

CHAPTER XXIX.

PRACTICAL POLITICS.

On a railway train I once fell in with a Pittsburgh brass band that was returning from a celebration. The leader and I shared the same seat, and between the times with which they beguiled the night, we got into a talk which, from politics, touched the tariff. I neither expressed my own opinions nor disputed his, but asked him some questions as to *how* protection benefited labor. His answers seemed hardly to satisfy himself, and suddenly he said:

"Look here, stranger, may I ask *you* a question? I mean no offense, but I'd like to ask you a straightforward question. Are you a free trader?"

"I am."

"A real free trader—one that wants to abolish the tariff?"

"Yes, a real free trader. I would have trade between the United States and the rest of the world as free as it is between Pennsylvania and Ohio."

"Give me your hand, stranger," said the band-leader, jumping up. "I like a man who's out and out."

"Boys," he exclaimed, turning to some of his bands-men, "here's a sort of man you never saw; here's a real free trader, and he ain't ashamed to own it." And when the "boys" had shaken hands with me, very much as they might have shaken hands with the "Living Skeleton" or the "Chinese Giant," "Do you know, stranger," the band-master continued, "I've been hearing of free traders all my life, but you're the first I ever met. I've seen men that other people called free traders, but when it came their turn they always denied it. The most they would admit was that they wanted to trim the tariff down a little, or fix it up better. But they always insisted we must have

a tariff, and I'd got to believe that there were no real free traders; that they were only a sort of bugaboo."

My Pittsburgh friend was in this respect, I think, no unfair sample of the great body of the American people of this generation. The only free traders most of them have seen and heard have been anxious to deny the appellation—or at least to insist that we always must have a tariff, and to deprecate sudden reductions.

Is it any wonder that the fallacies of protection run rampant when such is the only opposition they meet? Dwarfed into mere revenue reform the harmony and beauty of free trade are hidden; its moral force is lost; its power to remedy social evils cannot be shown, and the injustice and meanness of protection cannot be arraigned. The "international law of God" becomes a mere fiscal question which appeals only to the intellect and not to the heart, to the pocket and not to the conscience, and on which it is impossible to arouse the enthusiasm that is alone capable of contending with powerful interests. When it is conceded that custom-houses must be maintained and import duties levied, the average man will conclude that these duties might as well be protective, or at least will trouble himself little about them. When told that they must beware of moving too quickly, people are not likely to move at all.

Such advocacy is not of the sort that can compel discussion, awaken thought, and press forward a great cause against powerful opposition. Half a truth is not half so strong as a whole truth, and to minimize such a principle as that of free trade in the hope of disarming opposition, is to lessen its power of securing support in far greater degree than to lessen the antagonism it must encounter. A principle that in its purity will be grasped by the popular mind loses its power when befogged by concessions and enervated by compromises.

But the mistake which such advocates of free trade make has a deeper root than any misapprehension as to policy. They are, for the most part, men who derive their ideas from the

emasculated and incoherent political economy taught in our colleges, or from political traditions of "States' rights" and "strict construction" now broken and weak. They do not present free trade in its beauty and strength because they do not so see it. They have not the courage of conviction, because they have not the conviction. They have opinions, but these opinions lack that burning, that compelling force that springs from a vital conviction. They see the absurdity and waste of protection, and the illogical character of the pleas made for it, and these things offend their sense of fitness and truth; but they do not see that free trade really means the emancipation of labor, the abolition of poverty, the restoring to the disinherited of their birthright. Such free traders are well represented by journals which mildly oppose protection when no election is on, but which at election-times are as quiet as mice. They are in favor of what they call free trade, as a certain class of good people are in favor of the conversion of the Jews. When entirely convenient they will speak, write, attend a meeting, eat a dinner or give a little money for the cause, but they will hardly break with their party or "throw away" a vote.

Even the most energetic and public-spirited of these men are at a fatal disadvantage when it comes to a popular propaganda. They can well enough point out the abuses of protection and expose its more transparent sophistries, but they cannot explain the social phenomena in which protection finds its real strength. All they can promise the laborer is that production shall be increased and many commodities cheapened. But how can this appeal to men who are accustomed to look upon "over-production" as the cause of wide-spread distress, and who are constantly told that the cheapness of commodities is the reason why thousands have to suffer for the want of them? And when confronted by the failure of revenue reform to eradicate pauperism and abolish starvation—"when asked why in spite of the adoption in Great Britain of the measures he proposes, wages there are so low and poverty so dire, the free trader of

this type can make no answer that will satisfy the questioner, even if he can give one satisfactory to himself. The only answer his philosophy can give—the only answer he can obtain from the political economy taught by the "free-trade" text-books—is that the bitter struggle for existence which crushes men into pauperism and starvation is of the nature of things. And whether he attributes this nature of things to the conscious volition of an intelligent Creator or to the working of blind forces, the man who either definitely or vaguely accepts this answer is incapable of feeling himself or of calling forth in others the spirit of Cobden's appeal to Bright.

Thus it is that free trade, narrowed to a mere fiscal reform, can appeal only to the lower and weaker motives—to motives that are inadequate to move men in masses. Take the current free-trade literature. Its aim is to show the impolicy of protection, rather than its injustice; its appeal is to the pocket, not to the sympathies.

Yet to begin and maintain great popular movements it is the moral sense rather than the intellect that must be appealed to, sympathy rather than self-interest. For however it may be with any individual, the sense of justice is with the masses of men keener and truer than intellectual perception, and unless a question can assume the form of right and wrong it cannot provoke general discussion and excite the many to action. And while material gain or loss impresses us less vividly the greater the number of those we share it with, the power of sympathy increases as it spreads from man to man—becomes cumulative and contagious.

But he who follows the principle of free trade to its logical conclusion can strike at the very root of protection; can answer every question and meet every objection, and appeal to the surest of instincts and the strongest of motives. He will see in free trade not a mere fiscal reform, but a movement which has for its aim and end nothing less than the abolition of poverty, and of the vice and crime and degradation that flow from it, by

the restoration to the disinherited of their natural rights and the establishment of society upon the basis of justice. He will catch the inspiration of a cause great enough to live for and to die for, and be moved by an enthusiasm that he can evoke in others.

It is true that to advocate free trade in its fullness would excite the opposition of interests far stronger than those concerned in maintaining protective tariffs. But on the other hand it would bring to the standard of free trade, forces without which it cannot succeed. And what those who would arouse thought have to fear is not so much opposition as indifference. Without opposition that attention cannot be excited, that energy evoked, that are necessary to overcome the inertia that is the strongest bulwark of existing abuses. A party can no more be rallied on a question that no one disputes than steam can be raised to working pressure in an open vessel,

The working-class of the United States, who have constituted the voting strength of protection, are now ready for a movement that will appeal to them on behalf of real free trade. For some years past educative agencies have been at work among them that have sapped their faith in protection. If they have not learned that protection *cannot* help them, they have at least become widely conscious that protection *does* not help them. They have been awakening to the fact that there is some deep wrong in the constitution of society, although they may not see clearly what that wrong is; they have been gradually coming to feel that to emancipate labor radical measures are needed, although they may not know what those measures are.

And scattered through the great body thus beginning to stir and grope are a rapidly increasing number of men who *do* know what this primary wrong is—men who see that in the recognition of the equal right of all to the element necessary to life and labor is the hope, and the only hope, of curing social injustice.

It is to men of this kind that I would particularly speak. They are the leaven which has in it power to leaven the whole lump.

To abolish private property in land is an undertaking so great that it may at first seem impracticable.

But this seeming impracticability consists merely in the fact that the public mind is not yet sufficiently awakened to the justice and necessity of this great change. To bring it about is simply a work of arousing thought. How men vote is something we need not much concern ourselves with. The important thing is how they think.

Now the chief agency in promoting thought is discussion. And to secure the most general and most effective discussion of a principle it must be embodied in concrete form and presented in practical politics, so that men, being called to vote on it, shall be forced to think and talk about it.

The advocates of a great principle should know no thought of compromise. They should proclaim it in its fullness, and point to its complete attainment as their goal. But the zeal of the propagandist needs to be supplemented by the skill of the politician. While the one need not fear to arouse opposition, the other should seek to minimize resistance. The political art, like the military art, consists in massing the greatest force against the point of least resistance; and, to bring a principle most quickly and effectively into practical politics, the measure which presents it should be so moderate as (while involving the principle) to secure the largest support and excite the least resistance. For whether the first step be long or short is of little consequence. When a start is once made in a right direction, progress is a mere matter of keeping on.

It is in this way that great questions always enter the phase of political action. Important political battles begin with affairs of outposts, in themselves of little moment, and are generally decided upon issue joined not on the main question, but on some minor or collateral question. Thus the slavery question in

the United States came into practical politics upon the issue of the extension of slavery to new territory, and was decisively settled upon the issue of secession. Regarded as an end, the abolitionist might well have looked with contempt on the proposals of the Republicans, but these proposals were the means of bringing to realization what the abolitionists would in vain have sought to accomplish directly.

So with the tariff question. Whether we have a protective tariff or a revenue tariff is in itself of small importance, for, though the abolition of protection would increase production, the tendency to unequal distribution would be unaffected and would soon neutralize the gain. Yet, what is thus unimportant as an end, is all-important as a means. Protection is a little robber, it is true; but it is the sentinel and outpost of the great robber—the little robber who cannot be routed without carrying the struggle into the very stronghold of the great robber. The great robber is so well entrenched, and people have so long been used to his exactions, that it is hard to arouse them to assail him directly. But to help those engaged in a conflict with this little robber will be to open the easiest way to attack his master, and to arouse a spirit that must push on.

To secure to all the free use of the power to labor and the full enjoyment of its products, equal rights to land must be secured.

To secure equal rights to land there is in this stage of civilization but one way. Such measures as peasant proprietary, or "land limitation," or the reservation to actual settlers of what is left of the public domain, do not tend toward it; they lead away from it. They can affect only a comparatively unimportant class, and that temporarily, while their outcome is not to weaken land-ownership but rather to strengthen it, by interesting a larger number in its maintenance. The only way to abolish private property in land is by the way of taxation. That way is clear and straightforward. It consists simply in abolishing, one after another, all imposts that are in their nature

really taxes, and resorting for public revenues to economic rent, or ground value. To the full freeing of land, and the complete emancipation of labor, it is, of course, necessary that the whole of this value should be taken for the common benefit; but that will inevitably follow the decision to collect from this source the revenues now needed, or even any considerable part of them, just as the entrance of a victorious army into a city follows the rout of the army that defended it.

In the United States the most direct way of moving on property in land is through local taxation, since that is already to some extent levied upon land values. And that is doubtless the way in which the final and decisive advance will be made. But national politics dominate State politics, and a question can be brought into discussion much more quickly and thoroughly as a national than as a local question.

Now to bring an issue into politics it is not necessary to form a party. Parties are not to be manufactured; they grow out of existing parties by the bringing forward of issues upon which men will divide. We have, ready to our hand, in the tariff question, a means of bringing the whole subject of taxation, and, through it, the whole social question, into the fullest discussion.

As we have seen in the inquiry through which we have passed, the tariff question necessarily opens the whole social question. Any discussion of it to-day must go further and deeper than the Anti-Corn-Law agitation in Great Britain, or than the tariff controversies of Whigs and Democrats, for the progress of thought and the march of invention have made the distribution of wealth the burning question of our times. The making of the tariff question a national political issue must now mean the discussion in every newspaper, on every stump, and at every cross-roads where two men meet, of questions of work and wages, of capital and labor, of the incidence of taxation, of the nature and rights of property, and of the question to which all these questions lead—the question of the

relation of men to the planet on which they live. In this way more can be accomplished for popular economic education in a year than could otherwise be accomplished in decades.

Therefore it is that I would urge earnest men who aim at the emancipation of labor and the establishment of social justice, to throw themselves into the free-trade movement with might and main, and to force the tariff question to the front. It is not merely that the free-trade side of the tariff controversy best consorts with the interests of labor; it is not merely that until working-men get over thinking of labor as a poor thing that needs to be "protected," and of work as a dole from gracious capitalists or paternal governments, they cannot rise to a sense of their rights; but it is that the movement for free trade is in reality the van of the struggle for the emancipation of labor. *This is the way the bull must go to untwist his rope.* It makes no difference how timorously the issue against protection is now presented; it is still the thin end of the wedge. It makes no difference how little we can hope at once to do; social progress is by steps, and the step to which we should address ourselves is always the next step.³⁸

³⁸ There is no reason why at least the bulk of the revenues needed for the national government under our system should not be collected from a percentage on land values, leaving the rest for the local governments, just as State, county and municipal taxes are collected on one assessment and by one set of officials. On the contrary there is, over and above the economy that would thus be secured, a strong reason for the collection of national revenues from land values in the fact that the ground values of great cities and mineral deposits are due to the general growth of population.

But the total abolition of the tariff need not await any such adjustment. The issuance of paper money, a function belonging properly to the General Government, would, properly used, yield a considerable income; while independent sources of any needed amount of revenue could be found in various taxes, which though not economically perfect, as is the tax on land values, are yet much less objectionable than taxes on imports. The excise tax on spirituous liquors ought to be abolished, as it fosters corruption, injuriously effects many branches of manufacture and puts a premium on adulteration; but either by a government monopoly, or by license taxes on retail sales, a large revenue might be derived from the liquor traffic with much greater advantage to public health and morals than by the present system. There are

Nor does it matter that those now active in the free-trade movement have no sympathy with our aims; nor that they denounce and misrepresent us. It is our policy to support them, and strengthen them, and urge them on. No matter how soon they may propose to stop, the direction they wish to take is the direction in which we must go if we would reach our goal. In joining our forces to theirs, we shall not be putting ourselves to their use, we shall be making use of them.

But these men themselves, when fairly started and borne on by the impulse of controversy, will go further than they now dream. It is the law of all such movements that they must become more and more radical. And while we are especially fortunate in the United States in a class of protectionist leaders who will not yield an inch until forced to, our political conditions differ from those of Great Britain in 1846, when, the laboring-class being debarred from political power, a timely surrender on the part of the defenders of protection checked for a while the natural course of the movement, and thus prevented the demand for the abolition of protection from becoming at once a demand for the abolition of landlordism. The class that in Great Britain is only coming into political power has, with us, political power already.

also some stamp taxes which are comparatively uninjurious and can be collected easily and cheaply.

But of all methods of raising an independent Federal revenue, that which would yield the largest return with the greatest ease and least injury is a tax upon legacies and successions. In a large population the proportion of deaths is as regular as that of births, and with proper exemptions in favor of widows, minor children and dependent relatives, such a tax would bear harshly on no one, and from the publicity which must attach to the transfer of property by death or in view of death it is easily collected and little liable to evasion. The appropriation of land values would of itself strike at the heart of overgrown fortunes, but until that is accomplished, a tax of this kind would have the incidental advantage of interfering with their transmission.

Of all excuses for the continuance of any tariff at all, the most groundless is that it is necessary to secure Federal revenues. Even the income tax, bad as it is, is in all respects better than a tariff.

Yet even in Great Britain the inevitable tendencies of the free-trade movement may clearly be seen. Not only has the abolition of protection cleared the ground for the far greater questions now beginning to enter British politics; not only has the impulse of the free-trade agitation led to reforms which are placing political power in the hands of the many; but the work done by men who, having begun by opposing protection, were not content to stop with its abolition, has been one of the most telling factors in hastening the revolution now in its incipient stages—a revolution that cannot stop short of the restoration to the British people of their natural rights to their native land.

Richard Cobden saw that the agitation of the tariff question must ultimately pass into the agitation of the land question, and from what I have heard of him I am inclined to think that were he in life and vigor to-day, he would be leading in the movement for the restoration to the British people of their natural rights in their native land. But, however this may be, the British free-trade movement left a "remnant" who, like Thomas Briggs,³⁹ have constantly advocated the carrying of free trade to its final conclusions. And one of the most effective of the revolutionary agencies now at work in Great Britain is the Liverpool Financial Reform Association, whose *Financial Reform Almanac* and other publications are doing so much to make the British people acquainted with the process of usurpation and spoliation by which the land of Great Britain has been made the private property of a class, and British labor saddled with the support of a horde of aristocratic paupers. Yet the Liverpool Financial Reform Association is composed of men who, for the most part, would shrink from any deliberate

³⁹ Author of "Property and Taxation," etc., and a warm supporter of the movement for the restoration of their land to the British people. Mr. Briggs was one of the Manchester manufacturers active in the Anti-Corn-Law movement, and, regarding that victory as a mere beginning, has always insisted that Great Britain was yet under the blight of protectionism, and that the struggle for true free trade was yet to come.

attack upon property in land. They are simply free traders of the Manchester school, logical enough to see that free trade means the abolition of revenue tariffs as well as of protective tariffs. But in striking at indirect taxation they are of necessity dealing tremendous blows at private property in land, and sapping the very foundations of aristocracy, since, in showing the history of indirect taxation, they are showing how the tenants of the nation's land made themselves virtual owners; and in proposing the restoration of the direct tax upon land values they are making an issue which will involve the complete restoration of British land to the British people.

Thus it is that when men take up the principle of freedom they are led on and on, and that the hearty advocacy of freedom to trade becomes at length the advocacy of freedom to labor. And so must it be in the United States. Once the tariff question becomes a national issue, and in the struggle against protection, free traders will be forced to attack indirect taxation. Protection is so well entrenched that before a revenue tariff can be secured the active spirits of the free-trade party will have far passed the point when that would satisfy them; while before the abolition of indirect taxation is reached, the incidence of taxation and the nature and effect of private property in land will have been so well discussed that the rest will be but a matter of time.

Property in land is as indefensible as property in man. It is so absurdly impolitic, so outrageously unjust, so flagrantly subversive of the true right of property, that it can only be instituted by force and maintained by confounding in the popular mind the distinction between property in land and property in things that are the result of labor. Once that distinction is made clear—and a thorough discussion of the tariff question must now make it clear—and private property in land is doomed.