

High Cost of Living

ROSE HENDERSON.

Mr. J. A. Beaudry, Treasurer of the Dominion Retail Merchants' Association, takes issue with an article of mine appearing in the March number of the Canadian Municipal Journal, and challenges me to show some one responsible for manipulating the markets and raising food prices. I accept the challenge, but I shall relieve Mr. Beaudry's mind at once by assuring him that I am not going to point out any one individual as responsible for the high prices of food stuffs; this the Government itself, aided by the law, and all its power, has found difficult. How futile, therefore, would be my attempt, although the other day I met a man who told me that he had cleared \$500 on potatoes during that month, and smilingly said that if he didn't some one else would. Business is business, and as long as this game lasts, "We'll be there."

This is the curse and crux of the whole matter, the important duty of supplying the necessities of life to the people is looked upon as a "game," an opportunity for some individuals to make money out of the suffering sweat and tears of men, women and innocent, helpless children. Of what benefit would it be if this individual was brought before the courts and asked to give an account of his commercial transactions? The question is a social and international one, and there is no law in this country at present, that would bring an individual, found guilty, to justice, such as now exists in Great Britain. The individual trader is not apart from the Stock Exchange, the bank which loans him the money, short on time, and long on interest; the railway which hauls the product; the wholesaler which buys; the retailer which sells; and the great, unthinking ass—the dear public which consumes. We are one and all bound up in the social tangle, and cannot, if we would extricate ourselves individually. Take as an illustration the railways. We cannot point to any one person as the owner of this or that railway. Yet we know that a group of people control a system of railways, steamships, hotels, and other industrial enterprises, incidentally for the accommodation of the public—primarily because they are a source of profitable investment. We know, too, that if the dividends flowing into the pockets of the shareholders were diverted to the running expenses of these public necessities, the people would travel cheaper, food would be hauled cheaper, wages would be higher, and the standard of living of thousands thereby raised. The individual shareholders of these enterprises are not to be blamed. Certainly not.

Business is business, and so long as business is run for the profit of the individual, and not for the sake of life and happiness it is his or her right to take all the trade will allow.

Mr. Beaudry says, "I know of no combines that are raising the price of food stuffs and I wish Mrs. Henderson would name those she knows." I will with pleasure. Quote from the press—

Ottawa press despatches intimate that there is a possibility of Government interference with the methods whereby the B. C. Sugar Refinery operates, and controls with an iron hand the price of the commodity in which it deals.

The Ottawa advices intimate that Mr. H. O'Connor, K.C., the Dominion Cost of Living Commissioner, intends to take action against this concern on the charge of criminal conspiracy. The grounds of action are said to be the admitted practice of the sugar refinery in giving certain discounts to jobbers and wholesalers who maintain the list prices for sugar fixed by the concern. The jobbers also agreeing not to handle sugar from any other refinery, but also to sell only on terms of credit dictated by their refinery. "This looks like a combine to fix prices and to maintain them at all cost. Mr. B. T. Rogers, the Sugar King, in an interview, declared "that his action was perfectly legal, and sanctioned by the courts." He evidently neglected to interview the Government, as Ottawa despatches note that at the instance of the authorities, an eastern hat wholesalers had to send out some six hundred letters to his customers notifying them that they were not compelled to regard a trade agreement covering the price at which the hats were to be offered. In referring to sugar monopoly in B. C., the Free Economist on Feb. 23 reports:

"The request of the Ottawa authorities for permission to prosecute the B. C. Sugar Refinery for "criminally con-

spiring with wholesalers and jobbers for the maintenance of the price of sugar," has been granted by the Attorney General of British Columbia. The Nelson Board of Trade forwarded a petition to Ottawa asking for a commission to be appointed to take prompt action in the interests of the public. The investigations and findings of the merchants of Nelson make an interesting contribution to the study of this subject. They discovered that by the fixing of prices, granulated sugar selling in Vancouver at \$7.44 per 100 lbs., was being sold at Calgary at \$7.55, and this after paying a 75 cent freight rate, and at Regina, with the same freight rate for \$7.74. B. C. sugar was selling in Winnipeg at the jobbers' price of \$7.05, which, after deducting the freight rate of 69 cents, would mean \$6.36 net, or \$1.68 less than the jobbers' price in Vancouver..

The high prices of food cannot be attributed entirely to shortage of labor or cars, nor yet the war. Before the war, prices were continually ascending, in spite of the fact that there were thousands of jobbers' men looking for work, and we were not told of any shortage of cars. It is also useless to ascribe the trouble to the extravagances of the masses; we all know that the profits of manufacturers of boots, cloth, fabrics, as well as the necessities of life are enormous, while wages have not kept pace in proportion. No doubt there is much waste in the homes of thousands of the middle class and rich, but there is precious little in the homes of the masses, for the very good reason they have not got the money to buy the food to waste. If there was waste in the homes of the working people to amount to anything to-day, they couldn't live. Already they are obliged to forego the absolute essentials. Potatoes, onions, butter, meat, eggs, and many of the staples are beyond the pockets of many middle class people, much less the poor.

Mr. Beaudry quotes Mr. D. H. Houston, U. S. Secretary of Agriculture, as follows:

"The experts of the department report to me that studies made by them point to an annual waste of about \$700,000,000. These experts assert that food waste in households results in large measure from bad cooking, and an over-abundant supply." And Mr. Beaudry makes the further comment that what is true of the United States homes is also true of Canadian homes."

No one realizes this more than women themselves, 50 per cent. or more children on this continent die before they reach their fifth year through ignorant mothers. Why do those good men who control our schools not introduce into the curriculum the teaching of subjects which will fit girls for home making and motherhood. If the women need to be taught efficient housekeeping, men need to be taught efficient nation keeping. Millions of pounds of food products are yearly destroyed through careless handling, packing, transportation and a great deal allowed to rot in cold storage and in the fields. This waste is far greater than what takes place in households. If the State took more control of the necessities of life there would be less food allowed to rot in order to raise prices, and increase profits. According to the U. S. Department of Labor, staple food products have increased 86 per cent. from 1896 to 1913, the year before the war, while wages increased only 21 per cent. In view of these figures it is quite obvious that the majority of wage earners can neither afford to "waste" or secure an "over-abundant supply." Is it any wonder that the terrible trinity—immorality, crime and insanity—are increasing?

Mr. Beaudry says "investigation into the cherry story would probably prove that the cherries were allowed to rot on the trees because it was impossible to get labor at a "price" that would make it "profitable" to pick and handle the fruit." Exactly—"profits" are the crux of the matter; therefore the conclusion to be drawn is that when it isn't profitable to employ men they must go idle, and when it is not profitable to gather and sell food people must go hungry, or pay exorbitant prices. Surely Mr. Beaudry does not think this is a moral, safe or sane condition of society?

With every issue of the press new facts regarding food prices, the conditions and growing discontent of the masses are driving people to think seriously. In the local Star of April 10th we are informed that in the U. S. (markets which also affect ours)—"Sugar, flour and feeds of all kinds take a mad bound to dizzy heights—problem of caring