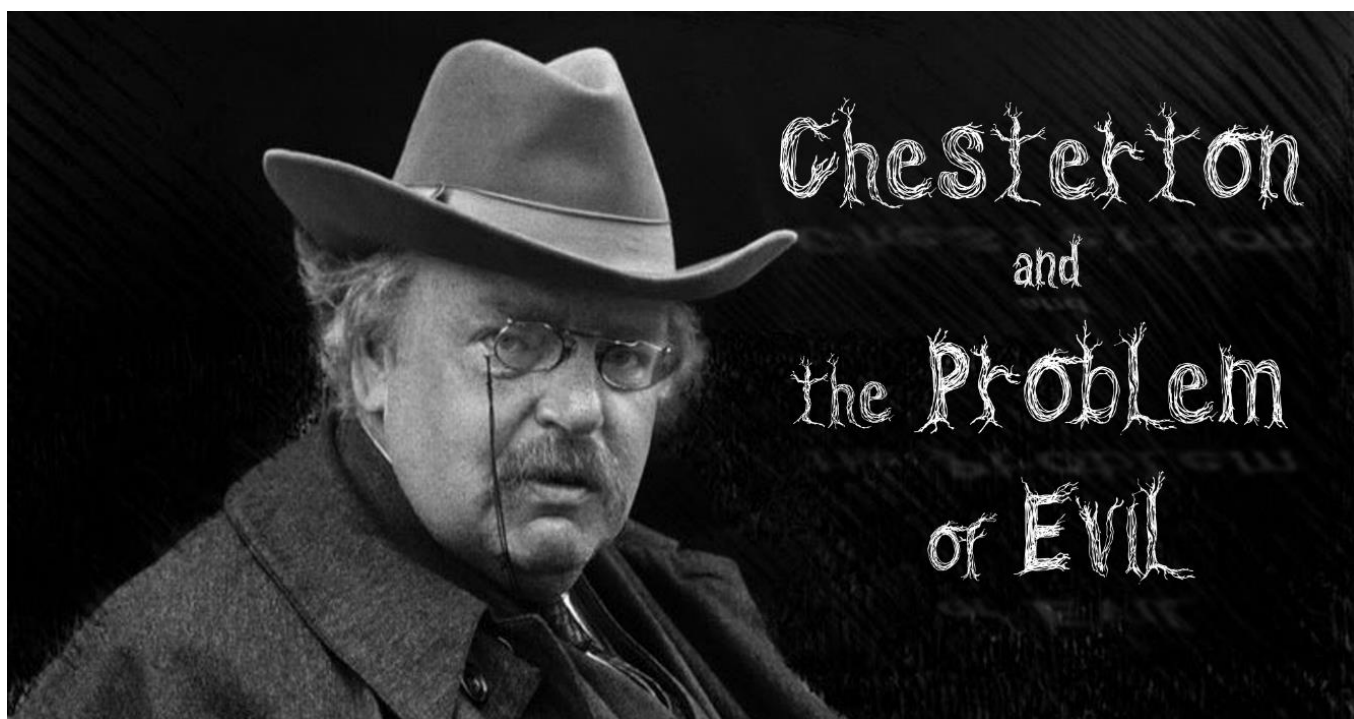


JULY 2017

SOUTHEAST PA CHESTERTON SOCIETY

READING PACKET



“This world can be made beautiful again by beholding it as a battlefield. When we have defined and isolated the evil thing, the colours come back into everything else. When evil things have become evil, good things, in a blazing apocalypse, become good. There are some men who are dreary because they do not believe in God; but there are many others who are dreary because they do not believe in the devil.”

- GKC, *Charles Dickens*

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THE NIGHTMARE

FROM TREMENDOUS TRIFLES

A SUNSET of copper and gold had just broken down and gone to pieces in the west, and grey colours were crawling over everything in earth and heaven; also a wind was growing, a wind that laid a cold finger upon flesh and spirit. The bushes at the back of my garden began to whisper like conspirators; and then to wave like wild hands in signal. I was trying to read by the last light that died on the lawn a long poem of the decadent period, a poem about the old gods of Babylon and Egypt, about their blazing and obscene temples, their cruel and colossal faces.

"Or didst thou love the God of Flies who plagued

the Hebrews and was splashed

With wine unto the waist, or Pasht who had green

beryls for her eyes?"

I read this poem because I had to review it for the Daily News; still it was genuine poetry of its kind. It really gave out an atmosphere, a fragrant and suffocating smoke that seemed really to come from the Bondage of Egypt or the Burden of Tyre. There is not much in common (thank God) between my garden with the grey-green English sky-line beyond it, and these mad visions of painted palaces, huge, headless idols and monstrous solitudes of red or golden sand. Nevertheless (as I confessed to myself) I can fancy in such a stormy twilight some such smell of death and fear. The ruined sunset really looks like one of their ruined temples: a shattered heap of gold and green marble. A black flapping thing detaches itself from one of the sombre trees and flutters to another. I know not if it is owl or flittermouse; I could fancy it was a black cherub, an infernal cherub of darkness, not with the wings of a bird and the head of a baby, but with the head of a goblin and the wings of a bat. I think, if there were light enough, I could sit here and write some very creditable creepy tale, about how I went up the crooked road beyond the church and met Something—say a dog, a dog with one eye. Then I should meet a horse, perhaps, a horse without a rider; the horse also would have one eye. Then the inhuman silence would be broken; I should meet a man (need I say, a one-eyed man?) who would ask me the way to my own house. Or perhaps tell me that it was burnt to the ground. I think I could tell a very cosy little tale along some such lines. Or I might dream of climbing for ever the tall dark trees above me. They are so tall that I feel as if I should find at their tops the nests of the angels; but in this mood they would be dark and dreadful angels; angels of death.

* * *

Only, you see, this mood is all bosh. I do not believe it in the least. That one-eyed universe, with its one-eyed men and beasts, was only created with one universal wink. At the top of the tragic trees I should not find the Angel's Nest. I should only find the Mare's Nest; the dreamy and divine nest is not there. In the Mare's Nest I shall discover that dim, enormous opalescent egg from which is hatched the Nightmare. For there is nothing so delightful as a nightmare-when you know it is a nightmare.

That is the essential. That is the stern condition laid upon all artists touching this luxury of fear. The terror must be fundamentally frivolous. Sanity may play with insanity; but insanity must not be allowed to play with sanity. Let such poets as the one I was reading in the garden, by all means, be free to imagine what outrageous deities and violent landscapes they like. By all means let them wander freely amid their opium pinnacles and perspectives. But these huge gods, these high cities, are toys; they must never for an instant be allowed to be anything else. Man, a gigantic child, must play with Babylon and Nineveh, with Isis and with Ashtaroath. By all means let him dream of the Bondage of Egypt, so long as he is free from it. By all means let him take up the Burden of Tyre, so long as he can take it lightly. But the old gods must be his dolls, not his idols. His central sanctities, his true possessions, should be Christian and simple. And just as a child would cherish most a wooden horse or a sword that is a mere cross of wood, so man, the great child, must cherish most the old plain things of poetry and piety; that horse of wood that was the epic end of Ilium, or that cross of wood that redeemed and conquered the world.

In one of Stevenson's letters there is a characteristically humorous remark about the appalling impression produced on him in childhood by the beasts with many eyes in the Book of Revelations: "If that was heaven, what in the name of Davy Jones was hell like?" Now in sober truth there is a magnificent idea in these monsters of the Apocalypse. It is, I suppose, the idea that beings really more beautiful or more universal than we are might appear to us frightful and even confused. Especially they might seem to have senses at once more multiplex and more staring; an idea very imaginatively seized in the multitude of eyes. I like those monsters beneath the throne very much. But I like them beneath the throne. It is when one of them goes wandering in deserts and finds a throne for himself that evil faiths begin, and there is (literally) the devil to pay—to pay in dancing girls or human sacrifice. As long as those misshapen elemental powers are around the throne, remember that the thing that they worship is the likeness of the appearance of a man.

* * *

That is, I fancy, the true doctrine on the subject of Tales of Terror and such things, which unless a man of letters do well and truly believe, without doubt he will end by blowing his brains out or by writing badly. Man, the central pillar of the world must be upright and straight; around him all the trees and beasts and elements and devils may crook and curl like smoke if they choose. All really imaginative literature is only the contrast between the weird curves of Nature and the straightness of the soul. Man may behold what ugliness he likes if he is sure that he will not worship it; but there are some so weak that they will worship a thing only because it is ugly. These must be chained to the beautiful. It is not always wrong even to go, like Dante, to the brink of the lowest promontory and look down at hell. It is when you look up at hell that a serious miscalculation has probably been made.

* * *

Therefore I see no wrong in riding with the Nightmare to-night; she whinnies to me from the rocking tree-tops and the roaring wind; I will catch her and ride her through the awful air. Woods and weeds are alike tugging at the roots in the rising tempest, as if all wished to fly with us over the moon, like that wild, amorous cow whose child was the Moon-Calf. We will rise to that mad infinite where there is neither up nor down, the high topsy-turveydom of the heavens. I will ride on the Nightmare; but she shall not ride on me.

THE DIABOLIST

FROM TREMENDOUS TRIFLES

Every now and then I have introduced into my essays an element of truth. Things that really happened have been mentioned, such is meeting President Kruger or being thrown out of a cab. What I have now to relate really happened; yet there was no element in it of practical politics or of personal danger. It was simply a quiet conversation which I had with another man. But that quiet conversation was by far the most terrible thing that has ever happened to me in my life. It happened so long ago that I cannot be certain of the exact words of the dialogue, only of its main questions and answers; but there is one sentence in it for which I can answer absolutely and word for word. It was a sentence so awful that I could not forget it if I would. It was the last sentence spoken; and it was not spoken to me.

* * *

The thing befell me in the days when I was at an art school. An art school is different from almost all other schools or colleges in this respect: that, being of new and crude creation and of lax discipline, it presents a specially strong contrast between the industrious and the idle. People at an art school either do an atrocious amount of work or do no work at all. I belonged, along with other charming people, to the latter class; and this threw me often into the society of men who were very different from myself, and who were idle for reasons very different from mine. I was idle because I was very much occupied; I was engaged about that time in discovering, to my own extreme and lasting astonishment, that I was not an atheist. But there were others also at loose ends who were engaged in discovering what Carlyle called (I think with needless delicacy) the fact that ginger is hot in the mouth.

I value that time, in short, because it made me acquainted with a good representative number of blackguards. In this connection there are two very curious things which the critic of human life may observe. The first is the fact that there is one real difference between men and women; that women prefer to talk in twos, while men prefer to talk in threes. The second is that when you find (as you often do) three young cads and idiots going about together and getting drunk together every day you generally find that one of the three cads and idiots is (for some extraordinary reason) not a cad and not an idiot. In these small groups devoted to a drivelling dissipation there is almost always one man who seems to have condescended to his company; one man who, while he can talk a foul

triviality with his fellows, can also talk politics with a Socialist, or philosophy with a Catholic.

It was just such a man whom I came to know well. It was strange, perhaps, that he liked his dirty, drunken society; it was stranger still, perhaps, that he liked my society. For hours of the day he would talk with me about Milton or Gothic architecture; for hours of the night he would go where I have no wish to follow him, even in speculation. He was a man with a long, ironical face, and close and red hair; he was by class a gentleman, and could walk like one, but preferred, for some reason, to walk like a groom carrying two pails. He looked liked a sort of Super-jockey; as if some archangel had gone on the Turf. And I shall never forget the half-hour in which he and I argued about real things for the first and the last time.

* * *

Along the front of the big building of which our school was a part ran a huge slope of stone steps, higher, I think, than those that lead up to St. Paul's Cathedral. On a black wintry evening he and I were wandering on these cold heights, which seemed as dreary as a pyramid under the stars. The one thing visible below us in the blackness was a burning and blowing fire; for some gardener (I suppose) was burning something in the grounds, and from time to time the red sparks went whirling past us like a swarm of scarlet insects in the dark. Above us also it was gloom; but if one stared long enough at that upper darkness, one saw vertical stripes of grey in the black and then became conscious of the colossal facade of the Doric building, phantasmal, yet filling the sky, as if Heaven were still filled with the gigantic ghost of Paganism.

* * *

The man asked me abruptly why I was becoming orthodox. Until he said it, I really had not known that I was; but the moment he had said it I knew it to be literally true. And the process had been so long and full that I answered him at once out of existing stores of explanation.

"I am becoming orthodox," I said, "because I have come, rightly or wrongly, after stretching my brain till it bursts, to the old belief that heresy is worse even than sin. An error is more menacing than a crime, for an error begets crimes. An Imperialist is worse than a pirate. For an Imperialist keeps a school for pirates; he teaches piracy disinterestedly and without an adequate salary. A Free Lover is worse than a profligate. For a profligate is serious and reckless even in his shortest love; while a Free Lover is cautious and irresponsible even in his longest devotion. I hate modern doubt because it is dangerous."

"You mean dangerous to morality," he said in a voice of wonderful gentleness. "I expect you are right. But why do you care about morality?"

I glanced at his face quickly. He had thrust out his neck as he had a trick of doing; and so brought his face abruptly into the light of the bonfire from below, like a face in the footlights. His long chin and high cheek-bones were lit up infernally from underneath; so that he looked like a fiend staring down into the flaming pit. I had an unmeaning sense of being tempted in a wilderness; and even as I paused a burst of red sparks broke past.

"Aren't those sparks splendid?" I said.

"Yes," he replied.

"That is all that I ask you to admit," said I. "Give me those few red specks and I will deduce Christian morality. Once I thought like you, that one's pleasure in a flying spark was a thing that could come and go with that spark. Once I thought that the delight was as free as the fire. Once I thought that red star we see was alone in space. But now I know that the red star is only on the apex of an invisible pyramid of virtues. That red fire is only the flower on a stalk of living habits, which you cannot see. Only because your mother made you say 'Thank you' for a bun are you now able to thank Nature or chaos for those red stars of an instant or for the white stars of all time. Only because you were humble before fireworks on the fifth of November do you now enjoy any fireworks that you chance to see. You only like them being red because you were told about the blood of the martyrs; you only like them being bright because brightness is a glory. That flame flowered out of virtues, and it will fade with virtues. Seduce a woman, and that spark will be less bright. Shed blood, and that spark will be less red. Be really bad, and they will be to you like the spots on a wall-paper."

He had a horrible fairness of the intellect that made me despair of his soul. A common, harmless atheist would have denied that religion produced humility or humility a simple joy: but he admitted both. He only said, "But shall I not find in evil a life of its own? Granted that for every woman I ruin one of those red sparks will go out: will not the expanding pleasure of ruin ..."

"Do you see that fire?" I asked. "If we had a real fighting democracy, some one would burn you in it; like the devil-worshipper that you are."

"Perhaps," he said, in his tired, fair way. "Only what you call evil I call good."

He went down the great steps alone, and I felt as if I wanted the steps swept and cleaned. I followed later, and as I went to find my hat in the low, dark passage where it hung, I suddenly heard his voice again, but the words were inaudible. I stopped, startled: then I heard the voice of one of the vilest of his associates

saying, "Nobody can possibly know." And then I heard those two or three words which I remember in every syllable and cannot forget. I heard the Diabolist say, "I tell you I have done everything else. If I do that I shan't know the difference between right and wrong." I rushed out without daring to pause; and as I passed the fire I did not know whether it was hell or the furious love of God.

I have since heard that he died: it may be said, I think, that he committed suicide; though he did it with tools of pleasure, not with tools of pain. God help him, I know the road he went; but I have never known, or even dared to think, what was that place at which he stopped and refrained.

THE KNOX LETTERS

FROM MASIE WARD'S BIOGRAPHY

[In 1922, on the verge of his reception into the Catholic Church, Chesterton exchanged a series of letters with (then) Father Ronald Knox. Knox was, along with Maurice Baring, one of the "the two people who helped him most at this time" according to his biographer Masie Ward, who prints the series of letters from Chesterton to Knox and says the correspondence best illustrates "the story of the last slow but by no means uncertain steps" of Chesterton into the Church. The letters from Ward's biography follow. - JLG]

* * *

I.

Dear Father Knox,

It is hard not to have a silly feeling that demons, in the form of circumstances, get in the way of what concerns one most, and I have been distracted with details for which I have to be responsible, in connection with the *New Witness*, which is in a crisis about which shareholders etc. have to be consulted. I can't let my brother's paper, that stands for all he believed in, go without doing all I can; and I am trying to get it started again, with Belloc to run it if possible. But the matter of our meeting has got into every chink of my thoughts, even the pauses of talk on practical things. I could not explain myself at that meeting; and I want to try again now.

I could not explain what I mean about my wife without saying much more. I see in principle it is not on the same level as the true Church; for nothing can be on the same level as God. But it is on quite a different level from social sentiments about friends and family. I have been a rottenly irresponsible person till I began to wear the iron ring of Catholic responsibilities. But I really have felt a responsibility about her, more serious than affection, let alone passion. First, because she gave me my first respect for sacramental Christianity; second, because she is one of the good who mysteriously suffer....¹

I have, however, a more practical reason for returning to this point. So far as my own feelings go, I think I might rightly make application to be instructed as soon as possible; but I should not like to take so serious a step without reopening the matter with her, which I could do by the end of a week. I have had no opportunity before, because she has only just recovered from an illness, and is going away for a few days. But at about the end of next week, say, everything

¹ There is no indication whether this ellipsis is Chesterton's own or Ward's. - JLG

ought to be ready. Meanwhile I will write to you again, as I ought to have done before, but this tangle of business ties me up terribly just now. Perhaps you could tell me how I could arrange matters with some priest or religious in London, whose convenience it would suit if I came up once or twice a week, or whatever is required; or give me the address of someone to write to, if that is the correct way. There are priests at High Wycombe which is nearer; but I imagine they are very busy parochial clergy.

I had meant to write to you about the convictions involved in a more abstract way, but I fear I have filled my letter with one personal point. But, as I say, I will write to you again about the other matters; and as they are more intellectual and less emotional, I hope I may be a little more coherent.

Yours very sincerely,

G.K. Chesterton

P.S. This has been delayed even longer than I thought, for business bothers of my own and the paper's, plus finishing a book and all my journalism, are bewildering me terribly.

* * *

II.

Dear Father Knox,

Please excuse this journalistic paper, but the letter-block seems undiscoverable at this time of night. I ought to have written before; but we have been in some family trouble; my father is very ill, and as he is an old man, my feelings are with him and my mother in a way more serious than anything except the matter of our correspondence. Essentially, of course, it does not so much turn the current of my thoughts as deepen it; to see a man so many million times better than I am, in every way, and one to whom I owe everything, under such a shadow makes me feel, on top of all my particular feelings, the shadow that lies on us all. I can't tell you what I feel of course; but I hope I may ask for your prayers for my people and for me. My father is the very best man I ever knew of that generation that never understood the new need of a spiritual authority; and lives almost perfectly by the sort of religion men had when rationalism was rational. I think he was always subconsciously prepared for the next generation having less theology than he has; and is rather puzzled at its having more. But I think he understood my brother's conversion better than my mother did; she is more difficult, and of course I cannot bother her just now. However, my trouble has a practical side, for which I originally mentioned it. As this may bring me to London more than I thought, it seems possible I might go there after all, instead of Wycombe, if I knew to whom

to go. Also I find I stupidly destroyed your letter with the names of the priests at Wycombe to whom you referred me. Would it bother you very much to send me the names again, and any alternative London ones that occur to you; and I will let you know my course of action then. Please forgive the disorder of my writing—and feeling.

Yours sincerely,
G.K. Chesterton

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III.

Dear Father Knox,

I was just settling down three days ago to write a full reply to your last very kind letter, which I should have answered long before, when I received the wire that called me instantly to town. My father died on Monday; and since then I have been doing the little I can for my mother; but even that little involves a great deal of business—the least valuable sort of help. I will not attempt to tell you now all that this involves in connection with my deeper feelings and intentions; for I only send you this interim scribble as an excuse for delaying the letter I had already begun; and which nothing less than this catastrophe would have prevented me finishing. I hope to finish it in a few days. I am not sure whether I shall then be back in Beaconsfield; but if so it will be at a new address:

Top Meadow
Beaconsfield.

Yours in haste,
G.K. Chesterton

* * *

IV.

Dear Father Knox,

I feel horribly guilty in not having written before, and I do most earnestly hope you have not allowed my delay to interfere with any of your own arrangements. I have had a serious and very moving talk with my wife; and she is only too delighted at the idea of your visit in itself; in fact she really wants to know you very much. Unfortunately, it does not seem very workable at the time to which I suppose you referred. I imagine it more or less corresponds to next week; and we have only one spare bedroom yet, which is occupied by a nurse who is giving my

wife a treatment that seems to be doing her good and which I don't want to stop if I can help it. I am sure you will believe that my regret about this difficulty is really not the conventional apology; though heaven knows all sorts of apologies are due to you. Touching the other idea of Lady Lovat's most generous invitation I am not so sure, as that again depends at the moment on the treatment; but of course I shall let Lady Lovat know very soon in any case; and make other arrangements, as you suggested. In our conversation my wife was all that I hope you will some day know her to be; she is incapable of wanting me to do anything but what I think right; and admits the same possibility for herself: but it is much more of a wrench for her, for she has been able to practise her religion in complete good faith; which my own doubts have prevented me from doing.

I will write again very soon.

Yours sincerely,

G.K. Chesterton

P.S. I am ashamed to say this has been finished fully forty-eight hours after I meant it to go, owing to executor business. Nobody so unbusinesslike as I am ought to be busy.

* * *

V.

Dear Father Knox,

This is only a wild and hasty line to show I have not forgotten, and to ask you if it would be too late if I let you know in a day or two, touching your generous suggestion about your vacation. I shall know for certain, I think, at latest by the end of the week; but just at the moment it depends on things still uncertain, about a nurse who is staying here giving my wife a treatment of radiant heat—one would hardly think needed in this weather; but it seems to be doing her good, I am thankful to say. If this is pushing your great patience too far, please do not hesitate to make other arrangements if you wish to; and I shall no doubt be able to do the same. But I should love to accept your suggestion if possible.

Yours sincerely,

G.K. Chesterton

* * *

VI.

Dear Father Knox,

Just as I am emerging from the hurricane of business I mentioned to you, I find myself under a promise a year old to go and lecture for a week in Holland; and I write this almost stepping on to the boat. I don't in the least want to go; but I suppose the great question is there as elsewhere. Indeed, I hear it is something of a reconquered territory; some say a third of this heroic Calvinist state is now Catholic. I have no time to write properly; but the truth is that even before so small a journey I have a queer and perhaps superstitious feeling that I should like to repeat to you my intention of following the example of the worthy Calvinists, please God; so that you could even cite it if there were ever need in a good cause. I will write to you again and more fully about the business of instruction when I return, which should be in about ten days.

Yours always sincerely,

G.K. Chesterton

* * *

VII.

Dear Father Knox,

I ought to have written long ago to tell you what I have done about the most practical of business matters. I have again been torn in pieces by the wars of the New Witness; but I have managed to have another talk with my wife, after which I have written to our old friend Father O'Connor and asked him to come here, as he probably can, from what I hear. I doubt whether I can possibly put in words why I feel sure this is the right thing, not so much for my sake as for hers. We talk about misunderstandings; but I think it is possible to understand too well for comfort; certainly too well for my powers of psychological description. Frances is just at the point where Rome acts both as the positive and the negative magnet; a touch would turn her either way; almost (against her will) to hatred, but with the right touch to a faith far beyond my reach. I know Father O'Connor's would be the touch that does not startle, because she knows him and is fond of him; and the only thing she asked of me was to send for him. If he cannot come, of course I shall take other action and let you know. I doubt if most people could make head or tail of this hasty scrawl: but I think you will understand.

Yours sincerely,

G.K. Chesterton

THE OTHER KNOX LETTER

[In Evelyn Waugh's biography of Knox, he gives the following account of an additional letter that is omitted from the series in Ward's Chesterton. Emphasis here is added in order to show that Waugh's access to this letter gave him an important insight into an aspect of Chesterton's psyche relating to his hesitancy and doubt in his conversion that the Ward account somewhat elides. - JLG]

* * *

“Since 1915 or earlier Chesterton had been so near the Church that his friends had begun to wonder whether he would ever enter it. Intellectually he accepted the full Catholic Faith; but he was as slow to action as he was quick in thought. Various considerations, practical and sentimental, held him back. At length in 1922, after visiting Jerusalem and Rome, he made his decision. **He did not, like Ronald, seek Authority but, surprisingly in a man of such transparent innocence. Absolution.** Ronald's was naturally one of the names that occurred to him and to his friends as a priest suitable to instruct and receive him. During the summer of 1922 they exchanged a series of letters, mostly concerned with the difficulty two busy men found in arranging a meeting; a difficulty which in Chesterton's case was complicated by his father's death, his wife's illness, and a change of house. Ronald's letters have not survived; Chesterton's, **with one exception**, are printed in [Ward's] biography. The exception was given to a friend as a keepsake and forgotten when Mrs. Maisie Ward was collecting her material. It illustrates Chesterton's life, rather than Ronald's, but is here appended so that the series may be complete” [Waugh, *Knox*].

* * *

VIII. The Other Letter

Dear Father Knox,

I had meant to make some attempt to finish the fuller reply I had actually begun to the very kind letter you sent me, I am ashamed to think how long ago, before my recent trouble; and though the trail and tangle of those troubles will still, I fear, make this very inadequate, there were two things in your letter I feel I ought to acknowledge even so late.

I cannot tell you how much I was pleased and honoured even by the suggestion that you might possibly deal with the instruction yourself; it is something that I should value more vividly and personally than I can possibly express. But as this was so long ago, before so many delays and interruptions, I fear your margin of Sundays in London must now be very much narrowed. But I think there must be

a Sunday or two left on your list; and with your permission, I propose to come up next Sunday, if I could have the pleasure of seeing you then. I have no doubt it could be arranged through Maurice Baring or somebody, supposing you have no arrangements of your own which you would prefer. Then we could see what could be done with that possibility, or finally make some arrangement about another one. I rather feel I should like to talk to you once more in either case: I hope it would not be an inconvenience.

For the other matter, I hope you do not really feel any need to apologise for what you said about private troubles dismounting a man from public platforms; for it is exactly what I am feeling most intensely myself. I am in a state now when I feel a monstrous charlatan, as if I wore a mask and were stuffed with cushions, whenever I see anything about the public G.K.C.; it hurts me; for though the views I express are real, the image is horribly unreal compared with the real person who needs help just now. I have as much vanity as anybody about any of these superficial successes while they are going on; but I never feel for a moment that they affect the reality of whether I am utterly rotten or not ; so that any public comments on my religious position seem like a wind on the other side of the world; as if they were about somebody else - as indeed they are. I am not troubled about a great fat man who appears on platforms and in caricatures, even when he enjoys controversies on what I believe to be the right side. I am concerned about what has become of a little boy whose father showed him a toy theatre, and a schoolboy whom nobody ever heard of, with his brooding on doubts and dirt and daydreams of crude conscientiousness so inconsistent as to [be] near to hypocrisy; and all the morbid life of the lonely mind of a living person with whom I have lived. It is that story, that so often came near to ending badly, that I want to end well. Forgive this scrawl; I think you will understand me.

Yours very sincerely,

G. K. Chesterton.

P.S. Forgive the disreputable haste of this letter; my normal chaos is increased by moving into a new house, which is still like a wastepaper basket. I am coming up to town tomorrow, and will try to fix something up with Maurice or somebody.

*[This letter also provokes many questions: what **were** the nature of Chesterton's doubts and hesitation? What did he feel so strongly needed absolving? From a literary-conspiratorial standpoint: did Ward purposely omit this letter, and perhaps edit and amend the others to fit her narrative, or more benignly out of respect for the Chestertons' privacy?... All good fodder for discussion. - JLG]*