

IV. The War on Holidays

The general proposition, not always easy to define exhaustively, that the reign of the capitalist will be the reign of the cad--that is, of the unlicked type that is neither the citizen nor the gentleman--can be excellently studied in its attitude towards holidays. The special emblematic Employer of to-day, especially the Model Employer (who is the worst sort) has in his starved and evil heart a sincere hatred of holidays. I do not mean that he necessarily wants all his workmen to work until they drop; that only occurs when he happens to be stupid as well as wicked. I do not mean to say that he is necessarily unwilling to grant what he would call "decent hours of labour." He may treat men like dirt; but if you want to make money, even out of dirt, you must let it lie fallow by some rotation of rest. He may treat men as dogs, but unless he is a lunatic he will for certain periods let sleeping dogs lie.

But humane and reasonable hours for labour have nothing whatever to do with the idea of holidays. It is not even a question of tenhours day and eight-hours day; it is not a question of cutting down leisure to the space necessary for food, sleep and exercise. If the modern employer came to the conclusion, for some reason or other, that he could get most out of his men by working them hard for only two hours a day, his whole mental attitude would still be foreign and hostile to holidays. For his whole mental attitude is that the passive time and the active time are alike useful for him and his business. All is, indeed, grist that comes to his mill, including the millers. His slaves still serve him in unconsciousness, as dogs still hunt in slumber. His grist is ground not only by the sounding wheels of iron, but by the soundless wheel of blood and brain. His sacks are still filling silently when the doors are shut on the streets and the sound of the grinding is low.

The Great Holiday

Now a holiday has no connection with using a man either by beating or feeding him. When you give a man a holiday you give him back his body and soul. It is quite possible you may be doing him an injury (though he seldom thinks so), but that does not affect the question for those to whom a holiday is holy. Immortality is the great holiday; and a holiday, like the immortality in the old theologies, is a double-edged privilege. But wherever it is genuine it is simply the restoration and completion of the man. If people ever looked at the printed word under their eye, the word "recreation" would be like the word "resurrection," the blast of a trumpet.

A man, being merely useful, is necessarily incomplete, especially if he be a modern man and means by being useful being "utilitarian." A man going into a modern club gives up his hat; a man going into a modern factory gives up his head. He then goes in and works loyally for the old firm to build up the great fabric of commerce (which can be done without a head), but when he has done work he goes to the cloak-room, like the man at the club, and gets his head back again; that is the germ of the holiday. It may be urged that the club man who leaves his hat often goes away with another hat; and perhaps it may be the same with the factory hand who has left his head. A hand that has lost its head may affect the fastidious as a mixed metaphor; but, God pardon us all, what an unmixed truth! We could almost prove the whole ease from the habit of calling human beings merely "hands" while they are working; as if the hand were horribly cut off, like the hand that has offended; as if, while the sinner entered heaven maimed, his unhappy hand still laboured laying up riches for the lords of hell. But to return to the man whom we found waiting for his head in the cloak-room. It may be urged, we say, that he might take the wrong head, like the wrong hat; but here the similarity ceases. For it has been observed by benevolent onlookers at life's drama that the hat taken away by mistake is frequently better than the real hat; whereas the head taken away after the hours of toil is certainly worse: stained with the cobwebs and dust of this dustbin of all the centuries.

The Supreme Adventure

All the words dedicated to places of eating and drinking are pure and poetic words. Even the word "hotel" is the word hospital. And St. Julien, whose claret I drank this Christmas, was the patron saint of innkeepers, because (as far as I can make out) he was hospitable to lepers. Now I do not say that the ordinary hotel-keeper in Piccadilly or the Avenue de l'Opera would embrace a leper, slap him on the back, and ask him to order what he liked; but I do say that hospitality is his trade virtue. And I do also say it is well to keep before our eyes the supreme adventure of a virtue. If you are brave, think of the man who was braver than you. If you are kind, think of the man who was kinder than you.

That is what was meant by having a patron saint. That is the link between the poor saint who received bodily lepers and the great hotel proprietor who (as a rule) receives spiritual lepers. But a word yet weaker than "hotel" illustrates the same point--the word "restaurant." There again you have the admission that there is a definite building or statue to "restore"; that ineffaceable image of man that some call the image of God. And that is the holiday; it is the restaurant or restoring thing that, by a blast of magic, turns a man into himself.

This complete and reconstructed man is the nightmare of the modern capitalist. His whole scheme would crack across like a mirror of Shalott, if once a plain man were ready for his two plain duties--ready to live and ready to die. And that horror of holidays which marks the modern capitalist is very largely a horror of the vision of a whole human being: something that is not a "hand" or a "head for figites." But an awful creature who has met himself in the wilderness. The employers will give time to eat, time to sleep; they are in terror of a time to think.

To anyone who knows any history it is wholly needless to say that holidays have been destroyed. As Mr. Belloc, who knows much more history than you or I, recently pointed out in the "Pall Mall Magazine," Shakespeare's title of "Twelfth Night: or What You Will" simply meant that a winter carnival for everybody went on wildly till the twelfth night after Christmas. Those of my readers who work for modern offices or factories might ask their employers for twelve days' holidays after Christmas. And they might let me know the reply.