A Meditation in a New York Hotel

All this must begin with an apology and not an apologia. When I went wandering about the States disguised as a lecturer, I was well aware that I was not sufficiently well disguised to be a spy. I was even in the worst possible position to be a sight-seer. A lecturer to American audiences can hardly be in the holiday mood of a sight-seer. It is rather the audience that is sight-seeing; even if it is seeing a rather melancholy sight. Some say that people come to see the lecturer and not to hear him; in which case it seems rather a pity that he should disturb and distress their minds with a lecture. He might merely display himself on a stand or platform for a stipulated sum; or be exhibited like a monster in a menagerie. The circus elephant is not expected to make a speech. But it is equally true that the circus elephant is not allowed to write a book. His impressions of travel would be somewhat sketchy and perhaps a little over-specialised. In merely travelling from circus to circus he would, so to speak, move in rather narrow circles. Jumbo the great elephant (with whom I am hardly so ambitious as to compare myself), before he eventually went to the Barnum show, passed a considerable and I trust happy part of his life in Regent's Park. But if he had written a book on England, founded on his impressions of the Zoo, it might have been a little disproportionate and even misleading in its version of the flora and fauna of that country. He might imagine that lions and leopards were commoner than they are in our hedgerows and country lanes, or that the head and neck of a giraffe was as native to our landscapes as a village spire. And that is why I apologise in anticipation for a probable lack of proportion in this work. Like the elephant, I may have seen too much of a special enclosure where a special sort of lions are gathered together. I may exaggerate the territorial, as distinct from the vertical space occupied by the spiritual giraffe; for the giraffe may surely be regarded as an example of Uplift, and is even, in a manner of speaking, a high-brow. Above all, I shall probably make generalisations that are much too general; and are insufficient through being exaggerative. To this sort of doubt all my impressions are subject; and among them the negative generalisation with which I shall begin this rambling meditation on American hotels.

In all my American wanderings I never saw such a thing as an inn. They may exist; but they do not arrest the traveller upon every road as they do in England and in Europe. The saloons no longer existed when I was there, owing to the recent reform which restricted intoxicants to the wealthier classes. But we feel that the saloons have been there; if one may so express it, their absence is still present. They remain in the structure of the street and the idiom of the language. But the saloons were not inns. If they had been inns, it would have been far

harder even for the power of modern plutocracy to root them out. There will be a very different chase when the White Hart is hunted to the forests or when the Red Lion turns to bay. But people could not feel about the American saloon as they will feel about the English inns. They could not feel that the Prohibitionist, that vulgar chucker-out, was chucking Chaucer out of the Tabard and Shakespeare out of the Mermaid. In justice to the American Prohibitionists it must be realised that they were not doing quite such desecration; and that many of them felt the saloon a specially poisonous sort of place. They did feel that drinking-places were used only as drug-shops. So they have effected the great reconstruction, by which it will be necessary to use only drug-shops as drinking-places. But I am not dealing here with the problem of Prohibition except in so far as it is involved in the statement that the saloons were in no sense inns. Secondly, of course, there are the hotels. There are indeed. There are hotels toppling to the stars, hotels covering the acreage of villages, hotels in multitudinous number like a mob of Babylonian or Assyrian monuments; but the hotels also are not inns.

Broadly speaking, there is only one hotel in America. The pattern of it, which is a very rational pattern, is repeated in cities as remote from each other as the capitals of European empires. You may find that hotel rising among the red blooms of the warm spring woods of Nebraska, or whitened with Canadian snows near the eternal noise of Niagara. And before touching on this solid and simple pattern itself, I may remark that the same system of symmetry runs through all the details of the interior. As one hotel is like another hotel, so one hotel floor is like another hotel floor. If the passage outside your bedroom door, or hallway as it is called, contains, let us say, a small table with a green vase and a stuffed flamingo, or some trifle of the sort, you may be perfectly certain that there is exactly the same table, vase, and flamingo on every one of the thirty-two landings of that towering habitation. This is where it differs most perhaps from the crooked landings and unexpected levels of the old English inns, even when they call themselves hotels. To me there was something weird, like a magic multiplication, in the exquisite sameness of these suites. It seemed to suggest the still atmosphere of some eerie psychological story. I once myself entertained the notion of a story, in which a man was to be prevented from entering his house (the scene of some crime or calamity) by people who painted and furnished the next house to look exactly like it; the assimilation going to the most fantastic lengths, such as altering the numbering of houses in the street. I came to America and found an hotel fitted and upholstered throughout for the enactment of my phantasmal fraud. I offer the skeleton of my story with all humility to some of the admirable lady writers of detective stories in America, to Miss Carolyn Wells, or Miss Mary Roberts Rhinehart, or Mrs. A. K. Green of the unforgotten Leavenworth Case. Surely it might be possible for the unsophisticated Nimrod K. Moose, of Yellow Dog Flat, to come to New York and be entangled somehow in this net of repetitions or recurrences. Surely something tells me that his beautiful

daughter, the Rose of Red Murder Gulch, might seek for him in vain amid the apparently unmistakable surroundings of the thirty-second floor, while he was being quietly butchered by the floor-clerk on the thirty-third floor, an agent of the Green Claw (that formidable organisation); and all because the two floors looked exactly alike to the virginal Western eye. The original point of my own story was that the man to be entrapped walked into his own house after all, in spite of it being differently painted and numbered, simply because he was absent-minded and used to taking a certain number of mechanical steps. This would not work in the hotel; because a lift has no habits. It is typical of the real tameness of machinery, that even when we talk of a man turning mechanically we only talk metaphorically; for it is something that a mechanism cannot do. But I think there is only one real objection to my story of Mr. Moose in the New York hotel. And that is unfortunately a rather fatal one. It is that far away in the remote desolation of Yellow Dog, among those outlying and outlandish rocks that almost seem to rise beyond the sunset, there is undoubtedly an hotel of exactly the same sort, with all its floors exactly the same.

Anyhow the general plan of the American hotel is commonly the same, and, as I have said, it is a very sound one so far as it goes. When I first went into one of the big New York hotels, the first impression was certainly its bigness. It was called the Biltmore; and I wondered how many national humorists had made the obvious comment of wishing they had built less. But it was not merely the Babylonian size and scale of such things, it was the way in which they are used. They are used almost as public streets, or rather as public squares. My first impression was that I was in some sort of high street or market-place during a carnival or a revolution. True, the people looked rather rich for a revolution and rather grave for a carnival; but they were congested in great crowds that moved slowly like people passing through an overcrowded railway station. Even in the dizzy heights of such a sky-scraper there could not possibly be room for all those people to sleep in the hotel, or even to dine in it. And, as a matter of fact, they did nothing whatever except drift into it and drift out again. Most of them had no more to do with the hotel than I have with Buckingham Palace. I have never been in Buckingham Palace, and I have very seldom, thank God, been in the big hotels of this type that exist in London or Paris. But I cannot believe that mobs are perpetually pouring through the Hotel Cecil or the Savoy in this fashion, calmly coming in at one door and going out of the other. But this fact is part of the fundamental structure of the American hotel; it is built upon a compromise that makes it possible. The whole of the lower floor is thrown open to the public streets and treated as a public square. But above it and all round it runs another floor in the form of a sort of deep gallery, furnished more luxuriously and looking down on the moving mobs beneath. No one is allowed on this floor except the guests or clients of the hotel. As I have been one of them myself, I trust it is not unsympathetic to compare them to active anthropoids who can climb trees, and

so look down in safety on the herds or packs of wilder animals wandering and prowling below. Of course there are modifications of this architectural plan, but they are generally approximations to it; it is the plan that seems to suit the social life of the American cities. There is generally something like a ground floor that is more public, a half-floor or gallery above that is more private, and above that the bulk of the block of bedrooms, the huge hive with its innumerable and identical cells.

The ladder of ascent in this tower is of course the lift, or, as it is called, the elevator. With all that we hear of American hustle and hurry it is rather strange that Americans seem to like more than we do to linger upon long words. And indeed there is an element of delay in their diction and spirit, very little understood, which I may discuss elsewhere. Anyhow they say elevator when we say lift, just as they say automobile when we say motor and stenographer when we say typist, or sometimes (by a slight confusion) typewriter. Which reminds me of another story that never existed, about a man who was accused of having murdered and dismembered his secretary when he had only taken his typing machine to pieces; but we must not dwell on these digressions. The Americans may have another reason for giving long and ceremonious titles to the lift. When first I came among them I had a suspicion that they possessed and practised a new and secret religion, which was the cult of the elevator. I fancied they worshipped the lift, or at any rate worshipped in the lift. The details or data of this suspicion it were now vain to collect, as I have regretfully abandoned it, except in so far as they illustrate the social principles underlying the structural plan of the building. Now an American gentleman invariably takes off his hat in the lift. He does not take off his hat in the hotel, even if it is crowded with ladies. But he always so salutes a lady in the elevator; and this marks the difference of atmosphere. The lift is a room, but the hotel is a street. But during my first delusion, of course, I assumed that he uncovered in this tiny temple merely because he was in church. There is something about the very word elevator that expresses a great deal of his vague but idealistic religion. Perhaps that flying chapel will eventually be ritualistically decorated like a chapel; possibly with a symbolic scheme of wings. Perhaps a brief religious service will be held in the elevator as it ascends; in a few well-chosen words touching the Utmost for the Highest. Possibly he would consent even to call the elevator a lift, if he could call it an uplift. There would be no difficulty, except what I cannot but regard as the chief moral problem of all optimistic modernism. I mean the difficulty of imagining a lift which is free to go up, if it is not also free to go down.

I think I know my American friends and acquaintances too well to apologise for any levity in these illustrations. Americans make fun of their own institutions; and their own journalism is full of such fanciful conjectures. The tall building is itself artistically akin to the tall story. The very word sky-scraper is an admirable

example of an American lie. But I can testify quite as eagerly to the solid and sensible advantages of the symmetrical hotel. It is not only a pattern of vases and stuffed flamingoes; it is also an equally accurate pattern of cupboards and baths. It is a dignified and humane custom to have a bathroom attached to every bedroom; and my impulse to sing the praises of it brought me once at least into a rather quaint complication. I think it was in the city of Dayton; anyhow I remember there was a Laundry Convention going on in the same hotel, in a room very patriotically and properly festooned with the stars and stripes, and doubtless full of promise for the future of laundering. I was interviewed on the roof, within earshot of this debate, and may have been the victim of some association or confusion; anyhow, after answering the usual questions about Labour, the League of Nations, the length of ladies' dresses, and other great matters, I took refuge in a rhapsody of warm and well-deserved praise of American bathrooms. The editor, I understand, running a gloomy eye down the column of his contributor's 'story,' and seeing nothing but metaphysical terms such as justice, freedom, the abstract disapproval of sweating, swindling, and the like, paused at last upon the ablutionary allusion, and his eye brightened. 'That's the only copy in the whole thing,' he said, 'A Bath-Tub in Every Home.' So these words appeared in enormous letters above my portrait in the paper. It will be noted that, like many things that practical men make a great point of, they miss the point. What I had commended as new and national was a bathroom in every bedroom. Even feudal and moss-grown England is not entirely ignorant of an occasional bath-tub in the home. But what gave me great joy was what followed. I discovered with delight that many people, glancing rapidly at my portrait with its prodigious legend, imagined that it was a commercial advertisement, and that I was a very self-advertising commercial traveller. When I walked about the streets, I was supposed to be travelling in bath-tubs. Consider the caption of the portrait, and you will see how similar it is to the true commercial slogan: 'We offer a Bath-Tub in Every Home.' And this charming error was doubtless clinched by the fact that I had been found haunting the outer courts of the temple of the ancient Guild of Lavenders. I never knew how many shared the impression; I regret to say that I only traced it with certainty in two individuals. But I understand that it included the idea that I had come to the town to attend the Laundry Convention, and had made an eloquent speech to that senate, no doubt exhibiting my tubs.

Such was the penalty of too passionate and unrestrained an admiration for American bathrooms; yet the connection of ideas, however inconsequent, does cover the part of social practice for which these American institutions can really be praised. About everything like laundry or hot and cold water there is not only organisation, but what does not always or perhaps often go with it, efficiency. Americans are particular about these things of dress and decorum; and it is a virtue which I very seriously recognise, though I find it very hard to emulate. But with them it is a virtue; it is not a mere convention, still less a mere fashion. It is

really related to human dignity rather than to social superiority. The really glorious thing about the American is that he does not dress like a gentleman; he dresses like a citizen or a civilised man. His Puritanic particularity on certain points is really detachable from any definite social ambitions; these things are not a part of getting into society but merely of keeping out of savagery. Those millions and millions of middling people, that huge middle class especially of the Middle West, are not near enough to any aristocracy even to be sham aristocrats, or to be real snobs. But their standards are secure; and though I do not really travel in a bath-tub, or believe in the bath-tub philosophy and religion, I will not on this matter recoil misanthropically from them: I prefer the tub of Dayton to the tub of Diogenes. On these points there is really something a million times better than efficiency, and that is something like equality.

In short, the American hotel is not America; but it is American. In some respects it is as American as the English inn is English. And it is symbolic of that society in this among other things: that it does tend too much to uniformity; but that that very uniformity disguises not a little natural dignity. The old Romans boasted that their republic was a nation of kings. If we really walked abroad in such a kingdom, we might very well grow tired of the sight of a crowd of kings, of every man with a gold crown on his head or an ivory sceptre in his hand. But it is arguable that we ought not to grow tired of the repetition of crowns and sceptres, any more than of the repetition of flowers and stars. The whole imaginative effort of Walt Whitman was really an effort to absorb and animate these multitudinous modern repetitions; and Walt Whitman would be quite capable of including in his lyric litany of optimism a list of the nine hundred and ninety-nine identical bathrooms. I do not sneer at the generous effort of the giant; though I think, when all is said, that it is a criticism of modern machinery that the effort should be gigantic as well as generous.

While there is so much repetition there is little repose. It is the pattern of a kaleidoscope rather than a wall-paper; a pattern of figures running and even leaping like the figures in a zoetrope. But even in the groups where there was no hustle there was often something of homelessness. I do not mean merely that they were not dining at home; but rather that they were not at home even when dining, and dining at their favourite hotel. They would frequently start up and dart from the room at a summons from the telephone. It may have been fanciful, but I could not help feeling a breath of home, as from a flap or flutter of St. George's Cross, when I first sat down in a Canadian hostelry, and read the announcement that no such telephonic or other summonses were allowed in the dining-room. It may have been a coincidence, and there may be American hotels with this merciful proviso and Canadian hotels without it; but the thing was symbolic even if it was not evidential. I felt as if I stood indeed upon English soil, in a place where people liked to have their meals in peace.

The process of the summons is called 'paging,' and consists of sending a little boy with a large voice through all the halls and corridors of the building, making them resound with a name. The custom is common, of course, in clubs and hotels even in England; but in England it is a mere whisper compared with the wail with which the American page repeats the formula of 'Calling Mr. So and So.' I remember a particularly crowded parterre in the somewhat smoky and oppressive atmosphere of Pittsburg, through which wandered a youth with a voice the like of which I have never heard in the land of the living, a voice like the cry of a lost spirit, saying again and again for ever, 'Carling Mr. Anderson.' One felt that he never would find Mr. Anderson. Perhaps there never had been any Mr. Anderson to be found. Perhaps he and every one else wandered in an abyss of bottomless scepticism; and he was but the victim of one out of numberless nightmares of eternity, as he wandered a shadow with shadows and wailed by impassable streams. This is not exactly my philosophy, but I feel sure it was his. And it is a mood that may frequently visit the mind in the centres of highly active and successful industrial civilisation.

Such are the first idle impressions of the great American hotel, gained by sitting for the first time in its gallery and gazing on its drifting crowds with thoughts equally drifting. The first impression is of something enormous and rather unnatural, an impression that is gradually tempered by experience of the kindliness and even the tameness of so much of that social order. But I should not be recording the sensations with sincerity, if I did not touch in passing the note of something unearthly about that vast system to an insular traveller who sees it for the first time. It is as if he were wandering in another world among the fixed stars; or worse still, in an ideal Utopia of the future.

Yet I am not certain; and perhaps the best of all news is that nothing is really new. I sometimes have a fancy that many of these new things in new countries are but the resurrections of old things which have been wickedly killed or stupidly stunted in old countries. I have looked over the sea of little tables in some light and airy open-air café; and my thoughts have gone back to the plain wooden bench and wooden table that stands solitary and weather-stained outside so many neglected English inns. We talk of experimenting in the French café, as of some fresh and almost impudent innovation. But our fathers had the French café, in the sense of the free-and-easy table in the sun and air. The only difference was that French democracy was allowed to develop its café, or multiply its tables, while English plutocracy prevented any such popular growth. Perhaps there are other examples of old types and patterns, lost in the old oligarchy and saved in the new democracies. I am haunted with a hint that the new structures are not so very new; and that they remind me of something very old. As I look from the balcony floor the crowds seem to float away and the colours to soften

and grow pale, and I know I am in one of the simplest and most ancestral of human habitations. I am looking down from the old wooden gallery upon the courtyard of an inn. This new architectural model, which I have described, is after all one of the oldest European models, now neglected in Europe and especially in England. It was the theatre in which were enacted innumerable picaresque comedies and romantic plays, with figures ranging from Sancho Panza to Sam Weller. It served as the apparatus, like some gigantic toy set up in bricks and timber, for the ancient and perhaps eternal game of tennis. The very terms of the original game were taken from the inn courtyard, and the players scored accordingly as they hit the buttery-hatch or the roof. Singular speculations hover in my mind as the scene darkens and the quadrangle below begins to empty in the last hours of night. Some day perhaps this huge structure will be found standing in a solitude like a skeleton; and it will be the skeleton of the Spotted Dog or the Blue Boar. It will wither and decay until it is worthy at last to be a tavern. I do not know whether men will play tennis on its ground floor, with various scores and prizes for hitting the electric fan, or the lift, or the head waiter. Perhaps the very words will only remain as part of some such rustic game. Perhaps the electric fan will no longer be electric and the elevator will no longer elevate, and the waiter will only wait to be hit. But at least it is only by the decay of modern plutocracy, which seems already to have begun, that the secret of the structure even of this plutocratic palace can stand revealed. And after long years, when its lights are extinguished and only the long shadows inhabit its halls and vestibules, there may come a new noise like thunder; of D'Artagnan knocking at the door.