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PREFACE

IMPRESSIONS AND  
COMMENTS

**P**

# R E F A C E

For many years I have been accustomed to make notes on random leaves of the things in Life and Thought which have chanced to strike my attention. Such records of personal reaction to the outer and inner world have been helpful to my work, and so had their uses.

But as one grows older the possibilities of these uses become more limited. One realises in the Autumn that leaves no longer have a vital function to perform; there is no longer any need why they should cling to the tree. So let them be scattered to the winds!

It is inevitable that such Leaves cannot be judged in the same way as though they constituted a Book. They are much more like loose pages from a Journal. Thus they tend to be more personal, more idiosyncratic, than in a book it would be lawful for a writer to be. Often, also, they show blanks which the intelligence of the reader must fill in. At the best they merely present the aspect of the moment, the flash of a single facet of life, only to be held in the brain provided one also holds therein many other facets, for the fair presentation of the great crystal of life. So it comes about that much is here demanded of the Reader, so much that I feel it rather my duty to warn him away than to hold

out any fallacious lures.

The fact has especially to be reckoned with that such Impressions and Comments, stated absolutely and without consideration for divergent Impressions and Comments, may seem, as a friend who has read some of them points out, to lack explicit reasonableness. I trust they are not lacking in implicit reasonableness. They spring, even when they seem to contradict one another, from a central vision, and from a central faith too deeply rooted to care to hasten unduly towards the most obvious goal. From that central core these Impressions and Comments are concerned with many things, with the miracles of Nature, with the Charms and Absurdities of the Human Worm, that Golden Wire wherefrom hang all the joys and the mysteries of Art. I am only troubled because I know how very feebly these things are imaged here. For I have only the medium of words to work in, only words, words that are flung about in the street and often in the mud, only words with which to mould all my images of the Beauty and Gaiety of the World.

Such as they are, these random leaves are here scattered to the winds. It may be that as they flutter to the earth one or another may be caught by the hand of the idle passer-by, and even seem worthy of contemplation. For no two leaves are alike even when they fall from the same tree.

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*July 24, 1912.*—I looked out from my room about ten o'clock at night. Almost below the open window a young woman was clinging to the flat wall for support, with occasional floundering movements towards the attainment of a firmer balance. In the dim light she seemed decently dressed in black; her handkerchief was in her hand; she had evidently been sick.

Every few moments some one passed by. It was quite clear that she was helpless and distressed. No one turned a glance towards her—except a policeman. He gazed at her searchingly as he passed, but without stopping or speaking;

she was drunk, no doubt, but not too obtrusively incapable; he mercifully decided that she was of no immediate professional concern to him. She soon made a more violent effort to gain muscular control of herself, but merely staggered round her own escaping centre of gravity and sank gently on to the pavement in a sitting posture.

Every few moments people continued to pass within a few inches of her—men, women, couples. Unlike the priest and the Levite in the parable, they never turned away, but pursued their straight course with callous rectitude. Not one seemed so much as to see her. In a minute or two, stimulated perhaps by some sense of the impropriety of her position, she rose to her feet again, without much difficulty, and returned to cling to the wall.

A few minutes later I saw a decently-dressed young woman, evidently of the working class, walk quietly, but without an instant's hesitation, straight up to the figure against the wall. (It was what, in Moscow, the first passer-by would have done.) I could hear her speaking gently and kindly, though of what she said I could only catch, "Where do you live?" No answers were audible, and perhaps none were given. But the sweet Samaritan continued speaking gently. At last I heard her say, "Come round the corner," and with only the gentle pressure of a hand on the other's arm she guided her round the corner near which they stood, away from the careless stream of passengers, to recover at leisure. I saw no more.

Our modern civilisation, it is well known, long since transformed "chivalry"; it was once an offer of help to distressed women; it is now exclusively reserved for

women who are not distressed and clearly able to help themselves. We have to realise that it can scarcely even be said that our growing urban life, however it fosters what has been called "urbanity," has any equally fostering influence on instinctive mutual helpfulness as an element of that urbanity. We do not even see the helpless people who go to the wall or to the pavement. This is true of men and women alike. But when instinctive helpfulness is manifested it seems most likely to reveal itself in a woman. That is why I would like to give to women all possible opportunities—rights and privileges alike—for social service.

*July 27.*—A gentle rain was falling, and on this my first day in Paris since the unveiling of the Verlaine monument in the Luxembourg Gardens, immediately after I left Paris last year, I thought there could be no better moment to visit the spot so peculiarly fit to be dedicated to the poet who loved such spots—a "coin exquis" where the rain may fall peacefully among the trees, on his image as once on his heart, and the tender mists enfold him from the harsh world.

I scarcely think the sculptor quite happily inspired in his conception of the face of the charming old man I knew of old in his haunts of the Boulevard Saint-Michel. It is too strong a face, too disdainful, with too much character. Verlaine was sympathetic, simple, childlike, humble; when he put on an air of pride it was with a deliberate yet delightful pose, a child's pose. There is an air of almost military rigidity about the pride of this bust; I do not find Verlaine in that trait.

Verlaine's strength was not that of character; it was that of Nature. I could imagine that the Silenus, whom we see with his satellites near by, might be regarded in its expression, indeed in the whole conception of the group—with its helpless languor and yet its divine dominance—as the monument of that divine and helpless poet whom I still recall so well, as with lame leg and stick he would drift genially along the Boulevard a few yards away.

*July 31.*—At the hotel in Dijon, the flourishing capital of Burgundy, I was amused to note how curiously my room differed from what I once regarded as the type of the French room in the hotels I used to frequent. There is still a Teutonic touch in the Burgundian; he is meticulously thorough. I had six electric lights in different positions, a telephone, hot and cold water laid on into a huge basin, a foot-bath, and, finally, a wastepaper-basket. For the rest, a severely simple room, no ornaments, nothing to remind one of the brace of glass pistols and all the other ugly and useless things which filled my room at the ancient hotel in Rouen where I stayed two years ago. And the "lavabo," as it is here called, a spacious room with an ostentatiously noisy rush of water which may be heard afar and awakens one at night. The sanitary and mechanical age we are now entering makes up for the mercy it grants to our sense of smell by the ferocity with which it assails our sense of hearing. As usual, what we call "Progress" is the exchange of one Nuisance for another Nuisance.

*August 5.*—It is an idea of mine that a country with a genius for architecture is only able to show that genius supremely in one style, not in all styles. The Catalans have

a supreme genius for architecture, but they have only achieved a single style. The English have attempted all styles of architecture, but it was only in Perpendicular that we attained a really free and beautiful native style in our domestic buildings and what one might call our domestic churches. Strassburg Cathedral is thoroughly German and acceptable as such, but Cologne Cathedral is an exotic, and all the energy and the money of Germany through a thousand years can never make it anything but cold, mechanical, and artificial. When I was in Burgundy I felt that the Burgundians had a genius for Romanesque, and that their Gothic is for the most part feeble and insipid. Now, how about the Normans? One cannot say their Romanesque is not fine, in the presence of William the Conqueror's Abbaye aux Hommes, here at Caen. But I should be inclined to ask (without absolutely affirming) whether the finest Norman Romanesque can be coupled with the finest Burgundian Romanesque. The Norman genius was, I think, really for Gothic, and not for what we in England call "Norman" because it happened to come to us through Normandy. Without going to Rouen it is enough to look at many a church here. The Normans had a peculiar plastic power over stone which Gothic alone could give free scope to. Stone became so malleable in their hands that they seem as if working in wood. Probably it really was the case that their familiarity with wood-carving influenced their work in architecture. And they possessed so fine a taste that while they seem to be freely abandoning themselves to their wildest fantasies, the outcome is rarely extravagant (Flaubert in his *Tentation* is a great Norman architect), and at the best attains a ravishing beauty of

flowing and interwoven lines. At its worst, as in St. Sauveur, which is a monstrosity like the Siamese twins, a church with two naves and no aisles, the general result still has its interest, even apart from the exquisite beauty of the details. It is here in Gothic, and not in Romanesque, that the Normans attained full scope. We miss the superb repose, the majestic strength, of the Romanesque of Burgundy and the south-west of France. There is something daring and strange and adventurous in Norman Romanesque. It was by no accident, I think, that the ogive, in which lay the secret of Gothic, appeared first in Norman Romanesque.

*August 8.*—I have sometimes thought when in Spain that in ancient university towns the women tend to be notably beautiful or attractive, and I have imagined that this might be due to the continuous influence of student blood through many centuries in refining the population, the finest specimens of the young students proving irresistible to the women of the people, and so raising the level of the population by sexual selection. At Salamanca I was impressed by the unusual charm of the women, and even at Palencia to some extent noticed it, though Palencia ceased to be the great university of Spain nearly eight centuries ago. At Fécamp I have been struck by the occasional occurrence of an unusual type of feminine beauty, not, it seems to me, peculiarly Norman, with dark, ardent, spiritual eyes, and a kind of proud hierarchical bearing. I have wondered how far the abbots and monks of this great and ancient abbey of Benedictines were occupied—in the intervals of more supra-mundane avocations—in perfecting, not only the ancient recipe of their liqueur, but also the physical type of the feminine population among

which they laboured. The type I have in mind sometimes rather recalls the face of Baudelaire, who, by his mother's family from which he chiefly inherited, the Dufays, belonged, it is held probable, to Normandy.

*August 9.*—Typical women of Normandy often have a certain highly-bred air. They are slender when young, sometimes inclined to be tall, and the face—of course beautiful in complexion, for they dwell near the sea—is not seldom refined and distinguished. See the proud, sensitive nostrils of that young woman sweeping the pavement with her broom in front of the house this morning; one can tell she is of the same race as Charlotte Corday. And I have certainly never found anywhere in France women who seem to me so naturally charming and so sympathetic as the women who dwell in all this north-western district from Paris to the sea. They are often, as one might expect, a little English-like (it might be in Suffolk on the other side of the Channel, and Beauvais, I recall, has something of the air of old Ipswich), but with a vivacity of movement, and at the same time an aristocratic precision and subtlety one fails to find in the English. When a pretty English girl of the people opens her mouth the charm is often gone. On the contrary, I have often noticed in Normandy that a seemingly commonplace unattractive girl only becomes charming when she does open her mouth, to reveal her softness of speech, the delicately-inflexed and expressive tones, while her face lights up in harmony with her speech. Now—to say nothing of the women of the south, whose hard faces and harsh voices are often so distressing—in Dijon, whence I came to Normandy this time, the women are often sweet, even angelic of aspect, looking proper material for nuns

and saints, but, to me at all events, not personally so sympathetic as the Norman women, who are no doubt quite as good but never express the fact with the same air of slightly Teutonic insipidity. The men of Normandy I regard as of finer type than the Burgundian men, and this time it is the men who express goodness more than the women. The Burgundian men, with their big moustaches turned up resolutely at the points and their wickedly-sparkling eyes, have evidently set before themselves the task of incorporating a protest against the attitude of their women. But the Norman men, who allow their golden moustaches to droop, are a fine frank type of manhood at the best, pleasantly honest and unspoilt. I know, indeed, how skilful, how wily, how noble even, in their aristocratic indifference to detail, these Normans can be in extracting money from the stranger (have I not lunched simply at the Hostel Guillaume-le-Conquérant in the village of Dives for the same sum on which I have lived sumptuously for three days at the Hotel Victoria in the heart of Seville?), but the manner of their activity in this matter scarcely seems to me to be happily caught by those Parisians who delight to caricature, as mere dull, avaricious plebeians, "Ces bons Normands." Their ancient chronicler said a thousand years ago of the Normans that their unbounded avarice was balanced by their equally unbounded extravagance. That, perhaps, is a clue to the magnificent achievements of the Normans, in the spiritual world even more than in the material world.

*August 10.*—On leaving France by the boat from Dieppe I selected a seat close to which, shortly afterwards, three English people—two young women and a man—came to

occupy deck-chairs already placed for them by a sailor and surrounded by their bags and wraps. Immediately one of the women began angrily asking her companions why her bag had not been placed the right side up; *she* would not have her things treated like that, etc. Her companions were gentle and conciliatory,—though I noticed they left her alone during most of the passage,—and the man had with attentive forethought made all arrangements for his companions' comfort. But, somehow, I looked in wonder at her discontented face and heard with surprise her peevish voice. She was just an ordinary stolid nourishing young Englishwoman. But I had been in France, and though I had been travelling for a whole fortnight I had seen nothing like this. She lay back and began reading a novel, which she speedily exchanged for a basin. I fear I felt a certain satisfaction at the spectacle. It is good for the English barbarian to be chastised with scorpions.

How pleasant at Newhaven to find myself near another woman, a young Frenchwoman, with the firm, disciplined, tender face, the sweetly-modulated voice, the air of fine training, the dignified self-respect which also involves respect for others. I realised in a flash the profound contrast to that fellow-countrywoman of mine who had fascinated my attention on board the boat.

But one imagines a French philosopher, a new Taine, let us suppose, setting out from Dieppe for the "land of Suffragettes" to write another *Notes sur l'Angleterre*. How finely he would build a great generalisation on narrow premises! How acutely he would point out the dependence of the English "gentleman's" good qualities or the ill-

conditioned qualities of his women-folk!

*August 15.*—I enter an empty suburban railway carriage and take up a common-looking little periodical lying on the seat beside me. It is a penny weekly I had never heard of before, written for feminine readers and evidently enjoying an immense circulation. I turn over the pages. One might possibly suppose that at the present moment the feminine world is greatly excited, or at all events mildly interested, by the suffrage movement. But there is not a word in this paper from beginning to end with the faintest reference to the suffrage, nor is there anything bearing on any single great social movement of the day in which, it may seem to us, women are taking a part. Nor, again, is there anything to be found touching on ideas, not even on religion. There are, on the other hand, evidently three great interests dominating the thoughts of the readers of this paper: Clothes, Cookery, Courtship. How to make an old hat look new, how to make sweetmeats, how to behave when a man makes advances to you—these are the problems in which the readers of this journal are profoundly interested, and one can scarcely gather that they are interested in anything else. Very instructive is the long series of questions, problems posed by anxious correspondents for the editor to answer. One finds such a problem as this: Suppose you like a man, and suppose you think he likes you, and suppose he never says so—what ought you to do? The answers, fully accepting the serious nature of the problems, are kindly and sensible enough, almost maternal, admirably adapted to the calibre and outlook of the readers in this little world. But what a little world! So narrow, so palaeolithically ancient, so pathetically simple, so good, so sweet, so humble, so

essentially and profoundly feminine! It is difficult not to drop a tear on the thin, common, badly-printed pages.

And then, in the very different journal I have with me, I read the enthusiastic declaration of an ardent masculine feminist—a man of the study—that the executive power of the world is to-day being transferred to women; they alone possess "psychic vision," they alone are interested in the great questions which men ignore—and I realise what those great questions are: Clothes, Cookery, Courtship.

*August 23.*—I stood on the platform at Paddington station as the Plymouth Express slowly glided out. Leaning out of a third-class compartment stood the figure that attracted my attention. His head was bare and so revealed his harmoniously wavy and carefully-tended grey hair. The expression of his shaven and disciplined face was sympathetic and kindly, evidently attuned to expected emotions of sorrowful farewell, yet composed, clearly not himself overwhelmed by those emotions. His right arm and open hand were held above his head, in an attitude that had in it a not too ostentatious hint of benediction. When he judged that the gracious vision was no longer visible to the sorrowing friends left behind he discreetly withdrew into the carriage. There was a feminine touch about this figure; there was also a touch of the professional actor. But on the whole it was absolutely, without the shadow of a doubt, the complete Anglican Clergyman.

*September 2.*—Nearly every day just now I have to enter a certain shop where I am served by a young woman. She is married, a mother, at the same time a businesslike young woman who is proud of her businesslike qualities. But she

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