

# CHAPTER I.

## INTRODUCTORY.

Near the window by which I write, a great bull is tethered by a ring in his nose. Grazing round, and round he has wound his rope about the stake until now he stands a close prisoner, tantalized by rich grass he cannot reach, unable even to toss his head to rid him of the flies that cluster on his shoulders. Now and again he struggles vainly, and then, after pitiful bellowings, relapses into silent misery.

This bull, a very type of massive strength, who, because he has not wit enough to see how he might be free, suffers want in sight of plenty, and is helplessly preyed upon by weaker creatures, seems to me no unfit emblem of the working masses.

In all lands, men whose toil creates abounding wealth are pinched with poverty, and, while advancing civilization opens wider vistas and awakens new desires, are held down to brutish levels by animal needs. Bitterly conscious of injustice, feeling in their inmost souls that they were made for more than so narrow a life, they, too, spasmodically struggle and cry out. But until they trace effect to cause, until they see how they are fettered and how they may be freed, their struggles and outcries are as vain as those of the bull. Nay, they are vainer. I shall go out and drive the bull in the way that will untwist his rope. But who shall drive men into freedom? Till they use the reason with which they have been gifted, nothing can avail. For them there is no special providence.

Under all forms of government the ultimate power lies with the masses. It is not kings nor aristocracies, nor landowners nor

capitalists, that anywhere really enslave the people. It is their own ignorance. Most clear is this where governments rest on universal suffrage. The working-men of the United States may mold to their will legislatures, courts and constitutions. Politicians strive for their favor and political parties bid against one another for their vote. But what avails this? The little finger of aggregated capital must be thicker than the loins of the working masses so long as they do not know how to use their power. And how far from any agreement as to practical reform are even those who most feel the injustice of existing conditions may be seen in the labor organizations. Though beginning to realize the wastefulness of strikes and to feel the necessity of acting on general conditions through legislation, these organizations when they come to formulate political demands seem unable to unite upon any measures capable of large results.

This political impotency must continue until the masses, or at least that sprinkling of more thoughtful men who are the file-leaders of popular opinion, shall give such heed to larger questions as will enable them to agree on the path reform should take.

It is with the hope of promoting such agreement that I propose in these pages to examine a vexed question which must be settled before there can be any efficient union in political action for social reform—the question whether protective tariffs are or are not helpful to those who get their living by their labor.

This is a question important in itself, yet far more important in what it involves. Not only is it true that its examination cannot fail to throw light upon other social-economic questions, but it leads directly to that great "Labor Question" which every day as it passes brings more and more to the foreground in every country of the civilized world. For it is a question of direction—a question which of two divergent roads shall be taken. Whether labor is to be benefited by

governmental restrictions or by the abolition of such restrictions is, in short, the question of how the bull shall go to untwist his rope.

In one way or another, we must act upon the tariff question. Throughout the civilized world it everywhere lies within the range of practical politics. Even when protection is most thoroughly accepted there not only exists a more or less active minority who seek its overthrow, but the constant modifications that are being made or proposed in existing tariffs are as constantly bringing the subject into the sphere of political action, while even in that country in which free trade has seemed to be most strongly rooted, the policy of protection is again raising its head. Here it is evident that the tariff question is the great political question of the immediate future. For more than a generation the slavery agitation, the war to which it led and the problems growing out of that war have absorbed political attention in the United States. That era has passed, and a new one is beginning, in which economic questions must force themselves to the front. First among these questions, upon which party lines must soon be drawn and political discussion must rage, is the tariff question.

It behooves not merely those who aspire to political leadership, but those who would conscientiously use their influence and their votes, to come to intelligent conclusions upon this question, and especially is this incumbent upon the men whose aim is the emancipation of labor. Some of these men are now supporters of protection; others are opposed to it. This division, which must place in political opposition to each other those who are at one in ultimate purpose, ought not to exist. One thing or the other must be true—either protection does give better opportunities to labor and raises wages, or it does not. If it does, we who feel that labor has not its rightful opportunities and does not get its fair wages should know it, that we may unite, not merely in sustaining present protection, but in demanding far more. If it does not, then, even it not

positively harmful to the working-classes, protection is a delusion and a snare, which distracts attention and divides strength, and the quicker it is seen that tariffs cannot raise wages the quicker are those who wish to raise wages likely to find out what can. The next thing to knowing how anything can be done, is to know how it cannot be done. If the bull I speak of had wit enough to see the uselessness of going one way, he would surely try the other.

My aim in this inquiry is to ascertain beyond peradventure whether protection or free trade best accords with the interests of those who live by their labor. I differ with those who say that with the rate of wages the state has no concern. I hold with those who deem the increase of wages a legitimate purpose of public policy. To raise and maintain wages is the great object that all who live by wages ought to seek, and working-men are right in supporting any measure that will attain that object. Nor in this are they acting selfishly, for, while the question of wages is the most important of questions to laborers, it is also the most important of questions to society at large. Whatever improves the condition of the lowest and broadest social stratum must promote the true interests of all. Where the wages of common labor are high and remunerative employment is easy to obtain, prosperity will be general. Where wages are highest, there will be the largest production and the most equitable distribution of wealth. There will invention be most active and the brain best guide the hand. There will be the greatest comfort, the widest diffusion of knowledge, the purest morals and the truest patriotism. If we would have a healthy, a happy, an enlightened and a virtuous people, if we would have a pure government, firmly based on the popular will and quickly responsive to it, we must strive to raise wages and keep them high. I accept as good and praiseworthy the ends avowed by the advocates of protective tariffs. What I propose to inquire is whether protective tariffs are in reality conducive to these ends. To do this thoroughly I wish to go over all the ground

upon which protective tariffs are advocated or defended, to consider what effect the opposite policy of free trade would have, and to stop not until conclusions are reached of which we may feel absolutely sure.

To some it may seem too much to think that this can be done. For a century no question of public policy has been so widely and persistently debated as that of Protection vs. Free Trade. Yet it seems to-day as far as ever from settlement—so far, indeed, that many have come to deem it a question as to which no certain conclusions can be reached, and many more to regard it as too complex and abstruse to be understood by those who have not equipped themselves by long study.

This is, indeed, a hopeless view. We may safely leave many branches of knowledge to such as can devote themselves to special pursuits. We may safely accept what chemists tell us of chemistry, or astronomers of astronomy, or philologists of the development of language, or anatomists of our internal structure, for not only are there in such investigations no pecuniary temptations to warp the judgment, but the ordinary duties of men and of citizens do not call for such special knowledge, and the great body of a people may entertain the crudest notions as to such things and yet lead happy and useful lives. Far different, however, is it with matters which relate to the production and distribution of wealth, and which thus directly affect the comfort and livelihood of men. The intelligence which can alone safely guide in these matters must be the intelligence of the masses, for as to such things it is the common opinion, and not the opinion of the learned few, that finds expression in legislation.

If the knowledge required for the proper ordering of public affairs be like the knowledge required for the prediction of an eclipse, the making of a chemical analysis, or the decipherment of a cuneiform inscription, or even like the knowledge required in any branch of art or handicraft, then the shortness of human life and the necessities of human existence must forever

condemn the masses of men to ignorance of matters which directly affect their means of subsistence. If this be so, then popular government is hopeless, and, confronted on one side by the fact, to which all experience testifies, that a people can never safely trust to any portion of their number the making of regulations which affect their earnings, and on the other by the fact that the masses can never see for themselves the effect of such regulations, the only prospect before mankind is that the many must always be ruled and robbed by the few.

But this is not so. Political economy is only the economy of human aggregates, and its laws are laws which we may individually recognize. What is required for their elucidation is not long arrays of statistics nor the collocation of laboriously ascertained facts, but that sort of clear thinking which, keeping in mind the distinction between the part and the whole, seeks the relations of familiar things, and which is as possible for the unlearned as for the learned.

Whether protection does or does not increase national wealth, whether it does or does not benefit the laborer, are questions that from their nature must admit of decisive answers. That the controversy between protection and free trade, widely and energetically as it has been carried on, has as yet led to no accepted conclusion cannot therefore be due to difficulties inherent in the subject. It may in part be accounted for by the fact that powerful pecuniary interests are concerned in the issue, for it is true, as Macaulay said, that if large pecuniary interests were concerned in denying the attraction of gravitation, that most obvious of physical facts would have disputers. But that so many fair-minded men who have no special interests to serve are still at variance on this subject can, it seems to me, be fully explained only on the assumption that the discussion has not been carried far enough to bring out that full truth which harmonizes all partial truths.

The present condition of the controversy, indeed, shows this to be the fact. In the literature of the subject, I know of no work

in which the inquiry has yet been carried to its proper end. As to the effect of protection upon the production of wealth, all has probably been said that can be said; but that part of the question which relates to wages and which is primarily concerned with the distribution of wealth has not been adequately treated. Yet this is the very heart of the controversy, the ground from which, until it is thoroughly explored, fallacies and confusions must constantly arise, to envelop in obscurity even that which has of itself been sufficiently explained.

The reason of this failure is not far to seek. Political economy is the simplest of the sciences. It is but the intellectual recognition, as related to social life, of laws which in their moral aspect men instinctively recognize, and which are embodied in the simple teachings of Him whom the common people heard gladly. But, like Christianity, political economy has been warped by institutions which, denying the equality and brotherhood of man, have enlisted authority, silenced objection, and ingrained themselves in custom and habit of thought. Its professors and teachers have almost invariably belonged to or been dominated by that class which tolerates no questioning of social adjustments that give to those who do not labor the fruits of labor's toil. They have been like physicians employed to make a diagnosis on condition that they shall discover no unpleasant truth. Given social conditions such as those that throughout the civilized world to-day shock the moral sense, and political economy, fearlessly pursued, must lead to conclusions that will be as a lion in the way to those who have any tenderness for "vested interests." But in the colleges and universities of our time, as in the Sanhedrim of old, it is idle to expect any enunciation of truths unwelcome to the powers that be.

Adam Smith demonstrated clearly enough that protective tariffs hamper the production of wealth. But Adam Smith—the university professor, the tutor and pensioner of the Duke of Buccleuch, the prospective holder of a government place—

either did not deem it prudent to go further, or, as is more probable, was prevented from seeing the necessity of doing so by the atmosphere of his time and place. He at any rate failed to carry his great inquiry into the causes which from "that original state of things in which the production of labor constitutes the natural recompense or wages of labor" had developed a state of things in which natural wages seemed to be only such part of the produce of labor as would enable the laborer to exist. And, following Smith, came Malthus, to formulate a doctrine which throws upon the Creator the responsibility for the want and vice that flow from man's injustice—a doctrine which has barred from the inquiry which Smith did not pursue even such high and generous minds as that of John Stuart Mill. Some of the publications of the Anti-Corn-Law League contain indications that if the struggle over the English corn-laws had been longer continued, the discussion might have been pushed further than the question of revenue tariff or protective tariff; but, ending as it did, the capitalists of the Manchester school were satisfied, and in such discussion as has since ensued English free traders, with few exceptions, have made no further advance, while American advocates of free trade have merely followed the English free traders.

On the other hand, the advocates of protection have evinced a like indisposition to venture on burning ground. They extol the virtues of protection as furnishing employment, without asking how it comes that anyone should need to be furnished with employment; they assert that protection maintains the rate of wages, without explaining what determines the rate of wages. The ablest of them, under the lead of Carey, have rejected the Malthusian doctrine, but only to set up an equally untenable optimistic theory which serves the same purpose of barring inquiry into the wrongs of labor, and which has been borrowed by Continental free traders as a weapon with which to fight the agitation for social reform.

That, so far as it has yet gone, the controversy between protection and free trade has not been carried to its logical conclusions is evident from the positions which both sides occupy. Protectionists and free traders alike seem to lack the courage of their convictions. If protection have the virtues claimed for it, why should it be confined to the restriction of imports from foreign countries? If it really "provides employment" and raises wages, then a condition of things in which hundreds of thousands vainly seek employment, and wages touch the point of bare subsistence, demands a far more vigorous application of this beneficent principle than any protectionist has yet proposed. On the other hand, if the principle of free trade be true, the substitution of a revenue tariff for a protective tariff is a ridiculously inefficient application of it.

Like the two knights of allegory, who, halting one on each side of the shield, continued to dispute about it when the advance of either must have revealed a truth that would have ended their controversy, protectionists and free traders stand to-day. Let it be ours to carry the inquiry wherever it may lead. The fact is, that fully to understand the tariff question we must go beyond the tariff question as ordinarily debated. And here, it may be, we shall find ground on which honest divergences of opinion may be reconciled, and facts which seem conflicting may fall into harmonious relations.