CHAPTER VI

THE ECLIPSE OF LIBERTY

If such a thing as the Eugenic sociology had been suggested in the period from Fox to Gladstone, it would have been far more fiercely repudiated by the reformers than by the Conservatives. If Tories had regarded it as an insult to marriage, Radicals would have far more resolutely regarded it as an insult to citizenship. But in the interval we have suffered from a process resembling a sort of mystical parricide, such as is told of so many gods, and is true of so many great ideas. Liberty has produced scepticism, and scepticism has destroyed liberty. The lovers of liberty thought they were leaving it unlimited, when they were only leaving it undefined. They thought they were only leaving it undefined, when they were really leaving it undefended. Men merely finding themselves free found themselves free to dispute the value of freedom. But the important point to seize about this reactionary scepticism is that as it is bound to be unlimited in theory, so it is bound to be unlimited in practice. In other words, the modern mind is set in an attitude which would enable it to advance, not only towards Eugenic legislation, but towards any conceivable or inconceivable extravagances of Eugenics.
Those who reply to any plea for freedom invariably fall into a certain trap. I have debated with numberless different people on these matters, and I confess I find it amusing to see them tumbling into it one after another. I remember discussing it before a club of very active and intelligent Suffragists, and I cast it here for convenience in the form which it there assumed. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that I say that to take away a poor man's pot of beer is to take away a poor man's personal liberty, it is very vital to note what is the usual or almost universal reply. People hardly ever do reply, for some reason or other, by saying that a man's liberty consists of such and such things, but that beer is an exception that cannot be classed among them, for such and such reasons. What they almost invariably do say is something like this: "After all, what is liberty? Man must live as a member of a society, and must obey those laws which, etc., etc." In other words, they collapse into a complete confession that they are attacking all liberty and any liberty; that they do deny the very existence or the very possibility of liberty. In the very form of the answer they admit the full scope of the accusation against them. In trying to rebut the smaller accusation, they plead guilty to the larger one.

This distinction is very important, as can be seen from any practical parallel. Suppose we wake up in the middle of the night and find that a neighbour has entered the house not by the front-door but by the skylight; we may suspect that he has come after the
fine old family jewellery. We may be reassured if he can refer it to a really exceptional event; as that he fell on to the roof out of an aeroplane, or climbed on to the roof to escape from a mad dog. Short of the incredible, the stranger the story the better the excuse; for an extraordinary event requires an extraordinary excuse. But we shall hardly be reassured if he merely gazes at us in a dreamy and wistful fashion and says, "After all, what is property? Why should material objects be thus artificially attached, etc., etc.?" We shall merely realise that his attitude allows of his taking the jewellery and everything else. Or if the neighbour approaches us carrying a large knife dripping with blood, we may be convinced by his story that he killed another neighbour in self-defence, that the quiet gentleman next door was really a homicidal maniac. We shall know that homicidal mania is exceptional and that we ourselves are so happy as not to suffer from it; and being free from the disease may be free from the danger. But it will not soothe us for the man with the gory knife to say softly and pensively, "After all, what is human life? Why should we cling to it? Brief at the best, sad at the brightest, it is itself but a disease from which, etc., etc." We shall perceive that the sceptic is in a mood not only to murder us but to massacre everybody in the street. Exactly the same effect which would be produced by the questions of "What is property?" and "What is life?" is produced by the question of "What is liberty?" It leaves the questioner free to disregard any liberty,
or in other words to take any liberties. The very thing he says is an anticipatory excuse for anything he may choose to do. If he gags a man to prevent him from indulging in profane swearing, or locks him in the coal cellar to guard against his going on the spree, he can still be satisfied with saying, “After all, what is liberty? Man is a member of, etc., etc.”

That is the problem, and that is why there is now no protection against Eugenic or any other experiments. If the men who took away beer as an unlawful pleasure had paused for a moment to define the lawful pleasures, there might be a different situation. If the men who had denied one liberty had taken the opportunity to affirm other liberties, there might be some defence for them. But it never occurs to them to admit any liberties at all. It never so much as crosses their minds. Hence the excuse for the last oppression will always serve as well for the next oppression; and to that tyranny there can be no end.

Hence the tyranny has taken but a single stride to reach the secret and sacred places of personal freedom, where no sane man ever dreamed of seeing it; and especially the sanctuary of sex. It is as easy to take away a man’s wife or baby as to take away his beer when you can say “What is liberty?”; just as it is as easy to cut off his head as to cut off his hair if you are free to say “What is life?” There is no rational philosophy of human rights generally disseminated among the populace, to which we can appeal in
defence even of the most intimate or individual things that anybody can imagine. For so far as there was a vague principle in these things, that principle has been wholly changed. It used to be said that a man could have liberty, so long as it did not interfere with the liberty of others. This did afford some rough justification for the ordinary legal view of the man with the pot of beer. For instance, it was logical to allow some degree of distinction between beer and tea, on the ground that a man may be moved by excess of beer to throw the pot at somebody's head. And it may be said that the spinster is seldom moved by excess of tea to throw the tea-pot at anybody's head. But the whole ground of argument is now changed. For people do not consider what the drunkard does to others by throwing the pot, but what he does to himself by drinking the beer. The argument is based on health; and it is said that the Government must safeguard the health of the community. And the moment that is said, there ceases to be the shadow of a difference between beer and tea. People can certainly spoil their health with tea or with tobacco or with twenty other things. And there is no escape for the hygienic logician except to restrain and regulate them all. If he is to control the health of the community, he must necessarily control all the habits of all the citizens, and among the rest their habits in the matter of sex.

But there is more than this. It is not only true that it is the last liberties of man that are being taken
away; and not merely his first or most superficial liberties. It is also inevitable that the last liberties should be taken first. It is inevitable that the most private matters should be most under public coercion. This inverse variation is very important, though very little realised. If a man's personal health is a public concern, his most private acts are more public than his most public acts. The official must deal more directly with his cleaning his teeth in the morning than with his using his tongue in the market-place. The inspector must interfere more with how he sleeps in the middle of the night than with how he works in the course of the day. The private citizen must have much less to say about his bath or his bedroom window than about his vote or his banking account. The policeman must be in a new sense a private detective; and shadow him in private affairs rather than in public affairs. A policeman must shut doors behind him for fear he should sneeze, or shove pillows under him for fear he should snore. All this and things far more fantastic follow from the simple formula that the State must make itself responsible for the health of the citizen. But the point is that the policeman must deal primarily and promptly with the citizen in his relation to his home, and only indirectly and more doubtfully with the citizen in his relation to his city. By the whole logic of this test, the king must hear what is said in the inner chamber and hardly notice what is proclaimed from the house-tops. We have heard of a revolution that turns everything upside down. But
this is almost literally a revolution that turns everything inside out.

If a wary reactionary of the tradition of Metternich had wished in the nineteenth century to reverse the democratic tendency, he would naturally have begun by depriving the democracy of its margin of more dubious powers over more distant things. He might well begin, for instance, by removing the control of foreign affairs from popular assemblies; and there is a case for saying that a people may understand its own affairs, without knowing anything whatever about foreign affairs. Then he might centralise great national questions, leaving a great deal of local government in local questions. This would proceed so for a long time before it occurred to the blackest terrorist of the despotic ages to interfere with a man's own habits in his own house. But the new sociologists and legislators are, by the nature of their theory, bound to begin where the despots leave off, even if they leave off where the despots begin. For them, as they would put it, the first things must be the very fountains of life, love and birth and babyhood; and these are always covered fountains, flowing in the quiet courts of the home. For them, as Mr. H. G. Wells put it, life itself may be regarded merely as a tissue of births. Thus they are coerced by their own rational principle to begin all coercion at the other end; at the inside end. What happens to the outside end, the external and remote powers of the citizen, they do not very much care; and it is probable that the democratic in-
Institutions of recent centuries will be allowed to decay in undisturbed dignity for a century or two more. Thus our civilisation will find itself in an interesting situation, not without humour; in which the citizen is still supposed to wield imperial powers over the ends of the earth, but has admittedly no power over his own body and soul at all. He will still be consulted by politicians about whether opium is good for Chinese, but not about whether ale is good for him. He will be cross-examined for his opinions about the danger of allowing Kamskatka to have a war-fleet, but not about allowing his own child to have a wooden sword. About all, he will be consulted about the delicate diplomatic crisis created by the proposed marriage of the Emperor of China, and not allowed to marry as he pleases.

Part of this prophecy or probability has already been accomplished; the rest of it, in the absence of any protest, is in process of accomplishment. It would be easy to give an almost endless catalogue of examples, to show how, in dealing with the poorer classes at least, coercion has already come near to a direct control of the relations of the sexes. But I am much more concerned in this chapter to point out that all these things have been adopted in principle, even where they have not been adopted in practice. It is much more vital to realise that the reformers have possessed themselves of a principle, which will cover all such things if it be granted, and which is not sufficiently comprehended to be contradicted. It is
a principle whereby the deepest things of flesh and spirit must have the most direct relation with the
dictatorship of the State. They must have it, by the
whole reason and rationale upon which the thing de-
pends. It is a system that might be symbolised by
the telephone from headquarters standing by a man’s
bed. He must have a relation to Government like his
relation to God. That is, the more he goes into the
inner chambers, and the more he closes the doors, the
more he is alone with the law. The social machinery
which makes such a State uniform and submissive
will be worked outwards from the household as from
a handle, or a single mechanical knob or button. In
a horrible sense, loaded with fear and shame and every
detail of dishonour, it will be true to say that charity
begins at home.

Charity will begin at home in the sense that all
home children will be like charity children. Philan-
thropy will begin at home, for all householders will
be like paupers. Police administration will begin at
home, for all citizens will be like convicts. And when
health and the humours of daily life have passed into
the domain of this social discipline, when it is admitted
that the community must primarily control the primary
habits, when all law begins, so to speak, next to the
skin or nearest the vitals—then indeed it will appear
absurd that marriage and maternity should not be
similarly ordered. Then indeed it will seem to be
illogical, and it will be illogical, that love should be
free when life has lost its freedom.
So passed, to all appearance, from the minds of men the strange dream and fantasy called freedom. Whatever be the future of these evolutionary experiments and their effect on civilisation, there is one land at least that has something to mourn. For us in England something will have perished which our fathers valued all the more because they hardly troubled to name it; and whatever be the stars of a more universal destiny, the great star of our night has set. The English had missed many other things that men of the same origins had achieved or retained. Not to them was given, like the French, to establish eternal communes and clear codes of equality; not to them, like the South Germans, to keep the popular culture of their songs; not to them, like the Irish, was it given to die daily for a great religion. But a spirit had been with them from the first which fenced, with a hundred quaint customs and legal fictions, the way of a man who wished to walk nameless and alone. It was not for nothing that they forgot all their laws to remember the name of an outlaw, and filled the green heart of England with the figure of Robin Hood. It was not for nothing that even their princes of art and letters had about them something of kings incognito, undiscovered by formal or academic fame; so that no eye can follow the young Shakespeare as he came up the green lanes from Stratford, or the young Dickens when he first lost himself among the lights of London. It is not for nothing that the very roads are crooked and capricious, so that a man looking
down on a map like a snaky labyrinth, could tell that he was looking on the home of a wandering people. A spirit at once wild and familiar rested upon its woodlands like a wind at rest. If that spirit be indeed departed, it matters little that it has been driven out by perversions it had itself permitted, by monsters it had idly let loose. Industrialism and Capitalism and the rage for physical science were English experiments in the sense that the English lent themselves to their encouragement; but there was something else behind them and within them that was not they—its name was liberty, and it was our life. It may be that this delicate and tenacious spirit has at last evaporated. If so, it matters little what becomes of the external experiments of our nation in later time. That at which we look will be a dead thing alive with its own parasites. The English will have destroyed England.