There is a hill not far from my home whence it is possible to see northward and southward such a stretch of land as is not to be seen from any eminence among those I know in Western Europe. Southward the sea-plain and the sea standing up in a belt of light against the sky, and northward all the weald. From this summit the eye is disturbed by no great cities of the modern sort, but a dozen at least of those small market towns which are the delight of South England hold the view from point to point, from the pale blue downs of the island over, eastward, to the Kentish hills.

A very long way off, and near the sea-line, the high faint spire of that cathedral which was once the mother of all my county goes up without weight into the air and gathers round it the delicate and distant outlines of the landscape--as, indeed, its builders meant that it should do. In such a spot, on such a high watch-tower of England, I met, three days ago, a man.

I had been riding my kind and honourable horse for two hours, broken, indeed, by a long rest in a deserted barn.

I had been his companion, I say, for two hours, and had told him a hundred interesting things--to which he had answered nothing at all--when I took him along a path that neither of us yet had trod. I had not, I know; he had not (I think), for he went snorting and doubtfully. This path broke up from the kennels near Waltham, and made for the High Wood between Gumber and No Man's Land. It went over dead leaves and quite lonely to the thick of the forest; there it died out into a vaguer and a vaguer trail. At last it ceased altogether, and for half an hour or so I pushed carefully, always climbing upwards, through the branches, and picked my way along the bramble-shoots, until at last I came out upon that open space of which I had spoken, and which I have known since my childhood. As I came out of the wood the south-west wind met me, full of the Atlantic, and it seemed to me to blow from Paradise.

I remembered, as I halted and so gazed north and south to the weald below me, and then again to the sea, the story of that Sultan who publicly proclaimed that he had possessed all power on earth, and had numbered on a tablet with his own hand each of his happy days, and had found them, when he came to die, to be seventeen. I knew what that heathen had meant, and I looked into my heart as I remembered the story, but I came back from the examination satisfied, for "So far," I said to myself, "this day is among my number, and the light is falling. I will count it for one." It was then that I saw before me, going easily and slowly across the downs, the figure of a man.

He was powerful, full of health and easy; his clothes were rags; his face was open and bronzed. I came at once off my horse to speak with him, and, holding my horse by the bridle, I led it forward till we met. Then I asked him whither he was going, and whether, as I knew these open hills by heart, I could not help him on his way.

He answered me that he was in no need of help, for he was bound nowhere, but that he had come up off the high road on to the hills in order to get his pleasure and also to see what there was on the other side. He said to me also, with evident enjoyment (and in the accent of a lettered man), "This is indeed a day to be alive!"
I saw that I had here some chance of an adventure, since it is not every day that one meets upon a lonely down a man of
culture, in rags and happy. I therefore took the bridle quite off my horse and let him nibble, and I sat down on the bank
of the Roman road holding the leather of the bridle in my hand, and wiping the bit with plucked grass. The stranger sat
down beside me, and drew from his pocket a piece of bread and a large onion. We then talked of those things which
should chiefly occupy mankind: I mean, of happiness and of the destiny of the soul. Upon these matters I found him to
be exact, thoughtful, and just.

First, then, I said to him: "I also have been full of gladness all this day, and, what is more, as I came up the hill from
Waltham I was inspired to verse, and wrote it inside my mind, completing a passage I had been working at for two
years, upon joy. But it was easy for me to be happy, since I was on a horse and warm and well fed; yet even for me
such days are capricious. I have known but few in my life. They are each of them distinct and clear, so rare are they,
and (what is more) so different are they in their very quality from all other days."

"You are right," he said, "in this last phrase of yours.... They are indeed quite other from all the common days of our
lives. But you were wrong, I think, in saying that your horse and clothes and good feeding and the rest had to do with
these curious intervals of content. Wealth makes the run of our days somewhat more easy, poverty makes them more
hard--or very hard. But no poverty has ever yet brought of itself despair into the soul--the men who kill themselves are
neither rich nor poor. Still less has wealth ever purchased those peculiar hours. I also am filled with their spirit to-day,
and God knows," said he, cutting his onion in two, so that it gave out a strong savour, "God knows I can purchase
nothing."

"Then tell me," I said, "whence do you believe these moments come? And will you give me half your onion?"

"With pleasure," he replied, "for no man can eat a whole onion; and as for that other matter, why I think the door of
heaven is ajar from time to time, and that light shines out upon us for a moment between its opening and closing." He
said this in a merry, sober manner; his black eyes sparkled, and his large beard was blown about a little by the wind.
Then he added: "If a man is a slave to the rich in the great cities (the most miserable of mankind), yet these days come
to him. To the vicious wealthy and privileged men, whose faces are stamped hard with degradation, these days come;
they come to you, you say, working (I suppose) in anxiety like most of men. They come to me who neither work nor
am anxious so long as South England may freely import onions."

"I believe you are right," I said. "And I especially commend you for eating onions; they contain all health; they induce
sleep; they may be called the apples of content, or, again, the companion fruits of mankind."

"I have always said," he answered gravely, "that when the couple of them left Eden they hid and took away with them
an onion. I am moved in my soul to have known a man who reveres and loves them in the due measure, for such men
are rare."

Then he asked, with evident anxiety: "Is there no inn about here where a man like me will be taken in?"

"Yes," I told him. "Down under the Combe at Duncton is a very good inn. Have you money to pay? Will you take some
of my money?"

"I will take all you can possibly afford me," he answered in a cheerful, manly fashion. I counted out my money and
found I had on me but 3s.7d. "Here is 3s. 7d.," I said.

"Thank you, indeed," he answered, taking the coins and wrapping them in a little rag (for he had no pockets, but only
holes).

"I wish," I said with regret, "we might meet and talk more often of many things. So much do we agree, and men like
you and me are often lonely."

He shrugged his shoulders and put his head on one side, quizzing at me with his eyes. Then he shook his head
decidedly, and said: "No, no--it is certain that we shall never meet again." And thanking me with great fervour, but
briefly, he went largely and strongly down the escarpment of the Combe to Duncton and the weald; and I shall never see him again till the Great Day....

(The end)
Hilaire Belloc's essay: The Onion-Eater

By Hilaire Belloc