

# GEORGE MIKES

## How to be Poor



PENGUIN BOOKS

HOW TO BE POOR

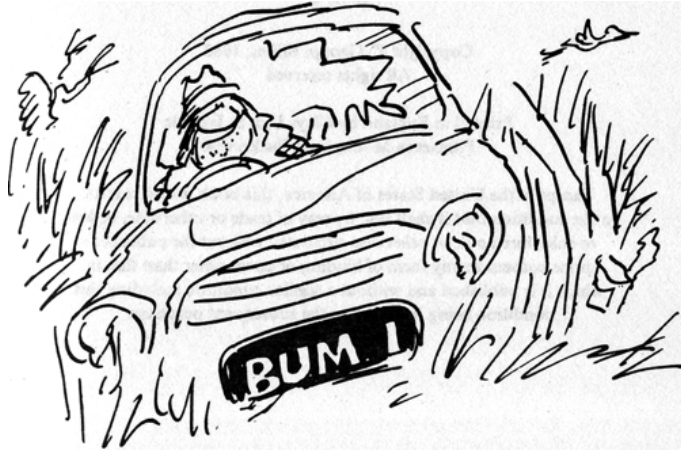
George Mikes was born in 1912 in Siklós, Hungary. He studied law and received his doctorate in Budapest University. He became a journalist and was sent to London as a correspondent to cover the Munich crisis. He came for a fortnight but stayed on and made England his home. During the Second World War he broadcast for the BBC Hungarian Service where he remained until 1951. He continued working as a freelance critic, broadcaster and writer until his death in 1987.

In 1946 he published *How to be an Alien* which went into thirty editions and established the author as a humorist writer, although he had not intended the book to be funny. Other publications include *Über Alles*, *Little Cabbages*, *Shakespeare and Myself*, *Italy for Beginners*, *How to Unite Nations*, *How to be Inimitable*, *How to Scrape Skies*, *How to Tango*, *The Land of the Rising Ten*, *How to Run a Stately Home* (with the Duke of Bedford), *Switzerland for Beginners*, *How to be Decadent*, *Tsi-Tsa*, *English Humour for Beginners*, *How to be Poor*, *How to be a Guru*, *How to be a Brit* and *How to be God*. He wrote the historical study, *The Hungarian Revolution*. He is also the author of *A Study of Infamy*, an analysis of the Hungarian secret political police system, *Arthur Koestler: The Story of a Friendship* and *The Riches of the Poor: A Journey Round the World Health Organisation*. On his seventieth birthday, in 1982, he published his autobiography, *How to be Seventy*.

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*How to be Poor*



*with cartoons by LARRY*

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*This book is dedicated to my friend and publisher, André Deutsch,  
without whose kind help I could not have managed to remain poor.*

# Contents



[Do You Sincerely Want to be Poor?](#)

[\*In Lieu of an Introduction\*](#)

[\*Part One: Private Poverty\*](#)

[The Misery of the](#)

[Monomaniac](#)

[Beware of Money](#)

[Country Houses](#)

[The Princess](#)

[Meanness](#)

[Bargains](#)

[The Best and the Worst](#)

[On Poor Millionaires](#)

[Smoked Salmon](#)

[A Few Tears for a Banker](#)

[A \(Very\) Short History of Poverty](#)

[Tempora Mutantur](#)

[The Poverty of Animals](#)

[\*Part Two: Public Poverty\*](#)

[The Snobbery of the](#)

[New Poor](#)

[How to be Middle-Glass](#)

[The Karl Marx of the Bourgeoisie](#)

[The New Poor](#)

[The Idle Poor](#)

[Inflation](#)

[Last Word](#)

## Do You Sincerely Want to be Poor? *In Lieu of an Introduction*



ALL MY LIFE I have been running away from money. On the whole successfully.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not trying to say that I am indifferent to money; that I don't care whether I have it or not. I do care. I do not want to have it. Neither do I want to convey the notion that I am not materialistic and my mind is always dwelling on higher matters. My mind often dwells on money, in order to loathe it. The loathing seems to be mutual. We- money and I — sometimes nod to each other but that's all.

Showing off one's riches — indeed the very desire to become rich — has always seemed to me the most vulgar sin. I have instinctively avoided rich people; although, of course, I have made exceptions. Some of my best friends are stinking rich, but they had to prove themselves before they were accepted; they had to overcome my instinctive suspicion and dislike. People who inherited money are more easily accepted. They cannot help it, poor things. I have never wanted to visit the sins of the father on their sons, particularly if they were doing their best — as they often have done — to squander the fruits of a lifetime of avarice in a year or two. But those people who actually strive to make money, who are proud of having it and show off their ill-gotten, or even decently-gotten, gains have achieved — to put it mildly — very low standing in my estimation.

Why? I often asked myself. I learnt early in life to regard my more violent feelings with the utmost suspicion. Moral indignation is the most suspect of all the so-called noble emotions. More often than not we react most violently against those sins which, at the bottom of our hearts and often unknown to ourselves, we would most willingly commit — if only training, or perhaps cowardice, didn't make us repress the desire to do so. So I must admit that my intolerance vis-à-vis rich people may be based on the lowest of motives. It is quite

possible that my soul too, like everyone else's, has its dark secrets. One of these secrets may be that I hate rich people because I have a desperate subconscious desire to become a Croesus myself and I have failed miserably. If so, it is so dark that it remains a secret even from me.

But I do not think this is so, for two main reasons, i. As far as I know I *never* wanted to be rich. 2. My family was reasonably well-off, so money never played a dominant part in its life. I was born in the Hungarian village (now small town) of Siklós and was only ten when my father — a lawyer, and himself the son of a lawyer — died. Family finances were never discussed in front of me, but small boys are perceptive and I would have sensed problems and difficulties had they existed. Even during the harsh years of World War One I remember no hardships, and immediately after the war, when Budapest was nearly starving, we in the country always had enough to eat. After my father's death, we moved to Budapest and my mother married a doctor. My step-father worked very hard. He had a vast practice and his annual income was the equivalent of £3000: a substantial sum in those days, even in Britain, and a real fortune in Hungary. (A popular song expressed the dream of young men to make the magnificent sum of £240 a year.)

I have never been a poor refugee in London, either. I was sent here by two newspapers, brought a useful little sum with me and received my salary more or less regularly. True, there was a period — between the end of my job which came when diplomatic relations between Britain and Hungary were broken off, and my finding a new job at the BBC — when I ought to have been worried. But I am a lousy worrier. Diplomatic, political and military events absorbed me so completely that I had no attention to spare for the puny problems of one insignificant individual, even if that insignificant individual happened to be myself. I was not always sure where my next meal would be coming from but it always came from somewhere. I never went hungry. Indeed — and more of this later — my life-style has always stayed much the same whether I was penniless or reasonably well off.

So, I repeat, I was never poor in my formative years, nor did money then play an important part in my life. Why, then, this aversion from the rich?



I vaguely remember some early indoctrination: not so much words, as attitudes. I am sure that my father, in the spirit of those days, looked down upon people “in trade”, — people who bought things cheap and sold them at a higher price. Nor were people without a university degree quite acceptable. They should be treated with courtesy (condescending courtesy, of course) but could never become friends. My parents’ best friends were, as it happened, a timber-merchant and his wife — charming and highly cultured people, but undoubtedly “in trade”, and without degrees — but this, I suppose, was simply the exception to confirm the rule. People “in trade” were intrinsically funny — but what was supposed to be funny about them I can no longer tell. On a conscious level I reject all this rubbish from beginning to end; but, at the bottom of my heart, I know that I have preserved a great deal of these attitudes and that I still think business people are intrinsically funny. To be a humorous writer is a serious occupation; to sell plastic mugs is ridiculous.

In the mid-sixties I travelled to Jamaica to write a book on that country. As I am a tennis-maniac, I was taken to the Kingston tennis club, played a few doubles and afterwards joined the other players for a drink. They were all in trade, ambitious junior executives and so on. One turned to me, whisky-glass in hand, and said: “I am in boilers.”

For a moment I was taken aback but then I saw what he meant. He said again: “I am in boilers. What are you in?” I forced myself not to give a facetious answer and replied politely: “I am a writer.”

He was puzzled. Obviously he had never met a writer in his life, and he gave me the impression that he did not quite grasp what I was talking about. He frowned and looked worried. Then his eyes lit up and he asked me with a bright smile: “An under-writer?”

I shook my head. “Alas, no. Just an over-writer.”

I was still a small boy when I heard the expression: “He’s worth two million crowns.”

“How do you know?” I asked in astonishment.

The man who had said it was amused by my childish ignorance. “Because that’s how much money he has.”

I was too small to understand fully, but the phrase lingered on: “He’s worth two million crowns”. Gradually it dawned on me that people who said things like that were not impressed by the high social standing of a lawyer. They did not care whether he had a degree or not. To such people a man is not what he is but what he has. He is “worth” as much as the money in his pocket, and never mind how he got it.

I am not sure whether I am a saint or an oddity — although, of course, all saints are oddities as well. Perhaps I cannot — or ought not — to claim the sanctity, but surely I must be at least a little odd, in that things which millions of people dream about with longing simply disgust me. I used to have a friend who was immensely proud of a desk so enormous that he could hardly see across it, which stood on carpet so deep that you could hardly wade through it. If I dreamt that I was sitting behind that desk, surrounded by that carpet, the dream would turn into a nightmare and I would wake up in a cold sweat (I think — I never have nightmares).

Another nightmare is the idea of being driven around by a chauffeur who would jump out to open the door for me. I regard a Rolls Royce as a particularly vulgar and ostentatious car. If I became a multimillionaire tomorrow — admittedly an unlikely supposition — even then I could not sink so low as to drive around in a Rolls.

I hate all servants, not as individuals but as a class. No man should “serve” another. Certainly, a very busy man should not clean his own shoes or cook his own meals. These tasks can be undertaken by other people as jobs, but without any cap-touching, bowing or other disgusting servility. Such servility, thank God, is slowly disappearing. It is surviving only in Communist countries.

I could never bear the idea of being anybody’s boss. I never had a secretary in my life. Even when I needed one badly, I sent all my manuscripts to be typed by agencies and paid the bills with a grin.



It has happened more than once that I was sent a first-class air ticket by some newspaper, magazine or other organisation. More often than not I have talked my way into economy class and regarded it as a special favour when allowed to move down. I prefer my fellow passengers in economy-class and just cannot accept myself as a “first-class passenger”. Imagine making a point of carrying one of those pink tickets ostentatiously in your breast-pocket! What a poor fool a man must be if he needs that sort of boost. On trains, too, I prefer travelling second class.

One often hears the phrase: “Only the best is good enough for me!” It has always astonished me. What does the speaker mean? Is he implying that he is one of the best people alive? If things were really allocated on the basis of merit, many of the people who use this phrase would be horrified to get the rubbish they deserve.

People who have gold taps fitted in their bathrooms positively nauseate me. They belong to a different species, or at least I should like to think so. But what species? Most of the animals I know have more sense than that: animals do not venerate gold.

This anti-rich attitude used to be an eccentricity (except among Marxists), but I am pleased to observe that most of Western Europe is being slowly converted to it. Britain has become poor, so it is chic to be poor. Money — just sheer, accumulated wealth — is losing its appeal and is starting to be despised. The rich man is no longer revered; the successful executive, the powerful manipulator takes his place. I am not sure whether this is a change for the better, but it is a change.

Showing off will not die away before humanity dies away, but it is taking new forms. Machismo is taking the place of the pride of the new rich. Indeed, some people have begun to show off their poverty (like myself). This snobbery of the poor is a small step in the right direction, because — and this is my main argument — you should not just accept poverty with a sigh of resignation, or even with a defiant shrug. You should be proud of it. You should positively strive for it. You should sincerely want to be poor.

One word of *caveat* should be uttered here. I am not speaking of the starving beggars of India or the emaciated children of the Third World. Not even of the pitiable rejects of our own society. They should be the subjects of other studies. I am speaking only of respectable — indeed, desirable — middle-class poverty, the poverty of a significant silent, and distinguished, majority.

Elsa Maxwell, the celebrated New York hostess of a former era made the remark: “Been poor: been rich. Rich better.”

She was wrong.

Poor better.

# *Part One: Private Poverty*



## The Misery of the Monomaniac



AS I GREW OLDER and wiser, my anger against the rich turned into pity for them. I should like to list my main reasons for this pity under a few headings.

Nearly all rich people are monomaniacs. It is hard to decide what came first, the egg or the chicken. Did their single-mindedness about money — their monomania — make them rich or did their wealth turn them into monomaniacs?

An interesting question but also a moot point. I can imagine no drearier, lower, more destructive preoccupations than worrying about money. You (and that means all of us) get into tight corners from time to time, and naturally you spend time fretting about how to get out of them. But, for most of us, these are passing worries, like an aching toe or a slight dent on the wing of your car. They are not the dominant feature of your whole life. And if you are poor your financial worries are justified: it is much more decent to worry about money you do not have than about money you do have.

The rich may object that there is a constant danger of their losing their riches. So what? There is a constant danger of my losing my poverty. Any book of mine may become a runaway bestseller, bringing in untold fortunes. I am sticking my neck out even further: I have just written <sup>a</sup> play, to be performed in six months time from the day of writing this. Plays are even more dangerous than books. For all I know, money may soon start pouring in from five Continents in an uncontrollable flood.



Indeed, dangers lurk everywhere. For a long time I lived in St John's Wood and in my immediate neighbourhood, in Hamilton Terrace, there was a house for sale. It was a huge building and they asked £800 for it—not a huge fortune even in those distant days just after the Second World War. The reason for this low price was that one of the tenants was a tax office, and how could you get a tax office out? My wife suggested that we should buy the house. I would not hear of it. I did not want to become a landlord (although the idea of becoming the landlord of H.M. Inspector of Taxes and getting a bit of revenge for his bullying did rather appeal to me). My wife went on nagging me about this house and, thank Heavens, I went on resisting. Today the tax office has disappeared — indeed it disappeared several decades ago — and the house must be worth a quarter of a million pounds. A terrifying thought. Having all that money would have completely ruined my splendid character.

I am aware of the fact that I may lose my poverty any moment. Yet, I am not in the least worried. I shall face that emergency when it arises.



When I was visiting Jamaica (see Introduction) I arrived in my hotel at the same time as an American who was pointed out to me by awestruck locals as a multi-millionaire. I went straight to my room, but before he occupied his, he went to the telephone in the lobby and rang up his stockbroker in New York. (He always phoned from the lobby, howling in a stentorian voice, for all and sundry to hear every detail of his conversation.) Soon the pattern of the day emerged. I was doing my job while he was talking to his stockbroker in New York; I was enjoying a rum punch on the terrace while he was talking to his stockbroker in Chicago; I was swimming in the pool while he was shouting himself hoarse talking to his stockbroker in Los Angeles. That was how he spent his days. His nights he probably spent on the phone in his room, quarrelling with stockbrokers in Australia and South Africa. And when, at last, the blessed hours of dawn came, he was, I am sure, on the phone to his stockbroker in the City of London.

I asked him once why he had come to Jamaica at all. He needed a proper rest, he told me. In New York he was spending all his time on the phone.



The very opposite of this attitude was reflected by a dear old friend of mine, a writer. He returned to England after a few years' absence abroad. He had a little money and, on the advice of some guru, invested it in War Loans. Occasionally I would ask him how his War Loans were doing and he would murmur some irritated reply. A few months later he informed me that he had sold his War Loans.

"But why? They were not going down," said I.

"No. *I* was going down. Sinking fast in my own estimation. Every morning I picked up *The Times* and even before glancing at the headlines, I looked up my War Loans. I was happy as a lark when they went up a few pence, and got depressed when they fell a few pence. Slowly I grew very angry with myself. I was damned, I decided, if I would become a chap who rushes every morning to see how his War Loans stand. So I sold the lot and put my money in a Building Society."

Then he frowned and asked me: "By the way, how is it that you *knew* that War Loans were not going down?"

I cast my eyes down.

"I kept looking them up too. For your sake. Before looking at the headlines. I am glad you sold the bloody things. To hell with War Loans."

We agreed on that. We also decided that there was something crooked about it all: the War had ended a long time ago, War Loans ought to have been paid back by now.

Having a lot of money changes and demeans a man's character. Quite a few rich men have a vague recognition of this fact and invent feeble devices to get around the problem. The most common is that rich men (and women) insist that people should love them "for themselves", not for their money. Thousands of novels, plays and films turn on this impossible dream.

The whole idea is ludicrous, of course. First, they are not, as a rule, lovable, so they should be pleased if someone loves them at all, for whatever reason. Secondly, no one can really love someone else "for his money". You may love money, and swallow the person who goes with it, but that is quite a different thing from *loving him* for his money. It is

the old story of the Platnik diamonds all over again. For the sake of the few uninitiated, here it goes.

Two New York ladies, old friends who have not seen each other since they left school, meet by chance and go into a café to have a chat. One of them is wearing a dazzlingly beautiful ring. When her friend goes into raptures over this ring for the fifth time, its owner says well, yes, she supposes the famous Platnik diamonds really are very fine. The other is impressed, but admits that she has never heard of the Platnik diamonds.

“This ring is part of them,” says the wearer of it. “They are very beautiful and worth a vast fortune. But, unfortunately, there is a curse upon them.”

“What’s the curse?”

“Mr Platnik.”

Yes, that’s how it is. The Platniks of this world might as well resign themselves to it.

A rich man — and this is the third point — cannot get away from his riches any more than a poor man can get away from his poverty, or a healthy man from his robust health or a tall man from his height. All these things are, or become, a part of what the person is as a whole. He would not be the same person without his poverty, or his health, or his height — or his money. Whoever loves a rich man loves — or reluctantly accepts — his money too. I could love a woman in spite of her money, but not for it.

There is nothing humiliating in this — those silly rich people are quite wrong. But a rich man who can jump on his own private jet and fly over to Paris to have dinner at the Grand Vefour will be a different person from the guitarist at Aldgate East underground station who is not quite sure where his next meal of sandwiches is coming from.

In my younger days — when I did not sincerely want to be poor — my dream was that young and beautiful women *should* love me for my money. It was not to be. They had to love me for myself. Poor things.

## Beware of Money



IN THAT PLAY of mine I mentioned earlier there is one single song, and it begins:

“A poor man can’t be free because he’s poor;  
A rich man can’t be free because he’s rich.”

Wise words. A poor man, however, can be considerably freer than a rich one.

As soon as you have possessions you start worrying about burglaries. Not that the poor are not being burgled. Indeed, more poor people are victims of burglaries than rich, simply because there are more poor people around than rich ones and there are innumerable burglaries. My house has been burgled twice and I did not particularly enjoy the experience, so I transformed my house into a mini-fortress and two further attempts at intrusion have been frustrated. The casual thieves, the teenage amateurs, cannot get in; the professionals, of course, can tackle anything, including the safes of the Bank of England. But no true professional would take the trouble to burgle my house. (These may be famous last words.) But the point is that the problem is not constantly on my mind; I do not live in permanent fear of being burgled. If I do come home one day and find my house ransacked, I shall simply say: “Damn the bastards!”... meaning the burglars, not the police who will come to check up, will send a fingerprint expert who will find no fingerprints, and will then conclude the investigation which was hopeless from the beginning in any case. They cannot find the culprits and they do not want to find them. They have the strictest instructions from the Home Secretary not to increase his already considerable problems by increasing the prison population.

The rich man, when it comes to burglaries, is the victim of specialists. I have some rich friends whose house was entered and only the silver — only the really good silver — was taken. Nothing else was touched. In other cases only pictures, jewels or carpets were stolen.

In addition to the constant worry, rich people's movements are seriously limited. They are prisoners, in the literal sense of the word. I once knew a couple who collected impressionist and post-impressionist paintings. They were extremely rich, very successful collectors and had in their house on the Riviera about fifty valuable Picassos, Matisses, Renoirs and so on, worth millions of pounds. They were so worried about thieves that they became nervous wrecks. Insurance cost a fortune, and in addition to that, even the vast premium was not enough for the insurance company, which made it a condition that the house must never be left unattended: either the husband or the wife had to stay at home when the other went out. Leaving servants in the house was not good enough. The couple could not go out together for the rest of their lives. In some marriages this might well be pure joy to one or other of the spouses, or to both; but even so, when people are not *allowed* to go out together, whether they want, to or not, then they are not free people.

And is there any need for dozens of valuable pictures in one's house? A good picture or two can brighten life and give immense and constant pleasure, but to live in a museum when you are rich enough to live in a pleasant home is sheer folly. Rich men's folly. No poor man would think of having a dozen Picassos, a dozen Matisses and a dozen Renoirs in his bedsitter.

The truly rich live in constant fear of being kidnapped. Or — even worse — of their children being kidnapped. So they have to hire bodyguards, strong-arm men and other unpleasant characters to be their constant companions and remind them of the danger all the time. Poor men may spend their time with their private friends or intimate enemies, rather than with retired police sergeants whom most of us respect but few of us love. Occasionally, the rich men *are* kidnapped all the same, and then, if they are lucky, their fortune is spent on the ransom. If unlucky, they are killed, or have a finger or two chopped off. A very unpleasant — and avoidable — experience.

The tax exile is perhaps the most pathetic and ludicrous figure of all. That a man who could afford to live anywhere should retire to some little island which, though sunny, is very boring, or even to Switzerland, which, though lovely, is very full of the Swiss — this is the

height of idiocy. Money, after all, should be there to buy pleasure, not to buy misery. So what if the rich man's heirs get a few millions less? It would be sheer luck for them.

Many of us remember the multimillionaire who at the age of sixty (and in frail health) was exiled by his loving family to a Caribbean island. As soon as he got there his health began to improve, and the poor wretch went on living until the ripe old age of ninety-two. In other words, he spent more than one third of his life in loneliness and boredom — practically in solitary confinement — in a place he loathed with all his heart, just because he was very, very rich. "*Tu l'as voulu, Georges Dandin.*" I have no sympathy for such fools.

## Country Houses



EVEN IF WE STEP DOWN from the level of Picasso-collectors and kidnappees — in other words from the level of the super-rich to the level of the well-off- we still meet plenty of misery.

Houses in the country and, even more, houses abroad are a damned nuisance and the source of great unhappiness. I readily admit that there is a small band of people whom this way of life suits perfectly. Some people just love to go to, say, Essex every Friday, cultivate their gardens, dig and hoe and paint walls and drive nails into wood. Let them enjoy themselves. The point is that the majority of the country-house owners do not enjoy themselves.

Having acquired the house, initially they feel happy. Having acquired *anything* they would feel happy — it is exactly this joy of acquisition that separates one half of humanity from the other. But after a while they realise that they must *go* to their country house, otherwise it becomes a bad investment. Not going there is “waste” — and waste, they think, is the worst of sins. They will never learn that it is, in fact, one of the most splendid virtues. If they do go to their house every weekend, the journey becomes a duty, a chore and a bore; if they don't they feel guilty. In either case they become nervous wrecks. But they will not admit this to themselves. They are proud of their country house and would not dream of selling their prize possession.

I can take holidays wherever I choose: in Brazil or the South of France; in Devon... or else I can stay at home. One of my rich friends must go to the Dordogne, and another to Tuscany, although the Dordogne and Tuscany are the only places they are fed up with. I know people who rush to central France at every Bank Holiday and try to convince themselves that they love it. After every holiday there they need a proper holiday somewhere else-everyone else can see that, but they can't. They do not realise how — deep down, unknown to themselves — they dread those Bank Holidays. They put a cheerful face on the matter. They grit their teeth and go. Duty calls; pleasure belongs to the poor.

I know one pitiable couple with two houses in Britain and four abroad. Once upon a time they tried to visit them all at regular intervals, but they had to give this up, it was just impossible. They maintain that those empty, abandoned, rusting, sad places are “good investments”. Perhaps. I, personally, have never wanted to invest.

(Not even small sums. A few days ago I asked my greengrocer if he had pears. He handed me a pound or two and said: “They’ll be ripe in five days.” I handed them back and told him: “I buy pears to eat. I don’t buy them as an investment.”)

Another woman I know takes a different attitude. She drives her car and her meek, obedient husband to the country every week and works there like a maniac. She gets up at five thirty and works incessantly — cooking, cleaning, gardening, making and repairing things — till eleven thirty at night. When I asked her what was the point of it, she replied: “I am quite prepared to slave for my comfort.” I could see the slavery; I failed to see the comfort.

Some of my readers may say: “Sour grapes” — meaning that I, in reality, envy those rich people with country houses. In certain other cases I might possibly doubt my own motives. It is one thing to imagine a situation and quite another to find yourself in it. It is one thing to say: “If I inherited a fortune, I’d give it away to charities” and quite another to inherit a fortune and then to write out those cheques. It is amazing how one’s views change as soon as one is able to make the sacrifice in practice one was so ready to make in principle. But in this particular case I have the right to speak out.

A very nice and very rich friend of mine owned a large number of cottages in his village. Poor old villagers paid rents of 40p or 50p a week, and a few even less. My friend absolutely refused to raise their rent. “Shall I demand a pound? Or two? What for? It would make very little difference to me and would ruin and embitter them.” So people went on paying their few pennies. In any case, he became an industrialist and was not interested in the cottages as a source of revenue. One day he mentioned to me that I could have one of his cottages for a twenty-one years’ lease. How much did he want for the lease? One pound. He added: not a pound per annum. One pound for twenty-one years. “Just to make it clear that you are a lease-holder.”

He explained that there was a very old couple in one of his prettier cottages and I could have the place when they died. I declined with thanks. He wanted to know the reason why, so, somewhat reluctantly, I explained that I would hate myself sitting there waiting for some old people to die. I would casually ask how they were and feel disappointed to hear that they were in robust health. A terrible thought.

“I fully understand,” said my friend, and did not mention the project again for six years.

Then, six years later, he asked me if I remembered his offer. Of course, I remembered. Very well, he told me, the old man had died and his wife had gone to live with their daughter. The cottage was at my disposal. Inflation was rampant by then but the lease was still one pound for twenty-one years.

One again I refused with thanks. My friend failed to understand me. He thought I was raving mad. Perhaps I am. But perhaps I am wise. I have seen too often that you do not own a country house; a country house owns you.



## The Princess



EVEN WHEN THEY *live* in the country, as opposed to being Sunday farmers, rich people are not free. Poor, fat stockbrokers *must* play golf and say they love it. New-rich accountants *have* to shoot although the sight of blood makes them sick. Quite a few of them just *must* ride, although they are terrified of horses and riding makes their behinds sore. You are not accepted in country society if you are not crazy about horses. Preferably, you ought to breed horses, too, and show a wild interest in racing. You cannot agree with that ancient Shah of Persia who declared: "I know that one horse can run faster than another and I care precious little which." Yachting is another curse, perhaps the worst punishment of all. Sailing makes many rich people sick, and can be freezing cold. And damp. And windy. And rough. And boring. But *noblesse oblige*. Sailing is a pleasure, and you have to bloody well enjoy it.

And the rural company they must keep. Many of those smug and empty people would make me cry. They make *them* cry, too, but — like the lady who was ready to slave for her comfort — they are ready to suffer for their pleasure.

I knew a man — a rich manufacturer — who achieved the dream of dreams. A member of the royal family became a regular visitor to his house in the country. Most of his friends were green with envy. He was known as the chap whom Princess X would visit for weekends.

I did a little favour for him and he wanted to reciprocate, so he invited me for a weekend. He said: "I want to do you a special favour. I shall invite you when the Princess will be down."

"Do me a special favour," I replied, "and invite me when the Princess is not down."

He was deeply hurt. He did not invite me at all and never spoke to me again.

It was years afterwards that I met his wife in someone else's house. I thought she, too, would turn away from me in disgust but she greeted me warmly.

“I was delighted by your attitude. You were the first and the last person to speak out. It was only after you said that, that I myself dared to confess to myself — and my husband — that I detested those royal visits. I was not allowed to speak freely in my own house, I had to wait until I was spoken to. I could not even go to bed when I meant to, I had to wait until I was, so to say, dismissed or rather until my royal guest decided to turn in. And she turned in at three or four in the morning.’

A sadly typical story of seemingly fulfilled dreams: a man dreams of going to bed with a princess; instead, he is landed with a princess who does not let him go to bed.

## Meanness



ALL OF US, even the most generous among us, can be incredibly mean on occasions. Most people would hotly deny this and would rationalise their meanness and feel deep contempt for the meanness of others. Mark Twain, as usual, was wiser. He admitted: "Like most people, I often feel mean, and act accordingly." I know a very charming and otherwise madly extravagant lady who is painfully conscious of the price of petrol. She is prepared to drive for miles (and waste an immense amount of petrol) in order to find a station where she can buy a gallon half a penny cheaper. (And she does not even pay for the petrol from her own pocket.) I am not money conscious at all but I collect plastic shopping bags with zeal and devotion. I often find myself without a bag when I need one and when I have to *buy* one for ready money (5P, perhaps i op — I do not even know the price) I feel upset. A man I know — otherwise an overwhelmingly, embarrassingly generous host, absolutely refuses to buy cigarettes for his guests. Not that he hates the smoke — he smokes himself, like a chimney. "People should buy their own cigarettes!" And what if they run out? "People should buy enough cigarettes if they want to smoke." There is plenty of evidence in history of such pettiness. Maria Theresa, when Frederick the Great started blackmailing her, and all her friends and allies left her in the lurch, travelled to Hungary, appeared at the Diet at Pozsony, and appealed to the noblemen assembled there, holding her little son (the future Joseph II) in her arms. The gallant Hungarian noblemen could never resist a beautiful woman, so they jumped up, like one man and shouted (in Latin, the official language):

*"Vitam and sanguinem pro Rege nostro, Maria Theresia!"* (Our life and blood for our King, Maria Theresa. Note that they called her King, not Queen. This was soon after the *Pragmatica Sanctio*, which enabled the first Habsburg woman to occupy the Imperial throne. The English, two centuries later, when they elevated the first woman to the Bench, addressed her for a while as "Mr Justice Soandso," trying to disregard

the painful fact that she was not a Mr. So Maria Theresa, too, was King.)

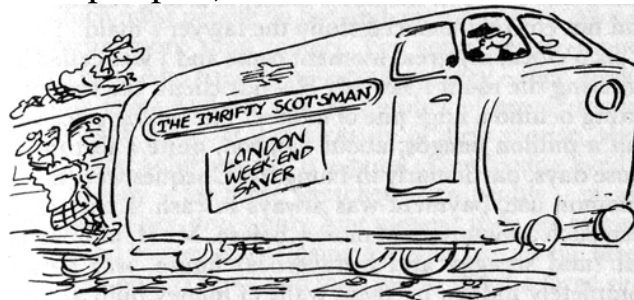
After these emotional scenes of gallantry the Queen (or King — as you wish) told them, as gently as she could, that enthusiasm, although touching, was not enough and asked for cash or at least fodder for the horses of her army. One gallant nobleman jumped up and shouted:

*“Vitam and sanguinem pro Rege nostro, Maria Theresia, sed avenam non!”*

In colloquial translation: “Our life and blood for our King, Maria Theresa, but she might as well forget about oats.”

This, by the way, has become a customary pattern for some people’s generosity. They offer everything to the needy, except the one thing he really needs.

It is not only the rich who are mean. It is preoccupation with money, not the possession of it, that makes one mean. A man’s past history is no guide. Some rich people who used to be very poor children are extremely open-handed and large-hearted. On the other hand, some people who have achieved the legendary American career in reverse — started as millionaires and ended up as newspaper boys — are as stingy as people born rich. But an avaricious and miserly poor man is more easily forgivable than an avaricious and miserly rich one. Jokes about the meanness of the Scots used to be popular until people started to understand that the Scots were not mean, just extremely poor. That was the end of those jokes — as if one could not be poor *and* mean at one and the same time. (The Scots, in my personal experience, are particularly generous people.)



It is the rich men’s avarice which has excited writers from Molière and Ben Jonson to Arnold Bennett, and it is the meanness of the rich which

interests us here. After all, it is more natural to worry about your next meal than about your next million.

I was a young law-student in Budapest when I came across my first staggering example of niggardliness. I was employed by a lawyer, a friend of our family, who was a larger-than-life figure with a robust laugh and who was in full sympathy with my ambition to become a journalist rather than a lawyer, so gave me all the free time I needed. Occasionally, however, he needed me and as he gave me a decent salary — quite undeserved — I did not consider this unreasonable. One Saturday afternoon what the British call “completion” of the purchase of a large block of flats was taking place, and I was ordered to come in at three o’clock and be helpful at the ceremony. My contribution was to be a modest one, emptying ashtrays and using the blotting paper on the parties’ signatures. First I had to wait three hours in the outer office, courting vehemently and not entirely unsuccessfully the lawyer’s maid. Then, at six o’clock, my great moment came and I was called in. Entering the room I saw Mr H — our client, the vendor — sitting behind a huge pile of money. The selling price was half a million pengös, about £25,000, quite a fortune in those days, particularly in Hungary. Cheques were not in common use, payment was always in cash. I had never seen such a mountain of money before. Mr H, although a tall (and scraggy and cadaverous) figure, was almost completely hidden by these walls of money built around him. The contracts were duly signed and most efficiently blotted, whereupon the buyer’s lawyer asked for the documents relating to the house (tenants’ contracts, insurance papers, etc). Mr H picked up a thick pile of documents fastened with a rubber band, took off the band and handed the documents to the lawyer. He went through them quickly — he had examined them before, of course — found everything in order and, as the documents were falling apart, asked Mr H casually: “May I have that rubber band, please?”

Mr H was visibly taken aback and worried. After some hesitation, he said: “The rubber band? You can have it for 50 fillers” (half of one pengö, about sixpence).

For the sake of historical accuracy I must add that my boss said, kindly but firmly, “Oh, Mr H...”, took the rubber band from his client’s hand

and passed it to the other lawyer. Whether 50 fillers were subsequently deducted from his bill, I do not know.

That was long ago. More than half a century ago, in fact. But the scene is clearly in my mind. I failed to understand then, and fail to understand now, why a man who has just pocketed £25,000 should feel the need to make fourpence profit on a used rubber band. But today I do know, at least, that love of money is a complex and consuming passion, like love of a woman (or man), like jealousy, hatred and envy. It cannot be understood through logic, as the Second Law of Thermodynamics can be (which most people do not understand either). Money can mean more than money. For some people money means love. And equally important: money — they think — can buy love. And for a large number of people money means even more. It is a measure of their success, their worth, their achievement: it is proof of not having lived in vain. Money — for these wretched, rich people — means *themselves*. They don't only *have* money; they *are* money. Paying out money is like losing a finger; like an eye being scratched out. When a rich man has to spend a large sum he feels like Prometheus chained to a rock with an eagle pecking at his liver — although few rich people are Titans and still fewer have brought fire to this earth.

Paul Getty was the richest man in the world. He was *pleased* to be the richest man in the world — a vulgar satisfaction. If one is the richest man in the world one should at least have the decency to be ashamed of it. He invited a large number of people to his place in the country but installed a coin-operated telephone box lest his guests should call London at his expense. Even if all of them had called Sydney, Australia, and had spoken for half an hour, he would not have noticed it financially. But he explained that he refused to “be taken advantage of”. Why not? What is wealth for? And in any case, what sort of people did he invite to his house? What sort of friends did he have who “took advantage” of their host? No poor man would have uttered the exact equivalent of this, namely: I invite you for a three course meal but if you want cheese, too, you must pay for it.

Ferenc Molnár, the playwright, was an immensely rich man. When a play reached its hundredth performance in pre-war Budapest, it was

the custom for the stage-hands to line up and greet the successful author, who gave them a hundred pengös. All authors, even penniless beginners whose first play it was, coughed up the hundred pengös with pleasure. Molnár gave them twenty-five. Sometimes fifty. He wasn't even ashamed of his meanness. "Some people like spending," he said. "I like saving."

He spent his last years in the United States. There was a law there (perhaps still is), protecting the small man; the US Treasury promised to indemnify savers against loss, up to \$20,000, should a bank go bankrupt. So Molnár divided his vast fortune into units of 20,000 and placed them in innumerable banks throughout the land. He refused to make a will (he was very superstitious and thought if he made a will he would die). He also refused to keep a list of his banks for fear that it might fall into the wrong hands. He thought he remembered them all. He died in spite of the precaution of not making a will, and now that list cannot fall even into the right hands. His heirs cannot get hold of the money, because no one knows where it is. The US Treasury will get it all in a hundred years' time.

A few years ago I used to visit a friend's office frequently and kept meeting there an old man of Romanian origin who was a millionaire and had some connection with my friend's firm. He always hung out there in the late afternoon. One day my friend explained the reason. The old man was waiting for the *Evening Standard*, which he refused to buy. He was not interested in the events of the world, only in the TV programmes. So he xeroxed the TV programmes on my friend's machine, and left — provided it was past seven. Being an old age pensioner he could travel free of charge on the buses after 7 p.m., so he would not leave earlier. He had a daughter who often came in to pick him up, and who was livid with him. She could not persuade the old boy not to waste half an hour in order to save a few pennies, or not to stand in a bus queue for a long time in the rain and get pneumonia. The old Romanian adored his daughter, but he too was angry with her, because of her extravagant tendencies. To waste a few pennies just in order to stay alive? Never!

I once met a girl whose uncle was one of the richest men in Britain. "They say," I told her, "that your uncle is the meanest man in the

country. Is it true?"

"No, it isn't," she shook her head firmly. "He is the second meanest. The meanest man is my father, his brother." And she told me that she had been keeping a secret from him for four years. When she and her husband weighed in at the airport at the start of their honeymoon, they had to pay a small sum for overweight. "For Goodness' sake," she told me, "never tell him this. Never. Even after four years it would create a major turmoil in the family."

Meanness runs in regions or countries. It is infectious, in the sense that if most people adore money, it becomes a state religion. In ancient Rome everybody was pagan; during the Reformation subjects of Protestant princes were Protestants, subjects of Catholic kings were Catholics. In West Germany every German is anti-Communist; in East Germany everybody seems to be a devoted Communist. Money is the state religion of Switzerland. The Swiss are fair people, who give value for money; Swiss workers — I know it sounds incredible — are ready to put in a decent day's work for their high wages. But to waste a few pennies would make a normal, decent Swiss go berserk. A Swiss businessman once meant to ask me a favour — let this be clear: *he* was asking the favour from *me* — and invited me to meet him in a coffee-house in Zurich. So *he* invited me. After our discussion he called the waiter and paid for *his* coffee, letting me pay for mine. I was quite ready to pay for both — indeed, I made an attempt to do so — and would not have given the matter another thought, but to split the bill was a special Swiss meanness. He would not agree with me. He asked me a favour which I could do or could refuse. But why should he pay for my coffee when, after all, *I* drank it, not he?

I have written a great deal about Swiss parsimony, and a journalist from the *Neue Zuercher Zeitung* took me to task for it. The journalist asked me if I really thought the Swiss mean. I replied that I loved the Swiss and admired many of their traits but yes, I thought they were mean.

"But the whole world loves the Swiss franc," he objected, "why do you reproach us for loving it too?"

"I don't reproach you for loving the Swiss franc," I replied. "I reproach you for being in love with the Swiss centimes."





## Bargains



LET US TAKE the orthodox definition of the word *bargain*. It is something offered at a low and advantageous price. It is an opportunity to buy something at a lower price than usual; or at a lower price than it is really worth. As more recent definition is: a bargain is a dirty trick to extort money from the pockets of silly and innocent people.

I have never attended a large company's board meeting in my life, but I feel certain that the discussion often takes the following lines. The cost of producing a new — for example — toothpaste would make 80p the decent price for it, so we will market it at £1.20. It is not a bad toothpaste (not specially good either, but not bad), and as people like to try new things it will sell well to start with; but the attraction of novelty soon fades, so sales will fall. When that starts to happen we will reduce the price to £1.15. And we will turn it into a bargain by printing 5p OFF all over it, whereupon people will rush to buy it even though it still costs about forty-three per cent more than its fair price.

Sometimes it is not 5p OFF but 1p OFF. What breathtaking impertinence to advertise 1p OFF your soap or washing powder or dog food or whatever. Even the poorest old age pensioner ought to regard this as an insult, but he doesn't. A bargain must not be missed. To be offered a "gift" of one penny is like being invited to a dinner and offered one single pea (tastily cooked), and nothing else. Even if it represented a real reduction it would be an insult. Still, people say, one has to have washing powder (or whatever) and one might as well buy it a penny cheaper. When I was a boy in Hungary a man was accused of murdering someone for the sake of one pengö, the equivalent of a shilling, and pleaded guilty. The judge was outraged: "To kill a man for a shilling!... What can you say in your defence?" The murderer replied: "A shilling here... a shilling there..." And that's what today's shopper says, too: "A penny here... a penny there..."

The real danger starts when utterly unnecessary things become "bargains". There is a huge number of people who just cannot resist bargains and sales. Provided they think they are getting a bargain they

will buy clothes they will never wear, furniture they have no space for. Old ladies will buy roller-skates and non-smokers will buy pipe cleaners. People will rush off on cheap holidays to Albania, although it is not clear why anyone should go to Albania unless he is *paid* a substantial sum. People subscribe to book clubs because they can obtain two novels by George Meredith at £2 per copy, and I once heard of a man who bought an electric circular saw as a bargain and cut off two of his fingers the next day. But he had no regrets: the saw had been truly cheap.

Quite a few people actually believe that they make money on such bargains. A lady I know, otherwise a charming and seemingly sane girl, sometimes tells me stories such as this: "I've had a lucky day today. I bought a dress for £120, reduced from £400; I bought a suitcase for £40, reduced from £120 and I bought a beautiful Persian carpet for £600, reduced from £900." Perhaps she may add vaguely that she has been a trifle extravagant, but it will never occur to her that she has actually wasted £760. She feels as though she has *made* £660. She also feels, I am sure, that if she had more time for shopping, she could make a living out of it.

Some people buy in bulk because it is cheaper. At certain moments New Zealand lamb chops may be 3p cheaper if you buy half a ton of them, so people rush to buy a freezer just to find out later that it is too small to hold half a ton of New Zealand lamb. I once knew a couple who could not resist buying sugar in bulk. They thought it a tremendous bargain, not to be missed, so they bought enough sugar for their life-time and the life-time of their children and grandchildren. When the sugar arrived they found that they had nowhere to store it — until it occurred to them that their loo was a very spacious one. So that was where they piled up their sugar. Not only did their guests feel rather strange whenever they were offered sugar to put into their coffee, but the loo became extremely sticky.



To offer bargains is a commercial trick to make the poor poorer. When greedy fools fall for this trick, it serves them right. All the same, if bargains were prohibited by law, our standard of living would immediately rise by 7.39 per cent.

And now to the verb, *to bargain*. This means to negotiate with the aim of beating the price down. The English like to think that bargaining is a filthy oriental habit and pride themselves that they never bargain. Well, they do not bargain in shops, but they do bargain when they buy a house or a second-hand car. Big business is always bargaining about millions of pounds, and British Trade Unions do hardly anything else but bargain. In spite of all this, however, bargaining may still be a filthy oriental habit which has gained a foothold here. The English, however, are bad bargainers — which is not the same thing as not being bargainers at all.

When you listen to a proper oriental bargain you would think neither love nor money would make the vendor part with, say, an antique table, while as for the buyer, he wouldn't accept it even as a gift. The vendor seems to be in love with the piece and praises it to the heavens; the buyer finds faults with it, and suggests contemptuously that it is a fake.

A proper oriental bargain is interrupted several times: the buyer rushes out of the shop (in order to return two minutes later), or the vendor refuses even to answer the latest, most insulting offer. Religion comes into it, too: the vendor swears by Almighty God, or Allah, or by the life of his mother (who died long ago), that he paid considerably more for that table than he was asking for it even in the first place, and the buyer swears equally solemn oaths that he would not pay such an outrageous price for this ramshackle rubbish even if he could afford it, which is not the case. A proper oriental bargain always ends in a deal and in friendly handshakes.

At the beginning of the war I worked as a freelance journalist, mostly for the BBC, and my first wife also had a job there. As I was free in the mornings I did all the household shopping. Our greengrocer in St John's Wood High Street was a fat old Italian woman, Mrs Salamone. She spoke perfect Cockney without a trace of foreign accent, but preferred to talk, shout and quarrel with her innumerable children and grandchildren in her native Italian. We, the customers, queued up patiently to ask for, say, a cabbage. "Ninepence," she would declare. A bit stiff for a cabbage all the English customers would think secretly, but they — and myself — would nevertheless pay up without murmur, and were, indeed, grateful to Mrs Salamone for selling us a cabbage at all. The only exception was another Italian lady Signora T.

"How much is this — 'cabbage'?" she would ask aggressively, her tone suggesting that the real word for the vegetable was "garbage".

"Ninepence."

Signora T would laugh ironically as if she had heard a really amusing joke.

"You don't mean this half-rotten, miserable, soft cabbage, hardly suitable for pigs?"

Mrs Salamone would indicate gloomily that she did mean that very cabbage. Signora T would go on: "Ninepence? Sheer highway robbery. It's criminal. It's profiteering. Sixpence."

Mrs Salamone, obviously much too dignified to answer, would turn to the next customer.

"Sixpence ha'penny," said Signora T as a last offer. Mrs Salamone still refused even to look at her and Signora T would flounce away... only to

return three minutes later with an offer of sevenpence. After a long and loud session of bargaining and quarrelling, Signora T would have her cabbage for eightpence.

For a long time I wondered why Mrs Salamone bothered to waste her time with the Signora at all. She had plenty of customers who gave her no trouble. Slowly it dawned on me — the evidence for it became clear — that Signora T was Mrs Salamone's favourite customer, the only one whom she respected. Signora T was the only person who did her shopping in the way Mrs Salamone had been taught to do hers. She felt contempt for the sheeplike English whom even she, an uneducated Italian peasant, could twist around her little finger. Far from not bothering with Signora T, Mrs Salamone considered her visits the highlights of her day. Bargaining was no chore to either woman, but a game, a pastime, a battle of wits and great fun. The aim of the exercise was not to gain a few pennies; the aim of bargaining was the pleasure of bargaining.

(Mrs Salamone is a cherished, an unforgettable person in my memory. One day, during the darkest part of the war, there were reports in the newspapers that a consignment of oranges had arrived and that people with green ration books — i.e. people with children — could buy one pound of oranges per green book. We had not seen an orange for a year, but as we had no children yet, I did not even ask Mrs Salamone about the oranges. When I finished my daily shopping for cabbages, turnips and sour apples, she turned to me and asked me quite casually: "Would you like four pounds of oranges?" My heart nearly stopped beating and I remarked timidly: "I thought oranges were for babies." Her eyes flashed and she shouted in a stentorian voice: "Bugger the babies!" And gave me five pounds of oranges. *Mutatis mutandis*, "Bugger the babies" has become the national slogan of Britain.)

Back to bargaining. It is not only a game, and fun; it is also a disease. Some people fight desperately for a little glory; they need victories of some sort. A friend of mine, who lives in Australia, once described a scene to me with great vividness. He went on a cruise, visiting Fiji, Tahiti, Tonga and other islands in the South Pacific. When passengers went ashore in Tonga, a large number of small traders were waiting to offer them their wares — mostly baskets and various bric-à-brac.

People who go on South Pacific cruises are, as a rule, richer than people who try to sell them hand-woven baskets. These Tongan natives who try to sell their baskets etc to the tourists are not only very poor, but they have worked hard all the Southern winter weaving baskets and making other bric-à-brac. Their well-being during the coming months depends on whether they can sell them at a reasonable price. It seemed to my friend that when a well-to-do tourist is asked two dollars for a pretty sewing basket, he might give the poor Tongan three. How naïve of him! The passengers instantly joined battle with the Tongan traders, bargaining fiercely, calling them robbers and beating the price down a dollar here, fifty cents there. He said that Wellington could not have described his victory over Napoleon in terms half as glowing as those used by the tourists when they described their victories at the Battle of the Baskets. “He wanted seven dollars for a small rattan table, but I’ve got it for 4.75!” They were not only fighting the poor Tongans, they were competing with one another as to who had made the biggest bargain, who had been cleverer, who had brought off the dirtier tricks. As to who, in fact had succeeded in depriving some poor woman — very probably a mother of five — of a dollar or two. My friend said that the bargains at Tonga remained the chief topic of conversation for the rest of the luxury cruise. The tourists were self-righteous: they refused to be cheated — that was their moral justification. I don’t see why. I like to be cheated. Anyway, I prefer to be cheated rather than to cheat others.

Some time after hearing the story of that cruise, I was walking with some friends in the streets of Dakar, Senegal. An African street jeweller joined us, and started talking to a young American in our company. The trader told Joe that he had a particularly beautiful golden necklace, worth 20,000 francs, but he would give it to Joe — as a personal favour — for the ridiculous price of 11,000.

“No, thank you,” said Joe, and walked on.

The street trader fell in beside him, took out an elegant little box from his pocket, unwrapped a chain, hung it on his index finger and went on with his sales talk: “It’s worth a fortune. 11,000 is a ridiculous price. I would not sell it to anyone even for that price. But *you* can have it for 10,000.”

Joe did not enquire how, on their very first encounter, the jeweller knew that he deserved this very special treatment. He tried to rejoin our conversation. In vain. The trader was determined: the price went down to nine thousand, then to seven, six, four and two thousand.

Joe stopped saying no, which was becoming monotonous. He just walked on in silence.

“As a very special favour to you: eight hundred.”

No reply.

“Seven hundred.”

No reply.

“Four hundred.”

Joe shook his head.

“Six hundred,” said the trader to my surprise.

Joe remained silent.

“Nine hundred,” the trader went on.

Joe looked worried.

“One thousand and one hundred,” the trader said remorselessly.

Joe stopped, took out his wallet and paid the man one thousand and one hundred Senegalese francs. The trader handed over the chain and disappeared as fast as he could.

“You know, of course,” I said, “that he had started raising the price? His last offers were going up and up.” Joe did not reply — I might have been the street trader. I went on: “You could have bought that chain for four hundred.”

Still no reply.

“Why did you buy it at all? And if you wanted to, why for eleven hundred when you could have got it for almost a quarter of that price?”

Joe stopped in his tracks, looking simultaneously miserable and incredulous, and at last he spoke.

“I broke down. My nerve snapped. I just could not resist any longer.” After a moment’s pause he added: “I *had* to buy it. And I had to buy it before he raised the price to 11,000 again.”



## The Best and the Worst



THE WORST BUSINESS DEAL I have heard about was, surprisingly, not my own. It was a deal concluded, or rather not concluded, by a gentleman called Francis X whom I used to meet in the house of a close friend. My wife, daughter and I visited Stephen Garrett's house every Saturday afternoon for quite a few years and for a while Francis X turned up there regularly, so I met him frequently without really knowing him well. Indeed, it was impossible to know him well. Not only was he a man of almost seventy — which amounted to ridiculous antiquity in my then-young eyes — and not only was he a taciturn introvert, but he was also a man obviously crushed and tormented by some deep sorrow or cruel blow which he was unable to forget or overcome. I knew he was a widower and at first I assumed that the loss of his wife was the grave blow that had crushed him. But it turned out that he had accepted that loss with remarkable ease — or shall we say, with admirable courage. My host and friend, Stephen, was rather discreet about the matter for a long while, but one day he told me what ailed Francis.

“You are on the right track. He did suffer a tragic blow he cannot overcome. It happened long, long ago, when he was a young man.”

“Something to do with love?” I asked, being the romantic soul I am.

“With love of money,” said Stephen.

“When he was still in business,” I nodded. “I know he's retired now.”

“Not exactly retired. He had no job to retire from. He has, and always had, private means.”

I held my peace and looked questioning.

“In his young days he used to have a friend called Lyons who planned to open a grocery shop. Lyons asked Francis to be his partner. Not a fifty-fifty partner, just to put a hundred pounds into the business. Francis pondered over this proposition for weeks. He did not want to offend young Lyons, but on the other hand a hundred pounds was a lot of money and he was terrified of losing it. He couldn't make up his mind. Lyons grew impatient and asked him to say yes or no. He said

neither. Then, after further heart-searching, he offered Lyons fifty pounds. Lyons murmured something uncomplimentary about his friend's parsimony and pressed him for a hundred. Francis was firm. Fifty or nothing. Lyons accepted the fifty." Stephen stopped, then added: "That's all."

I thought I understood. Stephen added: "The firm, as we all know, has become J. Lyons & Co — restaurateurs, tea importers, bakers, patisserie-people and God knows what — anyway, one of the industrial giants of this country. Francis used to be a moderately well-to-do man, now he became rich. In fact, very, very rich."

"And that ruined his life?"

"It did. Because if he had not been so foolish and mean, and had accepted Lyons's original suggestion, he would be twice as rich. He just cannot get over it."

A few months afterwards Francis died of a broken heart. He had no children. He left one and a quarter million pounds to some animal charity.

My own business career is not really glorious. I have usually kept away from business deals, but occasionally I have been persuaded to invest in one boom or another. My investment always marked the end of the boom. If I bought shares, the stock exchange plummeted; if I bought half a house as an investment — which I did once — house prices fell. When these things happened I felt a kind of *self-schadenfreude*, a masochistic glee: it serves me right, I should keep away from business, just as Paul Getty should keep away from writing humorous books on poverty. Yet the most successful business deal I know of — if deal it can be called — is mine, and it filled me with immense joy-

One day I was playing tennis at Hurlingham with a man whom I had not met before. He was a Czech, now a professor at a German university. I knew that much about him but no more: not even his surname.

After the game I offered him a lift to a nearby underground station. He was invited to a party and was a little late. On our way to the tube station, he discovered a florist's shop and asked me to stop so that he could buy some flowers for his hostess. I stopped and waited for him in

the car. Rush-hour traffic was building up and, after his return, I found it a little difficult to get back into the stream. In such cases one has to wait for the first gentleman. He turned up soon enough, stopped and waved me on. I nodded my thanks and started moving — whereupon, to my utter surprise, so did he, and hit my car. We both got out and examined our cars. The impact was so slight that neither of us could discover any sign of it. The man who had hit me told me that he was a bit worried because he was driving a company car and he had a lot of accidents (I did not remark that I was not surprised). The company had just paid out for a large sum for repairs and he would not be very popular if he came along with a new claim. Then he took the registration number of my car but, on second thoughts, told me: “Yes, I have taken your registration number but I shall throw it away. No point in it. You won’t hear from me again.”

We parted as friends. A few days later I received a letter from his insurance company, *re* “the accident in Fulham”. I was told that an estimate had been asked for repairs and they would get in touch with me in due course.

I wrote back and asked them to save themselves the trouble of getting in touch with me again as I was not really interested. The so-called accident had been their client’s fault and no one else’s, since first he had waved me on and then had hit me. In addition, we had examined our cars on the spot and no damage was visible to the naked eye. And finally, because their client had assured me that I would not hear from him again I had not even bothered to take the names of witnesses; indeed, I still did not know the name of my own passenger.

A few days later another letter arrived from the insurance company, making no reference to my letter, just telling me that according to preliminary estimates the repairs would cost £40. I wrote back telling them that the matter was becoming ludicrous and that I refused to waste my time on further correspondence. I was not going to reply to further communications, if any were sent.

Further communications were sent. In the next one I was informed that more thorough examinations proved that the damage to their client’s car was heavier than originally suspected. The bills will probably come to £100 and I would get the final figure soon.

I did not reply.

A week or so later I got a bill for £263.17p. I ignored that too.

A stiff letter followed telling me that unless I paid £263.17p within seven days they would hand the matter over to their solicitors.

I ignored that letter too.

A letter from the solicitors duly arrived and told me that unless I paid £263.17p within seven days (it's always seven days) they would start legal proceedings against me.

I looked forward to that with relish, but still did not reply.

When the seven days were up, another letter arrived, this time once again from the insurance company. They were sending me a cheque for £263.17p. I paid the cheque into my account and never heard of the matter again.

I must add a footnote to this, because while writing this chapter I heard about the least successful crime in history.

A gentleman with an Irish name was sentenced to one month's imprisonment because he had fiddled with his electricity meter. And as he had turned it the wrong way — forward instead of back — he also had to pay an electricity bill of £600, instead of his usual £35.



## On Poor Millionaires



I AM NO BROODER, particularly not over money. Money spent is money gone.

But there is one single financial riddle in my life that I should like to solve. As a young journalist in Budapest I had quite a reasonable income. I have already mentioned a popular song of those days according to which a man with a monthly income of 200 pengös was a happy and carefree man, indeed happy and carefree *pater familias*. My monthly income was over a 1000 pengös, so I should have been five times happier and more carefree than the average happy and carefree married man. In fact, *more* than five times, as I was living in my parents' house, paid no rent and got my electricity, gas, laundry etc for free (it was only much later, in London, that I learnt that such items existed). I always had breakfast at home and as many other meals as I chose to have. Most of the expenses of my car were borne by my step-father. When I used public transport — trams, buses or even trains — as a journalist, I was carried free of charge. On top of all that, I was never a reckless spender, I never had expensive habits. I did not drink, I did not gamble, I hated night clubs and I always looked down upon men who cared too much about their clothes. I ought to have been rich; yet I was always penniless. I often had to ask my mother for tiny sums — a single pengö sometimes — so that I could buy a black coffee when I visited the coffee-house. I still wrack my brains from time to time in an attempt to solve this riddle. How was it that others could keep families on a fifth of my income, while a reasonably modest bachelor like myself, who did not even have to pay for the necessities of life, found it insufficient?



I tell myself that I was too young and inexperienced to know how to manage money — but that is not the answer, because the mystery, in a slightly changed form, accompanied me to England. In my early days I had a salary from my Budapest papers. The money often failed to arrive on time but then I would get my salary for two, three or four months in one lump sum. In subsequent years — when contact with my papers were finally cut — I was sometimes badly off, and at other times I made quite considerable sums. And whether I was penniless or well off, it made absolutely no difference to my life-style. Sometimes I did not know (and usually I did not really care) where my next meal was coming from. On the other hand, even when I had lots of money, I never indulged in eating — and still less in drinking — orgies. Usually I could not afford posh restaurants; when I could, I carefully avoided them. I must repeat: whether I had the money or not, I did not drink, I did not eat a great deal, I did not gamble, I had no expensive hobbies. On the other hand, however poor I was I do not remember missing one single meal because I could not pay for it. This unchanging life-style drove me to one important conclusion, indeed to the **FIRST MIKES LAW**

OF ECONOMICS: *Your life-style has nothing to do with your financial situation.*

People are *born* either rich or poor and this has nothing to do with their bank accounts or the bank accounts of their fathers. It has everything to do with their character. We all know about the miserly rich who are unable to enjoy their wealth and live in misery. We all know about the spendthrift poor — and pretend to despise them, although we envy them. They say: “I wish I could afford to live in the style I do live in.” And somehow they *can* afford it. However, we also know the miserly poor and the spendthrift rich. I know people whose fortune has changed — indeed, changed several times — during their life-time. A friend of mine used to be extremely well off and, in those days, he was the most generous and extravagant host. Later he lived in very modest circumstances, yet he remained an equally generous and extravagant host. I do not know how he manages. Neither does he.



## Smoked Salmon



IT IS, of course, easier to be a rich miser than a madly extravagant poor person. But difficulties can always be overcome.

It seems to be incontrovertible that to be extravagant you need money. True. But you do not need your own money. An important school of thinking on the art of poverty holds that it is wise to avoid the psychological deformities caused by possessing too much money, yet it is equally wise to enjoy the money of others. Their aim is not to *be* millionaires but to live like millionaires.

In my own experience most millionaires are overworked, anxious people under constant pressure to preserve their money and to keep up appearances. In addition to which, as Logan Pearsall so rightly remarked: "It is the wretchedness of being rich that you have to live with rich people." But it is less wretched for the poor to live with rich people and enjoy all the benefits of their friends' fortunes. Indeed, poor people in that position are carefree and happy; they live a long time and are very good company. And this leads to the SECOND MIKES LAW OF ECONOMICS: *Only a poor man can live like a millionaire.*

It is not so much the rich, as the money-maniacs — rich *and* poor — who poison the air. They have invented a set of rules for themselves: i. You must surround yourself with people in the news, with people who are talked about. It is good to be seen with TV personalities however empty-headed, with giggling actors who have gained a little notoriety in idiotic radio-parlour games, with boxers and with jockeys ( but not with football players). Scientists and Thinkers, on the other hand — or any other kind of eminent person who does not figure in the gossip columns — are of no interest whatsoever. 2. Authors should be classified according to the number of books they sell. The author of best selling rubbish is good, the author of brilliant books revered by intellectuals... well, who knows about them, in any case? 3. Money is the only value: money is measurable, nothing else is.

These attitudes have two results.

1. *Rich people can afford much less than the poor.*



A poor person may live at any pleasant place he chooses: the rich *must* have a “good address”. A basement hole in Mayfair is to be preferred to a charming house even in “up-coming” Barnes. I am a proud and conceited poor and am convinced that wherever I live is a good address. Good enough for me. Some of the rich fail to realise that any address becomes lousy as soon as it becomes their address.

My favourite restaurant is a Czech place in Hampstead, run by a genius of a cook who has the magic touch. The decor is not outstanding, there is not one original Picasso or one crystal chandelier to be seen, and one can be fairly sure from the look of the place that food is more important to Mrs H than fresh paint. No rich person could *afford* to be seen there. They might start patronising the place if Mrs H quadrupled her prices and made them ludicrous, but she keeps them as low as she can and no rich person can *afford* to pay so little. So the poor rich must go to places where the food varies between the indifferent and the uneatable, but the pictures on the wall vie with those in the Tate.

Poor people can dress as badly as the greatest aristocrat. Well... perhaps they cannot go around in *quite* such rags as an eleventh earl is likely to wear, but they do not need to bother with such irrelevancies as clothes. A few poor men overdo it and go about in rags, not because they cannot afford cheap but pleasant-looking rubbish, but because they want to look like aristocrats or the old rich: a snobbish *new-poor* attitude. The rich, in turn, must wear — at weddings, for example — such outmoded and foolish clothes as a morning coat. And top hats.

Once, for a royal garden party, I made the foolish mistake of hiring a morning coat and top hat. I was — even at the party — thoroughly ashamed of myself. I made a sacred vow: never again. And this is one of the few sacred vows I have kept. I would rather be seen in mediaeval knightly armour than in morning coat and top hat.

2. The second result of money-mindedness is that *only the poor can really enjoy things; the rich just suffer if something is not perfect.*

A poor person appreciates the good things in life because they are exceptional for him. The rich person turns up his nose at them, partly to show that he is not impressed and partly because he is genuinely spoilt and his ability to enjoy has been replaced by an exquisite ability

to find fault. A poor man will be delighted at a concert; the rich one will only notice that X failed to play that violin concerto quite on the level of Y. The poor man will enjoy a grand meal at a grand restaurant (once in a while; when invited); the rich one will only notice that the meal at the Gavroche is not quite up to the level of Père Bise at Talloires or that his room at Claridges is not quite as magnificent as it was at the Georges V in Paris (or vice versa).

The outstanding example of this attitude I heard from a friend. A little girl was taken by her mother for lunch to the Ritz — where else? My friend had to join them because he had some business with the lady. (He advised her on financial matters.) They were in a great hurry, the lady had an appointment soon after lunch. Before they ordered their meal, however, the child disappeared into the loo. To save time, her mother ordered the first course for her.

When she returned to the table she discovered smoked salmon on her plate. The sight made her extremely peevish. “Oh Mother!” she whined, “you *know* I don’t like the smoked salmon at the Ritz!”

Here, in a nutshell, you have all the misery of the rich.



## A Few Tears for a Banker



AS IT IS ESSENTIAL to my subject, I must retell a story (in a slightly abbreviated form) which I have told in my autobiography. I do apologise to the millions of readers of that book. (*How to be Seventy*, André Deutsch, available — sometimes — in the better bookshops.)

The editor-in-chief of my Budapest paper, Miklós Lázár, was an inveterate walker and an even more inveterate frequenter of the Turkish bath. When he caught one of us hanging around in the office, he asked us to accompany him and very few excuses were accepted. I hated the walks and even more intensely the Turkish bath. When we smelt the danger, we fled or withdrew to safe rooms, but at regular intervals we were each caught.

One day it was my turn again and he suggested: “Come with me, we are going to visit Simi Krausz.”

Now that was a very different kettle of fish, a truly attractive proposition. Simon Krausz was a legendary figure: a former banker, once upon a time a multimillionaire, probably the richest man in Hungary. And, unlike most rich men, he had been recklessly generous. Perhaps, as a new rich, he was insecure and felt that he had to buy people’s admiration and affection. Whatever his reasons, he threw his money about with splendid generosity. He used to reward his friends and lovers in a royal fashion; a commissionaire who helped him with his coat would receive a tip equivalent of £10. The gossip columns had always been full of Simi Krausz stories — I had written quite a few of them myself. Then suddenly he went bankrupt and was completely finished. The papers reported that he was living in penury. I was much interested to see him, although I was afraid of an endless walk to the outlying, cheaper suburbs, where, I presumed, his dismal bed-sitter must be situated.

Hardly had we walked ten minutes, when my editor stopped in front of a most elegant villa in Andrásy ut, the smartest part of Budapest. A huge, black Packard protruded from the garage and a uniformed chauffeur was fiddling with its engine. We were received by a butler.

Lunch — caviar and venison and chocolate soufflé — was served by two footmen and — obviously — there must be at least one extremely good cook in the kitchen.

On the way back I said: “I thought Simi Krausz was poor?”

Lázár sighed: “Terribly poor. He’s desperate.”

“But he lives in one of the most elegant villas in Andrassy ut.”

“Oh yes, because there is so much debt on it that it is simply not worthwhile for his numerous creditors to put it up for auction.”

“He has a huge car.”

“An old wreck.”

“And a staff of five. Maybe more.”

“Poor bastard. He owes so much money to those people that they cannot afford to leave him.”

“And the meal he gave us...”

“What is a meal? Do you expect him to starve?”

I realised, with some surprise, that my editor was genuinely sorry for the man. I was supposed to shed a few tears for poor Simi Krausz. But he *did* live in an elegant house in the most expensive part of the town; *did* have a huge car and a large personal staff; and *did* wash down his caviar with the best Moselle, followed by red Burgundy with the venison.

I have retold this story because it led me to the THIRD MIKES law OF ECONOMICS: *When a rich man is ruined he is still much better off than a poor man who becomes rich.*

## A (Very) Short History of Poverty



THE FIRST GENERATION of cavemen were not poor. Admittedly, they enjoyed few luxuries but they regarded themselves as comfortable by cave standards. It was during the life of the second generation that a cave family — by the name of Jones — polished and sharpened a large piece of round stone and used it for skinning rabbits, opening shells and all sorts of other purposes. This acquisition made — sometimes literally — minced meat of their neighbours. They all wanted to have a polished, round stone with sharp edges, and found life intolerable if they could not keep up with the Joneses. Poverty had arrived.

These same Joneses covered the walls of their cave with drawings of mammoths and for a while this, too, caused envy and rivalry. But this feeling evaporated soon enough when one of the Joneses' neighbours declared that the drawings were not originals.

Ever since those days people have found it easy to bear their own poverty but impossible to bear the riches of others. The poor, however, have always outnumbered the rich and the problem has always been how to subjugate them and how to persuade them 1) to accept law and order and 2) to serve and revere the rich.



The poor — to save themselves — have tried three main devices.

1. Occasionally they have revolted against the rich. All their revolts, from Spartacus through to the Swiss revolt in the seventeenth century — the Swiss have always been a bit slow — were defeated, and it is difficult to decide who was responsible for the worst atrocities and cruelty during them, the educated and noble victors, or the uneducated and angry rebels.

2. Then the poor put forward the idea that all men are equal. This ideal failed because all men are not equal. It is far from true that it is the better man who wins. Often it is the meaner, baser, more ruthless, cruel and cunning who does so. But the point is that people are not equally mean, base, ruthless, cruel and cunning, any more than they are equally enterprising, brave, imaginative and intelligent. Briefly, they are not equal.

3. Then came the most brilliant idea: Marxism. Marxists declared that far from all people being equal, one layer of the population, the proletariat, was much better than the rest. As it happened, the proletariat — through no fault of its own, indeed, through the fault of the rich — was downtrodden, uneducated, bitter and revengeful, so the idea boiled down to being that the worst layer of the population was the best. As the doctrine developed, the Marxists added: to hell with

equality, let's change places. Let the poor be rich and the rich poor. Basically this was a good and fair idea, and as there were many more poor in the world than rich, the idea appealed to the masses. But the poor did not know how to be rich, they were mere beginners. And they were cheated again. A new layer of rich and spoilt rulers emerged and the fate of the masses was exactly as before except that it was worse. Capitalism, they say, is the exploitation of one man by the other; Communism is the other way round.

So the rich remained on top in all societies and they had to protect, or preferably to improve, their position. How to do that? By calling up God in their support. It was His wish that the poor be poor and the rich be rich. How could anyone reasonably expect God, as a logical Being, to create an order in which poor was rich and rich was poor? The very suggestion was an insult to His intelligence.

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them high and lowly  
And ordered their estate.*

This order worked well for a long time, so long as feudal society allowed no mobility: born a rich man, always a rich man; born a beggar, always a beggar. But the development of capitalism, industrialism, commercialism changed all that. A lot has been written about the archetypal rich man who started out with nothing and made millions; less about the archetypal poor man who started out with millions and lost the lot. Both of these came into being. It became possible for people to move up and down the scale.

God — who was beginning to look a trifle old-fashioned in any case — rather lost His standing. In capitalist societies His order had given way to chaos, while in Marxist societies it was now the poor man who was in the castle and the rich man who was at the gate, which was just as unfair as the old state of affairs used to be. So the socialists had to defend *their* unjust society, and had to invent a new myth for the purpose.

Under capitalism the “lower orders”, the poor, the down-trodden are despised; under socialism they are actually treated in exactly the same way, but they are glorified. Everything is supposed to be done for the poor; the working man is the finest, the most wonderful creature. All the power and all the riches of the land belong to him. If he doubts that, he will be imprisoned or murdered as a traitor to his class. The factory belongs to him, so he is working for his own benefit and for his fellow workers. It is all right to strike against a capitalist exploiter but to strike against oneself — against self-exploitation — is stupid and criminal. And indeed, it is nonsensical to want more when you have everything. Except that they have nothing.

Every system has produced its rich and poor, its oppressors and oppressed. In every system a tiny minority has had to persuade the vast majority to accept its lot, to be cheerful and, on top of that, to love its oppressors. But there are differences.

1. Under socialism the poor person is as poor as a church-mouse. Under capitalism he is also as poor as a church-mouse but church-mice are considerably better off under capitalism.

2. Under capitalism church-mice are allowed to squeak. Under socialism they must shut up.

Occasionally this poor oppressed creature — who is told that all power belongs to him — is called upon to fight for the privilege of keeping his chains. That is cruel. If history teaches us anything, it teaches us that humanity loves changing its chains.





## Tempora Mutantur



AT THE BAR in my club a member remarked, speaking of an absent fellow-member: "Wretched fellow... He's so badly off that — as they say — he can't call his hair his own."

A third member, scratching unobtrusively the top of his wig remarked: "Nowadays you have to be pretty well off to be able to call your hair your own."

## The Poverty of Animals



“ONLY MAN IS POOR.” I have met this statement several times during my thorough and indefatigable researches for this tome. It is enough to compare some poor, hungry, persecuted stray dog being chased from door to door, with the spoilt pet of some silly lady being shampooed and manicured twice a week, to see that this statement is untenable. I have also seen it stated that only man can be a true Christian.

Both statements are false. What *is* true is that animals’ poverty is always induced by man while their Christianity is instinctive. My ginger cat used to be very poor; he is also a good Christian.

Five years ago I published the biography of my then one and only cat, Tsi-Tsa. (The other day I was standing in front of my house with Tsi-Tsa at my feet when two ladies passed by. They paid no attention to me, indeed, ignored me studiously. One of them told the other: “There is Tsi-Tsa.” The other replied: “Don’t be silly. Tsi-Tsa can’t still be alive.” Well, Tsi-Tsa is very much alive. She is getting a bit of an elderly lady at the age of thirteen, but — like many other elderly ladies — she is youthful, beautiful and full of fun.) The book (*Tsi-Tsa*, André Deutsch) is dedicated to three cats, all personal friends of mine. The dedication runs: “To Harry, an Errol Flynn; to George, an Albert Einstein; and to Ginger, a saint among cats.” Ginger, who is my second cat now, used to belong to a neighbour and was always pathetically hungry. He looked terribly neglected; his hair was rough and prickly; he was covered with revolting sores; and he had a begging, hungry look in his eyes. Ginger’s poverty was undoubtedly man-induced, but his economic situation was undeniably appalling.

I started giving him breakfast every morning. As Tsi-Tsa was madly jealous, I fed Ginger outside, on the patio. On second thoughts, I cannot put all the responsibility on Tsi-Tsa: I did not want *two* cats. I did not want Ginger to spend too much time in the house. Then an ugly little kitten — locally known as Beelzebub — I turned up. He was even more miserable and forlorn than Ginger, unloved, despised and chased by other cats, unwanted by everyone — except Ginger. Every

morning they came to my patio together and poor, hungry Ginger, willingly — indeed courteously, like a perfect host — encouraged Beelzebub to share his probably one and only meal. This was the most Christian deed I have witnessed in the last twenty-five years — not forgetting all the deeds and utterances of that popular Polish show-biz personality in Rome.

Poor Ginger eventually became rich Ginger. Beelzebub joined the BBC (he got a job as a mouse-catcher at the Lime Grove studios) and, at about the same time, Ginger was chucked out by my neighbour. Now he did not even have a place to sleep, so he slept rough during the summer and early autumn. Then a severe cold spell descended upon us and Ginger's health — indeed his very life — was in danger. I built him a little house of cardboard — I could not obtain a wooden box for the purpose — and filled it with old clothes and rugs to keep him warm. Anyone who knows anything about my manual dexterity will not be surprised to hear that my architectural skill was not enough to protect Ginger from freezing to death. So I had to take him in. This caused tremendous friction. Jealous Tsi-Tsa's territory had been invaded, she was robbed of her monopoly. Ginger was fully aware of this. He was reticent, modest and apologetic. Now, years later, the two cats are devoted chums, they love each other and they sleep — sometimes on an armchair, sometimes on me — embracing each other fondly. Ginger loves Tsi-Tsa with true Christian love; Tsi-Tsa loves Ginger with the devotion of an ageing female for athletic youth.



I could not make a man rich; but I could make Ginger pretty well off. His life has changed. He has a home; he has central heating as well as all the emotional warmth he needs. His hair has become silky, his sores were healed long ago. But memories and the habits of a deprived childhood linger on: having consumed a huge and epicurean supper with gluttonous greed, he will sit around while I am having my supper, watching me with the heart-breaking, hungry look of a cat who has not seen food for a week.

There is another survival from his poverty-stricken youth. He is utterly uneducated. We all learnt at school that cats are carnivorous. Ginger, however, was never taught this. So he eats up all the vegetables he can find: peas, cauliflower, beans, corn on the cob and everything else. Tsi-Tsa — a cat with a happier childhood — would not even look at such things.

Ginger has also provided a clear example of how riches can change someone's character — be that *someone* a man or a cat. Tsi-Tsa fell ill and had to spend a longish time in hospital. I thought Ginger would be upset, missing her badly. I saw very few signs of that. He was happy as a lark. And when Tsi-Tsa came home at last, Ginger was as jealous of her

— now losing *his* monopoly — as she used to be of him. That is how a little money in a saint's pocket can deduct from his saintliness.

So much for the poverty of cats. The poverty of minks is even more of a cautionary and moral tale. This is a complex story, in three acts.

There are not too many mink-farms in Britain but there is one in Essex, owned by Mr John Morley. One of the do-goody organisations formed for the protection of animals decided that the suffering of the minks must be intolerable. The minks, as we shall see, were not consulted, but these people knew that minks had been born free and held that they must not languish in captivity. One night the animal-lovers broke into Morley's farm and freed several hundred minks who disappeared in no time in the neighbouring woods. This caused the greatest possible alarm.

Not that they behaved badly. Not in the least. But their reputation proved to be truly awesome. The RSPCA told people that the act of those so-called animal-lovers was highly irresponsible. Minks, they said, were dangerous animals — some of the most dangerous of all animals, in fact, they belong to the ferret family, the wildest and most vicious of creatures. Taking the ferret's weight and size into consideration — the RSPCA explained — the minks were more dangerous than tigers. The ferret — and the mink — does not only kill the unfortunate otter, which is dying out in any case, but might attack and kill *children*.

This is the first act of the story. This indubitably well-meant but extremely stupid act, this blow struck for the Freedom of the Mink, created wild panic in the neighbourhood and mothers lived in fear for the lives of their children.

Then an unexpected twist occurred. The minks failed to attack the children in Essex. A few hours after their release, when their morning feeding time approached, the little beasts mildly and obediently returned to the farm. They queued up for a renewed term of captivity. They came in large groups. Mr Morley refused to believe his own eyes. But the attitude behind the minks' decision was only too obvious: they preferred good room service, proper heating and sufficient and tasty food to the dangers and other inconveniences of the woods, to the risks of hunting and being hunted. In other words: they preferred comfort

to freedom. And — wrongly in my view — riches to poverty. Minks are only human.

Freedom means responsibility: equally shirked by man and ferret. Wearing a mink-coat seems to have a demoralising effect on both.

This, however, is not the end of the story. Act III is yet to be told. And a sad third act it is. One would think that the little minks, after their strange adventure, lived happily ever after. Alas, this was not to be. Minks multiply with terrifying rapidity. Most cages — prior to their release — were occupied by one huge family: all the minks in the cage belonged to one family: parents and many brothers and sisters. They knew one another and had got used to one another. After their brief excursion into the woods the families got mixed up so that total strangers had to share the same cage and they could not settle down. Vicious fights broke out, they were at each other's throats all the time, life became hell. The animal lovers' good will has completely destroyed the serenity and happiness of the minks' lives. The second moral we learn from this tale is this: we can, as a rule, deal with our enemies; but God save us from our friends!

## *Part Two: Public Poverty*



## The Snobbery of the New Poor



HUMANITY'S philosophical attitude to poverty has been changing throughout the ages (although the poor's own practical attitude has remained more or less the same). I have already touched upon a related subject (in the chapter "A Short History of Poverty") but I must add a few words... or rather, approach the problem from another angle.

Quite a few of the writers and thinkers of ancient Rome were puzzled by this phenomenon. Seneca, for example, remarked: "It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves for more that is poor." But we all know that the downtrodden, apathetic and broken poor person is resigned to his fate and that it is the greedy rich man who wants more and more. In other words, what Seneca suggests is that the poor person is not poor (because he is resigned to be his fate) while the real poor person is the rich person (because he craves for more). An attractive theory but not altogether convincing.

Seneca's apologetic approach found no favour with his contemporary, Jesus Christ, who angrily denounced the rich. "Blessed be ye poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God." Perhaps He had some special information on the subject — He had good connections; perhaps, in this case, was just wishful thinking. But He was certainly on the s\*de of the poor, unlike His Church, later. The Church served the rich; the Church was dependent on the rich; the Church, with its vast land properties, *was* the rich. The Church repeated Christ's words but with tongue in cheek: understand, ye poor, that poor ye must remain. Suffer and toil and sweat and starve and ye will be splendidly rewarded in the Kingdom of Heaven. And if not, bad luck. So the poor toiled and suffered and starved and few came back from the grave to complain. Not only few of the English poor (we know that Englishmen, rich or poor, dead or alive, hate complaining) but few even of the German or Austrian poor, who love complaining.

Never a bitter word from the dead. So the world slowly got used to the gentle and genteel poor, to people who modestly and shyly tried to hide



their poverty. Bernard Shaw went further. He declared that the poor should not be modest and shy: they should be thoroughly ashamed of themselves. “The greatest of evils and *the worst of crimes* is poverty.” (My italics — not that it matters whose italics they are.)

The poor were duly ashamed of themselves, as instructed by Shaw. But not for long. Where Marxism has failed, Marks-and-Spencerism has triumphed. When I first came to England it was easy to tell the rich from the poor. It was enough to look at them. The poor could not afford to dress like the rich and did not even want to. If the Kingdom of God was to be theirs, they meant to *look* poor, in order to avoid any misunderstanding at that final selection. But Marks-and-Spencerism changed all that; it defeated the Church — all Churches. People started to look alike. It became harder and harder to tell the messenger-girl from the director’s wife, the daily woman from her employer, the worker from the plant manager. There were still differences, of course; not everyone had a mink coat, various qualities of material still existed, and so on, but the boundaries were fading away and it was not enough just to throw a glance at a person to know all about his or her financial and social status. Workers — even unskilled workers! — started running cars and competing for parking spaces with the rich; the *cri de cœur* of the threatened rich went up: “Today the poor demand a standard of living formerly confined to the rich.”

Slowly but surely attitudes were changing and more and more people took up the defiant attitude of this book: the rich are a vulgar and pitiful lot, full of worries, pursuing the wrong aims, chasing after false values, worshipping false gods and have no idea how to enjoy life. It is much better to be poor and carefree, and learn how to enjoy your poverty. In the last few decades there have been three main phenomena which have recruited many converts to this idea.



1) It was probably James Burnham's book at the middle of this century which opened people's eyes to the managerial revolution and convinced us that power has slipped from the hands of proprietors into the hands of managers — from the hands of people who *had*, into the hands of people who *did*. The shareholders of a company were supreme on paper, but they were an amorphous and powerless horde without a unified voice while the general manager did as he pleased. The power was his — and so was the glory. When, from time to time, he ruined a company, the shareholders had to pick up the bills while he moved on to manage and ruin another company, at an increased salary. It was much better to be a poor general manager than a rich shareholder.

The managers took over everywhere. The rich aristocrats who ran Britain even as late as in Disraeli's time, receded into the background, and professional politicians — too clever by half- took over. The Trade Unions fell into the hands of a new kind of baron who in turn is now being threatened by a wild, clever and manipulating minority. In other words: the unions do not belong to their members; they too belong to managers.

The truth is that power has become much more interesting and exciting than sheer accumulated wealth. That is so in western societies

where everyone, or nearly everyone, can exist at a tolerable level. It makes a great difference whether you are hungry or well fed, but it does not really matter whether your belly is filled with smoked salmon or bangers and mash, so long as it is filled. The real difference is between having a motor car and not having a motor car, and not between having a Rolls and having a second-hand Mini. It makes a tremendous difference whether you stink or not, but only a small difference whether you are using an expensive French perfume or a cheap English one.

The hungry and stinking prowler cannot laugh at the well-fed and well-dressed man whose Rolls Royce sprays him with mud. But a well-fed, well-dressed and sweetsmelling poor man, who passes the Rolls in his third-hand Cortina, may laugh at anyone. And he does. From this point it was only a small step for the poor to laugh at the snobbery of the rich and establish the snobbery of the poor.



2) Another trait that has brought ridicule and contempt upon the upstart rich is that he cannot find his place in society. He always wants change. This is a truly basic difference between the upstart rich and the downstart poor. The downstart poor — the formerly well-to-do man who is sliding down the financial slope — will do his best to maintain his former style and will resist all change. The upstart rich *wants* to change. Not only does he want a bigger house in a better district and a larger and more expensive car; not only does he want to visit more expensive restaurants, more exclusive holiday resorts and hotels — and

mix with more and more distinguished, or at least richer and richer people. He *does* want all that, of course, but he also wants more fundamental changes. If he comes from the working class he wants to lose his common accent — but that is only one example, and not the most important. You would think that becoming rich has a satisfying effect and enables you to settle down. Not at all. You must start doing things you never wanted to do in the past. Aristocrats are invited onto Boards in the City and they try to give the impression of being tough businessmen; tough businessmen get rich, and try to look like landed gentry. Getting rich does not mean finding yourself; it means losing your former self. The upstart rich man hopes to lose his identity.

3) The most important reason for the decline of the prestige of the rich and the rise of the prestige of the poor is that the state itself has become poor. The splendid, glamorous, glittering state — which but yesterday ruled half the world — walks around with holes in its trousers, showing its naked behind. Every wage claim is answered with the protest: we can't afford it. No longer do we hear the old, impertinent, cry: "No, and shut up!" It has changed to: "Sorry, we can't afford it." Public expenditure must be cut and the Chancellor has become more parsimonious and penny-pinching than the meanest suburban housewife. Britain, once the epitome of glamour and grandeur, has not only lost its once undisputed lead, but has slipped out of the first eleven of the League of Rich Nations. And if she is slowly slipping back again it is not because she is getting richer but because some others are getting poorer still. There are vast private fortunes in this country, and those who are in work are still pretty well off. It is the *state* which is poor. The phrase about "public splendour and private squalor" is a thing of the past. Today it is the other way round. This is the era of private splendour and public squalor. (Royal occasions are exceptions. On royal weddings we would willingly spend our last pennies; besides, the show is good public relations.)

The first reaction to the poverty of the country was a silent and morose shock. It soon changed to acceptance and later into pride, and now into a new snobbery. If Britain is poor, then it is *chic* to be poor. If Britain, with her glorious past, is among the new poor, why not me? People started wearing their poverty in their buttonholes. Even rich

people started boasting about their poverty. Middle-class people were practising cockney accents. People whose fathers were solicitors in Birmingham lied and said their dads were miners in Durham. Fifty years ago no one would have uttered the words: "I can't afford it." Today it is a proud (and often untrue) boast.

Take writers as an example. In the last century they would confess to a certain literary ambition. They would freely admit that they were anxious to create something worthwhile, perhaps enduring; but under no circumstances would any writer admit that he had any financial considerations in mind. Words like "sales", "percentages", "commissions" etc were dirty words. Today the dirty words are "immortality", "literature", "poetic" and so on, and all authors take it for granted that they would do anything to "promote sales". They become clowns, they travel, they sign hundreds of copies (if they have a chance), they degrade themselves in all possible ways — and do not regard it as degrading because it is all in the interest of the one and only sacred matter: sales. And all this is not really because they are destitute, or because they are less vain about their achievements than they used to be. It is simply to emphasise how poor we are.

## How to be Middle-Glass



THE MIDDLE CLASS has been partly emulated and partly abused during the last few decades. There have been millions who wanted to achieve middle-class status, and almost as many (indeed, often the same people) who wanted to abolish the middle class altogether.

The two aims are not really contradictory. If everybody does become middle-class, the middle class will automatically be abolished. If everybody is in the middle, there is no middle. Complete success would mean complete failure.

The more the middle class — the bourgeoisie — was derided and despised and made the target of political attack, the higher it rose in prestige and snob-value.

The upper classes hardly exist any more: they have taken over, more or less, middle-class habits and virtues (or the middle class took over upper-class habits and virtues — it comes to the same). The former upper classes look pretty middle-middle-class to me nowadays, with the exception of the royal family which often gives me the impression of being lower-middle-class.

“We are all middle-class now”, was the boast twenty-five years ago. The tendency of becoming middle-class persists but the boast is dead: this is a desire to be achieved but not to acknowledge. In any case, we have a situation when millions want to become middle-class but do not know how. Here are a few hints.

1) The main plague in this country is still a man’s accent. (By the way, when I say *man* I also mean *woman*. When I say *he* I usually mean *she* too. This is no linguistic male chauvinist piggery, I fully support women in their struggle for equality, but resent clumsy and ugly ways of speaking. Chair-persons were not invented for me.) So, as I said, the main plague in this country is still a man’s accent. This immediate categorising does not exist in any other country of the world. Naturally, an educated person will express himself differently from an illiterate one all over the world, and this difference in speech often reflects difference in class — but not always. Landowners, on the whole, in

other countries speak the language of their peasants. And if an able working-class or peasant boy learns to be articulate, no one will be able to spot his background as soon as he opens his mouth — that is in German, French, Dutch, Polish, Thai and all other languages.

In England a man puts himself into a certain category as soon as he utters a sound. A person with a lower-class accent will often claim to be proud of it, all the same, they will do their best to get rid of it. A large number of Trade Union leaders are ridiculous in this way. These bulwarks of the working classes try to hide their natural way of speaking, dwell on certain vowels for half an hour or so until they get angry and then the East End a-s and i-s bubble up freely. Similarly, quite a lot of people manage to get rid of their country accent too, so long as they do not get angry or excited.

I know from personal experience how difficult it is to get rid of an accent. Not that I have tried terribly hard. Once, when my accent improved a tiny bit, a radio producer told me quite anxiously that I must not lose my Hungarian accent. I would not sound genuine and would become useless for the radio. The danger of really losing my accent has always been infinitesimal. As long as I can *write*, more or less, without a foreign accent, I am content.

A foreign accent has tremendous advantages over all other accents. It is classless. As soon as I open my mouth, people know that I was not born at Stoke Newington or Chipping Norton, but they have absolutely no way of knowing whether my father was a Court Chamberlain to Francis Joseph or a swineherd.

So this is my first advice to my pupils. *Cultivate a foreign accent.* If you were brought up with a Cockney or Geordie or whatever accent, and are unhappy about it, try to imitate Georg Solti or the late Professor Koch, the ornithologist. If your name is MacKilligan and you were born in Aberdeen, it may be difficult to explain where your Polish accent comes from — but, thank God, you still do not have to explain anything in this country. And it is easier to change your accent than you might think. I know a couple in Leeds, an Austrian husband who speaks English with a formidable German accent, and a Yorkshire-born wife. After years of happy and harmonious marriage that honest Yorkshire

lass is speaking with a German accent heavier than her husband's — without even trying.

2) How to dress. I have already mentioned the subject. Do not overdo it: shabby clothes, holes in your socks are aristocratic but, I am afraid, very hard to carry off. It is not enough to put on socks with holes; you must know how to wear them.

3) There is a great deal of snobbery involved in motor cars. Some naive people think that the more expensive the car the greater the glory. Far from it. A Rolls Royce is a vulgar, *nouveau riche* car while a Mini is perfectly all right.

Not to have a car at all is, once again, aiming too high. It is eccentric, even aristocratic, like not having television. (The thing is to have television but never switch it on.) However, not having a car has certain advantages. It will occur to no one that you do not have a car because you cannot afford it. People will think that you have lost your licence because of drunken driving, and drunken driving is revered and admired in our society.

4) Give the impression of being less well off than you are. The real big incomes are still middle-class incomes, but on the average, the working class is better off. Unemployment is a plague, of course, but even the Trade Unions do not care much about the unemployed. They are an excellent stick to beat the government with but they have no power. People in jobs are well off. A miner earns more than a budding barrister; a greengrocer makes more money than a bank clerk. Also, in working-class families more members are at work than in middle-class families. If you want to look middle-class, you must make yourself look poorer than you really are.

5) Politics, too, are more complicated than they used to be. Voting Conservative used to be a good ploy. The Tory Party was the bosses' party and if you voted Tory (or belonged to the Tory Party) you were one of the bosses. Not any more. Many ex-Labourites vote Tory for no snobbish reasons at all. Nowadays to be a Tory means nothing in class terms.

To belong to the Social Democrats is slightly better. They are fighting, not very successfully, against the image of being labelled as a middle-class debating society. By the way, never repeat those stupid jokes



about Roy Jenkins loving claret. He is not the only politician who enjoys an occasional drink, but one of the few who appreciates good wine and can tell an outstanding claret from plonk. You should be on Mr Jenkins's side, someone who loves good wine and knows good wine when he tastes it. Long live Roy Jenkins and claret!

The best idea, however, is to advocate the silliest extreme left views, the Trotskyite and Militant Tendency sort of ideas. They are an almost exclusively middle-class lot, not a true working man among them. To belong to these extreme left groups is a clear proof that you have nothing to do with the working class and do not care a damn about them. The movement often has a strong academic tinge. The whole thing is a purely middle-class aberration, and nothing short of a year under a Communist regime would cure these people. But *that* would certainly do the trick.

6) Gestures may expose many class secrets. Sometimes I watch elderly ladies who try to look young. They think of almost everything: they get their hairstyle right, and, of course, the colour of their hair; their dresses are impeccable, they talk and laugh like young girls — but they forget one thing: they always walk like elderly women. Similarly: one may have acquired the right accent, clothes and political attitude, but certain gestures can still give one away.

Few people nowadays put their knife in their mouth, and still fewer scratch their head with their fork. In any case, I am not speaking of such uncouth extremes. Some people, however, will gesticulate — just a little — with their knives and forks, and that, of course, is fatal. It is almost as bad as blowing your nose into your table napkin. No, worse: it is as bad as calling your table napkin a *serviette*. No worker will ever use a long cigarette holder, and no middle-class person will speak with a tiny cigarette stub hanging from his lip. Or take another example: some working-class people take a cigarette from their mouth in a way no middle-class person would ever do: they turn their palm towards their mouths, and use three fingers — index and middle on top, thumb below — and put the cigarette back in the same way. Such a gesture will tell one's life story even if one speaks like an Oxford don.

7) And do not be polite when driving a car. You just must not give way to your natural instincts, even if you are a really polite person by

nature. This used to be a middle-class habit but it has changed. On the road so-called gentleman have — on the whole — the manners of pigs, and the few remaining gentlemen are the lorry drivers. Not all but many. They are also some of the few people who have no desire to “pass” but remain unashamedly, nay proudly, working-class.

## The Karl Marx of the Bourgeoisie

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THAT'S ME. The Karl Marx of the bourgeoisie. Marxism has failed in many respects, Mikesism (*Mikes* to be pronounced in this exceptional case, to rhyme with *likes*) is to prevail.

*Vanitatum Vanitas* — Vanity of Vanities — is an old and destructive slogan. But, alas, only too often a precise description of human motives. Indeed, if we watch matters *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the viewpoint of eternity (please forgive me my slight attack of Latin, it will pass) all our efforts seem pretty futile. A few million years ago there were no human beings; a few million years hence there will be none. So why bother? But as we are not eternal, why should we observe matters from the point of view of eternity? Another version of the same attitude is this: when grave threats hang over our heads why bother with trivialities? This was a fashionable attitude during the fifties: the Bomb of Damocles was hanging from the skies and could have destroyed all of us at any moment, so — many felt — why bother about such ridiculous matters as the environment, football pools, the price of vegetables or the opening of new children's playgrounds? The danger of this way of thinking is twofold. Obviously, if there are no children, they will need no playgrounds. But as long as we are here, they need playgrounds, we eat vegetables and must spend our time somehow and many people know no better ways of spending their times than filling out football-pool coupons. Where would we be today if, for thirty years, we had not bothered to put our economy into order? We would be even worse off than we are today. Where would we be today without playgrounds, vegetables, football pools etc — in short: without having bothered about all those trivialities? Yes, the danger existed that the Bomb might explode; but there was also the danger that it might not — so we had to carry on with our humdrum lives.

The lesson humanity refuses to learn is that problems are unsolvable. *All* problems. Because the solution of a problem — although it may benefit millions and improve our lot — automatically and always creates new problems. The new problems, in turn, must be solved and

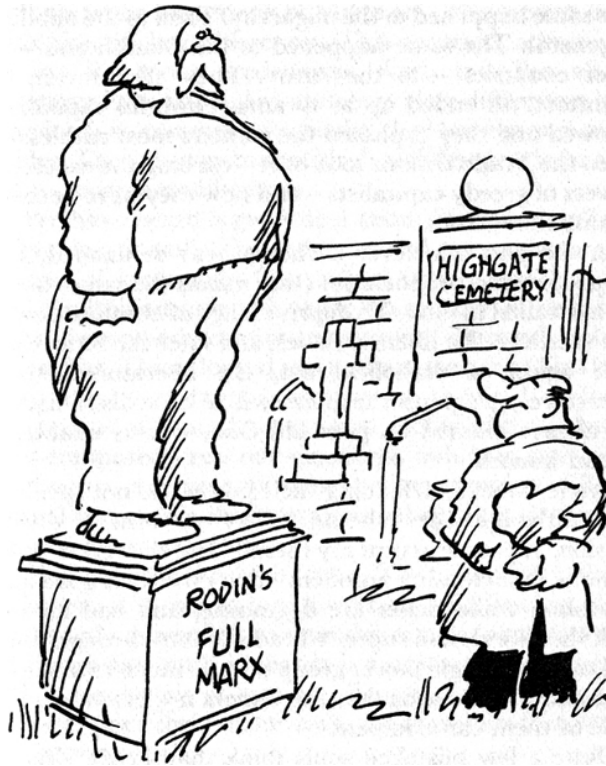
they often are; but *their* solution, too, creates new problems and so on *ad infinitum*. Sorry, I mean indefinitely.

This hopelessness of solutions is another example of *vanitatum vanitas*. It's all in vain. But this certainly does not mean, as it used to be fashionable to suggest, that we should not wrestle with our petty problems. Here we are, this is our world. If I am a grower of beans, I ought to go on growing beans whether there is a threat of nuclear war or not. Because if I do not produce beans, we might find ourselves without beans *and* without a nuclear war. Further, I cannot do anything about the Bomb but I can do a lot, or at least a little, about beans. In any case, Bomb or no Bomb: how am I to spend my time before the explosion?

And there is one further consideration: if I hurt my left toe very badly, this event will have little historical significance. But I shall try to do my best to stop or alleviate the pain. It's my toe, my pain and to hell with history.

*Vanitatum vanitas*? Certainly. But on that very superior, philosophical basis nothing is important. What are we in history? And what is history itself? What is "one-day-here-the-next-day-gone" humanity? Or even "one-million-years-here-the-other-million-gone" humanity? On a purely philosophical basis this is very sound. But our toe-aches force us to act and believe differently.

*Hic Rhodos, hic salta!* At one of the ancient Olympic Games at Athens a high jumper, who lost, tried to excuse himself by explaining that at home, in Rhodes, he could jump much higher. He was told: "Hic Rhodos, hic salta!" "Rhodes is here: jump here!"



The foregoing thoughts should serve as an apology for the fact that I am wasting my, and the reader's, time on a theory which might be out of date in a few thousand years. Marxism failed to solve certain problems; it did solve some others which — in the usual fashion — created new ones and soon became out of date.

At various moments of history various forces of society — of the “establishment” — were predominant. They would invariably grow too strong, become tyrannical and eventually have to be defeated. They often started as forces of justice and continued as liberators, before ending up as tyrants. Kings were badly needed as a unifying force to begin with, but then they started believing in their own divinity, thus becoming arrogant and despotic, and had to be either chased away or deprived of most of their powers. The same happened to the oligarchy. Then to the nobility in general. The same happened to the Church and — in other countries — to the Army. They all came in as liberators, all ended up as tyrants. Powerful capitalists followed and they exploited the workers most ruthlessly. Then the Trade Unions took over — curbing the excessive powers of greedy capitalists — and now they have become tyrants themselves.

In the past whenever a change was demanded, the supporters and beneficiaries (that means the same thing) always called in God. To deprive kings of absolute power was sacrilege. To liberate slaves, and later the serfs, was, once again, a diabolical act, the liberators setting themselves up against the divine will. All the ills of history are always blamed on poor old God, who is unable to defend himself.

Trade Unions, defending their power, do not speak of God although they should. They perform a divine mission. If people accept my thesis — and they seem to be doing so in increasing numbers — that poverty is good and ennobling while riches are degrading, and bad for the soul, then we should support Trade Unions through thick and thin. No single power group does so much to make us poor and miserable as they do. Others try, of course; but none of them can compete.

Quite a few mistaken souls think that Trade Unions have grown too big for their boots and should go the way kings, the nobility, the church and the capitalists have gone. In other words, they should survive but they should not be dominant in our lives. These people are victims of a fallacy. Trade Unions fulfil a divine mission, in fact two divine missions.

1) They see to it that we, as a nation, will become poor much more quickly than we could if we relied only on the recession and bad government.

2) They have also invented a much more original idea: *the exploitation of the rich by the poor.*

This is the first thesis of Mikesism. The second is the abolition of class differences. This occurred, admittedly, to my illustrious predecessor, Karl, too. But all his attempts have failed. In capitalism class differences have survived; in communist societies they have grown much wider. The only way to abolish class differences is for all of us to become middle-class.

We have heard a great deal about “levelling up” and “levelling down”. The public school system is surely a source of inequality. Our school system was bad and Shirley Williams made it worse. Her theory, in essence, is that if everybody cannot be properly educated, nobody should be. This is logical and perhaps even fair. This is the way to equality. And it is also the way to ruin. If we follow it, soon we will not have enough people who can handle our computers, run our electronic

industry, our courts and our government. We shall become a nation of Bums. Equal Bums. We shall not be equal to other nations but equal among ourselves.

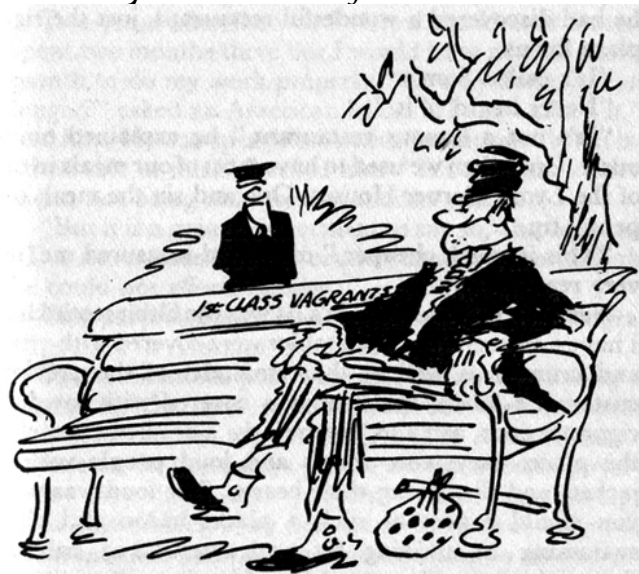
This is surely the wrong road. The road of Mikesism is different: it wishes to turn everybody middle-class. Mine is the only movement to state this aim in so many words, although the truth is that it is secretly shared by every other movement of our age. People want to own their homes, drive their motor cars, use their own free time in their own way.

To make middle-class morality prevail needs a certain amount of courage. You must be brave enough not to be uncouth among the uncouth; you must be brave enough not to be proud of being uneducated; you must be brave enough to wear decent and clean clothes, perhaps even — dare I say it? — a tie; you must go so far as not to use foul language; you must be brave enough to be courteous and you must face the derisive laughter of the crowd, should you offer your seat in a bus to a crippled and blind lady of ninety-two. You must be brave enough not to push, not to jump queues, not to elbow people aside, not to smoke cannabis even if everybody around you does, not to get drunk when all your friends do, not to admire drunken driving as an act of heroism; you must be brave enough to pay your bills, to treat all people — whether they are dukes or paupers — with courtesy and as your equals (never mind their rank or your own) ; you must be brave enough — and this is the most difficult of all — to face the howling hordes of your own people, whether they call you a blackleg, a union-basher, a nigger-lover, a traitor to your class (whichever class it may be), and follow the dictates of your own conscience. The overwhelming majority of those seemingly indomitable people who march under banners and shout slogans are pitiable cowards; the man who dares walk alone is the brave man.

By the time all this is achieved, we shall have become middle-class. Then rush to open a bank account. One of the great divides between classes is the bank account. The working class — perhaps rightly — do not believe in banks, they do not write out cheques and do not accept them. Those who aspire to a truly classless society must open bank accounts. Those who do have bank accounts — i.e. the established middle classes — should march proudly on. The future is not theirs but

they will have their fair share in it. They can serve as flag-bearers until the perfect Utopia of a “we are all middle-class now” society arrives. Until then, they should refuse to identify with the spoilt and degenerate rich, with their snobberies, yachts, farms, swimming pools in the garden, racing stables and Old Masters; but they should also turn away from the demonstrators, egg-throwers, pilferers, moonlighters, Trotskyites and the trolley-pushers who instruct surgeons which patients should be operated on and whose life should be put at peril.

All this put into a brief slogan: *Bourgeoisie of the World Unite! You have nothing to lose but your Overdrafts!*





## The New Poor



SOON AFTER I arrived in England before the War, in one of the periods when my salary from Hungary had failed to turn up, I was very short of money. A friend of mine, who stayed in the same boarding house, told me one day that he had discovered a wonderful restaurant, just the right place for us.

“It’s called Sam’s.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s not a famous restaurant,” he explained ominously. Until then we used to have most of our meals in one of the Lyons Corner Houses. One and six the meal, one penny tip.

“This is much cheaper,” my friend reassured me, not very reassuringly.

Next day we went to Sam’s. It was the filthiest stinkhole I have ever seen. The bare tables were covered with grime and crumbs as well as the remainder of the previous customer’s lunch; the floor was covered with sawdust, cigarette ends, ash and bacon rinds. The clients matched the place: they were rough and loud people without jackets and displaying their braces. The food was what you would expect at such a place: bacon and chips swimming in stinking fat and overcooked cabbage drowned in tepid water. My friend — always more interested in the quantity of food than in its quality — was delighted with his discovery. But I put my foot down and told him that the place was too awful for words.

“You are a snob,” he replied.

“I don’t mind a little dirt here and there,” I went on, “but to eat pure dirt — if there is such a thing — is too much.”

My friend was unconvinced:

“This is also for our education. We must face reality. We must accept the fact that the old, comfortable, middle-class days of Budapest are over. We are poor now, so we have to live as poor people do.”

“We cannot spend much money, I agree,” I argued. “But eating at Sam’s is just not on. This is a showing-off new-poor attitude.”

I was right; almost prophetic. The “new poor” became a commonplace figure of a subsequent period.

Two years after the war I visited the United States. I spent two months there but I would have needed another month to do my work properly. “So why don’t you stay longer?” asked an American friend. “I can’t afford it,” I told him. He was speechless with admiration. “What is so admirable in this?” I asked him. “It’s no great achievement, not being able to stay another month.”

“But it is a great achievement to say so,” he explained. “I’ve never heard in this country anyone admitting that he could not afford *anything*.”

That surprised me. What is — or at least was — a grave admission in America is a boast here.

The ostentatious poor were more numerous during the sixties, in the days of affluence, but they are pretty noticeable today too. Although they are different in character. In those days people simply affected poverty, today they flaunt their poverty, wear it aggressively in their buttonholes. Very well, we are poor. Any vulgar and dishonest fool can be rich; but we chose to be poor.

People keep boasting with things they do not have. Not having a television set is more of an intellectual boast than a financial — or should I say non-financial — one. Not having gadgets — from a lawn mower to an electric typewriter — is another source of pride. Not owning a car is, of course, the ultimate swagger, although it is more a sign of riches than of poverty. Only the rich can afford to be without a car today.

To be poor is right; to be poor is noble. It is better, more satisfactory, less worrying, and more human than being rich. But you must wear your poverty with dignified satisfaction and must not show off with it. Some people are less fortunate than we are; they are carrying the cross of riches for all of us. We must not laugh in their faces. Only behind their backs.

I must admit, all the same, that being rich has some advantages. Particularly for a humorist. Have you never noticed that a rich man’s joke is always funny?



## The Idle Poor



THE ERA of the Idle Rich is gone. The era of the Idle Poor has arrived. I have just heard that people have stopped queuing up for Rolls Royces, that much maligned (by me) car, that vulgar and ostentatious vehicle of Arab oil sheiks, advertising agents and pop stars.

Poverty carries no stigma any more; wealth does. There will always be, of course, a few incorrigible fools who show off their wealth — real or imaginary — but most people try to hide their riches.

Unemployment is a curse but carries no stigma either. It's not one's own fault. We have to distinguish between negative unemployment and positive unemployment.

The negative unemployed are the people who deserve our sympathy. They are the *real* poor who are not the subject of this treatise. The positive unemployed are a substantial minority who choose to be idle. They form the class of the Idle Poor. They may have diverse reasons for their choice. The two main reasons are: 1. They find that they are not worse off (indeed, sometimes better off) on the dole. 2. They are often intelligent people who know that humanity must train itself for idleness. Everybody speaks about this, everybody is fully aware of this with the single exception of the Trade Unions who go on fighting the battles of the thirties and speak of full employment. But full employment, as we knew it during the sixties, will never return. Prosperity will; full employment will not.

The most significant change in our attitudes — in addition to the change of attitudes towards richness and poverty — is to be found in our demands on the state. In one generation — perhaps in two — the nanny state has completely transformed us. We expect everything from the state: jobs, health-care, housing and all sorts of assistance in adversity. There is a huge army of bureaucrats whose duty is to look after us — to dole out social security payments or to look after our souls — and these people in order to secure their jobs, wrack their brains to find more things to do for us. (They also love denying our claims to show how powerful they are, but their main preoccupation is

to squander — well, to spend — the resources of the state.) This general attitude produces a Society of Babes, a society of people who expect to be looked after, people who are unable and unwilling to look after themselves. Initiative, the spirit of adventure, resourcefulness are on the decline. Lord Beveridge said something about all human beings having the right to be looked after by the state from the cradle to the grave. Good old times of modesty and restraint. Nowadays people expect to be looked after long before they are born (a large number of would-be embryos demand artificial insemination by the Health Service, in order to be born) and just listen to the rows some people make if their graves are not properly looked after at public expense.

The era of the Idle Poor coincides with the era of the Unemployed Babe. This fine state of affairs is being threatened. A new wave of prosperity is looming on the horizon, which will find us as unprepared as the recession did. There are not many signs of this coming prosperity, in spite of the repeated government forecasts, but — I warn everyone — it is on the way.

I must explain this.

A friend of mine, a psychotherapist, told me that she was listening to one of her patients who kept repeating that her relationship with her husband did not work. Her husband was a fine man; she herself was — needless to say — an even finer woman; but her tale of woe always ended in the refrain that the “relationship did not work”. I do not know what my psychotherapist friend told her patient but she certainly did tell me: “The ‘relationship’ became an independent force, almost a third person standing between her and her husband. They — the husband and herself- were innocent victims. What could they do if that nasty, lazy relationship refused to work?”

People often speak in the same vein about the “economy”. It does not work, either. I think the complaint about the economy is more justified than the complaint about the “relationship”. Surely, we could improve our lot marginally, we could alleviate some hardships here and there, but the real villain is “the economy”. We could work a little harder, no doubt, but even this would be futile as long as the economy refused to work. We must be all fed up hearing about monetarism and other isms, and even more fed up of listening to politicians who advocate the right

remedies in opposition, after mucking up all their chances when they were in power. They advocate old and discredited methods and people, amazingly, believe them. The truth is that *in a bad run* we must have either unemployment, or inflation, or a feeble currency, or very high interest rates — in other words we may get rid of one evil to introduce another and usually worse, one.



But all this changes when things are going well. And the end of recession is coming soon. It is not in sight yet but it is coming. What are the proofs of it? There are no other proofs except that everything comes to an end some time and that includes recessions.

My stepfather was a very busy doctor in Budapest, with a vast private practice. He was a devoted and caring man and quite a few patients swore that he was a miracle-healer. Once I asked him if he really was a miracle-healer, a wonder-doctor?

“Nonsense,” he replied. “I try my best, I can say that much with a good conscience. But, you see, one of two things happens to all sick people, whether they are treated by a doctor or not. The patient will either die or get better. There are a large number of people — among those who do not die — who rush from one doctor to another. They leave ten doctors in disgust and get better when in the care of the eleventh. They would get better even without any medical care at all, but they don’t know that. If I happen to be that eleventh doctor who looks after them when they get better, I am a miracle-healer; if I am the fifth or the eighth, then I am an incompetent fool like the rest.”

It is exactly the same with the economy. It will get better one day, with the help of — or in spite of — monetarism. The economy is a patient who cannot afford to die, so it will survive. If it survives it will improve. Whatever government will be in power at that crucial moment, will claim full credit; that government will be the miracle-healer, however incompetent it may be. And due credit *will* be given.

No cycle lasts forever, so that day is coming. And it will be a dangerous day. When the State ceases to be poor, the attraction of poverty will fade. That will be the time when the noble, idle poor must stand steadfast, must summon up their courage to continue despising riches, must really work at the enduring pleasures which come from *being* something, not from *having* something.



## Inflation



A FRIEND OF MINE picked up a 12½p stamp from the lawn at Hurlingham Club, examined it and noticed that it was unused.

“It must be my lucky day,” he remarked.

“Indeed,” I said. “It’s half a crown.”

We both agreed that when one speaks of “half a crown” it sounds like an awful lot of money. Soon we were talking of the good old days, of the era of the half-crown. I recalled that on my very first day in London I met a Hungarian Captain of the Hussars in my boarding house who, without much ado, borrowed half a crown from me. He told me to accompany him to the fishmonger’s where he bought a dozen oysters for the money. “A dozen oysters for half a crown!” I emphasised the point.

My friend was not impressed. His father, he told me, was born in 1882, so he was a young man at the turn of the century. In 1900 he used to go to a restaurant, eat a dozen oysters for sixpence, drink a glass of stout for 2d and then go to a music hall for a shilling. A wonderful evening, and he took home tenpence change from half a crown. (For younger readers to whom this is all double-Dutch, I should explain that the whole evening, oysters, stout and music hall, cost less than 9p).

To a man who lived in London in the days of the Napoleonic wars, this would probably have looked like mad extravagance. In those days, I am sure, you could travel to Manchester and back for ninepence. This is an endless story and, no doubt, will remain an endless story.





A hundred years from now, people will tell nostalgic tales about the cheapness of living in the nineteen-eighties. “Believe it or not, in 1983 you could get quite a good dinner for £25...” — “In those days people were complaining — actually complaining! — when their quarterly electricity bill went up to £600.”

Inflation is a menace and economists are helpless to deal with it. It is only the poor who know how to deal with inflation. There is only one way of preserving the value of money: *spend it*.

Money spent in an intelligent and enjoyable way cannot lose its value. A pleasant evening spent in the company of a charming companion of the opposite sex, or with witty, amusing and agreeable friends, enjoying good conversation, good food and good wine, is something truly valuable and no economic disaster can diminish its value, ever. A good book, an exciting concert, a pleasurable trip, the beauty of a landscape, a good laugh or a good cry are all the true values of life — completely unaffected by inflation.

And here the poor (in my sense of the word) score, once again, over the rich. You can spend a moderate income on such pleasures; you cannot spend a vast fortune. The rich can buy more of these pleasures than I can (whether they can enjoy them to the same extent is another question) but they will still be left with lots and lots of cash, shares,

investments or whatever rich people have to worry about — and all these things will be exposed to the ravages of inflation.

One evening after dinner, when I was sitting in the Garrick with a friend, a Chancery judge, we were approached by a man I didn't know. "He is X" — the judge mentioned his name — "the Official Receiver." Luckily I do not know much about Official Receivers, but I know enough to realise that *the* Official Receiver is the boss of all of them, and I shuddered. I hoped that he would not come to join us. But he did. And a very pleasant and amusing gentleman he turned out to be, although he started our chat rather frighteningly.

"I have just come from the annual dinner of Official Receivers," he said. I went pale. I imagined a huge room full of Official Receivers, hundreds of them. "And I heard a story which I found pretty amusing. It was told by one of my colleagues."

My blood froze. I could imagine a story told by an Official Receiver. But I was wrong again. He repeated the story.

"There was a bankrupt in front of my colleague who had inherited £80,000. Two years later he was bankrupt. The Receiver, of course, had to ask him how he spent the money. He said he didn't know."



“You know perfectly well. Just think.”

The man thought and replied: “I lost £20,000 on horses.”

“That leaves you with £60,000.”

The man went on thinking. “I spent £20,000 on drinks. Parties and that sort of thing.”

“That still leaves you with £40,000.”

A lot of further heart-searching: “£20,000 I spent on women.”

“Very well. And the last £20,000?”

He wracked his brain but to no avail. In the end he said: “I have no idea. I must have wasted the last £20,000.” At the time I thought this was a good anecdote. Today I know it is sound economic theory.

To underline all this I must tell a story which I heard from a friend who, in turn, was a friend of the late Charles Clore, the multi-millionaire. Clore was talking about the day when the Chinese Communists occupied Shanghai, at the end of the forties. On that day they confiscated forty million pounds from one of the Rothschilds.

“Forty million pounds gone in one day. In one hour. In one minute,” Clore piled it on. “One moment he had forty million pounds, the next it was all gone.”

His listeners remained silent. Then Clore added: “And, mind you, that happened at a time when forty million pounds was still money.”

## Last Word



MARK TWAIN was a great writer and a great humorist. He said the last word on many problems. On poverty he wrote: “Honest poverty is a gem that even a king might be proud to call his own, but I wish to sell out.”

For once I disagree with him. I refuse to sell out. Although if I get a *really* tempting offer....

