

CHAPTER XV

WHAT SHOULD EACH MAN DO ?

“BUT all these are general considerations, and, whether they are correct or not, they are inapplicable to life,” will be the remark made by people accustomed to their position, and who do not consider it possible, or who do not wish, to change it.

“Tell us what to do, and how to organise society ?” is what people of the well-to-do classes usually say.

People of the well-to-do classes are so accustomed to their rôle of slave-owners that when there is talk of improving the workers' condition, they at once begin (like our serf-owners before the emancipation) to devise all sorts of plans for their slaves, but it never occurs to them that they have no right to dispose of other people; and that, if they really wish to do good to people, the one thing they can and should do is to cease to do the evil they are now doing. And the evil they do is very definite and clear. It is not merely that they employ compulsory slave-

labour, and do not wish to cease from employing it, but that they also take part in establishing and maintaining this compulsion of labour. That is what they should cease to do.

The working people are also so perverted by their compulsory slavery that it seems to most of them that if their position is a bad one, it is the fault of the masters, who pay them too little, and who own the means of production. It does not enter their heads that their bad position depends entirely on themselves, and that, if only they wish to improve their own and their brothers' position, and not merely each to do the best he can for himself, the great thing for them to do is themselves to cease to do evil. And the evil they do is that, desiring to improve their material position by the very means which have brought them into bondage,—the workers (for the sake of satisfying the habits they have adopted), sacrificing their human dignity and freedom, accept humiliating and immoral employment, or produce unnecessary and harmful articles, and, above all, they maintain Governments,—taking part in them by paying taxes, and by direct service—and thus they enslave themselves.

In order that the state of things may be improved, both the well-to-do classes and the workers must understand that improvement cannot be effected by safeguarding one's own

interests. Service involves sacrifice, and therefore, if people really wish to improve the position of their brother men, and not merely their own, they must be ready not only to alter the way of life to which they are accustomed, and to lose those advantages which they have held, but they must be prepared for an intense struggle, not against Governments, but against themselves and their families, and must be ready to suffer persecution for non-fulfilment of the demands of Government.

And, therefore, the reply to the question—What is it we must do?—is very simple, and not merely definite, but always in the highest degree applicable and practicable for each man, though it is not what is expected by those who, like people of the well-to-do classes, are fully convinced that they are appointed to correct, not themselves (they are already good), but to teach and correct other people; and by those who, like the workmen, are sure that, not they (but only the capitalists) are in fault that their position is so bad, and think that things can only be put right by taking from the capitalists the things they use, and arranging so that all might make use of those conveniences of life which are now used only by the rich. The answer is very definite, applicable, and practicable, for it demands the activity of that one person, over whom each of us has real, rightful, and un-

questionable power, namely, oneself; and it consists in this, that if a man—whether slave or slave-owner—really wishes to better not *his* position alone, but the position of people in general, he must not himself do those wrong things which enslave him and his brothers. And in order not to do the evil which produces misery for himself and for his brothers, *he should, first of all, neither willingly, nor under compulsion, take any part in Governmental activity, and should therefore be neither a soldier, nor a Field-Marshal, nor a Minister-of-State, nor a tax-collector, nor a witness, nor an alderman, nor a juryman, nor a governor, nor a Member of Parliament, nor, in fact, hold any office connected with violence. That is one thing.*

Secondly, *such a man should not voluntarily pay taxes to Governments, either directly or indirectly; nor should he accept money collected by taxes, either as salary, or as pension, or as a reward, nor should he make use of Governmental institutions supported by taxes collected by violence from the people. That is the second thing.*

Thirdly, *a man who desires not to promote his own well-being alone, but to better the position of people in general, should not appeal to Governmental violence for the protection of his possessions in land or in other things, nor to defend him and his near ones; but should only possess land and all*

products of his own or other people's toil, in so far as others do not claim them from him.

“But such an activity is impossible: to refuse all participation in Governmental affairs, means to refuse to live”—is what people will say. “A man who refuses military service will be imprisoned; a man who does not pay taxes will be punished, and the tax will be collected from his property; a man who, having no other means of livelihood, refuses Government service will perish of hunger, with his family; the same will befall a man who rejects Governmental protection for his property and his person; not to make use of things that are taxed, or of Government institutions, is quite impossible, as the most necessary articles are often taxed; and just in the same way it is impossible to do without Government institutions, such as the post, the roads, etc.”

It is quite true that it is difficult for a man of our times to stand aside from all participation in Governmental violence. But the fact that not everyone can so arrange his life as not to participate, in some degree, in Governmental violence, does not at all show that it is not possible to free oneself from it more and more. Not every man will have the strength to refuse conscription (though there are, and will be, such men), but each man can abstain from voluntarily entering the army, the police force, or the judicial or revenue service, and can give the prefer-

ence to a worse paid private service rather than to a better paid public service. Not every man will have the strength to renounce his landed estates (though there are people who do that), but every man can, understanding the wrongfulness of such property, diminish its extent. Not every man can renounce the possession of capital (there are some who do), or the use of articles defended by violence, but each man can, by diminishing his own requirements, be less and less in need of articles which provoke other people to envy. Not every official can renounce his Government salary (though there are men who prefer hunger to dishonest Governmental employment), but everyone can prefer a smaller salary to a larger one, for the sake of having duties less bound up with violence; not every one can refuse to make use of Government schools¹ (though there are some who do), but everyone can give the preference to private schools, and each can make less and less use of articles that are taxed, and of Government institutions.

Between the existing order, based on brute force, and the ideal of a society based on reason-

¹ With reference to schools, the circumstances are different in Russia to what they are in England. Free England has compulsory education; Russia has not. But in Russia the Government hinders the establishment of private schools, and reduces even the universities to the position of Government institutions, watched by spies.—(Trans.).

able agreement confirmed by custom, there are an infinite number of steps, which mankind are ascending, and the approach to the ideal is only accomplished to the extent to which people free themselves from participation in violence, from taking advantage of it, and from being accustomed to it.

We do not know, and cannot foresee, still less—like the pseudo-scientific men—foretell, in what way this gradual weakening of Governments and emancipation of the people will come about; nor do we know what new forms man's life will take as the gradual emancipation progresses, but we do know certainly that the life of people who, having understood the criminality and harmfulness of the activity of Governments, strive not to make use of them, or to take part in them, will be quite different, and more in accord with the law of life and with our own consciences, than the present life, in which people while themselves participating in Governmental violence, and taking advantage of it, make a pretence of struggling against it, and try to destroy the old violence by new violence.

The chief thing is, that the present arrangement of life is bad; about that all are agreed. The cause of the bad conditions and of the existing slavery lies in the violence used by Governments. There is only one way to abolish Governmental violence; it is that people

should abstain from participating in violence. And, therefore, whether it be difficult or not to abstain from participating in Governmental violence, and whether the good results of such abstinence will, or will not, be soon apparent,—are superfluous questions; because to liberate people from slavery there is only that one way,—and no other!

To what extent, and when, voluntary agreement confirmed by custom will replace violence in each society and in the whole world, will depend on the strength and clearness of people's consciousness, and on the number of individuals who make this consciousness their own. Each of us is a separate person, and each can be a participator in the general movement of humanity by his greater or lesser clearness of recognition of the aim before us, or he can be an opponent of progress. Each will have to make his choice; to oppose the will of God, building upon the sands the unstable house of his brief and illusive life,—or to join in the eternal deathless movement of true life in accord with God's will.

But perhaps I am mistaken, and the right conclusions to draw from human history are not these, and the human race is not moving towards emancipation from slavery; perhaps it can be proved that violence is a necessary factor of progress, and that the State with its violence is a necessary form of life, and that it will be worse

for people if Governments are abolished, and if the defence of our persons and property is abolished.

Let us grant it to be so, and say that all the foregoing reasoning is wrong; but besides the general considerations about the life of humanity, each man has also to face the question of his own life, and, notwithstanding any considerations about the general laws of life, a man cannot do what he admits to be, not merely harmful, but wrong.

“Very possibly the reasonings showing the State to be a necessary form of the development of the individual, and Governmental violence to be necessary for the good of society, can all be deduced from history, and are all correct,” each honest and sincere man of our times will reply; “but murder is an evil,—that I know more certainly than any reasonings; by demanding that I should enter the army, or pay for hiring and equipping soldiers, or for buying cannons and building ironclads, you wish to make me an accomplice in murder, and that I cannot and will not be. Neither do I wish to, nor can I, make use of money you have collected from hungry people with threats of murder; nor do I wish to make use of land or capital defended by you, because I know that your defence of it rests on murder.

“I could do these things when I did not understand all their criminality, but when I

have once seen it, I cannot avoid seeing it, and can no longer take part in these things.

“I know that we are all so bound up by violence, that it is difficult to avoid it altogether, but I will, nevertheless, do all I can, not to take part in it: I will not be an accomplice to it, and will try not to make use of what is obtained and defended by murder.

“I have but one life, and why should I, in this brief life of mine, act contrary to the voice of conscience and become a partner in your abominable deeds?—I cannot, and I will not.

“And what will come of this—I do not know. Only, I think no harm can result from acting as my conscience demands.”

So, in our time, should each honest and sincere man reply to all the arguments about the necessity of Governments and of violence, and to every demand or invitation to take part in them.

The conclusion to which general reasoning should bring us, is thus confirmed to each individual, by that supreme and unimpeachable judge—the voice of conscience.