

Thou Shalt Not Steal

Louis F. Post in The Public

"A steel cage on wheels, cunningly wrought by a skilled craftsman and safeguarded by locks of the most complicated design, for the morning's ride of Vinson McLean, America's \$100,000,000 baby, is the latest and most startling novelty which two fond parents at Bar Harbor have adopted to protect their boy from kidnapers;" and "detectives, private watchmen, thirty house servants, and fifty outside retainers are also enlisted in protecting this child marvel from kidnapping." That is one of the news items with which the history of this glorious August week begins.

The news of the week before was enlivened with gay accounts of a bull pup passenger riding from ocean to ocean in a special Pullman car to save him the discomfort and indignity of traveling in the baggage car, a car whose master gets for years of hard work less than the cost of that bull pup's traveling expenses on that one luxurious journey.

Mixed with these news stories of prosperity were news stories of a different kind. There was the man who, gone crazy it may be from loss of a pitifully unremunerative job and with harrowing fears of starvation—at any rate indignant unto death from a sense of injustice, real enough no doubt though wrongly directed—tried to murder a mayor. There were young girls synchronized to the motions of tireless machinery, wearing out their lives at the murderous rate of ten hours a day. There were suicides caused by poverty and fear of poverty; and crimes caused by poverty and fear of poverty—emphasized, perhaps, by a plausible feeling that legality crimes are no worse in morals than the legality privileges that breed hundred million dollar babies and Pullman car pups.

Apologists for things as they are, may ask with a sneer if we would have the rich give all their wealth to the poor. It is a trick question which no intelligent person any longer asks, unless he is dishonest as well as intelligent. We would no more have the rich give all their wealth to the poor—though there is good Christian authority for it, is there not?—than we would have them give any part of it to the poor, as they piously and boastfully do through their charity donations.

Those contrasts raise a question, not of "dividing up" with the poor, but of stealing from the poor.

The over rich are thieves. It is a hard saying, to be sure, and we point to no person; let every one be his own jury, like Joseph Fels. But thieves they are, you know—thieves in all but guilty intent.

Some may have the guilty intent, too, but they are not worth distinguishing, for it can't be easily proved and it wouldn't be worth the proving. Let us, then, acknowledge guiltless intent in all.

This shields them from the penalties of the criminal law, and irritation at being regarded as sure enough thieves. But it can not shield them from the penalties of violated natural law, which is no respecter of persons and takes no account of intent.

Natural law is inexorable, from the bursting of a toy balloon to the collapse of a civilization. You can not have hundred million dollar babies and Pullman car pups, in the midst of suicides, murders, robberies, wretched wages, scant employment, starving babies and factory-foundered women, without sooner or later incurring its penalties. Think of the spectacle on Sinai as a fact of history or a truth symbolized, as you please; nevertheless you must see that you can not escape that elemental law of those tablets of stone which reads: "Thou shalt not steal."

The history of slavery in all its crude forms goes to verify that great law (of which we make so little when we relate it only to the larcenies of the criminal code) and to prove its penalties inexorable. Sanitary scientists are overwhelmingly proving its truth now. While perfumed seigneurs delicately lounging in some Oeuf-de-Boeuf—or busy capitalizers of common property, where lounging seigneurs are out of date—have an alchemy of the law whereby they may extract the juices of the industry of others for their very own, there will be slums as well as palaces, and the slums will avenge themselves by infecting palaces with disease and rearing kidnapers for palace-bred babies.

Nor always, it may be, in those ways alone. Read your Carlyle again and see.

Carlyle phrased a question and its answer for the disinherited of every era, a question addressed not alone to perfumed seigneurs of the

old regime in France, but as well to the American classes of our day among whom hundred million dollar babies are born: "How have ye treated us, how have ye taught us, fed us and led us, while we toiled for you? The answer can be read in flames over the nightly summer sky. This is the feeding and leading we have had of you: Emptiness—of pocket, of stomach, of head and of heart. Behold, there is nothing in us; nothing but what nature gives her wild children of the desert: Ferocity and appetite; strength grounded on hunger. Did ye mark among your rights of man, that man was not to die of starvation while there was bread reaped by him? It is among the might of man!"

Pray let no one be such a silly fate-defying fool as to take for violent threats what are but friendly warnings. Of disaster these warnings are, indeed—and of disaster inevitable, of the world-old kind, if the world-old crime of the classes against the masses be persisted in. You can avoid the catastrophe if you help establish justice. But if you keep on pampering your own insanely selfish desires for luxury, or your pride of power, until you have exploited out of the toiling millions everything but those primal faculties of the savage to which Carlyle gives name—ferocity and appetite, strength grounded in hunger—the disaster will overwhelm you, overwhelm us all, as inevitably as effect follows cause.

Are you blind to the menacing signs that even now appear? The necessity for an armored baby carriage, and doubtless it is a necessity, is one of them. Is there no fateful meaning to you in the growing violence attending labor strikes, nor in such more advanced signs as mutinies of long trained policemen when ordered on strike duty? Haven't you read of something like this in stories of the French revolution? Are you, like the French seigneurs, so insane as to imagine that repressive laws can control their ferocity and appetite, their strength grounded in hunger, once you have stripped your tollers of all but these? You may imprison them, you may kill them. Aye, but not so you can kill that which perennially raises them up in savage revolt. This is your crime against them, and you can kill that only by giving it up and sinning against them no more.

Is it not more wise, more human, more honest, to do as Joseph Fels is doing—acknowledge that the overwealthy, whether they intend to be thieves or not, owe their wealth to economic institutions that defy the mandate "Thou shalt not steal," and set about abolishing those institutions by educational methods? Instead of making war upon the impoverished and growingly impatient toiling class, would it not be better, even for yourselves—you of the Pullman-car-pup class, and you of the hundred-million-dollar baby class—wouldn't it be better for you, infinitely better for your babies, and no worse for your pampered pups, to soften your aristocratic or plutocratic wrath and anticipate an otherwise inevitable disaster by helping to do away with its cause? The cause is institutional. You may be no more to blame for it than are those whose earnings are your plunder. But you are in better position than they to rid our civilization of it.

You have only to be a little less selfish, a little more thoughtful, a little more patriotic, a little less pious and more religious, a little more courageous with the courage called moral.

"Thou shalt not steal"—neither against law nor by authority of law.

PUBLIC OWNERSHIP IN IRELAND

It looks like public ownership in Ireland. The Springfield (Mass.) Republican says:

"It is a weighty government commission which has been inquiring into the condition of the railroads of Ireland, and the radical conclusions which have been reached will have unusual force on this account. The members are Sir Charles Scotter, chairman of the London and Southwestern railway; Lord Pirrie of the Harland and Wolff shipbuilding concern, Thomas Sexton, the Irish parliamentary leader, Colonel Poe, an eminent engineer; Sir Herbert Jekyll of the British board of trade, W. M. Acworth, a leading English authority on railroads, and General Manager Aspinwall of the Lancashire and Yorkshire railroad.

"This distinguished body of experts is unanimously in favor of the consolidation into one concern of all the railroads of Ireland, and the first four men mentioned, constituting a majority, are unqualifiedly in favor of government operation of the roads, through a board of four government nominees and sixteen elected members; and of what is the equivalent of govern-

ment ownership under a plan of leaving the capitalization as it is and guaranteeing a certain rate of interest on the same. Nor does it appear that the other members of the commission are strongly hostile to such a plan. Certainly Mr. Acworth can not be, for he is already on record in approval of Mexico's nationalism of its roads through a holding company wherein the government owns a majority of the stock and controls the boards of directors. Mr. Acworth has contrasted the American plan of control with that of Mexico by saying that the latter country is showing the world 'how to do it,' while the United States is showing the world 'how not to do it.'

"Of particular interest to us is the fact that government regulation of railroads in Ireland has gone to just about the length now reached in this country under the recent amendments to the interstate commerce act. The Wall Street Journal says on this point:

"In Ireland rates have been regulated by act of parliament, exactly as some of our congressional insurgents and a large number of democrats want them regulated here. A maximum rate has been fixed beyond which the railroads can not go, while no rate below that maximum can be advanced without the express permission of the board of trade. The consequence has been exactly the contrary of what was expected. The important seaport of Cork, with all kinds of possibilities for truck farming in the area surrounding it, is securing its fruit, flowers and vegetables from the Channel islands or France. The reason is that the railroad would like to experiment with a reduction in rates, but dare not do so if it can not restore such rates as fall to stimulate new business."

"This brings out the essential weakness of carrying rate regulation to the point forced into the American railroad act at the last congress session. Before that railroads could advance rates, and if found unreasonable later on by the government commission their reduction could be forced. Thus railroads could then experiment with lower rates, as the New Haven company did in the case of two-cent fares for the whole system. Now, however, no railroad will care to experiment with reduced rates for stimulation of traffic since, if the experiment proves of contrary from the expected effort, the old rates can not be restored without the consent of the commission and after long delay under the ten-months' suspension provision.

"The effect of this policy in Ireland is said to have been the exclusion of all enterprise from the management of the roads and the driving away of new capital. Nothing now remains to be done, in the view of a majority of the above commission, save for the government to take over the roads and provide the capital for needed extensions and improvements. This is all rather strikingly confirmatory of the views of many of our railroad presidents and others that government regulation, carried to the point reached in the national act as lately amended, will in the end bring about government ownership."

MONOPOLIZING WATER POWER

Mr. Herbert Knox Smith, the United States commissioner of corporations, in the conservation meeting held at St. Paul recently, called attention to the concentration of water power in private hands. He said: "This process is rapidly advancing. Eighteen concerns control 3,200,000 horse power water power today. The total water power in the United States is 5,300,000. Fifty-three men in the Central Electric company form a group which controls eighty public service corporations, more than fifteen railroads, six companies that use their power in manufacturing cotton goods, and over fifty banks and financial houses." "This," Mr. Smith adds, "means a personal relationship that makes further conservation possible. A few brief conferences might at any moment concentrate into definite form a sweeping control over the dominant water power of the country, as well as their related public service corporations."

This is a very strong statement. More than one-half of the water power of the United States now controlled by eighteen concerns, and the larger use of water power for the generation of electricity just in its infancy! Is it strange that the special interests are active? Is it not strange that the public is not more alert than it is? This water power that comes rushing down the mountain sides and can be harnessed without great expense is an asset of tremendous value? Surely it behooves the public to see to it that this generation shall not fetter future generations by perpetual monopolies or even by limited franchises of excessive duration. Now is the time to act.