

CHAPTER IX.

FIRST PRINCIPLES.

WHOEVER considers the political and social problems that confront us, must see that they center in the problem of the distribution of wealth, and he must also see that, though their solution may be simple, it must be radical.

For every social wrong there must be a remedy. But the remedy can be nothing less than the abolition of the wrong. Half-way measures, mere ameliorations and secondary reforms, can at any time accomplish little, and can in the long run avail nothing. Our charities, our penal laws, our restrictions and prohibitions, by which, with so little avail, we endeavor to assuage poverty and check crime, what are they, at the very best, but the device of the clown who, having put the whole burden of his ass into one pannier, sought to enable the poor animal to walk straight by loading up the other pannier with stones?

In New York, as I write, the newspapers and the churches are calling for subscriptions to their "fresh-air funds," that little children may be taken for a day or for a week from the deadly heat of stifling tenement rooms and given a breath of the fresh breeze of sea-shore or mountain; but how little does it avail, when we take such children only to return them to their previous conditions — conditions which to many mean even worse than death of the body; conditions which make it certain that of the

lives that may thus be saved, some are saved for the brothel and the almshouse, and some for the penitentiary. We may go on forever merely raising fresh-air funds, and how great soever be the funds we raise, the need will only grow, and children—just such children as those of whom Christ said, "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father"—will die like flies, so long as poverty compels fathers and mothers to the life of the squalid tenement room. We may open "midnight missions" and support "Christian homes for destitute young girls," but what will they avail in the face of general conditions which render so many men unable to support a wife; which make young girls think it a privilege to be permitted to earn three dollars by eighty-one hours' work, and which can drive a mother to such despair that she will throw her babies from a wharf of our Christian city and then leap into the river herself! How vainly shall we endeavor to repress crime by our barbarous punishment of the poorer class of criminals so long as children are reared in the brutalizing influences of poverty, so long as the bite of want drives men to crime! How little better than idle is it for us to prohibit infant labor in factories when the scale of wages is so low that it will not enable fathers to support their families without the earnings of their little children! How shall we try to prevent political corruption by framing new checks and setting one official to watch another official, when the fear of want stimulates the lust for wealth, and the rich thief is honored while honest poverty is despised?

(Nor yet could we accomplish any permanent equalization in the distribution of wealth were we forcibly to take from those who have and give to those who have not.) We would do great injustice; we would work great harm; but, from the very moment of such a forced equalization, the

tendencies which show themselves in the present unjust inequalities would begin to assert themselves again, and we would in a little while have as gross inequalities as before.

(What we must do if we would cure social disease and avert social danger is to remove the causes which prevent the just distribution of wealth.)

This work is only one of removal. It is not necessary for us to frame elaborate and skilful plans for securing the just distribution of wealth. For the just distribution of wealth is manifestly the natural distribution of wealth, and injustice in the distribution of wealth must, therefore, result from artificial obstructions to this natural distribution.

(As to what is the just distribution of wealth there can be no dispute. It is that which gives wealth to him who makes it, and secures wealth to him who saves it.) So clearly is this the only just distribution of wealth that even those shallow writers who attempt to defend the existing order of things are driven, by a logical necessity, falsely to assume that those who now possess the larger share of wealth made it and saved it, or got it by gift or by inheritance, from those who did make it and save it; whereas the fact is, as I have in a previous chapter shown, that all these great fortunes, whose corollaries are paupers and tramps, really come from the sheer appropriation of the makings and savings of other people.

(And that this just distribution of wealth is the natural distribution of wealth can be plainly seen.) Nature gives wealth to labor, and to nothing but labor. There is, and there can be, no article of wealth but such as labor has got by making it, or searching for it, out of the raw material which the Creator has given us to draw from. If there were but one man in the world it is manifest that he could have no more wealth than he was able to make and to save. This is the natural order. And, no matter how

great be the population, or how elaborate the society, no one can have more wealth than he produces and saves, unless he gets it as a free gift from some one else, or by appropriating the earnings of some one else.

An English writer has divided all men into three classes—workers, beggars and thieves. The classification is not complimentary to the “upper classes” and the “better classes,” as they are accustomed to esteem themselves, yet it is economically true. (There are only three ways by which any individual can get wealth—by work, by gift or by theft.) And, clearly, the reason why the workers get so little is that the beggars and thieves get so much. When a man gets wealth that he does not produce, he necessarily gets it at the expense of those who produce it.

(All we need do to secure a just distribution of wealth, is to do that which all theories agree to be the primary function of government—to secure to each the free use of his own powers, limited only by the equal freedom of all others; to secure to each the full enjoyment of his own earnings, limited only by such contributions as he may be fairly called upon to make for purposes of common benefit. When we have done this we shall have done all that we can do to make social institutions conform to the sense of justice and to the natural order.

(I wish to emphasize this point, for there are those who constantly talk and write as though whoever finds fault with the present distribution of wealth were demanding that the rich should be spoiled for the benefit of the poor; that the idle should be taken care of at the expense of the industrious, and that a false and impossible equality should be created, which, by reducing every one to the same dead level, would destroy all incentive to excel and bring progress to a halt.

(In the reaction from the glaring injustice of present social conditions, such wild schemes have been proposed,

and still find advocates. But to my way of thinking they are as impracticable and repugnant as they can seem to those who are loudest in their denunciations of "communism." I am not willing to say that in the progress of humanity a state of society may not be possible which shall realize the formula of Louis Blanc, "From each according to his abilities; to each according to his wants," for there exist to-day in the religious Orders of the Catholic Church, associations which maintain the communism of early Christianity. But it seems to me that the only power by which such a state of society can be attained and preserved is that which the framers of the schemes I speak of generally ignore, even when they do not directly antagonize—a deep, definite, intense, religious faith, so clear, so burning as utterly to melt away the thought of self—a general moral condition such as that which the Methodists declare, under the name of "sanctification," to be individually possible, in which the dream of pristine innocence should become reality, and man, so to speak, should again walk with God.

But the possibility of such a state of society seems to me in the present stage of human development a speculation which comes within the higher domain of religious faith rather than that with which the economist or practical statesman can concern himself. That nature, as it is apparent to us here, in this infinitesimal point in space and time that we call the world, is the highest expression of the power and purpose that called the universe into being, what thoughtful man dare affirm? Yet it is manifest that the only way by which man may attain higher things is by conforming his conduct to those commandments which are as obvious in his relations with his fellows and with external nature as though they were graven by the finger of Omnipotence upon tablets of imperishable stone. In the order of moral development,

Moses comes before Christ—"Thou shalt not kill;" "Thou shalt not commit adultery;" "Thou shalt not steal;" before "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The command, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn," precedes the entrancing vision of universal peace, in which even nature's rapine shall cease, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them.

(That justice is the highest quality in the moral hierarchy I do not say; but that it is the first.) That which is above justice must be based on justice, and include justice, and be reached through justice. It is not by accident that, in the Hebraic religious development which through Christianity we have inherited, the declaration, "The Lord thy God is a just God," precedes the sweeter revelation of a God of Love. Until the eternal justice is perceived, the eternal love must be hidden. As the individual must be just before he can be truly generous, so must human society be based upon justice before it can be based on benevolence.

(This, and this alone, is what I contend for—that our social institutions be conformed to justice; to those natural and eternal principles of right that are so obvious that no one can deny or dispute them—so obvious that by a law of the human mind even those who try to defend social injustice must invoke them.) This, and this alone, I contend for—that he who makes should have; that he who saves should enjoy. (I ask in behalf of the poor nothing whatever that properly belongs to the rich. Instead of weakening and confusing the idea of property, I would surround it with stronger sanctions.) Instead of lessening the incentive to the production of wealth, I would make it more powerful by making the reward more certain. Whatever any man has added to the general stock of wealth, or has received of the free will of him who

did produce it, let that be his as against all the world—his to use or to give, to do with it whatever he may please, so long as such use does not interfere with the equal freedom of others. (For my part, I would put no limit on acquisition.) No matter how many millions any man can get by methods which do not involve the robbery of others—they are his: let him have them. I would not even ask him for charity, or have it dinned into his ears that it is his duty to help the poor. That is his own affair. Let him do as he pleases with his own, without restriction and without suggestion. If he gets without taking from others, and uses without hurting others, what he does with his wealth is his own business and his own responsibility.

I reverence the spirit that, in such cities as London and New York, organizes such great charities and gives to them such magnificent endowments, but that there is need for such charities proves to me that it is a slander upon Christ to call such cities Christian cities. I honor the Astors for having provided for New York the Astor Library, and Peter Cooper for having given it the Cooper Institute; but it is a shame and a disgrace to the people of New York that such things should be left to private beneficence. And he who struggles for that recognition of justice which, by securing to each his own, will make it needless to beg for alms from one for another, is doing a greater and a higher work than he who builds churches, or endows hospitals, or founds colleges and libraries. This justice, which would first secure to each his own earnings, is, it seems to me, of that higher than almsgiving, which the Apostle had in mind, when he said, "*Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.*"

(Let us first ask what are the natural rights of men, and endeavor to secure them, before we propose either to beg or to pillage.)

In what succeeds I shall consider what are the natural rights of men, and how, under present social adjustments, they are ignored and denied. This is made necessary by the nature of this inquiry. But I do not wish to call upon those my voice may reach to demand their own rights, so much as to call upon them to secure the rights of others more helpless. I believe that the idea of duty is more potent for social improvement than the idea of interest; that in sympathy is a stronger social force than in selfishness. (I believe that any great social improvement must spring from, and be animated by, that spirit which seeks to make life better, nobler, happier for others, rather than by that spirit which only seeks more enjoyment for itself.) For the Mammon of Injustice can always buy the selfish whenever it may think it worth while to pay enough; but unselfishness it cannot buy.

(In the idea of the incarnation—of the God voluntarily descending to the help of men, which is embodied not merely in Christianity, but in other great religions—lies, I sometimes think, a deeper truth than perhaps even the churches teach. This is certain, that the deliverers, the liberators, the advancers of humanity, have always been those who were moved by the sight of injustice and misery rather than those spurred by their own suffering.) As it was a Moses, learned in all the lore of the Egyptians, and free to the Court of Pharaoh, and not a tasked slave, forced to make bricks without straw, who led the Children of Israel from the House of Bondage; as it was the Gracchi, of patrician blood and fortune, who struggled to the death against the land-grabbing system which finally destroyed Rome, as it must, should it go on, in time destroy this republic, so has it always been that the oppressed, the degraded, the downtrodden have been freed and elevated rather by the efforts and the sacrifices of those to whom fortune had been more kind than by their own strength

For the more fully men have been deprived of their natural rights, the less their power to regain them. The more men need help, the less can they help themselves.

The sentiment to which I would appeal is not envy, nor yet self-interest, but that nobler sentiment which found strong, though rude, expression in that battle-hymn which rang through the land when a great wrong was going down in blood :

In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom to transfigure you and me ;
*As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free ! **

And what is there for which life gives us opportunity that can be compared with the effort to do what we may, be it ever so little, to improve social conditions and enable other lives to reach fuller, nobler development? Old John Brown, dying the death of the felon, launched into eternity with pinioned arms and the kiss of the slave child on his lips—was not his a greater life and a grander death than though his years had been given to self-seeking? Did he not take with him more than the man who grabs for wealth and *leaves* his millions? Envy the rich! Who that realizes that he must some day wake up in the beyond can envy those who spend their strength to gather what they cannot use here and cannot take away? The only thing certain to any of us is death. "Like the swallow darting through thy hall, such, O King, is the life of man!" We come from where we know not; we go—who shall say? Impenetrable darkness behind, and gathering shades before. What, when our time comes, does it matter whether we have fared daintily or not, whether we have worn soft raiment or not, whether we leave a great fortune or nothing at all, whether we shall have reaped honors or been

* "Battle-Hymn of the Republic," by Julia Ward Howe.

despised, have been counted learned or ignorant—as compared with how we may have used that talent which has been intrusted to us for the Master's service? What shall it matter, when eyeballs glaze and ears grow dull, if out of the darkness may stretch a hand, and into the silence may come a voice:

“ Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord! ”

I shall speak of rights, I shall speak of utility, I shall speak of interest; I shall meet on their chosen ground those who say that the largest production of wealth is the greatest good, and material progress the highest aim. Nevertheless, I appreciate the truth embodied in these words of Mazzini to the working-classes of Italy, and would echo them:

Working-men, brothers! When Christ came and changed the face of the world, he spoke not of rights to the rich, who needed not to achieve them; nor to the poor, who would doubtless have abused them, in imitation of the rich; he spoke not of utility, nor of interest, to a people whom interest and utility had corrupted; he spoke of duty, he spoke of love, of sacrifice and of faith; and he said that they should be first among all who had contributed most by their labor to the good of all.

And the word of Christ breathed in the ear of a society in which all true life was extinct, recalled it to existence, conquered the millions, conquered the world, and caused the education of the human race to ascend one degree on the scale of progress.

Working-men! We live in an epoch similar to that of Christ. We live in the midst of a society as corrupt as that of the Roman Empire, feeling in our inmost souls the need of reanimating and transforming it, and of uniting all its various members in one sole faith, beneath one sole law, in one sole aim—the free and progressive development of all the faculties of which God has given the germ to his creatures. We seek the kingdom of God *on earth as it is in heaven*, or, rather, that earth may become a preparation for heaven, and society an endeavor after the progressive realization of the divine idea.

But Christ's every act was the visible representation of the faith he preached; and around him stood apostles who incarnated in their actions the faith they had accepted. Be you such and you will conquer. Preach duty to the classes about you, and fulfil, as far as in you lies, your own. Preach virtue, sacrifice and love; and be yourselves virtuous, loving and ready for self-sacrifice. Speak your thoughts boldly, and make known your wants courageously; but without anger, without reaction, and without threats. The strongest menace, if indeed there be those for whom threats are necessary, will be the firmness, not the irritation, of your speech.