

G.K. Chesterton's Chivalrous Defense of an Elderly Lady and of Her Praiseworthy and Capacious Pet

--Epigraphs--

“There is nothing so perfectly poetical as an island; and when a [city] district is [slightly] flooded it becomes an archipelago. Some consider such romantic views of flood...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 them [the inconveniences] as an opportunity to grumble....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 complaining of having to hang about a railway station and wait for a train?....I myself am of little boys' habits in this matter. They also serve who stand and wait for the two-fifteen. Their meditations may be full of rich and fruitful things....**But in the case of all such annoyances [to 'grown-up people,' especially,] 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 [as of 1908] talked of as a 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?....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....**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....**When I last 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 the crowd.** The same principle can be applied to every other typical domestic worry.... Let him [such an agitated gentleman] **think for a moment of the patience of anglers sitting by dark pools, and let his ['irritated'] soul be immediately irradiated with gratification and repose.** Again, I have known some people of very modern views [as of 1908] **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 becomes merely exciting and not exasperating. Imagine you are tugging up a lifeboat out of the sea. Imagine you are roping-up a fellow creature out of an Alpine crevasse. Imagine that you are a boy again** and engaged in a tug-of-war....' Shortly after saying this I left him; **but I have no doubt at all that my words bore the best possible fruit.....**So I do not think that it is altogether fanciful or incredible to suppose that even the [slight] floods in London may be accepted and enjoyed poetically. Nothing beyond inconvenience seems to have been caused by them; and **inconvenience**, as I have said, **is only one aspect of**, 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.**" (G.K. Chesterton, "On Running after One's Hat," in his 1908 collection of essays, entitled *All Things Considered* (Henley-On-Thames: Darwen Finlayson, 1969—a re-print of the 1908 first Edition), pp. 25, 26, 27, and 28—my emphasis added. The entire essay is to be found on pages 25-28 in the new format of the re-print.)

On the Adventure, Hence the Risks, of the Faith: "Will made the world; Will wounded the world; the same Divine Will gave to the world for the second time its chance; the same human Will can for the last time make its choice. **That** is the real outstanding peculiarity, or eccentricity, of the peculiar sect [sic] called Roman Catholics." (G.K. Chesterton, "The Outline of Liberty," a chapter from his book, *The Common Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1950), p. 236—my emphasis added. The essay and chapter on "The Outline of Liberty" will be found on pages 233-239 of this edition.)

Even in G.K. Chesterton's little essay "On Pigs as Pets,"¹ a reader will soon deeply sense that the writer is a man of gratitude; and that both his chivalrous tone on behalf of an elderly lady and his unexpected encomium of an unusual animal deftly convey—for our further nourishment and delight—"the idea of **taking things with gratitude, and not taking things for granted.**"²

Chesterton always teaches us how to see again. He helps us to take a fresh view of little things, things that are often also things of moment to man, as well as a fitting occasion for giving gratitude.

On 14 June 2016, only ten days ago, those of us who have cherished Chesterton and his writings over many years were especially attentive to the eightieth anniversary of his death on 14 June 1936 and

1 G.K. Chesterton, "On Pigs as Pets," in *The Uses of Diversity* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1920), pp. 97-104.

2 G.K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G.K. Chesterton* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1936), p. 342—my emphasis added.

thus also to his posthumously published, and very modest, *Autobiography*. Even the first lines of that book show us his playful, but affectionate, irony—with a little poke at the inordinate Skepticism of the Higher Criticism and some of its self-professed Advocates. Drolly entitled “Hearsay Evidence,” that first Chapter surprisingly begins, as follows:

Bowing down in blind credulity, as is my custom, before mere authority and the tradition of the elders, superstitiously swallowing a story I could not test at the time by experiment or private judgment, I am firmly of the opinion that I was born on the 29th of May, 1874, on Campden Hill, Kensington; and baptised according to the formularies of the Church of England in the little church of St. George opposite the large Waterworks Tower that dominated that ridge. I do not allege any significance in the relation of the two buildings; and I indignantly deny that the church was chosen because it needed the whole water-power of West London to turn me into a Christian.³

Moreover, as he further develops his trustful and grateful point of view, he says:

My birth (as I have said) is an incident which I accept, like some poor ignorant peasant, only because it has been handed down to me by oral tradition. And before we come to any of my own experiences, it will be well to devote this brief chapter to a few other facts of my family and environment which I hold equally precariously on mere hearsay evidence. Of course, what many call hearsay evidence, or what I call human evidence, might be questioned in theory, as in the Baconian controversy [over Francis Bacon's purported Shakespearean authorship] or a good deal of the Higher Criticism. I might be the long-lost heir of The Holy Roman Empire, or an infant left by ruffians from Limehouse [a district in east London] on a door-step in Kensington, to develop in later life a hideous criminal heredity. Some of the sceptical methods applied to the world's origin might be applied to my origin, and a grave and earnest enquirer come to the conclusion that I was never born at all. But I prefer to believe that common sense is something that my reader and I have in common; and that they will have patience with a dull summary of the facts.⁴

As a further sign of his modesty, Chesterton wanted his autobiography to be published only after his death. And, with the help of his wife, Frances, it was thus accomplished, and even still in the year of 1936. (Regrettably, I still do not know all of the collaborators in, nor many other important details of, that loyally fulfilled project.) The substance and the tone to be glimpsed or more fully found in his posthumously published *Autobiography*—his gratitude, his generosity, his humility—are also to be found in his earlier sequence of writings, although sometimes in more incipient and more playful ways.

For example, some sixteen years earlier—in 1920, and shortly after the devastations of World

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

War I (including the loss of his brother, Cecil, and Belloc's son, Louis)—G.K. Chesterton began his chivalrous essay “On Pigs as Pets” with an evocation of his own warmly remembered dreams of youth and purity:

A dream of my pure and aspiring boyhood has been realized in the following paragraph...: **A complaint [that was made] against a spinster keeping a pig in her house...**⁵

This “complaint by the Epping Rural District Council” (in Essex, England, which is also contiguous with the Greater London) had “evoked the following reply” from the elderly woman who had never married and was especially now morally vulnerable as well as physically infirm. She wrote:

“I received your [official] letter, and felt very much cut up, as I am laying [sic] in the pig's room. I have not been able to stand up or get on my legs; when I can, I will get him in his own room, that was built for him. **As to getting him off the premises, I shall do no such thing, as he is no nuisance to anyone.** We [sic] have had to be in the pig's room now for three years. **I am not going to get rid of my pet.** We must all live together. I will move him as soon as God gives me the strength to do so.” (97—my emphasis added)

Chesterton then discloses to us the dubiously pert words of a clergyman, “The Rev. T.C. Spurgin,” who had then “observed”: “The lady will require a good deal of strength to move her pet, which weighs forty stone [*i.e.*, only 560 pounds!].

Our Chesterton promptly and fittingly responds:

It appears to me that the Rev. T.C. Spurgin ought, **as a matter of chivalry**, assist the lady to move the pig, if it is indeed too heavy for her strength; **no gentleman should permit a lady**, who is already very much cut up, **to lift forty stone of still animated and recalcitrant pork**; he should himself escort the animal downstairs. **It is an unusual situation, I admit. In the normal life of humanity** the gentleman gives his arm to the lady, and not to the pig; and it is the pig that is usually cut up. **But the situation seems to be exceptional in every way.** It is very well for the lady to say that the pig is no nuisance to anyone: as it seems that she has established herself in the pig's suite of apartments, the question rather is whether she is a nuisance to the pig. **But indeed I do not think that this poor woman's fad is an inch more fantastic than many such oddities indulged in by rich and reputable people.** (98—my emphasis added)

His earlier recalling of “a dream of my pure and aspiring boyhood” (97) leads Chesterton now to another dream, and to another revelation:

I have **from my boyhood** entertained the dream. **I never could imagine why pigs**

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Diversity* (1920), p. 97—my emphasis added. All future references to this essay on pages 97-104, will be placed above in the body of the essay, in parentheses—and often with my emphasis added.

should not be kept as pets. To begin with, pigs are very beautiful animals. Those who think otherwise are those who do not look at things with their own eyes, but only through other people's eyeglasses. The actual lines of a pig (I mean a really fat pig) are among the loveliest and most luxuriant in nature; the pig has the same great curves, swift and yet heavy, which we see in rushing water or in a rolling cloud. Compared to him, the horse is a bony, angular, and abrupt animal. (99—my emphasis added)

To confirm and sharpen his contrast between the curvilinear pig and the angular horse, Chesterton then draws upon the attentive and vivid perceptiveness of others:

I remember [for example] that Mr. H.G. Wells...pointed out that, **while a horse is commonly beautiful if seen in profile, he is excessively ugly if seen from the top of a dogcart, having a long, lean neck, and a body like a fiddle. Now, there is no point of view from which a really corpulent pig is not full of sumptuous and satisfying curves.** You can look down on a pig from the top of the most unnaturally lofty dogcart; you can (if not pressed for time) allow the pig to draw the dogcart....You can examine the pig from the top of an omnibus, from the top of the Monument [?], from a balloon, or an airship; **and as long as he is visible he will be beautiful. In short, he has that fuller, subtler, and more universal kind of shapeliness which the unthinking (gazing at pigs and distinguished journalists [such as gentle GKC himself in his huge rotundity?]) mistake for a mere absence of shape. For fatness itself is a valuable quality. While it creates admiration in the onlookers, it creates modesty in the possessor.** If there is anything on which I [as of 1920, and not yet a Roman Catholic until 1922] **differ** from the monastic institutions of the past, **it is that they sometimes sought to achieve humility by means of emaciation.** It may be that the thin monks were holy, **but I am sure that the fat monks were humble.** Falstaff said that **to be fat is not to be hated; but it certainly is to be laughed at, and that is a more wholesome experience for the soul of man. (99-101—my emphasis added)**

Returning now, and more playfully so, to the pig, as such, Chesterton adds a distinction as to the effectiveness of his larger analogy about the valuable quality of fatness for humility and for modesty:

I do not urge that it [the experience of fatness] is effective upon the soul of a pig....**Nor do I mean that mere fatness is the only beauty of the pig. The beauty of the best pigs lies in a certain sleepy perfection of contour** which links them especially to **the smooth strength** of our south English land in which they live. There are two other things in which one can see **this perfect and piggish quality**: one is in **the silent and smooth swell of the Sussex downs** [known so well by Mr. Belloc!], **so enormous and yet so innocent.** The other is the sleek, strong limbs of those beech trees that grow so thin in their valleys. **These three holy symbols, the pig, the beech tree, and the chalk down, stand for ever as expressing the one thing that England as England has to say—that power is not inconsistent with kindness. (101—my emphasis added)**

Recalling the afflicted spinster with her pet pig, Chesterton suddenly says: “Perhaps the lady's pig,

which weighs forty stone and seems to be something of a domestic problem, might begin to earn its living as an artist's model.” (102)

While beginning to let his imagination go a little too wild, perhaps, as he considers the potentially numerous varieties of Pig if it were first sufficiently made a Pet amid a wider range of owners—not just an elderly lady: “Again, we do not know what fascinating varieties might happen in the pig if once the pig were a pet.” (102) For it is so, says Chesterton (or his Persona in the Essay), that: “For hundreds, if not thousands, of years no one has looked at that terrible hairy original thing called Dog.” (102)

He then asks a reasonable follow-up question and proceeds to initiate some vivid speculations:

Why, then, should we be hopeless about the substantial and satisfying thing called Pig? Types of Pig may be differentiated; delicate shades of Pig may also be produced. A monstrous pig as big as a pony may perambulate the streets like a St. Bernard....An elegant and unnaturally attenuated pig may have all the appearance of a greyhound. There may be little, frisky fighting pigs...; there may be little pathetic pigs like King Charles spaniels. Artificial breeding might produce **the awful original pig, tusks and all**, the terror of the forests....**What is it that makes you look so incredulous? Why do you still feel slightly superior to the poor lady who would not be parted from her pig? Why do you not at once take the hog to your heart? Reason suggests its evident beauty.** Evolution suggests his **probable** improvement. It is, perhaps, some instinct, some tradition...? Well, apply that [reasoning, instinct, and possible tradition] to women, children, animals, and we will argue again. (102-104—my emphasis added)

Chesterton remains gracious and chivalrous to the end, even as he politely invites us to a further argument, as distinct from a quarrel. In his *Autobiography*, he notes that, from the outset as children, he and his beloved, and very intelligent, brother **had always argued, but never once quarreled!**

Our modest and humble Chesterton has taught us to have sympathy and empathy for the “poor lady who would not be parted from her pig”—with all of “its evident beauty.” We may now even “take [that] hog to [our] heart”! Chesterton has taught us how to see freshly again—about the little things and about the big things, too: *e.g.*, that “to be laughed at...is a more wholesome experience for the soul of man”(101); and that “power is not inconsistent with kindness” (101); and that an animal like that “animated and recalcitrant” pig can be “so enormous and yet so innocent.” (98, 101) May we also be blessed to know and to live G.K. Chesterton's generously radiant gratitude and his chivalrous humility.

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