

29: FIVE HUNDRED AND FIFTY-FIVE

Life is full of a ceaseless shower of small coincidences: too small to be worth mentioning except for a special purpose, often too trifling even to be noticed, any more than we notice one snowflake falling on another. It is this that lends a frightful plausibility to all false doctrines and evil fads. There are always such crowds of accidental arguments for anything. If I said suddenly that historical truth is generally told by red-haired men, I have no doubt that ten minutes' reflection (in which I decline to indulge) would provide me with a handsome list of instances in support of it. I remember a riotous argument about Bacon and Shakespeare in which I offered quite at random to show that Lord Rosebery had written the works of Mr. W. B. Yeats. No sooner had I said the words than a torrent of coincidences rushed upon my mind. I pointed out, for instance, that Mr. Yeats's chief work was "The Secret Rose." This may easily be paraphrased as "The Quiet or Modest Rose"; and so, of course, as the Primrose. A second after I saw the same suggestion in the combination of "rose" and "bury." If I had pursued the matter, who knows but I might have been a raving maniac by this time.

We trip over these trivial repetitions and exactitudes at every turn, only they are too trivial even for conversation. A man named Williams did walk into a strange house and murder a man named Williamson; it sounds like a sort of infanticide. A journalist of my acquaintance did move quite unconsciously from a place called Overstrand to a place called Overroads. When he had made this escape he was very properly pursued by a voting card from Battersea, on which a political agent named Burn asked him to vote for a political candidate named Burns. And when he did so another coincidence happened to him: rather a spiritual than a material coincidence; a mystical thing, a matter of a magic number.

For a sufficient number of reasons, the man I know went up to vote in Battersea in a drifting and even dubious frame of mind. As the train slid through swampy woods and sullen skies there came into his empty mind those idle and yet awful questions which come when the mind is empty. Fools make cosmic systems out of them; knaves make profane poems out of them; men try to crush them like an ugly lust. Religion is only the responsible reinforcement of common courage and common sense. Religion only sets up the normal mood of health against the hundred moods of disease.

But there is this about such ghastly empty enigmas, that they always have an answer to the obvious answer, the reply offered by daily reason. Suppose a man's children have gone swimming; suppose he is suddenly throttled by the senseless-fear that they are drowned. The obvious answer is, "Only one man in a thousand

has his children drowned." But a deeper voice (deeper, being as deep as hell) answers, "And why should not you--be the thousandth man?" What is true of tragic doubt is true also of trivial doubt. The voter's guardian devil said to him, "If you don't vote to-day you can do fifteen things which will quite certainly do some good somewhere, please a friend, please a child, please a maddened publisher. And what good do you expect to do by voting? You don't think your man will get in by one vote, do you?" To this he knew the answer of common sense, "But if everybody said that, nobody would get in at all." And then there came that deeper voice from Hades, "But you are not settling what everybody shall do, but what one person on one occasion shall do. If this afternoon you went your way about more solid things, how would it matter and who would ever know?" Yet somehow the voter drove on blindly through the blackening London roads, and found somewhere a tedious polling station and recorded his tiny vote.

The politician for whom the voter had voted got in by five hundred and fifty-five votes. The voter read this next morning at breakfast, being in a more cheery and expansive mood, and found something very fascinating not merely in the fact of the majority, but even in the form of it. There was something symbolic about the three exact figures; one felt it might be a sort of motto or cipher. In the great book of seals and cloudy symbols there is just such a thundering repetition. Six hundred and sixty-six was the Mark of the Beast. Five hundred and fifty-five is the Mark of the Man; the triumphant tribune and citizen. A number so symmetrical as that really rises out of the region of science into the region of art. It is a pattern, like the egg-and-dart ornament or the Greek key. One might edge a wall-paper or fringe a robe with a recurring decimal. And while the voter luxuriated in this light exactitude of the numbers, a thought crossed his mind and he almost leapt to his feet. "Why, good heavens!" he cried. "I won that election; and it was won by one vote! But for me it would have been the despicable, broken-backed, disjointed, inharmonious figure five hundred and fifty-four. The whole artistic point would have vanished. The Mark of the Man would have disappeared from history. It was I who with a masterful hand seized the chisel and carved the hieroglyph--complete and perfect. I clutched the trembling hand of Destiny when it was about to make a dull square four and forced it to make a nice curly five. Why, but for me the Cosmos would have lost a coincidence!" After this outburst the voter sat down and finished his breakfast.