

THE MAKING OF BEGGARS AND THIEVES

Sir Thomas More (1478–1535)

1516

But let us consider those things that chance daily before our eyes. First, there is a great number of gentlemen, which cannot be content to live idle by themselves, like drones, of that which others have laboured for; their tenants I mean, whom they poll and shave to the quick, by raising their rents (for this only point of frugality do they use, men else through their lavish and prodigal spending likely to bring them to very beggary). These gentlemen, I say, do not only live in idleness themselves, but also carry about with them at their tails a great flock or train of idle and loitering serving men, which never learned any craft whereby to get their livings. These men, as soon as their master is dead or be sick themselves, be incontinent thrust out of doors. For gentlemen had rather keep idle persons than sick men, and many times the dead man's heir is not able to maintain so great a house and keep so many serving men as his father did.

Then in the mean season they that be thus destitute of service, either starve for hunger, or manfully play the thieves. For what would you have them to do? When they have wandered abroad so long, until they have worn threadbare their apparel, and also impaired their health, these gentlemen, because of their pale and sickly faces, and patched coats, will not take them into service. And husbandmen dare not set them a work, knowing well enough that he is nothing meet to do true and faithful service to a poor man with a spade and a mattock for small wages and hard fare, which being daintily and tenderly pampered up in idleness and pleasure, was wont with a sword and buckler by his side to strut through the street with a bragging look, and to think himself too good to be any man's mate. Nay, by Saint Mary, Sir (quod the lawyer), not so.

For this kind of men must we make most of. For in them as men of stouter stomachs, bolder spirits, and manlier courages than handicraftsmen and plowmen be, does consist the whole power, strength, and puissance of our army, when we must fight in battle. Forsooth, Sir, as well you might say (quod I) that for war's sake you must cherish thieves. For surely you shall never lack thieves while you have them. No, nor thieves be not the most false and faint-hearted soldiers, nor soldiers be not the cowardliest thieves; so well these two crafts agree together. But this fault, though it be much used among you, yet is it not peculiar to you only, but common also to most nations. Yet France, besides this, is troubled and infected with a much sorer plague. The whole realm is filled and besieged with hired soldiers in peacetime (if that be peace) which be brought in under the same colour and pretence, that have persuaded you to keep these idle serving men. For these wise fools and very archdolts thought the wealth of the whole country herein to consist, if there were ever in a readiness a strong and sure garrison, specially of old practised soldiers, for they put no trust at all in men unexercised. And therefore they must be forced to seek for war, to the end they may ever have practised soldiers and cunning manslayers, lest that (as it is prettily said of Sallust) their hands through idleness or lack of exercise should wax dull; but how pernicious and pestilent a thing it is to maintain such beasts the Frenchmen by their own harms have learnt. For not only the kingdom but also their fields and cities by divers occasions have been over-run and destroyed by their own armies before hand had in a readiness. Now how unnecessary a thing this is, hereby it may appear that the French soldiers, which from their youth have been practised and inured in feats of arms, do not crack nor advance themselves to have very often got the upper hand and mastery of your new made and un-practised soldiers. But in this point I will not use many words, lest perchance I may seem to flatter you.

Yet this is not only the necessary cause of stealing. There is another, which, as I suppose, is proper and peculiar to you Englishmen alone. Your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame, and so small eaters, now, as I hear say, be become so great devourers and so wild that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves. They consume, destroy, and devour whole fields, houses, and cities. For look in what parts of the realm do grow the finest and therefore dearest wool, these noblemen and gentlemen, yea, and certain abbots, holy men no doubt, not contenting themselves with the yearly revenues and profits, that were wont to grow to their forefathers and

predecessors of their lands, nor being content that they live in rest and pleasure nothing profiting, yea, much annoying the weal public, leave no ground for tillage, they enclose all into pastures; they throw down houses; they pluck down towns, and leave nothing standing, but only the church to be made a sheep house. And as though you lost no small quantity of ground by forests, chases, lands, and parks, those good holy men turn all dwelling places and all glebe land into desolation and wilderness.

Therefore that one covetous and insatiable cormorant may compass about and enclose many thousand acres of ground together within one pale or hedge, the husbandmen be thrust out of their own, or else either by coveyn and fraud or by violent oppression they be put besides it, or by wrongs and injuries they be so wearied that they be compelled to sell all; by one means therefore or by other, either by hook or crook they must needs depart away, poor, silly, wretched souls, men, women, husbands, wives, fatherless children, widows, woeful mothers, with their young babes, and their whole household small in substance and much in number, as husbandry requires many hands. Away they trudge, I say, out of their known and accustomed houses, finding no place to rest in. All their household stuff, which is very little worth, though it might well abide the sale; yet being suddenly thrust out, they be constrained to sell it for a thing of naught.

And when they have wandered abroad till that be spent, what can they else do but steal, and then justly be hanged, or else go about a begging. And yet then also they be cast in prison as vagabonds, because they go about and work not; whom no man will set at work, though they never so willingly proffer themselves thereto. For one shepherd or herdsman is enough to eat up that ground with cattle, to the occupying whereof about husbandry many hands were requisite. And this is also the cause why victuals be now in many places dearer. Yea, besides this the price of wool is so risen, that poor folks, which were wont to work it and make cloth thereof, be now able to buy none at all. And by this means very many be forced to forsake work, and to give themselves to idleness. For after that so much ground was enclosed for pasture, an infinite number of sheep died from the rot, such vengeance God took of their inordinate, unsatiable covetousness, sending among the sheep that pestiferous murrain, which much more justly should have fallen on the sheep masters own heads.

And though the number of sheep increase never so fast, yet the price falls not one mite, for there be so few sellers. For they be almost all come into a few rich men's hands, whom no need forces to sell before they lust, they lust not before they may sell as dear as they lust. Now the same cause brings in like dearth of the other kinds of cattle, yea and that so much the more, because that after farms plucked down and husbandry decayed, there is no man that passes for the breeding of young store. For these men bring not up the young of great cattle as they do lambs. But first they buy them abroad very cheap, and afterward, when they be fatted in their pastures, they sell them again exceeding dear. And therefore, I suppose, the whole incommodity hereof is not yet felt. For yet they make dearth only in those places where they sell. But when they shall fetch them away from thence where they be bred faster than they can be brought up; then shall there also be felt great dearth, store beginning then to fail, when the ware is bought. Thus the unreasonable covetousness of a few have turned that thing to the utter undoing of your land, in the which thing the chief felicity of your realm did consist. For this great dearth of victuals causes men to keep as little houses and as small hospitality as they possible may, and to put away their servants. Whither, I pray you, but a begging; or else (which these gentle bloods and stout stomachs will sooner set their minds unto) a stealing?