

**Part II**  
**THE REAL AIM**



## CHAPTER I

### THE IMPOTENCE OF IMPENITENCE

THE root formula of an epoch is always an unwritten law, just as the law that is the first of all laws, that which protects life from the murderer, is written nowhere in the Statute Book. Nevertheless there is all the difference between having and not having a notion of this basic assumption in an epoch. For instance, the Middle Ages will simply puzzle us with their charities and cruelties, their asceticism and bright colours, unless we catch their general eagerness for building and planning, dividing this from that by walls and fences—the spirit that made architecture their most successful art. Thus even a slave seemed sacred; the divinity that did hedge a king, did also, in one sense, hedge a serf, for he could not be driven out from behind his hedges. Thus even liberty became a positive thing like a privilege; and even, when most men had it, it was not opened like the freedom of a wilderness, but bestowed, like the freedom of a city. Or again, the seventeenth century may seem a chaos of contradictions, with its almost priggish praise of parliaments and its quite barbaric massacre of prisoners, until we realise that, if the Middle Ages was a house half built, the seventeenth

century was a house on fire. Panic was the note of it, and that fierce fastidiousness and exclusiveness that comes from fear. Calvinism was its characteristic religion, even in the Catholic Church, the insistence on the narrowness of the way and the fewness of the chosen. Suspicion was the note of its politics—"put not your trust in princes." It tried to thrash everything out by learned, virulent, and ceaseless controversy; and it weeded its population by witch-burning. Or yet again: the eighteenth century will present pictures that seem utterly opposite, and yet seem singularly typical of the time: the sack of Versailles and the "Vicar of Wakefield"; the pastorals of Watteau and the dynamite speeches of Danton. But we shall understand them all better if we once catch sight of the idea of *tidying up* which ran through the whole period, the quietest people being prouder of their tidiness, civilisation, and sound taste than of any of their virtues; and the wildest people having (and this is the most important point) no love of wildness for its own sake, like Nietzsche or the anarchic poets, but only a readiness to employ it to get rid of unreason or disorder. With these epochs it is not altogether impossible to say that some such form of words is a key. The epoch for which it is almost impossible to find a form of words is our own.

Nevertheless, I think that with us the keyword is "inevitability," or, as I should be inclined to call it, "impenitence." We are subconsciously dominated in all departments by the notion that there is no turning

## The Impotence of Impenitence 93

back, and it is rooted in materialism and the denial of free-will. Take any handful of modern facts and compare them with the corresponding facts a few hundred years ago. Compare the modern Party System with the political factions of the seventeenth century. The difference is that in the older time the party leaders not only really cut off each other's heads, but (what is much more alarming) really repealed each other's laws. With us it has become traditional for one party to inherit and leave untouched the acts of the other when made, however bitterly they were attacked in the making. James II. and his nephew William were neither of them very gay specimens; but they would both have laughed at the idea of "a continuous foreign policy." The Tories were not Conservatives; they were, in the literal sense, reactionaries. They did not merely want to keep the Stuarts; they wanted to bring them back.

Or again, consider how obstinately the English mediæval monarchy returned again and again to its vision of French possessions, trying to reverse the decision of fate; how Edward III. returned to the charge after the defeats of John and Henry III., and Henry V. after the failure of Edward III.; and how even Mary had that written on her heart which was neither her husband nor her religion. And then consider this: that we have comparatively lately known a universal orgy of the thing called Imperialism, the unity of the Empire the only topic, colonies

counted like crown jewels, and the Union Jack waved across the world. And yet no one so much as dreamed, I will not say of recovering, the American colonies for the Imperial unity (which would have been too dangerous a task for modern empire-builders), but even of re-telling the story from an Imperial standpoint. Henry V. justified the claims of Edward III. Joseph Chamberlain would not have dreamed of justifying the claims of George III. Nay, Shakespeare justifies the French War, and sticks to Talbot and defies the legend of Joan of Arc. Mr. Kipling would not dare to justify the American War, stick to Burgoyne, and defy the legend of Washington. Yet there really was much more to be said for George III. than there ever was for Henry V. It was not said, much less acted upon, by the modern Imperialists; because of this basic modern sense, that as the future is inevitable, so is the past irrevocable. Any fact so complete as the American exodus from the Empire must be considered as final for æons, though it hardly happened more than a hundred years ago. Merely because it has managed to occur it must be called first, a necessary evil, and then an indispensable good. I need not add that I do not want to reconquer America; but then I am not an Imperialist.

Then there is another way of testing it: ask yourself how many people you have met who grumbled at a thing as incurable, and how many who attacked it as curable? How many people we have heard abuse the British elementary schools, as they would abuse

## The Impotence of Impenitence 95

the British climate? How few have we met who realised that British education can be altered, but British weather cannot? How few there were that knew that the clouds were more immortal and more solid than the schools? For a thousand that regret compulsory education, where is the hundred, or the ten, or the one, who would repeal compulsory education? Indeed, the very word proves my case by its unpromising and unfamiliar sound. At the beginning of our epoch men talked with equal ease about Reform and Repeal. Now everybody talks about reform; but nobody talks about repeal. Our fathers did not talk of Free Trade, but of the Repeal of the Corn Laws. They did not talk of Home Rule, but of the Repeal of the Union. In those days people talked of a "Repealer" as the most practical of all politicians, the kind of politician that carries a club. Now the Repealer is flung far into the province of an impossible idealism: and the leader of one of our great parties, having said, in a heat of temporary sincerity, that he would repeal an Act, actually had to write to all the papers to assure them that he would only amend it. I need not multiply instances, though they might be multiplied almost to a million. The note of the age is to suggest that the past may just as well be praised, since it cannot be mended. Men actually in that past have toiled like ants and died like locusts to undo some previous settlement that seemed secure; but we cannot do so much as repeal an Act of Parliament. We entertain the weak-minded notion that what is done can't be

undone. Our view was well summarised in a typical Victorian song with the refrain : " The mill will never grind again the water that is past." There are many answers to this. One (which would involve a disquisition on the phenomena of Evaporation and Dew) we will here avoid. Another is, that to the minds of simple country folk, the object of a mill is not to grind water, but to grind corn, and that (strange as it may seem) there really have been societies sufficiently vigilant and valiant to prevent their corn perpetually flowing away from them, to the tune of a sentimental song.

Now this modern refusal to undo what has been done is not only an intellectual fault ; it is a moral fault also. It is not merely our mental inability to understand the mistake we have made. It is also our spiritual refusal to admit that we have made a mistake. It was mere vanity in Mr. Brummell when he sent away trays full of imperfectly knotted neck-cloths, lightly remarking, " These are our failures." It is a good instance of the nearness of vanity to humility, for at least he had to admit that they were failures. But it would have been spiritual pride in Mr. Brummell if he had tied on all the cravats, one on top of the other, lest his valet should discover that he had ever tied one badly. For in spiritual pride there is always an element of secrecy and solitude. Mr. Brummell would be satanic ; also (which I fear would affect him more) he would be badly dressed. But he would be a perfect presentation of the modern publicist,

## The Impotence of Impenitence 97

who cannot do anything right, because he must not admit that he ever did anything wrong.

This strange, weak obstinacy, this persistence in the wrong path of progress, grows weaker and worse, as do all such weak things. And by the time in which I write its moral attitude has taken on something of the sinister and even the horrible. Our mistakes have become our secrets. Editors and journalists tear up with a guilty air all that reminds them of the party promises unfulfilled, or the party ideals reproaching them. It is true of our statesmen (much more than of our bishops, of whom Mr. Wells said it), that socially in evidence they are intellectually in hiding. The society is heavy with unconfessed sins; its mind is sore and silent with painful subjects; it has a constipation of conscience. There are many things it has done and allowed to be done which it does not really dare to think about; it calls them by other names and tries to talk itself into faith in a false past, as men make up the things they would have said in a quarrel. Of these sins one lies buried deepest but most noisome, and though it is stifled, stinks: the true story of the relations of the rich man and the poor in England. The half-starved English proletarian is not only nearly a skeleton, but he is a skeleton in a cupboard.

It may be said, in some surprise, that surely we hear to-day on every side the same story of the destitute proletariat and the social problem, of the sweating in the unskilled trades or the overcrowding in

the slums. It is granted ; but I said the true story. Untrue stories there are in plenty, on all sides of the discussion. There is the interesting story of the Class Conscious Proletarian of All Lands, the chap who has "solidarity," and is always just going to abolish war. The Marxian Socialists will tell you all about him ; only he isn't there. A common English workman is just as incapable of thinking of a German as anything but a German as he is of thinking of himself as anything but an Englishman. Then there is the opposite story ; the story of the horrid man who is an atheist and wants to destroy the home, but who, for some private reason, prefers to call this Socialism. He isn't there either. The prosperous Socialists have homes exactly like yours and mine ; and the poor Socialists are not allowed by the Individualists to have any at all. There is the story of the Two Workmen, which is a very nice and exciting story, about how one passed all the public houses in Cheapside and was made Lord Mayor on arriving at the Guildhall, while the other went into all the public houses and emerged quite ineligible for such a dignity. Alas ! for this also is vanity. A thief might become Lord Mayor, but an honest workman certainly couldn't. Then there is the story of "The Relentless Doom," by which rich men were, by economic laws, forced to go on taking away money from poor men, although they simply longed to leave off : this is an unendurable thought to a free and Christian man, and the reader will be relieved to hear that it never happened. The

## The Impotence of Impenitence 99

rich could have left off stealing whenever they wanted to leave off, only this never happened either. Then there is the story of the cunning Fabian who sat on six committees at once and so coaxed the rich man to become quite poor. By simply repeating, in a whisper, that there are "wheels within wheels," this talented man managed to take away the millionaire's motor car, one wheel at a time, till the millionaire had quite forgotten that he ever had one. It was very clever of him to do this, only he has not done it. There is not a screw loose in the millionaire's motor, which is capable of running over the Fabian and leaving him a flat corpse in the road at a moment's notice. All these stories are very fascinating stories to be told by the Individualist and Socialist in turn to the great Sultan of Capitalism, because if they left off amusing him for an instant he would cut off their heads. But if they once began to tell the true story of the Sultan to the Sultan, he would boil them in oil; and this they wish to avoid.

The true story of the sin of the Sultan he is always trying, by listening to these stories, to forget. As we have said before in this chapter, he would prefer not to remember, because he has made up his mind not to repent. It is a curious story, and I shall try to tell it truly in the two chapters that follow. In all ages the tyrant is hard because he is soft. If his car crashes over bleeding and accusing crowds, it is because he has chosen the path of least resistance. It is because it is much easier to ride down a human race than ride

up a moderately steep hill. The fight of the oppressor is always a pillow-fight; commonly a war with cushions—always a war for cushions. Saladin, the great Sultan, if I remember rightly, accounted it the greatest feat of swordsmanship to cut a cushion. And so indeed it is, as all of us can attest who have been for years past trying to cut into the swollen and windy corpulence of the modern compromise, that is at once cosy and cruel. For there is really in our world to-day the colour and silence of the cushioned divan; and that sense of palace within palace and garden within garden which makes the rich irresponsibility of the East. Have we not already the wordless dance, the wineless banquet, and all that strange unchristian conception of luxury without laughter? Are we not already in an evil Arabian Nights, and walking the nightmare cities of an invisible despot? Does not our hangman strangle secretly, the bearer of the bow string? Are we not already eugenists—that is, eunuch-makers? Do we not see the bright eyes, the motionless faces, and all that presence of something that is dead and yet sleepless? It is the presence of the sin that is sealed with pride and impenitence; the story of how the Sultan got his throne. But it is not the story he is listening to just now, but another story which has been invented to cover it—the story called “Eugenius: or the Adventures of One Not Born,” a most varied and entrancing tale, which never fails to send him to sleep.