

Saint Bede the Venerable (d. 735)

## Hilaire Belloc's Memorable 1911 Depiction of a Sussex Squire: Fuller of Brightling

### Epigraphs

“The Southern Hills [of Sussex] and the South Sea  
They blow such gladness into me,  
That when I get [to the coast] to Burton Sands  
And smell the smell of the Home Lands,  
My heart is all renewed and fills  
With the Southern Sea and the South Hills.”  
(Hilaire Belloc, *The Four Men* (1911))

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“My County [Dear Sussex], it has been proved in the life of every man that though his loves are human, and therefore changeable, yet **in proportion as** he attaches them to things unchangeable, **so they mature and broaden**....And on this account, Sussex, does a man love an old house, which was his father's [or his mother's, herself a widow], **and on this account does a man come to love with all his heart, that part of earth which nourished his boyhood**. For it does not change, or if it changes, it changes very little, **and he finds in it the character of enduring things**....

“Therefore it is that I have put down in writing what happened to me now so many years ago, when I met first one man and then another, and we bound ourselves together and walked through all your land, Sussex, from end to end. For many years I have meant to write it down and have not; nor would I write it down now, or issue the book at all, Sussex, did I not know that you, who must like all created things decay, might with the rest of us be very near your ending. For I know very well in my mind [like Hector in Homer's *Iliad*, Book VI, and his fear for his wife and son] that a day will come when the holy place shall perish and all the people of it and never more be what they were. But before that day comes, Sussex [as with Homer's Troy, with Andromache, Hector's wife, and his little son, Astyanax], may your earth cover me....” (Hilaire Belloc, *The Four Men* (1911), the Preface)

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“[This Inn, 'The Fuller's Arms,' says 'Myself,' is called] after the arms or the name of one Fuller, a squire of these parts, who had in him the Sussex heart and blood....And indeed this man Fuller deserves to be famous...for he spent all his money [generously] in a roaring way, and lived in his time like an immortal **being conscious of what was worth man's while during his little passage through the daylight**.” (Hilaire Belloc, *The Four Men* (1911)—my emphasis added, echoing Homer once again)

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One year after Hilaire Belloc's four-year term in the British House of Commons (1906-1910), he published *The Four Men: A Farrago* (1911)<sup>1</sup>, wherein he memorably depicts the robust and eccentric and magnanimously generous Squire Fuller of Brightling, an honored native of the County of Sussex, Belloc's own beloved county. A larger than life figure himself, Squire Fuller (d. 1834) had also been a Member of Parliament, as well as a Captain in the Sussex Yeomanry Cavalry.

This 1911 book covers the interval of 29 October 1902--2 November 1902 (All Souls' Day). The vivid depiction of the historical figure, Squire John ("Mad Jack") Fuller (1757-1834), occurs early in *The Four Men*, on 30 October 1902—while three of the personified four men are still in East Sussex—soon to meet the Poet—and together on the way on foot to the western border of the County of Sussex some four days away.

Moreover, the book's interior date of 1902 is one year after Belloc's own more or less solitary "Path to Rome" from France on foot, and an adventurous journey that was also a sincere pilgrimage. *The Path to Rome*, a remarkable, indeed unique, book in itself, was published in 1902; and then, very soon, Belloc started thinking about the fictional journey afoot through his home county of Sussex from east to west. However, it was to be almost a decade later, and after much germination and elegiac reflection, that *The Four Men* (1911) was finally published.

The three companions of Myself were to be Grizzlebeard, the Sailor, and, last of all, the Poet. And these four companions — representing special aspects of Hilaire Belloc himself — had many and varied counterpointed discussions during their brief journey together.

In this brief essay, however, I only wish to show the qualities of Squire Fuller, as Myself first introduces him, and as he then more fully elaborates upon his rare combination of qualities. We may thereby see how Belloc himself, perhaps, would have also liked to have spoken his farewell to the House of Commons, with its own manifest corruptions and its abidingly present "Host of Squalid Oligarchs" (in the memorable phrase of Russell Kirk).

Myself first addresses his first two companions, just before the three of them would then meet and welcome the Poet, the fourth man, to join their company:

1 Hilaire Belloc, *The Four Men: A Farrago* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984—first published in 1911 by Thomas Nelson and Sons). All further page references to this text will be from this paperback printing from Oxford University Press; and will be placed in parentheses above, in the main body of this essay.

“We are well met, Sailor, you and Grizzlebeard and I in this [Saint Thomas à Becket] parish of Brightling, which, though it lies so far from the most and the best of our county [of Sussex to the further west], is in a way a shrine of it....There may be shrines and shrines on any land, and sanctities of many kinds. For you will notice, Grizzlebeard, or rather you should have noticed already, having lived so long, that good things do not jostle....I was thinking of something far more worthy [than “the obelisk”], and of the soul of man. For do you not note the sign of this inn by which it is known?” (10-11)

Then the Sailor makes a speculative comment: “Why, it is called 'The Fuller's Arms'; there being so many sheep I take it, and therefore so much wool and therefore fulling [*i.e.*, a step in the cleansing of cloth, especially in woolen clothmaking].” (11)

Myself makes a prompt and informative reply to the Sailor's plausible hypothesis, and showed his sense of epic heightening (as in the tones of the poet Homer):

“No, it is not called so for such a reason, but after the arms or the name of one Fuller, a squire in these parts [in East Sussex], who **had in him the Sussex heart and blood**, as had Earl Godwin [1001-1053, Earl of West Sussex] and others famous in history. And indeed this man Fuller deserves to be famous and to be called, so to speak, the very demigod of my county, for **he spent all his money in a roaring way**, and lived in his time [1757-1834] like an immortal being **conscious of what is worth man's while** during his little passage through the daylight. I have heard it said that Fuller of Brightling, being made a Knight of the Shire for the County of Sussex in the time when King George the Third was upon the throne [1760-1820], had himself drawn to Westminster [to the Parliament] in a noble great coach, with six huge, hefty, and determined horses to draw it, but these were not of the Sussex breed, for there is none.” (11—my emphasis added)

After a somewhat lengthy interruption and hyperbolic digression by Grizzlebeard — who criticizes, for example, those “many kingdoms and countries and lands [that] are prodigal of their names, because their names [unlike Sussex' name] are of little account and in no way sacred”(12) — Myself tries to recall and resume what he was saying “about Fuller, that noble great man sprung from this noble great land [of Sussex].” (12) The Sailor then comes to his aid: “You left him going up to Westminster in a coach with six great horses, to sit in Parliament and be a Knight of the Shire.” (12)

Thus Myself could continue his tale and depiction of character:

“That is so, and, God willing, as he went he sang the [jester's] song 'Golier! Golier!' and I make little doubt that, until he came to the Marches of the county, and entered the barbarous places outside [those threshold-boundaries], great crowds gathered at his passage and cheered him as such a man should be cheered, for **he was a most noble man, and very free with all good things. Nor did he know what lay before him, having knowledge of nothing so evil as Westminster**, nor of anything so

**stuff** or so vile as her **most detestable** Commons House [*i.e.*, the House of Commons], where men sit palsied and glower, hating each other and themselves: **but he knew nothing yet except broad Sussex.**” (12—my emphasis added)

Myself then proceeds to tell us what happened after Squire Fuller arrived in London:

“Well, then, when he had come to Westminster, **very soon** there was a day in which the Big-wigs would have **a debate**, all empty and worthless, upon Hot Air, or the value of nothingness; and the man who took most money there out of the taxes, and his first cousin who sat opposite and to whom he had **promised the next wad of public wealth**, and his brother-in-law and his parasite **and all the rest of the thieves** had begun their pompous folly, **when great Fuller arose in his place**, full of the South, and said that he had **not come** to the Commons House **to talk any such balderdash, or to hear it, but contrariwise proposed**, then and there, **to give them an Eulogy upon the County of Sussex, from which he had come and which was the captain ground and head county of the whole world.**” (12-13—my emphasis added)

Belloc's artful narrator, “Myself,” will now show us — in contrast to his earlier and elegiac Homeric allusions and epic heightenings — a more exuberant Rabelaisian expression of his rumbustious narration concerning Squire Fuller in the House of Commons and his tribute to Sussex:

“This Eulogy he promptly and powerfully began, using his voice as a healthy man should, who will drown all opposition and who can call a dog to heel from half a mile away. And indeed though a storm rose round him from all those lesser men, who had come to Westminster, not for the praise of honour of their land, but to fill their pockets [with a “wad of public wealth,” their supposed share of the swag], he very manfully shouted, and was heard above it all, so that the Sergeant-at-Arms grew sick with fear, and the Clerk at the Table wished he had never been born. But the Speaker [of the House], whose business is to keep the place inane (I do not remember his name, for such men are not famous after death), stood up in his gown and called to Fuller that he was out of order. And since Fuller would not yield, every man in the House called out 'Order!' eight or nine hundred times. But, when they were exhausted, the great Fuller, Fuller of Brightling, cried out over them all.” (13—my emphasis added)

And, *ad hominem*, this is what Fuller the Ebullient somewhat insultingly said, as he departed:

“Do you think I care for you, you insignificant little man in the wig? Take that!” And with these words **he snapped his fingers in the face of the bunch** of them, and walked out of the Commons House, **and got into his great coach with its six powerful horses**, and ordering their heads to be **set southwards he at last gained his own land [of Sussex], where he was received as such a man should be**, with bells ringing and guns firing, little boys cheering, and all ducks, hens, and pigs flying from before his approach to the left and to the right of the road. **Ever since that day it has been held a singular honour and one surpassing all others to be a squire of Brightling, but no honour to be a member of the Commons House.**” (13-14—my emphasis added)

Myself — after he evocatively reminds us of the similar spirit of the great William Cobbett of Surrey (1763-1835) and some of his incisive writings — *e.g.*, *Rural Rides* (1830) and his clearly pro-Catholic *History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland* (1824-1827) — then himself returns us to Cobbett's own contemporary: the great John Fuller of Brightling. And Myself then ends his own vivid narrative tale with some memorable words about Squire Fuller's recurrently magnanimous and generous qualities of character:

**“He spent all his great fortune upon the poor of Sussex and of his own parish** [Saint Thomas à Becket], bidding them **drink deep and eat hearty** as, being habits, the best preservative of life, until at last he also died [in 1834, only one year before the great-spirited William Cobbett himself]. **There is the story of Fuller of Brightling, and may we all deserve as well as he.**” (14—my emphasis added)

Can we now not better imagine a journey together with Squire Fuller and William Cobbett, which might well even turn into a Catholic pilgrimage and Path to Rome? Men like this are not much to be seen today; and Hilaire Belloc, G.K. Chesterton, and Maurice Baring, each in his own grateful and elegiac way, later regretfully saw that to be so. Let us, however, imagine Cobbett and Fuller as Catholics today, and still singing their good and robust songs in a welcoming Old Inn. And then, we imagine, Belloc, Chesterton, and Baring would come walking in, to be among them, and undoubtedly to be received by them and their warm hospitality. What a bunch! What a gift!

#### CODA

Hilaire Belloc's poem on “The South Country”<sup>2</sup> — which is not to be found in *The Four Men* — will help us further see and savour Belloc's special combination of the elegiac and the robust; the melancholy and the well-rooted, along with an abiding desire for his beloved Sussex, for sustaining friends and for their companionship. Therefore, a large selection from this longer stanzaic poem, presented below without comment, will be a fitting conclusion to our little essay.

#### The South Country

When I am living in the Midlands  
That are sodden and unkind,  
I light my lamp in the evening:  
My work is left behind;  
And the great hills of the South Country  
Come back into my mind.

<sup>2</sup> Hilaire Belloc, *Complete Verse: Hilaire Belloc* (London: Pimlico, 1991—first published in a revised edition in 1970 by Duckworth & Co Ltd of London) The poem, “The South Country,” will be found on pages 36-38 of this text.

The great hills of the South Country [Sussex]  
They stand along the sea;  
And it's there walking in the high woods  
That I could wish to be,  
And the men that were boys when I was a boy  
Walking along with me....

But the men that live in the South Country  
Are the kindest and most wise,  
They get their laughter from the loud surf,  
And the faith in their happy eyes  
Comes surely from our Sister the Spring  
When over the sea she flies;  
The violets suddenly bloom at her feet,  
She blesses us with surprise.

I never get between the pines  
But I smell the Sussex air;  
Nor I never come on a belt of sand  
But my home is there.  
And along the sky the line of the Downs  
So noble and so bare.

A lost thing could I never find,  
Nor a broken thing mend:  
And I fear I shall be all alone  
When I get towards the end.  
Who will there be to comfort me  
Or who will be my friend?

I will gather and carefully make my friends  
Of the men of the Sussex Weald,  
They watch the stars from silents folds,  
They stiffly plough the field.  
By them and the God of the South Country  
My poor soul shall be healed.

If I ever become a rich man,  
Or if ever I grow to be old,  
I will build a house with deep thatch  
To shelter me from the cold,  
And there shall the Sussex songs be sung

And the story of Sussex told.  
I will hold my house in the high wood  
Within a walk of the sea,  
And the men that were boys when I was a boy  
Shall sit and drink with me.

--Finis--

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