

The Supreme Sacrifice

By MAX D. ARMSTRONG

(Editorial Note: The article by Comrade Armstrong will be continued in a later issue.)

Jack London, in a footnote of his novel, "The Iron Heel," says: "The people of that age (the capitalist epoch) were phrase slaves. . . . So befuddled and chaotic were their minds that the utterance of a single word could negative the generalizations of a lifetime of serious research and thought. Such a word was the adjective 'Utopian.' Its mere utterance was sufficient to damn any scheme of economic regeneration no matter how sanely conceived. Vast populations grew frenzied over such phrases as 'an honest dollar' and 'a full dinner pail.' The coinage of such phrases were considered strokes of genius."

To-day we have "scraps of paper," "rights of small nations" and the caption of this article, "The Supreme Sacrifice," used to describe the untimely deaths of so many men in the European butchery. Of course this term can only apply to the fallen of the allies, and is in no way applicable to the "duped" or "driven" soldiers of the Teutonic powers and their allies. This is self-evident. Sacrifice must be voluntary, and every one knows that every soldier of the allied powers is a volunteer, if not in form, at least in spirit, and has entered the conflict with an "intelligent appreciation" of the "tremendous issues" at stake, and with a cheerful readiness to lay down his life for "justice," "civilization" and "the rights of small nations." Beautiful self-sacrifice; generous self-effacement. Why do we all love unselfishness—in others and detest selfishness—in others?

As a member of the working class, I have had the beauties of self-sacrifice taught me since I was able to walk to a Sunday school. When I went to public school I was taught to think of others first. When I went to work I was told that the road to success was, not to try how little I could do for as much as I could get, but to do as much as possible and the remuneration would rise accordingly. In fact, I did reach that point where I had a vague feeling that I was a very worthless fellow, always self-seeking, and wholly destitute of consideration for the many good kind people, who spent sleepless nights worrying over my moral welfare, and how to provide me with work. As I grew older I began to meditate sadly on the frightful degeneracy of the human race since my grandmother's day, when the children were all good, and to marvel that after 1900 years of the gospel of self-sacrifice, and a large body of noble men devoting their whole time to preaching it both by word of mouth and daily example, the disease selfishness seemed to thrive enormously. Yet nobody admitted having it, though everyone agreed that all the ills of society grew out of selfishness. As I grew older and began to read the writings of great philosophers and uplifters of the human race, again I found the same lamentation about selfishness; the same praise of beautiful unselfishness, the same exhortations and entreaties that we should love one another, and bear each others burdens. And behold, wherever I turned my eyes all that I saw was selfishness, and everyone quite willing that some other should bear the burdens. Of course, as nearly everyone seemed to have a burden of some kind or other—the only advantage I could see in bearing each other's burdens, was an exchange of burdens. To be sure, every one was quite convinced that their burden was the heaviest, owing to the other fellow shirking part of his.

This remarkable state of mind affected groups as well as individuals. There was "the hard-worked artisan," "the tired business man," the "care worn statesman," and at the top, in pathetic loveliness, the monarch with the "bur-

den of empire on his shoulders." Now each of these were held up in turn as being the only genuine burden bearer, whose lot was unenviable. When the "hard-worked artisan" group complained about the weight of his burden, the "tired business man" informed him that he was selfish and thankless, whereas he should be contented and thankful that he had not the burden of responsibility which he, the "tired business man," groaned under. This information of course was imparted to the T. A. G. through the agency of the aforesaid noble men who devote their whole life to preaching unselfishness and the other gentlemen who write articles and editorials for the enlightenmen and "uplift of the toiling masses." I further marveled that when the price of anything increased, and that mysterious person the ultimate consumer complained to the retailer; he passed the blame on to the wholesaler, who in turn referred you to the farmer, manufacturer or trust. These, if they deigned to make any excuse, spoke feelingly about the exorbitant demands of labor. As the majority of the "ultimate consumers" are composed of this last named, it would appear that the U. C.'s are a very foolish lot of people, who believe they can grow rich by taking money from one pocket and putting it in another. The situation, reduced to its ethical basis, reveals the old commonplace—each group charges the other with greed and inconsideration for others, while amidst the clamor of mutual accusation the dispensers of ethics whine for Christian charity and forbearance.

Let us be serious. Why does the ethic, admired by all, and practised by none, seem to be in persistent antagonism with the most natural acts of men? Because man cannot live in society, as now constituted, and act any other way. He must obey the dictates of self-gratification.

Unselfishness is a delusion, like the flat earth of our forefathers. There is no such quality. It can arise as an ethical abstraction only in a society based upon conflicting class interests, and conflicts of individual interests arising therefrom. It is at bottom a class ethic, used by the dominant class in society as a check upon the natural disposition of the enslaved class to gratify self in any way detrimental to the interests of the masters. This is the basis of present-day ethics. Men seek to gratify their desires always. The primal desire is to get the best possible livelihood, food, clothing, etc., with the least expenditure of energy. This dictum is to political economy what the law of gravity is to physics. It is the law of life; the will to live, and then to live better. In obeying this law, the will of the two great divisions in society, masters and slaves, capitalists and wage-workers, is in conflict. The capitalist class own or control all the means (land, machinery, etc.) whereby the desires of man can be gratified. The wage-working class are destitute of such means. To live they must use these means. They are permitted to use them by their owners, not out of pure love, but of necessity, the owners being unable, and even if able, unwilling to use them personally. Property in the means of life is accumulated or acquired with no other end in view than that of avoiding work, i.e., getting a living with little or no labor, in obedience to the law laid down. The conditions under which the property owners allow the destitute access to the means of life are, that all the product in excess of what is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of the producers as a class (preservation and reproduction) belongs to the owners of

the means of production. Competition for the privilege of using the machinery of production among the propertyless (and they are always in excess of the needs of the property owners) keeps their share of the product at the minimum of subsistence. Each of these classes impelled by the primal law try to get the most for the least; the employers to get the maximum of production for the minimum of wages.

Hence the cry for efficiency—the workers to get the maximum of wages for the least expenditure of energy. Hence the demand for an eight-hour day. (Remember we are discussing what is, not what the preachers of ethics tell us ought to be; we are using as our subject of investigation neither idiots or geniuses, but normal, average men.) Hence the mutual recriminations, the cries of "tyrannical methods of compulsion of organized labor," "capital must have consideration," "exorbitant demands of labor" and on the other side "bloodsucker," "sweater," "slave-driver." And, above all, is heard the voice of the ethic pedlars begging for Christian charity, and assuring us that there is not, and should not be, any conflict between capital and labor, if, etc., etc. Arising out of and inseparably connected with this great conflict of class interests, we find the interests of individuals, and groups within these classes, in continuous conflict. Competition among the workers for jobs; jealousy among them, carefully fostered by the employing class when it serves their interests, and competition for markets among the various capitalist groups producing the same commodities. We have been taught that competition is the mainspring of progress, the great struggle in which only the best survive. Those who preach this doctrine, as a rule, seldom feel the stress of struggle. Others sing the praise of competition when they are more than holding their own; success is then the reward of industry, integrity, and brains, but when overtaken and beaten we hear the cry "Live and let live" from the erstwhile victor, and the vanquisher is characterized as a grasping, cunning scoundrel who employs very shady methods. And again we hear the plea for unselfishness and brotherhood. Oh ye, of vast credulity! When will ye learn that all men are selfish; that life would disappear, in fact would never have appeared on this planet but for this quality. We must be selfish, egoistic, before we can be altruistic.

"But," here you expostulate, "do you deny the fact that thousands of noble men and women have given their lives for the good of humanity without hope of gain?" Again, I repeat, that in every such case they gratified self. Those who bring this objection can only conceive of self-gratification as furtherance of material interests. What they term unselfishness is merely a differentiation of selfishness; selfishness expressing itself in another form, made possible in man because of his complex nervous system; his inordinate love of approbation of the group, be it ever so small, in which he moves. This is seen in the surrender (not sacrifice) of pecuniary advantage for the gratification gained in the support of a cause, devotion to which has become a passion. This desire for mental satisfaction, the outcome of a highly developed nervous system, is in some men so powerful that to gratify it they will neglect the animal satisfaction of food and shelter. But it does not disprove the primal law. Even dogs can be trained to bear hunger in sight of food. This training in man is social discipline and gives birth to "the sense of duty." "What I ought to do" is in conflict with the natural dictates of the primal law, yet the primal law is still at work through an artificial or socially-produced medium, "sense of duty." The example of the "self-sacrificing" mother does not come within the realm of ethics at

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CLIP AND COMMENT

London, Aug. 11.—Under the heading "Gambling in Bread," The Daily Express explains to its readers that the new rise in the price of bread which goes into effect in London next Monday is due to manipulations in Chicago.

"Circumstances," says The Daily Express, "appear to have conspired to enable the Chicago wheat market to indulge in one of its periodic gambles for the purpose of putting up the price against bread later. . . . While it is not believed that Chicago can create anything like a corner in wheat, there is a strong impression that operators in the Chicago pit are forcing prices as high as the market will let them go. Meanwhile supplies are rotting on the quays in Australia and being used as fuel, and large quantities are being held up in Argentina for lack of ships."—Canadian Daily Press.

It is easy to get up a scare against speculators and profiteers of any class. Surely the wise head that edits The London Daily Express must have seen long ago that the speculator must be eliminated, that production for profit rather than use must go, in short, that Socialism is the one and only sane cure for our present debilitated economic system.

"Just because Industrial Canada has sometimes been frank enough to tell the Government in plain language where it thought they were wrong, a few of the Liberal papers have chortled with glee, believing to see in our attitude an indication that the Canadian Manufacturers' Association was taking sides with the Opposition. We would like it to be clearly understood, once and for all, that the Canadian Manufacturers' Association is no more taking sides with the Opposition than it is taking sides against the Government. The association has no politics other than the politics of endeavoring to secure better and still better government from whatever party happens to be in power. Its constitution precludes it from being partisan, for its membership embraces Liberals as well as Conservatives, Free Traders as well as Protectionists. It is hostile to neither party as a party, nor is it the slave of any political organization. It is glad to commend where it believes commendation has been earned, but at the same time it does not hesitate to criticize frankly and fearlessly where it believes the policy or lack of policy of any Government has fairly invited criticism. The jockey plies the whip not to punish his horse, but to spur it on to do its best. Industrial Canada criticizes not to embarrass people nor to hurt their feelings, but to show them how they can do better."—Industrial Canada, official organ of the Canadian Manufacturers' Association.

Aha! Here it is, the "Declaration of Independence" by the Canadian Manufacturers' Association. At last we are happy to be informed that the bosses do not favor Grit any more than Tory, seeing that both are equally capitalistic. And note the illuminating confession—"the jockey plies the whip"—a naive intimation of the fact that the Government of Canada is not responsible to the people who elect, but rather to the bosses who control. Government by the people indeed!

By the way, is it any wonder that the Government's action in regard to the "High Cost of Living" problem ended merely with an order-in-Council. Surely the reason lies in the "jockey's whip-hand."

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