

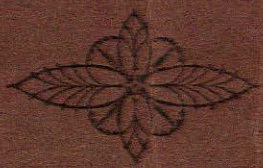
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A CONVERSATION

BETWEEN

The Ghost of General Beyers, and
Mr. Merriman, „Schoongezicht.”

By A. M. M.



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A Conversation

between the ghost of General Beyers and
Mr. Merriman, *Schoongezicht*.

A night during July 1917.

Merriman:—

Reclines near the fire in his library. On a table not far off are two books, Dicey's "Law of the Constitution" and Burke's "Speeches on Conciliation with America."

Murmurs:—Yes my motion certainly enraged those nationalists. Yet we can't permit these dangerous doctrines to go unchecked. They, of course, sneer at my apostasy, at my desertion of the real national cause. The memories of 17 years ago, I admit, give me compunctious throbbing. My consistency seems challenged, yet my principles in their essence remain the same; I could prove

A Rustling behind him.

The ghost of general Beyers appears.

Merriman:—

Heaven defend me—what's this. It must be my weakness—the excitement of these present times; illusions have been known—yet it seems familiar. Can you speak—perhaps a messenger of ill news.

Ghost:—

I am Beyers whom you knew. I come from the great beyond to commune with you a while, perhaps to stir up memories of a past time when you were the friend,

nay, the ardent champion of a wronged and persecuted people. You seem strangely shrunk from that manly stature, once so secure and commanding in its dignity, and against which the storms of hate broke in vain. 'Tis pity brings me here. The evil of expediency has triumphed over former principles. Your betrayal of old and honest traditions—your venom towards old friends—your subjection to a bureaucracy you once despised—entitle you to some compassion, but forfeit your claim to any vestige of statesmanship. Once, when liberty and humanity were hunted like hares about South Africa—you filled the breach in their defence. To-day you are the dupe of those hypocritical and damnable phrases which have involved Europe and S. Africa in physical, economical and moral disaster. If the violent insanity of the opening stages overwhelmed you—surely you have been sobered by the steady march of calamity. If your wisdom does not see, surely your heart must feel for the millions that revenge and greed are offering up to Moloch.

Merriman:—

Stop! firstly you speak as a rebel. Such people have achieved nothing. They are wreckers of public order. Subordination is the first principle of government. No nation becomes prosperous without obedience. To violate the perfect social system, we possess—to go in for wild speculations—you, as a lawyer, must know, will expose us to unheard of dangers, besides you have sworn to support the constitution.

Beyers:—

Pardon me, my attitude towards liberty is fundamental. I rebelled not against law—but against a breach of the law. Our protest was intended as nothing but a passive resistance to a piratical excursion against German West—on behalf of a nation that had always persecuted us, robbed us of genuine freedom and then by more subtle means, attempted to annihilate or submerge us. You know people never forgive those they have injured.

My protestation, I again affirm, was not in favour of Independence, but was to defy the tyrannical measures of a cynical, bureaucratic and totally anti-South African Government. *Moral scruples however rendered my movement weak from a military point of view*—whereas without such restraints, I may easily have achieved a most formidable position. I prefer constitutional measures—but I was prepared to die on the barriers where my ancestors expired, rather than be forced to break the Defence Law through duplicity, and *insult my common feelings of humanity by unprovoked aggression.*

Merriman:—

You speak very well—but your acts tended to break up the frame of society. I appreciate the fact that the Dutch have Liberty and Truth in their veins. They will no doubt be guided by sense and the eternal fitness of things. They have an inborn respect for the Law.

Beyers:—

My dear friend—your extensive reading of history and literature has taught you that only government misconduct will turn dissatisfaction into revolt. The double dealing and utter political meanness of the Government menaced freedom of thought and action—but could not suppress a just and haughty indignation. To make liberty a sort of treason was treading on dangerous ground. The Government *had to cast ridicule on high principles in order to give themselves an apparent security.* It is going to be a frightful calamity if such illiberal views become prevalent, on the other hand—you should *know that a powerful national sentiment, built on suffering, tradition, religion, usage and experience is not easily going to fail.* Parliament ought to be a security for freedom—not a subtle contrivance for obliging one section and making hatred of another a hypocritical virtue. The best legislation is in the closest contact with individual interest; in fact, in all decent countries, the liberty of the subject is the chief object of government.

Merriman:—

All this is very plausible. Why the Dickens should you and your sort set your house on fire, because you are cold. Our magnificent fabric is so constituted, so delicate, that any interference is immoral. It is stupid to be dissatisfied without proper cause. We don't as a rule meddle with clocks. Why should you break up a moral machine? Dear sir, only pettifoggers—

Beyers:—

Did your people consider the machine, they destroyed in 1900? Had they any mercy? For the sake of mere filthy lucre, they threw this innocent country into a bloody maelstrom. Why speak of other nations' vandalism and cruelties. Does history offer a finer example than what was here seen? Why should you people in S. Africa pretend to be so fastidious to-day—so attached to treaties and documents? Other territories, other desecrations or other interpretations I suppose.

Merriman:—

Look what we have erected here—a fabric uniting liberty and force. We have stability. We cannot and will not build on the principle of confusion.

Beyers:—

We have only asked for Fairplay and equal opportunity. Your conciliation meant only this. The Dutch must constantly submit unconditionally. The English section must prescribe, the Dutch must swallow. Any independent expression of opinion is forsooth racialism. In other words, the Dutch have no privilege of choice. Either pure English or nothing. This of course is not racialism, but I presume Anglo-Saxon superiority. The Dutch must render obsequious service—but an amiable equality is equal to a breach of the constitution. The government tacitly agreed to so monstrous a doctrine. All this in my ghostly opinion is tyrannical and deserves

to be defeated. Where an unscrupulous and immitigable ambition holds sway the majority must either submit or starve.

Merriman:—

Your are certainly irreconcilable. I predict a complete fusion between Dutch and English and this South African policy you should have supported. We want a nation here, based on the glorious foundations of the races of Europe.

Beyers:—

You want union between the two white races. Why don't you first advise your bureaucratic friend Botha to heal the breach between his own people? He alone stands for disintegration. Was it not his horrible desertion of former principles—his parasitic submission to Imperial mandates—that caused the cruel split among the Dutch? It was his German West policy that led to civil strife. It was his insincerity and violence that crushed out all natural impulses and precipitated fratricidal horrors. You speak in this connection of the sanctity of constitutions. Surely these were made for man and not man for constitutions. Do you believe in such a thing as the "Rights of man" and are not such more important than government comfort or an ungodly officialdom? Your political arithmetic turns mankind into mere ciphers.

Merriman:—

Yes, but the oath to the constitution. That is the essence of the matter. Argument is useless.

Beyers:—

What about History? Does it not flatly contradict you? What about Milton or Washington? Did not both these lofty personalities tell us that vows made in pain are useless and void? What about these patriots who invited William of Orange to England? Has not England weaned the Russians from their allegiance to the Tsar? What attitude have you towards the Poles, Greeks, or

Irish? It seems that you never act on principle—but purely from self-interest, convenience. Our Afrikaner people put liberty above this hypocritical talk of constitutions. We don't want civil war—but your suppression of natural sentiment will lead to it. It is your party who are foes to Free Speech and who make every attempt to conceal the Truth. I presume you have taken all your instructions from Downing Street.

Merriman:—

No, we believe in Free Speech. For fifty years I have been its champion. Any licence or innovation however must be condemned. Such will lead to horrors I hope I may never live to see.

Beyers:—

This has been said by the enemies of liberty from time immemorial. If we were intimidated thereby, farewell all human progress. Your constitution-at-any-price-loyalists have resorted to the same argument the world over. They have a predilection for ancient abuses and are the real parasites of government. You have lately by a most iniquitous perversion dragged in the names of Lincoln and Washington. What was Washington's opinion about the loyalists? Please give your audiences the facts of this history. Then again, have you and your reactionaries the courage to quote in full, Washington's "farewell address" to his people? Here is the principle we stand by—the principle of not being involved in European rascalities. That Americans have entered the arena shows what a gulf separates them from their sublime ancestors. Only so-called "loyalists" are bluffed by the vague phrases that cover the economic and territorial greed of nations. To support this material fabric, shop-keeping folk invoke the names of great men and great principles than which nothing can be more foul and blasphemous. Why not be manly and admit the fact? Your most recent historian (Manchester University) says bluntly that—with England—commercial greed has been the most predominant motive for war. They above all

nations nurse the old fallacious mercantilist theory that a nation thrives on the ruin of its trade rivals. All educated and refined peoples have long since abandoned this delusion. If your brains are not equal to those of another nation—indulging in universal bloodshed wont improve the situation. The first duty of international law should be to acknowledge the perfect legitimacy of a commerce (however vast) honestly acquired. When people are too uncultured to accept this view, they remain the perennial source of fresh calamities to the world. Truly has it been said that Providence has doomed many people to live on trust.

Merriman:—

My dear man, you are incorrigible. This is the language of sheer anarchy. Rather let me have your craven neutrality, your ingratitude for benefits conferred.

Beyers:—

Neutrality my friend would at least have preserved Peace, if not loyalty in S. Africa. It would also have spared us the deaths of thousands, and the permanent crippling of many more. It is your methods of coercion, the cowardly methods used by the government, the jingo intolerance in press and pulpit, that combined to produce bitterness and lack of confidence. Sad must be the structure of Empire, when so much duplicity has to be expended in its defence. Why should my poor tortured countrymen be compelled to fight for an Empire whose every method keeps alive the miseries of 16 years ago? Do not our martyrs of those times deserve a better memory? No Sir, the fine imagination of a few years ago no longer inspires you.

Merriman:—

Not at all. The same impulse of Freedom, the same passionate love of small nations is my creed to-day. Think you I am so hypocritical as to feign anger? Circumstan-

ces certainly alter one's views and may even change one's friends.

Beyers:—

No. The eternal principles are no longer with you. A man who tries to make liberty a matter of expediency or wishes to make it only partly applicable, is not a man to be trusted. The many winters on your brow (I say it with deep respect) or your pernicious environment have altered you strangely. True patriots view you more in sorrow than in anger. You may enunciate fine phrases but your political action makes them a hopeless mockery. The spirit has gone, the frame alone remains.

Merriman:—

Your words are bitter. They are worse, they are unjust. My conscience is quite clear. After half a century of political life, and observation, not even a visitor from the next world will convince me of the contrary. What consolidates my position further is that the majority concurs with me.

Beyers:—

Ah! that is only apparent. You can't see the hearts of men. Your present masters favour economic conscription and have as servile victims a vast officialdom where freedom of expression dare not exist. The dread of dismissal, of pains and penalties, force people into an artificial position. Bread is a mighty inspirer of opinion. Let your hybrid plutocratic government go for a holiday and the most opposite principles (those of national freedom and safety) will prevail instantly. The western Heavens may shine for a brief interval with their departing glory. The East shows a national dawn before which the tyranny must vanish like mist before the sun. The Government you support may carry out plans, but its prestige wanes each day. Since it has ousted Providence from its scheme, retribution is at hand.

Merriman:—

It is such sentiments that make me lean to drastic measures. There is a time to conciliate but also a time to bring all the terrors of the law into action. You, yourself evaded a more theatrical tribunal. We might have got all the children of the Union to see how a rebel dies under the beneficent justice of the Union Jack.

Beyers:—

Your levity at this dark hour is misplaced. Grey hairs don't become the fool and jester, as your bard well said. Your age should have made you an arbiter, not the partisan of the magnate section. Your whole weight has been thrown into the scale of alienation. You should have taught the English the value of conciliation at the very beginning. The victimised Dutch have nothing to forgive and a vast deal to forget. Your violent abuse of the people you formerly championed does no good and only raises formidable forces and sentiments against you and your unholy alliance. You shut your eyes to warnings that are prophetic. Large masses of humanity are never discontented without cause. If coercion, deception and bloodshed have failed, economic tyranny is not going to succeed.

Merriman:—

You are misstating the facts. All this has arisen through your people's perversity. They have been misled by demagogues. They have forgotten the real charity of the British Government. Your people could not exist without the protection of the protection of the grand fleet.

Beyers:—

If it were not for pernicious and compulsory connection—we would not want the invisible fleet or any other sinister protection whatever. Fleets don't protect sentiments or national aspirations. They exist to suppress these. Fleets exist to protect the profits of profi-

teers, although this fact is never stated so bluntly. In S. Africa—we want moral, legal and national preservation. You have forgotten principles in order to sacrifice people you do not care about at present. You, on the safe side of the bureaucrats, are not the victim of injustice. As to your talk about gratitude, this it is that nauseates the Dutch people beyond any other expression of hypocrisy. Ask Belgium whether she is grateful, for being allowed to exist under the magnificent protection of another flag. I see, however, you still read the books of the greatest political Englishman. (Pointing to the table).

Merriman:—

Yes. I wish your rebellious countrymen could get acquainted with him. He is the best nourishment to impoverished brains I know. You ought to read his opinion of Revolutions.

Beyers:—

Well, I also remember him. He told us that in a state, where a cry for liberty was equal to treason—there submission was equal to slavery. He also said that "Power is strong, only in proportion as it is based on the affections and true interests of the people." You speak of Revolutions—this writer was enthusiastic on behalf of American liberty. When he became old and reactionary, the French Revolution filled him with horror. In this latter, history has proved him to have been lamentably wrong. Great national movements are not to be stopped by conservative hatreds and opposition. Your present government adopted wrong principles and now pursue them out of obstinacy, although the consequences become more serious each day. Your government is only obeyed through the folks it can command. To be compelled to dip our hands in the bloody affairs of Europe or starve is not a sign of a Free Country. It is the most horrible badge of serfdom. Your eloquence can't make bad good or convince the Dutch that tyranny is not so black as it

is painted. The European horror is built on a palpable falsehood. Hypocrisy, revenge and profits are the agencies that direct its continuance. The proudest Empires however must sink, when the day of reckoning comes—when the veil is lifted from the frightful Truth.

Merriman:—

I affirm however that England is fighting for Anglo-Saxon liberty and the freedom of small nations—that her objects are high-principled—and that she does not want an inch of territory. This being the case, she can and will win this war.

Beyers:—

One would think you were repeating some school-boy's Imperial catechism. It can't bear investigation. If England did not covet territory—my countrymen would to-day be independent—there would have been no rebellion in S. Africa and we would not have this unlucky country steeped in misery. Thou shalt not covet another man's possessions honestly come by. Why does England issue a note to the world, affirming her respect for nationality and the restoration of territory, while her whole Press and deluded people repudiate the very suggestion of restoration? Does England reserve to herself the right to violate a principle while demanding that others be subject to it?

No my friend—the Dutch are sick of hypocritical and subtle explanations and protestations of righteousness, where guilt still remains so positive. Nature has been outraged in South Africa. Artifice and falsehood and abuse won't supply the remedy. No, it pains me to tell you, that your age is the dupe of a party. The time will come when you will say "Had I served God as faithfully as these new political masters—He would not have forsaken me in my old age." Farewell—we shall meet again—perhaps shortly. The cock crows—I must outrun the dawn.