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England Monopolised
or
England Free?

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England Monopolised or England Free?

With parched lips we stand beside the river, but we do not drink. We gaze hungrily at feasts of which we dare not partake. Instead of steering straight for our goal we wander round and round, like travellers blinded by a snowstorm, doubling on our tracks until we fall exhausted.

These are no fanciful images. If Labour were determined to drink it would not go thirsty. If the producers were resolute not to fast while non-producers feast, a profound change would result immediately. The disinherited would open their eyes and study realities instead of shadows. They would then perceive that *all* wealth, *all* productivity, comes from the application of labour to natural resources, and that he who hinders that application is a wealth-destroyer, a poverty-breeder, an enemy of civilisation and of his race. They would understand that the working-bee's first business is to rid the hive of drones. They would discover that at present there is an ever-broadening leak through which their earnings vanish; and they would stop that leak. Its name is Monopoly; and wherever Monopoly exists there is, of necessity, economic dependence and servitude to the Monopolist.

It is in England that every avenue of escape from economic subjection to the Monopolist has been most securely closed. It is in England that men are compelled to beg most piteously for employment, because not one out of a thousand has any chance of being his own employer. It is in England that Labour must submit to being bought precisely as fish are bought at Billingsgate. It is in England that the market price must be accepted most abjectly, because the only alternative is to stay at home and starve. And where is the English workingman's home? Always in the slum or near-by slum; in what is known as the "workingman's district"; that is to say, in the poorest, the dreariest, the least sanitary quarter of the town or city to which the necessity of finding work has dragged him. That so-called home also he holds only by sufferance. Whatever betides him he must pay his rent.

To me it seems indisputable that such a condition is one of utter weakness; and weakness leads to fear. The weakness

strikes at the very root of our national life, because, as Lord Beaconsfield once told us, it gives us "a country inhabited by two distinct nations, the rich and the poor, between whom there is absolutely nothing in common." The fear of unemployment robs men of that spirit of independence which is a nation's backbone. I personally know men who faced the German batteries with laughing eyes and are to-day as mice in the office where they think themselves fortunate to hold down a stool. Unemployment is the one Hell they dread, for in England the discharged and discredited have no hope.

In all probability England is only now at the very beginning of the greatest struggle she yet has faced, for no other country is so dependent on the delicate machinery of exchange, to-day thrown so badly out of gear by war and revolution. England is not a self-supporting peasant but the keeper of an international bargain-counter, with eggs in a thousand different baskets, any or all of which the hurricane now setting in may bring to smash. If a single market fails her the workers employed in ministering to that market are thrown, of necessity, upon the street. If world-wide revolution should bring her commerce to a standstill her population would become one vast army of unemployed.

This is the barely-whispered fear now holding all of us in thrall. It is this which makes us, as a whole, the most conservative of peoples. For these reasons revolution is dreaded to-day even more deeply than we dreaded it in France, over a century ago. Our ruling class knows well that, at any cost, the masses must be kept employed; and the masses themselves, drilled for generations into dependence on the employer, think only of their jobs. At bottom nearly all wish that the old order shall continue. At bottom, despite all the fine talk about making Democracy safe, practically all England was determined that things should go on after the war as they had gone on before it, and that nothing really material should be altered.

To me these are the tactics of the ostrich, who is afraid even to look at the onrushing storm. To me, we English are at present merely dreaming, and as we wish to dream. In my judgment we are not going to stop revolution, because revolution cannot be stopped. We are not going to confine it to Russia, because it cannot be confined to Russia. We are not going to set the old order on its feet again, because the old order is stricken with senile decay and cannot be rejuvenated. On that most hopeless of all tasks we shall simply bleed ourselves to death and go hopeless to pieces.

It is madness, however, to look to our aristocracy or plutocracy for salvation. All men are slaves to habit, and a class that for centuries dominated our national life, and is now seeking to dominate about a quarter of the globe, will fight to the last ditch for the retention of its power. By conscription and force of arms, by secret diplomacy and political chicanery, by wheedling and by bullying, with every weapon in its armoury it will oppose inevitable change. It will use every kind of pressure to enlist us in what is only its own quarrel, just as it compelled and inveigled us, more than a century ago, into fighting for the cause of France's nobility, which it recognised instinctively as being also its own. From its standpoint that is natural enough; but, as the position of the English worker is essentially different from that of those who rule him, so his standpoint should be different. Hitherto he has lived in dependence, and under it he has fared so badly that, if he strikes for anything, it should be for independence. Hitherto he has been used so ruthlessly as a mere profit-making thing that his yearning should be for a chance to prove himself a man. Hitherto his insecurity, under a régime of dependence, has been so appalling—for he lives in a land of almshouses, asylums, and help-the-poor charities—that he should be eager to see if self-ownership will not give him greater safety. I now call his attention to the fact that he is not only a dependent but a dependent on dependents. Under existing conditions neither he nor his employers can be free. For example:—

In the United States tens of thousands previously engaged in the manufacture of alcoholic liquors are now out of work, not because their employers wanted to get rid of them, but because Prohibition has swept the country. If a further development of Puritanism should result in the prohibition of tobacco, jewellery, and other articles of luxury, similar results would follow. When the motor succeeds the horse, stablemen lose their jobs; and if—as now appears probable—it should eventually supersede the railway, what will be the position of the railway man? In such cases, which are typical of our whole social evolution, it is obviously foolish to blame the individual employer. He also is the victim of a social process that goes on unceasingly; and the more progressive a society is, the more frequent, the more far-reaching, and the more revolutionary those changes are. The insecurity of the employed increases. Their helplessness increases. They become more and more mere driftwood, borne hither and thither on tides they are powerless to check.

For a century past the Labour Movement has been struggling to control these tides. Its first effort is always to make the job secure, and its second to make the job worth holding. In the matter of basic industries, such as digging coal, putting up houses, or transporting goods, it is able to register some partial measure of success; and the reasons are very clear. Such industries, which cater to our primal wants, are staple. Fashion and change affect them little. Their conduct necessitates the employment of labour in huge masses, and these masses threaten reprisals when themselves attacked. But they are only a small portion of the colossal whole. By virtue of their exceptional position they are the Aristocracy of Labour, and the fight they are able to put up is an impossibility to wage-workers in the bulk. The clerk, the salesman, the millions of men and women engaged in services which, at a pinch, society can do without, have no such wall against which to set their backs. If the market goes down, their wages fall. If the bottom drops out of it, they are discharged, and whatever organisation they may have effected will help them not one whit.

When the Armistice was declared the bottom dropped out of the munition market, and the munition worker's occupation automatically ceased. When, under the Peace Treaty, Austria was cut off from all her former markets, Vienna's wage-workers were reduced, automatically and instantly, to destitution; and theirs is perhaps the most appalling of all the hideous tragedies to which the war has given birth. If, as the result of great social upheavals now in process, this country should lose its Indian and Egyptian markets, our wage-workers would find themselves immediately as helpless as are their brothers of Vienna. Thousands of factories would have to close their doors. Millions of lathes and spindles would stand idle. How long would the Trade Union treasuries then hold out? How many jobs would the Labour Party be able then to furnish? These questions answer themselves.

There is no guarantee that this very calamity may not come to pass. No one can tell how much longer Britain will be able to hold down India, the best of all her customers, which has a population three times more numerous than is our own Anglo-Saxon race. No one can say what will be the outcome of the struggle with Russia into which our war-loving aristocracy has plunged us; for Russia, with a population of 180,000,000, is still an undeveloped giant, and that giant, justly indignant at our efforts to starve him into submission, probably intends to strike

us hard. How long will Africa be content to remain Britain's helot? And who dare prophesy the part China, even more populous and far more virile than India, will play in that great conflict now darkening all the world's horizon? These are the issues of the immediate future; and to the British worker, who still scorns to study them, they are issues on which his very existence hangs. By manufacturing for those markets he gets, under the present system, his daily bread; and the control of those markets by his employers is to him his life.

Helplessness, economic helplessness springing directly from economic dependence, is the basic evil. When all opportunity for self-employment has been surrendered, Man holds his very life at the mercy of those who are able to furnish him with work. Thenceforth the position of this Lord of Creation, whose natural power is so vastly superior to that of any other animal, becomes one of weakness unspeakable; for between him and utter destitution there stands only that most unsatisfactory of all defences, his job. At once Life, instead of being secure and strong, becomes precarious and weak, because the now indispensable job depends on the whim and interest of the employer, and goes exclusively to him who can best minister to that whim or serve that interest. It becomes thenceforth the prize of prizes, to be held at any cost and fought for bitterly as against the thousands of competitors who stand ready and eager to step into the holder's shoes.

All social dislocations tend to jeopardise the job, and it is in our most advanced and rapidly developing communities that such dislocations are at once most frequent and severe. In primitive Russia financial panics were practically unknown, and, despite the extortions of an aristocracy and officialdom whose corruption was a byword, the peasant had always a roof to shelter him and bread to put into his mouth. In the United States, on the other hand, I myself have seen the time when a Wall Street panic closed workshops and factories throughout the country, darkened every highway with abject but unwilling beggars, and suddenly swelled the army of unemployed to the colossal figure of five millions—a weltering mass of helplessness whose miseries omniscience alone could fathom.

In such countries—and England treads closely on the heels of the United States—invention succeeds invention, combination follows combination, and changes lead to other and more extensive changes, with bewildering rapidity. The machinery of production and exchange grows more and more complex; the circles affected

by each disturbance widen continually; interdependence increases steadily, and the ordinary man becomes the helpless prey of forces he can no longer even check. The strong find themselves crippled; the weakest, those whose very existence hangs on their jobs, are thrust into the gutter and ground to dust. Dog eats dog. Woe be to the conquered! "Get out, that I may occupy your place!" becomes in reality, whatever they may say, the one supreme commandment of the social code. Verily what we still are pleased to call industrial Peace hath her turpitudes, her debasements, her agonies, no less than War.

England is still profoundly conservative in thought, because until recently her dominant class has been strong enough to maintain the social mould as it has stood for centuries. Nevertheless here also vast and far-reaching economic changes have been at work; and it is now, when all the world is in upheaval, that we are beginning to glimpse their true significance. Consider only the fact that a hundred years ago agriculture employed more than one-third of our working population, and that to-day it employs less than one-tenth. Consider the crowding into cities that has resulted, and the colossal fortunes such a change has poured into the coffers of the few who had possessed themselves of the sites on which those cities stand and have been forced to spread themselves. Consider the national dependence this change has brought about, since we now have to draw our food supplies from distant countries; and consider the individual helplessness of the wage-worker when he loses his job and finds himself tramping that most barren of all imaginable deserts, a carefully police-guarded city. London's underground railways carried sixty-three and a half millions of passengers in the fortnight that preceded this last Christmas; men, women, and children packed like sardines, pushed here, pulled there, hooted at by sirens and howled at incessantly by over-worked and nerve-wracked officials—huge crowds that seemed to me, who was constantly one of them, well-nigh as helpless as a swarm of bees hanging confusedly upon some bough. Here, indeed, was a condition worth thinking over, for it mirrored not inaccurately our present national life. We are discontented, but helpless. Somehow or other we must work into a position where we can help ourselves.

For the greatest, the most frequent, and the most profoundly disturbing social dislocations, however, one must go to the United States, because there expansion has proceeded at a pace unparalleled. There a continent has been reduced to personal

ownership and brought, more or less, into cultivation since many of us were born. There the performance of an extraordinary task has called for the creation of extraordinary tools; immense labour-saving devices; immense combinations of capital; the rough-and-ready using up of huge industrial armies, employed here to-day, shifted there to-morrow, and discharged unceremoniously the moment their temporary usefulness was over. All this unchecked by sentiment, unhampered by tradition, and based on the theory that the country was one of boundless opportunities, that the man who could not make his living at one job should turn to another, and that if he lacked that adaptability he deserved to starve. Glorification of the big. Joy in the struggle. Change, never-ending changes, always welcomed. To be virile, to be versatile, to be a hustler, to shoulder your own way to the front, exalted into the national ideal. A distinctly new ideal, which came from the first into clash with old-world ideals, old-world caste tendencies not yet extinct, old-world institutions still thoughtlessly retained though utterly incompatible with the freer and more elastic aspirations of a people only just beginning to settle to its work. To-day the clash is most bitter. Let us examine it.

When the North American colonists had made good their revolt against the Mother Country they adopted, in 1776 and as their Magna Charta, a Declaration of Independence, which challenged everything that Caste and Special Privilege hold most sacred. When they publicly registered it as their solemn conviction that "all men are created free and equal," they declared war on that aristocratic philosophy which to-day is struggling for survival, and thereby deluging the world with blood. And that great Anarchistic shout of revolt—for the Declaration of Independence is essentially an Anarchistic document—found its immediate echo in France, where the masses, under the banner of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," marched to the overthrow of their own feudalism and their own landed aristocracy. There, however—and to this for the moment I diverge—British aristocracy, forming a coalition against the French as it did recently against the Russian rebels, for the time being conquered; waded to victory through seas of blood; triumphed by plunging the masses of its own people into a morass of indebtedness which to this moment holds them fast. The Napoleonic wars created, on the one hand, the most powerful plutocracy the world had known, and, on the other hand, that proletariat whose helplessness has been, and is to-day, the fatal flaw in Britain's armour. That

flaw we cannot conceal, but it will be well for us to remember that the insatiable greed of our aristocracy has now arrayed against us, as its supporters, the bitter indignation of the disinherited throughout the world.

Great truths are like new suns; when once they have dawned to man's intellect they shine on and on, however cloudy may be their dawning. It will not always be possible—to quote Napier, the great historian of the Peninsular Wars, himself an aristocrat—for the British soldier to “conquer under the cold shadow of aristocracy.” It is inconceivable that a species so naturally powerful as Man will crouch for ever helpless at the feet of the Moneybags now ruling this distracted orb. It is not thinkable that our intellectually gifted race will be content always to hold its existence by the precarious thread of markets captured by brutally invasive force and held by that systematised legal chicanery to which international finance to-day compels it. We shall not much longer be able to permit the few to monopolise this planet, on and by which everyone of us must live, and thereby dictate to us when, how, and where we shall labour, or whether we may work at all. Such a system—if it can be called a “system”—has to be killed, because it is killing us. It has to be throttled at any cost, because it is throttling the life out of us. It has to be thrown on the scrap-heap, because it is throwing us there by the million; feeding us as offal to what it calls its “wars,” and decimating us in that never-ending internecine conflict it has the audacity to label “Peace.”

Peace! There is no more brutal chapter in history than that which records the rise and development of our own factory power. No meaner or more bloody conflicts have been waged than those on which the control of foreign markets hung. Congo and Peruvian rubber atrocities, Mexican oil, tobacco and hemp atrocities, South African gold-mining atrocities, Indian famines, native wars so numerous that no one pretends to keep track of them—with these and similar abominations the cup is always full. And, nauseated with its lees, we turn despairingly to a League of Nations! A League that will leave the present monopolistic system standing, and police the world to *keep* it standing!

Happily—returning to the consideration of America—the forces that asserted themselves so vigorously when the United States revolted have never ceased to work. In the material domain they laid for her the foundations of that economic prosperity she enjoyed so long, because for many years she expanded with extraordinary vigour under the influence of a social equality

the Old World had never known. She prospered materially because she had great natural resources to which, for several generations, her masses had comparatively free access. She prospered in character and intellect because those masses, instead of being reduced to economic helplessness, had all their energies aroused by the opportunities laid open to them. She had inherited in the South, colonised largely from England's aristocracy, a system of negro slavery which was at once a blot on her escutcheon and a fetter on her hands. She overthrew it, and if anyone wants to understand how powerfully the thought embodied in the Declaration of Independence contributed to the overthrow of chattel slavery he need only study the speeches and writings of the great Abolitionists who set that avalanche in motion. It was Wendell Phillips who laid down, as their movement's cornerstone, the principle that “a man is better than a bank vault,” and President Lincoln who reminded his country that half-slave and half-free it could not live. He it was also who declared persistently that no man was wise enough to govern him against his will, and that he himself was not wise enough so to govern any other man. A basic Anarchistic principle. The very quintessence of the Declaration of Independence.

In the United States, as I myself judge from long residence and by present reading of American publications, that spirit is to-day more vigorous, more determined, more indomitable than it ever was. For in the United States the masses, taught from their cradles to worship Liberty in the abstract, find that the reality has escaped their grasp; that the national treasure-house, formerly regarded as inexhaustible, has passed into the legal possession of the moneyed few; that the land, from which every one in the past could carve himself out a home and means of livelihood, is to-day under lock and key; that, in their easy-going thoughtlessness, they have allowed monopolies, founded always on the capture of natural resources, to trap them into a net within the meshes of which the ordinary citizen flounders helpless; that, in a word, in America also the so-called order of the Old World has reasserted itself suddenly and is, for the moment, once more dominant. A most unsatisfactory, a maddening discovery; one that has set the entire nation thinking as it never thought before. When I went to the United States, nearly forty years ago, social problems were discussed but scantily, the ordinary worker considering that if he looked after his own business his future would be secure. Of late all that has changed.

I know of no country in which economic questions are debated

so incessantly, so exhaustively, so virulently. It is from there that the international revolutionary movement is drawing its most uncompromising thinkers and its most dauntless agitators. It is there that Plutocracy, new to the saddle, has become most seriously alarmed; and it is there that its would-be repressions are being faced with an intrepidity for which our admiration should be unbounded. For my part I have no hope for any man or nation that will allow itself to be reduced to helplessness without putting up a fight. I have no belief in shouldering off on politicians the struggle we ourselves should wage; and, scanning the horizon to the best of my ability, I can see no proletariat so likely to struggle manfully to freedom as is that of the United States. There hope, rudely shattered, is strenuously building up anew. There the masses have not been ground down long enough to have lost their love of independence. There great numbers of men and women really hold that a life of slavery is not worth living. The I.W.W. (Industrial Workers of the World), for example, both as individuals and as an organisation, usually hold that virile creed. As to many of their methods and much of their philosophy I myself have decided doubts, but for their courageous devotion to their ideal I have profound respect. To them the poorest of America's exploited workers have never turned in vain, as they have turned only too often to Mr. Samuel Gompers and his Aristocracy of Labour.

No one who has really known the United States can have remained unconscious of the rapid and almost universal growth of discontent; of the alarm created, fully thirty years ago, by the sudden development of the Trust; of the bitterness against England, then regarded as the main pillar of Plutocracy, which William Jennings Bryan's three Presidential campaigns revealed; of the denunciation of landlordism which the widespread sympathy with the Mexican Revolution brought in its train. And the real trouble with which the heart of America to-day is sore is that there also the masses find themselves reduced to helplessness, shorn of opportunity, entangled in the net of a financial system they are incapable of understanding and are powerless to control.

To-day they still flounder, as all the world is floundering. They plunge hither and thither, hoping by violence and sheer weight of numbers to break their way to freedom. It is well that they struggle, for without struggle nothing can be accomplished, and torpidity means death. It is well, perhaps, that they learn in the school of repeated failures, for experience is the best of teachers. Nevertheless the spectacle of the same old mistakes

repeated endlessly is full of melancholy, and one cannot but reflect on the care with which men study the easy trade by which they earn their wages and the carelessness they bring to the infinitely more difficult problems on the solution of which their individual and collective happiness depends. Man's strength is in his brain, and his fruitful struggles are those of the mind. Surely it is precisely now, in these times of universal hubbub, that the hard work of thinking is called for most imperiously and is most likely to be shirked.

Man's entire history is nothing but the record of his rise to strength, and if, as I maintain, the ordinary man of to-day has fallen once again from comparative self-mastery into pitiful dependence, his first business is to recover his independence and become once more master of himself. If life has become so complicated that he can no longer understand it, his first business is to simplify it. If he finds himself helpless in the clutches of landlordism, his first business is to abolish landlordism. If he is crushed to death by a financial system which puts him and his descendants in what is meant to be perpetual pawn, he must get rid of that system. He must think his way out of slavery and into freedom, and when he has thought it out he will find the going easy.

To me Anarchism—which I understand as the doctrine that men should be self-governing, and that this is impossible until they have become economically their own masters—seems a truth; but I care nothing for names. Indeed, I anticipate that, in the tremendous struggle through which we are about to pass, the names adopted by the various revolutionary camps will disappear with their amalgamation in one colossal whole. I expect the masses to revolt against their helplessness when once they understand that it is the cause of all their misfortunes and their one unpardonable crime. I expect that they will concentrate on the abolition of the economic subjection from which their helplessness springs; and ultimately, with one supreme effort, break out of the prison of slavery and into a freedom wherein Life, real Life, will have a chance.

It is preposterous that the earning of a livelihood should be so precarious and difficult as it is to-day. Our immediate business, therefore, is to make it sure and easy. It is calamitous that millions of English men and women should be compelled to waste their lives on useless, and often most pernicious, occupations, against which their better instincts are in constant revolt. Our business, therefore, is to see to it that the door to useful self-

employment is opened wide. We should not allow the dead hand of the past to enchain this nation's living present and perpetuate those gross social inequalities which are hurling her to ruin. For England to-day is, on the one hand, the happy hunting-ground of the greatest swarm of parasites that ever rode a submissive people to its death, and, on the other hand, the country in which those outside the charmed circle of wealth and special privilege have practically no chance at all.

As yet the war appears to have altered nothing, but in reality it is so revolutionising our own national and international relations that a complete social reconstruction is imperative. There is only one sound foundation on which we English can rebuild, and that foundation is England herself; England to which we belong and which belongs to us. It is monstrous that we cannot mine our own coal save by the gracious permission of some Do-Nothing who, living on our labour, calls that coal *his*. It is monstrous that we cannot get at the materials with which to build our houses, or at the sites whereon to place them, without paying whatever tribute some landlord, living in harmful luxury and idleness upon his rents, thinks fit to ask. This little piece of earth we call England should be, like all the earth, for the free and equal use of those living on and by it; for the full and untrammelled satisfaction of their individual needs. It is not a money-ball, to be sold at auction to the highest bidder. It is, in the last analysis, for each and every one of us the tool by the intelligent use of which we have to make our living; the one and only storehouse from which we have to draw every ounce of our supplies. It is our home. From its dust we sprang, and to it every one of us as dust returns.

This central truth millions of men must have comprehended, if but dimly, when fighting in the late war for what they called *their* countries. They are seeing it more and more clearly now that so-called peace has come. They are thinking, with growing intensity and in rapidly increasing numbers, that this wondrous world, whose hidden treasures we have as yet barely begun to scratch, is fit for something better than to be the mere plaything of the wanton rich, a counter in a great gambling game, a grab-bag with blanks for the many and ever fatter prizes for the lucky few. They want peace and cannot find it amid the industrial chaos of to-day. They want homes and see no chance of getting them; food, and it is placed beyond their reach; the chance of employing themselves usefully, and are given, as if it were a special favour, some useless and utterly unworthy job.

First must come the understanding of what Freedom is, and then the discovery that it is incomparably superior to every form of Slavery, however benevolently planned or well administered. Then will follow the passionate longing to attain to Freedom, and finally the conviction that this is possible only by the overthrow of Slavery; that the old mould must be broken before the new and larger life can come to birth.

Throughout it is a case of growth, of mental growth; and mental growth is always, of necessity, a personal affair which cannot be delegated. Each country, each class, each individual must do its own struggling, and it is not by looking to revolutionary successes in other countries, or by reliance on the energies of so-called leaders, that we shall win our liberty. That way only weakness lies, and victory is always to the strong.

It is here that we, living in England, must fight the fight; and, as I see it, the real issue is the reconquest of our country. There is no good reason why we English should not be masters in our own house, but to pretend that we are so at present is the most brazen and hypocritical of lies. Because to-day we toil mainly for the landlord, and exist only by the permission of financial buccaneers whose greed and ambitions are making this world a charnel-house of poverty, pestilence, and war.

That rapidly-tightening grip, which is paralysing progress, we must shake off. That race-killing slavery must go. We, the Makers, must have the ownership of our own lives, and, therefore, of the land on and from which we have to live. In this great conflict it is the Takers who must give way, and our great task is so to order things as that they shall give way. Without us, the workers, no honey comes into the hive, but the drones only consume. All that is out-of-date and has to die. All that is the pernicious legacy left us by a slavish and self-humiliating past; and from that past we have to free ourselves, or perish. We stand to-day at the parting of the ways, and whether we rise to freedom or sink to the lowest depths of servitude the immediate future will decide.

. FREEDOM .

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