

The Criminal Classes of the Future

A Retrospect and a Prospect.

Frank Kitz

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The persistent preaching of Socialist principles had leavened men's minds with new ideas, and the old prejudices against the poorer inmates of our jails and convict establishments had given place to a feeling that they were more sinned against than sinning. Bad training amidst filth, squalor, and manifold temptations, were held as (outside the judicial bench) excuses and condonation of offences against property. There, on the contrary, as the feelings of the people became more liberal, the harshness of their decisions became more marked. Shameful sentences and gross partiality were the order of the day. Prison discipline bore the marks of the haters of the people, and the brutal tortures of the past were replaced with refined cruelties. That made a sentence of imprisonment, in many cases, a sentence of death. Pitiful Cases of half-starved desperate men sent to jail for stealing food, with the brutal comments of the well-fed magistrate ringing in their ears, of paupers ill-treated with impunity by workhouse jailers, and of myriads preferring to lie and die by the roadside rather than accept the brutal charity of a corrupt Society, were the order of the day. The mass of unemployed workmen were insulted by the paid hirelings of the affrighted bourgeois with schemes of dietetic reforms, sterilisation, etc., etc. It seemed that the old saying that those whom the "Gods seek to destroy they first make mad" was having its illustration in Old England. Alternating with the insults as to raggedness, laziness, and depravity heaped upon the dispossessed, were demands for bludgeons and coercion; and the Russian legislation, hitherto confined to the sister island, was made applicable to the whole kingdom. The police, acting on the cue of their employers, changed their tactics of petty spydom for wholesale arrests, and plots smacking of the "Woolff and Bondurand" flavour were common discoveries.¹

It was during this social discord, and whilst the social contract was being challenged by simple and learned alike, that the European war-cloud, so long brooding over the Continent, burst. Two great nations, goaded on by vulture statesmen, were at each others throats, and wholesale carnage and desolation spread over their peaceful fields. England led by purblind rulers was insensibly drawn into conflict, but with another combatant. Her antagonist fitted out fleets of privateers who preyed upon her commerce. To transfer her freightage to foreign bottoms was

¹ Woolf and Bondurand were charged with possessing explosives. At first, with intent to blow up the German Embassy. Later, in order to extort money by threats. After a week's trial and an undecided jury, all charges were dropped. The chief witness against them was then charged with perjury.

tried and failed, for England had few friends. The American-Irish, with their burning memories of wrongs inflicted, effectually prevented the United States from rendering any indirect assistance. As a consequence her vast populations herded in the great centres divorced from the soil, and dependent mainly upon foreign supplies for food were famine-stricken, and although the propertied classes were preaching to them endurance on patriotic grounds, the spectacle was continuously before them of contractors defrauding the nation and furnishing the soldiers with rotten food and accoutrements, and even supplying the enemy with munitions of war. The trading-hucksters waxed fat out of the famine prices extorted from their countrymen whose patriotism they relied on.

Alarmed by the condition of things, the wealthy classes betook themselves to the pleasure resorts yet out of the zone of foreign war. The case of the people was desperate, and in striving to suppress expression of discontent by arresting a Socialist speaker at a large meeting, the fires of insurrection were lit. The capital, denuded of troops for foreign service was only defended by a few regulars and volunteers. At the first a mass of the latter joined the people, whilst the snob clerk element brought about their speedy defeat and destruction by firing on the people. The towns and cities of the country fell one by one, sometimes without a struggle, into the hands of the people. Everywhere the Cause triumphed. Trusty messengers were despatched to Ireland, and at once the standard of revolt was raised. The thin garrisons were powerless against the onslaught, and at one fell swoop Ireland and England freed themselves from the curse of landlordism and capitalism. Strange things happened at the original seat of war, large masses of troops revolted on both sides and fraternised; the officers either fled or were destroyed, and the two peoples passed out of the valley of despair into the dawn of the Social Revolution. In the first flush of rage the English revolutionists desired to destroy the workhouse bastilles and prisons, after emptying them of their unfortunate occupants, but wiser councils prevailed and they were put to a better purpose. For the wealthy who still remained were using their money to overthrow the new *regime*, and they were aided by the fast returning money-mongers who had fled at the first noise of war. The people, however, through their chosen delegates, declared the old currency null and void, and issued a new one representative only of labour. Gold and silver, so long the curse of nations, were no longer used as coinage, but a base metal of no intrinsic value took their place. By a decree issued simultaneously the idlers, whose monetary wealth was thus rendered useless, were cited to appear before the local Assemblies and give account of themselves, and many haughty dames and *distingué* swells were charged with being without visible means of subsistence. The answers to this charge were many and curious. A local Assembly sitting was occupied with a batch of culprits who had been in their day the elite of Society.

Chairman (to first accused): What are you?

Accused: I am the eldest son of Lord Broadlands, now abroad for the benefit of his health.

Chairman: How have you got your living hitherto?

Accused: Oh, I had great expectations and an allowance.

Chairman: Ever done any work?

Accused: Boating, cricketing, lawn-tennis, and so forth.

Chairman: No trade?

Accused: Oh, dear no.

Chairman: You are allowed three weeks to choose an occupation, and as you are unskilled you will have to go the workhouse during this time. Next case!

Chairman (to second accused): What are you?

Accused: I am a stockbroker and shareholder in railways, mines, and so on.

Chairman: You have had a good education, I presume. Ever contributed anything to literature?

Accused: No.

Chairman: Do you know any trade, for your occupation is now gone?

Accused: Oh, dear no.

Chairman: I consider some punishment necessary in your case, for you are one of those who plunged the country into incessant wars in order to get your dividends; three month's hard labour. Next case!

Chairman (to third accused, an austere looking maiden lady): What are you?

Accused: I am the daughter of a colonel in the army, who died fighting for the honour of his country.

Chairman: Indeed! Where did it happen?

Accused: In Mandalay, Burmah.

Chairman: Humph! How do you get your living?

Accused: What impertinence! Well, if you must know, I have shares in some coal mines.

Chairman: Ever done anything useful yourself?

Accused: The idea of such questions. I am the greatest collector of used foreign stamps in England, and my cat has taken a prize at the last cat show.

Chairman: Anything else?

Accused: I have written articles to the *Parish Magazine* how to make vegetable soup for the poor on an economical basis.

Chairman: You must go to the workhouse laundry for a training. Next case!

Chairman (to fourth accused): What are you?

Accused: I am a ratepayer and guardian of the poor. Have been labour master in the union —

Chairman: Stop! Take him away and put him in the oakum shed on bread-and-water; give him his water *hot!*

It was ludicrous in the extreme to witness the impotent rage of the “respectables” as they were one after the other passed from the Court on to scenes of really useful labour or condemned to the same penal discipline that in the hour of their triumph they had inflicted upon their fellow-creatures. One or two languid swells whose speech had hitherto been made up of painfully aspirated “aitches,” said that, “weally you know,” it was quite a change. And in time they became Men instead of the vapid prigs they had previously been. It was also curious to see the unbounded indignation of titled and untitled persons whose precious dignity was infringed upon by the “low fellows” who had charge of them. Scandalous! infamous! they exclaimed. There was in truth wailing and weeping over the tasks they had sentenced others to but now had to perform themselves.

Outrageous as this treatment seemed to be to these handlers of other people's rights and possessions, yet it had been mercifully adopted as an alternative to a policy of extirpation advocated by the more enraged of the revolutionists.

The true spirit of the revolution was not displayed in these acts, but was a policy imposed upon it as a matter of self-preservation. It had however, the effect of softening many who with loud-mouthed persistency had under the old regime advocated these forms of punishment for

the poor. The fellow-feeling which Shakespeare has said makes us wondrous kind, was born of the actual experience of the lot to which so many thousands of the now emancipated labourers had been condemned.

Many gave in their adhesion to the new order, and were at once set free to take part in the reorganisation going on outside. A large number were obliged to commence life *de novo*, for none of their previous nefarious occupations were left to them. All forms of usury and profit-mongering were abolished. The land had long since been declared common property, and was being cultivated by the free communities established in the smiling shires of old England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. These *ci-devant* stockjobbers, landlords, rentmongers, and usurers, formed, in short, the army of useless mouths in the new order of things.

No recruits came from this quarter to the literary, cultured class; but from the ranks of labour, freed from the benumbing process of their rent and profit getting, were reverent students of the knowledge thrown free and open to all. The brain-worker, no longer forced to sell his work in a commercial market, met with full recognition at the hands of the communities to whose refinement and pleasure he contributed; and in no instance was there a desire shown to exact excessive tribute from the communes because of varied or singular capacity.

Inventions from practical workmen were also applied to the most laborious and repugnant tasks; and this class of labour, whilst being equally rewarded, was reduced to a minimum.

The marvellous changes wrought in the capital completely transformed it. Its hideous suburbs, the houses of the smug legal cheats, disappeared and gave place to pleasure resorts. In the centre, the monuments of cant and greed, the monstrous barracks erected by five per-cent. philanthropists in which to herd a landless, rack-rented population, were levelled amid general acclamation. It is reported that an old, very old man, by name Alderman Lowwater, stood by and wrung his hands at the overthrow of his pet schemes for regenerating mankind and pocketing a profit as well.²

The monuments of nonentities and scoundrels that obstructed and disfigured the public places were removed, with other road rubbish, and in their stead arose monuments to the heroes and heroines whose labours in science, art, and letters had liberalised thought and paved the way for the glorious and beneficial change. Applied mechanical science reduced the working day for necessities to the limit assigned it by Hoyle some years before — viz., 1½ hours per diem. Labour rendered attractive by free selection and pleasant environment, with utility as its sole impetus, produced marvellous results, that stood out in bold contrast to the shoddy goods thrown upon the markets by half-starved workers driven by the twin scourges of greed and fear to exhausting toil. No less remarkable was the change wrought in the features and comportment of the people. Freed from cankering care and the fear of starvation and punishment, their manners and looks became more in accord with their happy and free state, but the marks of the fell system so recently destroyed would take a long time to finally obliterate. And as time went on, the younger children came into the colleges and academies; they listened with wonder to the record of how in the past times idlers were rewarded with wealth and honours, whilst the producers endured cold, hunger, and insult; how they had rattled their own chains and been pleased with the music, and echoed the shibboleths of their masters; how wholesale butchers of their kind were belauded

² Alderman Waterlow had built 'model' tenement houses since the 1860s using new cheap materials; announced as charitable but actually with a return of 7–9% (*Mr. Alderman Waterlow's Model Lodging Houses*, New York Times, Oct 13 1865).

and decorated, whilst merit and invention served only to increase the gains of low cunning commercial gamblers, and moreover allowed that every additional power over the forces of nature tended but to increase their misery. With the aid of models and diagrams the filth, squalor, and crime of the past was illustrated to their amazed gaze; and whilst they uttered joyful thanks that their lot was cast on pleasant lines, where neither thief, pauper, idler, or prostitute existed, they gave a mental tribute of praise to the memories of those who had laboured for the Cause “ere the toil of strife and battle overthrew the curse of Gold.”³

³ William Morris, *All for the Cause*.

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