

The Paralyzing Past

LYTTON STRACHEY relates of Queen Victoria that, after the death of Prince Albert, she became more and more perturbed by the lack of stability and permanence in her surroundings. When she was young she had looked forward with some fear perhaps, but certainly with eagerness to the future, but as she grew old she found that the friends and advisers of her youth were taken from her one by one, and even the institutions of society and the Empire developed and decayed before her eyes. She was after all, a quite ordinary old lady of the nineteenth century, and as she had had to adapt herself to the strange situation of being the embodiment of all the pomp and dignity of the leading nation of the age, it was not surprising that with her the desire for security became an obsession. She set herself to the task of petrifying the world as it was, and of suspending the forces of disintegration.

"She gave orders that nothing should be thrown away—and nothing was. There in drawer after drawer, in wardrobe after wardrobe, reposed the dresses of seventy years. But not only the dresses—the furs and mantles and the subsidiary frills and the muffs and the parasols and the bonnets—all were arranged in chronological order; dated and complete . . . mementoes of the past surrounded her in serried accumulations. In every room the tables were powdered thick with the photographs of relatives; their portraits, revealing them at all ages, covered the walls; their figures, in solid marble, rose up from pedestals, or gleamed from brackets in the form of gold and silver statuettes. . . . And it was not enough that each particle of the past should be given the stability of metal or of marble: the whole collection, in its arrangement, no less than its entity, should be immutably fixed. There might be additions, but there might never be alterations. . . . Every single article in the Queen's possession was photographed from several points of view. . . . The fate of every object which had undergone this process was thenceforth irrevocably sealed. The whole multitude once and for all, took up its steadfast station, and Victoria, with a gigantic volume or two of the endless catalogue always beside her, to look through, to ponder upon, to expatiate over, could feel, with a double contentment, that the transitoriness of this world had been arrested by the amplitude of her might."

You will smile at the picture, perhaps, at the same time sympathising a little with this exhibition of human weakness. For although we cannot all enjoy the troublesome delights of being Queen Victoria the hankering after the imagined peacefulness of stagnation, and the desire to peg down the universe, or our little corner of it, are not restricted to old ladies and did not die with the nineteenth century. We are all possessors, in some degree of the facility for retaining experiences and using them for the formation of habits. If we hadn't this power, life would be one long round of painful repetitions of error, and, in fact, it is difficult to imagine the continuance of human society at all under such conditions; but the price we have to pay is the disinclination we have for altering our habits when once use has made them natural. Every one of us would, if he could, sit back leisurely and content, and contemplate the blessedness of things as they are. It has chanced, however, that we were born in an age when things are not by any means blessed, and either we must deaden our perceptions by swallowing the illusions of religious and political charlatans or we must set ourselves to find the remedy. Individuals rarely set themselves this task by choice; our preference for the old familiar ways of thought and action leads us first to try every known but fruitless

remedy before we will recognise that new problems need new solutions. When therefore one system sinks into decay the energy to conceive and construct a new society must come from those who, despite their efforts to maintain themselves, have been forcibly deprived of status and security and cut off from traditional links with the past. And, again, no such revolutionary purpose can gain wide acceptance until the old conditions have become so unbearable that we cannot tolerate their continued existence.

We have arrived now at a stage of capitalist development in which it is becoming more and more difficult for the problems of the workers to be shelved any longer, and their solution within the system is a sheer impossibility, but as we find in every historical epoch, custom dies hard and new ideas progress but slowly. All the acquired ingenuity of individuals is first directed to stemming the tide of dissolution, and in view of this it is not surprising that old institutions should live on tenaciously long after they have become economically absurd and politically a mere obstruction. Discontent among the workers is fairly general, while among the capitalists there is a growing realisation that unless they can succeed in allaying the discontent they will fall victims to it. It is readily understandable why the latter, who view society from above, should look backwards to find remedies for today's problems, but the so-called leaders of the workers, many of them self-styled revolutionaries, are also in the ranks of the Queen Victorias.

In the war days, when the ruling class were in difficulties and the workers particularly restive, the talk was all of the new world. Now our Trade Union officials and Labour Leaders, the men, "of vision," can talk of nothing but the necessity of not going below the pre-war standards, and they and the business men are united in casting longing eyes on the supposed happy days of 1914. The prophets, who we are told will show us the way to our earthly paradise, can do nothing better than discuss financial schemes and currency reforms to get us back to 1914 prices. Labour men, Liberals, Conservatives and Communists are all devising plans to win back our pre-war trade. Liberal journalists on Labour's Daily sigh for a return of the clean and gentlemanly politics that existed before the devil, Mr. Lloyd George, turned the world awry. The agricultural labourer's wise men can think of only one policy, that of asking the Government to give them back their wages board. The dockers' officials tremble with fear over the unofficial strike lest it should lead to the destruction of a great mass of those much-sought-after seals on the worker's slavery, known as wage agreements.

Ramsay MacDonald is forever perturbed lest the ancient usages of our Parliament be departed from. We have, in fact, reached a point where the feeling of unrest is so acute that the very worker's organisations, existing nominally to hasten the process of change, have become rocks of stability for the ruling class.

The "Industrial Group of the House of Commons," composed of business men, recently issued a warning to the Government, in which they "viewed with apprehension" the "disruptive force of unemployment on the trade unions, which are a safeguard of industrial peace." In particular they "feared" that unless the Government did something the Amalgamated Engineering Union would disappear. (Daily Telegraph, 26, 7, 1923.)

In fact, like Queen Victoria, these captains of industry, these Labour Leaders, and many of the workers, too, want all the old junk of capitalism photographed, recorded and labelled, so that they, poor bewildered sheep, may rest secure in the knowledge that the capitalist system will be tomorrow to its minutest detail just as it is today. Better to rot or starve in the decrepit hovel they know than venture out and risk dying strange deaths out of their beds.

The capitalist would rather deal with a certain known and limited evil, the trade unions, than face the terror of the unknown. Think of the dockers' strike! If the unions were to go, what might there not be underneath? Hell itself. The Labour Leaders would far rather prepare for the next war, while protesting their determination to prevent it, than face up to the situation as it really is and decide to help scrap the social system which makes war.

But all their anxiety will avail them nothing; the conditions of 1850, which made the Amalgamated Engineering Union the "new model" for all the workers, have passed with the challenging of Britain's world supremacy, and the Engineering Union is now only an example of what the workers ought to avoid.

Sooner or later these leaders must justify themselves by their deeds, and as they cannot remove the cause of discontent, the discontented will some day awake to the necessity of removing the present form of society.

Before they arrive at this recognition a painful and necessarily slow mental process must be gone through, its speed increasing as the pressure of circumstances becomes more insistent. They have got to see that the limits of social development set by private ownership have already been reached, and that the continuing growth of our powers of production can only aggravate the present evils.

The capitalist class, having themselves once had to take charge of a similar dangerous situation, successfully developed the required revolutionary energy. They ushered in their social system, brought it to its triumph, and enjoyed the fruits of success. They then allowed their functions of initiating, organising and directing to fall to other hands, those of the workers. They made Socialism possible, but Socialism can be established only when the workers develop the same confidence in their powers, the same self-reliance and determination that characterised the capitalists who threw down the challenge to feudalism. The workers must cut themselves adrift from the old system and the old parties, persons and notions. They must challenge every institution, question every authority, examine critically every creed, every conception, not excluding those which are popularly supposed to be eternal like ideas of right and wrong. They must give up their pathetic beliefs in the superiority of the ruling class and its institutions and consciously develop their own standards of conduct, remembering that the purpose and the conditions are the only final measure of their usefulness. It may be true, for instance, that in a broad sense the members of the capitalist class owing to their leisure and opportunities of culture have developed qualities very desirable from a social standpoint, but from the nature of the present situation these qualities sink for the workers into insignificance in comparison with the urgent need for self-assertion, the necessary precursor of emancipation. They must realise that there is, and can be no improvement in the status of the workers, except at the expense of the other class, because it is the ownership of the means of wealth production which is at stake. It follows therefore that every step will be contested fiercely by the present owners, with whom there can be no useful compromise. They must give up trusting to leaders who can do nothing for them, whether well intentioned or otherwise. They must aim at understanding the social system in which they live as a means to controlling the forces which at present overawe them. It may seem easier to follow the method of Queen Victoria, who surrounded herself with a host of odds and ends to hide the unwelcome facts of life, but it has the two-fold objection that the forces of change went on working just the same, while Queen Victoria only succeeded in making herself a slave, toiling to perpetuate the myth she had created.

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