

LÀ-BAS
(DOWN THERE)

by

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Translated

by

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CHAPTER I

"You believe pretty thoroughly in these things, or you wouldn't abandon the eternal triangle and the other stock subjects of the modern novelists to write the story of Gilles de Rais," and after a silence Des Hermies added, "I do not object to the latrine; hospital; and workshop vocabulary of naturalism. For one thing, the subject matter requires some such diction. Again, Zola, in *L'Assommoir*, has shown that a heavy-handed artist can slap words together hit-or-miss and give an effect of tremendous power. I do not really care how the naturalists maltreat language, but I do strenuously object to the earthiness of their ideas. They have made our literature the incarnation of materialism—and they glorify the democracy of art!

"Say what you will, their theory is pitiful, and their tight little method squeezes all the life out of them. Filth and the flesh are their all in all. They deny wonder and reject the extra-sensual. I don't believe they would know what you meant if you told them that artistic curiosity begins at the very point where the senses leave off.

"You shrug your shoulders, but tell me, how much has naturalism done to clear up life's really troublesome mysteries? When an ulcer of the soul—or indeed the most benign little pimple—is to be probed, naturalism can do nothing. 'Appetite and instinct' seem to be its sole motivation and rut and brainstorm its chronic states. The field of naturalism is the region below the umbilicus. Oh, it's a hernia clinic and it offers the soul a truss!

"I tell you, Durtal, it's superficial quackery, and that isn't all. This fetid naturalism eulogizes the atrocities of modern life and flatters our positively American ways. It ecstasizes over brute force and apotheosizes the cash register. With amazing humility it defers to the nauseating taste of the mob. It repudiates style, it rejects every ideal, every aspiration towards the supernatural and the beyond. It is so perfectly representative of bourgeois thought that it might be sired by Homais and dammed by Lisa, the butcher girl in *Ventre de Paris*."

"Heavens, how you go after it!" said Durtal, somewhat piqued. He lighted his cigarette and went on, "I am as much revolted by

materialism as you are, but that is no reason for denying the unforgettable services which naturalism has rendered.

"It has demolished the inhuman puppets of romanticism and rescued our literature from the clutches of booby idealists and sex-starved old maids. It has created visible and tangible human beings—after Balzac—and put them in accord with their surroundings. It has carried on the work, which romanticism began, of developing the language. Some of the naturalists have had the veritable gift of laughter, a very few have had the gift of tears, and, in spite of what you say, they have not all been carried away by an obsession for baseness."

"Yes, they have. They are in love with the age, and that shows them up for what they are."

"Do you mean to tell me Flaubert and the De Goncourts were in love with the age?"

"Of course not. But those men were artists, honest, seditious, and aloof, and I put them in a class by themselves. I will also grant that Zola is a master of backgrounds and masses and that his tricky handling of people is unequalled. Then, too, thank God, he has never followed out, in his novels, the theories enunciated in his magazine articles, adulating the intrusion of positivism upon art. But in the works of his best pupil, Rosny, the only talented novelist who is really imbued with the ideas of the master, naturalism has become a sickening jargon of chemist's slang serving to display a layman's erudition, which is about as profound as the scientific knowledge of a shop foreman. No, there is no getting around it. Everything this whole poverty-stricken school has produced shows that our literature has fallen upon evil days. The grovellers! They don't rise above the moral level of the tumblebug. Read the latest book. What do you find? Simple anecdotes: murder, suicide, and accident histories copied right out of the newspaper, tiresome sketches and wormy tales, all written in a colorless style and containing not the faintest hint of an outlook on life nor an appreciation of human nature. When I have waded through one of these books its insipid descriptions and interminable harangues go instantly out of my mind, and the only impression that remains is one of surprise

that a man can write three or four hundred pages when he has absolutely nothing to reveal to us — nothing to say!"

"If it's all the same to you, Des Hermies, let's speak of something else. We shall never agree on the subject of naturalism, as the very mention of it makes you see red. What about this Mattei system of medicine? Your globules and electric phials at least relieve a few sufferers?"

"Hmph. A little better than the panaceas of the Codex, though I can't say the effects are either lasting or sure. But, it serves, like anything else. And now I must run along. The clock is striking ten and your concierge is coming to put out the hall light. See you again very soon, I hope. Good night."

When the door closed Durtal put some more coke in the grate and resumed a comfortless train of thought aggravated by this too pertinent discussion with his friend. For some months Durtal had been trying to reassemble the fragments of a shattered literary theory which had once seemed inexpugnable, and Des Hermies's opinions troubled him, in spite of their exaggerated vehemence.

Certainly if naturalism confined one to monotonous studies of mediocre persons and to interminable inventories of the objects in a drawing-room or a landscape, an honest and clear-sighted artist would soon cease to produce, and a less conscientious workman would be under the necessity of repeating himself over and over again to the point of nausea. Nevertheless Durtal could see no possibilities for the novelist outside of naturalism. Were we to go back to the pyrotechnics of romanticism, rewrite the lanuginous works of the Cherbuliez and Feuillet tribe, or, worse yet, imitate the lachrymose storiottes of Theuriet and George Sand? Then what was to be done? And Durtal, with desperate determination, set to work sorting out a tangle of confused theories and inchoate postulations. He made no headway. He felt but could not define. He was afraid to. Definition of his present tendencies would plump him back into his old dilemma.

"We must," he thought, "retain the documentary veracity, the precision of detail, the compact and sinewy language of realism, but we must also dig down into the soul and cease trying to explain mystery in terms of our sick senses. If possible the novel ought to be

compounded of two elements, that of the soul and that of the body, and these ought to be inextricably bound together as in life. Their interreactions, their conflicts, their reconciliation, ought to furnish the dramatic interest. In a word, we must follow the road laid out once and for all by Zola, but at the same time we must trace a parallel route in the air by which we may go above and beyond.... A spiritual naturalism! It must be complete, powerful, daring in a different way from anything that is being attempted at present. Perhaps as approaching my concept I may cite Dostoyevsky. Yet that *exorable* Russian is less an elevated realist than an evangelic socialist. In France right now the purely corporal recipe has brought upon itself such discredit that two clans have arisen: the liberal, which prunes naturalism of all its boldness of subject matter and diction in order to fit it for the drawing-room, and the decadent, which gets completely off the ground and raves incoherently in a telegraphic patois intended to represent the language of the soul—intended rather to divert the reader's attention from the author's utter lack of ideas. As for the right wing verists, I can only laugh at the frantic puerilities of these would-be psychologists, who have never explored an unknown district of the mind nor ever studied an unhackneyed passion. They simply repeat the saccharine Feuilleton and the saline Stendhal. Their novels are dissertations in school-teacher style. They don't seem to realize that there is more spiritual revelation in that one reply of old Hulot, in Balzac's *Cousine Bette*, 'Can't I take the little girl along?' than in all their doctoral theses. We must expect of them no idealistic straining toward the infinite. For me, then, the real psychologist of this century is not their Stendhal but that astonishing Ernest Hello, whose unrelenting unsuccess is simply miraculous!"

He began to think that Des Hermies was right. In the present disorganized state of letters there was but one tendency which seemed to promise better things. The unsatisfied need for the supernatural was driving people, in default of something loftier, to spiritism and the occult.

Now his thoughts carried him away from his dissatisfaction with literature to the satisfaction he had found in another art, in painting. His ideal was completely realized by the Primitives. These men, in Italy, Germany, and especially in Flanders, had manifested the am-

plitude and purity of vision which are the property of saintliness. In authentic and patiently accurate settings they pictured beings whose postures were caught from life itself, and the illusion was compelling and sure. From these heads, common enough, many of them, and these physiognomies, often ugly but powerfully evocative, emanated celestial joy or acute anguish, spiritual calm or turmoil. The effect was of matter transformed, by being distended or compressed, to afford an escape from the senses into remote infinity.

Durtal's introduction to this naturalism had come as a revelation the year before, although he had not then been so weary as now of *fin de siècle* silliness. In Germany, before a Crucifixion by Matthæus Grünewald, he had found what he was seeking.

He shuddered in his armchair and closed his eyes as if in pain. With extraordinary lucidity he revisualized the picture, and the cry of admiration wrung from him when he had entered the little room of the Cassel museum was reechoing in his mind as here, in his study, the Christ rose before him, formidable, on a rude cross of barky wood, the arm an untrimmed branch bending like a bow under the weight of the body.

This branch seemed about to spring back and mercifully hurl afar from our cruel, sinful world the suffering flesh held to earth by the enormous spike piercing the feet. Dislocated, almost ripped out of their sockets, the arms of the Christ seemed trammelled by the knot-ty cords of the straining muscles. The laboured tendons of the arm-pits seemed ready to snap. The fingers, wide apart, were contorted in an arrested gesture in which were supplication and reproach but also benediction. The trembling thighs were greasy with sweat. The ribs were like staves, or like the bars of a cage, the flesh swollen, blue, mottled with flea-bites, specked as with pin-pricks by spines broken off from the rods of the scourging and now festering beneath the skin where they had penetrated.

Purulence was at hand. The fluvial wound in the side dripped thickly, inundating the thigh with blood that was like congealing mulberry juice. Milky pus, which yet was somewhat reddish, something like the colour of grey Moselle, oozed from the chest and ran down over the abdomen and the loin cloth. The knees had been

forced together and the rotulæ touched, but the lower legs were held wide apart, though the feet were placed one on top of the other. These, beginning to putrefy, were turning green beneath a river of blood. Spongy and blistered, they were horrible, the flesh tumefied, swollen over the head of the spike, and the gripping toes, with the horny blue nails, contradicted the imploring gesture of the hands, turning that benediction into a curse; and as the hands pointed heavenward, so the feet seemed to cling to earth, to that ochre ground, ferruginous like the purple soil of Thuringia.

Above this eruptive cadaver, the head, tumultuous, enormous, encircled by a disordered crown of thorns, hung down lifeless. One lacklustre eye half opened as a shudder of terror or of sorrow traversed the expiring figure. The face was furrowed, the brow seamed, the cheeks blanched; all the drooping features wept, while the mouth, unnerved, its under jaw racked by tetanic contractions, laughed atrociously.

The torture had been terrific, and the agony had frightened the mocking executioners into flight.

Against a dark blue night-sky the cross seemed to bow down, almost to touch the ground with its tip, while two figures, one on each side, kept watch over the Christ. One was the Virgin, wearing a hood the colour of mucous blood over a robe of wan blue. Her face was pale and swollen with weeping, and she stood rigid, as one who buries his fingernails deep into his palms and sobs. The other figure was that of Saint John, like a gipsy or sunburnt Swabian peasant, very tall, his beard matted and tangled, his robe of a scarlet stuff cut in wide strips like slabs of bark. His mantle was a chamois yellow; the lining, caught up at the sleeves, showed a feverish yellow as of unripe lemons. Spent with weeping, but possessed of more endurance than Mary, who was yet erect but broken and exhausted, he had joined his hands and in an access of outraged loyalty had drawn himself up before the corpse, which he contemplated with his red and smoky eyes while he choked back the cry which threatened to rend his quivering throat.

Ah, this coarse, tear-compelling Calvary was at the opposite pole from those debonair Golgothas adopted by the Church ever since the Renaissance. This lockjaw Christ was not the Christ of the rich,

the Adonis of Galilee, the exquisite dandy, the handsome youth with the curly brown tresses, divided beard, and insipid doll-like features, whom the faithful have adored for four centuries. This was the Christ of Justin, Basil, Cyril, Tertullian, the Christ of the apostolic church, the vulgar Christ, ugly with the assumption of the whole burden of our sins and clothed, through humility, in the most abject of forms.

It was the Christ of the poor, the Christ incarnate in the image of the most miserable of us He came to save; the Christ of the afflicted, of the beggar, of all those on whose indigence and helplessness the greed of their brother battens; the human Christ, frail of flesh, abandoned by the Father until such time as no further torture was possible; the Christ with no recourse but His Mother, to Whom—then powerless to aid Him—He had, like every man in torment, cried out with an infant's cry.

In an unsparing humility, doubtless, He had willed to suffer the Passion with all the suffering permitted to the human senses, and, obeying an incomprehensible ordination, He, in the time of the scourging and of the blows and of the insults spat in His face, had put off divinity, nor had He resumed it when, after these preliminary mockeries, He entered upon the unspeakable torment of the unceasing agony. Thus, dying like a thief, like a dog, basely, vilely, physically, He had sunk himself to the deepest depth of fallen humanity and had not spared Himself the last ignominy of putrefaction.

Never before had naturalism transfigured itself by such a conception and execution. Never before had a painter so charnally envisaged divinity nor so brutally dipped his brush into the wounds and running sores and bleeding nail holes of the Saviour. Grünewald had passed all measure. He was the most uncompromising of realists, but his morgue Redeemer, his sewer Deity, let the observer know that realism could be truly transcendent. A divine light played about that ulcerated head, a superhuman expression illuminated the fermenting skin of the epileptic features. This crucified corpse was a very God, and, without aureole, without nimbus, with none of the stock accoutrements except the blood-sprinkled crown of thorns, Jesus appeared in His celestial super-essence, between the

stunned, grief-torn Virgin and a Saint John whose calcined eyes were beyond the shedding of tears.

These faces, by nature vulgar, were resplendent, transfigured with the expression of the sublime grief of those souls whose plaint is not heard. Thief, pauper, and peasant had vanished and given place to supraterrrestrial creatures in the presence of their God.

Grünewald was the most uncompromising of idealists. Never had artist known such magnificent exaltation, none had ever so resolutely bounded from the summit of spiritual altitude to the rapt orb of heaven. He had gone to the two extremes. From the rankest weeds of the pit he had extracted the finest essence of charity, the mordant liquor of tears. In this canvas was revealed the masterpiece of an art obeying the unopposable urge to render the tangible and the invisible, to make manifest the crying impurity of the flesh and to make sublime the infinite distress of the soul.

It was without its equivalent in literature. A few pages of Anne Emmerich upon the Passion, though comparatively attenuated, approached this ideal of supernatural realism and of veridic and exsurrected life. Perhaps, too, certain effusions of Ruysbroeck, seeming to spurt forth in twin jets of black and white flame, were worthy of comparison with the divine befoulment of Grünewald. Hardly, either. Grünewald's masterpiece remained unique. It was at the same time infinite and of earth earthy.

"But," said Durtal to himself, rousing out of his reverie, "if I am consistent I shall have to come around to the Catholicism of the Middle Ages, to *mystic* naturalism. Ah, no! I will not—and yet, perhaps I may!"

Here he was in the old dilemma. How often before now had he halted on the threshold of Catholicism, sounding himself thoroughly and finding always that he had no faith. Decidedly there had been no effort on the part of God to reclaim him, and he himself had never possessed the kind of will that permits one to let oneself go, trustingly, without reserve, into the sheltering shadows of immutable dogma.

Momentarily at times when, after reading certain books, his disgust for everyday life was accentuated, he longed for lenitive hours

in a cloister, where the monotonous chant of prayers in an incense-laden atmosphere would bring on a somnolence, a dreamy rapture of mystical ideas. But only a simple soul, on which life's wear and tear had left no mark, was capable of savouring the delights of such a self-abandon, and his own soul was battered and torn with earthly conflict. He must admit that the momentary desire to believe, to take refuge in the timeless, proceeded from a multitude of ignoble motives: from lassitude with the petty and repeated annoyances of existence, quarrels with the laundress, with the waiter, with the landlord; the sordid scramble for money; in a word, from the general spiritual failure of a man approaching forty. He thought of escaping into a monastery somewhat as street girls think of going into a house where they will be free from the dangers of the chase, from worry about food and lodging, and where they will not have to do their own washing and ironing.

Unmarried, without settled income, the voice of carnality now practically stilled in him, he sometimes cursed the existence he had shaped for himself. At times, weary of attempting to coerce words to do his bidding, he threw down his pen and looked into the future. He could see nothing ahead of him but bitterness and cause for alarm, and, seeking consolation, he was forced to admit that only religion could heal, but religion demanded in return so arrant a desertion of common sense, so pusillanimous a willingness to be astonished at nothing, that he threw up his hands and begged off.

Yet he was always playing with the thought, indeed he could not escape it. For though religion was without foundation it was also without limit and promised a complete escape from earth into dizzy, unexplored altitudes. Then, too, Durtal was attracted to the Church by its intimate and ecstatic art, the splendour of its legends, and the radiant naïveté of the histories of its saints.

He did not believe, and yet he admitted the supernatural. Right here on earth how could any of us deny that we are hemmed in by mystery, in our homes, in the street, — everywhere when we came to think of it? It was really the part of shallowness to ignore those extrahuman relations and account for the unforeseen by attributing to fate the more than inexplicable. Did not a chance encounter often decide the entire life of a man? What was love, what the other in-

comprehensible shaping influences? And, knottiest enigma of all, what was money?

There one found oneself confronted by primordial organic law, atrocious edicts promulgated at the very beginning of the world and applied ever since.

The rules were precise and invariable. Money attracted money, accumulating always in the same places, going by preference to the scoundrelly and the mediocre. When, by an inscrutable exception, it heaped up in the coffers of a rich man who was not a miser nor a murderer, it stood idle, incapable of resolving itself into a force for good, however charitable the hands which fain would administer it. One would say it was angry at having got into the wrong box and avenged itself by going into voluntary paralysis when possessed by one who was neither a sharper nor an ass.

It acted still more strangely when by some extraordinary chance it strayed into the home of a poor man. Immediately it defiled the clean, debauched the chaste, and, acting simultaneously on the body and the soul, it insinuated into its possessor a base selfishness, an ignoble pride; it suggested that he spend for himself alone; it made the humble man a boor, the generous man a skinflint. In one second it changed every habit, revolutionized every idea, metamorphosed the most deeply rooted passions.

It was the instigator and vigilant accomplice of all the important sins. If it permitted one of its detainers to forget himself and bestow a boon it awakened hatred in the recipient, it replaced avarice with ingratitude and re-established equilibrium so that the account might balance and not one sin of commission be wanting.

But it reached its real height of monstrosity when, concealing its identity under an assumed name, it entitled itself capital. Then its action was not limited to individual incitation to theft and murder but extended to the entire human race. With one word capital decided monopolies, erected banks, cornered necessities, and, if it wished, caused thousands of human beings to starve to death.

And it grew and begot itself while slumbering in a safe, and the Two Worlds adored it on bended knee, dying of desire before it as before a God.

Well! money was the devil, otherwise its mastery of souls was inexplicable. And how many other mysteries, equally unintelligible, how many other phenomena were there to make a reflective man shudder!

"But," thought Durtal, "seeing that there are so many more things betwixt heaven and earth than are dreamed of in anybody's philosophy, why not believe in the Trinity? Why reject the divinity of Christ? It is no strain on one to admit the *Credo quia absurdum* of Saint Augustine and Tertullian and say that if the supernatural were comprehensible it would not be supernatural, and that precisely because it passes the faculties of man it is divine.

"And — oh, to hell with it! What's it all about, anyway?"

And again, as so often when he had found himself before this unbridgeable gulf between reason and belief, he recoiled from the leap.

Well, his thoughts had strayed far from the subject of that naturalism so reviled by Des Hermies. He returned to Grünewald and said to himself that the great Crucifixion was the masterpiece of an art driven out of bounds. One need not go far in search of the extra-terrestrial as to fall into perfervid Catholicism. Perhaps spiritualism would give one all one required to formulate a supernaturalistic method.

He rose and went into his tiny workroom. His pile of manuscript notes about the Marshal de Rais, surnamed Bluebeard, looked at him derisively from the table where they were piled.

"All the same," he said, "it's good to be here, in out of the world and above the limits of time. To live in another age, never read a newspaper, not even know that the theatres exist — ah, what a dream! To dwell with Bluebeard and forget the grocer on the corner and all the other petty little criminals of an age perfectly typified by the café waiter who ravishes the boss's daughter — the goose who lays the golden egg, as he calls her — so that she will have to marry him!"

Bed was a good place, he added, smiling, for he saw his cat, a creature with a perfect time sense, regarding him uneasily as if to remind him of their common convenience and to reproach him for

not having prepared the couch. Durtal arranged the pillows and pulled back the coverlet, and the cat jumped to the foot of the bed but remained humped up, tail coiled beneath him, waiting till his master was stretched out at length before burrowing a little hollow to curl up in.

CHAPTER II

Nearly two years ago Durtal had ceased to associate with men of letters. They were represented in books and in the book-chat columns of magazines as forming an aristocracy which had a monopoly on intelligence. Their conversation, if one believed what one read, sparkled with effervescent and stimulating wit. Durtal had difficulty accounting to himself for the persistence of this illusion. His sad experience led him to believe that every literary man belonged to one of two classes, the thoroughly commercial or the utterly impossible.

The first consisted of writers spoiled by the public, and drained dry in consequence, but "successful." Ravenous for notice they aped the ways of the world of big business, delighted in gala dinners, gave formal evening parties, spoke of copyrights, sales, and long run plays, and made great display of wealth.

The second consisted of café loafers, "bohemians." Rolling on the benches, gorged with beer they feigned an exaggerated modesty and at the same time cried their wares, aired their genius, and abused their betters.

There was now no place where one could meet a few artists and privately, intimately, discuss ideas at ease. One was at the mercy of the café crowd or the drawing-room company. One's interlocutor was listening avidly to steal one's ideas, and behind one's back one was being vituperated. And the women were always intruding.

In this indiscriminate world there was no illuminating criticism, nothing but small talk, elegant or inelegant.

Then Durtal learned, also by experience, that one cannot associate with thieves without becoming either a thief or a dupe, and finally he broke off relations with his confrères.

He not only had no sympathy but no common topic of conversation with them. Formerly when he accepted naturalism—airtight and unsatisfactory as it was—he had been able to argue esthetics with them, but now!

"The point is," Des Hermies was always telling him, "that there is a basic difference between you and the other realists, and no patched-up alliance could possibly be of long duration. You execrate the age and they worship it. There is the whole matter. You were fated some day to get away from this Americanized art and attempt to create something less vulgar, less miserably commonplace, and infuse a little spirituality into it.

"In all your books you have fallen on our *fin de siècle*—our *queue du siècle*—tooth and nail. But, Lord! a man soon gets tired of whacking something that doesn't fight back but merely goes its own way repeating its offences. You needed to escape into another epoch and get your bearings while waiting for a congenial subject to present itself. That explains your spiritual disarray of the last few months and your immediate recovery as soon as you stumbled onto Giles de Rais."

Des Hermies had diagnosed him accurately. The day on which Durtal had plunged into the frightful and delightful latter mediæval age had been the dawn of a new existence. The flouting of his actual surroundings brought peace to Durtal's soul, and he had completely reorganized his life, mentally cloistering himself, far from the furore of contemporary letters, in the château de Tiffauges with the monster Bluebeard, with whom he lived in perfect accord, even in mischievous amity.

Thus history had for Durtal supplanted the novel, whose forced banality, conventionality, and tidy structure of plot simply griped him. Yet history, too, was only a peg for a man of talent to hang style and ideas on, for events could not fail to be coloured by the temperament and distorted by the bias of the historian.

As for the documents and sources! Well attested as they might be, they were all subject to revision, even to contradiction by others exhumed later which were no less authentic than the first and which also but waited their turn to be refuted by newer discoveries.

In the present rage for grubbing around in dusty archives writing of history served as an outlet for the pedantry of the moles who reworked their mouldy findings and were duly rewarded by the Institute with medals and diplomas.

For Durtal history was, then, the most pretentious as it was the most infantile of deceptions. Old Clio ought to be represented with a sphinx's head, mutton-chop whiskers, and one of those padded bonnets which babies wore to keep them from bashing their little brains out when they took a tumble.

Of course exactitude was impossible. Why should he dream of getting at the whole truth about the Middle Ages when nobody had been able to give a full account of the Revolution, of the Commune for that matter? The best he could do was to imagine himself in the midst of creatures of that other epoch, wearing their antique garb, thinking their thoughts, and then, having saturated himself with their spirit, to convey his illusion by means of adroitly selected details.

That is practically what Michelet did, and though the garrulous old gossip drivelled endlessly about matters of supreme unimportance and ecstasized in his mild way over trivial anecdotes which he expanded beyond all proportion, and though his sentimentality and chauvinism sometimes discredited his quite plausible conjectures, he was nevertheless the only French historian who had overcome the limitation of time and made another age live anew before our eyes.

Hysterical, garrulous, manneristic as he was, there was yet a truly epic sweep in certain passages of his History of France. The personages were raised from the oblivion into which the dry-as-dust professors had sunk them, and became live human beings. What matter, then, if Michelet was the least trustworthy of historians since he was the most personal and the most evocative?

As for the others, they simply ferreted around among the old state papers, clipped them, and, following M. Taine's example, arranged, ticketed, and mounted their sensational gleanings in logical sequence, rejecting, of course, everything that did not advance the case they were trying to make. They denied themselves imagination and enthusiasm and claimed that they did not invent. True enough,