

VIII. THE LASH FOR LABOUR

If I were to prophesy that two hundred years hence a grocer would have the right and habit of beating the grocer's assistant with a stick, or that shop girls might be flogged, as they already can be fined, many would regard it as rather a rash remark. It would be a rash remark. Prophecy is always unreliable; unless we except the kind which is avowedly irrational, mystical and supernatural prophecy. But relatively to nearly all the other prophecies that are being made around me to-day, I should say my prediction stood an exceptionally good chance. In short, I think the grocer with the stick is a figure we are far more likely to see than the Superman or the Samurai, or the True Model Employer, or the Perfect Fabian Official, or the citizen of the Collectivist State. And it is best for us to see the full ugliness of the transformation which is passing over our Society in some such abrupt and even grotesque image at the end of it. The beginnings of a decline, in every age of history, have always had the appearance of being reforms. Nero not only fiddled while Rome was burning, but he probably really paid more attention to the fiddle than to the fire. The Roi Soleil, like many other soleils, was most splendid to all appearance a little before sunset. And if I ask myself what will be the ultimate and final fruit of all our social reforms, garden cities, model employers, insurances, exchanges, arbitration courts, and so on, then, I say, quite seriously, "I think it will be labour under the lash."

The Sultan and the Sack

Let us arrange in some order a number of converging considerations that all point in this direction. (1) It is broadly true, no doubt, that the weapon of the employer has hitherto been the threat of dismissal, that is, the threat of enforced starvation. He is a Sultan who need not order the bastinado, so long as he can order the sack. But there are not a few signs that this weapon is not quite so convenient and flexible a one as his increasing rapacities require. The fact of the introduction of fines, secretly or openly, in many shops and factories, proves that it is convenient for the capitalists to have some temporary and adjustable form of punishment besides the final punishment of pure ruin. Nor is it difficult to see the commonsense of this from their wholly inhuman point of view. The act of sacking a man is attended with the same disadvantages as the act of shooting a man: one of which is that you can get no more out of him. It is, I am told, distinctly annoying to blow a fellow creature's brains out with a revolver and then suddenly remember that he was the only person who knew where to get the best Russian cigarettes. So our Sultan, who is the orderer of the sack, is also the bearer of the bow-string. A school in which there was no punishment, except expulsion, would be a school in which it would be very difficult to keep proper discipline; and the sort of discipline on which the reformed capitalism will insist will be all of the type which in free nations is imposed only on children. Such a school would probably be in a chronic condition of breaking up for the holidays. And the reasons for the insufficiency of this extreme instrument are also varied and evident. The materialistic Sociologists, who talk about the survival of the fittest and the weakest going to the wall (and whose way of looking at the world is to put on the latest and most powerful scientific spectacles, and then shut their eyes), frequently talk as if a workman were simply efficient or non-efficient, as if a criminal were reclaimable or irreclaimable. The employers have sense enough at least to know better than that. They can see that a servant may be useful in one way and exasperating in another; that he may be bad in one part of his work and good in another; that he may be occasionally drunk and yet generally indispensable. Just as a practical school-master would know that a schoolboy can be at once the plague and the pride of the school. Under these circumstances small and varying penalties are obviously the most convenient things for the person keeping order; an underling can be punished for coming late, and yet do useful work when he comes. It will be possible to give a rap over the knuckles without wholly cutting off the right hand that has offended. Under these circumstances the employers have naturally resorted to fines. But there is a further ground for believing that the process will go beyond fines before it is completed.

(2) The fine is based on the old European idea that everybody possesses private property in some reasonable degree; but not only is this not true to-day, but it is not being made any truer, even by those who honestly believe that they are mending matters. The great employers will often do something towards improving what they call the "conditions" of their workers; but a worker might have his conditions as carefully arranged as a racehorse has, and still have no more personal property than a racehorse. If you take an average poor seamstress or factory girl, you will find that the power of chastising her through her property has very considerable limits; it is almost as hard for the employer of labour to tax her for punishment as it is for the Chancellor of the Exchequer to tax her for revenue. The next most obvious thing to think of, of course, would be imprisonment, and that might be effective enough under simpler conditions. An old-fashioned shopkeeper might have locked up his apprentice in his coal-cellar; but his coal-cellar would be a real, pitch dark coal-cellar, and the rest of his house would be a real human house. Everybody (especially the apprentice) would see a most perceptible difference between the two. But, as I pointed out in the article before this, the whole tendency of the capitalist legislation and experiment is to make imprisonment much more general and automatic, while making it, or professing to make it, more humane. In other words, the hygienic prison and the servile factory will become so uncommonly like each other that the poor man will hardly know or care whether he is at the moment expiating an offence or merely swelling a dividend. In both places there will be the same sort of shiny tiles. In neither place will there be any cell so unwholesome as a coal-cellar or so wholesome as a home. The weapon of the prison, therefore, like the weapon of the fine, will be found to have considerable limitations to its effectiveness when employed against the wretched reduced citizen of our day. Whether it be property or liberty you cannot take from him what he has not got. You cannot imprison a slave, because you cannot enslave a slave.

The Barbarous Revival

(3) Most people, on hearing the suggestion that it may come to corporal punishment at last (as it did in every slave system I ever heard of, including some that were generally kindly, and even successful), will merely be struck with horror and incredulity, and feel that such a barbarous revival is unthinkable in the modern atmosphere. How far it will be, or need be, a revival of the actual images and methods of ruder times I will discuss in a moment. But first, as another of the converging lines tending to corporal punishment, consider this: that for some reason or other the old full-blooded and masculine humanitarianism in this matter has weakened and fallen silent; it has weakened and fallen silent in a very curious manner, the precise reason for which I do not altogether understand. I knew the average Liberal, the average Nonconformist minister, the average Labour Member, the average middle-class Socialist, were, with all their good qualities, very deficient in what I consider a respect for the human soul. But I did imagine that they had the ordinary modern respect for the human body. The fact, however, is clear and incontrovertible. In spite of the horror of all humane people, in spite of the hesitation even of our corrupt and panic-stricken Parliament, measures can now be triumphantly passed for spreading or increasing the use of physical torture, and for applying it to the newest and vaguest categories of crime. Thirty or forty years ago, nay, twenty years ago, when Mr. F. Hugh O'Donnell and others forced a Liberal Government to drop the cat-o-nine-tails like a scorpion, we could have counted on a mass of honest hatred of such things. We cannot count on it now.

(4) But lastly, it is not necessary that in the factories of the future the institution of physical punishment should actually remind people of the jambok or the knout. It could easily be developed out of the many forms of physical discipline which are already used by employers on the excuses of education or hygiene. Already in some factories girls are obliged to swim whether they like it or not, or do gymnastics whether they like it or not. By a simple extension of hours or complication of exercises a pair of Swedish clubs could easily be so used as to leave their victim as exhausted as one who had come off the rack. I think it extremely likely that they will be.