

ECONOMIC TANGLES.

CHAPTER I.

STRUGGLE THE LAW OF PROGRESS.

Many years ago John Swinton, during a visit to England, called on Karl Marx, who was then living in that country studying the effect of the wages system on the prosperity of the wage receiving classes. There was at the time a report of the interview in one of the New York papers, one incident of which specially impressed itself upon my mind. As the great American agitator was about leaving the great German economist, and they clasped hands for the last time, Swinton asked:

"What is?"

Marx, taking a moment to formulate a comprehensive answer to such an important query, finally replied:

"Struggle."

That is the sum total of not only the labor question, but of existence itself. The history of the world is a tale of struggle. The soil traversed and the caves inhabited by prehistoric people reveal the struggles of more or less ape-like men for existence. And there is no page of history that does not in some way recognize the ceaseless struggles of all animal and vegetable life to overcome the forces of nature, and the snares and pitfalls of greed and ignorance.

Everywhere, at all times, it has been struggle.

It is impossible for the producing, the great middle,

or the monopolistic classes themselves to escape from this natural law. To hold their own they must compete with somebody for something. And while with the oppressed and the enthralled the struggle is for the common necessities of life—for the food, clothing and shelter that will for a few years keep body and soul together—yet among what is considered the more fortunately situated there is also a struggle to hold their own and not be pressed down into the wage receiving class. Even among the millionaires at more or less regular intervals is seen the clash of contending interests, the effort to keep to the front in holding the major part of the wealth of the world, only to be followed by the downfall of the financially weaker or less cunning.

To be compelled to struggle for existence is not in itself an unalloyed misfortune. Progress arises from struggle, and from struggle alone. The joy of living is in overcoming obstacles. The hunter matches his cunning against that of the wild animal he is seeking. The scientist pursues, with the same keenness, the secrets of the laboratory that elude him and his fellow scientists, and when he has succeeded in wresting it from its hitherto unfathomed recesses, he shouts his triumph to the world. The manufacturer, too, strives to overcome the barriers, natural or artificial, that separate him from a customer, and, if he possesses the true mercantile spirit, rejoices more in finding a new market at a minimum of profit than in supplying an old one at a maximum of wealth. The coy maiden makes the earnest lover. The captains of industry everywhere, whether as railroad magnates or heads of great plants, are full of the same zeal. It is struggle that gives zest to their work, and let them amalgamate, and combine, and form trusts never so much, they cannot escape their fate.

Is it any wonder, then, that in civilized society closely or loosely organized, this same struggle is the predominating fact? The struggle is never ending, the victories never so complete as to call for no further

effort, the rewards never so large as to be completely satisfying.

Anyone for any considerable length of time closely affiliated with trade unions can look over many a struggle witnessed, and perhaps participated in, the joys of which, after all, were more in the fact of overcoming opposition and difficulties rather than in any great pecuniary gain. It was, mayhap, for an hour—fifty-nine instead of sixty hours to comprise a week's work; or for increased pay for work done after regular hours—a victory which helped to destroy the demand for labor in other than regular hours; or for slight advances in the rates per piece or per day. Not long ago, as showing how this spirit rejoices in little things, the then business agent of a street car men's association reported how greatly the members of that organization rejoiced over the fact that while they failed to get an advance in wages the company, after much negotiation, had agreed to allow each employe five minutes' time in taking care of his car after the end of a run. That five minutes, formulated into pay, was more than enough to pay each man's dues to the union for the year! Scores of just such little things might be mentioned as indicating for what unions struggle; and it can be shown that some of the great strikes of the last century had for their beginnings some seeming trifling thing that looked to those engaged as of supreme importance—at least of representing some principle about which it was worth while fighting.

Attend a union meeting, and on what are the discussions? Great principles? Very seldom. They concern trifling rules and regulations that have very little bearing on the solution of the labor problem proper. Indeed, in the eyes of one school of socialists, the time is taken up with endeavoring to get the employing class to ease the chains of labor, to provide a pad or two so that they will not gall quite so harshly, rather than in making preparations to break and get

rid of them. And yet it is all struggle. Even a pad on a chain is better than no pad, if one keeps in mind the fact that pads that reduce galling enable the wearer to gain strength, both physical and mental, that will enable him in due time to throw off the chains. There is no struggle, no matter how slight it may be, that is not a preparation for a greater struggle that will come for a more important object.

The greatest happiness does not rest with those having the easiest time. This is not saying, however, that those who struggle the hardest have the best time. The South Sea islanders who can sit under a bread fruit or palm tree and have the food drop into their mouths, without exertion, and who need no clothing and but little shelter, as well as the Esquimaux who amid the eternal snows of the arctic regions have a constant struggle to get food, are the two extremes that dwarf man and prevent the best coming uppermost. Too great struggle, as well as too great ease, is a detriment. These United States have been fortunate in this, that whereas Nature has provided bounteously, it has also demanded the best efforts for the best results. Brain and brawn have been called on to wrestle with and overcome natural and artificial obstacles to prosperity and happiness.

This is a great nation because it is an amalgamation of struggling races. Celtic, German, Scandinavian, Pole, Italian—all have in them the stuff that makes mighty men and women; and though many have been embruted by man-made environments, yet within them are the divine sparks that before now have blazed forth and lighted the world in its onward march toward the dawn of higher civilizations as well as more momentous struggles.

The probabilities are, therefore, that with a people so situated the problem of problems—the most economic and equitable production and distribution of wealth—will finally be solved. The experience and wisdom of all nations and races will be at its com-

mand, and each in turn will cast into the crucible of common knowledge that which will help to make the fine gold of perfect wisdom. To this end the socialists will pour in their idea of a cooperative commonwealth. The scientific anarchist will bring a society without coercive power, and the terrorist the bomb that jars blood-encrusted thrones. The free trader will add freedom of commerce at home and abroad. The protectionist will attach the idea of encouraging infant industries, even though some of them are as old as the human race. The single taxer will point to soil and sky, and offer them as aids to the great mixture out of which is to come right and righteousness. And the woman suffragist, with her demand for the equality of the sexes before the law; the prohibitionist, with the challenge as to the usefulness and uselessness of spirituous stimulants; and all the other admirers and adherents of palliatives and plasters for the sores of the body politic, will add their atoms of experience and practice, until from them all is evolved not only the wisdom of the ancients, but what is of far more importance, the wisdom of the present, that will enthrone right thinking and right action, and make them the moving power of the world in the conduct of neighbor toward neighbor—establishing the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

Let us walk together in the highways and byways of experience and see if it is not possible for each one of us to add a little to the common fund of knowledge on economic subjects. And though at times we stumble and falter, and may occasionally have to retrace our steps to get once more on the common highway, yet being imbued with a common purpose, and struggling for a common end, it is inevitable that by counseling together, by rubbing idea against idea, until the sharp edges of both are removed, by comparing, and constructing, and tearing down, and rebuilding, out of the seeming chaos of ideas will at last emerge the truth. And the truth will make us free.