

## **CHAPTER IV - THE PHILOSOPHY OF SIGHT-SEEING**

Various cultivated critics told me that I should find Jerusalem disappointing; and I fear it will disappoint them that I am not disappointed. Of the city as a city I shall try to say something elsewhere; but the things which these critics have especially in mind are at once more general and more internal. They concern something tawdry, squalid or superstitious about the shrines and those who use them. Now the mistake of critics is not that they criticise the world; it is that they never criticise themselves. They compare the alien with the ideal; but they do not at the same time compare themselves with the ideal; rather they identify themselves with the ideal. I have met a tourist who had seen the great Pyramid, and who told me that the Pyramid looked small. Believe me, the tourist looked much smaller. There is indeed another type of traveller, who is not at all small in the moral mental sense, who will confess such disappointments quite honestly, as a piece of realism about his own sensations. In that case he generally suffers from the defect of most realists; that of not being realistic enough. He does not really think out his own impressions thoroughly; or he would generally find they are not so disappointing after all. A humorous soldier told me that he came from Derbyshire, and that he did not think much of the Pyramid because it was not so tall as the Peak. I pointed out to him that he was really offering the tallest possible tribute to a work of man in comparing it to a mountain; even if he thought it was a rather small mountain. I suggested that it was a rather large tombstone. I appealed to those with whom I debated in that district, as to whether they would not be faintly surprised to find such a monument during their quiet rambles in a country churchyard. I asked whether each one of them, if he had such a tombstone in the family, would not feel it natural, if hardly necessary, to point it out; and that with a certain pride. The same principle of the higher realism applies to those who are disappointed with the sight of the Sphinx. The Sphinx really exceeds expectations because it escapes expectations. Monuments commonly look impressive when they are high and often when they are distant. The Sphinx is really unexpected, because it is found suddenly in a hollow, and unnaturally near. Its face is turned away; and the effect is as creepy as coming into a room apparently empty, and finding somebody as still as the furniture. Or it is as if one found a lion couchant in that hole in the sand; as indeed the buried part of the monster is in the form of a couchant lion. If it was a real lion it would hardly be less arresting merely because it was near; nor could the first emotion of the traveller be adequately described as disappointment. In such cases there is generally some profit in looking at the monument a second time, or even at our own sensations a second time. So I reasoned, striving with wild critics in the wilderness; but the only part of the debate which is relevant here can be expressed in the statement that I do think the Pyramid big, for the

deep and simple reason that it is bigger than I am. I delicately suggested to those who were disappointed in the Sphinx that it was just possible that the Sphinx was disappointed in them. The Sphinx has seen Julius Caesar; it has very probably seen St. Francis, when he brought his flaming charity to Egypt; it has certainly looked, in the first high days of the revolutionary victories, on the face of the young Napoleon. Is it not barely possible, I hinted to my friends and fellow-tourists, that after these experiences, it might be a little depressed at the sight of you and me? But as I say, I only reintroduce my remarks in connection with a greater matter than these dead things of the desert; in connection with a tomb to which even the Pyramids are but titanic lumber, and a presence greater than the Sphinx, since it is not only a riddle but an answer.

Before I go on to deeper defences of any such cult or culture, I wish first to note a sort of test for the first impressions of an ordinary tourist like myself, to whom much that is really full of an archaic strength may seem merely stiff, or much that really deals with a deep devotional psychology may seem merely distorted. In short I would put myself in the position of the educated Englishman who does quite honestly receive a mere impression of idolatry. Incidentally, I may remark, it is the educated Englishman who is the idolater. It is he who only reverences the place, and does not reverence the reverence for the place. It is he who is supremely concerned about whether a mere object is old or new, or whether a mere ornament is gold or gilt. In other words, it is he who values the visible things rather than the invisible; for no sane man can doubt that invisible things are vivid to the priests and pilgrims of these shrines.

In the midst of emotions that have moved the whole world out of its course, girt about with crowds who will die or do murder for a definition, the educated English gentleman in his blindness bows down to wood and stone. For the only thing wrong about that admirable man is that he is blind about himself.

No man will really attempt to describe his feelings, when he first stood at the gateway of the grave of Christ. The only record relevant here is that I did not feel the reaction, not to say repulsion, that many seem to have felt about its formal surroundings.

Either I was particularly fortunate or others are particularly fastidious. The guide who showed me the Sepulchre was not particularly noisy or profane or palpably mercenary; he was rather more than less sympathetic than the same sort of man who might have shown me Westminster Abbey or Stratford-on-Avon. He was a small, solemn, owlish old man, a Roman Catholic in religion; but so far from deserving the charge of not knowing the Bible, he deserved rather a gentle remonstrance against his assumption that nobody else knew it. If there was anything to smile at, in associations so sacred, it was the elaborate simplicity

with which he told the first facts of the Gospel story, as if he were evangelising a savage. Anyhow, he did not talk like a cheap-jack at a stall; but rather like a teacher in an infant school. He made it very clear that Jesus Christ was crucified in case any one should suppose he was beheaded; and often stopped in his narrative to repeat that the hero of these events was Jesus Christ, lest we should fancy it was Nebuchadnezzar or the Duke of Wellington. I do not in the least mind being amused at this; but I have no reason whatever for doubting that he may have been a better man than I. I gave him what I should have given a similar guide in my own country; I parted from him as politely as from one of my own countrymen. I also, of course, gave money, as is the custom, to the various monastic custodians of the shrines; but I see nothing surprising about that. I am not quite so ignorant as not to know that without the monastic brotherhoods, supported by such charity, there would not by this time be anything to see in Jerusalem at all. There was only one class of men whose consistent concern was to watch these things, from the age of heathens and heresies to the age of Turks and tourists; and I am certainly not going to sneer at them for doing no practical work, and then refuse to pay them for the practical work they do. For the rest, even the architectural defacement is overstated, the church was burned down and rebuilt in a bad and modern period; but the older parts, especially the Crusaders' porch, are as grand as the men who made them. The incongruities there are, are those of local colour. In connection, by the way, with what I said about beasts of burden, I mounted a series of steep staircases to the roof of the convent beside the Holy Sepulchre. When I got to the top I found myself in the placid presence of two camels. It would be curious to meet two cows on the roof of a village church. Nevertheless it is the only moral of the chapter interpolated here, that we can meet things quite as curious in our own country.

When the critic says that Jerusalem is disappointing he generally means that the popular worship there is weak and degraded, and especially that the religious art is gaudy and grotesque. In so far as there is any kind of truth in this, it is still true that the critic seldom sees the whole truth. What is wrong with the critic is that he does not criticise himself. He does not honestly compare what is weak, in this particular world of ideas, with what is weak in his own world of ideas. I will take an example from my own experience, and in a manner at my own expense. If I have a native heath it is certainly Kensington High Street, off which stands the house of my childhood. I grew up in that thorough-fare which Mr. Max Beerbohm, with his usual easy exactitude of phrase, has described as "dapper, with a leaning to the fine arts." Dapper was never perhaps a descriptive term for myself; but it is quite true that I owe a certain taste for the arts to the sort of people among whom I was brought up. It is also true that such a taste, in various forms and degrees, was fairly common in the world which may be symbolised as Kensington High Street. And whether or no it is a tribute, it is certainly a truth that most people with an artistic turn in Kensington High Street

would have been very much shocked, in their sense of propriety, if they had seen the popular shrines of Jerusalem; the sham gold, the garish colours, the fantastic tales and the feverish tumult. But what I want such people to do, and what they never do, is to turn this truth round. I want them to imagine, not a Kensington aesthete walking down David Street to the Holy Sepulchre, but a Greek monk or a Russian pilgrim walking down Kensington High Street to Kensington Gardens. I will not insist here on all the hundred plagues of plutocracy that would really surprise such a Christian peasant; especially that curse of an irreligious society (unknown in religious societies, Moslem as well as Christian) the detestable denial of all dignity to the poor. I am not speaking now of moral but of artistic things; of the concrete arts and crafts used in popular worship. Well, my imaginary pilgrim would walk past Kensington Gardens till his sight was blasted by a prodigy. He would either fall on his knees as before a shrine, or cover his face as from a sacrilege. He would have seen the Albert Memorial. There is nothing so conspicuous in Jerusalem. There is nothing so gilded and gaudy in Jerusalem. Above all, there is nothing in Jerusalem that is on so large a scale and at the same time in so gay and glittering a style. My simple Eastern Christian would almost certainly be driven to cry aloud, "To what superhuman God was this enormous temple erected? I hope it is Christ; but I fear it is Antichrist." Such, he would think, might well be the great and golden image of the Prince of the World, set up in this great open space to receive the heathen prayers and heathen sacrifices of a lost humanity. I fancy he would feel a desire to be at home again amid the humble shrines of Zion. I really cannot imagine what he would feel, if he were told that the gilded idol was neither a god nor a demon, but a petty German prince who had some slight influence in turning us into the tools of Prussia.

Now I myself, I cheerfully admit, feel that enormity in Kensington Gardens as something quite natural. I feel it so because I have been brought up, so to speak, under its shadow; and stared at the graven images of Raphael and Shakespeare almost before I knew their names; and long before I saw anything funny in their figures being carved, on a smaller scale, under the feet of Prince Albert. I even took a certain childish pleasure in the gilding of the canopy and spire, as if in the golden palace of what was, to Peter Pan and all children, something of a fairy garden. So do the Christians of Jerusalem take pleasure, and possibly a childish pleasure, in the gilding of a better palace, besides a nobler garden, ornamented with a somewhat worthier aim. But the point is that the people of Kensington, whatever they might think about the Holy Sepulchre, do not think anything at all about the Albert Memorial. They are quite unconscious of how strange a thing it is; and that simply because they are used to it. The religious groups in Jerusalem are also accustomed to their coloured background; and they are surely none the worse if they still feel rather more of the meaning of the colours. It may be said that they retain their childish illusion about their Albert Memorial. I confess I

cannot manage to regard Palestine as a place where a special curse was laid on those who can become like little children. And I never could understand why such critics who agree that the kingdom of heaven is for children, should forbid it to be the only sort of kingdom that children would really like; a kingdom with real crowns of gold or even of tinsel. But that is another question, which I shall discuss in another place; the point is for the moment that such people would be quite as much surprised at the place of tinsel in our lives as we are at its place in theirs. If we are critical of the petty things they do to glorify great things, they would find quite as much to criticise (as in Kensington Gardens) in the great things we do to glorify petty things. And if we wonder at the way in which they seem to gild the lily, they would wonder quite as much at the way we gild the weed.

There are countless other examples of course of this principle of self-criticism, as the necessary condition of all criticism. It applies quite as much, for instance, to the other great complaint which my Kensington friend would make after the complaint about paltry ornament; the complaint about what is commonly called backsheesh. Here again there is really something to complain of; though much of the fault is not due to Jerusalem, but rather to London and New York. The worst superstition of Jerusalem, like the worst profligacy of Paris, is a thing so much invented for Anglo-Saxons that it might be called an Anglo-Saxon institution. But here again the critic could only really judge fairly if he realised with what abuses at home he ought really to compare this particular abuse abroad. He ought to imagine, for example, the feelings of a religious Russian peasant if he really understood all the highly-coloured advertisements covering High Street Kensington Station. It is really not so repulsive to see the poor asking for money as to see the rich asking for more money. And advertisement is the rich asking for more money. A man would be annoyed if he found himself in a mob of millionaires, all holding out their silk hats for a penny; or all shouting with one voice, "Give me money." Yet advertisement does really assault the eye very much as such a shout would assault the ear. "Budge's Boots are the Best" simply means "Give me money"; "Use Seraphic Soap" simply means "Give me money." It is a complete mistake to suppose that common people make our towns commonplace, with unsightly things like advertisements. Most of those whose wares are thus placarded everywhere are very wealthy gentlemen with coronets and country seats, men who are probably very particular about the artistic adornment of their own homes. They disfigure their towns in order to decorate their houses. To see such men crowding and clamouring for more wealth would really be a more unworthy sight than a scramble of poor guides; yet this is what would be conveyed by all the glare of gaudy advertisement to anybody who saw and understood it for the first time. Yet for us who are familiar with it all that gaudy advertisement fades into a background, just as the gaudy oriental patterns fade into a background for those oriental priests and pilgrims. Just as the

innocent Kensington gentleman is wholly unaware that his black top hat is relieved against a background, or encircled as by a halo, of a yellow hoarding about mustard, so is the poor guide sometimes unaware that his small doings are dark against the fainter and more fading gold in which are traced only the humbler haloes of the Twelve Apostles.

But all these misunderstandings are merely convenient illustrations and introductions, leading up to the great fact of the main misunderstanding. It is a misunderstanding of the whole history and philosophy of the position; that is the whole of the story and the whole moral of the story. The critic of the Christianity of Jerusalem emphatically manages to miss the point. The lesson he ought to learn from it is one which the Western and modern man needs most, and does not even know that he needs. It is the lesson of constancy. These people may decorate their temples with gold or with tinsel; but their tinsel has lasted longer than our gold. They may build things as costly and ugly as the Albert Memorial; but the thing remains a memorial, a thing of immortal memory. They do not build it for a passing fashion and then forget it, or try hard to forget it. They may paint a picture of a saint as gaudy as any advertisement of a soap; but one saint does not drive out another saint as one soap drives out another soap. They do not forget their recent idolatries, as the educated English are now trying to forget their very recent idolatry of everything German. These Christian bodies have been in Jerusalem for at least fifteen hundred years. Save for a few years after the time of Constantine and a few years after the First Crusade, they have been practically persecuted all the time. At least they have been under heathen masters whose attitude towards Christendom was hatred and whose type of government was despotism. No man living in the West can form the faintest conception of what it must have been to live in the very heart of the East through the long and seemingly everlasting epoch of Moslem power. A man in Jerusalem was in the centre of the Turkish Empire as a man in Rome was in the centre of the Roman Empire. The imperial power of Islam stretched away to the sunrise and the sunset; westward to the mountains of Spain and eastward towards the wall of China. It must have seemed as if the whole earth belonged to Mahomet to those who in this rocky city renewed their hopeless witness to Christ. What we have to ask ourselves is not whether we happen in all respects to agree with them, but whether we in the same condition should even have the courage to agree with ourselves. It is not a question of how much of their religion is superstition, but of how much of our religion is convention; how much is custom and how much a compromise even with custom; how much a thing made facile by the security of our own society or the success of our own state. These are powerful supports; and the enlightened Englishman, from a cathedral town or a suburban chapel, walks these wild Eastern places with a certain sense of assurance and stability. Even after centuries of Turkish supremacy, such a man feels, he would not have descended to such a credulity. He would not be fighting

for the Holy Fire or wrangling with beggars in the Holy Sepulchre. He would not be hanging fantastic lamps on a pillar peculiar to the Armenians, or peering into the gilded cage that contains the brown Madonna of the Copts. He would not be the dupe of such degenerate fables; God forbid. He would not be grovelling at such grotesque shrines; no indeed. He would be many hundred yards away, decorously bowing towards a more distant city; where, above the only formal and official open place in Jerusalem, the mighty mosaics of the Mosque of Omar proclaim across the valleys the victory and the glory of Mahomet.

That is the real lesson that the enlightened traveller should learn; the lesson about himself. That is the test that should really be put to those who say that the Christianity of Jerusalem is degraded. After a thousand years of Turkish tyranny, the religion of a London fashionable preacher would not be degraded. It would be destroyed. It would not be there at all, to be jeered at by every prosperous tourist out of a train de luxe. It is worth while to pause upon the point; for nothing has been so wholly missed in our modern religious ideals as the ideal of tenacity. Fashion is called progress. Every new fashion is called a new faith. Every faith is a faith which offers everything except faithfulness. It was never so necessary to insist that most of the really vital and valuable ideas in the world, including Christianity, would never have survived at all if they had not survived their own death, even in the sense of dying daily. The ideal was out of date almost from the first day; that is why it is eternal; for whatever is dated is doomed. As for our own society, if it proceeds at its present rate of progress and improvement, no trace or memory of it will be left at all. Some think that this would be an improvement in itself. We have come to live morally, as the Japs live literally, in houses of paper. But they are pavilions made of the morning papers, which have to be burned on the appearance of the evening editions. Well, a thousand years hence the Japs may be ruling in Jerusalem; the modern Japs who no longer live in paper houses, but in sweated factories and slums. They and the Chinese (that much more dignified and democratic people) seem to be about the only people of importance who have not yet ruled Jerusalem. But though we may think the Christian chapels as thin as Japanese tea-houses, they will still be Christian; though we may think the sacred lamps as cheap as Chinese lanterns, they will still be burning before a crucified creator of the world.

But besides this need of making strange cults the test not of themselves but ourselves, the sights of Jerusalem also illustrate the other suggestion about the philosophy of sight-seeing. It is true, as I have suggested, that after all the Sphinx is larger than I am; and on the same principle the painted saints are saintlier than I am, and the patient pilgrims more constant than I am. But it is also true, as in the lesser matter before mentioned, that even those who think the Sphinx small generally do not notice the small things about it. They do not even discover what is interesting about their own disappointment. And similarly even those

who are truly irritated by the unfamiliar fashions of worship in a place like Jerusalem, do not know how to discover what is interesting in the very existence of what is irritating. For instance, they talk of Byzantine decay or barbaric delusion, and they generally go away with an impression that the ritual and symbolism is something dating from the Dark Ages. But if they would really note the details of their surroundings, or even of their sensations, they would observe a rather curious fact about such ornament of such places as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as may really be counted unworthy of them. They would realise that what they would most instinctively reject as superstitious does not date from what they would regard as the ages of superstition. There really are bad pictures but they are not barbaric pictures; they are florid pictures in the last faded realism of the Renaissance. There really is stiff and ungainly decoration, but it is not the harsh or ascetic decoration of a Spanish cloister; it is much more like the pompous yet frivolous decorations of a Parisian hotel. In short, in so far as the shrine has really been defaced it has not been defaced by the Dark Ages, but rather if anything by the Age of Reason. It is the enlightened eighteenth century, which regarded itself as the very noonday of natural culture and common sense, that has really though indirectly laid its disfiguring finger on the dark but dignified Byzantine temple. I do not particularly mind it myself; for in such great matters I do not think taste is the test. But if taste is to be made the test, there is matter for momentary reflection in this fact; for it is another example of the weakness of what may be called fashion. Voltaire, I believe, erected a sort of temple to God in his own garden; and we may be sure that it was in the most exquisite taste of the time. Nothing would have surprised him more than to learn that, fifty years after the success of the French Revolution, almost every freethinker of any artistic taste would think his temple far less artistically admirable than the nearest gargoyles on Notre Dame. Thus it is progress that must be blamed for most of these things: and we ought not to turn away in contempt from something antiquated, but rather recognise with respect and even alarm a sort of permanent man-trap in the idea of being modern. So that the moral of this matter is the same as that of the other; that these things should raise in us, not merely the question of whether we like them, but of whether there is anything very infallible or imperishable about what we like. At least the essentials of these things endure; and if they seem to have remained fixed as effigies, at least they have not faded like fashion-plates.

It has seemed worth while to insert here this note on the philosophy of sight-seeing, however dilatory or disproportionate it may seem. For I am particularly and positively convinced that unless these things can somehow or other be seen in the right historical perspective and philosophical proportion, they are not worth seeing at all. And let me say in conclusion that I can not only respect the sincerity, but understand the sentiments, of a man who says they are not worth seeing at all. Sight-seeing is a far more difficult and disputable matter than



many seem to suppose; and a man refusing it altogether might be a man of sense and even a man of imagination. It was the great Wordsworth who refused to revisit Yarrow; it was only the small Wordsworth who revisited it after all. I remember the first great sight in my own entrance to the Near East, when I looked by accident out of the train going to Cairo, and saw far away across the luminous flats a faint triangular shape; the Pyramids. I could understand a man who had seen it turning his back and retracing his whole journey to his own country and his own home, saying, "I will go no further; for I have seen afar off the last houses of the kings." I can understand a man who had only seen in the distance Jerusalem sitting on the hill going no further and keeping that vision for ever. It would, of course, be said that it was absurd to come at all, and to see so little. To which I answer that in that sense it is absurd to come at all. It is no more fantastic to turn back for such a fancy than it was to come for a similar fancy. A man cannot eat the Pyramids; he cannot buy or sell the Holy City; there can be no practical aspect either of his coming or going. If he has not come for a poetic mood he has come for nothing; if he has come for such a mood, he is not a fool to obey that mood. The way to be really a fool is to try to be practical about unpractical things. It is to try to collect clouds or preserve moonshine like money. Now there is much to be said for the view that to search for a mood is in its nature moonshine. It may be said that this is especially true in the crowded and commonplace conditions in which most sight-seeing has to be done. It may be said that thirty tourists going together to see a tombstone is really as ridiculous as thirty poets going together to write poems about the nightingale. There would be something rather depressing about a crowd of travellers, walking over hill and dale after the celebrated cloud of Wordsworth; especially if the crowd is like the cloud, and moveth all together if it move at all. A vast mob assembled on Salisbury Plain to listen to Shelley's skylark would probably (after an hour or two) consider it a rather subdued sort of skylarking. It may be argued that it is just as illogical to hope to fix beforehand the elusive effects of the works of man as of the works of nature. It may be called a contradiction in terms to expect the unexpected. It may be counted mere madness to anticipate astonishment, or go in search of a surprise. To all of which there is only one answer; that such anticipation is absurd, and such realisation will be disappointing, that images will seem to be idols and idols will seem to be dolls, unless there be some rudiment of such a habit of mind as I have tried to suggest in this chapter. No great works will seem great, and no wonders of the world will seem wonderful, unless the angle from which they are seen is that of historical humility.

One more word may be added of a more practical sort. The place where the most passionate convictions on this planet are concentrated is not one where it will always be wise, even from a political standpoint, to air our plutocratic patronage and our sceptical superiority. Strange scenes have already been enacted round that fane where the Holy Fire bursts forth to declare that Christ is risen; and

whether or no we think the thing holy there is no doubt about it being fiery. Whether or no the superior person is right to expect the unexpected, it is possible that something may be revealed to him that he really does not expect. And whatever he may think about the philosophy of sight-seeing, it is not unlikely that he may see some sights.