

SBHMS/PB/1/56

# SAINT BARTHOLOMEW'S HOSPITAL JOURNAL



VOL. L III

1949

Printed by
THE EXOMA PRESS LTD.
255-257 LIVERPOOL ROAD, N.I

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# ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S



# HOSPITAL JOURNAL

Vol. LIII

JANUARY, 1949

No. 1

Good morning, Algernon: good morning, Percy. Good morning, Mrs. Roebeck. Christ have mercy!

Hilaire Belloc.

It may be doubted whether the person exists, whose circle of acquaintances does not include at least one member of the family Roebeck. Fat or thin, tall or short, they have one characteristic feature in common; they share the ability to make an ordinarily sane and civilized being cast off the cloak of reason, and, in an orgy of mental atavism, harbour thoughts more appropriate to a sabre-toothed tiger.

Perhaps it is the way Mrs. Roebeck talks, or the way she walks, or the things she says and does; perhaps it is a gesture, an attitude, a mannerism—or just an indefinable something about her, an air too subtle to be analysed, that makes her call forth such bitter thoughts and silent profanities. She is, as it were, the spark that fires the murky pitches of the mind; she is the focal irritation that brings on the fit.

When first encountered Mrs. Roebeck is merely irritating, but as time passes by she is endowed, first with one deadly sin, then another, and gradually, almost imperceptibly, she becomes the devil's walking parody. It is a curious process, but still more odd is the fact that your friends are entirely oblivious of her sinister appearance—of the little sprouting horns and the peculiar gait, which to you are so apparent.

It may be the woman with the amber cigarette-holder and scarlet talons, who talks of "progress spiring round, of light and Mrs. Humphrey Ward." It may be the fourteenstone forward who says What! ho and slaps you on the back. It may be the vicar's wife who starts talking when she is still twenty yards away, is apparently able to dispense with breathing for fifteen minutes on end

and is still hard at it when you finally make a break and are receding as rapidly as is possible into the distance. It may be the man who has already told you that story three times in a week; it had no point, it wasn't funny and, as you rightly concluded when you cut yourself shaving while thinking about the beastly thing, it was all his fault anyway.

Opinions differ as to the best way of countering the effects of Mrs. Roebeck; much advice has been given. Saki thought that the best course was to send for Clovis. Mr. Wodehouse recommends the hunting of gnu. Mr. Thurber is frankly pessimistic and wishes we were all dogs, because then we should behave rationally. Mr. Chesterton, with a true blend of generosity and justice, would make a present of a butt of malmsey and hope for the best.

Any form of direct action is most unwise, in fact it is doomed to failure from the start. If Mr. Roebeck is a fourteen-stone forward and you, so to speak, hand him one on the kisser, he will undoubtedly fell you on the instant and your chances of ever getting equal with him will be gone. Whenever you meet he will continue to slap you playfully on the back and make asinine remarks, such as, "How are the molars today; champing away as usual?", while you grind your teeth in fury—the few, that is, which remain. Rocbecks will almost invariably get the better of you in the long run if you try to be clever at their expense. The vicar's wife has the ear of every lady in the surrounding half-dozen villages; the woman with the scarlet finger nails can wither you with a look. It is one of their characteristics that they should be able to do this. Jemmy