

## **XVI ARISTOCRACY AND THE DISCONTENTS**

It is the pathos of many hackneyed things that they are intrinsically delicate and are only mechanically made dull. Any one who has seen the first white light, when it comes in by a window, knows that daylight is not only as beautiful but as mysterious as moonlight. It is the subtlety of the colour of sunshine that seems to be colourless. So patriotism, and especially English patriotism, which is vulgarized with volumes of verbal fog and gas, is still in itself something as tenuous and tender as a climate. The name of Nelson, with which the last chapter ended, might very well summarize the matter; for his name is banged and beaten about like an old tin can, while his soul had something in it of a fine and fragile eighteenth-century vase. And it will be found that the most threadbare things contemporary and connected with him have a real truth to the tone and meaning of his life and time, though for us they have too often degenerated into dead jokes. The expression "hearts of oak," for instance, is no unhappy phrase for the finer side of that England of which he was the best expression. Even as a material metaphor it covers much of what I mean; oak was by no means only made into bludgeons, nor even only into battle-ships; and the English gentry did not think it business-like to pretend to be mere brutes. The mere name of oak calls back like a dream those dark but genial interiors of colleges and country houses, in which great gentlemen, not degenerate, almost made Latin an English language and port an English wine. Some part of that world at least will not perish; for its autumnal glow passed into the brush of the great English portrait-painters, who, more than any other men, were given the power to commemorate the large humanity of their own land; immortalizing a mood as broad and soft as their own brush-work. Come naturally, at the right emotional angle, upon a canvass of Gainsborough, who painted ladies like landscapes, as great and as unconscious with repose, and you will note how subtly the artist gives to a dress flowing in the foreground something of the divine quality of distance. Then you will understand another faded phrase and words spoken far away upon the sea; there will rise up quite fresh before you and be borne upon a bar of music, like words you have never heard before: "For England, home, and beauty."

When I think of these things, I have no temptation to mere grumbling at the great gentry that waged the great war of our fathers. But indeed the difficulty about it was something much deeper than could be dealt with by any grumbling. It was an exclusive class, but not an exclusive life; it was interested in all things, though not for all men. Or rather those things it failed to include, through the limitations of this rationalist interval between mediæval and modern mysticism, were at least not of the sort to shock us with superficial inhumanity. The greatest gap in their souls, for those who think it a gap, was their complete and complacent paganism.

All their very decencies assumed that the old faith was dead; those who held it still, like the great Johnson, were considered eccentrics. The French Revolution was a riot that broke up the very formal funeral of Christianity; and was followed by various other complications, including the corpse coming to life. But the scepticism was no mere oligarchic orgy; it was not confined to the Hell-Fire Club; which might in virtue of its vivid name be regarded as relatively orthodox. It is present in the mildest middle-class atmosphere; as in the middle-class masterpiece about "Northanger Abbey," where we actually remember it is an antiquity, without ever remembering it is an abbey. Indeed there is no clearer case of it than what can only be called the atheism of Jane Austen.

Unfortunately it could truly be said of the English gentleman, as of another gallant and gracious individual, that his honour stood rooted in dishonour. He was, indeed, somewhat in the position of such an aristocrat in a romance, whose splendour has the dark spot of a secret and a sort of blackmail. There was, to begin with, an uncomfortable paradox in the tale of his pedigree. Many heroes have claimed to be descended from the gods, from beings greater than themselves; but he himself was far more heroic than his ancestors. His glory did not come from the Crusades but from the Great Pillage. His fathers had not come over with William the Conqueror, but only assisted, in a somewhat shuffling manner, at the coming over of William of Orange. His own exploits were often really romantic, in the cities of the Indian sultans or the war of the wooden ships; it was the exploits of the far-off founders of his family that were painfully realistic. In this the great gentry were more in the position of Napoleonic marshals than of Norman knights, but their position was worse; for the marshals might be descended from peasants and shopkeepers; but the oligarchs were descended from usurers and thieves. That, for good or evil, was the paradox of England; the typical aristocrat was the typical upstart.

But the secret was worse; not only was such a family founded on stealing, but the family was stealing still. It is a grim truth that all through the eighteenth century, all through the great Whig speeches about liberty, all through the great Tory speeches about patriotism, through the period of Wandewash and Plassy, through the period of Trafalgar and Waterloo, one process was steadily going on in the central senate of the nation. Parliament was passing bill after bill for the enclosure, by the great landlords, of such of the common lands as had survived out of the great communal system of the Middle Ages. It is much more than a pun, it is the prime political irony of our history, that the Commons were destroying the commons. The very word "common," as we have before noted, lost its great moral meaning, and became a mere topographical term for some remaining scrap of scrub or heath that was not worth stealing. In the eighteenth century these last and lingering commons were connected only with stories about highwaymen, which still linger in our literature. The romance of them was a

romance of robbers; but not of the real robbers.

This was the mysterious sin of the English squires, that they remained human, and yet ruined humanity all around them. Their own ideal, nay their own reality of life, was really more generous and genial than the stiff savagery of Puritan captains and Prussian nobles; but the land withered under their smile as under an alien frown. Being still at least English, they were still in their way good-natured; but their position was false, and a false position forces the good-natured into brutality. The French Revolution was the challenge that really revealed to the Whigs that they must make up their minds to be really democrats or admit that they were really aristocrats. They decided, as in the case of their philosophic exponent Burke, to be really aristocrats; and the result was the White Terror, the period of Anti-Jacobin repression which revealed the real side of their sympathies more than any stricken fields in foreign lands. Cobbett, the last and greatest of the yeomen, of the small farming class which the great estates were devouring daily, was thrown into prison merely for protesting against the flogging of English soldiers by German mercenaries. In that savage dispersal of a peaceful meeting which was called the Massacre of Peterloo, English soldiers were indeed employed, though much more in the spirit of German ones. And it is one of the bitter satires that cling to the very continuity of our history, that such suppression of the old yeoman spirit was the work of soldiers who still bore the title of the Yeomanry.

The name of Cobbett is very important here; indeed it is generally ignored because it is important. Cobbett was the one man who saw the tendency of the time as a whole, and challenged it as a whole; consequently he went without support. It is a mark of our whole modern history that the masses are kept quiet with a fight. They are kept quiet by the fight because it is a sham-fight; thus most of us know by this time that the Party System has been popular only in the same sense that a football match is popular. The division in Cobbett's time was slightly more sincere, but almost as superficial; it was a difference of sentiment about externals which divided the old agricultural gentry of the eighteenth century from the new mercantile gentry of the nineteenth. Through the first half of the nineteenth century there were some real disputes between the squire and the merchant. The merchant became converted to the important economic thesis of Free Trade, and accused the squire of starving the poor by dear bread to keep up his agrarian privilege. Later the squire retorted not ineffectively by accusing the merchant of brutalizing the poor by overworking them in his factories to keep up his commercial success. The passing of the Factory Acts was a confession of the cruelty that underlay the new industrial experiments, just as the Repeal of the Corn Laws was a confession of the comparative weakness and unpopularity of the squires, who had destroyed the last remnants of any peasantry that might have defended the field against the factory. These relatively real disputes would bring

us to the middle of the Victorian era. But long before the beginning of the Victorian era, Cobbett had seen and said that the disputes were only relatively real. Or rather he would have said, in his more robust fashion, that they were not real at all. He would have said that the agricultural pot and the industrial kettle were calling each other black, when they had both been blackened in the same kitchen. And he would have been substantially right; for the great industrial disciple of the kettle, James Watt (who learnt from it the lesson of the steam engine), was typical of the age in this, that he found the old Trade Guilds too fallen, unfashionable and out of touch with the times to help his discovery, so that he had recourse to the rich minority which had warred on and weakened those Guilds since the Reformation. There was no prosperous peasant's pot, such as Henry of Navarre invoked, to enter into alliance with the kettle. In other words, there was in the strict sense of the word no commonwealth, because wealth, though more and more wealthy, was less and less common. Whether it be a credit or discredit, industrial science and enterprise were in bulk a new experiment of the old oligarchy; and the old oligarchy had always been ready for new experiments--beginning with the Reformation. And it is characteristic of the clear mind which was hidden from many by the hot temper of Cobbett, that he did see the Reformation as the root of both squirearchy and industrialism, and called on the people to break away from both. The people made more effort to do so than is commonly realized. There are many silences in our somewhat snobbish history; and when the educated class can easily suppress a revolt, they can still more easily suppress the record of it. It was so with some of the chief features of that great mediæval revolution the failure of which, or rather the betrayal of which, was the real turning-point of our history. It was so with the revolts against the religious policy of Henry VIII.; and it was so with the rick-burning and frame-breaking riots of Cobbett's epoch. The real mob reappeared for a moment in our history, for just long enough to show one of the immortal marks of the real mob--ritualism. There is nothing that strikes the undemocratic doctrinaire so sharply about direct democratic action as the vanity or mummery of the things done seriously in the daylight; they astonish him by being as unpractical as a poem or a prayer. The French Revolutionists stormed an empty prison merely because it was large and solid and difficult to storm, and therefore symbolic of the mighty monarchical machinery of which it had been but the shed. The English rioters laboriously broke in pieces a parish grindstone, merely because it was large and solid and difficult to break, and therefore symbolic of the mighty oligarchical machinery which perpetually ground the faces of the poor. They also put the oppressive agent of some landlord in a cart and escorted him round the county, merely to exhibit his horrible personality to heaven and earth. Afterwards they let him go, which marks perhaps, for good or evil, a certain national modification of the movement. There is something very typical of an English revolution in having the tumbril without the guillotine.

Anyhow, these embers of the revolutionary epoch were trodden out very brutally; the grindstone continued (and continues) to grind in the scriptural fashion above referred to, and, in most political crises since, it is the crowd that has found itself in the cart. But, of course, both the riot and repression in England were but shadows of the awful revolt and vengeance which crowned the parallel process in Ireland. Here the terrorism, which was but a temporary and desperate tool of the aristocrats in England (not being, to do them justice, at all consonant to their temperament, which had neither the cruelty and morbidity nor the logic and fixity of terrorism), became in a more spiritual atmosphere a flaming sword of religious and racial insanity. Pitt, the son of Chatham, was quite unfit to fill his father's place, unfit indeed (I cannot but think) to fill the place commonly given him in history. But if he was wholly worthy of his immortality, his Irish expedients, even if considered as immediately defensible, have not been worthy of their immortality. He was sincerely convinced of the national need to raise coalition after coalition against Napoleon, by pouring the commercial wealth then rather peculiar to England upon her poorer Allies, and he did this with indubitable talent and pertinacity. He was at the same time faced with a hostile Irish rebellion and a partly or potentially hostile Irish Parliament. He broke the latter by the most indecent bribery and the former by the most indecent brutality, but he may well have thought himself entitled to the tyrant's plea. But not only were his expedients those of panic, or at any rate of peril, but (what is less clearly realized) it is the only real defence of them that they were those of panic and peril. He was ready to emancipate Catholics as such, for religious bigotry was not the vice of the oligarchy; but he was not ready to emancipate Irishmen as such. He did not really want to enlist Ireland like a recruit, but simply to disarm Ireland like an enemy. Hence his settlement was from the first in a false position for settling anything. The Union may have been a necessity, but the Union was not a Union. It was not intended to be one, and nobody has ever treated it as one. We have not only never succeeded in making Ireland English, as Burgundy has been made French, but we have never tried. Burgundy could boast of Corneille, though Corneille was a Norman, but we should smile if Ireland boasted of Shakespeare. Our vanity has involved us in a mere contradiction; we have tried to combine identification with superiority. It is simply weak-minded to sneer at an Irishman if he figures as an Englishman, and rail at him if he figures as an Irishman. So the Union has never even applied English laws to Ireland, but only coercions and concessions both specially designed for Ireland. From Pitt's time to our own this tottering alternation has continued; from the time when the great O'Connell, with his monster meetings, forced our government to listen to Catholic Emancipation to the time when the great Parnell, with his obstruction, forced it to listen to Home Rule, our staggering equilibrium has been maintained by blows from without. In the later nineteenth century the better sort of special treatment began on the whole to increase. Gladstone, an idealistic though inconsistent Liberal, rather belatedly realized that the freedom he loved in Greece and Italy had its



rights nearer home, and may be said to have found a second youth in the gateway of the grave, in the eloquence and emphasis of his conversion. And a statesman wearing the opposite label (for what that is worth) had the spiritual insight to see that Ireland, if resolved to be a nation, was even more resolved to be a peasantry. George Wyndham, generous, imaginative, a man among politicians, insisted that the agrarian agony of evictions, shootings, and rack-rentings should end with the individual Irish getting, as Parnell had put it, a grip on their farms. In more ways than one his work rounds off almost romantically the tragedy of the rebellion against Pitt, for Wyndham himself was of the blood of the leader of the rebels, and he wrought the only reparation yet made for all the blood, shamefully shed, that flowed around the fall of FitzGerald.

The effect on England was less tragic; indeed, in a sense it was comic. Wellington, himself an Irishman though of the narrower party, was preeminently a realist, and, like many Irishmen, was especially a realist about Englishmen. He said the army he commanded was the scum of the earth; and the remark is none the less valuable because that army proved itself useful enough to be called the salt of the earth. But in truth it was in this something of a national symbol and the guardian, as it were, of a national secret. There is a paradox about the English, even as distinct from the Irish or the Scotch, which makes any formal version of their plans and principles inevitably unjust to them. England not only makes her ramparts out of rubbish, but she finds ramparts in what she has herself cast away as rubbish. If it be a tribute to a thing to say that even its failures have been successes, there is truth in that tribute. Some of the best colonies were convict settlements, and might be called abandoned convict settlements. The army was largely an army of gaol-birds, raised by gaol-delivery; but it was a good army of bad men; nay, it was a gay army of unfortunate men. This is the colour and the character that has run through the realities of English history, and it can hardly be put in a book, least of all a historical book. It has its flashes in our fantastic fiction and in the songs of the street, but its true medium is conversation. It has no name but incongruity. An illogical laughter survives everything in the English soul. It survived, perhaps, with only too much patience, the time of terrorism in which the more serious Irish rose in revolt. That time was full of a quite topsy-turvey tyranny, and the English humorist stood on his head to suit it. Indeed, he often receives a quite irrational sentence in a police court by saying he will do it on his head. So, under Pitt's coercionist régime, a man was sent to prison for saying that George IV. was fat; but we feel he must have been partly sustained in prison by the artistic contemplation of how fat he was. That sort of liberty, that sort of humanity, and it is no mean sort, did indeed survive all the drift and downward eddy of an evil economic system, as well as the dragooning of a reactionary epoch and the drearier menace of materialistic social science, as embodied in the new Puritans, who have purified themselves even of religion. Under this long process, the worst that can be said is that the English

humorist has been slowly driven downwards in the social scale. Falstaff was a knight, Sam Weller was a gentleman's servant, and some of our recent restrictions seem designed to drive Sam Weller to the status of the Artful Dodger. But well it was for us that some such trampled tradition and dark memory of Merry England survived; well for us, as we shall see, that all our social science failed and all our statesmanship broke down before it. For there was to come the noise of a trumpet and a dreadful day of visitation, in which all the daily workers of a dull civilization were to be called out of their houses and their holes like a resurrection of the dead, and left naked under a strange sun with no religion but a sense of humour. And men might know of what nation Shakespeare was, who broke into puns and practical jokes in the darkest passion of his tragedies, if they had only heard those boys in France and Flanders who called out "Early Doors!" themselves in a theatrical memory, as they went so early in their youth to break down the doors of death.