CHAPTER II

THE FIRST OBSTACLES

Now before I set about arguing these things, there is a cloud of skirmishers, of harmless and confused modern sceptics, who ought to be cleared off or calmed down before we come to debate with the real doctors of the heresy. If I sum up my statement thus: "Eugenics, as discussed, evidently means the control of some men over the marriage and unmarriage of others; and probably means the control of the few over the marriage and unmarriage of the many," I shall first of all receive the sort of answers that float like skim on the surface of teacups and talk. I may very roughly and rapidly divide these preliminary objectors into five sects; whom I will call the Euphemists, the Casuists, the Autocrats, the Precedenters, and the Endeavourers. When we have answered the immediate protestation of all these good, shouting, short-sighted people, we can begin to do justice to those intelligences that are really behind the idea.

Most Eugenists are Euphemists. I mean merely that short words startle them, while long words soothe them. And they are utterly incapable of translating the one into the other, however obviously they mean the same thing. Say to them "The persuasive and
even coercive powers of the citizen should enable him to make sure that the burden of longevity in the previous generation does not become disproportionate and intolerable, especially to the females”; say this to them and they will sway slightly to and fro like babies sent to sleep in cradles. Say to them “Murder your mother,” and they sit up quite suddenly. Yet the two sentences, in cold logic, are exactly the same. Say to them “It is not improbable that a period may arrive when the narrow if once useful distinction between the anthropoid homo and the other animals, which has been modified on so many moral points, may be modified also even in regard to the important question of the extension of human diet”; say this to them, and beauty born of murmuring sound will pass into their face. But say to them, in a simple, manly, hearty way “Let’s eat a man!” and their surprise is quite surprising. Yet the sentences say just the same thing. Now, if anyone thinks these two instances extravagant, I will refer to two actual cases from the Eugenic discussions. When Sir Oliver Lodge spoke of the methods “of the stud-farm” many Eugenists exclaimed against the crudity of the suggestion. Yet long before that one of the ablest champions in the other interest had written “What nonsense this education is! Who could educate a racehorse or a greyhound?” Which most certainly either means nothing, or the human stud-farm. Or again, when I spoke of people “being married forcibly by the police,” another distinguished
Eugenist almost achieved high spirits in his hearty assurance that no such thing had ever come into their heads. Yet a few days after I saw a Eugenist pronouncement, to the effect that the State ought to extend its powers in this area. The State can only be that corporation which men permit to employ compulsion; and this area can only be the area of sexual selection. I mean somewhat more than an idle jest when I say that the policeman will generally be found in that area. But I willingly admit that the policeman who looks after weddings will be like the policeman who looks after wedding-presents. He will be in plain clothes. I do not mean that a man in blue with a helmet will drag the bride and bridegroom to the altar. I do mean that nobody that man in blue is told to arrest will even dare to come near the church. Sir Oliver did not mean that men would be tied up in stables and scrubbed down by grooms. He meant that they would undergo a loss of liberty which to men is even more infamous. He meant that the only formula important to Eugenists would be "by Smith out of Jones." Such a formula is one of the shortest in the world; and is certainly the shortest way with the Euphemists.

The next sect of superficial objectors is even more irritating. I have called them, for immediate purposes, the Casuists. Suppose I say "I dislike this spread of Cannibalism in the West End restaurants." Somebody is sure to say "Well, after all, Queen Eleanor when she sucked blood from her husband's
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arm was a cannibal." What is one to say to such people? One can only say "Confine yourself to sucking poisoned blood from people's arms, and I permit you to call yourself by the glorious title of Cannibal." In this sense people say of Eugenics, "After all, whenever we discourage a schoolboy from marrying a mad negress with a hump back, we are really Eugenists." Again one can only answer, "Confine yourselves strictly to such schoolboys as are naturally attracted to hump-backed negresses; and you may exult in the title of Eugenist, all the more proudly because that distinction will be rare." But surely anyone's common-sense must tell him that if Eugenics dealt only with such extravagant cases, it would be called common-sense—and not Eugenics. The human race has excluded such absurdities for unknown ages; and has never yet called it Eugenics. You may call it flogging when you hit a choking gentleman on the back; you may call it torture when a man unfreezes his fingers at the fire; but if you talk like that a little longer you will cease to live among living men. If nothing but this mad minimum of accident were involved, there would be no such thing as a Eugenic Congress, and certainly no such thing as this book.

I had thought of calling the next sort of superficial people the Idealists; but I think this implies a humility towards impersonal good they hardly show; so I call them the Autocrats. They are those who give us generally to understand that every modern
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reform will "work" all right, because they will be there to see. Where they will be, and for how long, they do not explain very clearly. I do not mind their looking forward to numberless lives in succession; for that is the shadow of a human or divine hope. But even a theosophist does not expect to be a vast number of people at once. And these people most certainly propose to be responsible for a whole movement after it has left their hands. Each man promises to be about a thousand policemen. If you ask them how this or that will work, they will answer, "Oh, I would certainly insist on this"; or "I would never go so far as that"; as if they could return to this earth and do what no ghost has ever done quite successfully—force men to forsake their sins. Of these it is enough to say that they do not understand the nature of a law any more than the nature of a dog. If you let loose a law, it will do as a dog does. It will obey its own nature, not yours. Such sense as you have put into the law (or the dog) will be fulfilled. But you will not be able to fulfil a fragment of anything you have forgotten to put into it.

Along with such idealists should go the strange people who seem to think that you can consecrate and purify any campaign for ever by repeating the names of the abstract virtues that its better advocates had in mind. These people will say "So far from aiming at slavery, the Eugenists are seeking true liberty; liberty from disease and degeneracy, etc." Or they will say "We can assure Mr. Chesterton
that the Eugenists have no intention of segregating the harmless; justice and mercy are the very motto of—-” etc. To this kind of thing perhaps the shortest answer is this. Many of those who speak thus are agnostic or generally unsympathetic to official religion. Suppose one of them said "The Church of England is full of hypocrisy." What would he think of me if I answered, "I assure you that hypocrisy is condemned by every form of Christianity; and is particularly repudiated in the Prayer Book"? Suppose he said that the Church of Rome had been guilty of great cruelties. What would he think of me if I answered, "The Church is expressly bound to meekness and charity; and therefore cannot be cruel"? This kind of people need not detain us long. Then there are others whom I may call the Precedenters; who flourish particularly in Parliament. They are best represented by the solemn official who said the other day that he could not understand the clamour against the Feeble-Minded Bill, as it only extended the principles of the old Lunacy Laws. To which again one can only answer "Quite so. It only extends the principles of the Lunacy Laws to persons without a trace of lunacy." This lucid politician finds an old law, let us say, about keeping lepers in quarantine. He simply alters the word "lepers" to "long-nosed people," and says blandly that the principle is the same.

Perhaps the weakest of all are those helpless persons whom I have called the Endeavourers. The prize
specimen of them was another M.P. who defended the same Bill as "an honest attempt" to deal with a great evil: as if one had a right to dragoon and enslave one's fellow citizens as a kind of chemical experiment; in a state of reverent agnosticism about what would come of it. But with this fatuous notion that one can deliberately establish the Inquisition or the Terror, and then faintly trust the larger hope, I shall have to deal more seriously in a subsequent chapter. It is enough to say here that the best thing the honest Endeavourer could do would be to make an honest attempt to know what he is doing. And not to do anything else until he has found out. Lastly, there is a class of controversialists so hopeless and futile that I have really failed to find a name for them. But whenever anyone attempts to argue rationally for or against any existent and recognisable thing, such as the Eugenic class of legislation, there are always people who begin to chop hay about Socialism and Individualism; and say "You object to all State interference; I am in favour of State interference. You are an Individualist; I, on the other hand," etc. To which I can only answer, with heart-broken patience, that I am not an Individualist, but a poor fallen but baptised journalist who is trying to write a book about Eugenists, several of whom he has met; whereas he never met an Individualist, and is by no means certain he would recognise him if he did. In short, I do not deny, but strongly affirm, the right of the State to interfere to cure a great evil.
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I say that in this case it would interfere to create a great evil; and I am not going to be turned from the discussion of that direct issue to bottomless botherations about Socialism and Individualism, or the relative advantages of always turning to the right and always turning to the left.

And for the rest, there is undoubtedly an enormous mass of sensible, rather thoughtless people, whose rooted sentiment it is that any deep change in our society must be in some way infinitely distant. They cannot believe that men in hats and coats like themselves can be preparing a revolution; all their Victorian philosophy has taught them that such transformations are always slow. Therefore, when I speak of Eugenic legislation, or the coming of the Eugenic State, they think of it as something like The Time Machine or Looking Backward: a thing that, good or bad, will have to fit itself to their great-great-great-grandchild, who may be very different and may like it; and who in any case is rather a distant relative. To all this I have, to begin with, a very short and simple answer. The Eugenic State has begun. The first of the Eugenic Laws has already been adopted by the Government of this country; and passed with the applause of both parties through the dominant House of Parliament. This first Eugenic Law clears the ground and may be said to proclaim negative Eugenics; but it cannot be defended, and nobody has attempted to defend it, except on the Eugenic theory. I will call it the Feeble-Minded Bill, both for brevity and
because the description is strictly accurate. It is, quite simply and literally, a Bill for incarcerating as madmen those whom no doctor will consent to call mad. It is enough if some doctor or other may happen to call them weak-minded. Since there is scarcely any human being to whom this term has not been conversationally applied by his own friends and relatives on some occasion or other (unless his friends and relatives have been lamentably lacking in spirit), it can be clearly seen that this law, like the early Christian Church (to which, however, it presents points of dissimilarity), is a net drawing in of all kinds. It must not be supposed that we have a stricter definition incorporated in the Bill. Indeed, the first definition of "feeble-minded" in the Bill was much looser and vaguer than the phrase "feeble-minded" itself. It is a piece of yawning idiocy about "persons who though capable of earning their living under favourable circumstances" (as if anyone could earn his living if circumstances were directly unfavourable to his doing so), are nevertheless "incapable of managing their affairs with proper prudence"; which is exactly what all the world and his wife are saying about their neighbours all over this planet. But as an incapacity for any kind of thought is now regarded as statesmanship, there is nothing so very novel about such slovenly drafting. What is novel and what is vital is this: that the defence of this crazy Coercion Act is a Eugenic defence. It is not only openly said, it is eagerly urged, that the aim of the measure is to prevent any
person whom these propagandists do not happen to think intelligent from having any wife or children. Every tramp who is sulky, every labourer who is shy, every rustic who is eccentric, can quite easily be brought under such conditions as were designed for homicidal maniacs. That is the situation; and that is the point. England has forgotten the Feudal State; it is in the last anarchy of the Industrial State; there is much in Mr. Belloc's theory that it is approaching the Servile State; it cannot at present get at the Distributive State; it has almost certainly missed the Socialist State. But we are already under the Eugenist State; and nothing remains to us but rebellion.