

MUST WE ALWAYS HAVE RICH AND POOR?

The Boy Talks with the Man

UNDER HEADINGS as above the *Children's Newspaper*, of 12th April, published the following imaginary conversation:—

Boy. Once before we talked of Poverty, and you said that it remained because known means to make wealth were not properly used. So that we need not always have Rich and Poor?

Man. Society, when it chooses to do so, can produce and distribute all the goods needed for comfort, so that no one need be poor in that sense. Poverty of *Life* is another matter. Don't forget what Ruskin said: "*There is no wealth but life.*" A man may possess much property and yet be a life pauper, lacking that culture of his faculties, and that proper sense of what is right and wrong, without which a man remains a poor creature.

Boy. But it would be splendid, wouldn't it, if all people, because they possessed the means of comfort, could be saved from physical want and suffering and the degrading worry that destroys happiness?

Man. Undoubtedly! It is a fine aim to produce much wealth and to distribute it fairly. That is a material aim which promotes not only material happiness but, because of its essential morality, helps to make good lives.

Boy. What is the road to it?

Man. Some weeks ago there was an important conference of bishops, clergymen, and private citizens who met to study the relation of Christian thought to national effort after the war. They decided that the private ownership of industrial power causes poverty and, by acting as a moral stumbling block, destroys life itself. Thus they had regard both to material wealth and to the spirit of mankind.

Boy. Please explain that further.

Man. Modern work cannot be done without using enormous and costly tools. The old-time craftsman used hand tools in his own small workshop. He had a trade he could be proud of.

The modern worker labours with enormous machines in a factory owned by a great organization of which he knows little and in which he has no voice. He makes, not things, but bits and pieces, or he is one who puts bits and pieces together. Thus working, he gets a wage, and that wage is his sole connection with the process. No pride of work is left to him. The organization that buys his labour, and has him in a sort of inhuman control, earns profit (a margin between cost and selling price) which is distributed among the shareholders, *most of whom have never even seen the factory.*

That is a process which many Christians cannot regard as moral, for it divorces man from man and must lead to grave inequalities of wealth. So we find good men denouncing it and calling for the substitution of co-operative work, in which great producing units are no longer owned privately.

Boy. But the big-scale work would still have to be done!

Man. Yes, but in conditions that would reduce its scale because of absence of competition and that would free all lives from bondage to one irksome occupation. Given good organization, individual lives would gain ample time to practise individual crafts.

Boy. Can we hope for such social happiness?

Man. Indeed we can. We now direct the nation for the purposes of war; we can far more easily, and in good order and good time, arrange our work and lives

to give the individual a new freedom and to give society a happy sense of universal justice, conscious of serving the bodies and the souls of men.

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In a letter to the *Children's Newspaper*, Mr H. R. Lee has written with regard to the above:—

"Your replies to the Boy's question 'Must we always have rich and poor?' may be clear to him, but to me, a reader, they appear somewhat confused.

"The Boy looks out upon a world in which millions of workers, toiling long and continuous hours, hardly get the bare necessities of life and who usually end their old age on a miserably inadequate pension, or on doles from charitable institutions, or by a little kindly help from relations or neighbours, as poverty-stricken as themselves. He also sees a small number of the community living an idle life of luxury, wearing the best of clothes, enjoying the choicest of foods and residing in delightful houses and spacious mansions with numerous lackeys to minister to their most minute desires.

"Surely this to the Boy must be the picture of rich and poor? Your quotation from Ruskin in which he calls life a form of wealth has not the slightest bearing on the point under discussion. Wealth is the result of man's labour, but life is the gift of the Creator, and unless a distinction in terms is made, confusion must follow. This must be avoided if we are to arrive at the truth. 'Wealth, as alone the term can be used in the laws that govern the distribution of wealth, consists of natural products that have been secured, moved, combined, separated, or in other ways modified by human exertion so as to fit them for the gratification of human desires.'

"It has taken a ghastly war with its horrible destruction of precious lives and devastated homes to move the bishops, clergymen and private citizens to hold a conference to study national well-being after the war. Unfortunately, their decisions are so ambiguous that no one will know what they mean when they are to be translated into action.

"You say society can produce and distribute all the goods needed for comfort. Individuals produced wealth before society or governments existed, and history records that far from helping in the production of wealth, governments have been largely responsible for hampering, obstructing and destroying. As to the distribution of wealth, nature distributes wealth far more justly than any government can ever hope to do. Nature gives fish to the fisherman, not to the man who sits on the shore; game to the hunter, not to the man who stops at home. Before man can enjoy the products of the earth nature demands so much labour, and no schemes of society or governments can improve upon this. Under natural laws workers should be the richest in the community. Man can rob his fellow men, but he cannot rob nature.

"'Modern work cannot be done without enormous and costly tools,' but these tools cannot work upon air; they must have raw material which can only come from the land, therefore the owners of nature's storehouse determine whether the machine shall work or the craftsmen starve. Before the flywheel of any of these tools can revolve the owners of the soil have to be satisfied and assured of their share of the produce.

Surely here is 'the industrial power' to which the conference referred. However, the bishops, clergymen and private citizens despite their distinguished careers, either could not or would not see it. Or are they afraid of offending the land-owning class? These owners of the soil, who toil not neither do they spin, are the basis of aristocracy. They can trace their ancestry back for hundreds of years and must feel greatly relieved to hear the conference attribute the trouble to 'industrial power.'

"Riches and poverty did not arrive with modern machinery. They came some generations ago with the landed estates and enclosures. Enormous and costly tools can oppress no one while land is free for use. What has cursed man from time immemorial has been the private appropriation of what the Creator intended for all men—the land. Land values are the measurement of civilization; the higher the standard, the higher the land value, but instead of these values being used for the public benefit, they flow into the pockets of the land-owning classes. Every permanent improvement has made them richer. Shareholders, although they may never have seen the factory, have put something into it before taking anything out. What have landlords added to the general weal? They are just parasites, like rats in a bakery. I have seen no record in the *Children's Newspaper* where the Boy has been told this. Some day someone else may tell him, and he will wonder why it was omitted.

"The production of wealth is the marvellous development of unconscious co-operation, each doing the best for himself, but by so doing man's actions serve all others. There is no certainty that conscious co-operation can improve upon the natural condition. The benefit of the substitution of public ownership for private ownership is very problematic, and no illustration has yet proved it.

"What is certain is that private enterprise has more initiative and is far quicker to see and act than society or governments. In the case of those enterprises that by their nature are monopolies, public ownership is an advantage, but what bearing has this upon the question of riches and poverty? It is the abnormal luxury of the rich which accounts for the abnormal want of the poor.

"You infer that there would be a benefit by the absence of competition, but free and open competition is the safety valve of society; it stops one individual from taking advantage of another, and must drive the bad out of existence. In a society where the earth is monopolized, competition is one-sided, and must force some men into poverty and starvation, but in a community where equal right to the use of the land is assured to all, competition can injure no one. Competition acts according to the pressure behind, forcing down or driving up in response to that pressure, and to blame it either for good or bad conditions is like the Boy who blames the cane for giving him a thrashing. Competition now settles the price of goods and labour, and in its absence these would have to be fixed arbitrarily. Someone would have to decide the respective values of a landscape painting and of so much whitewashing, and fix the salary of the film star and the charlady. This appears to be a doubtful benefit.

"Social happiness can only come through social justice. To remove want and the fear of want so that all can enjoy leisure, comfort, independence and the decencies and refinements of life, with opportunities for moral and intellectual development it is not necessary to tear society up by the roots. All that is required is to conform to the natural order and break down the barrier that cut men off from their natural element—the land. What use is it to suggest 'arranging work and

lives' while this fundamental injustice permeates society? The equal right of all men to the use of the earth is as clear to those who will look as is their equal right to breathe the air. Only by sweeping away this injustice can the unnatural inequality of riches and poverty be abolished and the brotherhood of man and the Fatherhood of God be established on this earth."

FORESTALLING THE FUTURE

THE INTENSITY of the present speculation in land values, an evil and a danger so great that radical measures will have to be taken to deal with it, is shown in the following statement taken from the *London Evening Standard* of 22nd April:—

PRICE OF LAND IS SOARING

If you want to buy a bit of Britain you will have to hurry, for land is to-day sought by every type of investor, from the great financial trusts to the wage-earner whose ambition is an acre and a cow. Every day since the outbreak of war thousands of acres have been changing hands. Never before was a stake in the country so much in demand.

To-day it is difficult to buy good dairy and pasture land, so many millions of acres having passed into new ownership since the war began.

Prices, too, are almost double those of pre-war days. It is an almost commonplace for good farm land worth about £30 an acre in peace-time to fetch up to £80 an acre. There have been a number of sales at which land has realized from £100 to £150 per acre.

An official of one of London's largest firms of estate agents said: "Broadly speaking, there is hardly any land left for sale in the country. Most popular investments are rich dairy farms of between 150 and 500 acres:

"The large joint stock banks and insurance companies have been very active in these land purchases. People feel that land values are more likely to remain constant than those of movable commodities. Land is the least susceptible to bombing.

"This wave of land sales was a feature of the last war. But prices fell in the post-war slump."

The rise in the rent of land, due to the increase in the price of produce, is shown markedly in the case of grass parks. The following report is given in the *Glasgow Herald*, 17th March, of the annual letting (by Lawrie & Symington Ltd.) at Lanark Auction Market on 15th March: "There was the largest attendance for many years, and all the fields on offer met very keen competition and realised high prices. The following is the average rise on the different estates on the prices realized last year:—Macbiehill, 136 per cent; Hardington, 48½ per cent; Harburn, 21½ per cent; Eastshield, 30½ per cent; New Mains, 43 per cent; Throughburn, 90½ per cent; Highfield, 60 per cent; Birkwood, 145 per cent; Castlecraig, 53½ per cent; Broadshaw, 46½ per cent."

The landlord reaps but he does not sow.

The Women's Council of the Scottish Liberal Federation, holding annual meeting in Glasgow on 30th April (Lady Glen-Coats presiding), approved this resolution:—

"This Council earnestly desires to see a Scottish revival led by Scots in Scotland, and expresses the hope that a body of technical experts in research will be set up to investigate and advise on industries and agriculture; urges the necessity for the taxation of land values, access through modern transport to markets, power schemes, afforestation, and an intensive land settlement plan." (*Scotsman* report.)