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Bastille, Bourgeois, and Bumble

Frank Kitz

November 1885

Amongst the many indignities and miseries endured by the poor, none is so keenly felt or bitterly resented as those inflicted under the Poor Law. The poor rightly consider this as a heartless measure for the punishment and not the relief of their poverty and that this view is shared by the Poor Law officials themselves is shown by their brutal methods of administration. Scarcely a week passes but some poor wretch is done to death by the callous brutality of these minions of the brutal bourgeoisie, or some worn out worker commits suicide to avoid receiving the attention of the “Guardians of the Poor.”

We Socialists are engaged in a movement which regards both pauper and criminal as the products of an iniquitous system of robbery of which both aristocrat and hateful bourgeois stand guilty. Those who oppose us in this view often tell us that the present system is the result of Societary Evolution, for which no particular class is to blame. It is impossible within the limits of an article to give a history of the working class or the Poor Law, but as a student of both and as a worker I assert that the wrong and suffering endured by us to-day are the result of de-

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liberate, well-planned robberies on the part of the idle classes of society, and it will be an ill day for them if the workers in a moment of power should treat these parasites to a tittle of the torture to which by their laws they have subjected the poor.

Only glancing at the robbery of millions of acres of common and public lands from the peasantry, and hindrances to locomotion and knowledge in the past — all contributory causes of poverty — let us fix our attention on a period which is regarded with affectionate interest by the middle class, that of the Reform Bill of 1832, and its pendant the Municipal Reform Act, 1834. The working class had aided the bourgeoisie to break the power of the ruling families and installed the middle class in office. “Help us,” said they, “and your enfranchisement is assured.”; “The Bill, the whole Bill,” they cried, and in truth the gulled workers got nothing but the Bill. Their reward was a most infamous cold-blooded Poor Law. They punished them for poverty created by their despoilers. Those whom O’Connell before his apostasy from the people’s cause, fittingly described as “the base brutal and bloody Whigs,” gave Malthus’s inhuman denial of the right of the poor to live, concrete expression in the Poor Law Amendment Act of the day. Coleridge in his “Table Talk,” speaks of the practical father of this measure as follows : “I solemnly declare that I do not believe that all the heresies, sects, and factions, which the ignorance, or wickedness of men has given birth to, were altogether so disgraceful to man as a Christian philosopher, or statesman or citizen as this abominable tenet ... but it is so vicious a tenet, so flattering to the cruelty, the avarice and sordid selfishness of most men that I hardly know what to think of the result.”

The immediate result was that the working class were stirred to the heart. The perfidy of the authors was the theme and incentive of the noble band who founded first the Working Men’s Association and afterwards the Chartist Movement.

The working class were ground down with taxation to pay the enormous debt incurred by their rulers in the liberticidal

forego the desire and opportunity to reckon with those who bring the workers grey hairs in sorrow to the grave.

struggle with the French Republicans; they were the victims of a fiscal policy framed to fill the rapacious maws of place-hunters. Starvation stared them in the face, and whilst the country was being covered with railways, canals and mills, the results of the inventive brains of the Arkwrights, Stephensons and Fultons of Labour, there arose on every hand grim bastilles intended for their incarceration when broken down in the unequal struggle for life.

Protests were not wanting against this cruelty ; the power and eloquence of the working-class leaders were directed against its authors, and fierce and threatening demonstrations were the consequence. The poetry of Elliott, the fiery eloquence of Harney and O'Connor were allied with the patient work of Lovett and the politic utterances of Sir Richard Phillips, to break down this Law, but to no avail. And how do we stand to day in relation to this stupendous crime committed against the most helpless, and at the same time most worthy, section of the community, the struggling poor? They are crowded in thousands within the hideous cheerless walls of the modern bastilles. Man and Wife separated, imprisoned, deprived of liberty, fed upon food that is always coarse and frequently rotten. Let us peer into these wards crowded with aged and infirm men and women, and ask who are they who are condemned to pass the remnants of their lives in these infernos ? They are the mothers, and fathers of the working-class, who have by their toil contributed to make England's commercial greatness.

There is no system of torture but has its defenders, and it is fitting that the peregrinating penny-a-liner of the D.T. who, as Ruskin has it, "pawns the dirty linen of his soul in order that he may dine," should strive to whitewash the workhouse system and prove its advantage to the poor ; but their employers know better. At a Conference of Poor Law Guardians held in 1874, Reed declared publicly, "That the Poor Law was not intended to be either humane or just, but simply to give enough to pre-

serve the life of the pauper” ; and they literally interpret this, for in a workhouse not a hundred miles from the City Road, the inmates greedily devour the offal intended for the pig-tub. The ordinary food is unfit for human consumption. In some workhouses the inmates are deprived of the visits of friends and liberty out for three and four months together, and for the slightest infringement of the arbitrary rules are put in the Black Hole or Oakum Sheds. In the latter they are frequently compelled to pick more oakum than is allotted to felons within jails. In one the corpses of persons who die in the infirmary, or the “stiff un’s,” as the officers elegantly term them, are brought past the aged inmates as they sit in the “recreation “ (sic) ground, I suppose “pour encourager les autres” All inmates dread the infirmary, and with good reasons, and will sooner hide their ailments than go into what is with horror alluded to as “over there.” For over there in the general sense means a quick passage to the grave ; indeed a doctor told a patient, in a West End workhouse, “You come here to die and not to live.” In another, a woman in child-labour was forced to scrub out a ward until too ill to rise.

The cruel economy which has embittered and shortened their declining years, does not leave them in death. In Nottingham the coffins were so rotten that the bodies forced out the bottoms. Again, quite recently, in Clerkenwell, an undertaker spilt a load of dead paupers in the road, thus literally rattling their bones over the stones. A writer has spoken of the pauper’s “tomb,” but any cemetery gravedigger will tell you from what quarter of our public graveyards there comes into the public sewer the most noxious effluent ; it is from the pauper ditch where they are hurled together in a common grave. So much for Christian burial. A chalk mark, easily obliterated, has been thought sufficient name-plate, and hence it is a common occurrence for friends to mourn over the wrong coffins. Often a person dies in the infirmary and no notice is taken of the dying appeal to send for relatives and

friends, and the body lies unclaimed in the dead house, and if not claimed is given over to the surgeon’s knife. Of pauper lunatics I may have a word to say in the future.

The streets in the vicinity of a metropolitan workhouse on a paupers outing, present a sad spectacle in illustration of our civilisation. Crowds of tottering men and women stream in different directions. Many, without friends or relatives or places to go to, wander aimlessly about, without food or pence, till it is time to re-enter their prisons. Woe to them, if late, for the sure punishment of the Oakum Shed and deprivation of future liberty awaits them. Striving to hide their detested uniform, others revisit the scenes of their poverty and struggles and beg a few pence and a meal from friends, whose lot will be soon as bad as their own. Aged couples, whose best years have been spent together, parted at the workhouse gate, re-unite outside and totter through the grim streets on a weary pilgrimage. Those who taunt us with seeking to dissolve family ties, should amend their hypocritical marriage service where it says, “Until death do us part : “ and add, “Or the Relieving Officer.”

Let others talk of evolution and development, but I shall see with pleasure the dawn of a day of reckoning with these cowardly, cruel ill- treaters of the poor. Remember, that the class who have been most conspicuous for their brutality towards the unfortunate of our class are those who style themselves Liberals, philanthropists, and the friends of labour, who have erected the callous inhuman doctrines of Malthus into a science, and allude to your horror of receiving their cold charity as “wholesome dread of the ‘House,” and “an aid to thrift and industry.”

Those who are attracted to us from a sheer love of notoriety, and who in their previous careers never felt or sympathised with the poor, may from policy deprecate a cry for revenge. But the Socialist who looks forward to and works for the time when the worker’s evening of life shall be passed in the enjoyment of what he has earned and produced with his fellows, cannot