

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.

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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.

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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.