

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GOOD IN SOCIAL CONFERENCES.

Just how much good a national social and political conference, such as was in session in Detroit in the fall of 1901, can do, is a problem. There are plenty who sneer at all that has been and will be said at such gatherings, and others are absolutely indifferent to every one of the questions about which so many are in earnest. In all probability the majority of people of the United States do not believe any fundamental social or political reform is needed. They are satisfied with things as they are. Whatever is, is right, in their estimation. They may be amused at the earnestness with which people come from or go great distances to hear and take part in discussions about reforms and reform methods, but they do not consider that it ever can or ever will affect their interests.

But things happen, notwithstanding this indifference. It may be a fable, or it may be the record of a fact, still there is a paragraph in Genesis that tells of how the sons of men paid no heed to the preaching of Noah, but ate and drank, and were married and given in marriage until the floods came. Up to that moment it was all unreal—just as unreal as are, to the great majority, the warnings of the reformers of today. Yet—the floods came. So some of the floods prophesied by these reformers wrestling with the most profound subjects that ever perplexed the minds of men and women, will some day come. Not just in the way expected, perhaps, but they already loom up on the horizon, and like a hurricane will eventually sweep on, leaving in their wake the ruin of many a special privilege.

The hopeful thing about it all is the fact that there are so many interested in these subjects. Some are at cross purposes, to be sure; yet, being earnestly engaged in the work of discovering the line of least resistance, this very conflict of ideas will in the end clarify the situation and result in a concentration of effort around a few essentials that must eventually win out. To believe otherwise is to conclude that the world is going backward, and that social and economic progress is at an end.

Optimism is generally the prevailing characteristic of these delegates. If they were pessimistic they would not bother themselves. People who do not believe that reforms are possible keep away from such conferences. Knowing in their own minds that everything is going to the demnition bowwows, pessimists stay at home and nurse their dismal thoughts and gloomy forebodings. The optimist, on the other hand, sees the bright things in the world, feels in his innermost being that the good and the true must eventually be uppermost, and does all he can to make his hopeful prophesying come true.

And the optimist is eternally right. This is a better world to live in than it ever was before. There is more of it, and happiness is to be found spread over a larger territory than any other time of which history has left a record. The things to be enjoyed have greatly increased, and the methods of procuring them are better understood. Man has laid Nature under contribution in new ways, and with a minimum of exertion, until the luxuries of our ancestors have become the common necessities of the average worker.

It is true that the constitutional rights of the people—or what the people have long considered their constitutional rights—have been imperiled by the acts of the supreme court and the legislatures of some of the states. The flag goes where the constitution may not follow, and the legislative ripper enjoys his constitutional privilege of betraying his constituency. A bold

coterie of men use the franchises given them by ignorant or complacent councilmen to bond their privileges and buy up all the electric roads that converge at a great industrial center. And while all this is occurring, the various avocations in which the citizens are engaged goes on apparently undisturbed.

It is true, too, that the power of the trusts is being all the time strengthened. They are taking in more territory, reaching out after the natural as well as the artificial monopolies, and bringing a greater number of industries under their sway. And in the more humble walks of life the common workingman is being taught the power of the courts through the issuing of injunctions, so that acts against which there are no statutes have become criminal. He can no longer walk in front of a factory, and civilly argue with another as to the propriety of working or not working. He is not allowed to make a suggestion that evil communications corrupt good manners. And on the top of this, in Detroit at least, a common council has refused him the right of free speech, without the consent of the mayor, on the very park which was formally given up to that purpose when dedicated to the city.

It requires something of a prophetic eye to be optimistic under such a condition of affairs. It would seem as if things were just about as bad as they could be. But it must be remembered that the American people are long suffering. They will put up with petty annoyances, only occasionally grumbling at the difficulties experienced in exercising their rights, hoping and expecting that the leaders of the opposition will come to their senses and "ease up" a little. They even anticipate that matters will work around all right, in the end, in spite of the exercise of unwarranted authority by their servants.

Finally, however, they will become aroused. Some further annoyance of a minor character, and in itself of little consequence, will be the last straw. Like the crowd that assembled on the Campus in the fall of 1901

to show Police Commissioner Andrews and Board of Works Commissioner Moreland that they could not do just as they pleased with this time-honored place for the exercise of free speech, the people will arise en masse and, regardless of all forms of law, exercise their sovereign right to make and execute the laws. It will be such a "lawless" scene as was witnessed in Boston Harbor, when the British tea went overboard, or as the army of Great Britain saw on the morning of the battle of Bunker Hill, when the "rebels" audaciously threw up earthworks on the hill overlooking Boston. It will, in fact, be a new declaration of independence, when the foes are those of our own household, grown arrogant with the power of ill-gotten wealth.

The rut of special privileges has been worn so deep that it does sometimes seem that nothing can get us out of it except a revolution. One by one the legal avenues to liberty are being closed. In the south they are disfranchising the black worker and brutalizing the white ones by long hours and child labor. In the north they are contracting the circle within which the laborer can work and maintain his dignity—the dignity of labor. With his hands on the coal mines of the north, on lake and land transportation and the iron manufactures, one man controls billions of property and many priceless privileges. He can make or unmake a community by simply changing his plans. He can bestow a million-dollar salary on one man while grudging a dollar and a quarter a day to others. Like Monte Cristo, his power seems boundless and he can exclaim, with that great creation of Dumas, "The whole world is mine."

But is it? Not while there remains one spark of the desire for liberty in the breast of a single individual. The prominent "agitators" may be got rid of on one pretext or another, but the world is too big for the octopus to strangle the divine fire that has blazed up ever since the world began. And it will break forth

again and again, carrying with it death wherever it finds fuel. How petty, then, will seem man-made laws for the curtailing of liberty, and how insignificant will appear those "captains of industry," the supports of whose industrial and financial thrones now seem unshakable. They will all be swept away like chaff, and doubtless some good will go with the bad.

Liberty will triumph. The new declaration of independence will go further than defense against divine right of kings. It will take hold of the very foundations of society, and will proclaim that what no man created no man can own. It will make still more sacred the rights of property, but will draw a sharp line between what is and what is not property. There is danger only that the revolution may come before the masses have clearly defined ideas of where governmental functions end and individual functions begin; but whether it has the form of a great cooperative commonwealth, or, taking a lesson from history, narrows the duties of the collectivity while enlarging those of the individual, it cannot but be an improvement on present conditions, abolishing those great contrasts between wealth and poverty now so prominent, and leveling up, so that no one shall be deprived of the privilege of eating who is willing to work, and no one shall have the power to despoil another of the full results of his exertion.

So let the work of education through national social and political conferences go on. The people need all the wisdom, and all the ideas obtainable on the problems of the day. "Cranks" they may be, and wild eyed as well; yet from their brains, weary, mayhap, from long contemplation of intricate economic puzzles, will flash forth that which will, like the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of light by night, lead the enthralled people into the promised land.