

ON EVERYTHING

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On everything by H. Belloc

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BY
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In Song



SOME say that when that box was opened wherein lay ready the evils of the world (and a woman opened it) Hope flew out at last.

That is a Pagan thing to say and a hopeless one, for the true comfort that remained for men, and that embodied and gave reality to their conquering struggle against every despair, was surely Song.

If you would ask what society is imperilled of death, go to one in which song is extinguished. If you would ask in what society a permanent sickness oppresses all, and the wealthy alone are permitted to make the laws, go to one in which song is a fine art and treated with criticism and used charily, and ceases to be a human thing. But if you would discover where men are men, take for your test whether songs are always and loudly sung.

Sailors sing. They have a song for work and songs for every part of their work, and they have songs of reminiscence and of tragedy, and many farcical songs; some brutal songs, songs of repose,

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and songs in which is packed the desire for a distant home.

Soldiers also sing, at least in those Armies where soldiers are still soldiers. And the Line, which is the core and body of any army, is the most singing of them all. The Cavalry hardly sing, at least until they get indoors, for it would be a bumping sort of singing, and gunners cannot sing for noise, while the drivers are busy riding and leading as well. But the Line sings; and if you will consider quickly, all the great armies of the world, and consider them justly, not as the pedants do, but as men do who really feel the past, you would hear mounting from them always continual song. Those men who marched behind Cæsar in his triumph sang a song, and the words of it still remain (so I am told); the armies of Louis XIV and of Napoleon, of the Republic, and even of Algiers, made songs of their own which have passed into the great treasury of European letters. And though it is difficult to believe it, it is true, the little troops of the Parliament marching down the river made a song about Mother Bunch, coupled with the name of the Dorchester Hills; but I may be wrong. I was told it by a friend; he may have been a false friend.

They sang in the Barons' wars; they sang on the way to Lewes. They sang in that march which led men to the assault at Hastings, for it was written by those who saw the column of knights advancing to the foot of the hill that Taillefer was chosen for

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his great voice and rode before the host, tossing his sword into the air and catching it again by the hilt (a difficult thing to do), and singing of Charlemagne and of the vassals who had died under Roncesvalles.

Song also illuminates and strengthens and vivifies all common life, and on this account what is left of our peasantry have harvest songs, and there are songs for mowing and songs for the mid-winter rest, and there is even a song in the south of England for the gathering of honey, which song, if you have not heard it, though it is commonly known, runs thus:—

*Bees of bees of Paradise,
Do the work of Jesus Christ,
Do the work which no man can.
God made man, and man made money,
God made bees and bees made honey.
God made big men to plough, to reap, and to sow,
God made little boys to keep off the rook and the crow.*

This song is sung for pleasure, and, by the way of singing it, it is made to scan.

Indeed, all men sing at their labour, or would so sing did not dead convention forbid them. You will say there are exceptions, as lawyers, usurers, and others; but there are no exceptions to this rule where all the man is working and is working well, and is producing and is not ashamed.

Rowers sing, and their song is called a Barcarolle; and even men holding the tiller who have nothing to do but hold it tend to sing a song. And I will

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swear to this that I have heard stokers when they were hard pressed starting a sort of crooning chorus together, which shows that there is hope for us all.

The great Poets who are chiefly this, men capable of perfect expression (though of no more feeling than any other of their kind), are dignified by Song, much more than by any others of their forms of power. Consider that song of Du Bellay's which he translated out of the Italian, and in which he has the winnower singing as he turns the winnowing fan. That is great expression, because no man can read it without feeling that if ever he had to do the hard work of winnowing this is the song he would like to sing.

Song also is the mistress of memory, and though a scent is more powerful, a song is more general, as an instrument for the resurrection of lost things. Thus exiles who of all men on earth suffer most deeply, most permanently, and most fruitfully, are great makers of songs. The chief character in songs—that almost any man can write them, that any man at all can sing them, and that the greatest are anonymous—is never better proved than in this quality of the songs of exiles. There is a Highland song of which I have been told, written in the Celtic dialect and translated again into English by I know not whom, which, for all its unknown authorship (and I believe its authorship to be unknown) enshrines that radiantly beautiful line:

And we in dreams behold the Hebrides.