SUNSET AND EVENING STAR

BY

SEAN O'CASEY

You cannot prevent the birds of sadness from flying over your head, but you can prevent them building nests in your hair.

CHINESE PROVERB

I'm gonna wash 'em all outa ma hair.

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SUNSET AND EVENING STAR

BOOKS BY SEAN O'CASEY

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The Plough and the Stars
The Silver Tassie
Within the Gates
The Star Turns Red
Purple Dust
Five Irish Plays
Oak Leaves and Lavender
Red Roses for Me
Cock-a-Doodle Dandy

ollected Plays

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Vol. II. The Silver Tassie; Within the Gates; The Star Turns Red
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THE O'CASEYS

NIALL BREON SEAN SHIVAWN EILEEN

To
My dear Friend
HUGH MACDIARMID
Alba's Poet and one of Alba's
first men

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A DRIVE OF SNOBS

BACK to London, New York lingering beside him still (Oh, linger longer, do), his hand still touching Rockefeller Center, his eyes still luminous with the myriad windows lighting up New York's night; here he was driving back with his boy, Breon, and their maid, Marion, back to their new home, a flat in Battersea; back with presents, nylons for his wife from Tessa, his Agent's wife, more nylons from Lilian Gish, a padded silk bed-jacket for her from handsome Sylvia Sydney, a grand black-and-white silk scarf from George Jean Nathan, a set of pop-up books for his boy from Mimsie Taylor, a lass as lovely as his own wife, and that was saying a mouthful — a phrase he had learned in London, but which he had never heard in America; and his pockets jingling with enough dollars to keep things going for another year.

> Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
> And the hunter home from the hill.

Home safe from terrible dangers, too, as this letter, one of several, can show:

Hudson Theatre

Mr. SEAN O'CASEY

Now Mr. O'Casey, I attended your play, *Juno and the Paycock*, last night. I felt very discrossed also discoroged with it could you not make it any better than you have it, if not you are getting a warning to stop it at once or can you not make it any more pleasant for the Irish people who are delighted to hear something of their own country.

I have seen many plays throughout New York but I have

never seen anything like what is in the Hudson theatre. Its redicilus and why dont you think so too you must remember that these disgraceful pictures and plays are condemed and *Thank God.* You are getting a very keen and good advise now before you go any further with your work, dont you think you would be better to be bricklaying than ridicaudling the Irish, you are going to be Jumped upon some night and you and your gang are not safe. The most prinsible thing *Stop the cursing and swaring* for the players good. This is only a warning.

KELLY, BURKE, AND SHEA

Heaven having a blast at him! He would have to amend his The Bells of Mary's were bullying. He'd have to thank God for the race and the sod, for Kelly and Burke and Shea. The members of the Legue of Dacency were out defending western Christian culture. Sign your name, Kelly, sign your name, Burke, sign your name, Shea — this'll put the wind up him! O advocates of heaven. Their letter was a *cry di curé.* Comrades of the great war against profunity. Oh, sweet and salient natures! A chosen three, who carry great green banners in St. Patrick's Day Purrade, and are blessed by father Spiellman as they go bye byes. Henceforth he, with Erinn, would remember the days of old; he'd give three hours a day to mend the harp the minstrel boy tore asunder; he'd seek out mother machree and love the silver that shone in her hair, so that, at the last, having kept the faith, his name might be written down from everlasting to everlasting in the Book of the Green and Golden Slumbers.

The O'Caseys had taken a five-roomed flat in forty-nine Overstrand Mansions (the forty-niners), facing Battersea Park, on the south side of the Thames. All the homes here, along Prince of Wales Drive, were flats in groups of mansions, York, Prince of Wales, and

Overstrand, the line of them extending from one end of the park to the other. A. de Blacam, who, some time ago, used to write a daily column for De Valera's paper, *The Irish Press*, excited himself and his readers by proclaiming one morning that the great democrat, G. K. Chesterton, had lived for years in forty-eight Overstrand Mansions (next door, be God!), plump in the middle of the workers and the poor. He did in me neck! Occasionally, he may have caught a glimpse of a poor woman or a poor child coming from the poor quarters to enter the park for a play or a rest; but no fuller revelation of the worker's life comes before the eyes or enters the mind of the select residents of the flats in the select mansions of Battersea. These hoity-toity persons were far more selective of their chance acquaintances than were the proper persons of Park Lane in the hey-day of its historical hallowed be thy name period. The livers in these flats were of the higher-low middle-class, a step or two down from the grade of the middle-class who lived on the other side of the river in the Borough of Chelsea; so they had one more river to cross before they entered the land of Canaan. Battersea was, almost wholly, a working-class borough, and so the families of the mansion-flats shoved themselves as far as possible, bodily and spiritually, to the edge of the district. All they knew of the workers was the distant glimpse of sooty roofs they got from a few of the higher windows at the back of their flats; or, during an election, when they went to give their votes for what Disraeli called 'The barren thing — Conservatism — an unhappy cross-breed, the mule of politics that engenders nothing'; though the workers' district barely loomed into view from where the votes were cast. The name of the Borough rarely appeared on the notepaper of

the residents, who hid the humiliation of Battersea under the simple postal symbol of London, S.W.11. Peek a boo, I see you, I see you hiding there! In conversation the name was never mentioned: it was as if they had innocently crossed the border of Chelsea, and had settled in Battersea without knowing it. They were not to blame: that was their life, and they lived it.

The first floor of the flats had a balcony going right across the façade, the second floor a concrete jut-out on which one could stand, but couldn't sit, and the upper floor had no balcony at all; so the rents sank as the flats mounted. As well as this distinction between the flats themselves, there was also a distinction between the blocks, Overstrand being ever so slightly more genteel than York block; and York was careful to await an advance from Overstrand before assuming acquaintance with Overstrand, for fear of a snub; for it is almost unbearable for one snob to be snobbed by another.

Once a Mrs. Black, living almost next door to him, wife of a civil servant, was presented at Court. She dipped the knees in a curtsy to kingship, and returned to the flat creaking with exultation. Her kingdom had come, and she entered gallantly into it; for that night, in her court dress, feathers and all, her husband in white tie and tails, with a few select friends, she sat down in the flat's dining-room to a five-course dinner, done to a turn by a qualified chef, served by a footman in coloured coat and plush britches, and eaten by candlelight; a first-class offering of thanks to God for his regarding of the highliness of his handmaiden, who had now been magnified in the sight of all her neighbours.

There was a Mrs. Green, too, her husband, Ben, their two children, Peter and Pauline, all rigid with fear

of touching person, place, or thing, beneath them and quivery with desire to acquaint themselves with persons, places, or things they thought to be above them. Once a month, mother, son, and daughter went to ride in Richmond; and all morning before departure there was a running up and down parade of hard hats, whips, and jodhpurs (a lady goes apace apace, a gentleman goes a trit trot trittrot); though, as a matter of fact, each was taut with a constricting fear of canter and gallop, from the time they got on to the horses to the time they gladly got off again.

—No, said the mother once to Sean, they had never been in a stable; they mounted of course in the yard; and she was shocked when Sean told her a horse would never know what to do with her till she had spent a good deal of her time in a stable with him; till her nose got used to the smell of dung and horsesweat. Yet to those whom she believed to be her equals, she was a very pleasant woman, loved her children, and took good care of them. But no thought for other children troubled them, or any of the other residents. They all spluttered with indignation when the Battersea Council organised popular entertainments, flooding the park with poorer children, neatly dressed or tattered and torn, jostling the middle-class kids out of their way, the over-populated bodies of the rougher children transferring surplus vermin to the fresh and vacant bodies of the better-kept kids, making their flesh become delightful feeding-grounds for louse and flea. A hunting we will go, a hunting we will go, a hunting we will go! No one could blame them for dividing their children from the louse and the flea; they were to be blamed, though, for raising no word against the conditions which inflicted these dangers and torture upon the

children of others. Again, when a rough and tumble crèche, a roped-in patch of grass, surrounded by shade-giving trees, was founded so as to give working-class mothers a snatch of rest from their labours, by leaving their toddlers in charge of a woman there at tuppence an hour a head, the residents, as superior rate-payers, signed a complaint and sent it to the Borough Council, complaining that the crying of the children, in anger or in play, disturbed them, and that the crèche utterly destroyed the order and serenity of the park. And this was the rendezvous chosen by Chesterton in which to laugh and sing and clap hands with the workers!

Mrs. Green sorted out her mansion-house flat into a greater eminence by giving all the corks drawn from champagne bottles emptied enjoyably by her and her husband to the tune of a bottle a month, an honoured preservation. She fixed all the corks into a finely-made walnut frame, windowed with fine glass, enclosing a soft bed of cramoisie velvet on which the cosy corks lay; each cork crowned by its own patch of tinsel, green, gold, or silver, with an ivory-tinted card below each one telling the name of the wine and the district where the vine grew and the vintage year in which the wine was pressed from the grape; with the year, month, and day the wine was drunken. There they swung in their costly case on the wall of the dining-room, like dried-up, shrunken heads of enemies to be honoured and gloated over at seasonable times; honoured as Queequeg honoured, and departed from, the withered head he carried about with him, as told in the story of The White Whale. Wine of France and milk of Burgundy. No corks here damp with English ale or brown with the stain of Dublin's potent porter. No, sir. Fine bouquet, delicious aroma, Mrs. Green;

various vintages, but all excellent. You are honoured in your corks. There is nothing whatever vulgar about corks: they are graceful, and full of meaning. Quite: a soul is safe in a champagne bottle.

Here in the medley of middle-class dressing for dinner, of creaking jodhpurs; of grades in flats and grade in car; in assembly of champagne-bottle corks; in one-maid or two-maid establishments; in first-class or second-class convent school; in carat-weight of collar-stud or cuff-link; here, among all this middle-class tension and torture, *The Irish Press* was declaring triumphantly that Chesterton was living with, and plunging about, among the workers and the poor!

And yet these people were important to England and to life; intelligent, mostly kind in a limited way, and anxious about the future of their children in a mistaken way. Too anxious that they should get on in the world; anxious that they shouldn't do any new things, but that they win respect from others by doing all the old things that were fading out of life. The lady of the jodhpurs' son, Peter, was attending a school whose system was a preparation for the manner and method of a public school, imitating the public school in all it did, while the public school was itself imitating all that had been done by itself through all the years gone by forever, ignorant of, and indifferent to, the new throb in the world's heart, the new beat in the world's pulse. Once, when Sean was sitting on a park bench with Mrs. Green and her son, the mother complained to Sean that Peter didn't want to accept from Mr. Lemon, the headmaster of his school, an invitation to spend a week's fishing with him during the holidays. Fancy, she had said, thinking of refusing such an invitation from such a man; and Peter, head hanging down,

had mumbled, I don't want to go, mother; I'd hate it. To which she: You mustn't say such things, Peter. Mr. Lemon's your Headmaster, and, even if you do hate it, you'll have to like it; and you'll have to be nice to him, very nice to him all the time; all the time — do you hear? Don't you agree, Mr. O'Casey?

—Well, Mrs. Green, I can't see how Peter can hate and like a thing at one and the same time. You are asking too much of him.

—He'll have to like it, said Mrs. Green, emphatically; have to learn to like it. Mr. Lemon's his Headmaster, and quite a gentleman.

Sean knowing that nothing he could say would change Mrs. Green's attitude of mind, and anxious to make it as easy as he could for Peter, put his hand gently on the lad's shoulder, saying, Never mind, old boy; do your best. We old fellows are very trying to the young. You'll get used to him, and like him after a bit.

—No, I won't, said the lad, a little bitterly; I know I won't; I'll simply hate it all the time, all the time.

—All the time, all the time, thought Sean; tormented all the time. No choice for the kid. Lemon showing him how to fish, and the lad too nervous to take notice. Evidently a Headmaster wherever he might be. Aloud, Sean said, It won't be so bad, after a bit, Peter. You feel at ease with me, now; but if I asked you to come for a week's fishing with me, you'd be saying to your mother: I don't want to go; I'd hate it.

—No I wouldn't, burst from Peter. I'd simply love to go with you!

There was so much energy in the boy's exclamation, so much sincerity in the look he gave to him, that Sean, for the first time he could remember, was at a loss for a word to say.

Sean felt sure that no one out of all the middle-class residents in Battersea had ever thrust a foot into a working-class district. And here was where and this was how Chesterton lived among the workers and the poor of Battersea Borough. Never in his life, Sean believed, did he smell the smell of a slum. In her life of him, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, Maisie Ward flips in a remark made by a journalist that G.K.C. was 'cultivating the local politics of Battersea; in secluded pubs, he drinks with the frequenters, and learns their opinions on municipal milk and Mr. John Burns'. She doesn't halt to say what the frequenters said to Chesterton, or what he said to them; nor does he record any conversations held in the secluded pubs of Battersea; and, as a matter of fact, Battersea pubs are no more secluded than pubs anywhere else. These visits — if they ever occurred — were evidently part of those tip, touch, habits which coloured his whole life. Rushing round, he tipped Shaw, Dickens, Browning, John of Austria, breathless with running all the time; and as he ran past life, he shouted gee gee up to the white horse, dismounting for a while to chuck the roman catholic church under the chin. There's the brave horseman, there's his two min; there he goes out and here he goes in; chin chucky chin chucky under the chin. He never waited a second to sit down in any room of thought, contenting himself with peeping round the door, throwing in a coloured puff-ball of braggart doctrinal remark that went round the room of life till it fell into dull dust when some curious finger chanced to touch it. A whiff of his love for the workers is felt in his 'As far as personal taste and instincts are concerned, I share all your antipathy to the noisy Plebeian excursions. A visit to Ramsgate during the season and the vision of the crowded howling

sands has left in me feelings which all my Radicalism cannot allay.' His instinct was to run from the worker, man of the lower-class, when the worker was noisy. Lover of the worker's soul, let me from thy presence fly. He didn't like the noisy children just let loose from school. He never did. And his deep love of God expressed in his deep love of humanity, is shown in his 'The guide showed me a cross given by Louis XIV to Mlle. de La Vallière. I thought when reflecting what the present was, and where it was and then to whom it was given, that this showed pretty well what the religion of the Bourbon regime was and why it has become impossible since the Revolution.' In Chesterton's mind, the symbol couldn't come to rest in the hands of a whore. And Blake and Whitman were two of the higher souls this laddo tried to touch! Maybe, the king didn't give her the cross in levity; maybe, she didn't take it so. How did Chesterton know? Even if he gave it in levity and she took it in the same mood, what was that to him? The poor king and the rich whore — if Chesterton's religion was as true as he so heartily and so superficially made it out to be — would have to answer for it, and not Chesterton. It is difficult enough for all to judge the things of time; it is beyond us to judge the things of eternity.

In another way, we get a glimpse of his childish mind yielding to a visible dream of violence, for Maisie Ward tells 'His love of weapons, his revolver, his favourite sword-stick, remained with him all his life': till death did them part. Chesterton's bow of burnished gold, his arrows of desire. Bang bang! Not a hoe or a spanner, not a fiddle or a fife; no, a sword-stick and a gun. The cross and the gun; an up-to-date union. A film critic reviewing a film, said 'We saw at once that the face of