CHAPTER III

THE ANARCHY FROM ABOVE

A SILENT anarchy is eating out our society. I must pause upon the expression; because the true nature of anarchy is mostly misapprehended. It is not in the least necessary that anarchy should be violent; nor is it necessary that it should come from below. A government may grow anarchic as much as a people. The more sentimental sort of Tory uses the word anarchy as a mere term of abuse for rebellion; but he misses a most important intellectual distinction. Rebellion may be wrong and disastrous; but even when rebellion is wrong, it is never anarchy. When it is not self-defence, it is usurpation. It aims at setting up a new rule in place of the old rule. And while it cannot be anarchic in essence (because it has an aim), it certainly cannot be anarchic in method; for men must be organised when they fight; and the discipline in a rebel army has to be as good as the discipline in the royal army. This deep principle of distinction must be clearly kept in mind. Take for the sake of symbolism those two great spiritual stories which, whether we count them myths or mysteries, have so long been the two hinges of all European morals. The Christian who is inclined to sympathise generally
with constituted authority will think of rebellion under the image of Satan, the rebel against God. But Satan, though a traitor, was not an anarchist. He claimed the crown of the cosmos; and had he prevailed, would have expected his rebel angels to give up rebelling. On the other hand, the Christian whose sympathies are more generally with just self-defence among the oppressed will think rather of Christ Himself defying the High Priests and scourging the rich traders. But whether or no Christ was (as some say) a Socialist, He most certainly was not an Anarchist. Christ, like Satan, claimed the throne. He set up a new authority against an old authority; but He set it up with positive commandments and a comprehensible scheme. In this light all mediæval people—indeed, all people until a little while ago—would have judged questions involving revolt. John Ball would have offered to pull down the government because it was a bad government, not because it was a government. Richard II. would have blamed Bolingbroke not as a disturber of the peace, but as a usurper. Anarchy, then, in the useful sense of the word, is a thing utterly distinct from any rebellion, right or wrong. It is not necessarily angry; it is not, in its first stages, at least, even necessarily painful. And, as I said before, it is often entirely silent.

Anarchy is that condition of mind or methods in which you cannot stop yourself. It is the loss of that self-control which can return to the normal. It is not anarchy because men are permitted to begin uproar,
extravagance, experiment, peril. It is anarchy when people cannot end these things. It is not anarchy in the home if the whole family sits up all night on New Year's Eve. It is anarchy in the home if members of the family sit up later and later for months afterwards. It was not anarchy in the Roman villa when, during the Saturnalia, the slaves turned masters or the masters slaves. It was (from the slave-owners' point of view) anarchy if, after the Saturnalia, the slaves continued to behave in a Saturnalian manner; but it is historically evident that they did not. It is not anarchy to have a picnic; but it is anarchy to lose all memory of mealtimes. It would, I think, be anarchy if (as is the disgusting suggestion of some) we all took what we liked off the sideboard. That is the way swine would eat if swine had sideboards; they have no immovable feasts; they are uncommonly progressive, are swine. It is this inability to return within rational limits after a legitimate extravagance that is the really dangerous disorder. The modern world is like Niagara. It is magnificent, but it is not strong. It is as weak as water—like Niagara. The objection to a cataract is not that it is deafening or dangerous or even destructive; it is that it cannot stop. Now it is plain that this sort of chaos can possess the powers that rule a society as easily as the society so ruled. And in modern England it is the powers that rule who are chiefly possessed by it—who are truly possessed by devils. The phrase, in its sound old psychological sense, is not too strong.
The State has suddenly and quietly gone mad. It is talking nonsense; and it can't stop.

Now it is perfectly plain that government ought to have, and must have, the same sort of right to use exceptional methods occasionally that the private householder has to have a picnic or to sit up all night on New Year's Eve. The State, like the householder, is sane if it can treat such exceptions as exceptions. Such desperate remedies may not even be right; but such remedies are endurable as long as they are admittedly desperate. Such cases, of course, are the communism of food in a besieged city; the official disavowal of an arrested spy; the subjection of a patch of civil life to martial law; the cutting of communication in a plague; or that deepest degradation of the commonwealth, the use of national soldiers not against foreign soldiers, but against their own brethren in revolt. Of these exceptions some are right and some wrong; but all are right in so far as they are taken as exceptions. The modern world is insane, not so much because it admits the abnormal as because it cannot recover the normal.

We see this in the vague extension of punishments like imprisonment; often the very reformers who admit that prison is bad for people propose to reform them by a little more of it. We see it in panic legislation like that after the White Slave scare, when the torture of flogging was revived for all sorts of ill defined and vague and variegated types of men. Our fathers were never so mad, even when they were
torturers. They stretched the man out on the rack. They did not stretch the rack out, as we are doing. When men went witch-burning they may have seen witches everywhere—because their minds were fixed on witchcraft. But they did not see things to burn everywhere, because their minds were unfixed. While tying some very unpopular witch to the stake, with the firm conviction that she was a spiritual tyranny and pestilence, they did not say to each other, "A little burning is what my Aunt Susan wants, to cure her of back-biting," or "Some of these faggots would do your Cousin James good, and teach him to play with poor girls' affections."

Now the name of all this is Anarchy. It not only does not know what it wants, but it does not even know what it hates. It multiplies excessively in the more American sort of English newspapers. When this new sort of New Englander burns a witch the whole prairie catches fire. These people have not the decision and detachment of the doctrinal ages. They cannot do a monstrous action and still see it is monstrous. Wherever they make a stride they make a rut. They cannot stop their own thoughts, though their thoughts are pouring into the pit.

A final instance, which can be sketched much more briefly, can be found in this general fact: that the definition of almost every crime has become more and more indefinite, and spreads like a flattening and thinning cloud over larger and larger landscapes. Cruelty to children, one would have thought, was a
thing about as unmistakable, unusual and appalling as parricide. In its application it has come to cover almost every negligence that can occur in a needy household. The only distinction is, of course, that these negligences are punished in the poor, who generally can't help them, and not in the rich, who generally can. But that is not the point I am arguing just now. The point here is that a crime we all instinctively connect with Herod on the bloody night of Innocents has come precious near being attributable to Mary and Joseph when they lost their child in the Temple. In the light of a fairly recent case (the confessedly kind mother who was lately jailed because her confessedly healthy children had no water to wash in) no one, I think, will call this an illegitimate literary exaggeration. Now this is exactly as if all the horror and heavy punishment, attached in the simplest tribes to parricide, could now be used against any son who had done any act that could colourably be supposed to have worried his father, and so affected his health. Few of us would be safe.

Another case out of hundreds is the loose extension of the idea of libel. Libel cases bear no more trace of the old and just anger against the man who bore false witness against his neighbour than "cruelty" cases do of the old and just horror of the parents that hated their own flesh. A libel case has become one of the sports of the less athletic rich—a variation on baccarat, a game of chance. A music-hall actress got damages for a song that was called "vulgar,"
which is as if I could fine or imprison my neighbour for calling my handwriting "rococo." A politician got huge damages because he was said to have spoken to children about Tariff Reform; as if that seductive topic would corrupt their virtue, like an indecent story. Sometimes libel is defined as anything calculated to hurt a man in his business; in which case any new tradesman calling himself a grocer slanders the grocer opposite. All this, I say, is Anarchy; for it is clear that its exponents possess no power of distinction, or sense of proportion, by which they can draw the line between calling a woman a popular singer and calling her a bad lot; or between charging a man with leading infants to Protection and leading them to sin and shame. But the vital point to which to return is this. That it is not necessarily, nor even specially, an anarchy in the populace. It is an anarchy in the organ of government. It is the magistrates—voices of the governing class—who cannot distinguish between cruelty and carelessness. It is the judges (and their very submissive special juries) who cannot see the difference between opinion and slander. And it is the highly placed and highly paid experts who have brought in the first Eugenic Law, the Feeble-Minded Bill—thus showing that they can see no difference between a mad and a sane man.

That, to begin with, is the historic atmosphere in which this thing was born. It is a peculiar atmosphere, and luckily not likely to last. Real progress bears the same relation to it that a happy girl laughing bears
to an hysterical girl who cannot stop laughing. But I have described this atmosphere first because it is the only atmosphere in which such a thing as the Eugenist legislation could be proposed among men. All other ages would have called it to some kind of logical account, however academic or narrow. The lowest sophist in the Greek schools would remember enough of Socrates to force the Eugenist to tell him (at least) whether Midias was segregated because he was curable or because he was incurable. The meanest Thomist of the mediæval monasteries would have the sense to see that you cannot discuss a madman when you have not discussed a man. The most owlish Calvinist commentator in the seventeenth century would ask the Eugenist to reconcile such Bible texts as derided fools with the other Bible texts that praised them. The dullest shopkeeper in Paris in 1790 would have asked what were the Rights of Man, if they did not include the rights of the lover, the husband, and the father. It is only in our own London Particular (as Mr. Guppy said of the fog) that small figures can loom so large in the vapour, and even mingle with quite different figures, and have the appearance of a mob. But, above all, I have dwelt on the telescopic quality in these twilight avenues, because unless the reader realises how elastic and unlimited they are, he simply will not believe in the abominations we have to combat.

One of those wise old fairy tales, that come from nowhere and flourish everywhere, tells how a man
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came to own a small magic machine like a coffee-mill, which would grind anything he wanted when he said one word and stop when he said another. After performing marvels (which I wish my conscience would let me put into this book for padding) the mill was merely asked to grind a few grains of salt at an officers' mess on board ship; for salt is the type everywhere of small luxury and exaggeration, and sailors' tales should be taken with a grain of it. The man remembered the word that started the salt mill, and then, touching the word that stopped it, suddenly remembered that he forgot. The tall ship sank, laden and sparkling to the topmasts with salt like Arctic snows; but the mad mill was still grinding at the ocean bottom, where all the men lay drowned. And that (so says this fairy tale) is why the great waters about our world have a bitter taste. For the fairy tales knew what the modern mystics don't—that one should not let loose either the supernatural or the natural.