

The Masterless Man

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SOME time ago I read a newspaper article, which contained a rather arresting phrase, which is just exactly not one of the nine to thirteen phrases which, arranged in various ways, make up the whole of most newspaper articles. It had about it a smack of history, even if it was not altogether good history; a hint of the possibility of philosophy, even if it was here used in the interest of a false philosophy. Nor, indeed, was it without other merits. The writer was contributing an article to an Organ of Democracy, one of those great Radical sheets that are the flags of the people clamouring for freedom; but, to do him justice, he did not devote the whole article to hopes of the return of capitalism with all its monopolies and money power vested in the few; it was not from end to end a song of praise for the epoch of the employers and the unemployed, like a real democratic article in the Liberal press. The writer had some consciousness of the horror of the crisis that has come; and of which even its apologists admit that it may come again. He had the sense and courage to say something about the possibility of the peril becoming much more than a passing warning. But before he made any of these comparatively sane admissions, he went through a curious ritual, which I notice is now practised regularly *de rigueur*.

Before a free and unfettered Radical journalist is allowed to say that the present position is bad, he is morally forced to go through a form of saying

(almost in the same words in every case) that, of course, the past was very much worse. Keep an eye on this opening, for its recurrence and regularity is very amusing. By this the journalist formally purges himself of heresy; one might well say, of history. He is allowed to hint that things are worse than they ought to be; so long as he makes first a solemn legal affirmation that they are better than they were. It is a sort of Oath of Abjuration to preserve the Protestant, or Progressive, succession. The better sort of Liberal writers accompany it with sad admissions of our modern futility; but, when all allowance is made for these, I cannot work myself into a heat of admiration for this new form of Christian humility. Somehow I do not care very much for the Christian who says in his general confession: "I confess most humbly that I am a miserable sinner; but you must admit that I am not such a disgusting old rip as my grandfather; I really am a good, sound, virtuous fellow, compared with my Uncle Marmaduke; and you will not deny that I am at least a much finer fellow than my father; and that I have done something to balance, by sheer conscientiousness and unselfish public spirit, the more revolting characteristics of my mother."

I repeat that this formula for repentance does not in itself attract me; but it is a formula universally demanded of all Progressives, before they are allowed to admit that modern things are sometimes a little tragic; that a good many men died in the latest and most modern war, or that a good many men were sacked in the latest and most modern Slump. The writer here in question, however, doubtless to relieve the monotony of repeating this ritual preface, strikes

out one phrase which is not often used by journalists; and does really involve a number of interesting ideas, both on one side and the other. He said that crises like that of Unemployment often occurred in history; and that it was an even more tragic fate to be a Masterless Man in the Middle Ages.

Even the abuses of the Middle Ages are bright and breezy enough to bring something like a breath of fresh air into the filthy fog of the respectabilities and social virtues of the present day. And the phrase does suggest some very interesting speculations. To begin with, it is quite true that in the very early Middle Ages (that is in the converted Roman Empire partly recovering from the barbarian invasion) the Feudal System was so fixed that a man might have been unhappy through being a Masterless Man. Very few men were masterless, except the Pope and the Emperor; and even there there were complications. I am well aware, needless to say, that no man is really a masterless man. But those who complain of my articles being theological, will at least excuse me for not dwelling on the point here. It is enough to say that even the worst of the Popes had a curious tendency to believe; and that some of the worst of the Emperors had very adequate reasons to believe and tremble.

But the real point of interest is this; that since the Peasant progress, later in the Middle Ages, has expanded into the vast peasant communities spreading over all Europe today, a number of questions have been answered. The most important answer concerns the last question; since peasants are everywhere the prop of religious tradition, it is proved that a man may be more inclined to accept his real Master, be-

cause he has not any earthly master. But what such writers evidently do not know, is that the Masterless Man is even possible; let alone that he is universal. Now that is what is really meant by narrowness. Why are we annoyed by the crank; the really dull crank? I submit the reply that he is a man who is always solving what is solved already. He is like the cracked inventor who invents an existing invention. A civilized man's irritation with Prohibition, say, can be expressed in many ways; as that he merely dislikes what is uncivilized. But the true reason is this; he is irritated by imagining all the millions voting (at one time) for Prohibition, without knowing that in the centres of civilization the problem has been solved without Prohibition. In the lands where most men drink wine, very few men drink too much wine. In the same way, we are irritated by the Bolshevist, who would abolish all property like wine, because we feel he does not know that property can be well divided; and, in the old civilization, often is well divided. The Socialist cannot imagine anything but the Trusts; just as the teetotaller cannot imagine anything but the Trade. They do not know that in an older culture, both problems have long been solved. The writer in the Liberal paper was simply ignorant of the fact that the small farmer is a very large factor. He did not know that, if there is one figure now bestriding all Europe like a giant, it is the Masterless Man. He did know, but he did not think (for such men know many things they never think of) that modern England is in so utterly unhuman and unnatural a state, that (except for a millionaire or two) there is practically no Englishman who can boast of being a Masterless Man.

The Rise and Fall of Industrialism

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IT IS a common error to confuse industrialism with modern scientific technique. To wish to end the industrial system is supposed to involve a desire to relinquish all those added powers over natural forces which man has acquired within the past couple of centuries. Logically, we are told—quite rightly—that if one proposes to do this one cannot stop short of a return to primitive savagery. There are many today who are alive to the necessity of a return to the land but who withhold support of the pioneers of the Land Movement because they think we are irrational fanatics in deprecating the use of, for example, the tractor plough. Or again, because we make it a crucial point that the new settlers shall produce as much as possible for their own immediate consumption rather than for market. These misapprehensions arise from the failure to recognize that the present industrial system is not merely an imperfect system to be reformed, or even an evil system to be ended, but an impermanent system that must, by its very nature, pass away within a comparatively short time.

The Industrial System is not essentially a matter of technique. It is that system wherein society is dominated by the idea of exchange for gain. Its overlords are middlemen whose test of everything is, “Will it pay?”; that is, “Will it give us more power to effect further exchanges?” This is not necessarily the object