why, people will believe anything if they begin early enough.”

“And the man seemed to believe it, too—the dying man, I mean. I saw his eyes.”

She stopped.

“Well, my dear?”

“Oliver, what do you say to people when they are dying?”

“Say! Why, nothing! What can I say? But I don’t think I’ve ever seen any one die.”

“Nor have I till to-day,” said the girl, and shivered a little. “The euthanasia people were soon at work.”

Oliver took her hand gently.

“My darling, it must have been frightful. Why, you’re trembling still.”

“No; but listen. . . . You know, if I had had anything to say I could have said it too. They were all just in front of me: I wondered; then I knew I hadn’t. I couldn’t possibly have talked about Humanity.”

“My dear, it’s all very sad; but you know it doesn’t really matter. It’s all over.”

“And—and they’ve just stopped?”

“Why, yes.”

Mabel compressed her lips a little; then she sighed. She had an agitated sort of meditation in the train. She knew perfectly that it was sheer nerves; but she could not just yet shake them off. As she had said, it was the first time she had seen death.

“And that priest—that priest doesn’t think so?”

“My dear, I’ll tell you what he believes. He believes that that man whom he showed the crucifix to, and said those words over, is alive somewhere, in spite of his brain being dead: he is not quite sure where; but he is either in a kind of smelting works being slowly burned; or, if he is very lucky, and that piece of wood took effect, he is somewhere beyond the clouds, before Three Persons who are only One although They are Three; that there are quantities of other people there, a Woman in Blue, a great many others in white with their heads under their arms, and still more with their heads on one side; and that they’ve all got harps and go on singing for ever and ever, and walking about on the clouds, and liking it very much indeed. He thinks, too, that all these nice people are perpetually looking down upon the aforesaid smelting-works, and praising the Three Great Persons for making them. That’s what the priest believes. Now you know it’s not likely; that kind of thing may be very nice, but it isn’t true.”

Mabel smiled pleasantly. She had never heard it put so well.

“No, my dear, you’re quite right. That sort of thing isn’t true. How can he believe it? He looked quite intelligent!”

“My dear girl, if I had told you in your cradle that the moon was green cheese, and had hammered at you ever since, every day and all day, that it was, you’d very nearly believe it by now. Why, you know in your heart that the euthanatisers are the real priests. Of course you do.”

Mabel sighed with satisfaction and stood up.

“Oliver, you’re a most comforting person. I do like you! There! I must go to my room: I’m all shaky still.”

Half across the room she stopped and put out a shoe.

“Why—” she began faintly.

There was a curious rusty-looking splash upon it; and her husband saw her turn white. He rose abruptly.

“My dear,” he said, “don’t be foolish.”

She looked at him, smiled bravely, and went out.

When she was gone, he still sat on a moment where she had left him. Dear me! how pleased he was! He did not like to think of what life would have been without her. He had known her since she was twelve—that was seven years ago—and last year they had gone together to the district official to make their contract. She had really become very necessary to him. Of course the world could get on without her, and he supposed that he could too; but he did not want to have to try. He knew perfectly well, for it was his creed of human love, that there was between them a double affection, of mind as well as body; and there was absolutely nothing else: but he loved her quick intuitions, and to hear his own thought echoed so perfectly. It was like two flames added together to make a third taller than either: of course one flame could burn without the other—in fact, one would have to, one day—but meantime the warmth and light were exhilarating. Yes, he was delighted that she happened to be clear of the falling valor.

He gave no more thought to his exposition of the Christian creed; it was a mere commonplace to him that Catholics believed that kind of thing; it was no more blasphemous to his mind so to describe it, than

it would be to laugh at a Fijian idol with mother-of-pearl eyes, and a horse-hair wig; it was simply impossible to treat it seriously. He, too, had wondered once or twice in his life how human beings could believe such rubbish; but psychology had helped him, and he knew now well enough that suggestion will do almost anything. And it was this hateful thing that had so long restrained the euthanasia movement with all its splendid mercy.

His brows wrinkled a little as he remembered his mother's exclamation, "Please God"; then he smiled at the poor old thing and her pathetic childishness, and turned once more to his table, thinking in spite of himself of his wife's hesitation as she had seen the splash of blood on her shoe. Blood! Yes; that was as much a fact as anything else. How was it to be dealt with? Why, by the glorious creed of Humanity—that splendid God who died and rose again ten thousand times a day, who had died daily like the old cracked fanatic Saul of Tarsus, ever since the world began, and who rose again, not once like the Carpenter's Son, but with every child that came into the world. That was the answer; and was it not overwhelmingly sufficient?

Mr. Phillips came in an hour later with another bundle of papers.

"No more news from the East, sir," he said.