

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT.

The Conquest of Industrial Power—Revolt and Reform—The Owenites—
The North-West of England United Co-operative Company—Period, 1830.

WHEN the Americas lay discovered, and the races of Western Europe entered into the liberties of that glorious new world, a cynic might have said that the only result was an extension of human misery. In the wars and civil wars, in the treacheries and massacres, in the shameless piracies under all flags, in the cruel new slaveries and ruthless usages he would have found his evidences. A similar view could be taken of a conquest still greater than that of the two continents. When the cumulative results of three or four centuries' scientific study of nature suddenly gained practical force through the introduction of steam power, the immediate effects were disastrous to the English people. Not less than in the great colonial adventures, the greed of gain led to the swift destruction of the old forms of life and the imposition of new methods regardless of all social considerations. As a new star is said to begin its course by reason of some terrific collision, so the new industrial era commenced with what seemed like catastrophe.

The early nineteenth century witnessed modern problems attaining their ugliest aspect. The enclosures of land, which preceded and went with the industrial changes, reduced the villagers to laborers. The competition of the factories impoverished and finally destroyed their handicrafts. Works and coalpits almost equalled in the misery of their conditions the worst silver mines of old Peru. Big new towns without municipal powers enclosed masses of people who were practically uneducated and totally unfranchised. The laws that did little or nothing to prohibit the destruction of women and children in the new factories, or to secure the elements of sanitation and health, or to prevent truck, at the same time forbade the workers combining to help themselves. We have had pictures in number of "dear old England," but it is still difficult to realise what England actually was for those who knew