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The Bandits

Victor Serge

January 4, 1912

M. Ernest La Jeunesse, a journalist whose usual specialty is the praising and interring of Academicians, has become alarmed at what he calls his red Christmas presents. In truth, we've had a not very happy end of year for the potbellied gentlemen who have money in their pockets and the bank. Barely had the deplorable story of the stolen postal trunk fallen into discreet oblivion, than the same day some wretches, some evil wretches, opened the tomb of Mlle Lantelme, while other wretches attacked a messenger boy carrying funds on the Rue Ordener.

M. La Jeunesse is not completely wrong in being upset. These things have a meaning. That in order to rob it they should tip carrion into a burial ditch proves that there are living men who are determined to live. That in the middle of the day they shot down a miserable bank boy proves that men have finally understood the virtues of daring. All of these are lessons that for men of M. La Jeunesse's class are not in the least pleasant.

Nothing is more wicked, it is said, than an enraged poltroon. And so it is that M. La Jeunesse, who under the circumstances does nothing but translate the mood of a social category, shows himself implacable. In order to respond to bold crime, he says,

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rapid, inexorable, and decisive justice is necessary: in summary, Lynch law. The bandits, “kill them anonymously like what they are: mad dogs.”

Fortunately, this is quicker said than done.

And I hope that M. La Jeunesse experiences the sinister joke of somewhere meeting up with one of these famous bandits he makes so little case of.

Having no reason to fear for my safety, it will be understood that Monsieur’s reasons touch me not at all.

Along with honest M. Gaby who, poor man, miserable wage earner, consented to transport fortunes; with the miserable cowards who, not understanding either daring or the will to live, vociferate against the outlaws; with the police dogs, the journalist-squealers, the grocers sweating in fear, and the rich as ferocious in their hatred for the rebel as they would be cowardly in his presence, along with all these people M. La Jeunesse joins in the mob respectful of the law.

But these laws they respect, I know they’re aimed at garroting the weakest, to sanction their enslavement by brute force; that honesty they proclaim I know to be falsehood, hiding the worst turpitudes, permitting, even honoring theft, fraud, dupery when they are committed in the shadow of the criminal code; this so called “respect for human life” they never fail to speak of a propos of every murder. I know it to be ignobly hypocritical, since they kill in its name by hunger, work, subjection, and prison.

I am on the other side, and I’m not afraid to admit it. I’m with the bandits. I find their role to be noble; sometimes I see in them men. Elsewhere I see only fools and puppets.

The bandits demonstrate strength.

The bandits demonstrate daring.

The bandits demonstrate their firm determination to live.

At the same time, “the others” submit to the landlord, the boss and the policeman; they vote, protest against iniquities and die as they lived: miserably.

Whatever he might be, I prefer a man who fights. Perhaps he'll die younger; he'll know pursuit and the penal colony. Perhaps he'll end his days under the abominable kiss of the "widow"¹. It could be. I love those who accept the risks of the great struggle: he is virile.

And anyway, victor or vanquished, is his lot not preferable to the dismal vegetation and infinitely slow agony of the proletarian, who will die stupefied and retired, without having profited from existence?

As for the bandit, he gambles. And so he has a chance of winning. And that suffices.

The bandit is virile.

Haven't we seen workers whose demonstrations are broken up by the kicks of policemen. And workers who are kept in place by the shouts of the boss. And young men lacking in valor that aren't revolted by the insults of non-coms. And idiotic tramps who, finding full purses, bring them to the mocking policeman. And we've also seen the bourgeois of M. La Jeunesse and Co. trembling the evenings of strikes or on May Day; we've seen them assemble hundreds of cops to solemnly slaughter Liabeuf.²

We have so many times seen displayed the imbecility, the cowardice, the ferocity of these masses and slaves that they have finished by inspiring in us an insurmountable disgust.

But there are the bandits! A few, standing out from the crowd, firmly determined to not waste in servitude the precious hours of their lives, have decided to fight. And without ambiguity, they set out in conquest of the money that confers might. They dare. They attack. They often pay. In any event, they live.

They kill.

¹ Familiar name for the guillotine

² Jean-Jacques Liabeuf. Shoemaker executed in 1910 after killing a police officer. His execution was the cause of riots in Paris.

Without a doubt. Is it their fault? Did they desire the fate that is handed them? Many did nothing wrong other than wanting to be men and not citizens, wage earners or soldiers. Some dreamed of working freely in a world without masters. But the choice they were given was between servitude and crime.

Vigorous and valiant, they chose battle: crime.

No, they won't be pale hooligans, vague pimps, shady and sneaky rebels: they will be bandits whose fearlessness will disconcert you. They will be the anarchists whose ceaseless activity won't allow you to sleep in peace. They will respect neither the putrefied corpses of high whores nor the imbecilic devotion of the wage earner to his master's money. They will respect nothing!

And it will be in vain that the severest measures will be passed against them, the cruelest penalties. As long as the problem is posed as it is posed, as long as men can only choose between theft and submission, there will be enough brave men who will prefer all of rebellions' risks to passivity.

The bandits won't disarm, for it is impossible that they disarm. Their acts constitute the effects of causes situated beyond their personalities. These causes will only disappear if the social order is transformed. Until then the rebels – anarchists and bandits – will remain, whatever might be done, the champions of the human will to live.

So let them try to apply Lynch law to them, as the excellent M. La Jeunesse recommends. We'll see if it's a solution. We'll see this soon, for the cruel violence of the dominators has only ever succeeded in exasperating the rebels.