

A COMMENTARY

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A COMMENTARY

THE old man whose call in life was to warn the public against the dangers of the steam-roller held a small red flag in his remaining hand, for he had lost one arm. His brown face, through whose leathery skin white bristles showed, had a certain dignity; so had his square upstanding figure. And his light grey eyes, with tiny pupils, gazed with a queer intentness, as if he saw beyond you. His clothes were old, respectable, and stained with grease; his smile shrewd and rather sweet, and his voice—of one who loved to talk, but whose profession kept him silent—was deliberate and sonorous, with a whistling lisp in it, because he had not many teeth.

“What’s your opinion?” he said one summer morning. “I’ll tell you *my* experience: a lot o’ them that’s workin’ on road jobs like this are fellers that the Vestries takes on, makin’ o’ work for them—the lowest o’ the low. You can’t do nothing with them; here to-day and gone to-morrow. Lost dogs I call ’em. Most of them goes on the drink the moment they gets a chance, and the language that they’ll use—oh dear! But you can’t blame them’s far as I can see—they’re born tired. They ain’t up to what’s wanted of ’em nowadays. You might just as well put their ’eads under this steam-roller and ’ave done with it.”

Then lowering his voice as though imparting information of a certain value: “And that’s just what I think’s ’appened to them already; that great thing”—he pointed to the roller—“that great thing goes on, and on, and on—it’s gone over them! Life nowadays has got no more feelin’ for a man than for a beetle. See the way the poor live—like pigs, crowded all together; to any one

who knows, it's awful! An' morals—something dreadful! How can you have morals when you've got to live like that—let alone humanity? You can't, it stands to reason. Talk about democracy—government by the people? There's no sense in it; the people's kept like pigs; all they've got's like pig-wash thrown 'em. They know there's no hope for them. Why, when all's done, a working-man can't save enough to keep 'imself in his old age. Look at me! I've lost my arm, all my savin's was spent when I was gettin' well; I've got this job now, an' very glad to get it—but the time 'll come when I'll be too old to stand about all weathers; what 'll happen? I'll either 'ave to starve or go into the 'Ouse—well, that's a miserable ending for a man. But then you say, what can you do? That's just it—what *can* you do? Where's the money to come from? People say Parliament ought to find it, but I've not much 'opes of them; they're very slow. All my life I've noticed that. Very slow! Them fellers in Parliament, they've got their positions and one thing and another to consider, the same as any other people; they're bound to be cautious, they don't want to take no risks, it stands to reason. Well, that's all against reforms, I think. All they do, why it's no more than following after this 'ere roller, treadin' in the stones."

He paused, looking dubiously at the roller, now close at hand. "See what a lot o' things the money's wanted for. It's not only old-age pensions, there's illness! When I lost my arm, and lay there in the 'orspital, it worried me to think what I should do when I got out—put me in such a stew; well, there's thousands like that—people with consumption, people with bad blood—'undreds an' thousands, that's got nothin' to fall back on; they're in fear all their time."

He came closer, and his voice seemed to whistle more than ever. "It's a dreadful thing, is fear. I thought that I'd come out a log, an' just 'ave to rot away. I've got no family—but them fellers in consumption with families an' all, it's an awful thing for them. Here's a carriage—I mustn't get to talking!"

He moved forward to the barrier, and stood there holding up his flag. A barouche and pair came sweeping up; the sun shone on its panels, on the horses' coats, the buttons of the coachman, and the egrets in two ladies' hats. It swerved at sight of the red flag, and swung round the corner to the left.

The old man stood looking after it, and the silence was broken only by the crunching of the roller. Rousing himself from reverie, he said: "Fashion! D'you know, I can't tell what them sort of people think of all day long. It puzzles me. Sometimes I fancy they don't think at all. Thinking's all done for them!" And again he seemed to lapse into his reverie. "If you told them that they'd stare at you. Why, they fancy they're doin' an awful lot, what with their bazaars an' one thing an' another. Them sort of people, they don't mean any 'arm, but they 'aven't got the mind. You can't expect it of them, livin' their lives; you want a lot o' mind to think of other people."

Suddenly his eyes brightened. "Why, take them street-walkers you see about at night; now what d'you think ladies in their carriages thinks of them—dirt! But them women 'alf the time's no worse than what the ladies are. They took their bit o' sport, as you may call it—same as lots o' ladies take it. That's where money comes in—they 'adn't the money to keep off the streets. But what are you to do? You can't have the creatures about." A frown came on his brow, as though this question had long been troubling him.

“The rich,” he went on, “are able for to educate their daughters, and look after them; I don’t blame them—it’s human nature to do the best you can for your own family; but you’ve got to think of others that haven’t got your money—you’ve got to be human about it. The mischief is, when a man’s got money, it’s like a wall between ’im an’ ’is fellows. That’s what I’ve found. What’s your opinion? Look here! My father was a farm labourer, at eight shillin’s a week, an’ brought up six of us. And ’owever ’e managed it I don’t know; but I don’t think things are any better than they were then—I don’t—I think they’re worse. This progress, or what do they call it, is destroyin’ of us. You can’t keep it back, no more than you could keep back that there roller if you pushed against it; all you can do’s to keep ahead of it, I suppose. But talk about people’s increasin’ in the milk of human kindness—I don’t see it, nor intelligence. Look at the way they spend their ’olidays—it gives you stomach-ache to see them. All a lot o’ rowdy fellers, never still a minute, that’s lost all religion—a lot o’ town-bred monkeys. This ’ere modern life, it’s hollowed of ’em out, that’s what it’s done, in my opinion. People’s got so restless; they keep on tryin’ first one thing and then another; anything so long as they can be doing something on their own. That’s a fact. It’s like a man workin’ on a job like this road-mendin’; he just sees the stones he’s puttin’ down himself, and he don’t see nothing else. That’s what everybody’s doin’. But I don’t see how you can prevent it; it looks as if ’twas in the blood. They talk about this Socialism; well, but I’m not very sweet on it—it’s mostly all a-lookin’ after your neighbour, ’s far’s I can see.”

He paused, staring hard, as though trying to see further. “Well,” he went on suddenly; “that won’t work! Look at the police—never met such meddlesome creatures; very nice men in

themselves, I dare say, but just because they've got a little power—! And they're as thick as thieves together. Take these fellers that they send to prison; they talk about reformin' of them, but when they get them there it's all like that roller, crushin' the life out—awful, I call it. Them fellers come out dead, with their minds squashed out o' them; an' all done with the best intentions, so they tell me. I tell you what I think, there's only one man in a 'undred fit to 'ave power over other men put in his 'ands. Look at the workhouses—why ain't they popular? It's all because you've got to live by rule. I don't find no fault with rules so long as you don't order people about; what you want to do's to get people to keep rules of their own accord—that's what I think. But people don't look at it that way, 's far 's I can see. What's your opinion? Mind ye," he went on suddenly, "I'm not saying as there isn't lots o' things Government might do, that you'd call Socialism, I dare say. See the women in them slums—poor things, they can't hardly drag themselves along, and yet they breed like rabbits. I don't blame them, they don't know no better. But look 'ere!" and thrusting the handle of the flag into his pocket, he took a button of his listener's coat between his finger and his thumb; "I'd pass a law, I would, to stop 'em. That's going too far, you say! Well, but what's to be done? There's no other way, in my opinion. Then, of course, if you stop 'em, you won't 'ave none o' this cheap low-class labour. That won't please people. It's a difficult matter!"

He sank his voice to a sort of whistling whisper. "'Alf the children in them slums is brought about under the influence of drink. What d' you make of that? And that's only the beginning—they feed them poor little things on all sorts o' mucky stuff—an' lots o' them 'alf fed at that. Pretty state o' things for a country like this—it'd disgrace the savages, I think. I'd 'ave every child full-fed

by law. I'd make it a crime, I would, to 'ave half-starved children about the streets or schools, or anywhere. I'd begin at the beginning. But then you say that's pauperising of the parents. That's what they said when they began this 'ere free education—nobody ain't been pauperised by that. A country that can't keep its children fed ain't fit to 'ave them, that's what I think; 't isn't fair to them little things. But then you say that'd cost a mint o' money—millions! Of course it would! Well, look at the 'ouses in this road, look at them big flats—'undreds an' thousands of streets an' 'ouses like that all over England. They say that sixpence on the rates would feed the children, but they won't put it on—of course they won't, it's too much off their comfort. People don't like parting; that's a fact, as you know yourself. But what's the good of raisin' millions of these 'ere dry-rotted people—they're so expensive, you can't do nothing with them——” He broke off to intercept a cart. “But I dare say,” he said, returning, “they'd call that Socialism. What's your opinion? Shall I tell you what I think about it? These Socialists are like men that keep a shop, an' some one walks in an' says: ‘How much for the coat there?’ he says. ‘Ten bob!’ they say. ‘I'll give you five,’ he says. ‘No, we wants ten,’ they say. ‘No,’ 'e says, ‘five!’ And both of them knows all the time they're goin' to do a deal at seven an' six!”

He sank his voice, as though imparting a State secret: “It wouldn't never do for them to say seven an' six straight off; then 'e'd only give 'em six an' three. See? If you want to get a proper price you've got to keep hollerin' for more—that's human nature.”

Then, waving his flag towards the block of flats, he said: “Look at all this class of comfortable people. They don't see things the same as I do, an' I don't know why they should. They're

comfortable themselves. It stands to reason they're not goin' to think about such things. They've been brought up to believe the world was made for them. They never see no other people but their own sort; same as workin' people never see no other but workin' people. That's what makes the classes, in my opinion. All these fellers here," and he waved his hand towards the figures working at the road, "talk very big about betterin' their position, but as soon as it comes to standin' by each other it's every man for himself. It's only what you can expect—if you don't look out for yourself, nobody else will, that's as sure as eggs. They say, in England all men's equal under the law; well, but then you've only got to look around—that isn't true, how can it be? You've got to pay for law same as you've got to pay for everything. That's where it is! They talk about Justice in the country, the same for rich and poor; that's all very fine, but there's a 'undred ways where a man that's poor has to suffer for it, because he can't pull the lawyers' tails and make 'em jump."

And with these words he tried to raise both arms, but he had only one. "You haven't told me what you think?" he said: "I'll tell you my opinion," and his voice dropped to an emphatic whisper: "*There's things that want improvin', and there's things that stand in the way of things improvin'.*" But I've noticed one thing; it don't matter how low people get, they're always proud of something, even if it's only of their troubles. There must be some good in human nature, or we'd never keep ahead of that great thing at all;" he stretched his arm out to the roller, approaching with its slow crunching sound like the sound of Life crunching the bones of men; "we'd let it go right over us." And nodding his grey head twice, he stood holding up his red flag as still as stone, with his eyes fixed intently on a coming milk-cart.

I

THE LOST DOG

IT was the first October frost. Outside a half-built house, before a board on which was written, "Jolly Bros., Builders," I saw a man, whose eyes seemed saying: "In the winter building will stop; if I am homeless and workless now, what shall I be in two months' time?" Turning to me he said: "Can you give me a job, sir? I don't mind what I do."

His face was in mourning for a shave, his clothes were very ragged, and he was so thin that there seemed hardly any man behind those ragged clothes. He smelt, not indeed of whiskey, but as though bereaved of it; and his blue and watery eyes were like those of a lost dog.

We looked at each other, and this conversation passed between our eyes:

"What are you? Where did you work last? How did you get into this condition? Are you married? How many children? Why don't you apply to the proper authorities? I have money, and you have none; it is my right to ask these questions."

"I am a lost dog."

"But I have no work for you; if you are really hungry I can give you sixpence; I can also refer you to a Society who will examine your affairs, but if they find you a man for whom life has been too much, they will tell me so, and warn me not to help you. Is that what you want?"

“I am a lost dog.”

“I dare say; but what can I do? I can’t make work! I know nothing about you, I daren’t recommend you to my friends. No man gets into the condition you are in without the aid of his own folly. You say you fell ill; yes, but you all say that. Why couldn’t you look ahead and save some money? You see now that you ought to have? And yet you come to me! I have a great many calls—societies, old people, and the sick; the rates are very high—you know that—partly on your account!”

“I am a lost dog.”

“Ah! but I am told daily by the just, the orderly, the practical, who have never been lost or hungry, that I must not give to casuals. You know yourself it would be pure sentiment; you know yourself it would be mere luxury. I wonder you can ask me!”

“I am a lost dog.”

“You have said that before. It’s not as if I didn’t know you! I have seen and talked with you—with dozens of you. I have found you asleep on the Thames Embankment. I have given you sixpence when you were shambling empty away after running a mile behind a cab. One night, don’t you remember, in the Cromwell Road—well, not you, but your twin brother—we talked together in the rain, and the wind blew your story against the shuttered windows of the tall, closed houses. Once you were with me quite six weeks, cutting up a dead tree in my garden. Day after day you sat there, working very slowly to keep the tree from coming to an end, and showing me in gratitude each morning your waistbelt filling out. With the saw in your hand and your weak smile you would look at me, and your eyes would say, ‘You don’t know what a rest it is for

me to come here and cut up wood all day.’ At all events, you *must* remember how you kept yourself from whiskey until I went away, and how you excused yourself when I returned and found you speaking thickly in the morning: ‘I can’t *help* rememberin’ things!’ It was not you, you say? No; it was your double.”

“I am a lost dog.”

“Yes, yes, yes! You are one of those men that our customs breed. You had no business to be born—or at any rate you should have seen to it that you were born in the upper classes. What right had you to imagine you could ever tackle the working-man’s existence—up to the mark all day and every day? You, a man with a soft spot? You knew, or your parents ought to have known, that you couldn’t stand more than a certain pressure from life. You are diseased, if not physically, then in your disposition. Am I to excuse you because of that? Most probably I should be the same if life pressed hard enough. Am I to excuse myself because of that? Never—until it happens! Being what you are you chose deliberately—or was it chosen for you—to run the risks of being born; and now you complain of the consequences, and come to me for help? To me—who may myself at some time be in need, if not of physical, of moral bread? Is it right, or reasonable?”

“I am a lost dog.”

“You are getting on my nerves! Your chin is weak—I can see that through your beard; your eyes are wistful, not like the professional beggar’s pebbly eyes; you have a shuffling walk, due perhaps a little to the nature of your boots; yes, there are all the marks of amiability about you. Can you look me in the face and say it would be the slightest use to put you on your legs and thrust

you again, equipped, into the ranks of battle? Can you now? Ah! if you could only get some food in you, and some clothes on you, and some work to do! But don't you know that, three weeks hence, that work would be lost, those clothes in pawn, and you be on the drink? Why should I waste my charity on *you*—'the deserving' are so many! There's 'something against you' too? Oh! nothing much—you're not the sort that makes a criminal; if you were you would not be in such a state. You would be glad enough to do your fellows a good turn if ever you could do a good turn to yourself; and you are not ungrateful, you would attach yourself to any one who showed you kindness. But you are hopeless, hopeless, hopeless—aren't you now?"

"I am a lost dog."

"You know our methods with lost dogs? Have you never heard of the lethal chamber? A real tramp, living from hand to mouth in sun and rain and dirt and rags, enjoys his life. But *you* don't enjoy the state you're in. You're afraid of the days when you've nothing to eat, afraid of the nights when you've nowhere to sleep, afraid of crime, afraid even of this begging; twice since we've been standing here I've seen you looking round. If you knew you'd be afraid like this, what made you first desert 'the narrow path'? Something came over you? How could you let it come like that? It still comes over you? You were tired, you wanted something new—something a little new. We all want that something, friend, and get it if we can; but we can't recognise that *your* sort of human creature is entitled, for you see what's come of it?"

"I am a lost dog."

“You say that as if you thought there was one law for the rich and another for the poor. You are making a mistake. If I am had up for begging as well as you, we shall both of us go to prison. The fact that I have no need to steal or beg, can pay for getting drunk and taking holidays, is hardly to the point—you must see that! Do not be led away by sentimental talk; if we appear before a judge, we both must suffer punishment. I am not so likely to appear as you perhaps, but that’s an accident. No, please don’t say that dreadful thing again! I wish to help you. There is Canada, but they don’t want you. I would send you anywhere to stop your eyes from haunting me, but they don’t want you. Where do they want you? Tell me, and you shall go.”

“I am a lost dog.”

“You remind me of that white shadow with little liver spots that my spaniel dog and I picked up one night when we were going home.

“‘Master,’ he said, ‘there’s such an amusing cur out there in the middle of the road.’

“‘Behave yourself! Don’t pick up with anything you come across like this!’

“‘Master, I know it is a thin and dirty cur, but the creature follows me.’

“‘Keep to heel! The poor dog will get lost if you entice him far from home.’

“‘Oh, master! that’s just what’s so amusing. He hasn’t any.’

“And like a little ghost the white dog crept along behind. We looked to read his collar; it was gone. We took him home—and how he ate, and how he drank! But my spaniel said to me:

“‘Master, what is the use of bringing in a dog like this? Can’t you see what he is like? He has eaten all my meat, drunk my bowl dry, and he is now sleeping in my bed.’

“I said to him: ‘My dear, you ought to like to give this up to this poor dog.’

“And he said to me: ‘Master, I *don’t*! He is no good, this dog; I am cleaner and fatter than he. And don’t you know there’s a place on the other side of the water for all this class of dog? When are we going to take him there?’

“And I said to him: ‘My dear, don’t ask me; *I don’t know*.’

“And you are like that dog, standing there with those eyes of yours and that weak chin and those weak knees, before this half-built house with the winter coming on. And I am like my spaniel, who knows there is a proper place for all your kind of creature. Man! what shall I do with you?”

“I am a lost dog.”

II

DEMOS

“Well, she’s my wife, ain’t she?” He put his hands on the handles of his barrow as though to take it away from one who could not see his point of view, wheeled it two yards, and stopped.

“It’s no matter what I done to her. Look ’ere!” He turned his fish-white face, and his dead eyes came suddenly to life, with a murky, yellow glare, as though letting escape the fumes within his soul. “I ought to ha’ put her to bed with a shovel long ago; and I will, too, first chance I get.”

“You are talking like a madman.”

“Look ’ere, ’as a man a right to his own wife an’ children?” His thick loose lower lip trembled. “You tell me that!”

“It depends on how he behaves himself. If you knock her about, you can’t expect her to stay with you.”

“I never done no more to her than what she deserved. I never gave her the ’alf o’ what she ought to ’ave.”

“I’ve seen her several times with your marks on her face.”

“Yes, an’ I’ll mark ’er again, I will.”

“So you have just said.”

“Because a man ’its ’is wife when he’s got a drop o’ liquor in ’im, that don’t give ’er the right to go off like this and take a man’s children from ’im, do it?”

“I think it does.”

“When I find her——”

“I hope you will not find her.”

He thrust his head forward, and the yellow in the whites of his eyes deepened and spread till his whole face seemed suffused with it.

“Look ’ere, man an’ wife is man an’ wife, and don’t you or any one come between ’em, or it’ll be the worse for you.”

“I have told you my opinion.”

“You think I don’t know the law; the law says his children belongs to a man, not to a woman.”

“We needn’t go into that.”

“Needn’t we? You think, becos I’m not a torf, I got no rights. I know what the law says. A man owns ’is wife, an’ ’e owns ’is children.”

“Do you deny that you drink?”

“You’d drink if you ’ad my life; d’you think I like this goin’ about all day with a barrer?”

“Do you deny that you’ve often struck your wife?”

“What’s it to you or any one else, what I do to ’er in private? Why don’t you come down to my place an’ order me about?”

“But I suppose you know your wife can get a separation order if she goes down to the Court?”

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