

## CHAPTER IV

### THE VENGEANCE OF THE FLESH

By a quaint paradox, we generally miss the meaning of simple stories because we are not subtle enough to understand their simplicity. As long as men were in sympathy with some particular religion or other romance of things in general, they saw the thing solid and swallowed it whole, knowing that it could not disagree with them. But the moment men have lost the instinct of being simple in order to understand it, they have to be very subtle in order to understand it. We can find, for instance, a very good working case in those old puritanical nursery tales about the terrible punishment of trivial sins ; about how Tommy was drowned for fishing on the Sabbath, or Sammy struck by lightning for going out after dark. Now these moral stories are immoral, because Calvinism is immoral. They are wrong, because Puritanism is wrong. But they are not quite so wrong, they are not a quarter so wrong, as many superficial sages have supposed.

The truth is that everything that ever came out of a human mouth had a human meaning ; and not one of the fixed fools of history was such a fool as he looks. And when our great-uncles or great-grandmothers

told a child he might be drowned by breaking the Sabbath, their souls (though undoubtedly, as Touchstone said, in a parlous state) were not in quite so simple a state as is suggested by supposing that their god was a devil who dropped babies into the Thames for a trifle. This form of religious literature is a morbid form if taken by itself; but it did correspond to a certain reality in psychology which most people of any religion, or even of none, have felt a touch of at some time or other. Leaving out theological terms as far as possible, it is the subconscious feeling that one can be wrong with Nature as well as right with Nature; that the point of wrongness may be a detail (in the superstitions of heathens this is often quite a triviality); but that if one is really wrong with Nature, there is no particular reason why all her rivers should not drown or all her storm-bolts strike one who is, by this vague yet vivid hypothesis, her enemy. This may be a mental sickness, but it is too human or too mortal a sickness to be called solely a superstition. It is not solely a superstition; it is not simply superimposed upon human nature by something that has got on top of it. It flourishes without check among non-Christian systems, and it flourishes especially in Calvinism, because Calvinism is the most non-Christian of Christian systems. But like everything else that inheres in the natural senses and spirit of man, it has something in it; it is not stark unreason. If it is an ill (and it generally is), it is one of the ills that flesh is heir to, but he is the lawful heir. And like many other

dubious or dangerous human instincts or appetites, it is sometimes useful as a warning against worse things.

Now the trouble of the nineteenth century very largely came from the loss of this; the loss of what we may call the natural and heathen mysticism. When modern critics say that Julius Cæsar did not believe in Jupiter, or that Pope Leo did not believe in Catholicism, they overlook an essential difference between those ages and ours. Perhaps Julius did not believe in Jupiter; but he did not disbelieve in Jupiter. There was nothing in his philosophy, or the philosophy of that age, that could forbid him to think that there was a spirit personal and predominant in the world. But the modern materialists are not permitted to doubt; they are forbidden to believe. Hence, while the heathen might avail himself of accidental omens, queer coincidences or casual dreams, without knowing for certain whether they were really hints from heaven or premonitory movements in his own brain, the modern Christian turned heathen must not entertain such notions at all, but must reject the oracle as the altar. The modern sceptic was drugged against all that was natural in the supernatural. And this was why the modern tyrant marched upon his doom, as a tyrant literally pagan might possibly not have done.

There is one idea of this kind that runs through most popular tales (those, for instance, on which Shakespeare is so often based)—an idea that is pro-

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foundly moral even if the tales are immoral. It is what may be called the flaw in the deed: the idea that, if I take my advantage to the full, I shall hear of something to my disadvantage. Thus Midas fell into a fallacy about the currency; and soon had reason to become something more than a Bimetallist. Thus Macbeth had a fallacy about forestry; he could not see the trees for the wood. He forgot that, though a place cannot be moved, the trees that grow on it can. Thus Shylock had a fallacy of physiology; he forgot that, if you break into the house of life, you find it a bloody house in the most emphatic sense. But the modern capitalist did not read fairy-tales, and never looked for the little omens at the turnings of the road. He (or the most intelligent section of him) had by now realised his position, and knew in his heart it was a false position. He thought a margin of men out of work was good for his business; he could no longer really think it was good for his country. He could no longer be the old "hard-headed" man who simply did not understand things; he could only be the hard-hearted man who faced them. But he still marched on; he was sure he had made no mistake.

However, he had made a mistake—as definite as a mistake in multiplication. It may be summarised thus: that the same inequality and insecurity that makes cheap labour may make bad labour, and at last no labour at all. It was as if a man who wanted something from an enemy, should at last reduce the enemy to come knocking at his door in the despair of winter, should keep him waiting in the snow to

sharpen the bargain; and then come out to find the man dead upon the doorstep.

He had discovered the divine boomerang; his sin had found him out. The experiment of Individualism—the keeping of the worker half in and half out of work—was far too ingenious not to contain a flaw. It was too delicate a balance to work entirely with the strength of the starved and the vigilance of the benighted. It was too desperate a course to rely wholly on desperation. And as time went on the terrible truth slowly declared itself; the degraded class was really degenerating. It was right and proper enough to use a man as a tool; but the tool, ceaselessly used, was being used up. It was quite reasonable and respectable, of course, to fling a man away like a tool; but when it was flung away in the rain the tool rusted. But the comparison to a tool was insufficient for an awful reason that had already begun to dawn upon the master's mind. If you pick up a hammer, you do not find a whole family of nails clinging to it. If you fling away a chisel by the roadside, it does not litter and leave a lot of little chisels. But the meanest of the tools, Man, had still this strange privilege which God had given him, doubtless by mistake. Despite all improvements in machinery, the most important part of the machinery (the fittings technically described in the trade as "hands") were apparently growing worse. The firm was not only encumbered with one useless servant, but he immediately turned himself into five useless servants. "The poor should not be emancipated," the old reactionaries used to say, "until they are fit for free-

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dom." But if this downrush went on, it looked as if the poor would not stand high enough to be fit for slavery.

So at least it seemed, doubtless in a great degree subconsciously, to the man who had wagered all his wealth on the usefulness of the poor to the rich and the dependence of the rich on the poor. The time came at last when the rather reckless breeding in the abyss below ceased to be a supply, and began to be something like a wastage; ceased to be something like keeping foxhounds, and began alarmingly to resemble a necessity of shooting foxes. The situation was aggravated by the fact that these sexual pleasures were often the only ones the very poor could obtain, and were, therefore, disproportionately pursued, and by the fact that their conditions were often such that prenatal nourishment and such things were utterly abnormal. The consequences began to appear. To a much less extent than the Eugenists assert, but still to a notable extent, in a much looser sense than the Eugenists assume, but still in some sort of sense, the types that were inadequate or incalculable or uncontrollable began to increase. Under the hedges of the country, on the seats of the parks, loafing under the bridges or leaning over the Embankment, began to appear a new race of men—men who are certainly not mad, whom we shall gain no scientific light by calling feeble-minded, but who are, in varying individual degrees, dazed or drink-sodden, or lazy or tricky or tired in body and spirit. In a far less degree than the teetotallers tell us, but still in a large degree, the traffic in gin and bad

beer (itself a capitalist enterprise) fostered the evil, though it had not begun it. Men who had no human bond with the instructed man, men who seemed to him monsters and creatures without mind, became an eyesore in the market-place and a terror on the empty roads. The rich were afraid.

Moreover, as I have hinted before, the act of keeping the destitute out of public life, and crushing them under confused laws, had an effect on their intelligences which paralyses them even as a proletariat. Modern people talk of "Reason versus Authority"; but authority itself involves reason, or its orders would not even be understood. If you say to your valet, "Look after the buttons on my waistcoat," he may do it, even if you throw a boot at his head. But if you say to him, "Look after the buttons on my top-hat," he will not do it, though you empty a boot-shop over him. If you say to a schoolboy, "Write out that Ode of Horace from memory in the original Latin," he may do it without a flogging. If you say, "Write out that Ode of Horace in the original German," he will not do it with a thousand floggings. If you will not learn logic, he certainly will not learn Latin. And the ludicrous laws to which the needy are subject (such as that which punishes the homeless for not going home) have really, I think, a great deal to do with a certain increase in their sheepishness and short-wittedness, and, therefore, in their industrial inefficiency. By one of the monstrosities of the feeble-minded theory, a man actually acquitted by judge and jury could *then* be examined by doctors as to the state of his mind—

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presumably in order to discover by what diseased eccentricity he had refrained from the crime. In other words, when the police cannot jail a man who is innocent of doing something, they jail him for being too innocent to do anything. I do not suppose the man is an idiot at all, but I can believe he feels more like one after the legal process than before. Thus all the factors—the bodily exhaustion, the harassing fear of hunger, the reckless refuge in sexuality, and the black botheration of bad laws—combined to make the employee more unemployable.

Now, it is very important to understand here that there were two courses of action still open to the disappointed capitalist confronted by the new peril of this real or alleged decay. First, he might have reversed his machine, so to speak, and started unwinding the long rope of dependence by which he had originally dragged the proletarian to his feet. In other words, he might have seen that the workmen had more money, more leisure, more luxuries, more status in the community, and then trusted to the normal instincts of reasonably happy human beings to produce a generation better born, bred and cared for than these tortured types that were less and less use to him. It might still not be too late to rebuild the human house upon such an architectural plan that poverty might fly out of the window, with the reasonable prospect of love coming in at the door. In short, he might have let the English poor, the mass of whom were not weak-minded, though more of them were growing weaker, a reasonable chance, in the form of more money, of achieving their

eugenical resurrection themselves. It has never been shown, and it cannot be shown, that the method would have failed. But it can be shown, and it must be closely and clearly noted, that the method had very strict limitations from the employers' own point of view. If they made the worker too comfortable, he would not work to increase another's comforts; if they made him too independent, he would not work like a dependent. If, for instance, his wages were so good that he could save out of them, he might cease to be a wage-earner. If his house or garden were his own, he might stand an economic siege in it. The whole capitalist experiment had been built on his dependence; but now it was getting out of hand, not in the direction of freedom, but of frank helplessness. One might say that his dependence had got independent of control.

But there was another way. And towards this the employer's ideas began, first darkly and unconsciously, but now more and more clearly, to drift. Giving property, giving leisure, giving status costs money. But there is one human force that costs nothing. As it does not cost the beggar a penny to indulge, so it would not cost the employer a penny to employ. He could not alter or improve the tables or the chairs on the cheap. But there were two pieces of furniture (labelled respectively "the husband" and "the wife") whose relations were much cheaper. He could alter the *marriage* in the house in such a way as to promise himself the largest possible number of the kind of children he did want, with the smallest possible number of the kind he

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did not. He could divert the force of sex from producing vagabonds. And he could harness to his high engines unbought the red unbroken river of the blood of a man in his youth, as he has already harnessed to them all the wild waste rivers of the world.