On Lying in Bed by G.K. Chesterton

Lying in bed would be an altogether perfect and supreme experience if only one had a coloured pencil long enough to draw on the ceiling. This, however, is not generally a part of the domestic apparatus on the premises. I think myself that the thing might be managed with several pails of paint and a broom. Only if one worked in a really sweeping and masterly way, and laid on the colour in great washes, it might drip down again on one's face in floods of rich and mingled colour like some strange fairy rain; and that would have its disadvantages. I am afraid it would be necessary to stick to black and white in this form of artistic composition. To that purpose, indeed, the white ceiling would be of the greatest possible use; in fact it is the only use I think of a white ceiling being put to.

But for the beautiful experiment of lying in bed I might never have discovered it. For years I have been looking for some blank spaces in a modern house to draw on. Paper is much too small for any really allegorical design; as Cyrano de Bergerac says: "Il me faut des géants." But when I tried to find these fine clear spaces in the modern rooms such as we all live in I was continually disappointed. I found an endless pattern and complication of small objects hung like a curtain of fine links between me and my desire. I examined the walls; I found them to my surprise to be already covered with wall-paper, and I found the wall-paper to be already covered with very uninteresting images, all bearing a ridiculous resemblance to each other. I could not understand why one arbitrary symbol (a symbol apparently entirely devoid of any religious or philosophical significance) should thus be sprinkled all over my nice walls like a sort of small-pox. The Bible must be referring to wall-papers, I think, when it says "Use not vain repetitions, as the Gentiles do." I found the Turkey carpet a mass of unmeaning colours, rather like the Turkish Empire, or like the sweetmeat called Turkish delight. I do not exactly know what Turkish delight really is; but I suppose it is Macedonian Massacres. Everywhere that I went forlornly, with my pencil or my paint brush, I found that others had unaccountably been before me, spoiling the walls, the curtains, and the furniture with their childish and barbaric designs.

Nowhere did I find a really clear place for sketching until this occasion when I prolonged beyond the proper limit the process of lying on my back in bed. Then the light of that white heaven broke upon my vision, that breadth of mere white which is indeed almost the definition of Paradise, since it means purity and also means freedom. But alas! like all heavens, now that it is seen it is found to be unattainable; it looks more
austere and more distant than the blue sky outside the window. For my proposal to
paint on it with the bristly end of a broom has been discouraged--never mind by whom;
by a person debarred from all political rights--and even my minor proposal to put the
other end of the broom into the kitchen fire and turn it into charcoal has not been
conceded. Yet I am certain that it was from persons in my position that all the original
inspiration came for covering the ceilings of palaces and cathedrals with a riot of fallen
angels or victorious gods. I am sure that it was only because Michael Angelo was
engaged in the ancient and honourable occupation of lying in bed that he ever realised
how the roof of the Sistine Chapel might be made into an awful imitation of a divine
drama that could only be acted in the heavens.

The tone now commonly taken towards the practice of lying in bed is hypocritical
and unhealthy. Of all the marks of modernity that seem to mean a kind of decadence,
there is none more menacing and dangerous than the exaltation of very small and
secondary matters of conduct at the expense of very great and primary ones, at the
expense of eternal public and tragic human morality. If there is one thing worse than
the modern weakening of major morals it is the modern strengthening of minor morals.
Thus it is considered more withering to accuse a man of bad taste than of bad ethics.
Cleanliness is not next to godliness nowadays, for cleanliness is made an essential and
godliness is regarded as an offence. A playwright can attack the institution of marriage
so long as he does not misrepresent the manners of society, and I have met Ibsenite
pessimists who thought it wrong to take beer but right to take prussic acid. Especially
this is so in matters of hygiene; notably such matters as lying in bed. Instead of being
regarded, as it ought to be, as a matter of personal convenience and adjustment, it has
come to be regarded by many as if it were a part of essential morals to get up early in
the morning. It is upon the whole part of practical wisdom; but there is nothing good
about it or bad about its opposite.

Misers get up early in the morning; and burglars, I am informed, get up the night
before. It is the great peril of our society that all its mechanism may grow more fixed
while its spirit grows more fickle. A man's minor actions and arrangements ought to be
free, flexible, creative; the things that should be unchangeable are his principles, his
ideals. But with us the reverse is true; our views change constantly; but our lunch does
not change. Now, I should like men to have strong and rooted conceptions, but as for
their lunch, let them have it sometimes in the garden, sometimes in bed, sometimes on
the roof, sometimes in the top of a tree. Let them argue from the same first principles,
but let them do it in a bed, or a boat, or a balloon. This alarming growth of good habits
really means a too great emphasis on those virtues which mere custom can misuse, it
means too little emphasis on those virtues which custom can never quite ensure,
sudden and splendid virtues of inspired pity or of inspired candour. If ever that abrupt
appeal is made to us we may fail. A man can get used to getting up at five o'clock in the
morning. A man cannot very well get used to being burnt for his opinions; the first
experiment is commonly fatal. Let us pay a little more attention to these possibilities of
the heroic and the unexpected. I daresay that when I get out of this bed I shall do some
deed of an almost terrible virtue.

For those who study the great art of lying in bed there is one emphatic caution to
be added. Even for those who can do their work in bed (like journalists), still more for
those whose work cannot be done in bed (as, for example, the professional harpooner
of whales), it is obvious that the indulgence must be very occasional. But that is not the
cautions I mean. The caution is this: if you do lie in bed, be sure you do it without any
reason or justification at all. I do not speak, of course, of the seriously sick. But if a
healthy man lies in bed, let him do it without a rag of excuse; then he will get up a
healthy man. If he does it for some secondary hygienic reason, if he has some scientific
explanation, he may get up a hypochondriac.
Maintenant.
Mais je vais être féroce et fulgurant!
Il me faut une armée entière à déconforter!
J'ai dix coeurs; j'ai vingt bras; il ne peut me suffire
De pourfendre des nains... (Il crie à tue-tête)
Il me faut des géants!

...I've reached the stage
Where I can't rest, I'm so consumed by rage.
Bring on a whole army for me to fight!
I've ten hearts, twenty arms; it isn't right
that I face merely a dwarf's defiance.
Bring on the giants!