

**PLOUGHSHARE AND  
PRUNING-HOOK;  
TEN LECTURES ON  
SOCIAL SUBJECTS**

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Ploughshare and pruning-hook; ten lectures on social subjects by Laurence Housman

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**LAURENCE HOUSMAN**

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# PLOUGHSHARE AND PRUNING-HOOK

*Ten Lectures on Social Subjects*

BY  
LAURENCE HOUSMAN

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## PREFACE

THESE papers, originally given as lectures, make no pretence to the solution of the social or political problems with which they are concerned. They indicate rather a certain standpoint or attitude of mind from which these and like questions may be viewed, one which may find acceptance with only a few of my readers. Even those who are friendly may consider it too idealistic ; those who are adverse will employ other and harder terms.

With regard to that standpoint, while not wishing to avert criticism, I would like to secure understanding ; and if a few words of general application can make that more possible it may be well to offer them here.

Whether these lectures were primarily intended for the pulpit or the platform it would be hard to say. Most of them have been given in both places : and their drawback to some who heard them in the former was (I have been told) their occasional tendency to make the congregation laugh. That in itself is no special recommendation ; it takes so much less to make a congregation laugh than an audience. Between the pulpit and the platform there is bound to be a difference ; even the fact that the preacher is normally immune from interjection or debate tends to give to his statements a complacency which



is not always intellectually justified. And I remember well that two of these lectures, after having been accepted in a church with only momentary breaches of decorum, aroused elsewhere a storm of criticism and rebuke which taught me, if I did not know it before, that a preacher occupies a very privileged position, and can turn a church, if he chooses, into a place of licence which elsewhere will not be accorded him.

But there is one point of difference between the pulpit and the platform, between the exposition of religion and politics, which I have never been able to understand. After all, in both cases, you are dealing with and making your appeal to human nature; you may be inciting it to virtue, you may be exposing its imperfections and its faults. Why is it, then, that in the religious appeal "conversion"—change of heart—stands for almost everything, whilst on the political platform it is hardly reckoned with? It is so much easier and safer to tell a congregation that they are "miserable sinners," and even to get them (perhaps conventionally) to say it of themselves, than to tell it, or to extract a like confession from a political audience. In a church we allow ourselves to be taken to task for "hardness of heart and contempt of God's word and commandments"; at a political meeting it is only our opponents whom we so take to task, while of ourselves and our party we have nothing but praise. It is on these lines that

a general election is run—revivalist meetings are held throughout the country to denounce, not our own sins, but the sins of others. Is it any wonder that it does not produce honest results ?

Having said this, I have given the main standpoint of the papers that follow. I do not believe that we can get home to our political and social problems without self-accusation going quite as deep as anything we say of ourselves in church or chapel—or without making the application very direct and personal. There is no institution in our midst, religious or secular, which does not stand quite as much in need of conversion, change of heart, as do the individuals for whose benefit or disciplinary treatment it is run. Our schools, prisons, law courts, State institutions, ministries, diplomacies—all those things on which we most pride ourselves—are just as liable, perhaps more liable, to hardness of heart and contempt of God's word and commandments as we ourselves, for they are all part of us. It is, indeed, one of our social devices to get rid of our consciences by making them institutional. There is a certain class of mind which thinks that if it has established legality it has established a right over conscience—that if it has established order it has established virtue. It has very often established quite the contrary—not virtue but a State-regulation of vice ; for if we can turn the hardness of our hearts into a State-regulation, there we have

vice enthroned; and the callousness of the individual is enlarged and becomes a national callousness, all the more difficult to get rid of, because it has become identified with law and authority.

A very good (or bad) example of this was provided by the conduct of the Bishops in the House of Lords a few years ago, when, to provide the Government with a short cut out of its difficulties in dealing with political prisoners (mainly caused by its refusal to treat them as political prisoners) they allowed the rules of the House to be suspended for the passing through all its stages in twenty-four hours of the "Cat and Mouse Act." Before long its operations horrified them, and they signed (or some of them did) letters and memorials of protest to the Government, asking for those operations to be stopped. But not one of them would make a motion in the House of Lords for the suspension or repeal of that Act for which, in so special a way, they had made themselves responsible. By allowing it to become law they had passed on the responsibility to others; and being thus quit of it, the last thing probably that occurred to any of them was that they themselves needed "a change of heart" in order to recover moral integrity, or even political honesty.

And so, in these pages, law and authority are just as much questioned as any other of our social features, on the direct assumption that like produces like, and that a form of