

CHAPTER II.

IMPROVEMENT IN INDUSTRIAL CONDITIONS.

Every agitation in the world that works for progress has its ebb and flow. Even civilization itself at times has seemed to go backward. History is replete with accounts of waves of good as well as evil impulses. It is not to be wondered at, then, that such a mighty movement as that dealing with the status of the laborer should also show dark as well as light spots.

Time was when color was not the dividing line between slave and free labor. The Egyptians held the Hebrews in bondage, and only startling phenomena—according to scripture—loosened the grip and made the Jew a free man. Rome in its palmyest days was a city of rich and idle men and poor and slave artisans. Indeed the learning, skill and literary abilities of the world's political center were in great measure in the hands of white slaves. When the German hordes swept down upon Rome they left in their own land a great body of bondmen whose duty is was to till not only their own soil but also that of their masters. At the same time in England there can be no doubt that alongside of the free men were a class of slaves whose time and exertions were controlled by the lord.

Thus the modern laborer has been evolved out of much less promising conditions than those today confronting him. Up through the ages, he has tramped from slavery to serfdom, to the wages system, and he can look back from his present eminence over a bloody pathway of wrecked hopes and lost opportunities, as well as far reaching and important successes.

Rome saw its street mobs crying for bread, and Rome also saw the strong arm of the military press the

cowardly and senseless masses back while their leaders were killed. But generally some sop would be thrown to the discontented in the way of greater freedom, so that while the tumult was suppressed, a step forward would really be made.

That was a bright idea that led serfs to offer their lords a money consideration instead of labor for services due. It divided the masters into two classes, and between those who favored and those who opposed the innovation, the tillers of the soil and the artisans made great strides. For with freedom there is always given an enormous impulse to the creative forces of man. The human side comes uppermost, and the brute, servile and unthinking, takes his proper place in the economy of the human race.

It is a great debt that the wage worker of today owes to Wat Tyler. Wages were rising, the prices of agricultural products were falling, and the lords felt themselves to be in a bad way. So in 1350 there was passed by England's parliament an act fixing the status of laborers, and this remained the law, though not enforced for obvious reasons, for 200 years. It was enacted that no person could decline to do farm labor at the wages which was customary in 1327; the lord was to have first claim on the labor of the serf, and those who declined to work for him or for others could be sent to jail; those having trades were subjected to the same conditions as the agricultural laborers; it was a penal offense to take or offer an increase in wages; and alms were strictly forbidden to able-bodied laborers.

But as none of these laws worked satisfactorily, an attempt was made to overthrow the agreements made between masters and men to accept money payments in the place of service. In fact it was an attempt to take away the freedom that for something like 30 years had been gradually creeping in and changing the status of the wealth producers, and make them once more the absolute slaves of the lords of the soil. In June, 1381,

there was a simultaneous uprising of serfs and freemen, under Wat Tyler, and everywhere the fires of a great insurrection blazed fiercely, threatening to give England a new class of rulers. Wat Tyler was killed, but through promises made by the king the peasants and serfs returned to their homes. Then a royal commission was set at work, and 1,500 persons who took a more or less active part in the insurrection were seized and hung.

Yet so great had been the peril of the rulers that there was no further effort made to enforce laws against the freedom of the laborers, so that practically the rebellion was a success. The commuting of service for a fixed sum became almost universal, and the English peasant became a free man in so far as he could be free while others owned the soil.

Gloomy days came again, through a number of causes, one of which was the encroachment by the lords on the land heretofore free to all alike. The peasant had the privilege at one time of going to the forest and taking all the wood for fuel he needed. He also had the privilege of pasturing his cattle on the commons. Both these rights he lost by the action of parliament empowering the lords to fence in the commons and add these vast areas to their own possessions. Yet in spite of everything that the masters could do to the contrary, the laborer gradually became a free man, in comparison with the environments of his ancestors, and enjoyed privileges that only a few generations back were the exclusive right alone of the lords.

It is not an easy task to glean from history the life of the ancient toilers. Those who wrote at all were under the patronage of the rulers—the masters—and little else was recorded than war and conquest. But as some scientists can take a few bones of an extinct animal and from them build up the whole animal, so there are those who can from the scraps of history at least give an idea of the degradation and oppression of the laborers of old. And as wars have played an

important part in the liberation of slave and serfs, so have catastrophes and pestilences. One of the more recent of these events was the "black plague" that swept through Europe in 1348. In a short time it is estimated that a third of the population of England perished. This created a great dearth of labor, and in consequence wages rose in the competition between the masters for men to gather in the crops and tend the flocks that were beginning to roam unattended over the commons. All kinds of concessions were made the serfs to prevent them leaving and working for those who paid better wages and protected them from the vengeance of their old masters. They were still serfs, yet with more privileges and more time that they could call their own.

The wars of the crusades, which were for the purpose of wresting the tomb of Jesus from the Turks, helped greatly in alleviating the conditions of the laborers. So bitter and devastating were these conflicts that whole families of lords and rulers were wiped out, and the serfs were often left without masters. Then again many of the fighting men were given their freedom for acts of heroism, so that between the killing off of the masters and the thinning out of the ranks of the serfs, together with a commingling of nationalities in which each learned from the other, the common people who had everything to gain and little to lose from any change, greatly benefited. Thus war and pestilence were instruments that aided in the freedom of the laborer.

Coming down to modern times, it is a fact that under the present industrial system war has its advantages for wage-workers. It was so with the civil war. The Franco-Prussian contest left a favorable impress on industrial conditions in Germany. The Spanish-American war aided labor in the United States, as the British-Boer war is now doing for the artisans of England. And while it is true that alongside of these benefits can be found evidences of a retrograde move-

ment also, yet on the whole the gain has more than offset the evil. This, from the standpoint of dollars and cents. It is true, however, that the "war spirit" is not the very best one for any country. It tends to a disregard for human life and fosters a spirit such as seen in the looting of Peking. Let it continue long and all property rights may be swept away.

But in spite of it all the status of the laborer is improving. In the United States today, much as there is that is wrong, and conducive to the robbery of the real wealth producers, this might well be called the golden age of labor. And even if it is true that in proportion to the things produced, the wage worker has a smaller percentage than heretofore, still it is a fact that he has much more of the good things of life than he ever before enjoyed. In spite of "government by injunction," or the absorption of industrial establishments by great corporations, he can never be forced back to his old time status. Having tasted the delights of freedom, and won for himself some of the fruits of his labor, he will never go back to the swine-like conditions of his ancestors. Shorter hours, better conditions and higher wages are still his by right.

Truly the laborer is making progress. And he need only thank himself for it. In him is wrapped up the destiny of the human race. On his shoulders are the burdens of the world in all lines of human energy. Right and justice are bound to triumph in the end, and let us hope that long before this planet has been once more resolved into the cosmos of a new system, there will certainly arrive that industrial condition prophesied by Isaiah:

And they shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat.