

**THE COTTAGE HOMES OF
ENGLAND: THE CASE
AGAINST THE HOUSING
SYSTEM IN RURAL DISTRICTS**

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The Cottage Homes of England: The Case Against the Housing System in Rural Districts by W. Walter Crotch & G. K. Chesterton

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W. WALTER CROTCH & G. K. CHESTERTON

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The Case
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in Rural
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BY
W. WALTER CROTCH

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

G. K. CHESTERTON

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To a Happy Peasantry yet unborn.

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FOREWORDS

BY

G. K. CHESTERTON.

The opinions which are general and established among the wealthier classes of modern England are marked, here and there, by curious unconscious inconsistencies, even by unconscious hypocrisies. Two thoughts are kept separate in the mind, as it were, though it needs but a touch for them to come together with a click. Thus, for instance, the upper classes flirt with the idea of Catholicism; but they join with Orangemen in Ireland to crush the fact of Catholicism. Thus, again, they glorify national defence even at its fiercest: but in their legend of the "atrocities" of the French Revolution, they always miss the fact that the fierceness was one of national defence. They think that half an idea is better than no logic—a dangerous error. But, moreover, they think that two halves of two inconsistent ideas make up one idea between them. This is not the case.

But among these inconsistencies of fashionable thought one stands up separate and supreme. It will almost universally be found that the average prosperous lady or gentleman holds the fashionable view of Imperialism, but also a certain fashionable pessimism about the chances of putting the English people on the land. In short, the fashionable view is, first that the

Englishman is a good colonist, and second, that it is no good to ask him to colonise his own country. We cannot believe that our best workmen will be successful on the fields and in the villages of their fathers; but we are quite convinced (for some reason) that our worst workmen will be successful in regions as alien as the mountains in the moon. We have made an empire out of our refuse; but we cannot make a nation, even, out of our best material. Such is the vague and half-conscious contradiction that undoubtedly possesses the minds of great masses of the not unkindly rich. Touching the remote empire they feel a vague but vast humanitarian hope; touching the chances of small holdings or rural re-construction in the heart of the Empire, they feel a doubt and a disinclination that is not untouched with despair. Their creed contains two great articles: first, that the common Englishman can get on anywhere, and second, that the common Englishman cannot get on in England.

About this inconsistency there must be something irrational and dangerous, something unexplored. Either we are leaning far too heavily on a rotten staff of national character in all our external policies and foreign relations; or else we must be grossly and wickedly neglecting a tool that might redeem our race. This is one of the few problems (far fewer than most modern people suppose) which really cannot be settled by theory, but only by investigation. It is necessary to collect and classify the facts of our rural civilization (or barbarism) before we can be certain of anything in the matter. And we desire primarily to know two things; first, whether the condition of our peasantry is indeed below the normal sanity of mankind; secondly, if it is, whether it is due (as so many of the rich dimly believe) to something weak or hopeless in the English poor, except when they go to colonies (where they are mysteriously changed into Empire-builders) or whether it is rather due to something quite exceptionally chaotic or unjust about the conditions under which they

live. Did we, at some time or other, go very wrong, or are we, for some extraordinary reason, incapable of going right ?

It is to answer these two questions, in the main, that Mr. Crotch's book exists. Touching the first question, he deals with it sufficiently trenchantly and clearly in the first few pages, and it must be difficult for anyone to remain in much doubt about the answer. Our peasantry has reached a condition, not only of poverty, but often of an ignominy not human. It cannot be more strongly or justly expressed than by simply saying that our peasantry has fallen far below the lineage and dignity of the great name of peasant. That is with us not only a branch, but a withered branch, which is, in nearly all other Christian countries, the root of the tree. It is not so much merely that the peasant is poor ; it is that he is not a peasant : he is not even a fixed and calculable type. A common phrase, used in every newspaper and book to-day, is a curious symbol of the absence of the peasant ; of this great gap in our social picture. Nowadays when we wish to speak of democracy or of the average citizen, we always talk of the " man in the street." Real democracies are conscious of the man in the field.

This unimportance in the rural poor is due to something irrational and ramshackle in the framework of their life ; they do not feel like low squat pillars of the State, people supporting something, as most peasants do. They feel more like a fugitive and accidental riff-raff, like gypsies or migratory Jews. They are the thistle-down and not the grass. The strong English sense of humour, the perverse English good temper, is indeed not wholly destroyed in the villages. It is not wholly destroyed at the hulks. But no conditions perhaps ever existed which in their absence of security, clear citizenship, religion, or national tradition, were so calculated to make a man lose everything, as those which fester behind those flower-clad walls, which Mr. Crotch so vividly describes. He very truly says that the picturesqueness of those rose-covered cottages should not colour

our conception too much. The roses are all outside such places ; the thorns are within.

Touching the second question, Mr. Crotch answers substantially and positively that this disease of the countryside is not the decay of a people, but the paralysis of a system of government. He points out that the conception of municipal housing as something odd or " Socialistic " is essentially a new conception, one of the recent assertions of the most vulgar individualism ; and that the great thirteenth century took for granted that common government as well as individual charity should build for the poor. He points out that the evil is not due to any primal and physical development (such, for instance, as overpopulation) but to the extraordinary existing arrangements for such people as there are. By a horrible paradox, there is overcrowding even when there are not enough people. Mr. Crotch also goes through the main events of the history of the problem ; and propounds, in no uncertain terms, his own views of the mistakes of the past and the best remedies to be employed in the future. But of these, of course, he can speak best for himself.

What is essential to emphasise in any preliminary note is the urgency of the matter. The state of things is growing worse every moment ; for all human institutions slide downwards like a landslide, unless they are perpetually forced upwards by criticism and reform. It is vain indeed to speak of conservatism in this world, except as a convenient party label. Unless we are always changing things for the better, they are always changing themselves for the worse. This should be left at the last in the mind of any historic Tory or romantic Englishman who cannot help feeling that public powers or new proposals are breaking up the old rural life of England. Time and sin are already breaking up the old rural life of England ; they have already broken it up. All that was good in feudalism is gone ; the good humour, the common sports, the apportioned duties, the frater-

nity that could live without equality. All that is bad in feudalism not only remains but grows, the caprice, the sudden cruelty, the offence to human dignity in the existence of slave and lord. The English squire, the ruler of England, has made the one great mistake of supposing that if you leave a thing alone it goes on as before. If you leave a thing alone it goes on to the devil. He rode from the rose-covered cottage, swearing that no one should ever touch its blooming beauty and domesticity. And when he returned in the evening the place was full of darkness and all uncleanness, and worms.

G. K. CHESTERTON.

February, 1908.