

SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

CHAPTER I.

THE INCREASING IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL QUESTIONS.

THERE come moments in our lives that summon all our powers—when we feel that, casting away illusions, we must decide and act with our utmost intelligence and energy. So in the lives of peoples come periods specially calling for earnestness and intelligence.

We seem to have entered one of these periods. Over and again have nations and civilizations been confronted with problems which, like the riddle of the Sphinx, not to answer was to be destroyed; but never before have problems so vast and intricate been presented. This is not strange. That the closing years of this century must bring up momentous social questions follows from the material and intellectual progress that has marked its course.

Between the development of society and the development of species there is a close analogy. In the lowest forms of animal life there is little difference of parts; both wants and powers are few and simple; movement seems automatic; and instincts are scarcely distinguishable from those of the vegetable. So homogeneous are some of these living things, that if cut in pieces, each piece still lives. But as life rises into higher manifestations, simplicity gives

way to complexity, the parts develop into organs having separate functions and reciprocal relations, new wants and powers arise, and a greater and greater degree of intelligence is needed to secure food and avoid danger. Did fish, bird or beast possess no higher intelligence than the polyp, nature could bring them forth only to die.

This law—that the increasing complexity and delicacy of organization which give higher capacity and increased power are accompanied by increased wants and dangers, and require, therefore, increased intelligence—runs through nature. In the ascending scale of life at last comes man, the most highly and delicately organized of animals. Yet not only do his higher powers require for their use a higher intelligence than exists in other animals, but without higher intelligence he could not live. His skin is too thin; his nails too brittle; he is too poorly adapted for running, climbing, swimming or burrowing. Were he not gifted with intelligence greater than that of any beast, he would perish from cold, starve from inability to get food, or be exterminated by animals better equipped for the struggle in which brute instinct suffices.

In man, however, the intelligence which increases all through nature's rising scale passes at one bound into an intelligence so superior, that the difference seems of kind rather than degree. In him, that narrow and seemingly unconscious intelligence that we call instinct becomes conscious reason, and the godlike power of adaptation and invention makes feeble man nature's king.

But with man the ascending line stops. Animal life assumes no higher form; nor can we affirm that, in all his generations, man, as an animal, has a whit improved. But progression in another line begins. Where the development of species ends, social development commences, and that advance of society that we call civilization so increases human powers, that between savage and civilized man there

is a gulf so vast as to suggest the gulf between the highly organized animal and the oyster glued to the rocks. And with every advance upon this line new vistas open. When we try to think what knowledge and power progressive civilization may give to the men of the future, imagination fails.

√ In this progression which begins with man, as in that which leads up to him, the same law holds. Each advance makes a demand for higher and higher intelligence. With the beginnings of society arises the need for social intelligence—for that consensus of individual intelligence which forms a public opinion, a public conscience, a public will, and is manifested in law, institutions and administration. As society develops, a higher and higher degree of this social intelligence is required, for the relation of individuals to each other becomes more intimate and important, and the increasing complexity of the social organization brings liability to new dangers.

In the rude beginning, each family produces its own food, makes its own clothes, builds its own house, and, when it moves, furnishes its own transportation. Compare with this independence the intricate interdependence of the denizens of a modern city. They may supply themselves with greater certainty, and in much greater variety and abundance, than the savage; but it is by the coöperation of thousands. Even the water they drink, and the artificial light they use, are brought to them by elaborate machinery, requiring the constant labor and watchfulness of many men. They may travel at a speed incredible to the savage; but in doing so resign life and limb to the care of others. A broken rail, a drunken engineer, a careless switchman, may hurl them to eternity. And the power of applying labor to the satisfaction of desire passes, in the same way, beyond the direct control of the individual. The laborer becomes but part of a great machine,

which may at any time be paralyzed by causes beyond his power, or even his foresight. Thus does the well-being of each become more and more dependent upon the well-being of all—the individual more and more subordinate to society.

And so come new dangers. The rude society resembles the creatures that though cut into pieces will live; the highly civilized society is like a highly organized animal: a stab in a vital part, the suppression of a single function, is death. A savage village may be burned and its people driven off—but, used to direct recourse to nature, they can maintain themselves. Highly civilized man, however, accustomed to capital, to machinery, to the minute division of labor, becomes helpless when suddenly deprived of these and thrown upon nature. Under the factory system, some sixty persons, with the aid of much costly machinery, cooperate to the making of a pair of shoes. But, of the sixty, not one could make a whole shoe. This is the tendency in all branches of production, even in agriculture. How many farmers of the new generation can use the flail? How many farmers' wives can now make a coat from the wool? Many of our farmers do not even make their own butter or raise their own vegetables! There is an enormous gain in productive power from this division of labor, which assigns to the individual the production of but a few of the things, or even but a small part of one of the things, he needs, and makes each dependent upon others with whom he never comes in contact; but the social organization becomes more sensitive. A primitive village community may pursue the even tenor of its life without feeling disasters which overtake other villages but a few miles off; but in the closely knit civilization to which we have attained, a war, a scarcity, a commercial crisis, in one hemisphere produces powerful effects in the other, while shocks and jars from which a primitive community easily

recovers would to a highly civilized community mean wreck.

It is startling to think how destructive in a civilization like ours would be such fierce conflicts as fill the history of the past. The wars of highly civilized countries, since the opening of the era of steam and machinery, have been duels of armies rather than conflicts of peoples or classes. Our only glimpse of what might happen, were passion fully aroused, was in the struggle of the Paris Commune. And, since 1870, to the knowledge of petroleum has been added that of even more destructive agents. The explosion of a little nitro-glycerin under a few water-mains would make a great city uninhabitable; the blowing up of a few railroad bridges and tunnels would bring famine quicker than the wall of circumvallation that Titus drew around Jerusalem; the pumping of atmospheric air into the gas-mains, and the application of a match, would tear up every street and level every house. The Thirty Years' War set back civilization in Germany; so fierce a war now would all but destroy it. Not merely have destructive powers vastly increased, but the whole social organization has become vastly more delicate.

In a simpler state master and man, neighbor and neighbor, know each other, and there is that touch of the elbow which, in times of danger, enables society to rally. But present tendencies are to the loss of this. In London, dwellers in one house do not know those in the next; the tenants of adjoining rooms are utter strangers to each other. Let civil conflict break or paralyze the authority that preserves order and the vast population would become a terror-stricken mob, without point of rally or principle of cohesion, and your London would be sacked and burned by an army of thieves. London is only the greatest of great cities. What is true of London is true of New York, and in the same measure true of the many cities whose

hundreds of thousands are steadily growing toward millions. These vast aggregations of humanity, where he who seeks isolation may find it more truly than in the desert; where wealth and poverty touch and jostle; where one revels and another starves within a few feet of each other, yet separated by as great a gulf as that fixed between Dives in Hell and Lazarus in Abraham's bosom—they are centers and types of our civilization. Let jar or shock dislocate the complex and delicate organization, let the policeman's club be thrown down or wrested from him, and the fountains of the great deep are opened, and quicker than ever before chaos comes again. Strong as it may seem, our civilization is evolving destructive forces. Not desert and forest, but city slums and country roadsides are nursing the barbarians who may be to the new what Hun and Vandal were to the old.

Nor should we forget that in civilized man still lurks the savage. The men who, in past times, oppressed or revolted, who fought to the death in petty quarrels and drunk fury with blood, who burned cities and rent empires, were men essentially such as those we daily meet. Social progress has accumulated knowledge, softened manners, refined tastes and extended sympathies, but man is yet capable of as blind a rage as when, clothed in skins, he fought wild beasts with a flint. And present tendencies, in some respects at least, threaten to kindle passions that have so often before flamed in destructive fury.

There is in all the past nothing to compare with the rapid changes now going on in the civilized world. It seems as though in the European race, and in the nineteenth century, man was just beginning to live—just grasping his tools and becoming conscious of his powers. The snail's pace of crawling ages has suddenly become the headlong rush of the locomotive, speeding faster and faster. This rapid progress is primarily in industrial

methods and material powers. But industrial changes imply social changes and necessitate political changes. Progressive societies outgrow institutions as children outgrow clothes. Social progress always requires greater intelligence in the management of public affairs; but this the more as progress is rapid and change quicker.

And that the rapid changes now going on are bringing up problems that demand most earnest attention may be seen on every hand. Symptoms of danger, premonitions of violence, are appearing all over the civilized world. Creeds are dying, beliefs are changing; the old forces of conservatism are melting away. Political institutions are failing, as clearly in democratic America as in monarchical Europe. There is growing unrest and bitterness among the masses, whatever be the form of government, a blind groping for escape from conditions becoming intolerable. To attribute all this to the teachings of demagogues is like attributing the fever to the quickened pulse. It is the new wine beginning to ferment in old bottles. To put into a sailing-ship the powerful engines of a first-class ocean steamer would be to tear her to pieces with their play. So the new powers rapidly changing all the relations of society must shatter social and political organizations not adapted to meet their strain.

To adjust our institutions to growing needs and changing conditions is the task which devolves upon us. Prudence, patriotism, human sympathy, and religious sentiment, alike call upon us to undertake it. There is danger in reckless change; but greater danger in blind conservatism. The problems beginning to confront us are grave—so grave that there is fear they may not be solved in time to prevent great catastrophes. But their gravity comes from indisposition to recognize frankly and grapple boldly with them.

These dangers, which menace not one country alone, but modern civilization itself, do but show that a higher

civilization is struggling to be born—that the needs and the aspirations of men have outgrown conditions and institutions that before sufficed.

A civilization which tends to concentrate wealth and power in the hands of a fortunate few, and to make of others mere human machines, must inevitably evolve anarchy and bring destruction. But a civilization is possible in which the poorest could have all the comforts and conveniences now enjoyed by the rich; in which prisons and almshouses would be needless, and charitable societies unthought of. Such a civilization waits only for the social intelligence that will adapt means to ends. Powers that might give plenty to all are already in our hands. Though there is poverty and want, there is, yet, seeming embarrassment from the very excess of wealth-producing forces. "Give us but a market," say manufacturers, "and we will supply goods without end!" "Give us but work!" cry idle men.

The evils that begin to appear spring from the fact that the application of intelligence to social affairs has not kept pace with the application of intelligence to individual needs and material ends. Natural science strides forward, but political science lags. With all our progress in the arts which produce wealth, we have made no progress in securing its equitable distribution. Knowledge has vastly increased; industry and commerce have been revolutionized; but whether free trade or protection is best for a nation we are not yet agreed. We have brought machinery to a pitch of perfection that, fifty years ago, could not have been imagined; but, in the presence of political corruption, we seem as helpless as idiots. The East River bridge is a crowning triumph of mechanical skill; but to get it built a leading citizen of Brooklyn had to carry to New York sixty thousand dollars in a carpet-bag to bribe New York aldermen. The human soul that thought out the great

bridge is prisoned in a crazed and broken body that lies bedfast, and could watch it grow only by peering through a telescope. Nevertheless, the weight of the immense mass is estimated and adjusted for every inch. But the skill of the engineer could not prevent condemned wire being smuggled into the cable.

The progress of civilization requires that more and more intelligence be devoted to social affairs, and this not the intelligence of the few, but that of the many. We cannot safely leave politics to politicians, or political economy to college professors. The people themselves must think, because the people alone can act.

In a "journal of civilization" a professed teacher declares the saving word for society to be that each shall mind his own business. This is the gospel of selfishness, soothing as soft flutes to those who, having fared well themselves, think everybody should be satisfied. But the salvation of society, the hope for the free, full development of humanity, is in the gospel of brotherhood—the gospel of Christ. Social progress makes the well-being of all more and more the business of each; it binds all closer and closer together in bonds from which none can escape. He who observes the law and the proprieties, and cares for his family, yet takes no interest in the general weal, and gives no thought to those who are trodden under foot, save now and then to bestow alms, is not a true Christian. Nor is he a good citizen. The duty of the citizen is more and harder than this.

The intelligence required for the solving of social problems is not a thing of the mere intellect. It must be animated with the religious sentiment and warm with sympathy for human suffering. It must stretch out beyond self-interest, whether it be the self-interest of the few or of the many. It must seek justice. For at the bottom of every social problem we will find a social wrong.