

THE MAN ON TOP

There is a fact at the root of all realities to-day which cannot be stated too simply. It is that the powers of this world are now not trusted simply because they are not trustworthy. This can be quite clearly seen and said without any reference to our several passions or partisanship. It does not follow that we think such a distrust a wise sentiment to express; it does not even follow that we think it a good sentiment to entertain. But such is the sentiment, simply because such is the fact. The distinction can be quite easily defined in an example. I do not think that private workers owe an indefinite loyalty to their employer. But I do think that patriotic soldiers owe a more or less indefinite loyalty to their leader in battle. But even if they ought to trust their captain, the fact remains that they often do not trust him; and the fact remains that he often is not fit to be trusted.

Most of the employers and many of the Socialists seem to have got a very muddled ethic about the basis of such loyalty; and perpetually try to put employers and officers upon the same disciplinary plane. I should have thought myself that the difference was alphabetical enough. It has nothing to do with the idealising of war or the materialising of trade; it is a distinction in the primary purpose. There might be much more elegance and poetry in a shop under William Morris than in a regiment under Lord Kitchener. But the difference is not in the persons or the atmosphere, but in the aim. The British Army does not exist in order to pay Lord Kitchener. William Morris's shop, however artistic and

philanthropic, did exist to pay William Morris. If it did not pay the shopkeeper it failed as a shop; but Lord Kitchener does not fail if he is underpaid, but only if he is defeated. The object of the Army is the safety of the nation from one particular class of perils; therefore, since all citizens owe loyalty to the nation, all citizens who are soldiers owe loyalty to the Army. But nobody has any obligation to make some particular rich man richer. A man is bound, of course, to consider the indirect results of his action in a strike; but he is bound to consider that in a swing, or a giddy-go-round, or a smoking concert; in his wildest holiday or his most private conversation. But direct responsibility like that of a soldier he has none. He need not aim solely and directly at the good of the shop; for the simple reason that the shop is not aiming solely and directly at the good of the nation. The shopman is, under decent restraints, let us hope, trying to get what he can out of the nation; the shop assistant may, under the same decent restraints, get what he can out of the shopkeeper. All this distinction is very obvious. At least I should have thought so.

But the primary point which I mean is this. That even if we do take the military view of mercantile service, even if we do call the rebellious shop assistant "disloyal"—that leaves exactly where it was the question of whether he is, in point of fact, in a good or bad shop.

Granted that all Mr. Poole's employees are bound to follow for ever the cloven pennon of the Perfect Pair of Trousers, it is all the more true that the pennon may, in point of fact, become imperfect. Granted that all Barney Barnato's workers ought to have followed him to death or

glory, it is still a Perfectly legitimate question to ask which he was likely to lead them to. Granted that Dr. Sawyer's boy ought to die for his master's medicines, we may still hold an inquest to find out if he died of them. While we forbid the soldier to shoot the general, we may still wish the general were shot.

The fundamental fact of our time is the failure of the successful man. Somehow we have so arranged the rules of the game that the winners are worthless for other purposes; they can secure nothing except the prize. The very rich are neither aristocrats nor self-made men; they are accidents—or rather calamities. All revolutionary language is a generation behind the times in talking of their futility. A revolutionist would say (with perfect truth) that coal-owners know next to nothing about coal-mining. But we are past that point. Coal-owners know next to nothing about coal-owning. They do not develop and defend the nature of their own monopoly with any consistent and courageous policy, however wicked, as did the old aristocrats with the monopoly of land. They have not the virtues nor even the vices of tyrants; they have only their powers. It is the same with all the powerful of to-day; it is the same, for instance, with the high-placed and high-paid official. Not only is the judge not judicial, but the arbiter is not even arbitrary. The arbiter decides, not by some gust of justice or injustice in his soul like the old despot dooming men under a tree, but by the permanent climate of the class to which he happens to belong. The ancient wig of the judge is often indistinguishable from the old wig of the flunkey.

To judge about success or failure one must see things very simply; one must see them in masses, as the artist, half closing his eyes against details, sees light and shade. That is the only way in which a just judgment can be formed as to whether any departure or development, such as Islam or the American Republic, has been a benefit upon the whole. Seen close, such great erections always abound in ingenious detail and impressive solidity; it is only by seeing them afar off that one can tell if the Tower leans.

Now if we thus take in the whole tilt or posture of our modern state, we shall simply see this fact: that those classes who have on the whole governed, have on the whole failed. If you go to a factory you will see some very wonderful wheels going round; you will be told that the employer often comes there early in the morning; that he has great organising power; that if he works over the colossal accumulation of wealth he also works over its wise distribution. All this may be true of many employers, and it is practically said of all.

But if we shade our eyes from all this dazzle of detail; if we simply ask what has been the main feature, the upshot, the final fruit of the capitalist system, there is no doubt about the answer. The special and solid result of the reign of the employers has been—unemployment. Unemployment not only increasing, but becoming at last the very pivot upon which the whole process turns.

Or, again, if you visit the villages that depend on one of the great

squires, you will hear praises, often just, of the landlord's good sense or good nature; you will hear of whole systems of pensions or of care for the sick, like those of a small and separate nation; you will see much cleanliness, order, and business habits in the offices and accounts of the estate. But if you ask again what has been the upshot, what has been the actual result of the reign of landlords, again the answer is plain. At the end of the reign of landlords men will not live on the land. The practical effect of having landlords is not having tenants. The practical effect of having employers is that men are not employed. The unrest of the populace is therefore more than a murmur against tyranny; it is against a sort of treason. It is the suspicion that even at the top of the tree, even in the seats of the mighty, our very success is unsuccessful.