

GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON

TREMENDOUS TRIFLES

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Tremendous Trifles:

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G. K. Chesterton

Tremendous Trifles

PREFACE

These fleeting sketches are all republished by kind permission of the Editor of the DAILY NEWS, in which paper they appeared. They amount to no more than a sort of sporadic diary – a diary recording one day in twenty which happened to stick in the fancy – the only kind of diary the author has ever been able to keep. Even that diary he could only keep by keeping it in public, for bread and cheese. But trivial as are the topics they are not utterly without a connecting thread of motive. As the reader’s eye strays, with hearty relief, from these pages, it probably alights on something, a bed-post or a lamp-post, a window blind or a wall. It is a thousand to one that the reader is looking at something that he has never seen: that is, never realised. He could not write an essay on such a post or wall: he does not know what the post or wall mean. He could not even write the synopsis of an essay; as “The Bed-Post; Its Significance – Security Essential to Idea of Sleep – Night Felt as Infinite – Need of Monumental Architecture,” and so on. He could not sketch in outline his theoretic attitude towards window-blinds, even in the form of a summary. “The Window-Blind – Its Analogy to the Curtain and

Veil – Is Modesty Natural? – Worship of and Avoidance of the Sun, etc., etc.” None of us think enough of these things on which the eye rests. But don’t let us let the eye rest. Why should the eye be so lazy? Let us exercise the eye until it learns to see startling facts that run across the landscape as plain as a painted fence. Let us be ocular athletes. Let us learn to write essays on a stray cat or a coloured cloud. I have attempted some such thing in what follows; but anyone else may do it better, if anyone else will only try.

I. Tremendous Trifles

Once upon a time there were two little boys who lived chiefly in the front garden, because their villa was a model one. The front garden was about the same size as the dinner table; it consisted of four strips of gravel, a square of turf with some mysterious pieces of cork standing up in the middle and one flower bed with a row of red daisies. One morning while they were at play in these romantic grounds, a passing individual, probably the milkman, leaned over the railing and engaged them in philosophical conversation. The boys, whom we will call Paul and Peter, were at least sharply interested in his remarks. For the milkman (who was, I need say, a fairy) did his duty in that state of life by offering them in the regulation manner anything that they chose to ask for. And Paul closed with the offer with a business-like abruptness, explaining that he had long wished to be a giant that he might stride across continents and oceans and visit Niagara or the Himalayas in an afternoon dinner stroll. The milkman producing a wand from his breast pocket, waved it in a hurried and perfunctory manner; and in an instant the model villa with its front garden was like a tiny doll's house at Paul's colossal feet. He went striding away with his head above the clouds to visit Niagara and the Himalayas. But when he came to the Himalayas, he found they were quite small and silly-looking, like the little cork rockery in the garden; and when he found Niagara it was

no bigger than the tap turned on in the bathroom. He wandered round the world for several minutes trying to find something really large and finding everything small, till in sheer boredom he lay down on four or five prairies and fell asleep. Unfortunately his head was just outside the hut of an intellectual backwoodsman who came out of it at that moment with an axe in one hand and a book of Neo-Catholic Philosophy in the other. The man looked at the book and then at the giant, and then at the book again. And in the book it said, "It can be maintained that the evil of pride consists in being out of proportion to the universe." So the backwoodsman put down his book, took his axe and, working eight hours a day for about a week, cut the giant's head off; and there was an end of him.

Such is the severe yet salutary history of Paul. But Peter, oddly enough, made exactly the opposite request; he said he had long wished to be a pigmy about half an inch high; and of course he immediately became one. When the transformation was over he found himself in the midst of an immense plain, covered with a tall green jungle and above which, at intervals, rose strange trees each with a head like the sun in symbolic pictures, with gigantic rays of silver and a huge heart of gold. Toward the middle of this prairie stood up a mountain of such romantic and impossible shape, yet of such stony height and dominance, that it looked like some incident of the end of the world. And far away on the faint horizon he could see the line of another forest, taller and yet more mystical, of a terrible crimson colour, like a forest on

fire for ever. He set out on his adventures across that coloured plain; and he has not come to the end of it yet.

Such is the story of Peter and Paul, which contains all the highest qualities of a modern fairy tale, including that of being wholly unfit for children; and indeed the motive with which I have introduced it is not childish, but rather full of subtlety and reaction. It is in fact the almost desperate motive of excusing or palliating the pages that follow. Peter and Paul are the two primary influences upon European literature to-day; and I may be permitted to put my own preference in its most favourable shape, even if I can only do it by what little girls call telling a story.

I need scarcely say that I am the pigmy. The only excuse for the scraps that follow is that they show what can be achieved with a commonplace existence and the sacred spectacles of exaggeration. The other great literary theory, that which is roughly represented in England by Mr. Rudyard Kipling, is that we moderns are to regain the primal zest by sprawling all over the world growing used to travel and geographical variety, being at home everywhere, that is being at home nowhere. Let it be granted that a man in a frock coat is a heartrending sight; and the two alternative methods still remain. Mr. Kipling's school advises us to go to Central Africa in order to find a man without a frock coat. The school to which I belong suggests that we should stare steadily at the man until we see the man inside the frock coat. If we stare at him long enough he may even be moved to take

off his coat to us; and that is a far greater compliment than his taking off his hat. In other words, we may, by fixing our attention almost fiercely on the facts actually before us, force them to turn into adventures; force them to give up their meaning and fulfil their mysterious purpose. The purpose of the Kipling literature is to show how many extraordinary things a man may see if he is active and strides from continent to continent like the giant in my tale. But the object of my school is to show how many extraordinary things even a lazy and ordinary man may see if he can spur himself to the single activity of seeing. For this purpose I have taken the laziest person of my acquaintance, that is myself; and made an idle diary of such odd things as I have fallen over by accident, in walking in a very limited area at a very indolent pace. If anyone says that these are very small affairs talked about in very big language, I can only gracefully compliment him upon seeing the joke. If anyone says that I am making mountains out of molehills, I confess with pride that it is so. I can imagine no more successful and productive form of manufacture than that of making mountains out of molehills. But I would add this not unimportant fact, that molehills are mountains; one has only to become a pigmy like Peter to discover that.

I have my doubts about all this real value in mountaineering, in getting to the top of everything and overlooking everything. Satan was the most celebrated of Alpine guides, when he took Jesus to the top of an exceeding high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth. But the joy of Satan in standing on

a peak is not a joy in largeness, but a joy in beholding smallness, in the fact that all men look like insects at his feet. It is from the valley that things look large; it is from the level that things look high; I am a child of the level and have no need of that celebrated Alpine guide. I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help; but I will not lift up my carcass to the hills, unless it is absolutely necessary. Everything is in an attitude of mind; and at this moment I am in a comfortable attitude. I will sit still and let the marvels and the adventures settle on me like flies. There are plenty of them, I assure you. The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.

II. A Piece of Chalk

I remember one splendid morning, all blue and silver, in the summer holidays when I reluctantly tore myself away from the task of doing nothing in particular, and put on a hat of some sort and picked up a walking-stick, and put six very bright-coloured chinks in my pocket. I then went into the kitchen (which, along with the rest of the house, belonged to a very square and sensible old woman in a Sussex village), and asked the owner and occupant of the kitchen if she had any brown paper. She had a great deal; in fact, she had too much; and she mistook the purpose and the rationale of the existence of brown paper. She seemed to have an idea that if a person wanted brown paper he must be wanting to tie up parcels; which was the last thing I wanted to do; indeed, it is a thing which I have found to be beyond my mental capacity. Hence she dwelt very much on the varying qualities of toughness and endurance in the material. I explained to her that I only wanted to draw pictures on it, and that I did not want them to endure in the least; and that from my point of view, therefore, it was a question, not of tough consistency, but of responsive surface, a thing comparatively irrelevant in a parcel. When she understood that I wanted to draw she offered to overwhelm me with note-paper, apparently supposing that I did my notes and correspondence on old brown paper wrappers from motives of economy.

I then tried to explain the rather delicate logical shade, that I not only liked brown paper, but liked the quality of brownness in paper, just as I liked the quality of brownness in October woods, or in beer, or in the peat-streams of the North. Brown paper represents the primal twilight of the first toil of creation, and with a bright-coloured chalk or two you can pick out points of fire in it, sparks of gold, and blood-red, and sea-green, like the first fierce stars that sprang out of divine darkness. All this I said (in an off-hand way) to the old woman; and I put the brown paper in my pocket along with the chinks, and possibly other things. I suppose every one must have reflected how primeval and how poetical are the things that one carries in one's pocket; the pocket-knife, for instance, the type of all human tools, the infant of the sword. Once I planned to write a book of poems entirely about the things in my pockets. But I found it would be too long; and the age of the great epics is past.

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With my stick and my knife, my chinks and my brown paper, I went out on to the great downs. I crawled across those colossal contours that express the best quality of England, because they are at the same time soft and strong. The smoothness of them has the same meaning as the smoothness of great cart-horses, or the smoothness of the beech-tree; it declares in the teeth of our timid and cruel theories that the mighty are merciful. As my eye swept the landscape, the landscape was as kindly as any of its cottages, but for power it was like an earthquake. The villages in

the immense valley were safe, one could see, for centuries; yet the lifting of the whole land was like the lifting of one enormous wave to wash them all away.

I crossed one swell of living turf after another, looking for a place to sit down and draw. Do not, for heaven's sake, imagine I was going to sketch from Nature. I was going to draw devils and seraphim, and blind old gods that men worshipped before the dawn of right, and saints in robes of angry crimson, and seas of strange green, and all the sacred or monstrous symbols that look so well in bright colours on brown paper. They are much better worth drawing than Nature; also they are much easier to draw. When a cow came slouching by in the field next to me, a mere artist might have drawn it; but I always get wrong in the hind legs of quadrupeds. So I drew the soul of the cow; which I saw there plainly walking before me in the sunlight; and the soul was all purple and silver, and had seven horns and the mystery that belongs to all the beasts. But though I could not with a crayon get the best out of the landscape, it does not follow that the landscape was not getting the best out of me. And this, I think, is the mistake that people make about the old poets who lived before Wordsworth, and were supposed not to care very much about Nature because they did not describe it much.

They preferred writing about great men to writing about great hills; but they sat on the great hills to write it. They gave out much less about Nature, but they drank in, perhaps, much more. They painted the white robes of their holy virgins with the blinding

snow, at which they had stared all day. They blazoned the shields of their paladins with the purple and gold of many heraldic sunsets. The greenness of a thousand green leaves clustered into the live green figure of Robin Hood. The blueness of a score of forgotten skies became the blue robes of the Virgin. The inspiration went in like sunbeams and came out like Apollo.

...

But as I sat scrawling these silly figures on the brown paper, it began to dawn on me, to my great disgust, that I had left one chalk, and that a most exquisite and essential chalk, behind. I searched all my pockets, but I could not find any white chalk. Now, those who are acquainted with all the philosophy (nay, religion) which is typified in the art of drawing on brown paper, know that white is positive and essential. I cannot avoid remarking here upon a moral significance. One of the wise and awful truths which this brown-paper art reveals, is this, that white is a colour. It is not a mere absence of colour; it is a shining and affirmative thing, as fierce as red, as definite as black. When, so to speak, your pencil grows red-hot, it draws roses; when it grows white-hot, it draws stars. And one of the two or three defiant verities of the best religious morality, of real Christianity, for example, is exactly this same thing; the chief assertion of religious morality is that white is a colour. Virtue is not the absence of vices or the avoidance of moral dangers; virtue is a vivid and separate thing, like pain or a particular smell. Mercy does not mean not being cruel or sparing people revenge or

punishment; it means a plain and positive thing like the sun, which one has either seen or not seen.

Chastity does not mean abstention from sexual wrong; it means something flaming, like Joan of Arc. In a word, God paints in many colours; but He never paints so gorgeously, I had almost said so gaudily, as when He paints in white. In a sense our age has realised this fact, and expressed it in our sullen costume. For if it were really true that white was a blank and colourless thing, negative and non-committal, then white would be used instead of black and grey for the funeral dress of this pessimistic period. We should see city gentlemen in frock coats of spotless silver linen, with top hats as white as wonderful arum lilies. Which is not the case.

Meanwhile, I could not find my chalk.

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I sat on the hill in a sort of despair. There was no town nearer than Chichester at which it was even remotely probable that there would be such a thing as an artist's colourman. And yet, without white, my absurd little pictures would be as pointless as the world would be if there were no good people in it. I stared stupidly round, racking my brain for expedients. Then I suddenly stood up and roared with laughter, again and again, so that the cows stared at me and called a committee. Imagine a man in the Sahara regretting that he had no sand for his hour-glass. Imagine

a gentleman in mid-ocean wishing that he had brought some salt water with him for his chemical experiments. I was sitting on an immense warehouse of white chalk. The landscape was made entirely out of white chalk. White chalk was piled more miles until it met the sky. I stooped and broke a piece off the rock I sat on; it did not mark so well as the shop chinks do; but it gave the effect. And I stood there in a trance of pleasure, realising that this Southern England is not only a grand peninsula, and a tradition and a civilisation; it is something even more admirable. It is a piece of chalk.

III. The Secret of a Train

All this talk of a railway mystery has sent my mind back to a loose memory. I will not merely say that this story is true: because, as you will soon see, it is all truth and no story. It has no explanation and no conclusion; it is, like most of the other things we encounter in life, a fragment of something else which would be intensely exciting if it were not too large to be seen. For the perplexity of life arises from there being too many interesting things in it for us to be interested properly in any of them; what we call its triviality is really the tag-ends of numberless tales; ordinary and unmeaning existence is like ten thousand thrilling detective stories mixed up with a spoon. My experience was a fragment of this nature, and it is, at any rate, not fictitious. Not only am I not making up the incidents (what there were of them), but I am not making up the atmosphere of the landscape, which were the whole horror of the thing. I remember them vividly, and they were as I shall now describe.

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About noon of an ashen autumn day some years ago I was standing outside the station at Oxford intending to take the train to London. And for some reason, out of idleness or the emptiness

of my mind or the emptiness of the pale grey sky, or the cold, a kind of caprice fell upon me that I would not go by that train at all, but would step out on the road and walk at least some part of the way to London. I do not know if other people are made like me in this matter; but to me it is always dreary weather, what may be called useless weather, that slings into life a sense of action and romance. On bright blue days I do not want anything to happen; the world is complete and beautiful, a thing for contemplation. I no more ask for adventures under that turquoise dome than I ask for adventures in church. But when the background of man's life is a grey background, then, in the name of man's sacred supremacy, I desire to paint on it in fire and gore. When the heavens fail man refuses to fail; when the sky seems to have written on it, in letters of lead and pale silver, the decree that nothing shall happen, then the immortal soul, the prince of the creatures, rises up and decrees that something shall happen, if it be only the slaughter of a policeman. But this is a digressive way of stating what I have said already – that the bleak sky awoke in me a hunger for some change of plans, that the monotonous weather seemed to render unbearable the use of the monotonous train, and that I set out into the country lanes, out of the town of Oxford. It was, perhaps, at that moment that a strange curse came upon me out of the city and the sky, whereby it was decreed that years afterwards I should, in an article in the DAILY NEWS, talk about Sir George Trevelyan in connection with Oxford, when I knew perfectly well that he went to Cambridge.

As I crossed the country everything was ghostly and colourless. The fields that should have been green were as grey as the skies; the tree-tops that should have been green were as grey as the clouds and as cloudy. And when I had walked for some hours the evening was closing in. A sickly sunset clung weakly to the horizon, as if pale with reluctance to leave the world in the dark. And as it faded more and more the skies seemed to come closer and to threaten. The clouds which had been merely sullen became swollen; and then they loosened and let down the dark curtains of the rain. The rain was blinding and seemed to beat like blows from an enemy at close quarters; the skies seemed bending over and bawling in my ears. I walked on many more miles before I met a man, and in that distance my mind had been made up; and when I met him I asked him if anywhere in the neighbourhood I could pick up the train for Paddington. He directed me to a small silent station (I cannot even remember the name of it) which stood well away from the road and looked as lonely as a hut on the Andes. I do not think I have ever seen such a type of time and sadness and scepticism and everything devilish as that station was: it looked as if it had always been raining there ever since the creation of the world. The water streamed from the soaking wood of it as if it were not water at all, but some loathsome liquid corruption of the wood itself; as if the solid station were eternally falling to pieces and pouring away in filth. It took me nearly ten minutes to find a man in the station. When I did he was a dull one, and when I asked him if there was a

train to Paddington his answer was sleepy and vague. As far as I understood him, he said there would be a train in half an hour. I sat down and lit a cigar and waited, watching the last tail of the tattered sunset and listening to the everlasting rain. It may have been in half an hour or less, but a train came rather slowly into the station. It was an unnaturally dark train; I could not see a light anywhere in the long black body of it; and I could not see any guard running beside it. I was reduced to walking up to the engine and calling out to the stoker to ask if the train was going to London. "Well – yes, sir," he said, with an unaccountable kind of reluctance. "It is going to London; but – " It was just starting, and I jumped into the first carriage; it was pitch dark. I sat there smoking and wondering, as we steamed through the continually darkening landscape, lined with desolate poplars, until we slowed down and stopped, irrationally, in the middle of a field. I heard a heavy noise as of some one clambering off the train, and a dark, ragged head suddenly put itself into my window. "Excuse me, sir," said the stoker, "but I think, perhaps – well, perhaps you ought to know – there's a dead man in this train."

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Had I been a true artist, a person of exquisite susceptibilities and nothing else, I should have been bound, no doubt, to be finally overwhelmed with this sensational touch, and to have insisted on getting out and walking. As it was, I regret to say, I

expressed myself politely, but firmly, to the effect that I didn't care particularly if the train took me to Paddington. But when the train had started with its unknown burden I did do one thing, and do it quite instinctively, without stopping to think, or to think more than a flash. I threw away my cigar. Something that is as old as man and has to do with all mourning and ceremonial told me to do it. There was something unnecessarily horrible, it seemed to me, in the idea of there being only two men in that train, and one of them dead and the other smoking a cigar. And as the red and gold of the butt end of it faded like a funeral torch trampled out at some symbolic moment of a procession, I realised how immortal ritual is. I realised (what is the origin and essence of all ritual) that in the presence of those sacred riddles about which we can say nothing it is more decent merely to do something. And I realised that ritual will always mean throwing away something; DESTROYING our corn or wine upon the altar of our gods.

When the train panted at last into Paddington Station I sprang out of it with a suddenly released curiosity. There was a barrier and officials guarding the rear part of the train; no one was allowed to press towards it. They were guarding and hiding something; perhaps death in some too shocking form, perhaps something like the Merstham matter, so mixed up with human mystery and wickedness that the land has to give it a sort of sanctity; perhaps something worse than either. I went out gladly enough into the streets and saw the lamps shining on the laughing faces. Nor have I ever known from that day to this into

what strange story I wandered or what frightful thing was my companion in the dark.

IV. The Perfect Game

We have all met the man who says that some odd things have happened to him, but that he does not really believe that they were supernatural. My own position is the opposite of this. I believe in the supernatural as a matter of intellect and reason, not as a matter of personal experience. I do not see ghosts; I only see their inherent probability. But it is entirely a matter of the mere intelligence, not even of the motions; my nerves and body are altogether of this earth, very earthy. But upon people of this temperament one weird incident will often leave a peculiar impression. And the weirdest circumstance that ever occurred to me occurred a little while ago. It consisted in nothing less than my playing a game, and playing it quite well for some seventeen consecutive minutes. The ghost of my grandfather would have astonished me less.

On one of these blue and burning afternoons I found myself, to my inexpressible astonishment, playing a game called croquet. I had imagined that it belonged to the epoch of Leach and Anthony Trollope, and I had neglected to provide myself with those very long and luxuriant side whiskers which are really essential to such a scene. I played it with a man whom we will call Parkinson, and with whom I had a semi-philosophical argument which lasted through the entire contest. It is deeply implanted in my mind that I had the best of the argument; but it is certain and beyond

dispute that I had the worst of the game.

“Oh, Parkinson, Parkinson!” I cried, patting him affectionately on the head with a mallet, “how far you really are from the pure love of the sport – you who can play. It is only we who play badly who love the Game itself. You love glory; you love applause; you love the earthquake voice of victory; you do not love croquet. You do not love croquet until you love being beaten at croquet. It is we the bunglers who adore the occupation in the abstract. It is we to whom it is art for art’s sake. If we may see the face of Croquet herself (if I may so express myself) we are content to see her face turned upon us in anger. Our play is called amateurish; and we wear proudly the name of amateur, for amateurs is but the French for Lovers. We accept all adventures from our Lady, the most disastrous or the most dreary. We wait outside her iron gates (I allude to the hoops), vainly essaying to enter. Our devoted balls, impetuous and full of chivalry, will not be confined within the pedantic boundaries of the mere croquet ground. Our balls seek honour in the ends of the earth; they turn up in the flower-beds and the conservatory; they are to be found in the front garden and the next street. No, Parkinson! The good painter has skill. It is the bad painter who loves his art. The good musician loves being a musician, the bad musician loves music. With such a pure and hopeless passion do I worship croquet. I love the game itself. I love the parallelogram of grass marked out with chalk or tape, as if its limits were the frontiers of my sacred Fatherland, the four seas of Britain. I love the mere swing of the

mallets, and the click of the balls is music. The four colours are to me sacramental and symbolic, like the red of martyrdom, or the white of Easter Day. You lose all this, my poor Parkinson. You have to solace yourself for the absence of this vision by the paltry consolation of being able to go through hoops and to hit the stick.”

And I waved my mallet in the air with a graceful gaiety.

“Don’t be too sorry for me,” said Parkinson, with his simple sarcasm. “I shall get over it in time. But it seems to me that the more a man likes a game the better he would want to play it. Granted that the pleasure in the thing itself comes first, does not the pleasure of success come naturally and inevitably afterwards? Or, take your own simile of the Knight and his Lady-love. I admit the gentleman does first and foremost want to be in the lady’s presence. But I never yet heard of a gentleman who wanted to look an utter ass when he was there.”

“Perhaps not; though he generally looks it,” I replied. “But the truth is that there is a fallacy in the simile, although it was my own. The happiness at which the lover is aiming is an infinite happiness, which can be extended without limit. The more he is loved, normally speaking, the jollier he will be. It is definitely true that the stronger the love of both lovers, the stronger will be the happiness. But it is not true that the stronger the play of both croquet players the stronger will be the game. It is logically possible – (follow me closely here, Parkinson!) – it is logically possible, to play croquet too well to enjoy it at all. If you could

put this blue ball through that distant hoop as easily as you could pick it up with your hand, then you would not put it through that hoop any more than you pick it up with your hand; it would not be worth doing. If you could play unerringly you would not play at all. The moment the game is perfect the game disappears.”

“I do not think, however,” said Parkinson, “that you are in any immediate danger of effecting that sort of destruction. I do not think your croquet will vanish through its own faultless excellence. You are safe for the present.”

I again caressed him with the mallet, knocked a ball about, wired myself, and resumed the thread of my discourse.

The long, warm evening had been gradually closing in, and by this time it was almost twilight. By the time I had delivered four more fundamental principles, and my companion had gone through five more hoops, the dusk was verging upon dark.

“We shall have to give this up,” said Parkinson, as he missed a ball almost for the first time, “I can’t see a thing.”

“Nor can I,” I answered, “and it is a comfort to reflect that I could not hit anything if I saw it.”

With that I struck a ball smartly, and sent it away into the darkness towards where the shadowy figure of Parkinson moved in the hot haze. Parkinson immediately uttered a loud and dramatic cry. The situation, indeed, called for it. I had hit the right ball.

Stunned with astonishment, I crossed the gloomy ground, and hit my ball again. It went through a hoop. I could not see the

hoop; but it was the right hoop. I shuddered from head to foot.

Words were wholly inadequate, so I slouched heavily after that impossible ball. Again I hit it away into the night, in what I supposed was the vague direction of the quite invisible stick. And in the dead silence I heard the stick rattle as the ball struck it heavily.

I threw down my mallet. "I can't stand this," I said. "My ball has gone right three times. These things are not of this world."

"Pick your mallet up," said Parkinson, "have another go."

"I tell you I daren't. If I made another hoop like that I should see all the devils dancing there on the blessed grass."

"Why devils?" asked Parkinson; "they may be only fairies making fun of you. They are sending you the 'Perfect Game,' which is no game."

I looked about me. The garden was full of a burning darkness, in which the faint glimmers had the look of fire. I stepped across the grass as if it burnt me, picked up the mallet, and hit the ball somewhere – somewhere where another ball might be. I heard the dull click of the balls touching, and ran into the house like one pursued.

V. The Extraordinary Cabman

From time to time I have introduced into this newspaper column the narration of incidents that have really occurred. I do not mean to insinuate that in this respect it stands alone among newspaper columns. I mean only that I have found that my meaning was better expressed by some practical parable out of daily life than by any other method; therefore I propose to narrate the incident of the extraordinary cabman, which occurred to me only three days ago, and which, slight as it apparently is, aroused in me a moment of genuine emotion bordering upon despair.

On the day that I met the strange cabman I had been lunching in a little restaurant in Soho in company with three or four of my best friends. My best friends are all either bottomless sceptics or quite uncontrollable believers, so our discussion at luncheon turned upon the most ultimate and terrible ideas. And the whole argument worked out ultimately to this: that the question is whether a man can be certain of anything at all. I think he can be certain, for if (as I said to my friend, furiously brandishing an empty bottle) it is impossible intellectually to entertain certainty, what is this certainty which it is impossible to entertain? If I have never experienced such a thing as certainty I cannot even say that a thing is not certain. Similarly, if I have never experienced such a thing as green I cannot even say that my nose is not green. It may be as green as possible for all I know, if I have really no

experience of greenness. So we shouted at each other and shook the room; because metaphysics is the only thoroughly emotional thing. And the difference between us was very deep, because it was a difference as to the object of the whole thing called broad-mindedness or the opening of the intellect. For my friend said that he opened his intellect as the sun opens the fans of a palm tree, opening for opening's sake, opening infinitely for ever. But I said that I opened my intellect as I opened my mouth, in order to shut it again on something solid. I was doing it at the moment. And as I truly pointed out, it would look uncommonly silly if I went on opening my mouth infinitely, for ever and ever.

...

Now when this argument was over, or at least when it was cut short (for it will never be over), I went away with one of my companions, who in the confusion and comparative insanity of a General Election had somehow become a member of Parliament, and I drove with him in a cab from the corner of Leicester-square to the members' entrance of the House of Commons, where the police received me with a quite unusual tolerance. Whether they thought that he was my keeper or that I was his keeper is a discussion between us which still continues.

It is necessary in this narrative to preserve the utmost exactitude of detail. After leaving my friend at the House I took the cab on a few hundred yards to an office in Victoria-street

which I had to visit. I then got out and offered him more than his fare. He looked at it, but not with the surly doubt and general disposition to try it on which is not unknown among normal cabmen. But this was no normal, perhaps, no human, cabman. He looked at it with a dull and infantile astonishment, clearly quite genuine. "Do you know, sir," he said, "you've only given me 1s.8d?" I remarked, with some surprise, that I did know it. "Now you know, sir," said he in a kindly, appealing, reasonable way, "you know that ain't the fare from Euston." "Euston," I repeated vaguely, for the phrase at that moment sounded to me like China or Arabia. "What on earth has Euston got to do with it?" "You hailed me just outside Euston Station," began the man with astonishing precision, "and then you said –" "What in the name of Tartarus are you talking about?" I said with Christian forbearance; "I took you at the south-west corner of Leicester-square." "Leicester-square," he exclaimed, loosening a kind of cataract of scorn, "why we ain't been near Leicester-square to-day. You hailed me outside Euston Station, and you said –" "Are you mad, or am I?" I asked with scientific calm.

I looked at the man. No ordinary dishonest cabman would think of creating so solid and colossal and creative a lie. And this man was not a dishonest cabman. If ever a human face was heavy and simple and humble, and with great big blue eyes protruding like a frog's, if ever (in short) a human face was all that a human face should be, it was the face of that resentful and respectful cabman. I looked up and down the street; an

unusually dark twilight seemed to be coming on. And for one second the old nightmare of the sceptic put its finger on my nerve. What was certainty? Was anybody certain of anything? Heavens! to think of the dull rut of the sceptics who go on asking whether we possess a future life. The exciting question for real scepticism is whether we possess a past life. What is a minute ago, rationalistically considered, except a tradition and a picture? The darkness grew deeper from the road. The cabman calmly gave me the most elaborate details of the gesture, the words, the complex but consistent course of action which I had adopted since that remarkable occasion when I had hailed him outside Euston Station. How did I know (my sceptical friends would say) that I had not hailed him outside Euston. I was firm about my assertion; he was quite equally firm about his. He was obviously quite as honest a man as I, and a member of a much more respectable profession. In that moment the universe and the stars swung just a hair's breadth from their balance, and the foundations of the earth were moved. But for the same reason that I believe in Democracy, for the same reason that I believe in free will, for the same reason that I believe in fixed character of virtue, the reason that could only be expressed by saying that I do not choose to be a lunatic, I continued to believe that this honest cabman was wrong, and I repeated to him that I had really taken him at the corner of Leicester-square. He began with the same evident and ponderous sincerity, "You hailed me outside Euston Station, and you said –"

And at this moment there came over his features a kind of frightful transfiguration of living astonishment, as if he had been lit up like a lamp from the inside. "Why, I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "I beg your pardon. I beg your pardon. You took me from Leicester-square. I remember now. I beg your pardon." And with that this astonishing man let out his whip with a sharp crack at his horse and went trundling away. The whole of which interview, before the banner of St. George I swear, is strictly true.

...

I looked at the strange cabman as he lessened in the distance and the mists. I do not know whether I was right in fancying that although his face had seemed so honest there was something unearthly and demoniac about him when seen from behind. Perhaps he had been sent to tempt me from my adherence to those sanities and certainties which I had defended earlier in the day. In any case it gave me pleasure to remember that my sense of reality, though it had rocked for an instant, had remained erect.

VI. An Accident

Some time ago I wrote in these columns an article called "The Extraordinary Cabman." I am now in a position to contribute my experience of a still more extraordinary cab. The extraordinary thing about the cab was that it did not like me; it threw me out violently in the middle of the Strand. If my friends who read the DAILY NEWS are as romantic (and as rich) as I take them to be, I presume that this experience is not uncommon. I suppose that they are all being thrown out of cabs, all over London. Still, as there are some people, virginal and remote from the world, who have not yet had this luxurious experience, I will give a short account of the psychology of myself when my hansom cab ran into the side of a motor omnibus, and I hope hurt it.

I do not need to dwell on the essential romance of the hansom cab – that one really noble modern thing which our age, when it is judged, will gravely put beside the Parthenon. It is really modern in that it is both secret and swift. My particular hansom cab was modern in these two respects; it was also very modern in the fact that it came to grief. But it is also English; it is not to be found abroad; it belongs to a beautiful, romantic country where nearly everybody is pretending to be richer than they are, and acting as if they were. It is comfortable, and yet it is reckless; and that combination is the very soul of England. But although I had always realised all these good qualities in a hansom cab, I had not

experienced all the possibilities, or, as the moderns put it, all the aspects of that vehicle. My enunciation of the merits of a hansom cab had been always made when it was the right way up. Let me, therefore, explain how I felt when I fell out of a hansom cab for the first and, I am happy to believe, the last time. Polycrates threw one ring into the sea to propitiate the Fates. I have thrown one hansom cab into the sea (if you will excuse a rather violent metaphor) and the Fates are, I am quite sure, propitiated. Though I am told they do not like to be told so.

I was driving yesterday afternoon in a hansom cab down one of the sloping streets into the Strand, reading one of my own admirable articles with continual pleasure, and still more continual surprise, when the horse fell forward, scrambled a moment on the scraping stones, staggered to his feet again, and went forward. The horses in my cabs often do this, and I have learnt to enjoy my own articles at any angle of the vehicle. So I did not see anything at all odd about the way the horse went on again. But I saw it suddenly in the faces of all the people on the pavement. They were all turned towards me, and they were all struck with fear suddenly, as with a white flame out of the sky. And one man half ran out into the road with a movement of the elbow as if warding off a blow, and tried to stop the horse. Then I knew that the reins were lost, and the next moment the horse was like a living thunder-bolt. I try to describe things exactly as they seemed to me; many details I may have missed or mis-stated; many details may have, so to speak, gone mad in the race down

the road. I remember that I once called one of my experiences narrated in this paper "A Fragment of Fact." This is, at any rate, a fragment of fact. No fact could possibly be more fragmentary than the sort of fact that I expected to be at the bottom of that street.

...

I believe in preaching to the converted; for I have generally found that the converted do not understand their own religion. Thus I have always urged in this paper that democracy has a deeper meaning than democrats understand; that is, that common and popular things, proverbs, and ordinary sayings always have something in them unrealised by most who repeat them. Here is one. We have all heard about the man who is in momentary danger, and who sees the whole of his life pass before him in a moment. In the cold, literal, and common sense of words, this is obviously a thundering lie. Nobody can pretend that in an accident or a mortal crisis he elaborately remembered all the tickets he had ever taken to Wimbledon, or all the times that he had ever passed the brown bread and butter.

But in those few moments, while my cab was tearing towards the traffic of the Strand, I discovered that there is a truth behind this phrase, as there is behind all popular phrases. I did really have, in that short and shrieking period, a rapid succession of a number of fundamental points of view. I had, so to speak,

about five religions in almost as many seconds. My first religion was pure Paganism, which among sincere men is more shortly described as extreme fear. Then there succeeded a state of mind which is quite real, but for which no proper name has ever been found. The ancients called it Stoicism, and I think it must be what some German lunatics mean (if they mean anything) when they talk about Pessimism. It was an empty and open acceptance of the thing that happens – as if one had got beyond the value of it. And then, curiously enough, came a very strong contrary feeling – that things mattered very much indeed, and yet that they were something more than tragic. It was a feeling, not that life was unimportant, but that life was much too important ever to be anything but life. I hope that this was Christianity. At any rate, it occurred at the moment when we went crash into the omnibus.

It seemed to me that the hansom cab simply turned over on top of me, like an enormous hood or hat. I then found myself crawling out from underneath it in attitudes so undignified that they must have added enormously to that great cause to which the Anti-Puritan League and I have recently dedicated ourselves. I mean the cause of the pleasures of the people. As to my demeanour when I emerged, I have two confessions to make, and they are both made merely in the interests of mental science. The first is that whereas I had been in a quite pious frame of mind the moment before the collision, when I got to my feet and found I had got off with a cut or two I began (like St. Peter) to curse and to swear. A man offered me a newspaper or something that

I had dropped. I can distinctly remember consigning the paper to a state of irremediable spiritual ruin. I am very sorry for this now, and I apologise both to the man and to the paper. I have not the least idea what was the meaning of this unnatural anger; I mention it as a psychological confession. It was immediately followed by extreme hilarity, and I made so many silly jokes to the policeman that he disgraced himself by continual laughter before all the little boys in the street, who had hitherto taken him seriously.

...

There is one other odd thing about the matter which I also mention as a curiosity of the human brain or deficiency of brain. At intervals of about every three minutes I kept on reminding the policeman that I had not paid the cabman, and that I hoped he would not lose his money. He said it would be all right, and the man would appear. But it was not until about half an hour afterwards that it suddenly struck me with a shock intolerable that the man might conceivably have lost more than half a crown; that he had been in danger as well as I. I had instinctively regarded the cabman as something uplifted above accidents, a god. I immediately made inquiries, and I am happy to say that they seemed to have been unnecessary.

But henceforward I shall always understand with a darker and more delicate charity those who take tythe of mint, and anise,

and cumin, and neglect the weightier matters of the law; I shall remember how I was once really tortured with owing half a crown to a man who might have been dead. Some admirable men in white coats at the Charing Cross Hospital tied up my small injury, and I went out again into the Strand. I felt upon me even a kind of unnatural youth; I hungered for something untried. So to open a new chapter in my life I got into a hansom cab.

VII. The Advantages of Having One Leg

A friend of mine who was visiting a poor woman in bereavement and casting about for some phrase of consolation that should not be either insolent or weak, said at last, "I think one can live through these great sorrows and even be the better. What wears one is the little worries." "That's quite right, mum," answered the old woman with emphasis, "and I ought to know, seeing I've had ten of 'em." It is, perhaps, in this sense that it is most true that little worries are most wearing. In its vaguer significance the phrase, though it contains a truth, contains also some possibilities of self-deception and error. People who have both small troubles and big ones have the right to say that they find the small ones the most bitter; and it is undoubtedly true that the back which is bowed under loads incredible can feel a faint addition to those loads; a giant holding up the earth and all its animal creation might still find the grasshopper a burden. But I am afraid that the maxim that the smallest worries are the worst is sometimes used or abused by people, because they have nothing but the very smallest worries. The lady may excuse herself for reviling the crumpled rose leaf by reflecting with what extraordinary dignity she would wear the crown of thorns – if she had to. The gentleman may permit himself to curse the dinner

and tell himself that he would behave much better if it were a mere matter of starvation. We need not deny that the grasshopper on man's shoulder is a burden; but we need not pay much respect to the gentleman who is always calling out that he would rather have an elephant when he knows there are no elephants in the country. We may concede that a straw may break the camel's back, but we like to know that it really is the last straw and not the first.

I grant that those who have serious wrongs have a real right to grumble, so long as they grumble about something else. It is a singular fact that if they are sane they almost always do grumble about something else. To talk quite reasonably about your own quite real wrongs is the quickest way to go off your head. But people with great troubles talk about little ones, and the man who complains of the crumpled rose leaf very often has his flesh full of the thorns. But if a man has commonly a very clear and happy daily life then I think we are justified in asking that he shall not make mountains out of molehills. I do not deny that molehills can sometimes be important. Small annoyances have this evil about them, that they can be more abrupt because they are more invisible; they cast no shadow before, they have no atmosphere. No one ever had a mystical premonition that he was going to tumble over a hassock. William III. died by falling over a molehill; I do not suppose that with all his varied abilities he could have managed to fall over a mountain. But when all this is allowed for, I repeat that we may ask a

happy man (not William III.) to put up with pure inconveniences, and even make them part of his happiness. Of positive pain or positive poverty I do not here speak. I speak of those innumerable accidental limitations that are always falling across our path – bad weather, confinement to this or that house or room, failure of appointments or arrangements, waiting at railway stations, missing posts, finding unpunctuality when we want punctuality, or, what is worse, finding punctuality when we don't. It is of the poetic pleasures to be drawn from all these that I sing – I sing with confidence because I have recently been experimenting in the poetic pleasures which arise from having to sit in one chair with a sprained foot, with the only alternative course of standing on one leg like a stork – a stork is a poetic simile; therefore I eagerly adopted it.

To appreciate anything we must always isolate it, even if the thing itself symbolise something other than isolation. If we wish to see what a house is it must be a house in some uninhabited landscape. If we wish to depict what a man really is we must depict a man alone in a desert or on a dark sea sand. So long as he is a single figure he means all that humanity means; so long as he is solitary he means human society; so long as he is solitary he means sociability and comradeship. Add another figure and the picture is less human – not more so. One is company, two is none. If you wish to symbolise human building draw one dark tower on the horizon; if you wish to symbolise light let there be no star in the sky. Indeed, all through that strangely lit season

which we call our day there is but one star in the sky – a large, fierce star which we call the sun. One sun is splendid; six suns would be only vulgar. One Tower Of Giotto is sublime; a row of Towers of Giotto would be only like a row of white posts. The poetry of art is in beholding the single tower; the poetry of nature in seeing the single tree; the poetry of love in following the single woman; the poetry of religion in worshipping the single star. And so, in the same pensive lucidity, I find the poetry of all human anatomy in standing on a single leg. To express complete and perfect leggishness the leg must stand in sublime isolation, like the tower in the wilderness. As Ibsen so finely says, the strongest leg is that which stands most alone.

This lonely leg on which I rest has all the simplicity of some Doric column. The students of architecture tell us that the only legitimate use of a column is to support weight. This column of mine fulfils its legitimate function. It supports weight. Being of an animal and organic consistency, it may even improve by the process, and during these few days that I am thus unequally balanced, the helplessness or dislocation of the one leg may find compensation in the astonishing strength and classic beauty of the other leg. Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson in Mr. George Meredith's novel might pass by at any moment, and seeing me in the stork-like attitude would exclaim, with equal admiration and a more literal exactitude, "He has a leg." Notice how this famous literary phrase supports my contention touching this isolation of any admirable thing. Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson, wishing to

make a clear and perfect picture of human grace, said that Sir Willoughby Patterne had a leg. She delicately glossed over and concealed the clumsy and offensive fact that he had really two legs. Two legs were superfluous and irrelevant, a reflection, and a confusion. Two legs would have confused Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson like two Monuments in London. That having had one good leg he should have another – this would be to use vain repetitions as the Gentiles do. She would have been as much bewildered by him as if he had been a centipede.

All pessimism has a secret optimism for its object. All surrender of life, all denial of pleasure, all darkness, all austerity, all desolation has for its real aim this separation of something so that it may be poignantly and perfectly enjoyed. I feel grateful for the slight sprain which has introduced this mysterious and fascinating division between one of my feet and the other. The way to love anything is to realise that it might be lost. In one of my feet I can feel how strong and splendid a foot is; in the other I can realise how very much otherwise it might have been. The moral of the thing is wholly exhilarating. This world and all our powers in it are far more awful and beautiful than even we know until some accident reminds us. If you wish to perceive that limitless felicity, limit yourself if only for a moment. If you wish to realise how fearfully and wonderfully God's image is made, stand on one leg. If you want to realise the splendid vision of all visible things – wink the other eye.

VIII. The End of the World

For some time I had been wandering in quiet streets in the curious town of Besançon, which stands like a sort of peninsula in a horse-shoe of river. You may learn from the guide books that it was the birthplace of Victor Hugo, and that it is a military station with many forts, near the French frontier. But you will not learn from guide books that the very tiles on the roofs seem to be of some quainter and more delicate colour than the tiles of all the other towns of the world; that the tiles look like the little clouds of some strange sunset, or like the lustrous scales of some strange fish. They will not tell you that in this town the eye cannot rest on anything without finding it in some way attractive and even elvish, a carved face at a street corner, a gleam of green fields through a stunted arch, or some unexpected colour for the enamel of a spire or dome.

...

Evening was coming on and in the light of it all these colours so simple and yet so subtle seemed more and more to fit together and make a fairy tale. I sat down for a little outside a café with a row of little toy trees in front of it, and presently the driver of a fly (as we should call it) came to the same place.

He was one of those very large and dark Frenchmen, a type not common but yet typical of France; the Rabelaisian Frenchman, huge, swarthy, purple-faced, a walking wine-barrel; he was a sort of Southern Falstaff, if one can imagine Falstaff anything but English. And, indeed, there was a vital difference, typical of two nations. For while Falstaff would have been shaking with hilarity like a huge jelly, full of the broad farce of the London streets, this Frenchman was rather solemn and dignified than otherwise – as if pleasure were a kind of pagan religion. After some talk which was full of the admirable civility and equality of French civilisation, he suggested without either eagerness or embarrassment that he should take me in his fly for an hour's ride in the hills beyond the town. And though it was growing late I consented; for there was one long white road under an archway and round a hill that dragged me like a long white cord. We drove through the strong, squat gateway that was made by Romans, and I remember the coincidence like a sort of omen that as we passed out of the city I heard simultaneously the three sounds which are the trinity of France. They make what some poet calls "a tangled trinity," and I am not going to disentangle it. Whatever those three things mean, how or why they co-exist; whether they can be reconciled or perhaps are reconciled already; the three sounds I heard then by an accident all at once make up the French mystery. For the brass band in the Casino gardens behind me was playing with a sort of passionate levity some ramping tune from a Parisian comic opera, and while this was going on I heard

also the bugles on the hills above, that told of terrible loyalties and men always arming in the gate of France; and I heard also, fainter than these sounds and through them all, the Angelus.

...

After this coincidence of symbols I had a curious sense of having left France behind me, or, perhaps, even the civilised world. And, indeed, there was something in the landscape wild enough to encourage such a fancy. I have seen perhaps higher mountains, but I have never seen higher rocks; I have never seen height so near, so abrupt and sensational, splinters of rock that stood up like the spires of churches, cliffs that fell sudden and straight as Satan fell from heaven. There was also a quality in the ride which was not only astonishing, but rather bewildering; a quality which many must have noticed if they have driven or ridden rapidly up mountain roads. I mean a sense of gigantic gyration, as of the whole earth turning about one's head. It is quite inadequate to say that the hills rose and fell like enormous waves. Rather the hills seemed to turn about me like the enormous sails of a windmill, a vast wheel of monstrous archangelic wings. As we drove on and up into the gathering purple of the sunset this dizziness increased, confounding things above with things below. Wide walls of wooded rock stood out above my head like a roof. I stared at them until I fancied that I was staring down at a wooded plain. Below me steeps of green

swept down to the river. I stared at them until I fancied that they swept up to the sky. The purple darkened, night drew nearer; it seemed only to cut clearer the chasms and draw higher the spires of that nightmare landscape. Above me in the twilight was the huge black hulk of the driver, and his broad, blank back was as mysterious as the back of Death in Watts' picture. I felt that I was growing too fantastic, and I sought to speak of ordinary things. I called out to the driver in French, "Where are you taking me?" and it is a literal and solemn fact that he answered me in the same language without turning around, "To the end of the world."

I did not answer. I let him drag the vehicle up dark, steep ways, until I saw lights under a low roof of little trees and two children, one oddly beautiful, playing at ball. Then we found ourselves filling up the strict main street of a tiny hamlet, and across the wall of its inn was written in large letters, LE BOUT DU MONDE – the end of the world.

The driver and I sat down outside that inn without a word, as if all ceremonies were natural and understood in that ultimate place. I ordered bread for both of us, and red wine, that was good but had no name. On the other side of the road was a little plain church with a cross on top of it and a cock on top of the cross. This seemed to me a very good end of the world; if the story of the world ended here it ended well. Then I wondered whether I myself should really be content to end here, where most certainly there were the best things of Christendom – a church and children's games and decent soil and a tavern for men to

talk with men. But as I thought a singular doubt and desire grew slowly in me, and at last I started up.

“Are you not satisfied?” asked my companion. “No,” I said, “I am not satisfied even at the end of the world.”

Then, after a silence, I said, “Because you see there are two ends of the world. And this is the wrong end of the world; at least the wrong one for me. This is the French end of the world. I want the other end of the world. Drive me to the other end of the world.”

“The other end of the world?” he asked. “Where is that?”

“It is in Walham Green,” I whispered hoarsely. “You see it on the London omnibuses. ‘World’s End and Walham Green.’ Oh, I know how good this is; I love your vineyards and your free peasantry, but I want the English end of the world. I love you like a brother, but I want an English cabman, who will be funny and ask me what his fare ‘is.’ Your bugles stir my blood, but I want to see a London policeman. Take, oh, take me to see a London policeman.”

He stood quite dark and still against the end of the sunset, and I could not tell whether he understood or not. I got back into his carriage.

“You will understand,” I said, “if ever you are an exile even for pleasure. The child to his mother, the man to his country, as a countryman of yours once said. But since, perhaps, it is rather too long a drive to the English end of the world, we may as well drive back to Besançon.”

Only as the stars came out among those immortal hills I wept
for Walham Green.

IX. In the Place de La Bastille

On the first of May I was sitting outside a café in the Place de la Bastille in Paris staring at the exultant column, crowned with a capering figure, which stands in the place where the people destroyed a prison and ended an age. The thing is a curious example of how symbolic is the great part of human history. As a matter of mere material fact, the Bastille when it was taken was not a horrible prison; it was hardly a prison at all. But it was a symbol, and the people always go by a sure instinct for symbols; for the Chinaman, for instance, at the last General Election, or for President Kruger's hat in the election before; their poetic sense is perfect. The Chinaman with his pigtail is not an idle flippancy. He does typify with a compact precision exactly the thing the people resent in African policy, the alien and grotesque nature of the power of wealth, the fact that money has no roots, that it is not a natural and familiar power, but a sort of airy and evil magic calling monsters from the ends of the earth. The people hate the mine owner who can bring a Chinaman flying across the sea, exactly as the people hated the wizard who could fetch a flying dragon through the air. It was the same with Mr. Kruger's hat. His hat (that admirable hat) was not merely a joke. It did symbolise, and symbolise extremely well, the exact thing which our people at that moment regarded with impatience and venom; the old-fashioned, dingy, Republican simplicity, the unbeautiful dignity

of the bourgeois, and the heavier truisms of political morality. No; the people are sometimes wrong on the practical side of politics; they are never wrong on the artistic side.

...

So it was, certainly, with the Bastille. The destruction of the Bastille was not a reform; it was something more important than a reform. It was an iconoclasm; it was the breaking of a stone image. The people saw the building like a giant looking at them with a score of eyes, and they struck at it as at a carved fact. For of all the shapes in which that immense illusion called materialism can terrify the soul, perhaps the most oppressive are big buildings. Man feels like a fly, an accident, in the thing he has himself made. It requires a violent effort of the spirit to remember that man made this confounding thing and man could unmake it. Therefore the mere act of the ragged people in the street taking and destroying a huge public building has a spiritual, a ritual meaning far beyond its immediate political results. It is a religious service. If, for instance, the Socialists were numerous or courageous enough to capture and smash up the Bank of England, you might argue for ever about the inutility of the act, and how it really did not touch the root of the economic problem in the correct manner. But mankind would never forget it. It would change the world.

Architecture is a very good test of the true strength of a

society, for the most valuable things in a human state are the irrevocable things – marriage, for instance. And architecture approaches nearer than any other art to being irrevocable, because it is so difficult to get rid of. You can turn a picture with its face to the wall; it would be a nuisance to turn that Roman cathedral with its face to the wall. You can tear a poem to pieces; it is only in moments of very sincere emotion that you tear a town-hall to pieces. A building is akin to dogma; it is insolent, like a dogma. Whether or no it is permanent, it claims permanence like a dogma. People ask why we have no typical architecture of the modern world, like impressionism in painting. Surely it is obviously because we have not enough dogmas; we cannot bear to see anything in the sky that is solid and enduring, anything in the sky that does not change like the clouds of the sky. But along with this decision which is involved in creating a building, there goes a quite similar decision in the more delightful task of smashing one. The two of necessity go together. In few places have so many fine public buildings been set up as here in Paris, and in few places have so many been destroyed. When people have finally got into the horrible habit of preserving buildings, they have got out of the habit of building them. And in London one mingles, as it were, one's tears because so few are pulled down.

...

As I sat staring at the column of the Bastille, inscribed to Liberty and Glory, there came out of one corner of the square (which, like so many such squares, was at once crowded and quiet) a sudden and silent line of horsemen. Their dress was of a dull blue, plain and prosaic enough, but the sun set on fire the brass and steel of their helmets; and their helmets were carved like the helmets of the Romans. I had seen them by twos and threes often enough before. I had seen plenty of them in pictures toiling through the snows of Friedland or roaring round the squares at Waterloo. But now they came file after file, like an invasion, and something in their numbers, or in the evening light that lit up their faces and their crests, or something in the reverie into which they broke, made me inclined to spring to my feet and cry out, "The French soldiers!" There were the little men with the brown faces that had so often ridden through the capitals of Europe as coolly as they now rode through their own. And when I looked across the square I saw that the two other corners were choked with blue and red; held by little groups of infantry. The city was garrisoned as against a revolution.

Of course, I had heard all about the strike, chiefly from a baker. He said he was not going to "Chomer." I said, "Qu'est-ce que c'est que le chome?" He said, "Ils ne veulent pas travailler." I said, "Ni moi non plus," and he thought I was a class-conscious

collectivist proletarian. The whole thing was curious, and the true moral of it one not easy for us, as a nation, to grasp, because our own faults are so deeply and dangerously in the other direction. To me, as an Englishman (personally steeped in the English optimism and the English dislike of severity), the whole thing seemed a fuss about nothing. It looked like turning out one of the best armies in Europe against ordinary people walking about the street. The cavalry charged us once or twice, more or less harmlessly. But, of course, it is hard to say how far in such criticisms one is assuming the French populace to be (what it is not) as docile as the English. But the deeper truth of the matter tingled, so to speak, through the whole noisy night. This people has a natural faculty for feeling itself on the eve of something – of the Bartholomew or the Revolution or the Commune or the Day of Judgment. It is this sense of crisis that makes France eternally young. It is perpetually pulling down and building up, as it pulled down the prison and put up the column in the Place de La Bastille. France has always been at the point of dissolution. She has found the only method of immortality. She dies daily.

X. On Lying in Bed

Lying in bed would be an altogether perfect and supreme experience if only one had a coloured pencil long enough to draw on the ceiling. This, however, is not generally a part of the domestic apparatus on the premises. I think myself that the thing might be managed with several pails of Aspinall and a broom. Only if one worked in a really sweeping and masterly way, and laid on the colour in great washes, it might drip down again on one's face in floods of rich and mingled colour like some strange fairy rain; and that would have its disadvantages. I am afraid it would be necessary to stick to black and white in this form of artistic composition. To that purpose, indeed, the white ceiling would be of the greatest possible use; in fact, it is the only use I think of a white ceiling being put to.

But for the beautiful experiment of lying in bed I might never have discovered it. For years I have been looking for some blank spaces in a modern house to draw on. Paper is much too small for any really allegorical design; as Cyrano de Bergerac says, "Il me faut des géants." But when I tried to find these fine clear spaces in the modern rooms such as we all live in I was continually disappointed. I found an endless pattern and complication of small objects hung like a curtain of fine links between me and my desire. I examined the walls; I found them to my surprise to be already covered with wallpaper, and I found the wallpaper

to be already covered with uninteresting images, all bearing a ridiculous resemblance to each other. I could not understand why one arbitrary symbol (a symbol apparently entirely devoid of any religious or philosophical significance) should thus be sprinkled all over my nice walls like a sort of small-pox. The Bible must be referring to wallpapers, I think, when it says, "Use not vain repetitions, as the Gentiles do." I found the Turkey carpet a mass of unmeaning colours, rather like the Turkish Empire, or like the sweetmeat called Turkish Delight. I do not exactly know what Turkish Delight really is; but I suppose it is Macedonian Massacres. Everywhere that I went forlornly, with my pencil or my paint brush, I found that others had unaccountably been before me, spoiling the walls, the curtains, and the furniture with their childish and barbaric designs.

...

Nowhere did I find a really clear space for sketching until this occasion when I prolonged beyond the proper limit the process of lying on my back in bed. Then the light of that white heaven broke upon my vision, that breadth of mere white which is indeed almost the definition of Paradise, since it means purity and also means freedom. But alas! like all heavens, now that it is seen it is found to be unattainable; it looks more austere and more distant than the blue sky outside the window. For my proposal to paint on it with the bristly end of a broom has been discouraged

– never mind by whom; by a person debarred from all political rights – and even my minor proposal to put the other end of the broom into the kitchen fire and turn it to charcoal has not been conceded. Yet I am certain that it was from persons in my position that all the original inspiration came for covering the ceilings of palaces and cathedrals with a riot of fallen angels or victorious gods. I am sure that it was only because Michael Angelo was engaged in the ancient and honourable occupation of lying in bed that he ever realized how the roof of the Sistine Chapel might be made into an awful imitation of a divine drama that could only be acted in the heavens.

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