

Three Essays by G. K. Chesterton

On Running After One's Hat

I feel an almost savage envy on hearing that London has been flooded in my absence, while I am in the mere country. My own Battersea has been, I understand, particularly favoured as a meeting of the waters. Battersea was already, as I need hardly say, the most beautiful of human localities. Now that it has the additional splendour of great sheets of water, there must be something quite incomparable in the landscape (or waterscape) of my own romantic town. Battersea must be a vision of Venice. The boat that brought the meat from the butcher's must have shot along those lanes of rippling silver with the strange smoothness of the gondola. The greengrocer who brought cabbages to the corner of the Latchmere Road must have leant upon the oar with the unearthly grace of the gondolier. There is nothing so perfectly poetical as an island; and when a district is flooded it becomes an archipelago.

Some consider such romantic views of flood or fire slightly lacking in reality. But really this romantic view of such inconveniences is quite as practical as the other. The true optimist who sees in such things an opportunity for enjoyment is quite as logical and much more sensible than the ordinary "Indignant Ratepayer" who sees in them an opportunity for grumbling. Real pain, as in the case of being burnt at Smithfield or having a toothache, is a positive thing; it can be supported, but scarcely enjoyed. But, after all, our toothaches are the exception, and as for being burnt at Smithfield, it only happens to us at the very longest intervals. And most of the inconveniences that make men swear or women cry are really sentimental or imaginative inconveniences—things altogether of the mind. For instance, we often hear grown-up people complaining of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train. Did you ever hear a small boy complain of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train? No; for to him to be inside a railway station is to be inside a cavern of wonder and a palace of poetical pleasures. Because to him the red light and the green light on the signal are like a new sun and a new moon. Because to him when the wooden arm of the signal falls down suddenly, it is as if a great king had thrown down his staff as a signal and started a shrieking tournament of trains. I myself am of little boys' habit in this matter. They also serve who only stand and wait for the two fifteen. Their meditations may be full of rich and fruitful things. Many of the most purple hours of my life have been passed at Clapham Junction, which is now, I suppose, under water. I have been there in many moods so fixed and mystical that the water might well have come up to my waist before I noticed it particularly. But in the case of all such annoyances, as I have said, everything depends upon the emotional point of view. You can safely apply the test to almost every one of the things that are currently talked of as the typical nuisance of daily life.

For instance, there is a current impression that it is unpleasant to have to run after one's hat. Why should it be unpleasant to the well-ordered and pious mind? Not merely because it is running, and running exhausts one. The same people run much faster in games and sports. The same people run much more eagerly after an uninteresting little leather ball than they will after a nice silk hat. There is an idea that it is humiliating to run after one's hat; and when people say it is humiliating they mean that it is comic. It certainly is comic; but man is a very comic creature, and most of the things he does are comic—eating, for instance. And the most comic things of all are exactly the things that are most worth doing—such as making love. A man running after a hat is not half so ridiculous as a man running after a wife.

Now a man could, if he felt rightly in the matter, run after his hat with the manliest ardour and the most sacred joy. He might regard himself as a jolly huntsman pursuing a wild animal, for certainly no animal could be wilder. In fact, I am inclined to believe that hat-hunting on windy days will be the

sport of the upper classes in the future. There will be a meet of ladies and gentlemen on some high ground on a gusty morning. They will be told that the professional attendants have started a hat in such-and-such a thicket, or whatever be the technical term. Notice that this employment will in the fullest degree combine sport with humanitarianism. The hunters would feel that they were not inflicting pain. Nay, they would feel that they were inflicting pleasure, rich, almost riotous pleasure, upon the people who were looking on. When last I saw an old gentleman running after his hat in Hyde Park, I told him that a heart so benevolent as his ought to be filled with peace and thanks at the thought of how much unaffected pleasure his every gesture and bodily attitude were at that moment giving to the crowd.

The same principle can be applied to every other typical domestic worry. A gentleman trying to get a fly out of the milk or a piece of cork out of his glass of wine often imagines himself to be irritated. Let him think for a moment of the patience of anglers sitting by dark pools, and let his soul be immediately irradiated with gratification and repose. Again, I have known some people of very modern views driven by their distress to the use of theological terms to which they attached no doctrinal significance, merely because a drawer was jammed tight and they could not pull it out. A friend of mine was particularly afflicted in this way. Every day his drawer was jammed, and every day in consequence it was something else that rhymes to it. But I pointed out to him that this sense of wrong was really subjective and relative; it rested entirely upon the assumption that the drawer could, should, and would come out easily. "But if," I said, "you picture to yourself that you are pulling against some powerful and oppressive enemy, the struggle will become merely exciting and not exasperating. Imagine that you are tugging up a lifeboat out of the sea. Imagine that you are roping up a fellow-creature out of an Alpine crevasse. Imagine even that you are a boy again and engaged in a tug-of-war between French and English." Shortly after saying this I left him; but I have no doubt at all that my words bore the best possible fruit. I have no doubt that every day of his life he hangs on to the handle of that drawer with a flushed face and eyes bright with battle, uttering encouraging shouts to himself, and seeming to hear all round him the roar of an applauding ring.

So I do not think that it is altogether fanciful or incredible to suppose that even the floods in London may be accepted and enjoyed poetically. Nothing beyond inconvenience seems really to have been caused by them; and inconvenience, as I have said, is only one aspect, and that the most unimaginative and accidental aspect of a really romantic situation. An adventure is only an inconvenience rightly considered. An inconvenience is only an adventure wrongly considered. The water that girdled the houses and shops of London must, if anything, have only increased their previous witchery and wonder. For as the Roman Catholic priest in the story said: "Wine is good with everything except water," and on a similar principle, water is good with everything except wine.

The Dragon's Grandmother

I met a man the other day who did not believe in fairy tales. I do not mean that he did not believe in the incidents narrated in them—that he did not believe that a pumpkin could turn into a coach. He did, indeed, entertain this curious disbelief. And, like all the other people I have ever met who entertained it, he was wholly unable to give me an intelligent reason for it. He tried the laws of nature, but he soon dropped that. Then he said that pumpkins were unalterable in ordinary experience, and that we all reckoned on their infinitely protracted pumpkinity. But I pointed out to him that this was not an attitude we adopt specially towards impossible marvels, but simply the attitude we adopt towards all unusual occurrences. If we were certain of miracles we should not count on them. Things that happen very seldom we all leave out of our calculations, whether they are miraculous or not. I do not expect a glass of water to be turned into wine; but neither do I expect a glass of water to be poisoned with prussic acid.

I do not in ordinary business relations act on the assumption that the editor is a fairy; but neither do I act on the assumption that he is a Russian spy, or the lost heir of the Holy Roman Empire. What we assume in action is not that the natural order is unalterable, but simply that it is much safer to bet on uncommon incidents than on common ones. This does not touch the credibility of any attested tale about a Russian spy or a pumpkin turned into a coach. If I had seen a pumpkin turned into a Panhard motor-car with my own eyes that would not make me any more inclined to assume that the same thing would happen again. I should not invest largely in pumpkins with an eye to the motor trade. Cinderella got a ball dress from the fairy; but I do not suppose that she looked after her own clothes any the less after it.

But the view that fairy tales cannot really have happened, though crazy, is common. The man I speak of disbelieved in fairy tales in an even more amazing and perverted sense. He actually thought that fairy tales ought not to be told to children. That is (like a belief in slavery or annexation) one of those intellectual errors which lie very near to ordinary mortal sins. There are some refusals which, though they may be done what is called conscientiously, yet carry so much of their whole horror in the very act of them, that a man must in doing them not only harden but slightly corrupt his heart. One of them was the refusal of milk to young mothers when their husbands were in the field against us. Another is the refusal of fairy tales to children.



The man had come to see me in connection with some silly society of which I am an enthusiastic member; he was a fresh-coloured, short-sighted young man, like a stray curate who was too helpless even to find his way to the Church of England. He had a curious green necktie and a very long neck; I am always meeting idealists with very long necks. Perhaps it is that their eternal aspiration slowly lifts their heads nearer and nearer to the stars. Or perhaps it has something to do with the fact that so many of them are vegetarians: perhaps they are slowly evolving the neck of the giraffe so that they can eat all the tops of the trees in Kensington Gardens. These things are in every sense above me. Such, anyhow, was the young man who did not believe in fairy tales; and by a curious coincidence he entered the room when I had just finished looking through a pile of contemporary fiction, and had begun to read "Grimm's Fairy tales" as a natural consequence.

The modern novels stood before me, however, in a stack; and you can imagine their titles for yourself. There was "Suburban Sue: A Tale of Psychology," and also "Psychological Sue: A Tale of Suburbia"; there was "Trixy: A Temperament," and "Man-Hate: A Monochrome," and all those nice things. I read them with real interest, but, curiously enough, I grew tired of them at last, and when I saw "Grimm's Fairy Tales" lying accidentally on the table, I gave a cry of indecent joy. Here at least, here at last, one could find a little common sense. I opened the book, and my eyes fell on these splendid and satisfying words, "The Dragon's Grandmother." That at least was reasonable; that at least was true. "The Dragon's Grandmother!" While I was rolling this first touch of ordinary human reality upon my tongue, I looked up suddenly and saw this monster with a green tie standing in the doorway.



I listened to what he said about the society politely enough, I hope; but when he incidentally mentioned that he did not believe in fairy tales, I broke out beyond control. "Man," I said, "who are you that you should not believe in fairy tales? It is much easier to believe in Blue Beard than to believe in you. A blue beard is a misfortune; but there are green ties which are sins. It is far easier to believe in a million fairy tales than to believe in one man who does not like fairy tales. I would rather kiss Grimm instead of a Bible and swear to all his stories as if they were thirty-nine articles than say seriously and

out of my heart that there can be such a man as you; that you are not some temptation of the devil or some delusion from the void. Look at these plain, homely, practical words. ‘The Dragon’s Grandmother,’ that is all right; that is rational almost to the verge of rationalism. If there was a dragon, he had a grandmother. But you—you had no grandmother! If you had known one, she would have taught you to love fairy tales. You had no father, you had no mother; no natural causes can explain you. You cannot be. I believe many things which I have not seen; but of such things as you it may be said, ‘Blessed is he that has seen and yet has disbelieved.’”



It seemed to me that he did not follow me with sufficient delicacy, so I moderated my tone. “Can you not see,” I said, “that fairy tales in their essence are quite solid and straightforward; but that this everlasting fiction about modern life is in its nature essentially incredible? Folk-lore means that the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but that the soul is sick and screaming. The problem of the fairy tale is—what will a healthy man do with a fantastic world? The problem of the modern novel is—what will a madman do with a dull world? In the fairy tales the cosmos goes mad; but the hero does not go mad. In the modern novels the hero is mad before the book begins, and suffers from the harsh steadiness and cruel sanity of the cosmos. In the excellent tale of ‘The Dragon’s Grandmother,’ in all the other tales of Grimm, it is assumed that the young man setting out on his travels will have all substantial truths in him; that he will be brave, full of faith, reasonable, that he will respect his parents, keep his word, rescue one kind of people, defy another kind, ‘*parcere subjectis et debellare*,’ etc. Then, having assumed this centre of sanity, the writer entertains himself by fancying what would happen if the whole world went mad all round it, if the sun turned green and the moon blue, if horses had six legs and giants had two heads. But your modern literature takes insanity as its centre. Therefore, it loses the interest even of insanity. A lunatic is not startling to himself, because he is quite serious; that is what makes him a lunatic. A man who thinks he is a piece of glass is to himself as dull as a piece of glass. A man who thinks he is a chicken is to himself as common as a chicken. It is only sanity that can see even a wild poetry in insanity. Therefore, these wise old tales made the hero ordinary and the tale extraordinary. But you have made the hero extraordinary and the tale ordinary—so ordinary—oh, so very ordinary.”

I saw him still gazing at me fixedly. Some nerve snapped in me under the hypnotic stare. I leapt to my feet and cried, “In the name of God and Democracy and the Dragon’s grandmother—in the name of all good things—I charge you to avaunt and haunt this house no more.” Whether or no it was the result of the exorcism, there is no doubt that he definitely went away.

The Perfect Game

We have all met the man who says that some odd things have happened to him, but that he does not really believe that they were supernatural. My own position is the opposite of this. I believe in the supernatural as a matter of intellect and reason, not as a matter of personal experience. I do not see ghosts; I only see their inherent probability. But it is entirely a matter of the mere intelligence, not even of the motions; my nerves and body are altogether of this earth, very earthy. But upon people of this temperament one weird incident will often leave a peculiar impression. And the weirdest circumstance that ever occurred to me occurred a little while ago. It consisted in nothing less than my playing a game, and playing it quite well for some seventeen consecutive minutes. The ghost of my grandfather would have astonished me less.

On one of these blue and burning afternoons I found myself, to my inexpressible astonishment, playing a game called croquet. I had imagined that it belonged to the epoch of Leach and Anthony Trollope, and I had neglected to provide myself with those very long and luxuriant side whiskers which are really essential to such a scene. I played it with a man whom we will call Parkinson, and with whom I had a semi-philosophical argument which lasted through the entire contest. It is deeply implanted in my mind that I had the best of the argument; but it is certain and beyond dispute that I had the worst of the game.

“Oh, Parkinson, Parkinson!” I cried, patting him affectionately on the head with a mallet, “how far you really are from the pure love of the sport—you who can play. It is only we who play badly who love the Game itself. You love glory; you love applause; you love the earthquake voice of victory; you do not love croquet. You do not love croquet until you love being beaten at croquet. It is we the bunglers who adore the occupation in the abstract. It is we to whom it is art for art’s sake. If we may see the face of Croquet herself (if I may so express myself) we are content to see her face turned upon us in anger. Our play is called amateurish; and we wear proudly the name of amateur, for amateurs is but the French for Lovers. We accept all adventures from our Lady, the most disastrous or the most dreary. We wait outside her iron gates (I allude to the hoops), vainly essaying to enter. Our devoted balls, impetuous and full of chivalry, will not be confined within the pedantic boundaries of the mere croquet ground. Our balls seek honour in the ends of the earth; they turn up in the flower-beds and the conservatory; they are to be found in the front garden and the next street. No, Parkinson! The good painter has skill. It is the bad painter who loves his art. The good musician loves being a musician, the bad musician loves music. With such a pure and hopeless passion do I worship croquet. I love the game itself. I love the parallelogram of grass marked out with chalk or tape, as if its limits were the frontiers of my sacred Fatherland, the four seas of Britain. I love the mere swing of the mallets, and the click of the balls is music. The four colours are to me sacramental and symbolic, like the red of martyrdom, or the white of Easter Day. You lose all this, my poor Parkinson. You have to solace yourself for the absence of this vision by the paltry consolation of being able to go through hoops and to hit the stick.”

And I waved my mallet in the air with a graceful gaiety.

“Don’t be too sorry for me,” said Parkinson, with his simple sarcasm. “I shall get over it in time. But it seems to me that the more a man likes a game the better he would want to play it. Granted that the pleasure in the thing itself comes first, does not the pleasure of success come naturally and inevitably afterwards? Or, take your own simile of the Knight and his Lady-love. I admit the gentleman does first and foremost want to be in the lady’s presence. But I never yet heard of a gentleman who wanted to look an utter ass when he was there.”

“Perhaps not; though he generally looks it,” I replied. “But the truth is that there is a fallacy in the simile, although it was my own. The happiness at which the lover is aiming is an infinite happiness, which can be extended without limit. The more he is loved, normally speaking, the jollier he will be. It is definitely true that the stronger the love of both lovers, the stronger will be the happiness. But it is not true that the stronger the play of both croquet players the stronger will be the game. It is logically possible—(follow me closely here, Parkinson!)—it is logically possible, to play croquet too well to enjoy it at all. If you could put this blue ball through that distant hoop as easily as you could pick it up with your hand, then you would not put it through that hoop any more than you pick it up with your hand; it would not be worth doing. If you could play unerringly you would not play at all. The moment the game is perfect the game disappears.”

“I do not think, however,” said Parkinson, “that you are in any immediate danger of effecting that sort of destruction. I do not think your croquet will vanish through its own faultless excellence. You are safe for the present.”

I again caressed him with the mallet, knocked a ball about, wired myself, and resumed the thread of my discourse.

The long, warm evening had been gradually closing in, and by this time it was almost twilight. By the time I had delivered four more fundamental principles, and my companion had gone through five more hoops, the dusk was verging upon dark.

“We shall have to give this up,” said Parkinson, as he missed a ball almost for the first time, “I can’t see a thing.”

“Nor can I,” I answered, “and it is a comfort to reflect that I could not hit anything if I saw it.”

With that I struck a ball smartly, and sent it away into the darkness towards where the shadowy figure of Parkinson moved in the hot haze. Parkinson immediately uttered a loud and dramatic cry. The situation, indeed, called for it. I had hit the right ball.

Stunned with astonishment, I crossed the gloomy ground, and hit my ball again. It went through a hoop. I could not see the hoop; but it was the right hoop. I shuddered from head to foot.

Words were wholly inadequate, so I slouched heavily after that impossible ball. Again I hit it away into the night, in what I supposed was the vague direction of the quite invisible stick. And in the dead silence I heard the stick rattle as the ball struck it heavily.

I threw down my mallet. “I can’t stand this,” I said. “My ball has gone right three times. These things are not of this world.”

“Pick your mallet up,” said Parkinson, “have another go.”

“I tell you I daren’t. If I made another hoop like that I should see all the devils dancing there on the blessed grass.”

“Why devils?” asked Parkinson; “they may be only fairies making fun of you. They are sending you the ‘Perfect Game,’ which is no game.”

I looked about me. The garden was full of a burning darkness, in which the faint glimmers had the look of fire. I stepped across the grass as if it burnt me, picked up the mallet, and hit the ball somewhere—somewhere where another ball might be. I heard the dull click of the balls touching, and ran into the house like one pursued.