

HILAIRE BELLOC



On Nothing &
Kindred Subjects

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ON NOTHING &
KINDRED SUBJECTS



THE BIG NEST

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My dear Maurice,

It was in Normandy, you will remember, and in the heat of the year, when the birds were silent in the trees and the apples nearly ripe, with the sun above us already of a stronger kind, and a somnolence within and without, that it was determined among us (the jolly company!) that I should write upon Nothing, and upon all that is cognate to Nothing, a task not yet attempted since the Beginning of the World.

Now when the matter was begun and the subject nearly approached, I saw more clearly that this writing upon Nothing might be very grave, and as I looked at it in every way the difficulties of my adventure appalled me, nor am I certain that I have overcome them all. But I had promised you that I would proceed, and so I did, in spite of my doubts and terrors.

For first I perceived that in writing upon this matter I was in peril of offending the privilege of others, and of those especially who are powerful to-day, since I would be discussing things very dear and domestic to my fellow-men, such as The Honour of Politicians, The Tact of Great Ladies, The Wealth of Journalists, The Enthusiasm of Gentlemen, and the Wit of Bankers. All that is most intimate and dearest to the men that make our time, all that they would most defend from the vulgar gaze,—this it was proposed to make the theme of a common book.

In spite of such natural fear and of interests so powerful to detain me, I have completed my task, and I will confess that as it grew it enthralled me. There is in Nothing something so majestic and so high that it is a fascination and spell to regard it. Is it not that which Mankind, after the great effort of life, at last attains, and that which alone can satisfy Mankind's desire? Is it not that which is the end of so many generations of analysis, the final word of Philosophy, and the goal of the search for reality? Is it not the very matter of our modern creed in which the great spirits of our time repose, and is it not, as it were,

the culmination of their intelligence? It is indeed the sum and meaning of all around!

How well has the world perceived it and how powerfully do its legends illustrate what Nothing is to men!

You know that once in Lombardy Alfred and Charlemagne and the Kaliph Haroun-al-Raschid met to make trial of their swords. The sword of Alfred was a simple sword: its name was Hewer. And the sword of Charlemagne was a French sword, and its name was Joyeuse. But the sword of Haroun was of the finest steel, forged in Toledo, tempered at Cordova, blessed in Mecca, damascened (as one might imagine) in Damascus, sharpened upon Jacob's Stone, and so wrought that when one struck it it sounded like a bell. And as for its name, By Allah! that was very subtle—for it had no name at all.

Well then, upon that day in Lombardy Alfred and Charlemagne and the Kaliph were met to take a trial of their blades. Alfred took a pig of lead which he had brought from the Mendip Hills, and swiping the air once or twice in the Western fashion, he cut through that lead and girded the edge of his sword upon the rock beneath, making a little dent.

Then Charlemagne, taking in both hands his sword Joyeuse, and aiming at the dent, with a laugh swung down and cut the stone itself right through, so that it fell into two pieces, one on either side, and there they lie today near by Piacenza in a field.

Now that it had come to the Kaliph's turn, one would have said there was nothing left for him to do, for Hewer had manfully hewn lead, and Joyeuse had joyfully cleft stone.

But the Kaliph, with an Arabian look, picked out of his pocket a gossamer scarf from Cashmir, so light that when it was tossed into the air it would hardly fall to the ground, but floated downwards slowly like a mist. This, with a light pass, he severed, and immediately received the prize. For it was deemed more difficult by far to divide such a veil in mid-air, than to cleave lead or even stone.

I knew a man once, Maurice, who was at Oxford for three years, and after that went down with no degree. At College, while his friends were seeking for Truth in funny brown German Philosophies, Sham Religions, stinking bottles and identical equations, he was lying on his back in Eynsham meadows thinking of Nothing, and got the Truth by this parallel road of his much more quickly than did they by theirs; for the asses are still seeking, mildly disputing, and, in a cultivated manner, following the gleam, so that they have become in their Donnish middleage a nuisance and a pest; while he—that other—with the Truth very fast and firm at the end of a leather thong is dragging her sliding, whining and crouching on her four feet, dragging her reluctant through the world, even into the broad daylight where Truth most hates to be.

He it was who became my master in this creed. For once as we lay under a hedge at the corner of a road near Bagley Wood we heard far off the notes of military music and the distant marching of a column; these notes and that tramp grew louder, till there swung round the turning with a blaze of sound five hundred men in order. They passed, and we were full of the scene and of the memories of the world, when he said to me: “Do you know what is in your heart? It is the music. And do you know the cause and Mover of that music? It is the Nothingness inside the bugle; it is the hollow Nothingness inside the Drum.”

Then I thought of the poem where it says of the Army of the Republic:

The thunder of the limber and the rumble of a hundred of the guns.

And there hums as she comes the roll of her innumerable drums.

I knew him to be right.

From this first moment I determined to consider and to meditate upon

Nothing.

Many things have I discovered about Nothing, which have

proved it—to me at least—to be the warp or ground of all that is holiest. It is of such fine gossamer that loveliness was spun, the mists under the hills on an autumn morning are but gross reflections of it; moonshine on lovers is earthy compared with it; song sung most charmingly and stirring the dearest recollections is but a failure in the human attempt to reach its embrace and be dissolved in it. It is out of Nothing that are woven those fine poems of which we carry but vague rhythms in the head:— and that Woman who is a shade, the *Insaisissable*, whom several have enshrined in melody—well, her Christian name, her maiden name, and, as I personally believe, her married name as well, is Nothing. I never see a gallery of pictures now but I know how the use of empty spaces makes a scheme, nor do I ever go to a play but I see how silence is half the merit of acting and hope some day for absence and darkness as well upon the stage. What do you think the fairy Melisende said to Fulk-Nerra when he had lost his soul for her and he met her in the Marshes after twenty years? Why, Nothing—what else could she have said? Nothing is the reward of good men who alone can pretend to taste it in long easy sleep, it is the meditation of the wise and the charm of happy dreamers. So excellent and final is it that I would here and now declare to you that Nothing was the gate of eternity, that by passing through Nothing we reached our every object as passionate and happy beings—were it not for the Council of Toledo that restrains my pen. Yet ... indeed, indeed when I think what an Elixir is this Nothing I am for putting up a statue nowhere, on a pedestal that shall not exist, and for inscribing on it in letters that shall never be written:

ON NOTHING & KINDRED SUBJECTS

TO NOTHING

THE HUMAN RACE IN GRATITUDE.

So I began to write my book, Maurice: and as I wrote it the dignity of what I had to do rose continually before me, as does the dignity of a mountain range which first seemed a vague part of the sky, but at last stands out august and fixed before the traveller; or as the sky at night may seem to a man released from a dungeon who sees it but gradually, first bewildered by the former constraint of his narrow room but now gradually enlarging to drink in its immensity. Indeed this Nothing is too great for any man who has once embraced it to leave it alone thenceforward for ever; and finally, the dignity of Nothing is sufficiently exalted in this: that Nothing is the tenuous stuff from which the world was made.

For when the Elohim set out to make the world, first they debated among themselves the Idea, and one suggested this and another suggested that, till they had threshed out between them a very pretty picture of it all. There were to be hills beyond hills, good grass and trees, and the broadness of rivers, animals of all kinds, both comic and terrible, and savours and colours, and all around the ceaseless streaming of the sea.

Now when they had got that far, and debated the Idea in detail, and with amendment and resolve, it very greatly concerned them of what so admirable a compost should be mixed. Some said of this, and some said of that, but in the long run it was decided by the narrow majority of eight in a full house that Nothing was the only proper material out of which to make this World of theirs, and out of Nothing they made it: as it says in the Ballade:

Dear, tenuous stuff, of which the world was made.

And again in the Envoi:

Prince, draw this sovereign draught in your despair,
That when your riot in that rest is laid,
You shall be merged with an Essential Air:—
Dear, tenuous stuff, of which the world was made!

Out of Nothing then did they proceed to make the world, this sweet world, always excepting Man the Marplot. Man was made in a muddier fashion, as you shall hear.

For when the world seemed ready finished and, as it were, presentable for use, and was full of ducks, tigers, mastodons, waddling hippopotamuses, lilted deer, strong-smelling herbs, angry lions, frowsy snakes, cracked glaciers, regular waterfalls, coloured sunsets, and the rest, it suddenly came into the head of the youngest of these strong Makers of the World (the youngest, who had been sat upon and snubbed all the while the thing was doing, and hardly been allowed to look on, let alone to touch), it suddenly came into his little head, I say, that he would make a Man.

Then the Elder Elohim said, some of them, “Oh, leave well alone! send him to bed!” And others said sleepily (for they were tired), “No! no! let him play his little trick and have done with it, and then we shall have some rest.” Little did they know!... And others again, who were still broad awake, looked on with amusement and applauded, saying: “Go on, little one! Let us see what you can do.” But when these last stooped to help the child, they found that all the Nothing had been used up (and that is why there is none of it about to-day). So the little fellow began to cry, but they, to comfort him, said: “Tut, lad! tut! do not cry; do your best with this bit of mud. It will always serve to fashion something.”

So the jolly little fellow took the dirty lump of mud and pushed it this way and that, jabbing with his thumb and scraping with his nail, until at last he had made Picanthropos, who

lived in Java and was a fool; who begat Eoanthropos, who begat Meioanthropos, who begat Pleioanthropos, who begat Pleistoanthropos, who is often mixed up with his father, and a great warning against keeping the same names in one family; who begat Paleoanthropos, who begat Neoanthropos, who begat the three Anthropoids, great mumblers and murmurers with their mouths; and the eldest of these begat Him whose son was He, from whom we are all descended.

He was indeed halting and patchy, ill-lettered, passionate and rude; bald of one cheek and blind of one eye, and his legs were of different sizes, nevertheless by process of ascent have we, his descendants, manfully continued to develop and to progress, and to swell in everything, until from Homer we came to Euripides, and from Euripides to Seneca, and from Seneca to Boethius and his peers; and from these to Duns Scotus, and so upwards through James I of England and the fifth, sixth or seventh of Scotland (for it is impossible to remember these things) and on, on, to my Lord Macaulay, and in the very last reached YOU, the great summits of the human race and last perfection of the ages READERS OF THIS BOOK, and you also Maurice, to whom it is dedicated, and myself, who have written it for gain.

Amen._

ON NOTHING

ON THE PLEASURE OF TAKING UP ONE'S PEN

Among the sadder and smaller pleasures of this world I count this pleasure: the pleasure of taking up one's pen.

It has been said by very many people that there is a tangible pleasure in the mere act of writing: in choosing and arranging words. It has been denied by many. It is affirmed and denied in the life of Doctor Johnson, and for my part I would say that it is very true in some rare moods and wholly false in most others. However, of writing and the pleasure in it I am not writing here (with pleasure), but of the pleasure of taking up one's pen, which is quite another matter.

Note what the action means. You are alone. Even if the room is crowded (as was the smoking-room in the G.W.R. Hotel, at Paddington, only the other day, when I wrote my “Statistical Abstract of Christendom”), even if the room is crowded, you must have made yourself alone to be able to write at all. You must have built up some kind of wall and isolated your mind. You are alone, then; and that is the beginning.

If you consider at what pains men are to be alone: how they climb mountains, enter prisons, profess monastic vows, put on eccentric daily habits, and seclude themselves in the garrets of a great town, you will see that this moment of taking up the pen is not least happy in the fact that then, by a mere association of ideas, the writer is alone.

So much for that. Now not only are you alone, but you are going to “create”.

When people say “create” they flatter themselves. No man can create anything. I knew a man once who drew a horse on a bit of paper to amuse the company and covered it all over with many parallel streaks as he drew. When he had done this, an aged priest (present upon that occasion) said, “You are pleased to draw a zebra.” When the priest said this the man began to curse and to swear, and to protest that he had never seen or heard of a zebra. He said it was all done out of his own head, and he called heaven to witness, and his patron saint (for he was of the Old English Territorial Catholic Families—his patron saint was Aethelstan), and the salvation of his immortal soul he also staked, that he was as innocent of zebras as the babe unborn. But there! He persuaded no one, and the priest scored. It was most evident that the Territorial was crammed full of zebraical knowledge.

All this, then, is a digression, and it must be admitted that there is no such thing as a man’s “creating”. But anyhow, when you take up your pen you do something devilish pleasing: there is a prospect before you. You are going to develop a germ: I don’t know what it is, and I promise you I won’t call it creation—but

possibly a god is creating through you, and at least you are making believe at creation. Anyhow, it is a sense of mastery and of origin, and you know that when you have done, something will be added to the world, and little destroyed. For what will you have destroyed or wasted? A certain amount of white paper at a farthing a square yard (and I am not certain it is not pleasanter all diversified and variegated with black wriggles)—a certain amount of ink meant to be spread and dried: made for no other purpose. A certain infinitesimal amount of quill—torn from the silly goose for no purpose whatsoever but to minister to the high needs of Man.

Here you cry “Affectation! Affectation! How do I know that the fellow writes with a quill? A most unlikely habit!” To that I answer you are right. Less assertion, please, and more humility. I will tell you frankly with what I am writing. I am writing with a Waterman’s Ideal Fountain Pen. The nib is of pure gold, as was the throne of Charlemagne, in the “Song of Roland.” That throne (I need hardly tell you) was borne into Spain across the cold and awful passes of the Pyrenees by no less than a hundred and twenty mules, and all the Western world adored it, and trembled before it when it was set up at every halt under pine trees, on the upland grasses. For he sat upon it, dreadful and commanding: there weighed upon him two centuries of age; his brows were level with justice and experience, and his beard was so tangled and full, that he was called “bramble-bearded Charlemagne.” You have read how, when he stretched out his hand at evening, the sun stood still till he had found the body of Roland? No? You must read about these things.

Well then, the pen is of pure gold, a pen that runs straight away like a willing horse, or a jolly little ship; indeed, it is a pen so excellent that it reminds me of my subject: the pleasure of taking up one’s pen.

God bless you, pen! When I was a boy, and they told me work was honourable, useful, cleanly, sanitary, wholesome, and necessary to the mind of man, I paid no more attention to them than if they had told me that public men were usually honest, or that pigs could fly. It seemed to me that they were merely saying

silly things they had been told to say. Nor do I doubt to this day that those who told me these things at school were but preaching a dull and careless round. But now I know that the things they told me were true. God bless you, pen of work, pen of drudgery, pen of letters, pen of posings, pen rabid, pen ridiculous, pen glorified. Pray, little pen, be worthy of the love I bear you, and consider how noble I shall make you some day, when you shall live in a glass case with a crowd of tourists round you every day from 10 to 4; pen of justice, pen of the saeva indignatio, pen of majesty and of light. I will write with you some day a considerable poem; it is a compact between you and me. If I cannot make one of my own, then I will write out some other man's; but you, pen, come what may, shall write out a good poem before you die, if it is only the Allegro.

* * * * *

The pleasure of taking up one's pen has also this, peculiar among all pleasures, that you have the freedom to lay it down when you will. Not so with love. Not so with victory. Not so with glory.

Had I begun the other way round, I would have called this Work, "The Pleasure of laying down one's Pen." But I began it where I began it, and I am going on to end it just where it is going to end.

What other occupation, avocation, dissertation, or intellectual recreation can you cease at will? Not bridge—you go on playing to win. Not public speaking—they ring a bell. Not mere converse—you have to answer everything the other insufficient person says. Not life, for it is wrong to kill one's self; and as for the natural end of living, that does not come by one's choice; on the contrary, it is the most capricious of all accidents.

But the pen you lay down when you will. At any moment: without remorse, without anxiety, without dishonour, you are free to do this dignified and final thing (I am just going to do it)... You lay it down.