
Liberating Convicts

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The state of Tennessee has been endeavoring to make crime self-supporting, and, if possible, yield a surplus. Instead of building penitentiaries on the factory plan, as is done in several states, putting in the most approved machinery and utilizing crime, muscle, and brains behind prison walls, Tennessee adopted the plan of hiring out its able-bodied thieves and cutthroats to men engaged in the mining industries of the state.

The result was that for every able-bodied villain, burglar, murderer, incendiary, and so on through the list of convicted scoundrels, an honest, law-abiding citizen was remanded to the ranks of the idle, and himself and family were compelled to take the chances of starvation, degradation, and death.

In writing of such a policy it is not required that we should be over assiduous in the search for denunciatory expression, to convey our unmitigated hostility to the policy which impoverishes honest men, that contractors may amass fortunes by operating criminals.

It is a modern economic idea, in which there is, if we are to credit the sayings of lachrymose and lacteous sentimentalists, a deal of humanitarianism. It is one of those sharp tricks so frequently played nowadays upon an effeminate and over credulous public, by which the wool is pulled over its eyes by mountebanks in morals and knaves in politics, everywhere resulting to the detriment of honest labor. and, fortunately, honest labor is protesting, and in Tennessee, with a vigor and determination that has given to the subject startling prominence — taking on the characteristics of a revolution.

Boiled down, the facts are that the state of Tennessee, having harvested a large crop of criminals, concluded to hire them out to work in the mines of the state.

These criminals were confined, when not employed in the mines, in stockades, secured from escape by shackles and such other means as

were required. They were fed, in some regards, like wild beasts, and at the lowest possible cost. They constituted a motley mass of depravity, but they could wield picks and under the lash could be made valuable to those who had purchased them, and their condition was infinitely worse than that of slaves in “old plantation times.”

The state derived from its crime a little revenue, the contractors made money “hand over fist,” and honest miners and their families suffered; for them the state took no thought nor evince the slightest concern.

Here, then, was a grave state of affairs. For, at best, a little revenue, a great and powerful state was willing to adopt and pursue a policy which forced hundreds of her law-abiding, industrious, self-supporting citizens into idleness and vagabondage. And Tennessee is not the only state that has pursued and is now pursuing the same nefarious policy. But Tennessee is the only state where honest men have taken violent measures to remedy a great wrong.

In Tennessee the miners quietly armed themselves, liberated the convicts, set fire to the stockades, destroyed the property of the employers, and in every case where they made the attack success crowned their efforts. It was out and out rebellion, disobedience to law, and for what? Simply for bread.

All told, fully 600 convict miners have been liberated, and the Governor of Tennessee admits he is powerless to punish the men who have set at defiance the laws of the commonwealth.¹

What is the picture? Honest men organizing in regular military style, with arms and ammunition, tearing down and burning stockades, liberating prisoners, and ready to do battle and take the chances, that they may not be robbed of employment, of clothing, food, and shelter, by criminals. And this we doubt not they will continue to do.

This thing of educating and employing criminals for revenue, whereby honest men and their families are made to suffer, is an outrage so inherently infamous that no reason can be urged in its support worthy of a moment’s consideration.

It is often said that if convicts are kept idle they would decline in health, get sick, and die. Admit it all, for the sake of argument — what is the other side of the question? Employ these convicts at half price, or even less than half that honest labor is worth, and prison-

¹ Democrat **John P. Buchanan** (1847-1930) was Governor of Tennessee for a single two-year term, beginning in January 1891.

made goods go upon the market at half price, and honest men are thereby made to suffer from idleness, sickness, and death.

Between the two, if one must suffer, by all the gods at once, let it be the thief, the burglar, the footpad, the highway robber, the murderer — and not the honest man. Hence it were better that any convict in Tennessee should go free than one honest toiler and his innocent family should suffer from nakedness and hunger and be driven forth shelterless, to perish by the wayside or join the ranks of the abandoned. When a state enacts a law which in its operation adds to the perils of honest men, that the wretches behind prison bars may have work and preserve their health, it itself perpetuates a most flagitious crime for which it should wear stripes.

Recent transactions in Tennessee stand forth as a warning. Penitentiaries, as they are now conducted, having the characteristics of an industrial college, a first class boarding house, church, and a literary club, hospitals and homes for worn out criminals, are not after all distinguished as reformatories, in morals, but are a brilliant success as health resorts.

The present is not an age of savagery and torture. If criminals were required to sit during all their incarceration in their cells, looking through a couple of inch auger holes with such exercise as they could obtain by walking up and down in their cells, penitentiaries would perhaps become reformatory institutions.

True, robust villains would die, and the world would be all the better for the riddance. Some would lose flesh and be the worse for wear, so attenuated that they would be unable to ply their vocation immediately, and those who did survive the kindness of the treatment would reform — they would steer clear of prisons, for they would realize the curative quality of being well fed and idle. As is now the practice, a penitentiary, to the hardened wretches who find a comfortable home, is as the shelter of a great rock in a weary land. In them they regain their health and strength and go forth on their mission of cussedness; and yet in many states they are treated with more consideration and sympathy than falls to the lot of thousands of honest toilers who would rather die than steal.

Miners in Tennessee who want to work, and protest against having their bread snatched from them by convicts, have taught the legislature of that state that its policy is infamous, its laws a menace to peace and prosperity, and that the sooner they are repealed the better it will be for society.