

CHAPTER IV - THE BREAK-UP OF THE COMPROMISE

If it be curiously and carefully considered it will, I think, appear more and more true that the struggle between the old spiritual theory and the new material theory in England ended simply in a deadlock; and a deadlock that has endured. It is still impossible to say absolutely that England is a Christian country or a heathen country; almost exactly as it was impossible when Herbert Spencer began to write. Separate elements of both sorts are alive, and even increasingly alive. But neither the believer nor the unbeliever has the impudence to call himself the Englishman. Certainly the great Victorian rationalism has succeeded in doing a damage to religion. It has done what is perhaps the worst of all damages to religion. It has driven it entirely into the power of the religious people. Men like Newman, men like Coventry Patmore, men who would have been mystics in any case, were driven back upon being much more extravagantly religious than they would have been in a religious country. Men like Huxley, men like Kingsley, men like most Victorian men, were equally driven back on being irreligious; that is, on doubting things which men's normal imagination does not necessarily doubt. But certainly the most final and forcible fact is that this war ended like the battle of Sheriffmuir, as the poet says; they both did fight, and both did beat, and both did run away. They have left to their descendants a treaty that has become a dull torture. Men may believe in immortality, and none of the men know why. Men may not believe in miracles, and none of the men know why. The Christian Church had been just strong enough to check the conquest of her chief citadels. The rationalist movement had been just strong enough to conquer some of her outposts, as it seemed, for ever. Neither was strong enough to expel the other; and Victorian England was in a state which some call liberty and some call lockjaw.

But the situation can be stated another way. There came a time, roughly somewhere about 1880, when the two great positive enthusiasms of Western Europe had for the time exhausted each other--Christianity and the French Revolution. About that time there used to be a sad and not unsympathetic jest going about to the effect that Queen Victoria might very well live longer than the Prince of Wales. Somewhat in the same way, though the republican impulse was hardly a hundred years old and the religious impulse nearly two thousand, yet as far as England was concerned, the old wave and the new seemed to be spent at the same time. On the one hand Darwin, especially through the strong journalistic genius of Huxley, had won a very wide spread though an exceedingly vague victory. I do not mean that Darwin's own doctrine was vague; his was merely one particular hypothesis

about how animal variety might have arisen; and that particular hypothesis, though it will always be interesting, is now very much the reverse of secure. But it is only in the strictly scientific world and among strictly scientific men that Darwin's detailed suggestion has largely broken down. The general public impression that he had entirely proved his case (whatever it was) was early arrived at, and still remains. It was and is hazily associated with the negation of religion. But (and this is the important point) it was also associated with the negation of democracy. The same Mid-Victorian muddle-headedness that made people think that "evolution" meant that we need not admit the supremacy of God, also made them think that "survival" meant that we must admit the supremacy of men. Huxley had no hand in spreading these fallacies; he was a fair fighter; and he told his own followers, who spoke thus, most emphatically not to play the fool. He said most strongly that his or any theory of evolution left the old philosophical arguments for a creator, right or wrong, exactly where they were before. He also said most emphatically that any one who used the argument of Nature against the ideal of justice or an equal law, was as senseless as a gardener who should fight on the side of the ill weeds merely because they grew apace. I wish, indeed, that in such a rude summary as this, I had space to do justice to Huxley as a literary man and a moralist. He had a live taste and talent for the English tongue, which he devoted to the task of keeping Victorian rationalism rational. He did not succeed. As so often happens when a rather unhealthy doubt is in the atmosphere, the strongest words of their great captain could not keep the growing crowds of agnostics back from the most hopeless and inhuman extremes of destructive thought. Nonsense not yet quite dead about the folly of allowing the unfit to survive began to be more and more wildly whispered. Such helpless specimens of "advanced thought" are, of course, quite as inconsistent with Darwinism as they are with democracy or with any other intelligent proposition ever offered. But these unintelligent propositions were offered; and the ultimate result was this rather important one: that the harshness of Utilitarianism began to turn into downright tyranny. That beautiful faith in human nature and in freedom which had made delicate the dry air of John Stuart Mill; that robust, romantic sense of justice which had redeemed even the injustices of Macaulay--all that seemed slowly and sadly to be drying up. Under the shock of Darwinism all that was good in the Victorian rationalism shook and dissolved like dust. All that was bad in it abode and clung like clay. The magnificent emancipation evaporated; the mean calculation remained. One could still calculate in clear statistical tables, how many men lived, how many men died. One must not ask how they lived; for that is politics. One must not ask how they died; for that is religion. And religion and politics were ruled out of all the Later Victorian debating clubs; even including the debating club at Westminster. What third thing they were discussing, which

was neither religion nor politics, I do not know. I have tried the experiment of reading solidly through a vast number of their records and reviews and discussions; and still I do not know. The only third thing I can think of to balance religion and politics is art; and no one well acquainted with the debates at St. Stephen's will imagine that the art of extreme eloquence was the cause of the confusion. None will maintain that our political masters are removed from us by an infinite artistic superiority in the choice of words. The politicians know nothing of politics, which is their own affair: they know nothing of religion, which is certainly not their affair: it may legitimately be said that they have to do with nothing; they have reached that low and last level where a man knows as little about his own claim, as he does about his enemies'. In any case there can be no doubt about the effect of this particular situation on the problem of ethics and science. The duty of dragging truth out by the tail or the hind leg or any other corner one can possibly get hold of, a perfectly sound duty in itself, had somehow come into collision with the older and larger duty of knowing something about the organism and ends of a creature; or, in the everyday phrase, being able to make head or tail of it. This paradox pursued and tormented the Victorians. They could not or would not see that humanity repels or welcomes the railway-train, simply according to what people come by it. They could not see that one welcomes or smashes the telephone, according to what words one hears in it. They really seem to have felt that the train could be a substitute for its own passengers; or the telephone a substitute for its own voice.

In any case it is clear that a change had begun to pass over scientific inquiry, of which we have seen the culmination in our own day. There had begun that easy automatic habit, of science as an oiled and smooth-running machine, that habit of treating things as obviously unquestionable, when, indeed, they are obviously questionable. This began with vaccination in the Early Victorian Age; it extended to the early licence of vivisection in its later age; it has found a sort of fitting foolscap, or crown of crime and folly, in the thing called Eugenics. In all three cases the point was not so much that the pioneers had not proved their case; it was rather that, by an unexpressed rule of respectability, they were not required to prove it. This rather abrupt twist of the rationalistic mind in the direction of arbitrary power, certainly weakened the Liberal movement from within. And meanwhile it was being weakened by heavy blows from without.

There is a week that is the turn of the year; there was a year that was the turn of the century. About 1870 the force of the French Revolution faltered and fell: the year that was everywhere the death of Liberal ideas: the year when Paris fell: the year when Dickens died. While the new foes of freedom,

the sceptics and scientists, were damaging democracy in ideas, the old foes of freedom, the emperors and the kings, were damaging her more heavily in arms. For a moment it almost seemed that the old Tory ring of iron, the Holy Alliance, had recombined against France. But there was just this difference: that the Holy Alliance was now not arguably, but almost avowedly, an Unholy Alliance. It was an alliance between those who still thought they could deny the dignity of man and those who had recently begun to have a bright hope of denying even the dignity of God. Eighteenth-century Prussia was Protestant and probably religious. Nineteenth-century Prussia was almost utterly atheist. Thus the old spirit of liberty felt itself shut up at both ends, that which was called progressive and that which was called reactionary: barricaded by Bismarck with blood and iron and by Darwin by blood and bones. The enormous depression which infects many excellent people born about this time, probably has this cause.

It was a great calamity that the freedom of Wilkes and the faith of Dr. Johnson fought each other. But it was an even worse calamity that they practically killed each other. They killed each other almost simultaneously, like Herminius and Mamilus. Liberalism (in Newman's sense) really did strike Christianity through headpiece and through head; that is, it did daze and stun the ignorant and ill-prepared intellect of the English Christian. And Christianity did smite Liberalism through breastplate and through breast; that is, it did succeed, through arms and all sorts of awful accidents, in piercing more or less to the heart of the Utilitarian--and finding that he had none. Victorian Protestantism had not head enough for the business; Victorian Radicalism had not heart enough for the business. Down fell they dead together, exactly as Macaulay's Lay says, and still stood all who saw them fall almost until the hour at which I write.

This coincident collapse of both religious and political idealism produced a curious cold air of emptiness and real subconscious agnosticism such as is extremely unusual in the history of mankind. It is what Mr. Wells, with his usual verbal delicacy and accuracy, spoke of as that ironical silence that follows a great controversy. It is what people less intelligent than Mr. Wells meant by calling themselves *fin de siècle*; though, of course, rationally speaking, there is no more reason for being sad towards the end of a hundred years than towards the end of five hundred fortnights. There was no arithmetical autumn, but there was a spiritual one. And it came from the fact suggested in the paragraphs above; the sense that man's two great inspirations had failed him together. The Christian religion was much more dead in the eighteenth century than it was in the nineteenth century. But the republican enthusiasm was also much more alive. If their scepticism was cold, and their faith even colder, their practical politics were wildly

idealistic; and if they doubted the kingdom of heaven, they were gloriously credulous about the chances of it coming on earth. In the same way the old pagan republican feeling was much more dead in the feudal darkness of the eleventh or twelfth centuries, than it was even a century later; but if creative politics were at their lowest, creative theology was almost at its highest point of energy.

The modern world, in fact, had fallen between two stools. It had fallen between that austere old three-legged stool which was the tripod of the cold priestess of Apollo; and that other mystical and mediæval stool that may well be called the Stool of Repentance. It kept neither of the two values as intensely valuable. It could not believe in the bonds that bound men; but, then, neither could it believe in the men they bound. It was always restrained in its hatred of slavery by a half remembrance of its yet greater hatred of liberty. They were almost alone, I think, in thus carrying to its extreme the negative attitude already noted in Miss Arabella Allen. Anselm would have despised a civic crown, but he would not have despised a relic. Voltaire would have despised a relic; but he would not have despised a vote. We hardly find them both despised till we come to the age of Oscar Wilde.

These years that followed on that double disillusionment were like one long afternoon in a rich house on a rainy day. It was not merely that everybody believed that nothing would happen; it was also that everybody believed that anything happening was even duller than nothing happening. It was in this stale atmosphere that a few flickers of the old Swinburnian flame survived; and were called Art. The great men of the older artistic movement did not live in this time; rather they lived through it. But this time did produce an interregnum of art that had a truth of its own; though that truth was near to being only a consistent lie.

The movement of those called *Æsthetes* (as satirised in *Patience*) and the movement of those afterwards called *Decadents* (satirised in Mr. Street's delightful *Autobiography of a Boy*) had the same captain; or at any rate the same bandmaster. Oscar Wilde walked in front of the first procession wearing a sunflower, and in front of the second procession wearing a green carnation. With the *æsthetic* movement and its more serious elements, I deal elsewhere; but the second appearance of Wilde is also connected with real intellectual influences, largely negative, indeed, but subtle and influential. The mark in most of the arts of this time was a certain quality which those who like it would call "uniqueness of aspect," and those who do not like it "not quite coming off." I mean the thing meant something from one standpoint; but its mark was that the smallest change of standpoint made it unmeaning and unthinkable--a foolish joke. A beggar painted by

Rembrandt is as solid as a statue, however roughly he is sketched in; the soul can walk all round him like a public monument. We see he would have other aspects; and that they would all be the aspects of a beggar. Even if one did not admit the extraordinary qualities in the painting, one would have to admit the ordinary qualities in the sitter. If it is not a masterpiece it is a man. But a nocturne by Whistler of mist on the Thames is either a masterpiece or it is nothing; it is either a nocturne or a nightmare of childish nonsense. Made in a certain mood, viewed through a certain temperament, conceived under certain conventions, it may be, it often is, an unreplaceable poem, a vision that may never be seen again. But the moment it ceases to be a splendid picture it ceases to be a picture at all. Or, again, if Hamlet is not a great tragedy it is an uncommonly good tale. The people and the posture of affairs would still be there even if one thought that Shakespeare's moral attitude was wrong. Just as one could imagine all the other sides of Rembrandt's beggar, so, with the mind's eye (Horatio), one can see all four sides of the castle of Elsinore. One might tell the tale from the point of view of Laërtes or Claudius or Polonius or the gravedigger; and it would still be a good tale and the same tale. But if we take a play like *Pelléas and Mélisande*, we shall find that unless we grasp the particular fairy thread of thought the poet rather hazily flings to us, we cannot grasp anything whatever. Except from one extreme poetic point of view, the thing is not a play; it is not a bad play, it is a mass of clotted nonsense. One whole act describes the lovers going to look for a ring in a distant cave when they both know they have dropped it down a well. Seen from some secret window on some special side of the soul's turret, this might convey a sense of faerie futility in our human life. But it is quite obvious that unless it called forth that one kind of sympathy, it would call forth nothing but laughter and rotten eggs. In the same play the husband chases his wife with a drawn sword, the wife remarking at intervals "I am not gay." Now there may really be an idea in this; the idea of human misfortune coming most cruelly upon the optimism of innocence; that the lonely human heart says, like a child at a party, "I am not enjoying myself as I thought I should." But it is plain that unless one thinks of this idea (and of this idea only) the expression is not in the least unsuccessful pathos; it is very broad and highly successful farce. Maeterlinck and the decadents, in short, may fairly boast of being subtle; but they must not mind if they are called narrow.

This is the spirit of Wilde's work and of most of the literary work done in that time and fashion. It is, as Mr. Arthur Symonds said, an attitude; but it is an attitude in the flat, not in the round; not a statue, but the cardboard king in a toy-theatre, which can only be looked at from the front. In Wilde's own poetry we have particularly a perpetually toppling possibility of the absurd; a sense of just falling too short or just going too far. "Plant lilies at my head"

has something wrong about it; something silly that is not there in--

"And put a grey stone at my head"

in the old ballad. But even where Wilde was right, he had a way of being right with this excessive strain on the reader's sympathy (and gravity) which was the mark of all these men with a "point of view." There is a very sound sonnet of his in which he begins by lamenting mere anarchy, as hostile to the art and civilisation that were his only gods; but ends by saying--

"And yet These Christs that die upon the barricades
God knows that I am with them--in some ways."

Now that is really very true; that is the way a man of wide reading and worldly experience, but not ungenerous impulses, does feel about the mere fanatic, who is at once a nuisance to humanity and an honour to human nature. Yet who can read that last line without feeling that Wilde is poised on the edge of a precipice of bathos; that the phrase comes very near to being quite startlingly silly. It is as in the case of Maeterlinck, let the reader move his standpoint one inch nearer the popular standpoint, and there is nothing for the thing but harsh, hostile, unconquerable mirth. Somehow the image of Wilde lolling like an elegant leviathan on a sofa, and saying between the whiffs of a scented cigarette that martyrdom is martyrdom in some respects, has seized on and mastered all more delicate considerations in the mind. It is unwise in a poet to goad the sleeping lion of laughter.

In less dexterous hands the decadent idea, what there was of it, went entirely to pieces, which nobody has troubled to pick up. Oddly enough (unless this be always the Nemesis of excess) it began to be insupportable in the very ways in which it claimed specially to be subtle and tactful; in the feeling for different art-forms, in the welding of subject and style, in the appropriateness of the epithet and the unity of the mood. Wilde himself wrote some things that were not immorality, but merely bad taste; not the bad taste of the conservative suburbs, which merely means anything violent or shocking, but real bad taste; as in a stern subject treated in a florid style; an over-dressed woman at a supper of old friends; or a bad joke that nobody had time to laugh at. This mixture of sensibility and coarseness in the man was very curious; and I for one cannot endure (for example) his sensual way of speaking of dead substances, satin or marble or velvet, as if he were stroking a lot of dogs and cats. But there was a sort of power--or at least weight--in his coarseness. His lapses were those proper to the one good thing he really was, an Irish swashbuckler--a fighter. Some of the Roman Emperors might have had the same luxuriousness and yet the same

courage. But the later decadents were far worse, especially the decadent critics, the decadent illustrators--there were even decadent publishers. And they utterly lost the light and reason of their existence: they were masters of the clumsy and the incongruous. I will take only one example. Aubrey Beardsley may be admired as an artist or no; he does not enter into the scope of this book. But it is true that there is a certain brief mood, a certain narrow aspect of life, which he renders to the imagination rightly. It is mostly felt under white, deathly lights in Piccadilly, with the black hollow of heaven behind shiny hats or painted faces: a horrible impression that all mankind are masks. This being the thing Beardsley could express (and the only thing he could express), it is the solemn and awful fact that he was set down to illustrate Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. There is no need to say more; taste, in the artist's sense, must have been utterly dead. They might as well have employed Burne-Jones to illustrate *Martin Chuzzlewit*. It would not have been more ludicrous than putting this portrayer of evil puppets, with their thin lines like wire and their small faces like perverted children's, to trace against the grand barbaric forests the sin and the sorrow of Lancelot.

To return to the chief of the decadents, I will not speak of the end of the individual story: there was horror and there was expiation. And, as my conscience goes at least, no man should say one word that could weaken the horror--or the pardon. But there is one literary consequence of the thing which must be mentioned, because it bears us on to that much breezier movement which first began to break in upon all this ghastly idleness--I mean the Socialist Movement. I do not mean "De Profundis"; I do not think he had got to the real depths when he wrote that book. I mean the one real thing he ever wrote: *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*; in which we hear a cry for common justice and brotherhood very much deeper, more democratic and more true to the real trend of the populace to-day, than anything the Socialists ever uttered even in the boldest pages of Bernard Shaw.

Before we pass on to the two expansive movements in which the Victorian Age really ended, the accident of a distinguished artist is available for estimating this somewhat cool and sad afternoon of the epoch at its purest; not in lounging pessimism or luxurious aberrations, but in earnest skill and a high devotion to letters. This change that had come, like the change from a golden sunset to a grey twilight, can be very adequately measured if we compare the insight and intricacy of Meredith with the insight and intricacy of Mr. Henry James. The characters of both are delicate and indisputable; but we must all have had a feeling that the characters in Meredith are gods, but that the characters in Henry James are ghosts. I do not mean that they are unreal: I believe in ghosts. So does Mr. Henry James; he has written some of his very finest literature about the little habits of these creatures.

He is in the deep sense of a dishonoured word, a Spiritualist if ever there was one. But Meredith was a materialist as well. The difference is that a ghost is a disembodied spirit; while a god (to be worth worrying about) must be an embodied spirit. The presence of soul and substance together involves one of the two or three things which most of the Victorians did not understand--the thing called a sacrament. It is because he had a natural affinity for this mystical materialism that Meredith, in spite of his affectations, is a poet: and, in spite of his Victorian Agnosticism (or ignorance) is a pious Pagan and not a mere Pantheist. Mr. Henry James is at the other extreme. His thrill is not so much in symbol or mysterious emblem as in the absence of interventions and protections between mind and mind. It is not mystery: it is rather a sort of terror at knowing too much. He lives in glass houses; he is akin to Maeterlinck in a feeling of the nakedness of souls. None of the Meredithian things, wind or wine or sex or stark nonsense, ever gets between Mr. James and his prey. But the thing is a deficiency as well as a talent: we cannot but admire the figures that walk about in his afternoon drawing-rooms; but we have a certain sense that they are figures that have no faces.

For the rest, he is most widely known, or perhaps only most widely chaffed, because of a literary style that lends itself to parody and is a glorious feast for Mr. Max Beerbohm. It may be called The Hampered, or Obstacle Race Style, in which one continually trips over commas and relative clauses; and where the sense has to be perpetually qualified lest it should mean too much. But such satire, however friendly, is in some sense unfair to him; because it leaves out his sense of general artistic design, which is not only high, but bold. This appears, I think, most strongly in his short stories; in his long novels the reader (or at least one reader) does get rather tired of everybody treating everybody else in a manner which in real life would be an impossible intellectual strain. But in his short studies there is the unanswerable thing called real originality; especially in the very shape and point of the tale. It may sound odd to compare him to Mr. Rudyard Kipling: but he is like Kipling and also like Wells in this practical sense: that no one ever wrote a story at all like the Mark of the Beast; no one ever wrote a story at all like A Kink in Space: and in the same sense no one ever wrote a story like The Great Good Place. It is alone in order and species; and it is masterly. He struck his deepest note in that terrible story, The Turn of the Screw; and though there is in the heart of that horror a truth of repentance and religion, it is again notable of the Victorian writers that the only supernatural note they can strike assuredly is the tragic and almost the diabolic. Only Mr. Max Beerbohm has been able to imagine Mr. Henry James writing about Christmas.

Now upon this interregnum, this cold and brilliant waiting-room which was Henry James at its highest and Wilde at its worst, there broke in two positive movements, largely honest though essentially unhistoric and profane, which were destined to crack up the old Victorian solidity past repair. The first was Bernard Shaw and the Socialists: the second was Rudyard Kipling and the Imperialists. I take the Socialists first not because they necessarily came so in order of time, but because they were less the note upon which the epoch actually ended.

William Morris, of whom we have already spoken, may be said to introduce the Socialists, but rather in a social sense than a philosophical. He was their friend, and in a sort of political way, their father; but he was not their founder, for he would not have believed a word of what they ultimately came to say. Nor is this the conventional notion of the old man not keeping pace with the audacity of the young. Morris would have been disgusted not with the wildness, but the tameness of our tidy Fabians. He was not a Socialist, but he was a Revolutionist; he didn't know much more about what he was; but he knew that. In this way, being a full-blooded fellow, he rather repeats the genial sulkiness of Dickens. And if we take this fact about him first, we shall find it a key to the whole movement of this time. For the one dominating truth which overshadows everything else at this point is a political and economic one. The Industrial System, run by a small class of Capitalists on a theory of competitive contract, had been quite honestly established by the early Victorians and was one of the primary beliefs of Victorianism. The Industrial System, so run, had become another name for hell. By Morris's time and ever since, England has been divided into three classes: Knaves, Fools, and Revolutionists.

History is full of forgotten controversies; and those who speak of Socialism now have nearly all forgotten that for some time it was an almost equal fight between Socialism and Anarchism for the leadership of the exodus from Capitalism. It is here that Herbert Spencer comes in logically, though not chronologically; also that much more interesting man, Auberon Herbert. Spencer has no special place as a man of letters; and a vastly exaggerated place as a philosopher. His real importance was that he was very nearly an Anarchist. The indefinable greatness there is about him after all, in spite of the silliest and smuggest limitations, is in a certain consistency and completeness from his own point of view. There is something mediæval, and therefore manful, about writing a book about everything in the world. Now this simplicity expressed itself in politics in carrying the Victorian worship of liberty to the most ridiculous lengths; almost to the length of voluntary taxes and voluntary insurance against murder. He tried, in short, to solve the problem of the State by eliminating the State from it. He was resisted in this

by the powerful good sense of Huxley; but his books became sacred books for a rising generation of rather bewildered rebels, who thought we might perhaps get out of the mess if everybody did as he liked.

Thus the Anarchists and Socialists fought a battle over the death-bed of Victorian Industrialism; in which the Socialists (that is, those who stood for increasing instead of diminishing the power of Government) won a complete victory and have almost exterminated their enemy. The Anarchist one meets here and there nowadays is a sad sight; he is disappointed with the future, as well as with the past.

This victory of the Socialists was largely a literary victory; because it was effected and popularised not only by a wit, but by a sincere wit; and one who had the same sort of militant lucidity that Huxley had shown in the last generation and Voltaire in the last century. A young Irish journalist, impatient of the impoverished Protestantism and Liberalism to which he had been bred, came out as the champion of Socialism not as a matter of sentiment, but as a matter of common sense. The primary position of Bernard Shaw towards the Victorian Age may be roughly summarised thus: the typical Victorian said coolly: "Our system may not be a perfect system, but it works." Bernard Shaw replied, even more coolly: "It may be a perfect system, for all I know or care. But it does not work." He and a society called the Fabians, which once exercised considerable influence, followed this shrewd and sound strategic hint to avoid mere emotional attack on the cruelty of Capitalism; and to concentrate on its clumsiness, its ludicrous incapacity to do its own work. This campaign succeeded, in the sense that while (in the educated world) it was the Socialist who looked the fool at the beginning of that campaign, it is the Anti-Socialist who looks the fool at the end of it. But while it won the educated classes it lost the populace for ever. It dried up those springs of blood and tears out of which all revolt must come if it is to be anything but bureaucratic readjustment. We began this book with the fires of the French Revolution still burning, but burning low. Bernard Shaw was honestly in revolt in his own way: but it was Bernard Shaw who trod out the last ember of the Great Revolution. Bernard Shaw proceeded to apply to many other things the same sort of hilarious realism which he thus successfully applied to the industrial problem. He also enjoyed giving people a piece of his mind; but a piece of his mind was a more appetising and less raw-looking object than a piece of Hardy's. There were many modes of revolt growing all around him; Shaw supported them-- and supplanted them. Many were pitting the realism of war against the romance of war: they succeeded in making the fight dreary and repulsive, but the book dreary and repulsive too. Shaw, in *Arms and the Man*, did manage to make war funny as well as frightful. Many were questioning the

right of revenge or punishment; but they wrote their books in such a way that the reader was ready to release all mankind if he might revenge himself on the author. Shaw, in Captain Brassbound's Conversion, really showed at its best the merry mercy of the pagan; that beautiful human nature that can neither rise to penance nor sink to revenge. Many had proved that even the most independent incomes drank blood out of the veins of the oppressed: but they wrote it in such a style that their readers knew more about depression than oppression. In Widowers' Houses Shaw very nearly (but not quite) succeeded in making a farce out of statistics. And the ultimate utility of his brilliant interruption can best be expressed in the very title of that play. When ages of essential European ethics have said "widows' houses," it suddenly occurs to him to say "but what about widowers' houses?" There is a sort of insane equity about it which was what Bernard Shaw had the power to give, and gave.

Out of the same social ferment arose a man of equally unquestionable genius, Mr. H. G. Wells. His first importance was that he wrote great adventure stories in the new world the men of science had discovered. He walked on a round slippery world as boldly as Ulysses or Tom Jones had worked on a flat one. Cyrano de Bergerac or Baron Munchausen, or other typical men of science, had treated the moon as a mere flat silver mirror in which Man saw his own image--the Man in the Moon. Wells treated the moon as a globe, like our own; bringing forth monsters as moonish as we are earthy. The exquisitely penetrating political and social satire he afterwards wrote belongs to an age later than the Victorian. But because, even from the beginning, his whole trend was Socialist, it is right to place him here.

While the old Victorian ideas were being disturbed by an increasing torture at home, they were also intoxicated by a new romance from abroad. It did not come from Italy with Rossetti and Browning, or from Persia with Fitzgerald: but it came from countries as remote, countries which were (as the simple phrase of that period ran) "painted red" on the map. It was an attempt to reform England through the newer nations; by the criticism of the forgotten colonies, rather than of the forgotten classes. Both Socialism and Imperialism were utterly alien to the Victorian idea. From the point of view of a Victorian aristocrat like Palmerston, Socialism would be the cheek of gutter snipes; Imperialism would be the intrusion of cads. But cads are not alone concerned.

Broadly, the phase in which the Victorian epoch closed was what can only be called the Imperialist phase. Between that and us stands a very individual artist who must nevertheless be connected with that phase. As I

said at the beginning, Macaulay (or, rather, the mind Macaulay shared with most of his powerful middle class) remains as a sort of pavement or flat foundation under all the Victorians. They discussed the dogmas rather than denied them. Now one of the dogmas of Macaulay was the dogma of progress. A fair statement of the truth in it is not really so hard. Investigation of anything naturally takes some little time. It takes some time to sort letters so as to find a letter: it takes some time to test a gas-bracket so as to find the leak; it takes some time to sift evidence so as to find the truth. Now the curse that fell on the later Victorians was this: that they began to value the time more than the truth. One felt so secretarial when sorting letters that one never found the letter; one felt so scientific in explaining gas that one never found the leak; and one felt so judicial, so impartial, in weighing evidence that one had to be bribed to come to any conclusion at all. This was the last note of the Victorians: procrastination was called progress.

Now if we look for the worst fruits of this fallacy we shall find them in historical criticism. There is a curious habit of treating any one who comes before a strong movement as the "forerunner" of that movement. That is, he is treated as a sort of slave running in advance of a great army. Obviously, the analogy really arises from St. John the Baptist, for whom the phrase "forerunner" was rather peculiarly invented. Equally obviously, such a phrase only applies to an alleged or real divine event: otherwise the forerunner would be a founder. Unless Jesus had been the Baptist's God, He would simply have been his disciple.

Nevertheless the fallacy of the "forerunner" has been largely used in literature. Thus men will call a universal satirist like Langland a "morning star of the Reformation," or some such rubbish; whereas the Reformation was not larger, but much smaller than Langland. It was simply the victory of one class of his foes, the greedy merchants, over another class of his foes, the lazy abbots. In real history this constantly occurs; that some small movement happens to favour one of the million things suggested by some great man; whereupon the great man is turned into the running slave of the small movement. Thus certain sectarian movements borrowed the sensationalism without the sacramentalism of Wesley. Thus certain groups of decadents found it easier to imitate De Quincey's opium than his eloquence. Unless we grasp this plain common sense (that you or I are not responsible for what some ridiculous sect a hundred years hence may choose to do with what we say) the peculiar position of Stevenson in later Victorian letters cannot begin to be understood. For he was a very universal man; and talked some sense not only on every subject, but, so far as it is logically possible, in every sense. But the glaring deficiencies of the Victorian

compromise had by that time begun to gape so wide that he was forced, by mere freedom of philosophy and fancy, to urge the neglected things. And yet this very urgency certainly brought on an opposite fever, which he would not have liked if he had lived to understand it. He liked Kipling, though with many healthy hesitations; but he would not have liked the triumph of Kipling: which was the success of the politician and the failure of the poet. Yet when we look back up the false perspective of time, Stevenson does seem in a sense to have prepared that imperial and downward path.

I shall not talk here, any more than anywhere else in this book, about the "sedulous ape" business. No man ever wrote as well as Stevenson who cared only about writing. Yet there is a sense, though a misleading one, in which his original inspirations were artistic rather than purely philosophical. To put the point in that curt covenanting way which he himself could sometimes command, he thought it immoral to neglect romance. The whole of his real position was expressed in that phrase of one of his letters "our civilisation is a dingy ungentlemanly business: it drops so much out of a man." On the whole he concluded that what had been dropped out of the man was the boy. He pursued pirates as Defoe would have fled from them; and summed up his simplest emotions in that touching *cri de cœur* "shall we never shed blood?" He did for the penny dreadful what Coleridge had done for the penny ballad. He proved that, because it was really human, it could really rise as near to heaven as human nature could take it. If Thackeray is our youth, Stevenson is our boyhood: and though this is not the most artistic thing in him, it is the most important thing in the history of Victorian art. All the other fine things he did were, for curious reasons, remote from the current of his age. For instance, he had the good as well as the bad of coming from a Scotch Calvinist's house. No man in that age had so healthy an instinct for the actuality of positive evil. In *The Master of Ballantrae* he did prove with a pen of steel, that the Devil is a gentleman--but is none the less the Devil. It is also characteristic of him (and of the revolt from Victorian respectability in general) that his most blood-and-thunder sensational tale is also that which contains his most intimate and bitter truth. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a double triumph; it has the outside excitement that belongs to Conan Doyle with the inside excitement that belongs to Henry James. Alas, it is equally characteristic of the Victorian time that while nearly every Englishman has enjoyed the anecdote, hardly one Englishman has seen the joke--I mean the point. You will find twenty allusions to *Jekyll and Hyde* in a day's newspaper reading. You will also find that all such allusions suppose the two personalities to be equal, neither caring for the other. Or more roughly, they think the book means that man can be cloven into two creatures, good and evil. The whole stab of the story is that man can't: because while evil does not care for good, good must care

for evil. Or, in other words, man cannot escape from God, because good is the God in man; and insists on omniscience. This point, which is good psychology and also good theology and also good art, has missed its main intention merely because it was also good story-telling.

If the rather vague Victorian public did not appreciate the deep and even tragic ethics with which Stevenson was concerned, still less were they of a sort to appreciate the French finish and fastidiousness of his style; in which he seemed to pick the right word up on the point of his pen, like a man playing spillikins. But that style also had a quality that could be felt; it had a military edge to it, an acies; and there was a kind of swordsmanship about it. Thus all the circumstances led, not so much to the narrowing of Stevenson to the romance of the fighting spirit; but the narrowing of his influence to that romance. He had a great many other things to say; but this was what we were willing to hear: a reaction against the gross contempt for soldiering which had really given a certain Chinese deadness to the Victorians. Yet another circumstance thrust him down the same path; and in a manner not wholly fortunate. The fact that he was a sick man immeasurably increases the credit to his manhood in preaching a sane levity and pugnacious optimism. But it also forbade him full familiarity with the actualities of sport, war, or comradeship: and here and there his note is false in these matters, and reminds one (though very remotely) of the mere provincial bully that Henley sometimes sank to be.

For Stevenson had at his elbow a friend, an invalid like himself, a man of courage and stoicism like himself; but a man in whom everything that Stevenson made delicate and rational became unbalanced and blind. The difference is, moreover, that Stevenson was quite right in claiming that he could treat his limitation as an accident; that his medicines "did not colour his life." His life was really coloured out of a shilling paint-box, like his toy-theatre: such high spirits as he had are the key to him: his sufferings are not the key to him. But Henley's sufferings are the key to Henley; much must be excused him, and there is much to be excused. The result was that while there was always a certain dainty equity about Stevenson's judgments, even when he was wrong, Henley seemed to think that on the right side the wronger you were the better. There was much that was feminine in him; and he is most understandable when surprised in those little solitary poems which speak of emotions mellowed, of sunset and a quiet end. Henley hurled himself into the new fashion of praising Colonial adventure at the expense both of the Christian and the republican traditions; but the sentiment did not spread widely until the note was struck outside England in one of the conquered countries; and a writer of Anglo-Indian short stories showed the stamp of the thing called genius; that indefinable, dangerous and often

temporary thing.

For it is really impossible to criticise Rudyard Kipling as part of Victorian literature, because he is the end of such literature. He has many other powerful elements; an Indian element, which makes him exquisitely sympathetic with the Indian; a vague Jingo influence which makes him sympathetic with the man that crushes the Indian; a vague journalistic sympathy with the men that misrepresent everything that has happened to the Indian; but of the Victorian virtues, nothing.

All that was right or wrong in Kipling was expressed in the final convulsion that he almost in person managed to achieve. The nearest that any honest man can come to the thing called "impartiality" is to confess that he is partial. I therefore confess that I think this last turn of the Victorian Age was an unfortunate turn; much on the other side can be said, and I hope will be said. But about the facts there can be no question. The Imperialism of Kipling was equally remote from the Victorian caution and the Victorian idealism: and our subject does quite seriously end here. The world was full of the trampling of totally new forces, gold was sighted from far in a sort of cynical romanticism: the guns opened across Africa; and the great queen died.

* * * * *

Of what will now be the future of so separate and almost secretive an adventure of the English, the present writer will not permit himself, even for an instant, to prophesy. The Victorian Age made one or two mistakes, but they were mistakes that were really useful; that is, mistakes that were really mistaken. They thought that commerce outside a country must extend peace: it has certainly often extended war. They thought that commerce inside a country must certainly promote prosperity; it has largely promoted poverty. But for them these were experiments; for us they ought to be lessons. If we continue the capitalist use of the populace--if we continue the capitalist use of external arms, it will lie heavy on the living. The dishonour will not be on the dead.