

CHAPTER XIII.

UNEMPLOYED LABOR.

HOW contempt of human rights is the essential element in building up the great fortunes whose growth is such a marked feature of our development, we have already seen. And just as clearly may we see that from the same cause spring poverty and pauperism. The tramp is the complement of the millionaire.

Consider this terrible phenomenon, the tramp—an appearance more menacing to the Republic than that of hostile armies and fleets bent on destruction. What is the tramp? In the beginning, he is a man able to work, and willing to work, for the satisfaction of his needs; but who, not finding opportunity to work where he is, starts out in quest of it; who, failing in this search, is, in a later stage, driven by those imperative needs to beg or to steal, and so, losing self-respect, loses all that animates and elevates and stimulates a man to struggle and to labor; becomes a vagabond and an outcast—a poisonous pariah, avenging on society the wrong that he keenly, but vaguely, feels has been done him by society.

Yet the tramp, known as he is now from the Atlantic to the Pacific, is only a part of the phenomenon. Behind him, though not obtrusive, save in what we call "hard times," there is, even in what we now consider normal times, a great mass of unemployed labor which is unable, unwilling, or not yet forced to tramp, but which bears to

the tramp the same relation that the submerged part of an iceberg does to that much smaller part which shows above the surface.

The difficulty which so many men who would gladly work to satisfy their needs find in obtaining opportunity of doing so, is so common as to occasion no surprise, nor, save when it becomes particularly intensified, to arouse any inquiry. We are so used to it, that although we all know that work is in itself distasteful, and that there never yet was a human being who wanted work for the sake of work, we have got into the habit of thinking and talking as though work were in itself a boon. So deeply is this idea implanted in the common mind that we maintain a policy based on the notion that the more work we do for foreign nations and the less we allow them to do for us, the better off we shall be; and in public and in private we hear men lauded and enterprises advocated because they "furnish employment;" while there are many who, with more or less definiteness, hold the idea that labor-saving inventions have operated injuriously by lessening the amount of work to be done.

Manifestly, work is not an end, but a means; manifestly, there can be no real scarcity of work, which is but the means of satisfying material wants, until human wants are all satisfied. How, then, shall we explain the obvious facts which lead men to think and speak as though work were in itself desirable?

When we consider that labor is the producer of all wealth, the creator of all values, is it not strange that labor should experience difficulty in finding employment? The exchange for commodities of that which gives value to all commodities, ought to be the most certain and easy of exchanges. One wishing to exchange labor for food or clothing, or any of the manifold things which labor produces, is like one wishing to exchange gold-dust for coin,

cotton for cloth, or wheat for flour. Nay, this is hardly a parallel; for, as the terms upon which the exchange of labor for commodities takes place are usually that the labor is first rendered, the man who offers labor in exchange generally proposes to produce and render value before value is returned to him.

This being the case, why is not the competition of employers to obtain workmen as great as the competition of workmen to find employment? Why is it that we do not consider the man who does work as the obliging party, rather than the man who, as we say, furnishes work?

So it necessarily would be, if in saying that labor is the producer of wealth, we stated the whole case. But labor is only the producer of wealth in the sense of being the active factor of production. For the production of wealth, labor must have access to preëxisting substance and natural forces. Man has no power to bring something out of nothing. He cannot create an atom of matter or initiate the slightest motion. Vast as are his powers of modifying matter and utilizing force, they are merely powers of adapting, changing, recombining, what previously exists. The substance of the hand with which I write these lines, as of the paper on which I write, has previously formed the substance of other men and other animals, of plants, soils, rocks, atmospheres, probably of other worlds and other systems. And so of the force which impels my pen. All we know of it is that it has acted and reacted through what seem to us eternal circlings, and appears to reach this planet from the sun. The destruction of matter and motion, as the creation of matter and motion, are to us unthinkable.

In the human being, in some mysterious way which neither the researches of physiologists nor the speculations of philosophers enable us to comprehend, conscious,

planning intelligence comes into control, for a limited time and to a limited extent, of the matter and motion contained in the human frame. The power of contracting and expanding human muscles is the initial force with which the human mind acts upon the material world. By the use of this power other powers are utilized, and the forms and relations of matter are changed in accordance with human desire. But how great soever be the power of affecting and using external nature which human intelligence thus obtains,—and how great this may be we are only beginning now to realize,—it is still only the power of affecting and using what previously exists. Without access to external nature, without the power of availing himself of her substance and forces, man is not merely powerless to produce anything, he ceases to exist in the material world. He himself, in physical body at least, is but a changing form of matter, a passing mode of motion, that must be continually drawn from the reservoirs of external nature.

Without either of the three elements, land, air and water, man could not exist; but he is peculiarly a land animal, living on its surface, and drawing from it his supplies. Though he is able to navigate the ocean, and may some day be able to navigate the air, he can only do so by availing himself of materials drawn from land. Land is to him the great storehouse of materials and reservoir of forces upon which he must draw for his needs. And as wealth consists of materials and products of nature which have been secured, or modified by human exertion so as to fit them for the satisfaction of human desires,* labor is the active factor in the production of

* However great be its utility, nothing can be counted as wealth unless it requires labor for its production; nor however much labor has been required for its production, can anything retain the character of wealth longer than it can gratify desire.

wealth, but land is the passive factor, without which labor can neither produce nor exist.

All this is so obvious that it may seem like wasting space to state it. Yet, in this obvious fact lies the explanation of that enigma that to so many seems a hopeless puzzle—the labor question. What is inexplicable, if we lose sight of man's absolute and constant dependence upon land, is clear when we recognize it.

Let us suppose, as well as we can, human society in a world as near as possible like our own, with one essential difference. Let us suppose this imaginary world and its inhabitants so constructed that men could support themselves in air, and could from the material of the air produce by their labor what they needed for nourishment and use. I do not mean to suppose a state of things in which men might float around like birds in the air or fishes in the ocean, supplying the prime necessities of animal life from what they could pick up. I am merely trying to suppose a state of things in which men as they are, were relieved of absolute dependence upon land for a standing-place and reservoir of material and forces. We will suppose labor to be as necessary as with us, human desires to be as boundless as with us, the cumulative power of labor to give to capital as much advantage as with us, and the division of labor to have gone as far as with us—the only difference being (the idea of claiming the air as private property not having been thought of) that no human creature would be compelled to make terms with another in order to get a resting-place, and to obtain access to the material and forces without which labor cannot produce. In such a state of things, no matter how minute had become the division of labor, no matter how great had become the accumulation of capital, or how far labor-saving inventions had been carried,—there could never be anything that seemed like an excess of the

supply of labor over the demand for labor; there could never be any difficulty in finding employment; and the spectacle of willing men, having in their own brains and muscles the power of supplying the needs of themselves and their families, yet compelled to beg for work or for alms, could never be witnessed. It being in the power of every one able to labor to apply his labor directly to the satisfaction of his needs without asking leave of any one else, that cutthroat competition, in which men who must find employment or starve are forced to bid against each other, could never arise.

Variations there might be in the demand for particular commodities or services, which would produce variations in the demand for labor in different occupations, and cause wages in those occupations somewhat to rise above or fall below the general level, but the ability of labor to employ itself, the freedom of indefinite expansion in the primary employments, would allow labor to accommodate itself to these variations, not merely without loss or suffering, but so easily that they would be scarcely noticed. For occupations shade into one another by imperceptible degrees, no matter how minute the division of labor—or, rather, the more minute the division of labor the more insensible the gradation—so that there are in each occupation enough who could easily pass to other occupations, readily to allow of such contractions and expansions as might in a state of freedom occur. The possibility of indefinite expansion in the primary occupations, the ability of every one to make a living by resort to them, would produce elasticity throughout the whole industrial system.

Under such conditions capital could not oppress labor. At present, in any dispute between capital and labor, capital enjoys the enormous advantage of being better able to wait. Capital wastes when not employed; but labor starves. Where, however, labor could always

employ itself, the disadvantage in any conflict would be on the side of capital, while that surplus of unemployed labor which enables capital to make such advantageous bargains with labor would not exist. The man who wanted to get others to work for him would not find men crowding for employment, but, finding all labor already employed, would have to offer higher wages, in order to tempt them into his employment, than the men he wanted could make for themselves. The competition would be that of employers to obtain workmen, rather than that of workmen to get employment, and thus the advantages which the accumulation of capital gives in the production of wealth would (save enough to secure the accumulation and employment of capital) go ultimately to labor. In such a state of things, instead of thinking that the man who employed another was doing him a favor, we would rather look upon the man who went to work for another as the obliging party.

To suppose that under such conditions there could be such inequality in the distribution of wealth as we now see, would require a more violent presumption than we have made in supposing air, instead of land, to be the element from which wealth is chiefly derived. But supposing existing inequalities to be translated into such a state, it is evident that large fortunes could avail little, and continue but a short time. Where there is always labor seeking employment on any terms; where the masses earn only a bare living, and dismissal from employment means anxiety and privation, and even beggary or starvation, these large fortunes have monstrous power. But in a condition of things where there was no unemployed labor, where every one could make a living for himself and family without fear or favor, what could a hundred or five hundred millions avail in the way of enabling its possessor to extort or tyrannize?

The upper millstone alone cannot grind. That it may do so, the nether millstone as well is needed. No amount of force will break an egg-shell if exerted on one side alone. So capital could not squeeze labor as long as labor was free to natural opportunities, and in a world where these natural materials and opportunities were as free to all as is the air to us, there could be no difficulty in finding employment, no willing hands conjoined with hungry stomachs, no tendency of wages toward the minimum on which the worker could barely live. In such a world we would no more think of thanking anybody for furnishing us employment than we here think of thanking anybody for furnishing us with appetites.

That the Creator might have put us in the kind of world I have sought to imagine, as readily as in this kind of a world, I have no doubt. Why he has not done so may, however, I think, be seen. That kind of a world would be best for fools. This is the best for men who will use the intelligence with which they have been gifted. Of this, however, I shall speak hereafter. What I am now trying to do by asking my readers to endeavor to imagine a world in which natural opportunities were "as free as air," is to show that the barrier which prevents labor from freely using land is the nether millstone against which labor is ground, the true cause of the difficulties which are apparent through the whole industrial organization.

But it may be said, as I have often heard it said, "We do not all want land! We cannot all become farmers!"

To this I reply that we *do* all want land, though it may be in different ways and in varying degrees. Without land no human being can live; without land no human occupation can be carried on. Agriculture is not the only use of land. It is only one of many. And just as the uppermost story of the tallest building rests upon land as truly as the lowest, so is the operative as truly a user of

land as is the farmer. As all wealth is in the last analysis the resultant of land and labor, so is all production in the last analysis the expenditure of labor upon land.

Nor is it true that we could not all become farmers. That is the one thing that we might all become. If all men were merchants, or tailors, or mechanics, all men would soon starve. But there have been, and still exist, societies in which all get their living directly from nature. The occupations that resort directly to nature are the primitive occupations, from which, as society progresses, all others are differentiated. No matter how complex the industrial organization, these must always remain the fundamental occupations, upon which all other occupations rest, just as the upper stories of a building rest upon the foundation. Now, as ever, "the farmer feedeth all." And necessarily, the condition of labor in these first and widest of occupations, determines the general condition of labor, just as the level of the ocean determines the level of all its arms and bays and seas. Where there is a great demand for labor in agriculture, and wages are high, there must soon be a great demand for labor, and high wages, in all occupations. Where it is difficult to get employment in agriculture, and wages are low, there must soon be a difficulty of obtaining employment, and low wages, in all occupations. Now, what determines the demand for labor and the rate of wages in agriculture is manifestly the ability of labor to employ itself—that is to say, the ease with which land can be obtained. This is the reason that in new countries, where land is easily had, wages, not merely in agriculture, but in all occupations, are higher than in older countries, where land is hard to get. And thus it is that, as the value of land increases, wages fall, and the difficulty in finding employment arises.

This whoever will may see by merely looking around him. Clearly the difficulty of finding employment, the

fact that in all vocations, as a rule, the supply of labor seems to exceed the demand for labor, springs from difficulties that prevent labor finding employment for itself—from the barriers that fence labor off from land. That there is a surplus of labor in any one occupation arises from the difficulty of finding employment in other occupations, but for which the surplus would be immediately drained off. When there was a great demand for clerks no bookkeeper could suffer for want of employment. And so on, down to the fundamental employments which directly extract wealth from land, the opening in which of opportunities for labor to employ itself would soon drain off any surplus in derivative occupations. Not that every unemployed mechanic, or operative, or clerk, could or would get himself a farm; but that from all the various occupations enough would betake themselves to the land to relieve any pressure for employment.