

CHAPTER V

THE MEANNESS OF THE MOTIVE

Now, if any ask whether it be imaginable that an ordinary man of the wealthier type should analyse the problem or conceive the plan, the inhumanly far-seeing plan, as I have set it forth, the answer is: "Certainly not." Many rich employers are too generous to do such a thing; many are too stupid to know what they are doing. The eugenical opportunity I have described is but an ultimate analysis of a whole drift of thoughts in the type of man who does not analyse his thoughts. He sees a slouching tramp, with a sick wife and a string of rickety children, and honestly wonders what he can do with them. But prosperity does not favour self-examination; and he does not even ask himself whether he means "How can I help them?" or "How can I use them?"—what he can still do for them, or what they could still do for him. Probably he sincerely means both, but the latter much more than the former; he laments the breaking of the tools of Mammon much more than the breaking of the images of God. It would be almost impossible to grope in the limbo of what he does think; but we can assert that there is one thing he doesn't think. He doesn't think, "This man might be as jolly as I am, if he need not come to me for work or wages."

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That this is so, that at root the Eugenist is the Employer, there are multitudinous proofs on every side, but they are of necessity miscellaneous, and in many cases negative. The most enormous is in a sense the most negative: that no one seems able to imagine capitalist industrialism being sacrificed to any other object. By a curious recurrent slip in the mind, as irritating as a catch in a clock, people miss the main thing and concentrate on the mean thing. "Modern conditions" are treated as fixed, though the very word "modern" implies that they are fugitive. "Old ideas" are treated as impossible, though their very antiquity often proves their permanence. Some years ago some ladies petitioned that the platforms of our big railway stations should be raised, as it was more convenient for the hobble skirt. It never occurred to them to change to a sensible skirt. Still less did it occur to them that, compared with all the female fashions that have fluttered about on it, by this time St. Pancras is as historic as St. Peter's.

I could fill this book with examples of the universal, unconscious assumption that life and sex must live by the laws of "business" or industrialism, and not *vice versa*; examples from all the magazines, novels, and newspapers. In order to make it brief and typical, I take one case of a more or less Eugenist sort from a paper that lies open in front of me—a paper that still bears on its forehead the boast of being peculiarly an organ of democracy in revolt. To this a man writes to say that the spread of destitution will never be stopped until we have educated

the lower classes in the methods by which the upper classes prevent procreation. The man had the horrible playfulness to sign his letter "Hopeful." Well, there are certainly many methods by which people in the upper classes prevent procreation; one of them is what used to be called "platonic friendship," till they found another name for it at the Old Bailey. I do not suppose the hopeful gentleman hopes for this; but some of us find the abortion he does hope for almost as abominable. That, however, is not the curious point. The curious point is that the hopeful one concludes by saying, "When people have large families and small wages, not only is there a high infantile death-rate, but often those who do live to grow up are stunted and weakened by having had to share the family income for a time with those who died early. There would be less unhappiness if there were no unwanted children." You will observe that he tacitly takes it for granted that the small wages and the income, desperately shared, are the fixed points, like day and night, the conditions of human life. Compared with them marriage and maternity are luxuries, things to be modified to suit the wage-market. There are unwanted children; but unwanted by whom? This man does not really mean that the parents do not want to have them. He means that the employers do not want to pay them properly. Doubtless, if you said to him directly, "Are you in favour of low wages?" he would say, "No." But I am not, in this chapter, talking about the effect on such modern minds of a cross-examination to which they do not subject

themselves. I am talking about the way their minds work, the instinctive trick and turn of their thoughts, the things they assume before argument, and the way they faintly feel that the world is going. And, frankly, the turn of their mind is to tell the child he is not wanted, as the turn of my mind is to tell the profiteer he is not wanted. Motherhood, they feel, and a full childhood, and the beauty of brothers and sisters, are good things in their way, but not so good as a bad wage. About the mutilation of womanhood, and the massacre of men unborn, he signs himself "Hopeful." He is hopeful of female indignity, hopeful of human annihilation. But about improving the small bad wage he signs himself "Hopeless."

This is the first evidence of motive: the ubiquitous assumption that life and love must fit into a fixed framework of employment, even (as in this case) of bad employment. The second evidence is the tacit and total neglect of the scientific question in all the departments in which it is not an employment question; as, for instance, the marriages of the princely, patrician, or merely plutocratic houses. I do not mean, of course, that no scientific men have rigidly tackled these, though I do not recall any cases. But I am not talking of the merits of individual men of science, but of the push and power behind this movement, the thing that is able to make it fashionable and politically important. I say, if this power were an interest in truth, or even in humanity, the first field in which to study would be in the weddings of the wealthy. Not only would the records be more

lucid, and the examples more in evidence, but the cases would be more interesting and more decisive. For the grand marriages have presented both extremes of the problem of pedigree—first the “breeding in and in,” and later the most incongruous cosmopolitan blends. It would really be interesting to note which worked the best, or what point of compromise was safest. For the poor (about whom the newspaper Eugenists are always talking) cannot offer any test cases so complete. Waiters never had to marry waitresses, as princes had to marry princesses. And (for the other extreme) housemaids seldom marry Red Indians. It may be because there are none to marry. But to the millionaires the continents are flying railway stations, and the most remote races can be rapidly linked together. A marriage in London or Paris may chain Ravenna to Chicago, or Ben Cruachan to Bagdad. Many European aristocrats marry Americans, notoriously the most mixed stock in the world; so that the disinterested Eugenist, with a little trouble, might reveal rich stores of negro or Asiatic blood to his delighted employer. Instead of which he dulls our ears and distresses our refinement by tedious denunciations of the monochrome marriages of the poor.

For there is something really pathetic about the Eugenist's neglect of the aristocrat and his family affairs. People still talk about the pride of pedigree; but it strikes me as the one point on which the aristocrats are almost morbidly modest. We should be learned Eugenists if we were allowed to know

half as much of their heredity as we are of their hairdressing. We see the modern aristocrat in the most human poses in the illustrated papers, playing with his dog or parrot—nay, we see him playing with his child, or with his grandchild. But there is something heartrending in his refusal to play with his grandfather. There is often something vague and even fantastic about the antecedents of our most established families, which would afford the Eugenist admirable scope not only for investigation but for experiment. Certainly, if he could obtain the necessary powers, the Eugenist might bring off some startling effects with the mixed materials of the governing class. Suppose, to take wild and hypothetical examples, he were to marry a Scotch earl, say, to the daughter of a Jewish banker, or an English duke to an American parvenu of semi-Jewish extraction? What would happen? We have here an unexplored field.

It remains unexplored not merely through snobbery and cowardice, but because the Eugenist (at least the influential Eugenist) half-consciously knows it is no part of his job; what he is really wanted for is to get the grip of the governing classes on to the unmanageable output of poor people. It would not matter in the least if all Lord Cowdray's descendants grew up too weak to hold a tool or turn a wheel. It would matter very much, especially to Lord Cowdray, if all his employees grew up like that. The oligarch can be unemployable, because he will not be employed. Thus the practical and popular exponent of Eugenics has his face always turned

towards the slums, and instinctively thinks in terms of them. If he talks of segregating some incurably vicious type of the sexual sort, he is thinking of a ruffian who assaults girls in lanes. He is not thinking of a millionaire like White, the victim of Thaw. If he speaks of the hopelessness of feeble-mindedness, he is thinking of some stunted creature gaping at hopeless lessons in a poor school. He is not thinking of a millionaire like Thaw, the slayer of White. And this not because he is such a brute as to like people like White or Thaw any more than we do, but because he knows that *his* problem is the degeneration of the useful classes; because he knows that White would never have been a millionaire if all his workers had spent themselves on women as White did, that Thaw would never have been a millionaire if all his servants had been Thaws. The ornaments may be allowed to decay, but the machinery *must* be mended. That is the second proof of the plutocratic impulse behind all Eugenics: that no one thinks of applying it to the prominent classes. No one thinks of applying it where it could most easily be applied.

A third proof is the strange new disposition to regard the poor as a *race*; as if they were a colony of Japs or Chinese coolies. It can be most clearly seen by comparing it with the old, more individual, charitable, and (as the Eugenists might say) sentimental view of poverty. In Goldsmith or Dickens or Hood there is a basic idea that the particular poor person ought not to be so poor: it is some accident or some wrong. Oliver Twist or Tiny Tim are fairy

princes waiting for their fairy godmother. They are held as slaves, but rather as the hero and heroine of a Spanish or Italian romance were held as slaves by the Moors. The modern poor are getting to be regarded as slaves in the separate and sweeping sense of the negroes in the plantations. The bondage of the white hero to the black master was regarded as abnormal; the bondage of the black to the white master as normal. The Eugenist, for all I know, would regard the mere existence of Tiny Tim as a sufficient reason for massacring the whole family of Cratchit; but, as a matter of fact, we have here a very good instance of how much more practically true to life is sentiment than cynicism. The poor are *not* a race or even a type. It is senseless to talk about breeding them; for they are not a breed. They are, in cold fact, what Dickens describes: "a dustbin of individual accidents," of damaged dignity, and often of damaged gentility. The class very largely consists of perfectly promising children, lost like Oliver Twist, or crippled like Tiny Tim. It contains very valuable things, like most dustbins. But the Eugenist delusion of the barbaric breed in the abyss affects even those more gracious philanthropists who almost certainly do want to assist the destitute and not merely to exploit them. It seems to affect not only their minds, but their very eyesight. Thus, for instance, Mrs. Alec Tweedie almost scornfully asks, "When we go through the slums, do we see beautiful children?" The answer is, "Yes, very often indeed." I have seen children in the slums quite pretty enough to be Little Nell or the outcast whom

Hood called "young and so fair." Nor has the beauty anything necessarily to do with health; there are beautiful healthy children, beautiful dying children, ugly dying children, ugly uproarious children in Petticoat Lane or Park Lane. There are people of every physical and mental type, of every sort of health and breeding, in a single back street. They have nothing in common but the wrong we do them.

The important point is, however, that there is more fact and realism in the wildest and most elegant old fictions about disinherited dukes and long-lost daughters than there is in this Eugenist attempt to make the poor all of a piece—a sort of black fungoid growth that is ceaselessly increasing in a chasm. There is a cheap sneer at poor landladies: that they always say they have seen better days. Nine times out of ten they say it because it is true. What can be said of the great mass of Englishmen, by anyone who knows any history, except that they have seen better days? And the landlady's claim is not snobbish, but rather spirited; it is her testimony to the truth in the old tales of which I spoke: that she *ought not* to be so poor or so servile in status; that a normal person ought to have more property and more power in the State than *that*. Such dreams of lost dignity are perhaps the only things that stand between us and the cattle-breeding paradise now promised. Nor are such dreams by any means impotent. I remember Mr. T. P. O'Connor wrote an interesting article about Madame Humbert, in the course of which he said that Irish peasants, and probably most peasants, tended to have a half-

fictitious family legend about an estate to which they were entitled. This was written in the time when Irish peasants were landless in their land; and the delusion doubtless seemed all the more entertaining to the landlords who ruled them and the money-lenders who ruled the landlords. But the dream has conquered the realities. The phantom farms have materialised. Merely by tenaciously affirming the kind of pride that comes after a fall, by remembering the old civilisation and refusing the new, by recurring to an old claim that seemed to most Englishmen like the lie of a broken-down lodging-house keeper at Margate—by all this the Irish have got what they want, in solid mud and turf. That imaginary estate has conquered the Three Estates of the Realm.

But the homeless Englishman must not even remember a home. So far from his house being his castle, he must not have even a castle in the air. He must have no memories; that is why he is taught no history. Why is he told none of the truth about the mediæval civilisation except a few cruelties and mistakes in chemistry? Why does a mediæval burgher never appear till he can appear in a shirt and a halter? Why does a mediæval monastery never appear till it is "corrupt" enough to shock the innocence of Henry VIII.? Why do we hear of one charter—that of the barons—and not a word of the charters of the carpenters, smiths, shipwrights and all the rest? The reason is that the English peasant is not only not allowed to have an estate, he is not even allowed to have lost one. The past has to be

painted pitch black, that it may be worse than the present.

There is one strong, startling, outstanding thing about Eugenics, and that is its meanness. Wealth, and the social science supported by wealth, had tried an inhuman experiment. The experiment had entirely failed. They sought to make wealth accumulate—and they made men decay. Then, instead of confessing the error, and trying to restore the wealth, or attempting to repair the decay, they are trying to cover their first cruel experiment with a more cruel experiment. They put a poisonous plaster on a poisoned wound. Vilest of all, they actually quote the bewilderment produced among the poor by their first blunder as a reason for allowing them to blunder again. They are apparently ready to arrest all the opponents of their system as mad, merely because the system was maddening. Suppose a captain had collected volunteers in a hot, waste country by the assurance that he could lead them to water, and knew where to meet the rest of his regiment. Suppose he led them wrong, to a place where the regiment could not be for days, and there was no water. And suppose sunstroke struck them down on the sand man after man, and they kicked and danced and raved. And, when at last the regiment came, suppose the captain successfully concealed his mistake, because all his men had suffered too much from it to testify to its ever having occurred. What would you think of the gallant captain? It is pretty much what I think of this particular captain of industry.

Of course, nobody supposes that all Capitalists, or

most Capitalists, are conscious of any such intellectual trick. Most of them are as much bewildered as the battered proletariat ; but there are some who are less well-meaning and more mean. And these are leading their more generous colleagues towards the fulfilment of this ungenerous evasion, if not towards the comprehension of it. Now a ruler of the Capitalist civilisation, who has come to consider the idea of ultimately herding and breeding the workers like cattle, has certain contemporary problems to review. He has to consider what forces still exist in the modern world for the frustration of his design. The first question is how much remains of the old ideal of individual liberty. The second question is how far the modern mind is committed to such egalitarian ideas as may be implied in Socialism. The third is whether there is any power of resistance in the tradition of the populace itself. These three questions for the future I shall consider in their order in the final chapters that follow. It is enough to say here that I think the progress of these ideals has broken down at the precise point where they will fail to prevent the experiment. Briefly, the progress will have deprived the Capitalist of his old Individualist scruples, without committing him to his new Collectivist obligations. He is in a very perilous position ; for he has ceased to be a Liberal without becoming a Socialist, and the bridge by which he was crossing has broken above an abyss of Anarchy.