

THE INTERNATIONAL Socialist Review



An
Incident from
JACK LONDON'S
story,

"The
Dream
of Debs" in
this issue

THE HOLD UP MAN By Clarence S. Darrow FEBRUARY-1909

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The Hold Up Man

BY CLARENCE S. DARROW



THE season of the "hold up man" and the "anti-hold up man" is once more at hand. This period comes annually at the same time of year, just after the flower show, the horse show, and along with the college foot ball games. It begins with the season of gaiety, when the days grow short and the nights grow long, when the first sharp, tingling frost of winter drives the people off the streets and huddles them around their fires, and when the price of coal goes up.

The season of the "hold up man" will wane as the winter gaieties fade away—soon after lent—when the nights again grow short and the days grow long, when the price of coal goes down and the sun comes back once more and warms the poor and homeless, without money and without price.

Lawyers, mayors, doctors and policemen freely give their advice as to the best way to treat the "hold up man." There is scarcely a topic of the day in which all classes of society so generally agree—one remedy is prescribed by all—more police, more revolvers, more clubs, more jails—this is the remedy for the "hold up man." One able lawyer advises every citizen to carry a revolver and to shoot at every suspected hold up—to aim at the abdomen, presumably the most fatal spot—why the "hold up man" should be treated differently from other men who transgress the moral law is not quite clear. If all sinners were to be shot at sight few would be left to bury the dead. A doctor, generally humane and wise, declares that the mayor is responsible for all the hold up men, that there is no excuse for a burglary on "Maple street," and some other street. What the residents of these streets have done to exempt them from the hold up man is not made clear.

It has not occurred to any of these eminent people to find the cause for the "hold up man," and yet most of them know that nothing in this world exists without a cause.

Of course no one but a crank or a fanatic could find any necessary connection between the brilliant costumes of the horse show, the cold blasts of winter, the price of coal and the hold up man, yet after all many men whom the world has called wise—and even orthodox—have associated these causes and brought not only arguments but long tables

of figures to show that there is a law which governs even the actions of the hold up man and relates him to every other living thing upon the earth.

There are many other facts that students have learned while policemen were wielding their brutal clubs.

The number of homeless girls who patrol the streets of our large cities grows greater, they walk more briskly and waste less time negotiating with the prospective customer as the nights grow long and cold—to most people this is an accident like all other things on earth. There are those who know that the rooms where these girls sleep are poor, that they are not all heated with steam, that most of them are cold, and that to say nothing of food, these wanderers must do something to keep warm. There are other facts, too, which the “crank” and sentimentalist has found out. Our jails and police stations are fuller in winter than in summer. “The Salvation Army” and other bodies of evangelists who have warm rooms and nice bowls of hot soup make many more converts in winter than in summer. The winter “Christian” is known to all who do this sort of work. Our poor houses, wood yards, orphan asylums, and even art galleries and public reading rooms are well patronized in winter. This last would teach some profound thinkers that cold weather conduces to literature and art. Pawn shops and second hand furniture men get better bargains in winter than in summer—but still what of it?—do not lawyers, doctors, policemen and clergymen all say that the panacea for all ills is the policeman’s club?

There are other facts which dreamers and visionists are wont to note—those people have so little to do with the practical side of life that they must needs dream. In good times tramps are scarce, jails are empty, criminal courts not over busy, street walkers few, hold up men very rare.

The early winter is the time that frugal men and frugal beasts lay up their stores for the cold days and nights coming on. The thrifty mine owners lay in their stocks by marking up the price of the coal which the Lord placed in the earth long ages since; the lawyer and merchant telephones his dealer to put twenty tons of coal in his cellar to feed his furnace through the winter months—the poor seamstress works farther into the black night to buy a few bushels to keep her fingers from growing stiff. Old, bent, haggard women take huge sacks upon their shoulders and wander up and down the railroad tracks for the stray lumps that may drive away a portion of the frost, and lean, dirty, little boys pull their carts through the streets and sweep up what the rich man leaves, and the hold up man, he, too, goes out to lay in his winter stock against the ice and cold.

The hold up men are not the ones who mark up the price of coal and gas and beef—these would take no such chances as fall to the lot of the hold up man. The hold up man comes from the home of the wretched and the poor—who think you is this hold up man—was he born this way? if so, don't fire as you meet him on the street but turn your gun on God Almighty who made him as he is. But he was not born—he was made—he might have been an unsuccessful merchant who could not compete with the department store—or a railroad man whose name is on the black list because he dared to strike. He grew more and more desperate year after year until he became a "hold up man."

It is fifty years since the great philosopher and historian Buckle gave his monumental work to the world. In this work he showed not alone by reason and logic, but by statistics covering long periods of time, that the suicides, the defalcations, and the crimes of all kinds increased and decreased in England, and have for years, exactly as the price of bread went up and down. This was not new when Buckle wrote it down, it was known before and has been shown by almost every good economist since then.

There are many other facts that cranks often cite. Australia was settled by exported criminals, but they went to a country where land was cheap and opportunity great, and became industrious, hard-working men, the next generation became respected, high-toned citizens. Take a thousand of our low-class crooks and a thousand of our commonest prostitutes, and put them on an island where land is cheap and opportunity great, and in the third generation their descendants will be civilized, well-mannered citizens, with houses and barns, books and pictures, churches, policemen and jails.

The hold up man of to-day is the same man who lurked around the mansions of the rich in Rome 1500 years ago. He was sent to jail, but he battered away at the civilization of Rome until the rich and poor went down in common ruin and despair. He is the same hold up man that Louis XV and Louis XVI were wont to club and kill in France a hundred years ago, but one day all the disinherited hold up men crept out from the alleys and caverns and marched on the king's palace and took possession of the state. Then these men made the rules of the game and the nobles and princes went into the back alleys and took the place of the hold up men, that is those who did not move to the catacombs.

Every increase in the price of coal makes "hold up men." Every time the price of meat goes up, some women go upon the streets, and some men get burglars' tools. Every extortionate penny taken by the gas trust makes hold up men. In their last analysis these despised criminals are men whom our social system has frozen out—who cannot live—who

have no place upon the earth. Even the prostitute who plies her trade for the love of the trade, and the criminal who loves crime (if any such there be) have come to their present place through years of misfortune or hard environment, and would surely disappear under fairer conditions and with anything like a decent chance.

The rescue missions save many girls from prostitute lives but they only make room for some other girl whom society is starving and freezing until she takes her place. So you may kill all the hold up men, but back of these are a long line of other men standing on the border, waiting for a chance to take their place.

Chicago is fairly well to do for jails and lock-ups. We have just built a fine, large addition to our county jail—the building has steam heat and electric lights and many boarders are found therein—especially in winter time, but has crime decreased as the jail increased in size? No one seems to expect this—it is taken for granted that this will grow as fast as any other institution of the town. If a pestilence of typhoid fever should break out in town the wise, humane doctors would advise us to build more hospitals—the cranks and visionists would tell us to boil the drinking water and stop the scourge. Thank God, the practical man has always ruled the world—with clubs!

With a small handful of men controlling all the earth and every opportunity for life, and the great mass forced into hopeless want, it will take more jails, policemen and clubs to keep the disinherited at bay. There is one way and only one to treat the hold up men—feed them, or rather let them feed themselves.

But more grim and farcical still than the senseless talk about the hold up man is one other fact. Chicago has hundreds of Christian churches—we are a Christian people. It is nineteen hundred years since Christ's teachings were given to the world—we profess to be the disciples of that lowly man who believed in no jails or clubs—who taught infinite love and infinite mercy—who said if a man asked for your coat, give him also your hat—and yet to-day we know nothing better than hatred, repression, brute force, jails and clubs. We single out a considerable class of our fellow men to shoot on sight. Of course, the world will continue to treat its so-called criminals in this enlightened human way, therefore would it not be well to rechristen our churches, and stop calling them after Christ?