CHAPTER II

TRUE HISTORY OF A TRAMP

He awoke in the Dark Ages and smelt dawn in the dark, and knew he was not wholly a slave. It was as if, in some tale of Hans Andersen, a stick or a stool had been left in the garden all night and had grown alive and struck root like a tree. For this is the truth behind the old legal fiction of the servile countries, that the slave is a "chattel," that is a piece of furniture like a stick or a stool. In the spiritual sense, I am certain it was never so unwholesome a fancy as the spawn of Nietzsche suppose to-day. No human being, pagan or Christian, I am certain, ever thought of another human being as a chair or a table. The mind cannot base itself on the idea that a comet is a cabbage; nor can it on the idea that a man is a stool. No man was ever unconscious of another's presence—or even indifferent to another's opinion. The lady who is said to have boasted her indifference to being naked before male slaves was showing off—or she meant something different. The lord who fed fishes by killing a slave was indulging in what most cannibals indulge in—a satanist affectation. The lady was consciously shameless and the lord was consciously cruel. But it simply is not in the human
reason to carve men like wood or examine women like ivory, just as it is not in the human reason to think that two and two make five.

But there was this truth in the legal simile of furniture: that the slave, though certainly a man, was in one sense a dead man; in the sense that he was moveable. His locomotion was not his own: his master moved his arms and legs for him as if he were a marionette. Now it is important in the first degree to realise here what would be involved in such a fable as I have imagined, of a stool rooting itself like a shrub. For the general modern notion certainly is that life and liberty are in some way to be associated with novelty and not standing still. But it is just because the stool is lifeless that it moves about. It is just because the tree is alive that it does stand still. That was the main difference between the pagan slave and the Christian serf. The serf still belonged to the lord, as the stick that struck root in the garden would have still belonged to the owner of the garden; but it would have become a live possession. Therefore the owner is forced, by the laws of nature, to treat it with some respect; something becomes due from him. He cannot pull it up without killing it; it has gained a place in the garden—or the society. But the moderns are quite wrong in supposing that mere change and holiday and variety have necessarily any element of this life that is the only seed of liberty. You may say if you like that an employer, taking all his workpeople to a new
factory in a Garden City, is giving them the greater freedom of forest landscapes and smokeless skies. If it comes to that, you can say that the slave-traders took negroes from their narrow and brutish African hamlets, and gave them the polish of foreign travel and medicinal breezes of a sea-voyage. But the tiny seed of citizenship and independence there already was in the serfdom of the Dark Ages, had nothing to do with what nice things the lord might do to the serf. It lay in the fact that there were some nasty things he could not do to the serf—there were not many, but there were some, and one of them was eviction. He could not make the serf utterly landless and desperate, utterly without access to the means of production, though doubtless it was rather the field that owned the serf, than the serf that owned the field. But even if you call the serf a beast of the field, he was not what we have tried to make the town workman—a beast with no field. Foulon said of the French peasants, "Let them eat grass." If he had said it of the modern London proletariat, they might well reply, "You have not left us even grass to eat."

There was, therefore, both in theory and practice, some security for the serf, because he had come to life and rooted. The seigneur could not wait in the field in all weathers with a battle-axe to prevent the serf scratching any living out of the ground, any more than the man in my fairy-tale could sit out in the garden all night with an umbrella to prevent
the shrub getting any rain. The relation of lord and serf, therefore, involves a combination of two things: inequality and security. I know there are people who will at once point wildly to all sorts of examples, true and false, of insecurity of life in the Middle Ages; but these are people who do not grasp what we mean by the characteristic institutions of a society. For the matter of that, there are plenty of examples of equality in the Middle Ages, as the craftsmen in their guild or the monks electing their abbot. But just as modern England is not a feudal country, though there is a quaint survival called Heralds’ College—or Ireland is not a commercial country, though there is a quaint survival called Belfast—it is true of the bulk and shape of that society that came out of the Dark Ages and ended at the Reformation, that it did not care about giving everybody an equal position, but did care about giving everybody a position. So that by the very beginning of that time even the slave had become a slave one could not get rid of, like the Scotch servant who stubbornly asserted that if his master didn’t know a good servant he knew a good master. The free peasant, in ancient or modern times, is free to go or stay. The slave, in ancient times, was free neither to go nor stay. The serf was not free to go; but he was free to stay.

Now what have we done with this man? It is quite simple. There is no historical complexity about it in that respect. We have taken away his freedom to stay. We have turned him out of his
field, and whether it was injustice, like turning a free farmer out of his field, or only cruelty to animals, like turning a cow out of its field, the fact remains that he is out in the road. First and last, we have simply destroyed the security. We have not in the least destroyed the inequality. All classes, all creatures, kind or cruel, still see this lowest stratum of society as separate from the upper strata and even the middle strata; he is as separate as the serf. A monster fallen from Mars, ignorant of our simplest word, would know the tramp was at the bottom of the ladder, as well as he would have known it of the serf. The walls of mud are no longer round his boundaries, but only round his boots. The coarse, bristling hedge is at the end of his chin, and not of his garden. But mud and bristles still stand out round him like a horrific halo, and separate him from his kind. The Martian would have no difficulty in seeing he was the poorest person in the nation. It is just as impossible that he should marry an heiress, or fight a duel with a duke, or contest a seat at Westminster, or enter a club in Pall Mall, or take a scholarship at Balliol, or take a seat at an opera, or propose a good law, or protest against a bad one, as it was impossible to the serf. Where he differs is in something very different. He has lost what was possible to the serf. He can no longer scratch the bare earth by day or sleep on the bare earth by night, without being collared by a policeman.

Now when I say that this man has been oppressed

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as hardly any other man on this earth has been oppressed, I am not using rhetoric: I have a clear meaning which I am confident of explaining to any honest reader. I do not say he has been treated worse: I say he has been treated differently from the unfortunate in all ages. And the difference is this: that all the others were told to do something, and killed or tortured if they did anything else. This man is not told to do something: he is merely forbidden to do anything. When he was a slave, they said to him, "Sleep in this shed; I will beat you if you sleep anywhere else." When he was a serf, they said to him, "Let me find you in this field: I will hang you if I find you in anyone else's field." But now he is a tramp they say to him, "You shall be jailed if I find you in anyone else's field: but I will not give you a field." They say, "You shall be punished if you are caught sleeping outside your shed: but there is no shed." If you say that modern magistracies could never say such mad contradictions, I answer with entire certainty that they do say them. A little while ago two tramps were summoned before a magistrate, charged with sleeping in the open air when they had nowhere else to sleep. But this is not the full fun of the incident. The real fun is that each of them eagerly produced about twopence, to prove that they could have got a bed, but deliberately didn't. To which the policeman replied that twopence would not have got them a bed: that they could not possibly have got a bed: and therefore (argued that thoughtful officer) they ought to be
punished for not getting one. The intelligent magistrate was much struck with the argument: and proceeded to imprison these two men for not doing a thing they could not do. But he was careful to explain that if they had sinned needlessly and in wanton lawlessness, they would have left the court without a stain on their characters; but as they could not avoid it, they were very much to blame. These things are being done in every part of England every day. They have their parallels even in every daily paper; but they have no parallel in any other earthly people or period; except in that insane command to make bricks without straw which brought down all the plagues of Egypt. For the common historical joke about Henry VIII. hanging a man for being Catholic and burning him for being Protestant is a symbolic joke only. The sceptic in the Tudor time could do something: he could always agree with Henry VIII. The desperate man to-day can do nothing. For you cannot agree with a maniac who sits on the bench with the straws sticking out of his hair and says, "Procure threepence from nowhere and I will give you leave to do without it."

If it be answered that he can go to the workhouse, I reply that such an answer is founded on confused thinking. It is true that he is free to go to the workhouse, but only in the same sense in which he is free to go to jail, only in the same sense in which the serf under the gibbet was free to find peace in the grave. Many of the poor greatly prefer the grave to the workhouse, but that is not at all my argument here. The
point is this: that it could not have been the general policy of a lord towards serfs to kill them all like wasps. It could not have been his standing "Advice to Serfs" to say, "Get hanged." It cannot be the standing advice of magistrates to citizens to go to prison. And, precisely as plainly, it cannot be the standing advice of rich men to very poor men to go to the workhouses. For that would mean the rich raising their own poor rates enormously to keep a vast and expensive establishment of slaves. Now it may come to this, as Mr. Belloc maintains, but it is not the theory on which what we call the workhouse does in fact rest. The very shape (and even the very size) of a workhouse express the fact that it was founded for certain quite exceptional human failures—like the lunatic asylum. Say to a man, "Go to the madhouse," and he will say, "Wherein am I mad?" Say to a tramp under a hedge, "Go to the house of exceptional failures," and he will say with equal reason, "I travel because I have no house; I walk because I have no horse; I sleep out because I have no bed. Wherein have I failed?" And he may have the intelligence to add, "Indeed, your worship, if somebody has failed, I think it is not I." I concede, with all due haste, that he might perhaps say "me."

The speciality then of this man's wrong is that it is the only historic wrong that has in it the quality of nonsense. It could only happen in a nightmare; not in a clear and rational hell. It is the top point of that anarchy in the governing mind which, as I said at the
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beginning, is the main trait of modernity, especially in England. But if the first note in our policy is madness, the next note is certainly meanness. There are two peculiarly mean and unmanly legal mantraps in which this wretched man is tripped up. The first is that which prevents him from doing what any ordinary savage or nomad would do—take his chance of an uneven subsistence on the rude bounty of nature.

There is something very abject about forbidding this; because it is precisely this adventurous and vagabond spirit which the educated classes praise most in their books, poems and speeches. To feel the drag of the roads, to hunt in nameless hills and fish in secret streams, to have no address save "Over the Hills and Far Away," to be ready to breakfast on berries and the daybreak and sup on the sunset and a sodden crust, to feed on wild things and be a boy again, all this is the heartiest and sincerest impulse in recent culture, in the songs and tales of Stevenson, in the cult of George Borrow and in the delightful little books published by Mr. E. V. Lucas. It is the one true excuse in the core of Imperialism; and it faintly softens the squalid prose and wooden-headed wickedness of the Self-Made Man who "came up to London with twopence in his pocket." But when a poorer but braver man with less than twopence in his pocket does the very thing we are always praising, makes the blue heavens his house, we send him to a house built for infamy and flogging. We take poverty itself and only permit it with a property qualification; we only allow a
man to be poor if he is rich. And we do this most savagely if he has sought to snatch his life by that particular thing of which our boyish adventure stories are fullest—hunting and fishing. The extremely severe English game laws hit most heavily what the highly reckless English romances praise most irresponsibly. All our literature is full of praise of the chase—especially of the wild goose chase. But if a poor man followed, as Tennyson says, "far as the wild swan wings to where the world dips down to sea and sands," Tennyson would scarcely allow him to catch it. If he found the wildest goose in the wildest fenland in the wildest regions of the sunset, he would very probably discover that the rich never sleep; and that there are no wild things in England.

In short, the English ruler is always appealing to a nation of sportsmen and concentrating all his efforts on preventing them from having any sport. The Imperialist is always pointing out with exultation that the common Englishman can live by adventure anywhere on the globe, but if the common Englishman tries to live by adventure in England, he is treated as harshly as a thief, and almost as harshly as an honest journalist. This is hypocrisy: the magistrate who gives his son "Treasure Island" and then imprisons a tramp is a hypocrite; the squire who is proud of English colonists and indulgent to English schoolboys, but cruel to English poachers, is drawing near that deep place wherein all liars have their part. But our point here is that the baseness is in the idea
of bewilder ing the tramp; of leaving him no place for repentance. It is quite true, of course, that in the days of slavery or of serfdom the needy were fenced by yet fiercer penalties from spoiling the hunting of the rich. But in the older case there were two very important differences, the second of which is our main subject in this chapter. The first is that in a comparatively wild society, however fond of hunting, it seems impossible that enclosing and game-keeping can have been so omnipresent and efficient as in a society full of maps and policemen. The second difference is the one already noted: that if the slave or semi-slave was forbidden to get his food in the greenwood, he was told to get it somewhere else. The note of unreason was absent.

This is the first meanness; and the second is like unto it. If there is one thing of which cultivated modern letters is full besides adventure it is altruism. We are always being told to help others, to regard our wealth as theirs, to do what good we can, for we shall not pass this way again. We are everywhere urged by humanitarians to help lame dogs over stiles—though some humanitarians, it is true, seem to feel a colder interest in the case of lame men and women. Still, the chief fact of our literature, among all historic literatures, is human charity. But what is the chief fact of our legislation? The great outstanding fact of modern legislation, among all historic legislations, is the forbidding of human charity. It is this astonishing paradox, a thing in the teeth of all
logic and conscience, that a man that takes another man’s money with his leave can be punished as if he had taken it without his leave. All through those dark or dim ages behind us, through times of servile stagnation, of feudal insolence, of pestilence and civil strife and all else that can war down the weak, for the weak to ask for charity was counted lawful, and to give that charity, admirable. In all other centuries, in short, the casual bad deeds of bad men could be partly patched and mended by the casual good deeds of good men. But this is now forbidden; for it would leave the tramp a last chance if he could beg.

Now it will be evident by this time that the interesting scientific experiment on the tramp entirely depends on leaving him no chance, and not (like the slave) one chance. Of the economic excuses offered for the persecution of beggars it will be more natural to speak in the next chapter. It will suffice here to say that they are mere excuses, for a policy that has been persistent while probably largely unconscious, with a selfish and atheistic unconsciousness. That policy was directed towards something—or it could never have cut so cleanly and cruelly across the sentimental but sincere modern trends to adventure and altruism. Its object is soon stated. It was directed towards making the very poor man work for the capitalist, for any wages or none. But all this, which I shall also deal with in the next chapter, is here only important as introducing the last truth touching the man of despair. The game laws have taken from him
his human command of Nature. The mendicancy laws have taken from him his human demand on Man. There is one human thing left it is much harder to take from him. Debased by him and his betters, it is still something brought out of Eden, where God made him a demigod: it does not depend on money and but little on time. He can create in his own image. The terrible truth is in the heart of a hundred legends and mysteries. As Jupiter could be hidden from all-devouring Time, as the Christ Child could be hidden from Herod—so the child unborn is still hidden from the omniscient oppressor. He who lives not yet, he and he alone is left; and they seek his life to take it away.