

THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE CONDITION OF THE PEOPLE.

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(FROM THE EVANGELICAL CHURCHMAN.)

I have been asked to speak to you about the condition of the people, of the body of the nation, those who work with their hands; and of the way in which that condition may be improved. There are many, I know, who think that we have no need to trouble ourselves about such a question at all. In this new country, they say, whatever may be the case in the old world, the working classes are all in comfortable circumstances; or, if they are not, it is their own fault. Every man who is sober, and steady, and thrifty, and industrious, can get on. I propose, in what I have to say, to deal only with the population of our cities; and of their condition the account I have just quoted is, I am sure everybody who knows anything of real life must own, much too bright and cheerful. We have not yet in Toronto, thank God! such a dense mass of hopeless and thriftless poverty as is to be found in the old cities of Europe; with the great body of our people there is a helpfulness and buoyancy and self-reliance that prevents their sinking into pauperism; and almost every man who is willing to work, though he may sometimes have a hard time and a sad time to go through, can manage to earn enough to keep body and soul together. But when we think of the uncertainty of employment, not only of unskilled laborers, but also of skilled mechanics who know their trade; of the narrow margin which wages allow above the cost of mere living, even when fairly regular work is secured, if a man has a wife and family to support; of the wearisome and uninteresting character of much of the work that has to be done, so different from the employment of a professional man; of the mean and unhealthy homes in which so many of the working classes have to live; when we think of all these things, we must surely hope that a better time is coming.

Well now, gentlemen, you might fairly ask what weight can be attached to my opinions on questions like these. I am but a man of books, and cannot feel the stress of competition, or the pinch of need, like those who have themselves to enter into the industrial struggle as employers or employees. That is to a large extent true; and yet there are two circumstances which may justify my speaking to you. The first is that, owing to the circumstances of my life, working men, toiling with their hands, are among those who are nearest and dearest to me. From my intimate knowledge of their lives, I know what "hard times" really mean, what uncertain wages mean, what the substitution of machinery for human skill means. In a recent prolonged strike in London, I have had friends among the employers on one side, and among the leaders of the strike upon the other. These things are not all theory to me. And the second is, that for some years I have been studying the condition of the people in many ages and countries.

A great change is coming over the science of Political Economy. A few years ago the economist used to say, "Give me a few simple principles to start from, such as that every man will take care of himself, and I can construct the rest of the science for myself, and explain everything very well, without the aid of particular facts." But now political economists are not so bold; they begin to ask, What are the real facts of industry? What has been the condition of the laborers in past ages? Has it improved or gone back? How have the conditions of labor

which we find to-day come into existence? This, then, has been my special work; and if this is of any use at all, it ought to some extent to put me into a position to deal fairly with the question we are considering. And if I should say anything that is distasteful to you, I am sure you will be generous enough to believe that I try, at any rate, to be honest and impartial.

Let me begin with making this remark: There is very good reason for believing that, hard as is the condition of the working classes, and slow as is the rate of its improvement, that condition has been gradually improving in Europe and America, from the earliest times of which we have any knowledge. Some writers last century were fond of drawing fancy pictures of the noble savage, and arguing that civilization was all a mistake. You know too much about the noble savage to fall into such an error as that. There are very few of you who would, if you could, exchange your lot with that of a North American Indian. But writers nearer our own day, though they do not go so far as that, are nevertheless fond of pointing to some remote period, when everybody was comfortable and happy, when there were no wicked capitalists, or grinding landlords; and of telling us that since that time the working classes have been degraded and robbed of their inheritance. Sometimes they refer to a period when the land was owned in common. The only common ownership of which we are quite certain, is among savage tribes; and there, if there is no individual ownership of land, there are also no individual rights at all, and scarcely anything that we can call individual freedom of thought or action. It is true that historical scholars once believed that the early English held their land in common; and from these historical scholars the idea was taken up by the socialists, and by Mr. Henry George. I have great respect for Mr. Henry George, but of course he is not a special authority on early history; and he very naturally borrowed the idea from the books that came in his way. But since that theory was started—and it was never anything more than a theory—it has been examined by later historical scholars, who have had no sort of bias against socialism, and it is now being altogether given up. It is now coming to be generally accepted that at the earliest period to which we can go back in English history, instead of the land being tilled by brotherly groups of common owners, it was cultivated by men but little above the position of slaves—many of them, indeed, absolutely slaves; and these serfs were almost entirely at the mercy of their masters, who owned the land. They usually had a little plot of land to themselves; they could give but little time to it; most of their time they were bound to spend working without pay on the farm of their master. It was only gradually that the Church was able to touch men's consciences, and secure for these poor drudges some little time they could call their own, some little store of goods they could regard as their own property.

There are others who place what they call "the golden age of the English laborer," many centuries nearer our time; but still, more than four hundred years ago. In the fifteenth century, we are told, the laborer was able to procure more food with his wages than at any other time before or since. It was Professor Thorold Rogers who first made this statement; and it was at once taken hold of by the socialist, Karl Marx. Since then it has come to be accepted as almost a certain fact that the history of the last three centuries has been one of oppression and degradation of the laboring classes. I believed something like this myself a few years ago; but more careful study has convinced me that the account Mr. Rogers gives of our ancestors four hundred years ago is not sup-

ported by evidence; and this is the opinion of all those who have given any careful study to the subject. The life of the great mass of the people was mean and sordid; they were subject to periodical famines; more frequently they were swept away in hundreds of thousands by pestilence, the result of their unhealthy mode of life; their morality was slow; brutal quarrels and bloodshed were almost as common among them as among the Italians at New Orleans; they toiled and squabbled from year's end to year's end with no one to help them or care for them.

No, I am convinced that the condition of the working classes in English-speaking countries is better now than in any preceding century. For the last fifty years, it has been proved beyond a shadow of doubt, that the condition of the average English and French working man has distinctly been raised. And the same thing is true, I imagine, of America and Canada.

Are we to rest content with this? God forbid. The history of the past is certainly, in one view of it, encouraging; for it teaches us that the world is, after all, slowly becoming better; and it rebukes those unwise agitators who go about saying that things are going from bad to worse, and that there is no hope except in revolution. But after all, the story of the sorry lives men have led in this world in the past, of the cruel wrong, the long-abiding oppression they have endured, is a very sad one, and should stimulate us to make the world a better place to live in for those who come after us.

But now comes the question, What are we to aim at? Have any of you who have thought over these matters ever formed for yourselves a sort of ideal or object towards which to work? Perhaps the idea that has occurred to some of you is this: We hear of the enormous wealth of a certain comparatively small number of individuals; why should not that wealth be divided among those who labor with their hands? Then we should be able to enjoy the comforts which are now the exclusive property of the few! But even if it were just to do this, it would not help us much. The incomes of the wealthy look very large by themselves, and I certainly think that they are much larger than the services they render to the community deserve. But they would not go very far, if they were divided. If all the incomes which go to individuals in England were divided equally to every family, how much do you think it would come to? About \$8 per week per family. The first fact then, we notice, is that there is not enough wealth—not enough good things for man's use actually got ready for him out of the earth—to make us just yet very comfortable all round. Others may say: "Why should we laboring men always have to work under directions? why can't we enjoy the independence of a boss? Simply because as things are now, and as they are likely to be for a long time, industry and manufactures are so organized that the number of "bosses" must be comparatively few. The old handloom has disappeared; most things nowadays get to be made in large mills and factories, or by comparatively large capitalists employing a good many men. There are some trades still in which small shops are the rule; and in these cases most men of any force of character can fairly hope to become employers themselves; but in most important trades, it is manufacture-on-a-large-scale that is winning the day. Even if, as the socialists demand, all the processes of manufacture were taken over by the State, it would still be necessary for the mass of men to continue to work with their hands, under the direction of others. Even with socialist workshops, we could not all of us sit in the counting house.

What conclusions can we draw from all this? They are these: We cannot hope, by any reforms or revolutions,

that the working classes can, for some centuries at least, be placed in a position of affluence and luxury. And, secondly, the vast majority of them will have to continue working men. Well, then, what can be reasonably hoped for? This:

1. That though it is impossible in the nature of things that every working man, or working man's son or daughter should be able to rise to what is called a higher position, yet that there should be as few obstacles as possible in the way of those rising to positions of higher worldly dignity and influence who are fit for them.

2. That as the majority must remain working men, they should, while remaining working men, have a wage which will secure them a sufficiency of food, healthy houses, and warm clothing; which will enable them to put by against a season of ill-health, or the enforced idleness due to the seasons and unavoidable slackness of trade, as well as against old age; that they should have a reasonable regularity of employment so as not to be harassed and demoralized by uncertainty; and that when their work is monotonous and exhausting their hours of labor should be so limited that they should have time for wholesome recreation.

A few words about each of these. And first, as to opportunities of rising. People have often the most mistaken notions as to what getting on in the world means. To struggle along with a miserable little "corner store"; to try to live in a big house and keep a black coat on your back as a half-starved doctor or chemist, rather than to do the work of a skilled mechanic, is not to rise in the world. The anxiety to leave a trade and get into what is called a "profession" seems to me to be even stronger in Canada than it is in the old country; and it is very absurd when looked at from a truly democratic point of view. Still we must recognize that a man who is fairly successful in a profession can secure a life of greater comfort, with more opportunities for mental cultivation, than the average skilled artisan; and it is an honorable ambition on the part of a working man, or a working man's son, to try in this way to improve his position. Thomas Carlyle used to say that the great message of the French Revolution was that "careers should be open to talents." But the reason why I dwell upon this is more than the desire that every one should "have fair play," though that ought to be of great weight. My reason is that it is of the utmost importance for the community that it should be able to command the best services of the ablest of its members. We want the men of greatest ability the country can produce to sit upon the bench as our judges, to sit in the legislature as our lawgivers, to sit upon municipal councils, to heal our bodies as doctors, to elevate our thoughts as clergymen, to direct our manufactures and manage our finances as men of business. You know how much has, of late years, been done to make some profitable use of what are known as "waste products"—all that apparent waste and rubbish that used to be thrown away in manufactures. All sorts of uses are being found for them; and it is sometimes discovered that they can be made more valuable than the article itself which was originally produced. But a distinguished and wise English economist, one who measures his words, has said that "the great waste product" of modern society is the higher ability latent but undeveloped among the working classes. We want to remove every obstacle in the way of making the best use of all the ability that can anywhere be found. I cannot dwell on all the many ways in which this can be done, but there is one in particular about which I want to say something. We ought to have a system of compulsory elementary education. The country cannot afford to lose the ability that will never be called forth, or that will be turned to evil

uses, among the children of our streets. The Government of Ontario has recently passed a compulsory educational act. But to pass an act may be a useless sop to conscience, unless efforts are made to carry it out. Truant officers are to be appointed. Now, I want all of you to use your influence that there shall be enough truant officers—not one or two for this huge city, but half a dozen or more, and to give them all the aid in your power to do their work. It may seem hard at first that children should be forced to go to school when they are helping their parents, or are said to be helping their parents, by picking up odd jobs; and the truant officers may make a few mistakes at first. But the act cannot be enforced without a little hardship here and there; and we must weigh this hardship against the gain to the children themselves and to the community. And, again, the act cannot be enforced without some little additional expenditure in the way of school buildings. Encourage the trustees to enter upon a bold and vigorous policy; be suspicious of a trustee who asks your vote merely on the ground that he will keep down the taxes; remember that penny wise may be pound foolish.

When the children have been got into the public schools, then there ought to be an open road, for such of them as have ability, to the high schools, and from the high schools to the university. I am very proud of the educational system of this country in many respects; and it has this great advantage over England, that it is easier here for a lad of moderate ability, whose parents have moderate means, to get to the university. But for boys whose parents are very poor, however great their ability may be, I am inclined to think that the way to the university is here more difficult than even in old England. The English universities have a great number of scholarships open to general competition; and, what is infinitely more important, during the last ten years or so a great number of scholarships have been established at the grammar schools (corresponding to our high schools) and annually offered for competition among the senior boys in the board or public schools. I know several men of great ability, now in positions of influence and dignity, who were the children of very poor working men, and who have had a way opened to them by this system of scholarships. I think much more ought to be done in this way at our own university. There are very many farmers' sons among our students, but very few sons of city artisans. This ought not to be so.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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