

Chapter 38

Changes in Society

WE PROPOSE to readjust the very foundation of society. Space does not permit an elaborate discussion of all the changes this would bring about. Once general principles are applied, the details will be easily adjusted. Still, some of the main features merit mention.

Most notably, government could be vastly simplified. We could eliminate an immense and complicated network of governmental machinery needed to collect taxes, prevent and punish evasion, and check revenue from many different sources.

A similar saving would occur in the administration of justice. Much of the business of civil courts arises from disputes over ownership of land. If all occupants were, essentially, rent-paying tenants of the state, such cases would cease. With poverty ended, morality would grow stronger, reducing other business of these courts.

Wages would rise and everyone would be able to make an easy and comfortable living. This would immediately reduce, and soon eliminate, thieves, swindlers, and other criminals who arise from the unequal distribution of wealth. This would lighten the administration of criminal law, with all its paraphernalia of police, prisons, and penitentiaries. We should eliminate not only many judges, bailiffs, clerks, and jailers, but also the great host of lawyers

now maintained at the expense of those who actually produce wealth. They would cease to be a drain on the vital force and attention of society. Talent now wasted in legal subtleties would be turned to higher pursuits.

The legislative, judicial, and executive functions of government would be vastly simplified. Public debts and standing armies historically were products of the change from feudal to allodial (i.e., private) land tenures. Once we revert to the idea that land is the common right of the people of a country, I do not think these would remain for long. Public debts could readily be paid off by a tax that would not lessen the wages of labor nor check production. As intelligence and independence grow among the masses, standing armies would soon disappear.

Society would approach the ideal of Jeffersonian democracy; repressive government would be abolished. Yet, at the same time and in the same degree, it would become possible to realize the goals of socialism without coercion. With many of its present operations simplified or eliminated, government could assume other functions that now demand recognition. Surplus revenue from land taxation would grow as material progress increased its speed, tending to increase rent. Government would change its character and become the administrator of a great cooperative society. It would merely be the agency by which common property was administered for common benefit.

Does this seem impracticable? Consider the vast changes in social life if labor kept its full reward. It would banish want and the fear of want. Everyone would have freedom to develop in natural harmony.

We are apt to assume that greed is the strongest human motive and that fear of punishment is required to

keep people honest. It seems selfish interests are always stronger than common interests. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Don't these behaviors arise because of want? Poverty is the relentless hell waiting beneath civilized society. Poverty is not just deprivation; it is shame and degradation. It is only natural that people should make every effort to escape from this hell. People often do mean, greedy, grasping things in the effort to save their families, their children, from want.

In this struggle, one of the strongest motives of human action—the desire for approval—is sometimes distorted into the most abnormal forms. The hunger for the respect, admiration, or sympathy of our fellows is instinctive and universal. It is seen everywhere. It is as powerful among the most primitive savages as it is among the most highly cultivated members of polished society. It triumphs over comfort, over pain, even over fear of death. It dictates both the most trivial and the most important actions.

People admire what they desire. The sting of want—or fear of want—makes people admire riches above all else. To become wealthy is to become respected, admired, and influential.

Get money! Honestly, if you can—but at any rate get money. This is the lesson society daily and hourly exhorts. People instinctively admire virtue and truth. But poverty makes them admire riches even more. It is well to be honest and just, but those who get a million dollars by fraud and injustice have more admiration and influence than those who refuse it. They are on the list of “substantial citizens,” sought and flattered by men and women. They may be patrons of arts, friends of the refined. Their alms

may feed the poor, help the struggling, and brighten desolate places. Noble institutions commemorate their names.

Long after they have accumulated enough wealth to satisfy every desire, they go on working, scheming, and striving to add more riches. They are driven by the desire "to be something." This is not from tyrannical habit, but from the subtler satisfactions riches give: power and influence, being looked up to and respected. Their wealth not only raises them above want, but makes them people of distinction in the community. This is what makes the rich so afraid to part with money, and so anxious to get more.

The change I have proposed would destroy the conditions that distort these impulses. It would transmute forces that now disintegrate society into forces to unite it. Give labor its full earnings and expanded opportunity. Take, for the benefit of the whole community, that which the growth of the community creates. Then poverty would vanish.

Production would be set free. People would worry about finding employment no more than they worry about finding air to breathe. The enormous increase of wealth would give even the poorest ample comfort. The march of science and invention would benefit all.

With fear of poverty gone, the admiration of riches would decay. People would seek the respect and approval of their fellows in ways other than the acquisition and display of wealth. The skill, attention, and integrity now used for private gain would be brought to the management of public affairs and the administration of common funds.

The prize of the ancient Olympic games was a simple wreath of wild olive. Yet it called forth the most strenuous effort. For a simple bit of ribbon, people have performed services no money could buy.

Any philosophy based on selfishness as the master motive of human action is shortsighted. It is blind to the facts. If you want to move people to action, to what do you appeal? Not to their pockets, but to their patriotism; not to selfishness, but to sympathy. We will all give everything to preserve our lives. That is self-interest. But to higher impulses, people will give even their lives.

Call it religion, patriotism, sympathy, love of humanity, or love of God. Call it what you will. There is a force that overcomes selfishness and drives it out. It is a force beside which all others are weak. Anywhere people have ever lived, it has shown its power. Today, as ever, the world is filled with it. The person who has never seen or never felt it is to be pitied.

This force of forces now goes to waste, or it assumes perverted forms. We may use it, if we but choose. All we have to do is give it freedom and scope. We are made for cooperation, like rows of upper and lower teeth. One thing alone prevents harmonious social development: the wrong that produces inequality.

Some suppose that only impracticable dreamers could envision a society where greed is banished, prisons stand empty, individual interest is subordinated to general interest, and no one would seek to rob or to oppress neighbors. Practical, levelheaded people, who pride themselves on seeing facts as they are, have a hearty contempt for such dreamers. But those practical people, though they write books and hold chairs at universities, do not think.

Among the company of well-bred men and women dining together there is no struggle for food, no attempt to get more than one's neighbor, no attempt to gorge or

steal. On the contrary, each is anxious to help a neighbor before helping himself or herself, offering the best to others. Should anyone show the slightest inclination to act the pig or pilferer, the hoarder would face a swift and heavy penalty of social contempt and ostracism.

All this is so familiar that it seems the natural state of things. Yet it is no more natural to be greedy for wealth than to be greedy for food. People are greedy for food when they are not assured there will be a fair and equitable distribution, which would give each enough. When these conditions are assured, they stop being greedy.

In society as presently constituted, people are greedy for wealth because the conditions of distribution are so unjust. Instead of each being sure of enough, many are condemned to poverty. This is what causes the rat race and the scramble for wealth. An equitable distribution of wealth would exempt everyone from this fear. It would destroy greed for wealth, as greed for food is destroyed in polite society.

On crowded steamers, manners often differed between cabin and steerage, illustrating this principle of human nature. Both had enough food. However, steerage had no regulations to insure efficient service, so meals became a scramble. In cabin, on the contrary, each was assigned a place, and there was no fear of not getting enough to eat. There was no scrambling and no waste. The difference was not in the character of the people, but simply in the arrangements. A cabin passenger transferred to steerage would participate in the greedy rush; a steerage passenger transferred to cabin would become respectful and polite.

The same would occur in society in general if the

present unjust system were replaced with a fair distribution of wealth. In cultivated and refined society, coarser passions are not held in check by force or law, but by common opinion and mutual desire. If this is possible for part of a community, it is possible for a whole community.

Some say there would be no incentive to work without fear of poverty; people would simply become idlers. This is the old slaveholders' argument that labor must be driven with the lash. Nothing is further from the truth. Want might be banished, but desire would remain. Humans are more than animals: we are the unsatisfied animal. Each step we take kindles new desires.

Work itself is not repugnant to humans, only work that shows no results. To toil day after day and barely get the necessities of life, this is hard indeed. But released from this prison, people would work harder and better. Were the lives of great people, like Benjamin Franklin or Michelangelo, idle ones? The fact is, work that improves the condition of humanity is not done to earn a living. In a society where poverty was eliminated, such work would increase enormously.

The waste of mental power is the greatest of all the enormous wastes resulting from the present organization of society. How infinitesimal are the forces that contribute to the advancement of civilization compared to the forces that lie dormant! Considering the great mass of people, how few are thinkers, discoverers, inventors, organizers. Yet many such people are born—it is conditions that permit so few to develop. What would their talents have mattered, had Columbus gone into the clergy instead of going to sea, or Shakespeare been apprenticed to a chimney sweep, or Isaac Newton become a farmer?

But, it will be said, others would have risen instead. And this is true. It shows how prolific human nature is. The common worker is transformed into the queen bee when needed. When circumstances are favorable, a common person rises to the status of hero or leader, sage or saint. But for every one who attains full stature, how many are stunted and denied?

How little does heredity count compared with conditions. Place an English infant in the heart of China, and it will grow up the same as those who are native. The person would use the same speech, think the same thoughts, show the same tastes. Switch a countess with an infant in the slums. Would the blood of a hundred earls give you a refined and cultured woman?

To remove the fear of want, to give to all classes comfort and independence and opportunities for development—this would be like giving water to a desert. Consider the possibilities if society gave opportunity to all. Factory workers are now turned into machines; children grow up in squalor, vice, and ignorance. They need but the opportunity to bring forth powers of the highest order. Talents now hidden, virtues unsuspected, would come forth to make human life richer, fuller, happier.

In our present state, even the fortunate few at the top of the social pyramid must suffer from the want, ignorance, and degradation underneath. The change I propose would benefit everyone, even the largest landholder. Wouldn't the rich person's children be safer penniless in such a society, than with the largest fortune in this one? If such a society existed, it would be a bargain to gain entrance by giving up all possessions.

I have now traced our social weakness and disease to

their source. I have shown the remedy. I have covered every point, and met every objection. But the problems we have been considering, great as they are, pass into problems greater still. They go to the grandest problems with which the human mind can grapple. I am about to ask the reader to go with me further still, into higher fields.