

Chapter 3

The Other Side of the Tracks

IN THE early days of the factory system in England, David Ricardo enunciated the grim principle which he called the Iron Law of Wages; the principle that all wages tend to fall to the level which the most unskillful or most desperate man will accept. In pre-industrial times this law had not often operated unchecked. The prince, or the baron, or the squire, or the neighbors had tended to look after those who by reason of incompetence or illness or adversity were in want. And in the United States of pre-industrial days, men and women who were in cruel straits—whose crops had failed, or whose trade was dwindling, or whose family store had gone broke—had at least been able to go on working, for whatever pittance they could command, or could move on elsewhere to try again. But the coming of industrialism had brought a change, in America as well as in Europe.

For when a man built a mill or factory, around which there grew up a mill village or factory town, those who came to work for him were in great degree imprisoned by their choice. They did not own the tools with which they worked, and therefore were dependent upon what employment the mill offered; and anyhow there was not enough work in such a community for all who would be looking for it if the mill shut down. And if their wages were really low they could not afford to look elsewhere for jobs. So they ceased to be free agents. They were at their employer's mercy. The code of conduct

of the day did not require him to feel any responsibility for what happened to them. And the Iron Law really went into action.

Likewise in a city slum into which there flowed a steady stream of newcomers from abroad—almost penniless people, ignorant, inexperienced, often friendless, and unable to speak the language of the country—men and women were likewise imprisoned by circumstance. Theoretically there were all manner of occupations open to them; theoretically they were dependent upon no single employer. But in practice poverty, limited skills, and ignorance kept them—the great majority of them—where they were, year after year, to battle fiercely for chances to earn a living, and to accept whatever miserable wage was offered to them. Here too the Iron Law ruled.

Nowhere in the United States, in the middle years of the nineteenth century, had the Iron Law brought quite such abominations as it had produced in England, where the wages, hours of work, and sanitary conditions in the new industrial towns and the mining areas had been a stench in the nostrils of decency; but in all conscience they had been bad enough. For in the second quarter of the nineteenth century wages had fallen in the mill towns of New England until by 1850 whole families were laboring at the machines for three or four dollars a week per worker; a twelve-hour day was average, and a fourteen-hour day was not unusual; there were even children of what we would consider junior high school age who had to spend the hours from five o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock at night—with half an hour off for breakfast and half an hour for dinner—six days a week, in an ill-lighted, ill-ventilated factory, foregoing sunshine, recreation, education, and health itself to keep the family alive; and all this even if the employer was raking in high profits. It had been conditions such as these, appearing wherever the new industrial capitalism seemed to be making its most active forward progress, that had prompted Karl Marx to see if he could not invent a different system.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, industrialism had advanced with mighty strides in the United States. A remarkable

series of inventions and technological improvements had sparked its progress. By 1900 what had formerly been a land mostly of farmers and villagers had become a land increasingly of cities and roaring industrial towns; and comforts, conveniences, and wealth had so piled up that it almost seemed as if a whole new world had been invented for people to work and play in. But the wealth still tended to flow into a few people's pockets.

During most of this incredible half century, to be sure, the general standard of living in the United States had happily shown considerable improvement. Prosperity had tended to sift down through the ranks of society and to improve the conditions of life for the great majority of Americans. For instance, economists calculated that between 1860 and 1891, wages in twenty-two industries had increased on the average over 68 per cent, while wholesale prices had declined over 5 per cent. Those figures represented a real gain. But during the hideous depression of the mid-nineties wages had been widely slashed; and, although there had been some improvement in the lot of the workers afterward, as good times returned toward the turn of the century (an improvement, at least, in their chances of regular employment) there was no further gain in the trend of what the economists call "real wages," which is to say wages as measured against prices. What was happening to prevent the new wealth which the millionaires were so happily raking in, and from which millions of Americans in the middle economic ranks were directly or indirectly benefiting, from percolating all the way down to the lower levels of American society?

One thing that was happening was that the good American land was filling up. Traditionally, when the American workingman's position had become intolerable, he could always go west—if he could raise the cash to go. The West had been the land of new hope, not only for men of adventurous ambition, but also for the discards of industrialism. But now the frontier was closed, and though there were still chances for a man to arrive in the West with nothing and then to achieve comfort, these chances seemed to be dwindling. And a second thing that was happening was that the United States was con-

tinually importing a proletariat of such size, and such limited employability for the time being, that the labor market in the large cities and industrial towns was glutted and the wage level was held down.

Throughout most of the nineteenth century this proletariat had been coming across the Atlantic. For a time it had been mostly Irish: in the eighteen-forties and -fifties it had been the Irish who were the diggers of ditches, the builders of levees, the mill workers who labored twelve or thirteen or fourteen hours a day for a microscopic wage. Then, as the Irish began to better themselves, the Italians had begun to pour in. And then, increasingly, the Jews and Slavs of Eastern Europe. As each group arrived, it tended to form a proletarian level under the previous one. (Always at or near the bottom, in menial and ill-paid jobs, remained our Negro population, slaves no longer, but condemned nevertheless to a servitude of ignorance and exclusion from opportunity.)

Little by little, most of the members of these foreign groups caught the contagion of freedom and ambition in the American air and began to lift themselves out of poverty. But as they did so, their places on the lowest economic level were taken by still newer immigrants, lured from Europe by the glowing reports (sometimes fictitious) of relatives and fellow townsmen who had preceded them, or by the bright promises held out by industrial agents. So fast did they come that they filled up the slums of New York and Boston and Philadelphia and Chicago, and the factory towns of New England and Pennsylvania and Ohio, more rapidly than American opportunity could drain them off. During the single year 1900, the number of immigrants who arrived was 448,572; during 1901 it was 487,918; the figure kept on rising until in 1907 it reached a peak of 1,285,349. Here was irony indeed: so brightly did the Goddess of Liberty's lamp glow, with its promise of hope to the dispossessed of many lands, that the very numbers in which they answered its invitation tended to keep the wage level down, not only for these new arrivals but for native-born Americans as well, and delayed the modification of the Iron Law.

(Incidentally, a certain tendency among many Americans, then and later, to be arrogant or condescending toward Europeans may be

partly due to the fact that for generations almost the only Europeans that the average native-born American saw were poor, ignorant, ill-dressed, and often dirty members of this imported proletariat, jabbering in incomprehensible tongues while they did menial jobs. They were scornfully known as Dagoes, Polacks, Hunkies, Kikes. As they bettered themselves, they became in most cases less Italian or Polish or Serbian or Czech or Russian, more American; and so the unfavorable image of Europeans in the American mind persisted.)

But, one may ask, what about those traditional foes of the Iron Law, the labor unions? The answer is that they were few and—except in a few favored crafts—weak; that they existed in peril of the law, which in general upheld the notion that what an employer chose to pay a man, and what that man chose to accept, were those two men's business and nobody else's; and that they were generally viewed by the rest of the public with fear and dislike.

In 1900 the total trade union membership came to 868,500; of these, the unions in the American Federation of Labor claimed 548,321. In a few successfully organized trades, such as the cigar makers', their pressures had pushed wages up. Robert A. Woods of the South End House in Boston, a scrupulously careful observer, reported in 1902 that unskilled laborers in Boston were making from \$9 to \$12 a week—when work was available; skilled labor artisans in general were making \$13.50 to \$19.50—again with "some lost time"; but cigar makers, by contrast, were making \$15 to \$25, with "little lost time." The head man of the AF of L was a cigar maker himself, Samuel Gompers, a thickset, strong-jawed, wide-mouthed man with unruly hair and rimless pince-nez glasses who took a strictly limited view of the aims which the unions under his influence should pursue. In his youth Gompers had learned German in order to read the works of Marx; but since then he had seen American unionism so often weakened by the impracticality of revolutionary theorists, and by the hatred that their imported revolutionary theories aroused among the public at large, that he stuck rigidly to the principles of craft—as opposed to industrial—unionism, opposed any attempt to put his

unions into politics (as by forming a labor party), and bade them bargain only for improvements in wages, hours, and conditions of work.

But to cite the modest aims which Gompers pursued is to give an utterly misleading picture of unionism in general at the turn of the century. Most big industries were not unionized at all; and where unions did exist, or where attempts were made to organize the men, there were likely to be violent, headlong, and bloody conflicts, with ferocious battles between rebellious workmen on the one hand, and their implacable employers and the employers' scabs and perhaps the militia on the other hand.

In 1898, when the United Mine Workers won their first important strike, a group of them at Virden, Illinois, "armed with shotguns, revolvers, and rifles, vanquished a trainload of similarly accoutered strikebreakers and company guards, with great loss of life on both sides," according to Herbert Harris's history of *American Labor*; Mr. Harris adds aptly, "By means of superior marksmanship, the union was granted all its demands." That was the sort of spirit in which labor and capital were more than likely to be opposed.

Such was the temper of the times that when Oliver Wendell Holmes, in 1896, dissented from an antipicketing decision of the Massachusetts Supreme Court, he was convinced that his dissent had shut him off from all chances of future judicial promotion. The decision granted an injunction to a shopkeeper, named Vegelahn, to prevent two men from picketing outside his shop. There had been no suggestion of violence, no threat to physical property; nevertheless when Holmes suggested that the men were within their rights in thus advertising that they thought their employer was unfair, he was propounding what public opinion considered gross heresy.

Under such circumstances it is not remarkable that labor unions had, on the whole, only a minor influence in 1900. And anyhow they could not reach down to the very bottom ranks of labor to protect the men and women on whom poverty bore down most cruelly of all.

There were other reasons than the closing of the frontier, the flood of immigrants, and the weakness of organized labor for the fact that the Iron Law still held much of its old force; we shall come to these

in due course. But it is time for us now to look at a few of the hard facts of life on the other side of the tracks at the turn of the century.

II

Here are a few cold figures:

1. WAGES. The *average* annual earnings of American workers, as I have already said, were something like \$400 or \$500 a year. For unskilled workers they were somewhat less—under \$460 in the North, under \$300 in the South. A standard wage for an unskilled man was a dollar and a half a day—when he could get work. That qualification is important: one must bear in mind that according to the census of 1900, nearly 6½ million workers were idle (and therefore, in most cases, quite without income) during some part of the year; that of these, nearly 2 million were idle four to six months out of the twelve.

In Boston, Robert A. Woods reported in 1902 that the average wage of shopgirls in the North and West Ends was from \$5 to \$6 a week. In the South, in 1900, nearly a third of the male employees over sixteen years of age in the cotton mills were getting less than \$6 a week. Nor was this anywhere near the bottom of the scale. Investigating the condition of Italian workers in Chicago at about this time, the federal Bureau of Labor found one class of unskilled laborers who averaged as little as \$4.37 a week. Woods reported further that in the garment shops of Boston, women were earning from \$5 a week down to \$3 a week, and added that "women sewing at home cannot earn more than 30 cents or 40 cents in a long day"; and he was echoed by Jacob A. Riis in New York, who reported in 1900 that he had seen women finishing "pants" for 30 cents a day. Try translating *that* into the terms of today: even after you have multiplied it by three to take account of the tripled cost of living, you arrive at the noble sum of 90 cents a day, which is \$5.40 a week, which is \$280.80 for a full working year!

2. HOURS. The average working day was in the neighborhood of 10 hours, 6 days a week: total, 60 a week. In business offices there was a growing trend toward a Saturday half holiday, but if anybody had suggested a five-day week he would have been considered de-

mented. At the time when the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union was established in 1900, the hours in this trade, in New York, were 70 a week.

3. CHILD LABOR. Among boys between the ages of ten and fifteen, no less than 26 per cent—over a quarter—were "gainfully employed"; among girls in the same age groups, 10 per cent were. Most of these children were doing farm work, but 284,000 of them were in mills, factories, etc., during years in which, in any satisfactorily arranged society, they would have been at school.

4. ACCIDENTS. The standards of safety were curiously low from our present-day point of view. Consider this set of facts: in the single year 1901, one out of every 399 railroad employees was killed, and one out of every 26 was injured. Among engineers, conductors, brakemen, trainmen, etc., the figures were even worse than this: in that single year, one out of every 137 was killed.

The accident hazard could be particularly acute for children working in industrial plants. "In the large stamping works and canning factories in a city like Chicago," Professor William O. Krohn had told the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1897, "not a day passes but some child is made a helpless cripple. These accidents occur after three o'clock in the afternoon. The child that has begun his work in the morning with a reasonable degree of vigor, after working under constant pressure for several hours, at about three o'clock becomes so wearied, beyond the point of recovery, that he can no longer direct the tired fingers and aching arms with any degree of accuracy. He thus becomes the prey of the great cutting knives, or of the jaws of the tin-stamping machine."

5. THE HUMAN RESULT. Robert Hunter's book, *Poverty*, published in 1904, was a conscientious attempt to define the extent and nature of the group of people in America who were "underfed, underclothed, and poorly housed."* Hunter defined poverty very strictly, as a condition in which people, "though using their best efforts, are

* Were these words of Hunter's in Franklin D. Roosevelt's mind in 1937, when in his second inaugural address he said, "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished"?

failing to obtain sufficient necessities for maintaining physical efficiency." His best guess, after studying all available statistics, was that there were at least 10 million of them in the United States, of whom 4 million were public paupers—people dependent upon public or private charity—while the rest gained no such relief from their pitiable state. Hunter admitted that his figure of 10 million might be far short of the truth; there might be 15 million, or 20 million. He was dismayed that a nation devoted to the use of statistics had not shown real interest in getting an answer to what seemed to him a vital question. "*But ought we not to know?*" he asked.

III

And what did those cold figures mean in human terms? To read the reports of qualified observers of poverty at its worst in the big city slums and the grim industrial towns at the beginning of the century is to hear variation after variation upon the theme of human misery, in which the same words occur monotonously again and again: wretchedness, overcrowding, filth, hunger, malnutrition, insecurity, want.

"It is impossible to describe the mud, the dirt, the filth, the stinking humidity, the nuisances, the disorder of the streets," wrote G. Giacosa, an Italian dramatist who visited his fellow countrymen's quarter in New York in 1898.

In March, 1899, the consulting architects of the City of Boston made a report on certain tenements they had found in the North and West Ends of the city. They had found, they said, "dirty and battered walls and ceilings, dark cellars with water standing in them, alleys littered with garbage and filth, broken and leaking drain-pipes, . . . dark and filthy water-closets, closets long frozen or otherwise out of order . . . and houses so dilapidated and so much settled that they are dangerous."

Even in far more hygienic quarters the overcrowding could be acute. M. E. Ravage, arriving as an immigrant from Rumania, became a tenant, at 50 cents a week, of Mrs. Segal's apartment on Rivington Street in New York's Lower East Side. During the day, he

reported later in his book, *An American in the Making*, Mrs. Segal "kept up the interesting fiction of an apartment with specialized subdivisions"—a parlor, a dining room, a kitchen, a young ladies' room, Mrs. Segal's own room, a children's room. But at night, between nine and ten o'clock, the place "suddenly became a camp." Sofas opened up, carved dining-room chairs were arranged in rows; the sofa in the parlor alone held four sleepers, broadside, with rocking chairs arranged to support their feet. One night the parlor alone was occupied by nine men, some of them on the floor. "The pretended children's room was occupied by a man and his family of four." The windows had been puttied tight shut, and the air was "heavy with the reek of food and perspiration."

Far more filthy and insanitary habitations than this were equally overcrowded. A few years earlier, Paul Bourget had found in the Italian part of the Bowery two rooms on the street level, "small as a boat's cabins," in which eight men and women were "crouched over their work, in a fetid air, which an iron stove made still more stifling, and in what dirt!" And Bourget had gone on to inspect various workshops in the Jewish quarter, where he had found "hunger-hollowed faces" and "shoulders narrowed with consumption, girls of fifteen as old as grandmothers, who had never eaten a bit of meat in their lives—a long, lamentable succession of the forms of poverty."

In 1908 a Hungarian churchman, Count Vay de Vaya und Luskod, told in a book, *Nach Amerika in einem Auswandererschiffe*, how the life of the Hungarian immigrants in the steel town of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, had looked to him when he had visited the place a few years earlier.

Fourteen thousand tall chimneys are silhouetted against the sky along the valley that extends from McKeesport to Pittsburgh, [he wrote], and these fourteen thousand chimneys discharge their burning sparks and smoke incessantly. The realms of Vulcan could not be more somber or filthy than this valley of the Monongahela. . . . Thousands of immigrants wander here from year to year . . . and here they suffer till they are swallowed up in the inferno. . . . Scarce an hour passes without an accident, and no day without a fatal disaster. But what if *one* man be crippled, if *one* life be

extinguished among so many! Each place can be filled from *ten* men, all eager for it. Newcomers camp out within sight of the factory gates, while a little farther away others arrive with almost daily regularity—thousands of immigrants to don the fetters of slavery.

A surplus of labor, a desperate willingness to take any job, under whatever conditions, just to fill the stomach: the theme occurs again and again in the reports of these observers. Here is Robert Hunter, writing not about the steel districts of Pennsylvania, but about Chicago:

On cold, rainy mornings, at the dusk of dawn, I have been awakened, two hours before my rising time, by the monotonous clatter of hobnailed boots on the plank sidewalks, as the procession to the factory passed under my window. Heavy, brooding men; tired, anxious women; thinly dressed, unkempt little girls, and frail, joyless lads passed along, half awake, not one uttering a word, as they hurried to the great factory. . . . Hundreds of others, obviously a hungrier, poorer lot . . . waited in front of a closed gate until finally a great red-bearded man came out and selected twenty-three of the strongest, best looking of the men. For these the gates were opened, and the others, with downcast eyes, marched off to seek employment elsewhere or to sit at home, or in a saloon, or in a lodging house. . . .

Still another note recurs frequently in these reports: the idea that these dregs of the industrial population, being foreign, were cut off from the rest of America by their foreignness.

A few years ago [wrote Hunter], when living in Chicago in a colony of Bohemians and Hungarians who had been thrown out of work by the closing of a great industry, I went about among the groups clustered in the streets or gathered in the halls. I felt the unrest, the denunciation, the growing brutality, but I was unable to discuss with them their grievances, to sympathize with them, or to oppose them. I was an utter stranger in my own city.

That there were alleviating aspects of these miserable scenes even these very chroniclers agreed. That even the hungriest people were better dressed than one might have expected struck almost all visitors from abroad. Ravage, fresh from Rumania, noted that almost nobody

wore patched garments, and added that ". . . if you went merely by their dress, you could not tell a bank president from his office boy." He was echoing what Giacosa wrote after riding on a New York elevated train: "Some elegant Wall Street bankers are marked by special clothes of English cut. But with that exception, no European would be able to pick out by eye who there represents the infinite variety of professions, trades, states, fortune, culture, education, that may be encountered among the whole people." After visiting the Chicago slaughter houses—which he found inexpressibly filthy—Giacosa was struck by the dignified and well-dressed look of the workers when they emerged from their horrible labors at the end of the day; how very like Woods's comment on the people who lived in the South End of Boston: "Among the young men and women, the young women especially, it is surprising to find what becomingly dressed persons can come out of really miserable abodes."

Nor should we forget how many of the immigrants in these very slums found things new to them which delighted them. Ravage was pleasantly surprised by finding soap used for everyday purposes; egg-plant and tomatoes in winter; beer, in a pitcher from the corner saloon. Mary Antin, as a child newly arrived from Russia, was entranced with canned foods, iron stoves, washboards, speaking tubes, and street lamps—"so many lamps, and they burned till morning, my father said, and so people did not need to carry lanterns." Even more wonderful, to her and her parents, was free public education—"no application made, no questions asked, no fees." Her father "brought his children to school as if it were an act of consecration."

It was quite true, too, that little by little the worst horrors of the slums were being eliminated. Investigating commissions, tenement house commissions, and other groups of the more fortunate citizens had been aroused by such reports as that of Jacob A. Riis in his memorable book, *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890. Ten years later Riis was able to report that in New York the worst of the rear tenements were gone, the dreadful police-station lodging rooms were gone, "Bottle Alley is gone, and Bandit's Roost, Bone Alley, Thieves' Alley, and Kerosene Row—they are all gone." And it

seemed to Riis that by 1900, on the East Side, rags and dirt had become the exception rather than the rule. A beginning had been made in the job of providing parks, playgrounds, and gymnasiums for the poorer parts of New York. Not only in New York but in other cities and states, legislation was nibbling away at the worst abominations of factory employment and of housing.

Yet, as the floods of immigration continued, and wages obeyed the Iron Law even though industry was booming, and dirty and dilapidated habitations acquired new layers of grime and sagged still further, those who made it their business to wrestle with the problem of American poverty often felt helpless to bring about any real improvement. "The real trouble," wrote Woods, "is that people here are from birth to death at the mercy of great social forces which move almost like the march of destiny." Did not what was happening make a mockery of the very idea of a democratic society? "We are witnessing today, beyond question, the decay—perhaps not permanent, but at any rate the decay—of republican institutions," said the sociologist Franklin H. Giddings to the members of the Nineteenth Century Club. "No man in his right mind can deny it."

And when Edwin Markham wrote his poem, "The Man with the Hoe," which appeared in 1899, even people whose contact with American poverty had been slight felt a vague sense that a portent had been described; that in these verses, written by Markham after seeing Millet's famous painting of a brutalized toiler, they were getting a picture of what industrialism was doing to the common man and might, perhaps, do to themselves some day if the social forces which they had seen in operation were not somehow reversed. Markham saw the toiler as a man with

The emptiness of ages in his face,
And on his back the burden of the world.

Markham asked:

Who loosened and let down this brutal jaw?

And commented:

There is no shape more terrible than this—
More tongued with censure of the world's blind greed—
More filled with signs and portents for the soul—
More packed with danger to the universe.

And concluded:

O Masters, lords and rulers in all lands,
How will the future reckon with this man?
How answer his brute question in that hour
When whirlwinds of rebellion shake all shores?
How will it be with kingdoms and with kings—
With those who shaped him to the thing he is—
When this dumb Terror shall rise to judge the world,
After the silence of the centuries?*

From the vantage point of the nineteen-fifties one can read those prophetic lines and declare that they proved not to be prophetic for the United States. But surely it was significant that when the century was beginning a great many Americans were far from sure that the "dumb Terror," asking his "brute question," would not cause the "whirlwinds of rebellion" to shake, not only Europe, but also an America in which such gaudy wealth was contrasted with such in-human misery.

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