

Fending off Doomsday: Christina Stead's Response to Postwar, Democratic Europe

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Abstract: The article offers an overview of Stead's response to the bourgeois social order, with special emphasis on her satiric commentary after the Second World War. In particular, Stead's interest in covert statement and the role of Lenin's seminal theses on the rentier class and imperialism are traced in *The Little Hotel* to reveal Stead's unrelenting espousal of communism and her apparent certainty that the capitalist order was facing imminent overthrow.

Keywords: communism, post-war, Switzerland, imperialism, Lenin, rentier class

Christina Stead's relationship with postwar Europe is problematic and under-explored. Given that the continent lay in soul-sickening ruins from Madrid through to Moscow, the decision of the Stead household to leave Manhattan for London in December 1946 amounted to a flight from plenty to penury, or a shift from the citadel of consumer abundance to war-worn Britain which in February 1946 had increased domestic food rationing "to hardship levels unknown even during the war" (Sebestyen 67).¹ Their motivation, then, was almost certainly ideological. America was already becoming too virulently anti-communist for Stalinists and fellow-travellers, like Stead and her life-companion Bill Blake. Simone de Beauvoir, speaking from firsthand experience of America at that time, noted that there "anti-communism" already "bordered on neurosis The witch hunt was getting underway" (Sebestyen 321). In the circumstances Europe seemed to offer more congenial political prospects. There the Left was vigorously reasserting itself. In England the Labour Party had, to the surprise of many observers, defeated wartime leader Churchill and his Conservatives, while local Communist Parties, their reputation buttressed by resistance to German occupation and by association with the heroic struggle of the Soviet Union against Fascism, were seriously vying for control of governments in France, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Greece. Also the presence of massive Soviet armies in Eastern Europe was no drawback for Stead or her partner Blake. As early as 1930 Stead had mocked "the regular yearly rumour ... that Stalin has been assassinated" (Letter to Gwen Walker-Smith, 24 Nov. 1930, Geering 35), and gloated that "the successful communistic state of Russia ... is determined to wreck the capitalistic world. It is marvellous that Soviet Russia has put itself into a position to frighten the whole of Europe in so short a time" (Geering 35-36). Similarly, its postwar military and diplomatic ascendancy was to Stead a source of hope rather than dread. In what follows I want to trace the effects of this standpoint on her contemporary observations, as well as to contrast her depiction of the bourgeois order pre- and postwar, focusing in particular on how she pinpoints through the institution of marriage, in *For Love Alone* and *The Little Hotel*, the irreversible decline of a superannuated class structure, and details through diverse well-to-do guests its pending eclipse in *The Little Hotel*.

¹ There are numerous excellent accounts of the forties and fifties, and of the effects of the war on its principal combatants. Stone, with the brilliantly entitled opening chapter "The War of British Succession," is particularly good, as are the relevant chapters in Kenwood and Morgan.

In her prewar fiction the bourgeois order is shown to hold the reins of power firmly and ruthlessly. The depressed, impoverished state of workers and strikers in *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* is proof of that, as is the social order, steeped in centuries' old religious beliefs and hierarchical traditions, portrayed in *The Salzburg Tales*. It opens with a succinct snapshot of a dominant civic hierarchy, headed by the archbishop ("he greeted ... like a prince welcoming talent to his court" [8]), and seconded by his paladins, a senior prelate and the local mayor, who constitute an apparently natural and immutable structure ("these three great persons ... divided the town ... between them" [10]). Beneath them jostle the rapacious, vainglorious, self-satisfied bourgeoisie, clutching their privileges, wealth and prejudices, secure and cordoned off from the hoypolloy. Perhaps most tellingly, in *The Beauties and Furies* diverse, potentially insurgent figures, from the man of mystery, Malpurgo, to the rebellious lovers Elvira and Oliver, finally return to, or are subsumed within the bourgeois order. There, too, a poor *demi-mondaine* like Blanche d'Arnizy, who cannot afford illusions about what it takes to get on in life, longs to join the bourgeoisie. Hence she takes a business-like view of human relations, enhances her allure with the name of a nearby chateau (Stead, *The Beauties* 109), and is fixated on attaining social and economic security, if not for herself then for her child: "she will live bourgeois. Bourgeois! They can laugh: it is very pleasant to know you will have the same roof over your head ten years hence and will have bread and meat in the larder, wine in your cellar" (Stead, *The Beauties* 218). In Stead's fiction this attractiveness proves a constant temptation to the gifted but underprivileged, such as working-class protagonists from Oliver Fenton in this novel through to Jonathan Crow in *For Love Alone*.

Apart from the traditional support of oligarchs and the church, the bourgeois order could also rely on state violence to maintain its sway. This was lent a semblance of legality by the complementary actions of judiciary and constabulary which, according to Lenin, constituted "a public force organized for social enslavement, an engine of class despotism" (Christman 300). In particular, Stead emphasizes the oppressive power of police surveillance and intervention. In *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, for instance, plain-clothed police are a repeated threat to the radical left, disrupting publication of the *Daily Worker*, raiding homes, and spying on political gatherings (Ackland 88-89). Indeed such is the level of bourgeois anxiety and state repression in *The Beauties and Furies* that it is rumoured there is one policeman to every citizen (51). Tellingly, too, in *The Salzburg Tales* the Police Commissioner is dubbed the "man of his time" (51). He is thoroughly familiar with the use of machine guns, prisons, tear gas, and torture to maintain stability. Opportunistically he has moved between posts, as well as made himself a master of repression and recurring scandals to move inexorably towards "the driver's seat ... despite his ass's ears" (*The Salzburg Tales* 50). Admitted into the best circles and a recipient of multiple state decorations, he has studied advanced methods of police enforcement in America, Britain, France, and Nazi Germany—the countries described by Lenin as the "four 'pillars' of world finance capital" (*The Salzburg Tales* 65)—and has transformed constabulary into a para-military force.² A visit to the Soviet Union is notably lacking from his résumé. In Salzburg to polish his veneer of culture, this coordinator of right-wing terror is now being "groomed for a coup d'état" (*The Salzburg Tales* 51): a last desperate stratagem of the capitalist order to retain power.

² From Nazis he had "learned how to turn recidivists into citizens by kindness, and how to discover non-existent documents" (*The Salzburg Tales* 51). The allusions are respectively to the paramilitary gangs and armies that dominated many European streets, to early concentration camps created by Fascists for political opponents and, probably, to the suspect evidence used to charge communists with the Reichstag fire.

This class system projected itself as normative and god-ordained. In the unequivocal words of one railway baron, George F. Baer, “God Almighty has given the rich men their money” (qtd. in Blake 726). John D. Rockefeller and diverse fellow plutocrats concurred. Similarly, it followed that the poor were to blame for their miserable lot: their improvidence, debauchery, and general lack of personal discipline saw to that. Defended by palliating ideology and state violence, the bourgeois order seemed unshakable, at least until the end of the *Belle Époque*. Then came the October Revolution as well as two world wars, and between them the gigantic grab for wealth and tainted influence depicted by Stead in *House of All Nations*. Smug, self-satisfied, and wallowing in luxuries from around the globe, Stead’s bankers and rentiers realise that the general trend is downwards.³ But far from being a threat, this is seen as providing new opportunities for making a financial killing. In spirit, they are peers of the Manhattan financiers depicted a decade later in the opening of *A Little Tea, A Little Chat* (1948), set during the Pacific War. The home of these men, in Stead’s striking formulation, is “that extraordinary one-time democracy, now territory of financial oligarchs These men loved the United States intensely, ferociously, with terror and greed” (4, original ellipsis). Clearly the bourgeois-capitalist system imagined itself to be virtually indestructible irrespective of national setbacks or catastrophes.

A neglected but crucial interim snapshot of this order during the late 1930s is provided in *For Love Alone*. There conventional marriage is both the lynch-pin of the dominant social system and a key measure of its health.⁴ The novel’s opening memorably depicts the bodies of young virgins wracked by inner and outer burning fires, their garments clinging to “their wet breasts and streaming thighs” (25) during a summer heatwave. Sexual ardour grips them like a fever, they feel the same “awful eagerness,” they share the same “naked need” (39). Yet society deems this need can only be met through sanctioned wedlock. The young of both sexes are shown to suffer horribly from thwarted sexual desire. On rare occasions, momentarily freed from constraint, “something hurled them at each other” (65). To deny such raging, instinctual energy is obviously dangerous. Madness, according to rumour, is one possible outcome that is repeatedly invoked, while Teresa witnesses the body of her virgin cousin violently convulsed on a bathroom floor, alternately writhing or with head banging on the ground (59). Stead is utterly dismissive of the panacea for this scene offered by a moral guardian: “It was the bible of a mumbo-jumbo religion widespread among women in small houses” and, by implication, with even smaller brains (59). Yet marriage, too, is also seriously flawed and, as Marxist Leninism often repeated, a dissectible manifestation of current social arrangements. To criticize it thus becomes potentially a revolutionary act, as does Stead’s contravention of the centuries-old taboo that had silenced treatment of women’s intimate experience.

Bourgeois wedlock is depicted as a deadening, comatose state that conforms to the dictates of wealth and religion. Stead’s characters speak of “the marriage-sleep” (*For Love Alone* 265) or being “entombed in their lives” (*For Love Alone* 73). Arousal would be explosive. To challenge

³ Here as elsewhere I use the now almost obsolete term of “rentier,” once frequently employed in Marxist-Leninist writings, to signify someone living off her or his capital investments and outlays, and so, by extension, a capitalist parasite battenning off the labour of productive workers. To Stead and Blake, both pre- and postwar, its use was a sign of their ideological persuasion as well as an affirmation of key communist theories.

⁴ For fuller accounts of *For Love Alone* see Lidoff 57-102; Brydon 80-89; Sheridan 55-8; and Rooney.

behavioural norms and moral rules seriously has the potential to upset the whole social order: “if women began to love freely ... [a]n abyss would open up in the principal shopping street of every town” (*For Love Alone* 464). To overthrow the institution of marriage with its possessiveness, property, and exclusive rights, which turns once-free individuals into prisoners and warders, would be like the storming of the Bastille or the Winter Palace. Hence to love is attributed an earth- or regime-shaking power, so that James Quick, remarking its first stirrings, felt “quite different, as if there had been a revolution and the poor were free” (*For Love Alone* 451). In the capitalist world, according to one iconoclast, ardent “love is feared: it dissolves society” (*For Love Alone* 236), whereas in the homeland of socialism, the Soviet Union, far different relations pertain between the sexes. Equality of education and opportunity for both sexes was promoted in propaganda and practice, while in widely disseminated posters women were portrayed as members of the productive workforce or as key players in the revolutionary vanguard. There, empowered to speak and act, as Girton reminds Teresa, “a girl who loved a man would tell him so” (*For Love Alone* 475). A new and better society is not only possible but at hand. Such a revolution, however, seems far off in England. The couples who visit Quick and Teresa in their London apartment are invariably jealous, bitter, fearsome, veritable prisoners of a married state, or its *de facto* counterpart, that satisfies no one, and yet provides even the model for extra-marital unions. By the novel’s end Teresa has seriously challenged the normal possessiveness of real, as well as pseudo wedlock, and subdued her male partner. Change is apparently possible, but in general bourgeois conventions still provide key paradigms and social norms.

The huge strains that the Second World War had placed on the dominant bourgeois order are evident in Stead’s correspondence during the years immediately following the armistice. Her letters attest to parlous social conditions in England and France, and to the high personal cost of her and Blake’s precipitous return to London. This was paid initially in undermined health, later in dwindling publication opportunities and greatly diminished earnings. The available accommodation in 1946-47 was dreadful: “There are holes in the staircase, the banisters are all out, the ceilings and walls are ... ripped and gapped” (Letter to Aida and Max Kotlarsky, 9 July 1947, Geering 105). The next potential lodging in a row of once comfortable, multi-storey mansions was scarcely an improvement: “completely eaten-up, fallen-down, broke and bleating in every breeze and moulting with every drop of rain: what a drippy, scareful, rotten-planked old row it is” (Geering 105). Dwellings, in brief, were falling apart, money, materials, and habitable space in short supply. Nutrition was hardly better, whether in severely rationed England or the former gastronomic capital Paris. There in 1947, according to Stead, bread had been allegedly corrupted by an admixture of rotten corn, producing “rashes, fever, nightmares,” and diarrhea, while everywhere the black market was rampant. Government complicity was treated as a foregone conclusion, as was the probable result: “*je crois que la famine et sa soeur la révolution rôdent en France*” (“I believe that famine and its sister revolution are on the prowl in France” [letter to Nadine and Lina Lewin, 1 Sept. 1947, Geering 108]). How long will the much abused people put up with these contretemps is the unspoken question—as it was throughout the crisis-plagued 1930s.

The recurring issue of food shortages and famine brought a dissenting reading of the historical record. The Marshall Plan, then and now, is usually praised as American aid which saved Western Europe from potential regime-change and laid the basis for spectacular recovery. This bounty was inspired by the continent’s dire plight during one of the worst winters on record, that of late 1946

when Stead returned to London—and by the fear of Western Europe falling to the U.S.S.R. Less than a year later Stead saw here a dastardly Yankee plot. “[T]he Americans believe that by inducing and encouraging this winter’s famine all Western Europe will be in their hands,” and so ship “rotten wheat and corn to France” (Letter to Nadine and Lina Lewin, 1 Sept. 1947, Geering 109). Further surmises, dubious speculation, and Party-sanctioned clichés tumble from her pen. The “Marshallites,” as she calls them, are perceived as having overplayed their hand. “Supposing the French rise? Will the Americans send an army against France? ... If they do—who is at the gate, on the other frontier?” [The Red Army is here understood] (Geering 109). In her eyes, the ever-rapacious aims of the capitalist democracies, those arch imperialists, stand fully and laughably exposed: “What a mess they have got themselves into trying to starve all Europe including England into submission to the frenzied American imperialists! It is all crazy ... It is awful from any point of view ...” (Geering 109). Paranoia was clearly not the sole preserve of anti-communists. The Americans emerge in Stead’s eyes as the lords of famine, the manipulators of seasons, the dispensers of second-rate produce with grand gestures, and as typical capitalist mountebanks and charlatans whom socialist truths, supported by victorious armies, are destined to sweep into the Atlantic.

This emphasis on imperialism owed much not only to recent events, but also to her awareness of Britain’s ongoing exploitation of its so-called dominions. Stead had long harbored serious reservations about England and its relationship to the antipodes. From the outset England’s carefully compartmentalised society unsettled her: “I begin to have doubts about it all” (Letter to Gwen Walker-Smith, 11 July 1928, Geering 4). Its pretensions and intellectual life were soon seriously questioned, and by early 1931 the empire was dismissed as “a sell,” the colonies viewed as being “sold” (Letter to Gwen Walker-Smith, 25 Jan. 1931, Geering 39). On 7 November 1937 Stead’s verdict was unequivocal: “I detest and despise the London Englishman who runs the Empire; they are the smuggest, bottlickingest, most class-saturated, most conceited and ignorant people I ever met” (Letter to Gilbert Stead, 7 Nov. 1937, Geering 73). The dominions, she asserted, had been persistently exploited and persuaded to adore their bondage. In fact English history, as she argued in the essay “A Waker and a Dreamer” (1972), was one long “sell.” Here heroic British historical narratives are reclassified as “engaging travel fiction” (Stead, “A Waker” 483). The self-serving myths of British justice and equality are rudely shattered by attention to victims and incidents usually “expurgated from the school books” (Stead, *The Salzburg Tales* 465). As Stead bluntly states: “In the nineteenth century little in England was Merrie” (Stead, “A Waker” 482). Instead of viewing it as a seat of enlightenment and technological advances, she enumerates instances of class oppression and rebellion, from rural workers hoping for emancipation through a French invasion, to rick-burners, machine-breakers, Chartists and later dangerous associations, such as “ILLEGAL Meeting ... LECTURE ON SOCIALISM” (Stead, “A Waker” 482; original emphasis). Marx may have lived and studied in England, but its vaunted institutions and traditions were politically antithetical to much that Stead held dear. Post-war little had changed. Whereas even conservative Switzerland in elections could register a “30 per cent red vote” (Letter to Nettie Palmer, 30 Jan. 1951, Geering 124), as she noted, Britain continued its pantomime of beneficent rule, which she passionately rejected, avowing unalloyed “hatred and contempt for the seat of a vicious Empire, oppressor of many nations and author of many crimes; and home of judicial crime, [and] famine”—an incontestable sign of oppression and the unjust distribution of wealth (Letter to Nettie Palmer, 9 May 1951, Geering 126).

Also informing her attitudes and analysis was Lenin's seminal study *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916). This stage was marked allegedly by the unfettered reign of finance capitalism (wielded primarily by banks), by the internecine struggle of cartels and monopolies competing for global dominance, and by a huge expansion of the rentier category in the Western world. Idle bourgeoisie living off their investments personified the greed, corruption, and decay of this highest and final phase of the capitalist system, which had been unfolding since the beginning of the twentieth century. Lenin was categorical: "The supremacy of finance capital ... means the predominance of the rentier" (71). This group had undergone "extraordinary growth" (127). Allegedly its income was fivefold that garnered by foreign trade (127), while in the "United States of Western Europe" (131) there was a widespread "yearning" to become rentiers, living off "income from interest and dividends, issues of securities, commissions and speculations" (127). Nor does Lenin hesitate to list (citing John A. Hobson) its long-established seats of power: "in the South of England, in the Riviera, and in the tourist-ridden or residential parts of Italy and Switzerland, [reside] little clusters of wealthy aristocrats drawing dividends and pensions from the Far East ..." (129). These details were not lost on Stead. She had, of course, depicted this climactic manifestation of capitalist greed and parasitic behaviour among the supernumeraries in *House of All Nations* (1938). Daily they gather in Bertillon's bank to follow luminous, shifting figures that designated market fluctuations, grimly determined to live off their capital rather than from any physical labour. Decades later their relevance, to Marxist-Leninists, as a putative sign and measure of capitalist decay remained unaltered—and Stead found herself daily in their midst. For whereas in the 1930s she had spent much of her time in Communist-affiliated circles (Ackland 59-65; 167-195), in postwar Europe she lived, for long stretches, out of a suitcase, and substituted hotels and pensions for a fixed address. In short, she was brought face-to-face with case studies of that crucial rentier category singled out in *Imperialism* and penetratingly dramatized, with all its foibles and conceit, in *The Little Hotel*.⁵

Equally important to the novel's genesis, though usually overlooked, was Stead's abiding interest in covert statement. Although presumably always aware of it as a potential compositional strategy, her few extant statements on it appear in occasional reviews published in the Communist cultural journal, *New Masses*. During a controversy on the merits of Louis Aragon's latest novel, for example, she argued strongly for the need to distinguish between a work's "surface design" and "deeper thoughts [that] are masked by that" ("Pro and Con on Aragon" 2). Four years earlier she had been even more explicit about the potential gap between a "smooth, ironic detached surface"—in the Finish novel *Meek Heritage*—and unpalatable truths expressed in "sly, oppressively cautious" ways:

The story is written in plain, limber language with the familiar style of country saws. It is easy to read. Doubtless, political circumstances account for the rather sly, oppressively cautious sort of asides which sprinkle the text ... but they are on the surface, which is written to appear smooth, ironic, detached. Immediately under it there is terror and agony which expressed itself not only in the author's choice of ideas [but also of characters]. ("Revolution in Finland" 25)

This emergent interest in veiled authorial intention appeared at a time of unprecedented crisis for Communist writers in the United States. Not only was Roosevelt's government increasingly concerned with "un-American activities" and the amorphous category of seditious utterances, but

⁵ The subject's inception dates back to Lausanne in 1950 (Rowley 386-387), and eventually involved "reworking" two short stories first published in 1952 and 1968 (Lidoff 154).

the Communist Party of the United States, under Earl Browder, was decrying old-fashioned Communism in favour of embracing key American and capitalist traditions. Stead and Blake were incensed at this ideological volte-face; however, they knew that overt opposition to it could produce a punitive response and even ostracism for Communist ranks.⁶

Faced with potential harassment or worse from the radical Left as well as the mainstream, federal Right Stead, not surprisingly, turned to covert statement to present ideologically unpalatable views. As recent scholarship has convincingly demonstrated, this began with *The Man Who Loved Children* and was a structuring principle of her final composition, decades later, “The Old School” (Ackland 197-219). Once read as little more than a vivid evocation of school-days by “an older, mellow Stead reflecting on her past” (Rowley 540), commentary has shown how the school serves as a microcosm of everyday life and its fierce, implacable conditions during the Cold War (Ackland 10-16)—as arguably does “the little hotel.” Crucial to grasping the neglected Marxist-Leninist subtext of the latter work is the recurring character of the rentier. They are the mainstay of a superficially humorous, anecdotal plot, but one which arguably reveals a more coherent and ominous critique of the current social order once the rentier class is granted its Marxist-Leninist due as a key marker of the climactic stage and inevitable doom of Western capitalism.

Depicted in this hotel-cum-guest house and its clientele is postwar Europe in miniature—and Stead’s verdict on it.⁷ The fall of Nazi Germany has issued in neither jubilation nor self-assurance. Instead the immediate Fascist past is still a disturbing influence. Some characters cite the ideology’s ascent and decline as evidence of history’s unpredictability, others (their own past unexplained) are perhaps over-insistent on their loathing of Germans (like the mayor of B), while Madame Blaise’s copious fortune is attributed to undisclosed Nazi sources (*The Little Hotel* 134). Accurately the threats attributed to Fascist Italy are of a lesser order. The marginalization of non-supporters of Fascism was one evil (69), another its malformation of individuals, such as the servant Gennaro, whose later eccentricities seem a product of Mussolini’s youth movement (62). Now, with the Fascist menace at last overcome, personal neuroses and a perpetual struggle for advantage resume prominence, while long-simmering national rivalries and resentments threaten to fracture any possible European order. Here too individual freedom, even in the land of Switzerland (self-defined in terms of liberty and neutrality), is at best circumscribed. It was not just in Stalin’s Russia or Hitler’s Germany that daily life was monitored by informants, that surveillance (together with its handmaiden threat) was virtually ubiquitous. Stead’s hotel proprietors observe rules, enforce order, and maintain the proprieties. Repeatedly they speak of the need to control their guests. Apparent social cohesion among a varied clientele is preserved through constant snooping, spying, manipulating and a careful mixture of rewards, reprimands and favours. The continued existence of the whole is assured through a well-regarded constabulary: “the police are our friends, we need each other” (9), the proprietess, Mrs. Bonnard, states matter-of-factly. Its officers provide confidential documents, information and a threatening presence to assure acceptable compliance, while cartel-like collusion among hotel-keepers helps maintain or raise prices (*The Little Hotel* 66-67).

⁶ See Ackland 180-193 for a fuller discussion of Stead’s predicament, and Ottanelli for a detailed account of the American Communist Party during this crucial period.

⁷ For further comment on Stead’s trenchant social criticism see Brydon 138-145; whereas Pender, despite a monograph devoted to Stead as satirist, unaccountably ignores this novel.

Unobtrusively but insistently, banter and exchanges between hotel guests reveal the new international bogeyman to be the U.S.S.R., together with an unknown number of Communists who work Moscow's will throughout the Continent and beyond. The Red army, having smashed the supposedly invincible Wehrmacht, now stands in overwhelming strength at the very centre of Europe: a ready source of fears, rumours and phantasies. "All agree in hating the Russians" (*The Little Hotel* 18). Among rentiers this armed might inspires anxieties about their own considerable possessions and personal prospects, given their condemnation as social parasites in Communist circles. The widespread dispossession and massacres sparked by the October Revolution (and reported far and wide by the White Russian diaspora) have ignited fears of their revolutionary recurrence in other lands. Tellingly, in the main dinner party of the book, once formalities and orders have received due attention, the first topic of conversation is the Communist menace. Trite repartee, beginning with "as well to be hung for a sheep as a lamb" (*The Little Hotel* 118), quickly assumes a dreaded immediacy: "'We are not going to be hung, I hope' ... 'We will be, if the Russians get us. If they saw us having a dinner like this, we should at once be stood up against a wall and shot, not even a drumhead court-martial'" (118). The threat is then historicised, with the Politburo likened to the French Revolution's Committee of Public Safety, and the fear of Communist sympathisers (read potential spies) actualized: "Now the Russians and their friends are everywhere. Would you believe it ... there are communists in the British Civil Service. They have found them and are going to root them out. Oh, I could never have believed such a thing of Englishmen ... What can be the matter?" (118). The question, slyly placed by the author, remains unanswered. The monied class is blind to all but self-interest; self-criticism lies outside its ambit. Nor does an occasional, furloughed American serviceman from Germany, drinking in a bar (*The Little Hotel* 131), do anything to dispel speculation about an imminent Red invasion of France, or a bold incursion to grab the fabled, hidden gold in Swiss bank vaults.

Importantly, the little hotel's clientele provides evidence of crucial historical processes. Its guests represent the parasitic rentiers pilloried by Marxist Leninism: that is, they consist primarily of aged retirees, or of others who have early deserted the field of productive activities to live off the labour of the oppressed. Money was and remains their ruling passion. *The Financial Times* is preferred reading—guests even compete for its limited exemplars to enable informed speculation. Mr Wilkins, determined to augment his already considerable assets, begins each day by updating "his sheets and ... daily chart, for analysis of the currency fluctuations and stock-market quotations" (*The Little Hotel* 34). Proudly he distinguishes himself from the "ignorant British tourist" who, bamboozled by banks, accepts the inferior "tourist rate" (34). Instead, he subordinates his life and whereabouts to achieving favorable "exchange operation[s]" (34). Marriages, or other enduring relationships between the sexes, depend more on monetary than amorous considerations. Wilkins, in the course of a twenty-seven-year-long liaison, has changed from an appealing lover into a greedy, emotionally arid, petty tyrant, determined to get full control over his partner's wealth. Others, like the Princess, use their fortune to attract a much younger companion, as well as to reverse time's handiwork on their faces and figures. Marriage for this category of capitalists has usually been regarded as a means of getting ahead, or as a calculated financial transaction, as is the case with the Blaises. They "had much to keep them together, a daughter, a son, Madame Blaise's fortune, a beautiful old house in Basel" (*The Little Hotel* 36). The last two items, rather than offspring, dominate their maneuvers. Finally, having devoted their lives to hoarding wealth, rentiers are most reluctant to part with it. Guests repeatedly lie about their financial assets, their

ready cash and personal liabilities. Stingily they stay long-term in the cheapest hotel, or contrive to have “friends” pick up the tab for meals or accommodation, their actions ruled by blatant greed and miserly calculation.

Idle parasites one and all, their pettiness, self-centredness and narcissism are relentlessly dissected, their dividends traced to exploitive industry and farflung empires. Without property, professions or nearby children to bother them, the guests’ time is filled with leisure pursuits and stifled boredom, their days measured out with meals and ritualistic drinks. They find entertainment in updating, upgrading their jewellery (*The Little Hotel* 45), or pleasure in observing the physical efforts of others. “I get real amusement out of watching the men at work” (35), confesses Mr. Wilkins unashamedly. Meanwhile their individual marriages are in tatters. Disillusionment is rife: “all marriage is hell” (121). Wealth not love is the great desideratum. Vile class and racial prejudices abound, self-interest trumps all: “Let’s leech all we can out of the damned ruined robber Empire and lick up the bloodspots. Little salesmen and their half-caste mistresses running here to be safe from doomsday and thinking themselves our equals” (*The Little Hotel* 134). End-products of a rapacious system, their vanity, class consciousness and physical decline are on display in diverse encounters as well as serried hotel mirrors. From this clientele can be expected neither further progeny nor inspiration. The Western order as represented by them is intellectually exhausted and unmistakably on its last legs.

Two key pillars of the triumphant postwar, democratic order are bitingly represented through incisive cameos of American and English guests. Although the novel provides a brief vignette of a linguistically and sartorially able “surprising American woman” (*The Little Hotel* 128), encountered while dining out, the main action focuses on more typical and far older figures: the southerner, Mrs. Powell, and the Princess. The latter recalls the generations of American heiresses sent to Europe in quest of a title. More generally, she displays the unqualified power of the mighty dollar, the self-confidence this breeds, a national proclivity for meddling in the affairs of others, and a pronounced willingness to turn a blind eye to traduced human rights or defunct democratic ideals if specific regimes otherwise meet American needs: “in South America ... they have dictators and an organized society and excellent servants and I am going to get married” (127). Mrs. Powell reveals darker currents still lurking in the American psyche and liable to inflect national and international policies. She combines the pro-Hitler and anti-Semitic attitudes of a Henry Ford with the racism and segregationist stance of the southern Democratic Party.⁸ “Darwin showed that God has arranged it so that blood will tell No one would approve Hitler, but he understood the danger ... he was like a surgeon cutting out the disease” (38). She is outraged by the intermittent presence of black artists in their dining-room (41-42), and voices what for Stead would have been the ultimate inanity: “Karl Marx ... was a revolutionary because of his liver trouble” (41). Finally, the fight against Communism gives Mrs. Powell an occupation, a platform and *bête noire* for every ill. Her “political work” consists in placing anti-communist cuttings on dining-room tables and haranguing, in some cases directly libelling, unwary or innocent guests, such as Mrs Trollope (54). Here, Stead suggests, are the well-springs of American patriotism and policy, a surmise confirmed by Mrs. Bonnard’s judgment: “She was the most patriotic American I ever met” (*The Little Hotel* 54).

⁸ There is nothing haphazard about this identification. For the crucial historical role of this group and its relation to the New Deal and racial legislation see Katznelson.

Stead's enduring contempt for the vicious, exploitative, British Empire finds diverse expression among the novel's largest group of national characters, the English abroad. They include numerous superannuated women who have variously wasted their lives (*The Little Hotel* 90), and whose interests merely extend to tea, cards and small-minded, vindictive acts. Theirs is a society in which status is all-important, its "bedrocks" are class, colour and upbringing. The likes of "little salesmen and their half-caste mistresses" (134) are definitely to be kept in their place, while their palpable increase has, according to Mrs. Powell, one predictable explanation: "I never imagined there would be so many coloured people and half-breeds about in Switzerland. Communism attracts such unfortunates" (54). Presumably the "better" English guests, already shaken by a reforming Labour government at home, would have agreed. Certainly in *The Little Hotel* a deep sense of caste and self-bestowed privilege are shown to be readily transportable. This is not only the case in an abject colony, such as Malaya, the former home of Mr. Wilkins and Mrs. Trollope, or Australia, but may even be observed in minor English implantations overseas, such as those found at fabled European watering-holes. There social hierarchies are reproduced, nuances proliferate. In Switzerland Mr. Wilkins feels infinitely superior to the transitory "ignorant British tourist" (34). But he, as a relatively recent arrival, is in turned looked down on by "the old community of English in town ... [which] never acknowledged English visitors. Mr. Wilkins ... was snubbed and ignored by the resident English, even those drunk or in debt" (*The Little Hotel* 34). What wealth is to the Americans, hierarchy is to the English—and as destructive of core moral and humane values. The system is well developed and deeply rooted in the colonies, or latterday dominions, which inculcate intense veneration of all things English and produce multitudes of "mimic men" (Bhabha 84-85).

This imperial heritage is specifically arraigned through the elderly rentier familiarly dubbed the Admiral and the Wilkins-Trollope couple. Identified through sobriquet and stentorian voice with England's glorious maritime past, the Admiral projects, in effect, the condition of a country that is but a shadow of its former self: "She rattled her stick, the poor old bully in a great rage, in misery" (*The Little Hotel* 147).⁹ Though victorious in two world wars, England emerged from them crippling indebted, her vast overseas wealth depleted, her industry and agriculture woefully inadequate, her once global-spanning forces drastically undermanned and underfunded. The Suez crisis of 1956 of course drove home this loss of power, and her continued dependence on the United States. Subject to conflicting impulses, England wanted both to keep and to be rid of blue-chip colonies, to intervene overseas and yet to hold back, to play the regal imperialist and to focus on her country's internal problems—in short, a bundle of contradictions and inappropriate impulses deftly evoked by the Admiral: "Mrs Trollope ... thought she had gone away, given up, gone to her room; but no, she [the Admiral] was standing there all the time, formidable, irreducible, miserable in the strength that can't be turned off or controlled, unable to walk down, too proud to return to her room, deserted in her painful age" (147). Mr. Wilkins articulates, and acts upon, the hard historical truth of imperial decline and looming eclipse. A prescient expatriate "with a lot of medals ... told me we were quite done out there in the East" (163). This draws from Mrs. Trollope a question, from him an answer: "'But all these terrible wars, Robert?' 'Those are parting shots to cover our retreat'" (164). His response stresses orderly purpose, a well-executed plan, whereas the psychologically probing Admiral metaphor suggests more plausibly conflicted deeds and motivation: a "strength that can't be turned off or controlled ... too proud to return to her room, deserted in her painful age" (147).

⁹ Gribble notes that the Admiral "exemplif[ies] the pathos of the death throes of Empire" (103).

A small savouring of the fruits of England's colonial past are offered by Mr. Wilkins and his "cousin." Both have been enduringly shaped by the East. Though often passing for white, Mrs. Trollope's face betrays telltale signs of exoticism, such as hints of a tawny hue or fascinatingly long, Egyptian eyes. Although this is occasionally attributed to prolonged exposure to heat and a burning "oriental" sun (*The Little Hotel* 95), she had in fact a Javanese mother, an influence still perceptible in her own daughter, Madeleine, who is "dazzlingly, with the fresh beauty of blood newly mixed" (141). Once protected in "the unreal world of empire outposts" (142), now she must cope with racist epithets, such as "that Asian" (43), and a dawning realization of her partner's greed and cold heartedness. He, Robert Wilkins, retains work habits inspired by the East (139) and a drive, associated with his rural and colonial past (84), to become truly rich. In his case, however, family and national traits are less benign than in his partner. She eventually sees him (correctly) as "selfish, cold, lazy ... slowly engulfing all my money" (152)—an intensely egotistical, greedy patriarch, capable of doggedness as well as "unflinching cruelty" (100). He has much in common with his vain, mercenary siblings who are "soulless commonplace people" (*The Little Hotel* 142), a verdict which Stead would arguably have levelled at large sections of the British population.

Morally and emotionally, Mrs. Trollope is his antithesis. Love she alone still treasures and looks for. Hard-heartedness repulses her, an existence utterly without purpose or use horrifies her, and she alone makes a genuinely generous gift of money to help another human being: in this case a distressed, dying expatriate. In addition, Mrs. Trollope can look objectively at herself: "I know I am not clever: it is partly because I cannot believe that life is meant to be ugly" (*The Little Hotel* 187). Yet there is simply too much, be it personal or political, that she "cannot understand" (187). The weight of evidence in the novel suggests that an early life of unreality (based on extreme protection) has enabled her to maintain unreal, unexamined beliefs and hopes, including the Marxist opium of the people, Christian faith, which sees her turning in vain to her name saint for counsel in moments of crisis or decision. Clearly she is not a viable exemplar, though she sets store by once-prized human values that are otherwise abused or denied in a thoroughly capitalist society.

Britain emerges as a severely depleted, nearly bankrupt nation, its citizens encumbered with prejudices born of the imperial past and a moribund culture—its rentiers battling to adapt. Part of the English rentier mind longs nostalgically for a recent past where all were decent and contented, a phantasy which draws them to re-screenings of "Goodbye, Mr. Chips" (*The Little Hotel* 54), or White Russians to a Swiss hotel called "Old English" (178). Instead the present offers them socialist insurrection in the guise of an elected Labour government, made up of "the sons of bricklayers and boot-menders" (81), bent on expanding social welfare and shaking up the established order. For they are allegedly determined to turn the rich into "tramp and beggar" (82), make the expatriation of fortunes extremely difficult, and reacquaint the rentier with tough physical labour, "since he had no occupation" (27). The general dilemma of the English rentier is summed up by Mrs. Trollope: "naturally, we are all miserable with the Labour Government ... their England isn't England to me" (91). Meantime the empire is finished, the English bereft of their lustre. Hence even the Admiral assumes grotesque, comic proportions, recalling fleetingly "some limitless being who, for a reason obscure, had taken on the flesh of a superannuated tea-drinking English paying guest" (145). The fall is indeed great, with the run-of-the-mill Englishman appearing to European eyes, once again, as quintessentially "unreliable, awkward, ignorant, provincial and poor" (87).

Portrayed in *The Little Hotel*, then, is a telling microcosm of the final phase of capitalism grown, in Lenin's words, "ripe, over-ripe, and rotten" (136). Tottering toward the grave, the aged, envious, egotistical guests are harbingers of the irreversible collapse of a sclerotic system, as well as markers of Stead's disgust. In postwar Western Europe former grounds for hope seem exhausted. Of the Americans it is said without qualification: "Ideas are not very important to them; it is their own aim that counts" (*The Little Hotel* 39). They too are fittingly self-centred, demanding access to formerly closed markets in exchange for aid, and willing to rearm a recently hostile Germany to save their own "boys." The prospects of the old Great Powers are far worse. "The French and English are the laughing stock of Europe. Everyone knows the English are a fallen nation" (*The Little Hotel* 127). And *The Little Hotel* amply confirms this verdict. Nor should a redeeming deity be looked to. Neither the divine afflatus nor Wordsworth's "gentle breeze" betokening a kindred presence is affirmed (Wordsworth 498). In fact, it is quietly ridiculed like other putative Western saviours: "Just then there was a sound like a not-yet-heard wind. It rattled a little like the beginning of a wind against the shutters at night, without snow or rain. It was the electric motor of the new lift" (*The Little Hotel* 148). Characteristically Stead will have nothing of ethereal or otherworldly explanations. Similarly, although she would probably have agreed that "doomsday always comes" (134), she would certainly not have envisaged it as Mrs. Trollope does, "[w]ith wings coming down so thick you could see no sky" (164). Instead, the novel ends with open questions, and the unspoken but still menacing threat of a Soviet takeover. Given Stead's comprehensive, pointed and late attack on capitalism in this work, Communist Russia presumably remained her last best hope, her article of faith, while to the end Britain was for her a "ruined robber empire," idle rentiers the inheritors of a doomed order, and capitalists capable of vile demeaning actions (even willing to lick up, as well as shed blood [134]), so long as their "robber" hegemony was preserved and doomsday postponed until the morrow.

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