CHAPTER VIII

THE END OF THE HOUSEHOLD GODS

The only place where it is possible to find an echo of the mind of the English masses is either in conversation or in comic songs. The latter are obviously the more dubious; but they are the only things recorded and quotable that come anywhere near it. We talk about the popular Press; but in truth there is no popular Press. It may be a good thing; but, anyhow, most readers would be mildly surprised if a newspaper leading article were written in the language of a navvy. Sometimes the Press is interested in things in which the democracy is also genuinely interested; such as horse-racing. Sometimes the Press is about as popular as the Press Gang. We talk of Labour leaders in Parliament; but they would be highly unparliamentary if they talked like labourers. The Bolshevists, I believe, profess to promote something that they call "proletarian art," which only shows that the word Bolshevism can sometimes be abbreviated into bosh. That sort of Bolshevist is not a proletarian, but rather the very thing he accuses everybody else of being. The Bolshevist is above all a bourgeois; a Jewish intellectual of the town. And the real case against industrial intellectualism could hardly be put better
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than in this very comparison. There has never been such a thing as proletarian art; but there has emphatically been such a thing as peasant art. And the only literature which even reminds us of the real tone and talk of the English working classes is to be found in the comic song of the English music-hall.

I first heard one of them on my voyage to America, in the midst of the sea within sight of the New World, with the Statue of Liberty beginning to loom up on the horizon. From the lips of a young Scotch engineer, of all people in the world, I heard for the first time these immortal words from a London music-hall song:

"Father's got the sack from the water-works
For smoking of his old cherry-briar;
Father's got the sack from the water-works
'Cos he might set the water-works on fire."

As I told my friends in America, I think it no part of a patriot to boast; and boasting itself is certainly not a thing to boast of. I doubt the persuasive power of English as exemplified in Kipling, and one can easily force it on foreigners too much, even as exemplified in Dickens. I am no Imperialist, and only on rare and proper occasions a Jingo. But when I hear those words about Father and the water-works, when I hear under far-off foreign skies anything so gloriously English as that, then indeed (I said to them), then indeed:
"I thank the goodness and the grace
That on my birth have smiled,
And made me, as you see me here,
A little English child."

But that noble stanza about the water-works has other elements of nobility besides nationality. It provides a compact and almost perfect summary of the whole social problem in industrial countries like England and America. If I wished to set forth systematically the elements of the ethical and economic problem in Pittsburg or Sheffield, I could not do better than take these few words as a text, and divide them up like the heads of a sermon. Let me note the points in some rough fashion here.

1.—Father. This word is still in use among the more ignorant and ill-paid of the industrial community; and is the badge of an old convention or unit called the family. A man and woman having vowed to be faithful to each other, the man makes himself responsible for all the children of the woman, and is thus generically called "Father." It must not be supposed that the poet or singer is necessarily one of the children. It may be the wife, called by the same ritual "Mother." Poor English wives say "Father" as poor Irish wives say "Himself," meaning the titular head of the house. The point to seize is that among the ignorant this convention or custom still exists. Father and the family are the foundations of thought; the natural authority still comes natural to the poet; but it is overlaid and thwarted with more artificial authorities; the official,
the schoolmaster, the policeman, the employer, and so on. What these forces fighting the family are we shall see, my dear brethren, when we pass to our second heading; which is:—

2.—Got the Sack. This idiom marks a later stage of the history of the language than the comparatively primitive word “Father.” It is needless to discuss whether the term comes from Turkey or some other servile society. In America they say that Father has been fired. But it involves the whole of the unique economic system under which Father has now to live. Though assumed by family tradition to be a master, he can now, by industrial tradition, only be a particular kind of servant; a servant who has not the security of a slave. If he owned his own shop and tools, he could not get the sack. If his master owned him, he could not get the sack. The slave and the guildsman know where they will sleep every night; it was only the proletarian of individualist industrialism who could get the sack, if not in the style of the Bosphorus, at least in the sense of the Embankment. We pass to the third heading.

3.—From the Water-works. This detail of Father’s life is very important; for this is the reply to most of the Socialists, as the last section is to so many of the Capitalists. The water-works which employed Father is a very large, official and impersonal institution. Whether it is technically a bureaucratic department or a big business makes little or no change in the feelings of Father in connection with it. The water-
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works might or might not be nationalised; and it would make no necessary difference to Father being fired, and no difference at all to his being accused of playing with fire. In fact, if the Capitalists are more likely to give him the sack, the Socialists are even more likely to forbid him the smoke. There is no freedom for Father except in some sort of private ownership of things like water and fire. If he owned his own well his water could never be cut off, and while he sits by his own fire his pipe can never be put out. That is the real meaning of property, and the real argument against Socialism; probably the only argument against Socialism.

4.—For Smoking. Nothing marks this queer intermediate phase of industrialism more strangely than the fact that, while employers still claim the right to sack him like a stranger, they are already beginning to claim the right to supervise him like a son. Economically he can go and starve on the Embankment; but ethically and hygienically he must be controlled and coddled in the nursery. Government repudiates all responsibility for seeing that he gets bread. But it anxiously accepts all responsibility for seeing that he does not get beer. It passes an Insurance Act to force him to provide himself with medicine; but it is avowedly indifferent to whether he is able to provide himself with meals. Thus while the sack is inconsistent with the family, the supervision is really inconsistent with the sack. The whole thing is a tangled chain of contradictions. It is true that in the special
and sacred text of scripture we are here considering, the smoking is forbidden on a general and public and not on a medicinal and private ground. But it is none the less relevant to remember that, as his masters have already proved that alcohol is a poison, they may soon prove that nicotine is a poison. And it is most significant of all that this sort of danger is even greater in what is called the new democracy of America than in what is called the old oligarchy of England. When I was in America, people were already "defending" tobacco. People who defend tobacco are on the road to proving that daylight is defensible, or that it is not really sinful to sneeze. In other words, they are quietly going mad.

5.—*Of his old Cherry-briar.* Here we have the intermediate and anomalous position of the institution of Property. The sentiment still exists, even among the poor, or perhaps especially among the poor. But it is attached to toys rather than tools; to the minor products rather than to the means of production. But something of the sanity of ownership is still to be observed; for instance, the element of custom and continuity. It was an *old* cherry-briar; systematically smoked by Father in spite of all wiles and temptations to Woodbines and gaspers; an old companion possibly connected with various romantic or diverting events in Father's life. It is perhaps a relic as well as a trinket. But because it is not a true tool, because it gives the man no grip on the creative energies of society, it is, with all the rest of his self-respect, at the
mercy of the thing called the sack. When he gets the sack from the water-works, it is only too probable that he will have to pawn his old cherry-briar.

6.—'Cos he might set the water-works on fire. And that single line, like the lovely single lines of the great poets, is so full, so final, so perfect a picture of all the laws we pass and all the reasons we give for them, so exact an analysis of the logic of all our precautions at the present time, that the pen falls even from the hands of the commentator; and the masterpiece is left to speak for itself.

Some such analysis as the above gives a better account than most of the anomalous attitude and situation of the English proletarian to-day. It is the more appropriate because it is expressed in the words he actually uses; which certainly do not include the word "proletarian." It will be noted that everything that goes to make up that complexity is in an unfinished state. Property has not quite vanished; slavery has not quite arrived; marriage exists under difficulties; social regimentation exists under restraints, or rather under subterfuges. The question which remains is which force is gaining on the other, and whether the old forces are capable of resisting the new. I hope they are; but I recognise that they resist under more than one heavy handicap. The chief of these is that the family feeling of the workmen is by this time rather an instinct than an ideal. The obvious thing to protect an ideal is a religion. The obvious thing to protect the ideal of marriage is the Christian religion. And
for various reasons, which only a history of England could explain (though it hardly ever does), the working classes of this country have been very much cut off from Christianity. I do not dream of denying, indeed I should take every opportunity of affirming, that monogamy and its domestic responsibilities can be defended on rational apart from religious grounds. But a religion is the practical protection of any moral idea which has to be popular and which has to be pugnacious. And our ideal, if it is to survive, will have to be both.

Those who make merry over the landlady who has seen better days, of whom something has been said already, commonly speak, in the same jovial journalese, about her household goods as her household gods. They would be much startled if they discovered how right they are. Exactly what is lacking to the modern materialist is something that can be what the household gods were to the ancient heathen. The household gods of the heathen were not only wood and stone; at least there is always more than that in the stone of the hearth-stone and the wood of the roof-tree. So long as Christianity continued the tradition of patron saints and portable relics, this idea of a blessing on the household could continue. If men had not domestic divinities, at least they had divine domesticities. When Christianity was chilled with Puritanism and rationalism, this inner warmth or secret fire in the house faded on the hearth. But some of the embers still glow or at least glimmer; and there
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is still a memory among the poor that their material possessions are something sacred. I know poor men for whom it is the romance of their lives to refuse big sums of money for an old copper warming-pan. They do not want it, in any sense of base utility. They do not use it as a warming-pan; but it warms them for all that. It is indeed, as Sergeant Buzfuz humorously observed, a cover for hidden fire. And the fire is that which burned before the strange and uncouth wooden gods, like giant dolls, in the huts of ancient Italy. It is a household god. And I can imagine some such neglected and unlucky English man dying with his eyes on the red gleam of that piece of copper, as happier men have died with their eyes on the golden gleam of a chalice or a cross.

It will thus be noted that there has always been some connection between a mystical belief and the materials of domesticity; that they generally go together; and that now, in a more mournful sense, they are gone together. The working classes have no reserves of property with which to defend their relics of religion. They have no religion with which to sanctify and dignify their property. Above all, they are under the enormous disadvantage of being right without knowing it. They hold their sound principles as if they were sullen prejudices. They almost secrete their small property as if it were stolen property. Often a poor woman will tell a magistrate that she sticks to her husband, with the defiant and desperate air of a wanton resolved to run away from her husband.

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Often she will cry as hopelessly, and as it were helplessly, when deprived of her child as if she were a child deprived of her doll. Indeed, a child in the street, crying for her lost doll, would probably receive more sympathy than she does.

Meanwhile the fun goes on; and many such conflicts are recorded, even in the newspapers, between heart-broken parents and house-breaking philanthropists; always with one issue, of course. There are any number of them that never get into the newspapers. And we have to be flippant about these things as the only alternative to being rather fierce; and I have no desire to end on a note of universal ferocity. I know that many who set such machinery in motion do so from motives of sincere but confused compassion, and many more from a dull but not dishonourable medical or legal habit. But if I and those who agree with me tend to some harshness and abruptness of condemnation, these worthy people need not be altogether impatient with our impatience. It is surely beneath them, in the scope of their great schemes, to complain of protests so ineffectual about wrongs so individual. I have considered in this chapter the chances of general democratic defence of domestic honour, and have been compelled to the conclusion that they are not at present hopeful; and it is at least clear that we cannot be founding on them any personal hopes. If this conclusion leaves us defeated, we submit that it leaves us disinterested. Ours is not the sort of protest, at least, that promises
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anything even to the demagogue, let alone the sycophant. Those we serve will never rule, and those we pity will never rise. Parliament will never be surrounded by a mob of submerged grandmothers brandishing pawn-tickets. There is no trade union of defective children. It is not very probable that modern government will be overthrown by a few poor dingy devils who are sent to prison by mistake, or rather by ordinary accident. Surely it is not for those magnificent Socialists, or those great reformers and reconstructors of Capitalism, sweeping onward to their scientific triumphs and caring for none of these things, to murmur at our vain indignation. At least if it is vain it is the less venal; and in so far as it is hopeless it is also thankless. They have their great campaigns and cosmopolitan systems for the regimentation of millions, and the records of science and progress. They need not be angry with us, who plead for those who will never read our words or reward our effort, even with gratitude. They need surely have no worse mood towards us than mystification, seeing that in recalling these small things of broken hearts or homes, we are but recording what cannot be recorded; trivial tragedies that will fade faster and faster in the flux of time, cries that fail in a furious and infinite wind, wild words of despair that are written only upon running water; unless, indeed, as some so stubbornly and strangely say, they are somewhere cut deep into a rock, in the red granite of the wrath of God.