

25: THE FIELD OF BLOOD

In my daily paper this morning I read the following interesting paragraphs, which take my mind back to an England which I do not remember and which, therefore (perhaps), I admire.

"Nearly sixty years ago--on 4 September, 1850--the Austrian General Haynau, who had gained an unenviable fame throughout the world by his ferocious methods in suppressing the Hungarian revolution in 1849, while on a visit to this country, was belaboured in the streets of London by the draymen of Messrs. Barclay, Perkins and Co., whose brewery he had just inspected in company of an adjutant. Popular delight was so great that the Government of the time did not dare to prosecute the assailants, and the General--the 'women-flogger,' as he was called by the people--had to leave these shores without remedy.

"He returned to his own country and settled upon his estate at Szekeres, which is close to the commune above-mentioned. By his will the estate passed to his daughter, after whose death it was to be presented to the commune. This daughter has just died, but the Communal Council, after much deliberation, has declined to accept the gift, and ordered that the estate should be left to fall out of cultivation, and be called the 'Bloody Meadow.'"

Now that is an example of how things happen under an honest democratical impulse. I do not dwell specially on the earlier part of the story, though the earlier part of the story is astonishingly interesting. It recalls the days when Englishmen were potential lighters; that is, potential rebels. It is not for lack of agonies of intellectual anger: the Sultan and the late King Leopold have been denounced as heartily as General Haynau. But I doubt if they would have been physically thrashed in the London streets.

It is not the tyrants that are lacking, but the draymen. Nevertheless, it is not upon the historic heroes of Barclay, Perkins and Co. that I build all my hope. Fine as it was, it was not a full and perfect revolution. A brewer's drayman beating an eminent European General with a stick, though a singularly bright and pleasing vision, is not a complete one. Only when the brewer's drayman beats the brewer with a stick shall we see the clear and radiant sunrise of British self-government. The fun will really start when we begin to thump the oppressors of England as well as the oppressors of Hungary. It is, however, a definite decline in the spiritual character of draymen that now they can thump neither one nor the other.

But, as I have already suggested, my real quarrel is not about the first part of the extract, but about the second. Whether or no the draymen of Barclay and Perkins have degenerated, the Commune which includes Szekeres has not degenerated. By the way, the Commune which includes Szekeres is called Kissekeres; I trust that this frank avowal will excuse me from the necessity of mentioning either of these places again by name. The Commune is still capable of performing direct democratic actions, if necessary, with a stick.

I say with a stick, not with sticks, for that is the whole argument about democracy. A people is a soul; and if you want to know what a soul is, I can only answer that it is something that can sin and that can sacrifice itself. A people can commit theft; a people can confess theft; a people can repent of theft. That is the idea of the republic. Now, most modern people have got into their heads the idea that democracies are dull, drifting things, a mere black swarm or slide of clerks to their accustomed doom. In most modern novels and essays it is insisted (by way of contrast) that a walking gentleman may have adventures as he walks. It is insisted that an aristocrat can commit crimes, because an aristocrat always cultivates liberty. But, in truth, a people can have adventures, as Israel did crawling through the desert to the promised land. A people can do heroic deeds; a people can commit crimes; the French people did both in the Revolution; the Irish people have done both in their much purer and more honourable progress.

But the real answer to this aristocratic argument which seeks to identify democracy with a drab utilitarianism may be found in action such as that of the Hungarian Commune--whose name I decline to repeat. This Commune did just one of those acts that prove that a separate people has a separate personality; it threw something away. A man can throw a bank note into the fire. A man can fling a sack of corn into the river. The bank-note may be burnt as a satisfaction of some scruple; the corn may be destroyed as a sacrifice to some god. But whenever there is sacrifice we know there is a single will. Men may be disputatious and doubtful, may divide by very narrow majorities in their debate about how to gain wealth. But men have to be uncommonly unanimous in order to refuse wealth. It wants a very complete committee to burn a bank note in

the office grate. It needs a highly religious tribe really to throw corn into the river. This self-denial is the test and definition of self-government.

I wish I could feel certain that any English County Council or Parish Council would be single enough to make that strong gesture of a romantic refusal; could say, "No rents shall be raised from this spot; no grain shall grow in this spot; no good shall come of this spot; it shall remain sterile for a sign." But I am afraid they might answer, like the eminent sociologist in the story, that it was "waste of spice."