

The Vital Question

Lizzie M. Holmes

1889

IN the present phase of the labour movement, the philosophic or argumentative aspect is most prominent. At least it is so in America. I am reluctant to say that the old spirit of devotion-the determination, desperate courage, and whole-souled anxiety to work in the cause that fearlessness of conventionalism, and utter disregard of the opinions of the "respectable" element, which characterised the agitators of twelve seven, and four years ago-have utterly died out. But these qualities are not conspicuous. The worker "with a job" is apathetic and obedient, for he doesn't want to lose it; the man without one is discouraged, hopeless, enfeebled, his highest ambition to get a "steady position." The one-time agitator who gave his time, strength, and pennies, almost day and night, looks on this strange dead quiet, and thinks for the time being he may as well be looking out for himself a little until the people are ready for him.

In the meantime the polite discussion of economic questions is becoming quite a "fad." No first-class magazine is without its article on an industrial subject, by some high-sounding Prof., who knows nothing whatever of genuine work. No pulpit but devotes a Sunday now and then to the "labour question" and the "labouring classes." No rostrum but is open to a dainty handling of the working-man's cause, with kid gloves, and where now and then a bare-handed lover of truth walks in and shakes up their aesthetic nerves with a few wholesome criticisms. Debating societies, clubs, associations, where the air is redolent with "culture" and opulence, exist, whose members dive as deeply into the economic sea as though after a new idea in art or an old one in bric-a-brac. There are clubs which give weekly banquets, and where, over plates that are spread at a cost of five dollars a-head, they discuss "eight hours," "single tax," "free land," and "wages" as glibly as though these things did not mean the destruction of their privileges.

Not long since, one of our oldest and ablest agitators had the floor on a question of labour in a society where Julius S. Grinnell presided as chairman! Such a fact either shows up mighty well for Grinnell or very bad for the agitator. I think many of our truest men and women could not speak and address that atrocious perjurer and murderer with calmness or patience on any subject.

The old time Radicals are in the meantime too much inclined to discussing different "schools of Socialism," philosophic points of difference, definition of terms, and "hair-splitting." A few have established a society with a creed almost as close as a close-communion Baptist's, and all not subscribing to those principles have no right to call themselves Socialists, and "do so at their peril."

Of course this general discussion of economic questions must result in good; a greater number of people will arrive at some inkling of the truth; but there is danger, under this veil of respectability and mild arrangement of societary wrongs, that the great urgency of the question, the keen, living importance of its settlement to all humanity, will be forgotten-glossed over with cultured conventionalism-lost in a labyrinth of 'isms and abstractions. We may not all agree on the finely drawn differences as to what constitutes "personal liberty." We may differ as to the efficacy of "eight hours," "single tax," "mutual bank," or individual co-operative schemes. We may cherish lingering affections for the State, and hope it will yet steer us out of poverty and slavery; or we may be certain there is no hope as long as legalised Authority holds sway. But there are some things we can all agree on, and some we ought never for a moment to forget.

We all agree that the earth is for man; without it he must die. His birthright is as much of the natural elements as he needs; and when he is robbed of these and made to toil for his necessary share, he is robbed of so much of his life. We know that human labour applied to nature's resources alone creates wealth. We know that the labourer is wronged when in every land he is poor, helpless, dependent, duped and enslaved, instead of being in the enjoyment of his productions, walking upright and free before his fellow-creatures. We know that his deplorable condition is due to established and lawful systems in society, continuous methods, ever increasing in disproportionate results, recognised and accepted ways and means of production and distribution. We know that the present standard of right, which does not recognise every man's need and right to the land, nor to the full results of his labour, is working most terrible suffering among the human race, when there is literally no excuse for poverty on the face of the bountiful earth. We all know, but we do not realise it, that all the boasted advantages of civilisation are obtained at a fearful cost of human suffering.

And *this* is what we ought never to forget.

If we are comfortable-shut up in cosy rooms away from wan and hungry faces, we can easily discuss tweedledee and tweedledum. The bricks of houses do not show the drops of blood from little children's rasped arms that carried them. The coal that burns so cheerily in the grates bears no mark of the drudgery and agony of men and women's lives, the wasted youth of hopeless children; nor do the ghosts of the dead, sacrificed in its procuring, peer out from the blue dancing flames. The comfortable clothing we wear carries no stain of the tears dropped from weary eyes at midnight, the stitches tell no tales of the worn lives and faded youth sewn into the seams.

Our cosy tea-table bears no mark of the gambler's art; the crisp loaves tell no story of the farmer's unrequited toil, his mortgaged farm, nor of the bursting elevators and full bank vaults of "brokers," manipulators of the world's food. Sitting quietly at home, we realise nothing of the many men wandering homeless, hopeless, friendless; of the uncared youth, to whom no pathway is open but the road to crime and prison life; of the hungry children, whose wan pleading faces seem asking why they were born to suffer so.

But, bringing these dismal facts home to ourselves, I do not mean that we should be charitable-go out and feed a few hungry people, or save one or two boys from jail; if we did this we but make room for more. The causes beneath the surface of society continuously produce such results; the seething pool of injustice and corruption is constantly making wrecks of human beings, and casting them up as mere driftwood. The whole of societary arrangements must be changed, and soon, or civilisation will go backward. While we are philosophising, the most terrible suffering is going on; the degraded are becoming more degraded, the poor poorer, and the ruling classes wealthier and more greedy.

It is well enough to cry "Patience!" when you are not in the fire. One can wait for the slow growth of better conditions if one is never hungry; but how can we look out upon the gaunt, woeful, hardening faces that peer at us from the highways and byways, from dark cellars, from factory doors, and from frightful mining shafts, and still cry "Patience!" How can we *feel* "patient," when knowing that this repressed, smothered, smoothed-over crater of wrong, suffering, and discontent, must burst forth into more terrible ebullitions than anything the world has ever seen if the present course is pursued?

The only hope there is, is that a general sense of "danger" may be infused among intelligent people; there is little time for waiting, for patience, or for philosophising. Not that I would stop the discussion of economic subjects, be they discussed ever so mildly and politely; but I would urge upon the already converted the necessity of more determination, more zeal for work, more of the spirit of self-sacrifice, less regard for respectable and conventional observances, and more for the truth, and a keener sense of the importance of the vital question.

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