

CHAPTER VIII

CULTURE AT HOME

THE cryptogams in Pry's little garden of fungi had 'taken' well. The spores had germinated and sent out their ramifications of spawn under the surface of the jelly; fruiting bodies had been thrust up; and there were visible circular patches of mould, some red, some grey, some orange and some white. At a casual glance, and to an unsympathetic eye — such as Mary's — this garden of Pry's had no very great aesthetic appeal: just so many dishes of mouldy jelly.

It was not until Pry examined the tufts of mould with a strong lens or under the microscope, and picked out individual threads from the mass, that the beauty of detail was revealed. The tufts were made up of multitudes of fine filaments which branched and were hung with spores like queer fruit on glassy, leafless trees; or there were mace-like sporing heads; or flails delicate as poised beads. Between the various species were great differences and also confusing similarities; there was much for the eye to see and for the mind to dwell upon. These pretty parasites were of negative economic value: mycologists studied them in order to destroy them. Pry was not going to do that; one of the consequences of having bought himself out of Industry for two years was that he was free to do things, and to

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regard things, for their own sake. It was very important that he should take that freedom, or he would have achieved nothing.

But to cultivate his fungi successfully it was necessary to maintain them at the right temperature and to provide them with the right nutriment and moisture: to set them in the environments best suited to their habits of life. Each tiny fungus was, like himself, a living organism in an environment. Organism and environment had to be considered together.

The same thing applied to his novel. With Mary, in the virtual isolation of Snoot House, out on the marshes, the conditions for incubation of the novel were, on the whole, satisfactory. But writing the novel was only half the total enterprise: the other half was getting it published; and the real environment of the novel, even in process of writing, was his imagination of the readers with whom he was communicating. To write for himself was not art for art's sake, it was narcissistic and sterile. The freedom that Pry had won for himself was not freedom to jump off the earth, but to do things of his own choosing, within the limitations of a pre-existent environment.

Every sentence he wrote was referred to his readers, a ghostly company in his mind. When at this or that passage they seemed to yawn, he drew his pen through it, when they seemed to exclaim at a gentle prod, or to chuckle, or to be listening thoughtfully, he took courage and went on. They were sinful people, on the whole, Pry's readers, they hid behind defensive pretensions of

all sorts, and in their lives they had to endure an appalling amount of monotony and boredom. Hardly anybody escaped the monotony and boredom, and the efforts of the human animal to get out of it provided some of the most conspicuous mass-phenomena of the time — from revolution-politics to petty speculation on second-hand sport. The world was a paradise for purveyors of anti-boredom goods and services.

The exhibition of 'Mass-Art', then on at the Hurlingham Galleries, would, Pry felt, enlighten him a little further about his environment. He knew practically nothing about 'Culture', and it said in the prospectus that Mass-Art was not only a new social dynamic but a last desperate effort, on the part of the seriously minded intelligentsia, to preserve Culture on earth. The sort of thing a novelist could scarcely afford to miss.

No. 207, before which Pry stopped first, was an enlarged photograph, ten feet by six, of some two thousand workmen going to work at a motor-car factory on a wet Monday morning. The next, a painting in oils — the distraught colouring of which revealed the torment in the artist's soul — showed twenty-five workmen standing in a line at a communal urinal in Pradvak. And the next was a neo-pastel, in the Japanese style, of migrating swallows. Pry paused in turn before a realistic painting of a green swarm of locusts in Liverpool Street Station; an 'object' being a real wasp's nest with a Swastika painted on it; and a 'montage' of two hundred and fifty pearl buttons falling into a tin. At floor level, all round the main gallery, was a strip cartoon of

boots, workers' boots, of heavy tread, marching in dull and endless monotony.

Every now and then a tall woman in shrouds, her face a painted death-mask, went slowly round the gallery with five dachshunds on a leash. And the central exhibit listed as sculpture (reinforced concrete) was an enormous head-with-megaphone, petrified in the act of pouring forth tram tickets, which, with the help of some gauze, were arrested in multitudinous spiral flight to the roof.

Pry sat down after a while and watched the people. There were smooth, well-dressed young men, not yet weaned from public schools, talking very earnestly with bearded young men in proletarian lounge suits, jerseys and plus-fours. There were about an equal number of young women, less solemn than the young men, but of the same well-fed social caste. Then there were a number of women of indefinite age, with carefully built-up complexions, who wore the latest things from Oxford Street shop windows — hard-slimmed women, with a sort of instructed brightness of expression. In these last Pry took a particular interest, surreptitiously sketching them on his programme. From amongst them he picked out a few more acquaintances for Agatha Boom. Not forgetting Mrs. Vogue, who had no children because of the political situation, and was thus just able to live within the Hampstead postal district; and Miss Peahen, who wore homespuns, went in for crafts and had a little shop where she sold pen-wipers and perfectly sweet red goblins to sit a-fishing beside concrete ponds in gardens.

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By the table reserved for members of the committee, Pry caught sight of Geoffrey Warp. The thin sideboards, the cravat and the double-breasted waistcoat were unmistakable. He was listening with a non-committal expression to one of the smooth young men, who, Pry felt, was undoubtedly trying to interest him in some very undergraduate poems. Geoffrey Warp shook off the young man after a while, and his place was promptly taken by an intense-looking young woman. Pry kept his eye on Geoffrey Warp as he went round the rest of the exhibition and noticed that he seemed to be holding a sort of court.

'Who is the distinguished gentleman by the table?' he asked the red-haired young man at the bookstall in a respectful whisper.

'Why, that's Geoffrey Warp, the publisher,' said the young man.

'Ah!' said Pry.

There was nobody else at the exhibition Pry knew, and a publisher was, after all, a publisher; but the idea of joining in the courting of Geoffrey Warp, and with the same *arrière pensée* as all the rest, was distasteful to Pry.

Geoffrey saw him, after a while; came up to him when he was in the 'mobile' room, gently blowing on a Frenchified contrivance of polished steel wire, making the suspended parts of it swing to get the mobile effect. Geoffrey didn't know he was interested in art, and asked him what he was doing there.

'Looking for a publisher,' said Pry.

He confessed that he was, after all, writing a book; but it was only a novel, not in Jeff's line . . . He blew indifferently at the wings of a stainless steel pterodactyl, making them vibrate.

'We *do* do novels. . . .'

'Oh,' said Pry, who had studied the catalogues and card-indexed the 'lines' of most of the publishers in London, 'I didn't know. Then perhaps Gossage & Onions — I mean you yourself might . . .'

Geoffrey invited Pry's confidences about his book, and Pry recited the account of it he had prepared in his mind for just such an occasion. He did not give away the title, or the subject matter, or what he felt to be the more ingenious parts of the plot.

'That sounds excellent,' said Geoffrey, 'there is scope on the Centre Left-Centre orbit for socially conscious works of fiction, which though not strictly Centre Left-Centre, have for ideological content the impact of Centre individualism on mass-left-centre deviations.'

'I'm so glad you think so,' said Pry, 'that's just what I was groping towards saying myself.'

'Market value depends a lot on treatment, of course, but if you would send me the first three chapters, and a synopsis, quite short, of the rest, we might be able to fix up. . . .'

'A contract?'

'By all means. Of course, you know, we don't make any advance on such a work before publication.'

'Naturally,' said Pry. 'I'm most grateful to you; I'll think it over.'

'Now if you'll excuse me,' said Geoffrey, who was polishing his gold watch, 'I must go and speak to Denis Falcon-Walker. Do you know Denis Falcon-Walker?'

Pry had heard of Denis Falcon-Walker; who had not? He had written two plays, two volumes of poetry, one work of criticism, four novels and a most controversial pamphlet in the 'What we mean' series — it would be something to be introduced to Denis Falcon-Walker.

Pry felt there must be some mistake: the pink-faced overgrown boy to whom he was presented could not have been more than twenty-seven, and he looked about nineteen. Denis Falcon-Walker was far too important a person to have any words to waste on Pry, so Pry left him to Geoffrey Warp and made off, feeling rather depressed: he had started novel-writing too late in life.

The only thing for him to do now was to study the exhibits, products of the fire and spirituality of youth, and humbly try to discover what they meant. Most of them seemed to be asserting some beauty in collectivism. Pry exposed himself, as receptively as he could, to any feeling this art could give him of liking or sympathy for men and things in the mass, for crowds, processions and armies. But he could feel none. It was only for individuals, separated from the mass and with space about them, that he had ever felt any interest. Masses meant sameness and dreary monotony, individuals were diverse. One of the painters, at least, seemed to share Pry's feelings, for he had depicted the march of masses through the ruins of a civilization towards a

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vaguely yellow new dawn, whilst one poor individual stayed behind, woefully regarding a small pink piece of gut, from his own intestines, which he had hung over his little finger.

In the evening there was a conference, with readings and speeches, because, as it explained in the prospectus, the paintings and 'objects' only represented a part of the whole Mass-Art movement. Literature, Music and Science all came in, and the differences between them were being liquidated in the new exegesis of cultural orientations. Denis Falcon-Walker and others were going to read extracts from their works that would make this clearer. Pry took a chair at the extreme end of the back row.

The first paper, by Alexander Yawk, educated, according to the programme, at Winchester and Oxford, was about the preservation of Culture and the happy outlook for Mass-Art in the Soviet Union, where, Pry gathered, there was going to be a kingdom of heaven on earth for young men with literary aspirations from English Universities, whose minds were then in chains. So much had already been done in Moscow that the walls of workers' dwellings were being coated with a sensitized preparation so that photographic enlargements of works of art could be produced directly on them, by projection from the State mural decoration lanterns. Mass-labour scenes and portraits of Stalin were being projected and rendered permanent in this way, happily promoting the workers' sense of mass-identification and general culture. Pry, who had

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a horrible vision of the face of the Prime Minister of England projected on the walls of Snoot House, did not join in the applause.

Then Claud Rutland D'Umbert and Denis Falcon-Walker demonstrated the possibilities of mass-enunciation, using the new technique of stereo-phonetics. They stood one at each end of a table and recited some of their own mass-prose-poetry together. One lagged a fraction of a second behind the other and emitted at a semitone difference in pitch. This was the secret of the stereo-phonetic effect.

Magyrio Zhovosni Ghunt, who was the guest speaker of the evening and had once been involved in a real revolution, read his paper in his mother tongue. It went on for half an hour, and then Hubert Watermere read his full translation of it, with notes. Hubert Watermere had a peculiarly irritating slow lisp, superimposed upon his Oxford accent, which, with his esoteric vocabulary, made the general drift of Ghunt's thought rather difficult to follow. But so far as Pry was able to make it out, Hitler, Mussolini and Franco had come upon earth, through the operation of historic process, as dialectical manifestations of the unholy trinity of the Antichrist; and what the proletariat had to do was to redeem culture from their satanic influence by mass-sacrifice; whereby the proletariat would pass, after some inevitable resurrection, into or up to heaven, which would be organized as a classless society.

It then came over Pry that when the meeting was opened for discussion he was going to say something,

the feeling that this would happen, and that he would stand up before so many people, almost paralysed him with nervousness. His heart thumped and his hands got very hot and moist.

The last speech, by Roy Camberleigh, on what the working classes should do for the proper cultural nourishment of their ruling caste in mass-society, finished it for Pry. He did not so much mind the speculations about the hierarchical position of special sorts of angels in Kingdom Come. What girded him to fury was the ineffable assumption by Mr. Roy Camberleigh that society could in no circumstances survive without him and his kind. Pry was maddened by the tone of matter-of-course superiority in Mr. Roy Camberleigh's voice. The slurred, emasculated voice of Eton and Cambridge, don't you know, that seemed to be saying in every drawling syllable: 'We are the salt of the earth.'

'Not the *salt* of the earth, dear friends,' Pry growled, 'but the *soap*. You are the soap of the earth.'

At discussion time there was great eagerness amongst some dozen young men, all of the same fry, to get up and speak. Pry bobbed up from time to time, but he was not quick enough, and it was not until the very end of the meeting that he got a hearing. He spoke in a loud clear voice that seemed to explode out of his nervousness, and everybody swung round to stare at him.

'Would someone please tell me,' he said, 'what two hundred and fifty pearl buttons falling into a tin have got to do with the ultimate happiness of the masses?'

There was a laugh. Claud Rutland D'Umbert smiled at the speaker beside him and rose. He pulled his neck-tie straight.

'If our querulous friend, whose name I don't know, would refer to his Karl Marx, he would find there the interpretative concept of which he appears to be in need. Quantitative change may become qualitative change.' He turned to Denis Falcon-Walker, 'I should suppose it evident that the implications of two hundred and fifty pearl buttons falling into a tin are quite different from those of one pearl button falling two hundred and fifty times into the same tin.' He prepared to sit down, having turned the laugh against Pry.

'And would you please tell me what *you* have got to do with the toiling masses? I should suppose it evident that you have never done a day's work in a factory in your life.'

The chairman objected that this was too personal.

'I'll make it impersonal,' said Pry, boldly enough, now he was started. 'You say that the salvation of culture and society is a job for the working class. Young men who have led sheltered lives at Public Schools and Universities don't belong to the working class, and apart from an occasional slumming trip to get "copy" for proletarian novels, they don't know anything about it. So according to your own theory you are superfluous.'

As it happened, Denis Falcon-Walker had in fact spent nearly three weeks in South Wales, when writing his most important novel, but Pry did not know this. Denis was annoyed; he jumped up and answered Pry, quite briskly:

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'The contradiction to which the bourgeois speaker draws attention is dialectical and inevitable under capitalism.'

There was a murmur of approval; the meeting seemed to find this answer completely satisfactory.

'That is so much cant,' said Pry, 'and one useful way of preserving culture is to speak plain English. If you want communism or any other political system in this country, why don't you work for it in your own right, without hiding behind the working class? And if you want to be political leaders of the working class I don't see why you shouldn't go for it openly, if you're any good at leadership. But that would mean getting your hands dirty. Your alleged concern for the working class is purely abstract, illusory and sentimental. This mass-art and proletarian culture of yours is only another middle-class distraction. And you are all tamely employed by capitalist publishers and art-exhibition promoters to run it — a most profitable racket while it lasts. How many working-class people have the time or the money to come to this exhibition, or to buy and read your stuff? How many working-class people could make head or tail of it, if they did? You know the weakness of your position, but you're afraid to acknowledge it for fear you should be thought reactionary.'

Several speakers tried to interrupt him, but Pry swept on.

'You don't want to break down class distinctions, you want to accentuate them, because your particular

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prophet prescribes salvation by class war. If you'd been born ten years sooner you'd have seen all you wanted to see of war. As it is, you're just playing into the hands of our nominal government, diverting attention from their chicanery, and weakening the constitutional opposition, by giving people the opium of an escapist religion — which is what your Marxism is, with its dogmas of inevitability, apocalyptic revolutions and heaven-to-come of a classless society. And all the time you're ignobly doing your bit to work up hatred and detestation of an abstract "enemy", alias Fascism, alias Hitler, alias "the Huns". There's no difference in kind between your Culture and *Kultur*. The creation of dreadful hallucinations of an "enemy" in the minds of the people is as sinister as any campaign of rearmament in the preparation for war.' When, in the name of Culture, you repeat tales of Fascist atrocities and let off jibes at our contemporaries across the water, you help nobody, you create nothing, you examine nothing and you explain nothing; you feed your boggy on the food it wants, and add your little spittle to all the other poison in the atmosphere.'

Pry had spoken passionately, and he was very much worked up. 'That's what I wanted to say and I've said it', was his rather clumsy way of closing his tirade. He sat down confused and ashamed at having made such an exhibition of himself.

'Now, if there are no more questions or remarks,' said the Chairman, 'I think it is time for me to close the meeting. Some people have a long way to go. . . .'

To Pry's shame at his outburst, his feeling of cowardice and impotence at not having spoken sooner, and so avoided being counted out, was added a suspicion that he had not spoken well, that his words were gross and loose, and that he had left much out of account. He had exposed himself to ridicule amongst people, who, whatever their doctrines, were more talented and better educated than himself.

He was going out, flushed and hurt, keeping close to the wall, when a virile man of fifty who had been quietly watching him hurried across and took his arm. 'I am glad you spoke up,' he said, 'it needed somebody to challenge their conceits — you did well.'

'No,' said Pry, 'I lost my temper; it wasn't good enough.'

It did not seem that he was talking to a stranger, this man had so understanding and mercurial a look, amongst the lines of his deeply graven face; he had gone so directly to the root of Pry's feelings.

'I am Dan Hambledon,' he said, 'I edit a small and unpopular magazine called *The New Interrogator*.'

The New Interrogator! In the presence of an 'editor' and of a man who indeed looked more like a critic of the arts than Pry would have thought possible in life, a fresh wave of nervousness came over him. Having his book to get published, with all its inevitable train of unacknowledged and unmentionable aspirations, was worse than being in love. As Dan Hambledon was the very kind of person Pry most dearly wished to know, he now sought to escape from him. Dan Hambledon

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sensed this feeling in Pry, and from much experience assessed it as a promising sign. 'I am interested,' he said, 'have you time to have a cup of coffee with me?'

'The trouble is,' said Pry, when they were outside, 'I can't really speak their language. . . .'

'A damn good thing you can't,' said Dan Hambleton, 'and if I were you I should take care to avoid it. Much better to forge an instrument of expression for yourself. They whine about being in chains but the only reason they can't jump is that they haven't got it in them. You ought to develop what you were saying somewhere: do you think you could manage it for me?'

'I don't know enough about them,' said Pry, 'I've only come up to Town to get an impression. . . .'

'Well, you seem to have got a correct one. We can't pay much for contributions in *The New Interrogator*, but we do try to preserve some independence of mind, and when we want to assess literary values it is not our habit to refer to Karl Marx. These people talk about literature in revolt, they take the name of literature in vain, and they are certainly not in revolt. To write for a best-paying market is hardly a gesture of revolt.'

They went into an Arcadian Snack-Bar and sat on high stools. The white-coated barman took the order for coffees, produced them as it were from nowhere with the air of a prestidigitator, taking the money, punching the cash register and smacking down the change, with one return swing of his body.

'Slick!' said Pry.

'Slick, yes, impersonal and automatic. Tell me,'

said Dan Hambleton, 'something about yourself. Why are you a "pacifist"?' He pronounced the word as though picking it out of the contemporary stew on the end of a long fork.

'I'm not,' said Pry. 'I've never got anything in my life without fighting for it; but the kind of fighting they want is just chucking up the sponge. Sometimes I get so miserable I'd rather welcome a chance to die, or to gamble with death as fantastically as possible: I sympathize with all that, because I know it so well; but something makes me fight that lurking desire. The damned moralist in me makes me pretend it's more heroic to live out my days; and when I hear people like those to-night, naively creating an abstract enemy, in the attempted destruction of which they would disguise their own inner desire to die, then I lash them with my own whips — oh, it's so difficult to say all this. . . .'

'Perhaps I can help you,' said Dan Hambleton.

'But, you see, it's all wrong: to steer away from death and war, it's best not to talk about death and war, but to give rein to their opposites. I'd rather write a happy tale of love and strange inventions. . . .'