Labor and Neighbor

CHAPTER I.

The Labor Question.

Many sweating, ploughing, threshing, and then the chaff for payment receiving;
A few idly owning, and they the wheat continually claiming.
—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself."

I remember once sitting for half an hour on the platform of the little railway station at La Turbie, just above Monte Carlo on the Corniche Road, and watching two aged peasants at work breaking up the heavy soil with mattocks. Their forms were bent over and stiff with long, long years of toil; their eyes were unobservant, their expression listless. They lifted their implements at each stroke as if they were very heavy, but they did it with the uncomplaining resignation of old machines—rusty and worn, indeed, but still fulfilling the only law of their being. Just behind them lay one of the most beautiful views in the world—the wide sweep of the blue Mediterranean, with two or three steam yachts and other pleasure boats moored near the shore, the fairy-like buildings of the famous resort standing among their groves and gardens—a paradise on earth, with two old grandfathers working themselves to death in the foreground. And I knew too what was going on in that Eden where the serpent has at last succeeded in evicting God. I could see with my mind's eye the luxurious salons with their gambling tables, the *petits chevaux,* the roulette, the *rouge et noir*—the crowds of elegantly dressed people, men and women, young and old, grand dukes and countesses, American iron-masters and French adventuresses, carefully placing their stakes on the green cloth—the clink of the piles of gold pieces, the metallic voice of the

croupier, "Faites le jeu, messieurs et mesdames! —Le jeu est fait!" Here was the carnival of excessive wealth, with its ball rooms and soft music and banquet halls and choicest wines, its ennui and its suicides; and between it and me these two misshapen, decrepit delvers. How insignificant they looked at first; but as I sat thinking they loomed up bigger and bigger, for was it not they who were even now digging these piles of gold out of the earth, and these buildings—were they not built upon their backs? And as I drew up the issue between them and the invisible throng of feasters below, on which side of the controversy did I find myself? With my purse full of twenty-franc pieces and my letter-of-credit in my breast pocket, with an ample stretch of leisure behind me and before, was I plaintiff or defendant in this centuries-old litigation? Was I an aggrieved accuser, or rather the prisoner at the dock? Fortunately for my peace of mind the little funicular train came on the scene and speedily carried me down and away from La Turbie, its two old laborers and my own uncomfortable thoughts.

It is not necessary to go to Monaco in order to have the extreme inequality of human destinies brought up vividly before us. We need only open our eyes. Spend a half day in walking through the slums and factories and fashionable streets of your city, and you will find the same issue joined at home—the same undeserved poverty and excessive toil, the same superabundant wealth, the same gambling, the same casinos (though we may call them speculation and exchanges), the same intolerable ennui, the same suicides. It is a strange way to live, is it not? Travelers tell us that in savage tribes if a single child is hungry it is proof positive that the chief is hungry too. With us it is just the reverse. Hunger and plenty walk hand in hand. The worse the slums the finer the palaces, and the tramp and millionaire came on the stage together and their numbers increase proportionately.

The civilized world has always been divided into slaves and masters, and we differ from the ancient world more in name than in fact. But there is beneath the surface one essential difference. We have accepted principles, religious and political, which are inconsistent with our social and economical order, and which, if they ever prevail, are bound to effect a far-reaching revolution. In religion we profess the belief that we should do unto others as we would have them do unto us, and in politics we claim to adhere to the similar principle of democracy. It is very clear that the two old men of Monaco could win their case against us if these principles were actually observed as law. But if we are heretics in religion and politics, they can still appeal to another phase of the same fundamental ideas, and one which must find a response in every human heart—the principle of fair play. The gamblers of Monte Carlo are here superior to the world at large. They play their game fair. Every player has an equal chance. And this is the ideal of all decent sportsmen. Prize fighters are as evenly matched as possible; race horses carry weight in order to equalize their chances; yachts are measured, and handicapped accordingly. But in ordinary life all these considerations are disregarded, and it is considered perfectly honorable for a man to profit in every possible way by his superior education, his wealth or his position. Men who would scorn to pit their thoroughbreds against a broken-down hack, or their steam yachts against a cat-boat, see nothing unfair in insisting on every advantage which they can grasp in the infinitely more important game of life. If we cannot claim the virtues of Christians or of democrats, let us at any rate lay claim to those of sportsmen! The solution of the labor question requires nothing more intricate or technical than an honest application of the plainest rules of fair play.