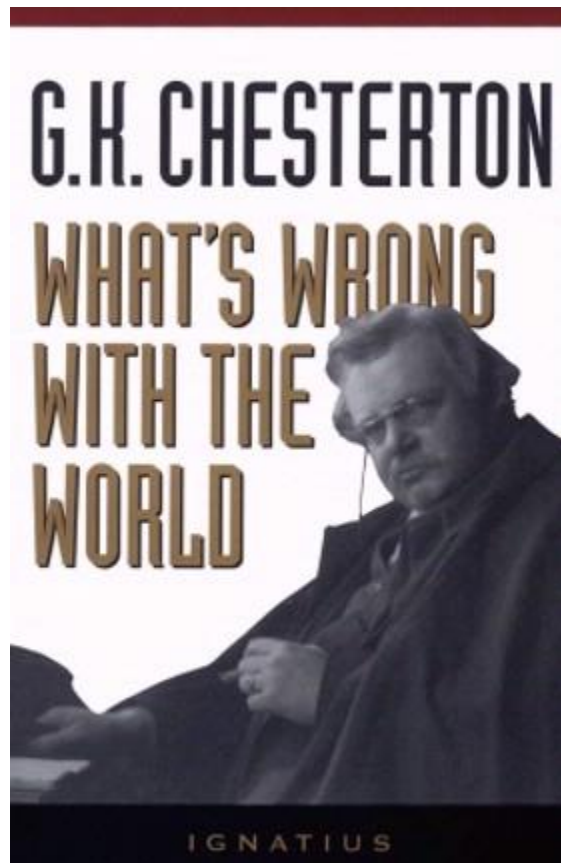


A Summary of What's Wrong With the World by G. K. Chesterton



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About the Author

G. K. Chesterton was an astonishingly prolific, rotund, and revered author, poet, essayist, lecturer, radio personality, playwright, biographer, religious commentator, politico, travelogue, debater, and even illustrator. Born in 1874 in London, England, he was educated at University College, though he never received a degree. In his young adulthood he was captivated by spiritualism, but he returned to the Christian faith sometime after marrying Frances Blogg in 1901. He could quote whole chapters from famous authors at will, and often demonstrated his astounding memory and wit. He converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism in 1922, which stimulated him to write his famous biographies of St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Francis of Assisi. In 1925, he began to publish his “G.K.’s Weekly,” and continued to do so until his death. He died in 1936 after producing more than 100 books and numerous essays and stories, including his most famous character, the detective Father Brown. Other notable works include *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908), *Orthodoxy* (1909), *Manalive* (1912), *The Everlasting Man* (1925), and *Autobiography* (1936).

General Overview

Chesterton attacks a ridiculously large subject with his usual logic and wit. His main argument is that what is wrong with the world is that the world is moving headlong toward Socialism without thinking of the ideal of Socialism. In fact, the modern world has forgotten the ideals of everything. We do things, but we do not remember why we do them. And more, we are afraid of fulfilling any ideal.

Since the institution that was most dear to Chesterton’s heart was the family, this book was his attempt to restore the family to its rightful place in society. His hope was that if the family was restored, then society would be restored. Thus, he discusses in turn, man, woman, and child in his tightly woven critique of modern society. Chesterton was never a purely negative critic, and offers a variety of solutions to the problems that he enumerates.

Since Chesterton’s wit and insight were so fantastically unique, this summary of necessity includes his own summarizations of his arguments, indicated by quotation marks.

PART ONE: THE HOMELESSNESS OF MAN

Chapter I: The Medical Mistake

Chesterton states that most books of social inquiry scientifically come to a conclusion that they call “The Remedy,” but this remedy is never found. He believes that instead of stating the disease and then finding the cure, we ought to find the cure before we find the disease. Before explaining himself, he takes issue with modern fallacies of biological metaphor, like referring to the Social Organism or a “young nation”. It is ridiculous to speak of social ills in the same manner as a bodily disease, for a doctor would never plan to build up a whole new person like sociologists want to build new societies. Medicine seeks to restore; social science seeks to renew or anew. In modern social arguments, “we agree about the evil; it is about the good that we should tear each other’s eyes out.” He says that “the only way to discuss the social evil is to get at once to the social ideal. We can all see the national madness; but what is national sanity?” The meaning of the book’s title is that what is wrong with the world is that no one remembers to ask what is right.

Chapter II: Wanted, An Unpractical Man

Chesterton looks at the “chicken and the egg” question sideways, saying that an egg’s only purpose is to produce a chicken, whereas a chicken has many more uses than just producing eggs. The chicken’s life is value

in itself. But politics seems to reduce things to their uses only. He extols idealism, which he defines as “considering everything in its practical essence.” When things go wrong, instead of looking for a practical man, he suggests finding an unpractical man, a theorist. His reasoning: a practical man is used to daily practice where things already work, but if things no longer work, one needs a thinker who can know why things worked in the first place. The more complicated the problem, the more abstract the thinker needed. He disparages “efficiency” by the same logic, for if any action has occurred, then it was efficient simply by virtue of having happened. Modern politics is full of this confusion. Politicians no longer remember why they are to do what they do, and it all becomes “an extravagant riot of second bests.” Politicians are full of “floundering opportunism,” when they say one thing but privately think it unattainable and who regret something but resignedly continue it. “If our statesmen were visionaries something practical might be done.”

Chapter III: The New Hypocrite

“This new cloudy political cowardice has rendered useless the old English compromise.” Compromise used to mean that two sides get half, but now it means that no side ever gets a whole. For those persons who fear “dogmas,” Chesterton says the only alternative is “prejudice.” “A doctrine is a definite point; a prejudice is a direction”, meaning that at least a point is somewhere, whereas a direction prevents one from ever being sure of their position. Even a clear difference of creed will unite men in chivalrous argument, whereas “tendencies” simply cloud the issue and divide. “Men will walk along the edge of a chasm in clear weather, but they will edge miles away from it in a fog...The rational human faith must armor itself with prejudice in an age of prejudices, just as it armored itself with logic in an age of logic.” The sincere controversialist, who is rare nowadays, is actually a good listener, but a modern prejudician is only either constantly talking or completely silent. “Doctrine, therefore, does not cause dissensions; rather a doctrine alone can cure our dissensions.”

Chapter IV: The Fear of the Past

Our current age, in cowardice, looks to the future rather than the past. Modern war does not excite the imagination like a Crusader’s charge because the Crusader was charging *toward* God and justice whereas modern wars generally occur because we believe the enemy is wrong. “It is impossible to imagine a mediaeval knight talking of longer and longer French lances, with precisely the quivering employed about larger and larger German ships.” The past is as broad as humanity itself, but the future can be safely limited by my imagination. All Revolutions have been Restorations (e.g. witness the Renaissance, which means “rebirth”). The future can only be fruitful if it is rooted in the past. Moderns are also fearful, and often omit to record the huge ideals which made the past great. By always seeking new ideas, valid and tried old ideas are omitted. A famous lie: “As you have made your bed, so must lie on it.” No; make it again. Tools are not blunted simply because they have been once used.

Chapter V: The Unfinished Temple

Moderns erroneously believe that if a thing has been defeated, then it has been disproved. If a monk is unchaste, that does not mean that the ideal of the Church has been destroyed but rather that an individual fell to sin. The Church, through the reality of the world and churchmen, has never accomplished all of its ideals. “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” The French Revolution proves to be a similar example, in its unfulfilled ideals of the honorably impoverished stoic statesman and extreme publicity. Like the great medieval ideals, the modern great democratic ideal has thus remained unfulfilled.

Chapter VI: The Enemies of Property

The solution then is to actually *do* the ideal. “Christ knew that it would be a more stunning thunderbolt to fulfill the law than to destroy it.” This book takes one old ideal: domesticity, the happy and holy family. God can make something from nothing and man can make something out of anything. Man uses limited creation, and thus needs the limits. A man’s land, his property, is the admirable limit of his creation, and is thus the art of democracy. A man’s land has no shape until he can see his neighbor’s boundaries.

Chapter VII: The Free Family

There is no such thing as “free love,” since there are enormous consequences attached to love and sex. These consequences are gradual, and necessitate the family structure in its cooperative and educational senses. The home is the only truly anarchist institution: it is older than, and stands outside, the State. The State is not delicate enough to deal legislatively with family issues. There is an essential principle in family life, that in everything worth having, there must be some pain to be survived in order for the pleasure to endure. “If Americans can be divorced for ‘incompatibility of temper’ I cannot conceive why they are not all divorced. I have known many happy marriages, but never a compatible one. The whole aim of marriage is to fight through and survive...incompatibility.”

Chapter VIII: The Wildness of Domesticity

There is a false psychology of wealthy persons that causes error, e.g., “Why should woman be economically dependent upon man?” The answer is that she isn’t among poor and practical people, but is only among the highly wealthy where the woman has to invent herself occupations. Another error is that the home is dull and adventure is only outside, since the wealthy man can afford to be a vagrant and can pay for any indiscretion. The poor man’s home is the only place of liberty, where he can picnic on his own floor and wear whatever he likes. Any other place has specified rules of conduct, and the poor man is not at all free. Every normal man desires his own house and land, as opposed to apartments or constant travel. To have nearly everybody live in a house would please nearly everybody.

Chapter IX: History of Hudge and Gudge

These two characters represent wealthy and noble young men. Hudge tries to rescue people from slums and builds up a row of tall tenements for them which, though weatherproof, are scarcely better. Gudge feels something lacking in these shapeless buildings, and convinces himself that the people were better off before. Hudge overreacts and begins to think his tenements palaces of true beauty. Gudge overreacts and says that poverty is good for people. But neither Hudge nor Gudge stopped to think what sort of a house the people might actually prefer. Chesterton ridicules Burke’s statement that an Englishman’s house is his castle, since only in the rest of Europe does one find that peasant proprietorship. These governors, Hudge and Gudge, represent England’s ruling aristocratic oligarchy.

Chapter X: Oppression by Optimism

The oligarchic aristocrats inherit their power through their adherence to fashion, not tradition, since by following “Progress” they are constantly intent on the future. They always stand with the modern against the tradition, and are enabled to enslave the common man by “reasoning” with him in fine language about the future.

Chapter XI: The Homelessness of Jones

Jones, who represents the modern Englishman, simply wants to live his own life in his own home, but is constantly beleaguered by meddling aristocrats who know better. He is turned out of his home, his garden, and eventually has to head for the Socialistic workhouse. Chesterton draws a parallel to how the aristocrats forced the poor into factories and modern wage-slavery in the name of Progress. “Whether necessary or not, both Industrialism and Collectivism have been accepted as necessities – not as naked ideals or desires...Nobody likes the Marxian school; it is endured as the only way of preventing poverty.” The real vision remains private property, free families, democratic domesticity, and one man one house.

PART TWO: IMPERIALISM or THE MISTAKE ABOUT MAN

Chapter I: The Charm of Jingoism

Popular British Imperialism of Chesterton’s time seemed to stem from an unwarranted English sentimentalism. For example, Australia and British Columbia were regarded as paradises where the wicked convert and the weary rest. It is a strange optimism that says that although England appears ugly and apathetic, there is still hope somewhere else in the world. It is a false creation, easily dominated. But the Imperialism which is the title of this Part is a different, deeper, and more sinister sort altogether.

Chapter II: Wisdom and the Weather

Common things can be extraordinarily complex, such as birth, death, and first love. Vulgar things can have subtle refinements. The custom of discussing the weather is a many-layered one: it evokes the image of primeval elemental worship, it is polite and politic – that is, recognized equality since all conversationalists share the weather – and it arises from the bodily brotherhood of man. Discussing the weather expresses comradeship, which is half of life whereas the other half is love. The term “comrade” can become fatuous, but it is necessary to describe how men relate to each other. They do not talk to each other like women, but talk to the subject which they are discussing.

Chapter III: The Common Vision

Democracy rests on the assumption that all men have something in common, even if it be as silly or simple as the propensity to wear clothes or to admire courage. Chesterton believed the old Public Houses, which were already in decline, to be the finest examples of true democracy, with their rowdy egalitarianism and fine masculine debates. Men do not enjoy naked superiority, but rather the struggle of equals (e.g. the introduction into sports of artificial handicaps in order to make opponents equal). But this “democracy has one real enemy, and that is civilization.” Technology and scientific miracles tend to isolate men from each other, despoiling democratic machinery.

Chapter IV: The Insane Necessity

Man has always been democratic, but has always assumed an oligarchy because of the element of speed: if a house is burning, only one person can give the order to put it out, there is no time for a democratic vote. It is better that the stupidest person give orders than everyone vote on every order. European aristocracy is misnamed; it is really the remnant of the ancient Roman military organization made to prop up the continent against peril. In the military, a man is not obeyed because he is the most serious, or the smartest, or the most attractive; he is obeyed because of his rank. The same is true with the aristocracy.

There are two kinds of social structures: personal government (kings) and impersonal government (creeds). Modern business is at odds with leisure and comradeship, and it is despotic, un-democratic, and unromantic. The “modern doctrine of commercial despotism” is the highest example of the impersonal government. “This is what is wrong. This is the huge modern heresy of altering the human soul to fit its conditions, instead of altering human conditions to fit the human soul... Certainly, we would sacrifice all our wires, wheels, systems, specialties, physical science and frenzied finance for one half-hour of happiness such as has often come to us with comrades in a common tavern.”

PART THREE: FEMINISM, or THE MISTAKE ABOUT WOMAN

Chapter I: The Unmilitary Suffragette

Chesterton was sympathetic to “the feminine question,” but took issue with the popular Suffragette movement. He said that the Suffragettes were not militant enough in the sense of raising a vibrant movement, but were rather a small group of women who created disorder. These women were using the wrong means, in his opinion: “If...all the woman nagged for a vote they would get it in a month.” The real problem is that there were millions of women who were opposed to the Suffragette philosophy. “These people practically say that females may vote about everything except about Female Suffrage.”

Chapter II: The Universal Stick

Many common objects are common because they have no specialty, that is, they can perform many functions. A stick, for example, can be used to hold a man up or knock him down, to point with, to balance with, to trifle with, etc. Modern substitutes for these universal things always seem to be perfectly specialized to only one function, so they are not as useful. The same is true with religion, which used to inform man of his universe and many other uses, but is now broken into lesser specialties. Liberal education, once prized, is also now disregarded. Modern man has to be specialized in order to survive in a ruthless trade environment. Tradition had decided, therefore, that the woman is to be the mistress-of-all-trades. But for women this ideal of comprehensiveness has faded away.

Chapter III: The Emancipation of Domesticity

The woman does not have to excel at one thing like the man, but rather has to be able to *do* various things: cooking, teaching, etc. Competitiveness is the antithesis of the woman’s art, and she may develop all of her hobbies. Women are thus kept at home not to keep them narrow but to keep them broad. Only by partly limiting the woman can she be free to do everything. This is not to deny that women have often been mistreated or oppressed. Women stand for the idea of sanity, the solidity of home. Clearly, the woman, who bears and first raises the children, needs to be able to teach them everything. The woman is the monarch of the home, and is in charge of a gigantic number of details which can be exhausting, but are by no means narrow. “Modern women defend their [workplace] with all the fierceness of domesticity...That is why they do office work so well; and that is why they ought not to do it.”

Chapter IV: The Romance of Thrift

Women stand for thrift, and men stand for extravagance. Thrift is the more romantic, since it takes more imagination and creativity. The man often makes the money, but the woman has hundreds of decisions on how to use it. Most masculine pleasures are ephemeral; once the beer is drunk, it is gone. Most feminine pleasures are rooted; a diamond necklace may cost much, but at least one still has the diamonds. Female thrift stands against male waste like feminine dignity against masculine ill-manners.

Chapter V: The Coldness of Chloe

Chesterton discusses artificiality in order to examine the poetical frigidness of women. Although women are painted as emotional, their most terrible quality can be their icy protection of their own vulnerability. A woman is most feminine when she wears a skirt, although modern women claim the right to wear trousers. But a proof of the dignity of the skirt: rulers, judges, and priests wear long robes when wishing to be dignified.

Chapter VI: The Pedant and the Savage

He will not discuss whether woman should be educated out of her thrift and dignity because it is an unanswerable question – which is why moderns love it so – and because he does not wish her to cease these virtues. There is a great battle between the qualities of woman and the pleasure-seeking barbarities of man.

Chapter VII: The Modern Surrender of Woman

But oddly, woman has publicly surrendered to man, saying that man has been right all along, and that woman should behave just like man (cf. Suffragettes). “We knew quite well that nothing is necessary to the country except that the men should be men and the women women...Suddenly, without warning, the women have begun to say all the nonsense that we ourselves hardly believed when we said it.” Yet, oddly, most of these women do not actually know what a vote is, if directly asked.

Chapter VIII: The Brand of the Fleur-de-Lis

“Seemingly from the dawn of man all nations have had governments; and all nations have been ashamed of them.” They are accepted as unfortunate necessities. Governments punish lawbreakers, but the executioners were always masked. Government, by definition, coerces its subjects; it is force. Modern democracies are also collective, so that we all become the masked executioner.

Chapter IX: Sincerity and the Gallows

The tradition against female suffrage really keeps the woman out of the collective acts of coercion and punishment. Making a vote is not just writing on a paper, but marking a collective death warrant for wrongdoers, among other things. But executions are no longer held in public, though they are public. Merely veiling the brutality does not make the act any less brutal.

Chapter X: The Higher Anarchy

“Woman’s wisdom stands partly, not only for a wholesome hesitation about punishment, but even for a wholesome hesitation about absolute rules.” Women do treat each individual as an individual. Women’s wisdom – and sometimes applied cold shoulders – are often more effective than a broad law from the government.

Chapter XI: The Queen and the Suffragettes

Why were women allowed to be queens, but were rarely admitted to democratic processes? “The reason is very simple: that something female is endangered much more by the violence of the crowd.” One bloody and conniving Queen Elizabeth is an exception; a thousand of her is a nightmare.

Chapter XII: The Modern Slave

The rigid rules of business were designed by males for males. “If clerks do not try to shirk their work, our whole great commercial system breaks down. It *is* breaking down, under the inroad of women who are adopting the unprecedented and impossible course of taking the system seriously and doing it well. Their very efficiency is the definition of their slavery.” The modern feminist appears to dislike feminine characteristics. Most feminists agree that women are tyrannized in shops and mills, but their solution is to propose unions; Chesterton proposes to reclaim their womanhood from this modern slavery.

PART FOUR: EDUCATION, or THE MISTAKE ABOUT THE CHILD

Chapter I: The Calvinism of To-day

Since Calvinists like Bernard Shaw believe in predestination, they do not place the same emphasis on this life that Catholics do. When discussing children, Chesterton’s Catholicism steers emphasis away from heredity and eugenics.

Chapter II: The Tribal Terror

A prominent journalist of the day claimed that a child was a heterogeneous mixture of its parents: like yellow beads and blue beads in a bottle. Chesterton argued that a child was a homogenous mixture of its parents: the color *green*, which, though a mixture, is yet a whole new experience. No child is a perfect copy of its parents. There is no science to determine a child’s moral heredity, much less to predict a future child’s mannerisms or traits.

Chapter III: The Tricks of Environment

Nor can an educator claim that a person is molded only by their environment. Even if this were so, the very same environment can have different effects on different people. “Even in matters admittedly within its range, popular science goes a great deal too fast, and drops enormous links of logic.”

Chapter IV: The Truth About Education

“The main fact about education is that there is no such thing...It is not an object, but a method.” Anything can be passed on to a child within “education,” whether it be manners, mathematics, or even how to commit a crime. The only commonality among all teachers is their authority; that they are dogmatic and pass something on.

Chapter V: An Evil Cry

One cannot give something to a child unless it is first possessed by the teacher; that is, it cannot be “drawn out” latently from within the child (e.g. they can burble on their own all day long, but they can only speak a specific language after it has been painstakingly taught to them). For example, the foolish cry of “Save the children” implies that it is impossible to save the fathers. Now, if the fathers cannot be saved, then there are no role models with which to save the children. “Education is only truth is a state of transmission.”

Chapter VI: Authority the Unavoidable

The educator thus has to form the child's mind, and this can be an arbitrary thing. "Education is violent; because it is creative...It is an interference with life and growth." The teacher has to be sure enough that something is true in order to have the courage to transmit it to the child. But often the educational theories are younger than the babes taught by them, as authorities flee from their real duty. And modern educators forbid more things than the old-fashioned headmasters. Why should children be forbidden to play with toy soldiers or to read adventure stories?

Chapter VII: The Humility of Mrs. Grundy

"You cannot have free education; for if you left a child free you would not educate him at all." If a Puritan forbids the playing with soldiers on Sunday, then he is democratic since he expresses a larger opinion; if an Educator forbids soldiers on all days, then he is a despot on his own authority. Some moderns say that education should merely be the enlightenment of the mind, but in actuality all persons – schooled or not – are educated by virtue of their living life. Even the truant is being taught all day. The poor learn everything backwards, from the present day, and the educated learn everything forwards, from ancient times. The poor "are not like sheep without a shepherd", for they have "experts" howling all about them. There is no darkness to be defeated, only light replacing light.

Chapter VIII: The Broken Rainbow

Color is used as an example of modernity. Artists past would use color to convey importance and to show that colors are worthy of note themselves. The same colors are used now as were used in ancient times, but they have lost their meaning. Monks wore brown to connote labor and humility; brown now is just brown. Kings wore purple to suggest riches and solemnity; purple now is just purple. "We are like children who have mixed all the colors in the paint-box together and lost the paper of instructions."

Chapter IX: The Need for Narrowness

"The true task of culture today is not a task of expansion, but very decidedly of selection – and rejection. The educationist must find a creed and teach it." Without an orthodox theory, there is no direction. Chesterton urges the positive solution of returning to the old ideals and doing them well.

Chapter X: The Case for the Public Schools

Contemporary public schools, distinguished from the old private system in England, are attacked wrongly by three groups of people. The first claim that Greek ought not to be taught to modern children, but the very word *democracy* comes from the Greek. The second say that public schools promote animalism and brutality, but cruelty is removed from the public schools by the encouragement of physical courage. The third say that it is merely for the aristocracy, but Chesterton disagrees. Thus, the false accusations are of classicism, cruelty, and exclusiveness.

Chapter XI: The School for Hypocrites

But what is really wrong with the public schools is the cynical indifference to truth; students are not taught to desire truth, and thus are not taught to speak truth. The highest virtues then become what had been pleasurable for "gentlemen," like cleanliness and sport. The same hypocrisy is shown in their strange reasons for not helping the poor. "But there is something quite pestilently Pecksniffian about shrinking from a hard task on the

plea that it is not hard enough.” [Mr. Pecksniff was a pricelessly hypocritical Charles Dickens character from his novel Martin Chuzzlewit]

Chapter XII: The Staleness of the New Schools

English public schools are the ideal because they disregard truth. “Progress ought to be based on principle, [but] our modern progress is mostly based on precedent.” The elementary schools had no ideal, since they only borrowed from the public schools what had been borrowed from the aristocratic schools.

Chapter XIII: The Outlawed Parent

The opinions of the people, of the parents, are not allowed within the schools. The parents are the only ones restricted from education. Indeed, among the lower classes the schoolmaster actually works against the parents.

Chapter XIV: Folly and Female Education

“All the educational reformers did was to ask what was being done to boys and then go and do it to girls.” This is imitation, not genius. Many boyish activities, like physical games, are not good for girls. There is no intellectual design in modern feminine education, which also forces the girl to specialize.

PART FIVE: THE HOME OF MAN

Chapter I: The Empire of the Insect

Edmund Burke and Charles Darwin essentially agree that man ought to adapt himself to circumstances. Chesterton says man ought to adapt circumstances to himself. It is dangerous to say that man is a shifting and alterable thing. Ants were used to typify industry, not for the ant’s sake, but for industry’s sake. But now we are told not to look down at the insect, but up at it.

Chapter II: The Fallacy of the Umbrella Stand

Mending and ending are not the same; you mend something because you like it, you end it because you don’t. “Piece by piece... personal liberty is being stolen from Englishmen.” Socialists seem to think that umbrellas and walking sticks are the same things, simply because both are put into an umbrella stand. Not so.

Chapter III: The Dreadful Duty of Gudge

A question for both Hudge, the energetic Progressive, and Gudge, the obstinate Conservative: “Do you want to keep the family at all?” If so, both must be told quite sternly that they need to amend their outlook by reading this book.

Chapter IV: A Last Instance

Could Hudge and Gudge secretly be in partnership? “The quarrel they keep up in public is very much of a put-up job.” Is it conscious or not? “I only know that between them they still keep the common man homeless.”

Chapter V: Conclusion

Chesterton prefers Peasant Proprietorship over Socialism, and stresses in a parable about a young girl's hair that "we must instantly begin all over again, and begin at the other end." He urges the reader to think of people first, and thus to save humanity.

THREE NOTES

Note I: On Female Suffrage

The women who oppose female suffrage actually have a positive argument, not a negative one, and this should be borne in mind.

Note II: On Cleanliness in Education

Washing is, of course, important and good, but should not be elevated above godliness. "Dirt is evil chiefly as evidence of sloth."

Note III: On Peasant Proprietorship

What is wrong is "that we will go forward because we dare not go back." He hopes to decentralize property, and dislikes Socialism because it will allow commerce to remain unchanged.