

## **XXV. A Cab Ride Across Country**

Sown somewhere far off in the shallow dales of Hertfordshire there lies a village of great beauty, and I doubt not of admirable virtue, but of eccentric and unbalanced literary taste, which asked the present writer to come down to it on Sunday afternoon and give an address.

Now it was very difficult to get down to it at all on Sunday afternoon, owing to the indescribable state into which our national laws and customs have fallen in connection with the seventh day. It is not Puritanism; it is simply anarchy. I should have some sympathy with the Jewish Sabbath, if it were a Jewish Sabbath, and that for three reasons; first, that religion is an intrinsically sympathetic thing; second, that I cannot conceive any religion worth calling a religion without a fixed and material observance; and third, that the particular observance of sitting still and doing no work is one that suits my temperament down to the ground.

But the absurdity of the modern English convention is that it does not let a man sit still; it only perpetually trips him up when it has forced him to walk about. Our Sabbatarianism does not forbid us to ask a man in Battersea to come and talk in Hertfordshire; it only prevents his getting there. I can understand that a deity might be worshipped with joys, with flowers, and fireworks in the old European style. I can understand that a deity might be worshipped with sorrows. But I cannot imagine any deity being worshipped with inconveniences. Let the good Moslem go to Mecca, or let him abide in his tent, according to his feelings for religious symbols. But surely Allah cannot see anything particularly dignified in his servant being misled by the time-table, finding that the old Mecca express is not running, missing his connection at Bagdad, or having to wait three hours in a small side station outside Damascus.

So it was with me on this occasion. I found there was no telegraph service at all to this place; I found there was only one weak thread of train-service. Now if this had been the authority of real English religion, I should have submitted to it at once. If I believed that the telegraph clerk could not send the telegram because he was at that moment rigid in an ecstasy of prayer, I should think all telegrams unimportant in comparison. If I could believe that railway porters when relieved from their duties rushed with passion to the nearest place of worship, I should say that all lectures and everything else ought to give way to such a consideration. I should not complain if the national faith forbade me to make any appointments of labour or self-expression on the Sabbath. But, as it is, it only tells me that I may very probably keep the Sabbath by not keeping the

appointment.

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But I must resume the real details of my tale. I found that there was only one train in the whole of that Sunday by which I could even get within several hours or several miles of the time or place. I therefore went to the telephone, which is one of my favourite toys, and down which I have shouted many valuable, but prematurely arrested, monologues upon art and morals. I remember a mild shock of surprise when I discovered that one could use the telephone on Sunday; I did not expect it to be cut off, but I expected it to buzz more than on ordinary days, to the advancement of our national religion. Through this instrument, in fewer words than usual, and with a comparative economy of epigram, I ordered a taxi-cab to take me to the railway station. I have not a word to say in general either against telephones or taxi-cabs; they seem to me two of the purest and most poetic of the creations of modern scientific civilisation. Unfortunately, when the taxi-cab started, it did exactly what modern scientific civilisation has done--it broke down. The result of this was that when I arrived at King's Cross my only train was gone; there was a Sabbath calm in the station, a calm in the eyes of the porters, and in my breast, if calm at all, if any calm, a calm despair.

There was not, however, very much calm of any sort in my breast on first making the discovery; and it was turned to blinding horror when I learnt that I could not even send a telegram to the organisers of the meeting. To leave my entertainers in the lurch was sufficiently exasperating; to leave them without any intimation was simply low. I reasoned with the official. I said: "Do you really mean to say that if my brother were dying and my mother in this place, I could not communicate with her?" He was a man of literal and laborious mind; he asked me if my brother was dying. I answered that he was in excellent and even offensive health, but that I was inquiring upon a question of principle. What would happen if England were invaded, or if I alone knew how to turn aside a comet or an earthquake. He waved away these hypotheses in the most irresponsible spirit, but he was quite certain that telegrams could not reach this particular village. Then something exploded in me; that element of the outrageous which is the mother of all adventures sprang up ungovernable, and I decided that I would not be a cad merely because some of my remote ancestors had been Calvinists. I would keep my appointment if I lost all my money and all my wits. I went out into the quiet London street, where my quiet London cab was still waiting for its fare in the cold misty morning. I placed myself comfortably in the London cab and told the London driver to drive me to the other end of Hertfordshire. And he did.

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I shall not forget that drive. It was doubtful weather, even in a motor-cab, the thing was possible with any consideration for the driver, not to speak of some slight consideration for the people in the road. I urged the driver to eat and drink something before he started, but he said (with I know not what pride of profession or delicate sense of adventure) that he would rather do it when we arrived--if we ever did. I was by no means so delicate; I bought a varied selection of pork-pies at a little shop that was open (why was that shop open?--it is all a mystery), and ate them as we went along. The beginning was sombre and irritating. I was annoyed, not with people, but with things, like a baby; with the motor for breaking down and with Sunday for being Sunday. And the sight of the northern slums expanded and ennobled, but did not decrease, my gloom: Whitechapel has an Oriental gaudiness in its squalor; Battersea and Camberwell have an indescribable bustle of democracy; but the poor parts of North London... well, perhaps I saw them wrongly under that ashen morning and on that foolish errand.

It was one of those days which more than once this year broke the retreat of winter; a winter day that began too late to be spring. We were already clear of the obstructing crowds and quickening our pace through a borderland of market gardens and isolated public-houses, when the grey showed golden patches and a good light began to glitter on everything. The cab went quicker and quicker. The open land whirled wider and wider; but I did not lose my sense of being battled with and thwarted that I had felt in the thronged slums. Rather the feeling increased, because of the great difficulty of space and time. The faster went the car, the fiercer and thicker I felt the fight.

The whole landscape seemed charging at me--and just missing me. The tall, shining grass went by like showers of arrows; the very trees seemed like lances hurled at my heart, and shaving it by a hair's breadth. Across some vast, smooth valley I saw a beech-tree by the white road stand up little and defiant. It grew bigger and bigger with blinding rapidity. It charged me like a tilting knight, seemed to hack at my head, and pass by. Sometimes when we went round a curve of road, the effect was yet more awful. It seemed as if some tree or windmill swung round to smite like a boomerang. The sun by this time was a blazing fact; and I saw that all Nature is chivalrous and militant. We do wrong to seek peace in Nature; we should rather seek the nobler sort of war; and see all the trees as green banners.

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I gave my address, arriving just when everybody was deciding to leave. When my cab came reeling into the market-place they decided, with evident disappointment, to remain. Over the lecture I draw a veil. When I came back

home I was called to the telephone, and a meek voice expressed regret for the failure of the motor-cab, and even said something about any reasonable payment. "Whom can I pay for my own superb experience? What is the usual charge for seeing the clouds shattered by the sun? What is the market price of a tree blue on the sky-line and then blinding white in the sun? Mention your price for that windmill that stood behind the hollyhocks in the garden. Let me pay you for..." Here it was, I think, that we were cut off.