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Saved—and Lost! The Sobraon Boys

There is one thing at least that New South Wales does on the cheap. I have seen it with my own eyes on the school-ship Sobraon. I acknowledge that the Sobraon is a splendid ship, splendidly equipped for the purpose she serves. The appointments and arrangements are all that can be desired. The boys have all the signs of being well fed, well cared for and well trained. Still, I contend that the way New South Wales looks after these boys is on the cheap compared with the way most states and large cities in this world look after boys of similar status.

To go no farther than my own state, I'll make frank to aver that California pays out of her state and municipal treasuries ten times as much in the course of taking care of a similar number of similar boys. To begin with, she lets most of her homeless boys run wild. They get little or no education, while they imbibe much that is vile and pernicious. They do what they like, except when they run foul of the police. In childhood they are public nuisances, in manhood public menaces. The majority of them wind up as criminals and paupers — in either instance public charges that cost the state in the total far more than ten Sobraons, or twenty Sobraons. No, California has not learned to do it on the cheap.

The flower girl in Richard Whiting's "No. 5 John Street" complains bitterly in one tragic passage, "Oh why didn't they catch me when I was young!" Carlyle somewhere says, "And these were once red pulpy infants capable of being moulded into any social form you chose." The secret of catching them while they are young was known to Doctor Barnardo, famous for his child rescue work in London. Mr. Dugdale, who made the sociological study of four generations of the notorious Jukes family (a family that cost the state immense sums of money), made the generalisation upon that family that the tendency of any environment is to perpetuate itself. Thus, the slum perpetuates the slum. The children of a slum, surrounded by viciousness and criminality, will grow up vicious and criminal, and will, in their generation, perpetuate all the vile conditions into which they were born.

Dr. Barnardo's cure was simple. He caught the red pulpy, homeless waifs that were being moulded into vicious and criminal members of society, and shipped them out to the farms of Canada, where they were moulded into honest and industrious members of society. I forget the percentage of failure among them, very small though it was; but it was precisely the same percentage as that of the native born Canadian boys, which goes to show that Dr. Barnardo's boys were quite as much the creatures of the new environment as they would have been creatures of the old environment had they remained in it.

This secret of catching them while they are young has been learned by New South Wales, and while her effort, insofar as the Sobraon is concerned, must be applauded, on the other hand certain suggestive warnings may be given. The slum is a direct by-product of the capitalist system of production. When New South Wales steps into the slum and rescues all these hundreds of lads and sends them on board the Sobraon, she might well say to them:

"I am protecting you from the capitalists who have made the slum and its evil conditions that threaten you — from the capitalist who does not care what becomes of you so long as he can continue to extract profits from his system of production. If you remain in the slum you will become worthless and degraded members of society, and, after much suffering, you will end in the public hospital, the almshouse, the prison, or the morgue. Instead of this, you shall be placed on the *Sobraon*. You shall be well fed. You shall be made clean and healthy. You shall be taught law, order, and restraint. You shall develop inhibition, the most salient characteristic that distinguishes a civilized man from a savage. Also, you shall learn a trade. You shall grow up into honest, hard-working men with minds and muscles trained to do men's work in the world. And you will end up as respectable members of society. What more can you expect the state to do for you?"

Which is very well indeed. But still the state may reasonably be expected to do more for them, for itself, and for the remaining members of society. At a great expense the state has interfered to protect itself by protecting these boys from the capitalists, the by-product of whose system of production is the slum. Yet the state permits the slum to go on so that next year, and the year after, and all the remaining years, the state must go on interfering in order to save the boys from the slum. Is this fair to the boys that are to come? Is it fair to the state? Or, in other words, is it fair to all the people who compose the state and whose money is being used by the state in this work?

Again, the state, having expended the public money on the training of these boys, turns them over to the capitalists in order that very training may be exploited by the capitalists, who will receive a profit from it. If anybody is to make a profit out of these boys, why should it not be the state, or, in other words, the people who comprise the state, and whose money has been expended on training these boys into good workmen?

Quite a number of the boys who graduate from the *Sobraon* go to sea as sailors. And of these, in turn, quite a number go on wind-jammers. Granted, of course, that the ship owners make a profit out of them, and are glad to get them, let us follow the boys and see what they get out of the transaction. Engaging on an English sailing ship in an Australian port, they sail away over the sea. In the first place, compared with the fare they were used to on the *Sobraon*, they will think they are being deliberately starved to death. The poor food on English ships, poor in quantity as well as quality, is a scandal about which there can be no discussion. In truth, these boys, when they sail under tropic suns, will find they do not get even enough water to drink. Three quarts every 24 hours is their allowance, from which is subtracted what is used in cooking their food.

When the ship arrives in England they will be paid off along with the rest of the crew. English ships pay off in England, and in no other place than England. And in England these boys will have to sign on again on some other ship outward bound. If they can sign as an able seaman they will be lucky to get 3 pounds per month, or even 2 pounds 15 shillings. If they are not able seamen, they will have to be content with less. And they will be lucky if they sign on a ship at all. England is always full of sailors looking for ships. It is a hard struggle to find one. Many an English merchant sailor have I encountered in casual wards and Salvation Army shelters, starving along somehow while waiting for a ship out of England. And the world over English sailors have told me of their terrible experiences in trying to ship out from home.

I have heard of *Sobraon* boys stranded in England in this manner, and for such as may be skeptical regarding the hardness of such misfortune I recommend the reading of Frank T.

Bullen's "Log of a Sea Wolf". Likewise read Mr. A. E. Gay's "England's Duty to Her Merchant Seamen," published in Adelaide.

But suppose the lads we are following do manage to get away on another ship. If they are not fortunate in striking a "good" ship they will find, after a voyage lasting anywhere from one to two years, an accession of deliberate and systematic ill-treatment that will compel them to desert, leaving the year or two years' wages behind them. Who gets the wages I don't know; but I do know that this driving of crews to desert in outward ports is a common enough practice on many English sailing ships. And the next wind-jammer the boys engage on will most like prove to be one which has, by this method, succeeded in driving her own crew to desert. In which case, the boys will find themselves bound back for England, where they will pay off and start around the dreary circle once again.

As I stood on the *Sobraon* the other day I was made glad at the sight of so much splendid young life being saved by the state. But I was at the same time made sad as I looked into the future, and saw numbers of those boys going down to the deep waters to the dog's life of the merchant service. Here is the situation. New South Wales spends the public money on training these boys. But when it comes to exploiting them, to wringing a profit out of their toil, New South Wales does not get that profit for the public that invested in the enterprise. Furthermore, the New South Wales capitalist does not get it. Neither does the Commonwealth capitalist get it. Instead, the profit is presented to the capitalists of England. A man who ran his private business that way would be considered a fool. Well then, is not the business of the government of New South Wales, financed by the general public, as serious as the business of a private capitalist?