

FIREWORKS AND COWRIE SHELLS (A FABLE)

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RECENT discoveries in the ruins of several of the great cities of Capitalistia—that huge island or sub-continent which a thousand years or more ago maintained for many generations a highly civilized but self-contained life of its own while its neighbours were immersed in barbarism—have shed a flood of light upon the sudden breakdown of its economic system, following an event known to its chroniclers as the Great Slump, and the rapid subjugation of most of its territory by the Leninians under the theocratic government of the Priests of Marx.

It has long been vaguely surmised—indeed the historians of Capitalistia itself were the first to suggest—that there was some connection between the Great Slump and the extraordinary phenomenon which preceded it by several years and was known as the Four Years Fireworks Mania. But archaeology has now given us the key to the whole tragic story. From the fragmentary indications afforded by the account-books of bankers, the price-lists of the great municipal stores, the wage agreements of the trade unions and scores of other records unearthed in the last year or two, we can piece together the history of those closing years with no less clearness, and with far more certainty, than if they had been recorded for us in detail by a contemporary writer with insight enough to tell what was going on. But the most astounding thing in the whole narrative is just this incredible fact, that nobody in Capitalistia seems to have had the slightest comprehension of what was going on, or whither it was leading. We, at this immense distance of time, can easily see that fireworks and cowrie shells were the joint causes of their doom; but the writers of that time had only a vague feeling that doom was impending, and no perception whatever of the causes that were hastening it on. Fireworks, which they felt to be the original cause of their sufferings, they had suppressed, by an agreement among their various states that they should never again be used as instruments of state policy. Cowrie shells they had always had, and apparently they thought that they must always have them. Yet it was cowrie shells, in the peculiar situation resulting from the fireworks mania, that brought about the whole disaster.

The population of Capitalistia, as has long been known, was divided into a large number of separate states of moderate size and possessing a marked degree of independence. Their transport facilities, towards the end of their period, became excellent, and a great deal of commerce was carried on between the states, each of which had its own currency and credit system based upon the cowrie shells to which I have referred. Balances between states were constantly being settled in cowrie shells, and the supply and movement of these charming little reminders of a long deceased race of marine polyps was watched with the liveliest interest. The supply was maintained only by intense industry on the part of the three or four states which had cowrie beds on their coasts, and which had hardly any labour to spare for the production of any other article.

At the height of Capitalistia's prosperity, and not improbably on account of that prosperity itself, there occurred that extraordinary phenomenon known to archaeologists and historians as the Fireworks Mania. Whether it was due to some sudden and important improvement in the art of pyrotechny, or to the increasing wealth and consequently greater capacity for luxury of the Capitalistians, we shall probably never know. But we do know that a passionate addiction to fireworks, originating either in the state of Wilhelmia or in that of Nickoslav, spread with extraordinary rapidity from one end of the continent to the other. Our uncertainty as to the exact place of origin of the disease (for disease it undoubtedly was) is due to the fact that, as soon as its disastrous character became apparent, the authorities of each state set to work to destroy all evidence which would connect its origin with their own territory, and to fabricate evidence which would convict some neighbour of the crime.

The victims of this mania, and eventually there was practically nobody left exempt, were possessed with an uncontrollable desire to see fireworks. At first they were content with compelling their own municipal authorities to put on a fireworks show every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday night. Then they began going to other states where there were reported to be bigger and better fireworks on Wednesday and Friday. At the climax of the mania, whole populations were moving about Capitalistia in search of the city which would give them the best fireworks; and every state on the continent had pledged its resources for years to come in order to fill the nightly sky with fireworks more brilliant and fascinating than those of any rival state, and thus to keep its own people from leaving it for other states, and at the same time strengthen itself by luring in large numbers of strangers.

Counting from the earliest and most primitive efforts of one state to out-rocket another, this incredible competition lasted for more than four years, and is computed to have consumed goods and labour to an extent that would have enabled the whole of Capitalistia to live in luxury without a hand's turn of work not for four years but for something like forty. The manufacture of fireworks requires a very diversified assortment of chemicals, some of which were to be found in quantity only in the territory of one or two of the states. At the close of the Fireworks Mania, there was only one state which was not heavily indebted for chemicals and other supplies to its neighbours; and this state possessed the promises-to-pay of various other states of Capitalistia to the value of about seven times as many cowrie shells as there were in the whole continent. It is obvious that if immediate payment of this debt had been insisted upon by Hooveria, the creditor state, the other states would have had to go into bankruptcy and their citizens to become slaves of the Hooverians; but this painful proceeding was avoided by the spreading out of the task of payment over a large number of years. It was the theory of the debtors that if they handed over to the Hooverians all the cowrie shells in their possession at the end of each year, they would be able to get them back again, in exchange for goods of their own production, in time to return them to Hooveria again a year later as the next instalment of their debt.

But this theory was confined to the debtors. What theory the Hooverians had will probably never be known, but it cannot have been anything like the theory of the debtors, for instead of preparing to facilitate the exchange of the cowrie shells in their possession for goods in the possession of their debtors they immediately proceeded to impose even higher market dues upon every article (except cowrie shells) brought into their territory from outside, making it practically impossible for the other states to get back their cowrie shells on any terms whatever. For a few years the debtor states managed by superhuman efforts to grub up enough cowrie shells from various hiding places to meet most of their immediate obligations, and the Hooverians obligingly lent some of their own cowrie shells (naturally at fairly high rates) to those states which would otherwise have completely failed to make their payments.

But after a few years it began to dawn on the debtor states that they had practically no cowrie shells with which to carry on their own domestic business; and not only that, but that there was no prospect of their ever having any cowrie shells for several generations to come, since the whole Capitalistian stock of that charming but (except for currency purposes), entirely useless

article would have to be turned over to the Hooverians as fast as it got away from them. When this was seen to be the fact, it produced an unspeakable pride and avarice in the possessors of the few shells which were still in circulation outside of Hooveria, and a corresponding humility and depression of spirits in the possessors of everything else; so that the owners of shells began to demand enormous quantities of foodstuffs and clothing and building materials and fuel in exchange for a single cowrie shell, and the producers of these commodities, all of whom owed huge quantities of cowrie shells to their creditors or their Governments, were compelled to accept what was offered or go bankrupt, not to mention the third possibility of doing both.

Thus began that which the Capitalist historians and economists, noting only the visible phenomenon and not its hidden causes, proceeded to name the Great Slump. Like too many economists and historians in other ages, they seem to have supposed that having given it a name they had also given it a complete and adequate explanation, and they concerned themselves no more about it, turning over that task to the owners and workers of the bankrupt farms and factories and mines and industries. These persons had ample time for thought and plenty to think about, but lacked that regular food supply and freedom from worry which are essential if thinking is to be an entirely calm and purely intellectual process. In the language of a French commentator, their situation gave them furiously to think; and it is not surprising that some of them began to think somewhat furiously.

In the meantime the state of Hooveria had far more cowrie shells than it had ever had before in its history, and it might have been supposed that the relations between the owners of cowrie shells and the owners of other kinds of goods would have shown the opposite tendency to that which we have seen developing in the de-cowried states. And for a very short time such was indeed the case. But alas! the industries of Hooveria had long been organized on a scale adequate for supplying with their products the needs not only of the Hooverians but also of great numbers of other Capitalistians; and now that these other Capitalistians no longer had any cowrie shells with which to purchase Hooverian products, there could be no other purchasers than the Hooverians. The Hooverians tried hard to learn to consume enough of one another's products to keep one another busy, but it simply could not be done. They could not learn to wear twice as many of the garments which they fabricated from their trees, nor to eat twice as much of the wheaten flour and the dog meat ("hot dogs" appear from contempor-

ary references to have been their favourite diet) which they raised on their enormous "ranches". Thus, although the banks and the treasury were bursting with cowrie shells so that great armies of men had to be hired to guard them, the price in cowries of wheaten flour and hot dogs went down and down, and still there was not enough demand for them to keep the makers busy. And the growers of wheat could not buy hot dogs because nobody would buy their wheat, and the makers of hot dogs could not buy wheat because nobody would buy their hot dogs; and that was that.

The Great Slump therefore soon extended to Hooveria as effectively as to every other part of Capitalistia, and was followed by the usual vigorous outburst of furious thinking. Billions of cowrie shells lay inactive in the great vaults, and their owners would not purchase any more hot dogs or wheat flour or tree cloth for themselves because they had all they wanted already, and would not lend the shells to anybody else to buy them with because they feared that prices were going to go still lower. Which, for that matter, they were.

The rest of the story is clear enough. The Priests of Marx, authors and propagators of a new religion, whose teachings included the foolishness of cowrie shells and the wickedness of all economic systems based upon their use, sent their missionaries into every part of Capitalistia, where they made converts in considerable numbers among the furious thinkers in every state—aided therein not a little by the strong tendency of the adherents of the cowrie religions to make martyrs of any of these missionaries that they could lay hands on. One after another, several of the Capitalistian states, finding it difficult and unsatisfactory to go on worshipping cowrie shells when one has not got any, decided to go over to the religion of the Leninians, whose first teaching was that debts in cowrie shells should never be paid. These states naturally repudiated their debts to Hooveria and indeed to everybody else, and adopted—or accepted—a policy of non-intercourse with all other parts of the world except those which had rid themselves of the cowrie incubus. In taking this step they do not appear to have been always actuated by any convinced enthusiasm for the main doctrines of the Priests of Marx, which included the immediate execution of all persons found in possession of a cowrie shell or any other article capable of being used as a personal possession. Some of them indeed endeavoured to mitigate the harshness of these doctrines within their own borders; but they were promptly informed that communion with other Leninian countries was conditional upon complete acceptance of the priestly doctrine in its utmost

rigour. As they had to trade with somebody, and could no longer trade with the cowrie states, they naturally conformed.

That the cowrie shell system survived at all in any part of Capitalistia seems to have been due to a curious and apparently accidental development. The Priests of Marx, finding it impossible to overthrow the Government of Hooveria from within, and not quite daring to attack it from without, very unwisely proceeded to declare war against certain of the less powerful Capitalistian states which still recognized their debts to Hooveria and adhered to the cowrie faith. In order to prevent the conquest of these states by the Leninians, the Government of Hooveria had to come to their rescue in great force; and long before the resultant general war had come to an end, the Hooverians had not only had to remit all the debts due to them from the other cowrie shell states, but had themselves incurred an enormous debt to one of these states which happened to be situated where the Leninians could not get at it, and which possessed a large supply of the most important chemical used in the conflict.

This fortunate state, together with Hooveria and three or four more, managed to preserve its independence and its adherence to the cowrie faith throughout a prolonged and frightful struggle in which the rest of the Capitalistian countries were converted to the religion of the Priests of Marx. Had the cowrie states continued to quarrel among themselves as to the amounts which they owed one another for their mutual deliverance from the common foe, there is no doubt that they too would speedily have been conquered by the Leninians in another war. But luckily the state which now possessed all the cowrie shells of Capitalistia, together with the promises of Hooveria and its sister states to pay it eleven times as many more, had at its head a statesman of considerable penetration and wisdom, to whom its people deferred with the respect due to those qualities. It appeared to him that cowrie shells, while probably excellent as regulators of the ordinary month-to-month commerce between individuals and communities, were entirely unsuited for the effecting of gigantic inter-state transactions on a scale about a thousand times as large as ordinary business, and requiring scores of years for their settlement. He therefore wrote off all the debts due to his country from the remaining cowrie shell states, and accepted in full settlement thereof the erection by each of those states of a great monument in its own territory, bearing the figures of several dead soldiers in the uniforms of the various allied states, and the inscription: "These lent and asked not again."