

Chapter IX

IT may not be out of place here to take a quick glance at the condition of Western civilization. Now that its leading journals think it is time for "hard thinking," there is a good chance of the people learning how their governments have deliberately deceived them for over twenty years, at least since the Armistice. This depression differs only in degree from that of 1921. Perhaps an important difference is found in the way great statesmen, editors, and publicists now seem inclined to accept the advice given by experts twelve years ago. In 1920 it was possible to save Europe and America from this collapse. But that was not politic nor diplomatic. Any suggestion of dealing with the international situation in a sane, business-like way was rejected. It would "upset this," and "disturb that," and "our allies are not there yet," and "we must be loyal to our friends," and "Germany hasn't suffered enough." For sheer incompetence, chicanery, and audacious misrepresentation, Western politicians and editors during the past fourteen years have established a record without rival in the past and not likely to be matched in the future. They and their misinformed supporters destroyed Europe.

It is computed by statisticians that about thirty millions of people are unemployed in the great Western states, including America. Millions of these people are fed, and a high percentage housed, by state and private charity. The majority of these people are citizens, not slaves; though a starving citizen, vote in hand, may wonder just what his economic status really is. The Negro who crooned "Swanee River," the day before he

died of starvation, perhaps had visions of a time when a slave was quite as valuable as a horse.

People who have time to talk with the unemployed hear little complaint. Some "intellectuals" venture remarks about war, capitalism, and banks. The great mass of folk, unable to find work they need and wish to undertake, seldom rail against such far-off dignitaries as diplomatists, politicians, and financiers; they ask questions. The situation is critical, for the thinking of a hungry man, when he starts to do his own thinking, means he is in the way of learning something. The "shelter," formerly for human wreckage, has become something like a professorless college of jobless men thirsting for knowledge, and standing a good chance of getting it. There will be much opportunity for thinking for many winters yet. The machine will see to that. Not less unemployment as a condition, but more in the next generation is the likelier. Fifty per cent of the machinery built up to meet demands which the fiscal systems of Western states reduced until industry lay crippled, will be thrown on the scrap-heap. Business organized on 1928-29 demands was bound to suffer all the pains and penalties of vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself. The tax drain on industry, apart from reparations, gold hoarding, or tariffs, was quite enough in itself to slow up the machine. In a few months, only six, a change came all over the commercial world; no country escaped; inflation disappeared, paper values vanished, leases on future productions were not wanted, exports and imports fell away, the tourist trade dwindled, and the *de luxe* transatlantic travellers stayed at home.

The machine now is pretty nearly idle; considering it from the mass production viewpoint of four years ago, it is finished for this generation's use. The machine has crippled its maker. Not for many years will there be the remotest

chance of what is called "trade recovery," sufficient to absorb half the labour the machine has displaced. The machine has done its work as a labour-saving appliance so well that great masses of labour are saved the trouble of using it. Moreover, machine knack cannot be cultivated for mass production with fewer and still fewer machines. In the machine school many machines are necessary for the thousands from which hundreds graduate to take regular jobs when trade is active. The more perfect the machine is made, the less opportunity for schooling masses of men in the use of it. The hand-made article, which gave employment to millions, is displaced by the machine-made article which can employ only thousands, if its objective as a labour-saving appliance is to be reached. The end is not yet. The next ten years will be disastrous if present policies are not radically altered. There is no going back now to the apprentice system. It had glaring defects, but its virtues were innumerable: one, it restricted the supply of men under twenty. Although the labour market was sometimes congested then, it was never so glutted with tradeless youth as it is now. If wage was low and hours long under that system, anyone who served as an apprentice knows that there is now no substitute for the discipline and general knowledge of the shop that most young men learned before they became skilled journeymen.

What then is to be done about the awful problem of the unemployed? Neither public nor private charity can be relied on. Falling incomes and rising taxes are an anomaly only politicians can ignore. Rising expenditure, including public and private charity, and falling revenue lead to bankruptcy. In a world of superabundance millions go hungry. Commodity prices generally are lower than they have been for generations.

Would it be wise to rely solely on the probability of an international monetary conference solving the disabilities of the gold standard and gold hoarding? One has only to read the clear statements of Sir Henry Strakosch in the *London Times* to gather how difficult and complex money problems are today. Anyway, knowledge of these problems and their consequences is as necessary as confidence, if they are to be solved. But when a few experts seem to have a monopoly of the knowledge, and hundreds of politicians have no knowledge on which to base confidence, what hope is there for adjusting the standards of value?

Imperialism of the old order is done. The days of the flag following trade are gone. Economic imperialism may be useful, but not yet. Tariffs must go before economic imperialism can be fruitful. Labour in remote lands does not want labour from home lands. Immigration quotas are narrowed where immigrants are tolerated. Even if far-off countries were open for exploitation, the city-bred youth is in no mind to try the forests, mines, or prairies of sparsely settled lands. The pioneering spirit which peopled the Americas and Canada faded away generations ago. There is no use counting on economic expansion in the Far East, nor dreaming for a moment that emigration is a way out of the difficulty. Some slight movement may be made back to farming small plots, but this chance cannot be taken by capital-less men of the towns who have never known what it is to work with a spade.

Men who are willing to work, and the majority of the jobless are yet willing to work, now curse sentimentalism and charity. In some "shelters" the ill effects of "panic philanthropy" are freely discussed. "Why can't we do something for our meals and lodging?" some ask. The reply invariably

is: "Because the unions are against it!" Stuck between charity and the opposition of the unions, the non-union man without work will soon "lose all sense of independence."

All the expedients of a political state fighting for its existence will be tried during the next ten years. But will it cut its expenditure in half and discharge the "unnecessary" bureaucrats? Will it wipe out foreign debts? Will it repudiate its home obligations?

Senator King warned the United States Senate that the tax-payers may go on strike if the expense of government be not reduced. That may be one way out of the mess. It has been done before; indeed, the tax-payers of some municipalities are on strike now. It would not be at all surprising if tax-payers came to the conclusion that the only way they could remain solvent was to deprive the government of supply. Redress of grievances before supply is a time-honoured custom. What other course is left the people when the vote is ineffective? Political parties and their leaders who ignore election pledges must take the consequences. At any rate, it is becoming an everyday expression, and one frequently seen now in the editorials of the most dignified newspapers, that respect for political government was never so low and the party system never held in such contempt.

Suppose by some political or financial miracle, without changing the system, trade recovery should come, how long would it last? Trade recovered in 1923-24, but even such a boom reached in 1929 quickly petered out, and left the world strangled by the abundance it could not consume. In the United States the combined federal, state, and local expenditure for 1929 amounted to over thirteen billions of dollars. Already organizations are forming in Western states against "bureaucratic wastrels." The slogan of a Texas association

is: "Control your tax money before it is spent rather than complain after it is spent." Senator Robinson says that the nation can no longer afford the luxury of a government costing four billion dollars annually. True, but Congress and the great spending departments do not realize that, for they are now increasing the cost of the luxury. Fewer bureaucrats, more unemployed; less wage for officials, less trade; so the "vote-catchers'" argument goes. The revolutions of the vicious circle are increased every day. Business has been "rationalized," but government—hands off! Yet there is not a department of importance in the government of any great Western state that could not function very well on twenty-five per cent less employees. The statistician of a large ready-made clothing concern reported, after a survey of three consecutive years, that only half the time put in by the clerical employees was necessary for the work done. It is computed that it costs the tax-payer one day's work out of every five to meet the expenses of government in the United States.

Political government of the day seems to be deliberately committing suicide. That is its historical *métier*. It always succeeds in draining the source of its supply. The old phrase, "milked to death," has been resuscitated for speech and cartoon, but no one thinks it worth while pointing out what the excessive milking process did for Babylon, Greece, and Rome. There can be no analogy because everything is changed, some think. What do the changes amount to, in all? Economic principles have not changed. Probably the great change is the number of accessories. The elaboration of existence runs to speed in locomotion and communication, but life itself jogs along at the same old pace. The seasons work out at about the same average. Growth keeps the same old pace. Life is much harder for the mass because it is attended by greater risks; all extras

in the way of living bring greater anxieties and fewer satisfactions. The progress of invention must be judged by the losses as well as the gains. Once man had time in his life to commune with his spirit, but now existence is too strenuous a matter for taking time for spiritual communion. This is an age of telegraph, cable, telephone, high-speed vehicles, lifts, and electric bells. Man works very hard in this labour-saving age. When the ticker dominated all, it became a shrine for the rich and poor. No altar ever drew so many communicants. From wild markets and quick returns to, in a few months, mere existence, which, for the vast majority, is a battle for the sheerest necessities. So it was in Babylon, Greece, and Rome.

The fight for food is so debilitating that it ends in undermining all political instinct in the masses. The decay of political instinct was one of the defects most noticeable in the decline of the old civilizations. The great war broke the tradition of political continuity when it wiped out a generation. In Europe the present generation is destitute of tradition; it lacks political knowledge and drifts aimlessly from one party to another. In the last phases of old civilizations statesmanship lost technique and vigour; the luxuries and attendant anxieties of imperial old age brought on senility and incapacity. Political change brought no beneficial reform because one party succeeded another for the perquisites of office. The fundamental causes of collapse in all ancient states were alike. Paterson says:

In a financial situation which was always precarious and confused, even the rich incurred immense risks, for we hear that, during the Empire, taxation was enforced by torture . . . amid such sterilizing tendencies Italy ceased to be productive and depended for her food supply on the labour of thousands of slaves in the harvest fields of Africa and Sicily. And in the city a worthless population waited like beggars on the imperial alms in the form of wheat,

pork, oil, and wine. Like Athens, Rome had become the parasite of her subject peoples. . . . When we remember that the economic systems of all ancient states were organized on the same basis and that, in the hope of making that basis permanent, ceaseless activity was kept up in the gold mines of Egypt, in the copper mines of Cyprus and Sinai, in the iron, salt, and sulphur mines of Persia, in the European and Asiatic tin, lead, and silver mines, in the Caucasian naphtha pits and ruby mines of Bactria, in the quarries of Numidia, and in the vast brickfields of Rome and Babylon, we are almost able to descry the dim masses of chained men whose labour was the creature force of antiquity. Those states appear to have been incapable of profiting by each other's social and economic errors.

What, then, is the essential difference between the political state of this day and Rome? Is it this: Men and women have the vote now, and Western civilization has abolished slavery?