

CHAPTER XV
PIECEMEAL REFORM

MEDIOCRITY

No one would dream of practicing in his business, or even in the conduct of running a home, the absurd plan of placing a high value on mediocrity and malingering. It is only when sentimental individuals, who are sometimes exacting business men and good housekeepers, desire to interfere with somebody else's business that this absurd notion becomes a popular pastime. I have known many men of the school of sentimental liberals, eager to recompense, almost without discretion, what they call the poor and needy; who, in their businesses and also in their homes, demand the best service they can possibly get. Indeed, I knew one who was always ready to jump into any fatuous scheme for dispensing other people's money, who was well-known in his business as a taskmaster. I have even heard his employees call him a skinflint. There are exceptions to this rule, but even many of the exceptions that I have known, here and in England, have found that their employees, who receive from them benefits and advantages not usually given, are not always satisfied with the better conditions they enjoy. The poor laboring man, you may be sure, when you hear of him from a friend, is not in that person's employ, but in the employ of his neighbor.

ENVY

Other people's money is the most powerful magnet in the world; it draws all and sundry. It is only the man, who cultivates strict notions of what is proper in conduct and thought, that remains impervious to the attraction. It is sad to think that envy can sometimes lead even the best of us astray. But there is another vice, which is far more difficult to understand, and that is the one of hating the person who has succeeded. One of the best-known criminal lawyers of the country was having tea with me when, apropos of nothing in particular, he said, "I hate——!" naming a well-known capitalist. When I recovered from the shock, I asked why, and he replied "because he's so stinking rich!" It was rather an eye-opener to me to find a man who preached for many years peace and good will all over the United States, launching out in that way, as if he were a Socialist Freshman. When I told him it was not easy to understand the spleen and rancor which were generated in certain souls against mere riches, when everybody wished to have them, he told me that he hated them because they were the cause of so much jealousy and animosity. Did he think that the cure for the evil was equal compensation to all? Would he, for instance, be perfectly willing to accept the salary of his typist, or, say, his devil? His reply was, "Not by a damned sight!" He was getting on in years, and he had to think of an old-age pension. Moreover, on consideration, he was not sure that even equal remuneration would solve the problem because, he said, there would always be those who would waste where others would save, and that would ruin the whole scheme.

THE TRAIL OF RELIEF

It is hard to think how to run the world on an even keel; but this business which has become the popular pastime of all sections of society, here and abroad, is aggravated a thousand-fold by the entrance of politicians of the first order who now compete with Tom, Dick, and Harry, of the ancient cult of soap-box orators, and lay down rules which enable them to win the first prizes. The worst of it is there is no hope at all of the poor and needy ever escaping from the grip of poverty, so long as the politician has need of them, not only for votes but for appropriations. The poor and needy are the essential pawns in the game. Furthermore, they must continue over long periods in their impoverished condition because they are serviceable for the purposes of oratory. And again, what would a political speech be without the purple passages on poor humanity?

The excuse that is put forward so often today on behalf of the politician, who harps constantly upon the poor and needy, is that he is sincere in his ignorance of actual conditions, and that it is not his fault if he is not gifted with discretion and judgment. The excuse is a shallow one. There is no source of information open to one man of intelligence that is not open to another. There is very little in the experience of observers that has escaped recorders, and for the man who has neither known poverty nor taken the trouble to get close to it, there are whole libraries within reach of anyone who desires information on the question. Anyway, we have suffered enough from the sincere man who is an ignoramus. What does his sincerity amount to? He has not taken the trouble to inform himself, and sincerity without information in this matter is merely an excuse,

which permits these people to go on capitalizing the misery of the poor for their own purposes. If there had been the slightest desire on the part of these people to deal with the authentic poor and needy, the first thing that they would have done would have been to legislate for categories to have been made, in which they would have segregated the deserving from the undeserving, the criminal from the worthy citizens, the boodler from the honest man, the inconstant worker and the malingerer from those who were willing to work. This was not done because indiscriminate relief meant coining votes. Relief touched at least fifty percent of the families of this country, and it may be taken as a fair approximation that relief to one member undoubtedly influenced the votes of those in the family who did not require it. I have heard of numbers of cases, in the district in which I live, of the votes of whole families being swayed to the side of the administration, because it had been so kind to Tommy or Sissy.

The trail of relief leads in all directions, and for people to say the majority the administration received in November is to be explained away by the votes of those who actually received it, is nonsense. The influence of relief did not stop with the direct recipient. It ran on in its influence in innumerable directions. And it will take a far more severe slump than that of 1930-32 to obliterate its trail, and bring politicians to their senses!

THE VIRTUE OF THRIFT

It is presumable that our early ancestors had to deal with this problem. There must have been seasons when Nature's gifts were hard to get. Even in the early stages, harvests were not equal to expectation, and men were driven by force of circumstance to make plans of

providing for not only rainy days, but dry ones. They had, then, floods and droughts, late frosts, and all the other vagaries of weather, such as we suffer now. The element of surprise was not lacking in the experience of the husbandman of that day, and it is worth while imagining how the exigencies of bad seasons were met by our progenitors. Here at once we come to the problem of thrift which was once a virtue, you might say, ingrained, in the stock of the men and women who landed on bleak Cape Cod. Thrift, alas, is gone today: the proletariat does not want it, because it has not to think of it. How can one think of thrift in an orgy of relief and high taxation? Still, thrift somehow or other did an amazing lot for the founders of this country, just as it did for the men who discovered the rudiments of providing for their desires and needs with the least exertion.

It is not difficult to imagine the surge of ideas in the minds of our early ancestors after they suffered from the first drought. Having no administration to think of curtailing production so that the price would rise, they had to do their own thinking, and the result of the process must have been this: that when they gathered the next harvest, they took in more than they could devour, because they were not going to be caught napping twelve months hence. Such was the rude beginning of the granary or cold storage warehouse, for they, most assuredly, would plan to put their surplus "where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt and where thieves do not break through nor steal." At that time, I take it, they made no provision for keeping it safe from thieves for, having no government, there was no reason, up to that time, for anyone to take what did not belong to him. So it was almost a natural trait to cultivate the habit of thrift.

DISCREET GENEROSITY

Now it has not generally been recognized that with this old virtue of thrift, generosity was its corollary. But we may be sure that it was discreet generosity; anyone who was under the weather and unable to gather the harvest and put by a surplus, would be aided by his fellows. Yet, one may be quite sure that the indisposed would be physically unable to do his bit before he received a share of what the others harvested. Why? For the simple reason that behind man, from the beginning, there was a force, economic pressure, which was not easy to escape, if he desired to keep his health, and he had to bow to this law which drove him with ruthless persistency to fend for himself.

EARLY MAN AS INVENTOR

Every advance which was made by early man as a parent and husbandman was made because of the rigor of economic law. This law was responsible for thrusting him in upon himself, to discover the profundity of his being. The external world was not sufficient for him; he had to find the world of his spirit and, in that world he one day realized he was an inventor, and that through invention he could provide means of doing for himself that which no animal could do. This was the man who made all things possible for us. But only so long as he was conscious of the driving force of this economic pressure was he able to devise the means of laying the foundation of a culture. From the time that this economic pressure was taken from him by the State, he became a pariah, if he did not fend for himself. The law is: use the faculties you have been endowed

with, to satisfy your desires and needs with the least exertion.

Comparing modern man with his ancient forefather, how utterly insignificant seem all the gadgets with which this civilization is afflicted: the speed machines in air, on sea, on land, the telephones and cables, the radios and phonographs, and all the other devices that can be used not only to give man a thrill of pleasure, but to be turned, in a night, to destroy him! Comparing all these things with the work we find in the excavations of archaeologists, modern man's achievements are scarcely worth recording, so far as his material and spiritual well-being are concerned. We go too fast to see the world; we have no time for introspection. The result is, man has made a god of the machine which he is perfecting and, at the same time, hastening the day when it will turn upon him and rend him to pieces.

THE CRY FOR JUSTICE

"For ye have the poor with you always"—until. Until what? The coming of the Kingdom. It was never to be inferred from the saying of Jesus that the poor would be with us always, because there was no remedy for the conditions that impoverished people. Taken by itself, and that is the way it is usually taken, it is so far at variance with the whole conception of the physical and material redemption of man that many students have thought that the saying could never have been uttered by Jesus. Torn from the context, it is very much like blasphemy. It not only controverts the precise declaration "Your heavenly Father knoweth ye have need of all these things," but it also shatters all hope of the reign of justice. The insistence with which this cry for justice is repeated in the days of tribulation of all

peoples who have left any record behind them, is one of the most striking things in history. If, however, we are far too modern to think of learning anything from the classics, we might skip a civilization or two and come down to this our own, and read the history of the English people. There will be found again the insistence of that cry. The cry was for justice—not bread; for the people knew then that if they could have a just system, they would produce bread for themselves. Today, no one cries for justice, economic justice. The poor cry for bread, and that is the most hopeless fact to be countenanced in all this turmoil.

History shows quite clearly that at all periods there have been men and women who have made a very good living out of attending to the wants of the poor. Shortly after the "Hungry 'Forties" in England, organizations for dispensing charity were established, but it took a long time before it was realized how great an opportunity was afforded certain types of folk to make a living by fastening themselves on the backs of the poor. In the days when "slumming" in New York and London, and in other great congested centers, became a pastime for some members of the well-to-do, no one thought the day would come when huge bureaucratic departments would be set up for dealing with the wretched, along strictly party lines. Indeed, it was left to this administration to perfect this system in all its tragic hopelessness. The administration has, perhaps, succeeded in "shutting the gates of mercy on mankind," for no attempt whatever has been made to change the basic economic condition from which unemployment and involuntary poverty spring. Probably it is tacitly understood in the bureaucracies that the condition is utterly hopeless, far too intricate and deep-seated, to

be resolved by political action. The easier way is to tender a loaf for a vote, because it is on votes the politicians thrive, and it is quite in order, in the business of counting the voters, that the people who dispense the loaves should remind the recipients that it might be well for them to understand "they should not bite the hand that feeds them." At any rate, it is now well-known that the government's remuneration for dispensing the loaves and fishes, is sufficient to afford luxuries of which the dispensing bureaucrats never dreamed before this administration's advent.

But criticism of such things today has lost its sting. There was a time when people who took more than a mere subsistence wage, for alleviating the wants of the people, were called jackals. A district worker in London years ago denounced, at an open-air meeting, well-paid assistants of "charity organizations," and said it was robbery for these people to take more than they gave to the poor. And yet, there are today thousands of men and women who have devoted the greater part of their lives to the work of alleviation among the poor, who have carried on their work on a mere subsistence wage. How true it is that only the poor can be kind to the poor!

"REFORMER'S ITCH"

I can remember the days when I resented deeply the Tory phrase, "reformer's itch," which was thrown at the heads of some of my companions, who wished to bring about a better state of affairs. Yet, in looking back over a period of more than forty years, it is difficult for me to determine which of the reforms advocated by my friends has turned out to be the blessing they imagined it would be. I scan the long list of reforms advocated, when I began my political career, and I

cannot find one which was worth all the bother created in the constituencies about it, and the long, tedious, whittling debates in the House of Commons to get a modicum of what was proposed. The poor are still with us; the reforms in connection with the conditions of sweat-shops, have, in the main, only made things harder for those who must work for a meal. I knew some of the sweat-shops of London forty years ago; I knew also the conditions under which their workers lived. The East End of London was familiar to me, and I spent a good deal of time in going the rounds with many of my friends, who were connected with the institutions for the amelioration of the condition of the poor. Now I find that as the reformers of that period have grown older, some of them have learned the lesson I tried to set out at that time, that it was the economic condition which made the sweat-shop, and not any particular individual employer. It may be said that he took advantage of the impoverished condition of the people. True enough! He did. But in that respect, he was not the only one that made something out of the poor and needy, who were driven by economic circumstances to work for low wage. Indeed, I have known men who were well-to-do reformers, whose incomes came from industries (at that time not unionized) where every advantage was taken of what the system offered. And strangely enough, I have known some of these people to busy themselves in the East End of London, to get a knowledge of the conditions under which the people worked, but who never, for a moment, thought it was necessary for them, as reformers, to have regard for conditions under which the laborers worked in the industries from which they drew their incomes.

"SLAVIES"

It was pointed out to me by "Will" Crooks that millions of domestic servants lived continually under sweat-shop conditions, but no reformer I ever heard of thought of introducing a practical bill into the House of Commons to alleviate the wretched conditions under which these people worked. For long hours and small pay they were then, and they still are now, pitiable victims of sweat-shops. When I was a boy, these wretched creatures went by the name of "slavies," and I know for a fact that the maid of all work who ministered to the wants of my father's family was nothing but an abject slave. She rose at six in the morning, and I have heard my mother say of the maid, sympathetically, "Her work is never done, and I wish I could afford to engage another woman to help her."

Yes, sentimental reformers are strange people. It never occurs to them that their reforms might very easily make things worse for the victims of the system. Indeed, I have known such reformers to be lectured by the very people they would help. Once, after a meeting in the East End of London, a friend of mine was accosted by a deputation of women, who pleaded with him to leave things alone. It was hard enough, they said, to make a bit, and they felt sure that his reform would only make things harder for them. It is sad, very sad, that the schemes which we think out in our studies, for the amelioration of the poor, are not quite so efficacious in operation, as we imagine they will be. Under N. R. A. we learned (or did we learn?) the lesson that occurred almost every day: that the reform of one abuse merely aggravated another.

I distinctly remember a small mill in a manufactur-

ing village in the north of England, where the people were busy making the raw material of shoddy. There were between forty and fifty people, when times were good, employed in this mill. The machinery was old-fashioned; the mill itself was far from sanitary. For years, it had stood empty, then two industrious men, who gathered rags, set it going and employed people in the village. There was no other industry nearer than five miles away. The wage was low and the hours long. After it had been in operation some years, government inspectors came along and condemned it, and the employees were thrown out of work. It is needless to relate what happened to the people of that village during the long winter, with no work. I hope it is needless to relate what those people thought of government interference. Yes, but people must work under healthful conditions! That is desirable, but people must live from day to day, and if they have no work, they can buy no food, can pay no rent, unless they go to a neighboring labor market, which is already congested, and aggravate the problem of low wage and unemployment there. Anyway, it should be clear to all thinking people that nearly all reforms, so far as small industries are concerned (where low wage is paid), serve, in the main, to harden conditions, and make things more difficult for the workers.

SLUMMERS

Consider the pet schemes of the "slummers" who were so busy when I was a young politician, and think of the innumerable efforts that were made to put the people who lived in slums into decent houses. Not once were they able to do anything for the economic benefit of those who lived in slums; for a slum clearance meant setting up buildings that slum-folk could not afford to rent. Therefore, they went off to another district in a

poor neighborhood, where the buildings were falling to pieces, and created another slum. That is the history of all slum efforts. I remember John Murphy when he was Tenement House Commissioner in New York. I knew him well, and was familiar with much of the work he performed. One day he said to me that he did not think a modern wash-tub installed in a slum tenement solved the problem, nor did he think that a larger window frame or a door on perfect hinges enabled the people to pay a higher rent; but Murphy was a practical man. He knew the problem in its entirety, and he also knew the way it should be reformed: that is, he knew how to reform it altogether, not bit by bit.

WOULD-BE REFORMERS

The great difficulty to be faced is that of the social position of the would-be reformer. Oscar Wilde said "Only the poor can be kind to the poor." That is a fact with which anybody who has ever spent much time at close quarters with them, should be familiar. Our reformers know little or nothing about the poor. They may have had hard times when they were young, and have found it difficult to make both ends meet, even when they were raising families, but as for the real conditions under which the poor live, they are utterly devoid of knowledge. The so-called reforms that they suggest are sufficient evidence of this. As a rule, they see one specific abuse, and they go for that, without the slightest idea of what it will mean to the sufferers if that abuse be reformed.

NIBBLING REFORMERS

There is, however, this other matter to be considered, and it is perhaps one of the most important

which faces the reformer. Do the poorer classes, taking them generally, desire reform? There is little or no indication of this. All we know is that the reformers desire reform. They want to see their pet schemes go through the process of legislation, and to be exhilarated by the fuss that is created, particularly when it comes to the matter of setting up the new department to put the reform into operation. They do not realize that the creation of the bureaucrats will, undoubtedly, increase the expense of government, and throw greater burdens upon the workers. What is gained in order is lost in betterment. Few reformers desire the system to be changed. The practical politician, who is the chore-man of the reformer, knows that his career in politics depends on the business of nibbling at reform. The lingering process, long drawn-out, is what he wants; and for anyone who desires to give the system short shrift, and see it abolished, to go to him with an idea to reform it altogether, would scarcely receive the courtesy of the phrase, "I will give it my earnest consideration—when I have time."

The curse of the reforming business is the system which permits people to live upon the backs of the poor; all the weepy sisters, all the Stigginses, all the comparatively highly-paid social workers, who have made a vested interest of the lucrative business of caring for the poor. In this country the names of these are legion. They fatten on the suffering and misery of the great cities. Paternalism has become a vast business and, after all the reforms to aid the people in the large towns, their position today, so far as the lowly-paid are concerned, is just as bad as ever it was. And it cuts two ways; for as the problem grows in enormity, the cities expand in misery. Jefferson saw this problem clearly.

He said, "The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body."