

THE UNROMANTIC WINDOW

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ONE who is interested in the curiosities of history and literature might do worse than to collect some information about windows, famous and otherwise. There was a window through which certain well known spies were let down to safety; and was not the same window afterward marked by a scarlet thread? There was a window through which three men were ejected in 1618 or thereabouts, not without some superficial effect on the course of history. There was a window through which a careless young man incurred the appropriate penalty for sleeping in church, and one through which Charles I stepped to meet his fate. There is a window in the cell of Savonarola in the Palazzo Vecchio, a window to cause sombre reflections to the thoughtful mind. There are vast seas of glass in great cathedrals, and small, round, thick panes in portholes through which one surveys the tumbling ocean. There is the window in the railway carriage, kaleidoscopic or kakeidoscopic as the case may be, and the skylight that permits merely the view of the upper regions of the universe, and that often obscured by cloudbanks. There is the cheerful shaded window that casts a subdued light over the path to the gate, and the window of the lonely lighthouse that guides tall ships upon their way. There is the square-paned window through which one gazed while counting flies and hoping for the speaker to stop, and the unfortunate window in the school-house that was shattered by an erring stone. There are glorious and honorable windows, memorials to great men and great deeds, and dull, dirty windows that gaze in back districts of cities upon dingy, dirty yards and streets. There are show windows of shops, not so much windows as newspapers, luring men to the destruction of their savings and comfort, and colourless panes of glass in wayside railway stations that give the best view in the world of nothing at all. There is no end to the enumeration of windows. Even the greatest picture in the world owes half its beauty to the light through its window.

But it is an easy thing to grow enthusiastic over windows of historic fame or aesthetic charm. One may sit for a day unperturbed and oblivious of time watching the Tree of Jesse at Chartres, the splendour of Canterbury, the glories of Sainte Chapelle, or the great Rose window of Notre Dame. Yet no one of these performs the proper and original function of a window but as a secondary detail. And to study carefully the window as such, one would begin with more primitive forms. Here shall be no discussion of

the window in itself; this window, whatever it may be, would elude our grasp as the thing-in-itself eluded Kant and his followers and everybody else who has ever looked for it since. The unromantic window is enough.

If this unromantic window had not selected itself and thrust itself upon the page with very little volition on anyone's part, one might write of other windows not more famous but fairer to the eye. There is a window of small panes in the northeast side of an old wooden church—a window that looked across sloping pasture and woodland, and a blue inlet of the sea traversed by infrequent ships and occasional small boats to a diminutive range of mountains behind; a window through which, on warm Sunday afternoons in summer, texts and sermons seemed to float out and permeate the air, and by which it would not greatly have surprised young hearers to see angels, in robes of correct pattern, wafted in on the afternoon breeze. The nostalgia for early youth is real though not rational, and early memories and hopes are tied by cords of mystery and splendour to objects in themselves common or obscure. But all these incentives to romance are absent from our window.

It is a double window, of four large panes of glass. It is as two ordinary windows, united in indissoluble marriage, and bound in wooden bonds. The curtains that cover the lower part are white and flimsy, and have a funny little pattern, and the green blinds that depend from above to shut out the light that it is the object of all windows to admit, are of the commonest and least interesting variety.

The window looks from above upon half a dozen small backyards, and the poetry of the small backyard has perhaps never been sufficiently sung. One backyard is kept for trees and grass, a pleasant resting place in summer, requiring little labour to maintain. A second is devoted to shrubs and tall raspberry bushes, avid of attention and productive of beauty or utility. A third is boldly given over to intensive cultivation as though it were a farm; spaded, fertilized, planted, hoed, weeded with merciless care. Here in the season, the great flowers of the bean, the relative of Pythagoras, fling scarlet contempt upon the more humble plants around, and eye with envy the tall trees in the next yard. It is not the fault of the beanstalk if the ancient fable is not true. And a backyard may be—and some are—neglected. Rough circles of stones mark what were meant to be flower beds; and sometimes a flower peeps mutely and timidly through the surrounding wilderness of weeds to challenge the sympathy of a careless world. The trees dotted among the various yards relieve the minor vegetation; and one pear tree

climbs valiantly toward the unromantic window, and cranes its neck as if to penetrate the mysteries within.

The population of the houses attached to the various yards it would be impertinent to scrutinize. As seen from the street the houses are the principal feature of the landscape; but from the yards, and from the unromantic window that sympathizes with the yards, they are merely prosaic additions to out-of-doors; useful for warmth, for shelter, and for storehouses, but not otherwise of importance. They are houses of common wood, without pretence, and therefore not hideous, which is about all the praise that can be extended to most city houses. Some of them add a touch of the picturesque, with their chimney pots standing rigidly against the sky. A chimney pot is a humble, kindly thing in spite of its exalted position, and it adds a human interest to the clouds that gather round the setting sun. There are upon some houses villainous little wires, some part of radio sets, another device for multiplying noise. It is strange that, in a world that contains books and tobacco and conversation, such things can exist. For commercial purposes and the rapid transportation of messages, it is a different story. But for the multiplication of the human voice, with which the world is deluged already, and for the transmission of the noises of prize fights and political conventions, there is no excuse. However, such instruments preserve the mind from total vacuity without the exertion of thought, and so far serve their purpose. One reflects upon what Dr. Johnson says of a far worthier invention.

The window is not limited in its outlook to mere backyards. Across the fence lies a street corner often populous with traffic, and beyond that corner is a cemetery. The street is lined and the cemetery well planted with trees. There is nothing unpleasant to a healthy mind in the *meditatio mortis* suggested by a peaceful cemetery. The setting of this cemetery is different from that at Stoke Poges; but another Gray could have found here another elegy. Somewhere beyond the trees in the cemetery stands an ancient fortification, and at stated hours the boom of a gun therefrom warns all the natives of the time of day.

In winter, the shapeless snows spread their all-hiding blanket over shrub and garden plot. The trees are hung with glistening white raiment. Denizens of houses build their toilsome paths to strategic points, shed and clothesline. The thaw percipitates its dreary product of slush and mud. From the unromantic window all the changes appear as in the country; one may follow "each facet flash of the revolving year". The trees stand bare and cold. On a calm morning, the black lines of telephone and electric wires

that pass beneath and among their limbs are not more rigid. The window looks northeast; and when a big storm comes, the limbs dance and whirl and clash in a savage orgy. Then the wind falls, and the quiet snow settles upon the limbs again, and the world from the window is a dazzling whiteness. Or a sleet storm loads the trees with ice, like giant decorations for Christmas, and sends twigs and even entire branches headlong to the ground. These are the days when the pedestrian keeps a wary eye for a fallen wire. But from the unromantic window, falling boughs and fallen wires are only part of the entertainment.

Spring comes, after its protracted preface of ice and mud, and the brown earth peers through as though it were real country. Shortly the guarded and cherished vegetation tries its ineffectual best to rival that of the open fields. The miniature farms and parks of the backyards pursue faithfully the changes of the seasons as their inalienable right and destiny, and the drama of seedtime and harvest is seen as through the small end of a telescope.

The wall of the backyard nearest the street is high, higher than a man's head. It is made of closely joined boards, so that no prying eye can peer between them. But the unromantic window is in an upper story, and the watcher thereat has corresponding advantages. At his appointed season the ice-man opens the gate in this wall, and deposits his burden upon somebody's steps. Or the garbage-man appears for his unlovely load. Half or more of the unloveliness of his task would disappear if he were known as a dustman. How great a man is Mr. Doolittle in Shaw! And good old Boffin from *Our Mutual Friend* makes the memory play around the dustheap with affection and delight. But it does seem difficult to appreciate the poetry of the garbage can. Even Eugene O'Neill might falter.

Ordinary passers-by along the wall are discriminated, if sufficiently tall, by their hats. The hats serve after their sort as the shadows in Plato's cave, and from them one may conjecture the nature of the person beneath. But on the other side of the street, people walk in full view; no ceaseless tide, for there are interruptions, and the street is by no means Broadway or the Strand. The corner by the cemetery is an intersection of traffic, and one watches the harmless pedestrian weighing his chances with the approaching automobile. North and south on the main line of traffic run the street cars, grinding their plaintive discords from the lamenting rails.

Those who remember the corner as it was a quarter of a century ago can recall to mind the fact that no automobile had then passed it by. Our machine-ridden civilization may be better or worse;

here shall appear no moral reflections; but there can be little doubt that, to an observing mind, the horse is a much more interesting affair than the auto. There is, no doubt, to the expert autoist, some difference between the Ford and the Cadillac or Pebeco or Tecumseh or whatever the latest mechanical toy is. The thing is useful to some of those who use it. It goes farther and faster than a horse, is more trouble to keep, makes more noise, costs more money, and kills more people; all of which may comfort the devout Malthusian. But it lacks interest and individuality. There is a difference, as one observes the stream of traffic from the window, between the heavy truck laden with coal as it thunders down the way, and the softly moving limousine that glides along with its gentle purr. There is a difference; but not a difference such as that between the huge draft horse and the Shetland pony. The horn of the auto, too, is an unmitigated abomination when one is at peace beside the street, and a vile atrocity during hours for sleep; but a very present help to the innocent pedestrian. From the unromantic window, a quiet window beside a quiet corner on a quiet residential street, for some hours every day the autos average one per minute. And the street cars urge their course up and down with sudden clang of bell and raucous groan of wheels. On rare occasions, the fire apparatus dashes by. These occasions are great opportunities for the small boy. Even some citizens old enough to know better plod earnestly after the engines. In most cases the apparatus returns in a short time, and everyone is relieved, even though the small boy may be disappointed. It is a tense moment when the engine hurls itself past, reckless of speed, with menacing horn or bell. Still more exciting is it when the horsedrawn waggons appear, the four horse teams running freely and cheerfully, the stately firemen in complete armour standing nonchalantly beside their ladders. In the daytime the passing of the cavalcade furnishes a dramatic interlude; at night, an authentic thrill.

There are, to be sure, sometime days in winter when from the window for hours one may see no auto pass, no street car buffet its way through the tempestuous seas of snow. Then comes the mighty sweeper, plunging its bristles into the heaping drifts, and hurling the snow far and wide around. Then one may enjoy the satisfaction of being snowbound in town. It is the advantage of living in a small city in the north. In southern cities, the ordinary citizen can never lose his neighbours. They are imminent, pervading the vicinity, dominating the situation and submerging the individual. Much of the time one would not have

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it otherwise. Yet each man needs to retire into himself by times—providing that he has a self to retire into. And in great cities the cliff-dweller in his tenement cannot be separated from his kind. But in a small northern city by the sea, one may enjoy in a twelve-month more comfortable thrills of fundamental interest than perhaps anywhere else. There are no wolves to howl around the storm-bound cabin; but the house is storm-bound none the less. The shriek of the wind and the deadening weight of the snow cut off all usual noise from outside. Even the dull roar of the fog whistle at the harbour mouth comes diluted to a faint wail, and the hoarse blast of the steamer as she works her way up toward the docks is a mere softened moan. The gun, itself, sounds like the breaking of a thick pewter plate. In the daylight it is interesting, fascinating, the sort of experience one would pay to undergo if it were not provided free by nature; but when night falls, if the storm continues unabated, the window is a gateway whence the eye pursues strange scenes of beauty and wonder. In the light of the electric lamp outside, the trees toss their limbs and make weird shapes and shadows against the descending avalanche of white. From one's safe vantage point behind the window one may watch the variegated pattern of the snowflakes that appear out of the night in pitiless assault upon the adamant glass. One wonders how there can be so much fabric of such dainty manufacture. One knows that one is allowing one's entertainment to be charged, and that in the morning an inexorable civic ordinance will present the bill in the shape of sidewalks heaped high with snow that must be made easy for the feet of the passer-by. But it is not hard to forget the reckoning as the house quivers in the wind and the snow dashes against the window. He who has not had this experience from a warm and snug room does not know the meaning of the word comfort.

Or consider the view from the window as the sun moves toward its setting. Through the thin curtains inside and the pattern of the limbs outside, one sees sometimes a glow running around the north. Against this glow a few modest chimney pots stand out demure and motionless. There is a bit of whitewashed wall across the cemetery, and the gravestones stand a little blurred as the darkness rises from the earth. The great black post in the street just beyond the trees nearest the window rises clear to the top of the branches, bearing its load of wires that furnish a ready road around the world. And long before the glow fades from the sky, the rotund bulb on the post shines sturdily beneath the barren limbs.

It is estimated that the corner is passed by more than two hundred trams per day. Statistics are not for us; but it is certain

that the trams march in regular—more or less regular—procession from early in the morning until late at night. From the window one hears a whining roar. There follows a pause, then the roar recommences with a more pronounced whine, and one knows that the car has been stopping at the upper side of the corner which is invisible from the window. There stands a tall tree under which the prospective passenger patiently waits. That one knows, having previously observed; but from the window one can see only the other side of the corner. It is a pleasant enough corner, but seems bleak and obvious when one has to wait for a car. In fine weather only a chance straggler too idle, or it may be unable, to walk is to be seen there. On a cold windy day some sufferer will succumb to the attractions of a heated apartment and steamed up windows for the journey down-town. On a rainy morning, people are piled up in a little drove. The umbrella shuts off the flood above, rain-coat and rubbers protect the body and feet, but these easterly rains in the fall are so pitiless. The welcome car appears; the streaming victims climb drippingly aboard. The door is shut. But the compassionate motorman looks west. Down the gentle slope from that direction some belated soul is running with gigantic splashes and a suspicious "squishing" sound from his feet like the noise of a leaky piston. Again the door opens. The late one puffs and blows his way aboard. The door glides to with a muffled click, and the weary Titan of the streets is on its way again, rumbling and grumbling about its load as is the way of Titans. But the whole drama of the corner is enacted in full view of the window, and causes one to hug oneself, warm and dry within, as one realizes one's superiority to the mob outside.

There are so many people who daily pass the corner in sight of the window. It is not a street of very early risers, yet someone is always early astir. If one takes one's seat by the window at an appropriate hour, one will hear little for a time save the periodical car. The automobiles are sporadic; one scarcely sees why they are needed at all, except for the morning trains. The paper boy hastens past, leaving his budget of news on the doorstep. Soon the office workers begin their procession north and east, a mild though persistent procession. Then the delivery teams begin dodging about the streets. There are old rattling delivery teams, and smart automobiles at the same task. Best of all is the rubber-tired wagon with the neatly groomed horse. The shoes click smartly, but the wheels make no noise. Yet the pace is never to be confused with that of a riding horse carrying a load. Three or four times each day the mail cart goes by in its regular professional stride, bearing

His Majesty's arms upon its countenance. Often the sound of the mail cart is the last sound to be certainly and definitely identified at night. At or near 11.30 one hears it. There is no mistaking the beat of the hoofs. One glances from the window to see the shadow pass beneath the lamp. After that there may indeed be much noise or many noises. Boys may still be loose upon the street, trying with no indifferent success to demonstrate how foolish and unattractive the human animal may be. People may come along in a small group from the late shows. Here and there the loud laugh speaks the vacant mind; as the harsh 'ha ha' or the foolish feminine cackle strikes the window. Automobiles at indefinite intervals, indefinite rates of speed, and on indefinable business may go bustling along the street. But it is night traffic. The evening is over.

All through the night a watcher at the window might see the occasional straggler casting a shadow on the pavement, the humming auto speeding by on its mysterious errand. But there are long periods of stillness when the light throws its rays and the trees throws shadows over houses as silent as the city of the dead across the corner; quiet moments, when the machinery of living ceases to clatter, and one may come closer to regard life itself, perhaps finding it in its essence little different from death that dwells across the way. Perhaps the window will be here after another century; all the people will have gone with Xerxes's host. It may be the moon is in the sky, and the mysteries of the trees and shadows are intensified by her touch. It may be as dark and wild as the night that Odysseus foregathered with the swineherd. Rain may deluge the city all night long. Patient, uncomplaining, serviceable, the window maintains its steadfast contemplation of the universe.

On warm summer nights, the window may be left open. The air is fragrant so long as the wind is to the west. It is a short time from evening to morning. On a fine night in June the light is only four or five hours out of the sky. It begins to steal across the cemetery, and the blur of white to separate into individual stones. For a few brief days then the foliage stands out in semi-tropical exuberance. The sun is far in the sky before anyone begins to stir. He laughs at our laziness. He is himself unwearied after his plunge through the ocean under and around our tenuous plain of earth. A little later in the season, the hucksters are busily crying their wares. From the window one sees them coming; but before that, one has heard the impassioned shouts that heralded their approach. Especially insistent and impressive are their cries in the strawberry season. The strawberry is the noblest work of nature to be found in the northern hemisphere. But, like oppor-

tunity, it is a thing that must be taken when it offers. One may hear the fortunes of the changing market rehearsed every day, and far into the night when the berries come into town on the late train. So one sits at the window, fortified by a desk and a few bookshelves, and gazes upon the scene. The gun fires, the car creaks and groans past. The house shivers in sympathy. One surveys quietly the cross section of human life and activity that the window presents. That is all. It is a good spot for that purpose.

It is a quiet spot, withal, even granting the occasional raucous gramophone, squeaking street car, honking auto, and rattling coal cart. The noise seems all to remain without, and never seriously to invade the privacy behind the window. One may see in miniature what the ancient poet meant:

*Suave mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis
E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem
Non quia vexari quemquamst iucunda voluptas
Sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suave est.*

One knows that the shelter behind the window is only temporary, as indeed is all other shelter in this insecure life. One knows that people in the streets are in no danger or difficulty, that in an hour or so one will be merely a unit in a similar crowd, to be gazed at with feelings of pity and superiority by other watchers from other windows. One may, perhaps, think of Axylus, an unfortunate man in Homer killed by that enterprising person, Diomedes, who was good at shouting. This kindly soul, it will be remembered, lived in his house by the side of the road, and used to entertain people; and one reflects that Axylus probably had the equivalent of our unromantic window, and that he may have been given to entertaining people because, as he watched from his house by the side of the road, he felt that he owed them something for the excellent entertainment that they had given him.