

An Unexpected Request for Alms in a Southern Harbor: Hilaire Belloc Under Sail in Palma of Majorca

(This essay by Robert Hickson has been posted on the *Apropos* website: www.apropos.org.uk)

--Epigraphs--

"I knew a man once who made a great case of Death, saying that he esteemed a country according to its regard for the concept of Death, and according to the respect which it paid to that conception....This was upon a river called Boutonne, in Vendée, **and at the time I did not understand what he meant because as yet I had had no experience of these things.** But this man to whom I spoke had had three kinds of experience; first, he had himself been very probably the occasion of Death in others, for he had been a soldier in a war of conquest where the Europeans were few and the Barbarians many! secondly, he had been himself very often wounded, and more than once all but killed; thirdly, he was at the time he told me this an old man who must in any case soon come to that experience or catastrophe [of Death] of which he spoke." (Hilaire Belloc, from his essay "On Death," in his 1908 Anthology, *On Nothing & Kindred Subjects*, pp. 247-248—my emphasis added)¹

"It so happened that one day I was riding my horse Monster in the Berkshire Hills right up above that [chalk] White Horse which was dug...no one knows by whom....Well, then, I was riding my horse and exploring the Island of England, going eastward of a summer afternoon...**when I came...upon a very extraordinary being. He was a man like myself [a poet and an exile],** but his horse...was quite unlike my own [it being "a winged horse" like Pegasus, the Horse of the Muses, the winged divine stallion of Greek Mythology]....The man who was **the companion rather than the master** of this charming animal sat upon a lump of turf **singing gently** to himself and looking over the plain of Central England....He looked at it **with a mixture of curiosity, of memory, and of desire....**And as he looked at it he went on crooning his little song **until he saw me, when with great courtesy he ceased and asked me in the English language whether I did not desire companionship....**'How did you come by this horse,' said I [to him]; **'if it is not trespassing upon your courtesy to ask so delicate a question.'** 'Not at all; not at all,' he answered....'This kind of horse runs wild **upon the heaths of morning and can be caught only by Exiles: and I am one [as well as a poet!]**....Moreover,...**a pestilent stricture of the imagination, or rather, of the compositive faculty** so constrains me that I have not yet finished **the poem I have been writing with regard to the discovery and service of this [inspiring] beast.'** 'I have great sympathy with you,' I answered....'Well, then,' he said, 'you will be patient with

¹ Within seven years, on Candlemas 1914, Hilaire Belloc was himself to know the intimate grief of loss and to be very deeply pierced by the death of a beloved companion: the death of his beloved wife, Elodie, from which he himself barely recovered, even with the prompt and sustainingly consoling help of his cherished friend, Father Vincent McNabb, O.P.

me when I tell you that I have but three verses completed.' Whereupon without further invitation he [the "Exile"] sang in a loud and clear voice the following verse [the last stanza of which is this]:

'For you [Oxford?] that **took** the all and all, the things you **left** were three:

**A loud Voice for singing, and keen Eyes to see,
And a spouting Well of Joy within that never yet was dried!
And I ride!**

"He sang this last [stanza] in so fierce and so exultant a manner that **I was impressed more than I cared to say, but not more than I cared to show**. As for him, he cared little whether I was impressed or not; **he was exalted and detached from the world**. There were no stirrups upon the [winged] beast. He vaulted upon it, and said as he did so: 'You have put me **into the mood**, and I must get away!' **And though the words were abrupt, he *did* speak them with such a grace that I will always remember them!....**

"[They] made out southward [to dearly beloved Sussex?] and upward into the sunlit air, a pleasing and a glorious sight. In a very little while they had dwindled to a point of light and were soon mixed with the sky. **But I went on more lonely along the crest of the hills, very human**, riding my horse Monster, a mortal horse—I had almost written a human horse. **My mind was full of silence.**" (Hilaire Belloc's Essay "On a Winged Horse and the Exile Who Rode Him," in his 1908 Anthology, *On Nothing & Kindred Subjects*, pages 171-173, 176-179—my bold emphasis added; italics in the original text)²

Amidst the cool breeze of memories

While recently on the ocean-seacoast island of my boyhood home, I decided to read again amidst the inspiring cool sea breezes my own fragile first edition of Hilaire Belloc's 1908 collection of essays, entitled *On Nothing and Kindred Subjects*, which was dedicated to his friend Maurice Baring who was not yet, but almost, a Catholic.³

In this Anthology, I have especially wanted to consider our Belloc's essay "On a Southern Harbour" (225-231), for it subtly prepares and gradually conveys another special atmosphere; and it anticipates not only his 1925 experience at Mass in Narbonne, France on the High Feast of the Holy Ghost in 1925⁴—but also something that unforgettably came into my own life quite unexpectedly, fifty years later (in 1975) at the Cathedral of Santa Rosalia, in Palermo, Sicily. (Santa Rosalia is the Patron Saint of Sicilian Mariners and of that harbor city of Palermo in northwestern

² For the complete 4-stanza poem, entitled anew "The Winged Horse," see, also, H. Belloc, *Sonnets and Verse* (Sheed & Ward, 1944), pp. 135-136.

³ Hilaire Belloc, *On Nothing and Kindred Subjects* (London: Methuen & Co., 1908), 262 pages. In 1907, when most of the essays were written, Belloc was a vigorous thirty-seven years of age, and several of his essays still have a robust Rabelaisian and an elegiac Homeric spirit suffusing them, while also being permeated by his Catholic Faith. Maurice Baring was to enter the Catholic Church gratefully almost two years later, in 1909—on 1 February 1909 at Brompton Oratory in London, one day before the Feast of Candlemas. Further page references to Hilaire Belloc's 1908 collection of varied essays will be placed above in parentheses in the main body of this appreciative commentary.

⁴ See H. Belloc, *Towns of Destiny* (New York: Robert M. Mc Bride & Company, 1927), wherein the 7-page essay, "Narbonne," may be found on pages 223-229 (Chapter 32).

Sicily. Palermo was made the new capital city of Sicily—because of its spacious and protected harbor for their many marauding corsairs—after the Mohammedans and their pirates had conquered Sicily in the 9th century (837-902) and strategically transferred the traditional capital to Palermo from Siracusa (Syracuse), which lay on the more confined and confining east coast of Sicily, and therefore inherently took away an active navy's freedom of action and maneuver-room.)

The Island of Goats

Hilaire Belloc begins his essay with a hint of mystery, as well as a sense of poetic wonder:

The ship had sailed northward in an even manner and under a sky that was full of stars, when the dawn broke and the full day quickly broadened over the Mediterranean. **With the advent of the light the salt of the sea seemed stronger**, and there certainly arose **a new freshness in the following air** [i.e., the ship was running with the wind, and a fair wind it was!]; but as yet no land appeared. Until at last **seated as I was alone in the fore part of the vessel**, I clearly saw a small unchanging shape far off before me, peaked upon the horizon and grey like a cloud. This I watched wondering what its name might be, who lived upon it, or what its fame was; for it was certainly land. (225—my emphasis added)

Belloc remained in the prow for an extended period until the features and nature of that shape might disclose itself, to include its more specific location in the Mediterranean:

I watched in this manner for some hours—perhaps for two—when the island, now grown higher, was so near that I could see trees upon it; but they were set sparsely, as trees are on a dry land, and most of them seemed to be thorn trees. It was at this moment that **a man who had been singing to himself in a low tone** aft came up to me and told me that the island was called the Island of Goats and that there were **no men upon it to his knowledge**, that it was a lonely place and worth little. But by this time there had arisen beyond the Island of Goats another and much larger land. (225-226—my emphasis added)

“The Larger Land”

Will we soon come to know, in Belloc's companionship, where we are geographically? He draws us further on, before he tells us more, and it is the way I, too, once first approached this Island:

It [that “larger land”] lay all along the north in a mountainous belt of blue, and any man coming to it for the first time or unacquainted with maps would have said to himself: “I have found a considerable place.” And, indeed, the name of the island indicates this, for it is called Majorca, “the Larger Land” [one of the beautiful Balearic Islands off the coast of Spain, almost directly offshore to the east of Valencia]. Towards this, past the Island of Goats, and past the Strait, we continued to sail with a light breeze for hours, until at last we could see on this shore also sparse trees; but **most of them were olive trees**, and they were **relieved with the green of cultivation up the high mountain sides** and with **the white houses of men**. (226—my emphasis added)

Return of the exiles

Belloc then unexpectedly returns to the theme of exile, and he makes it touch us more personally and intimately, especially if we have and cherish little children:

The deck was now crowded with people, most of whom were coming back to their own country after an exile in Africa among un-Christian and dangerous things. The little children who had not yet known Europe, having been born beyond the sea, were full of wonder; but their parents who knew the shortness of human life and its trouble, were happy because

they had come back at last and saw before them known jetties and the familiar hills of home. As I was surrounded with so much happiness, I myself felt as though I had come to the end of a long journey and was reaching my own place, though I was, in reality, bound for Barcelona [to the northwest, on the mainland of Spanish Catalonia], and after that up northward through the Cerdagne, and after that to Perigord, and after that to the [English] Channel, and then to Sussex, where all journeys end. (226-227—my emphasis added)

Sliding in to Palma haven

Then he will describe his entrance by sea, and under sail, into Palma of Majorca:

We neared this harbour, but we flew no flag and made no signal. Beneath us the water was so clear that all one need to have done to have brought the vessel in if one had not known the channel would have been to lean over the side and to keep the boy at the helm off the very evident shallows [shoals] and the crusted rocks by gestures of one's hands, for the fairway was like a trench, deep and blue. So we slid into Palma haven, and as we rounded the pier the light wind took us first abeam and then forward; then we let go [of the sails] and she swung up and was still. They lowered the sails. (227)

Belloc shows us then a glimpse of those who are returning home or seeing Palma for the first time:

The people who were returning were so full of activity and joy that it was like a hive of bees; but I no longer felt this as I had felt **their earlier and more subdued emotion**, for this place was no longer distant or mysterious as it had been **when first its sons and daughters had come up on deck to welcome it and had given me part of their delight**. It was now an evident and noisy town....Its streets, where they ran down towards the sea, were charmingly clean and cared for, and the architecture of its wealthier mansions seemed to me at once unusual and beautiful, **for I had not yet seen Spain**. Each house, so far as I could make out from the water, was entered by a fine sculptured porch which gave into a cool courtyard with arcades under it, and most of the larger houses had escutcheons carved in stone upon their walls. (228—my emphasis added)

Steeped in the terseness of the classics

All of this is preparation for the Cathedral and its setting and history—and for the man who so abidingly touched Belloc's heart:

But what most pleased me and also seemed most strange was to see against the East a **vast cathedral** quite Northern in outline, except for a **severity and discipline** of which the North is incapable save **when it has steeped itself in the terseness of the classics** [the Greco-Roman Classics]. (228—my emphasis added)

The Cathedral was “far larger than anything in the town” and “it stood out separate from the town and dominated it **upon its seaward side**, somewhat as might **an isolated hill, a shore fortress of rock**.” (228-229—my emphasis added) Moreover,

It was almost bare of ornament; its stones were very carefully worked and closely fitted, and little waves broke ceaselessly along the base of its rampart. Landwards, a mass of low houses which seemed to touch the body of the building [cathedral] did but emphasize its height. When I had landed I made at once for this cathedral and with every step it grew greater. (229)

It was Spaniard

In Belloc's judgment, the Cathedral's high roof "had not been raised under the influence of the island" (229), but, rather,

It had surely been designed just after the [11-12th century?] re-conquest from the Mohammedans, when a turbulent army, not only of Gascons and Catalans, but of Normans also and of Frisians, and of Rhenish men [from the Rhine Valley], had poured across the water and had stormed the sea-walls. On this account the cathedral had about it in its skyline and in its immensity, and in the [early?] Gothic point of its windows, a Northern air. But in its austerity and in its magnificence it was Spaniard. (229)

Prayer, Sir

For, Belloc had earlier said, with some exceptions of course, that "The Southern men see nothing but misproportion in what is enormous" (229) and "They love to have things in order, and violence in art is odious to them." (229) (For, example, look at the coruscating gem of the Cathedral in Seville and its scale and proportions.)

Now we are to meet another surprise which will haunt him:

As I passed a little porch of entry in the side wall [of the cathedral] I saw a man. **He was standing silent and alone**; he was not blind and perhaps not [materially] poor, **and as I passed he begged the charity not of money but of prayers.** When I entered the cool and darkness of the nave, **his figure still remained in my mind and I could not forget it....I remembered...the rough staff of wood in his hand. I was especially haunted by his expression, which was patient and masqued as though he were enduring a pain and chose to hide it.** (230—my emphasis added)

The very qualities of the nave of the cathedral enhanced Belloc's poignant remembrance of this humble mendicant; for, surprisingly:

The nave was empty. It was a great hollow that echoed and re-echoed; there were no shrines and no lamps, and no men or women praying, **and therefore the figure at the door filled my mind more and more**, until I went out and asked him if he was in need of money, of which at that moment I had none. **He answered that his need was not for money but only for prayers.**

"Why," said I, "do you need prayers?" **He said it was because his fate was upon him.** I think he spoke the truth. **He was standing erect and with dignity, his eyes were not disturbed, and he repeatedly refused the [material] alms of passers-by.** (230—my emphasis added)

Remembering his life

Then Belloc thought to admonish, and perhaps also to console him; and said to that man of suffering and dignity: "**No one,**" said I, "**should yield to those moods** [perhaps of despondency, or even despair?]." (231—my emphasis added) However, in response,

He answered nothing, but looked pensive like a man gazing at a landscape [like the Exile of the Winged Horse] and remembering his life.

But it was the hour when **the ship was to be sailing again** [for Barcelona], **and I could**

not linger, though I wished very much to talk more with him. I begged him to name a shrine where a gift might be of especial value to him. He said that he was attached to no one shrine more than to any other, and then I went away regretfully, remembering how earnestly he had asked for prayers.

This was in Palma of Majorca not two years ago. **There are many such men, but few who speak so humbly.** (231—my emphasis added)

Mercy, Sir

It was in Palermo, Sicily that I, too, met such a humble person—but it was, in this case, a dignified woman with unforgettable eyes—and I met her as I was first entering the beautiful Cathedral, which was dedicated to Santa Rosalia. All that this somewhat elderly and radiantly beautiful woman said to me as I passed was “Mercy, Sir; Mercy, Sir”—and the purity and sincerity of her eyes and of her steady, serene look pierced me through—as it did when I spoke to her later again, giving her a further and but modest alms and smile after I had re-emerged from the Cathedral and was to depart upon the sea. Inside that Cathedral, her bearing had also haunted me, as the other figure of a man had haunted Belloc—and I was especially haunted by her humble extended hand and by her voice and the look of her eyes. I know now a little more what Hilaire Belloc comparably experienced both outside and within the Cathedral of Palma of Majorca in 1906 or so.

All these years since the mid-1970s, I still vividly see the gracious lady begging alms in Palermo on the steps of the Cathedral, and I see her in my mind not only when I pray for the intercession of Santa Rosalia on her behalf. Her face and her look still haunt me—and the humble voice and extended hand requesting mercy. May she, too, be blessed more fully in the end. And perhaps even remember the little mercy and warm smile she once received from, as well as gave to me.

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