



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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G.K. CHESTERTON IN RUSSIA

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in London in May 1874. Although he once spoke of himself as a “rollicking journalist,” he was actually a gifted and prolific essayist, novelist, literary critic, poet and Christian apologist, with over 69 books published in his own lifetime and 10 after his death. The most well-known are his “Father Brown” detective novels, popular theological writings, and biographies of authors and historical figures.

Although as a youth he was troubled with thoughts of suicide, Chesterton found the answers to the paradoxes of his life in Christianity and, after converting to Catholicism, became a well-known religious writer. His books: *Orthodoxy*, *Heretics*, and *The Everlasting Man* are still widely read.

Chesterton and his wife Frances enjoyed a long and happy (although childless) marriage, and his exuberant and gregarious personality allowed him to maintain warm friendships with a variety of people. His better known friends included not only like-minded writers such as Hillaire Belloc, but also George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells — with whom he vehemently disagreed.

He often spoke publicly, enormously talented at defending his strong opinions, and was one of the few journalists to oppose the Boer War. In 1930 he defeated Clarence Darrow in a New York debate, “Will the World Return to Religion?” He was a prolific writer against eugenics and advocated a view called “Distributionism,” which he summed up by saying that every man should be allowed to own “three acres and a cow.” Some contemporary writers see him as the father of the “Small is Beautiful” movement, and according to others, a newspaper article of Chesterton’s provoked Mahatma Gandhi into seeking a “genuine” nationalism for India. Chesterton died in 1936.

I. Is Chesterton Worth Reading?

A Preface by Dr. Natalia Trauberg

I have been reading Chesterton almost continually for fifty years and at one time in my life I thought I would go mad without him. They kept telling me that, on the contrary, such a need to read him was a symptom of madness, but I did not surrender. Certainly, I noticed that sometimes his writings were very bad and sometimes (which is more important) he is biased — for example, he is delighted with all that there is in Catholic countries or in “common people,” but it is not for this that people who love him turn to him. Many times they (we) try to explain what is good about him, but some time ago it occurred to me that a normal person would not read him.

The word “normal” has several meanings — one of them is “practical, bold, fit,” another is “sceptical, bitter, deprived of illusions.” It is easy to say that Chesterton did not write for them, or more precisely — he did write for them, but in order to change and awaken them. The world where God rules and decides can be seen only by him who dares to be as unprotected and grateful as a child. Chesterton’s world is just like this, and he hopes that once having entered it, a reader who does not know joy will become like a little child. Those who have known this experience love him faithfully. But are such people numerous?

It seems to me that it is particularly difficult to love him nowadays. Literature has become very strange. There is Scylla — unbearable copy-book maxims — and there is Charybdis¹ — complete bawdiness, very boring no matter if it is high-brow or inferior. Maybe books have had their day as Marshall McLuhan thought? (By the way, as a young man he quite accidentally met Chesterton, and this saved him from despair.) Chesterton himself wrote in his Dickens that “inventions in prose may turn out to be temporary,” that people used to live without them in past times and would again be able to do without them. However, books still exist and somewhere between Scylla and Charybdis (probably closer to Scylla) dangles the outdated and incongruous author.

¹ Scylla and Charybdis: Classical monsters who guarded the sea-portal between the Mediterranean and Black Seas. If a traveller went too far to one side, he was caught by Scylla, if too far to the other, by Charybdis.

And still I don't believe this. Can it be accidental that some, even if few, people have been saved reading him? Some of them solicitously publish at a loss his collected works which will never, as it seems, come to an end in both academic journals and enthusiastic ones ("Gilbert!"). For them, as well as for me, his is the world of paradise, not of cardboard, and he himself is a wise man and a prophet — not a naïve and importunate moralist whom it would be ridiculous even to talk about after Joyce, the Bloomsberrians, and those who carried on their tradition.

And what is even stranger: he has been continuously published here in Russia ever since the opportunity appeared to go beyond the limits of a small set of "Fishers," "Ponds," and "Browns."² Two five-volume and two three-volume editions were published, a few thick one-volumes and numerous thin books. It means that someone needs them, doesn't it? There is enough detective stuff besides his, and it is not only his detective stories that are being published. Can he be awakening people more often than it seems?

It is impossible to calculate this, but there is another argument: tired of both Scylla and Charybdis, readers all over the world are falling upon simple children's books.... Chesterton must be right, "a human being is a human being." Neither artificial angels can be made of us, nor retarded teenagers interested only in half-crazy indecencies. People are more normal than this (using the third meaning of the word). They will not do without justice, mercy, simplicity and the beauty that a good child can see "in the white light of a miracle." Then Chesterton is not only worth reading — we need to read him very much.³

² Fisher, Pond and Brown: Three characters from Chesterton's books: *The Man Who Knew too Much*, 1922; *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond*, 1935, and the many-volumed *Father Brown* detective stories.

³ Translated from *Chesterton*, a 3 vol. Russian edition of Chesterton's works, Profobrazovaniye Ltd., Moscow, 2001.

II. Out of Samizdat: Fifty Years of Chesterton in Russia



Dr. Natalia Trauberg is a legend among contemporary Russians who love 20th century English Christian literature. Since her first reading of Chesterton in 1944, Natalia has translated most of his major works — for forty years as forbidden samizdat manuscripts in Soviet Russia. The mother of six children, Natalia is now a tonsured nun, known to her friends as Sister Joanna. She continues to give radio broadcasts and inspires young translators eager to follow her lead.

When we first entered her flat, the hall was filled with young people taking leave: one a translator of Charles Williams, a second working on C.S. Lewis' "Allegory of Love," and a third bursting through the door with a book of Chesterton's essays in hand. The impression of being caught between two worlds (a Russian third-floor walk-up sparkling with the inspiration of England's greatest 20th century Christian writers) was so incongruous that we knew that Chesterton himself would heartily approve.

RTE: Natalia, when was Chesterton first introduced to Russians?

NATALIA: The main period was the '20's, although there are earlier traces of him. One day an elderly woman sent me her grandmother's Russian translation of Chesterton. Her grandmother had discovered him and made translations even before the 1917 Russian Revolution. This is an interesting subject in itself because we can suppose that in 1910 people who read a lot and loved England and English literature noticed Chesterton — he was incredibly popular in England at that time.

In 1918, the well-known Russian poet Nicholas Gumilyov was introduced to a certain Lady Duff. Gumilyov must have thought that the most prominent and popular writer in England was Chesterton, because he told her an insane thing; that poets should rule nations, and that Chesterton should have the British crown. Chesterton must have heard about it and been taken aback for, twenty years later, he mentioned in his autobiography about "the crazy Russian poet." Obviously Chesterton was known among the very

noble and well-educated, English-speaking Russians, like this woman who translated a bit of him in 1910, but there were only two stories of his actually published in Russian before 1920.

RTE: His real popularity came after the revolution?

NATALIA: Yes. In the early '20's cinema people and some left-wing writers took a liking to him. Some of them were soon disappointed, but those were the "clever" ones. Everyone else loved him as a modern English eccentric. Eisenstein, the best known Russian film-director of the first half of the 20th century, marked the passages in Chesterton's writings which seemed interesting to him. For example, Chesterton writes: "Why do we say 'a white man' when in reality he is pinkish-yellowish-beige? Why do we say, 'white wine,' when it is yellowish?" He is trying to awaken our vision, but to what? To make us humbly rejoice at having been given such a world as a gift, to be grateful for it, and to understand that we often think in cliches...

RTE: Did these writers and cinema people understand his depth?

NATALIA: Eisenstein understood only this idea about cliches. They thought in the '20's that Chesterton's writings would help them to blow up the old cliches and replace them with their own inventions. Young eccentrics thought that he was the farthest left of the whole left-wing, absolutely wild, and existing only to be wild. Many years later when some of them found out that he was Christian, and not just Christian, but a very gospel-like one, they were disgusted. One of them said to me about one of his religious works, "I don't know why he wrote this or why you translated it."

RTE: They only took what they wanted.

NATALIA: Yes, and the reaction of such people can be explained like this. In his book, *Heretics*, Chesterton writes: "The secret of life is in laughter and humility." These people understood very well about the laughter but had no idea of humility. They formed a cult of self-satisfied might, which Chesterton hated. This was not the horrible force we had in the 1930's, but some idiotic teenage strength. It all looked like teenage psychological problems: belief in unflinching strength, a freedom in which everything is permitted... "I am original and free, and more clever than anyone." They thought that Chesterton was something like this.

These writers of the '20's who so admired Chesterton thought that it was their duty to savour these cruel things, but Chesterton would have wept over them and prayed for them. And they all had to pay for their idiocy afterwards.... Chesterton did not like this thinking, and he has a remarkable essay entitled, "The Futurist," where he speaks about just this — people who invariably sing the praises of cruelty but are themselves pitifully small, avoiding every danger. He disliked them almost as much as he disliked cruel worldly ladies, but they did not know this, as his poems and essays could not reach Russia. His English fiction was available, but only "Father Brown" was translated then, and about him they thought: how funny that a priest should be so eccentric!

Chesterton's role here was very strange. For twenty or even thirty years, until 1958 he was a half-hidden treasure (not altogether forbidden, but not entirely permitted) of the '20's culture.

RTE: When did you come to love him yourself?

NATALIA: I will tell you. What I first heard about him was that he was a humorist, and that his verses were funny. So, I looked through my father's "Brown," (this was 1944, when I was 16) and enjoyed the mixture of coziness and surprising freedom. I read such a lot of English and Russian books at that time that everything was mixed up in my head, but I remember being happy that there was such a country as England, and that it was homey and free there. I saw that "religious" and "free" were the same things.

My real love for him, though, began in 1946 when I was a university undergraduate and read the "Return of Don Quixote." As a student I observed the people I met as follows: I gave them Chesterton to read, and those who liked him, I knew, were closer to me than those who didn't. They were people of a different freedom of soul, unprogrammed people, and I am very grateful to them for this. There were about five such people in my university.

RTE: What attracted you to him particularly?

NATALIA: God, or an angel. I don't know. I was reading many books at that time, but suddenly I saw that he was my author, my writer, that he was for me. What caught me was his beauty, and then... his purity. That tremendous purity. I was afraid of his angelic purity. It was very important for me because my family was very Bohemian. This was in 1946, an awful time, but

when I took up his book I found paradise there. I couldn't live without him. I was almost mad from all these calamities and he saved me.

It was only the Bible and Chesterton, although we couldn't read his essays then; they weren't allowed because they are religious literature. They were impossible to get, especially in St. Petersburg; but the Father Brown stories were available and some other fiction. When I moved to Moscow in 1953, with great difficulty I got his essays and tracts and I began to translate them into Russian.



RTE: Were you the first Chesterton translator in Russia?

NATALIA: Yes. It was *samizdat*, of course; but he was well known in *samizdat* in church circles.

RTE: Which of his works have you translated?

NATALIA: Four novels: *The Man Who Was Thursday*, *The Flying Inn*, *The Ball and the Cross*, and *Don Quixote*. Then, the essays and religious works: *The Everlasting Man*, *St. Thomas*, *St. Francis*, *Dickens: The Last of the Great Men*. Then half of *Orthodoxy* — one of my pupils translated the other half because I didn't have time. *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* was translated by Muravyov, and *ManAlive* by Korney Chukovsky. I also translated the autobiography.

Now I am translating something different: *The Secret Garden*, by Frances Burnett. I made a list a few years ago of my favorite stories.

RTE: Please tell us.

NATALIA: They are *Lady Jane* by Jameson (from the 19th century), *The Little Princess* by Frances Burnett, the four Louisa Alcott books, *The Eighth Day* by Thornton Wilder, *The Flying Inn* by Chesterton (which I translated), then something by Wodehouse, and something by Dickens.

RTE: Did you ever teach at an institute or university?

NATALIA: Yes, but for only a year. I wasn't allowed to stay because I had two

great faults: I was a believer and I was the daughter of a cosmopolitan. In 1940's Russia, a cosmopolitan was a Jew. My father was Jewish, although he converted to Orthodoxy before he died. He liked the American cinema and his lectures reflected that, so it was a problem. My mother's parents were Russian-Ukrainian and very religious, which was also considered bad. So, they threw me out, and then I began translating samizdat. It was a miracle, really, because it was terrible working in a Soviet institute.



RTE: What kind of influence does Chesterton have in Russia today? Are there Chesterton societies? Do young people attend?

NATALIA: In our church we have a literary group of young people, a kind of institute, and we also had a Chesterton society, organized on his anniversary in 1974. But only myself and Averintsev are alive. The brothers Muravyov are dead and the philosopher Yurii Schrader is dead, and a young Lithuanian who belonged is also dead. So, the society is at an end. There was also a tomcat, Kirsha, (*laughter*) who was the chairman of the society, the president.

He is dead also. So, they are with Chesterton now, most of the society, and only Averintsev and me, old and not very strong, are here. But the group of young people at our church give talks, and I still do broadcasting lectures on Chesterton and other Christian literature.

RTE: Do you still teach?

NATALIA: Yes, For many years I had a three-year course on English Christian literature ("From St. Patrick to C.S. Lewis") which I gave to both private students and those at our institute. Now I am teaching English history.

RTE: Were you ever able to visit England?

NATALIA: Yes, the American writer on Chesterton, Father Boyd, wrote me in 1990 or '91 to ask me about our *samizdat* works. We sent him some books and then he asked me to London in 1998, because he was too old to come here. While I was there I attended a meeting of the Sts. Alban and Sergius Society, and then there were two conferences — on Charles Williams and a

centennial for Lewis.

RTE: Are there Chesterton journals?

NATALIA: Yes, the journals are all in English, and include: *Gilbert*, *The Chesterton Review*, and *The Seven*. I like *The Chesterton Review* the best.

RTE: Natalia, in your preface to the three-volume Chesterton collection you said that Marshall McLuhan wrote that Chesterton saved him. Can you tell us more of that story?

NATALIA: I don't remember the details now, but there are two letters about Chesterton from McLuhan to his mother in the archives of the Chesterton Institute at Oxford. I think it was in Cambridge that he saw Chesterton and it was a great shock for him.

RTE: You also quote Chesterton as saying, "People have done without books in past times, and may do without them again." What does this mean?

NATALIA: I don't know precisely, but I do know that Chesterton was a prophet. In *The Man Who Was Thursday* we have the modern terrorist. In the *Flying Inn* we have Islam in England.

RTE: Do you know of other people who have had the same heartfelt response to him as yourself?

NATALIA: Of course, I know Oxford dons who say they were also saved by him: Stratford Caldicott, John Saward and others. Here in Russia I also know two or three Russians: Sergei Averintsev, the humanitarian, then the late Vladimir Muravyov whom I already mentioned (he was a very good translator), and his brother Leonid also.

RTE: Saved from the same despair and lack of values?

NATALIA: Yes. And what about you?

RTE: For me, as a teenager the awakening was Tolkien, and then C.S. Lewis, and then Chesterton, later George Macdonald and Charles Williams.

NATALIA: It was the same for me, except that I didn't know Lewis, Williams and Tolkien until the seventies. Fr. Alexander Men gave me "*The Problem*

of Pain,” my first Lewis, in 1972.

RTE: What do you think it was in the history of England and the West that brought these amazing Christians together, with the same world-views at the same time?

NATALIA: It was providential, quite natural and charismatic like in the Bible.

RTE: When there is a need, the prophets appear — both the literary and the spiritual prophets?

NATALIA: Yes.

RTE: Also, you said about Chesterton: “His is the world of paradise and not cardboard,” I was delighted to see that, because that paradisaical feeling is really his characteristic.

NATALIA: Yes. The flavor of paradise, light... the *odor sanctitatis*. Such an experience.

RTE: I’ve heard you speak on the radio about how people live now, and you often say, “It is not necessary to push your way through life. There is a way to live your life normally and not be trodden upon by other people.” How is this possible?

NATALIA: I don’t know how this is possible without believing in God. It is impossible in general, and during the Soviet times it was impossible even for the believer. It was too terrible. These camps and so on. Now it is not so bad.

RTE: But if people rush at you and tear you to pieces?

NATALIA: They do it all the time. But it doesn’t matter because it is like a cross for the Christian. I’ve been crying for two days because of one of these things, but we have God and our angel. Our life is a kind of martyrdom. I am very weak and I don’t know how I could exist without my angel, without the prayers of others.

RTE: Sometimes when life is difficult, if I happen to think of Chesterton, or C.S. Lewis, or Tolkien and their wonderful inspiration, I ask them to pray to God for me if they’ve found favor before Him. They’ve been a part of my whole life.

NATALIA: Yes, yes. And Charles Williams. He is very strong.

RTE: He understood the protection of God.

NATALIA: Yes, and Chesterton had hope and ...

RTE: ...hilarity. Tolkien, of course, had nobility, and Lewis?



NATALIA: Lewis has cleverness and something more. I will have to think about that. Lewis is more complicated.

RTE: What are your favorite images of Chesterton as a man?

NATALIA: The pessimism of his youth and then his awakening, the same as my own. Then, his marriage. The love between Frances and Gilbert was very touching. It was very pure, very chaste. And his death, of course. Do you know about it?

RTE: No.

NATALIA: Being Catholic, he went to Lourdes and to Lisieux, and then returned to England. He was very ill, they didn't know exactly what it was, perhaps heart and kidneys. He was asleep in a coma for a week, and when he awoke, he smiled, and said to his wife Frances and to Dorothy Collins, his secretary, who were by his bedside, "Good morning, darling!" "Hello dear!" and he died. He awoke to greet them, and then he died. I think he is a saint. Certainly he is.



Through Contemporary Eyes

In January of 1931, during his second trip to America, Chesterton debated with Clarence Darrow, at New York City's Mecca Temple. The topic was "Will the World Return to Religion?"

THE FOLLOWING is a passage from "Chesterton As Seen by His Contemporaries," compiled by Cyril Clemons, Webster Groves: International Mark Twain Society, 1939, pp. 66-68.

Mr. Joseph J. Reilly attended a debate at Mecca Temple in New York City, between Chesterton and Clarence Darrow, which dealt with the story of creation as presented in Genesis.

It was a Sunday afternoon and the Temple was packed. At the conclusion of the debate everybody was asked to express his opinion as to the victor and slips of paper were passed around for that purpose. The award went directly to Chesterton. Darrow in comparison, seemed heavy, uninspired, slow of mind, while G.K.C. was joyous, sparkling and witty quite the Chesterton one had come to expect from his books. The affair was like a race between a lumbering sailing vessel and a modern steamer. Mrs. Frances Taylor Patterson also heard the Chesterton-Darrow debate, but went to the meeting with some misgivings because she was a trifle afraid that Chesterton's "gifts might seem somewhat literary in comparison with the trained scientific mind and rapier tongue of the famous trial lawyer. Instead, the trained scientific mind, the clear thinking, the lightning quickness in getting a point and hurling back an answer, turned out to belong to Chesterton. I have never heard Mr. Darrow alone, but taken relatively, when that relativity is to Chesterton, he appears positively muddle-headed."

Although the terms of the debate were determined at the outset, Darrow either could not or would not stick to the definitions, but kept going off at illogical tangents and becoming choleric over points that were not in dispute. He seemed to have an idea that all religion was a matter of accepting Jonah's whale as a sort of luxury-liner. As Chesterton summed it up, he felt as if Darrow had been arguing all afternoon with his fundamentalist aunt, and the latter kept sparring with a dummy of his own mental making. When something went wrong with the microphone, Darrow sat back until it could be fixed. Whereupon G.K.C. jumped up and carried on in his natural voice, "Science you see is not infallible!" Whatever brilliance Darrow

had in his own right, it was completely eclipsed. For all the luster that he shed, he might have been a remote star at high noon drowned by the bright incandescent light of the sun. Chesterton had the audience with him from the start, and when it was over, everyone just sat there, not wishing to leave. They were loath to let the light die!

THE FOLLOWING is excerpted from the February 4, 1931, issue of *The Nation*. Here Henry Hazlitt gives his impressions of the debate:

In the ballot that followed, the audience voted more than two to one for the defender of the faith, Mr. Chesterton of course, and if the vote was on the relative merits of the two debaters, and not on the question itself, it was surely a very just one. Mr. Chesterton's argument was like Mr. Chesterton, amiable, courteous, jolly; it was always clever, it was full of nice turns of expression, and altogether a very adroit exhibition by one of the world's ablest intellectual fencing masters and one of its most charming gentlemen.

Mr. Darrow's personality, by contrast, seemed rather colorless and certainly very dour. His attitude seemed almost surly; he slurred his words; the rise and fall of his voice was sometimes heavily melodramatic, and his argument was conducted on an amazingly low intellectual level.

Ostensibly the defender of science against Mr. Chesterton, he obviously knew much less about science than Mr. Chesterton did; when he essayed to answer his opponent on the views of Eddington and Jeans, it was patent that he did not have the remotest conception of what the new physics was all about. His victory over Mr. Byran at Dayton had been too cheap and easy; he remembered it not wisely but too well. His arguments are still the arguments of the village atheist of the Ingersoll period; at Mecca Temple he still seemed to be trying to shock and convince yokels.

Mr. Chesterton's deportment was irreproachable, but I am sure that he was secretly unhappy. He had been on the platform many times against George Bernard Shaw. This opponent could not extend his powers. He was not getting his exercise.

Clarence Darrow wrote the author shortly before his death, "I was favorably impressed by, warmly attached to, G.K. Chesterton. I enjoyed my

debates with him, and found him a man of culture and fine sensibilities. If he and I had lived where we could have become better acquainted, eventually we would have ceased to debate, I firmly believe.



CHESTERTON SPEAKS FOR HIMSELF

I.

On Father Brown:

Father Brown, Chesterton's famous priest-detective accompanies the district inspector to investigate the murder of Colonel Norman Bohun, a cruel and lecherous wastrel who was killed by the heavy blow of a hammer. The villagers think the culprit is the blacksmith, the only man in the village with an arm strong enough to do the deed and a motive — his wife's honor. Rev. Wilfrid Bohun, the clergyman and brother of the murdered man, demures, suggesting that it was Mad Joe, a half-witted youth whom his brother publicly humiliated before his death. When all clues lead to a tangled skein, Father Brown climbs with Wilfrid Bohun to the dizzying heights of the church bell tower:

'I think there is something rather dangerous about standing on these high places even to pray,' said Father Brown. 'Heights were made to be looked at, not to be looked from.'

'Do you mean that one may fall over,' asked Wilfred.

'I mean that one's soul may fall if one's body doesn't,' said the other priest.

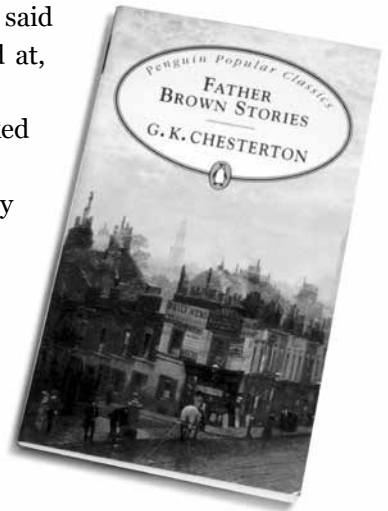
'I scarcely understand you,' remarked Bohun indistinctly.

'Look at that blacksmith, for instance,' went on Father Brown calmly: 'a good man, but not a Christian — hard, imperious, unforgiving. Well, his Scotch religion was made up by men who prayed on hills and high crags, and learnt to look down on the world more than to look up at heaven. Humility is the mother of giants. One sees great things from the valley; only small things from the peak.'

'But he — he didn't do it,' said Bohun tremulously.

'No,' said the other in an odd voice; 'we know he didn't do it.'

After a moment he resumed, looking tranquilly out over the plain with his pale grey eyes. 'I knew a man,' he said, 'who began by worshipping with others before the altar, but who grew fond of high and lonely places to pray



from, corners or niches in the belfry or the spire. And once in one of those dizzy places, where the whole world seemed to turn under him like a wheel, his brain turned also, and he fancied he was God. So that though he was a good man, he committed a great crime.'

Wilfred's face was turned away, but his bony hands turned blue and white as they tightened on the parapet of stone.

'He thought it was given to him to judge the world and strike down the sinner. He would never have had such a thought if he had been kneeling with other men upon a floor. But he saw all men walking about like insects. He saw one especially strutting just below him, insolent and evident by a bright green hat — a poisonous insect.'



G.K. Chesterton at age 6.

Rooks cawed round the corners of the belfry; but there was no other sound till Father Brown went on. 'This also tempted him, that he had in his hand one of the most awful engines of nature; I mean gravitation, that mad and quickening rush by which all earth's creatures fly back to her heart when released. See, the inspector is strutting just below us in the smithy. If I were to toss a pebble over this parapet it would be something like a bullet by the time it struck him. If I were to drop a hammer — even a small hammer—'

Wilfred Bohun threw one leg over the parapet, and Father Brown had him in a minute by the collar.

'Not by that door,' he said quite gently; 'that door leads to hell.'

Bohun staggered back against the wall, and stared at him with frightful eyes.

'How do you know all this?' he cried. 'Are you a devil?'

'I am a man,' answered Father Brown gravely; 'and therefore have all devils in my heart. Listen to me,' he said after a short pause. 'I know what you did — at least, I can guess the great part of it. When you left your brother you were racked with no unrighteous rage to the extent that you snatched up the small hammer, half inclined to kill him with his foulness on his mouth. Recoiling, you thrust it under your buttoned coat instead, and rushed into the church. You pray wildly in many places, under the angel window, upon the platform above, and on a higher platform still, from which you could see the colonel's Eastern hat like the back of a green beetle crawling about. Then something snapped in your soul, and you let God's thunderbolt fall.'

Wilfred put a weak hand to his head, and asked in a low voice: ‘How did you know that his hat looked like a green beetle?’

‘Oh, that,’ said the other with the shadow of a smile, ‘that was common sense. But hear me further. I say I know all this; but no one else shall know it. The next step is for you; I shall take no more steps; I will seal this with the seal of confession. If you ask me why, there are many reasons, and only one that concerns you. I leave things to you because you have not yet gone very far wrong, as assassins go. You did not help to fix the crime on the smith when it was easy; or on his wife, when that was easy. You tried to fix it on the imbecile, because you knew that he could not suffer. That was one of the gleams that it is my business to find in assassins. And now come down into the village, and go your own way as free as the wind; for I have said my last word.’



Frances Chesterton

They went down the winding stairs in utter silence, and came out into the sunlight by the smithy. Wilfred Bohun carefully unlatched the wooden gate of the yard, and going up to the inspector, said: ‘I wish to give myself up; I have killed my brother.’

From “The Hammer of God,” in *The Innocence of Father Brown*

II. On David Copperfield:

“...But the best part of the tale — the account of the vacillations of the hero between the humble life to which he owes everything, and the gorgeous life from which he expects something — touches a very true and somewhat tragic part of morals; for the great paradox of morality (the paradox to which only the religions have given an adequate expression) is that the very vilest kind of fault is exactly the most easy kind. We read in books and ballads about the wild fellow who might kill a man or smoke opium, but who would never stoop to lying or cowardice or to “anything mean.” But for actual human beings opium and slaughter have only occasional charm; the permanent human temptation is the temptation to be mean. The one standing probability is the probability of becoming a cowardly hypocrite. The circle



of the traitors is the lowest of the abyss, and it is also the easiest to fall into. That is one of the ringing realities of the Bible, that it does not make its great men commit grand sins; it makes its great men (such as David and St. Peter) commit small sins and behave like sneaks..."

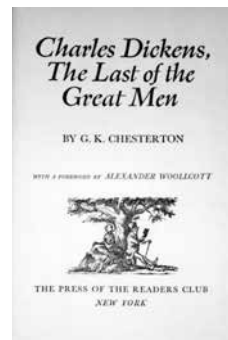
From Charles Dickens, *The Last of the Great Men*

III. On Youth, Age, and Experience:

It is currently said that hope goes with youth, and lends to youth its wings of a butterfly; but I fancy that hope is the last gift given to man, and the only gift not given to youth. Youth is pre-eminently the period in which a man can be lyric, fanatical, poetic; but youth is the period in which a man can be hopeless. The end of every episode is the end of the world. But the power of hoping through everything, the knowledge that the soul survives its adventures, that great inspiration comes to the middle-aged; God has kept that good wine until now. It is from the backs of the elderly gentlemen that the wings of the butterfly should burst. There is nothing that so much mystifies the young as the consistent frivolity of the old. They have discovered their indestructibility. They are in their second and clearer childhood, and there is a meaning in the merriment of their eyes. They have seen the end of the End of the World.

... Mrs. Nickleby with her beautiful mazes of memory does her best to prevent the story of Nicholas Nickleby from being told. And she does well.... There is a desperate and crying necessity that we should know that Mrs. Nickerby once had a foot-boy who had a wart on his nose and a driver who had a green shade over his left eye. If Mrs. Nickleby is a fool, she is one of those fools who are wiser than the world. She stands for a great truth which we must not forget; the truth that experience is not in real life a saddening thing at all.

The people who have had misfortunes are generally the people who love to talk about them. Experience is really one of the gaieties of old age, one of its dissipations. Mere memory becomes a kind of debauch. Experience may be



disheartening to those who are foolish enough to try to co-ordinate it and to draw deductions from it, but to those happy souls, like Mrs. Nickleby, to whom relevancy is nothing, the whole of their past life is like an inexhaustible fairyland. Just as we take a rambling walk because we know that a whole district is beautiful, so they indulge a rambling mind because they know that a whole existence is interesting. A boy does not plunge into his future more romantically and at random, than they plunge into their past.

From Charles Dickens, the *Last of the Great Men*

IV. Conversation With an Atheist:

“You may be right or wrong to risk dying,” said the girl, simply; “The poor women in our village risk it whenever they have a baby. You men are the other half of the world. I know nothing about when you ought to die. But surely if you are daring to try to find God beyond the grave and appeal to Him — you ought to let Him find you when He comes and stands there every morning in our little church.”

[Turnbull responds], “I do not love God. I do not want to find him; I do not think He is there to be found. I must burst up the show; I must and will say everything. You are the happiest and most honest thing I ever saw in this godless universe. And I am the dirtiest and the most dishonest.”

Madeline looked at him doubtfully for an instant, and then said with a sudden simplicity and cheerfulness: “Oh, but if you are really sorry it is all right. If you are horribly sorry it is all the better. You have only to go and tell the priest so and he will give you God out of his own hands.”

“I am sure there is no God.”

“But there is,” said Madeline, quite quietly, and rather with the air of one telling children about an elephant. “Why I touched His body only this morning.”

“You touched a bit of bread,” said Turnbull, biting his knuckles. “Oh, I will say anything that can madden you.”

“You think it is only a bit of bread,” said the girl, and her lips tightened ever so little.

“I know it is only a bit of bread,” said Turnbull, with violence.

She flung back her open face and smiled. "Then why do you refuse to eat it?"

From *The Ball and the Cross*

V. Great and Honest Men:

We are able to answer the question, "Why have we no great men?" We have no great men chiefly because we are always looking for them. We are connoisseurs of greatness, and connoisseurs can never be great; we are fastidious — that is, we are small.

When Diogenes went about with a lantern looking for an honest man, I am afraid he had very little time to be honest himself. And when anybody goes about on his hands and knees looking for a great man to worship, he



is making sure that one man at any rate shall not be great. Now the error of Diogenes is evident. The error of Diogenes lay in the fact that he omitted to notice that every man is both an honest man and a dishonest man. Diogenes looked for his honest man inside every crypt and cavern, but he never thought of looking inside the thief. And that is where the Founder of Christianity found the honest man; He found him on a gibbet and promised him Paradise.

Just as Christianity looked for the honest man inside the thief, democracy looked for the wise man inside the fool. It encouraged the fool to be wise. We can call this thing sometimes optimism, sometimes equality; the nearest name for it is encouragement. It had its exaggerations — failure to understand original sin, notions that education would make all men good, the childlike yet pedantic philosophies of human perfectibility. But the whole was full of faith in the infinity of human souls, which is in itself not only Christian but orthodox; and this we have lost amid the limitations of pessimistic science. Christianity said that any man could be a saint if he chose; democracy, that every man could be a citizen if he chose. The note of the last few decades in art and ethics has been that a man is stamped with an irrevocable psychology and is cramped for perpetuity in the prison of his skull. [Their's] was a world that expects everything and everybody. It was a world that encouraged anybody to be anything.

From Charles Dickens, *The Last of the Great Men*

VI. On Our Ancestors' Opinions:

Our fathers had a plain sort of pity: if you will, a gross and coarse pity. They had their own sort of sentimentalism.... No doubt they were often narrow and often visionary. No doubt they often looked at a political formula when they should have looked at an elemental fact. No doubt they were pedantic in some of their principles and clumsy in some of their solutions. No doubt, in short, they were all very wrong, and no doubt we are the people and wisdom shall die with us. But when they saw something that in their eyes, such as they were, really violated their morality, such as it was, then they did not cry "Investigate!" They did not cry "Educate!" They did not cry "Improve!" They did not cry "Evolve." Like Nicholas Nickleby, they cried



“Stop!” And it did.

From Chesterton’s *Introduction to Nicholas Nickleby*

VII. On Lions and Lambs:

It is constantly assumed, especially in our Tolstoian tendencies, that when the lion lies down with the lamb the lion become lamb-like. But that is brutal annexation and imperialism on the part of the lamb. That is simply the lamb absorbing the lion instead of the lion eating the lamb. The real problem is — Can the lion lie down with the lamb and still retain his royal ferocity? That is the problem the Church attempted; that is the miracle she achieved.

From *Orthodoxy*

VIII. On Literature:

Nothing is important except the fate of the soul; and literature is only redeemed from an utter triviality, surpassing that of naughts and crosses, by the fact that it describes not the world around us, or the things on the retina of the eye, or the enormous irrelevancy of encyclopaedias, but some condition to which the human spirit can come. +

Chesterton’s *Introduction to The Old Curiosity Shop*